
1
KAYA
Illus. INARU
Taking My Reincarnation One Step at a TIME
No One Told Me There Would Be Monsters!


1
KAYA
Illus. INARU
Taking My Reincarnation One Step at a TIME
No One Told Me There Would Be Monsters!

Taking My Reincarnation One Step at a Time: No One Told Me There Would Be Monsters! Volume 1 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8


1
KAYA
Illus. INARU
Taking My Reincarnation One Step at a TIME
No One Told Me There Would Be Monsters!

Prologue: The Goddess's Room

Sarasa Ichinokura was tired. It was Friday, the end of a long string of overtime. Tomorrow, she could finally rest. Of course, she wouldn't know what it was like to *not* be tired. Though Sarasa's health wasn't particularly poor, ever since she was very young, she had *always* been tired.

"Guess it's nothing new..."

Kindergarten was one thing, but when she'd moved up to grade school, though she naturally envied the kids who had a lot of energy, she had found herself almost envying the sick kids with frequent fevers and coughs more. All Sarasa had was a constant feeling of sluggishness and a headache that never went away, which was hard for the other kids to empathize with.

It was as though there was a limit to the amount of energy she could use on any given day. If she didn't push herself, she was fine, but if she was even slightly more active than she had the energy for, that sluggishness would come back in full force. Her symptoms were vague, and no doctor could ever determine the reason for the way she felt. It was almost too much for her parents and her school to deal with. It was too much for Sarasa *herself* to deal with.

It wasn't bad enough to leave her unable to move, so she couldn't rest. She couldn't rest, so she only got more tired. Eventually, she got tired enough that she couldn't move.

Finally, her mother had simply said to her, "It's just your constitution. You were born with it."

"It's hard now, because you have school," she'd further told Sarasa, "but when you're an adult you'll have something called paid time off. You'll only work five days a week, and have bigger breaks, so it's basically just four days a week. It's okay if you can't handle more than that."

Work four days a week and rest three. Sarasa thought she could probably handle that much.

“With the right job, you won’t have to do overtime, like you do with club activities at school, and you won’t have homework, either. If you just work enough to cover your living expenses, you’ll get by fine.”

Those words gave Sarasa hope when school was exhausting her, and when she became a working adult, she was able to follow through on them for a few years, using up all of her paid time off every year. She was able to efficiently make use of her limited stamina, and she was even able to enjoy her hobby of making handicrafts, so those first few years after becoming a working adult might have been the happiest ones of her life.

But her workplace had been short-staffed lately and she’d had to do a lot more overtime over the last six months, so things were getting steadily more difficult.

“Wonder what it’s like to not feel tired...”

That was the last thought Sarasa had as she sunk into slumber after finally making it home from work.

The next time Sarasa opened her eyes, she found herself in a white room for some reason.

“You are to be reborn into another world.”

So said a shimmering, goddess-like woman who stood before her in a white dress.

Ah. A dream.

Still lying down, Sarasa closed her eyes once more. With her eyes closed, she couldn’t see the figure anymore, but she could sense the confusion emanating from her.

“Hey, wait, this is the part where you’re supposed to ask, ‘What’s my reincarnation perk?’ right?”

“*Whatsmyreincarnationperk*...”

“Not very enthusiastic, are you? At least open your eyes. Come on, have some hopes or dreams or something.”

“Uh huh...”

Sarasa was too tired to have hopes, dreams, or even curiosity. She heard the goddess sigh and felt her crouch down beside her.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t joke around. Everyone’s so happy to reincarnate lately, I forgot that there are people who aren’t.” She patted Sarasa on the shoulder. “Sometimes, people are born into the wrong world. My job is to guide those people to the world where they’re supposed to be. Though it’s mostly just moving people from Earth to my world.”

“Born into the wrong world?” The implications were preposterous.

“Yes. For instance, your body requires mana, but you were born on Earth, where there’s very little mana, so you’ve always been sluggish, right?”

At that, Sarasa opened her eyes wide. There was a reason for her sluggishness?

“See? How is it now? There’s mana here, so you shouldn’t feel so exhausted.”

Sarasa stood up. She didn’t have a headache. She should have been tired, but she was filled with an unprecedented amount of energy and stamina. She felt like she could do literally anything.

“If you go back to Earth, you won’t have much longer. Why not move to my world and live a healthy life?”

“But...”

“Unlike Earth, my world is filled with mana; there’s almost too much of it, in fact. That’s why we need people like you who can absorb large amounts of mana. And it’s not just you. I’ve moved a lot of people to my world from Earth, and all you need to do is be there. You’re like air purifiers.”

Even if that was true, what about her family and friends back on Earth? And how was she supposed to live in an entirely new place that she didn’t know anything about? Sarasa was a natural pragmatist.

“How exactly will it work, living there?”

“It’s basically the same as it is on Earth. I’ll send you to the person who needs you the most there. I’m sure you’ll be well taken care of. And don’t worry about

your family back on Earth. I'll explain things to them."

The goddess was not providing her with very much concrete information. This wasn't something Sarasa could simply decide on the spot.

"There's no time to hesitate. I'll send you to Trilgaia now. Oh, and you're going to be about ten years old so that your body adapts to Trilgaia a little better."

"Huh? Wait!"

"Take care!"

Before Sarasa could even object to the goddess's sudden words of parting, her consciousness sunk into darkness.

The next thing Sarasa was awakened by was a cool breeze on her cheek.

"Hm? Is the window open? Wait..."

When she opened her eyes, she saw before her an endless expanse of grass.

"I'm...sitting?"

She was seated on what seemed to be a set of wooden steps. She looked quickly back and saw the door to a mountain cottage behind her. In other words, *this* was the exact spot and moment she had been reincarnated to.

"Come *on*, aren't I supposed to wake up in a bed looking up at an unfamiliar ceiling or something? This feels like a rip-off," Sarasa grumbled, though there wasn't anyone around to hear her.

She looked down at her hands and found that she'd shrunk in size, just like the goddess had said she would. She appeared to be around the size she was in elementary school. She was wearing boyish clothes that were easy to move around in, and her black hair fell to around her chin, the same length it had been when she was an adult.

She stood and she didn't feel any dizziness. She wasn't tired either. She felt like she could run at full speed if she wanted to.

She looked around. The cottage seemed to be somewhere around halfway up

a tall mountain. There was a gentle downward slope in front of the building, and far in the distance, she could see the tiny shape of something that might have been a town.

“It’s like Heidi’s cabin.”

She looked straight out in front of her and saw a herd of some sort of animal crossing the path leading up to the cottage.

“Are those deer? They look like they have big antlers.”

She looked up and saw several birds wheeling around on massive wings.

“Are they eagles? Or hawks? I’ve never seen birds like that before. Guess I landed somewhere with a lot of nature...”

Sarasa liked nature, so the thought excited her. But the longer she watched the birds flying above, the more she couldn’t help noticing their wings seemed too small for their bodies.

“*Kyeee!*”

“‘Kyeee’? What a strange cry. Guess that’s what hawks sound like in this world. Huh?”

One of the birds suddenly folded up its wings and dove toward the herd of animals she’d been watching.

“What? A deer’s gotta be way too big for you!”

But the bird got bigger and bigger as it drew closer, until it caught one of the fleeing deer in its talons. The moment it began to fly back up into the air however, something flashed, like a mirror reflecting the sun.

“*Gyeee!*”

“Wh-What?”

In time with its cry, the large bird fell to the ground along with the deer. A person who appeared seemingly out of nowhere walked over to them, looking as though they were checking whether the two animals were still alive. Even from far away, Sarasa could see the person’s bright red hair that was tied back, and a figure that immediately identified her as...

“A woman...”

The woman reached out and the bird and deer vanished.

“Wh-Where’d they go?”

Before Sarasa could solve that mystery, the woman strode over to the cottage. She was dressed lightly with a sword at her hip, and she was beautiful. And Sarasa could see something slipping in and out of view behind her.

“Watch out!”

The creatures coming in and out of view weren’t deer. They were a pack of large dogs with manes like lions.

As if spurred on by Sarasa’s voice, one of the dogs leaped at the woman, but the next moment, it was flying through the air with a pathetic whimper.

“She punched it? A dog *that* big?”

She hadn’t even touched her sword. All it took was an artless swing of the woman’s fist, and the dog went flying through the air.

While the other dogs cowered, the woman made her way up to the cottage. It must have been *her* cottage.

Sarasa got down from the steps and introduced herself. “Umm, it’s nice to meet you. I’m—wait, huh?”

But after sparing her little more than a glance, the woman looked away and headed for the steps, giving her a wide berth. In that glance, Sarasa saw her beautiful green eyes.

Thud. The door closed behind her.

“She ignored me? Huh? Wasn’t I supposed to be sent to the person who needed me the most?”

“*Grrr*...”

While she was staring slack-jawed at the door, she heard an ominous sound coming from behind her. *Oh yeah,* her mind supplied, *didn’t that woman just punch a dog?*

The dog in question? It had gone flying, sure, but Sarasa wouldn’t go so far as

to say it had been defeated.

“Not to mention there was a whole pack of them...”

“*Grrr*...”

“Aaaaah!”

Not bothering to look back, Sarasa raced up the steps and banged on the door.

“Let me in! The dogs! They’re behind me! Aaah!”

“Growl!”

“Gyaaa!”

It was all over. That goddess had told her all she needed to do was be here, but she was going to die on the same day she was reincarnated.

Sarasa crouched down and squeezed her eyes shut, clasping her hands together. “It was a short life...”

Should she at least try to fight back? That wasn’t happening. A pillow was just about the only thing Sarasa had ever hit.

“Hey.”

“Please let it not hurt at least...”

“Hey!”

Sarasa opened her eyes. The door was open and the woman from before was standing there as if she wasn’t sure what she should be doing.

“Ah! Dogs! There! Growling!”

“There’s a protection field, isn’t there?”

“P-Protection field?”

Come to think of it, for as much time as had passed, the dogs never attacked her. Sarasa turned around apprehensively.



“Eep!”

The pack of dogs was ambling around about a meter out from the steps.

When they saw Sarasa's face, they bared their fangs and growled at her.

"No!"

Still crouched down, Sarasa clung to the woman's leg.

The redhead made no move to shake Sarasa off but also offered her no help, instead simply murmuring curiously, "Does this not...bother you?"

"I-It does bother me! Those dogs are scary!"

Fear was stealing her breath away. Sarasa didn't actually dislike dogs. She typically liked them, in fact. But now that she'd seen these up close, she realized the dogs behind her were far larger than an adult human. Pacing around as they were with their fangs bared, it was hardly the sort of situation where she would be remarking about how cute they were.

"They're not dogs, they're mountain wolves. And that's not what I meant..." The woman put her hand on her head and moved it about awkwardly. "Well, whatever. The door wasn't locked. Go ahead and come in."

"Thang you!"

Wait, why am I talking like that? Childlike appearance or no, Sarasa was twenty-seven years old...

She suddenly started shuddering when she realized she wouldn't be dog food after all, and let go of the woman's leg, scrambling to her feet and tottering through the open door.

The dogs growled until the woman told them, "Get lost," and then ran away whimpering.

Of course, it seemed as though she had thrown something at them besides just her words. In any case, the dogs—or rather, the wolves—were now gone.

Sarasa sniffled, tears pouring out of her eyes now that she was able to relax. Part of her was disgusted at herself for behaving like this when she was an adult, but the goddess had told her that she'd made her ten years old again, so Sarasa figured she was allowed a few tears.

"Just sit down wherever."

“O-Okay.” Sarasa looked for a place to sit down, wiping her tears with her sleeve.

Around her she saw: Scattered articles of clothing. A pile of wrinkled pelts. Browning apple cores. Some kind of bones. *Bones?*

“I-I can’t.”

The goddess said she’d be well taken care of... Goddesses were liars.

Seeing the hopelessness on Sarasa’s face, the woman glanced around with some chagrin and cleared some things off of what must have been a chair. “You can sit here.”

As Sarasa stumbled over to the chair, something at her feet snapped, but she decided to pretend she hadn’t heard anything. There was nothing on the chair, for the time being. It was a little big for her, so she had to clamber up onto it before sitting down.

The woman pulled another hidden chair out of who-knows-where, sat down on it, and propped her chin onto her hand, asking without preamble, “You’re one of the Invited, aren’t you?”

“Invited?” Sarasa cocked her head. The goddess hadn’t said anything about that. She hadn’t said much of anything, in truth.

“I don’t know if she was a goddess, but a person who looked like one told me I had a body that needed mana and that she’d make it so I could adapt to this world... That’s all I know.” She had said some other things too, but that was all Sarasa could think of at the moment.

“A goddess-like person... This world... Needs mana... You *are* one of the Invited. It’s no wonder.”

It might have been no wonder to the woman, but Sarasa was completely lost.

Her elbow still resting on the table, the woman drily explained, “People come here from another world sometimes. We call them the Invited. They just show up out of nowhere like you did. They vary in age, but they’re usually young.”

Sarasa recalled the goddess saying she’d brought several people here from Earth already. She’d also said she’d make Sarasa ten years old to adapt to this

world, but if there were people who came at different ages, that must not apply to everyone. What else had she said...? Oh, right.

“Umm, I also think she said something about absorbing mana?”

The woman raised an eyebrow in surprise at that. “That’s right. The Invited can absorb mana and make use of any amount of it, so they often make names for themselves as Hunters. They’re in real high demand.”

It was news to her that she could *use* mana in addition to just absorbing it, but something else caught her attention more than that. “Hunters.” People who hunted animals?

Sarasa recalled what she’d just seen outside. Ridiculously large deer. Even larger birds who caught those deer in their talons. A vicious pack of wolves. People hunted *those*?

“I can’t be a Hunter...” Sarasa shook her head. There was no way she could hunt such terrifying creatures.

“Yeah, probably not. You chose to get eaten over fighting earlier.” The woman crossed her arms and looked up at the ceiling. “Since you’re a woman, you could marry into the nobility. You’d live in a big mansion, carefully protected, at least as far as I hear.”

“I don’t want to do that either. I mean, I finally came to a world where I don’t have to be tired all the time.”

After being suddenly thrust into a different world and told all she had to do was exist there, acting as a sort of air purifier, there was no way she could know immediately what she wanted to do right away. But she could tell that she wasn’t tired or sluggish at the moment. She would be able to do so much more than she ever could before, so why not live an active life?

Sarasa was feeling rather cheerful now, completely forgetting the fact that her life had been in danger just moments ago. She didn’t need to decide what she wanted to do right away, she supposed.

“Let me ask one more time. Are you really feeling okay?” the woman asked Sarasa.

“I feel great. Better than I ever have before.”

“Hmm. There’s no pressure or anything?”

“No.” Sarasa wasn’t quite sure what the woman was asking. She supposed if she had to name something that was making her a little uncomfortable, it was the messy state of the cottage.

“Okay.” The woman nodded and stood up, evidently satisfied. “In any event, whatever decision you make, you won’t be able to leave here for a while anyway.”

“I can’t leave?” Sarasa was taken aback.

“You saw outside, right? This is the Dark Mountain, in the north. There are wyverns in the air, herds of moose on the ground, and mountain wolves running around everywhere. It would take an adult three days to get to the nearest town on foot. I can make it there in one full day, myself, but not if I have a kid with me.”

So the thing Sarasa had seen wasn’t an eagle or a hawk but a wyvern. No wonder its wings had looked so small. That likewise meant that the “moose” wasn’t an ordinary moose either, Sarasa realized, feeling a little overwhelmed. Yet the woman continued on without a care for Sarasa’s bewilderment.

“In other words...”

“In other words?”

“Until you’re strong enough to leave, you’ll be stuck here at this cottage.”

She’d come to a totally different world, but she was stuck living alone with this woman in this filthy cottage. The thought almost caused Sarasa to lose hope, but she quickly recovered.

Sarasa had always had so little energy that she’d never been able to do any of the things she wanted to, so she had confidence in her ability to manage her own expectations.

She listed out all the good things about her situation. At the very least, the person she’d be living with was another woman—a strong woman, from what she’d seen earlier. It was hard to tell at a glance, but she seemed kind. Even if it

was filthy in here. But Sarasa could just do something about that herself.

"I'm Nef... No, Nelly. Call me Nelly." The woman held out her hand to Sarasa, one side of her mouth quirking up into a tiny smile. Her hand was large and strong, protected by a fingerless black leather glove.

"I'm Sarasa. Ichinokura Sarasa."

"Ichinok Rasarasa? That's an odd name. Do I call you Ichinok?"

"No, no, my name is Sarasa."

"Sara, then."

This was the first person who'd ever called Sarasa "Sara." Was there really a need to shorten her name? Her family and friends had all called her Sarasa. But maybe that was fine. This was a new life, after all.

Sarasa wasn't sure about addressing someone she'd just met by her first name, though. She looked up at the woman called Nelly. She was big. It was hard to tell now that Sarasa was smaller, but she looked like she was over 170 centimeters, and probably the same age Sarasa had been on Earth. In other words, her late twenties, maybe thirty.

She was beautiful. She wore practical, masculine clothing, but with her long, flame-red hair tied up messily behind her head, it was obvious to anyone that she was a beautiful woman. The bright green of her gemstone-like eyes contrasted with her hair. The fact that Sarasa was able to talk normally with someone like this, who would have looked very out of place in Japan, brought it home to her that she really was in a different world.

"Nelly?" She mustered up her courage to call the woman by her name and timidly held out a hand, which Nelly gripped firmly.

For some reason, Nelly closed her eyes for a moment, grimacing. "Nelly, eh?" *Was* it too forward of her to call her that? "That's nice." Apparently, it was nice.

Sarasa couldn't help supplying the mental commentary. Evidently, the grimace had been her enjoying being called Nelly. Maybe she was actually a pretty funny person.

Nelly opened her eyes and smiled widely this time. Sarasa was shocked,

having only paid attention to the color of her hair and eyes until now. When she smiled, she gave off a completely different impression. She was bursting with vigor, and truly stunning.

“I’m a Hunter. I act as the caretaker of the Dark Mountain.”

“Okay. I appreciate you letting me stay with you for a while.”

Sarasa had no idea what this Dark Mountain was and what being the caretaker of it entailed, but she accepted the introduction without fuss, figuring she’d work all that out sooner or later. For the time being, she at least had a place to stay.

And that was how Sarasa’s new life started.

Chapter 1: You Wolves Don’t Scare Me

“Don’t push yourself, Sara.”

“I know. I’m okay, Nelly.”

By the time she’d gotten used to her nickname, Sara wasn’t too bothered anymore by the idea of using Nelly’s name, and the cottage had gotten a lot tidier. The goddess had told her that her purpose here was to absorb the world’s excess mana, but Sara couldn’t tell whether or not she was actually doing that, so she had no sense that she was accomplishing anything. As a former working adult, it didn’t sit right with her to be eating without doing any work, so she’d asked Nelly for some things to do. Those things? Tidying the cottage and preparing their food.

“Whatever you can do is fine.”

At first, Nelly had been hesitant to accept her help, but just as Sara suspected, housework wasn’t really her strong suit. In fact, she would say the woman was hopelessly bad at it. She only cleaned her home enough to have a place to sit and sleep. All she ate was bread, dried meat, and fruit. That first day, there hadn’t even been anywhere for Sara to sleep.

“There should be a spare room or two...”

“‘Should be’? Isn’t this where you live?”

“Well, I don’t use any of the rooms I don’t need.”

Eventually, they found two guest rooms to the left, between the front door and the living room and kitchen area. “First time I’ve seen these,” had been Nelly’s commentary as she gave them a curious look-over.

“Just how little interest do you have in your own life?” Sara had asked her, astounded.

Fortunately, the beds and furniture in the rooms had been covered, so she was able to use them without worrying about dust from her first day there.

When she woke up the next day, Nelly had already gone hunting. Sara was

nervous at first, but she quickly decided to get cleaning, since it would be for her benefit, too.

“It’s so nice to not get tired...”

Sara wasn’t particularly adept at housework, but she enjoyed tidying and cooking. Since she got tired so quickly, however, she’d never done it to her heart’s content before, so now she could really appreciate having a body that didn’t get worn out at the drop of a hat.

However, she wasn’t sure how long she’d be able to stay healthy on a diet of nothing but bread, dried meat, and fruit. She wasn’t going to demand miso and soy sauce and rice (and when she mentioned such things to Nelly, she just tilted her head in response, so maybe they didn’t even have them in this world), but on that first day, she’d stepped on some kind of bone. That meant that there were at least bones with meat on them in this world. And vegetables. Vegetables were a necessity.

There appeared to be some sort of magic stove, and the cottage was equipped with cooking implements, so she could at least do some amount of cooking here. A short lecture from Sara on food and the importance of nutrition was enough for Nelly to bring back some meat, vegetables, and spices on her next shopping trip.

Nelly spent her days subjugating monsters near the cottage on the Dark Mountain and went down to the town at the base of the mountain every ten days or so to sell the materials she obtained from the monsters and restock on necessities. It took a full day for her to get to the town and a full day to get back. Since she spent a day there in the middle, that meant that she was gone from the cottage for three days every time she went shopping, which made Sara a little nervous at first. But she had lived alone on Earth, and it was safe in the cottage, surrounded by the protection field, so she quickly got used to it.

Every so often, there was a loud thud as something crashed into the protection field, but it couldn’t get inside, so it was safe... She hadn’t yet worked up the courage to ask what was making those sounds.

“I don’t want to go into town this frequently, honestly, but there’s a limit to how much can fit in one storage bag.”

Apparently, they weren't like the bags with infinite capacity you might see in a fairy tale. Her bag filled up in ten days, so that was when she went to town to sell her materials.

Still, Sara's eyes had lit up when she'd first seen the storage bag, so Nelly had politely explained, "You see 'em sometimes, right, Sara? Stealth slimes. You need stealth slime cores to make the magic stones used for storage bags, but even the biggest core can only make a bag that holds twenty wyverns or so."

There were wyverns like the one she'd seen on her first day flying around all over the place, but they rarely came down to the ground, so apparently Nelly didn't get many opportunities to take them down. She'd smiled about that day and said, "Made some good money off of that."

But even if Sara had seen the creatures Nelly described, she had no knowledge at all about the monsters here. She went out to the deck at the front door every day and gazed at the area around the cottage, but all she saw was the same things she'd seen on that first day, wyverns, moose, mountain wolves. As for the slimes Nelly had just told her about...

"Are stealth slimes those things I see out of the corner of my eye sometimes that disappear as soon as I look?"

"Yeah. They're all over the place, really, but they're so quick, it's hard to catch them. A swordsman basically has no chance and even casters have a hard time aiming at them, so they usually just torch the whole area around them. Or you find 'em in treasure chests in underground dungeons sometimes."

For that reason, storage bags were very valuable; even small ones cost a lot.

There was another unfamiliar term, though. Underground dungeons? If there were underground dungeons, did that mean there were aboveground dungeons, too? Sara wondered vaguely, but she had her hands full just inputting information about stealth slimes right now.

"Well, you can't do much without one, so any Hunter worth their salt has one. As for me, I'm a *good* Hunter, so I've got the biggest kind you can get."

Nelly was obviously fishing for a compliment, so Sara chuckled and told her how impressed she was. The unsociable impression Nelly had given off at first

had faded as they'd gotten to know each other and Sara came to understand that she was just an awkward person. She was actually rather friendly, and even though she lived alone and didn't chat much, Sara could tell that she enjoyed talking to her and being with her. If such an awkward person was bragging about herself, even humbly, of course Sara would answer her with as much praise as she could muster. That was how much she'd grown to care for Nelly.

Finding it adorable how satisfied Nelly was with her praise, Sara smiled sunnily. "I wonder if I'll ever be able to buy one."

"Hmm. Doesn't seem like you'll be able to make it as a Hunter. We'll have to figure out how you'll make your money."

Nelly supported Sara's desire to be independent, which she appreciated. But maybe because she was a Hunter, she didn't seem to know much about other professions in this world.

"The easiest thing would be gathering medicinal plants. That's how a lot of Hunters start out."

In the end, it all came back to Hunters, though Sara was pretty sure there must be clerical work and sales and customer service as well.

Just considering their environment, all there was around the cottage where they lived was a big field of grass. Sara enjoyed the idea of walking around with a basket or something and picking medicinal plants as the flowers swayed on the breeze around her. If she could make a living doing that, she wouldn't have any complaints.

"Well, I'd love to try it, but..."

Sara opened the door of the cottage.

"*Growl*."

And she shut it.

"Whew..." Sara sighed. She still couldn't even leave the cottage.

To be precise, she could go down to the bottom of the stairs, where the protection field extended to, and she could make a tight loop around the outside of the building. But just outside of the protection field, there were

wolves loping about, and here and there in the grass were slimes, which could dissolve even animals.

But then, it was thanks to those slimes that she'd been able to clean up the trash in the cottage. Her disposal system was this: when Nelly went out hunting, Sara tossed all the garbage outside of the protection field. By the next day, it had disappeared completely. Nelly had marveled at how handy the slimes were, but Sara wished she'd figured that out previously.

"For now, I'll go pick up a beginner's guide to gathering plants from the Apothecary's Guild in preparation for when you can leave the cottage. I know a guy there, anyway. They're always short on plants, so once you can start gathering them, you'll be able to sell them right away."

"Okay, that sounds good... At this rate, I'll never be able to go into town."

Without any money or ability to survive on her own, she'd have to rely on Nelly for everything.

"Yeah, but you can just stay here as long as you want. That's what the goddess told you, right?"

"She did, but...since I'm finally healthy now, I want to go to all sorts of places."

Nelly looked dissatisfied at this for some reason. She grew even less talkative for a time after that, which worried Sara, but by the next time she'd gone into town and come back, she seemed refreshed, like she'd sorted something out for herself.

She carefully took out two thin books from her pack on her return. "I'm a swordsman who specializes in physical strengthening, so I don't fight with magic, and I have no reason to gather medicinal plants either. But you can't become a swordsman, right? So here, I got you a magic textbook and a guide to medicinal plants."

"Wow! Thanks!"

Sara hugged Nelly. Every time she did that, Nelly always hesitated for a moment before hugging her back. Then she let out a big breath like she was relieved, as if she was expelling all her fatigue and discontent. Sara wanted to

do whatever she could to comfort Nelly, so she spent as much time as she could with her when she was at the cottage.

Though they were both women, Nelly's first impression as a brusque slob had made Sara nervous about living alone with her in the beginning, but life with her was surprisingly comfortable and fun . Maybe that was because Nelly didn't pry much, or because Sara wasn't too chatty. It was remarkably quiet in the cottage as Nelly tended to her sword and Sara read her two books beside her or prepared their meals. That was how they spent their time together.

Of course, with the magic textbook and the medicinal plant guide, Nelly was practically ordering Sara to become a Hunter, but it was subconscious on Nelly's part and Sara didn't notice it herself. Still, she couldn't go and gather plants just from reading the guide, and she couldn't use magic either. Sara decided her next goal was to train until she could use magic.

A few days after receiving the book, the time finally came.

"Okay, let's put it into practice!" Sara declared.

It would be dangerous to do it inside the cottage, so she went out to the deck just outside the front door and faced Nelly, who was helping her out with her training before she went hunting.

First, however, there was something Sara wanted to ask Nelly.

"Hey, Nelly. Can everyone in this world use magic?"

"Of course they can. Right, you're one of the Invited, so you're from a world with no mana."

This conversation took place a month after the two of them met. If there were another person there, they would probably be incredulous that it had taken them this long to discuss this. But Sara was more concerned with getting used to her smaller body and new lifestyle than something like magic. And while magic tools took the place of electric appliances in their daily life, Sara had never actually seen Nelly use any magic.

"But it's less like everyone can use magic and more like everyone has mana. There aren't many situations where you'd use magic in your daily life. People

who have a lot of mana tend to end up in physical jobs or jobs where you use magic. The easiest example is Hunters."

So that was why Sara never saw Nelly using magic around the cottage.

"Okay, please start by explaining magic to me."

She'd read the book, but asking someone who knew what they were talking about was the best way to learn.

Nelly folded her arms smugly. "Now, when you think of magic, you normally think of attack magic, but mana is something that exists inside the body and *becomes* magic. So."

"So?" Sara asked, excited.

"It's like another body, or..."

"Or?"

"Like another you..."

"..."

There was no further elaboration. This explanation was abstract and difficult for Sara to understand. The biggest lesson Sara had learned was that Nelly was a hell of a lousy teacher. No wonder she'd bought a textbook before trying to explain things herself.

It was immediately apparent to Sara that she wouldn't be able to rely on Nelly for this, so she had no choice but to go back to the textbook. Sara recalled what she'd read.

"I think in the textbook, it said that mana will do whatever you imagine it to. Take into account the amount of mana you have, don't push yourself, and imagine freely. There was an example, too..."

"That's right. Most people start with water magic, since it's safe, but that's not what I did."

Nelly hesitated for a moment, but she then thrust her hand out at Sara.

"Hold my hand."

"Like this?"

Sara gripped Nelly's hand and squeezed. Even through the glove, it was soft and comfortable to hold.

"It's just your hand."

"Yep. But if I put mana through it, see?" Nelly held her hand out to Sara again.

"Huh?"

Her hand was hard. Like a rock.

"Why?"

"I specialize in using my mana for physical strengthening. I'm a swordsman, but honestly, I don't really need my sword. If you use your mana the right way, your whole body becomes a blunt weapon."

"So that's how you can punch wolves."

"Yep."

Nelly clenched her fist and turned toward the steps, and a roving wolf took a few steps back. If they were so scared of her, then they didn't have to rove so close by.

"The wolves only started gathering here after you showed up, Sara. They must be waiting for you to leave the cottage."

"That's scary. They don't need to do that," Sara said, horrified.

The mountain wolves were probably two meters long from head to tail, and their faces sat right about at Nelly's chest height. At that height, they were perfectly positioned to gobble up Sara's head whole. That was too scary.

But if Sara didn't make it past these wolves, she would never be able to gather medicinal plants, let alone go into town. If she wanted to do either of those things, she'd have to gain the sword or magic skills necessary to take down these wolves. She might as well give up hope. Sara was practically ready to give up before even starting her magic practice.

That was when Sara had an epiphany.

"Hey, if I learn physical strengthening too, could I stop a wolf's fangs from getting through my skin?"

Even if she couldn't defeat them, if she could protect herself somehow, she'd at least be able to move around.

Nelly nodded, impressed. "It's possible. Come to think of it, I've seen casters use shield magic to create protection fields around themselves."

"That's it! That's what I'll do!"

Sara's goal was established. She just needed to use Nelly as an example. Nelly didn't use physical strengthening while she was at home, since the amount of mana in one's body was limited. For the same reason, casters couldn't keep up a shield or a protection field forever.

"Come to think of it, what happens when you run out of mana?"

"Well, you won't be able to maintain your physical strengthening."

That was obvious. And not what Sara was asking.

"Does it make you feel bad or something?"

"When you run out, you just can't use it anymore. It's not like you feel *bad*, but you definitely feel lethargic. If you rest for a bit, it'll recover on its own, but that's a dangerous state to be in for a Hunter, so you'll probably want to keep mana potions on you."

"I see." Sara was relieved to hear that, since she didn't want to feel exhausted like she had in Japan again. "Right, but I'm an Invited. I'm always absorbing mana and can always use it, so it won't be a problem for me."

So theoretically she could use magic forever. It was true that she'd never felt particularly low on mana before. Not that she'd really used it or sensed its presence either. She just felt healthy every day.

"So that must be why the Invited do so well as Hunters! Not that I'm gonna be one."

Sara didn't want to do any harm to people, monsters, or any living thing. This was very important to her.

"I think you'd make a pretty good Hunter, though..."

"Are you just saying that because you want me to come hunting with you?"

“Ahem, ahem.”

She must have hit the nail on the head. Nelly clapped her hands together in front of her chest, changing the subject.

“Now, first of all, try picturing another you. Basically, the source of your energy.”

She should have just started with that. Sara sighed and collected her focus. She’d never had this internal wellspring of energy when she was living in Japan. She’d never thought about it before, but when she realized that was mana, it was surprisingly easy to get a feel for it. She even felt like she could move it if she wanted to.

“I think this is mana. If I just gather it in my hand and make it hard... Picture it being hard enough that a wolf couldn’t bite through it... Hard, hard, like iron, I guess? Harden!”

Sara tried just making her right hand hard. Nelly grasped her hand solemnly and squeezed. Sara could feel the sensation of her taking her hand, but there was no pain or anything.

“Oh? Pretty impressive... Hmph!”

What’s “hmph” supposed to mean? Sara questioned for a moment, but Nelly was clearly also using physical strengthening to grip her hand. Actually, she was trying to crush her hand.

“Wait, wait, wait, I’m just a beginner! Don’t crush it!”

“Oh.”

Oh? What was she gonna do if Sara’s physical strengthening wasn’t good enough and she actually crushed her hand? Of course, though Sara could feel pressure, she hadn’t actually felt any pain. How strange.

“That’s what these greater potions are for.” Nelly smugly took out a vial with a potion in it. In this world, injuries were typically healed with potions. How strange.

“No, no, no, just because you can heal it doesn’t mean it wouldn’t hurt. No way.”

“Huh.”

Don’t gimme that.

“I couldn’t crush it even with my own physical strengthening activated. The Invited really are something else.” Nelly seemed satisfied. “Should we see what a wolf can do, then?”

“Huh?”

“A wolf.”

“I heard you. You don’t need to repeat yourself.”

I just started learning magic five minutes ago, Sara thought to herself. She’d managed to use physical strengthening somehow, and avoided having her hand crushed by Nelly. So she should try it against a wolf *now*? That was weird, wasn’t it? It was too soon.

“You should put it into practice, though.”

“I got it. I get it already.”

Sara gave in. *As long as its teeth can’t get through my skin, it’s fine,* she thought to herself, completely unaware that the very thought marked her as a rather gutsy girl.

“But you have to hold my other hand.”

“Sure thing.”

And so, Sara held hands with Nelly and timidly stuck her hardened other hand outside of the protection field where a wolf was waiting, drool spilling from its open mouth.

“*Growl. Grawr!*”

“Eep!”

There was an impact, but the sound of the wolf’s teeth breaking was scarier. The wolf scampered away.

“You did it.”

Sara wasn’t really sure whether she should feel accomplished or not. On her

very first day of magic training, she was already feeling rather drained (mentally, at least).

After that, Nelly went out to hunt, looking rather satisfied with herself, and Sara finished her cleaning. While she made their dinner soup, she thought to herself: It was true that she knew now that she could harden herself enough to resist a wolf's fangs. She could most likely strengthen her entire body and not just her hand. However...

She added a little salt to the soup.

Strengthening herself to resist bites meant that she would still have to be bitten. Meaning that she'd have to be ready to be bitten at any time while she was going anywhere. That was just too much. In other words, she'd have to figure out how to use magic to defend herself in other ways if she didn't want to get bit.

In that case, instead of strengthening her body, what if she just created a round protection field around herself? She'd allowed Nelly to influence her into starting with physical strengthening, but Nelly had also mentioned protection fields and shields and things like that. If she could just use something like that, the wolves wouldn't be able to get near her.

“Your soup is as delicious as always, Sara.”

Nelly contentedly ferried her soup to her mouth that night at dinner.

“Thanks. So, I was thinking...”

Sara explained to Nelly what she’d been pondering earlier.

“Hmm. Shields and protection fields, eh? Well, if you want to keep yourself safe at a fixed location, you can use a magical tool to create a temporary protection field.”

“A temporary one?”

“Right. There are protection cases around this cottage that create the field to keep monsters out. You need to be holding a stone like this to get through. It’s called a friction stone. I completely forgot about it, but I’ll get one for you later.”

Nelly showed Sara something that looked like a clasp on her belt. Apparently, she wouldn’t have been able to leave the protection field at all earlier if she hadn’t been holding Nelly’s hand.

So couldn’t she move around safely if she just carried some of those protection cases with her? Sara decided to ask.

“Well, they are used on vehicles sometimes. But you have to fix them in place somehow, usually by leaving them on the ground. And you have to use three or four of them together to create a field, so you can use them while camping, but not while moving. I mean, I guess you could try, but it wouldn’t be very stable, so I don’t think it’d be practical.”

Gee, fantasy worlds sure were complicated.

“Well, if you want to make your own protection field, go ahead and try it. It consumes a lot of mana though, so I’ve never seen someone keep one up at all times outside of battle.”

And so, the next day, Nelly ended up keeping Sara company again for more training before she headed out hunting.

“Okay, putting it into practice, day two!”

“Growl.”

“Would you guys go away?! Ugh! You got hurt yesterday, didn’t you?”

“Growl.”

The wolf bared its fangs. New fangs, which had just grown in.

“No way... That’s gotta be a different wolf than yesterday, right?”

“It’s probably the same one. Monsters on the Dark Mountain have really powerful regenerative abilities. That’s why you have to be doubly sure when you take one down.”

“Are they sharks? They can regrow whole teeth?”

She didn’t want to know that. Now that she did, of course, there was nothing she could do about it. Sara was pretty good at changing gears.

“Oh, whatever. Then I’ll use physical strengthening, but in a bubble around me... Protection field!”

She imagined a bubble around her and strengthened its surface to be as hard as iron. It was pretty impressive that she could strengthen mana after it had left her body, no?

Seeing how proud Sara looked, Nelly took off the friction stone at her waist and drew her sword.

“Hey, hold on a second. You’re not going to—”

Clang! Sara could almost see sparks flying. She’d squeezed her eyes shut at the moment of impact, but timidly opened them to find Nelly looking back and forth between the protection field and her sword, impressed.

“D-Did it work?”

“Impressive stuff, Sara. You can’t be closing your eyes when you’re facing off with an enemy, though.”

“You’re asking too much of me.”

Sara didn’t want to face off against enemies in the first place, she just wanted to protect herself. Nelly’s standards were too high because of the things she herself was capable of.

In any case, she'd managed to successfully create a protection field.

"What were you going to do if it hadn't worked, Nelly?!"

"It's fine." Nelly took out a potion with a cheery grin.

Hadn't Sara just told her yesterday that just because she had potions, it didn't mean she could do whatever she wanted?

"Should we see what a wolf can do, then?"

"Huh?"

"A wolf."

"I heard you. You don't need to repeat yourself."

Okay, I can make a protection field, Sara thought to herself. So she should go face off against a wolf now? That was weird, wasn't it? It was too fast.

"You should put it into practice, though."

"I got it. I get it already."

In the end, she'd have to try it eventually.

"*Growl.*"

"*Growwwl.*"

The wolves were clearly very excited that Sara was finally coming out. She went up to the very edge of the house's protection field and created her own within it. It seemed the two fields didn't interact at all.

With a sigh, Sara stepped forward. Nelly was right beside her, focusing, but not so intensely as to drive the wolves away, so she was fine.

She took another step, then another.

"*Growl!*"

A wolf hit the protection field. The impact was intense, but the wolf's fangs didn't go through the circular field.

"Did it work?"

"That's a perfect protection field." Nelly nodded, satisfied.

Why was the scenery tilting, then?

“If the field is a circle...”

“*Growl!*”

A wolf lunged at her for a body slam.

“A-Aaah!”

“Sara!”

...Because round things roll.

Sara rolled down the gentle slope of the field until Nelly came and stopped her.



I’m gonna be sick...

Rolling like that had made Sara so ill that she decided to take a break from going outside, instead practicing her protection fields inside the house for a little while.

Sara put her noggin to work. The strength of her protection field wasn't a problem. It had kept her safe from the wolf's fangs and it hadn't been damaged by all the rolling either. She wanted to compliment herself for that. In other words, if Sara could keep her cool, she'd be fine.

"I can't just roll everywhere, though..."

She kept her hands moving while she thought. She was slicing the tail meat of a cockatrice Nelly had hunted the day before.

"Aren't cockatrices those things that kill you just by looking at you?"

Or was it petrification? Sara tapped on Nelly's body here and there to see if anything was wrong with it. Nelly seemed happy that she was worried about her.

"Eh, you'll be fine with physical strengthening."

"Is there anything physical strengthening *can't* do?"

From a logical standpoint, that couldn't possibly be true, but Nelly was the only person Sara knew in this world, so whatever she said was the truth as far as Sara was concerned. She decided to believe her and simply react with surprise.

"A cockatrice's gaze can't penetrate a temporary protection field either, so you'd probably be fine with your magic, Sara."

"I guess if it's not a big deal, then that's fine..."

"But what's best about them is that their meat's great. I've only been able to roast them whole up until now, but you can cook them in all kinds of other ways, right, Sara? I don't even roast them all that often now since it's such a pain."

That explained the bones on the floor on Sara's first day here. Nelly must have roasted some monster whole.

These days, Nelly was asking more of Sara, like this. Sara, meanwhile, felt like

she was entirely reliant upon Nelly, so she was happy to do whatever she could to repay her.

“I think I know what to do with the bird part that you separated out for me, but I wonder what we should do with the snake part...”

The bones were surprisingly thick. There were barely any small bones, so in the end she’d decided to simply slice the tail into round sections. The knives in this world were pretty handy. She could cook the slices like steaks or she could stew them and then remove the skin and bones...

Sara was unaware of the fact that she was merely running from reality by standing around thinking about cooking. She couldn’t just stay inside forever, though.

Having no choice, Sara racked her brains as she cooked. If she didn’t want to roll, then she could simply make her protection field a cube. No, even dice rolled down slopes... That wouldn’t work.

When she thought about cubes, her mind went to the apartment building she used to live in. Didn’t buildings like apartments put pillars deep into the ground as a countermeasure against earthquakes? Pillars... That was it!

“The charred parts of these cockatrice tail steaks are *so* good.”

Nelly cut up her tail steak, looking content. Sara wasn’t sure how much they needed to be cooked for them to be safe, so they were well-done. She could just picture Nelly saying, “Well, with physical strengthening,” if the meat had only been half-cooked, so Sara felt it was up to her to be thorough.

“Thanks. So, I was thinking...”

Sara thanked Nelly for her compliment and then explained what she had come up with earlier about extending part of her protection field into the ground like a pillar.

Nelly considered it before saying, “Well, doesn’t hurt to try.”

Sara felt encouraged by her words, but soon realized why she’d sounded so dubious.

“Okay, putting it into practice number three!”

“*Growl.*”

“I’m good on wolves, thanks.”

She didn’t need an answer from the wolf.

By her third practice try, she could go down to the bottom of the steps without fear. She was barely even scared of the wolves anymore.

“*Growl!*”

No, she was still scared.

“Okay, protection field.”

She created a bubble around herself and hardened it. This was the same as her last attempt. Then after leaving the protection field around the cottage, she swiftly extended the bubble into the ground like a stake before the wolf approached her.

“Now it won’t budge!”

“*Growl.*”

Wham. The wolf hit the field and bounced off of it.

“Heh.” Sara puffed her chest out.

“*Growl.*”

Wham. It was repelled each time it hit the field.

“Wahaha.”

No matter which direction the wolf came at the field from, it barely budged from the impact.

“It worked! Huh...?”

Sara’s eyes naturally turned toward Nelly, who wouldn’t meet her gaze. Sure, her field was fixed in place and wouldn’t budge no matter how many times the wolf crashed into it. However...

“How do I get to town like this...?” Sara murmured.

Pity in her voice, Nelly replied, “O-One step at a time?”

“I won’t get there until next year...”

Things didn’t always work out how you wanted them to. Sara learned the importance of failure. This was also Sara’s first step toward independence.

“At least I can gather medicinal plants like this.” Sara decided to be positive.

There were actually a lot of medicinal plants growing around the cottage. The guide that Nelly had gotten for Sara from the Apothecary’s Guild listed just six plants: healing herbs, greater healing herbs, paralysis herbs, poison herbs, mana herbs, and greater mana herbs. She’d perused the guide thoroughly, so she’d memorized the characteristics of all these plants. Shouldn’t there be more varieties, though?

“Is this all there is? Or is this just for beginners?”

“Of course not. But what else would you need?” Nelly asked, not seeing the problem. The healing herbs must have been used to create potions. So then what about regular medicine outside of potions?

“Say you have a stomachache, for instance.”

“You’d take a potion. You could water it down if you want.”

“What about a headache?”

“Yeah, that’d be a potion.”

“A cold?”

“Well, nothing cures a cold, but you can take something made with paralysis herbs if you have a cough and it’ll relieve your symptoms. For a fever, you’d use mana herbs.”

“Hunh.”

Sara was a little disappointed. There was nothing fun like synthesizing a recipe from a specific mixture of ingredients, then?

“But the apothecary’s mana manipulation and technique are all the more valued since the ingredients are so simple. The apothecaries in Rosa know what they’re doing.”

“Rosa?”

“Yeah, the town at the base of this mountain. There’s an underground dungeon there, and demand for potions is higher there than anywhere else on the continent. That means it attracts all the most skilled apothecaries. The head of the Apothecary Guild in particular is amazing.”

That was the first time Sara had heard anything about a town in this world from Nelly.

“His name’s Chris and he’s got about the same amount of mana as I do, but he’s able to get along with people somehow.”

Nelly was happily describing Chris before a shadow passed over her face. “Sara.”

“Yeah?”

“The only person you can really rely on in Rosa is Chris. If anything happens and there’s nothing else you can do...you should go to Chris at the Apothecary’s Guild for help.”

Nelly was so serious it was almost frightening. But Sara could barely leave the house right now, so it was hard to think about something as specific as what she should do after going into town.

“I won’t be able to go to anyone for help if I can’t even leave the house.”

“Yeah. Gotta start with getting a few steps out of the house.”

Nelly smiled like she was relieved for some reason. Almost like she was actually happy that Sara couldn’t leave the house.

For the time being, Sara observed the ground around the cottage, staying just inside the building’s protective field.

“Healing herb, healing herb, slime, greater healing herb, slime, healing herb.”

“*Growl.*” A wolf was also observing Sara, but...

“I’m good on wolves, thanks.”

So she said.

Outside of the cottage’s front door, there was a gently sloping field of grass,

but perhaps because this was midway up a mountain, there was a rocky area nearby, and a small hill in the distance as well. Grass filled all the space in between these areas, and if Sara looked closely, there were quite a few medicinal plants among the grass as well.

"I guess I can poke my head out of this field and fix my own field in place with a stake to gather plants. I'll ask Nelly what she thinks of that. There are a lot of slimes here, though... It's kind of dangerous."

Nelly had told her to simply get some bread ready and wait for her that day, so she hadn't made anything for dinner. Nelly bought enough bread for ten days every time she went into town, so Sara didn't have to bake it herself.

Incidentally, bread didn't go bad if you left it in a storage bag, so it remained at the same quality for the whole ten days. That being said, it tended to start out already stale, which Sara was a little curious about.

Also, in the beginning, the only seasoning in the cottage was salt. Nelly had bought pepper and other spices in town when Sara asked her to, so she didn't think this world had a particularly undeveloped food culture or anything like that.

In any case, as Sara waited without preparing dinner as Nelly had instructed her to, Nelly came back earlier than usual.

"Here's today's souvenir!"

Outside the door on the deck, Nelly enthusiastically took out a big square stone from her storage bag.

"A rock?"

"No, no. Look closer. See? It has a face and a body, right? This is a gargoyle."

Were gargoyles not rocks? Sara cocked her head while Nelly drew her sword.

"They're hard on the outside like rock, but the meat inside is really tasty. I never used to hunt them since it was too much of a pain to cook them, but now you're here, Sara," she said, and... "Hmph!" ...swung her sword down.

All of a sudden, there was a cube of juicy meat in front of them, the rocky outside sliced away. The wolves outside ate the discarded exterior. Sara

decided to pretend she hadn't seen it happen.

"Well... If we had time, I could make a roast, but let's just season it with salt and pepper and make steaks!"

The small amount of meat they were able to extract from the large gargoyle had barely any fat on it. It was real premium stuff, which they grilled to perfection.

"You normally only ever find these guys in rocky areas or mines, so it's rare to find them on the Dark Mountain."

"Huh."

She'd only just learned the name of one town in this world recently, but she was collecting all sorts of knowledge on monster cuisine. The thought tickled her.

Drinking some tea after their meal, Sara suddenly remembered the question that had occurred to her earlier that day and asked Nelly, "On that note, I think I'll be able to gather some medicinal plants, but there are a lot of slimes around, so I'm not really sure what to do."

The tea was black, incidentally.

"Slimes, eh? They're not a problem as long as you don't step on 'em, but they're a real pain for swordsmen."

"Even for you, Nelly?"

"Yeah. I hear it's actually easier for casters to take them down. Especially when they're just starting out."

When she heard that, something suddenly occurred to Sara. She'd gotten her hands on a magic textbook, but all the magic she was casting was physical strengthening and protection fields; she wasn't doing anything in the actual book. The book actually described four basic magic types.

"Fire, wind, water, earth... You can take down slimes with basic spells in any element."

Sara opened up the magic textbook when Nelly told her that.

“I can picture a small ball of fire, I guess. Wind blades... I can also picture, because of kamaitachi. The earth spell is just growing stakes from the ground. I can picture that, too. But this water spell... What’s a water blade, exactly?”

Was this really for beginners? Why would you need a fireball or a water blade in daily life, anyway? Sara read the cover of the book out loud. “‘Into the Dungeon: Beginner Spells for Casters.’ I guess it does say ‘beginner.’”

“Yep. That was the easiest one the Hunter’s Guild was selling. Guess you’ll need a map of the central dungeon, too.”

“I will not. Why would I need a dungeon map when I can’t even get to the town?”

As always, Nelly’s thinking was slightly divorced from reality.

Nelly cleared her throat as if to change the subject. “Right. A water blade. As far as I can tell from seeing casters use one, it’s just like a wind blade but with water instead.”

“Not ice?”

“No, it was water. After taking the monster down, it just left behind water. If it was ice, it’d leave behind ice, right?”

True.

“Huh. Do you know how big a small fireball usually is?” Sara asked more questions.

“Let’s see... The caster I was with made ’em about this size.” Nelly made a big circle with her arms.

“What? That’s huge. That’s a small one?”

“Well, that’s the smallest I’ve seen. I think bigger magic’s usually in the shape of a sword or a wall or something. I haven’t really seen anything else.”

Did that mean that that was the size people meant when they said “small” in this world? In any case, Sara didn’t want to set the cottage on fire making a fireball that big, so she decided to only play around with smaller, more compact spells. The textbook said that picturing what you wanted to cast was important.

“Okay, I don’t want to make a big fireball, so I’ll just do a little one. A tiny little flame at high heat. I can’t picture a water blade, so I’ll make an ice one. I think I can make spikes come up from the ground. And I’ll picture kamaitachi for wind. That’s how I’ll practice.”

“Sounds good. Just like there are all sorts of ways to fight with a sword, casters all have their own different spells.”

Sara read the beginning of the textbook aloud. “‘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.’”

She pictured a small flame heading toward a monster. Such a thing would be impossible in reality, so she pictured it like it was a scene in a science fiction movie. That had been a plane... no, was it a spaceship? If she wanted it to hit the monster, could she just give it homing properties?

Sara perfected the image in her mind. A small flame with high heat and homing properties. Even if a slime ran away, it would chase after it and finish it off. Yeah, that’s what she’d go with.

The next day...

“I’ll try it from halfway inside the protection field first,” Sara had said to convince Nelly. She’d decided to practice her magic on her own. Nelly had gone off to hunt, if reluctantly.

“Okay.”

“*Growl.*”

“I’m good on wolves... thanks.”

She affixed the friction stone she’d gotten from Nelly to her waist, stuck her right side out of the cottage’s protection field, and fixed her own field in place.

“I’ll start with the fire I was picturing yesterday. I’ll shoot it at that slime. First, make fire, then shrink it down and make it real hot. Then make it follow the enemy... Okay, go!”

Whoosh. Sizzle. The slime lost its shape in an instant.

“*Growl?*” The wolf looked confused, but it wasn’t cute at all.

“It’s gonna hit you, so don’t stand around there!”

She took out all the slimes she could see, then sighed with relief and took out her medicinal plant guide to do her first gathering. This was her real goal today.

Sara knelt down. *Wham.*

“*Grrr...*”

“I’m okay even if wolves come at me. Leave the roots, fold the plant three leaves down, and pluck. There we go.”

She’d demonstrated that she could gather plants from the grass just below the steps to the cottage. Just making her way around the cottage, she should be able to gather a decent amount of them.

Sara waited excitedly at the front door for Nelly, who came back punching away the wolves who charged at her as always. But just before reaching the cottage, she stopped and picked something up, getting a good look at it under the sun.

“Nelly?”

“Don’t come out from the protection field, Sara,” Nelly said quietly, bending down and picking something else up. She looked around and nodded to herself, evidently satisfied, before returning to the cottage.

“Sara.”

“Welcome back, Nelly!” Sara hugged Nelly’s waist.

Nelly happily wrapped her arms around Sara’s back, but she soon frowned and showed Sara what she’d picked up off the ground.

“What’s this?”

“I guess I never told you, did I? Mana gets condensed inside monsters in this world. Hunters make their living by hunting monsters and selling the magic stones they can harvest from them to the Guild.”

Not being very familiar with the concept of magic stones, Sara stared blankly at Nelly before she gasped and recalled, “Magic stones from stealth slimes.”

“Good, you remember that. It’s not just stealth slimes that have magic stones,

though. Regular slimes do too, and those mountain wolves over there have them, too. The mana in these stones is used to power magic tools, which make people's lives easier. The hot water in the bath and the fire in the kitchen come from them, too."

"They all use magic stones?"

"That's right."

Nelly handed Sara the magic stones from the slimes.

"Maybe it's weird for me to say this as someone who hunts monsters, but if you put down a monster, you have to honor its life. You should eat whatever meat you can eat from it, and use whatever parts you can use. I think it's only right to pick up the magic stones and make use of them when you kill a monster. Sara."

"Yes..." Sara responded, feeling chastised.

"Sorry I didn't tell you this before. Can you pick up the magic stones when you beat monsters from now on?"

"Yes!" she answered enthusiastically.

She hadn't wanted to fight. She didn't want to attack anything. But she had to kill monsters just to take one step out of her home in this world. Even if she didn't go anywhere near them, if she took them out with magic from afar, it still counted as killing monsters.

She didn't want to attack creatures indiscriminately, but she had to become strong. With that determination in her heart, Sara clenched her fist, looking down at the town of Rosa, where she would head one day.

Nelly started selling the medicinal plants Sara was gathering a little bit at a time when she went into town. The first thing she bought for her with the money she'd earned was a basket for gathering and a small storage bag.

The rectangular basket had a handle for easy carrying and was divided into two sections. The bottom section had a divider that created five small spaces, while the top section was undivided.

“The top’s for healing herbs, which you’ll find the most of. From left to right, the bottom’s for greater healing herbs, poison herbs, paralysis herbs, mana herbs, and greater mana herbs. Ten healing herbs’ll get you five hundred gil. One greater healing herb’s worth fifteen hundred gil. Poison and paralysis herbs are each worth five hundred gil. You probably won’t see many mana herbs, but one’s worth one thousand gil, and if you can find a greater mana herb, that’ll be worth five thousand gil.”

“‘Won’t see many’? They’re growing right there.” Sara pointed to the area just under the cottage steps.

“Oh,” said Nelly, scratching her head. She must not have noticed them since they weren’t of interest to her. “Well, this *is* the Dark Mountain...”

Sara didn’t know how that explained things, but she could clearly see them growing around the cottage.

“Potions made from these plants have a direct effect on people’s well-being, so the buying price for the plants is unlikely to change. So even if you hardly ever find greater mana herbs, they’ll always go for five thousand gil. And if you find a bunch of them, they still won’t get cheaper. Always go to the Apothecary’s Guild to sell them, because they’ll buy them at a fixed price. You should remember that.”

“Sell plants at the Apothecary’s Guild, and rely on Mr. Chris if I get in trouble.”

“That’s right.”

By that time, it was winter, and it was fairly cold outside. Even if she could fix her protection field in place with stakes, she couldn’t be outside for long because of the cold anyway. In ten days, she could find about one hundred healing herbs, a few each of greater healing herbs, poison herbs, and paralysis herbs, and if she was lucky, some mana herbs and greater mana herbs, too. She made roughly twenty thousand gil every ten days.

The storage bag Nelly had bought for her was the smallest kind and took the form of a pouch she could attach to her belt. Even one this small had cost three hundred thousand gil, according to Nelly. There was no way for her to gather that many plants right away, so she was essentially in debt for the storage bag.

“It only fits one wyvern in it, but that’s probably enough for you for now.”

“A wyvern? That’s a crazy amount.”

A wyvern was a creature that could pick up a moose, which was even larger than a mountain wolf, in one claw and fly away with it, so this was probably equivalent to the storage space in a small room.

“Spend a few days in a dungeon and it’ll get full of monster materials in no time. A skilled Hunter would have to buy a new one right away.”

“Well, I’m not going to any dungeons. The only things I have to put in it are medicinal plants and some necessities.”

Still, she’d come to a different world, so even if it was the smallest kind, she’d definitely wanted one of these storage bags. Sara excitedly put all sorts of things in it and took them out until she was used to using it.

“For now, I’ve got to make enough to pay back the cost of the storage bag!” Sara pumped herself up.

She was still only ten, but she’d have to become independent one day. For the time being, she had to pay off her storage bag debt.

Sara had one complaint, however. Though Nelly would buy her specialized items like storage bags and baskets for gathering medicinal plants, things only people like Hunters or merchants made use of, she wouldn’t buy new clothes for her. Nelly herself always dressed in a masculine style, wearing pants and a vest or jacket over a shirt. That was fine, since she made her living as a Hunter. But why should the ten-year-old Sara have to wear clothes that were sized for an adult?

“Sorry. I just can’t go into a store and ask for clothes for a little girl.”

“Can you at least get clothes for an adult in a smaller size?”

“Well, I don’t want them to think I’m trying to fit into something that’s obviously too small for me either...”

Sara didn’t know why she cared so much what people thought of her. Apparently Nelly had some trouble interacting with people. Sara suspected there may have been a reason for a woman like her to be living all alone in a

mountain cottage like this—a reason that went further than her choice of profession—but she couldn't bring herself to ask about Nelly's circumstances.

Anyway, she could only go a few meters from her house at this point, so there was no point in complaining that her clothes weren't fashionable. She would just have to keep wearing her baggy clothes with the sleeves and pant legs rolled up and a belt cinched tight around her waist.

Fortunately, magical tools could produce hot and cold water, so they had something like a washing machine, meaning she didn't have to scrub her clothes in a basin to keep them clean. Since imagination was key when it came to using magic, she'd thought maybe she'd be able to use cleaning magic, but her attempts had been unsuccessful. You could gather up the dust in a room with wind magic, for instance, but if you couldn't picture exactly what to do with any dirt or grime on yourself or your clothes and to what extent you wanted to clean them, you couldn't do it with magic.

But after a winter without much snow, when she had been in this world for about half a year, Sara was able to pay back the money she owed Nelly for the storage bag.

"When I think about how it's really mine, this storage pouch seems so precious to me..."

Sara affectionately patted the small pouch affixed to the long tunic she wore over her baggy pants. All it had in it right now was the basket with the medicinal plants she'd gathered and a bag for the magic stones she'd collected from slimes, but she was still fond of it. Incidentally, she'd sewn the bag for the magic stones herself.

"The Hunter's Guild will buy magic stones from you, but the income would go to me if I sold them. You can't sell them through an intermediary. Besides, it'd be suspicious for a Hunter of my level to suddenly come in with a bunch of slime stones. So you should save them up until you're twelve and sell them all yourself then."

That's what Nelly had told her regarding the slime magic stones.

"Twelve?" If anything, that was the part Sara was curious about.

“You need to register with the Guild if you want to make a living hunting monsters. But even hunting the smallest slime can put your life in danger, so that’s around the minimum age people are allowed to register.”

“So I can’t be independent for another two years, no matter what happens, huh?”

“A year and a half,” Nelly corrected her gently.

Still, since she could only take a few steps out of the house right now, it was hard for Sara to imagine becoming independent even in another year and a half.

“Okay, I’ll do my best!”

“By the way, I got one of these today.”

As she watched Sara pump herself up out of the corner of her eye, Nelly took a big egg out of her bag. It was about the size of an ostrich egg, but it was round like that of a turtle.

“It’s a cockatrice egg. There are some monsters that lay eggs, and it’s spring now, so.”

“So they lay eggs...” If anything, Sara was more surprised about that. She tried to take the egg when Nelly handed it to her, but her hand slipped on its surface. “Aaah! It’s gonna... break....?”

But the round egg didn’t break, instead jumping back up into the air like a bouncy ball before eventually settling on the floor of the cottage.

“That scared me...”

“Strong monsters have strong eggs.”

Well, maybe, but Sara hadn’t been expecting it to *bounce*. Something sparked in her brain when she saw it, but the flash of inspiration was gone before it could form into a proper thought.

“Well, if it doesn’t crack, how are we gonna eat it?”

“Hmm. You have a point.”

She shouldn’t have brought it here if she didn’t know what to do with it. But if

she'd brought it thinking Sara would probably be able to do something with it, then Sara would just have to come up with something.

In the end, she brought the egg outside and opened a hole in it with a high-temperature flame, like a blowtorch.

"Come to think of it, this is my first time actually seeing you use real magic. I've never seen a caster produce such a small, high-temperature flame before." Nelly put a hand to her chin, impressed.

"Nah, anybody from Earth would be able to do this. I mean, even I thought of it."

"The Invited, eh? I've never really gotten to know one before."

"So I'm your first?"

"I guess so." Nelly's cheeks looked a little red as she averted her eyes. Sara couldn't help giggling at the sight.

That day, they made veggie omelets with the cockatrice egg, and the next day, they made sweet rolled eggs. The cockatrice egg they'd eaten together was delicious.

But Sara was starting to get impatient since she'd been here for half a year already and she could still only get a few meters away from the cottage. Fortunately, she got along well with Nelly, and she'd never really had any complaints about her situation. In fact, she was enjoying every day she spent here a lot. Still, she didn't think she could be completely reliant on Nelly forever.

"That egg was so good... It was funny how much it bounced, though. Oh, wait!" What was that flash of inspiration she'd gotten then?

"Right. I was thinking my protection field was kind of like the egg, but I didn't want to bounce and roll in it, so what if I just made the things that hit it bounce instead?" She followed the logical thread of her spark of inspiration. "So if I make my field reflect all sorts of things, like a mirror, then..." Instead of her rolling, the monsters would take damage instead. With how it was right now, it repelled wolves, but the impact carried inward, so they wouldn't bounce like she was imagining.

“I can’t really picture it, though... Bounce off, bounce off... It’s like that bubble game. They just bounce off. That way, the impact wouldn’t carry to me and I could keep the field around me as I walked. What would you call that... Not a shield, a... barrier. A barrier!”

The magic textbook had said that picturing what you wanted to happen was important.

“Why did I start with physical strengthening, anyway?”

Well, that was because of Nelly, obviously.

The next day, she asked Nelly to keep her company before she went hunting since she was going to try out something new for the first time in a while.

“Okay, putting it into practice again. It’s been a while!”

“*Growl.*”

“You’re relentless! You’ve been at this for half a year now!”

She tried to just ignore the wolves. Though lately it seemed like they were disposing of the cottage’s leftovers more than the slimes were, so she kind of got the feeling she was just feeding them.

Nelly folded her arms and watched Sara with some interest.

“Not a protection field... Well, a protection field, but I’m picturing a bubble... A bubble that will reflect anything that comes at it, whether it’s magical or physical. Okay!”

She formed a barrier around herself. She pictured a double-layered protection field, the outer barrier repelling anything that came into contact with it and the inner one reinforcing it. She took one step out from the field around the cottage, then another. The wolves lunged at her like always.

Boing.

“*Yap!*”

“*Yap!*”

The wolves that lunged at her bounced off of her barrier one after another. Sara felt no impact. It was a success.

Sara turned around without thinking and shouted, “Nelly!”

Nelly was frozen with her arms still crossed, a shocked look on her face.

“Nelly?”

With a start, Nelly uncrossed her arms and murmured, “I guess I should have expected as much from an Invited. You can’t even fight; who knew you could do all *that*.” There wasn’t any joy on her face. Instead, the expression she wore looked almost sad.

“It’s too too soon to relax, though. Even if you use magic tools to protect yourself at night, you’ll have to keep that thing up for a full five days until you make it into town.”

Sara definitely didn’t think she could do that yet. Still, she’d taken one step forward.

She looked down proudly at Rosa at the base of the mountain. “I’ll get there one day! In like two years!”

She had a clear goal now, but she still had to face reality. Sara was well aware that she was frail.

“Two years, huh...? Guess I can just refuse for that long...”

“Nelly?”

“It’s nothing. So you can finally leave the house. I’ll keep you company, so you should start training to stay out longer!”

“Yeah!”

Sara didn’t know what was troubling Nelly, but she resolved to get stronger so that she wouldn’t be a burden on her.

“If you’re heading to town, the next thing you’ll need is *these*,” said Nelly. She had bought Sara magic tools to create a protection field with. Four small, flat boxes. Even stacked on top of one another, Sara could hold them in one hand.

“These are magic tools to create a temporary protection field. If you put four of them around you in a square, they’ll form a field like the one around the

cottage. It'll even keep a wyvern out. But it only extends about two meters on each side. It's just for one person. I guess two people could probably squeeze close to fit inside, though."

"Then we should only need one set, huh?"

"Yeah." Nelly blushed a little at this. "There are bigger ones for parties to use, but it's safer for everyone to have their own in case something happens. It's just..."

"Just...?" Was there something else?

"One set's five hundred thousand gil. What do you want to do?"

At first, Nelly tried to buy everything for Sara, saying it was thanks for taking care of the cottage, that she could never get someone to come out to such a remote place just to clean. If Sara hadn't said anything, she probably would have bought her the biggest kind of storage bag they had available. But that didn't really sit right with Sara.

If Sara had absolutely no ability to work, or if she was still in Japan, she might have allowed herself to rely completely on an adult, but she knew that she could make a decent amount of money gathering medicinal plants at this point. The magic stones she was saving up from slimes would make good money once she was able to sell them, too. So, she wanted to earn the things she'd need to be independent on her own.

When Sara insisted as such to Nelly, Nelly told her to at least let her handle the cost of her daily necessities to show her appreciation for the cooking Sara did, so Sara relied on her for food and clothing and such. She wished Nelly would buy something other than these baggy clothes for her, though, Sara mused as she looked down at her outfit with a wry smile.

So, in deference to Sara's wishes, Nelly always asked whether she wanted to buy things like this, convenient magic tools and the like. Of course, she usually asked after buying them already, so Sara tended to just go along with it.

"I'll buy them."

"Okay."

That was usually how it went.

Sara's range of movement had actually expanded quite a bit now that she could put up her own barrier. It was still only fifty meters or so from the cottage, but she could now visit places like the cluster of trees or the rocky area that she could see from their house.

Thanks to that, she'd been able to find an area where a ton of poison herbs had been growing, and a spot with some mana herbs too. Previously, she'd basically only been able to find healing herbs. In other words, her earnings from one ten-day period of gathering had increased from fifty thousand to one hundred thousand gil. That meant she'd be able to pay back the cost of the protection cases in around three months.

"If I've got protection cases, I guess a tent is next, huh? What do you think I'll need to travel, Nelly?"

"Well, you don't have any stamina, so you'll need to rest at night for sure. Temporary protection fields will keep the rain off of you, so I'd suggest skipping the tent so you can see what's outside the field. They'll take up some space in your storage bag, but you'll want a thick mat and a blanket so you can sleep well at night. Then you'll want a lantern, portable cookware, and a canteen."

"Cookware... Can't I just put food I've already cooked right in my storage bag?"

Nelly blinked. Almost like the thought had never occurred to her before. "You'll want to... make tea and stuff though, right?"

"I guess so."

Nelly probably ate and drank while walking to prioritize speed. She must have been thinking back to when she still went into dungeons to figure out what Sara would need.

"I don't have to think about this until I'm actually going somewhere, but then there's the issue of food... Come to think of it..." Sara asked something she'd always been curious about. "Why doesn't the cottage have any supplies?"

"Supplies?"

When Nelly went into town every ten days, she always bought bread and vegetables and whatever else they'd need. She'd started buying a bigger variety of things after Sara had asked her to, but she never bought more than what they'd need for the next ten days. Since the town was so far away, though, Sara thought she should keep more things in the cottage in case she couldn't go at some point.

"You have a storage bag, so you could buy a lot more while you're there. Aren't there times when you can't go shopping because you feel bad?"

"I've never felt bad before or gotten injured. I want to fill my storage bag with as many monster materials as I can, so I don't really like putting anything unnecessary in it."

Nelly was just so strong she'd never had to think about what-ifs before, Sara supposed.

"Are there thermoses for soup or lunch boxes? If I had containers, I could pack individual meals."

"The Guild sells simple meals you can eat in the dungeon. It comes in a basket with a cup of soup and some bread and meat. If you buy it outright it's three thousand gil, but you can get fifteen hundred gil back if you return the basket. They're cheap, but they're not very good, so I don't usually get them. Plus, they take up too much space. I'd rather just put monster materials in my bag."

"So there *are* lunch boxes! We can wash them and reuse them, right?"

"I guess so... Everybody in the dungeon just tossed them after they ate. You can fit more monster materials in your bag that way."

Sara was astounded. Just how much did people want to collect monster materials? What *Sara* wanted was food you could easily walk around with. She didn't need to keep space open in her storage pouch to hold monster materials.

Cooking outdoors might be fun, but unlike camping in Japan, Sara imagined they'd end up surrounded by monsters while they ate here. She didn't really want to spend the time cooking in a situation like that.

"Can you buy me one of those lunches? Please?"

“I guess if I’m buying stuff at the Guild, that won’t be suspicious...”

“I want you to buy some food we can stock up on, too. I’ll keep it in my storage bag so it won’t have to take up space in yours. Okay?”

“I got it. It’s true that there might be times when I can’t go into town someday.”

Having been convinced, Nelly started buying some of the things she’d asked for little by little in town. The first thing she bought for her was a new storage bag.

“I wanted a storage *box*, really, but you can’t put storage boxes or bags in other storage bags and I didn’t want to carry it all the way back up the mountain...”

“Box?”

It was the first time she was hearing that you couldn’t put a storage bag inside another storage bag, but that made sense to her, since otherwise you could end up with an infinite storage space. What was a storage box, though?

“When you asked me about stocking up, I remembered that most houses have boxes instead of storage bags. They’re more convenient, after all.”

A storage box, according to Nelly, was about the size of a large cardboard box, with a lid on top that you could open and close.

“It’s more convenient for them to be boxes in a house, so they actually make them bigger on purpose.”

The smallest capacity for a box was the size of one wyvern. *What a weird way to measure things,* Sara thought every time she heard this unit of measurement.

“Hey, Sara.” Nelly looked like she was excited about something.

“Yeah?”

“One day...yeah, one day. If I’m with you, maybe I can live in town, too. If that ever happens, let’s buy a storage box together.”

Sara was curious about her saying “if I’m with you,” but this didn’t seem like

the time to ask what she meant by that. Still, up until now, Sara had been wholly focused on becoming able to live by herself so that she didn't burden Nelly any more, since right now, Nelly was stuck here at the cottage with her. She hadn't been thinking about living together with Nelly in the future. She *could* live with Nelly in town though, and they could both do their own work there. If they could make that happen, she'd be thrilled.

"We can stay together?"

"Of course! You don't have to become independent for the rest of your life."

"You sound like an irresponsible dad, Nelly." Sara smiled wryly, but she felt like the narrow future she'd been imagining for herself had widened a bit.

"I want to use my own storage bag to hold monsters," was the reason Nelly gave Sara for buying a new bag just for supplies. She just couldn't give up her monster material space. "I can hunt stuff for meat, but I can't make bread on my own. Guess I'll just start buying a little more bread and other ingredients."

"Can't you just buy it all at once and put it in the storage bag?"

"Well..." Nelly frowned. "I don't want people thinking I'm gonna move somewhere else if I buy too much or do stuff I don't usually do."

Sara was taken aback. "That makes it sound like you're under surveillance or something. Aren't you just the caretaker of this mountain?"

"How should I explain this... By reducing the number of monsters on this mountain, I make it so that they don't head down toward the town. They'd be in trouble if I suddenly left."

"But that's...!"

"That's enough about that. I'll start buying more a little at a time. Okay?"

Sara couldn't press her further after hearing that. Still, she was left with a bad taste in her mouth. If the job she was performing was that important, then Nelly should have been treated better.

There were people who preferred to live alone, so it was fine that she was on her own up here. Shouldn't she be able to buy whatever she wanted and spend

her free time however she wanted too? Why did she have to act like there were things she could and couldn't do? In the over half a year she had lived with her, Sara had never seen Nelly do anything other than work. She didn't seem to ever take a day off, either.

One day...when she could do something to take even a little bit of the burden off of Nelly, Sara wanted to have a proper conversation with her about this. With that modest determination in her heart, Sara put her concerns to the side for the time being.

Then she smiled and took the new storage bag from Nelly. Time didn't pass inside the storage bag, so anything inside it would stay fresh.

"We can store as much as we want in here!"

"Not a lot of people think about things that way, you know."

People had to eat every day, and they had to replace things that they used up. Nelly seemed to think that whether or not you had space to store things, it didn't change the amount of things you would go through in one day. Now that Sara thought about it, in Japan, where there were frequent earthquakes, people were taught to have three days of supplies ready at all times, but there were a lot of people who didn't do that, and even if they had a fridge, a lot of people still went out and bought food every day.

"I see... But there aren't any stores near this cottage. Even if you can go out and hunt for meat, I'd like to have a month of supplies on hand at the very least..."

"I think three months would be enough to fool everyone, so I'll aim for three months' worth."

What did she have to fool people about? Nelly misspoke like this every so often, but Sara was used to it, so she just started listing things without commenting.

"Lunch boxes *will* take up space, so we should get like five of them for each of us. Let's make a bunch of sandwiches, too. It never hurts to have something you can take out and eat right away."

"Make a bunch with cockatrice meat, the part that's not the tail. With a bunch

of mustard and onions.”

“Of course! That’s your favorite, Nelly. I’ll make a bunch of the thin-sliced roast gargoyle ones for me.”

After that, Nelly bought nothing for a while but lunch boxes from the guild, bread, and vegetables.

“You know, we’ll need salt and sugar and pepper and oil and flour, too.”

“Oh. Huh.”

“And a canteen. Remember?”

Nelly cocked her head and said, “That much?” but it didn’t hurt to have a lot of versatile ingredients. And even if she could produce water with magic, it would still make Sara feel better to have a canteen.

By the end of summer, almost a full year since Sara's reincarnation, Sara was finally able to go so far from the cottage that it was a tiny speck on the horizon. The pair had also managed to stockpile a month's worth of food.

"Okay, I think I want to start practicing camping," Sara announced to Nelly at the start of fall. A year had passed now, so she was probably eleven at this point.

"Camping?"

"Yes. You said it would take an adult three days to walk to Rosa, right? On my legs, it'd probably be more like five. So I want to practice spending the night outside."

So she said, but she was scared of doing it by herself. Sara wanted Nelly to come with her. More than anything, of course, she was just itching to use the camping tools Nelly had bought for her.

"You won't be able to hunt as many monsters, so maybe it'll get in the way of your job, but I'm scared to do it on my own."

"You're scared to be on your own? *Scared?*" Why were her cheeks getting red? "Cute."

How could those two things be connected? Sara didn't understand how Nelly's brain was wired.

"Of course I'll go with you! Yeah, you've got it, kid!"

She was strangely fired up about it, but as long as Nelly was okay with going with her, Sara was happy.

"I think I should practice walking a lot more, too."

"Yeah. Anywhere you've been once, you can probably go again on your own later. We should start off easy and go along the path... No, maybe we should head *up* the mountain first..."

Nelly came up with all sorts of plans, but in the end they settled on heading down the mountain along the path.

Sara closed the door behind her and did her final checks in front of the

cottage. “Got my camping set, got the food, got my storage bag.”

“*Growl.*”

“Good on wolves, thanks!”

Even a year later, the pack of wolves remained. They must have been painfully aware that they couldn’t eat Sara, but they still made attempts on her barrier and were repelled every single time.

“It’s been a while since I’ve camped too, so I’m a little nervous myself.”

“Oh yeah, you always go straight to town without stopping to rest, right?”

“Yep. I’m nervous, but I’m looking forward to it.”

“Yeah!”

Sara wanted to hold hands, but it was dangerous here if your hands weren’t free, so they just walked next to each other. Nelly protected herself with her physical strengthening, Sara with her barrier.

After an hour’s walk, the cottage now minuscule in the distance, Sara stopped beside a pair of large pine trees along the side of the road.

“Need a break already?”

“It’s more that...this is the farthest I’ve ever been.”

“Just this far, seriously?” Nelly was taken aback.

She’d been practicing on her own up until now, so this was actually the first time she’d gone anywhere this far from the cottage with Nelly. It was pretty hard on her eleven-year-old body to walk this long, and Sara was feeling rather tired.

“If you’re resting this frequently, it might really take you five days to get to town.”

The town sure didn’t feel like it was getting any closer.

“Okay, come hunting with me as much as you can from now on. You’ll be fine if you have protection cases with you and you’ll be able to practice staying out for multiple nights in a row, too.”

“Okay. I’ll try my best!”

This was like a dream. In the beginning, she couldn’t even take a single step out of the house, but if she could go along on Nelly’s hunting trips and stay outside for multiple nights, then they could just keep heading in the direction of Rosa. That meant that if Nelly took the monsters she hunted into town and Sara came with her, Sara would make it there too. For all her determination, she had yet to realize this.

“From here, the cottage looks more like it’s halfway up a hill than a mountain.”

They couldn’t see anything higher than the cottage, so it looked like it sat at the summit of a hill. There were wyverns flying in the sky, but from a distance, they just looked like birds, so it was practically picturesque.

“It’s just the caretaker’s hut on the Dark Mountain.”

“But it’s cuter if you think of it as ‘Nelly’s house on the hill,’ right?”

“Cute? Cute. Yeah, that’s nice.” Nelly laughed.

Sara preferred to think of her home as a cute mountain cottage.

“Okay, I’m feeling better. Let’s start walking again. Where do we go from here, Nelly? Down? Or across?”

“It’ll make the walk back harder, but let’s keep following the path and go down this time.”

Their camping trip had only just started. The sky even looked a little more blue than usual today.

After walking a bit farther from the two pine trees, they suddenly noticed an absence of mountain wolves.

“Did they finally give up?” Sara thought this might be her first time seeing any wolf-free scenery.

“No, it’s just that their habitat is higher up the mountain. Down here you get...*well...*”

“*Growl!*”

A big dog lunged at Sara from behind, bouncing off of her barrier. It was smaller than a mountain wolf, with darker fur. It was traveling with a large pack, though.

“Forest wolves. Their territory is from here down to the meadow at the bottom of the mountain. They’re small, but they hunt cleverly with their packs.”

“Huh.”

“Unlike the mountain wolves, they won’t attack me, but I’ve got you with me today.”

“So they see me as prey?! I’ll pass on these wolves, too!”

Was she going to be stalked by wolves no matter where she went? The thought alone was enough to exhaust her.

The forest wolves continued to attack her as they walked down the path, but...

“*Yap!*”

One of them stopped moving after being repelled by her barrier. They came at her with the full intention to take down their prey, but all the force they used to attack was redirected back at them when they hit the barrier. That was the full effect of Sara’s barrier.

Sara was frozen in shock. The mountain wolves might break their teeth, but they always came back for more after bouncing off of her barrier. She never expected something to die from hitting it.

“Looks like it broke its neck. That’s what it gets for not giving up,” Nelly said simply, kneeling down next to the black-furred wolf. “It was repelled by your protection field, so it’s your kill, Sara. What do you want to do?”

“What do you mean...?”

“If you keep it in your storage bag, you’ll be able to sell it at a decent price. It’ll take up space, though.”

Even if they were monsters, Sara didn’t want to attack them, so she’d been trying not to. Slimes didn’t bleed, so she didn’t feel too bad taking them out with magic, but she hadn’t prepared herself to take down larger living things.

Nelly stood up and, staring at the rest of the forest wolves who were eyeing them cautiously, murmured, “I didn’t say anything since it looked like you hadn’t noticed, but your barrier has already killed a lot of slimes, Sara.”

“Huh?” Sara jumped back. Just like Nelly had said, there was a smushed slime right beside her.

“I didn’t say anything because it wouldn’t be good for your training to stop and pick every single one up, but that barrier of yours reflects back the full force of anything that attacks you. Mountain wolves are tough, and they hold back when they come at you, so it hasn’t had much effect on them, but any lower down the mountain and the monsters get a little weaker. They’ll come at you with their full strength, and all that strength will be reflected back at them.”

In other words, since they were trying to kill her, they might lose their lives from the force of their attacks.

“You’re not a Hunter, Sara. So you don’t need to go after them on purpose. But all the monsters on this mountain are targets for extermination. In other words, they’re harmful pests. Frankly speaking, it’s better for us if there’s fewer of them.”

“Fewer...”

“That’s why I’m up here.”

Sara knelt down silently and picked up the slime’s magic stone. Then she steeled herself and headed for the forest wolf.

“We’re really not supposed to do this, but I could sell it for you.”

Sara shook her head and held her pouch out over the wolf. The wolf vanished into the bag. She tried not to think about how it could be right next to her lunch boxes. It wasn’t like they’d contaminate one another, after all.

If she really didn’t want to hurt anything, then she just had to stay in the cottage, not taking a step outside. But Sara *wanted* to go outside. She finally had a body that wasn’t tired all the time, so she wanted to try all sorts of things she’d never been able to do before. And in order for her to do that, it seemed she had to be prepared to take lives. And she had to take responsibility for the lives she took.

“I took it down myself... Well, it just kind of went down on its own, but it was because of something I did, so I’ll take responsibility.”

“Good.” Nelly patted Sara’s shoulder.

But how many forest wolves would fit in this storage bag when it could only hold one wyvern? Sara understood for the first time why Nelly was so particular about making space for monster materials in her bag.

“By the way, how much did your storage bag cost, Nelly?”

“This? Well. About a hundred million.”

That was too much. If it could fit ten wyverns in it, then maybe it made sense, but... If one wyvern wasn’t enough space for Sara, then how big of a storage bag did she need, exactly? Not to mention, it had to be something she could actually pay for.

“Then what about one that could fit three wyverns in it?” Even she found it funny that she had started using wyverns as a unit of measurement before she knew it, as though it made total sense.

“Two wyverns would be two million. Three was ten million, I think.”

So the price rose exponentially the more they could hold, perhaps because the larger a stealth slime’s magic stone was, the harder it was to find.

“Wouldn’t it be better to have three one-wyvern pouches, then? Then you get the same amount of storage as a three-wyvern bag for only nine hundred thousand.”

Nelly made a face like she had a good point. “I-I dunno about having three different storage bags, like... rattling around on your belt, though...”

She seemed to really want Sara to buy the more expensive bag for some reason.

“You don’t consider storage bags expensive, do you, Nelly?”

“Nope.”

“Then you can do what you want, but since I’m poor, I think my next goal will be to buy another one-wyvern storage bag.”

“How about one you wear on your back, then?”

“They have backpack versions? I’ll take one of those next, then.”

Sara pumped herself up, telling herself she’d have to gather a lot of medicinal plants again. But her enthusiasm was dashed an hour later when she got a blister on her foot.

“We’ll have to stop here for today. We could fix it with a potion, but if you just slap some healing herbs directly on it, it’ll heal up by tomorrow morning.”

“Really? Let’s try it.”

Sara felt a little pathetic, but she’d been stuck inside that cottage for half a year. It was no wonder she had less stamina than was average for a girl her age. Even if they’d had to rest along the way, it was progress that she’d been able to walk for three hours at all.

“I’ve gotta build up some stamina before I can even think about challenging monsters,” Sara told herself.

She rested her aching feet while Nelly went hunting. Forest wolves ambled about, but they didn’t charge endlessly at her barrier like the mountain wolves. They were being cautious after seeing one of their own taken down by it earlier.

“Maybe they’re smarter than the mountain wolves.”

“*Growl!*”

“You don’t need to reply!”

Sara couldn’t just spend the whole time resting. She used a big rock as a landmark and searched cautiously for some medicinal plants. There were healing herbs, greater healing herbs, poison herbs, and paralysis herbs around the cottage, but she had hardly ever seen the other two, mana herbs and greater mana herbs. She took her guidebook out of her pouch and confirmed their appearance as she gathered other plants.

“Oh, I found one!”

There were rocky areas here and there on the Dark Mountain, breaking up what was otherwise an expanse of sloping grassy hills. In the small amount of dirt between two rocks in one such area, a greater mana herb was growing.

“Come to think of it, I think I’ve only ever found mana herbs near rocks around the cottage, too,” Sara muttered to herself, using wind magic to pluck the greater mana herb that was too far away for her to reach. The herb floated over to her on the wind. She was getting better at using magic in her own way. She could use all of the beginner spells now, more or less.

“Magic sure is handy. Okay, one greater mana herb—that’s another five thousand gil.”

Just then, Sara caught sight of a shadow moving on the other side of the rocks.

“It’s a stealth slime.”

She noticed stealth slimes near the cottage sometimes too, but they were strange creatures that out of the corner of your eye just looked like a heat mirage, and vanished as soon as you turned to look at them. Sara had never gotten a good enough look at one to even know what color or shape they were. Still, there was something she’d always wanted to try.

“I won’t turn to look, but...I can use my usual homing flame attack... Go!”

A high-heat flame about the size of the nail on Sara’s thumb appeared before her only to speed off in the direction of the slime.

“It’s never worked before, but...”

Sara slowly climbed over to the other side of the rocks. In the spot where the slime had likely been, something was sparkling.

“That’s it! So this is a stealth slime’s magic stone... This is the first time I’ve seen one.”

She knelt down and picked it up, then stood and held it up to the light. Most magic stones from monsters were dark, but this one was a milky white, with all sorts of colors on the inside when it was held up to the light.

“It looks like an opal.”

“Kyeee!”

“‘Kyeee’?”

Boom! Thud!

With a gross snapping sound, Sara's barrier, which should have repelled anything that impacted it, shook. Recalling the large monster that sometimes slammed into the protection field around the cottage, Sara shook her head.

"I-It couldn't be, right?"

Carefully stowing the magic stone in her pouch, Sara slowly turned around to see a wyvern on its deathbed.

"I only just made up my mind to take the lives of monsters *today*. Why are all these big ones throwing themselves at me already?"

"*Grr...*"

"*Grr...*"

The forest wolves, who had been keeping an eye on Sara, started to close in after determining that the wyvern was completely dead.

"No way... You're gonna eat the wyvern?"

"*Growl!*"

A wyvern was scary even dead. It looked like a dinosaur, jagged teeth jutting from its mouth, which was still wide open after it broke its neck. It was several times the size of a mountain wolf and its claws, the ones that could pick up a moose, were razor sharp. But Nelly said it would sell for good money. Could Sara just let the forest wolves eat it without doing anything to stop them? No, no she couldn't.

Sara put a hand on her storage pouch, then stopped. "It'll fit one wyvern, but then I won't be able to store anything else..." That would mean she'd have to take out all her camping gear, her medicinal plants, her emergency food, and the forest wolf from earlier.

Sara moved just her eyes. She could see the forest wolves getting closer. In the time it took to take everything out of her pouch, the wolves would get to the wyvern. What should she do, then?

Sara sighed. "I'll make my barrier bigger, so it can fit me *and* the wyvern inside. Then I'll just wait for Nelly..."

She knew from experimentation that she could alter the size of her barrier somewhat. She also knew she could let people and things through it if she wanted to. She should be able to fit one wyvern in easily enough. She didn't *want* the wyvern in there with her, but there was nothing she could do about that.

"Ugh... Alone with a corpse. Wyverns are scary..."

Sara walked over to the wyvern and reluctantly expanded her barrier to fit them both inside. Noticing that something had changed, the forest wolves rushed over, but they were repelled by the barrier, whimpering. It seemed the sturdiness of the barrier didn't change when she made it larger. Sara was relieved to see that.

"Nelly..." Sara prayed for Nelly to come back soon, but it was evening before she returned.

She hadn't left until after lunch, so she'd gotten started much later than usual, but still... how could she leave a helpless eleven year old all alone until it got dark? Sara grumbled to herself next to the wyvern as she lit her camping lamp. It was the end of fall, and it got pretty chilly in the evening. Also, the way the wolves' eyes glittered from outside of the barrier, reflecting the light of her lamp, was pretty upsetting.

"Sara?" Nelly's voice came from the other side of the rocks, near the large stone Sara had originally been waiting by.

"Nelly! I'm over here!"

"What are you doing over—ack!" Nelly's voice grew closer before ending on a note of surprise.

The forest wolves slunk away. *Thanks, Nelly.*

"That's a wyvern! What's it doing here? Oh, did it crash into the barrier like the forest wolf? Still..."

"Well, it's big, and it came down from the sky, so I bet it hit with a whole lot of force."

"So even a wyvern can kill itself with its own momentum on that barrier of

yours. You should have put it in your storage bag...”

“Well, this one’s...”

“Oh.”

“A one-wyvern bag...”

Nelly coughed as if to clear her throat before saying, “See? This sort of thing happens all the time, which is why you should have a three-wyvern bag at the very least.”

“It doesn’t! There’s no way this happens all the time!” Sara staunchly protested.

“M-Mm... Yeah, I guess it doesn’t,” Nelly replied awkwardly.

“Don’t think you’ll be able to sell a wyvern without people getting real suspicious. It hurts to do this as a member of the Hunter’s Guild, but no one will suspect anything if I sell a wyvern or two. I’ll sell this for you. Speaking of which, Sara...”

“Yeah?”

Nelly cleared her throat again. “One wyvern’ll get you ten million gil, so with that money...”

“Please buy a three-wyvern storage bag that I can wear on my back.”

“Mm. Good decision.”

Her equipment kept getting upgraded. At this rate, Sara felt like she’d never hold on to any money.

That night, they camped out for the first time. First, they set their protection cases down to form a field two meters long on each side. The field appeared when they placed the third case on the ground, and when they placed the fourth, it stabilized into something more solid.

Now Sara could let down her own protection field. Of course, it didn’t change how close the wolves were to them, so she was still scared, even though she knew they should be safe.

Still, Sara did her best to relax and prepare their dinner. She wanted to do

some proper cooking, but that was for camping for fun. The purpose of this outing was to get used to moving long distances or to come with Nelly on her hunts, so she had to make sure she wasn't putting in too much effort and tiring herself out. Thus, for their meal today, they were having the boxed lunches Nelly had bought them from the Hunter's Guild.

Still, Sara wanted to at least use the camping gear Nelly had bought for her... No, that she'd bought with her own money. Sara took out her portable stove and a small pot and lit the stove with a click. Once the water came to a boil, Sara put in the tea leaves Nelly had bought in town and turned off the flame.

By the light of her portable lamp, Sara watched the tea leaves open up and sink to the bottom of the pot, then she poured just the liquid at the top of the pot into two cups.

"I'll have mine straight, and put some sugar in yours, Nelly. Here."

"Mm."

After Nelly gratefully accepted the tea, Sara opened up her lunch box.

"Interesting," she said, peering in.

"It's been a long time since I've had one of these," said Nelly.

They'd been saving up lunch boxes a few at a time now, so this was Sara's first time trying one. "The bread is...the same as our usual bread." She picked up the bread in the corner of the box and scrutinized it. There were two hefty rolls in the box, made of the same brown bread that they always had.

"The meat is...what kind of meat is this?"

"That'd be orc."

"Orc?"

"They're monsters you find in underground dungeons. There aren't any on the Dark Mountain. Their meat is good—when it's fresh, anyway."

"When it's fresh?" That sounded ominous.

There was one more thing in the box. A large ceramic cup with a tight lid on it. These boxes were pretty inconvenient to carry around after all, bulky and rather

heavy as they were.

“Vegetable soup, maybe?” By the light of the lamp, she could see congealed fat in the cold soup.

“It’ll fill you up.”

“It does look like a lot of food...” The bread was good, but the meat was hard and the soup was cold and greasy. “Everyone takes storage bags with them into the dungeon, right?”

“No excuses not to buy one soon as you can afford it, yeah.”

“Then, couldn’t you put food into a storage bag right after you make it or buy it, so it’s still hot when you take it out?”

“...Well, these’re sold cold.” Nelly’s face suggested that the thought had never occurred to her.

Maybe it was a little silly to be thinking about this after boiling water to make tea, but if people could use magic freely in this world, couldn’t they just heat up food that way? They could make water and fire out of nowhere, so why not?

With that thought in mind, Sara held her hand over the soup that she’d only managed one sip of so far. This was when she needed to remember what her magic textbook said. *Mana will empower you in whatever way you imagine. Keep your mana level in mind and don’t push yourself as you picture the magic you want to cast.*

“Heat up.”

Steam rose from the cup. The blobs of grease disappeared and a tasty smell wafted toward her. Sara tasted some.

“It’s good.”

She heated up Nelly’s soup while she was at it.

“Ooh! This is good!”

Well, that was easy enough. What about the meat and bread, then? She didn’t want to burn her mouth or anything, so she just warmed them up.

“It’s not exactly juicy, but it’s a little softer, at least! I’ll warm yours up too,

Nelly!”

“No, mine’s...”

Nelly’s meat was already gone. *Well, if a Hunter takes too long to eat, they might get attacked by monsters,* Sara convinced herself.

“W-Well, no matter. We at least know now that we can have tasty food whenever we want, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Probably don’t need the portable stove either, if you can boil water.”

“Oh.”

Well, she had fun boiling the water and making tea. There would be times when they would just camp out for fun too, right? Yeah.



Giving the pot a light wash, Sara put it and the empty lunch boxes in her storage pouch and pulled out her mat instead, laying it out. Nelly did the same,

laying hers down next to Sara's.

"It's nice that we get to sleep next to each other. Normally, we're in different rooms."

"Yeah. It's kinda fun, isn't it?"

Sara pulled out her blanket next. It was cold outside in the fall, especially at night. But when she looked to her side, Nelly was lying there without a blanket in sight. Was it her muscles? Did she not get cold because of her muscles?

"Aren't you cold, Nelly?"

"Nope.

"Is it 'cause you're so buff?"

"What's that supposed to mean? I'm just using physical strengthening to create a warm layer around myself."

Sara was a little annoyed that Nelly was talking as though what she was saying was totally obvious. It also kind of annoyed her that she just used physical strengthening to solve all of her problems. Plus, it didn't cost anything to just explain that to Sara, did it?

"That means I can use my barrier to keep myself warm too, doesn't it?" Was it her competitive spirit that made her say that? "Create a warm layer...like this?"

She created heat all around her, but that made things a little stuffy, so she lowered the temperature and tried to keep the heat away from her face. "There we go."

It was pretty comfortable.

"Magic sure is handy, isn't it?"

"It usually takes people a little more time to figure that stuff out. You Invited, I swear..." Nelly seemed a little frustrated.

"Well, there wasn't any magic in the world I came from, but I lived a pretty comfortable life, you know?"

"Well, *I* don't have any complaints about how we live right now. What more could you want?"

True, Sara had never felt particularly inconvenienced living here. That said, she didn't think someone who was fine with bones lying around on her floor should really be talking about living comfortably. Was there anything she found herself missing now that she didn't have it anymore?

"Let's see... The internet, I guess?"

"Internet? What's that?"

It was hard to explain when someone asked like that.

"There's a place that's connected with something invisible like magic, and if you go through it, you can see what's in all sorts of books and find useful information and things like that. Like, you could look up recommended recipes for cockatrice meat or how to cook their eggs."

"Yeah, you can't do that with magic here. You'd have to read a book or ask someone who knows that stuff."

She wasn't hurting without instant access to monster recipes, but she still wouldn't mind it.

"You could also use the internet to talk to people who were far away and send letters back and forth."

"That'd be nice."

"Yeah. Like you could go to town and send me, 'Just got to Rosa. What veggies should I buy?' or 'Leaving Rosa now,' from afar."

If they could do that, Sara wouldn't have to spend those three days that Nelly was gone worrying about her every time.

"That *would* be convenient." Nelly paused for a moment, thinking. "Doesn't feel like something that I...that a Hunter wouldn't need, though." Did that mean Nelly didn't want to contact her? "When we're hunting, even if we're resting, we can't let our guards down. I have to spend all day outside believing that you're getting by okay even if the thought of how you're doing might occur to me at any given moment. I feel like if I could contact you at any time, I'd be so curious I wouldn't be able to focus on hunting."

True, many people with access to the internet became dependent on it.

“It’d be nice if I could contact you when I go to Rosa, but if something made me get in touch a day late, wouldn’t that make you worry about why I wasn’t contacting you?”

“Wow, Nelly. You’re right, that kind of stuff happened all the time.” Sara was impressed by Nelly’s insight. “It was handy for all sorts of stuff though, like talking about work without having to meet in person or ordering things from a store without having to actually go there.”

“Oh yeah?” That seemed to catch Nelly’s interest.

“I doubt anyone here could actually deliver stuff to us if we bought it, though.”

“*Growl!*”

“Eep! That scared me. What, are they growling in their sleep? Geez, I told you we’re good on wolves...”

The forest wolves were resting too, all around their protection field.

“What about delivery wolves? It’d be nice if they did something useful like that, wouldn’t it?”

“*Growl...*” It must have been Sara’s imagination that that wolf sounded a little dejected.

“But even with how convenient that world was, I still don’t want to go back there.”

“Huh,” Nelly said, turning to face Sara. “There’s...nothing you left behind that you miss?”

“There is. My savings.”

Nelly probably wanted to know if Sara had anyone she was close to that she’d left behind, but the goddess had said she’d do something about Sara’s family. If they learned that she was somewhere where she didn’t have to feel tired all the time, they’d probably accept that.

“It’s the money I earned from forcing my exhausted body to work. It’s not like I had all that much, but she could have let me take it, converting it to the money they use here or something, right? I think that goddess’s customer

service could use a little work."

"Customer service...? I'm not sure you can ask for something like that from a goddess, Sara..."

Couldn't she? The experience had been pretty barebones, so there was no point lamenting it now.

"The goddess said she'd do something about my family, so I'm fine."

"Huh." Nelly looked back up at the night sky.

"Besides, you're like my family now, Nelly."

"Yeah. I guess you're right." Nelly's mouth looked like it quirked up a bit at that. "Family, eh? I guess as your family, I ought to train you a bit more then, Sara."

"That has nothing to do with it!" Sara blurted out. Suddenly she was scared to meet Nelly's actual family. "All family has to do is be together and get along."

"Is that all?"

"That's all... Hwaaah..." Sara didn't want to think about the definition of family. She found herself yawning instead.

"Oh yeah, until you practice more, your magic will come undone while you're sleeping, so you should get under a blanket."

"Okay."

Sara could see the night sky through the protection field. She wanted to talk a bit more, but she must have been tired, because the next thing she knew, it was morning. Just like Nelly had said, her magic had come undone at some point, so she woke up to the chilly morning air.

"*Growl!*"

As soon as she opened her eyes, they met the eyes of a forest wolf. *You've gotta be kidding me.*

"I'm good on wolves...thanks."

"Hmm? You awake, Sara?"

“Did I wake you up, Nelly?”

“Nah, I was just thinking about getting up. Whoa...” Nelly sat up sleepily and exclaimed in wonder as she looked down toward the town. “Haven’t seen the sunrise in a long time.”

“It’s beautiful.”

Nothing was really different from any other morning. They’d just taken a day’s walk out from the cottage. But Sara felt like something had changed. Maybe it was because she’d really talked about Japan properly for the first time, or maybe it was because she’d fallen asleep next to Nelly after chatting with her.

“I really am living in this world now.”

Under the sunrise, wyverns were flying, wolves were roving, and Nelly was nearby. Japan, with its comfortable way of life, was nothing but a memory for Sara now.

“Okay, let’s give it all we’ve got again today!”

First, she had to be able to walk without getting blisters. Sara stood up energetically. It was the start of a new day.

That day marked the first of Sara and Nelly’s camping training. They started by just staying out one night at a time. They would camp out, then take a day off to organize their supplies and make more portable food to keep in Sara’s storage bag. Over time, they expanded their sojourns outward from the path, going to the left and right of the cottage and up the mountain sometimes, too. They found springs that fed into creeks, which sometimes became deep pools where monsters lived.

“The golden trout that live here are tasty, but I’m not really a swimmer or a fisher, and they don’t come up to where my sword could reach them, so all I can do is watch them.”

“They’re good?”

“I’ve had them in the capital. They’re thicker than normal trout, but the flavor

is light and they almost melt in your mouth...”

“Come to think of it, I haven’t had fish in a while.”

Nelly provided them with a lot of meat, but since they lived on a mountain, Sara had given up on fish.

Sara peered into the pool. The water was very clear, but she couldn’t see the bottom. It must have been pretty deep, then.

A school of fish with black backs swam by.

“I’d love to eat some fish...” Sara’s eyes glazed over. If she could just catch a glimpse of something, she could use her homing magic to target it, but she hadn’t spotted a single golden trout, and she didn’t have any magic she could use in the water.

“Lightning, maybe...?”

“Lightning?”

She couldn’t picture a blade of water, but she could picture herself calling lightning down into the pool. Maybe it was because she’d played that game with the monsters in the balls.

“Stand back a little, Nelly.”

“Sara, what are you gonna do?”

“I said stand back.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Sara stood back a little as well. Then she focused on the picture in her mind.

“Thunderbolt!”

With a flash, lightning struck the water’s surface.

“Sara!”

Sara calmly observed the pool as small fish began to float to the surface, before a large, sparkling gold fish floated up from the depths of the water as well.

“A-A golden trout...”

“We’re having fish tonight!”

Sara had Nelly finish off the fish, which had only been knocked out by the lightning, and they went home that day in high spirits.

The golden trout was about as tall as Sara, so she spent a whole day fileting it and preserving it, mostly by frying. Their dinner that night, a meunière with just a bit of flour, was so good it had not just Nelly but Sara writhing in ecstasy as well.

The times that they went up the mountain, there was a precipitous, rocky area, and a field of flowers beyond the gap between two crags. Of course, there were strong monsters here and there all over the mountain as well. Sara had to take them down to protect herself sometimes, and by the time a year had passed, her three-wyvern bag was already full, so she had to have Nelly sell the things in it for her after all.

“You could buy a max-size storage bag.”

“I can’t pay one hundred million.”

Nelly was acting like a shady merchant trying to tie her down with loans, so Sara practically pushed the bag onto her, telling her to just sell its contents and that she could keep the money if she wanted to.

Nelly sold the materials and told her, “I’ll keep it separate so I can give it back to you once you’re a proper member of the Guild,” like she was her mother setting aside some money for her future.

By the time two years had passed, Sara had built up the strength to walk all day and stay out for three nights at a time. Nelly, who had gone into town once every ten days in Sara’s first year there, had bought another storage bag and started stocking up more when she went, so she only had to go every twenty days now. With twenty days together instead of ten, it was easier to plan their hunting and training.

Sara was all for it, since she was just happy to have Nelly around more. She could go out with Nelly now instead of just waiting for her to come home. They did different things while they were out, Nelly hunting and Sara gathering, but they ate lunch together, and at night they looked up at the starry sky, their

pillows side by side.

Their mental ages were too similar for them to feel like mother and daughter. In fact, they felt more like equals. Their relationship was closer than good friends, and Sara found it strangely comfortable.

One thing was bothering Sara, however. As their second fall together went on, Nelly's expression began to cloud more and more.

"Nelly."

"Yeah?"

Sara worked up the courage to ask her about it one day when they were lazing around after dinner.

"You've looked kinda down lately. Are you worrying about something?"

"Nah, not really." Nelly's tone was gentle, in contrast to the bluntness of her words. Sara sensed that she was trying to decide whether or not to tell her something, though, so she decided to give her another push.

"Did something bad happen in town?"

"Nah. Well, no more than usual..." Nelly pulled her feet, which had been resting close to the heater, back in close, seemingly debating what to say.

Since it seemed like she was in fact ready to talk, Sara waited quietly for Nelly to continue.

"The thing is...I'm actually only supposed to stay at this house on the hill from spring until fall."

"You mean...?"

Was it because Sara had come? No, there was no doubt about it. Nelly had been forced to stay here all through winter because Sara had come and for no other reason. Sara felt a chill settle over her. She understood now why Nelly had had such a hard time bringing this up.

"Nelly..."

"No, wait, Sara. It's not what you're thinking."

What wasn't what she was thinking?

"I don't mind staying here all year. In fact, the town of Rosa, who I'm contracted with, is probably thrilled to have me here all year."

Sara settled down and decided to listen for a while longer.

"But in winter, I tend to get a lot of requests through the Guild."

"Requests?"

"People ask for me specifically for certain jobs. It happens a lot when you specialize in a field. Basically, when you're strong," Nelly said proudly before her tone settled again. "Of course, you can turn down requests. The fact that they want strong people for them tends to mean the jobs are dangerous, and you can't force someone to take work like that. Not usually, at least."

Not usually. Meaning the job that was being requested of Nelly was something she was being forced to do, more or less.

"Last year and the year before, I turned them down, and I'm trying to turn them down again this year, but..." Nelly smiled wryly. "They're real persistent."

"So that's what's going on."

"It's not for you, Sara. I'm turning them down because I want to stay here. In this house on the hill." Nelly reached out and stroked Sara's cheek.

Still, it obviously *was* for Sara's sake. Or rather, it was Sara's *fault* that she had to. That much was clear to her. Along with the fact that that was obviously why Nelly hadn't wanted to tell her.

It had been two years since Sara had come to this world. She was twelve now, and she'd built up some stamina. She'd mastered beginner spells, and she could even shoot thunderbolts. She was pretty sure twelve was the age when she could register at the Guild, too.

"It's only three days..."

"Sara?"

"I can still only stay out for three days, but I could make it for another two, so let's go to town together. Then you could...!"

“No!”

Sara had been thinking she’d be able to make it to town by next spring. This was just pushing her schedule up half a year.

“You’re only saying that because you don’t know how cold Rosa is. It’s a dungeon town. It’s hard for anyone to make it there if they didn’t start out there, unless they’re one of the strong earning their living in the dungeons.”

Now that Nelly mentioned it, Sara realized that her whole goal had been making it to Rosa and she hadn’t thought at all about how she would make a living once she got there. She wasn’t considering going down into the dungeons at all. The only reason she was thinking about registering at the Guild was so she could sell the slime magic stones she’d been collecting all this time.

“It’ll take time to find a place to live there. We might even have to stay outside of the town if we’re unlucky. And if I take this request, I won’t be able to stay with you...”

She’d have to leave Sara to go do her work, but how was that different from what she did now? Sara didn’t think that was any reason to be unable to leave.

“Then...!” Sara interrupted Nelly. “What if I came with you on the job?”

“Well...” Nelly looked like she’d never considered the idea. “While I’m working, I could leave you with someone in the capital... But we might get separated doing that...”

Sara tried not to press Nelly. Where was the capital? How was it different from Rosa? Why would Nelly have to stay outside of the town when she was doing so much for it? She had plenty of questions.

“I’m sorry, Sara. I can’t decide right away. Next time I’m in town, I’ll ask someone I trust what he thinks I should do. I told you about Chris the apothecary, right?”

Sara pulled the name from her memory. “Chris. The only person in Rosa I can trust.” Sara remembered him because Nelly had never mentioned anyone else to her.

“That’s right. Well, the Guildmaster’s also... No, not that idiot...”

Was the Guildmaster the head of the Hunter's Guild? Was it okay for the head of a guild of monster fighters to be an idiot? Sara was curious about everything Nelly said.

"Chris might be able to come up with a way to make this work. Yeah, maybe we *can* go together."

Nelly's face lit up. She had a tendency to try to do everything herself, never relying on anyone else.

Sara was relieved to see her looking so much more cheerful, but she really should have asked more follow-up questions.

"I'll talk to Chris and try to think about things a little differently from now on."

"Okay. I'm sure I can make it to the town!"

"Well, I hope you don't have to."

The next time she went shopping, right after this conversation, Nelly gave Sara a solemn look and said, "Listen, Sara. Three days. No, four days. Normally, I'm back in three days, but it might take me a little longer this time. If I'm not back in four days, go to Rosa."

"Nelly?"

"Even if you have to go by yourself, do it. And go to Chris at the Apothecary's Guild for help."

Sara didn't know what Nelly was resigning herself to, but she nodded firmly, despite her unease.

"When I'm back, let's start practicing being out for four days at a time. And no matter what happens, let's go to Rosa together next spring."

"Yeah."

"Okay, I'm off."

Sara smiled and waved when Nelly stopped after heading down the steps outside the front door and turned around.

"Take care."

"*Kyeee!*"

“*Growl.*”

And with that Nelly strode off to town like she always did, wyverns in the sky and wolves stalking all around.

On the first day, Sara cleaned Nelly’s room like she always did.

“How does it get this messy in such a short amount of time?”

She always gave Nelly her clean laundry folded neatly, and it wasn’t like Nelly ate in her room. Still, she found clothes that should have been clean tangled up in the sheets on Nelly’s bed, and paper, trash, and books littering the floor. Shrugging exasperatedly, Sara cleaned not just Nelly’s room but the whole cottage.

On the second day, she took some meat she hadn’t had time to do anything with yet and cooked it, making it into sandwiches, stewing it, frying it, and putting it away in her storage pouch.

On the third day, she made soup around the time that Nelly usually came back.

“She’s late... She might not be back today.”

Sara turned off the heat that had been keeping the soup warm so it could be eaten at any time. She could reheat it whenever she wanted with her magic, but she thought it would be nice if Nelly could come home to the smell of warm soup. But Nelly’s shadow never crossed the threshold that evening.

Nelly didn’t come back during the night, and by the fourth day Sara had finished all the chores she did while Nelly was in town, leaving her with nothing to do.

“I could look for medicinal plants.

“*Growl.*”

“Good on wolves, thanks!”

The wolves were the only ones who had said anything to Sara these last three days, but that still didn’t mean she found them cute.

“There’s a road that goes all the way to town and it’s a straight shot. I guess I have to do this...”

Nelly had said to go if she wasn’t back in four days.

“I’m going to Rosa.”

All by herself.

“Nelly...”

She could do it.

On the morning of the fifth day...

“She must have run into some trouble,” Sara muttered to herself as she did the final check of her gear. Just as she’d prepared herself to do last night, Sara was about to keep her promise to Nelly and head into town.

“I’ll leave half of our supplies here in case we miss each other, so Nelly can stay here for three months on her own if she needs to. I’ll take *my* three months of supplies with me, though.”

She took with her warm lunches she’d packed into the Guild’s lunch boxes, sandwiches with thin-sliced roast gargoyle and spicy watercress, the cockatrice breast meat Nelly was fond of and its stewed tail, fried golden trout, all kinds of soups, and fruit both raw and dried.

“I wonder if they’ll have more than just brown bread for sale in town.”

If she wasn’t looking forward to something, she thought her hands would start shaking with how nervous she was. Her food supplies took up about half of her smaller storage pouch. She also had camping gear, some changes of clothes, and the slime magic stones she’d saved up in her pouch, making it about two-thirds full.

“There’s nothing to worry about, though. I’ve got a three-wyvern backpack that’s basically empty.”

She talked to herself as she tidied up, tears welling up in her eyes with her worry for Nelly.

“Nelly’s fine. She’s strong. If anything happens to her, she’ll get through it

with physical strengthening somehow. She's stronger than mountain wolves and wyverns, after all."

Nelly had left the cottage in her care, so Sara always made sure it was clean. There wasn't a speck of dust in Nelly's room right now either.

Sara turned back to look at the cottage from the front door. There weren't clothes littering the floor or unidentifiable bones lying around anymore.

"I have to keep it clean, so she can come back whenever she wants. So Nelly and I can live together again."

Lastly, Sara checked how she was dressed. Nelly never did end up buying girls' clothes for her, so her sleeves and pant legs were rolled up, and she wore a tunic over her shirt with a belt tightly cinched at her waist. Her storage pouch sat on her belt so she could quickly get out anything she might need at any time.

Sara put her jacket on, shouldered her backpack, and set off. She flung open the door as though she was breaking free from something.

"*Growl.*"

"Good on wolves, thanks! We'll be saying goodbye just down the road from here, anyway."

"*Growl?*"

No one would come here, so she didn't bother locking the door.

"When I come back, it'll be with Nelly. So it's fine."

She went down the stairs and stopped before the end of the protection field.

She took a deep breath and said loudly, "One step at a time!"

This was the true beginning of Sara's reincarnated life.



Chapter 2: To Rosa We Go

Sara strolled for an hour away from the cottage, but even after she passed the two pine trees, the mountain wolves stuck with her as if they'd sensed something about today's journey. Naturally, this meant they were entering the forest wolves' territory.

"Don't fight with the forest wolves, okay? You guys know you're stronger than them."

"*Growl, growl.*"

"*Growl! Yap!*"

She was sure they were just arguing about who had stolen whose prey or something like that. The forest wolves put up a bit of a fight at the beginning, but quickly backed away, dejected. It seemed there was quite a significant difference in their strength.

Sara continued on indifferently, taking care not to hurt herself. She walked all day, taking plenty of breaks, resting at lunchtime and making tea. She was in a hurry, so she didn't use the stove, though. She just took out a cup, heated the water inside with magic, and dropped the tea leaves directly in. When they sank to the bottom of the cup, she drank the tea slowly, carefully avoiding them. And she ate one sandwich that was supposed to be Nelly's, all the while thinking that Nelly would have eaten two.

She stayed put at night when she couldn't see where she was walking. This was something she'd promised Nelly she'd do. While the sun was still up, she had found a place to camp, right on the path. Nelly and Sara were the only people who used it anyway.

She set a light down, taking out a lunch box from the Guild. After tasting the lunches they sold, she'd made her own in similar fashion. Today's box had some piping-hot bread and soup and sautéed poultry. She tried to remember exactly what kind of poultry it was, but decided it was too much effort and gave up. It was probably cockatrice or something. Or maybe it wasn't poultry at all, but elk.

After her year of training, she was able to walk all day without issue, but she'd never camped out on her own before. Nelly was always there next to her, smiling and laughing. *Sure is quiet at night when you don't have anyone to talk to,* Sara thought.

"*Growl.*"

The mountain wolves were all lying around Sara's protection field for some reason.

"I keep telling you I'm good on wolves."

The wolves' voices didn't do much to ease the lonely silence, but the sound was rather easy on the ears now, Sara having heard it every day for the last two years.

"This isn't good... I'm losing heart. They're *not* easy on the ears. I should warm up and get to bed."

She looked up at the unfamiliar constellations twinkling in the sky.

"Nelly..." Sara closed her eyes.

Three nights was the longest Sara had ever camped out in her training. Since she had to return to the cottage each time, that meant that the path she walked on the second day was familiar to her, but it was all new by day three. That morning, she recalled what Nelly had told her:

"At your speed, you should reach the base of the mountain on day three. Starting on day four, you'll be in the meadow. You should get to Rosa around the end of day five."

The mountain wolves were still with her, which deterred attacks from other monsters. Though she was somewhat thankful for this, they would take experimental leaps at her barrier every so often, so she was well aware that if she ever let her guard down, they would take the opportunity to eat her.

The path to the cottage was level and easy to walk on, unlike an animal trail, which meant someone must have maintained it at one point.

"This must be what they use earth magic for."

Apparently, earth magic wasn't just used for combat; it could also be used to

harden paths like the one she was on and create walls and such to protect towns. Still, this was a mountain path, if a downhill one, and Sara didn't want to trip and fall, so she was fairly exhausted by the time she reached the foot of the mountain.

"I'm finally out."

She'd been walking through woodlands for all of day three. Some kind of animals she couldn't identify were jumping around high up in the trees, but when they launched themselves at her barrier, they were repelled by it and swiftly gobbled up by the mountain wolves, so she could never figure out exactly what they were.

Around the time the light coming in through the trees started to dim, she finally made it out of the forest.

"Wow... It's so flat..."

A vast field spread out before her eyes. There were hills and groves of trees here and there, which the path continued weaving through. Now that she was level with it, the town that she'd been able to see from up on the mountain was no longer visible.

A little ways out from the forest there was a leveled clearing, and the path that had only been wide enough for one person could now have fit an entire automobile.

"Come to think of it, I wonder how people get around in this world." Sara cocked her head. Nelly always walked, and she hadn't heard anything about Rosa except that there were dungeons there.

"The cottage had a toilet, and we had all the hot and cold water we needed with magic stones. Maybe they have cars that run on magic stones, too."

She'd have to get to the town to find out.

"I'll camp in this clearing tonight."

"*Growl.*"

"I'm good on...huh?"

The mountain wolves were still back at the entrance to the forest.

“I see. This is what it means to have a different habitat. That must really be the limit of your guys’ turf.”

“*Growl, grr...*” The mountain wolves snarled at her, baring their fangs, then they turned around and headed back up the mountain.

“You were really raring to eat me until the end, weren’t you? But...” Sara gave the wolves a little wave. “Thanks. Bye.”

It was thanks to the mountain wolves that she’d been able to come this far without much trouble.

“Okay, time to get set up in that clearing.”

Wham!

“Huh?”

Something slammed into her head-on.

“A-A rabbit? It’s big...”

Right before her lay a grey rabbit that she’d just barely be able to hold in her arms. Sara knelt down, feeling sad.

“You must have bumped into my barrier and died. I’m sorry.”

Wham!

Wham!

“...”

Rabbits shot at her like bullets, all repelled by her barrier. Some of them died on impact and some staggered away after hitting the field. Though she was nervous from the impacts to her barrier, Sara carefully observed the downed rabbits.

“Now that I get a closer look, they have sharp, pointy canines and big claws. They’re horned, too. They look like rabbits, but I bet they’re carnivores... Meaning they see me as prey. It’s the same here, huh...”

They were monsters, most likely. Sara sighed and took off her backpack, stuffing the rabbits inside. Even if she couldn’t lift them, they went into the bag when she pointed it at them. It really was convenient.

Wham!

“Ugh... I don’t want to take these. I shouldn’t have felt sorry for them... But I’m sure I can sell them, and I just can’t stop thinking about things the way Nelly taught me to...”

The clearing should have been only a short walk away, but the sun was setting by the time she finally made it there. Strangely, monsters seemed to be avoiding the open area.

“I’ve never seen anything like this, but if people come to the Dark Mountain to hunt monsters sometimes, could this be a base for them, with a protection field around it?”

There was no way to know for sure, but it was nice that she’d be safe here. Still, she made sure to put her own protection field up in the middle of the clearing. She placed her protection cases around her in a square and laid out her mat. The clearing was big enough to fit a small park inside it, so it felt a little desolate to be staying there all by herself.

Walking as much as she had tended to temper one’s desire to eat meat for some reason. Sara took out some soup and brown bread without any other filler and silently ate her meal. She didn’t want tea either, so she just drank some warm water.

The wider path could be called a road now, but if anything it made Sara more nervous than the mountain path, since she couldn’t see where it ended and there still wasn’t any sign of anyone nearby. Also, she didn’t want to admit it, but she was a little lonely without any wolves around.

“Two more days... At the end of the second day, I should make it to Rosa. Once I’m there, I’ll go to Chris at the Apothecary’s Guild for help. I can’t count on anyone else.”

Sara counted on her fingers all the things Nelly had told her. In the two years she’d spent on the Dark Mountain, Sara had gathered medicinal plants and entrusted Nelly with the monsters she’d taken down (if accidentally), making a decent amount of money. Most of it had disappeared into her storage pouch and backpack and camping gear, but she still had a reasonable amount left over, at least as far as she assumed.

“Nelly had all of the actual money, though...”

She’d said she’d give it to her when they actually went into town. Sara hadn’t had a problem with that, since there was nowhere to use money up on the mountain, but she should have asked for it before Nelly left this time.

There had never been anything that looked like money anywhere in the cottage. Sara didn’t even know what “gil” looked like. In other words, Sara was penniless at the moment. It was too late for regrets, though. At least she knew how she could earn some money. She thought back to what Nelly had told her.

“Medicinal plants are always sold at fixed prices, so I should sell them at the Apothecary’s Guild for money. Then I can use that money to register at the Guild and get an ID. Once I have an ID, I can sell my slime magic stones. So basically, I need to find the Apothecary’s Guild first.”

She had quite a long checklist to go through.

“But I don’t even know what kind of town this is or where the guilds are. I’ve heard that you should be able to register at twelve, but I wonder if I’ll be okay...”

Her only goal had been to make it to the town, but now that she was actually heading there, she realized she didn’t know a single thing about the place.

“I know the money is called gil. And I know a wyvern sells for ten million gil, but I don’t know how much a roll of bread costs.”

She had no idea what the price of goods would be in the town, either.

“I had someone to rely on in Nelly, so why didn’t I ask her more actual questions?”

Nelly wasn’t the most talkative person, but they’d gotten along well. Sadly, Sara had been too focused on just enjoying being able to move around as much as she wanted every day to think about the future. All she could do now was regret her past behavior.

“I want to take a bath... I should have had Nelly buy me a tent no matter what she said...”

Even if it were only rabbits with horns watching her, she still didn’t want to

get undressed outside. And she definitely didn't want to do so anywhere where there were mountain wolves.

"Two more days..."

All she could do was try to make it into town.

After walking down a mountain for so long, it really was nice to be walking on a level path, even if it did have some minor hills and valleys. But it only made the distance seem longer since she was able to walk so quickly, and by the time she took her lunch break, Sara's legs were exhausted.

"My feet hurt..."

She felt like the girl in the fairytale who'd danced too much. Not only was she out of breath, but her legs felt like they were made of lead, her feet throbbing with each step she took.

Wham!

Wham!

"Yeah, yeah... In you go..."

She'd gotten pretty used to the rabbits ramming into her by now.

Wham!

Wham!

"Wait, are there more rabbits than usual? Whoa!"

She wouldn't be able to rest properly if they were constantly bombarding her barrier while she was taking a break, so she'd expanded it a bit when something white suddenly spread around her field.

When she got a good look, she realized it was... "Sheep?" The round-horned creatures with their thick, fluffy wool were larger than the sheep Sara was familiar with, but she was fairly sure that was what they were. The herd of sheep seemed confused when they collided with Sara's barrier, but they quickly learned to avoid it like they would any other obstacle.

After watching the sheep pass by for an extended period of time, Sara noticed

some rabbits leaping at the sheep.

“Oh no, the sheep—huh?”

The rabbits were lunging at the sheep with everything they had, but their horns got caught in the sheep’s wool, and while they struggled they were headbutted away by other sheep and even kicked sometimes. The sheep eventually faded away into the distance, not one of them falling to the rabbits’ assault.

“Those sheep are strong...”

The sheep never showed any indication that they ate the rabbits, so they must have been herbivores. Sara didn’t really understand the power relationships between monsters.

“Well, guess I’ll get going.”

She walked all through her fourth day, and on day five...

“I see the town!”

Perhaps because she was getting closer to town, the ground was more level now, and in the distance of the meadow, with groves of trees here and there all around her, she could see a town that had to be Rosa. It was still probably some ten kilometers away, of course.

“Those are the walls.”

From up on the mountain, she could faintly see the buildings inside the town, but from down in the meadow, all she could see was the tall walls around it.

“Just gotta keep walking.”

Now with her goal in sight, she felt a renewed purpose in her walking. She put some effort into walking through the day and by the time the sun was starting to sink in the sky, she had finally made it to the town.

“So this is Rosa...”

She’d made it, but... Sara stood there, not sure what to do next.

“The gate’s closed?”

The path led to an open area just before the town, beyond which the walls

towered in each direction. The town must have been behind those walls, but the large gate between them was closed. Above it, two people who were probably soldiers just chatted idly.

In another two hours, the sun would set, so she didn't have much time to debate her options. Sara made up her mind and walked into the open area, calling out to the soldiers on top of the wall.

"Umm, excuse me! Hello?"

One of the soldiers looked down at her. The other one glanced around before the soldier next to him elbowed him, after which he finally looked down at her too.

"Excuse me!"

"What is it? What are you doing at the east gate?"

East gate? Nelly hadn't told her there were multiple gates.

"Umm, I'd like to enter the town..."

The soldier made a gesture of exasperation, which ticked Sara off a bit. This was the second person she'd met in this world after Nelly and she was pretty disappointed in him already.

"You're an outside kid and you don't know?"

"Cut it out. It's probably just a new kid who got turned around looking for medicinal plants out here."

They were both wrong, but Sara was too tired to have a shouting match with them from the bottom of the wall. Actually, she guessed she *was* both an outside kid and a new kid. Sara was so tired her mind was starting to go in a strange direction.

The kinder soldier gave her an explanation that was easy to understand. "The east gate stays closed outside of emergencies. You should get back to the central gate before it gets dark. You won't be able to get inside at night, yeah?"

"You can't get inside at night?" Nelly hadn't said anything about that.

Seeing Sara's confusion, the *un*kind guard shrugged his shoulders again. "Are

you seriously a new kid? I'm sure your parents are Hunters or something, but why do people bring their kids to Rosa?"

"'Cause you make good money in the dungeons. That explains why the kid's over here, though. Must have gotten lost."

The other one scratched his head and leaned out over the wall. "Listen, walk straight down the road with the Third on this side. Don't go to the other side of the road, alright? You'll leave the town's protection field if you do."

Sara nodded, though she had no idea what he was talking about. What was the Third? But she knew she needed to walk to the left from the wall, and she knew that there was a protection field around the town that went out to the road, too.

"I'm sure you know this, but you can get into town even without an ID during the day. Hope you turn twelve and register at the Guild soon."

"If you live that long."

"Stop that."

The first person she met in the town after Nelly was actually pretty nice. (Sara decided to forget about the other guy.)

"Thanks!"

"Sure thing. Be careful out there."

Would she make it there before sundown? If they wouldn't let her in even if she did make it, she'd have to camp out again tonight. Sara's shoulders slumped at the thought as she walked off.

She could hear the voices of the two soldiers from behind her. They must have still been watching her. Sara was a little annoyed at their carefree tone. They should be watching the rabbits with the horns instead of her, she thought.

"Hey, we're supposed to be on watch, technically, right?"

"Yeah. What's that supposed to mean?"

"Didn't that kid come from the meadow?"

"No way. If you stray from the road at all, you'll get skewered by horned

rabbits. The only ones who can go for a stroll out there are the Red Reaper and maybe Master Chris and the top guys at the Hunter's Guild."

"Right?"

They seemed to be debating whether or not she'd shown up from the direction of the meadow, but that just annoyed Sara more considering she *had*. They were supposed to be on watch, but they obviously hadn't been paying attention if they were saying things like that. When they mentioned horned rabbits, Sara figured anyone who wasn't her probably *would* have been skewered, and their voices finally faded after that.

There were little weeds growing in the grass along the side of the road, and Sara might have found herself in the mood for a picnic if the situation wasn't what it was. She knew that she wouldn't be attacked by monsters as long as she was inside the town's protection field, at least. Her trained eye also spotted medicinal plants among the weeds, so she found herself reaching out and picking them by reflex.

"I'm a bit of a workaholic, aren't I?"

Maybe that was why night came before she saw hide or hair of the central gate. Sara wasn't just picking medicinal plants the whole time, of course. She was also trying to figure out when to set up camp. Normally, she made sure she had her base set up before the sun had fully set, but...

"I wanted to at least see what the town was like before tomorrow... It would have been nice to know how long it takes to get to the central gate, at least... Man..." she sighed.

She wasn't able to get inside, but she'd at least made it to Rosa. All told, Sara wasn't feeling *too* down for the time being.

"I want to know how Nelly's doing, but I have to survive myself to find out. At least I know I can survive outside of town."

She'd camped out for the last four nights, after all. She had more than three months of food on her and her barrier ensured that she wouldn't be attacked by monsters.

"Well, I was attacked plenty, but they all just bounced off it. Seems like

nothing attacks me when I'm close to the town's walls either."

If she was going to be camping out again tonight, then it should be safe to camp by the walls, Sara thought as she searched for a good spot to set up. Things would be fine as long as she used her protection cases just to be safe.

"You know, it's weird that there's grass growing near the walls if the protection field keeps the rain off. Hmm?"

Sara stepped off of the path and crouched down. She'd picked whatever medicinal plants she'd seen on the side of the road as she'd made her way here from the east gate, but when she looked at the walls like this, there were a lot of medicinal plants growing near them, too.

"Healing herb, healing herb, greater healing herb... wait, is that a mana herb?"

Mana herbs didn't grow just anywhere on the Dark Mountain. They were rare plants you could only find in rocky areas. It was obviously dry next to the town's walls, which must have made it a similar environment to those rocky areas.

"Come to think of it, I've just been thinking about coming to the town without thinking about what I'd do once I got there. If I camp out, I don't have to worry about paying for an inn, so I guess I'll keep the option in mind... I can make money picking medicinal plants. Yeah."

She'd enter the town. She'd find the Apothecary's Guild and Chris. She'd sell her medicinal plants and register at the Guild. Then she'd look for Nelly. That was her plan.

"Okay, I'll rest here tonight."

She still wasn't sure what the logistics were with putting a protection field inside of another protection field, but she'd be scared if her barrier wore off while she was sleeping, so she decided to use her protection cases. Normally, she just set them down right on the road, but now that she was so close to town, someone might actually come by, so she picked a place next to the wall where there wasn't much grass growing to set up camp. She set her protection cases closer together than she usually did, lit her lamp, and sat down on her mat, wrapping her arms around her legs.

“I’m beat...”

Now that she could relax, her concern for Nelly’s well-being came to the forefront of her mind. The whole way here, she’d actually been hoping she’d spot Nelly running toward her, saying, “Sorry I’m late!” But that hadn’t happened.

“I have to take care of myself first... Meaning I need to eat properly. It’s such a pain, though...”

She was so tired she had no appetite. Still, she really needed to eat something. What did she have...? Sara buried her face in her knees. She wanted to just go to bed.

“Hey.”

“Hwuh?”

Sara whipped her head up at the sudden sound of a voice to find someone standing right in front of her. Sara hadn’t had a bath in the last five days and she’d tripped and fallen a few times on her way here, so she could only imagine how ragged she looked.

But the boy... Well, from his voice and height, Sara guessed he was a boy, but he was even more filthy than her, so she couldn’t really tell.

“You shouldn’t have a light on like that if you’re alone. There might be people up to no good out here.”

“Huh? Oh... Thank you?”

The boy reached out and touched the protection field. Sara nervously prepared to cast her barrier, but he stopped there.

“Protection cases, eh? You’ve got some good stuff. Guess you’ll be fine if you have those.” Saying that, the boy turned and began to wander off, but he stopped and looked back at Sara instead.



She was surprised by their sudden meeting, but the boy looked to be around the same age as her, so she relaxed a little. He didn’t seem that dangerous.

“Hey.”

“Y-Yeah?”

“Does this not bother you?”

“No...?” Sara wasn’t sure how to answer, since she wasn’t sure exactly what he was asking. The question sparked something in her memory, like she’d been asked the same thing once before.

“You don’t feel...overwhelmed, talking to me?”

“No.”

That’s right, Sara recalled. Nelly asked her the same thing when they first met. Then she asked if Sara was one of the Invited. But the boy didn’t ask that.

“Huh,” was all he said before he sat down like all the strength had gone out of him. “I felt something like a comfortable breeze, so I came over here and found a light on. Haha. It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to chat normally with someone the same age as me.”

All Sara had said was “Thanks,” and “Yeah,” and “No,” so she felt it wasn’t much of a conversation at all, but it had been ten days since she had talked to another person, too.

“No, wait, I just talked to those gate guards, didn’t I...” Sara muttered out loud to her own thought.

“*Growl.*”

The boy hurriedly covered his stomach and stood up, starting to walk away.

“Umm, are you hungry?” Sara found herself asking him.

“Not really... Ugh...” His stomach answered differently, however.

Nelly’s voice chided her in her head, asking if she should really be looking out for someone else when she couldn’t even take care of herself properly, but Sara couldn’t help the words coming out of her mouth.

“Want to eat together?”

The boy spun around, looking like he couldn’t believe what he’d heard. “Y-You’ve got your reasons for camping out here alone too, don’t you?”

“I do. But I have food.”

I can’t let someone right in front of me go hungry, Sara responded to the Nelly in her head. She imagined Nelly would probably respond with, *As long as you know what you’re doing, follow your heart, I guess.*

Hearing that she had food, the boy wandered close again. Sara took a lunch box from the Guild out of the storage bag on her waist.

“Is that from the Guild?”

“So I hear. I’m just reusing the box, though,” Sara said, emphasizing the fact that there was something different inside it before gently setting the box outside the protection field.

She took out a cup of soup and some plain bread for herself. She wasn’t hungry, but she figured the boy probably wouldn’t touch the lunch box until she started eating. As she watched him hesitate over whether to take it or not, she came to a realization.

“Do you need a fork?”

“No, I have one.”

The boy finally seemed to make up his mind, picking up the lunch box and sitting across from Sara with the protection field in between them. He opened the box and gulped, quickly taking out a fork from his pouch. Even hungry and dirty, he still owned a storage pouch, Sara thought, not realizing that the boy had just had the same thought about her when she took out the lunch box.

Though he looked a little surprised to see steam rising from the lunch box, he started eating slowly, then soon after began quickly shoveling the food into his mouth, and it was gone in no time. Sara watched him with surprise. He really must have been hungry.

“That was great. I’ve never eaten anything that good before.”

It was soup Sara had made and cockatrice tail she had cooked. Now that someone in this world other than Nelly praised her cooking she felt quite confident in her skills. The compliment made her happy.

“Want some tea, too?”

“Can I?” A little more frank now, the boy handed over the empty lunch box to Sara and took out his own cup. Sara used magic to fill it with water, then heated the water and put some tea leaves into it. The boy watched the whole process eagerly.

“Want some sugar?”

“Sugar? Yeah.”

She added a spoonful of sugar like she did for Nelly. Sara didn’t have tea at night, since it would keep her awake. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

He’d told her not to leave her light on, but she didn’t want to eat in the dark, so it was still lit. Sara felt herself relaxing as she watched the boy happily drink his tea.

Even hungry and dirty, he’d shown restraint and thanked her properly. Plus, the first thing he’d said to her, he’d clearly said out of concern. He was a good kid, Sara thought.

When he’d finished his tea, the boy dug through his pouch for something and held it out to Sara on the palm of his hand. It was one large round piece of metal with a hole in it and five small pieces of metal.

Sara cocked her head. “What’s that?”

“What do you mean? It’s money. Guild lunch boxes are fifteen hundred gil if you return the container, right? It was way better than the stuff they sell at the Guild, though. Not that I’ve had one of those in a really long time, ’course.”

Sara remembered Nelly telling her the same thing. A lunch box from the Guild was three thousand gil, or fifteen hundred if you returned the container. Sara studied the coins. If this was fifteen hundred gil, then the one with the hole was one thousand gil and the small ones were a hundred gil a piece.

“So this is money.”

“Are you serious?”

Sara began to sweat at the boy’s incredulous tone. *Whoops.*

“Err...” Sara gave him a strained smile and the boy finally took the time to look her up and down.

“Your clothes are dirty, but they look like they’re well taken care of. Your hands are soft. I get it. You’re some rich kid with something going on.”

Well, that was rude. It got on her nerves a bit to be told that by someone her age. He couldn’t have been that much older than her, in any case. Sara decided to be honest.

“I’m not a rich kid, I was just living far away from town, alone with a relative. But she usually comes home right away, and this time, she never came back after going to Rosa.”

“So you’re here looking for her?”

“Yeah.”

It turned out that was really all she had to say about it. She’d been wondering how to explain to the people of the town why she was looking for Nelly, but she sighed in relief after figuring it out rather quickly. That was all she had to say, wasn’t it? Of course, it was a small white lie that Nelly was her “relative.”

“What’s your relative’s name?”

“Nelly.”

“Nelly, huh?” He murmured to himself that he’d never heard the name before. “A lot of people go in and out of Rosa, but the only people who live there are the people who’ve always been there or strong Hunters who make their living in the dungeons. So if your relative came to town a lot, someone there probably knows her. I only just got here myself, so I don’t know that many people.”

“Thanks.”

She was feeling more hopeful about the town now. Nelly was pretty and strong, so she was sure people would recognize her right away. She stood out, after all. Even from a distance, you could see how good her posture was and her flame-red hair. She’d draw eyes wherever she went.

“Here, take it.” The boy held the money out to her again, so Sara stepped out

from the protection field and took it. He was an upstanding kid.

“But, umm...”

“Allen. I’m Allen.”

There was something Sara wanted to ask the boy who’d introduced himself as Allen. She didn’t know what fifteen hundred gil was worth, but if he could hand it to her without fuss, that should mean he could afford to eat, right?”

“Allen, you weren’t hungry because you didn’t have any money?”

“No. Well, not exactly...” Allen scratched his head. “I just turned twelve.”

So they *were* the same age. Sara straightened her back with glee at the affirmation.

“Are you really not uncomfortable next to me?” he asked.

“Nope.”

“I guess we can talk, then. Let’s sit down.”

Allen sat down happily. Sara sat down next to him.

“It really has been a long time since I’ve eaten with someone or sat next to them.”

Sara was surprised to hear that. True though, if he had family, they probably wouldn’t have let him get this filthy. That must mean he didn’t have anyone to take care of him, even though he was only twelve.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m not completely aimless. I’m working in town, doing odd jobs. But I only interact with my clients enough to do the work and get paid. That’s it.”

That made sense. Sara was a little hesitant to ask someone she’d just met things like, “Where are your parents?” or “What sort of work do you do?” and especially not “Why are you so filthy?”

“What’s your name?”

“Sara.”

“Sara...? Well, alright. I guess...” After asking her name, Allen went on to

explain the things she hadn't been able to ask him. "It's unfair for just one of us to know the other one's circumstances."

So he said, but Sara suspected he actually just wanted to tell someone. It was lonely when no one took interest in you. Sara quietly lent an ear to Allen.

He told her how he'd lost his parents at a young age, but an uncle on his mother's side had taken him in. How his uncle had had a lot of mana and had been a strong mage. How the two of them had visited various dungeons together (though Allen would stay home in a nearby town when his uncle delved into them).

"My uncle bought me this pouch right before I turned twelve. He thought we could go into dungeons together when I was old enough."

That was why he had a storage pouch despite not looking like he had much money.

"But my uncle was too kind for his own good. He had a lot of mana, so he didn't really need to protect himself outside of town, and he wasn't very smart." It was written on Allen's face that he absolutely loved his uncle. "Someone tricked him and he went into debt. We came to Rosa so we could make more money, but he died in a dungeon."

Hunters lived dangerous lives fighting monsters, Nelly had said.

"I was told that my uncle paid off the rest of his debt with the last bit of money he earned, but I was left with nothing but this pouch and what I had in it already. I bet they wanted to take that too, but this is my own personal belonging, so they couldn't. The only thing I have left of my uncle is my memories of him."

How was he making a living, then?

"That was two months ago. I had pretty much nothing to my name, but I was able to start doing odd jobs around town. I could camp outside of town and not get rained on and afford enough to eat. But I'm twelve now, so I want to save as much money as I can to register at the Guild. So I've got a little money, but I'm trying not to spend too much of it."

Allen gave her a carefree smile. He must have looked unsteady on his feet

earlier because he was skimping on his food budget. If he was saving his money, then Sara felt a little bad about forcing him to use some, but Allen went on without noticing Sara's remorse.

"If you register at the Guild, you'll be able to get into town at night even without a guardian, and you can go inside the dungeons, too."

"Dungeons? You were talking about them earlier too, but isn't that dangerous?"

"On the first few levels, the monsters are weak, so even Hunters just starting out can make enough to eat. And I have a lot of mana, so I can use physical strengthening."

"Huh."

Sara had just been thinking if she could make it out of the cottage and down to the town, things would work out, so she was surprised to think about an actual twelve year old going into a dungeon to make a living. She hadn't connected registering at the Guild to making a living that way yet.

"Sheesh." Allen gave Sara a pitying look. "You really don't know anything, do you?"

"Ugh..."

Talking to Allen made her understand how much she really didn't know. She probably didn't even need to talk to him to figure that out. She sighed, thinking about their financial transaction earlier. One lunch box had already taught her plenty of things.

She really must have been lonely, too. She'd been thinking about nothing but Nelly this whole time, but talking with Allen had allowed her unease and anxiety to almost completely fade away. She had no idea that just talking to another person could bring her so much comfort.

"I'm glad we could talk too, though. When you have a lot of mana, you kind of give off this pressure to other people, so you can't really talk to people who don't have that much. It was better when my uncle was around, but people tend to avoid me now outside of work, so I haven't talked this much in a long time."

He must have been a cheerful kid at heart. Sara was sure he'd seen her light and longed for some human companionship. She was glad he'd come to talk to her.

"Still, it costs a hundred thousand gil to register at the Guild. It's too much for a twelve year old to make on their own. I'm having trouble saving it all up."

"One hundred thousand? That much?" Sara repeated the number. She hadn't even thought it would cost money to register, so she could never have imagined it costing that much. Not when a lunch box was just fifteen hundred gil.

"Did you want to register, too? I guess you'd have to. That's normally what you do for an ID when you don't have any parents."

"Yeah, I was planning to, but I don't have any money." Literally, she didn't have a single cent. "Isn't it hard for a kid to save up a hundred thousand gil?"

"Well, twelve is only the age when you *can* register. Normally, people register a little older. Most parents wouldn't throw their kids out at twelve without any money either."

"I guess that makes sense. There shouldn't be too many twelve year olds earning their registration fees from nothing."

Sara and Allen exchanged a glance. As a matter of fact, there were two of them right here.

"Earlier, I said the monsters are weak on the first few levels, but do you think a kid who can't even do errands around town can beat monsters, even if they're weak?"

"No."

"That's why I think the money is also to discourage people who don't have that kind of resolve."

"That makes sense."

Still, one hundred grand was a lot.

"Oh well. I'll just have to sell plants."

She should have had enough of them by now to make a decent amount of

money. Still, she really didn't think she could make a living in the dungeon, so even if she managed to register at the Guild, she'd just have to keep making money selling medicinal plants.

"Like medicinal plants? That'll be hard, won't it? You can't find any near here, so I heard people have to go pretty far south to do that."

"Really? There are some growing right over there, though."

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

Sara and Allen exchanged a glance.

"Sara, do you know a lot about medicinal plants?"

"I wouldn't say that, but I've been earning a little money gathering them for a while now. That's how I could afford this pouch. There are only six kinds in the guide I use, anyway."

Sara wanted to ask what Allen was talking about.

"So that's why you have a storage pouch. Then..." Allen's face lit up. "I'll show you around town and teach you about money, so can you teach me how to gather medicinal plants? You can get good money for them, right? Odd jobs around town don't make that much..."

"Okay."

"Really?! I just need twenty thousand more gil to hit one hundred thousand. Then I can get my ID."

Sara had just learned from reading the guide, so it wouldn't be hard to teach him what she knew.

Allen stood up, looking satisfied. He must have been going back to where he slept. "Get back in your protection field, okay?"

"Yeah."

"See you tomorrow! And turn off your light."

"Yeah. See you tomorrow."

She felt her heart warming at being able to promise to see one another the next day so naturally.

Nelly... Sara looked up at the night sky. It seemed she'd managed to make one friend, at least. The stars she saw above the town looked just like the ones she could see on the Dark Mountain.

“Morning.”

“Morning.”

In the morning, Allen was still as disheveled as he had looked the night before, but Sara noticed in the light that his hands and face were clean. He was about a head taller than Sara, his hair messy and sand-colored, his eyes a greyish blue. On his right hip he wore a pouch that looked a little different from Sara’s, a dagger attached to his belt on his left.

“Hungry?”

“No, I...”

“Think of this as your information fee. Besides, it’s just a sandwich.”

“...Thanks.”

Sara tidied up her protection cases and mat, handing Allen a sandwich and pouring him a cup of tea.

“This is good.”

“It’s cockatrice breast meat, with onions and mustard.” Nelly’s favorite.

“No way. Cockatrices are powerful monsters, from the lower levels of the dungeon. This is just some really good poultry, right?”

What were monsters from the lower levels of a dungeon doing on the Dark Mountain? Nelly wouldn’t have lied to her, which made this all the more curious. But maybe the cockatrices Nelly and Allen were talking about were different things, and it *was* good poultry either way, so Sara was fine with calling it that.

“Well, it’s something like poultry, anyway.” It had feathers at any rate. Its tail was a snake, but it laid eggs, too.

“Poultry, eh? It’s good.” Allen pointed at Sara’s cup as he munched on his sandwich. “So, how do you do that? I’ve been wondering since last night.”

“Do what?”

“Make hot water. You’re not using fire on it, right? How do you heat it up?”

“It’s magic... I just tell the water to heat up.”

She remembered teaching Nelly how to do it, but Nelly’d just said she wasn’t good at fine control and though she *could* do it, she didn’t want to.

“What’s that supposed to mean? You make it sound like you’re talking to it.” Allen laughed like she’d said something funny. To be more precise, it was more like she was imagining water boiling on fast-forward, but she didn’t think she could explain that to him.

“Can I try it later?”

“Sure. I’ll give you a better explanation then.”

Allen drank his tea, cleaned his cup, and tidied up his things before standing. “Wanna head into town first?” he asked, seemingly itching to go.

Sara chuckled. “Let’s look at the medicinal plants a little first, since it’ll take a bit of time to get back out here.”

Allen’s face lit up.

Sara took her medicinal plant guide out of her pouch as they returned to the road. “This is a healing herb. See?”

“Hmm. I guess so.”

“Try crouching down here and looking for things that look like that.”

“Here?”

Sara told Allen to crouch down. She could see a cluster of them to their right, and some beyond that, too.

“These?”

“Yeah.”

The plants Allen timidly pointed out were indeed healing herbs. They grew in big groups, so he had ten of them in no time. Sara gathered her own from a different cluster.

“If you pick them all from one place, they’ll stop growing there, so leave half of them and then move on, okay?”

“Right... Wow, I already have so many. The town’s got a healing herb shortage right now, too.”

“Really?”

“I guess they need them in the capital, so not a lot of them are making their way here.”

Allen was able to gather ten bundles—one hundred herbs in total—in no time at all. Sara was a little surprised. She thought it would be harder for a twelve year old to focus so deeply on something he’d only just learned how to do. Was this proof of how serious he was about becoming independent, or was Allen himself just special? Sara was able to gather the same amount while also watching him, but with the two years of experience she had on him this was no surprise.

“Want to learn about poison herbs and greater healing herbs, too?”

“Those are different, huh? No, it’ll be hard to find them all at the same time, so I’ll stick with these today. I want to make sure I have healing herbs down. So, where do you want to go anyway, Sara?”

“Well, I was told to rely on Chris at the Apothecary’s Guild if I was ever in trouble.”

“Master Chris, eh? Well, we’ll have to go to the Apothecary’s Guild if we want to sell these plants anyway, so that’s perfect. Let’s head there first, then.”

“Okay.”

Allen was already proving to be a reassuring presence for Sara. She was curious why he’d called Chris “Master,” though.

It took about an hour to make it to the central gate. Naturally, it was bigger than the east gate—about wide enough for two carriages to pass by one another—but it was rather small in comparison to the size of the town as a whole.

Perhaps because it was morning, there were a lot of carriages leaving the town. Sara watched them, a little taken aback by the size of the horses drawing them. No cars, she made a note to herself.

“Rosa’s got two dungeons near it, but apparently monsters flooded out of them a long time ago. That’s why the gates are so small, so they can protect the town if they need to.”

“Huh.”

Monsters flooded out of dungeons? So they normally didn’t come out, then? That was news to her. Sara felt like she’d learned more in the last half a day than she had in the last two years with Nelly.

“You can come and go freely during the day.”

“Right.”

Sara looked up at the gate, gaping as she walked through it. It was her first step into Rosa, which had been her goal for a long time now. She was a little disappointed that Nelly wasn’t there beside her to celebrate.

“Allen!”

“Morning!”

A gate guard called out to Allen.

“You made enough money yet?”

“Just a little left.”

“Keep it up!”

The soldier gave Sara a sharp look, but he let her through, either because of Allen’s presence or simply because that was his job.

The first thing they saw after passing through the gate was a large fountain.

“I wash my face here in the morning.”

“Is that okay?”

“The town’s surrounded by a protection field, so no rain falls on it, but water comes down from the mountain to the north, so there are fountains like this all over town. You can use ’em all you like.”

Allen washed his face in the fountain, wiping it dry with his sleeve. Sara glanced around, but no one reprimanded him for it.

“The Hunter’s Guild is right over there, but the Apothecary’s Guild is farther in. It’s in the Second District, so you have to go through one more gate.”

“Okay,” Sara responded. She was too preoccupied to say any more than that.

She stared at the large horses drawing carriages through the street. The rabbits she’d seen had been carnivores, and the sheep had been strong, too. These horses might have been similarly different from the horses she was accustomed to.

As Sara tiptoed by, a horse going the other way bared its teeth to her. “*Brrrh.*”

“Eep!”

“Hahaha. It’s just a horse. It probably likes you.”

No, it was definitely trying to intimidate her. It reminded her of the mountain wolves.

“They’re normally only used if you have to travel long distances, like moving between towns. They’re tough, so horned rabbits can’t pierce their hides.”

So those grey rabbits were just called horned rabbits. Then these really weren’t normal horses. Sara decided avoiding them as much as possible was probably for the best.

The tallest buildings in the town were three stories high. Though the streets were fairly wide, they wound about confusingly. Every so often the pair passed by other fountains. It didn’t seem like an old town, but the buildings didn’t have any sort of sense of uniformity. It looked like each one had been built separately however the builders wanted, which made them interesting to compare. If they could harden roads with earth magic, she felt like they could probably make the buildings taller, too. As Sara gawked at everything, she wondered if they didn’t because there was some rule about not making them taller than the walls around the town.

Here, just past the central gate, it was less like a residential area and more like a bustling marketplace. There were quite a few men and women dressed similarly to Nelly, and hardly any kids around Sara and Allen’s age about.

“Most people get lost the first time they come here. You should memorize the

way the different fountains look and use them as landmarks."

"O-Okay."

So he said, but Sara was already starting to forget the route they'd taken to get to where they were. As they wound through the streets heading deeper into the town, Allen pointing out the unique characteristics of all the fountains they passed, after ten minutes or so they reached another gate. No, not a gate, but a wall. Another wall stretched out ahead of them, as though there was a second town in the middle of Rosa. The wall was about two stories high, so Sara couldn't see anything beyond it.

"What's this? A town inside the town?"

"In a way, yeah. What's beyond this wall is the *old* Rosa. It's called the Second District. Where we are right now is the newest part of the town, the Third District."

"Thus, the Third." Sara clapped her hands together. She finally understood what the soldier at the east gate had meant. "So this wall is the Second?"

"Right."

"Then I'm guessing beyond this one..."

"There's a First District, yeah. I've never been there, though."

Apparently, there were three layers to the town of Rosa. They went through the gate, which was narrower than the central gate, the guard glaring at them as they passed. Beyond the gate was a large fountain.

"That's the landmark for the Apothecary's Guild, and just in front of it is the Guild itself."

"Wow!"

The building, which sported a sign with a drawing of what was obviously a healing herb on it, appeared to be a fairly spacious workshop. They pushed past the saloon doors and were met with a deserted, wide-open space. Sara glanced around the room and saw a long counter on one side, with shelves behind it holding all sorts of small glass bottles that she imagined were potions. There were no customers or clerks in the space, but she could sense someone in a

room beyond the shelves and hear various objects clattering together. Someone must have been making potions in the back of the shop.

“I’ve only been here once with my uncle. We came to sell some healing herbs we’d just happened to get ahold of when we first came to town.”

Sara nodded. Allen had been whispering, but whoever was in the back must have heard him anyway, because they poked their head out from the other room.

“Excuse me, do you have a minute?” Allen asked without delay.

The person who emerged from the back was a young man who looked to be in his mid-twenties with blond hair and droopy blue eyes. He wore a white jacket with an eye-catching green brooch at his lapel. Maybe it marked him as an apothecary. He was probably popular with the girls, Sara thought, though he wasn’t *her* type.

Glancing at Allen and Sara, the man grimaced. Maybe that was unavoidable, since they were still pretty dirty, but it was rude all the same. Allen didn’t react to the man’s look, as if he was used to being treated that way.

“I’ve got business with you too, but let’s start with Sara,” said Allen. He turned to her. “You’ve got something you want to ask here, right?”

Having been introduced, Sara stepped forward. The man took a step back when she did for some reason, but then he looked like he’d realized something and stepped forward once more.

“You don’t have that much mana,” he said to Sara, then, “You, don’t come any closer,” to Allen. “So, what do you want?”

Sara realized that he’d grimaced because he’d sensed Allen’s mana. At least he seemed willing to hear what she had to say.

“Umm, my name is Sara. I was living with a relative up in the mountains, but she went to Rosa and hasn’t come back.”

“She hasn’t, eh? What’s this relative’s name?”

“It’s Nelly.” Sara realized her name probably wasn’t enough, so she described Nelly. “She’s about this tall, in her mid-twenties, and has pretty red hair and

green eyes."

"Sounds like the Reaper, but her name and age are different. Can't say I'm familiar." The man looked annoyed, but he did seem to think on Sara's description before he answered. What did he mean by "Reaper," though? Did the grim reaper look like that in this world? She was curious about that, but Nelly should have been coming to the Apothecary's Guild to sell medicinal plants, so why didn't he know her? It made her nervous that he didn't recognize her.

"She said if she didn't come back from the town in four days, I should go to Chris at the Apothecary's Guild for help."

"Master Chris, eh?" The man's eyes narrowed and his voice suddenly took on a chilly tone. "Just some woman after Master Chris, huh? Well, he's not in town right now."

"He's not here?"

"He's out on business. So I guess I can't help you."

"When will he be back?"

"No clue."

Sara was stumped. Nelly had told her to rely on Chris at the Apothecary's Guild. She'd also told her she couldn't trust anyone *other* than Chris. Really, that was *all* she'd said.

"Sara." Allen beckoned her over from the doors. "Let's try the Hunter's Guild, too."

"Yeah..." Right, she might have sold her medicinal plants there, too. Sara regained some hope.

Allen gave Sara a pat on the shoulder to cheer her up and then called back to the counter, "Hey, mister."

"That's not my name. It's Ted," he said with a tone like everyone should know that, even though he wasn't wearing a nametag or anything.

"I'm Allen."

Allen introduced himself properly. True, if they were going to come here regularly to sell medicinal plants, it would probably be better if he knew their names. But Ted just gave him a look as if to ask “What’s your point?” Sara felt like he was ridiculing Allen, and was starting to get annoyed.

“I picked some healing herbs.”

“What?” Ted’s expression changed at that. “Put them on the counter.”

He indicated the counter and then took several steps back, unlike when he’d spoken with Sara. Did people with mana really give off that much pressure? She’d heard about it from Allen, but since Sara couldn’t feel it, it just seemed strange to see it in action.

“I got it. Take yours out too, Sara.”

Allen nodded and took out ten bundles of ten herbs each from his pouch, setting them down on the counter. Sara laid her own healing herbs out next to his.

“These are fresh.” Ted checked over the herbs with a solemn look on his face. “Nothing else mixed in. I’ll give you each a thousand gil for a hundred of them.” He placed two coins with holes in them on the counter.

Sara tilted her head to the side. Hadn’t Nelly told her that ten healing herbs sold for five hundred gil? If so, they should each be getting five thousand gil.

“Hey, mister.”

“Ted.”

“Ted, that’s not the right price,” Allen pointed out calmly. So it wasn’t just Sara’s imagination.

“It isn’t, is it? They’re healing herbs, sure, but their quality is poor. I can’t buy them at full price.”

That struck a nerve with Sara. She had made sure they were of pure quality herself, and she’d *just* overheard Ted himself commenting on their freshness.

Allen stared silently at Ted without changing his expression as if he was trying to determine something. Ted just smirked, looking down mockingly at Allen.

“Is it because I’m a Third District kid?”

“A Third District kid? You’re not even that, are you? I’ve heard the rumors. Some kid left behind here without even an ID, wandering around not only the Third District but the Second as well.”

“I’m not wandering around. I’m doing deliveries.”

Sara was appalled. This man knew about Allen. He knew the healing herbs were of good quality, but he was trying to take advantage of Allen because of how weak his social standing was.

While Sara looked on in shock, Allen gathered up the herbs on the counter and put them back in his pouch without changing his expression. He handed Sara hers too, so she put them away as well even if she wasn’t quite sure whether she should.

“Hey!”

“If you won’t buy them from us at the proper price, then we don’t need to sell them to you.”

Ted seemed upset by Allen’s refusal to sell to him, but Allen didn’t so much as spare him another glance, as if he was used to being treated this way.

“Let’s go, Sara.”

“Ah, I...”

Sara had wanted to sell the plants she’d gathered on the Dark Mountain as well, but Allen shook his head. She realized with a start then that she’d been offered the same price as Allen. To Ted, Sara was “not even a Third District kid” just like Allen. In other words, no matter what quality or variety of herbs she offered Ted, he would rip her off for them all the same.

As Allen pulled her by the hand, Sara looked back at the Apothecary’s Guild to see Ted heading back behind the counter with a frustrated look on his face. They hurried out of the building to see the water in the fountain before them sparkling under the bright sunlight as if nothing had happened.

The two of them trudged out of the Second District gate. Allen had seemed to give up quickly, but he couldn’t have been okay with the way Ted had treated

him. As for Sara, her whole premise of going to the Apothecary's Guild and relying on Chris for help had been ruined, not to mention her plan to earn money by selling her medicinal plants, so she wasn't sure where to go from here. He would buy her herbs for one thousand gil, so if she had no other options, she could still make some money, but it frustrated her to be taken advantage of, so she didn't want to do that unless she really had no choice. Besides, based on his attitude, he might even start ripping her off *more* in the future.

"For now, let's head to the Hunter's Guild," Allen said quietly.

Sara looked up at him. He seemed to have shrugged off what had happened already.

"You're right. They might know something about Nelly."

This time, she'd try to remember the way there. Sara pulled herself together and faced forward firmly.

"We don't want to waste time. Come on, let's hurry."

"Yeah!"

It comforted her to have Allen with her. They returned to the central gate and headed west this time, quickly reaching a large building. It was two levels, like she expected, but the facade was a lot more broad than the Apothecary's Guild building, and looked like it extended back a ways, too. On its sign was a picture of a wyvern.

"So there are wyverns here, too." Sara chuckled, which seemed to relieve Allen somewhat.

"This is the Guild," he explained to her with a boastful tone for some reason. "Or the Hunter's Guild, to be more precise. They've got reception desks, so let's ask there. It shouldn't be that busy right now, so I'm sure they'll talk to you."

"Okay."

She was a little nervous, having just been treated rather poorly by someone, but she allowed Allen to lead her through another set of double doors.

"Hey, Allen! You save up the cash yet?"

Someone called out to Allen here too, but with a friendly, familiar tone that helped put Sara at ease.

“Just a bit left,” Allen responded brightly.

“Looking for work again?”

“That’s part of why I’m here, yeah...” Allen glanced at Sara, who nodded. “Try the guy at that reception desk. His name is Vince. He’s a little gruff, but he’s a nice guy.”

“I’m not gruff,” the man shot back without delay.

“Okay. Umm...”

The Guild was a big, wide-open hall with a long counter that was dotted with receptionists here and there. There were both men and women behind the counter, but almost all of them were middle-aged or older with a laid-back air to them.

The counter Allen had pointed out was the one just in front of them. Behind it sat a solidly built man who Sara would have easily believed was still actively working as a Hunter. His shaggy brown hair hung down over his blue eyes. On the chest of his crisp white shirt was the same wyvern symbol they’d seen outside the building.

Sara was a little scared, but he looked like he was in his late thirties, which was the same age her boss had been in Japan. When she thought about it that way, it made it easier to talk to him. Still, she had to muster up some courage to actually get started.

“Umm, well, I’m looking for someone.”

“Is this a request?”

“A request?”

What did he mean by that? Sara turned back to Allen for help.

“It’s not a request. Sara was living with a relative who went to Rosa and didn’t come back, so we’re here to ask if anyone’s seen her.”

“You’re barking up the wrong tree coming to the Guild for that.”

Sara hung her head, discouraged by his words, and Vince turned his head to the side and raised his voice a bit.

“So, uhh...what’s this relative of yours look like?”

He probably couldn’t really help her if it wasn’t a job, but he was willing to hear her out if it was framed as nothing more than small talk, Sara realized.

“She has long, pretty red hair, but she says it gets in the way so she ties it back, and pretty green eyes, and she’s tall and buff and pretty...”

“Okay, I get that you like the lady. How old is she, and what’s her name?”

“She’s in her mid-twenties, and her name is Nelly.”

“Hmmm.” The receptionist groaned and looked around the room. Everyone listening in on their conversation shook their heads. “Well, it sounds like she looks like the goddess, but her name and age don’t match up.”

Earlier she’d heard that she looked like the reaper. Did the grim reaper and the goddess they worshiped in this world both have red hair? The question occurred to her, but this wasn’t the time to ask it. Wasn’t there anything else she could say about her?

“Well... She’s really strong and nice and she doesn’t say much but she’s fun to talk to and she’s dependable but she doesn’t always think things through...” She was remembering more and more and starting to get choked up as she went on. “She always sold the medicinal plants I picked when she came into town, and she told me if anything happened I should go to Chris at the Apothecary’s Guild for help, but...”

“How’d it go at the Apothecary’s Guild?” the receptionist whispered to Allen. “If she didn’t sell those plants here, then she had to have been selling them at the Apothecary’s Guild.”

“We went there first, but the guy was kinda nasty. He said he didn’t know Sara’s relative and that Chris was gone. He was trying to rip us off on the medicinal plants too, so I brought Sara here instead.”

“Oh yeah, Chris isn’t in town right now, that’s true. Since you were looking for a young woman, he probably thought she was one of Master Chris’s fanatics

and didn't want to deal with you. There's always too much going on around that guy..."

The receptionist looked up at the ceiling while Allen hung his head.

"It probably didn't help that I was there. He said we weren't even Third District kids."

"Yeah, the people in the First and Second Districts are all a little full of themselves. Who do they think makes it so they can live comfortably in there anyway?"

"I don't blame him, Vince. It's true that I don't have an ID yet, after all."

"Well, show me those medicinal plants for now. You can't sell 'em at the Guild without an ID, but I want to see 'em all the same."

"Sara, show him yours, too."

Allen seemed to trust Vince. Sara placed her medicinal plants on the counter, feeling a bit more confident this time.

"These are some good healing herbs. They're all the same size and shape, and they're good quality, too. They were trying to rip you off for these at the Apothecary's Guild?"

"He said he'd buy them all for one thousand gil," Allen spat.

"Tch. What are those guys thinking? We've got a shortage now, too. Hey," Vince turned his gaze back to Sara. "I haven't seen you around before. From what you were saying earlier, it doesn't sound like you're from Rosa."

Sara shook her head, but she wasn't sure whether she should tell him that she was living up on the Dark Mountain. He asked another question before she could make up her mind.

"Are you registered with the Guild?"

Sara shook her head.

"You got any money?"

All she could do was shake her head again.

"So you're here looking for your relative without any leads and without a cent

to your name?” There was definitely pity in his voice, but it was overshadowed by exasperation for how reckless she was being.

Sara sighed. This other world was cold.

“I didn’t want to just wait at home by myself for Nelly to come back.”

“So it was just you back home. I guess that makes sense, then...” Vince gave Allen a resigned look. “Allen, you hurry up and register and sell Sara’s healing herbs. We do take twenty percent as a handling fee when we buy them here, though.”

“Hey, you can sell for someone else at the Apothecary’s Guild, but it’s against the rules here. You can’t be talking about that right there at the reception desk. At least do it where I can’t see you.”

A large man with short blond hair emerged from somewhere behind the counter to reprimand Vince. He looked like he was either in his late thirties like Vince or maybe in his early forties. He had an intimidating air to him that led Sara to believe he was definitely a Hunter, the same wyvern mark adorning his shirt. Something about the way he walked and talked also gave Sara an impression that he didn’t take himself too seriously, though.



“But Jay—”

“Call me Guildmaster.”

“Guildmaster.”

The guildmaster responded to Vince just to correct him and then turned to Allen.

“How much left until you can register?”

“Twenty thousand.”

“They’ll probably just keep trying to rip you off at the Apothecary’s Guild. Nothin’ else you can do. Hurry up and do some odd jobs to earn your registration fee. You can do whatever you want here as long as you register properly.”

“Okay!”

The Hunter’s Guild, at least, seemed to treat Allen right. Even if he had to live outside of town and was scraping by with odd jobs just to be able to eat, he would be one of them as long as he managed to make the money to register. Sara sensed that they were all trying to encourage him to grow into a proper Hunter. It was a big difference from how he’d been treated at the Apothecary’s Guild, but Allen’s composure there made sense to Sara now. They even seemed concerned for Sara to an extent just because Allen was the one who’d brought her there. Sara was grateful for her run-in with Allen the day before.

“*Growl,*” grumbled Allen’s stomach.

“Skipping lunch again? Listen, kid, if you wanna be a Hunter...” The guildmaster launched into a lecture about how Allen should eat properly even if it put his registration back a bit. Before, he’d told him to hurry up and register. The contradiction struck Sara as somewhat funny. He’d told Vince to break the rules where he couldn’t see earlier, too.

But when it came to food, that was something that Sara could help with. She tugged Allen’s sleeve. “Want to have lunch?”

“You still have lunches left, Sara?” He sounded incredulous, but the guildmaster’s lecture must have been effective. Allen nodded, taking Sara up on her offer. “Thanks.”

Sara took a lunchbox out of her pouch, and... “Hey! I know!” Allen exclaimed.

His face lit up like he'd just had a brilliant idea. "I'll buy food from you, Sara. It'll put off my registration a bit, but then you can make money, too."

"Oh yeah, come to think of it, I do have some money! I've got fifteen hundred gil!" The fifteen hundred gil Allen had given her for his dinner last night was still in her pouch.

"Yeah, you do!"

Sara had been starting to feel like she was out of options, but if she just worked hard little by little, she might be able to manage somehow. She at least wouldn't have to worry about food for a few months. Sara's mood was improving.

"Let's eat at the table over there!"

"Okay!"

Allen brought Sara to a big table in the corner of a cafeteria connected to the Guild. It was empty, since it was still a little early for lunch.

"People with a lot of mana always sit in the corner or in another room. We use the reception desk closest to the front, too."

"Huh."

"You guys aren't supposed to actually use the Guild cafeteria since you haven't registered yet..." Vince said with a wry grin from the reception desk, but the cafeteria didn't get very crowded even when it was in use, so everyone generally let it go.

"You want another lunch box?"

"Yeah. Since I'm eating, I'd better eat properly."

Sara took a lunch box out of her pouch. It had originally belonged to the Guild, but you were free to either return it or dispose of it, so it must be fine for her to reuse it.

"Here, fifteen hundred."

"Thanks." Sara accepted the money with both hands. One coin with a hole in it and five smaller coins. She put them away in her pouch.

Allen opened the lid and an appetizing smell wafted through the guildhall. “Is this different from last night’s?”

“This one is tomato soup and stewed tail slices.”

She’d sliced and stewed a cockatrice’s tail, then carefully removed the bones and skin from them. It made a lot of food at once, so it was perfect for preserving.

Allen took out his fork and took a bite quickly, stuffing his cheeks with the meat. “It’s good! It’s pretty tender.”

“Nelly loves that, too,” Sara said before she could stop herself. She made herself sad, remembering Nelly. Where in the world had Nelly gone? She’d thought she’d be able to find something out if she came to the town.

“She told you to come to Rosa, right?” Allen asked as he chewed the meat. His tone was like that of an older brother, which might have amused Sara if not for the current circumstances. “So you gotta figure out how to live here first of all.”

“Yeah.”

Sara felt a little pathetic. Her body was twelve, but she was supposed to be an adult on the inside. Yet not only was she relying on a twelve-year-old kid for anything and everything, she was even letting him console her.

A shadow fell over the two of them. They looked up and found the guildmaster staring down at them.

“Hey, Allen. I know I told you not to skip lunch, but...”

“Yeah! So I bought lunch from Sara!” Allen grinned and the guildmaster’s meaty hand landed on his head.

“This looks a little *too* delicious. What the heck is this piping-hot lunch you’ve got?”

Sara heard a chair scrape and Vince walked over from the counter. “Hey, you’re right. Let me taste that.”

“No! There’ll be less for me!” Allen clutched the lunch box to his chest.

How immature, Sara thought. She looked up at the two men with exasperation before an idea occurred to her.

“Excuse me!”

“What?” the two men said in unison, turning to look at her. It was a little scary, but she also found it cute that they were getting so worked up about food.

“I have more of the same kind of lunch.”

“I’ll buy,” the two said in unison again.

Sara took out two lunches matching Allen’s from her pouch. Apparently not intending to return the boxes to her, the two men each handed three thousand gil to her and sat down.

It looked like other people were keeping their distance from the two of them as well. Vince was manning the frontmost reception desk and the guildmaster must have been strong to reach that rank, so Sara surmised that the two of them had a lot of mana just like Allen.

“What is this...?” Vince muttered when he opened his lunchbox. He started in on the meat. “Stewed cockatrice tail? No, it couldn’t be...”

“Man, this is good!”

“Come on, Jay...”

“Call me Guildmaster.”

Vince scolded the guildmaster, telling him to taste the food if he was gonna eat it, but Sara was happy to see someone enjoying the food she’d made that much.

Allen finished eating first and handed his empty lunchbox to Sara, who put it away in her pouch. She’d wash all the used boxes later and then fill them up again.

“Okay, I’m gonna go look for odd jobs. What do you want to do, Sara?”

“I think I’d like to go back outside of town.” She didn’t really want to wander around the town by herself. There was something she’d rather be doing

anyway.

Allen picked up on her plan right away. “You want to gather plants? Even though you can’t sell them?”

“I know I can’t sell them, but I have a storage pouch, and I want to see the west side of town, too.”

“I guess there’s a protection field around the town, so it’s fine, but most people don’t like to go out there.”

Allen was worried about her and seemed unsure of whether to let her go out on her own, but he had his own work to do, so he settled on letting Sara do as she pleased. He made sure to at least share some information with her instead.

“The central dungeon is just west of the central gate. The town also has a west gate, and the west dungeon is right next to it. There are more people on the western side, but a lot of Hunters aren’t very friendly, so keep your distance from them.”

“Okay.”

As they stood from the table, they decided to meet at sunset outside the central gate, making plans together like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Okay, the day’s not over yet.

Curious Kids

“Hey,” Vince said to the guildmaster, but the other man wasn’t listening to him at all.

“Man, this is good!” He was focused solely on scarfing down the food in front of him.

“Is that all you have to say? It *is* good, though...” Vince sighed at the lack of thought going on in the guildmaster’s head.

The two of them had been in a party together when they were active Hunters. They were war buddies, so to speak. The guildmaster was both capable and well-liked, and Vince had ended up in the role of vice guildmaster to support him, but he was constantly irritated by the man’s carefree attitude.

When he was finished with his lunch, the guildmaster looked up, a satisfied smile on his face. “Way tastier than the Guild’s lunches.”

“Enough about how tasty it is.”

“Huh?”

Vince almost sighed again at the thought of such an oaf running their guild, but he had a ton of mana and he was an incredibly skilled Hunter, so it wasn’t worth fussing over.

“That kid. Sara, I think.”

“Yeah. What a good cook.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. Don’t you think it’s strange?” Vince asked him soberly.

“...Well, sure I do.” The guildmaster diligently closed his lunchbox.

“Kid didn’t seem bothered at all next to Allen, who’s got a crazy amount of mana.”

“Allen looked happy.”

“Yeah.”

Any Hunter with a good amount of mana could imagine what kind of childhood Allen was experiencing. That was why the whole Guild was watching over him as he strove to become independent after the death of his uncle.

Everyone originally from Rosa had a traceable background, and there weren't any kids around who didn't have guardians. The needy children that could occasionally be spotted around town were the kids of Hunters trying to get rich quick, but anyone without the chops to make it in Rosa disappeared quickly. That was why Allen stood out in both a good and a bad way, still working to support himself two months after his uncle had died. To the residents of the Third District, he was a good, hardworking kid, but the people of the First and Second Districts saw him as nothing but a nuisance. He had a good chance of becoming a talented Hunter with the amount of mana he had, though. Not to mention, Allen specialized in physical strengthening, which gave him a leg up in combat.

The fact that that boy had so cheerfully brought in another child without a guardian was a bit of a conundrum for the Guild. Should they watch over Sara like Allen, or did they not want another burden on their hands?

"That's not all. Sara didn't seem bothered at all by you or me either," said the Guildmaster. "Even Hunters tend to avoid us."

"I didn't sense that the kid had a ton of mana, though. And to have no money but be carrying a storage pouch *and* backpack?"

"The backpack was one, too?"

"It was a three-wyvern bag."

Not even many Hunters could afford something that cost that much.

"There *is* a goddess who shows up with wyverns like it's no big deal, though."

"Nefertari? Can't believe they dragged her off to the capital like that. It's a real pain for Rosa."

"You said it. I didn't think they'd use force like that."

"A mage would be way more useful against migrating dragons than Nefertari and her physical strengthening anyway. It happens every year, so I wish they'd

just deal with it themselves."

Even with physical strengthening, there was a limit to how high a human being could jump. Perhaps the most efficient way to deal with a dragon was for a caster to bring it down and a swordsman to finish it off.

"They've got a couple of the Invited in the capital, too. If anything, I wish they'd send people *here*. I'm always telling them that."

"There aren't many Hunters who want to come to Rosa, since there's so little to do here. Yet they want us to send them magic stones and monster materials. How selfish can they be?"

The two middle-aged men hanging their heads and sighing made quite a dour sight.

"Anyway, that's a problem, but the Apothecary's Guild is another issue."

"Had to happen when Chris is away, too. Good grief."

If it was just selling medicinal plants, they could do it at the Hunter's Guild, though the Guild would take a handling fee. It was against the rules to sell things someone else had hunted or gathered, but if the two people had an agreement, no one really stopped someone from making proxy sales for someone else.

Anyone could gather medicinal plants though, be they children, the elderly, or women, so the Apothecary's Guild bought plants from everyone equally even if they weren't registered with the Guild. Or they were *supposed* to, at least. It was worrying to think that the Apothecary's Guild had lost its impartiality, but knowing Rosa, it didn't surprise the two of them, which was all the more vexing.

Rosa natives like Ted were especially troublesome, since they tended to think they were superior to newcomers to the town. Ted in particular was the son of an influential figure in the town, so it was hard to object to his behavior. If they made their complaints public, the best they could expect was simply being told to get rid of the problematic children in question.

"Things got a lot better after Chris showed up, but it's hard to change the minds of people who have always thought a certain way," Vince grumbled.

The guildmaster agreed with him. “There aren’t many people who gather medicinal plants in Rosa to begin with. Now that Chris is gone, it’s just making the rest of them feel even more superior.”

“Yeah, the ones here are more specialized in making medicine, so they don’t put much stock in the actual trade of the plants.”

They had no choice but to keep an eye on the situation for a bit more.

***

Sara never expected that she wouldn’t be able to sell her plants. She trudged through Rosa’s central gate, hanging her head. She’d been holding her head high on the way in, full of hope. It was too bad. Sara wasn’t too upset about the plants, though.

She had more than three months of food, so she didn’t have to worry about eating. Actually, it was more like five months, she thought as she touched the pouch at her waist. They’d only had three months of food for the two of them stocked up in the cottage, but Sara had a lot more stored in her own pouch. Why? Well, what was a bag for if not holding things? That was the only reason she needed. She hadn’t thought amusing herself by cooking and storing the food would come in handy like this, though.

If she couldn’t sell her medicinal plants, she could save up money little by little like Allen, doing odd jobs around town. She just had to save up enough to register at the Guild in the five months that her food would last her. She could live outside of the town. Her five days of camping out had made Sara stronger. Not to mention, she had her protection cases and barrier.

What she was sad about was finding no clues as to Nelly’s whereabouts. Obviously, Sara had noticed that something was strange about Nelly. The reason she hadn’t wanted to buy children’s or women’s clothes and why she didn’t want to stock up on a lot of food at once was obviously because she didn’t want people to find out about Sara, but Sara didn’t know *why* she wanted to keep her a secret. Was it because Sara was one of the Invited, or did the reason have something to do with Nelly’s identity?

She may have been strong, but Sara couldn’t imagine it was normal to have one woman looking after a whole mountain full of monsters. But she couldn’t

ask Nelly about it. She felt like if she did, their happy life together would come to an end. The Nelly she knew likely wasn't the same Nelly that the town knew. If she wanted answers, she had to survive long enough to ask her questions.

She decided to change gears. This world was so dangerous that she had to become strong just to take one step out of the cottage. It was naive to think that things would suddenly get easier if she was able to make it to a town where people lived.

Sara held her head high and hastened her pace. The central gate was on the south side of the town. After passing through it, Sara turned to her right, heading west. She strolled along the road that led to the west gate without leaving the protection field around the town.

Just like on the east side, there was almost a small town set up just outside the gate on the west. If there was any difference, it was the large, one-story building along the road leading south from town. It must have been the entrance to the central dungeon.

Along the wall, there were simple stands selling food and other necessities. Sara wanted to browse them, but she only had a little money right now, so she gave up on the idea. Beyond that, there were actual houses here and there.

"If the walls are there to protect people from monsters coming out of the dungeon, is it okay to build houses out here?" Sara wondered.

Past the houses, it was just the wall and grass as far as the eye could see, like on the east side. In which case, there was only one thing for her to do: look for medicinal plants.

Sara knelt down. It was easier to find them when she was lower to the ground. There were medicinal plants scattered around, just like on the east side. They were pretty easy to find, so why didn't the people of the town look for them? It'd make for a decent side gig, and hadn't Allen said that the town had a shortage of healing herbs, too?

Not that I'll be able to sell them even if I do find them... Sara thought to herself. Allen could sell the ones he found, at least.

"I'll tell him there are healing herbs over here, too." It was useful information

to have if she ever got her own ID and ended up living in town with Nelly, too.

Sara trotted over to the west gate. As she expected to, she first found houses, then a smaller collection of stands than the one by the central gate, and a building she suspected was the entrance to a dungeon.

“It’s about the same distance as it was from the central gate to the east gate. Oh! I have to hurry back to the central gate before the sun sets!”

Sara hurried back toward the central gate. She made it there right before the sun had fully set.

“You’re late, Sara! I’ve been waiting for you.” Allen waved to her from next to the gate.

“Sorry. I went all the way to the west gate, so it took a long time to get back.”

A gate guard who overheard them glanced at Sara for a second.

“The west gate? You went all the way there and back in this time? You’ve got more stamina than I expected, Sara.”

“Really? I guess I’ve finally built some up.”

Sara smiled, remembering when her feet would hurt after just an hour of walking. She’d used a bit of physical strengthening as well. It made her tired, so she couldn’t use it for a long time, but if she concentrated it on her legs, it made her walk a lot faster. Nelly had said that was how she made it to Rosa in a single day.

“I’ll be sleeping outside again today, but what do you want to do, Sara?”

She’d just met Allen yesterday, but he already trusted her a lot, though Sara didn’t doubt him in the slightest either, so that went for the both of them.

“What do you mean? I can’t even get into the town at night, right?”

“I mean where outside do you want to sleep?”

So that was what he meant.

“I just kinda wandered closer to the east gate yesterday, but usually I camp out closer to the central gate.”

“Around where the houses are?”

“Yeah. It’s sort of an unspoken agreement that the people with a lot of mana who can’t live in town live out here. I camp out in the same area. People with a lot of mana are also strong, so there isn’t a lot of crime around there.”

Nelly had said something to that effect as well, but was it really that hard for people with a lot of mana to fit in? Sara didn’t feel a thing next to Allen, so she didn’t understand it at all.

“I’ll stay there, too. I’d be fine staying in the same place as yesterday, but it’s a little too far from the central gate.”

“Okay!” Allen nodded happily for some reason. “Also, I can’t buy food from you for every meal, so do you want to get dinner from a cheap stand?”

“Yeah! I want to check out what they have for sale.” Sara was thrilled at the suggestion, since she was too scared to browse the stands by herself.

The sun had almost set, but the stands outside the gate were crowded with Hunters on their way back from the dungeons.

“When I’m trying to save money, I just get bread, but there’s all kinds of bread. Sometimes I get those skewers, too.”

“Skewers?”

“They’re usually orc or horned rabbit.”

“Horned rabbit...” She had plenty of those in her bag.

“That stand sells soup, and that one has drinks.”

They weren’t like festival stands as Sara had been expecting, but just regular food stands where working people could grab a quick bite to eat. They seemed like they would be open late, so Sara and Allen took their time looking around.

One roll of the brown bread Nelly usually bought was two hundred gil. Allen just had one of those when he was trying to save money, he explained breezily.

Soft bread was three hundred gil. Sara was somewhat surprised to see soft bread and sweet bread being sold like it was completely commonplace. Nelly had only ever bought brown bread, so she’d thought brown bread was all they had.

Skewers were five hundred gil for orc and one thousand for horned rabbit. These were something else Nelly could have just bought and stuck in her storage bag, but Sara had never seen them before.

“Nobody comes out to the meadow to hunt, so horned rabbits are more rare. They taste better, too.”

“H-Huh...” Sara had stocked up plenty of them without hunting a single one.

Soup was five hundred gil and a roll of brown bread with some vegetables and meat inside was three hundred. Sara didn’t understand the money system very well, so she didn’t know if that was expensive or cheap. Still, she felt like two hundred gil for a single roll was a lot. It was like paying two hundred yen for a rice ball with nothing inside it in Japan. Should she just think of one gil being worth about half a yen?

“Rosa’s protected by walls, right? There’s no room inside for anything but the people living there, so there’s no space to grow crops or anything. So any food that’s not from the dungeons is imported from the south. That’s why it’s so expensive. Of course, anyone strong enough to survive in the dungeons here can afford it.”

Everything led back to the dungeons in the end, but at least Sara understood that things were cheaper in places other than Rosa.

“I guess the fifteen hundred gil price makes sense for Guild lunches, then.”

“They’ve got a lot of meat in them. If anything, they’re almost cheap for how much bread you get. So, Sara, what are you gonna get?”

“I want that bread with sugar on it.”

Nelly hadn’t really bought anything sweet. She’d bought sugar, so Sara was able to make her own sweets, but she’d been wanting to try something someone else had made. Sara bought the sweet bread, which was a little smaller than a plain roll, and Allen bought a sandwich, both of them spending three hundred gil. It was her first time buying something in this world.

“We splurged a bit.”

“Yeah.”

They headed for the east side of the gate after that. Sara could see houses here and there on this side too, and tents that she hadn't noticed in the morning.

"There are tents."

"Yeah, those are Hunters who are new here."

Sara had seen a lot of people dressed like Nelly around the stands earlier. She'd assumed they were Hunters.

"They don't stay in inns?" Didn't Hunters make a lot of money?

Allen glanced in the direction of the tents and lowered his voice. "A lot of people come here to make money but aren't able to make as much as they thought. Inns are expensive in Rosa."

So the people living in tents weren't very strong. When they got through the area with the tents, they arrived at an open space.

"You were more over there last night. This is where I usually sleep. Is this okay?"

"Yeah."

They were far enough from the houses that they could only faintly see their lights when they turned toward them. They could see the tents in the distance, too. It was deserted here, which did give it a lonesome air, but Sara didn't have a tent and she didn't want anyone to see her while she was sleeping, so it was better for her to be this far away.

As Sara placed her protection cases around her, Allen took a small tent out from his storage bag and began to set it up.

"So you do have a tent..."

"Well, I have to change clothes and stuff, you know."

"Yeah."

Sara stared off into the distance. When it was just her and Nelly, they hadn't needed to worry about changing clothes as they were both girls, and since Nelly could make it to town in one day, she didn't have any need to stop and change

herself. That's why she'd said that Sara didn't need a tent.

"Hey, Allen?"

"Yeah?"

"Could I...borrow your tent, so I can change and wipe myself down and stuff?"

"Y-Yeah, of course."

Sara hadn't had a bath or even changed her clothes in the last six days. She took a bucket out of her bag, filled it with water magically, got a change of clothes ready, and borrowed Allen's tent.

"I really am glad I met you, Allen."

"It's nothing to cry over..."

"Ugh... But..."

She wouldn't say she was fully satisfied, but she was feeling a lot cleaner now. She took the opportunity to wash her hair outside of the tent while she was at it. And when Allen expressed interest as he watched her, she washed his hair for him, too.

"Phew... That feels a lot better."

"Sure does."

She dried Allen's hair with a hot magical breeze. He suddenly seemed a little bothered by his own hygiene, so he borrowed Sara's bucket and washed his body too after she filled it with hot water. Still, as they looked at each other under the moonlight afterward, Sara's black hair was still black and Allen's sand-colored hair was still sand-colored.

"Pfft."

"Haha!"

No matter how clean they made themselves, they were still just two homeless, jobless twelve year olds. But they weren't alone. That alone reassured them.

"Hey Sara, are you a caster?"

“I dunno. I studied magic from a book, but I’m not planning on becoming a Hunter or anything.”

“But I’ve never seen anyone make hot water with magic before, or hot wind like that.”

Sara remembered Nelly being impressed when she dried her hair for her, too.

“Before I lived with Nelly, I was somewhere where everything was really convenient.”

“Like you had a lot of magic tools?”

“Something like that. We had tools to make ice too, not just hot water.”

“Never heard of something like that before. You really are a rich kid, aren’t you?”

Sara smiled wryly. Allen probably thought she was a fallen noble or a kid who lost her parents and was poor now or something.

“But no matter how things were before, all I can do now is get through every day.”

“Yeah. Now’s what’s important.”

The two of them exchanged a firm nod. No matter their pasts, they were kindred spirits now. That was how it felt to Sara, anyway.

“Good night.”

“Good night.”

When she looked up at the night sky next to her new friend, it really did look like the same one she’d seen from the Dark Mountain.

“Let’s gather some healing herbs. We might not be able to sell them, but we can store them for later.”

“Yeah.”

The next day, after a breakfast of plain bread, Sara gathered healing herbs on her own while Allen did so by consulting her guide. Then they ran for the central gate with their healing herbs in their hands. Well, no, tucked away safely in their storage bags. This time, she didn’t gawk at the gate. And then they ran straight to the Hunter’s Guild.

“I’ll look for odd jobs to do, too!”

According to Allen, the Hunter’s Guild would act as a go-between for odd jobs even for kids who weren’t old enough to register yet.

“The rewards are crap, though.”

“Yeah, you’ve been at this for two months already, right?”

“Uh huh.”

Still, they had to do it.

Sara stepped in front of Allen and pushed open the doors to the Hunter’s Guild.

“Hey there... Sara, right?” said the receptionist.

“Yep! Umm, Vince?”

He nodded, so she must have gotten it right.

“Vince! Sara and I are both here for odd jobs today,” said Allen.

“You can do your usual deliveries, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Sara... You come over here.”

“Okay...” Sara said tepidly.

Allen tried to go with her, but Vince stopped him. “Go do your deliveries,” he said. “Sara will be fine.”

Allen turned back to give Sara a worried look before finally leaving. Vince sighed and shrugged, sitting Sara down in a chair in the guildhall cafeteria.

“Now then. First off, that lunch yesterday was delicious.”

Well, she was glad about that. Sara smiled.

“Frankly, if you have a lot of those, you could earn your Guild registration selling them, easy.” The moment she heard this, Sara reached into her pouch, but Vince waved his hand to stop her. “So you *do* have a lot.”

Sara nodded.

Vince shook his head, furrowing his brow. “Frankly, I’d like to eat them every day myself. But the Hunters would catch on and then they’d want them, too. I can just picture the Guild lunch boxes no longer selling and people telling us to sell your lunches instead. So at least don’t sell them here at the Guild.”

Sara didn’t really see the problem. From what she’d seen the day before, there were plenty of tasty things being sold out at the stands.

“You need a permit to run a stand too, so you can’t sell them outside either. Basically, it’s okay if you treat Allen and us to them and accept money from us in the form of gratitude.”

In the end, she needed an ID to do anything officially. *Life’s tough,* Sara thought to herself with a sigh.

“I’ve got a job for you if you want it, though. We just so happen to be a little short-staffed in the kitchen right now. If you like to cook, what would you say to helping out in the kitchen?”

“Well, that’d be great, but if you have regular work like that, couldn’t you give it to Allen?” Sara didn’t want to take a well-paying gig from Allen.

“He’s not suited to that kind of meticulous work. Not to mention in a confined space like a kitchen, his mana’s gonna be all the harder for anyone in there with him to handle. That’s why he mostly helps with deliveries between the Second and Third Districts.”

Sara finally understood the nature of the odd jobs Allen did.

“You can come in around this time every day and help with prep work in the

kitchen until lunchtime. We'll pay you three thousand gil a day."

"So I'd earn my registration fee in a little over a month if I worked every day."

It helped a lot that Sara didn't need to worry about paying for food. It was nice that she didn't have to worry about getting rained on living outside either. These conditions weren't as bad as she'd been expecting.

"Wow, you did that math fast." Vince was taken aback. "If you're good at math, you could help out at the Guild store after lunch, too."

"I'm not confident that I have the stamina for all that." Sara hung her head. It had taken her five days just to get into town, after all.

"Well, just try the kitchen stuff first. You look like you've cleaned up some since yesterday, so you can start today if you want."

"Okay!"

Even if she couldn't sell her medicinal plants, it seemed like everything would work out anyway. Relieved, Sara let Vince take her into the kitchen.

In the kitchen, Sara found herself face-to-face with a macho man whose arms were crossed in front of his chest. His name was Mize, and he'd been introduced to her as the head chef. He looked like he was Vince's age, or maybe a little older, and like he'd bravely shaved off whatever was left of his thinning hair.

After studying Sara for some time, Mize finally opened his mouth. "Don't you have any clothes that fit you, kid?"

So *that's* why he was staring at her. Unfortunately, Nelly had provided all of Sara's clothes. Which meant...

"All of my clothes are this size."

Yep.

"Guess if you're trying to earn your registration fee, you can't really be spending money on clothes," Mize said resignedly. "Listen up. It's dangerous to wear baggy clothes in a kitchen. Keep your sleeves and pant legs rolled up, tuck your shirt into your pants, and cinch your belt tight."

“Right!”

“Okay, start with peeling potatoes.”

Peeling potatoes was the start of any cafeteria job. Sara psyched herself up. She peeled potatoes, and when the dishes piled up, she washed them. Even when noon came around, the cafeteria never got very crowded, so Sara almost had to wonder what she’d even been hired for.

“That’s good enough for today.”

She hadn’t done kitchen work like this in a long time, and it used different muscles from walking. But she didn’t feel the persistent exhaustion she’d felt in Japan, just the typical sort of fatigue that came with doing any work. Sara was thankful for that.

“You’re more handy than I thought you’d be.”

Sara was happy that all her cooking in the cottage had come in useful for something.

“The cafeteria’s busiest at night. Lots of Hunters coming back from the dungeons eat dinner here.”

“So that’s why it’s not very busy at noon.”

“Yeah. Most of what you’re doing is prep work for dinner. Once you’re registered and you can live in town, I’d like for you to help with dinner too, but we’ll start with just lunch,” Mize said, handing her her pay.

Sara was grateful that she’d be paid by the day. She had three new coins with holes in them. She’d technically earned the money she’d gotten by selling her lunches too, but the ingredients for those meals had come from Nelly, so these three coins felt like the first real monetary reward she’d gotten for her labor. Sara clenched her fist around the coins.

“Hey, looks like you finished your work in the kitchen,” said Vince, poking his head in. “Okay, next up is the store.”

“Huh?”

He led Sara over to the store this time. She hadn’t actually accepted this task yet, though.

“When it’s less busy in the middle of the day, the reception desks double as a storefront, but it’s such a pain...”

Sara looked at the other receptionists in surprise, and they all nodded with irritated looks on their faces.

“We’ve got real sales staff that start at five, so you just have to sit here and do nothing for the next three hours and we’ll pay you one thousand gil. How’s that sound?”

Ten to two in the kitchen, meal included, then two to five at a store counter. It wasn’t bad. There was one problem, of course. Sara knew nothing about money.

“Umm, could you show me the money?”

“Money? It’s in this chest.”

Vince opened up a box under the counter of a snug little kiosk right next to the cafeteria.

“Right, let me start with this. I dunno what Ted said about the Third District, but whether you have a proper place to live or not, there’s practically no crime in Rosa.”

“Really?” Sara tilted her head, not sure why Vince had started talking about this.

“The monsters around Rosa are strong, so the Hunters here are strong, too. Which means if you commit a crime, you’re not gonna be able to get away with it.”

“I see. Oh.”

In other words, he was telling her not to swipe any of the money. That didn’t quite sit right with her, but there wasn’t much she could say in response. She decided to just be grateful that he was still offering her work despite her background.

“I understand. I just have a few questions.”

“Yeah?”

“The coin with the hole in it is one thousand gil. The smaller one is a hundred gil. What else is there?”

“Huh?”

“Well, those are the only kinds of money I’ve seen...” It was awfully embarrassing, but Sara had only just seen money in this world for the first time the day before.

“Uhh, I see. Okay. There are smaller coins too, but somehow you’ve only seen silvers? How’d that happen?” Vince asked himself, staring at the reception desks with a blank look on his face. “Well, you’re still a kid. I guess there are kids who’ve never handled money before.”

He seemed to convince himself of something, then turned back to Sara and gave her a reassuring smile—though it came off kind of scary because of his gruff exterior.

“Okay, no problem. You just need to remember four more.”

“Right!”

“This copper coin is ten gil. The square one is one gil. You’ll hardly ever see the one gil, though.”

“So, the round copper is ten gil and the square copper is one gil.”

“This square silver coin is ten thousand gil, and the big round one is a hundred thousand gil.”

“The small silver is a hundred gil, the one with the hole in it is a thousand gil, the square silver is ten thousand gil, and the big silver is a hundred thousand gil,” Sara repeated. It was only six coins, so she felt confident. She smiled.

“You got them already?”

“Yep.”

“R-Right. Well, good. What we sell here is potions, greater potions, poison antidotes, antiparalytics, mana elixirs, and greater mana elixirs. And lunchboxes.”

Behind the counter were a bunch of disorganized bottles and a box.

“What’s this?”

“A storage box.”

“So *this* is a storage box! I’ve never seen one before!” Sara’s eyes lit up. She and Nelly had promised to buy one together one day. It was the size of a large moving box.

“Guess there are people who’ve never seen a storage box, too. They’re pretty expensive, after all. Mhm. I’m not gonna make the obvious joke,” Vince muttered, staring blankly toward the reception desks again. “The lunches are in this storage box. There’s only three kinds and they’re all three thousand gil apiece. If someone comes to return a box, give them fifteen hundred gil. You can put the returned boxes back into the storage box, too.”

“Okay.”

“Ask me if you need anything else.”

“Can I have some cleaning tools and, if possible, something to write with, too?”

Vince stared off into the distance again. “Why do you need something to write with? No, it’s fine. There should be a notepad and pen behind the counter.”

Sara peeked inside the kiosk. He was right.

“And cleaning tools would be...”

“They’re over here,” one of the other receptionists pointed out, unable to leave Vince floundering. He didn’t clean, apparently. All Sara needed was a bucket and a rag to wipe the counter with, so she took those and nothing else.

“Okay, ask me if you need anything,” said Vince.

“Got it.”

There wasn’t much to do in the Guild around this time, and there weren’t many Hunters buying things, so Sara decided to start by organizing the money. She lined up the jumbled-up mess of coins by type and counted the money currently in the chest.

“If they put it in a storage pouch, they wouldn’t have to reorganize it like this. I wonder why they don’t do that?” Was it because a lot of different people used this chest? Was it because storage bags were expensive? She picked up the notepad as she wondered to herself.

“Potions are two thousand gil, greater potions are ten thousand, poison antidotes are five thousand, antiparalytics are also five thousand, mana elixirs are ten thousand, and greater mana elixirs are a hundred thousand. That’s pricey.”

Sara sighed, looking down at the small vial of medicine in her hand. Still, she considered, if you could cure a headache or stomachache for just a little more than the price of a lunch, it wasn’t too expensive. She also learned that the things she was walking around with thinking they were potions were actually greater potions. Nelly might have called them that, now that she thought about it.

“Be more clear about things, Nelly...”

It was obvious to her in hindsight that Nelly was just equipping her with high-quality items out of fondness for her, and she was thankful for that, but she wished the woman could be a bit more upfront. Sara might have taken one out of her bag without thinking and made Vince get that empty look in his eyes again.

“Maybe I could sell my greater potions, too. It’s probably better to keep them in my bag, though...”

It was a little frustrating that she had so many things on her that she couldn’t use. For the time being, she filled up the bucket with hot water and wiped the counter with the rag. Then she took the potions off the shelf and wiped it down, finally wiping off any vials with dust on them. She pushed the disorganized bottles to the left side of the shelf and counted how many she had. Selling the older items and then restocking was Retail 101.

Satisfied, Sara put away the cleaning tools. Now she was ready to run her kiosk. She never noticed the bored receptionists watching her with their mouths wide open.

Eventually, she got her first customer. He looked like a Hunter. He started

heading toward one of the reception desks, then noticed Sara at the shop and headed for her instead.

“Hey. Five potions.”

Sara plucked five potions from the shelf and set them on the counter. “That’ll be ten thousand gil.”

“Mm. Also, I’m returning three lunchboxes, and can I get three more?” The man took three empty lunch boxes from his bag and set them on the counter.

“All together, that will be fourteen thousand five hundred gil. Which lunches would you like?”

“One of each. Here’s ten thousand and five thousand.”

“Thank you. That’s five small silvers in change. And here are your three lunches.”

“Thanks.”

That went a lot more smoothly than she’d been expecting.

The man went to a reception desk after that, and after a brief exchange with the clerk, started laying monsters on the desk. The receptionist assessed the materials and paid the Hunter for them. That seemed to be how the system worked. She surmised that they were taken to a separate room when the monsters they wanted to sell were large or if they had a large amount of them. She picked all this up over the course of the day as Hunters came in.

Eventually, as Hunters came back from the dungeons for the day and business started picking up, the old man who was typically in charge of the kiosk came in. He seemed like a cheerful, good-natured sort of person.

“Oh, we got some new help in?”

“My name is Sara. I’m just filling in from around two to five.”

“Call me Modz. I wouldn’t mind if you helped out a little longer. Or just took over for me!”

Sara smiled awkwardly. He seemed like he was either working here just to amuse himself in his old age or because someone he couldn’t turn down had

asked him to.

“I don’t have an ID yet, so I can’t really work in the evenings.”

“That’s unusual. No family in Rosa I’m guessing, like Allen?”

That was the first time Sara realized that it was unusual to be a child without an ID or family in Rosa. If she had family, she supposed, it wouldn’t matter that she didn’t have an ID. She’d only been in town yesterday and today, but she did notice that she and Allen were the only kids wandering around unattended that she’d seen.

“Sara!”

“Allen,” Sara replied when Allen popped his head into the guildhall. She made sure to hand the money off to Modz properly before heading over to Vince. Her pay for the kiosk would also be by the day.

“Here you are, one thousand gil.”

“Thank you.”

She had a long way to go yet, but if she kept this up for another month, she’d be able to get her ID. *Maybe Rosa isn’t so bad,* Sara thought.

“How was your work, Sara?”

“I managed to make four thousand gil in one day in the kitchen and at the kiosk.”

She was lucky to be able to make so much in one day when she was nothing but a twelve-year-old kid without any particular skills. The Hunter’s Guild was a lot more generous than she’d been expecting.

“Man, I could work the kiosk if I didn’t have so much mana. I gotta run around outside ’cause I got no other choice.”

“That’s too bad...”

Having too much mana really did seem to cause trouble. Vince had said something similar himself.

“Something weird happened today, though. A place I usually always deliver for told me they didn’t need my help anymore. Normally, I can make two or

three thousand, but today I only made one. And I only need another nineteen thousand, too...”

“I wonder what happened.”

“If this keeps up, I’ll just ask Vince if he has other work for me.”

Sara and Allen passed through the central gate as they chatted.

“But even if we register at the Guild, it’ll still cost money to stay in the town, won’t it?”

“Yeah. Even the Guild’s cheapest rooms still cost five thousand. It’s ten thousand if you stay at an inn in town.”

“Can you make that much just after registering at the Guild?”

“Yeah, I think so. Just taking out one slime will net you a thousand gil for the magic stone. I still plan on camping out outside town for a while after registering, though. You need to save up your money and make sure each member of the family has enough to get by. Otherwise...” Allen frowned. “When the worst happens, you’ll be out of luck.”

He must have been thinking about his uncle. He’d made a good amount of money, but just ended up running into people who took advantage of him for it. You could say that money only brought trouble for him in the end, but Sara still thought it was good that Allen planned to save up some funds for himself. She had her own money problems, too. It was because she’d thoughtlessly entrusted all of her savings to Nelly that she’d ended up in her current penniless state.

“I can sell your medicinal plants for you when I register, too.”

Sara shook her head. “You don’t have to do that. Nelly told me it’s against the rules. You already got me a pretty well-paying gig, anyway. You’re letting me borrow your tent so I can change my clothes and wash off too, but I’d really like a tent of my own, I think.”

“I don’t mind letting you use it at all. They had cheap used tents in the capital, though... I don’t know what they’ve got in Rosa, since I’ve never had time to really look in any of the shops. Guess I could stop by while I’m on my deliveries

tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m good for now, since I’ve still got plenty of food.” Sara tapped the pouch at her waist.

“Man, how much do you have in there?”

For whatever reason, she couldn’t bring herself to say “five months’ worth.”

The two of them picked medicinal plants the next morning, too.

“It’s not like it’s a secret, but I never see anyone else out here gathering plants. I guess there’s plenty of ground to cover out here, though.”

“You don’t really notice it since *we* sleep out here by the walls, but the people who live in the town are scared of the outside. Especially the ones in the First and Second Districts.”

“Even though there’s a protection field?”

“Well, a protection field won’t make a difference against a really strong monster.”

Sara had no idea how to react to that.

“My protection cases repel wyverns... What kind of monster is stronger than a wyvern?”

“You’ve got ones that work against wyverns, eh? For being so broke, the stuff you’ve got is really first-class.”

Allen did have his inconsiderate moments.

“I’ve heard Rosa’s walls went down once in the past when a group of continental tortoises were moving through the area, and once when they pissed some dragon off.”

“Are things like that out in this meadow?”

“I don’t think so. And I don’t think anything like that has happened recently.”

Then what did they have to worry about?

“But people can’t help what scares them,” Allen continued. “It’s not like everyone wants to be a Hunter. Most people spend their whole lives inside of a

town. I mean, just look at that.” He turned toward the protection field around the town.

Beyond the field, there were fluffy sheep in the distance, with horned rabbits hopping about closer to town. It was a peaceful sight.

“Oh, that one just hit the field.”

The horned rabbits seemed to be after Allen and Sara, who were safely inside the field. There was nothing peaceful about the situation after all.

“See? You’ll see stuff like that from closer up if you take the main roads. It’s scary even when you know you’re inside a protection field.”

Sara couldn’t deny that. She’d seen for herself that the protection field on the road hadn’t done a thing when she was coming down to Rosa from the Dark Mountain.

Sara thought about the rabbits in her storage backpack. She didn’t even know how many she had. Dozens, at least. The rabbits were pretty big, too. They were about half the size of Sara herself.

“It’s fine if you can use physical strengthening, but it’s hard work keeping it activated at all times.”

Nelly had said the same thing. But Allen was only twelve years old. He wasn’t scared?

“Do they scare you, Allen?”

“I’m fine. Since I couldn’t go into dungeons, my uncle trained me plenty out in fields like this. I’ve got a few horned rabbits on me at the moment, actually. I just can’t sell them.”

“I don’t suppose your uncle said something like this to you, Allen: ‘You figured out physical strengthening? Let’s go to the field, then.’” Sara remembered vividly how Nelly had been with her.

“That’s exactly what he said. Sara, how’d you know?”

“Because Nelly was the exact same way.” Sara stared off into the distance, unable to bring herself to tell him that she’d even told Sara to let a wolf bite her. Allen seemed to catch on anyway, seeing the look on her face.

“But wasn’t your uncle a caster? How’d you end up using physical strengthening?”

“It’s just what I was good at.”

According to Allen, it was difficult to learn something like physical strengthening through study. Whether you could do it well had more to do with the qualities you were born with.

“I see.”

Allen really made things easy to understand. Maybe if he was good enough at physical strengthening to take down horned rabbits, he would be fine down in the dungeon. Nelly had talked about it as if her whole body was a blunt weapon. That reassured Sara a little.

She clenched her fists. “Let’s give it our all again today!”

“Yeah!”

She parted with Allen in front of the Hunter’s Guild.

“I’ll get going a little early today to make up for what I didn’t earn yesterday.”

“See you later.”

Sara waved at Allen as he ran off, and then stepped into the Guild.

“Good morning,” she greeted Vince.

“Hey, Sara. Where’s Allen?” Vince asked, glancing behind her. He was sitting by himself in the corner looking bored as always. The people at the other counters responded to her greeting as well, which brought Sara a great deal of comfort.

“He just left. He said he wanted to get to work early.”

“I gotcha. Thanks for helping out again.”

“Of course!”

Sara rolled up her sleeves and headed for the kitchen.

“Good morning!” she chimed.

“Hey! Tuck your shirt into your pants and tighten your belt!”

“Yes, sir!”

At Mize’s command, Sara’s potato-peeling began. This was her fourth day since arriving in Rosa.

When she finished helping out in the kitchen, she received her three thousand gil and headed for the kiosk in the Guild to help out there again today.

“I’ll check our stock first... Hmm? There aren’t any new potions here... Will this be enough?” She was curious about that, but keeping track of stock wasn’t her job. For now she just moved the bottles she had over to the left.

“The money in the chest is... It’s not all mixed together, so it’s better than yesterday.” She lined up the coins for quicker access.

“Lunches... There aren’t any extras of these either, but there are still plenty left, so it’s fine.”

She didn’t have any customers yet, so Sara trotted over to Vince to ask him some questions.

“Vince, I don’t have that many potions left.”

“Huh. They should be delivered tonight, I think...”

“I saw plenty of them on shelves at the Apothecary’s Guild,” Sara said, remembering the bottles she’d seen lined up on the other Guild’s shelves.

“Those guys... They said they didn’t have many potions they could spare. What’s the point of holding out on us? It’s not like many people go directly to the Apothecary’s Guild to buy them.”

“It did seem pretty slow over there when we were there. Allen and I picked more medicinal plants again today, too.” Sara took the mana herbs she’d picked today out of her pouch and showed them to Vince.

A chair clattered to the floor as a bored-looking receptionist on the other side of the room leaped to her feet. “Those are mana herbs, aren’t they?! And freshly-picked ones, too!”

“I don’t think I’m going to get a good deal for them at the Apothecary’s Guild though, so I’m not going to sell them yet.”

“Then sell them to us! We’ll have to take twenty percent as a handling fee, of course.”

“Listen, Mina, this kid doesn’t have the money to register at the Guild.”

“So sell the plants to earn the...oh.”

It came full circle.

“I have all sorts of things I could sell, really. It sucks that I can’t register yet.” Sara laughed.

Still, she had a part-time job now, and more than anything, she was thankful that she wasn’t alone during the day or at night here in Rosa.

“You’ve got stuff to sell other than lunches and medicinal plants?”

“Yes.”

When she listed magic stones from slimes and horned rabbits as examples, the Guild went quiet.

“Are you serious?” the other receptionist, Mina, asked, but Vince cut her off.

“Drop it. We can’t protect someone who’s not registered with the Guild as a Hunter. Showing us a bunch of stuff you can’t sell will only lead to trouble.”

It was Vince who had brought up the subject, Sara noted.

“Oh, and while I’m here...” Sara decided to ask the other question she’d been thinking about at the kiosk. “About the lunches, can we sell them warmed up?”

“Warmed up? I mean, I guess so...”

“Do you think I could charge an extra hundred gil to warm them up when I sell them?”

It hurt that she couldn’t sell her medicinal plants, but she was thankful for the opportunity to make four thousand gil in a day working here. But since both Nelly and Allen hadn’t known how to use magic to heat up water for tea, Sara had been wondering if she could make a business out of that.

“Come to think of it, the lunch I bought from you was still warm... I have heard there are people who can do that... You could eat hot food like that inside a dungeon, huh?”

“I can make the soup nice and hot. And the meat gets a little softer, too.”

“Well, that lunch I got from you was at just the right temperature. I guess you could. I wonder if anyone’ll ask for that, though.”

Well, Vince was skeptical, but she’d gotten permission. Even if only one person asked her to do it per day, that would mean she’d make two hundred gil in two days, which would buy her a roll of brown bread.

Sara returned to the kiosk, fired up. She still didn’t get too many customers, but a few of them at least glanced at the piece of paper she’d left on the counter that said “Heated lunches: +100 gil.” Though it wasn’t compulsory, most people learned basic math and how to read and write by the age of ten, so literacy was commonplace. So she’d heard from Nelly.

“Hey, you’re tending the store again?”

A Hunter who had come the day before as well returned to the kiosk.

“I’ll be here around this time every day.”

“Oh yeah? I’ll take two greater potions and three lunches today.”

“One of each?”

“Yeah.”

“That’ll be twenty-four thousand five hundred gil. Also...” Sara accepted the Hunter’s empty lunch boxes, but before handing over the new ones, showed the Hunter the paper on the counter.

“Heated lunches? What happens when they’re heated?”

Well, Sara certainly wasn’t expecting that question.

“They taste better.”

“How do you heat them?”

“With magic.”

“Hunh. A hundred gil, eh? Sure, I’ll try it for just one of them.”

Sara opened up the lunch box as she always did and held her hand over each item inside it, heating up the soup, meat, and bread individually to their ideal

temperatures without touching them. When they started to steam and a nice smell wafted out from the box, she closed the lid. It didn't even take a full minute.

"Just like that."

"For a hundred gil, huh? Go ahead and do it for all three of them, then."

"Okay! That'll be twenty-four thousand eight hundred gil! Please put them away in your storage bag quickly before they cool."

"Yeah."

Sara took the three hundred gil she charged for her warming service and put it in her own pouch. While the appetizing smell from a previous lunch lingered in the vicinity of the kiosk, several other Hunters came by and asked for their own lunches to be warmed. By the time the old man in charge of the store during the evening came around, she'd managed to make an extra thousand gil warming lunches up.

It was about time for Allen to come back. Sara glanced toward the entrance of the Guild restlessly, waiting for him to run in, calling her name. But that wasn't what happened.

Allen pushed the door in quietly, eyes downcast.

"Allen?"

"Yeah. It didn't go well today either."

It seemed he wasn't able to do his usual delivery jobs again today.

Sara turned back to Modz. "Do you mind taking over?"

"Of course. See you tomorrow."

"Yes. Goodbye!"

The people of the Guild were giving Allen worried looks, too. Sara patted him on the back and gave him a look of her own to suggest they leave. More and more Hunters were coming back from the dungeons, so it was getting crowded around the entrance. She shouldn't have recognized anyone aside from the Hunters who had bought things from her kiosk, but there was one person who

came through the doors and headed for the reception desk in the center of the Guild who she couldn't forget.

"Finally bringing in some new stock? Can you come on schedule?"

"What do you expect? The capital's late on their delivery of healing herbs."

Sara recognized that nasty tone from the Apothecary's Guild, she realized with a start.

"Ted..."

She'd just muttered the name to herself quietly, but Ted still turned around and looked at her and Allen.

"Ha. Didn't think I'd find Third District trash wandering around here," he said with his disgust on full display.

"Hey, Ted!"

"I stand by what I said, Vince. The only people allowed to be here in Rosa are the people who have always been here or people who have proven their strength. Kids without guardians who haven't registered at the Guild are nothing more than a burden on Rosa. They're eyesores."

The Hunters in the Guild who'd heard Ted's rather loud proclamation turned to look at him, then glanced at Sara and Allen, and finally went back to their original business, showing no interest in the conflict. Though, to their credit, a lot of the receptionists were scowling at Ted.

"Hey... You're not interfering with my work, are you?" Allen couldn't stop himself from stepping forward.

"Work? You're just some garbage wandering around town, aren't you? Do you seriously think you're contributing something here? I just told some places I'd prefer not to see that kind of trash around town."

"Are you serious?!" Allen was clenching his fists in anger, but if he acted on his feelings, he would be the one at fault. He knew that, so he was desperately holding himself back.

Sara found herself remembering Nelly's words. *"You're only saying that because you don't know how cold Rosa is. It's a dungeon town. It's hard for*

anyone to make it there if they didn't start out there, unless they're one of the strong earning their living in the dungeons."

The first person Sara had met in Rosa had been Allen. The Apothecary's Guild had been cold to them, but everyone at the Hunter's Guild was kind. They'd even offered her work. So Sara hadn't given Nelly's words much weight.

"This is Rosa..." she found herself muttering. "It's just like Nelly said it was."

"Hmm, this Nelly of yours really knew what she was talking about. If she was able to be that realistic about things, maybe she gave up on Master Chris and went to the capital to find herself another man."

"Huh?"

Sara couldn't believe what she was hearing. Nelly was faithful to a fault. She always put Sara first. She would never just go off to the capital without saying a word to Sara.

And "gave up on Chris"? "Went to find another man"? That wasn't why Nelly had told her to go to Chris for help. This guy didn't know a thing about Nelly.

"Apologize." Sara took a step forward.

"What?"

"Apologize. You said you didn't know Nelly. If you don't know her, why are you badmouthing her like this?"

"She left a kid behind and ran off somewhere, right? Doesn't exactly leave the best impression."

Nelly had considered the possibility that she wouldn't be able to come back. Just because the Apothecary's Guild couldn't actually be counted on didn't mean that was Nelly's fault. Sara took another step toward Ted.

"...Huh? Hey, what are you...?"

Even when a wolf was about to bite her or a wyvern was diving for her, all Sara cared about was protecting herself. She didn't want to hurt anyone if she didn't have to. Sara had never considered how infuriating it was for someone she cared about to be hurt, though.

Fury was rising inside her. As it did, the Hunters in the Guild started to back away from her.

“Sara!” Allen called out to her.

Sara took another step toward Ted.

Ted was pressed up against the reception desk, leaning back over it. “Eek!”

She took another step forward.

“Sara.”

She heard a quiet voice above her and felt hands on her shoulders. Sara gasped and relaxed her tense muscles. Ted suddenly collapsed to his knees.

What did I just do? Sara wondered dazedly.

“Did you do that without thinking, Sara? That was a ton of pressure. I didn’t think you had that much mana.”

“Vince...”

He’d come around from behind his desk at some point, though Sara didn’t know when.

“Sara! Are you okay?” Allen ran up to her and took her hand.

She hadn’t noticed, but apparently Sara had been exerting pressure on Ted.

“Y-You’re worse than garbage! You’re a monster! If you’re gonna let this thing into the Guild, at least train it properly!” Ted managed to stand somehow and left those parting words as he fled the Guild.

“Nelly wouldn’t just leave me without telling me why. Something else is going on, I’m sure of it.” Sara squeezed Allen’s hand. Allen reciprocated.

“Yeah. If she didn’t care about you, she wouldn’t have set you up with that storage pouch.” Vince knelt down and met Sara’s eyes. “Especially not one that holds three wyverns.” He gave her an awkward wink.

“Yeah.” Sara nodded, trying not to cry, as Allen clenched his fist beside her.

“We’re not garbage.”

“Yeah.” Sara nodded again.

“We’re just not proper Hunters yet.”

“R-Right.” Sara didn’t particularly want to be a Hunter, so her agreement to this statement was a little more tempered.

When she looked up she found that things were pretty much the same as usual in the Guild, as if none of that had even happened. Was that “cold”? It was true that no one had stepped in when Ted had been ridiculing Sara and Allen, but they also hadn’t particularly changed the way they looked at Sara when she accidentally pressured Ted and everyone else around her.

Yeah. I’m not garbage or a monster. I’m just Sara, who’s going to become independent and find Nelly. Rosa might have been cold, but it wasn’t unaccepting. *As long as I keep myself under control, I’m sure I can make it here.* Sara lifted her head, determined.

“That’s the spirit.” Vince nodded and Sara found herself smiling.

She turned to Allen. “Should we head out, Allen?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

As they strolled out of the Guild together, they didn’t hear Vince muttering to himself as he wiped the cold sweat from his brow.

“Kid might have more mana than Jay. The two of them might really become monsters if we treat them like the Apothecary’s Guild does. They’ve got talent, for sure, but...why do they both have to be orphans, seriously?”

Everyone in the Guild was doubtless hoping the Apothecary’s Guild wouldn’t start anything else.

Sara and Allen bought some bread at a stand on their way home, like always.

“Are you okay spending money?”

Sara was worried about him, but Allen grinned.

“I’ve got a separate fund for food set aside.”

It seemed he’d reflected on how bad he’d looked staggering around hungry on that first day they met, and had set aside some money for food. Sara was

impressed. Fantasy world kids were tough.

The rest was the same as usual. They camped on the very edge of the residential area outside town. And when they woke up in the morning, they gathered medicinal plants.

“Are you gonna look for delivery work again today?”

“Of course! Even if I only make a thousand gil in a day, I’ll have ten thousand in ten days.”

The two of them jogged to the Hunter’s Guild together. Sara had her own work to take care of once she was there.

“Good morning, Mize!”

“Hey. Tighten your belt!”

She felt like today would be a bit better than yesterday. As Sara peeled potatoes in a corner of the kitchen, she sensed a commotion in the Guild outside.

“Mize, Guildmaster says to make a bit extra for lunch and dinner today.” A receptionist even popped in to deliver a message to the chef.

“Sounds like something’s up out there.” Mize poked his head out to see what was going on and grimaced. “It’s a unit of knights from the capital. I thought they were so busy over there that they’ve been scooping up our Hunters for their work, so what are they doing here?”

Sara was a little excited when she heard the word “knights.” The knights she knew were all hot guys who pledged their loyalty to royal families. Maybe she’d go sneak a peek of them later. Come to think of it, she’d heard there was a capital, but not who ruled there. Was this place a monarchy? She was a little appalled at herself for not knowing, but she made the excuse to herself that she was busy just getting by at the moment.

The only impact this exciting event had on Sara’s life was that she had more potatoes to peel, so she worked an extra hour and made an extra thousand gil at her part-time job, which was pretty nice for her. Since she had an hour of overtime in the kitchen, she thought she might get out of running the kiosk

today, but the moment she emerged from the cafeteria, one of the receptionists pulled her right over to the store.

“Those knights from the capital are giving us extra work, so it’s even harder for us to look after the store. Can you just look after it for an hour?”

“Huh? Well, sure...”

“We’ll pay what we always do.”

“Leave it to me!”

There was a line for the reception desks, which was unusual, and while Sara was organizing the money and potions at the kiosk, more and more Hunters started coming her way instead.

“Five lunches, whatever kind. And two greater potions.”

“Would you like me to warm them up? It’ll cost a hundred gil per lunch.”

“Warm them up? Nah.”

“No boxes to return? That’ll be thirty-five thousand gil.”

The first person turned her down, but as soon as one person requested a warm lunch out of curiosity, everyone after that person followed suit, so she was able to make two thousand gil in one hour just warming up lunches.

“Thanks again. I’ll switch with you. Oh, lots of customers today.”

“Mr. Modz! I don’t really know why either. You can ask a receptionist about it.”

“Doesn’t look like I’ll have time. Honestly, I wish you could stay and help out more.”

“I’ll try to register as soon as I can!”

Sara was fired up.

The next day, Allen picked medicinal plants early and headed into town before Sara. He needed all the time he could get to look for odd jobs to do. Sara picked plants and headed into the Guild when she always did, but when she pushed open the doors to the building, she was met with a different sight than usual.

“It’s crowded...”

People came and went through the usually empty hall and the cafeteria was more crowded than it usually got even at lunchtime. Though when she got a good look at the people there, she realized they might just be using it as a rest area.

The only reason she could think of for this change was the “unit of knights from the capital” she’d heard about the day before. Were the people milling about in the Guild knights, then? Sara was a bit excited by the thought. She did feel like they were all wearing something like a uniform. But she didn’t have any time to get a better look than that.

“Sara!”

“Sara!”

Two people called out to her from different directions.

“Huh?” She wasn’t sure which one to answer.

“Sara! Come help in the kitchen!”

“Sara! Can you help with the store right away today?”

Mize was calling for her from the kitchen and Vince, from the reception desks.

Sara hesitated for a moment before heading to the kitchen and calling out to Vince on the way, “If you want help at the store, you’ll have to ask Mize, Vince.”

“Okay, tighten your belt!”

“Yes, sir!”

She just wished she’d been able to get a better look at the knights.

Chapter 3: Left Behind

Trouble Comes From the Capital

While Sara was putting her all into potato-peeling, Ted was hounding Vince out in the Guild proper. Of course, he was doing this from a slight distance, since he couldn't get too close to Vince.

"Get those kids to cough up their medicinal plants, would you?"

"Ted, you're aware that you called Sara and Allen garbage the other day, right? Aren't they just burdens on the town as far as you're concerned?"

Vince sat down at his desk and started blithely organizing some papers. Allen and Sara would both doubtless earn the money for their registration without having to rely on the Apothecary's Guild. There was no need for them to get involved with someone so irritating.

Ted wouldn't back down, though. "Well, it's the truth, isn't it?"

"Not as far as the Hunter's Guild is concerned. Even if they're not capable of much now, with the amount of mana they've got, they're bound to steadily improve and contribute to the Guild before long. Not to mention, if they're able to gather medicinal plants at twelve, I'd say they're already fully capable of contributing."

Without prejudice, those were the facts.

"Ugh... But regardless of their abilities, they can't just come in and demand to see Master Chris. Do you know how many women try to get Master Chris's attention by using kids?"

"Even if that's true, it's a point against Sara's guardian, not against Sara. Plus, if Chris were actually there, you know he would have treated Sara or those women fairly."

Vince was starting to raise his voice. Neither of them noticed it, but they were starting to draw the attention of the rest of the Guild.

“Those kids you called garbage are here working every day and camping outside of town because they can’t register at the Guild to sell their medicinal plants. Do you understand that?”

“Camping? So they *are* just garbage.”

“You wanna say that again?” Vince stood, knocking the chair out from under himself.

Ted took a step back, raising a hand to caution Vince. “I didn’t say a thing! And I’ll pay the standard price. Okay?”

“Then quit whining to me and tell that to the kid in the kitchen right now! If you don’t get those healing herbs, the knights will never be able to set out, will they?”

Vince could tell that no matter how well he argued the point, Ted didn’t intend to change the way he thought about Sara and Allen. Either he really didn’t want to talk to the two of them or he was just loath to apologize to them. Vince didn’t care either way.

“Did you find somewhere to get the healing herbs, Ted?”

“M-Master Chris...”

Just then, the person Ted wanted to keep his little issue from more than anyone else emerged from the back of the Guild. It was the subject of his admiration, the head of the Apothecary’s Guild. Vince smirked at the sight.

Chris was a man of character, but that didn’t necessarily mean that he attracted the same sort of people to him. With his faintly glossy silver hair tied back behind his head and his grey eyes, he had a wintry, intelligent look to him. His tranquil personality and, more importantly, the earnings and talent he possessed as the head of Rosa’s Apothecary’s Guild—as well as the fact that he was single—meant that he was popular with women. He was always dealing with some trouble or another due to this. But by far the worst thing about him was the blind devotion with which the other members of the Apothecary’s Guild treated him.

“Yes, most likely,” Ted responded reverently, keeping his panic under control.

Vince grimaced at how marked and immediate this change in behavior was.

“Procure them immediately, then. Every second counts right now.”

Ted paled and began to head for the kitchen as Vince had directed him to.

Watching him, the Guildmaster, who’d emerged from the back with Chris, complained, “If you were in such a hurry, couldn’t you have brought potions with you from the capital? We’ve got Hunters fighting in the dungeons here. You can’t just go taking all our potions.”

“I’m sorry. No one knew that Nefertari was turning down her requests because she’d taken a child in. Not even me...” Chris’s eyes said that he wished she’d confided in him.

Vince sighed. He knew that Nefertari, the caretaker of the Dark Mountain, had been turning down the capital’s request for her to subdue migrating dragons for the last two years now. It was more convenient for Rosa if she stayed, so he hadn’t given it much thought, but no one had realized that the reason she didn’t want to leave was because she’d taken in a child. She hadn’t been able to turn down the request for the third year in a row and they’d ended up taking her to the capital by force, but as a result, there was a lone girl left behind on the Dark Mountain now.

It wouldn’t look good for the capital if people found out about that, so they’d dispatched a search party, in part to pacify Nefertari as well. Chris had returned from the capital to accompany that search party. He likely didn’t trust the knights to get the job done either.

“Anybody would be worried about a girl all alone on the Dark Mountain, but it’s already been more than half a month.” The Guildmaster implied that it was likely too late, to which Chris winced.

“Don’t say such things! At the very least, Nefertari won’t be satisfied until she finds out what happened to the girl. In the first place, this is all the fault of those knights for putting Nefertari to sleep and taking her to the capital. She was practically out of her mind when she woke up in the capital, and I only got her to stay there when I said I would send a group back to search for the girl.”

“Yeah, and you came along because you were worried about leaving it all to

them.”

“Of course I did! What were they thinking, using a paralysis agent on a human being?! What would they have done if it had caused some sort of side effect?!”

None of this would have happened if Nefertari had simply married another noble in the capital, but Nefertari was too strong to remain a simple noble girl, and her family already had an heir. It was these difficult circumstances that led to her living practically in hiding on the Dark Mountain, Rosa’s north dungeon.

“She’s doing plenty for us here, so they should just leave her alone.”

They had never felt so much sympathy for Nefertari, who was still at the mercy of the capital.

“She might still be safe as long as she doesn’t leave the cottage. There’s a strong protection field around it.”

Everyone bowed their heads almost in prayer at Vince’s words.

“In any case, we need to make a round trip to the cottage. At the very shortest, it’ll be six days to get there and back and one spent on searching, so seven days in total. The potions we have right now won’t be nearly enough. You can’t spare any Hunters from the Guild to help out, can you? I just can’t bring myself to trust those knights.”

“Doubt it. We’re already short on hands as it is with the migrating dragons in the capital.”

“You said it. In any case, we need more healing herbs, and especially greater healing herbs. We have to hurry...”

The two of them looked toward the kitchen, where Ted had run off.

***

“I’ll buy your medicinal plants. Get out all you have,” Ted said as soon as he stepped into the kitchen while Sara was peeling potatoes.

Sara just gaped at him, potato in hand.

“The knights are heading to the north dungeon, and they need greater potions. I’m guessing you have greater healing herbs too, don’t you?”

Ted wasn't exactly being polite, but his expression made it clear that he was in dire need. Cooks were passing by him looking extremely annoyed by his presence.

"I do, but..."

"Sell them to me. I'm begging you!"

Frankly speaking, no matter how poorly she'd been treated, she'd been doing just fine for herself for the last few days. She had protection cases for camping and her storage pouch was full of food due to Sara's naturally cautious personality. If it wasn't, she would probably be in quite a bit of trouble by now. It didn't really occur to her that the fact that she was camping out at all and earning whatever money she could day by day might already count as "being in trouble."

She'd like to think she wasn't so stubborn that she'd hold a grudge forever over a little poor treatment. And Ted would only be in the way if he kept standing around there.

Sara looked up at the head chef. "Mize."

"Go ahead. Finish up fast and get back here."

"Okay!"

They couldn't conduct their business here in the crowded kitchen. Sara signaled Ted, who left the kitchen with her, looking like his attitude had improved at least somewhat. Or maybe that was just Sara's imagination.

While she was glancing around trying to determine where they should conduct their business, a tough-looking man who wasn't Vince beckoned her over. Sara wondered for a moment who he was before it dawned on her.

"The guy who bought one of my lunches!"

"I'm the guildmaster here..."

He didn't look that important, but apparently he was. Actually, he was basically Sara's employer.

"You have medicinal plants? Can you put them here?"

Someone Sara didn’t recognize indicated a counter like it belonged to him. His eyes and hair were both a light color, and he wore white robes as well, giving him a wintry impression. He wore the same kind of green brooch Ted did, so Sara assumed he was from the Apothecary’s Guild.

“How many do you want?”

“How many?” The wintry person lowered his voice. “However many you have.”

Sara looked not to the guildmaster but to Vince, who she usually dealt with. She couldn’t help feeling distrustful of the Apothecary’s Guild, and the coercive attitude of the wintry man wasn’t helping, so she wanted some guidance on whether or not she should do what he said.

Vince gave her a firm nod from the other side of the reception desk, so Sara took her whole gathering basket out of her storage pouch. For the five days between Nelly leaving and Sara heading to town, she’d been gathering as many medicinal plants as she could to try to take her mind off of her anxiety, so both levels of the basket were completely stuffed with everything from healing herbs to greater mana herbs.

“This is...”

“Whoa!”

“Wow...”

Everyone exclaimed in wonder when they saw the basket.

“I’m sorry, but we’ll be taking the whole basket for now! Ted, go!”

“Yes, sir!”

Ted snatched up the basket and ran right out of the Guild. Sara didn’t even have time to tell him to wait. Before she could even react, the wintry man told her, “We’ll calculate the purchase price and deliver the fee here. We’ll return the basket later, too. I must be going.”

The man followed Ted out of the Guild. Sara didn’t have time to say a thing in response.

“I was gonna tell him to buy Allen’s plants before mine.”

“Sara...”

“Then Allen could register at the Guild.”

Vince wasn’t sure what to say. He raised his hand, then lowered it. “He already left to find work today. Just tell him when he gets back.”

“I will!”

Allen had been feeling down lately, so Sara was looking forward to seeing him later knowing she had good news to tell him.

“Why is everyone at the Apothecary’s Guild so full of themselves?” she couldn’t help grumbling.

Vince gave her a wry grin. “I won’t argue with that. Chris, the guildmaster, isn’t so bad, though. He was just in a hurry because of the situation we’re in right now. Don’t worry, he keeps his promises.”

“That was Chris?” Sara turned to Vince in surprise. “There isn’t another person named Chris?”

“That’s the only Chris if you’re talking apothecaries.”

Sara couldn’t believe *that* was the person she’d been waiting for all this time. She didn’t feel like she could go to him for anything, no matter what Nelly had said. That was Sara’s frank judgment of the man.

At the same time, Rosa wasn’t nearly as cold as Nelly had made it out to be. She hadn’t been able to rely on Chris, but Allen, Vince, and Mize were all helping Sara plenty. *Them*, Sara felt like she could trust.

“I’m the guildmaster here...”

The guildmaster who was the boss of all of them, too.

“Okay, the apothecaries have their healing herbs. We should be able to head to the north dungeon in mid-afternoon.”

“Do you need to hurry that much, Jay?”

“Might be too late at this point, to be honest. But if the kid’s still alive, it’ll be better to put her at ease as soon as we can. Time to get ready.”

The guildmaster returned to the back of the building. Everyone was so busy.

It didn't go how you said it would, but I'm living in Rosa just fine, Sara told Nelly in her heart.

"Hey! Sara! Potatoes!"

"Yes, sir!"

She was busy, too. She'd have overtime again today.

"Four thousand again today."

"Thank you!"

Despite everything, she was steadily earning her keep. After her work ended, Sara waited anxiously for Allen to come through the doors, excited to tell him he'd be able to sell his medicinal plants now, but she waited much longer than she usually did and Allen never came back.

"It's gotta be too late now. I guess I'll go wait for him outside the gate."

Sara said goodbye to Modz at the kiosk and hurried toward the gate.

"Hey, kid."

"Huh?" Sara stopped walking as someone called out to her, surprised. It was the gate guard who usually just glared at her.

"Allen went through the gate around when he usually does. Said he had something to take care of. He asked me to tell you that if I saw you."

"He did?" That made Sara feel a little better. She was starting to worry that something had happened to him. But the gate guard had said he'd left the town. What could he have to take care of outside of town?

"You didn't happen to hear what he was doing, did you?"

"He said something about a job from the Apothecary's Guild."

"Oh, good. He must have sold his healing herbs, then." He must have heard directly from them that he could sell his herbs now. Now Allen could register at the Guild as soon as tomorrow.

"That's not what it sounded like," the gate guard said, raining on Sara's parade. "That squad of knights left for the Dark Mountain this afternoon,

right?”

“The Dark Mountain?”

“You know, the north dungeon.”

Come to think of it, the guildmaster had said something like that, too.

“He said they were able to make some extra potions, so he was going to deliver them. And that if he could do this errand for the Apothecary’s Guild, he’d be able to register at the Guild tomorrow. He was thrilled.”

“Errand. For the Apothecary’s Guild.” Something didn’t sit right with her. “Hey, mister. You mean Allen went chasing after a bunch of adult knights on foot?”

“Y-Yeah. Kid’s fast though, and he’s got plenty of stamina. He said it might take him the rest of the day, but he should be able to catch up to them by tonight. And even if he can’t catch up to them, he’ll be safe if he sticks to the road. If he wakes up early, he can just catch them tomorrow.”

Sara didn’t know how much stamina Allen had, but was it really enough to catch up to a group of adults, and knights at that? It was true that you could move a lot faster with physical strengthening, and that was Allen’s speciality. But still...

Something was sticking in Sara’s mind, and it irritated her. The north dungeon was the Dark Mountain. The Dark Mountain was where Sara and Nelly had lived together. She was surprised to learn that she’d been living in a dungeon, but she didn’t have time to think about that right now. Something was wrong here. He’d be safe if he stuck to the road? Sara gasped and looked up at the soldier.

“The road isn’t safe! The protection field around the road from the Dark Mountain to the east gate barely functions at all, and horned rabbits are charging at you constantly!”

When Sara came down to the meadow at the base of the mountain, there were definitely safe spots here and there with protection fields around them, but she’d never felt particularly safe walking down the road. In fact, she hadn’t known that the road was supposed to have a protection field around it until she’d come to Rosa.

“R-Really? How do you know that?”

Ted the apothecary’s face immediately came to mind. Even if it was supposed to be safe on the road, would he really entrust a job that would take until nighttime, an important job involving the knights, to a twelve-year-old child he thought of as garbage? No. The potions he’d given Allen were likely real, but Sara was sure Ted intended for Allen to fail to catch up to the knights so he could ridicule him later.

After all, Ted knew that if Allen simply sold the healing herbs he’d gathered, he’d be able to register at the Guild today. The problem was that Ted likely didn’t know that the protection field around the road to the Dark Mountain wasn’t functioning. He thought his scheme would end with merely ridiculing Allen.

Sara pictured a horned rabbit taking Allen down and shuddered.

“Mister, Allen left at the same time we usually do, right?”

“I’d say so.”

If so, he’d left about an hour ago. Could Sara catch up to him? She couldn’t use physical strengthening like Nelly could. If she made herself faster like Nelly did, she got so tired the next day that she could barely move. That was why she’d chosen to take her time coming down to Rosa with her own strength. But she couldn’t be picky right now. Allen was in danger.

She didn’t hesitate a bit before deciding to go help Allen. She was weak and timid and it had taken her half a year to even leave the cottage, but if she didn’t use the strength she’d built up over the last two years now, when would she? She and Allen were supposed to be friends, weren’t they?

“Mister Gate Guard.”

“Yeah?”

“Could you tell Vince at the Hunter’s Guild that Allen headed for the north dungeon on a delivery for the Apothecary’s Guild and that the protection field around the road in that direction isn’t working?”

“The vice guildmaster?”

Sara was a little surprised to hear that Vince was the vice guildmaster and not simply a receptionist, but there was no time to dwell on that.

“Please. I know Allen’s good at physical strengthening, but he could still lose his life out there.”

The gate guard probably wanted to ask her why she didn’t go and tell Vince herself, but the sun had already set, so Sara couldn’t get back into the town.

“I got it. We can’t really leave the gate right now, but I’ll go tell him when our relief comes.”

“Thank you!”

She didn’t know if the Guild would be able to help, but she wanted to make all the moves she could. Sara nodded to herself and ran off toward the east gate.

“Hey! Why are *you* going?!”

She didn’t have time to explain things to the gate guard.

“Use physical strengthening on my legs and walk like I’m jumping...” She could move at twice her normal speed this way, and it was less tiring than running. But she’d run out of strength completely if she kept this up for half a day. For now, however, she didn’t care about tomorrow.

“Physical strengthening only really comes in handy after you’ve built up some muscle to enhance. You should focus on using your own strength to cover long distances for now.” She felt like she could hear Nelly’s voice.

“But I have no choice right now. I need to catch up to Allen.”

Sara leaped forward, reaching the east gate in half the time it had taken her to get there previously. The sun was long set by now.

“Heeey!”

Even after sundown, there were still lookouts up on top of the east gate. Sara called up to one of them.

“What is it? Huh? It’s the new kid. You lost again?”

Up on the gate was Town Resident 1, who she’d met on her first day here.

“No. Umm, did Allen—err, did a twelve-year-old boy come by here after the knights?”

“He did. Less than an hour ago, I think. I tried to stop him since it’s dangerous out here, but he said he was on an errand for the Apothecary’s Guild, so I guess he had to go.”

An hour. If Allen was using physical strengthening too, then she wasn’t closing the distance between them at all. She had to hurry.

“Thank you!” Sara called up to the soldier before setting back out toward the Dark Mountain. She had her barrier up, of course.

“Hey, wait! It’s dangerous!”

“I’ll be fine!”

“No you won’t! Hey!”

No matter who tried to stop her, she had to go. Two kids had run off down the road now. The soldier posted on the east gate had the good sense to contact the Hunter’s Guild when it was time for his shift change, but the central gate guard’s relief had come late, so by the time the two soldiers had reported to the Hunter’s Guild that two children had run off in the direction of the Dark Mountain, it had already been quite some time since Sara had left town.

She’d come down this road just a few days earlier.

Wham!

“There’s a bunny...”

The horned rabbits were relentless, so she definitely felt like there wasn’t any sort of protection field around the road. Maybe it just hadn’t been maintained.

Wham!

Wham!

“Yep, lots of bunnies...”

It was her first time traveling at night, but maybe the horned rabbits were nocturnal. She felt like a lot more of them were attacking her than they had

during the day. Or maybe it was just because she'd lit a lantern when she started to get worried she'd stray from the road with only the moonlight to rely on.

Perhaps because of how fast Sara was moving, a lot of the rabbits were missing her, so most of them weren't suffering fatal wounds when they hit her barrier. She sensed a lot of them staggering away after they bumped into her, which she was thankful for, since it meant she didn't have to stop and pick them up.

Sara could repel them with her barrier, so the rabbits' sharp horns didn't pose a threat to her, but what was Allen doing about them? Nelly always knocked aside persistent monsters with her fists, but Sara definitely couldn't do something like that in the dark when she didn't know where the rabbits would be coming at her from. She'd just have to hope that Allen could, since he'd trained out here.

"I wonder if I lost some stamina living in town."

Sara was starting to get pretty tired when she finally saw a faint light in the distance.

"It's Allen!"

She hurried forward. By the time she could make out Allen himself and not just his light, she could tell that his shoulders were heaving with each breath he took.

"Oh, he's punching the bunnies."

It seemed he was more of a puncher than a repeller when it came to horned rabbits. He downed each rabbit with one blow. He wasn't much taller than Sara, but he was striking down rabbits that were half his size one after another. Sara couldn't help watching the spectacle with her mouth hanging open. At the very least, he wasn't some helpless boy. Just like he said, he likely really was strong enough to go down into dungeons.

She didn't think physical strengthening alone would allow him to instantly react as soon as a rabbit jumped at him. Sara herself only noticed the attacking rabbits when they had already bounced off of her barrier. He must have gone

through some truly rigorous monster hunting training with his uncle.

But this was no time to stand around being impressed. Allen was visibly frustrated that he wasn't making any forward progress. The rabbits weren't allowing him a moment's rest either. Sara could tell from where she was that the rabbits had Allen surrounded, and he couldn't keep an eye on the ones behind him. Sara shuddered, picturing what it would have been like if she'd been surrounded like that on her way down from the Dark Mountain.

If she called out to him now, it would distract him, but if one of those rabbits landed a hit on him, he could be badly hurt. While Sara considered her actions, she saw the rabbits all lowering themselves to leap at him at once. They must have caught on that the one-by-one approach wouldn't get them anywhere.

It was more than twenty meters still to where Allen was. There was no time to hesitate. Sara's barrier could deflect monsters' attacks. She had to think back to when she'd protected the wyvern she'd inadvertently downed from the forest wolves. She'd never expanded her barrier this far before, but she could handle it one way or another.

"Kinda forgot about this, but I'm one of the Invited, so...it'll reach!"

Sara expanded her barrier all at once. She could see all the rabbits in front of her being thrown back by her protection field.

"Oh no, Allen!"

She was worried she might have sent Allen flying too, but then she remembered that unlike a protection field, her barrier distinguished between who she considered an ally, so he'd be fine.

Sara ran up to Allen while he was looking dumbfounded at the rabbits that had been blasted away. Now that Allen was inside her barrier, she gradually shrunk it as she got closer to him. She was tired from walking with physical strengthening activated, but it didn't tire her out at all to expand her barrier out so much. Three cheers for the Invited.



“Allen!”

“Sara?”

Still panting with exertion, Allen recognized that it was Sara who had called out to him, but he still didn't let his guard down.

"You really will be something one day, won't you?" Sara said, impressed.

First, they needed to make sure they were safe. They'd be fine, since they were inside Sara's barrier, but she placed her protection cases out around them anyway, so that Allen would be able to more easily relax.

Seeing Sara set her protection cases up like she did when she camped at night, Allen finally let some of the tension out of his muscles. As always, the protection field lit up when Sara set the third case down, and solidified into something more sturdy when she set down the fourth. The two-by-two-meter field was plenty of space for Nelly and her to sleep in, so Allen fit inside easily.

Sara finally addressed the keyed-up boy. "Allen, let's rest for a bit."

"But my errand..."

He could complain all he wanted, but Sara could barely stand at the moment.

"Look how dark it is, Allen. The group up ahead is resting somewhere at this point, too. They won't get any farther away if we rest for a bit here."

Adults had to rest or they would feel it the next day, too. It was their first day on the road, so they might have pushed themselves a little, but it was long past dinnertime, late enough that kids should be in bed.

"I won't stop you from finishing your errand, but just rest for now. You can drop your physical strengthening, since we're inside a protection field."

"Oh, right, your protection cases."

Allen practically crumpled to the ground. Sara got out a cup and gave Allen some water to drink, then took out a lunch box.

"Here, this one's on me," she said before Allen could protest.

"But..." And he protested anyway. Sara chuckled.

"Listen, I was able to sell my medicinal plants today."

"You were...?"

Allen took a moment to let the words sink in. Of course, she hadn't actually

received any *money* for them yet.

“This morning, Ted came with a person named Chris from the Apothecary’s Guild to the Hunter’s Guild because they didn’t have enough potions to give to the knights. They bought all the medicinal plants I had on me.”

“Chris and Ted came...in the morning...”

“Yeah. *Ted* came,” Sara emphasized. She wanted Allen to figure out on his own what the situation was and why she didn’t want him to push himself like this.

Allen shot upright. “I actually managed to find a lot of odd jobs to do today, and when I was delivering something to the Second District, Ted stopped me.”

“Yeah?”

“He said he wouldn’t normally ask me to do something like this, but he had a special delivery job for me. That it was dangerous, but he’d pay me twenty thousand gil and I could probably do it since I could use physical strengthening, so I figured I’d do it...”

“Right.”

If he had twenty thousand gil, he could go straight to the Hunter’s Guild and register. It must have been an enticing offer, even if Ted *had* described it as dangerous.

“But Ted could have just bought my healing herbs from me if he wanted to.”

“Yeah.”

It was exactly as Sara had expected. Ted was just getting a kick out of being cruel to Allen.

“Damn it! Why?! I’m just trying to make money on my own... I’m not bothering anyone... Is it really so wrong to not have parents or guardians?!”

A rabbit hit the protection field with a *wham* as if to express Allen’s emotions.

“It’s not wrong.”

She didn’t think Allen really wanted an answer to his question, but she wanted to express to him that she was on his side somehow.

She opened the lunch box and held it out to Allen. “Come on, eat something.”

“Okay...”

She pretended not to hear the tears in his voice.

Sara nibbled on a sandwich herself, made some tea for Allen, adding a little more sugar than usual to it. As Allen ate his lunch box and drank his tea, Sara quietly spoke to him, figuring he was probably ready to hear what she had to say now.

“To start with, even if you’re good at physical strengthening, it’s not normal to expect a child to be able to catch up to a group of knights or Hunters. I think Ted just expected you to come back crying that you couldn’t catch up to them so he could laugh at you.”

“What’s so fun about something like that?”

Sara couldn’t understand that herself, but she knew there were definitely people out there who enjoyed ridiculing and being nasty to other people.

“I don’t know. He seemed like he really didn’t even want to buy my medicinal plants from me, but he had to because Chris was upset with him.”

“I hate this... Even though I know I’m being reckless and that he tricked me, I really don’t want him to make fun of me for not being able to do it.”

Of course he didn’t want that. Sara could understand that, though she would never have accepted a job like this in the first place, and it didn’t particularly bother her if she couldn’t do it. But it was time to change gears. She’d managed to confirm that Allen was safe. Now they had to decide whether they’d push forward, head back, or camp here. Whether they moved forward or backward, it would probably be another hour or more of walking.

Sara looked Allen in the eye. “Want to go?”

“Huh?”

“On your errand. I’ll come with you.”

“It’s too dangerous for you!”

Sara smirked and started cleaning up. How did he think she got here?

Seeing how at ease she was, Allen finally seemed to realize the strangeness of the situation. “Come to think of it, what are you doing here anyway, Sara?”

“You’re only asking that now?” Sara couldn’t help laughing out loud. “I heard where you were from the gate guard and came out here to find you ’cause I was worried.”

“But the protection field around the road isn’t working. What did you do about the horned rabbits?”

Allen reached out as if to check if Sara was hurt at all, then realized she was healthy enough to be having a casual chat with him and pulled his hand back.

“I can make my own protection fields.”

“Huh?”

“I can make protection fields.”

“*Huh?!*”

Sara cracked up at how surprised Allen was.

“So you can walk around with a protection field around you so that you’re safe?”

“Yeah. I think I use my mana a little more like a caster would. I still have no intention of going into any dungeons, though. And get this: I can put it up around anyone with me, so if I go with you, we can make it to where the knights are camping without getting hurt.”

She may have looked a little smug.

Allen considered it for a moment before coming to a conclusion. “If we can make it there, then I want to go.”

“Okay. Let’s go, then.”

“Yeah!”

They started out slow, then sped up once Allen saw that they really were safe. Sara had been watching Allen as they went, but Allen was watching her just as closely.

“Sara, can you use physical strengthening while you have that protection field

up?” he asked her.

“I can, but it makes me tired the next day, so I don’t like to do it.”

“It makes you tired...? I’m surprised you can pull it off at all...”

Allen was muttering something, but Sara was more concerned with what she could see up ahead. She thought she could see light in the distance.

“Allen, look! Is that...?”

“It’s a light! It must be the knights!”

The two sped up, relieved by the sight.

“Heeey!” They called out loudly as they approached so that they weren’t mistaken for monsters. The knights were camping in one of the large open areas here and there along the road.

“Halt!”

A knight cautioned them, so Sara and Allen did as he said.

“State your business.”

“Huh? If it isn’t Allen. Sara’s here, too.” The laidback voice that followed the knight’s belonged to the guildmaster.

“Allen? Children? Hurry and come inside the plaza.” This voice was Chris’s.

The two of them entered the plaza with the protection field around it and sank to the ground out of relief. It really *was* hard to maintain a protection field and physical strengthening at the same time. Sara could just hear Nelly telling her she needed to train more. She almost laughed at the thought. She must have really been tired.

“Hold on a second. What the heck are you two doing here?” The guildmaster put a hand to his chin in exasperation.

Chris ignored him and rushed over to the two of them, kneeling down and checking over them almost like a doctor, starting with Allen. Sara felt a little embarrassed when he put a hand on her cheek and looked her over.

“Mm. They’re not injured, just tired. What are you two doing out here?”

Sara's estimation of Chris rose slightly when he expressed concern for their well-being first and foremost, but there was a limit to how highly she could think of him considering he was Ted's boss.

Allen got to his feet and took a bag out of his pouch that must have contained the potions he'd been instructed to deliver. He held it out to Chris. "I'm here on behalf of Ted at the Apothecary's Guild to deliver these potions to the knights."

"Potions?" Chris furrowed his brow, took the bag from Allen, and looked inside it. "Ten potions. They'll definitely help, but he sent a child just to deliver a handful of potions?"

Having finished his delivery, Allen seemed to run out of fuel for real, dropping to the ground again and starting to nod off. He was *supposed* to fail in his mission, and if he had, Chris likely wouldn't have found out about this. Thankfully, Ted's cruel prank had been for naught. Sara could only hope he'd be thoroughly reprimanded by his revered Master Chris. She felt a little better about all this imagining that.

She hurried over to one end of the area where the knights were setting up their tents, set her protection cases down, and laid out her mat. Then she went back and lent her shoulder to the unsteady Allen, laying him down on the mat and covering him with a blanket. While she watched him sleep soundly, she fell asleep next to him at some point. Thankfully, she'd heated up the area around her out of habit beforehand, so she didn't catch a cold or anything.

Sara opened her eyes when she sensed people moving around her and realized it was morning. Before rising, she glanced around and could see the knights getting ready to set off for the day. The sun hadn't even fully risen yet.

"Oh no! Allen, wake up! Allen!"

"Mmmn... Oh! My errand!"

Allen shot up. Sara gave him a wry grin.

"You finished your errand yesterday."

"Oh yeah."

The two of them relaxed when a voice called out to them from outside their protection field.

"You awake? You got a minute?"

It was the guildmaster's voice. Right next to him was Chris. The field a set of protection cases created would protect you from monsters, but anyone with a friction stone could pass through it. Courtesy was the only thing keeping them from strolling right in.

"I want to hear the whole story, but we have to finish the mission we're on with these knights first. Let me just ask this: Since the two of you were able to get here on your own, can you get back to town on your own, too?"

Allen and Sara exchanged a look. "Yes!" they both said at the same time.

"Okay. I want the full story when I'm back in town, got it?"

The guildmaster stepped back and allowed Chris to address them next.

"I don't want to let you two go back on your own, to be honest, but bringing you to the Dark Mountain would be even worse. What would you say to waiting here for a few days until we get back? We'll leave food for you."

It was a more realistic proposal than the guildmaster's, but the two of them shook their heads all the same.

"So be it. Allen, you said your name was? How much were you asked to run this errand for?"

“Twenty thousand gil.”

“Very well. You don’t need to report your results to Ted. I’ll give you your payment right now.”

Chris dropped two square coins into Allen’s hand. He looked Allen in the eye and told him, “Don’t go to the Apothecary’s Guild until I’m back in town. If you want to sell medicinal plants, go through the Hunter’s Guild. I’ll compensate you for the handling fee later. Is that understood? You too,” he added in Sara’s direction.

After Allen and Sara passed out the night before without explaining anything, the two adults must have discussed things between themselves. They doubtless had plenty of things they wanted to ask them, such as how two children managed to arrive here safely on their own, but they focused first on completing their given tasks and putting countermeasures in place for any future trouble. Sara was honestly impressed with them.

While the two of them finished their conversation with Sara and Allen, the knights finished preparing for their departure.

“Careful on your way home. We don’t want to lose any Rosa kids,” the guildmaster told them before setting off as the knights’ vanguard.

Sara and Allen remained there until the knights were tiny dots in the distance.

“Rosa kids... Not garbage, and not a burden. Even if we’re not registered with the Guild yet,” Allen muttered, closing his hand around the coins.

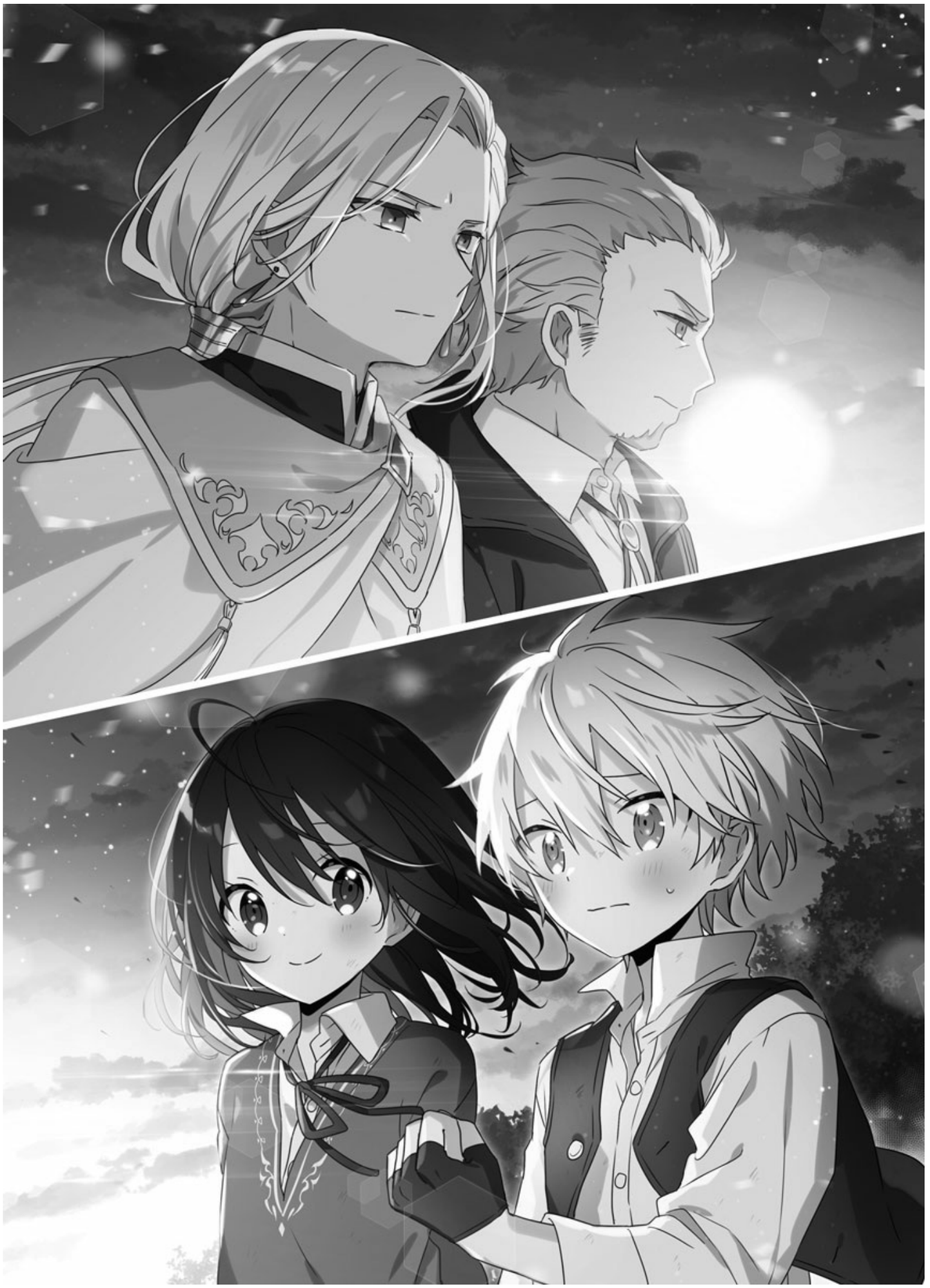
“Yeah.”

It must have been really reassuring to be acknowledged like that by someone Allen respected. Sara couldn’t care less how people thought of her as long as she could reunite with Nelly one day, but she was glad she’d come all this way since it had made Allen so happy.

“Should we head back, Sara?”

Allen’s voice was bright, so Sara responded with the same enthusiasm.

“Yeah! Leave the return trip to me, too!”



As the sun rose and the meadow grew brighter, Sara and Allen took off toward town. They felt light on their feet. As soon as they returned, Allen would

be able to register at the Guild. Sara could register as well, as soon as she was paid for her medicinal plants. Then the two of them would be free to come and go from town as they pleased, even at night.

Wham!

Wham!

“And another one.”

They had time to stop and pick up the dead rabbits now. Of course, the ones they hadn’t been able to pick up last night had vanished, most likely eaten by something. *Yeah, this world is still scary,* thought Sara.

They arrived at the east gate in what felt like no time at all. It had seemed so far away the day before.

“Good morning!”

The soldiers on the east gate were surprised to see two kids show up from the direction of the meadow, but they called back down to them right away.

“You the kids we got word about yesterday?!”

“Yes!”

“You’re safe, then! That’s great!”

Word seemed to have gotten around.

“The Hunter’s Guild was contacted, so check in there as soon as you get inside!”

“We will!”

That was where they were headed anyway. They dropped their speed after reaching the east gate, but still arrived at the central gate much earlier than they usually would.

“Hold on!” A gate guard who wasn’t the one they usually saw stopped the two of them. “Are you the kids who went on the errand to find the knights?”

The people here knew about them, too. The two of them nodded and the gate guard sighed in relief.

“They were talking about sending a search party out for you, you know. You should hurry to the Hunter’s Guild.”

Sara and Allen exchanged a glance, then rushed through the gate and ran for the Hunter’s Guild.

“Vince!”

“Allen! Sara!”

Maybe because they were here earlier in the day than usual, the Guild was awfully busy.

“Thank goodness. That report must have been a mistake.” Vince walked over to them and gave their shoulders a light smack.

“Report? Mistake?”

“We heard Allen headed out after the knights on their way to the north dungeon to run an errand, and that you went chasing after him.”

Sara and Allen exchanged a look again. Then they glanced behind Vince to see a group of Hunters looking in their direction, all of them either relieved or irritated.

“Is that a search party?”

“Yep. We heard about it at night, but weren’t able to get enough people together until morning. I’m glad it was wasted preparation, though.” Vince looked relieved, too.

If she was being honest, Sara half-expected her request to be ignored. So she was both surprised and thankful that not only had Vince planned to send out a search party, he’d also actually found enough people to go looking. When Ted had ridiculed Allen, the rest of the Hunters had stayed out of it, but when his life was actually on the line, they did step up to go save him.

“Umm, thank you Vince, and everyone else.” Sara bowed her head.

Next to her, Allen bowed as well, then looked up, putting on a serious face. “Umm, I did go on that errand.”

“What?”

Allen wanted to avoid more ridicule from Ted for not being able to complete his task, so he asserted that he *had* finished his errand. “There were a ton of horned rabbits, so it was pretty tough, but Sara came after me and found me...”

He mentioned Sara too, unable to take all the credit for himself.

Sara added to his explanation. “We slept at the knights’ camp and headed back at dawn.” She figured if she mentioned that they were with the knights, it would make their story more believable.

“Seriously? Had the knights not actually gotten that far?” Vince muttered to himself before turning back to the gathered Hunters and shouting, “You hear that, everyone? The kids got back on their own. You’re dismissed!”

None of the Hunters, who obviously preferred dungeon-diving over looking for a couple of lost kids, looked angry about this. They all simply filed out, giving Allen and Sara pats on the head or shoulder as they left.

“Oh yeah! Chris paid me for my errand, so I saved up a hundred thousand gil!”

The receptionists all stood up when they heard that. The mood in the Guild had shifted straight from dismal to bright.

“Finally!”

“You did it, Allen!”

Not everyone was like Ted. The people at the Guild had been watching Allen’s hard work over the last two months and cheering him on in secret. Sara grinned, as though it was her they were all proud of.

“Oh... Sara,” Vince got her attention. “Your payment for the medicinal plants came.”

“Oh?” Sara hadn’t been sure whether she’d actually get her money, since she didn’t trust the Apothecary’s Guild.

“Don’t gimme that. Let’s take care of you first.”

“Me?” Sara repeated dumbly.

“Come on...” Vince shrugged. “Let’s see... I’ve got a receipt here. Five hundred healing herbs, fifty greater healing herbs...”

A cry of surprise went up in the Guild. They must not have seen many greater healing herbs.

“Twenty each of poison herbs and paralysis herbs, thirty mana herbs, and two greater mana herbs.”

At this, the Guild was silent. Mana herbs weren’t just rare, you hardly ever saw them.

“I thought you were joking when you were talking about selling medicinal plants to register at the Guild, but I guess you were serious. Your payment’s one hundred sixty thousand gil. You can register with that.”

“Huh?”

“You can register. Get an ID. You don’t want one?”

“I do!”

Allen slapped her on the back. Sara stumbled, but her face still lit up with glee. She excitedly filled out the registration form and accepted her ID and change.

Sara held up her ID. She was happy. She’d obtained physical proof of her place in this world with her own hands. It probably wouldn’t have been all that hard as an adult, but as a kid with no guardian, even this had been hard work. Not to mention...

Sara held the ID to her chest. Now, no matter when Nelly came back, Sara could wait for her right here in Rosa.

“Okay, you’re up next, Allen.”

At Vince’s urging, Allen excitedly took the money out from his pouch. A mountain of small change sat on the counter before them, but it added up to a hundred thousand gil all the same.

Allen accepted his ID and held it up just like Sara had. As the two of them grinned ear-to-ear, the Guild filled with the sound of applause. Vince, however, looked a bit conflicted.

“Hey... Sara.”

“Yes?”

“Did you say something a little while ago about having stuff to sell?”

“Yes!”

She could finally get those pesky monsters off her hands. Sara eagerly took her backpack off and Allen removed the pouch from his waist as well.

“Wait. Wait a second, you two. Listen...” Vince took a deep breath to steady himself. “I’m guessing... you’ve got a lot?”

“Yes!” They said in unison. His shoulders sagged just like Sara expected them to.

“Okay. Let’s move somewhere else.”

He brought them to the back, through the door the guildmaster was always emerging from. Beyond the door was a hallway, with the guildmaster’s office at the end. Sara was excited to be seeing the back of the Guild for the first time. The guildmaster himself was currently out, on his way to the Dark Mountain, but two of the receptionists who appraised monster materials came with them into the office.

Vince took another deep breath. “Okay. Allen, you first. Show me what you got.”

Sara only had horned rabbits and magic stones from slimes, so she waited excitedly to see what Allen had with him. Allen took monster after monster out from his pouch and Vince appraised them.

“Oh? Got some slime stones? No, wait a minute, how many of those do you have? Huh? You hunted these while you were traveling with your uncle? W-Well, okay. That’s all of those, then. What else you got?”

The receptionists watched with interest from the other side of the desk, their arms folded. Next, Allen started taking out round things a little bigger than a basketball.

“Those are steel armadillos, aren’t they? You got those in the field south of the capital? What were you doing out there in the first place? It’s not as bad as here, but the monsters there are pretty strong, aren’t they?”

“My uncle said that was the best place to practice physical strengthening.”

“Ah... Man, your uncle was really...”

Vince seemed to know Allen’s uncle, so the explanation made sense to him. Just what kind of person had Allen’s uncle been for the vice guildmaster to make that sort of face about a caster?

“Why do you have so many of them, though?”

“Well, they came at me all together, so I punched them away and they all died.”

Sara remembered how Allen had been fighting the night before. He’d definitely been punching the horned rabbits that leaped at him.

“Those things can really mess someone up if they hit you, so newbies are supposed to run away from them, you know.”

“Well, my uncle said you could take care of them with physical strengthening...”

“Ah... Right, right...”

A little puff of a laugh escaped from Sara’s lips. Allen was just like Nelly, handling anything and everything with physical strengthening. Allen gave her a look as if to ask “You know what I’m talking about, right?” which just made it harder to hold back her laughter.

“Next. Flame bats. They attacked you while you were walking at night west of the capital? Why were you out there at night?” Vince grabbed Allen by the head, but Allen seemed to be enjoying himself, so Sara just watched with a smile.

“They fly around above you and shoot fire at you, right?”

“I just punched them when they got close enough. My uncle said I’d be fine as long as I used physical strengthening.”

“What? How does that follow?”

Sara was desperately trying to contain her mirth at this point. The other receptionists were grinning wryly, too.

“Horned rabbits. I expected these. Finally something more normal.”

“Vince, your standards are all wrong. Horned rabbits aren’t normal either.” One of the receptionists finally commented on Vince in the same way Vince had been talking about Allen.

“Wait a second... How many of these do you have...?”

This time the problem was the number of monsters. The guildmaster’s office was filled with the fluffy critters. Magic stones still littered the table between them. Eventually, Vince just gave up and leaned back in his chair, letting the other receptionists total up Allen’s materials.

“For you to be strong enough to hunt monsters like this, and to have so many of them but not be able to sell them because you weren’t registered kind of makes me feel like the Guild’s system isn’t really working as intended.”

The receptionists tilted their heads in contemplation after they appraised all of Allen’s materials.

“Well, there’s never been a situation like this, where things got as weird as they did with Allen and Sara.”

Vince turned his eyes on Sara when she burst into laughter again.

“Right, you had stuff too, Sara.”

“Oh, me?”

Sara had had so much fun seeing what was inside Allen’s storage pouch that she’d completely forgotten about her own materials. The slime magic stones weren’t taking up much space, but the horned rabbits were, so she’d love to sell them if she could. She was finally starting to understand how particular Nelly was about storage bags.

Sara took a rabbit out of her backpack.

“*You* have horned rabbits?!”

Vince lunged up from his chair. Sara was taken aback. Hadn’t Allen just taken a bunch of horned rabbits out?

“Well, there were a bunch of them when I was coming to town.”

“Sure, there are a bunch of them! Yeah, it’s a real pain how many there are, huh...”

She had more than ten, she was pretty sure.

“Let’s see... That’s it. I guess I had twenty-five.”

“Yep... Quite a lot of them...” Vince muttered.

Ignoring him, the receptionists inspected the horned rabbits, carefully sorting them and writing something down on a piece of paper. One of them nodded thoughtfully before looking at Sara.

“Most of them have broken necks. Do you use physical strengthening like Allen, Sara?”

“No, I’d say I’m more of a caster, really.”

She’d been led into starting from physical strengthening because of Nelly, but Nelly had said her barrier was something a caster would use. And, with apologies to Nelly and Allen, she didn’t really want people to think of her in the same category as them. Sara averted her eyes a bit from Allen.

“A caster. Hmm. How’d you take the horned rabbits down, then?”

“I didn’t take them down.”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t take them down.”

The horned rabbits had just crashed into her on their own.

“Haha! Yeah, I guess they just ran into you and died on their own.” Allen laughed at the memory, though Sara didn’t really think it was a laughing matter...

Sara gave him a bit of a cold look, then something occurred to her. Maybe they doubted her because there wasn’t any evidence of the barrier magic she’d used.

“Oh, I *can* use magic. Here’s proof.” Nelly had said that casters hunted slimes a lot, right?

“What? There’s *more*?”

Sara had started taking the slime stone bag out of the pouch at her waist, but she quietly slid it back inside when Vince said that.

Vince jumped up from his chair. “That’s not what I meant. Uhh, I do want to see it. Okay? Just take it out.”

Sara took out just one bag and set it on the table with a *clunk*, opening it up.

“Huh. Slime stones, eh? Slimes... Guess you see slimes all over the place, not just in dungeons, right? I s’pose it’s easy enough for casters to hunt them, too.”

Sara was relieved to hear it. Casters really *did* hunt slimes.

“*Normal* kids don’t really hunt them, though. Since it’s dangerous. But Allen hunted them. But I guess Allen’s not normal.”

“Vince, I am normal.”

“No, you’re not.”

While they were having that unproductive exchange, Vince suddenly narrowed his eyes.

“Hey, wait a second!” Vince shouted, and the other two receptionists leaned forward at the same time.

“Th-This is... Sara, you...” Vince’s hands and voice were both trembling. “Th-This is a stealth slime’s magic stone...”

Sara nodded. It was the first one she’d gotten, so she’d just put it together with all the other slime stones. Wow, that brought her back.

“It was in this rocky area on a slope.”

“Yeah, they’re in rocky areas a lot, aren’t they...” Vince was smiling, but there was something scary about his expression. “These are hard to hunt though, aren’t they?” His face was more serious when he picked up the stone to inspect it.

“Yes. You gotta just zap it with magic without looking.”

“Zap it, eh? With magic? You make it sound pretty easy, Sara.”

“It’s pretty simple once you get the hang of it.” Sara grinned.

“Well, it’s not supposed to be...”

She’d gotten so good at it, she didn’t even bother reporting it to Nelly when she took one down now.

“I don’t suppose you’ve got more of them, then?”

“I do.”

Sara took out the bag she used for stealth slimes, the stones rattling around as she did. Sometimes, she didn’t bother sorting them, so there were a couple more in the normal slime stone bag, too.

“Those are all...?”

“Yes.”

She could fit about twenty stones in one bag, and she had several bags. The stones were all different sizes, too.

“Don’t take them out. Just open the bag and let me see inside.”

“Okay. Here.”

Vince peered down into the bag. The other two joined him, and then all three of them closed their eyes and tilted their heads back.

“They’re all stealth slime stones. Ha ha ha.” With a vacant laugh, he returned the bag to Sara. “Listen, Sara. You have to keep it a secret that you have stealth slime stones. Sell one a month, maybe two or three at most, but go through me and don’t let anyone else know. If you sell them all now, well...it’ll upset all kinds of balance.”

“Okay.”

She wasn’t sure what balance he was talking about, but magic stones didn’t take up that much space and it seemed like she’d have enough money to spare for a while, so she didn’t mind waiting to sell them. Now they at least understood that she was more of a caster, she thought with relief.

“Allen, you’ll get one million, five hundred thousand if you sell everything you’ve got. And Sara, you’ll get seven hundred thousand if you sell what you can for now. You guys have got enough money to stay in town now, so what do

you want to do? We've got rooms in the Guild inn."

Sara and Allen exchanged a glance. For Sara's part, if she could work at the Guild, she didn't mind staying outside of town. She might prefer it if the people of the town were going to be nasty about her living there, in fact.

"I'm fine staying outside of town for a while still. But Sara..."

"I don't mind staying outside either. But since I've got some money now..."

"You want a tent."

"I want a tent," they said at the same time, and then burst out laughing.

"Well, I guess I don't blame you for getting excited about this," said Vince.

The receptionists watched them with warm smiles as if they remembered a similar time in their own pasts.

"I guess if Allen's with you, you'll be fine outside. No, you'd be fine even on your own if you can hunt horned rabbits. I didn't think you were that strong, Sara."

Vince looked up as if something had just occurred to him. "Guess that's how you were able to catch up to the knights and make it back to town, too. It wasn't that they hadn't gotten very far or anything like that. You've just got what it takes," he muttered, as if to convince himself.



After the two of them had settled down a little, Vince started, “So, Allen. I’m guessing tomorrow...”

“I’ll be heading into the dungeon, of course!”

“And you, Sara?”

“Huh? I’m not going into any dungeons.”

“What?!” The two receptionists were shocked.

“You’re a caster good enough to take down stealth slimes and you don’t want to go into dungeons?”

Sara didn’t know why they were so surprised. She’d never wanted to go into a dungeon in the first place.

“I might be a caster, but I don’t know anything other than beginner spells.” Sara took out the thin textbook she’d made ample use of from her pouch and showed it to them.

“‘Into the Dungeon: Beginner Spells for Casters,’” Allen read the title of the book aloud curiously. “Didn’t know they had stuff like this. Wonder if there’s a book for physical strengthening, too.”

“Nelly said they sold this at the Guild.”

Now that she thought about it, they weren’t selling anything like this at the kiosk. Maybe they sold them at the reception desks?

“Do you see the word ‘dungeon’ on the cover of that book, Sara? It’s a book for magic you use in a dungeon. Do you get that?”

“Well, Nelly said I could apply it to all sorts of other things if I learned it.”

“So she’s just like Allen’s uncle, I take it. Is it ’cause of their guardians that these two ended up like this?” Vince was mussing up his hair, but Sara didn’t know what to tell him.

“I haven’t even mastered it yet either. I’m not really good with water magic, so I usually make do with ice. It’s hard to picture water stuff.”

“With ice...?” Vince looked like he was about to start scratching his head again, so Sara hastily blamed it on Nelly.

“Nelly said that’d be fine.”

Of course, since Sara didn’t intend to go into any dungeons, it didn’t really

matter to her whether she could do it or not.

“It seems like I’ll be able to sell medicinal plants now, so I’ll gather those and wait for Nelly to come back. I’d like it if I could keep working in the kitchen, too.”

“Nelly, huh? Right, Nelly’s the relative of yours who hasn’t come back yet. You’re here to look for her, yeah?”

The receptionists nodded, recalling Sara’s first day there. So many things had happened that it was hard to believe that had only been a few days ago.

“Well, if you want to come into a dungeon, tell me. I’ll take you with me.”

“Okay. Thanks, Allen.”

If she really needed more money for some reason, she could always look for medicinal plants, and if that didn’t make her enough, then all she needed to do was stroll around the meadow, since horned rabbits would crash into her whether she wanted them to or not. Sara saw no reason to go into an underground dungeon.

And that was how Sara finally obtained the right to live in Rosa.

Of course, just because she had an ID now didn’t mean Sara’s everyday life changed much. It had been a few days now since she’d proudly showed off her Hunter’s Guild ID to the gate guard and gotten laughed at, and she was still gathering medicinal plants, helping out in the Guild kitchen, and tending the kiosk afterward.

Since she was an official member of the Guild now, her pay increased a bit, and she was making enough that she could stay in the Guild’s cheapest inn room without losing money. Still, she’d bought a tent instead and slept outside town next to Allen.

Allen’s life, on the other hand, *had* changed. He’d stopped gathering medicinal plants and started heading into a dungeon in the morning. Sara saw him off with a smile and lived her ordinary life.

A few days after she got her ID, Ted wandered into the Hunter’s Guild while

Sara was minding the kiosk.

“Not gonna come sell your plants?”

“I’m making enough money here,” Sara said, turning away from him.

The knights hadn’t returned to town yet, and Chris had told her not to go to the Apothecary’s Guild to sell her plants until he got back. After what he’d done to Allen, Sara sort of wanted to send Ted flying with her barrier, but it’d be a waste to use even a little bit of her mana on him. Not to mention, he’d actually come into the Guild with a nasty smirk on his face the day they got back from their errand. Sara recalled what had happened a few days before.

Vince had told them to take the day off since they were probably tired, but Allen had gone off to go into a dungeon just for a bit, and Sara figured she’d be fine peeling potatoes, so she’d gone into the kitchen to the exasperation of everyone there at the Guild. As for Sara, she was just happy she’d managed to build up some stamina.

“Yo. That piece of trash back from his errand yet?”

That was how Ted had shown up.

“Hey!” Vince leaped over the reception counter and lifted Ted up by his collar. (Incidentally, Sara had heard about this later from the receptionists.)

It was around this time that Mize sensed the commotion from the kitchen and sent Sara out on reconnaissance. “Sara, go peek out front,” he told her.

Sara poked her head out from the kitchen door, not wanting to get caught up in whatever was going on, so the first thing she actually saw was Vince holding Ted up by his collar.

“What? There’s no way he could have caught up to the knights. He came home crying, didn’t he?”

“So you knew that when you sent him out there! How do you live with yourself as an adult, as a man?!”

Vince let go of Ted like he’d touched something filthy. He was so cool, Sara wanted to hold out a handkerchief for him to wipe his hands. She decided to

watch the rest so she could tell Allen about it later.

“Hah. No one’ll say a word about anything I do to garbage like that.”

“You can’t call him that as of today.”

“What?”

Having fallen pathetically to the ground when Vince let him go, Ted stood up, looking confused. Vince smirked, or at least, Sara liked to think he did. From the kitchen, she could only see his back. In exchange, she had a good view of Ted’s dumbfounded face.

“Allen completed that stupid errand of yours properly.”

“Yeah right! Sure, he can do a little physical strengthening, but those were knights he was chasing after!”

“And still, he caught them. And he was paid for his trouble, too. Your precious Master Chris handed him his payment personally.”

“Wh-What did you say?!”

The person he most wanted to keep it a secret from had found out about his little scheme. Sara could see the color draining from Ted’s face.

“Soon as Allen got back, he registered with the Guild. As of today, he has official recognition as a citizen of Rosa. Too bad for you.”

“Dammit!” Ted spat.

“He’s an official member of the Hunter’s Guild as of today. You know what that means, don’t you?”

There was a banging noise from the counters, and she could hear people hitting the walls in the kitchen, too. The other cooks must have started listening in at some point, too. The meaning was clear to her: Next time Ted messed with Allen, he’d be taking on the whole Hunter’s Guild.

“That goes for Sara too, of course.”

Sara smiled at the thought.

Ted sucked his teeth and said, “They may have registered at the Guild, but the weak don’t last in Rosa. Trash is trash.”

With those parting words, he left. It must have been a slow day at the Apothecary's Guild.

"Okay, get back to work." Mize's hand landed on Sara's shoulder.

"Right!"

He didn't say anything, but there was a clear camaraderie in the gesture. Before she returned to the kitchen, Sara gave one last grateful look at the reception counter.

Sara was almost impressed that Ted could just stroll in here like this only a few days after embarrassing himself like he had.

"I understand that you're just a child, so you're not to blame."

Sara looked at Ted in surprise, then immediately regretted giving him the attention. It was clear from his expression that he had no remorse for his actions.

"The adult who abandoned you is to blame. Right? Just give up on this relative of yours. I'm sure she's not coming back." He'd just changed the target of his ridicule from Allen to Sara.

Sara plucked a potion bottle from the kiosk shelf and started wiping it down, though it wasn't particularly dusty. Ted hadn't noticed, but all the receptionists were watching him. None of them had said anything to her, but she was sure that they would protect her if Ted tried to pull something.

"She hasn't abandoned me. She just can't come back for some reason," Sara said curtly. That was all it was.

"Well, aren't you just tragic."

"If Nelly can't make it back to Rosa, then there's some reason why she can't." Sara gently placed the potion back on the shelf. "And if she can't come back on her own, then I just need to go find her."

"Feh."

Ted didn't say any more than that, leaving as if he no longer cared. He was doubtless disappointed by Sara's stalwart reaction to his ridicule. Sara knew

that the people of the Guild thought of Nelly in the same way, that she'd abandoned her and wasn't coming back. They just wouldn't come out and say it like Ted did.

"Nelly will come back. And if she doesn't, then I'll go find her. That's all there is to it," Sara repeated to herself.

Right. She even had money now. Once she got a little more comfortable here, maybe she'd try going to the capital.

There was a bright smile on Sara's face.

"Just wait for me, Nelly."

She was ready to take her next step forward.



Epilogue: In the Capital

Nelly looked down at the capital before her. It was so big that it couldn't even be compared to how Rosa looked from the Dark Mountain. The gentle hills to the southwest that led down to it were also nothing like the Dark Mountain.

Nelly sat hugging her knees on a rock a slight distance away from a group of armed men.

"Sara..." Was she doing okay? She must be, Nelly decided, smiling slightly. "She's a lot more responsible than I am."

By the time Nelly had woken up in the carriage, it was already past the four days she'd promised Sara. She'd never expected she'd be abducted like this, but it made her glad that she'd made such a promise with Sara. She'd been ready to destroy the whole carriage to escape, and the only reason she hadn't was because Chris had been there to calm her down, but the fact that he was there with her meant that there would be no one in Rosa Sara could depend on.

"I can't believe I was getting ready to tell everyone about her and they hit me with a paralysis agent before I could..."

She'd entered Rosa from the east gate and had been on her way to the Apothecary's Guild when a group of knights had surrounded her.

"How can they call themselves knights? Damn cowards."

They knew they couldn't overpower her, so they'd sprayed her with a paralyzing mist using wind magic.

"It's like I'm a monster."

They were treating her like some kind of rabid beast. She was used to it, but that didn't make it hurt any less.

Nelly didn't have any particular reason to get so strong. She was born into a family of knights, but she had two older brothers and an older sister, so she led a happy childhood, with no real expectations from her family. But she just so happened to have a knack for physical strengthening and her father just so

happened to be a knight. Her eldest brother also specialized in physical strengthening and the younger was good with magic. Since Nelly had potential, her father and brothers trained her, half out of amusement. By her early teens, she'd already surpassed her father and brothers in ability, but they didn't give her a chance to make a name for herself as a knight.

In this country, where magic was commonplace, it was normal for women to become Hunters or knights. In fact, there should have been ample opportunities for female knights to find work protecting female members of the royal family, a job men weren't fully qualified for. But Nelly had far too much mana for any member of the royal family to tolerate her presence. Even the other knights couldn't manage.

At that point, they could have told her to just go and get married instead, but all Nelly knew how to do was fight. Still, she obeyed her parents and had several marriage interviews, but none of her potential partners could withstand the pressure of her mana.

She became a Hunter only when it was her last choice remaining, but no matter where she went, people just weren't comfortable around her with her vast amount of mana. The people she'd adventured with when she was young eventually found their own partners and split. She ventured from one dungeon to the next and eventually ended up on the Dark Mountain outside of Rosa.

She was fine just being left alone there, but when her father became the captain of the knights, he started sending for Nelly to come join the capital's yearly culling of migrating dragons. At first, he'd apparently been hoping that she'd form a connection with someone strong so she could marry into another house, but no one was stronger than Nelly. And Nelly's presence eventually became vital to the dragon culling process, though that wasn't something Nelly's father had planned.

When someone took over for Nelly's father as knight captain, they continued summoning her to the capital every year as if it was tradition. Of course, that just happened to be the year Nelly had taken Sara in, and when she started turning down their requests, this is what it led to.

Nelly had found physical strengthening fun, but she hadn't particularly

wanted to use it to get ahead or anything like that. She'd only stuck with it because her family had praised her for her talent with it. So she wasn't particularly bothered that she couldn't become a knight, and she was satisfied simply using her skills to become self-sufficient as a Hunter. Despite her strength, she'd never asserted her own will in any meaningful way, and when she finally tried to make a decision for herself, she was met with this kind of interference.

"I want to eat Sara's food..." A sigh escaped her lips.

The food in the capital wasn't particularly bad, but she felt so much happiness when she was eating Sara's food, across from Sara herself, that she didn't want to trade that time for anything else.

"Hey! A dragon's coming!" one of the gathered knights shouted.

Nelly didn't need to be told. She'd sensed it coming quite a while ago. She didn't live on a mountain where wyverns roamed free for nothing.

Every year when winter approached, the dragons moved through the center of the country from west to east. Some of them always grazed the southern territory of the capital when they did, so the knights set themselves up on a hill to the southwest of the capital and drove off or killed any dragons who got too close, so that they wouldn't cause any damage to the capital. That was all this job entailed.

What was troublesome about the dragons was that they were heavier than wyverns, so they flew lower to the ground and tended to land more often, hunting the horned rabbits and cotton sheep that roamed the plains. If that was all they did, of course, then the knights merely would have needed to keep watch, but apparently several decades ago, a dragon had strayed too close to the capital and had done a great deal of damage to the southern district of the city, so things were done the way they were now to prevent another such tragedy.

The tiny speck in the western sky gradually grew larger, and the knights drew their swords. A group of five or so casters held out their arms and readied themselves for the dragon's approach. The moment it was close enough for magic to reach it, the mages shot off fire spells. This magic alone wasn't enough

to take down a dragon, but when they realized that there were people below them shooting fire at them all of a sudden, they tended to hastily change course to move around the south side of the hill.

That was the best reaction they could hope for. Unfortunately, after taking a blast of fire to the face, this dragon landed heavily on the hill with an enraged cry. It wasn't easy to scare dragons back into the sky at that point, so the human defenders had to take them down instead, should that occur.

While the dragon was confused, the knights leaped at it one by one, weakening it. Nelly didn't think she'd even have to get involved at this point, so she folded her arms and looked off into the western sky instead.

"Nefertari! You noticed them, too?"

"We aren't friends—don't talk to me. I'll lose my concentration."

An Invited from the capital had called Nelly's name. Just like Sara, he wasn't bothered at all by Nelly's pressure, so he was the only one to interact with her so casually.

"I sense several dragons approaching. Six...no, seven."

It wasn't unusual for two of them to come together, but more than five of them at once would be a considerable pain.

"Can the casters take down all seven of them?" Nelly asked the Invited.

"Those five can handle two. Haruto can do two, and so can I. That leaves one more, though."

Haruto was a young Invited who was currently larking about with the knights. He was usually down in a dungeon near the capital. This was probably his first time dealing with dragons. He'd been excited the whole time he'd been here, though Nelly didn't know what there was to be so happy about.

One Invited could equal the strength of five casters, no matter how young they looked. That was why they were so valued. Anyone would be safe with a strong Invited at their side. That was why they were usually in the capital with someone who could entice them to stick around.

If Sara was brought to the capital as one of the Invited, she would surely be

treated well, but Nelly could just picture the fierce battle between factions that would break out as people tried to entice her to one group or another. That was why Nelly hadn't wanted to let her leave until she was at least a little older. Old enough to make it on her own.

"No, I guess I just wanted to keep her by my side..." That was the only reason, really.

"Nefertari, I can probably manage to take three of them down, but I don't think I can take them all out once they're on the ground."

"That's fine. Don't push yourself, just concentrate on taking down the two you can manage. If the casters can take out six of them, I'll handle the last one."

"I know you're strong, but you can't take a dragon down with physical strengthening."

"If you're not confident you can take down all three, you'll just get the knights wiped out. Leave one of them to me."

"...Very well."

Nelly unfolded her arms and headed to the east of the casters.

"S-Seven dragons, incoming!"

The knights finally noticed the next group of dragons approaching.

"Not a problem. You have two of us Invited with you today." The Invited from earlier gave orders in a quiet but well-carrying voice. "You five casters can take two dragons. I'll take two and Haruto will take two."

"I can handle all of them if you want!" the young Invited, Haruto, said sunnily.

"We can't take any risks here. People's lives are at stake."

"Feh. I got it." He acquiesced surprisingly quickly.

"Nefertari will handle the last one. Everyone ready?"

Nelly shrugged her shoulders and relaxed, unaffected by the tension in the air around the knights.

"What was his name? Bradley?" Nelly mused.

Unlike Haruto and Sara with their black hair and eyes, this Invited didn't look a bit out of place in this world with his dull blond hair and green eyes.

Nelly put the Invited out of her mind and looked up toward the dragons. True, unless you could make it up there by jumping, there was no way to take down a dragon with physical strengthening. But in living with Sara, Nelly had gotten several hints about how to use her magic.

"The protection field Sara uses and physical strengthening really come from the same place. Physical strengthening is less like enhancing your actual body and more like enveloping it in mana. So I should be able to extend my physical strengthening outward from myself just like Sara does with her protection field."

In other words...

"I just have to stretch the mana out from my fist to hit the dragon with it."

She'd actually practiced this on the Dark Mountain before. The Hunter's Guild would get suspicious of her if she brought too many of them in, so she only did it on occasion, but she was able to take wyverns down like this by now. That meant she could defeat pretty much every monster in this world at this point.

The mages brought down one dragon after another in front of Nelly. The knights didn't even have to finish off the ones brought down by the Inviteds' high-powered flames. By the time they hit the ground, they'd already expired. Finally, the last remaining dragon flew Nelly's way.

"Hmm. Mmn."

She pictured her fist hitting the dragon's head.

"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. Isn't that right, Sara?"

Behind the smiling Nelly, an unconscious dragon fell with a great *boom*.

"Now, let me finish it off."

Nelly drew the sword at her hip, activated her physical strengthening, and plunged it into the dragon's neck.

“*Gh, gh...*”

“Please just avoid the capital next year. Not that there’s any point in telling you that...”

The dragon collapsed, expired.

“Monster...”

“She’s a monster...”

She wasn’t sure if it was the knights or the casters whispering behind her back.

“The Red Reaper.”

“It’s just like the rumors say.”

Nelly shook her sword and returned it to its sheath. The Invited, who took down two dragons and even killed them with magic alone, were extolled for their strength, while she was treated like a monster for just killing one.

“I don’t want Sara to see me like this...”

It would hurt her to see Sara’s kind eyes look at her with fear.

“Hey, miss! How’d you do that?” The excited voice belonged to the Invited. “You didn’t touch the dragon directly, right? Did you send a shockwave at it? The magic here doesn’t have stuff like shockwaves though, does it?”

Her eyes met the young Invited’s when he came over and started talking to her. Up close, Haruto looked less young and more childish. Nelly was surprised to see that he was either Sara’s age or only a bit older. And there was admiration and curiosity in his eyes.

Nelly answered honestly without thinking. “I don’t know what a ‘shockwave’ is, but that’s not what I used. I applied the same technique as a barrier.”

“A barrier... A barrier, eh? No, it was less like a barrier and more like smacking the dragon with shield magic.” His voice shifted from excited to serious. “I was aware of shield magic existing outside of the four elements, but it’s the first time I’ve actually seen someone use it. I bet you could pump up the defense from how you just used it and apply it to attacks, too. Say, miss?”

“Y-Yeah?”

“Nobody says ‘barrier’ here. You have an Invited that you know, don’t you, miss?”

“No.” Nelly turned her head to the side. She didn’t like people with good intuition.

“Haruto, leave it at that.” Bradley came over to them. By that point, all the fallen dragons had been dealt with.

“But...”

“No buts. Stay on task until everything’s finished.”

“Okaaay.”

Haruto obeyed Bradley—if reluctantly—and stopped hounding Nelly. Nelly sighed, relieved.

“You’re strong, Nefertari,” said Bradley.

Nelly wasn’t sure how she felt being called strong by an Invited who could take down two dragons without breaking a sweat.

“I’m glad to know it’s not all just nobles trying to figure out how to use the Invited without putting in any effort themselves,” he continued, patting her on the shoulder in an overly familiar way. She couldn’t let her guard down around either one of them.

“How strange that it’s only the Invited who accept me.” A wry smile on her face, Nelly had completely forgotten the unease she’d been feeling earlier.

“Sara would never react like that to me...” She would never call someone a monster. “I took down a wyvern right in front of her when we first met. Punched a wolf, too.” Yet Sara hadn’t been put off by her at all. “If anything put her off, it was how filthy the cottage was. Well, never mind that...” Nelly cleared her throat despite the fact that no one was listening to her. “All Sara would say is something like, ‘Wow, you can take down dragons too’ or ‘How cool’ or ‘You’re not hurt, are you?’ And then, haha...” Nelly laughed. The knights looked over at her with a start, but she didn’t care.

“Then she’d look up at me and say, ‘So, how do you think we should cook this

dragon? Think we could make a lunch box out of it?' Hahaha!"

Yeah, she'd say something like that for sure.

"She's got a barrier that can repel anything. I'm sure she made it to Rosa. And even if she stayed on the Dark Mountain, she's probably gathered a ton of medicinal plants, and when I get back, she'll say, 'What took you so long? Look at all the plants I've gathered waiting for you!'"

Then she'd hug her tight.

"I'll be back, I promise. Just wait for me, Sara."

And she would be back—just as soon as migrating dragon season was over.