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Taking My Reincarnation One Step at a Time: No One Told Me There Would Be Monsters! Volume 2 [Complete]

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Prologue: Let’s Buy a Tent

Once again, Sara found herself minding the Hunter Guild’s shop kiosk.

“I worked so hard to get a Guild ID, but I’m doing the same stuff now as I was before...”

As usual, the customers came only in a slow drip. Of course, while today was business as usual, the past two days had been pretty intense.

Sara didn’t understand what they’d done to deserve it, but Ted from the Apothecary’s Guild had it out for her and Allen. Allen was a sweet boy who had been kind to Sara when she’d shown up as a complete stranger to the town. Ted’s distaste for Sara wasn’t totally incomprehensible to her if it stemmed from the fact that she was an outsider, but she didn’t understand why he was so cruel to Allen when the boy was just trying to earn his keep doing odd jobs around town.

In any case, petty harassment was one thing, but she’d never expected Ted to send Allen on a dangerous errand outside of town, down a road with a nonfunctioning protection field around it. Sara had hurried after him and the two of them had headed north down the road, braving attacks from horned rabbits as they went, finally delivering Ted’s potions to the knights resting down the road.

“It scares me to think of what could have happened to Allen if I wasn’t able to make my barrier.” Sara shuddered, thinking back to the sight of Allen surrounded by horned rabbits.

In the end, they’d managed to complete the errand, earning Allen enough money to register at the Guild with Sara, so they both finally had IDs now.

Sara took a furtive look around her and pulled her ID out from her storage pouch, holding it in her hand. She didn’t even know how many times she’d looked at it like this since yesterday. About half a month after she left the Dark Mountain to search for Nelly in Rosa, it was finally hers. It was just a simple metal card with her name engraved in it, and it didn’t do anything fancy like

display her stats or rank, but it was proof of Sara's right to wait for Nelly in Rosa.

"Three lunches, warmed up."

She thought the wyvern symbol in the top right was cool, too. So absorbed was Sara in admiring her ID card that she completely failed to notice the customer at her kiosk.

"Three lunches, warmed up," the Hunter repeated.

"Y-Yeees!" Sara hastily responded, almost dropping her ID. She had to be careful with it; it was incredibly important. She hurried to stow it back in her pouch and looked up at the customer. "Do you want three different varieties—oh, Allen! What did I go and panic for?"

Grinning before her was Allen. He'd been granted his ID the day before, the same time as Sara had, after which he'd gone right into the dungeon. Sara was surprised, but he'd headed for the dungeon first thing this morning too, so he must have been really aching to go. But since he was so gung-ho about dungeon delving, she'd expected him to return late again today—thus her surprise to see him back in the guild so early.

Sara, on the other hand, planned to keep doing what she'd been doing the whole time she'd been in Rosa, even now that she had an ID: gathering medicinal plants, helping out in the kitchen, and minding the guild's kiosk. If she could sell her medicinal plants, she'd have a decent income. Of course, she didn't intend to go to the Apothecary's Guild until Ted changed his attitude, so she wasn't planning on selling her plants anytime soon.

She could always sell them at the Hunter's Guild, but it felt like a waste to lose out on the handling fee they charged. Plus she'd managed to sell a lot of the materials taking up space in her storage pouch, so she wouldn't run out of money anytime soon. The materials she sold had turned into a tidy seven hundred thousand gil. She'd be able to stay in an inn for months on that money, and she still had plenty of slime magic stones she could sell, too.

"You really want to buy them? They're three thousand gil a piece, you know," Sara asked the grinning Allen just to be sure.

“Sorry, I was just teasing you.”

“I thought so.”

Allen shrugged apologetically and Sara gave him a wry grin. It was still just the second day after they’d started really making money, so they both agreed that they shouldn’t be splurging anytime soon. Now that they had IDs, they could stay in an inn in town, but they were still camping outside to save money, much to the chagrin of the vice guildmaster Vince.

“You guys can live in town easy for months with just the money you made today,” he’d said to them.

Sara did have to admit that she liked the idea of sleeping indoors on a bed, and being able to take a bath more than anything, but their days struggling to obtain their IDs had instilled a somewhat miserly outlook in Sara and Allen, so they both felt like if they could be saving money, they should be.

“Oh, but I came back early today thinking maybe we could live it up a bit tonight.” Allen grinned happily.

“Live it up?” Sara cocked her head, wondering what that meant coming from Allen.

“Let’s go eat.”

“Go eat?” She still had plenty of food in her storage pouch, but she was guessing that wasn’t what he meant. Sara’s eyes twinkled when she realized what he was implying. “You want to go out to eat?”

“Yeah! We have our IDs now, but we haven’t celebrated yet, right?”

“I guess not.”

The idea hadn’t really occurred to her since she’d been so happy just to get the dang thing. Sara looked over in the direction of the guild’s cafeteria.

“No, let’s go to a place in town,” said Allen. “There’s a food hall I went to a couple of times with my uncle. I think we should be able to eat there.”

“Let’s go!”

It was her first time dining out in this world. She’d never looked forward to

the end of her shift more than she did today. Modz, who took over for her during the late shift, was old enough to be her grandfather, but the Guild had requested his services manning the store at night. Sara waited impatiently for him to arrive, finally trading places with the smiling old man when he did.

Sara and Allen rushed out of the guild. The food hall Allen mentioned was toward the middle of the town, when entering from the central gate. It was an area Sara hadn't really been to before.

"Not that there are very many places I *have* been in Rosa," she shot back at herself.

Anyway, it wasn't the lively streets or shops they passed that caught Sara's eye, but the tall walls that divided the town into segments. The internal walls weren't as high as the external ones, but they were tall enough that you couldn't see the top of them once you got too close. Sara put them at about three stories.

"Allen, that's the Second Wall, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. Inside of it is the Second District of the town. We're in the Third District right now. I see it all the time, so I don't think much of it, but this is only your second time, right?"

"Yeah, the first time I saw it was when we went to the Apothecary's Guild. I know we can stay inside the town at night now since we have IDs, but those walls just make me feel like we shouldn't be here."

Allen stopped and looked up at the wall. "Walls are just walls, aren't they? If you think of them as something to protect the people of the town if monsters attack, then they're more of a good thing, aren't they?"

"I guess so."

She'd sensed this when they were dealing with Ted too, but Allen, with his quick acceptance of things, in some ways seemed a lot more mature than Sara, who tended to dwell on minute details.

"I go through there a lot for errands, so I've seen the fancy shops and houses inside. And deep inside the Second District is the First Wall. I guess the mayor lives inside there, but I don't know for sure. Most of the people involved with

the Hunter's Guild live in the Third District or outside of town."

"What a stark difference."

"That's normal, isn't it?"

It was a picture-perfect example of a class-divided society, but pointing that out wouldn't do any good. Sara decided to just be thankful that a twelve-year-old without any family could somehow make a living here.

"Anyway, that's it there." Allen pointed out the food hall restlessly. A bird-shaped sign swayed in the wind above the door. "It's called the Flycatcher Eatery. Their meat's really good."

Just hearing the word "meat" made Sara's mouth fill with drool. "Meat! Let's go!"

They waded through the crowd to reach the restaurant. They pushed open the saloon doors that Sara was familiar with from the guild and entered a building full of delicious-smelling food and noisy diners. It wasn't a small place at all, but every table within was packed.

"Welcome! Oh, if it isn't Allen."

A busy woman in a white apron stopped when she noticed Allen. She was maybe in her mid-thirties, too young to be the proprietress in Sara's eyes. With her wavy blonde hair tied back behind her head, she cut a striking figure as she bustled around the restaurant. When her green eyes turned their way, it reminded Sara of Nelly, which made her a little forlorn.

"Emma! I registered at the Hunter's Guild!"

"Well, hey, good for you! Come on, sit down over there."

Her hands full with plates, the woman jerked her chin over at a two-person table in the back, hidden behind a pillar. Sara followed Allen over and they sat down, facing each other.

"We're way in the corner."

"Yeah, people with a lot of mana usually end up sitting back here. Everybody knows about it, so people who are weak to the pressure sit in the front. And people who don't mind it so much sit near here."

Allen glanced at a group of men sitting nearby who got up and moved, obvious looks of distaste on their faces. Sara was surprised and a little saddened to see this. Allen smiled at her to tell her she didn't need to worry about it.

"Maybe they haven't been here that many times. But all they have to do is get up and move without saying anything. A lot of Hunters come here, so most people are used to people with a lot of mana."

Well, it was a lot better than starting a fight with a couple of kids, Sara supposed.

There weren't any menus at the tables, but there were papers up on the walls with what looked like the names of dishes. But Allen didn't even glance at them before making his suggestions to Sara.

"I recommend either the orc or the horned rabbit, but the horned rabbit is more expensive."

"It was the same with the skewers outside of town."

"There isn't much edible meat on a horned rabbit, and there aren't a lot of people who hunt them, so they're pretty pricey."

"In that case..." Sara's eyes twinkled. She was very interested to know what the horned rabbits that had bumped into her so many times outside of town tasted like. Plus, the meals she got working in the kitchen at the guild were mostly orc meat. "Horned rabbit."

"That's what I thought you'd say," Allen said with a grin, ordering from Emma right away since she was passing nearby. "Emma, two horned rabbit sets!"

"Two horned rabbit sets, got it! It's gonna be two thousand gil apiece, though. Is that okay?" she asked quietly out of concern for their wallets. Rosa was an expensive town where one piece of bread cost two hundred gil. That meant even a cheap meal wasn't *that* cheap. The orc set was fifteen hundred gil, incidentally.

"It's fine." Allen took out his shiny new ID from his storage pouch and showed it to Emma. Sara nodded beside him. She understood well the reason why he took out his ID to show her even though he could simply tell her in words.

“My, you really did become a Hunter, didn’t you?”

“Sara and I both got our IDs and sold all our materials at the Guild.”

He even casually slipped in the fact that Sara could pay as well. Allen put away his ID and took out some money this time, signaling Sara with his eyes. Sara followed suit, taking out two coins with holes in them, and the two of them placed the money on the table.

“You pay when the food comes, okay? Hope to see you here again!”

She must have explained things for Sara since it was her first time here. It seemed Emma was as nice a person as she looked.

The restaurant was pretty big, filled mostly with two-person tables, but there were people who had pushed their tables together to eat in groups of four, and those who were drinking alcohol instead of eating, too.

“There are a lot of Hunters here. They probably just got back from the dungeon. Pretty exciting.”

“You think?”

Sara looked around the place and saw ages ranging from late teens to forties. The majority were men, but there were a decent amount of women, too. She didn’t know if they had just been in the dungeon, but they did look like they were basking in the relief of a workday over and done with.

“There’s all sorts of different people here.”

“Most people with a lot of mana become Hunters, and if you can use physical strengthening, it doesn’t matter if you’re a guy or a girl. There’s also young people of course, but experience is really important for a Hunter, so there are a lot of older people, too. Experience is something we’re really lacking, huh?” Allen said with a smile.

“Thanks for waiting! Here’s your stewed horned rabbit.”

The waitress returned with two big bowls of stew filled with meat and veggies and some sliced bread.

“And here, to celebrate your becoming Hunters.”

Next, she set down two tankards.

“It’s not ale, okay? It’s diluted bush strawberry juice. Perfect for the two of you,” she said with a wink, pocketing the money on the table and getting back to work.

“Yay! Juice!”

“Yeah!”

They didn’t need to act older than they were. They were at an age where they were perfectly happy to be drinking juice. Not to mention, Sara hadn’t yet had juice since coming to this world. All she’d had was tea.

“Bush strawberries. Since I’m living up in the mountains, maybe I should try looking for them along with medicinal plants in the spring.” Sara decided she would try to make some herself later.

The two of them held up their tankards.

“Well, cheers!”

“Cheers!”

Sara had been intending to just get a small taste to start with, but the cool, sour-sweet juice went down her parched throat all too easily. It had a refreshing, raspberry-like taste, and it seemed to wash away the day’s fatigue as she drank it.

“Phaah!” they both exclaimed at once, grinning at each other. “Delicious!” they agreed.



Next was the stewed horned rabbit. It was a hearty stew full of plenty of meat and veggies, and the rabbit was so soft it could be split apart with a spoon. It

practically melted in Sara's mouth as she took a big bite, the juice from the meat filling her mouth. The vegetables were rich too, having absorbed the flavor of the meat.

"I'll definitely pick more of these up the next time I'm out in the meadow." The meat was so good that this was a no-brainer. It was the moment horned rabbits were upgraded from "annoying monster" to "delicious ingredient" in Sara's mind.

"You don't normally just find them lying around, you know..." Allen said coolly.

"Right..."

Even Sara knew this was not the place to make excuses about how they simply ran into her on their own.

Sara mopped up the rest of the soup with the bread, filling her stomach to the brim.

"It's not that late yet, so do you want to go look at tents?"

"Sure!"

Satisfied with their horned rabbit sets, the two of them departed for a store that sold equipment for Hunters.

"You don't really need a tent unless you're traveling, and anyone coming to Rosa probably has one already, so hopefully they've got some."

"Yeah. A cheap, light one, if possible."

A little apprehensive, they nevertheless let the faint lights of the street lamps and shops nearby guide them to the equipment store.

"Here it is."

The door Allen indicated was narrow, but once they went through it, the store was fairly spacious inside.

"Welcome. Oh, don't get many customers your size." A man with a mustache that was starting to turn grey in places sat at the shop counter, as several Hunters ambled about the store selecting gear.

“Wow...”

The store was a lot bigger than it had looked from the outside, the shelves filled with neat rows of products.

“Oh, protection cases.” Sara spotted some protection cases of the same sort that she used.

“Oh? You’ve seen protection cases before? You got a Hunter or a merchant in the family, kid?” the man at the counter asked her sunnily, evidently not having anything else to do.

“Yes.” Sara nodded. She wanted to brag that Nelly was a *strong* Hunter, but she held it in. Before Sara could say anything else, Allen told the man their purpose in being here.

“We’re here to buy a one-person tent, Mister.”

“Oh, you’re that little errand boy with the Hunter’s Guild, aren’t you?”

The man at the store seemed to have at least heard rumors about Allen. He looked Allen over, suddenly seeming a lot less friendly than he had when he’d called out to Sara.

Allen took his ID out of his pouch and held it up to him. “I’m a Hunter as of yesterday.”

“Oh?” The man’s voice changed in an instant. He gave Allen a big nod. “Then as of today, you’re a customer.”

“That’s right.” Allen stuck his chest out, then scratched his head sheepishly a moment later. “But I’m not actually a customer today. She’s the one who wants to buy a tent. Sara?”

“Your name’s Sara?” asked the man.

“Yes. It’s nice to meet you.” Sara hastily bowed her head and took her own ID out of her pouch. “Umm, I got one of these yesterday, too.”

“Oho. A Hunter’s Guild ID. So you’re not from Rosa, I take it. Ah, you must be the one I’ve heard about...”

What had he heard? Sara was a little nervous to find out, but the old man

didn’t elaborate.

“New tents are in the back on the right. Used ones are behind those,” was all he told them.

“Let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

They headed for the back of the store, glancing at gear Sara couldn’t identify on their way over, and arrived in a section with a bunch of neatly folded tents on the shelves.

“Wow, this one’s nice! The price is... ack, three hundred thousand gil!”

“Sara, that says it’s for five people.”

“O-Oh. I got scared there for a second.”

“These ones are for one person.”

One-person tents were stacked up on one end of the shelves.

“Fifty thousand for a new one... and twenty for a used one...”

Sara’s desire to save money was pointing her toward a used tent, but she couldn’t deny the appeal of a new tent either.

“You don’t live outside of town as well, do you?”

Sara was surprised to hear the man’s voice so close to them. It seemed he’d come out from behind the counter while she was trying to make up her mind. He never got right up next to them though, maybe because of Allen’s pressure.

Allen and Sara exchanged a look.

“I know *you* live outside,” he said to Allen, and then to Sara, “Your name was Sara, right? You do too?”

Sara nodded, although hesitantly.

“There’s a rumor about a kid wandering around Rosa looking for her sister or a relative or something. And that the kid ended up at the Hunter’s Guild, too.”

Sara didn’t know there were rumors going around about her.

“Hunters come and go from Rosa all the time, so no one really pays them any

mind, but kids tend to stand out. You're a girl, too. I really think you should stay in town even if you have to push yourself to do it."

Well, she *could* stay in an inn, but Sara almost found it easier to live outside where she didn't have to worry about all the people in town she didn't know. She was finding it hard to make the transition to living in town.

"If you really want a tent, get a used one. People'll look down on you with a new one. It'd draw attention in a bad way."

Sara appreciated the advice, since something like that would have never occurred to her. She took it to heart and picked up a slightly worn tent.

"Your clothes are baggy, but they're clean and high-quality, and you have good manners, too. You don't really seem like the kind of kid who lives outside town," the man said, twisting his mustache.

Sara didn't know what to say.

"People don't have the best impression of kids who live outside town. I'm sure you have your reasons for now, but you should really try to start staying in town as soon as you can."

Sara thought it was none of his business where she lived, but for the time being, she paid the twenty thousand gil for the used tent and left the store. When they got outside, she realized more time had passed than she'd thought and they hurried to the town gate as the sky darkened above them. Maybe because it was so late, the person they were used to wasn't at the gate, and someone had already set up a tent in the spot they usually used, so they had to put their own tents up farther out.

"This is..."

"Yeah, it's the place you were sitting when we first met."

"It's already been half a month or something since then. This brings me back."

Now that she had a better look at things, Sara realized it was a lot brighter here than where she'd camped out in the meadow and the forest, perhaps because the moonlight reflected off of the town's walls. She set her tent up as Allen instructed her how to and got inside it, lying down.

“It’s pretty big in here, but...”

It did actually make her more nervous not being able to see what was around her. She knew Allen’s tent was right next to hers, but she ended up feeling like she was all alone in the world. She stuck her head out right away, unable to relax.

“Wah!”

Allen was right there, and they almost bumped into each other.

“It’s nice having your own tent, right?”

Crouching there with a cheery smile on his face, Allen evidently wanted to hear Sara’s impressions. Sara started to enjoy herself a little more seeing how Allen’s eyes twinkled. This was the first thing she’d picked out for herself and bought with the money she’d earned. Sara looked at the slightly worn tent in a new light.

“Yeah. It’s nice...”

It was small, but it was like a little home just for her. For now, this was the real start of her life in Rosa.

“Nelly...I’ll do my best here,” she vowed to the night sky. “Now, let’s wash up.”

“What? We can skip it today, can’t we?”

Sara found Allen’s protests amusing.

“Your appearance is important.”

“Feh...”

Even as he grumbled, Allen wiped himself down properly inside his tent. He was the diligent type, at heart. Sara took the moment to appreciate once more having a tent she could make use of whenever she pleased.

Chapter 1: Sara and the Knights

Since she wouldn't have any trouble supporting herself for the foreseeable future, Sara had decided not to sell her medicinal plants anytime soon, but only a few days after buying her tent, Ted came to the Hunter's Guild to collect more plants from her.

It was still morning. Ted had come the day before to make snide remarks to Sara, which made her want to ask him what he even did at the Apothecary's Guild.

Sara was not fond of Ted to begin with. He'd only ever been nasty to her, and his nastiness to Allen had almost resulted in Allen losing his life. But the Guild kiosk was running low on potions, so Sara got out her medicinal plants reluctantly for him.

When Sara and Allen delivered the potions to the knights heading to the north dungeon, Chris, the guildmaster of the Apothecary's Guild, had told them not to go to the Apothecary's Guild until he got back from the north dungeon, but if the Guild had come to them, Sara supposed it was fine to sell her plants. Such was Sara's charitable decision, but Ted took her entire basket of plants and made to leave without even thanking her before he was stopped by a voice coming from the reception desks.

"Wait a second."

It was Vince.

"Tch..." Ted sucked his teeth before turning around. Sara imagined everyone in the guild heard the sound. She could hear it from the door to the kitchen, after all.

"Ted, count the plants out here."

"And why do I have to do that?"

"Look here, you..."

Vince sighed, sitting at the counter. Still, Ted didn't drop his annoyed attitude.

Sara had been watching when Vince lifted Ted up by the collar the other day. She would think that most people would either be too scared or too embarrassed to even show their face around the Hunter's Guild after being threatened like that. Instead, Ted came to the Guild almost every day to harass Sara, and even spoke back to Vince. In fact, Ted might have been the person in Rosa who had spoken to Sara the second-most after Allen. It was almost impressive at this point. Creepy, too.

"I can't trust you with stuff related to Sara and Allen. Count them here."

"Tch." Ted sucked his teeth again, but placed the basket down on the counter in front of Vince and started counting out the plants. Unlike his attitude, the way he handled the plants was careful and attentive.

"That's...five hundred healing herbs, fifteen greater healing herbs, and ten mana herbs."

No one missed the blatant pause before he stated the count.

"Don't try to fudge the numbers."

"I'm not! It's just..."

"Just what?"

Ted gave Vince a sharp look. "It's been five days since the last time we bought the kid's plants and this is exactly five days' worth of each kind."

"What about it?"

Sara shuddered at the door to the kitchen from where she was surreptitiously listening in, creeped out by the fact that Ted had actually guessed exactly how she gathered.

"So we're short on plants right now and the kid is gathering a specific number of each kind every day, and working here every time I come by, too. Meaning we could be getting a lot more if the little brat actually felt like gathering it."

It gave Sara goosebumps to think that Ted knew that much about how she did things. She found herself rubbing her arms as she listened in.

"You're such a creep, Ted." Thankfully, Vince said what Sara was thinking.

“Wha—?! Why?!”

She couldn’t see him, but Sara guessed that Vince was giving Ted a cold look.

“Why don’t you reflect on your own behavior before criticizing Sara?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You brought this on yourself! If you want more plants, all you have to do is give Sara an official apology from the Apothecary’s Guild and put in a proper request for more plants. Until you do that, you have no right to complain about how Sara does things!”

With a huff, Ted carefully packed the plants back into the basket and made to leave, but Vince stopped him again.

“It’s fifty seven thousand, five hundred gil in all, right? Leave it here before you go.”

“I’ll bring it when I bring back the basket later.”

When Ted left through the double doors, Sara felt like time had finally started moving again.

“Oh, I gotta get back to work.”

“Y-Yeah.”

Sara thought she was talking to herself, but everyone else in the kitchen had apparently been holding their breath and listening in too, so at her murmured words, the kitchen finally started moving once more.

She still didn’t care for Ted, but if she could make money outside of working at the Hunter’s Guild, then Sara would have a much more comfortable income, which gave her some relief. If she could sell medicinal plants regularly, she’d be making ten thousand gil in a day easily. By the time Nelly came back, she wouldn’t just be supporting herself, she might even be putting aside some savings.

“Okay, time to work hard.”

When her work in the kitchen was done, she went to the shop kiosk at the usual time, where one of the receptionists, Mina, called out to her. She must

have been listening in on Ted and Vince's exchange about the medicinal plants. Mina was a beautiful woman with a steady composure to her, a little younger than Vince. She was always kind to Sara.

"You might be making more than other beginner Hunters with medicinal plants alone, Sara. There are some Hunters who can only take down a few weak monsters, after all. I guess there aren't too many beginners here in Rosa, though."

"Really?"

Sara sold Hunters lunches and potions every day, but the only differences she could spot among them were their ages and genders. She couldn't tell who was a beginner and who was experienced.

"Well, there aren't any weak monsters around here. Any new Hunters have to train way south of here. The dungeons down there are so easy, they're perfect for kids just starting out."

Sara wasn't sure exactly what kind of monsters a twelve-year-old could easily beat, but she nodded thoughtfully anyway. But what did that mean for Allen?

"Is Allen okay?"

"We wouldn't let him go into the dungeons if he wasn't."

Seeing how worried Sara was, Mina decided to elaborate.

"Right... Since you don't know what it's like in the dungeons, I'll use the monsters in the meadow as an example. Horned rabbits are pretty strong. They charge at you with strong attacks, so beginners can't really defend against them. So since Allen can take them out before they land an attack on him, he can't really be called a beginner. Meaning he won't have any problems on the lower floors of Rosa's dungeons."

That made Sara feel a bit better.

"Well, I can't take horned rabbits down with my fists, so I'm not even a beginner. I'm not gonna push myself just because I have my ID now."

"*Koff, koff.*"

"Oh? You okay, Vince?"

Mina gave Vince a worried look when he coughed suddenly.

“I-I mean, there are Hunters who use magic too, and swords and bows and stuff. You don’t have to be able to take them down with your fists. If you’re bringing horned rabbits in to sell, then you’re not a beginner anymore.”

“I guess that’s true. But we’re talking about Allen here.”

“R-Right. He uses physical strengthening, doesn’t he? Huh?”

Vince looked over at the entrance, so Sara followed his gaze. Allen, who usually came in full of energy by himself, was walking with a bunch of Hunters around him. Sara almost ran over thinking they were harassing him, but she noticed some of them keeping an eye out behind him and realized they were protecting him. But why?

“Allen?”

Allen had been hanging his head, but he raised it when Sara called out to him. However, it wasn’t him who spoke next but one of the Hunters around him.

“Vince, it might be good for Allen to stay out of the dungeon for a while.”

“Why?”

Sara didn’t know what was going on, but she headed for Allen’s side.

“Some low-level Hunters are getting in his way. He can fight back against monsters, but not against people. I’m sure these guys won’t last long in Rosa, so I think it’d be best if he just waits ’til they’re gone.”

“Is it that bad?”

“No matter how good you are at physical strengthening, you can’t keep your guard all the way up the whole time you’re down in the dungeon.”

Allen clenched his fists in frustration. It was just one thing after another. Even after withstanding Ted’s harassment and obtaining his ID, now he might not be able to go down into the dungeon for another reason. Sara raised her fists at these low-level Hunters in her imagination, but there was nothing she could do for Allen in reality. At the most, she could stay by his side and share her food with him, but she wanted to do all she could for him.

“Well, we’re gonna get going.”

The Hunters had apparently brought Allen back from the dungeon out of concern for him.

“Thank you.” Allen bowed to them politely, but his expression said he found his current circumstances unbearable.

“Well, you’ve made plenty of money in the last few days, so you’ll be able to get by for now, right, Allen?”

“Yeah...”

Sara thought Allen would say he wanted to go into the dungeon no matter what, but instead he meekly agreed with Vince.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone, even by mistake...”

It was because Allen was such a good kid that so many people wanted to help him out, in Sara’s opinion.

“Want to watch the kiosk with me like we did yesterday?”

Vince and the other receptionists nodded as Allen considered Sara’s proposal, so he figured they’d given him their permission and headed over to the kiosk with Sara.

As she dealt with the occasional customer, Sara asked Allen, “So, other people are getting in your way?”

“Yeah. They hang around me and take down monsters I was fighting or get close enough that my fists might hit them on purpose. If I have a bunch of people around me, there’s nothing I can do.”

“They should just hunt more monsters if they have the time for all that.”

“Right? I’m glad I sold a bunch of monsters right away.”

They’d both sold a bunch of monsters when they’d gotten their IDs, so they had enough money to survive for a few months without making any more.

“Man, I gotta go back to running errands tomorrow...” Allen lamented. Evidently, he didn’t plan on taking any sort of break. He wanted to get right back to work.

Sara noticed some noise outside just as the doors to the guild flew open.

“We need some apothecaries! We’ve got injured here!”

Ten Hunters flew into the guild with that shout. No, Hunters would have all different gear, but these people wore matching armor. Their hair was sticking to them with sweat, and they seemed tired, but they were all pretty good-looking, too.

Sara gasped. Hadn’t she seen these guys when she’d come with Allen on his errand? They were the knights. They were lightly equipped, with breastplates, greaves, and bracers that looked easy to move in, but their armor was red, so it stood out. Right now, however, they were lending one another their shoulders, sporting obvious injuries.

Vince’s chair clattered as he stood. “The knights. Allen!”

“Yes!”

“Go to the Apothecary’s Guild and tell them the knights are back, but they’re hurt. We need apothecaries and as many potions as they’ve got!”

“Got it!”

Allen ran off like the wind before Sara could even get a word in. She was a bit worried how things would go considering Allen’s history with Ted, but the knights in front of them right now were more important.

“The knights...”

Sara watched them with wide eyes. She hadn’t had any time to get a proper look while they were on Allen’s errand.

Their clothes were torn and bloody, but they were all standing on their own two feet with or without support, and it didn’t look like any of them were in any grave danger. Still, if Vince was calling for apothecaries and potions, that meant their injuries were bad enough that they couldn’t take care of them on their own.

Sara turned around and confirmed the kiosk’s stock. They didn’t have many, but there were regular and greater potions. While Vince was sending Allen to the Apothecary’s Guild and giving other orders, the knights looked exhausted

enough to collapse at any moment.

Sara looked over at the cafeteria, which wasn't busy yet, and scurried over to Vince after checking the amount of empty chairs.

"Vince."

"What is it, Sara? I'm kinda busy at the moment." Vince glanced down at Sara, then shot an annoyed look at the knights.

"There's five greater potions at the kiosk," Sara whispered to Vince. "And ten regular ones. There are empty seats in the cafeteria, so why don't you have them sit down in there?"

"Well, the potions'll help, but we should wait until the apothecaries get here before using them. Don't want them to go to waste."

Sara was a little surprised to hear him say that.

"You're right though, we should have them sit down. They're blocking the doors like that."

That was quite a way to talk about people who were clearly exhausted and injured. Still, she had permission, so Sara called out to the wobbly-looking knights.

"Umm, please sit down over here until the apothecaries get here."

"You're..."

A young man who looked steadier on his feet than most of them noticed Sara and began moving the knight he was supporting toward the seats, after which the rest of the knights joined him.

Sara took a bucket and a fresh towel from her pouch. She hesitated for a moment over whether she should share her personal belongings with them, but eventually filled the bucket with water the temperature of a warm bath using magic, and stuck the towel into it before wringing it out. She set it down on the table next to the man who'd noticed her, placing the bucket at his feet so he could use it too if he needed to.

Then she headed for the kitchen, where she told Mize, "The knights just came back injured. Is there anything we can give them to drink?"

“We don’t owe ’em anything, but I guess I’ll get ’em something if you’re asking, Sara.”

Just like Vince, Mize seemed cold toward the knights. Still, he set out some ale, which Sara cooled down as the people in the kitchen watched with some fascination.

“I know you were warming up lunches, but you can cool stuff down, too?”

“Yes. It works the same way.”

“It does, does it?” Sara’s coworker asked, picking up two ales in each hand. Sara took two total, thinking it best not to push herself.

“Here’s some drinks from the kitchen.”

“It’s cold ale.”

Her coworker slapped the ales down on the table, but Sara set them down carefully, so that they didn’t spill. Her specialty was peeling potatoes, not waitressing.

“You’re...” the same man repeated. His face was clean now after having used the towel. Now that she got a better look at him, he was a handsome young man around the same age as Ted, with dark blond hair and blue eyes. No, he was clearly hotter than Ted. It was an insult to even compare the two. But he hadn’t shared the towel with the other knights.

“Umm, I can wash that towel, so please let the other knights use it, too. Or do you have your own towels to use?”

“The others? Ah, this was yours? Everyone, get your towels out! You can wash your faces!”

While this exchange occurred, one of Sara’s coworkers brought out several more buckets from the kitchen, so Sara filled them all with hot water using magic and wrung out the knights’ towels for them. Most of them looked a lot more comfortable after being able to wash off some.

“Where are Chris and the guildmaster, anyway? Didn’t they go with you? Why’d just the knights come back by themselves?” Vince asked them when things had finally calmed down some, but before they could answer, the people

from the Apothecary's Guild arrived. Of course, Ted was the only person among them Sara recognized. Seeing how fast he was moving, Sara hurriedly collected her bucket and turned back toward the kitchen.

"You're in the way! Move it!"

It was exactly what she'd been expecting to hear. Luckily, she was already in position to flee, so flee she did, sticking her tongue out at Ted as she went.

"Wha..."

"Ted! Focus!"

"Serves you right," Sara jeered when Ted got scolded, quietly enough that he might not have heard her. Judging from the irritated look he shot her, he had. Sara felt better after that, so she returned to the kitchen. She knew she was being childish, but Ted didn't exactly act like an adult himself, so she was just getting on his level. Sara nodded to herself.

"I know you just ran in here, Sara..." Mize started. "But don't you need to be watching the store? Doesn't look like Modz is in yet."

"Oh."

During the commotion with the knights, some Hunters had arrived at the kiosk like usual to buy lunches. They were the same as Vince and Mize, clearly feeling like the commotion had nothing to do with them, which almost made Sara laugh.

"Well, Ted's busy right now, so it should be okay for me to go out there." When Sara poked her head out of the kitchen, Allen, who had returned with the apothecaries, spotted her.

"Sara! Come on!"

Allen ran over to the kitchen and held a hand out to her. Sara grabbed it and the two of them jogged over to the kiosk. The people in the guild watched them with warm looks. As soon as Sara got behind the counter, the loitering Hunters looked visibly relieved,one of them calling out to her, "Looks like something happened, but whatever it was, we still gotta go into the dungeon tomorrow. Three lunches. Heated up, please."

“Yes! That’ll be four thousand five hundred gil, and three hundred to warm them up.”

“Here you go.”

“Thank you!”

Sara took the Hunter’s empty lunch boxes, then exchanged heated-up lunches for money, setting aside the three hundred gil as her personal earnings.

Allen’s eyes lit up when he saw that. “Wow! You already earned enough for a piece of bread!”

“Right? Aren’t I great?” Sara boasted. Just looking at the two of them, it was as if the commotion with the knights hadn’t even happened, though the men were still right there, being treated.

“Looks like potions were enough to do the trick, but what happened, anyway? Some of those injuries looked pretty bad.”

An apothecary Sara had never seen before was talking with the knights. He looked about Mina’s age, with a calm air about him.

Sara had thought that apothecaries just made potions, but the ones who had come to the guild had checked over each and every knight, assessing their conditions and giving them an amount of potions that corresponded to the severity of their injuries. Some of them had taken only small amounts of potion at a time with pauses in between.

Sara glanced over and found even Ted assessing one of the knights’ injuries and gently administering a potion. He looked exactly like Chris had when he’d looked over Allen after the nasty errand Ted had sent him on.

“Ted’s actually a real apothecary.”

“That doesn’t excuse the way he treats us.”

“True enough.”

The apothecary and knight’s conversation continued on while Sara and Allen were distracted by Ted. The knight answering him wasn’t one of the injured, but was instead the one Sara had given her towel to. He did seem young, but he looked like the most competent of the group.

“Well, to start with, the protection field around the road to the north dungeon is almost completely nonfunctional. We were supposed to be walking down a safe road, but we were constantly being bombarded by horned rabbits.”

A buzz went through the guild and Ted’s head snapped up at that.

“There’s no protection field?” Vince murmured, but he didn’t interrupt the conversation.

“Still, the only danger in the meadow was horned rabbits. There was a frightening amount of them, but we managed to make it through them easily enough to make it to the north dungeon. But as soon as we made it through the forest upon entering the dungeon, we were attacked by a pack of mountain wolves.”

It was the first time Sara had heard that name in a while, but she wasn’t happy about it at all. She furrowed her brow. As she suspected, mountain wolves were troublesome creatures in any dungeon. Well, all monsters were troublesome, really. No, some were tasty. Those ones were different.

“No way. The lower mountain portion of the north dungeon is forest wolf territory. Forest wolves shouldn’t be much more trouble than horned rabbits, and mountain wolves live way higher up.” This time, Vince raised his voice and butted in.

“Vince. Just wait a second. Let him finish first.” The apothecary held up his hand to Vince. He seemed younger than Vince, but the Apothecary’s Guild must have been the more powerful organization. Sara wished they would do something about Ted’s behavior if that was the case.

“So, you were attacked by mountain wolves.”

“Yes, but we were able to put protection cases down right away to keep them away and treat some of our members who were injured.”

“Hmm.”

“But the mountain wolves stayed around us the whole time as if they were waiting for something.”

“They are pretty persistent,” Vince said with a groan. Sara nodded in agreement.

“At the rate we were taking injuries, we would have run out of potions before we made it to the top of the mountain, so...well, the guildmaster told the dead weight to return to town. And when we went back into the forest, the mountain wolves didn’t bother us again. We were attacked by weaker wolves instead, of course...”

Sara confirmed her suspicions that mountain wolves were indeed dangerous creatures. The forest wolves hadn’t amounted to much, though.

“So you treated your injuries and the forest wasn’t a challenge. Why’d you get injured again, then?”

“Well...because of the horned rabbits.”

Another buzz went through the guild. Among just the people Sara knew, horned rabbits were monsters that even Allen could hunt. If those horned rabbits had presented so much challenge to the knights, did it mean they were that weak, or was there some other reason? Hadn’t they said they’d made it past the horned rabbits easily enough on their way to the dungeon?

“On our way there, we had more people with us, and more energy. But why are there so many horned rabbits in that meadow anyway? Our injuries had been healed with potions, but we’d still taken damage. We had our guards down when we went back into the meadow and one of us got taken out, then another got hurt protecting him, and so on. Soon enough, we’d gone through all the potions we were left with and this was the result.”

The knights seemed to be mostly swordsmen who specialized in physical strengthening. If they were too weak to maintain their physical strengthening, Sara supposed it was definitely possible they could be taken down by a horned rabbit. Allen had been just about to succumb to their attacks when he went on Ted’s phony errand, too.

“From the severity of these wounds, I’d buy that it was done by horned rabbits. They’re particular to meadows like those, and if you’re not used to them, even veteran Hunters can be injured by them.”

From the expressions on their faces, everyone in the guild seemed to agree with the apothecary, so it wasn't that the knights were particularly weak, Sara supposed.

Vince put a hand to his chin thoughtfully. "Supposing everything you said is true, there's no protection field around the road through the meadow in the north and there's an abnormal amount of horned rabbits out there, too. Did you see herds of cotton sheep too, then?"

"Oh," Sara gasped. That must be the name of those fluffy sheep that hadn't so much as twitched in response to the horned rabbits attacks. *She* had seen plenty of them.

"Sara..." Vince gave Sara a suspicious look before coming to some realization and telling her not to say anything with a glare. Sara hadn't been planning on saying anything, so that was fine with her. If she could avoid standing out, then that's what she wanted to do.

"In any case, that's all the treatment we apothecaries can do. Potions won't restore your stamina, so all you can do now is get some rest. Please go back to your inn, have a good meal, and get some sleep." The apothecary wrapped up and stood, and a wave of relief went through the room.

"Good thing I just got some greater healing herbs in stock. We'd be out of greater potions if I hadn't," Ted said with a bit of a sour face.

Behind the shop counter, Sara puffed her chest out. It was all thanks to Sara diligently gathering plants every day and having a big enough heart to sell them to the malicious Ted. And she wasn't even bragging about it either. What a humble person she was.

"Hey, you." Vince called out to the knight who had been doing the talking.

"It's Liam. Liam Hills."

"Call me Vince. I'm the vice guildmaster here. So, Liam." Vince didn't hesitate to call the knight by his first name with no title. "You can send you men back to the inn, but I want a few more details from you."

"That's fine. I was never injured."

“Looks like it. Come over here.”

Most likely, he was taking him to the guildmaster’s office in the back of the building. The knights who had been treated for their injuries began to move, too. They were leaving for their inn. Sara looked at the potions on the shop shelf they hadn’t ended up needing to use, relieved that they could still be sold to Hunters.

“Ah, you.”

“Sara, he means you.”

“Me?” Sara turned around to see the knight from before giving her a warm look.

“Thanks for everything. It helped to be able to sit down, and I appreciated being able to wash my face and have that drink. You’re quite responsible for how small you are, aren’t you?”

“I’m just glad I could help,” Sara replied with a smile. She thought the comment about her size was unwarranted, but then she remembered that she was only twelve, so she let it slide. It was nice that he’d taken note of everything and thanked her, in any case.

“Wait, haven’t I seen the two of you somewhere before?”

Seeing Sara and Allen standing behind the counter must have jogged his memory. These were indeed the two brave kids who had gone and delivered the potions to him and the knights.

“Liam.”

“Oh, yes. I’ll see you, then.”

Vince called his name and the knight left. He did seem to be around the same age as Ted.

“Feh. What’s he mean he’ll see us? He doesn’t have any business with us. What’s he trying to act cool for when he got taken out by some horned rabbits?”

“You shouldn’t say that, Allen.” Sara decided to chide him. It wasn’t good to disparage people who were doing the best that they could at their jobs. Of

course, any sort of admiration Sara had had for the knights had thoroughly vanished at this point. Sure, maybe they were tired, but she had no respect for adults who couldn't even beat a horned rabbit.

"Well, we were the ones who delivered the potions they were using and they didn't even remember us."

That was what had rankled Allen, apparently. It was reasonable to be irritated about the errand they'd worked so hard to complete being treated lightly, she supposed.

"Yeah. I'd think they'd remember a couple of kids delivering them potions in such a dangerous place. I didn't remember any of the knights, though..." Now that Sara thought about it, she didn't recognize any of the knights from seeing them back then either.

"But mountain wolves really are scary, aren't they?"

"I think I've heard they're monsters only found in the north dungeon and they're really strong. Let's see... I think their pelts sell for a lot." Allen told her what he could recall.

While pondering the fact that they were only found in the north dungeon, Sara suddenly hit upon an idea. She'd thought horned rabbits had been a huge pain, but they had been tasty, hadn't they? Then...

"I wonder if mountain wolves taste good..."

"I think I remember hearing that their meat tastes so bad you can't even sell it."

"Well, darn."

The mountain wolves would live to see another day. If they had been listed as "tasty" in Allen's memory, then they would have been upgraded to "ingredient" in Sara's estimation.

Before Sara went home, she received her basket and payment for her plants from the Apothecary's Guild—from Ted.

"Not Ted again..." Sara liked to think she was a pretty reasonable person, but anyone would be sick after seeing *Ted* three times in one day.

“Hey, I don’t particularly want to see your face either. And I definitely don’t want to see *his*.” Ted glared in Allen’s direction. Still, he placed her basket down on the counter and set her money down where she could see it, too. She was surprised when she’d seen him acting like a proper apothecary earlier as well. Maybe Ted actually took his job pretty seriously.

“So, anyway...”

“Is there something *else* you want?” Sara asked in annoyance when Ted lingered. She stretched up and looked toward the entrance, hoping Modz would come to relieve her soon.

“Bring more plants tomorrow.”

“What...?” Sara was of course planning on picking more medicinal plants the next day, but Ted demanding it of her didn’t really motivate her to sell them to him. She put her hands on her hips, exasperated. “Can’t you just be honest and say you need more plants, so you’d like to buy them from me again tomorrow?”

“Don’t want to.”

“Are you a child?” Sara sighed.

Allen was shuffling the products around on the shelves, stealing glances at them as he did so. Ted had been nasty to him a minute ago, but Allen wasn’t the sort to pick fights for such petty reasons. Seeing him, Sara clapped her hands together.

“I know. Why don’t you ask Allen?”

“Me?”

“This brat?”

“He’s not a brat. His name is Allen.” The two of them seemed incredulous, so Sara explained, “You can’t go into the dungeon tomorrow, right, Allen? If you were just going to run errands in town anyway, why not pick some plants in the morning first?”

“I guess that makes sense. It’s fine with me, but...” Allen shuffled some potions around. “Only if I get a proper request. I’m not gonna pick them for someone acting like it’s a huge pain to buy them from me.”

“Same here.”

Sara and Allen both turned their heads away from Ted. He may have only intended that request of his to be a trivial prank, but if Sara hadn’t gone to get Allen, he could have gotten injured or even died. He also called Allen trash and badmouthed Nelly. The more she remembered, the worse Sara’s mood got.

Ted flinched, seeing her mood souring, and sighed. “I’ll be honest with you. So many unexpected things have happened lately that the Apothecary’s Guild doesn’t have enough plants to make the potions we need to make. If something else unexpected happens, we might not be able to heal the next injured person who needs our help.”

Ted paused for a moment as if he couldn’t bring himself to continue. At some point, the guild had become dead silent. “Sara, Allen. I want you to gather medicinal plants for the Apothecary’s Guild. As many as you can is fine. It would especially help if you could bring in greater healing herbs.”

Sara sighed. She knew it was probably pointless to expect Ted to say something like, “I apologize for making that cruel request” or “I shouldn’t have called you trash” or “I’m sorry” or “please.” The high-handed way he was making his request was probably the most that she could expect of Ted at this point.

Even without a request or an apology, Sara had sold her medicinal plants to Ted today. She’d probably sell them to him again tomorrow. Even if your client was a jerk, work was work and payment was payment. That was what it meant to be a working adult. Emotionally, Sara was much more of an adult than Ted was.

But what did Allen think? Sara snuck him a glance as he faced the potion shelf.

“Guess I’ve got no choice. If you insist, I’ll take that job of yours,” Allen said. He was trying to hide it, but there was a smirk on his face. Sara smiled to herself when she saw it.

“Tch.”

It was rude of him to suck his teeth at them, but Sara knew Ted wouldn’t be

satisfied without some amount of sour grapes. As far as Sara and Allen were concerned, they felt like they'd at least achieved some small victory against Ted, or maybe against the Apothecary's Guild. Ted's rude gesture couldn't sour their sunny mood.



“Oh, if it isn’t the kid from the Apothecary’s Guild. Did you come here to deliver some potions?”

“I’m not a kid. My name is Ted.”

Modz finally came to take over, Ted not bothering to hide his irritation at the man’s greeting. Sara gave up her spot behind the counter, stifling her laughter at the exchange.

“Let’s get outta here,” Allen said.

“Yeah. See you tomorrow, Ted. Oh...” It wasn’t like they were friends, so she didn’t need to say “see you tomorrow” to him.

“I’ll be here for them again tomorrow. You’d better have them.”

He was *still* acting full of himself. Sara stuck her tongue out at him and ran out of the guild with Allen, heading for the gate.

“I almost acted friendly with him. Now that I think about it, I only started living outside of town because he wouldn’t buy my plants from me.”

“Yeah, you don’t hold a grudge, Sara. I don’t think you need to push yourself to stay mad at him.”

There went Allen, acting all mature again. That just made Sara more annoyed.

“I think you could stand to be more upset about how he treats you, Allen.”

“I don’t care. It’s more important to me to get stronger and make money than stay mad at Ted.”

“You’re too pragmatic.”

Allen laughed. Just today, some Hunters had gotten in his way, too.

“At the very least, I can eat as much as I want now, unlike when I was trying to save my money. What do you want to have for dinner today?”

“Well, since we’re already at the gate, want to get some sandwiches with a bunch of meat in them?”

“Yeah!”

If nothing else, they could eat their fill on the money they made in a day. A lot had happened today, but they ended it in a cheerful mood once again.

Allen got up a little earlier than usual and set about gathering medicinal plants for the first time in a few days. As she helped him out, Sara pondered how she'd make a living from now on, realizing she'd been so relieved to finally get her ID that she hadn't given much thought to what came next.

"Allen, check how it looks in the guide. You want to pick from a little lower than that."

"Okay. Err, are these leaves from a greater healing herb?"

"Yeah. You should try to focus on figuring out greater healing herbs today instead of just gathering regular ones. After all, we have a proper request from the Apothecary's Guild."

Now that she had her ID, she had a way to make money every day. And if it came to it, she still had plenty of magic stones from slimes she could sell. It was starting to get cold outside, but Sara could put up a protection field and warm herself with magic, so living outside of town wouldn't be a problem.

"Come to think of it, what do you do about the cold, Allen? It's gotten pretty chilly lately."

"I don't really feel it."

Sara felt like she'd heard something like that before.

"Is it because of physical strengthening?"

Nelly probably said something about how you could use physical strengthening to cover your body in a layer of warmth.

"I don't know. My uncle always complained about how cold it was in winter, but whenever I got cold, I could just tense up a little and I got warm somehow. He never understood what I meant when I told him that, though. I do wake up cold sometimes, I guess."

Okay, it was definitely physical strengthening. And he was doing it without meaning to, which was kind of scary. No, maybe it just meant that he had that much of an aptitude.

"Nelly told me once that she used physical strengthening to create a layer of warmth over her so she wasn't cold. If you're doing it unconsciously, maybe it's

coming undone before you wake up in the morning."

"Is that why? I'll try doing it on purpose next time."

"I think that's a good idea. Oh, healing herbs usually grow close to each other, so when you find any greater ones keep checking that area."

"Got it."

As she instructed Allen, Sara searched for her own greater healing herbs a slight distance away. She found a few, but always made sure to leave half of them alone.

She was only here in Rosa in the first place because Nelly had told her to come here, but it was also true that Nelly hadn't told her anything *but* to come to Rosa and go to Chris for help. Chris was the person with the silver hair she'd met on Allen's errand, but he wasn't in town right now. He'd seemed like a good enough person, but from just meeting him once, Sara wasn't sure whether or not she could really rely on him yet. And her experiences in Rosa left her loath to trust anyone from the Apothecary's Guild.

But if she simply continued to wait in Rosa, would Nelly actually come back? As long as Sara was waiting for her, Nelly would try to get back to her. Sara was sure about that. So if she wasn't coming back, it meant there were some circumstances preventing her from doing so.

Sara looked up and spotted some mana herbs growing near the town walls. She stood up and picked those, too. Glancing around from that spot, she noticed a group of greater healing herbs growing by the road, so she moved over to that area next.

"You're really good at finding those, Sara. I've gathered plants with my uncle before, but they'd always say we had some other stuff mixed in when we brought them to the Apothecary's Guild. It wasn't like my uncle was an expert or anything, but still."

"Really? I think it's pretty easy to tell them apart."

Sara cocked her head. She *had* been gathering plants up on the Dark Mountain almost every day, so she had a lot more practice than the average person, she supposed.

Allen looked up at the sky to check the position of the sun. “Sara, don’t you think you should start heading to the Guild?”

“You’re right. Are you gonna stay?”

“No, I’ll go, too. I *could* stay out a little longer, but I’m not confident enough to gather on my own yet, so I’ll look for errands in town for the rest of the day.”

They’d decided to start combining their plants and splitting the profit for the time being. Once Allen could gather on his own they would start selling separately.

Just like when he’d been working to afford his ID, Allen headed off to look for odd jobs after arriving at the Guild. Sara headed for the kitchen.

“He’s right back where he started,” Vince muttered pityingly.

Sara grinned. “We can sell the plants we gather now, so he’s not back where he started.”

“I guess that’s true. You two really are tenacious.”

Something about that seemed rude to Sara, but she decided to take it as a compliment.

Just before noon, as she peeled potatoes in the kitchen like usual, Vince called for her.

“It’s Ted. He’s here. I’ll be right back.”

“Hey, Sara.” Mize stopped her before she could slip out of the kitchen. She didn’t think he was going to scold her, but it was rare for him to stop her like this. “It’s fine if you slip out for a minute, but couldn’t you just leave your basket out at the reception desks when you come in in the morning?”

“Oh, you’re right.” Sara was disappointed in herself for not realizing that on her own.

“Then you wouldn’t have to see Ted’s face every time he shows up.”

He was right, and his consideration for her warmed her heart. Still, Ted had made an official request to her, so she felt she needed to see him face-to-face at least for today.

“Thank you for waiting. Here they are.” She set her basket down in front of Ted.

“Tch.” As always, he sucked his teeth at her.

“Ted...” Vince started, irritation clear in his voice. “Why does a twelve-year-old kid have better manners than a grown adult like you?”

“Lay off it,” Ted shot back, but he was just as careful as always in opening the basket and counting the plants inside. There was no need for Sara to wait for him to finish counting, so she decided to go back to the kitchen. She didn’t expect him to thank her, so she didn’t need to wait for that either.

“Twelve? I’d *thought* you were pretty small, but you’re *twelve*?”

She noticed someone standing next to Ted when he called out to her. He was so handsome he was completely out of place here in the Hunter’s Guild. Sara had to stop and think about who he was before recognizing him as the knight who had been talking with the apothecary the day before.

“Huh? Yes. I’m twelve.”

“I came to return this to you. Thank you for yesterday.”

“Oh, my towel.” Now that she thought about it, she’d collected her bucket, but she hadn’t gotten the towel back. “This isn’t mine, though.” Sara’s towel had been new, but it was just a normal towel, not a fluffy one like this.

“Yes, well, I got that towel pretty filthy yesterday. It really helped, though.”

He must have gone out and bought her a new towel. Sara glanced at the knight’s high-quality clothing and decided it would be more work to refuse him. He was probably pretty well-off.

“Thank you.” Sara accepted the towel, thanked the knight, and turned to head back to the kitchen.

“Ah, one moment.”

Sara wrinkled her nose, her face still turned toward the kitchen. Vince burst out laughing at her, but she ignored him. Apparently, the knight still wanted something.

“You were selling things at the kiosk yesterday, weren’t you? What are you doing now?”

“I’m supposed to be helping out in the kitchen right now.” *Hence, I’m busy,* went unsaid, though the smile on her face might have been a little strained.

“Then what are these plants you just handed over to Ted?”

“I picked those this morning.”

“Is that true? You’re so young, yet you work all day, from early in the morning? What about your parents?”

“I...” Sara wasn’t sure what to say. She couldn’t tell him, “They’re living happily in Japan.” She didn’t realize he was interpreting her silence in her hesitation as the sadness of a child without any parents.

“Sara, just get back to work.”

“Okay.”

Vince threw her a lifeline, so Sara hurried back to the kitchen. She sighed, finally free from the nosy knight.

“Wasn’t that one of those knights you look up to, Sara?”

“I don’t look up to them, I’ve just never seen one before, so I was curious about them.”

She’d been excited when she’d first heard that the knights were coming, but after finding out that they were a bunch of pretty faces with nasty personalities like Ted, their good looks lost their appeal. Frankly speaking, they were weaker than Nelly and maybe even weaker than Allen, so their title didn’t mean much to Sara.

“They don’t seem that strong either.”

“Pfft.” Someone in the kitchen burst out laughing at Sara’s frank evaluation.

“L-Listen, Sara, pfft...” Her coworker couldn’t stop laughing. “Everyone who comes to the Hunter’s Guild in Rosa is pretty strong, so...well, the knights might look weak in comparison to them, but they’re really not, okay?”

“Well, if you say so...”

“Don’t think of Allen as the baseline. Those weaklings were only giving him a hard time because they’re jealous of how strong he is.”

“Is that right?”

“So you really didn’t know...”

Sara didn’t know what this world’s standards for strength were. On the Dark Mountain, she hadn’t even been able to leave her home until she could do something about the mountain wolves, and on her way to Rosa, she had to be able to defend herself against the horned rabbits, so the knights who had been taken down by those rabbits seemed undeniably weak to her.

But enough about the knights. Her livelihood came first!

“First, potato peeling!”

“Y-Yeah, I guess so.”

She had to continue living strong like she always did. As she peeled potatoes, Sara continued her train of thought from earlier in the day. What would she do if Nelly was in a situation where she couldn’t come home? Sara didn’t know why Nelly had left Rosa in the first place, but if she thought back, there were some hints in what Nelly had last said.

“A request...” Nelly had said that once, hadn’t she? “The capital...” Sara thought she recalled hearing this once, too. Nelly’d also said that she normally only stayed in the cottage on the Dark Mountain from spring to fall. In other words, Nelly had gone to the capital as part of some sort of request, and simply hadn’t left word with Sara to that effect. That was the most likely explanation.

So why hadn’t she left word with Sara? Nelly cherished their relationship, so it was hard to think she could have simply forgotten or chosen not to leave a message with her. That would mean that for whatever reason, she hadn’t been able to leave a message before leaving for the capital.

She’d said that requests normally came through the Hunter’s Guild. If that was the case, then why didn’t the Hunter’s Guild in Rosa know about Nelly? The Apothecary’s Guild hadn’t known her either, even though she should have been selling Sara’s medicinal plants to them.

The mystery was only deepening. Sara didn't want to consider this, but what if Nelly had gotten caught up in some kind of trouble? Her hands stilled. If she *had* gotten wrapped up in something, there was nothing Sara, who was weaker than Nelly, could do to help her. In which case, what Sara should do was obvious. She should assume Nelly was out completing her request and wait in Rosa for her to return in the spring.

If she didn't come back after spring came, Sara would go to the capital to look for her. She didn't know how much money such a journey would take, and since it was the capital, she assumed prices would be higher there than they were in Rosa. Or was Rosa supposed to be more expensive? It didn't really matter, she supposed.

Sara would earn as much money as she could over winter, and then she would go looking for Nelly. And while she was looking, she figured it wouldn't be so bad to sample more of the tasty foods this world had to offer.

"Sara."

She'd start her conquest with the food stands of Rosa.

"Sara."

"Hwuh?" Sara hurriedly stopped her potato peeling.

"It's time to help out at the kiosk, isn't it? You've been super focused today."

"Ha ha ha. I had something on my mind."

Sara hastily washed her hands and headed to the kiosk, the morning's pay in hand. She was relieved to see that there wasn't anyone waiting at the kiosk, though if there were, one of the receptionists would handle it, so it wasn't like Sara really needed to hurry. She was just moving between areas in the same building, but she felt busy going in and out of the kitchen like this.

When she arrived at the kiosk and began rounding the counter...

"Excuse me."

Sara rolled her eyes without meaning to. It was the knight who had come with Ted, she was sure of it. He was still here?

"Err, hello. Do you need potions? We have lunches, too." She turned around

with her best customer service smile on, but the knight's gaze was directed at her hand.

"What's that?"

"Huh? Uhh, my pay for working in the kitchen."

"You start in the morning and only make three thousand gil?"

Sara didn't like the way he'd said that, but she decided he was probably just ignorant of the cost of living here, so she decided to explain things politely to him.

"I don't start in the morning. I only work three or four hours, and lunch is included. And with three thousand gil, I can afford to eat out for dinner if I want to." If she didn't eat out, that money paid for four days of breakfast *and* dinner, she explained to him ardently, tucking the three coins away in her pouch. "So, do you need something?"

"No, I wouldn't say that, exactly."

"Are you serious?" Sara wanted to ask him, but she had enough common sense to keep it to herself. After that there was only a dull silence, so Sara began meaninglessly rearranging the potions on the shelves like Allen had been doing the day before and wiping down the counter.

"Three lunches, warmed up."

When a real customer finally showed up, her smile was beaming.

"Of course! That's four thousand five hundred gil, with a warming fee of three hundred."

"Warming fee..." the knight muttered from nearby, but Sara did her best to ignore him. She was doing her best, so why was he still here when he didn't have any business with her? Sara shot a look at Vince's desk, appealing to him for help with her eyes, but he shook his head. He must have wanted her to do something about the situation herself. Even though she was asking for help because she *couldn't* do that.

Just before Sara's irritation reached its peak, Allen burst into the Guild.

"Sara! I'm done with my errands for the day! I'll help out at the kiosk!"

“Allen!”

This might have been the happiest Sara had ever been to see Allen. With Allen here, the knight’s gaze didn’t bother Sara as much, and even though some Hunters expressed annoyance at Allen’s mana, it was still fun to have him helping out.

Still, when Modz finally came to relieve her, Sara was so thankful she felt like crying. It wasn’t that the knight’s expression was particularly cold, but it still made her nervous to have him watching her like that.

“What do you want to have for dinner tonight?”

“Let’s try out a different food stand this time.”

Just as they were leaving the Guild, someone stopped them from behind.

“Excuse me.”

Hearing the familiar phrase, Sara wrinkled her nose again. Allen saw this and answered for her.

“Are you talking to us?”

“Yes, that’s right. Where are you headed now?”

Where were they headed? Home, of course.

“Uhh, we’re just getting dinner and going home for the day.”

“Do you mind if I accompany you?”

Sara and Allen exchanged a surprised glance. Despite the knight’s handsome looks and noble air he seemed like nothing but trouble to Sara, so she was trying to avoid looking at him as much as possible. When her eyes unfortunately shifted his way, she regretted it, just as she thought she would.

His hair was shorter than Ted’s and a darker blond, and his eyes were a more vibrant blue. Sara supposed he must be pretty popular with the ladies his age. He had the honed build one would expect of a knight, but he seemed more lithe than burly. The clothes he wore were unadorned, but well tailored and fitted.

Sara looked down at her own baggy clothes and let a small sigh escape her lips. What would a man who seemed like he had money and status to spare

want with Sara and Allen?

He must have seen how nervous he was making them. The knight hurriedly appealed to Vince to mediate for him.

“I just want to know how the children in this town live their lives, Vince. Could you let them know they don’t need to be so wary of me?”

“For crying out loud...” Vince scratched his head in annoyance and looked Sara’s way without getting up from his desk.

“He’s just some rich kid from the capital. There’s no question about his background, and he’s a talented knight. However...” Vince turned to the knight this time. “You’re still a stranger to them, Liam. You know these kids don’t have guardians, don’t you?”

“That’s why I’m so curious. Don’t you see?” The knight looked between Sara and Allen. “My name is Liam. Liam Hills. I captain a platoon of knights in the Royal Guard. I’m simply curious to see what sort of lives you two lead. Is it alright if I accompany you?”

Vince was giving her a look that seemed to say “He’s a pain, so take him with you,” but Sara wasn’t eager to do so. Allen apparently didn’t mind, however.

“It’s fine by us. Right, Sara?”

“What? I don’t want to...” she said immediately. No matter how trustworthy he was, she didn’t want to spend time with someone she didn’t know.

Silence fell for a short time.

“I’ll buy you dinner tonight, and anything else you might want,” Liam said.

“Well, in *that* case...”

“*That* makes it okay?!” Allen interjected, but even if Sara continued to protest, she figured the adult man would probably get the better of her eventually, so it behooved her to at least get a good deal out of it.

Liam chuckled, covering his mouth. The gesture just made him seem more attractive, which annoyed Sara further. She’d never had such a problem with handsome men before, so why were they all irritating her so much lately?

“Okay, let’s get going.”

“Sure thing. It’s nice to meet you, umm...”

“I’m Allen. I just became a Hunter,” he boasted.

“And you’re...”

“Sara,” she said curtly, walking off with Allen.

“We were gonna leave through the central gate and get something to eat from a food stand outside town.”

“Is that where you always eat?”

“Pretty much. We just went to a restaurant together for the first time the other day.”

Allen glanced at Sara and she nodded in confirmation, recalling that she wanted to make some of that stewed horned rabbit herself.

“Hey, Allen, Sara. Who’s that with you? Oh, you’re a knight? I apologize for my rudeness.”

The soldier at the central gate finally remembered Sara’s name. She was a little happy about the way he’d greeted her, since it seemed to her that that meant the townsfolk’s protective attitude toward Allen extended to her now, too.

“This way.” Allen led them toward the food stands they always got dinner at.

“Wow, there was nowhere like this in town,” Liam said.

Of course, there was in fact an area just like this in the Third District, where the Hunter’s Guild was, which told Sara that Liam had only been to the town’s Second or First District. Sara wondered why he didn’t explore more of the town if he had the time to shadow Sara and Allen like this.

“If you’re buying, I want a kabob.” Allen wasn’t holding back.

Sara pointed at a soup stand across the way. “I want that soup.”

“You’re bold, Sara,” Allen said, but Sara thought he was being much more greedy. They bought skewered horned rabbit, their usual bread, and a hearty soup, and headed for their usual spot. The soup was sold in the same kind of

cup used in the Guild's lunch boxes, and it was cheaper if you brought your own cup.

"I thought cups like this would be more expensive, but they're pretty cheap, aren't they?"

"Why would they be expensive? They're just like the town walls. A craftsman can make one in an instant with earth magic. A lot of people just throw them away after using them."

"Earth magic. That makes sense."

In addition to her barrier magic, Sara used fire magic to take down slimes, water and ice magic, and wind magic to knock things down from high places. She had her thunderbolt too, though she didn't use that one much. She'd never used much earth magic, however, since she hadn't been sure what the utility of it was.

"I'd love to see someone make one at some point. You can make a living that way too, I guess."

"Are you good at magic, Sara?" asked the knight.

Sara felt a twinge of irritation at the man's friendly use of her name. "I wouldn't say I'm good at it, but I can use it."

"You can use magic, but you're picking medicinal plants and peeling potatoes in the kitchen? What a waste!"

So he said, but Sara didn't know how to make money with her magic, so what was she supposed to do?

"Well, what sort of work can I do if I can use magic, then? Besides being a Hunter." Sara decided to ask Liam. If he could tell her, then she wanted to know.

"Hmm, there's not much you can do right away other than being a Hunter. In the capital, you could be a court mage. At your age, you'd start as an apprentice with room and board. Just as Allen said, you could also be a craftsman using earth or fire magic. If you have a decent handle on a few different types of magic, you can make decent wages as a maid or butler in a noble's mansion."

In the end, no matter what profession she picked, she'd be starting on a low rung of the ladder. If that was the case, then Sara saw no issues with her current employment. Plus, she was only working here until she reunited with Nelly anyway.

"But those are all full-time positions where I'd have to be learning or working all day."

"I guess you're right about that, but the pay is stable and your future would be guaranteed. Not to mention, it's cheaper in the capital than it is in Rosa. Way up here in the north, things are pretty pricey."

Well, she liked knowing that things were cheaper in the capital. Sara rethought her opinion of Liam slightly. If he was worried about the future of some child he hardly even knew, maybe he really was a good person.

"Where do you want to sleep today, Sara?"

"Umm..."

Since they were putting up their tents a little later than usual today, they would likely miss out on their usual spot. Sara glanced at Liam. He would leave, she figured, so she didn't have to worry about him.

"We should stay somewhere farther out if we're going to pick plants in the morning. Our usual spot's probably taken by now, too."

"Yeah. If I were going into the dungeon, I'd want to stay closer to the central gate, but I probably won't be able to go tomorrow either." Allen agreed with Sara and gave Liam a sunny smile. "Okay, see you, Liam. Thanks for dinner."

"Wait a second."

Sara was hoping he would just leave, but he didn't seem to get the hint.

"Can you take me to see where the two of you sleep?"

Allen asked Sara with his eyes what she wanted to do, but Sara just shrugged her shoulders defeatedly. This was probably Liam's aim to begin with.

"It's a bit of a walk," Allen warned Liam.

"I don't mind."

As they walked they spoke about Ted's usual attitude, learning with some surprise that Ted and Liam knew each other, and about Allen's errands for the day. Eventually, they arrived at a location close to where Sara and Allen had stayed the first time the two of them met.

"Okay, let's put up our tents first."

"Yeah."

There was no point worrying about Liam's presence, so they set up their tents as they always did and got out a light so they could eat.

"You bought something too, right? You're not gonna eat?" Allen asked Liam.

"No, I will."

"If you have a cup, get it out. I'll make some tea."

Normally, she was too lazy to get out the portable stove, but since there were three people present, she figured it was time to use it. Sara cheerfully got out her stove, a small pot, and her tea. She loved using the set that Nelly bought for her.

As they ate their kabobs under the dim light of their lamp, the water boiled. Sara put the tea leaves directly into the pot and waited for them to sink, pouring the tea into their cups.

"Sugar?"

"Yes, please!"

"S-Sure, a little."

Sara didn't need any, so she put the sugar in the other two's cups and handed them over.

"When we camp out, we drink tea loaded with sugar, too. I didn't think you two would be the same. I guess you don't have it all that bad out here."

Nelly bought the tea, so Sara didn't know how much it cost.

"I had this at home, so..."

"Is that right? This tea is from the Chandeli region south of the capital. The area's famous for it. I recognized it right away from the size of the tea leaves

and how good it smells.”

Sara and Allen looked down at their cups once more, but it was just the same old tea they always drank. Nelly didn’t seem to have any particular opinions on tea; it was probably just what she was used to drinking. In other words... Sara hit upon an idea. Maybe Nelly was actually from a rather well-to-do family.

He was a bit pushy, but Liam was knowledgeable and a good conversationalist. Sara’s opinion of him rose slightly once more.

“Horned rabbits are good grilled, too.”

“They’re a little softer than orc, yeah. Huh, I guess even if I can’t go into the dungeon, I could hunt out here, couldn’t I?”

Liam’s brows shot up. “You can hunt horned rabbits at your age, Allen? You must be pretty skilled, then.”

“Nah, I’m still just a grunt.”

Sara thought it was a little funny how Allen reacted so modestly to Liam’s praise. As an adult who not only acknowledged Allen’s ability but praised him for it too, Liam had risen to the status of “decent guy” in Sara’s mind.

Just as Allen had said, when they’d gone on their potion delivery, they’d hunted quite a few horned rabbits along the way. At the time, they were in a hurry, so they’d only picked up the ones that had run into Sara’s barrier or Allen’s fist on their own, but if Allen put his mind to it, he could probably hunt a fair amount of them.

“There are a lot of people down in the dungeons though, right? If you’re all alone out here, what will you do if something happens? You can’t always watch your own back.”

“Yeah. I could keep the protection field around the town behind me, but there won’t be many horned rabbits there, so it’s not very efficient. Guess I’ll be running errands for a while still after all... Man...”

Sara took Allen’s cup from him as he reconfirmed the facts and washed it with water magic. She washed Liam’s cup next, then washed her own cup and pot, putting them away with the portable stove.

“Sara, this...”

“Yes? Is it not clean?”

The cup Liam held out to her didn’t seem dirty to her.

“You washed it, but it’s dry.”

“Well, yes, I dried it.”

“You dried it? How?”

“Err, with wind?” Sara’s answer was in the form of a question because she wasn’t sure what to say herself. At first, she’d pictured a hair dryer and used hot wind, but that would dry her hands out, so she’d changed her method. Now she just pictured the cup drying off naturally but faster, but she wasn’t sure how to explain that.

In any case, Liam’s estimation may have risen to “decent guy” in Sara’s mind, but she was still wondering exactly how long he was going to stick around. She wanted to bathe.

“Hey, Liam. You should get going soon. We’re tired.” Allen said exactly what Sara was thinking, without worrying about it like Sara did. That was Allen.

“No, I’ll sleep here, too. I’m worried about you, after all.”

“We’ve been out here for weeks on our own. And I’ve been out here by myself for longer. We don’t need some adult worrying about us at this point. Leave.”

What was amazing about Allen was that he could tell someone to leave flat out and it didn’t sound harsh; it was just a plain request. Because of that, however, Liam didn’t listen to him, instead getting out a mat and blanket from his storage pouch and setting them up next to the road.

“We camped out on our way up to the north dungeon. I’ve got plenty of supplies. You’ve got a knight with you tonight, so take it easy and rest well.”

Sara knew he was just being kind, but it was a pain that he couldn’t understand what they were trying to tell him. There was no way they could “take it easy” with a person they didn’t know nearby.

“I’ll stand guard outside, Sara.”

“Okay, thanks.”

She didn’t think Liam would pull anything, but it still didn’t sit right with her to undress while a man she didn’t know was nearby. Thankfully, Allen understood that. Liam seemed to want to ask how they planned to wash themselves without a bathroom, but they paid him no mind and took turns bathing, after which Sara got in bed with a sigh.

She woke up in the middle of the night when she heard something and sensed movement outside of her tent. Sara poked her head out of her tent and found Liam shivering even under his blanket. His physical strengthening must have worn off in the middle of the night like Allen’s did.

Sara wasn’t sure why he went to so much trouble for two kids he barely even knew, but she understood that he was freezing out here because he wanted to protect them. She could keep her barrier up all night, so she didn’t actually need a blanket. It may have been unwanted on their part, but he *was* being kind to them, so Sara felt bad for what he was going through. She warmed up her blanket and carefully draped it over Liam.

The next morning, Sara and Allen slept in a little, no doubt on edge from having another person nearby. They quickly ate some of the sandwiches Sara had on hand, sharing one with Liam as well, and did their best to gather some medicinal plants. They looked mainly for greater healing herbs, aiming to make ten thousand or so gil per person. Liam sat around nearby, plucking random plants from the ground and tossing them into the wind.

Adults sure had it easy.

Since he was there, Sara had thought Liam could help them, but no matter how much she explained the difference to him, he couldn’t tell healing herbs from other random weeds, so she gave up before too long. He *was* gainfully employed as a knight, so it wasn’t like he had any need to gather plants.

With the useless Liam in tow, Sara and Allen headed for the Guild like they always did.

“That was a valuable experience. Oh, here. Thanks for this.” With a kind smile, Liam handed Sara her blanket from his storage pouch along with his thanks. A new blanket wouldn’t be cheap, so Sara accepted it with a relieved smile. After spending half a day together, she was beginning to feel some fondness for the man, whether she wanted to or not.

“I’m gonna go look for odd jobs. Seriously, Liam, get going already.”

Allen must have felt the same way. As he left, he called out to Liam as though he was a friendly neighbor.

Sara left her medicinal plant basket with Vince and headed for the kitchen. It had been a bit of a hectic day so far, but she was finally relaxing now, feeling like she’d be able to get back to her daily life.

That evening, however, Allen was late coming back. He finally ran into the Guild around the time Modz came in to take over for Sara. It was around the time when there were a lot of Hunters coming back from the dungeons.

“Sara! I made enough money for dinner!”

Sara didn’t think there was any reason for him to report that to her, but she understood somewhat why he wanted to. “Great,” she said with an awkward smile.

“Tch, not a care in the world.”

Sara flinched for a moment, thinking it was a little late in the day for Ted to show up, but the comment had come from a young Hunter in a small group. He was probably in his late teens. Sara hadn’t seen many young Hunters, so that was the first thing that surprised her. This group had never been in the Guild at the same time as her, it seemed. Their clothing wasn’t especially clean either, which made them seem rough and scary to Sara.

Allen wiped the smile from his face, acting indifferent.

Were these the low-level Hunters who were interfering with Allen’s dungeon delving? When she’d first heard about that, she was upset about how cowardly they were, but now that she actually saw them, they were only a few years older than her. They were probably just doing whatever they could to survive, just like she was.

Sara didn’t say anything to them either, and she and Allen left the Guild as they always did.

“Yeesh, girls have it easy even when they’re grunts like us.”

But they switched their target to Sara. Allen squeezed her hand, so Sara bumped her shoulder against his, trying to tell him that she was fine so they should just go. An ambush from an unexpected direction caught Sara off guard, however.

“Huh? Girls?” The rude interjection came from Vince.

Sara looked down at herself. Yeah, her clothes were baggy, and she didn’t exactly have curves, but her hair was long, and she didn’t think there was any way to confuse her for a boy. And the man from the gear store as well as Emma from the Flycatcher Eatery had recognized her as a girl right away.

“Really?! You’re telling me you didn’t know?”

The interjection came from the mean Hunter for some reason.

“I-It’s not that I didn’t know, I just didn’t really care,” Vince hastily replied.

If he didn’t care, then he could have just kept quiet. Sara strode up to the reception desk, glared at Vince, and then stood before the man who’d said that girls had it easy.

“Wh-What do you want?”

“I make three thousand gil in the kitchen and one thousand gil at the kiosk. I also get up early and pick medicinal plants. If you want to live the same way I do, you can ask for work in the kitchen, and I can teach you how to pick medicinal plants if you want.”

If they thought things were so easy for her, they could just live the same way she did.

“That’s all you’re making? Then you can’t even stay in an inn, can you?”

Well, it was better than nothing. Vince was making an awkward face behind the reception desk, but Sara ignored him.

“Well, I can eat.”

“But...”

“Drop it,” one of his friends told him. “She’s living outside of town with Allen. I didn’t realize she was a girl, but there’s no point picking a fight with someone who isn’t a Hunter.”

He’d picked a fight with her and then he’d ended up worrying about her, too. Either way, he shouldn’t be getting involved with her.

Sara turned her face away in a huff and walked over to Allen with her head held high. No matter what anyone said, she was supporting herself, so no one could complain.

“It was them and a few other groups picking on me,” Allen explained to her on their way home. “Those guys weren’t that bad. They just heckle me outside of the dungeon. The real nuisances are the ones who get in my way while I’m trying to hunt, because they can’t attack me directly.”

Sara thought that heckling him was still pretty bad.

“There are some other Hunters who aren’t that strong. They spend all day in the dungeon, from morning until night, but they don’t make that much, so they’re all kind of surly.”

That was why it was dangerous to be in town late at night, Allen warned her. But she was with Allen right now, and she wouldn’t be out late at night anyway.

“Shouldn’t those people not force themselves to stay in Rosa and go to, like...the capital or some other place with dungeons instead?”

“Yeah... You get more money for beating stronger monsters, though. It’s important to start killing weak monsters in weak dungeons in order to get strong. I’ve trained carefully with my uncle since I was a lot younger, but the weak monsters don’t net you that much money. Even if a slime will get you a thousand gil, there aren’t many mages who can take them out from a distance, and they’re fast, so it’s hard to beat them with physical strengthening.”

“R-Really?”

Sara got the feeling she’d talked a big game about being able to kill slimes easily when she’d gotten her ID, which made her a little nervous.

“And if they go back, they’ll just be known as the guys who couldn’t make it in Rosa. That’s hard to stomach for people who come here determined to succeed.”

“Pride, eh? What a pain.”

“I’m used to people giving me a hard time anyway because of my mana.”

They were just doing their best to make it in this world, Allen said with a smile. Once again, Sara was impressed with him.

On their way into the Guild the next morning, Sara couldn’t help glancing around on her way inside. She had to admit she was a bit scared of someone picking a fight with her.

“They’re pretty serious about this, so they’re already down in the dungeon. Don’t worry.”

“But I’m a girl, so I’m scared.”

“Yeah right.”

Sara scrunched up her face at Vince’s exasperated comment and he hastily thrust his hands out. “No, not because you’re a girl or anything. I mean, what does it matter if you’re a girl or a boy at your age? You’re just kids named Allen and Sara.”

All the Guild could do was snicker as Vince dug himself deeper. It was surprisingly comfortable for Sara to not be treated like a girl, though. On the other hand, she didn’t like being told what to do just because she was a girl or because she could use magic. Sara rubbed her arms, thinking about Liam the day before. He wasn’t a bad person, but he was pushy and pitying, which didn’t win him any points with Sara.

“And you say you’re scared, but those guys can’t even handle slimes, you know. Even though they have a decent amount of mana. Not as much as Allen, but it seems like they got a little full of themselves and came to Rosa before putting in enough time training beforehand.”

“Well, most Hunters have problems with slimes,” Mina added.

Sara cocked her head. Allen had said something like that too, but that wasn't what Nelly had told her. "Nelly told me you could take down slimes with beginner magic, though. She said casters hunt them a lot even when they're just getting started."

"Listen, Sara..." Vince looked exhausted even though it was still early in the day. "Do you actually know any casters?"

Sara thought for a moment and shook her head. Nelly, Allen, the guildmaster... all of the strong people Sara knew used physical strengthening.

"Well, *I'm* a caster," he continued. "Most Hunters make use of a mix of physical strengthening and magic to take monsters down. It's actually rare to specialize in one or the other."

Sara gaped. She was surprised both to hear that Vince was a caster and to hear that it was rare to specialize in magic.

"So if you tell someone you're more of a caster, it means you have confidence in your magic and you don't intend to hide that."

"What...? I wish you'd tell me these things, Nelly..." Sara was feeling extremely embarrassed by the things she'd said about herself.

"Which is why even if you're a girl, to me, you seemed more like a rookie Hunter with a good amount of confidence than a boy or a girl."

"That's a pretty sorry excuse," said Mina. The other guild receptionists laughed.

Though she had no intention of actually becoming one, Sara didn't mind being treated like a rookie Hunter, so she wasn't going to get on Vince's case any more than this. Vince just looked relieved that he'd dug himself out of his hole. Sara left her basket of plants with him and her usual day began.

A few days passed, with Ted coming to pick up their medicinal plants and Sara helping out in the kitchen and at the kiosk. Allen still couldn't go down into the dungeon, but he was getting a regular income from gathering plants, so he went out and did his odd jobs in high spirits, no longer having to worry about having enough money to eat.

Eventually, the guild kiosk was stocked up on a variety of potions again and Sara was asked to find poison herbs and mana herbs as well, not just greater healing herbs. That seemed to be a sign to her that things were going well.

As Sara eyed her selection of potions with satisfaction, the door to the guild burst open and several exhausted-looking Hunters stumbled in. No, they weren't Hunters. One of them was dressed like the knights. The same thing had happened a few days ago, but this was a different group.

"That's the guildmaster, and Chris... There's one guy wearing the knights' uniform, and a Hunter I don't know..."

This must have been the small group who had proceeded to the north dungeon after sending the injured knights home.

Vince shot up from his desk, his chair scraping against the floor. He had a much more serious look on his face than he usually did. "Guildmaster! Did you find the girl?"

The guildmaster shook his head weakly. He usually looked so carefree and cheerful, but his expression was somber now.

Chris stood expressionlessly beside him, his normally tied-back hair hanging loose instead as if to suggest he was too exhausted to care about his appearance right now.

"I see... Well, get some rest in the back for now."

"I don't need permission to use my own room..."

The guildmaster's response was somewhat feeble, but the exchange at least resembled their usual banter, so the rest of the guild was relieved to hear it.

Sara turned around and checked her stock of potions again. No one seemed to be injured, but if they *did* need any of them, she was confident they'd have enough. She was curious about what had happened in a nosy sort of way, but she thought it was better that she didn't get involved if Chris and the Apothecary's Guild were.

She hadn't seen Liam for a while now, but he arrived soon after. Someone must have sent word to him. Sara quietly watched him head to the back with

the rest of the group. And when Modz arrived to relieve her, she was perfectly happy to leave the guild and its related drama behind.

The Girl's Whereabouts

"Thanks for waiting."

They hadn't ordered anything, but Mize figured the group in the guildmaster's office would need hot food and drinks, so he and another cook brought some to them. When they arrived, the room was as quiet as a wake.

The guildmaster leaned back in his chair, looking up at the ceiling. Meanwhile, Chris, the leader of the knights, and the Hunters sat almost collapsed on the reception couches. Vince and Liam, the young knight, watched them worriedly.

Mize shook his head slightly at the knights who Sara had looked up to...no, who Sara had found annoying. True, from the point of view of someone stubbornly clinging to life like Sara, these knights were nothing but a bunch of spoiled brats.

Knowing that the group had gone to the north dungeon to retrieve a girl who'd been left up there on her own, the grim looks on all their faces gave Mize some idea of the results. He'd heard that the girl in the dungeon was around the same age as Sara and Allen, who were doing all they could to get by in a world that wasn't very kind to them. He felt sympathy for the girl, but having retired from hunting to be a cook, Mize had his hands full just worrying about the happiness of the people he was already close to. When it came to actually dealing with the situation, all he could do was step back and leave it to the people who were directly involved.

At Vince's words, however, his hands stopped as he was setting out their drinks.

"But it sounds like there's no actual evidence that the kid Nefertari took in was killed by monsters."

That made it sound like the girl was only missing, not dead. What could that mean?

"Well, there was no sign of her. The door was unlocked, and there was a storage bag inside the cottage with months of food inside it," Chris replied

numbly.

Chris could be said to be the only person in Rosa who was actually close to Nefertari. The woman never tried to get close to anyone on her own, and most people kept her at arm's length due to the pressure of her mana.

"If the food was left behind and the door was unlocked, it means she probably left for a short time, intending to return right away. The cottage was clean, which is proof that someone other than Nef was living there. But the furniture and tables had a thin layer of dust on them and the cottage was cold."

So if someone had been there, they had probably been there up until a few days before the search party arrived. Mize started setting the food down on the table, a little perturbed that Chris was so familiar with Nefertari that he apparently knew her cleaning habits.

"And there were mountain wolves loitering around the cottage constantly. Even when we approached, they just watched from a distance instead of fleeing. If the knights who fled from the low levels of the dungeon were still with us, they probably wouldn't have been able to take a step out from the cottage."

Vince raised an eyebrow in surprise when Chris showed his irritation so openly, which was rare for him.

The knights reacted angrily. "They didn't flee. You sent them back, Chris."

Mize recalled hearing the same thing from the knights themselves when they'd returned.

"If I hadn't, we would have run out of potions. We may not have even reached the cottage with them holding us back. Even if we made it, I doubt the knights would have been able to return to Rosa."

"Well, if we had enough potions, we would have been fine."

"Then tell the capital to stop hoarding medicinal plants and send some to Rosa."

Chris and the captain of the knights were glaring at one another, but the knight captain was obviously at a disadvantage. Not because of his abilities as a

knight, however, but because of Chris's mana.

Mize sighed. Everyone present, Mize included, had a lot of mana, but with some training, one could regulate the amount of mana that emanated from their body. Chris was particularly good at it, such that most people didn't even notice the amount of mana he really had. That fine control of mana was necessary for making potions of high quality, or so Mize had heard, but he was just a cook, so he didn't know much about that. Chris was well-liked because he was easy to be around despite his mana, but right now, he was letting his mana flow freely, and the knight captain, who had comparatively less mana than the rest of the people in the room, was struggling under its pressure.

Surprisingly, the young knight who had returned early with the other group didn't seem to be feeling much of the pressure.

"Rein it in, Chris." The guildmaster had stopped leaning back in his chair at some point and was looking at Chris now.

Chris looked surprised for a moment before containing his mana. The air in the room immediately relaxed and the knight captain breathed a sigh of relief. Chris turned his face away petulantly. Mize was surprised; he had never seen Chris express his emotions so openly before.

"Well, the kid probably just stepped outside while waiting for Nefertari and accidentally left the protection field." Whatever happened after that, only the mountain wolves knew.

"What am I going to tell Nef...?" Chris covered his face with his hands, but the guildmaster waved a hand as if to sweep away Chris's question.

"That's not our responsibility." It was cold, but true. "You went with Nefertari to the capital because you were worried about her, right? And you came up to the north dungeon with us out of the goodness of your heart. We came with you too, but just 'cause we were worried about the knights being on their own up there. The report should come from the captain of the knights there. The only people who should be responsible for explaining things to Nefertari are the people of the capital. This is on them, not us."

The captain's eye twitched, but the guildmaster was right. The knights might have even been wiped out if Chris, the guildmaster, and some talented Hunters

hadn’t been with them.



“Anyway, why’s the protection field around the road out? Not to mention how many horned rabbits there are out there. That was tough even for us to

get through.”

It seemed there were still plenty of things to address, but Mize exchanged a look with the other cook and nodded, and the two of them quietly left the room.

“Bummer.”

“A girl Sara’s age? Wish I hadn’t heard that...”

The two of them had only been there to serve food, but they’d ended up hearing some rather heavy news.

“Well, if there’s that many horned rabbits out there, I’d love to serve them in the cafeteria.”

“I hate having nothing to cook but orc. But cooking’s what we’re paid to do, so let’s go finish up dinner!”

Sad stories like this were a dime for a dozen. Still, Mize didn’t want Sara hearing about it, he decided as he headed back to the kitchen.

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When Sara came to the guild the next day, the knights were gearing up to return to the capital. Or to be more precise, they were pretty much ready to return, but they seemed to be waiting for something. They lounged in the cafeteria, glancing over at the annoyed Vince every so often. The knights who had staggered in a few days ago had healed up by now.

Sara headed for the kitchen with some relief. Allen waved to her and made to leave the guild to go look for odd jobs, when...

“Sara, Allen.” The familiar voice belonged to the knight who had spent some time with them a few days ago.

“Liam.” It was Allen who answered him.

Sara just turned around and cocked her head. *Oh yeah, should we say goodbye to him?* she thought. He *had* treated them to dinner.

“I was waiting for the two of you to get here. I have something I’d like to ask you.”

Sara left her basket with Vince and told Mize where she'd be before heading over to Liam. Allen already had an annoyed look on his face. He clearly wanted to go get to work.

"Please." Liam was indicating for them to sit.

Sara glanced at the other knights, wondering if they would also be annoyed because they were anxious to get going, but if anything, they seemed amused by the situation. There were also a few of them who were smiling at her, perhaps remembering how she'd treated them kindly the last time they'd met.

"We're finished with our mission, so we're returning to the capital."

"That's great. Take care." Sara gave him a little bow of the head. No one had told her exactly what the results of their mission had been, but Sara had gathered that it hadn't gone very well. Still, it didn't seem to be weighing heavily on the knights. They seemed happy to be able to return to the capital.

"See ya," Allen said with a wave.

Liam frowned at their cheerful words of parting. "No, I didn't come to say goodbye. I've got a proposal for you. Particularly you, Sara."

"Me?" Sara put her hand on her chest. She had no clue what this proposal of his could be.

"Won't you come back to the capital with me?"

"Huh?" Sara tilted her head, sincerely shocked by this question. "What for?"

"'What for'...?" Liam looked confused, but Sara wasn't sure why. *She* was the one who should be confused here.

"I'm gainfully employed here, more or less. I know you're a knight, but I have no reason to go with a person I don't know when I'm doing fine here."

When Sara made her feelings on the matter known, someone in the guild gave an impressed whistle. Even the other knights looked amused.

"I got a glimpse of how the two of you live, though. You have no guardians. You're two kids living all on your own. You may be working, but you're living hand to mouth and camping out too, which means you have nowhere to live. You're homeless, in other words."

Sara's jaw dropped. She wasn't relying on anyone else...well, no, she *was* getting work from the guild...but she was supporting herself and had a place to sleep at night, even if it was a tent. Yet he'd called her homeless. Sara thought her shock was reasonable.

She looked at Vince, at a loss as to how to respond. At times like these, she relied on Vince. He made a face at her as if to say, "Don't look at me," but he still spoke up chivalrously.

"Err, I guess you can't call a tent a home..."

Sara looked to Allen next, but he was just staring at Liam expressionlessly, so she couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"In the capital, there are facilities for children without guardians. There, you can learn a lot of things, and they'll provide you with a job once you're of a certain age. Homeless kids tend to get caught up in crime. Frankly, I have a hard time understanding why Rosa allows you to carry on as you are."

Sara was starting to understand what Liam was getting at. He wanted them to come to the capital so he could shove them into a facility instead of letting them roam free. Sara tensed unconsciously, on her guard.

"So you want to bring us to some institution in the capital."

"No. I heard you two are twelve. In that case, I can take you on at my mansion as apprentices." So he wanted to hire them.

"Liam's father is a count. He has a big mansion, and a lot of people want to be hired there as maid or butler apprentices because the pay is good and it affords you some amount of status to work for them. It's not a bad deal," one of the knights kindly explained.

"When we returned injured, you provided chairs for us to sit in, warm water and towels for us to wash our faces, and asked that cold ale be brought out to us. I spent a night outside town with you and you were considerate and capable of using a variety of magic that would be useful for a maid to know. With the proper education, you'd be a fantastic maid, I'm sure. And you could live a stable life, sleeping with a roof over your head."

Sara hung her head. She'd discussed how to live in this world with Nelly, of

course. Nelly had provided only the single option of becoming a Hunter, but Sara *had* thought that being hired somewhere was probably more realistic for her. Liam was also offering to take her to the capital, which was somewhere she did want to go at some point.

"And what are you bringing *me* for?" Allen asked condescendingly from beside her.

"You would be an apprentice butler. Actually, you're a Hunter who specializes in physical strengthening, aren't you, Allen?"

"That's right," Allen answered without hesitation. From what Vince had told Sara the other day, Allen seemed to have some confidence in his abilities.

"In that case, you could be my personal squire. I could make a recommendation for you to become a knight in the future."

A buzz went through the guild at that, because this was an impressive offer, Sara assumed. Now that she thought about it, she realized this country was a monarchy, and the fact that there were counts meant that there were different ranks in this society. In that case, she figured it was probably unheard of for a child without a guardian to become a knight. This might be a pretty good deal for Allen.

Sara looked over at Allen, feeling a bit despondent. She had no desire to go with him, of course. She wouldn't be able to look for Nelly if she was stuck in one place.

"I'm not going!" Allen crossed his arms and thrust his chest out.

Another buzz went through the guild. The knights in particular seemed to be shocked that someone would turn down such an offer.

After puffing his chest up, Allen took his guild ID out from his storage pouch. Sara took hers out after him.

"I earned this ID with my own money, and it proves that I can support myself here. I'm gonna be a strong Hunter, so I have no time to take a detour in becoming a knight first." There was a fierce light in Allen's eyes.

Sara held up her ID, too. "I'm not planning on being a Hunter, but I do have a

guardian. She's just out of town right now."

When she said that, she realized how much it sounded like she was just putting on a brave front, which made her a bit nervous. She glanced around and everyone was suddenly giving her pitying looks.

"If Nelly... If my guardian doesn't come back, then I want to go look for her, but if I'm employed somewhere and I can't quit easily, I won't be able to do that, so..." Sara gave Liam an apologetic look. "Thank you for the invitation, but I decline."

"I see. That's too bad." Liam stood, looking regretful. "I really don't think you can keep sleeping outside of town, though. I told the mayor that I think it's dangerous for kids to be out there at night."

"You jerk! You act like you're such a nice guy, but you're the devil in disguise!" Allen stood up, his chair clattering behind him, and pointed at Liam. *So they have devils in this world,* Sara thought idly.

"That's why I hope you'll come with me. If you'd like to prepare yourself first and come later, I'll leave you a letter of introduction."

"I told you I'm *not* going!" Allen was furious. It was a rare sight. "No way I'm becoming the kind of gutless knight who takes away a kid's home! A knight who gets his butt kicked by horned rabbits!"

"Allen!" Sara tried to stop him, but she didn't make it in time.

"What, Sara?!" he snapped. "You can take horned rabbits on too, right?"

"W-Well, I guess so, but..."

The knights were in a bit of an awkward position now. Liam shook his head like they were being unreasonable children. The knights who were sitting in the cafeteria stood at the same time.

"Well, darn. Now I *really* can't let you stay in Rosa if you understand your own abilities so little. Now..."

Now? Now what? Sara thought before she realized the knights had surrounded them. True, they might not have guardians or permanent housing, but they'd shown them their Hunter's Guild IDs, and above all else, Sara was

employed by the Hunter's Guild, if only on a day-to-day basis. Why did they have to leave? Sara was too confused to do anything.

"Children who can use magic or physical strengthening to the extent that you can are rare."

Vince had said the same thing. In other words, this noble wanted to make use of their talents for himself. Once he took them under his wing, there would probably be no getting out from under it. Finally reaching that conclusion, Sara instantly put herself on guard.

"I can't leave you out here in the middle of nowhere with no guardians. You're coming with me." It was all the more creepy how gentle his voice was.

"Hey, cut it out!" Vince couldn't keep quiet after that. "You better not be planning to do the same thing you did to Nefertari to them! They're kids!"

"It will be much better for them to stay in my mansion instead of out here where they're allowed to camp out on their own."

This was the kind of person who could justify anything as long as he believed in his own reasons. Sara shuddered. At this rate, he'd apprehend them.

Sara stood, whispering to Allen, "Should I put up my barrier?"

"No, I think it'd be worse if they found out about that. Sara, you know how we can both use mana pressure? Can you do it?"

He was talking about what she'd done to Ted.

"I've never done it intentionally before, but I just have to push my mana toward them, right? I think I can do it."

Sara exchanged a look with Allen and nodded. The plan was to hit them with their mana and run when they flinched. If they managed to get away from them now, she didn't think they would stick around forever just to chase around some kids.

"Okay, three, two, one..."

On Allen's signal, they both released their mana.

"Whoa!" The knights around them staggered as if hit by some invisible force.

“Let’s go!”

They slipped between the off-balance knights and headed outside.

“My shift in the kitchen!”

“You’ll just have to miss it! Which way do we go?!”

“Won’t it be bad if the people in town see knights chasing us?”

“Okay! Outside town, then!”

They ran to the central gate, but when they looked back they saw the knights still chasing after them.

“What do they get out of chasing us around like this?! Help the kids in the capital instead!”

“Seriously! I’m not getting caught until I see Nelly again!”

They surprised the gate guard as they ran through, heading for the area where they always set up their tents.

“How long are they gonna chase us?! Oh, it’s Vince!”

People from the guild were chasing after the knights.

“I didn’t want the people of the town to see us, but now we’re just making a huge scene, aren’t we? We totally look like bad guys! This sucks!”

Right then, one of the knights threw something into the air. It looked like a potion vial. Another knight exploded it with fire magic or something. Fragments of the vial glittered in the sun. Sara felt a chill.

“Barrier!” she shouted reflexively.

The fragments of glass and some kind of aerosolized liquid bounced harmlessly off of her barrier and fell to the ground. Of course, anyone watching probably had no idea what had happened.

“What was that? It wasn’t a potion, and the fact that they were trying not to get hit by it themselves means it must be a sleeping drug or something, right? I can’t believe them!”

Sara glared at the knights, who seemed surprised that the two of them

weren't going down. Realizing that their attack had had no effect, one of the knights took another vial out of his pouch.

"Here it comes again. Allen."

"Yeah. We'll have to leave the town's protection field."

They'd left town in order to avoid the eyes of the townspeople and to buy time. If it seemed like the knights would give up at some point, then they could stay in reach of the town's walls, but if they were going to use these unfair tactics, then the children had no choice.

Sara and Allen decided to leave the town's protection field. The knights might just give up if they went that far, and even if they *did* continue to chase them, Sara and Allen should have the advantage as long as they had Sara's barrier.

"Do you need my barrier?"

"I can manage for now!"

"Got it."

Watching the knight with the potion bottle in his hand, the two of them backed up to the very edge of the town's protection field. Horned rabbits slammed against the protection field like they were waiting for them.

"Sara! Allen! Stop!" Vince shouted, worried for them, but from Sara's perspective it was the knights who should stop.

"Let's go," she said to Allen.

"Yeah."

The moment they stepped outside the protection field, the horned rabbits attacked them.

Wham!

One of them slammed against Sara's barrier and was knocked back.

Whack!

Allen's fist sent another one flying.

The two of them kept backing up toward the meadow. He'd said he didn't

need it, but Sara still expanded her barrier to protect Allen's rear.

"I'll just guard your back with my barrier."

"Thanks."

The knights stopped right at the edge of the protection field. Liam crossed his arms and sighed. He looked like a big brother whose disobedient younger siblings were causing him trouble.

"A girl with the courage to boldly leave the town's protection field. A boy who can take down horned rabbits as if they don't even present a challenge. It really would be a waste to leave you in Rosa."

It was none of his business. Sara and Allen moved farther and farther away. They could see Vince and the people from the guild catching up to the knights.

For the knights, however, as long as they weren't already injured, horned rabbits were no challenge. They left the protection field around the town, protecting the knight holding the potion bottle. That was unexpected. But neither Sara nor Allen intended to be caught.

"If it comes to it, can you use physical strengthening to run too, Sara?"

"Yeah. Let's run as fast as we can."

The knights threw another vial and detonated it in the air. This time it was a lot closer to the two. The sparkling shards of glass bounced quietly off of Sara's barrier, raining down on the horned rabbits around them.

"The horned rabbits..."

The horned rabbits that had been lunging at Sara and Allen collapsed one by one.

"You were throwing *that* stuff at those kids?!"

Sara could hear Vince's angry voice. By the time the knight took out the next bottle, Vince was standing in front of them. Other receptionists and even cooks from the kitchen stood before them as well, forming a wall in front of them.

"Look at the horned rabbits!"

Vince and the receptionists were former Hunters, but Sara didn't think the

cooks were. She was nervous, but...

“Don’t worry. We’re all former Hunters,” Vince told her quietly. He then turned to the knights and raised his voice. “Listen up. It’s not our place to complain about what you knights do to some random kids who don’t have any guardians. You’re even offering to give them work. Sounds like a good deal to me.”

As Vince spread his arms, Sara and Allen backed up even more behind him. At the same time, Sara quietly expanded her barrier to cover Vince and the others from the guild as well. She didn’t know what the knights were throwing at them, but she didn’t want it to hit anyone.

Vince twitched. He must have sensed her barrier somehow, but he didn’t turn around. The people from the guild watched curiously as horned rabbits bounced off of the barrier, but they kept their guards up.

“But we’ll only stay silent if the kids appreciate what you’re doing. Allen and Sara are both officially recognized members of the Hunter’s Guild, you hear me?”

“They’re still children,” Liam responded.

“If they’re twelve, they’re official members. Whether they have guardians or not doesn’t matter.”

“Why do you let them camp out, then?”

“They’re not the only ones out here camping. And unlike in the capital, the people who camp out here don’t commit any crimes. The Hunter’s Guild doesn’t meddle in the lives of its members. As long as they follow the rules and hunt monsters, they’re doing their job.”

Liam shrugged his shoulders. “Then there should be no problem in my taking them with me. Exactly what sort of contributions are you saying these children will make to the guild?”

“Allen’s hunting monsters with the best of them. Sara, too. Don’t act like you know them when you’ve only spent a few hours with them.”

“Sara, too?” He gave her an incredulous look, so Sara balled up her fists at

him, but he just scoffed at her. “Ridiculous.”

“You’re the ridiculous one, Liam.”

Allen was rather surprised at this newcomer, but Sara was so shocked she almost dropped her barrier. “It’s Ted... Why is he here?”

Ted dangled a potion vial in his hand. The knight who was throwing things at Sara and Allen looked down in dismay at his own hand, which was empty. Ted must have swiped the vial from him.

Ted held the vial up to the sun, opened it and sniffed the liquid inside, then placed a drop of it on his finger and licked it, grimacing. “It’s a paralysis agent. It’s a bit more diluted than what you’d use on a monster, but it’s still too strong to use on a human being.”

“It’s not administered orally,” Liam responded calmly. “It’s a suitable amount for spraying at someone in a mist form.”

“Hah. Maybe for subduing a violent criminal, but you’re using it on these little pieces of trash? Are you crazy?”



Sara was speechless. She exchanged a glance with Allen. She'd thought maybe this Ted was a fake, since he was helping them out, but his rude comments

identified him as the man himself. What was he doing here, though?

“We just started using this drug in the capital. What does some backwater apothecary know about it?”

“This may be a backwater, but the Apothecary’s Guild in Rosa hasn’t approved the sale or use of this drug. As such, I’ll be confiscating it. Hand over everything you’ve got.”

Ted was overbearing not just with Sara and Allen but with the knights from the capital, too. When his attitude was directed at her it was practically unbearable, but Sara couldn’t deny that it was refreshing to see it being utilized the way it was now.

The knight must have had a few more bottles of the paralysis agent. He shrunk back from Ted, but still managed to shoot back at him, “Knights don’t take orders from apothecaries.”

“Don’t.” It was Liam who cautioned the knight. “He may be a mere apothecary, but he’s the mayor’s son, too.”

“I’m not a ‘mere’ anything, you useless second son.”

Wham!

Whack!

While sparks flew between Ted and Liam for reasons Sara and Allen couldn’t comprehend, horned rabbits were still lunging at them now that the paralysis agent had settled on the ground, so they took them down when they had to. Well, in Sara’s case, she just stood there.

“Places where there are children without guardians always become slums. If you don’t want us interfering in your business, then Rosa needs to shape up.”

“Would you shut up? How often do you think there are kids living independently outside of town, anyway? It’s because something so rare is happening now that I’m racking my brains over how to handle them too.”

Racking his brains? The only thing Ted did to “handle” them was treat them like garbage.

Liam and Ted glared at one another for some time, but the knight eventually

turned toward Vince and shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

“Allen! Sara! I won’t force you to accompany me, so come back here.”

Neither Sara nor Allen had any intent to trust the knights, so they stubbornly remained in the meadow.

“You guys leave first. I’ll take them back when you’re gone,” Vince told Liam. “They’re not gonna budge as long as they can still see you.”

Striking a horned rabbit without even glancing down at it, Liam looked Allen’s way with regret. “Such a shame, with how strong you are.”

“And he’ll use that strength for Rosa’s sake. Get out of here already, seriously,” Vince grumbled.

“If you’re ever in the capital, you’ll have a job with House Hills. I’ll make sure they have your names!”

Liam and the knights took their leave, Liam bringing up his attractive offer once more beforehand.

When they’d departed, the people from the guild crowded around the children curiously. Ted had left at some point too. Sara and Allen were still determined to stay put until the knights disappeared from sight.

“Come on, let’s go back. I’ve got work to do.” Vince had stuck around the whole time, but he returned to the town’s protection field now, calling out to Sara and Allen from there.

They finally moved to join him. Of course, Sara made sure to pick up all of the horned rabbits on the ground as she went. She hesitated before the ones that were only stunned by the paralysis agent, however. Those ones were still alive, so...

“Vince, what do I do about the paralyzed horned rabbits?”

“That’s what you’re worried about? You kids really are fearless, aren’t you...” Vince looked up at the sky in exasperation. “It’ll be a pain to wash that stuff out of their fur. The paralysis will wear off eventually, too.”

“I’ll just leave them alone, then.”

Sara was relieved, since she didn't want to ask Allen to finish them off. If they were still alive, there was no need to take their lives for no reason.

"Well, that was a pain, but if we sell these horned rabbits, then we made pretty decent money today, didn't we?" Sara asked Allen.

"I guess so. Are you okay with splitting them?"

"I mean, I didn't do anything to them... Can I really take half of them?"

"Sure you can."

Vince just watched them dumbfoundedly. "You know, I wasn't sure if I believed that you guys really delivered those potions to the knights, but now I can see it."

"I was actually kind of in trouble that time," Allen confessed. "I ended up okay since Sara was there, though."

"Right. I get what you're doing, but what are *you* doing, Sara? It looks like the horned rabbits are just avoiding you or hitting something and breaking their necks."

"Well..." Sara wasn't sure how to explain. It wasn't like she was really hiding it, she'd just never had an opportunity to tell someone about it before. "Nelly told me that casters could use shield magic..."

"Nelly again, huh? Who is this person teaching you this stuff?" Vince seemed annoyed, but he bought the explanation at least. "Shield magic, eh? I get why the horned rabbits bounce off it, then. But just so you know, Sara..." Vince paused, taking a deep breath. "That's pretty advanced magic, and not many people can do it."

"Really?"

"Really."

Nelly... Sara faced the direction of the capital, though she wasn't sure if that was actually where Nelly was. "I wish she'd teach me normal stuff..."

Sara couldn't help smiling even as she complained, picturing Nelly giving the excuse that that was normal to *her*.

“Now, get back inside the protection field already. You’re making me nervous!”

“Right.”

Vince and Allen had entered the field some time ago, so Sara hurried to join them, sneaking a glance at the knights leaving from the central gate as she did.

“It was pretty crazy when Ted sent you on that stupid errand, but it was crazier today... Scary, really.”

“I’m gonna keep my distance from knights from now on,” Allen grumbled.

The three of them headed for the guild, passing by the curious gate guards.

“You know, I meant what I said earlier,” Vince told them.

“What you said?” Sara wasn’t sure which comment he was referring to.

“About Liam giving us work, you mean?” Allen asked.

Vince nodded. “That’s right. Not just anyone can become a maid in a house like that. Or a knight. I wouldn’t have stopped you if you’d decided to go with him.”

In the end, this all went back to Sara showing Liam and the knights kindness. All they owed her in return was some appreciation. Taking them all the way to the capital and offering them jobs on top of that was undoubtedly very generous.

“But I can’t decide something like that without talking to Nelly first. And...” Sara shuddered. “He creeped me out.”

“Me too.”

“Hahaha. That knight with the swollen head? His type’s pretty popular, you know...”

They were just in front of the Hunter’s Guild now.

“Even creeps can be right about stuff. Good on you two for realizing that.”

Sara wasn’t quite sure what Vince meant, but she breathed a sigh of relief anyway. “Still, I didn’t think Ted would come to our rescue...”

It had been a real shock when Ted had shown up like a hero. The event was so shocking, Sara had been able to forget that it had actually happened. Of course, they probably would have been fine even without him, but still...

“That surprised me too,” agreed Allen.

“Same here.”

Sara laughed when even Vince agreed with them.

“I guess we should probably thank him, right?”

“I think it evens out with his previous behavior,” Allen replied. “No, he probably still owes us at this point.”

Sara laughed again at Allen’s harsh assessment as she considered adjusting her opinion of Ted somewhat. Just a tiny bit, though.

Chapter 2: Sara and Allen in Rosa

Of course, even if she thought somewhat better of Ted now, he still wasn't someone Sara wanted to see every day.

"Ted wants *me*? Why?"

The day after the chaos with the knights, Sara left her basket at the reception desks in the morning so that she wouldn't have to see Ted, but he ended up summoning her when he came in anyway, to her discomfort. She headed for the reception desks, where she found Vince looking annoyed and Ted standing across from him languidly.

"Did you need something?" she asked him, appalled at his attitude when he was the one who'd called for her.

"Tch..."

He really was rude. *So* rude Sara wondered if she'd just hallucinated him coming to her aid the day before.

"That guy from yesterday, Liam? Did you know he's got a higher standing than the captain of his unit?"

Sara wasn't sure why he was bringing this up, but it sounded important, so she thought back to what she knew about Liam. "Oh yeah, his father's a count, right? And he's the second son?" That second bit of information had come from Ted.

"This wouldn't be a problem if you'd just shut up and gone with him."

Was *that* what he'd come to tell her? That since someone important had his eye on her now, she should have gone with him to spare Ted whatever trouble he was going through now? Was what Vince had told her yesterday true? That Ted was worried about Sara? If that was the case, then maybe that was kind of cute, Sara thought as she stole a glance at him. Ted was just staring in a random direction, though, looking like nothing more than a spoiled rich kid. Not cute after all, Sara decided.

Sara grew impatient when Ted provided no more information, and started to head back to the kitchen.

“Wait.”

She was allowed a sigh, right? “I have work to do.”

“The two of you should stay at an inn starting today.”

“Huh?”

The suggestion was so abrupt, Sara couldn’t process it immediately. She had the money to stay in an inn for now, but if she wanted to keep saving up, it would be better to camp out. And Ted had said “the two of you,” which meant Allen as well.

“Well, Allen’s not here right now, so I don’t know what he wants to do, but...”

Sara didn’t want to talk about Allen’s circumstances with Ted, so she looked in Vince’s direction, knowing she could count on him at times like these.

Vince had an unusually serious look on his face as he said, “Ted, you can’t lead with that. Explain things properly.”

“Tch.”

Sara wanted to ask him if he was physically incapable of speaking without sucking his teeth first, but she let him begin his explanation instead.

“Rosa’s in a bit of a tizzy right now because Liam had to go and run his mouth about things that aren’t any of his business.”

“A tizzy?”

Ted was actually looking her in the eye for once as if this was a situation he thought he should take seriously. Seeing him with no scorn or disgust on his face, it almost seemed like Sara was meeting him for the first time somehow.

“Liam and those knights of his raised three concerns with the town. The first was that the protection field around the road to the north isn’t functioning. This has nothing to do with you, but...”

Sara was a little miffed at that. That was exactly the reason why Allen had been in danger on Ted’s errand.

“I wouldn’t have sent Allen out there if I’d known the protection field wasn’t working,” he muttered, his voice extremely quiet. “Second!” he shouted abruptly, as though embarrassed to have admitted fault.

“Pipe down, Ted,” Vince grumbled.

“Second, there are too many horned rabbits in the meadow on the way to the north dungeon. I’ve never seen so many horned rabbits that close to the central gate either.”

Sara didn’t think there were any more of them than there had been when she’d come down from the Dark Mountain, but things must have already been abnormal then, she supposed.

“More horned rabbits means more cotton sheep. Cotton sheep are docile, but they’re also sturdy, so they can weaken the protection fields around roads and towns by bumping into them.”

Sara had seen a lot of cotton sheep, too.

“Third, you guys.”

“Us?”

“More specifically, everyone living outside of town in tents. They’re basically all Hunters, and Rosa is small, so there isn’t enough space inside the walls. There haven’t been any particular problems yet, so it’s been tacitly allowed, but if someone starts saying it’s going to turn into a slum eventually... In other words, we’ve got unnecessary eyes on us from the capital now all because of Nefertari.”

Well, Sara wasn’t sure what to say to that.

“It’s not Nefertari’s fault. It’s the fault of the guys who paralyzed her and dragged her to the capital. And maintaining the roads *is* the town’s job. You’ll need the Guild’s help with that, won’t you? What a pain...” Vince grimaced like his head hurt.

“Nefertari should have said something about it, though... How were we supposed to know the protection field was down when she cuts through the meadow like it’s no problem?” Vince was still muttering to himself, but this had

nothing to do with Sara either.

In any case, it seemed like the town had its fair share of problems. She didn't want to do what Ted told her to, but several different people had been telling her she should start staying in town lately, so she figured she could at least take the suggestion seriously. The problem was *where* she was going to stay.

"Where's the cheapest inn?"

"Here. The Guild runs an inn. It's five thousand without meals. Just reserve a room now. It's usually empty, but it seems like it's gonna fill up."

"I'd like a room, then."

Ted gave Sara a surprised look. "I thought you'd say no, judging by how you were acting yesterday."

"What, did you think I just love living outside because I turned down that knight's offer?"

"I guess so."

Well, she *had* been thinking that it might be safer to stay outside than in a cramped inn with how Allen was getting harassed lately.

"I was staying outside because I wanted to save as much money as I could. It's not that I *can't* stay in town. I just wanted to save up traveling money since I'll have to go look for Nelly if she doesn't come back soon."

"You're still saying stuff like that?" Ted said before realizing he almost sounded concerned and sucking his teeth again. "We can leave the road alone for a little while longer, but the town's probably going to start cracking down on people living in tents outside soon. Hold off on the camping for a while if you don't want to get caught and thrown out of town." With that, Ted began to leave the guild, but he stopped after a moment and said, "*I'd* feel better if you *did* get thrown out, of course. Ha."

Sara was a little relieved to hear that, though even *she* thought it was strange to be relieved by seeing a nasty Ted over a kind one. An air of exasperation had settled over the guild upon his departure.

"Vince, I'm fine with staying in town, but what about Allen? We're picking

medicinal plants now, so we can pay the inn fees, but we're not necessarily always going to be able to gather the same amount."

"You'll just have to ask him."

But when Allen burst into the guild that evening, it was with unexpected news.

"You found a place to stay?" Vince asked him. "But what about your pressure?"

"Well, it's an old watchtower," Allen whispered so that only Vince could hear.

Vince frowned and tapped his temple as if trying to remember something. Then he responded just as quietly as Allen, "An old watchtower, like those ones they have here and there on the Second Wall? I thought those were just for show."

"They are now. They haven't been used for a long time. But I was helping clean out the Flycatcher Eatery's storage space the other day and we found some stairs that go up to one of the towers."

"Wow," Sara couldn't help interjecting. This was exciting.

"We went up them, and the tower's made of stone since it's attached to the Second Wall, but it's a watchtower, so it's got a big open window, and there's enough space on the floor for a few people to stay up there. And it's in town, so rain won't get in or anything." Allen grinned. "No one's maintaining it or anything, so Emma told me I could use it as a place to stay. And since it's so high up, it's above the roofs of the other buildings."

"I see. Since it's a decent distance from everything around it, your pressure won't reach anyone up there," Vince mused.

"Yeah. So Sara..." Allen smiled happily. "Want to stay there with me? If you don't want to sleep next to each other, we can just pitch our tents in there. It'll probably be just like being outside, since the window's open all the time."

"But I don't know Emma at all. Is it okay for me to stay there too?"

"Emma doesn't care. She remembered you and said you had good manners, so she was fine with you staying up there too."

Sara turned to Vince.

“Well, we could probably use the extra room in the Guild inn now, so you can cancel your reservation if you want. It’s winter now, though. Are you guys really fine with staying in a place with an open window?”

Sara and Allen exchanged a glance.

“You know, Vince...”

“We sleep outside right now.”

“Ah... Right.”

Sara waited impatiently for Modz to come take over, and when he did, she and Allen ran over to the Flycatcher Eatery.

“You just go around back and go in through the storage area.”

“What about checking in with Emma?”

Sara thought they should check in with Emma, since she was basically their landlord, but Allen told her they didn’t need to.

“She’ll be busy right now, so later would be better.”

They passed through a narrow alley into a space between the buildings and the Second Wall, where various things were left for storage. Rain didn’t fall on the town, so there was no need to worry about anything out here getting wet.

There was a storehouse that looked like it was growing out of the Second Wall. Sara looked around and found that other stores and houses had buildings like this behind them attached to the Second Wall too.

“The wall’s right there, so they might as well use it. Come on, it’s right in here.”

The door to the storehouse was open and inside were stacks of old chairs and tables.

“This is stuff they used before they remodeled the store, but there are still people who can use them, so I was helping move them, and look...”

Along the wall on the second level of the storehouse was a hole that an adult

could fit through if they bent down a little.

“There was probably a door here back then.”

Sara took a light out from her pouch and shone it down by her feet, finding a steep spiral staircase with a handrail beyond the hole.

“I’ve been up and down it a few times. It’s safe.”

Sara didn’t have a problem with high places, so she followed Allen up the stairs. She’d gone around in circles so many times she was starting to feel dizzy when Allen suddenly disappeared in front of her. She hurried to follow him, spotting him on the other side of the staircase.

“Watch out at the end.”

She finished climbing the stairs and her jaw dropped. Right at the top of the stairs, there was a big window she could fit through easily, light from the moon and the lamps in town illuminating the room faintly from outside. She looked up to see a ceiling high above them.

Allen rubbed his nose proudly. “I did a little cleaning, but just on this side.”

There really was nothing inside the room. It was about half the size of a school classroom, maybe so that lookouts could sleep up here. Even while keeping enough distance from the stairs and window, there was plenty of room for the two of them to spread out, and it did seem a little too big for one person to clean the whole thing.

Sara crouched down and touched part of the floor that had been cleaned. It was the same brick-like material that the walls and stairs of the tower were made of, hardened with earth magic. Compared to the ground they’d been sleeping on up to this point, it seemed like it would chill them to the bone. Still, there was an overwhelming sense of security she felt just from having a roof over her head. She could hear the noise from the town through the window, so it wasn’t quiet at all either, but if anything, Sara felt comforted by the noise.

“It’s great, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is.”

That was all the two of them needed to say to each other to get across what

they were feeling.

“It won’t be that cold with our mats on the floor. We can bring up a small table and some chairs from downstairs at some point. Then it’ll be like our own little room, even if it is a little cold!”

“It’s a little unfortunate that it’ll take longer to go out and gather medicinal plants, though.”

“But we’ll be able to get back quicker from the guild at night. We can go to bed a little earlier and get up earlier to gather plants. Though I’d really like to get back into the dungeon soon...”

That night, for the first time in a while, they stayed in and just ate Sara’s lunches for dinner. Allen tried to pay for his, but Sara turned him down, telling him it was his fee for finding her a place to stay.

“Your food is so good, Sara.”

“Well, I have good ingredients to work with.”

Nelly had often brought back cockatrice meat and eggs on the mountain, but Sara had never seen either of those things in town, so she figured she was just working with better ingredients.

She looked out the window after their meal. “I can’t really see outside of town...”

“Well, the Third Wall is taller than the Second. But we get a good view of the town here, and in the afternoon, you can see the mountain in the distance. Oh, isn’t that the guildhall down there?”

“You’re right! There are a lot of Hunters going in and out, even at this hour.”

There was a good distance from the tower to the Third Wall and Sara could see all the fountains that acted as landmarks between here and there, with the winding paths that led between them. She could also see people walking around town from here, tiny though they were from this vantage point.

“Well, this is around when we would be putting our tents up outside.”

“We can probably go say hi to Emma then, right? I haven’t heard what our lodging fees will be yet either.” Sara looked over at the stairs restlessly. Allen

had told her it would be okay, but she hadn't actually gotten permission to stay here personally yet.

"Come to think of it, she said I could stay here, but she didn't tell me the rent or anything. Okay, I guess we should go ask," he agreed.

They headed carefully down the dark stairs, lights in hand. Sara wasn't sure about going into the place through the back entrance, so they went through the alley again and poked their heads through the front door of the Eatery.

"Welcome! Oh, it's you, Allen." Emma's bright voice echoed through the restaurant. The place was full of people eating after work. It still looked busy. "We can talk tomorrow morning. Come around at your usual time." She shooed them away from the doorway after hearing that they weren't here to eat. Allen beat a retreat, an awkward smile on his face.

"Well, you heard her. Let's gather plants tomorrow and then come back here."

"Okay."

Back in the tower, Sara laid her mat out on the hard stone floor and pulled her blanket over herself. Allen did the same. There was no glass in the window, and the town was still as bustling as ever, but the sounds were soothing, almost like a lullaby, and Sara was soon able to sleep.

The next morning, Allen woke up first. It took Sara a little extra time to awaken, since it wasn't as bright inside the tower as she had grown accustomed to.

"Where are we...?"

"The watchtower."

"The watchtower..." Sara shot up and ran over to the window. "Wow, the town's so pretty in the morning light!"

The deep shadow cast by the Third Wall by contrast made the parts of the town that were lit look so much brighter. The fountains around town glittered under the sunlight and shops that opened early were getting set up. The scent of freshly baked bread wafted up to them from somewhere. Were the people

hurrying toward the central gate Hunters? The town was already bustling.



“The meadow is nice in the morning, but the town looks pretty, too.”

The two of them admired the view for a little while before hurrying off to

gather plants.

“Hey! Allen!” a guard called out to them at the central gate. It was the one they usually saw in the morning. “The guy on the evening shift told me you two didn’t leave town last night. What happened? Is everything okay?”

Sara was surprised that she was included in the guard’s question, too.

“We’re staying in town as of last night! At Emma’s place.”

“Emma? From the Flycatcher Eatery?”

“Yep! We cleaned up the storage space behind the shop and found a spot.”

“In a storage space? Well, I guess if you’ve got a roof over your head, it’s better than camping out, at least. Good for you!” The guard gave them a relieved nod. “I’ll tell the evening shift guy. You going out to gather plants now?”

“Yep! See you later!”

The two of them hurried out to where they usually picked plants. It was early enough that there were still tents set up here and there.

“Guess it was okay to stay out here last night at least,” Sara observed.

“I knew it was dangerous for kids like us to live out here in tents, but I feel like it should still be okay for grownups...”

“You knew, huh?” Sara said with a wry smile.

“Well, I told you when we first met, didn’t I?”

“I guess you did. I was distracted by how you were stumbling around with an empty stomach, but you did say that, didn’t you?”

Sara thought back to her meeting with Allen fondly. He’d told her to turn her light off because it was dangerous to have it on.

They picked a set amount of medicinal plants and then headed for the Flycatcher Eatery to meet with Emma.

“I feel like I’m running everywhere lately,” Sara observed.

“You’ve got more stamina than you had when we met, don’t you? Maybe

you’re using physical strengthening without thinking about it like I do.”

“What? I don’t like the sound of that...”

“Why not?” Allen said with a bit of a pout, but Sara couldn’t explain it to him, because the blame lay with Nelly, not him.

Sara loved Nelly, but she wasn’t fond of the Hunter’s penchant for trying to solve every problem with physical strengthening. She didn’t want to think that she was using physical strengthening unconsciously, because that would mean being part of Nelly’s little physical strengthening club.

The Flycatcher Eatery had been closed when they’d left, but it was open now. It wasn’t business hours yet, but the door was unlocked and people were busily working inside.

“Emma!”

“Be right with you!”

There was a cheerful response and a moment later, Emma emerged from the back.

“Let’s sit inside and talk,” Emma invited them, though she chose a chair two tables away from them after Allen and Sara sat down.

“If we’re gonna chat for a while, I’ll be more comfortable over here. If you didn’t have so much pressure, I’d ask you to help out a lot more around the store.”

“It’s okay. I can be a Hunter since I have this power.”

“True enough.” Emma laughed heartily and Sara greeted her timidly.

“Thank you so much for letting us stay here. I’m Sara, by the way.”

“It’s no trouble. Doesn’t hurt my wallet to put up a kid or two. I’m just lending you my storage space now that it’s cleaned up. I don’t much care what’s behind it.” Emma gave them a wink.

True, the storage area belonged to Emma’s shop, but the watchtower behind it was the property of the town. Were they trespassing, then? Sara was beginning to get nervous.

“The town won’t say anything about a watchtower no one’s using anymore. And they definitely won’t say anything if nobody tells them about it. Just make sure you tell people you’re staying in the storeroom.”

“Got it,” Allen said with a grin.

Sara thought back to all the people they’d talked to and realized he hadn’t told anyone except for Vince that they were staying in the watchtower. She was impressed with him, but she also wished he’d said something to her about this earlier.

“What about you though, Sara? Unlike Allen, you could help out in the kitchen or wait tables. I’ll beat the Guild’s rate, so what do you say to working here?”

“Me? Oh, I don’t know...”

It was an enticing offer, and Sara was tempted to take it right away, but the words got stuck in her throat. When she pondered why that was, the reason she hit upon was Nelly.

Sara hung her head for a moment before looking back up. “Umm, I think I could help out for a short time, but I’m waiting for my guardian to come back to Rosa, and I think she’ll show up in the Apothecary’s Guild or the Hunter’s Guild first.” She didn’t want them to miss each other if that happened.

“Her name was Nelly, right? I think a young woman would stand out around here, but I’ve never heard anything about her before.”

Sara had never told Emma about Nelly, which must have meant that the rumors going around town about her were that specific. Emma probably thought Sara had been abandoned by her guardian like everyone else did. Her next words were unexpectedly kind, though.

“To be honest, I can’t imagine anyone abandoning a little sweetheart like you. Maybe some wires just got crossed somewhere. Are you sure she told you Rosa?”

“Yes.”

Sara thought that might be the case too, but she couldn’t imagine it was Rosa she would have been wrong about, out of everything she remembered Nelly

telling her.

“Oh, about the rent...”

“Who would take rent for a storage space?” Emma waved off Sara’s question. “But let’s see... If you could wash a few dishes after you get done with your work at the Guild, that’d help me out.”

“Okay! I can do that.”

“I’ll help, too.”

Emma waved off Allen’s offer, too. “I can’t let you into the kitchen with your pressure, Allen. Just help out a little more during the day.”

“Okay.”

The two of them parted after that. Sara headed to leave her basket with Vince, but he wasn’t at his usual reception desk that day. Mina took her basket for her instead.

“I’ll take that for you, Sara.”

“What happened to Vince?”

“Well, this probably won’t mean much to you since you don’t go into dungeons, but we had a little problem with monster material purchasing... He’s talking about it in the back with some Guild higher-ups.”

Sara suddenly remembered that Vince was the vice guildmaster. She wasn’t sure how important the vice guildmaster was, but he’d at least seemed to have more authority than any of the knights when they had been in town. Sara headed for the kitchen, musing to herself.

“They want you out front, Sara.”

“Even though I left my basket out there?”

Sara was summoned from the kitchen again during her potato-peeling. If it was Ted, she was going to give him a piece of her mind, but she found the silver-haired guildmaster of the Apothecary’s Guild there instead.

“Mr. Chris...”

“It was Sara, right? I’d heard that you made it back to town fine. You look healthy.”

His winter-colored eyes looked cold at first, but they crinkled warmly as he looked down at her face. He was the same kind man Sara had seen during Allen’s errand.

“Tch...”

“Ted.”

“Yes, sir. I apologize.”

Ted was there as always as well, but he was standing behind Chris, being a little more well-behaved than usual.

Sara stuck her tongue out at him when Chris wasn’t watching her.

“You little...!”

“Ted.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sara was satisfied that Ted was cowed by one short word from Chris. Though she wasn’t being very mature, she admitted.

“It seems we’ve been purchasing medicinal plants from you almost every day lately. That’s a big help. Greater healing herbs especially. I also hear that you bring in a set number of each kind of plant every day. Is there a reason for that?”

“Yes. I wasn’t told to gather a specific amount, so I just pick an amount I know I can provide every day. I also avoid picking too many of any one kind at once.”

“Hmm. You’re just as clever as I thought.”

“Feh.” Ted was mixing it up now.

“If I asked you to gather paralysis herbs, would you be able to do that?”

“Paralysis herbs?”

Paralysis herbs pretty much grew everywhere, but never in large clusters, so she couldn’t say she’d always be able to find them. She’d also only been looking

for healing herbs and greater healing herbs lately, so she didn't have a specific place in mind to look for them.

"I haven't been looking for them lately, so I can't say I would know where to go for them specifically. I could only say that I'll prioritize finding them."

"Feh. As little as I'd expect."

"Ted."

"I apologize."

Sara gave him a withering look. If he was going to have to apologize, he could just not make the disparaging comments in the first place.

"Ted told me that the knights tried to use a paralysis agent on you and Allen."

"I don't know what the liquid they were spraying was. I was just scared of the shards of glass."

"I see. Even healing potions must be adjusted when used on adults and on children. I can't believe those idiots."

Sara could practically hear Chris's teeth grinding.

"A paralysis drug should wear off in time, but we can't have things like this happening more than they already have. I'd like some fresh paralysis herbs to synthesize an antiparalytic that can be used to counteract this drug. Could you prioritize finding them for me?"

"All I can say is that I'll make an effort, but yes, I can do that."

"Please. And one other thing..." Chris's face fell. "Her name was Nelly, was it not? The woman who told you to go to me for help."

"Yes. She told me that Chris at the Apothecary's Guild was the only person in Rosa I could trust." Her voice trembled a little as she recalled how hopeless she'd felt when she first realized she wouldn't be able to rely on Chris.

"I may not have been present at the time, but I apologize regardless for leaving a young boy like yourself with no one to rely on."

You left me on my own after you got back too, someone more sarcastic than Sara commented in her mind. She chased the thought away but then got stuck

on the word “boy.” Chris had examined her for injuries so carefully during Allen’s errand and still hadn’t realized that she was a girl? He must have been surprisingly unobservant like Vince was, Sara decided.

“But I really don’t know anyone named Nelly. I may have little interest in women’s names, but if she had red hair and green eyes, I’m sure I would have remembered her for her similarity to my dear Nefertari.”

“Uh huh...”

His sharp, beautiful features, almost like an ice sculpture, were creased in anguish, but when Sara considered what he was saying rationally, it was pretty self-centered. He claimed he didn’t have any interest in women, but he would have remembered her if she looked similar to the girl he liked.

Ted was making an indescribable face behind Chris, but in this instance alone, Sara thought she probably felt the same way he did.

“My dear Nef is almost forty like I am, and though she remains vivacious as ever, I imagine the young woman you’re looking for can hardly compare to her mature beauty.”

Well, she had no particular desire to compare them, and she didn’t want to know anything about this Nefertari or Nef or whatever either.

“I didn’t approach you until now because it seemed you were doing fine on your own here at the Hunter’s Guild, but if there’s anything you need my assistance with in the future, don’t hesitate to visit me at the Apothecary’s Guild. I will make sure Ted understands that you are welcome there, too.”

“Okay.”

There were all sorts of things Sara could say to him, like “Ted’s rolling his eyes behind you right now” or “You’re going to have your work cut out for you convincing him,” but she decided to simply accept what he had to say. She wasn’t interested in expending any more effort than that.

“Well then, I’ll be counting on you for those paralysis herbs.”

“Right.”

Chris strode out of the Guild, his apothecary’s cloak billowing behind him.

“What a weirdo.”

One of the receptionists burst out laughing at Sara’s muttered comment, but she ignored whoever it was. She’d look for paralysis herbs and she’d keep gathering healing herbs, but she didn’t really want to have anything else to do with the man.

Ted was still there, looking like he wanted to say something, but Sara felt no need to try to find out what that was, so she turned and headed back toward the kitchen. Right at that moment, however, they heard the sound of a large group of people moving around near the guildmaster’s office in the back.

“Tch.”

Before Sara could even make a note of Ted sucking his teeth once more, he grabbed her arm.

“Come here.”

“Huh? Huh?”

If she’d sensed something malicious in Ted’s intentions, she thought her barrier probably would have activated, but she was so taken by surprise that she simply let him drag her over to the Guild kiosk.

“Get under here and stay out of sight.”

She wanted to ask why, but her surprise won out and Sara simply ended up crouching behind the kiosk obediently. The crowd of people entered the guild proper and stopped somewhere around the reception desks.

“See to it that you make those changes, then.”

“The Guild has no choice but to abide by any decisions Rosa makes. But we can’t ban our members from taking on side work. What anyone does outside of the Guild, Hunter or not, isn’t for us to decide.”

“You’re as stubborn as always, Jay. I imagine it would make things easier for you here if you had fewer rookies to worry about.”

Something about the conversation felt tense. The man called Jay, who was speaking somewhat languidly, must have been the guildmaster, but who was the other one?

“The Hunter’s Guild doesn’t exist for the Guild’s sake. It exists for the sake of the Hunters who work in the dungeons and out in the meadow, and for the town where those Hunters live.”

“And that is why, for the sake of the town’s law and order, we have no need for those who are struggling to get by and are likely to turn to crime.”

“There’s no such thing.” The guildmaster’s tone hardened. “Rookies and young and weak Hunters grow into strong Hunters. I’m not saying we need to baby them, but cutting them off isn’t right either.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree on that,” said the other voice sardonically, then, “Oh, Ted.”

Footsteps approached the kiosk.

“What a coincidence, Father.”

Father. Of course, it was obvious that Ted *had* a father, but Sara was still surprised to hear the word. Ted’s polite tone surprised her, too.

“What are you doing at the Hunter’s Guild?”

“Just procuring medicinal plants.” From what Sara could hear, it sounded like Ted was showing his father the plants he’d purchased from her. “Master Chris just left, so I should be getting after him.”

“Ah, you were with the guildmaster? Well, you’d better not keep him waiting, then.”

“Yes, sir. Shall we head in that direction together?”

“Sure.”

Ted left the guildhall with his father and Sara poked her head out from behind the kiosk.

“That scared me.”

“Me too.” Vince had come over to the counter at some point, so his presence startled Sara once again.

“Ah, that Sara over there? Looks like you got back safe.” The guildmaster smiled at Sara, belatedly taking in her safe return. Chris had been the same

way. That was simply all their worry for her amounted to, she supposed.

“So Ted really *was* somebody important’s son, huh?”

“Yeah, that was the mayor.”

What had surprised her most of all was the polite tone he’d used with his father, and the fact that he’d hidden Sara.

“Why’d he tell me to hide?”

“Ah... Probably didn’t want the mayor seeing one of the kids who live outside town.”

Sara looked down at herself. She kept herself clean, and she could dry her clothes quickly, so she washed them regularly, even now that it was getting colder. She hadn’t cut her hair in a while, so it was getting a little shaggy, but she didn’t think she looked unkempt or anything.

“It’s nothing to do with how you look. Allen’s been looking a lot more clean since he started hanging out with you, too. It’s just that the two of you really stand out since you don’t have parents or guardians. I think pretty much everyone in the Third District knows who you two are at this point.”

“So that’s why...”

The person who’d sold her her tent, Emma, the gate guard, even people Sara didn’t see all that often... It seemed like everyone somehow knew about Nelly already. No one had treated her poorly at this point, though.

“I think the mayor’s not making a big deal about it because it’s just not on his radar, but if he sees a kid without a guardian working at the Guild, he’ll probably tell us to take some sort of direct action.”

“Huh? Should I not be working at the Guild, then?”

“Nah, you’d attract attention no matter where you worked, so it’s actually better for you to work here, where we can keep an eye on you. And...” Vince lowered his voice. “You’re not staying outside town anymore, right?”

“Right, as of yesterday, I’m staying at Emma’s place.”

“Good.”

Vince already knew, but she kept quiet about the watchtower.

“Oh yeah? You two have graduated from tent living, then?” The guildmaster seemed relieved to hear it.

“So, is there some kind of trouble?”

“Yeah... Well, it’s only trouble for you kids and the rookies. I’m gonna put up a sign about it later. I don’t really want to go through it twice, so can I tell you later, when Allen comes in?”

“Okay.”

That would be fine. Sara was curious if Ted had actually been protecting her, but it was nothing she could come to a conclusion about on her own, so she decided to put it out of her mind and hurry back to her kitchen work. She sighed, wondering why she was always getting interrupted at work.

While she was working at the kiosk that day however, she noticed the atypical air around the reception desks whether she wanted to or not.

“What do you mean you’re not buying them anymore?”

“It’s a decision made by Rosa, and we’re just as surprised as you about it.”

Vince was dealing with Hunters who had complaints, directing them to look over at the bulletin board where there was a sign explaining the town’s new policies. Realizing this was what the guildmaster was talking about earlier, Sara waited for a break between customers before heading over to look at the paper posted up on the wall.

“Umm... ‘The Guild will no longer be purchasing the following materials: any slimes other than stealth slimes; orcs or any monsters with a lower purchasing price than orcs, magic stones included. This policy will be in place until Rosa declares otherwise. An exception will be made for any monsters hunted between the east gate and the north dungeon. A temporary sales stand will be set up at the east gate.’ What does that mean?”

Sara still had stealth slime stones, so she understood that she wouldn’t have to worry about running out of money any time soon, but she had no idea why they were suddenly not purchasing certain materials anymore and what that

meant for Hunters. She also recalled seeing plenty of horned rabbits near the central gate, so she wondered why an exception was being made specifically for monsters near the east gate in particular.

“I can’t make any money if I can’t sell orcs and slimes anymore!”

“I know! I know, but the Hunter’s Guild is beholden to the town where it’s established, so we can’t fight the town on the decisions it makes.”

When the Hunter shouted at him, Vince responded with a strained, sympathetic tone.

“What do you mean we can’t stay outside of town anymore either...? With no income and nowhere to stay, how are we supposed to make it here?”

Sara finally understood what was going on when she heard the Hunter’s lament. Liam and Ted had both mentioned the knights warning Rosa that anywhere people camped out risked becoming a slum. In other words, this was a strategy to force low-level Hunters out of Rosa. Anyone with some savings could stay at an inn and wait for the town to start purchasing their materials again, but anyone without that kind of money was probably camping out precisely because they couldn’t afford to do otherwise.

“We can only hunt the monsters in the meadow? That’s crazy... Why do they think horned rabbits go for more than orcs? Size has nothing to do with strength... And how much time do they think it takes to get over to the east gate?”

Upon hearing the Hunter’s complaints, Sara finally grasped just how strong the “monsters of the meadow” were. The reason horned rabbit was more expensive was because its meat was harder to get ahold of, which was because horned rabbits were strong, so they were difficult to take down. She’d thought it was simply because the meat tasted good yet there wasn’t a lot of meat on the animals.

“Listen, the Guild’s monster processors will also be getting less work now, but you can always hire them on an individual basis and sell materials to vendors directly. We can’t ban any business conducted outside of the Guild.”

Vince was indirectly saying that while the Guild had to follow the town’s

policies, they'd come up with a workaround so that people who needed to could still make some money off of the materials the Guild was no longer purchasing.

"How much more work and time is that gonna take, though? You're basically saying we need to hunt horned rabbits or get out of Rosa."

So the people eking out a living day to day hunting orcs and slimes were rookie Hunters, and Rosa was trying to use those Hunters to cull the number of horned rabbits in the meadow or leave town if they couldn't do that. It was a smart move on the part of whoever had come up with it, but it was rather cruel, too. Sara wasn't sure how she felt about this.

Some of these rookie Hunters were harassing Allen, but they were all working hard to fulfill their dreams of becoming Hunters just like Allen was. The knights had been concerned about the area outside of town turning into a slum, but there were no actual crimes being committed there now. In Sara's mind, they were all people trying to make an honest living.

On an adult's legs, it would probably take about three hours to reach the east gate from the central gate. It might be a bit quicker to cut through the town, but that was still time that couldn't be spent hunting.

By the time Allen jogged into the Guild, the commotion had gotten a little louder and there was a crowd of people gathered in front of the bulletin board. Allen edged in front of the group to get a look at the sign before sprinting over to Sara.

"I can't believe they're pulling this crap." His expression was dark.

If the rookies all left, Allen's harassers would be gone too, and he would finally be able to go back into the dungeon. They might even leave as soon as tomorrow. Still, Allen wasn't thinking about the potential benefit to him at all.

Sara and Allen stood around at the kiosk feeling somewhat lost as the clamoring continued around them, wondering what they would do starting tomorrow and whether they should just keep on doing what they had been, until Vince walked over to them.

"Allen, Sara. You need any more details than what's on the sign?"

“No, I think I understand what’s going on.”

“Gotcha. I’ll be at the east gate starting tomorrow, at that temporary sales stand. Wish someone younger could take care of that, to be honest, but there’ll probably be some kinks to work out at first. Worst case scenario, I might have to go out and rescue some people. Rosa’s really screwing us over. Pisses me off to think it’s all because of that little knight brat, too.”

“Wasn’t he just the second son of a count, though? I know that’s nobility, but was he really powerful enough to make a whole town change how they do things?” Sara asked, picturing Liam. He hadn’t even been the one in charge of the knights on their mission. The leader had been someone else, at least as far as she remembered.

“He’s the second son of a count, sure, but more *importantly*, he’s the son of the current prime minister. You followi?”

“Oh... Yes.”

So he didn’t have a lot of power on his own, but he knew how to use his parents’ power. And his meddling was all the more difficult to deal with because it came from a place of perceived righteousness.

“You two could’ve been a maid at the prime minister’s house and a knight referred by the prime minister’s son, you know.”

“I don’t care about that,” Sara said.

“Me neither,” Allen agreed.

“Oh yeah? Not very ambitious, are you?” asked Vince, though he seemed happy to hear it. “So, what are you two gonna do?”

“I’ll keep doing what I have been,” Allen replied.

If he was fine with that, then Sara would do the same. “Me too.”

“Mm. Nice and simple. Good.” Vince nodded, looking relieved, and headed back to his reception desk.

When they went back to the watchtower that day, a small table and two chairs had been added to it.

“Wow!”

That simple addition made the empty tower room feel like a home. They moved the lamp they’d been setting on the floor to the table. From its higher position it was able to illuminate much more of the room.

They ate dinner, chatting about their day as if nothing at all had changed, and then set up a tent so that they could take turns washing off. They didn’t have any pajamas, so they just changed into the clothes they’d wear the next day and slept in them.

“Hey, Allen.”

“Yeah?”

“Chris from the Apothecary’s Guild came to the guild today.”

“He gave me my pay on that errand.” Allen remembered him.

“Ted was with him, too. Heh heh.” Sara couldn’t help laughing at the memory.

“What’s so funny?”

“Well, Chris is really important in the Apothecary’s Guild, right? He kept scolding Ted every time he sucked his teeth. It was so funny.”

“If he’s really that important, I wish he’d tell Ted to get his act together even when he’s not around.”

“I thought the exact same thing.”

The two of them laughed at that.

“But he hid me from someone important in the town and he seems kinda weird lately... He said he wouldn’t have sent you on that errand if he knew the protection field around the road was down, too.”

Ted was always nasty, but he had his decent moments too, and Sara wanted to tell Allen about that for some reason. Allen didn’t say anything in response to this, though.

“Allen?”

“Well, I’m relieved to hear that he’s not *always* nasty to you, but...” Allen finally said. “He doesn’t seem any different to me. Sure, he’s not picking on me

anymore, but that's just because we both don't want anything to do with one another. So..." Allen turned to Sara and smiled. "I'll only change how I act toward him if he changes his attitude toward me. *You* may have noticed something different about him, but I'll wait until I see it myself."

"Yeah." Sara smiled. Allen didn't let other people sway him. She liked that about him. But...

"I won't change my mind *that* easily!"

She liked him swinging his fists around like this, too.

"Oh yeah, we were talking about Chris. He also asked me to find paralysis herbs for him."

"Paralysis herbs, eh? I haven't learned those ones yet."

Sara nodded and explained to him why he wanted the herbs.

"Well, sounds like you should work on finding some of those tomorrow."

"Yeah. I wanted to ask you something too, Allen..."

"Me?" Allen looked confused, sitting on his mat. He must not have expected her to ask him something about picking plants.

"If horned rabbits could injure even a knight, if he let his guard down, what do you think would happen to Hunters who are weaker than you are in a fight against them?"

"I think it'd be dangerous for them even if they've got their guards *up*. It'd be dangerous for me, too."

"What if hunting horned rabbits was the only way for you to stay in Rosa?" Sara had been watching weak Hunters react to the news of Rosa's new policies all afternoon from the kiosk. "I think I'd push myself even if I got injured. And I'd end up using a lot of potions."

"I get that," Allen said.

"I was just trying to gather a certain number of herbs up until now, but I think it'd probably be good to find as many healing herbs as you can, and not just greater ones."

“Makes sense. Those guys were always nasty to me, but it’s not like I want them to quit being Hunters or anything. Maybe this is self-centered, but I want them to get strong so we can work together.”

“Allen...”

Manning the kiosk, Sara saw a lot of Hunters come into the guild early to sell monsters and magic stones whether she wanted to or not. There were a lot of people who came to the kiosk by themselves, but people usually went to the reception desks in parties.

After getting his ID, Allen had been going into the dungeon by himself. Part of it was because of his mana, but it was mostly because Rosa didn’t have a lot of Hunters who were just starting out.

“You know, Allen... Since you have your ID now, you don’t really need to stay in Rosa anymore, do you?”

“Yeah, I don’t, but...” Allen told her about the Hunter’s Guild in the capital. “I was too young, so I wasn’t able to go into the dungeon, but while I waited for my uncle to get back, I ran some errands and hunted slimes and other smaller monsters out in the fields. There are more Hunters my age in the capital, but...”

He shrugged. “They’re weaker than me. Anyone who’s got social standing and parents in the capital is trying to become a knight, not a Hunter. People who register as Hunters at my age have no other choice. That’s why people work with people they already know, who are at similar skill levels. There still aren’t any parties I could join there. So...”

Allen laughed with a look on his face that Sara couldn’t imagine a twelve-year-old making. “I’d still be alone even in the capital.” He preferred Rosa, since he was already familiar with it, he told her with a smile.

Maybe he was also being considerate of Sara, not wanting to leave *her* alone. Maybe he simply valued the relationships he had now, and didn’t want to give them up. Either way, Sara wanted to stay with him until Nelly came back. She was sure about that.

“For now, let’s just wake up a little early tomorrow and gather a bunch of plants.”

“Yeah.”

Sara wasn’t sure if she’d ever had a day that she would call ordinary since coming to Rosa. Still, another unusual day came to an end as she drifted to sleep, the hustle and bustle of the town serving as her lullaby.

Before heading out in the morning, Sara got out her medicinal plant guide and sat side by side with Allen, peering down at the page on paralysis herbs.

“I’ll focus on these today, so you should focus on finding as many healing herbs and greater healing herbs as you can, Allen.”

“Sure thing.”

Before the sun had fully risen, the two of them were off running through Rosa.

“Early start today, eh?” The soldier at the gate cheerfully greeted them as they hurried to their gathering spot, using physical strengthening on their legs for speed.

“None of the tents that were out here yesterday are there today.”

“I wonder if they’re all staying at the Guild inn. Five thousand for a night’s stay... Two thousand for three meals. They’d need to make at least seven thousand gil in one day. If you could gather plants, that’d be doable, but...”

“That’s seven slimes. It’d be two horned rabbits.”

Considering how ferocious horned rabbits were, their selling price didn’t seem worth it.

“I’d rather hunt the slimes.”

“It’s not that easy to hunt them for most people... And the Guild won’t buy slimes unless they’re from the meadow now anyway.”

“But how can they tell whether a slime came from the meadow or the dungeon?”

“I think that’s why they have the sales stand out here.”

They’d only buy magic stones from freshly killed slimes, Sara realized.

“Okay, let’s get started.”

Sara set her basket down between them and they set about gathering plants. Mana herbs grew in the dry grass near the town walls, so Sara typically gathered between the road and the wall, but she couldn’t recall seeing many paralysis herbs in that area.

“Guess I’ll try near the protection field.”

Sara kept her body low, holding her plant guide in one hand just in case, and searched for paralysis herbs, deftly plucking any healing herbs she spotted while she looked.

“There are thorns near the top of the stems, so you have to pick from lower on the stem where there aren’t any... There’s one!”

The thorns weren’t hard like rose thorns. They were fine, and there were a lot of them, like on an okra plant.

“The part without thorns... Here.” She snapped the stem off cleanly and carefully placed the plant into her basket, then went back to gathering.

After gathering more herbs than usual, the pair headed triumphantly for the Guild.

“Vince isn’t here, so I’ll hold on to these for you.”

“Thanks, Mina. Be careful, there’s paralysis herbs in there today.”

“Impressive as always. You’ve already fulfilled your request.”

Sara headed for the kitchen, hoping that today would finally be a day like any other, but when trouble came, it came somewhere that didn’t really have anything to do with her.

“Huh? People keep going into the Flycatcher Eatery and then coming right back out.”

“You’re right.”

Sara poked her head into the Eatery while she and Allen were on their way back to the watchtower. She went in through the back whenever she was helping out with the dishes, but at the moment she wanted to see what was going on inside the dining area. There were people eating inside, but a lot of others were looking at a sign on the wall and then talking with Emma and leaving.

Usually, the restaurant would be too busy for them to chat with her, but that wasn’t the case today.

“Emma.”

“Oh, hey Allen. And Sara.” Emma didn’t look busy, but she did look tired.

“Not many customers today.”

“Well, take a look at the sign.”

“Let’s see... ‘Orc meat will be lunch only until regular supply is restored.’” So they weren’t serving orc meat at dinnertime anymore.

“We usually get a ton of orc meat delivered regularly, so we don’t keep a lot of extra supply of it. We buy horned rabbit in bulk when we’re able to, so we’ve got a few days’ of that in stock, but it’s a more expensive meal. If it comes down to it, we’ll have to order poultry from the capital, but I’d really rather not if we can help it.”

Sara had heard about this in the Guild kitchen. Poultry was mass-produced in the capital, so it was cheap, but it was bland and mushy, so it wasn’t well-liked.

“They’re not buying orc anymore at the Guild, but did they stop selling it, too?” Allen asked.

“They sure did... I heard there were a lot of Hunters out in the meadow today, but I wonder how many horned rabbits they were able to bag. It’d be nice if we got a bit of a discount on the meat...”

Emma had a lot on her plate. The stands they’d passed by on their way here had seemed the same as always, but if this went on, Sara wondered if the usual sandwiches they bought would increase in price.

And in fact, that was exactly what happened.

“What? It’s twice as much now?”

“I’m sorry, kid. The price of the bread hasn’t changed, but we’re not getting any meat in these days.”

Since the Guild wasn’t buying it no matter how many orcs people hunted, their meat would never end up on the market. Even with storage bags, there weren’t many people who had ten-wyvern bags like Nelly did. So even veteran Hunters who didn’t need to hunt orcs might take one out just defending themselves but then have to deal with them taking up space in their storage

bags.

“What if I rented out my storage bag space? I could hold onto one orc for five hundred gil or something.” Sara was even joking with Allen about it, since her backpack was still pretty much empty.

“Well, I’ve got ten orcs. Could you hold on to them for me?” Apparently it hadn’t sounded like a joke to a nearby Hunter who was there to buy a lunch. People must have really been struggling.

“Err, I’m sorry, I was kidding.” Sara lowered her head to the Hunter. She had a three-wyvern storage bag, but she wasn’t really sure if she should be putting things in it that she hadn’t hunted herself.

The Hunter laughed and scratched his head. “I thought it might have been a joke, but it’s a deal I’d really take. It’s a pain carrying these things around.”

If the Guild had a ranking system, then they could have just barred entry to Rosa’s dungeons to anyone below a certain rank. Since there was no system like that however, they were using this roundabout method to rid the town of Hunters who couldn’t make it here, but it was throwing the entire town into all sorts of chaos as a result.

“What’s the point of kicking out rookie Hunters when they haven’t even done anything wrong? This is just causing problems for the townspeople like us. Not that they care about us Third District folks anyway, I’m sure.”

Emma complained to her every day when Sara went to wash dishes at the Flycatcher Eatery, though there wasn’t much to help with since they weren’t getting as many customers. From the way the other kitchen staff watched the two of them from a distance, Sara got the sense that her real purpose in being here was serving as Emma’s conversation partner.

“Seems like it costs too much to stay at inns and the town’s too small to build any new housing. Though the reason Allen and I were staying outside of town was because we didn’t have our IDs yet.”

“Poor things. When’s this Nelly of yours going to show up, anyway?”

“I wish I knew. Hopefully soon...”

Emma said the things everyone else was thinking, but not out of malice, so Sara was able to speak her mind with her. She appreciated having somewhere she could say the name Nelly without it being a big deal.

Some people had already left Rosa after the monster-selling restrictions were put in place. The town was even offering a discount on carriage fees for anyone going to the capital.

Sara sighed as she headed through the central gate to gather plants again this morning. No matter how many healing herbs she and Allen picked, the Guild's stock of potions was never fully replenished, and she'd just gotten a complaint from a Hunter the day before. Just as she'd predicted, a lot of people were out in the meadow injuring themselves, which was eating up all the potions. But potions weren't free. If people were buying potions for every horned rabbit they hunted, they couldn't be making much money.

"Can't tell if they're smart or dumb..."

"Definitely dumb. They haven't figured out yet that the town works the way it does 'cause everyone contributes, weak Hunters included."

Even Allen was starting to get annoyed since he was still having to do odd jobs now instead of going down into the dungeon. Things were only made worse by the fact that if he went out into the meadow and made hunting horned rabbits look like a breeze, the weak Hunters having trouble out there would only get more annoyed at him and would likely ramp up their harassment. He was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

"Can't believe those knights did this. I'm glad we didn't go with them."

"You said it."

She hadn't met a single handsome guy in this world who'd been a decent person, Sara thought, picturing Liam's and Ted's faces. Maybe she could even add Chris to that list.

And because she was thinking about Ted, of course he was there in the Guild when she got there.

"Tch."

Surprisingly, this tongue click came from Allen. He must have been really irritated, Sara thought pityingly.

“Okay, I’m gonna go, Sara.”

Now Sara pitied herself for being left behind while Allen could leave.

“Wait, Allen.”

She hadn’t realized since she’d been distracted by Ted, but Vince was also standing behind the apothecary. He wasn’t at his desk, and looked like he was getting ready to leave. He also looked tired, with more stubble than usual on his face.

Sara turned toward the kitchen, thinking this was her chance to get away.

“You too, Sara.”

Her shoulders sagged. She thought this might happen.

“I’m just gonna come out and say it. I’ve lent the two of you out to the Apothecary’s Guild.”

Sara’s eyes opened wide while Allen crossed his arms and scowled.

“No. Sara makes sense, but why me?”

“Wait a second. Why does it make sense for *me*? Are *you* selling me out to the Apothecary’s Guild too?”

“Err, no. Sorry. That’s not what I meant...”

Allen’s hasty apology salvaged Sara’s mood somewhat, but what in the world was Vince talking about?

“Ted.”

“Uh huh.”

He hadn’t even sucked his teeth, so Sara wondered if he was sick or something. The question must have shown on her face, because Ted gave her an annoyed look, though he managed to keep any comments to himself.

“You guys have been bringing in more plants lately and the Apothecary’s Guild is...well...thankful for that.”

An impressed murmur went through the Guild.

“Ted, do you have a fever?”

“Of course I don’t! And even if I did, I’m an apothecary!”

Sara thought she remembered Nelly saying that you could bring fevers down with potions.

“Anyway, it’s still not enough right now...” Ted sounded frustrated. “But I heard you two are only gathering plants in the morning, so I want you to spend the whole day out there instead.”

“The whole day... Well, it’s fine with me, but...”

Sara wasn’t worried about the Guild. She helped them out by working there, but they had been getting by just fine before her and had only taken her on out of compassion. Of course, she liked to think she was contributing enough to make it worth it for them, too.

She’d gathered all day up on the Dark Mountain enough times that she was confident she could do it. She looked over at Allen, who was shuffling his feet looking irritated.

“I... If I have to be out in the meadow all day, I’d rather hunt horned rabbits than pick plants.”

He may have been a rookie, but he was still a Hunter. It was only for a few days after getting his ID, but he *had* been going down into the dungeon and earning money hunting monsters.

“Well, I’d prefer gathering to hunting horned rabbits...” Such was Sara’s preference. Everyone was different.

“I know how you feel, Allen,” Vince said. “But you were already staying out of the dungeon to avoid conflict, so you shouldn’t waste that effort.”

“I know.” Allen tapped his foot on the floor and looked up. “Fine. I’ll let you rent me out with Sara.”

Swallowing one’s annoyance to do what needed to be done was a rare trait even in adults. Sara just wished Ted could learn something from Allen’s maturity.

Vince sighed with relief. “Okay. Let’s head for the east gate, then. You can set up camp at my sales stand.”

“I’ll be set up outside the east gate making potions, too.”

Sara was surprised to hear that Ted would be out there. But if they were going to the east gate, it would make more sense for them to take the long route instead of cutting through the town to get there. That way, they could pick some more plants before noon.

“Allen, we should...”

“Yeah. Vince, we’ll pick some plants on the way out there. We can meet up once we get to the east gate.”

“Oh yeah? Well, that sounds good, I guess...”

Sara handed Ted what they’d already picked this morning. “Do you have another basket?” she asked.

“Yeah, I got an empty one,” he replied.

“Then let’s trade.”

“Sure...”

They didn’t need anything else. Sara and Allen exchanged a glance and nodded.

“Okay, we’ll head out.”

“See you at the east gate!”

They had only just arrived at the Guild but they spun right back around. The guard at the gate gave them a funny look when they passed through it again, which made Sara laugh. She got the sense today would be a hard, but interesting, day.

After arriving at the spot where they usually gathered plants, they began looking for more as they headed toward the east gate. Sara remembered spotting a lot of them when she had come to town the first time from the direction of the east gate, and there were still a lot of plants around. No one else must have been gathering them. They picked what they could and headed

for the east gate on legs quickened with physical strengthening.

“Did I gain more stamina?”

“You’re a lot faster than the last time we were out here.”

“Yay! Oh.”

When the east gate finally came into view, they started seeing people here and there in the meadow. They were likely Hunters.

“It’s my first time seeing people out here not on the roads... Ah!” She saw someone dodge an attack by a horned rabbit but lose their balance and fall over. “Oh no! He’s too far away for me to reach!” Sara could expand her barrier and change its shape somewhat, but the man was too far away for her to reach.

“Looks like he avoided getting hit in a bad spot, but he’s bleeding. He should be able to get back into the protection field, at least.”

“Ugh... I don’t want to see people getting hurt like that...”

Sara felt the color draining from her face after what she’d just seen. She’d been out hunting with Nelly before, of course, so she’d seen the Hunter use her fists and even her sword on monsters, but she hadn’t actually seen much blood before. Now that she thought about it, it felt less like Nelly was cutting things with her sword and more like she was bashing them with it.

“We’ll have to gather as many healing herbs as we can...” Sara was extra motivated now.

In front of the east gate, there was a big table, behind which Vince was leaned back in a chair. Potions were lined up on the table and there were storage bags strewn haphazardly at his feet. Ten-wyvern bags, she’d guess.

When Vince spotted them, his mouth fell open. “I just got here. And I cut through town.”

“Well, you know, I use physical strengthening.”

“You can’t just use physical strengthening for everything!”

Sara burst out laughing at the nostalgic exchange. She was always like this with Nelly.

“And I thought you were a caster, Sara.”

“Well, I’ve built up some stamina lately.”

“Is it really a matter of stamina?”

The Hunter that had just been injured limped up to the exasperated Vince, leaning on one of his companions.

“Oh...” Sara couldn’t help exclaiming when she saw them. It was the rookie Hunters who had picked a fight with her in the guild a little while ago. The weak ones who had been harassing Allen despite having a decent amount of mana themselves.

Right now, however, they had no time to concern themselves with Allen *or* Sara.

“One potion, Vince.”

“Two thousand gil.”

“...Put it on my tab.”

Vince handed the potion over silently.

Sara started to get out her basket, but stopped, surprised. Potions weren’t cheap, but at two thousand gil, you could pay for one after hunting two slimes or one horned rabbit. If the Hunter couldn’t pay, then what was he going to do about dinner or lodging later?

“You’ll be fine with a potion, but what about you?”

“Mine’s just a scratch,” the other Hunter responded, holding his arm. Sara could see a tear in his clothes and some blood.

She hesitated for a moment, then got a towel out of her pouch. It was the new one Liam had bought her. She didn’t really like even having it, but was holding onto it since it wasn’t like the towel was at fault. She started cutting it into one long strip. She was a little embarrassed when everyone started paying attention to her, but she quickly finished cutting up the towel and took out a healing herb, giving it a little rub.

“Gimme your arm.”

“Huh?”

“Your injured arm. It’ll take a little time, but it’ll get better if you put a healing herb directly on it.”

The Hunter hesitantly held out his arm and Sara set the herb over his injury, wrapping it up in the towel. She looked into the man’s eyes and told him, “With this many horned rabbits out here, you’ll find ones by the town’s protection field, too. You can lure them toward you from inside the field and attack them when they get close enough. It’s a little overcautious, but I think that’ll work just fine.”

“What do you know?”

True, they probably didn’t want advice from a kid who’d never even been down in a dungeon. Sara wasn’t offended by his rude tone, though.

“Look.” Sara pulled the Hunter’s uninjured arm and turned him to face the meadow. His friend turned around, too. “See there? Compare the amount of rabbits around the party fighting way over there, and the one near here.”

The Hunters were shocked when they looked between the two groups.

“There’s almost as many of them over here near the town...”

“It seems like there’d be more of them out in the middle of the meadow, but there’s a lot of them right nearby, too. Come here.” Sara pulled them right up to the edge of the protection field.

Wham!

“Whoa!”

The Hunter flinched from the horned rabbit’s ferocity, but the rabbit couldn’t get past the protection field, so they were safe. And after bumping into the field, it took the horned rabbit a moment to get its bearings again.

“See how you’ve got an opportunity now?”

“Y-Yeah.”

They, on the other hand, could freely enter and leave the protection field as long as they had a friction stone.

“If you’re in a hurry to hunt a lot of them, you’re just going to get hurt pushing yourself. But if you want to make sure you take your targets down even if it takes a little extra time, you should hunt more safely. If you don’t get hurt, you won’t have to use potions. You can have someone act as bait to draw the horned rabbits to you. When the horned rabbit hits the protection field, slip out to finish it off, then get back inside. Why not try that until your injury gets a little better?”

Sara looked up at the Hunter, who hesitated a bit before asking, “Why would you...?”

She wasn’t sure if he wanted to know why she knew what she did or why she would share that knowledge. She didn’t ask. “Because I don’t want to see anyone get hurt,” she said with a smile before jogging back over to Vince.

They could figure out the rest themselves. If they took Sara’s advice, things would probably get a little easier for them, but if they didn’t want to listen to her, then what happened to them was their responsibility.

“Sara, don’t offer people things they’re not asking for. Even if you’re just trying to be nice, they won’t always take it that way. Besides, you know those are the kids who were picking on Allen, don’t you?”

Vince had a point, but Sara couldn’t just keep quiet when people were getting hurt right in front of her.

“Why don’t you teach them things, Vince? You must know more efficient ways to hunt.”

She was sure Vince was aware of the method she’d just taught the young Hunters. Sara gave him her best puppy-dog eyes and Vince made an awkward face like he was trying to figure out how to answer her question.

“If you depend too much on other people as a Hunter, you’re going to get hurt one day. Say somebody who wouldn’t be able to get through this on their own just happens to make it through. It’ll go to their head and they’ll eventually self-destruct, going down into dungeons that don’t match their skill levels, like Rosa’s. Or they’ll get all twisted and start harassing people like Allen.”

“But...”

“What do you think I’m all the way out here for?” He was saying some harsh things, but Vince’s tone was gentle. “It’s so that they can hunt as many horned rabbits as they can in the time they’d usually be spending going to and from the Guild. And just like we do at the desks in the Guild, I’m here to give advice to anyone who comes and asks me for it. Not that anyone really takes advantage of that service.”

Sara looked over at Allen. He was only out here gathering medicinal plants because Sara had taught him how. There were some things you just couldn’t do unless someone taught you about them.

“I *am* thankful to you Sara, but I asked you to teach me about gathering plants myself, didn’t I?”

That was right, wasn’t it? Allen was always like that. When he wanted to know something, he made sure to ask, and he always tried to pay for anything he received. While Sara had taught him about medicinal plants, Allen had taught her about Rosa and about common knowledge in this world.

“They’re treated like rookies here, but anyone who’s come to Rosa, whether it’s for fame or fortune, has *some* ability. If they’re too impatient to put in the effort to improve little by little, that’s on them.” Vince gave the Hunters in the meadow a pitying look. “While this decision Rosa’s made is a pain in the ass, I do think it might have been necessary. After all, these people could make it pretty much anywhere *but* Rosa. And they wouldn’t be treated like rookies there either.”

That might be true, but Sara still didn’t like watching them get hurt when they couldn’t even afford potions. Still, what Vince said did ring true to her. Sara had just managed to carve out a space for herself in Rosa. She was in no position to be giving other people advice.

Sara looked out at the meadow and saw another group going down when they could have just used their heads a little more.

“What do you think about that party, Sara?” Vince asked her casually, so she answered honestly.

“They seem like the physical strengthening type, but they can’t keep up with the horned rabbits’ movements. They only move after the rabbits attack them,

so they have to focus completely on dodging. Instead, they could hone their physical strengthening for even just a moment so that they could take the rabbits' attacks. Then they could take out the rabbits before they're able to attack again."

"Hmm."

Somewhere else, someone was shooting fire magic at a horned rabbit. Sara was surprised, since it was her first time seeing someone else actually using magic, but the flames were weak and dissipated as soon as they hit the rabbit. The rabbit only ended up fleeing in surprise, so the caster wasn't able to land a definitive blow.

Vince followed Sara's eyeline and asked her the same question. "What do you think about that caster, then?"

What would Sara do? She had never directly attacked a monster that wasn't a slime, but she was always thinking about how to keep herself safe.

"If I were going to use magic to take them out, I'd shoot from a little farther away. If they're close enough to attack you, it's probably pretty hard to aim. I wouldn't want to burn the pelt and I'd want to finish it off quickly, so I'd shoot a small, high-temperature flame into its head. I'd try to aim for an eye. Or I'd cut its head off with an ice or wind blade."

"Show me that high-temperature flame on that slime."

"Slime?" Well, she wouldn't mind taking a slime out. Sara looked where Vince was pointing, reaching out her hand to aim. "Flame, go."

With a sizzling sound, the slime outside of the protection field vanished.

"Wait a second, I'm here to gather plants! What am I doing?" Sara jabbed at herself. She turned around. Allen and Vince were giving her indescribable looks. Nelly had been strict with her about not letting monsters' lives go to waste, so Sara went over and picked up the magic stone, putting it away in her pouch.

Wham!

Of course, as soon as she left the town's protection field, a horned rabbit attacked her, but she had her barrier up, so she was fine. The Hunter she'd

helped out earlier even called out to her worriedly.

“Hey, watch out! Oh, it hit the field. Don’t you push yourself either!”

“I know!”

He seemed to think the rabbit had just hit the town’s protection field. Sara strolled back over to Vince and Allen.

“Sara, why won’t you go into dungeons?” Allen asked her exasperatedly.

“Err, because I’m scared of monsters?”

“I don’t buy it. You’re not scared of horned rabbits at all!”

Now that she thought about it, she wasn’t really scared of slimes or horned rabbits. The scariest monsters she’d seen were the mountain wolves, but she could deflect their attacks now. Sara’s barrier even repelled wyverns.

“Well, I’m not really scared of horned rabbits, but they’re just rabbits, right?”

“That’s not a reason. Monsters are monsters.”

Apparently rabbits were *not* pets in this world.

“Well, what’s the scariest monster around here, then?” she decided to ask.

“It depends on where you go, but in the meadow, it’d be horned rabbits. There are a couple different ones in the dungeons, but wyverns would be the strongest.”

“Wyverns?” She could handle wyverns.

“Why do you look relieved? Wyverns are huge and fly in the sky, and they’ll attack you from directly above or from behind, and swords don’t do much against them, so they’re really scary. If you’re not a Hunter, you’ve probably never seen one.” Vince pointed at the Guild mark on his shirt.

She knew the symbol of the Guild was a wyvern, but now that she was taking another look at it, it was pretty cool. Vince was exasperated with her, but Sara wasn’t trying to take the monsters down, she was just trying to protect herself from them, which she knew she could do.

Next to her, Allen seemed to be thinking of something. “I haven’t been to where wyverns show up yet, but from where I *have* been, I think crimson

centipedes are the worst so far. They're big and creepy-looking and hard and I don't really want to punch them..."

Sara froze. On the Dark Mountain, there were wyverns, mountain wolves, and cockatrices, but she couldn't recall ever seeing any bug monsters. She wouldn't say she had a phobia or anything, but she'd prefer if she didn't have to see any "big" centipedes.

"Oh yeah. You always gotta deal with those in underground dungeons. There are people who really can't deal with them, but they do make good materials. Hey...Sara?"

"Centipedes...scary..."

Vince looked apologetic, but it was too late. Sara's desire to become a Hunter had now dropped as close to zero as it was possible to get.

"B-But if you used that magic you used before, you could take out a crimson centipede in an instant. You'd just have to shoot it between sections. And if you aimed at it from far away, you wouldn't have to touch it either. So it's not that scary, is it?" Vince said, patting Allen on the back.

"What? Oh..." He finally noticed how pale Sara was. "I-It's fine. It's less that they're scary and more that they're just gross with all their legs and kinda noisy —ouch!"

Watching Allen get scolded out of the corner of her eye, Sara reaffirmed her plans to never enter an underground dungeon.

"I was only ever thinking about living with Nelly and not what kind of work I wanted to do. We lived somewhere where there happened to be a lot of medicinal plants, so I thought I could take my time thinking about it as I made money gathering plants. We were thinking about living in town together..."

Rosa, the capital... She didn't care where.

"I wasn't planning on figuring out what I wanted to do until I came to town, whether it was hunting or something else. So, since I haven't decided yet, I don't think there's any reason for me to go into any dungeons..."

"I see." Vince nodded, thumbing his stubble. "Well, keep hunting in mind as

an option, yeah? It'd be better than being a maid at Liam's house, wouldn't it?"

"Hmm... If I was living in the capital with Nelly, I guess I wouldn't mind just working there during the day." If she had the right idea about maids, then the thought of wearing one of those crisply starched uniforms and bustling around a house wasn't half bad.

"What? It's way better being a Hunter than working at the house of a creep like him!"

Why did everyone she knew want her to be a Hunter so bad, like Nelly? Of course, thinking about how the people at the Apothecary's Guild demanded she gather plants and Emma would tell her to help out at the restaurant, she found that kind of amusing.

"Hey! You find any plants?" As if to ruin her fun, Ted's voice came from the top of the gate.

Sara turned toward the east gate. The gate was thrown open, though it wasn't as wide as the central gate. Two carriages probably wouldn't be able to get through it at once.

"So he won't come down here to get them himself."

"Well, it *is* Ted."

"You really don't hold back against him. He was actually a really talented apothecary back in the capital, at least from what I hear."

So Vince said, but from Ted's typical behavior, Sara couldn't believe it. She didn't want to go see him, but she did want to see the top of the gate, so she and Allen went over to deliver their plants to him. There were doors to the left and right of the gate on the inside of the walls, and they were open, too.

"It's just like the watchtower. There must have been a wooden door like this over there once, too."

"There's no spiral staircase inside here, though."

Inside the door was a small room with stairs along the wall that led up to a second and third level.

"We're here to deliver our plants."

“Ted’s in the workroom on the fifth floor.”

“The fifth floor?! Just do it down here!” Allen moaned, but he still flew up the steps.

Sara followed him slowly, keeping an eye on her surroundings. She was impressed that they could make rooms inside the wall and still keep it thick enough to protect the town. From how large the room inside the watchtower was, the Second Wall must have been pretty thick, too. She shuddered at the thought of whatever monsters had made these people build walls this thick. From what Allen had told her, she couldn’t imagine those monsters actually being real.

They climbed up four flights of stairs and found a nap room with several beds inside, along with a desk at which Ted was working. Sara spotted a mortar and pestle and a portable stove and pot. She was disappointed not to see any beakers or spiraled glass apparati that looked particularly “apothecary-like.”

“Here are the potions I’ve finished with. Sorry, but could you make regular deliveries of healing herbs?”

In apothecary mode, Ted was just a normal young man who spoke without scorn in his voice. Taken aback, Sara and Allen meekly left their herbs with Ted and went back down the stairs, returning to Vince in a bit of a daze.

After they went up another two times, Vince asked them, “How was the view from the top of the wall?” which was when Sara finally remembered that they *were* going up to the top.

“I forgot to look. I was so surprised to see Ted taking his job seriously.”

After that exchange, Sara and Allen continued gathering plants, watching the Hunters around them as they did.

“Oh, those people over with Vince aren’t there to get potions, they’re talking to him. They’re pointing at that first party, too.”

“They’re finally asking Vince for advice, huh? Took ’em long enough.”

Allen sounded exasperated, but that just made Sara curious why he seemed to be able to ask people for help when most Hunters couldn’t. Crouched down

picking plants next to him, she decided to ask.

"'Cause that's the kind of person my uncle was."

"You said he was a strong caster, right?"

"Yeah, he was strong. And he was honest about stuff. He always said when food tasted good or when he was having fun or feeling down, and he asked people whenever he didn't get something. Some people were annoyed by him, but he always said you'd learn more if you went looking for info yourself. He was the one who taught me to pay a proper price for information, too."

Sara thought about Nelly. Nelly had really only ever said what was most important and never anything else. Actually, she'd barely mentioned the important stuff, honestly. Sara almost sighed thinking about it, but it *was* teaching her how important it was to speak up when something really mattered to her.

"In the end, he was too trusting and was tricked by some bad people, but I still want to ask questions and listen to what people tell me."

"Listening to people is very important," Sara agreed with a deep nod.

After getting advice from Vince, the party started hunting near the protection field. It would take them some time to get used to hunting that way, but they'd at least figured out a way to be sure they finished off their prey without getting hurt.

"What did I say?" Sara folded her arms and stuck her chest out.

"I get why you want to brag, but..."

Vince told her not to meddle when it wasn't any of her business, but people needed help sometimes.

By the end of that day, there were a few groups who were able to sell enough horned rabbits to get by. That meant the eateries in town would get some horned rabbit meat in stock, too. That was sure to bring Emma some peace of mind.

"Your name's Sara, right?"

The Hunter whose arm Sara had bandaged up walked over to her.

“How’s your arm?”

“I think it’s healed up... You mind looking at it?”

“Get your friend to do it,” Allen grumbled, but Sara unwrapped the towel around the man’s arm for him.

“Yep, it’s healed. My blister healed just from putting a healing herb on it, too.”

“Don’t compare this to a blister... Thanks, though. That helped.” The Hunter, who looked to be in his late teens, gave her his honest thanks. Then he turned to Allen and pursed his lips. “Hey, Allen.”

“What?” Allen asked, not looking at the Hunter. He hadn’t forgotten the way they’d harassed him. Sara scooted closer to him protectively.

“Sorry, kid.”

“Huh?” Allen turned to the Hunter in surprise.

“I’m sorry. You have so much mana and such an impressive command of it for being so young, we were insanely jealous of you. I mean, we have a decent amount of mana too, but we can’t use it well, so we’re always going in circles... We were just taking out our frustrations on you.”

“Right...”

They may have apologized, but Allen couldn’t forgive them that easily. Sara thought it was admirable of him to even respond with one word. They’d caused him more than a little emotional distress, but they’d done measurable damage to his income as well.

“This is the end of it, though. We’re leaving Rosa tomorrow.”

“What? Why? You hunted a decent amount of horned rabbits today, didn’t you?” Sara had taught them how to do it herself, so she had been sneaking glances at their progress.

“We’ve actually been putting the cost of potions and our Guild lodging on our tab. We earned enough to pay it today, with just enough left over to pay for a ride to the capital.”

“Can’t you just make more money tomorrow?”

If they went at the pace they’d gone at today, they should be able to make a decent amount of money.

The other two members of the party joined them, shaking their heads at Sara’s question. “We’ve figured out horned rabbits, but if we get through this and go back down into Rosa’s dungeons, I get the feeling we’d end up going in circles again. So we just decided to go back to the capital and start over somewhere a little more fitting for our level.”

If they were able to feel that way, they’d probably be okay, Sara figured.

“If you guys are that serious about this, why didn’t you ask Vince for advice?” Allen asked them, still not making eye contact.

“Vince?” *Like we could ask the vice guildmaster for advice,* the Hunter’s expression seemed to say.

“You might not know this since you’ve got a party, but if you’re on your own, the only way you can learn things is by asking other people for advice,” said Allen, who had been on his own ever since he’d lost his uncle. “There’s no point in trying to be polite.”

Well, Sara didn’t quite agree with that.

“Even if asking annoys somebody, if you’re persistent, you’ll at least get some kind of information. And Vince wouldn’t even be annoyed. He’s a nice guy who’ll give you plenty of advice on how to do stuff and how to fight.”

Everyone looked over at Vince, who was holding up a hand at them and looking awkward.

“We’re just burdens to Rosa, though...”

“Anyone who hunts monsters is welcome in Rosa. Especially people who are motivated to get better at what they do. We don’t need guys who let their skills rust out of apathy, though.”

The Hunters must have really wanted to stay in Rosa and try a little harder. It was clear from their expressions that their feelings were wavering, despite their conviction to leave.

“Sara.”

“Allen?”

Allen tugged Sara to the side. “Listen... I think our watchtower could fit a few more people in it. Just until Rosa’s done with this weird plan of theirs, and only if you’re okay with it...”

He was asking if she was okay with letting those Hunters stay in the watchtower with them. If they could save on the lodging fees for three people, they would be able to hold out that much longer and they’d have a little more leeway to consider their options.

“You were the one who got permission to stay there. I’m only staying there with you because you said I could. If you’re okay with it, then I am too. It *is* pretty big in there.”

“Thanks.”

To be honest, she’d be more comfortable with just Allen, but if they could reconcile with people they didn’t have the best relationship with, Sara thought it would be a good idea to do so. Though there were some people she didn’t particularly care about reconciling with too, she mused with a glance toward the east gate.

The three Hunters were shocked by Allen’s invitation. “You really don’t mind?”

“Yeah. It’s just a stone floor and roof, though. With a big hole in the wall.”

“That’s fine. It’ll be the same as sleeping outside in a tent.”

At the end of the day, Allen and Sara took the three Hunters back to the watchtower with them.

After an awkward greeting to Emma, the three Hunters climbed the spiral stairs up into the watchtower, *ooh*ing and *aah*ing when they got to the top. They were probably feeling rather self-conscious about themselves after the way they had bullied Allen.

“It’s like a secret hideout.”

“Well, it’s really just a cold stone room,” Allen said, though he was rubbing his nose with barely-disguised pride.

There was still a tiny bit of room left over after they all set up single-person tents to ward off some of the cold. If they were all going to stay in the same room like this though, there was one thing Sara was going to demand of them.

“We really have to wipe ourselves down?”

“You do.”

Regardless of their skepticism, they accepted the hot water from Sara, and when they emerged from their tents after wiping themselves down, they all looked refreshed. They’d clearly enjoyed the experience.

“I’ll treat everyone to dinner to celebrate our newfound friendship,” she said.

“I appreciate it, but are those Guild lunches?”

“Sara made the stuff inside,” Allen explained to the curious Hunters. But why did *he* sound so proud?

After a hesitant first bite, the three of them gobbled up the rest of the lunches in no time at all. Sara boiled some water as she ate her own dinner, making tea for everyone after the meal. With everyone finished eating, the pleasant scent of tea filled the room, which was illuminated by one small light.

“Sugar?”

“Yes, please!” the Hunters answered right away.

All cleaned up, enjoying some tea on full bellies, the Hunters were completely relaxed. They watched curiously as Sara quietly tidied up her portable stove and pot. “I don’t know how to say this, but there’s something about you that really doesn’t add up...”

“What do you mean?” Sara had never heard something like that before.

“Well, everyone knows that your guardian abandoned you, but you’re cool as a cucumber all the time. From the way you act and the things you carry, it seems like you’re from a wealthy family, but you’re in the Guild every day doing grunt work. You’re super independent, too.”

Sara didn’t come from a particularly wealthy household. She was penniless when she arrived here, living in a cottage that was full of garbage before she cleaned it up. She hadn’t started out with the best diet either. The things she had on her now, she’d just bought because Nelly had picked them out for her. If she’d known more about the price of things, she probably would have insisted on cheaper items.

“I’m just normal, really.” When she’d been living in Japan, she’d also been a normal person, just one with no stamina whatsoever. And now that she was in this world, she was just a normal kid in the middle of learning all sorts of things before she became an adult.

“My guardian hasn’t come back yet, that’s true...” This was not very normal, she supposed. “But she didn’t abandon me. She just can’t come back right now for some reason.” Sara lamented how this always sounded like an excuse to people, no matter how many times she said it.

“O-Oh yeah?” As she expected, the Hunters didn’t seem to know how to respond to her assertion.

Sara was accustomed to such reactions, however, so she went right to bed after she finished tidying up. It seemed like everyone else stayed up chatting for a while after that, but Sara was tired after spending the whole day outside, so she fell asleep right away.

In the morning, they headed through town to the east gate, munching on some bread as they went. It was the first time Sara and Allen were able to witness horned rabbit hunting going on from first thing in the morning. They were impressed to see Vince already outside of the gate. Horned rabbits hopped about everywhere, as though no one had done any hunting at all the day before.

The Hunter trio left to get started right away, Allen sighing as he saw them

off. “Man, I want to hunt, too.”

Now that Sara thought about it, if he’d reconciled with the group that was harassing him before, then he should be able to start hunting again now.

Allen shook his head when she pointed this out, however. “It wasn’t just them, and all they did was heckle me, so they were better than the ones actually getting in my way down in the dungeon. I feel bad for the people who are gonna be driven out of town because of this thing, but I do kind of hope the really annoying people leave...”

That was reasonable in Sara’s mind. Besides, if they spent all day gathering plants, they’d be able to pick three times what they usually did, so it would make them a decent amount of money. If anyone came up to them and asked them how to pick medicinal plants, Sara was ready and willing to teach them, but no one did, which took the wind out of her sails a bit.

“This really does make pretty good money, though,” she grumbled to Allen.

“It does.”

“You could make enough to get by just doing this.”

“You can, but I’d just rather do something I can get excited about to get by.”

Apparently gathering plants did not get Allen excited.

“I guess that makes sense. It wouldn’t excite *me* to be a Hunter. Oh...” She spotted something wavering out of the corner of her eye. Sara raised her hand without even looking.

“Sara?”

“Flame, compress, homing. Go!” A tiny flame shot out and sped right into the stealth slime she caught just on the corner of her vision. Her flame was so small she doubted the Hunters in the meadow even noticed. Sara trotted over and picked up the magic stone from the stealth slime. When she held it up to the light, it glittered like an opal.



“Want this, Vince?”

“Sara, what did you just do?” Vince’s mouth was hanging open.

“Huh? Well, I shot a little flame at it.”

“Did it turn? It turned in the air, right?”

Sara and Allen were picking plants nearby him, so despite not paying particular attention to them, Vince had seen everything.

“Well, yeah.”

“How?”

“I’m not sure what to say to that...” Sara took her magic textbook out of her storage pouch. “It says right here in the beginning: ‘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.’ So I just cast fire magic and pictured it chasing after its target.”

Sara put her magic textbook away. She’d really gotten a lot of use out of that book. “If I do that, it’ll follow any monster I’ve seen, so it doesn’t miss against stealth slimes either.”

“It follows monsters? That’s a little *too* imaginative.”

Vince seemed to be struggling to understand the logic behind Sara’s magic, but there wasn’t much logic involved on Sara’s part. She was just able to easily picture what she wanted to happen because she’d seen movies and things with homing missiles before.

“Listen, Sara. I’m sure this is a matter of this ‘Nelly’ either teaching you something weird or *not* teaching you something, but I’ll let you know what’s *supposed* to be common sense. Magic doesn’t turn corners.” Vince’s eyes were glazed over.

“Wh-Whaaa...?”

“Fire magic isn’t that small. And it doesn’t follow monsters.”

“I-Is that right?”

“As a more experienced caster, I’ll be frank with you...” Vince’s eyes were still glazed. “You’re gonna have to teach me how to do that later.”

“O-Okay!” Sara had thought she was about to be scolded more, so the nerves

she'd just worked up felt like they'd been wasted.

Vince sighed and went back to his usual listless expression. "We're allowed to purchase magic stones from slimes hunted between the east gate and the north dungeon, so I can buy that from you, but I don't really want there to be a record of a rookie like you hunting a stealth slime, so can you hold on to it until all this business is over?"

"Yeah, that's fine."

"You're making a good amount from those medicinal plants right now, at least. I feel like you're a good example of how there are all sorts of ways to make money."

She *was* earning a decent amount, so Sara puffed up proudly. "Allen was just talking about how you want to make money doing something that excites you, though. I enjoy picking medicinal plants, which is why this works for me."

"Yeah, I enjoy being a Hunter more," he agreed.

"I figured."

Vince gave her an amused smile.

"Heeey!" Some soldiers called out to them from atop the gate.

"Cotton sheep incoming!"

"You Hunters okay?!"

"Cotton sheep, eh?! Sara, mind the stand for a bit, would you?"

"What? I can't—ah..."

Vince rushed over to the gate before Sara could stop him.

"Think he's gonna be okay?" Allen asked. "He's getting on in years, isn't he?"

"I mean, he has the energy to come all the way out here to the east gate first thing in the morning and hang around all day, doesn't he?"

Sara prayed for Vince to come back soon, nervous about what she'd do if someone came to sell their horned rabbits. She turned around and spotted Vince up on the wall with the soldiers, peering out toward the Dark Mountain. When she followed his line of sight, she saw a white mass approaching in the

distance.

“So those are cotton sheep.” Allen seemed to have better vision than her.

Those who had gotten advice from Sara or Vince were hunting horned rabbits safely, close to the gate, but there were others who had headed toward the Dark Mountain and were spread out all around the meadow.

“Should we call them back?”

Sara recalled the time she got caught up in a herd of cotton sheep and got nervous. Her barrier had protected her, so she’d basically just stood there and watched the flock pass by, but she felt a chill imagining what might have happened if she *didn’t* have her barrier. She remembered how the horned rabbits had lunged at the cotton sheep and the sheep hadn’t been bothered in the slightest by their horns. The rabbits had been engulfed by the flock and crushed between the sheep or trampled by their hooves.

Besides, these sheep were a lot larger than the ones Sara was familiar with from Earth. Within a flock of them, her head would just barely be sticking out over top of the sheep. With how much they must weigh being that size, they might break a person’s foot just by stepping on it. They were clearly dangerous.

“Heeey! Everybody, back! There’s cotton sheep out there!”

Vince’s voice resounded through the meadow. Had it reached the people way out in the field? Hopefully any Hunter going after horned rabbits that far away from the protection field would be able to handle themselves...

“You should tell them to use protection cases if they have them!” Sara called up at Vince, who was still atop the wall.

“Rookies aren’t gonna have stuff like that!”

“Really?” Sara asked Allen, a hand on her storage pouch. Allen nodded with an exasperated look on his face and Sara started to wonder what he’d thought about her on that night they’d first met.

Eventually, the Hunters out in the meadow came back a few at a time. A white wave of cotton sheep followed them. Vince came down from the wall before long, too.

“Good, they’re coming back. No, that’s not all of them...” Vince seemed to be aware of the exact number of Hunters out in the meadow.

One of the Hunters who’d returned looked back out at the field worriedly, reporting to Vince, “Those guys said they’d gotten pretty used to horned rabbits, so they were gonna go kind of far from town.”

“That’s not good... If they can keep their cool in a flock of cotton sheep, it’s fine, but if they can’t...”

Sara could imagine what might happen.

“Wait, Vince. Look, they’re not that far away.”

Everyone turned to look out at the field. True, there was a trio all standing in one place watching the flock of sheep pass by them with dazed looks on their faces.

“Oh, they’re getting pushed. The flock is pushing them.”

At a glance, it looked like a peaceful sight, but if they lost their footing and tripped, they’d be trampled by the sheep. If they weren’t careful, they’d get their feet stepped on and broken. And they couldn’t stay ahead of the sheep forever.

The cotton sheep bounced off the town’s protection field, merrily walking by it, sweeping the pale-faced Hunters off with them.

“Dammit... We gotta go help them.”

Several people moved to go to the Hunters’ aid, but Vince stopped them.

“Don’t. You’ll just join them.”

“Because we’re rookies? Then you go, Vince!”

“I can’t,” Vince told them flatly. “Maybe Jay or Nefertari could force their way through, but even a decently strong Hunter can’t match the force of a flock of cotton sheep.”

“But...”

The cotton sheep passed by the dismayed Hunter.

That was when Allen stepped forward.

“Allen! You can’t!” Vince tried to stop him when he noticed.

“I’m probably the best here when it comes to physical strengthening. I’ll be able to hold out for a little while even if I get trampled. I’m gonna go help them.”

Allen walked off without looking back. Sara shrugged her shoulders and hurried to catch up to him. She’d figured he might do this.

“Allen!”

“Don’t push yourself, Sara.”

“Come on, you know I’m the best person for the job,” she said breezily.

Allen grimaced. “But won’t Nelly be sad if you get hurt? You’re her family...”

Sara could tell that he was worried for her, and that there was at least a part of him that figured that it didn’t matter what happened to him since he didn’t have anyone.

“Well, *I’d* be sad if *you* got hurt, Allen.”

“Sara...” Allen stopped and clenched his fists at his side. Sara could sense a wave of relief from the people behind them; they must have thought that she had stopped him. She felt a bit sorry for the misunderstanding.

“Honestly, you’d be better for this. I’m not sure I can even do it.” Allen seemed to be unsure of whether he should involve Sara in something like this.

“Well, I was gonna go anyway. Even if you didn’t, Allen.”

Allen looked up at her in surprise.

“I bet Nelly’d say, ‘Just do what you want to do.’” She could even picture the expression that would be on her face. She would be worried, but she’d be proud of Sara’s growth.

The two of them exchanged a look and grinned, though Sara felt sorry for Vince, who obviously didn’t know what they were planning to do.

“Let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

They stepped out of the town's protection field and slipped into the flock of cotton sheep.

"No, don't!" Vince's voice rang panicked behind them as they walked forward as though they were just taking a stroll in town. Everyone probably thought they'd been swallowed up by the herd of sheep, completely at their mercy, but that wasn't what had happened at all.

"It's kinda funny the way they're avoiding us."

"I wonder if they just think we're weirdly hard sheep."

Pushed aside by Sara's barrier, the cotton sheep made room for them, looking vaguely inconvenienced.

"Gotta be careful until we make it to the people caught up in it."

"It'd all be for nothing if we made the cotton sheep do something that got the guys hurt while we're trying to help them."

They walked with the sheep, slowly approaching the group of Hunters in the manner one might swim across a flowing river.

"Look, Vince!"

"He's coming with 'cause he's worried about us. Vince really is a good guy."

"Can't say that to his face, though."

Vince was looking for an opportunity to get through the sheep, giving the two grinning kids a look that seemed to say, "What the hell do you think you're doing?!" The Hunters rooming in the tower with them hung behind him worriedly.

Sara and Allen waved at them, receiving furrowed brows in return, and slowly got closer to the wayward Hunters, Sara carefully expanding her barrier. She wanted to make sure she didn't spook them and get them caught up in the herd of sheep. When they finally caught up, Sara pushed her barrier out around them as Allen called out. "We're here to save you."

Just as Sara expected, the Hunters lost their balance in surprise, so she was glad they'd approached them carefully.

“Allen?!” In their voices was a mix of pure surprise at Allen’s arrival and a bit of annoyance at seeing someone they obviously didn’t like. Sara puffed up in anger, equally annoyed by their attitude.

Allen, however, was unruffled. “Listen up. You’re more or less inside a set of protection cases right now, got it? Don’t complain and just do like we do if you want to get out of the cotton sheep.” He explained the situation briefly before they could question why they were suddenly safe, leaving out the specifics about Sara’s barrier, naturally.

“But...”

“Don’t complain. Do you want to march all the way to the capital?”

“Ugh...”

In reality, the flock would likely stop at night, but even if that was the case, the Hunters would have to walk carefully for over half a day, trying to avoid getting trampled. They were likely already feeling a considerable amount of pressure from the animals all around them. After a little hesitation, the Hunters eventually nodded meekly.

“Got it.”

“Okay. Get behind us.”

They stepped in front of the Hunters and waded through the flock as if swimming ashore, heading slowly toward Rosa’s protection field. Carefully, carefully...

Eventually, they grew closer to Vince, and when they finally passed the last sheep, they slipped right into the field, making their way over to the road just to be safe. They’d strolled back so casually that the Hunters all exchanged glances, unable to believe what they’d just seen.

“We made it back...”

“Looks like it... You guys got way too carried away just ’cause you figured out the trick to hunting horned rabbits.”

Vince hauled the three Hunters back to the east gate, scolding them. The rubberneckers who’d followed him looked down to make sure Sara and Allen

were okay and then went off after Vince as if nothing had happened.

Sara and Allen stayed behind. Allen shrugged his shoulders, smiling wryly. “Want to stay here for a bit?”

“Let’s pick some more plants, since we’ve still got time.”

“We’re hard workers, aren’t we?”

Sara and Allen started picking plants like they had no other reason for being there. Meanwhile, the flock of sheep was still passing by. Sara watched them with a vague thought about how horned rabbit hunting wouldn’t be able to resume for some time.

Vince knew Sara would be safe out in the meadow from the knight incident the other day. And he knew it was some sort of shield magic that she used. But apparently shield magic couldn’t protect you in every direction. She was sure he wanted to ask her how she’d safely entered the flock of cotton sheep as badly as he wanted to scold them for being so reckless, but he’d left them alone so as to not call excess attention to them.

“Everybody’d be all over us asking what we just did if we went back now...”

“You don’t think I could tell them I used to herd sheep or something, do you?”

“How would you do that? Are you supposed to be some mythical Tamer or something?”

Allen’s words revealed that there was such a thing as a “Tamer” in this world, but since he’d used the word “mythical,” they must be pretty rare, Sara thought with some interest. In any case, that ruled out the shepherd excuse.

“It’s not like I’m keeping my magic a secret or anything, but if people find out I can put up a barrier that reflects any attack aimed at me, they’ll definitely tell me to be a Hunter.”

“I *wish* you’d be a Hunter... No, wait a second.” Allen gave Sara a surprised look. “I knew you could protect yourself, but I didn’t know you could reflect any attack aimed at you.”

“I didn’t tell you? I can reflect any kind of attack or magic.”

“Doesn’t that mean you’re invincible?”

Invincible. Now that had a nice ring to it.

“I only came up with it because I had to to protect myself, though. It wasn’t to take down monsters.”

“Sara. Where the heck did you grow up?”

“Umm...over there.” Sara pointed toward the Dark Mountain.

Allen stood up and held his hand over his eyes, squinting in the direction Sara had pointed. “I haven’t ever heard of a town or village in that direction. Though maybe it’s just some place I don’t know,” he muttered as if talking to himself, then he just knelt back down and started picking plants again without asking Sara any more.

This same thing had happened countless times before. Even when a suspicious girl showed up at the Guild out of nowhere, no one asked her where she’d come from, and Sara wasn’t the type to blab about things no one wanted to know. Not to mention, it was actually Japan where she’d grown up.

“Err, Allen...”

Still, Sara was starting to feel like she should come clean to Allen.

“It’s okay, Sara. I don’t need to know yet.”

“Allen...”

“I don’t know what to tell people about myself either. You’ve got plenty of other stuff you’re hiding too anyway, right? Like weird magic. I want to try that thing you used to take out the slime, too.” Allen’s eyes sparkled at the prospect.

“It’s not like I’m hiding them... I just don’t know what’s weird and what’s normal.”

“Yeah, you’ve got no common sense at all.”

He was exactly right, so all Sara could do was smile awkwardly. “I can teach you magic, but can you use it, Allen?”

“Sure I can. Physical strengthening comes naturally to me but look, I can make a flame, see?” Allen made a flame appear above his palm and showed it to Sara. “My uncle was a caster, remember? He taught me a few things.”

Maybe Allen was actually pretty incredible.

“It’s fatal for a Hunter to stop to think about whether to use magic or physical strengthening, though. That’s why I stick to the latter. Magic’s fun though, so if I *can* use it, I want to.”

“Guess you’re right about that.” Magic was the stuff of dreams. “Okay. I’ll teach you sometime.”

“Thanks. Man, I really feel if we *could* party up and go into a dungeon, we’d be unstoppable...”

“I’m not fighting any centipedes.”

Some things, she was not going to budge on. He had passed it off as a joke, but Sara had no doubt that those were Allen’s true feelings. But just as Allen had no desire to make plant gathering his full-time job, Sara had no desire to work as a Hunter. They didn’t force each other because they understood that about one another without having to say so.

“Nelly keeps trying to get me to become a Hunter, too.”

“Well, with the talent you have, it makes sense. But if I spend all my time being jealous of you, I’d be just like those rookie Hunters. First off, I’m gonna build up my own strength more. That way, if something like that happens again, I’ll be strong enough to go and save them even without you, Sara.”

“Didn’t Vince say only Jay or Nefertari could do that? I don’t know if you’ll be able to get as strong as the guildmaster...”

“Man...”

Allen probably *would* get that strong one day. Sara had teased him, but that was what she really believed.

The cotton sheep finally finished crossing the meadow after half of the afternoon had passed. The Hunters who were staying with Allen and Sara in the watchtower immediately started hunting horned rabbits again, apparently raring to get back to it, but the same didn’t go for all of the Hunters.

The ones who had gotten caught up in the flock of cotton sheep had decided

to leave Rosa. Without even thanking Allen and Sara, who had saved them, they'd spat, "We're sick of this ridiculous place," and left town. Sara heard about it later. They may have been rookies where Rosa was concerned, but they had the strength to take down horned rabbits. They'd just gotten fed up with barely making ends meet in Rosa after getting caught up in something they hadn't anticipated.

In the end, the cotton sheep had served to drive out the Hunters who lacked ambition but were stubbornly sticking around in Rosa, and the tent village outside of town disappeared. Things went just as the town of Rosa wanted.

All the Hunters who remained were those who had managed to learn something hunting the horned rabbits in the meadow. The trio staying with Sara and Allen in the watchtower eventually found their own place to stay and vacated the tower.

Emma's discovery of the watchtower behind her restaurant spurred an unearthing of several other unused watchtowers, but just about the only people who would willingly stay in a wide-open stone tower like that were the people who were already camping out in tents in the winter. Those Hunters were happy to move in.

"Do you miss them?"

"No, but I'm really glad we don't have to fight anymore."

The town of Rosa wasn't particularly improved by the removal of the tent village. Things just went on like usual. For such a trivial thing, the town had driven out young people trying to chase their dreams. Sara just couldn't agree with that.

Not all of the town's problems were solved, however. Just having weak Hunters go after them didn't actually significantly reduce the number of horned rabbits around the town. And if they didn't reduce the number of horned rabbits, they wouldn't be able to dispatch the technicians needed to repair the road's protection field.

Their strategy was to pay a special bonus for just one day. Doubling the purchasing price of horned rabbits didn't appeal much to strong Hunters, but mid-level Hunters and lower flocked to the meadow to take advantage of the

deal, and strong Hunters ended up joining in just to do something different for a day, so it became a big event.

The town set up food stands outside of the east gate for the occasion, and townspeople even came to spectate from the safety of the protection field. Allen was excited to participate as a Hunter, and Sara was done with her special order from the Apothecary's Guild, so she planned to spend the day watching lazily from the crowd. Unfortunately, the Guild wasn't nice enough to give her the day off.

"We'll need help with the purchasing on a day like this. I want you on call in case cotton sheep show up again, too."

She couldn't exactly refuse a request like that from Vince. In the end, Sara went out into the meadow early in the morning and then spent her day dutifully stuffing horned rabbits into a large storage bag at the temporary sales stand.

Sara watched Hunters stroll out into the chilly meadow, starting with Allen. She was impressed watching the veterans, noting their relaxed air compared to the rookies, but the ones who'd left earliest returned after no time at all. They'd been told that the protection field around the road wasn't functioning, but that information must not have really sunk in for them. They'd headed toward the north dungeon on the road but had to hurry back after coming under attack from the vicious horned rabbits. Some of them had even been seriously hurt.

Sara had freaked out upon seeing the injured Hunter but, unbelievably, Vince had pointed and laughed at the man as he healed his injury with a potion he had on hand, glaring at Vince behind the stand counter. *Well yeah, you'd be mad, wouldn't you?* Sara thought, trying to make herself as small as possible so that she didn't earn his ire as well.

"This is dangerous! You were making rookies hunt these things?!"

Though the Hunter was shouting angrily, what he was saying was unexpectedly considerate.

"Wasn't me making them do it. It was Rosa. In fact, I was here watching out for 'em *because* it's dangerous. Don't take it out on me just 'cause you let your guard down. Besides, look." Vince jerked his chin in the direction of Allen, who was merrily hunting horned rabbits. He had gone out into the meadow before

anyone else, thrilled to finally be able to do some hunting now that their request from the Apothecary's Guild was fulfilled.

"It's Allen. Come to think of it, he hasn't been able to go into the dungeon at all lately, has he? That kid's really a natural-born Hunter." The Hunter watched Allen fondly, his anger apparently forgotten. After a pensive nod, he turned and pointed at Vince. "Listen, the problem is that you just told people to be careful since the protection field around the road's out. Tell everybody who comes after this to consider the meadow a dungeon in itself, okay? Then they won't let their guards down like I did."

"S-Sure. I'll tell that to the next guys."

True, if he'd been thinking of the field as a dungeon crawling with horned rabbits, he probably would have been much more cautious. If everyone thought of this area that way, then fewer people would take it lightly and get themselves hurt like the knights had. Sara was impressed by the Hunter's appraisal of the situation. And she wanted to report her growth to Nelly all the more, having crossed over that dungeon-like meadow herself to get to Rosa.

"So, Sara..."

"Yes?"

They dealt with the Hunters coming out to the meadow one by one until there was a lull in arrivals, at which point Vince turned to her and started to speak, as casually as discussing the weather.

"You have no problem strolling through a field veteran Hunters say is on the same level as a dungeon and you can take down not only slimes but stealth slimes like it's no big deal. You say you're too scared to be a Hunter, but horned rabbits scare you about as much as kittens. And most of all, you can hang out next to Allen and me and our mana doesn't bother you one bit."

Sara flinched. To tell the truth, she had noticed some things that didn't quite add up to her either. For instance, how what Nelly said differed from what the people in town said, or how her magic seemed to be nothing like the magic other people used, things like that.

"All that said, it's not like you're causing problems. You barely stand out at all,

really. And you're helping the Guild out a lot. Which is why I've put off saying this, what with everything else going on lately, but..."

"Y-Yes?"

"There are just too many weird things about you."

Sara wasn't sure what to say to that.

"I think we'll finally be able to cull a good amount of the horned rabbits today, so all this nonsense should be over with by tomorrow."

"I'd say so, yes."

"Tomorrow, then. At the Guild. I hope you're ready."

Having no idea what she should be ready *for*, Sara could do nothing but await the next day with dread.

Interlude: Escape From the Capital

Migrating dragon season was coming to an end. The capital wouldn't have any use for her anymore soon, Nelly thought with some relief as she watched the dragons flying lazily through the sky from a short distance away from the capital.

She'd been planning on coming to the capital this year in the first place. She may not have made it for the start of the season, but she figured she'd have enough time to bring Sara with her or leave her with someone in Rosa before she left. Yet on the very day she'd gone to Rosa to discuss the matter with a few people, she'd been jumped by the knights on her way out of the Apothecary's Guild. Maybe it was more accurate to say the knights had blocked her path rather than jumped her. They'd kept plenty of distance from her, after all.

Nelly scowled, remembering the incident. What was it they'd said to her?

"Nefertari, you've ignored the capital's summons for two years now, but you won't be allowed to ignore them again this year. You're coming with us to the capital."

She thought they'd said something like that. Nelly'd been taken by surprise, but she *was* planning on going to the capital this year, she just wanted to talk to some people at the Hunter's Guild before she did. She'd raised her hand to begin explaining that to the knights, but the one closest to her had thrown something in the air right then. She thought she could remember it bursting somewhere above her, but that was where her memory of the event ended. The next thing she knew, she was lying in a carriage with a worried Chris peering down at her.

"Chris?"

"Nef! I thought you might never open your eyes again..."

She was too confused to notice Chris squeezing one of her hands in his, but she shook off his grip in surprise when she finally did. Chris looked disappointed when she did, but she didn't know why. He did things that made no sense to

her sometimes.

She'd relaxed for a moment after seeing someone she knew, but she quickly noticed several presences around her that couldn't be called friendly. The fact that Chris had been holding her hand like that meant that her physical strengthening had come undone. She immediately activated it again, leaping up from the carriage seat.

"A carriage, and..."

She could see several knights who had half-risen from their seats in surprise when she'd leaped up. Nelly instantly remembered what had happened just before she woke up.

"You're enemies, then."

She slammed her fist into the stomach of the closest knight at the same time, swiftly turning afterward. There must have still been something in her system, though. She staggered, unsteady on her feet.

"Stop that! She's not exactly in the peak of health right now!"

One of the knights had been about to shoot magic at her, but Chris stopped him.

"She seems perfectly healthy to me," the knight spat.

Enemies. She was surrounded by enemies.

"Please wait, Nef. I'll stop these idiotic knights. Just calm down."

The one voice that didn't belong to an enemy tried to calm Nelly down. She didn't let her guard down, but she quietly moved to Chris's side, glaring at the knights from there.

"Just listen to me, Nef. These stupid knights from the capital wanted your help so badly, it seems they used a paralysis agent on you."

"A paralysis agent. Doesn't the Guild only sell *anti*paralytics?"

"It's for use on monsters," Chris said sourly.

"For use on monsters," Nelly repeated dumbly.

"You're basically a monster, aren't you?" one of the knights spat, hostility

plain in his voice.

“How dare you!”

Chris leaped on the knight before Nelly even had time to fully digest the words. A brawl broke out in the cramped carriage. *And he was the one who told me to calm down,* Nelly thought, some part of her finding all this funny.

Able to remain calm due to Chris’s outburst, Nelly beat back the knights attacking him, shielding the apothecary from injury. Unfortunately, the commotion drew the attention of the other carriages nearby, which just brought more knights and an even bigger commotion.

“I don’t understand what the fuss is all about. I was planning on fulfilling the capital’s request this year anyway.”

Once things had calmed down somewhat, Nelly was able to bring the conflict to a complete close with those words. She frowned afterward, though. She *was* planning to fulfill the request, but she felt like there was something she was forgetting about.

“What’s wrong, Nef?”

“I just feel like there’s something I’ve forgotten... Something...”

Something warm. Right. They’d said they’d go together.

“I’ve changed my mind. I’m going back.”

Nelly tried to jump out of the carriage then and there, but they weren’t just going to let her do that, of course. The knights all tried to stop her, but it was only Chris’s words that had any effect on her.

“Nef, I know you’re confused. And I agree that the knights are at fault here, completely. But could you just explain what it is you’re so concerned about, so we can all understand? If you were going to fulfill the capital’s request, then why do you want to go back so badly?”

Nelly didn’t want to explain herself to people she didn’t care one bit about, but it didn’t seem like the knights were just going to let her leave, so she decided to come clean.

“I left a child behind.”

After a chilling silence, Chris groaned, “Nef... Why wouldn’t you tell me you got married...?”

“No, I’m not married. I took her in.” To be precise, it was more that the child had come to her for help, but Nelly would have helped her even if she hadn’t asked. She just wasn’t expecting the Invited to be so ignorant of the ways of this world. She summed all that up by saying, “I found her. So I took her in.” She nodded, satisfied with her explanation.

“When was this...?”

“About two years ago.”

The knights, who had been too surprised to do anything but listen to this, opened their eyes wide in comprehension.

“That’s why you ignored our summons to subdue the migrating dragons.”

“I didn’t ignore them. I turned them down. I said I was busy.”

“All this unnecessary conflict only happened because you didn’t say *why* you were busy...” the knight pointed out with a sigh.

“It’s the Hunter’s choice whether or not to accept a job request. They’re not orders. Therefore, there’s no reason why I should have to explain my reasons for declining.”

“So you’re capable of conversation after all...”

They had no right to say that when they’d knocked her out like she was a hostile monster before even trying to speak with her. Nelly grew irritated, wondering just what her reputation was in the capital now that she’d stayed away for a mere two years. This wasn’t the time for that, though.

“I left her behind in the caretaker’s cottage on the Dark Mountain. I’m usually back in three days, so if I don’t return, I can only imagine how lonely she’ll be...”

“She’s in the north dungeon?! What is she doing in such a dangerous place, Nef?! Why didn’t you bring her to Rosa?!” Chris’s face was pale, though the knights seemed to have no idea what was going on. His irritation plain on his face, Chris told them, “The north dungeon, otherwise known as the Dark Mountain, is one of the most difficult dungeons in the kingdom. Nef lives in the

caretaker's cottage on that mountain, culling the monsters there. You are aware of this, aren't you?"

The knights nodded.

"That means there's a child who's been left behind in that cottage. For several days now..."

Nelly didn't like the sound of that. "Several days" would mean...

"Chris, was I out for a whole day? How long has it been since then?!"

"Nef... you were unconscious for three days."

"Three days..."

"I'm sorry. You wouldn't wake up, and I thought if you needed treatment it would be better to head for the Apothecary's Guild in the capital, since they'd have a larger array of potions, so I made them speed up the carriages."

"You don't mean..." Nelly stood and opened the carriage's door. She could already see the capital in the distance.

Nelly grimaced now, remembering how aghast she'd been at the time. If she were to hurry back to Rosa, it would still take her three days and then another day to make it back to the Dark Mountain. It would be long past the five days she'd promised Sara, which meant that Sara might have already been on her way to Rosa.

Now that she thought about it, as long as she stayed in the cottage, she'd have enough food to last her several months. She had her barrier, so she shouldn't have anything to fear from monsters, but Nelly shuddered when she imagined what might happen if she ran into monsters she was unfamiliar with, like the horned rabbits of the meadow. She fiercely regretted not simply telling her to stay in the cottage.

This realization triggered another scene in front of the knights, Nelly insisting she go back to the Dark Mountain, but Chris told her, "Once we arrive in the capital, I'll go back myself and confirm the girl's safety." She'd chosen to believe in him, which was why she was alone in the capital now, waiting to hear from him still. Chris had been the head of the Apothecary's Guild in the capital in the

past, so the knights trusted him and quickly acquiesced to his request for a search party to be sent with him.

“They didn’t need to come get me if they had enough knights to send out a search party...” Nelly grumbled.

Chris shook his head. “You know they can’t send noble brats out against migrating dragons, Nef. Though they *will* send them to the Dark Mountain, apparently. Just goes to show how ignorant the current knights of the capital are, I suppose.”

“You’re right about that.”

“Besides, nobles or not, they’re weak.” So weak were the knights that an apothecary could cut right to the heart of the matter like this. “Nef, I say this for your own good. Once migrating dragon season’s over, you should stop minding the cottage on the Dark Mountain. Rosa and the capital both take your strength for granted.”

“You might be right...”

“Wherever you go, I’ll go with you, Nef.”

“Uhh, I don’t need a chaperone.”

Nelly described Sara to Chris in detail. How she was afraid of mountain wolves, how she disliked the idea of even harming monsters, how she was sensitive, and how she was an adorable girl with black hair. Chris had looked a little fed up by the end, but once she started talking about Sara, she could go on about her forever.

“Ichinok Rasarasa, got it.”

“No, it’s Ichinokura Sarasa.”

He couldn’t get her name right no matter how many times she told it to him, but there wasn’t anything she could do about that. Nelly decided to trust Chris, figuring it wasn’t like he was going to run across any *other* adorable, delicate girls with black hair.

It had been some time since then, but the search party was probably getting back around now, Nelly figured as she gazed down at the capital. She smiled

wryly, since she was likely to get back to Rosa before even hearing the results. There weren't many people who could move as fast as she could with physical strengthening, so that was to be expected.

Okay. I'll leave today. The knights and Invited can handle the rest of the dragons.

"You're in a good mood today, Nefertari," Bradley the Invited said to her.

"I wouldn't say that," Nelly responded curtly. She'd come to understand during this job, however, that Bradley was a pleasant sort who didn't treat her like a monster or a goddess. In other words, he was a colleague she got along with, and she supposed she could discuss how she was feeling with a colleague. "I was just thinking I'd head back to Rosa soon."

"You're going back? I'll miss you." He said the words easily, and they contained no hidden meaning or sarcasm.

"You're going back, Miss? But there's still dragons!" A boy barged into their conversation loudly. His name was... Haruto, Nelly thought. The kid was a handful, so Nelly wasn't really fond of him. She'd thought all Invited were calm and quiet like Sara and Bradley.

"She's leaving? The Reaper?"

"But dragon migration season isn't over."

Just as she expected, the knights overheard her and began whispering to each other. Nelly regretted letting her plans slip like she had.

Nelly'd had enough conversation at that point, so she took down the dragons that strayed too close to the capital as her whims dictated without responding to Bradley or Haruto again.

She returned to her lodgings and got together her things, smirking to herself about how surprised Sara would be at the lack of mess in her room. But there was nothing for her to make a mess with in a room she was only temporarily staying in. Most of the things she used, she put right back into her storage bag afterward, so there was no mess to be made. After that, she headed straight for the knight commander's office.

The office had a reception desk first thing after you entered, and you could only meet with the commander in the back room after getting permission from the receptionist. There were guards posted in the reception room, so anyone who wasn't permitted to see the commander was mercilessly removed from the office.

Nelly knocked politely and entered the reception room when she was allowed to. The receptionist grimaced as soon as she walked in. Not out of malice but simply as a result of the pressure Nelly's mana exerted. Nelly suppressed her mana reluctantly.

She wasn't sure if the girl had any idea what she was doing, but Sara used mana in an extremely delicate way, like threading a needle. It was cute how she had such fine control but came up with such ridiculous ideas, like creating a protection field with stakes driven into the ground. But anyway, by observing Sara from up close, Nelly had figured out some different ways of manipulating her own mana. She'd just never been very proactive about practicing to suppress her mana, since there weren't a lot of people she cared about having pleasant interactions with. The receptionist was a woman, at least, so Nelly figured she might as well try to be polite.

"Is the commander in?"

"D-Do you have an appointment?" the receptionist asked her bravely. That was probably just a stock phrase for her, but Nelly raised an eyebrow at it.

"The knights didn't exactly have an appointment with me when they brought me to the capital. I didn't know they understood the meaning of the word."

The receptionist was frozen, having no idea how to respond to her.

Nelly had lashed out without meaning to, but there was no point in berating a woman who had nothing to do with her abduction. "I don't have an appointment, but is the commander in?" she repeated.

"I can't let you through without an appointment," the receptionist huffed. Nelly must have hurt her feelings.

Nelly couldn't help chuckling at the woman's prickly response, at which the tensed guards relaxed and the receptionist blushed. "Fine. Can you give him a

message, then?”

“I can do that.”

“My name’s Nefertari. The migrating dragons are starting to thin out, so I’m going back to Rosa. Can you tell him that?”

“Very well. Miss Nefertari... Huh? Rosa? But Rosa is...” The receptionist glanced at the door to the commander’s office, but Nelly had already spun on her heels, her business taken care of. She seemed relieved that she wouldn’t actually have to meet with the commander.

Nelly opened the door and took a step out into the hallway before the door to the commander’s office was thrown open.

“Wait! Nefertari!”

Nelly sighed. She thought she’d be able to get through this without seeing him. And if he knew Nelly was there but still made his receptionist go through that farce, that was all the more irritating.

“Err, the search party I dispatched to Rosa has returned.”

“What?” Nelly spun around again and strode over to the commander. “And? How was she? Was she on the Dark Mountain or in Rosa? Who’s looking after her right now? Chris?”

“W-Well...”

The commander was shrinking back from Nelly when a knight thrust an arm in between the two of them. “You’re Nefertari? You’re bothering the commander. Could you back up, please?”

Nelly glared at the young man. He had neat, dark blond hair and blue eyes, and was good-looking enough that he probably had young women swooning over him. The receptionist, in fact, was blushing as she watched him, but Nelly was interested in him for another reason: he wasn’t bothered by her pressure. The most important thing to her at the moment was getting back to Rosa, though.

Nelly stayed put, but the commander took the opportunity to step back himself, a look of relief on his face.

“I appreciate it, Liam,” the commander said rather pathetically.

“The commander just heard the report himself. The captain of my unit will give you the details, so please step into the office.”

The young knight had taken clear control of the situation. Strangely bothered by the agreeable young man, Nelly nevertheless entered the office silently. No one offered her a chair, so she stood by the door with her arms folded in front of her.

The knight who had been indicated as the young man’s captain, a man who looked to be a few years younger than Nelly, hesitantly began, “Err... When we arrived in Rosa, we planned to head straight for the north dungeon, but the guildmaster stopped us, informing us that it was a much harsher environment than we expected. We headed to the dungeon only after securing a necessary amount of potions and taking on several Hunters as well as Rosa’s guildmaster and Chris, the apothecary, as our guards. Were you really living up there on your own—err, the two of you, rather?”

“Of course.”

“Damn it... The trip to the dungeon itself was bad enough. The protection field around the road was down and our troops were worn out by a constant onslaught of horned rabbits. Then when we finally made it to the dungeon, there were mountain wolves in the lower forest area and most of our forces were hurt so badly they became completely useless.”

She appreciated that the man was working his way to the point, but what she was most concerned about was the part after this.

“The guildmaster, Chris, a few Hunters, and I headed for the caretaker’s cottage, but we were worn down by constant attacks from mountain wolves and wyverns.”

“And?” It bothered her that they had been attacked by wyverns. Nelly frowned, knowing that wyverns didn’t normally prey on humans.

“And we arrived at the cottage, but the door wasn’t locked.”

Nelly silently urged him to continue.

“The cottage was tidied up, but no one was living there.”

No one was there. So Sara had gone down to Rosa.

“There was a thin layer of dust on the furniture and no evidence that the heat had been on recently, so we believe anyone who might have been there had left some time ago. In short, there was no girl in the cottage.”

The captain wiped the sweat from his forehead. He must have forced himself to say all that at once.

“So? Where in Rosa was she?”

“Rosa? There was no such girl in Rosa. And how is a twelve-year-old girl supposed to climb down a mountain path while being attacked by mountain wolves and wyverns anyway? The knights couldn’t even make it.”

“*She* could.”

“There’s no way. It’s likely that she left the protection field around the cottage and...”

And was killed by the forest wolves, he doubtless wanted to say. Nelly scoffed. She didn’t know why Sara wasn’t in Rosa, but she had a barrier that could repel wyverns, so she wouldn’t get killed by monsters. She’d even been able to keep her barrier activated while she slept recently.

“I understand. I appreciate you going all the way to the north dungeon to look for her.” Nelly left the office and strode over to the door to the reception room.

“Umm, err...!” The receptionist looked between Nelly and the door to the commander’s office that she’d thrown open and hurriedly exclaimed, “M-Message from Miss Nefertari, sir! Err, the migrating dragons are thinning out, so she’ll be going back to Rosa.”

She read out the note she’d carefully taken earlier, then smiled in relief. The commander had poked his head out, so she must have wanted to pass on Nelly’s message as soon as she could. She was passionate about her work.

Satisfied that her message had been conveyed, Nelly opened the door and made to leave the room.

“W-Wait, Nefertari. It’s true that there are fewer of them now, but they’re

not done migrating. I won't permit you to leave."

"You won't *permit* me?" Nelly spun around and marched over to the commander again, pulling him toward her by the collar. All she was doing was walking back and forth inside this small room. "When you brought me to the capital without my consent, did I complain?"

"N-No..."

"In addition, your bringing me here without my consent led to a child who's very important to me, who's now *missing*, being left behind. Do you have any thoughts on that matter?"

"I-It's unfortunate, to be sure." The commander pulled back as much as he could, sweat pouring from his forehead.

"Are you saying I need permission to return to Rosa and confirm the safety of a missing child?"

"O-Of course not."

"That's what I thought." Nelly abruptly let go of the commander's collar, causing the man to stagger backward. That was no concern of hers, of course. "Goodbye."

"Nefertari." It was the young man's voice. His name was Liam, she thought she recalled. Nelly decided to see what he had to say. "There were homeless children in Rosa, and many people camping out outside the town. I believe the town to be unsafe at present. Be careful."

"Your concern is unnecessary."

Mountain wolves couldn't get Sara, so there was no way she'd be in danger from humans. The man continued to argue something, but Nelly didn't turn back around to him again. She left the building and headed for the main street, intending to walk straight out of town, when someone called out to her.

"Miss!"

"From your personality, I figured if you said you were leaving, you'd head out that same day, so we came to see you off."

It was the two Invited.

“I don’t need seeing off... I appreciate it, though.” Nelly decided to be polite. The bigger one was at least nice enough to be around.

“I heard there’s something called the Dark Mountain in Rosa! It sounds fun, so I’ll come to visit one day, okay?”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“How cold!”

Finding herself wanting to make one more comment, Nelly looked down at the smaller Invited. Maybe it was because he was close in age to Sara. “It takes an adult two days just to make it across the meadow to the Dark Mountain from Rosa, and you’ll have to weather constant attacks from horned rabbits the whole time. Then when you get to the Dark Mountain, there are packs of wolves and wyverns flying in the air. It’s a place where you can’t let your guard down for a second. You should train yourself up some more before going there.”

“Wow...” The Invited’s eyes twinkled. Her warning seemed to have backfired. There was nothing wrong with a young person having some ambition, however.

Nelly gave the kid a wave, an extremely rare gesture from her. “See you.”

“Take care.”

“I’ll be there! Just you wait!”

Nelly started walking, a smile forming unbidden at her lips, when someone rushed out in front of her.

“Not this again.” Nelly was fed up. She glanced at the knight’s hand, expecting to see a bottle clutched in it. She was right.

“A knight? Hey, wait. What’s that?” The young Invited spoke up, shocked.

“Exactly what you suspect. It’s the paralysis agent we developed at your suggestion.”

“That’s crazy! It’s supposed to be for big monsters in dungeons! You shouldn’t be using that in the middle of town, and on a person, no less!”

The knight ignored the Invited, however, and threw the bottle. Of course, if

she knew what was coming, it wasn't particularly difficult to defend against it.

"Barrier," Nelly said so quietly that no one could hear her, holding her hand up and extending her mana out to the knight's hand, knocking the bottle to the ground. It wasn't really a barrier but more of an extension of Nelly's physical strengthening, but she'd always wanted to say that once. It was a little embarrassing when she actually did it, though. This was no time to get caught up in something like that, however.

"See you," Nelly said again to the Invited, running off with physical strengthening activated before the knight could produce another bottle. The townspeople who had been attracted by the commotion quickly left when it didn't escalate into anything interesting.

"I screwed up. She's going to Rosa? This will be trouble..."

She likely didn't hear her pursuer's muttered words.

It would take Nelly three days to get to Rosa. She believed Sara was safe, but she still hurried.

Chapter 3: The Truth Is Right in Front of You

After finally getting to do some hunting again, Allen was in such a good mood and had made so much money that he decided to treat Sara to dinner that night, figuring this would be a rare occurrence—at Emma's eatery, of course.

"Order whatever you want today."

How generous of him. Though, the only meals on the menus pasted to the walls were still orc and horned rabbit.

"If you want anything else, just ask for it and Emma will make it. I mean, she said they had cockatrices and stuff in stock, right?"

"She did, didn't she? I've eaten plenty of cockatrice before though, so I think I want something else."

Allen crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. "You know, that's the kinda stuff that makes Vince all suspicious of you."

She'd told Allen that Vince was probably going to be grilling her tomorrow.

"Cockatrice is a real high-quality ingredient. I didn't even get to eat much of it when my uncle was around. In fact, I think I've had more of it in your lunches recently than I ever had it before."

"Well, I don't know what's normal and what isn't..." *She'd* been surprised to learn about orc and horned rabbit meat.

"Emma!"

"Ready to order?"

"Hey, can I get cockatrice—"

"Shh!" Emma quickly stopped Allen, then looked around. When she was satisfied that no one was paying attention to their table, she folded her arms exasperatedly. "Caught a lot of horned rabbits today, did you? I've got plenty of fresh ones in, so I'm roasting them with herbs. You had them stewed before, so that's fine, isn't it?"

Allen looked dissatisfied, so Emma gave him a flick on his forehead. “Don’t get cocky. Those annoying rookies might be gone now, but you’ll still get flak if you’re acting like a bigshot when you’re just starting out. Save that stuff for when you’re earning more on the whole.”

“Okay... But...”

“I know. Horned rabbit for two, got it!” Emma nodded to herself, walking off after deciding on their order for them.

Allen grinned awkwardly. “I guess we’re getting horned rabbit.”

“I’ll gladly accept. Thanks.”

She was happy just to get to eat anything she hadn’t made herself. And herb-roasted horned rabbit would be a new food for her. She was excited to find out how it tasted.

“It was a real spectacle today though, wasn’t it? That was my first time seeing so many Hunters.”

She’d seen Nelly take down a wyvern before, but she kept quiet about that, figuring that definitely *was* something she shouldn’t tell people.

“Same here. The dungeons in Rosa only get about as wide as the guildhall, and there’s lots of different paths, so you don’t see many other Hunters down there.”

You could see a lot from the cottage on the Dark Mountain, so if a bunch of Hunters came up there, Sara would probably be able to watch quite a few of them. No, no, Sara shook her head. If a bunch of Hunters went there, then they’d hunt all the mountain wolves, and she’d be a little sad about that. Just a little, though.

“Here you are, herb-roasted horned rabbit!” Emma set down two plates of fragrant horned rabbit, a basket of bread, and some drinks they hadn’t ordered.

“It’s bush strawberry juice!” Sara’s eyes opened wide with excitement.

“Courtesy of this Hunter here.” Emma winked and pointed at Allen with a smile of barely contained mirth before walking away.

“Gimme a break, Emma...” Allen covered his eyes with one hand. Sara

couldn’t help giggling. These *weren’t* Emma’s treat. Allen had likely actually ordered them.

“Thanks. Mind if I dig in?”

“Let’s do it. Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

They tapped their cups together.

“Pwaaah!” they both exclaimed after taking a drink. Then they gave each other a look, grinned, and said, “Yum!”

The juice seemed to wash away all the fatigue of the day.

“I’m starting to feel like I’ll survive Vince’s interrogation tomorrow.”

“You can do it. I’d kinda like to hear your story myself, Sara.”

Now that she thought about it, she didn’t think anyone would really care if she was a bit lacking in common sense. If she told everyone about her life up in the cottage, maybe she’d be able to figure something out about Nelly, too.

Incidentally, Sara enjoyed the herb-roasted horned rabbit—even more than she’d liked it stewed.

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The next day, she parted ways with Allen in the morning for the first time in a while and went out to pick plants, arriving at the guild just in time for her cafeteria work. She left her basket with Vince as she usually did.

“You look nervous, Sara,” Mina noticed.

Vince seemed to be busy, so he just told her, “Come see me when you’re done helping out at the kiosk.”

Relieved, Sara hurried into the kitchen and began peeling potatoes like she’d never left.

“I won’t get called out there today, right?”

“Yeah, someone’s always here looking for you, aren’t they? You’ve been gone for a bit, so it’d be nice if you could stick around this time.”

She'd been called out from the kitchen so many times that her coworkers seemed to feel sorry for her. Fortunately, no one came to interrupt her today, so she went straight out to the kiosk afterward and earned some spare change for herself warming up lunches. Surely she was finally going to have a laid-back, uneventful day.

"Allen should be getting back from the dungeon soon." With that carefree thought on her mind, she was organizing the potions on the shelf when Vince called out to her from his reception desk.

"Sara! Think it's about time to—"

Sara flinched, having completely forgotten about her appointment with Vince, but before he finished speaking, he stood from his desk and looked toward the main door.

"Nefertari! You're back!"

Sara stopped sorting the potions when she heard that. "Nefertari? I've heard that name before..."

Vince had mentioned the name during the horned rabbit hunting. He'd said only Jay or Nefertari could do anything about cotton sheep. Jay was the guildmaster. Sara was fond of the way Vince accidentally called him that sometimes. "Nefertari" had come up a few times when people were talking about strong Hunters, so Sara remembered the name. It belonged to a woman, she was fairly certain.

The kiosk was on the opposite side of the guild from the reception desks, to the left of the entrance, so Sara couldn't see who'd just come in from where she was. She craned her neck to look, and froze.

Just as Sara expected, the person walking over to Vince's desk was a woman. The Hunter named Nefertari looked tired, but her pace was brisk, and she wore her red hair tied behind her head as though it was too much of a bother to do anything else with it.

"I almost thought we'd never see you again."

"Vince, can you get the guildmaster?" the woman asked bluntly, ignoring Vince's comment. The truth was she was kind, but she never said enough,

which always caused trouble. Sara put both hands over her mouth. She wanted to move, but she was stuck. She wanted to run over there right now.

“Sure. Gimme a second.” Vince signaled someone, who rushed into the back to the guildmaster’s office.

“I want to hear about the cottage on the Dark Mountain, from someone who was there. I heard Chris and the guildmaster went up there.”

“You heard the knights’ report? But, uhh...”

Anyone could tell from the look on Vince’s face that the report hadn’t been good. But the red-headed woman told him flatly, “I don’t believe it. I don’t believe for a second that that girl is gone.”

“Nefertari!” The guildmaster threw open the door to the back and strode over to Nefertari. He must have been in a rush to see her. Several of the buttons on his vest were still undone. “You’re back—”

“I heard the cottage was empty. Give me the details,” was all Nefertari said. No greeting, no nothing.

The guildmaster sighed and explained, “No one was there, and everything was neat and tidy. It was so clean, it was hard to imagine you living there.”

“It’s thanks to her. She always kept the place clean.”

The guildmaster must have wanted to comfort Nefertari. He reached out to her, but she brushed his hand away. Even though whenever Sara had reached out to her, she’d always warmly taken her hand.

“There were no signs of anyone being in the cottage recently. The door wasn’t locked. There was dust on the furniture. And a pack of mountain wolves around the cottage. What more evidence do you need?”

“Was there food?”

The guildmaster already had an answer to her question ready. He must have investigated pretty thoroughly. “There was food. She would have taken it if she’d gone somewhere, right?” His face said he felt bad about breaking the news, but she should just accept it already. But Nefertari was insistent.

“How much was left?”

“How much? A lot. There were Guild lunches and bread and stuff.”

“How much? How many months of food was left?!” Nefertari grabbed the guildmaster by his shirt and pulled him to her. Sara was starting to panic. She didn’t need to do that. The guildmaster would answer her if she just asked.

“How much? Hold on a second. If you don’t let me go, I’ll die before I can remember.”

“Tch...”

She tossed the guildmaster aside. Right... She was normally gentle, but when she needed to be, she was so strong that she could beat a wyvern with a single swing of her sword.

“Let me think... Uhh, let’s see... If one person were to eat it, I’d say it’d last ’em about three months.”



“Ahh...” Nefertari seemed to collapse to the floor. At a glance, she seemed devastated, and all the people of the Guild could do was grimace in sympathy,

but she quickly stood back up and threw her head back.

“Thank you! Thank you! She’s alive! She’s alive!” Nefertari shouted. Everyone could only assume that she’d lost her mind due to shock, but that wasn’t the case at all. “There was supposed to be three months of food there for both of us, so six months in total. If there were only three left, that means she took her own portion and headed to Rosa with it! She’s smart, so she left my portion there in case we missed each other.”

Vince shook his head pityingly and the guildmaster stood back up and touched Nefertari on the shoulder lightly as if to comfort her. This time, she didn’t shake his hand off.

“Nefertari, not even the knights could handle those mountain wolves. A twelve-year-old girl would stand no chance.”

Nefertari shook her head adamantly, her eyes full of hope. “That’s not true! My Sara is—”

“Sara?” several of the receptionists muttered at once.

At the same time, the doors to the Guild flew open. “Sara! I got out from the dungeon early today! Let’s go get something to eat at the Flycatcher!” Allen ran in shouting, but he stopped hesitantly when he saw Sara. “Sara? Why are you crying?”

She wasn’t crying. She was just a little overcome with emotion. Sara shook her head and smiled. “Didn’t I say Nelly was okay? That she was strong?”

“Sara?” Allen peered over the reception desks at her.

Sara had no idea what wires had gotten crossed where, but the red-haired woman called Nefertari, who was now looking back and forth between Allen and Sara in surprise, was unmistakably Nelly.

She took a deep breath before exclaiming, “Nelly! Welcome back!”

“Sara!” Nelly was at her side in an instant, leaping over the counter to embrace her. She was cool even at times like these. Sara buried her face in Nelly’s chest, returning her hug with a tight squeeze of her own.

“You took so long to come back...”

“I’m sorry.”

She wanted to tell her she was happy to see her, but the first thing out of her mouth was how lonely she’d been without her, and once she’d started, she couldn’t stop herself from continuing.

“It did take me five days to reach town...”

“I thought so.”

“I couldn’t take a bath...”

“That must have been tough.”

She thought she heard someone mutter, “Not bathing was the tough part?” But she felt she had to tell Nelly about *everything* she went through at first.

“The people at the Apothecary’s Guild were mean...”

“Well, we can’t let them get away with that, can we?”

She could almost feel the temperature in the Guild dropping several degrees at that.

Nelly slowly let go of Sara. “Sara, let me see your face.”

“Okay.”

There were tears in her eyes, but she was the same beautiful Nelly that Sara remembered. She’d put on a brave face, but there were nights when Sara had been scared she’d only imagined Nelly existed, since no one in town knew her.

Nelly grinned and embraced Sara again. She always had physical strengthening activated, but she let all her defenses down only when she was hugging Sara. The gentle warmth of her body was the same warmth Sara had always felt at the cottage on the Dark Mountain.

“Oh, Sara, I’m finally home...”

“Yeah. Welcome home, Nelly.”

She was really back. Sara felt like her unmoored emotions finally had a place to settle down again.

The people in the guild could only see Nelly’s back, but from the smile on

Sara's face, they figured everything had wrapped up nicely. A wave of relief went through everyone.

"A kid who has no trouble hunting stealth slimes. Yeah, I guess there was no way she grew up normally." Vince's muttered words only made sense to a few people, but his next comment was enough for everyone to understand. "So the kid Nefertari took in made it to town on her own."

"How the heck were we supposed to tell? Didn't she say the kid was a delicate, pretty girl?" the guildmaster griped. Needless to say, Vince smacked him. And of course, Nelly gave him another good strangle later.

After confirming one another's well-being, Sara and Nelly turned to thank the members of the Guild when the doors were thrown open again and someone else burst into the building.

"Nef! You're back?!"

"Chris?"

Someone must have run to the Apothecary's Guild, thinking Chris should be summoned for any unusual situations involving Nefertari. He burst in, out of breath, surveyed the guild, and strode over to Nelly when he spotted her.

"How are you feeling? That drug didn't have any lasting effects on you, did it?" He put his hands on Nelly's cheeks, carefully observing her complexion and completely oblivious to Sara's presence.

Taken by surprise, Nelly let him touch her for just a few short seconds before slapping his hands away. "You're so annoying. You came all the way to the capital with me and treated me, didn't you? I'm grateful to you, but I'm fine now."

"As long as you're okay..." Chris smiled, not at all bothered by her attitude toward him.

Watching them, Sara realized... "Wait, your beautiful friend with red hair and green eyes was..."

"Sara? I didn't see you there."

"Well, I've been here the whole time. Right next to Nelly."

That was all Sara amounted to in his eyes, she supposed. He was all too happy to answer her question, however. It was as if the cold look that was usually on his face was a complete lie.

“Yes, that’s right. This is the beautiful friend who’s my age that I was telling you about.”

Why did he look so proud? That ticked Sara off a little. She came to a realization here, however. Sara had never actually asked Nelly her exact age. Was that what had caused all this confusion?

“Wait, Nelly...” she asked.

“Yeah?” Nelly responded, in a much softer tone than the one she’d used with Chris.

“I thought it’d be rude to ask a woman this, but how old are you, Nelly?”

“I think I’ll be forty soon...”

“You’re kidding me!” Sara shouted, immediately slumping her shoulders afterward. “Also, you could at least have some confidence in your answer...”

“S-Sorry.” Nelly apologized, though she didn’t look like she knew why she was doing it. She was just as vague about her age as she was about everything else, but Chris apparently knew better than she did.

“She’s the same age as me, so thirty-nine. Ow! What was that for, Nef?”

Nelly had hit him, but it was his own fault. He called her Nef because her name was Nefertari. Finally understanding this, Sara felt a deep regret at not prying more details out of Nelly sooner. If she’d at least known Nelly’s actual age, Chris at the very least might have been able to put together the fact that Nelly was Nefertari.

“It’s not just the age, Sara. Do you remember how you described your ‘Nelly’ to us?” Vince asked her exasperatedly.

“Umm, she’s strong and nice and doesn’t say much but she’s fun to talk to, and she’s dependable but she doesn’t always think things through?” Sara recalled. She didn’t think there was anything wrong with any of that. It was cute how Nelly was scratching the bridge of her nose like she was embarrassed.

Vince only seemed to be getting more annoyed, however. “Sara, after seeing what happened a minute ago, can you still describe this woman in the same way?”

A minute ago. When she’d grilled Vince without even greeting him and held the guildmaster up by his lapel. Well, “strong” seemed accurate. “Dependable” may also fit. But she wasn’t sure if she could say that woman had been “nice” or “fun” or not thinking things through.

“Err...”

“You can, can’t you? Come on, Sara...” Nelly pleaded with her rather pathetically. Sara started feeling like she had to say *something*.

“S-See? It’s kinda fun when you talk to her, and she’s nice to *me*...”

The guild fell silent for a moment before an air of reluctant acceptance settled over everyone.

“What’s this? Wait, the Nelly you were talking about was Nef, Sara?”

At Chris’s question, everyone sagged with exasperation again. Maybe it was to be expected, since he hadn’t been present for the confrontation earlier, but Sara had called her Nelly several times since he’d appeared. Sara was starting to feel like it wasn’t just her fault that he didn’t know who she’d meant.

Chris nodded to himself with realization, then turned pale. “Wait, so the child you took in was...?”

“That’s right. Seems she was able to make it to town on her own. This is Sara, the girl I was living with.” Nelly put her arm around Sara’s shoulder proudly. Then hurriedly added, “Chris, Guildmaster, I appreciate you going up to the Dark Mountain to look for Sara. It must have been hard babysitting those knights.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say it was fun... It *was* Sara though, huh...?”

The shrugging guildmaster, as well as everyone else in the guild, had some idea of Sara’s strength even if they hadn’t seen it firsthand, since they knew she’d brought in horned rabbits and magic stones from slimes. They all had some understanding that Sara was, if not as strong as Allen, then at least close

to his level of strength, so they acknowledged right away that she must have been the child that Nefertari had taken in. This was not the case for Chris, however.

“Nef, do you remember what you said to me in the capital? You said she was an adorable twelve-year-old girl with black hair. That she was sensitive, couldn’t harm a fly, afraid of mountain wolves, and could hardly leave the cottage so you were too worried about her to bring her into town with you.”

“So? None of that’s wrong, is it?”

“What...?” Chris gave Sara a rather rude look. “An adorable, delicate girl. *You*?”

She’d wondered if he was mistaken about her gender, but apparently he really *hadn’t* known she was a girl. And he was being incredibly rude about it, too.

“Obviously,” Allen interjected disgustedly. “The way she talks and acts, and how she looks? Of course she’s a girl!”

Behind her desk, Mina was nodding along in agreement. Sara had gotten a vague sense of this, but there seemed to be those who knew she was a girl and those who were under the mistaken impression that she was a boy. The guildmaster, for example, whose gaze was wavering this way and that, was clearly guilty. And though Vince, who stood beside him, wore a look as though this was totally obvious, Sara knew that he’d had the wrong idea himself up until just a few days ago. What didn’t sit right with her was the fact that Mize, peeking in from the kitchen, quickly drew his head back looking flustered. She worked with him every day!

“Let’s say for the sake of argument that she’s delicate and sensitive.”

Sara’s irritation grew at the way Chris was framing his comment.

“How exactly are you suggesting she made it all the way here down a path even the knights couldn’t travel without injury?”

Sara didn’t know how to answer that. She decided to just be honest. “Umm, I walked? It took me five days to get all the way to town.”

“That’s not what I mean! I’m asking how a frail, cowardly girl who can’t so much as attack another creature made it through so many monsters to get to the town!”

“Delicate and sensitive” had become “frail and cowardly.” Sara really would never get along with Chris, would she? It was a reasonable question, though. He might have been acting more reasonably than anyone else here, in fact.

Still, Sara was at a loss as to how to respond. She really had just walked there like she always did. She’d picked up the monsters that had been unlucky enough to die when they’d run into her barrier, but she really had just walked to get to town. Did other people do things differently?

“It’s a natural question, Sara,” Vince said. “Normal Hunters couldn’t make it past mountain wolves.”

Well, she *had* been rather scared of mountain wolves at first.

“Irritatingly enough, they took out the knights, too. So let me ask you, Nef. Are you saying this Sara child has the strength to defend herself from mountain wolves?” Chris looked like he thought even asking the question was absurd.

“I am,” Nelly asserted firmly.

“What?” Chris asked, and everyone else in the guild looked like they wanted to ask the same thing. “Can she use physical strengthening, too?”

“No, in Sara’s case, she *can* use physical strengthening, but more importantly she’s very good at a sort of shield magic that she calls a barrier.”

“So she’s a caster, just like she said,” Vince muttered. “You call it a barrier, Sara?”

“Yeah.” Sara nodded.

“She can create a shield that reflects any and all magic and attacks that come her way,” Nelly said proudly.

“Well, what did we have to worry about, then?” said the guildmaster, his shoulders slumping.

“Sure, she can protect herself, but you really can’t understand why I would worry about a child who’s this important to me being left alone on the Dark

Mountain?! Would you not worry about a twelve-year-old girl all on her own?”

“Sure I would...but you could have told us about that, don’t you think?”

“I-I’m sorry about that.” Nelly bowed her head remorsefully.

For Sara’s part, she was just thankful that Nelly *had* been worried about her. After all, she’d managed to make it to Rosa, but she’d been very nervous herself about whether or not she’d be able to.

“I was just so pissed at the guys in the capital I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“Yes, they were incredibly out of line,” Chris agreed.

Nelly shrugged. “Just when I had been thinking that I *would* accept their request if I could just bring Sara with me to the capital... That was what I was on my way to the Hunter’s Guild to talk to you guys about.”

That was when Sara finally realized what that mission Chris and the guildmaster had been on was about. She’d thought it didn’t have anything to do with her, but it was *her* that they were up on the Dark Mountain looking for.

“Wait a second. The north dungeon *is* the Dark Mountain then, right?” she asked.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t know,” Vince said with an exasperated look.

“I didn’t...” Sara shook her head. “All Nelly told me was that we lived on the Dark Mountain.” Then she came to another realization. “Wait, are you saying I was living in a dungeon? And I kept saying how I didn’t want anything to do with them!”

“You’re only figuring that out now...?”

This led to an even more shocking realization for Sara.

“Wait, so the knights getting injured and Allen getting sent on that stupid errand were actually my fault?”

As the color drained from Sara’s face, Chris walked up to her solemnly and put a hand on her shoulder. He had the same professional expression on his face as when he’d examined her during that errand. “That’s not true, Sara,” he told her definitively. “The fault lies entirely with the knights of the capital who think

they can use Nef however they please.”

“The knights...” The people who had tried to take Sara and Allen back to the capital with them, and their friends.

“So everything from the very start was all just a huge misunderstanding...” Vince muttered, summing the situation up.

“No, it’s all the knights’ fault. There was nothing any of us or Sara or Nelly could have done. That’s all there is to it,” the guildmaster said, with an air as if to say “break it up, everybody.”

Sara and Nelly finally let themselves relax. Sara looked around the guild and found everyone smiling as if to say in reply, “well, everything worked out in the end.”

Yeah, Sara agreed. *Nelly came back. That’s enough.* She looked up at Nelly next to her and smiled.

“Hey, Sara.”

Sara gasped and turned around to Allen.

“I guess this means you’re gonna leave town now?”

Allen’s words pulled everyone back to reality. Sara was thrilled that Nelly was back, but that also meant the end of her life with Allen. It was fine for Sara to go back to her old life, but for Allen that meant being left alone in Rosa again.

Allen hung his head for a moment, but quickly looked back up again and grinned. “I’m really glad you found your sister, Sara. Just wait. I’ll get stronger, and then I’ll come visit you.”

Even if Sara wanted to leave, Allen wouldn’t keep her here. He had the drive to keep working hard in Rosa, even if he was all on his own. Sara’s heart ached at the thought of leaving him behind.

Looking at things realistically, though, the place where Sara lived was somewhere even the knights from the capital had to run away badly injured from. Allen was good enough at physical strengthening that it was hard to think of him as a rookie, but he was still at the level where he had to take his time on the lower floors of the dungeon, getting stronger little by little.

If Sara returned to her old life on the Dark Mountain, she'd get very few opportunities to see Allen. He had supported her steadfastly throughout her whole time here in Rosa.

Nelly seemed to study Allen for a moment before turning to Sara. "Sara?" she asked quietly. The implication of the question seemed to be, "Who is this boy to you?"

Sara did her best to explain. How he was the first person to talk to her after she came to town, and they'd been together this whole time. How he'd taught her so much. How she would have been completely lost without him.

"Hmm. Your name was Allen?"

"Yes," Allen answered stiffly. He had never struck Sara as particularly shy, so he was probably feeling pressured by Nelly. Sara couldn't sense it at all, but everyone else in the guild had an expression like they were enduring something. The people at the far end of the reception desks were turned in another direction, looking as though they could hardly even bear being here.

"Looks like you specialize in physical strengthening. Okay."

Sara had a bad feeling about this. She'd been through this plenty of times on the Dark Mountain.

"Let's see what you got." Nelly drew the sword at her waist in a fluid movement.

"Wh—Nefertari, are you—?!" Vince shouted, but Nelly didn't stop.

She swung her sword down on Allen and a loud *clang* rang through the guild. There was no time for Allen to draw his own sword or for Sara to activate her barrier either.

"No fights in the guildhall, Nefertari," Vince said coldly.

Nelly answered just as casually, "It's not a fight. It's training."

Allen had been surprised, but he'd activated his physical strengthening in time to remain unharmed if a little shaken. He glared at Nelly after her sudden attack.

Nelly put a hand to her chin, impressed. "Hmm. You guarded against my

sword, which can cut down a migrating dragon. Pretty impressive."

"Are you crazy, Nelly?!" Sara shrieked.

"Well, I had to see what he could do."

This felt like an exchange they'd had in front of the cottage a thousand times.

"I can't believe you..."

Sara slumped down, not expecting *this* to be what made Nelly's return feel real to her. Allen, on the other hand, had cheered right up when Nelly had called him impressive.

"So this is the weirdo you were raised by, Sara."

"Yeah."

She wouldn't really say she was raised by Nelly, but it was true that she'd forced all sorts of weird ideas on her.

"Nah. Sara learned everything and got strong all on her own."

"No I didn't. You were just as reckless with me," Sara asserted.

"Was I?"

Even that exchange was nostalgic, and Sara and Nelly both grinned at the feeling. The smile quickly faded from Nelly's face as she turned to Allen with a serious question, however.

"Allen. If your physical strengthening is that good, you shouldn't have too much trouble with mountain wolves. Seems like you can withstand my pressure, too. Want to come to the Dark Mountain with us?"

Sara was truly relieved. Nelly really was a good person. She'd taken Sara in, after all. She knew that Nelly would extend the same courtesy to Allen.

"I-I..." Allen didn't know how to answer her sudden question. He'd only ever considered earning money for himself in dungeons. He had a home now in the watchtower and he was finally able to start delving into the dungeons for real, so all of the problems he'd been having in Rosa were more or less cleared up. The only thing that would be changing for him was that Sara, who had been living with him almost like a family member, would be leaving. It would be

harder than ever to go back to being alone after experiencing how fun it was to live with someone else, though. Sara had learned that herself after parting from Nelly, and this would be Allen's second time ending up on his own.

"No, if Allen's going to be all on his own, then *I'll* be taking him in," came a voice.

"Guildmaster?" Allen turned around in surprise.

"I was planning on taking both of you in myself once things had settled down, but you seemed to want to be independent, so I was giving it a bit of time first."

"Sure you didn't just forget about it since they weren't having any problems on their own?" Vince said shrewdly.

"I could take you in as well, if you wouldn't mind," Chris piped up next. "I intended to take in Sara. I can't teach you swordplay or fighting, but I can help you control your mana pressure, and I'll give you all of my support if you wish to become an apothecary."

Sara gave Chris a cold look. If he'd been planning on taking her in, then why hadn't he? She was fairly certain he didn't give a crap about her. Her mental rating of him had now been thoroughly solidified as a disappointment who only had eyes for Nelly.

Allen clenched his fists and hung his head, thinking. He'd always planned to live on his own, so now that so many people were extending helping hands to him, he didn't know whose to take.

He didn't want Sara to think he wasn't cool, though. The next time Sara saw him, how would he have changed? Did he want to go with the dragon-fighting Nelly and train with her, living together with Sara? Every day would doubtless be fun if he did so. But...

Allen looked down at his hand. It was true that he was much stronger than other kids his age since he could use physical strengthening. But he was still new to dungeon-diving. He had to climb the proper steps before facing monsters like mountain wolves and cockatrices. In order to train the right way, he had to make his way through the dungeons floor by floor.

That meant he should stay in Rosa. Everyone thought the guildmaster was a

bit of an airhead, but Allen respected him. He ran a guild with so many Hunters without any issues. It might seem like it was actually Vince running things, but it was clear if you paid attention that Vince still thought of the guildmaster as his boss.

Every night, they'd eaten together under the stars. They'd taken turns bathing in their tents, keeping watch for one another. They'd chatted, slept next to one another, and said good morning when they woke up the next day. It was the same after they'd started staying in town in the watchtower. And it would be the same between them the next time they met. Sara was sure of it.

Allen raised his head. "I'll stay in town and live with the guildmaster."

He wouldn't be coming with them. Sara felt herself deflating, but she knew that it was what was best for Allen.

"Allen..."

"Sara..."

"Yeah, yeah..."

When the two of them stared sadly into each other's eyes, Vince cut between them with an annoyed sigh. What didn't annoy that guy?

"Sara, are you not planning on ever returning here after you go back up to the north dungeon?"

The question made Sara's mind go blank. All she'd been thinking about was finding Nelly. She hadn't considered at all what would come next.

Nelly gave her a gentle pat on the shoulder. "Well, now I know that you can get to town on your own. From now on, you can just come into town with me to sell monsters and plants. I can hunt on our way down."

Sara felt like a whole new world was opening up before her. "Nelly... Oh yeah, I *did* make it here on my own! I came here all on my own!"

"And you'll be even safer from now on, since I'll be with you."

"Yeah!" This time, Sara turned to Allen with a grin on her face.

"Then, the next time we see each other, it'll be a competition to see who's

stronger.”

Allen returned her grin and Sara’s expression soured.

“No it won’t. I don’t *want* to get stronger.”

“Oh, right. You don’t want to be a Hunter.”

The whole Guild laughed at the disappointment on Allen’s face. *And they all lived happily ever after,* Sara thought.

Nelly was smiling, seeing how happy Sara was, but she hardened her expression and quietly turned to Chris. “By the way, Chris.”

“Yes, Nef?”

“I told Sara to go to Chris at the Apothecary’s Guild for help.”

The laughter came to an abrupt stop.

“Oh, yeah. Nelly said Chris was the only person in Rosa I could trust before she left,” Sara recalled.

“You trust me that much, Nef?” Chris shouted.

“Come on, Nefertari, that’s not true!” The guildmaster shouted at the same time.

Nelly crossed her arms icily. “So why exactly was Sara living with some boy she’d just met, with no one else she could rely on?”

“W-Well...”

“I should really be getting back to work...”

What happened to the two of them after they were dragged into the guildmaster’s office was not for Sara to know.

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Sara and Nelly decided to return to the Dark Mountain the next day, partly because the guildmaster had expressed his concerns to them about leaving the mountain unattended for any longer.

“There are a lot more horned rabbits in the meadow on the way to the north dungeon now, but Rosa will do something about that, like we always have. The unusual behavior of the mountain wolves really bothered me, though... It was like they were waiting for something.” The guildmaster seemed to be thinking back on his time in the north dungeon.

Nelly tilted her head to the side curiously. “Sure, I guess it seems like their territory has expanded lately, but I don’t think they’ve gotten more aggressive or anything. They’re happy to eat the garbage we throw out up at the cottage. If anything, I’d say they’re kinda like Sara’s pets.”

“They are not!” Sara swiftly refuted. “They try to eat me every chance they get!”

“Oh...that right? You’re sure they weren’t just waiting for you to come home? Err, forget I said anything,” said the guildmaster, backing off after Sara gave him a chilly glare.

That night, Nelly, Allen, and Sara stayed in the watchtower together, at Nelly’s insistence.

When they headed to Emma’s from the Guild and Sara told her that Nelly had come back, Emma wept with joy.

“I can’t believe you left such a cutie here all on her own! Everyone in town was trying to figure out how to help her!”

Nelly had to have been the older one of the two of them, but she seemed to shrink under Emma’s scolding, desperately trying to explain to her the unavoidable circumstances involved. Sara almost laughed at the sight.

“Well, I guess you were in a pretty difficult position, but... Hey, now that I get a good look at you, you’ve been here a few times, right? You always sit way in the back.”

“Yeah. I haven’t come recently, but I used to. I always liked the herb-roasted horned rabbit.”

“Same as me!” Sara exclaimed. She’d tried the same dish recently and had really enjoyed it.

“Yeah, we got the best herb-roasted horned rabbit around! Now, this is the part where I wish I could tell you to stay and eat, but...” Emma shrugged her shoulders resignedly. Sara wasn’t sure what she meant. She looked back and forth between Emma and Nelly, who wore a wry smile.

“Between my mana and Allen’s, even in the seats way in the back, our pressure would be too strong.”

Sara hadn’t even realized that would be a problem.

“Well, if you take the plates and bring ’em back later, you can eat up in the tower. What do you want to do?”

“I’ll carry ’em!” Allen volunteered.

Nelly climbed the stairs and looked around the watchtower with amusement as Sara watched her. Meanwhile, Allen made three trips down to the restaurant to carry up their dinner.

“Sorry about that,” Nelly told him.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve got confidence in my stamina.”

If Sara were in Allen’s shoes, she didn’t think she’d ever forgive Nelly for swinging her sword down on him the way she had, but strangely enough, that seemed to be the impetus for the friendly rapport they had now. Allen treated Nelly like an older relative he hadn’t seen in a long time, and Nelly accepted his affection easily. Sara felt very comfortable with the two of them.

“Emma threw in some bush strawberry juice.”

“Yay!”

Sara and Allen always seemed to get a glass of bush strawberry juice on special occasions, so it felt right to celebrate Nelly’s return with it.

“We had bush strawberry juice when we finally got our IDs too, didn’t we?”

“And when I hunted a whole bunch of horned rabbits.”

“It was so funny when she said, ‘courtesy of this Hunter here.’”

“Yeah.”

So many things had happened in such a short time.

“Maybe it was hard, but it sounds like you really had a good time here.” Nelly watched over their conversation with a smile.

“Yeah. I don’t know what I would have done without Allen.”

“I had fun every day ’cause Sara was there, too.” He seemed surprised after the words left his lips. “I had fun... I really did,” he repeated, breaking into a big grin. “At first I thought I had to look after you, but we became equals right away, and it was just so comfortable to be around you, and fun...”



Sara couldn’t help laughing at his revelation. “Of course it was. We’re friends, after all!”

“Friends...”

“Yeah, friends!”

She felt a little embarrassed calling him a “best friend,” so she went with simple “friends.”

“And we’ll still be friends even when we’re apart.”

Yeah, she *was* still embarrassed. Nelly grinned, watching the two of them giggle bashfully, as the sun set on Sara’s last night in Rosa.

Sara and Nelly stopped by the guild the next day before they left, with everyone there seeing them off. Allen included, of course.

“Take care, Sara.” He seemed worried. The guildmaster did as well.

“I just went to the north dungeon myself... Not even the knights could have made it up there if they didn’t have their guards up. Are you really sure you’ll be okay, Sara?”

Sara smiled wryly, thinking it was a bit late for him to be asking her that. She hadn’t had much direct contact with the guildmaster, but she’d been roped into plenty of annoying guild business by the vice guildmaster, Vince.

“I’ll be fine. My barrier even repels wyverns.”

“Are you serious? Man, if you’d just told us that at the start...” The guildmaster sighed and shrugged his shoulders, no doubt lamenting all the extra work their misunderstanding had caused. But Sara thought if she’d led with the fact that she could take down wyverns, they probably would have trusted her even less.

“I’ll hire you any time in the kitchen! With higher pay, of course.”

“We’ll take you full-time at the kiosk, too.”

“Thanks for everything, Mize, Mina.”

Mize from the kitchen and Mina the receptionist had come out to see them off, too. Even the people from the Apothecary’s Guild were there. Of course, Chris was clearly just after Nelly.

“You’re welcome in the Apothecary’s Guild at any time. And you should come with her, Nef.”

“Nelly can decide if she wants to come.”

“If I got somethin’ to do there, I’ll show up,” was all Nelly offered in response.

“Tch.”

“You didn’t have to come if you were just going to suck your teeth at us, Ted.”

“Err...” Ted murmured, facing away from Sara. “I’ll apologize for saying I didn’t know any red-haired women when we first met, at least. I couldn’t imagine you were talking about a middle-aged lady the same age as Master Chris when you said she was in her twenties.”

“Oh? Does that mean you see me as a middle-aged man, Ted?”

“Ah, no! I mean, well, yes, but...”

Ted just couldn’t keep his foot out of his mouth. At this point, Sara felt like it was less a matter of him saying things with malice and more just that he always said exactly what he was thinking without ever considering the consequences. The problem was that every thought that crossed his mind was apparently rude, but if he hadn’t yet figured that out himself, there was nothing that could be done for him at this point. Sara quietly hoped that his beloved Master Chris would give him a good chewing out later.

“Well, let’s go, Sara.”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks for everything.” Nelly bowed her head to those present, and she and Sara set off for the central gate. Once Nelly made a decision, she was always quick to act.

Sara walked beside her, like they’d always done, like it was the most natural thing in the world. The sight of them walking happily together put a smile on more than a few of the faces of those who saw them.

Nelly suddenly came to a stop, however.

“Tch... Persistent creeps.”

Sara followed her gaze to find a group of people wearing a familiar uniform.

“Liam? What are you doing here?”

Liam raised his eyebrows when he saw Sara beside Nelly, but he quickly shifted his gaze back to Nelly, glaring harshly at her. Sara put her guard up. At first glance, he was a kind, handsome young man, but she knew from personal experience that he was a creep who would do whatever it took to accomplish his goals once he had his mind set on something.

“Nefertari. The capital never gave official permission for you to leave. You’re to return immediately.”

“I got permission from the knight captain. Liam, is that right? You were there. You saw it,” Nelly responded curtly. “There are hardly any dragons left. You’ll be able to handle the rest of them just fine without me. If you’ve got the personnel to send ten people after me, then just put that manpower toward taking care of the dragons instead.”

Everyone from the guild had rushed over when they saw the knights, so they all must have heard the exchange.

“You said it.” Vince nodded in agreement, but Liam ignored both of them.

“You haven’t fulfilled the request made of you yet.”

“I didn’t even officially accept a request this year. I helped out out of the goodness of my heart instead of holding a grudge over being abducted.”

Nelly wasn’t backing down. The air was starting to grow tense.

“Then we’ll just have to bring you back by force again.” Liam gave a signal to another knight, who took a small bottle out from his clothes.

“The same old trick, huh? It didn’t even work the last time you tried it.” Nelly sneered at them.

Sara knew they’d succeeded once, since she’d heard that was how Nelly had been taken to the capital. But since Nelly said it hadn’t worked the last time, that meant they’d tried to do it to her again. Sara glared at Liam, but she quickly shifted her gaze to the other knights. They’d tried to do the same thing to Sara before, too. Since they’d already failed once with her and with Nelly, they

would be stupid not to change up their strategy, no matter how stupid they actually were.

Just as she suspected, she spotted several knights taking out those little bottles. They must have been aware that if they started throwing them all over the place, they too would almost definitely be affected by the drug. Sara was disgusted by the knights' insistence on using something so dangerous without considering the consequences.

"Don't underestimate us this time. We've been imparted with the wisdom of the Invited!"

One of the knights threw a bottle high above Nelly and Sara, while another one, who must have been a caster, shot a pebble at it. The pebble struck the bottle, breaking it, while another caster used wind magic to aerosolize the drug, which sprayed down around them.

"If we spray you with multiple bottles of mist, there's no way you can deflect all of them," the man cackled. Laughing like that, the man looked less like a knight and more like a supervillain. Disgusting behavior to the last.

"What are you doing?! That's a little girl you're attacking!" Chris shouted somewhere behind them. It felt a little awkward, but Sara was happy that he was showing some common courtesy toward someone other than Nelly for once.

Nelly didn't move a muscle, saying only, "Sara."

"Yeah." Sara was happy that Nelly trusted her to resolve the situation. She'd deployed her barrier around herself and Nelly as soon as she'd spotted the knights, of course. Now, she deployed a second layer around the first.

"Barrier! Second layer!"

An extra barrier formed around the paralysis agent, trapping it between the two layers.

"What? What's happening? Why is the drug not working on them?"

Like popping a balloon, Sara opened up little holes in her barrier next to each of the knights. Most of the mist had fallen to the ground already, but what was

still floating in the air now drifted over to the knights.

“Ugh... What? The mist is coming this way?! No way...”

With the exception of a few of them who were nimble enough to dodge it, most of the knights inhaled the paralysis agent and collapsed to the ground. Sara dispelled her second barrier and used wind magic to blow the rest of the drug far away. She kept her first barrier in place.

Glaring at the rest of the knights, including Liam, who’d managed to dodge the spray, she asked, “Did you mention the Invited just now?”

Both the people watching and the knights were surprised to hear her question.

“Who *are* you...?”

Sara was just an extra as far as the knights were concerned. There was likely no one there who understood exactly what she’d just done. That was why they only responded to her to ask what she even had to do with this situation.

“I thought I heard you say the Invited,” Sara repeated quietly. It wasn’t that she wanted to call attention to herself. This confrontation meant nothing to her either. She just wanted an answer to her question.

Intimidated, the knight answered, “Th-That’s right. The Invited taught us efficient ways to fight strong monsters.”

“I see. So they’re all just jerks.”

She remembered Nelly telling her there were quite a few people like her in this world. She’d thought it might be nice to meet some of them one day, but if they were just going to try to harm Nelly, then the Invited were nothing but more enemies of Sara’s.

“Were you the one who turned the mist back on us, Sara? What sort of method did you use?”

Liam was the only one who seemed to realize that it was Sara who’d done it. *Not that he caught on last time,* Sara thought, giving him a cold look.

“Why should I tell an enemy my secrets? Come on, Nelly, let’s go.”

“Yeah, let’s.”

Nelly had been watching the whole thing quietly, but with a satisfied nod, she walked off with Sara as if the knights weren’t even present.

“Wait!” One of the knights reflexively drew his sword as they passed, but before he could even approach them, he was thrown back by something. It was rare for Sara to use her barrier offensively, but she was more than a little angry right now.

“Wh-What? What just happened?”

“Listen,” Sara said to the knight who had fallen on his rear and was staring dumbly up at her. She made sure she was speaking loudly enough that the rest of the knights could hear, enunciating carefully, “I won’t let so much as a single attack hit Nelly.”

The knights shifted their gazes to Nefertari, seeming to realize that she hadn’t lifted a finger during any of this encounter. In other words, the attack that had pushed the knight back had come from Sara. He looked at her with disbelief in his eyes.

Sara held her palm out at the knight. “My barrier reflects any attack and any magic. And it will never run out of power.”



“That’s impossible... No caster can keep up a spell forever.”

“I’ve never run out of mana before. After all...” Sara glared at the knights. “I’m

one of those Invited myself.”

The knights were dumbfounded. They froze as if realizing there was nothing else they could do.

Sara relaxed when she heard someone’s exasperated voice.

“Why couldn’t you have told us that from the start? That’s super important!” The guildmaster’s shoulders slumped in exhaustion.

“S-Sorry,” Nelly apologized to him first.

“I’m sorry,” Sara added remorsefully. “I thought if I told people, I’d get dragged off to the capital.”

Everyone shrugged in understanding. And even after learning that she was one of the Invited, the people of Rosa and the Hunter’s Guild didn’t demand anything of Sara. They just seemed relieved, understanding now how it was possible for her to live safely on the Dark Mountain.

“Sara, come see me the next time you’re in town. I promise I’ll be stronger then!”

“Yeah, I’ll definitely be back. And someday...”

She was able to come down to Rosa from the Dark Mountain now. Where would she be able to go next? Wherever it was, Sara just prayed Nelly would be coming with her.

But for now, it was time to return to the Dark Mountain...

“Let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

...together with Nelly.

Epilogue: Homecoming

Sara and Nelly walked side by side, just like they had during Sara's camping training up on the Dark Mountain, as they excited Rosa through the central gate. "I've actually never used the central gate much," Nelly commented as they passed through it. "I usually use the east gate. It's closer to the Apothecary's Guild, and it takes less time to get to the Hunter's Guild from there too, since you don't have to go all the way around the town."

"But when I came to Rosa, the east gate was closed and they told me to go to the central gate." Sara had been made to walk all the way to the central gate even though the sun was already setting.

"That's weird... They always open the east gate right away whenever I come to Rosa." Nelly looked down at Sara and cocked her head. "Maybe they just didn't open it for you 'cause you didn't have an ID yet."

"I'm not sure..." Sara didn't think that was the reason. She was fairly certain the east gate remained closed when most people approached it. It only opened for special occasions, like when knights from the capital visited. Nelly's presence was just another of those special occasions, the same as a town-sponsored hunting event.

"You should have explained way more things to me, Nelly."

"S-Sorry." She at least seemed repentant about it.

"So, umm..." Sara's heart warmed with understanding. Which gate she entered Rosa through or the fact that Nelly was really Nefertari, a noblewoman, seemed trivial compared to the fact that she'd been knocked out with a paralysis agent and dragged to the capital. But it was because she hadn't discussed any of those trivial things that the two of them didn't know that much about each other and ended up getting so many other people involved in this grand misunderstanding. So she could tell that Nelly was doing her best to get her caught up on all the details now.

"I'll be sure to ask questions from now on, too."

“That’d help. I’ve never really talked to anyone else about myself before, so I don’t really know what to say.”

“I get that. Oh, that reminds me!” Sara remembered the very first thing she’d had trouble with upon arriving in Rosa. “Money! First of all, you didn’t leave any for me, but also, I didn’t even know the first thing about the currency here!”

“Money, huh...” Nelly got a far-off look in her eyes for some reason. “I’ve found that you’ll get through most situations if you just hold out a hundred-thousand-gil coin.”

“Normal twelve-year-olds don’t have hundred-thousand-gil coins, okay? They should be scrounging up the smallest kind of coins to buy sweets with or something.”

“Huh.”

This was the same sort of attitude that saw Nelly simply tossing greater healing potions at Sara in the case of any injury. She probably thought she’d “get through most situations with a greater potion.”

“I can’t believe you, Nelly. I know you can do math just fine, so why are you so careless with money? Is it because you’re a rich kid?”

“A rich kid,” Nelly repeated with a puff of laughter. “Yeah, when I was a little girl, I was probably a rich kid who never had to do her own shopping. It was ’cause all I was doing was training with a sword and physical strengthening, though.”

“Did you have dancing lessons and stuff like that, too?”

If she was a noble girl, she must have had etiquette lessons and the like, Sara figured.

“Of course. Only people I had to practice with were my father and brothers, though. I’m perfectly capable of wearing dresses and behaving like a proper noblewoman, too... Probably, at least.”

Nelly, who was scratching her nose awkwardly, didn’t look like a noblewoman at all. But...

“Wow!” Sara’s eyes twinkled all the same.

Apparently etiquette training didn't include learning to tidy up after yourself. She might have tossed bones and fruit cores on the floor whenever she was done eating, but she could still act like a proper lady if she put her mind to it, allegedly. Even if she *was* strong enough to lift the guildmaster up by his collar. Sara's train of thought was starting to derail, so she decided to drop it. The point was, Nelly was powerful, but she could act like a noble lady if she wanted to. That was cool, wasn't it?

"Nobody really wanted to marry me, though. Imagine still being single at my age."

"Nobody wants to marry you, eh? I don't know if I would say that..."

Sara was thinking, of course, of Chris. Apparently he was popular with women... Actually, he was revered by some men too, wasn't he? Sara scowled, picturing Ted's face. Chris wasn't the one causing problems or anything, but Sara thought it was pretty irresponsible of him to let Ted get away with all he did. Ted had caused her more than a little trouble, and he was practically Chris's lackey.

In any case, it was obvious to anyone around him that Chris was infatuated with Nelly. He practically worshiped the ground at her feet.

"What about, say, Chris?"

"Chris? I guess I thought I could consider him a friend...but I'm frankly pretty disappointed in him after this thing with you."

Poor Chris. Not only did she not even notice his feelings for her, he'd worked so hard and her evaluation of him had only *worsened*.

"Nelly... Let me ask you something."

"Okay." Nelly nodded obediently. "What is it?"

"Firstly, who came with you all the way to the capital out of concern for your wellbeing when you got knocked out?"

"Chris."

"And who came all the way *back* from the capital when he heard about me all alone on the Dark Mountain and got a search party dispatched for me?"

“Chris. But he couldn’t even find you,” she said indignantly.

Sara sighed. “Of course he couldn’t. I was in Rosa. How’s he supposed to rest in peace when you have such high expectations of him?”

“As far as I’m aware, he’s still alive.”

“Sheesh.”

Looking at it another way, however, he was one of very few people Nelly could be so honest about her feelings with. That at least implied a certain amount of intimacy between them. It wasn’t like Sara was in a rush to get Nelly married or anything, but she wished the Hunter would be more aware of the affection other people had for her. Her reputation at the Hunter’s Guild hadn’t been bad at all. Sara wasn’t going to give Chris any more help, though. He was an adult, so he would just have to work things out on his own.

As they spoke, the houses outside of town grew more sparse until all they could see was the town walls, the road, and the meadow. Sara thought back fondly to just a few days ago when she’d been sleeping out here at night.

“This is where I usually put my tent up,” said Sara.

“Looks like a lonely place even in the middle of the day. I’m sorry you had to go through that because of me.”

“I missed you, but I was okay since I had Allen.”

Nelly seemed fond of Allen after spending the night with him. “He really had a lot of mana. I was going easy on him, but there aren’t a lot of *adult* Hunters good enough at physical strengthening to block my sword.”

“Nelly!”

“It’s fine. Wi—”

“Even with potions, there are things you should and shouldn’t do!” Sara insisted. She was just too reckless!

“Kid’s features looked kinda familiar to me, though...” Nelly screwed her face up in thought.

“Like his sandy hair and grey-blue eyes?”

“Yeah... You really pay attention, don’t you, Sara?”

Nelly was impressed, but they seemed like perfectly normal things to take notice of to Sara.

“There was his coloring, sure, but the way his face looked, too... The kid was really put-together, but that’s not what I remember...”

“He said his uncle was a caster.”

“A caster... Oh!” Nelly’s eyes lit up with recollection. “I forgot, since he wasn’t as friendly as that kid, but he looks like a caster I partied up with back when I was first starting out as a Hunter.”

“Huh? You might have known Allen’s uncle, then? You should have remembered sooner...”

“Hmm... Well, it was a long time ago. All I remember is that he was kind of a weird guy... I see. So he passed away in a dungeon in Rosa, then.”

Nelly closed her eyes like she was saying a silent prayer for the man.

“Yeah. He fell for some scam and ended up in debt, or something...”

“I’d believe it. He was pretty trusting. He was obsessed with training in physical strengthening when I knew him, even though he was a caster.”

“Huh... Wait.” She couldn’t just ignore that. “It couldn’t be...”

“Couldn’t be what?” Nelly asked curiously.

“Did you use your ‘put it into practice!’ tactics with him?”

“Sure did. How else are you supposed to train in physical strengthening?”

That was it! The whole reason behind Allen’s punch-it-and-it’ll-work-out attitude! Sara felt light-headed.

“You know, I was wondering why the way Allen used physical strengthening was just like the way you do it, Nelly...”

“So it’s thanks to me.”

“No,” Sara swiftly corrected her. It was Nelly’s *fault*. “I mean, it is, and you could say he got as strong as he is now because of you, but you could die if you

make a single mistake with the way you do things!”

“That’s why you—”

“Potions aren’t all-powerful!”

Things were the same as always between Sara and Nelly.

At the east gate, someone called out to Nelly, finding it unusual that she’d left from the central gate instead.

“People talk to me a lot more when I’m with you,” she told Sara.

“Really?”

“In the past, the guys at the east gate always just opened the gate and then closed it again without saying a word when they saw me.”

They were probably just intimidated by the way Nelly hurried toward them.

After that, the pair began to travel through the meadow a veteran Hunter had compared to the inside of a dungeon.

“They said there was supposed to be a protection field around the road, but it’s not working right now.”

“They only noticed now, eh? Doesn’t make a difference to me, but it’s probably rough on the people who only come out here every so often.”

“It was rough on me! There were a ton of horned rabbits.”

“S-Sorry. I didn’t think Rosa would do anything about it even if I said something.”

True. It was likely the town had only taken action because the son of an important noble had suggested they do so. Sara wrinkled her nose at the thought of Liam, but she was curious about something else.

“People come out here? To the Dark Mountain?”

“Yeah.” Nelly nodded like she wasn’t saying anything unusual. “Vince and the guildmaster were with me the first time I went up to the cottage... And Chris came a lot when I first started up there. He’d pick plants and then leave.”

Sara was sure that was just an excuse. He was going up there to see Nelly.

“The Apothecary’s Guild got busy at some point though, so he stopped coming.”

They sure hadn’t had any visitors in all the time Sara had been at the cottage.

“But as long as I show up in town every ten days and buy the stuff I need, nobody needs to go see how things are going up there.”

And they weren’t likely to get visitors in the future either. Nelly smiled.

Nelly had matched Sara’s pace as they’d started out, but she gradually sped up as they went, watching to see if Sara could keep up. Sara did her best to do so, and by the end of the morning, they were going at a pretty fast clip. They had a quick lunch, and by midafternoon, they’d made it to the base of the Dark Mountain.

Sara gaped at the sight of the forest. “That was fast...”

“How are you feeling?”

“Tired, but not so much that I won’t be able to move tomorrow.” Sara checked herself over, but she really was only tired.

“Hmm. Maybe meeting all those people in Rosa who use it made you a little better at physical strengthening, Sara.”

She didn’t think she’d met *that* many people, but she *had* worked alongside people with a lot of mana, like Vince. Maybe she’d picked up on something from them subconsciously. She was always running somewhere with Allen too, wasn’t she?

“Well, I’m really glad I went to Rosa, then.”

“Yeah. I guess it worked out.”

They nodded to each other in the open area just before the Dark Mountain. The forest loomed before them.

“W-Wait a second.”

“What? Tired?”

“No...” Sara looked around, finding the supposedly green meadow looking a lot more grey than it should. She sighed. “Remember that horned rabbit

problem?”

“Oh? They think we’re trying to escape to the Dark Mountain, eh? Well, they *are* pretty high in the food chain in the meadow. They must really want to hunt us.” Nelly shrugged as if to say it was pointless for them to even try.

“Let’s hurry up the mountain, then... Huh?”

She looked back toward the mountain and found the edge of the forest packed with the forest wolves that the mountain wolves had chased away the last time she’d been here.

Nelly put a hand to her chin, impressed. “Monsters really love you, huh, Sara?”

“I don’t need their love...” Sara shoved her irritation down and took a step forward. “Nelly, just leave this to me.”

“Oh? Sure thing.” Nelly took a step back instead. “This is a nice change of pace.”

Sara held back a comment about not getting used to it and raised her hand. There was no meaning in the gesture really, but she felt like she could give her barrier a little more oomph when she did this.

Today, she’d created a layered barrier to deflect the knights’ attacks back at them. And even when she was weaker, she’d once expanded her barrier to cover a whole wyvern.

“Barrier. Expand!”

Sara slowly expanded the barrier around herself. First, the horned rabbits retreated, pushed back by the protection field. Then the forest wolves waiting at the edge of the woods gradually began to move backward as well.

Now there was nothing blocking their way forward.

“I just need to prevent them from getting close to me,” Sara said, blowing a breath out from her nose.

Nelly chuckled behind her, though Sara had no idea what was so funny.

“You should’ve just sent ’em flying. I know you wouldn’t do that though,

Sara.”

Apparently, she was laughing because she knew Sara so well.

“Well, I must be inside your barrier too now. I’ll just follow you, then.”

Sara felt like some kind of living protective amulet as they headed into the Dark Mountain.

“I didn’t know the mountain was a dungeon, though. Actually, I thought dungeons were underground things that you delved into. Since it’s outside, isn’t this just a mountain?”

“It’s mysterious to be sure.”

That was all Nelly was going to say about that, Sara surmised. Actually, she probably hadn’t found it mysterious in the slightest until Sara had pointed it out. Meaning she wasn’t going to give her a reasonable explanation.

“Guess I’ll ask Vince about it next time I’m in Rosa. No, wait...” Sara wrinkled her nose. “Vince would just say, ‘what’s it matter?’ and the guildmaster would say something like, ‘what’s the point of asking that?’ Mina’s probably the only one I could get a clear answer from.”

That was more or less what all the adults she knew in town were like.

When they stepped into the Dark Mountain, the forest wolves on the other side of Sara’s expanded barrier gave them frustrated looks.

“Heh heh.” Sara gave them a look as if to ask, “How do you like that?”

“The forest at the base of the mountain makes it kinda hard to walk while keeping my barrier so wide, though. Guess it just needs to be big enough to fit me and you inside.”

Sara adjusted her barrier so that it was only surrounding the two of them. Still, to fit the two of them, it had to be decently big.

“When I came down, the mountain wolves followed me all the way—”

Wham!

“Huh?”

“*Gyeee!*”

Sara heard a flustered flapping of wings. She stubbornly resisted the urge to look up. It was probably just an eagle or something.

“A wyvern. Haven’t seen one of those in a while.”

Sara’s shoulders slumped. They didn’t need to come all the way down here, did they?

“So, like I was saying, the mountain wolves—”

Bam!

“*Eek!*”

“I don’t even *know* that one! What is that? A-A bat?”

“Rare to see them during the day. These are forest megabats. They only live here on the Dark Mountain.”

“They must eat fruit, right?” She felt like all the big bats on Earth mainly ate fruits.

“Nah. They’re bloodsuckers.”

“Nooo!”

The monsters that had struck her barrier and fallen to the ground for the mountain wolves to eat must have been forest megabats.

“Since they’re only found here in the Dark Forest, they sell for a pretty good price. Their coats repel water, so they make good material.”

“Well, I’ll keep that in mind, but...”

The bat that had hit her barrier flew off somewhat unsteadily, so she didn’t have to collect it.

Sara recollected her thoughts. “Right, so the mountain wolves... Huh? Ack!”

Something like a boulder was rolling toward them from the mountain path ahead.

“What is that?!”

“You didn’t see any on your way down? It’s called a steel pangolin. They live on the lower part of the mountain. Their scales are hard and sharp, so they’re

good materials.”

Wham! Roll, roll, roll...

It must have been too hard for the forest wolves’ fangs to penetrate. When it hit Sara’s barrier and bounced away, they just watched it go placidly.

“Mountain wolves hunt them and eat them, but I guess forest wolves don’t.”

“W-Wow...”

Now that she thought about it, the mountain wolves had eaten the hard part of the gargoyles just fine, too.

“Whatever. We’ll be fine with my barrier. I just want to get out of the forest.”

“We should try for a more open area, at least. With wyverns around, it’s pretty uncomfortable being in these trees that block your field of view.”

Sara agreed. It made her nervous being in the forest even with her barrier. Night came before they escaped the forest, however, so they decided to camp in a relatively open area among the trees.

“Heh heh. Check this out, Nelly.”

“Your tent? I saw it yesterday.”

“I know...”

She was alone with Nelly today, so she didn’t really need the tent, but Sara still wanted to brag to Nelly about it, since she’d picked it out herself and bought it with money she’d earned (even if it *was* secondhand). It was just for one person though, so she put it away again after showing it to Nelly.

Sara took out some Guild lunch boxes and filled their cups with water, boiling it and adding tea leaves. This was what she always did when she went out with Nelly. She used her stove when she had more energy, but she’d done a lot of walking today, so she picked the easier option.

“I missed your cooking so much in the capital.”

“Really?” Sara grinned. “Allen and Vince and the guildmaster all said it was good, but I was always happiest when *you* said that, Nelly.”

“Well, it really *is* good. Hmm... But since you can finally leave the Dark

Mountain, maybe next time we go into town we should stay at an inn and check out some of the restaurants."

"That sounds fun."

It was partially for Sara's sake, but the suggestion was probably because Sara's cooking would get even better if they did that, so Nelly would be able to enjoy it more, too. Of course, Sara intended to answer Nelly's expectations.

"Come to think of it, I was planning on going to the capital to look for you if you didn't come back after a few months."

"Really?" Nelly looked up from her tea in surprise.

"Yeah. I thought you mentioned a request from the capital, and I knew if you weren't coming back it was 'cause there was some reason you couldn't." Sara looked up from her tea as well and smiled. "So I thought I'd have to go find you."

"Sara..." Nelly set her cup down and gently wrapped her arms around Sara.

"Eh heh heh..." Sara laughed bashfully.

"I'm so glad you came to me, Sara."

"I'm happy about it now, too."

"Now?" Nelly pulled back, asking with her expression if she wasn't happy at first.

"Well, I was scared of the wolves, and the cottage was all grimy."

"S-Sorry. I kept my room in the capital clean, though."

Sara giggled, catching on immediately that she'd just never let it get cluttered in the first place because she wanted to be ready to leave whenever she could.

"We'll have to stay at an inn together so I can see if you keep it tidy, then."

"Yeah. Maybe we should go on a trip instead of just staying up on the mountain all the time."

"You mean it?" Sara was just teasing her, since she didn't think Nelly would slack on her work.

“Nobody wants to live in a dungeon, so I can’t really find anyone to take over for me. It does pay well, though... I could buy a house in the capital and still have money left over. Not that I’ve counted it much lately.”

“You’re rich, Nelly!”

“Yeah, I guess so. But it’s not like I can’t ever leave even if there’s no one to take over for me. It might be better to spend some time up there right now, but I’m sure I can take a vacation at some point.”

Sara hadn’t thought Nelly would suggest something like that. She was excited for what the future would bring. She fully intended to tag along with her, of course.

“Would you come with me if I do, Sara?”

“Of course!” She was even happier to be invited. “I want to try a bunch of new foods.”

“There are a lot of monsters besides horned rabbits out in the meadows around the capital.”

“I want to try that poultry everyone hates, too.”

“It’s really not good, you know.”

If even Nelly felt that way, it must really suck.

“I won’t be able to eat your cooking if we go on a trip though, huh...”

Sara laughed at the rueful face Nelly was making. “Well, we can camp out or rent a house somewhere, but I want to try a bunch more food before we do something like that.”

“Good idea. Let’s do it.”

There were plenty of places on the Dark Mountain she hadn’t been yet, and probably some monsters she hadn’t eaten yet, too. They wouldn’t be going on that trip anytime soon, so Sara decided to get the most out of her life on the Dark Mountain for now.

“I’m really looking forward to it... For now, I’ve learned how to cook horned rabbit from working in the cafeteria at the Guild.”

“Oh yeah? Horned rabbit is pretty pricey.”

“Speaking of pricey...” Sara recalled. “When I told Allen I ate cockatrice a lot, he said there was no way that was true. Is it rare?”

“Err, well...” Nelly averted her eyes from Sara. “I guess it’s one of those, you know...luxury foods?”

“So that’s why...”

That was why everyone had thought it was just “some kind of poultry.”

“We really should talk more.”

“Mm. No objections here.”

“*Growl.*”

“*Growl.*”

Wait a second. I feel like I just heard something really nostalgic.

“*Growwwl.*”

“Wait, it’s not nostalgic! What are mountain wolves doing here...?”

“*Growl!*”

At some point, the pack of forest wolves had been swapped out for a pack of mountain wolves.

“They couldn’t have come here because they sensed my presence or something like that...right?”

“Hahaha. You might be right about that. You *are* one of the Invited, though. Maybe the wyvern told them.”

“*Growl.*”

“You think so? Hahaha...”

Sara half-wondered why she was laughing, but she also felt relieved, like she’d just come home.

“*Growl.*”

Welcome home, Sara.

