



Taking MY Reincarnation One Step at a TIME

No One Told Me
There Would Be Monsters!

4

KAYA
ILLUS. INARU

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

– Tensei Shoujo wa mazu Ippo kara Hajimetai –

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[J-NOVEL CLUB]

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Characters

Sara

Nelly

Chris



Caren

Kuntz

Allen

Riot

Thedias

She plucked the leaves from the stems and put them in the mortar, but she couldn't use too little or too much. She moved her hands at a careful, steady speed. Before she knew it, the herbs were looking good. They had a deep green color, like concentrated vegetable juice.

“There we go. Waugh!”

Sara stood up, satisfied with her work, and the apothecaries were all looking at her again. It scared her. She wished they'd stop.

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PROLOGUE

MONSTERS AREN'T THE ONLY DANGER AROUND

It had been three years now since Sara was reincarnated, and the season had turned to fall. It had been about a month since the group had left Camellia. They stopped at a town along the way and had a modest celebration for Sara and Allen turning thirteen, but besides that, their travels had been leisurely since their last adventure, with Sara picking medicinal plants just off the road as they went.

"It's wonderful not having any work to do." A short distance away from Sara, Chris, who was no longer associated with any particular Apothecary's Guild, stretched languidly. He then knelt down and began swiftly gathering plants.

"Is *that* not work?" Sara couldn't help asking. She paused her own gathering and stood up, looking out at the grass around them with her hands on her hips. She could see the small figures of Allen and Nelly in the distance. Allen was looking up at Nelly and saying something as Nelly gestured animatedly with her hands.

Sara looked in the direction the two of them were facing and saw something fluttering in the air. She cocked her head, not sure what it was. They looked like butterflies, but if she could see them from this far away, they must have been a lot bigger than that.

"Are those bats?" She'd seen large bats on the lower part of the Dark Mountain.

"Oh, those are seven-colored swallowtails. It's rare to see them out in a field like this. They're pretty, but their only value is in their magic stones, I'm afraid." Chris answered Sara's question. He must have been looking in the same direction.

"Swallowtails? They're monsters?"

"Indeed. Are swallowtails smaller where you come from? You said the same of the bog frogs as well, I believe."

"Yes. Even the big ones were smaller than one of my hands." The hand Sara held up

was slightly smaller than an adult's, but she still thought that was an accurate description.

"That really *is* small," Chris said with some surprise.

Sara was relieved she'd asked. After the frogs, she'd had more than enough of being shocked at seeing monsters up close.

The butterflies fluttering through the air weren't the best targets to fight with physical strengthening, so Allen's fists had been whiffing ineffectually through the air for some time now. He was starting to look pretty frustrated.

"It looks like Allen is saying, 'You're my mentor. You show me how to beat them.'"

"I see Nef saying, 'I see your point.' She should have realized sooner, but that's my Nef for you."

Even from a distance, the two of them could tell exactly what the pair were saying.

Sara nodded in agreement. "Yep, that's Nelly."

The woman in question raised her fists nonchalantly and lowered her hips, swinging one of those fists in a swift motion. A seven-colored swallowtail a short distance away suddenly lurched as if struck by something, falling to the ground a second later.

"Wow, she defeated it with wind pressure. Hmm, no matter how skilled she is with physical strengthening, is that even possible?"

Chris's question was reasonable.

"That's an application of my barrier. I think she said something about stretching her physical strengthening out from her." Sara had seen Nelly do the same thing before, so she had some idea of what it was she was doing.

"How is Allen supposed to imitate that? She should start by teaching him something easier," Chris said pityingly.

Sara looked away, thinking something about how people really couldn't see themselves. After all, it was Chris who had started off teaching Sara by telling her to taste test antidotes. He'd said one drop wouldn't hurt her, but Sara was fairly certain

that wasn't the first lesson for most apothecaries.

"No, wait. I stand corrected."

Sara looked over to see a swallowtail falling to the ground in front of Allen. They were heavier than they looked, she noted.

"That one was flying very close to Allen, so his fist could have connected to it directly, but I still saw some gap between them. Has he really already figured out how to do it?"

Allen picked up the fallen butterfly and ran straight toward Sara without even sparing a moment to collect its magic stone.

"Sara! I did it!"

"Waaah! That butterfly's way too big!"

With the swallowtail's rainbow-patterned black wings, it almost looked like Allen was holding a peacock.

"I tried stretching my physical strengthening out in front of me. I've seen you use your barrier from up close a lot, Sara. H-Huh?" Allen suddenly stumbled, still holding the butterfly.

"Is that...? Allen, drop the swallowtail, right now." Chris's arms wrapped around Sara at the same time, pulling her several steps back.

Allen opened his arms obediently, and the butterfly hit the ground with a *thud*. When it did, Sara saw glittering scales flutter into the air. Allen dropped to a sitting position on the ground at the same time.

"Pretty..."

"This is no time to be admiring the sights. It's a paralysis poison."

Before Sara could comprehend what that meant, Chris set her down and went around behind Allen, dragging him away from the seven-colored swallowtail.

"Sara, can you wash the scales off of Allen with warm water?"

"Y-Yes."

Finally comprehending the situation, Sara took a wide berth around the seven-colored swallowtail and hurried to Chris and Allen's side. Colorful scales dotted Allen's hands and clothes all over.

"Make a shower of warm water..." Sara produced a jet of water from her hand and scrubbed the scales off of Allen through her barrier.

"Sara! Don't touch them directly!"

"It's okay. I'm using my barrier, so it's like I'm wearing gloves."

"Hmm. Is that right?"

Though his tone was scolding, Sara understood that Chris was worried about her, which made her at least a little bit happy. After she removed the scales from Allen, Chris fed him a little sip of an antiparalytic and watched to see if his condition improved.

Allen just sat there numbly for a while, but he recovered quickly. Nelly had wandered over looking concerned at some point as well.

"What about you, Nelly? Are you okay?" Sara asked worriedly. Nelly had been punching the butterflies as well.

"Yeah, I'm not some chump who'd be taken out by scales." Well, the sentiment was a bit cruel to Allen, but at least Sara didn't have to be worried about Nelly anymore.

"That's right. Nef should be fine." Chris tended to lose his mind when it came to Nelly, but the two of them had a strong belief in one another's abilities, which was pretty nice.

"But I've never heard of these guys having paralysis poison out in a field like this. Maybe just a single one in a dungeon, but... If I'd known, I wouldn't have let Allen do that."

Chris nodded. "That's not surprising. It rings a bell for me, though. I believe there's a type of moonlight mushroom, white moonlight mushrooms, that have poison, and if the swallowtails feed on those mushrooms' nectar, their scales will take on the

paralysis poison. But white moonlight mushrooms typically sprout closer to winter, so how did this happen?"

Chris looked up at the sky, where several swallowtails still fluttered about gracefully. "A few of those probably have this same poison. We have no responsibility to hunt them, but is there another town between here and Hydrangea?"

"Yeah, it's at the base of that hill over there. Not sure if it's big enough to really call it a town, but I was thinking we could stay there tonight if they've got an inn. Should we do it?"

Nelly headed for the meadow without hesitation. She must have wanted to prevent any harm from coming to the people of the nearby village. Sara felt reassured to have adults around who not only could communicate such things without speaking but also moved to take action right away. She'd really come to see Chris and Nelly in a new light during this trip.

"Achoo!"

"Allen!" This was no time to be impressed with her traveling companions. Though the water she'd sprayed Allen with was warm, it was still fall.

"It's fine. I can move now. I'll change my clothes." Allen stood up a little wobbly and started to change, so Sara hurriedly turned around.

"Hey, there are ladies present," Chris said to him.

"Sorry. I'll just be a second."

Sara was tickled by the exchange. While she had her back turned, she pondered magic. Her textbook told her that magic did whatever you could imagine, but the imagining part was harder than it sounded. She wished she could just dry Allen's clothes while he was still wearing them, but though she could imagine water heating up and evaporating, she couldn't figure out how to pull the moisture from the clothes, so she didn't know how to dry them.

"I guess magic isn't all-powerful after all, is it?"

"What was that, Sara?" Allen asked.

“Nothing. Are you feeling better?”

“Yeah, I’m good now. That was really dumb of me though, huh?”

Allen’s ability to reflect on his mistakes was one of his good points. He grumbled pathetically as he moved his body experimentally, now in dry clothes.

“And just when I thought I’d gotten that thing with your barrier figured out too. I did it though, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you took it down without touching it. The problem is you touched it all over the place after that.”

Allen slumped his shoulders at Chris’s remonstration, but Sara thought it was pretty amazing for a Hunter who specialized in physical strengthening to be able to take down monsters without touching them.

“Nelly said that was breaking the rules, though. That to be a proper Hunter I have to be able to hit things that fly in the air too. She says you have to stop just before hitting them, but it’s pretty hard to do.”

True, when she was hunting the seven-colored swallowtails, Nelly had looked like she was taking them down with very light taps of her fist. She must have been showing him how it was done earlier.

“You say the basics are important, but you kinda suck at teaching them, Nelly,” Allen told her.

“I’m supposed to be the mentor here, but you’re way more strict,” she replied, chagrined.

In a sense, Nelly was Sara’s mentor too, so Sara understood what Allen meant very well. Still, as Nelly went and hunted down every seven-colored swallowtail in the area, Sara and Allen both had to admit that they respected her.

“Guess we’ll keep on to the next town, and hunt any swallowtails we come across along the way?”

“Yeah. The next town was...”

"That would be Stock. I believe various nuts and mushrooms are in season there now."

"Mushrooms... That's not good."

In an area where mushrooms were cultivated for food, the locals wouldn't be in danger of mistakenly eating something poisonous, but the seven-colored swallowtails had also had a paralysis poison they weren't supposed to possess.

"Guess we should hurry."

"Right."

They wrapped up their hunting for the day early and hurried on to the next town of Stock.

At some point, the road exited the meadow, trailing forward between a small mountain range on one side and a river on the other. Vibrant fall colors surrounded them. Fall on the Dark Mountain was beautiful, but this place was just as pretty, Sara thought as she walked along.

The path opened up before them and they could see Stock in the distance. The white walls and orange roofs of the buildings looked like something out of a painting. But when they finally arrived, the stores that should have been displaying products for sale on the main street were closed, and all the people outside were rushing about hurriedly.

"What's..."

Before they could even stop someone to ask what had happened, they heard a cry from deeper into the town. Several people were running toward them, seven-colored swallowtails fluttering after them as if in pursuit.

"They're not supposed to attack people, so I guess they just wandered into town..."

The buildings were in the way, so instead of leaving, they were forced to flutter around the streets. If they just flew above the roofs, they could leave the town easily, but Sara supposed monsters couldn't be expected to make such judgments.

"They're large monsters, so I suppose I understand people running from them, but for the town to be in such a panic... the seven-colored swallowtails around here really must all have a paralysis poison."

Sara looked up at Nelly with admiration as she rattled off this precise analysis. "First-class Hunters really know their stuff, huh?" she remarked.

"Hardly. This is basic stuff."

Sara thought Nelly was cool even when she was embarrassed.

Her admiration was cut short by a cry from a townsperson, however. "Are you travelers?! Hurry, run! Those butterflies are poisonous!"

It was kind of him to warn them. Nelly, of course, simply strode through the fleeing townspeople and batted down the fluttering swallowtails one by one.

"Who *is* that...?"

The people stopped and murmured amongst themselves as Nelly shook the scales from her fist.

Chris strode over to her and quietly raised his hand. "I'm a traveling apothecary. Is there anything I can do to help here?"

A moment later, he was surrounded. It turned out Chris and Nelly's theories out in the meadow had been correct. From what the crowd said, people had started developing symptoms of paralysis a few days earlier. It quickly became apparent that it was people gathering mushrooms and eating them who were getting sick.

"But everyone eats mushrooms here. We all know which ones are poisonous and no one eats those. We don't know what's causing this and drinking potions doesn't help. And there are hardly any high potions for sale."

It seemed Nelly wasn't the only one who figured you could cure most things just by drinking a potion.

"That was when those monster swallowtails started to show up, and the people who tried to chase them off with sticks inhaled some sort of powder that paralyzed them too. That must be what's causing it, right?" The man acting as the group's

representative timidly pointed at the seven-colored swallowtails at Nelly's feet. "Is your pretty friend going to be okay? You're not feeling wobbly, are you, miss?"

Nelly realized the man was talking to her and raised a hand to show that she was fine. The gesture was so cool that Sara couldn't help sighing in awe.

Listening quietly to everything the man had to say, Chris raised his hand again. The buzz of the crowd around him subsided. "The cause is likely white moonlight mushrooms. The symptoms are paralysis, and potions and high potions don't work. What you need is antiparalytics. I have some with me. You'll be affected if you inhale the powder that falls from the seven-colored swallowtails' wings, so all you have to do is avoid them."

The people around him absorbed the information as he rattled it off.

"I'll visit anyone who's particularly affected. Can you gather anyone who's able to move in one place? Is there somewhere we can use for such a purpose?"

"The mayor's house."

The mayor was a little more friendly here than in Rosa, perhaps because it was a smaller town.

"I'll carry anyone who can't move," Nelly said, and Allen stood next to her with his own chest thrust out proudly too.

The townspeople were rather dubious about these claims coming from a woman and a child, so Nelly strode over to Chris and put her arm around his waist, lifting him up with one hand. Chris merely maintained his neutral expression.

The sight of a slender woman easily lifting a man with one arm and the man looking like this was only natural was pretty cool. *And* they were both good-looking.

Sara tried to burn the sight of them into her eyes, but it turned out she shouldn't have let her guard down. All of a sudden, Allen was right next to her, putting an arm around her waist and lifting her up too.

"Gah—!"

Not even she was sure what she was trying to say, but she realized if she made a scene,

Nelly and Allen's effort would be for nothing, so she did her best to remain calm. She might have made a bit of a weird face anyway, but she could hardly be blamed for that, could she?

"These two are Hunters who specialize in physical strengthening. Allow them to assist you in any way you need," Chris said, and the townspeople finally understood. He'd won them over in such a short time. Sara was deeply impressed. She was starting to understand how he ended up with lackeys like Ted.

"Nef picked me up... what a blessed day!" Chris said to himself. Sara just pretended she hadn't heard that. She wasn't particularly glad to be picked up, personally. All she felt from the experience was embarrassment.

"I'll head to the mayor's house and help out with getting everything ready," she suggested.

"Mm. I would appreciate that."

Sara wasn't an apothecary herself yet, but she'd seen Chris and Ted treat plenty of people suffering from poison, so she figured she could at least prep the space for him.

"We won't need to wash anyone off since the issue isn't caused by skin contact this time."

"Got it."

She wouldn't need to prepare anything for that, then. Just having places to sit and lie down should be fine, since there were people suffering from different degrees of paralysis.

"Could you all assist us in getting where we need to go?"

At Chris's suggestion, the townspeople all began guiding them, but the mayor's house, where Sara was headed, was just nearby. Before the person who had shown her there could knock on the door, it opened and someone came out from inside.

"Oh, Morgan. I thought it was rather noisy outside," said the person.

The person who had shown Sara there was named Morgan, apparently.

"Yes. A bunch of big swallowtails got into town and then a traveling apothecary and his party arrived and defeated them." Morgan indicated Sara, who was very amused at the way her group had been described. "The apothecary wanted a spacious place to examine the people who have been getting sick recently, so do you mind if we use your entrance hall, Mayor?"

"Is the little one the apothecary?" The mayor was giving her a rather dubious look, so Sara hurried to introduce herself.

"My name is Sara. I'm an apprentice apothecary." She wasn't really, but the only thing she had to prove her identity was her Hunter license. She'd decided to introduce herself this way since they'd been introduced as a traveling apothecary and company. "The apothecary is my master, Chris. He was guildmaster of the Apothecary's Guild in Rosa until recently." As a child, she would have to borrow the authority of Chris, the adult.

"Master Chris from Rosa... I've heard nothing but good things."

"Rosa. Chris?" A low, masculine voice suddenly came from behind the mayor. The individual, who'd been quietly listening in, startled Sara. Her mouth fell open as he stepped into view.

"Nelly...?"

The man had Nelly's same thick red hair, tied in a low ponytail behind his head. He had the same green eyes as well. He looked about the same age as Rosa's guildmaster.

"Nelly? Err, my name is Thedias. I run the Hunter's Guild around here."

She was a bit curious why he hadn't called himself "guildmaster," but it was hardly the time to worry about that.

"It's nice to meet you. Do you mind if we use the space?" She was curious, but she had to ready the space for Chris's patients first.

"Of course. Come in. What do you want to do, Thedias?"

"I'll go get a look at those 'big' swallowtails."

Of course the Hunter guy was interested in the monsters.

"There's one on the street outside. Be careful. The scales have a paralytic poison."

The red-haired Thedias raised his eyebrows with concern, but nodded wordlessly and stepped outside. But it was no time to sit there watching him as though she hadn't a care in the world. Sara hurried to confirm the information she needed.

"How many people are there who are doing badly, do you think? I'd like enough room for them to lie down, so we'll need enough floor space for them all."

"At least a few dozen. Should we move the furniture to the sides of the hall?"

"That would help."

Sara thought back to the knights in Rosa and the Hunters in the Apothecary's Guild in Camellia. There would likely be even more people to tend to this time, so she wanted to divide those with worse symptoms from those with milder ones for the ease of Chris's work.

"If we can set up chairs and couches on this side where people can sit, and something people can lie down on in this more open area, that would be good..."

Under Sara's direction, the hall was quickly cleared. As they worked, people suffering from paralysis started being brought in one by one. Some were carried by Nelly and Allen, but most were walking slowly with someone else's assistance. It was a bit strange to see people who weren't elderly moving like that, which was just another reminder of the unusual situation the town was in.

Sara felt a little awkward asking people to lie down on the floor after bringing them all the way here, but there wasn't much else she could do. She had the people with lighter symptoms sit and those more heavily affected lie down.

There must not have been many people who were so affected as to be bedridden, because Chris returned quickly. He took a look around the room, nodded, and started confirming the severity of each patient's symptoms.

Once he'd examined them all, he instructed Sara, "The ten seated individuals need only a small amount of an antiparalytic. Sara, borrow some cups and portion out one antiparalytic into ten parts, giving each individual a cup. You'll make sure they drink it."

"M-Me? But..." Sara had thought her work was over. She looked nervously over at the people in the chairs, but naturally they were only looking at her more nervously. It was only reasonable to be concerned over a child Sara's age treating them even if they had heard she was an apprentice apothecary.

She looked over at the other adult in the room, but Nelly only shook her head. If she were any good at delicate work like this, then the mountain cottage wouldn't have been so disgusting when Sara had first arrived.

She wiped the nervous look off of her face and took out an antiparalytic from her bag. "Excuse me, Mayor, can you bring me ten cups? Of the same size, if possible."

"Got it."

The mayor, who had just been hovering, not sure what to do, went and fetched the cups quickly, and Sara started portioning out the small bottle into ten servings. She had done the bottling herself, so she was more or less aware of how much liquid made up each antiparalytic.

She handed the first cup to her first patient, supporting the individual's trembling hands. The patient seemed hesitant to actually drink the liquid but eventually gave in under Sara's quiet stare. Sara made sure the cup was empty before moving on.

She wasn't sure how exactly it worked, but potions healed wounds instantly when poured on them and, though it took a little more time, they worked pretty quickly when they were imbibed as well. Antiparalytics were no different, and the first patient made a swift recovery. Sara let go once the individual's hands were no longer shaking.

"Oh! I can hold the cup just fine!" they exclaimed. The instructions had come from Chris, so Sara was sure the patient would be cured, but she was relieved to hear it anyway. "Thanks, kid!"

It was gratifying to watch the individual's eyes go from uncertainty to surprise to joy and trust. But she could enjoy herself later. Sara focused and handed the next cup to the next person.

While Sara was treating the patients with lighter symptoms, Chris steadily worked on the people who were more seriously affected.

Sara heard shouts of "Oh! It's a miracle!" and "Thank you so much!" behind her. Cries

of joy came from not just the patients themselves but from their family members who had helped them here as well. Sara continued the relatively simple work of helping her own patients drink from their cups as she listened to them.

“Good work,” Chris told her when her final patient had been cured.

She turned around and found hardly anyone still lying down in the room and smiles all around. In the time it had taken Sara to cure the ten people she was in charge of, Chris had treated all twenty or so with heavier symptoms.

“It went quicker thanks to you,” he added.

“Thanks.” Sara had only helped a few people drink some medicine, but she was still grateful for the praise, and exhausted too. No one was on death’s door this time, but she was still surprised how tiring it was dealing with potentially fatal ailments.

Chris, of course, looked like he hadn’t expended any effort at all. “We’ll stay for a few days. Please bring anyone who hasn’t recovered by tomorrow to me again. Everyone, you’re dismissed.”

“Dismissed?” Like they were having a meeting or something? The odd wording lightened Sara’s mood considerably.

“Thanks for your help too, little one.”

“Oh, I didn’t do much...” Sara was finally able to enjoy the compliment now that it was all over.

“Never thought Master Chris from Rosa would show up to help at a time like this,” the mayor said with a relieved smile.

“The title isn’t necessary. I’m merely the traveling apothecary Chris, unaffiliated with any particular guild at the moment.”

Sara might have been the only one who’d noticed that Chris had enjoyed being called a traveling apothecary earlier.

“We can work out your payment later. For now, please allow me to set you up with some lodgings. You must be tired, handling all this the moment you arrived in town. The little apothecary too.”

Sara shrunk at that, since she wasn't even really an apprentice apothecary. At that moment, the door opened and the man who'd called himself Thedias strode in without warning, holding a handful of white mushrooms.

"Mayor, another butterfly was coming down from the mountains, so I chased it off and went after it. I found a bunch of 'em swarming around mushrooms like this."

"They're a little big, but they're oyster mushrooms, aren't they? There's plenty of them in this season and they're tasty, but I didn't think the swallowtails ate them."

Chris stepped between the two of them, his eyes glued to the mushrooms. "Thedias, let me see those."

"Chris. So it *is* you."

Sara was surprised to see that the two of them knew each other. They didn't seem all that close, though. If anything, she sensed some sort of tension between them. She glanced over at Nelly, who was leaning against the wall with Allen, to find her opening and closing her mouth like a fish.

"Nelly?"

Before Sara could ask her what was up, Chris took one of the mushrooms and set it on the floor, swiftly splitting it in two.

"Mm. They look like oyster mushrooms on the outside, but they're actually early winter mushrooms. You can tell the difference between them when you split them like this. These have more moisture, and insects are fond of them."

Chris scooped up a bit of liquid from the mushroom with his little finger and licked it. He closed his eyes and focused on the flavor before taking out a scrap of paper and spitting into it.

"Sara, put a bit of it in your mouth but don't swallow, and see what happens."

"Ugh... okay."

Part of her wanted to ask why she had to do it, but she had to admit she was curious. Sara knelt down next to Chris and took a pinky-full of moisture from the mushroom like Chris had, bringing it to her mouth.

"It's sweet." A faint sweetness spread over the tip of Sara's tongue. The flavor faded, and then her tongue started tingling. Chris handed her a scrap of paper when Sara grimaced, so she spit the liquid out.

"You don't notice it at first because it tastes sweet, but as it mixes with some element of your saliva, it becomes a paralytic poison. These are white moonlight mushrooms."

"White moonlight mushrooms... They do look like oyster mushrooms, but they're supposed to grow in a completely different season."

"They must have popped up unusually early for some reason. But there *is* a way to tell them apart."

The mayor thought for a moment before saying, "Nighttime..."

"That's right. White moonlight mushrooms are luminescent at night. They should continue to emit light for two or three days after they're picked, or you could simply advise people to go picking at night."

Chris seemed satisfied at that point. He stood and glanced Sara's way before walking away. This was his way of telling her to follow. It was rather demanding of him, but it was progress for Chris, since he hadn't even acknowledged Sara's existence until recently.

"You must be tired, Nef. Let's take the mayor up on that offer for lodging."

"Did you say Nef?!" Thedias shouted, turning toward Chris.

"L-Long time no see, brother." Nelly raised a hand and gave a hesitant greeting.

"Brother'? Nelly?"

Needless to say, what followed was quite the spectacle.



CHAPTER 1

THE MUSHROOM VILLAGE

Sara found Thedias, the man Nelly had called “brother,” a little scary. He was about the same height as Chris, but a lot broader on account of all the muscles, and Sara didn’t really want to be anywhere near a person like that when they were so clearly agitated.

“What are you doing here, Neffie? And with this smart-mouthed apothecary too.”

Sara could swear she saw Chris’s face twitch at that, but maybe it was just her imagination.

“I wrote in my last letter that I would be visiting Hydrangea soon regarding the official guardianship of an Invited, did I not, Thed?”

“Well, where is this Invited? And you never said you’d have three hangers-on with you! Or that one of them would be *him*!”

Sara exchanged a glance with Allen as Thed thrust his finger out at Chris. It made sense that she wouldn’t have mentioned Chris, since he had just kind of tagged along with them when they left Rosa, but what had she written to make the man question even Sara’s and Allen’s existence? Well, Sara had an idea about herself, at least...

“You wrote that the Invited was a beautiful, delicate girl with not a soul in the world to rely on who might be blown away like a leaf on the wind. Well, what did you do with her? Was she so weak she couldn’t even make the journey?”

“Ugh!” With a strange grunt, Allen hunched over. Sara went the other way, bending her neck to stare up at the ceiling. It was exactly what she thought.

“Are you blind, brother? She’s right there.”

“‘There’? ‘There’ where?” Thed’s eyes swept over Sara and then returned to her a moment later. “Surely you don’t mean...?”

Sara gave him an awkward grin and a quick bow. A “Sorry about her,” was implied, as

well as, "She's a little crazy about me."

"What? This hypercompetent whiz kid? Err, I'm sorry." Thed suddenly apologized to Sara, face serious. He must have thought he was being rude. "You don't look like the wind would blow you away, but you *are* a beautiful girl, that much is true."

"Isn't she? That's my Sara," Nelly said proudly.

"I still have questions, though. Wasn't the Invited's name supposed to be Ichinok Rasarasa?"

We're still stringing that gag along, are we? Sara thought with a faraway look in her eyes.

"It's Ichinokura Sarasa." She introduced herself again. "Sara for short. Nelly's been taking care of me ever since I landed on the Dark Mountain."

"So your name's Sarasa..." Allen said with some surprise.

It was a bit strange that he'd been with her all this time and still didn't know, but she didn't hear people using family names much in this world, and no one had ever asked her about it. She didn't even know Ted's or Rosa's guildmaster's surnames, and they were some of the more important people she knew.

That was when she realized she didn't even know *Nelly's* last name.

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Thedias Wolverié. The older brother of Nefertari over there. I run the Hunter's Guild around here."

Wolverié. Sara's head swam. She'd finally learned Nelly's surname. Also, the man in front of her was Nelly's older brother. She'd always assumed she would meet Nelly's family at some point, but she wasn't actually ready for it yet.

You could've asked anytime, Sara! What's wrong with you?! She ground her teeth at her own carelessness.

Chris stepped forward then. "And *my* name is Christian Deltmont. I'm the third son of Count Deltmont. I figured you should know your master's name, Sarasa."

Was he competing with the other guy or something? Sara was surprised by Chris's

introduction, though. So he really *was* a noble.

"You can just call me Sara, really." She was so surprised, that was the only comment she could muster.

The situation was chaotic enough as far as Sara was concerned, yet there Allen was, stepping forward himself.

"I'm Allen, a Hunter. Nelly's my mentor and Sara's my hunting buddy. Chris is a traveling companion."

He introduced himself with his head held high. Sara admired his confidence, but she wished he wouldn't call her his "hunting buddy."

Thed looked between Allen and Sara. "When you say 'Nelly,' you mean Neffie, my sister?"

"That's right," Allen said. Sara nodded.

"And Allen, you said you're Neffie's student?"

"Yep." Allen held his head up even higher. Sara was getting a bad feeling about this.

"Step outside, then. I'll see what you're capable of."

She had seen this coming from a mile away. The only reason Thed hadn't just brought his sword down on the kid without warning was probably because they were inside. Sara was starting to feel like she could guess what Nelly's brother would do next.

"Sure," Allen said fearlessly, strolling outside behind Thed.

"Do we really need to do this right now?" Sara muttered to herself. Either no one heard her or no one *cared* to hear her, as they all ended up streaming out of the mayor's house.

"From the look of you, I'd say you're the physical strengthening type. Show me if you can withstand my fist, then."

At least he wasn't the "strike first, ask questions later" type like Nelly was.

"Ready when you are."

Allen lowered his stance and Thed did the same. Sara couldn't really tell what happened next. Some kind of blobs of color shot back and forth in front of her eyes with sounds like *whoosh* and *whap*, and then Allen and Thed returned to their original positions.

Thed narrowed his eyes and asked Allen, "What was that you did just now?"

"Like I'm just gonna tell you," Allen replied boldly.

"Oh? Well then..."

Sara was at the end of her rope. She clapped her hands together loudly. "Okay, wrap it up. Allen, you're over here, and you stay over there, Mr. Thed." She extended her barrier out between them, pushing them away from one another.

"Wh-What's going on?"

"Nothing's going on. That's the whole point." Sara put her hands on her hips and glared at Thed. "It's the mushrooms and swallowtails we need to be worrying about right now. And why are you concerned about Allen's skills? Shouldn't you be concentrating on enjoying your reunion with Nelly?"

Nelly also seemed more confused than emotional, but her brother's attitude just didn't sit right with Sara. Maybe he was just concerned about the people around Nelly *because* she was important to him, but wasn't there something he should be doing before all this?

Averting her eyes, Nelly said quietly, "It's been a long time, brother. I'm... happy to see you."

"Oh, Neffie!" Thed's voice trembled, Sara assumed with emotion. A second later, he was in front of Nelly, wrapping his arms around her. "I know you're strong, but you didn't get picked on, did you? If you'd just stayed with your brothers, we could have protected you!"

"Hey, that's too much! You're going to crush me! And you know I can handle myself anywhere..."

Sara wondered just how strong Thed was if *Nelly* was worried about being crushed in his arms. It looked like she was just being bashful since they hadn't seen each other in a long time and they didn't seem to be on bad terms or anything, which made Sara feel a lot better.

Standing next to one another like that, their identical red hair and green eyes really made them look like family. Sara thought about her own older brother for the first time in a while and felt a bit sad. Her worrywart brother didn't look a thing like her in her mind, but maybe when other people looked at them, they saw something like Nelly and Thed. Even though they were apart now, Sara was sure her brother was doing fine back in Japan.

"I wasn't alone anyway. I had Chris in Rosa and Sara on the Dark Mountain."

"Nef!" It was Chris who reacted to Nelly's muttering with a show of emotion.

"What use is a spindly guy like him anyway?"

"You want to see just how spindly I am?"

"Oh yeah? You wanna go?"

"Okay, okay. Do I need to repeat myself?" Sara clapped her hands again, figuring *someone* around here needed to think with their brain and not their muscles. She was a bit surprised, since she'd thought Chris was a more rational person. But surprised or not, emotional reunion or not, they needed to decide on their next course of action.

"Nelly, Chris. I assume we're just staying here for three days or so to see if everyone recovers from their paralysis?"

"That should be good. I'll be able to examine anyone who happens to eat a white moonlight mushroom today by mistake if we stay that long," said Chris.

"Sounds good to me too. I'll help with whatever, like I did today."

The pair were in agreement. Nodding in satisfaction at the news that Nelly would be staying for a few more days, Thed turned to the mayor.

"I can hunt any swallowtails I come across, but what should we do about the mushrooms?"

"I'll spread word of their characteristics and make sure people don't pick and eat them, but what should we do with the ones growing out there right now...?"

Even if they picked them and got rid of them, new ones would just grow back. The mayor was likely worried such an endeavor would be pointless.

"It would be best to make sure the mushrooms don't get too large, so that the seven-colored swallowtails don't develop the paralysis poison. I would suggest disposing of the mushrooms every few days."

With Chris's advice, plans were made to go mushroom hunting that night. Chris would participate as an apothecary and Nelly as a Hunter. When he learned of this, Allen barged into Sara and Nelly's room at the inn.

"I'm coming too," he insisted, but Nelly shot him down.

"I didn't agree to teach you night-hunting. I doubt there'll be any trouble, but it'll distract me to have people around I have to look out for."

"You don't have to look out for me, though," Allen said with frustration.

Sara felt the same way. "I'll come too."

"No. Chris is the only apothecary we need. Why would you come along, Sara?"

"Well, 'cause..." There really was no particular need for Sara to go along. There was no role for her to play in the hunt. But Sara had her own reasons for wanting to go. "Cause I want to see glowing mushrooms..."

That was all it was, but it was very important to Sara.

"You want to *see the mushrooms...*?" Nelly asked in disbelief.

There *had* been mushrooms on the Dark Mountain too, but Sara hadn't spared them so much as a glance since she hadn't considered them food. And she'd never imagined there might be glowing mushrooms.

To make matters worse, since Sara hadn't been very mobile in Japan, she'd never even seen mushrooms growing anywhere, let alone gone somewhere to pick them.

"They're mushrooms! And they glow! We have to see that! Right, Allen?"

"R-Right." Evidently, Allen wasn't all that interested in the mushrooms. But Sara had passed the baton to him, so she was hoping he wouldn't fumble it. Sara jabbed him with her elbow and he finally realized that she was trying to give him an assist. He set about persuading Nelly. "I don't want to do anything dangerous. I just want to learn what Hunters should do on a night hunt or when they're guarding folks. I just want to watch. And if Sara wants to go see the mushrooms, I'll stay by her side and protect her. Come on, let us come too, will you?"

Sara wanted to see the mushrooms, so if Allen could use her as an excuse to come along himself, then that was fine with her. She nodded and stood next to Allen in solidarity.

With the two of them standing there, their fists raised in determination, Nelly couldn't seem to maintain her stoic expression. She cracked a smile and said, "The most dangerous thing at night is straying from the group. Stick with us and don't wander off. Don't do anything unnecessary. Just keep to yourselves and watch. If you agree to that, you can come."

"Yes!"

"Thanks, Nelly!" Sara wrapped her arms around Nelly and Nelly gave her a pat on the back. "Eh heh."

Sara would guess that Nelly was just as happy as she was.

Nelly's brother had been leaning against the wall watching this whole exchange, but he suddenly straightened up as if he'd thought of something.

"Come to think of it, Neffie. I know the *Invited* are supposed to have a ton of mana, but that student of yours is the same way, isn't he? I mean, it makes sense that he would, if you've taken him on as a student, but neither of these two look like they're bothered by your pressure at all. No, wait a second..."

Thed put a finger to his temple like he was trying to remember something. "You were there with everyone else in the mayor's mansion, but nobody was avoiding you at all. I mean, even I was thinking, 'How did I not notice my adorable little sister?' but, could it be...?" He looked up, shocked. "Your pressure is gone?"

"You can tell?" Nelly smiled bashfully, but Thed just rushed over to her and started patting her all over the place, a panicked look on his face.

"Did you lose your mana? Is that why you left Rosa?"

"That's not it at all," Nelly said with a wry grin. "I've just learned how to control it lately. See?"

Nelly dropped her concentration and released the full might of her mana. Even Allen had to take a step back from her, so it must have been really something else. But Thed stayed right where he was. Sara was thoroughly impressed. He was Nelly's family after all.

"There's my Neffie. That's what was missing."

Nelly drew the pressure back into herself. "There are people like Chris who can control their mana like this. Sara scolded me for slacking just because it's hard to do, so I'm putting in some effort these days."

"We probably should have been the ones to tell you that, instead of the kid. Everyone just lets their mana go completely at home, so maybe we didn't think about it much, but we're all able to control it outside of the house."

Nelly looked away awkwardly. She wasn't very good at talking to people, so she tended to just avoid them instead of putting in the effort to communicate. Sara could guess that was largely why she'd become so isolated.

Still, that didn't mean she forgave the people who'd allowed it to happen. The people who thought it was only natural for her to be up on the Dark Mountain toiling on her own and who had made it difficult for her to leave there. And the knights of the capital, who felt entitled to her strength when it suited them.

Sara planned to prevent Nelly from ever being taken advantage of like that again as long as she was around. Renewing her determination quietly, Sara listened as Nelly changed the subject.

"Well, anyway, it's surprisingly not that hard when you put some effort in. Now I can go shopping with Sara and eat at food stands in town." Nelly met Sara's eyes and smiled. Sara grinned back.

"We should go out to eat with Kelsey when you get to Hydrangea, then."

"With Kelsey? What about the kids?"

"They moved out a while ago. Guess we've really been out of touch, what with all the distance between us."

This was new information. Apparently Nelly's brother was married. Sara couldn't hide her excitement as Nelly's family tree became more and more clear to her. And judging from Thed, they didn't seem like bad people either.

"Well, should we go eat something with the jerk loitering in the hall outside?"

Sara looked toward the door. This was a far cry from how Chris had abandoned Sara and Nelly to go shopping by himself the moment they'd stepped foot into that tea town. He must have reflected a bit on his behavior since then.

"Are you staying here too, brother?"

"Yeah. I talked to the inn about us all eating together."

Nelly's complete and total disregard for Chris was the same as usual too. They'd gotten distracted by Thed's talk of dinner, but Sara was just satisfied that she'd gotten permission to go see the glowing mushrooms at night.

Sara glanced over at Allen, wondering if all this family talk was bothering him at all, but he didn't seem bothered in the slightest. He was just waiting for the talking to be over.

He grinned when he noticed Sara's gaze. "I didn't realize it until you said something, but I really *am* excited to see those glowing mushrooms. It's exciting getting to go out at night, isn't it?"

He was thinking the same thing as Sara. "Yeah. It'd be scary if I was on my own, though."

"You said it." The grin vanished from Allen's face. "I'm proud of how I made it on my own in Rosa, but I never want to go back to how things were before I met you, Sara."

At the time, the pressure from Allen's mana had prevented him from getting close to

too many people, just like Nelly.

"I can control my mana too now, but I'm also around a bunch of people who also have a ton of mana now, so I don't need to worry about it too much or tire myself out. I'm really grateful."

They met up with Chris, who was waiting impatiently in the hallway, and headed to dinner, relishing the local cuisine the inn provided. Sara was a little worried there wouldn't be any mushrooms, what with the town's current troubles, but she found her concerns were unfounded.

"We just need to avoid anything that looks like an oyster mushroom, but there are plenty of other mushrooms to eat in this season," the proprietress explained.

Sara enjoyed the cream of mushroom soup the most and even asked for seconds, but she regretted it when she realized there was still dessert coming.

"For dessert we have a nut tart."

"A tart!"

The firm tart dough was fragrant and topped with a heaping serving of caramelized nuts. Happiness spread through Sara's mouth with each bite. Unfortunately, it was rather filling as desserts went.

"I could only eat one..." Sara lamented, rubbing her stomach.

"They keep well, so you could take whatever's left with you," the proprietress offered. Was she an angel?

Sara watched sadly as the remaining tarts vanished one by one in front of her eyes and decided, "I'll buy some tomorrow, if you wouldn't mind selling me a few." She was making money, after all. Of course, Nelly had given her a hefty sum for their food expenses, so she shrewdly planned to make use of that.

"Let's browse some sweets shops in town tomorrow"

Just like that, they had a new thing to look forward to in this town.

After the meal was mushroom hunting.

"Listen up. We're going out to clear out as many poisonous mushrooms as we can. It's not a game, okay?"

Sara and Allen must have looked really excited for Thed to feel he needed to lecture them like that. Incidentally, Nelly was too busy fawning over how adorable Sara was to do so, and Chris was too busy fawning over how adorable Nelly was, so Thed was the only person who had any time to spare to worry about them.

They met up in front of the mayor's house and headed for the direction the swallowtails had come from. This was a problem that would have to be solved by sheer force of numbers, so there was already a decent number of people there when Sara and company arrived. Nelly stood at the front of the line with Thed while Chris, Sara, and Allen took up the rear of the procession.

There was a magical quality to the town, its street lamps glowing around them as they walked, but the place was small, so they reached the mountain outside in short order. As Sara had heard it, the mountain was the collective property of the town as a whole, so people were free to climb it at any time, picking whatever mushrooms they liked.

After about ten minutes of climbing with lamps in hand, the three at the back reached a small clearing where people could stop and rest. There should have been a bunch of people in front of them, but the clearing was almost empty. Nelly and Thed weren't there either.

The mayor beckoned Sara and Allen over with a smile. "People split into small groups here and went off to hunt those mushrooms. We're here to run messages and do some mushroom studying." Chris would be standing by here as well. "I wasn't sure how we'd do that studying, but it looks like I didn't need to worry. Well then, there shouldn't be any problems this early into our little excursion, so if you would put out your lamps..."

They put out their lamps one by one and the darkness they'd been holding at bay crept in. When the final lamp went out, they were blind, their eyes still adjusting to the lack of light. The darkness settled over them like a heavy blanket. Sara huddled close to Allen, a little nervous, but she felt reassured when he took her hand and squeezed it. To a city kid, darkness like this was scary.

Sara's eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness. First, she could pick out Allen's silhouette next to her. Then she noticed the border between the tops of the trees and the sky, and then she could pick out the difference in the darkness between the trees

and the clearing.

"Take a look at the base of the trees," the mayor said.

Sara glanced down and spotted a fuzzy white shape.

"Whoa!"

Bluish-white mushrooms began to glow one after another like they were sending signals to one another. There were ones as big as the one Thed had brought to the mansion earlier that day and ones as small as Sara's fist. It almost looked like they were lighting up the path they'd taken up the mountain, and the path that led into the trees as well.

"They normally grow in a colder season, when the undergrowth has all died. That's an even more impressive sight. But they're bigger than usual, maybe because they're early this year. And unfortunately..." The mayor's tone dropped. "It looks like there are a lot of them. It's no wonder people were picking them by mistake."

In the light of day, it would be easy to mistake the smaller ones for different mushrooms, the mayor explained. It was probably prudent to worry like the mayor, but Sara found herself captivated by the fantastic sight before her.

The group spent some time in silence before Sara spotted a light out of the corner of her eye. Before she could turn to see what it was, Allen started tensing up next to her. He let go of her hand and took several steps forward.

"Sara, stay here and, if you can, cover everyone with your barrier."

"O-Okay."

Sara took the barrier she always kept around herself and puffed it up, covering the people around her with it as well.

"Whoa!" the mayor exclaimed.

Sara looked up and saw a shimmering light floating toward them. It was so beautiful, she almost found herself reaching out toward it.

"It's a seven-colored swallowtail. Its wings are glowing a little bit."

Apparently the scales glowed when they had the paralysis poison on them.

"That can't be. I had Nef come along to be safe, but these monsters aren't supposed to be active at night."

Chris was surprised, but he didn't move from where he stood. Allen was with them, after all.

"Leave it to me."

Allen took another couple of steps forward and followed the seven-colored swallowtail calmly with his eyes. The moment the high-flying butterfly came down to where his fist would reach it, he swung and the shimmering light fell to the ground with a *thud*.

"So pretty..."

Allen leaped back and shook his hand off, and Sara let him into her barrier. She was able to observe the cloud of phosphorescent scales burst and fall to the ground from the butterfly's body.

"I hit it in the middle, so I don't think I got any scales on me." His hand wasn't glowing, Sara noted with relief. "I took one down, but it came at us, so it should be fine." Allen looked a little nervous since he'd promised Nelly he was only here to watch.

"Even small, a Hunter's a Hunter, I guess." The mayor was impressed and Sara was proud. Chris didn't seem to agree, however.

"Really, Allen?"

Sara didn't think he had any right to complain when he hadn't stopped Allen from going after the butterfly in the first place.

"I understand wanting to try out a technique you've just learned, but this isn't training in the meadow with Nef. If you're here as a Hunter, what's the best way you could have handled that?"

"Hitting it with a high-temperature flame like Sara does and burning it so the scales don't get anywhere."

"Exactly. You may prefer physical strengthening, but you can use magic too. When you have time to choose your method, like just now, you should consider using magic as well."

"Right." Allen was quick to agree. Sara thought she'd probably be too busy sulking to respond if she was in his position.

"I should have known a friend of the Wolveriés would be strict on themselves *and* on their companions. I suppose the lot of them are all rather practical," the mayor said with a wry grin. If that was how her whole family was, then it was no wonder Nelly was so strong.

"Don't lump me in with those muscleheads. I may revere Nef, but I am *not* a Wolverié." Chris sounded so offended that Sara couldn't help but laugh.

"Have you known Nelly since you were little, Chris?"

"Unfortunately, I don't know what Nef was like when she was young. We met when I was fifteen, when I had just established myself as a skilled apothecary and was dispatched with a group of knights..."

Sara listened excitedly, already anticipating that this would take a while. But they must have been watching the mushrooms for longer than she thought. They started hearing the voices of the people who'd gone mushroom hunting returning, so she wasn't able to get the rest of the story. Unfortunately, their mushroom studying was over already.

Signaling for them to light their lamps again, the mayor asked no one in particular, "What should we do with the mushrooms we've collected?"

Poisonous mushrooms appearing unexpectedly and attracting monsters couldn't have been a very common occurrence. Even the mayor of the mushroom village wasn't sure what to do in this unprecedented situation.

"How about putting all the mushrooms in one spot and then hunting the seven-colored swallowtails they attract? Afterward, we can burn them," Sara suggested, recalling Chris's instruction to Allen to use fire.

The mayor gaped a bit, then nodded firmly. "We'll do that."

Sara smiled. It was nice when people listened to you.

"I'll speak to Thedias later as well. With the amount of mushrooms here... It'll take a few days for them to grow back, so maybe we should have some Hunters and apothecaries come in from Hydrangea." Chris offered a more long-term suggestion. When he said things like this, it made sense to Sara that he'd served as guildmaster for as long as he had.

They headed down the mountain with the first group to return so that they weren't out too late. Sara was highly satisfied with this little outing. Obviously anything involving a paralysis poison wasn't a good situation, but she'd gotten to see glowing mushrooms and big glowing butterflies. And she'd gone out at night too. Before coming to this world, she'd walked through the dark town at night after late overtime sessions, but she'd never gone out at night to do something *fun* before.

"There's something fun every day in this world."

She knew this was nothing but trouble for the people of the town though, so she kept the comment to herself. That night, Sara was tired, so she fell asleep right away without waiting for Nelly to get back.

The next morning, Thed was gone.

"He's heading over to Hydrangea and arranging for Hunters and apothecaries to be sent. He asked me to take charge of the mushroom hunts with Chris until he gets back," Nelly explained. "Knowing my brother, he'll probably get there around noon today and be back with the cavalry in two or three days. That means we'll be staying here for another few days, but you're fine with that, right?"

"Yeah. I'd like to go see the mushrooms every night if I can," said Sara. "And if I don't have anything else to do, I'm going to spend my days buying up all the sweets, mushrooms, and nuts I can get my hands on."

"Would you mind looking for paralysis herbs with me during the day? It would help to have some more on hand."

Sara enjoyed picking medicinal plants, so Chris's suggestion was also tempting. She ended up picking plants with Chris in the morning, accompanying him when he checked on his patients at noon, and then spending the afternoon on a leisurely stroll around town to shop.

Mushrooms were gathered not in town but out in the meadows, a short distance from

the road, so Sara and company could keep an eye out while they were gathering plants. When a seven-colored swallowtail wandered too close, Allen would take it out with magic. At first, his magic wasn't very strong, and he'd run around trying to avoid the swallowtails that were still flying after only taking a singeing from him, which wasn't the ideal way to go about hunting them.

"I'll get good at magic too." As Allen did his best to look out for the mushroom pickers, Nelly watched over him from a short distance away. Sara and Chris in turn watched this as they gathered paralysis herbs.

"There really are a lot of them here once you pay attention to them," Chris remarked.

"Maybe that's why there are plants with paralysis poisons too," Sara responded, though she had to stop for a moment and think about whether mushrooms counted as plants or not.

"I'm sure the Apothecary's Guild is aware, but I'll let the apothecaries who are coming know just in case." Chris swiftly plucked paralysis herbs from the ground. He seemed all too ready to make this someone else's problem.

They spent three days like that, and on the fourth day, relief finally arrived.

"Mushroom hunting, treating paralysis poisonings that may or may not occur, and culling seven-colored swallowtails... Not too many people were raring to take such an unglamorous request. I had to promise a hefty daily rate and basically force some younger kids to take the job."

With a wry grin, Thed returned with a Hunter and an apothecary, both of whom looked to be around fifteen or sixteen years old.

As soon as the two kids saw Nelly, they looked back at Thed and went pale for a moment before they were brought in front of a white moonlight mushroom, where they stood looking rather lost.

Ignoring their confusion, Nelly peered at the blond, blue-eyed Hunter and asked him, "You a caster?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then Allen, you're up."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Allen strode forward with his chest puffed out and shot a high-powered flame at a seven-colored swallowtail that just happened to be passing by. The flame burned through the butterfly's poisoned wings in an instant and the rest of the bug fell to the ground, dead.

"If the flame is too weak, it just makes the swallowtail suffer needlessly, so I use a high-temperature flame to take 'em out."

"That's fascinating. I didn't think fire magic was all that practical. So you can use it that way too..." The young Hunter was visibly impressed at this.

"Yeah. But it's also so the scales with the paralysis poison on them don't get everywhere. Normally, I just use my fists to take stuff down."

Since Allen was keeping his mana in check, he could talk to the young Hunter from up close without the other boy avoiding him. Nelly was the same way; it made Sara happy to see the fruits of their efforts.

"I'd use stone-throwing magic myself," said the Hunter. "As long as you take them down from a distance, you don't have anything to worry about from the scales."

Allen went quiet at that. Now that she thought about it, Sara didn't use much earth magic either.

"Fire magic uses a lot of mana. Especially with a bigger or hotter flame. If you use a stone, you can keep it small and just move it fast and hit a vital spot, and it doesn't take that much mana. Maybe that doesn't bother you since you've got so much mana, though."

Allen blinked, looking surprised, then fell silent once more. He'd clearly never even considered conserving mana before. Sara stood nervously nearby, feeling like she was watching over her little brother. At the same time, she realized her own preferences for using fire magic. She could easily picture defeating monsters with fire, but couldn't really imagine shooting rocks at them.

Sara shook her head. She didn't have any need to defeat monsters in the first place.

The reason she tended to use fire and water was because they were so closely tied to daily life. That was good enough for her.

"Hydrangea's dungeon is deep. If you want to spend a long time down there, you've got to use this." The young Hunter tapped the side of his head. He must have figured Allen was headed for Hydrangea next and thought to give him some advice. Well, optimistically speaking, it was advice. Otherwise, maybe he just wanted to show off to Allen.

The idea irritated Sara, but Allen wasn't the type to be annoyed by something like that. "Let me see what you can do then, for reference." He was always focused on bettering himself.

"Sure. I'm Kuntz, by the way. What's your name?"

"Allen."

"And you?" prompted Kuntz.

"Huh? Me?" Sara asked, flustered. "My name is Sara."

"Sara, if you're just gonna stand over there worrying, why not come over here? You don't get too many chances to see magic outside of dungeons, you know."

Was he being kind? Sara wasn't sure. She looked to Chris to see what he might think, but he was already splitting apart a mushroom and explaining to the young apothecary how the paralysis poison functioned, so it wasn't like she had anything she needed to be doing at the moment.

"Come study with me," Allen said, so she agreed to join him in observing Kuntz.

Nelly, incidentally, was watching over them all with a serious look on her face, evidently placing herself in the role of guardian.

"There's a seven-colored swallowtail now. They show up in the dungeon in Hydrangea a lot too, but they don't usually have the paralysis poison, so nobody hunts them. You can sell the magic stones, but there are monsters way easier to hunt if that's all you're getting."

Sara immediately felt bad for assuming he might have been acting full of himself. He

was clearly a super nice guy who was just trying to fill them in.

"So to be perfectly honest, I've never actually shot a stone at one of 'em. This'll be my first try." Kuntz grinned and held his hand out toward the seven-colored swallowtail. "You hold your hand out like this to get the direction right..." He narrowed his eyes. "And shoot."

With a dull *whap*, the swallowtail stopped moving and fell to the ground.

"Whoa!"

"Wow!"

Allen and Sara ran over to the fallen butterfly.

"Hey! The scales might still be in the air!"



As Kuntz scolded them, Allen observed the swallowtail while Sara searched for the stone he'd shot at it.

"There it is!" It was a grey oval-shaped stone that fit snugly in the palm of Sara's hand. "It's got a pretty shape, but it's just a normal rock..." She flipped the stone over in her hand. "I wonder how you make something like this."

Fire and water were things she saw all the time in her daily life, so they were easy for her to picture, but stones were different. She'd heard that all sorts of things, big and small—like the roads she walked on every day, the huge walls around Rosa, and the disposable cups that were sold in stores—were made with earth magic, but she'd never tried it out herself.

"Err, do stones come from lava? Or is it like sand and soil that hardens or something?" The more she tried to recall specific facts about stones, the more she just confused herself.

"Are you a caster? Earth magic can be a little tricky." Kuntz called out to Sara as she flipped the stone over, crouched down next to it.

"I was just wondering how you make stones with magic. I can picture water and fire easily enough, but..."

"You can use fire and water, huh? In that case..." Kuntz tapped the stone in Sara's hand. "How about forgetting about shooting it for the time being and just trying to make something that looks like this? I got started by looking for a good example to copy myself. Have you never practiced like that before?"

"I never had any other casters around to teach me..."

She'd gotten a book, but that was all the guidance she'd had. Vince in Rosa was a skilled caster, but he was a busy guy, so Sara had never thought about asking him to teach her anything, and Chris had only ever taught her apothecary stuff.

"He shot two. I thought it was just one rock, but there were two of them," Allen said from behind Sara. She and Kuntz stood back up.

"Depending on where you hit them, sometimes you can't take a monster down with just one shot, so I hit it twice in succession. I'm impressed you noticed."

The way Kuntz was smirking, he was probably testing Allen. Or maybe all young Hunters were just like this. Once again Sara felt confident that she would never be able to become one herself. But the possibilities of magic were fun to consider.

"Another stone the same as this one..." Sara pondered this. The same color, the same shape, the same mass. It was a rock made from magic, so she didn't need to think about whether it came from lava or whatever anyway. "Another stone..."

Magic collected in the palm of her hand and took shape. "I did it!"

It was a little smaller, but otherwise it was the exact same as Kuntz's stone. In that case, she could definitely sling it.

Sara faced a direction where there were no people and reached out her hand. She didn't have a target, so it didn't need to be homing. She would just go for a simple throw.

"Slingshot! Go!" The stone flew from her hand, falling to the ground again a fair distance away in the meadow. "Hey, I did it."

"Sara, I want to try too. Can I have that stone?" Allen stood next to her. "Use this as an example, huh...? I feel like my uncle's stones were pointier."

Allen looked at the stone in Sara's hand and reached his own hand out to the meadow as well. "Slingshot! Go!" It shot out faster and went farther than Sara's stone. Maybe enthusiasm was a factor. "Hey, I did it!"

Seeing Sara and Allen exchange a grin, Kuntz said somewhat coldly, "You know, the two of you are kind of strange." They turned around with blank looks on their faces. Kuntz grabbed them and shook them, saying, "Sara, I see you giving me a look like, 'Well, you said to practice...' but it usually takes a little more time than that! And Allen, you're not supposed to be able to watch someone do something and just instantly recreate it!"

The two of them deflated. Evidently, they'd done something they shouldn't have.

Kuntz ran a hand through his hair, irritated. "I'm not saying it's bad. It just makes me look really uncool for thinking I could teach the two of you anything! In exchange, can you show me that high-power flame thing you did until I can replicate it, Allen? Sara, stick around and root for me, would you?"

Apparently he wasn't angry with them, nor did he even dislike them. Allen and Sara exchanged another relieved look.

"S-Sure."

"If all you want me to do is root for you, okay."

"You're so in sync. What are you, childhood friends? Damn, I'm jealous!"

Suddenly the cool and aloof air Kuntz had been putting on was nowhere to be seen, his hot-blooded personality now shining through. Sara and Allen laughed at the revelation. At least until the next swallowtail flew over and Nelly scolded them for not paying attention.

The three of them remained on the lookout for swallowtails until that evening. When there weren't any butterflies to worry about, Kuntz practiced producing a high-powered flame while Sara crafted stone after stone beside him. By the end she had a small mountain of them, having gone a little overboard, which got some amusing double takes out of everyone passing down the road.

"I made a whole heap of these, Nelly... huh?" Nelly had vanished at some point without Sara's noticing.

"Hey, that uhh, Nelly person... She looks a lot like the Guild Director. Could she be...?"

"She's his sister. They have the exact same hair and eye color, don't they?" Sara was amused finding out that other people thought they looked a lot alike too.

"Then she really is the Red Reaper."

Sara had been warming up to Kuntz, but her heart chilled at those words.

Allen gave her a bit of a worried look before asking in a measured tone, "Is Nelly really that famous?"

"She is. Nefertari Wolverié... A woman who strikes fear into the hearts of every Hunter. She's the Guild Director's sister, but she might even be stronger than him, or so the rumors say."

What hurt the most was finding out that someone who'd never even seen Nelly before

knew her surname—something that Sara herself hadn't even known until recently.

"She's called the Reaper 'cause she's strong?" Allen asked.

"That's right. I heard not a single monster remains in any dungeon she delves into."

Sara felt tears welling up in her eyes. Up on the Dark Mountain, Nelly always honored all life, even the life of monsters, so it saddened her to think that this was the way people thought about her.

"Kuntz, did Nelly really seem like that kind of person to you?" Allen asked him.

"Well, she didn't. She was pretty and looked strong, but she had kind eyes."

"Mmm. I'm glad you think so. If you could, I'd really appreciate it if you didn't call Nelly the Reaper from now on."

"Sure. Sorry." Kuntz gave them a genuine apology.

"In Rosa, they call Nelly the Red Goddess," Sara spoke up.

"A goddess, eh? I can see it."

Even after he agreed, she kept going. "She took me in and looked after me even though she has no relation to me, and she's not good at housework, but she's kind, and she loves good food, and she's clumsy but really nice, and—"

"Sara, Sara, it's okay. Don't cry. Everyone who gets to know her understands all that." Allen comforted her, but she still felt sad.

"I'm not crying. And people who don't know her still say terrible things about her! What's wrong with being strong anyway? Everyone's safe because she takes care of the monsters for them, right?"

"I'm really sorry, honestly."

To get back at him, Sara regaled him with a list of Nelly's good points. Of course, this list wasn't infinite. At some point, she ran out of things to say, and Kuntz told her about Hydrangea instead.

"A lot of the monsters in Hydrangea's dungeon are black in color. The wolves you see in pretty much every dungeon are black, and the centipedes are black too. Even the horned rabbits are grey."

"Centipedes..."

At Sara's muttered word, Allen sucked his teeth and glared at Kuntz. But she'd heard him say it, so there was no taking it back now. Sara's wariness of the dungeon in Hydrangea had risen another level.

"Huh? Did I say something I shouldn't have?"

"Sara's not good with bug monsters."

"Even though she's a Hunter?"

She wanted to tell him she wasn't a Hunter, but she wasn't really an apprentice apothecary yet either, so Sara was a little stuck on how exactly to describe herself.

"That's why Hydrangea's dungeon is called the Black Dungeon, or the Hell Dungeon."

"Huh," Sara remarked disinterestedly. If that was what people called it, then she really thought it would be better to steer clear of the place.

"There's one Hunter in Hydrangea people say is the next strongest after the Guild Director. He's got black hair and blue eyes and people call him the Black Reaper. A lot of Hunters in Hydrangea practically worship the guy."

"Oh yeah?" Sara was getting a bad feeling about this.

"That's why everyone's really interested in Nefertari, since people call her the Red Reaper. I mean, she's supposed to be even stronger than Thedias Wolverié, who's already super strong."

This sounded like nothing but trouble to Sara. But Rosa and Hydrangea were pretty far apart. That was why Sara assumed she'd never heard the name "Black Reaper" in Rosa. Yet the Hunters in Hydrangea all knew Nelly. Sara asked Kuntz why directly.

"That'd be because Thedias brags about her himself."

From what she knew of Thed, that made sense to Sara. But what was the point in bragging about your family just to drive people away?

Additionally, Sara got the sense that Kuntz didn't have a great impression of this "Black Reaper." Curious, she asked him, "What do you think of that Black Reaper guy, Kuntz?"

"He's strong. He uses physical strengthening and beats most monsters with one hit. He was a knight once, and can use a sword too. But..." Kuntz hesitated a moment before saying, "Since he's so strong and so many people look up to him, you feel kind of ostracized if you're not part of his clique. I'm a caster, so I fight in a different way than physical strengthening types. I don't have a lot of reason to associate with them, but just being on my own kind of makes people treat me like I'm the opposition. It kinda makes it awkward around the guild for me."

"Nothing like that happened in Rosa," Allen said.

"Yes, it did," Sara shot back. "People totally treated you like crap just because you were strong even though you were a rookie."

"Yeah, that was annoying... I couldn't go into the dungeon for a really long time 'cause of that."

It was shocking to Sara that Allen had almost forgotten all about that ordeal. It made her feel like *she* was the weird one for still being angry about it.

"I did think you two were small for Hunters. So you're just starting out, eh? That makes sense."

"We're not just starting out. We've been at this for almost a year already. Right, Sara?" Allen argued when Kuntz smirked at him.

"Hmm, I'd say you're probably still a newbie for like three years," Sara mused. Of course, Sara didn't consider herself a Hunter in the first place, so it didn't bother her to be called a newbie. Nope!

"Man... Anyway, all I meant was that the strong Hunters didn't cause us any trouble. The stuff with me was just squabbling among young Hunters."

"Three years... Yes! That means I'm not a newbie anymore!" While Allen continued to talk about Rosa, Kuntz pumped his fist into the air. "I'm on my fourth year, after all. I'm

fifteen. I was dungeon crawling in the capital up until a little while ago, but I thought a change of scenery might be nice, so I came to Hydrangea."

"Rosa's a nice place too. You should've gone there."

"It's too expensive there. Plus, I hear the monsters are stronger than they are in Hydrangea. I'm on my own, so I try not to push myself."

If everyone was like this, there wouldn't be Hunters pushing past their limits in Rosa, but some people needed to test themselves—and there was no shortage of problems caused by those people.

"Is this 'Black whatever' guy that bad?" She didn't like it when Nelly was called a "reaper," so she didn't want to use the word for this man either.

"It's not the guy himself. But when people he associates with cause problems and he acts like it's got nothing to do with him, I just dunno about that, you know? Thedias, the Guild Director, is supposed to be strong too, but I've never seen anyone around him throwing their weight around or causing trouble under his nose."

The image of Chris popped into Sara's head. He was capable, didn't throw his weight around, and people liked him, but he couldn't control Ted at all, so he'd been indirectly responsible for a lot of trouble Sara had gone through. He himself had gone through some trouble in Camellia because someone had been jealous of his abilities. In both cases, the problem stemmed from Chris's disinterest in other people, Sara suspected.

"In which case, this guy either doesn't care about other people or he's a king of the hill type."

"King of the hill?" Allen asked, unfamiliar with the phrase.

"It means a person in a small group who has to be the most important."

"Bwa hah!" Kuntz burst out laughing, holding his stomach.

"Am I right?"

"I don't know. I was just thinking it'd be fun to try and see if I could figure out which it was the next time I saw him. Thanks, Sara. I've got something to look forward to now."

They chatted until it was evening and the swallowtails thinned out, and by the time Chris came to get them, the three of them were already friends.

“Okay, Sara, Allen. We’re going to burn today’s bunch.”

Even after they had been picked, the moonlight mushrooms would still release spores at night, so any mushrooms collected had to be burned every night.

Sara and Allen lined up next to Chris.

“Go ahead,” he said.

At his signal, they produced a high heat in the middle of the mushrooms. Instead of going up in flames, they simply melted away in a few minutes, leaving behind nothing but a black mark on the ground.

“Wow... I’m gonna be doing that starting tomorrow, huh?” Kuntz watched in awe, but Chris shook his head.

“There’s no need to do exactly what they do. It’s fine if it takes longer. You can just burn them as normal.”

It amused Sara to see Kuntz considering exactly what “as normal” meant, but there was something he’d said that she was curious about.

“Are we leaving tomorrow?” she asked. She had good memories of this place now, of seeing mushrooms that glowed at night and giant butterflies, and eating delicious mushroom dishes and nut tarts. She felt a little sad to be leaving already.

“We’ve really taken our time on this journey, but it would be best to get you officially introduced to House Wolverié sooner rather than later. After all, there are some people who still haven’t given up on winning official guardianship of you...”

The face of the prime minister’s son flashed across Sara’s mind.

“I was pretty clear with him. It’ll be fine, won’t it?” Sara muttered to herself as they all headed for the inn.

The apothecary waiting for them there looked pretty haggard, so Chris must have really crammed his head full of stuff. When he saw Sara, the young apothecary

complimented her right away. “The people in the town told me Master Chris had a little apprentice. You’re an impressive kid. You really are.”

There were tears in his eyes, but Sara felt like she understood why. It was probably hard dealing with Chris all day. She wanted to tell him she wasn’t really his apprentice, but instead she just sneaked him some of the nut cookies she’d bought in town. He seemed to appreciate that. Dinner at the inn would probably have dessert, but she figured he could eat them as a snack whenever he was tired.

On their last night, they enjoyed more mushroom dishes and went and saw the glowing white moonlight mushrooms with Kuntz and the young apothecary. And so ended their fun stay in Stock, though it should never have been more than just a quick stop to begin with.

The next day, they had breakfast and left right after. Thedias stayed behind to help with the cleanup, so Sara headed toward Hydrangea in her usual group of four.

“Wanna go down into the dungeon together when I get back to Hydrangea?” Kuntz asked Allen.

“Well, sure. That’d be great, but is it okay?”

“Yeah. You’re probably stronger than me, so I’m calling dibs now.”

Kuntz was looking off to the side like he was embarrassed, but a two-year gap was a lot when you were in your teens. As Allen had implied, it was really lucky that Kuntz had offered to partner up with him. Nelly was his mentor, but the strength gap between them was too great to call them a party. Sara had been worried about Allen going into a dungeon for the first time all alone, so she was relieved he’d have someone he knew in Hydrangea.

When they were ready, they left the inn and found a big group of people at the edge of town.

“Are there seven-colored swallowtails over there?”

“Doesn’t look like it. Wonder what’s going on. They’re waving at us.” Nelly cocked her head curiously, and they hurried toward the group in case there was some kind of

trouble.

"Hey. Thought you might be leaving town around now." The mayor stepped forward with a big smile. "Our little town only got through this trouble because the four of you happened to be passing through, so..." One of the townspeople shouted about his speech going on too long and someone else laughed. "Well, we just wanted to express our thanks on your way out. So we're here to see you off."

"See us off..."

They had only just happened to notice some seven-colored swallowtails out in the meadow when they were planning on staying the night here. They'd pretty much just stayed a few more days than they planned to. Compared to the trouble they'd gone through in Camellia, they hadn't done much more than sightsee here, really.

Yet unlike when they'd left Camellia almost like they were being chased out, the people of Stock were seeing them off with smiles and gratitude.

"Yeah, I figured other people had it worse than me, so I was just putting up with the slight tingling in my arms and legs, but I feel great now thanks to the little lady. I really appreciate it."

"Huh? Me?" Sara was basically just an extra that came with Chris, but it wasn't just her. The people thanked Chris, Nelly, and Allen as well. They even gave Sara and Allen little packages of sweets.

"Good luck in Hydrangea!"

"I'm sure you'll make a great apothecary!"

The four of them walked down the road in a daze, forgetting to even activate their physical strengthening. It was Allen who broke the silence.

"Beating monsters is a Hunter's job, and the monsters they beat are useful to everyone. I knew that in my head, but..."

Monster meat was used for food, their skins and horns were used for materials, and their magic stones were what made magic tools run. But that was all just common sense, and no one really thanked Hunters for doing their job.

“It’s really nice when people thank you.”

Sara nodded in agreement and looked up at Chris. “We worked so hard in Camellia and didn’t get a thing for it, so it was nice being appreciated in Stock.”

“Indeed.” There was a rare smile on Chris’s face. “Whether they’re thanked for it or not, apothecaries will make all the potions and antidotes they need to when need arises. I’d always thought of it as that sort of job, but it does feel nice to be thanked by regular people who aren’t even Hunters.”

Potions were things everyone in this world could casually buy to heal injuries and cure fevers. But once again, this was so obvious that no one really thought about the apothecaries who made this possible.

When Sara had first come to Rosa, she’d only had a bad impression of the Apothecary’s Guild because of Ted and the people who didn’t reprimand him for his behavior. For that reason, she hadn’t thought very well of apothecaries despite gathering medicinal plants for her livelihood. But after spending so much time with Chris, who she initially didn’t like very much, she’d realized that he was a person who took his job very seriously. And seeing people thank him for his work for the first time, she was finally starting to feel like it might be a job worth doing.

“If I make potions out of the plants I gather myself, I’ll be able to get by wherever I go. I’m not a twelve-year-old kid anymore, after all.” Sara nodded to herself. She was finally thirteen now, but it was no big deal.

“You could be a Hunter too, Sara. There’s work no matter where you go, and you can do just about anything with that barrier of yours.” Nelly was pushing her Hunter agenda, as always. Allen too.

“That’s right. Don’t you think it’d be fun to go hunting with Nelly and me?”

“Sure, it might be fine, but I still don’t want to do it.” She turned them down swiftly. Sara knew that if she hung out with these gung-ho physical strengthening types too much, it’d only wear her out. She didn’t deny that it would probably be fun, though. “Plus Kuntz said there are bug monsters in Hydrangea’s dungeon,” she added quietly.

“Mmm... There are bug monsters pretty much everywhere you go. I mean, seven-colored swallowtails are bugs too. But wyverns are way scarier.”

"I'm used to wyverns." Sara knew that was a strange thing to say, but when the other two were pushing so hard for hunting, she was curious why Chris didn't have anything to say in defense of his own profession.

"What do you think, Chris? Seems like Sara's leaning more toward being an apothecary." Apparently, Nelly was curious too.

"Shh! I'm trying to stay hidden!" Chris hastily stopped Nelly.

"What's wrong?" Nelly asked him suspiciously. "That's not like you."

"This is Sara we're talking about. If I tell her to be an apothecary, she'll just sulk and say she hasn't decided what she wants to do yet. That's why I was hanging back, patiently waiting for Sara to see things my way..."

Of course, now that he'd put his strategy into words, it was bound to fail. Sara laughed at the look of regret on Chris's face. It was true that she was leaning toward becoming an apothecary, but she still hadn't fully decided. She had just come up with the idea of an apothecary who left town and gathered their own plants instead of staying cooped up in a guildhall making potions all day, though, and that was a point in the profession's favor.

"Hey, Nelly. We'll be staying in Hydrangea for a little while no matter what, right?"

"Yeah. Things didn't work out in Camellia, so we've been traveling for a while now. I think it'd be nice to settle down somewhere for a bit."

If that was the case, Sara thought she might take the opportunity to do some serious thinking about her future.

"Come on, let's use physical strengthening to speed up a bit. I want to make it there tonight."

And so they headed for Hydrangea.

CHAPTER 2

HEADED WHERE SARA'S HEART DESIRES

Even with regular breaks, Sara was fairly exhausted by the time midafternoon came around. According to Nelly, they would arrive in Hydrangea shortly.

"It's at the foot of that mountain."

Nelly was pointing toward a huge mountain range that was steadily growing closer as they trekked on.

"Is it marshy around here too, with frogs again?"

Camellia had been in a marshy area, but Hydrangea was situated next to a large lake.

"No. Hydrangea was a small town originally. It got its start as a sort of health resort for the nobility. It's at the base of a bunch of tall mountains, next to a lake. It's cool in the summer and warm in the winter. It's comfortable and the scenery is nice."

"Is that right?"

Sara should have asked about this earlier, but so much was happening on their trip that she could only focus on the next town they planned to visit. According to Nelly, there weren't many monsters outside of the dungeon, so Sara was excited at the prospect of not having to deal with any beastly shenanigans for the first time in a while.

There were just too many monsters in the world of Trilgaia, both inside and outside of dungeons. Sara didn't understand why.

A health resort surrounded by mountains next to a lake brought to mind Switzerland for Sara. She'd never gone anywhere like that in her past life, as even just traveling anywhere tended to tire her out so much she wouldn't be able to do anything but sleep, making the trip rather pointless in the first place. The mountain where she'd lived before this trip was scenic enough, but it was also the sort of place where you'd get attacked by monsters if you took so much as a step outside, and there hadn't been a

lake there either.

And so, Sara was greatly looking forward to this next town, but she wasn't naive. There was always a catch, and she couldn't get caught up in her own preconceptions. She needed to make sure she had things straight.

"Wait a second, though. I'm guessing the lake is full of monsters?"

"Nope. It's rare, but there *are* lakes that don't have any monsters in 'em. It's formed from spring water from up on the mountains where there aren't any monsters either. I think the water's supposed to be too pure for monsters to live in it or something."

"It sounds like a paradise..." Sara was so moved she almost cried. Allen was a little more realistic.

"There's no way that's true, Sara."

"Why do you have to say that? I can dream, can't I?"

"Well, why do you think *I'm* looking forward to Hydrangea so much, then?"

"Err..."

It was because there was a large dungeon next to Hydrangea. And it was a hellish place, full of bug monsters.

"But I'm not going into the dungeon, so as long as the monsters stay in there, I'll be fine."

"S'pose so. The monsters haven't left the dungeon in Hydrangea lately. It's one of the more well-managed dungeons, or so they say."

With Nelly's guarantee, Sara's expression brightened up. "See?" she said hopefully.

Sara pictured herself leisurely gathering plants next to the lake. If there weren't any monsters around, she'd be able to wear a skirt. It'd be nice to turn her plants in at the Apothecary's Guild and then go out for tea somewhere.

"Hee hee. Sounds great!" Sara spun around like she was wearing a skirt. Bringing a lunch to eat out at the lake would be fun too!

"Sara and I will help out at the Apothecary's Guild. I've yet to see one that's not understaffed, so I'm sure they'll be happy to have us."

Chris made plans for Sara as if it were a given. Sara decided to at least *try* to get out of it.

"I still haven't said I want to be an apothecary."

"You haven't said you *don't* want to be one either."

"Mrgh."

He wasn't wrong. When they left Stock, Sara had decided she would think on that very question once they arrived in Hydrangea. It wasn't that she didn't want to be an apothecary, necessarily. She just wasn't sure if she wanted to decide on her career at thirteen. What she *did* want was to be independent, and becoming an apothecary was a practical, achievable way to do that.

"That's right!" Sara exclaimed. Her enthusiasm stopped Nelly, Allen, and Chris in their tracks. "The problem is I only have Hunters and apothecaries around me, so those are the only paths for my future I've been able to consider!" She didn't even know what other options she had. "Even just in the Guild, there are people who appraise materials, salespeople, cooks, receptionists... I don't need to be a Hunter. Oh yeah, there was the lady at the clothing store too!"

Even in Sara's tiny, little world, there were so many professions other than Hunter and apothecary. She'd even experienced helping out in a kitchen and at a sales kiosk herself.

"Oh yeah, that guy mentioned being a maid or a court mage too," Allen piped up. "He said I could be an apprentice knight with his recommendation—not that I was interested."

"That guy" referred to the prime minister's son, Liam, but both Sara and Allen would only upset themselves if they said his name. Allen, of course, was set on becoming a Hunter and nothing else, so he couldn't be swayed one way or the other.

With the sobering mention of "that guy," the group started moving once again.

"I guess when I was a kid the only thing I dreamed of was being a knight," said Nelly.

"And if that didn't work out, all I could think of was to be a Hunter. I guess I could've done plenty of other things, though, based on the way you think of things, Sara."

"So you wanted to be a knight?"

Sara was surprised to hear that. She knew Nelly sometimes helped out the knights in the capital, but it was reluctant help and they'd done terrible things to her like use that paralysis drug on her, so she'd thought it was a profession Nelly would hate.

"Well, my father and my brother were both knights. That was all it was, but when I was a kid, or rather, until recently, I couldn't control the pressure of my mana at all. I *did* manage to become a knight, but I couldn't stay one for long."

Nelly smiled sadly. Sara was shocked to hear about this. She wondered if being a Hunter wasn't something Nelly initially wanted.

"You'd have no problem being a knight now, though, since you learned how to control your mana."

"Now that you mention it, you're right. I can hang out in restaurants too. Wonder what I would be doing now if I'd managed this back when I was younger."

"I wouldn't be surprised if you were the commander of the knights by now, Nef. You have the lineage and more than enough of the ability," Chris said, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Sara didn't necessarily disagree. Traveling together with her away from the Dark Mountain like this, Sara had come to see Nelly as a calm and considerate person with good judgment. She was hopeless when it came to teaching, but that was something she could have someone else do.

"Many people in the knights would envy you for that, though. I think you made the right choice becoming a Hunter. Hunters are evaluated only for their abilities, after all."

"Chris..." Nelly gave Chris a surprised look, then smiled. "Yeah. I don't regret anything about how I've lived my life. It was because I chose to be a Hunter that I met Sara too."

"Nelly!" Sara gave Nelly's arm a delighted squeeze. They continued their journey with their arms linked.

“Don’t forget about me! It’s not every day you come across such a talented apprentice!” Allen chirped.

“You brat. I *am* happy that I met you, though.”

“Course you are.”

It was just like him to be so confident.

Nelly lifted the arm Sara wasn’t clinging to and coughed into her hand, clearing her throat. “Uhh, and you too, Chris.”

“What was that, Nef? Could you say it one more time?” Chris looked shocked to his core. It was rare for Nelly to say anything so considerate to him. “Come on, Nef,” he insisted.

“Shut up. Once is enough.”

Before Chris could get his wish, Hydrangea came into view. They couldn’t see the lake from where they stood, but they started to see houses dotting the landscape, their white walls shining in the light from the now setting sun. The mountains were still far in the distance, but the houses stretched all the way out into the meadow; Sara could tell this town was big.

“Heh heh. This brings me back. I haven’t been here since I was little. Welcome to Hydrangea!” Nelly spread her arms almost giddily.



They reached the main street of the town quickly, which was busy with people doing their evening shopping. Just like in Camellia, there were a lot of women and children out. There were so many kids running around, in fact, that one of them accidentally bumped into Nelly.

“Sorry, miss. Oh...” In Japanese terms, the boy looked like he was in second or third grade. He looked up at Nelly and froze.

“What’s wrong? Your mom’s looking for you.” Nelly shot a glance at Allen, nervous that her mana was leaking out, but he shook his head. She looked back down at the kid, relieved.

“Are you the lord?”

Nelly made a face. “Do I look like a scruffy old guy?”

Sara realized Nelly’s father must be the lord here (and that he had a scruffy face). As always, Nelly never said enough, though she was equally at fault for not asking.

“Scruffy... Ah ha ha! You’re funny, miss.”

“Hey! I’m sorry about him.” A woman who must have been the boy’s mother ran over and scolded him.

“I said sorry,” the boy protested.

“It’s fine. He’s just a kid. Don’t worry about it, ma’am.”

The mother put a hand to her slightly flushed cheek. “My... how dashing.”

Just say thank you, Sara wanted to comment, but Nelly *was* rather dashing with that smirk on her face.

The mother and son waved at them as they parted and they continued through the town, watching the hustle and bustle around them as they went. Sara felt like the townspeople were paying a lot of attention to Nelly, but it might have just been her imagination. Nelly and Chris were both rather handsome, so they tended to stand out no matter where they visited.

Sara and Allen, incidentally, were typically treated as no more than the pair’s hangers-

on, but Sara didn't actually want to stand out, so that suited her just fine. She had no sour feelings on the matter whatsoever.

Before Sara could ask where exactly they were headed, Nelly said, "They'll need some time to prepare the family home for our visit, so I think we'll find an inn to stay at tonight."

"Sounds good. If we're going to be here long, maybe I'll find myself a place to properly rent instead of just an inn."

Chris could probably go to the Apothecary's Guild and get a place lent out to him pretty quickly, but that didn't seem to be his plan.

"Why don't you stay at our place, Chris?"

"I'll pass. I'd have no idea when Ri's sword might come swinging at me."

"I doubt he still has that kind of energy..."

Sara exchanged an alarmed look with Allen. What kind of house was it where swords might come swinging at you at any moment? Still, Sara planned to stick with Nelly as much as she could, meaning she would be staying at this dangerous house too. She'd thought Allen would feel the same way, but apparently he had a different idea.

"I'll look for my own place to stay too. I think I'll ask at the Guild first. Their inn's usually the cheapest place to stay."

Nelly frowned. "We might not be able to go down to the same levels in the dungeon if you're on your own, but you can train with me every day if we stay together."

"I know. You're still my mentor. But I..."

Allen hung his head, but Sara thought she knew what he was thinking. It was Kuntz. His and Nelly's abilities were too disparate for them to always hunt in the same place, but Kuntz had promised to party up with Allen when he got back from Stock. And it was unlikely Kuntz had a mentor; he was likely taking care of all of his expenses on his own.

"The guildmaster was saying I was about the age to start living alone back in Rosa. I don't think someone else should be looking after me anymore. If I'm going to go into

the dungeon with Kuntz, it's not really fair if I'm the only one who gets to stay at your place, Nelly."

"Well, you can do what you want. Just because we're mentor and student doesn't mean we need to be joined at the hip. We can just go hunting together every so often. For as long as we're here, and even if we end up parting, I'll still be your mentor, Allen."

"Yeah."

Sara was worried about Allen being on his own too, but if he'd already made a friend and he wanted to get used to living in a new place, she figured that would be good for him. Even in Rosa, she'd lived up on the Dark Mountain while Allen had lived in town, so it wasn't like they were together all the time.

"Still, you should visit Nef's house at least once to introduce yourself, Allen. You can stay until you're otherwise situated."

Chris's words weren't that convincing considering he planned to stay at an inn himself, but it was true that Allen could stand to take a little time to get himself settled.

"Well, there should be a hotel for summer visitors somewhere on the middle of the main street. Hopefully they've got some open rooms..."

A downtown hotel for seasonal visitors sounded like a fancy sort of place to Sara. She was looking forward to the kind of food they'd have.

"Hey, Nelly, do they serve any kind of local... Huh?"

Sara tried to ask about dinner but was interrupted by an approaching commotion—the screams and shouts of surprised men and women.

Sara had a barrier up almost always, so she wasn't that worried about getting hurt herself. She glanced at her companions. Chris and Nelly also didn't look worried, though they were both making awkward faces. Allen had his eyes focused forward, his center of gravity lowered slightly so that he could deal with whatever came their way.

If the two adults weren't worried, then maybe it was nothing to be concerned about. But Sara sensed trouble coming.

Her eyes met Allen's. They were thinking the same thing: they would protect Nelly.

Sara took a big step forward, and Allen stepped out even farther. Sara stood in front of Nelly and Chris to the left, Allen to the right. She recalled the two of them being called “kin of the goddess” in Camellia and smiled, once again picturing her and Allen as a shrine’s lion-dog guards.

“Sara, put your barrier around Nelly and Chris.”

“Got it. What about you?”

“I don’t need it.”

As the commotion neared them, it actually got quieter, until a middle-aged Hunter appeared before them. He looked like a Hunter to Sara because of the sword at his waist, his lightweight dress, and his tall, solid build, plus the way he carried himself—calmly, but without leaving himself open to attack. He had the same air to him as the active Hunters in Rosa’s Guild.

“Since he looks like he’s in his fifties and he’s got red hair, green eyes, and scruff, I’m sure about it...” Sara sighed, exhausted. Even the fact that he looked younger than his years was just like her. “It’s Nelly’s dad.”



"How could you tell, Sara?" Nelly asked from behind her, but Sara didn't understand the reason for her surprise. Still, though she was rather exhausted by the situation, she didn't let her guard down. Neither did Allen.

The man who appeared to be Nelly's father looked over the four of them vigilantly, stroking his beard with one hand. The first thing he said was, "Hmm. Out of my way, boy."

"Why?" Allen stayed put.

"I've business with the girl behind you."

"Girl? I'm forty. And he's a senior citizen," Nelly muttered behind them, but that wasn't the issue.

"If you've got business with her, you can discuss it from there. I may or may not let you through depending on what you say," said Allen.

"Oh? You're a cheeky one."

Allen was just as aware as Sara that this was Nelly's father. But neither of them let their guards down. And for good reason.

"'Cheeky' is fine by me. If you just want to talk, then we'll have no problems. But your attitude says that's not all you're here to do."

That about summed it up. There was an intimidating air to the man, like he was about to draw his sword at any moment. Sara strengthened her barrier just in case.

"Ha. And what is it you think you can do against me?"

"I'll stop you." Allen moved even farther forward, dropping his center and widening his stance.

"Some fresh new Hunter thinks he can stop me, eh?"

The man before them drew his sword with a loud *clank*.

"Aah!"

“It’s the lord!”

“Someone stop him!”

People around them were calling out in distress, which Sara found only natural. This man was on the town’s crowded main street, drawing his weapon on an unarmed boy. People were starting to swarm around their group now. Sara was uncomfortable with so many eyes on her. Allen, however, paid no mind to the gathering crowd or Sara’s discomfort and continued quietly facing off with the “lord.”

“That’s the spirit. En garde, boy!”

Sara found herself thinking, *At least he gave him warning, which is more than Nelly did.* Nelly must have really poisoned her mind for that to be a comfort to her.

The man slowly raised his sword and took a full-power swing at Allen. There was a loud *clang* like metal striking something hard, and Sara saw Allen’s feet sliding against the ground as he was pushed back.

“Hmm. He’s gotten a lot better at physical strengthening since we met.” Nelly nodded in satisfaction behind her. Was she not at all worried? Sara felt a little faint, but she wasn’t much better. She knew she could protect him completely with her barrier, but she had no doubts about letting Allen handle this himself. “But it’s not enough.”

At the same time Nelly made the comment, the man pulled his sword back, sweeping Allen’s legs out from under him.

“Ack!”

Allen had probably just been feeling relieved that he’d blocked the man’s sword, so he had no time to prepare himself for the Hunter’s next move. He was on his back in an instant.

But he stopped before dealing Allen the final blow. Or rather, it was more accurate to say that he *was* stopped.

He tried to move his sword, then stepped back like he’d been repelled by something—that something naturally being Sara’s barrier. Sara was aware he was likely thinking the same thing Nelly had been when she’d tested Allen’s strength, and he didn’t want to hurt him. But even if he stopped right at the last second, Sara didn’t want anything

drastic happening to a friend of hers.

"Okay, if you want to talk, please put your sword away," she said, clapping her hands authoritatively.

The man gave her a dubious look and took a step forward silently, but he was repelled again.

"Tch."

The way he reacted made Sara want to ask him if he was actually some kind of petty crook, but he reluctantly put his sword away while she watched him. Allen took the opportunity to get up and hop back into the confines of Sara's barrier. He was back in a fighting stance a second later.

"If you have something to say, you can say it from there. Depending on what it is, you can come through." Sara repeated Allen's instructions.

The man removed his hands from his sword and spread them in front of himself. "I won't draw my sword again."

"We can't trust you."

Sara's firm tone drew a couple of impressed exclamations from the watching crowd. "You can do it, kid!" someone even shouted. Sara was just getting more exhausted.

"A pitiful old man rushes out because he'll finally be able to see his daughter again and this is the treatment he gets."

Sara couldn't help rolling her eyes. How was he pitiful *or* old? "There's nothing pitiful about you to my eye," she told him frankly. "How can we trust someone who swings around a sword in the middle of town, endangering everyone nearby?"

"You tell him!"

"She said it."

The people of the town were getting into the confrontation now, adding their own interjections.

Sara pretty much had it all figured out by now. This ridiculous man was Nelly's father and her benefactor, the noble who had promised to become Sara's official guardian. She understood that the townspeople's heckling came from an affectionate place as well. She also knew that for people like Nelly, who were all about practicality, things like restraint wouldn't solve anything.

"What's the plan, Nelly?"

"Thanks, Sara. Sorry for worrying you. I'll take it from here."

If she said so, that was fine with Sara. Sara shrunk her barrier and stepped back to allow Nelly to come forward.

Nelly strode right up to the man. He was bigger than her and more solidly built, his red hair and green eyes the spitting image of Thedias. This was unmistakably Nelly's father.

"Father, it's good to see you."

"Oh, Neffie..."

As he embraced Nelly tightly, his voice trembling, the man seemed altogether a different person than the one who had been pointing his sword at them just a moment ago. The people watching started to clap.

"So she *is* his daughter!"

"Good thing we contacted the lord's mansion."

From the reactions of the crowd, Sara surmised that it wouldn't be a bother at all for them to stay with Nelly's family. In fact, they'd been awaiting her arrival rather impatiently.

"We can talk business at the estate. We'll be a spectacle if we do it out here."

"We're already a spectacle thanks to you, father."

Sara was relieved to see the way they spoke frankly to one another. She'd gotten the sense that Nelly had been raised rather strictly, and since she hadn't contacted her family in so long, Sara had been worried they might be estranged.

Nelly's father gave warm looks to Sara and the rather miffed Allen, then turned to Chris with a sour face. "Haven't seen *you* in a while either, Chris. You've grown. From what Thed tells me, it was lucky you tagged along."

"It's good to see you, Ri. I wouldn't say I've really grown in the last twenty years, but that's neither here nor there." Chris's tone was as sour as Nelly's father's expression. Chris tended to be unaffected by most things, but he was pretty much at the mercy of Nelly and her family.

"As for the small ones..."

Allen thrust his chest out huffily. "Allen."

"I'm Sara." Sara didn't feel the need to posture.

"I'm the lord who governs this region, Riot Wolverié. It seems my daughter Nefertari owes you much."

Ri was a nickname for Riot, Sara realized. There was probably some difference in stature between them, but Sara had never met anyone who'd cared about that in Rosa or Camellia, so she responded without worrying about their social positions. After all, she'd likely be relying on him for much in the future.

"On the contrary. It was Nelly who took me in and cared for me when I had nowhere to go."

"And Nelly's my mentor." Allen introduced himself properly as well, no longer so sullen at the man's sudden assault.

Riot stroked his beard, looking pleased. "It's just as Thed explained. Come, let's head straight for the mansion. You too, Chris."

Sara was a bit concerned about what Thed had actually said, but for the time being, they were welcome in Nelly's home, so she sighed in relief.

Chris, however, put a hand to his chest and took a step back. "No, this is a long-awaited family reunion. I'll stay at an inn in town. Pardon me." He looked a little nervous, Sara assumed because he was a little scared of Riot.

"You're not coming, Chris?" Nelly asked. They had been together since Rosa. Maybe

she really would miss him if they parted ways now.

"If you insist. I appreciate your hospitality, Ri." He changed his tune so fast Sara wondered if she'd misheard him when he turned the offer down mere moments ago. She giggled at the notion that he couldn't say no to Nelly.

When it was decided that everyone would be heading to the lord's mansion, a servant who had been standing by behind Riot stepped forward. "A carriage is prepared for you, so please come this way. Not that it's faster than our lord..."

Maybe he didn't mean for them to hear that last part, but Sara had, and she had to fight to keep herself from laughing at it. It was true that walking with physical strengthening activated might have been faster than a carriage. It was also something she wasn't surprised to hear about Nelly's father.

The townspeople started to disperse as Sara and company boarded the splendid carriage, the show now over.

"Hmph. It's just a short walk."

"Most people probably wouldn't agree with your idea of 'short,' father"

From the way they teased one another, Sara was even more sure that Nelly and her father had a good relationship.

"I'm disappointed I couldn't find out how much stronger you've gotten though, Neffie."

"Normally that's something you'd try to find out *after* a friendly reunion with your daughter."

Riot seemed to be the more... unconventional of the two of them. Nelly was the one with more common sense. From their attitudes, it sounded like this sort of fight was common when the two of them met up after not seeing one another for a while.

"Which I was prevented from having by these two." Riot shot a glance at Allen and Sara.

"Have some common sense. What do you think the townspeople would think of Nelly if she beat the stuffing out of their lord right in front of them?"

Riot gave Allen a blank look. He was Nelly's father so he must have been over sixty, but he looked at least ten years younger, though his expression was less than charming.

"I wouldn't get *anything* beaten out of me."

"That's all you have to say?" Sara took the liberty of making the jab on Allen's behalf.

"You don't know how strong Nelly is," Allen continued. "I don't know when the last time you saw her was, but she's really something now."

"Is she, now?"

Sara wished the two of them would stop glaring at one another inside the carriage.

"That's not the point. Allen is saying that it would be a problem for the townspeople to be put off by Nelly's strength. Even if she is a Hunter, she's also a young woman," Sara courteously explained.

"Ha. Man or woman, if you're a knight, your strength is everything. What's wrong with showing that strength off? Neffie hasn't been here in Hydrangea since she was young. She should show everyone just how far she's come."

It was probably because her father was like this that Nelly was so straightforward and guileless. Then again, it could be said that same attitude was the reason for her isolation.

Nelly was just smiling awkwardly through this conversation. Sara rolled up her mental sleeves, determining that she'd have to be the one to make Nelly's father understand. But before she could say anything, Allen spoke up again.

"Hunters aren't Hunters all the time. They're just normal people when they're not working. They go out to eat, or to shop. What does being strong have to do with any of that?"

"A knight is a knight. Even if Neffie makes her living as a Hunter now, she was originally a knight. A knight must remain capable at all times."

Sara cocked her head. Allen was being straightforward with Riot, but it didn't seem like what they were saying was getting through to one another.

"Whatever she was originally, she's not a knight now. I know some knights myself and they were all unpleasant people, whether or not they were working at the time."

He meant Liam, of course. Sara wrinkled her nose next to him in silent agreement. Allen was talking about Nelly the Hunter, while Riot was talking about Nelly the knight.

"Hey, Nelly. When is it exactly that you were a knight?"

"I spent three years starting at age thirteen as a squire, then another three years as a knight. I became a Hunter after that."

So she'd started out at around Sara's current age.

"Six whole years, huh? You must have worked really hard."

Nelly looked a little bashful at Sara's praise. "You're earning your own living gathering medicinal plants, Sara. I didn't work any harder than that."

"Hey, I'm earning my living as a Hunter too," Allen insisted, pointing his thumb at himself.

"It wasn't a good fit, though. I had to quit after three years." Nelly didn't hang her head, but she did get a far-off look in her eyes.

"With your abilities, you could have made captain in a few more years, Neffie..."

No one here doubted Nelly's abilities.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused you back when you were the commander, father." Nelly bowed her head to Riot, her hands on her lap, seeming to be deferring to him more as a commander than a father.

"It was twenty years ago. I regret not being able to protect you, myself."

Allen was giving Riot a rather harsh look. He looked like he wanted to say, "If you regret it, then stop pushing Nelly to act like a knight." Sara could tell, because she felt the same way.

The air in the carriage had become rather heavy, the carriage itself rolling to a stop as if the weight was too much for it.

"Walking would have been faster, but we're here," Riot said brightly, cutting through the awkward air. He even offered Sara a hand on her way down from the carriage, which she found kind of fun.

"Wow, it's huge!"

The carriage was already on the grounds of the mansion when they alighted from it. Before her stood the largest house Sara had seen yet in this world. It may just have been because of the evening darkness, but she couldn't even see where the house began and where it ended.

She turned around to see a carefully tended garden and a shadow far in the distance that must have been the gate. Rosa was a small town, and she'd never been in the district where the wealthy people lived. Camellia was bigger, but they were so busy they'd never made it to the mayor's house. That meant this was basically the first noble's mansion Sara had seen since coming to Trilgaia. She clasped her hands in front of her in awe.

"Hah, it's not that big. This also serves as the southern headquarters for the knights. See? Those buildings over there belong to the knight corps."

As Riot indicated, the buildings did appear to be somewhat separated. Still, this place was like a castle to Sara.

She sneaked a glance at Nelly, who was looking around, her eyes narrowed in nostalgia. Chris was just standing there like there was nothing special to see. It was only when Sara saw Allen's wide-open mouth that she felt some relief at not being the only one who was surprised.

"I have the room you stayed in when you were younger ready for you, Neffie, in the northern tower."

"The northern tower!" Sara exclaimed. It was like something out of fantasy just to have a "tower" in your house. She did see some things that looked like towers when she looked back up at the mansion. "I want to stay there too." She was practically champing at the bit.

"Uhh, me too." Allen raised his hand rather helplessly. They'd slept right next to each other when they were both living in Rosa, so Sara didn't have any objections.

“I’ll stay in Nef’s room as well.”

“Out of the question.”

Riot shut down Chris when he tried to take advantage of the situation.

“If you want to stay in a tower, I can have the eastern one prepared for you.”

“You know I don’t want to stay in a tower.”

“Then you’ll get a guest room. Allen, was it? You can stay with Chris, yes?”

Riot apparently had issues with Allen staying with Nelly as well, but Allen looked like he was fine staying with Chris instead.

“To think there would be three people constantly by Neffie’s side who would all insist on staying in the same room with her...” Riot muttered.

It was likely that no one had ever wanted to stay in a room near Nelly before because of the pressure of her mana. When Sara realized that, the tower lost its fantasy appeal and seemed to her more like a solitary confinement cell. She felt her heart sinking.

“Don’t worry about it, Sara,” Allen said to her while they received a tour of the mansion. “People avoided me because of my mana when we first met too, but there are those seats in the Guild cafeteria for people with a lot of mana, right? It’s just normal.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“Having a lot of mana basically just means you’re strong. It means you’re able to help people. I never thought it was bad for people to ask you to control your mana or sit a little farther away because of it. To me, that’s a lot better than someone walking on eggshells around you.”

Sara couldn’t help dragging around the sense of values she’d had in her previous world, but Allen thought she was being too sensitive.

“Besides, you’re the only person I’ve ever stayed in the same room with other than my uncle. And it’s more because of money than anything to do with my mana.”

“Oh yeah.”

Sara'd had her own room when she was living with her family and when she was living on her own. She realized she was overreacting out of a want to protect Nelly.

"I guess I was letting it bother me too much."

"It's not every day we get to stay in a huge mansion like this. Let's enjoy it." Allen grinned and went back to concentrating on the tour.

When Sara visited their room in the tower to change clothes, it was just as amazing as she'd expected it to be.

"It was originally a watchtower, so it's got a bath and laundry area so you can stay here without leaving," Nelly explained somewhat boastfully. "Course, I haven't been here in thirty years, so I don't remember *that* much about it, but... this is the same, I see."

Her hand brushed the covers on the bed, which had a floral design on a white background. The whole room was decorated in a feminine way.

The maid who'd guided them there opened the closet, where there was a series of colorful dresses as well. Sara wondered if they were Nelly's when she was a child, but they weren't.

"His Lordship had them prepared for your arrival, should you have need of them before you're able to acquire what you need here."

Sara ran over to the closet to inspect the conservative yet attractive dresses inside. She was a little curious about the knight's uniform to the side, but she decided not to ask.

"We were told you would have a young girl of twelve or so years, so we have these for Lady Sara as well."

"Wow! Thank you!"

Nelly's dad was pretty considerate for a guy who'd tried to fight them in the middle of the street.

Sara decided to have a simple bed brought into the room for her and placed next to Nelly's. Storage bags were really convenient at times like these, since they allowed you

to move heavy furniture so easily. They changed into the clothing that had been prepared for them and headed to the dining room.

"Nef! You look beautiful!"

Chris was looking pretty good himself in some aristocratic-looking clothing, missing the usual apothecary's cloak, but as always, he ignored Sara's existence completely as he bounded over to Nelly. As she was in front of her father, Nelly couldn't exactly tell him to "shut up" this time, so she allowed Chris to escort her, though somewhat reluctantly. Allen stepped forward in his best clothes to escort Sara, but Riot stopped him and performed the task himself.

At first, Sara was a little nervous about sitting at the big table, but the five of them bunched up on one side of it and had more fun than she was expecting chatting. As for the food, she was very fond of the trout meunière. It had a mushroom cream sauce that was just delicious.

"The trout was caught in the lake nearby. They're so hearty that people come from the capital to buy them. We usually get our mushrooms from Stock, but these were picked on the mountains out back."

From there, Allen spoke with great enthusiasm about the seven-colored swallowtails and white moonlight mushrooms they'd seen, which led to sharing amusing stories about their travels, and in no time they were having their after-meal tea.

The tea was unlike what they'd had in Rosa or what she'd bought on the way here. As Sara enjoyed the new flavor, Riot cleared his throat conspicuously.

"Ahem. Sara. Or should I call you Miss Ichinok Rasarasa?"

Sara waved her hands in front of her face. "No, Sara is fine." Even if she could get people to understand where her first and last names were divided, it would be difficult for them to pronounce.

"I put the matter off as I was so overjoyed to see my daughter again, but you are one of the Invited and you wish for House Wolverié to become your official guardians. Is that right?"

Sara wasn't sure about any of the details pertaining to the nobility and the Invited in this world, but she bowed her head meekly all the same. "I'd be very grateful if Nelly's

family could be my guardians. Actually, I feel like I should apologize for bringing you trouble like this..."

"Perish the thought. The Invited are brought here by the goddess herself and have always been revered as bringers of good fortune. I hear most of them were frail children in the world they come from. Most appear in the castle in the capital in the form of children of ten or so."

Sara nodded along to Riot's explanation. It was the same thing she'd heard from Haruto. She was glad she'd already heard it too. If she hadn't, she'd likely have been thrown by the difference between what he explained and what had happened to her.

"Many of them don't know the first thing about, well, anything, really, so they're given thorough educations on this world. A noble house takes guardianship of them and the boys mostly become Hunters or knights while the girls are raised with care to marry into another noble house. Occasionally they bring with them knowledge from their world. Many magic tools are an example of this. The most recent of them would be washing machines and portable stoves."

That made sense to Sara. It was no wonder these devices were so familiar to the ones she knew from her old world.

"All this to say that there really isn't a drawback to taking in an Invited. Additionally, House Wolverié is quite healthy financially and we have no real need of anything from one of the Invited. As such, you may be at ease and allow our name to shield you."

Sara was relieved from the bottom of her heart to hear Riot's warm words. More than anything, she had been afraid of causing trouble for Nelly's family.

"As Count Wolverié, Nef's father rules the southern lands and supports the southern branch of the knight corps. Now that you're *here*, neither the royal family nor the prime minister's house will be able to say much about it one way or the other," Chris explained as he lifted his tea to his mouth.

Sara still had to wonder why Nelly had been holed up on that mountain and why the knights had gone so far as to abduct her to bring her to the capital. Or why she'd been planning to accept the knights' job even *before* they'd abducted her.

"It's *because* the family is powerful that we have to show the capital that we're doing what they want," Nelly explained before Sara could even ask her question. "I had to

perform my duty without complaint as a member of House Wolverié. As for the Dark Mountain, I was up there 'cause I was sick of dealing with people. I really understood when the Invited, Bradley, said the same thing himself."

That made it sound like the Dark Mountain was some sort of health retreat, which was a funny thought to Sara.

"From what I hear, Neffie has already been looking after you for the last three years, so the capital has little choice but to accept her guardianship of you. They did request in a roundabout sort of way that you visit the capital, but I don't see any reason why that should have to happen anytime soon."

"Right." Sara wanted to visit all sorts of places with Nelly, so she had no problem with the idea of visiting the capital one day. "But since we're here in Hydrangea now, I'd like to spend some time here for the time being."

"You should!" Riot smiled warmly at her, in large part due to the fact that Sara staying meant that Nelly would be staying, she assumed.

After a fun night in the tower with Nelly, Sara discussed with Allen what to do the next day. Sara suggested sightseeing. Allen wanted to head straight into the dungeon, but Sara wanted to take it easy since they'd come to a place with a nice lake.

"I want to take a look around town, and there might be medicinal plants growing around the lake."

"So you *do* just want to work," Allen retorted, but of course the plants were just something Sara wanted to check for while she was already there. "Nelly, you're going with Sara, right? I was gonna go into the dungeon by myself anyway, so just go and sightsee without me."

Allen was supposed to be Nelly's student, but as far as Sara saw it, it was more like he'd decided for himself that Nelly was his mentor. Nelly wasn't really teaching him anything; he was just proactive about absorbing things from her on his own. That was why he never really depended on her for anything or demanded anything of her.

"I had a lot of fun on our trip over here, but I want to get a sense of the local Guild and the dungeon on my own. So we'll be doing our own things for a little while."

The decision wasn't for the mentor to make but the student. But this was just how

Nelly and Allen's relationship was. Sara was a little surprised that Nelly agreed with it so quickly, though.

"Well, all right. I'd rather hang out with Sara, so that's fine with me."

Back on the Dark Mountain, Nelly had been almost obsessed with hunting monsters whenever she had the time. Even when the two of them were out camping together, she'd sometimes forget Sara was even there and end up coming back to their campsite late.

"I'm happy to hear that, but are you fine with not hunting anything, Nelly?"

"What is it you think I am, Sara?"

"Err..." Sara found herself unable to say "a natural-born Hunter who lives to fight monsters."

"I'll accompany you as well, Sara," Chris said.

"Me? Not Nelly?" she couldn't help asking.

"That's right. Sightseeing will be fun, but you'll get tired of it if you spend all day doing it, right? Let's spend a few hours practicing potion-making."

"Why do *you* get to decide that?" Sara wanted to tell him he couldn't dictate how she spent her time, but she found she couldn't say the words. After all, for a second, she'd thought potion-making might be fun too. Instead, she asked him something that she'd been wondering about. "Didn't you say you wanted to go to the Apothecary's Guild in Hydrangea, though?"

"I did consider it..." Chris glanced away. He looked embarrassed for some reason. "But being a free agent sounds more fun than I'd thought. Once I actually arrived in town, I found I didn't want to go to the Guild anymore."

So, he liked not being beholden to anyone.

"Up until now, I used whatever medicinal plants were brought into the Guild, regardless of their quality. It sounds fun to only brew potions using materials I gather myself." He turned hurriedly to Nelly. "Of course, I also want to spend time with you, Nef."

“What does *that* matter?”

Sara laughed. It was the same old reaction from Nelly.

After breakfast, the three got into a carriage loaded with a couple of lunches that had been prepared for them. They waved to Allen, who was heading to the Guild, and the carriage went around to the back of the property. From the window, Sara looked out at the garrison where the knights were training.

“The lake is right behind the mansion,” Riot told them. “We could have walked, but it’s pretty far.”

Sara refrained from commenting how he’d walked farther without a carriage just the day before. The road behind the mansion was well-maintained, but there was plenty of nature as well, with groves and thickets dotting the landscape here and there as they went. When they got through the majority of the plant life, they finally saw the lake.

“Wow! It’s sparkling!”

Small boats floated across the wide lake, its water shimmering under the morning sun.

“The fishermen will be finishing up just about now. For the rest of the morning, it’ll be mostly nobles’ boats out on the lake.”

Sara would be thrilled to be able to catch fish in what was basically her backyard. She shared that excitedly with Nelly, who responded with some exasperation, “What’s the difference between this and the meat and fish we could get up on the Dark Mountain? That was like our yard too.”

“Catching fish when you have no idea when a mountain wolf or wyvern might attack you is completely different from doing some leisurely fishing,” Sara said indignantly.

Riot watched their exchange with a strained smile on his face. “The Dark Mountain, eh...? You’ve lived a harsh life, Sara.”

By the time she left, she was completely used to it now, but it was true that Sara hadn’t been able to take a single step outside of their home in the beginning. She didn’t want to be pitied, however, so she just kept quiet about that.

Sara rushed down from the carriage as it came to a gentle stop, running over to the water's edge before turning back to Nelly.

"Are there really no monsters in the lake? Can I get my feet wet?"

Nelly and Riot both smiled and nodded, so Sara gathered up the hem of her skirt and took off her shoes and socks.

"Okay! There are no monsters here, so I don't have to be worried about getting attacked or eaten!"

She gingerly stuck a foot in the water.

"It's cold! It feels good..."

It was fall, but it was still warm out in the mornings. The water that came down from the mountains was cold but clear. Sara splashed about in the shallows, feeling the small pebbles underneath her feet.



"We could go swimming if it were summer..." she said with some chagrin. She vowed to buy a swimsuit and come swimming out here every morning if they were still here next year. "I'm pretty cold now, though..."

Sara hurried back ashore and found a stone warmed by the sun to stand on. "That's nice..."

Nelly watched affectionately as Sara warmed her feet. Chris had meanwhile hiked a fair distance down the shore at this point.

Watching him wander off, Riot murmured, "Guess he has no interest in being an old man's conversation partner."

Sara was sure he didn't. She smiled wryly. She wasn't sure she agreed with calling Riot an old man either.

At the lake, Sara got a taste of everything she'd wanted to try out as a kid—skipping stones on the water and flipping over rocks near the shore—and she was satisfied.

"Shall we have lunch?"

At Riot's words, some servants slipped a table and some chairs out from a storage bag. Sara watched, slack-jawed, as a beautiful spread was laid out on the table before them.

"The sandwiches were stored outside of a storage bag so that the flavors could better meld."

This sort of extra consideration really made it seem like a lunch befitting the nobility. Chris eventually noticed what was going on and hurried back, and they enjoyed some nonfish specialties of the area like fried poultry.

"All we ate on the Dark Mountain was cockatrice, but this is what poultry should really taste like! It's so satisfying!"

"Nothing but cockatrice... What a luxury..." one of the servants said, sounding rather horrified, but that was what they were able to catch most often on the mountain, so what was Sara supposed to do?

After lunch, Riot returned to the mansion in the carriage. He was the lord around here, so Sara supposed he must be busy. The rest of them stuck around. They were still on

the grounds of the mansion, so they weren't worried about getting lost on the way back.

"Have you enjoyed the lake enough, Sara?" Chris asked.

Sara gave him a big nod. She was thrilled enough to have been able to play in the water, so she was fine with going along with whatever Chris wanted for the rest of the day.

"Come pick medicinal plants with me for the afternoon, then."

Chris took her around the edge of the lake. There was a decent number of medicinal plants growing near the shore.

"Since we're here at the lake, why don't I teach you some plants that aren't in your guide?"

"Okay. But what about Nelly?" She didn't mind learning about new plants, but she was supposed to be sightseeing with Nelly today. What was Nelly going to do?

"I'll take a little break, then I think I might practice with my sword a bit over there."

Sara watched Nelly sit down by the lake and headed with Chris to pick plants. He taught her about each plant as he pointed them out to her.

"This plant that grows in the waters of the lake has only a fifth of the efficacy of a healing herb. Considering the work it would take to mash them up and extract their healing properties, it's not really worth it to make potions out of them. But if you're ever hurt near a lake and you don't have any potions on you, these would come in handy. See?"

She plucked one of the leaves from the water and chewed it. A cool sort of spicy flavor, like that of watercress, spread through her mouth.

"You'll sometimes find it served alongside meat or fish, but it *is* a medicinal plant, so you'll get sick if you eat too much of it."

"Right."

That made it seem like anything Sara might consider an "herb" counted as a medicinal plant here. The guide she'd used had likely only listed plants with greater effects that

were easy to recognize.

"I have plenty of white moonlight mushrooms on me, so I'll teach you how to make a paralysis agent later as well. They shouldn't have a problem with us making a mess in the knight barracks, so we'll see if we can borrow a room from them."

It was just like Chris to make sure he was collecting useful materials even in the middle of that mess with the seven-colored swallowtails and poisonous mushrooms. And to treat the knights the way he did.

"What about the butterflies?"

"It's difficult to both collect the scales and extract the poison from them, so they're really not good for much more than looking pretty."

He didn't bring any seven-colored swallowtails, apparently. Sara turned around while they were talking and spotted Nelly quietly swinging her sword instead of watching the lake.

"Step forward, thrust right and left while stepping back..." Sara followed her movements, humming them like a tune.

"To Nelly, her sword is like an extension of her physical strengthening. She can just use her fists for most things, but for hard monsters or things you need to cut deeply, the sword can concentrate all her power in one point."

Nelly had practiced her sword every morning on the Dark Mountain too, the wolves looking on from a distance.

"But I don't think she's practicing how to fight monsters. Oh, that movement was for parrying another sword."

She must have been picturing who she was fighting against as she swung her sword. Nelly was a Hunter, but her sword mostly stayed at her waist. She hardly ever made use of it. Allen mostly used the shortsword he carried to process monsters for their parts. Still, he practiced using it every day too.

"I wonder if it's because the first training she got was as a knight."

Sara didn't really know what it meant to fight, but whenever she saw Nelly practicing

her swordplay, she thought it was truly beautiful.

"The first time I saw Nef, it was right when she'd transitioned from squire to knight. She was astoundingly strong. She had me questioning if something so beautiful could really exist in this world."

If Nelly had spent three years as a squire starting at age thirteen, that would have been when she was around sixteen.

"I was dispatched as an apothecary attached to the knight corps. Nef had a lot of injuries, you see. She's never taken good care of herself... When some other young knights picked a fight with her, she'd injure them and get injured herself... It wasn't her fault, but she tends to attract trouble."

Sara felt a little awkward hearing this but was happy to suddenly get to learn about how Chris and Nelly met.

"I wish I could have seen her back then."

"She's the same now. Beautiful as she ever was."

She felt like he could have meant her heart just as much as her appearance.

"I think you and I love Nelly a little too much," she told him.

"What's wrong with that?"

The fact that Chris could say that was at least a little bit cool, Sara decided.

They felt bad making the mansion servants prepare them lunch every day, so the next day, they went into town in the morning, ate lunch there, and explored around the lake picking medicinal plants in the afternoon. That was the rhythm they soon settled into.

Allen, meanwhile, delved merrily into the dungeon every day.

"It's more spacious than Rosa's dungeon, but it's kinda dim in there. And all the monsters are black or close to it, so it was a little spooky when I first went in. But the monsters on the earlier floors are the same in any dungeon. If you don't push yourself,

it's more than easy enough to get by on your own."

There was a time in Rosa when Allen was going into the dungeon on his own, but more recently, he had been going with the guildmaster instructing him. That might have contributed to his initial anxiety about going in alone, but he seemed plenty confident about it now. Sara, however, was concerned about the less-than-ideal atmosphere Kuntz had described.

"How were things in the guild?"

"No problems, really."

According to Allen, the guildhall here was larger than Rosa's, and the attached two-story inn was spacious and cheap.

"Things are cheaper here than in Rosa, so it's easier to get by. Wish my uncle and I had come here instead. I guess he couldn't have repaid his debt if we had, though."

Sara recalled hearing about how Allen's uncle had become the guarantor of a debt and had pushed himself too hard because of that.

"I stood out in Rosa 'cause of my mana, but I learned how to keep it under control with Nelly, so the only attention I'm getting is as a new Hunter in town. And if no one's paying attention to me, no one's bullying me either."

This was meaningful coming from Allen, who was well-traveled due to everywhere he'd been with his uncle.

"Was our thing with Riot in the middle of town okay? I feel like we stood out a lot during all that."

"Well, there weren't any Hunters watching. It was all just townsfolk. So there are some people giving me looks when they talk about the guy that picked a fight with the lord, but I just ignore 'em. When people ask me directly, I just go, 'Wow, really?' I mean, I didn't know he was the lord at the time, so it's not like I'm lying."

How sneaky. Sara giggled. Listening to Allen, Sara was starting to feel like she couldn't just spend all her time goofing off. She was starting to get bored of sightseeing and eating out every day anyway.

"There are a lot of medicinal plants growing near the lake, so maybe we should get permission to start gathering them in earnest." Her muttering this during dinner was the impetus for the change in their current leisurely lifestyle.

"Let's go to the Apothecary's Guild tomorrow, then, Sara," Chris said with an enthusiasm that suggested he'd been on the edge of his seat waiting to hear those words. Before she could tell him it was a mere suggestion, Riot spoke up next.

"Very well. You should visit the knights tomorrow, Neffie."

"Why would I do that? If Sara's going to be working, I'll go into the dungeon."

Unlike Sara, Nelly could speak her mind. Unfortunately, Sara was aware of something else as well. Every afternoon, she, Chris, and Nelly had been visiting the lake, but after that first day with the carriage, they'd walked there. And every time they went past the knight garrison, she could hear people looking over at Chris and Nelly and whispering about them. They didn't seem to even notice Sara's existence, but that was neither here nor there.

"She's the lord's daughter, but she's just fooling around every day."

"The rumor is she's stronger than Lord Thed, but she's just a woman!"

"Letting her walk around with a man like that... What is the lord thinking?"

Every time they went past the knights, they heard things like this. Sara was sure Nelly and Chris could hear them too, but neither of them acted like it had anything to do with them. Sara was on her own in getting irritated that people were bad-mouthing someone she cared about.

Nelly was a noble. Sara wasn't sure what sort of work was expected of her as a lord's daughter, but since she'd served as the caretaker of the Dark Mountain for so long, this last year or so had been a well-earned vacation for her, as far as Sara was concerned. People had no right to criticize her for taking a break. What was wrong with her hanging out at the lake on her own property?

Also, what was wrong with her being a woman? And wasn't it natural for her to have someone come along with her as a guard, whether it was Chris or not? Not that anyone guarding her would actually be stronger than Nelly herself, but that wasn't the issue.

"Neffie. I fear discipline may be slipping among the southern region's knights lately. Do you think you could motivate them?"

"Can't you do it, father? I have no issue with people calling me a lazy spinster or whatever else they might say."

So she *had* heard it all. Sara didn't even know people had been calling her a spinster! Her little body trembled with rage at the idea.

"No matter what ignorant bystanders may say, the fact remains that my Nef is the most splendid person in the world." Chris must have heard it all too. "Still, it doesn't sit right with me to let them say whatever they like. Shall I do it, Ri? I'm not that confident in my ability with a sword, but I won't lose to any knight in magic." Chris was stronger than most Hunters. Rosa's vice guildmaster Vince guaranteed it. "I'm sure Sara would be happy to go herself."

Mentally questioning why he had to offer *her* up as well, Sara nevertheless turned to face Riot. "I don't mind, but I specialize in defense, so I can't exactly teach them a lesson or anything like that. I won't ever let anyone lay a hand on Nelly, though. I can guarantee that."

"You've got me too. I can take a break from dungeon diving." Allen, who was only there to say hello, raised his hand as well.

"All of you..." Riot's voice was trembling as he pressed a hand to his eyes.

Nelly shrugged her shoulders awkwardly. "I really don't mind, but if you'd all go that far, I suppose I can whip those knights into shape tomorrow."

Sara knew it was rich coming from her, but she was starting to think everyone was a little *too* confident in themselves.

"Neffie. You don't need to hold yourself back or feel bad about who you are anymore."

"I know, father. The monsters on the Dark Mountain have made that much clear. I've faced off against similarly strong creatures for the last ten years. For that reason, I can't say I have much interest in associating with the weak."

When she quit the knight corps at eighteen or nineteen, she was likely already stronger than anyone else there. There was a good chance she hadn't been able to

display her true strength there for whatever reason, though.

"Then we'll settle things with the knights before Sara and I head to the Apothecary's Guild," Chris said.

"Sounds fun. I've gotta see this!" Allen added.

Sara opened her mouth to make her own comment, but she closed it eventually without saying anything. She'd already decided what it was she had to do. Still, she was excited for tomorrow as well, though she wondered if she was getting a little *too* complacent.

Sara assumed she'd feel either excited or nervous when she awoke the next day, but she ended up feeling no different from usual. She changed and had breakfast with everyone as she always did. The only things that were different were that Riot and Allen were with them today and that after they ate, they planned to go not into town but to the knight garrison on the mansion grounds.

Riot headed through the doors into the garrison that Sara had paid almost no attention to up until this point. She followed, emerging in a spacious hall. There were a bunch of swords on the wall, so it must have been some sort of training hall. The knights leaning idly against the wall hurriedly straightened upon Riot's entrance.

"Knights, assemble!"

Riot's voice carried through the building and knights began to appear from every direction, straightening up their uniforms. He was right, discipline *was* slipping. Sara was wondering how much the "southern region" covered. About thirty men in total gathered at Riot's summons.

"Since she is my family, I didn't think I needed to introduce her to you, but it seems some of the knights have taken such an interest in my daughter that they're neglecting their training."

Riot's first words were rather biting, but they seemed to hit home. Many of the knights looked rather awkward, avoiding looking Nelly's way.

"This is my daughter, Nefertari. She spent much time as the caretaker of the Dark

Mountain in Rosa, but has come to Rosa to formally assume guardianship of one of the Invited. As she'll be living in the mansion for the time being, I imagine you'll see her frequently. You will treat her as you treat me."

To Sara, it had felt like a rather meandering journey, but when he put it like that, there *had* been a purpose to their trip, hadn't there? And it was all for her. It made her feel warm and fuzzy to think so.

A sense of relief seemed to fill the room after everyone heard she was here for a reason. The only unfortunate thing was that very few of the knights had reacted to any of the details in Riot's rather short explanation. Meaning very few of them knew just how difficult being the caretaker of the Dark Mountain was, and very few of them knew the significance of assuming guardianship of one of the Invited.

"Introduce yourself, Neffie."

Nelly stepped forward boldly. "I'm Nefertari Wolverié. As you're aware, I'm an unemployed spinster who walks around with an unmarried man."

Sara reeled from Nelly's hard-hitting introduction, and the knights seemed rather flustered by it too. She gave them a rather scornful look at the way they panicked, seeing as they were happy to talk about her behind her back so loudly that she could hear them.

"I was instructed to introduce myself, but I don't particularly intend to get along with anyone here, so I'd appreciate it if you just ignored me."

Her combative tone was just turning the knights against her even more. Sara was surprised, since Nelly didn't usually act like this, but before she could give it any more thought, Chris casually stepped forward. It occurred to Sara that Riot had only introduced Nelly, so the knights were likely wondering who her hangers-on were.

"My name is Christian Deltmont. As you're aware, I'm an unemployed fop who walks around with an unmarried woman."

This time Sara almost burst out laughing. She had no idea they were saying those things about Chris. It was especially funny considering that everywhere else he went, he was treated almost reverently as "Master Chris, the apothecary"

"If I called myself Chris the apothecary, however, I imagine some of you would

recognize the name. While Nef was the caretaker of the Dark Mountain, I was also in Rosa, serving as guildmaster of the Apothecary's Guild, though for my own reasons I am nothing more than a traveling apothecary at the moment. As apothecaries must be impartial, though I may have my complaints, I will treat you without discrimination should you be injured during my stay here."

The knights *did* recognize the position of guildmaster and the name "Chris the apothecary," so they looked rather awkward at this revelation. Their eyes traveled to Sara and Allen next, as if to ask, "Well, what's with these two, then?" Sara considered how exactly to introduce herself.

"This is my apprentice. Allen the Hunter."

"And this is mine. Sara the apprentice apothecary."

Before she could decide, the adults did the work for her. Apparently Sara was an apprentice apothecary—Chris's apprentice apothecary, in fact. Allen was just standing there with his arms crossed and his chest puffed out, but Sara felt like she needed to say something herself.

"Err, I'm Sara. Umm, we've been picking medicinal plants every day by the lake." That made it clear to them why they were going to the lake every day. "So don't worry about getting hurt! You should get all the training you can from Nelly!"

The knights gaped at her before turning red with anger. Nelly stepped forward when they did, so Sara ducked behind her. She wasn't trying to provoke them, but that was the effect her words ended up having.

"Well, that's the deal. You wanted to know what I'm capable of, didn't you?" Nelly drew her sword fluidly. "I'm fine with this dulled blade. You can come at me one at a time or all at once. I'm ready."

Some of the knights stepped forward, irritated, but Riot stopped them.

"Please don't provoke them, Neffie. I'll make sure they're all wielding dulled blades as well, so just train them normally, would you? They should understand your strength easily enough from that."

Nelly put her sword away again. Frankly, Sara had wanted to see Nelly toss the knights aside one by one, but normal training was more than worth watching as well. She

moved to the wall, excited to see how it was done.

"This'll actually be my first time seeing Nelly fight against a person with swords," she told Allen excitedly.

"Come to think of it, me too. She hardly even uses her blade against monsters. Oh, it's starting."

After Nelly and her opponent took position, Riot raised his arm to signal the start of the match. Instantly came the *clang* of swords clashing, and all of a sudden the knight's blade was flying through the air.

"No way..." Sara hadn't even really been able to see it, but Nelly had stepped forward and knocked the knight's blade out of his hand.

"Next." Nelly wasn't out of breath in the slightest.

Knights charged at her one after another, but she took down each and every one. It was almost funny how easy she made it look.

"I don't think you can call this one-on-one... Wow, she twisted the sword right out of his hands! Was that an elbow strike? She kicked that guy halfway across the room!"

Maybe she was starting to get annoyed, but she'd notably started using her arms and legs in addition to her sword.

"It's probably too much work. I can tell," Allen said.

"You can tell?"

"Even a dulled sword might hurt someone, but if you're punching or kicking someone, it's easier to hold back."

The knights must have heard him. The end of the fight became a complete free-for-all. It was bad enough that Sara wanted to ask them, "Just what are knights supposed to be, anyway?" But in the end, Nelly was the only one left standing.

"Ten years on the Dark Mountain... I'm not sure if I got stronger or the knights got weaker." Nelly sighed and one of the knights on the floor cursed her.

“Damn Reaper!”

“I take it you don’t need treatment, then. Not if you’re insulting my darling goddess who, might I add, held back against you.”

It was rare for Chris to say such un-apothecary-like things, but Sara didn’t blame him. If he didn’t show his affection for Nelly as much as he possibly could, they’d only continue to remain friends. Sara, who could read the room, took this as her moment to step forward.

“Okay, I’ll do the examining, then. Is one potion good enough for bruises like this, Chris? Or would high potions be better?”

“Personally, I’d recommend taking their potions away from them and letting them savor the pain for a while.”

It was actually pretty scary when Chris said things like that with a straight face, so Sara wished he wouldn’t. Still, he walked over to her and gave her thorough instructions for each knight.

“Potions will be effective on bruises and light cuts. Hence, for most of the knights here, a single potion will suffice. A bruise like this should just be left to heal on its own, in my opinion.” So he said. “Things like antidotes and antiparalytics are rare, and you have to be careful not to imbibe too much of them, so being precise with the amounts is important, but for injuries like this, just downing a potion is more than sufficient.”

“I see.”

Sara didn’t like pain, so she hadn’t been injured much herself. She hadn’t even gotten a fever since coming to this world, so while she’d been assiduous in her gathering of medicinal plants, she’d hardly ever made use of potions herself. This was her first time giving them to other people as well.

While she was appreciating the novelty of the situation, Chris stopped before a groaning knight. “Look here, Sara.”

“Well, he’s obviously in pain. We should give him a potion, quick.”

Unlike the other knights, this one was clutching his stomach, covered in sweat.

"Nef got him in the gut with her elbow. Unlike bruises on the arms and legs, these types of injuries may involve damage to the internal organs. In situations like this, you should choose a high potion without deliberating."

"Right."

Sara took out a high potion as instructed and had the groaning knight take a sip of it. He started looking a lot better even before finishing the whole bottle, but Sara made him finish it nonetheless, as Chris had told her to do.

"The thing you must be most careful of in a dungeon is injuries like this, where you can't tell what's wrong at a glance. If you try to take care of it with a regular potion, it's possible the damage will remain and lead to your death later. Hunters just starting out, especially those who make use of physical strengthening, are in close-quarters fights often. You should not neglect proper preparation."

This was his advice for Allen. The Hunters just starting out in Rosa struggled to afford even normal potions. It must have really been difficult to make it as a Hunter.

"Come to think of it, I've been wondering this for a while... I know Hunters fight monsters, but what exactly is it that knights do?" Sara asked Riot when she was finished administering her potions. In Rosa, the Hunters had been way stronger than the knights. In the capital, they'd had to borrow the strength of Nelly, a Hunter, and the Invited to deal with the dragons. So what was the point of the knights anyway?

What Sara said must have been rude. An awkward silence descended on the knights as Riot stroked his beard.

"Living on the Dark Mountain, you must not have seen the knights at work. There aren't any stationed in Rosa, after all."

There weren't any in Camellia either as far as Sara could tell.

"Hunters hunt monsters," Riot explained. "Knights keep the peace. That's the long and short of it."

"Keep the peace..." Sara glanced over at the now recovered knights.

"I don't hear about many of them these days, but there are bandits sometimes, and various disasters. People are more often in danger from nature or other people than

monsters. The knights are there to protect the citizenry in the case of such dangers.”

Riot’s voice was full of pride, and the knights who heard it straightened up.

“They were probably just slacking because their commander went to the capital and isn’t back yet. As I’ve retired, I decided not to interfere, but I just couldn’t bear the sight of you lot lately... Shape up!”

“Yes, sir!”

It seemed Nelly had done her job perfectly.

“I appreciate you going to all this trouble, Neffie.”

“It wasn’t much work at all, really.”

None of the knights were provoked by her words anymore. What she said next, however, was clearly a mistake.

“But for you to have someone else motivate them instead of doing it yourself... You must really be getting on in years.”

“What was that?”

He had just explained his position earlier, so why was she provoking her own father now? Sara watched nervously but relaxed when she realized provoking him was exactly what she intended. She was a little irritated at the way he’d made use of her for this.

“A sword!”

As one of the knights scrambled to retrieve a sword from the wall, Chris made his way over to Sara.

“Shall we?”

“Sure.”

They could have their petty squabble on their own. Unlike Allen, whose eyes were practically sparkling, Sara didn’t have much interest in their match. She decided to

leave the garrison with Chris.

"Nef has gotten even stronger." Chris seemed satisfied.

"She was strong before, wasn't she?"

"She was. She was stronger than any other trainee knight at the time. And she was isolated."

Sara thought back to Nelly's attitude earlier. She'd seemed... over it. Sara had thought she hadn't been able to get close to people because of the pressure of her mana, and that was the reason for her isolation, but maybe it was something else.

"Did people avoid her because she was so strong?"

The corner of Chris's mouth quirked up into a smile. "She quit being a knight after three years but has been a Hunter the whole time since then. Why do you think that is?"

Sara pondered the question. Nelly had been brusque with the people in Rosa's Hunter's Guild, but there hadn't been anyone there who was hostile to her. They were somewhat bothered by her mana, but that was all.

"It didn't suit her to be a knight?"

"Ri was the commander of the knights in the capital. And even if he weren't, she would have gotten a lot of pushback if she'd chosen to be a Hunter from the beginning. Since she was born into a family of knights, she had to be strong. For the sake of the people, she had to be an upstanding knight. But the more she acted that way, the more isolated she became. The knight corps isn't such an upstanding place anymore. It's suffocating there," Chris said bitterly. "People's opinions of her ability were colored by the fact that she was the commander's beloved daughter and Thedias's sister. Even though it's so easy to see the real Nef simply by crossing swords with her. Yet the people who should have understood her the most, her peers, could never get along with her. Well, I imagine it was nothing more than one-sided rivalry on their part."

While they were talking, they strolled all the way into town.

"Darn it, how'd I let you lead me here?"

"Ha ha ha. As an apprentice apothecary, your first step should be to procure a set of brewing gear from the Apothecary's Guild."

"Ugh..."

Chris was as pushy as ever, but Sara was starting to think maybe it wouldn't be so bad to learn a little more about being an apothecary. Even she was unsure why she couldn't fully commit to the idea.

"It'll be my first time visiting the Apothecary's Guild here as well. I wonder what it's like."

There seemed to be a spring in Chris's step as he removed his apothecary's robe and stowed it away in his storage pouch.

"Going undercover, eh?"

"Well, I am unattached right now."

The Apothecary's Guild was on a large street in the west of town.

"The Hunter's Guild is across from the Apothecary's Guild, and past that is the dungeon outside of town. I've scouted the area. They don't seem to be busy at the moment either," Chris remarked proudly. When did he have time to stroll around town? He was probably concerned about how busy they were because he didn't want to get roped into helping out again. The situation in Camellia had really been rough.

"I don't see anyone visiting either."

"Most potions go to the Hunter's Guild. Townspeople will come buy them sometimes, but generally, the Apothecary's Guild isn't going to be doing much selling directly. We got so little business in Rosa that *Ted* often manned the counter. Though that also gave people the opportunity to speak to the mayor's son when they wanted to."

"Wait, was he popular or something?"

Chris smiled at Sara's shocked reaction. "With the people of the First and Second Districts, sure. Hunters and people from the Third District didn't buy potions much, and if they did, they'd go to the Hunter's Guild to do it."

So that was why Ted had looked down on Sara and Allen so much. After coming to this world, Sara had really only experienced hostility from Ted and the guildmaster of the Apothecary's Guild in Camellia. The knights had tried to take her away, but their intentions were *theoretically* good, if creepy. Maybe this was the reason Sara couldn't commit to becoming an apothecary.

"Well, shall we?"

Chris stepped through the swinging doors and a bell jingled above them.

"Comiiing."

With a cheery call, a young apothecary emerged from the workspace in the back. To Sara's surprise, it was a woman. Chris took advantage of Sara's interest in her to glance over the items on offer behind the counter.

"Looking for potions?"

"No, I'd like to purchase a set of brewing gear."

"Brewing gear...?"

There likely weren't too many people who bought such things. The apothecary looked a bit thrown by Chris's request.

"If you have a ready-made set to purchase, that would be best, but if not, I can select all the individual items I'd like as well."

"Err, right." The apothecary turned back to the shelves behind the counter. She ran her eyes over the items for sale and then turned back, looking stumped. "I don't think we have anything like that."

"Listen..." Chris started slowly. "You accidentally break your tools sometimes, right?"

"Yes. Of course. I'm rather clumsy myself, so it does happen sometimes. Ah ha ha."

So she was a bit of a klutz. Chris continued on patiently.

"So what do you do when that happens?"

"Well, I purchase a spare tool," the apothecary said sunnily.

Chris seemed to be getting more and more irritated with her. "So you have spares in stock, then."

"Yes, in the workspace in the back."

"Then sell them to me, would you?"

"Right. Huh?"

She seemed to be having a hard time wrapping her head around selling something that wasn't on the store's shelves.

Chris sighed and continued, "They may be in the back, but if they're available for apothecaries to purchase, that means they can be sold. I'd like a complete set, so could you bring everything you have in the back?"

"R-Right!"

The apothecary rushed back into the workspace.

"Rats. I forgot that most apothecaries procure their tools in the capital. Perhaps we'll simply put in an order and head home for the day. Until they arrive, you can make use of my tools."

While Sara was debating what to say, several people emerged from the back of the building.

"Who's the weirdo who's here to buy apothecary's tools?"

"Hmm? That voice..."

Sara turned around in surprise when Chris took a couple steps back, then she flinched when she heard another woman's loud voice.

"Aah! If it isn't Master Chris!"

"No, I'm just a simple traveler..." Chris said, his voice trembling uncharacteristically.

"You may be a traveler, but you're also Master Chris, aren't you?" For how loud she'd been, this woman seemed like the calmer of the two.

"Well, I suppose I have been known as such at times..." It was written in 72-point font on Chris's face that he wanted nothing to do with this woman.

Sara turned from him to look at the woman and laid eyes on a beautiful figure wearing an apothecary's badge who may or may not have been over thirty. She had green eyes like Nelly and glossy black hair tied behind her head so as not to get in her way.

"This is Master Chris?" the younger apothecary from before asked with stars in her eyes.

"You said you wanted a set of brewing gear, but you would never break yours and even if you did, you'd surely have your own spare equipment, which means...!" She thrust her finger out at Sara, causing her to take a few steps back with Chris. "You want to buy them for her! I'm right, aren't I?"

Sara gaped in awe of her powers of deduction, even though the woman's attachment to Chris reminded her of Ted.

"Well, err, you're right."

"Am I? Come, come, into the back with you."

Chris took another step back. Just to be safe, Sara stepped back with him.

"After you holed up in Rosa and never left, I didn't think I'd ever see you in Hydrangea, Master Chris! What a stroke of good fortune. Now, when would you like to take over as guildmaster?"

Chris looked down at Sara silently. Sara nodded. He raised one hand and said, "Well, I have that traveling to get back to. Sara?"

"Uh-huh!"

They pushed open the swinging doors and headed for the center of town at top speed. Far behind them, they heard the chime of the door opening once more.

"Let's duck into a shop somewhere." He sighed in relief when he saw that they weren't

following them. “They won’t find us if we hide inside.”

They headed into a place they’d been several times already this week and ordered some floral tea.

“Was that woman an apprentice of yours or something?”

“No, just a junior. A subordinate, really.”

If that was how you distinguished between people, then to Chris, who had been guildmaster in the capital and in Rosa, everyone he had worked with had been a subordinate. So that told Sara pretty much nothing about the woman.

“You really have a lot of devotees, huh?”

“Please. I haven’t even done anything.”

Sara took a good look at Chris. In the time they’d spent together, she’d come to respect the profession of apothecary. His passion for his work and his position as guildmaster as well as the way he treated everyone fairly regardless of position or gender was likely the reason for the respect his fellow apothecaries showed him. Of course, it was less that he treated people equally and more that he just showed as little interest in any one person as the next. There was one trait of his that stood out above all else, though.

“Well, you do have a pretty face.”

“What are you talking about?”

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

And he was unaware of it. For all his extolling of Nelly’s beauty, he was completely oblivious to his own. He probably only thought of his eyes as tools to assess the quality of potions, his nose as an organ to distinguish between the scents of medicinal plants, and his mouth as an apparatus to determine how well a potion was made.

“Well, what does it matter? It’s better to be revered than hated, isn’t it?”

“It’s nothing but trouble if you ask me...”

Sara didn't exactly disagree.

"I just came to Hydrangea to follow Nef. I don't want to take on a troublesome position like guildmaster again. If they're in need here, I don't mind helping out, but I'm busy teaching you right now, Sara."

Normally, Sara would have responded with something like "I didn't ask you to teach me" or "We're not that busy," but when Chris was using her as an excuse to avoid responsibility, he was much more human than he'd seemed in Rosa, and much easier to like as well.

Chris cleared his throat and told her about the woman from earlier. "Her name is Caren, and she's a skilled apothecary. She started around the same time that I became the guildmaster in the capital. She comes from an affluent merchant household, but she's not a noble and she is, of course, a woman. It's not as if there are *no* women apothecaries, but there aren't many, so she had a bit of a hard time."

"It doesn't seem like there are many women knights either. I didn't see any this morning."

"Well, the southern branch doesn't recruit locally but is dispatched from the capital, and most female knights guard royalty or high-ranking nobles, so they have no reason to come to Hydrangea."

Now that he mentioned it, Sara remembered Nelly saying her mana pressure was too strong to take any bodyguard work.

"And just so you know, Caren's married. I think her husband's a merchant."

What was impressive about Chris was that for all his lack of interest in people, he did tend to remember personal details like this.

"It's rare for a woman to serve as guildmaster of an Apothecary's Guild, but considering Ri's the one in charge around here, it makes sense. He's the type to make use of anyone he considers competent. He was the one who started making use of Hunters in the capital's dragon culling."

That was news to Sara. "How did that lead to Nelly being conscripted to help out?"

"Well, when the commander changed, the quality of the organization changed with it,"

Chris said bitterly. "Let's give up on the new brewing gear. You'll have to put up with using my hand-me-downs."

"That's perfectly fine. I'm thankful just to receive them. Actually, I bet I could get a lot of money for them if I sold them." Ted's face appeared in Sara's mind. She could just picture him telling her, "I'll pay anything you want, just give 'em to me."

"You won't get much for used tools," Chris said dubiously.

You can't underestimate fans, Sara thought in return.

"Well, let's get back and start your lesson. I'm sure that family squabble has wrapped up by now."

Sara was slightly astounded to realize she'd left Nelly behind and was out having tea with Chris. She'd been so uncomfortable around him before. When had they gotten this close? While she was questioning this, they made it back to the mansion in no time at all. They didn't see Nelly and Allen when they went inside.

"They're not still at it, are they?"

"Couldn't be... I mean, we went all the way to town, stopped into the Apothecary's Guild, and even had tea before coming back."

"Right..."

They stopped by the knight garrison next door anyway.

"Hah hah hah! You can't beat your own age, can you, father?"

"Don't give me that. You haven't had a match with Neffie yet, have you? Do you know how much stamina that took?"

It was Riot and Thedias who were facing off now. Nelly, Allen, and one other were relaxing against the wall and watching the bout.

The knights looked half-exasperated and half-resigned, but they watched the bout solemnly all the same. Just like Nelly had earlier, the pair of combatants were using both swords and limbs to face off against one another.

“Was everything okay, Nelly?”

“Sure it was. Wait a sec, you weren’t watching, were you, Sara?”

She’d barely even noticed Sara was gone! Still, Sara was glad there hadn’t been any issues.

“Hey, Sara.”

“Oh, Kuntz, you’re here.”

The other one watching the match was Kuntz, whom they’d met in the town of Stock.

“I finally made it back with the Guild Director. I told him I wanted to go into the dungeon with Allen and he said he’d probably be staying here, so he brought me with him,” Kuntz said with a wry smile. “He told me to stay the night. I never thought I’d find myself in the lord’s mansion. I think it’s pretty impressive that you and Allen are so comfortable here, Sara.”

Sara was from a society that didn’t have this sort of stratification, so she wasn’t bothered by having lodgings or food that was a little fancy. She probably lacked a fundamental understanding of the class system in the first place. So it might have been Allen who was the really impressive one.

“Well, I was always a commoner, and some stuff around when Sara and I met led to us basically living at the bottom rung of society in our town.” Allen gave Sara a smile. They’d had no adults to help them and had to work to earn their Hunter IDs all on their own. They wouldn’t likely forget that period of their lives anytime soon.

“It just turns out someone who’s helped us a lot is actually a noble. Since I’ve got a roof over my head and food to eat now, I don’t mind if they’re a fancy roof and fancy food. If you’re uncomfortable here, I don’t mind staying in an inn instead,” Allen told Kuntz.

“That simple, huh?” Kuntz folded his arms and watched the intense battle unfolding before them. “The Wolveriés really are amazing. Their match was finished by the time I arrived, but it sounds like Nefertari beat the lord.”

“Sure did. Guess father went easy on his daughter after not seeing her for so long. Well, if he’s gonna let me win, then that’s what I’m gonna do.”

Nelly was smiling, but Kuntz looked somewhat awkward.

"Just as the rumors say, you're stronger than the Guild Director"

He spoke quietly, but Nelly still heard him.

"There were rumors like that, huh? I still don't think I can beat my brother, but if you're curious, I guess we could see." Nelly stopped leaning against the wall and called out to the two dueling men. "Brother, you'll be fighting me next. Got another match in you?"

"What?! Ack!" Distracted by Nelly's shout, Thedias let Riot strike his leg and throw him off-balance.

In the end, the three Wolveriés faced off against one another until they were called for lunch.

"Well, the rumors were *close* to true," was Kuntz's conclusion. "Who's stronger than who isn't really important. *All* the Wolveriés are strong. That's what matters."

Sara couldn't help laughing. Nelly was all about putting things into practice immediately and training as much as possible, but it made sense if this was the environment she'd been raised in. Since Nelly was so kind, however, it must have been difficult for her to keep winning against people and being in a superior position to them.

After a tense stay for Kuntz in the mansion that night, he left with Allen the next morning.

Allen said his thanks for the family's hospitality, then turned to Sara. "I'm heading to the dungeon as a Hunter now, but I haven't given up on getting you to join me, Sara."

"What? What's that supposed to mean?" Sara laughed.

"I know you're thinking about becoming an apothecary now, even though you said you didn't want to at first. But I think you're just letting Chris push you around," Allen said sternly. "That means if I put in the effort, I might still be able to convince you to become a Hunter."

Sara wasn't sure that was exactly true.

"You're not as freaked out by monsters as you say you are, Sara. I bet you'd be fine with bug monsters as long as you got used to them too. You were fine with the butterflies, right?"

"I guess I was. Huh?" Butterflies were definitely bugs, but she'd never had an issue with them or dragonflies.

"They're actually not as scary when they're bigger. You could handle them, Sara, I'm sure of it."

"I dunno..." What he was saying was starting to make sense to her, so she shook her head. She had to remember the mountain wolves. Those were only scarier the bigger they were.

Before Sara could reiterate her position on becoming a Hunter, Allen made himself scarce. Why did everyone want to decide Sara's future for her anyway?

"You sure are popular, Sara."

"You're just having fun with this, aren't you, Nelly?"

Nelly never told Sara what to do. That, at least, always comforted her.

Nelly's brother Thed didn't live in the mansion with her father, but in a place they had purchased from another noble, who had been using it as a vacation home. "Once you're settled, you should come visit. And if you don't want to stay here, you can come stay with me, Allen, Kuntz," he said, but his house would likely be even more uncomfortable for them than the lord's.

"We're not seeing any seven-colored swallowtails in Stock anymore, and we've dealt with all the white moonlight mushrooms. We couldn't feasibly get rid of all the spores though, so I'm sure they'll be back. We might need to get the knights up there to take care of it with numbers."

"Hunters hunt monsters and knights keep the peace, right?" Sara remembered Riot's words.

"Indeed. And it seems it's not monsters Stock needs to worry about. So this has

nothing to do with you and Sara, Neffie," Thedias murmured before making himself scarce.

"Thed only came by to give you an update on Stock since he figured you'd be wondering how they were doing. He said there weren't any new cases of paralysis after you left," Nelly explained.

"Thank goodness," Sara sighed. She thought back to the young apothecary who'd been dispatched with Kuntz. She was glad he hadn't had to endure too much difficulty after they were gone.

That day, Sara received her hand-me-down potion-brewing gear from Chris and started her lessons. Nelly watched fondly. When they were all alone in their tower room that night, she said, "Think I should get back to hunting soon."

"I guess so," Sara agreed.

She'd been taking a break to accompany Sara, but Nelly was normally so passionate about her work that she never took so much as a day off. Sara wouldn't go so far as to say she hated relaxing or anything like that, but she'd been wondering for a while now if Nelly did want to go back to hunting, so this confirmed her suspicions. She nodded her head firmly.

"Doesn't seem like I need to worry about Allen, so I think I might go into the dungeon. It's been a while."

"Sounds like a good idea. I've gotten my sightseeing fix, so I'll start working on learning how to make potions after I gather plants tomorrow."

If they just did the same stuff they had today, Nelly really would be doing nothing all day, every day.

"Thanks. Problem with dungeons like these is they're not like the Dark Mountain, though..."

"There's a problem?" Sara couldn't imagine what she might mean.

"The monsters are freakishly strong on the Dark Mountain. There were wyverns flying around even up by the caretaker's cabin, but normally you don't see things like that until way down in the lower floors of a dungeon."

"What about mountain wolves?"

"Same thing. Forest wolves and steel armadillos start showing up in the middle floors."

Sara's mouth fell open. She'd been sort of aware that only strong monsters showed up on the Dark Mountain, but she'd never thought to compare it to other dungeons since she had no interest in them.

"Frankly speaking, the fact that you made it down to Rosa from the Dark Mountain means you're strong enough to make it down into the deepest floors of Rosa's dungeons."

"And... I was saying I didn't want to go down into them 'cause I was scared of *horned rabbits*?"

"Well... yep." Nelly looked aside awkwardly, but her lips were curled into a slight smile.

It was a bit late for it now, but Sara turned bright red. "That's so embarrassing! I bet Vince was judging me so much! Actually, now that I think about it, he did have that look on his face sometimes, didn't he? Aaagh, that's so *embarrassing*!"

Sara rolled around on her bed and shoved her face into the covers before popping up again with a realization. She couldn't make this conversation all about herself. Sara refocused the conversation on Nelly, trying to convince herself that it wasn't just a way to deflect from her embarrassment.

"That's not important right now. We were talking about what the problem with the dungeon is."

Nelly chuckled and nodded, explaining, "Basically, if I want to be satisfied hunting something at my level, I have to go all the way down into the deepest levels. Even if I ignore all the monsters on the way and speed down with physical strengthening, it'll still take two days to reach the depths. I'd probably stay down there hunting for another two or three days and then it'd be another two days to get back out."

"So if you want to go into the dungeon, you won't be back for a whole week."

"If I go all the way to the depths, yeah. Honestly, though, it's boring fighting the monsters in the other areas."

"That makes sense."

Sara could understand what Nelly was saying. Whether it was for your hobby or for work, you always wanted to give everything you had, and if you could, you wanted to improve. That was only natural.

"So I'll be all alone here while you're gone." Sara sat down on her bed and crossed her arms, thinking.

On the Dark Mountain, even when Nelly wasn't around, she always came home at night, and the days they spent together were fun. If she left to go into the dungeon, Sara would have to spend a whole week without her, having dinner alone with Riot each night.

Riot used his muscles to think just like Nelly did, but he was at least kind to Sara. He wouldn't suddenly try to attack her with his sword or anything. She supposed she could find somewhere to stay in town too, but considering Nelly's family members were supposed to be her official guardians now, she figured it would be better for her to stay in the mansion for a little longer.

"I guess it would just mean you'd be eating alone with my father a lot."

Sara's own father had also been the sort to sour the mood around the table with lame jokes. She'd spent plenty of time interacting with people older than she was at her job as well, so she'd be fine.

"It's okay, Nelly. I'll be all right." Sara uncrossed her arms and smiled at Nelly. She'd just have to fight through her loneliness. "Let's just try it and see what happens." If they didn't try it, they'd never know how it would go.

"That's my Sara. Always up for a challenge, just like me."

"Not that I want to be..." Sara sighed heavily, thinking back to that day when Nelly first told her to let a wolf bite her.

But this wasn't just about Nelly. Sara had things she needed to do too. Chris seemed to be enjoying his current circumstances, but Sara knew that a child with only a half-baked determination to follow in his footsteps couldn't keep monopolizing the time of such a skilled apothecary. Sara was thirteen now. She had to face her own future at some point.

Nelly would go hunting, spending days in the dungeon, and Sara would gather plants and learn how to make potions with Chris. Knowing that her life would be changing, Sara felt a little anxious about being apart from Nelly, but she also felt excited about doing something different. That is, until the next morning came.

"You're going back to hunting, Nef? I suppose I'll have to change my plans as well, then," Chris said when Nelly broached the topic. They were drinking tea in the dining room after breakfast.

"Change your plans? Weren't you going to teach Sara how to brew potions?"

"Well, that will have to come later."

Sara was gobsmacked. Chris was the one who'd decided he'd be teaching her in the first place.

"Nef, you may have forgotten this after spending so much time on the Dark Mountain, but even if the monsters there are weaker, it's rough staying in a dungeon. And it's not just monsters you have to look out for down there but other Hunters."

"I know that. But—"

"But nothing. There's a reason why it's recommended that you take a party with you, especially to the deeper floors. I know how strong you are, Nef, but think about how Sara would feel if something happened to you, however unlikely that might be."

Nelly looked aside awkwardly. Sara thought hunting all by herself on the Dark Mountain had been more dangerous, but maybe it wasn't.

"Sure, but how am I supposed to find someone willing to team up with me? Especially in Hydrangea, where no one knows me. The whole reason I'm doing this is because I don't want to have to lower myself to someone else's level."

As strong as Nelly was, it was unlikely she'd be able to find someone to party up with her even temporarily. Sara was despondent thinking about Nelly being all alone again.

"I'll team up with you."

Sara couldn't keep up with the conversation the two of them were having. What did Chris mean? Chris might have been strong, but he was an apothecary, wasn't he?

"That's crazy. I can't keep an apothecary of your talents all to myself. And what if something happened to *you*? I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

"That's the same way I feel, Nef. I don't even want to think about losing you." Chris's eyes were serious. "But honestly, you should be considering Sara over me. Do you really want her to have to go through losing you? Of course, I assume I would *also* be someone she would be upset to lose."

"Err..."

Sara realized it was naive of her to assume Nelly would be fine no matter what. If it would raise her chances of coming back safely even a little bit, then she'd rather Chris was with Nelly than with Sara.

"Hold it!"

Sara almost jumped out of her skin when a woman's voice suddenly entered the conversation.

"How rude of you to join us, Caren." Chris frowned at the sudden intruder, but he was exactly right. And wasn't this a private room in the lord's residence?

"Well, I'm the guildmaster of the Apothecary's Guild. You shouldn't be surprised that I'm here."

Having the right to be in someone's home wasn't grounds to barge into a conversation as far as Sara was concerned, but the woman's pushiness certainly marked her as someone who'd worked with Chris before. Incidentally, Riot stood behind Caren with an apologetic look on his face, so she'd doubtless pushed past him to get inside.

"It must be the work of the Goddess for Master Chris to come here under the circumstances he did. You caught me off guard showing up like you did yesterday, but I'd like to extend you an official invitation from the Guild. We can't have you going into the dungeon."

Nelly had a look on her face as if to say "See?" while Chris was clearly irritated.

"I heard something interesting from Caren too, Chris. I think you should hear what she has to say whether or not you decide to help her out."

"Hmm. If you say so, Ri." Chris nodded reluctantly and Caren and Riot took a seat.

"It started with seven-colored swallowtails."

"Seven-colored swallowtails." The irritation faded from Chris's face.

"We dispatched a young apothecary to Stock to deal with some seven-colored swallowtails carrying a paralysis poison. And now we're seeing the same monsters in Hydrangea's dungeon."

That was a strange coincidence. But monsters stayed in dungeons, didn't they?

"When there are too many of them, monsters can leave dungeons," Nelly said, answering the question that must have been written on Sara's face. "That's why I was up on the Dark Mountain, to prevent that from happening."

"I see." Sara nodded.

"Everyone knows that. What's the deal with the kid?" Caren gave Sara a suspicious look. Sara's confusion may have derailed their conversation a bit, but Caren was the one who had interrupted their chat with this discussion in the first place, so Sara was a little annoyed.

"It's none of your business. There's no need to pry. Finish what you were saying." Nelly's curt dismissal of the woman cleared Sara's irritation away. "It's not that rare for seven-colored swallowtails in a dungeon to have paralysis poison," she added.

"It's not, but the more of them there are, the more likely Hunters are to be hit with the poison, so more of them are trying to buy antiparalytics than usual."

"Meaning?"

"We don't have enough of them," said Caren.

Sara shrugged as if to say "Good grief." She thought back to the frantic antidote-making in Camellia. Were they about to be asked to help out with making antiparalytics? Or would it be gathering paralysis herbs? Sara recalled all the paralysis herbs she'd picked on the road. She hadn't sold any of them yet, so she should still have plenty.

"The poison on a seven-colored swallowtail should be treatable with just a tenth or a

fifth of a bottle of antiparalytic," Chris pointed out.

"Yes, but just because you only need a fifth of a potion doesn't mean we can only sell a fifth of one. It's because the poison is trivial and people want to stock up 'just in case' that we're running out. At this rate, we won't have any when someone shows up really needing treatment."

When Sara was helping out, she had in fact been instructed to divide one bottle into ten different servings for ten people. But if you didn't know how much to use, you'd probably just take a whole bottle.

"Do potion leftovers have less effect than fresh ones?" Sara asked.

"Yes. The components start to break down, so it's recommended to buy a new bottle to replace any you use," Caren responded.

Well, that answered that.

"I understand your circumstances. But what is it you want me to do?" Chris asked calmly.

"We can't increase our stock of paralysis herbs right away, but we've requested for the white moonlight mushrooms growing in the dungeon to be gathered, so we want to see if we can synthesize an antiparalytic from the mushrooms' poison. I want your help with that research."

Sara glanced over at Chris. He'd already gathered a great number of white moonlight mushrooms for just such research. He'd even borrowed a room in the knight garrison to do it. Sara had even seen him nodding to himself looking satisfied, so she couldn't imagine the results of his research were all that disheartening. Sara waited for Chris to explain all that.

"I decline."

Sara looked over at him in shock. It wasn't like Chris was nice to everyone; in fact, he was more likely to express no interest at all in someone than anything else. But he never hesitated to help when a situation called for an apothecary, just like he had in Camellia and Stock. Even when he was promised nothing in exchange.

So Sara wasn't expecting him to turn down a request from the Apothecary's Guild like

this. Not only that, she found she trusted Chris enough to assume that he had a reason to decline.

"Why?! Wasn't it you who taught me to anticipate possible problems and plan for them, Master Chris?"

"Caren," Chris said quietly. "No, Guildmaster of Hydrangea's Apothecary's Guild. I am nothing more than a traveling apothecary. I would ask that you not refer to me as 'Master Chris.'"

"But Master Chris—" After a sharp glare from Chris, Caren amended herself. "Chris..."

"I have something more important to be doing right now. Please return to the Guild."

Caren glared at Nelly, who'd been watching the proceedings with amusement. "It's your fault Master Chris—*Chris* left the capital. You must be the reason this time too."

Well, Chris himself said that he went to Rosa to chase after Nelly. According to Nelly, he'd even come all the way to the Dark Mountain at first. Depending on how you looked at things, Sara supposed you could say it *was* Nelly's fault that Chris left the capital. Nelly, however, just shrugged her shoulders exasperatedly.

"'My fault'? What is that supposed to mean? Chris left the capital because he wanted to. He's just doing what he likes this time too."

What happened to, "I can't keep an apothecary of your talents all to myself"? Sara agreed with Nelly, though. Anyone with important skills was in high demand with the people around them. And if you bowed to those people's desires too much, you'd end up just like Nelly, trapped up on the Dark Mountain.

That was why Sara felt like Nelly understood and respected Chris a lot more than someone like Caren, who only *professed* to hold him in high esteem. All of Sara's fuzzy feelings evaporated at Chris's next words, however.

"Oh, but if you need an extra hand, I can lend you Sara."

"What? You can't do that!" Sara stood from her chair with a clatter.

"I was just going to teach her how to brew potions. In exchange for her help, you can teach her. What do you say?"

What was she, an extra set of tools he had lying around? She protested, naturally.
“What are you even saying? I’m not doing that!”

But the pair just kept on going, ignoring what she had to say.

“Very well. If *you insist*, Master Chris, err, Chris, then I suppose I must.”

“Will you all listen to me?! Aah, hey!” Sara shouted.

With an apologetic look, Nelly vanished from the room with Chris, leaving Sara there with Caren and Riot.

“He’s always so selfish,” Caren muttered with a sigh, but it was Sara who was at the mercy of his selfishness. Caren hardly had a right to complain, as far as Sara was concerned.

Anyway, Nelly wasn’t supposed to be planning on spending a week in the dungeon out of nowhere. She was just going to check it out to start, heading down deeper little by little, Sara thought. Chris had been worried about her, but even on the Dark Mountain, Nelly was always careful. Now because of Caren, she’d practically fled the scene. And Chris had gone with her. Sara felt she was more than entitled to a little anger.

“True, Chris can be self-serving, but I think *you’re* the selfish one in this case,” she snapped. Caren may have been her future boss, but Sara had to tell her how she felt. Caren looked down at her like she was noticing her for the first time. “I don’t know how much you heard, but Nelly didn’t even want Chris to go into the dungeon with her, since he’s such an important apothecary.”

“But...”

“Everyone knows how impressive he is. But I think *he* should be the one to decide how to use his abilities.”

Honestly, Sara hadn’t even said all she wanted to say at this point. Chris only wanted to go into the dungeon to make sure Nelly was safe. If he’d gone with Caren instead, Nelly would have gone into the dungeon on her own regardless of the danger. Sara couldn’t bring herself to like Caren, knowing that she didn’t have a shred of concern for Nelly.

“I thought you were just some kid tagging along with Master Chris, but you can really

dish it out, can't you?" Caren said snidely.

Sara was fed up. She knew nothing she could say would get through to a pushy type like her. There was no point in saying anything more to her.

She stood up. Despite what Chris had said, Sara had never actually asked him to teach her how to make potions. She'd rather gaze out at the lake and gather medicinal plants if the alternative was getting dragged into yet more trouble.

"Where are you going?" Caren asked her.

"The lake," Sara answered curtly.

Caren shrugged at Sara's rebellious attitude. "We're going to the Apothecary's Guild. Master Chris told me to teach you how to make potions. I don't know when he'll be back, but what can I do other than what he's asked of me? Gives me an extra set of hands too."

That last part was probably what she really cared about. But Sara couldn't deny that part of her *did* want to go learn about potions.

Thus was Sara unceremoniously tossed into an Apothecary's Guild where she hardly knew anyone, but she did like new experiences, so she wasn't too broken up about it. This was her first new place and new people in a while.

"Let's go, then," Sara said, which confused Caren.

"Huh?"

"Huh?" she parroted. They were going to the Apothecary's Guild, weren't they? Sara cocked her head.

"Don't you have to get ready?"

"All good," Sara said, patting the storage pouch at her waist.

"You've got a storage pouch," Caren said, with a, "No wonder you're so spoiled," left implied.

"I bought it with my own money, of course," Sara clarified. "From selling medicinal

plants."

"Is that right?"

Sara turned to Riot, who was watching over the two of them somewhat worriedly, and bowed her head. "Well, I'm sorry, Mr. Riot, but it appears Nelly and Chris have gone off to the dungeon. At the most, they should be gone for a week or so."

"It *was* rather sudden, wasn't it?"

"Well, something unexpected happened," Sara said with a pointed look at Caren. "Apparently, I'll be going to the Apothecary's Guild now. I'll be back in the evening, though." She smiled, implying that she was looking forward to having dinner with him.

"Right. Good luck. I'll be waiting for you."

Sara blithely began to walk toward town, but a flustered Caren stopped her and they got into a carriage together instead. Sara might not have liked her much, but Caren *was* supposed to be teaching her this and that. It was an awkward carriage ride, but Sara at least decided she could afford to drop the surly attitude.

"So, how much have you learned from Master Chris at this point?"

Sara thought to herself. Caren was asking about her education as an apothecary. Recalling Chris's lessons, Sara answered, "Let's see... He just taught me about a plant that grows near the water recently. It has about a fifth of the effect of a healing herb and it only gets weaker when it's processed, so it should be consumed directly in emergencies. It's also served in meat dishes sometimes."

"I didn't even know that. You don't learn anything about gathering plants in the capital." Caren had a solemn look on her face.

"In Camellia, we were extracting the poison from the glands of poison bog frogs and brewing them into antidotes. All I did was bottle the completed potions, though."

"So you didn't do any extracting yourself. That's fine, but you're not getting very balanced lessons, are you? Usually, you start by learning to differentiate medicinal plants so you can purchase them for the guild. Then it's endless mashing up healing herbs. You gotta keep at that for at least a year before you learn how to make potions."

Well, she didn't start out wanting to be an apothecary. She had just been helping out here and there whenever she was asked to, but she didn't feel like explaining that.

"I gathered plants to make a living, so I think I can tell them apart."

"It's not just healing herbs, you know. There's stuff like mana herbs too," Caren said condescendingly, but Sara just nodded.

"Yes. I gathered mana herbs, poison herbs, paralysis herbs, all six of the varieties in my medicinal plant guide often, so I can tell at least those apart."

"Yeah, right." Caren sneered, but Sara's expression remained neutral. "Wait, really?"

"Yes. I worked hard enough to afford a storage pouch and some camping supplies, among other things."

"I-I see. I guess it *would* be pretty hard to afford all that if you were only gathering healing herbs. Well, I'll test your knowledge later," she added on at the end almost as if to reassure herself.

They were silent the rest of the way to the Apothecary's Guild, but Sara had an understanding of her role now. She'd be grinding up healing herbs for the time being. Ted had taught her how to do that in Camellia, but that had only been for a few weeks. If you were supposed to keep at it for a whole year, then Sara would probably be grinding up healing herbs in the Apothecary's Guild for quite a while.

Well, she had plenty of time. She also had the stamina and willpower to no longer collapse when she worked hard. All she had to do now was learn what she could in a new environment. Once she'd made up her mind about this, she didn't feel so bad anymore.

The carriage finally stopped in front of the Apothecary's Guild. Other apothecaries spilled out from the building as if they'd been waiting for their arrival. They all looked pretty young.

"Where's Master Chris? Where's Master Chris?"

"What is he, an idol?" Sara couldn't help remarking, seeing the restless apothecaries.

Caren shrugged her shoulders. "Master Chris headed for the dungeon with a Hunter.

He declined my request for assistance.”

As the apothecaries all groaned in disappointment, Sara got out of the carriage as well, feeling a bit guilty that she was the only one who'd come. But it wasn't Sara's fault that Chris wasn't here. In fact, Sara was the biggest victim here.

“This girl's a prospective apothecary Master Chris left with us to study. Uhh...”

“Sara. It's nice to meet you all.”

After Sara's concise greeting, the apothecaries all filed back inside, looking obviously disappointed. Sara was a bit disappointed too, but she figured it was a better response than when she'd first met Ted, which made it sting a lot less. And even if she was interested in the work of an apothecary, she really didn't expect much from their personalities at this point.

Sara turned to Caren. “What would you like me to do today?”

“You've got pretty thick skin, huh?” Caren said, exasperated, but Sara didn't know what she meant. This was nothing compared to being unable to go outside for fear of mountain wolves, or tediously studying medicinal plants up on the Dark Mountain, or all she'd been through in Rosa. “Well, let's see. Sort the plants we were just delivered, I'd say.”

“Very well.”

Sara had been in this building just the day before. She strode in and lifted the board to head behind the counter, peeking into the work area in the back. Rosa's Apothecary's Guild was similar, as was the one in Camellia. She was pretty used to buildings like this at this point.

There were several large tables in the workspace as well as a counter looping all around the room. On a table to the right was a pile of white moonlight mushrooms, while a table to the left had a mountain of healing herbs.

“Scuse mee. I was asked to help sort a delivery?”

“Oh? I thought you were here to study. If you can already tell plants apart, you'll be a real help.”

A young person beckoned Sara over to the healing herbs. From what she could see, there were around ten apothecaries here, an even mix of men and women. It was pretty busy in the back area. The apothecary she'd met in Stock was here too, and she was relieved to get a friendly wave from him. The person currently looking over the healing herbs looked to be on the younger end of those present.

"We purchased these healing herbs from the capital, but whoever originally bought them wasn't very good... There are weeds mixed in, and they're not all the same lengths. Can you sort the healing herbs from the weeds and organize them by length?"

"I can do that. Do you want ones around this length?" Sara picked up a healing herb that was around the length that she picked them.

"Yes, that's right. Put all the good-looking ones in this basket and the ones that are shorter or just scraps in here. The weeds go in the basket underneath."

"Got it."

She was surprised that her work started at simply sorting herbs instead of grinding them up, but this was fun enough for her. Sara faced the table cheerfully.

"Hm-hm-hmm, hmm..."

By the time Sara caught herself humming a little tune, the pile of healing herbs on the table had shrunk considerably. It was absolutely nothing but healing herbs and weeds, so she was a little disappointed not to find anything more exciting in the pile.

When she reached out to the rest of the healing herbs, she realized the air in the room felt a little strange. She looked up to find the rest of the apothecaries staring at her with their mouths hanging open. Sara looked herself over, flustered. She was just wearing her normal tunic and pants that were easy to work in, and she wasn't having a bad hair day or anything.

"Let me see those." One of the apothecaries strode over to her and picked up the basket of healing herbs. "Damn, they're all perfect."

This time, it was Sara's turn to gape. Wasn't that obvious? It was what she'd been asked to do. And why was he baffled that she'd done a good job?

"These are all weeds too. Not only are there no mistakes, they're sorted perfectly by

length as well."

"Well, yes... That's what I was told to do," Sara said, though she might have been making a somewhat dopey face.

"Well, do this next, then. Grind up the healing herb scraps."

It was rather economical to use even the scraps that had been cut off from properly trimmed herbs, but they probably only used these so that they didn't waste plants on practicing trainees.

"Okay. Should I use my own mortar?"

"Hold on a second!"

"Waugh!"

Caren suddenly appeared from who-knows-where.

"I-I-Is that mortar Master Chris's?" she asked.

"Yes. It's a hand-me-down," said Sara.

"What?!"

What was she so shocked about? Sara had only received Chris's hand-me-downs because they hadn't been able to buy new equipment here the day before.

"I'll buy it. How much do you want for it?"

"Yikes..." Sara took a step back without thinking. She *had* had the thought yesterday that you could never underestimate fans, but she couldn't help but balk in the face of actually meeting these fanatics. She'd probably pay whatever ridiculous sum Sara asked for. Sara flicked a little abacus in her mind for a moment, but the tools had technically been a gift, so she really didn't think she could just get rid of them.

"I may have been given these, but I don't think it's my place to sell them. Sorry..."

"Tch. You're a tough one."

Caren was fierce enough that Sara felt like she had to put a hand on her pouch to protect it.



"Fine. We'll just have to lend you one of ours."

She didn't want to dirty Chris's precious hand-me-downs, Sara guessed. But she'd already used them yesterday, and since they were hers now, the next person to use them would be using *Sara's* hand-me-downs, she thought with a smirk.

She plucked the leaves from the stems and put them in the mortar, but she couldn't use too little or too much. Normally, you ground up a bundle of ten at a time, but Sara was working with scraps, so she eyeballed what she had until it looked like a bundle's worth.

She'd wondered if you could just grind them up with magic like a food processor, but she couldn't picture the process well enough. It was her life's greatest shame when she'd scattered a bundle of healing herbs all over the floor in Camellia and Ted had reprimanded her for it.

She really felt like she should be able to figure something out, but nothing was coming to mind at the moment, so she sat down and diligently ground the herbs up with her pestle. You couldn't do this too fast, since it was bad if the herbs got too warm while you were grinding them up. She moved her hands at a careful, steady speed. Ted had actually been a pretty good teacher. His words came to mind as she worked and she thought somewhat fondly of those busy days in Camellia. Was Ted working without clashing with anyone? Probably not, Sara thought with a smile.

Before she knew it, the herbs were looking good. They had a deep green color, like concentrated vegetable juice.

"There we go. Waugh!"

Sara stood up, satisfied with her work, and the apothecaries were all looking at her again. It scared her. She wished they'd stop.

"Let me see that." The apothecary who'd given her her instructions earlier took the mortar from her and looked it over from several angles. Sara found it a little funny, since it reminded her of tea ceremony etiquette back in Japan. "How much of the herbs did you use?"

"I just eyeballed an amount that looked the same as ten herbs."

"Got it. I'm borrowing this, okay?"

The apothecary took the mortar over to the wall and began making potions with the herbs.

Finally getting a chance to breathe, Sara looked around and found some people grinding herbs like she had just been or making potions like that other apothecary. About half of them were over at the table with the white moonlight mushrooms. She headed over there since she hadn't been told to do anything else.

Drops of the nectar seven-colored swallowtails enjoyed welled up in the center of the halved mushrooms. The apothecaries were scooping the nectar up with spatulas and putting it in containers that looked like beakers. Once they were done, they disposed of the mushrooms and cut open new ones.

More experienced apothecaries were taking the nectar and adding water to it, warming it up in a heat bath. Then they poured it into a blue liquid and stirred it at a steady rate, adding mana to it. Once the blue color became translucent, they pulled the stirrer from the liquid.

"Phew. It's nice that we don't have to grind them up, but they're not very potent if they're only about a fifth as effective as a normal antiparalytic."

They were making antiparalytics from the white moonlight mushrooms, apparently.

Caren, who'd been watching them work up close, shrugged her shoulders. "Don't have to? We *can't* grind them up, because they're even less effective when you do that. But we're not going to be able to get many paralysis herbs, so I guess we'll just have to sell these cheap as a seven-colored swallowtail countermeasure."

Sara was surprised to hear all this. Didn't that mean they'd already perfected the process that Caren had asked for Chris's help with? Sara almost lashed out at Caren for bothering Chris and Nelly when she didn't actually need his help, but she held her tongue.

Chris had likely been aware of all this. He seemed to be getting close to perfecting his own antiparalytic, so he must have known that Caren would be able to do the same. He also knew that the antiparalytics were only an excuse and what Caren really wanted was for him to help out at the Apothecary's Guild.

If there were someone she should honestly be criticizing, it was Chris, who had lent her out to the Guild. Sara sighed.

“Hey! Could you grind up a regular bundle of healing herbs this time?”

By the time Sara was finished pondering, she had received a new instruction, and so she returned to her earlier spot. She felt like the guy giving her directions was being a little nicer by this point.

“It’s lunch after that, so just keep it up a little longer.”

“Got it.”

He *was* being nicer. That was much better than being bullied, Sara thought as she plucked leaves from the herbs and dropped them in her mortar. By the time she’d finished grinding them up, her stomach *was* rumbling.

“Okay, lunchtime!”

Compared to the frantic work they’d done in Camellia, grinding up some herbs wasn’t hard at all. Sara was a bit nervous being all alone in a place where she didn’t really know anyone, though, so she was relieved when lunchtime finally came around.

However, this was where things got difficult. The first hurdle when it came to working in a new place was figuring out what everyone did for lunch. Did everyone bring their lunch or buy it? Did they all sit around a table or eat on their own? Or did they go out to eat? Of course, since going out for lunch would have knocked Sara out in her old life, she’d only had two options in Japan: bring lunch or buy it on the way to work.

While she was considering all this, someone went around and passed out familiar-looking baskets from a storage box that was sitting in a corner of the room.

“Oh, those are the lunch boxes from the Guild.”

“Yep. Here’s one for you.”

“Oh! Thank you!”

Even Sara got one. She set it on the table where she’d been sorting plants earlier and removed the lid. Warm air and a delicious scent wafted out from the box.

“The food comes out of the box hot. I guess they actually do that in some places.”

The lunch boxes in Rosa had been sold cold originally, but since Sara started offering her warming up service when she sold them, by the time she left town, they were starting to be sold warm.

"It's just here. The ones at the Hunter's Guild are sold cold," one of the apothecaries told her. "Apothecaries tend to forget to eat when they're brewing potions."

"I guess that makes sense."

Chris and Ted had made sure to eat properly at least, Sara thought. They were both completely uninterested in anything but apothecary work though, so she could easily see what her new coworker meant.

"That's why the first thing Master Caren did when she took over here was take a fee for lunch and make sure everyone got one. She says it makes no sense for an apothecary to be unhealthy."

It was shrewd of her to take a fee for it, but since lunches would cost fifteen hundred gil per person, even if you returned the box, it *would* be pretty pricey to feed ten people every day for free.

"She negotiated with the vendors to put them in a storage bag while they were still hot in exchange for buying them in bulk regularly, so now we always get a warm lunch. Nobody wants to take the time to go out to eat anyway."

"It's nice when they're hot, isn't it?" Sara commented, munching on her warm lunch. "I don't get why the vendors don't just supply them to the Hunter's Guild hot too. There were a lot of Hunters who wanted their lunches heated up in Rosa."

"Sounds like they could if there was demand from the Guild."

Some of the other apothecaries joined in on the conversation, evidently having been listening in.

"You came from Rosa? Do you know Ted?"

"I do! He's the one who taught me how to grind up herbs."

"No way!"

Sara had proved that she could do the basics even though this was her first day on the job, so the other apothecaries' indifference and annoyance had faded considerably since the morning. Many of them had studied in the capital and quite a few of them knew Ted, so they had plenty to talk about.

"The kid's only ground up healing herbs before, so before teaching her how to make potions, I want her to know how to handle mana herbs and poison herbs first."

In the afternoon, she was finally doing things a real apprentice apothecary might do.

"Mana herbs are valuable, and they're often used in small amounts for things like antidotes, so you only grind them one at a time. Always just one."

She was glad for the apothecary's lessons, and that he was going out of his way to teach them to her even though they were so busy. Now that she was finally doing something different from what she was used to, she fully concentrated on her task. But before she could finish, there was a commotion near the building's entrance.

"M-M-M-Master Chris is here! He says he's here for Sara!"

It was the young apothecary who had been tending the store counter. She must have known what Chris looked like from the day before. Sara sighed with relief. Honestly speaking, she'd been terribly worried about Nelly and Chris disappearing into the dungeon for an entire week almost without warning. Plus, if Chris was here, that meant Nelly was here too.

"Pardon me."

"Aaah!"

"Gwaaah!"

There were a few deeper voices mixed in with the shrill, girlish squeals, and Sara was newly impressed with the breadth of Chris's fandom. She was surprised and delighted to hear that he'd come to fetch her, but she also found it a bit strange. Hadn't he offered Sara up in sacrifice because he wanted to avoid coming to the Apothecary's Guild at all?

"That's quite enough of that," Chris said flatly, raising an admonishing hand.

"He's used to this, eh?" Sara muttered. If he heard her, Chris didn't react to her voice, though Nelly was standing behind him looking amused, which improved Sara's mood rather dramatically.

"So, Caren," Chris started. For supposedly having come to fetch her, he hadn't so much as glanced Sara's way yet. "You've finished it, haven't you? Let me see your white moonlight mushroom antiparalytic."

"You saw through me, huh?" Caren said sulkily. She got what she deserved for trying to trick Chris into coming to the Guild, as far as Sara was concerned. While Caren went to retrieve the medicine in question, Chris peered attentively at the halved mushrooms on the table and the pots and beakers where the potions were brewing. "This is the finished product," she said.

"Hmm." Chris opened the bottle without hesitation and let a drop fall onto his hand, licking it up. "Sara."

"Right." Sara hurried over to him and held out her hand. He placed a drop of the potion on her palm. "So I can swallow this one?"

She followed Chris's example and licked up the drop, seeing how it tasted. There was a little tingle, but it didn't make her tongue go numb. She could tell that it was a lot weaker than a normal antiparalytic.

"About a fifth as effective as a regular antiparalytic, eh? Still, it's more than enough to deal with the poison of a seven-colored swallowtail."

Sighs of wonder went through the guildhall. Not only had Chris realized Caren was already working on a new antiparalytic, he'd surmised its exact efficacy from sampling a single drop of the potion. The rest had probably heard rumors, but had no idea what Chris was actually capable of.

Chris took a potion bottle out of his pouch. Inside was an antiparalytic. "This is one I synthesized myself from white moonlight mushrooms. Sara?"

He held out the potion for her to try a drop of it. Caren was giving her a rather frightening look, but she hesitantly accepted a drop of the liquid and placed it on her tongue.

"Well, it's a little easier to drink than the other one, since it doesn't tingle, but I have

no idea how effective it is as a potion."

Chris sighed at her honest appraisal, but what was he expecting? "It has about a tenth the effect of a normal antiparalytic. This is more than enough to cure a little numbness of the arms and legs brought on by accidentally consuming a white moonlight mushroom. Hence, it should suffice for a light dusting of seven-colored swallowtail scales as well."

"Let me try it too." Caren took the bottle and tried a drop, then raised an eyebrow. She must have sensed just how different the two potions were.

"I'd like the rest of the apothecaries here to compare the two potions as well," Chris said, handing them to a nearby apothecary and turning to Sara. "Were there differences in our methods?"

Caren's eyes bored into Sara again. She felt like she was under attack from two fronts. "From what I could tell, they were using the same process you did, Chris. If there was a difference, it was probably just the amount of water you added and... maybe the temperature?"

"The temperature?" Chris asked.

Sara thought back to what she'd seen that morning. "Well, I saw them using a heat bath, but I couldn't say how warm the potion actually got. And I don't know how warm your potions were either." She'd only watched him work out of the corner of her eye, so how was she to know what was different about the process?

"So she says, Caren."

"I hate to admit it, but she's probably right." As usual, Caren was glaring at Sara as she spoke.

"I figured you could create a potion on your own. The only thing I wasn't sure of was how it would turn out compared to mine, but I didn't think you'd need my help."

"Master Chris..."

"It's just Chris. I've no title at the moment."

Caren was giving Chris a heated look. Sara was just glad her eyes were finally on

someone else. Why couldn't he have just told her that in the first place? Of course, Chris ignored Caren's emotions completely and called out to Nelly, who was standing languidly by the door, instead.

"Nef."

"Here's good?" Nelly strode over to the table and started emptying white moonlight mushrooms from the pouch at her waist. "You put in a request with the Hunter's Guild, right?"

"Y-Yes. We couldn't offer much in the way of a reward, so this helps a lot, honestly. These aren't something we usually buy, but we'll pay the same price for them that we pay for healing herbs. Not many people want to bring them in since they take up so much space, though."

The big ones were practically an armful, so it would be difficult to convince Hunters to gather them, since they needed as much space as possible in their bags to carry more lucrative monster parts.

"We picked these on the higher floors of the dungeon. Sure enough, there are white moonlight mushrooms all over the place, and seven-colored swallowtails nearby. Most Hunters just ignore them, but they're proving an annoyance to the younger kids." Nelly shook her head. "Soon as they go for one, they're doused in paralysis poison. And you can't tell which ones have the poison and which ones don't. It's hard to avoid the scales when you're removing the magic stones. Seems like everyone's stressed out about this."

She wasn't talking their ears off or anything, but Sara was still surprised to hear Nelly saying so much to someone she didn't really know. Glancing over in Sara's direction, Nelly smiled warmly.

"It was beautiful, though. Most of Hydrangea's dungeon is a meadow, not a cave. There's a ceiling instead of the sky above of course, but enough light gets in that the seven-colored swallowtails flying in the air look just magical."

Sara could practically picture it. The higher you went on the Dark Mountain, the fewer tall trees there were and the more short grasses. Wyverns flew above while elks grazed below and mountain wolves loafed about.

She had to admit the image was somewhat colored by the positive memories she

associated with the place, but she did think that seeing seven-colored swallowtails flying around up there would be a beautiful sight.

"Of course, there were little Hunters running around hopping mad underneath them," Chris added unnecessarily.

"You don't want to go see it?" Nelly asked her.

"H-Hmm..." Sara wasn't sure what to say. She *did* want to see more pretty things. "But there's big centipedes and stuff underneath the swallowtails, right?"

Nelly waved a hand in front of her face. "Oh, there's hardly any."

"But there are *some*." That was that as far as Sara was concerned.

Chris had wrapped up his discussion with the Apothecary's Guild while they carried on this little debate. "It seems to me like Hydrangea's in good hands with its current guildmaster, so I don't intend to involve myself further."

"B-But..."

She should just be happy that Chris thought she was doing a good job. That was what Sara thought, anyway.

"I enjoyed our foray into the dungeon, so I think I'll make a few more trips. Sara came in handy, didn't she?"

"Y-Yes. Her knowledge and skills are just very mismatched, so that will take some adjusting."

Chris smiled slightly. "The way you take stock of a newcomer and immediately consider how best to educate them speaks to how suited you are to be guildmaster, Caren."

Caren clutched her bright-red cheeks. She must have finally realized Chris was complimenting her.

"For now, you can come here and study every day, Sara."

"Okay."

Her two guardians wished for her to go into the dungeon and commute to the Apothecary's Guild respectively, so Sara chose the latter. On their way home, Nelly apologized to Sara.

"Honestly, I didn't care about what Chris wanted to do."

"That's not very nice, Nef."

She smoothly ignored Chris's protests. "I wasn't going to go down there for a week right away. I'd tell you if I were. We were only going to check things out today."

"I kind of figured, so it's okay." Nelly's concern warmed Sara's heart.

"But Chris has the right to do what he wants to do too. I haven't really paid it much mind until recently, but it seems I don't really like being told what to do. I guess I feel the same way about someone telling Chris what to do too."

Sara just barely stopped herself from saying, "What about Chris telling me what to do? That's okay?"

"And I knew you'd be okay on your own, Sara."

"Well, I'm happy you trust me."

They did different things during the day on the Dark Mountain, and Sara had been on her own the whole time Nelly was stuck in the capital. They might have been friends—family even—but Hunters and apprentice apothecaries had different work to do.

"Oh..."

"What's up, Sara?"

That was when Sara realized every time she'd pictured her future together with Nelly recently, it had been with her as an apprentice apothecary.

"I guess I want to be an apothecary..."

"Yes!" Chris exclaimed behind Nelly.

"Ah... Thought so. Man, I really wanted you to be a Hunter..." Nelly was disappointed.

It surprised Sara to realize this was the first time she'd actually said outright that she wanted Sara to be a Hunter. "Then I could teach you a bunch more and we could be together all the time."



"Even if I *did* become a Hunter, you'd be so far above my level that we'd hardly ever be together, wouldn't we?" Sara smiled wryly, but Nelly just looked at her with a completely straight face.

"If you can walk around on the Dark Mountain like you're taking a stroll through town, you can go anywhere, Sara."

"I guess you're right about that." Sara thought back nostalgically to her days strolling around the Dark Mountain and camping out with Nelly as part of her training. "But you don't *need* to hunt monsters just 'cause you go into a dungeon."

"S'pose not. You'll see other people hunting monsters here and there, though. I guess that would be hard for you. There are plenty of other Hunters around in most dungeons."

Sara appreciated how Nelly explained both the good and the bad.

"I was just tagging along with Nef instead of hunting myself today, but if you consider it from the point of view of an apothecary, plenty of medicinal plants grow inside dungeons. There are more mana herbs inside dungeons than outside of them." Chris happily explained to her how she could still do her gathering work inside dungeons.

"I'm not sure I can say I want to stay here in Hydrangea learning from Ms. Caren forever, but I *would* like to learn enough to be able to call myself an apothecary wherever we end up going after this."

Putting it into words like that helped Sara realize what she wanted. She wanted to keep traveling with Nelly. And wherever they traveled to, Nelly would work as a Hunter and Sara would work as an apothecary. They could still be together if they did that.

Maybe she'd fall in love and get married someday or find something else she wanted to do, but right now, there was an opportunity right in front of her to learn more about a profession she was interested in, so she decided she should take it.

"Wow, now that I've decided what I want to do, I'm kind of excited!"

"I'm happy for you." Nelly was always so kind.

"Would you like to make some potions tonight, Sara?" And Chris was always trying to

pack Sara's schedule full.

Sara turned him down flatly. "I'm tired from coming to a new place today, so I want to rest tonight."

"Wasn't tiring for us," Nelly added unhelpfully.

"True enough. It was more like a relaxing day out."

Not everyone thought the same way as a person who could make it into Rosa from the Dark Mountain in one day. Sara decided to take out her frustrations on the happy couple.

"So while I was slaving away in the Apothecary's Guild the two of you were having a nice date in the dungeon, eh?"

The two of them gaped at her for a moment before turning red.

"I-I-It wasn't a date."

"That's right. It was just a trip into the dungeon. No, *was* it a date?"

"Don't be silly, Chris. It was work! Just work."

"Right. Work..."

They should just call it a date, but the two of them were such late bloomers... Sara watched over them warmly as they struggled to regain their composure. It was a fun walk back to the mansion for her.

The next day, Sara headed for the Apothecary's Guild on her own, without anyone telling her to. Nelly and Chris were headed for the dungeon again.

"We'll stay the night tonight and head a bit deeper in."

So they said. Thus, Sara would be heading in to work on her own today and tomorrow.

"Good morning!" Sara called out as she entered the guildhall. Greetings were important.

"Oh. I thought I'd have to go get you, but I guess I didn't." Caren hustled over to Sara with what she assumed was good-natured concern. "Say, did Master Chris say anything else about me yesterday? Like how I was reliable or something like that?"

"No, not particularly. He just said he was going to spend the night in the dungeon tonight."

"Well, that's useful enough to know... But he could say more about me, couldn't he?!"

The life of a fan was a solitary one. Sara waited until Caren was done writhing about in agony before calmly asking, "Where should I start today?"

"Well, let's see..." Caren called over an apothecary who was waiting for her signal. It was the one who had checked Sara's sorting of the healing herbs the day before. "We have a decent stock of potions, so for the next week or so, I think we'll be working on mass-producing one-tenth-strength antiparalytics. We got plenty of white moonlight mushrooms in yesterday, after all."

She took the time to explain things to Sara and was capable enough to immediately put into practice what Chris had just told her yesterday. Sara thought she was an impressive person—other than her excessive affection for Chris.

"Seems you know how to grind healing herbs, so I'll teach you how to make potions next." The apothecary Caren called over had apparently been informed of the work they would be doing, so he relayed their plans to Sara. "You'll start by sorting healing herbs again, then grinding up the scraps like you did yesterday. Then I'll teach you how to make potions with them. You have enough mana, right?" the apothecary asked a little worriedly. It must have been really important to have a minimum amount of mana when you were making potions.

"I think I'll be fine."

"Let's get started, then."

Even the apothecaries who had been making unrelated potions yesterday were working with the white moonlight mushrooms today.

"It takes time to extract this nectar. We can't make potions until we've got the materials for them..."

"You said you couldn't grind them up, but what about cutting them into thinner slices?" Sara called out while she was grinding up her healing herbs.

"Thinner slices? Like three instead of two? We'll still get the same amount of nectar from one mushroom, though. It'll just be more effort."

The time-consuming part was scraping the nectar from the surface of the mushroom.

"Then what if you didn't scrape it at all? Instead, you could slice them thin and collect the nectar through a paper or cloth filter." She tried a less labor-intensive suggestion. She recalled straining yogurt like that back in Japan.

One of the apothecaries thought on her suggestion for a moment before his face lit up. "That's it! Guildmaster! I want to try the new kid's method."

"Sure. You okay on your own?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Sara was surprised they were adopting her casual suggestion so quickly. The apothecary swiftly set up some filter paper and five funnels.

"I'll try one sliced into three pieces, one sliced into thinner pieces, and one chopped up. Then I'll measure the time it takes to collect the nectar."

The apothecary was busy comparing the amounts of nectar he collected, comparing the taste, and recording all the data. Sara watched him, impressed, as she carefully ground up her healing herbs.

Everyone here took action according to their own judgment. When someone made a new suggestion, they talked it out. Caren made decisions for the group sometimes, but with everyone's cooperation, their research progressed steadily. Chris must have known they'd have a new antiparalytic by now because he was aware of how skilled Caren was as a guildmaster.

She was a far cry from Camellia's guildmaster, and different from Rosa's too, Sara decided. She didn't want to tell him this, but she thought everyone in Rosa probably relied on him too much for them to make their own decisions. Now that Sara had decided to become an apothecary, she found the productive atmosphere of Hydrangea's Apothecary's Guild invigorating.

When she finished grinding her healing herbs, she brought her mortar to the apothecary who was instructing her. He approved her herbs for use and began to explain how to make potions.

“Have you ever watched a potion being made closely?”

“No. I’ve seen people make antidotes, though.”

“I see. So that’s why Caren says your skills and knowledge are mismatched. I wonder what Master Chris was trying to do, teaching you like that.” The apothecary tapped the edge of the mortar contemplatively. “Well, no matter. I’ll show you how it’s done and then you’ll try with the herbs you ground up. Okay?”

“Okay.”

The workroom went silent for a second. Sara was curious about that, but before she could turn around, the noise started up again, so she decided to just focus on her lesson.

“Making potions is simple. Healing herbs are so effective, you can place them directly on injuries and they’ll do their work. Making potions is just distilling that effect into water and fixing it into place. That’s why grinding the herbs up properly is really the more important part.”

And that part of the work, Sara had already received approval for.

“After that, put three cups of pure water into a beaker and spoon the herbs in slowly, mixing them into the water.”

Sara’s mortar contained a vibrant green paste. It was smooth from the abundant moisture in the plants.

“About a third of the water should evaporate while you’re heating the mixture, so one beaker’s worth makes five potions. It takes a lot of practice to mix the right quantity and quality of herbs with the right amount of water, though, so until you get used to it, it’s better to err on the side of stronger potions than weaker ones.”

“I see.” Sara deflated a little after listening diligently to the apothecary’s explanation.

“Potions don’t require mana herbs or any other ingredients.”

“Right.”

“Transfer that to a pot and slowly boil it until it sits at this line, then remove it from the heat.”

Sara carefully observed the process.

“Now, this is the important part. After removing the pot from the heat, slowly stir the spoon while adding your mana.”

Sara thought back to what Chris had told her. She thought he’d said something about sediment and suffusing the liquid with mana.

“The sediment sinks and only the liquid remains. See?”

“Oh!”

The muddy green of the healing herb paste had given way to a light green translucent liquid.

“Once it cools, you strain it with paper filters into ten bottles. You can do that part, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s not too uncommon. I guess there are some trainee apothecaries who have only ever helped out with that step,” he muttered to himself. Sara’s skills really must have been mismatched.

“Okay, I have a spare set of tools here, so go ahead and try making some potions.”

“Okay!”

Sara set her pot on the stove and placed a pot stand next to it. She wanted to measure out three cups and set it to the side, but the pot was the only large container she had, so she held off on that.

She followed the steps carefully, adding cups of water one by one and slowly scraping the herbs from the mortar, blending them with the water. She felt like she was making cold soup, which made the process feel just like cooking, so then she started really

having fun. When she got to three cups of water, she felt like it wasn't quite enough for the amount of herbs she'd added, but she'd been told the potions could be strong, so she decided that was fine.

She transferred it all into the pot and put it over a low flame like the other apothecary had. Magic tools were useful for things like this, since the flames could be kept at a steady temperature.

She boiled the mixture until it reached the line on the inside of the pot, then removed it from the flame. Some would evaporate while it was cooling as well, so she hesitated for a moment, wondering if the line on the pot accounted for that or not. The apothecary next to her looked like he was holding himself back from saying something, so she decided to just keep going.

She'd never added her mana to a potion before, but she was of the opinion that she was pretty skilled at handling mana.

"Pure mana with no element, like with physical strengthening..." Sara knew what sort of mana to use since she could use physical strengthening. As the mana welled up in her, she focused it in her stirring hand and mixed it into the potion through the spoon. "A little at a time, slow... Oh, it changed!"

The fluid turned transparent, like when you mixed potato starch into hot water. She pulled the spoon out of a beautiful light green liquid.

"There. I did it."

"No way..."

Sara started. "What is it?" She turned around to find all the apothecaries gathered behind her.

"Well, we all want to see what kind of potion Master Chris's apprentice would make."

"I'm glad you didn't tell me beforehand... I might have screwed up 'cause of the pressure..."

She'd been able to relax here because the people *weren't* that interested in her. Learning that they actually *were* paying attention to her made her incredibly embarrassed.

"Even without pressure, you normally don't get it right on your first try. We make newbies use the scraps because we expect them to fail a few times before they get it right. That's normal for a beginner. This potion looks like a veteran made it! You must be really good with your mana."

Apparently she'd done something she shouldn't have again. But Sara was just impressed with the apothecary who could tell why she'd succeeded when she didn't know herself.

"You handled the tools well too. It's a lot of work and takes up a lot of space when you don't know what you're doing with the equipment. Maybe we should add that to the lessons," Caren mused.

"Well, it's not like you get new kids every day. Whoever teaches 'em ends up teaching in their own style. I think I did pretty okay."

The apothecary who'd taught her was giving himself a compliment, but Sara agreed. He was a good teacher.

"I did have some questions, though. First of all." He held up a finger. "Why'd you take the pot off the fire when the potion was a little above the line?"

"Err, because the water is still evaporating a little while it cools down. Also, from the color, I thought I used a little too much healing herb for the amount of water I put in."

"Damn! That's stuff you're only supposed to pick up on when you've got some practice at this!" It was kind of funny how frustrated he seemed. "Second. What did you mean about physical strengthening?"

Some other apothecaries piped up that they were curious about that too, and Sara felt like her face was on fire realizing so many people had heard her muttering to herself.

"It's what Chris told me. He said most people think of casters when they think of mana, but apothecaries use mana when making potions too. He told me to picture the kind of mana I use when I'm using physical strengthening magic."

The workroom went silent.

"Master Chris never said anything like that to me..." Caren sulked behind all the other apothecaries. "Master Chris was always saying things like 'Just watch it once and you'll

remember it' and 'I'll only say this once so you better memorize the steps,' so everyone who wanted to learn from him was just desperate to keep up... I can't believe he was so thorough teaching this kid..."

Sara figured that had to be a sign of his own growth as a person, and she wasn't about to take credit for that.

"I'll just have to absorb all I can about Master Chris from the girl..."

"Huh...?" Sara was dumbfounded as Caren strode up to her.

"Still, it could have been a fluke, so you'll be sorting healing herbs and making potions from the scraps for a few more days."

"That's more than fine with me."

Sara's instructor had given her a reasonable plan of action, which Sara agreed to immediately.

Thus, Sara began to commute to the Apothecary's Guild every day, and she had fun making potions—so much fun that she was starting to feel like all that time she'd spent refusing to commit to becoming an apothecary had been a waste. Once she'd gotten a hang of things, she started to be able to pay attention to what was going on both in the workspace and in the front of the guildhall. She was still practicing making potions from healing herb scraps, but while she was grinding the herbs up, she had time to survey her surroundings.

At first, she'd just paid attention to her senior apothecaries and their antiparalytic research, but she realized things were pretty noisy in the front of the guildhall too. When she concentrated on the conversations happening out front, she realized many of the guild's visitors were younger Hunters who weren't bringing antiparalytics into the dungeon with them. Since they didn't have antiparalytics, they naturally got into trouble when they got seven-colored swallowtail scales on them. So they dragged their stiff bodies back to the surface and headed to the Apothecary's Guild to buy antiparalytics. From what she could hear, it sounded like they drank the whole bottles after buying them too.

"Bring these cheap ones over to the Hunter's Guild too, would you? It's a pain having

to come here every time.”

She heard complaints like this as well.

“It’s a new drug, so we can’t sell it wholesale yet.”

The apothecary who responded to their complaints did so gracefully. She was obviously used to dealing with them.

“Hello! I brought you some white moonlight mushrooms.”

She heard another pleasant voice. This one belonged to Allen.

“Oh, Allen. And Kuntz. Come in, come in.”

Allen and Kuntz had started picking white moonlight mushrooms on their way out of the dungeon. It didn’t make much money, but Nelly had asked them to do so. It gave them an opportunity to see Sara before they went home for the night as well, so they regularly came into the back of the guildhall when they had deliveries.

“Sara! I kicked butt again today!”

“Welcome back, Allen. How was the dungeon?”

“There were a ton of seven-colored swallowtails down there again. Feels like there’s more of them every day.”

“I’ve been going down there since before there were so many of them, but there’s definitely a lot more since I got back from Stock,” Kuntz added. “The younger Hunters have started ignoring them, so they’re not getting paralyzed by them, but the numbers aren’t really changing. People who are trying to avoid them still end up getting hit by them every so often, so I can’t see the amount of antiparalytics people need changing.”

They brought with them valuable information when they came to visit Sara, so they were valued guests of the Apothecary’s Guild. Of course, they were making day trips into the dungeon, so they could only report the state of the shallower floors. They had no info on the deeper floors.

“Huh. So there *are* some randos going in and out of the Apothecary’s Guild.”

Sara turned around in surprise at the sound of a voice she'd never heard before and saw three young Hunters standing at the entrance to the workspace, as if to block the way out. They looked the same age as Kuntz or maybe a little older. Sara guessed that two of them were physical strengthening types, while one was a caster.

"And what do you have to do with the Guild?! You can't just go into the back like that!"

The receptionist apothecary's voice sounded from behind the trio. Sara didn't know what they were here for, but apparently they didn't have permission for it, whatever it was.

"I was wondering who was back here. If it isn't Day-Trip Kuntz. And there's another day-trip newbie too."

Kuntz looked annoyed, while Allen was expressionless. "Day-trip" must have been an insult among Hunters, but Sara had never heard it before, so she asked Allen quietly, "You always make more than enough in one day no matter where you're hunting, don't you, Allen? Is it different in Hydrangea?"

"I make enough to live comfortably. So does Kuntz," Allen answered just as quietly. Still, that probably meant he wasn't making as much as he had in Rosa or Camellia.

"Are you not able to hunt as much 'cause you're gathering white moonlight mushrooms?"

"Nah, we're only picking a few of them on our way back after we're done hunting. We're just being careful since this is a new dungeon for me and we only just partied up recently."

"I get it. I think that's really smart." Sara nodded proudly. Then she realized she was ignoring the three in the doorway and hastily told them, "I'm sorry. I interrupted you, didn't I?"

"I-It's fine."

Now that she got a better look at them, they were a colorful trio. One had red hair, one had black, and one was blond. But now they were just standing there, having lost their momentum.

"Err, you're kind of in the way."

“Oh, sorry.”

Now they were apologizing to an apothecary who was trying to get through the doorway.

“Anyway, now we know what the day-trip bros always following Nefertari around have been up to.”

“Yeah!”

With that exchange, they left the Apothecary’s Guild.

“What was that about?”

“Who knows.” Allen shrugged like he could truly care less.

“What’s with the ‘day-trip bros,’ though? Pfft. That’d make them the red-black-blond bros, wouldn’t it?” Sara couldn’t help laughing. She felt bad about it, since it felt a little like she was laughing at Kuntz and Allen, but the nickname made them sound like travel hobbyists, and it was just too funny to her.

“They were making fun of us, you know.” Kuntz shrugged his shoulders exasperatedly. “Things are cheap in Hydrangea, so you can make plenty of money in just one day in the dungeon. Enough to save some, even. When you’re adventuring alone like we usually do, the most important thing is being safe.”

“We’d have an easy job if everyone thought that way,” one of the apothecaries muttered. As far as the Apothecary’s Guild was concerned, the careful Day-Trip Duo were doing things the right way.

“Come to think of it, they said something else, didn’t they? Oh yeah, they said you were always following Nefertari around. Are you?”

She thought they were doing different things down there.

“No, we just happened to run into Nelly outside the dungeon one morning. We caught up for a while, which I guess some people noticed.” Allen frowned, crossing his arms. “Nelly attracts a lot of attention. Everyone was asking, ‘What’s Rosa’s Red Reaper doing here?’” He gave her a look that Sara interpreted to mean, “I’m just repeating what I heard, okay?”

"What's she doing here? Her dad lives here, so why wouldn't she come visit? And..." What she was really here for was becoming Sara the Invited's official guardian. They told the knight corps as much when they visited.

Allen shook his head. "Word about that hasn't gotten around yet. Plus Chris is a famous apothecary, but Hunters don't really know his face, so they're all talking about him too. A Hunter who shouldn't be here is bringing a guy who isn't a Hunter into the dungeon... I mean, Chris is going in there in his apothecary's cloak."

"That's our Master Chris!" one of the apothecaries exclaimed somewhere nearby, but Sara felt like it made more sense to just wear normal adventuring clothes when you went into a dungeon.

"Anyway, it seems like Nelly's known for being a lone wolf, so..."

"Huh? A lone wolf?"

Sara exchanged a look with Allen and then they both looked away awkwardly.

"She's just shy and too lazy to figure out how to talk to people," Sara said.

"Yep," Allen agreed before they both burst into laughter.

"I'll make sure to tell her that when she comes back. Heh heh."

"Don't, Sara! She'll know it came from me! Ha ha!"

She could just picture Nelly turning red in embarrassment.

Kuntz gave the two of them an exasperated look as they continued to giggle. "You two really don't have a care in the world, do you? Those guys only have their eyes on us because you're so friendly with this so-called lone wolf. They probably think we're both from Hydrangea but mooching off a Hunter from Rosa. Not that I care. I haven't even been here long enough to say I'm from Hydrangea anyway."

Kuntz was awfully easygoing to be criticizing *them* for not having a care in the world.

"You really should be careful, though," one of the apothecaries told them worriedly. "I hear Hydrangea's dungeon is harder than the ones around the capital. Of course, they're nothing compared to Rosa's dungeons."

Overconfident Hunters coming from the capital only to have their dreams crushed in Rosa was a familiar-sounding story to Sara.

"All Hunters want to go to Rosa one day, but if you come *from* Rosa, it seems like you weren't strong enough to make it there or something else went wrong for you. So you're basically either looked down on or avoided."

What that trio had said made some sense now. When he was on his own and when he was paired up with Kuntz, Allen hadn't really attracted any attention, but when he acted like he was close to Nelly, suddenly everyone's eyes were on him. When they observed him from afar, however, they only saw a pair of Hunters acting frustratingly cautious, so people started to look down on them instead.

"But Nelly didn't even really go into the dungeons in Rosa," Sara said.

"Yeah. I did, though!" Allen added.

Kuntz and the apothecaries in the back gave them dubious looks. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, Nelly was the caretaker of the Dark Mountain. That's where she lived."

"The Dark Mountain?"

A buzz went through the workspace. No one was concentrating on their work anymore, but even the guildmaster Caren was surreptitiously listening in.

"I'd heard of Rosa's Red Rea—I mean Goddess, but I always thought she hung out in Rosa's dungeons. The Dark Mountain? That aboveground dungeon? With the wyverns and the mountain wolves?"

Sara couldn't confirm, so she looked to Allen, who answered in her stead.

"Yep. That Dark Mountain. Nelly lived up in the caretaker's cabin and came into Rosa every ten days to sell her game. And there were wyverns and mountain wolves up there, right, Sara?"

Why did she feel so nostalgic at the mention of mountain wolves that she wanted to cry? They were supposed to be nothing but an annoyance to her, weren't they?

"You two know about the Dark Mountain?" Kuntz was looking at them with wide eyes.

"Yep. I went there to get Nelly to become my mentor. And Sara lived up there with Nelly. She even had some mountain wolves as pets."

"They weren't my pets. They were my trash disposal service." Sara turned her head aside huffily, but that just meant she was facing the gawking apothecaries.

"Y-Y-You lived up there?"

"Yes. I couldn't even leave the cottage at first. Ha ha."

She was scolded for laughing over something like that, but the apothecaries were also jealous that she'd been able to pick medicinal plants up on the Dark Mountain, so it was all good, she decided.

"I just happened to witness a bout between Nefertari and the Guild Director at the lord's mansion, so I know just how strong she is. It makes sense to me after hearing she was the caretaker of the Dark Mountain, but people who think she's just a strong Hunter from Rosa might get into trouble if they take her lightly," Kuntz muttered.

As far as Sara was concerned, anyone who messed with Nelly got whatever was coming to them. Of course, she hoped people would leave her alone.

When trouble came, however, it didn't come just for Nelly.

CHAPTER 3

HOME SWEET DARK MOUNTAIN

Time passed uneventfully for a while after that, with Nelly traveling to the dungeon for two and then three days at a time and Sara diligently continuing her potion-making studies as an apprentice apothecary. Allen and Kuntz had been receiving some harassment, but they dealt with it gracefully as they made plans to camp out in the dungeon for a night or two themselves.

“We’re really in sync lately,” said Kuntz.

“It took me a while to get used to having a partner, since I’m so used to being on my own.”

As the two of them explained, “When you’re used to weakening an enemy and finishing it off on your own, it’s hard to get used to having help.”

“The caster usually ends up in the support role, you see. But when I think about how I could have finished the monster off myself, given a bit more time, it kinda hurts my pride,” Kuntz said with a wry smile. According to him, the better the caster, the stronger those feelings were. “So when you form a party, it’s to hunt monsters that are too strong for you to take down yourself and that are worth a lot of money. We’ve figured out how to work together at this point, so it’s time to go in a little deeper, but those darn seven-colored swallowtails...” Kuntz grumbled. Apparently, the swallowtails were hindering their forward progress.

“We’re picking white moonlight mushrooms for the Apothecary’s Guild, so we get first dibs on the antiparalytics they make with them, but with all the people down there who don’t have them, the situation’s gotten pretty dicey. It’d be nice if we could go down deep enough to just avoid the whole area...”

In the evenings, Hunters swarmed the Apothecary’s Guild, buying up their new antiparalytics, so the apothecaries were plenty busy making and selling them. So busy in fact that they didn’t have time to do their usual potion brewing, so they’d even started putting Sara’s potions out for sale, right next to the stuff made by the veterans.

"I-I-I-Is that okay? I'm still an apprentice... I'm basically a complete beginner!" Sara asked, flustered.

Caren, the guildmaster, snorted. "It's not like there's an exam to become an apothecary. If you can't make potions, you can't be an apothecary. That's all there is to it. It's a pretty rare ability to have, you know."

Ever since she first went to Rosa, she'd been surrounded by nothing but Hunters and apothecaries, so she hadn't thought it was rare at all. It was a bit surprising to just now be learning this.

"Saves on healing herbs too, so it's two birds with one stone."

Guilds were financially independent entities, so the more profit they could make, the better. Especially when it came to something like their new antiparalytics, where they had to take a pretty heavy loss just to get the materials to develop them.

"Things turned out more or less the way I expected them to, but there was always the chance we wouldn't need these antiparalytics at all. If that had happened, we'd be in the red."

A few of the Hunters who'd needed the antiparalytics had gathered some white moonlight mushrooms in thanks as well, so getting ahold of materials to make them was getting a little easier now.

"But it's still not nearly enough. And what's going on with the dungeon anyway? It's time to get serious about cleaning up those butterflies if you ask me."

Caren paced around, irritated. Sara remembered the official request the Hunter's Guild had made in Rosa when the meadow had been overrun with horned rabbits. It was the same in Camellia with the poison bog frogs. In both cases, the Hunter's Guild had been involved in culling the problem monsters.

"Oh yeah, who's the guildmaster of the Hunter's Guild in Hydrangea anyway? Thed?"

"No." Caren was taking a break at the moment, so she explained things to Sara.

Now that she thought about it, Sara realized she hadn't been to the Hunter's Guild here at all yet. She'd just heard it worked the same way Rosa's did from Allen.

"We've got a guildmaster dispatched from the capital, but he makes excuses to go back there all the time. The captain of the knights down here's in the capital right now too. Neither of 'em's any use!"

Sara hadn't been very impressed by what she'd seen at the barracks next to Riot's mansion.

"I guess they were slacking off 'cause their captain's been away," she realized.

Still, there was always some trouble or another to deal with in Rosa, so Vince the vice guildmaster and Jay the guildmaster were both busy all the time. Was Hydrangea usually trouble-free or was Rosa just special? Well, every town had their own thing, Sara supposed.

She helped out another apothecary with their work until the time Allen and Kuntz usually showed up, but it seemed the boys were taking their time today.

"Are they staying in the dungeon tonight?"

It wasn't like they were little kids, so she didn't need to worry about them, but she looked forward to seeing them every day, so she got a little restless when they were late to arrive. And when someone eventually *did* appear, it wasn't Allen *or* Kuntz.

"Sara!" The apothecary out front called for her and she emerged from the back to see a young Hunter she didn't recognize.

"I don't really have anything to do here, just... Those Day-Trip guys are always coming to the Apothecary's Guild..."

He must have been talking about Allen and Kuntz. Sara resisted the urge to tell him they were about to start taking longer trips into the dungeon and instead said, "They're my friends. Did something happen to them?"

"Oh, well... Won't do much good telling a girl..." The Hunter looked away awkwardly. Sara took that to mean they'd gotten caught up in something violent.

Caren spoke up from behind Sara. Sara wasn't even sure when she'd come out from the work area in the back. "They're exemplary Hunters who provide the Apothecary's Guild with much-needed white moonlight mushrooms. Tell us what happened."

"Well, you know how they're friends with the Red Reaper? I just saw some of the younger Hunters from around here harassing them in the Hunter's Guild... It's really stupid, but I don't, like, know them well enough to help out or anything..."

Though he seemed flippant about it, he'd clearly come here because he was worried about them. Sara gave him a thankful smile.

"What's the staff doing?" Caren asked, irritated.

The young Hunter shrugged. "The Guild doesn't get involved in that kinda stuff."

It wasn't like Sara supported favoritism or anything, but Nelly was the daughter of the local lord, wasn't she? She should be respected, not singled out as "Rosa's Red Reaper." The thought made her sad, but Nelly wasn't the one in trouble right now, Allen and Kuntz were.

Pulling herself together, Sara turned to Caren. "I'm going to the Hunter's Guild."

Caren opened her mouth, presumably to stop her, but quickly closed it again. She knew that Sara was one of the Invited, but she didn't know exactly what the young girl could do. Still, she nodded her approval. "You lived up on the Dark Mountain, right?"

"Yes."

The Hunter who came to tell them about Allen and Kuntz tried to stop her, however. "Hey, cut it out. You won't be any help to them."

It was kind of him to worry, but Sara would be fine.

"Thanks, but I'm going."

"Ah, hey!"

Sara swiftly crossed to the other side of the counter before remembering that she'd never been to the Hunter's Guild before.

"Err, please take me to the Hunter's Guild."

"You don't even know where it is?"

She hurried to the Hunter's Guild along with the boy who'd brought the news. He was clearly exasperated with her, but she'd never been there before, so what was she supposed to do?

"Does this sort of thing happen with outsiders a lot?"

"Not really, it's just that the person who came this time is such a big deal. Some people don't like that she's doing her own thing and not trying to fit in, but since she's so strong it's not like they can pull anything with her, so they're just taking it out on the weaker guys."

"That *is* annoying."

They should just ignore other people, but apparently the Hunters in Hydrangea had energy to spare.

When they arrived at the Hunter's Guild, the crowd had spilled out of the building.

"Dang, we might not be able to even get inside. Huh? Hey!"

Sara shrunk her barrier around herself and wedged her way into the crowd. Compared to the cotton sheep she'd waded through, this was nothing.

"Hey!"

"Don't push!"

People around her barked, but Sara wasn't doing anything. They were just bouncing off of her barrier. Blindly following the direction everyone was looking, she eventually popped out into an open space in the middle of the crowd.

"I keep telling you we're not running away."

Sara looked up when she heard Kuntz's annoyed voice. He and Allen were up against the wall with the red-black-blond trio facing off against them, the crowd boxing them in all around.

"So you admit that the Red Reaper is weak."

"That's got nothing to do with it."

From the murmurs of the crowd, it seemed the red-black-blond trio had challenged Allen and Kuntz to some sort of hunting competition, but Kuntz had been trying to turn them down. Was Sara the only one who thought that if they had a problem with Nefertari, they should take it up with her?

Allen had been standing there like none of this had anything to do with him until he noticed Sara watching them worriedly, her hands clasped in front of her chest. He mouthed her name before giving an annoyed look around as if to ask, "Who told you?" He was so upset his mana flared for a moment, causing the watching Hunters to all take a step back in surprise. Even Kuntz looked over at him for a second, spooked by the sensation. Allen appeared to be watching the red-black-blond trio, but his gaze was actually focused behind them and slightly to the side.

"Listen, if you really think Nelly—I mean Nefertari—is weak, then you should just challenge her yourselves instead of making your lackeys do the work."

Sara followed his gaze to a group of young people behind the trio sucking their teeth in frustration. The trio were looking between this new group and Allen nervously. Provoked by Allen, this group stepped forward. It was another trio who looked somewhere around twenty years old, maybe a little younger than Ted.

"If you want to lose that badly, then *we'll* challenge you. Come on, let's go to the training area downstairs."

Sara was surprised to learn that there was a training area underneath the Hunter's Guild, but she was more surprised by what Allen said next.

"Not happening." He crossed his arms and held his head high, exuding an attitude that his challengers must have found infuriating. "We're telling you we're not doing it. If you want to fight, you can fight Nefertari."

Sara was impressed by his pluck.

Allen clenched his fist in front of his face. "I'm a Hunter. Maybe knights and swordsmen challenge each other, but my fists are only for hunting monsters. I don't wield them against other people."

"Wow, he's cool!" Sara exclaimed quietly, applauding Allen soundlessly.

The older trio shot her an irritated look and proposed a compromise. “A hunting challenge, then.”

But Allen was just as adamant. “No. I’ve only been a Hunter for a year. You’re obviously more skilled than me. It’s embarrassing to want to compete with us when we’re not on equal footing, just to show how superior you are.”

People in the crowd were starting to mutter about Allen’s sudden change in attitude.

“Listen.” Allen pointed his finger at the trio. “We would never lose to you, and even if we did, it’d be because *we* were lacking. It wouldn’t have anything to do with Nefertari. That’s all there is to it. Now get out of our way.”

“Couldn’t you have been this motivated from the start? Why’d I have to do all the talking up until now?” Kuntz muttered.

Seizing her chance, Sara ran over to the two of them. “Allen! Kuntz! Are you okay?”

“We’ve been fine the whole time.” Allen grinned and Kuntz sighed. Sara was relieved until a voice rang out in anger.

“I *thought* it was weird you were so motivated all of a sudden. Turns out you just wanted to show off!”

Those three young men were still angry, it seemed. The red-black-blond trio beside them recognized Sara, so she gave them a little wave.

“What, do you guys know her?” the older boys asked them.

“N-No, she’s just an apprentice apothecary we met one time.”

“What?”

They’d started squabbling amongst themselves, so Sara thought she’d take the opportunity to grab Allen’s hand and sneak out, when the path to the entrance of the guildhall she’d squeezed herself through suddenly opened up like a parting sea.

“Huh? Can we leave?” Sara cocked her head as the commotion died down.

“Sheesh. Loud in here today,” said a low voice as three Hunters entered the guildhall.

"Zachary. The guy in the middle is the one I told you about in Stock," Kuntz whispered to Sara.

"That's him?"

The man Kuntz had indicated looked like he was about forty years old. He was probably the same age as Nelly and Chris, then, but there was something about his large, wiry frame that made him look more his age than the pair.

"Why'd they make a path straight here? Couldn't they have just let them get to a reception desk?"

It was scary having Hunters she didn't know stomping toward her. Sara looked away. She thought she could remember reading somewhere that you shouldn't make eye contact with wild animals. To distract herself, she tried to find the sales kiosk, but the footsteps stopped right in front of them, dashing her hopes.

"You the new kid?" They must have known Kuntz already, since they were only talking to Allen.

"Yep," Allen said shortly.

"And you?"

Sara was still averting her eyes, so she didn't notice when they addressed her. Kuntz elbowed her, so she looked up for the first time to see a pair of bright blue eyes looking down at her. Blue eyes and black hair, just as Kuntz had described.

"Huh? M-Me?"

"Who else would I be talking to?"

She wasn't a Hunter, but since she was here in the guild, he must have thought she was.

"I'm not a new kid."

"You trying to say you're a veteran? At your age?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Err, no, I'm not a Hunter, I'm an apprentice apothecary. So I guess I am a new kid, just not here." Sara laughed awkwardly, but the man's expression didn't change, which was

a bit of a letdown.

“An apothecary? When you’re so well defended?”

There was another buzz around the black-haired guy. People were probably wondering what he could mean by that when she wasn’t even paying enough attention to know that he was talking to her. Sara felt the same way.

“Cut it out. She’s a girl.”

She looked over to Allen and found him gripping the black-haired man’s wrist. The older Hunter’s fist was aimed right at her. This guy was as rude as one of the wyverns on the Dark Mountain, going after her when she wasn’t even looking at him. It was enough to tick off even the mild-mannered Sara, but she was also still scared, so she scurried around to hide behind Kuntz.

“Hydrangea’s Hunter’s Guild is scary...”

Seeing how she was acting, the crowd around them seemed to agree with Allen that the black-haired Hunter was going a little too far. Maybe he was strong, but violence wasn’t cool. No way. Kuntz gave her an apprehensive look and Sara popped her head out from behind him.

“These are Nefertari’s flunkies, Zachary,” one of the trio of young men told him.

“Oh?”

“What do you mean, flunkies? We’re just friends with Nelly.”

Allen was well-spoken, as always.

“Friends? With that lone wolf?” Zachary’s expression finally changed.

There was no reason to give him a courteous response, so Sara and Allen both turned their heads aside in a huff.

“Come on, let’s get going. We’re wasting our time.”

“Yeah. Hey.” Allen looked up at Zachary. “Control your flunkies. They’re a nuisance.”

The crowd gave an impressed murmur. Allen was being rude, but from a neutral perspective, like that of the Hunter who'd come to the Apothecary's Guild to get Sara, it was clear that Allen and Kuntz (and now Sara) were the victims of the trouble that had been occurring lately. They were all impressed that Allen could stand up for himself.

Relieved that they could finally leave, Sara started down the path Zachary had opened for them.

"Wait."

Sara and Allen were both pros at dealing with situations like this. There was only one thing to do: pretend they hadn't heard anything. At the same time, they each put a hand on Kuntz's back, lifted him up, and sped off.

"Huh? Hey, what?!"

Kuntz could complain all he wanted later. Unfortunately, they weren't able to leave the guild.

"I said *wait*."

What was Zachary doing in front of them? He'd been behind them a second ago. He must have been better at physical strengthening than Allen and Sara were. But that wasn't the problem. The question was why he'd told them to wait when they were just beginner Hunters and an apprentice apothecary.

"Err, can we help you?"

Sara stepped forward as the group's representative. She preferred to avoid confrontation, but she had experience as a working adult, so she wasn't completely out of her depth here.

"I'm interested in what you kids can do."

"Are you?" Sara gave him a sunny smile. "We're just some average kids, so there's not much to see, unfortunately. If that's all, then we'll be going."

She tried to ignore him and walk past, but he used his large frame to block her. The guild went silent again at the next words to leave his mouth.

“Come into the dungeon with me tomorrow.”

Not happening. Hadn’t Sara told him she was an apothecary? While she was deliberating how to respond, Kuntz spoke up instead.

“We’ve only just formed a party and are still making our way through the first few floors. That wouldn’t satisfy you, would it?”

Sara nodded emphatically. Surely this guy didn’t have time to babysit newbies.

“No, I’m bringing you to a deeper floor. I want to see how you fight against strong monsters.”

Sara looked up at Zachary in disgust. It was crazy to bring beginners down to a deep dungeon floor just because he wanted to watch them fight. Even if they could heal injuries with potions or high potions, it was all over for them if they died. And deeper floors were where monsters who could do a lot more than just injure you lurked. Like wyverns. While Sara wasn’t all that impressed by them, that was only because of her upbringing on the Dark Mountain. Maybe Allen would be able to hunt one, but she couldn’t imagine the same went for Kuntz.

“Can’t you take us instead of them, Zachary?” one of the older trio protested.

Sara heartily agreed. They were his flunkies after all, weren’t they? As for the red-black-blond trio, they had looks on their faces that said bringing them would definitely be crazy, so they seemed to have a good grasp of their actual abilities.

“You’re not even scared. All three of your faces just say you think this is a pain. You’ll be fine, then. Tomorrow, got it?”

“No, we don’t ‘got it.’ I told you I’m an apprentice apothecary. I’ve never even been in a dungeon. And I can’t just skip work. I need to go to the Apothecary’s Guild like I always do. You can’t just tell us what to do.” Sara fired all this off, punctuating it with a furious huff.

Zachary opened his mouth to respond, but just then...

“Sara! Did you come to meet me?”

“Nelly!”

Nelly's gentle voice came from outside. She must have been confused by the crowd of people blocking the entrance, but she'd heard Sara's voice, so she'd called inside for her.

As soon as she was in sight, Sara held Nelly tight. A chorus of "oohs" came from the crowd and Sara smirked, sure that they were jealous that she could embrace such a beautiful person.

"No, but since I'm here, let's go home together."

"Sure. I just want to stop by a reception desk and the Apothecary's Guild. That okay?"

"Yeah. Allen and Kuntz are here too." Sara turned around to find Zachary giving them a sharp glare. "Ack..."

"He's..." Nelly furrowed her brow, searching her memory.

"Long time no see, Nefertari."

"It was Zachary, right?" She seemed to remember his name after hearing his voice, but the only thing in her own voice was surprise.

Sara looked between the two of them calmly. According to Kuntz, Zachary seemed to have some sort of one-sided animosity for Nefertari. Hence the harassment his flunkies were carrying out on his behalf.

But there didn't seem to be any hatred between the two of them. There was just *something* in Zachary's gaze...

If Nelly had said, "I haven't seen you in a long time. How have you been?" that would have gotten her passing marks in Sara's mind, but as if she was satisfied after simply having remembered his name, Nelly turned right back to Sara and simply said, "Seems like there's a lot of people around today for some reason. It's not safe, so you should stick with me."

"Wait a second."

Why was this situation so familiar? Sara suddenly remembered going to the Hunter's Guild in Camellia. It had been the same sort of situation then, with no one being on the same page.

"What is it, Zachary?"

Sara was sure Nelly had repeated the name simply because she was pleased that she'd remembered it.

"I was talking to those kids. Wait until we're finished, would you?"

Well, he was being a little more polite with her than he'd been with them. Nelly gave Sara a dubious look as if to ask if they knew each other.

Sara shook her head. "I guess he wants to go into the dungeon with Allen and Kuntz."

Allen gave her a nasty look as if to tell her not to force the problem on them, but Sara wanted him to remember that she was not a Hunter.

"And you," Zachary added unhelpfully.

"Well, I've already said no," Sara said matter-of-factly.

Nelly gave her a bit of a mystified look before turning to Zachary. "Sara's a sweet girl, so you must have really made her angry for her to be so prickly. She plans to be an apothecary, so she won't be going into any dungeons."

The crowd of Hunters around them all looked surprised to see Nelly being so mild, if not outwardly affectionate.

"There are plenty of apothecaries who go into dungeons. Take the pretty boy with you, for example. I see you're still shadowing Nefertari, Chris."

Oh, thought Sara. She looked behind Nelly and sure enough, there was Chris. That was only obvious, since they were going into the dungeon together, but it was strange for him to be attracting so little attention when he was usually the very center of it.

"I'd love nothing more than to be by Nef's side always. Is there something wrong with that?"

Sara usually found these professions of Chris's feelings to be off-putting, but this one was cool for some reason. Seeing Zachary at a loss for how to respond was satisfying too. She was impressed by the fact that all Hunters around Nelly's age seemed to know Chris.

"I see that *you're* still harassing her as well. You haven't grown at all since your time as a knight, have you?" Chris shot back.

Unperturbed, Zachary responded, "It's got nothing to do with Nefertari. I'm talking to those kids."

And giving us no chance to say anything in return, Sara thought sulkily.

Zachary jerked his chin in the direction of Kuntz and Allen. "That kid looks like he's just getting started, but he's strong. I could tell from the burst of mana he let out and the way he sucked it all back in a second later. And I feel like the girl would deflect any attack I aimed at her. Is it so strange to want to see what some new kids can do?"

"You'd attack Sara?" Pressure oozed out from Nelly.

"Hold it in, Nelly, hold it in."

"Hmm. Right, sorry." Nelly took a deep breath and her mana settled down.

"You've gotten really good at that."

"You think so?"

Sara and Nelly smiled happily at one another until an annoyed voice got their attention.

"I guarantee I'll heal you right away if you get hurt. That work?"

"Why would we do something that'll get us hurt?" Sara asked despite the fact that she was trying to ignore the belligerent man.

"Well, a certain amount of injury is expected in this line of work, but I can't let you take them if they say they don't want to go."

Sara looked up at Nelly dubiously. She made it sound like if they *did* want to go, she'd be fine with it. She glanced over at Allen next. He was clearly itching to get down into the deeper parts of the dungeon. What about Kuntz, then? He looked nervous.

"I..." Allen finally opened his mouth. "If you mean it, then I don't mind going."

"Same here," Kuntz agreed.

"What...?"

Allen clearly didn't like it when people bothered him for no reason and he didn't want to be ordered around by anyone, but you didn't often get a chance to go down into the deep part of a dungeon with a strong Hunter's supervision. If you separated Zachary's proposal from the harassment his goons were doing earlier, it probably *was* something Allen would be thrilled by. Sara couldn't empathize with their Hunter-like way of looking at things, but if Allen and Kuntz really wanted to do this, then who was she to stop them?

"Wait a second, Zachary."

Another "wait." Sara was fed up. This one had come from the trio of young adult Hunters.

"Why are you giving these newbies special treatment? You've never taken *us* down there. Every Hunter in Hydrangea would kill to be able to go into the dungeon with you."

Sara agreed wholeheartedly. Since he was based in Hydrangea, he should value his connections here. She nodded along with their words.

"You don't have the strength to make it in the deeper floors, do you?" Zachary's response to them, however, was rather cutting.

"But we haven't been down there and neither have they! How do you know we can't do it?"

Sara nodded along with this as well, but she knew what Zachary was trying to say too. Strong Hunters could tell to some degree what other Hunters were capable of. Maybe that was why the trio cut off whatever Zachary was about to say in reply.

"Let us have a contest with them and whoever wins can go with you! If we lose, we'll give up."

If they were able to be this frank with the man they clearly looked up to, maybe they weren't just flunkies. Sara thought a bit better of the trio now. Not that it was any time for that at the moment. The crowd watching all seemed to agree that Hunters from

Hydrangea should get priority over new kids like Kuntz and Allen. Even Zachary was considering their words.

“Fine. Do as you like.”

“Yes!”

Sara watched the Hunters rejoice with pity in her eyes. Allen was strong, and he would be even stronger with a caster like Kuntz helping him out.

“It’s three on three. That’s perfect.”

“No it’s not!” Sara squawked. Why did she have to keep piping up like this? “Why are you counting me?! I keep saying I’m not going! Don’t I, Nelly?!”

But Nelly seemed to find something on the other side of the room very interesting all of a sudden. Sara turned to Allen. He was facing her, holding his hands together as if in prayer.

Chris was her last hope, then. But all the apothecary did was smile warmly at her.

“Apothecaries go into dungeons sometimes. You’re my apprentice, aren’t you, Sara? I’m not worried one bit.”

He didn’t understand her at all. Sara wasn’t worried either. She’d just never so much as thought about going down into a dungeon.

That was when the guildmaster of the Apothecary’s Guild, Caren, showed up.

“Oh, Sara, if you’re going into the dungeon, can you pick up some white moonlight mushrooms on your way back?”

“Ugh! Why?!”

Why did everyone want to get her into a dungeon?! If even her employer was approving of this, then she couldn’t use the excuse that she had to work at the Apothecary’s Guild! It wasn’t fair. But now that her coffin had been thoroughly nailed shut, Sara didn’t have the courage to continue insisting that she wouldn’t go. She wanted to put her foot down, but being an adult on the inside, she endured the urge. But just because she was enduring didn’t mean she was going to let them walk all over

her.

Sara lifted her head sharply. “What kind of contest are we even talking about?”

Why was no one being more specific? Were they competing over how many of something they could hunt or how many magic stones they came back with or the money they made? There were all sorts of parameters they could use.

“Hmm.” Zachary put a hand to his chin. Sara watched, her eyes narrowed. It was all his fault Sara was going to have to go into a dungeon. “Number of hellhounds is simple enough.”

“Those are in the deep part already, aren’t they? You can’t make newbies hunt hellhounds.”

Hellhounds and wyverns were deep dungeon monsters. Sara knew.

“The stuff on the shallow floors is like horned rabbits and slimes and hellworms. No fun at all.”

“What does fun have to do with it? And did you just say ‘hellworms’?”

That didn’t sound good.

“Yeah, they’re larval monsters you see a lot in Hydrangea. Black worms with bright yellow stripes.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay, I get it.”

“On the middle floors, there’s steel armadillos, hellants, and centipedes.”

“So it’s all bugs!”

Sara was on the verge of tears. Could they just forfeit?

“Oh yeah!”

There *was* a bug Sara could handle, wasn’t there?

“Sara.” Allen was telling her to look his way, but Sara was busy thinking, so she ignored

him. He could tell her later.

"Okay, let's do this." She clapped her hands together. "Everybody's talking about how there are so many of them that they're a big problem, right? Let's see how many seven-colored swallowtails we can each hunt."

"Seven-colored swallowtails... Boring."

Sara ignored the older Hunters' grumbling.

"Plus, there's no need for it to be a competition between just us now either." Sara spun around. If she was going down, she was dragging everyone else down with her. "You *all* want to go down into the depths of the dungeon with Zachary, don't you?"

The watching Hunters hesitated for a moment when Sara dragged them into the conversation, but a sparkle glinted in the eyes of the younger ones.

"That's right! When else are we gonna get a chance to go down into the deepest part of the dungeon with a veteran Hunter?! I wanna go!"

"Me too!"

Sara thrust her fist in the air. "We'll *all* have a hunting contest, then!"

"Yeah!"

Sara turned back to Nelly and Zachary. "So, we'll compete over the number of hunted seven-colored swallowtails. Do we agree?"

Zachary nodded reluctantly. "We'll set a date later," he said before leaving.

He seemed to want to say something to Nelly, but it was hardly the time with the buzz going through the guild. Of course, it was his fault there was such a commotion in the first place, so he was only getting what he deserved, as far as Sara was concerned. It wasn't *her* fault. No sirree.

"Goodness, this is annoying."

While Sara was huffing and puffing, Allen murmured, "Sara, why'd you pick seven-colored swallowtails?"

"Cause they're such a problem right now. It's two birds with one stone. And we can hunt them easily, right?"

"But..."

"But what?"

Allen hesitated a moment before saying, "If we win, you'll have to go down deep into the dungeon too, Sara."

"Ah."

All Sara could do was rue her own pigheadedness.

The Hunter's Guild was thrilled about this little competition. Not only had they not gotten their hands dirty interfering in the interpersonal trouble that had led to it, they were reaping the benefits of its conclusion.

"Oh yeah?" Sara said lackadaisically when Kuntz shared this news with her. Now that she thought back to it, she regretted letting things get so out of control, but at the same time, she was certain that not a single thing could actually be blamed on her.

Nelly always said she wanted to see what Sara could do once she let her guard down, and Allen didn't even disguise the fact that he was constantly trying to get her into a dungeon. Add in a power-tripping older Hunter and how was she supposed to keep the situation under control?

"So, about the contest..." Allen started excitedly. Sara gave in and let him continue. "It'll be three days long, starting the day after tomorrow. You're allowed to hunt from eight in the morning to six at night, in a party of three. The group who collects the most magic stones from seven-colored swallowtails wins, and any area of the dungeon goes."

"Three days? So we can just pick any one day?"

"We could, but come on... It's the total over the course of the whole three-day period."

Sara looked over at Caren, hoping her new boss would say she couldn't take that much time off, but the woman just smiled happily. She was probably just thinking about the number of white moonlight mushrooms she'd be able to get when they were done.

"Yeah, yeah... I guess we can just go until whenever, then..."

"What are you talking about, Sara? If we're gonna do this, we're gonna win."

Stars glittered in Allen's and Kuntz's eyes.

"You heard that the Guild Director's back, right?"

"Yeah. He apologized to Sara for causing her trouble when we were having dinner at the lord's house."

Thed had apologized to her for being too busy inspecting another guild to keep things under control in Hydrangea. Incidentally, this mass outbreak of seven-colored swallowtails wasn't occurring in any of the other nearby dungeons.

"So it's just this one. Guess that makes sense, since they're all isolated from one another." Caren, who'd been listening in, put a hand to her hip thoughtfully.

Meanwhile, Allen explained what he meant about winning. "It's not fair for just one group to get to go down into the deep part of the dungeon, so Zachary is gonna take three of the top-ranking parties, and Nelly and Chris are gonna take another three groups."

"Is that why Nelly had that sour look on her face? Chris looked the same as always, I guess."

Nelly had given her a look like she'd wanted to say something, but in Sara's experience, she never spoke until she'd sorted it all out in her head beforehand, so Sara just left her to stew. Knowing what had been bothering Nelly now, Sara felt a little bad for the three groups that would end up going into the dungeon with her.

Nelly was a good person, but she was brusque until you got to know her, and Chris wasn't the type to worry about making other people feel comfortable. Sara could just picture any group going with them being too nervous to do any hunting.

"Oh yeah, Allen, Kuntz." Caren suddenly got the boys' attention. "I'll let you borrow Sara, but she'll be there on assignment from the Apothecary's Guild, so don't count on her to do much fighting, okay?"

"Hey, wait a second!" Sara held a hand out in front of her.

They were in the Apothecary's Guild, so she'd been expecting to hear something like this. She'd spent plenty of time with Chris after leaving Rosa, after all. She knew exactly how selfish these people called apothecaries were.

"First of all, no one's borrowing anyone. Second, if you want me to do a job, explain it to me first. This is my first time even going into a dungeon, so don't you think it's a bit dangerous making me focus on extra work at the same time?"

"Dangerous? For *you*, Sara?"

"I'm a total beginner! Of course it'll be dangerous! And what do you mean 'for me'?"

Sara was a reserved person, but she'd learned very well over these last three years that if she kept quiet, the people around her would be more than happy to make her decisions for her.

"Oh?" Caren looked Sara up and down. "But you know, I saw you speaking your mind in front of all those brawny Hunters without backing down once. And this whole contest went just the way you wanted it to in the end, didn't it?"

"Well... I just couldn't help it."

She was used to being around Nelly and Chris, so some brawny Hunters weren't all that impressive to her. She interacted with mountain wolves on a daily basis, so she'd built up a bit of a resistance to fear at this point. Now that she thought about it, she'd also protected Nelly from the knights back in Rosa and saved the town from a horde of swamp frogs in Camellia. If Sara had any guts, it came solely from existing in this world.

"You're right, though. I should have run it by you first. Sorry," said Caren.

"Well, if you just tell me what it is you want me to do, I'll help if I'm able to."

Caren had apologized, so Sara ended up backing off as well. She really shouldn't have, though.

"I want to put you in charge of the dungeon branch of the Apothecary's Guild, Sara."

"Say what?" It wasn't a very polite way to speak to the guildmaster, but Sara could manage nothing else after that.

"You didn't hear me? The dungeon branch of the Apothecary's Guild."

"I heard you. I just thought there was no way you actually said that." Sara decided there was no reason to hold back anymore. Putting her hands on her hips, she mustered whatever rebuttal she could. "Listen. I'm going down into the first dungeon I've ever been in. I'm scared. I'm nervous. And I have to hunt seven-colored swallowtails. Where in all that do you think I have the time to run a branch of the Apothecary's Guild? Not to mention..." Sara held her hands out toward Allen and Kuntz. "That'll cause trouble for the people I'm with!"

How's that? Sara thought as she puffed her chest out. *You've gotta admit, that's a pretty sound counterargument.*

"I'll throw in a special bonus, of course."

"Huh? A bonus?"

Sara was doing the work of an apprentice right now, so she received pay every week, but it wasn't that much, frankly. She didn't have time to gather plants anymore either, so her income had really taken a hit lately.

"You'll get a regular apothecary's wages plus hazard pay. How's that sound?"

Allen gave her a look that said "Don't do it" for a moment, but in the end, he didn't say anything. He must have wanted her to stick with them no matter what.

"What would a dungeon branch even do?"

"Well, let's see..."

Here she was asking about the particulars just because the promise of a raise had enticed her. This really was hopeless. Basically though, she was just being asked to sell potions and antiparalytics to people who wanted them, like a traveling apothecary.

"I want you to go down to the bottom of the first level of the dungeon, the fifth floor. If Hunters are able to get ahold of an apothecary on the fifth floor, then they won't have to leave the dungeon for something like light paralysis. That'll help all the Hunters taking part in the contest."

Allen and Kuntz frowned thoughtfully.

"Well, there *are* more seven-colored swallowtails on the fifth floor than anywhere else, and it's a good compromise between the shallower floors and the middle floors, but if we're limited to one floor, won't that put us at a disadvantage?" Allen asked.

"That might be true for other monsters, but you don't even need to look for seven-colored swallowtails right now. They're everywhere. It might be more efficient to go straight down to the fifth floor and set up base there instead of wandering around everywhere else. We've got our strategy down pat, after all," Kuntz replied.

"Yeah, you take 'em down with a slingshot, and I finish 'em off."

"Yep."

They smiled, explaining that they'd spent the last several days practicing. There were plenty of other young Hunters practicing just like they were, and yet the number of seven-colored swallowtails wasn't dropping at all.

"Plus, we've got Sara with us just so we make up a group of three, but we shouldn't count on her to take down many by herself."

"I don't need to hunt butterflies?"

"Nah. I just wanted to go into a dungeon that wasn't the Dark Mountain with you together. I know you don't plan on being a Hunter, though."

Allen looked a little disappointed, but he seemed to have gotten the message that Sara was enjoying her time as an apprentice apothecary.

Kuntz rubbed his nose bashfully. "I've been on my own pretty much the whole time since I became a Hunter, so I haven't really been able to take risks. I'll be the one doing most of the heavy lifting hunting swallowtails during this contest, and I'm kind of excited to be able to go all out without worrying about standing out or getting into fights with other guys."

Human relations seemed to be difficult for Hunters too. In that sense, Sara could understand why Nelly had so many issues with people no matter how strong she was, since she wasn't exactly an expert socializer.

"It'll all depend on our skill in the end. I'll do the best I can too. If there's anything new you want to try out, just let me know, Kuntz!"

“Sure thing!”

Sara smiled as the two boys fist-bumped, but the Apothecary’s Guild was frantic around them preparing the vast amounts of antiparalytic they’d need for the day after tomorrow.

“So, I’ll be going with them just so they have the right number of people, and I don’t really need to do any hunting. Instead, I ended up in charge of a branch of the Apothecary’s Guild,” Sara explained after returning to the mansion that night.

“Oh?” Riot said, looking impressed. “They may have storage bags, but it will be nice to have an apothecary on call in case something happens. But you haven’t even been inside a dungeon before, have you, Sara? Will you be okay?”

Since coming to Hydrangea, Sara had eaten with Riot more than she had with anyone else. He’d grown to care for her like she was his own granddaughter.

“Well, maybe Sara hasn’t delved into a dungeon, but she *did* live in one,” Nelly said proudly, for some reason.

“The Dark Mountain was just a normal mountain other than the fact that there were monsters on it. You could see the sky, and there were forests and meadows. That’s why I’m still kind of nervous about underground dungeons,” Sara said honestly.

“Ah, I get it. Well, Hydrangea’s dungeon is a lot like the Dark Mountain. It’s underground, but it’s not a cave. There are pretty wide spaces and it’s bright during the day and dark at night. It’s got a sky and forests too. If it didn’t, how would there be wyverns flying around down there?”

It *was* difficult for her to imagine such large creatures existing in cramped underground spaces.

“They say if you dig down from above where an underground dungeon is, you’ll never actually reach the dungeon itself. It’s a little strange, but some people say the dungeons are a kind of different world than this one.”

That didn’t make much sense to Sara. If that was the case, then how come you could see the Dark Mountain from outside of it?

"That's 'cause it's not actually the Dark Mountain you're seeing."

"What do you mean?" Sara didn't get it at all.

"That one spot we go in and out of is the only entrance to the Dark Mountain. If you try to climb it from somewhere else, apparently you end up on a different, totally normal mountain. So basically, the dungeon and a mountain that's not a dungeon exist in the same place."

In other words, underground dungeons weren't really *underground* at all. They existed in the same space as the ground. The Dark Mountain was the same; it just happened to be aboveground.

"Why'd the Goddess make the world so weird?"

"Who knows. I've got no complaints about it since it lets me make a living, though."

A whole three years after coming to this world, Sara had finally learned the strange truth about dungeons.

"On top of all this, even *you* started out only staying one night down there, but I have to stay down there for two nights on my very first trip! Two nights! I heard there's a safe area, but I'm still worried..."

Sara was the type who liked to come into things fully prepared, so she wished she had a little more information before embarking on such a big endeavor.

"Oh, you'll be fine. Hydrangea's dungeon isn't as dangerous as the Dark Mountain, and we camped out up there for a few days at a time, remember?" Nelly smiled nostalgically.

"There were mountain wolves all over every time we woke up in the morning, weren't there?"

"The looks on your faces make it seem like a heartwarming memory, but the things you're actually describing sound horrific."

Riot was making a face at Nelly and Sara's reminiscing, but it really *was* a nostalgic time for them. Sara wondered if the mountain wolves were doing well. No, she wasn't worried about them at all, she decided, shaking her head. What would be the point in

a weakling like Sara worrying about the top of the food chain on the Dark Mountain?

"The dungeon here has plenty of medicinal plants in it as well, just like the Dark Mountain. If you have time to, you should gather some," Chris suggested.

"Really?" Sara was happy to hear it.

She wondered why Hunters didn't pick them for some extra cash, but decided it was probably too inefficient. They didn't even gather white moonlight mushrooms, which stood out considerably, so identifying medicinal plants when they weren't used to doing so would take up too much of their time, she decided. And anyone who specialized in gathering plants probably wasn't a Hunter, so just like Sara, they wouldn't want to go into a dungeon. It made sense.

"I'll wake up early and hurry down to the fifth floor with Allen and Kuntz. Then I'll open up the temporary Apothecary's Guild in a safe area, pick plants when I have downtime, and hunt seven-colored swallowtails if I feel like it. No, actually let's forget the hunting."

Sara planned out what she'd be doing on the day the contest started.

"I have the camping set I always use, and plenty of food. I've got a one-wyvern pouch and a three-wyvern backpack. Well, I'm sure it'll work out."

She was now free to ignore the thing she'd been most worried about, hunting monsters, so she was a lot more at ease. If anything, she was actually kind of looking forward to her first dungeon after hearing that it was a lot like the Dark Mountain.

"Oh, that reminds me. Several groups from the knight corps will be participating as well."

In fact, she was looking forward to it so much that that little comment from Riot didn't even bother her. Her only thought was, *The knights aren't that strong, though. Wonder if they'll be okay.*

There was a little orientation for the participants in the evening the next day, and the guildhall was full of young Hunters practically radiating enthusiasm.

"Well, the guildmaster's still in the capital, so I'll explain things in his absence. I'm Thedias, the Guild Director."

Thed stood on a raised platform before the assembled Hunters. Next to him was the black-haired, sullen-faced Zachary.

"We'll call this little hunting competition the Zachary Cup."

The crowd hooted and hollered at that, but Zachary remained as glum as ever, to Sara's amusement. He'd done plenty to annoy her, so it served him right to be annoyed in return.

"The contest will take place over the next three days, from eight in the morning to six at night. The group that obtains the highest number of magic stones from seven-colored swallowtails will be the winners. You're free to camp out in the dungeon or commute each day."

Sara nodded along. It was exactly as she'd heard from Allen so far.

"The six highest-placing groups will earn the right to a trip into the depths of the dungeon with either Zachary's party or Nefertari and Chris's party."

An excited cheer went through the guild. Allen and Kuntz looked excited as well.

"As we expect some people to fall victim to the seven-colored swallowtails' paralysis poison, the Apothecary's Guild has announced that they will open a temporary sales stand inside the dungeon for the period of the contest. Sara?"

Oohs, ahhs, and That'll helps went through the crowd as Sara was called up to the platform as well. She glared at Zachary, now standing next to him. It was all his fault she was standing out like this!

"This girl will be running the Apothecary Guild's temporary stand."

She thought she could hear laughter among the crowd as Thedias patted her back, but it was just her imagination. Probably.

"She should stand out in that red tunic. She'll be in the safe zone on the fifth floor, so go to her if you need potions or antiparalytics."

Sara bowed to some hesitant applause. Some people were asking if it'd be okay, what with her being so young, but some other people recognized her, so they must have been here for the confrontation the other day. Sara was just glad they weren't starting out with a bad impression of her.

When she felt a harsh gaze on her, however, she looked around and spotted the knights Riot had mentioned. They were giving her an appraising look, which Sara found somewhat unnerving, but it wasn't like she had any good memories of knights anyway, so she put them out of her mind. If they wanted antiparalytics from her in the dungeon, she'd sell some to them. That was all the contact they needed to have.

She headed to the Apothecary's Guild after that, where she was handed a truly astounding number of antiparalytics.

"We'll give you some of the full-strength ones as well, just in case. These ones are five thousand gil, and the weaker ones are one thousand. And you might as well take potions, greater potions, mana elixirs, and greater mana elixirs too!"

She made it sound like she was throwing in a bunch of extras for her, but basically, Caren just wanted her to sell as much as she could. Sara stuffed the various potions into her pouch somewhat reluctantly. There was nothing wrong with *not* selling them if there was no demand, so she just prayed she wouldn't be busy tomorrow.

The next day, Sara, Allen, and Kuntz met up in front of the Hunter's Guild at five in the morning. They headed past the building and left town, hurrying toward the dungeon.

"I'm surprised I don't see that many Hunters around," Sara said, observing the streets of the town.

Kuntz shrugged. "Well, the early birds went into the dungeon last night to camp out. They're probably hunting other monsters until the start time."

"Really? Are you two okay not doing that?"

"It's 'us three' not 'you two,' Sara," Allen said with a wry smile.

For Sara's part, she wasn't really counting herself as a member of their party. She was feeling the responsibility of her Apothecary's Guild work a lot more keenly.

"It'll take three hours to get down to the safe zone on the fifth floor through the quickest route. I thought it'd be more tiring for you to stay overnight in the dungeon when you're not used to it than head down there this morning."

She felt a bit bad hearing they were getting a late start out of consideration for her. But it was kind of crazy that she was going all the way down to the fifth floor in a dungeon she'd never been in before anyway, so they were even, she figured.

The dungeon was under a small hill, through a little hole in the ground where two people stood as guards. The dungeon entrances in Rosa had been covered by buildings, but it must have been different everywhere.

"You guys here for the Zachary Cup? You're probably the last ones in there," the guard said with a disguised smile.

So everyone else *was* going early.

"We don't like to push ourselves. Okay, we're going in."

"Be careful!"

Sara timidly stepped into the hole to find a surprisingly well-lit downward slope.

"You go down this slope and it opens up into a really big space eventually. Come on, let's go."

They proceeded downward, hurrying just a little bit with physical strengthening. Just as Allen said, the tunnel suddenly opened up into a much brighter space. Sara squinted for a second at the light, and when she opened her eyes again, it was to a nostalgic sight.

"It's just like the entrance to the Dark Mountain..."

A forest thick with vegetation and a blue sky. If you looked closely, however, you could see where the sky ended. The floor was basically like a huge concert hall or stadium.

"Oh, white moonlight mushrooms."

"Don't worry about those for now. Steel armadillos won't come flying at you like on the Dark Mountain, so we can make good time down this path."

“Okay.”

They jogged down the path, Kuntz in front, Sara in the middle, and Allen bringing up the rear. Sara got the feeling her barrier was squishing slimes as she went, but they really didn’t have time to stop and pick up their magic stones, so she just hoped someone else would later.

Every so often she caught sight of wolves watching them from between the trees, or bright yellow caterpillars and bugs that looked like woodlice, but she pretended she didn’t see any of that. There were white moonlight mushrooms growing here and there in the forest and seven-colored swallowtails fluttering about as well. Some people were hunting them here, but they’d decided to go straight to the fifth floor first thing, so they ran past without worrying about them.

Right when Sara was starting to get out of breath, Kuntz slowed his pace. The forest came to an end and there was a cliff face with another hole in it just like the dungeon’s entrance.

“This is the hill down to the second floor. And this area where nothing’s growing is the safe zone.”

Sara spun around to see what he meant and realized the seven-colored swallowtails were turning around in the air like they’d hit a wall.

“We’ll rest for a bit here.”

They didn’t sit down, but they leaned against the cliff face and looked out over the first floor together.

“I didn’t think it’d be like this. Oh, there’s horned rabbits too. And they’re grey.”

That was how Sara really felt. She’d thought underground dungeons would be dim caves with bug monsters crawling around everywhere, not brightly lit fields like this.

“This is what I wanted to show you, Sara.” Allen looked out in the same direction Sara was. “You say you’re scared of bug monsters, but those yellow caterpillars are kinda pretty when you see ‘em in the light, aren’t they? Those killer bees over there won’t attack you if you don’t go after their hives. Isn’t it cute the way their necks are all fluffy?”

"Yeah, it is. It looks kinda magical with all these seven-colored swallowtails flying around too..."

Since they'd gone through the forest so fast, they hadn't had any time to pay attention to the swallowtails, but they had time to watch them now. Sara regarded the swarms... just in time to see one of the Hunters going after them get a face full of paralysis poison.

"Mm... It's magical, but they *are* still monsters."

She'd been under the illusion that she'd wandered into some kind of fairy tale forest for a moment, but this was a dungeon full of monsters. As she focused up, one of the teammates of the Hunter who was just hit with the paralysis poison ran over to her.

"Great timing! Can I get some antiparalytics?"

"Already?" Sara was surprised, but she pulled an antiparalytic out of her pouch right away regardless.

"Gimme two just in case— No, three."

"That'll be three thousand gil," she droned. She exchanged the potions for some silver coins and the Hunter ran back to his friends.

"I didn't think they'd actually come to buy stuff from me."

"It's pretty crazy to think they'd go into the dungeon unprepared like that," was Kuntz's commentary.

Since he and Allen were often in dungeons on their own, if they got hit with poison like that, they'd have to do something about it on their own. They couldn't afford to be walking around without potions to protect themselves. Sara could also see how young Hunters would have trouble *affording* to be prepared, though.

"I don't care if they call me a day-trip Hunter. I'd rather be safe than have to rely on someone else or risk getting hurt."

"What a coincidence. I feel the same way."

They must have gotten along so well because they agreed about things like this.

"Okay, we should get going. Let's head straight down to the fifth floor."

"Got it."

They told her that the scenery wouldn't really change—there would just be some different monsters on the next four floors—so Sara made up her mind to pick up the pace. She could admire the view once they were down on the fifth floor.

Still, every floor, there were more and more seven-colored swallowtails, and whenever they paused to rest in the safe zone, there were always Hunters coming to buy antiparalytics from her. By the time they made it down to the safe zone of the fifth floor, it was right around eight, when the contest got started.

"Wow, there are so many of them..."

The farther they descended from the first floor, the less forest there was and the more meadow, and the number of seven-colored swallowtails increased at the same rate. It was so bad on the fifth floor that she felt like she could see more butterfly than sky when she looked up. The Hunters watched the sky impatiently, waiting until they could start.

"Okay, we'll see you later!"

Allen and Kuntz ran off the moment the hour turned. Sara saw them off with a smile and set up a long table in the area near the cliff. She lined up a few potions and a whole lot of antiparalytics, then set out a piece of paper that said, "I'm nearby. Just call and I'll be right there." This was her plan, since she didn't think many people would steal them and she didn't want to just sit there all day. After all, this was a chance for her to gather plants for the first time in a long while.

Once everyone had started hunting, Sara stepped out of the safe zone and started gathering.

"Oh, I've already found a mana herb! Why? Is it 'cause it's dry near the safe zone?"

She had more questions than she knew what to do with, but this boded well. To be safe, she made her barrier a little bigger than she usually did and opened her eyes wide, scanning for plants she recognized. She picked any healing herbs she noticed right away, but since she'd already found a mana herb, she wanted to look for more. They were worth a thousand gil a pop, after all.

“Whoa! There’s even a greater mana herb! That’s five thousand gil, just sitting there!”

She carefully arranged the plants she gathered inside her basket with a beaming smile. She worked assiduously until she thought she heard a muffled voice, like someone calling her from another room. But that didn’t make any sense. She was in a dungeon, after all.

“Sara!”

“Hmm? Is someone saying my name? Oh, another mana herb.”

“Sara!”

This time, the voice was a lot clearer. She turned around at this point, now certain someone was calling her.

“Huh? Waugh!”

All she could see was black. Then she realized it was fluttering wings with rainbow patterns on the black.

“Are you okay?!”

It was Kuntz’s voice she could hear.

“She’ll be fine! Get back, Kuntz! You’ll get the poison on you!”

She was fine, since she had her barrier, but her maidenly heart wasn’t sure how it felt about Allen’s supreme confidence in her.

“I’m fine! Get back, Kuntz!” Sara called back to him. “Even seven-colored swallowtails see me as prey? That can’t be right. It’s not like I’ve got any nectar. Ugh, I feel like a bug trap right now...”

She’d panicked for a split second when she saw all the butterflies, but she’d trained herself to keep her barrier up even when she was sleeping on the Dark Mountain, so she knew she had nothing to worry about.

“But if I don’t do something about these swallowtails, Kuntz will be too worried about me to keep hunting... What should I do...?”

The simplest thing would be to expand her barrier. If she made it so they couldn't get as close to her, it wouldn't look like she was being attacked. But when she thought about how they'd just continue to pester her, she decided she at least wanted to lessen their numbers somewhat.

Still, she didn't want to get her own hands dirty if she could help it. She had the perfect plan to account for this.

"I'll be fine, so go ahead and use me as bait!"

"But that's not fair!"

Well, it wasn't like she was gathering them to herself on purpose. What else could they do?

"You can let other Hunters get them too, then!"

"That's fine for people like me who can just punch them, but what if a Hunter shoots magic at your barrier and it bounces off and hits them? Will you take this seriously?" Allen was practically pleading with her.

Sara clapped her hands in realization. "They're all over me 'cause I'm staying in one place! I'm gonna run around, Allen! Then they should disperse a little!"

"Got it! We'll move back!"

Sara expanded her barrier a little and headed back toward the safe zone for now. She could decide when she got there how she'd get rid of the butterflies. When she moved, the swarm of swallowtails moved with her.

"Ugh, gross!" spat Allen.

"Even if you're not talking about me, that's rude."

She was farther from the safe zone than she'd thought, so the swallowtails had thinned out a bit by the time she made it there. No one was at the table where she'd left the potions yet. It seemed she hadn't been gathering plants for *that* long.

She looked up. She could see the swallowtails bumping up against the safe zone. From the shape of the swarm, she could tell that there was a spherical protection field

around the entrance to the slope that led down to the next floor.

"It's so weird that there's just a natural protection field here. That means monsters can't go between floors... Is that why they can't leave the dungeon either?" Sara cocked her head, musing over the workings of the dungeon. "Well, I guess I'll just do a lap of the meadow."

"Heeey! Heeey!"

"Oh? I hear somebody shouting."

"Hey, apothecary! You're there, right?! What kind of torture is this, making people hit with paralysis poison cross a sea of swallowtails to get to you?!"

He had a point. At this rate, even healthy people coming to stock up on potions might get taken out by the butterflies. For the time being, Sara used their voices to guide her to the trio of Hunters and led them back into the safe zone with her.

"How do you keep the butterflies off of you like that?" one of them asked her curiously.

Sara shrugged. "Trade secret. Here, one antiparalytic is a thousand gil. I recommend drinking it right away and buying a few to have on hand."

"Right. Give us five, would you?"

The poisoned Hunter recovered quickly, but the group looked hesitant to go back out into the swarm even with backup antiparalytics.

"With this many of 'em, we're never gonna be able to leave without running into one. Hard to work up the courage when you know you're just gonna get paralyzed again right away."

As Sara was considering how to respond, another group of three waded through the swallowtails into the safe zone.

"The knights?"

They were wearing the uniform of the southern branch of the knights. Sara thought she recalled Riot telling her a few groups of knights would be participating in the contest. This group might have been made up of knights, but they appeared to be a

bunch of kids all under the age of twenty. Nelly had told her that you could become a knight in your teens after a few years of apprenticeship, so perhaps they were proper knights already, even at their young age.

"I've got antiparalytics, but I don't want to dip into my stock this early. Sell me one, would you?"

The young man seemed to want to make it clear that he wasn't underprepared. Sara dutifully sold him the antiparalytic.

With that, it was like the floodgates were open. People were asking for help from outside of the protection field more and more, or leaping in from outside and then sticking around because they didn't want to leave right away. Sara took Allen and Kuntz's absence to mean their hunting was going fine.

"Err, this seems like a good opportunity, so why not go out and hunt? You've got more prey than you could ask for right now." *See?* Sara asked with a gesture toward the seven-colored swallowtails.

"Huh... Two seven-colored swallowtails will net you one antiparalytic, so I know I'm not really gonna take a loss no matter how much paralysis poison I get hit with, but that still doesn't make me want to go out there... Who the hell came up with this brutal contest?"

"Wh-Who knows?"

All Sara had done was ask if everyone else wanted to take part. It was the Guild higher-ups who had taken advantage of the situation to take care of the swallowtail problem. Maybe it was Thedias's fault, but it certainly wasn't Sara's. If anything, it was Zachary's.

"Then I'll go with you partway, okay? There's three whole days left. It'd be a waste for you to take a break so early."

With so many people around, she could hardly slip away to gather medicinal plants now.

"What do you mean, you'll go with us? Wait... Come to think of it, how'd you get those Hunters back into the safe zone anyway?"

One Hunter began to laugh off Sara's suggestion before freezing and remembering

how she'd come to fetch them from outside the protection field.

"Well, I can make my own protection fields, basically."

"How?"

"Like this?" Sara put up her barrier and invited the Hunter to touch it. The Hunter reached out timidly, his hand bouncing off of the field.

"What the heck?! It *is* a protection field..." The Hunter looked between Sara and his hand, speechless.

"So I can bring you a little ways away from the swallowtails. Then you can get hunting, right?" Sara asked with a grin.

Bolstered by her confidence, the Hunters who had lost their motivation all started to rise from the ground again.

"Do we go one group at a time?"

"No, I can take a few at a time," Sara said, thinking back to the incident in Camellia with the bog frogs. "Let's see... I shouldn't bring you all to the same place, so how about we take three trips in three different directions?"

Sara headed to her left. "Okay, everyone who wants to go this way, come over here."

Three of the groups who had been resting on the left side of the safe zone walked over to her.

"Keep as close to me as you can, please. Okay, let's go!"

She felt like a tour guide. A smile crept to her lips at the thought that it'd be perfect if she just had a little flag that said "Apothecary's Guild" on it.

"Hey, uhh... you're also one of the Red..." one of the Hunters began to timidly ask her.

"You mean Nefertari? Please don't call her a Reaper. She's a good person." Sara wanted to make that clear first and foremost.

"Sorry. You're part of Nefertari's crew? Or her friend?"

"That's right. More family than friend, I guess. We live together."

She gave the Hunter a curious glance, wondering why he'd asked her that, and found him looking hesitant.

"Well, it's rare enough for an apothecary to go into a dungeon, but you're totally okay down here even though you're a little girl, and you were even smiling like you were having fun earlier." Sara put her hands to her face. She hadn't noticed that she was smiling. "I just thought it must really make you tough to be around strong people."

"Well, we lived on the Dark Mountain, so most places aren't bad in comparison."

"Growl!"

"Growl!"

Sara suddenly felt like she'd heard something nostalgic.

"Eep... Hellhounds! What are they doing on the fifth floor...?"

On the other side of Sara's barrier were three hellhounds. The Hunters with her looked uncertain, fearful even.

"They really are pitch black! They're about the same size as mountain wolves. Which means..." Sara took a deep breath. "ALLEN! WOLVES! I FOUND WOLVES!"

They were still scary even if you knew they couldn't hurt you. At times like these, it was best to leave things to a companion you trusted.



Allen must have been nearby already, because he arrived quickly with pounding footsteps.

“Sara! You okay?! Ack! What are these doing on the fifth floor?!”

He had the same concern as the Hunters with Sara, but he swiftly stopped and lowered his stance. “They’ll run off if I hit ‘em once or twice, right? Yah!”

Slammed to the ground with strengthened fists, the hellhounds yapped and ran off into the forest. It was a rather anticlimactic retreat.

“What are you doing, Sara?”

“Escorting, I guess.”

Allen gave Sara and the Hunters with her an exasperated look before running back over to Kuntz, who’d been watching him, dumbfounded.

“Come on, let’s get back to hunting swallowtails.”

“S-Sure. Uhh, I didn’t know you could take down hellhounds, Allen.”

“I didn’t either since today’s my first time hitting one, but I guess if they’re around as strong as a mountain wolf, I can.”

The two walked off, chatting. Sara bet he could.

“That kid’s Nefertari’s friend too, huh?”

“Yep. He’s strong. But the prize goes to the top six groups, so there are still five places left. Keep it up.” Sara cheered the Hunters on with a clenched fist.

“You’re confident they’ll be first, huh?”

“Of course I am.”

It wasn’t just that he was strong now. Allen never spared any effort, so he would only get stronger. And as long as Kuntz stuck with him, he’d get stronger too. Sara was confident of that.

“This should be good.”

“Yeah. Thanks. Uhh...”

“It’s Sara.”

“Sara. We’ll try our best.”

Sara saw the Hunters off with a smile and hurried back to the safe zone, escorting the others out as well.

“I’m busier than I thought I’d be down here. There’s not gonna be any time to gather plants after all,” Sara muttered to herself, restocking the table with antiparalytics. “But the seven-colored swallowtails are finally starting to thin out now that everyone’s hunting them.” She looked up and found that she could now see more sky than butterfly.

“You’re one of the Invited, right?”

“Eep! Who’s there?”

Sara turned around to find one of the knights she’d just escorted in the middle group now leaning against a wall. She felt a little silly for not noticing him when she got back, but she made the excuse to herself that her absentmindedness was the whole reason she always had her barrier up in the first place.

“I took Nefertari lightly, thinking the rumors about her were sure to be exaggerated since she was the lord’s daughter, but our expectations were completely shattered that day when she went up against all of the knights. But you...”

He must have been one of the knights Nelly had clobbered back then.

“You didn’t bat an eye that whole time. Nefertari, with her terrifying strength, and Master Chris, who was as cold as ice... you got right in between the two of them like you were their little sister or something. It made sense to me later when I heard you were an Invited.”

She wasn’t sure how he knew she was an Invited, but it wasn’t like she was hiding it or anything, and now that Nelly’s family had assumed guardianship of her, she didn’t have to worry about getting caught up in squabbles between noble houses who

wanted an Invited in their pockets. That meant she was free to tell people who she was, but she wasn't in the habit of doing so, so she was curious how this knight had found out.

Of course, the southern knights were stationed right next to the lord's mansion, and their job was to maintain the peace, so she supposed they had a right to know.

"Today you're in a dungeon, supposedly for the first time ever, and you're strolling around like you're in your own backyard. People who have been Hunters for years already can barely handle themselves down here."

That was just because she'd lived on the Dark Mountain for two years, but she didn't see why she had to explain that to a complete stranger. Sara was getting a little annoyed at the man.

"It's true that I'm one of the Invited, but I'm not hiding it. It's just not something I feel the need to tell everyone I meet. You might have the impression that you do of Nelly and Chris because you're strangers, but they're practically family to me, so it's only natural that we're close."

Well, Chris wasn't really family. He was more like an uninvited mentor, but it was too much of a pain to explain all the details of their relationship.

"I'm okay in dungeons because I have a protection field, like I explained earlier." She got the feeling he wouldn't leave until she'd answered his questions, so she gave him the bare minimum she thought she could get away with.

"I've never heard of magic like that. Guess that's just what the Invited can do."

Sara was sick of hearing the word by now. "Chris can use this spell too, you know. And some other people in Rosa. You've heard of shield magic, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, you can get the same effect with that. And another thing..." Sara lowered her voice. "I may be one of the Invited, but I came from a place that didn't even have magic. So all the magic I know, I learned after coming here to Trilgaia and mastered through my own efforts. Even now, I'm training at the Apothecary's Guild, mashing up herbs every day so I can become an apothecary." She was sure the boundless mana of the Invited was an impressive thing, but it wasn't something you could make use of

without any effort at all. “You’re here for the hunting contest, aren’t you? Want me to take you out there again?” she asked, fully aware of the sardonic tone in her voice.

“No, I’m good. I just wanted to talk with you a bit.”

“Why not ask me what my hobbies are or what I like instead, then?” Sara shrugged exasperatedly. Their “conversation” had been less like a chat and more like an interrogation so far.

“I can do that later. At the very least, I’ve learned that you’re kind, a bit of a busybody, and a hard worker. Not to mention...” The young knight grinned. “You’re cute.”

“Wha—?” Sara went speechless for a moment before turning bright red. “Where the heck did that come from? Goodness gracious... I let my guard down.” Even if he was just teasing her, it flustered her to be called cute. Sara fanned her hot cheeks.

“Ha ha ha! Well, I’d better get back to hunting before you think I’m a slacker.”

“Yeah, yeah. Get going.” Sara saw the knight off with her red cheeks, finding him faintly annoying.

The contestants must have been getting better at hunting the swallowtails, because she got a lot fewer victims of the paralysis poison after that. But that was only until noon came.

While she was taking a leisurely noontime break in the safe zone, a Hunter popped his head out from the path down to the lower floors.

“Is the Apothecary’s Guild here?”

“Oh, yes! That’s me.” Sara stood, dusting the bread crumbs from her lunch off of her lap. “How many?”

“Ten.”

“Ten!” Sara counted the antiparalytics on the table and reached into her pouch. She’d sold quite a few of them in the morning, so she was starting to get a little worried about her stock. “Okay, I’ve got them. That’ll be ten thousand gil.”

The Hunter accepted the potions, looking tired, and glanced up at the sky of the fifth floor before looking back to Sara worriedly. “My group’s hunting on the seventh floor, but there’s way more seven-colored swallowtails than we were expecting. I came to stock up on some antiparalytics early, but I’m guessing you’re about to get a whole lot of people who’ve run out by now”

“Really? I hope I’ll have enough...” She should have had a few hundred bottles, but she’d already gone through somewhere around a tenth of them.

“There’s more of them now than when we came to check things out before the contest. If you can, you should restock in the middle. Maybe we’ll hunt on the fifth or sixth floor tomorrow...”

Since they were on a lower floor, they must have been pretty strong despite their youth. And if they were still having trouble, the number of seven-colored swallowtails really must have been unmanageable.

“They didn’t bother us when we could just ignore them and run past, but they’re really hard to deal with when you actually have to hunt them.”

“Seems like it,” Sara agreed, remembering how much trouble Allen had had getting his fist to connect with the first one he’d taken down.

“Well, it helps that I didn’t have to go all the way outside. See you.”

“Yeah, see you later.” Sara saw the Hunter off with a grin. She was used to tending a shop from working at the kiosk in Rosa’s Guild, and it was nice that everyone was so grateful to her for the service. “It feels like a convenience store. I bet if I sold tea, I could make some money.”

“Sara, I don’t know what a convenience store is, but I would be a bit more careful about what you say,” Allen warned her.

“Huh?” Sara looked over at him and noticed several resting Hunters’ eyes focusing on her.

“Are you gonna?”

“If you are, I’m buyin’”

She could practically see a heat haze rising from the Hunters that represented just how serious they were. Sara hastily shook her head. "It was just a joke. I mean, I don't have any water or anything."

"Hey, don't underestimate Hunters. We can produce as much water as you want with magic right here."

Then make tea yourselves, she almost said, but she felt bad for making them want to drink it in the first place, so she ended up making tea for all of them for free.

"It's only like ten groups anyway," she told herself. And she had plenty of tea. She got out a pot, filled it with water using magic, made it boil with magic as well to save time, and tossed some tea leaves in.

"I've never made this much at once. I guess I should scoop it out with a ladle."

Sara got out her sugar and some spoons and called out to the resting Hunters.

"Everybody bring your own cups up here, okay?"

She ladled tea into their cups, feeling like a lunch lady at a school. The last few cups were probably astringent from the more concentrated tea leaves, but everyone drank it all down like it was delicious and waved to her happily before they went back to their hunting.

"I figured you'd caught on to this in Rosa with the cold lunches, but Hunters are really sloppy about anything outside of hunting. You shouldn't be too nice to them. They'll take advantage of you," Allen warned her with a sour face.

"Ugh, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"It's always something with you, Sara. I'd better not see you serving soup out here tonight." With a final warning from Allen and a wry smile from Kuntz, the two of them went back to hunting.

Left alone, Sara started tidying up her pot and getting ready to go plant-gathering for the afternoon.

"Apothecary's Guild."

"Yep, right here." Sara turned around with a smile even as her motivation faded. When she saw who had called out to her, however, she regretted putting on the smile. "Mr. Zachary."

"How's it going?"

Well, how was she supposed to answer *that*? Sara had no idea how things normally went in a dungeon, so she was at a loss for a moment before guessing what he meant by the question. She had experience dealing with people who weren't the best talkers from Nelly.

"Umm, there were a ton of seven-colored swallowtails at first, but there are fewer of them now. A lot of people have come to buy the weak antiparalytics, but I've still got plenty in stock."

"I see."

She was relieved to find that that seemed to be the right answer. When his eyes went to the pot she was cleaning up, she couldn't help asking, "Would you like some tea?"

"Yeah. Thanks." There was a pause before he answered, but after he did, he leaned up against the wall and took some bread out of a pouch. Everyone on the fifth floor had already finished lunch and gone back to hunting, but apparently Zachary was only eating now.

"You don't need to be out there?"

"Well, I *am* just an apprentice apothecary. I was hoping to go and gather some medicinal plants later." She chose not to tell him it was his intrusion that had prevented her from doing so now. "Would you like sugar?"

"Yeah." He'd answered without hesitation this time, so Sara put a heavy scoop of sugar in before handing him his cup. "It's good."

Such a simple creature was Sara that that phrase was all it took to restore her good mood. But her ears pricked up at Zachary's next muttering.

"Nefertari's... really changed."

Not satisfied with merely pricking up her ears, she asked him directly, "Changed how?"

"How, eh?" Zachary hesitated. He must not have been expecting her to ask him a question, but how could she not be curious? "When she was with the knights, Nefertari never got close to anyone. She kept everyone at a distance. Even Chris, who never left her alone despite only joining up later. And look at her now."

Sara's cheeks twitched at the revelation that Nelly had been just as unreceptive to Chris then as she was now, but she kept herself under control. By "look at her now," he must have meant how many friends she had now, but if you included Kuntz, it was only four.

"Wasn't she just keeping her distance because of the pressure of her mana?" Sara asked.

"That was part of it, of course," Zachary answered right away. "But this was the knights in the capital. There were plenty of people with a lot of mana there, like me, and we did well enough for ourselves. If you lived in Rosa, do you know Vince and Jay?"

"Yeah. I owe a lot to them." She wasn't expecting to hear those names.

"They're well-known Hunters who get by fine even with strong mana pressure, right? Most people either adjust their output or come to some sort of compromise with the people around them and they do just fine. But Nefertari always kept her distance from us. She was courteous, strong, beautiful, and aloof."

He was right about making compromises. Allen had a lot of mana and people tended to avoid him, but he was able to get work from the people in town and everyone at the Guild loved him. He'd put in the work to carve out his own little space in Rosa. Nelly exuded more pressure than other people, but Sara had always thought there was some other reason she kept her distance from people. She'd thought it was the knights' fault for sure, but maybe it wasn't.

"Nefertari never got serious any time we challenged her to a fight, and she avoided them whenever she could. She'd accept when she felt like she had to, but... do you know what it feels like when someone's trying to figure out how easy to go on you?"

"Err, no, not really." Sara wasn't interested in fights in the first place, so that was all she could say.

"I was working my ass off to catch up to her and surpass her, but she went and quit the knight corps with no warning. And even after she became a Hunter, she went off

to the Dark Mountain on her own, so there was no way for me to challenge her again.”

Sara was starting to feel bad for him. Zachary had been spinning his wheels all this time, trying to beat Nelly. At the same time, she couldn’t help feeling that the knights had taken the wrong approach in trying to get closer to Nelly.

“I heard she participates in the dragon hunts in the capital, so I’ve tried to join in for the last few years, but she stopped coming right when I started.”

Well, that was Sara’s fault, so she felt a little bad about that. Just a little bit.

“Then when I gave up and didn’t go, she came back. And while I was feeling frustrated about it, she shows up in Hydrangea out of nowhere.”

He hadn’t told her how she’d changed at all, but she’d come to understand how he felt about her very well. He’d wanted to get stronger alongside her.

“You should have just come to Rosa, then.”

“I wanted to, but once you become a veteran Hunter, it gets harder to pull up roots and just leave somewhere.”

Nelly hadn’t been able to leave the Dark Mountain until she found a replacement to take over for her, so that made perfect sense to Sara.

“And now that I can finally challenge her again, she doesn’t even remember me. What was that reaction she had? It was like she’d just happened to run into someone she vaguely knew. Even Chris remembered me when he has no reason to.”

Sara looked up when she heard Zachary sulking and he hastily looked away to hide his expression. “Umm, Mr. Zachary...”

“What?” he asked, still facing away from her.

“The other day, Nelly had a big melee with all the southern knights, and Riot and Thed.”

“What? I haven’t heard anything about that.”

“Well, she beat the stuffing out of the knights, so I can see why they wouldn’t exactly want to advertise it. It didn’t really look like Nelly was holding back or going easy on

them to me... She was acting like it was a pain, though."

Sara didn't think Nelly was the same now as she was when she was a kid. Now, if you had a genuine conversation with her, Sara was pretty sure she'd take you seriously. She hoped that would come across in what she told Zachary.

"Nelly likes work and she likes fighting, but she doesn't care about comparing herself to other people and finding out who's stronger," Sara said to her pot. "Why don't you just tell her directly that you want to fight her, without getting anyone else involved?"

"I'm fairly certain it was you who got everyone involved."

His all-too-apt rebuttal took the wind out of her sails a bit. An awkward silence settled as Sara aimlessly stirred the tea in the pot, which was only getting more and more bitter.

"The tea was good." With that, Zachary left like the wind. Sara watched him go, shrugging her shoulders.

"I guess Chris really has been chasing after Nelly for over twenty years. That's pretty amazing." Of course that would leave more of an impression than a guy who showed up out of nowhere and could only talk about the past. Still, it seemed to Sara that the unpleasant feelings Zachary was lugging around with him had lessened at least somewhat.

In the end, Sara was busy all afternoon serving customers who came down from the fourth floor or up from the sixth. And since she never got around to putting away the pot, she ended up serving tea to all the Hunters who came by as well. As it got closer to evening, Sara watched the "sky" of the dungeon darken curiously, but it didn't seem to get completely dark down here like it did on the Dark Mountain.

"You can't even see the sun down here, so how is it setting, anyway?"

"I guess I've never really thought about it."

As Allen himself had said, that was just how Hunters were, she supposed. If she asked Nelly, she'd probably get the same answer.

"Sara." *Oh, Nelly.* As Sara thought about her, she started to imagine her voice.

“Oh, Nelly! Welcome back!”

It wasn’t her imagination. It really was Nelly.

“I just wish we could stay.” Nelly had a rare look of exhaustion on her face. Chris wore the same expression next to her.

“Oh yeah, you two are acting as judges, right?”

“Yeah. That said, this dungeon’s huge, so we’re basically just walking around making sure everyone’s following the rules and no one’s getting seriously hurt.”

“Wow, that sounds like a lot of work. Want some tea before you go?”

A buzz went through the safe zone at the word “tea,” but no one said anything out of respect for Nelly.

“You know, there’s a lot of Hunters in the safe zone here. And...” What was the little smile that crept in at that last word? “Hellhounds. Shoulda known.”

“Known what...?”

“*Growl!*”

“*Growl!*”

Sara turned around to find a pack of the black wolves Allen should have driven off at midday gathered nearby, their eyes glinting.

“Wanna throw them some meat on the bone, Sara?”

“I don’t have anything like that. And this isn’t the Dark Mountain...”

“Ha ha ha. I could carve up a cockatrice. I hunted one up while I was doing my rounds. Ha ha ha.”

“Come on, Nelly, you’re gonna make people think something weird.” Sara hurriedly cut Nelly off. It was just their typical banter to the two of them, but she could see how their conversation could be rather gruesome to someone else. She was even laughing at the hellhounds, which were supposed to be scary monsters. Of course, Chris didn’t

seem bothered by it at all. In fact, he was even checking on the table Sara had set up and her antiparalytics.

"Make us some tea when we get back, would you? We have to at least check up on the safe zone on the first floor."

"Want me to come too? It'll be faster if we split up the work." Allen stood up, but Nelly shook her head.

"No. There's a reason I'm taking an apothecary with me."

"Well, I'll go with Sara, then."

"It's fine with me. If it's just curing paralysis, I can handle that." Sara was tired as well, of course, but if it lightened Nelly's burden at all, she could put in some more effort.

"Nah. You two are participants, you know. Rest up and get ready for tomorrow. Chris?"

"Ready."

They left, perfectly in sync, and Sara sighed with relief, watching them go. The hellhounds flying into the air as they went must have been on the receiving end of Nelly's fist.

"She's so cool, isn't she?"

"It's kinda frustrating, but Nelly and Chris are *both* super cool."

Kuntz sighed behind Sara and Allen. "You two are plenty cool for thirteen-year-olds." The safe zone went quiet, so there must not have been many thirteen-year-old Hunters in Hydrangea. Not that there were many in Rosa either. "I knew you were strong, but I never thought you were as strong as you are. Are you sure I'm not just holding you back?"

Kuntz was fifteen. He was two years older than Allen, but nowhere near as strong as him. It must have been frustrating for him.

"Of course you're not, Kuntz." Allen had a pained smile on his face, like he hadn't been expecting Kuntz to say something like that. "Kuntz, why do you think I'm a Hunter?"

"Well..." Kuntz wasn't sure how to answer the sudden question. "To get stronger?"

Strength really was important to a lot of Hunters. They were sensitive to the topic, and it was the reason why so many young Hunters were participating in this contest.

"That's part of it, of course. Hey, Sara."

"Yeah?" Sara listened quietly to what he had to say.

"We'd just turned twelve a year ago, but we didn't have the money to get our IDs yet, and we were camping out together, remember?"

"We sure were. In Rosa, you can't get into the town at night if you don't have an ID. So we camped out outside town. And did odd jobs every day to earn money."

Sara took out her Guild ID from her pouch and held it up to the sky, thinking back to the sky she could remember seeing outside of Rosa's walls.

"So the main reason why I'm a Hunter is just to get by. As a Hunter, I can make enough money to live off of. Being strong only helps with that." Allen rubbed his nose bashfully. "So even if I'm not as cool as Nelly and Chris, staying alive is most important to me, and to do that, I won't push myself and I don't mind taking it slow. I learned that from you, Kuntz, so you're not holding me back. If anything, if *I'm* getting in *your* way, then..." Allen hung his head. "I hope you'll tell me."

"Don't worry, you're not. Casters have a hard time getting to the deeper parts of a dungeon on their own. It really helps having you around, Allen. It just makes me wonder if I'm good enough to join you."

"Well, people aren't exactly lining up to team up with me," Allen said half-jokingly, but it was true. At first, it was because he was new, and then after that it was because everyone thought he was part of Nelly's "posse."

"We don't have the wrong idea about the red lady anymore," one of the resting Hunters piped up. "And we saw just how strong you two are today with our own eyes."

They were all in the safe zone together, so they must have heard everything they'd said.

"I dunno if we're even strong enough to team up with you, but if you ever want more

numbers, you can ask us.”

“Us too.”

The resting Hunters spoke up one after another. Sara listened happily, sitting on the ground.

“You’re acting like this has nothing to do with you, but we’re talking to you too. Uhh, it was Sara, right?”

“Huh? Me?” Sara wasn’t expecting the conversation to turn her way. Now that she thought about it, someone had asked her name before lunch, hadn’t they?

“You might actually be the strongest person here. Anyone who can’t see that isn’t fit to be a Hunter.”

Sara looked around, flustered, but everyone was nodding along like they agreed. And why did Allen look so proud?

“It’s true. Sara is totally invincible. She doesn’t really hunt stuff herself, but if you’re with her, you can survive no matter where you are. But again, she doesn’t hunt.”

Sara couldn’t help smiling at the way he sounded so disappointed. “I just want to protect myself. I don’t think hunting’s a good fit for me.” She reached her arms up. “I’d rather live gathering plants than hunting monsters. Looking down at the ground instead of at the sky. Taking it easy and not rushing.” The words resonated with Sara herself more than anyone else. “At Nelly’s side.” That part was essential.

“If you just wanna look at the ground with Nelly, you can do that in the dungeon, you know.”

“Way to ruin it, Allen...”

Allen made the suggestion with a laugh, but she did want him by her side as well if possible.

Nelly and Chris sped through the top five floors and were back before they knew it, and the first day of the contest ended peacefully, with everyone having fun chatting with each other.

On the morning of the second day, a mid-level Hunter delivered Sara more antiparalytics from the Apothecary's Guild, so there was no longer any worry about her stock running out.

Naturally, there weren't as many people getting hit with paralysis poison on the second day, so Sara was able to take more breaks to gather plants. It was a slow, apothecary-like day for Sara. Of course, the seven-colored swallowtails, which had thinned out at the end of the first day, were back with a vengeance at the start of day two, the reason for which Sara stumbled upon while she was looking for medicinal plants near the forest.

"Look at all those cocoons..."

In the past, Sara had seen swallowtail caterpillars on a prickly ash tree in her yard. When they got bigger, they'd leave the prickly ash tree and make their cocoons somewhere else. Sara sidled up to one out of curiosity and noticed some of them were squirming.

"If this many of them are hatching every day, it's no wonder they're not going away."

While she was observing the cocoons, however, Sara spotted something black in the underbrush with a whole lot of legs, and scurried away from the forest as fast as she could. When she met back up with Nelly and Chris that night at dinner, she decided to tell them about what she'd seen. For some reason, Zachary was also there. Sara had to wonder if it was okay that there was no one down on the lower floors.

"Well, more seven-colored swallowtails would naturally mean more caterpillars and cocoons. Sara, would you take me to that area?" Chris asked, sounding interested, but Sara didn't really want to go back there.

"I'll go too." Zachary stood casually, apparently having listened in on their conversation.

"You will, will you?"

"Got a problem?"

He and Chris were having an unproductive exchange, but Sara didn't have time to worry about them.

"It's just... there was this... black... *thing*."

"Ah, a centipede."

"Eep!"

Yeah, she should probably just stay where she was, she thought.

"Oh, you can avoid those things with a little light. We just need to make sure you're well lit, Sara."

Only with Nelly's reassurances did Sara take Nelly and Chris to the forest, albeit reluctantly. Needless to say, a whole crowd of Hunters tagged along with them.

"See? Right here."

The trees Sara pointed out were covered in black cocoons. Incidentally, she'd taken Nelly's advice and was not only holding a lantern but had one attached to her backpack as well, so light was shining off of her in every direction. As a result, it was so bright around her that she couldn't see many details in the scenery of the dark dungeon surrounding. And if she couldn't see them, then it wouldn't bother her even if there were black things wriggling around on the ground. Two birds with one stone.

"Wow, this is creepy."

"I've been delving into this dungeon for a long time, but I've never noticed this before."

From Nelly's and Zachary's frank opinions on the matter, it didn't seem like Sara's sensibilities were all that different from the people of this world after all. She was relieved to know that. Satisfied that she'd done her job, Sara returned to the meadow by herself. Of course, the cocoons she'd spotted were right on the edge of the forest, so she was still close enough to hear her companions if they called. She watched them lazily from the grass.

"Ack!"

"It cracked!"

When she heard those cries, she almost went to look, but she reined in her curiosity. She was more concerned by the traces of black she kept spotting out of the corner of

her eye. Sometimes they would flit across her vision as well.

"They're not hellhounds, which means... But don't seven-colored swallowtails sleep at night?"

She steeled herself and looked up, but she couldn't see the sky. All she saw was flapping black wings.

"My bug repellent lights are just attracting other bugs. Umm, what should I do about this?"

If she turned the lights off, they would disperse, but then centipedes might come out of the forest.

"Let's try this..." By "this," she meant the thing where bugs who gathered around a light on a summer night got a little zap of electricity. It was a bit of a cruel trap, but seven-colored swallowtails were monsters. If Sara didn't hunt them, then one of the other Hunters around here would. That was all there was to it.

"I'll put an electric charge on the outside of my barrier. And I'm scared, so I'll make it a little bigger." Sara expanded her barrier so there was enough space for her inside it. She immediately felt it hitting swallowtails. "But that's not enough, so electricity... I'll zap 'em."

In the darkness, Sara's barrier began to glow blue, and someone near the forest noticed.

"Hey, something weird's happening to that girl!"

Nothing weird was actually happening to her, but if someone came up to her out of worry, they'd be in danger. Flustered, Sara upped her output and closed her eyes.

Zap! Zap! Zap!

With a much louder sound than she expected, she felt the impacts through the air. The sounds continued for some time before...

Zap... Zap...

Eventually, they fizzled out.

Sara timidly opened her eyes and saw the faint light of the dungeon's night sky, along with a giant heap of seven-colored swallowtails. On the other side of the pile, her friends seemed to be frozen in the middle of a game of charades. Nelly was reaching out to her like she wanted to rush over but couldn't find a chance to, and Chris had his arms around her waist to stop her. Allen was also frozen in a pose like he was looking for a chance to run over.

Whoops, Sara thought. She clasped her hands in front of her and laughed awkwardly. “Umm, did I maybe go too far again?”

“You’re okay...” Nelly sighed with relief and Chris let go of her waist, looking entirely too disappointed. Sara almost burst out laughing despite the circumstances.

“Sara! Is that zap thing over with?”

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

Allen hurried over to her after hearing that it was safe, carefully wading through the seven-colored swallowtails.

“Hup...”

“Ack!”

Sara had shrunk her barrier down around herself so that Allen could get close to her, and as soon as he reached her, he picked her up and trotted back over to Nelly.

“I’ve got my barrier. I’m fine...”

“Nelly would worry about you walking over all those swallowtails.”

“I guess so. Thanks.”

Sara was probably stronger than Allen, but the way he always came to save her without hesitating was what made him so dependable to her. Allen set Sara down in front of Nelly.

“Sara! I can’t believe you!” It was rare for Nelly to raise her voice like that.

“Sorry for worrying you.” Sara apologized right away.

"I'm always telling you not to close your eyes when you go up against monsters."

"That's what you meant?" Sara couldn't believe that was what she was worried about, but she appreciated the depth of Nelly's trust in her.

"I've seen something like that once, a long time ago. It was smaller, but when I was teamed up with Vince, he put something like that on his hand to keep monsters away. Was that the same thing?"

It almost sounded like Zachary was just talking to himself, but Sara answered him anyway.

"Yes. It was electricity."

No one had harassed her today, and Zachary had mellowed out, which she was relieved to see. The other Hunters were all observing the fallen swallowtails. One of them called out to her next.

"Can we finish off the ones that are still alive?"

"Please do!"

It was a lot of electricity, but it was only enough to knock out golden trouts, and there were a lot of seven-colored swallowtails who were only knocked out by it too.

Of course, there were still Hunters back by the forest observing the cocoons as well. Kuntz was one of them. "The swallowtails are emerging!"

When he shouted that, Sara forgot about the centipedes and went over to the forest to see the butterflies. "Whoa, they're huge!" It was incredible seeing a butterfly so huge hatching from an equally huge cocoon. They may have been monsters, but they were still living things.

"Nelly, Chris. This magic stone came from one of the cocoons." Kuntz opened his hand to reveal a magic stone that looked almost the same as the ones that came from full-grown swallowtails. "If you can get magic stones from them when they're just cocoons, you don't need to wait until they're fully grown to hunt them. It's not gonna be a challenge or any fun, but it might help Hunters just starting out to make ends meet."

No one had paid much attention to them until now because seven-colored

swallowtails had never been such a problem before. When there weren't so many of them everywhere, they were probably pretty hard to spot.

"I get the feeling it's a pretty short time they actually spend in those cocoons."

"They are pretty vulnerable like this. They'll be picked off if they don't emerge quickly." Nelly observed the cocoons curiously.

"Hey, the one that just hatched is about to fly off!"

She felt like swallowtails in Japan took a little more time both to emerge from their cocoons and to dry their wings off before taking flight. But seven-colored swallowtails went from cocoon to ready for flight in not even an hour.

"We'll never cull their numbers if this many of them are emerging every day."

They hadn't even found out the reason for the unusual amount of seven-colored swallowtails lately, but at least they knew the reason why their numbers recovered immediately after being culled.

"This calls for a more serious countermeasure than a little hunting contest," Zachary commented after wandering over to the forest at some point.

"I'll have to contact my brother," Nelly agreed.

"Hydrangea's guildmaster is seriously never around when it counts."

It was a little awkward, but they were able to have more or less a natural conversation, Sara was relieved to see. The adults were busy considering their next moves, but Sara was more concerned by the wriggling things on the ground that she kept catching out of the corner of her eye.

"Err, can I go back now?"

"Yeah. You'll be fine on your own?"

"Uh-huh."

She wished to remain blissfully ignorant of whatever wriggly thing she was catching glimpses of. She asked the Hunters to take care of the seven-colored swallowtails she'd

taken out with her barrier and hastily retreated from the nighttime forest.

"Going strong on day three," Sara murmured to herself the next day as she plucked medicinal plants from the earth. Thanks to their little outing the night before, the seven-colored swallowtails on the fifth floor had been thinned out considerably, so the Hunters had dispersed to higher and lower floors for the last day of the contest. Nelly and Chris had left the dungeon temporarily to make their report to Thedias. There were hardly any swallowtails still bothering Sara and no matter how many hellhounds showed up, all she had to do was keep them out of her barrier. The centipedes didn't come out from the forest, so it was as close to a peaceful day in the dungeon as possible.

"Hey! Apothecary's Guild!"

"Yep! Coming!"

Hunters came to buy antiparalytics every so often, but she put on her best customer service smile, sold them their potions, and then got right back to gathering.

"What a relaxing day." Sara got up and stretched her back out, looking up at the sky. She enjoyed working at the Apothecary's Guild, but gathering plants like this really was her favorite. "Allen and Kuntz said it was too much trouble to come back for lunch, so I can just take it easy and eat on my own." It was supposed to be three people per group, but they'd ended up working separately for all three days of the contest, she mused to herself. "Still, I bet Allen and Kuntz will come in first."

They had trained for this with a specific strategy in mind, so they should have been able to hunt the swallowtails more efficiently than anyone else.

Sara picked plants until she was fully satisfied, but it was still a little early for lunch. Sara went back to the safe zone for a break, and just as she arrived, Allen popped out of the path down to the lower floors. His shoulders were heaving, so he must have really been hurrying. It was rare for him to be so out of breath.

"Oh, Allen. Did you want to have lunch together after all?"

"Th-This is no time for a leisurely lunch..."

"Huh...?"

Apparently something had happened. Allen had run here at top speed, and he even took an antiparalytic out of his bag and chugged it as soon as he came to a stop. Sara took a cup out of her pouch and set it on the table, jotting down a note that she set beside it.

"Let's see... 'I'm away from the table right now. Please put your payment in the cup. One potion is two thousand gil. One antiparalytic is one thousand gil.' There."

If she left out twenty of them, it would probably be enough. She'd just have to trust in the Hunters' consciences. With that, Sara was ready to go. She shouldered her backpack and turned to Allen.

"You need another person down there, right?"

"Not just another person, we need you, Sara. It's crazy... Just come down to the sixth floor for now."

Sara ran after Allen down the path to the sixth floor, all the while musing that she'd been told someone needed her, but it hadn't sounded romantic in the slightest.

"We're almost there."

"Okay!"

Sara stopped for a second after emerging from the dark path into the bright sixth floor. There was a safe zone right when she exited the path as well, and there were quite a few Hunters inside, all looking up at the sky. Sara followed their gazes and let out a gasp at what she saw.

"There's so many of them..."

"Right? We've been hunting here all day, but we're not even making a dent in them. And that's not all. There are so many of them that your body starts slowing down after a while just from being outside the safe zone. The air is full of their scales. A couple people collapsed 'cause they didn't notice."

"What about antiparalytics?" Sara put her hand to her pouch, but Allen shook his head.

"We have enough. Everyone recovered with the weak ones, but we can't go outside if it's dangerous to even breathe out there. We have to get rid of at least some of them,

and you're the only one I could think of who might be able to help." Allen looked frustrated that he couldn't do anything about the situation himself.

"Nelly and Chris aren't back yet... What about Zachary?" He went down to one of the lower floors early in the morning, if Sara recalled right.

"Well, this is only the sixth floor. I bet he's held up somewhere way farther down. Kuntz is over at the safe zone near the path down to the seventh floor."

Sara calmly considered the situation. Last night, Sara had made herself into a light trap, though it wasn't on purpose, and she'd hunted a considerable number of seven-colored swallowtails by covering her barrier in electricity. But that strategy wouldn't work when it was still bright out. The butterflies seemed to have the same strange affinity for Sara that the wolves did, but that was just more so than the average person. She wasn't like a light trap *all* the time.

What could she do, then?

When the poison bog frogs had attacked Camellia, there had been a ton of them too. To deal with them, she'd used her barrier like a shield to hold them back, but the swallowtails were flying in the air. She could blow up her barrier like a bubble and push them all the way to the walls of the dungeon, but if there were any Hunters still outside the safe zone, they'd get caught up in her attack too.

"They're up in the sky, and I only want to catch butterflies..."

Sara could put up another barrier around her own. Then what about casting a sort of net out from her barrier?

"I'll expand my barrier out like a net and try to catch as many swallowtails in it as I can."

"Sara..."

"It's fine. I'll try it."

Sara stepped out from the safe zone.

"Hey! What are you doing?! Stop!"

Allen stood behind her like a guard, and he didn't budge when the other Hunters started yelling at him.

"Stay back! Don't get in Sara's way!"

He even had his fists pointed at the Hunters. It was all too clear how serious he was.

With one more glance back at him, Sara turned and reached out toward the sky.

"I'll shoot my barrier out like a party popper..." She concentrated her mana at the tip of her barrier and shot it out into the sky like a thin net. She could feel the swallowtails fluttering about inside her barrier, but she tried not to let it bother her. "Once it's out as far as I can get it, I'll shrink the other side..." She shrunk the end of the net like she was closing a bag.

"Look at that..."

"I can't believe it..."

The butterflies looked like they were fluttering about inside a big ball in the sky.

"I'm sorry..." Sara muttered. She closed the holes in the net she'd been imagining, picturing it as a balloon instead, and remembered the words in her magic textbook.

"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. Now, if you open up a hole in a balloon..."

With a whistling sound, the air inside the sphere shot out. The sphere shrank, crushing the seven-colored swallowtails inside, and crashed to the ground.

All that remained was the empty sky. Until the few swallowtails still hiding in the forest emerged to flutter gracefully about, that is. If anything, that just made Sara feel worse.

"Holy crap..."

That set off a cheer that went through the safe zone. But it wasn't over yet. Sara lifted her weary arms to the sky once more. The cheers gradually subsided as she did.

Dark clouds began to gather in the clear sky. "Sprinkler," Sara intoned.

There were no Invited here to complain that the name was lame. At Sara's command, a misty rain fell across the sixth floor, dragging the paralysis poison in the air down to the earth. Eventually, the clouds faded and the sky returned to its original clear state.

"Allen..."

"Yeah." Allen left the safe zone and took a deep breath, checking the quality of the air. "I think the poison's gone."

This time, there was an even greater cheer, but Sara didn't turn around to face it. She couldn't.

"Sara... I'm sorry."

"Yeah..." Her face was a mess with tears, after all. "Allen, I really think I can't be a Hunter."

"Yeah. That was hard, wasn't it?"

She'd downed a lot of seven-colored swallowtails with electricity the night before as well. She was sure her barrier had crushed a bunch of poison bog frogs too. Then there were the horned rabbits who crashed into her barrier. Even the wyvern.

"I've taken so many lives even before this, and I told myself it was okay because they were monsters so I had to. I could make up for it by making use of their magic stones, their skins and their meat, to give their deaths purpose..." Sara's voice shook. She wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "But it hurts taking so many monsters' lives for no other reason than there are too many of them... I know if we leave them, they'll just go on to spawn more and more of them, so we need to hunt them, but... I hate it..." Sara stared down at the black mountain of unmoving seven-colored swallowtails, the sight of it distorted by the tears in her eyes. "I hate seeing something stop moving like this..."

"Yeah..." What else could Allen say? Hunting monsters to reduce their numbers was his job. He walked over to Sara and put his arms around her, pulling her to him. Allen was a little taller than Sara, so she buried her face in his shoulder. Right now, she just wanted to feel someone's warmth.



"Uhh, you guys good?"

Sara lifted her head with a start. Her eyes met Allen's, and she quickly pulled away from him. She turned around nervously to find a bunch of Hunters awkwardly looking in random directions. Sara almost screamed. It wasn't like she was clinging to Allen for any sickly sweet sort of reason, so there was nothing to be guilty about, but she felt unbearably awkward nonetheless.

"I washed away the paralysis poison with rain, so I think it's okay to leave the safe zone now," she said to the Hunters.

"R-Right. Thanks. You're really something, kid."

It was a genuine compliment, but Sara still felt a little strange about it. This was no time for reflection, though.

"Hey!" Kuntz's voice came from a slight distance away.

"Whoa, what the heck? Look at all the swallowtails..." He jumped when he saw them, but obviously anyone would be surprised. "I thought that might have been you, Sara. Seems like it's the same on the seventh floor. Think you can help?"

Sara closed her eyes and checked her mana reserves, then nodded. "Should be fine."

"Wow..." the Hunters around her exclaimed. She was showing her stuff as one of the Invited, casting such a large-scale spell and still having mana to expend. If anything, her arms were a little sore from holding them up in the air for so long, but that was all.

"Are you sure, Sara?"

"Yeah. I can go now."

Even if she was sad or in pain, Sara was the only one who could do something in their current situation. It wasn't her nature to curl up into a ball and cry. She could cry, but she'd face forward doing it. That was Sara.

"Okay, let's go to the seventh floor."

"Right."

“It’s this way!”

Kuntz led the way, and Sara took off with Allen. On the final day of the hunting contest, Sara took home the victory practically all on her own.

EPILOGUE

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN, INTO THE FIRE

“I’m so tired...”

“Ha ha ha. I bet.”

Sara walked back toward the lord’s mansion with Nelly, Chris praising her efforts all the while. There was no need to hurry, so they took their time, chatting while they walked, not bothering with using physical strengthening. The hustle and bustle of the hunting contest had ended after three days, but Sara had ended up sticking around for a fourth to clean up the rest of the seven-colored swallowtails, much to her chagrin.

Other people had been taking care of the cocoons at the same time, so fewer swallowtails were emerging now, and Sara’s work was done after the fourth day, but taking so many lives really was tiring.

“I’ve really come to understand that I’m not suited to being a Hunter through all this. I guess that’s the best thing that’s come from it.”

“It’s too bad, but there’s nothing we can do about that. No matter how strong you are, you can’t be a Hunter if you can’t bring yourself to take the lives of monsters. It makes sense that someone more suited to apothecary work isn’t fit to be a Hunter, I guess.”

Nelly was disappointed, but this was no surprise to her. She’d probably just had a hard time giving up on the idea due to Sara’s strength as one of the Invited.

“You must have been invited here to be an apothecary, Sara,” Chris said, sounding satisfied, but Sara wasn’t sure about that either.

“I feel like the goddess told me I didn’t really need to do anything, though...”

“True enough. I’m fine with you just staying here and doing nothing, Sara.” So she said, but Nelly always seemed eager to train Sara anyway. As for Chris, he always seemed to

want to push her to even greater heights.

"You handled running that branch shop wonderfully despite only just starting out as an apothecary. That's my apprentice. At this rate, I'll be able to leave you in charge of a whole Apothecary's Guild sooner or later."

"I think you're getting a little ahead of yourself, Chris," Sara said with a wry smile. If she was going to be the head of a whole organization, she'd need to do some political bargaining, and she'd need leadership skills as well. Sara had no reason to strive toward being a guildmaster if it meant dealing with annoyances like that. Not to mention Chris, Caren, and that jerk in Camellia were all pretty far from the sort of ideal adult Sara wanted to become herself.

"I can't help thinking I should try not to stand out so much as one of the Invited."

"You seem to end up doing it even when you're not trying to," Chris commented.

Sara's shoulders slumped. "It's just hard... I mean, if I hadn't done anything, could we have closed the dungeon for a few days and let the seven-colored swallowtails die off on their own?"

"It might have just resulted in a vicious cycle of all the swallowtails continuing to lay eggs and Hunters having to cull them over and over again."

People ended up relying on the Invited or those who were unusually powerful when they couldn't do anything about a situation on their own. It was the reason why Nelly hadn't been able to step down as caretaker of the Dark Mountain, and why their solution to Hydrangea's problem had hinged on Sara.

"But that wasn't the issue if you didn't want to stand out, Sara. The problem this time was you riling up the Hunters and coming up with the idea of this hunting contest."

Sara grimaced at Chris's calm analysis of the facts. But what was she supposed to do? She simply didn't want to go along with Zachary's selfishness.

"You should give up on not standing out and just work on not going along with other people's schemes and doing whatever it is you want to do. Like me."

"I guess so."

It was convincing coming from Chris. He never let other people decide what he did. He also always had the strength to do what he thought he needed to, whether or not there was anything in it for him, both as an apothecary, and as an individual who valued Nelly. To someone like Sara, who tended to get wrapped up in things, this strength was nothing but a nuisance, but if she was able to hold her ground like Chris did, it wouldn't be an issue.

"Chris has his own way of doing things. You can do things your way, Sara," Nelly told her. "You always work hard to make the people around you more comfortable, not just yourself. Do you even know how many people you've helped? It might get you caught up in annoying stuff sometimes, but if it means staying true to yourself, that's fine, isn't it?"

Those words really hit home for Sara.

"I'd prefer to avoid annoying stuff, though."

"I don't blame you."

In any case, the annoying hunting contest was done with and Sara had completed her apprentice apothecary mission as well. She went through the gates to the mansion feeling satisfied in a job well done.

The Hunter's Guild was busy dealing with the rest of the seven-colored swallowtails for some time after that, so the young Hunters were starting to get impatient by the time the contest results were finally announced. Two weeks was a long time to wait.

Kuntz and Allen invited Sara to go hear the results, to which she made a sour face.

"Can't they just write it down and post it somewhere? Why does there have to be a big announcement?"

Sara was technically a participant herself, but even if Allen's group won, she had no intention of going down into the dungeon again. For that reason, she didn't particularly feel like she needed to be in attendance for this.

"Come on, it's like a festival. There's meaning in participating and having a good time. The contest was an opportunity for us to get accepted in Hydrangea."

Now that he mentioned it, when Sara had first met Allen, he'd mentioned how he had never really spoken to other kids his age due to his mana. She'd always thought he was simply the type who liked putting in a solitary effort, but maybe that wasn't the case.

Sara herself was being treated a lot more warmly by the people in the Apothecary's Guild after completing her little mission in the dungeon as well.

"Well, I guess I can go, then. I'm gonna head out now," she told the other apothecaries in the workspace before leaving the guild.

"You guys must have gotten first place, right?"

"Well, we were training to hunt them efficiently for a few days before the contest started. But other people caught on to what we were doing right away and started copying us, and we barely got to hunt at all on the last day, right? Maybe the people hunting up on the third floor, where there wasn't so much chaos, actually had the advantage."

"You think so? It's hard to say, huh?"

Sara was supposed to be a member of their team, but the number of seven-colored swallowtails she'd ended up defeating was so great that it didn't end up in the official count. In exchange for that, she'd received the money for the magic stones early since they didn't have to be counted. Considering the number she'd turned in, Sara's wallet was doing just fine now. She'd made sure to sell the mana herbs she'd gathered on the first and second day as well, of course.

"Well, I've made a nice profit at least," Sara said sunnily. She'd stubbornly refused to go into dungeons up until now, but it had ended up being a good thing in the end, she figured. "It was just like the Dark Mountain. I could gather healing herbs and mana herbs. I know how to avoid the bugs I don't want to run into now, so I guess I'm more open to going in there now than I was before."

"Right? I can't recommend going in alone, but we could go in together every so often."

"I guess so. It wouldn't be too bad to hang out on the same floor together even if we're doing different things."

There were fewer things she wanted to avoid now and more things she wanted to try. She was still as busy as ever after coming to Hydrangea, but she was starting to feel

like she was getting used to this world, which made her happy.

“Oh! Look at the crowd!”

They could sense the energy inside the Hunter’s Guild even before going in.

“Sara!”

“Hey!”

“Oh, hello!”

There were a few Hunters she’d come to know during the contest there as well. Sara really felt like she was starting to fit in here.

“You should open a permanent shop down there instead of just a temporary one.”

“If you sold tea down there, I’d pay twice what I would in town.”

“I’m still an apprentice apothecary, you know. Don’t forget that!” Sara made sure to point out. She couldn’t have people taking advantage of her.

“Oh, it’s Thed.”

Thedias stood atop a raised platform like he had when the contest had been announced. With him this time were Nelly and Chris, as well as the ever-sour-faced Zachary and his party. Sara felt herself tearing up at the sight of Nelly up there.

“She could never stand that close to people before because of her mana.”

“Yeah. It’s pretty lonely having a big bubble of space around you all the time.” Allen could be packed in with the rest of the Hunters like sardines too now. He actually seemed to be enjoying the experience.

“Okay, before we announce the results of the Zachary Cup...”

Sara giggled as Zachary scowled next to Thedias.

“Ahem, we have a comment from Zachary himself.”

The guildhall went quiet at those unexpected words.

"Zachary's gonna make a speech...?" someone whispered. Everyone else must have been thinking it as well. Sara was surprised herself.

Zachary cleared his throat nervously before beginning to speak surprisingly fluidly.
"Uhh, this contest only happened because I selfishly wanted to see what some new kids were capable of..."

So he was aware that he was being selfish. It was a funny thought to Sara.

"As one of the judges, I went between the floors and was able to see a side of Hydrangea's young folks that I hadn't seen before. It was a good experience."

He was giving a super respectable speech. Sara almost burst out laughing at the shocked looks on Nelly's and Chris's faces, but Zachary's eyes traveled over her way, so she controlled herself.

"Uhh, I don't mind taking young Hunters into the dungeon every so often from now on, even without a contest."

This time, the guild went completely silent before cheers and applause erupted.

"Is this 'cause of that apothecary kid?" one of the Hunters asked, guessing from Zachary's gaze. Sara shook her head in protest. Sure, they'd spoken inside the dungeon, but it hadn't been about that at all.

"Uhh..." Zachary seemed a little taken aback by the reaction in the room, but he still had more to say, so when he began again, the crowd quieted down once more.
"Nefertari, Chris. No, I guess Chris doesn't have anything to do with this."

Sara could see Chris tamping down his desire to respond to that comment. Nelly was just giving Zachary a curious look, as if she was wondering what he could possibly want to say to her.

"Since you're one of Hydrangea's Hunters now..." Nelly's eyes went wide. "You look after the young Hunters too. I mean, *I'm* doing it."

Sara put a hand to her chest. She was a little choked up. *"Since you're one of Hydrangea's Hunters now..."* In other words, Zachary had acknowledged Nelly as one

of them in front of the whole Guild.

"Zachary..." Nelly stopped like she was choked up too. "Of course I will. We go way back, after all."

"Y-Yeah..." Zachary stammered. Maybe they would finally be able to have a relationship that wasn't just antagonistic after twenty-some years.

"Ha ha ha, Hydrangea's got a bright future, doesn't it?" Thed slapped Zachary on the back and the Guild was filled with good cheer once more.

"Well, let's announce the results of the Zachary Cup, then! First place goes to..."

"We're starting with first place?!" That was the biggest shock to Sara.

"Kuntz and Allen."

There were some sighs and *Obviouslys* as Kuntz and Allen fist-bumped while Sara applauded them. Even the Hunters on different floors had heard about how they'd put solving the problem of the seven-colored swallowtails before competing in the contest. They'd taken first place with the numbers they'd hunted even on top of that, so no one could possibly complain.



"Sara, who ran the temporary Apothecary's Guild table down there, was also a part of their group, and as you all know, she took down so many seven-colored swallowtails on her own that we ended up not counting her contributions for their group."

Sara tried to hide behind Allen, but some people stood on tiptoe to try to see her, which felt a little awkward. Still, it was just curiosity on their part, and when she made eye contact with a few of them, they just gave her bashful smiles in return.

"Moving on to second place."

As the announcement continued, Sara felt a strange sense of unity amid the cheers and groans of the crowd. Sara was one of the Invited, and she was powerful enough to hunt a huge number of seven-colored swallowtails all on her own. She might even be able to manage a whole dungeon on her own like Nelly did with the Dark Mountain.

Yet she wasn't isolated. She was able to share in the joy of the crowd just like everyone else. Meanwhile, Zachary was still as sour-faced as ever up on the platform. Nelly elbowed him to get him to participate a little more, which made the mood in the Hunter's Guild even more raucous.

Though she had special abilities, she wasn't alone here. People relied on her, and she could share in the fruits of their labor. Everyone expected to see her again in this town, like the people who had called out to her in front of the guildhall.

"Now, the winners can discuss their plans with Nefertari and Zachary!"

Everyone started moving after that announcement from Thedias.

"Okay, we're gonna go over to Zachary too!"

"See you."

Sara watched Allen and Kuntz go. At the same time, she saw three groups running over to Nelly and Chris. In the beginning, everyone had kept Nelly at a distance. They'd even been somewhat hostile to her. Now, young Hunters looked up at her with stars in their eyes as a mentor figure.

Chris had been freed from his obligations as guildmaster as well, and was able to live freely with Nelly. Even Caren, who'd been disappointed at first, couldn't turn down the high-quality medicinal plants he brought back with him now, so she started accepting

his trips into the dungeon as well, if somewhat reluctantly.

"Hydrangea's a nice place."

Sara's thoughts spilled from her lips. She remembered leaving Camellia and praying that nothing would happen in the next town they visited. Well, something *had* happened, but it had wrapped up in an unexpected way.

"It'll be a real pain to take three groups down into the deep part of the dungeon."

She complained, but Nelly looked a little happy about the idea, and Chris watched over her warmly. They returned to the lord's mansion after that to find Riot waiting for them with a frown on his face. He held a bundle of ostentatious envelopes in his hand. They seemed to be addressed to him.

"Th-Those aren't..." Nelly was surprised enough to take a step back. Sara wondered what they could possibly be to provoke that reaction from her. She looked in between Nelly and Riot a few times.

"I didn't think they'd attack from this angle. It's too soon no matter how you look at it," Riot lamented, spreading the bundle of letters out like a fan. "They're engagement proposals from capital nobles, for Sara the Invited."

"Engagement...?" Sara's mouth fell open as she considered the meaning of the word.
"Engagement as in... marriage? Huh?"

All Sara wanted was to live in peace, but it seemed the universe had other plans for her.



Taking ^{MY} Reincarnation One Step at a TiME

No One Told Me
There Would Be Monsters!

4

KAYA
ILLUS. INARU

Taking ^{My} Reincarnation One Step at a TiME

No One Told Me
There Would Be Monsters!

4

KAYA
ILLUS. INARU



Characters

Sara

Nelly

Chris



Caren

Kuntz

Allen

Riot

Thedias



She plucked the leaves from the stems and put them in the mortar, but she couldn't use too little or too much. She moved her hands at a careful, steady speed. Before she knew it, the herbs were looking good. They had a deep green color, like concentrated vegetable juice.

“There we go. Waugh!”

Sara stood up, satisfied with her work, and the apothecaries were all looking at her again. It scared her. She wished they'd stop.



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by KAYA

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