
Author : KAME
Illustrator : OX
They Don't Know I'm Too Young for the Adventurer's Guild
01


Author : KAME
Illustrator : OX
They Don't Know I'm Too Young for the Adventurer's Guild
01


Waine
Sheya
Chikka
Old Badger
Kiri
Characters


The old man stopped, turned to face me, then jerked his head toward where we'd been going. Although we were deep in the forest, the trees just up ahead opened up into a bright clearing where the sunlight was streaming down at an angle.
"You'd never know a feelin' like this if you was a slave."
I saw what he was talking about right away. These were the third herbs on the request, worth several times more than the ones listed below.
And they were so *beautiful*—lovely purple flowers carpeting the ground in front of us, swaying gently in the breeze.



# Contents

Chapter 1:
A Child at the Adventurer's Guild

Chapter 2:
Fortune, Misfortune, and Herbs

Chapter 3:
The Adventurers

Chapter 4:
Equipment

Chapter 5:
Old Badger the Yellow-Bellied

Chapter 6:
The Guild Quest

Epilogue

Afterword

**Story by KAME**
**Illustration by ox**

# Table of Contents


1. Cover
2. Prologue
3. Color Illustrations
4. Chapter 1: A Child at the Adventurer’s Guild
5. Chapter 2: Fortune, Misfortune, and Herbs
6. Chapter 3: The Adventurers
7. Chapter 4: Equipment
8. Chapter 5: Old Badger the Yellow-Bellied
9. Chapter 6: The Guild Quest
10. Epilogue
11. Afterword
12. Bonus Textless Illustrations
13. About J-Novel Club
14. Copyright

As I trudged through the dense forest undergrowth, my foot caught on a tree root and I felt my body lurch forward. I quickly thrust the butt of my spear into the ground. My shoulder bashed into the thick tree trunk, but at least I kept myself upright.

The unfamiliar weight of the leather armor was heavy on my shoulders, while the clothes I wore underneath were drenched in sweat and clinging unpleasantly to my body. The smell of sweat, leather, and damp greenery all mixed together was enough to make my head spin.

The little old man who walked ahead of me was bald (but only on the top of his head) and bundled up in a cloak that had been mended so often it was now just a mismatched patchwork of rags. He seemed like he was used to navigating the rough terrain, taking steps with confidence and ease while wielding a kukri to cut down any branches blocking the way.

I didn't trust him. But I followed him anyway, even though I was getting more tired with every step and more convinced that I was being duped with every moment. This was all just a big joke. He was making a total fool of me, and any minute now he'd turn around with that unmistakable laugh of his. But still, I kept going. I had no other choice. If this didn't work out, I was finished. I had nowhere left to turn. I would simply waste away, forgotten... The thought sat as heavy and cold as a lump of iron in my chest.

*Should I have just stayed in the village after all? What would everyone say if they could see me now?*

The forest gradually grew denser, the shades of green darker and richer, and the ground more uneven and dangerous. The little old man continued like he hadn't noticed any of it. He was definitely leading me on a wild-goose chase. I'd given up hope already. A thick and chilly fog had settled over my heart. And yet, for some reason, I kept on walking.

The old man turned to face me. The trees gave way to a clearing that opened up before us, and I fell to my knees.

The view before me was something I'd never, ever forget for the rest of my days. Glimmering like jewels under the sunlight, thousands and thousands of purple blooms swayed in the breeze like a gentle sea of petals carpeting the forest floor.

# Chapter 1: A Child at the Adventurer’s Guild

My older big brother married a pretty girl and took over our house and fields. My younger big brother became a hunter and built a hunting lodge up in the mountains. And my big sister was going to marry the fellow from two doors down in a few years. As for me…

My older big brother had told me he’d give me some of his fields when I grew up. But the village priest had explained that it was a bad idea to split up the fields, because that would just make everyone even poorer than we already were. So I’d told my brother I didn’t need them.

Then the priest had asked me if I wanted to become the next priest, but I turned him down. I liked talking to him, but I never really understood the idea of praying to the Earth Mother and how prayers even worked. He’d explained that questioning the gods is part of being a good servant, and that a lot of priests can’t actually hear the voices of the gods, but that didn’t make much sense to me either. Anyway, the idea of becoming a priest just didn’t sit right with me.

“I’m sure it didn’t, Kiri, but that’s no reason to run off to town without a single clue about what you’ll do when you get there. Foolishness is what that is,” Uncle Lehmar said with a sigh.

He gave the donkey pulling the cart a couple of taps on the back. The animal clearly understood the signal and came to a gentle stop before folding its legs under itself to rest for a while.

“That’s why I’m so glad you came along, Uncle Lehmar!” I replied happily. “Even my older big brother didn’t mind me going if you were the one taking me.”

I patted the donkey. What a clever animal it was, stopping slowly to avoid jostling the goods loaded on the cart. Its coat felt coarser and tougher than the animals’ coats back home in the village. This donkey must have been used to weathering the elements on its long journeys.

“Goddess save us…” Uncle Lehmar muttered. “I’m just gonna ask a merchant friend of mine for a favor. I’m not promising you

anything, understand? If it doesn't work out, you're going straight back to the village."

"Yeah, I know."

Uncle Lehmar was a traveling merchant who passed through our village every now and then—maybe a couple of times a year. He'd bring things like salt, iron farm tools, and pots and pans, then trade with us for wheat and animal skins, mostly. Our village hardly ever had any visitors, so it really cheered people up when he came by. It was almost like a festival. Even the priest would come rushing out to see if Uncle Lehmar had managed to get ahold of the books he'd asked for.

My older big brother and his wife were getting ready to welcome their new baby, so I'd been thinking about going to town by myself. But then Uncle Lehmar had shown up at our village to trade with us at just the right time, so I'd asked him to take me. Maybe the goddess was smiling on me after all.

Of course, everyone tried to tell me I should wait until my coming-of-age ceremony. They said nine was too young to be going out into the world. I did want to stay and meet the new baby and see my big sister get married too. But I knew our family was only just making ends meet. In a town, even a nine-year-old could become a merchant's assistant or a craftsperson's apprentice. Like I'd told everyone, there were plenty of stories of kids moving in with a different family and working for room and board. Besides, people who'd worked since they were young were respected and valued. At least, that's what I'd heard somewhere or another, so it had to be true.

And so here I was, on the long road toward town. Having come a little way, I looked back just once.

"I've never left the village before," I whispered to no one but the breeze. I'd be a liar if I said I wasn't a little anxious, but I was twice—no, ten times as excited.

The first day of our journey went by peacefully, and we continued making our way to town the next day.

"So, what is there in Hiriyenka?" I asked Uncle Lehmar.

"It's a port town," he replied. "You'll see the sea and plenty of big ships."

"I've never seen the sea before. Not once. It's huge, right?"

"That it is. So big you can't see the other side."

"And the ships are really big too?"

“Yep. Gotta stretch your neck to see the tops of the biggest ones. That’s how big ships have to be to sail the wide, wild sea.”

That night, we made camp for the second time in the shadow of a large boulder, gathering up as much kindling as we could carry and lighting it with a flint before laying out animal skins to sleep on. Uncle Lehmar had his own, and he was nice enough to lend me one of the ones he meant to sell.

But I couldn’t go to sleep just yet. “I’ll see all kinds of interesting things in town, right?” I asked.

“No doubt,” Uncle Lehmar replied. “Lively dances, beautiful songs, the best wine you’ll— Ah, you’re still a little young for that. I’m sure you’ll find some fun new toys too, and… Oh, by the way, they were putting on some kind of play last time.”

“A play? Like the one with the warrior?”

“Couldn’t say for sure. I was in a hurry at the time. But there was a dashing young lad with a sword cutting down enemies left and right, so it might’ve been the tale of the warrior.”

Uncle Lehmar patiently entertained my questions as he threw a few more branches onto the fire. The warm light of the flames made his round, ruddy nose look redder than ever, like a rosy apple stuck in the middle of his face. He’d warned me that we must never, ever let the fire go out while we were at camp because it kept wild beasts away. Even monsters, like slimes, wouldn’t approach.

I thought about what Uncle Lehmar had just said. “If it was just someone fighting enemies with a sword, it might not have been about the warrior.”

“Oh?” Uncle Lehmar prompted.

“Yeah, I mean, the play could have been about a hero or an adventurer.”

“Hmm, a hero I could see, but an adventurer?” Uncle Lehmar paused for a moment. “They’re not really the kinds of people who get plays written about them.”

“They’re not?”

“I’ve hired them a few times, see, and they’re not these grand, impressive characters like warriors or heroes of legend. They’re just…” Uncle Lehmar hesitated. “How can I put it? Useful sorts, I suppose. Then again, some adventurers did become heroes, so maybe there are some plays about them after all.”

*Wow. So Uncle Lehmar has even done business with adventurers!* I could hardly believe my ears.

When I was still just a baby, adventurers had come to our village to kill some goblins. Of course, I didn't remember anything about it, but I'd grown up hearing from my younger big brother about how amazing they were. Still, I'd never seen an adventurer with my own eyes.

"Now, don't you go getting all starry-eyed over them," Uncle Lehmar chided. "Look, next time I'll tell you some of the dullest stories I know about adventurers. Just go to sleep now. We'll have to be off before dawn if we don't want to spend another night under the stars."

That was easier said than done, since my mind was buzzing with swashbuckling thoughts long into the night.

It was around noon, and the sun was shining down from right over our heads. The trees started to thin out, and the road merged with another. I felt the ground become firmer under my shoes, a clear sign that more people traveled here. Like he'd promised last night, Uncle Lehmar was telling me about the adventurers he'd met on his travels.

"Let's see now," Uncle Lehmar began. "I'll start with the story about the letter delivery. Someone in town had asked me to take a letter to one of the far-off villages. And I fully intended to deliver it myself, but then another job suddenly came in that I just couldn't turn down. So, I hired an adventurer to deliver it for me."

"Delivering letters... Huh." It was a bit of a letdown. The adventurers I imagined slew monsters or explored labyrinths.

Uncle Lehmar continued. "I employed them as bodyguards once too. There was a spot I had to head to on business. But I'd heard that goblins sometimes showed up along the road, so I hired a couple for protection."

"Wow, goblins?!" I exclaimed.

"Mm-hmm. In the end, we never did see any, though."

"Oh..." I was glad it'd been a safe journey, of course, but I was hoping for a more exciting story.

"What else? Oh, I've hired them to search for missing people once or twice. I knew this dwarf—fine craftsman, very good with his hands, but a bit of an odd duck. Anyway, one day he just threw down his tools and disappeared to who-knows-where. Came back of his own accord after three days, though."

The adventurers Uncle Lehmar described to me didn't match

up with the ones in my imagination at all. After all, none of them did any adventuring! But I was starting to understand what he'd meant by "useful." Rather than sticking to one type of work like farmers or hunters, adventurers did any odd jobs people needed.

"So that's what adventurers are really like. If things don't work out at the shop you're taking me to, maybe I could become one."

*If adventurers do all kinds of work, then there must be something that even I can handle.* Or so I thought, but the reality wasn't so simple.

"I'm afraid not." Uncle Lehmar shook his head. "You're still nine, aren't you? Most guilds don't take applications from anyone younger than twelve. I don't think the adventurer's guild is any different."

*Why can't I just be grown-up already?*

"Well, the first thing is to get yourself trained up at the shop. You're a good lad, Kiri," Uncle Lehmar reassured me. "I'm sure they'll take you on. Anyway, aren't you getting tired? We can rest if you'd like."

"No, I'm fine," I insisted. "I can keep going."

According to Uncle Lehmar, if conditions were good, he'd normally arrive in town on the morning of the third day after leaving my village. But this time, he'd slowed down so I could keep up. He still seemed sure that we'd make it before sundown, but I felt a little guilty all the same. Ah, why couldn't I just be grown-up already? Or at least old enough to walk a little faster.

"This shop we're going to, what do they sell there?" I asked.

"Hmm? Ah, well..." Uncle Lehmar stroked his chin thoughtfully and glanced up at the sky. "Take a guess. See if you can get it right."

"Oh. Um..."

I began to think it over. *The owner of the shop knows Uncle Lehmar, so maybe the shop sells the same kinds of things Uncle Lehmar brings to the village. Tools and pots and such would probably come from a smith rather than a shop, though, so that leaves...*

"I got it! Salt! They sell salt, right?"

Uncle Lehmar nodded with a broad smile as I gave my answer. "Oh, well done, Kiri. Got it on your first try."

Well, it had to be salt. Still, I was happy I got it right. *So, I'm going to work at a salt shop.* I felt my chest tighten a little with

emotion at the thought. Then I noticed a faint but odd smell wafting by on the breeze. One I'd never smelled before. I sniffed at the warm air. There it was again. It wasn't a bad smell, but it wasn't pleasant either.

"That's the smell of the sea. Not far now," Uncle Lehmar remarked.

My eyes grew wide with wonder at his words. Until that moment, the sea had been something I'd only heard of.

"Really?! I wanna see it!" I was so excited, I could have leaped into the air. Well, actually, I did just that.

"Just a little farther," replied Uncle Lehmar. "You'll get a look at it on our way into town."

I couldn't wait. "C'mon, let's hurry!" I urged.

"You really *are* still full of energy, aren't you?"

Once I had set my eyes on the sea for the first time, it took me a while before I could look away. It was so wide and so perfectly flat across the horizon. Uncle Lehmar was saying something to me, but all I could do was plod along silently with my eyes glued to the water. I was just so amazed it left me speechless.

Before I knew it, we'd reached the town. Uncle Lehmar had grabbed my hand at some point to keep us from getting separated, but I didn't even notice until I could no longer see the sea past all the buildings now blocking my view. That was when I realized there were people all around us. I'd never seen so many people in my life. Voices shouted back and forth from every direction. And it was evening now—the sky above us had turned crimson, and shops were getting ready to close up for the day. Vendors were cutting prices to try to clear out the last of their stock, Uncle Lehmar explained, but his voice sounded like it was coming from far away and his words were just vaguely drifting into my head.

The sea had been amazing. This town was amazing too. Amazing and scary.

"So this is a town," I murmured.

There were so many people. Too many to count. And I didn't recognize a single one of them.

I think that was when I finally understood why everyone in the village had been worried about me. No, I'd understood before, but now I really *felt* it. There were no strangers in my village. I knew not just everyone's faces, but their names and where they all lived too. I'd greet every person I met, because that was just

what you did. There were a few grumps who never replied, but most always said hello back. But here? There was a whole sea of faces around me, but I knew no one. I'd never been in a situation like this before, and it felt scary and horribly, horribly lonely. I gripped Uncle Lehmar's hand tighter. With my other hand, I stroked the donkey's fur. Its ears twitched, and it looked back at me with kind eyes.

Once, a long time ago, I'd gotten lost in the forest. Back then, I'd cried because I was all alone. Now I wanted to cry because there were so many people all around me. But leaving the village had been my decision. I'd convinced my family, turned down the priest's kindness—everyone in the village had come out to see me off. *I can't get cold feet now. I'm going to get a job and live here from now on. That's what I came here to do.*

"Well, here we are, Kiri. This is where you're going to work from now on."

When I heard Uncle Lehmar's voice, I suddenly realized I'd just been staring down at the ground. There must have been interesting new sights all around me, but I spent all this time looking at paving stones. To be fair, there were no paving stones in my village, so they were interesting enough in their own way.

I looked up. A building many times the size of the village chief's house loomed over me, almost like it had been waiting...

"Right, in we go. Be a good lad and keep quiet while I talk to the owner, will you?" Uncle Lehmar smiled and gently pulled my hand.

At the same time, something else caught my attention. It was the tiny shop sign—much *too* tiny for a building this size, almost as if it weren't supposed to be seen. If I was reading it right, it said...Zelmar Slavers.

*"This shop we're going to, what do they sell there?"*

*"Hmm? Ah, well..."*

A chill ran down my spine. I hadn't thought much of it at the time, but there was something very strange about the way Uncle Lehmar had dodged my question back then. Terror surged through me as I felt his large, firm hand gripping mine, and I wrenched my hand free. Something wasn't right. This was no salt shop.

"Kiri? What's the matter?" Uncle Lehmar looked at me in surprise as I leaped away from him. He was the same old merchant I'd always known, and yet I suddenly felt like I was

looking at a complete stranger. “Something frighten you?” he asked, this time with a puzzled expression. After a few moments, he seemed to notice what I was looking at. He tilted his head as he turned around to face the little shop sign. “Don’t tell me you can—”

I ran.

Into the dark streets of that town where I knew no one, I ran. I had to get away from that man. I ran as fast and as far as my legs would carry me, without a clue where I was going, until I found myself in a pitch-black alley. I crouched down, trembling like a leaf, even though the nights were still warm this time of year. That was when I realized a kid like me had only gotten away from Uncle Lehmar because of the donkey and the load of merchandise it pulled. He couldn’t risk leaving them behind to chase me. My heart was still pounding, I couldn’t stop shaking, and my teeth chattered so loudly I was terrified that he’d find me by the sound.

The priest had taught me how to read. He had me copy some faded scriptures, which were so faded the letters were almost invisible, and then he bought the copies from me and kept them in the village church. Everyone back home knew I could read, but Uncle Lehmar was an outsider. The possibility probably never even crossed his mind. After all, no one else in the village knew how. Some people even made fun of me for my “useless” skill. *Well, who’s laughing now? It’s a darn good thing I know how to read, isn’t it?*

I sat huddled in the dark alleyway with my teeth still clacking together and let out an odd little birdlike squeak. It was supposed to be a laugh, but my voice had hitched and it had come out funny. In the darkness and quiet of the alley, the sounds of my own trembling seemed ridiculously loud, and I was starting to feel cold from all the sweat I was covered in after my desperate run. I was so scared, and I had no idea what I was going to do next. For now, all I could do was curl my body up small and tight so that no one would find me before sunrise.

***

“Congratulations!” My throat was so dry, it felt like my voice would quit on me before I could squeeze the word out.

*Not good. Can’t keep being like this. Not today. I can’t stand here*

*looking miserable when they're about to start their new life together. Right? Journeys should begin with a smile. That's how it's done.*

I gripped the handle of the basket filled with yellow petals. *I'm sure this is the goddess's will. After all, I'm not the first man who's ever been snubbed by a woman, and I won't be the last. It happens every day! Just laugh it off and be happy for the lucky bastard she picked instead. I can do that much, right?*

"Blessings to the both of you! Congratulations!" I emptied the basket of petals over the man and woman beaming with joy under the bright sunshine.

The happy couple, who had exchanged their battle-worn armor and weapons for wedding clothes that didn't suit them quite so well, stared at me in surprise with their eyes wide and mouths hanging open.

"Wha— Waine! Enough with the horseplay!" shouted Miguel, still high-strung with nerves.

Ranna just laughed as she always did. "Ha ha ha! Don't we make a pretty bouquet?"

With that, everyone burst into laughter and applause. Even the priest was in stitches. *Yeah, this is how it's meant to be.* The ceremony was a bit unorthodox by most folks' standards, but who'd decided these things had to be stuffy affairs anyway? We were doing things our way.

"Yeesh, what a darn mess... But thanks, Waine. You're the reason we're standing here today."

"Ha, that's not like you, Miguel. Well, there's probably not a man alive who wouldn't be nervous on his wedding day. Come on, drink up. The groom's gotta finish every drop that's poured for him—that's the tradition here in Hiriyenka!"

"Funny how I've never heard that one before..."

I gave Miguel's outstretched right hand a firm shake and slapped him on the shoulder before topping up his still half-full wooden cup with liquor.

"Look after yourself, Ranna. Make sure to kick Miguel's ass if he slacks off on the farm." I greeted the new bride too, but I didn't pour for her. There was a tiny life growing within her belly. It was a shame that we couldn't drink together, but even I knew that alcohol was no good for babies.

"Heh, oh, I will," she replied with a grin. "You take care too, Waine. Don't do anything I wouldn't."

This was a blessed day.

An old veteran had once told me: When adventurers part ways, and all of them are still alive, you celebrate. Even a falling-out or a betrayal. A happy day like today, then, was truly special. Festive yellow flowers bloomed everywhere I looked. Even the fluffy clouds in the sky seemed like they were filled with cheer. Across the water, a group of dancers were waving fluttering lengths of fabric for some reason and taking swigs from a bottle.

"A toast to the bride and groom! May the blessings of the goddess Amana be upon them!"

I raised my cup to meet the others' before bringing it to my lips. A fine, expensive brew, much smoother than our usual fare. I emptied the cup with a satisfied gasp. And then...

*Thud!* I slammed my cup of cheap liquor down on the wood. Having cried myself to sleep, slumped over the table, I'd woken up with a pounding headache and a wobbly stomach too. The dregs of the alcohol I'd drowned myself in last night to escape reality tasted about as good as you'd expect. I wanted to die.

I let out a hiccup and then a sob. It had been two days already, and I still couldn't squash those dreams. Each time the alcohol got to me and turned on the waterworks, the corners of my eyes stung.

"You held up well, Waine."

The comforting words came from a wild-haired mage who suddenly appeared in the seat across from me. Actually, she was probably just here to make sure I hadn't drunk myself to death.

"Ugh... Listen, Sheya, I... I..."

"You loved Ranna. But Miguel beat you to her, and by the time you found out, she was already pregnant." Sheya took the words right out of my mouth.

Actually, I might've told her that half a dozen times already. I hung my head, feeling dejected.

The battle had ended before it had ever begun. I had no magic that could turn back time. Still slumped over the table, I let out a heavy sigh. I groped around, without lifting my head, until I found some leftover rye bread from last night. The sight of the small lump almost made my stomach lurch. My head was throbbing, and I was nauseous with heartburn. But my sluggish brain thought it'd be a waste to throw the bread away, so I made myself take a nibble. Miguel didn't like the stuff—said it was hard and sour—but I liked the texture. Plus, rye bread was filling and

cheap. Ranna liked it too and ate it often.

"Wish I could get married..." I mumbled.

"Who'd be your bride?"

"Sheya... I know, why don't you—"

"Get to Rank B and I'll think about it."

It was a harsh system, the hierarchy of adventurers. My position in Rank D hung around my neck like a boulder. Low-ranked adventurers didn't even get a shot at the high-paying jobs. But then again, bigger reward means more complicated work. Too complicated for me, anyway.

*But come on, Sheya... Rank B? Give a guy a chance.* There were only two parties of Rank B adventurers in Hiriyenka, and not a single Rank A. There were no unexplored dungeons or big bounties around here. All the heavy hitters ended up in the capital.

"Hmm. The capital, huh...?" I murmured, thinking idly that maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to strike out on a journey to somewhere new, until I remembered the state of my finances. I'd spent almost every last coin on the wedding celebrations. Paying for tomorrow's lunch was already gonna be a problem, let alone some journey to who-knows-where.

I let out another long, sad sigh. Heartbroken or not, I couldn't sit moping here forever. It was another luxury I couldn't afford. Being idle was a hobby for those with much fatter coin purses than mine. It was depressing, being forced to face this harsh reality, but not enough to bring me to tears. Sadly, my heart was too hard for that.

I stuffed the last of the rye bread into my mouth, washed it down with the cheap swill, and sighed again. I glanced at the wall where requests were pinned and saw that there were a few posted. If only I could get a nice one-way escort mission that'd take me toward the capital, I'd kill two birds with one stone. But there was a problem.

*Work, huh? This is gonna be tricky.*

Sluggishly, I pushed myself up off the table and, with a hand pressed to my aching forehead, stared at the requests wall. By the looks of it, the morning people had already scattered for the day, so there was nobody to block my view. My hangover and however many tears I'd cried over the last two days weren't exactly helping me see any better, but eventually I managed to squint my eyes into focus. My sharp vision was one of my few

points of pride. From where I sat, I could make out not only the headings but also the shapes of the small letters written below them.

The only problem was, I couldn't understand a single word.

At that moment, the guild's door slowly opened with a soft creak.

***

"Oh..."

I opened my eyes. An earthy smell filled my nose. I slowly sat up and saw a wall in front of me. Its bricks were faded with age and cracked all over. I didn't think anyone would call this a fine building, even if they were trying to be nice.

The sun had already climbed high in the sky. My head felt like it was filled with fog. When I rubbed my cheek with my sleeve, I felt bits of grit scratch against my skin.

"Guess I fell asleep."

Right... We came to this port town yesterday. Uncle Lehmar had taken me to a slaver's, and I'd run away and hidden in this alleyway before falling asleep on the spot. If only it'd all been a dream.

My mind was blank. I sat there, with my back resting against the old brick wall, and stared up at the sky. I felt weak and unsteady, and I didn't want to move. Not a single finger. What would I do, anyway? I didn't want to think about it.

"Uncle Lehmar... He's not looking for me anymore, is he?"

Hours had gone by. I didn't have to worry anymore, right? I felt relieved for a few moments, but then anxiety washed over me. I was truly alone now. What was I going to do?

As I looked up at the bright sky, tears stung my eyes. But before any could fall, my stomach growled.

"I'm starving..."

I hadn't eaten a single thing since lunch yesterday. Now that I knew I was hungry, I realized my throat was dry too. It left me feeling even more hopeless than before. I didn't want to do anything, but I knew I couldn't just sit there. So I tried to stand up—I managed to. Then I tried walking—I could. Still, my mind was as blank as a sheet of paper. I didn't want to think.

I found myself on a wide road all of a sudden. Nothing bad happened, but I shrank back and hid against the wall anyway.

After a few moments, I gathered up enough courage to peer up and down the road. Rows of two-story buildings lined each side. None of the buildings in my village had an upstairs. I'd only ever heard of buildings with upper floors from the priest's stories. But these buildings were everywhere, here. This town was really something.

There was something scary about walking down the middle of the road, so I stayed off to one side. I wasn't alone on the street. A handful of people walked by me, and there was a flower seller working at a stall, but not a single person even seemed to notice me. I kept going, glancing up anxiously at the tall buildings as if one of them might topple over at any moment and squash me flat.

A bookstore. A locksmith. An apothecary. I tried to read every shop sign I saw on the way. *Does this one sell pots? And this one sells stone? Is that a cloth shop?* I couldn't read all of the words, but a peek inside soon told me what they sold. An inn. A blacksmith. A leather goods store. A restaurant.

"Can't get anything without money, though, huh..." I murmured. All I had was the clothes on my back.

I smelled something tasty from inside the restaurant and paused for just a few moments in front of the sign before moving on. I was hungry, but they'd have nothing for a kid who couldn't pay.

I held my growling stomach and looked up at the next sign: Adventurer's Guild.

I stopped and stared. The guild's name was written underneath, but I couldn't read the scrawly letters. Probably characters I didn't know. I looked the building up and down. It was large, like the others I'd seen, with an upstairs and downstairs. Pieces of sturdy iron strengthened the wooden window frames, and a symbol of a horse with a fish's tail instead of back legs was painted on the front of the building.

My head still felt foggy, and my legs wobbled as I headed for the guild entrance. I reached for the door—then hesitated, pulling my hand away. But I couldn't turn back either. So I gulped and slowly pushed on the door. The dry, creaky hinges squealed as the door swung open.

It was dim inside. The first thing I noticed was that meals were served here. A man and woman in strange outfits were eating at a table. That man... He was wearing metal armor. I'd

only ever seen something like that gathering dust in the village chief's house. The woman sitting across from him had a pointy hat, just like the ones mages wore in a book I'd read. There were a handful of other people in the back of the dingy space, all of them wearing some sort of unusual clothing. Nervously, I stepped inside.

There was a counter in an area separate from where people were eating. A big, muscly man with a grim face sat behind it. He was reading over some kind of document but looked up when he noticed me.

"Hey. Got a request?" the man asked.

His eyes were full of doubt as he looked at me. He also had the deepest voice I'd ever heard. I could almost feel it echo in my empty stomach. I was about to turn back and leave, until I remembered that I had nowhere else to go. I clenched my hands. Right now, this was the only way I could think of to make a living in this strange town.

"I... I want to...become an adventurer," I said, my voice tiny and trembling.



The old but fragrant wooden counter seemed to be the guild's reception desk. The man had asked me if I had a request, so I guessed this was where people came with all kinds of tasks for the adventurers to do. There were bundles of parchment all piled up, a dull and scruffy quill pen, and an inkpot too.

The man glowered down at me. He was built like a bear, with chestnut hair and a beard streaked with gray. When I looked more closely at his face, I noticed a huge scar on one cheek. He was just looking back at me, but it almost felt like he was squeezing my throat with his hand.

"Can you write your name?" he asked.

Judging from his expression, he still didn't trust me. And I was too scared to process what he'd said to me at first, but his question eventually sank into my brain. I quickly straightened myself up and tried to answer. *My name. Write. Okay.*

"Y-Yes. I can."

"Right. Then write it here."

The man was definitely not a talker. He took a sheet of parchment from a shelf behind him and put it on the counter in front of me without saying anything else. I tried to sit down, which was a little tricky because the stool was too tall for me. My feet couldn't even reach the floor, but I wiggled my butt into a comfortable position and then looked down at the parchment. There were blank spaces for my name and some other details too.

"Um... I don't have a family name, so what should I put?"

"Leave it blank."

Well, at least he answered the question. He even pushed the quill and inkpot closer to me so they were easier to reach. I still thought he was scary, but he didn't seem like a mean person. I dipped the tip of the quill into the ink and started to write my name. The quill's tip was really worn, so the first letter came out a little funny. Even the priest would have replaced a quill this old.

"Should I fill in the rest too?"

"Yup," came the flat reply.

*Wait a minute. Is this a sign-up form for the guild? If it is, does that mean they're not going to make me leave?*

I worked my way down the form. Race. Place of birth. Gender. The quill ran dry and I dipped it into the pot again, being careful about the amount of ink I added because of the worn tip. *That should be good.* I adjusted my grip on the quill, moved my hand

down to the next item on the form…and stopped.

Age. I remembered what Uncle Lehmar had said on our way into town.

*“Most guilds don’t take applications from anyone younger than twelve. I don’t think the adventurer’s guild is any different.”*

He was an awful person. He’d lied to me and taken me to a slaver, but I felt like he hadn’t been lying about this. I didn’t like the idea of trusting him about anything. If what he’d said was true, though, the guild would tell me I was too young to become an adventurer and kick me out. And then what would I do? I had no idea, and that really scared me.

I shut my eyes and apologized to the gods, hoping they’d forgive what I was about to do. It was probably the sincerest prayer I’d ever made. And then, I put the quill’s tip on the parchment and wrote the number twelve.

I finished filling out the form and handed it back to the menacing man on the other side of the desk. He scowled as he scanned over what I’d written. Honestly, I was petrified. What if he figured out that I’d lied? It reminded me of the time when I had to admit I broke someone’s farm tools while playing with them, except right now it felt twice as hard to breathe. It took everything I had to stay in my seat and not run for the door.

“Nice handwritin’.”

“Oh, um… Thank you.”

I wasn’t expecting that gruff mumble to be a compliment. Maybe he was talking to himself, not to me. Well, I’d gotten lots of writing practice copying those scriptures for the priest. He’d always reminded me to write clearly and carefully.

“All right,” the man said. “You’ll be registered as a Rank F adventurer.”

“Huh?” I stared at him for a few moments. Yes, I was the one who’d asked to become an adventurer. But I didn’t understand. I mean, it couldn’t be *this* easy.

“Th-That’s it…?” I asked. “There’s nothing else?”

“Nope. If you can read, go look at the requests on the wall and pick one.” With that, he seemed to lose all interest in me and went back to reading the sheet of parchment he’d been looking at when I came in.

*Seriously…? That’s all there is to it? I’m an adventurer now, just like that?*

While I was still just sitting there, dazed by how simple it had

been, the man stopped reading again and lifted his scarred face. It seemed like he'd changed his mind.

"Hold on. Guess I better go over a few points of caution with you," he grumbled. He locked his eyes on mine, narrowing them as if to threaten me, and I sat up a little straighter.

"There used to be a fee for registerin' at the guild."

My heart skipped a beat. I didn't have a single coin on me.

"But it's free now. Why d'you think that is?"

"Why...? Um..." I didn't really know, but I sure was thankful. I tried thinking of an answer, but it seemed like my time ran out because the man answered for me.

"It's 'cause we had an endless parade of thievin' dogs stealin' to pay for their registration."

*Stealing? There were thieves here too?*

"Gives a guild a bad name when you've got those types hangin' around. We gave 'em a good drubbin' and threw 'em out whenever we caught 'em, but you can't go investigatin' every newbie who puts their name down."

He heaved a heavy sigh and tutted. Apparently just thinking about the thieves was enough to put him in a bad mood, and I found myself hoping he'd never get mad at me.

"So we made it free. And now it ain't thieves we have to deal with, it's time wasters. I dunno if they're puttin' each other up to it or just bored or what. They sign up and then you never hear from 'em again. What a pain in the ass... But there's a worse type out there—the ones who take on requests and never get the work done."

It sounded like running an adventurer's guild was a tough job. I couldn't help but feel some sympathy for the bearish man as his face creased into a frown.

"Well, those types get tied up and thrown to the monsters. Bad for business to leave 'em be."

*Huh? Did I...hear that right? They feed you to monsters if you don't do your work right?*

"Now listen up, 'cause this is important." That voice like tumbling rocks grew even lower than before as the man glared at me. "If you take a request, make damn sure you do a proper job," he growled.

"I-I will..." was all I could say. I was leaning back so far I almost toppled off the stool and barely got my balance back in time.

"If you get it, then get goin'."

“Yes, sir.”

Adventuring was scary. The man behind the desk was scary too.

Dozens of requests were pinned to the wooden wall he’d mentioned earlier. The sheets of parchment were stuck up in a sloppy mess. Some of the requests covered others up, while parts of the wall were left bare. It was strange. Why couldn’t people put them up nice and neatly? I almost felt sorry for the state the wall was in, with pinholes sprinkled all over. I tried reading some of the request forms at eye level.

“Ex-ter-mi-na-tion… They want something killed. Some kind of snake monster? It appeared in a cave and they want someone to get rid of it.” I could read most of the letters, but I felt like I was missing something. It didn’t say how big this snake was, and I wouldn’t be able to find it because I didn’t know the name of the place written in the request. Still, I did learn something: The big letters at the top of the forms were headings. I looked up at the wall and read as many of those headings as I could see.

Extermination. Extermination. Escort. Survey. Missing person. Mining. Extermination. Unloading ship’s cargo. Guarding. Transporting stone. Survey. Escort. Delivery.

Some of it was just your everyday manual labor, but it seemed like adventurers would take on all of these. They really were jacks-of-all-trades. I read through the requests one by one, struggling with some of the harder words.

I knew extermination, escort, and guarding jobs were out of the question for me. I’d never even fought with kids my own age and won before. Manual labor was probably out too. I thought maybe a survey job would be doable, but the request details were about researching rare monsters and where they lived and…stuff like that. It sounded really hard. As for the delivery job and searching for a missing person, there was no way I could do those. I didn’t know anything about this town and its streets.

This wasn’t good. I couldn’t find anything that I could do. Did people even make requests that a kid could handle? Doubt was creeping in, but I kept looking for anything I might be able to take on. I’d helped out lots with farmwork back home. Something like that would be perfect.

“Hey, kiddo. You a newbie? And you can read, huh?”

A voice from behind startled me. I whirled around to see a strange man standing there. He was tall and had dark brown

hair with one very noticeable tuft of white in the front. He wore battered metal armor and had a longsword hanging from his hip. This guy was definitely an adventurer.

*But…what's up with him?* My eyes went wide in surprise as I looked up at his face. I was pretty sure it was still morning, but the man stank of alcohol. Judging by his bright red face and the way he was clutching the back of his head with his right hand, he was probably drunk and nursing a headache too. The man who lived a couple of doors down from us back in the village would get like this after just a few sips. And this adventurer's eyes were all red and puffy like he'd been crying for days. I had no idea what was going on with him, and it made me a little uneasy.

"I-I, um… I just joined the guild. And I can read, more or less." I answered what I was asked, nothing more.

The man was still wincing at his headache, but he grinned. It didn't make me feel any better.

"You don't say? Not every day you meet a kid your age who knows his letters. Let's see…" Swaying unsteadily, the man walked closer until he stood beside me and pointed to one of the sheets on the wall. "Go on, then. Can you tell me what this one says?"

The man seemed to doubt I really could read. The request he pointed to had a picture of some lizard-like monster drawn on it. According to the heading, it was a survey job.

"It's about a survey of great lizards in the swamps. They want to know roughly how many there are, where they build their nests, what they eat, and they also want you to bring back some droppings. And it says to be careful because they're known to attack people."

I managed to read it. But this work wasn't something I could handle, especially because of that last part.

"Huh. All right, how about this one?"

"They're looking for someone to guard their fields from bears and boars. The job takes twenty days."

This one was easy to read, but again, the work was impossible for me. What would I do against a bear or a boar?

"Too long. What's this one say?"

The next one he pointed to was a little trickier. I could read the words, but I couldn't really picture what they were describing.

"It's a request for the extermination of some, um, big rats in the…" I paused for a moment, puzzled. "Water paths under the

ground?”

“Gotcha. They want the dire rats cleared out of the sewers. They’re about twice the size of cats, those things.”

“Sewers? What are those?”

“Hm? They’re underground waterways. They run under the town and carry dirty water and such out to the sea.”

I’d never even heard of anything like that. This town was amazing above and below the ground.

“They only run under the Central District, though. Anyway, what about the bit underneath?”

“Under... Oh, I think it says...per-ma-nent. You have to collect tails as proof that you’ve killed them. The reward for each one you kill is—”

“Tails, huh? Yeah, yeah, I remember now.” The man nodded. “Color me impressed, kiddo.”

Something funny was going on here. But before I could figure it out, the man pulled out one of the request’s pins and thrust the loose sheet of parchment into my hands.

“This one’s for you.”

“Huh?”

“See ya, kiddo. Don’t wander too far from town.”

I was so surprised I couldn’t say a word, so I just took the parchment. The man grinned, turned away from me, and went to the reception desk. He waved at me lazily over his shoulder with his right hand, and with his left he held another sheet of parchment from the wall.

*What just happened?*

“Fooled by a fool.”

“Wah!” I yelped, startled by a voice that came from behind me, right by my ear. *Could people stop doing that?!*

I spun around to see the woman in the pointy hat I’d noticed earlier. She was crouching so that her face would be level with mine. The way she’d hitched up her dark blue robe to keep the hem from touching the floor seemed a lot like what a townsperson would do, somehow. She had lovely bluish-silver hair, pale skin, and a face like a beautiful sculpture. Her eyes, sparkling like clear, blue gemstones, followed the man in armor.

“Waine can’t read, you see.”

“Oh... Really?”

So his name was Waine. I looked at the wall again and, sure enough, the request for the rat extermination was gone. Waine

had taken it with him to the reception desk.

"He could've just told me."

I wouldn't have minded reading the requests for him, and I wouldn't have felt so nervous if he'd just said he couldn't read. *I thought he was testing me the whole time! Ahh, I was all worried for nothing.*

"He's embarrassed," the woman stated.

"Embarrassed?" I blinked in surprise. "Because he can't read?"

In the village, people had made fun of me for being able to read and write. Were things different here in town? Maybe here no one would tell me I should learn to skip a stone three times on the water before wasting my time on reading.

"He forgets what he's supposed to do."

*"Yeah, yeah, I remember now,"* Waine had said before, nodding to himself.

"Until now, he's had comrades to pick up the slack."

This woman used words like she was paying through the nose for each one. I'd understand her a lot better if she'd just explain a little more. Still, once I thought about what she said and put the pieces together, things started to make sense.

Basically, Waine had done that same job a few times before, but he couldn't remember exactly what to do. And because he couldn't read, he had to ask someone for the details if he wanted to take on that request again...and that's what he was embarrassed about. Yeah, I could see why he might feel that way. But what happened to the people he'd been working with until now? Were they not here anymore?

"Here."

She dropped something into my hand, and I quickly grabbed it. It was a long object, small but solid and heavy. I glanced down curiously, wondering what it was, then felt my heart skip when I realized what I was holding. It was a knife inside a sheath. A weapon. It wasn't the first time I'd touched one, but back home they'd mostly been kept out of reach for safety's sake. I never imagined someone would hand me a weapon so casually.

"For reading for him. It'll help you with that job," the woman said calmly. Without another word, she placed her hands on her knees to straighten herself up, turned on her heel, and headed for a table in the eating area.

Just like that, the conversation was over, and I was alone again. *What kind of person just leaves like that?*

“Well, I guess I should take this to the reception desk,” I said to myself. I glanced left and right to make sure no one was lurking behind me before I looked over the parchment in my hand. It had plenty of pictures, so it was easy to understand.

*Oh… I see. I might just be able to handle this.* I read the details of the request, then walked back toward the man with the scarred face sitting at the reception desk. He still seemed to be glowering at that same document, whatever it was.

When I placed the request down on the counter, he drew his brows together and looked at me. The heading of the request said “herb collection.” There were pictures of several kinds of plants, and the instructions were simple: Pick those plants, then bring them back. It looked like a straightforward request compared to the others, and the spot where the herbs grew was supposed to be close to town. The reward wasn’t much, but I was grateful for any work I could do right now.

“Right. Consider it accepted.” The man sighed and picked up the request, placed it on a shelf behind him, then went back to scowling at the document from before.

That was a problem. I spoke up. “Um… Am I not allowed to take that with me?”

The man gave me an impatient look. “That’s a permanent request. Anyone can accept it whenever, so I’ll be puttin’ it back up on the wall. Which is a pain in the ass, so just tell me you want the job next time.”

Permanent. That same word was on the rat-extermination request. So that meant a request was always available. *Okay, that’s why the sheet goes back on the wall. But now what? That messes up my plans.* I’d been hoping I could look at the pictures while gathering, so I asked, “If it’s not too much trouble…could I please take a look at the pictures on that request again?”

The man heaved another sigh but didn’t complain as he let me study the sheet.

I stepped out of the dim adventurer’s guild into the bright sunshine. The glare made me scrunch up my eyes for a few moments, but I felt relieved at the same time. I looked up and down the unfamiliar street lined with tall buildings and saw more shops than I’d seen in my whole life. There were so many people and voices everywhere, and I was amazed all over again. *I’m in a town. I’m really in a town.*

I'd been so nervous and scared when I was inside. This busy port town by the sea was nothing like the village I was from. You could tell just by looking around. But somehow, I felt like there was something extra special about this guild.

I was about to close the doors behind me but decided to peek inside one last time. Even though it was still early in the day, the faint smell of alcohol drifted from inside the dimly lit guild. I could see the man with the scary, scarred face sitting at the reception desk and the dozens of requests on parchment stuck to the wall. And when I narrowed my eyes to peer into the gloom, I could see that pretty lady with the pointy hat still eating her meal. The man in armor who couldn't read, Waine, wasn't there anymore. In this strange town, there was now a place that I knew—even if only a little.

"Okay!" I closed the doors and nodded with satisfaction once I was sure they were shut tight. It was very important to properly close any door you opened. The grown-ups in the village always said bad things could slip in through a door left open, so we always closed them tight behind us. I didn't want anything evil to get into the guild while I was away.

"I'll be back," I said softly, and then I turned away from the guild and started walking. Luckily, the road leading out of town was as straight as an arrow and wide too, so I had no chance of getting lost along the way. I did my best to ignore my hunger.

Our house back in the village was pretty far away from the other houses, so I was used to walking a lot. Going to the river every time we needed water wasn't my favorite chore in the world, but now I could walk a long way before getting tired thanks to that.

I was still too scared to walk down the middle of this big road, though, so I stayed to the side and out of everyone's way. The large paving stones under my feet were placed so nice and neatly that I almost felt bad stepping on them. *How did they even do this?* I wondered. While I was busy puzzling over little details like that, I soon reached a stretch of road where single-story shops and buildings replaced the bigger, two-story ones I'd seen until now. After a certain spot where I saw large carriages stopped, I started noticing fields and not as many people around. Then I saw a brick wall with thick wooden pillars and a tall set of gates in the distance.

"Looks twice as tall as a person..." I mumbled to myself.

The closer I got to the huge wall, the tinier I felt. I realized I'd seen it before, when Uncle Lehmar and I first got to town, but I'd been so interested in the sea back then that I hadn't paid very much attention. But now... *Does this thing circle around the whole town?* In the village, we had wooden fences to keep monsters out, but they were nothing like this wall. *How do you build something like this? And more importantly, what's it keeping out? Are the monsters around here really that dangerous?* I felt a chill run up my spine as that thought popped into my head. Here I was, about to leave for the other side of that wall.

"I'll be fine," I reassured myself. "It's not like I've never been outside before."

Uncle Lehmar and I hadn't run into anything dangerous when we were traveling together. He'd lied to me, but I was pretty sure that had nothing to do with not seeing a single monster during our three days on the road. I just had to keep my eyes peeled and my wits sharp. Besides, a little danger was a part of the job—that was why the request had been posted at the adventurer's guild, right?

"Right. I'm..." I paused, then pushed through my hesitation. "An adventurer."

I felt like an idiot when I realized how long it'd taken me to, well, realize it: I was a real adventurer now. This time yesterday, I never would've thought I'd be here. But look at me now! I'd gotten registered, taken on my first request, and now I was heading out of town to fulfill it. *That's real adventuring, if you ask me.*

"No turning back. I gotta do this," I told myself, and I walked on with a new sense of determination. Go out there, gather those herbs, and earn some money. That was my mission now. If I couldn't do that, I wouldn't eat today.

The large gates ahead were open, but two guards in metal armor stepped forward to stop me. Their armor, helmets, and even their spears looked exactly the same. They peered down at me.

"You lost, boy?" asked one of them, a middle-aged man with a short mustache. "This way leads out of town."

"Um, n-no. I want to go outside," I replied, then realized I probably needed to explain myself better than that. "I'm an adventurer. I'm going to pick some herbs."

The guards looked at each other, then they looked back at me.

Would the guards believe me? They didn't seem convinced. I'd registered at the guild, but that man with the scary face hadn't given me anything that proved I was an adventurer. Plus, I was a little on the short side for my age. Could I really pass for a twelve-year-old? If not, they probably wouldn't let me through.

"What guild're you from?"

"Oh, uh..."

I opened my mouth to answer— *Ahh, I couldn't read the guild's sign! Darn it. What am I doing?* Who would believe I was an adventurer if I didn't even know the name of the guild I belonged to? I was starting to feel like my adventure might end right here at these gates.

"It's..." I did my best to come up with something to say. "The one with a horse with a fish's tail. Straight down this road."

"Oh, that's the Raging Kelpie's Tail."

"Makes sense he'd leave town this way, then."

The guards nodded. It seemed like telling them where the guild was and about the picture painted on the outside was enough. So it was called the Raging Kelpie's Tail? What a weird name. It seemed kind of long—and why the tail? The horse part was much cooler. They could've named the place after its mane or hooves or something. Kelpie, I guessed, was probably the horse's name.

"What's your name?" one of the guards asked.

"It's Kiri."

"Kiri, huh? Be sure you're back by evening. The gates close then," said the mustached guard. He stepped back to let me through.

"Stay alert," said the other guard. "And don't stray too far."

Had they believed me after all? As I stood there, a little stunned, I felt like the open gates were calling to me. I was sure of it. The guards urged me on, so I passed through and found myself outside of town.

I was sure someone would stop me. Like, some kind person would say, "It's dangerous out there," or "Don't be silly, you can't go alone," or "A kid like you shouldn't be adventuring!" That was the kind of person Uncle Lehmar had pretended to be, and the thought made me shiver. In the end, no one like that came along to offer kindness or a helping hand. Alone and hungry, armed with nothing but the small knife I'd been given for doing a little reading, I stood outside the walls of the unfamiliar town.

The landscape opened up far and wide before my eyes. Winding across a wide, grassy plain, there was a small path that seemed to have been worn down over many years by many travelers' footsteps. A few trees stood scattered here and there, with their branches waving in the breeze. They grew thicker on the slopes of a far-off hill. In fact, that looked like a forest. A pair of kites circled high in the sky. I heard their high-pitched cries, almost as if they were calling to me. I gripped the knife by its sheath tightly in front of my chest and set off into the strange wilds beyond.

Yes, I was scared and full of doubts. Yes, I was starving. But as I looked up at the bright blue sky and thought about how nice the cool breeze wafting over my warm cheeks felt, I realized something: I was setting out on my first adventure—and even with everything that was going on, a little part of me was excited.



# Chapter 2: Fortune, Misfortune, and Herbs

“Sheya, wait.”

I was just about to leave the guild when a voice called me back. I turned around, wondering who had spoken, and saw the head of the guild, Barque. Paperwork had never been his strong suit, and now that those two had given up adventuring, he was more or less forced to sit and tussle with the piles of parchment at the reception desk. From the way he’d been bemoaning the convoluted forms and procedures, it must have been quite a handful for him. As a result, he’d been in a pretty foul mood lately.

“Not taking any requests today either?” Barque asked.

“There’s nothing that suits me.” I pinched the brim of my pointed hat and drew it low over my eyes. I had little talent for conversation.

“Thought the survey work would be right up a mage’s alley.”

“Surprisingly not.”

Barque let out a sigh at my terse reply. Honestly, almost none of the requests pinned to that wooden wall suited my skills. Most had been unfulfilled for some time; if I were to take those types of jobs, I might as well start unloading cargo at the docks to earn my wages. I knew the guild wanted those requests completed, but who would walk into danger for such poor rewards? The ability to select worthwhile jobs was an important skill for any adventurer.

“It’s tough out there for a solo mage. Won’t you think about joinin’ a party?” Barque suggested.

This again. Beneath the low brim of my hat, my brows drew together in a slight frown. It wasn’t the first time we’d had this discussion. Nor the second.

Most mages preferred light armor, because heavier pieces impeded our ability to channel mana. This made mages vulnerable in battle, and taking requests that may involve solo combat was unwise. However, a mage’s abilities were always in high demand. Even simple spells for creating light or starting a fire were useful on any expedition, and many mages boasted magic that could be powerful in battle. Additionally, with spells

like water walk, a party could even traverse the sea on foot. In short, having a mage in your party expanded your possibilities immensely. From Barque's perspective, it must have seemed like a waste for a mage like me to be acting alone.

"It's none of your concern," I replied coolly.

It wasn't like you could find magic users on every street corner in town, and those interested in adventuring were fewer still. If I had wanted to form or join a party, I'd have my pick of companions—even those ranked higher than me. But to work in a party or not was an individual choice for each and every adventurer to make. Even the guildmaster at headquarters had no right to interfere in that decision. Companions had to be chosen with the utmost care, because those choices could make the difference between life and death. Who would willingly place their life in the hands of someone they didn't trust?

"S'pose you're right. Pardon my meddlin'." Once again, Barque sighed.

He'd been doing that a lot lately. I prayed the stress wouldn't make him start going bald.

"He was a curious one," I commented, changing the subject before the conversation could continue down that line.

Barque raised one eyebrow and tilted his head before understanding seemed to dawn on him. He nodded. "The boy? He'll be gone by tomorrow," he said, with yet another sigh.

If the head of the adventurer's guild said so, it was probably true. For Barque, nothing was more important than being a good judge of character. Countless petitioners and adventurers passed through his doors, and he could see through a person and understand them far more reliably than I could hope to. He had to evaluate the merits of each request and, at times, turn down the ones that didn't make the cut. It was his job to assess the strength and trustworthiness of each adventurer, to make the call on raising or lowering their rank according to their accomplishments, and to assign work to individuals with particular skills when necessary. The duties and responsibilities of a guild leader were significant, indeed; no wonder his eyes were ever watchful. Though we might not say so, the adventurers who frequented the guild—including me—trusted Barque's judgment.

"What makes you say that?" I asked out of idle curiosity.

"Just look at his writin'." Barque reached for a sheet of

parchment on the shelf and placed it on the counter. “Neat, ain’t it? It’s one thing to be readin’ and writin’ at his age, but a hand like that? Takes practice.”

The letters were indeed clear and well shaped. The first few were a little crooked, probably because the boy had been unused to the quill, but the rest were neat and precise enough for church scripture. Truth be told, his penmanship was better than mine. Well, there was no particular reason for a mage to worry about handwriting. Plenty of mages wrote in nearly indecipherable chicken scratch.

“You do find ’em now and then—kids from commoner families who can write,” Barque explained. “But they don’t write like that. No need to. If you ask me, that’s the son of a rich merchant or some such, one who’s been sent out to learn a lesson in hard work.”

The pieces fit. If that was the case, then he truly wouldn’t last. Only some sort of eccentric plant fanatic would be able to earn a decent income from that herb-gathering job the boy had taken. Even if you managed to gather a decent amount, nearly every coin would be gone after you paid for a cheap meal and a night in an inn room shared with a dozen others. It would be a harsh awakening for a lad from a wealthy family. *I don’t know if he ran away from home, or if he’s just amusing himself by playing adventurer, but he’ll go running back to his parents soon.*

Then again, wasn’t it a little simplistic to assume he was a merchant’s son? There were other possibilities for the identity of a boy who could write well. Like…

“One of the lord’s sons, perhaps?”

“Nope. Those boys’ve got blond hair that’ll blind you on a sunny day.”

Well, it made sense for the head of the adventurer’s guild to be well-connected. I tapped a finger on my lower lip, trying to imagine other possibilities, but soon gave up. It didn’t matter to me. By the day after tomorrow, I won’t even remember the boy’s face.

My interest in the conversation evaporated, and I turned my back to Barque. “I’ll be back,” I said lightly. If I happened to see a request that suited me tomorrow, I’d be sure to take it.

He didn’t call out to me again.

***

After walking for a little while, I left the path and stepped into a grassy meadow. I could still see the gates to town behind me. Waine had said not to stray too far, and I thought it'd be good to take his advice. Besides, that probably meant that the herbs I wanted grew pretty close by. I hoped so, at least.

I really lucked out with this herb-gathering job. I'd gone picking wild vegetables, herbs, nuts, fruit, and stuff like that with my younger big brother, the hunter, dozens of times. So I more or less knew what I was doing. Some herbs tasted good, some were bitter, and some didn't have much flavor at all. Most of them were the bitter kind.

"Up we go...!"

I pulled myself up over a little ridge. This area had looked like a flat plain from far away, but it was actually pretty bumpy. Only the path was easy to walk on. There were tall grasses off to either side that came up to my stomach, and I had to push my way through. I wondered if monsters could be hiding in all this grass, and that made me really nervous. While looking this way and that to make sure nothing could sneak up on me, I searched for the herbs. The whole time, I was ready for something to jump out at me with every step I took.

To tell the truth, I couldn't remember all of the herbs from the pictures back at the guild. There had been nine total on the request, with detailed gathering instructions written beside each one. But I'd been so hungry, I couldn't concentrate and take it all in. Now, I could only clearly remember four. I wasn't sure if I'd recognize the other five even if I saw them growing out here, but there was nothing I could do about that now. Someone had once told me that it was important to know when to quit. *Don't remember who, though... Sounds like something Uncle Lehmar might've said.*

"Oh! There!" I shouted without thinking, then clapped my hands over my mouth right away. I dropped down to my knees in the grass and barely even dared to breathe. *Can't yell like that. What if the monsters hear me?*

I sat absolutely still for a while, but nothing appeared. Then I took a peek around to make sure the coast was clear before standing up again. The herbs I found grew up to my knees, with shiny, round, yellowish-green leaves. The shape was just like one of the plant drawings on the request.

"Yay..." I celebrated very quietly. My hunch had been right.

They did grow near the town.

I carefully held the stem between my fingers and gave it a light tug. It was surprisingly strong. I hesitated a little before pulling my knife out of its sheath. The edge was a little nicked, but there was no sign of rust. I gripped the handle firmly and remembered the instructions for gathering this herb. You had to cut the stem above the leaves at the very bottom. I wasn't sure *why* you were supposed to leave those bottom leaves on the plant, but that was what the request said to do.

I held the knife tightly and turned the sharp edge away so I wouldn't cut myself, just like my older big brother had taught me. He'd also taught me to never use blades unless I was with family or some other grown-up like the priest, but I was all alone out here. I didn't want to disobey my brother, but I couldn't exactly go back to the village to get his permission. I didn't even know how to get there. So I let out a breath, steeled my nerves, and pinched the herb just above the lowest leaves. I pressed the blade's edge against the stem and slowly pushed until it cut through.

I gathered my first herb!

I untied the strings on my dark green coat, at my chest and my stomach, and shrugged the coat off. It was a little stiff, but the cloth it was made from was thick and sturdy. The weather had gotten a lot warmer lately, but since there were still a few cold days here and there, I'd been stuffed into the coat when I left the village. I'd left the rest of my things on Uncle Lehmar's cart, so I really had nothing except the clothes on my back. Well, those and the knife the pretty lady had given me.

*Well, if you look at it another way, at least I have clothes.*

I took a thin but strong branch I found on the ground, bent it into a U shape, and tied it in place using the strings from my coat. Then I tied the ends of the sleeves together to make a handle, and my makeshift bag was complete. Or not.

"Hmm..." I frowned. "That's not gonna work."

The balance was off, and the bag tipped to one side when I lifted it by the tied sleeves. Anything I tried to put in would just fall out. After putting a little more thought into it, I tried shortening the handle part by threading the sleeves under each of the coat strings tied to the branch then tying the sleeves together where my elbows would be.

"That should do it."

The whole thing still tilted a little when I tried lifting it, and it looked nothing like a bag, but it was almost like a basket. Well, a badly made one. *At least I'll be able to carry more with this.* I put the herbs I'd gathered into my coat-basket-thing and stood up.

I had a good reason for making something like that. There were other patches of the yellowy-green plant with round leaves nearby. I'd happily started cutting and grabbing more, but then I realized I could only carry a little bit with my bare hands. Just one or two of these herbs wasn't worth much. I'd need to bring back a lot if I wanted to earn enough money for food. That was why I came up with the idea of turning my coat into a bag. The results weren't all that great, but it got the job done. I could already carry more than before. Green sap from the cut plant stalks was leaking onto my coat, but this was not the time to worry about a few stains.

"All right, let's grab a bunch of this stuff."

With a fresh boost of energy, I went back to gathering. It was already past noon. Almost a whole day had gone by since I'd had anything to eat or drink. My throat was as dry as dust, and the feeling of emptiness in my stomach had turned into something even more unpleasant. The fact that I was making real progress, though, was enough to help me find a little more enthusiasm and keep working.

But after that, even though I searched as far and wide as I could while staying near the gates, I couldn't find any more of the requested herbs.

"This isn't good..."

I wiped the sweat from my forehead with the back of one of my hands and felt gritty soil scratch my skin. I didn't have time to fuss about dirt, though. The sun was beginning to sink in the sky, and I was getting desperate. I had to get back to town before they shut the gates for the night, but I hadn't been able to find any more of the four herbs I'd memorized since stumbling across that first patch.

"This *really* isn't good..."

Now that my time was running out, something finally dawned on me: I was really lucky when I found those herbs nearby. I mean, if you could pick a bunch of these herbs this close to town, why in the world would you pay someone else to do it? And that meant they usually grew farther away, probably toward

the forest or hills, and it was very rare to find them here. It would take time to get to the forest, plus it was probably dangerous there. That was exactly why someone had asked adventurers to get the herbs.

"What do I do…?" I bit my bottom lip anxiously. "Should I go to the forest?"

I was annoyed with myself for being so stupid. Finding those herbs close to town had worked against me today. I ended up thinking I'd find more without having to go too far and wasted time wandering around places where the herbs didn't usually grow. If I hadn't found them, I would've gone searching farther away from town.

Fortune and misfortune were like two sides of a coin or a sheet of paper. There was nothing you could do about having good luck or bad luck, so there was really no point in worrying about it. That was what the priest had told me once. *I didn't really know what he meant back then, but whether I like it or not, I definitely get it now.*

Well, beating myself up over it wouldn't solve anything. I probably still had time to make it to the forest and back. But even if I got going right now, I wouldn't have enough time for a thorough search. Maybe I'd be better off staying here and hoping I got lucky again. *What should I do?*

"Ugh… Can't stand around like this. Gotta make a decision."

I did decide, but not because I came up with an amazing plan or anything like that. I mean, I was so hungry I couldn't even think straight. I started walking toward the forest, but I wasn't going all the way there. For that, I'd need to walk along the path…

"And I don't think valuable herbs would be growing right by the road."

If herbs didn't really grow near town, then the farther away I went, the better my chances were of finding some. So I decided to head toward the forest and look for herbs off the path, but I'd only go as far as I had time for. The guard had told me to be back by evening, but when exactly was that? If it was around when the sky started to change color, then I'd need to give up and turn back pretty soon. But I'd have more breathing room if evening meant after the sun went down but before light disappeared from the western sky.

"I wish I'd asked…"

Another mistake. If I'd thought to ask when I had the chance, the guards would've told me what they meant by evening. But since I didn't, I had to head back early to make sure I was on time. Even if I couldn't find any more herbs.

I walked through the grass in a hurry because I knew my time was running out, but I kept scanning the ground left and right as I went. I was getting used to being out here, so I wasn't jumping at every shadow like before. After all, people like Uncle Lehmar wouldn't be able to travel alone if there really were monsters lurking in every bush. I told myself I'd be fine as long as I could see all around me and didn't go too far from town.

At the same time, I think I was getting a little annoyed.

I'd been searching high and low since this morning, and I'd even made a basket on the fly to carry what I'd gathered. I worked hard and ended up with only a few handfuls of herbs. This was my very first job as an adventurer, and I felt so frustrated and embarrassed to have messed it up. What if people thought I'd just been goofing off all day? That scary-looking man was going to be disappointed for sure. Waine would probably laugh and make fun of me. And what if that lady asked for her knife back? *I can't face them like this...* Time was ticking, and I was starting to panic.

"Whoa!"

I tripped over a small bump, which I hadn't noticed because of the thick grass, and went tumbling to the ground.

"Owww..." I grumbled and pushed myself up. *Ugh...* I'd scraped my hand when I used it to stop myself from landing face-first. I think I'd banged my knee on something too, but at least it wasn't bleeding. I sat down in the grass and made sure I didn't have any other injuries, and then I brushed the dirt and pebbles off the palm of my hand and licked the scraped part. It tasted like blood and soil, and I spat on the ground.

Tears stung my eyes. How did I end up like this? I was supposed to be in town right now, training as a merchant's apprentice. Why was I out here, running all over looking for herbs that probably didn't even grow here? I tried to stand up, but I was so hungry I couldn't find the will or the energy. Just sitting here was making me tired. I wanted to flop over on my side right here in the grass. Maybe this was all just a bad dream. Maybe if I closed my eyes and went to sleep, I'd wake up back in my village.

“Oh…” That was when I saw them—plants with little buds and big, bright green leaves that looked like the tips had been snipped with scissors. “Valenwort!”

The village priest told me all about this plant. It could be made into a tonic or salve to cure all kinds of ills. Scrunching up the leaves and placing them over a wound would help it heal, and you could even roast them to make a tea that was full of goodness, even if it was a little bitter. It was incredibly useful. And here was a whole patch of it!

“There’s loads!”

A few moments ago, I hadn’t even been able to gather the will to stand, but now I hopped to my feet and ran over to the lush patch of herbs. I dropped to my knees, not caring if they got dirty, and studied the plants closely. *Yeah, this is valenwort for sure.* The priest had made herbal tea with valenwort for me a lot. I remembered the nasty, bitter taste well.

I put my coat-basket down on the ground and quickly pulled my knife from its sheath, but I fumbled and dropped it. I picked the knife back up and made sure my grip was firm this time.

“Calm down… Gotta be careful here.”

I knew how to gather this plant. The priest had taught me. It was easy—you just had to leave the roots behind. I held one of the stems close to the bottom and cut it, and then I put the herb in my basket. Then another, and another. Before long, I’d gathered a whole heap. As much as I could carry, actually, so I decided to take a break. I looked up at the sky and saw that the sun wasn’t setting yet. *I made it. I finished on time!*

I picked up the basket full of herbs. The weight of it was satisfying, and I felt happy about what I’d accomplished. I wasn’t sure how much money I’d get for this, but it’d probably be enough for a meal, at least.

“All right, back to town.”

The thought of a full belly put a spring in my step. I made sure to remember this spot. If I could come back here to gather more tomorrow, I’d be able to earn enough to get by for now.

Or so I thought.

“These’re no good,” the scary-faced man said flatly.

Back at the dimly lit adventurer’s guild, all I could do was stand there in front of the reception desk. I couldn’t say anything, and I didn’t want to believe what I’d just heard.

I finally got a couple of words out. “But. Why?”

*Did I pick them wrong? Did they go bad while I was carrying them? Or is this actually not valenwort?*

“This plant’s not in the request,” the man explained.

“Huh?!” I was shocked. Valenwort was used in medicines all the time. I didn’t even think there was a chance it wouldn’t be on the request. But then, I thought about the four plant pictures I’d memorized—no valenwort. If it’d been on the request, I would’ve noticed for sure.

“How come it’s not?” I asked. “It’s definitely useful for medicine.”

“Beats me,” the scarred man replied. “All I can tell you’s what’s in the request. I don’t bother with the whys and hows.”

That made sense. This man didn’t make the request. He just handled the reception desk. No point asking questions he couldn’t answer.

“Come to think of it,” he continued, scratching his bearded chin with his thumb. “I think the physician’s guild’s got a field of the stuff. Can’t see anyone puttin’ in a request if it’s somethin’ you can grow on your own.”

“Oh…” My mouth fell open as I realized how stupid I’d been.

*I should’ve realized… It makes total sense.* People can grow herbs for medicine just like any other plant. Of course someone would be farming something as useful as valenwort. Growing handy crops in a field so you’d always have some nearby was just common sense. Even the village priest had a little patch of herbs for medicine in his garden.

“Well,” the man continued, “just make sure you read the request properly next time.”

It was as simple as that. I had no excuses. I was so embarrassed and annoyed with myself, I felt my face turn bright red. What was the point of being able to read if I didn’t even pay attention? That was the one request on the wall that even came with pictures. If I’d tried harder to remember them all, I never would’ve made such a dumb mistake.

“These ones are on the list, though. Here.”

I saw a big, rough fist coming toward me and quickly covered my head with my hands. *He’s gonna hit me!*

Then I heard a metallic jingle. When I felt brave enough to look, I saw a small pile of copper coins on the counter in front of me. “Um, is this…”

“‘Sall I can give you for this little,” the man said, picking up the first herbs I’d found.

*Wait a minute. These coins are my reward? His face was so scary, I thought he got mad and was gonna punch me for bringing all these plants nobody asked for!*

“Take the rest with you. See ya.” The man shoved the valenwort back toward me. He muttered to himself as he turned to one side in his chair and made himself comfortable. It looked like he was going back to those parchments he’d been dealing with since this morning. *I guess there’s a lot of paperwork to do in towns.*

But I wasn’t ready to leave yet.

“Um, c-can I buy something to eat with this?” I could see that the coins I just got wouldn’t add up to much, but I had to ask.

“With that much?” The man raised an eyebrow at me. His rumbly voice made me shy away, but he didn’t seem angry. He counted out the copper coins again, told me to wait, then disappeared into the back somewhere.

After a minute or two, he came back with a wooden plate and cup. “Here’s what you can buy. If you want it, take it.”

There was a piece of rye bread on the plate, and the cup was filled with water. It wasn’t much, but it was food. Without even taking the plate, I grabbed the bread and took a bite. It was hard and grainy, and the strong flavor of rye filled my mouth. I never thought plain old rye bread could taste so good! My throat was so dry I couldn’t swallow right, so I grabbed the cup of water and washed the bread down. Another bite, another gulp of water, and then I shoved the rest into my mouth. The bread had vanished in just three mouthfuls, but I could already feel myself coming back to life.

As I let out a satisfied sigh, I noticed the scary man staring at me like he couldn’t believe what he just saw.

“You coulda sat down, at least,” he said.

“S-Sorry,” I stuttered. I felt a little guilty as I stood there holding the empty cup, and I was pretty sure my cheeks were turning red again. This time I’d embarrassed myself with my bad manners. I’d been starving, but it wasn’t like the bread and water were going to run away. I should’ve looked for an empty seat at a table and eaten there.

“Don’t matter,” the man replied. “Gimme the cup if you’re done with it.”

I did. There were still a few drops of water left, but I was too embarrassed to turn the cup upside down to drink the rest. The man turned and left with the cup and plate. At first I just watched him go, but then I remembered I had an important question to ask.

"Um, excuse me!" I called out.

The man turned around with a face that said he was starting to get tired of me. It almost made me lose my nerve. Still, I stood my ground—but only because I was out of options.

"Is there anywhere here I could sleep? E-Even just under the eaves is fine."

There was no way I'd be able to stay in an actual room without any money. But I had nowhere else to go. If the scarred man said no, I'd have to go back to the alley where I'd slept last night. I could only pray that he was feeling kind.

He blinked at me like he was looking at some strange animal. What was that about?

"Somewhere to bed down for the night? Lemme see..." He rubbed his chin, glanced off to the side, then pointed toward the back of the guild. "There's a stable out back. You can take an empty spot there."

I left the guild with my basket of valenwort. It was already nighttime, but even though I didn't think there was a festival going on, the main street was lit with braziers and people were still walking around. It seemed pretty strange to me.

I headed for the area behind the guild. There were no braziers here, of course, but the moon was bright tonight. I could see just fine, and I wasn't scared of the dark because I could still hear laughter from inside the walls. I found the stable behind the building, just like the man had said. It was hard to miss—there was even a little shed full of straw beside it with a spade and fork propped up.

"Pardon me..."

I timidly stepped inside. The old wooden stable's windows were all open, but it was still too dark to see everything inside by moonlight. The smell of animals wasn't as strong as I'd expected. I stood still for a few seconds and closed my eyes, because that was what you should do when it was dark and you couldn't see. Maybe it was just my imagination, but I was pretty sure your eyes got used to the dark faster this way.

I opened my eyes—this time, I could just barely make out

some shapes inside the stable. A passageway ran down the center. Wooden walls about my height divided the spaces on either side into stalls for the horses. It looked like each horse got its own stall here. They seemed very well looked after compared to the cows back in my village.

The front gates of the horses' stalls were wooden fences rather than walls, so they were easy to see through. The first stall in the row was empty. There was no straw on the floor, just bare soil. I crept down the center passage and found that the second stall was the same. The scary man had said I could take an empty spot, right? I guess I shouldn't be surprised to find a few empty stalls here. It would've been pretty mean of him to say that if there weren't any.

I could already see the back wall of the stable. It was smaller than I'd imagined, with only four stalls. It was almost a little disappointing, but I moved on to the next stall—and there it was.

"Whoa, you're big."

Even though the horse was lying down on its side, it was easy to see just how huge it was. The horse was all muscle, not just round and fat. Its coat seemed to be dapple-gray, though it was a little hard to tell in the dark. I'd never seen a horse like this before. It must've been used for plowing fields or pulling heavy loads. It looked really strong, and I could easily picture a legendary hero riding into battle on a horse like this. But...

"It's not moving..."

The horse should've noticed me by now, but it didn't move a muscle. It was just lying there, facing the wall, not looking in my direction at all. *What if it's dead? What if these stables are actually abandoned, and someone just left the corpse here?* The thought sent a chill down my spine. But when I took a closer look, I could see its sides rising and falling. I could hear it breathe now too, in the quiet of the night. It was just a big old horse, fast asleep. I didn't want to wake it up, so I moved quietly to the last stall. This one was empty too. That horse was the only one in the stable.

"Guess I might as well get comfy."

There was plenty of space. I wasn't in anyone's way, and I had permission. I'd be a little lonely on my own out here, but beggars couldn't be choosers. I decided to take the stall at the very back of the stable. The sound of the horse's breathing through the fence made me feel at ease. With that big, strong horse beside me, I felt like I'd be safe even if something scary crept in during

the night.

I lifted up the stall's wooden bolt and pulled the gate open. It was surprisingly heavy and solid. I had to use both hands and pull hard just to move it. It made sense, though. Horses were very strong, so sooner or later they'd break out of a stable that wasn't built sturdy.

I put the coat-basket full of valenwort down on the floor, then went back outside. I hesitated in front of the shed full of straw for a few moments before I went in and gathered up an armful. I really didn't feel like sleeping on the bare ground if I didn't have to, so I went back and forth between the shed and the stable until I had enough straw to sleep on.

I sat down in my stall after I finished. The quiet, slow breaths of the sleeping horse in the stall next to me were comforting to hear. My makeshift straw bed was thin because I didn't want to take too much, but it was good enough for me. I plopped down on the straw and spread out my arms and legs with a big sigh. The strength drained from my body like all the tiredness I'd built up today caught up with me all at once. I thought I'd fall asleep in no time, but I couldn't for some reason. I looked out through the window at the half-moon.

*I became an adventurer today.*

I'd registered at the guild, gone out beyond the town's walls, and gathered herbs. I'd messed up too, but I'd still earned enough money for some bread. I thought back on what I accomplished today and felt a warm, fluttery feeling inside my chest. The scary man with the scarred face, Waine, the pretty lady, the tall buildings, the guards at the gate—everything and everyone I'd seen today swirled round and round in my head. I should've been totally worn out, but I didn't feel sleepy at all. Honestly, I didn't want to go to sleep just yet.

"Oh, the valenwort…"

With a little effort, I sat up again and pulled the coat-basket toward me. It wasn't cold tonight, so I didn't need the coat for warmth. I'd need it as a basket again tomorrow, though, so I had to do something about the valenwort inside. I seemed to remember the priest drying the herbs by hanging them up in the shade. I guess they kept longer that way. Valenwort was good for wounds, and you could make a tonic or roast it for a bitter tea—it was pretty useful, and it wouldn't hurt to have some around just in case.

I plucked out a few strands of straw from my bed and started tying them together in pairs to make a thin rope. Well, it was more like a string. A pretty shabby one. One little tug would probably make it fall apart, but it'd be strong enough to hold the herbs. I made two more, and then I started to tie the valenwort together three at a time since I had so much. The priest always carefully tied them up one by one, but my strings weren't long enough for that. I could make more, but then my already thin bed would end up even thinner. I didn't have the energy to go get more straw either. So I decided to just keep doing what I was doing. If it didn't work out, I'd figure out something better next time.

Still feeling that happy glow in my chest, I worked under the moonlight streaming in through the window. By the time I finished tying up the last of the herbs, I was feeling really tired. My eyelids were getting heavier with every second. I hung the plants from the top of the fence facing the corridor, right next to my bed, since I was too sleepy to move them farther away. The strings held and the leaves weren't touching the ground, so I hoped they'd be all right there.

"Okay, good." I rubbed my eyes, looked over my handiwork one last time, then nodded in satisfaction. I flopped down on my straw bed, completely exhausted, and quickly fell into a deep sleep.

I woke up the next morning to a weird scrunching sound. When I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was dapple-gray fur and a huge, muscly neck. I was so scared, I couldn't move. I was wide awake, but I had no idea what was going on. We had big animals like cows back in my village, so I was used to them, but I'd never woken up *this* close to one before.

I still couldn't move a muscle, other than my eyes. The horse was stretching its neck over from the stall next to mine. My eyes followed its thick neck and well-brushed fur to its chin, and I noticed its mouth was moving. I raised my head for a better look. *Is it eating something?*

"Wait, that's not for you!" I yelled.

All the valenwort I'd tied up on two of the strings was already gone, and the horse was about to start on the third. But just like last night, when it didn't even move a hair after I came into the stable, that darn horse completely ignored all of my yelling and

happily munched down the rest of my herbs.

# Chapter 3: The Adventurers

The horse ended up eating every last leaf of the valenwort I'd gathered. After all the trouble I'd gone through to get it and all the time I'd spent tying it up last night... *Ugh.*

"I'm never hanging up any valenwort where you can reach it ever again!" I vowed with tears in my eyes. But as I said that, I remembered that I wouldn't be picking any more anyway. It wasn't one of the herbs on the request list. I'd only been trying to dry the valenwort because the man with the scar gave it back to me, and I thought it'd be good to hold on to it. Gathering more at this point would be pretty dumb and a total waste of the hard lesson I'd learned.

I sighed. I was annoyed, but yelling at a horse was kind of pointless. I picked up my coat-basket and trudged over to the guild. The guild was already open, even though it was still early, and there were quite a few adventurers inside. The scary man was sitting at the reception desk as usual, busy with some kind of paperwork.

"Good morning," I greeted him. For some reason, he gave me a funny look and didn't say anything back. *Maybe he didn't hear me?*

I tried again. "Good morning."

"Uh, hm. Mornin'."

This time he replied. Guess he hadn't heard me after all. My voice wasn't very loud, so this happened sometimes.

"Thank you for letting me use the stable. I'm planning to go gather more herbs today."

"Oh. Right, gotcha."

Good. I'd thanked him and taken the request for another day. Since the herb-gathering request was permanent, he'd told me I only needed to tell him when I wanted to take it on.

Now, it was time to fix my mistakes from yesterday. I didn't leave the guild right away. Instead, I went to the wall where all the requests were pinned up. I looked for the herb-gathering one and found it stuck back in the same place as before. I read it again, slowly and carefully, from top to bottom. I memorized the pictures, reading the notes under them out loud (but quietly) to

help me remember them better. I wished I had a quill and parchment so I could make a copy for myself, but I didn't, so I just did my best to cram every detail into my head.

There were nine kinds of herbs in all. Each one came with a picture and notes on how to gather it, plus other details like any special treatment it needed or how to tell it apart from plants that looked similar. Just like yesterday, my empty stomach made it hard to concentrate, but I tried to forget about my hunger and focus on the parchment in front of me.

"This one's poisonous..."

I was just now noticing that some of the requested plants weren't only dangerous to eat—even handling them wrong could hurt you. *Scary... I didn't really read any of this yesterday.* Looking back now, I hadn't taken things seriously at all. I went out there with only four out of the nine herbs memorized and came back with one that wasn't even on the list. Someone was paying real money for this work—money that I needed to buy food. If I wanted to have a full belly again, I needed to do things right. Even a kid like me could understand that. It was common sense. But I still messed it all up yesterday.

"All right," I told myself. *I got it this time.* I'd looked over all the information about the four kinds of herbs I could already remember from yesterday and learned the five others too. I couldn't really say I felt confident, since I'd only seen one of the plants for real before, but at least I was pretty sure I wouldn't make the same mistakes again today. Read the request properly—that was what the scary man had taught me. It was probably the most basic of basics, but it was a lesson that I'd finally learned.

That was when I heard a familiar voice—and there weren't many of those in this town.

"Oh, look who's back. Hey, kiddo."

I turned around. It was the tall man with dark brown hair and a tuft of white in front. He didn't look drunk today, but I recognized him and his scratched and worn metal armor right away. I remembered his name too.

"Waine..."

"Hm? Did I introduce myself already?" Waine raised an eyebrow. He looked puzzled.

*Oh, right. He never told me his name—that pretty lady did.*

Waine shrugged. "Well, never mind that. How's it going? Find

lots of herbs yesterday? Heading out again today?"

"Um..."

I thought I should explain how I knew his name, but it seemed like Waine wasn't the type of person who cared about little things like that. He didn't seem unhappy at all as he fired questions at me one after another. He wasn't asking me hard questions or anything, so I should've been able to answer them, but he'd caught me off guard and I couldn't find my words. While I was scrambling to come up with an answer, my empty stomach grumbled a loud complaint before I could say anything.

"Oops, sounds like someone's hungry. Why don't I get you something, huh? I made a nice bit of coin hunting those rats yesterday, so you can have whatever you want. My treat." Waine looked down at me with a friendly smile.

Meanwhile, my face burned red with embarrassment. I was tempted. *Really* tempted. All I'd had to eat yesterday was a chunk of bread, which wasn't nearly enough to keep me going. I'd been starving ever since I woke up this morning, but I didn't have any more money to buy breakfast with. I was ready to jump up and grab the man's offer with both hands. And that was exactly what gave me a sudden chill.

"...I'm fine. You..." I shook my head and backed away. "You don't have to pay me!"

I was so hungry, it almost hurt to give up this chance to eat. But I made myself turn away. I hurried out of the guild and ran for the town gates.

***

"What was that all about?" I watched the boy dash out of the guild and scratched my head. I wasn't really sure what to make of the situation, but it seemed like he was running away from me for some reason or other. I knew I hadn't exactly been at my best when he saw me yesterday, so I was making an effort to be friendly. I wanted to thank him for helping me out.

"Were you mean to him?" a sleepy voice asked. That could only be Sheya. She wasn't much of a morning person, but she was up early today. Weird.

"'Course not. Kid seemed hungry, so I offered to get him something. That's all."

"Oh," she replied.

*I take the time to explain myself, and she gives me one word.* I shrugged my shoulders and looked down at her. Sure enough, that was one sleepy face under the wide brim of her mage's hat. She was the one who'd started talking to me, but now she was just standing there like she was asleep on her feet. Well, nothing new there. On a good day, Sheya was about as energetic as a sack of potatoes. She almost never went out of her way to do anything she didn't need to. When she did, it was usually on a whim. Even talking was a waste of effort to her, apparently, so she kept her words to the bare minimum.

I'd heard rumors that this oddball mage had signed up at the guild just to get out of her training. Sheya was good-looking, capable with magic, and in serious demand as one of the few adventuring mages. But she didn't seem interested in joining a party at all. If I had to guess why, I'd say that with her personality, she just wasn't into the idea of working with others. I'd also heard that mages didn't earn much going solo, but come on, just look at her. Pretty obvious she just wasn't interested. Besides, she didn't seem like she was short on coin.

"He won't be back," Sheya said.

"Whuh?" I blurted. I hadn't expected her to speak up, and I didn't know what she was talking about.

"The boy," she clarified. "Barque says he's from a rich family."

Oh, the kid. So, that was Barque's take on him—some wealthy lad with his head full of fairy tales about adventurers had come to sign himself up. And once he'd had a cold, hard dose of reality, he'd go running straight back to mama and papa? Well, it wasn't impossible. Still...

"You think? I mean, sure, he wasn't wearing rags, but he wasn't dressed all fancy either."

"Hmm..."

"And his manners weren't anything special. Didn't strike me as coming from money."

"Barque thought otherwise."

Barque... He wasn't the most reliable guy around. Didn't have much of a head for details. He was the one who'd messed up and spoiled the surprise we'd planned for Ranna and Miguel's wedding. Lemme tell you, it took some real finagling to fix that mess. That said, he never made any real blunders when it came to handling the requests here at the guild. I was grateful for that, at least.

“Oh yeah. The kid said I didn’t need to pay him. Wonder what he meant by that.”

“Who knows?”

I crossed my arms and tried to work it out, but I gave up pretty quick after I figured I wouldn’t find any answers anytime soon. I scratched my head and headed for the guild’s tavern counter. I was gonna go on a rat hunt again today—dull work any adventurer worth their salt could handle, but it was important to prepare for any job with a square meal.

I heard footsteps behind me and glanced back to see Sheya trailing after me.

“Need something?”

“Food. Too tired to think,” she mumbled.

She was planning on getting whatever I got. Sure, the easiest way to order was just to say, “Same for me.” No need to think about it. But wasn’t picking what you felt like having that day one of the joys of eating? Food could add so much color to your daily life. I couldn’t imagine giving up the simple joy of digging into a favorite dish. I mean, what was she going to do if I ordered something she didn’t like? I couldn’t get my head around it. She really was an oddball.

“Well, sure, it’s no skin off my nose. Hey, Sheya, wanna tag along with me on the rat hunt today? You got nothing better to do, right?”

“Pass.”

***

I ran and ran until I could finally see the town wall. Then I doubled over with my hands on my knees and gasped for breath. My head was spinning after running like that on an empty stomach. My throat was parched, and I felt awful.

“Maybe I…should’ve let him…treat me,” I panted, wiping the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand. I was regretting my decision, but I’d already turned the man down and run off. There was nothing I could do about it now, just like how there was no point in crying over spilled milk.

*Come on, stay positive.* I’d taken the request again, and this time I’d made sure to remember the herbs I was looking for. I had my basket, and I had my knife. I hadn’t forgotten anything—not that I had anything else to forget. It was a little depressing to

think about, but everything I owned in the world was right here. I headed toward the gates.

"Excuse me. I'm Kiri, the adventurer. I'd like to go outside again."

The men standing guard at the gates were the same as yesterday, and they waved me through right away. Just as I was about to leave, I remembered something important.

"Um, you told me yesterday that the gates shut in the evening, but when exactly is that?"

"Hm? Oh, the gates stay open until the sun's completely below the horizon," the mustached guard replied.

Good thing I asked. Now I definitely hadn't forgotten anything. I thanked the guard and went on my way. Beyond the wall, the land opened out before me. I looked up at the sky. The weather was good—no sign of rain.

"Let's head to the forest today," I murmured to the breeze and started walking.

From far away, I could see that the forest was close to a small hill, with lots of tall trees growing close together. But as I got closer, following a small trail worn by wheels that led to the woods, I noticed something else.

"Stumps *everywhere*..."

I paused and blinked in surprise as I looked around. It seemed like this whole area had once been part of the forest. On either side of the trail, the ground was full of tree stumps with the rings that showed their age exposed to the sky. All the bushes here had been cleared away, and only a few thin or crooked trees were left. I saw a small woodcutter's hut where thick, round logs stripped of their leaves and branches were drying.

It was like a big bite had been taken out of the forest. There was a woodcutter in my village too. We needed wood to build houses and fuel our fires. But I'd never seen so many trees cut down that it changed the shape of a whole forest before. While I was staring at the strange sight around me, I heard a knocking sound echoing from somewhere. It wasn't an animal's cry. It was the sound of an axe chopping into a tree. They were still cutting, even after all this.

"Can anyone really need this much wood?"

I thought about the buildings back in town. A lot of those two-

story houses were built with bricks, but they must've used wood for things like pillars and roof beams. All the people living there would need lots of firewood and even more wood for tables, chairs, cups, bowls, and all kinds of other stuff. I could probably come up with dozens more if I tried.

Just how much wood *did* it take to keep the town going? When I tried to imagine, I couldn't help feeling scared that the forest might disappear. But even if it did, it wouldn't happen for a long, long time. It wasn't something I had to worry about today. Actually, I felt a little better knowing so much work was going on here—it meant this area was pretty safe. The woodcutters wouldn't work in a place where they might be attacked.

In my village, kids weren't allowed to go into the forest alone. I'd only ever gone with grown-ups from the village or my brother, the hunter. Everyone said the forest was dangerous, so I never went by myself. There were two brave kids a couple of years older than me, though, who would break the rule to go play near this pond sometimes. It was really close to the edge of the forest, so I think the grown-ups mostly just let them get away with it.

"I'll be fine as long as I don't go in too deep," I reminded myself.

I thought it'd be a good idea to remember this spot with the woodcutter's hut. There was a trail that led here, so if I could find the hut again, I wouldn't have to worry about getting lost on my way back to town. I gave the hut one last glance and walked on.

I could see, just by looking down at my feet, that the plants growing here were different from the ones out on the open plain. It got my hopes up about finding some of the herbs from the request, but thick roots all over the ground made the going tough. The tree stumps looked like they'd been cut more recently the farther I walked, and there weren't as many around here.

I'd only heard about my brother running into monsters in the forest maybe once or twice. And I'd never seen anything dangerous when the grown-ups had taken me there. I'd be fine as long as I was careful.

I saw what looked like an animal trail weaving among the trees and decided to follow it. Soon, I found something.

"Mushrooms..."

There was a cluster of bright red mushrooms with white dots on their caps that had popped up around the roots of a tree. *Yep,*

*not touching those. Definitely poisonous. They might even kill me if I eat them.* The village grown-ups had always warned me to never, ever pick mushrooms on my own. But...

"Right. There should be food here."

I knew a thing or two about gathering wild fruits, nuts, and vegetables in the forest. It was something I did a lot back home. I knew how to use my hands to catch fish from streams too. Root vegetables like wild yams could be tough to dig up, but they were really filling. Forests were full of things to eat. If I kept an eye out while looking for the herbs, I'd find something to fill my stomach with even without any money. Just thinking about that doubled my enthusiasm in a flash.

I kept my eyes on the ground, carefully looking left and right, left and right, as I followed the narrow trail. In a patch of soft mud, I noticed some animal tracks. Something had passed by here very recently. Probably a deer or something like that. Meat-eating creatures left paw prints or claw marks, but these were definitely from hooves. Following the trail of a meat eater could end up with you getting eaten, so being on the path of something much less dangerous was a big relief. It wasn't herbs or food, but it was still a good discovery.

"My brother would be getting his bow ready right about now," I thought out loud.

Sadly, I didn't have a bow or even know how to use one, so I ignored the hoofprints and continued hunting for herbs instead. I wondered how much the pictures of the herbs drawn on the request actually looked like the real thing. I'd only seen one so far—the one I'd managed to gather a little bit of yesterday. I didn't want to risk missing any, so I took a good look at any plant that caught my eye and studied its leaves and stalks while thinking back to the pictures.

Yesterday, I couldn't even remember all the plants from the request. I hadn't known how much time I had, and I'd been panicking, wandering willy-nilly all over the grasslands. Today was different. I hadn't found anything yet, but I felt like I was making progress.

"Oh." I spotted a familiar plant, but it wasn't one I wanted to find. It had big, green leaves that looked like they'd been snipped with scissors at the ends. I'd gathered a whole bunch of it by mistake yesterday, and when I tried to turn it in at the guild, they wouldn't take it. "Valenwort."

There wasn't as much valenwort here, compared to what I'd found yesterday, but it was still a pretty big patch. Maybe it liked growing in one spot like that. I took a moment to stop and think. You could put it on wounds. You could roast it and make tonics and tea. Horses loved it, apparently. I drew my knife and cut one of the stalks, and then I pinched a leaf between my fingers and stared at it for a second. Then I took a bite.

"...Urgh."

It tasted like grass. It was bitter, it felt weird on my tongue, and it was full of tough stringy bits. But I was so hungry. I kept on chewing and finally swallowed. That horse *liked* this stuff? Honestly, I felt a little betrayed. And then I stuffed one more leaf into my mouth before going back to my hunt.

I put my empty coat-basket on the ground, reached up, and grabbed a thick tree branch with both hands. I placed my right foot on a bump on the trunk and then kicked off from the ground.

"And up!" I pulled with my arms and straightened my right leg to push myself up until I got my left foot onto the branch I was holding.

I'd always been good at climbing trees. I was probably the best out of all the kids in the village. I wasn't all that great at footraces or any tests of strength, but I was a pretty decent climber for some reason. The trick was choosing the right branches to grab and keeping your body tucked in close to the tree. I didn't have any tips for people who were scared of heights, though. In that case, it was probably best not to go climbing trees in the first place.

I quickly climbed up to the top branches and stopped just before they grew too thin. Making sure to keep my balance, I stretched out my hand and grabbed a red, egg-shaped fruit—a nirnaberry—with three of my fingers. It came off the branch easily.

Nirnaberries were big, but that was mostly because of the large seed inside. The flesh was just a thin layer around it. They were safe to eat, but birds didn't like them. Small birds couldn't swallow them, and bigger birds didn't bother since they couldn't digest the seed. Sure enough, this tree was covered in nirnaberries. It looked like birds hadn't touched the berries at all, but maybe that was also because most of them were still green and unripe. I brought the one I was holding to my mouth and

scraped the smooth and slippery peel with my teeth. A tiny bit of faintly sweet juice oozed out once I broke through.

"Hmm..."

If anyone had been around to see me, one look at my face would've told them I was not impressed by the taste. I mean, it wasn't exactly good or bad. There just wasn't much flavor at all. But it was still food, even if it wasn't very filling. I finished it, threw away the seed, then picked a few more. I took a look around while chewing on some nirnaberry peel. Although there were a lot of tall trees in the way, the view from up here was good. I could see a long way.

"Oh!" I noticed a spot in the forest where the trees suddenly disappeared, and when I squinted at it, I could see flashes of light reflecting off something. "There's water down there."

It was probably a river. I popped another nirnaberry into my mouth and climbed down from the tree. My throat had been dry as dust all morning. I prayed that the water would be safe to drink.

*"See ya, kiddo. Don't wander too far from town."*

*"Stay alert. And don't stray too far."*

I *had* been warned. More than once. But I was so excited, those words just vanished from my mind.

"It *is* a river."

Just like I'd thought. Only a few trees stood on either side of the water. It was like the forest got cut off by a bed of smooth, whitish stones. The river's banks sloped gently down to the water, but the river itself almost looked like a giant scar running through the forest. There was a river near my village too, but its banks didn't look like this.

I walked down to the river's edge, being careful not to trip over any stones. The water definitely wasn't the cleanest I'd ever seen. It wasn't muddy or anything, but it also wasn't clear enough for me to see the bottom of the river. I knelt down, tried scooping some up in my hands, and took a closer look. There wasn't anything gross floating around, so I cupped my hands again, filled them with water from the very top of the river, and drank it up. I'd heard that drinking too much river water could give you a tummy ache, but I was so thirsty I couldn't hold back. I scooped up another two handfuls before I was satisfied enough to stop.

I looked up and spent a few seconds taking in my surroundings. This river wasn't actually very big. The other bank didn't seem too far away, and the water wasn't moving that fast either. Still, the fact that I couldn't see the bottom meant it was probably pretty deep, and I'd need to swim if I wanted to cross it. Good thing I didn't have any real reason to.

I was curious, though. Just a little.

The sea. All those people. Tall buildings, huge walls, chopped stumps—nothing but new sights and sounds since I'd left my little village. What was on the other side of this river? More places I'd never seen before?

"Huh? The plants around here look kinda different…" I'd only had eyes for the water at first, but now I saw them. I jumped to my feet and rushed over to what I'd spotted. I didn't have to run, but I was too excited not to. Leaves were peeping out, almost like they were shy, between the smooth rocks all over the riverbank—leaves I'd seen before.

"Found one!" I shouted, like I was proudly announcing my discovery to the world.

The leaves were fleshy but long and thin, while the stalks were covered in nasty-looking spikes. This was definitely one of the herbs I needed. It was the one drawn at the very top of the request. It wasn't worth a lot, but I was just glad to have my first harvest for the day. Plus, I could take as much as I wanted since it was growing all over the bank.

I quickly drew my knife and started cutting the leaves off the stem, just like the request said to. They were pretty tough, so I was glad I had a knife. The instructions also said to leave the thorny stems alone. I didn't know why, but I followed the request. There wasn't that much room in my coat-basket anyway. I couldn't afford to go filling it with stuff I didn't need.

I finished picking one plant and moved on to another right next to it. Then another. It felt great to see the leaves filling up my basket, and pretty soon I forgot about everything else. After finishing off the third plant, I looked around for another and saw one a little farther away. I jogged over, knelt down on one knee, then grabbed the herb with my left hand and—

"Ouch!"

One of the thorns on the stem stabbed into my finger while I was rushing to cut the leaves. The thorn came out as soon as I yanked my hand away, but a spot of blood appeared on my skin.

My finger stung as I licked it, and I could taste metal on my tongue. *Calm down. The plants won't run away. Besides, you're carrying a knife. What if you trip on a rock and fall? Gotta be more careful.*

I reached for the same herb, watching out for the thorns this time as I grabbed it again. I held my knife firmly and brought its edge to one of the leaves.

Just then, a nearby bush rustled.

I flinched, and my hand slipped. The knife slid right past the leaf and cut nothing but air. I fell backward, landed butt first on some pebbles, and sat there without moving a muscle. I was too scared to even make a sound. The bush rustled again, and I stared with wide eyes. It wasn't just my imagination—something was there.

I was in the middle of a forest, far from town and far from people. Of course there could be dangerous wild animals or monsters out here. But because I'd come this far without seeing signs of any, I'd let my guard down.

I shuffled backward over the pebbly ground, away from that bush, but I kept my eyes on it. The branches of a small tree shook a little, and then I saw something *ooze* out.

"A slime!" I gasped.



Although I'd never seen a slime before, I knew what it was. There was no mistaking that round blob of see-through jelly. It was a monster. I heard the sound of rustling leaves once more as the slime came out of the bushes and plopped down the bank. It started to ooze slowly toward me. I couldn't see any eyes or a nose on it. Could it tell I was here?

It was still a little distance away. Slowly, carefully, without making any noises or sudden moves, I put my hands on the ground and pushed myself up into a crouch. Then I pulled my coat-basket full of leaves toward me and crept out of the slime's path. I figured the slime might actually be looking for the river. Its jellylike body looked like it was mostly made out of water, so it probably needed to drink a lot. But after I moved out of its way, the slime changed direction and started moving toward me again. It could see me somehow, and it was coming for me.

I kept my eyes glued to the slime and felt the handle of my knife with my left thumb. I adjusted my grip. It was a small blade, but at least I had one.

Grown-ups in the village said you could kill slimes just by beating them with a stick. Or you could chop them up with an axe or stomp on them real hard. Oh, they hated fire too. Slimes usually ate stuff like fruits, bugs, and mice, but sometimes they would melt down animals that were already dead and eat those too. They weren't really dangerous to people unless they got really big or attacked in a swarm.

"You're... You're not so tough."

The slime crawled toward me. I backed away. Even after all that water, my throat was bone-dry again. I couldn't breathe right, and I was gripping the basket of herbs so hard my knuckles were turning white. I whirled around and ran for it.

***

I threw my torch to the ground and turned the edge of my sword toward the two enemies coming at me. They were massive, dark gray rats—ugly things with dirty, bristly fur and long front teeth—that looked like they'd hunt cats and not the other way around. At the same time, these rats were surprisingly hard to catch because they were quick and nimble enough to run along the walls. Hunting these things could be a tough job for a new adventurer. But for me?

“There!”

The two rats leaped at me, and that was when I swung my sword—one horizontal slice, down low. My longsword cut clean through both of them. They dropped to the ground in four blood-spurting, twitching chunks before lying still.

“Sure makes it easy when *they* come to *you*.” I smirked and cleaned the blood off my sword before sliding it back into its scabbard. Hunting prey that ran the other way, like deer and rabbits, was a tall order with just a sword. You either had to hide yourself somewhere and wait forever to strike an ambush or figure out where your prey might pass by and set some kind of trap. All of that was a little beyond a run-of-the-mill swordsman like me. Just finding the damn beasts in the first place was impossible sometimes. I was no stranger to spending an entire day wandering around a mountainside without a thing to show for it. Hunting wasn’t as simple as you might think.

That was one good thing about the sewers: All you had to do was walk around for the rats to come running right at you. Then you just cut them down to make some easy money. An idiot could do it. Not that *I* was an idiot. Well… Not the biggest one around anyway.

“How many is that? Must’ve taken out a good few by now.”

I knelt down and lopped off the rats’ tails with my knife. I tried to count how many I’d killed but gave up pretty quick. Counting them wouldn’t add any more to the bundle. Barque could figure it out later. For now, it was fair to say I had plenty. I picked up the torch I’d tossed on the ground then kicked the chunks of dead rat into the water channel. They landed with loud splashes before the sluggish current carried them away. This was the best way to deal with the rat meat. Eating it would give me a stomachache, but just leaving it on the ground would be like giving the other rats down here free food.

This was a decent day’s work. Was it time to wrap up? I had enough tails for a meal and a bed for the night. So I could call it a day, or I could stick around a little longer and earn enough for a drink or two. I was getting pretty tired of these rats, though. It was only my second day of hunting them, but it already felt like a chore. I wasn’t getting any decent sword practice just from killing these things, plus sewers weren’t the nicest places to hang around in. I scratched my head. *Time to call it, I guess.*

Then I felt it.

“Hm?”

I felt *something*. Couldn’t tell you what. I pointed the burning torch in my hand out in front of me but couldn’t see anything. I turned around—nothing behind me either. I thought I’d felt some kind of presence, but maybe it was my imagination. I tilted my head and tried to think it through, but no. This wasn’t one of those times when my brain would help. That *something* I’d felt was in my gut. It was instinct, not logic, and right now it was sounding the alarm bells. Right or wrong, this feeling was something no adventurer should ever ignore.

To be an adventurer was to dice with death. This was true even with that safe job where your chances of dying were maybe one in a hundred, because chances were you’d kick the bucket on the hundredth time. Somehow, we adventurers made a living out of this. The ones who survived were the ones with a knack for staying alive. But survival instincts would do you no good if you decided to ignore your gut at times like these.

I heard a splash. I leaped back, threw down my torch again, and gripped the handle of my sword. The surface of the sewer water boiled, then erupted, as something huge burst from below and came at me with jaws wide open—a pale reptile about twice the size of a human.

“What is that, a great lizard?!” I yelled. I avoided its vicious teeth just in the nick of time. Those things looked like they’d crunch right through my armor. I drew my sword and slashed, but the blade glanced off the lizard’s thick scales. I jumped back in a hurry to put some distance between me and the beast.

“Scary bastard, you coulda killed me!” Seriously, that thing surprised the crap out of me. A great lizard? Here? I’d never heard of one showing up in the sewers before. I could’ve been in real trouble if that thing had caught me off guard. It’d been hiding underwater in the darkness of the sewers, and I’d had no idea. I’d only avoided its attack thanks to good luck and the splash that gave its position away. This was exactly why you could never let your guard down while adventuring. Still…

“A great lizard, huh?” Its ambush had failed. I straightened myself up. I wouldn’t lose to a monster like this in a head-on fight. Great lizards usually grew to about the size of a human. They had sharp, sawlike teeth and smooth, soft skin. They were classed as monsters but were really more like animals. Don’t ask me how they decide which is which. Ranna, Miguel, and I had

run into one a while back, and we'd had a serious discussion about whether their tails could pop off and grow back again like little lizards' did.

The memory brought a smile to my face. I stood with my sword at the ready in front of the great lizard and took a good look. It was massive, about twice the size you'd expect. Its pale skin was covered in thick scales that gleamed in the flickering light of the torch on the ground. The thick, long, heavy tail looked like it was made of pure muscle. The lizard's snout was long too, and its wide mouth was filled with knifelike teeth. All in all, this monster, crawling low across the ground, looked much nastier than any of the great lizards I'd seen before.

"There's something different about you..." I murmured.

With surprising agility, the reptile hurled its whole body sideways to sweep its tail at me. It smashed into the wall and sent bits of stone flying everywhere. I jumped the tail like a skipping rope and frowned while I was still in midair. Maybe this wasn't a great lizard but something else entirely. It had to be. But what the heck was it?

The reptile launched itself at me again. It was fast, even with all that weight and those huge jaws. A beast this size could kill a human in a single bite.

"Well, whatever."

In a few seconds, it was all over. My sword struck like a flash of lightning. The blade slid between the vertebrae, cut the spine, then severed the creature's airways and arteries. A clean beheading.

"If it bleeds, you can kill it. By and large."

As the head tumbled to the ground, its mouth opened wide like it was about to roar. The body thrashed and twitched while blood poured from the neck. I backed away to a safe distance and kept a firm grip on my sword. I'd be grateful if cutting the lizard's head off was enough to finish it. But I'd have more work on my hands if it happened to be one of those undying types. With those, you had to keep chopping and chopping until they stopped moving.

Thankfully, both the head and body did stop, and I could let down my guard. I bent down to pick up my torch and saw that the thing's claws were still twitching a little, but other than that it seemed to be very much dead. Satisfied, I sheathed my sword.

"Now, what am I gonna do with you?" I muttered, frowning

and gazing at the huge reptile's corpse. *Hmm...*

It looked a lot more edible than the rats, but it was just too big for me to carry. I didn't like the idea of butchering it here in the sewers either. Would eating it even be a good idea? This thing had been living down here, just like the rats. It'd been too long since I'd had some decent meat, though. Some juicy grilled meat... *Ah, that'd hit the spot.*

I stood there pondering with my head tilted to one side. My eyes rested on the head I'd chopped off. That alone was a big old chunk of lizard. It'd be heavy, but...

"Hmm. Lizard cheek."

I decided to take it with me.

Back at the guild, with a plate of smoked meat in hand, I looked around for somewhere to sit. I was on my own, so I could just take a counter seat. There were almost always a few tables free, though. No reason not to take one.

Actually, most of the tables were empty today. The food here was all right. Good portions, low prices. Not a bad place to eat, but people who weren't adventurers didn't come here much. The atmosphere probably put most of them off. So when someone from outside the guild did eat here, every other person in the building would stare at them and wonder why. Who'd enjoy a meal with a dozen rogues and rapscallions like us watching every bite? They'd have to be pretty damn sure of themselves to put up with that.

Well, the whole point of having a tavern inside the guild was to make sure we rowdy adventurers wouldn't go causing trouble in other, more reputable establishments. Of course any regular folks who wandered into the cage were gonna get some funny looks...

Just like *him*, sitting there at a table on his own and devouring his food. The little guy was biting chunks out of his rye bread like he hadn't eaten in days. He dipped bread into his vegetable-scrap soup now and then and gulped down water when something got stuck in his throat. He paid absolutely no attention to his audience. Actually, I don't think he even noticed them. This lad was really something.

"Hey!" I called. "How goes the herb picking?"

I dragged a chair out from under the table and sat down across from him. There were other empty tables, but I thought

I'd keep him company for a while. He was just a kid, but I owed him one for reading requests for me the other day. And no one would bother him if they saw me here.

"Oh!" The kid jumped and gave me a worried look. "Waine..."

Then again, maybe *I* was bothering him? I pushed the thought aside. It'll be a good lesson for him—in this line of work, he was gonna have to deal with ne'er-do-wells like me sometimes. Might as well get used to it.

"Um, I got a lot more than yesterday," he said. "But I had to run away from a slime partway through."

"A slime, huh? Those are pretty scary," I replied.

The rye bread and salted soup set the kid had ordered was the cheapest the guild had to offer. Watching him wolf down that meal really took me back. I'd eaten it all the time when I was first starting out. The sad thing was that right now, I felt a little jealous of him. I sliced off a piece of my smoked meat with my knife, bit into it, and sighed.

"Wait, they are?" he asked, looking surprised.

"Yeah. They're slow, but if they get ahold of you, they're a real pain to shake off," I explained. "Trust me, you don't want one creeping under your armor. They lurk in the shadows and even drop out of trees sometimes, so you gotta keep your wits about you."

The boy nodded along while spooning his soup. Good, he was actually listening. We were having a proper conversation this time.

"By the way, um..." He had noticed what was on my plate and was looking at it like he wasn't sure what to say. "What are you eating?"

It was a fair question. I wished I knew the answer.

"It's s'posed to be smoked meat. Of some sort."

The meat sat on my plate as one solid chunk. This, along with some cheap grog, was all I was having for dinner tonight, but it wasn't really enough for me. Even rations we ate while out on a job had more to them.

"I took care of some strange beast down in the sewers today," I continued. "Thought I'd get it cooked up here, but they took it away from me for some reason. 'If you wanna eat meat, then here, eat this,' he says. He could've at least given me some bread to go with it, right?"

"You were going to eat something from the sewers?" the kid

asked.

*Hey, don't look at me like that! You didn't even know what a sewer was when you came in here.* The meat would've been fine if it was marinated in alcohol or cooked with some detoxifying herbs. There were all kinds of tricks you could use in the kitchen to get rid of any nasties. Not that I'd actually done that before.

I'd wanted to order something else, but Barque was in a foul mood for some reason and he'd marched off. The place was so shorthanded that Barque's daughter—who was also the guild's cook and waitress—was working at the reception desk right now. *I could go get my own bread from the kitchen… Nah. Barque would have my head on a stick.*

I sighed, sliced off a little more meat, and took a bite. I sipped my drink and took another bite. And so on. *I know I said I wanted to eat some meat, but chewing on this all night's gonna make my jaw ache. I like smoked meat as much as the next guy, but I'm getting sick of the taste already.*

"You could do with a little more to eat, right? Why don't I give you some of this?" I offered.

"…I'm good." The boy shook his head. He looked like he didn't trust me one bit.

*Did I do something to him?* My expression soured. I was gonna have to finish off this whole lump by myself. I spent a while longer chewing my way through the smoked meat while feeling glum, until the kid finished his food and stood up.

"Well, good night, Waine," he said. "See you around."

"Oh, g'night."

*What a good, polite kid,* I thought. *Even brought his plate back. I was more of a rascal at that age. Just a little.*

I watched him leave the guild and took another sip of my drink. It was lukewarm, harsh, strong stuff. The kind of cheap grog that came with a nasty hangover if you had one too many. At the same time, just one cup didn't feel like it'd be enough. Money was tight, though, so I decided not to get a refill.

I picked up my knife and brought it to the lump of meat again. I sliced it thin. I sliced it thick. I sliced it into cubes. I even tried scoring some pieces to make them easier to chew. Even if it all tasted the same, I could at least change up the texture. *What am I even doing?*

"Never did get his name, huh?" I thought out loud as I brought a chunk of meat to my mouth. Not that I needed his

name for any reason, but he knew mine, and that felt a little unfair. If Barque's theory was on the mark, though, today would be his last day here. Well, if he was still around tomorrow, I'd ask him then.

"Hey, you know that kid?" a voice asked out of nowhere.

I turned my head to see a young guy in hard leather armor with a sword on his hip. He looked about fifteen years old, and judging by the two others hanging back behind him—another fellow holding a staff and a lass with a shortsword—the three of them were in a party together. They all looked like they were around the same age. A warrior, a mage, and a scout, probably. They were pretty new to the guild. I'd seen them around before, but we'd never talked.

"Not really," I replied. "Don't even know his name."

The kid stood out. Of course they were curious about him. Not that I knew much more about him than they did.

"He's human, right? Is he really twelve?" the adventurer asked.

"Who knows? If he's from the streets, I could see him being that age," I reasoned.

"Looks too healthy for a street kid, though."

*Fair point.* Just the fact that he could read meant he wasn't the kind of brat you'd find sleeping rough in a back alley somewhere. His clothes were nothing fancy, but they weren't rags either. Maybe he just looked young for his age, but I had a feeling he'd lied about how old he was. Still, even if he had, that was none of my business.

"A kid that age, adventuring? I doubt he has a clue what he's getting into."

Harsh. These three didn't seem too thrilled about the lad being here. Not many adventurers got into the game so young. I wasn't surprised to hear mixed opinions about him.

"If he's got the okay from Barque, that's good enough for me," I said. "No reason for us to worry about it."

"But he's just a little boy. Should that really be allowed?"

"You don't get it, huh?" I decided to give these three doubters a little lecture. Spelling things out for them was kind of a pain, but acting like a wise veteran now and then didn't feel half bad. "The guild's not interested in his age. It's not like they can check anyway. Registering yourself here's a formality, that's all. You can even get away with giving yourself some dumb made-up name if it tickles your fancy."

Of course, you'd be in for some questioning from the guild leader if he found out you were using a fake name, but you wouldn't get kicked out or anything. That only happened if you caused actual damage to the guild. In general, people who ran adventurer's guilds didn't really sweat the details. That wasn't out of the kindness of their hearts, though.

"As long as you get your work done, the guild's not gonna poke its nose into who or what you are. Adventuring's something you take re...reasonability? For. Yourself. Yeah." I nodded.

The guy blinked. "Responsibility?"

"Right, that's the one." I took another sip from my already half-empty cup. Every adventurer was responsible for looking out for themselves. That was just how it worked.

"If an adventurer gets killed on the job, that's on them. No one else," I continued. "The guild's not gonna do anything about it. No matter how bad someone gets hurt, even if they die, the guild will just look the other way and say, 'None of my business.' What I'm saying is, we're disposable. Like chess pieces. And we're all crazy enough to wanna live like this. You get it? That's why the guild doesn't give a damn about who we are, and we don't need them poking and prying into our lives anyway, right?"

"What the heck is your problem?" the adventurer complained.

I shrugged. "If you don't like it, go find yourself a real job."

The three adventurers looked pretty unhappy. Annoyed, even. Well, they seemed like the types who'd come in here full of hopes and dreams—of course they weren't gonna like being called disposable pawns. Young people's emotions were always running hot. Best just to leave them to it. With more experience under their belt, they'd realize all these worries weren't worth getting all worked up about. Anyone who couldn't figure that out would quit sooner or later. The ones who stuck with adventuring wanted an easier life without all the responsibilities of a respectable job, or they just couldn't fit into society anywhere else. That was how adventurers lived.

But enough about that. I still had meat to get through.

"Hey, are..." The adventurer trailed off, then tried again. "Are you the one who took down that cave alligator?"

"Hm?" *Great. He had to ask right when I took a bite. Changed the topic too.* I chewed slowly, swallowed, and then wondered what he could be talking about. A cave alligator? Sounded like some big reptile that skulked in dark places. "Oh, that thing. It was an

alligator, huh?”

“You killed it and you didn’t even know?!” the youngster yelled, goggling at me.

*Hey, no need to make such a fuss,* I thought to myself. Then I told him, “Don’t need to know what it is to lop its head off, do I?”

“I…” He hesitated. “I guess.”

So that wasn’t just some pale, overgrown great lizard. It was a cave alligator. I’d learned something, thanks to these three. Now I knew what an alligator looked like.

“I saw the head you handed over to the guild leader earlier. Could hardly believe it. I’ve heard cave alligators are pretty tough customers. You’ve definitely got some skills.” The youngster leaned forward as he spoke. He had a bit of a spark in his eyes now.

“Maybe.”

To be honest, I wasn’t exactly thrilled by the praise. You needed more than just a good sword hand to get ahead in this game—I knew that better than most folks. There was a reason I hunted rats in the sewers for next to nothing. Sure, knowing how to handle yourself in a fight was important, but there weren’t many requests where you could get by on that alone. I knew how to swing a sword, but that was all I had to offer. Thinking about the chump change I made today just made that young pup’s envious look sting.

“So, the thing is, um…” The adventurer seemed hesitant all of a sudden. “Y-You’re solo right now, right? Would you think about joining our party?”

*Ah, so that’s your angle. That talk about the kid was just a conversation starter.*

“I appreciate it, but I’m not in the mood right now. Better try your luck elsewhere.” I shot him down without a second thought and turned my attention back to my plate of meat. Listening to this nonsense was a waste of my time.

“Not in the mood?” he repeated. “But why?”

“I said what I said,” I replied.

“We could make some good coin with you in the party. Come on, please? Just one job?”

Seemed like he wasn’t about to give up so easily, but I wasn’t gonna change my mind. I just had to figure out how to shake him off without making things more complicated.

“Heh heh! Give it to ’em straight, Waine,” croaked a cheerful

voice, raspy from long years of drinking. “Ya just don’t wanna be on babysitting duty, ain’t that right?”

The owner of that voice plopped himself down at my table, in the seat the kid had sat in just minutes ago—a wrinkled little old man, bald as an egg on the top of his head. I wanted to bury my face in my hands and groan. *Here comes trouble…*

“Stuffin’ that face with nothin’ but meat again? Like I said, you’ll never live to this ripe ol’ age without eatin’ yer veggies,” the old man chided.

He was a tiny man, but he was no dwarf or halfling. You could tell he was human by his build and the shape of his ears. As always, he wore a tunic patched together from mismatched scraps. He sat down with one elbow on the table, his chin resting in his palm, and a mocking grin on his face. Unfortunately for me, I couldn’t get away with ignoring him now.



“Believe me, I’d rather be eating something else,” I said, trying to defend myself, and sighed. I would’ve been more than happy with a side of vegetables.

The old man was a familiar face. We’d met back when I registered at the guild, and I saw him around every day. He was basically a permanent resident of the big shared room upstairs. The hair he still had on his head was snow white. He probably hadn’t cut it in years—it reached all the way down his back—but he always kept his face clean-shaven. I still had trouble wrapping my mind around that. He took care of his face, but he dressed in those old rags? Did he care about how he looked or not?

He was definitely old, but his back was as straight as a pole, and his suntanned skin proved that he was an active member of the guild. But the most remarkable part of his looks were his big, brown eyes that flashed with a youthful spark even now.

“Hey, what’s your game, grandpa?” The youngster’s voice was harsh. “We’re having a conversation here. Who do you think you are?” He was clearly upset. Angry, even.

Well, no wonder. The old man did just barge in while we were talking. What he said was pretty rude too.

“Who, me?” said the old man. “Ol’ Badger’s the name. Pleased to meet ya.”

“Badger?” the lad repeated. “What, like the animal?”

“Eh heh heh!” Old Badger laughed. “That ain’t my real name, sonny. It’s what they call an *adventurin’* name. Didn’t Waine just tell ya? Gettin’ away with a dumb nickname’s a perk of the job. Ah, young’uns wouldn’t understand. Still wet behind the ears an’ all.” The old man grinned like an imp, and the young adventurer’s face turned bright red with anger.

Well, Old Badger’s awful habit of teasing newbies obviously hadn’t changed. *They’re not your toys, old man. If you’re gonna kick up trouble, at least do it when I’m not around.*

“I guess an introduction’s in order.” I sighed. “Old Badger’s been adventuring for decades. He’s pretty much part of the furniture here at the guild. Or like some friendly gargoyle watching over the place. You can look at it however you want.”

I had to step between them. I didn’t really have a choice, because I’d be the one getting an earful from Barque if this old fool caused a brawl. Pretty unfair when I was just an innocent bystander.

“So what if he’s a vet?” the young adventurer snapped. “We

don’t need your meddling, gramps. You might’ve been something back in the day, but you’re just a dusty old antique now.”

“Eh heh heh! That’s right, sonny.” Old Badger chuckled. “Don’t bother bowin’ down to a fossil like me. Got one thing wrong, though—I ain’t never been *somethin’* my whole life. Been Rank F all this time.”

The youngster had been all worked up, but now he was just shocked. “Rank *F*?”

It was a fair reaction. Rank F was the bottom of the barrel, the same level as the kid who was just here. Adventurers at that rank didn’t even get anything to prove their status. In other words, Old Badger hadn’t ranked up a single time since he’d registered at the adventurer’s guild decades ago. No wonder the newbie was lost for words. He’d thought he was snapping back at some arrogant old veteran, but now he seemed to realize he was talking to a complete nobody.

“Well, you don’t get to Rank E without taking down some goblins or something,” I explained. “And that’s not in Old Badger’s wheelhouse.”

“Ain’t that the truth! Adventurin’ work ain’t just about swingin’ a sword around. There’s jobs for weaklings an’ scaredy-cats like me. Eh heh heh!” He looked at me like he was expecting me to agree.

I couldn’t help shielding my eyes with my hand. What the old man said was the last thing I wanted to hear. It was something I hadn’t understood back when I was first starting out, so I wasn’t surprised the youngster didn’t get it either.

The young adventurer sighed. “Yeah, well, we’ll leave those jobs to you, then.” He glanced away and looked deflated as he scratched his head.

It seemed like he finally understood just what he’d gotten himself into. *Took you long enough.*

“That’s what I like to hear. By the way, sonny, give up on Waine, will ya? For yer own good,” the old man warned.

“Why’s that?”

“‘Cause he’s too good for ya, that’s why.”

“Huh?!”

*Can’t you at least try to spare his feelings? …Not that you’re wrong,* I thought, as I listened to their conversation.

Old Badger jabbed his pointer finger at the young adventurer.

“That there’s a nice sword, but it don’t suit yer build. Yer off-balance. Sure don’t look like you know how to wrap that handle neither. There’s some dirt on that leather armor but not one scratch—that says you ain’t come up against nothin’ worse than a butterfly just yet. You might think yer a hotshot, but I can tell yer an amateur just by lookin’.”

Well, the old man’s eyes were as sharp as ever, though those were pretty big words from someone who’d never even stuck a single toe into battle. Then again, it did make sense for an old-timer like him to have a keen eye for judging people’s abilities after kicking around here for so long. In this case, at least, it looked like Old Badger had hit the mark.

The young adventurer was speechless, and Old Badger didn’t waste any time filling the silence. “Here’s a question, sonny. Let’s say there’s a big request that’s too much for yer party to handle, so you get Waine on board an’ take the job. What’re you gonna do about the reward?”

Now, there was an important question. The years of experience the old man had under his belt meant that he knew what really mattered in a party. Not that I’d ever seen him join one himself.

“The reward? Well, that would depend on everyone’s contributions,” the youngster answered.

“Heh heh! Payin’ for performance? That’s the worst answer in the world!” Old Badger cackled. He really didn’t mince his words.

Our table was starting to draw a fair bit of attention from the other patrons. Actually, it had been for a while already because of the kid. Now there was something new to gawk at. What a day. I was just trying to chew my way through this smoked meat, but thanks to these two I’d ended up in a sideshow for everyone else in the room.

“Now, listen real close,” Old Badger continued, not letting up. “Pretend yer out on a job an’ there’s a battle. Party wins without breakin’ a sweat. Not a scratch on any of ya. Sounds great so far, right?”

“Right…” the youngster replied.

“Then, warrior says to the cleric, ‘Nobody got hurt this time, so you didn’t really do nothin’. Take a smaller cut of our pay, all right?’ Heh heh!”

“W-We don’t even have a cleric!”

Whether this party actually had a cleric didn’t matter. The old

man was just making a point: The cleric would eventually start hoping that their companions got hurt, the party would then take on requests that were beyond them, and they'd all end up paying the price sooner or later.

If the party knew their reward depended on their performance, it would affect every single member's judgment. Each of them would try to steer the party toward jobs where their own skills could shine. When they couldn't, their motivation would go up in smoke. There were plenty of fools out there willing to put themselves and others in danger for a fatter coin purse at the end of the day. There'd be no happy ending for a party working like that. Disbanding over a squabble might be the best-case scenario for them.

"Nothing stirs up trouble in a party like money. Team up with others on your own level and split your profits evenly. That's the way to go," I explained.

The young adventurer looked at me. His expression was a mix of angry and upset. "L-Look, I know you're ranked higher than us. But what about this? If we double your share, then—"

"It's the same thing," I said, cutting him off. "Unless you three are planning on doing half the work I do." This fellow's persistence was starting to grate on me, and my words were getting a little pointed. I knew I was right, though. If one person was getting a bigger cut, the rest of the party would rely on them. Maybe it'd be all right if I was more capable and hardworking, but all I could do was swing a sword. Things would never work out in a party like that—I could see it as clear as day.

The old man chimed in. "Heh heh heh! Stick to the jobs that suit yer skills. Don't go bitin' off more than you can chew. There's plenty of time. Keep yer nose clean, work hard, an' build up experience bit by bit. Do that, and yer in for a real surprise when you see how much you grow."

I sighed as Old Badger broke into that unmistakable laugh of his. *Keep your nose clean and work hard, huh? You know most of us became adventurers to get away from that life, right?*

The young adventurer and his companions left the guild, and Old Badger turned on me without missing a beat. "Yer too soft on 'em, Waine. Don't go givin' invites like that the time of day. What, you tryin' to be friends with the whole wide world? You behavin' that way was what let Miguel take Ranna from ya."

*Leave those two out of it, will you?*

"I wasn't gonna say yes," I countered. "Those kids are still Rank F. If I join them a couple of times and get them up to E, and then they end up getting wiped out as soon as I leave, I won't be able to sleep at night."

"True, true. Or they get wiped out tomorrow *because* you ain't with 'em," said Old Badger.

I shook my head. "That's none of my business. Adventurers gotta take personal rep...res...*responsibility* for themselves. We all have to learn how to pick jobs we can handle."

"Well, aren't you gettin' sage?" he teased.

*Hey, even I know that much. It's not like I started adventuring yesterday, so could you ease up on the grandson treatment a little? I wasn't* that *young even when I first came here two years ago.*

"Heh heh, guess yer no greenhorn. So I'll let ya in on somethin', Waine."

"Huh? What?"

Old Badger pointed to the wall. "That rat-huntin' job ain't permanent no more."

It was a little far, but I could see that the request with the picture of a rat on it wasn't pinned up anymore. *Are you kidding? I was counting on that one.*

"That head you brought back. What was it again? A cave alligator? Well, we can't go sendin' newbies down the sewers with big nasties like that crawlin' around. Barque took the request off the wall before he left," Old Badger explained.

"So that's why. Damn it, what am I gonna do tomorrow, then?" I held my head in my hands. I was the last person who could argue with taking the request down, since I was the one who'd brought that monster's head back. One cave alligator would make short work of any fresh-faced adventurer unlucky enough to run into it during a rat hunt. But now what? Maybe I could get the kid to do some reading for me again. We weren't exactly best friends yet, but he'd do it if I slipped him a couple of coins, right?

"Far as I can tell, you ain't got nothin' to worry about." The old man cackled. He held his hand out, palm up, while he looked right at the lump of smoked meat in front of me.

The chunk of meat was definitely smaller than when I'd got it. I was bored of the taste by now, my jaw hurt, and my stomach was just about satisfied anyway. I sighed in defeat and put the smoked meat in his outstretched hand.

“Much obliged, eh heh heh! Veggies are important, but a little meat now an’ then is good for ya,” he said cheerfully. He didn’t bother cutting it. Instead, he sank his teeth into the tough meat with relish. Those chompers were obviously still in good shape. By the looks of him, this quirky old veteran would be adventuring for another ten years at least.

“Barque’s off payin’ a visit to his lordship,” Old Badger said between chews.

“The lord?” I repeated. “Why?”

“He’s called off the rat hunt for now, but that ain’t gonna last,” he explained. “If those dire rats keep breedin’ like they do an’ spread out of the sewers into town, we’ll have a real doozy on our hands. I’d even call it a crisis.”

Well, those beasts even overwhelmed adventurers now and then. If their numbers got out of control, they would be a real danger to ordinary people—especially kids. Dire rats were several times bigger than regular ones, but like their littler cousins, they ate anything and everything. They’d probably attack food vendors on the street. The old man was right. The rats needed to stay in the sewers where they belonged.

“That’s why Barque’s consultin’… Well, more like he’s reportin’ to the lord, to get a request out of him.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is…” The corners of Old Badger’s mouth curved up in a sly grin. “A guild quest.”

Early next morning, under a gray, cloudy sky, Barque came back to the guild with details about the lord’s request.

“This is a guild quest,” said Barque. His scarred face was grim as he spoke. “You will investigate the route the cave alligator took to enter the sewers, search for any other cave alligators or similar dangerous creatures, and exterminate any you find. This request comes directly from his lordship, and the credibility of the Raging Kelpie’s Tail depends on seein’ it properly fulfilled.”

Requests that came directly from some big shot, jobs that involved snuffing out some kind of threat fast, and work meant to keep up a guild’s reputation were all top priority assignments classified as guild quests. This request seemed to be a combination of the first two. The pressure I could feel radiating from Barque was enough to tell me he wanted this dealt with fast.

“I’ve got a question,” I said, raising my hand, but Barque just glanced off to the side. I ignored that reaction and went ahead. “Why me?”

“You were the first one to find the cave alligator, and you’ve proven yourself capable of taking one down,” he replied. “You know where and how you discovered it—that’s valuable information for the investigation. You’re the logical pick.”

Well, his reason for choosing me was solid. It made sense when he put it like that.

A hand went up beside me. “Question.” Barque’s gaze was still elsewhere, but this woman wasn’t the type to be bothered by that. “Why me?”

I couldn’t see Sheya’s face past the low brim of her pointed hat, but I heard a spark of annoyance in her voice. She probably wasn’t thrilled about having to take a trip down to the sewers. But this was a guild quest, and those were hard to turn down once you’d been chosen. A guild could cancel your contract if you didn’t have a good reason for avoiding the call.

Barque’s answer was curt. “Because Waine’s an idiot. He’s not fit to do an investigation on his own.”

“Hey, that’s harsh!” I complained. *But fair. Still, would it kill the guy to use a little tact? I’ve got feelings too.*

“If the guild’s reputation is at stake, the Rank Cs or Bs should handle this,” Sheya pointed out.

She *did* have a point. I was Rank D. Sheya, if I remembered right, was Rank E. There were higher-ranked adventurers at this guild. A request this important should go to them.

“I can see why you’d say that, but lemme tell you why I chose you. Those sewers are part of some ancient ruins. Looking for where that cave alligator came in might lead you into unexplored passages, and that’s where a mage’s knowledge comes in. You’re needed,” the guild leader insisted.

Barque made a convincing argument. Mages were hard to come by, and adventuring mages were even harder to find. Now that there was a quest that needed a mage’s skills, of course he’d pick Sheya for the job. Plus, she didn’t have much else going on.

“Besides,” he continued, “you’re only Rank E because you don’t do any work. Your ability’s well above your rank.”

“There are other parties with mages,” Sheya protested.

“Aye, two of ’em. And they’re both otherwise engaged.”

Sheya went quiet. I could tell she wasn’t happy. There were

two Rank C parties at the guild with mages, but come to think of it, I hadn't seen either of them in a while. They must've been out on long-term escort jobs or plumbing the depths of some old ruins.

I had a feeling Sheya was giving up on questioning Barque. She didn't look totally convinced, but she must've realized she was the only one with the skills the quest called for. That was why *I* raised my hand again and piped up instead.

"Another question," I said. I could practically feel the guild leader get more irritated as he shifted his gaze away from me again. *Hey, look at me when I'm talking to you.* "The reward for this quest—isn't it a tad low for what's involved?"

Sure, I couldn't read, but I knew what kind of rewards requests offered most of the time. Cave alligators were big and dangerous. If my senses hadn't been tingling back when that beast had appeared, I could've been alligator food. Besides, this request was for an investigation. We'd be looking high and low for those big reptiles, not knowing if they were even there or not, and trying to find the routes they were using. We'd have to search every nook and cranny of those sprawling sewers. It was gonna be a royal pain in the backside. In spite of all that, the reward written on the request was so tiny I got depressed just thinking about it.

"The guild's only runnin' thanks to his lordship financin' our operations, y'know," Barque replied.

"Yeah, and?"

"And if we wanna keep enjoyin' that support, we prioritize his requests and get them done. Even if the reward's on the low side."

"Well, that's all well and good, but we're putting our lives on the line here," I said, dissatisfied.

Barque groaned. The man was getting frustrated, but I was right. We weren't adventuring out of the goodness of our hearts. When we took on dangerous jobs, we had a right to decent pay. No sense in doing work that wasn't worth the risk. We'd be better off joining a different guild at that point.

"This is a guild quest," Barque reminded me. "I'll make sure your work's reflected in your rank evaluation."

"I'd rather get some cold, hard cash in my pocket right now..."

Well, this was business as usual for guild quests. They looked good on your record, but they usually didn't pay much. The

reward for this one was so miserable, you'd think some hidden charges had been taken out of it or something. Still, if we pulled it off, Sheya would probably go up to Rank D and I'd be close to Rank C. At a higher rank, I'd be able to take on better-paying jobs that had been off-limits to me until now. There was definitely *some* merit to this quest. Then again, as long as I was on my own, it was hard for me to see myself doing much better than rat hunting.

"I've suspended the permanent rat-hunting request for now, but that doesn't mean the sewers aren't still infested. I'm sure you'll see plenty of rats along the way. Bring back the tails and I'll pay you separately for that," Barque added.

"Guess we're adding that to the list, then…" I muttered.

Like the old man had said, it'd be a disaster if the dire rats started venturing out of the sewers. Since the guild wasn't letting newbies down there for the time being, Barque had to rely on us to keep the beasts in check. Well, those rats would find us anyway. It wouldn't take any extra effort on our part. Investigate the alligators, exterminate the rats. Two birds with one stone. Hopefully the two jobs combined would give us a decent payoff.

"Fine. I'll do it," Sheya muttered with a deep, deep sigh. She clearly wasn't happy about it, but she seemed to be willing.

I sighed too. If even the guild's resident lazybones was up for it, then I couldn't keep griping. "Oh, fine. I'm in."

"Glad to hear it." Barque was definitely relieved. He finally looked me in the eye again—with a beaming smile too. *And what was your plan if we'd said no, huh?*

"But we need more," said Sheya, and Barque's smile froze. She was asking for something else, and I was thinking the same thing. Not an extra reward, but something even more important.

"A scout, right?" I said, glancing over at her.

"Right."

Barque's expression melted into relief again. For the leader of a guild, he was slow on the uptake sometimes. Not that Sheya helped, being a woman of few words. Right now, we had a warrior and a mage. I'd be fine wandering the sewers on my own if this was a normal rat hunt, but we'd want at least one more party member for an investigation. A specialist. Someone with an eye for detail and sharp ears. Someone light-footed enough to take the first steps into unexplored ruins, if our search led us there. A scout.

“A dwarf would come in handy,” I said. “Good night vision. You know any who fit the bill?”

“No dwarves. Not for this job,” Barque replied.

“Why not?”

“The sewers are full of water. Their vision’s good, but not good enough in the dark to see the difference between solid ground and murky water. And they sink like boulders,” he explained.

“Oh, true. Can’t swim, can they?”

Dwarves were heavily built—almost solid muscle. We weren’t planning on taking a dip in sewer water, but someone might fall by accident. I didn’t like the idea of taking someone who couldn’t swim, and they probably wouldn’t like the idea of coming along anyway.

“Leave it to me,” Barque said. “I’ve got an idea for your scout. And it’s someone more reliable than you two.”

“You hearing this, Sheya? No faith in us whatsoever.”

“That’s on you, Waine.”

*Come on. Like you can talk. I work harder than you, you damn sloth.*

“Um…” A timid voice spoke up, right when there was a break in our conversation. It came from down low—a quiet, young lad’s voice, one I’d only started hearing very recently.

“Oh, hey there, kiddo,” I said cheerfully.

“H-Hey, Waine.” The lad turned to the others. “Good morning.”

*Oh? Is he acting a little more friendly with me now?*

“Morning,” Sheya replied coolly before glaring at Barque.

Speaking of Barque, didn’t he say the kid would be gone by yesterday? But the kid said “good morning” just now, not “goodbye.”

“Er, mornin’. Need somethin’?” the guild leader asked. He scratched the scar on his cheek and seemed pretty awkward. Well, he was the one who’d misjudged the kid.

“Yes, I’d like to go pick herbs again today,” the lad replied.

“Oh, sure. Watch yourself out there.”

“I will! Thank you.” He gave a quick bow and turned to leave. It seemed like that was all he wanted. He’d probably been waiting for us to finish talking, but when the conversation had dragged on he’d chimed in during a lull instead. I couldn’t help but smile at how polite and proper he was. Might not have quite enough spunk to make it as an adventurer, though. He didn’t seem like the adventuring type to begin with. Still, I liked the lad, and I

watched him make his way out of the guild.

"Oh, hey. Hold on a minute," Barque called out to the boy, who looked puzzled as he turned around. "Good timing, actually. I've got a guild quest for you."

***

"I guess this is the place." I read the signboard at the entrance to the building to make sure it matched the name I'd been told. *Yep, this is it.* The front matched the description too.

The building had two floors, and it looked really, really old. I could tell from the color of the bricks. Even the way it'd been built seemed different. But that wasn't all. This place was definitely old, but it wasn't falling apart at all. There wasn't any moss growing on the walls either. When I looked closely at the bricks, I could see lots of marks where they'd been repaired. Someone was taking really good care of this place. I'd thought old houses were always shabby and crumbly, but this seemed even nicer than a brand-new one. It had kind of a calm, comfortable atmosphere.

"Pardon me..." I stepped into what looked like a cafeteria. I'd heard this place was an inn, but it looked like they served food too. There were no customers right now, though. The only person here was a thin lady who stood with her back straight even as she wiped a table.

She greeted me once she saw me come in. "Good day, sir. How may I help you?"

Even though I was just a kid, she was so polite to me. It felt really odd. The only other person who ever talked to me like that was the priest back home, but this lady didn't seem like she was with the church. The church opened its doors to all people, but her attitude felt sort of brisk and cold. Her words were polite, but I didn't feel welcome for some reason. It was kind of like the first time I went to the reception desk at the adventurer's guild.

"I, um, I have a message from the adventurer's guild. I was told that someone called Chikka is staying here. Is that right?"

This was the guild quest I'd been given.

*"You're headin' out of town, aren't you? You'll find Chikka's lodgings on the way. I'll give you somethin' for your trouble, so bring her a message for me. You can go and pick your herbs after."*

I was still new to this town and didn't know its streets at all.

But since this inn was along the main road out of town, I knew I'd be fine. The man at the guild had told me roughly where the building was and what it looked like. Besides, I could read the sign. It was an easy way to earn a little extra money, and I had no reason not to do it. But I was curious why Waine and the pretty lady had looked worried as soon as Chikka's name came up.

"You will find her on the second floor; her room is at the end of the hallway. The stairs are straight ahead," the prim lady said.

"Th-Thank you!"

With her permission, I went farther inside the inn until I found some stairs with a handrail. And then, for the very first time ever, I went upstairs inside a building. On the second floor, there was a hallway with high windows to let the sunlight in and a few doors leading to rooms. Following the lady's instructions, I went to the one in the very back.

The lady had said "her," so Chikka had to be a woman. It did kind of sound like a girl's name. And she was an adventurer. But that was all I'd been told—just the message, her name, and where she was staying.

"I hope she isn't scary..." I said quietly. I felt a little anxious now that I was standing right in front of the door, but that was no reason to abandon the task I'd been given. I gathered my courage and knocked.

Then I thought a knock might not be enough on its own, so I added, "Good morning. I'm looking for someone called Chikka. I have a message from the adventurer's guild."

A moment later, I heard a loud clatter. And then a crash. And then another crash. And then a shriek like someone had stepped on a cat.

"Um...?"

It sounded like something had fallen down, and another something else had fallen over, and then *that* ended up falling onto someone. Was the person inside okay? And what kind of person lived in a room that fell apart just from someone calling at the door?

"Coming..." came a very sleepy voice from inside the room. I heard the sound of footsteps getting closer—footsteps that were kicking things out of the way—and then I saw the doorknob turn. The door opened.

"Huh...?" I couldn't believe my eyes. At first, I was too shocked to say another word.

“Hmm? You’re an awfully small messenger,” said the sleepy-looking woman in the doorway. She stood there in her nightclothes and combed her fingers through her tousled red hair.

“Not as small as you.”

The slim woman who’d appeared was even shorter than me.



I'd seen a lot since coming to this town. New things, old things, things I'd heard of, and things I hadn't. Even though every day brought brand-new sights, it seemed like the surprises weren't even half done yet.

"Hey, I'm not one of your lot. Great, gangly giants. I'll have you know I'm pretty tall for my race," she grumbled, then stifled a yawn.

I blinked in surprise. Her race?

"Wait, you're not a human?" I asked.

"What?"

I looked at her from head to toe. Messy red hair. Pretty dandelion-yellow eyes. The color of her slightly freckled skin didn't seem unusual. But her ears! They were pointy and definitely not like human ears.

"Are you a halfling? Wow, I've never met one before! You're so small!" I blurted.

"What village in the back end of nowhere did you come from?" she asked.

"A really small one!"

"Oh yeah?"

I'd read about halflings in one of the priest's books. They were short and slender. Their ears were pointy but not as long as those of the elves who lived deep in the forests. There weren't any halflings in my village. In fact, only humans lived there. Sometimes that big, beefy, dwarven blacksmith would come by and mend things for us, but that was about it. Chikka was the first halfling I'd ever seen.

"Well, you're a messenger, aren't you? What's the message?" Chikka asked. There was a hint of impatience in her voice, and I remembered what I came here for.

"You're wanted at the adventurer's guild right away. There's a job they want you to do."

"Gotcha. That figures." She raised a hand to her mouth and yawned again. She seemed to have known what the message was about before I'd said a word. "An adventure, huh? Been a while."

"It has? But aren't you an adventurer?" I asked, puzzled.

"I'm a specialist."

I didn't know what that meant, but it sounded impressive.

"Well, thanks for coming by. I'll get some clothes on and head over."

“Okay, thank you.”

“Yep.”

As I bowed politely, Chikka gave a lazy wave and went back inside to get dressed. Hopefully. As she left, I got just a peek at the room behind her—and decided it’d be best to pretend I hadn’t.

“Okay, that’s that,” I said. I clenched my hands into fists, proud of a job well-done. I’d successfully delivered the message and completed my guild quest. Not that I knew what a guild quest was.

I didn’t expect Chikka to be a halfling, but other than that one surprise it’d been a simple job. The inn had been easy to find, and luckily, Chikka had been home. Getting paid for such a straightforward errand felt like a good deal.

The door swung open again all of a sudden, and Chikka popped her head out. “Oh, by the… Hey, what’re you doing, tiny?”

“Wah!”

I was still standing there with my fists in a little victory pose. I whipped my hands behind my back, embarrassed that she’d caught me like that.

“Well, whatever. Got a question for you,” she said. “Who asked for me?”

“Oh, um, it was the man with the scar on his face who sits at the reception desk.”

“What? Barque?!” Chikka scowled. “Urgh. That can only mean one thing: a guild quest. Pain in the ass…” She slapped her forehead with one hand and sighed.

*So that man’s name is Barque?* I thought to myself. *And are guild quests really that bad?*

“Here I thought I’d be heading into some labyrinth full of traps and treasure. My first job in ages and it’s some drudge work for the guild,” she complained. “Might as well go back to bed.”

“Uh, please don’t!”

I’d delivered the message, but I probably wouldn’t get paid if Chikka didn’t show up at the guild.

She looked at me and stuck out her tongue. “I’m kidding. Ignoring a guild quest’s more trouble than it’s worth. I’ll go, so off you hop. Scram.”

Her head disappeared back behind the door. One of her hands popped out to shoo me away before it shot back inside, and the door closed again. Maybe this time she’d go and get

dressed. I felt a little uneasy, but I didn't have time to wait for her to come back out and take her to the guild myself. I wanted to go back to the river in the forest today.

I hesitated a little bit and then stepped away from the door. My job was done. Chikka would go to the guild now and deal with whatever Barque wanted her to do. Now I just had to focus on my own work and do a good job again today.

"Wonder what makes guild quests different from other requests," I pondered out loud. I didn't have much of a clue, but they seemed a little more important than regular requests.

# Chapter 4: Equipment

I followed the path out of town to the forest's entrance, where the woodcutter's hut stood surrounded by stumps. I climbed the nirnaberry tree, took a short break up in its branches while snacking on its fruit, then headed toward the river with stone-covered banks. I didn't eat any valenwort today. That stuff tasted so bad. Besides, I had enough money to buy a piece of bread for breakfast this morning, so I wasn't that hungry. The nirnaberries weren't very filling, but they did taste a little sweet and were pretty good as snacks.

*I wonder if that slime's still hanging around by the river. I hope not. The grown-ups back home all told me slimes were easy to beat, but Waine said they were scary... If an adventurer says that, then I did the right thing when I ran away. Yeah, I'm sure I did.*

Because of that slime, I ended up going back to town early yesterday. But there were still plenty of herbs growing on the riverbank. If I could fill my coat-basket, I might be able to earn twice as much today. *Well, maybe not* that *much. Pretty sure my basket was more than half full yesterday even though I stopped early.* Anyway, I'd definitely earn more, and I'd get my reward for taking a message to Chikka on top of that. Maybe, by tomorrow, I could even buy extra bread to eat for lunch.

I was starting to see how things were looking up, and I was *so* glad. I was earning money and buying my own food now. That alone made me feel really happy and proud of myself, like I'd already taken a big leap toward being a grown-up. Plus, I met Chikka today. It was my first time meeting a halfling, and I even got to talk to her. It was like all the things I couldn't experience as a village kid were happening all at once.

Back when Uncle Lehmar had tried to take me to a slave trader, I'd run away... I'd been so scared and actually really regretted leaving home. But now? I felt like I was going to make it. Not as a merchant, like I'd thought at first, but I could get by as an adventurer somehow.

"Oh?" A drop of water landed on the tip of my nose. I looked up at the sky and saw that it was completely covered by clouds. It had been cloudy ever since I'd left the guild this morning. The

drips kept coming, but it was only light rain and I didn't need to find shelter. It was time to start working, though. "Better hurry and get picking," I said to myself.

The clouds weren't too dark, so I figured the rain probably wouldn't last long. It wouldn't rain harder than this, at least. But as I thought about the weather, a new worry popped into my head. There wouldn't only be sunny days and cloudy days ahead. Sometimes it might pour all day long. In winter, there might even be snowstorms. I couldn't pick herbs on days like that. And if I couldn't pick herbs, I couldn't buy bread. I could go for a day without food—two days, if I really had to. But I didn't think I'd make it through three.

"I've gotta earn more coin," I muttered. Being able to buy a couple pieces of bread just wasn't good enough. I needed money to pay for at least a few days of food.

There was a light gust of wind, and it felt damp and kind of warm against my neck. I headed for the river like yesterday but tried to pick up the pace this time.

The rain, light but stubborn, dragged on longer than I'd expected. Even though my clothes were only a little wet, my heart already felt damp and heavy. On the bright side, there was no slime today. Waine had warned me about slimes hiding in the trees and shadows, so I kept my eyes open for any signs of movement. In the end, I didn't see anything, and I was able to fill my coat-basket to the brim with herbs.

I could've stopped for the day then, but I wanted to explore a little. These herbs growing by the river didn't sell for very much. I'd be able to earn more if I could track down one of the more valuable kinds from the request. I stood under a big tree for shelter and looked up at the gloomy sky while brooding over what to do next. The rain was still light, but it showed no signs of stopping…

I decided to give up for today. Walking back to town would be miserable if the rain picked up. And even if I found more herbs, my basket was already full. Calling it a day now was the smartest choice.

I got back to town without any trouble. As I passed by the inn where Chikka was staying, I glanced at the building before hurrying on. Annoyingly, now that I was back, the clouds started to break up and revealed a dull sunset. Then it stopped raining,

and I sighed. I'd picked more herbs than yesterday, but for some reason my heart felt heavier today.

There were already a lot of people inside the guild when I arrived. Maybe they'd all come back early because of the rain, like me. The mood seemed less lively than usual, though—there wasn't much chatter. When I went to the reception desk, the man with the scarred cheek, who Chikka had called Barque, was sitting there as always. He was glaring at some kind of paperwork again.

"Excuse me," I said. "Here are the herbs I picked today."

"Hm? Oh, it's you, lad. Well done," he replied. He turned to me, put down the documents he'd been reading, then had a big stretch that made his bones crackle and pop. He must've been sitting there for a long time. "I'm not built for sittin' at a desk all day... All right, let's see what you've got." It seemed like his shoulders were awfully stiff, because he kept moving them round and round while he spoke.

I put my coat-basket piled high with herbs onto the counter. Then I asked, "Did Chikka come see you?"

"Aye, she did," Barque replied with a nod. "Much appreciated."

Chikka had kept her word, and I was glad I'd done something helpful. Based on what I'd heard this morning, my guess was that Chikka, Waine, and that pretty lady had left on an adventure together—probably to the sewers. I couldn't help smiling when I imagined those three adventuring together, because the first thing I pictured was Waine and Chikka getting scolded by the pretty lady for being too rowdy. I was pretty sure they wouldn't be bored together.

I looked around the guild in case they were back already, but I couldn't see them anywhere. *I guess they're still out. That's a shame. I kinda wanted to talk to them.* Come to think of it, the sewers were supposed to be like an underground cave. If that was the case, the rain wouldn't matter to them. They'd probably be back later on.

"These all look fine. Here's your reward for today," Barque said, having finished checking the herbs I'd brought. He handed me my money. There was much more than yesterday, since it included the payment for delivering the message to Chikka. I took it with both hands and bowed my head.

"Thank you! Um, would it be okay if I borrow the stable again tonight?" I asked.

“Sure. Keep at it, all right?”

That was a huge relief. I’d been worrying about what to do if he said no and it rained tonight. It also reminded me that I still had a long way to go before I could say I’d made something of myself in this town. I was buying my own food, but I still relied on Barque’s kindness for a place to sleep. It’d be great if I could be like Chikka and stay at an inn. That meant doing more than just picking low-value herbs. I’d brought back my biggest haul yet today, but the money I got still wasn’t enough. Not even close.

I was feeling a little glum when I thanked Barque again and went over to the eating area with my small reward in hand. Yesterday, I’d found out that I should order food from the younger lady in the apron here, not from Barque. Apparently, she was the guild’s cook and waitress. I had a bit more money tonight, but I decided to order the same meal to save a few coins.

“Hey, Barque, here’s my haul for today. Mind checkin’ ’em over?”

I heard an unfamiliar voice and a *thud* of something heavy that made me curious. I looked back at the reception desk and saw a pack basket filled to the top with herbs that belonged to the least adventurer-like person I’d ever seen—a little old man in a patchwork tunic made of mismatched rags. He was tiny. I thought he might be a dwarf at first, but he didn’t look that bulky under his clothes. In fact, he looked pretty thin. He wasn’t a halfling either. His ears were a normal shape, and he was taller than me. Chikka was shorter, and she’d said she was tall for a halfling. His hair was all gone on the top of his head, and his face was suntanned, a little blotchy, and *very* wrinkly. His big, wide eyes kind of scared me a little, and I couldn’t help noticing his funny, crooked smile.

“Ah, Old Badger.” Barque stood up. “Always grateful,” he said.

Barque hadn’t bothered to get up when he was talking to me. Did he stand because it was such a big load of herbs or because of this old grandpa? He took the herbs out of the pack basket and started checking. A lot of them were the not-so-valuable ones, but there were plenty of others that were worth much more—ones I’d only seen in pictures. Even though there were so many herbs, Barque checked them very quickly. He’d peered closely at every plant I’d brought in, but he was hardly looking at

these at all. It was like he was just confirming which types were there. He finished in no time and handed the old man a heavy-looking bag of coins. I watched in amazement.

"Heh heh, thank ya kindly." The old man chuckled. "Any new ones pop up?"

"Yeah, two in the north," Barque replied.

"More an' more lately, huh? I'll take a look-see."

The old man stowed his heavy coin purse away inside his clothes somewhere, slung the empty pack basket over his shoulder, and walked away from the reception desk. He headed toward the wall covered in requests and stopped in front of one of the parchments. I crept a little closer and peeked from behind him to see that it was an extermination request.

"Goblin slaying?" I read. I was so surprised, I said the words out loud by accident. I thought he'd be looking at the herb-gathering one.

"Hmm?" The old man turned around, and our eyes met.

*How can I put it?* He had some of the biggest, clearest facial expressions I'd ever seen. He looked at me with one eye narrowed and the other open wide while his lower lip was set in a pout. Confusion was written all over his face.

"What's this, then, sonny? You can read them letters?" he asked.

"Oh, um... Yes." I replied.

"Well, well, well, ain't you a lucky one? Don't be hangin' around a place like this. You oughta study an' become a scholar or some such." The old man finished with a cackle.

*Lucky? What makes him say that? He can read too.* As for scholars, I was pretty sure I'd read about someone like that in one of the priest's books. He'd worn a thing called a monocle. I think he was an important person who did a lot of hard thinking about complicated things... *But how do you earn money doing that?*

"Um, if it's okay...!" I began. I figured I might as well ask, since he'd already spotted me. "Can you tell me how to get good at gathering herbs?"

"Whassat?" The old man stared at me like I was some strange, magical beast before turning away and scratching the bald part of his head. "Oh..." he said to himself. Then he crossed his arms, tilted his head, and frowned.

He looked like he was thinking very hard. He was so easy to

read, I knew for sure that something was troubling him. But what? His face was grim, but he didn't seem angry. It was like he was thinking my question over very seriously but couldn't think of what to say. Was it really that hard to answer?

"See this one?" he finally said, pointing at a parchment on the wall.

It was a permanent request—the herb-gathering job I always did. The old man's knobbly finger was pointing at one particular picture. It was a drawing of a low-growing plant with big, flimsy leaves and flowers in the center that looked like fuzzy grass-seed heads. This herb was a nacturus, and it was the second most valuable one on the list.

"Don't pick it yet," the old man said.

And just like that, there was one less herb I could gather.

The skies were clear the next day with no sign of rain clouds. Once again, I left town to gather herbs. Barque had called the old adventurer "Old Badger," right? Well, last night Old Badger had scurried off to the guild's upstairs without explaining a thing to me. Apparently there were rooms up on the second floor. He must've been staying in one of them. I had more questions to ask him next time. He definitely knew things that I'd need to know if I wanted to make it.

"Don't pick it yet..." I murmured as I walked along the path to the forest, repeating the only bit of advice that Old Badger had given me.

I still didn't know what he meant, and that was really bugging me. There was nothing written on the request about picking nacturus at a particular time of year. All it said was that the thick roots of the nacturus were useful in medicine, so you should dig them up carefully without damaging them. Maybe the roots were still thin at this time of year, and that made them worth less money. Maybe there was some other reason. Or maybe the old man had lied to me because he wanted all the nacturus for himself, but I didn't want to believe that. Well, even though I really wanted to know the truth, I wouldn't be able to figure it out on my own.

"Let's see if I can find it."

If I saw the plant for myself, maybe I'd understand the old man's advice. I'd been meaning to search for some more valuable herbs anyway—ones that didn't grow by the river. That

was my goal for the day. Luckily, the weather was good, so I was going to explore parts of the forest I'd never been to before. I made up my mind at the entrance to the forest, with tree stumps all around me, then made my way into the woods and back onto the animal trail.

I decided to try going in a different direction once I was a bit farther inside. My plan was to head for the nirnaberry tree, take a quick break there, and then start walking away from the river. The forest floor was still soggy from yesterday's rain, and my footsteps made soft squelching sounds as I made my way to the tree. To my surprise, that was when I spotted a new herb from the request.

It was growing on a moss-covered boulder about half my height, next to the animal trail. Dark green leaves without stems were peeking out from cracks on the rock's surface. The leaves looked very plain and were almost buried in the moss—no wonder I hadn't noticed this plant before. It wasn't nacturus. And it wasn't the herb I found growing by the river. Not valenwort either, of course—this herb was definitely on the request. I'd seen it before.

"At the guild yesterday..." I murmured.

It was one of the herbs from Old Badger's basket. Yesterday, I'd recognized it as a plant drawn on the request. This time, I knew it was a plant I'd seen with my own eyes. I realized how important it was to get a look at the real thing. After all, drawings and words couldn't tell you exactly what color or how big something was. I wouldn't have been able to match this plant up with the one in my memory if I hadn't actually seen it myself.

I reached for the plant growing on the boulder. As far as I could remember, there weren't any special instructions for picking this one. I tried pulling from the bottom, and the whole thing came out easily. By the looks of it, the roots on this plant were short and weak.

*Wonder if it likes growing on rocks. Or maybe it grows here because of the moss. Or... Maybe it's just a coincidence.*

I took a thorough look around me, but I didn't see any more of this herb nearby. That didn't tell me much. I didn't notice it at all the last time I was here. That really bothered me, even though it wasn't all that valuable, because I thought I'd been searching really carefully. I turned and looked back at the path I'd taken to get here. The breeze whispered in the branches above me, and I

heard a little bird calling from somewhere.

*What if I missed more herbs along the way? I probably did. No, I know I did.*

"I've gotta look closer," I scolded myself.

I thought back to my first day, when I'd wandered all over the plains without memorizing even half the herbs I was supposed to collect. I must've walked right by some back then for sure. Even after taking the time to learn them all, I'd still missed these until now.

*Ugh, what's the point of having eyes if I don't use them?*

I let out a long sigh and kept breathing out until I emptied all the air from my chest. I leaned back a little, resting my butt against the mossy boulder, and slowly took a big breath in—then let it all out again. I took two or three more deep breaths like this while I searched my memories. I had the whole request memorized now. I could remember every single picture. Then there were the herbs Old Badger had brought in yesterday. I'd watched Barque check them. There'd been a few different kinds, but I remembered them all. I concentrated and tried to match those real herbs to their drawings.

I'd seen a total of six kinds of herbs with my own eyes. One of those was the herb I'd found at the river, so that left five new ones. I'd just found one on the boulder. Four left. The old man had found all of those, so picking them at this time of year had to be possible.

"I'll forget about the nacturus," I decided. If I happened to find it, then that was fine, but there was no point in going out of my way to look for it. I hadn't planned on picking it anyway. "Let's find those other four."

Although I hadn't reached the nirnaberry tree, I made up my mind there and then. I stepped off the trail—off on an adventure.

When I got back to the adventurer's guild, Waine, Chikka, and the mage lady were all sitting around a table having a meal.

Waine greeted me. "Oh, hey, kiddo. Man, what happened to you?"

"I tripped and fell in the mud," I mumbled.

"Ah, right, it was raining yesterday, huh." Waine chuckled and washed down a bite of sausage with his drink.

He'd taken his armor off and changed clothes, and the lady

beside him wasn't in her usual pointy hat and robes. Chikka wasn't in her nightclothes anymore, obviously. I hadn't recognized them at first. If I had, I probably wouldn't have gone over.

I really didn't want to bump into anyone I knew. Being seen like *this* was so embarrassing. I'd just started to explore new parts of the forest when I'd tripped on the soggy ground and fell flat on my face. I was covered in mud. It'd dried up and left stains on my clothes that I couldn't just brush off. At least all I had was a dirty face and muddy clothes. I could've gotten hurt, or my clothes could've been ripped, but the forest floor was soft and covered in leaves.

"It's often damp in the shade," said the pretty mage. She was digging the meat out of some big shellfish. It sounded like she was giving me advice, but her timing was a little late.

"Yeah, I'll be more careful next time," I replied, and my shoulders slumped.

Even though I'd looked high and low, I never found any of the other herbs. I ended up stopping by the river on my way back to fill my basket with the ones I'd found before. At least that got me enough money for more bread and soup tonight. I knew there was no point being down in the dumps about it. I still had one problem, though—I didn't have a change of clothes.

I'd wanted to wash my clothes before eating, but if I did that I'd have nothing to wear. I couldn't exactly come in here naked, so I gave up on that idea and decided to wash them after my meal. I guessed Waine and the others were all wearing different clothes because their usual ones had gotten dirty during their adventure. I wished I could change too. I wished for a lot of things.

"You went to the sewers, right? Did everything go okay?" I asked. I was curious, and there was no point in being embarrassed anymore. They'd all seen me like this already.

The three of them hadn't come back to the guild last night. Well, they might've later on, after I'd gone to the stable, but I didn't think they had because I didn't see them in the morning either. It must've been a tough job if they were there for two days straight.

"Sure did! Made some great progress," Waine said cheerfully. "We thought we might find some unexplored rooms and passages here and there, but it's much more than that. We found

a whole new area hidden behind some rubble. It's really something. We started exploring and mapping it out, but it's gonna take a while. So we decided to come back here and make sure we're prepared before heading out again. Had to report what we found too."

"Wow, that's amazing," I replied. Actually, I wasn't really sure if it was amazing, but it probably was if Waine was this excited about it.

"Just so we're clear," Chikka chimed in, "*I* found the place, *I* mapped it, and *I* decided we should stop back at the guild. This idiot was just waving his sword around."

"Hey, it's a good thing you had me around with so many rats down there!" Waine pointed out.

"Also, it may be a ruin, but it's still a sewer and always has been. It's not like we're gonna find treasure or anything down there, so I'm not sure I'd call it amazing," Chikka said with a sigh.

She was swinging her legs under the table as she sat with her chin in her palm. It seemed like she wasn't enjoying the underground adventure very much. I noticed that all she had in front of her was some fruit. Maybe she didn't have much of an appetite, or maybe halflings just weren't big eaters because they were so small.

"This might expand the sewer system," the mage lady said quietly. She was still fighting with her shellfish, and I wasn't sure who was winning. "Only the town center has sewers now. But they might be able to extend them to other areas," she explained, adding more details to what she'd said. She must've thought she wasn't clear enough.

"So, that'll make life easier for everyone?" I asked.

"More prime land." She finally managed to pry the meat out of the shell. She popped the morsel into her mouth, chewed happily, and swallowed. Then she continued. "The lord will be delighted. Barque will be busy. We might get a good reward."

I'd noticed before, but this lady used as few words as possible whenever she talked. It was really clear to me now. Anyway, if Barque was busy, that explained why he didn't really seem interested in checking my herbs today.

I thought about everything else she'd just said. "Prime land" probably meant good land, like fields that were much better for growing crops because of how much sun they got, the quality of the soil, how well they drained water, and things like that. If

more sewers meant more prime land—more *good* land—then there'd be bigger harvests. Yeah, that'd make the lord happy. And if he was happy, then maybe he *would* give the three of them a big reward. But why would Barque be busy? I didn't get that part.

"Then I guess you found something great down there after all!" I said. I understood that much, and I couldn't help feeling impressed.

"I can't complain about more coins in my purse, but it's kinda hard to get excited about this one," Chikka grumbled. "No traps, no treasure, no hidden doors or anything. No big moment of, 'Ooh, there it is!' You know?"

"Yeah, I hear you," agreed Waine. "Here I thought we were on an alligator hunt, but it's been nothing but rats, rats, and more rats so far. Even if we do find a hidden door, I bet it leads to a room full of rats."

"*I'll* negotiate with Barque," came the other lady's quiet but determined voice. Her brow was creased like she was annoyed about something, but I wasn't sure what.

"By the way, are you telling me tiny here's an adventurer?" Chikka peered at me with suspicion. "I mean, he's hanging out and chatting like he belongs here."

It'd taken her a while to notice. Also, I wished she wouldn't call me "tiny" when she was even shorter than me.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" asked Waine.

"He did say he came from the guild," Chikka said. She sounded puzzled. "Didn't know he was an adventurer himself. I thought Barque just found some kid passing by to run his errand for a few coins."

Waine nodded. "Well, that's not far off the mark."

*Barque told me that was a guild quest,* I thought. *Not just an errand…*

"All right then, time for introductions," Waine continued. "This here's Chikka. Hardly ever shows up here 'cause she's too busy fishing. And Chikka, meet the guild's newest recruit. Just signed up the other day. What was your name again?"

"Kiri," I replied.

"Kiri, huh?" he repeated. "Guess that's the first time I've heard it too."

"Yeah."

"Well, there you have it, Chikka. This kiddo here's Kiri. Be nice to him, yeah?"

That might've been the sloppiest way of introducing someone I'd ever heard.

Chikka seemed to feel the same way, judging by how she was staring at Waine. "Looks like you two're best buddies. Or not. You don't know a thing about this kid, do you?"

"Hey, that's not true," Waine countered. "I happen to know he's a brilliant lad—he can read, y'know. At his age!"

"Yeah? Well, isn't that something? What, did he read the requests for you?"

"Huh? Uh, n-no... He didn't..." Waine stuttered. He was clearly ruffled. I'd never seen such a bad liar before.

"Speaking of age, even I can see he's still just a kid. How old *are* you?" Chikka asked me.

I hesitated a little before I answered. "I'm twelve."

"Hmm." Chikka peered at me with a doubtful look. Maybe she knew. I had a feeling she did. That said, she was a halfling—maybe she had no idea how tall human children were supposed to be.

"Hup!" With a little noise, Chikka hopped off her chair. She was so small that her feet didn't touch the floor when she sat in these chairs made for humans. Well, mine didn't either.

She came right up to me and stared as she slowly walked in a circle around me.

"Um, is something wrong?" I asked.

"Waine, Sheya." Chikka addressed her companions instead of answering me. "Can I leave tomorrow's prep to you guys?"

"No problem!"

"All right."

Waine and the other lady agreed.

Chikka snickered like she just came up with some kind of mischief. "Okay, tiny. I've got a job just for you. Come to the inn first thing tomorrow."

The next morning, I made my way to the inn where Chikka was staying. She was waiting for me outside and cheerfully waved when she saw me.

"Hey, you showed up. Over here!" she called.

"Good morning, Chikka. Um, what's this?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious? It's a cart."

I mean, it *was* obvious. What she was leaning against had to be a cart. It was made of wood and had two big wheels. The

same half-horse, half-fish creature I'd seen above the door to the Raging Kelpie's Tail was painted on the side. The cart must've belonged to the guild. Maybe it was something you could borrow if you asked Barque. But why was it here? Chikka had said she had a job for me, one where I'd get a reward *and* a meal, so I'd accepted on the spot. Now I felt kind of dumb for doing that, because I realized I had no idea what she wanted me to do. Well, if a cart was involved, maybe I'd be carrying stuff for her.

"Today, we're gonna clean my room," Chikka announced. Her arms were folded over her chest, and she smirked when she saw the puzzled look on my face. Because of her size, it was hard for me to see her as anything other than a little girl. She even looked kind of cute.

I felt like my image of an adventurer was getting more jumbled up every day.

"So, here's the thing," Chikka explained. "My room's a dump, and the innkeeper's ready to blow her top. I think she'll actually kick me out if I don't do something about it soon."

My face had clouded over when I realized what I'd gotten myself into, but it did seem pretty serious for Chikka. I hadn't known that even paying customers could be kicked out of their inn rooms. Then again, I couldn't blame the innkeeper for getting angry if Chikka's whole room was like what I'd seen when I'd peeked inside.

Now that I thought about it, some of the requests on the wall back at the guild were for simple things like heavy work and deliveries. It was like Uncle Lehmar had told me—adventurers did anything and everything. Maybe being asked to clean someone's room wasn't the strangest thing after all.

In fact, it might even be my lucky day. I could handle cleaning. I'd earn a reward and a meal, and there was no danger involved. I had a feeling cleaning up *that* mess would be hard work, but work wasn't supposed to be easy. I had nothing to complain about, honestly. This was a good deal. After all, with enough elbow grease, you could get anything clean. It wouldn't be like my first day of herb picking, when I'd searched all day and got barely anything to show for it.

Part of me did want to go back to the forest and track down those herbs I couldn't find yesterday, but I could do that anytime. For now, I should be patient and focus on the task at hand. Herb picking could wait until tomorrow.

“Let’s go on up. You haven’t seen the situation, right? I’m warning you now. It’s pretty shocking.”

I believed her.

When we went inside the inn, the lady from yesterday was there again. She really was as thin and upright as a broom handle. She glanced at me and gave me a small bow. I bowed back.

“May I assume you intend to clean your room at last, Miss Chikka?” she asked without a word of greeting. Maybe she’d overheard us talking, or maybe she’d guessed from the cart sitting outside. Her way of speaking was still a little stiff and polite, but she sounded kind of cheerful this time.

“Yup, from top to bottom,” Chikka replied. “I even called in help. You might hear a few bangs and bumps for a while, but don’t be alarmed.”

“Excellent. I hope I shall not have to worry about the floor collapsing any longer.”

“Sure won’t.”

The floor collapsing? Was there *that* much stuff in there? Chikka’s room was on the second floor—if the floorboards gave out, it’d be a disaster. What if there was someone in the room below? They’d be squashed! I got a chill just thinking about it. I had to do a good job here. It was just cleaning, but I was starting to feel a sense of duty and determination to get this done.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor and followed Chikka to the room at the very end of the hallway. Chikka pulled out a key out of nowhere, and I couldn’t figure out where in the world she’d gotten it from. She definitely hadn’t been holding it before. It was like magic, but she didn’t act like she’d done a trick or anything. Before I could ask her about it, Chikka opened the door and that little surprise was suddenly trampled by a much, much bigger one.

The room was worse than I’d imagined. Way worse. All I could do was wonder... *How?* How was a mess like this even possible? There was a chair with *three* broken legs, a coat stand covered in rust, and a thick iron shield that was way too big for Chikka to use. Huge piles of junk on the floor—at least, most of it looked like junk—almost reached the ceiling. Empty bottles and food containers were scattered all over the place.

A squashed old boot full of holes sat on the windowsill like some kind of weird decoration. There was a mountain of clothes

on top of something that was probably a table. Under all of that, I saw a mysterious orb that reminded me of the night sky. The orb was fixed to a pedestal and looked valuable, but it seemed like someone just left it on the floor and forgot about it. A chest of drawers with every drawer pulled out overflowed with stuff. A bunch of fishing poles were stacked up in one corner of the room, kind of like how you'd dry straw.

There was nowhere to walk. You couldn't even see the lower half of the room's walls. The only open space was where Chikka slept—a bed covered in crumpled sheets.

"Did an evil god curse you or something?" I asked.

Chikka shrugged. "Not that I can remember."

I was almost disappointed. If she'd been cursed, there was at least a chance she'd get better if she just went to church.

"Anyway, this is our job for today. Let's get this place cleaned up."

"Okay..."

"Come on, tiny. A little more energy."

"Uh, yeah! Gonna get this room spick-and-span!" I tried talking like the loudest, bounciest kid from back home, but it didn't really work. How was I supposed to be cheerful standing in front of *this*? No, that wasn't important right now. I really needed to get started here. Even after we cleaned the room out, getting rid of all this stuff would take dozens of trips with the cart. Could we really do it in a day?

*Not if we just stand here looking at it.*

"All right, where should we start?" I asked, rolling up my sleeves.

"Hey, that's more like it. Okay, first, can you grab the little bits of trash and take them to the cart? You can put them in this." Chikka handed me a wooden bucket with a handle.

I took it and got to work right away by picking up anything small that looked like trash. Getting rid of big things first would give us more space to work, but I could already see that wasn't a good idea here. We really needed clear floor space to stand on before doing anything else. It'd be really dangerous to stumble or trip while carrying something heavy. I didn't want to get crushed under an avalanche of junk. This bucket smelled kind of funny, though. I wondered if Chikka used it for fishing.

"Oh, tiny?"

"Yeah, Chikka?"

I turned when Chikka called for me and saw her with a cheeky grin. She looked like such a prankster just then, like a little goblin or an imp from a fairy tale.

"If you find any panties, you better not steal them."

My cheeks burned red as soon as I thought about *that*. "Of course I won't!"

Chikka's room was at the very end of the second-floor hallway. That made it the room farthest from the inn's entrance. I gathered up as much as I could carry, loaded it onto the cart, ran back upstairs, gathered up another load, and on and on and on. It wasn't really that far, but I was getting worn out. The stairs were the worst part. This job was much tougher than I'd expected, but I had to just keep going.

The cart was finally full after Chikka and I carried some of the bigger things out of her room together. We probably could've added more to the pile, but then the cart would've gotten too heavy for us to move.

"Where exactly are we taking this stuff?" I asked.

"The armorer's shop. It's next to the adventurer's guild," Chikka replied.

I was pretty sure I knew the place Chikka was talking about, though I'd never been inside. It had to be the shop with the thin sword and the round shield painted on its sign. That wasn't far from here, since the adventurer's guild was just down the road. But would the armorer really take all this junk off our hands?

"We call it the armorer's shop, but they sell anything and everything adventurers could need, not just weapons and armor," Chikka explained while pushing the cart. "Canteens, flint, rope, lanterns, you name it. And they'll buy pretty much anything they think they can turn a profit on."

That definitely sounded useful. I'd never really thought about all the different kinds of gear and supplies adventurers needed.

"That shop didn't look all that big, though," I said. It had seemed pretty average sized to me. If they were already selling weapons, armor, *and* lots of useful bits and bobs for adventurers, there was no way they'd have room for all of Chikka's junk too.

"They won't sell everything in that one shop," she replied. "They'll buy things from us cheap, cart them off elsewhere, and sell them at a profit there. That way, the size of the shop doesn't

matter, see?"

"Doesn't that kind of mean you're getting ripped off?"

"Nah, it's not like that."

The cart rolled smoothly and easily over the paved road. If we'd been on one of the paths in my village instead, we would've stumbled over little bumps and dips the whole way. At first I didn't get why someone would lay all these paving stones on the ground when it seemed like such hard work, but now I really appreciated this nice, flat road.

"Adventurers bring back all kinds of stuff from all kinds of places, like relics from ancient ruins, monster parts, or weapons and armor they pinched off their enemies. Magical items too—an amateur won't even recognize a lot of those at first glance. It's not easy finding someone who'll give you a proper appraisal *and* a fair price for them," Chikka continued.

So the armorer's shop knew the value of just about everything, because they bought and sold almost anything. That was impressive. Trust was clearly very important in this line of work. After all, there were people like Uncle Lehmar who'd lie to you and take you to a slave trader if they had the chance. Finding a shop you could trust and sticking with them definitely seemed like a good idea, even if it might cost you a little more. I decided I'd go to the armorer's too if I needed anything in the future. But right now...

"This is all just junk," I said. "Will they really take it?"

"You'd be surprised what sells. Anything they can clean up and repair has value, even if it's not ready for customers right away," Chikka explained. "Metal can be melted down and reused by a smith. Doesn't matter if the thing's rusty or damaged. Whole bottles can be washed and reused, and broken ones can be turned into raw materials. They'll take leather as long as the size is right, and even old furniture can be turned into firewood if it's no good for anything else."

"Really?"

"Sure. It's not a good way to make money, though. I doubt I'll even get enough coin for today's lunch with all this." Chikka sighed sadly.

That was a little depressing. We'd filled the cart with as much as we could carry, though it was all stuff Chikka didn't need. But if she could actually get some money out of this, it definitely made sense to bring the cart to the shop first before throwing

anything away. Now that I knew about the armorer, the stuff on the cart was starting to look more like proper cargo and less like a pile of trash.

"What if there's stuff we can't sell?" I asked.

"There's a furnace behind the guild," said Chikka. "We can leave it there and they'll burn it along with the firewood."

I suddenly imagined Barque tossing trash into the fire while grumbling and complaining the whole time.

After unloading the cart at the armorer's and requesting an appraisal, Chikka and I went straight back to the inn. Apparently, the shop would pay her later. She seemed to trust them a lot, since she was willing to hand over all her stuff without getting money for it right away.

Back at the inn, there was still lots of work to do. I was jogging back and forth again, in and out, up and down the stairs, over and over, until the room finally started to look, well, kind of okay. At first, every time I'd picked anything up—other than stuff that was obviously broken, like the one-legged chair—I'd checked with Chikka to make sure it was okay to throw out. But my patience was running thin after hours of cleaning with no end in sight, and that was when it hit me: *Every single thing* in this room was junk.

"Oh, isn't that vase an interesting shape?" Chikka said. "It's from one of the kingdoms across the sea. They use it for displaying flowers."

"You don't have any flowers," I said flatly.



“I won this shield off some lunkhead warrior in a wager.”

“It’s too big for you.”

“Did you know you can make stew for twenty people in this pot?”

“You’ll never need that much.”

“They use these dolls in the theater. They were popular in the capital for a—”

“So you don’t need it.”

“This came out of a ruin I—”

“Trash.”

The cart was full again, and I went with Chikka—who seemed a little quieter for some reason—to the armorer’s and back once more. We’d been at it since early morning, and now the sun was high in the sky. It was probably past midday already. I had a pretty good idea of what I still needed to do, so it was time to pick up the pace. I wanted to get the rest of the big stuff cleared out right away and then move on to the next part of the job. Taking out the trash was just the first step, after all.

I needed to get the place clean and organized too. It would be good to empty out the chest of drawers and separate the clothes Chikka could still wear from those she couldn’t. Since Chikka lived alone, getting rid of most of the dishes and cutlery lying around and only keeping what she really needed would help make the place less cluttered. Then I had to hurry and take care of all of the random little things still scattered around the room and sweep the floor, or else the job still wouldn’t be done by the end of the day. Was there time to wash the bedsheets? Probably not. That was kind of annoying.

When we got back to the inn, we found the prim innkeeper standing there like she’d been waiting for us.

“Welcome back. Would you care to take a short break from your work?” She gestured to the dining area, and I saw a table set for two people. “If you have not yet taken lunch, I shall be glad to prepare it for you. Though I’m afraid I can only offer a simple meal.”

“Oh, uh…” I was hungry, but I couldn’t answer her. Uncle Lehmar’s face appeared in my mind. I saw the sign for Zelmar Slavers. I heard his voice—friendly, at first, like when we’d traveled here together. Then I heard the way that voice had changed as soon as he’d realized I could read. My body froze, and my throat dried up. I felt the urge to back away from this

woman. She was a stranger in this strange town, and she had no good reason to be kind to me.

"Guess she's glad we're cleaning up," Chikka muttered.

"Huh?" Those words broke the spell. I looked at the innkeeper, and her expression did seem a little softer... It was kind of hard to tell, though.

"We'd appreciate that," answered Chikka. "We were just thinking of eating."

"Very well. Please keep up the good work this afternoon," the innkeeper said curtly.

Chikka turned and stuck her tongue out so that only I could see.

So the innkeeper was being nice because we were doing good work. As soon as I realized that, my appetite came rushing back and my stomach growled loudly.

"Th-Thank you very much!" I blurted. That was a little embarrassing... As I hurried over to the table with Chikka, I heard a quiet chuckle from the innkeeper behind me.

By the time we'd carried out the last of the big items, tidied up the smaller ones, and put away all the clothes that'd been scattered around higgledy-piggledy, the sun had set and it was dark outside. But the room finally looked like a room instead of a trash heap. I was really proud of the work we'd done here today. There was just one thing left.

"Y-You can't touch these!" Chikka cried.

There wasn't a single cleaning tool in Chikka's room, not even buried in the mountains of junk, so I'd borrowed a broom from the innkeeper and swept up with that. But there was still one spot in the room I wasn't happy with. I put my hands on my hips and stared at the corner where all those rods and other fishing gear were stacked up against the wall. Chikka stood in front of the pile with her arms spread wide like she was protecting her own child.

"Chikka... It's not like I'm asking you to throw them *all* away."

"No, these have to stay!"

"You can't need this many."

"I do! I need them all!"

"Some of them look broken."

"I'll fix them!"

Waine had mentioned something about Chikka being into

fishing. Apparently, it was her hobby, and she was *really* into it. Why else would she need so many rods? I counted more than ten. That explained why she was so attached to the stuff in this corner, even though she'd let me get rid of everything else without much fuss.

I crossed my arms and thought about how the room had looked in the beginning. This had been the fishing gear corner back then too. The rods and stuff were in a jumbled mess, but it seemed like Chikka had put all of it over here on purpose—the fishing gear would be safe and out of harm's way even if the other junk in the room toppled over or something. Maybe all this fishing stuff really was important to Chikka. *Hmm. Fishing, huh?*

"Is fishing fun?" I asked. I couldn't help wondering.

"Huh? Of course it is. Haven't you done it before?"

"I've caught fish in the river with my hands before, but not with a rod. Aren't nets better?"

Back in my village, people often left nets in the river. You could catch a lot of fish that way and give everyone a good meal. But with a rod and line, you caught a lot less. There were some grown-ups who'd take a rod and go out for the day, but they never came back with a catch like we got in the nets. In fact, they'd often come home all gloomy because they hadn't caught anything at all.

"Wow, you're dumb. Dumb *and* tiny!"

Maybe I was dumb sometimes, but who was she to be calling anyone tiny?

"Listen. Rod fishing and net fishing are *totally* different things. Depending on the kind of fish you're after, everything changes—the spot where you cast, the time of day, the bait, the technique. Do you wait patiently? Do you change your spot? Do you hook some bait and try to tempt the fish? It's all about pitting your wits against the fish's. When you hook one, you gotta get the timing right so it doesn't wriggle free. It takes skill, determination, and concentration to make sure your line doesn't snap. And if you snag something big, you need strength if you don't wanna lose your whole rod. You see, fishing isn't like hunting. It's a battle between you and the fish!"

Something told me the poor fish weren't interested in fighting battles, but I got the message. Chikka was crazy about fishing. It was good to have something you really love. The priest always said that when he was reading a new book.

“Fishing’s why I came here, you know,” she added. “I used to live in the capital, but here, I can go down to the sea and fish anytime. I can still remember the way everyone in my party looked when I told them I was moving. They thought I was crazy.”

When she put it like that, I could see how liking something *too* much might be a problem sometimes.

“Hey, what’s that look for?” Chikka asked. “You still don’t get just how awesome fishing is, do you?”

“Uh, no, no, I get it,” I said quickly.

“I know what’ll do the trick. Next time I go, I’ll take you with me. I’ll even lend you one of my rods!”

*When did I say I wanted to go?*

“Fishing’s great. You can bring home something for the dinner table, and if you’re lucky, you might even earn yourself some coin. People will pay a lot for high-quality sea fish.”

“Wait, really?” I leaned in. Now I was interested.

Chikka grinned. “‘Course. I wouldn’t lie about that. Tell you what—once I’m done with this job in the sewers and I’ve got some downtime again, I’ll take you. So.” Chikka jerked her thumb over her shoulder at the pile of gear behind her. “Let’s just leave these where they are. Okay?”

I still didn’t see why we shouldn’t at least tidy them, but Chikka was the one who’d asked me to help out. If she didn’t want me to touch them, I should listen to her. Still, I *really* didn’t think she needed to hold on to the broken ones…

“Aaanyway, now that we’ve settled that, come over here a sec.” Chikka quickly changed the subject and pulled me by my sleeve. We took a few steps away from her fishing stuff to a different part of the room where some of her work tools were sitting out. There was a big knife with a pretty gem set in the handle, a few small knives that were completely painted black, a small crossbow, a set of leather armor along with some spare parts, a leather canteen, and some…thing I couldn’t recognize. Her backpack was there too. It was full, like she was ready to leave anytime. There was no need for her to tell me how important these things were. This was her adventuring gear.

With a cheeky grin, Chikka picked up the slightly dusty leather armor. “This is for you,” she said. “Try it on. You tripped and came back all covered in mud yesterday, right? Well, I saw that and thought, hmm, this kid’s playing a dangerous game.”

I put the armor on over my head and adjusted the shoulder pads so they sat right. It still felt a little strange, though, and pretty heavy too—each piece looked like it was made out of a few layers of leather put together.

Chikka stepped behind me and patted the armor a few times to make sure it was on properly, and then she tied the leather cords at each side for me too. “Your clothes wouldn’t have gotten that dirty if you’d been wearing armor. That’s how I knew you didn’t have any,” she explained.

“Huh. That makes sense.” If I’d been wearing something like this when I’d fallen, the mud would’ve only gotten on the armor and not all over my clothes.

“Plus, I could tell by the color of the mud and the little bits of dead leaves on you that you’d been to the forest.”

“You knew just from that?!” I was so surprised I almost shouted the question.

“’Course I did. I’m a specialist, you know. A scout. I wouldn’t be a very good or useful one if I couldn’t work out something as simple as that.”

A specialist. I’d heard Chikka call herself that before. I wasn’t sure what exactly a scout did, but I knew her ability to notice and understand what she saw around her was really amazing if she could tell where someone had been just from the dirt on their clothes. She seemed to think it was nothing special, though. In fact, she thought she’d be useless if she couldn’t do that much. I was speechless.

“I’m guessing you use the gates on this side of town, which means the nearest patch of forest is where the dwarven woodcutters work,” Chikka continued. “Those big guys can chase most of the monsters off themselves, so that area’s pretty safe. But beasties still show up now and then. Pretty reckless to go out there without any armor.”

“I guess so,” I admitted.

I *had* come across a slime in the forest. I’d gotten away from it without anything bad happening, but what if it had been something quicker than a slime? That was a scary thought. I was just lucky I hadn’t bumped into anything really dangerous yet, wasn’t I? It was a little late, but I was finally starting to understand what a risky situation I was putting myself in every time I went gathering there.

“So, then I remembered I had some old armor lying around.

It’s made for halflings, but you’re just a kid—and a little one too—so I figured it might be just the right size. Didn’t have a clue where it was, though, with the room being in that state.” After tying the leather cords, Chikka tugged on the armor to check the fit. She didn’t seem satisfied, so she undid the cords and retied them.

I almost couldn’t believe what Chikka was telling me. It took me a moment to find my words. “Do you mean this was all for me?” I asked.

Chikka must’ve been tired yesterday after getting back from the sewers, especially since they’d discovered a new area and everything. She should’ve been resting today to make sure she was ready for more adventuring tomorrow. Instead, she’d spent the whole day cleaning just to dig out this armor for me.

“Nah,” Chikka replied. “I really was about to get kicked out ’cause of that mess.”

Or not.

“I knew I was gonna have to deal with it soon,” she continued. “Then this dumb, reckless kid showed up and I figured, screw it, might as well hunt for that armor and get the place cleaned up at the same time. You just gave me the little kick I needed to get going, I guess.”

“Do you really need someone to kick you before you’ll get around to cleaning?”

“It’s weird you don’t. Well, good for you, I guess. Especially since you’re still just a kid.”

I didn’t think it was that strange. Grown-ups like my older big brother and the priest had always taught me to keep my things tidy.

Chikka pulled the armor’s cords tight, and the fitting was done. This time, the armor hugged my body and didn’t shift when she tugged on it. It even felt lighter somehow. I tried moving around and was pleasantly surprised at how easy it was. I even tried a little jump and didn’t feel anything rubbing or hurting. The weight of the armor on my body felt reassuring, like I could depend on it to protect me.

“Wow,” I breathed. I ran my hands over the armor and felt how thick and tough it was.

“Nice and easy to move when it’s on tight, right?” said Chikka, looking pleased. “Armor’s like dead weight on your shoulders if you don’t wear it right. You’ll have to practice so you can put it on

yourself."

"Yeah, I will!" I felt a rush of joy well up inside me. "Thank you so much, Chikka!" I said, and I meant every word.

She smiled bashfully while scratching her cheek. Out of all the faces I'd seen her make so far, this one was definitely the cutest.

"Oh yeah, I've got a spare leather belt too, so I can make you a strap to hold your weapon while I'm at it."

I blinked. Getting another kind offer like that from Chikka caught me off guard. "Really? You'd do that for me?"

"Sure, don't sweat it. Halflings like me are good with our hands. I can whip up something like that in no time. Plus, you gotta have a strap that fits your armor properly. So, what's your weapon of choice? A sword? Spear? Don't tell me it's an axe. Or even a mace?"

So halflings were good at delicate work like crafting? I didn't know that. Not that it really mattered right now. *My weapon, huh. Well...*

"Um, I've got this." I took out the sheath holding my small knife and showed it to Chikka.

The next thing I knew, we were bursting through the door to the adventurer's guild.

"*Waine!* You dumbass! Blockhead! Where are you?! Show yourself!" Chikka's shrill voice cut clean through the chatter in the guild.

People turned to look at us, but she ignored all of them and marched forward with me in tow. Her grip was firm on my wrist, so I had no choice but to follow.

Waine waved a piece of meat on the bone at us like he was saying hello. He didn't seem bothered by the sudden ruckus at all. "Hey, Chikka. Why are you so worked up? I took care of all the prep for tomorrow already."

"Great, thanks. Now come with me." Chikka jerked her head toward the guild's door.

The pretty lady in the pointy hat—I think Chikka had called her Sheya—was at the table too, but she didn't even look up from her bowl of soup.

"Well, sure, but will you tell me what's going on?" Waine asked. "What, did I do something wrong?"

"Not you. Did you know tiny here's been going to the forest without armor *or* a weapon?!"

“You’re kidding…” Waine shook his head at me. “There’s a line between brave and stupid, kiddo.”

I could see the concern in Waine’s eyes. *Waine*, of all people. It seemed like I’d been even more reckless than I thought.

“I have this knife…” I mumbled.

“You call that a weapon?! Idiot! The goblins would laugh you out of the woods!” Chikka shouted.

*You don’t have to yell in my ear…*

Sheya had been blowing on her hot soup until now, but she paused to speak. “That’s not for fighting,” she said.

She had said the knife would be useful for gathering herbs when she gave it to me. I guess she never said anything about using it to fight.

“Didn’t I tell you not to go too far from town?” Waine asked me.

“Yeah.” I felt really guilty and looked away from him. The guards at the gates had told me the same thing. The forest was pretty far, and you couldn’t even see the town once you went in. I hadn’t listened to any of them.

Waine sighed. “All right, I hear you. Let’s go.” He shook his head and stood, taking his piece of meat with him. “To the armorer, right?”

“Yup.” Chikka nodded. Her cheeks were puffed out. She was probably still in a bad mood.

Nobody asked *me* what I wanted to do, but Chikka and Waine were ready to go. As for Sheya, she just kept eating her soup.

The armorer’s shop was right next to the adventurer’s guild. We’d sold all of Chikka’s junk here, but we had dropped everything off and talked to the owner outside. This was going to be my first time seeing the inside of the shop.

Waine and Chikka banged on the door and just marched right in.

“Excuse us,” I muttered, then I followed the two of them into the building.

It was pretty dark inside, with only one lamp burning. In fact, the shop was already closed. Waine and Chikka had told me the time of day didn’t mean much to adventurers, but what about the shopkeeper? Didn’t they mind? Maybe it was something you had to accept when you did business with adventurers. I decided on the spot *not* to become an armorer when I grew up.

“Hmm. I’ve never picked out a weapon for a kid before,” Waine thought out loud.

“He’s a little pip-squeak as far as humans go, so we better steer clear of anything too big. What about a shortsword?” Chikka suggested.

“Sure, if he has the time to learn how to use it. But don’t we want something he can use right away? Can’t recommend a sword for a total beginner. He’ll chop his own leg off.”

“That rules out an axe too. A big knife, then?”

“We humans aren’t as nimble as you folks, remember.”

“Hmm… So, what does that leave us with?”

The two of them looked around the shop without paying any attention to me. They never asked what *I* thought. Not even once.

“What’s the budget, anyway?” Waine asked. “That’ll make a big difference.”

“This.” Chikka held up a small pouch of coins. “His reward for today’s cleaning.”

“Oh? You splurged a little, huh?”

“Well, my room at the inn looks good, and I got more than I expected for all the stuff we cleared out of there. Scored a free lunch too.”

*Wait, that’s my money!* I plucked up my courage and said something. “U-Um, I’ve never actually used a weapon before. So I don’t think I really need—”

Chikka turned around and reached toward my face. I couldn’t tell what she was doing until she flicked me on the forehead. Hard. *Ouch.*

“Listen, tiny,” she began. “What matters is having one in your hand. Even beasts will think twice about attacking if they see you’ve got something that can hurt them.”

“Not all of them get the message, though,” Waine chimed in.

“They won’t wanna pounce if you’re pointing something sharp at them,” Chikka continued. “You’ve got a good chance of driving them off with just a few swings—even clumsy ones. But being empty-handed makes you a sitting duck. That’s why you need a weapon.”

“Although you do get bandits looking to steal arms and armor sometimes,” Waine added.

“Nobody asked!” Chikka snapped. She elbowed Waine in the stomach, and he doubled over in pain with a noise like a frog’s

croak. “Tsk… Not that great lunking idiots like this guy know what it’s like, but there are scumbags out there who attack small folk like us ’cause they think we’re easy prey.”

“Easy? Why?” I asked.

“They think we’re weak and won’t fight back. And it’s not just bandits looking to steal your gear like this dumbass was talking about. Common thugs or even regular people on the street might try to have a go at you sometimes. If you’re walking around without a way to defend yourself, you’re just asking for trouble,” she explained.

*Bandits, thugs, or traveling merchants looking for people to sell into slavery.* If I’d had a weapon back then, would that have stopped Uncle Lehmar from taking me to the slaver? No, he’d known that I’d trusted him, so that wouldn’t have mattered.

There was no point in thinking about the past over and over—I couldn’t change what had happened back then. But maybe having a way to defend myself *would* change things the next time I ran into a bad person like that. If there was a chance they’d leave me alone because they were afraid of me fighting back and hurting them with a weapon, it was definitely worth having one.

“I guess I really do need one,” I admitted.

“You finally get it, huh? Good,” said Chikka with a satisfied nod before turning to Waine. “Go on, then, Waine. Tell him what’s his best bet.”

“Well, it’s more or less what I thought from the start… Gotta be a spear.” The warrior, who’d been hunched over clutching his stomach, combed his fingers through the tuft of white hair on his head. He stood up straight and walked to the back of the shop as if nothing had happened. Either he’d already recovered from the blow to his gut, or it hadn’t hurt all that much in the first place.

Waine stopped in front of a wall where a few spears were propped up. “The advantage of a spear is the reach it gives you. If you can attack from a distance and stay out of your enemy’s range, you’ve got a fair chance of winning the battle without a scratch. After all, taking down your enemy but getting horribly wounded yourself is as good as losing if you don’t have a healer with you.”

A weapon you could use to win without getting hurt… I didn’t have to think very hard to understand how valuable that was.

Waine took some of the shorter spears off the wall. He held each one up before putting it back, and I could tell by the way his hands moved that he was used to handling them. Sometimes he'd turn them sideways, but I couldn't guess why.

"Spears are pretty light," he said, "since it's basically just a blade on the end of a stick. The long haft means you can hold it with a wide grip, so it's easier for beginners to handle than swords and such."

I wasn't very strong, so a light weapon was good for me. I didn't get why a long haft made it easier to use, but if Waine said so then it had to be true... Probably. He finally settled on one spear and held it out to me. It was a little shorter than I was tall, and the handle was painted light green. Other than the color, there was no decoration on it at all. It was just a pole with a butt on one end and a blade on the other. Well, that really was all a spear needed.

"Also, spears are almost all wood, so they don't cost as much," Waine added.

I decided right away. "I'll take it."

"Good lad. Can you make sure it's paid for, Chikka?"

"You got it."

"C'mon then, kiddo, outside with me. I'll show you which one's the pointy end." Waine seemed happy I went with the weapon he suggested. He cheerfully slapped me on the back, which made me cough. Adventurers sure were strong.

"Um, wait, but... Didn't you say just having a weapon was enough?" I asked.

"Come on now, use your head," Waine scolded. "Better to know how to use it than not, right?"

I couldn't argue with that.

***

I finished my meal and dabbed my mouth with my handkerchief. I liked the food served here at the adventurer's guild. The shellfish were especially good—being able to enjoy freshly caught fruits of the sea was one of the best things about this town. Chikka and Waine had left to take that boy, the guild's little newcomer—Kiri, was it?—to the armorer. Did they feel the need to foist their help on him? Were they just amusing themselves? Both? It was all the same, in the end. Maybe they

were happy to give him a little company and friendly advice, but they wouldn't go as far as to open their coin purses for him. That leather armor he wore was probably just some old spare set Chikka had wanted to get rid of.

Every adventurer was responsible for looking out for themselves. Coddling someone only taught them to rely too much on others, which could turn into a death sentence. The more you cared, the more it would hurt when the inevitable happened. Those two knew that as well as anyone. They were simply throwing a scrap of fish to a stray cat. There was nothing more to it.

While I understood their motivation, I felt no particular urge to join them even after finishing my meal. We had an early start planned for tomorrow, so I decided to head home and go to bed. As I stood up from the table, a loud voice shattered the relative peace inside the guild.

"What's wrong with them?!" the owner of that voice demanded.

*Ugh, do you really have to make so much noise?* I turned toward the commotion and saw Barque at the reception desk embroiled in some disagreement with a party of adventurers. There were three of them—a male warrior, a female scout, and a male mage. All of them were rather young. I didn't know their names, but I had noticed them frequenting the guild lately.

"Didn't you read the request? You've cut and carried these herbs all wrong. I can't send 'em to the physician's guild in this sorry state. What's worse is that the plant'll wither and die if you cut it like this, so there'll be none growin' there next time," Barque growled.

"Ugh... Well, how's anyone supposed to remember all those instructions anyway?!"

"That's your problem, not the guild's."

Poor Barque. That herb-gathering job required detailed knowledge and a careful hand, so he ran into this sort of problem fairly often. That party was obviously unfamiliar with the work. Perhaps they had been hunting the dire rats down in the sewers before the cave alligator had appeared. That request had been ideal for rookies to cut their teeth on before it had been removed. Now that it was gone, I imagined some parties were struggling to find work they could handle. But the rookies were lucky Waine had discovered the cave alligator before they

had what would've been an unfortunate encounter. Or did that make Waine the unlucky one?

"Gods save us... That kid's more useful than the three of you put together," Barque grumbled, and the humiliated young adventurers scowled.

# Chapter 5: Old Badger the Yellow-Bellied

I held the spear at hip level, with my hands about shoulder's width apart on the haft, and shifted my weight back a little. I let out a breath, relaxed my shoulders, and made sure my body was loose.

"Hmph!"

I took a step forward, turned my hips, and thrust the spear forward.

"Hmm..." I held still in that position and looked down to check if I was leaning too far forward. I needed to stay balanced enough to spring back right away. "Not sure that's right," I muttered to myself.

With a little grunt, I turned the spear and let the butt rest on the round pebbles that covered the ground here at the river. I'd moved the way Waine had shown me yesterday, but was I really doing it right? Maybe it felt a little off because he'd told me to practice the step, the pivot, and the thrust separately until I got used to it, but he'd also explained that it was supposed to be all one movement in the end.

The weather was good today. The sun was shining high in the sky, and I could see a kite circling above me. The air was thick with the green, earthy smell of the trees. The ground was soft under my feet. I could hear the whisper of leaves in the breeze and the rush of the river beside me. I'd changed a little since the last time I was here, with my armor and weapon, while the forest seemed the same as ever. But I couldn't find the will to explore anymore.

"It's dangerous," I whispered, staring into the trees ahead. The forest wasn't safe. People had been telling me that for a long time, but it was like I'd completely forgotten until now.

Chikka had told me that the woodcutters chased off most of the monsters around here, so I'd be fine as long as I didn't wander in too deep. She'd been angry about me coming here without a weapon, but I had a spear and armor today. I'd thought I would be safe as long as I stuck to the edge of the forest, but the hairs on the back of my neck had still stood up when I'd reached the entrance. The trees had looked so much

scarier than before.

*I have to go in*, I'd thought. *That's the only way I'll find any herbs.* So I'd forced my feet to move and my eyes and ears to watch and listen for any sign of danger until I'd made it to the river. Picking the usual herbs hadn't taken very long, so I'd had extra time to explore the area and look for more herbs. Except I hadn't done any of that. I'd been hanging around here all day practicing with my spear.

I knew I was being stupid. Go home, or go explore. I needed to pick one. Spear practice at the guild made a lot more sense than doing it all the way out here. I was far from town, and it wasn't safe—even if monsters didn't show up often. Or, if I was going to stay, I had to look for more herbs deeper in the forest. I did *want* to explore, but I was scared... I couldn't choose, so I stayed at this familiar spot by the river where I could see everything around me. Nothing could sneak up on me here.

I planted my feet firmly into the ground and twisted my hips, keeping my arms clamped at my sides. I swung the spear to one side in a horizontal sweep.

"Hm!"

I knew I was a coward, and I hated being scared. But I'd thought I was smart compared to most of the other kids back in the village. Now, I felt like an idiot too.

"Hah!"

I practiced some more thrusts, keeping my voice down so any monsters nearby wouldn't hear me. Waine had only taught me how to thrust and sweep. I guess he'd gotten bored after that. I repeated the movements again and again while staring into the trees. Were there dangerous beasts lurking somewhere in there? Of course there were. It was a stupid question. And I'd be stupid not to be scared—just one monster could eat me up if it found me. But I knew that venturing deeper into the forest was the only way I'd find the valuable herbs I wanted.

"It's... It's an adventure," I murmured. That word meant choosing to face danger. Risking your safety to chase a reward. "And I'm an adventurer."

I looked into the trees again and gripped my spear. I'd been coming to this part of the river for days, and the herbs here would soon run out.

I ended up swinging my spear all afternoon by the river. My

palms got so sore and my arms were so heavy that my grip on the spear started to feel weak and shaky. I decided not to practice like this outside of town ever again. On the way home, I figured out a spear also worked as a pretty good walking stick—definitely not a lesson I wanted to learn right now.

Before long, I was back at the adventurer's guild. I looked around for Chikka and the others when I walked in, but there was no sign of them. Yesterday, they'd gotten all prepared to continue their adventure in the sewers. They'd left early this morning and were probably still down there right now. I didn't think they would come back tonight, or even tomorrow, so it would be a couple of days at least before I saw them again.

A young man I didn't know was yelling at someone. "How can you earn that much coin just picking those stupid herbs?!"

"Hmm? That's easy!" a raspy voice croaked. "'Cause I'm Ol' Badger the Yellow-Bellied, greatest herb picker of 'em all!"

That voice belonged to a familiar face: Old Badger, with his bald head, tanned skin, wrinkled face, and a patchwork tunic of rags. The old man gave himself the worst title I'd ever heard, then let out a cackle. The way he said everything was so bold and confident that I actually thought he sounded kind of cool, but the person he was talking to wasn't impressed at all.

"Oh yeah?" the younger adventurer scowled. "Sounds like you're real proud of that name."

He looked around the same age as my younger big brother, which would make him about fifteen. He wore leather armor and had a longsword on his hip, so I guessed he was a warrior. Two other people, a stern-looking young man dressed like a mage and a woman, stood beside him. She seemed a little more shy than the other two. Her gear reminded me of what Chikka had been wearing, except it was human sized, so maybe she was a scout too.

"You bet I'm proud—proud of earnin' more than some of them C-rankers when the season's right. Heh heh heh! Sure feels nice bringin' in more coin than folks callin' me a coward an' a fool!"

"Now look, gramps...!"

I got the feeling Old Badger might be a little mean.

"Looks like they're fighting," I said. I handed today's herb harvest over to Barque at the reception desk. I didn't like when people shouted like that, but at least they were doing it over by the requests wall. I wouldn't get dragged into their argument

over here.

“Happens all the time,” Barque replied.

He didn’t look concerned at all, but he did seem a little grumpier than usual today. I wondered if something had happened. He took only a quick look over the herbs I’d brought before counting out my reward.

“Can’t do this job as long as I have without learnin’ a thing or two,” said Old Badger, “figurin’ out what grows where an’ when an’ whatnot. Didn’t I tell ya? Workin’ hard and buildin’ experience bit by bit—that’s the way. Keep gatherin’ those herbs for a few decades or so. One day you’ll be rollin’ in coin like me! Heh! Can’t say I see you followin’ a harebrained plan like that, though.”

I was still at the reception desk with Barque, so I ended up hearing Old Badger’s whole speech. Honestly, I was impressed. He said he’d been gathering herbs for *decades*. No wonder he knew how to find so many. Did he go to the forest too? To the deeper parts? Maybe he even knew where to gather outside the forest. I was still too scared to leave my spot by the river, but this old grandpa probably went to all kinds of places. After all, he was an adventurer.

“Tsk. You’re full of it. I bet herbs aren’t growing anywhere near town because of you. You went and took them all, didn’t you?” the warrior yelled.

His accusation made my breath catch in my throat. I turned around to see how Old Badger would respond.

“Beg yer pardon?” Old Badger’s mouth twisted into a frown, and he glared at the three adventurers in front of him. He looked really offended.

The warrior, who seemed to speak for his party, pointed a finger at Old Badger like he’d caught the old man red-handed. “That’s it, isn’t it? Almost none of those herbs are growing on the plains outside town. The ones we did find there are barely worth the trouble. Admit it. You took them all for yourself!”

He was all worked up, but Old Badger just gave him a blank stare and scratched the bald part of his head. And then he sighed.

“Listen, boy—”

“I’m not a boy!”

“A boy’s all I see. Now, you seem to be forgettin’ somethin’, boy, so lemme say it straight: This herb-gatherin’ request’s a job for the *adventurer’s* guild.” There was no trace of the mocking

smile that was usually on the old man's face. He was serious about what he was saying, though the tone of his voice made him sound like he was scolding a child. "The physician's guild wouldn't pay us good money if you could just stroll outta town an' find bushels of those herbs growin' right there, would they?"

It was the same thing I'd thought on my first day.

Old Badger continued. "They're growin' real far away, or somewhere plenty dangerous, or there ain't hardly any growin' at all. It's usually one of those. Sometimes all three. That's why folks ask adventurers to go find 'em. Ain't gonna find herbs sproutin' for ya just past them gates. Is that really as far as y'all went? With them big weapons an' fancy armor? Psh. Like li'l kids on an errand."

"Hey...!" The warrior's face turned bright red, but Old Badger wasn't finished yet.

"Let's say I was takin' all them herbs for myself. What gives you the right to go complain about it? Early bird catches the worm in this game. Unless yer tellin' me you own all that land past the walls and everyone's poachin' on yer property."

I agreed with the old man. In a way, I was keeping all those herbs growing by the river to myself too. I didn't think it'd be right for another adventurer to start complaining about that.

"Th-Then where in the world are you finding that many herbs?!" The warrior sounded frustrated as he demanded an answer.

"Hey now, think about what yer askin', sonny. That's how I make all my coin. Can't expect a fella to cough up his secrets just 'cause you asked."

"Ugh, gods damn it! You're just a useless, stubborn old goat."

"Not that I mind sharin', though."

"Uh. What?"

That was my reaction too. I pricked up my ears. I wouldn't want to tell anyone about my spot by the river. There weren't that many herbs left. If I did tell someone, the rest of the herbs would be gone, and I'd be in trouble if I couldn't find a new patch to harvest quick. So why would the old man agree to share what he knew, just like that? I couldn't understand. Maybe I'd heard him wrong.

"Sharin' my secret spot. Don't worry, I ain't gonna ask for no entry fee. Givin' rookies a hand now an' then's the least I can do as a ol' veteran. Call it my civic duty! Heh! If that floats yer boat,

come find me tomorrow mornin'. I'll take y'all there myself."

The way he said that didn't sound like he was doing anyone a favor at all. But I didn't think he was lying either. He just threw the offer out there and didn't seem to care if anyone would take him up on it.

The three younger adventurers just stood there. They seemed stumped about how to respond. Without another word, Old Badger turned and headed for the stairs.

"E-Excuse me!" I called out before I could stop myself.

The old man turned back with a look of surprise. The three other adventurers stared at me. I shrank back a little, with four pairs of eyes on me all of a sudden, but I had to stand my ground.

"Would it be okay if I join you?" I asked.

I woke up extra early the next morning. The sun wasn't up yet, but the sky was already pale through the stable window. I stretched and loosened up my stiff muscles before getting up and putting on the old armor Chikka gave me. I tied the fastening cords tight for a snug fit, just like she showed me, and adjusted everything until I was satisfied.

After that, I went to the corner of the stall where I'd left my spear last night, picked it up, and brushed off some dust. I'd propped the weapon up as far away as possible from my straw bed, even though I didn't usually toss and turn that much in my sleep, because I was still worried I might somehow knock it over and stab myself in the middle of the night. I grabbed my coat-basket, looked around to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything, and left my stall.

The big horse that had eaten my valenwort was still resting in the next stall. It raised its head to look at me sleepily when I passed by. I waved hello, but it just laid its head back down on the straw with a soft thud. It probably wanted to sleep a little longer. I didn't want to disturb it, so I left the stable as quietly as I could, then headed to the guild.

Old Badger greeted me from across the room. "Rarin' to go, ain't ya, sonny?"

I was surprised to see him here already. Since I really didn't want to be late, I'd gone to bed early last night and gotten ready as soon as I could today. I'd been sure I would be the first one here.

“Good morning,” I said, and walked up to him. “Thank you for letting me come along.”

Old Badger hadn’t just beaten me here. He was already having breakfast. I was curious about what he was eating and took a closer look. It wasn’t a prepared dish or anything—just some raw vegetables with salt.

“Er, sure. Don’t mention it.” He didn’t sound as energetic as usual. Maybe he wasn’t much of a morning person. He turned away from me while scratching his cheek and wouldn’t look me in the eye. “Got a long walk ahead, so feed yerself first. Not much on the menu at this hour—cook’s still gettin’ ready—but she’ll give you somethin’ as long as it don’t need no cookin’.”

“Oh, right.” I nodded.

So that was why he was just munching on raw vegetables. After a little thought, I decided I’d have the same. I ordered vegetables with salt and a cup of cooled boiled water, and the lady in the kitchen brought me what I asked for right away. Meals didn’t get much simpler than this, so it only cost a couple of copper coins. I took my food to the table where Old Badger was sitting, sat down, and said a prayer of thanks to the gods. Then I realized…

“Oh, I should’ve asked for bread too!”

Even though it was early, the kitchen would’ve had some bread. *Forgetting that was dumb…*

“Heh heh!” Old Badger laughed. “Saw my plate an’ thought there was only veggies to eat, did ya? Too bad.”

“Hrm…” I grumbled. He was laughing at me. But he was right, and hearing him perk up made me feel better. He was probably just a little slow in the morning. I was glad he wasn’t sick or anything.

I looked down at my plate. I liked vegetables, especially freshly picked ones from our fields back home. I’d snack on them all the time during harvests. I really loved this one juicy, red vegetable, and everyone else in the village did too. We all looked forward to picking it every summer—the funny thing was, everyone just called it “the red one” because nobody knew its real name. I still didn’t know. There weren’t any red ones on my plate now because it wasn’t the right season, which made me a little sad, but the vegetables I did have were all really good. It seemed like the cook had picked ones that were nice and easy to eat raw.

“She gave me a lot of salt,” I said. There was a whole heap near the edge of my plate.

“Hmm?” Old Badger looked over.

Being able to sprinkle so much salt all over my food felt like a real treat. We were never allowed to use this much back in the village. I figured I might as well enjoy it while I could, so I added more to my vegetables.

“I guess there’s lots of salt because we’re so close to the sea,” I thought out loud.

“That’s right. They make it on the salt fields,” the old man replied.

There were fields for salt? I’d never heard of that before. If… If Uncle Lehmar had taken me to a salt merchant like he’d said he would, maybe I’d be working on a salt field now. It was hard to imagine myself as a merchant’s apprentice. While I tried, I opened my mouth wide and took a big bite of a *very* salty vegetable. I grabbed my cup of water in a hurry and gulped it down.

By the time the other three adventurers showed up, the sun was up and the guild was filling up with people. Old Badger and I had both finished our breakfasts, and a few requests on the wall had already been claimed.

“Well, here we are, gramps,” the warrior announced.

“So I see,” Old Badger replied. “Let’s get movin’, then.”

Even though Old Badger had been waiting so long, he didn’t look annoyed at all as he got up from his chair. I thought back to last night and realized we’d never decided on a meeting time. Old Badger had just said to come to him in the morning. Would he have waited all the way until noon? He *had* looked perfectly patient and relaxed sitting there with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Good morning. Thank you for letting me join you.” I greeted the other adventurers just like I had Old Badger. I was only going today because these three were here last night, so I was really grateful.

“You better not slow us down,” was all the warrior had to say.

“I won’t!” I replied.

The fact that he hadn’t changed his mind and told me not to come was a huge relief, but I still needed to make sure I wasn’t a burden today. That was the best I could do, because I had

nothing on these adventurers. I did have a weapon and armor now, but I still wouldn't be able to take even just one of them in a fight. This trip was really for these three adventurers and the master herb gatherer, Old Badger. I was just tagging along, which made me feel a little guilty, but this was just too good a chance to pass up. I was going to learn new spots where I could harvest herbs! In a group like this, we could even go places that were more dangerous than anywhere I'd been before.

Old Badger picked his basket off the floor and put it on his back. Then he took his weapon—a short sword in an unusually wide sheath—and slid it into his belt before turning to the rest of us.

"Right, then. Before we get goin', lemme just lay a couple of things out for ya," he began. "The five of us are a temporary party, just for today. 'Course, I'll be the leader. Y'all will follow my orders *to the letter*. If that's a problem, yer free to go home anytime."

Hearing the word "party" made me think of Waine, Sheya, and Chikka. Those three were in a temporary party too, for their adventure down in the sewers. Being in a party like them made me feel like a *real* adventurer.

"We can just drop out if we don't like your orders? That what you're saying?" the warrior asked.

Old Badger nodded. "Exactly. Also means I ain't gonna go changin' my plans for none of ya. Don't matter what yer reasons are."

The young warrior glared at Old Badger, and he glared right back. The shy scout and the stern-looking mage gave each other anxious glances. It felt like our party might not even make it out of the guild, but after a few moments the warrior gave in.

"Fine. You're the leader," he said.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good. All right, kids, off we go! Heh heh!" Old Badger laughed. "Ain't never stepped out in a party before. Glad I didn't kick the bucket before I got the chance!"

"Never? In all *your* years?" the warrior asked, like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You know most adventurers would've done this a few decades ago, right?"

He had a point. You really didn't have to wait as long as Old Badger had before you could join a party. *I mean, just look at me. Sure, it's only my first time, but I joined a real party of adventurers*

*today.*

The route Old Badger took us on wasn't how I usually went to the forest. At first, we'd walked along the road marked by carriage tracks out of town. Then we'd gone on a smaller path that branched off toward the far hills. The forest spread up over these hills, and tall trees grew on the rough, steep slopes. Lots of bushes and thick, twisty roots sticking out of the ground everywhere made our uphill hike even harder.

Old Badger walked ahead of us, following a narrow animal trail while cutting his way through the branches with his weapon. The blade was broad, curved, and sharpened on just one edge so it could be used like a billhook. I'd heard people call swords like that a woodsman's knife or a kukri. The person who trained my younger brother to be a hunter had used one just like Old Badger's.

The kukri was shorter than other kinds of swords and didn't have a guard on it—not really the kind of weapon I pictured an adventurer using, to be honest. It was a tool for hunters and foresters, not a blade wielded by legendary heroes, made for fighting through bushes instead of monsters.

I was last in our group, while Old Badger was first. He marched up front, swinging his blade to cut a path forward. The warrior trudged right behind him. The mage followed a few steps after, and the scout trailed a little farther back.

"Hah... Hagh..." she panted.

"Um, are you okay?" I asked. Her breathing was heavy and her feet dragged as she walked, so she probably wasn't used to hiking up mountains.

"I'm...fine. N-No need...for concern," she answered coldly.

The scout was so out of breath she could hardly get her words out, but I still heard the frustration in her voice. She was sweating buckets as she started to trip and stumble down the trail. She really didn't seem okay to me, but from the way she'd replied, I didn't think she'd appreciate me asking again. I was getting worried about lagging too far behind the others, though. If some meat-eating animal or monster appeared, it would ignore the three people up front and attack us instead. I was small, and she was tired.

I gripped my spear a little tighter and looked around. I couldn't see any sign of danger—I couldn't see much at all, with trees and dense undergrowth everywhere.

*We should ask Old Badger if we could slow down a little,* I thought, and I looked ahead to the front of the group. My eyes met with the warrior's, and he scowled at me.

"Gramps, can we take a break?" he asked Old Badger.

"Hmm?" The old man stopped, turned around, then nodded. "Oh, sure. Why not?"

*Phew. They noticed the scout's having a tough time.* As I sighed with relief, I felt eyes on me—grim stares from both the warrior and the mage. I couldn't think of any reason they'd look at me like that. Maybe there was something behind me? I turned to check, but there was nothing. The scout had made it to the front of the group by the time I turned back around, and I jogged after her.

"We'll take a breather here. Climbin' these hills is real tirin' for folks not used to this kinda thing," Old Badger reminded us once I'd caught up.

I was shocked to see that Old Badger wasn't out of breath at all. He'd been moving more than the rest of us, but he wasn't even sweating. He was obviously in way better shape than you'd expect for someone his age.

Old Badger rubbed his chin and scanned the group. "Now, while we're catchin' our breath, I reckon we oughta sort out our formation," he said.

I wasn't totally sure what "formation" meant, but I felt like it had something to do with the order we should walk in. Did that really matter?

"You first, missy," Old Badger said to the scout, who was bent over catching her breath with her hands on her knees. She raised her head to look up at the old man as he spoke. "Yer a scout, so it's yer job to keep an eagle eye out for danger. Walk up front with me, and don't let yer guard down. Next, the mage. Go second from the back—you ain't equipped for fightin'." The old man didn't wait for the mage's answer before pointing to me and the warrior. "That leaves you two for the vanguard."

"You're seriously including *him*?" the warrior asked scornfully.

I thought the same thing. My heart had skipped a beat when the old man pointed at me.

"'Course I am. Ain't he in the party too?" Old Badger replied like it was common sense, but he paused to think for just a second before he continued. "Little 'un, go right behind me and the scout. If a baddie or a beastie pops out, go ahead and fight.

Big ’un, go all the way back.”

*Me? In front?* If a monster appeared, I’d be the first one in its path. I understood that much. I had armor and a spear, so it did make sense, but still…

“Why the heck is *he* the one in front?” the warrior questioned.

“’Cause he ain’t got a big, loud voice like you. We’ll know yer still there even without lookin’—that’s why yer protectin’ the rear,” Old Badger replied.

The warrior crossed his arms and sighed at the explanation, then he glanced sidelong at me and sighed again. “Fine. Got it.”

The old man’s reasons weren’t what I expected, but with that, our formation was settled.

As we kept going uphill, I started using my spear as a walking stick. The butt end landed on the ground with soft, rhythmic thuds as I climbed. Something shorter would’ve been better, but spears weren’t supposed to be walking sticks anyway. Besides, it still made hiking on rough terrain a little easier. I was glad I’d figured out how to support myself with my spear yesterday, though I didn’t think I’d be using it like this again so soon.

Still, the walk was really tiring even with a stick to lean on. I’d gotten used to walking long distances back in my village, but I still had less stamina than the grown-ups. My armor weighed me down too. I was only keeping up because Old Badger had to cut through all those branches and bushes to clear our path—or so I thought.

Old Badger made hooking branches in his kukri’s curved blade and slicing through them look easy. I’d assumed that was slowing him down, but I realized I was wrong after we changed formation. The scout was the slowest out of all of us, and Old Badger had slowed down on purpose to match her pace.

“Look.” The old man stopped and pointed to something a little far off. “Herbs growin’.”

The rest of us paused and stared in that direction. I had to squint a little to see the herbs, but they were there. How in the world had he noticed those?

“Those eyes of yours magic or something?” the warrior asked.

“Just used to it. Do this job as long as I have, and you can even spot ’em out of the corners of yer eyes.”

“So, are we gonna pick them?” The warrior sounded a little impatient.

“Nah.” Old Badger shrugged his shoulders. “Ain’t much over there. Too far off to be worth the trouble. We’ll carry on.”

I got the feeling Old Badger had just pointed them out for the sake of having something to talk about. As we kept going, he stopped every now and then to show us other plants too.

“Cut these vines slanted for a little water. Just a few drops, but good to know when yer thirsty.”

“You can eat the young leaves right off that plant. Taste good too. Go pick a few if yer peckish.”

“The bark on this tree comes off easy, but the fibers inside are good an’ tough. Use ’em to make a string or rope in a pinch. But it’ll take all day to make somethin’ long.”

Every time he saw a plant or anything else useful for adventuring, he’d take a minute to tell us about it. I drank up every word. After a while, I noticed the scout catching her breath whenever we stopped. I realized Old Badger was slowing our pace by coming up with excuses to give her short breaks while sharing lots of useful knowledge. He must’ve put her at the front to keep an eye on how she was doing.

“*That’s* a leader,” I murmured to myself.

I thought what he was doing was amazing. He was leading us on this difficult hike, clearing a path for us, keeping his eyes on the surroundings the whole time, *and* looking out for the whole party. There was no way I could do all that.

I was impressed, but it seemed a little strange to me too. Old Badger didn’t seem like a very kind person. I got that from the way he talked with the other adventurers when they argued at the guild last night. But he didn’t get angry at all this morning, even though the three of them made him wait a pretty long time. He didn’t complain when the warrior asked for a break either. Somehow, I knew for sure he didn’t act like that out of kindness. But I didn’t know what the real reason could be.

We’d come a long way. The sun had already gone past its highest point in the sky. By now, both the scout and mage were panting and dripping with sweat. I was pretty sweaty too. Even the warrior was much quieter than before. Walking up this rough slope was so much harder than a normal path. I missed the town’s paving stones and its smooth, flat roads more than ever.

I saw Old Badger reach up to wipe his brow with the sleeve of his patchwork tunic. He was so tough for such an old man, but it seemed like even he got tired eventually. Seeing that he was

human like the rest of us made me feel a little better, but he was still in the best shape out of the whole group even after doing the most work.

I tried to calm my breathing with deep breaths, but it didn't work very well. I wiped away drops of sweat almost trickling into my eyes with the back of my hand and forced my legs to keep moving so I didn't fall behind.

Suddenly, Old Badger crouched. "Git yer heads down! Down!" he hissed. His voice was quiet but sharp.

Old Badger's command was so out of the blue that I didn't react. I just stood there, and the other three did the same. I looked around, but I couldn't see any sign of movement except for some branches swaying in the breeze.

"What're y'all playin' at?! I said, git down! Now!" Old Badger repeated.

This time, I crouched down right away. Once everyone else had done the same, the old man pointed to the trail ahead of us with his thumb. I looked hard, but I couldn't see anything. Then I tried searching for something smaller, like a dangerous snake or something instead of a monster, but I still couldn't find a single thing.

I was about to give up when the scout whispered, "Oh... Footprints."

I looked where Old Badger was pointing again, but this time I focused on the ground. There *were* footprints. I never would've noticed by myself, though I started to see a whole trail of them after I spotted the first one. They were about the same size as my feet, and there were a whole lot of them. The prints came out of the bushes and then followed the trail ahead of us.

"Goblins. Pah, rotten luck," Old Badger tutted.

Goblins were a kind of monster with green skin. They were about the same shape as people but only the size of children. They were nasty creatures I'd read about a lot in the priest's books, and they'd been on some requests at the adventurer's guild too. Those requests always had the same word in the title: extermination. Without realizing it, I tightened my grip on my spear. My palms were sweating. Somewhere on the path ahead of us were monsters we adventurers were supposed to fight.

"Welp, nothin' for it," the old man said. "We'll go someplace else. Turn back."

I couldn't believe my ears. But Old Badger had already turned

around. He looked grumpy, not like someone telling a joke.

"Wha— But the herbs are just up ahead, aren't they? They can't be far!" The warrior grabbed the old man's shoulder.

We were almost at the top of the hill. Old Badger had never told us exactly where the herbs were, but since we'd climbed this far, they had to be at the very top or close to it. Getting up here had been such hard work. Turning back now felt like a real waste.

"Keep yer voice down," Old Badger scolded. "Goblins might still be close by."

"So what?" the warrior snapped. "We'll kill them. Couple of goblins aren't gonna get the better of—"

"Save it!" Old Badger batted the warrior's hand off his shoulder. "Last thing we need is some small fry tryin' to be a darn hero. I'm the leader, and my orders say you ain't goin' no further."

"Why, you...!"

With a face like thunder, the warrior reached for his sword. I was so scared, I accidentally let out a squeak, but Old Badger didn't even flinch.

"Look," he said, and pointed to the trail of footprints once again. "The size and shape of those tracks? That means goblins—three of 'em, maybe four. No hobs. Came through last night, so they're close."

I stood there with my mouth open, stunned and amazed, as I stared at the footprints. Figuring out what made the tracks was one thing, but the fact that he could tell how many of them there were and how long ago they'd passed by from this far away was unbelievable.

"Now look," Old Badger said. With his thumb, he pointed to each of us: an old man, an out of breath mage, a sweaty and exhausted scout, and a kid in armor. "If we take 'em on, maybe we could win. But I can't guarantee we'll all make it. Even if none of us was killed outright, someone could still get hurt so bad they're beyond savin'. Times like this, leader gets to decide if the party fights or retreats. Tell me, boy, what happens if that young missy or yer mage friend there gets killed, huh? Ain't that when you pull that sword an' put me down with it?"

I heard an odd scraping sound and realized the warrior was grinding his teeth together. I never knew that could be so loud.

"Tsk. Waste of godsdamned time." The warrior let go of his sword. He turned away from Old Badger and took his anger out

on a tree root nearby with a hard kick. “Now I remember that title you gave yourself: Old Badger the Yellow-Bellied. Suits you.”

“Heh heh, I’ll take that as a compliment.” The old man chuckled before turning around one last time and heading back down the way we’d come. None of the other three adventurers looked pleased, but nobody seemed to feel like complaining anymore.

We were going back the way we came. Walking downhill was much faster, but it wasn’t easy because the pace was exhausting. It felt like more than my body weight pressed down on me with every step. We went down a long, long way before Old Badger turned and looked back. I looked too, and I couldn’t see goblins following us or any other sign of danger.

“Hm, oughta be safe at this distance. Let’s take five,” the old man said. He walked up to a large tree nearby, sliced through one of the water-filled vines he’d told us about, and drank a few drops from the slanted cut he’d made. After that, he just said, “Gonna take a leak,” before he pushed a couple of bushes aside and disappeared behind them without waiting for a reply.

I let out a sigh. My feet hurt, and my throat was as dry as a bone. I searched for a vine like the one Old Badger had just been drinking from, found one, and cut it. But as I brought it to my mouth, I found out why Old Badger had told us to make a slanted cut. I’d cut straight across, and almost nothing came out. I licked up the tiny bit of water that did seep out from the vine, then threw it away and looked for another.

Thankfully, that wasn’t too hard. I cut the new vine I found the way we’d been told. The water inside came out much more easily this time, but it was still only a few drops. Nowhere near enough. *Shoot, I’ll have to buy a canteen too,* I thought. *It’ll get a lot hotter once summer’s here.*

While I was busy searching for a third vine to drink from, a voice startled me.

“Hey.” It was the warrior. I turned around and saw him, the mage, and the scout standing together and looking at me.

*What do they want?* I wondered. *They’ve never really talked to me before.*

“We’re going back to town,” the warrior said. “What about you?”

My eyes widened. “Really? You’re leaving?”

“Yeah.” The warrior nodded. His hair was tousled and damp with sweat. The scout stared down at the ground, and the mage’s expression was set in a frown. They were all unhappy with Old Badger—it was practically written on their faces.

“I thought this was fishy from the start,” the warrior continued. “If you ask me, that old goat never planned on showing us where the herbs are.” He clicked his tongue and glared toward the bushes Old Badger had disappeared behind.

I blinked a few times and thought over what the warrior had just said, but I didn’t get it. “What do you mean?” I asked.

“He led us up this damn mountain on a wild-goose chase just so he could have a good laugh at us. It’s just like him. He’s a nasty piece of work. And we’ll just be making fools of ourselves if we stick around,” he replied.

I saw what he was getting at now. This whole thing had puzzled me too. It just didn’t make any sense for Old Badger to go showing other people his gathering spots. There was nothing in it for him—in fact, he would end up with less to pick. Maybe it would be different if we were all good friends, but we were strangers. These three had even been arguing with Old Badger last night. I couldn’t imagine why he would tell them anything. The warrior *did* make sense when he said Old Badger was just being mean and making fools out of us. But I shook my head.

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. I couldn’t explain why I was so sure, but I was convinced there was some other reason. My gut told me so. Whatever Old Badger was up to, he wasn’t just tricking us for fun. “Look at this path he took us on.” I pointed up the animal trail we’d climbed and come down again with the butt of my spear. “He definitely knew where he was going, but he had to cut bushes and branches the whole way. So he’s been on this trail before, but it’s probably been a while. Maybe this was his first time here this year.”

“What makes you say that?” the warrior asked.

“With this many people, we’d have to go somewhere with lots of herbs. So I think he picked a spot where he hasn’t been gathering yet this year. A place no one’s touched in a long time,” I explained.

The warrior’s eyes followed the trail upward. He stood there in thought for a few moments before running his fingers through his hair and looking down at me. “Or he might’ve just picked any old trail, right?”

“Well, I guess,” I admitted. I couldn’t prove that Old Badger didn’t just choose a random trail.

The warrior heaved a huge sigh like he was trying to push every bit of air out of his chest and then some. “Who knows what he’s thinking?” he said. “Whatever. Either way, we’re leaving. What about you? We’ll take you back to the guild if you wanna join us.”

*That’s nice of him,* I thought. *So that’s why he decided to talk to me.* I was surprised—we’d never had a conversation until now, and I kind of got the feeling he didn’t like me. *So what should I do? Old Badger* did *say we could leave anytime if we didn’t like his orders.* These three were planning on doing just that. Were there really herbs growing up on the hilltop? We hadn’t made it up there, so I couldn’t be sure. Maybe the warrior was right, and Old Badger had been lying to us all along. But what if he was wrong?

“I…” I thought about what the warrior said before I answered, but it didn’t take me long to make my decision. I knew it was pathetic of me, but I’d felt a little relieved when we’d turned back earlier. That was why I told him, “I’ll stay.”

At first, no one said anything. Each member of the party just looked at me with a different expression. Then, as usual, the warrior spoke up. “All right, then. See you.”

That was all he said before he turned and left. The other two followed, and I stood watching them walk down the hill.

“Well, I ain’t surprised,” came a voice from behind me.

*When did he get there?!*

I spun around, and there he was: a little old man standing there in his ragged clothes, rubbing his chin. Old Badger didn’t look happy, but he didn’t seem angry either—disappointed, maybe, or even a little sad.

“They said they’re going back to town,” I told him.

“Yeah, I know,” he replied.

*Wait, didn’t he just go for a pee? He was gone for a pretty long time. Was he listening to us?* I wondered.

“What’re you still doin’ here?” Old Badger asked me. “Said they’d take ya back to the guild, didn’t they?”

So he *had* been listening in. The priest had always told me it was bad to eavesdrop and peep on others.

“Hmm…” It was hard to put my reasons into words. They weren’t complicated, but how could I say it in a way he’d understand? He was waiting for my answer, so I had to come up

with something.

"Because you're not a very nice person," I said.

"Come again?" He gave me a confused look.

*I guess anyone would be confused if I told them that.* I grumbled a little and crossed my arms as I thought hard about how to explain myself. *It's not like that's my only reason. I should go ahead and explain everything.*

"Those three seem pretty strong, so I think they'll be able to find work other than picking herbs," I said, looking in the direction the other adventurers had gone. They were a warrior, a scout, and a mage—the same as Waine's party. A group like that could take on all kinds of jobs. "But this is all I can do. That's why I can't just leave."

Old Badger snorted a short laugh through his nose and smiled his usual smile—sarcastic, yet cheerful, with a little scorn. Then he cackled. "Heh heh heh! Strong? Those three? Pah! Goblins woulda ate all of 'em for breakfast."

We left the trail that the three adventurers had taken back to town and started forging a new path through the trees. Old Badger walked ahead of me while cutting through bushes and branches like before.

"I bet those kids were just a merry li'l band of friends," he said.

"Friends?"

"Right. Probably grew up in the same neighborhood, played together, then started adventurin' soon as they was old enough," he explained.

We were walking at a steady pace. In the back of my mind, I was a little worried that the town gates might close before we got back. I had no idea how far away this new gathering spot was.

"You notice how that brat with the sword kept yappin', but the others never told him off? An' none of 'em said nothin' about that girl slowin' us down. She's got less stamina than a darn kid! Then there's the mage. I bet he's the brain in that group, but I ain't never heard a peep outta him," the old man grumbled. "All of 'em just turnin' a blind eye on each other's faults, too worried about makin' their best buddies feel bad. They done some jobs but never had a real challenge. Total amateurs. Probably fussin' and whinin' about you an' me right now."

As I followed behind Old Badger, I placed my finger on my lip and thought back on how the three adventurers had behaved. I'd

assumed that the warrior talked the most because he had the biggest voice and that he was being kind to the scout when he asked for a break. As for the mage, I'd figured he was just the type of person who didn't talk very much. But after Old Badger's explanation, I could see the three of them acting that way because they were good friends.

"I can kind of understand why they might complain about you, but why me?" I asked. *I* hadn't done anything bad to them. I mean, I hadn't helped them either, but I'd made sure to keep up and not get in their way at all.

"'Cause you didn't slow us down," said Old Badger. "They weren't expectin' that."

"Well, *that's* unfair," I protested. That didn't make sense to me at all.

"Li'l close-knit groups are like that. They're always lookin' for someone below 'em. Don't mean they're mean-spirited or nothin'. Just the nature of the beast. Can't see their own faults, can't get ahead, so they go lookin' for even weaker folks to make themselves feel better."

Somehow, it didn't feel like he was talking about me when he said that. From the way he spoke, I could tell this was something he'd experienced himself many times before.

"But they ended up with *you*—tougher than most kids, never whinin', even kind enough to slow yerself down for that young missy," he continued. "All they was thinkin' was not losin' to ya, heh heh! Maybe you missed it, but I could read it clear as day on their faces. I gotta say, that warrior was on his last legs. Serves that boy right for wearin' armor like that and draggin' around a sword as big as him. He'll be achin' in the mornin' for sure. Tickled me to see it."

I hadn't noticed any of that. But since Old Badger had mentioned it, I realized the warrior *had* looked very sweaty. So he'd been worn out too.

"I reckon they're sayin' somethin' like this right about now: 'That darn kid was only climbin' like that 'cause he had his spear for a walking stick. An' he had lighter armor made for halflings. Can you believe he decided to stay after we said we'd take him back? Must be soft in the head.'"

"I guess they might be," I agreed.

"Heh, an' they'd be right." Old Badger chuckled as he cut through another branch with his kukri. The strong smell of sap

made me wrinkle my nose. “Ain’t that Chikka’s armor? I seen her wearin’ it. And lemme guess: Waine picked out that spear for ya. That fella’s got sawdust for brains, so don’t listen to a thing he says if it ain’t about fightin’.”

“You’re right,” I said, eyes wide. “That’s amazing.”

“Nothin’ to it.” Old Badger shrugged. “She thinks in funny ways and he don’t think at all—they’re about the only ones in the guild who’d bother helpin’ a kid out.”

I had to admit Chikka was a little odd, but I kind of felt bad for Waine after hearing Old Badger talk about him like that. I was pretty sure he thought things through in his own way... Probably.

“That good, light gear suits ya ’cause those two did the pickin’. Our three buddies had quality gear, but I’ll bet anythin’ they just picked it for looks. Slingin’ a stone around yer neck would be just as useful,” the old man said.

I remembered what Chikka had told me when she first gave me her old set of armor: *“Armor’s like dead weight on your shoulders if you don’t wear it right.”*

“Well, don’t go gettin’ the wrong idea,” said Old Badger. “You ain’t tough—those idiots just don’t got a clue.”

“I didn’t think I was,” I mumbled, and I meant it.

How could I think *I* was tough when Old Badger was in front of me? The little old man had been swinging his kukri left and right this whole time, without ever slowing down, and he wasn’t even a little out of breath. He watched our surroundings while we talked too, keeping a sharp eye out for any sign of danger.

“Them three won’t make nothin’ of themselves anytime soon if a hill wears ’em out. Say they take one of those escort jobs guardin’ a caravan or some such—walkin’ for days before somethin’ attacks ain’t unusual. How are they gonna be useful if they’re too tuckered out to put up a fight? Decent stamina’s the most basic outta all the basics. Can’t see nobody takin’ ’em seriously without it.”

It was all I could do just to keep up with the old man. *I guess that means nobody will take me seriously either. Not that I can blame them...*

“Welp, I’ll say this for ’em: They were smart enough to cut their losses and go home. Better do that than stick around with someone like me.”

“That’s true,” I agreed without thinking.

I didn’t mean to be rude, but I was getting tired of this

conversation. What Old Badger was saying might've been right, but it was mean too. I didn't want to listen to someone go on and on bad-mouthing others. Maybe those adventurers didn't like me very much, but they had still gone out of their way and asked me to join them when they left. I knew they weren't bad people. I also understood why Old Badger might want to complain about them, but overdoing it wasn't a good idea. I'd heard that saying too many nasty things would invite nasty things into your mouth sooner or later.

"Well, sonny, I'm real sorry to say yer the dumbest of 'em all for stayin' behind. Not that you had a choice, given yer circumstances. Heh heh!" The old man cackled. "You ain't from town, are ya, kid? Yer an outsider," he added, as casually as he'd been slicing through branches.

"How did you know?" I asked.

Barque knew where I was from because I'd written it down when I signed up for the guild. Chikka had guessed I was from the countryside. No one else in this town had been curious enough to ask me. I'd definitely never said anything about it to Old Badger—I hadn't even told him my name. How had he been able to tell I was from somewhere else?

"Breakfast," he answered. "Even kids know how much salt to put on their food. Unless they ain't from around here."

"Oh..."

I'd piled way too much salt on my vegetables this morning, because not using all of it had seemed like such a waste. But the people who lived here wouldn't think like that. *They* wouldn't have wiped up every grain of salt on their plate with their vegetables.

"Yer sleepin' in the stable, so I'm guessin' you ain't got nowhere else to go. Thing is, yer clothes ain't rags, yer shoes ain't bad, an' you can even read. Real unusual—not just some kid who's been kicked outta the house. Maybe a travelin' merchant's son. Came to town, got split up from yer folks, and the only place you could go was the guild. How's that? Am I warm?"

"Whoa. That's almost exactly right."

Old Badger smirked, looking pleased with himself. It was amazing how he'd been able to tell that much just from clues like the salt, my clothes, and the fact that I could read. But he hadn't been right about everything. Uncle Lehmar wasn't my dad, and we hadn't gotten separated... Not exactly.

“I left my village and came here with a traveling merchant I knew. He was going to introduce me to another merchant so I could become their apprentice, but…” I hesitated before telling him the rest. “He ended up taking me to a slaver instead. I ran away and ended up at the adventurer’s guild.”

Once I’d explained what had really happened, Old Badger stopped in his tracks. He was silent for a few seconds before he turned to face me. “I’m sure no one was bettin’ on that,” he said.

*I’d be happier if nobody was making bets about my life.*

“Well, then again, might not be such an unusual story,” Old Badger added. He scratched the bald part of his head and shrugged his shoulders.

It had only taken me a few moments to explain how I ended up at the guild. I’d felt like something pretty terrible had happened to me, but it was kind of underwhelming once I said it out loud.

“Merchants lying to people, you mean?” I asked.

“Merchants bringin’ slaves to sell,” he said.

We kept walking, and after a while I noticed Old Badger didn’t have to cut as many branches out of the way anymore. We were on a narrow animal trail again, but a lot of the undergrowth had already been cleared away. Maybe he used this path more often. Thanks to that, we could go faster now.

Then Old Badger picked up where we’d left off. “Lots of couples in small villages are poppin’ out babies one after another. They say a big family’s a happy family, even if they’re poor. But every few years or decades, maybe, there’s a real bad harvest. Now, that big family’s worried they’re all gonna starve to death. That’s when yer travelin’ merchant shows up.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about him talking about kids like they were mushrooms sprouting up after the rain, but he was right about one thing: Bad harvests meant big trouble. They were sad times. I could remember us going around the village asking for any food people could share, searching the forest for anything we could eat—anything to get us through the winter. My brother had decided to become a hunter after that.

“Merchant buys a kid or two for cheap, takes ’em to town, and sells ’em to a slaver for a profit,” Old Badger continued. “A real shame for the parents, but at least the kid ain’t starvin’ an’ the family gets a little more money with less mouths to feed. Everybody wins. I bet yer merchant’s made a few deals just like

that."

"I see..."

I'd never heard about Uncle Lehmar doing that kind of thing, but maybe no one in the village knew. If they had, I was sure they would've tried harder to stop me from going with him. Besides, even after the few bad harvests we'd had, no one starved to death in our village anymore. The grown-ups had told me stories about people who did before I was born, though.

"So that's how you became an adventurer, huh? Heh heh! Mighta been better off as a slave!" Old Badger chuckled.

"You think so?" I asked. I'd never even thought of that. I'd always heard slaves were treated really badly.

"Sure. Depends on yer master, of course, but at least you'd have meals an' a roof over yer head. Don't gotta worry about becomin' some monster's lunch neither."

He had a point. Monsters lurked in these trees, and I could be in danger right now. Back when I'd first arrived in town, just reading the word "slaver" had scared me so much I'd run away without a second thought. But if I'd been sold, they wouldn't have killed me—they'd put me to work somewhere in town. Working was the whole point of leaving my village and coming here. If becoming a slave meant having work, food, a place to stay, and clothes to wear, then maybe it wouldn't have been so bad after all.

"I'm kiddin'," Old Badger said. "Wouldn't wish that on nobody."

There was a hardness in his voice I'd never heard until now. It startled me so much that I looked up and watched him more closely. He sliced at the branches ahead more roughly than before, and I was pretty sure we could've just ducked under the ones he'd just cut down.

"Ever heard of the slaves' graveyard?" Old Badger asked me. I couldn't see his expression because he was facing ahead, but his question and the tone of his voice were enough to send a chill down my spine.

"No," I replied.

"It's off in the farthest corner of a big cemetery outside town. Grass there grows up to yer knees. Grave posts are all crumblin' to dust. Grave keepers hardly visit, so undead end up crawlin' around there from time to time."

"Really? That's what it's like?"

There was a graveyard in my village too, behind the church.

Since I used to go to see the priest a lot, sometimes I'd help clean the graveyard and cut the grass and weeds there before praying. But there weren't any slaves, so of course we didn't have a graveyard for them. This was the first time I'd heard of something like that.

"Dead slaves get buried separate from ordinary folks, an' their masters gotta pay to bury 'em. That's the rule in this town. Sad thing is, only the lucky 'uns—slaves whose masters give half a damn—ever make it to the graveyard. Ain't nobody takin' care of that place, an' slaves get the cheapest coffins, so burials are real cheap. But this world's full of nasty skinflints who won't even part with that much."

Our conversation about living and working had turned into a conversation about death... It was a little scary.

"You can imagine how *those* types treat their slaves. Feedin' 'em only once a day with slop even dogs won't touch, givin' 'em nothin' but rags to wear, makin' 'em sleep in a drafty hovel with holes in the roof... Livin' like that'll make anybody sick sooner or later. An' when that happens—when slaves with that kinda master get real sick or hurt, when they ain't got long to live? Master'll thank 'em for their service, tear up their contract, an' throw 'em out on the street. Save a few coins on the burial that way."

"That's awful."

"Sure is, but that's bein' a slave, sonny. Yer just somethin' for folks to use up and throw away. Heh heh!" Old Badger let out his usual cackle and then looked up at the sky.

I looked up, too, and noticed that the sun was starting to sink. We didn't have much time.

"I oughta know," Old Badger said. "That's how *I* became a free man."

I didn't know what to say. So there really were such cruel masters in the world and such poor slaves being treated that way. I'd only ever heard rumors about things like this until now.

Old Badger kept walking and talking like he wasn't saying anything serious enough to be worth stopping for. "I was halfway to dyin' from a sickness. Most folks who get it are goners. So master tore up my contract an' threw me out, but somehow I clung on and stayed alive. Signed myself up as an adventurer to earn a livin'. Got caught for stealin' to pay the registration fee—they beat me up an' threw me out, but I turned

right back around, got down on my hands an' knees, an' begged 'em to let me stay. They did, but I had another problem. I was starvin' back then, an' no way a li'l bag of bones like me was gonna go fightin' monsters. So I did the only work I could: gatherin' herbs, every day, day after day. 'Course, this was decades ago, back when Barque was only yer height. Now, ain't that a miserable story? Least I can look back an' laugh about it now, heh heh!"

Old Badger cackled like usual, but I didn't feel like laughing. Not even a little. I remembered Barque telling me why they'd gotten rid of the registration fee when I signed up for the guild. So that went back to Old Badger.

"So ya ran away 'cause you read the writin' outside the slaver's? That's good luck. Or yer own gumption, more like. Or maybe both. Well, that don't really matter. But I can say this for sure." The old man stopped, turned to face me, then jerked his head toward where we'd been going. Although we were deep in the forest, the trees just up ahead opened up into a bright clearing where the sunlight was streaming down at an angle. "You'd never know a feelin' like this if you was a slave."

I saw what he was talking about right away. These were the third herbs on the request, worth several times more than the ones listed below. And they were *so beautiful*—lovely purple flowers carpeting the ground in front of us, swaying gently in the breeze.

"I was a li'l early last time I came by, but now? I reckon these are just about ready for pickin'," Old Badger said as he knelt down and peered at the purple blooms. Then he sprang back onto his feet and looked around the clearing. "Folks call places like this mana pools. They say there's more magic in the air here. Mana pools ain't common, but yer chances of findin' the most valuable herbs are pretty good in 'em."

I'd never heard of a mana pool before, but from the name I could more or less understand what sort of place it was and what kinds of herbs grew here. They had to be the ones you could never plant in a garden or find by the roadside, ones that only grew in special, rare places—valuable herbs.

"There's another spot just like this near the top of that there hill we climbed," Old Badger said. "I was plannin' on takin' y'all 'cause they grow even better up there most years, but I gotta say, the crop here ain't bad neither."

“But why…?” I had to ask—I couldn’t help it. “Why would you tell us about these amazing places?” This place was so beautiful. It was easy to picture fairies flitting among the lovely purple flowers.

When Old Badger had brought his gathering haul back to the guild that night, I’d watched him turn in six different kinds of herbs. Some of them were rare and valuable, but most of them were common. He must’ve gone far and wide to get all those. Thanks to his sharp eyes, especially his ability to spot herbs on the very edge of his vision, and his stamina, which kept him going for hours over difficult ground, he’d filled his basket.

Today, I’d thought we would be picking herbs like Old Badger, keeping a watchful eye out and picking anything we came across, but that didn’t happen. He hadn’t stopped to pick anything along the way. In fact, he’d totally ignored herbs that even I’d noticed. I definitely thought that was strange.

To be honest, the other three adventurers weren’t the only ones who’d doubted Old Badger. Deep down, I had too. I’d only gone along with him because I had no other choice and no one else to pin my hopes on. Herb gathering was the only work I could do. Learning something from Old Badger, who had so much experience, had seemed like my only chance of making a living.

I had known that Old Badger might be lying—that it was possible I’d wasted a whole day following him around. He wasn’t a nice person, not even the kind who would act nice just to use people. I’d thought the other three adventurers could be right about what they said before leaving: Old Badger would lead me on a wild-goose chase and laugh in my face at the end of the day. That was what I’d been thinking until now.

“Said I was gonna show ya my secret spot, didn’t I?” Old Badger said as I just stood staring, stunned, at the scene in front of me. He scratched behind his ear and hummed while he thought about something, and then he bit his lip and gazed off into the distance. “Never said I was smart. Goin’ off our records alone, I ain’t much better than Waine at this adventurin’ lark. Couldn’t really tell ya why I brought ya here. Hard to explain.”

The old man looked deep in thought. I’d seen him like that before, in front of the requests wall at the guild, when I’d asked him about the best ways to gather herbs.

“I ain’t gettin’ younger,” he continued. “My strength’s fadin’

away year after year—ol' peepers ain't what they used to be neither. Can't keep doin' this job forever. First started thinkin' about hangin' up my basket a few years ago, but Barque just won't have none of it. Says there ain't nobody else who knows herbs like I do, so he'd be in a real pickle if I up an' retired. What about *my* aches and pains? Lemme tell ya, all this walkin' does a number on these ol' bones. Still, far as Barque's concerned, it seems like I've gone and made myself pretty useful over the years."

He said his strength was fading? After he climbed that steep hillside while barely breaking a sweat? After he spotted that tiny patch of herbs earlier from so far away? Then again, Old Badger was, well, *old*. He had to be getting weaker. That happened to everyone when they got old.

"That bein' the case, well, I got to thinkin'. Maybe retirin' like that *would* be a real waste. Maybe I actually did all right for myself. Found these mana pools, didn't I? Gotta show *those* off to somebody before I call it a day, I thought. Heh heh!" Old Badger chuckled and turned to look at me. His face was wrinkled, but his bright smile was just like a kid's. "Guess I was lookin' for an apprentice," he said.

Before long, we were done gathering and on our way back to town. It was almost evening—the sun was very low in the sky, and we were trying to make it to the gates before they shut us out.

"Can't pick them herbs at the mana pool all year," he explained to me as we hurried along. "There's only, oh, about fifteen days around this time each year when they're good for pickin'."

"That's not many."

"Sure ain't. That's why I come as much as I can durin' the season. Oh, but don't go pickin' all of 'em, understand? Leave about a quarter behind. Take 'em all, an' there won't be none left to make seeds. No seeds means nothin' to pick next year."

I was tired to the bone, but my steps were light. Carrying my full coat-basket over the bumpy ground wasn't easy, but it didn't bother me at all.

Old Badger kept telling me about all kinds of things on the long walk back. "Like I said," he continued, "you only got about fifteen days to pick them herbs. Same as the other mana pools I know—a real short window of opportunity. Gotta spend the rest

of the year searchin' high and low over the hills and in the forests."

"How can I learn to spot herbs from really far away like you do?" I asked.

"Ya just get used to it," he replied.

*That's it?* I thought. *There has to be a little bit more to it than that.*

"Guess it comes naturally if yer keepin' a proper eye out for monsters and the like," he explained. "Can't be starin' down at yer feet all the time. Slime'll get the drop on ya from outta the trees."

I remembered hearing about this before. "Oh, Waine warned me about that. He said they're pretty dangerous."

The old man nodded. "Yeah, he had a real nasty run-in with a slime once. Real important to find danger before it finds ya. Keep yer eyes peeled an' ears open. Look for signs like tracks and dung. When you find somethin', get yerself outta there sharp. Never let 'em know yer there. Whatever yer doin', be it cuttin' branches or whatever, keep the noise down."

Old Badger hooked a branch in the curve of his kukri's blade, then quickly sliced through it just like he'd been doing since this morning. I'd watched him do this more times than I could count by now, but I'd never noticed just how quiet he was. Sure, the leaves did rustle a little, but there was no sharp sound of the blade hitting the branch like when you chopped wood with an axe and no cracking or groaning from the tree. The kukri's shape probably made it easier to cut the branches so quietly, but I knew Old Badger's skill was what really made that possible.

"Oh, speakin' of monsters, I know a trick for keepin' yerself safe. Reckon you could use it better than I can," he said.

"What's that?"

"Now, this ain't exactly a point of pride, but I can't read or write. Told ya I ain't smart."

"R-Right. I guess that's not something to be proud of," I agreed.

"But there's a few words I got memorized. The names of places around town and the word 'extermination.' Just by knowin' those, you can find out somethin' real useful by takin' a look at the requests wall in the guild."

As soon as he said that, I understood. My mind went back to the first time I'd spoken to him. He'd been looking at a request

for slaying goblins. “Wait, so you were…”

“Yup. I was checkin’ out the location. I look at extermination requests on the wall every day, find out where them nasties are, and stay well clear.”

“That’s the exact opposite of the other adventurers!”

“Heh heh! Don’t call myself Ol’ Badger the Yellow-Bellied for nothin’, sonny! I ain’t never taken one of those requests in my life.”

Before I knew it, we’d left the forest behind and reached the road into town. We arrived at the gates just minutes before the sun disappeared below the hills, and the guards closed them almost right after we went through. The sky in the west was the pinkish color of sunset and dark blue in the east. Our shadows were stretched out as long as they could possibly get on the street’s flat paving stones.

It was completely dark by the time we reached the adventurer’s guild. Inside, lots of adventurers were sitting around the tables eating and drinking. I stood by the door and looked around.

Old Badger glanced at me. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Oh, um…” I replied. “It’s just, I don’t see those three.”

“They woulda made it back long before us. Gotta be home by now.”

“I wanted to tell them that you weren’t lying.”

“Eh, don’t bother.” He waved away my concern.

Not clearing up that misunderstanding didn’t feel right to me, but I couldn’t do anything about that now if they weren’t here. I decided to explain the next time I saw them.

“I don’t see Waine and the others either,” I said.

“They’ll be down the sewers still. If they ain’t back tonight, they probably found a pretty big area for explorin’. We’ll see ’em tomorrow.”

I was a little disappointed. I wanted to tell Waine what a good walking stick my spear had been, thank Chikka for showing me how to put my armor on right, and tell them all about what had happened today. But it would have to wait. I could talk to them tomorrow and tell those other three adventurers about Old Badger too. And there was one more person I wanted to talk to.

“Old Badger? Can you teach me more tomorrow?” I asked.

He rubbed his chin. “Sure I can, but I got one condition for ya.”

I felt my body go stiff. *Is he going to ask me to do something? Will it be difficult? I hope not. There's not much that I* can *do, but I still wanna learn so much more from him.*

"Go buy yerself a proper basket for yer herbs first," he told me. "They'll sell ya one over at the armorer's."

*Phew. It wasn't a big deal after all.*

I handed in my herbs to Barque right away, got my reward, and ran over to the armorer's. It was closed, so I banged on the door and called for the shopkeeper. After all, the time of day didn't matter to *adventurers*.

I left with Old Badger early next morning. We followed the same route we'd taken yesterday to the mana pool and got to work picking the purple flowers right away. Old Badger was so fast, he was picking twice as much as I could. I tried to hurry so I wouldn't make him wait, but he scolded me for it. He said it was better to be slow and careful rather than rush and make a mess.

The pack basket I'd bought was smaller than Old Badger's, but it could still fit way more inside than the thing I'd made out of my coat and a couple of sticks. Once we'd both filled our baskets with the valuable herbs, we went back to town. We made it way earlier than we had yesterday—the sun was still high in the sky by the time we got to the adventurer's guild.

"Them pack baskets hold more, but a basket ya sling over one shoulder might be better, hm?" Old Badger said thoughtfully as we walked.

"Huh? Why?"

"Well, don't ya carry yer spear on yer back?"

He was right. When I walked in town or on the main road, I kept my spear on my back using the fastening cord Chikka had made for me. It was really well-made, so taking my spear off my back and putting it back on was nice and easy... Until I started carrying a pack basket. It really did get in the way. But a basket that went over my shoulder would be even smaller, so I wouldn't be able to carry as much.

"Could be the end of the line if ya need yer weapon but can't get it off yer back," Old Badger warned. "I've had to scare off goblins and boars and the like with this thing before." He patted the kukri hanging from his belt.

"Really?"

"Yep. Happens now an' then. Each time I wonder if my luck

finally ran out. That's why, startin' tomorrow, take that spear out soon as ya can't see the town gates no more. Don't wait till ya get close to the forest."

On rough paths, having my spear out was useful because I could use it as a walking stick. But on a normal road, it was definitely easier to have it on my back. Still, I thought what Old Badger said was a good idea.

"Maybe I should use a kukri too. Instead of a spear," I said, but the old man quickly shook his head.

"Heck no. Sure, this thing's useful, but it's real tricky to handle. No good for a kid like you."

Now that I was carrying a basket on my back, I thought a weapon I could hang on my belt like a sword would be better for me. Then I remembered all the good things about spears that Waine had pointed out—they were long, easy to handle, and cheap. The kukri was much shorter, had an unusual shape, and was probably a little expensive because of that big blade. It looked heavy too. Old Badger was right. The kukri didn't suit me.

"Besides, this ain't no weapon for an adventurer," he added.

"There's weapons adventurers should and shouldn't use?"

Old Badger ignored my question. "Just keep practicin' with that spear. I'm sure Waine taught ya a thing or two, didn't he?"

"Yeah, just how to do thrusts and sweeps—"

Right when we were about to enter the adventurer's guild, we heard someone call out to us.

"Hey, kiddo! And Old Badger too. Didn't expect to see you two making friends."

Waine appeared from behind the building with a wide smile on his face and came up to us.

"Hey there, Waine." Old Badger raised a hand to greet him. "Yer lookin' none the worse for wear."

I bowed my head. "Hello! Did you finish your job in the sewers?"

"Sure did. Finished exploring the new area and everything. Found out where the alligators were coming from too. Turns out there was a hole in the sewer wall with a network of natural caves behind it. Those caves? Absolutely hopping with alligators. We blocked up the hole, so they shouldn't be getting through anymore."

"What about the ones that got through already?" I asked.

"Well, we took care of the ones we ran into, but our job was to

survey the place. If they want us to go down again and make sure it's cleared out, they'll need to put in a new request."

*Oh, so that's how it works,* I thought.

Waine had something to do inside the guild, so we all went in together. Barque was sitting at the reception desk and glaring at some parchments as usual, but no one else was inside. I was a little surprised to see the guild like this, since it was always so busy in the mornings and at night.

I followed Old Badger to the reception desk while Waine headed for the kitchen. I wondered what he wanted in there while waiting for Barque to inspect our herbs. Then Waine came back out holding a big stack of wooden plates. He grinned at us and jerked his head toward the back of the guild.

"Hey, gramps, kiddo. Come 'round the back once you're done with that," he said.

We found a whole bunch of people gathered where Waine had told us to go. Most were adventurers who belonged to the guild—I could tell from the gear they were wearing, and I knew their faces. But there were other people here too. I recognized one of them as the owner of the armorer's shop. And right in the middle of the crowd...

"What *is* that?" I thought out loud.

It looked like a gigantic lizard, but it couldn't be one. *Such a big mouth, and sharp teeth, and thick scales... This must be a cave alligator. I think it could swallow me in one bite.* It was being roasted whole over a fire.

"Some sight, huh? Biggest and ugliest out of all the alligators down there," said Waine. He came over and handed me a wooden plate while I stood there gawking.

"Oh, tiny and grandpa! Hang on, it'll be ready soon," Chikka said cheerfully as she threw some wood onto the fire.

"It came from a natural cave. Should be safe." Sheya suddenly appeared beside me. She held a plate too.

"Barque confiscated that head I brought back before," Waine said. "This time, we brought the whole alligator back because we got Sheya to lighten the carcass with her magic, but there's way too much for the three of us to eat. So we figured, why not invite everyone for a feast?"

Waine, Sheya, and Chikka all looked fine. I felt a little silly for worrying about them earlier.

“Ain’t nobody ever hauled back a whole cave alligator before,” said Old Badger, like he couldn’t quite believe what he was seeing. But from the way he said it, I got the feeling people did sometimes bring back other creatures.

The smell of the roasting meat drifted toward us. So the party was sharing their catch. My younger big brother, the hunter, did the same thing when he caught something big. The cave alligator did look way too big for the three of them to eat by themselves, and it seemed like there was enough for everyone to get a share, so I took a plate. This monster hadn’t been living in the sewers, so I had no reason to refuse. *I can finally eat some meat! I’ve never had alligator before.*

“Take a good look, sonny,” Old Badger muttered so only I could hear. “Those are *real* adventurers. Marchin’ off to places crawlin’ with big nasties like that, fightin’ ’em, an’ comin’ back with the spoils.”

They were the opposite of Old Badger, who saw goblin tracks and turned back the other way. They chose to leap straight into danger, to hunt it down and reach out and grab it, rather than run from it. That was what adventuring was all about—I understood that.

I think that was also when I realized what Old Badger had meant when he’d said the kukri wasn’t meant for adventurers. It was a tool for working in the mountains and forests. It *could* be used as a weapon in a pinch, but there were lots of other, better choices if you wanted a weapon. And a real adventurer’s work called for real weapons.

“You ain’t ready for that, though, heh heh!” The old man cackled and clapped me on my shoulder.

That was true—I wasn’t ready. Right now, there was no way I would win if I fought something like that cave alligator. To be honest, even if I were older and taller, I still couldn’t picture myself fighting a monster like that.

The roasted alligator was way more delicious than I’d expected. Chikka and Waine had put a big pile on my plate, and soon my belly was full with the first meat I’d eaten in a while. Everyone seemed to be enjoying it. The feast had started in the afternoon, and it continued into the evening until every last bite of that huge alligator had been eaten.

Then everyone started drinking and singing happily. I didn’t know the songs, but I guessed they were drinking songs. After a

little while, somebody brought out a musical instrument with strings and started to play. It was my first time seeing an instrument other than a flute or drum, and the sound was so beautiful and mysterious that for a while, all I could do was stand and stare. It had to be a harp stringed with the hair of the Earth Mother herself.

I was sleepy from my hearty meal and went to the stable. In my straw bed, I could still hear merry voices through the wall. I listened to them, feeling warm and content, as I slowly drifted closer to sleep. I thought about Waine, Sheya, and Chikka. I wondered about all the adventures they'd had until now. I wanted to talk to them more, but I didn't get the chance. They were the hosts of today's feast, and *everyone* wanted to chat with them. *Maybe we can talk tomorrow. That would be good.* I wanted to know what exactly had happened down in the sewers. I wanted to know how they'd killed such a big alligator. I was sure it would be a more exciting story than any of the ones I'd read in the priest's books.

My eyelids were getting heavy. I was pretty used to sleeping on the straw by now. Even though people were still celebrating nearby, I could hear the horse in the stall next to mine sleeping soundly. *Nothing bothers you, huh?*

"Oh..." Just before I fell asleep, I realized something. It didn't have anything to do with herbs, or Old Badger, or the alligator, or Waine and the others. It was about some people I *hadn't* seen today. *The three adventurers who climbed the hill with me yesterday... Why weren't* they *at the feast?*

The next morning, it poured with rain. The guild was much busier than usual. Almost every table in the small eating area was taken. People were chatting and laughing loudly—it was still early, but a lot of people had already started drinking. It seemed like adventurers, just like farmers and hunters, took a day off when the weather was as wet as this.

Of course, I did too. We couldn't go picking herbs in this rain. An adventurer was no good to anyone unless their body was fit and healthy, so it was better to stay here than risk catching a cold or something. Still, not gathering herbs today didn't mean I had nothing to do. Right now, I was busy learning geography from Old Badger.

"This here's the Pardeem Plains. Here, the Forest of Bedge. The Sherzon Hills," he said, pointing to each of them in turn on a

big sheet of parchment on the table in front of us. “And here, runnin’ from the north, through the middle of town, out to sea—that’s the River Marmunild.”

*“I said to steer clear of the places on the extermination requests, but you gotta know where them places are first.”*

Old Badger, who was also stuck at the guild because of the rain, had told me that earlier. So he’d decided to teach me. I was happy about that, but he’d been sipping on a drink the whole time. His face was getting redder and his words were starting to slur together a little, which didn’t exactly make him easy to understand.

The town and its surroundings were sketched out on the parchment. It was a map for adventurers, so it was a little rough and only had basic information, but it was enough for learning where everything was. I copied the place names onto a wooden board with a piece of charcoal Old Badger had given me and worked on memorizing them one by one.

“So, the Raging Kelpie’s Tail, where we are now, is on the west side of town,” I noted.

After spending ages drilling all the places outside of town into my head, I wanted to learn how the town was laid out too. According to the map, the town was split down the middle into east and west by the big River Marmunild. It ran from the north all the way to the sea in the south, like the river was drawing a line down the middle of the whole map. I was surprised to learn that the town even had a river—I’d never seen it.

“And there are only four gates in and out of town—one in the northwest, one in the southwest, one in the northeast, and one in the southeast. The one I always use is in the northwest.” I hummed and nodded slowly as my eyes wandered over the map. We didn’t have any maps in my village, so this was actually my first time looking at one. It was really easy to understand where everything was when it was drawn in pictures.

When I’d first arrived in town, I must’ve come through the southwest gate. I remembered being able to see the sea when I’d arrived with Uncle Lehmar. I’d panicked during my escape, so I could barely remember anything, but I was sure I’d never crossed a river. Looking at the map, I could see how I ended up in the northwest part of town and the adventurer’s guild after coming in from the southwest.

“It’s so big,” I mumbled. I’d thought this town was big before,

but the map made me realize I'd only seen a small part of it. There were dozens of places here on the west side that I hadn't been to yet. I hadn't even set foot on the east side, which was the same size as the west. For someone from the countryside like me, it was kind of overwhelming.

I pointed to something written on a different part of the map. "Is this, on this road that goes out east, the name of the road? Do roads even have names?"

"Well, they do, but they ain't written on this map. That's the name of the capital. It's tellin' ya that's where you'll end up if you keep followin' that road," Old Badger explained.

"Is a capital bigger than a town? Bigger than *this* town?"

"Yeah. Heard it's much bigger. Ain't never been myself, though, so I couldn't tell ya more than that."

I couldn't even imagine it.

"The capital? Never been there," came a lazy-sounding voice from beside me.

It wasn't just me and Old Badger at this table—there were four seats, and they were all taken. Waine spoke up just now. Like Old Badger, he'd been sipping away on a drink since morning.

"Not that I wouldn't like to go to the capital," Waine continued, "but it's a long trip. How many days does it take on foot?"

"Traveling light, three days. Escorting a caravan, four days," answered Sheya. She was slumped over the table, napping...or so I'd thought. Obviously, she was listening to the conversation.

We'd all ended up at the same table because of how crowded the guild was, thanks to the weather. I could hardly believe the difference in these two today. They'd seemed so cool at the feast yesterday after returning from the sewers with their prize, but now? They were loafing around like a couple of lazy cats. I'd wanted to ask them all about their adventures, but I gave up because I'd just feel silly doing that now.

"Don't look at 'em, sonny. You don't want these two rubbin' off on ya. This is what they're *really* like, see? One hopeless idiot and one hopeless lazybones. Fine examples of what you *don't* wanna be," Old Badger warned me. I was pretty sure he pointed them out to me just yesterday as examples of what adventurers *should* be, but, well, yesterday was over.

"That's rich coming from you, Old Badger. I'm not the one who wastes half my earnings gambling down at the docks," Waine

said, returning the jab.

*Wait a minute, he does what?*

"There are shady gambling dens at the docks. Since they're technically at sea, you can get away with kinds of gambling that aren't allowed here," Sheya explained.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"That's the truth, kiddo. This old fella's the worst gambler in the whole guild. Knows all the best spots for picking valuable herbs, but he can't save a lick of coin 'cause he keeps losing it all on bets. *That's* why he's still working at his ripe old age."

I turned to look at Old Badger. The old man took a swig from his cup and cackled in his funny way.

"Heh heh! Yep, we adventurers are just a bunch of scoundrels an' wastrels. Ain't got our reputation for nothin'!" He was loud enough for the whole guild to hear, but he carried on. "Ain't nobody with their head screwed on tight ever thought of becomin' an adventurer. Not one! Starry-eyed youngsters who think they're gonna be heroes, shirkers who'll do anythin' to get out of an honest day's work, oddballs who couldn't fit in nowhere else... Then there's yer treasure hunters thinkin' they're gonna strike it rich an' idiots who ain't thinkin' nothin' at all. This here's the trash heap where they all end up, so don't go expectin' nothin' better. Heh heh!"

He seemed pretty drunk. Now that I thought about it, he might've refilled his cup a few minutes ago.

"There must be some *decent* people here," I said.

Old Badger just laughed. "As if! Decent people don't up and decide to spend their lives dicin' with death and fightin' monsters. They find themselves a nice, safe job and live in peace."

"Not that *you've* ever fought a monster in all your days," Waine chimed in. Although he was one of the people Old Badger was being so mean about, he didn't seem to mind at all.

"Well, what about Chikka?" I asked. "She seems pretty normal, even if her room was a disaster."

"Lemme tell you where she is right now," said Waine. "*Fishing.* In this rain! She takes a job now and then to earn some coin, then does nothing but fish until she's flat broke again. That last day down in the sewers, all she would talk about was how bad she wanted to go fishing again! I was getting sick of the whining."

“Lives for her hobby,” added Sheya. “And she *is* good at it.”

“But she ain’t interested in work at all. That’s why she’s a C-ranker and earnin’ less than me,” Old Badger added.

*I knew we should’ve taken that old fishing gear to the armorer’s,* I thought to myself.

“Well, lookin’ on the bright side, you’ve got a whole heap of bad examples to *not* learn from.” The old man chuckled.

Could it be true? Were adventurers really so bad that I should make sure I didn’t end up like any of them?

I didn’t want to accept what he was saying. “What about those other three?” I asked. I was pretty sure *they* weren’t bad people.

But Old Badger just snorted. “Don’t go makin’ me laugh. They were no good the moment they decided to start adventurin’.”

*Hold on a second… Doesn’t that mean I’m no good either?* I didn’t like the thought of that.

“Which three are we talking about?” Waine asked, tilting his head and looking puzzled.

I’d forgotten that Waine, Sheya, and Chikka had been down in the sewers when that other party was arguing with Old Badger, and they hadn’t been around when we’d gone herb gathering the next day. There were probably other parties of three who visited the guild, so it made sense that Waine wasn’t sure who I meant.

“Um, two men and a woman,” I told him. “A warrior, a mage, and a scout. They’re pretty young.”

“Ones who tried recruitin’ ya. Bunch of rookies. You oughta remember ’em,” Old Badger added.

“Oh, *them*.” He gave his head a light knock with his hand like we’d jogged his memory. I hadn’t known they’d invited Waine to join their party, though.

“Probably the ones who were hunting rats.” Sheya’s head moved sluggishly. While she sat slumped over with her cheek on the table, her eyes wandered around the guild. It sounded like she knew those three too, and that they’d also been adventuring in the sewers until recently. “They should quit. Sooner the better. Actually, I didn’t see them yesterday. Or today.”

I followed her lead and looked around the guild. There were a lot of adventurers here, but I couldn’t see that warrior, mage, or scout in the crowd. Just like I hadn’t seen them at the alligator feast yesterday.

According to Old Badger, decent people didn’t become

adventurers. The ones who did would quit soon after. What about those three? When we'd gone on our herb-gathering trip, they'd decided to leave early because they didn't trust Old Badger and didn't want to waste their time. I thought they'd judged a little too quickly, but maybe their choice made sense for normal—decent—people. None of them were as weird as the people gathered around this table (or Chikka). I was sure about that much. Maybe they had already quit after all.

A gruff voice joined our conversation. "They went off to the capital."

Hearing the voice come out of nowhere all of a sudden made me jump. I looked around and saw a big man built like a brick wall with a scar on his cheek standing near our table. It was Barque, and he looked scary as usual.

"Left yesterday mornin'," he continued. "We won't be seein' them again."

He seemed to have some business with Sheya and handed her a sheet of parchment.

"The capital?" I repeated. "Like, that place you get to if you follow the road all the way east from here?"

"The same. It's a three day walk from here. Then if you walk another three days from there, you'll get to the royal city."

"Royal city...?"

That was where the king lived. He was someone really important, but that was about all I knew. Well, now I also knew you'd have to walk for six whole days to get to where he lived.

"The capital, huh?" Waine said, taking a sip of his drink. "They say there's all kinds of work for adventurers over there."

I wondered if that included work that I could do—work other than gathering herbs.

"They can have all the jobs in the world. Don't make no difference if ya don't got the wherewithal to get 'em done. Just goin' somewhere else don't change nothin'," Old Badger scoffed.

"Dreams draw adventurers in, one after another," Sheya said quietly as she read over the parchment from Barque.

*Dreams, huh...?* I knew plenty of tales of adventurers who had done great things. Some had discovered treasure buried in ancient ruins, killed terrible monsters and become heroes, and even rescued trapped princesses and got happily married. Had those three adventurers gone off to the capital to chase dreams from stories?

It was a shame I'd never gotten the chance to explain that Old Badger had never lied to us, but maybe that was okay. *Maybe they'll be heroes by the time we meet again. Even if we never see each other again, I might hear about the amazing things they'd done in songs.* That was kind of exciting to think about.

"Waine, we've got work to do," Sheya said, rolling up the parchment as she stood.

I couldn't believe my ears, and it seemed like Waine couldn't either.

"What? In *this* rain?" He pointed to the window. It was still pouring out. They'd be soaked by the time they got to wherever they had to go. And yet Sheya of all people, the guild's "hopeless lazybones" who'd been slumped flat on the table until a few moments ago, seemed almost *eager* to go to work.

"No complaining. It's a guild quest."

"Why us, though? We just got back yesterday! There's plenty of other folks for them to pick on."

"I'll explain later. Come on."

The parchment Barque had given her had to be a request. Waine obviously wasn't happy about it, but he didn't put up much of a fight once Sheya tugged on his arm. He just sighed as the two of them left to go get ready in another room.

"Hmm. Well, that woke 'em up," said Old Badger, resting his chin in his palm as he watched them go.

Barque had disappeared as suddenly as he'd arrived. That left just Old Badger and me at the table.

"I wonder why they're in such a hurry."

"Beats me. Gotta be somethin' to do with whatever's goin' on down in the sewers."

"Oh, I guess so."

If that was the case, I could see why Barque would go straight to Sheya and Waine. At least they might not have to get wet, since the sewers were underground.

"Never mind that, sonny. Back to yer map. I'm gonna show ya where to find the mana pools where you can go pickin'."

"Oh, right. That would be great!"

I focused on the map in front of me again like Old Badger told me to. There was still a lot I had to cram into my head. I didn't have time to worry about little things. Little things, like... *Why* had Sheya glanced at me like that when she'd pulled Waine away? No, there was no point in trying to figure that out.

The sky was so clear and sunny the next day, it felt like yesterday's rain clouds had never been there. The ground was still soggy, though, so Old Badger and I walked carefully as we made our way to the forest.

"Yeah, that roughneck Waine's been around for years," Old Badger said. "But he ain't *from* here. Just drifted in from who-knows-where one day. Always had a knack for fightin'. Surprised us all when he started takin' down big targets just a li'l while after he became an adventurer! But he kept messin' up requests. No brains at all, see? Barque scolded him plenty back in the day."

"Waine was that bad at doing requests?" I asked.

"Yup. 'Til he joined up with Ranna an' Miguel. That sorted him out."

I didn't know those names, but I'd heard something like this from Sheya the very first time we'd met. Something about Waine's comrades picking up the slack?

"Turns out them two weren't cut out for the adventurin' life," Old Badger added.

"What do you mean?"

"They got married an' settled down to make an honest livin' off the land. Went off to the countryside to run a farm, they did. Heh!"

"Oh, right." *Decent people quit adventuring, apparently...*

That was from our conversation yesterday. Waine's friends must've been good people, or they'd *become* good people somewhere along the way. Maybe retiring from adventuring was actually something to be happy about.

"Those two were never gonna get nowhere," Old Badger explained. "Heard through the grapevine Waine was always savin' their skins when battles got tough. I bet Ranna an' Miguel realized they weren't measurin' up. Waine's an idiot who needs someone to help keep his head on straight, but plenty of folks could do that. Those two weren't doin' nothin' special, an' they knew it."

So they had given up because Waine was too strong? I never thought something like that would even happen, and I wasn't sure how to feel about it. I was just thinking that retiring from adventuring was worth celebrating, but hearing how Waine's friends had quit because they thought they weren't good enough made me a little sad.

“Here’s the kicker,” Old Badger continued. “Waine was head over heels for Ranna. After the party disbanded an’ the weddin’ was done—oh, he was in his cups for days tryin’ to drown his sorrows. What a miserable sight he was! Heh!”

*That’s such a shame,* I thought. Waine had lost his party, and his friends had gotten married and broken his heart. Now, Old Badger was telling the story like it was a joke! As far as I knew, Waine had never done anything to deserve all that. It was only because he was so strong.

“Oh! Look, sonny. More herbs.” Old Badger pointed at something in the distance.

“You’re right. You beat me to them *again*.” I followed his finger and saw the herbs growing at the foot of a tree a little ways off. Bright yellow-green plants with round, shiny leaves—the same ones I’d found on the plains my very first day.

“Those spread their seeds by makin’ ’em catch on people’s clothes or animals’ fur. Might run across ’em just about anywhere. Never in big patches, though. They fetch a decent price, but don’t waste yer time tryin’ to hunt for ’em.”

*If only I’d known* that *when I first found them… Old Badger really is amazing!* He kept impressing me again and again with how much he knew.

The two of us were sort of competing to see who could find the most herbs before we got to the mana pool. We didn’t actually pick anything along the way, though, because there were plenty of valuable herbs where we were going. Still, it was good training for me since the mana pool herbs wouldn’t be there for long.

“Sheya’s apprenticed to a mage in town,” Old Badger said as we walked. “Now, I don’t know much about magic or mages, but I hear there’s this master of water magic. A real big deal. An’ *that’s* who Sheya’s apprenticed to, only she’s been givin’ her master the runaround ’cause she don’t like how tough the trainin’ is.”

“Is training as a mage really difficult?” I asked.

“Couldn’t tell ya. Remember, we’re talkin’ about Sheya here. Reckon she’s just playin’ hooky, an’ that’s all there is to it.”

“Huh…”

As we walked, I looked left and right, over and over, to try and find some herbs. I also kept an eye out for broken branches, where something might’ve pushed through a tree or bush, and

for any tracks or dung in the dirt. I watched and listened for any movements or sounds that didn't seem right. Old Badger did all of this without even thinking about it, and he'd told me to do it too. I was trying my best, but it felt like my brain was being pulled in so many different directions at the same time.

"That laziness of hers is why she works alone as much as possible," Old Badger continued. "Real unusual for a mage. Thing is, far as Sheya's concerned, dealin' with people's just a whole lot more bother than it's worth. Gotta work with yer party members when yer in a party, right? Can't go sleepin' in or only takin' whatever jobs tickle yer fancy. That's why she turns down every party invite. Lemme tell ya, I've seen more get-up-an'-go in a hunk of stale bread."

"I get what you mean, I think," I said, remembering how Sheya had looked slumped over the table yesterday. If that was her true self, then maybe Old Badger was right.

"Well, there's some good sense in that too."

"There is?"

"Well, who wants to be stuck with a bunch of folks they don't like, doin' work they don't wanna do? Especially when you don't wanna work at all."

That did make sense. Sheya had a right to choose what she did. Adventurers shouldn't do dangerous work they really didn't want to do. At least, I thought so.

"Can't say I know much about workin' in parties. But when yer lookin' to put one together someday, better think good an' hard about who ya choose. Sheya ain't doin' nothin' special by goin' solo. Every adventurer's gotta consider how they wanna work. Look, another herb there."

"Huh? Oh!"

*Not again! How did he even see that one? It's just one little plant hidden under a bush... I never would've noticed that. He found it while we were busy talking too.*

"Heard Chikka came here from the capital not so long ago. Don't think a year's gone by yet," said Old Badger.

"Really?" My eyes went wide. "Her room got that messy in less than a year?" Making that much mess in just a few months almost seemed like a talent to me.

"Saw Chikka's room, did ya? Heard it was a real dump. Most halflings are like that, though. They ain't attached to their possessions, or so they say."

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s like they ain’t really thinkin’ about tomorrow. It don’t bother ’em if the stuff in their house is broken or dirty, an’ they don’t lose no sleep over throwin’ things away. Someone explained it to me before—halflings ain’t cut out for fightin’, so most of the time they just up an’ run away when they’re bein’ attacked. They don’t think twice about leavin’ all their earthly possessions behind. That attitude’s helped their kind survive over the years.”

Chikka had sold just about everything I’d said she should. She’d been the one paying me to help her out that day, so she could’ve put her foot down anytime. I thought about what Old Badger said—how halflings would run away and leave everything behind. Sure, you could rebuild somehow as long as you were alive. But I didn’t think many people could throw away everything they owned just like that.

“I couldn’t get Chikka to sell a single piece of her fishing gear, though,” I said.

She’d stood in front of her stack of fishing rods with her arms flung out like she was protecting them. There’d been so many, and she’d never use them all, but she wouldn’t have parted with them no matter what.

“Halflings have this habit—they get real occupied with one thing. Won’t think about nothin’ else ’til they get tired of it. An’ when they gotta run away, that’s what they take with ’em,” Old Badger explained.

If you had to escape, and you had lots of things that were important to you, you’d never be able to carry them all. But that wouldn’t be a problem if you only had one. Chikka’s love was fishing, and her gear was her treasure. She’d never be able to run away with *all* of those rods and things, but if she had to, my guess was that she’d pick the most important ones to take with her.

“Heh, time flies when yer yakkin’. We’re here.”

Before I knew it, we’d arrived at the mana pool. This whole clearing was covered in rare and valuable herbs. I could smell the fresh purple flowers on the breeze. It was my third time coming here, but I still had to stop and stare at how beautiful it was.

“Well, let’s get to it,” said Old Badger. “Been a couple of days, but ya remember the way to pick ’em, right?”

“Yeah, of course I do.”

We didn’t come here yesterday because of the rain, but I wouldn’t forget how to pick the herbs so quickly. It wasn’t even that difficult. I saw Old Badger chuckling to himself as he turned away and figured he was joking anyway.

I put my spear on the ground, took out my knife, and knelt down. All you had to do was cut the flowers about halfway down their stems and put them in your basket. Apparently, the petals were the useful part, and that was why we didn’t have much time to gather them. Once the flowers wilted, they wouldn’t be worth anything. Leaving part of the stem attached kept them fresh longer.

Cut one, then move on to the next. Skip every fourth flower, because taking them all would mean none next year. It was an easy job. Maybe that was why I felt like chatting a little more. “What about you, Old Badger?” I asked.

“Hmm?”

“Don’t *you* have some stories?” He’d told me about Waine, Sheya, and Chikka on the way here. But I wanted to hear more about him.

“Me? Told ya how I ended up in this game already. What else do ya wanna know?”

“Um… Well, how about the gambling? Is it really true you lose all your money that way?”

“That it is, sonny, that it is. But lemme set ya straight on one thing: I pay all my debts. Don’t got no loans or owe nobody nothin’. Been shook down for everythin’ I own once or twice but nothin’ worse than that.”

I wasn’t sure that was anything to sound so proud of, but I kept that to myself. Instead, I asked, “But you’re thinking about retiring soon, right? How will you do that without any money saved up?”

Before, Old Badger had told me how he didn’t feel strong enough to keep adventuring for much longer. But he’d still need money after he retired. How was he planning to live?

“Oh, well… I got somethin’ lined up, more or less.” Old Badger stopped his gathering and scratched his chin. “When you do the same job long enough, you end up makin’ some connections here an’ there. There’s a fella from the physician’s guild who comes an’ collects the herbs we turn in. We been chattin’ now an’ then, since I’m a master herb gatherer an’ all. One day I

happened to mention how the work was gettin' tough on the ol' bones an' I was thinkin' of retirin'. So he asked if I'd be interested in growin' herbs over at his guild."

I remembered Barque telling me how the physician's guild had fields where they grew their own herbs. He'd said that the reason valenwort wasn't on the gathering request, even though it was so useful for making medicine, was probably because they could grow it themselves.

"Learned a thing or two about these herbs over the years," Old Badger continued. "Fella from the guild reckoned, with my help, they might figure out how to grow ones they couldn't grow before. Never thought people would come knockin' on my door on account of my wisdom. I mean, do I look like one of them hoity-toity scholars? Still, I gotta say, it don't sound so bad."

Not just growing herbs, but discovering how to grow ones nobody ever had before? *That* was an adventure. Maybe there wasn't any danger in it, but still, it was a chance to be the very first person to do something totally new. *Isn't that what adventuring's all about?*

"Wow... I think that's amazing," I told Old Badger. "Growing new herbs sounds *so* cool."

"Heh, ya think so? Well, I can't say if what they want's even possible, an' they're still waitin' on my answer, but they said the offer's open if I feel like takin' 'em up on it."

"You can do it!" I said. "I mean, you know everything there is to know about these herbs! I know you'll find a way." I forgot all about the flowers in front of me as I imagined Old Badger's herb garden. It was so exciting. What would he grow there? Could he find a way to grow the purple flowers? It would probably be really difficult, but maybe there was a way to *make* something like a mana pool. "Oh, but I guess if that works out, they'll stop asking adventurers to find the ones you grow. That wouldn't be good for me."

"Nonsense. Even if I could grow 'em, it'll be years before there's enough of a supply," he said.

"Huh. Right. Well then, before that happens, I'll have to get even better at finding herbs than you!"

If it was going to take that long, I probably didn't have much to worry about. Old Badger made enough money doing this to live comfortably and still had enough left over for gambling. If I worked hard and got good enough to pick as many herbs as

him, then it wouldn't matter if there weren't as many herbs on guild requests in a few years. I'd still be able to make enough money for food, a roof over my head, and anything else I needed.

"Sonny, you plannin' on pickin' herbs for the rest of yer days?"

His voice sounded so serious, I just blinked at him at first. He'd stopped picking and was standing there staring back at me with wide eyes.

After I was almost sold as a slave, I was alone in this strange town without a single coin in my pocket. By lying about my age, I started making a living as an adventurer. But when I saw that huge alligator Waine brought back, I knew I'd never be able to fight monsters like that. So I was really glad I'd met Old Badger. I'd even say it felt like fate. If I could live like him, I might have a chance to make it as an adventurer after all.

"Well, yeah, I—"

"Oh no yer not." Old Badger shook his head and cut me off before I could even finish. "Not in a million years, no. No, no, *no*," he repeated as he kept shaking his head. The look on his face was so very sad, or maybe he was hurting. The way he was moving and saying "no" was almost like he wasn't in control of his own body. For the very first time, I was a little scared of him.

All of a sudden, Old Badger went quiet and stood staring down at the ground.

*What was* that *about?* "Um... Would that really be so bad?" I asked him.

"Aye, it would," he replied.

That answer wasn't what I was looking for. I wanted to know *why*. There was no way for me to understand what was so wrong with what I'd said if he wasn't going to explain. I didn't know what else to do except scratch my cheek with my pointer finger.

*So awkward... Maybe it's not the right time to talk about this,* I thought. *We're still gathering, after all.*

"Keep at it for a few years." Old Badger spoke up then, like he'd been waiting for the moment I was distracted by my own thoughts. "Takes a lot of walkin', this job, so it'll build yer stamina. Develop a sharp eye too, watchin' for danger. Yep, a few years won't do ya no harm."

Stamina and sharp eyes—even I knew how important those were to every adventurer.

"But once yer bigger an' stronger an' better with that spear,"

he continued, “get out there an’ make somethin’ of yerself. As a real adventurer.”

*A real adventurer?* I repeated to myself. *Does that mean becoming like Waine? Or Sheya? Or Chikka?*

“No, no, that ain’t right. That ain’t what matters.” Old Badger pressed a hand to the bald part of his head and shook his head like he was trying to wring something out of his brain. It felt like he was trying to tell me something really, really important. “Don’t gotta be the spear. Maybe learn magic. Or how to spring locks an’ traps. Take up the bow. Heck, you could even become one of them folks who listens to the voices of the gods.”

There were so many skills an adventurer might have. Too many to even count. The best way to use those skills was by combining them with others in a party. Right now, I had a spear, but there was no reason not to learn more.

“Matter of fact, ya might wanna think about quittin’ the adventurin’ life.”

“What?” I couldn’t believe my ears at first. Old Badger, of all people, telling me I should quit adventuring? I almost felt betrayed. Didn’t he remember what he’d said when he’d first brought me here?

*“Guess you could say I was lookin’ for an apprentice.”*

Those were his words. I thought he’d be happy if I tried to follow in his footsteps.

“Told ya before. Adventurers are just a bunch of scoundrels who ain’t fit for nothin’ else. Yer life’s gonna be a whole lot better if yer doin’ somethin’ respectable an’ earnin’ an honest livin’. Sooner the better!”

“But…” I felt like I had to say something, but I didn’t know what.

“Listen to me, sonny,” Old Badger said firmly. I could tell he wasn’t going to let me argue. “Yer smart. Can read an’ write an’ everythin’. Best of all, yer still just a young lad. I bet there’s a merchant or two in town who would hire ya straightaway. Or maybe start studyin’ now an’ become a scholar.” He sounded so serious, like he wanted me to remember every word. “If adventurin’ calls to ya, well, I can’t say I recommend it. But if ya wanna take that road, yer smarts are gonna be yer best weapon. Work hard on trainin’ that body, sharpen them skills, an’ yer gonna be a force to be reckoned with one day.”

I still couldn’t understand why he was telling me all this and

why he was so wound up.

"So *don't* go wastin' yer life pickin' herbs, ya hear?"

*A waste? Picking herbs isn't a waste—not at all!* Old Badger had spent his life doing this work. He made a living from it and built up so much knowledge that the physician's guild wanted him to grow herbs for them. And he'd given me hope that I could go on living too. It was just too sad to call all of that a *waste*. Old Badger's tone was so serious and intense that I couldn't argue with him, but agreeing would be like saying everything he'd done meant nothing. All I could do was look back at him until he finally turned away from me to gaze over the clearing.

"Almost done pickin' these flowers here." Old Badger's voice was quiet as he crouched down and started gathering again like nothing had happened. "Come on yer own tomorrow," he told me. "Should be just enough left to fill yer basket."

I couldn't accept what Old Badger had said. It didn't sit right with me at all. I wanted to say something, but even after I kept thinking and thinking I couldn't find the right words. In the end, I went back to picking the flowers in silence.

Old Badger and I hardly said another word to each other for the rest of the day. Once our baskets were full, we returned to the adventurer's guild and went our separate ways.

***

*Just one big pile of regrets, this life of mine. Yep, made a real hash of it. Meant nothin' when it started, an' it'll mean nothin' when it ends—that's how I joke to myself, actin' like a wise ol' man.*

I left the adventurer's guild while the sky was still dark in the mornin'. The guild kitchen ran in two shifts, with different staff workin' before an' after noon. So they started preparin' early an' kept servin' food late into the night. Adventurers took all kinds of requests, so strict business hours didn't make sense. Trade caravan escorts set off around this time. Folks doin' guard work were in an' out at odd hours of the night. That was why the guild was always open from the crack of dawn 'til after midnight.

I walked down the street, chewin' on vegetables from the kitchen an' lookin' up at the sky. It was gettin' lighter now. The town gates opened an' closed at set times every day: sunrise an' sundown. Not like the guild. Monsters got more active once the sun went down below the hills, so the gates stayed shut 'til

sunrise.

By the time I got to the wall, I was done with my vegetables an' the guards were openin' the gates. I waved to 'em an' went on through. I'd been walkin' this same road for decades, an' I knew exactly when to get here so I could leave town without havin' to wait.

"Maybe I oughta..." I mumbled to myself as I followed the road, but I let the thought trail off. It was stupid anyway. Everyone knew the gates opened at sunrise. That was all anyone needed to know. If you arrived a li'l early, you waited. If you arrived a li'l late, you walked on through. No point tellin' him.

"Gotta be somethin' else. Anythin'..." I could rack my brain all I wanted, but there wasn't much to rack in the first place. No bright ideas were comin' up. Never taught nobody before, but I still wanted to do a decent job. Except I wasn't, an' that bothered me. Maybe I was expectin' too much from myself. Folks callin' themselves teachers always seemed like a bunch of stuffy know-it-alls to me, but now I'd gotten a taste of how tough teachin' was.

"He's got a good head on his shoulders," I thought out loud. 'Course I wanted to think that. I would be wastin' my time otherwise. But I was pretty sure the lad was smarter than yer average kid. He remembered what I taught him. He did as he was told. If there was somethin' he couldn't do, he'd start practicin' so he could learn.

Truth be told, he was wasted on me. Woulda been easier to deal with that party of young whelps. All attitude an' almost no talent. Young adventurers were supposed to be unruly brats like them, but I'd ended up with this kid instead.

Only four days. Four days since he'd started gatherin' with me, an' now I didn't have a single thing left to teach him. Sure, his skills still needed a lot of work. That came with time an' experience. Far as knowledge was concerned, though, my well was dry.

"So much for showin' off before I retire," I muttered. The sting of it made me grit my back teeth. What was I thinkin'? I was Old Badger the Yellow-Bellied, an F-ranker who'd done nothin' but pick herbs my whole life. The boy was a quick learner, but four days? Only four days to pass on all the knowledge I'd gathered over years an' years? That left a real bitter taste in my mouth.

"Damn it all," I grumbled. Not that there was any point in

cursin'. It was my fault, an' I should feel sorry for the kid. He wanted to learn from me, but this was all I could give him? When he said he planned on gatherin' herbs his whole life, all I could do was panic. I'd already taught him everythin' I knew. Rambled on an' on about other folks we knew 'cause I'd had nothin' useful to say no more.

I shoulda done more—learned more. Shoulda learned how to fight in case it ever came to that. Shoulda learned how to get around the hills an' mountainsides from them adventurers who spent their lives up there instead of figurin' it out on my own. If I'd done that, I'd still have somethin' to teach the kid. I wouldn't be overflowin' with regret an' worryin' about makin' the kid feel the same way.

"Nah, there *is* more." I left the main road an' headed for the hills. There, I followed an animal trail up the slopes. I'd only pointed out the other mana pools on that rough map. They were all outta the way, so he might miss 'em if I didn't take him there myself. There had to be more—at least a few other things that weren't comin' to mind just yet. If I just had a li'l more time to think, I could come up with plenty more to teach him. I was sure of it. Well, pretty sure.

"Ain't never been nobody's teacher before," I said. "Only fair I should get a day or two to prepare."

I kept climbin', headin' for the peak where I'd been takin' the kid an' the other three young 'uns before we'd found goblin tracks an' turned back. There was a mana pool up there too, where purple flowers grew. If them goblins had moved on already, I could pick the flowers while they were still good an' bring the kid along too.

There was a cliff face near the top of the hill. Mostly bare rock, with a few tough plants clingin' on here an' there. The cliff wasn't vertical, but it was too steep to climb up for most folks an' too likely to crumble if yer tryin' to climb down without a rope. Goin' the long way 'round the bottom of that cliff led to a cave in the shadow of a big boulder. It'd been there for a long, long time. No idea if nature or some big beast or monster had made that cave, but I remembered it bein' a fair size—big enough for five or six people to get inside easy.

It'd poured the day before yesterday, so them goblins woulda been lookin' for a place to keep dry. Even they went lookin' for shelter when the rain came down. If goblins were still in the

area, chances were good they found their way into that cave.

"Tch..." I didn't wanna be right, but I was. From the top of the cliff, I saw somethin' that looked like goblin tracks on the ground near the cave. Kinda hard to tell from here, but there was probably more than one goblin. The footprints were real clear—more than enough for me to spot 'em from this far away. Them prints told me goblins had been here after the rain when the ground was soft an' damp.

"They'll still be close by," I muttered. No doubt about it. The goblins had been here yesterday morning, after it stopped rainin'. I sighed. Givin' up on this mana pool 'til next year was a real shame, but knowin' the danger was a blessin' in itself. The best harvest did me no good if I didn't make it back alive.

"Hmm. Weird." I frowned. My eyes weren't so sharp no more. Took 'em a while to focus close up or far away. But the longer I stared, the better I could make out what I was seein' down on the ground. Now I could tell there were a lot more footprints than there shoulda been. Sure, there would be a lot of comin' an' goin' at a cave entrance, but somethin' told me there were still too many prints.

Three or maybe four goblins had left the tracks we'd found before. But by the looks of what I was seein' at the bottom of the cliff, about twice as many had been here. I moved along the ridge, keepin' low an' quiet as I started followin' these tracks. I went fast but stayed hidden in the bushes while watchin' for signs of danger.

"Did they join up with another group?" I asked myself. The footprints were easier to make out here, away from the cave. All of 'em were leadin' the same way. I was right—there were more goblins. At least six, I reckoned, but less than ten. Hard to be sure from a distance, though. A second group of goblins had sheltered from the rain in the cave at the same time, an' the two groups had merged into one. That was my theory, anyway.

*Damn good thing we turned back when we did,* I thought. *We coulda been caught right in between.*

"Six or more... That's trouble." The number didn't exactly matter to *me*. I wouldn't be fightin' 'em even if there was just one goblin. But it was gonna be a problem for someone else. I rubbed my chin an' thought about what I oughta do.

*Better report it to Barque,* I decided. Goblins got bolder as their packs got bigger. A group this big findin' its way to the main road

an' attackin' people wouldn't surprise me at all. 'Course, even if I did report it, nobody would do nothin' 'til a request came in. In other words, not 'til damage was already done.

"Eh, might as well let him know." Reportin' it wasn't my duty or nothin', but I had no reason not to speak up. I wanted somebody to take care of them goblins sooner rather than later, an' what I told Barque might be useful for the request.

The tracks led down the hill but not toward the road. Goblins probably went down to the forest. Bigger group meant more mouths to feed, an' they were gonna want better huntin' grounds than these steep slopes. In that case, I didn't think they would come back here.

*Maybe that mana pool's not a lost cause?* I shook my head to chase away that silly thought. *No, no. Too risky. Just wishful thinkin'.* If the goblins came back, they would make a quick meal outta me an' the lad.

"This ain't like me. I'm actin' all funny." I tutted at myself an' breathed deep to calm down. I never thought about nonsense like that. In fact, if I was bein' my usual self, I wouldn't even be here no more—not when goblins might still be wanderin' around. Gotta get a grip, forget about them herbs, an'...

"Wait. Down to the forest?"

The tracks were headed straight for the other mana pool 'round here, the one where the lad was gatherin' today. *Alone.*

I ran.

"Hah, hah, hah...!" I panted.

*What am I thinkin'? No, really—what the heck am I thinkin'?* I followed the goblin tracks, hurryin' through the trees an' down the slope as fast as I could.

*What in the world am I gonna do when I find the goblins?* The voice of reason in my head kept askin' me that, but I didn't have an answer. All I had were these *feelings*, ones stronger than anythin' I'd felt in a long, long time. They spurred me on, makin' me run 'til I was strugglin' to breathe.

"Eight of 'em." Once I'd followed the trail for a while, I figured out their number. Eight sets of prints. At least none of 'em were especially big. By the looks of it, they'd been movin' slow, probably snackin' on bugs an' lizards while searchin' for more fillin' prey.

The trail continued past the foot of the hill. The goblins' tracks

were still clear an' easy to follow, because the forest floor was still soft an' damp in the shade of the trees. I stooped low an' kept movin'. The goblins were smaller than me, but by crouchin' a bit I could follow 'em anywhere. Didn't wanna waste time or make noise cuttin' branches an' rustlin' leaves anyway.

"There they are..."

I darted behind a bush an' reached into my tunic for a hood made of the same patchwork cloth. I put the hood on an' covered my mouth with my hand to stifle my heavy breaths.

Up ahead, I saw the goblins gathered in a circle an' restin' on the forest floor. My heart was poundin', not just 'cause I'd been runnin', an' it was so loud I started worryin' the goblins would hear. I counted 'em on my fingers. Eight, just like I thought, an' six of 'em were armed with clubs or rusted swords.

Some were asleep, while the others looked drowsy. Goblins had good night vision, so most folks thought they were only active at night. That was a myth. Goblins slept when they were tired an' hunted when they were hungry. They didn't care about day or night. I'd learned that more than ten years ago from an adventurer who'd been on dozens of goblin hunts.

I reckoned these goblins had slept in the cave waitin' for the rain to stop the day before yesterday, gotten up in the mornin' after it'd quit pourin' out, then slept again last night. They were gonna be up an' about again real soon.

"They're close to the kid," I whispered sourly. The other mana pool was only a stone's throw away. I'd cleared the trail to give him an easier time, an' our footprints were still on the ground 'cause we'd been there just yesterday. Goblins weren't known for their brains, but even they could figure out people were nearby from them clues. Would they follow our trail? Or try for an ambush? I could picture it goin' either way. Both would be the end of that lad. He didn't have a chance against a pack this size.

"Now what?" I racked my brains while tryin' to keep my breaths quiet. Hidin' was what I did best. They wouldn't see me while I was wearin' this tunic an' hood. These clothes looked like a bunch of old rags, but they were some of the best things I'd ever made. That patchwork pattern made by stitchin' together scraps of cloth in all different shades was real hard to pick out mixed in with the leaves in the forest. Even at half this distance, the goblins would never notice me. As long as I kept still, they could walk right by an' still never know I was there.

“Still gotta teach him about that.” These clothes were definitely worth tellin’ the kid about. I took ’em for granted, so I’d forgotten ’til now, but they’d saved my skin so many times I’d lost count. Then again, maybe he wouldn’t wanna end up lookin’ like me. Not real fashionable. Well, if he started worryin’ about fashion I’d have a good laugh at him before settin’ his priorities straight. Nothin’ mattered more than keepin’ yerself alive.

One of the goblins stood up. It yawned an’ took its sweet time wanderin’ away from the circle.

*What’s this one up to? Could just be goin’ for a poop or somethin’. Even goblins want privacy. Probably. Or maybe it’s gettin’ food or water.*

Whatever the reason, one of ’em had left the others an’ was headin’ for the trail. I was on the move before I could think past that.

“Damn it all… What am I gonna do?” I whispered to myself. I didn’t have an answer. For the first time, Old Badger the Yellow-Bellied was in a real bind. I stayed hidden in the undergrowth an’ kept followin’ the goblin without makin’ a sound.

No, I knew the answer. I knew what I had to do. It was just that voice of reason makin’ a fuss inside my head. *Get outta here,* it told me. *Ain’t nothin’ left to do. Already taught the lad how to watch for danger. If he’s lucky, he’ll see them goblins an’ run away before they see him.*

I kept my eye on the goblin, held my breath, an’ crept closer while makin’ sure I stayed in its blind spot. The goblin scratched its backside through the rags wrapped ’round its waist as it walked. It didn’t carry a weapon or nothin’ else, an’ it didn’t suspect a thing.

My heart was poundin’ like a hammer. I couldn’t think straight. This voice in the back of my head kept yellin’ at me to give up this damn fool idea right now. I knew I should listen. I oughta get myself back to the guild.

*Then what? Order a cup of cheap grog an’ just pray the boy makes it back in one piece?*

I gripped my kukri in its scabbard. Then I crept closer, slinkin’ behind tree trunks an’ bushes without makin’ a sound. Sneakin’ up was easy. The goblin hadn’t caught so much as a whiff of me. Could do a surprise attack if I charged in from here, but I got closer still. If that thing turned around now, my tunic wouldn’t hide me. My arm was shakin’, an’ my heart kept thud-thud-

thuddin'.

*I can see the trail from here. Ain't too late to run away.*

"Let's get rid of you." Makin' noise didn't matter now, so I drew my kukri an' ran at the goblin.

*Take it down in one swing. Don't let it make a sound. Don't let the others notice. Then get outta here. Leave a trail for the rest to follow once they find the body, then shake 'em off somehow. Just lead 'em away from the trail an' the mana pool.*

The goblin heard me an' turned around. I raised my kukri. The ugly little beast's eyes went wide with shock as I brought the blade down with all my might. The kukri tore deep from the base of the goblin's neck to its heart.

The goblin *screamed* at the top of its lungs. "GYAAAGH!"

"Damn swine!" I swore. *So much for bein' quiet.* The kukri was stuck in the goblin. I kicked its stomach as it thrashed around an' spit up blood. The blade came free, but I lost my balance an' fell on my backside.

I'd never killed a monster before. *I did it. I actually did it. If they ain't armed an' I get the jump on 'em, I can kill 'em!*

"Never mind that. Gotta move," I told myself.

The whole forest woulda heard that goblin's screech. What did I expect? I wasn't some swashbucklin' swordsman. All I could do was swing as hard as I could an' hope for the best. A silent kill woulda been a miracle.

The other goblins were probably on their way. I had to run, an' I had to run *hard*. No need to worry about bein' stealthy now, since I wanted to leave a trail. But should I go left? Or right? No time to think. Didn't matter anyway. This forest was like my own back garden, since I'd been gatherin' here for decades. In fact, I knew every single bit of land surroundin' town. This wasn't goin' accordin' to plan, but I was still gonna shake 'em off no matter what.

I ran left. New plan was to head for the hills, circle wide 'round the animal trail an' the mana pool, then make for town. If goblins started catchin' up to me, I had my tunic an' hood. I could hide an' let 'em slip by. But right now I just had to run as fast as my—

Somethin' caught my leg. I tumbled down face-first an' grunted when I hit the ground. I didn't see it 'til I tried gettin' up—the goblin, the one that shoulda been dead, snarlin' at me with rage an' diggin' its dirty, yellow nails into my ankle. I cried out. Shoulda known better. No, I *did* know. I'd heard this at the guild a

dozen times, but it hadn't stuck 'cause I'd never experienced it myself: Even a creature with a fatal wound will keep movin' if it ain't killed outright. It'll keep movin' till its very last breath.

"Die already!" I shouted. I kicked the goblin in the face as hard as I could, but it still didn't let go. I kicked it again an' again. On the fourth kick my leg came free, an' I scrambled to my feet. Then I heard a screech that made my blood run cold. I looked up—the rest of the pack was here. The goblin in front pointed at me an' started yellin' its head off.

"Gods damn you too!" I shouted. I gripped my kukri, ready to fight.

***

*Even when they're fatally wounded, living things struggle to the last. They'll fight whoever hurt them with everything they have left and try to rip their throat out. They'll shout to warn their companions and run just to live a little longer. They'll struggle until their last spark of life flickers out—just like that goblin cut open from neck to heart. Anyone who's lived through a real battle knows you have to make sure your enemy's dead. The strength and tenacity of somebody on the verge of death is incredible indeed.*

When I heard the news, I jumped to my feet so fast I knocked over my chair. Why weren't there any healers in the guild today, of all days? I roared at someone nearby to go find one at the church before I started running to the northwest gate.

*It can't be true. Don't let it be true,* I prayed.

As an adventurer, he was...far from the greatest in the guild. Despite decades of experience, he was the same coward he'd been on his first day. He stuck to his own odd ways of doing things no matter what anyone said. But I didn't know of any other human adventurers who'd been at the job as long as him. He was always around, though I hadn't seen much of him these last few days. For someone like me, born and raised in the guild, he was one of very few people I could count on to come back day after day. I'm middle-aged now, and he was *still* snarking and sniping at the other adventurers. Honestly, there was something comforting about that.

*"If you want to stay alive, learn from Old Badger."* I'd told dozens of rookies—too many to count—those exact words over the years. *"Watch what he does, even just for a day, and never forget it."*

“So how… How could this…?”

Just inside the northwest gate, I pushed through a huddle of people and saw a familiar patchwork tunic.

“Barque! Where’s the healer?!” shouted Waine when he saw me. He looked like he was arguing with a guard. What was he doing here? Then I noticed Sheya and Chikka. They were crouched down by Old Badger, tending to him as he sat with his back against the wall.

“What’re you all doing here?” I asked.

“We ran into him on our way back from that cleanup request!” Waine replied. “Anyway, how come you’re alone? Why’s no one—”

“No healers at the guild. I sent for someone from the church.”

“Damn!”

Why didn’t any of them know healing magic? Why couldn’t a party with a healer have run into him instead? With useless questions like that running through my head, I approached the crouched adventurers. Healers were few, and adventuring healers were fewer still. The fact that there were none in the guild today wasn’t unusual. I just wanted to blame *someone.*

“Oh… That you, Barque?”

It killed me to hear the old man’s voice so weak.

“It’s me. What happened to you?” I tried to ask calmly, but I heard the tremble in my voice.

“Heh. Pack of goblins. Took a couple of ’em down with me.”

I’d be putting it lightly if I said his wounds were dire. A shortsword was buried deep in his gut. He must’ve known that he’d be dead from blood loss in minutes if he took it out. There was already a puddle of blood spreading around him. This was a mortal wound. No amount of medicine would change that. Even if, by some miracle, a skilled healer showed up right now, whether they’d be able to save him was a coin toss.

I didn’t have a clue what to say, and what eventually came out was about work. “I’ll see that you’re promoted,” I told Old Badger. He laughed at me, and I wasn’t surprised.

“Heh heh! When I don’t even got their ears to prove it? Can’t run a guild like that.”

Even when they’re fatally wounded, living things struggle till their last breath. The strength and tenacity of somebody on the verge of death was incredible indeed. Old Badger had probably run into a pack of goblins in the forest and fought them. Though he’d been wounded, he’d wrung out the strength to run to the

main road. Most people wouldn't have made it more than a few steps with a wound that deep. He'd clung onto life with every tough, old fiber of his being. It was just like him. And after he'd fought so hard to get here, none of us could save him. I wanted to weep.

"Bah... Lost my edge. Had my heart set on dyin' of old age too." Old Badger sighed feebly and gazed up at the blue sky with a smile on his face. He looked strangely cheerful for a man breathing his last. "Heh heh, so this is gonna be my final request, huh? There goes my reputation." Blood spilled from his mouth as he laughed. He tried wiping it away with his palm, but a smear remained on his face. With his eyes still fixed on the sky, he spoke in a faint voice. "Listen, y'all..."

"Yeah?" I answered quietly.

"Look after that kid, will ya?"

"We will."

It wasn't like him at all—not Old Badger the Yellow-Bellied. Was this really him? Using his precious last words, not for his own sake, but for someone else... You'd think he was a good guy. I tried to tell him that, but only a sob came out. Chikka patted the old man's shoulder, Sheya sighed, and Waine started to sniffle and cry.

Old Badger looked around at each of us and then stuck out his tongue. "Heh heh... Some sight y'all are. Ain't exactly fillin' me with confidence."

Now, that was the Old Badger I knew. A smile on his face and a jibe on his tongue, right to the very end.



# Chapter 6: The Guild Quest

I was going to the mana pool by myself today, so I got up a little later than usual. Over the last few days, I'd been doing my best to get going early enough so that Old Badger wouldn't have to wait for me. But no matter how early I'd gone to the guild, he'd always been there munching on his vegetables already. When did he even sleep? Well, I was going to be on my own all day, so I felt like I could take it easy and sleep in a little. I must've slept like a log, though, because the stall beside mine was empty—I didn't even notice someone coming into the stable and taking the horse away.

I was still feeling strange about my conversation with Old Badger yesterday, but I decided to forget about it for now. I really wanted to buy a canteen and a change of clothes while I had the chance. The two of us had always headed out before shops opened, and at the end of the day we'd always gone straight to the guild. But it was just me today, and I had a little coin to spend thanks to Old Badger. So, instead of going straight to the forest right after eating breakfast at the guild, I went shopping.

I found a canteen at the armorer's shop, but they didn't have anything I could wear. The shopkeeper told me about a place nearby where I could buy something, and I got cheap clothes there before going back to the stable to change. I'd been feeling really uncomfortable in my old clothes because I hadn't washed them at all. The best I'd been able to do was just cleaning spots that got *really* dirty. Now that I had new clothes to change into, I wanted to give my old ones a really good wash and hang them out in the sun to dry. But if I didn't start gathering soon, I wouldn't make it back to town in time. So I decided to do laundry after. I put on my armor, picked up my spear, grabbed my basket, and left for the forest.

I remembered the way to the mana pool, starting on the main road before turning toward the forest. I grabbed my spear and kept it ready just like Old Badger had told me to before, and as I followed the animal trail through the trees I looked at and listened to everything around me. I took a deep breath and

noticed the smell of the trees and the soil. The walk was easier now that the branches had all been cut away, and soon I arrived at the mana pool.

I got to work right away. This was the last day I could pick the purple flowers. Once I filled my basket, I'd have to leave the rest for next year. I was really glad Old Badger was letting me have the last of these herbs. I'd just gotten my canteen and new clothes, but there were still lots of things I wanted to buy.

Some sturdy shoes made for adventuring and a cloth pouch I could hang from my belt would be really useful. If I had a flint and oil, I could make campfires. If I had a cloak, I could wrap myself up and sleep in it. That would be nice and comfortable. Things like bandages and medicine would be good to have too, though I hoped I wouldn't have to use them. And I'd *really* like to stay in an actual room. Yeah, I was going to need a lot more money.

I finished up and started to head back. I kept an eye out for danger the whole time, just like I had on the way here, but nothing happened. I was a little worried about the time because I'd left later than usual, but I made it back to the town gates by evening. The square in front of the gates was a little more noisy and crowded than I'd expected, and the guards who normally greeted me seemed busy. The people passing by kept looking at the town wall, though I couldn't see anything in particular from where I was. Maybe something had happened, but it seemed to be over now. I was curious, but I didn't stop. I wanted to get back to the guild before the sun went down.

As I walked, my shadow stretched out ahead of me on the paved streets like I was following it around. I hadn't walked by myself like this in a while because I'd been with Old Badger from morning till night, day after day. The streets felt so wide and the tall brick buildings felt so cold when you were alone. It reminded me of when I first came to this town. I started to walk a little faster, hurrying after my shadow, until I made it back to the guild and breathed a sigh of relief.

When I opened the doors, I noticed a lot more adventurers than usual. Some of them were just standing by or leaning against the walls because there weren't enough places to sit.

"Huh?"

Something felt off the moment I stepped inside. There were so many people, but it wasn't noisy at all. On a normal day, even

when only half the seats were filled, it would be loud in here with people laughing and talking.

*That's really strange,* I thought, and I went to the reception desk. Barque was leaning over some parchment and scratching away at it with a quill. There was a serious expression on his face.

"Excuse me, I'm back from picking herbs. Could you look at them for me, please?" I asked.

He paused before glancing up at me. "Oh, it's you. Right, give 'em here."

Barque put down his quill and took the basket from me. He checked the herbs quickly before handing me the same amount of money as yesterday. I thanked him and slung the now empty basket over my shoulder, while he picked up his quill again and went back to writing.

Ever since I'd started gathering with Old Badger, Barque had been checking my herbs a lot faster. I guessed that showed how much he trusted the old man. But Barque had been pretty quick just now, even though I was on my own. That made me kind of happy—it felt like he was starting to trust *me* a little bit too.

I looked around the guild for anyone I knew and spotted three familiar faces by the requests wall.

"Hi, Waine, Chikka, Sheya!" I greeted them. "It's really busy today, huh?" When the three of them turned to me, I noticed right away that they didn't look happy. In fact, Waine's eyes were all puffy and bright red. "Waine? What's the matter?"

"Oh, uh, it's just..." he mumbled, trailing off.

"He got rejected by a girl again," Chikka cut in.

Why did that sound familiar? Oh, right... He used to like a woman in his party, but in the end she'd picked the other person.

"Happens all the time," Sheya added. "He gets turned down. He cries."

Waine scowled. A memory came to me as I looked at his puffy eyes. "Wait, the very first time we met..."

"Was three days after he last had his heart broken. Correct." Sheya nodded.

"Wait, what?" Chikka piped up. "Waine, were you blubbering for three whole days after the wedding? Yeesh, what a baby."

"Give me a break. My heart broke the day before the wedding. I only cried for *two* days," Waine countered.

I hadn't realized the story Old Badger told me was so recent.

But if this kind of thing did happen to Waine all the time, like Sheya said, maybe it wasn't such a big deal. Still, for his sake, I thought it'd be better if we talked about something else. I looked around the guild for the person I'd been searching for before, but I still couldn't see him. I decided to ask the others and change the subject at the same time. "Hey, do you guys know where Old Badger is?"

Everyone's faces went stiff. I tilted my head. "What's wrong?" I asked.

Chikka looked away. Sheya just stared at me. Waine was the one who spoke up. He looked really anxious for some reason. "Gramps, uh... He went to the capital."

A chill ran up my spine. My heart started racing, my lip trembled, and my throat went dry.

"You're lying." My words sounded cold and far away, almost like someone else had said them.

I remembered how, on that rainy day, Old Badger had bad-mouthed adventurers who went off to the capital. I remembered his story about being a slave years and years ago before signing up to be an adventurer here at this guild. He'd even told me what he was going to do after he retired.

Something wasn't right. Why had those people at the gates kept looking at the wall? Why was the guild quiet even though it was full? Why had Barque checked my herbs so quickly even though I'd gone gathering by myself today? None of it made sense.

Sheya had said the capital was where adventurers went to chase dreams, but why would Old Badger go all the way there when he had things he wanted to do in this town? Why were Waine's eyes so red, and why was he so bad at lying?

"Liar!" I yelled. I lunged at Waine, seized the bottom of his shirt, and pulled so hard I thought the fabric would tear against his armor. The whole guild turned to look at us, but I didn't care. "All Old Badger does is pick herbs! He's gonna grow them in a field and keep picking them here when he retires! He wouldn't go to the capital!"

"Look, just hold on a second and—"

"Where is he?! Where's Old Badger?!"

"T-Tiny, calm down, okay?" Chikka put a hand on my shoulder, but I swatted it away.

Waine reached for my arm to try and make me let go, but I

grabbed his hand and yanked him closer. I didn't know what I was doing. I had no idea what I was supposed to do. The only thing I *could* do was demand answers. "The capital?! You think you can fool me with that?! Tell me what happened!"

"Waine shouldn't have said that." Sheya sighed.

I glared at her without letting go of Waine. All I wanted was the truth. I didn't care who it came from.

"Outta the way," came a low, rumbling voice. It was an order, not a request.

I looked around and saw a big man with a scar on his cheek. It was Barque. With one thick, muscly arm, he pushed me off to one side with unbelievable strength and ease. Then, with his free hand, he grabbed Waine by the shoulder.

Barque glared down at me with a grim look on his face, but I stood my ground and glared right back. After letting out a short "hmph," the leader of the guild pushed past us to stand in front of the requests wall. He reached up high and pinned a piece of parchment where everyone could see it. Then he went back to his desk like nothing had happened.

That parchment—that *request*—was different from the others. My eyes were drawn to the words "Guild Quest" written at the top. That was usually where the type of request was written, like "gathering" or "survey" or something. The ink wasn't dry yet, and it still had a dull shine that reflected the light inside the room. *This has to be what Barque was writing at the reception desk,* I thought, and I started reading the rest.

*Extermination. Goblin pack. Forest of Bedge.* Since I'd gotten that advice from Old Badger, I'd been skimming requests every day. So I could tell that this was a totally normal extermination request, other than those two words at the top.

"There are different kinds of guild quests." Sheya was almost whispering as she stood beside me. She'd been looking at the parchment too. "Requests from the local lord or other important people. Urgent emergencies. Tasks that need to be done for the guild's reputation," she listed. "The requester usually isn't willing to part with much money, or there isn't a requester at all, so the rewards are poor. The guild tempts adventurers with promotions instead." Sheya's explanation was more thorough than usual, and even though her voice was quiet I heard every word.

I stared hard at the request. The Forest of Bedge was where I went today—the forest with the mana pool. Old Badger had

taught me what it was called and showed it to me on the map that rainy day.

"But this one's different," said Sheya. "The reward is good. Someone wants this done no matter the cost."

I reached out, tore the sheet off the wall, and walked away as fast as I could. If anyone said anything to me, I didn't hear them. My head was buzzing, and all I saw was the request I held. I had crumpled it—half-dried ink had smudged onto my fingers, and my hands hurt from clutching the parchment so tightly. But I didn't care. I knew what I had to do.

I smacked the request onto the reception desk and glared at Barque. "I'll do it," I said.

The guild went silent. Nobody made a sound, not even the quietest murmur. Or maybe I just didn't care enough to notice. My blood felt colder than ice. My face was frozen in a scowl like anger was the only expression I knew. Black, shadowy flames were burning me from inside my chest. Old Badger and I had been together just yesterday. Today, he was gone. I didn't know how or why, but I knew enough to guess what had happened. That didn't mean I accepted it, though. How could I? As for everyone who was trying to hide the truth from me… They were enemies now.

The scarred guild leader crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes at me. "The only thing *you'll* do is become another body to bury."

I couldn't argue. Somewhere in the back of my head, there was a horribly calm part that knew Barque was right. But that meant nothing to the rest of me. I curled my right hand into a fist, scrunching the parchment into a ball. What was I supposed to do? Just say, "Oh, okay then!" and leave?

*No way,* I thought. *I'm not letting anyone else touch this request. If Barque won't let me take it, I'll tear it into pieces and go anyway.* I felt like my heart was going to burn until my whole body turned into a pile of ash if I didn't do something.

"I'll join his party temporarily," said a quiet voice behind me. They didn't even say who they were—just a few words that went straight to the point. A point that I missed, at first.

"Me too. The forest's a big place. You'll need a scout," came another voice.

I turned around and saw the mage with bluish-silver hair spilling out from under her pointy hat and the red-haired halfling

glowing with confidence even though she was even smaller than me. Then one more person joined them.

“I swear, you guys are crazy,” he said. “No wonder gramps was worried about us.” The man in armor walked up to us while running his hand through his dark brown hair with that one white tuft. He tapped the scabbard on his hip and grinned down at me. “Your party’s looking a little thin there, kiddo. Don’t you think it could use a good swordsman for the vanguard?”

Sheya, Chikka, and Waine all stood around me. The three of them had tried to hide what had happened to Old Badger. They’d lied and tricked me. A minute ago, I’d thought they were my enemies. Now, they were all looking at me like they were waiting for an answer—an answer to a very important question.

“Guys…” My throat was still dry, and my voice came out hoarse. I looked back at them, with fresh eyes this time, and saw adventurers—*real* adventurers. Everyone in this guild was a real adventurer, and Barque was their leader. But I… I was just a guest here. I mean, I was basically useless. I was nothing like Old Badger, who dodged around danger and always found a way forward. When I found danger, I got scared and ran like a little kid. Now, I was letting my temper take over and being reckless without thinking anything through. I was just a clueless child, but these adventurers were all still waiting for *my* answer.

“Please. I need your help,” I said.

Sheya pinched the brim of her hat and smiled. Chikka grinned and winked at me. Waine put his hand on my head and tousled my hair.

“You got it, leader,” Waine said.

That was the day I became a party leader for the very first time.



We set off early next morning. Chikka suggested we start by tracing Old Badger's footsteps, and we all agreed. The Forest of Bedge was a big place to search, and this seemed like our best bet for finding a lead. If we could find where he'd run into the goblins, there should be clues we could use to track them down. We talked to the gate guards before leaving town and followed the main road to the place they described.

"According to the guards, gramps collapsed by the road right around here... Ah, over there." Chikka pointed to a spot on the roadside. She seemed to find something right away, but I couldn't see anything.

"Um, how do you know?" I asked her.

"The grass. The way it's flattened down doesn't look natural. I can smell sap, and there's a hint of blood too," she replied.

I tried sniffing the air, but I could only smell grass—nothing unusual, and definitely not blood. Still, Chikka seemed sure of herself.

"Halflings have sharp senses," Sheya explained.

The priest in the village had told me how other races had abilities humans didn't. Dwarves were very strong and could see in the dark, and elves were good at using magic. Beastfolk were good at different things depending on what kind they were, and merfolk could breathe underwater. Halflings were small, quick, and had *very* sharp eyes, ears, and noses.

"Chikka's the scouting specialist. You can leave that kind of stuff to her," said Waine.

"I'm not that great outdoors, though. And plenty of beastfolk have sharper noses than me," Chikka replied. I had a feeling she was just being modest.

*What was she best at again? Picking locks and avoiding traps—that kind of thing, right? I think I remember hearing she likes exploring old ruins.*

"The guards said that some travelers found gramps here, called the guards, and then the guards carried him inside the gates. That tells us two things. First, gramps made it this far on his own. Second, he shook the goblins off somewhere along the way," Chikka said, holding up one finger and then another as she counted. Then she spread all her fingers apart. "With a scout in your party, that's enough to go on. I know what happened. Let's go." She clapped her open palms together, stepped off the main road, and took off just like that.

With Chikka in the lead, we followed Old Badger's trail into the forest. I hadn't been to this part before. There weren't even any animal trails here, and the forest floor was thick with fallen leaves and soft under my feet. Chikka wove in and out of the trees just ahead. I tried looking for Old Badger's footprints, but I couldn't see any.

"Tiny, did gramps ever teach you how to cover your tracks?" Chikka asked, turning back to look at me.

I shook my head. Old Badger had taught me all kinds of things, but not that.

"Okay. See, the ground's soft in parts of the forest where no one usually walks, like where we are now. So you end up leaving clear footprints," she explained. "But if you make sure to only step on roots like these ones sticking up here, biggish rocks, patches of low, tough grass—things like that—you won't leave much of a trace. Keep that in mind."

"Really?" I tried stepping on a root. When I lifted up my foot, the root was dirty with mud from the bottom of my shoe.

"Well, moving around without leaving *any* signs behind is basically impossible. But you can get close if you just avoid stepping in dirt," said Chikka.

"But isn't that really hard?" I asked.

"You bet it is. Takes someone like Old Badger the Yellow-Bellied to pull that off. No wonder he made it all these years without fighting a single monster. I haven't tracked anyone this crafty in a long time."

I blinked in surprise before looking down at the ground again. Old Badger had taught me how to spot tracks, and I'd been practicing. But I couldn't find a single one anywhere.

"He's that good, huh?" Waine sounded amazed. "Man, you'd think the old guy was some kind of fairy. Not many people can get around the woods like that."

"He might've been better than me outdoors. I could see us being the same rank if he'd decided to become a scout," said Chikka with a halfhearted smile.

I was pretty sure Chikka was Rank C. It was amazing to think that Old Badger's skills were so good he could've been ranked that high.

"That wouldn't have happened," said Sheya, brushing the idea aside. She paused to think for a moment, like she was choosing

her words carefully. “If he had done normal adventuring work, he would’ve stopped years ago.”

Chikka and Waine nodded like they agreed with her. That did make sense to me too.

“Well, we can talk about what might’ve been over drinks later,” said Chikka. “I think it’s clear gramps was covering his tracks around here. That’s proof he was trying to shake off the goblins. So they were still close, but he was out of their line of sight. We should find more clues soon.”

Chikka made the rest of us stay put and went on by herself. She walked slowly and stopped every few steps to look around. I didn’t know what she was seeing, but I could tell she moved with confidence. After going a little farther, she sniffed something and pointed ahead.

“I can definitely smell blood coming from over there. I think that’s where they actually ran into each other,” she said.

The scene we found made my blood run cold. The ground was covered in dozens of tracks from little feet that had gone charging through the forest. The leaves on the bushes where the tracks led were splattered with drops of blood. I could just barely see bigger footprints that had almost been trampled out by the smaller ones. I didn’t need Chikka to explain that these were Old Badger’s tracks. A *whole pack* of goblins had gone after him. I bit my lip. With the signs right in front of me, it was too easy to picture what had happened.

Chikka was calmly looking around and taking in the clues. She didn’t seem bothered by the scene at all. “Hmm. Well, that’s odd,” she said.

“What is?” asked Waine.

“Gramps told us he killed two of them, but I don’t see any bodies. Sheya, do goblins eat each other?”

Thinking about that made me feel a little queasy.

“Not according to what I’ve read about them,” Sheya replied soberly.

“Even if they did, wouldn’t there be bones left?” Waine pointed out with a grimace.

He was right. I didn’t see anything that looked like goblin bones around here.

“True,” said Chikka. “So, assuming gramps wasn’t telling tall tales, this isn’t where he fought them. It has to be somewhere

farther back on the trail. There are spots of blood going that way too." She followed Old Badger's trampled footprints, spacing her steps to match his. "He was running as fast as he could while protecting his wound. He wasn't trying to hide his trail, and there's more blood. Up until here," she said. She stopped right before the blood-splattered leaves and faced the direction the goblins had run when they left this area.

"I think this is an old adventurer's trick. You might wanna remember it, although hopefully you'll never be in a situation where you have to use it." She sighed a little before explaining the situation to us. "Ugh. So, I think he used his hand to collect some of the blood from his wound, and then he tossed it this way." To show us what she meant, Chikka cupped her right hand and held it to her stomach, moved it away carefully so she wouldn't spill the imaginary blood, and then mimed flinging it at the bushes. "Nasty monsters like goblins have a keen nose for blood, but they get really excited when they see it. He made them think he went this way before going off in a different direction. That's when he started stemming his bleeding and covering his tracks—after he tricked them. I'm sure of it."

*He used his own blood as a lure? Even when he was so hurt, he thought of that trick to throw the goblins off and escape? That's incredible. I could never do that.*

I'd always thought he used that silly "Yellow-Bellied" title to poke fun at himself. Now I finally understood that he'd earned it by being as slippery as an eel. I wished I could've learned so much more from him.

"But it's strange," Chikka said. "Gramps ran into the goblins, they wounded him, and then he somehow got away. They went after him, but he wouldn't have tried this trick unless he was out of the goblins' sight." She glanced back in the direction the footprints came from with a puzzled look on her face. "You'd think he'd want to disappear as soon as possible, but he didn't even try to cover his tracks until he left. It even looks like he was stepping on soft ground on purpose to leave footprints, and he left a blood trail. Like he was leading them here."

My eyes followed the trail in the direction it came from. Then it hit me. I knew what happened, and I knew why.

"The mana pool's that way," I said quietly. My mind went blank, and my arms and limbs felt like jelly. I tried to hold myself up with my spear, but it was no good—my knees gave out from

under me. “I was gathering herbs there on my own yesterday,” I said. The words slipped out before I could stop them. It felt like a terrible confession. *Old Badger’s dead because of* me*.*

“Huh, so that was it. He died a good death, our old friend,” said Waine.

*How can he say that so cheerfully? He actually sounds glad. Why?*

Chikka chimed in. “*Now* it makes sense.” She folded her arms and nodded. “I was wondering why he bothered killing a couple of them.”

“We have all the necessary information. Now to exterminate them,” said Sheya, staring in the direction the goblin tracks led.

*How? How can the three of them be so calm? They just found out I’m the reason Old Badger died, and here I am right here in front of them.*

“You shouldn’t blame yourself, kiddo,” said Waine, like he’d read my mind.

I didn’t know what sort of look I had on my face, but it must’ve been terrible.

“Right. Listen, tiny. Gramps decided to do this himself,” Chikka added. “I get how you feel, but we can deal with that after we get back.”

She was telling me to just shut these feelings in a box and put them away for now? How could I? I didn’t *want* to be the kind of person who could do that.

“Most adventurers die for nothing. But there’s meaning in dying to protect someone,” said Sheya.

Hearing her say some people’s deaths had meaning and others didn’t, like some were better than others, made me feel sick.

“The one who was protected must show that the sacrifice was worth it. By living their life,” she told me.

Were those words of encouragement, or were they a curse? What she said was like a spell that forced you to move on with your life whether you wanted to or not. It reminded me of a scary sorcerer I’d read about in a story once.

“I saw one adventurer who drowned themselves in drink and never recovered,” Sheya continued. “Another who cut their own arms out of despair, injuring themselves so badly they were never the same. And another who took the most dangerous requests just to follow their friend to the grave. The ones who died to protect these people died in vain.”

I thought that was an awful thing to say. Her words, so straightforward and plain, were like a sharp knife to my throat.

"Stand up," she ordered. Both her eyes and her voice were as cold as ice.

I felt my legs tremble under me.

"Waine, gramps was hurt really bad. Would a human normally get this far with a sword in their gut?" Chikka asked.

"Hard to say. Guess it depends on where you got stabbed, but it takes some serious grit and determination to get anywhere at all like that. To run as far as he did... It's a miracle, if you ask me," Waine replied.

"Well, there you have it, tiny."

My heart skipped a beat as Chikka spoke to me.

"Old Badger made a miracle happen just so he could lead those goblins here," she said. "We can all be proud of him for that. But it's up to *you* to make sure it wasn't for nothing."

I pressed a hand on my leg to make it stop trembling. With my other hand, I gripped my spear and pushed the butt into the ground. I'd be doing wrong by Old Badger if I couldn't get to my feet... So I did. All I really wanted to do was fall on the ground and cry, but I leaned on my spear and stood up.

"That's more like it," Chikka said brightly. "Now, let's get going. Those goblins shouldn't be far."

With our scout in the lead, we set off once again.

"Typical, though, isn't it? This is just the kind of job where having Old Badger around would've been useful," said Chikka as we walked through the trees.

The goblins hadn't even tried to hide their trail. A lot of goblins meant a lot of footprints, and they were still fresh and easy to see on the soft forest floor. Even I'd be able to track these. Chikka could probably do it while she was chatting with us.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Gramps knew every nook and cranny of all the land around town. I bet he would've told us all the spots where goblins might hide if we'd just bought him a drink or two."

After all those years Old Badger had spent gathering herbs, he'd known the area better than anyone. There probably wasn't a single place around here where he hadn't set foot. If we'd been able to tell him where we were searching, he would've told us where to find goblins for sure.

“Yeah, I think I know what you mean,” said Waine. “I bought him drinks and meat and such pretty often. Never tried to get anything out of him in return, though.”

“Your old comrades did. They were regulars,” Chikka replied.

“Wait, seriously?” Waine looked shocked, like it was his first time hearing this.

*What were their names again? Ranna and Miguel? They’re the ones who got married and quit adventuring.*

“His absence will be felt,” Sheya murmured. “Thanks to him, stores here offer a wide range of medicines at better prices than stores in the capital.”

“Yeah, that’s helped me out a lot over the years,” Waine said.

The herb-gathering job was a permanent request from the physician’s guild. All the herbs we brought back went to them. The people there turned the herbs into medicines, and those medicines ended up on shelves in places like the adventurer’s guild and the armorer’s shop. Through his work, Old Badger had been helping out his fellow adventurers.

But he was gone now. The person with a complete map of this whole area in his head—the person who had always kept the physician’s guild well supplied with herbs—was gone. Other adventurers were going to have a hard time without him. The guild too. That was how important he had been.

“Quiet.” Chikka put a finger to her lips. “It looks like the goblins gathered here. See how the ground’s all roughed up from them kicking and stomping? They must’ve been mad. But after this point, the spaces between their footprints get much smaller. That means they slowed down. I think it’s safe to say this is where they gave up on hunting gramps.”

As Chikka crouched down and peered at the ground, she described the scene like it was happening right in front of her. At first, I wondered how she could possibly tell all that just from footprints. But after listening to her, then taking a look myself, I could see exactly what she meant. *What an amazing skill,* I thought.

“That frenzy they got into after seeing and smelling the blood back there would’ve worn off about here,” she continued. “Some of them would start grumbling about being tired or hungry, so the next thing they would want to do is find somewhere nearby to rest.”

“A place they may now be using as a temporary den,” said

Sheya.

When I heard that, my hand started to tremble. *The goblins might be close. We might be just a few minutes from finding the monsters that killed Old Badger.*

"How about our formation, Chikka? Want me to go up front now?" Waine asked.

"No, this is fine. I'll find them before they find us," Chikka replied. She started walking again, and the rest of us followed.

We went deeper into the forest. The undergrowth got thicker here, and the trees were all tangled with vines. Lots of branches were in the way, but Chikka was small enough to follow where the goblins had gone without any trouble. It wasn't so easy for Waine and Sheya. They had to find other ways through or crawl on their hands and knees.

Nobody was cutting branches down or trying to clear the way. That meant everyone was trying to be as quiet as possible. They even started using just their eyes and hands to make signals instead of talking. Seeing them act so differently made me realize just how close the goblins must be. This would be my first time seeing one. I did know they were about the size of human children but had green skin and ugly faces. They were also supposed to be very wicked.

Chikka flattened herself on the ground. She didn't seem to mind being in the dirt at all. Waine knelt, and Sheya just stopped. I copied Waine and crouched down with one knee on the ground. With a jerk of her thumb, Chikka signaled for us to come closer.

Waine kept his body low and crept forward very slowly and carefully to avoid making too much noise with his armor. Mine was made of leather, so it didn't make much sound when I moved, but I stayed crouched down like he did. I could hear my heart thudding in my ears, and I started to worry that the sound of my breathing might give us away. Finally, I reached the low bushes Waine and Chikka were hiding behind and peered between the leaves.

I saw them. "Goblins..." My dry whisper was too quiet for anyone to hear.

There was one tree much bigger than the ones around it. Its trunk was very thick, and its roots stuck up high out of the ground in a big tangle all around. Up above, its branches spread out wide. One goblin sat in a hollow in the tree trunk. Two more

sat with their backs resting against the tree. Three were curled up among the roots. That was six altogether. They were small, with green skin, just like I'd heard.

The goblins had lost two of their friends just yesterday, but it was like they'd already forgotten them. There wasn't even a hint of sadness in the way they lazed around and talked to each other with nasty cackling sounds. Had they been angry when the others were killed? Was that why they'd chased Old Badger and killed him? Maybe, but there was no sadness. Maybe goblins couldn't even feel sad, and that was why they laughed and napped peacefully like nothing had happened. Maybe they'd never cared about the others at all, and they'd just attacked Old Badger because he was human.

There was a horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach, like dark, burning flames rising up. I couldn't breathe right, my hand gripped my spear so hard it hurt, and my back teeth clenched together. I knew I had to stay quiet, though. The voice of reason telling me that was the only thing stopping me from screaming and charging at them with my spear held high. Keeping still almost felt like I was betraying Old Badger, but I made myself take calm and quiet breaths. I had no chance of winning if I tried to fight that many goblins. That wouldn't achieve anything. I knew what I had to do.

"I'll kill them," I whispered. My insides burned black. I gripped my spear and glared at the monsters.

"Ah, that takes me back. Makes me worry a little less," Waine said. He grabbed my head and ruffled my hair, but it felt more like he was scrubbing my head. It was annoying, and I tried to move my head and make him stop, but he was too strong. All I could do was keep staring down at the ground.

"Okay, kiddo. I'm about to pass on a bit of wisdom from someone else here, so listen close."

"Does that mean I don't have to listen close to wisdom that comes from you?"

"Kiddo, are you making fun of me?"

*Everyone else does,* I thought.

"Well, whatever," Waine continued. "This doesn't come from an adventurer, but here goes: You should never live to kill. Only kill to live."

"Kill to live?" I repeated, hesitating between each word.

Waine finally relaxed his grip on my head a little, and I

glanced up at him. He looked kind of awkward and embarrassed, but I couldn't figure out why.

"That's right. We'll cut these little bastards down like we're harvesting vegetables from a field, then have a good laugh about how many we killed. We're gonna eat a good meal with the reward we get for killing these guys. We'll drink and celebrate. Then we're gonna get a good night's sleep."

I blinked at him. What was he talking about? Those goblins *killed* Old Badger. How could we ever laugh about this? And comparing their lives to vegetables, even if they were wicked monsters, didn't sit right with me.

But we were here to complete a request, and adventurers who did that got rewards. I didn't drink like the others, and my bed was just a stall in a stable, but I would buy myself some food with that money and maybe some more adventuring supplies. I'd use that reward from killing goblins to live—that was true, at least.

"That's what we pick up our weapons for," Waine continued. "You heard Old Badger, right? Adventurers are nothing but a bunch of scoundrels. You don't need to fight for justice or payback. Fight for your next meal. Fight so you can eat a tasty dinner, sleep like a log, and live to laugh another day. When it comes down to it, we adventurers are just like those goblins. So don't go weighing yourself down with big, heavy ideas. What we're about to do is work. Nothing more, nothing less."

When he put it that way, we really weren't that different from the goblins. We wanted the same things. I wanted to tell Waine he was wrong, to get angry with him for even comparing us. But something told me that if Old Badger was here right now, he'd laugh that funny laugh of his and nod. And then, with a cheeky grin, he'd probably say we'd all be better off as goblins than adventurers or something like that.

"Ha, yeah, that sounds like what you'd call wisdom. Not all adventuring's about chopping up monsters, you know," said Chikka, with a short laugh through her nose.

She had a point. I never had to kill any monsters when I was gathering herbs.

"Still, I agree with the part about not living to kill. It's all well and good getting fired up, but you can't go around with a face like *that*." Chikka looked right at me.

"Um... A face like what?" I asked.

“If gramps saw that face, he would’ve turned and run the other way.”

Somehow, I could picture that happening. I must’ve looked scary.

“You want revenge. So you can’t help being on edge,” said Sheya. I hadn’t even realized she’d moved right behind me until she spoke and placed her hand on my back. “But Old Badger would be watching his surroundings.”

Hearing her say that made me feel like I was coming out of a dark tunnel. The forest opened up around me, and my eyes darted from the trees to the bushes. Nothing was moving. I didn’t even hear any birds singing—maybe they were scared of the goblins. I’d been so focused on watching the monsters under the big tree that seeing and noticing everything else around me made me breathe a sigh of relief.

Keep an eye out on all sides. Always pay attention to what’s around you. I’d forgotten what Old Badger had taught me until now.

“Point is, you gotta loosen up. You’re gonna die if you’re all wound up,” said Waine. He gave my head a couple of gentle pats before he finally took his hand away.

I was pretty sure he’d been trying to make me feel better just now, but *gosh*, he was bad at it. There had to be a better way to say what he’d meant. The priest would’ve quoted the words of the gods or something to give me advice.

I took one, long, slow breath. I checked my grip on my spear. It was fine—at least, I wasn’t clenching the shaft like I was trying to snap it anymore. I was here to do a job: to exterminate these monsters. I wanted revenge too, but that was no excuse to lose sight of everything else around me. I couldn’t let the lessons Old Badger himself had taught me go to waste.

“Thanks, guys,” I said quietly. “So, what do we do?”

The goblins showed no signs of moving. They were probably too far away to hear us talking, and they didn’t seem to be aware of us at all.

“Right, let’s think… An ambush would be easy, but the trouble is they’d all scatter into the trees,” Chikka said.

There were six goblins. If they all ran in different directions deeper into the forest, it’d be really hard to chase them all down.

“Yeah, little bastards are damn quick on their feet,” Waine grumbled. He sounded so grumpy, I wondered if goblins had

escaped from him before.

"We couldn't get them all at the same time?" I asked.

"They're just a little bit too spread out. I'm wearing plate, so I can't get any closer without the noise giving me away," Waine explained. "Even if I ran, I'd get maybe three of them at most. The rest would get away."

That wasn't good enough. We couldn't leave the job half done. We'd have to make sure we killed them all, but how?

While we were trying to figure that out, Sheya spoke up. "Leave it to me," she said, and her voice was full of confidence.

*Right. She's a mage. I bet she can do all kinds of things normal people can't,* I thought. I turned to look at Sheya, and she smiled at me with an odd glint in her eye.

"I have a plan," she said.

I started gathering stones—ones that fit in my hand, not too big or too small—while making sure the goblins didn't notice me. I didn't need a lot, but not having enough made me feel a little nervous too. So I decided on ten, and it didn't take me long to find that many.

I clutched the stones with both hands and hid behind the bushes we'd agreed on earlier. The others were already in their places, with each of them in a different spot, while the goblins were still chatting and lazing around. I understood now why it was so important to find your enemy first. Doing that gave you time to prepare.

I put the stones and my spear on the ground. I wasn't carrying my basket today, so it would've been easy for me to take my weapon off my back, but picking it up from the ground would be even faster. I took a long, slow breath again.

"Okay," I told myself.

I picked out one of the stones. It was a little smaller than the others, but that made it easy to hold. This first one needed to go the farthest, so I wanted one that was light and easy to aim. I was about to do something the grown-ups in the village had told me I should never, ever do, not even by accident. It was dangerous, it was painful, and it was nasty. *I know I've been saying I'm going to kill these goblins, but doing this still feels really wrong.*

"Guess I should get used to it. Adventurers are supposed to be awful people anyway," I muttered, trying to convince myself

this wasn't so bad. It worked, more or less.

I let out a breath and stood up, but the goblins still didn't notice. It made me feel really dumb (and kind of annoyed) for being so careful about staying hidden in these bushes until now.

"Yah!" I chucked the stone as hard as I could. I really wanted to hit a goblin, but it would be fine as long as the stone just landed near one.

The stone sailed through the air in a smooth curve and straight into the face of a goblin who had turned toward the sound of my voice. The goblin yelled.

*Perfect,* I thought. Then I shouted, "This is for Old Badger, you ugly monsters!"

I grabbed another stone and threw it. My aim wasn't as good this time because I'd rushed, and the stone hit the big tree's trunk with a light knock. The goblin I'd hit earlier was bleeding from its forehead—it snarled at me. The one who'd been talking to it turned to look at me and cried out, waking the others who'd been asleep. I got another stone ready, took more time to aim, and threw it. The goblin dodged, and I grabbed one more stone.

Meanwhile, all of the goblins scrambled to pick up their gear. They were monsters, but they used weapons too. I knew they would come at me any second now, swinging their clubs and rusty old shortswords around—just thinking about that sent an icy chill down my spine.

I threw the stone in my hand and missed. The goblins glared at me, and I saw the anger in their horrible faces. I couldn't breathe. I wanted to think of something else to shout at them as I pelted them with stones, to yell every bad word I could think of. But nothing would come out. I couldn't run away either. The last thing I wanted to do was turn my back on those beasts, so I picked up another stone.

The goblins yelled with rage and charged at me. I was the only one they could see—one little kid even smaller than they were. So all of them came running, waving their weapons around and letting their anger take over. I threw the stone I was holding, grabbed the biggest one I had, and hurled it without checking to see if I'd hit anything. I did hear a sharp yelp, but the goblins didn't stop.

They were right in front of me in no time. The closest goblin shrieked and raised its club.

"Nice knowin' ya!" Waine called. He cut the goblin down from

the bushes where he'd been hiding.

If we had ambushed them while they were resting, they would panic and scatter. If we'd gotten any closer, they would notice us and run away. The answer was to make them come to us. So as the smallest, youngest, and weakest-looking member of the party, my job was to throw stones at the goblins.

Hitting or missing didn't matter, as long as I got the goblins riled up. Stones could be deadly, but not in the hands of a kid like me. Even if I used all of my strength, only a really lucky shot would take an enemy down. But the point was just to make the goblins mad. All they would see was one little human who had the nerve to attack them. They would be furious and come running in for the kill. That was a guarantee once they saw a kid throwing the stones. The goblins would never run away from *me*.

That was Sheya's plan. I thought back to when she'd explained it to all of us.

"So, I'm like a decoy?" I asked.

"No." Sheya shook her head. "Bait."

*Honestly, I prefer my word,* I thought.

"Heh, I know plenty about bait. Sounds good to me," Chikka agreed.

Waine smirked. "Too bad we're only catching small fry today."

I wished they'd think about it a little more. Sure, Sheya had mentioned bait, but we weren't *actually* fishing here. This was going to be a battle with goblins! But Chikka and Waine were totally on board with her idea, and they were already looking for places to hide.

Something told me neither of them would even try to come up with other ideas, and I lost the will to argue. "Bait" was the perfect word after all, because those goblins were really going to think they would get to eat me. My role was to make them think their enemy was weak. I wasn't happy with that, but I didn't complain because I *was* weak. I didn't have any better ideas anyway, and at least I was going to be useful.

"Rrragh!" Right after cutting down the first goblin, Waine yelled and swept his sword to slash through another.

The goblin screamed as blood sprayed from the deep cut in its stomach.

"Get back, kiddo!" Waine commanded. He'd just killed two

goblins in the blink of an eye, and now he leaped out from his hiding spot in the bushes to stand in front of me and take his position as the party's vanguard.

There were four goblins left. Two of them ran to attack Waine with their clubs held high. He dodged one and fended off the other with his sword. He made a feint, and the goblins jumped back to avoid it. The other two were tangled up in the bushes and branches Waine had been hiding behind. As soon as I saw that, I knew Waine had positioned himself like this to make sure all the goblins couldn't fight him at the same time. Waine really was an amazing fighter—he could handle so many enemies and take them down with a single slash.

But our ambush was over. A goblin swung its club at Waine. He avoided the blow and was about to counter, but another goblin attacked and forced him to deflect its attack instead. Waine was using the trees and such around him to his advantage, but it was still four against one.

I looked down at what I could use for a couple of seconds before I grabbed my spear and one of the stones. Then I started to run.

I knew Waine was strong, and that cave alligator roasting behind the adventurer's guild had been proof of *how* strong he was. But he was fighting four enemies and protecting me too, and I thought he looked a little frustrated as he held off the goblins. He was being forced to concentrate on defense, which didn't give him any leeway to strike back.

I remembered something Waine had said to me before: Defeating your enemy but dying from your wounds was the same as losing. He was playing it safe right now, patiently waiting for the right moment to strike—and I was going to *make* that moment.

I held my spear at the ready with my left hand and gripped the stone with my right, but I couldn't throw the stone while I was right behind Waine. I didn't think I would hit him, but I didn't want to risk it. So I sprinted past Waine as fast as I could until I had a clear view of the goblins.

"Hah!" I shouted, and I hurled the stone. My nerves sent it flying a little off target, but luckily it hit the goblin behind the one I'd been aiming for. The monster squealed, and I clenched my fists in triumph. *All right! I did it!*

That goblin saw me.

At the same time, Waine shouted, “Hey, what are you doing?!” He sounded shocked at what I’d done.

Two goblins came running right at me.

“Oh…”

Because I’d moved out from behind Waine, he couldn’t stop the goblins coming at me. The goblins and I were around the same size, but since my weapon had the longer reach I had a chance against one—not two. One goblin held a rusty shortsword, and the other had an axe with a chipped, jagged blade. Both weapons were filthy, so they looked even scarier. Getting hit with one of those wouldn’t just hurt me… Well, the goblins *were* coming to kill me.

I was scared. But the moment I took a step back, I regretted it. *I have to get revenge for Old Badger. I can’t run away. I can’t!*

“Damn it, I’m only supposed to be watching for ones trying to escape!” Chikka complained.

One of the two goblins in front of me shrieked, and all of a sudden there was a knife stuck in its shoulder. Chikka popped out of her hiding place in the trees with another throwing knife ready in her hand. The goblin noticed—it clutched its injured shoulder and went after her. Now, only the one with the rusty sword was coming for me.

“Run! Like Old Badger would!” came Sheya’s voice from somewhere.

She was right—that was what he would’ve done. I was determined to get revenge, so I felt like I had to stand my ground against the charging goblins. If Old Badger had been in my shoes, though, he wouldn’t have thought twice about running away. And he’d be doing the right thing. If I ran, this goblin would follow me. I would be leading it away from the others, then dealing with it myself. That was probably the most useful thing I could do right now. Running *was* the right choice.

“I won’t run,” I decided.

I readied my spear, holding it parallel to the ground with the tip pointed at the goblin. I’d have to say sorry to Waine, Chikka, and Sheya later. *And* to Old Badger. He’d done his best to teach me to avoid danger, but…

The goblin raised its sword, and I thrust my spear.

I did it without taking a step forward. Instead, I planted my back foot then pushed hard against the ground to shift my weight to the front of my body. At the same time, I turned my

hips and shoulders before driving my arms toward my target and letting my strength flow to the tip of my weapon.

A shock jolted through my hands. The goblin had swung its sword with all its strength and whacked my spear. The haft slipped out of my right hand, and the tip bounced on the ground. The goblin raised its rusty blade again, but I couldn't get my spear ready with just my left hand. The sword came down, and I couldn't get out of the way.

I'd never felt pain like that in my life. I couldn't even cry out.

The spear was a weapon with a long reach made for fighting enemies at a distance. That was the first thing Waine had taught me about it. He'd also taught me how to keep enemies at bay with thrusts and feints—sweeps were only useful in open spaces. You had to keep moving to make sure enemies never got too close, Waine had said, but it was more important to think about how to move your feet than the spear.

He'd told me a lot more than that, like how you didn't need to use all your strength with every attack because there was a sharp blade on the end. Or how you could try to take your enemy down in one thrust but also be ready with another move in case that didn't work. He'd said you should look after your weapon but not be too precious about it. If the fight turned against you, you should run. And if you won, you should always finish your enemy off.

Back when Waine had taught me all of that, it'd been a little too much for me to take in. But I still remembered what he'd said about the thrust technique. The reason you shouldn't take a big step forward was to keep your weight on your back foot. That made it harder for your enemy to get close to you. Even if they did, you would be able to back up easily.

I jumped back and screamed, but no sound came out of my mouth. I gripped my spear with just my left hand and swung it as hard as I could. At the same time, the goblin rushed at me. The tip of my spear smacked into a thin tree nearby, bounced off the trunk, and brushed right past the goblin's nose. That stopped it in its tracks and gave me the chance to jump back twice and put some distance between us.

I tried moving my right hand. "Ngh... Guh..." I grunted. My shoulder hurt and throbbed, but at least I could move it. I got my spear ready again and gritted my teeth to try and bear the pain.

The goblin's sword had chopped straight down onto my

shoulder. The pain had been so bad that I'd thought the goblin had cut my arm off. But I still had my arm, and I could still move it. I could even hold my spear. I was surprised at first, but then I realized why.

It was my armor. The goblin's strength and that rusty sword hadn't been enough to cut through the equipment Chikka had given me. It had saved me. I'd be really hurt right now without that armor. Now I understood why she'd been so shocked and angry about me going into the forest without wearing any. It really did matter.

But then, I remembered something else. Armor made for halflings was extra light. Old Badger had told me that. So armor for humans probably would've made the goblin attack hurt less. I decided to check how much new armor would cost when we got back to town. Chikka had been nice enough to give me this set, so I felt kind of bad about replacing it, but I was really starting to think it would be a good idea to buy armor for humans if I could afford it.

The goblin ran at me with its sword in the air and a horrible grin on its face. It was planning on doing the same trick again—scaring me into thrusting at it and then smacking my spear down. I could tell from the way it looked at me.

So, I *pretended* to do that, and the goblin brought its sword down like I'd predicted. I yanked my spear back right away, then thrust again. The goblin was surprised, but it jumped and dodged just in time. Even though I couldn't hit the goblin, I did open up more distance between us and stop it from coming at me right away.

"Yah!" I went on the attack. This time, I aimed above the goblin's chest. Going lower might let it smack my spear down again, but aiming high would make it block or dodge.

The goblin avoided my first thrust by jumping back out of reach. I attacked again, but it blocked my spear with its sword. On my third thrust, the tip of my spear burst into flames.

"Wh-What the...?!"

*What's going on? Why's it burning? Is the rest of my spear gonna catch fire too?*

At the end of that last thrust, the point of my spear stopped just short of the goblin's face. The goblin tumbled back and landed on its butt, though I was pretty sure it only did that because of the fire and not my attack.

I didn’t make this opening. I didn’t even understand what had happened. But I wasn’t about to let this chance slip away.

“Raaagh!” I yelled, and I lunged with my spear.



Along with a terrifying scream, I heard the horrible sound of the goblin's flesh sizzling in flames.

My hands felt everything through the spear—the point cutting through flesh, grinding against bone, and stabbing into the goblin's heart. I felt sick. The goblin's wide eyes stared at me while its arms and legs thrashed. The smell of burning flesh and blood filled my nose. I'd gotten revenge for Old Badger, but I didn't feel happy at all. I tugged out my spear and bit my lip as I watched the goblin die.

"Oh, the others!" I blurted. This was no time to be standing around. There were still three goblins left. I'd left Waine fighting two and Chikka the other. The battle wasn't over just because I'd defeated one. I had to go and help them.

"Hey, nice work," said a cheerful voice.

It was Waine. He was crouched down on the ground with his elbow resting on his knee and his chin in his palm. Four goblins lay dead on the ground nearby, and his sword was already in its scabbard.

"You really scared us when you took a hit. You'd be dead if that was your head. Maybe it's time you get yourself a helmet," said Chikka. There was concern and relief in her voice as she stood wiping a knife with a piece of cloth. Another dead goblin was splayed out at her feet.

"Show me your shoulder. I can handle first aid." Sheya appeared from the trees barely five steps away from me with a bottle of medicine in her hand.

"Were you guys watching me the whole time?" At first I thought that couldn't be possible, but it was the only way I could explain how they were all acting.

The three of them looked at each other.

"Not the *whole* time. Only most of it," said Waine.

"We figured you could take one on your own."

"*I* helped. Unlike them."

They didn't even look embarrassed.

"If you really wanted to help, wouldn't it be faster to take it out with magic bolts, or fireballs, or, I don't know, putting it to sleep?" Chikka pointed out. "Tiny was as surprised as the goblin!"

"Waine dragged the fight out on purpose," Sheya muttered.

"Hey, that was just 'cause I wanted to hand one off to the kid from the start. And if you're gonna talk, Chikka, couldn't *you* have handled two of them, no sweat?"

Waine, Sheya, and Chikka's banter told me that this hadn't been a battle for them at all. They'd killed the other goblins like they were squashing bugs before kicking back to watch me fight. I *had* felt like something was odd before we attacked. Even though we were outnumbered, everyone only worried about not letting the goblins escape. Nobody had talked about how to fight them. Now I knew there'd been no need for that, because these three were a lot stronger than the goblins. Plus, we pulled off a surprise attack that made things even easier.

*But I'm still not sure how I feel about everyone watching me fight for my life like a show...*

"We would've stepped in if it got too hairy! I was all ready to play the hero," Waine reassured me.

"Right!" Chikka agreed. "I had my knives all ready to go too."

"Preparing for all possibilities is the essence of being an adult," Sheya added.

*A proper adult wouldn't just stand by and watch...*

"Well, it worked out in the end. You wanted to kill one of them yourself, right? For Old Badger," said Waine. He had a sheepish grin on his face.

I realized what this was all about—Waine had been worried about me. I looked back at the goblin I'd killed. It wasn't thrashing around anymore. Now, it just stared up at the sky with its face twisted in agony. I still didn't feel happy. Not even a little.

"Ah..."

In my head, I suddenly heard Old Badger's funny cackle. My eyes filled with tears, and soon they rolled down my cheeks. I couldn't hold it in anymore, and I started to sob.

# Epilogue

I followed the main street west from the adventurer's guild, but I didn't go as far as the inn where Chikka stayed. Instead, I turned north before that and continued on. Before long, the tall buildings and people started to thin out. Just as the big wall that circled Hiriyenka came into sight, I found the place I was looking for.

It was tucked away in this quiet part of town. There was a low, stone wall all around, with a row of trees just inside. And there were rows and rows of stones with names carved into them.

This was the graveyard.

It was very still and quiet this far from the center of town. No one was here except me and the resting dead. Some of the graves had flowers, so it wasn't like nobody ever came. But right now, I was alone. Waine, Sheya, and Chikka had offered for us all to go together, but I'd said no and just asked them how to get here.

I walked down the paved pathway farther into the graveyard, following the directions I'd been given. The place seemed to be divided up by rows of low trees with small leaves. There were a lot of graves at first, but as I kept going I noticed there weren't as many after every row. Well, it made sense for the spots near the entrance to be more popular, because those graves were closer and easier for visitors to find.

Then I reached a different section of the graveyard. Even though it was far from the entrance, there were dozens of headstones here. I'd heard that adventurers were often people from outside of town, people with no families, or people whose families had thrown them out. So when they died, nobody would take care of their remains. When that happened, the Raging Kelpie's Tail organized their burials. This was where those adventurers rested.

"Pardon me..." I said quietly.

It felt right to say something to my fellow adventurers as I entered this part of the graveyard. When I thought about how I might be buried here one day, I felt like we were all kind of connected somehow. As I walked by, I read each of the names

carved into the stones. Some of them were so silly they must've been made up as a joke. Others were just nicknames. Maybe nobody knew their original names, but maybe *these* were their real names. After all, these were the names everyone knew them by—the names everyone still called them now. What was the point of having your old name carved into your gravestone if no one was using it?

"That must be it."

I spotted a brand-new gravestone from a little ways off and smiled. The burial had happened on the day we went to slay the goblins, and now the grave was a real mess. When I saw it up close, it made me want to smack my forehead. There were lots of bottles of alcohol and jars of pickles, along with worn playing cards and old dice. There was even a shiny new helmet there for some reason, along with lots of little knickknacks I didn't recognize. And there were *so* many flowers just stuffed into every tiny bit of space on the grave among all the other offerings.

"That's adventurers for you."

It was the liveliest grave I'd ever seen. On my way here, I'd thought I would be sad when I got to the graveyard. I'd thought I might cry when I saw the gravestone. But seeing this blew those worries away, and I heard something that sounded like the echo of an old man's cackle.

*"Heh heh! What are ya lookin' so down in the dumps for?"*

"Old Badger..." I knelt down in front of the grave. I was still a little upset when I'd heard that we'd missed the burial. When I'd asked Barque why they hadn't waited for us, he'd said that the guild buried adventurers so often that there wasn't really a ceremony that went with it. Old Badger was no exception. He had been laid to rest just like all the adventurers before him.

"I'll do my best," I told him. "I promise."

I'd picked a purple flower before coming here, and I placed it on the grave. It was just a single bloom, but I knew *he* would definitely see it among the rest.

# Afterword

The idea for this story came to me while I was on a treadmill. I was on one hell of a runner's high, thinking, *I'm gonna push myself to my limits! Here I gooooo!!!* By the way, when you trip and fall on a treadmill, it feels like your skin's getting scraped off with sandpaper. So don't do that!

Anyway, I'm KAME! It's great to meet you. This is my first time ever publishing a book and writing an afterword, so I'm a little nervous. I want to start this off on the right foot, so I'll try to do it properly. Okay, here goes.

Did you enjoy *They Don't Know I'm Too Young for the Adventurer's Guild*? It received an award at the Tenth Web Novel Awards competition held by Crowd Gate in collaboration with Shosetsuka ni Naro before it was edited into this novel. It won an award! That's still hard for me to believe.

I've always loved reading novels—especially light novels. When I was a student, I used to save up my pocket money for the bookstore and then stay up all night reading the books I bought. I guess it isn't surprising I ended up wanting to write a novel of my own. But at first, I couldn't write a word. How do you even start? Are there rules when it comes to writing? Can I really write something I think is worth reading? I worried and worried and ended up in a deep, dark fog. I couldn't take a single step forward; I couldn't even write the opening line.

It's partly embarrassing and partly nostalgic to look back on the way I was back then. If I could go back in time, I'd give myself a good kick in the butt and tell myself to just write without worrying about all that. After falling so hard at the first hurdle, I never dreamed that I'd end up winning an award. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the announcement, and it took a long time to sink in. When it did, I was so happy I could've cried.

I'd like to take a moment to thank everyone who's supported me as I stumbled along on this journey and lent me the strength I needed to see this novel published. I want to thank all the readers of the web novel for their constant support. You've been a true source of strength for me. I want to thank the judges of the Web Novel Awards for choosing my work. Receiving that

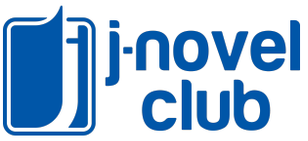
award opened up the path to publishing this novel. To my editor, Yuri Wada, thank you for guiding and encouraging me so kindly through the publishing process. I hope you can forgive all my unreasonable requests. To the wonderful artist ox who provided all the beautiful illustrations for this novel, thank you for indulging my selfish requests time and time again. I love the way your artwork breathes so much life into the characters. Lastly, I'd like to offer my deepest gratitude to each and every person who bought this book. I hope my story brought you a few hours of fun and enjoyment.

I'm going to do the very best I can to repay everyone's kindness, so I hope I can count on your continued support. Let's meet again in the next volume of *They Don't Know I'm Too Young for the Adventurer's Guild*!









Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 2 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

# Copyright

They Don’t Know I’m Too Young for the Adventurer’s Guild: Volume 1
by KAME

Translated by Nikolas Stirling
Edited by Ren Alea

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2023 KAME
Illustrations © 2023 ox
Cover illustration by ox

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2023 by MICRO MAGAZINE, INC.
This English edition is published by arrangement with MICRO MAGAZINE, INC.
English translation © 2025 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author’s intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: March 2025