



Taking ^{My} Reincarnation One Step at a Time

No One Told Me
There Would Be Monsters!

3

KAYA
ILLUS. INARU

TAKING MY REINCARNATION ONE STEP AT A TIME: No One Told Me There Would Be Monsters!

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There were the obligatory mountain wolves in the view, but looking out from the cottage, the verdant expanse before them was like a beautiful painting.

“We didn’t have any time to turn around when we were coming up here, but the view’s really incredible.”



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PROLOGUE

PEOPLE WHO JUST DON'T LISTEN

Sara stretched out her tired body and peered at Rosa's east gate from the meadow. She glanced to her side and found Nelly looking toward the gate as well, a hand on her hip.

The last time she'd come down here, she'd been alone, but now she had Nelly with her. She may have been tired, but her heart felt light.

She'd finally reunited with Nelly and returned to the Dark Mountain. It had only been a month since then, but she'd spent all that time running around the Dark Mountain with Nelly, so the time she'd spent in Rosa already seemed like something from the distant past.

"We really made it to Rosa in just two days. I guess it was worth all that training I did."

Nelly nodded with satisfaction. "Next time, we'll make it in one."

"That's not happening. You're asking way too much."

"Oh. Am I?"

The east gate slowly opened for the two of them.

"It really does open. It stayed closed the last time I came."

"Always opens for me."

Nelly raised a hand in silent greeting to the gate guards and strolled into town. Sara hurried after her, and once she was inside, the gate slowly closed behind them.

"It's my first time getting a good look at this part of town."

"Oh yeah? I always head straight south to the guild, so I've never seen the north part of town. I was invited to the mayor's house once, but it's right in the center of the town."

Apparently, Nelly didn't know that much more about Rosa than Sara did. She supposed even if you lived in a town, you might not know that much about it, and that went doubly so for a town you only visited on occasion.

"Let's go to the Second District and head for the Apothecary's Guild," Nelly suggested.

"Actually, I want to go to the Hunter's Guild first if we can."

Nelly had sold Sara's medicinal plants for her in the past, but Sara could sell them herself now. She'd sort of just been gathering as something to do up until recently, but it would be her occupation from now on—for the time being, at least. She'd spent the last twenty days up on the Dark Mountain gathering plants, but there was something she wanted to do first before selling them. She'd brought a gift for the Hunter's Guild to thank them for looking after her while she was in Rosa.

Looking back on things, her help with the Guild kiosk and in the kitchen hadn't really been necessary. The people at the Guild were just helping her become independent like they indirectly helped Allen. The people in the kitchen had been especially helpful. Before arriving in Rosa, the only things she'd eaten other than jerky were special ingredients only available on the Dark Mountain, like cockatrice and gargoyle. The cooks in the kitchen had taught her about other kinds of meat in this world and how to prepare them.

"Think they'll be happy about the golden trout?"

"I think they'll be thrilled."

"You like it too, don't you, Nelly?"

Golden trout were, apparently, monsters you could only hunt in dungeons, but to Sara, what was important was that they were fish. She'd always said she didn't like taking the lives of monsters, but fish she could deal with. They were a little different from other kinds of monsters, at least in her mind. She could hunt them on her own too. Not just that, Nelly actually had trouble hunting things that lived in water, so she actually felt like she was helping Nelly out by hunting fish. It was two birds with one stone.

Each golden trout was massive, so it made plenty of fillets that Sara fried or made into trout meunière and kept in her storage bag. The next time she went to the pool where she'd found the first trout, there had been a smaller one there, and when she traveled down the stream, she found golden trout in every deep pool she passed, so she didn't

think there was any danger of overfishing them.

She'd brought five golden trout to gift to the Guild.

"Five should be enough for everyone in the Guild to get some."

"I think it's more than enough, but if that's what you want to do, Sara..."

Sara didn't know why Nelly was giving her that wry grin, but the two of them hurried on to the Hunter's Guild regardless.

"Hello!" Sara pushed open the Guild's doors and gave a cheery greeting.

"Hey, Sara! Long time no see. You look like you're doing well." Vince stood up at his desk, giving her a surprised smile. The rest of the receptionists waved and greeted her cheerfully too.

"Yeah. I pick plants every day and go with Nelly on her hunts."

"With Nelly, eh? I-I see." Vince sounded hesitant for a moment before pulling himself together and greeting Nelly too. "Hey, Nefertari. You can come by more often than every twenty days, you know."

"I could, but twenty days is just about right when I bring Sara with me."

"Yeah, I guess so. Considering the time it takes to get here and back."

Sara left Nelly chatting amicably at the reception desks and headed for the kitchen, but the staff must have heard her voice, because Mize and the other cooks all filed out before she got there.

"Mize!" she exclaimed happily. "I brought you a present! I have some golden trout!"

"G-Golden trout?!" Vince and not Mize shouted in surprise.

Sara turned around and blinked at him. "Yeah. There's more of them than you'd think in the streams on the Dark Mountain."

"Ah... Yeah, I guess there are a lot of them in dungeon streams, huh?" Vince said, his face twitching. Sara stiffened, very familiar with this exchange. "They're usually pretty

deep though, so people can't hunt them all that much."

"Oh yeah, you said they were hard for swordsmen to hunt, didn't you, Nelly?"

"They're hard for casters to hunt too! I can't believe you..." Vince sighed, but Sara wasn't going to let it bother her. "Mize."

"Yep, I was thinking the same thing."

Vince and Mize nodded to each other. Sara cocked her head.

"Sara, come into the back."

There was nothing shady going on here. The back was just where they did assessments of monster materials when you had a particularly large quantity of them or if you had anything you didn't want to make too public.

"But we're just preparing and eating some fish."

"They're not just fish. They're golden trout."

Sara wanted to say a fish was a fish, but she held her tongue.

"They've gotta assess my materials too," Nelly added. "Might as well get 'em both done at once."

Well, that made sense to Sara. She reluctantly followed Vince to the guildmaster's office in the back.

"Jay."

"I'm working." The guildmaster was clearly resting, leaned back in his chair, but he shifted forward when he saw Sara. "Hey, Sara. And you're here too, Nefertari." He greeted Nelly and then smiled, looking impressed. "All the way from the Dark Mountain, eh? You really made it all the way to town, Sara."

Nelly might have been strong, but with the number of monsters between the cottage and the town, it'd be almost impossible for her to protect Sara the whole way there. That meant that even if they'd come together, Sara had been able to protect herself for the journey.

“I’ve got materials, Jay.”

“You don’t have to do that back here, do you?”

“Well, we’ve got fish monsters. We can make a mess back here.”

“No you can’t! This is my office! I hold meetings back here!”

Vince ignored the guildmaster’s protests. “Let’s see ‘em.”

Sara reluctantly got out one of her golden trout and set it on the floor. She’d caught one of a legendary size once, but the rest of them had all been about a meter long. Just one of those fish lasted Sara and Nelly a few days.

“A-A golden trout. From the Dark Mountain?” The guildmaster half-rose from his chair.

“There’s one for every deep part of the stream and they come back after a while, so I don’t think they’ll run out.” Sara asserted that she was being careful not to overfish them.

“Err, they’re monsters, so you can hunt as many of ’em as you want. You hunted this to sell it, Sara?”

“No, I’m not here to sell them.” Sara shook her head. “Everyone at the Guild helped me out, so I brought them as a gift. I caught extra, so everyone at the Guild could have some.”

“Wait, wait, wait. You don’t have just one?”

“I have five or so.”

Vince’s eyes glazed over. “Five, huh? Okay. *Five* golden trout—fish you hardly see even in the capital. Ha ha ha.” His face hardened. “Sara, one of these will be more than enough for everyone at the Guild. Do you want to sell the rest of them to us?”

“Huh? You really think one will be enough?” Sara wanted everyone to get their fill.

“One of these is enough to feed twenty people, easy. Even with all the cooks, the receptionists, and Allen, it’ll be enough.”

Sara was happy that Vince had included Allen. Of course, she'd brought several lunches that she'd cooked for Allen, including fried golden trout, so he was definitely getting some either way.



"Town bigshots'll probably buy two of them, so we'll send the other two to the capital... One trout is five hundred thousand gil, so we'll give you two million for four of them. What do you say?"

"What do I say? Uhh..." Sara looked up at Nelly.

"Eh, it's not that much compared to a wyvern. How 'bout you sell 'em?"

"A wyvern, huh? I guess that's true." It made no sense to compare them to wyverns that sold for ten million each, but Sara went along with it nonetheless. "Okay, I'll sell them."

"Phew. Good. It's a rare ingredient, so if we just ate it here at the guild, there'd be people getting on our case for abusing our authority or whatever."

Well, that made sense. Sara got the rest of the fish out of her backpack as the guildmaster grumbled, then nodded to Nelly and ran off to the kitchen.

"You couldn't register at the Guild at first, so I thought you were poor!" one of the cooks told her as she helped peel potatoes for some reason after handing over the fish.

"I didn't have any money on me at the time and I couldn't sell my medicinal plants, so I really was in trouble back then. But it's not like there are stores up on the Dark Mountain. I've got more than enough to eat, but having money doesn't really make a difference," was all she could say.

"Well, I guess that's true."

"Right? The views are great, though." She kept the fact that there were always mountain wolves or wyverns or *mountain wolves* in those views to herself. "By the way, where's Allen?"

She'd arrived at the Guild in midafternoon. It was around the time Hunters started getting back from the dungeons.

"Allen, huh?"

"Allen, eh?"

For some reason, everyone in the kitchen was making an awkward face.

"Now that I think about it, the guildmaster said he was gonna look after him or something, didn't he?"

"Yeah, he is. Allen's staying at his house now. Allen and the guildmaster both use physical strengthening and have kinda similar personalities, so he's training the kid too. He's busier than you might think, so it's not every day, but I think Allen's gotten a lot stronger just in these last three weeks."

Sara had just heard something she couldn't ignore. Their personalities were similar? Were they really?

"The guildmaster was in the back, though. And he didn't look busy."

Everyone averted their eyes when Sara asked why the guildmaster wasn't with Allen.

"Allen's in a party right now, I guess you could say. Wasn't his idea, but..."

"A party?"

Allen was still young, but he had such an abundance of mana that there was no one around his age in Rosa that could stand to be around him.

"Did a nice older Hunter take him under their wing or something?"

"Well, no... The kid he's with is the same age as him." The cook got a faraway look in his eyes.

Some noise came from the guild proper then, and a voice called Sara's name.

"Sara!"

"Allen! It's good to see you!"

Allen poked his head into the kitchen and grinned widely when he spotted Sara.

"Go ahead, Sara. Oh, and thanks for the gift."

"Okay!"

Sara sped out of the kitchen. There was so much she wanted to talk to Allen about.

"Sara! You look good!" Allen's first reaction was to smile in relief when he saw how happy Sara looked.

"You do too, Allen. Actually, you look kind of..." Sara looked him over head to toe. He seemed to have cleaned up some on the whole.

Allen scratched his head a little awkwardly. "I'm staying at the guildmaster's house right now."

"So you're not camping out anymore?"

"Yeah. I was fine with camping out, but the guildmaster said that even if I was strong, I can't necessarily keep my physical strengthening activated the whole time while I'm sleeping."

"Well, that's great!"

Allen's clothes had been washed and his hair was neater. There was clearly someone who cared about his appearance around him now.

While the two of them grinned at each other, enjoying their reunion, there was a clacking sound like someone opening and closing a storage bag behind Allen. Allen gasped and turned around, then stepped to the side. Sara hadn't noticed until then, but someone was standing behind him. It was a boy the same age or maybe a little older than Allen.

"This guy's in a party with me right now."

"Mm. It was a request I couldn't turn down."

The boy had a hand on his hip. His body was turned Sara's way, but his head faced away slightly, so his eyes didn't meet hers. His hair was black, but his bangs were too long to see what color his eyes were. Sara had barely seen any other kids her age, so she was a little happy to meet him, though he didn't seem to have the best attitude.

"Well, it wasn't my idea either, so we're in the same boat," Allen shot back exasperatedly. He raised his eyebrows at Sara as if to say, "Yep, this is what he's like."

But dealing with someone rude was no reason for Sara to be rude herself. "It's nice to meet you," Sara said politely. "I'm Allen's friend, Sara."

"Name's Haruto," said the boy before stealing a glance at Sara from under his long bangs. "You a commoner?"

"Hmm?"

Sara looked down at herself after the boy asked if she was a commoner. She was wearing her adult's tunic like always, but she thought her outfit was pretty normal. Nothing about it stood out as odd to her. Some people apparently thought she looked like a boy, but she kept clean and tidy.

She gave Haruto a look next. He wore a well-tailored shirt and vest, above which he had on a long jacket with some kind of odd-looking extra pockets. He wore a black shortsword on his belt and had a pouch at his waist and one on his leg as well. The pouches were probably all storage pouches. He *did* look pretty wealthy, she supposed.

Sara looked down at herself again. Yeah, compared to this Haruto, Sara could only see herself as a commoner.

"A commoner..."

"Hey! You really are rude, you know that?! Is that how you greet every girl you meet?" Allen smacked Haruto on the shoulder.

"What? A commoner's a commoner, right? And did you say...?" Haruto looked her in the eyes properly this time. "...'girl'?"

"Yeesh," Vince muttered at the reception desks.

Sara hadn't thought about nobles or commoners much since coming to this world, but if she was asked which she was, she'd probably say she was a commoner, just like she'd been in Japan. She thought of the word as meaning she wasn't particularly wealthy or in politics, so it didn't feel like an insult to her. So when someone who wasn't her friend or anything like Haruto called her a commoner, all she thought was that he was somewhat lacking in tact. But Allen felt differently.

"Why can't you understand how other people feel, huh?! It's like you're trying to offend someone every time you open your mouth!"

"Hey, that means..." Haruto muttered.

“See?! You’re not even listening to me!”

“Allen...”

True, he didn’t seem to be listening to a word Allen was saying.

“You’ve got a girlfriend?”

“What...?” Allen’s mouth hung open.

“I had to team up with you ‘cause there aren’t any other Hunters my age in this town, but you’ve got female friends? That’s kind of a rip-off, isn’t it?”

“What the heck are you talking about? Sara’s not a Hunter, and what does it matter if I have friends, male *or* female?”

“Gah! This is why I can’t stand lucky bastards like you! And you’re not even aware of it!”

What was this guy *saying*? Sara was speechless. She felt her brain stopping to process what she was hearing.

“Sara.”

Nelly just happened to come out of the back of the guild then. Sara let out a sigh of relief. She was happy to see Allen, but they hadn’t really gotten to talk yet and there was some weird kid here, so Sara was getting a little exhausted...

For the time being, Sara decided to go over to Nelly, but the boy ran past her, beating her to it.

“Ah! Miss Nefertari!”

“Miss?” The confused word came from several directions at once.

Sara stopped short, too surprised to move. He knew Nelly? She knew Nelly was a noble and that she had older brothers, but she hadn’t heard about any kids the Hunter was acquainted with...

“I came to Rosa to see you, but the people at the Guild wouldn’t let me go to the Dark

Mountain, so I've just been waiting here this whole time."

So he was here to see her. But when he looked up at Nelly with a smile he hadn't shown Sara, Nelly's expression didn't change at all. She just looked down at him for a few seconds before saying, "Who're you?"

"What's that supposed to mean? We hunted migrating dragons together, didn't we?"

"Migrating dragons?" Nelly squinted down at him. "Oh, you're that Invited."

An Invited! Sara had heard that there were more of them out there, but she didn't think she'd meet another one so soon.

"You can't really have forgotten me, can you? I can kill dragons with one spell!"

"It's not that I forgot. I just didn't care..."

A buzz went through the guild at the boy's claim that he could kill migrating dragons, but Sara was more curious about how dragons compared to wyverns in strength.

Haruto went on, completely ignoring the rather cold words Nelly had muttered. "The dragon-hunting squad totally freaked since you left the capital before migrating season was over. Of course, everything was fine since we were there."

"Oh yeah? Well, uhh, good on you."

Sara wasn't sure she'd ever heard someone give such half-hearted praise before. She almost felt sorry for the boy, but was kind of relieved that he wasn't as close to Nelly as he seemed to think he was. She hadn't gotten to talk with Allen at all, though... Sara decided to leave the weird kid for Nelly to deal with.

"Nelly, I want to talk to Allen a little more..."

"Right." Nelly gave Sara a kind look before raising her arms agreeably. "Let's go use the guild cafeteria, then."

Sara and Allen went and sat in the corner of the cafeteria, in the seats people with lots of mana used.

"How have you been?"

"Good. I went into the dungeon a couple times with the guildmaster at the start."

Allen's eyes were practically sparkling. Sara couldn't really tell how strong the guildmaster was, but he must have been good if Allen admired him so much.

"Did you learn a bunch of stuff about hunting from him?"

Sara wondered if he told him he'd have to start over from the basics and whipped him into shape or anything like that.

"No, actually..." Allen smiled wryly. "He said what a Hunter needs more than anything is stamina, so he had me running around the dungeon with physical strengthening activated the whole time. The guildmaster never runs out of breath, you know."

"You seem like you have a lot of stamina for your age, though."

"Yeah. But he asked me if I could make it to the Dark Mountain in a day without resting, and I had to say I didn't think I could."

"Well, of course not." Sara was astounded. Nelly could only do that because she was Nelly.

"Well, how long did it take you to get here this time, Sara?"

"Uhh..." Sara averted her eyes from Allen. He knew that it had taken her five days to reach town the last time she came. Would he be shocked to learn that she'd made it in two this time? Well, he'd find out eventually..."It took... err, two days."

"Two days? Didn't you say it took you five days last time?"

He did remember.

"Yeah, but Nelly said if I practiced, I'd be able to make it to Rosa faster, so..."

"Dang... I haven't caught up to you at all." Allen looked up at the ceiling in frustration. "This isn't an excuse, but I haven't been able to practice at all since I had to team up with Haruto."

"That *is* an excuse, kid." Nelly sat down next to Sara, who was sitting across from Allen. Her mouth was quirked up into a bemused smile.

"Nelly... I mean, err... Miss Nefertari," Allen corrected himself. He must have thought of her as Nelly and not Nefertari because of the way Sara addressed her.

"Nelly's fine," she said, waving Allen's qualms away. "Physical strengthening types often have to pair up with casters. And casters can be a quirky bunch, so you have to learn how to work with them."

"Come on, miss, you make it sound like I'm quirky or something. Everybody wants to hunt with me in the capital since I make it so much easier for them." Haruto sat down across from Nelly even though no one had told him he could.

"That's just flattery," Nelly told him point-blank.

"By the way, Miss Nelly—"

"I didn't say you could call me that."

"When are you going back to the Dark Mountain?" Haruto asked, blowing right past her comment.

Nelly's disinterest turned to annoyance for the first time. "Why do you want to know?"

"Cause I'm coming with you, of course!"

Sara and Allen were speechless. Nelly put a hand to her temple, then shouted, "Vince!"

"What do you want me for? Talk to Jay." He tried to foist it off on the guildmaster, but Vince eventually made his way over to them, if reluctantly. "Haruto, go back to the capital. You're in the way here."

Sara couldn't help snickering at the directness of Vince's comment.

"No! I'm going to the Dark Mountain. The capital's no fun," Haruto huffed.

"I told you the Dark Mountain isn't somewhere a kid can just go for fun, Invited or not. At least take a guardian with you who can get there in three days or less."

"Hardly any adults can keep up with me, though." So he was all alone. He must have noticed Sara's pitying look, because he scrambled to tell her, "It's not like that, okay?! I'm not all on my own or lonely or anything like that!" He hastily added, "Actually,

Bradley was supposed to come too, but he got a request, so he had to stay behind. Don't look at me like that!"

Sara looked away awkwardly. She didn't know why he wanted to go to the Dark Mountain in the first place. She thought she felt someone's eyes on her and noticed Nelly looking her way. "What is it?"

Nelly gave her a thoughtful look. "Hey, Sara, I feel like we had some extra rooms in the cottage..."

"That'd be because we do. Jeez, you don't pay attention to anywhere but your own room and the living room, Nelly," Sara said exasperatedly.

"How many people could stay there?"

Sara pictured the mountain cottage in her head. "Well, there's only one guest room that's ready to use, but there's another one we could clean. And if we really needed more space, there's an attic too. I don't think there's any bedding up there, though."

"Hmm. I thought you'd know."

In other words, they could host two people right now, and if they had a little time to prepare, as many as five or six people could stay with them.

"Vince."

"Yes, Nefertari?"

"The cottage on the Dark Mountain doesn't belong to me. I'm just staying there for the time being myself. Thus, I have no right to refuse visitors."

"Then...!" Haruto stood, his chair clattering behind him.

"However," Nelly continued coolly. "I don't think it makes any sense to let someone who can't move as fast as Sara go to the Dark Mountain."

What was she saying? Sara's eyes darted about nervously. Everyone was staring at her now!

"Right, Sara... You came to Rosa from the Dark Mountain all on your own, didn't you?"

Vince asked hesitantly.

"Yes, the first time..."

"I'm, uhh... sorry about all that." It was a bit late now, but Vince seemed to regret all the misunderstandings that had occurred around Nelly.

"No, I didn't explain myself well enough. I don't think there's anything you could have done. And..." She looked over at Allen. "It worked out in the end."

"Yeah," Allen agreed.

As the two of them grinned at each other, Vince continued, "How many days did it take you to get to town that time?"

"Five."

"But Sara, you—mgh."

Sara leaned over the table and covered Allen's mouth before he could say any more. She'd draw more attention if he told everyone she made it in two this time!

"She *is* your girlfriend."

"No she's not. We're friends."

She almost covered Haruto's mouth this time. And Nelly was right next to her too. She couldn't rest with all these people who might let something slip at any time around her.

Vince started muttering to himself after hearing Sara's answer. "A Hunter should be able to make it to the entrance of the Dark Mountain in a day. But the protection field around the road isn't working too great right now..."

"It's not working at all," Nelly pointed out. "All the way up the road on the Dark Mountain."

The guildmaster had wandered over to them at some point. "Get the mayor to do something about this, Jay," Vince shot at him.

“I’m trying, but he’s not giving me approval for anything.”

Apparently they weren’t fixing the protection field because Rosa wasn’t giving them permission to.

“Are you confident you can make it there with all that, Haruto?”

“Sure I am. I mean, that… that girl there made it, right?”

“I could make it too.”

Why was Allen getting competitive now?

“What, have you been there, Allen?”

“No, but you know I’m fine going into dungeons that don’t have any protection fields with you.”

“Well, I guess so…”

And why was Haruto arguing with him?

Sara watched the two of them irritatedly, then took a deep breath, telling herself it wasn’t like her to get so annoyed. What was she so annoyed about anyway? Haruto and Allen coming to the Dark Mountain? No, she didn’t mind that. Cooking for everyone might be a bit more work, but she thought watching the mountain wolves and hunting for golden trout together would probably be fun. Haruto didn’t seem like the easiest person to communicate with, but she didn’t see any need to go out of her way to play nice with him. She could leave dealing with him to Allen and Nelly. When she thought about things that way, she kind of looked forward to having some guests at the cottage. There shouldn’t be any problems, then…

“If you’re that worried about me, then why not just test whether or not I can make it to the Dark Mountain?”

“Yeah, I guess the best way to be sure would be to go and see. We can always turn back if it starts looking dangerous.”

On this at least, Haruto and Allen agreed. And Sara didn’t think it was a bad idea either. She knew Allen had a good handle on his physical strengthening and had plenty of

stamina, so she wasn't all that concerned about him.

I know, I should finally go buy some girl's clothes for myself while they're doing that, she thought, off in her own little world. It was a good idea, she decided. She'd start out by selling her plants tomorrow morning, and while everyone was testing their ability to get to the Dark Mountain, she'd wander around town and buy some clothes. Nelly had told her they could stay for a few days if she wanted.

While everyone chatted around her, Sara was off in her own world, making plans for the next day, before Vince brought her back to reality by asking her, "So, what do you think?"

"What do I think? About what?"

"You weren't listening? The dungeon thing."

"Dungeon thing?" Question marks flitted through her head. Weren't they just talking about seeing whether or not they could make it to the Dark Mountain?

"Like I said..." Haruto drew each word out, to Sara's irritation. "If we're going to the base of the Dark Mountain and coming back, it'll take two days..." They'd have to stay the night at the plaza between the town and the mountain. "So we just need to prove that we can actually make it there..." What was he getting at? "So if you... uhh... Sa... Sara..."

That was one "sa" too many. Sara's eyes narrowed. "If I what?"

"You're around the same age as us and you can make it to the Dark Mountain, so if you come into the central dungeon with the two of us, you can judge whether or not you think we can make it there."

"Huh?" Where did that idea come from? Sara turned to Allen for a helping hand and immediately regretted it. He was looking at her with stars in his eyes.

"I know you said you didn't want to go into any dungeons, but I've always wanted to go to one with you."

She didn't know he'd been holding on to that desire. Sara turned to Nelly this time, who immediately looked away. "Nelly?"

"I-I don't necessarily agree with all this. But I *am* curious what all you can do after all that training up on the Dark Mountain."

"What are you talking about, Nelly? I haven't done any training!" Sara said, doing her best to sound convincing. "All I do up on the Dark Mountain is pick plants. I might go out for two or three days at a time and do some fishing here and there, but I'm not hunting any monsters."

"Err, right. Of course."

"Why do you have slime magic stones, then?" Vince asked. Sara shot him a cold look and he stepped back, averting his eyes from her. "Right... You just came across those by chance, yeah?"

"That's right. I saw them by chance and gave them a little zap."

"A little zap, right. Casters do that all the time, sure."

"No they don't!" Sara sighed and shot the guildmaster a look. Would she have to have a chat with him too?

"No, maybe they do." Good, she didn't.

Sara turned to Haruto and Allen, who straightened up for some reason. "Listen. If you want to go to the Dark Mountain and you need to prove that you're strong enough to do so, then you should just show everyone that you can do it without any input from me."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes, ma'am."

Sara was relieved that she wouldn't have to go into any dungeons, but she should have tried harder to anticipate what a bunch of people who didn't listen might get up to.

CHAPTER 1

AN EXCESS OF INVITED

Sara was a good sleeper. Or rather, she'd become a good sleeper after coming to this world. When she was in Japan, she was always tired, and she hardly ever woke up feeling well rested in the morning. She'd often thought about how healthy people probably didn't know that it took energy even to sleep.

"Mmm, what a nice morning."

Sara sat up and looked around the inn room she was staying in. It had white walls and two plain yet sturdy beds, a writing desk, and two chairs. It came with a closet, a bath, and a toilet too. It was nothing fancy, but it was apparently the nicest room in the inn managed by the Guild.

"Mmn."

In the other bed, Nelly's red hair stuck out from the blankets. She *wasn't* a very good sleeper. It would probably be a little while until she woke up.

Sara hopped out of bed and looked out the window. The inn was on the second floor of the guildhall, so she could see the Third District of the town from the window.

"We'll go to the Apothecary's Guild to sell my plants first, and then we'll go shopping. I'm gonna get some proper clothes today!"

Honestly speaking, Sara had hardly seen any girls around her age in town, so she had no idea what kind of clothes they wore, but the receptionist at the Guild, Mina, usually wore a plain long skirt at least, and she'd seen shop- and innkeepers wearing skirts too. Though there were of course also people who wore pants like Nelly.

"At least I've got money to spend. Yep..." Sara got a bit of a distant look in her eyes.

She'd spent two years up on the Dark Mountain gathering medicinal plants and saving up money. She'd also sold all the monsters that ran into her barrier every so often, so the money Nelly had been holding on to for her ended up being quite a sum. She felt

her shoulders sagging as she recalled the conversation they'd had when Nelly had returned and given her the money.

"If I'd had this money, I wouldn't have had such a hard time in Rosa..."

"S-Sorry... Now that I think about it, I could have brought it back to you every time I sold stuff or kept it in the storage bag in the kitchen. I just never thought you'd end up living by yourself in Rosa."

"Neither did I... But wait a second. Wasn't it all Ted's fault in the first place?"

Sara got so mad when she thought about how Ted didn't buy her medicinal plants just to be mean, and the Apothecary's Guild, which must have known about his behavior, did nothing to stop him.

"Well, whatever. It's in the past now."

Sara was quick to get over things too.

"Today I'll buy some clothes and stroll around town with Nelly, and then we'll stay one more night and head back to the Dark Mountain tomorrow."

By the time she'd reconfirmed her plans and changed her clothes, Nelly had finally woken up, so they went downstairs together.

"I was working at the Guild this whole time, but I didn't even know this inn was up here."

"I've stayed here before—that's how I knew."

They chatted as they headed for the cafeteria, passing a different crew at the reception desks and in the kitchen than the ones who usually worked when Sara did. The pair watched the guild lazily after finishing breakfast, until eventually the people Sara was used to all came in and switched with the morning shift.

"So there's a morning shift and a noon shift, huh? Wow."

"Well, the Guild's open from early in the morning till late at night."

Nelly smiled as she watched Sara get excited about seeing a different side to the Guild

than she usually did.

"Well, the Apothecary's Guild must be open by now. Let's go."

"*They're* not open early, huh?" Sara couldn't help jabbing. The people there just didn't seem like hard workers to her. "No, I guess it's better to be open at set hours." She needed to stop looking at things so negatively.

Just then, a flustered voice came from the reception desks. "Hey, if you're here, you should have said something!"

It was Vince. Sara had been giving him an amused look, thinking about how it seemed like he lived at the guild since he was always there, but he must commute after all. Apparently, he hadn't noticed Sara and Nelly himself, though.

"We have no such obligation," Nelly replied coldly. She took Sara and made to leave the guild.

"Hey, wait a second! Today's the thing, right? You're gonna go with the kids on their training mission."

"I don't remember agreeing to that. If Sara doesn't want to go into any dungeons, why should she have to look after other Hunters? Besides, we're going shopping today."

It was pretty hypocritical of Nelly to say that, since Sara was sure the Hunter would be happy to accompany her if she said she *did* want to go into a dungeon. Sara wasn't opposed to Nelly helping Allen train, of course, but the guildmaster seemed to be doing a good enough job at that right now, so it seemed there was no particular need for Nelly to step in.

Sara looked up at Nelly, who looked down at her and smiled. *Well, time to go shopping!*

"Oh, come on, it's one day! Just one day. I'll even go too! I can handle Allen, but that Invited who doesn't listen is too much for me."

"You think *I* can handle him?" asked Nelly.

"Sara..."

"I don't know if I can either..."

It was rare for Vince to struggle this much with something, but Sara wasn't all that keen on spending more time with Haruto the Invited either. Before she could flee, however, the doors to the guild flew open.

"Sara!"

Sara smiled widely when she saw Allen. Whether or not she'd accompany him on his training, she was always happy to see him.

"I'm so pumped for today! I can't wait to show you how much stamina I've got now!"

"Huh? But I'm not..."

"Well, it's just going for a bit of a long walk. Won't be a problem for me."

Haruto was, of course, with him. Was he staying at the guildmaster's house too?

The man himself poked his head in after Allen and Haruto. "Okay, let's see how far you can get today. We'll go as far as we can, stay the night, and then come back tomorrow."

"No, we won't! When was this decided? I'm not going!" Sara insisted.

"Come on, Nelly," Vince started up again. "The Dark Mountain was fine when you left for a few months, so it'll be fine if you take a few more days to get back to it. You don't owe Haruto anything, but Allen's helped Sara out, right?"

"I mean, I appreciate him looking out for Sara..."

Uh-oh. Nelly was convinced now.

"Well, you don't want to go into dungeons, but the meadow isn't a dungeon, right? It's only got cute little horned rabbits and cotton sheep anyway."

"They're not cute," Sara insisted. Not everything fluffy was cute.

However, when Allen told her, "I want you to see how strong I am now, Sara," she had no choice but to go along with it.

"You have to let me go sell my plants at the Apothecary's Guild first, though!"

"Of course. It's on the way to the east gate, so that's perfect," the guildmaster said, raring to go. There was no way Sara could tell them she wanted to go look at clothes first now.

"We'll go shopping when we come back, for sure..."

"Yeah."

Nelly had fully defected now, so Sara reluctantly went along.

The Apothecary's Guild was to the east past the Second Wall. Sara had bad memories associated with the place, and not a great impression of it, to be honest. Not to mention, *Ted* was waiting for her there.

Sara steeled herself in front of the guildhall and opened the doors.

"Hello!" Sara called into the work area in the back. Unlike the Hunter's Guild, the counter here was right in front.

"Coming... Oh, you're..."

It wasn't Ted who came out of the back. It was the vice guildmaster, Sara was pretty sure. Seeing that Sara was alone, he asked her, "If you're here, Nefertari must be here too, right?"

"Yes, she's outside."

"Can you give me a minute, then? If I don't let Chris know, he'll throw a fit later."

The vice guildmaster popped into the back and the guildmaster Chris quickly appeared, rushing outside without sparing Sara so much as a glance. The other apothecary watched him with an exasperated expression before finally turning back to Sara.

"Sorry about that. Selling plants today?"

"Yes. Here you go." Sara took out her gathering basket from the storage pouch at her waist and handed it directly to the apothecary. It was full to bursting with medicinal plants she'd gathered up on the Dark Mountain.

"These really do help. We've been gathering in Rosa too lately, so things aren't quite as bad as they were before, but still. Give me a second, I'll count these up."

"Okay."

Sara was relieved that she hadn't run into any particular trouble. She sneaked a peek into the work area in the back.

"Looking for Ted?" the apothecary asked as he carefully counted Sara's plants.

"No," she said, maybe a little too fast.

"Ted's outside the First Wall right now, gathering plants."

"*Ted* is?" Sara was honestly surprised.

"It's not just Ted. He's got some young apprentices with him and old folks who have too much time on their hands. It's pretty hard to identify the plants, so he's not bringing in a ton of them, but it's nice out since it's spring now, so there are more people interested than you'd expect."

"I thought Ted was all about making other people do the work for him," she couldn't help blurting out. She'd also thought Ted was just a grunt, the lowest rank of apothecary, so she was surprised to find out that he wasn't.

"Well, there's finally someone around here who treats him like an equal, which seems to have motivated him lately."

"I'm surprised you guys have someone like that," Sara told him, straight-faced.

"Ha ha ha, so you're clueless, huh? Umm, what was your name again?"

"It's Sara."

"Sara, you don't hold back at all with Ted. I guess Allen's the same way."

"I think Ted could stand to hold back a little himself."

There was nothing to praise Ted for, so Sara naturally found herself being strict with him. The apothecary was about to say something else when Vince called out from the

doorway.

"Hurry it up, Sara."

"Ugh. I'll come and collect my fee later."

"There's a lot to count, so that would help. I'll give you back the basket now."

Sara hurried outside. She'd come to like Rosa a lot, but for some reason, she could never do things at her own pace here, which wasn't great.

"I had a lot of plants, so I decided to come get my payment later," she reported to everyone. She'd learned firsthand the importance of sharing information...

"Ah, Sara." Chris finally acknowledged her.

She'd been here this whole time. In fact, he'd walked right past her in the guildhall. Sara wanted to point this out, but she held herself back. She knew Chris only had eyes for Nelly.

"So you'll be back again soon too, Nef."

"Maybe."

"If you'll come again, then there's no need for us to part now. Jay."

"What?"

It was the first time she'd heard Chris call the guildmaster Jay, but the two of them were both guildmasters, she supposed, so using their titles would be confusing. There was nothing strange about them using each other's names.

"I'll go too. I'm worried about the children."

"Oh yeah? Well, sure. Whatever your reasons are, having an apothecary along can't hurt. This is an overnight trip, just so you know."

"That's fine."

Sara was sure she wasn't the only one thinking that he couldn't give a crap about the

kids and only wanted to come so he could tag along with Nelly. It didn't make a difference to Sara who came as long as they didn't create more work for her. Maybe she should try to get along with Haruto, she decided. Of course, if they talked about good old Japan as fellow Invited, then Allen would be left out of their conversation. What would be a safe topic of conversation...?

"Hey, Haruto."

"Me?" Haruto turned to Sara with surprise, which surprised Sara in turn.

"Yeah. You came from the capital, right?"

"That's right. This is my first time to a town outside the capital."

She was relieved that he'd responded to her question in a normal way.

"What's living in the capital like?"

"What do you mean? It's normal?"

Why was it a question?

"Mm... Well, how much do things cost compared to Rosa, for instance? How much is a piece of bread in the capital?"

"Bread just comes with your food, doesn't it? I don't know."

"Huh? Then what's it cost to stay at an inn for a night? It's five thousand gil to stay in the Guild inn."

"I don't know. I have a mansion."

He was proving a formidable foe. Actually, he was sounding a lot like Nelly sometimes did...

"Let me guess, you figure if you hand someone a hundred-thousand-gil coin, things will more or less work out?"

"Wouldn't they?"

"You're a noble, then..." Sara said with a wry grin, recalling what Nelly had told her way back in the beginning about the Invited.

"That's just normal, isn't it? In the capital, the Invited are just automatically assigned to a noble house where they live. I only know one other, though."

"There's one more, huh? Isn't that stifling, though?"

"Sure, I guess, but for a body that actually works, it's a small price to pay."

Yeah, I guess, Sara thought as she looked up at the sky. It was because she had boundless strength here that she'd been dragged along on this test, but that was still way better than being paralyzed with exhaustion.

She was slightly surprised to find herself having a normal conversation with Haruto. She was curious about the other Invited in the capital, but she could ask about that later, she decided.

"How old are you, Haruto?"

"Fourteen. Hey, you're doing all the questioning here. What... What about... you?"

For being fourteen, he was the same height as Allen and kinda scrawny. Maybe he was just the thin-boned type, she decided.

"I'm twelve, like Allen," she told him.

"Oh. So you're younger than me. Well, just leave things to me out here then, Sara."

Haruto thrust his chest out. Sara decided he really did look younger than fourteen.

Allen jabbed an elbow into him. "What are you saying? We're only out here to see if we even have as much stamina as Sara does."

"Are you stupid? Of course we do."

"*I do. You don't,* Haruto."

"No, I definitely do."

They passed through the east gate with that rather stupid exchange.

"There are still a lot of horned rabbits out here," the guildmaster observed.

"It's always like this lately," Nelly said dryly.

"Well, guess I'll take the lead. It's been a while. Kinda want Sara to do it though, I'll admit." Vince stepped forward, cracking his neck. Sara had *no* desire to take any sort of lead, incidentally.

"Vince and I'll take point," said the guildmaster. "Haruto and Allen will follow us. Then Nelly and Sara. And Chris..."

"I'll go last," he said. "Don't get hurt, okay? It'll be a pain to deal with."

Sara agreed with the guildmaster's positioning.

Allen pointed south. "Wait, what's that?"

There were several people gathered near the east gate. There may have been a protection field out here, but it was still rare to see people from the town outside the gates.

"Huh, they're gathering plants. Oh! It's Ted!"

That characteristic blond hair and figure could only belong to Ted. Not only that, he wasn't just overseeing the gathering, he was actually crouched down on the ground carefully gathering plants himself. He even looked like he was having *fun*. Right, that apothecary had said Ted was out doing this, hadn't he?

"Should we say hi...?" she asked Allen.

"Let's just leave him be."

With Sara and Allen's firm agreement on the matter, their silly little outing-slash-stamina test began.

"What the heck?! They're so fluffy, and they're everywhere! How cute!"

Soon after they got into formation, Haruto's voice rang out across the meadow. It

looked like there might be more horned rabbits out than usual. Maybe they'd sensed a big group coming.

Sara looked down at the horned rabbits with disgust, agreeing in part that they did *look* cute if nothing else.

"Weren't there horned rabbits near the road to the capital too?"

"I only saw them from afar when I was close to the city. Also, I came to Rosa by carriage, and I didn't see many of them on the way either."

"Looks like this really is the only place that has this many of them." Vince crossed his arms in frustration.

"These guys are the biggest hurdle in getting to the Dark Mountain, or the north dungeon. If you're just standin' around thinkin' about how cute they are, they'll gut you with their horns."

"I'll be fine. Hey, I wonder if you can tame these."

He was free to dream, Sara thought as she stared up at the sky above them.

"Hey, Mister Bunnyyy!"

"Whoa, hold on! What do you think this formation's for?!"

Lured by the bunnies, Haruto had already taken a step outside the town's protection field by the time Vince shouted at him. Sara hurriedly made to raise her barrier, but she was too late.

Wham!

Wham!

"Look!" Haruto turned around with a big grin, holding a horned rabbit.

Sara noticed he was only using physical strengthening on his arms and the rest of his body was covered in a barrier much like Sara's. Even with physical strengthening, when something rammed into you, it'd knock you off-balance, but barriers reflected the shock, so you wouldn't take any damage from a tackle.

“Sara, Allen, you want to touch it? It’s super fluffy!”

“Wait, wait, wait, look at it! It’s biting your arm and kicking you as hard as it can! They’re carnivores, you know?” Sara protested.

“Good bunny, good bunny, don’t be scared!”

“I’m telling you, it’s not scared! I think it’s super pissed, actually! Let it go already!”

Eventually growing tired of the struggling rabbit, Haruto let it go, but everyone other than Sara was too surprised to even react to the whole thing. Of course, if he’d been in trouble, she was sure they would have rushed to his aid, but Haruto had been so amused by the whole thing they must not have known how to react.

“The Invited are nuts,” Vince grumbled.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” the guildmaster muttered in response.

“Are you serious...?”

The two of them deserved their positions as the top two members of the Guild, of course. They recovered quickly and made sure to set Haruto straight.

“Listen, the formation is important. If you can’t listen to what we say, we won’t give you permission to go to the Dark Mountain.”

“I got it.”

“There’s no protection field around the road. You have to be ready for horned rabbits to attack at any time.”

“Yessir.”

Vince gave Haruto a dubious look but swiftly turned to look back at Sara and Nelly instead. “We’ll start out at our quickest pace and see if they can keep up with us. You okay with that too, Sara?”

“If I said I wasn’t, you’d still do it, wouldn’t you?”

“Well, I guess so.” Vince grinned and stood next to the guildmaster, signaling Chris to

the back before leaving the protection field and setting off.

Haruto acquiesced surprisingly easily, lining up with Allen and walking off behind them.

Wham!

Wham!

The horned rabbits didn't waste any time lunging at them. They weren't out here to hunt, so Allen knocked down only the rabbits that came close to hitting him and Haruto did nothing, simply letting the rabbits be repelled by his barrier. Sara did the same, of course.

Vince and the guildmaster's walking speed was quick, but Sara was able to keep up easily enough. Allen and Haruto didn't seem to be having any issues either.

"Is that a barrier you're using, Haruto?"

"A barrier? Sure, I guess you could call it that. Barrier's such a lame name, though..."

"Hey, don't say that!" Allen tried to stop Haruto, but he couldn't exactly take the words back now that they'd already left his mouth. He didn't seem to notice Sara glaring at him from behind them.

"Well, what do you call it, then?"

"Me?" Haruto held his arm out in front of him for no reason and intoned, "Bastion."

"That's the same thing," Sara couldn't help interjecting.

"Bastion's cooler!"

"Barrier is way easier to say."

"What does it matter? You don't need to say the name to use it anyway."

Allen stepped in to mediate between the two, but Sara was not convinced.

With only little irritations like that, the first hour passed smoothly. When they found

a spot where the protection field was still intact, they decided to take a break. Of course, walking for an hour was nothing to Sara after two years of training.

“This is nothing.”

Haruto sat, breathing slightly harder. Watching him from behind, Sara found herself pondering something. The two of them were both Invited, so they wouldn’t run out of mana no matter how much physical strengthening they used or how long they maintained their barriers. But if you weren’t used to walking for a long time, you’d still get blisters or sore feet. That was why it had taken Sara two years to make the trip into Rosa.

Sara had noticed something off about Haruto’s gait. He seemed unbalanced, like he was leaning forward and he wasn’t lifting his thighs at all. In other words, he didn’t look like he was used to walking for long periods at a time whatsoever.

“Haruto, I never really asked, but just what sort of work did you do as a Hunter in the capital?” Allen asked him. He must have noticed the same thing Sara had.

“Well, I went into dungeons pretty much every day with my party. I had fun testing out all kinds of magic down there. Other than migrating dragon season, when I had to help out, I was pretty much allowed to do anything I wanted.”

“Oh? You helped out with the dragons, eh?” Vince sounded impressed. He must not have been listening when they were talking in the guild.

“Yeah, that’s where I got to know Miss Nelly.”

“We didn’t get to know each other. We just worked together.” Nelly was as cold as usual.

“Dungeons in the capital, huh? They’re right outside of town, yeah?”

“No, no, not those baby dungeons. The south dungeon.”

“Well, that one’s far away from the town, right?”

Allen had lived in the capital before, so he was familiar with the geography.

“I took a carriage from my mansion.”

"A carriage... So that's why. How long did you spend down there?"

"I'd go around noon and come back in the evening. I do get kinda tired when I use bigger spells."

"Hmmm."

Everyone other than Haruto seemed to come to the same conclusion then. Haruto was an Invited and *did* have a lot of mana, and he might have been working as a Hunter. But he did it as a noble, and he had never done any hard training. In other words, he had no stamina.

Even a tough kid like Allen was receiving training from the guildmaster to improve his stamina. Of course, it was pointless for everyone else to realize this if Haruto himself did not.

Vince looked around again and sighed. "Those horned rabbits are really something. I'd heard about the issue, but I didn't think there would really be this many of them."

"I wrote about it in my report," the guildmaster said, his lips pursed, but there were things that were hard to believe without seeing them for yourself. There were more and more horned rabbits the closer you got to the Dark Mountain from the east gate. There were so many around the clearing where they were resting that the meadow around them looked gray.

"I'll deal with the lot of 'em." Haruto quickly rose to his feet.

"We're just here to make the trip today, so you don't need to do anything about 'em."

"Here I go."

"No, seriously, wait. You really don't listen, do you?"

Ignoring Vince, Haruto held his arms up animatedly. Everyone was just watching him curiously, but Sara was on pins and needles. Just what did he intend to do?

"Dungeons are real cramped, you know. There's something I've always wanted to try out in an open space."

"Wait, I don't think you should do that." Someone had to stop him. If no one else was

going to, Sara decided to speak up. But Haruto, of course, was not listening.

“Gather, dark clouds... Gather, rise up, and form a galaxy!”

“Hold on, clouds don’t form galaxies,” Sara piped up. She was beginning to feel some odd obligation to keep making comments like this.

Above Haruto’s head and slightly ahead of him, dark clouds began to spread out over the meadow. They pulled together, lightning sparking here and there inside.

“Let’s do this.”

“I really don’t think you should.”

“Fly, shooting star... Cosmic Dust!”

Light rained down from the clouds above them, and a second later, there was nothing left alive in the meadow below.

“Couldn’t you just leave it at shooting star?!” Sara’s voice rang out fruitlessly in the silence.

As Haruto delighted in the success of his magic while everyone else watched, stunned, the grass, still dry from winter, slowly began to burn.



“Huh? What?”

“What do you mean, ‘huh’? I knew this would happen...” Sara stood up, having no other choice, and raised her arms up to the sky just like Haruto had. “Let’s see... Just do it like the magic textbook said... ‘Mana will empower you in whatever way you imagine. Keep your mana level in mind and don’t push yourself as you picture the magic you want to cast.’”

Clouds began to gather above Sara this time.

“Hey, Sara, you’re not gonna...”

“Don’t worry, Vince.”

The clouds grew thick enough to darken the whole area around them.

“Sprinkler!”

“Lame.”

So what if it’s lame? Just as Sara had declared, rain fell from the clouds like a sprinkler, putting out the fires in the meadow. Sara watched it, feeling a little sad, and then said, “Okay, Haruto. Let’s go.”

“Huh? Go where?”

“Into the meadow. We have to go pick up the horned rabbits.”

Maybe Haruto was satisfied simply shooting off a big spell, but he’d taken the lives of a great number of horned rabbits with his magic. Horned rabbits were ferocious monsters, and since there were so many of them, it only made sense to cull them for the safety of the people. Still, there was something Sara felt she needed to say to Haruto.

“Haruto!”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m coming.”

“Look.” Sara knelt down next to a dead horned rabbit. “Your lightning magic ruined most of the fur on this one. There are probably a lot of them that can’t be eaten

anymore either. You can still harvest their magic stones, but these are worthless as meat and pelts now. Sure, you finished off a lot of them all at once, but what do you think of this as a Hunter?"

Sara wasn't a Hunter herself and she certainly wasn't in any position to be teaching anyone anything, but she'd been taught by Nelly the importance of making use of the bodies of the monsters you killed, even if it was just a single slime.

"They may be monsters," she continued, "but they were living things up until just a second ago. They're all fluffy, right? It's important to cull the numbers of dangerous monsters, and it's important to defend yourself as well of course, but this isn't a good way to do it. It's not right."

After saying all that, Sara began quietly picking up horned rabbits. She was going to give them all to Haruto later, of course. She wanted whatever could be sold to be sold and whatever could be eaten to be eaten. She felt that was the responsibility of a Hunter.

Haruto must have seen some truth to her words, because he started picking up horned rabbits without arguing. Eventually, he said, "You sound like Bradley."

"Bradley?"

"Another Invited. He's older than me."

"Oh, the other one in the capital?" Sara turned and looked at Nelly, who nodded. Evidently, she knew him.

"Bradley's got a lot of common sense."

"*That's* what reminds you of him?" That felt like very important information, though. Sara was thrilled to hear that the other Invited wasn't the reckless type like Haruto.

"Part of it's that he's older than me, but he said it's also 'cause he has experience as a working adult. He's kind of a nag, but he worries about me too."

"He sounds like a nice guy."

Bradley was a foreign name. Haruto looked Japanese to Sara, and she'd wondered if the Invited were *all* Japanese, but maybe they weren't. There were all sorts of things

Sara wanted to ask Haruto, but she wasn't sure what she should ask in front of other people, so she hesitated to say much.

"There haven't been any fluffy monsters in the dungeons I've been in so far. I thought these were cute and kind of wondered if I could keep one as a pet, but I guess I just killed a bunch of those cute monsters, huh?"

"Well, they *are* monsters."

There were even times when Sara found those mountain wolves cute. But they were monsters, so there were lines that had to be drawn.

"But the magic was cool, right?" Haruto sounded proud as he stuffed horned rabbits into his storage bag.

Sara's answer was harsh, however. "Eh, not really."

"Why not?"

"The incantation's too long. And none of it fits together. Besides, I don't get what's wrong with 'barrier'."

Sara hadn't forgotten that he'd called her barrier uncool.

"Wait, you..." Stuffing the last horned rabbit into his bag, Haruto exclaimed, "You're so plain I didn't notice, but you're an Invited, aren't you?!"

"You just realized this *now*?"

How did he think a totally normal girl was living up on the Dark Mountain? Not to mention, he'd very rudely called her plain.

"So the barrier Miss Nelly used in the capital was something you thought up. And since my bastion copies that, it's based on your barrier too. How lame!"

"Could you be *more* rude? And you were copying me the whole time too?"

"S-Sorry. I'm grateful to you for the idea, really. I always thought physical strengthening was enough, so I never thought about using shield magic in all directions. The name's lame, but the magic itself is great."

"It's not lame." Sara turned her head away with a huff and walked back to the clearing.
"You used my barrier back in the capital, Nelly?"

"Not exactly. I sort of stretched out my physical strengthening, so it wasn't shield magic, but, umm..." Nelly scratched her nose bashfully. "I just wanted to say 'barrier' like you do, Sara. And I guess that Invited was listening."

"Nef... you're so adorable," Chris sighed.

Ignoring the apothecary and his solitary show of fondness, Sara sat down next to Nelly and bumped shoulders with her. "It was kinda fun when you said it, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. It's embarrassing when somebody hears you though, so I'll keep it to myself."

"That figures."

Even if the rude Invited called her plain or lame, as long as she and Nelly were having fun, that was good enough for Sara. Haruto eventually apologized to her, evidently thinking that he'd said too much after all, so Sara forgave him.

"Okay, should we get going?" Vince asked calmly, and everyone stood and started walking again.

Sara took off, nervous to find out what Haruto would do next, but she didn't need to worry. This time he just chatted with Allen as he walked.

As they walked, however, Sara noticed Allen looking down at Haruto's feet more and more frequently. Sara could tell exactly what he was looking at. Haruto had started dragging one foot. He almost certainly had a blister.

Strangely enough, dungeons had stairs in them, and the ground could become uneven in places down there, so Haruto was equipped to deal with such terrain, but that was different from simply walking for a long time. He could use physical strengthening to push himself forward as much as he wanted, but what hurt still hurt.

"Okay, stop."

Sara didn't miss Haruto's shoulders sagging with relief when Vince instructed everyone to stop. He probably intended to use a potion on their break to heal his injury and then keep walking.

“Haruto, was it? Show me your foot.”

“Huh? It’s fine. I can just use a little potion on it.”

“Show it to me,” Chris insisted, and Haruto reluctantly revealed the blister on his foot. Observing the blister closely, Chris looked up with his hand still on Haruto’s foot. “Jay, Vince, we’ll stop here today.”

“Guess so.”

Vince and the guildmaster both nodded without hesitation and sat down.

“Huh? Hey, wait. It’s barely even noon.”

“You want to use a potion on it and keep walking, right? But look at your legs.”

Haruto’s legs were trembling all over.

“You don’t have the muscle to walk like this. You’re still young, so you don’t need to put on as much muscle as Jay or anything, but there’s no point to any of this if you don’t build up a bit more stamina. You need to be pretty strong to use physical strengthening in the first place.”

“Then I should use a potion and walk back to town instead of resting here, shouldn’t I?”

“Don’t waste a potion on a blister. Sara?”

Sara stood. She’d been expecting this. She knew Chris was a bit of a slave driver, and she had confidence that of all the people here other than him, she knew the most about medicinal plants.

“A healing herb?”

“Yes. Fresh ones are best. Thank you.”

“No worries.”

“I’ll go too.”

Allen went with her. Even just outside the clearing where they were resting, Sara quickly found healing herbs. The grass was longer than it was in winter though, so it was a little harder to spot the herbs than usual.

Wham!

Wham!

She was used to the sound of horned rabbits crashing against her barrier by now. She plucked a nearby healing herb and hurried back to Haruto and Chris.

“You know what to do, Sara?”

“Rub the herb in my hand and stick it to the blister”

“Show me.”

Sara did as Chris asked, rubbing the herb and carefully applying it to Haruto’s blister as Nelly had shown her. Then she wrapped it with the strips of towel left over from the last time she’d done this.

“It should heal in half a day or so.”

“Mm. A passing grade.” Chris nodded, satisfied, but Sara just gave him a vacant stare, wondering what it was she’d passed.

“Are you serious, Sara?” Haruto’s genuine question was a lot easier for Sara to understand.

“Yeah, I’ve done this before too. The first time I did my own hiking training, I got a blister too.”

Nelly smiled. “I was shocked that you couldn’t even walk for an hour back then, Sara.”

“We had to take a break after an hour, then walked for another two hours with breaks here and there, and I couldn’t walk anymore after three hours ‘cause of my blister, so I was basically the same as you, Haruto.”

“So you couldn’t do it at first either.” Haruto sighed with relief.

"Nelly uses potions right away too. And high-grade ones, at that. It's such a waste when just sticking a healing herb on it will fix it."

Allen nodded beside her, but he didn't forget to add, "Don't take what she says at face value, Haruto. It's true that it's not good to waste potions, but there aren't that many people who know how to find healing herbs or use them like that either, okay?"

Now that Sara thought about it, if you got hurt in a dungeon, there wouldn't necessarily be healing herbs for you to use there. It was just that this meadow and the Dark Mountain, where Sara lived, both happened to have plentiful healing herbs growing around.

"But you won't be able to make a living as a Hunter if you have to buy potions for every little injury. First, try not to *get* hurt, and second, let injuries that will heal naturally do so. Those are the basics."

"Even the locals think like that? I thought since there were potions here, people would just use them for everything."

Sara burst out laughing. The way he'd said "the locals" had tickled her.

"I always thought you didn't have a lot of common sense, Sara... Is the world of the Invited that different?"

"Why are you dragging me into this, Vince?! I had nothing to do with any of that!" Sara waved her hands in front of her face. Haruto, meanwhile, was sincerely answering Vince's question.

"I was really weak and in the hospital all the time until I was ten, so I don't really know that much about my world either. Bradley knows a lot about it though, so you can ask him if you want."

"So the Invited really don't live for long in their original world."

Sara was shocked to hear both of their words. First, she was surprised at herself for having forgotten that the Invited here likely lived all sorts of different lives before coming to this world. She herself had always been so exhausted she couldn't say she'd fully enjoyed her life either.

Vince's rather direct words surprised her too. That goddess-like person had told her

she'd had a short life expectancy too, she supposed. Sara had completely forgotten about that, since she found herself about to be lunch for a wolf the moment she was reincarnated into this world. She was simply desperate to survive.

"They say the Invited usually show up here when they're around ten."

"Yeah, that's when I came here. It's been four years since then, huh?"

Sara had been twenty-seven before she reincarnated. She was fatigued all the time, but she'd been a working member of society. But Haruto had come here when he was actually ten years old. And without experiencing much in their old world either. Then he was immediately taken in by a noble house and lived under their protection. Sara was starting to understand why he seemed younger than he was.

When he gave her a smug look after mentioning his four years here, however, Sara's sympathetic feelings for him blew away on the gentle breeze. His "I'm two years your senior" look infuriated her.

Doing her best to ignore her irritation, Sara decided to get lunch ready. If they were going to be staying here, that meant they were camping. They had plenty of time this afternoon, so she was excited to spend it gathering plants and chatting with Allen, just having fun.

"Okay, I'll boil water first."

Sara took out her portable stove and pot, and Haruto came over, looking curious.

"You carry this stuff around with you?"

"Of course. This is a necessity for going between Rosa and the Dark Mountain."

"Wow..."

Haruto's eyes sparkled at the sight of her camping equipment and Sara's mood improved just like that.

Watching Sara, Nelly spoke up as if something had just occurred to her. "Jay, Vince."

"Yeah?"

It was rare for Nelly to initiate a conversation.

"I'll watch the kids, so you can go back to town if you want. I know you're busy, Vince."

She must have been worried about the two of them.

"So, I get to stay," Chris said smugly.

"I'm busy too, you know," the guildmaster insisted.

Nelly ignored both of them.

"Nah. I want to take it easy too, since I've got the opportunity," said Vince, reclining on the grass. "I dunno how long it's been since I've had half a day off."

Looking at him, Sara wondered if she really *had* tagged along out here for no reason.

"Want to have some hot soup for lunch, Sara?"

It was rare for Nelly to make a suggestion like that. Sara readily agreed.

"I've got a whole pot of soup in my pouch, so we can have that. Can I use your stove, Nelly? I want to make tea with mine."

"Got it."

Under everyone's curious gazes, they lined up Sara's stove and Nelly's, which looked like it had hardly seen any use, and Sara took a large pot of soup out from her storage pouch. Inside the pot was tomato soup with cockatrice. It would be dangerous to take it out of the pouch if she put it in still hot, so she'd let it cool down first, intending to divvy it up later.

She set the pot on the stove and filled the other pot with water so she could boil it later. She could make the tea after they ate.

Everyone else took out their own lunches and cups as they watched Sara work. Haruto followed suit a beat after everyone else. Sara then poured everyone cups of hot soup. It reminded her of being on lunch duty at school.

"Don't you make money heating up lunches, Sara? Can't you just heat the soup up the

same way?" Vince asked her.

Sara smiled wryly. "Well, sure, but I have all these camping tools, so I want to use them."

"Right? I'm gonna buy some when we get back to town too!" Haruto agreed enthusiastically.

Allen shook his head. "No thanks for me. It's too much of a pain."

"Same here."

Everyone else seemed to be on the "too much work" side. Sara chuckled when Nelly raised her hand to agree.

"But it's fun to sleep outside."

"Yeah! I'm glad we didn't go back to town."

It seemed Haruto had changed his mind despite talking about going back to town earlier.

Chris and Allen ate silently while the old guys from the Guild ate with enthusiasm.

"Delicious! Your food is always amazing, Sara."

"That lunch I had before was good, but this soup's good too. And this meat inside, is it...?"

"Oh, it's cockatrice."

"I thought so! Felt like that was what was in the lunch I ate too."

Vince got that far-off look in his eyes at Sara's answer. "Nelly, don't feed the kid such fancy stuff from such a young age."

"Sorry. It's just that when you want fresh meat up on the Dark Mountain, you don't have many options other than cockatrice and gargoyle."

"Gargoyle? Did you say gargoyle? With that and the golden trout, you make it sound

like the Dark Mountain's a paradise! It's supposed to be full of dangerous monsters!
Oh, Sara, can I get some more soup?"

"Me too."

"Same here."

"Yes, yes."

Everyone wanted seconds. Sara pictured the contents of her storage pouch as she poured them soup.

"I should have some roast gargoyle in my pouch right now. Gargoyles are so funny the way they roll around, aren't they?"

"You're the funny one, Sara." Vince pointed his spoon at Sara as he chewed some meat. What bad manners. "Listen, you might think it's funny to watch gargoyles roll around, but it's really dangerous if you get hit by one doing that. And nobody normally has roast gargoyle just sitting in a pouch."

"Really?" Sara asked blithely as she considered whether or not to wash the now-empty soup pot before putting it away. She had certainly gotten the sense that Nelly's lifestyle up on the Dark Mountain wasn't exactly normal.

"Well, we're all full from lunch now, so we'll save the gargoyle for dinner"

"Please do so."

"Sure thing."

As she was handing out the last of the tea, the guildmaster's face lit up in recollection.

"Oh yeah, I forgot my wife gave me an apple pie to take with me."

"Jay! How could you forget something so important?! I'm full already!"

Chris explained the reason for Vince's irritation. "Jay's wife makes excellent pies. We're all full now, so let's have it later as a snack."

"Sounds good!"

"A snack? I didn't take you for the type, Chris..." Vince muttered, but Sara didn't see anything wrong with a cool, good-looking guy liking sweets.

The boys, meanwhile, were discussing their afternoon plans.

"Haruto, want to pick plants together in the afternoon? Even if your legs are shaking, you can do that much, right?"

"They're not shaking. I'm perfectly fine."

He was in, then. His legs were, of course, shaking, but his eyes were twinkling. Sara nodded to herself in agreement. Allen only thought of gathering plants as work, but it was a fun activity! Haruto would understand if he tried it.

Sara appreciated that Allen didn't rely on her for things like this. It would be fastest to ask her about plant-gathering, but he planned to do what he could without going to her for help.

"I'll join you," Chris said, rising to his feet.

The other adults all lay down on the ground or propped up on their elbows, thoroughly relaxed.

Sara watched them somewhat coldly before asking, "Should I put up my barrier?"

"It's probably a good idea. Until I'm confident I can identify the right plants, I'd like to concentrate on that."

Sara put up her barrier so Allen could gather without worrying about horned rabbits. They crashed against the outside of the barrier, but Sara had expanded it so that the four of them had plenty of room to work, so they weren't scary at all.

"Here you go."

"This is..."

While Allen and Haruto happily gathered plants inside the barrier with no qualms, Chris stepped inside gingerly. And with physical strengthening still activated, no less.

"You can create a protection field with no tools. This is convenient," he muttered,

stepping in and out of the barrier. “Shield magic spread out in every direction, hmm...? Let me try.”

“Wait! I wanna try too. You’re just an apothecary; don’t underestimate what a caster can do!” Vince leaped up and stood next to Chris. “You’re super good at physical strengthening too. You’ve got too many talents, Chris. You could be a Hunter that’d put Jay to shame, so why are you an apothecary instead?”

“Because I enjoy being one, of course.”

“Hey, I’m good at what I do, okay?!?” the guildmaster retorted from a slight distance away, but he remained on the ground, lying still.

Sara knew everyone respected Chris as the talented guildmaster of the Apothecary’s Guild, but she didn’t know he had all those other skills. Oblivious to her surprise, Chris stood on the border of Sara’s barrier, concentrating on his own mana.

“Shield magic is easy enough, but keeping it up in every direction when there aren’t any enemies around is just a waste of mana. It’s something only an Invited would think of. Interesting, though.”

“I know all that.”

Chris and Vince seemed to be on pretty good terms.

Sara had only one comment regarding the apothecary. “He’s not picking plants with us at all...”

She decided to leave Chris and Vince alone and check in on Allen and Haruto instead.

“Look, this is an example. Study it carefully.”

Allen had a healing herb in his hand and was showing it to Haruto. He must have picked it back when Sara had plucked the one for Haruto’s blister. Sara was impressed.

“There’s a lot of tall grass in this season so it can be hard to find them, so you crouch down like this.”

“I see.”

"First just memorize how this plant looks, then search for more of them, and take your time. The leaves of healing herbs have this whitish part on the underside, which you'll notice right away when you get used to it."

"Let me try."

Seeing Haruto not just crouch down but get on his hands and knees, observing his surroundings carefully, Sara wondered if she'd taught Allen this carefully... She was pretty sure she'd just handed him the book and showed him what she did herself.

She'd always wondered why more people didn't gather plants, when it was easy enough for Sara and Allen to do it without any trouble, but maybe the Apothecary's Guild just didn't have anyone this observant or good at teaching other people. The Hunter's Guild operated in a similar way, expecting people to mainly figure things out themselves.

"I wonder if Ted's actually taking his time to teach the people of the town properly... Couldn't be." Sara shook her head, chasing the thought from her mind. If he was capable of that, then he could have just done it to begin with without relying on Sara to gather plants for him.

"Hey, Sara."

As Sara watched over Allen and Haruto, Nelly called out to her from a short distance away.

"Yeah?" Sara turned around to find Nelly curiously watching the good-for-nothing pair of adults screwing around with Sara's barrier.

"Your barrier should be able to repel anything, so how come those two can go in and out of it without any trouble?"

"Huh?"

Now that she mentioned it, the two of them had been going in and out of her barrier over and over again, observing its mana carefully.

"Is it not working?" Sara wondered. "It's repelling rabbits, though. So..."

"Are people just free to go in and out of it?" Nelly stood and strode straight inside Sara's

barrier.

"You got in... Am I just letting people in? It repelled the knights, though... But it repelled you the first time I did it, didn't it? Maybe I just don't let in things I don't trust."

Sara thought back to her scuffle with the knights.

"Why not pick someone to consider a bad guy and test it out, then?" Nelly suggested.

"A bad guy? Everyone here's been nice to me, though." That was a tough suggestion.
"But if I had to pick..." Sara glanced in Chris's direction.

"Wait. Me? Why me? Nef is so important to me!"

"Yes, Nelly is important to you, but you don't care about me at all, do you?" Sara asked him honestly.

Everyone looked in various directions, an awkward air settling between them. But Chris just shrugged and shook his head.

"Well, that's only natural, isn't it?"

"Only natural? Not, 'Well, I'll try to show that I care a little more in the future?' Apothecaries really must see things differently than normal people," Sara muttered to herself. Allen shot her a sympathetic look, but no one else paid her any mind.

"That being said, I can still freely enter and leave. Now, think of me as an enemy," Chris said somewhat arrogantly, stepping out of the barrier.

"Why do you sound so full of yourself? An enemy, though... Hmm... What if instead of thinking of him as an enemy, I remember how sad I felt when Nelly was gone and I realized I couldn't rely on him? What an unreliable, unreliable man..." she muttered, feeling sadder and sadder.

"I'm not sure how I feel about this, but I suppose it's unavoidable," Chris muttered as well, raising his hand toward the barrier as Sara hung her head and ruminated on her sadness. "Ugh..."

There was no sound effect or anything, but Chris's hand was repelled from the barrier. Undaunted, Chris rammed into the barrier with his shoulder. "Ack!" He bounced back

from it, falling to the ground.

"That's surprising. Sara's feelings influence it that much, huh?" Nelly nodded to herself, stepping in and out of the barrier again. So it wasn't just people in general, it was specific individuals she was rejecting.

Chris looked dejected to see that. "I feel like my heart's being repelled along with my body, and I can't say I like that. Sara, could you stop thinking of me as an enemy?"

"Sure." Sara stopped thinking about her sad feelings. However...

"Ack! I still can't get in!"

"It's hard to change how you feel about someone right away, huh?"

There was a bit of a commotion for a time after that.

"Hey, Sara. I always thought you'd be safe sleeping in a tent or whatever 'cause your barrier would repel people, but can it tell who to let in or keep out while you're asleep? I'm kinda worried now. It doesn't seem like it works unconsciously."

Allen took a break from his plant-gathering to give Sara a worried look. Sara nodded to herself, appreciative of his concern for her.

"I think you and Nelly could probably get in whenever you want at this point."

"That's not good, Sara. You should make it repel everything."

Nelly gave Sara the same worried look. She also seemed to exchange a look with Vince and the other men, but Sara couldn't see them doing anything dangerous, so she wasn't too worried.

"Let me try what I was curious about before and see if I can create shields out in every direction at once."

"No, wait, Chris. You'd have to layer a ton of shields over one another to do that, wouldn't you?"

"Well, that was my plan."

"You'd have to be controlling so many shields at once that your mana would run out in an instant."

As Chris and Vince discussed the matter seriously, Haruto, with his eyes still trained on the ground looking for plants, said to them, "The thing we—Or well, the thing I pictured when I heard about Sara's bastion—"

"My barrier." Sara wasted no time correcting him.

"...was a capsule, and when I saw it, it was more like a soap bubble, so I think you should picture something round instead of a shield."

"Cap-sel'? And soap bubble... You mean like kids play with when you're doing laundry?"

Apparently this world didn't have capsules. Sara searched her memory for something similar.

"What about fish eggs, or frog eggs?"

"Frogs! I can picture those!" For some reason, it was Allen who reacted to what she'd said. "There's always huge outbreaks of them in spring in the marshes west of the capital! I helped my uncle out hunting them once. Yeah, their eggs were big and see-through and round!"

"Oh, poison bog frogs! Yes, I can picture that. We often use them as materials, just like poison herbs."

All this new information shocked Sara. First of all, she'd never seen an egg like Allen was describing, and second of all, according to Chris, something about them produced an ingredient for medicine?

"I thought potions only needed herbs. The gathering guide only had plants in it."

"What do you mean? Of course they need plants, but there are plenty of monster materials that go into potions as well."

"I didn't know that... Guess I'm not cut out to be an apothecary either."

It wasn't like she had her heart set on it or anything, but monsters were still rearing

their heads in front of her even now.

Just as her magic textbook said, picturing the spell you wanted to cast was all there was to it, and with the strange image of frog eggs in mind, Chris and Vince were both able to make their own barriers. It did seem that they couldn't keep it activated for long, though.

"I can keep my physical strengthening activated for more than half a day, so how come I can only keep this barrier up for a few minutes? I can't imagine it takes *that* much more mana to use."

"You think it'd be that easy? It's called training, man. This is why I can't stand natural prodigies..."

Ignoring Chris and Vince's shenanigans, Sara, Allen, and Haruto busied themselves gathering plants. After mastering healing herbs, Haruto borrowed Sara's guide and quietly studied it, searching for different plants without asking any further questions. That surprised Sara. She'd thought Haruto was merely loud and self-centered, but maybe he had some layers to him after all.

"Snack time yet, you think?" the guildmaster (who'd been doing nothing but lying around) called out. The adults all returned to the clearing at the speed of light.

"Can I cut it?" Haruto asked, pointing to the pie. "Also, can you show me how to use that stove?"

He sliced the pie somewhat awkwardly and played around with the stove, his eyes twinkling. He made no comments other than asking Sara questions, and he moved quietly too. He even helped out with cleaning up.

"If you're just washing a cup, you can spray water magic from your hand and then wipe it down."

"Oh, like this?"

"That's right. When you're done, it'll dry fast if you just picture the water evaporating off of it."

"I dunno if I can do that..."

Chris and Vince listened slack-jawed to Sara and Haruto's conversation. Nelly and Allen were used to it from talking to Sara, and the guildmaster wasn't particularly moved.

"The Invited sure think up some crazy stuff."

"Why do they waste mana for random crap like washing dishes?"

Sara thought she could remember Nelly saying that everyone in this world *had* mana but not all of them used it proactively. That made sense, since it was faster to get water from a faucet, and easier to get heat from a magic tool. There was really no reason to use magic for such trivial things, she supposed.

"I only ever thought about how to kill monsters with big magic spells, so I never tried any of this small stuff. You can use mana for all sorts of things, huh?"

"Yeah. *I* never thought about big magic myself."

Different people thought about things differently. Haruto hung his head, his expression hardening.

"Hey, Sara... And Miss."

"Name's not Miss. It's Nelly."

"Nelly, then."

Sara turned around, surprised. It almost sounded like Nelly was allowing Haruto to use the nickname. Her mouth was quirked up in a smile, confirming Sara's suspicions.

"I first showed up right in front of the king. He said that happens with most Invited. Just before that, a goddess lady told me that I'd be treated well since I'd have a lot of mana but I still had to live by this world's rules just like I did in Japan."

"Huh?" Sara gasped. "But I was hardly even 'invited'...She just kinda dumped me on the Dark Mountain. And it was mountain wolves that were right in front of me when I woke up. And she didn't explain *anything* to me."

The difference in treatment she and Haruto had received was dizzying. Why had she been singled out?

“The king set me up in a really nice room right away.”

“I was living in a mountain cottage.”

“They taught me all about this world, decided who would be my guardian, and gave me a mansion.”

“I don’t even know what to say to that.” Sara’s tone was exasperated, but since she’d been a twenty-seven-year-old working adult and Haruto had only been a ten-year-old child, she supposed it made sense. Ten-year-olds still needed their parents, so it was good that he hadn’t been sent to the Dark Mountain or to someone with absolutely no skill at housework.

“They said I could take my time thinking about what I wanted to do in the future, but after hearing about dungeons and monsters and Hunters, I really wanted to do stuff like that, so I became a Hunter at age twelve.”

“Oh, I did that too.” Sara nodded.

“They said it would be dangerous for me to be alone, so they set me up with a party, and I used all sorts of magic and did some good stuff, I think. But then someone asked me if I had any magic to control a big monster from far away.”

“Hmm, like a sleep or a stun spell?” That was the most Sara could come up with.

“You came up with that right away too, Sara?” Vince asked her, surprised.

“Yeah. I’ve never used any magic like that, but it shows up all the time in fiction.” She could think of a few different types of magic like that from stories, but she didn’t remember any specifics.

“But I couldn’t use any magic that affected another creature’s mind. I just can’t picture a way magic would do something like that.”

“I can’t either. I guess it would be difficult. Dangerous too.”

“Yeah. But I didn’t realize that, so... I was the one who suggested combining a paralysis agent with magic to do something similar. Even though Bradley didn’t say anything when they asked him the same thing.”

"Ah." Sara thought back to when the knights had attacked her. "And the knights used that idea against people. Those knights aren't just weak, they're rotten too..." This reaffirmed Sara's disgust for this country's knights.

"I saw them using it on Miss... I mean, on Nelly in the capital too. I didn't feel all that responsible for it at the time since Nelly avoided it easily enough, but I heard afterward that Nelly had been taken from Rosa and had left a child behind as a result. And that was all my fault..."

"I don't think that's true." Sara didn't feel any anger toward Haruto after hearing that. She just felt disgusted by the people behind the knights using their influence to get whatever they could out of the Invited.

"When I came here, I heard that Sara was that child. You seem pretty carefree about most things, but when I thought about a twelve-year-old kid being left all on her own, I really feel like I did something terrible..."

"Just so you know, I'm not carefree. I have my own worries," she asserted, feeling like it needed to be said.

Haruto looked up at Nelly for a moment before bowing his head deeply. "I'm sorry! They used that drug on you because of me and put you through something awful! I really am sorry..."

Nelly made an indecipherable expression before suddenly smiling. "Don't worry about me. It was Sara who was left behind and went through something difficult."

This time, Haruto bowed his head to Sara. "Sara. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have made a suggestion like that so carelessly."

"Well, I'll accept your apology, but it's fine, really."

"It's not, though. It's not fine..." Haruto's voice had an unexpected gravity to it. "I felt bad about the paralysis drug, but I have no idea what's okay to say to people and what isn't. I was worried that if I stayed in the capital with everyone fawning over me, I might say something else that could hurt someone. So I..."

"You ran, right?" Allen spoke up when Haruto went silent.

Haruto nodded. "I left a letter saying I was going to the Dark Mountain and just left.

They never told me not to go anywhere, but I've always felt like they wanted me to stay in the capital. Somebody always tried to stop me when I said I wanted to go to Rosa."

"They're probably panicking in the capital," Vince said. "Which means someone might come to fetch you soon. You Invited are valuable, after all."

"Valuable?" Sara blurted out without thinking. Then she remembered that she'd kept her being an Invited a secret because she didn't want to deal with all of that. "Oh yeah. I was keeping it a secret 'cause I wanted to be free to go wherever I wanted and not be tied down, now that I can do whatever I want without getting tired."

"Really? Well, I just did what everyone told me to and didn't think about anything for myself. Sara, I..."

"You want me to forgive you or something? Well, you're forgiven. It wasn't your fault I was separated from Nelly anyway."

Haruto may have been the one who suggested aerosolizing a paralysis agent, but the fault lay with the knights who'd decided to use that suggestion against a human being and the people controlling those knights. Sara didn't want anything to do with any of those people for the rest of her life if she could help it.

"Hey, wait a second." Vince looked like he'd just realized something. "Someone'll probably be coming from the capital for Haruto, but won't they be coming for Sara too? You told the knights that you were one of the Invited, right?"

"Crap! I should have stayed quiet about it, but I just couldn't help it..."

It was true. She'd wanted to boast about it when she was clashing with the knights.

"It's fine. They can come for you if they want, but you don't have to go with them. Even you shouldn't have any obligation to stay in the capital, Haruto." Nelly looked at Haruto like she had no idea what he was even worried about.

"You think so? I just feel like I need to repay them somehow for everything they've done for me..."

"That's how they'll keep you trapped there. I think the goddess lady said all we need to do is be here."

Once you got past his initial quirkiness, Haruto was a good kid.

"I don't think you need to worry about paying them back, Haruto. You're the same way with my wife," said the guildmaster. "Allen too. She told me she wished you would think of her like your own mom and just let her spoil you."

"I appreciate it, but I don't need to be spoiled at my age."

It seemed Haruto and Allen were behaving themselves at the guildmaster's house. When Allen turned down the guildmaster's offer, Haruto raised his head too.

"I really appreciate it too. But my only mom's the one I had in my original world, so I don't need anyone to spoil me. Besides, I'm pretty much an adult at this point."

Everyone present seemed to agree that this claim wasn't true, but it was good that he was trying to be independent.

"If that's what you think, then maybe it's time for you to try living on your own. I can tell from taking the two of you in that you won't do anything too crazy while you're at home at least."

Haruto stood straighter when he heard the suggestion. In Japan, it was unthinkable for a twelve-year-old *or* a fourteen-year-old to be living on their own, but it happened in this world. Allen was practically a veteran at it at this point after living on his own, in a tent no less, for months after his uncle died.

"I guess staying up on the Dark Mountain was kind of like living on my own. Nelly was there, but I did all the cooking, cleaning, and laundry, and I had to gather plants to support myself."

"Yeah. You're taking such good care of me that I don't think I'd be able to get by on my own anymore."

"You mean Sara's doing fine living on her own but Nefertari's completely dependent on her?"

Nelly ignored Vince's comment, so all his misgivings glided away on the meadow breeze.

"You were on the Dark Mountain for two years, right, Sara? Weren't you bored with

nobody around up there?"

"Bored? No way. At first, I was terrified of monsters and couldn't even leave the cottage, but it was still fun just living life there. Then I just started going outside one step at a time, and now I go to the rocky areas where gargoyles live and to the deep water where you can find golden trout. I'm gonna go find a cockatrice egg next. And..."

"And?"

Sara hesitated to continue. She wasn't sure whether or not to include what she was thinking in her list of things she had fun with.

Instead, Nelly finished her thought for her, a big smile on her face. "Sara feeds the mountain wolves. There's a ton of 'em around the cottage."

"I'm not feeding them. I just throw out the garbage every day and the wolves wait outside for it. And they were already there, even without me feeding them." Huffing, Sara turned away from Nelly but met Haruto's sparkling gaze instead.

"Wolves? You're friends with wolves?"

"We're not friends. If anything, we're natural enemies."

"How many are there?"

Sara wasn't expecting that question. Too surprised to remain angry, she answered frankly, "There's usually around ten."

"Ten of them! Ten wolves! At your house?!"

"It's not my house, it's the caretaker's cottage. And they're outside the protection field."

"Okay, I'm definitely going to the Dark Mountain! Plus, the people from the capital won't show up there, right?"

True, the only knight from the capital who actually made it up to the cottage was the platoon leader.

"Well, if you want to come, you should. Seems like my pressure doesn't bother you,

just like with Sara and Allen.” Nelly generously gave Haruto permission to visit before blinking and turning to confirm with Sara. “That’s fine, right, Sara?”

“Yeah. I’d be happy to have people come hang out at our place.”

“Err, it’s not your place, it’s the Dark Mountain. And they wouldn’t be coming to hang out.”

Sara appreciated the guildmaster’s prudent correction.

“You’ll need the leg strength to make it to the Dark Mountain first though, Haruto,” Nelly cautioned him.

“Right,” Haruto readily agreed, as if he’d never whined about going back to town earlier. Once someone had a goal in mind, the effort required didn’t seem so difficult anymore, of course. Haruto turned to Allen. “Hey, Allen. Looks like I can’t go into dungeons for a while.”

“I know. You’re gonna practice hiking through the meadow, right? Just promise that we’ll hunt horned rabbits on our way back. We’ve still gotta make enough money to get by every day at the very least.”

Allen stated his terms with a wry grin and Haruto gave him a surprised look.

“You’ll come with me?”

“You don’t have the focus to make it to one end of the meadow and back by yourself, Haruto. It’s too dangerous for you to go alone.”

“Ugh, y-you might be right about that...” Haruto looked away awkwardly. He could put up a barrier, but he hadn’t practiced with it like Sara had, so if he lost concentration, it would unravel in an instant. He had physical strengthening down, but you never knew what might happen if you got surrounded by a horde of horned rabbits.

“I want to visit Sara up on the Dark Mountain too. I’m not letting you get there ahead of me.”

“So that’s why. And I was all touched too...”

Haruto was disappointed, but Sara was thrilled to hear it. She couldn’t wait for them

to come visit her.

The next day, Sara and Nelly saw off the group as the rest hurried back to Rosa, before heading for the Dark Mountain just like usual.

“We’ll need to remodel a bit up there.” Sara counted out all the things they’d have to do excitedly. “It won’t just be Haruto and Allen, but whatever chaperone they bring too, right? While we have guests, can I stay in your room, Nelly?”

“Of course.”

Nelly’s and Sara’s rooms were both meant for two people, with two beds, and since there were three two-person rooms, the cottage was built to house six people.

“We can have two guest rooms ready, so Haruto and Allen can stay in one of them, and whatever adult comes can have the other one.”

“Mm. I think the attic can also serve as a guest room in emergencies.”

“Yeah, but there’s nothing up there.”

She knew there was an attic, but she thought it was just a storage space.

“Hmm... Is there any bedding for it?”

“I feel like there might have been a small storage bag up there...”

As always Nelly had no interest in and no clue about the place she’d lived in for the last several years.

As they chatted, they made it to the foot of the Dark Mountain in no time, and as Sara kept watch over the horned rabbits doggedly following them with more than a little annoyance, Nelly suddenly stopped.

“Nelly?”

“Hmm. Uhh...” Nelly got a guilty look on her face, then swiftly bowed her head. “Sorry, Sara.”

"Wh-What?" Sara asked, confused.

Nelly frowned awkwardly. "We forgot to buy clothes."

"Aaah!"

She'd planned on going back to Rosa and buying clothes before returning to the Dark Mountain, but they'd started on the way back without realizing.

"It's not your fault, Nelly... I forgot too. And besides, it's the guildmaster's fault for springing all this on us so suddenly..."

"No, I should have remembered. I know, if we just buy up the whole shop's stock the next time we're in town, we'll be fine for a while even if we forget again, right?" Nelly said. It was obvious how little interest she had in shopping.

"Fashion has these things called trends, Nelly... And I don't want the whole store, I'd settle for a single outfit!"

Though she complained, she knew it wasn't worth moping about, so Sara got over it quickly.

"Next time we go to Rosa, we're buying clothes before we go to the Apothecary's Guild or the Hunter's Guild. I'm not letting anyone get in my way. And that's all there is to it!"

Nelly smiled warmly at Sara's show of determination. "Sounds like a plan. Let's try to remember next time."

"You'll have to practice controlling your mana like Chris does so you don't bother anyone else in the store, Nelly."

"Right."

She'd learned how difficult it was to get by with strong mana from Allen, but he and the guildmaster and Vince were all living normally in town even if they did have to be a bit considerate of other people. And Chris, the guildmaster of the Apothecary's Guild, had so many people around him all the time it was probably stifling.

"We won't even be able to go inside if you're letting your mana run wild 'cause it's too

much of a pain to control it, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am." Nelly nodded meekly and the two of them returned to the Dark Mountain.

Greeted by the mountain wolves upon her return to the cottage, Sara first headed for the attic to inspect it. It was a little dusty, but it was just a big open room with nothing in it. The small storage bag in the corner of the room contained four bed frames and mattresses, but the floor was sturdy, so if they were fine with sleeping on the floor, even more people than four could fit up there.

"So the guest rooms fit six and the attic fits four, but in a pinch, about twenty people could stay here somewhere or another. No, there's no need to think about something that's not going to happen. As long as Haruto and Allen and two adults can stay here, that's fine, I think," Sara muttered to herself, considering the sleeping arrangements of their guests. She really felt like she'd grown since back when she was itching to head down to Rosa.

The mattresses in the storage bag seemed usable when she pulled them out to check, so she put them back as they were. The guest rooms would be ready to use right away, so all Sara had to do now was wait to see when the boys would be able to make it up the mountain to them.

"It took me two years, but I wonder how long it'll take Allen and Haruto."

Of course, Sara had been starting from absolute zero, so they were in a much better position than she had been to start with.

"It'll be fun to see their progress the next time we go to Rosa," Nelly agreed.

Sara had been having fun every day since Nelly came back. Of course, she'd enjoyed the time she'd spent with Allen in Rosa too, but there'd been a cloud hanging over her the whole time since she'd been so worried about Nelly.

As she prepared the rooms for their guests and spent her time gathering plants and going with Nelly on her hunts, the ten days between their trips into town passed in no time. Sara shouldered her storage backpack as she always did and called out to Rosa in the distance, "This time, we're buying clothes!"

"Let's do it!"

When they reached the clearing at the foot of the mountain and stopped to camp, however, they found it already occupied. One person was lying on the ground shielding his face from the sun while the other two looked down at him exasperatedly.

The two smaller figures noticed Sara and Nelly.

“Sara!”

“Sara and Miss!”

“It’s not Miss. It’s Nelly.”

The two familiar figures were Allen and Haruto. Sara wasn’t surprised to see Allen here, but she was a little shocked to see Haruto all the way at the base of the mountain after only ten days. Who was the one lying on the ground, though?

“Allen! Haruto! And...?”

“Tch...”

There was only one person around here who was so rude.

“Ted? What are you doing here?”

“Shut up...” he said reluctantly.

“There’s no adult? Don’t you have a guardian with you?”

Sara looked around, but she could only see the three of them.

“Well, obviously... *I’m* the guardian...”

Sure, Ted was at least twenty, but he was hardly guardian material by any stretch. Not to mention, he couldn’t have all that much mana since Allen’s pressure bothered him so much. Wasn’t him coming out into the meadow practically suicidal?

“What? But you’re not looking after the two of them. You’re the most tired of the three of you.”

“I’m not tired. I’m just watching the sky.”

She wouldn't get anywhere talking to Ted.

"Allen?"

"Err, well..."

There must have been a reason for this.

Unlike Allen's awkward reaction, Haruto answered her question with enthusiasm. "The guildmaster asked us to look after Ted. He said the other guildmaster asked him."

"I—!" Ted sprang up into a sitting position before slowly falling back down and turning his head away. "I just needed to come out into the meadow. And Allen and Haruto happened to be there. That's all there is to it."

"But you're not looking out for them at all. You're no guardian..." Sara put a hand on her hip. Besides, it was ridiculous to even consider depending on him for anything after all the trouble he'd caused Allen and Sara.

"Nobody asked me for anything. Haruto's just looking after him 'cause he was asked to." Allen shook his head. Evidently, he agreed.

"I'm impressed you made it this far, though. You, Ted, *and* Haruto." Sara was impressed. She had taken her time training and here they had made it this far in only ten days.

Haruto thrust his chest out proudly.

"So, how long did it take you to get here?"

"Well, we have Ted with us today, so we had to stop and sleep once on the way."

"What, it was my fault?"

Obviously it was Ted's fault.

"Honestly, my legs are still shaking, though. This is gonna be a long road..." Haruto said candidly.

Nothing had changed for Sara since everyone in Rosa's Hunter's Guild had found out she was one of the Invited. Haruto was also likely experiencing being treated like a

normal Hunter of his age for the first time since coming to this world. Sara felt like his rough edges had smoothed out a bit, and he listened to people properly now.

"Well, we should rest too," she suggested.

"Yeah," Nelly agreed, and the two of them sat down.

"Why are you training with them all of a sudden, Ted? You don't even have that much mana, do you?"

"Shut the hell up..."

"I'm not making you any tea if you talk to me like that," Sara said flatly. There was no sugarcoating things with Ted.

Ted sat up lazily and thought for a moment before revising his earlier words. "Shut up."

"Is that supposed to be more polite?" Sara asked him disgustedly.

Watching Sara and Ted, Haruto smirked. "I went to Ted's house the other day for dinner."

"Shut it, Haruto."

"Ted's house? Wait, why?" Sara was truly confused. Ted did *not* seem like the type to have people over for dinner.

"I have a house, obviously."

"That wasn't in question."

Haruto looked between Sara and Ted giddily. "He had me over 'cause I'm an Invited. This kinda thing happens all the time in the capital, so I'm used to it. It's like a prestige thing, like an important person's visited town, so they have me over. You know Ted's dad is the mayor, right? So I went for a sort of formal dinner with the guildmaster."

"Oh yeah, that's right, isn't it?" Sara saw Ted's father just once, in the Hunter's Guild.

Haruto turned to Allen a little awkwardly. "Sorry only I got to go, Allen."

"I told you it's fine. I'm never gonna get invited to something like that."

"I don't like that part of this world, but I had to go to be polite."

When Sara heard Haruto was invited to dinner for being an Invited, what she thought was this: *I'd love to eat tasty food, but I don't want to have to go to Ted's house to do it.*

"You're a good kid at home, so why do you act like this when you leave, Ted?" Haruto asked him with genuine curiosity.

"God, shut up. Don't call me a kid. I can do what I want when I'm not home, can't I?"

"I do what I want when I'm not home, but I'm not rude like you, Ted," Sara pointed out.

"Shut up..." Ted seemed to be losing steam now.

"You were really excited when we camped out last night too, Ted. You were all like, 'I know how to tend a flame from making potions, so leave the cooking to me,' and then you screwed it up."

"Ack! Hey! Shut up!"

Haruto and Ted seemed to get along fine. Sara started to make some tea, amused by that fact, but then thought maybe they should have cold drinks instead since it was hot out.

"Let's have this!" Sara took a bottle with some red jam in it out of her pouch. Allen sat up straight when he saw it.

"What's that, Sara?"

"Heheheh, it's some bush strawberries I boiled down. Everyone get out your cups."

Sara'd wanted to look for bush strawberries up on the Dark Mountain ever since she'd had juice made from them in town. They'd finally started popping up now that it was spring, so she'd carefully gathered enough of them to boil them down with sugar.

She took the cups (including the one Ted meekly held out) and put two spoonfuls of jam into each of them before filling them with cold water. She mixed the jam in and the drinks were done.

"Here you are."

Reactions ranged from twinkling eyes to suspicious looks, but everyone took one sip and then gulped down the rest of it in an instant. It didn't have a strong flavor, but that meant it had a refreshing aftertaste, which made it perfect for drinking after doing some exercise.

Sara watched everyone drink, smiling.

"Mm." Ted held out his cup to her.

"You can say 'seconds, please' can't you?"

"Seconds, please," said Nelly.

"Seconds, please," said Allen.

"Seconds, please," said Chris.

"Seconds," said Ted, after a lengthy pause.

Good enough. She gave everyone seconds and looked up at the sky breezily. Then she suddenly realized something.

"Ted, are you okay being around Nelly and Allen?"

"You were spewing a stupid amount of mana that one time. I can handle anything that's not that."

He was being rude as always, but most likely he was referring to when he made Sara angry and she hit him with her mana. Well, why had he told Allen not to come close to him the first time they met, then?

"I get it. You're just a bully," she concluded. But if Allen's mana didn't really bother him, then Ted must have had a decent amount of mana after all. "Oh yeah, come to think of it, how did you get this far, Ted? Even the knights got hurt coming out here."

"Nothing special. Just physical strengthening."

"I didn't know you could do that. You should have been gathering plants on your own

after all, then.”

“I have to make the medicine.”

She still didn’t understand what he was doing out here if that was the case, but he didn’t seem to want to say, so she just dropped it.

“Oh, whatever. I’m not that interested.”

Unfortunately for Ted, there was no one present in this group who would say something like, “Isn’t that a little harsh?” like Vince. Sara dropped the matter, focusing instead on what kind of clothes she’d buy once she got to Rosa.

They made it to Rosa the next day somehow, even with Ted holding them back. Haruto didn’t even seem tired, to Sara’s surprise.

“Well, I’ve done a lot of dungeon diving, so it’s not like I have no stamina or strength,” he explained. “Once I understood that doing a bunch of different things and just walking for hours at a time means using your body in a different way, it didn’t take long to adjust.”

“Huh.”

Haruto flexed his arm, but Sara couldn’t tell whether he had any muscles or not, and frankly, she didn’t care. They’d made it to town, and that was all that mattered to her.

It was almost evening, but the town’s east gate was wide open.

“Hmm. Normally, they only open the gate after they know I’m coming. It’s rare for it to be open already. Hmm? Who’s that?”

“Master Chris! You were waiting for me?” Ted was wobbling on his feet, but his voice at least was full of energy. He wobbled over to a stern-faced Chris, who stood there with his arms folded.

“Ted? Oh yes, you were out in the meadow too.”

“Master Chris...”

As always, Chris was cold to anyone who wasn’t Nelly. Which meant there was only

one reason he could be out here. Sara put a hand to her forehead, annoyed.

“Nef!”

“I thought so,” she muttered to herself. But Chris’s tone wasn’t the bright one he usually used when he called out to Nelly. There was something grim about it.

Chris strode over to Nelly and wrapped his arms around her out of nowhere.

“Hey! What are you doing?!” It was so sudden Nelly hadn’t been able to dodge. She raised her fist to hit him, but then hesitated and relaxed her hand, lowering it. “What is it, Chris? What’s got you so frantic?”

“I don’t want to be apart from you! I don’t want to...”

“What? Come on, let go of me. Hey, Chris.”

“I don’t want to.”

Chris was being oddly childish. Nelly usually didn’t hold back with him, but she didn’t seem to know what to do with him acting like this.

Watching the two of them, Sara sighed quietly and looked up at the darkening sky, mumbling to herself, “Don’t think we’ll be able to buy clothes today either...”

“Want me to come with you instead? Like when we bought your tent.”

“Thanks, Allen.” She felt misty-eyed at Allen’s kindness. “I’d be happy to just buy clothes for myself, but I kinda want to buy stuff for Nelly too.”

“I get it. You’d have to go with her, then.”

“It’s not just that either. If I bought my stuff first, I bet she’d say, ‘Then we don’t need to go back.’”

“Ah, I get it.”

Still, if Nelly was busy, maybe she *should* just buy her own clothes first...

“Nelly, Chris.” She didn’t see them resolving this on their own, so Sara called out to

both of them. She knew if she only said Chris's name, he would just ignore her. "You're tired, right, Nelly?"

"No."

"You're tired, right?"

"N—Err, yeah," Nelly corrected herself after making eye contact with Sara. "Gee, I'm so tired after coming all the way here from the Dark Mountain."

"We should go right to the guild inn and rest, right?"

"Yes, of course."

This was a total farce, since there was no way such a brief walk would have tired Nelly out, but it worked on Chris at least.

"I'm sorry to keep you here. Come on, let's go to the Hunter's Guild. Though, you know, my house is always open to you."

"Why would I have to stay at your house?"

Sara felt sorry for Chris with how dense Nelly was. At least they could finally get into town now.

Ted returned to his own home while the rest of them headed for the Hunter's Guild. With a forlorn look toward the stores in the Third District, Sara entered the Hunter's Guild.

"Oh hey, you're all here." Vince's familiar voice greeted them.

The guildmaster, who was leaned against the counter talking to Vince, peered past them. "I thought you might run into Allen and Haruto, but what happened to Ted?"

"He headed home first. Oh, and he made it to the Dark Mountain in two days."

"He did, eh? Didn't think the rich kid had it in him. Even the knights had a rough time of it."

It was supposedly Chris who had asked the guildmaster to let Ted accompany Allen

and Haruto, so his indifference compared to the kindness of the people at the Hunter's Guild didn't quite sit right with Sara.

"Ted went into dungeons for materials all the time in the capital, and he took long trips if there were rare ingredients to be found. He should be fully capable of such things. He just doesn't do anything he has no interest in."

All sorts of new truths about Ted were coming to light, but the only one that resonated with Sara was the one about how he didn't do anything he wasn't interested in. That didn't surprise her in the least.

"Well, if you're back safe, that's great. The mayor was gonna send a search party out if you weren't back by tomorrow." Vince laughed, but it wasn't very funny to Sara. "By the way, since Chris is with you, I'm guessing you've already heard?"

"I haven't told them yet. Let's talk somewhere private."

"You know, my office isn't a clubhouse."

They all ignored the guildmaster, filing into his office and reclining on his reception couches. Allen and Haruto came too for some reason.

"The thing is, I got a request from another town," Chris said ruefully when they were all settled.

"A request. Like the one Nelly got about the dragons?" That was all Sara could think of when he said "request."

Chris shook his head, however. "As the guildmaster of the Apothecary's Guild, it usually falls to me to assign such tasks rather than take them on myself. This time, however..." He sighed heavily.

"Spit it out already, man. Another town wants you to take over as guildmaster."

"Jay! I was going to tell them myself."

He hadn't yet done so, of course, so the guildmaster's interjection was understandable.

"So? Why don't you go?" Nelly said bluntly. "Which town?" At least she cared enough to ask for more details.

"Camellia."

"Ah, that big town in the west. It'll be poison bog frog breeding season there soon."

"Yes. They make good poison and antidote materials, but there are a bit too many of them lately."

"If they just need more people, then couldn't you just send an apothecary? Why do they want you?"

Sara was wondering the same thing.

"They have some apothecaries they want to train from the ground up. They eventually want to build a school for apothecaries there in addition to the one in the capital."

"So you'd be the headmaster," Sara blurted out. She hadn't known there was a school like that in the capital. From looking at Ted, it seemed like anyone could be an apothecary.

"Yes, that might be what they intend to ask of me."

Nelly gave Chris a look and asked him, "Do you not want the job?"

"That's not it. The guildmaster also has the responsibility to teach new apothecaries, after all. And that includes sending those with promise to the capital."

"Then what are you dragging your feet for?"

"What am I dragging my feet for?!" Chris slammed his hands on the desk and stood up. "I obviously don't want to be apart from you, Nef!"

"What...?"

"Why do you think I'm here in Rosa in the first place? I don't even like it here! It's because *you're* here, Nef!"

"R-Really? I did think it was a bit odd... So that's why."

The guildmaster and Vince were giving Chris sympathetic looks.

"Are you going to say no?" Sara asked, curious.

"I am. But we're always short on apothecaries and I do think it's inconvenient for the capital to be the only place for them to train. Apothecaries all end up being from the capital or from wealthy families as a result."

It must have been a pretty attractive profession, then.

There was a knock on the door at that moment.

"You have a visitor, Guildmaster."

"And it was just getting good too..."

Sara almost scolded him for being *too* honest.

"Pardon me."

The visitor had already been shown in. He strode into the room, without even waiting to receive permission to enter.

"Bradley!" Haruto leaped up and ran over to the man excitedly.

Sara recalled hearing the name Bradley before. Right, he was the Invited with common sense.

"Sorry I'm late, Haruto."

"It's fine. Everybody's been really nice to me here."

"Have they?" Bradley smiled. Unlike Sara and Haruto with their black hair, Bradley had ash-blond hair like Allen and green eyes. He had a quiet bearing and looked much older than Ted, but much younger than Vince. And he *did* look like he had common sense.

"I apologize for the sudden visit. I'm Bradley, one of the Invited, here from the capital. May I ask who the guildmaster is?"

"That's me. Welcome to Rosa's Hunter's Guild." The guildmaster stood up in a bit of a cool way and spread his arms out toward Bradley. Now that she thought about it, Sara

hadn't seen anyone shaking hands in this world. That must have been how they welcomed someone.

"I hope Haruto hasn't caused you too much trouble."

"Y-Yeah. Well, it's fine now, I'd say."

"Now? I never caused any trouble!"

"Not that you noticed, at least."

Bradley smiled wryly at the guildmaster's frank words. "If we could live together, I'd be able to keep a better eye on him, but they make sure a different noble is the guardian of each Invited. The capital was in quite a stir trying to figure out who would become the guardian of Rosa's Invited as well."

"So the knights spilled after all." Nelly scowled.

"Yes. It's very rare for an Invited to appear outside of the capital, and it was a girl too. I thought she'd be under the care of the mayor of Rosa, myself."

When she thought about the mayor being Ted's father, Sara was *very* glad that she wasn't "under his care."

"Ah... Well, we didn't know Sara was an Invited, so..."

"Yeah. It's not like she told us."

Sara was surprised to hear the guildmaster and Vince say that.

"All we're aware of at the Apothecary's Guild is a girl who's been selling us good medicinal plants lately," Chris added casually. "So I doubt the mayor even knows there's an Invited in Rosa—or rather, on the Dark Mountain."

Of course, everyone at the Hunter's Guild knew now, and she imagined at least a few people, including Ted, suspected at the Apothecary's Guild too.

"Is that so? Understood." Bradley nodded obligingly, comprehending the situation quickly.

"Bradley," Nelly asked him worriedly. "Does that mean someone'll be coming from the capital for Sara too?"

"They were ready to send someone, if I recall. I believe her guardian was to be..." Bradley hesitated, searching his memory for the name. He must not have had much interest in the subject.

Allen suddenly looked up like something had occurred to him. "I know a knight who's a noble. He's from a count's family. The prime minister. His name's Liam."

"Yes, that was it. An influential noble to have on your side, for sure."

"No freaking way!" Sara was so disgusted by the idea she couldn't help but yelp. She had only unpleasant memories when it came to knights.

"Well, he'll be here to come get you in just a few days, regardless of how you feel about it. The country can't just leave one of the goddess's Invited alone."

"Even if she *wants* to be left alone? Even if she already *has* a guardian?"

"But your guardian isn't a noble house, it's an individual, yes? You certainly won't be left alone while you're underage. It's hard enough to become independent as an adult."

Sara turned to Nelly for help. "Nelly, what age are you an adult here?"

"Sixteen."

"That's four years from now!" Sara wanted to scream. It wasn't as if she was completely uninterested in the life of the nobility. She had a particular interest in say, dresses, and also dresses. However, the only nobility she'd met in this world were the knights, and the only son of an important person who wasn't a noble she knew was Ted. She didn't have a good impression of anyone related to the nobility.

Sara had been blithely listening to Chris's woes, thinking, *Sucks to be him*, but now that she was in her own trouble, she was finding it hard to remain so aloof. Not to mention, they'd barely even gotten into Chris's problem.

As for the man in question, he looked Sara in the eye (a rarity for him), and smiled. "Sara, it seems you have some concern for me, but you should focus on your own problems for now. I've been putting this request off for some time, but I feel a bit better

after sharing my honest feelings with Nef. It pays to be sincere. I even managed to hug Nef in all the confusion.”

Sara took a step back from Chris, but he was looking at the guildmaster, so he didn’t notice. Why couldn’t he have just left it at the nice stuff?

“Prioritize your Invited visitor. We don’t need to talk about my business anymore.”

“But what are you gonna do, Chris?” The guildmaster seemed concerned for his colleague. They’d worked together for the sake of Rosa for some time, so maybe that was to be expected.

“I’ll delay as long as I can, but I’ll likely have to go eventually.”

“Well, Rosa will probably pull through, but what are *you* gonna do, Nefertari?”

“Me? I...” Nelly was surprised to be asked, since the conversation wasn’t about her, but she didn’t ignore the question like she usually would. “I’ll decide after I talk to Sara.”

Sara was happy to hear it.

Vince, who’d been listening silently to the conversation, turned his eyes to their visitor.
“By the way, Bradley, was it?”

“That’s right.”

“What exactly are you here for? If it’s to take Haruto back with you, then you didn’t really need to come, did you?”

“Yes, exactly.” Bradley frowned thoughtfully for a moment before smiling. “I’m here for the same reason Haruto is.”

“You are?” No one was quite sure what to make of that.

“I’ve fled. From the capital.”

“Huh?”

Was the capital really such a hard place to live? Sara silently vowed never to accept a noble’s protection.

"Oh, but please don't misunderstand. I haven't done anything wrong, and they're unlikely to send someone to apprehend me, though someone might come to keep an eye on me." Sara didn't like the sound of that. "That means there's three Invited in Rosa now, and all of them in this room, even. Ha ha ha."

What was he laughing about? For supposedly having common sense, this guy was starting to seem just a bit off to Sara.

"It's been more than ten years since I came to this world, and the knights are starting to ask more of me lately. I guess it's because I've never been particularly willful." Bradley sighed. "Bringing knowledge from a more advanced civilization into this world may have a greater effect on it than you predict. It might seem like a good idea at first but then lead to something bad down the line. It seems all the Invited who came to this world up until now were young, so knowledge wasn't something people here actively sought from them, but problems are beginning to occur now, one example being Haruto's paralysis agent."

"Don't call it mine. I mean, it *was* my idea, but..."

He'd already apologized for it, so no one here would make that mistake. Bradley shrugged, looking relieved when he realized that everyone understood.

"I've grown tired of carelessly answering questions only for my responses to be used for some nefarious purpose. So I fled, under the pretense of sightseeing."

"But you're not gonna be able to do anything if they send someone to keep an eye on you, right?" The guildmaster pointed out the flaw in his plan.

"Quite. That's why I thought I might go to a place even the knights have trouble getting to."

A place the knights can't get to? "The Dark Mountain?" Sara asked.

"Miss Invited."

"It's Sara."

"Sara. You're exactly right. I'd like to go to the Dark Mountain if possible."

Everyone in the room was taken aback. The Dark Mountain was dangerous. Not even

Hunters wanted to spend much time there. That was why Nelly was acting as its caretaker all on her own. Well, Sara was with her now. But suddenly two more people wanted to visit, Haruto and Bradley.

Vince frowned. "It's dangerous, though. Sara doesn't seem to understand this, but the knights *are* strong. And only particularly talented ones were able to make it up the mountain."

"Well, Bradley should be fine." Nelly gave him her stamp of approval with no hesitation whatsoever. "He had no problems taking down migrating dragons. And Haruto may not have much stamina, but he can defeat dragons as well." She added quietly to Sara that it had been during this incident that they'd met.

"If you know how strong I am, then why didn't you want me to come to the Dark Mountain?" Haruto pouted, but Nelly just snorted at him.

"Even Sara could take down a dragon from a safe place. She can handle wyverns just fine, after all."

"Err, I don't know about using me as an example... Besides, it was just once, and I didn't do anything... It just crashed into me on its own..." Sara mumbled. She hadn't wanted to call attention to herself but felt several shocked pairs of eyes on her now.

"A wyvern...?"

"A wyvern!"

Well, some of the eyes were twinkling with excitement, but Sara ignored all of them, explaining what she figured Nelly meant to say. Nelly never said enough on her own, after all. "It's not about whether you can beat a wyvern or not! On the Dark Mountain, stuff happens like... mountain wolves will come after you while you're distracted by a wyvern, and there are tons of slimes all around your feet. Monsters might try to roll into you, so it's not enough to be strong, you have to be *careful* to live on the Dark Mountain. I think you *are* strong, Haruto, but you don't have your guard up all the time, and you need more stamina too. *That's* what Nelly means."

"Right. Though your stamina *does* seem to have improved." That his tendency for arrogance or letting his guard down *hadn't* improved was left implied.

"That's where I come in."

“Where is that, exactly?”

Bradley stepped forward, ignoring Sara’s comment. “I’m used to Haruto’s carelessness.”

“Isn’t that a little harsh?”

“Haruto’s *slight* tendency for carelessness. Since I’ve looked after him for so long, I can guess what he’s likely to do and make sure he doesn’t get into any trouble. But more than that, I just want to live a laid-back life, with no one watching over my shoulder.”

So he was more concerned with his own freedom than helping Haruto. The weary way he looked made Sara want to give him a pat on the shoulder, but she resisted the urge.

“You must be tired,” she said instead.

“Yes. The goddess said all I needed to do was be here. I was happy to finally have a healthy body. I could move all I wanted, but all I want to do is live quietly and read books. Since I have a lot of mana, however, the people in this world expect me to use it to fight, and it’s hard to say no since they’ve given me so much support. I’m just tired of it.”

It was a bit extreme of him to go to a dangerous place like the Dark Mountain, but that was just how tired he was of being watched all the time.

“Well, we have room for another two people to stay with us, but we don’t have any books up there.”

“Thank you! And don’t worry, I brought a ton of books with me.” Bradley patted the pouch on his waist.

Well, it didn’t surprise Sara that a quiet bookworm might be reincarnated like her. And having a few more roommates could be fun. But what would Nelly think? If their guests were just Invited, her mana pressure shouldn’t bother anyone.

“Nelly?”

“Hmm. Might be a good idea.” It seemed Nelly approved. She looked at the guildmaster. “What does the Guild have to say about it?”

"Well, it'll help Rosa to have more Hunters looking after the Dark Mountain..." Vince answered instead of the guildmaster, but Nelly shook her head.

"It won't be any more than before."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

It wasn't just Vince who was confused by this. Everyone in the room cocked their heads.

"I mean if someone else is willing to do it, maybe it's time for a new caretaker to take over."

"Huh?!"

The room was filled with surprised cries.

Vince was the first to recover from his shock. "W-Well, I do think you've worked real hard on your own for a long time now, Nefertari, but I don't know if the Hunter's Guild can just accept something like this right away." What he said was reasonable enough.

Unexpectedly, it was the guildmaster who disagreed. "No, it's a good opportunity. I'll have to see what the Invited are capable of with my own eyes, but this is your chance to be free from Rosa, Nefertari."

"Jay! But..."

"Quiet, Vince. Did you forget that Nefertari only came here to get away from those assholes in the capital?"

"That's all the more reason!"

Nelly crossed her arms and looked away, obviously feeling rather awkward to have started this argument between the two of them. "Well... That's why I can kind of understand how Bradley feels."

Sara was a little surprised. She'd always known Nelly was a good person, but it was rare for her to actually say something so sympathetic to another person's feelings.

"It's not just Sara. It seems the Invited aren't bothered by my mana. It'd be a bit

cramped, but we could all stay in the cottage on the Dark Mountain. But Sara..."

"Huh? Me?" Sara asked. She hadn't been expecting the conversation to turn to her.

"Didn't you say when you first came here that since you could do more now, you wanted to go to all sorts of different places?"

"Now that you mention it, I guess I did." She did somewhat remember saying that. Now that she wasn't so exhausted all the time, she wanted to do all the things she'd never been able to do in her previous life.

"Well, you made it to Rosa. Do you want to go somewhere else next?"

"Somewhere else..." Sara was stumped by the sudden suggestion until Nelly cleared her throat.

"Like, say, Camellia?"

"Nef!" Chris leaped to his feet, his chair scraping under him.

Nelly gave him a deterring wave and said dryly, "It's a suggestion. Just a suggestion. I was actually hoping to go to the capital to sightsee at some point, but now would *not* be a good time. I don't think they'd want me for anything now that migrating dragon season is over, but with their two Invited gone, if Sara were to go to the capital now..."

"They'd 'take her in,' I'm sure," Vince said sympathetically. "Hey, Nefertari... If Sara's going to stay with you, don't you think you could ask your family for help? I think they have the standing to be Sara's guardians."

"Mm. Now that it's come to this, I do think I should tell them what's going on, but my family's in the south now, not in the capital. Sending them a letter and waiting for a reply and then getting things moving in the capital would take time."

"Right, it wasn't just the kid who fled the capital to get away from annoying stuff. Parents went too."

Apparently Nelly's family had some circumstances Sara wasn't aware of.

Nelly looked Sara in the eyes. "Sara, do you want to head to Camellia for some 'sightseeing' before anyone comes from the capital to get you?"

"But what about your job, Nelly? And how am I gonna support myself in Camellia?"

Rosa had dungeons, so Nelly could find plenty of work as a Hunter in Rosa even if she left the Dark Mountain. Sara didn't know what there was for Nelly and Sara to do in Camellia for money. Sara had been up on the Dark Mountain for so long and had only just become able to come down to Rosa, so she was a little confused by how quickly things were changing.

"Oh, is that what you're worried about? I keep telling you you're doing enough just taking care of me, Sara."

"That's for sure. Sara's probably the only one who *could* take care of Nefertari," Vince said, earning a glare from Nelly.

"But there are dungeons in Camellia too anyway, and there's marshland all over with monsters in it like the meadows east of Rosa. There's plenty of work I could do there. Not that I really need to work."

Now that she mentioned it, Sara recalled that Nelly had *quite* the impressive income.

"You shouldn't need to work for at least a bit either with all the money you've made gathering plants and selling slimes. I mean, you got by in Rosa without even selling your plants, didn't you?"

"I guess you're right."

"I'm really sorry about that." Chris bowed his head when the two of them gave him cold looks. Of course, to Sara, the period when he'd been in town but had been unconcerned about her stood out in her mind more than when he hadn't been around.

"Anyway, we can wait to decide until we've seen what the Invited are capable of," Vince said, wrapping things up.

"I'd appreciate it."

"So I'll finally get to go to the Dark Mountain!"

Bradley and Haruto both smiled.

Sara and Nelly had just come in here to hear what Chris had to say and now all of a

sudden they were talking about leaving the Dark Mountain. Sara's head was spinning trying to keep track of all these new developments. Now that the conversation was ending, however, there was one question that stood out in her mind.

"Allen."

"Yeah."

Sara had Nelly. Haruto had Bradley. But Allen was all alone. Still, he was staying with the guildmaster, working properly as a Hunter, and starting to get along with all sorts of people in Rosa, so maybe she didn't need to worry about him. If Sara was in his position right now, though, she thought she'd at least feel a little lonely.

When Allen nodded to her in response, however, she didn't see loneliness in his eyes. There was only a calm, unwavering light. "I want to think about this a little too."

"Okay."

Sara wanted some time to think too. She *had* said she wanted to go to all sorts of different places, but she had no complaints about her life with Nelly up on the Dark Mountain. After all, she didn't have to be scared of monsters anymore now that she had her barrier. When asked if she wanted to leave the Dark Mountain and go to a new town in the west, what she felt first was hesitation, not excitement. And inside that hesitation was a reluctance to part from Allen.

"We're finished for now, right?" Allen asked.

Everyone agreed. They could decide the specifics tomorrow. Sara was amused by the exchange, as if Allen were the one leading the meeting.

"Okay, Sara. You have clothes you want to buy, right?"

"Yes, please!"

Allen was more considerate than anyone.

Thus, Sara was finally able to go clothes shopping.

“Ta-dah! We’re finally here!”

“Uh-huh.”

Sara wasn’t sure Nelly’s response was really befitting of a lady about to go clothes shopping, but it was certainly Nelly-like. Allen had of course swiftly retreated after reminding her of her desire to buy clothes. Not surprising, Sara supposed. There weren’t too many men who wanted to tag along on a girls’ shopping trip. Thus, it was Sara and Nelly alone who stood in front of the clothing store.

“We’re going in.”

“Right.”

The two of them cautiously stepped inside.

“Welcome! Oh...” An employee greeted them cheerfully, but with some hesitance. Perhaps because she was unfamiliar with the two of them?

“Wow!” Sara looked about, her eyes sparkling. It was her first time in a clothing store in this world. She was honestly a little overwhelmed.

And Nelly was totally useless. She was just standing there, not looking at anything at all. Probably because she’d been raised as a rich girl.

This was precisely the time to rely on an employee.

“Umm, excuse me.”

“Yes? Urgh!” After a genial response, this person too made a rather unladylike sound.

“Nelly, control your mana,” Sara chided.

“R-Right.”

Nelly must have reflexively unleashed her mana when the employee stepped toward them.

“Phew... That’s better. Would you like some help choosing clothes? You’re Miss Nefertari, the Hunter, yes?”

“I don’t believe we’ve met...”

“You’re rather famous in Rosa. Let me think... Something tailored to you would probably be best, but...” The employee nodded, intuiting Nelly’s reluctance to come back for the amount of visits such clothing would require. “We have a few practical options for casual wear.”

“Sure. I’m fine with that. But Sara...” Nelly looked down at Sara, who made proper eye contact with the employee for the first time. “Sara will have whatever she likes. The best that you’ve got.”

“My, then...” the employee said with both hesitation and delight.

Sara shook her head, smiling awkwardly. “I don’t need all that. It’s just that I only have pants right now, so I want some girls’ clothes. Two sets of casual wear, and one outfit for when I want to dress up a bit would be great, if you could suggest something.”

“Very well!” The employee happily led Sara over to the clothes.

It wasn’t as if Sara had exclusively worn skirts in Japan, so she wasn’t opposed to wearing pants. But if she had some pants made for girls, at a size that actually fit her, those would obviously be better than what she currently wore.

“Kids are active at your age, so I’d say you’ll want something that goes down to your calves. Most kids start wearing more adult styles when they get closer to fifteen.”

At first she thought she might get bigger clothes so that she could wear them for a long time, but she’d come all the way to another world, so she decided she might as well get clothes that fit her now.

“If you don’t want to change up your look drastically, how about pairing a red skirt with a white blouse? You can get an apron for when you help out around the house, and maybe this light-yellow dress...”

Sara’s purchases were decided right away. After getting together some underclothes and accessories, it was time to shift her attention to the rather directionless Nelly.

“I, uhh... I’d like to keep my sword on me if that’s possible...”

“My, even with a dress?”

“I guess that wouldn’t work, would it...”

“Hmm...”

Sara thought a sword with a dress was pretty cool too, but it wasn’t like they were going to a ball or anything. She just wanted them to have clothes they could wear if they went out to eat at a moderately fancy restaurant.

“I don’t think you need a dress, Nelly. How about just a shirt with some frills maybe, and a nice jacket?”

Nelly was a Hunter. Even if she wasn’t going to be attacked by monsters in town, she probably wouldn’t feel safe unless she had her guard up all the time.

“I’m pretty much fine as long as I’ve got my fists, but I still get a little nervous without having my sword on hand.”

And there it was. Just as Sara wanted to dress in the way a girl her age would, Nelly should of course get to dress in a way that made her feel comfortable too.

“In that case...”

Sara wanted to get Nelly an outfit that was both as pretty and dashing as she could make it, and evidently, the store clerk agreed. Nelly flinched under their gleaming gaze, but she quickly gave up, submitting to her role of dress-up doll.



Inside the store, Sara changed into a light-yellow dress and Nelly put on a navy-blue jacket, and then they headed for the guild to store their things. Sara felt lighter on her feet, happy to be wearing a skirt that wasn't too long for the warm spring weather. The people of the town smiled at them as they passed, their cheer infectious.

When the pair opened the guild doors and strode inside, the chatter inside the building went quiet, one conversation at a time. Sara headed straight for the stairs to get to the inn on the second floor, but...

"Sara... is that you? And Nefertari?"

Hearing Vince, Sara stopped and looked over at the reception desks. Mina gave her a warm, complimentary smile, which she returned, though she felt a little irritation at Vince and the men who were looking at her in surprise. The door to the back of the guild opened and Allen and the guildmaster came out. They must have sensed the change in atmosphere out here.

"What's goin' on? Oh..." The guildmaster saw Sara and smiled warmly at her.

Allen was as genuine as always. "Sara! You look great!"

"Thanks." Sara didn't think it was anything to make a big deal out of, but she didn't have any complaints about the guildmaster's reaction either.

"I like your usual look, but this is nice too, Sara. You, on the other hand..." The guildmaster crossed his arms and glared at Nelly. "What the heck? You're not allowed to be more handsome than us!"

"Yeah, that's what I wanted to say," Vince agreed. "I was all ready to laugh if you showed up in a frilly dress or something, Nefertari."

Vince's stock dropped to the lowest value it had ever been in Sara's mind. Needless to say, all the other women in the guildhall were giving him cold looks as well.

Of course, with Nelly's flawless posture and regal bearing, Sara thought she would look great in a ballgown too, but her usual handsome self was just as good.

After that, Nelly and Sara dined at a slightly fancy restaurant in the Second District, one that the guildmaster sometimes went to with his wife. Nelly had never been there before, but she had gotten a lot better at suppressing her mana lately, so the meal went

smoothly.

"We eat cockatrice all the time, but in creamy sauce like this, it really feels fancy," Sara said, cutting a soft piece of cockatrice meat artfully arranged on the flat dish in front of her. Butter and cheese stayed fresh inside a storage bag, so they had some up on the Dark Mountain, but it wasn't sourced from Rosa, so it was expensive.

"The cockatrice is a lot more expensive than the butter and cream, though."

Things were a little different up on the Dark Mountain where the only fresh meat you could get was things like cockatrice.

"I didn't think we'd be leaving the Dark Mountain so soon."

"Neither did I. But I was starting to think about how to get somebody else to take over as caretaker, so I figured this might be our chance."

From Vince's reaction when Nelly had made the suggestion, Sara got an idea about how difficult finding someone to take that job would be.

"I feel bad about putting you on the spot like that."

"It's fine. Now that I'm not so shocked anymore, I've been thinking about what kind of place Camellia might be and how we're going to get there."

"Oh yeah?" Nelly's gaze wandered some. She must have been thinking about where to start. "Well, the town's big."

"Rosa doesn't feel very big with all the walls."

"Mm. There's no mountains nearby, so the land's flat... Actually, the town's right by a big wetland."

"It's hard to imagine a town near a wetland..." Sara tilted her head.

"I think they were supposed to grow some kind of grain the Invited tend to like too..."

"You mean... rice?"

"Maybe. It's all, like... crumbly, and hard to scoop up with a fork."

"Just use a spoon, then." That wasn't the issue. What surprised her was this: "It's been two and a half years since I came to Trilgaia and I didn't even realize there was rice here."

"Nobody really eats it. It's just kind of a filler for meat dishes."

If most Invited came to this world when they were around ten like Haruto, it was very unlikely any adults with knowledge of agriculture had reincarnated here. It was probably closer to wild rice than what Sara was used to. Still, she wanted to try it.

"I'm really looking forward to this now."

"That's good. We could get there by carriage or on foot, but I think it might be fun to take our time walking there. It'll take about two weeks, and we can stop by some towns on the way."

"Let's do that!"

She wasn't against riding in a carriage, but from what she saw of them in town, they didn't look very comfortable.

"The roads aren't so bad, and you've got the strongest security you can get." Nelly flexed her arm before her ears turned red with embarrassment.

"I'll be counting on you!"

"Just leave it to me."

Their heads were so full of thoughts of sightseeing that they'd completely forgotten about Chris, who was the whole reason they were going to Camellia in the first place.

They'd finally bought nice clothes, but they couldn't exactly wear them back to the Dark Mountain. As they stood in the doorway of the guild the next morning in their usual outfits, they were met by Bradley, Haruto, Vince, and Allen. Were they here to see them off? Most of them were cheerful, but Allen simply stood there with a serious look on his face.

"What's up? Here to say goodbye?" Nelly asked them casually. It was rare for her to initiate a conversation like this.

Allen took a big step forward. What was that look on his face for? “Nelly. There’s something I want to ask you.”

“Shoot,” Nelly said without hesitation, like she’d seen this coming.

“Last time you asked me if I wanted to come to the Dark Mountain, I turned you down. I thought it would be better for me to take my time training in Rosa’s dungeons.”

“I remember.”

“So I stayed in Rosa and learned a lot from the guildmaster, and went into dungeons with Haruto. But being in the meadow with you yesterday and the day before, I started thinking maybe the best way for me to learn would be by studying how you use mana.”

Sara often found herself thinking that the way they used their mana was similar, so what Allen was saying made sense to her.

“It might be a bit late to say this, but I want you to teach me, Nelly! I promise I’ll do everything I can to protect Sara too!”

Sara clasped her hands in front of her chest, thrilled. *Did you hear that? He said he'd protect me!* She repeated his words in her heart.

“Oh? Big words. How are you gonna do that when you still need me to teach you how to fight?” Nelly smirked, but Sara was desperately trying not to laugh next to her. In reality, Sara didn’t need to be protected by anyone. Nelly, Sara, and Allen were all well aware of that, so they all understood that “protecting Sara” really meant keeping Sara company and watching out for her more careless moments.

“Nelly! Try to understand how Allen feels!” Haruto shouted dramatically. It was hard to tell whether he could read the room or not. “When we were dungeon diving together, I would always get ahead of myself and he would rein me in and support me. It makes me feel a little pathetic since I’m older than him, but he’s reliable and he always speaks up when I say something weird.”

“*That's* what you like about him?” Sara couldn’t help but question.

“The truth is, I want Allen to come live with us up on the Dark Mountain, but he said he wanted to go with you instead... Allen’s a really valuable guy to have around. He wouldn’t ask just anyone if he could go with them. So won’t you take him with you?!”

"Haruto... You just think of me as some kind of handy tool to have around, don't you?" Allen's words cut sharply.

Nelly looked to the ground for a moment before raising her head and laughing loudly.
"Ha ha ha! You kids are hilarious."

Everyone stood there with their mouths hanging open. They must have never seen this side of Nelly before.

"Teach you, huh? Guess it's finally time for me to be a mentor."

Sara kept her comments about how lousy a teacher she was to herself.

"Then you'll..."

"Yeah. Why don't you come with us to Camellia?"

"Yes!" Allen crowed. "Sara!"

"Yeah. We'll be together again, huh?" So they wouldn't have to be apart after all.

"Uhh," Vince piped up. "Well, if we're all clear on everything, should we get going, then?"

Get going? Get going where? Sara tilted her head.

"To the Dark Mountain. We should strike while the iron's hot, right?"

"It's a little *too* hot, isn't it?" Sara was really starting to feel like being able to make good comebacks was a valuable skill in Rosa.

Vince started walking off like they'd all agreed with him, so they gradually began to follow. Bradley had only gotten to Rosa yesterday, so he'd hardly had a chance to rest before setting out again. He must have really wanted to avoid his tagalongs from the capital catching up to him.

"I understand why Bradley and Haruto are coming with us, but what about Allen and Vince?" Sara asked.

"I'm just coming 'cause I want to. Like I said before, if Haruto can go at his level, then

it should be fine for me to go up there too." Allen's reason was simple enough. He was going because he felt like it.

Vince's reason, on the other hand, was this: "I've gotta go to see if the Invited can really handle themselves up there, right? I'll check to see if they need anything else up at the caretaker's cabin while I'm there, and since I haven't been in a while, I'll check the state of the dungeon on behalf of the Hunter's Guild."

"Even though you've been ignoring it all this time?"

"Well, I feel a bit bad about that, but you never brought anything up, Nefertari. I'm just checking this time 'cause these two are technically nobles and all."

"I'm technically a noble too, you know," Nelly muttered, to which Vince averted his eyes.

Well, it was true that they hadn't really lacked for anything up in the caretaker's cabin. It was just that Nelly didn't clean... Sara nodded to herself, then looked up with a realization.

"Actually, if you two were treated like nobility and totally spoiled, I don't know if you'll manage up there. You have to make all your own food and clean and do laundry. Even if you have magic and magic tools, you'll still have to do as many chores as you would have had to back in Japan."

"Ah... Well, I have plenty of premade food in my pouch, and I think we can handle a little cleaning. When we need to do laundry, we can just take it to town. Are you okay with that, Haruto?"

"Fine with me."

Well, Haruto aside, if a grown man like Bradley knew what he was getting into, it was probably fine. Though the way he was so committed to not doing any kind of housework was a little weird.

They passed through town and into the meadow from the east gate, proceeding at Haruto's speed since he was the slowest. Still, they managed to clear almost all of the meadow by the end of their first day of travel. At this pace, they'd just have to camp out one more night before making it to the cottage.

It hardly felt real that it had taken her five days to get to Rosa the first time she went. It felt even less real that Haruto had been able to build up this much stamina in less than a month, and that Allen never showed any signs of being tired in the first place. Vince might have actually been the most tired of them. But none of them had any trouble with horned rabbits.

“Leave me alone. I’m not an active Hunter. I do paperwork and management. Augh... I’m beat...”

Vince practically collapsed when they reached the clearing where they’d be resting for the night, making excuses for himself even though no one had asked.

“Well, what should we have for dinner today...?”

As Sara considered the matter, Bradley produced something from his pouch. “Oh, I don’t intend to trouble you. In fact, you should let me handle it tonight. I have plenty of food I procured in the capital.”

Well, Sara was more than happy not to have to worry about the food. Bradley had produced a small table at some point and Haruto, after rummaging around in his bags for a moment, took out a portable stove next. From how pleased with himself he looked as he boiled water, Sara surmised that he planned to make tea.

“When you have a lot of people, you can put the tea leaves right in the pot of boiled water. Sara taught me that.”

“I’ve got this.” Bradley took out the same kind of lunch box that they sold in the guild, but in a wicker basket with handles that made it look awfully fancy.

Vince pointed at it like he couldn’t help himself. “W-Wait, isn’t that from that fancy restaurant in the capital...?”

“It’s the special lunch from the Elk Bistro. I told them I wanted them for dungeon crawling and had them make me a bunch of them.”

“Damn Invited...”

Sara wished he wouldn’t lump all Invited together like that. But food was food. There wasn’t anything too special inside the Elk Bistro’s lunches. It was just horned rabbit. But it was a lot tastier than the kabobs you could get at food stands.

"How is it so good? Does it taste different because of the herbs they used? Or because the meat's aged? Or is it grilled over charcoal first?" Sara muttered to herself.

"This is definitely good, but your food's good too, Sara." Nelly said. Allen and Vince were quick to agree.

"Yeah, it is."

"Sure is. That stewed cockatrice tail was amazing."

Well, she was happy to hear it, but she *did* want to learn some new recipes.

As she watched Bradley collect the lunch boxes from everyone and Haruto give out tea refills, Sara figured they must really be looking forward to their life up on the Dark Mountain. She couldn't help but pray that it would be good for them.

After a good night's sleep, they made it to the base of the mountain early the next day. The horned rabbits swarming around them were becoming vexing, so Sara pushed them far enough away with her barrier that Haruto wouldn't try anything crazy.

"So this is the Dark Mountain. I know it's supposed to be a dungeon, but it just looks like a normal mountain to me."

Haruto's mouth was agape. Allen's wasn't, but he looked just as surprised. Vince jerked his chin in the mountain's direction and said, "There's your proof that it's the Dark Mountain. Wait, hang on a sec... Aren't those a little big for forest wolves? They're not the right color either..."

"*Growl!*"

"*Growl!*"

There was a pack of mountain wolves right at the base of the mountain.

"What are mountain wolves doing here...?" Vince was surprised, but they were here, and there was nothing they could do about that. He cleared his throat and began to explain once again, "As you can see, dungeon monsters can't leave the bounds of the dungeon."

True, for all their growling, they weren't actually coming down into the meadow.

“Huh? What are you guys doing all the way down here anyway?”

Not to mention, they looked like a familiar pack to Sara.

“Growl!”

“Growl!”

It was almost like they'd come down to meet her, but Sara wouldn't be fooled. They were monsters, after all. They obviously intended to make tasty meals of them all if they got the chance.

“Y-You’re not cute in the least, do you hear me?”



Some in their group, however, were more than happy to be fooled.

“What big wolves! Come here, boy!”

“Haruto! Don’t do that!”

“*Growwwl!*”

“*Growl!*”

Haruto had moved a bit closer to them and they looked ready to pounce on him. Drool was spilling from their mouths, their teeth bared.

“Yipes! What the heck?”

“Come on... I told you.”

“*Growl!*”

The wolf’s growling almost sounded like a small-time punk asking Sara, “Ya want me to take care a’ this guy fer ya, boss?” but that was just her imagination, surely.

Nelly suddenly burst out laughing. “Ha ha ha! These guys are here to protect Sara. I guess you’ve finally tamed them that much.”

“I haven’t tamed them. This is just a coincidence. Probably.”

In the end, she had to explain to the wolves that these men were her friends, so they were okay. This didn’t sit right with her.

“Well, as you can see...” Nelly, who was usually so quiet, spread her arms in front of everyone, looking rather pleased for some reason. “There’s plenty of danger on the Dark Mountain. That’s why I warned you about coming here, Haruto. But you want to live up here anyway. And Allen...”

“Y-Yes?” Allen answered nervously, not expecting to be put on the spot.

“If you want me to teach you, then you understand, right?”

“Yes! It’s not enough just to be able to walk from one end of the meadow to the other.

I have to get to the cottage on the Dark Mountain on my own, without relying on Sara's barrier."

"Good work." Nelly nodded, satisfied with his answer, while Sara stared slack-jawed at Allen and his ramrod-straight posture. How did he know what Nelly wanted to say? Sara had lived with her for years and she'd had no idea.

"Fortunately, it's a straight shot to the cottage. Haruto? Allen? You can take turns heading up there on your own, yeah?"

"Hey, I don't know about that, Nefertari." Vince looked on with exasperation as Nelly and the two boys nodded enthusiastically. "Haruto has magic that can take down dragons. I don't think you should hold him and Allen to the same standard."

"You and the guildmaster are both too naive." Nelly shot Vince down immediately.

"Too naive?" Vince said, looking straight at Sara. His eyes seemed to say, "*You spoil Sara plenty, don't you?*" but Sara didn't think that was the case at all.

"You know, I got my hand bit by a wolf," she informed him.

"Huh?"

"The very first time I got physical strengthening to work, Nelly told me to let a wolf bite my hand."

"That's pretty rough..."

Sara was worried about Allen, but if Nelly thought he'd be okay, he'd probably be okay. Most likely.

"Sara could deal with the mountain wolves from her first day. You'll be fine, Allen."

"Right!"

Sara didn't like Nelly acting like she was strong from the very beginning, given that she couldn't take a single step out from the cottage's protection field on her first day, but she swallowed her retort.

She gave the restless mountain wolves a sad look. "And I told the wolves not to attack

us too..."

"*Growl!*"

"What's with the nasty looks in your eyes? Why are you guys so aggressive?"

"Well, they *are* monsters. All that matters to them is whether you're stronger than them or not." Nelly showed them her clenched fist, and the wolves backed up a bit. She had the strength to back the gesture up, for sure. "Haruto, Allen. Show them with your own fists that they're no match for you!"

"Yes!"

"Yes!"

Sara waited in the back, ready to jump in to help at any moment. Still, she didn't want to hurt the mountain wolves either, so she only had her barrier up at its smallest size.

"We'll hang back, then," Vince said.

"Yeah," Nelly agreed.

And thus, their trial began.

"I'll go first." Allen stepped forward and Nelly quietly placed a hand on Sara's tense shoulder.

"Allen repelled my sword with his physical strengthening. A mountain wolf's fangs will never hurt him. He might get knocked around a bit, but don't interfere."

Sara pushed down her desire to protest.

Allen took a step onto the path up the Dark Mountain and immediately vanished under the tide of wolves that descended onto him.

"Allen..."

"You better be that worried about me too," said Haruto.

"..."

Sara didn't care one bit about him at the moment. With some *whacks* and *thwacks*, one wolf after another was flung back from the mound around Allen. Eventually, Allen and his flying blows became visible, and the wolves retreated to merely circling Allen menacingly. Allen just stood there with his fists still raised, not even out of breath.

"Looks like they've acknowledged Allen's strength." Nelly nodded, satisfied.

"That means it took them a really long time to acknowledge me, doesn't it?"

"M-Mm. I guess it does mean that." Nelly cleared her throat awkwardly and had Allen come back to the rest of them. "Haruto, you're next."

"Okay!"

Haruto would be fine. This time, Sara relaxed, but Nelly grabbed her shoulder to caution her instead.

"You should see what happens when you're not properly trained—even if you can use physical strengthening and you're good at magic. Put your barrier around him if it looks like he needs it."

"Huh?"

That wasn't what she'd said with Allen. Sara watched Haruto take a step onto the path, newly nervous.

Haruto wasn't buried by wolves like Allen had been. Instead, he sent several wolves flying with his fists, one after another, until eventually one of them surprised him and sent *him* flying.

"Ack!"

There were wolves waiting for him where he was about to land, but Haruto was too panicked to notice. Sara stretched her barrier out toward him and covered him with it. Haruto bounced a few times inside the barrier before carefully standing up.

"Your hips are too high. You need to lower your center of gravity and make heavy attacks in an upward motion. You're light, so if you get tackled, that's it!" Nelly called over to him. "Don't try to compete with Allen. Use your barrier or magic or whatever you need to!"

“O-Okay!”

Haruto glared at the wolves and then took a deep breath. Inside Sara’s barrier, he formed his own barrier around himself.

“Thanks, Sara.”

“Of course. I’ll remove it now, okay?”

Sara pulled her barrier back, removing it from Haruto. The wolves immediately leaped at him, but his own barrier pushed them back.

“You’re stronger than Allen at the moment. If you can conquer your carelessness and timidity, you shouldn’t have any issues either”

“Okay!”

It didn’t take long for the wolves to surrender after that.

“Whew...” Sara let out the breath she’d been holding. “You’re both so strong.”

“I was pretty cool, wasn’t I?”

“At the end, at least.”

They were only at the foot of the mountain, so Sara was still a little nervous, but the boys must have steeled themselves after Nelly’s trial by fire. They made the journey up the mountain with no issues, not even appearing tired by the end of it.

Incidentally, Vince never really stood out strengthwise, and he was a self-professed caster, so Sara was a little worried about him as well, but he strode up the mountain path, brushing aside any monsters that got in his way. “Physical strengthening is the most basic of the basics,” he told them.

“Vince, you’re not even hitting them, but the monsters are running away from you. Is that some kind of magic?”

“Yeah. You know, uhh, when it’s dry in the winter and you get a little shock sometimes? I’ve got that around my hands.”

“Static electricity! I see...”

It wasn’t as bombastic as the thunderbolt Sara used to catch golden trout, but would that qualify as electric magic too? There wasn’t anything like that in the magic textbook Sara had read, so Vince must have come up with it himself. Sara looked up at him with admiration, and he wasn’t humble about it at all.

“See? I’m not just a receptionist, right?”

“U-Uh-huh.”

What Sara took from this was that even people with impressive abilities could be lacking in other areas.

“Well, outside of the cottage looks good. Let me go see the back.” As soon as they arrived, Vince put on his Guild employee face and headed for the back of the cottage.

“So this is Sara and Nelly’s house. It looks like it’s from some kind of storybook.”

“I always thought that too! Look, turn around.”

“*Growl!*”

“We’re good on wolves!”

There were the obligatory mountain wolves in the view, but looking out from the cottage, the verdant expanse before them was like a beautiful painting.

“We didn’t have any time to turn around when we were coming up here, but the view’s really incredible,” Haruto said, awed.

Allen just stared out at the view in silence. Sara wasn’t boorish enough to pester him for his impressions, so she just stood next to him until he let out a big, satisfied-sounding sigh.

“There are all sorts of views I’ve never seen before in the world. I can’t wait to go see them one by one.”

“Yeah. This is just the beginning.”

But before that beginning, he'd get a tour of the cottage.

"First thing when you go inside is the living room and the kitchen. On the right is Nelly's room, and the two on the left are guest rooms. I'm using one of them, so it'll be free soon. They're two-person rooms, so think about how you want to divide them up."

"Wow, it's smaller than I thought it'd be."

"Yeah, I'd say it's only slightly larger than the average house."

"The protection field around this place is ridiculously expensive, so this was as big as they could make it." Vince returned from the back of the cottage while she was giving the tour. "The monsters up here are so strong, a normal protection field wouldn't cut it. Oh yeah, Sara, sell a few of your stealth slime stones before you go. I was only buying a couple at a time since I thought I'd always be able to get more, but everyone knows that you're an Invited now."

"That'd be nice. I'd like to lighten my load as much as I can before we leave."

And if she could sell all of her stealth slime stones, her wallet would be that much heftier.

Vince checked out the bedrooms, the kitchen, and the bathroom, then returned to the living room and put a hand to his chin like he was thinking about something.

"Nefertari was just up here on her own... err, well, she had Sara too, but... With two Invited up here, they'll probably get more visitors. If Haruto and Bradley each take a room, then there's just one guest room left over. Doesn't feel quite like enough..."

"They could sleep outside on the deck."

"That'd be a little too cruel, I think..."

Nelly's crude suggestion was shot down with more than a little exasperation.

"There *is* an attic. I checked up there and there's bedding. Enough for four people, I think," Sara supplied.

"That's it!" Vince checked the attic and the bedding and concluded, "If they're fine on the floor, twenty or so people could stay here. That's enough." It was the same

conclusion Sara had reached, which tickled her a bit.

"I heard from the guildmaster too, but the rooms are all clean and there's three months of food stocked up here... Hey, Nefertari."

"Yeah?"

"Hard to come by a girl like Sara."

"I'm grateful to the goddess from the bottom of my heart."

Sara felt awkward listening to Vince and Nelly's exchange. She'd discussed it with Nelly and they'd decided to leave half of the food behind. The Invited were prepared enough on their own, but Sara thought it would be good for them to have some examples of how they could cook the monsters they'd find on the Dark Mountain.

They spent the next few days taking a tour of the monster spots on the mountain, courtesy of Nelly. They visited the rocky area where Nelly and Sara had gone gargoyle-hunting too.

"Gargoyles really come out of these crevices?"

"They really do."

"Oo... oo..."

"When you hear that creepy sound, one of them's about to peel off. They're really tasty."

While Sara commentated to Allen, Haruto, and Vince, Bradley was getting hunting advice from Nelly.

"Do we have to hunt all over the place constantly?"

"For the last few years, it's been enough to just take down a few monsters every day."

"I see." Bradley looked relieved. He'd said he just wanted to live in peace and read books, so he didn't think like Haruto, who was thrilled hearing he'd be able to hunt as much as he wanted.

"Gargoyles are good, though. Cockatrice too. Haruto's got plenty of energy, so it might be good to take him to a few different places."

"Yes. Most of my time was spent socializing and dining with nobles. Having to be so social all the time was a source of stress for me. Just hunting a few monsters every day would actually be a nice break."

Sara showed them how she hunted golden trout too. She told Vince she was just using a bigger version of his static electricity spell, and that made sense to him, but he also said, "Nobody but the Invited would do something so huge."

Haruto bent down and observed the golden trout she'd caught. "I should learn how to cook these. I can come back here when I want to eat fish."

"Just remember that you hardly ever see golden trout normally. It's a luxury, you hear me?" Vince emphasized. There was so little common sense to be found among them that he didn't even know what to comment on.

They spent the next ten days doing a little bit of everything. Sara taught Haruto how to cook a few things, Bradley asked her to show him how to gather medicinal plants around the cottage, and they all tossed bones to the wolves outside. It seemed Bradley would rather pick plants than hunt monsters.

"There's no point in an Invited doing that," Vince lamented, but Sara understood his feelings exactly.

They would be able to make more than enough money hunting together up here, so Sara hoped he could spend some time relaxing and picking plants just to have fun. It would help Ted, who would no doubt be moping around without Chris at the Apothecary's Guild, Sara thought, then she quickly rethought, *No, no, there's no need to think about him.*

In that time, they also decided what they'd be taking with them and what they'd be leaving behind. Of course, Sara had already gotten everything she owned together into one pouch when she went to Rosa to look for Nelly, so she was just adding some foodstuffs she could only get up here on the Dark Mountain.

"Until Sara came, I was going into town every ten days, but for Haruto's sake, you should probably stay until your storage bag's full." That was Nelly's final piece of advice.

"I don't want anyone from the capital giving us an earful if we go back to Rosa now, so I plan to stay up here for around a month."

"That's a good idea."

On their final day, Haruto and Bradley were the only ones who remained at the cottage. Sara and Nelly would be setting off with Allen.

"If anyone comes to the guild looking for you, I'll play dumb as much as I can, but if someone makes it all the way up here, you'll have to deal with them yourselves."

"Got it. And I appreciate it," Bradley told Vince.

"Take care, Haruto."

"Yeah. I'll see you again sometime, Sara, Allen."

"Of course."

Haruto, Sara, and Allen said their goodbyes. Sara was also saying goodbye to the cottage she'd lived in for two-and-a-half years. She burned the sight of it into her eyes.

Nelly's hand settled on her shoulder. "Okay, Sara. Allen. Let's go."

"Yeah!"

"Yeah!"

"I'm here too, you know..."

That first time, Sara had headed for Rosa all on her own, but now she had all these people with her.

"I'm really looking forward to this."

"*Growl!*"

"But I'm good on wolves, thanks."

Every journey started with just one step.

CHAPTER 2

MY FIRST TRIP

On their way back to Rosa, Allen stayed mostly in front, with Vince and Sara in the middle and Nelly bringing up the rear. Sara was stunned by how Allen had grown as of late.

Though he specialized in physical strengthening, he had learned it from his uncle who was a caster, so he had a bit of his own way of doing things. After his uncle died, he hadn't been able to team up with anyone who used physical strengthening or learn from anyone until recently either, so he'd polished his skills on his own this whole time. He had vast amounts of physical and magical potential, but he'd never learned how to make use of it properly. Of course, it was also *because* he was alone that he'd only ever fought carefully, against opponents that suited his skill level.

Nelly was too slapdash a teacher for Sara, but she was good for Allen, and he'd really come into his own up on the Dark Mountain. Watching him grow stronger made Sara happy. Looking back on her own progress, she felt like she was getting too caught up in other people's business to do much growing of her own, but she could get by even with the strength she already possessed, so she wasn't really worried about it.

In other words, on their trip back to town, Sara didn't have to put her barrier up around anyone else; she could simply focus on repelling the monsters that came for her specifically. After parting with the mountain wolves at the base of the mountain, they got through the hordes of horned rabbits with no issue whatsoever, reaching the east gate in no time at all.

"Oh? The gate opened up faster than it usually does," Nelly observed.

Sara stretched up and could indeed see the gate opening in the distance.

"And then it closed again. Huh."

"That's odd," Vince said. "Maybe something happened. Let's hurry."

They picked up their pace, and when they arrived at the gate, they found a pair waiting

for them, in a scene that gave them déjà vu.

"Chris!" Nelly called out to him while Sara and Allen exchanged a look. It wasn't exactly an unusual pairing, but...

"Ted?"

"What was he doing here?"

"Chris, what's wrong?"

"There are some visitors from the capital in town right now," Chris said quietly. Sara's heart pounded in her chest. It had been some fifteen days since they'd last been in Rosa, more than enough time for the capital to send her supposed "guardian" here to take her in.

"They're not here for Sara, are they?" Nelly asked.

Chris shook his head. "Sara's visitor hasn't arrived yet. The ones here right now want to check on the Invited who fled from the capital—rather, who *journeyed to Rosa*, and if possible bring them back."

That they'd fled was the truth, but it must have been the official story that they were just visiting Rosa.

"They're currently trying to figure out what to do after hearing that the Invited have holed up on the Dark Mountain. The guildmaster told them he 'accidentally' hired them as caretakers of the Dark Mountain, not knowing their circumstances, and told their visitors that they would have to convince the Invited to come back themselves. He's doing his best to dodge responsibility."

"That's a lot for Jay to have to shoulder. I'll go back to the guild right away, but what are you doing out here anyway, Chris?" Vince asked him what everyone else was wondering.

Chris furrowed his brow sullenly. "They didn't say anything about Sara, but I imagine her visitor will be following shortly, and if that happens, Nef won't be able to leave Rosa. I already sent word to Camellia that I'd be accepting the guildmaster position there, you see..."

Sara was impressed by Chris's determination to stay put himself if Nelly couldn't leave. It was also just like him to show not a shred of concern for Sara.

"So, I thought maybe we'd head to Camellia before Sara's visitor makes contact with her. I asked the soldiers at the east gate to let me know right away if they spotted you, Nef."

"You want us to head straight to Camellia from here, then?" Nelly asked, this sudden development apparently not shaking her composure whatsoever.

"I can't force you, but I'd like you to consider it."

Though he said he couldn't force them, he was dressed for the road and exerting quite a bit of pressure, which was making Sara rather nervous.

Nelly frowned thoughtfully and looked down at Sara, meeting her eyes. "Sara."

"I'm fine with that. I wanted to buy some food before we left, but it's not like we're completely unprepared."

"Right. What about you, Allen? I'm sure you wanted to say goodbye to the guildmaster."

"I'm fine too. I said goodbye before we headed up to the Dark Mountain."

Nelly looked up at the sky for a moment before looking down to confirm with Sara and Allen once more. She nodded. "Okay. I would rather avoid any annoying situations. We should head to Camellia while our visitors from the capital have their hands full with Bradley and Haruto."

"You don't mind?"

"No. I appreciate you looking out for Sara like this."

"N-No, I..." Chris received Nelly's words of appreciation with more than a little awkwardness, which was unsurprising to Sara. She knew she was nothing more than Chris's pretense. He really wasn't concerned about her at all.

"Well, now that that's decided... What's Ted doing here? Saying goodbye?" Allen asked.

"Tch." Rude as always. But Sara was curious too, for one particular reason: Ted was

also packed for a trip. They all looked to him for an explanation, but he just looked aside, irritated, like he couldn't even bring himself to open his mouth.

"Ted. I told you it would be up to Allen and Sara. If this is going to take much longer, we'll just leave you here."

"Leave him here?" Allen and Sara repeated at the same time. They exchanged a baffled glance. The implication was obvious.

"Uhh, so, before, I, err..." Ted started haltingly. Sara could have teased him, but he looked relatively serious, so she decided to just wait quietly for him to finish. "I feel... sorry... for how I lied to you... and hurt you... when you first came to town."

Sara and Allen just gaped at him. The last thing they'd been expecting was Ted to apologize. From the sour look that endured on his face, however, it was hard to say whether he really regretted his past behavior or not. Chris had likely told Ted that he wouldn't take him along unless he apologized. When she sussed that out, Sara just wanted to ask him, "Are you a *child*?"

Of course, to Sara, Ted's harassment was no longer anything but a bitter memory. It hardly even bothered her anymore. Allen had endured far more than her. His life had even been endangered. He might forgive Ted, but would he want to travel somewhere with him?

Maybe he couldn't endure the long silence currently stretching between them, or maybe he'd intended to do this from the start, but Ted rummaged around in his bag and pulled something out from it.

"Here, for Sara. And this one's for Allen."

He handed a basket for gathering medicinal plants to Sara. She had one already, of course, but she *did* leave it at the Apothecary's Guild fairly often, so it would help to have another one. What he handed to Allen, however, was far beyond the level of a gathering basket.

"It's a leg pouch. A one-wyvern bag."

That was a pretty pricey gift. It was something Haruto also wore, and, to tell the truth, Sara secretly thought it was pretty cool.

"I never... I didn't know the errand I asked you to go on could endanger your life. That doesn't excuse what I did. I thought a lot about how to apologize, but since I come from a wealthy family, this was all I could come up with."

From his behavior up until now, it was hard to imagine Ted having actually put that much thought into this, but Sara actually appreciated that he came right out and said he wanted to solve this with money, since it was what he had available to him. What did Allen think, though? Sara watched over the two of them nervously, concerned that it would hurt Allen's pride to accept money to settle things between them.

"You can apologize and give me gifts, but I can't say I forgive you for what you did. I can't just forget that it happened," Allen said slowly. He'd clearly put a lot of thought into this. "But I accept your apology. I'll accept the pouch too. We can consider this our starting point. Our relationship is at zero as of now."

Allen really was principled. Sara decided to accept the basket too.

"Thanks for the new basket."

"You're, uhh, always helping me out by gathering plants. I thought you'd appreciate this more than something expensive."

He must have wanted to get it all out and done with now. If he'd bought the basket specifically for Sara, then he must have picked something he thought Allen would like as well. Sara's evaluation of Ted improved just a bit. The question of what he was doing here still remained, however.

"I know why Chris is going to Camellia, but what about you, Ted? Your dad's the mayor, right? Is your family okay with you leaving?"

If they were to travel together, it was best to get everything out in the open. Sara didn't need to hold back with Ted, and she couldn't be too apathetic about him either.

Ted snuck a pleading glance at Chris, but the other man just shook his head slightly. He must have wanted Ted to speak for himself.

"There are still things I want to learn as an apothecary. I managed to go to the capital and study there, and when Master Chris came, I was fortunate to be able to serve as his assistant. There's still so much I can learn from him, but no, my family doesn't really want me to leave Rosa." Sara had been thinking of Ted as a bit of a slacker, so she

was surprised to hear he was so passionate about learning. "I managed to get permission with the pretext that I would be serving as Master Chris's assistant, but Master Chris told me it would ultimately be up to Sara and Allen whether or not I could come along. Since I put you through so much but hadn't even apologized yet."

So Chris wasn't as unaware as he seemed to be.

"I don't expect us to be friends or anything, but I want to leave Rosa with Master Chris. More specifically, I want to extract the poison glands from a poison bog frog and learn how to make medicine from them!"

In the end, it was almost a relief how self-serving Ted turned out to be. An admirable Ted was no Ted at all.

"I know he's not the most pleasant fellow to have around, but I don't want to turn away anyone who wants to learn. Since he wants to accompany me to Camellia, I'd like to take him, but what say the rest of you?"

Well, Chris's feelings on Ted were rather unfortunate, but as long as Nelly was with them, Sara didn't really care about anything else.

"I'm fine with it if Sara is." Nelly had no regard for Allen's feelings, apparently, but that was fitting as well. The adults were the same as they always were.

Sara wasn't the type to hold a grudge, so she nodded her assent.

"Let's head straight to Camellia, then."

"I'll just head quietly back to the guild and figure out what to say," Vince added. "Actually, I could head straight home and just not go into work for a few days too, couldn't I...?"

He was up to no good at the moment, but Vince had always been a big help to Sara. He was always fair to her, and he never hesitated to provide whatever assistance he could.

"Thanks for everything you've done for me, Vince," Sara said.

"Yeah, same here," Allen added. "Thanks for everything you did for me after my uncle died."

Sara and Allen bowed their heads to him.

"Oh, cut that out. It's not like we'll never see each other again. You'll come back to Rosa sometime, right? I'll be waiting for you at the Hunter's Guild like always," Vince said a little tearily, waving his hand before stepping through the east gate.

"I imagine we'll be camping out the first night. That okay with you?"

"Of course."

Chris seemed happy even to have such an insignificant exchange with Nelly. Of course, her question was probably more directed at the kids and Ted, but in Chris's mind, it was almost certainly just the two of them on this little trip. Sara almost burst out laughing at the thought.

"We can use the same roads carriages use to get to Camellia. No one's after us at the moment, so I think traveling on foot will be fine."

"I agree."

Their walking pace was ridiculously fast, of course, so Ted was wiped out by the end of their first day of travel. Somehow, he managed to earn even more points with Sara at the end of the day too, though needless to say, her impression of him had still not improved to anything more than a neutral sentiment.

They secured a spot for themselves in a clearing with a protection field around it, similar to the one in the meadow with the horned rabbits. Merchants pitched tents here and there, likely headed to Camellia as well.

"Sorry, Sara..." Ted said suddenly. Sara almost leaped out of her skin at the words. "I'll take care of dinner tonight, but could you just make some tea? To be honest, I'm exhausted..."

Sara dutifully took out her portable stove and began boiling water. The dinner Ted was providing was a lot like Bradley's. As Bradley had, he took out fancy lunch boxes from his pouch, one after another.

"You nobles..." Sara muttered reflexively.

"Shut up," was Ted's response. It actually felt comforting for Sara to hear it.

"Oh? Is this from the First District?"

"Yes. I got some takeout from the Spring Flower Café."

Sara had only been as far as the Apothecary's Guild in the Second District, but she'd heard that the First District was exclusively where the influential people in the town lived.

"The First District is mostly private residences, and most houses have their own personal chefs, but people still like to go out to eat somewhere nearby, so there are a few restaurants. The Spring Flower Café is a first-class option among them," Chris explained.

Sara had no interest in the restaurants in Rosa or the capital, but she was glad she could taste food from fancy places thanks to Bradley and Ted.

"They don't really do takeout, honestly, but because I'm the..." He stopped midsentence. He must have used his influence as the mayor's son to get what he wanted, though Sara didn't think it mattered as long as he wasn't inconveniencing anyone.

"As long as you paid for them."

"Of course I did," Ted said in a huff.

Sara ignored him and opened up her lunch box, smiling at the tasty-looking stew inside. She warmed it up with magic.

"Who else wants their lunch heated up?" she asked.

"I'll do mine myself," Allen said proudly.

Everyone else (even Ted) held their lunches out to Sara. Allen meanwhile had learned how to warm up his own food up on the Dark Mountain.

"I can do it too, you know," he pointed out to them.

"I have a bit of a sensitive tongue," Chris said in response.

Allen didn't have very good control yet, so he had a tendency to overheat his food.

"I didn't know you could do that," said Ted.

"Honestly, I always wonder why people don't just put the food in their bags hot. But you've already learned something coming on this trip, huh?" Sara laughed.

Needless to say, Ted's response to this was, "Shut up." He was quieter than he usually was, however. Incidentally, the stew was made with horned rabbit, and it was seasoned very tastily.

It took about ten days to reach Camellia at a slow walking pace. It was refreshing to walk down a straight road, endless fields of grass on either side. Not that walking all day didn't have its own difficulties. They were able to take a few of the regular carriages that took passengers between towns as well, at least.

One of the large horses pulling one of the carriages snorted at Sara and tried to bite her hair.

"Why? Nelly's hair looks way tastier!"

"*Bh, Brrrh.*"

"Guess they don't like red hair."

Nelly was laughing, but Sara didn't want her hair to get covered in slobber or bitten off. Sara took a wide berth around the horses and scurried onto the large carriage. The vehicle seated twelve, on three rows of four-person benches, with some room for luggage. Because of the hot weather, the carriage's cover was down, allowing them to see far into the distance. The meadow breeze brushed against their cheeks and hair pleasantly as they traveled.

For once, they didn't have to use physical strengthening. They simply leaned back in their seats and stared out at the passing scenery. Even the horned rabbits hopping about looked cute from up here.

After riding in one of the carriages for an hour, they got off and switched to another one, and the original vehicle returned to the town or village it had left from. This made

journeys like theirs quicker.

"It's a bit of a pain to have to change carriages so often, but you can get stiff riding one for too long, so maybe it's actually a good thing."

"Yeah. Honestly, I find walking easier."

That was the conclusion they reached after several carriage changes.

"Let's stay here in Zinnia tonight," Chris announced.

The town known as Zinnia sat at the bottom of a gently sloping hill. It was a busy town, with carriages arriving from all directions. There were so many of them, in fact, that after they disembarked, Sara had a hard time avoiding all the horses nearby.

"Guess critters like you no matter where you go," Allen remarked dryly, but all the "critters" that liked her were enormous, so their affection just scared Sara.

Though it gave her that same faraway look in her eyes that Vince always had when the three adults rented rooms at the most expensive inn in town without exchanging so much as a word about it in advance, she was happy to get to stay in an inn at all. The three each came away from the reception desk with keys.

"Allen, you'll stay with me."

"Sara will be with me, of course."

They'd split the rooms between Chris and Allen, Sara and Nelly, and Ted.

"Listen, Sara." Ted suddenly spoke up after looking rather restless for a little while.

"Yeah?"

"They produce tea in this town. They grow really good tea leaves up on that hill to the north."

"The medicinal plants here are also of very high quality, though we don't often get them in Rosa," Chris added.

All Sara thought was, *Is this something to talk about at the reception desk?*

"So, I'll be going to buy some high-grade tea you can only get here. They have cheaper varieties as well, so I suggest you buy some as well, Sara."

"O-Okay. Thanks?" Sara said, baffled by the sudden suggestion. She had enough money to buy expensive tea herself, but she thanked him for his considerate(?) words before Ted blustered out like the wind.

"I think I'm going to look at the medicinal plants as well. Let's meet up again at dinnertime." Chris dropped his key into Allen's hand and left to go shopping.

Left behind, Sara, Allen, and Nelly stood there rather dumbfounded, though they realized they were in the way in front of the reception desk.

Sara sighed. "That's why Nelly won't give you the time of day, you know," she said to no one.

Allen burst out laughing, but Sara truly didn't think there were any girls who would find a guy who came to a new town and prioritized his own desires dreamy.

"I'll check out our room and then wander around a bit, I think," Allen said.

"Be careful."

They were all just friends, of course, it was fine. Their whole group had separated as soon as they'd entered town, but at least now she had some alone with Nelly, which was perfectly fine with Sara. They headed to their room to rest for a moment and discussed what they should do for the rest of the day.

Nelly's cheeks were red, and she was having trouble saying what she wanted to say. "Err, Sara... If we're going out together, do you want to wear those, you know... the cute clothes we bought in Rosa?"

"I totally forgot! Yeah, if it's supposed to be a town with good tea, let's get dressed up and go have some!"

Sara excitedly changed into her yellow summer dress while Nelly went into the bathroom to change. She took longer than she usually did to change clothes, and when she finally popped her head out from the room, she was acting rather shy. But why?

"Don't... Don't laugh, okay?"

“I won’t laugh... Wow!”

When Nelly emerged from the bathroom, she was wearing a dress! It was a dress that went down to her ankles in a thin fabric well suited for summer. The mature dark blue color, with a bit of lace around the collar and sleeves, gave it a feminine flair.

“Wow, you look so elegant! You’re beautiful!”

“Mm... I got out some clothes from kind of a long time ago to match what you bought.”

Nelly sniffed the sleeve of the dress. Sara did laugh a bit at that, but she gave Nelly a tight hug. The dress must have been stored with a sachet, because it had a bit of a flowery scent.

“You smell nice. I can’t wait to go out!”

“Guess I should probably leave the sword here, huh?”

Sara nodded to herself. Even in a dress, Nelly still looked perfectly cool clenching her fists.

They headed down from the second floor and left their key with the smiling receptionist before going out to wander around the town. There was quite a height difference between them, so Sara was practically hanging off of Nelly, but they linked arms tenderly as they walked.

True to the town’s apparent reputation, there were several stores selling tea on the main road just outside the inn.

“Care for some samples, ladies?”

Sara and Nelly must have really looked like tourists. People at all the shops were calling out to them as they walked by. It felt a little embarrassing, but Sara did frequently drink tea after meals, so she accepted the small cup of tea and had a sip.

“It tastes... hmm... fresh, like it’s not aged as much as the tea we usually drink. It’s good.”

The fresh flavor gradually faded from her tongue.

"Ah, is the tea you usually drink from the capital, little miss?"

How could he tell? A satisfied look spread on the shopkeeper's face when he saw Sara's surprise.

"They prefer more aged tea leaves in the capital," he explained. "Here, we use the leaves harvested from that hill over there, so we prefer them on the fresher side. Of course, as soon as you put them into a storage pouch, the flavor will be preserved." The man laughed and, not only did he tell them about the history of tea production in the town, he even let them sample a few other kinds of tea.

"I'll buy some of this," Sara decided quickly.

"There's a place just next door where you can enjoy a proper cup of tea. Stop by, won't you?"

"Of course!"

They bought some delicious tea and headed to the next building over, which had several tables outside next to the street like a café. There were all sorts of people enjoying tea there, looking like they might be on their way back from shopping.

"Nelly?"

"Yeah, let's stop by and have some tea. Go ahead and sit down here, Sara."

Sara sat down at a round table that seated four and watched as Nelly went to order them some tea. As a Hunter, Nelly's posture was flawless, and she looked cool as she skirted around the tables. Nelly was always cool, whether she was in a dress or her Hunter's garb.

Eventually, Nelly returned carrying a small tray with some teacups on it, but someone suddenly stood in front of her before she reached Sara.

"That was close. If this were the Dark Mountain, I think she would've slugged him."

Sara's heart was pounding. She thought it was just an accident, but the man took the tray from Nelly and started walking toward Sara, saying something to her. Nelly was dumbstruck for a moment, hurrying after him, much more flustered than she'd usually be.

The man came straight to Sara's table, set the tray down, and returned to the front counter. He was probably around Bradley's age and tall enough for Nelly to have to look up a bit at him. He had light brown hair and eyes of the same color, Sara thought she'd noticed.

"What was with that guy?" Nelly looked like she wasn't sure if she was allowed to be angry or not.

"I think he was trying to be nice, but that was pretty dangerous, wasn't it?"

"You said it."

The tea did smell good, though. And there were snacks too. Sara reached out for one immediately.

"What's this?"

"A specialty here. It's got fruit preserved in sugar baked into it, to go with the tea. See how it's long and thin so it's easy to hold in one hand?"

"Err, yeah," Sara said, slightly distracted by the fact that that man from before was now sitting down at their table with his own cup of tea.

"Hey..." Nelly started, but before she could warn the man, he called out to someone behind him.

"Hey, over here!"

"Geez, Raul. You're always like this with pretty girls."

Another man, much younger than the first, came and sat down at their table as well, again with his own cup of tea. They looked similar, so maybe they were brothers.

This was a new situation for Sara and Nelly, so they both froze, unsure of what exactly they should do.

"Thought I saw a pretty red-haired lady having tea, but you're cute too, aren't you?"

Now the other guy was talking to Sara. Her eyes went wide with surprise. She was *more* surprised by Nelly's response, however.

"She is, isn't she? The cutest thing about my Sara is—"

"So your name's Sara. I don't see black hair like that too often, and your big brown eyes are cute too. What's your name?"

"I'm Nelly."

"I'm Bern. Raul here's my brother. It's nice to meet you."

He'd used Sara to get Nelly's name out of her, and they were even having a nice chat now too. The men told them they cultivated tea, and they worked while it was cool in the morning and hung out around town like this later in the day. They didn't seem like bad people, exactly, and Nelly seemed to be enjoying herself, so Sara gradually relaxed, leaning back against her chair.

When Nelly started talking about how good Sara was at making tea, a shadow fell over Sara. She looked up to find Allen standing there, blocking the sun. He set a cup of tea on the table with a loud *thunk*.

"Excuse me, gentlemen." It was rare for Allen to sound so prickly. "These are my traveling companions. Mind making some room for me?"

The pair of brothers glanced at Allen and gave him a look as if to say, "What, just some brat?"

"You their little brother or something? I'm sure you can see we're having a nice chat together right now. You should find somewhere else to sit."

Sara, frankly, would rather have sat with Allen than these people she didn't know. She picked up her cup to join him instead when a shadow fell over Nelly this time. It was Chris. The complete lack of expression on his face conveyed just how poor his current mood was.

Chris set his hand down on Nelly's shoulder and bent down to say to her, "Sorry to keep you, Nef."

"Uhh, you didn't—ow!" Before Nelly could tell him they weren't waiting for him at all,

Sara kicked her leg under the table. Not enough to actually hurt her, of course.

"Thanks for entertaining my companions, you two." Chris was smiling with his mouth, but not with his eyes, as he pulled Nelly closer.

"Who's this, your dad?" Bern said. Sara felt a cold sweat coming on.

"I'll have you know Nef is the same age as me."

Chris's response wasn't exactly the best thing to say either. Still, with a surprised glance at Nelly, Bern and Raul both quickly stood.

"I-I guess we're good, then. It's been fun, Nelly, Sara."

"See you."

The two brothers took their tea and beat a swift retreat.

"We were having such a nice chat, though."

To be more precise, Nelly was just having a nice time talking about Sara.

Allen and Chris sat down with a sigh in response to her complaint. Sara felt a bit glum at the prospect of the lecture that was incoming.

"Nef."

"What?"

"Why have you never worn that in front of me before? I can't stand thinking that those two men saw how beautiful you look in that before I did."

"Sara saw it before them."

As always, the two of them weren't quite getting through to one another, which made *Sara* want to sigh.

"That's not the problem here, Chris," Allen said calmly. "You can't be letting your guard down around people you don't know in a place you've never been before, Nelly."

“R-Right.”

“You might be fine yourself, but what would you do if something happened to Sara?”

“I understand.”

Well, thankfully, Nelly understood what Allen was trying to say.

Sara didn’t know what the men were after. Maybe they were just being nice, or maybe they just wanted to talk to Nelly because she was pretty. Either way, Sara’s heart beat a little faster at the thought that Nelly really *was* pretty enough for people to want to talk to her when she was acting normally, even though people avoided her so much in Rosa.

Where Chris was concerned, of course, there were clear lines to be drawn.

“If you were that worried about Nelly, you shouldn’t have gone off on your own somewhere without talking to her.”

“Ugh... I’m regretting that now, yes.”

Chris looked properly remorseful, so Sara was relieved that she didn’t have to scold him anymore.

They stopped by towns sometimes in that fashion, but most of their journey was spent trekking across fields.

When they walked all day, they took long lunch breaks, and Chris gave them some lessons on plant-gathering. It didn’t sit quite right with Sara to be learning alongside Ted, but Nelly and Allen went off to hunt monsters during their breaks, so her only options were to pick plants on her own or to do so with Chris and Ted. That she didn’t even consider just lazing about in the grass was a testament to Sara’s diligent nature.

Still, she wasn’t exactly envious of Allen for getting to hang out with Nelly. She knew if she said she wanted to participate in their hunts or training, Nelly would be thrilled. But Sara didn’t want to be a Hunter, so she avoided joining in on their activities as a matter of principle.

Chris was teaching her to gather plants that weren't listed in the guide she had. According to him, that guide contained only a quick list of the plants that would be easy for any layman to gather, and there were actually plenty of other materials that went into potion-making.

"I already suspected from how you only ever brought in plants of good quality, but you've got a real eye for identifying plants, Sara."

"Once I get used to spotting them, they kind of stand out from the rest of the plants around them."

Even in places where there were a ton of people, if you were a student, your eyes would naturally find people in school uniforms, and if you were job-hunting, you'd naturally spot people in suits. When she was looking for certain plants, she found them easy to pick out from the rest. It was something like that.

"I've handled them while making potions at the Apothecary's Guild, but this is my first time gathering these. They're much fresher than what I usually work with. If we made potions right here, would the quality of the brew change?"

Ted was asking such diligent questions. Sara had to hide her face since she was desperately trying not to laugh. Ted's sucking his teeth at her as her shoulders trembled was just like the usual Ted. "What?" he asked.

"Nothing?"

Having a studious discussion like this was kinda fun with the vibrant green grass all around them.

"The freshness doesn't affect the efficacy of the potion, but you can get a lot more out of fresher plants. I believe you should have learned that."

"Yes, I just thought there might be things I wouldn't know if I didn't try them myself."

Chris considered this quietly for a moment. "Well, we've been gathering plants during our breaks, but you can do whatever you like with this time, really."

"Right! I'll try it next time."

As Ted excitedly searched for plants in a different spot, Chris watched him, muttering,

“Was he always this proactive?”

So Ted *was* acting differently from usual.

Chris sighed and turned to Sara, and then, of all things, he said this to her: “Once we get to Camellia, we’ll have to get you a set of potion-brewing gear as well.”

“Huh? Err, I...”

Why would Sara need potion-brewing gear? And why would *Chris* be buying it for her and not Nelly?

“Don’t be shy. If you’re Nef’s daughter, you’re basically my daughter as well. We’ll get you the best set money can buy. No wait, you’ll only be shunned if you have high-quality gear when you’re only a beginner. We should just get you a normal set to start with.”

“Err, I never said I wanted to be an apothecary, though...”

“We’ll reach Camellia in three days or so. I’ll be able to teach you a lot more there.”

Chris was giving her a rather gentle look (for him at least), which made it all the more difficult to turn him down. The one time she would welcome an interruption from Ted and he couldn’t even manage that. Typical.

To be honest, she had so much fun gathering plants that she did have more than a little interest in becoming an apothecary. It was just that the Apothecary’s Guild in Rosa was so cemented in her mind as a place to avoid, she hadn’t given it much serious thought. Her opinion of Chris and Ted may have improved a great deal from what it was originally, but they would still be there in Camellia... Sara wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

Still, she was supporting herself fine gathering plants at twelve, but if she thought about whether she wanted to be doing the same thing at twenty, she wasn’t sure about *that* either.

“I guess I have to think about my future a little, huh?”

When Sara suddenly said that, while alone together with Nelly that night, Nelly looked a little surprised.

"I think you're getting by just fine gathering plants."

"Do you think I should still be out there picking plants on my own after I become an adult, though?"

"I think you'll still be cute even when you're an adult, Sara."

That wasn't the issue. Sara shot Nelly a scolding look and Nelly thought for a moment.

"Well, if you get really good at it, I guess you could be like an Herb Hunter, fulfilling specific requests for people."

"An Herb Hunter..."

"You'd have to go to dangerous places to do that, and you'd end up having to hunt monsters sometimes too, though. Not that you'd have anything to worry about, I'm sure."

If she had to do dangerous things and hunt monsters, then how was that different from being a regular Hunter?

"There are a lot of poison bog frogs a little off from the road to Camellia, so maybe we should stop by there before we get to the town," Nelly proposed, on the day they were set to arrive in town.

Sara wasn't particularly bothered by frogs. She wouldn't say she *liked* them, but they were nowhere near as bad as bugs with too many legs. Little tree frogs, she'd say, were even cute.

"That would help." Chris agreed with Nelly, so instead of heading into town, they turned from the wider road onto a small path leading to the nearby wetlands.

The road was only wide enough for one carriage to use it, so there were clearings here and there where vehicles could pass one another, and they saw several Hunters who must have been visiting the swamplands resting in them.

"Come to think of it, I only ever really saw Hunters in the guild in Rosa, so it feels a little strange to see so many of them out here like this."

"Well, Rosa has a lot of Hunters, but you mostly see them in the dungeons."

They glanced around as they walked, quickly reaching a large clearing that appeared to be a base for Hunters, with tents set up here and there. Beyond that, there were working Hunters and a lot of brown... somethings.

"Hmm? What's all that brown?"

"Those are the poison bog frogs. They're brown."

Sara had been picturing green frogs like tree frogs, so the color was the first thing that gave her pause. Then she had to rub her eyes just in case she was seeing things wrong.

"I must be tired... They're supposed to be frogs, but they look like they're as big as horned rabbits."

"Hmm? Are there frogs that aren't that size?"

There were in Japan! Sara wanted to tell them that they had frogs that would fit in the palm of your hand. All that came out of her mouth, however, was, "I-I can't do this..."

Common sense in this world did not line up with her own.

Oblivious to Sara's consternation, the rest of the group watched the frogs with glimmering eyes.

"I've never seen so many poison bog frogs before!"

"Is it really something to be so excited about?"

Allen couldn't hide his excitement, but Sara was a little distressed about his good cheer.

"What's that supposed to mean? We're Hunters, you know. If we hunt a bunch of those, we'll earn a ton of money. That means we can eat a lot of tasty things. So those things are basically just frog-shaped money."

"I see."

Sara considered herself a pretty pragmatic person. She looked toward the swamp

again intending to try to see the frogs as money when a Hunter flew up into the air.

"Huh? Did someone just fly?"

"Ah, tongue got him. He'll be fine, though. Frogs that size can't swallow a Hunter whole."

When the Hunter landed, however, a frog closed its mouth around his whole head. There were ones the same size as horned rabbits, but some of the frogs were half the size of a grown man too.



"The frogs are pretty stupid to try to eat something that won't even fit inside them. Ha ha ha."

"That's not the problem, okay? Normal people don't want to be inside a frog's mouth for even a second!"

In another spot, a Hunter was collapsing, clutching at his face.

"What's happening there?"

"He got sprayed with poison. That's when you use..."

Sara didn't even need to look to know that Nelly was pulling an antidote out from her waist pouch.

"You know, even with antidotes, it'll hurt until the medicine takes effect," Sara chided.

"M-Mm. Right."

Nelly and Allen were both Hunters, so they were both somewhat lacking when it came to a normal person's sensibilities.

"Ugh. If you get hit like that though, the frog's poison glands will shrink. It's better to finish them off quickly before they can use their poison."

"If we set up a temporary office here, we could make antidotes quickly with nice fresh ingredients, couldn't we?"

"We'd need fresh mana herbs and healing herbs as well. If we could maintain a steady supply of freshly picked herbs, maybe."

Chris and Ted were even more excited than Allen, and Sara didn't know what to do about them either. Sara glanced behind her, but of course there were no normal people like her around. Allen was just itching to get hunting, but Sara coaxed him and the rest back to the road. On their way there, however, she caught sight of a part of the scenery she hadn't noticed on their way in.

"There are people standing there like guards around the Hunters."

It was a bit odd for people to be protecting the people hunting the frogs, wasn't it?

"Are there horned rabbits around here too? I don't think I saw any."

"Ah, it'd be meadow wolves around here, not horned rabbits. Didn't see many on our way here, though."

"Wolves..."

"They're not as strong as the ones on the Dark Mountain, so you don't need to worry about them, Sara. Frog season's also a good time to hunt wolves."

It wasn't particularly strange for there to be wolves here, but Sara had gotten it into her head that they were only up on the Dark Mountain, so she couldn't help being a bit surprised.

"Well, it's not like the wolves on the Dark Mountain were *never* cute... As long as I don't see them all that often, it's fine."

Sara nodded to herself and hurried everyone along. If they took their time, it would be evening before they arrived in Camellia.

As they hurried from the wetlands toward the town, they passed fields on the way where people were farming here and there. That must have meant there weren't dangerous monsters like horned rabbits too close to the town. It would surely be easy to gather medicinal plants just outside town too, then.

Sara stopped when the town came into view. "There's no wall."

That was only natural, but since Sara was used to Rosa, it made the town look awfully vulnerable.

"Is it okay for the town to be so unprotected when there are wolves around?"

"They wouldn't get close when there are so many buildings and people."

"I guess not."

The road continued straight into the middle of town, and there were no sort of guards at the town border. There were people who looked like merchants going in and out of town, and they were completely free to do so. None of the people in town paid any mind to Nelly, who looked like a typical Hunter, or Chris, who was very obviously

dressed as an apothecary, and no one spared Sara so much as a glance as she looked around the town.

“Oh! There are kids here!”

Sara suspected most of the kids in Rosa dwelled in the residential areas of the First and Second Districts. She’d hardly seen any in town herself. But in Camellia, there were small children with their mothers and kids around Sara’s age all over the place.

What Sara was most interested in was how the girls were dressed. She was relieved to see them in shorter skirts than the adults, blouses, and dresses. It looked like she’d fit in just fine here in the clothes she’d bought in Rosa.

“The Apothecary’s Guild should have prepared a residence for me, so Nef, you should stay there with me—”

“Nah, I’ll go to the Hunter’s Guild for an inn room.”

As usual, Chris couldn’t even perceive Sara and Allen. He wasn’t even looking at Ted. Sara thought it served him right when Nelly quickly turned him down. Sara wanted to sell the plants she’d gathered on their way here, though, so she was more interested in stopping by the Apothecary’s Guild than the Hunter’s Guild.

“I want to go to the Apothecary’s Guild first, I think. Nelly, Allen, do you want to meet back up again later?”

Nelly thought for a moment after Sara’s question, but she quickly nodded. “Yeah, I guess the Apothecary’s Guild would be more important for you. Right. It’s our first time here, so let’s go to the Apothecary’s Guild first, then Allen and I can head to the Hunter’s Guild.”

“I would love it if you would send word to the Apothecary’s Guild when you’ve decided where you’ll be staying and what your plans are...” Chris seemed relieved.

“I believe the Apothecary’s Guild was on the main street, on the side where the swamp is, and the Hunter’s Guild was on the other side... Oh, here it is. Hmm?”

The building had the same healing herb sign that the guild in Rosa sported. The reason for Chris’s grunt of curiosity was the crowd in front of the structure. It was nothing like the deserted Apothecary’s Guild in Rosa.

"Is there some trouble?"

Sara peered over at the crowd with Chris, who seemed to be saying something about trying to buy antidotes.

"With how many materials they must be receiving, why would they be having any trouble?" Chris muttered, striding into the crowd. "I apologize, but I have business inside. Please let me through."

"Hey, don't cut in line!"

The man who'd shouted raised his eyebrows at Chris's face, then looked down at his apothecary's robes and brooch, narrowing his eyes.

"You an apothecary? Tell them to give us antidotes, then."

Chris gave the man a short nod before looking back at Nelly. "There might be trouble here, so head to the Hunter's Guild first, would you?"

"No, I'll come too." Nelly's words were short but firm. Of course! Sara's precious Nelly wasn't the kind of person to abandon someone in need. Even if that someone was Chris.

"Hey, these people are apothecaries! Let them through!"

The man who was yelling convinced the crowd to part for them. They must have all known each other because the rest of the people did what he asked right away. Of course, there were a few suspicious looks as they passed, like people wanted to ask, "Why are they coming from outside?" or "Why do they have kids with them?"

"Thank you."

Chris led the way into the building, where there was even more trouble occurring.

"I keep trying to tell you, you can crowd around all you want, but we don't have any more antidotes today!"

A man was curled up behind the counter, practically crying. He must have been one of the apothecaries here. His light brown hair and eyes of the same color made him give off a timid impression.

There were still plenty of potions on the shelves behind him, but it didn't look like any of them were antidotes, just as he'd said.

"Why don't you have any antidotes?"

"I keep trying to explain! Huh?" The young man was clearly irritated but began to explain anyway, until he finally turned to them and noticed who he was talking to. He must have seen how Chris and Ted were dressed and realized they were apothecaries, not Hunters.

"I'm Chris, here from Rosa at your request."

"Aaah, thank you! I heard you were coming. I'm sorry, I'm the only apothecary here right now, and you can see how crazy it is at the moment..."

"Mm..." Chris swept his eyes across the guild. All the Hunters inside moved back at the sight of his quiet stare. They must have finally realized the futility of what they were doing when there weren't any apothecaries here to make the medicine they were demanding. That being said, there were clearly unwell people among them, so it wasn't as if they were asking for things they didn't well and truly need.

"Are there no antidotes being sold at the Hunter's Guild right now?" Chris asked them.

The Hunters shook their heads. Normally, they went to the Hunter's Guild to sell the monsters they caught and stocked up on potions while they were there. It was rare for them to come directly to the Apothecary's Guild for potions.

"We were managing to sell our stock to the Hunter's Guild up until yesterday, but we finally ran out today..." the young apothecary explained.

"Do you have ingredients available?"

"We've got tons of poison glands, but hardly any mana herbs or healing herbs."

"So you do have a few, then. Understood."

There must have been plenty of questions Chris wanted to ask the man, like why he was the only apothecary present and why they had no ingredients, but he put those aside for now and focused on solving the immediate problem.

“Ted, what do you have on you?”

“Not many, since I thought we’d be making them here, but I have a few.”

Chris sent a look at Sara and Nelly as well, so they also nodded.

“I imagine you all heard that. We’ve just arrived in Camellia today, but we have a few antidotes on hand. How many people are in need of one right now?”

A few people were pushed forward. There were likely a few more outside, so Sara estimated ten people in need at the moment. Quite a few of them were being supported by their comrades, their eyes in less than working order. Their movements were sluggish too.

“You have enough, Ted?”

“Yes.” Ted nodded firmly.

The situation seemed fairly serious, so Sara wanted to make herself useful as well.

“Umm, can I help?”

“No. In fact, get out.”

It was the first time in a while that Ted had been so harsh with her. Sara took a step back reflexively.

“How could you say something like that?!” It was the timid-looking apothecary who got angry with him on her behalf. “You have to explain to her that it’s dangerous to be around people who are still affected by bog frog poison. Look at the poor girl. You scared her!”

“Tch...”

Ted was the same as always, but Sara’s hurt feelings were relieved somewhat by the young apothecary. It was true that she didn’t have much to contribute here, not being an apothecary herself.

“Okay, you all heard that, right? We have some new apothecaries here now, so we’ll be able to treat those who are currently in need, but we can’t spare any antidotes for others. I’m sorry, but please just go home today.”

Though he looked fainthearted, the man did appear to be able to say what needed to be said. As the Hunters shuffled out resignedly, he shut the door and hung a “Closed” sign on it, then returned and bowed his head to Chris and Ted.

“That should take care of things for now. Thank you so much.”

Chris gave him a nod of acknowledgment, but Ted was over in a corner, too busy to respond, dripping antidotes into Hunters’ eyes or feeding them to them without touching them directly. Eager to fill the awkward silence, Sara decided to introduce their group.

“Oh, my name is Sara. This is Nelly and that’s Allen; they’re Hunters. The rude guy over there is Ted.”

“I see. My name is Ronny. I’m sorry for all the commotion. I’m going to go put up a notice about how we’re out of antidotes. Give me a moment.”

“Right.” Chris nodded. He probably wanted to confirm their stock of ingredients right away, but he moved to Ted’s side instead, assisting with the Hunters’ treatment.

Standing next to Ronny as he wrote the notice, Sara and Nelly started taking antidotes out of their own bags and lining them up on the counter. Almost like they’d agreed on the number beforehand, the two of them both took ten antidotes out of their pouches. Living in a place where they couldn’t easily restock, they tended to keep a good amount of medicine on hand. Honestly, they both had more in their pouches, but they weren’t feeling charitable enough to hand over every single *one* of them.

Allen didn’t provide any of his own antidotes, but that was only natural. He may have been strong, but he *was* just a rookie Hunter, so not only did he not have a lot on hand, he was also smart enough not to get rid of them when he knew he might not be able to obtain more. Sara thought it was the right decision as a Hunter.

Nelly finished lining up her antidotes on the counter. Sara was glad she and Allen could suppress their mana enough to be in this small room together without bothering anyone.

“You should be able to get by with these for now,” she told Ronny.

“I don’t know what to say. You just arrived and you’re being so gracious. Thank you so much.” Ronny stopped writing to thank the two of them. Then a rather sad look spread

across his face. “There should be other people in this town who have antidotes to spare too, honestly...”

“Most Hunters have their own antidotes on hand. In a situation where there’s no stock of them, however, they’re unlikely to give up their own.”

“Right, making sure your own body can function is of the utmost importance to a Hunter. I understand that...”

By the time Ronny finished writing the notice and pasting it on the front of the guild, the poisoned Hunters had all been treated and left, saying their thank-yous.

“You! Sara!”

“Huh? What is it?”

When things had finally settled down enough that they could chat, Ted suddenly rounded on Sara. Actually, if anything, he kept his distance. Even though he hadn’t touched the people he was treating, he must have been being careful in case he had gotten poison on himself.

“I told you to get out. And you, why didn’t you make her leave?” He was even hounding Nelly now.

“Because I didn’t want her on her own in an unfamiliar town with riled-up Hunters outside. That good enough for you?”

“Ugh... I guess that makes sense...”

Sara was touched to learn that Nelly had been worried about her.

“Nothin’ to say to me?” Allen asked sullenly. Of course, if Ted had told him to get out too, he probably would have complained about being treated like a kid.

“You’re a Hunter. You know how to handle yourself. Sara’s, you know... well, you know...?”

“*You know* what?” Sara wondered. True, though, she was registered at the Hunter’s Guild, but she wasn’t a Hunter herself. She was just a plant gatherer.

"Sara's stronger than me, though."

"Tch. Whatever." Ted looked away huffily, but Sara wasn't bothered by his attitude anymore. She might have been confident in the defensive abilities of her barrier, but as scared as she was of those frogs, she didn't think there was much point in comparing her "strength" to Allen's.

While they went back and forth like this, Chris went into the workshop in the back and emerged again looking slightly bewildered.

"Camellia's a larger town than Rosa and there should be more than ten apothecaries here. Where are all of them and what are they doing? The guildmaster's name was Clive, wasn't it?"

"They all went to the capital."

"The capital? In frog-breeding season?"

"Yes." Ronny looked down sadly and explained the situation. "The one who invited you here was actually the mayor of the town, and he did it without consulting the Apothecary's Guild."

"It *was* the mayor who made the request, but I didn't know it was without the consensus of the Apothecary's Guild..."

"Yes. I believe the mayor intended to have the guildmaster keep his current position and put you in charge of the school he wanted to open here, but you were the guildmaster in the Apothecary's Guild in the capital, weren't you, Master Chris? That's the highest position an apothecary can have."

Putting that together with what Chris himself had said before, that meant Chris had reached the highest position he could possibly reach and then left it to chase after Nelly. And in spite of that, he was so busy acting as guildmaster in Rosa that he hardly even had time to see her after chasing her all the way there.

"You take your work very seriously, don't you, Chris?" Sara didn't mean to butt in, but she found the words leaving her mouth before she could stop herself. "I mean, that's why you were so busy in Rosa, right? And you think it's so important to teach new apothecaries that you came all the way to Camellia to do it. I think that's really impressive."

"Unfortunately, not everyone thinks like that. Clive was nervous hearing that someone talented enough to be the guildmaster in the capital was coming. At the same time, we heard that the capital was short on apothecaries too, so he up and quit his post and left for the capital. The rest of the apothecaries went with him, saying they were sick of making nothing but antidotes for bog frog season this year"

"How many are left?"

"Just me. I came to Camellia to get away from the capital, so I didn't want to go back there." There was someone who hated the capital here too.

"I suppose I should have obtained more information before coming here..." Chris said with some chagrin, but without the internet and other information networks, Sara didn't think there was a way to get information like that easily. The problem here was the mayor's less-than-stellar groundwork before making his request and the measure of the apothecaries working here.

"Even so, I imagine the request to teach new apothecaries was because you have people here who wish to learn, no?"

"There aren't that many here, no... I mean, you really have to go to the capital if you want to get any proper credentials... It's a pain, and it takes time to really learn this stuff."

"So the situation is nothing like what I expected." Even Chris was shocked speechless at this news.

Nelly, on the other hand, didn't seem all that bothered by it. "Well, sounds like things are gonna be rough for you, but we're just Hunters here, so sorry we can't help you out. Okay, want to check out the Hunter's Guild and secure some lodging?"

"Wait a second, Nef." Chris hurriedly stopped Nelly. "The situation has changed. I'll grant you Allen and yourself, sure." Grant them what, exactly? "But you'll leave Sara here, won't you?"

"Huh?" Sara couldn't help grunting. He wanted her to stay?

"Sara's gathering skills and overall instincts for medicinal plants are fantastic. I'd like to teach her to brew potions eventually as well, so would you let her work here at the Apothecary's Guild during the day?"

"Well, I dunno..." Nelly put a hand to her chin thoughtfully, looking down at Sara. She probably would have refused right away if Sara had been a Hunter and all pumped up about hunting frogs like Allen was. But Sara didn't really have any concrete plans about what she wanted to do here in Camellia.

All she'd really been planning was looking around the town and doing some casual plant-gathering. She hadn't planned on accompanying Nelly and Allen on their hunting, so she supposed that meant she would be on her own here.

That being said, she wasn't so sure about someone else deciding what she'd be doing for her, and right after they'd arrived in town too. Not to mention, since she'd done so much at the Hunter's Guild in Rosa, she'd been looking forward to seeing what the guild was like in Camellia.

"Umm, so basically, you want me to gather mana herbs and healing herbs for you?"

"To start with, yes. Then I'll teach you to brew potions when we have enough herbs in stock. If you try it and decide it's not for you, you can consider other paths. How does that sound?"

Sara thought about it for a second, then went around to the front of the counter and got both of her gathering baskets out from her pouch. They were both full. Ted and Sara both had gathered plenty of healing herbs and mana herbs when they'd spotted them on the way here.

"Oh! So many medicinal plants, and of such high quality! This will really help!" Ronny reached out for the plants, his eyes sparkling.

"I gathered these on the way here. I'll come back for my fee and the baskets later."

"Sara." All he said was her name, but Sara could tell just from that one word that Chris was insisting that she stay. The tone probably came naturally to him as someone with a fair amount of authority.

Sara looked him right back in the eye. "Chris. I was already thinking I would probably gather plants here in Camellia to get by, and I understand that things are hard for the Apothecary's Guild right now. But I want to decide for myself whether or not I'm going to help out here, and what the extent of that help will be," she stated plainly. "So for today, I'm going to go with Nelly and Allen to the Hunter's Guild and think about how I want to spend my time here."

"I see," Chris said, heaving a sigh. "I see," he repeated, then smiled and spread his arms in capitulation. "I'll be waiting here tomorrow, then."

Sara couldn't help laughing at how he hadn't given up at all. "Okay."

"Well then, Ronny." With a nod to Sara, Chris turned back to the young apothecary. "Please send word to the mayor that I've arrived from Rosa. Then I want you to go to the Hunter's Guild and put up a posting about how we've run out of antidotes and we're making more, but we can't make many until we have more mana herbs and healing herbs, so we're looking to purchase as many of those plants as we can."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you ordered mana herbs and healing herbs from the capital?"

"Yes, but just the standard amount we order every year."

"Poison bog frog season will likely last another month. Let's order additional herbs now."

"Yes, sir!"

Ronny must have had no idea what to do all on his own here. He was so happy to have a clear direction to move in now that he was practically crying.

"Ted, we'll start making antidotes right away."

"Understood!" Ted sounded happy too.

"Okay, we'll head to the Hunter's Guild," said Nelly. "I'll tell you later where we end up staying tonight."

"Right. And Nef? Try to keep your mana to a minimum."

"Don't worry. The kid's fine, isn't he?"

Nelly and Allen had both gotten a lot better at controlling the pressure of their mana. They probably wouldn't have to worry about people keeping them at a distance on their first meeting anymore.

Sara left the building with Allen and Nelly. There was no longer a crowd around the front of the guild, but they saw a few people slump their shoulders or suck their teeth after reading the notice posted on the door.

"Chris was doing good work as the guildmaster of the Apothecary's Guild in the capital from a young age. I hear they were real disappointed when he up and quit. The mayor must have thought if he could get a guy like that, it'd solve all their problems."

"I didn't know he was that impressive." To Sara, he was nothing more than a kind of strange guy, but it was true that Ted really looked up to him, she supposed.

"Even Rosa had five or six apothecaries. Camellia only has one dungeon, but it's a big town, so I imagine there were more than ten before they left. If they all went together, they must have been really unhappy with their treatment here, or..."

"You're worried about Chris, aren't you?"

"Eh, he's an adult. He'll figure something out." There *was* worry in her voice, but that was all she had to say. Nelly could be a bit stubborn. "You can't see everything there is to see just looking at the Apothecary's Guild, after all. We'll have to see how the Hunter's Guild is handling the bog frogs too."

When you visited someplace for the first time, gathering information about it was key. Still, Sara imagined at least a little of Nelly's curiosity was for Chris's sake.

After walking for about ten minutes straight down the busy road, they found the Hunter's Guild.

"So every Hunter's Guild has the same wyvern sign."

"It's cool, isn't it?" Allen said.

"S-Sure." Sara wasn't sure that she agreed, seeing as she'd been attacked by wyverns several times (though she'd repelled those attacks with her barrier, of course). A lot of the people walking in the same direction as them were Hunters, who poured in through the doors.

"Let's go in."

"Wow, my first time in another Hunter's Guild!" Sara wasn't even a Hunter, but she was

very enthusiastic to be here.

Allen, on the other hand, was calm. He'd been here before with his uncle. "This is only your second guild, eh?"

"Well, not only was Rosa my first, but it kinda feels like my home base too."

"Your home base, eh? Yeah, Rosa's a nice place..."

They followed the crowd and pushed open the doors and were immediately hit by a damp smell. They looked around the building, which was a size bigger than Rosa's guildhall. There was a kiosk to the left and a cafeteria beyond that, and reception desks in the center. But what really stood out was the low counters to the right.

"Fr-Frogs..."

One poison bog frog after another was taken out of a storage pouch, appraised, and stored again behind the counter.

"If a town has a specialty, sometimes the Guild will do something like this. It's neat, isn't it, Sara? Well, Allen..."

"Yeah. Let's go look at the bulletin board."

"I'll check out the kiosk, then."

Sara decided to do something different while Nelly and Allen checked the bulletin board. She headed for the kiosk, thinking to start somewhere she was more familiar with.

At a glance, it was bigger than Rosa's kiosk, with a lot more things for sale lining the shelves. There were even two clerks, both wearing uniforms with that wyvern symbol on them.

"They don't just sell potions, they have pouches and backpacks, and books too. What are the books?" Sara had to stretch to try to see them, since there were a lot of Hunters around the kiosk. "It's way different from our kiosk. There were never this many people around," she muttered to herself.

She didn't have the courage to mingle with the Hunters around the kiosk, so she just

looked it over for a little while before heading to the cafeteria. It was evening, so a lot of the seats were filled. She took a casual glance at the menu and found that it was different from Rosa's.

"We'll have to get our inn sorted right away and have dinner!" Sara hurried over to Allen and Nelly, who were standing around idly after checking the bulletin board. No one else looked like they were checking it.

"There was a note about buying bog frogs at a higher price because so many are spawning now and a note about buying other monsters at regular price. That was it."

That was why they'd finished looking so fast. Sara glanced over at the bulletin board too.

"So they didn't already have a note up about how they don't have enough antidotes or how they want to buy mana herbs."

"Nope. Probably didn't occur to the guy since he was all on his own. Plus anyone selling medicinal plants is probably gonna go straight to the Apothecary's Guild anyway."

Well, if that was all the bulletin board could tell them, they should find an inn next. But just as the three of them all agreed on that and headed for the reception desks, a voice suddenly called out to them from behind.

"Haven't seen you before. And it doesn't matter where you sell 'em. Mana herbs don't grow around here."

"They don't?" Sara couldn't help asking. Sure, they were rare, but she had found some in even Rosa, albeit not a ton of them, and she'd gathered a few on the way here too.

The man behind them was dressed just like Rosa's guildmaster, with a wyvern symbol on his chest. His black hair was slicked back smoothly, not a strand out of place despite it being the end of the day. Sara's eyes were drawn to his rather vampiric hairline.

He must have sensed Sara's gaze, because he put a hand to his chin and said, "My hair grows perfectly fine, I'll have you know. It's mana herbs that don't."

Sara averted her eyes. She had been thinking no such thing, but apparently it was something he was sensitive about, so she looked away awkwardly.

"I see. Thanks for the info," Nelly said in her place, turning back toward the reception desks again.

"Hey, wait a sec. Didn't you hear what I said? I said I hadn't seen you before."

Sara sighed a quiet sigh. If Nelly had any communication skills, she would have realized that "haven't seen you before" means "Who are you?" and she would have answered, "Oh, I'm Nelly from Rosa."

But Nelly had no communication skills. To her, her only response to "haven't seen you before" was "Uh-huh. What about it?" That was why she was now trying to get back to what she was originally doing without engaging with the man.

"Uh-huh."

Sara supposed it was progress that she didn't merely ignore the man, and that she didn't ask, "What about it?"

Allen answered the man's implied question instead. "We just arrived in Camellia. We came from Rosa."

"From Rosa. That's rare."

With Sara's legs, it had taken them two weeks to get here, so she supposed there was a fair bit of distance between the two towns.

"I'm Allen. This is Sara."

Sara bowed her head.

"This is Nelly, our guardian. We're Hunters." Allen puffed his chest out with pride. Nelly was just nodding along. She wasn't even hiding her annoyance either.

As a former Japanese person who was fairly skilled at reading a room, Sara was beginning to panic, between the annoyed Nelly and the person from the Guild who was getting annoyed at *her*.

Allen, meanwhile, possessed no such skill. "So? Who're you?"

Sara covered her face with her hand.

The person from the Guild cleared his throat. He must have realized that they were just as unfamiliar with him as he was with them. “I’m Derrick. I’m the guildmaster here.”

Sara had suspected as much, but he was indeed the guildmaster, then. *He should just do his work in the back then*, she thought rather discourteously, while Allen grinned up at him as though he was the same guildmaster Allen had lived with back in Rosa.

“I think we’ll be here for a little while, so it’s nice to meet you!”

“R-Right. Nice to meet you,” the guildmaster said, overpowered by Allen’s cheerful greeting.

Satisfied, Allen turned to Nelly and said, “The inn is next, then.”

“Yeah. Excuse us.”

“Wait a second. Uhh, Nelly, your name was? Are you these kids’ mom? No, their sister?”

Even Sara and Allen got a sour look on their faces when he told them to wait again. Allen had already introduced Nelly as their guardian. Sara looked up trepidatiously at Nelly, but was surprised to find that she wasn’t as annoyed as she expected her to be.

“Heh.” Nelly smiled. “I look like their mom, eh? Heh heh heh. Well, sister’s not bad either. Heh heh.”

“Nelly?”

“Mm. Ahem.” Nelly hurriedly cleared her throat. “Ahh... Regrettably... Yes, truly regrettably, I am neither their mother nor their sister, though I *am* their guardian. To be more precise, I’m Sara’s guardian and Allen’s mentor.”

“I-I see. You’re responsible for them, in other words.”

“Of course. Anyway, while we’re here, could you point us to an inn?” Nelly finally just gave up on going to the reception desks and decided to get their business done here.

“Yeah, about that. There aren’t any.”

“There aren’t *any*?” Sara repeated, a hint of disappointment in her voice. It wasn’t as if

she was opposed to camping out, and they'd already stayed in some inns on the way here, but there was no substitute for a proper bed to sleep on at night.

"Camellia's packed with Hunters around now. The inns are already filled up. Yet poor planners like you still show up and then complain that they can't get a room."

This was really what the receptionists were supposed to do, but he must have come over to greet them personally because there were a lot of Hunters bothering the receptionists around this time. Well, that was nice of him.

If there were no inns, then there was nothing they could do, but Sara thought she remembered there being a place to camp out along the road into town. There was no need for them to stay in the crowded guild for any longer, then. The three of them all had the same thought.

"I see."

With Nelly's short words, the three of them strode off.

"Wait, wait! You're not gonna argue? Aren't you gonna ask if there's something that can be done since you've got kids with you?"

Sara felt her own annoyance rising as he told them to wait for the third time. Couldn't he just say what he wanted to say already?

Nelly turned back to him expressionlessly. "Is there something that can be done?"

"N-No, there isn't."

"Then that's that." Nelly gave him a pitying look, which clearly confused Derrick.

"Why are you giving me that look?"

"Well, if you insist." Nelly sighed. The two of them were not on the same wavelength.

"I haven't insisted on anything."

"Can you recommend a place to eat?" Since he'd stopped them once more, Nelly decided to get one more errand done with.

"S-Sure. You should try the frog at the Hopping Frog Eatery across the street from the guild."

"Got it. Thanks."

This time the three of them were able to walk off without turning back around. Sara took one last glance back when they arrived at the doors and found Derrick staring at them, so she flashed him a smile. He was kind of persistent and kind of annoying, but she figured he only talked to them because he didn't recognize them, and then got thrown off by how none of their responses were what he expected. Sara felt a bit of pity for him (though the truly pitiful were them, since they'd have to go without an inn room).

"Frog, huh? I'm looking forward to it."

"Didn't you say you couldn't handle frogs, Sara?" Allen asked her dubiously.

"If I didn't eat frog, then I wouldn't be able to eat cockatrice or gargoyle either. I mean, they're all scary-looking, right? But even if I can't hunt them, food's food and what's tasty is tasty." Sara clenched her fists in front of her chest. "In my old world, I at least heard that frog was like poultry and that it tastes good. As long as it's not roasted whole or anything, I should be fine."

"I've never heard of whole-roasted frog!"

"Me neither," agreed Nelly.

Well, that made Sara feel a little better.

"Chris may have a place to stay, but I doubt they're providing him with meals too. Let's go get him before we eat."

"Nelly, that's like something a considerate person would say!"

"Oh yeah? Heh heh. Guess I've grown."

Allen gave the two of them a wry grin. The three of them made sure they knew where the restaurant was and then headed back to the Apothecary's Guild.

Just like before, there were people leaving with chagrined looks after seeing the paper

on the door and people barging in without looking at it before emerging again sullenly. Once again, Sara appreciated how Allen could just slip through those people and walk into the guild like he had every right to be there. Sara and Nelly followed him.

"No antidotes... Oh, it's you." Ronny greeted them, much less panicked than he had been earlier. "Good timing. I have to head to the Hunter's Guild. Will you watch the shop while I'm gone?"

"Huh? We were gonna go..."

Ronny grabbed a piece of paper and flew out of the guild like the wind.

"We were gonna go eat..."

Ronny was deaf to Sara's words. And when she peered into the workplace in the back, Chris and Ted were hard at work making antidotes. Or she guessed that was what they were doing at least, since their backs were turned to her and she couldn't see their hands.

"I'll handle the counter," Nelly said with some enthusiasm.

"Ack! Nelly, I get that you're excited, but your mana's out of control!"

Sara couldn't tell what Nelly's mana was doing, but Allen was scolding her, so it must have been leaking out. Nelly still needed to put some effort into controlling it, so it tended to seep out when she got emotional.

"Mm... mm-hmm. Right."

Nelly went behind the counter and started taking potions down and then putting them back like she was a clerk. Sara knew for a fact that she was not a tidy person, so it was all the more funny that she was trying to act like one.

"You're so cute," Sara murmured, a smile naturally coming to her face.

"Hmm? What is it? You want to do it too?" Nelly asked her.

Sara shook her head.

Allen turned back to the workspace. "I'll keep an eye on Nelly, so you can go into the

back, Sara.”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?!”

“Well, you don’t know the prices of potions at all, do you? When you’re selling them, you can’t just hold out a gold coin, you know.”

“R-Right. You can help out, then.”

Sara gratefully headed for the back, listening to their banter. She wanted to see what Nelly was like trying to run a store, but she was curious about what Chris and Ted were doing too.

In a large sink like she would have had in cooking class at her old school, there was a shallow bucket where several long, light pink sacks that must have been poison glands were soaking in water. Next to that, Ted carefully opened up a poison gland with a knife before mashing its contents into a paste and handing it to Chris.

“Wow...” Sara gasped. Ted glared at her, but she couldn’t help it. She’d seen him making potions before, but it had just looked like mashing up healing herbs and boiling them in a pot.

What Chris was doing was slightly different. Next to Chris was a mash of the poison glands’ contents with some herbs, and he was facing a pot where the same thing was likely boiling. Chris turned off the heat and held his hand above the pot, stirring the liquid inside with a spoon in his other hand. Eventually, the liquid turned a translucent light purple.

“Next pot.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ted handed Chris a pot with the ingredients inside. Next to that, Ted selected a pot from several and poured the liquid inside it through a funnel with a filter into a large glass bottle.

“Ted was mashing up poison bog frogs’ poison glands. The blue paste is healing herbs and mana herbs. You mix a set amount of them together, boil them, and then cut the heat and suffuse the potion with mana as you stir it. Sediment forms as you stir, with clear liquid remaining on top. You then strain the fluid and portion it out into smaller

bottles." Chris explained how to make antidotes as he boiled the next pot.

Sara watched, spellbound. Now *this* was some otherworldly stuff.

"It's simple, isn't it, Sara?"

Sara snapped out of it when he called her name. She looked up at Chris and naturally caught sight of Ted too. The younger apothecary's face very clearly said, "*Of course it's not simple,*" which brought her back to reality somewhat. She was about to just take Chris's word for it.

"N-No, it looks really complicated."

Chris smiled slightly at her response, his expression saying he almost had her. "It *is* simple. You can sense the sublime flow of the mana, can't you? Most people think an apothecary's work is similar to a caster's, but it's actually closer to physical strengthening. You take the pure mana with no element attached to it that surrounds your body and gently suffuse the medicine with it. The mana causes the sediment to sink and brings out the potency of the liquid medicine."



Sara had never heard Chris say so much at once before. His low voice seemed to move her heart almost like music. Even Ted, who must have heard all of this countless times before, listened practically enraptured. She liked how it felt, but there was something strange about it too. Suddenly feeling rather anxious, Sara put up a small barrier around her body.

“Sara?” Chris’s voice was back to how it always was.

“Chris, your mana’s in your voice,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Chris turned around once he’d reached a stopping point in his work. From the confused look on his face, he must not have been doing it consciously.

“I felt kind of dizzy listening to your voice—like I had to do what you said. But it went away when I put my barrier up.”

“Mana in my voice? I’ve never heard of such a thing before... Hmm. I’ll have to consider this later, but for now, we need to finish these antidotes. How many more can we make, Ted?”

“Each pot has been making about ten antidotes. Once we’re done straining everything, I think we’ll have fifty or so.”

“Well, normally, that would be enough, but with how many Hunters there were today...”

Thinking back to the Hunters she’d seen from a slight distance away, it had almost looked like the kind of crowds she’d see when people went clam digging in her past life. With that many people, it was no wonder they didn’t have any inn rooms to spare, and they’d need plenty of antidotes too.

Of course, if *Sara* had been a Hunter, she thought she would probably have made sure she had enough antidotes to spare before frog-hunting season started. Then again, she’d seen in Rosa how there were people who couldn’t even afford to buy the potions they were using that very day. Potions could heal injuries, but that meant that if you didn’t have any, you’d be forced to suffer for that much longer. In the same way, if you couldn’t get ahold of any antidotes, you’d only suffer for longer if you had the misfortune to be poisoned.

The fault for all of this may have lay with the guildmaster who took all of the

apotheccaries to the capital without waiting for anyone to take over during such a crucial time, but that meant little to the Hunters who were currently suffering from poison.

"They do make enough antidotes to cover the whole season every year, and they had the same amount of stock they usually do this year, but they ran out of that stock halfway into the season. That would mean that the spawn rate of bog frogs this year is twice as high as usual, or maybe even higher."

I see, Sara thought. *So they weren't that irresponsible.* That just brought another question to mind, though.

"Couldn't they just stock up on mana herbs and healing herbs beforehand too, then?"

"If they could, I'm sure they would have..." Chris mused. "If they tend to use the same amount every year, then they likely simply don't gather enough to have any left over."

"That's not what I mean."

Chris's response was a lot like what Nelly had told her when she said she wanted to have three months of food stocked up on the Dark Mountain. It was the same as people going out to buy food every day or every other day in Japan where they had refrigerators. They had storage bags in this world, but it was still common for people not to stock up on things they might need later.

But they'd run low on healing herbs in Rosa and ended up needing Sara to gather them, and they were low on mana herbs here in Camellia, and it looked like they would need Sara to gather them.

"I'm saying the way they do things here means they're not prepared for emergencies like this," Sara explained. "All they have to do is keep a stock of one month's worth of plants, or three months' worth if possible. Like how you have potions lined up on the shelves and you sell the old ones first before restocking from the back. You just need to use storage bags."

Chris's mouth was hanging open, a rarity for him. "The plants we use need to be fresh, though."

"If you pick them and put them right into a storage bag, then transfer them to the guild's storage bag when you sell them, they'd stay fresh, wouldn't they?" Then Sara

wouldn't have to go out and do so much emergency gathering. "You should keep the same kind of stock of potions too. If you keep them in a storage bag, they'll stay fresh, so why don't you guys do that?"

It was the same principle behind staying stocked up for emergencies. You made sure you always had a set amount of things that you replaced as you used them, so that you'd always have that same amount stocked up in case of an emergency. Maybe it was actually harder to come up with something like that when you had storage bags. Or was it a problem if they had too much unsold stock?

"Chris! Someone needs an antidote out here," Nelly called from the reception counter.

"R-Right."

"I'll go. We can't waste the antidotes." Ted shot a glance at Sara before heading to the front. His eyes said, "*Don't waste Master Chris's time chatting.*"

"Talented apothecaries can administer just the amount of antidote necessary to cure a patient to save on medicine. He may not seem it, but Ted *is* talented."

"You don't need to make excuses to me," Sara told him. Being a good apothecary didn't make having a rotten personality any better. Chris shrugged as if to say, "So be it."

"Let me finish today's batch, then. Will you help transfer the finished potions to bottles?"

"Sure."

Chris nodded with satisfaction after watching Sara skillfully funnel the antidote into bottles. When they were just working side by side like this, Chris kind of had a dad-like air to him. Remembering Nelly's reaction at the Hunter's Guild earlier, Sara chuckled to herself.

"What is it?"

"Someone asked Nelly at the Hunter's Guild if she was me and Allen's mom or our sister."

"Oh?"

Sara chuckled again. “She seemed so happy about it. And I just thought you seemed kind of like my dad while we’re doing this. Oh, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Heh heh heh. Your dad. I’m the dad and Nef’s the mom. Heh heh.”

Sara looked over and found a sunny smile on Chris’s face. He was probably happy about a different thing than Nelly was, but if he was enjoying himself, that was all that mattered. Sara figured she probably shouldn’t tell Nelly about this, though.

“Sara! You can’t be assisting Master Chris! You’re not even an apothecary yet!”

Ted came back when he was finished treating the Hunter. Behind him was Ronny and an older man.

“Thank you so much, Guildmaster, and Ted. I put the notice up at the Hunter’s Guild and brought the mayor by.”

“I’m not the guildmaster just yet, so please just call me Chris.” Chris frowned a bit at the address and turned to face the mayor. Sara put him at fifty or so years old, with a medium build and a bit of a gut. His forehead was a little large, but he had warm brown eyes.

“Oh, okay. Chris, then. This is the mayor.”

“I’m Miles Baldwin, the mayor. I didn’t intend for you to be doing this grunt work when you came here. I’m truly sorry for the state of affairs.”

Chris frowned again at the word “grunt work,” but he made no comment about it, just spreading his arms and introducing himself. “I’m Chris. I just arrived in response to your request. I know the idea was for me to become the guildmaster, but I have no issue with doing the more practical work. I’d appreciate an explanation of the situation, however.”

Sara felt Chris’s request was very reasonable.

“Where should I start? I’m sure you’re aware that Camellia experiences a poison bog frog breeding season from spring to early summer, and that it’s a town that needs apothecaries both because our Hunters require antidotes and because we have so many ingredients available to make those antidotes.”

Everyone nodded, so this must have been common knowledge among apothecaries.

"The difference between our busy and slow periods is just too vast, however. Also, while there are plenty of poison bog frogs to catch, there aren't a lot of herbs that can be gathered around here, so we're dependent on other towns. That's why we have such a hard time keeping our antidotes stocked."

Ronny was nodding fervently.

"They're paid good wages, but we just can't keep on the number of apothecaries we need. That's why I had the idea to have apothecaries working during our busy periods and training during the slow periods, so that we can train up the talent we need right here in town."

"It's a good idea in itself, I think. But..."

"Yes. Clive was a good guildmaster, but he somehow got the impression that his job was being stolen from him and went back to the capital before I could correct his misunderstanding."

"I came here under the impression that I would be taking over as guildmaster, so I understand the reason for the former guildmaster's anger. In fact, I had thought that the guildmaster planned to leave and that was the reason I was being asked to take over."

Things were so simple, so why hadn't anyone gotten the right story?

The mayor shrugged. "Your reputation simply worked against us in this case. Oh, I'm not trying to lay the blame on you, though," the mayor hurriedly added, though Sara thought Chris was well within his rights to be angry with the man.

"I see. But it seems there are no apothecaries here to teach, so there isn't much for me to do here, is there?" Chris turned to get back to the work he was in the middle of. Ted hurried to go and take over. Sara was impressed that Chris's biggest fan had held himself back so well and hadn't snapped at the mayor.

"You're not going to leave, are you? We completely ran out of our stock today, so there's no way I'll be able to keep us going all by myself!" Ronny said tearfully, but the problem was between Chris and the mayor, so there was nothing he could do. After all, Chris had thought he'd be coming here long-term, to teach young apothecaries.

The mayor was surprised by what Ronny had said. “That can’t be. You always make sure to have enough stock to last the whole season at its start, don’t you?”

“Yes, the guildmaster made sure we had our usual stock before he left. But there must be so many more bog frogs this year than usual. We’ve sold way more antidotes than we normally do. Our stock is completely gone...” Ronny told the mayor.

It shouldn’t have been that long ago that the previous guildmaster left, though. In which case, he must have known that they would run out soon and he’d left anyway. Without even warning anyone.

Chris sighed. “Let me be frank with you. You should apologize to the previous guildmaster and ask him to come back.”

Sara was surprised. She hadn’t expected Chris to say something like that. She’d thought he was the type to just say, “I’ll figure something out.”

“I am an apothecary, but I have no interest in being guildmaster. That’s why I left my post in the capital, and why I came here when I was confident I could leave Rosa in someone else’s hands. I was interested in training up new apothecaries. But if you don’t even have *potential* apothecaries, then there’s nothing for me to do here.”

Chris wouldn’t take the job. They’d come all the way to Camellia, but he couldn’t do the job he thought he was being hired for.

“If you send a messenger to the capital and the apothecaries return as quickly as they can, they should make it before the end of the season. Just tell them that Chris wouldn’t take the job, and that Camellia needs them. Until they return, Ted and I can remain here and help Ronny as two apothecaries and nothing more.”

“But that’s not what we agreed on!”

“That’s my line. You told me you wanted to train people who want to become apothecaries. Well, where are those people?”

The mayor’s eyes wandered, settling on Sara. Sara waved her hands in front of her face. Right now, she had no particular desire to become an apothecary. Besides, she’d only come to Camellia today. She wasn’t even a resident of this town.

“In any case, we’ll remain here to help the Hunters who need these antidotes. But

while we do, I'd like for you to find someone to take over when we leave."

Even just having Chris's help should have been plenty right now. The mayor nodded reluctantly.

"One more thing. Is there a residence we can use? Or an inn?"

"Well..." The mayor averted his eyes.

Ronny looked between Chris and the mayor, hesitantly asking the mayor, "What about the guildmaster's mansion? It's pretty big, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's just... I tried to have it ready in time, but the beds and most of the furniture are gone, so it's not in a very livable state currently. All the inns are full right now too..."

"Harassment?" Ted asked, referring to the missing furniture. Perhaps that was just how displeased the previous guildmaster was.

He would know, Sara thought, looking over at him. He glared at her in response, but she wasn't scared of him.

"N-No. Well, I don't know for sure. Of course, you can stay in my mansion until it's ready for you."

Chris frowned. He didn't like that idea, evidently. "Does the guildmaster's mansion have running water?"

"Yes, there's no problems there."

"Then it will be fine. As long as we have a roof and a floor. Please send someone to show us there later. I have a few more antidotes to make. Ronny, Ted, Sara."

Sara wasn't sure why her name was included in the list, but she couldn't just abandon someone in need, so she ended up helping out too. The mayor told them he'd be back again tomorrow and left in a hurry.

Though they turned aside those hoping to buy antidotes, they couldn't turn away those currently in need of them, so they ended up not being able to go back to that mansion until late that night. Everyone finally heaved sighs of relief when the last Hunter finally left.

"Nef, I never got a chance to ask, but were you able to find an inn?"

"Nope." Nelly shrugged. "We can just stay outside of town like usual, though. There was that clearing just outside of town, right?"

"I think the guildmaster's mansion will be better just by virtue of having a roof. We were with you until now, so it was okay, but it's dangerous for a beautiful woman like yourself to camp out alone, Nef. Won't you at least stay with us tonight?"

Isn't it dangerous for kids to camp out too? Sara thought, but for some reason, Chris had made no mention of that.

"Well, I guess it'll be better to sleep on a floor than on the ground. Sara, Allen, what do you want to do?"

"I don't care either way, but I *do* want to see the guildmaster's mansion," Allen said.

"Me too!"

Now that she thought about it, Sara had only ever seen the cottage up on the Dark Mountain and the inn above the guild. She wouldn't pass up the chance to see a normal residence.

"Let me show you the way," said the young man waiting idly in the corner of the room with no small amount of relief. The mayor had sent him to take them to the mansion.

They locked up the Apothecary's Guild and all got moving, Ronny coming with them. The mansion was only a short walk into town from the guildhall.

"Wow, it's pretty big!" Sara exclaimed.

"It's not *that* big."

"Seems about right."

The follow-up came from the two apothecaries. Having only stayed in a cottage with three rooms, however, the three-story building with a spacious yard was plenty big to Sara.

"Rich kids..." She felt she could get away with the quiet comment. Their guide burst

out laughing, but Sara couldn't imagine it was her fault.

Large, heavy doors opened to a spacious front hall with a reception room to one side and a dining hall to the other. Another young man rushed to take over, showing them around from the left side of the house, but he seemed perplexed upon seeing Sara, Nelly, and Allen.

"The bedrooms and guest rooms are on the second floor. The mayor will be bringing furniture, but let me show you to the master bedroom for now. You may have dinner later in the dining hall."

Guests should probably stay out of the master bedroom, but Sara tagged along out of curiosity. She gave the excuse to herself that she'd have to check out her own guest room while they were up there.

The master bedroom was right up the stairs, and the spacious room did indeed contain a bed, but it had nothing else.

"Each room has a bath and toilet. It's just that all of the bedding and furniture is gone, so we were only able to procure beds for Master Chris and the other apothecary on short notice."

"What about the other guest rooms?"

"They're, well, empty."

"Nef and Sara can use the bedroom, then. We'll sleep on the floor."

Sara was happy to be included in Chris's considerate gesture this time. But something occurred to her, hearing that all the furniture was gone.

On the Dark Mountain, there was that storage pouch full of beds and bedding up in the attic. If this was a mansion given to whoever was serving as guildmaster at the time, then it would be theft to take all the furniture. Sara didn't think someone would go that far for simple harassment, so if Ted was right, then maybe all the furniture was simply stashed somewhere out of sight like the attic in a storage bag. If the guildmaster were questioned about it, he could simply say that he stored the furniture so that it wouldn't get dusty and just forgot to mention it.

But they could leave that until tomorrow to figure out. Sara glanced at Nelly, who

seemed to be thinking the same thing.

"Well, I appreciate the thought, but you're obviously going to be the most busy out of all of us tomorrow, Chris. Today was a long day too. We'll be fine just having a roof over our heads, so you should get some real rest."

"But..."

"I don't need anyone to coddle me. Will you not treat me like an equal, Chris?"

Chris hung his head, nodding reluctantly.

"Feel free to have dinner, then. Just..." Their guide was relieved to have the matter of the rooms settled, but it seemed there was another issue now.

"Let me guess, you only have enough food prepared for two."

"I'm terribly sorry."

Well, they hadn't been counting on that in the first place.

"Well, we've got plenty to eat, so that's fine. Would you like to eat with us, Ronny? We'll treat you to some horned rabbit from Rosa."

"Really?! I was just going to go home and sleep today, so I'd really appreciate that!"

Chris often seemed cold, like he had no interest in anyone around him, but after spending some time with him, Sara was starting to see that it was only when it came to Nelly that he was completely useless. One of the reasons people liked him so much was probably because he was capable of being considerate like this.

Sara's first long trip had come to an end in a very unexpected way. Just what sort of days would she have here starting tomorrow? She fell asleep excited, staring up with Nelly not at the night sky, but at a mansion's ceiling.

CHAPTER 3

AN EXCESS OF FROGS TOO

Sara woke up early the next morning, likely because it was too quiet. She was alone with Nelly in one of the guest rooms, and while she could sense Nelly's presence, there was no sign of the breeze or animals she would have typically been able to sense sleeping outside in the meadow.

Knock.

Or maybe it was just because she'd heard the light tapping against the door. Sara had been sleeping in her clothes, so she got right up and attached her pouch to her waist, quietly leaving the room so as to not wake Nelly. Outside her room, Allen sat against the opposite wall, apparently about to throw something at the door. Sara bent down and picked the object up exasperatedly.

"A slime stone? What are you doing?" she asked, chuckling.

Allen grinned as well, picking up the rest of the magic stones on the floor. "Morning, sleepyhead. I got up early and I was bored. Want to explore the house?"

"Yeah!"

"I went around a little earlier. There's a basement here."

"A basement? Well, we've *gotta* check that out."

They went down the stairs quietly so they didn't wake anyone, Allen showing Sara to a corner of the kitchen, where another narrow staircase led to the basement.

"Wow, it's big!"

"I'm not gonna say 'it's not *that* big' or 'seems about right.' I've been living on the road for so long that any old house seems impressive to me."

"Yeah."

The basement was about the size you'd expect for a house this big, and contained several storage boxes like the ones the guild kiosk used for its lunches, all neatly lined up.

"So this is the kind of storage box normal houses have. There wasn't one on the Dark Mountain."

"Yeah, I don't think I'd want to haul a box like this up the mountain while dodging monster attacks the whole time."

Sara immediately began to daydream about living in a house someday; somewhere that had a basement where she could keep a storage box like this.

They looked around the kitchen and went through the dining hall where they'd eaten yesterday, peeking into the reception room from the entrance hall.

"It's just like the guildmaster's office."

"Yeah, it is. They probably had meetings here when they weren't at the guildhall."

They climbed to the third floor this time, avoiding the second floor, where everyone was sleeping. Passing by a line of doors that likely led to guest rooms, they reached a staircase at the end of the hall that probably went up into the attic, as well as one that went back down to the second floor. These stairs were far from the guest rooms, perhaps so that servants could remain out of sight while using them.

"The attic on the Dark Mountain is there for people to stay in during an emergency. I'd thought there wasn't anything up there, but I found a storage bag when I looked."

"Huh. Wanna check it out? I'll go first," Allen said, hopping up the first few steps. He slowed down when he got closer to the top. There was no door at the top of the stairs; instead, they emerged right into a spacious attic.

"Here goes!"

For all his enthusiasm, Allen still waited for Sara at the top of the stairs. They walked out into the large space, heading for a window at the back that let light into the room. They sat down in front of the window, looking out over the roofs of the town, which glowed in the light of the just-risen sun.

"I wish I'd come here when I was younger. I could put my futon up here and pretend it was my room. I bet that would have been fun." It wouldn't have worked out, though. When she was in Japan, climbing stairs had exhausted her, so even if she'd had an attic, she wouldn't have been able to enjoy it.

"Well, you're here now."

"Yeah."

"Adults can sleep in attics too. Our room in that watchtower in Rosa was cold, but it felt kinda special in there, didn't it? It was fun living there."

It felt like a long time ago, but it wasn't, really. It was just a few months ago that the two of them had lived in a watchtower with a big hole in it, completely exposed to the elements.

"Yeah, you're right. If you're not a kid, you can decide where you want to live yourself. Wherever it is and however you want to do it are totally up to you."

"Right. And even if you're not an adult, even if you're only twelve, you should do whatever you want that you're capable of. There are people like me who have to work, but you don't have to, right, Sara? You can if you want to, but you don't *need* to. Not that I'm jealous or anything, though."

"I know."

Sara just wanted to earn her own living because she'd been an adult in Japan. She'd already relied on her parents as a kid, so she didn't feel the need to rely on anyone now.

"So don't let adults boss you around just 'cause you want to make money, Sara." Allen hugged his knees, still looking out the window. "I think Chris is a good guy, and it'd be pretty amazing if you could become an apothecary. It's a job we really need done, it pays well, and you'd be really respected. But it's a job that normally only rich folks are able to get."

"It is?"

"Well, Ted's the mayor's son, and I'm sure Chris is from some noble family. Even Ronny must have had enough money to make a clean break from the capital if he found it

hard to live there. He's just like Ted in that sense." There was something pained in Allen's voice. "If you become Chris's apprentice, I'm sure you'd be able to become an apothecary just as easily as you would if you had some noble's backing. But I only want you to be one if *you* want to be one, or like... Maybe I'm just being selfish, but..."

"No, I get it." Allen wasn't telling her not to become an apothecary. He was just telling her to make sure her decision was really *hers*.

"If you're just gonna take a job 'cause someone told you to, then don't listen to Chris... Become a Hunter with me instead."

"And you were doing so good too."

"Ha ha. I'm just kidding."

"I know." Sara knew he *wasn't* kidding, but there was still no way she was going to be tangoing with those huge insects.

"Should we get back?"

"Yeah. Oh!" Finally remembering what she'd come up to the attic for, Sara looked around hastily. It was a big empty room, so she found the storage bags right away. "There they are! There's three bags."

"Let's see what's in 'em."

The two of them went over to the bags and each picked one up, then exchanged a glance after seeing what was inside them.

"It's beds and blankets."

"This one's tables and chairs."

"Great, now we can sleep on beds tonight."

She was also glad the previous guildmaster's harassment hadn't escalated to anything serious. When they sighed in relief, they heard a laugh come from behind them.

"Well, I was thinking about finding an inn to stay in tonight..."

"Don't say that, Nef. Stay here with me. You can stay in an inn whenever you want, but we'll only have this mansion until the old guildmaster comes back. What do you think, Sara? Wouldn't it be fun to sleep on the beds you found for yourself?"

They turned around and found Chris and Nelly poking their heads up from the stairs.

"Reminds me of the attic back home up here. Think ours was a little bigger, though."

"So was mine."

Allen gave Sara a look as if to say, "See?" It looked like Chris and Nelly really had lived in big mansions.

Today was likely to be another busy day. This might be the only chance they had to relax. In that case, there was something Sara wanted to ask.

"Are you frustrated by what happened yesterday, Chris? I mean, you quit your job in Rosa just to come here."

"Well, let me think..." Chris finished climbing the stairs and sat down on the last one. "I'm not frustrated, no. I like being an apothecary, but frankly it's just annoying to be a guildmaster. That being said, it's not like I want to work for someone incompetent either. My vice guildmaster in Rosa was finally ready to take over for me, so I was looking forward to handing my position off to him. And I did think it would be fun to teach young apothecaries in Camellia, but if I have no students, there's no point in staying here."

"Wouldn't you be mad if the old guildmaster came back and acted like you needed him around this whole time, though?"

For some reason, it wasn't Chris but Nelly who smiled at Sara in response. "You really are considerate, Sara. You don't have to worry about Chris. He can handle his own problems."

"Actually, I wish *you* would worry about me a bit more, Nef." Chris was smiling wryly. "Clive has run the guild here without issue for the last several years, so I'm sure he understands that he threw his position away due to his own pride, causing trouble for his guildmates. He was pretty overt with his motivations, after all. And a man like that looking down on me won't change the value of my own abilities as an apothecary."

Chris had some real confidence.

"As for how I feel about it... I was released from Rosa and then unexpectedly released from Camellia as well. It feels freeing, I would say, to be nothing more than an unattached apothecary simply helping out in Camellia for a short time. I'm actually hoping Clive comes back to take over sooner rather than later."

Chris was probably the most inconvenienced of anyone in this situation, and he was taking it well, so Sara figured things would probably work out fine.

"Since we're here, I'd like to go frog hunting today instead of helping out at the Apothecary's Guild." Allen hadn't forgotten his Hunter-related goals either.

"I suppose I'll go hunting with my protégé, then," said Nelly. "What are you gonna do, Sara?"

Nelly and Allen were both looking at Sara with stars in their eyes, obviously eager for her to join them.

Sara smiled, faintly amused. "I'd probably be most useful gathering plants. That guy at the Hunter's Guild said mana herbs don't grow around here, but on the Dark Mountain, I found them in rocky areas, so I'll try leaving town and searching somewhere dry and higher up. I'll be fine on my own with my barrier."

Sara had made her money gathering plants so far, so that was what she wanted to do, ultimately.

"Well, let's eat and start our day, then."

The same person from the day before was here again to bring breakfast. Sara and Allen gave the servant the storage bags with the furniture in them and left, feeling a slight weight lifted off their shoulders. Once they reached the main road, Chris and Ted left for the guild and Sara, Nelly, and Allen headed for the outside of town.

Stopping at the edge of town, Sara first took a look at the swampland where the bog frogs were. Then she spun in a circle. With flat land all around, in the opposite direction of the swamp, there were a few gentle hills.

"Okay, I'll go check out those hills."

"We'll head frogward, then."

Sara parted from Allen with a smile, tickled by his use of the word "frogward." Nelly turned back toward the town and seemed to glare harshly at something for a second, but she made no comment, instead giving Sara a fond look before strolling off to follow Allen.

If there weren't many herbs to be found, that just meant Sara would have to be efficient about her search. She activated her physical strengthening and headed for the hills at top speed. It would likely have taken three hours to get there if she'd walked normally, but Sara arrived at the hills in a mere thirty minutes.

"All thanks to my training." Sara looked out over the hill, praising her efforts. It sloped gently. There were no large trees, and rocks peeked out from the ground here and there. It was pretty far from town, but it seemed like a good place to come for a picnic.

"Where's the driest spot around here...? Oh, here we go."

She'd found healing herbs and not mana herbs, but she needed to gather *something* to pay for her meals today. Relieved to have found any plants at all, Sara started carefully gathering at the base of the hill. She searched for mana herbs near any larger rocks she could find as she swiftly picked the healing herbs. After a full sweep of the area, Sara finally spotted some distinctive leaves.

"There we go! And this was the first place I thought to look too. Man, what *am* I doing?" Chastising herself for not searching near the rock sooner, Sara reached out when a shadow fell over her. "Huh?" Since she was gathering close to the ground, she only had a very small barrier around herself, so whoever—or whatever—was over her was quite close. She wasn't that close to town, however, and it wasn't like Rosa's meadow where there were horned rabbits everywhere. Reaching this conclusion in an instant, Sara timidly raised her head, strengthening her barrier as much as she could.

"Don't move." It was the same low voice she'd heard yesterday, just quieter.

"Guildmaster..." His name didn't come back to her right away. But the man who had his back turned to her didn't have the time to remind her what it was either.

"Growwwl..."

"Growwwl..."

Sara suddenly realized that they were surrounded by wolves. Their coats weren't the familiar yellow-brown of mountain wolves. These were gray meadow wolves. They were a little smaller than forest wolves, but each one was still bigger than Sara.

Remembering the guards at the frog hunting ground who were there to deal with wolves, Sara lamented her own carelessness. For now, she quietly plucked the mana herb at her feet and stored it in her pouch. Then she slowly stood and took a look around. The guildmaster she'd met yesterday was standing protectively in front of her and a dozen or so wolves were gathered all around them.

"Tch. There's too many of them. They're not all that strong on their own, but..."

The wolves leaped at the guildmaster one after another. Sara waited, ready to expand her barrier if she needed to, but the man took down each and every wolf with his fist. He'd clearly earned his current position. Still, one wolf got past him, and when it was repelled by Sara's barrier, the guildmaster put it down with his fist.

Eventually, the wolves decided they were no match for the two of them and fled, their tails between their legs. The guildmaster sighed, carefully slicking back the hair that had fallen in front of his face before turning around to Sara.

"What in the world are you doing here? You're a speedy little thing, but this is no place for a kid to come alone. That sister or mom or whatever of yours went off in a different direction too. What's going on here?"

She was pretty sure Nelly had told him that she wasn't her sister *or* her mother, but that made Sara remember the man's name.

"Mr. Derrick."

"Just Derrick will do."

That was fine with Sara, since calling him Guildmaster would just remind Sara of the guildmaster back in Rosa.

"Umm, I'm looking for mana herbs."

"I told you they don't grow around here. Were you not listening?" he grumbled.

Sara took out her basket from her pouch and showed him the mana herb she'd just

gathered. "Well, I found one."

"That can't be. Those only grow in dry areas. This is..." Derrick looked around. "This is a little drier than it is everywhere else around here, but only a little bit. This is a real swampy area, so there's no way mana herbs grow around here..."

"I-I see one over there too." Sara was looking around as Derrick was, and spotted another mana herb she'd missed before. "See? Right here."

"Hrmm..." Derrick groaned, crossing his arms.

"Chris and Ted need as many mana herbs as they can get to make antidotes. The Apothecary's Guild has completely run out."

"I was wondering what was going on with the Apothecary's Guild yesterday. So you know the new guildmaster, eh? All veteran Hunters know Chris the apothecary. Jeez, if you'd said you were with him, I wouldn't have tailed you out here."

Sara looked up at Derrick disgustedly. "You were tailing me? We would have told you if you'd *asked* us."

"You didn't exactly seem anxious to share!"

All Sara could do was shrug. She knew Nelly wasn't very approachable, but Derrick was an adult, so she wished he'd try a little harder to communicate.

"I thought we'd be welcome. You're so busy you need all the Hunters you can get around here right now."

"Well, sure, having more Hunters is always a good thing, but if you were here for bog frogs, you would have come earlier. Plus you hardly ever see a beautiful female Hunter walking around with kids in tow. It was only natural to be suspicious."

"I see..." Sara wasn't sure what to say to that. As she listened to the man grumble, she headed for the next rock and found another mana herb. That made three. "Well, you should have gone after Nelly, then."

"A kid on her own was obviously the riskier party. And you *were* attacked by wolves, just like I thought you would be."

He'd said he was tailing her, but he had actually just followed her because he was worried about her.

"A beautiful red-haired Hunter from Rosa brings to mind Nefertari, but your friend had a different name and kids with her, and wasn't serving as the caretaker of the Dark Mountain..."

Still searching for herbs, Sara helpfully explained to him, "I call her Nelly, but that *was* Nefertari."

"Huh?"

"Nelly is Nefertari. Her friend Chris was going to Camellia, so she went with him. She's also my guardian. And she's Allen's mentor."

That would surely answer all of his questions. Sara nodded, satisfied at a good deed done.

"Wh-What about the Dark Mountain?"

"Oh, right. Some Invited came and said they wanted to serve as the new caretakers, so she gave them the job."

It had been two weeks since they'd left Rosa. Sara figured the capital had probably heard the news by now, so she didn't have to keep it a secret anymore.

"That's a little *too* much information..." Derrick knelt down wearily next to Sara as she hunted for herbs.

"Is there some problem if Nelly's here? Doesn't it help to have a strong Hunter around?"

"Of course it does. This is someone who people call the Red Reaper or Goddess, though. She's so famous, it kinda makes me weak in the knees."

Sara gave him another disgusted look. A guildmaster shouldn't be saying a strong Hunter made him go weak in the knees. He was talking about Sara's family too.

"Nelly's a strong Hunter, but she's also a perfectly nice person. I don't think you have to worry about her. Just let her hunt however she wants. Allen's strong enough to make

it up the Dark Mountain and back too, so you don't need to worry about him either." She almost added, "Don't get so scared that your hair runs away," but she managed to keep the thought to herself.

"The Red Goddess, with a boy who can make it up and back from the Dark Mountain and a girl who can find mana herbs in places where they shouldn't grow."

He made them sound kinda cool, Sara thought as she found another herb. That was four.

"So, where did Nefertari take in this girl?"

"The Dark Mountain."

"Of course..."

"There are tons of medicinal plants up on the Dark Mountain. I make my living gathering and selling them." Sara held her head high as she crouched down to pick her fifth herb. She plucked a nearby healing herb from the ground as well. If there were two mana herbs growing near every rock on these hills, she'd be able to gather a pretty decent amount of them.

"If there's anyone here who gathers mana herbs, I wouldn't mind giving them this spot." Sara felt like they wouldn't be staying in Camellia long. Once bog frog season ended, they could move somewhere with a dungeon that would be good for Allen's training. Sara was starting to feel like she could gather plants like this no matter where they ended up going. And if they were going to leave soon, there was no point in keeping this spot a secret.

"No one would gather plants here since so few of them grow in this area."

"Well then, if you need mana herbs in the future, I hope *you'll* remember this spot. It's pretty dry up here, so there are a few mana herbs around, and there are healing herbs here and there too."

"Thanks for the tip. Since you're up here looking for them, is what Ronny said about them not having enough true?"

"Yes." Sara nodded.

"Got it. We'll order more for the Hunter's Guild too. Okay, let's get back to town."

"Huh? I'm staying here."

"But those wolves from earlier are still nearby."

"Oh. I'll be fine." Sara smiled. "Meadow wolves are weaker than mountain wolves, right? My barrier, or protection field, can defend against the mountain wolves on the Dark Mountain, so yeah."

"What? So this is the power of the goddess's kin..."

Sara felt like one of those lion-dog guards that stood at the entrance of shrines. She pictured her and Allen standing to the left and right of Nelly and had to fight back a chuckle.

"I learned to handle myself living up on the Dark Mountain. Umm, thanks for coming up here 'cause you were worried about me, though."

"Don't mention it. Well, *I'm* going back, then." Derrick left on light feet, his burdens lifted.

Sara kept gathering until she had ten mana herbs, then left on equally light feet after making a note of the gathering spot she'd start at tomorrow. She thought about seeing how Nelly and Allen were doing on her way back into town, but the frogs just didn't appeal to her, so she went straight to the Apothecary's Guild.

It was just before noon and there was no one in front of the guildhall, probably because all the Hunters were out frog-hunting at this time.

"Hello!" Sara called into the empty hall.

Ronny poked his head out from the workspace in the back. "No antidotes tod—oh, it's Sara. Welcome back."

"Hey. I found a couple of mana herbs for you."

"What?! They're not supposed to grow around here! Where were they? No, I shouldn't ask."

Sara shook her head. "It's fine. Someone in this town should know. They grow on the hills southeast of town, around the rocks."

"All the way down there?! How did you get back here so soon...?"

"I'm fast on my feet. Anyway, that was the only place I could think of that seemed drier than everywhere else around here."

Sara got out the mana herbs and healing herbs and handed them to Ronny. Ronny accepted them almost reverently and hurried back into the work area. Sara turned around to leave, satisfied at a job well done. She figured she'd spend the rest of the day however she wanted. She was a little scared to go into a restaurant on her own, so she planned to find a food stand for lunch. She was excited to wander around town afterward. But all her plans crumbled to dust at Ted's shout from the back of the guildhall.

"Sara! What are you still doing out there? Get in here!"

"Huh? I was gonna go sightsee..."

"There's no time for that."

Ted came out from behind the counter and practically shoved Sara into the workspace.

"I've brought Sara, Master Chris."

Sara felt like she was being taken away by the cops.

"Mm. Just like yesterday then, Sara. Strain and bottle these antidotes."

"Huh? But I was gonna go sightsee..."

With how busy the three of them were, Sara didn't feel like she could just walk away, however, so she ended up helping out. She knew she was too serious and prone to getting wrapped up in things, so all she could do was console herself with the knowledge that she would have been plagued by guilt if she'd gone out sightseeing on her own anyway.

"Listen, Sara. High-quality antidotes will have that light green color. You should remember that. I'll allow you to check the taste as well, so before you wash the funnel,

take a drop of antidote and put it on your tongue. One drop won't do any harm to you."

Holding back the urge to ask if multiple drops *would* do her harm, Sara checked the taste of the antidote. "Blegh. Gross."

"I don't want your opinions on the taste. I want you to memorize the bitterness, the astringency, and the unique balance of flavors that a well-brewed antidote has."

"You should have flavored it with berries or something..." Sara grumbled.

Ted gave her an exasperated look. "It's not as if we *can't* flavor them, but the color and taste of a potion is what differentiates it from other varieties. If the flavor offends you so much, you can just drink something else after the antidote to cleanse your palate."

Sara reached into her bag to get out her berry jam, but Ted stopped her.

"I'm talking about when you actually take one. Since you're learning right now, you can't have anything that would confuse the taste for you."

Sara mentally bemoaned Ted's strictness, but Ronny gave her an envious look.

"You're lucky, Sara. Normally, you start your apothecary training just mashing up healing herbs. You wouldn't learn how to make an antidote for a really long time. Plus, you have two really skilled teachers showing you the ropes."

Well, she didn't *ask* to be learning all this, and she wasn't sure how skilled the two of them were herself, but she didn't want to antagonize Ronny, so she kept her comments to herself.

As he mashed up mana herbs beside Ted, Ronny continued, "Lots of aspiring apothecaries are from wealthy families, so they tend to get sick of the menial labor and tending the storefront, but the ability to perform basic tasks like that efficiently is what makes a good apothecary."

Sara couldn't help glancing at Ted. He was the lousiest storekeeper possible, but he was pretty good at doing the menial labor part without complaint. Ted glanced in her direction and smirked, which made Sara's eyes fly open. That might have been the first time she'd ever seen him smile. And it wasn't charming in the least.

"Once we're good on antidotes, you can bet you'll be grinding healing herbs," he said.

She didn't mind doing that, but she shuddered to think of having to work under Ted.

They worked silently until evening that day. Everyone was too busy to tend the storefront, so when someone called for one of them from the front, Ted or Ronny would go out and prescribe them an antidote before hurrying back to work.

"Sara! We're back!"

Sara was relieved from the bottom of her heart when Allen called her name.

"With my physical strengthening, those frogs went down in one hit!"

"So you punched them after all..."

"My fists work better for me than a sword. My specialty's physical strengthening, after all."

Sara backed up a little from Allen.

"What? I washed off, so I shouldn't smell like frog..." He sniffed his hand.

"You didn't get poisoned at all?"

"It's easy to avoid if you just pay attention. You just have to get in close and hit 'em before they can spit poison or shoot their tongue at you," Allen bragged.

"Wow, I thought Sara was impressive for her age, but you're pretty amazing too, Allen," Ronny said admiringly. "I know twelve is the youngest the Hunter's Guild will let you register, but I don't think I've ever actually seen an active Hunter at that age before. Of course, I only see the people who come in to buy potions, so maybe there are more of them out there than I thought."

Now that Sara thought about it, Allen was the youngest Hunter working in Rosa too. He thrust his chest out proudly, but then cocked his head as if remembering something.

"You know, when I turned in all my bog frogs at the guild, they said something about me being 'another kin of the Red Goddess.' Wonder what that was about."

"I'm the first one. The guildmaster Derrick said that to me. The goddess is Nelly."

"Me?" Nelly asked, face blank. Sara beamed. She was so cute.

"You're the Reaper, right? Ow!"

"Ted. How many times do I have to tell you not to insult people? And for you to say such things about my goddess Nef of all people. I suppose you must want to resign as my apprentice."

"Please accept my apologies, ma'am!"

Chris hit Ted with an elbow to the gut and Ted apologized to Nelly frantically, which just seemed to confuse Nelly.

"Oh, the Red Goddess and the Red Reaper refer to the red-headed dragon-killer Nefertari, right? I've heard of her too. She's a legendary Hunter, isn't she?"

Ronny mentioned his own knowledge on the subject. Sara got an idea of what was coming next, so she averted her eyes from Nelly.

"Dragon-killer Nefertari, eh? Didn't think there was another Hunter with my name around," Nelly said with a completely straight face.

"Nef, err... You see," Chris somewhat awkwardly explained to her, "You never come down from the Dark Mountain, so..."

"What? Speak plainly."

"The red-haired dragon-killer Nefertari and the solitary red goddess of the Dark Mountain are both *you*, Nef."

"Huh? Me?"

Allen snapped his finger. "So that's why Sara and I are the goddess's kin. Kin is like family, right?"

"Yeah." Sara nodded. "That suits me fine." Nelly was looking up at the ceiling with a red face, however.

"This knowledge is going to haunt me for the rest of my life... We can't pretend they never existed, can we?"

"I doubt it. They're not so bad though, are they? I mean, you certainly have the beauty of a goddess." Chris tried to take Nelly's hand, but she swatted him away.

"He really would be perfectly respectable if not for this..."

Sara decided to pretend she hadn't heard Ted's muttered lament. What was important was that Allen's strength had been acknowledged by the Hunter's Guild in Camellia, whether or not he was "the goddess's kin" or whatever.

"Don't you want to hear how I beat the bog frogs with physical strengthening?" Allen asked.

"Not really..."

"First, I strengthen my legs and hips..."

"But you want to tell me anyway, I take it."

Sara gave up and decided to hear all about physical strengthening and bog frogs. Maybe the knowledge would come in handy somehow for her—it *could*, anyway.

"Their breeding season in early summer is the only time when there are so many of them around. They're still pretty aggressive later in the season, but they hardly move in the winter, so you can get right up next to them with no problem."

"Can you not just leave them alone?" Sara asked Ronny what she'd been wondering for some time. There were plenty of animals in Japan that swarmed during their breeding season but caused no harm outside of that season. Frogs were one of them.

"If there are too many of them, they'll enter the town in search of somewhere to spawn. You saw how close they were, right?"

True, it was pretty scary to think about frogs that big hopping into town.

"Nobody but Hunters would be able to handle so many frogs, and such aggressive ones too. The whole town goes into a panic when it happens, which it has a few times in the past. If they're dealt with out in the swamp, then people profit off of them instead. It's pretty clear which option's the better one."

Sara came to realize once more that monsters inside and outside of dungeons needed

to be culled for this world to function, which was why the profession of Hunter even existed.

"I'm guessing they told you there are a lot more bog frogs than usual this year so it helps to have strong Hunters joining in, right, Allen?"

"Yeah. I was surprised. From how the guildmaster acted yesterday, I thought people would be a lot more wary of us."

Sara was a little upset by the difference in their treatment, considering she'd been tailed, but then she figured that it was probably because of her that the guildmaster had since reconsidered his suspicion of Nelly and Allen.

"Oh yeah. I met the guildmaster this morning and told him about you, Nelly."

"So they just figured the famous Nelly and her apprentice would be fine, huh? Dang, I thought they were treating me like a promising newcomer." Allen looked disappointed.

"So the person I spotted this morning was from the Guild. Allen, I'm sorry, but Sara and us were both being followed."

"Followed? Why?"

Sara was relieved that it wasn't just her who hadn't noticed.

"I dunno. I mean, we're perfectly nice people, right?"

"Right."

Nelly and Allen seemed truly confused, but Sara could understand well how Derrick must have felt. An unfriendly Hunter who showed up mid-season with two kids and no understanding of the town's current situation was totally suspicious. Nelly really never said enough. Still, she'd left the Dark Mountain and was managing to get by without causing anyone any serious problems. That was enough, Sara decided.

"If you're so famous that we can live here in peace, then I think that's a good thing."

"You think so? Well, if you say so, Sara."

Sara felt like all the fatigue of the day was washed away by the smile Nelly gave her.

"Thanks to not just Chris and Ted but also Sara, I think the Apothecary's Guild will just manage to pull through," Ronny said cheerfully. "We're at the peak of the season, so the bog frog numbers should start decreasing soon."

Those words were just the motivation Sara needed. She didn't want to waste time commuting to and from the hills, so she started spending all day out gathering mana herbs.

Even if it seemed like they would have enough antidotes, just scraping by wouldn't prepare them for a possible emergency. Chris, Ted, and Ronny worked as hard as they could to make as many spare antidotes as possible, and they saved as many of the potions as they could by being extra efficient with the Hunters who came in for treatment. But their stock of antidotes never grew by much.

After a week of this, Sara was starting to be able to sense the slight differences in taste between antidotes whether she wanted to or not, and with whatever time she had to spare, she was practicing grinding up healing herbs for potions. Her apothecary training was entirely incidental, as there was a limit to what she could do to help out. She'd gotten a lot closer to Chris and Ronny in the last week, so it was hard to say no when they asked for her help, though it was still awkward that Ted was the one teaching her.

"I like learning new things, but not from Ted..." She hoped Allen would forgive a little grumbling. They were still staying in the mansion Chris was borrowing, and it had become their routine for Allen and Sara to chat up in the attic after dinner, looking out over the town at night through the window.

"I wouldn't like that either. It's 'cause you never say no to things, Sara..."

"I don't think that's true... It's just that it's hard to say no when people don't have any option besides asking you."

Of course, she *could* just ignore the needs of the people around her, but when she thought about how many Hunters would suffer if they didn't have antidotes, she couldn't really bring herself to complain about who was teaching her. Plus (though it pained her to admit it) it was true that Ted was a better teacher than Ronny would have been.

"How are things with you, Allen?"

"I think it's going fine. I've been trying to figure out how to hit bog frogs, since they're so bouncy, and I think I'm starting to get it. But..."

"But?" Did he have some problem?

"Ronny said there would be fewer bog frogs soon, right? But it feels like there's only more and more of them lately. I see a lot of Hunters retreating 'cause they got hit with poison."

"I wonder if that's why we haven't been able to build up our antidote stock any."

Sara was helping out, but she wasn't handling sales, so she didn't have any exact numbers. Things seemed just as tight as they were when they'd arrived, though.

"How's Nelly, anyway?"

"Sometimes it looks like she's trying out some kind of new technique, but usually she just watches me and watches over the hunting grounds as a whole. She gives me advice sometimes, but honestly, I don't really get it. I don't know what she means when she says, like, 'Get 'em all together and give 'em a *whap*.' She seems like she's having fun, though."

Nelly had hunted monsters on the Dark Mountain dispassionately. All she was doing was meeting a quota of beasts she had to cull, but she had no quota now. Though she was Allen's "mentor," all he really had to do was train on his own, so she was probably enjoying a carefree life for the first time in a long while, Sara figured.

They heard the stairs creaking as someone came up to join them.

"Hey."

They thought it would be Nelly or Chris, but it was Ted of all people.

"Surprised there's a room like this up here. The attic at my place is a lot bigger. Lots more stuff in it too."

"Damn rich people," Allen grumbled, but Ted ignored the comment, slowly walking over and plopping down next to him.

He silently pulled out three steaming cups from his pouch. “It’s tea. With sugar. Here.”

He wanted them to drink it, apparently. Sara and Allen timidly took the fancy teacups, feeling like they would be better suited to a tea party.

Though he’d apologized to them at the start of this trip, they hadn’t really gotten closer or anything since then. Sara was now used to being around him since she saw him every day at the Apothecary’s Guild, but to Allen, Ted was nothing more than an acquaintance, really. Maybe it spoke well of Ted somehow that he could just barge in like this whether or not they were close enough to warrant it.

Sara blew on the hot tea to cool it down before taking an obliging sip. “Mm. It’s good.” She normally took her tea without sugar, but sweet drinks were nice when you were tired.

No one said anything as the sound of sipping tea filled the attic. It felt strangely comfortable to Sara.

“You saw we got a shipment of herbs from the capital today, right, Sara? Come into the Apothecary’s Guild first thing tomorrow.”

“Okay. You could have just told me that tomorrow morning, you know.”

He probably wanted her to help out making potions all day tomorrow since they didn’t need more mana herbs anymore, but she didn’t know why he hadn’t just told her that in the morning.

“We’re using even more antidotes now than we were before.”

“You did say we didn’t seem to be building our stocks up at all no matter how many we make.”

If they had more mana herbs now, they could just make a ton of potions tomorrow, Sara thought, but Ted shook his head quietly.

“We had our hands full just with the mana herbs you were bringing in, Sara. Even with mana herbs, there’s a limit to what three apothecaries can physically do. The stock for this season is usually accumulated by over ten apothecaries over the course of half a year or more.”

“So why were you showing me how to grind up healing herbs?”

“I was basically taking a break doing that.”

So he wasn’t teaching her because he had the time to.

“We’ll have to start producing even more tomorrow.”

“But didn’t Ronny say we were past the halfway point in the season? There are fewer Hunters who need antidotes now, right?” Allen asked. And *he’d* just said there seemed to be more and more frogs lately. It was clear to everyone, including Ted, that Allen just wanted to argue with him.

Ted glared at him. “Allen. Are there fewer bog frogs out in the swamp?”

When he was asked directly, all Allen could do was answer honestly. He sighed. “No. I was just telling Sara it actually felt like there were *more* now. There are a lot of Hunters pulling out early after getting hit with poison too.”

“That’s what I thought. I’ve got a bad feeling about this. No, it’s not a wild prediction, but an observation of the Hunters affected by poison and the number of antidotes we’re going through.”

Sara and Allen waited quietly for Ted to continue.

“The bog frogs will most likely overrun the swamp and flood into town. People can take shelter inside their homes if that happens, but no normal person will be able to do anything about it if the Hunters are struggling so much. There’s gonna be panic.”

“Is that what you wanted to tell us?”

“Yeah. Master Chris and Nefertari both never say enough. I didn’t think they’d tell you this. But when you’re actually ready for what’s coming, it changes what you’re capable of doing in response.”

So he’d come looking for them just to tell them that. With the vague sense of unease she’d been feeling put into concrete words, Sara *did* feel like she’d be able to come at things from a better angle tomorrow.

“Thanks.”

"It's nothing." Ted turned away from them and left with the cups.

"Weirdo."

She didn't disagree with Allen's sentiment, but Sara could appreciate the clumsy way Ted showed his kindness. She felt like the warmth of the tea had reached her heart.

Chris and Ronny were surprised to see her at the guild in the morning, but they looked relieved at the same time. Being considerate and efficient, Sara was a valuable person to have around. Ted shot her an annoyed glare when he noticed her quiet ego trip, but she didn't let it bother her.

"We've still got some time, so get grinding those healing herbs."

"Yes, siir." She brushed right past his unfriendly instructions.

All she could do to help with making antidotes was strain the potions and bottle them when they were completed, so she dutifully crushed up herbs until it was time for her to do her part.

More Hunters than usual visited the Apothecary's Guild that day. By now, all the Hunters in Camellia knew that the guild had no potions to sell, so the only people from town who came were there to be treated, but apparently there were some new Hunters here from the capital.

"What do you mean you don't have any antidotes?!"

"I apologize, but our stock has run out."

Ronny apologized to the incensed Hunters without explaining more of the details around their situation. The Hunters likely wouldn't accept his explanation that even though there were more bog frogs spawning, they didn't have enough apothecaries to stock up on antidotes.

A little after lunch, the guildmaster of the Hunter's Guild, Derrick, appeared with a tired look on his face.

"There are finally some Hunters here from the capital answering our request for help, but they're all throwing fits about not having any antidotes. Is there anything you can do?"

"Hmm... I'm sorry, but..." Chris said without taking his eyes off the pot in front of him. "We only just received a shipment of herbs yesterday, so we plan to make more starting today. Still, we want to keep as many on hand as we can. Camellia's Hunters got by for a week without purchasing any antidotes, so the Hunters from the capital will just have to do the same."

"That's what I thought..."

Sara felt a little bad about the guildmaster having to trudge back resignedly, but the Apothecary's Guild really couldn't do anything more at this point. There were more and more Hunters showing up needing antidotes that afternoon, so even with their increased production, they *still* couldn't build up any stock.

"Guess I finally have to hunt some bog frogs myself," Nelly sighed that night at dinner.

"Finally?" Wait, you *haven't* been hunting them?"

"Not really. It was fun enough just watching other people hunt them. I liked watching Allen grow too. Bog frogs don't even put up a fight anyway. Well, with how springy they are, their skin kinda does, but they're just too weak."

"Huh."

"Just so you know, that's not true at all." Sara had been about to accept the idea that bog frogs were weak when Allen interjected. "Since they're so springy, their skin absorbs physical blows, and it's so crowded out there, you can't use any big magic either. They're like horned rabbits; rookies can't handle them at all, but they don't present enough of a challenge to veterans. Well, *I* can beat 'em, though."

Sara laughed at the way he had to brag at the end.

"How would you take one down, Sara?"

"Me?" Allen didn't ask her things like that very often, so Sara thought of what she knew about bog frogs. "Well, I wouldn't touch them, that's for sure."

"How would you take them down, then?"

Not everyone hit things to take them down like Allen did. That would mean using magic, but Sara had never proactively hunted anything other than slimes and golden

trout, so she had to use her imagination a bit.

"Maybe a high-temperature flame like I use when hunting slimes one by one. If I had to take out a bunch at once, I could use a lightning strike like I do with golden trout, but that would take out all the Hunters nearby too."

"How 'bout something less scary?"

Nelly was laughing and Ted was giving her a frosty look, so Sara thought for a moment to come up with something else.

"What about what Haruto did? Uhh, the 'shooting star, cosmic dust' thing? Raining down light from the sky?"

"I thought we were trying to avoid hitting Hunters. And can you do that too, Sara?"

"Probably."

She wished he wouldn't give her that exasperated look.

Since they were talking about hunting, Nelly actually joined in on the conversation for once. "When casters have to fight on their own, they tend to end up using big spells. If I were gonna come up with a strategy, I think I'd put Sara on support. Like how Sara knocks out a golden trout and I finish it with my sword. If you could get a bog frog to stop moving like that, then even rookies would be able to take them down."

"A strategy? Nelly, that's so cool!"

"You think?"

Sara could hear someone nearby saying something about how Nef was beautiful even when she was flustered, but she ignored that. Her eyes were sparkling at the idea of Nelly talking like a commanding officer.

"Oh yeah, Ronny said frogs don't move very much in winter. Couldn't you just cool them down, then?"

There were a lot of animals that stopped moving when they got cold.

"There aren't a lot of people who can cool down drinks or make ice like you can, Sara.

And even if someone could cool down one frog, that wouldn't mean much," Chris pointed out calmly.

"I guess making cold air wouldn't matter if it just went away on the wind, but..." When Sara camped out in the winter, she formed a barrier around her body and heated the air within. Which meant she could do the same with cold air. "I think I could cool a pretty big area with my barrier."

"Hmm. Why don't we try it?"

Sara gave Nelly a chilly look. It was the first time she'd heard that question in a while. But she *did* think it might be fun.

"Okay, I'll put a barrier around the whole dining hall." She could make her barriers any shape she wanted, but she settled for creating a sphere around the table they were all seated at. "Then, cold air..." She pictured the chilly air inside a refrigerator filling the barrier.

"Ha ha ha. I knew you could do it. It's nice and cool. Actually, it's *cold*."

Nelly enjoyed herself for a brief few seconds, but the space inside the barrier got so cold so fast that Ted started shivering.

"That's enough of that!" Sara took the barrier down and waved the cold air away, then started gently heating the air inside the dining hall without a barrier.

"Hey, Sara! I'm a delicate guy! What do you think you're doing?!"

"Sorry, I wasn't really thinking about you at all, Ted. Chris and Nelly, are you okay?"

"You're not worried about me?"

Allen and Ted were young, so they'd be fine. Chris shook his head as if to shake away the cold air and gave Sara an indulgent smile.

"You don't need to treat me like an old man. I'm sorry for egging you on like that, Sara. You didn't run out of mana or anything, did you?"

"I'm fine."

“That’s the Invited for you.”

“That’s my *Sara*, you mean.” For some reason, Nelly was the one bragging about her.

“Since we’re a bit chilled now, I’ll go make some warm tea. Wait here.”

Ted got up and headed for the kitchen. It felt like he just wanted an excuse to make tea, really.

“I wonder if he’s going to make some for me...”

“Probably. He’s gotten very into making tea lately. It feels like he’s interested in doing things with his own hands these days. He makes tea whenever he has the time to.”

This time, Chris smiled rather affectionately. Sara and Allen exchanged a glance. His bringing them tea in the attic made a lot more sense to them now.

The days after that were so busy, however, that not even Ted’s nighttime tea could relieve the pressure they felt. Even with Hunters here from the capital, the number of bog frogs wasn’t decreasing at all. If anything, there were only more of them every day. Allen was excited about all the money he was making, but Nelly always came home looking tired, which was normally a rarity for her.

“I thought we’d be able to do some sightseeing in Camellia while we hunted frogs... I’ve seen nothing but swamp and frogs every day. I’m sick of it.”

“Yeah, there were all kinds of monsters up on the Dark Mountain, and the scenery is so nice up there.”

Sara never expected she’d be looking back so fondly on the days when she’d had to work so hard just to take one step outside of the cottage on the Dark Mountain. Sadly, Nelly not having time to go sightseeing meant Sara had no time to do it either.

“At least they’re providing food for us now, but we haven’t been able to go out to eat at all. I want to try the frog.”

The servant who brought them their dinner every night was surprised to hear Sara’s grumbling. “Here, frog is considered commoners’ food. The mayor likely decided it would be beneath his guests to eat it. I’ll tell him that you’d like to try some proper Camellia food, even if it’s common fare.”

"Thank you. We would all appreciate it." Chris put in an official request, so they could only do their best to look forward to tomorrow's dinner.

Chris just didn't seem to gel with Camellia, though. The next day, while they were tirelessly crafting antidotes once again, there was a commotion, this time from the back of the guild rather than the front.

Knowing that Chris and Ted weren't the type to pay attention to anything other than their work, Sara turned to see what was going on. Ronny turned with her, gasping in surprise when he did.

"Huh?! Guildmaster?!"

Chris stopped for a moment, likely thinking Ronny meant him, but he quickly surmised otherwise and shook his head, finishing what he was doing and turning around.

Standing there was a man a little younger than Chris and some five other people. They all wore apothecary's brooches, making their professions obvious. From Ronny's exclamation, Sara surmised that the old guildmaster had returned.

Sara's shoulders sagged with relief. If six apothecaries had returned, they would finally be freed from all this work.

The old guildmaster, who had blond hair that was darker than Ted's, tied back behind his head like Chris's, signaled silently to one of the people who'd come with him with his harsh blue eyes. The other apothecary timidly put the large bag he was carrying down on the floor. In it was laundry and a tea set.

"Hey, that's my tea set. What gives?" Ted finally turned around from the poison glands he was boiling and raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"It was in my mansion. I don't want it there. Take it with you when you leave."

"*Your* mansion? That's not right, is it? It's the mansion we're borrowing from the mayor."

To be precise, it was Chris who was borrowing it, but Sara didn't begrudge Ted's brazen argument. But it was the former guildmaster he was arguing with. Sara was nervous, unsure of whether he could really take an attitude like that with this man.

The former guildmaster raised an eyebrow. “I came all the way back here from the capital at the mayor’s request. It’s the guildmaster’s mansion, so I’ll be taking it back now.”

Chris shrugged. “Clive, was it? I think we’ve met before, but I’ll introduce myself anyway. I’m Chris.”

Clive sneered. “Master Chris, former guildmaster of the capital’s Apothecary’s Guild. I know you, of course. After all, we worked together for a short time in the capital.”

“So that’s why the name sounded familiar. Well then—”

Sara knew that Chris was trying to give the man his job back, but Clive was in a bad mood, so he cut him off before he could finish.

“The fact that I’ve been called back to serve as guildmaster again means you came all this way from Rosa but couldn’t handle Camellia’s little bog frog problem, so you’re giving up and going home, is that it?”

Sara got so angry with the way he was talking that she almost lashed out at him, even though it wasn’t like her, but surprisingly, it was Ted who held her back. It was obvious what was happening here at a single glance. Chris hadn’t given up on anything, and it was *his* idea to call the previous guildmaster Clive back to give him his old job in the first place.

Chris merely shrugged his shoulders in response. He took a deep breath, then indicated the workstation where he was brewing antidotes.

“Shall we get back to it, then?”

“There’s no need.” Clive’s tone brooked no argument.

“I’ll just gather my personal things, then.”

“Let me help you.” Ronny jogged over to help him.

Ted had gone back to his work, looking completely disinterested in everything happening around him. His belongings were still on the floor.

Chris got together his own tools and said, “Sara, let’s go.”

"Wait," Clive said. Sara looked up at him in annoyance, wondering what more he could possibly have to say. "If that trainee apothecary is staying, I'll look after her."

Sara couldn't help looking around, wondering to herself what trainee apothecary he was talking about.

"You're the only one here, aren't you?"

"Huh? Me?" Sara was so surprised she gave a genuine response. Then she hurried to shake her head. "I'm not a trainee apothecary. I just happened to be here, that's all."

"But..."

"Come on Chris, let's go." Sara pretended not to hear Clive. She didn't want any more trouble. If Chris was just going to quietly leave, then Sara would do the same. The only one left was Ted.

"Ted?" She turned around and found Ted silently working. He didn't seem to intend to come with them. "Ted."

"I'm staying," Ted said shortly. After making eye contact with Sara, he turned to Clive. "And I'm staying in the mansion just like I have up until now too. Go put my things back," he commanded the apothecary who'd carried in his things. It was just like Ted to be rude to everyone equally. Sara and Nelly, incidentally, kept all their things in their storage pouches, so they'd left nothing behind in the mansion.

"Who are you, anyway?!" the former guildmaster shouted, his voice echoing through the guildhall. Sara thought she might see something interesting for the first time in a long while, so she wanted to stick around to watch, but Chris gently pushed her forward, so they left the Apothecary's Guild together.

"Wait!" Ronny ran out after them. "Camellia owes you all so much, and he was so rude to you... I'm going to tell the mayor!"

"It's fine, Ronny." Chris had the same look as always on his face. "More importantly, I was in the middle of a brew. You're the only one who knows where I stopped in the process. You don't need to go to the mayor, just finish the potion, would you? And look after Ted for me."

"I will. Thank you for all your help, Chris, Sara." Ronny bowed his head, then turned

reluctantly and headed back into the Apothecary's Guild.

Sara didn't know what to do after getting outside. The old guildmaster had shown up out of nowhere and kicked them out of both the Apothecary's Guild and the mansion they'd been staying in. Yet Ted, who loved Chris so much, wasn't coming with them. Sara had no idea why and no idea what to do from now on.

"Looks like there's nothing for us to do now."

"Yeah..." Sara sighed, deflated.

Chris gave her a funny look. "That's fine, isn't it? We're free now. We can sightsee or find something to eat. I know! Let's head toward the Hunter's Guild. There was a restaurant you wanted to try near there, wasn't there?"

"Yeah, the Hopping Frog Eatery across the street. But..." Sara never forgot important information. Still, she looked back at the Apothecary's Guild with concern.

"Are you worried about Ted? Let's walk and talk, shall we?"

The two of them started down the main road. They passed Hunters on the street they'd come to know when administering antidotes, who raised their hands or nodded in greeting to them. Sara felt like they'd just been cooped up in the Apothecary's Guild the whole time they'd been here, but they'd become completely natural presences in Camellia at some point. The thought made her a bit bashful.

"We're the ones who have been supporting Camellia these last few weeks, no matter what anyone says."

"Yeah."

"About Ted..." he started. Sara looked up at Chris as she walked beside him. This was what she was curious about. "He's going to stay here in Camellia."

"What? But isn't he, you know, on your side, Chris? From how that guildmaster was acting, he's definitely gonna be bullied."

She wasn't worried about Ted, of course. Perish the thought. But she knew how miserable it was to work hard all alone in a place where you had no friends. Plus, hadn't he only come here in the first place out of a desire to stick with Chris?

"When I heard the town's circumstances from the mayor, I knew I wouldn't be able to stay here for long. Ted understood that as well, of course. But all Ted's father has permitted him to do is travel to Camellia."

"Is it that much responsibility to be the mayor's son?"

Looking at Ted, it didn't seem like there was much more to the role than just being a spoiled rich boy.

"It is. The mayor is in essence the lord of the region where his town resides. The title is passed down hereditarily, and mayors can have more power than some nobles."

"So Ted's the next mayor of Rosa."

Chris chuckled. "That's right."

"Hmm. I'm worried about Rosa's future."

This time, Chris laughed loudly. "Me too."

"That's where you're supposed to disagree."

Even his beloved mentor was nervous about having Ted in charge.

"Even if he wants to accompany me further, his agreement with his father won't allow him to. As soon as it became clear that I wouldn't be remaining in Camellia, Ted's only option was to return to Rosa. I'm sure that's the last thing he wanted to do, however, which is why he said he'd stay in Camellia."

Well, Sara could understand the desire to get some distance from one's parents.

"Ted will be fine. You know him. He's got thick skin."

"Chris..."

"The mayor knows Ted's background. Frankly speaking, as a fellow apothecary, Clive's attitude doesn't exactly sit right with me, but it gives me some satisfaction to think that I'll be leaving Ted with him as a parting gift."

"Isn't that a little *too* harsh?"

Chris burst out laughing again. “Do you know how much I’ve gone through having him working for me? I hope Clive enjoys his new employee.”

So Chris was pretty fed up with Ted too, Sara thought tepidly. As they spoke, the Hunter’s Guild came into view. Across from it, there were a few restaurants, and some food stands along the wide road as well.

“Oh? That’s...”

Sara’s eyes were completely focused on the restaurants until Chris drew her attention toward the Hunter’s Guild. Some people in matching equipment were filing out of the guildhall. Sara gasped, recognizing their uniforms.

“It’s knights from the capital. I gotta go, Chris.”

Sara slipped into the crowd around the restaurants and food stands just slowly enough to not look suspicious. Chris followed her casually, a step behind. Maybe it was rare to see knights from the capital here, because as Sara and Chris watched them from between the food stands, the people around them all watched curiously as well, gossiping among themselves.

“It’s a squad of knights. I heard they developed a paralysis agent they could use on monsters, so they’re here to participate in the frog hunts.”

“A paralysis agent, eh? That should stop the frogs in their tracks.”

Chris frowned, hearing that. “A paralysis agent?”

They were no doubt planning on making serious use of the drug they’d abducted Nelly with on monsters now. Sara was relieved to not spot any faces she recognized among them, but she also felt rather disgusted recalling when the drug had been used against her.

As she watched them head in what was most likely the direction of the swamp, Sara suddenly realized... that was where Allen and Nelly were.

“Chris.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think the knights will be able to use the drug on just monsters?”

“I doubt it.” Chris looked down at Sara and sighed. “Which means we’ll be in need of a large amount of antiparalytics.”

“Yeah.”

Rosa was just about the only Apothecary’s Guild that had a decent stock of antiparalytics, and that was because of the shocking event in which paralysis agents had been used against Sara and Nelly.

“Nef is out in the swamp.”

“And Allen,” Sara added without delay. She couldn’t have him forgetting that.

Both their shoulders slumped.

“I can make decent potions wherever, but for paralysis agents and antiparalytics, I’d really like to make them at an Apothecary’s Guild.”

“Right...”

Sara really wanted to pretend she’d just never seen the knights, but since Nelly and Allen were out there hunting, this was already their business.

“Let’s get back, I suppose.”

“Yes. But first...”

Sara told Chris to go on ahead and went through all the food stands, ordering whatever she wanted. She was frustrated, after all. She hadn’t gotten to eat a single Camellia specialty yet!

After she was finished ordering her food, she ran back to the Apothecary’s Guild and found Chris standing in front of the building.

“It’s a little hard to go inside, isn’t it?” she asked him.

“We’ll have to do things Ted’s way.”

“Ted’s way?”

“At our own pace and to our own tune.”

Sara resisted the urge to ask him if that wasn’t just “Chris’s way” and followed him inside the guildhall. As they expected to, they found a commotion inside.

“You were providing antidotes here up until yesterday!” one Hunter yelled while another one swayed unsteadily on his feet beside him.

“If you’re not going to provide them or sell them, what are we supposed to do?!” one Hunter yelled, slamming his hands on the counter.

It wasn’t Ronny at the counter but an apothecary Sara didn’t know, who was not helping matters in the slightest with his ineffectual panic.

“Excuse me.” Chris took one of his own antidotes out of his pouch and treated all of the suffering Hunters in the guildhall one by one. Once he was finished, he headed into the back, not once sparing a glance at the Hunters who thanked him or the blank-faced apothecary behind the counter, his expression unchanging. Sara followed him like a bur stuck to his clothes.

In the workspace, the guildmaster was nowhere to be seen. It was just Ted and Ronny silently brewing antidotes.

“Ted.”

Ted turned around in surprise at Chris’s voice. The shock on his face made it obvious to Sara that he’d just been putting on a brave face earlier.

“I suppose since it’s his first day back on the job, Clive went home to his mansion to take the rest of the day off. What an idiot.”

Ronny looked down in shame. He must have heard the commotion out at the reception counter.

“Ted. The knights are here to hunt bog frogs.”

“The knights?” In a short moment, Ted’s expression changed several times, finally settling on a questioning look directed at Sara. His gaze seemed to ask her if it was the

same as when they'd used the paralysis agent on her in Rosa, so she nodded.

"So we'll need antiparalytics. When we did our initial checks of the stock here, there were only a couple of them, though."

Ronny looked back up. "There aren't any monsters who paralyze people in the dungeon here, so people carry them around as little more than good luck charms. But why does knights coming mean we need antiparalytics?"

"The knights are likely planning on spraying a large amount of a paralysis agent over a wide area. In a melee so dense that casters are loath to use large-scale spells for fear of hitting fellow Hunters, however, there will almost certainly be human victims of the paralysis agent."

"What? I've never heard of such a thing before. And aren't paralysis drugs so dangerous that you can only use them on fairly large monsters?"

"This is a new invention." Chris shrugged his shoulders, taking his brewing tools back out of his pouch. "Fortunately, I have some paralysis herbs that Sara gathered that I never made use of. I can make antiparalytics with them. Ted."

"Yes, sir!" Ted replied.

The two of them had brewed antiparalytics rather passionately in Rosa as well.

"I was feigning ignorance, but until the mayor officially dismisses me, this Guild is my responsibility. I give you permission to treat poisoned Hunters at the reception counter. Ronny, Sara, help me here."

"Yes, sir!" all three of them replied.

The previous guildmaster must have told them not to sell antidotes or use them to treat affected Hunters. The apothecary at the reception counter returned there with a relieved look on his face.

Apart from a delivery of several food items for Sara a short time later, they worked silently making antiparalytics until evening. Fortunately, they didn't hear about any Hunters getting paralyzed that day. According to one of the Hunters who came to be treated for poison, the knights were just getting stock of the situation today and would carry out their operation tomorrow morning.

"The plan is for Hunters to stand by next to the swamp and then get to work once the paralysis agent has spread. Some people are really excited to hunt all the frogs they can."

The Hunter who had accompanied his poisoned friend put a hand to his chin and cocked his head. "Maybe there are some in Rosa, but I can't imagine there are that many Hunters based in Camellia who have handled paralysis agents, though. You have to wash away all the drug after you use it, right? Who knows how many of them are aware of that..."

There were some people who *did* understand the dangers involved, but most were just fed up with the endless stream of bog frogs and wanted whatever solution to the problem they could get.

They left most of the antiparalytics they'd made at the Apothecary's Guild, but Chris and Sara bought up some of it.

"We're back, Sara!"

By the time Allen's cheerful voice rang out in the guildhall, they were ready to leave.

Since Ted was staying behind, Ronny told him, "You can come to my place if you want. It's just one small room, though."

"It's fine. I'm staying in that mansion for a while whether the guildmaster likes it or not." Ted turned him down point-blank. Sara was honestly a little impressed, since she knew *she* wouldn't want to live with that guildmaster.

Ted gave Sara a look out of the corner of his eye for some reason, but then turned back to Ronny. "I appreciate the offer, though."

"Well, we're coworkers, aren't we? It's only natural."

Ted probably didn't actually care one bit about the invitation, but he'd learned that this was one of those times when he was supposed to express gratitude. Sara almost burst out laughing when she saw Allen's mouth hanging open, but she controlled herself.

Chris explained the circumstances to Nelly and apologized that they didn't have a place to stay anymore, but she just smiled at him cheerfully. "That's fine. We've got all

our stuff with us. It's warm out this time of year, so we can just stay right outside town. There's a lot of Hunters out there since they can't get inns."

Sara had been cooped up in the Apothecary's Guild this whole time, but since Nelly and Allen were hunting outside town, they knew what things looked like out there.

The four of them parted from Ted and Ronny and headed for the outside of town.

"Oh yeah, Sara. *He*'s here, you know."

"*He*?" The person she must have meant didn't come to mind right away.

"That guy. The knight. From the count's family, the prime minister, I think?"

"Liam, was it?"

"That's it."

Sara immediately felt weary.

"When we realized the knights had come, we snuck away, so I don't think they noticed us," Allen told her. "Seems like they're here on a real job, so maybe we don't have to worry, but let's try not to let them find us."

"Yeah. I'm glad I hid when I saw them in town too."

Liam wasn't among the knights she'd seen earlier that day, but one of the knights who'd seen her in Rosa could have been.

As they talked, they arrived at the clearing where they would stay the night. Maybe because it was a little late, there were so many Hunters out here that it took them some time to secure a spot. Sara was surprised to see so many people out here.

"So this is why he came to tell us there were no places to stay."

Still, she was used to camping out. She set her tent up and then it was time to eat.

"Argh, we shoulda eaten in town." Nelly scratched her head in frustration.

Sara puffed her chest out proudly. "Just leave dinner to me tonight."

"Well, your cooking is always good, but aren't you tired?" Allen asked worriedly.

Sara waggled her finger. "Don't worry, I'm not cooking. I bought some food earlier today. See?"

Sara pulled out the food she'd ordered and had delivered to the Apothecary's Guild and lined it all up. She'd paid upfront for the massive delivery.

"This is... fried something. These are kabobs. Sandwiches. Fruit. Something that's fluffy. And some other stuff."

She'd basically gone to every food stand she saw, so she wasn't entirely sure what it all even was.

"None of it was that expensive on its own, so it's probably all what the common folks around here eat."

"So bog frog."

"Yeah, probably."

Sara was excited to try it, but also slightly nervous.

"Well, let's dig in."

"Yeah. Thanks, Sara."

The two adults began eating without hesitation, and Sara didn't intend to be shown up. Because they had monsters to cook, there was plenty of oil to be found in this world, so deep-fried food was fairly common. But Sara thought she'd start with the kabobs to enjoy the natural flavors of the ingredients. Sara bit down wholeheartedly on a skewer with several pieces of what looked like chicken meat that were too large to fit into her mouth.

"This is good! And it's soft. But it's so cheap!" She enjoyed the crunchy tips of the meat that were charred a little more than the rest of it too.

"It can't be cheap?" Allen laughed, but price was important.

"I mean, this is just two hundred gil! For two hundred gil in Rosa, you can only get one

little piece of meat.”

“Yeah, prices are high in Rosa. This is pretty normal in other places,” Allen told her as he gobbled down his own meat.

“It’s a bit plainer than cockatrice. But since it doesn’t have a strong flavor, I could eat this forever.”

“You’re the only one who would compare something to cockatrice, Sara.”

Their cheerful laughter echoed through their camping spot. Just as Sara expected, bog frog had a refreshing, poultry-like taste, and the bones were removed, so it was easy to eat.

“I’m gonna get some frog meat if I have time tomorrow. I bet it’d be really good in a stew with some veggies.”

“I want it with tomatoes. Your cockatrice tomato stew is amazing, Sara.” With Nelly adding her own request, Sara felt like they’d finally actually arrived in Camellia.

Putting away everything they hadn’t managed to eat, Sara got ready for bed. She put out her light and looked up at the night sky. Feeling reluctant to go into her tent for some reason, she turned to Nelly.

“Nelly, want to sleep outside our tents like we did up on the Dark Mountain?”

“Hmm.” Nelly looked around the clearing, but she must have determined that there was no danger around. She nodded. “I’m sure nobody’s got so much free time that they’d come watch us sleep. Sure, let’s sleep out under the stars tonight.”

“Okay!”

“I will too, then,” Allen said.

“I suppose I’ll join you,” added Chris.

In the end, they used their tents to surround them and they all lay down in the middle of them. There were still people awake around them, but everyone had hunting to do tomorrow, so no one was making noise.

"The stars are the same, I guess, though I think they were clearer up on the Dark Mountain."

"They change with the seasons too. They're prettiest in winter."

Nelly and Chris lay beside Sara and Allen as if to protect them. Sara wondered what tomorrow would bring.

Chris didn't have any reason to stay in Camellia. Sara, Nelly, and Allen could have stayed, but they weren't sure they wanted to, now that the knights were here. Should they lie low in Camellia until the knights left or should they flee to another town?

Everything had happened so fast they'd had no time to discuss it. Still, Sara wasn't alone anymore. She closed her eyes feeling confident that things would work out somehow.

Sensing people moving around her, Sara awoke, opening her eyes to find the Hunters nearby all getting ready for the day. Allen woke up at the same time, and together the two of them quietly got up. Chris and Nelly, however, showed no signs of waking yet.

"I know they keep their physical strengthening up while they're sleeping, but don't you think they're a little *too* unguarded?"

"Adults are more like that than you'd think." Allen laughed, saying his uncle was the same way, as the adults finally began to stir.

For breakfast, they ate the rest of the food Sara had bought at the stands.

"What should we do today?"

Normally, Sara and Chris would go to the Apothecary's Guild, so there was nothing for them to do today.

"Let's go hunting!"

Allen was the same as ever, but hunting still didn't appeal to Sara.

"Maybe I'll go gather plants."

"Let's go huntiiing! The frog was good, wasn't it?"

Sara stopped despite herself. True, if she butchered it herself... No, if she had *Nelly* butcher it like always and just kept the meat, then she wouldn't have to go buy it from a store.

"Sara, I think a professional has to remove the poison glands or all the meat will be tainted by it," Nelly pointed out.

"What...? Then there's no point in hunting them."

"Of course there is... You could at least watch and see how cool I am."

In the end, it was Chris, watching Allen's insistence with some amusement, who decided what they'd do that day.

"The knights will likely use the paralysis agent today. If it hits a monster, it will remain on the monster's skin and paralyze any Hunter that touches it. That's what antiparalytics were originally for."

Sara was surprised to hear that. She had simply assumed that there were monsters who could paralyze people, just as there were monsters that poisoned people.

"I can't imagine those knights will make particularly safe use of that substance. Allen, Nelly, and I will stand by near the Hunters and see how things go. As for you, Sara..."

"Yes?" Sara was worried he'd ask her to help out again today.

"I don't think we should be apart today. We'll just be worried if we can't contact each other, should something happen."

He was right about that. Which meant they would all be hunting today. Sara decided to just consider this another experience.

"Okay! Let's get going!" Allen was full of energy. "We always hunt right in the middle of everyone," he told Sara.

The Hunters around them called out to him.

"Allen! You with your girlfriend today?"

“Show her how cool you are, man!”

Sara huffed a little on the inside, annoyed that people always automatically interpreted a boy and a girl together in that way, but she decided to just be happy people actually saw her as a girl here, unlike in Rosa.

“No, she’s a Hunter too.”

But Allen said something completely absurd in response, so Sara waved her hands in front of her face.

“Wh—?! N-No, I’m—”

“Well, we got our IDs at the Hunter’s Guild together, didn’t we?”

Voices around them asked if they were childhood friends, but Sara knew that if you denied these things, it only gave them more credibility, so she swallowed her complaints and just smiled politely.

“This place is pretty rough for beginners. Look out for her, yeah?”

“Of course!”

If nothing else, Sara had at least come to understand that the Hunters around here acknowledged Allen’s abilities.

Upon reaching the swamp, Sara felt like there were a lot more Hunters around than the last time she’d been there.

“Those are the tough guys who are out here early to hunt what they can before the knights kick them out later today. Okay, Sara, put up your barrier and watch from there.”

“Sure.”

Nelly and Chris were just standing behind them, acting as chaperones. Sara shot Nelly a slightly resentful look, but Nelly was unbothered. That didn’t surprise Sara. She didn’t particularly desire to see them, but the brown bog frogs were already popping

up everywhere, taking the Hunters' presence as an invasion of their territory.

Confirming Chris and Nelly's presence behind Sara, Allen secured a spot with good footing and began punching away all the frogs that came at him one after another. He punched upward from below to avoid the frogs' poison glands and they went flying into the air, almost comically. Before long, there was a mountain of frogs around Allen. He put them all away in his pouch before facing the next onslaught.

"Wow... He's amazing."

"Pretty much. All the Hunters around here acknowledged him more or less right away."

That was why so many of them had called out to him, then.



The three of them were getting some suspicious looks as they stood there like Allen's attendants or something, but after observing them for some time, Sara found that the frogs weren't very scary as long as they weren't leaping at her. She kind of wanted to try out the idea of enclosing them in her barrier and cooling them down now...

Normally, Sara put her barrier around herself and changed its size and shape however she wanted. But she got the feeling she could separate it from herself just fine or close it around something else instead.

Sara crept forward a bit so that she wouldn't get in Allen's way and quietly closed her barrier around one of the bog frogs heading toward Allen. She kept it close to the ground so that it couldn't jump. Sending cold air somewhere far away from her seemed difficult, but magic was all about how you pictured it. She'd been able to form clouds above her head and make rain with her "sprinkler" spell, and clouds were about as far away from her as things could get.

Remembering that, Sara made cold air seep up from the ground inside the barrier. Since the barrier was so small, the frog stopped moving right away. Sara quietly removed the barrier, and it still stayed immobile. It seemed like they cooled down quickly but took time to warm up.

If one worked, her next plan was to try two at once. She tried a few more experiments near Allen and soon it looked like the frogs were just gathering and stopping there, which was a funny sight.

"Can I beat these guys up now?" asked Allen.

Sara granted him permission, and he brought his fist down on the frozen frogs one by one. For some reason, by the time he was finished, his face looked blue, almost as if he was in shock.

"Sara. It's cold."

Apparently freezing the ground had made the overall temperature in the area plummet. She must have gone overboard if *Allen*, who was fine outside in the winter, was complaining.

"S-Sorry."

Now that she looked down at it, the grass was wilting too. She heard Nelly laughing

behind her, but when she trudged back to her, the older woman had wiped the smile off her face. Sara thought about complaining to Nelly, but saw the small figures of the knights behind her.

"The knights are beginning their operation. Hopefully they can get rid of at least a few frogs..."

The Hunters were told to vacate the area, so the ones who had been hard at work since early morning now headed toward town obediently. Sara and her companions mixed in with the crowd, trying to walk as far apart from the knights as they could.

Though everyone went *toward* town, they didn't actually return there. Everyone wanted to see the knights' big operation, after all. They backed up to where the paralysis agent wouldn't reach and relaxed, waiting for the show to start. Sara's group decided to watch as well.

Allen, who had the best eyes among them, commentated. "Looks like they're upwind, with the wind at their backs. Oh, they threw something. A bottle? It burst apart when it was high in the air. It's just like last time, Sara. Just bigger."

"Last time" referred to when the knights had tried to paralyze Allen and Sara in Rosa in the same way. It was still a bitter memory for Sara.

The Hunters began to shout.

"The frogs are all slowing down!"

The knights moved downwind, spraying the paralysis agent as they went. At their rear, casters blew the paralysis agent away with wind magic. Then, after them, Hunters came through, finishing off the frogs without touching them, sucking their bodies into storage bags. It was interesting to watch.

"I figured knights were just for show and useless in a real fight, but I guess they're pretty decent after all," one Hunter muttered.

Sara thought the same thing.

"Can they really keep up this luck, though?" Chris muttered behind Sara. "They're likely working with the Hunter's Guild, but if that's the case, why wouldn't they contact the Apothecary's Guild as well?" Chris was indignant that there wasn't a single

apothecary present for this operation.

When trouble started, it started with the Hunters collecting the frogs. One of them became unsteady on his feet, then collapsed. The other Hunters all ran over to him, but then they started to collapse one by one too.

“They can blow away the paralysis agent remaining in the air, but the drug will remain on the vegetation at their feet. They must have inhaled some of the drug walking through the grass.”

The knights, meanwhile, hadn’t even noticed what had happened behind them and simply continued spreading the drug. That meant the Hunters here were the only ones who could help the ones out in the swamp. Everyone around started moving, hurrying to the other Hunters’ aid.

“Wait!” Chris shouted. “If you rush in like that without a plan, it will only mean more paralyzed Hunters.”

“Then what do we do?!” one of the Hunters asked.

“You saw how it took some time for them to collapse. At least three people should head for each Hunter out there, and you shouldn’t stay there for long. Cover your mouths and noses when you go so that you don’t breathe in the paralysis agent. If you have a towel, you can wrap it around your face.”

Chris had an actionable plan ready immediately.

“I’m an apothecary. Please bring the affected Hunters to me. And...”

After receiving Chris’s instructions, the Hunters all partied up and headed to help. Chris gave different instructions to the ones who remained behind.

“Someone please go to the Apothecary’s Guild and tell an apothecary to come here with antiparalytics. If they refuse, speak to the guildmaster of the Hunter’s Guild.”

A couple of quick-looking young Hunters ran toward town.

“Is there anyone skilled in water magic? The affected Hunters and the ones who went to rescue them may have the paralysis agent on their bodies, so they’ll need to wash off right away.”

Chris gave precise instructions one after another. Sara stood by beside him, since she was one of those who could use magic.

"I can use magic too, and I've got my physical strengthening, so I'll stay here too."

Allen stood next to Sara with Nelly behind them. Eventually, the first victim was brought before them.

The Hunter was placed on the ground in front of them. He was conscious.

"I can't... move..."

He tried to raise his arm and explain what had happened, but he could hardly move, and he couldn't speak much either. Chris nodded to assuage him, antiparalytic in hand.

"It's good that you're conscious. Even without treatment, I'm sure you'd be able to recover in a day or two. But you should drink this antiparalytic so you can recover sooner. Here."

The fact that he was conscious and able to drink was in his favor. After carrying another of the Hunters over, another man wiped the sweat from his brow and looked up at the sky.

"I shouldn't be sweating so much when I'm using physical strengthening..."

Sara suddenly realized something when she heard that. "There's no wind..."

"There's no wind?" When Nelly parroted the words, the wind picked back up again and an air of relief went through the gathered Hunters. But Sara felt that something was still wrong.

"Wait. It was blowing from behind us before, so why is it coming from the front now?"

The cool breeze she remembered hitting her back was now hitting her face. Wiping the sweat from her brow as well, Nelly turned in the direction the wind was coming from.

"The wind's changed direction. That's not good! Have the knights noticed?!"

Everyone looked over and sure enough, the knights were starting to collapse, starting

with those in front, now that the paralysis agent was being blown back toward them.

"Hey, wait a second." The voice came from the Hunters behind them. "Wh-Wh-Wh- What's that?"

Sara turned around and found Allen and the rest of the Hunters looking not toward the knights but toward the swamp. She looked in the same direction and then took a step back.

"Th-There are so many frogs..."

The drug should have paralyzed a large number of frogs, but there were more and more of them coming from behind the affected frogs. Since there was still paralysis agent on the grass, some of the swarm did stop moving, but more frogs just continued on over them. The green field was now buried in the brown of the frogs.

Allen was clenching his fists beside Sara, but even with all the Hunters here, they wouldn't be able to defeat the horde of frogs in its entirety.

"Heeey!"

Just then, they noticed a group coming toward them from town, the guildmaster of the Hunter's Guild among them. Ronny was there too. Sara was grateful to have another apothecary joining them.

"Sorry we're late! Wait, what's going on?!"

The guildmaster's surprise was only natural. He thought he was only supposed to be there to accompany some apothecaries, but when he arrived, it was to the sight of a huge band of bog frogs emerging from the swamp.

Fortunately, they'd managed to rescue all of the Hunters who had gotten stuck. They looked over at the knights and found them speeding their way, carrying their comrades with them, so they likely hadn't left anyone behind either. Chris laid the patient he was treating on the ground and stood.

"Guildmaster, it looks like it's not simply a matter of treating the affected Hunters anymore."

"Why are you here while the former guildmaster's in the Apothecary's Guild? What in

the hell is going on?!"

"Take your complaints to Clive and the mayor. Right now, we need to retreat and warn the town!"

Derrick swallowed whatever he was going to say, looked around, and quickly began issuing orders.

"We can't defeat this many of them here. Let's pull back to the edge of town and create a defensive formation! Carry those who can't move into town, quickly!"

The comrades of the Hunter Chris had been treating used their physical strengthening to pick up the man. The last group to remain was Sara's party, Ronny, and the guildmaster.

From town, they heard the sound of a bell.

Clang, clang.

"What's that?"

"The signal to get inside since bog frogs might come into town," Ronny told her.

"People should be safe, then." Sara was relieved. "We should get back too."

They hurried back to town and found the Hunters who had left before them standing in a line just outside Camellia. Sara was taken aback for a moment, then recognized the fire in the Hunters' eyes, as if they were saying, "We're not letting a single frog into our town!" Her own heart burned along with them.

"You had me worried," said one Hunter. "You guys saved my friend."

Sara was happy to hear their kind words too.

She turned around and looked toward the swamp with the Hunters. The bog frogs were headed for the town almost as if they were chasing the Hunters and stretched out in one long line. But the row of frogs wasn't as thick as she was expecting.

Sara thought to herself for a moment. Was she scared? No, not at all. The big bog frogs were gross, but they weren't scary. What could she do in this situation, then? She could

enclose a couple of frogs in her barrier, but what about a much larger number? She'd never used her mana to its fullest extent before. Her barrier had always worked just like she pictured it would. In fact, none of her magic had ever really *failed*.

"I think I can do this."

"Sara?" Chris gave her a dubious look, but Sara ignored him, striding out away from the town and toward the bog frogs. "Sara! Nelly and Allen too! What are you doing?! Stop her!"

Chris's voice echoed across the meadow, but the two of them were unlikely to stop her. Once she'd found a spot with enough room, Sara turned around. Nelly stood at her right, Allen at her left.

"Well, I think it's probably time to get serious," Nelly said.

"You haven't seen me serious yet either," Allen added.

Sara burst out laughing. "So you weren't serious earlier?"

"Well, uhh..."



The Hunters watched, astounded, as the three of them laughed despite the gravity of the situation.

"Okay, let's do this." Sara thrust her hands out at the mob of bog frogs.

"Yeah. Show us what you can do." Nelly's voice, full of trust, rang out from behind her. Nelly was all about putting things into practice.

A small smile on her face, Sara looked toward the bog frogs and thought to herself. She couldn't see the end of the line of frogs, so a round barrier wasn't going to cut it. But she *could* create a half-sphere pointed toward the bog frogs and cool the ground to make them slower. Yes, that was the plan she'd go with.

"Barrier." With a sound like a bowstring going taut, an enormous invisible shield rose up in front of them. Sara nodded. *Good.* Next, she rapidly cooled the ground behind the shield. The ground froze with a brittle sound.

Eventually, the first of the bog frogs made it to the frozen ground. They charged forward regardless, their movements gradually slowing. The few who continued on were stopped short by the invisible wall in front of them. When the ground was filled with unmoving frogs, the frogs behind them hopped on top of them, but they too hit the invisible wall, bouncing off of it.

"Wh-What's going on?"

Sara could hear the confused Hunters behind her, but she was busy controlling two different spells, so she couldn't answer them.

"Let's get going," Nelly said to Allen.

"We should be able to get through Sara's barrier," he agreed.

They strode toward the bog frogs together, stopping in front of the barrier. Allen punched the first frog, his fist easily passing through Sara's barrier.

"Great! We can do this!" Allen shouted.

Nelly kicked one of the bog frogs next. It flew through the air, falling onto some other frogs in the distance. She turned around, a fearless smile on her face and her fists clenched. "Does it matter how this is working? What's important is that these frogs

are all-you-can-hunt."

Allen thrust his fist up next to her. "So let's get hunting!"

There was silence for a moment, as if time had stopped. But a moment later...

"Yeah!"

With a great cry, the Hunters charged at the unmoving bog frogs. Sara was worried, not confident at all that anyone other than Allen and Nelly would be able to get through her barrier, but the Hunters seemed to get through with no issue. None of them had ever done anything to harm her, so it seemed they had been safely registered as allies in her mind.

Chris quietly entered Sara's field of view to help her concentrate and keep her safe. He didn't say anything to her, but stood before her to make his presence known. And that was the right decision.

"Sara?! What are you doing here?!"

Sara's barrier almost wavered at the sound of the familiar voice. It was Liam. The person who'd tried to use a paralysis agent on Sara and Allen just to bring them back to the capital with him.

"This is the front line! It's no place for a child to be—get back!"

Sara was a child, but she was also one of those fighting here on the front line. Liam had ignored her feelings when he'd tried to bring her back to the capital with him as well. Though she was remembering that now, Sara tried to push the thought from her mind. She was having trouble doing that when she could sense the knights getting closer, however. Luckily for Sara, she had a reliable ally nearby.

"Stop right there, knights. Do you not see how you're frightening Sara?"

Chris stood between her and the knights, leaving her able to calm down and focus on maintaining her barrier.

"Being frightened is better than getting injured by those bog frogs. You're the guildmaster of the Apothecary's Guild, aren't you? Why would you let a child stand on the front line of a fight like this when you're supposed to be helping people?"

Technically, nothing Liam was saying was wrong. His arguments were nothing if not fair. But had fair arguments helped Allen when his uncle had died? Had they helped Sara when Nelly had disappeared? The answer was no. Sara had no need of a guardian who could spout nothing but “fair” arguments.

“Look there.” Chris indicated the bog frogs.

“We’re well aware of the danger!”

“That’s not what I mean. Look at Allen.”

“Allen?” Liam finally seemed to notice the Hunters fighting the frogs. “That’s ridiculous! He’s fighting on the front line too! We have to go save him!”

“It’s you who are ridiculous. Calm down and observe the situation.”

Liam had probably never been spoken to like that before. He was frozen with shock for a moment.

“The bog frogs are stopped there because Sara’s using shield magic to hold them back,” Chris told him quietly.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Give it a rest, would you? Liam, you should know this already. Sara’s one of the Invited. She’s holding the bog frogs back with the limitless mana she’s able to manipulate.”

It was the prime minister’s household that had volunteered to become Sara’s guardians. In other words, Liam’s family. He should have been well aware that Sara was one of the Invited.

“But she’s just a girl!”

“A girl who made it on her own for months in Rosa. Don’t belittle her.”

That might have been the first time Sara thought Chris was kind of cool.

“Allen is fighting with Nefertari, an equal match for any adult Hunter. Don’t belittle him either. Besides, this is hardly the time to be concerning yourself with them.”

"Ugh..." Liam fell silent with some frustration, eventually ordering half of his squad to assist the Hunters in fighting the bog frogs. He had the remaining half stand by in case the frogs made it past the Hunters.

Of course, the knights who went to help the Hunters were repelled by something before they reached the frogs. That something being Sara's barrier.

"Huh? That's weird..." she said, though she knew the reason of course. The knights were marked very clearly as enemies in Sara's mind.

"You said it was shield magic?" asked Liam. "Sara, could you remove it for a moment to let the knights through?"

"Are you an idiot?" Sara asked him.

"Wha—?! An idiot?!"

"If I remove the shield now, the bog frogs it's holding back might get out. Getting everyone in formation again and putting it back up wouldn't be easy."

"But you can do it, can't you? Do I have to order you to do it?"

This was why Sara found Liam so disgusting. Not only did he treat her like a child, but he also attempted to make use of her as a tool when it suited him. Sara kept herself calm so her shield stayed up, speaking quietly, almost like she was only talking to herself. "I'm not a knight, so I don't listen to your orders."

"You're a citizen, though."

"I was only sent to this world by chance. The people in Rosa have treated me well, but this country hasn't done anything for me yet. So I won't listen to your orders."

Liam fell silent again. He must not have expected her to argue so much.

"Anyway, first you say I'm a child, then you say I'm just a girl, but as soon as you realize I'm worth something in a fight, you try to order me to do the impossible. That's what's so gross about you."

She was getting tired, so she lowered her arms. The barrier still stood, of course, and she was keeping her eyes on the hunting ground. So as she continued speaking, she

didn't once make eye contact with Liam.

"Liam. As one of the Invited, I was dropped onto the Dark Mountain at the age of ten, but I was an adult before I came here. I have a reliable guardian in Nelly as well. I don't like dealing with you, so I'd appreciate it if you left me alone from now on."

"I can't do that. I was interested in you even before learning you were one of the Invited. And now that I know, that's even more reason why I can't let you go. You'll end up under the guardianship of some noble or another eventually, so it should be my family."

"No, thank you."

Sara was normally rather meek and kind, almost too much for her own good, so Liam might have really had some sort of talent to make people angry for Sara to be this obstinate with him.

Chris had been making sure no harm came to Sara, but he was watching the hunting ground as well, of course. As if to cut short the pointless conversation they were having with Liam, he reported, "The number of bog frogs has decreased significantly. I don't see any new ones showing up from the direction of the swamp."

"I think I can hold out a little bit longer."

Her mana might have been limitless, but her concentration wouldn't last forever. She was able to keep a barrier up around herself for a whole day now without even thinking about it, but this was her first time making one so big, and using a different spell at the same time. And Liam's arrival had just made her more tired.

"I think you can drop the cold spell."

Sara followed Chris's advice and stopped cooling the ground. Then once there were few enough frogs that the knights could probably handle them if they got over the barrier, she decided to drop it.

Stumbling a bit when she dropped the spell, Sara let Chris support her.

"Good work."

"Thanks."

She thought it was impressive herself, so she accepted the compliment readily. Allen and Nelly were still hunting frogs, of course, so Sara and Chris retreated to a safer area but kept their eyes on the conflict.

By the time Sara sat down and caught her breath, the fight was pretty much over. When a bog frog staggered past the Hunters every so often, the knights took care of it. Eventually, all the bog frogs in sight were hunted.

Allen hurried back first, his face blue. It must have been hard, as Sara suspected.

“Sara, I’m cold.”

“S-Sorry.”

He was practically hunting on ice, so it was only natural he’d be cold.

Nelly chuckled beside him. “You gotta use physical strengthening to keep yourself warm at times like these. You still got a way to go, kid.”

“Ugh... Nelly, a mentor usually teaches that kind of stuff before you go hunting.”

“R-Right. Sorry. I just thought you could do it already.”

Winter hadn’t come yet since Allen had become Nelly’s student, so there was plenty he still had left to learn. But Sara was sure Allen would use his frustration to quickly master this new technique and put it into practice in no time.

“Chris, there are some people who need treatment for paralysis and poison. Will you help?” Ronny asked. He’d been doing an outstanding job thus far as the only apothecary on call.

“Wait, Ronny,” a Hunter said to him. “Where’s Clive? I saw him strutting around town last night with his favorite apothecaries.”

“The guildmaster is, well, at the guild,” Ronny said, head bowed.

“If he’s in town, why isn’t he out here for such a crucial event? You and this temporary apothecary are the only people out here treating folks. The ones at the front in the middle of the frog-hunting are Hunters from somewhere else. What are the apothecaries here doing? You’re not gonna tell me they didn’t hear the emergency bell,

are you?"

The Hunters had been a united front until now, but there were doubtful whispers going back and forth between them now. The Hunter who'd spoken up wasn't the only one who'd seen Clive in town the day before. He'd probably made a bit of a show of being back in town.

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to bring him here."

As Ronny slumped his shoulders, Chris gave him a pat on the arm before heading over to the Hunters needing treatment. It wasn't Ronny's fault that Clive wasn't here, of course, and it wasn't Chris's either. There was no point in them joining the Hunters in bemoaning Clive's incompetence, so they focused instead on their work as apothecaries.

"We'll meet back in the clearing where we stayed last night," Chris said to them as he left.

Sara guessed that the only reason Ted hadn't come was because he was the only one back at the guild making antidotes. Her opinion of Ted had improved enough that she was confident in that guess.

After Chris left, Sara looked over at Nelly and Allen with a wry smile. Chris wasn't the only one helping the people of Camellia. Sara, Nelly, and Allen were practically the heroes who'd saved the town, but in the state of confusion after the attack, it was unlikely anyone had actually realized exactly what had happened. Chris's words in part had meant not to expect to be celebrated anywhere in town tonight.

The mayor had provided them with lodging and meals but had left the situation at the Apothecary's Guild alone. The guildmaster at the Hunter's Guild wasn't a bad person or anything, but he was late to respond to issues and not very adaptable. As for the Apothecary's Guild and its now-returned former guildmaster, it wasn't even worth thinking about.

As Nelly and Allen rested in the meadow, Hunters greeted them and praised their display of skill before heading back to town. By evening, Sara, Allen, and Nelly were the only ones still out here. Chris had gone with the Hunters into town to treat them. Even the knights had left at some point.

The three of them returned to the clearing where they'd camped the night before and

put up their tents, washing off and changing into clean clothes. Sara got all nostalgic, thinking about her time living outside the walls of Rosa. Even though those should have been painful memories.

By the time Chris returned, looking exhausted, Sara was warming up some cockatrice stew in a pot.

"You're back late. Nice work today."

"I'd work forever just to hear you praise me like that, Nef."

Chris was operating as usual, so Sara decided there was no need to worry about him.

"Come on, let's eat," she said.

"You could pay me a compliment or two yourself, you know, Sara."

If he valued her a little more, maybe she would, Sara thought to herself.

She was a little bummed to be eating the same food she ate on the Dark Mountain here in Camellia, but for Nelly and Allen, who had been chilled to the core by Sara's magic, this meal was extra appreciated.

After dinner, Chris washed off and changed in his tent as well and came out with a pouch Sara didn't seem him handling often.

"It's time for a reward, I think."

Sara and Allen perked up at those words. They didn't know what this reward would be exactly, but just hearing the word was exciting.

First, Chris took out jangling bags of gold coins for Allen and Nelly. To Sara, however, he handed only three gold pieces. She'd been paid for all of the herbs she'd collected already, so this was likely her payment for helping out at the Apothecary's Guild. Frankly, she could have made a lot more money selling the stealth slime stones in her pouch, but she wouldn't complain. Unlike Allen and Nelly's money, her pay was probably coming directly out of Chris's own pocket.

She'd started helping at the Apothecary's Guild out of little more than momentum, but she'd gained plenty from it. The experience was worth more than the money, she'd

say.

That being said, with the medicinal plants she'd sold and the money she'd saved on lodgings and food staying and eating at the house the mayor had given them, she'd made a decent profit in Camellia. Certainly enough for a twelve-year-old, but she was confident it was a decent amount for an adult too.

Sara looked down at the gold coins happily, and gratefully put them away in her pouch.

"I threatened—rather, *persuaded* Derrick to pay us a reward," said Chris. "You prioritized taking down as many bog frogs as you could without worrying about collecting them at the end there, didn't you, Allen, Nelly?"

"Guess so. But we made a lot before this, so it's fine." Allen rubbed his nose bashfully.

Even when he'd done his long-distance hiking training with Haruto in the meadow outside Rosa, Allen had hunted plenty of horned rabbits as he went, so Sara was sure he was getting paid either way. Chris and Allen really had worked hard for little in return though, Sara thought.

"But thanks, Chris."

"Don't mention it. I couldn't get anything for you though, Sara. The guildmaster should have been watching with the rest of us, but the imbecile said he didn't know what he'd be paying you for." Chris's expression was a lot more dour than usual. "I doubt many Hunters realized what your barrier even was, Sara. No one's so much as heard of a shield spell you can pass through, after all."

"I heard a lot of people saying that there being a caster who could freeze the ground was awesome, though," Allen commented.

"It's fine. I don't want to stand out." Those were Sara's true feelings. So she didn't mind not getting a reward either.

It was probably Chris who'd drawn the short stick this time anyway. He'd quit his job as guildmaster in Rosa to come here and then after being worked to the bone, he was chased out without so much as a thank-you.

For Nelly, who was used to fighting much stronger monsters, the bog frogs in Camellia probably hadn't presented enough of a challenge. It seemed like she was just hanging

around Allen and giving him advice on occasion for the most part.

At least Allen was happy.

"Man, what did I even do here?" Sara asked herself. While she did value the experience of learning a bit about being an apothecary (even if she'd basically been forced into it by Chris and Ted), it still hadn't solidified any sort of desire to actually become an apothecary in her.

"There's no need to think so hard about things, Sara. We were just here in Camellia on a vacation anyway." Nelly put her arm around Sara and pulled her closer.

"Nef, me too!" Chris piped up, hoping to get in on the embrace. Nelly ignored him.

"You work too hard, Sara. Even without me looking out for you, you could afford a house in a small town with the fortune you earned up on the Dark Mountain, without even having to rush to make more money. You could fool around for years on the funds you have."

"Now that you mention it, I guess you're right."

The medicinal plants she'd steadily gathered, the monsters she'd accidentally felled, the golden trout... She still hadn't sold all of her slime and stealth slime stones either. With all the work Sara had done up on the Dark Mountain, she was almost wealthy now.

It was important to her to be independent no matter where she went, but it wouldn't mean anything if she forgot her original goal.

"I said I wanted to go all sorts of places and do all sorts of things since I'm healthy now, didn't I?"

"You did. And now you've gone to Camellia, done some apothecary training, and even helped out exterminating bog frogs. Is that not enough for you?"

Sara wrapped her arms around Nelly in return. She'd been hard on herself, thinking she was just letting other people decide everything for her, but she'd gotten to have all sorts of interesting experiences here.

"I've never taken it easy like this either," Nelly sighed. "It's nice being someone's

mentor."

"Well, it's hard being a student whose mentor never says anything." Sara burst out laughing as Allen shrugged his shoulders in exasperation.

Chris leaned back on his hands, looking up at the night sky. "I've been busy here, but it's a small price to pay for freedom. I'm not beholden to anyone starting tomorrow." He fell back on the grass and muttered, "I'll be free, but Clive will probably see hell."

"Clive... The former guildmaster?"

"Yeah."

To Sara, he was nothing more than an old man she'd seen once. Her only impression of him was as a pathetic adult who'd abandoned his work just to harass Chris.

"You were definitely the one who worked the hardest today, Sara."

"I sure did." Sara clenched her fist, still clinging to Nelly.

"But to everyone else, it only looked like Allen, Nelly, and myself were working hard."

Sara didn't mind that, though. She knew what she'd done.

"And while us outsiders were working hard, what were Clive and his lackeys doing?" It didn't seem like Chris expected anyone to answer him, so everyone just listened as he spoke. "Once things calm down and people realize where the blame and the triumph lay, the majority of the criticism is likely to fall on the Apothecary's Guild. Everyone saw how hard Ronny worked, of course, so their ire will fall squarely on Clive."

Not only had he left them with a shortage of antidotes, he'd also done nothing in the town's biggest crisis. That was sure to become his lasting legacy as guildmaster.

"Seeking fame and standing is all well and good, but you're done for as an apothecary when you forget the meaning of the profession. I pity him." Chris had a sour look on his face. "And I hope Ted knocks him down a peg."

"Tell us how you really feel," Sara couldn't help jabbing. Still, the stagnant air around them had cleared up.

As everyone's mood improved, Nelly let go of Sara and looked down into her eyes. "I think we'll leave Camellia tomorrow. The knights are here, after all."

Allen nodded beside them and Chris held up a hand in agreement from the ground. Sara had been thinking the same thing, so she nodded as well.

"Where are we gonna go, though?"

They'd been so busy, they hadn't talked at all about what they'd do next.

"Mm. South. I'm thinking Hydrangea."

"Hydrangea..." Sara hadn't heard that name before.

"It's on the other side of the capital from Rosa. My parents are there too. I'm thinking of asking for our family to become your official guardians, Sara."

She could escape the clutches of that nasty knight if they did that. Sara agreed without hesitation.

"Then for now we'll head to the next town over, Orlean."

"Orlean?" She'd never heard that name before either. Sara wondered what Orlean would be like. She let her imagination run wild, almost worried that she'd fall asleep against Nelly from how exhausting the day had been.

"It's by the ocean."

"The ocean!" Sara was wide awake in an instant.

"I've heard the seafood is good there."

"Let's eat it!"

"There's a dungeon too."

"Whatever."

Nelly's laughter echoed through the quiet clearing.

“I hope we get to take it easy in the next town.”

“Yeah.”

They'd take another step forward tomorrow, heading toward Hydrangea. Sara got the feeling their next trip would be a relaxed one.

EPILOGUE

THE REAL FUN OF TRIPS

"Didn't think Ted was gonna come to see us off," Sara said as she walked down the road, remembering the morning they'd left Camellia. She touched the pouch at her waist. The day after the mass outbreak of poison bog frogs, they'd decided to leave the troublesome town as soon as possible, and on their way out, Ted had appeared before them.

Sara knew Ted was going to stay in Camellia, but they'd parted so indifferently the other day that she honestly hadn't thought she'd see him again.

"I'm here to say goodbye," he had said to Chris.

Chris gave him a genial smile and patted him on the back to encourage him, but apparently that wasn't Ted's only business.

"Sara."

"Me?"

Ted walked over to Sara and took a small basket out from his waist pouch. "For you."

"For me...? You already gave me a gathering basket... What is this?"

"Mm."

Interpreting Ted's grunt to mean she should open it and find out, Sara accepted the basket and carefully opened it up. Then she looked up in surprise. "This is the tea set you always use, Ted. I thought you were really into making tea lately, though."

"It's used, so it's fine. The set you use is kinda plain, right?"

The set consisted of a teapot and five cups. There were no saucers, but the material

was thick enough to be used outdoors. The white cups had a red ivy design around them that Sara had always thought was cute.

"Those are from the Royal Regio set, Sara. They're luxury items, only available on special order."

"Master Chris! She doesn't need to know that!" Ted snapped. He hardly ever talked back to Chris that way.

"I can't accept something so expensive."

"They're not *that* expensive," Ted grumbled. "And it's not like they're new."

Allen was making a face as if to say, "Rich people, I swear," which almost made Sara laugh, but she held it in. Still, she figured, it was rare for Ted to actually want to do something for someone, so she decided to accept the gift.

"Well, if you insist, I'll take them. Thank you. I always thought your tea set was really cute." Sara thanked Ted, cradling the tea set in her arms.

"Mm. See ya." Ted raised one hand, thanked Chris for all his instruction, and headed back into Camellia without looking back once.

"He's got a ways to go still if he can only show goodwill through gifts, but this is a big step for Ted." Chris's opinion of Ted was as grim as ever, but he was smiling as he said this, so Sara chose to believe his apprentice was at least somewhat important to him.



With that, their departure from Camellia turned out to be a rather pleasant event. Their initial destination of Orlean would be a two-day walk with their physical strengthening activated. They trekked forward, camping out once on the way, which was old hat to them by now, and the mountains gradually gave way to a sparkling ocean in the distance.

“The ocean!”

It was still far away, but Sara couldn’t help running toward it. Allen chased after her, the two of them racing for a bit.

Sara had never been able to go to the beach with friends in her old life since she was so low on energy all the time. Even when she’d gone with her family, she’d gotten worn out on the first day and ended up resting in the hotel for the rest of the vacation. Now, she could play all day without getting tired, and she had a friend running at her side.

Once she’d run enough to be satisfied, her feet naturally stopped. Unlike Sara, who was huffing hard, Allen wasn’t out of breath at all. That frustrated her a little. There was no flat ground on the Dark Mountain, so she’d never gotten to run around like this before. Sara decided that now that she was down on flat ground, she’d practice running more.

“I’ve never seen the ocean before.” Allen was squinting out into the distance.

“You never went with your uncle?”

“We went to Camellia, but Orlean is a little out of the way, and I don’t think we ever went this far south.”

As they stood in the middle of the road watching the reflection of the light on the water, Nelly and Chris finally caught up with them.

“Goodness... I don’t know that there’s anything that would get me running like that at this age.”

“Yeah, I only run when monsters attack me. Can’t say I’ve run for fun in a long time.”

Sara laughed at the two of them acting like old folks when they looked so young and had so much energy to spare. Something occurred to her then, so she asked, “Nelly, can we buy swimsuits in Orlean?”

“Swimsuits? Why?”

“What do you mean, why?” She turned to stare at Nelly. “To swim in the ocean, obviously.”

“Sara.” Nelly grabbed Sara by the shoulders, her face frighteningly serious. “Sara, there are tons of monsters in the ocean. Swimming is out of the question.”

“Monsters?” Sara’s mouth fell open. Sure, there were monsters in meadows and not just dungeons, but she didn’t think they would even be in the ocean. “Then what about just splashing around on the beach?”

“It’s pretty dangerous, but it’s better than swimming. If it’s something you *really* want to do, more than anything, then I’ll do everything I can to protect you, just as far as the beach.”

“It’s *that* dangerous?” Sara didn’t want anyone putting their life on the line for her fun, so she gave up on swimming.

“If you want to swim, we can go to a lake that doesn’t have any monsters. I believe there’s one near Hydrangea.”

“I’ll save the swimming for then.”

Since her parents considered it a necessary skill, she’d learned to swim, though it was a slow process since she had to take so much time between lessons to rest. She found it fun, though.

“Count me out. I don’t want to get wet.” Allen scrunched up his face. Sara recalled that Allen didn’t even like bathing that much.

“But it feels good. The water’s nice, and so is the feeling of floating in it.”

Amidst their discussion, the party arrived in Orlean. Like Camellia, Orlean was a rather open town, and though it was small, the main street was bustling.

“There’s a dungeon here, and the ocean’s full of monsters too, so there’s a Hunter’s Guild here as well.” Nelly pointed to the other side of the street where a sign with a wyvern on it hung.

The two Hunters were interested in the monsters that could be found around here, but Sara wasn't. She was more interested in the pleasant scent she'd been smelling for a little while now. She practically felt it pulling her toward whatever was giving it off.

"Can I get one of those, mister?" By the time she realized it, she was already in front of a stand, ordering a kabob.

"Sure thing, little lady. They're a bit expensive, though. Five hundred gil a pop."

"That's fine. Here you go." The coin practically flew out of her pouch. "What kind of meat is this anyway?"

"Normally, it's moray, but I got ahold of some kraken recently, so it's kraken grilled with salt."

"Kraken... The thing with a bunch of legs?"

The man nodded. Krakens were monsters, she assumed, but basically they were squids or octopuses, which were both tasty, so either one was fine with her. Sara opened her mouth wide and took a big bite of the white meat.

"Sara!"

"Uhn?" Sara's mouth was full of kraken when Allen ran over. "Ih's goo'!"

"Will you wait a second? Can I get one of those too, sir?"

"Sure thing."

Allen bought a kabob as well, opening his mouth wide and taking a big bite. "Mm, it's so chewy, it's hard to bite through, but it's good!"

"It's so juicy, and the salt only brings out the flavor more!"

Nelly and Chris seemed amused watching the two of them, but in fairness, they had been so busy in Camellia that just buying and eating food from a stand was something they hadn't had the chance to do.

The two of them bought their own kabobs and were surprised by how good the kraken was. After hearing that it was monsters that made the ocean too dangerous to even

swim in, Sara was curious: Even a strong Hunter like Nelly had problems fighting the monsters in the streams up on the Dark Mountain, so how did people hunt monsters in the ocean?

“How do people catch monsters in the ocean?”

The man at the stand looked at Chris and Nelly behind Sara and nodded to himself as if realizing something. “A traveling Hunter are you, little miss?”

“I’m a Hunter too.” Allen pointed at himself with his thumb as he munched on his kabob.

“Oh, are you? Pretty impressive with how young you are. Let me give you a warning, though. Don’t try to hunt out on the ocean. Stick to the dungeon, yeah?”

Sara didn’t know anything about the dungeon here either, but apparently it was safer than the ocean.

“The monsters are in the water, see? Unlike dungeons, it’s not like you can just walk into the ocean. It’s all over if you get attacked somewhere where your footing’s unstable. That’s why there are Hunters who specialize in ocean monsters. They use nets or set traps or fish them up out of the water.”

Well, that answered some questions, but Sara still had more.

“Do they use boats?”

“The monsters in the ocean would make short work of a boat. Save the sailing for lakes.”

Monsters must flip boats over, then. That was pretty interesting. Nelly had mentioned lakes too, so the ocean must really have been dangerous in this world.

“If you really want to hunt something, you can dig for shellfish near rocks on the shore. That’s safe. It doesn’t make much money though, so it’s more something kids do for pocket change.”

“Do you want to just go see it for now?”

“Yeah!” cried Sara.

They headed toward the ocean, which was straight down the main road at a slightly lower elevation, stopping on the way to watch as shellfish sizzling over charcoal popped open and to inquire about unknown meats being fried up with vegetables.

They arrived at a large bay surrounded by rocks with a sandy beach on the inside, where people who must have been Hunters were busily working on something. They were pulling ropes, but when what was attached to the ropes emerged from the water, it wasn't a net but several large pots. They then pulled octopus-like creatures from the pots and finished them off.

"Are those krakens?"

"Those're just octopuses."

So there were just normal octopuses too, then.

"How do they get heavy pots like that into the water without a boat?"

"Eh, you can do most things with physical strengthening."

Sara hadn't heard Nelly's physical strengthening creed in a while. She was right, though. Sara saw the people who'd pulled out the pots tossing them back into the water one after another, and there were people fishing up incredibly large fish on what looked like normal fishing rods too.

She glanced over at the rocks and saw kids that looked around the same age as her and Allen. Just like the man at the food stand had said, they must have been digging for shellfish.

"Looks like it's not too dangerous over there. Let's check it out."

Sara started heading for the rocks when she suddenly popped up into the air.

"Huh? What? Waaagh!"

Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she could see something sand-colored and whiplike twisting about, but it was hard to pay attention to anything when you were flying through the air. She had her barrier up, so she'd be fine when she hit the ground, but in her panic, she was powerless to act as her barrier bounced like a ball toward the water.

“Sara!” Nelly called out, but there was nothing Sara could do.

After bouncing a few times, she finally regained enough calm to right herself. “I didn’t think all my experimenting on the Dark Mountain would come in handy in a place like this... I guess this is better than back when I went rolling down that hill.”

She looked down to find an enormous octopus trying to grab her with an arm—no, a leg?—its tentacle bouncing harmlessly off of her barrier. This creature must have been the one bouncing her around like a beach ball. She glanced toward land and found that she hadn’t moved that far yet.

It seemed a large octopus hiding near the shore had identified her as prey. At this rate, she’d be dragged out all the way into the water. She didn’t like attacking things, but in this case, it would be self-defense. Her thunderbolt was the first thing that came to mind, but if she aimed it at the water, it would shock any nearby Hunters too.

“I’ll just hit the octopus... Thunderbolt, go!”

She lined her sights up with the octopus as she bounced along and brought her thunderbolt down on it. With a *boom*, the octopus sank into the water before rising to the surface again, limp.

This wasn’t the end of Sara’s problems, however. She bounced once more on the octopus and then fell straight into the water. Of course, she was just floating on the surface thanks to her barrier, but how was she going to get back to the shore?

“Sara! I’m coming!”

Judging from how desperately Nelly was trying to get into the water to save her and how hard everyone around her was working to hold her back, Sara really needed to get back quickly. She knew she could expand and shrink her barrier when she needed to. She’d have to use that.

“Nelly! Catch me!”

“Sara! Got it!”

Nelly understood what she planned to do immediately, planting her feet where she was and lowering her hips. Floating on the water, Sara extended her barrier out to cover Nelly as well.

"Then I'll shrink it around Nelly..."

There was a commotion on the beach as Sara slid over the waves into Nelly's waiting arms.

"That was scary..."

"There, there. You did good."

With Nelly's warmth beside her, she finally calmed down, anger and horror welling up in her at the same time. Why did she almost get abducted by an octopus just from walking along the beach? Sara pulled her face away from Nelly's chest and glared at the offending octopus. Of course, the octopus was unconscious and couldn't respond, so there was no point in making her anger known to it.

"I guess I'll bring it over here." She could use the same technique she'd just applied to herself. She really didn't want to, but she extended her barrier out to it and let the octopus inside, shrinking it around herself to pull the octopus toward shore.

"There we go. Oh, it's still alive."

Moving it must have woken it up.

"How dare you try to steal my Sara!" Nelly leaped up and brought her fist down on the octopus's head. The enormous octopus trembled a few times before it stopped moving.

"The ocean's scary," Sara said.

"I couldn't agree more," Nelly replied.

Allen just gave them an exasperated look. "I'm sure everyone around here is thinking you two are scarier."

Who knew if that was true, but the Hunters around them at least thanked Sara and Nelly profusely for taking the octopus down.

"If you two hadn't dealt with it, it might have gotten the kids collecting shellfish over there."

It had gone after Sara instead, so she wasn't sure how she felt about that. Additionally, the octopus Sara and Nelly had taken down was in fact not an octopus but a kraken.

"So this is what we just ate."

Sara wasn't sure how she felt about that either, but she did feel some relief if it was food that they'd ended up hunting.

"This is weird, though." One of the Hunters cocked his head, looking down at the kraken. "Krakens are normally very cautious despite their size. They hardly ever come out into water this shallow. We just happened to snag one in a net the other day, but that only happens a few times a year, maybe. It's really rare for a big one like this to attack someone on the beach."

So that was why children were theoretically safe earning some spending money just a short distance away from the beach. Sara was wondering why they were hanging out somewhere so dangerous. But if it was supposed to be safe, then why did Sara have to get attacked?

"Big animals really do love you, Sara."

"They don't love me. It's a coincidence." It was a lame excuse, but it was all she could offer.

"Hey, Sara, now that the kraken's gone, I wanna try that out."

Sara looked at Allen like she couldn't believe what she was hearing. It wasn't "gone." Sara had put her life on the line to eliminate it! Didn't he think she deserved a little rest after that?

Allen was looking at the kids digging up shellfish. "You really think there's shellfish you can just dig up in the sand?"

"Well, sure I do." Sara had been clam digging before, so it wasn't a particularly strange idea to her.

"Ha ha, you wanna dig for shellfish, eh? You're strong, but I guess you're still kids. Okay, I'll show you how to catch 'em."

"Really? Thanks!"

Somehow or another, an enthusiastic Hunter ended up teaching them.

"Look. The hole in the sand here is proof that there's a shellfish, so if you dig under it like this..." The Hunter thrust his spade deep into the sand, lifting up a shellfish about the size of a child's palm with the sand around it. "You'll only get twenty gil or so for each one you find, but you can earn yourself a nice snack if you get ten of 'em."

He tried to lend Allen his spade, but three hands reached out for it.

"You want to do it too?"

"As their guardian, I should get some experience doing it too," Nelly said, her eyes positively sparkling. As for Chris, he was dealing with the kraken's body like a proper guardian.

While the physical strengthening pair struggled with sticking their spades in so deep they couldn't pull them out again or accidentally splitting the shellfish in half, Sara steadily dug up one after another.

"Hm-hm-hmm," she hummed. "There we go."

They were big, so they piled up in no time. By the time Sara stood up with a full bucket, Allen and Nelly were finally starting to be able to catch them steadily. As she looked down at the tops of their heads as they fervently dug in the sand, an indescribable sense of amusement welled up in her.

"It's nice to take a trip, isn't it?"

The fact that she'd been attacked by a kraken had completely slipped Sara's mind at this point. Unfortunately, the shellfish they'd caught had to purge their sand for a day before they could be eaten, so they ended up selling them all off.

"Can you get these at food stands?"

"Yeah, you can get 'em anywhere. Don't be so down, Miss Hunter." The Hunter comforted Nelly, who must have really wanted to eat the shellfish she'd caught herself, with a laugh. "Man, you're good at hunting kraken *and* shellfish, little lady," he said to Sara.

"I'm not sure what the kraken has to do with it..." Sara muttered. They'd just happened

to hunt one, so she didn't want any weird rumors about them spreading. "How should I say this... I gather medicinal plants for my work, which is pretty much the same thing. As long as you pay attention, it's pretty easy to spot the holes where you'll find shellfish."

"Makes sense. Ocean monsters are a popular foodstuff, so we never have enough Hunters here. You'd be welcome on a hunt anytime, all of you."

Sara wanted to tell him she'd had enough of krakens, but she smiled awkwardly instead. She had no desire to be a Hunter, after all.

Luckily, they were able to sell the kraken for a tidy sum. There was even a special reward at the Hunter's Guild for it, so they got to stay at a fancy inn for free and try some of the local food that day.

"It's all stuff we weren't able to do in Camellia."

The inn rooms they were given were adjoining, with a shared living room between them. They could see the ocean from the terrace attached to the living room, where there was a big couch for them to lounge on. They had two bedrooms and a full bathroom. Chris and Allen were given a different room, so this one was girls only.

Sara and Nelly took a bath and freshened up, then they changed into the clothes they'd bought in Rosa to go out in and headed down to the restaurant on the first floor. Waiting there, Chris pulled out Nelly's chair when they arrived.

"You're even more beautiful than usual, Nef. But you could have worn the dress you had on in Zinnia."

"Shut up."

Nelly was the same as always, but she was beautiful and refined as she sat down in the chair.

As always, Chris acted like Sara didn't even exist, so Allen followed his example and pulled her chair out for her instead.

"Why do people do this, anyway? Isn't it faster to just sit on your own?" he asked her.

"Who knows? Thanks, though." Sara smiled, thinking it was just like him to ask

something like that.

“Sure. That yellow dress looks good on you.”

“Really? I’m glad to hear it.” Sara thanked him with a grin instead of telling him to shut up.

Once they were all seated, food was brought out to them dish by dish. Their appetizers were smoked oysters and some thin-sliced ham and pickles. Sara and Allen followed Chris and Nelly’s example, savoring the food slowly. The main dish was a soup filled with plenty of seafood.



"So these are the shellfish we gathered earlier. They're big."

"They're not as big as the ones *I* caught, but they're pretty nice."

Nelly ferried the shellfish to her mouth, looking satisfied. They were bigger than hard clams and packed full of meat, which Sara dug out with a knife and cut into bite-size pieces before eating. It was a little annoying, but kind of fun too. The flavor was rich and addicting.

The next dish brought out was a large platter, again with lots of seafood on it.

"It's paella! Rice!" Rice was, again, something she hadn't been able to eat in Camellia.

"It's cultivated near the town of Camellia," the server told them. So she really should have eaten it in Camellia. She at least wanted to get ahold of some to cook with herself.

"Can you buy it here?" Sara asked the server.

"Of course. We can have some delivered here as early as tomorrow morning if you like. After all, you *are* the Hunters who took down a kraken."

"*Ahem, ahem.*" Nelly cleared her throat to interrupt the server, who was giving Sara a wink.

"I'd prefer to pick some out myself."

"You can ask the front desk where to find the store tomorrow, then."

"Thank you."

The server left, giving Nelly an awkward smile. She was always too overprotective of Sara.

The first rice she'd had in a long while was different from Japanese rice, but it was so good Sara almost cried. Tomorrow, she'd buy herself some rice. And then... And *then...*

"What should we do next?"

"That's the whole fun of trips. What's next after Orlean?"

As Nelly tried to picture the map in her mind, Chris stared at her lovingly and Allen shoveled food into his mouth. It was a strange group they made, but this way was so much more fun than being all alone.

In her heart, Sara softly prayed, "Please let nothing happen in the next town."

CHARACTER DESIGN

Invited

Haruto

Bradley



Taking ^{My} Reincarnation One Step at a Time

No One Told Me
There Would Be Monsters!

3

KAYA
ILLUS. INARU

Taking ^{My} Reincarnation One Step at a Time

No One Told Me
There Would Be Monsters!

3

KAYA
ILLUS. INARU







There were the obligatory mountain wolves in the view, but looking out from the cottage, the verdant expanse before them was like a beautiful painting.

“We didn’t have any time to turn around when we were coming up here, but the view’s really incredible.”



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by KAYA

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