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ILLUS. INARU

# Taking My Reincarnation One Step at a TIME

No One Told Me  
There Would Be **Monsters!**





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# Table of Contents:

Prologue: **Soon to Be an Apothecary**

Chapter 1: **Everyone and Their Uncle, Headed for the Capital**

Chapter 2: **In the Capital**

Chapter 3: **Plant Gathering**

Chapter 4: **Sara's Abilities**

Epilogue: **Still Far to Go**





## Prologue: Soon to Be an Apothecary

Today was a turning point in Sara's new life as an apprentice apothecary. As she faced a beaker with a faint yellow liquid inside it, the rest of the Apothecary's Guild held their breath all around her.

Some seasons had passed since their arrival in Hydrangea, and Sara was now fourteen. If it were still the fall when Chris had unceremoniously dumped her here, the situation she found herself in now would likely have caused her nothing but anxiety, but after training all this time under the strict, but fair (if eccentric) guildmaster Caren, the gazes of her senior apothecaries now felt warm and encouraging to her. After all, if she proved she could mix a stable mana elixir, she would be able to join their ranks as a fellow full-fledged apothecary.

Over the last year, Sara had learned how to synthesize potions, poisons, antidotes, paralytics, and antiparalytics, one after another, but the most difficult concoction to create was a mana elixir, and she hadn't yet succeeded at producing one.

To finish the potion off, Sara carefully stirred the yellow liquid in the beaker at a steady rate. "Just a bit of mana, steady... There!"

Whenever she added her mana, potions went from a muddy green to a clear green, and antidotes turned to a clear purple as well. Mana elixirs were a bit different, however.

"Completely clear... I'd say that's a success." Caren, watching from nearby, sighed with relief.

Mana elixirs were mainly used by casters to replenish their spent magical power. They caused intense drowsiness immediately after consumption, though, so people didn't tend to use them when they didn't have to, which meant demand for them wasn't high. There always would be *some* demand, however, as casters usually took some with them into a dungeon for peace of mind, if nothing else. That being said, they were difficult to produce and didn't



net much profit, so they were a bit of a pain from an apothecary's perspective.

"If you really did succeed, then that'll be a load off of *our* shoulders..." Caren sighed. Sara gave her a sidelong glance and she hastily corrected herself. "I mean, it's always a relief to have a new, talented apothecary on the scene."

The revised statement was pretty much the same thing, but Sara figured it was a big step for Caren that she'd considered Sara's feelings at all. It made Sara a little lightheaded to think back on all that she'd been through in this past year. Caren had definitely learned some things from Chris.

"Let's see how it turned out, then." Caren took the spoon from Sara, dabbed a drop of mana elixir on her hand, and licked it up. Her mouth quirked up into a smile. "It tastes just like it should. Congratulations on the successful mana elixir, Sara."







Applause and cheers erupted throughout the guild and Sara's mana elixir and spoon were passed around to all of the senior apothecaries. Some of them nodded and smiled, saying, "Mm-hmm, it's perfect," while others groaned in frustration, "That took me five years to do!" Still, everyone was happy, since like Caren had said, more people sharing the work meant less time to get it done and more time to do other things like research. Though Sara liked to think they were simply celebrating her success, of course.

She felt the tension leaving her shoulders.

"I would expect nothing less from Master Chris's favorite student," said Caren. "You know, Master Chris was acknowledged as a full-fledged apothecary at thirteen. He'd actually mastered everything at twelve, but the thickheaded guildmaster at the time wouldn't acknowledge him until he was thirteen."

"Is that right?"

It was Caren's usual excited Master Chris talk, so Sara's response was somewhat half-hearted, but she enjoyed getting to hear things about him that he probably didn't remember himself. She was excited to go back to the mansion later and report her success to Nelly too.

"Well, that's enough about Master Chris," said Caren.

Sara decided not to comment that *she* was the one who'd brought him up in the first place.

"We've still got a decent stock of mana elixirs, so you'll be in charge of producing them for us for a little while. Once you're able to make them consistently, you'll be officially recognized as an apothecary in Hydrangea."

Another cheer went through the guildhall.

"Pretty lively in here, huh?"

"We're back!"

Kuntz and Allen stuck their heads into the workspace in the back of the guildhall. Sara turned toward the front, realizing that it was already evening. Time flew when you were nervous.

"Welcome back!"



Sara had grown a bit in the last year, settling somewhere around the height she'd been before she'd reincarnated, but Allen had grown even more. Kuntz, who was already taller than Allen, still seemed to be growing too, so while the height difference between them hadn't changed, Sara was having to look farther up at both of them, which she found a little frustrating.

It had been a year since the outbreak of seven-colored swallowtails as well, and though the adult forms of the monsters could be hunted, it was impossible to eliminate the eggs and cocoons completely, so there were still quite a few of them around, though not as many as at the height of the problem. Thus, there was still demand for antiparalytics, which meant there was demand for the ingredients to make them: white moonlight mushrooms.

Kuntz and Allen were able to go down pretty deep into the dungeon now, but they still dutifully gathered white moonlight mushrooms, so they were as popular as ever with the Apothecary's Guild. But that wasn't the only place they were popular. After coming in first in last year's seven-colored swallowtail hunting contest, they were immediately thrust into the spotlight as talented young Hunters.

"Allen, what's that you've got there?"

"Oh, this?" Allen lifted up his hand like he'd only just realized he was holding something and then tossed it into the storage pouch on his waist like it was completely unimportant. "Just a letter. They gave it to me right in front of the Apothecary's Guild today, so I ended up just bringing it here."

"Today?" That implied that he had gotten other letters.

"I get them too, you know. Most of my invitations are in person, though." Kuntz put his arm around Allen's shoulder and grinned.

Allen was fourteen like Sara, but Kuntz was sixteen, so maybe he was getting invitations from older groups who were more proactive. In any case, Sara was just curious what Allen had been holding, so she didn't intend to pry into his personal affairs. She was pretty sure she'd managed to stop herself from smirking too.

"Oh yeah? You sure are popular." She left it at that.

“Come on, you’re not gonna ask them any questions?” someone piped up from the crowd, but Sara ignored them.

Teenagers didn’t like people butting into their business, Sara recalled from her past life. Of course, she had been more concerned with simply surviving at the time, so she hadn’t exactly had a normal experience of puberty.

“Anyway, we heard cheering from outside, Sara. Does that mean...?” Allen asked her with stars in his eyes.

Sara stuck out her chest. “It sure does! I finally made a mana elixir!”

Allen and Kuntz broke into big grins. Sara preferred these honest expressions on them over the surly looks they wore when they were trying to show off their stuff as Hunters.

“You did it! Congrats!”

“You’re only fourteen, right? Exceptional as always.”

Sara was happy to receive Allen’s heartfelt congratulation *and* Kuntz’s somewhat sardonic praise.

“Though *Master Chris* became an apothecary at thirteen. I suppose it’s only natural, considering Sara is his apprentice.” Caren always had to bring up Chris, but Sara was still happy that she acknowledged her abilities.

“Well, we should celebrate! Of course, Nelly’s still down in the depths of the dungeon...”

“Yeah. She always stays for a week when she goes down there.”

She’d left just two days ago, so she wouldn’t be back for a while still. It was sad to think she wasn’t here when she was the one who’d be happiest to hear the news, but Sara was comforted by the fact that they each knew the other one was fine even when they were apart.

“Well, let’s celebrate twice, then! Just with us first and then with Nelly when she gets back.”

“Can we?!” Sara had been planning to wait until Nelly got back, so she leaped up in excitement at Allen’s unexpected suggestion.



“No, wait. Once with us, then again with the lord, and then a third time when Nelly gets back, right?”

“Kuntz...” Sara felt her eyes watering at the kindness of her friends.

“Oh? Well you know we’re going to celebrate here at the Guild as well, Sara. Once now, and again when your promotion is official,” said Caren.

The apothecaries all cheered.

“Thank you so much.” Sara was so touched that she couldn’t help bowing her head low.

One of the apothecaries gave her a curious look. “Oh, that’s a custom of the Invited, isn’t it? It’s the first time I’ve seen it.”

“Oh, I suppose so.”

Ever since the hunting contest last year, she’d stopped hiding the fact that she was one of the Invited, and thankfully she was able to get by without being treated differently by anyone else. Sara had really treasured this last year in Hydrangea.

“Oh, I think they’re already making dinner for me at home, though, so can we celebrate later?”

Here, “home” meant the mansion of Nelly’s father, the lord of Hydrangea, Riot. As his daughter, it was only natural for Nelly to stay there, but Chris and Sara had ended up taking advantage of his hospitality as well.

“Sure. Just let me walk you home since it’s been a while. We can buy some sweets or something on the way.”

“Okay!”

Sara was able to leave a little early that day, and she walked back home to the mansion in between Kuntz and Allen.

“Maybe Marcia’s cookies. Ri would like that.”

Of course, the chefs at the mansion were perfectly capable of baking delicious desserts, but Ri was just as fond of the simple, plain cookies Marcia sold at her store.

Sara had been calling him “Mr. Riot” last year to be polite until he’d told her, “You can call me ‘father,’ you know?”

Nelly had responded, “That’s a little shameless, isn’t it? It should be ‘grandfather.’”

After that savage exchange, she’d settled on calling him “Ri” like Chris and other people who were close to him did.

“The muffins sell out by noon, but she should still have some cookies left.”

She was familiar with Marcia’s shop since she and Nelly often stopped there when they went home together. Of course, they usually ate what they bought as soon as they bought it, so it was rare for any of it to actually make it back to Ri.

As they made their way to Marcia’s shop, the young girls of the town tittered and whispered about them, but this was a common occurrence as of late, so it had stopped bothering Sara.

“You two really *are* popular.”

“Guess so.”

Kuntz smiled smugly while Allen shrugged his shoulders, his expression neutral.

“Doesn’t really matter to me.”

“Yeah, yeah. You always gotta play it cool, Allen.” Kuntz jabbed Allen’s shoulder with his fist behind Sara’s back.

“I’m not playing it cool. I just know I’m a Hunter, so if I got together with someone and something happened to me, I’d just make them sad. I hate that.”

Sara was so startled she stopped walking. Not only had Allen lost his parents when he was young, he’d lost his uncle in a dungeon soon after. The pain Allen was describing, of being left behind, was something he’d experienced personally.

“You say that, but you’re not even going out with anyone right now and you know if something happened to you, you’d still make me and Sara sad. ‘Course, that wouldn’t happen as long as you’re teamed up with me.”



Unlike Sara, who'd been stunned speechless, Kuntz was able to argue with Allen right away.

"You'd be fine on your own, Kuntz. And Sara..." Allen gave Sara a gentle smile. "You've got Nelly. You'd be fine too."

Allen was acting like he didn't have anyone. Sara's chest felt tight, but she played it off by bumping her shoulder against Allen.

"Don't ever push yourself down in the dungeon. Promise me, okay?"

"Yeah, I know."

It was supposed to be a lighthearted conversation about how he was popular with girls, but somehow things had gotten very heavy very quickly. They cheerfully bought their cookies and headed home to try to dispel the sour mood that had settled around them.

"Oh, I love this smell!"

Sara sniffed the air after passing through the mansion's gates. There was a sweet, floral smell almost like jasmine coming from the building used by the southern branch of the knight corps.

"You think so? I don't really like it."

"Yeah, me neither. I've never really liked perfume."

Allen and Kuntz wrinkled their noses. It *did* smell a little like a woman's perfume.

"Kinda feel bad for the knights," Allen commented.

Sara had to agree. "They never should have given Chris the opportunity."

"I dunno. Even if they'd put up more of a fight, do you really think anyone other than Nelly can stop that guy from doing what he wants?"

"Guess not."

The three of them shrugged sympathetically in the direction of the knights' headquarters.

Chris, in the last year, had been busy gathering materials in the dungeon and working on developing a new drug. The floral smell was a by-product of this

development, and Chris had been borrowing a room in the knights' building because "it would cause trouble to the Apothecary's Guild" to do it there. It was indeed important for such strong-smelling work to be done where it wouldn't affect the brewing of other potions and drugs, but since the knights' building always smelled like flowers now, it was the knights who had to deal with the smell sticking to their clothes and such.

When Chris asked them stone-faced, "Is there a problem?" and the only damage they could claim was being done to their dignity, there wasn't anything they could really say to get him to stop.

"The people of the town seem to think it's kinda stylish that the knights all smell like flowers now, though," Kuntz told them. He was most in tune with the rumors around town of the three of them.

"Yeah. Chris even said he'd think about actually making perfume once he finishes the drug he's working on. I guess there are a lot of things that go into potions that are also used to make perfumes."

Sara was very interested in the subject herself. You could be an apothecary as long as you could make the six basic kinds of potions, but there were actually a ton of materials that could be used for potions, and when you were on the level of a guildmaster like Chris, there were all sorts of different things you could make with those materials.

"I wonder if Nelly will really be able to stop going to the capital for that special job once he finishes it, though."

"It'd be nice. Personally, I feel like it'd be hard to use even if he does finish it," Kuntz commented.

The drug Chris was developing was a dragon repellent. He'd hit upon the idea while deep in the dungeon with Nelly, after hearing that there was a spot where wyverns would apparently never attack. Sara remembered how excited he'd been when he was telling her about it.

"The fact that wyverns never fly over this area has to mean that there's something there that they avoid. I searched the area for plants I'm familiar with and found a variety of dragonmint with a color I've never seen before."



Despite otherwise being carnivores, dragons liked to eat the dragonmint plant. Normally, it was purple, but the dragonmint Chris had found was an almost transparent white.

“I’m calling it silver dragonmint for now. It was this great, sparkling silver field with a fragrant scent, and though we were in the very depths of the dungeon, it was almost like I was out on a date with Nef—*ahem, ahem.*”

Sara would keep to herself how she had almost burst out laughing at the way Nelly glared at Chris as he acted like he hadn’t said what he had.

“With the number of wyverns down there, it was strange that none of them were flying down to attack us. If anything, it was like they were avoiding the area deliberately. The first thing I tried was the rather primitive method of coating a rock with some of the plant’s nectar and having Nef throw it at a wyvern.”

“Don’t call it primitive. It’s a normal way for a Hunter who uses physical strengthening to fight.”

Physical strengthening could improve your throwing power, but whether you hit the target accurately depended on training.

“The wyvern dodged the rock like it was mocking me, but then it arched its back and flew off really fast.”

So they had guessed that wyverns really didn’t like the smell of the plant.

“We confirmed it later with the help of Nef and some other Hunters, so I started wondering if we could use this to deal with the migrating dragons in the capital.”

If they could deal with the dragons using only the knights and Hunters already in the capital, then they wouldn’t have to call Nelly for help. As always, Chris was thinking first and foremost about Nelly’s happiness.

Chris had brought the subject to the Apothecary’s Guild and Caren had agreed to a joint research project right away, both out of pure enjoyment of the development process and a desire to spend more time with Chris. The knights had already been letting Chris use a room for his work, so they’d allowed him to work on the project there without asking enough questions about what it was

before he started.

As a result, the knight's base now always smelled like flowers and the Apothecary's Guild was more lively than ever.

Extracting the components of the plant that produced the scent had been difficult at first, but Chris had eventually succeeded with the help of the Apothecary's Guild and Sara. Sara was proud of her part in the process. She'd suggested lowering the temperature of the water and had spent some time learning ice magic from one of her senior apothecaries. Those days had been a lot of fun for her, and she'd filed the memories of them away in a special album in her heart.

Of course, just as Kuntz had mentioned, even if they had perfected the drug, they still weren't quite sure how to use it, so Nelly and Chris were currently down in the depths of the dungeon testing out some of the methods they'd come up with.

There was no point in standing around talking outside the mansion forever, so Sara and company headed inside. They handed Marcia's cookies to Ri and all three of them partook of dinner in the mansion that night.

Kuntz had been reserved around Ri at first, but he had gotten used to dining with the lord of the region by now, and Allen had never been reserved in the first place.

"Casters are used to their own magic methods, and it's kind of difficult to implement drugs with those." Kuntz continued the topic they'd been discussing outside. Of course, they'd told Ri about Sara's successful mana elixir first, and he'd been thrilled to hear it.

Sara tried to remember what little she knew about migrating dragons. "I think Nelly said migrating dragons fly low enough that you can see them, so it's easy to hit them with magic."

"That's the problem." Ri was commander of the capital knights for a long time, and migrating dragons were a headache for him the whole time.

"Naturally, knights train in physical strengthening, but most of them make use of swords, which don't do much good against flying creatures. There's an archer unit as well, of course, but the biggest problem for them is that they can't shoot



the dragons down.”

“They can’t?” Sara had thought the whole point of subduing the migrating dragons was, well, to get rid of them.

“Dragons are large and heavy, so we try to drive them away from the capital so they don’t do any damage there. We only eliminate the ones we can’t drive away. That’s why it’s such a complex issue. If we culled too many of them, the number of horned rabbits and cotton sheep in the meadows would just become a new problem, after all.”

Sara thought back to the meadow to the east of Rosa. There had been so many horned rabbits there that the Guild had had to sponsor a hunting event to get rid of them. Sara wondered if migrating dragons had something to do with that. She chased the thought from her head, since that wasn’t what they were discussing right now.

“That’s why Hunters who are casters are so important,” Kuntz added to what Ri had said. “They use flames, wind, water—whatever they’re good at—and aim at the dragons’ faces, trying to get them to change direction without hurting them. They only finish off the dragons that don’t change direction or that come down to the ground. Nelly says it’s a pain, but as a caster, I’d kinda like to try taking part at least once.”

Sara’s mouth fell open before she remembered they were eating and hastily closed it. Nelly always acted sick of the process, so she’d thought it was something no one actually wanted to do.

Ri gave her a wry grin. “There’s a big reward, so it’s not a bad job for a caster. It’s also a good opportunity to show off the level of control you have.”

“Yes, exactly.”

Ri and Kuntz were basically on the same wavelength.

“For the swordsmen who have nothing to do until the dragons come down to the ground, it’s not a very fun job, though. It’s not very glamorous just finishing off a monster squirming on the ground after it’s fallen out of the air.”

Sara couldn’t help wrinkling her nose, thinking of Liam. He seemed like the type to care about looking good.

“When I was there, we put out a general request for Hunters, but I was also the one who established the tradition of requesting Neffie’s help specifically. I really feel bad for what I did...” Because of the precedent Ri had set, Nelly had been called to the capital even after he retired like it was tradition.

“That paralysis agent they used on Neffie was likely developed with migrating dragons in mind as well. I hear they’ve been using it all over, testing it on various monsters.”

“But if they bring the dragons down by paralyzing them, then they’ll just have to kill them, won’t they?”

“Right. I have to wonder what the current knight corps is thinking about this.”

They hadn’t been very successful in Camellia with the poison bog frogs, so Sara wasn’t sure they were thinking anything at all. She shook her head. Surely, they had to be thinking *something*, right?

“They messed up in Camellia when the wind changed direction and got themselves paralyzed by their own drug, so I hope they’re not making the same mistake in other places.”

“Well, I can’t exactly defend that.”

When even the former knight commander was grimacing at the current state of the knights, Sara had to abandon any expectations she had of them.

“It’d be nice if Nelly didn’t have to go anymore.”

“He was nothing but an impudent brat in the past, but looking at him now...maybe I can leave things to Chris from now on.”

Sara didn’t ask him what (or who) he wanted to leave to Chris.

“By the way, did you hear that other brat out?” Ri suddenly asked Sara, changing the subject to another “brat.”

Sara didn’t really want to talk about this, so she might have scowled a little. “Which brat would this be, now?”

“You know, Andy...whatever his name was, from the southern knights.”

Andy Whatever-his-name-was was a second son or something of a minor

noble family based in Hydrangea, a rarity for the southern branch of the knights who were mostly dispatched here from the capital. Apparently, he'd fallen in love with Sara at first sight during the seven-colored swallowtail hunt last year, and he'd proposed marriage to her. He was eighteen or nineteen, so not too far off from Sara's age, but whether they were close in age or not, Sara wasn't interested in getting married yet.

"Cut it out, Ri." Allen stepped in for her right away. "You're just thinking about how Sara would stay in Hydrangea forever if she settled down with a noble from here, aren't you?"

"You're sharp, Allen." Ri looked a bit taken aback.

"Sara and I are still just standing at the threshold as a Hunter and an apothecary. We haven't made anything of ourselves yet. I don't think marriage or anything should happen until after that."

As always, Allen had good stuff to say. Sara looked Ri in the eye as well.

"Ri, I know you cherish me. I don't have to worry about most of the proposals from the capital since you turned them down for me. But I don't want to think about marriage right now. I've got enough on my mind with my apothecary training."

"I suppose you're right. I'm sorry I brought it up."

"It's okay. You're... Well, you're kind of like my dad in this world, so I'm happy that you worry about me."

"'Dad'..." Ri looked up at the ceiling, overcome with emotion. "See, isn't that what I said, Neffie?" he muttered to no one. "I said dad. Not grandpa. Do you understand?"

Sara wanted to take back the bashfulness and affection she'd felt a moment ago, but could you blame her? Still, Sara was very much enjoying her life in Hydrangea, where she always had close friends and family nearby even when Nelly was away.

In the days after that, Sara went out to celebrate with Allen and Kuntz, and waited for Nelly to return, crafting mana elixirs with everything she had. But

even after the usual week they spent in the dungeon, Nelly and Chris still didn't come back. As Sara fretted about them, someone she wasn't expecting paid her a visit. It was Zachary.

"They were real sucked into the little experiments they were doing down in the deep parts of the dungeon. With that dragon repellent or whatever."

He hadn't been given a message or anything; it seemed he'd just come to tell Sara what was happening since she was likely worried. Now that she'd gotten to know him, she'd found that Zachary was awkward but kind. It was silly to her how frightened she'd been of the "Black Reaper" last year.

"Were they okay?"

They'd brought a lot of food with them, but Nelly wasn't exactly the best at looking after herself, and Chris tended to forget to eat or sleep when he got into his work. Sara had to worry about them.

"Well... They seemed like they were having fun," Zachary said after a thoughtful pause.

Sara nodded solemnly. "Okay. I get it." So they weren't neglecting their health, but they *were* so into their experiments that they'd forgotten how long they were supposed to be down there.

"I think they're fine. Just looked like they might be getting back late, so I figured I should let you know."

"Thank you."

Since she knew how Nelly and Chris were doing now, Sara could concentrate on her work without worrying. She seemed to have gotten the hang of making mana elixirs after succeeding at it once, so she hadn't failed again yet, but she still felt like she had a lot of practicing to do—on mana elixirs and all other kinds of potions as well. While time and stock allowed, she wanted to get in as much practice as she could.

A few days later, a commotion came from the front of the Apothecary's Guild while Sara was finishing up her final successful mana elixir of the day, portioning it out into potion bottles.



“Is that Allen?”

If it was, she figured he would poke his head in back, but she was a bit curious about the excited squeals coming from out front. Still, she restrained herself until she’d finished portioning out the rest of her mana elixir, and then, giving herself a pat on the back, she turned to the door out to the front of the guildhall.

“Nelly! And, huh?”

She could recognize Nelly no matter what state she was in. Even if she was standing in the doorway with her shaggy red hair covered in muck and her clothes and face black with soot. But who was that next to her, who was black as tar from head to foot? Mouth wide-open, Sara looked into the man’s grey eyes when he turned to face her.



“Is that...Chris?”

“Is there any other man worthy of standing beside Nef?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s Chris,” Nelly added helpfully.

They’d known each other long enough that Sara could pick out the offended look on his face, even through the thick layer of grime.

“Welcome back! But what happened?” Sara ran over to Nelly, intending to hug her, but just before she reached her, she stopped like she’d hit a wall and leaped back. “You stink!”

Normally, Sara would never say something so rude to someone, especially someone she cared so deeply for, but the smell was so intense that the words spilled out of her mouth before she had time to stop them. Just hunting and sweating without taking a bath for over a week would be one thing, but they also had a stench on them like super concentrated flowers smoked on a bonfire. It was so intense that it hurt Sara’s eyes when she got near them.

“That bad?” It was cute how Nelly sniffed her sleeve, but what stunk stunk.

“That bad. I think you two should take a bath first.”

“But...” Chris took a step forward, so Sara took a step back without thinking. “We figured out that if we burn the repellent on a bonfire, the wyverns will avoid the smoke.”

“So you kept the bonfire going for your experiments and ended up just as smoked as the repellent yourselves. Just what I would expect from you, Master Chris.”

“The title is unnecessary.”

“Right. Chris.”

Caren could still blush over Chris when he was pitch-black with soot from head to toe. Fans were really something, thought Sara.

“Still, it will probably feel better to discuss things when you’ve washed off and changed. We have facilities here in the Apothecary’s Guild that you may feel free to make use of.”

Apothecaries would stay the night when they were busy or when their research was reaching its peak, so they had facilities that could be used at such times.

“Go ahead and go first, then, Nef.”

“I’ll take you up on that.”

She had a change of clothes in her storage pouch, so Nelly let one of the apothecaries direct her to the bath.

“Why don’t you take a seat while you wait, Chris?”

“No, I don’t want to make too much of a mess.” So he *was* aware that he was absolutely filthy. “The repellent itself is complete,” he said. “It’s just finding a way to make use of it on flying dragons that’s the difficult part.”

“Right.”

With the nearly limitless magical capabilities Sara had due to her being one of the Invited, she could disperse the repellent wherever she wanted using wind magic. If she did that, however, it would just mean the capital would start relying on *her* indefinitely instead of Nelly. Chris’s goal was for the knight corps to be able to deal with the dragons by themselves, or at least with the help of some Hunters from the capital.

“It pained me to imitate those idiotic knights, but we tried their method of throwing bottles of repellent and rupturing them with magic near the wyverns, but that spooked the wyverns so badly that they went on a total rampage and some of our Hunters ended up injured. Definitely not the way to do it.”

Sara had heard about this from Nelly as well, but all she’d said was that “it was funny how much they freaked out.” Sara hadn’t thought people had actually been injured.

“Wyverns usually fly high up in the sky, so it’s only natural there would be some confusion with them coming down to lower altitudes and even landing on the ground.”

“Oh, it’s not a problem for a Hunter who knows their stuff.”

“You can’t think of Nefertari as an average Hunter. It’s ’cause of you two that



the Hunter's Guild asked us to make a request in writing now when we want to do experiments down in the dungeon," Caren said somewhat ruefully. Their most recent experiment had been carried out with express permission from the Hunter's Guild.

"Our first primitive experiment with the rock was the same way. It's clear that the repellent works, but if anything, it's *too* strong. Even the silver dragonmint on its own, before any processing."

"I guess that's why the wyverns don't even fly above the area where it grows."

Chris nodded his soot-blackened head. "They seem to respond to even the slightest whiff of the scent, even if it's too faint for a human nose to detect it. Oh, Nef! You're even more beautiful than usual..." he gasped as she emerged.

"That'll happen when you clean yourself off." Nelly brushed off Chris's compliment like usual, but Sara got the impression she was warming up to the man a little more recently.

"I'll go wash off as well." Chris left to take a shower next.

"Your hair's still wet, Nelly."

Nelly plopped down into the seat Chris had refrained from taking earlier and Sara went around behind her, dabbing the bottom of her lazily tied-back hair with a towel she took out of her pouch.

"Thanks, Sara. If I leave it like this, Chris won't shut up about drying it off himself. That helps."

"Don't do it 'cause of Chris, do it so you don't catch a cold. Jeez."

It was plain to see that Nelly was, in fact, getting used to Chris's clinginess.

"So how far'd Chris get?"

"He was explaining how your previous experiments failed," Caren answered in Sara's place.

Their first meeting had been antagonistic, but Caren had softened somewhat since the white moonlight mushroom incident, and she and Sara shared something of a mutual respect now.

“Well, I dunno if I’d be able to give you a good explanation, so I’ll just say that we basically figured out that smoke has a good chance of changing the direction of a wyvern in flight.”

“So this one was a success?”

“Yeah. Plus, we didn’t have to use much of the repellent to do it.”

“Really?” Caren had been standing while Chris was in the room, but she sat down in a chair now, looking relieved.

“Chris also said we only succeeded ’cause we had the help of a bright apothecary from Hydrangea.”

“I would have liked to hear that from him directly, but he’s not really the type, is he?” Caren looked a little disappointed, but all of the other apothecaries who had been involved in the production of the repellent were just happy to hear the words, even if they came from Nelly.

“Now it’s just a question of how to propose this to the knights. It’d be nice if Ri could just make the suggestion to the current commander, but the guy’s got a bit of an inferiority complex. Not sure he would listen.”

“Inferiority complex?” Sara asked.

“It tends to happen when you keep hearing about how good the previous guy was at your job.”

From what Sara knew of the current knight corps, it definitely made sense that the current commander wasn’t as good at his job as the last one.

“The current guildmaster of the Apothecary’s Guild in the capital is Master Chris’s senior, so maybe we can make a request through the Apothecary’s Guild.”

“Senior? Not junior?”

“That’s right. Master Chris was just so talented, he became guildmaster instead of a lot of people who were older than him at the time.”

Sara just got more worried hearing that. “And that guy doesn’t have an inferiority complex?”

Caren shook her head. “Most apothecaries value real skill over anything else. There aren’t many people talented enough to even see Master Chris as a rival. Though there are the ambitious types like Camellia’s guildmaster too.”

Sara had heard on the grapevine that Camellia was treating the guildmaster’s little trip to the capital like it had never happened. In other words, he’d gone right back to his position as guildmaster with no issues.

“I wonder how Ted’s doing...” Even with his personality—no, *because* of his personality—she was worried he was having a hard time of it there, clashing with the other apothecaries.

“I’ve never met him personally, but he’s a bit of a legend among apothecaries, since even Master Chris had his hands full with him,” Caren said with a bit of a chuckle.

“He put *you* through quite a bit too, you know. You’re too kind for your own good, Sara.” There was a hint of exasperation in Nelly’s voice.

“Well, yeah, but he was our traveling companion too, wasn’t he? I mean, he treated us to meals and tea and stuff.”

“Ted did?” A disbelieving voice came from behind them. It must have been one of the apothecaries who had worked with him in the capital.

“Yeah. He even gave me a gathering basket and a tea set since he caused me so much trouble.”

“*Ted* did?”

Sara almost laughed at how disbelieving the other apothecary was. Since she always had the tea set he’d given her in her storage pouch, she decided to get it out and show everyone. She used it a lot when she had tea outside, since it was a gift and all.

“Sara, this is a Royal Regio tea set!”

“Oh yeah, I think Chris said something about that. This little red ivy design is so cute, isn’t it?”

“It’s not *cute*... I mean, it *is* cute, but this is a super rare, made-to-order set...”

Sara was a little surprised to find that something she used so casually was that

valuable, but Ted used it just as casually, hadn't he? Besides, tools were meant to be used.

"Ted said it was fine since it's used, so it's okay."

"He just said that so he could give you something he special-ordered because he obviously liked it. Ted must have been really fond of you, Sara."

Sara waved her hands in front of her face in a no-way gesture. "It was his way of apologizing for being really nasty to me at first."

"Oh, if it isn't Ted's favorite tea set." Chris had come back from the bath, his hair finally back to its original silver coloring. And he'd made a completely unnecessary comment.

The "You see?" looks everyone was giving Sara stung a bit. But she was also a bit frustrated, since the way Ted had given it to her implied it meant nothing to him.

Chris turned to Caren. "Did Nef tell you the good news?"

"She said you found out you could reliably change the direction of a wyvern's flight by making the repellent into smoke."

"Mm. That's my Nef. Always straight to the point."

"I'm not yours." There was no punch to Nelly's comebacks anymore. Actually, Sara knew Nelly well enough to say with some certainty that she was simply getting tired of making them lately.

The conversation now turned to an apothecary-like discussion about how much repellent to use with one bonfire and how much stock would be needed to cover the entire region of the capital, so Sara started tidying up the gear she'd been using to make her mana elixirs. She'd had nothing but success for the last week, and if she had another week of the same success, she'd be able to officially call herself a real apothecary. Her movements were light and cheery as she worked.

"I have another experiment or two I'd like to run, so once those are done with, I'll set about getting involved in this year's dragon subjugation. It is a bit of a pain, though."

It was rare for Chris to come right out and say something was a pain. He normally never complained one bit about research or things he knew he had a responsibility to do. Even Chris had a hard time with politics, Sara supposed.

“Oh yeah, Chris,” Caren said, “Sara’s succeeded in brewing a mana elixir.”

Chris’s chair clattered out from behind him as he stood. Sara saw Nelly stand up as well.

*“Finally!”*

Sara felt the need to check if her cheeks were twitching. Yes... *This* was the sort of person Chris was.

Sara was really glad she’d gotten the opportunity to train in Hydrangea. She felt like she’d finally been able to see what “normal” looked like here. If she’d just trained under Chris, it would have been a repeat of her thinking living up on the Dark Mountain was normal.

“So, Caren...?” Nelly asked and Caren smiled in response.

“So she can call herself an apothecary officially in another week.”

“Really?! Sara, that’s amazing!” Nelly strode forward and picked Sara up like she was still a little kid.

“Eh heh heh. I’ve been hard at work too.” Sara got a big, dopey smile on her face, feeling rather ticklish.

“Well, you *are* my apprentice. Good work.” Chris’s compliment was very Chris-like, but there was genuine happiness on his face, so Sara accepted it without complaint.

“Thank you.”

“Well, we’ve gotta celebrate! Should we go out on the town?”

Sara was happy for the invitation, since she didn’t get to go out much with Nelly, but her response was this: “Yeah, but I think you really should get home and take another bath for now.”

“That bad?” Nelly sniffed her sleeve again, which was just as cute the second time, but...



“Yeah, a little bit. Just a little bit, though.”

The smell of that bonfire lingered quite a bit.

The fall of Sara’s fourteenth year passed in that fashion, and right around when she was officially recognized as an apothecary, several letters arrived from the capital. One was for the Apothecary’s Guild, one was for Chris, one was for Nelly, one was for Ri, and one was for Sara.

# Chapter 1: Everyone and Their Uncle, Headed for the Capital

The letters were, of course, all from different senders.

Sara's was yet another inquiry about a marriage proposal. It was down to two houses now vying for her still, so it had been a bit since she'd last received one. This one was from the prime minister's family.

"That darn Liam. He's so persistent. I'm sure he's thinking something stupid again, like, 'I have to save that pitiful homeless girl.'"

Ri laughed when he saw the huff Sara worked herself into upon seeing the letter. "I'm sure it's not just that. Every house wants an Invited. Plus, Liam's a talented knight who's sent on all sorts of missions as a unit commander, despite his youth. Since he's the prime minister's son, he's a top contender for knight corps commander as well. He's got a brilliant future for sure, and yet..."

"He might be talented, but it annoys me to no end that he doesn't ever listen to what people tell him. And I don't like that he still thinks he needs to protect me when I'm with Nelly, who's way stronger than him, and when I'm staying with the Wolveries too," Sara hissed.

"You really hate him, huh?"

If anything, Ri was *too* tolerant of Liam, especially after he'd tried to use a paralysis agent on Nelly.

"Don't worry, I made my objections to the incident clear," he'd said on the matter. "Chris also put forth his opinion as an apothecary that the drug shouldn't be used on people, so they're not just tossing it around willy-nilly anymore."

That was apparently good enough for him. Of course, it didn't seem to bother Nelly herself much anymore either. She thought of it as something that was in the past at this point. Sara and Chris were the only ones still holding a grudge about the harm that had been done to Nelly.

“Plus, look at *this*.” Sara sighed. “It says he wants to come to Hydrangea to see me. Well, I don’t want to see him.”

“Ah, yes...” Ri seemed to be hesitating over whether or not to tell Sara something. Eventually, he made up his mind and asked a servant to bring him something. It was an envelope far fancier than the one Sara had received. “I believe I told you the royal family expects all invited to come by the capital at least once. I replied saying you would visit when you had settled into life here a bit more, but I just got a letter suggesting now might be a good time.”

“Oh, right.” Sara nodded. She knew that she couldn’t put off reporting in to the royal family forever. She just hadn’t been thinking about exactly when she would go.

“You’ve established yourself as an apothecary now and you’ve had a year to settle in here. This is probably a good time to go introduce yourself to the king. And if you don’t want that boy showing up in Hydrangea, you could stop by the prime minister’s residence and make your rejection clear to them. I would go with you, of course, and I’m sure Neffie will be there as well, so I don’t think there’s too much to worry about...”

“You could also argue that I should get some more real training in since I’ve only just become an apothecary, but...” Sara considered Ri’s words. Just as he’d said, if she made her refusal more clear to them, she might be able to put off any more marriage proposals for at least a little while. “I’ll ask Nelly about it when she gets back from the dungeon.”

“That would be for the best.”

A few days later, Nelly returned from the dungeon again. This time, she’d avoided turning black with grime, but she had a sour look on her face for some reason instead. Chris looked just as upset. Sara and Ri exchanged a glance without thinking. They both seemed to agree that they shouldn’t bring it up right away and instead broached the subject after dinner that night.

“Neffie. Is something the matter?” Ri asked directly as they all shared some after-dinner tea.

“You could say that. We stopped by the Guild on the way home and there was

a personal request for me.”

Sara felt a tightness in her chest. A personal request was an honor, since it meant your abilities were widely recognized, but for Nelly, it was just an order to go and do something she didn’t want to do.

“The migrating dragons?”

“Yes,” Nelly confirmed. “Father, Sara. I really think it would be a good idea for me to go this year. But it will mean leaving Sara behind, and I can’t help worrying about her.”

Sara’s heart warmed now, knowing that Nelly’s sour mood was out of concern for her.

“Of course, this isn’t like leaving you alone on the Dark Mountain,” she continued. “You’re working now, and you can rely on your workplace. You have friends and a place to live. And my father can serve as your guardian.”

“Indeed.” Ri twirled his mustache, looking satisfied.

“It might just be a selfish desire to stay with Sara on my part.”

“Nelly...”

Nelly smiled sadly and Sara scooped her chair over so she could lean against the older woman, even if it was bad manners. She was about to tell Nelly that she’d in fact been discussing going to the capital with Ri when Chris spoke up. Sara sat back up, remembering that Chris had looked dour as well. She decided to hear what he had to say too.

“I’ve been summoned to the capital as well.”

“Err...” Sara started, but she stopped, not sure what she wanted to actually say to him. He’d been negotiating to test his repellent on the migrating dragons, so the correct response was probably... “Congratulations?”

Her tone rose at the end because she wasn’t entirely sure of her answer. If it was a good thing, why did he look so dour? In any case, Chris nodded, so she must have picked correctly.

“Thank you. Even with the track record I have, I wasn’t sure whether they would allow me to run my experiments, so I’m frankly very pleased by this

news. However...”

This “however” was the concern.

“The knights have their own experiments they want to run during dragon season this year, so we’re supposed to work together.”

“The knights... So they’re experimenting with...?”

“Yes. The paralysis agent.”

“Ah.” Sara knew exactly why Chris was so worried now. “You’re worried you’ll be too busy cleaning up after the knights to actually run your own experiments.”

“Exactly.”

He had plenty of reason to be worried. He’d tested the repellent enough to know how wyverns behaved around it, but there was no guarantee the migrating dragons would react in the same way. It could be like their first experiments with the wyverns and the dragons might start rampaging. And what would happen if they started falling to the ground because of the paralysis agent? Sara didn’t even want to think about it.

“I don’t want to hit the dragons directly with the repellent and confuse them, I want to try to divert their course to the south by diffusing the repellent in smoke. Since the dragons move from the west to the east, the hills to the southwest of the capital are the best place to observe their progress, which is why the knights will be testing their paralysis agent there with some Hunters. What *I’d* like to do is set up several bonfires on the plains west of those hills with some casters who can manipulate the smoke, and determine where it’s most effective to utilize the repellent.”

Sara had a question after hearing that. “Doesn’t that mean you’ll be away from the knights, so you won’t have to worry about them bothering you?”

“It’s the opposite. I’m worried they’ll end up calling me over to the hills for every little thing, so I won’t be able to get anything done.”

Sara thought it was a little premature to worry about something like that, but no one could really say how it would go until he was there.



“The silver lining is that I’ll be able to go to the capital with Nef.”

“Guess it worked out for you,” Nelly said with a chuckle. It was cool, but it also made Sara feel a little forlorn.

Nelly had been going into the dungeon with Chris a lot ever since they came to Hydrangea, and after the hunting contest last year, she’d started looking after younger Hunters, either alternating with Zachary or sometimes working together with him. As a result, she’d gotten even better at regulating her mana pressure. Either because of that or maybe because the younger generation didn’t care about the rumors about her, there was always someone trying to talk to her at the Hunter’s Guild, and she had completely lost her reputation as a “lone wolf.”

Sara had heard from Kuntz and Allen that Nelly hadn’t improved much as a communicator, but as long as she was strong, that didn’t really matter much to other Hunters. As a result of all this, the solitary Nelly of Rosa was a thing of the past now. Sara’s forlorn feeling now stemmed from her desire to have Nelly all to herself rearing its head. She also wasn’t thrilled that Chris and Nelly had decided all this on their own, since she was thinking about going to the capital herself.

“Come to think of it, Ri and I were talking about going to the capital too.”

“You were? And you, father?” Nelly gave them a look like she couldn’t imagine why they might do so.

Twisting his mustache, Ri replied, “Indeed. We received another letter from the prime minister’s household about wanting to come see Sara, you see.”

“They really don’t quit, huh? Does that guy not understand that Sara doesn’t like him?”

While Nelly was exasperated, Chris just nodded serenely. “That’s just how marriage between nobles is. Besides, any noble would want to add one of the Invited to their family. Like Haruto said, most Invited come here at around ten years old. This makes them innocent and pliable. If raised with care, they’ll be thankful for the opportunity and they won’t let their power go to their head. And any offspring they produce will have superior mana reserves and control.”

“Huh...” Sara would have thought that more of them would be running wild like Haruto to make up for the time they spent in their last life unable to do much of anything, but apparently that wasn’t the case.

“Any family ranked higher than count, whether it’s the prime minister’s household or my own House Deltmont, has an Invited somewhere in their ancestry if you go back far enough.”

“Really?” She hadn’t heard shocking new information like that in a while. And the Invited all really did have guardians from important noble families, she noted with a faraway look.

“Come to think of it, I think there’s one in our line somewhere as well, though I never paid much attention to the family tree myself.”

Sara thought Ri’s level of disinterest was just about right, personally.

“So, I thought I would take Sara to the capital and introduce her to the king, as well as make her feelings perfectly clear to the prime minister’s family while we’re there.”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Nelly said. “Then we can be together in the capital too, Sara.”

Sara grinned and took Nelly’s hand.

“I can only hope it goes so well. I think the nobles of the capital are a lot more stubborn than you and Ri are thinking, Sara,” Chris muttered. “But I suppose there’s no point worrying about it now. In these circumstances, I imagine Caren will be willing to let Sara go without a fight.”

“In these circumstances? So what if it weren’t these circumstances?”

“She wouldn’t let a talented apothecary go for a moment if she could help it.”

Sara wanted to say she was nothing but a newbie, but she figured she should talk to Caren, since she *was* a real apothecary now. She didn’t end up having to wrack her brains for an excuse like she thought she would, however.

The next day, Caren was waiting for her when she went to the Apothecary’s Guild. The unnatural cheer she was displaying reminded Sara of when she’d asked her to run the temporary booth in the dungeon during the hunting

contest, which immediately put Sara on guard.

“Sara, I have a favor to ask you.”

“I respectfully decline.”

Sara respected Caren as an apothecary, but she lived up to being Chris’s junior with how pushy she was. Sara was already certain that the favor she wanted to ask was unreasonable, enough to decline upfront.

“Oh, don’t say that.” Caren put a hand on Sara’s back and led her to a chair, so Sara reluctantly decided to hear what she had to say.

“Sara, you helped out making antiparalytics in Camellia, right?”

“I mean, I just crushed herbs and poured potions into bottles, so if you can call that helping out, sure.”

“You’re good at finding paralysis herbs too, right?”

“Well, I’ll grant you that.”

Sara held her head up high. She’d started out making a living gathering medicinal plants. Even after starting her apothecary training, she still picked them out by the lake near the mansion whenever she had spare time. Now that her head was held up high, however, she was getting nervous about where this was going.

“I wonder if you could take a little trip to the capital, then.”

“Huh?” Sara had just been about to ask her for a vacation so that she could take her trip to the capital. She didn’t think Caren would ask her to do the very same thing.

“There’s a reason I ask, you see...” Caren sat down across from Sara and crossed her legs. “I wonder if Master Chris told you he’s going to the capital to perform experiments with the dragon repellent and the knights’ paralysis agent.”

“He did. The two experiments are happening in two different places, so he’s worried he’ll be pulled in two directions at once.”

Caren nodded. “Never mind Master Chris. They’re already bothering the

Apothecary's Guild, to tell you the truth."

It was rare for Caren to dismiss "Master Chris" of all people. What did she mean by that, though?

Caren took a letter out from her work coat and waved it around. "The guildmaster of the Apothecary's Guild in the capital has asked every guild in the region to send apothecaries familiar with antiparalytics, since they'll need a lot of them for their experiments. They want paralysis herbs too, and it's the knight corps making the request. Since they're responsible for keeping the capital safe, we can't exactly say no, no matter how much we may want to."

Sara sighed. "They knew that as soon as they decided to run their experiments, didn't they? Why didn't the guild in the capital spend the last year stocking up on antiparalytics?"

"Pfft." It was rare for Caren to burst out laughing like that. "If there'd been a request a year ago, they probably could have done that, but I'm sure there wasn't, so go easy on them, would you? Also, you probably shouldn't say that to their faces. The guildmaster in the capital is brilliant and impartial, but he's a bit hardheaded."

She wanted to tell Caren that she wouldn't have an opportunity to see the guildmaster in the capital, but she'd caught on to why Caren was telling her all this.

"I *just* became an apothecary, you know." No one would believe that Sara was particularly familiar with antiparalytics.

Caren didn't deny that Sara was green. "It's true that you haven't been an apothecary for long, but I *do* have a reason to refer you."

Sara looked around, wondering if that reason was simply that no one else wanted to go to the capital. She got the feeling there were a lot of apothecaries in Hydrangea who wouldn't like living in the capital. Some of them had only worked here, but Caren preferred to have most of them train in the capital for at least a little time. She hadn't heard much about the capital even from those who had trained there.

The apothecaries Sara caught sight of didn't avert their eyes, but they smiled

awkwardly at her, so she figured she wasn't far off with her guess.

"It took you a pretty long time to succeed at mana elixirs, didn't it, Sara? You had to fail a lot before you got it right."

"Well, I guess so... It was hard to figure out." Once she'd gotten the hang of it, she hadn't failed again, but it was a long road to get there.

"That's a big hurdle on the way to becoming an apothecary. But there's actually another hurdle."

"Another one..." Sara recalled the six types of potions she'd trained to craft. It had taken time to brew each of them with a consistent quality, but she hadn't had trouble with anything other than the mana elixir.

"It's antiparalytcs."

There wasn't much demand for paralytcs *or* antiparalytcs, so apothecaries didn't have much opportunity to make either. They didn't supply many paralytcs to the Hunter's Guild, so Sara had only made a couple of them.

"You don't have much opportunity to practice making them, and it's difficult to time adding your mana to the mix, so a lot of apprentice apothecaries get tripped up there."

Sara hummed and nodded.

"But you succeeded on your first try, and you haven't failed since then either."

That was probably because she'd been able to watch Ted and Chris make them in Camellia.

"That's why I think you're probably the best option here in Hydrangea's guild. It'll give you a good opportunity to practice too."

"But I've only been an apothecary for a month! I can't do something like this yet! Plus, if someone asks me who taught me and I say Chris, I just know I'm going to get bullied!"

"You'll be fine. Just say Caren taught you."

Sara barely held herself back from saying that Caren actually hadn't taught

her anything.

“Well, it’s one thing that you’re coming from Hydrangea, and another thing that I’m supposedly the one who taught you, and the capital is its own thing, but I’m sure you’ll manage, Sara.”

Sara wanted to ask what all these “things” were, but she was already planning on going to the capital anyway, she realized.

“Err, I don’t think I can decide this on my own, so can I discuss it with everyone at home first?” Sara decided it would be dangerous to say anything one way or the other at the moment. She had to say what she’d come here to say first, anyway. “Also, I had a request of my own.”

“What might that be?” Caren gracefully recrossed her legs.

“Erm, I’d like to take a bit of a long vacation for personal reasons.”

“Oh? I can’t say it’s a good time for a long vacation, what with you just having become an apothecary and all.”

Sara nodded awkwardly. She’d thought the same thing herself. “I feel the same way, but I guess because I’m one of the Invited, I keep getting these really persistent marriage proposals from this one house...”

“That’s right, you are, aren’t you? You don’t intend to accept the proposal?”

It was a personal question, but Sara didn’t intend to hide anything from those she was close to, so she answered truthfully. “I don’t. I’m only fourteen. I can’t even think about marriage right now. Back in my original world, it was normal to marry around thirty...I think.”

“Thirty? That’s taking it awfully slow. I get it, though. If you want to make something of yourself in your field of work, it’d take about that long.”

At least Caren could understand women wanting to work.

“Exactly. I don’t want my freedom restricted like that right now. So I’m going to the capital to make my feelings on the matter clear to this family. Ri also says I should have an audience with the king while I’m there.”

“Sara, I think the marriage thing is the one you do ‘while you’re there.’ An audience with the king is a pretty big deal.”



Caren gave her a wry smile, but to Sara, her business with the king was just a simple introduction. She anticipated Liam making a lot more trouble with her, so on that matter, she was preparing herself for a fight. Her meeting with the king was incidental, as far as she was concerned.

“That’s great, though. I figured it’d be perfect to send you as our apothecary since Nefertari and Master Chris were going to the capital anyway, but now I know you’ve already got a reason to be there.”

“It’s not perfect. It’s just more for me to do!”

Sara’s protests were, of course, dodged with a smile. Her mind was starting to get dizzy with all the things going on in the capital that she was now involved in. There was no point dwelling on these things all on your own, so she decided to take the question home with her after all.

“Anyway, I’ll discuss things with my family first.”

“Of course. I won’t insist if they’re against it.”

The problem there was that they absolutely wouldn’t be—so she determined and so she found out upon going home that night.

“They’re recruiting Hunters from Hydrangea’s Guild to deal with the migrating dragons as well, so I thought you might enlist, Sara. You know, while you’re there to see the king.”

Sara was fed up with all these “while you’re there” suggestions.

“Nelly. How many times do I have to tell you I’m not a Hunter?”

“I know that, but Chris goes into dungeons even though he’s an apothecary, right? It’s just like that. I just thought it’d be fun to hunt migrating dragons with you, Sara.”

“Why are you thinking about hunting dragons like it’s a picnic or something?” Sara couldn’t help jabbing, but it had come through that Nelly was looking forward to going to the capital with her at least.

“Well, it’s too bad we can’t do that, but if you’re making antiparalytics for the Apothecary’s Guild, then I guess we’ll still be able to live together in the townhouse in the capital.”

“I suppose I should send some staff to the townhouse, then. We don’t use it much, so I haven’t left too many servants there to look after it.”

Sara was going to ask Ri if that meant they had another mansion in the capital, but he *was* the commander of the knights in the past, so she supposed it was only natural.

“It’s too bad, though... I was thinking once Sara was finished with her business, we could go sightseeing here and there.”

Sara was a little tickled by the grandfatherly way Ri looked at her. She felt the same way he did, but from his words, it was clear that he too assumed Sara would be working at the Apothecary’s Guild like it was a matter of course.

“I heard about the antiparalytics from Chester as well. He seemed pretty annoyed, since it was so sudden.”

From what Chris said, it seemed Caren was right about them not having any time to prepare the antiparalytics beforehand. Chester was apparently the name of the guildmaster in the capital, incidentally.

“Of course, it was the Apothecary’s Guild in the capital helping the knights develop the paralysis drug in the first place. I helped out a bit in improving it myself when they abducted Nef last year. It should have been pretty obvious that they’d begin serious testing in fall or winter. Maybe they just used up too many paralysis herbs making the drug itself to have enough left for antiparalytics?”

Chris fell into thought, so Sara thought she’d leave him to it, but he immediately emerged from his musings again.

“Sara. There is a certain status your nature as one of the Invited grants you. Since you’re still young, you need a guardian, but you’ll become independent one day as an adult. A good example of someone in a similar situation is Bradley, who’s currently serving as the caretaker of the Dark Mountain.”

“Right,” Sara said, though she wasn’t sure why Chris was bringing this up now.

“As soon as I considered you a potential apothecary, however, I knew you would have to go to the capital one of these days. Training in the capital has a significant effect on the appraisal one receives as an apothecary. I’m sure Caren

would have sent you to the capital at some point regardless of an opportunity like this. I would do the same thing. Meaning...”

Before Sara could ask “Meaning what?” Chris finished what he was saying.

“Meaning, I want you to go to the capital as an apothecary from Hydrangea.”

With that, Sara’s final escape route of Chris calling her immature as an apothecary was cut off.

“The Apothecary’s Guild in the capital is huge. People are always coming from all over the place to train there. They likely won’t even expect you to make any potions as a newbie apothecary. I imagine it’s more likely you’ll be grinding paralysis herbs up or being sent out to gather them.”

“Do they really need somebody from Hydrangea to come and do that?”

Chris chuckled. “No, I suppose they don’t.”

“Ugh!”

“But that’s why you don’t need to worry too much about it. We’ll be able to have fun together in the evenings at least.”

Sara was surprised that Chris was looking forward to hanging out with her, and not just Nelly. But that did make her feel better. If she didn’t have to worry about brewing potions and could just crush herbs or go gathering, she was fine with that.

Even if she had things she’d have to do there, she’d be able to spend time with Nelly as well. She’d also get to hang out with the people from Hydrangea she considered her family. She thought about Allen for a second, but quickly put him out of her mind.

The two of them had been together ever since Rosa, but Allen had his own path. They couldn’t be together all the time like they were when they were twelve anymore.

As Sara expected, when she discussed things with her family, they were all in support of her taking the apothecary job.

Everything had been decided rather quickly, but she still wanted to tell Allen

about it. The next day, she told Caren she would accept the job, and then set about practicing making paralytics and antiparalytics as she waited for Allen's visit to the guildhall that evening. She was a little nervous about using paralysis herbs to practice, since they were rather valuable, but she was the one who had gathered them in the first place, so she figured it was fine. She was hard at work all day and evening came before she even knew it.

Incidentally, Nelly had gone to the dungeon that day, and Chris was at the Apothecary's Guild arranging to bring his repellent to the capital with Caren.

"We're back, Sara."

"Ugh, I'm tired..."

"Allen! Welcome back! You too, Kuntz." Sara giggled. They were just here to deliver mushrooms, but they were acting like they were returning home after work.

Seeing her good mood, Kuntz started hesitantly, "Say, Sara..."

"Yeah?" She was going to bring up her going to the capital, so she felt a little like he'd beaten her to the punch.

"I've decided I'm going to participate in the migrating dragon hunts."

"Really? But, err... Sorry Kuntz, but isn't it more experienced Hunters who usually do that?"

"Yeah, normally it is, but this year's special. Chris is doing those experiments with his smelly stuff, right?"

"The dragon repellent." Sara thought it smelled nice and flowery, but Allen and Kuntz didn't like it much.

"They need people who can use wind magic to control the smoke from the bonfires, and they're recruiting people around my skill level too."

"That's amazing! You were saying you wanted to go, right?"

"Yeah." Kuntz smiled shyly and rubbed his nose. "If I had a little more skill, I could work on hitting the dragons with magic directly to try to change their course, but for now, I'll just watch the dragons from afar and do what I can to help with Chris's experiments."

Sara thought it was positively dazzling how Kuntz was always working to improve as a Hunter. “It turns out I’m actually going to the capital as well, for a few different reasons.” This was the perfect chance to bring up her own plans.

She glanced at Allen after she spoke. If Kuntz was going to the capital to work as a caster, then what would Allen do, since the two of them were a team?

Maybe there was a little anticipation in Sara’s eyes. Allen met her gaze and quirked his mouth up into a bit of a grin. “Yeah, I think I’m gonna go too.”

“Really? Yes!” She broke out into a big smile.

“Hey, why didn’t I get a cheer?” Kuntz asked with a wry smile, but Sara couldn’t help it. It was just a matter of how long she’d known the two of them respectively. “There’s something we wanted to talk to Ri about, so is it okay if we go back to the mansion with you today?”

“Sure, that’s fine with me. I think Nelly should be coming back soon too.” Since they were going to the capital soon, Nelly was only making day trips to the dungeon now, forgoing the longer experiments.

“I heard someone say ‘Nelly.’” Chris poked his head out from the storeroom.

“I said her name, but I didn’t say she was here.” Sara shrugged her shoulders exasperatedly. “Weren’t you with Nelly all day every day up until yesterday? I can’t even be with her that much since I have to work.”

“You could just go into the dungeon with Nef to gather, couldn’t you, Sara? It’s a treasure trove of materials, you know.”

“It’s more important that I practice brewing potions now, isn’t it? I’m still new at this. I think you’re the only apothecary who can just do whatever he wants, Chris,” Sara protested, pursing her lips.

“You think so? Well, just call me when Nef gets here.”

“I know, I know.” Maybe it was another sign of her growth in the past year that she could talk back to Chris a little now.

“You really are Master Chris’s apprentice. I’d never be able to say something like that to him.” Such was the opinion of one of her coworkers.

“Somebody has to put him in his place sometimes. He might be a great

apothecary, but he's a total free spirit otherwise." It was harsh but true as far as Sara was concerned.

"That's probably just what it takes to be a guildmaster, huh?"

Some chuckles went through the guild until Caren poked her head out from the storeroom this time.

"I didn't hear someone bad-mouthing me out here, did I?"

"No, ma'am!"

Sara enjoyed the lighthearted atmosphere of her workplace.

Nelly returned soon after that, so Chris excitedly wrapped up his work and they all cheerfully headed for the mansion. Seeing them like that, there was no one in Hydrangea anymore who could possibly think of them as the Red Reaper and her flunkies.

"So we'll all be able to spend time in the capital together. And everyone's working on something related to the migrating dragons, so we'll all be there for the same period of time. This should be fun." Ri was in a great mood after hearing about Kuntz and Allen's plans.

"About that... The reason we came here to talk to you was actually because we had something we wanted to ask you." Kuntz faced Ri rather formally. "You see, we heard from the Guild Director that House Wolverié has a townhouse in the capital. He also advised us to ask you for lodging there, since you're likely to have rooms you won't be using. And since we'll be traveling around the same time, we were wondering if we might accompany you there and back as well."

The Guild Director was Nelly's brother Thedias, who was always busily flitting between nearby Hunter's Guilds.

Sara was a little surprised to hear this request. She knew Ri had said they had a townhouse, but since he'd used that word, she'd assumed it wasn't as big as a normal noble's mansion. *How many people could stay there?* she wondered.

"That's perfectly fine. We planned on using two large carriages to make the trip, and I'm sure the manager of the townhouse will be happier if more of it is

used.”

“Thank you so much!”

Sara thought it was very responsible of Kuntz to make sure he asked Ri personally even though the Guild Director had already given them permission. She *was* a little perplexed by this, though. Kuntz and Allen both took their own independence very seriously, and the capital didn’t seem like it had an overly high cost of living, so why did they want to stay in the Wolveriés’ townhouse?

They must have picked up on the question from her face. Kuntz explained to her, “Grunts like us aren’t paid much for helping out.”

“Ah. Got it.”

Well, even the trip there would be fun, then.

And just as she expected, it was. Allen and Kuntz rode along with them in the carriages, but insisted on finding their own lodging when they stopped on the way until Ri persuaded them otherwise.

“It’s not a bad idea to experience how the nobility live, you know.”

With that, they ended up staying in the same inns as everyone else.

When they’d traveled from Camellia to Hydrangea, they’d stayed in slightly fancy inns every once in a while, but relatively speaking, these had only been places that were a bit expensive for commoners like Sara and Allen. Chris was happy as long as he was with Nelly, and Nelly didn’t care what she spent on lodging, so they’d picked their inns without putting much thought into it. So, Sara had been expecting to stay in only slightly upscale places like that on this journey as well. When they arrived at their first inn, however, her jaw dropped.

“We’ve reserved the third floor for you, Lord Wolverié. Will that suffice?”

“Mm. I’d say so.”

They had the whole third floor of the largest inn in town to themselves.

“We don’t have quite the numbers to rent out the whole inn. This will do for a little trip with the family, I’d say.”



“Th-The whole inn...” Sara was practically knocked off her feet. She’d heard stories but had never thought anyone would actually do something like that.

Unlike Sara, Chris and Nelly were acting like it was totally normal, and Allen and Kuntz weren’t particularly bothered either, though they might have just been putting up a front. Sara found that frustrating, so she feigned calm as well while they were led to their lodgings.

Ri, Nelly, and Sara stayed in a suite with a living room that was smaller than their mansion’s—though still fairly spacious—and three bedrooms. Chris was given a similar suite and, after beckoning Nelly to join him and receiving a light scolding from Ri, relented to sharing the suite with Kuntz and Allen instead. With the servants attending them, they all fit neatly on the third floor.

Those servants stood by in the corner of their living room, even though they were staying in an inn. “Umm, aren’t you tired?” Sara couldn’t help asking them.

They replied with a smile, “We had nothing to do in the carriage, so that was time enough to rest.” What professionals.

She’d been expecting to laze around until dinnertime, but Kuntz and Allen quickly arrived with a knock on her door.

“We’ve got a little time, so let’s do some sightseeing.”

“Okay!” Sara got up excitedly and got permission from Nelly.

“Go on. I’ll be resting here with father.”

“Okay! I’ll be back later!”

The fancy inn was making Sara a little nervous, so she let out a tense breath when she got out into the hall.

“What’s with you? You stay in the lord’s mansion every day, so aren’t you used to this?” Kuntz teased her.

Sara exchanged a glance with Allen and sighed. They seemed to be thinking the same thing. “That’s that and this is this. I’ve gotten used to the mansion and the people who work there, but like...even if it’s their job, having adults I don’t know waiting on me just... I dunno, it makes my back feel all itchy.”

“Yeah. You’re from a normal family, Kuntz, but Sara and I were homeless for a time, even if it was only temporarily.”

Sara still couldn’t forget those days. Part of it was how cruel Ted had been, of course, but the cold way the people of Rosa looked at Allen stuck with her just as much. There were plenty of kind people as well, but only in the Third District; Sara felt like there were very distinct classes of people in Rosa.

They headed into town as they chatted. The place was smaller than Hydrangea, but they passed by plenty of people shopping and bustling about here and there.

“Let’s see... I think this is a farming town. It provides a lot of Hydrangea’s food too.” Sara shared what Ri had told her.

“That’s right. It has a small dungeon too. The Guild Director said he comes here a lot on his rounds.”

Sara laughed. “Don’t tell me: you want to go check out the Hunter’s Guild?”

The two of them grinned in response. Sara’s goal was to get to the capital. If she could have fun on the way there, that was a nice bonus, but she had no particular sightseeing goals on the way.

“Sure.” She shrugged.

“Yes! Let’s go!”

“Come on!”

They raced over to the Hunter’s Guild, stopping in front of the familiar sign of a wyvern. It was a smaller guild building to match the size of the town’s dungeon.

“Huh, it’s not as small as I thought. Oh.” There was a sign with a healing herb on it under the wyvern sign. “So the Apothecary Guild’s in here too.”

There was no point in standing around outside, so they headed in. Pushing through the saloon doors, they spotted a sales kiosk that doubled as the Apothecary’s Guild storefront on the left and some reception desks on the right. Just like every other Guild, there were stairs in the back that led to the inn on the second floor.

“We could have just stayed here. Let’s check out the bulletin board.”

The bulletin board was normally empty unless the Apothecary’s Guild wanted particular materials like the white moonlight mushrooms in Hydrangea, or there were specific requests for jobs like the migrating dragon hunts in the capital.

“They’ve got the migrating dragon request here too. And a request for paralysis herbs and mana herbs.”

It was the exact reason they were traveling to the capital.

“It says casters with at least three years of experience hunting and confidence in their skills, Kuntz.”

“Well, I’ve got experience and confidence.”

“And skills?”

“Chris told me I should be fine.”

“That’s pretty impressive,” Sara said, looking up at Kuntz.

“Actually, it’s kind of awful.”

“Awful?”

“His exact words were ‘we’ll have plenty of use for average casters like you as well.’”

“Well...that does sound like him.” Sara laughed dryly. “He said the same thing to me, actually. That for new apothecaries like me, they’d probably only want me to mash up herbs or collect materials. So I didn’t have to worry about making potions or anything like that.”

This time, Kuntz laughed. You really had to get to know Chris to understand the unique way he talked to people. A strange solidarity had now formed between Kuntz and Sara.

“Hey, Kuntz, Sara.” Allen traced the line on the flyer about paralysis herbs. “We’ve got about an hour until evening. Want to go check out the dungeon?”

“What? Like it’s a little picnic?” Sara asked before realizing she’d had the exact same exchange with Nelly recently as well.

“Yeah. I mean, isn’t it? Do you want to just gather plants for an hour? I want

to see what the dungeon here's like."

"Well, sure, I guess." She *was* wanting to get a little exercise, since she'd spent the whole day in the carriage, so maybe it was a good idea.

Sara had lost her apprehension toward dungeons after the hunting contest last year. She'd found out then that dungeons weren't the dank, dark, bug-filled places she'd thought they were. Not only that, they tended to have a lot of medicinal plants growing in them as well.

"Allen, are you...?"

"Yeah. I just want to get a feel for it."

Sara wasn't really sure what the two of them meant. Maybe they were practicing another combo move or something.

The dungeon entrance was just behind the Hunter's Guild. There were a lot of people coming out from inside at this time, so the guards at the entrance gave them a bit of a dubious look as they walked against the crowd.

"Heading in now?"

"Just for an hour or so. We usually hunt in Hydrangea, but we're passing through, so we thought we'd check out the dungeon here."

The guard let them through easily enough, perhaps due to Allen's affable mood. Sara was relieved they hadn't met any trouble.

"Come on, let's go."

They jogged down the slope and emerged in a wide-open space, just like Hydrangea's dungeon.

"This is small?"

"The size of the floors doesn't change much. This one just isn't as deep."

"I see." That made sense to her.

"But the monsters on the first floor are stronger. I'm sure you'll be fine, but be careful while you gather, okay?"

Sara took Allen's advice seriously and expanded her barrier somewhat, heading closer to the forest part of the floor and crouching down to look for

herbs.

“There are good-quality healing herbs all over... Oh, and there’s a paralysis herb.”

Medicinal plants tended to grow in clusters, so once she found one, she looked around the same area for more. Mana herbs grew in drier areas and she often found paralysis herbs on the border between forest and meadow.

Sara lost herself in gathering until she heard Allen call, “I think it’s been about an hour.”

“Already?”

She looked up and saw Allen a little ways away. Kuntz was past him, practicing changing the direction of the wind. There was nothing odd about the sight of them, but Sara still felt like something was off.

“Hey, Allen. Did you do any hunting?”

“Nah, I was just checking out the dungeon today.”

That was it. Sara didn’t think Allen had moved from that spot since she’d started gathering.

“Allen?”

Allen smiled. “Come on, if we don’t get back soon, Nelly will worry.”

“Oh, you’re right!”

They hurried back, but instead of telling them she was worried, Nelly ended up scolding them for not inviting her if they were going to the dungeon.

With all that, it ended up taking them over ten days to reach the capital. Most commuter carriages took a week to make the trip, so they hadn’t taken too much extra time, but Sara still worried the Apothecary’s Guild might scold her for being late as they entered the capital.

“We took our time, since they didn’t tell us to arrive by a certain date, but I wonder if they were expecting us to come before now...”

“If you’re nervous, I could go with you to the guild,” Chris suggested.

He’d likely invited her out of kindness, but they were going to the

Apothecary's Guild for very different reasons. Chris was in charge of the dragon repellent experimentation and Sara was just a random apothecary sent from Hydrangea to help out. If they went together, she'd draw way more attention.

Sara shook her head. "I couldn't possibly. Can you imagine what kind of bullying I'd get for coming with *the* Master Chris? I'll just sneak in first."

"Very well. I'll join you later. If we're already late, it shouldn't matter if I'm a little *more* late."

"We *are* late, then..." Sara was surprised to hear it, since Chris hadn't shown any indication that they should be hurrying while they were on the road.

A tiny smile graced Chris's lips. "I was given permission to run my experiments. Why should I listen to an incompetent fool who tells me to arrive for them in seven days without considering preparation or travel time at all?"

"I guess you've got a point." Sara could only hope she could imitate Chris's boldness one day. "Well, you're a scoundrel who ignored the date you were supposed to make, so I'll just say I made it here as fast as I could since I wasn't given a date to make. I'm just a grunt anyway."

She felt better after reasoning it out like that.

Eventually, the road widened and the number of carriages traveling around them increased. Ri looked out the window to check where they were.

"Ah, I can see it. That's the capital there."

## Chapter 2: In the Capital

Hearing Ri's words, Sara leaned out of the window of the carriage to look at their destination. It was bad manners, but she was too excited to care.

"Wow! Err...or maybe not?"

She'd thought she would be surprised by the sight, but in fact she was a little let down. The first town she had seen in this world was Rosa, which was surrounded by walls, so every other town she encountered just ended up looking normal in comparison, no matter how big it was.

The city in front of her, which lay in the middle of a great flat meadow surrounded by small hills to the east and west, was bigger than any she'd seen before, however. The road they traveled down was more than large enough for carriages to pass by one another, and it was full of other travelers going in and out of the city just like them.

Kuntz smiled wryly at Sara's reaction. "It's a regular town, just one that's really huge. They sell all sorts of things, and stuff is affordable enough that a regular craftsman like my father can live here comfortably. Normal people just can't buy anything too expensive or rare. That's why I figured there was no real reason for me to stay in the capital, and decided to go to Hydrangea instead."

It was the first time Sara had heard anything about Kuntz's family, so she pulled herself back into the carriage. Allen seemed interested in hearing more too.

"What kind of craftsman is your dad, Kuntz?" he asked.

"He mostly makes tableware and kitchen stuff. But he uses earth magic, so he can really make anything if he needs to. He helps out building houses and fixing roads sometimes. Stuff like that."

"Sounds like a good job that helps a lot of people."

"Yeah, I guess so. I really respect my dad," said Kuntz. A warm, fuzzy feeling filled the carriage.



“Huh? Then why aren’t you staying at home?” Sara wondered.

“Well, ’cause my room belongs to my younger brother now. I’ll stop by to say hello of course, but I can’t really stay with them for long since I’ve already left the house.” Kuntz rustled around in the pouch at his waist and pulled something out. “I’ve got dried mushrooms, some of Marcia’s cookies, trout fillets... I bought all sorts of souvenirs for them.”

Sara had always thought Kuntz was a reliable older brother type, and this conversation was only bolstering her appraisal of him.

“I thought every place was pretty much the same when I first got to Hydrangea, but once you’ve lived there for a while, you realize each town’s got its own things going on. You have to actually go somewhere else to experience what it’s really like there.”

“Yeah, I think so too,” Allen agreed. “But I don’t think what the town’s like matters as much as what kinda relationships you’re able to build with the people there.”

Sara nodded along to the two boys’ conversation. Her mental age was higher than theirs, but there wasn’t much she could add about traveling. She hadn’t been able to experience it until coming to this world.

“Now that I’ve left the capital, I actually feel it wasn’t a bad place after all. I can show you around some of the less fancy parts of town if you want.”

“Let’s do it!”

“Yeah, I’d like to see it too,” said Allen. “I lived in the capital for a time myself, but I didn’t get a chance to see much.”

Sara could imagine there weren’t too many places in the capital where Allen could go in the past since his mana had prevented him from doing much in Rosa either. Now that he could control the amount of pressure his mana exerted, however, he could go wherever he wanted. Sara and Allen exchanged glances and grinned. Now they had something else to look forward to in the capital.

Eventually, they got close enough to make out buildings within the town. There was a large structure outside the capital a little ways away from the gates into town. Sara got a closer look and spotted some food stands and things like

that around it.

“That’s the capital’s southern dungeon. There’s an eastern and northern one too, so three in total,” Allen explained. “That’s why there’s not just one Hunter’s Guild. There’s three of those too.”

“What about Apothecary’s Guilds?” Sara asked.

“There’s only one Apothecary’s Guild,” Chris said in response. “In the center of town. It has branches at each Hunter’s Guild, as well. They are all pretty big, though, so I guess you could say there are four guildhalls. You and I will check in at the central guildhall, Sara.”

“I see.”

It made sense since the town was so big, she supposed.

“It’ll take us over an hour to arrive even after we pass through the gates, so you’ll need to be patient just a little while longer,” Ri told Sara as she gawked out the window at the lively town.

“Okay.” There was nothing they could do about that, since the capital was so big. Sara spent the next hour excitedly observing the town and all the colorful clothes the women there wore. Once they’d gotten close to the center of the town on the main street, the carriage turned to the west.

“Come to think of it, the castle’s not in the center of town, is it?” Sara asked.

“The castle’s in the west, away from the dungeons. The noble district is just in front of it, so that’s where we’re headed.”

“Makes sense.”

As the buildings around them grew larger and more spacious, it was clear that they were entering the aforementioned district. The carriage eventually came to a stop in front of a large mansion, its thick iron gates slowly opening to allow them inside the estate.

“This is the ‘townhouse’?”

“That it is. It’s not even half the size of the mansion in Hydrangea, of course.”

*So, ridiculously huge still,* Sara thought to herself, her eyes unfocusing slightly.

Her impression of a “townhouse” was much more of a chic, smaller building.

“Look, the mansion’s just past the gate,” Nelly indicated, though Sara took the time to note a large yard, neatly trimmed plants, and a fountain between the two.

“He may be retired, but he’s still the former knight commander, Sara,” Allen explained. He was a commoner just like her, but it seemed he’d been expecting something like this.

“Right. I was taking nobles too lightly.”

It seemed that, to the Wolveries, a “townhouse” merely meant a house that was inside a town, regardless of the size.

The couple who managed the house came out to greet them, but some servants they’d sent ahead from Hydrangea were also there, which comforted Sara a bit. She headed to the room that had been prepared for her and Nelly, and the two of them changed into dresses laid out for them there. Sara felt like she’d transformed into a noble girl herself.

“You look beautiful, Nef.”

When they came down to the living room, Chris wasted no time extending a hand out to Nelly (who swiftly swatted it away). Sara wholeheartedly agreed with his assessment, of course.

“It wasn’t the case in Hydrangea, but we’ll have guests here on occasion. I can’t very well turn them all down, and as we’re the official guardians of one of the Invited now, I don’t want to give anyone any opportunities to misbehave. I imagine it will be a little uncomfortable, but I hope you don’t mind dressing like a noble while you’re at home.”

“That’s fine. This is fun in its own way. Thanks for all the fancy clothes.”

Sara thanked Ri and headed to see Kuntz and Allen, finding them wearing clothes a lot like Chris’s. Allen seemed more or less used to them, but Kuntz looked incredibly uncomfortable.



“They lent us these clothes and said that was the only condition they had for us staying here. We’re supposed to wear this while we’re here unless we’re in our own rooms or out working.”

Sara turned around to Ri. He said it was a condition of staying here, but the fact that they had clothes to “lend” in Kuntz and Allen’s exact sizes meant they must have taken their measurements and tailored the clothes for them specifically. Ri was clearly giving them an opportunity to learn how the nobility lived while they stayed here.

Ri gave her a playful smile when their eyes met, so she must have guessed right. Sara’s clothes were all new too. Just like Nelly, the rest of her family was somewhat awkward, but they were all nice people. Very *wealthy* nice people. It warmed her heart.

“There’s something I’d like to speak with you about, Sara.”

“Yes?” Sara trotted back to Ri.

Just as he’d done back in Hydrangea, he fanned two letters out toward her. “They’re from the royal family and the prime minister’s household.” Ri burst out laughing when he saw Sara’s face. “You don’t have to make a face like that. They say similar things. They both express much admiration for your decision to participate in the migrating dragon culling as an apothecary. It seems the audience and the meeting with the prime minister’s household can both wait until after your apothecary work has calmed down some.”

“But...” And so, Sara’s plan to get the annoying stuff out of the way quickly ended in failure.

“Well, I’d say it’s time to eat, wouldn’t you?”

The moment Ri glanced at the clock, the doors opened and the manager of the townhouse walked in.

“I apologize for disturbing you, Master, but a visitor has arrived.”

“And since you came to inform me of this, I suppose it’s someone I can’t turn away, eh?”

“It is the second son of House Hills, my lord.”

*Who are House Hills?* Sara wondered idly as Ri flapped the envelopes her way.

“Hills. *Liam Hills*. Not that guy!” Allen was the one who figured it out first. Sara was always getting letters from him, but she wanted nothing to do with them, so she usually just made Ri read them for her. She had completely forgotten the guy’s last name.

“Huh? But I thought it could wait until after the dragon culling!”

“He seems to wish to make a personal greeting rather than have a formal meeting, my lady.”

She balked when the manager called her “my lady,” but she was going to have to get used to that, wasn’t she?

“You should accept the meeting, Sara. If he’s just here to greet you, I don’t imagine he’ll even bring up the engagement.”

“Ugh... Okay, I understand.”

*“Welcome to the capital. I thought we should at least see each other once.”* Sara imagined what Liam was likely to say, mentally preparing herself for the meeting.

“Show him in,” Ri told the manager. Sara was relieved he didn’t say anything to the effect of leaving the two young people on their own or anything like that.

A tall, familiar man soon entered the mansion behind the manager. He had medium-blond hair and deep-blue eyes and he wore a well-tailored if somewhat worn knight’s uniform, as if he’d just stopped by on his way back from work without bothering to change first.

Sara caught a scent she was familiar with from her time at the Apothecary’s Guild. “Paralysis poison...” she muttered, and Liam’s eyes lit up.

“I can see how you became an apothecary so quickly. It’s been a while, Lady Sara.”

“Long time no see.” It would be good manners to mention all the help he’d provided her previously but, if anything, he had caused her trouble more than he’d helped her, so she left her response at that.

“So they’ve already started the experiments,” Chris muttered. Liam gave him

a brilliant grin.

“I can’t believe this guy,” a quiet voice said somewhere in the corner of the room. Sara hoped that Liam hadn’t heard it.

“Migrating dragon season lasts two months, and they’re already flying overhead. We decided it would be smart to start at least one experiment early.”

“That’s fine. Your experiment shouldn’t affect mine, after all. In fact, once my experiment starts, there may be no more dragons heading for the southwestern hills. You should get all the results you can now.” Chris’s words were kind on a surface level, but they displayed absolute confidence in his own experiments’ success, which made Sara a little nervous.

“My own results have been quite favorable as well, as it happens. I would love to give you more details, but I came on different business today, so you’ll have to forgive me for keeping things brief. I hope for your success as well, Chris.”

“Thank you.”

Sara couldn’t tell if their conversation was polite or shameless. She thought it would be perfectly fine for them to continue on together, but they wrapped it up and Liam turned to Sara, giving her a kind smile.

“Lady Sara. I can see that you’ve grown more beautiful in the past year.”

Sara willed herself not to wrinkle her nose. It was none of his business how she grew as far as she was concerned. Not to mention, he hadn’t been anywhere near this polite a year ago, and Sara still hadn’t forgotten his suggestion that she become his maid before that.

It wasn’t that she would have minded being a maid, of course. Maids were impressive career women in her books. What she didn’t like was that his attitude had completely changed the moment he found out that she was one of the Invited.

“I’m quite busy as well, so our official business will have to wait, but I was just so thrilled to hear that you would be coming to assist in our work and so I wanted to thank you personally, Lady Sara. A wife who understands her husband’s work is a wonderful thing indeed.”



“You’re not my husband. We’re not engaged. I have no intention of *getting* engaged to you, and what’s more, we’re not even friends,” Sara proclaimed. “I am not here to help you with your work, Sir Liam. I was dispatched by the Apothecary’s Guild where I’m employed, nothing more. That we are involved in the same work is coincidence.” Sara rattled all this off and ended her speech with a satisfied huff, but Liam just chuckled.

“Sure, we’ll leave it at that.”

Sara was fed up. He was agreeing in theory, but it was clear that nothing Sara had said was getting through to him. This was what was so creepy about this guy.

“I’m even more motivated knowing I might be using concoctions you personally made. Well, I’ll take my leave for now.”

Having said whatever he wanted to say, Liam greeted Ri, Chris, and Nelly as well before he left. When Sara rolled up her sleeves, Nelly, who had been kind enough to stay by her side, looked down at her and sighed.

“You’ve got goose bumps.”

“That creeped me out.”

Ri laughed loudly. “I doubt the pup could even imagine that’s how you feel about him. It’s clear he’s never experienced a single setback in his pampered little life.”

“Was I not getting across how much I hate him? I thought I was making it pretty clear.” Sara couldn’t believe it. She’d turned down his proposals countless times already, hadn’t she?

“It was clear enough to me, but he’s the prime minister’s second son. He has no pressure to succeed his father; he’s blessed with good looks and smarts, and he’s a talented knight. There’s no gossip about him that I’m aware of. He’s had everything he’s ever wished for given to him on a platter, and anything that wasn’t, he was surely able to achieve anyway with a little hard work. It’s no wonder he’s confident.”

“I don’t care how talented or whatever else he is. He’s not my type.”

Ri laughed again. “How amusing.”

Well, at least *someone* was having fun. Nelly and Chris weren’t much better. Incurrable, every single one of them. But that wasn’t what was important right now.

Having seen him again for the first time in so long, Sara was able to reaffirm her dislike of the man. Her determination to turn Liam down once and for all renewed, Sara turned to Ri.

“Ri, you’ll go with me when I reject him, right?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

His attitude aside, she wanted a staunch ally at her side when the time came. Sara was well aware that she tended to let other people walk all over her, so she wasn’t ashamed to make use of another person’s authority if she could.

After a fun dinner, Sara retreated to her and Nelly’s room, somewhat curious about why Allen had told Kuntz to go back to their room on his own and then left with Ri. She knew she didn’t have to worry about him, since they’d been living apart from each other for the last year, but she felt a little lonely when no one was telling her things.

“Eh, they’ve probably just got guy stuff to talk about. My brothers were always the same way. They wanna play cards or drink after dinner, just hang out with other guys. Just leave him be.”

That’s what Nelly said, so Sara decided not to worry about it. After all, she had enough to worry about with her trip to the Apothecary’s Guild the next day.

## Boys Grow Fast

Ri and Allen had headed for the study on the second floor. Allen was glancing around at everything in the room with interest, but interest wasn't the only thing in his eyes. Ri thought back to the first time he'd met the boy a year ago and felt a little forlorn at how much he'd grown.

Allen's frank desire to defend Neffie, even from the lord of the region himself, had stirred his heart for the first time in a long while. The boy's eyes were now working to memorize the structure of the townhouse, and this time it was all to protect Sara. It showed that at his core, Allen was still the same boy who valued those close to him over everything else.

Feeling slightly ashamed of his reaction to the boy's growth, Ri turned to Allen. "Well, have you given some thought to your plan of action?"

"Yeah." Allen nodded firmly. "After this, I'll make sure I know the layout of the townhouse and all the entrances and exits. Tomorrow morning, I'll go with Sara to the Apothecary's Guild. Once I've checked out the area around there, I'll return to the mansion and train with you while you're there. If you need to leave, I'll just practice on my own."

"Sounds like a plan. But it's not too late, you know. You could help out Chris with Kuntz, or go into one of the capital's dungeons like you told Sara you would. In fact, that would probably be the better option for you."

Unlike before, when he didn't know what to do with his excess mana, Allen could now put it to great use hunting monsters. Even without the title of Neffie's apprentice, he could likely be considered Hydrangea's strongest young Hunter. Ri had even received a report from the Hunter's Guild that Allen should be more than able to handle the capital's dungeons.

"No. I've decided that I'll serve as Sara's guard until she's done with her work."

Allen had come to Ri with the request soon after it had been decided that

Sara would be dispatched to the capital by the Apothecary's Guild. It was convenient for Ri, who had been thinking she would need a guard anyway. At fourteen, he might have been young for the job, but he was the same age as Sara, and they were close to one another. Ri had thought he would have no trouble showing his stuff as her guard, so he'd quickly approved of the idea.

At the same time, however, Ri felt rather ambivalent about it. Allen was at an age where he would improve greatly at anything he trained in now, so Ri thought it would be better for him to get more practice as a Hunter here in the capital. Sara and Allen were both precious to Ri. In his mind, he'd taken the two of them under his wing.

"I can arrange for guards myself, Allen. Why do you insist on doing it yourself?"

"I..." Allen looked up at Ri in surprise, then cast his eyes down to the floor. He likely hadn't even been aware that he was "insisting" until Ri had told him. He looked back up at Ri sharply. "Well, why do *you* think just anyone could be Sara's guard, Ri?"

"You know she had no problem living for the past year in Hydrangea."

Even after showing everyone what she was capable of, Sara had lived the past year in peace, without any trouble.

"And you *don't* know the kinda crap the Apothecary's Guild in Rosa and Camellia pulled with her. She doesn't get along with those guys."

Ri swallowed the argument that she was an apothecary herself. He knew that Caren's presence as the guildmaster in Hydrangea made it a place where people could concentrate on their work regardless of station or gender. As he was unfamiliar with Apothecary's Guilds in other locations, there was nothing he could say if told Hydrangea's guild was different from all the rest.

But that wasn't what Ri was interested in hearing about. He cleared his throat and said, "Allen. If Sara is that important to you, you have the option of being adopted by another noble house, you know."

When he saw how Allen's jaw dropped, Ri realized he'd made a mistake. As Allen was fond of Sara and Sara didn't seem unreceptive to his affections, he

had figured the two of them could work something out regardless of their positions in society, but the two of them were both still too young for that conversation. He couldn't get ahead of himself.

"No, never mind that. In any case, what you're saying is that you can't trust the Apothecary's Guild. Is that right?"

"That's part of it, but it's not all," said Allen. "I get the feeling that Sara doesn't really understand her position, and that scares me."

As far as Ri was concerned, there were few children who could understand themselves as well as Sara could. He twisted his mustache thoughtfully.

"Sara's invincible against monsters with her barrier, but there aren't any monsters in the capital, and it takes a lot for her to consider a human being an enemy," Allen continued. "I really don't feel like that's a good thing."

"Hrm."

Sara *was* rather forbearing with people. Her ability to get along with not only Neffie but Chris and Caren as well was proof enough of that. Unfortunately, that meant it was somewhat easy to take advantage of her.

In any case, perhaps Allen would grow the most if he was allowed to act in the way he himself wished to. Ri nodded to himself, deciding to let the boy do as he pleased.

"When I'm not at home, I'll make sure my location is always known to you. If you're ever in trouble or need my help with something, don't hesitate to contact me."

"Got it. Thanks, Ri."

"Oh, you know... Don't mention it."

In the end, Ri was simply thrilled to watch the growth of the children he'd taken under his wing.



The next day, it was finally time to head to the Apothecary's Guild. Its location was extremely convenient for Sara, being only a fifteen-minute walk from the Wolveriés' townhouse.

Clad in her brand-new apothecary's uniform, Sara fixed her pouch to her waist, making sure her letter of introduction was inside. The uniform consisted of a simple white robe with an apothecary's brooch on the lapel. Grinning at the fresh feel of her new clothes, Sara strode out of the mansion—until the manager hastily stopped her.

“Young miss, please make use of this carriage.”

“Sorry,” said Sara. “I know I should, but I can just picture the stuff they'd say to me if I showed up in a carriage.”

“The master has instructed us to let you do as you please, but you *are* one of the Invited, young miss. Your position is such that you could demand all sorts of special treatment. If you'll allow me to make a suggestion, I think you'll have to act more brazen here in the capital.”

Sara took a good look at the manager's face for the first time. What she saw was earnest concern for her.

“It's just not in my nature to be brazen or demand special treatment. Fortunately, my power as an Invited allows me to defend myself from pretty much anything. It may not be the best for appearances to have me just walking around, but I'm plenty safe, so you don't need to worry about that.”

The caretaker was nagging a bit, but Sara understood that it was out of worry for her, so she tried to make her own stance clear.

Shoulders sagging in defeat, the caretaker simply warned her, “People might think you're a servant, but just ignore anyone who talks to you on your way to your destination. At least promise me that.”

“I understand.” Sara nodded firmly.

“I'll be with her, so it'll be fine.”

“Ah, Master Allen.” The caretaker stepped aside as if relieved.

“Huh? You're not going to the Hunter's Guild with Kuntz, Allen?”

“Nah, we'll be doing something different this time. Come on, if we don't hurry, you'll be late.”

“Right.”

She was always happy to have Allen with her, but she did think it was a bit strange that he was accompanying her when he was usually so gung-ho about dungeon diving.

The two of them sped off using physical strengthening (only to a degree where they wouldn't be bothering other pedestrians, of course) and Sara asked Allen, “If you're not going into the dungeons, why'd you come to the capital with us?”

“I thought I'd have Ri teach me how to use a sword when he's got time while we're here.”

“A sword,” Sara repeated. She hadn't been expecting to hear that. Allen used physical strengthening, but his primary weapon was his fists. Unlike Nelly, all he had at his waist was a dagger.

“I don't plan to change how I fight, but since Nelly's already taught me the basics, I kinda wanted to learn more if I got the opportunity.”

Sara had never had much interest in fighting styles or anything like that, so while she was surprised to hear this, she didn't really have anything for or against it to say. At least now she knew what he had been talking to Ri about the day before.

“I got into a really good rhythm this last year in Hydrangea. I've got the savings at this point to take a bit of a break from work. I mean, I can't afford my own mansion or anything, but...” Allen smiled wryly, looking up at the huge mansions all around them in the noble district. “Luckily, Kuntz found a job he can do by himself, and I just figured it'd be better for me to come here than stay in Hydrangea by myself. Anyway, I thought I should let you know that's what I'll be doing.”

“Sounds like a good idea.” As always, Allen was thinking for himself and doing what he thought was best. Sara was impressed with him yet again.

“Still, Ri's gonna be pretty busy while we're here, so I'll kind of be an attendant for him when he needs it, and he'll only teach me when he's got time.”

“Can you be out here with me right now, then?”

“Escorting you is a part of my job too, basically.”

“Oh yeah? Well, thanks.”

Ri must have asked him to go with her since he was worried and he knew Sara wouldn't want to stand out by taking a carriage.

“Listen, Sara.”

“Yeah?” Sara looked up at him when Allen's voice took on a more serious tone.

“If you're just gonna be making medicine inside the Apothecary's Guild, then there shouldn't be any issues, but if you ever have to go somewhere across town for an errand or they ask you to go gather plants, make sure you come back to the mansion first and get me. I'll almost always be at the townhouse.”

“Well, okay...”

If that was part of the duties Ri had given him, that was fine, but even walking a little faster than the average person, it was a thirty-minute round trip to the townhouse and back. And if he was at the mansion, was he able to do his work as Ri's attendant? And how would he learn the sword while running around with Sara all day? She wasn't sure yet what kind of work the Apothecary's Guild would have for her, but she didn't really want to restrict what Allen was able to do.

Allen made eye contact with her soothingly. “You don't need to worry about me. I'm just doing my job. You can focus on your own work as an apothecary, but if you have to leave the guildhall, just let me know. That's all you need to worry about.”

“But...”

“Look, that's the guildhall, isn't it?”

“Oh, you're right.”

She got the feeling he was hiding something from her, but if he said he was just doing his job, Sara decided she'd go along with that.



Still a bit nervous about what she'd end up being asked to do here, Sara opened the doors to the Apothecary's Guild, marked by a large sign with a healing herb on it.

Unlike other storefronts, the Apothecary's Guild didn't greet people when they came in. Customers would come to the counter if they had business, so the apothecaries simply waited there quietly.

Sara's mouth fell open when she walked into the building. The only Apothecary's Guilds Sara had seen before were Rosa's, Camellia's, and Hydrangea's, and they were all around the same size, with the same layout.

This one was different, however. The counter was large and U-shaped, with several apothecaries waiting behind it. It was still early morning, but there were already customers making purchases. It was a far cry from Rosa, where Ted had lackadaisically minded the counter all on his own.

But this was no time to be gawking. Sara found an apothecary who wasn't busy with a customer and took her letter of introduction out from her pouch.

"Umm, I'm here from Hydrangea to answer your call for additional apothecaries."

"Huh? You're an apothecary? No way. You're just a kid!" A girl who must have been older than Sara gave her a critical look. Her eyes opened wide when she noticed the brooch Sara had pinned to her collar.

Sara was relieved. She'd been right to wear her robe. "Here's my introduction. Can you tell me where I should be going?" All she could do was ask, since she hadn't been instructed where in the Apothecary's Guild to report to or at what time.

"Most of the visiting apothecaries have already arrived. You're super late."

So she *was* late, but responding to the girl's snide remark would only make her more late. Sara simply waited for her to continue. The girl eventually grew impatient and raised her chin snootily. Still, she did tell her what she needed to know, so she wasn't fully nasty.

"Go outside and to the right and you'll find a side entrance into the guild. That's where they'll be expecting you."

“Thank you.” Sara smiled and left the guild, sighing to herself. Her anxiety was only growing.

“Already on an errand?”

“Ack! Allen? You’re still here?”

“I was just checking out the building from out here,” Allen said, looking up at the sign. He turned to Sara and cocked his head as if to ask her what was wrong.

“Oh, they told me to go in through the side entrance.”

“Ah, that one? I’ve seen a few people who look like apothecaries going in there.”

“Thanks.”

She was a little surprised that Allen had been watching the building more closely than she had, but she waved at him and headed for the side entrance. Another apothecary happened to be going in at the same time, so she was able to sneak in as well, hoping she looked like she belonged there.

Apparently, she did not.

“Haven’t seen you before. You a visiting apothecary? You sure are small...”

Sara wanted to retort that the person talking to her didn’t look any older than twenty herself, but she ignored the comment and simply answered the question instead (though she did wonder what Chris had looked like when he was thirteen, if she was considered small).

“I was dispatched from Hydrangea to help out. Today’s my first day in the capital.”

“I’ll bring you to your supervisor, then.”

The person was nice enough to take Sara through several doors until they found the supervisor they were looking for. The man she’d been led to was dressed in apothecary’s robes and looked to be around Ted’s age. The young man probably brought Ted to mind because he was blond with blue eyes and pretty handsome. Unlike Ted, however, his face looked kind, and he had his hair tied behind his back, like Chris.

“We got a little apothecary from Hydrangea,” said Sara’s guide.

“The ‘little’ isn’t necessary, is it?” she commented without thinking, but as it was under her breath, she got away without them hearing it.

“That’ll help. We don’t have enough of anything right now. I didn’t think we’d get any more apothecaries. You really are small, though, aren’t you?”

She didn’t think they were talking about her height, exactly. She was likely just young for an apothecary. Sara could understand that, but wasn’t as though you could just call yourself an apothecary. She wished they’d remember that you could only become an apothecary if a guildmaster somewhere acknowledged your skills.

They were currently standing in a spacious workroom, with several long work tables and shelves along the wall just like in Hydrangea’s guildhall.

“How long have you been an apothecary?”

Sara breathed a sigh of relief at the reasonable question. “Two months.”

“Two months... I suppose Hydrangea didn’t take this summons very seriously.”

Sara didn’t think that was true, but she wasn’t Caren, so she had no way to know.

“Well, can you make antiparalytics?”

“Yes.” Sara nodded, puffing her chest out proudly. She was an apothecary *because* she could make them.

“Huh. Make one for me, then.”

“Hey, Josef! Shouldn’t we—” The apothecary who’d brought her here started to say something, but stopped when the supervisor, Josef, held up his hand.

“Umm, okay.” Sara decided to go ahead and do it. Maybe it was like an exam.

She set herself up at an open table and took out her gear, gathering basket, potions, and mana elixirs from her pouch, lining them up neatly. For some reason, she was attracting attention already, but she was used to that from her time in Hydrangea. No matter where you went, Apothecary’s Guilds were all the

same.

With the familiar scents of potions and paralytics drifting through the room to calm her, Sara took out an appropriate amount of paralysis herbs from her basket and began grinding them up in her mortar.

Paralytics were like potions; you ground up the herbs, added water and heat, and fixed the effect in place with mana. Antiparalytics required a bit more effort. You had to use fewer paralysis herbs and extract their characteristics with potions instead of water. You heated them, but only so hot that you could put your finger into the mix without burning yourself, and added mana for a longer period after the ingredients began to display their effects. After you added a little bit of mana elixir, they were done. It didn't require particularly complex components, nor was the process difficult, but you had to be careful with the timing and temperature and it required fine mana control, so it was hard to master. Apparently, Sara had mastered this right away, so she hadn't known how hard they were to make until Caren had told her just before she came to the capital.

"Lastly, pour it out into ten bottles, and..." Sara used a funnel to pour out the clear antiparalytic into bottles. Since they were the same color as paralytics, they were distinguished from other potions by the shape of the bottle they went into. "Done... Waugh!"



She'd been concentrating for a pretty long time, and when she finished, she found herself surrounded by apothecaries. In the middle of them was the supervisor from before, watching Sara with his arms crossed. He took the pot from Sara and scooped up a drop of the remaining liquid inside it with his little finger, licking it.

"Mm, look at that. You pass."

He passed the pot around to the other apothecaries present, who tasted the antiparalytic inside with disappointed looks on their faces. Sara was dumbfounded by the sight.

The supervisor shrugged his shoulders. "An apothecary from the boonies comes late, and she turns out to be a newbie who's only been an apothecary for two months. Plus, she's a spacey little girl who looks like she might not be of any use at all. You'd hope that she'd fail normally, wouldn't you?"

"No, I wouldn't! I'd wish her luck! In fact, wouldn't it be more normal to want to help her?" Sara was disgusted with the man.

"Huh, so you can talk back. Guess you've got more backbone than I thought."

"On the contrary, I would say I'm rather timid. I came here terribly worried about what I'd do if anyone bullied me here." And that was just what was happening, wasn't it? Sara felt tears welling in her eyes, but the supervisor just laughed it off.

"Eh, if you're as strong as you seem, you'll be fine. Now then, as for your assignment, let's see..." The supervisor took a look around and then looked down at Sara appraisingly. "Hmm, given your age, it would probably be better for you to work with the other two new apothecaries here rather than the visiting apothecaries. After all, everywhere else sent us veterans."

"Did they?" Sara let the comment slide. It was Caren who had sent her here, not Sara. If she responded to every jab about this, it'd open up a hole in her stomach.

"S'pose I'll send you to the rookie room, then."

Why did this feel like a punishment?

There was a knock on one of the doors in the room. It opened.

“Josef, did we get any paralysis herbs in?”

“Nope, not yet. We did just get in ten antiparalytcs, though.”

“Antiparalytcs? How’d we manage that without any paralysis herbs?”

The surly voice was familiar to Sara, but she figured it would be better to pretend not to recognize it, so she didn’t turn toward the door. He was supposed to be in Camellia, so what was he doing here in the capital?

She knew why the apothecaries had been looking at her now, at least. They’d all expected her to give up and cry because they didn’t have any paralysis herbs to work with. Sara’s shoulders slumped. So they *were* bullying her.

“Where’d you get antiparalytcs from?”

Still, while her shoulders were slumped, Sara didn’t want to go to any particular effort to hide, so she let the person at the door stride into the room without moving.

“We got a latecomer from Hydrangea who made them with her own paralysis herbs.”

“Hydrangea?”

The footsteps stopped just next to Sara, whose head was still bowed.

“That you, Sara?” the voice said, surprised.

If she’d been found out, there was no point hiding it. Sara looked up and found herself smiling dopily at the nostalgic face before her. He was handsome as always and, of course, frowning like usual.

“Long time no see, Ted.”

“Y-Yeah. So you ended up becoming an apothecary after all, huh?”

“Yep.”

It was a little strange to be having a normal conversation with Ted. He wasn’t even sucking his teeth at her or anything.

“So you’re the apothecary Hydrangea sent, then.”

“Yep. What about you?”

“I spent a year in Camellia, but I work here now.”

Sara wanted to commend him on putting up with Camellia for a whole year, but this wasn't the place to have their little reunion chat. Ted must have felt the same way. He ran his eyes over Sara's tools and plucked her gathering basket from the table.

“Ah!” she exclaimed in dismay.

“Lemme see.” Annoyingly, Ted turned his back to her so she couldn't take it back, and examined the basket's contents. “Just like I thought. I figured you'd have all sorts of stuff in here. I'm borrowing this, Sara.”

“But I need that!”

To an outsider, the scene might have looked like a bully taking a child's things. The person who'd guided her to this room seemed to be debating whether or not to step in. All Sara could do was be glad at least one person here seemed nice.

“You have another basket, don't you?”

“Well, yeah...”

“We'll buy the contents. Including the paralysis herbs for the ten antiparalytcs. We can replace the potion and mana elixir you used. That fine?”

“I guess so...”

Well, he was as pushy as always, but compared to when they'd first met and he'd tried to bilk her on her medicinal plants, he was like a completely different person.

Ted opened Sara's basket and showed its contents to the other apothecaries in the room. “Healing herbs, greater healing herbs, mana herbs, and paralysis herbs. She's got so many paralysis herbs 'cause she heard we'd need them, so she prioritized those when gathering. That right, Sara?”

“Uh-huh.”

“When I'm finished with the purchase, I'll hand them over to the brewing



team,” Ted declared, striding toward the exit with Sara’s basket.

“Aaah—wha...? You can’t just do whatever you want...though I guess that’s never stopped you before.”

Her last quiet comment made a nearby apothecary burst out laughing before they hastily looked over to Josef and schooled their expression. Sara looked over at him too and immediately regretted it. He was giving her an icy-cold look. This was not a workplace where she could joke around, it seemed.

“Sara.” Ted suddenly stopped and held the basket up slightly. “You used the basket I gave you, huh?” He finally left then.

Sara watched him go with her mouth hanging open. He did whatever he wanted as always, but was able to communicate a little better now. What was that at the end all about, though? He made it sound like there was something between the two of them.

The ring of people around Sara suddenly tightened, cutting off her avenues of escape.

“Where’d you gather all those paralysis herbs?”

“Hey, you. You can actually hold a conversation with Ted. Who the heck are you?”

“Did Ted really give you that basket?”

“Why’d he know you so well, huh?”

Sara didn’t know what to answer first, and she didn’t want anyone asking her any personal questions in the first place, so she resented Ted a little for bringing this on. She hadn’t been expecting to see Ted here in the capital. She was also surprised that people were so interested in him; she figured he’d probably just be causing problems for people and earning their resentment.

“Okay, you can do your prying later. We’ve got some paralysis herbs now, so we’ll be busy making antiparalytics from now on. Come on, everybody, back to work.”

Josef the supervisor pulled the bewildered Sara out of the room. She couldn’t tell if he was nice or mean.

“I *am* curious why a girl from Hydrangea knows Ted, but I can hear about it later. We’re busy right now. Just go fight it out with your fellow newbies. Girls?”

They moved through the halls and Josef stuffed Sara into the room where the new apothecaries must have been working. Some apothecaries who’d been lounging in chairs shot up when the door opened. It was a small room and there were only two people inside it.

“This is an apothecary who came to help from Hydrangea, but she’s new, so she’ll be doing the same thing as you two.”

“Umm, okay. Got it.”

Josef left right away, so Sara went over to the girl who had responded to him. She looked more like the leader of the two. They each looked around Kuntz’s age or maybe a little older, so somewhere around sixteen. If there were only two newbies, then maybe the Apothecary’s Guild in the capital was actually pretty small, Sara thought.

“You’re from Hydrangea? That’s way out in the sticks,” the leader girl said, looking down at Sara with a hand on her hip. Her comment seemed to imply she was born and raised in the capital.

Sara had no thoughts on being from “the sticks.” Having lived and worked in the most populated city in Japan, she didn’t find the capital of this country particularly city-like, and the countryside was somewhere she’d always wanted to travel to, so she didn’t see it as a place to be ridiculed. Besides, Sara had really enjoyed living in Hydrangea, so the words didn’t hurt her one bit.

“Yeah, there’s a big lake and a lot of nature around,” she answered simply.

“Wow, boring.”

The girl went back to the chair she’d been sitting in before Josef had come. Sara wondered what was so boring, but she realized it wasn’t just Sara’s words she was reacting to, but the fact that they didn’t have any work to do.

“I’m sure he said the newbies should fight it out together, but there’s nothing to fight over when we don’t have any work to do. I figured I could at least tease you a little, but you don’t play along at all... Sorry for being nasty to you earlier. We’re all new apothecaries here anyway.”

Sara giggled, finding the way she'd said that funny.

"If you're laughing about it, I suppose it doesn't bother you, then. Josef's supposed to be in charge of the new apothecaries, and he seems nice at first glance, but he's really kind of a jerk. Oh yeah, my name's Mona."

"I'm Heather."

The lively Mona was a tall girl with beautifully wavy dark blonde hair and green eyes. Behind her hid Heather, a smaller girl with light brown hair in pigtails and hazel eyes. They both wore the same apothecary's robes as Sara.

"My name is Sara. I came from Hydrangea. I've only been an apothecary for two months." Sara introduced herself as well, and sighed after hearing about Josef. "So he *was* being a jerk."

Her impression of him had zigzagged back and forth a few times, so she wasn't sure what to make of him, but if his fellow apothecaries said he was a jerk, then it was probably true.

"Hey," Mona asked Sara with stars in her eyes, "the guildmaster in Hydrangea is Master Caren, right?" Mona had a pretty face, her cheeks speckled with freckles, which made her look cute in a more girlish way.

"That's right."

"Aww, I'm jealous. Master Caren's the only one who would send a new kid to the capital like this. And a girl, at that."

Hadn't she said Hydrangea was out in the sticks earlier? Sara narrowed her eyes slightly.

"You don't need status to become an apothecary, but you need mana and the training takes time, so it's easier to become one if you're a noble or otherwise wealthy. There aren't a lot of women either. Training in the capital and becoming the guildmaster of a country town like her... I admire that. Of course, I wouldn't mind being an apothecary in the capital either." Mona sighed.

"We're not nobles or anything, so it was pretty difficult to become apothecaries, and it's pretty difficult now too. I mean, there's so much going on right now, but they don't even have any work for us to do. And how are we supposed to practice when we don't have any work?"

“Does status matter that much?”

“I’d say so. You could also say it’s one of the few jobs you can get regardless of status. It’s just hard to get there, and once you’re there, it’s hard to get ahead. We’re all new here, but there are other newbies in another room doing real work, or out manning the reception desk.”

“Are there?”

It’d be fine if they had the sort of iron will to just relax since there was no work to do, but they had all become apothecaries because they were driven to. It was only natural that they wanted to work.

“So, what exactly should I be doing?” Sara asked them.

“Chatting, I guess? Ha ha ha,” Mona laughed wryly.

This was a bit anticlimactic for Sara, who’d thought she was going to be driven like a workhorse while she was here, but it also felt obvious that they’d only get scolded if people caught them chatting. Since she had the opportunity, Sara thought she might as well see how other apothecaries worked.

“Well, while we chat, could you show me how people make potions in the capital? I guess it’ll just be talking since we don’t have any plants, though. Everyone had slightly different methods back in Hydrangea, so I’d like to know how other people do things for reference.”

“That’s a good idea. I can show you how I do it, but I want to know what you do when I’m done too.” To Sara’s surprise, the meek-looking Heather smiled and nodded at her suggestion.

Mona didn’t seem opposed either. “Sure, let’s do it. It’s not like we’ve got anything better to do. I wouldn’t say I have trouble sitting still, but we’ve been stuck in here for days.”

“You don’t do any gathering?” If Sara didn’t have any work to do, her first instinct would be to go out and gather plants.

“You really *are* from the sticks.” Mona shrugged, but Sara realized she probably wasn’t saying this just to be mean.

“Oh, it’s probably too far to go all the way outside of town, huh?”

“Yep. It’d take three hours to get to the outside from here. I mean, we’re pretty much right in the center of town.”

“I guess it’d be hard to go gather plants *or* to come in here to sell them, huh?”

“That’s why we often end up using plants brought in from other towns.”

There were difficulties when it came to procuring medicinal plants in every town, Sara mused. Sara recalled some grumbling in Rosa about how they weren’t getting plants in from the capital, but if there was demand in the capital, it was only natural that they wouldn’t be sending plants out to other places.

Mona made fun of her for being from the countryside a few times, but Sara had never chatted with people around her age who were in the same position at the same job, so she had a lot of fun talking to her and Heather. They all set out their equipment in front of them and compared their brewing methods, which made Sara feel like they were doing science experiments or something.

“Is this what being in a club is like?” Sara had always gone straight home after school, so she’d never experienced anything like this.

“A club?”

“It’s like, where you get together with people who all have the same hobby,” Sara explained awkwardly.

Mona scoffed in response. “What are you talking about? This is a job. It’s work. I mean, we *are* getting paid for it.”

“Understood, pres’.” Sara raised her hand and saluted without thinking.

“What’s ‘pres’ mean?”

“Umm, that you’re the person in charge here?”

“Well, I guess that’s fine, then.”

Mona seemed to be a frank, friendly sort of girl.

“Anyway Sara, you’re already doing things differently than us right from the preparation stage. Not grinding up the herbs faster is a waste of time, yeah? Speed is important too, you know.” Heather had been watching Sara closely

and noticed right away when their methods differed.

“Oh, I go slow on purpose.”

“What do you mean?” Heather frowned.

“If you move at a regular, slow pace, the mortar doesn’t heat up as much, and the potion turns out better.”

“Really? Ugh, I wish we had some plants to work with. I want to experiment!” Heather’s hands moved like she was grinding up herbs in a mortar. Sara understood how she felt. She still had some of her own plants on her, but she didn’t want them getting taken away again, so she decided not to get them out just yet.

“Plus, when you talked about adding mana, you said ‘the same kind of mana you use for physical strengthening,’ but what does that mean? I always picture it like wind magic, since that’s what I’m good at.”

“That’s fine, but if you do that, you might focus too much on the wind instead of the mana, which sort of...divides your intent? It makes it less efficient.” Sara explained her interpretation of what Chris had told her. “With physical strengthening, it’s more like pure mana comes from your hands while you mix it, so...”

“Ooh, I want to try it!”

“Yeah.”

The two of them didn’t find fault with what she had to say. They just moved their spoons around in their empty pots, adding mana to nothing.

“Pfft. What are you doing?”

Josef’s voice surprised the three of them so much that they all jumped.

“Err, just practicing?” Mona said, embarrassed.

Josef scoffed at them. “Must be nice to have time to play around since you’ve got nothing to do.”

His bullying wasn’t the same as Ted’s, but he was firmly categorized as another jerk in Sara’s mind.

He set a basket down in front of her, opening up the lid. “Here’s your basket and your payment for the mana elixirs, potions, and plants. There’s an itemized receipt, so make sure it’s accurate.”

She didn’t know the exact amount of plants in the basket, but the numbers on the paper seemed to more or less match what she had in there, so Sara told him, “Looks right to me.”

“You’re an apothecary, but you gather plants yourself?”

“If I have time.”

She had more experience gathering plants than being an apothecary, in fact.

“Huh,” Josef said, laughing with a nasty look on his face. “Well, since Ted seems to trust your skills and you’ve got nothing else to do, why don’t you go gather plants, then? Prioritizing paralysis herbs, of course.”

Sara didn’t mind gathering plants. She’d actually been prepared for it, since Chris had told her it was likely she’d be given grunt work like that.

“Josef, it takes three hours to reach the fields from here. I think it’s a little crazy to ask an apothecary who came all the way here from Hydrangea to take a six-hour round trip to gather plants. Not to mention, paralysis herbs aren’t easy to find. And there are horned rabbits out there!”

Sara was happy that Mona protested so passionately on her behalf, but Josef just narrowed his eyes at her.

“And since when did you give me orders, Mona?”

“I-I wasn’t trying to...” Mona stepped back, cowed, but Sara thought she was right, whether or not she was in a position to speak back.

“You kids from the outer city really do stick together, don’t you? Well, you don’t have to worry.”

Sara felt like *all* they could do was worry, but she kept this to herself.

“Mona, Heather, you three are friends now, right? You go with her.” Sara was about to protest that it was too much to ask of regular girls like them when he continued, “I won’t tell you that you have to walk or anything. I’ll send a carriage out with you. You should get there in an hour, right? Hurry up and get

ready.”

“Umm!” If they were taking a carriage, it was probably fine, but Sara still raised her hand because of what Allen had told her.

“What is it? I’m not taking any complaints.”

“That’s not it. It’s just, there’s a person in the capital who’s taking care of me, and he told me that if I have to leave the Apothecary’s Guild, I have to take someone from the house with me.”

“What? Oh, Caren’s family are some big merchants or something, right? Well, that’s fine, I guess.” Josef had his own interpretation of what Sara had said, but she didn’t think she needed to clarify every little thing. For now, she was just relieved that she could do what Allen wanted her to.

“Meet outside the side entrance when you’re ready. I’ll get the carriage ready for you. Oh, and Sara?” For some reason, those words made Sara a little nervous. “Ted told me to make sure you didn’t do anything crazy, so don’t do anything crazy.”

Sara couldn’t believe Ted. He was probably trying to look out for her, but she was just going to draw more attention to herself with Ted of all people showing concern for her.

“You’re the one making her do something crazy!” Mona waited to shout this until Josef had left the room and she was sure he wouldn’t be coming back. Sara understood how she felt. “Ugh, what a jerk. But he’s from a count’s family and it’s true that we’re in no position to talk back to him.” Mona’s shoulders sagged.

“Sorry for getting you wrapped up in this.” Sara apologized as they hastily put away the gear they’d set out.

“It’s fine. In fact, I’m happy, since you hardly get any chance to go out to the meadow while you’re working in the middle of the city. Think we have time to get some snacks to eat while we’re out there?” Heather put away her things, smiling happily. Sara started to feel like they were going out on a little picnic too.

“I’m scared of horned rabbits... I hear they show up in the meadow sometimes.” Mona raised a practical issue. She was clearly hesitant, but her



hands still moved quickly. Sara was starting to think the two of them might actually be really talented apothecaries. Maybe the bullying was motivated by jealousy and not scorn.

“If it were really dangerous, I can’t imagine they’d send us out to pick plants.”

“I hope you’re right...”

When they sneaked out from the side door, there was indeed a small vehicle waiting for them, but it was less of a carriage and more of a cart.

“Hey there! Normally, I’m transporting goods, but I guess I get to transport three pretty girls today!”

“Where are we supposed to ride in this thing?!” Mona groaned. Sara understood where she was coming from, but she was a little excited at the prospect herself.

“On the hay, I’d say. It’s there so the stuff I carry doesn’t get damaged, so it shouldn’t feel too bad to ride on.”

“But we’re people!”

Sara was about to tell the driver she had to go get Allen when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

“Sara.”

She turned around and there he was.

“Allen? I was just gonna go get you. We’re supposed to go gather plants.”

“Got it. I’m glad you were gonna keep your promise.” Allen looked at the cart and shrugged his shoulders. Sara wanted to ask him if he’d been waiting here the whole time, but before she could, he looked up at the driver and murmured, “Thought so.” Again, before Sara could ask what he’d thought, Allen said, “Hey, mister. I’ve been asked by this girl’s family to go with her. Mind if I come along?”

“Well, there’s room. I’d be glad to have you along, actually. I was a little worried about it being just me, since I’m taking them outside town.” Everything after “Well, there’s room” had been said in a whisper, so Mona and Heather likely hadn’t heard.

“Just leave it to me. I may not look like much, but I’m a Hunter.” The guileless way Allen smiled was awfully cool.

“Hey, Sara,” said one of the girls.

“I’ll explain later. Let’s just get in the cart.”

They all climbed timidly onto the straw, but found it was more comfortable than they’d been expecting. Some of the apothecaries watching them from the front of the guild snickered at them, but Sara had never ridden in a cart before, and she had three people around her age with her too, so she found the experience more fun than anything else.

They all had a bit of a giggling fit before Heather turned to Sara and started, “So...”

Sara was about to explain that Allen was a friend, assuming Heather wanted to know who the boy was, but that wasn’t the question she asked.

“Who are you, exactly? I mean, I know you’re a new apothecary from Hydrangea, but it seems like there’s more to it than that.”

Sara froze up a little. She really cut to the chase.

“You look normal enough, and Josef brought you to join us, so he doesn’t think much of you, but you’re definitely not normal on the inside. I mean, no ordinary new apothecary could actually get Mona to do work.”

“Hey, you make it sound like I’m some kinda lazy problem child!” Mona exclaimed, but Heather ignored her.

“You’re really good at brewing potions and it seems like you can do all sorts of other stuff. Then there’s the fact that *Ted’s* worried about you, and you need a guard when you go out? There’s gotta be something there.”

She was exactly right, but Sara still wasn’t sure just what to say.

“Most of all, there’s no way Caren in Hydrangea would just send any normal newbie. It’s crazy that Josef thinks he’s actually smart, isn’t it?” Heather could be surprisingly caustic.

“Umm, wow, you’re actually pretty harsh, huh?”

“You can’t survive in an Apothecary’s Guild if you’re not strong-willed.”

Sara couldn’t help exchanging a glance with Allen. Ted, Chris, Caren... True, every apothecary they knew *was* rather strong-willed. They were also all rather unique.

“I-I’d say I’m rather timid, myself...”

“If you were really timid, you wouldn’t be grinning riding a cart like this. And you haven’t answered my question.”

Well, Sara didn’t really plan on hiding it. She wanted to be friends with these two if she could, so she decided to be honest with them.

“Umm, I’m one of the Invited, you see.”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

They both cocked their heads at the same time. That must not have been what they were expecting to hear.

“Uhh, so the Invited are, like...” Sara looked to Allen for help.

“People invited here by the goddess. They can use pretty much infinite mana.”

“Yeah, that.” That was where the explanation would have to start.

“Huh? What?!” It seemed it sank in first for Heather. “I know what the Invited are! There’s two of them in the capital, right? I think they’re both Hunters.”

“They’re probably both in Rosa right now.”

“So you’re just like them, Sara? That means there are three Invited in Trilgaia right now!”

Sara laughed, finding that phrasing kind of funny. She was glad they hadn’t assumed she was lying or something like that, though.

“I heard the Invited always arrive young, and women end up shut away in noble houses. Why are you working as an apothecary like you’re a commoner, Sara?” Heather asked, clearly very curious about her.

“Well, I didn’t actually show up here... I was invited here closer to Rosa.”

“Rosa... Oh, so that’s how you know Ted!”

It was amazing how she made that connection so quickly. Ted really must have been famous. Mona seemed to be catching on now too. She nodded next to Heather, her arms crossed.

“Rosa’s kind of a rarity. It’s run by Ted’s family instead of a noble house. Were you taken in by Ted’s family, then?”

“No, I’m staying with House Wolverié.”

“Wolverié...the former knight commander. He’s the lord in Hydrangea.” Sara could just picture how Mona’s glasses would be glinting if she had them. “It all makes sense now.”

“It does?” Weren’t there still questions like “How did she come to the southern Hydrangea from the north of Rosa?” or “Why did she become an apothecary?”

“Well, that clears up everything that’s been bugging me since you showed up. The rest I can take my time asking you about.”

“Umm...” Sara looked down. “You don’t think it’s unfair that I get all this special treatment?”

Mona and Heather exchanged a glance and grinned.

“We’re used to unfair. I mean, we work with a bunch of nobles.”

“Yep. But we still became apothecaries, and once this migrating dragon stuff is over with, we’ll go back to our fun jobs as apothecaries where all the nobles get special treatment instead of us. And if things get too hard for us in the capital, we can just go somewhere else. Apothecaries are welcome anywhere. You can’t keep us down now that we’re qualified.”

They grinned at one another again.

“I think it’s only natural that you get some special treatment as one of the Invited. That’s why it’s pretty funny that you’re getting sent out to gather plants like you’re just another grunt.”

“Just remember the two of us later on, so you can give us some special treatment of your own down the line.”

The way they laughed so sunnily made Sara think back to when she’d first met Allen. Even when his mana was so strong that everyone avoided him, he acted like it didn’t bother him at all. When he was told he “wasn’t even a Third District kid,” he made up his mind to live by his own strength.

“You’re too self-conscious, Sara,” Allen added. “None of us have to be nobles to do what we want to.”

“Yeah. Maybe you’re right.”

“‘Maybe you’re right’? I bet you could even say ‘I’m an Invited, so you better give me special treatment!’” Mona poked Sara with some hay, looking exasperated.

“I just don’t want to stand out... And Caren didn’t send me because I’m an Invited, she sent me because I’m good at making antiparalytcs. I *like* picking plants too, so if I can, I’d prefer to just stay out of the spotlight like this...”

“I’d say Ted looking out for you puts you pretty squarely in the spotlight already.”

“You’re so right. I can’t believe Ted... It’s not like we’re friends or anything.”

While they chatted, they arrived in the meadow to the east of the capital.

“We’re here, ladies. Can you really pick medicinal plants around here, though?” The driver stopped the cart a little ways off from the road and looked around. There were quite a few people around, since the dungeon was nearby.

“I’ve never been here before, so I don’t really know,” Sara said, hopping down from the cart.

Allen helped Mona and Heather down and the two of them fidgeted a little once they were on the ground. Sara looked around and then honed in on the area between the road and the meadow. She felt like paralysis herbs could be found around where the vegetation changed.

“The road doesn’t have a protection field around it here, huh?”

“That’s just a Rosa thing. Not that the field really functioned around there,”

Allen said with a wry smile. He quickly wiped the grin off of his face, though. "I'll keep an eye out around here. I'll watch for horned rabbits too, so try to stick together, you three."

"Okaaay," the trio chimed before Heather and Mona gathered around Sara. Sara knelt down and looked around. The driver headed back to town with his cart, saying he'd come back to pick them up later.

"Healing herb, healing herb, greater healing herb. Well, there's plenty of healing herbs around here."

"You're kidding." Mona and Heather knelt down too, but they couldn't seem to tell the healing herbs from the other grass.

"And if we follow where the grass starts to grow off of the dry ground of the road, then... Here we go." She'd found a paralysis herb.

Sara took her medicinal plant guide out of her pouch. "It might seem a little basic, but just think of this as a review. Think about the plants you use to make potions every day as you memorize their characteristics."

"Got it."

"The healing herbs we use look like this, but they're much taller on the ground, so you want to look up from the middle of the plant instead of at the base," Sara explained courteously. She pointed at one nearby. "There's one right here. Compare the plant to the illustration."

"You're right. From here on up, it's the healing herbs we use at the Apothecary's Guild."

Mona was looking closely at the plant with interest, but Heather had already started her own gathering.

"I gathered healing herbs before I became an apothecary. Those are the only ones I know, though."

"That's great!" Sara watched warmly as Heather happily gathered plants. Picking plants was fun.

"Sara, expand your barrier around them," Allen suggested casually. There *were* horned rabbits and meadow wolves out here, but it was fairly safe near

the road, and there was even farmland a slight distance from the area where they were gathering.

“I thought I might, but do you really think I need to?” Sara found it strange that he’d go out of his way to make the suggestion.

“Just in case.”

Sara felt like Allen had changed a little since they’d come to the capital... No, since a little *before* coming to the capital. It felt like there was some distance between them that wasn’t there before, or like he was hiding something from her, which made her feel rather despondent.

Still, she expanded her barrier so that it would cover Mona and Heather as well, as Allen had suggested. The two of them didn’t seem to notice, but at least Sara could work without worrying about them now.

“Use this as an example and start looking for more closer to the ground.”

“Got it.”

Sara handed Mona a healing herb to use for reference and plucked a paralysis herb herself. She kept an eye on the other two while she gathered in a different direction.

“There are a lot of paralysis herbs out here. Judging from the amount of healing herbs too, it seems like no one’s been gathering here for a while,” Sara murmured to herself.

Heather responded to her musings, “The Guild in the capital gets enough healing herbs on its own, but paralysis herbs are typically sent in from Duranta in the west. But the knights started using that paralysis agent around two years ago, right? So we’re even shorter on a resource that’s already scarce ‘cause of that.” She stood with a grunt and walked over to Sara, peering into her gathering basket. “You’ve already picked this many?”

“Yeah. They tend to grow near one another, right? I left the small ones alone so they can be picked later.”

They glanced over at Mona, who was carefully folding and plucking healing herbs from the ground. She had a few in her other hand already, so she seemed

to be making progress. Sara was a lot more relaxed out here than in a new and unfamiliar guildhall.

“Sara,” Allen called to her. “It’s almost noon.”

“You’re right!” So much had already happened today, it was hard to believe only half of it had passed by now. “Wait, Allen, you...”

“Aaah!” Mona screamed when she saw the pile of horned rabbits at Allen’s feet.

“Yeah. They’re probably used to people hurrying by either by carriage or on foot, so we must have looked like nice targets, since we’re all staying put. I took care of ’em all before they hit your barrier, though, so it shouldn’t have affected your gathering at all. Right?” He grinned, stuffing the horned rabbits at his feet into his pouch. There were at least five of them in the pile.

“It was fine ’cause you and me were here today, but if Mona and Heather were out here on their own...” Sara shuddered, turning to face the other girls. “I know we’re only out here because of me, but if anyone ever asks you to come gather out here without a guard, you should refuse them, okay? It’s way too dangerous out here.”

“I-I got it.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

They both nodded gravely, which Sara was relieved to see. She wondered if the Hunter’s and Apothecary’s Guilds were aware of this. She didn’t really want to, but she figured she should probably report this to Josef, which brought her mood down a bit. Still, she was able to recover quickly enough when her thoughts turned to lunch.

Sara always had food in her pouch, and Allen was the same, of course. Mona and Heather had their own lunches as well, so they decided to eat together near the road.

“Everyone who wants it gets warm lunches in Hydrangea. Though it costs money, of course.”

“That sounds nice. We make our own lunches to save money. I’d say about



half of the people in the capital do that. The other half buy it from somewhere. Even if you get steady pay as an apothecary, you never know what could happen, after all.”

“Sounds smart.”

Sara was part of the pack-your-own-lunch camp. The chefs of House Wolverié told her to ask them whenever she wanted a lunch made for her, but she stubbornly borrowed the kitchen and batch-cooked lunches for herself regardless. She couldn’t let them take care of her forever. She had to do what she could for herself to prepare for when she would be independent one day.

They didn’t trade side dishes or anything, but when they were finished eating, Sara shared some of Marcia’s cookies with everyone. It made her happy to hear the others remark that it was like they were really out on a picnic.

“Now, we’ll continue working after lunch.” Mona stood, clearly excited to get back to gathering, but Sara stopped her.

“Mona, it’s our lunch break right now. Want to use the time to make potions instead?”

She’d done this with Chris every so often on their way to Hydrangea. They were outside, so the potion quality would be somewhat affected by the wind and surrounding temperature, but it would also benefit from the freshness of their just-picked herbs.

“It should be fine to make potions with plants we’ve picked ourselves. Besides, I get the feeling Josef just wants to laugh at us when we come back and tell him we weren’t able to gather anything out here.”

“You might be right.” Mona and Heather agreed with her.

“So if we don’t have any left over, we can just take his criticism, and if we *do* bring some back, we can do it with a big smile on our faces.”

Taking bullies seriously was just a waste of time. Allen chuckled when he saw how heated Sara was getting.

“You’re getting tougher by the day, Sara.”

“This world has forced me to grow strong...”

“Guess so.”

This time they both smiled wryly. You were bound to grow if you got wrapped up in things as much as they had.

Sara just so happened to have a long table in her three-wyvern pouch.

“Nobody walks around with something like that!”

Though Mona laughed at her, the three did the same sort of comparison of their methods they’d done earlier in the guildhall, tasted the potions they’d made together, and stored them surreptitiously in their own pouches when they were finished.

“I learned a lot today!” Heather said. “Now when there’s nothing to do at the Guild, I can at least practice gathering mana in my hand.” She held an imaginary spoon in her hand and stirred it around.

“Right, you gather mana and add it in at a regular speed...” Mona and Sara stirred imaginary spoons as well. Then they remembered Josef making fun of them earlier and they all burst into laughter.



“Okay, for the afternoon, Mona can gather healing herbs and Heather can work on paralysis herbs with me.”

“What? But I got into such a groove with the healing herbs...” Heather grumbled, but it was paralysis herbs that the Guild needed more than anything else. Sara decided it was better for a more experienced gatherer like Heather to stay on task.

“We will now begin our afternoon gathering session.”

Heather and Mona were both older than Sara, but just as she’d said at the Apothecary’s Guild, having a group of people even vaguely around the same age who were all interested in the same thing felt a lot like being in a club to her, so she was really enjoying herself.

By the time most of the afternoon had passed, Heather had found a paralysis herb on her own and was now able to gather them as well. Allen was carefully observing their surroundings as always, and he seemed to be making steady progress hunting horned rabbits.

“Heeey! Heeey!”

The driver came to pick them up when the sun had just started to set.

“Sorry I’m late. Were you kids all right? Whoa!” He’d likely shouted because he’d noticed the pile of horned rabbits at Allen’s feet. Normally, Allen stored them in his pouch right away, so he must have let them pile up on purpose to show off both now and in the morning.

“I had no idea there were so many horned rabbits this close... If I’d known, I never would have brought you out here, even if I’m being paid for it...”

So if there were more horned rabbits appearing lately, it apparently wasn’t a big enough thing for the townspeople to be discussing it yet.

“There probably aren’t too many people who stand around out here away from the road, so it makes sense people wouldn’t know. I’d think the farmers would have noticed, though...” Allen stretched up, glancing over at the farmland nearby.

“Well, horned rabbits don’t do any damage to their crops, so the farmers

don't really have a reason to report it to the Hunter's Guild... Plus, they probably all have protection cases."

"Protection cases!"

Allen and Sara exchanged a glance. If you moved them little by little, you could probably harvest crops without having to worry about horned rabbits. Sara's set, at least, could withstand attacks from mountain wolves.

"Do you have protection cases, Mona, Heather?"

The two of them shook their heads, their expression saying it was a ridiculous question.

"We have no need for them. Not to mention, they're expensive."

They were indispensable items on the Dark Mountain, but it didn't make sense to have them if you didn't need them.

Allen looked at the driver, his face solemn. "Could you at least report this to the Apothecary's Guild? I just happened to be here today, but it would be pretty dangerous for the average apothecary to come out here unattended."

"I got it."

By the time they arrived back at the Apothecary's Guild, the sun had almost fully set.

"We normally never work this late if we're not manning the counter."

"Especially recently. We'd leave early with everyone making snide comments about how it must be nice not to have any work to do."

They headed in through the front entrance, toward the room Josef was in. Sara learned some more about life at the capital's guildhall as they went.

"Took you long enough," snarked Josef.

They were late because their ride was late picking them up, but there was no point in telling him that. Josef then looked behind them at Allen, who'd accompanied them inside, and narrowed his eyes. "I don't believe you have permission to be back here."

Allen shrugged wordlessly and began pulling horned rabbits out of his pouch

one by one. There were twelve in all. Horned rabbits were pretty big, so twelve of them took up a decent amount of space. Other apothecaries in the middle of work stopped to watch as the rabbits piled up.

“And what do you think you’re doing? This isn’t the Hunter’s Guild, you know.” Josef’s eyes sharpened, but Allen remained unbothered.

“I hunted these horned rabbits while guarding these apothecaries today. They were all going after these three.”

“What? I sent them to the eastern meadow, near the farmland. There aren’t any horned rabbits that close to town.”

“If you really think that, then go ahead and send other apothecaries there tomorrow. If they’re lucky, they’ll only be badly hurt, and if they’re unlucky, they’ll die. That’s the long and short of it.”

Sara paled, realizing that if she’d been less careful, she might have gotten Mona and Heather hurt. The two of them had equally pallid complexions.

“I normally hunt in Hydrangea, so I don’t know what it’s like around the capital, but I imagine the situation in the meadow might change in migrating dragon season. At the very least, I don’t think you should be sending anyone out to the eastern meadow without a guard right now.”

Josef schooled his usual mocking expression and turned to a nearby apothecary. “Send somebody to the Hunter’s Guild. Tell ’em Josef from the Apothecary’s Guild wants to know about the monsters in the eastern meadow, so they should send somebody over who knows something about that. And tell the guildmaster there too.”

Well, it seemed like he was able to make reasonable judgments of a situation.

“You’re the guard for that apothecary from Hydrangea?”

“That’s right. I’ve been hired by House Wolverié from Hydrangea to keep her safe.”

“Wolverié. The lord of Hydrangea, eh? So you weren’t from Caren’s family.” Josef scowled when he realized his assumptions had been wrong.

Sara was somewhat annoyed at herself for not realizing Allen had been hired

too. She'd thought he'd been acting differently, but now it made sense. She was a little frustrated with him too, though. He could have told her about this.

"So they were lucky you were with them. I appreciate your help."

Allen accepted his thanks with nothing more than a slight bow of his head.

"Mona, Heather. And you, Sara."

Somehow Sara was a bit annoyed at the fact that he *did* in fact remember her name.

"I might not have known, but I still put you in danger. I'm sorry. I'll think of something else for you to do tomorrow, so you can go home for today."

She wondered for a second if anyone would actually consider that an apology when there wasn't an ounce of real feeling in it whatsoever, but Sara nevertheless silently took her gathering basket out of her storage pouch.

"Mona? Heather? You should get out what you gathered too."

The two of them hesitantly set out what little they'd gathered on the table as well.

"This is what we have for today."

"Paralysis herbs? And healing herbs. You really got these in the eastern meadow?"

Why would he send them there if he didn't think there was anything out there? He really did just want to tease them for not finding anything, didn't he?

"They grow next to the road."

Josef looked over to Allen for confirmation for some reason, so Allen gave him a nod.

"Hurry and tell Ted, would you? We can make more antiparalytics tomorrow, now."

The room was starting to get busier.

"We'll pay you tomorrow. You three are dismissed."

They all left the room just like that, without saying anything like, "We were

the ones who picked those oh-so-important paralysis herbs, you know,” or, “You could handle them a little more carefully, couldn’t you?”

“Man, so he really was just picking on us.”

“Come on, let’s just go home.”

Mona and Heather groaned as they made to leave through the side door. Just then...

“Sara. And...”

Ted called out to Sara. The “and...” was most likely because he’d noticed Allen behind her.

“Tch. Allen, eh? You’ve gotten bigger.”

Was it strange to feel relieved that Ted hadn’t changed, hearing him suck his teeth like he always used to? Allen *had* grown, but he wasn’t as tall as an adult yet, so he was still shorter than Ted. Ted’s words almost made him sound like a younger uncle of Allen’s or something.

“Ted, huh? They finally chased you out of Camellia, eh?”

Sara was surprised that Allen was talking back to him.

“Wrong. I work in the capital now.”

She was also surprised that the conversation was continuing, if a bit frigidly.

“Well, whatever. I’m busy right now. We’ll talk later.” With that, Ted went into the room where Josef was.

Sara and Allen exchanged a glance, so surprised they thought their jaws might hit the floor.

“‘We’ll talk later’? *Ted?*” they said in unison.

Had something happened to him to change him this much? As they all hurried home, Sara wondered whether or not she even wanted to know.

“You know, you could have told me you’d been *hired* to be my guard.” Sara was honest about her feelings on their way home.

“I know. It’s a little different from that, though, honestly. I’ll explain the rest



when we get back to the townhouse. Can you wait until then?"

"Well, sure..." It seemed Sara would get her answers, so she decided to wait a little longer.

By the time Sara and Allen returned, everyone else was back at the townhouse too, chatting genially as they waited for them.

"Took you two long enough! I was so cool today!"

From the sunny look on Kuntz's face, it seemed Chris's experiments had started. Not only that, they were already going well.

"Meant I didn't get a chance to do jack, though."

Nelly was working for the knights, so she wasn't involved in Chris's experiments.

Sara expected they would join the conversation, but Allen kept quiet, instead turning to her after a moment and saying, "Sara, could you stand there and make your barrier a little bigger?"

"My barrier?"

She always had it up unconsciously now, so she could easily change its shape when she wanted to. She didn't know why Allen was asking, but she trusted him, so she did as he wanted.

This time, Allen turned to face Kuntz stone-faced and strode toward him.

"Allen, I—" Kuntz's face turned serious to match Allen's when Allen reached out to his chest.

"Sorry about this."

"Huh? Whoa!"

It happened in an instant. Allen grabbed Kuntz by the collar and lifted him up, throwing him at Sara. Sara was watching the whole thing, but her mind and body were equally slow in reacting.

She could see Nelly standing up and reaching toward her, Chris yelling something, and Kuntz's back rapidly approaching all at the same time.

Easily passing through her barrier, Kuntz slammed into Sara, and the two of

them both tumbled to the floor. Sara felt an impact on her back and then she was staring dazedly up at the ceiling, Kuntz on top of her.

“Sara!” Nelly pushed aside Kuntz, who was just as dazed, and slowly lifted Sara, a hand supporting her head. “Are you okay?”

“My back hurts a little...”

“Okay, I’ll give you a potion.” Nelly promptly took a potion out from her pouch, which made Sara laugh awkwardly.

“Nelly, that’s a greater potion.”

“Eh, this works for most things.”

“Jeez. You’re just like you were...on the Dark Mountain...”

“Sara, don’t cry...” Nelly was rather flustered, but Sara didn’t mind a little bruise on her back. It would be fine if she just stuck some healing herbs on it; she didn’t need a potion. She was just so sad that Allen would do something so violent when she trusted him so much.

Allen meanwhile was staring straight at Sara. Though his face was pained, he wasn’t looking away.

“What the hell was that for, Allen?!” Kuntz leaped up and grabbed Allen’s shirt.

“I said I was sorry, didn’t I?”

“You think that makes it okay?! What if Sara got hurt?!”

One side of Allen’s mouth quirked up as he called Sara’s name sadly. “Sara.”

Sara couldn’t respond. Her lips were trembling. She’d faced everything that had happened to her up until now without giving in, but she couldn’t accept that someone she cared for so much had attacked her.

“I’ve always thought your barrier had a fatal flaw, Sara. It’s been bothering me ever since we went up the Dark Mountain with Haruto and Bradley.”

“What does that have to do with this?!” Kuntz voiced Sara’s thoughts perfectly.

“Listen, Sara. Your barrier repels anything and everything, but someone you

trust can get through without any issues. Just like Kuntz did.”

Sara’s eyes widened. She felt Nelly, who still had her arms around her, stiffen as well.

“That was fine before. I mean, the only people you were close to were Nelly and me, Rosa’s guildmaster and vice guildmaster, Chris... They were all strong people.”

Normally, this was where Kuntz would have teased him for calling himself strong.

“But on our way to Camellia, and when we got there, you ended up adding Ted to that group too. I doubt your barrier would repel Ted now, would it?”

“Well—! Probably not... But Ted’s a traveling companion of ours, right? He’s not mean to us anymore, is he?” Sara was a little confused by what Allen was saying. It was true that Ted had been terrible to Allen, but she had thought that was in the past now, in both her mind *and* Allen’s.

“I think so too. Ted won’t do anything mean to us anymore.”

“Then why are you talking like this?”

“Because Ted’s weak.”

Ted acted important, and he was strong-willed. He had a decent amount of mana too. But he wasn’t like Chris. He couldn’t fight as a caster on equal footing with a Hunter.

“You met a lot of people in Camellia too. But they were mostly apothecaries, right? They’re all weak.”

“Well, they’re not Hunters! Isn’t that only natural?”

“Yeah. You’re right. But you’re *not* natural. Not in a group like that.”

Sara could use near-limitless mana as one of the Invited, and her defensive capabilities could awe Hunters.

“But... But—!”

“That’s why you draw the attention of guys like that apothecary today. Sly bullies like him. They lord over people they think are below them, and if those

people are better than them, they try to drag them down.”

In Rosa, that had been Ted. But there hadn’t been anyone like that in Camellia. Sara wanted to protest, but Allen was still going.

“I mean, you’re already being bullied! If it were just you, I know I wouldn’t have to worry, but that guy took hostages.”

“Hostages? You mean Mona and Heather?”

“Yeah.”

Sara couldn’t keep up with what Allen was saying. Weren’t hostages people someone had captured?

Chris quietly interjected, “From what I’ve heard, I would call them hindrances rather than hostages.”

Well, sure, they couldn’t do as much as Sara could, but she wouldn’t call them hindrances just because of that.

“If I hadn’t been there, what would have happened if they’d been attacked by horned rabbits before you expanded your barrier around them, Sara?”

“Well...”

It was true that Sara had had her guard completely down. She’d been comforted by Allen’s presence, and by the assumption that they wouldn’t be sent out to gather anywhere dangerous. Sara hung her head, now considering the possibility that her own carelessness could have gotten the two of them hurt.

“That’s not the point, Sara. I’m sorry, but I don’t really care if they get hurt or not.”

Sara looked up at Allen in shock.

“What if a horned rabbit jumped at one of them and they fell onto you, Sara? Like just now, you’d fall over too, and what if you were so surprised, your barrier went down?”

Sara hugged herself in surprise. “My barrier...it’s gone...”

“That’s just what happens when you get surprised. It’d be hard for me to keep

my physical strengthening going if something like that happened to me too.”

Sara finally understood what it was Allen was trying to tell her.

“Your barrier can repel a wyvern, but it doesn’t do anything to people who are close to you. That was fine in Hydrangea, because there weren’t any people plotting anything there. But here in the capital?” Allen clenched his fists at his side. “There are a ton of people here who want to own you or use you, Sara. Those people will do whatever they have to to get at you, and the more people you become close to, the more danger you’ll be in.”

“But... But! I can’t just *not* make friends just to stay safe!” She understood what Allen was saying, but people couldn’t live alone. Sara couldn’t, at least.

“I know. I know that. That’s why I asked Ri to let me come with you. I wanted to protect you from the shadows. And if nothing happened, then it would be fine. I would have just kept quiet about it the whole time. It’d be like nothing happened once we made it back to Hydrangea.”

“Allen...” Now that she knew Allen was worried about her, she stopped crying and her trembling subsided a bit.

“But it’s already happening,” Allen continued bitterly. “It’s the first day and someone’s already going after you, Sara. I’ve never once thought that you working with the Apothecary’s Guild was a good idea, and I was right.”

Chris frowned at that. “Calm down, Allen. Did something happen at the Guild today?”

“Yes! She was sent out to gather in the meadow with two apothecaries who didn’t know anything about picking plants and couldn’t protect themselves!”

Chris was just looking at him as if to say, “So what?” He’d predicted that Sara would be sent out to gather plants. He had told her that himself.

Allen reached into his pouch irritably and started pulling horned rabbits out of it once more. “These are all the horned rabbits that tried to attack them today. We got out there a little before noon.”

“Really? Is the number of horned rabbits in the meadow increasing?”

Allen shook his head since he didn’t know. “I know there are horned rabbits a

little farther out from town, and I know they don't usually come that close. I hunted around the capital before I went to Rosa. But I'm guessing things are a little different right now because of the migrating dragons."

"The more dragons falling victim to the paralysis agent, the fewer of them predating the monsters in the meadow," Chris said thoughtfully. "Either that or there are just more horned rabbits gathering in the meadow since they've deemed it safe now that fewer dragons are coming down."

It sounded reasonable enough, but there was no way to know for sure from just a single day of observation.

"Either way, the fact is that there are horned rabbits out there. And they tried to attack Sara and the other apothecaries." Allen shot an irritated glance at Chris, who remained as calm as ever, and turned to look at Sara again instead. "I can't just guard you in secret like this. But if I tell you I want to look out for you, you just say I don't need to, and if I tag along with you anyway, you just act like you're having fun since your friends are with you and you lower your guard even *more*."

It was true that she'd been happy to have Allen by her side for the whole day.

"That's why this was all I could do. I wanted you to see for yourself that your barrier isn't as foolproof as you think it is."

She knew now that he'd done what he had out of concern for her, and he'd gotten his feelings across to her as well, but there was still something nagging at Sara.

Nelly must have felt the same way, because after she helped Sara up, she turned to face him and said, "But Allen, you're not a bad talker like I am. If you just told everyone what was weighing on you, we could have all thought of a solution together. There should have been a more peaceful way to handle this."

Allen hung his head, muttering something that sounded quite unlike him. "None of you would understand how I feel."

Allen was always in perfect control of himself. Even Sara, who should have been older than him on the inside, was always appreciating the way he thought and acted like such an adult. But right now, his lips were trembling like he was

just a child.

“Nelly, you have Ri. Chris, you have family in the capital. You have a home to go back to too, Kuntz. But I don’t have any family.”

Everyone’s breath caught at that. Up until now, Allen had never once lamented his lack of family.

“Sara’s all I have.” A tear fell down Allen’s cheek. “How do you think I felt when I was all alone in Rosa? Can you understand what it feels like for people to avoid you because of your mana? For them to call you ‘worse than garbage’? Do you know how lucky I was to run into Sara like I did? The truth is that no one else can understand how hard we worked and what we went through before Sara reunited with Nelly.”

Sara hadn’t even realized the loneliness Allen was shouldering.

“You can do everything yourself, Nelly, so you don’t know how hard the things you expect Sara to do really are. You make Sara push herself, Chris, because you know she’s one of the Invited and she has power here. But you don’t understand how hard Sara works to live up to what you expect of her. Before this, she was just a normal girl with a weak body.”

Even Sara thought it was only natural for her to be able to do certain things due to the unlimited mana she wielded. She thought it was only natural that she work hard since she was given such impressive power. That was why she did her best to live up to people’s expectations, no matter how impossible the task they asked of her (though not without complaint). Allen was the only person who really understood how hard she worked.

“Even if I told you how I felt, you’d still make Sara push herself. How could I talk to you about this knowing that?!”





“Allen!” Sara left Nelly’s side and ran over to Allen, wrapping her arms around him. “I’m sorry... I’m sorry for worrying you...”

“You don’t need to apologize, Sara. I just can’t stand being so scared all the time.” Allen slowly returned Sara’s hug. “Things had finally settled down in Hydrangea, but... No matter how hard I work in the capital, there’s no way I can protect you when I’m just some Hunter.”

“Allen. It’s okay. It’s okay...” Sara tightened her grip on Allen. The thing Allen was most anxious and scared about was Sara disappearing—like Allen’s uncle had.

Sara remembered the conversation she’d had with Kuntz and Allen right before she became an apothecary. Allen didn’t think anyone would miss him if he died. He’d told Sara she would be fine if he was gone because she had Nelly.

“I’m not going anywhere. I promise.”

Allen didn’t say anything; he just tightened his grip on Sara in return as if saying he didn’t believe her.

Sara sighed. “Besides, I don’t want *you* going anywhere either, Allen.”

“Even if something happened to me, you have Nelly,” he reiterated.

“I do. But if you went away, I wouldn’t have *you*.”

“Nothing’s gonna happen to me. I’m careful.”

Sara knew she could be careless, but Allen pushed himself plenty.

“Oh yeah? And who was it who went out into a meadow filled with horned rabbits at night after Ted tricked you?”

“That’s not...! I was twelve!”

“And who wanted to go up the Dark Mountain when they were twelve?”

“Me.”

“Who jumped into a big horde of poison bog frogs?”

“...Me,” Allen admitted reluctantly.

Sara sighed again, louder this time. “How much do you think I worry about

*you*? And even if I want to be together with you all the time, I don't say so because I know you have your own life to live."

"Say it! Tell me you need me! All I want is for one person in this world to be happy that I'm around."

Sara was remembering how she'd felt when she first came to this world. She'd been full of anxiety before she realized that Nelly was a good person, someone she could trust. And after they did start trusting one another and became important to each other, they hadn't understood just *how* important they were to one another until they were separated.

Sara let go of Allen and placed her hand on his chest. "Allen," she said.

"Sara," he responded right away.

"You're important to me, Allen. I consider you my family in this world."

"Is it okay for me to think of you as *my* family, and not Nelly's?"

Sara couldn't help chuckling at that. Her tears were dry now. "I won't give up being Nelly's, but I'm yours too. I mean, we were almost like twins in Rosa, weren't we? We were always together, with our tents right next to each other outside of town."

"We shivered together in the cold in the watchtower and watched the sunrise together."

"I worked hard back then, knowing I'd see Nelly again."

"And we've been together ever since then."

Sara was thinking back on everything that had happened since Rosa, and Allen must have been doing the same. Sara had always been at Allen's side, just like their other friends.

Allen took a deep breath and let it out. "I get it now. I always thought I was alone, but I wasn't, was I?"

"You weren't."

"I haven't been alone since I met you, Sara."

"Yeah. You were just taking too much worry onto yourself."

Allen pulled away from Sara and put his hands on her shoulders. Finally looking her in the eye, he wiped his tears away with his sleeve somewhat bashfully and broke out into a grin. This wasn't the Allen who had watched over Sara maturely all day but the fourteen-year-old boy that he really was.

Hearing someone sniffle behind her, Sara quickly pulled away from Allen and turned around. Nelly and Ri were both sniffing, their heads bowed and one hand covering their faces, while next to them, Chris had his head tilted back and his eyes closed for some reason, his arms crossed. Kuntz was just looking away from them awkwardly.

Allen turned redder and redder until he swung his head down into a bow. "I...! I never meant for this to happen! I'm sorry!"

"Worry not." Ri sniffled again. "Angst is the privilege of youth. It's good that you were able to vocalize your troubles."

"Oh no... What have I done...?"

Sara had completely forgotten that he'd bowled her over with Kuntz earlier and was just laughing at how Allen was writhing with embarrassment now.

"That's what I want to ask. If you'd just told me, I would have helped you out, you know. You really threw me for a loop..." Kuntz grumbled. "Am I in the way here? Do you two not want me around?"

Sara and Allen both hurriedly shook their heads.

"You're important to me too, you know, Allen. I mean, we're in a party together, aren't we? Trust me a little more, would you?"

"I do! I do trust you!" It was funny seeing Allen try to make excuses to Kuntz too.

Allen must have been worried about Sara leaving him ever since he found out she'd be going to the capital to work as an apothecary. Maybe that was the reason he'd felt distant from her all this time.

Sara was wondering if he was feeling any better after getting all of that out, when Nelly, who'd been silent for all of this, stood up swiftly.

"Allen."

“Oh, Nelly... I’m sorry, I...”

Nelly suddenly disappeared and reappeared in front of Allen, wrapping him up in an awkward hug.

“Huh?”

“Allen! I’m sorry for not realizing my apprentice was so lonely!”

“No, err, I...”

“You can think of me as your family as well from now on. I’ll be your mother if you want, or your older sister, whatever you need.”

Sara thought he wasn’t answering because he was surprised, but when she turned to look at him, she hastily told Nelly, “Too tight! Too tight! You’ll kill him!”

“What? Oh.” Overcome with emotion, Nelly had embraced Allen a bit too hard.

“I think I saw a river or something...”

“Whatever you do, don’t go across it!” Sara didn’t know if Trilgaia had the River Styx, but she made the comment regardless. “I see, so it really is hard to use physical strengthening when you’re surprised.”

“Cut it out, Sara...”

The room filled with awkward laughter.

That was when Chris, who hadn’t yet said anything, stood. “I’ll be right back.” He quietly left the room just like that.

Allen looked down, his eyes still red. “I really went too far, didn’t I?”

“Oh, Chris won’t let it get to him. I’m sure he just wants to be alone right now. Just leave him be,” Nelly said, hard as always on Chris. Still, she shot a look that Sara might go so far as to call worried at the door he’d left from.

Sara thought it was a bit strange herself. Chris could be selfish, but it wasn’t as if he was completely devoid of compassion. She could hardly believe he’d witness Allen at the end of his rope like that and have no words of comfort for him whatsoever.

Allen bowed his head to everyone once more. “I really am sorry about all that. I apologize. Especially to Sara and Kuntz. I got way too in my own head and just ended up making things worse.”

“No, no...” The adults shook their heads, while Sara and Kuntz gave Allen lighthearted shoulder bumps. There were no hard feelings anymore.

“Well, shall we have dinner, then?” Ri suggested, reminding Sara that she’d completely forgotten about food.

They had dinner, though Chris remained gone for it, and after they ate, the townhouse’s caretaker appeared and whispered something into Ri’s ear. His voice was loud enough for everyone to hear him, however.

“Master Chris is in the gazebo in the eastern garden, sir.”

Nelly rose to her feet immediately, but Allen stopped her.

“I’ll go, Nelly.”

“But...”

It was true that Chris was always thrilled to see Nelly, but if she went, it likely wouldn’t clear up this issue.

“It might not be my fault, but I want to talk to him anyway.”

“I see. I’ll leave him to you then, Allen.”

“Okay. I’ll go find him.” Allen turned around and strode out of the room just like a Hunter would.

Sara watched him go, then stood quietly herself. “I think I’ll go with him.”

“You’re not gonna leave it to him?” Nelly asked her, looking rather surprised.

“I will, but I’m curious why Chris reacted like that, you know?”

“True. It’s not like him to run off like that. I mean, *ahem*.”

She didn’t need to pretend not to care like that, did she?

“Do you know where this gazebo is, Nelly?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go watch them, then.”

“Sounds good to me.”

In the end, Kuntz and Ri came along with them too, and they headed for the gazebo using a different route than the one Allen had taken.

“How did Allen know how to get there, though? I’ve never been there,” Sara said.

Ri laughed, giving his beard a twist. “He’s your guard, Sara. He’s memorized the layout of the townhouse, of course.”

“Huh?” Sara’s cheeks reddened when she learned it was for her sake. She couldn’t say anything more after that. She was honestly rather embarrassed to hear that Allen had been studying the townhouse for her safety while she and Nelly were just goofing off together in their room.

“Oh? We got here before Allen,” Ri informed them. Sara puffed up a bit, proud of herself for deciding she should go with him right away.

“Chris...” Nelly, however, sounded worried for Chris, who sat alone inside the gazebo.

The sun had set and the season was approaching winter. The temperature in the garden was dropping rapidly, yet Chris sat in the gazebo with nothing more than a small lamp to illuminate his surroundings, tilting his head back like he had inside earlier.

“Shh. There’s Allen,” Ri pointed out, and they all hid behind the expertly trimmed shrubbery.

Allen headed straight for Chris without slowing down, stopping when he reached the older man.

“Chris.”

“Allen...is it? Is something the matter?”

It seemed like Chris was choosing his words carefully, which also wasn’t like him. Sara couldn’t help squirming until Ri cautioned her not to move.

“That’s what I wanted to ask you. Everyone’s worried since you ran out like that and didn’t come to dinner. You’ve got more experiments to run tomorrow, right? You’ve gotta eat.”

“I see. I suppose you’re right.” It sounded like neither his experiments nor dinner had been on his mind at all. The words sounded nothing like those of someone so devoted to his craft, who’d spent a whole year preparing to run these experiments.

Allen plopped down next to Chris. There was a bit of an odd gap in between them, signifying the distance between them mentally. Allen cleared his throat before apologizing.

“Chris. I’m sorry about earlier.”

“About what?” Chris asked. He seemed to sincerely not know what Allen was apologizing for.

“I told you you were pushing Sara too hard. And I made a scene ’cause I got too emotional.”

“Ah, that. You don’t need to apologize. I’m aware that I push Sara hard, and when else can you make a fool of yourself but when you’re young?”

*So you knew you were pushing me,* Sara jabbed internally. She felt a little bad for Allen. It must have been agony for everyone to look so fondly on his actions because of his youth.

“If you weren’t upset about that, then what are you doing out here on your own? Nelly’s worried about you, you know.”

“She is?! That’s fantastic news.”

Nelly fidgeted and Ri signaled her not to make a sound. Sara was starting to feel guilty for listening in like this.

“I’ll have to apologize to Nef for worrying her.”

Nelly nodded firmly beside Sara. Sara had to resist the urge to tease her for being worried about him after all.

“Right. Sorry. You wanted to know what I’m doing out here on my own.” Chris brought the conversation back on track, letting out a heavy sigh. “As the talented third son of Count Delmont, I never wanted for anything while I was growing up, and I answered the expectations of those around me more than well enough, in my opinion.”

Sara hadn't been expecting Chris to start talking about himself, but she couldn't deny that she was interested to hear what he had to say.

"There were some bumps in the road when I entered the Apothecary's Guild in my teens, but I figured it wasn't worth worrying about other people's schemes, as I could prove myself with results either way. I could use the power of my name as well if I needed to. Once I met Nef, all that mattered to me was my beautiful Nef and my work as an apothecary. I had no trouble living with those two things at the forefront of my mind."

This time, everyone was nodding along at how very Chris-like these words were, so Ri made no comments to the rest of them.

"Allen, come closer."

"Hmm? Okay." Allen scooted a little closer, sounding apprehensive at Chris's unexpected suggestion.

"Closer."

Sara and the rest of the onlookers couldn't see Allen's expression, since he was on the other side of Chris, but they could picture the confusion on his face. After all, Allen was Nelly's apprentice; he wasn't particularly close to Chris at all.

"Sara."

"Eep!" Sara couldn't help yelping when Chris called her name unexpectedly. Chris chuckled and the four hiding in the shrubbery all felt rather awkward since he'd likely been aware of their presence from the start.

"Come here, Sara."

"O-Okay."

She'd been called and so she would go. She respected Chris enough as a mentor to go to his side when he asked her to. She hesitated for a moment, but sat down on the other side of Chris from Allen.

"Come closer, you two."

They scooted closer, sitting right up against Chris. Being fourteen, the two of them were both a little hesitant to do so, but they exchanged a glance and squished themselves up against Chris, since he wouldn't continue until they'd



done so.

When they did, Chris reached around behind them and grabbed them, pulling them to him.

“Agh...”

“Ugh...”

They made strange squeaks of surprise, but Chris just sighed contentedly. He was often holding his hand out to Nelly and hanging around near her, but he wasn't one to initiate physical contact without warning. Not even with Sara.

So Sara and Allen just froze. Hugging them like this like he was their dad was something he'd never done before; something they couldn't have even pictured him doing. Sara heard gasping from the bushes, so their observers must have been just as surprised.

“I was listening to what Allen said before, of course...” Chris started, still hugging the two of them.

The sound of his low voice so close to her eased Sara's anxiety somewhat. She thought back to Camellia, remembering the soothing quality she'd realized his voice had.

“I'm sorry, but though I know I'm pushing Sara, I don't intend to stop. I'm sure you understand that in a world with mana and social stratification, effort alone isn't enough sometimes, Allen.”

It was Sara that he was pushing, so why was it Allen he was apologizing to? Sara couldn't understand that.

“Yeah, that really sank in when we were in Rosa.”

Even Chris hadn't been very helpful to them in Rosa. If Sara had been less suspicious of him and had done as Nelly had told her and relied on him, maybe their problems would have been solved sooner. But Chris hadn't seemed reliable to Sara then, even if she'd learned that she could count on him since then.

Sara sighed quietly. Chris hadn't actually changed at all since then. It was just that Sara's opinion of him had changed after getting to know him. It was just as

true that Nelly trusted him completely both then and now.

“In a world like that, with an apprentice who has nearly limitless mana and doesn’t complain about working hard to improve her abilities, I feel almost as if it’s my duty to drive that apprentice to the greatest heights she can reach.”

Sara almost interjected to say that Chris was only pushing her out of his own arrogance and that there was no way his intentions were really so noble. She hadn’t even become his apprentice because she’d wanted to; it had just been decided one day without any input from her. She decided to keep quiet and let him finish, though.

“Sara’s an apothecary now, but that isn’t the goal for her. And I’m sure I’ll continue to push her hard in the future if I think she’ll grow from it.”

“Well, at least you’re honest about it,” Allen said tiredly.

“Don’t give up, Allen!” Sara couldn’t help interjecting. She didn’t want him to give in, since he was just about the only person who would stand up for Sara.

“But, how should I say this...?” Chris couldn’t find the words right away, which was a rarity for him. “Listening to what you had to say, I started thinking. I know that I push Sara, but what would I think if others did the same? And if it wasn’t for her growth or anything like that, but just being reckless for no good reason?”

Sara wanted to protest that she didn’t necessarily grow from everything Chris made her do, but she was forced to realize that all of Chris’s unreasonable demands had indeed been connected to her work as an apothecary.

“I felt such anger when I considered it. Just like I felt when Nef was taken away to the capital.”

Sara looked up at Chris, surprised. Did he really worry about her the same way he did about Nelly?

Chris went on without meeting Sara’s eyes. He’d just been looking up at the sky the whole time. “I got angry again when I saw you shouting like that earlier, Allen. I wondered whose fault it was that you were suffering so much.”

He lowered his gaze to the ground this time.

“And then I realized that it was *my* fault, at least partially.”

To be precise, it was all of the adults around Sara who did nothing about the possibility that Sara might disappear, which caused Allen’s anxiety.

“I don’t know what to call this feeling, but it became clear to me that there was something else inside me other than an apothecary or a mentor. It’s the first time I’ve ever felt like this, so I’m frankly having a hard time accepting it.”

That tickled Sara a little. They were having such a serious conversation, but all that was happening was that Chris was maturing a little emotionally.

“Anyway, while I was considering all this on my own, four people sneaked up to spy on me and then you showed up, Allen.”

So he *had* noticed them immediately.

“I suppose you might call the feeling in my heart then—almost like wings fluttering—love?”

When she heard that, Sara felt like there were little wings fluttering in her own heart as well. He was selfish and strict, but for him to feel that way about her meant that Sara had truly become someone important to Chris.

“I suppose I must take that to mean that I’m very glad to have you two by my side. Though not as much as Nef, of course.”

“That’s a little too honest.” She couldn’t very well keep that comment to herself, could she?

“Allen, I can’t apologize to you for the anxiety I’ve caused you. I’m not sorry about it, after all.”

“That’s fine. I didn’t want you to apologize. I was just feeling anxious on my own anyway.” Allen didn’t seem as nervous anymore either. He was never the type to brood anyway.

“But from now on, you can consider me your family—or rather, *ahem, ahem.*” He must have thought that was going too far. “You should consider me one of the people close to you as well. No matter where you go or what you do from here on out, I’ll consider you important to me as well.”

So there was a tiny space in his heart reserved for her and Allen, Sara thought

(the rest of it, of course, being reserved for Nelly).

That meant that in addition to Sara, Allen could also think of Nelly and Chris as his family. Sara and Allen would become adults and live on their own somewhere soon enough, but if they had family, there would always be somewhere they'd be able to come home to no matter where they ended up.

"Thanks, Chris."

Allen put a hand around Chris's back. Sara leaned onto him too. A shadow fell over the three of them. It was Nelly.

"Nef."

"That's no fair, Chris. You can't get closer to Sara and Allen all on your own."

"I didn't intend to..."

Sara could feel Chris's heart rate rising as she squished close to him.

"I love Sara and Allen too, you know."

There was no need to make it a competition, but Nelly *was* rather adorable crossing her arms and pouting like that.

"We can all be family, can't we?" Chris suggested. "We may not be related by blood, but me and you and Sara and Allen can be a family."

Did Nelly even realize that Chris was shooting his shot?

"I can't have you forgetting me. I'm the grandfather of the family, you know." Ri slid in.

"So you've finally admitted that you're a grandfather," Nelly commented.

"Shoot!"

That finally allowed them to laugh.

"Man, I'm starting to want to see my family again too..." Kuntz grumbled, his hands clasped behind his head.

"Your room will always be available to you here, so feel free to come and go as you like," Ri told him. "Your parents want to see you more than you think," he added.

“Yeah.” Kuntz smiled bashfully in response.

That night, Sara crawled into bed next to Nelly and stared up at the ceiling, thinking that it had been a rather long day despite only just arriving in the capital. She’d figured out what Allen’s strange behavior had been about and heard Chris’s unexpected confession. But she couldn’t exactly consider everything over and done with. Sara decided to organize her thoughts to figure out what was still weighing on her mind.

First, there was the proposal from Liam, the prime minister’s son. All she had to do there was make them understand that she wasn’t going to accept, so while it was unpleasant to think about, it wasn’t really something she was worried about.

Then there was the issue of the Apothecary’s Guild. A gloom descended on her when she thought about it, so this was clearly the issue that was bothering her.

The truth was that Sara hadn’t really been bothered by the cold treatment she’d received at the Apothecary’s Guild today until Allen had pointed it out. After all, up until now she’d always just done what she could without complaining. She’d been thinking of her time in the capital as something she just had to get through until she could return to her fun life in Hydrangea, but was that really enough?

Sara rolled over in bed. “My barrier lets people I’m close to through, huh? I’m in more danger the more people I get close to, huh?”

Allen’s emotional outburst today was primarily because of his fear that Sara might disappear one day, which stemmed from his sadness at not having a family. But just because they understood that now didn’t mean that the problems Allen had pointed out had just gone away.

Sara turned to face the ceiling again, raising her hand up in front of her face. “My barrier’s on...” Her barrier remained around her even as she slept, and not much caused it to come undone.

“But I know I shouldn’t be overconfident. So what should I do?”

If she asked Nelly, she would just say all she could do was train. And Sara did want to try to figure out how she could make her barrier stay up even when she was surprised. But what was really weighing on Sara's mind was Mona and Heather, who she'd gotten close to today, and who she'd gotten wrapped up in her trouble.

She felt bad for Kuntz as well, of course, since he'd also gotten wrapped up in all this, but Kuntz was at least a Hunter. If anything happened to him, he would be able to protect himself to some degree. But Sara understood now how dangerous it was for her to get involved with people who might have been apothecaries, but were otherwise just ordinary people who had no idea what to do when monsters attacked them.

Allen would protect Sara, and she was happy about that, but it bothered her at the same time. According to Ri, it was only natural for Sara to be protected as one of the Invited. But when Haruto had come to Rosa, he'd been alone. There hadn't been anyone protecting him. He'd been around the same age that Sara was now, and he was always being totally reckless, but he never relied on someone else completely for protection.

Sara brought her hand back down and clenched her fist over her chest.

"It's because I'm a coward."

Sara didn't want to stand out. She didn't like people paying attention to her, and she didn't like people treating her like she was special either. In Rosa, she'd kept her abilities a secret, figuring it was best if no one found out about them, and even after reuniting with Nelly, she'd kept her status as one of the Invited a secret until she had a proper guardian. But...

"It's been a whole year since I got an official guardian. And everyone I'm close to knows I'm one of the Invited. So why am I at the Guild as just a rookie apothecary? Why am I still keeping it a secret?"

If she'd told everyone she was one of the Invited, no one would look down on her at the Apothecary's Guild, since they valued status there.

"Instead, I'd get people trying to curry favor with me or keeping their distance."

She wouldn't be able to have a nice lunch with her friends anymore or cultivate a friendly rivalry among her fellow rookies. She probably wouldn't have even gotten to know Mona and Heather. Instead, she'd probably be working with Josef and Ted or something. Sara wrinkled her nose, picturing it.

"My desire to be normal is just causing everyone else more trouble and preventing *them* from having normal lives."

"Sara."

Sara jumped and rolled over toward Nelly. Nelly should have been sleeping in the bed by the window, but she was sitting on the edge of it instead.

"I'm sorry. All my grumbling woke you up, huh?" She should have just kept her thoughts to herself, but she ended up speaking out loud for some reason. She felt bad for waking Nelly.

Nelly stood and sat down on the edge of Sara's bed. "Nah, I just thought you might not be able to sleep since you were rolling over so much. A lot happened today, right?" She gently patted Sara on the head. It didn't change her worries, but she felt better, so she grinned. "There are so many things it could be, I can't really imagine what might be bothering you, but...well...if you want, you could tell me about it."

Nelly wasn't the type to pry. The fact that she was asking to hear what was bothering Sara just made her feel more guilty. Since she'd asked, however, Sara was able to realize that there was only one thing really bothering her.

"It's not Allen. It seems like Allen's feeling a lot better now. And it's not my barrier." Sara listed a few examples that Nelly might have been thinking of. At the end of the day, what she really wanted to figure out was what she wanted to do at the Apothecary's Guild. "I'm trying to figure out whether I should tell everyone at the Apothecary's Guild that I'm one of the Invited. Mmmh..." When she put it into words, however, she realized that that wasn't what was at the core of her problem. She leaped up in bed. "What I want to do is tell everyone I'm one of the Invited and get them to let me do a particular job!"

Her days of hiding were coming to an end.

## Chapter 3: Plant Gathering

The next morning, Sara was sleep-deprived, as was Nelly, thanks to Sara's late-night confiding. The two of them yawned together at the breakfast table. Allen and Chris, on the other hand, who'd managed to open up about some of the things weighing on them, looked rather refreshed. Meanwhile, things were business as usual for Ri and Kuntz.

"What's wrong, Sara, Neffie? Didn't get enough sleep?" Ri flashed a look at Allen, asking in a roundabout way whether the business with him yesterday had kept them up.

"There was something bothering me last night, so I had a hard time getting to sleep," Sara confessed. She was glad Ri had asked, not just because she was happy he worried about her, but because there was something she wanted to ask him as well. "I'm thinking of telling everyone at the Apothecary's Guild that I'm one of the Invited."

"Are you really?" Ri looked like that was the last thing he'd expected her to say. "I can't say I have any objections, but I was of the impression that you wanted to hide it." He was exactly right.

"Well I didn't hide it in Hydrangea, and it's public knowledge that you're looking after one of the Invited in Hydrangea, since I keep getting those marriage proposals and all."

"Of course. Are you sure, though? I imagine you'll garner a good deal of attention."

She might have had a guardian already, but she was still a young girl. There were bound to be nobles trying to curry favor with her or people attempting to get close to her to reap the benefits of her acquaintance. Of course, Sara wasn't sure what those benefits could possibly even be.

"Yeah, but I would be more upset if I got people caught up in trouble because they didn't know who I was. Like the people I met yesterday."



“The commoner apothecaries, eh? I see the Apothecary’s Guild in the capital is still hard on commoners and women. It was the same in Caren’s time.” Chris seemed distant somehow, but Sara didn’t intend to do anything about the power imbalance. You needed power to preach equality in a world with social stratification, and Sara’s power was still limited to her immediate surroundings.

“Yes, but that’s not all that I want to do.” This wasn’t really the sort of lighthearted thing to talk about over breakfast, but Sara wanted to explain her reasons. “I was sent here to help out, but if anything, there are too many apothecaries and not enough paralysis herbs for anyone to even make any antiparalytcs with.”

“Procuring medicinal plants is a headache for any Apothecary’s Guild. I’ve only discussed my experiments with the repellent with Chester, the guildmaster, so I wasn’t actually aware that the shortage of paralysis herbs was that bad.”

“It seems like Ted is heading up the antiparalytic-making.” Sara told Chris what she’d seen the day before.

“Is he? I had heard that he was working in the capital now. I’m glad our research into the paralysis agent in Rosa is proving useful to him,” Chris said with a wry smile. Their research in Rosa had benefited considerably from the paralysis herbs and mana herbs Sara had gathered for them, so she’d made her own contributions to his career as well. But this was no time to be reflecting fondly on Ted.

“I was sent out to gather plants yesterday, and I found plenty of paralysis herbs, but I’m pretty sure that nasty apothecary Josef didn’t actually expect us to find anything at all. It was like he just sent us out to be mean, because we didn’t have anything to do, and all he was thinking was, ‘It’d be nice if they came back with a healing herb or two.’ But I came all the way from Hydrangea to actually help out here.”

Sara got more and more irritated the more she went on, but she sighed and calmed herself down.

“Hydrangea has enough plants in stock now because I went out gathering whenever I had nothing else to do, but like you said, I think pretty much

everywhere, capital included, is lacking in medicinal plants. So since they have people that aren't doing anything right now..." Sara declared with a determined huff, "I want to form a gathering squad to safely procure plants, providing the Apothecary's Guild with the paralysis herbs it requires. And I, as one of the Invited, will head this group."

No one reacted to her spirited declaration, so Sara deflated somewhat as silence fell on the breakfast table.

"Will that not work, you think?"

"No, I think if anything it will really help, but there's a slight problem with it." Chris folded his arms and looked pensive.

"Is it something about an apothecary's pride?"

"That's right. There's also the fact that I don't know if Chester—the guildmaster, that is—will listen to you just because you're one of the Invited. You're as green as they come as an apothecary, after all."

"Right..." Sara could only laugh ruefully.

"But that's why I brought it up." Sara looked up at Ri fiercely. "Ri."

"Y-Yes? What is it?" he asked somewhat hesitantly in the face of her determination.

"Please come with me to the Apothecary's Guild and back me up as my guardian." Just as Chris had said, she assumed that her word alone wouldn't be enough, so she intended to borrow Ri's authority once again. If she needed to, she'd make ample use of the fact that she was under the protection of the lord of Hydrangea.

"Well, sure. I don't mind, but..."

"You'll come with me, then? Thank you!"

Thus, Sara headed to the Apothecary's Guild that day accompanied by both Ri and Allen. The villa caretaker tried to persuade them to take a carriage to protect the "dignity of the count's name" or some such, but Ri was the one who turned him down, surprisingly.

Ri walked to the Apothecary's Guild in between Sara and Allen, all smiles.

“Why, I feel as if I’ve got two new grandchildren!”

“Nelly will tease you for being a grandpa again if you tell her that.”

“Well, she’s not here right now, so it’s fine. Ha ha ha,” Ri laughed, nodding politely as a carriage slowed down as it passed them.

“Ah, it’s so fun to see people I know wondering who it is I’m walking around with.”

It was only a fifteen-minute walk, but Sara enjoyed herself as well, seeing how much fun Ri was having showing off his new “grandchildren.”

“Here we are.” Sara pointed out the Apothecary’s Guild proudly.

Ri nodded. “I’m aware.”

“Oh, right.”

In that cheerful mood, the three of them went in through the side entrance and headed for the room where Josef had been the day before.

“Good morning!”

“Oh, it’s you.” Josef sighed as soon as he saw her, which Sara wasn’t too pleased with. She’d been plenty helpful yesterday, turning in all those paralysis herbs, hadn’t she?

“I believe I told you not to bring outsiders here. And today you’ve got two. Wait, you’re—” Josef stood from his chair with a clatter.

“Mm. Now that I think about it, we probably should have come in through the front. I was just so excited to be out with you two.” Twisting his beard, Ri addressed Josef. “I am Riot Wolverié, the lord of Hydrangea, and Sara’s guardian.”

“I know who you are, Lord Wolverié. I am Josef Vanguard, Count Vanguard’s second son.”

“Oh? You’re Chester’s boy.”

Sara was all ears. She tucked away the thing about Josef being a count’s son in the back of her mind, but wasn’t Chester the guildmaster?

“So you walk the same path as your father. Admirable.”

*He's a bully, though,* Sara added silently. Josef glared at her as if he'd somehow heard the comment, but he still turned to face Ri politely.

"Well, I imagine you've heard from Sara already, but I don't plan to send her anywhere dangerous again, so please don't worry."

Which meant he probably just intended for her to sit around bored in a room with Mona and Heather again, just like the day before.

"I'm actually here today because Sara has something she wishes to speak with the guildmaster about. Will you take us to him?"

"Huh?" She couldn't believe he was taking this attitude with one of his betters, but Josef frowned at Ri and said, "As I'm sure you know, there are two different experiments on the migrating dragons running right now and the Apothecary's Guild is incredibly busy. A rookie apothecary like Sara is in no position to meet with the guildmaster, and if you have business with him yourself, Lord Wolverié, you understand that you'll have to make an appointment to see him, yes?"

What he was saying made perfect sense, but it just reminded Sara of how Ted had practically shooed her out of the Apothecary's Guild in Rosa the first time she'd visited, which made her feel rather miserable.

"I see. Let me make myself a little clearer, then." Riot stood up straighter and all of a sudden he seemed to be radiating some kind of dignified aura. He really must have been the former head of the knights. "I'm here as the guardian of Ichinok Rasarasa, the Invited."

"Huh?"

Sara almost commented that the joke of his reaction was getting old. At the same time, she was at a loss as to how this name misunderstanding was still continuing to this day. What the heck was a Rasarasa?

"Rasarasa has absolute defensive capabilities as she is able to form a protection field around herself." Sara felt a lump in her throat at having her barrier described like that. It was nothing that cool. "She's able to defend against attacks even from wyverns. As she has this absolute defense, she desires to take the Apothecary's Guild's current troubles upon herself and go

out to gather plants for you even though it would be dangerous for someone in her position normally. With this knowledge, are you still unable to arrange a meeting for us?”

“Ugh...”

Sara was truly thankful that Ri had come along with her. She had no confidence in her own ability to explain what she wanted so succinctly, and so impressively.

“Very well. Come with me.”

Sara wanted to stick out her tongue at his back, given how he’d put on airs when he could have just taken them to see the guildmaster at any time, but rebuffing them really was the right thing to do when he was so busy, so she endured the urge.

Still, they reached their destination after nothing more than a quick walk down a hallway. However, their destination wasn’t the guildmaster’s office as Sara had been expecting.

“It’s huge!”

“This is our main workplace. I imagine you don’t have as much space out in more rural guildhalls.”

Sara wanted to ask how many rural guildhalls the boastful Josef had been to, but she decided to just admit that she was impressed. The room was easily ten times the size of Hydrangea’s workspace. It was as big as a small gymnasium, divided up into four areas with cleverly spaced tables. Only two of the areas were busy, however.

Sara sniffed the air. “Antiparalytcs and mana elixirs...”

“I see you really *are* an apothecary, green or not.”

The apothecaries who weren’t busy looked Josef’s way and started muttering about the three unfamiliar people he’d brought with them. A familiar teeth-sucking sound came from the table where the antiparalytic smell was coming from, and Ted’s voice followed. They must have distracted him.

“Sara!”

“I’m here too, you know,” Allen murmured and Sara had to fight not to laugh. It was hardly the time.

“Guildmaster! You’ve got visitors.”

“Don’t they know we’re busy? What is it?”

The guildmaster’s voice came from the mana elixir table. A man with slicked-back gold hair streaked with white and a stern-looking face strode toward them. He did resemble Josef now that Sara got a good look at him.

“Ah! If it isn’t Riot. It’s been too long. I didn’t know you were back in the capital.”

“It’s good to see you again, Chester.”

Sara met eyes with Josef, though she didn’t mean to. They both seemed to be surprised that the two men knew each other, not expecting them to act so close. Chester seemed to be somewhere in between Nelly and Riot’s ages, so he must have been working as an apothecary in the capital at the same time that Riot was heading up the knights. They were both nobles as well, so it made sense that they knew each other.

Ted arrived shortly after the guildmaster. “What’s up, Sara?”

“I’m just here to ask the guildmaster something.”

There was an even louder buzz at the rather ordinary exchange between the two of them than there had been when the group had entered the room.

“Josef, were you referring to Riot when you said I had visitors?”

“Lord Wolverié is just along for the ride. The one who wants to speak with you is here. Lady Ichinok Rasarasa, who was sent here from Hydrangea and has been an apothecary for two months.”

She was impressed that he’d remembered her name after just hearing it once. And that he’d described Riot as “along for the ride.” Sara thought a tiny bit better of Josef. He’d figured out just from their earlier conversation that Riot was only here to provide backing to Sara and had let the guildmaster know that.

“It seems she’s also one of the Invited.”

“An Invited. Summoned to Rosa and living in Hydrangea now. So that’s you...”

Nobles had probably all heard *something* about her.

“Are you acquainted with her as well, Ted, since she’s from Rosa?”

“Yes.”

Ted nodded honestly, and Sara felt Allen twitch in surprise next to her. To be honest, she was surprised too. Their initial acquaintance had been rather rocky, after all.

“A lot of things happened in Rosa, but she’s something of a junior apprentice to me. I trained her a bit as an apprentice apothecary in Camellia.”

This time, Sara really felt like her eyes were going to bug out. Nothing that he was saying was technically incorrect, but he made it sound like he had been a mentor to her from the start, following some sort of planned path she had been on.

“Junior apprentice?”

“Since Sara is Master Chris’s apprentice.”

This time, there were *oohs* and *ahhs* from the crowd. Sara hardened her resolve. She was an Invited, she knew Ted, she was Chris’s apprentice. There was nothing she was hiding anymore.

Chester shook his head slightly as if he had a headache. “I see. Chris is also here from Hydrangea. He could have said *something* to me.”

“Master Chris doesn’t show favoritism to anyone.”

“You mean he doesn’t show *interest* in anyone. I see you still admire the man, Ted.”

Sara was impressed. From the way Chester dealt with Ted with a wry grin to how he understood Chris completely, he was really something else. His eyes were harsh, however, as he looked down at Sara.

“I’m thankful that one of the Invited would choose to be an apothecary instead of a Hunter. But you *are* still new. I feel you should listen to Josef and do the work of a novice apothecary, personally.”

What he was saying was reasonable, but Sara still had to speak her piece.

“I think so too, and I have no qualms with doing as Josef wishes.”

“Then, why are you here?” the guildmaster asked, frowning down at Sara.

She looked up at him and told him, “Before I became an apothecary, I made a living gathering medicinal plants for three years. I still gather whenever I have time.”

“You were gathering in Rosa? It’s dangerous outside town there, is it not?”

Sara shook her head. “I gathered in Rosa as well, but I lived on the Dark Mountain for two years before that, so that’s where I spent most of my time gathering. And I’ve done a little gathering in many other places as well. There are actually plenty of medicinal plants growing inside the protection field around Rosa, so you don’t even need to go out into the meadow there.”

“The Dark Mountain? And you say you made a living gathering?” The second question was a bit belated, but Sara responded to both of them.

“I’ll explain the particulars later. For now, I’d just like you to understand that gathering medicinal plants was my job before I became an apothecary, and that I was good enough at it to find plants even inside Rosa’s protection field.” There was no point in being modest here, so Sara just came right out and said it. “That’s why I was able to find paralysis herbs in the meadow outside town yesterday.”

“Ah, so you gathered those. I see. It was also reported to me that it was dangerous out there, so you shouldn’t go back out, however.”

“That was my recommendation,” Allen said. “I’m a Hunter, and I’m serving as Sara’s guard right now. I determined that it was too dangerous to be gathering out in the meadow without any monster countermeasures in place.”

“As Allen says, I don’t think anyone who can’t protect themselves should be out there right now. But I have the ability to form a protection field around myself.”

“Her defensive capabilities are such that she could repel the attack of a wyvern back when she was living on the Dark Mountain. I’d like to see it for



myself once, but she doesn't often go into dungeons, you see."

Ri interjected rather casually, so Sara found herself responding to his comment. "Wyverns are big and scary! And I don't like bugs! But that's not important right now!"

"Sorry."

That likely got across how much Ri cared about her, at least.

"I gathered plants in Rosa, in Camellia, and in Hydrangea, because every time I visited an Apothecary's Guild, I was told they didn't have enough in stock, and the same seems to go for the capital now that I'm here. I just find this strange."

The apothecaries in the back stirred when she said the situation was strange.

"I think there would be less of a problem for guilds everywhere if more plants were gathered locally. If they end up with excess, they can just store them in gathering pouches." Sara indicated the pouch at her waist. She always kept her gathering basket in her own pouch, and it almost always had a variety of plants inside it. "If apothecaries don't want to do the gathering themselves, then the guild can hire gatherers locally or train locals in a new position, but that's getting ahead of ourselves for now..."

There was no need to go into the specifics now.

"My defensive capabilities aren't limited to myself. I can protect other people as well." She wanted to just call it her barrier, but she went with the "cooler" appellation. She knew Haruto would laugh at her for this, so she decided to keep it a secret in the future. "What I'm asking is to take charge of any apothecaries who have no other work and are interested in gathering. I'm not familiar with the specific vegetation around the capital, but I can guarantee a supply of healing herbs at the very least."

Chester was unable to respond to her unexpected suggestion immediately, so Riot stepped in to back her up.

"I know Sara and Allen look young, but they're talented enough to make it to the depths of Hydrangea's dungeon."

More *oohs* and *ahhs* went through the listeners.

“Allen is employed as Sara’s guard, but I can charge him with the protection of any apothecaries that accompany her to gather plants as well. Though Sara alone should keep them more than safe enough.”

Chester looked down at Sara with his arms crossed, observing her carefully. Eventually, he seemed to come to a conclusion. “You’re a woman. As one of the Invited, you *should* be living a life of peace under a noble’s protection...” As expected, he was a noble, so he knew exactly what the Invited were. He had no questions for anyone and simply formed his own conclusions from what she’d said. “But I suppose I can take this to mean that you’re capable of the same sorts of things as Bradley and Haruto are.”

She wasn’t sure how she felt being compared to Haruto, but from how he was talking, it seemed like he was familiar with Haruto and Bradley and had acknowledged their capabilities.

“Yes.” Sara nodded firmly.

She was honestly happy to have people protecting her, but if she was going to do what she wanted to do, then she couldn’t simply rely on other people for protection.

Surprisingly, the next person to stand up for her was Ted. “We started holding apothecary-led medicinal plant-gathering sessions outside of Rosa about a year ago, so I believe at least Rosa has stopped requesting additional plants from the capital.”

Chester raised an eyebrow as if he’d only just realized that. “You know, you’re right. I would say ‘I’d expect nothing less from Chris,’ but let me guess... It wasn’t his doing.”

“Master Chris is of course a brilliant individual, but this all started with Sara. She was always bringing high-quality plants in, so I thought the people of the town would be able to gather as well if it was inside the protection field, and I started the initiative.”

Sara could recall seeing Ted gathering plants with the townspeople of Rosa now that she thought about it. She hadn’t known that it had been a proper initiative and not just for fun, and even if it *was* due to Sara, it genuinely surprised her that Ted would actually acknowledge that.

“Normally, I couldn’t force apothecaries who didn’t want to go gathering to accompany you just because you claim it will be safe, but... It’s true that we’re short on all sorts of medicinal plants, not just paralysis herbs. For now, I’ll recruit a couple of volunteers to go with you.”

Caren had called Chester “hardheaded,” but he’d accepted Sara’s proposal rather flexibly, she thought. Of course, Riot’s presence probably helped, and her knowing Ted might have contributed a lot too.

Sara was relieved that she could do some real work now instead of just passively waiting for someone else’s instruction. However, whether it was because they were suspicious of her or because of their pride as apothecaries, she ended up only getting three volunteers. The apothecaries who had been sent here from other locations were all fairly experienced, so the only volunteers were young apothecaries from the capital like Mona and Heather.

“Well, this is about what I was expecting.” As long as it wasn’t zero, she should probably consider it a win. If they had too many people, they might not be able to protect them with just Sara and Allen. Sara was surprised to see that Mona and Heather weren’t among the volunteers, though.

“I’m more than happy just having three people, and I’m thankful that they’re volunteering, but where are Mona and Heather? They already learned a little gathering yesterday, so I feel like they’d be good assets to have.”

She hadn’t even seen them today. Since they already knew Sara was an Invited, she thought they’d be happy to go along with her on a gathering trip, knowing they’d be protected from monsters.

“Mona and Heather? Ah, our rookies? Josef?” Chester asked after them.

“I had someone ask around in every room.” In other words, he was saying that they weren’t showing up because they didn’t want to come, but Sara found that a bit strange.

“I’m just gonna go check the room they were in yesterday.” Sara headed from the large workroom to the room she’d been taken to the day before. She found it deserted, with no signs that anyone had been there since then. “There’s no one here...”

“I didn’t give them any instructions today, so they should just be in here spacing out like always.” Josef must have been curious as well, since he’d come with Sara and was cocking his head at the state of the room.

Sara was starting to get a bad feeling about this.

“What do you mean, ‘spacing out,’ when we’re this busy?”

“Guildmaster,” Josef said awkwardly. Still, he was upfront, at least. “With a shortage of paralysis herbs and an excess of apothecaries, I had the rookies from the capital on standby. After all, we couldn’t have the people here from elsewhere doing nothing.”

Sara shot Josef a look. What was *she*, then?

“Sure, you were here from somewhere else, but I wasn’t gonna prioritize someone who’s only been an apothecary for two months.”

*Even with the guildmaster of Hydrangea’s stamp of approval?* Sara stopped herself from retorting. This wasn’t the time. Besides, she *was* happy that even three people wanted to participate in her gathering proposal.

The cart waiting for them outside was a small coach, not a proper wagon. Of course, as Sara thought about it, there was no real need for the Apothecary’s Guild to hire a full cart, since anything they needed to transport could easily fit in a storage pouch. Sara wasn’t able to stop herself from glaring at Josef this time, but her companions were already boarding the cart to head outside town.

Just then, however, the driver of the cart they’d taken the day before appeared, evidently having newly returned from a trip somewhere. He called out to Sara and Allen when he noticed them.

“Ah, it’s you two. You ended up not needing a guard after all, then?”

“What do you mean?” Allen asked before Sara could.

“What do I mean? Well, there were all those horned rabbits yesterday, right? I made a report just like you said that the east meadow was dangerous.” It was good that Allen had showed him the horned rabbits, then. “But then this morning, I was told to bring those rookie apothecaries out to the southern meadow. Oh yeah, they mentioned that you two would be coming later too.

You headed there now?”

“No one told us anything about that,” Allen said, but the driver just went on cheerfully.

“Plenty of people pass between the southern gate and the dungeon, and if they said to take ’em out there even after I reported the monsters, that must mean the south is safe, then—wait, you haven’t heard?”

When he noticed the grim looks on Allen’s and Sara’s faces, he finally realized there was a problem. The driver cut himself off, his face pale.

“Hey, I’m not even from the capital and I know the migrating dragons are here now, right? Horned rabbits are the least of anyone’s concern out there,” said Allen. “With the dragons flying in the southwest of the capital, the meadow to the south is the most dangerous place to be right now!”

The whole reason the knights were out there now was because dragons were so huge they could wreck buildings if they came down into the capital. And even if they didn’t come down in the capital, there was more than enough chance they’d come down in the southern meadow. Allen was exactly right.

“No, that can’t be... They say the knights are doing well this year, so there have hardly been any dragons coming down into the southern meadow. And Master Chris is doing some kind of experiment out there too, right? What’s there to worry about? Right?” asked Sara.

He might have been right. But even though Josef was a bully, Sara couldn’t imagine he would have ordered this. There could have been some big miscommunication happening here.

Sara had finally mustered the courage to make use of her connections, but now she had something much more important than plant-gathering to worry about.

Turning to the three confused apothecaries and the pale-faced driver, Sara said, “Please tell either the guildmaster, or Josef if he’s not available, what you just told us. Even if it’s just some sort of miscommunication, it’s far too dangerous for those two to be out gathering in the meadow without any protection.”

The apothecaries nodded, though somewhat hesitantly, and Sara exchanged a glance with Allen. She'd never used physical strengthening on busy city streets before, but they hardly had a choice now.

"I'll head to the southern meadow," Allen told her. She thought she heard someone say "wait," but there was no time. It took an hour to make the trip by carriage, but they could make the trip in less than thirty minutes.

"Right. You're faster, but I'll be right behind you!"

"Got it."

Allen was always moving around as a Hunter, so he was bound to be faster than Sara. Still, Sara did her best to go as fast as she could too, though it wore on her some to make sure she didn't hurt anyone weaving through the crowds. In no time at all, she lost sight of Allen as they hurried down the path they'd taken when they'd first entered the capital two days ago.

Just who had sent Mona and Heather to the southern meadow? Josef might have been spiteful, but he didn't seem malicious enough to try to hurt people.

Sara didn't know if dragons really did come down to the meadow, but the two of them could be worse than badly hurt if even a single horned rabbit attacked them. Sara shuddered, remembering when Allen had gone chasing after the knights before they'd registered at the Hunter's Guild in Rosa. Even Allen could miss attacks from behind when he was tired.

Reaching the southern edge of the capital faster than a carriage would, Sara spotted Allen a little ways off the main road. She also saw two girls in apothecary's robes next to him.

"Allen! Mona! Heather!" Sara called out to them, deeply relieved.

"Sara!"

"You came too, Sara?"

Sara arrived, panting with exertion. Mona and Heather looked nervous, but they were unharmed.

"They came 'cause they were told to, but they didn't want to go out into the meadow, so they just stayed around where there were other people. I'm glad

they're okay," Allen told her.

"Thank goodness... Really, thank goodness..." Sara was glad they were careful.

Heather pointed out to the meadow, looking a little guilty. "Look, there's healing herbs and paralysis herbs right there."

"Huh? Oh, you're right." Sara agreed with her assessment. "You mastered them after just one day. Shows what an apothecary can do!"

"Well, when I thought about it, I handle them every so often, so it was pretty easy to get the hang of spotting them." Heather was as confident as always, which Sara was happy to see. She wasn't *quite* as she always was, however. "I think I deserve a pat on the back, though," she said a little forlornly.

"Huh? A pat on the back?"

"Yeah. Because I wanted to go pick them but I didn't. Since you and Allen said it would be dangerous to go without a guard."

"It's not the eastern meadow, so we have no idea if it's safe out here," Mona added. "We knew something was up, so we talked about it and decided that even if we couldn't gather any plants, we should stay where it was safe. I mean, no one cares what we gather anyway."

Sara was impressed. When you were surrounded by reckless people, it made people with normal judgment seem kind of amazing. It showed that they could be relied upon in a crisis, and it made Sara happy that they trusted her judgment as well.

"I'm really glad you two came, though. We were super nervous."

"You'll be fine now."

They were already fine, of course, since they hadn't actually left the limits of the town, but Sara expanded her barrier over them nonetheless, just to be careful.

When Allen spoke up, however, his voice was unexpectedly tense. "Sara, your barrier."

"It's already up. Do you want in too?"

“I’m good. Sara, look up at the sky, slowly. Then get back inside the town.”

“Huh?” Sara was taken aback by his sudden instructions, but she looked up at the sky just as he’d told her to. There was a group of something flying toward them from the west. It was a scene she’d seen countless times on the Dark Mountain.

“Wyverns! It’s rare to see so many of them at once, though. No, wait. They’re kind of round... So then, are those...?”

Allen just stared up at the sky silently, his guard up, but Sara could hear carefree voices coming from the road identifying the creatures as migrating dragons. Everyone stopped and looked up at them like they were a feature of the season. But they certainly didn’t look as graceful as wyverns.

“Wait, are they getting bigger? Which means...”

They were planning on landing, weren’t they? When Sara realized that, a chill ran down her spine. She grabbed Mona’s and Heather’s hands and told them, “We’re going back into town. Hurry!”

Others had noticed the same thing Sara had by now and so they hurried back toward town. Sara shrunk her barrier down as far as she could shrink it so as to not get in other people’s way.

“Horned rabbits are the least of our problems! Huge monsters like that come down to the ground here? The capital’s scary!”

Sara felt like she finally realized why the knights in the capital summoned Nelly here so persistently during this season. She understood exactly how big these creatures were, since she’d seen a wyvern up close (a dead one, at least). Migrating dragons weren’t as long as wyverns, but they were wider and had the look of the sort of dragons she’d seen in western fantasy works back in Japan. They had an other coloring, so they wouldn’t stand out on the ground in the meadow. She understood completely why they were so set on exterminating them if they came this close to human settlements.

As she mused on this, Sara felt like she was forgetting something.

“Allen!”



“Hey, watch it!”

She stopped abruptly and someone behind her scolded her.

“Mona, Heather, follow everyone else and get as far away as you can.”

“But—”

“You should run too, Sara!”

They realized she was planning on going back, so they tried to stop her. Sara was happy they were worried about her, but she shook her head.

“My defenses are strong enough to repel a wyvern. I should be back there protecting Allen, protecting the town.”

She turned against the crowd and began heading back. She extended her barrier out in front of her and behind her, so people parted to let her through almost comically. It wasn't the time to be enjoying the sight, though.

She got past the crowd quickly, arriving back at the meadow to find Allen facing off against the migrating dragons.

“One, two, three... There's seven of them! I know you're strong, but you can't do this alone, Allen... Why didn't you run with us?”

Three of the seven stout dragons were shaking their heads and stumbling like they weren't feeling well.

“Let me guess... They got hit with the paralysis agent, but only a bit of it, so they flew on for a while, but had to come down when it got to be too much, and this is where they ended up. The rest of them are their friends, who are probably worried about them and pissed off, and...”

She was calm enough to analyze the situation, but with seven dragons who were as big as wyverns this close to her, her knees were knocking with fright. Not to mention, one of the dragons was headed straight for Allen, even if it was a little ways away still. It seemed pretty mad. Had Allen done something to it?

Still, she couldn't say anything to him. What if she called out to him and the rest of the dragons focused on him because of it? She had her barrier, but she didn't know what to do with it. Should she protect the town or Allen? She'd come back to help in some way, but she was frozen now, unable to decide what

to do.

That was when Allen noticed her. “Sara, protect the town, like you did with the bog frogs!” he called to her.

“But! Allen!”

“I’ll be fine. Nelly said I could take on a wyvern if I could take a hellhound out in one hit, right?”

Allen smiled fearlessly, but didn’t that mean that he hadn’t actually taken on a wyvern before? She’d seen Nelly take down a wyvern only once, and she was pretty sure she’d used her sword to do it. Sara was only getting more nervous thinking about it.

Eventually, the three dragons who had likely been hit with the paralysis agent collapsed to the ground, stunned, which was some good news finally. There were still four others, though. One of them was chasing Allen in a direction away from the town, but the other three seemed to have just noticed the structures of the town.

“Ooh, this is bad! Okay, expand my barrier...”

Sara got in between the dragons and the town and expanded her barrier out in a dome, like she had in Camellia. Dragons were a lot scarier than frogs, so she made sure the barrier was far away from her. She gave them room on the sides and on top so that they could move a little too.

“When it’s farther away from me, I feel like it’s harder to control... Ugh!”

The dragons had noticed the invisible barrier and were headbutting it now. She didn’t feel the impact or anything; she could just tell they were hitting it, but scary stuff was still scary.

It wasn’t all bad news, though.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Allen leaping up and throwing his fist into a dragon’s head. One, two, three times.

“Allen... Allen...!” All Sara could do was pray.

Eventually, the dragon fell to the ground with a heavy thud. “You’re so reckless!” she shrieked.

Relieved, she shifted her eyes from the collapsed dragon to Allen to make sure he was okay, when on the edge of her vision she saw the three dragons held in place by her barrier all opening their mouths at once.

“Huh?”

That was the last thing she remembered.



“Sara! Sara!”

Allen seemed to be calling her name rather desperately for some reason.

“Sara! Wake up! Put up your barrier!”

“Ba...rrier...”

“That’s right! You can maintain it even in your sleep, right?! Put it up right now!”

“Barrier...” Sara put up a bigger barrier that covered her and Allen, who seemed to be holding her.

Suddenly, there was a booming impact. Of course, all the force of the impact was directed outward, so it was quiet inside the barrier. But wait...this was no time to be calmly explaining how her barrier worked, Sara realized with a start.

“Where are the dragons?!”

“They’re right next to us.”

“Ack!”

Sara wondered if she and Allen were the only people who’d ever seen the inside of a dragon’s mouth and lived. The dragons were gnawing at and ramming the barrier, trying to bite Sara and Allen. She might have been used to this from the mountain wolves, but dragons were still big and scary.

“Sara, Sara... Just listen,” Allen said to her calmly, his hands on her back. She looked up at him and saw sweat on his forehead, his eyes swimming. He was doing everything he could to keep his cool. “You fainted from the dragons’ roar.”

“Fainted...?”

“That’s right. I don’t think you were even out for ten seconds, though. Dragons are slow on the ground, okay? But they can hunt horned rabbits and cotton sheep because they scare them stiff.”

The last thing Sara remembered was the dragons opening their mouths.

“They roared at me, and I fainted...” What Allen was saying was finally getting through to her.

“That’s right. You got your barrier back up at the last second, but we’re actually still in trouble.”

Sara gasped and surveyed her surroundings. The three dragons hadn’t lost interest in her yet.

“They’re not roaring now because they’re all jumbled together, but if two of them lose interest and leave or they get into a formation where they won’t affect one another with their roars, they’ll do it again, and you might pass out again.”

“And my barrier will go down...”

“That’s right.”

Even if she was safe while she was sleeping, she was weak to sneak attacks. They hadn’t expected to encounter a demonstration of the exact thing Allen had warned her about the day before so soon.

“Can you do something?”

“Do something...?” All she was doing was repeating what Allen said to her. “Something, something...”

Sara thought back to her magic textbook. “Mana will empower you in whatever way you imagine. Keep your mana level in mind and don’t push yourself, as you picture the magic you want to cast...” Dragons stunned with their roars, meaning sound. Sara’s barrier didn’t repel sound.

“Crap... Two of them are heading toward the town. There’s only one left paying attention to us.”

So she just had to make it repel sound in addition to magic and physical attacks.

“It’s opening its mouth!”

Listening to Allen’s live commentary, she concentrated. “Just need to reflect sound too... Barrier!”

Something about the invisible barrier changed in that instant.

“Here it comes!” Allen’s arms tensed around her and she saw the dragon’s

wide-open mouth trembling with the force of its roar.

“I can’t...hear anything.”

“Yeah. I tried making it reflect sound too.”

The dragon fell back onto the ground, its mouth still open. It seemed Sara’s barrier had reflected the roar right back at it.

“I guess a dragon can get taken out by its own shock waves,” she commented.

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess so.” Allen sighed with relief, setting Sara down and sitting beside her with a soft thud. “That was scary... I really thought that might be the end.”

“Yeah... And I couldn’t protect the town since I had my hands full protecting myself...”

The other two dragons had almost reached the outermost buildings of the town. At least there weren’t any people around. They’d managed to buy time for them to escape, which was a small mercy.

That was when Sara saw something in one of the windows not facing the meadow. Peering out nervously from behind some curtains was a small child in the arms of a young woman.

“There’s people inside the buildings!”

“What?!”

They must not have heard the commotion from inside, or maybe they had small children that they couldn’t easily carry.

“Why don’t the dragons just head for the road?”

There were wide pathways they could take instead of heading right for the buildings, weren’t there? Sara stood up shakily, irritated at the belligerent dragons. Her head must have still been spinning because she’d been hit with shock waves powerful enough to knock her out.

“Sara, don’t push yourself.”

“I know. But if we head back into town and I extend my barrier around the buildings, we might be able to at least save them.”

Allen stood and grabbed Sara's hand, supporting her. "You'd do it even if I tried to stop you, wouldn't you?"

"Sorry."

"Let me carry you, then." Allen turned his back to her and knelt down. Sara didn't know how she felt about getting a piggyback ride at her age, but she wasn't at all confident that she could walk on her own. Then again, it'd be a problem if she got so embarrassed she distracted herself and her barrier went back to normal. She did her best to keep her cool as she draped herself over Allen's back, putting her arms around his neck.

"Hup."

"Ack!" She was way higher than she'd expected to be, meaning this was way more embarrassing than she thought it would be.

"Let's go."

"Right."

Allen circled around the dragons, hurrying toward the town while being careful not to shake Sara too much.

"Even if I know we'll be safe, I don't really want to stand in front of them. Can you make your barrier reach from here?"

"I'll try."

There wasn't any space to fit in between them and the buildings now anyway. Sara slid off Allen's back and sat down, maintaining her cool as she expanded her barrier around herself in two directions to envelop the nearby buildings. She had to be careful to make sure the barrier didn't lose its soundproofing, but she had to hurry too.

"I got 'em. Just barely!"

The dragons headed straight for the buildings, not even trying to avoid them, but they were repelled by her barrier. They tried again and again, looking around in confusion when they couldn't move forward. Eventually, they spotted Sara and Allen and opened their mouths toward them.

"Here it comes again!" Allen shouted, and Sara tried not to close her eyes, but



in the end, she was too scared to keep them open.

When she squeezed her eyes closed, it was like she was in a world without sound. All she could hear was Allen's and her own quickened breathing. There was an impact, but it was strange. It didn't come from the barrier but from the ground.

"She's here! She came!"

Sara opened her eyes when she heard that and saw the two dragons even closer than they were before falling to the ground.

"Eep! What happened?"

"It's Nelly! Nelly's here!"

Sara looked up from the dragons and saw Nelly standing with her fist out in front of her chest, her ponytail swaying behind her like a tail.

"Nelly!"

Nelly was still looking around with her guard up like she hadn't heard Sara. She must have been looking for other dragons and people from the town who might be nearby.

"With my barrier repelling sound, Nelly can't hear me... But I'm too scared of the dragons."

Allen checked on the remaining dragons. "Three of them are paralyzed by the drug. I took out one of them. Nelly took out two. The only one we have to worry about is the one stunned by its own shock waves right now. I don't know when it'll recover."

"Then I guess I can go back to my old barrier for now."

"Yeah. I'll go out there and make sure everything's okay, so don't push yourself, okay, Sara?"

Allen was always free to come and go through Sara's barrier. He left and Sara let it shrink around herself.

"Normal barrier... Normal barrier... Huh? How do I make my normal barrier again?"

She could figure out how to make a barrier that repelled sound, but how did she make a barrier that repelled everything *but* sound again? She reached out her hands as if asking for help and they were shaking terribly.

“Sara!”

Nelly’s voice suddenly entered her soundless world, her arms wrapping around Sara.

“Are you all right?!”

“Nelly...” She wanted to tell her that she was okay, but for some reason, everything in front of her was going in and out of focus. She thought she saw Allen’s face, and she thought she could see a bunch of people running too.

But she saw nothing after that as she fainted for the second time that day.

## Chapter 4: Sara's Abilities

"Mmn..."

Sara usually woke up feeling refreshed. Well, to be more precise, she'd *started* feeling refreshed when she woke up after coming to this world. Today, however, she felt rather awful upon awakening. When she tried to move, her muscles felt sore. She had a bit of a headache and some nausea. It was like she had a hangover.

"I don't *remember* any drunken merrymaking..."

It wasn't as if Sara couldn't drink at *all* before reincarnating, but it wasn't exactly a talent of hers either. She didn't need her already sluggish body becoming even more sluggish, so she tried to avoid alcohol, but she'd had a youthful indiscretion or two, so she'd experienced being hungover before.

Her mind must have been meandering like it was to avoid recalling what had happened before she'd lost consciousness.

There was a quiet sound and the door opened. Whoever it was must not have knocked because they thought Sara was still sleeping. When Sara saw who it was, she spoke up herself, surprised.

"Ted?"

"You're awake." Ted walked over to her expressionlessly, setting a tray down beside her bed and seating himself in a chair.

"Why you?" Sara asked the first question that came to mind and Ted jerked his chin at the window.

"Nefertari's on a job. Master Chris is doing his experiments. Count Wolverié and Allen are in the living room." He listed off where everyone else was as if to say that left him as the only option. Kuntz's name hadn't come up, but that was probably because he meant nothing to Ted. And none of that actually answered why Ted was here.

“Let me see your face.”

“M-M-M-My face?” Sara stammered, not sure what was going on.

Ted grabbed her face in both hands and turned it this way and that as if he was performing proper tea ceremony etiquette and her head was the cup.

“Ugh...” she squeaked. His face was right up next to hers, which she found rather embarrassing. His hands were dry and warm and she couldn’t help worrying about whether she’d sweated or drooled in her sleep.

“Does your head hurt?”

When he asked that, she realized he was here as an apothecary and she finally relaxed.

“A little. I’m nauseous too.”

“Nausea. Anything else?”

“My muscles are all sore.”

“Sore muscles.” Ted tapped at his knee as if coming to a decision and took a potion out of the pouch at his waist, placing it on the tray he’d brought in next to a pitcher. He poured some water into a cup and reached behind Sara, slowly lifting her up. Sara was feeling dizzy now just because she couldn’t connect Ted with the kindness he was displaying. “First, drink some water.”

“Okay.” Sara drank dutifully.

“Next, a third of a potion.”

“Okay.” She traded the water for the potion, which eased her stomach. She couldn’t help giggling at the thought she found herself having.

“What is it?”

“I was just thinking Nelly would take out a greater potion at a time like this. She’d say, ‘Drinking this’ll fix most things.’”

“Would she? Medicine that’s too strong isn’t good for the stomach. You’d feel better for a time before relapsing, so I can’t recommend it.”

She giggled again at Ted’s businesslike answer and she finally accepted the situation she was in.

“This is because of the dragons’ shock waves, right?”

“Yes.” Ted reached behind Sara again and laid her down this time. “It’s been a day and a half since then.”

“So that was yesterday?” Sara looked out the window and saw the sun lowering in the sky.

“Yes. Not many people get hit with a dragon’s shock waves and survive, so everyone was rather panicked.”

Sara supposed most people who were on the receiving end were quickly eaten, so there weren’t many people who could describe the effect on the body. People fighting them were careful to avoid the shock waves and when the dragons were brought down, they were finished off as quickly as possible, Ted explained.

“Horned rabbits have been observed recovering from them fairly quickly, so I figured you’d be okay, but you’re human, after all. When you passed out again after Allen woke you up, we decided that an apothecary should stay with you until you came to.”

Ted’s checking in on her finally made sense.

“Thanks, Ted.”

Ted shook his head to say her thanks were unnecessary and answered the questions she still had little by little. “It was the new apothecaries working the reception desk who sent Mona and Heather to the southern meadow.”

Sara didn’t know what to think about that. They hadn’t even been suspects in her mind. “Why? They had no reason to, and no authority to either.”

“Apparently they witnessed you returning on the cart the day before. They’re rookies too, yet you got a special assignment and returned with a handsome guard looking like you had the time of your lives. They were jealous, I suppose you’d say.”

Well, they *did* have fun, but it was the sort of fun you have while doing your best to accomplish the task you were assigned. And “handsome guard”? Allen was fourteen like Sara, so she thought they were a little too young for that sort

of jealousy.

“Instead of apologizing, they just asked why you got special treatment, even though they were the ones who chose to do the easy job of manning the reception desk.”

“Couldn’t they have just said they wanted to go gathering themselves instead of sending Mona and Heather out there, then?”

“I doubt they actually wanted to gather plants. They just didn’t want Allen going with those two and figured they had to make sure *you* didn’t go with them to make sure that didn’t happen. Rather simplistic of them to just send the girls away before you arrived. And to think they’re apothecaries themselves, rookies though they may be,” Ted spat.

It seemed their motives were entirely childish. They’d acted maliciously, but they were too low on the totem pole to have heard that it was dangerous out in the meadow, so they’d likely intended it as nothing more than a tiny prank. One they weren’t worried about being punished for.

“Let me guess: they’re nobles?”

“That they are. Frankly, commoner apothecaries are at a disadvantage here. Since nothing actually happened to the pair, it’s unlikely this will be treated as anything more than a prank.”

It didn’t sit right with Sara, but there wasn’t much she could do about it.

“Anyway, you two ran off and the rest of us arrived a little later by carriage to find you on the ground with Nefertari shaking you. I didn’t know what was going on, but I made sure to stop her. You should never shake someone who’s unconscious.”

“I can just picture her,” Sara said with a wry smile.

“Since you were unconscious, we sprinkled a potion over you since you might have been hurt in a place we couldn’t see. When someone’s unconscious and can’t drink, it can be beneficial to administer a potion through the skin. You should remember that. We might have gone a bit overboard, so that’s likely why you’re so exhausted.”

“Huh.” Chris would have just as readily sprinkled in his apothecary’s knowledge as he spoke, which made Sara realize that Ted really was Chris’s apprentice.

“Then Master Chris and the knights arrived and all hell broke loose. And we brought you to Count Wolverié’s mansion in a carriage. That’s the long and short of it.”

“Thanks.”

Ted nodded with a Ted-like “hmph” before standing. “I’ll go get Allen and the count.” He strode over to the door before stopping and glancing back at Sara. “I barely even have any acquaintances... You know, when I asked the receptionists why they’d done such a stupid thing and they said they didn’t think it would be dangerous, I finally realized...” Ted’s voice grew quieter and quieter. “I did the same exact thing they did.”

“What was that, Ted?” Sara asked, but Ted didn’t answer.

He looked away again, opening the door. “You’re not fully recovered yet. Keep resting.” He left, closing the door quietly behind him.

“He did the same thing? Oh, in Rosa, with Allen.”

They’d gotten an apology, so it was over and done within Sara’s mind. And she thought she could recall Allen saying something like he wouldn’t forgive Ted, but that he wouldn’t hold a grudge either. She was surprised to find that Ted was still thinking about it, to be honest.

“Has he finally realized what he did? Over two years later? It’s a bit late, Ted. And...” Sara rolled her eyes and laughed. “‘I barely have any acquaintances’? So he knows he doesn’t have any friends.”

Allen and Riot burst into the room then and scolded her, saying it was no time to be laughing.

“Sara... I should have told you more about migrating dragons’ characteristics. This is all because I boasted about how impervious your defenses were.”

Riot took both of Sara’s hands, pressing his forehead down onto them. Even just seeing the back of his greying head, his remorse was clear.

“To think you took a dragon’s roar from such proximity with that tiny frame of yours... I can count on one hand the number of times I experienced the same when I was knight commander, and I was always surrounded by so many knights at the time that nothing ever came of it. I was more than horrified hearing what had happened from Allen and seeing those seven downed dragons.”

“Seven? When I fainted, four of them were still alive. The ones that were only paralyzed were killed too?” Sara had been worried about what would happen when the paralysis wore off.

“The knights killed them. When you bring them down to the ground, all you can do at that point is finish them off. I’m sure you understand why now.”

“Yeah.” Sara was living proof of the danger they posed. “When they came down, it seemed like only three of them had been hit with the paralysis agent and the others came down because they were worried about them.”

“Yeah, I think so too. The other four were huddled around those three like they were protecting them. But when they started taking an interest in the people running away from them, I hit one of them with magic to distract it. I only got the attention of one of them, though.”

So that was why one of them had been focused on Allen, Sara realized.

“Dragons are normally solitary, but sometimes they form loose groups. You must have run into one of those, but it wasn’t simply a matter of bad luck in this case.”

“Bad luck?” Sara asked. Where had that come from?

Ri nodded sourly. “It seems the knights screwed up in their experiments. They tried to hit some dragons that were too far away, got them with a half-baked dose, and then the dragons got away on top of that. Since they were experimenting on the southwestern hills, the dragons just happened to come down in the southern meadow right where you two were.”

“Why would they be so reckless now when they’ve been experimenting for a month already?”

“They must have gotten overeager.”



Sara pictured Liam, who'd gone out of his way to greet her on the day she'd arrived in the capital. He was on his way back from work then and had smelled of the paralysis agent. He'd seemed to be in a good mood, so she'd assumed their experiments were progressing smoothly.

"I thought their experiments were going well, though."

"I'm sure they were. But then Chris showed up, you see."

"But..." That didn't make sense to Sara. "It's not a matter of which one's better, is it? I thought it was a good thing if both experiments succeeded, and that's why they were doing them at the same time."

"But you'd naturally compare the two if they occur at the same time, right? The first day of Chris's experiments was the day Allen had his outburst, so I don't think you've heard from him how it went, have you, Sara?"

Now that she thought about it, she hadn't gotten to hear anything from Chris or Nelly or Kuntz. She'd jumped right into her second day at the Apothecary's Guild without getting to discuss any of it with them.

"I'm really making a fool of myself this time around, aren't I?" Allen murmured, to which Ri could do nothing but smile sympathetically.

"It seems the dragon repellent is already working very well."

"Of course it is. It's Chris."

He'd already spent almost a year perfecting the drug and experimenting on how best to make use of it. That preparation was clearly paying off now.

"From a set distance away, they put the repellent in a bonfire and then disperse the smoke as much as they can with wind mages. That was all the experiment amounted to, but the dragons clearly avoided the smoke and fled to the south from the beginning to the end. Which means..."

"No dragons came toward the southwestern hills where the knights were?"

"Correct. I knew you'd catch on quick, Sara."

So the knights sat around with nothing to do for a day, panicked, and used the paralysis agent on some dragons that were farther away than they normally would have gone for. But they couldn't hit the dragons at that distance with no

training, thus causing the events of the previous day.

“Well, I suppose that’s also a form of experimentation...”

“I can’t call it successful with the harm it caused, though.”

Sara wasn’t necessarily sure. Her being injured was basically a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and everyone else had been able to escape without getting hurt. She wouldn’t really call that a failed experiment, then.

She gasped and looked at Allen. “What about the people in the buildings? Were they okay?”

“Yeah, they were fine. None of the buildings were damaged. There were actually quite a few people still inside.”

“I guess I was able to come in a little useful, then. I was kind of wondering if it even made a difference, us being there.” Sara laughed awkwardly.

She’d been wondering while she was fleeing with Mona and Heather. They were already somewhere safe before the dragons came, so they might have been able to run away with everyone else just fine even if Sara and Allen hadn’t shown up.

Riot shook his head, still grasping Sara’s hands. “A few people watched the whole thing from some of the taller buildings closer to the capital’s center. You seem to think you only protected the buildings, but that’s not true, Sara.”

They’d been on the ground, so all they’d been able to see was what was happening at their eye level.

“The dragons were heading for the road into town, following the fleeing people. Allen distracted them, getting them to focus on him in the meadow instead. That gave everyone time to escape.”

That matched what Allen had said earlier.

“Once the people had gotten away, the dragons had no reason to chase them anymore, so they instead took interest in the buildings, which would have been a rare sight for them. And you protected those buildings, Sara.”

“Though I fainted right away afterward.” She really didn’t think she’d protected the buildings for all that long.

“The people watching were quite shocked when they heard the dragons roaring and saw a girl collapse. Then a boy jumped in and they thought the two of them were done for, but they were safe somehow. Then the dragons started heading toward the town.”

Sara remembered Allen carrying her on his back and got embarrassed thinking about how people had probably seen that.

“But the dragons were trapped in place, like there was some sort of wall preventing them from moving forward. And soon enough, a red-haired Hunter —*ahem*,” Ri suddenly cleared his throat. “That is to say, my incredible daughter Nefertari, appeared like a gust of wind and clobbered the migrating dragons. Oh, if only the townhouse were on the southern side of town, I might just have seen it too.” He must have cleared his throat because he was choked up with pride. “I wish I could have seen my dear Neffie at that moment.”

“Well, *I* saw her,” Allen said smugly. He’d been giving Sara the play-by-play while her eyes were closed, so she knew he had.

“Nelly really is cool, huh?”

“Why, of course she is!”

The three of them all laughed before Riot suddenly gave them a serious look.

“What I mean to say is, if the two of you hadn’t been there, the dragons might have hit all the people fleeing down the road with their roar.”

Sara shuddered, remembering how suddenly she’d lost consciousness.

“Several buildings might have been destroyed as well. Who knows how many people inside might have been hurt, or worse. Thus, the two of you being there absolutely made a difference. I’m certain of it.”

“I’m glad...” She’d acted impulsively out of concern for some people she’d only just become friends with, but she’d ended up helping a lot more people because of it, so it was worth going through something so scary.

“I really want to apologize, though, Sara. I mean, I call myself your guard, but I’m always just relying on your power. I might’ve figured out a flaw in your barrier, but it’s not like I could actually do anything about it,” Allen said sullenly.

Sara smiled. “But if you hadn’t jumped in to protect me and gotten me to put my barrier back up, who knows what would have happened? And I only felt safe going back there because I knew you were there.”

They knew each other well, so they depended on one another. That wasn’t a bad thing.

“This is just another example of there being certain things only I can do and things only you can do, Allen. I think we make a pretty good team, personally.”

Allen smiled teasingly. “Does that mean you’ll go into the dungeon with me?”

“No, it does not.”

She actually probably would, if she could get valuable medicinal plants there, but since Allen was being nice enough to wrap things up with a joke, she had to reciprocate.

“Okay. I’ll rest well today, and then tomorrow we can finally get started gathering plants!”

“R-Right. I hope everything goes well,” Ri muttered. Sara wasn’t sure what he meant by that, but she would see what he meant the next day.

“I have to insist that you take the carriage today.”

Judging that she’d fully recovered, Sara made to head to the Apothecary’s Guild with Allen the next day when the manager of the townhouse hurriedly stopped her.

“Oh, I’m fine. I’m completely back to normal.” Sara flexed an arm to reassure the manager.

“And just what is that arm supposed to assure me of? Rather—” The manager cleared his throat. “Personally, I think it’s ludicrous that you’re going back to work at all after resting for only one day.”

After resting for the whole day that she’d collapsed on and the day after that, Sara felt like she was perfectly fine. She’d gotten permission from Ri, Nelly, and Chris to go back to work, so why was the manager trying to stop her?

“If I can’t get you to stay home and rest, will you please at least use the

carriage?”

Now that she thought about it, she'd told everyone that she was one of the Invited, so there was no reason for her to try not to stand out anymore. Thus Sara acquiesced to the caretaker's request and took the carriage to work. Boarding it in front of the mansion and riding it out through the gate really made her appreciate how big the townhouse was. As she gazed out the window thinking such casual thoughts, she almost jumped out of her seat when she heard a cry come from outside.

“It's the Invited!”

“The Invited who protected the town from the dragons and her guard!”

Sara hurriedly sank down into her seat as much as she could, hiding her face from the window. Allen quickly pulled the curtains shut.

“Why didn't Ri say something? So this is what he was grinning over all morning,” Allen grumbled. He must not have known either.

“Sara!”

“Allen!”

They were still in the noble district, but there seemed to be way more people around than there usually were. Not to mention...

“They even know our names?!”

“Me too? Why?” Allen asked, his face twitching.

In response, Sara crossed her arms and bragged as if she were talking about herself, “Well, I just got knocked out, but you actually took one of them down.”

“The knights take them down every day, and how many do you think Nelly's hunted? I just happened to be there when the dragons attacked. I'm not gonna get a big head over taking out one of them.”

“Yeah,” Sara agreed.

She and Allen were both thankful that they'd come out of the situation mostly unscathed, and neither of them felt particularly proud of what they'd done, so they both had trouble understanding why they were getting this reaction.

The slow, swaying carriage finally arrived at the Apothecary's Guild. It frankly would have been faster to walk there.

"Young miss, young master, we're here, but I'd advise steeling yourself somewhat before you get out."

Sara and Allen gulped and nodded at one another at the driver's warning. They didn't even have the chance to comment on Allen being called "young master."

"I'll get out first and then I'll help you out, so put your barrier up right away. Like when we went through those cotton sheep."

"Right."

It was hardly the time for it, but that gave Sara a nostalgic feeling.

"Okay."

The moment Allen opened the door, there was a cheer. They heard people saying things like, "So that's the Invited, Sara," and, "That's the Hunter, Allen."

"Sara. Don't hesitate. Let's go."

Allen swiftly got out and held his hand out for Sara. Normally, they each got out on their own, but this was no time for that. Sara let Allen help her down, and they headed for the side door with her using their barrier to keep the crowd away.

"Wow, your barrier is handy for crowds too. Ack! Come on, let's hurry!" Allen ducked his head down after glancing toward the front of the guildhall. Being a fair bit shorter than him, Sara couldn't see what had caused him to react like that, so she started to feel a little nervous before someone loudly called her name.

"Sara!"

"What's *he* doing here?" A second ago, Sara'd had no idea why Allen had exclaimed, "Ack!" but it made perfect sense now. The man's presence here was what didn't make sense.

The moment the man called her name, a path opened up for Sara and Allen, but not to the side entrance. He would probably just go to them if they

continued standing there, so they reluctantly headed for the front of the building instead.

“Hey, Sara. You look well.” Waiting for them with a bright smile and a crisp knight’s uniform was Liam.

“I appreciate your concern,” Sara said, without letting her annoyance show on her face. Of course, she immediately regretted not showing him just how annoyed she was.

“As your potential fiancé, being concerned for you is only natural.”

“What?” Sara said flatly, but her response was drowned out by the excited screams of the onlookers. A rumor about the Invited girl marrying the prime minister’s son swept through the crowd like the wind, and they all left in satisfaction after getting a good look at Sara and Allen. There hadn’t even been time for her to deny it.

“I believe I’ve refused your offer multiple times now.”

“And I’m still offering, aren’t I?”

Sara didn’t know what *he* was seeing, but to her, there were sparks flying between the two of them that were more explosive than romantic.

But the crowd had finally cleared up, so Sara turned her head to the side with a huff and went back around to the side entrance.

“Kindly refrain from entering without permission.”

“Oh, I’ve got permission.”

They headed for Josef’s room with their annoying barnacle still clinging to them and were greeted by the apothecary’s openly irritated face.

“I did hear you were coming today, but you could have taken a few more days off, you know.” It sounded almost as if he would have preferred that she stayed home, but Sara ignored that.

“I’d like to do the plant-gathering we weren’t able to do the other day today.”

“You’re really going gathering? Didn’t you almost die out there?” Josef asked her, astounded.

“I’ve got a countermeasure for the dragons’ roaring now,” Sara said with a confident huff. “Plus, we’ll be fine if we just don’t go to the southern meadow.”

She’d already discussed all this with Chris and Nelly. After they got back from work, Chris and Nelly fussed over Sara just as much as Allen and Ri had, but sensing how strong Sara’s will to work was, they’d all discussed a concrete plan of action together.

“Chris told me the western and southern meadows are the only places where you have to worry about migrating dragons right now, so we’ll be fine in the north or the east. According to Nelly, the safest place for me with my current defenses would be the dungeon, so if there are apothecaries who are scared to go out into the meadow, she said I should bring them to the dungeon instead.”

“Can you think of the trouble you’re causing us, Master Chris? And a guardian who would suggest taking rookie apothecaries into a dungeon is just ridiculous,” Josef grumbled. He stood from his chair and turned to Liam, who stood behind Sara. “Liam. Don’t act like you have permission to be here, because you don’t.”

Apparently Josef and Liam knew each other.

“If you want to see your fiancée’s face because you’re worried about her, go to the Wolveriés, not the Apothecary’s Guild. Though I’ll note it seems like it was the knights’ fault that she almost died in the first place.”

“Sara understands. And the Wolveriés refused my visit.”

“They did, did they?” Josef shot back at him, so Sara didn’t even have to.

So that was why he’d ambushed her at the Apothecary’s Guild.

“Can I just say something?” Sara resolutely cut into the pair’s conversation. “I am *not* Liam’s fiancée. I’ve turned him down multiple times now. And I do *not* understand about the knights and the migrating dragons. But if you wanted to see my face, you’ve seen it now. Please leave.”

Her voice might have been a bit loud. With a sigh, Josef directed one of the other apothecaries in the room, “Please escort our visitor outside. Through the front entrance.”



“I’ll see you later, Sara.”

Liam left with less of a fight than Sara was expecting. It would be nice if some of what Sara had said sank in a little, but there were no signs of that.

“I’ll see you never!” Sara said, scrunching up her face.

“I think Liam’s a pretty good bargain,” Josef commented. “What do you find so disagreeable about him?”

Ri had said something similar. Why was everyone so quick to compliment Liam?

“I think he’d be a terrible husband, that’s what!”

“Really? He’s got standing, he’s kind to women, he’s rich... He’s at least better than Ted, isn’t he?”

“Why is Ted my only other option?”

What kind of comparison was that? Sure, objectively speaking, there were plenty of merits to the arrangement, but Sara just couldn’t see it as a good option.

“The first time we met, he didn’t see me as anything more than a pitiful girl with no guardian, and now I’m just a convenient Invited that he can use—some endless font of mana.”

If he didn’t, then he would have *actually* been worried about her when he saw her. Having that huge smile on his face when his own actions had caused her to be unconscious in bed for more than a day was nothing but creepy!

“But I’m neither of those things! He doesn’t care who I am at all. How could I ever live with someone like that?” When she put it into words, it really came into focus for her. Liam only ever saw what he wanted to see. He had never really *seen* Sara even once.

“Yeah, I’ve never liked the guy either. He’s always so ‘positive’ it’s disgusting. I guess we see eye to eye on that.”

Sara wasn’t particularly happy to see eye to eye with Josef on anything.

“Anyway, sorry to stop you when you’re on a roll, but the guildmaster told me

to let him know if you showed up today. I'll be sitting in too, of course."

Sara gave Josef a suspicious look. "Sitting in on what?"

"All the details of what happens when you get hit with a dragon's roar, of course. Ted said he gave you a potion, but was that really all it took? We'll all discuss whether you should have been given an antiparalytic or an antidote instead to wake you up."

"Eek!" So Sara was their guinea pig.

"Your name was Allen, right? You come too. Your perspective as a witness is very valuable as well."

"Fine with me, if Sara's okay with it."

Well, maybe this *was* a rather important lesson for an apothecary. Sara's passion for work was flagging a bit, but this would be another good learning opportunity, so she prepared herself to take part in their little discussion.

"I mean, I don't know how much I'll be able to tell you, since I just fainted right away."

"It'll be helpful enough just to hear about how you felt when you woke up, things like that. Come on, this way."

Ironically, this ended up being the day the Apothecary's Guild most appreciated Sara's presence in the capital.

"I'm exhausted..."

"Me too. That was way harder than any dungeon."

By evening, there were finally no more people coming to see Sara and Allen, and they were able to take a leisurely ride back home when their carriage came to get them.

"We didn't even get to see Mona and Heather. I wonder if they're scared to go gathering now..." Sara mused.

"That's just 'cause we were too busy to see them. I wonder what'll happen tomorrow, though..."

Things just weren't working out how Sara wanted them to.

“If you’re just gonna be stuck in the Apothecary’s Guild all day, I wish the two of us could go hunting instead.”

“I told you I’m not going into the... Huh?” Before Sara could finish turning down his invitation, she had a thought. What was she even doing here? Hadn’t she been dispatched to the capital by Hydrangea’s Apothecary’s Guild? Yet they had so many apothecaries, there was nothing for rookies to do. That was why she thought she’d gather plants, since it was what she was good at, and she would teach some of the apothecaries here who had nothing else to do about gathering while she was at it. After all, she had her barrier, so she could do so safely.

“Everything’s gotten all messed up ‘cause I’ve gotten involved with the dragon stuff...”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Allen’s response was somewhat lackluster, given there was nothing for him to do anymore but escort Sara back to the townhouse.

“I got myself all worked up about letting people know I’m an Invited so that I could actually do some work, but then way more people than I wanted to tell ended up finding out about it.”

“Yeah, people even know who I am now. I’m sure they’ll forget about me soon enough, though.” Allen was as pragmatic as ever. Even if everyone knew his name, he was firm in his belief that strength was all that mattered for a Hunter.

“Whatever. When we go back to Hydrangea, everything will be back to normal.”

“Guess so.”

In that case, what *was* it that Sara needed to do here in the capital?

“I still want to create a better system for gathering plants! I mean, it doesn’t have to be such a big thing, but I want to go out and gather with a couple of people, since I feel like that’s how I can be the most useful here.”

“Maybe we should go out to the eastern meadow again tomorrow, then. Horned rabbits are no worry for us, after all. I *did* want to go into the dungeon, though.”

Allen advocated for the dungeon as he always did, but when Sara really thought about where she wanted to go, she realized it wasn't the eastern meadow.

"What I really want to do is work where Nelly is..." Her true feelings slipped out and, unexpectedly, Allen agreed.

"Where Nelly is, eh? So the southwestern hills? Chris won't be far from there either. That's probably fine, right?"

"Huh? But didn't Chris say we should go to the east or the north tomorrow?"

"If we want to be safe, yeah. But when you think about it, the safest place to be is near Nelly, isn't it?"

"You're right!"

When Sara's and Allen's eyes met, the carriage was just arriving at the townhouse.

They brought up the idea right away at dinnertime, but Nelly's reaction was far more disapproving than they'd expected.

"Is it a bad idea after all?" Sara asked forlornly.

"No, it's not that. It's just that Chris's experiments are going *too* well so far. There aren't any dragons coming to the southwestern hills, so I won't be able to show off at all for you, Sara!"

"*That's* what you're so bummed about?" Sara smiled, relieved. "Well, that just means it'll be extra safe, so I should definitely go, right?"

Chris was just eating quietly, the expression on his face saying she should do whatever she wanted. "If there are no dragons coming to the southwestern hills, why not just come watch for them with me, Nef? That way, Sara can watch both of us as she does her gathering."

Sara resisted the urge to tell him she had no particular desire to watch him.

"Yeah, I would if I could, but with what happened the other day... The knights haven't been making any reckless attacks anymore after what happened to Sara, but if something like that happens again, I've gotta be nearby. 'Course, I had no idea it was Sara I was going to rescue at the time."

The hills were probably the best place to watch the dragons' movements. Nelly must have run after them the other day because she'd noticed they were acting strange. She needed to be paying attention, since she'd be able to get there faster than anyone else if something happened.

"Okay, I'll go to the Apothecary's Guild tomorrow, get some volunteers, and head to the southwestern hills. Nelly, umm..." Sara hesitated to ask what she wanted to ask.

"I'll inform the knights," Nelly said firmly.

Sara was relieved to hear it, and happy too. Not because she was getting her way, but because Nelly was finally taking the initiative to speak up about things instead of giving up on communication from the start.

"If they don't want us gathering there, we can do it near Chris instead."

"There are plenty of healing herbs around where we're set up." Chris seemed to welcome their presence at least.

"You don't mind us being there?"

"Of course not. I just didn't think Chester would approve yesterday, so I didn't suggest it."

"Don't try to lure her over to you. She's coming with me first," Nelly said petulantly, though with some amusement as well.

"That's up to her," Chris said teasingly in response.

Sara was a bit surprised to see the rapport between the two of them. Maybe they really were starting to grow closer.

Sara and Allen left the townhouse early the next day, but the rumors about them seemed to have cleared up in just a single day, and not the seventy-five she was expecting.

"Guess they're good after seeing us in person once? I mean, I'm not complaining..."

"Well, it's just *us*," Allen said. Sara agreed heartily. They were just a pair of plain old kids. Yep.

They headed into the Apothecary's Guild from their usual side entrance and went straight to Josef, who was, predictably, in a bad mood once again.

"Can you kids go *one day* without bringing me trouble?"

Sara's mouth hung open. Just what was wrong with an apothecary coming to the Apothecary's Guild?

Josef sighed deeply. "Master Chris poked his head in this morning and said you'd be heading to the southwestern hills to do your gathering today and that he'd 'leave the rest to us.' Just what is he leaving to us, do you think?"

"I-I couldn't say."

She was glad Chris had said something, but he probably could have said a little more if she was being honest.

"First of all, it's dangerous."

"Well, we figured Nelly would be there, so it would be the safest place."

"That Wolverié woman, eh? I guess that figures." Josef shrugged as if giving in. "It's true that we have no work for you to do here other than gathering. Be careful, and if you find any new data to share with us, make sure you report it. Your report yesterday was very useful."

"Well, I did put my life on the line for it." She could only hope that some of her insincerity got across to him. Why were people at Apothecary's Guilds always like this? Thankfully, she was long used to it from Chris, so she kept her comments at that.

"So, do you think there are any apothecaries who want to come with us?"

"I really don't," he shot back immediately.

"Can I just ask Mona and Heather at least?"

"Fine with me, but I really don't think they'll want to go."

When asked, the pair did seem a bit hesitant about going to the southwestern hills in particular, but Mona eventually resolutely declared, "I'm going."

"Yeah, you really like the knights, don't you, Mona?"

"Well, how many chances do you get to see them up close?"

Sara thought back to her days in Rosa nostalgically. There had been a time when she was excited to see the knights as well...

"I know what the situation will be too. We didn't see much since we ran pretty far away, but the whole town's talking about how Sara the Invited saved us and Nelly and her apprentice Allen took down all those dragons to save *her*."

"Urgh..." Sara hadn't known exactly what the rumors about her were. She felt like her face was on fire.

"I also heard that the Invited's fiancé Liam commanded a squad of knights to take out the rest of the migrating dragons yesterday too."

"How are these rumors moving this fast? And he's *not* my fiancé."

"Why not? He's the prime minister's son. That's a pretty good deal, isn't it?"

That didn't matter at all to Sara. Why was everyone trying to sell her on this guy? She wanted to tell them all he was defective merchandise.

"Well, the rumors might be because we were yelling your names, since we were worried about you."

"So it's *your* doing." Sara's shoulders slumped. She couldn't really blame them for being worried, though, could she? Now she had nowhere to place the blame for her personal information leaking.

"Oh, whatever. Anyway, I think we'll be safe since Nelly and the knights will be there. Want to come with us?"

"Let's go!"

"I'm sure we'll find some good stuff out there."

She took the two of them to Josef to triumphantly report her success. All he did was shoo them away, one eyebrow raised.

"They asked me to deliver these antiparalytics too, today. Man, I don't really wanna go. I'm kinda scared," their usual driver moaned. Still, he headed out with them to the southwestern hills, all of them of course escorted by Allen, the subject of the receptionist girls' envy.

"You two seen the castle before? There's a street that goes past it out to the

west. We'll head south from there," the driver told them, taking them back toward the noble district Sara and Allen had come from this morning.

"Wow!"

Eventually, they caught sight of the castle, which looked like a bunch of the mansions House Wolverié had in Hydrangea all stuck together. There were several towers, only one of which they'd been able to see from the townhouse. The most striking part about it was that it was surrounded by a wall like Rosa was. The castle's wall was a lot shorter, though, so they could still see the buildings within it.

"It looks really, umm, practical?"

"That it is. The watchtowers are all still in use, and if we need to, the whole capital's supposed to evacuate into the castle. It can serve as a shelter for the whole town in an emergency."

The driver taught them about the capital as they moved. The most likely scenario for a town-wide evacuation would be monsters coming out of one of the three dungeons in the area, Sara supposed.

"Rosa's walls are tougher, though." On this subject, Allen knew more than the driver.

"Well, yeah, Rosa's walls have gotta protect them from continental tortoises, right? All the capital's walls have to hold back are migrating dragons, mountain wolves, and wyverns."

"I don't really get the comparison..."

She'd heard a little about how monsters would flood out of dungeons that weren't properly managed, and wyverns and mountain wolves would be pretty scary to have in town. But what on earth were continental tortoises like if they were a bigger threat than those?

"Nobody really knows much about them, but they come out of some dungeon somewhere every few decades or centuries and head toward the Dark Mountain, I guess. They're as tall as a two-story building and Rosa's right in their way."



“Why did they put the town there, then?” Sara couldn’t help asking.

“But the capital’s dungeons are managed well, so the last time anything like that happened was so long ago, we don’t even know about it,” Heather added.

“Still, the castle’s there if we need it, and we can take comfort in that,” the driver concluded as they passed by the complex.

Sara sighed, thinking she really was ignorant about a lot of things. Was it because she’d always been so focused on becoming independent and making a living, at the expense of everything else?

“Things were busy all the way to Camellia, but I had time in Hydrangea. Those dragons only took me out ’cause of my lack of knowledge too. Once I’m done with everything here in the capital, I really should do some studying, I think.”

“No one who isn’t a knight would know what to do if you ran into a dragon. You’re so studious, Sara.”

Mona didn’t seem to think there was any reason to put in all that effort, but Sara’s circumstances were unfortunately rather unique. If there was no way for her to get by without standing out, then her best option was to learn enough that she could respond to whatever the world threw at her.

“Here we are. The western meadow. Wow, wind’s strong today.”

The moment they emerged onto the road heading south outside of the capital, there was a strong gust of wind that seemed to carry winter on it.

“Huh?” Sara lifted her head and sniffed the air. “Do you smell that?”

“Let me see...”

Everyone else sniffed the air after her.

“What is it? I smell dry grass.” This was the driver.

“I think I smell flowers.”

“Me too. It smells like the perfume my aunt wears.” Unsurprisingly, the girls were a bit more sensitive to the scent.

Sara and Allen exchanged a glance.

“It’s Chris’s experiment.”

“I really don’t like this smell... Blech.”

The experiment was being run some thirty minutes away from there by carriage, but they could already smell the distinct scent of the repellent they’d often picked up on back at the mansion in Hydrangea.

“Think they’ll get complaints if the smoke carries all the way to the capital?”

Chris sure was something. But it wasn’t Chris they were headed toward; it was the knights on the southwestern hills.

“You can see them from here, right? Over there, where the ground rises up.”

They were gentle hills, not steep enough to be called mountains. As the cart approached, they could see several people standing atop the tallest one looking upward. And where they were looking, there were tiny dots like poppy seeds moving through the sky.

“Migrating dragons! They look so small from here!” They were so much bigger up close. Sara shivered. She’d seen inside their mouths from point-blank, after all.

“It’s a little scary, but the knights are here...”

“That red-haired lady’s here too. We’ll be fine.”

Mona and Heather pumped themselves up as Sara observed the vegetation around the hills.

“There aren’t any big trees, and there are rocks here and there... We’ll probably find mana herbs here.”

“Really?”

Paralysis herbs were rare, but mana herbs were just as valuable. If they could pick some, then they absolutely should.

“They grow in drier areas, right? I think we should concentrate our search around the rocks today. Let’s focus on mana herbs and whatever else we can find nearby.”

“Got it.” Heather was raring to go.

“Okay, this should be good.”

The driver stopped the cart at a small station set up at the foot of the hills. There were several carriages in an orderly line nearby and a stable for their horses. There was even a simple shelter for people to rest in.

“Guess it makes sense they’d have something like this out here, if they have to use this spot every year.” Sara observed the station with interest as one of the knights asked the driver’s business.

“Transporting apothecaries? We did get word about that rather suddenly this morning...”

Everyone got off the cart rather hurriedly.

“We’re from the Apothecary’s Guild. We’re here to do some gathering on the hills.” Sara was the leader of the group, she figured, so she gave the knight a greeting. “We have need of paralysis herbs and heard that it would be safest to gather here where the knights are.”

“O-Of course...” The knights were the ones who needed paralytics and antiparalytics, and she’d made sure to mention how safe they’d be in their presence, so the man held his head high. “Well, we rarely have anyone injured out here in our yearly dragon culling, but thanks to Commander Liam’s plans this year, we’re at zero injuries so far. Go ahead and be at ease while you gather.”

“Will do! Thank you.”

The girls smiled and bowed their heads to him while Sara kept quiet about how these were the very four people who had almost been badly hurt thanks to his “Commander Liam’s” plans.

The knight led them up to the top of the hill, where there were some ten Hunters sitting and standing here and there and twenty knights cautiously watching the sky. When the four arrived, every single one of those present turned to look at them.

They probably should have greeted the knights first, but Sara’s eyes were of course drawn to Nelly first.

“Nelly!”

“Sara!”

How cool was it the way she strode over to them in an instant?

“These are my apothecary buddies, Mona and Heather. They came to gather with me today.”

“Ah, so that’s you two. Thanks for looking after Sara.”

Nelly’s coolness seemed to have rendered Mona and Heather speechless as well. Still, they managed to greet her (even if it took some fidgeting).

“Oh, no, she’s been looking after *us*.”

“Sara’s taught us a lot about gathering already. We’re the ones who should be thanking her.”

From Sara’s perspective, Nelly was smiling the biggest smile she could manage, but anyone who didn’t know her probably saw it as but the slightest of grins. That just made her even cooler, of course, as far as Sara was concerned. Now that she could hold back the pressure of her mana, she was able to have normal conversations like these much more often.

“Sara, this one’s coming too.”

At Allen’s words, Sara stopped her mooning and remembered what she needed to be doing.

“Liam,” she said, mentally sticking her tongue out at him as he crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow at her. She hadn’t even noticed him coming over. Mona was looking up at him with stars in her eyes. Good-looking men did know how to show themselves off, she had to admit.

“Thank you for allowing us to gather nearby today. We’ll be able to focus on our work without worry with the knights nearby.”

“Well, we appreciate your trust, but be sure to keep an eye out for yourselves regardless. You may be safe from migrating dragons, but the meadow is plenty dangerous anyway.”

Sara was surprised to hear him saying something so reasonable.

“We’ll be careful. These are my colleagues, Mona and Heather.” She made

sure to introduce them, knowing of Mona's admiration.

"You two be careful as well." Liam raised a hand to them and turned back around to return to his work. Mona clasped her hands together and sighed, watching him go.

"He's so cool, your Liam. So was the guy who brought us up here. It was worth coming here just for this."

"He's not mine. If you're satisfied, though, I'm glad." That made it worth bringing them to Sara. "Now, let's do some gathering! We'll start by those rocks over there."

She'd been keeping an eye out for medicinal plants the whole time they were climbing the hill.

"First off, this is a mana herb." Sara took out her gathering basket and plucked a mana herb out from it.

"Wait a second, Sara. Didn't you turn that basket in the first time we gathered?" Heather pointed out. She had a sharp eye when it came to things like this.

"Yeah, but I've got another one I didn't turn in. You never know what might happen, so I like to keep some on hand."

Ever since Ted took her whole basket from her back in Rosa, she'd decided to keep some plants on hand even when she didn't have her basket with her.

"You're like a wilderlands apothecary, Sara." Mona had likely intended the comment to be praise, but it made Sara feel a bit strange.

"Meanwhile we're totally spoiled city kids. I bet you could find plants and make potions *anywhere*, Sara."

This time, she really appreciated the compliment.

"That is kind of what I'd like to do, actually. Here, each of you take one and really get a good look at it. They grow in dry areas like this." Sara indicated the border between the dry area the rocks sat in and the grass growing nearby.

"There's one!" Mona had already spotted a mana herb. Sara had spotted the same one, but she'd left it for one of them to find.

“You can look for healing herbs or mana herbs or paralysis herbs, of course. If you find a bunch of them, make sure you only take half. Okay, let’s get started!”

She could see several migrating dragons flying in the sky when she looked up, but Nelly was nearby and the knights were around too. She had Allen at her side as well. They were able to gather without worrying too much about the danger.

Noon came quickly, perhaps because Sara was able to concentrate so hard. The knights seemed to be eating in shifts. Nelly came and joined them, and they had lunch together on a big, flat rock.

Sara *did* somewhat hope to see Nelly in action, but Chris’s experiment seemed to be going so well that there hadn’t been a migrating dragon appearance all morning. The Hunters were all sitting around bored, but Sara was impressed.

In Camellia, the knights had been foolish enough to hit themselves with their own paralysis agent, and just a few days ago, they’d been so reckless with their attacks that some dragons had almost reached the town. She’d thought they’d just be sitting around doing nothing, but in fact they were counting all the dragons that flew by and carefully keeping track of their distance, making sure they had paralytics ready at all times if they needed them. They had antiparalytics a short distance away as well, to treat any knights affected by the paralysis agent.

When she thought about how they’d had to keep this up for a whole month so far and wouldn’t be done until migrating dragon season was over, it did seem to be rather laudable work.

It must have been Liam’s turn to eat lunch. He came over to Sara grinning sunnily when he saw that she’d just finished eating. “I’m glad you’re here,” he said, “but it looks like I won’t be able to show off for you at all.”

She couldn’t help smiling in spite of herself when he said the same exact thing Nelly did. “That’s fine. I have no desire to see any more dragons up close.” Sara shook her head. Anyone normal would never want to see such a dangerous creature up close, she was fairly certain.

Still, she wanted to tell him what she’d noticed. She didn’t like him, but her

feelings had nothing to do with the work he was doing.

“I noticed you taking down all those observation notes on the dragons. It might not be very flashy, but I think that’s very important, valuable work.”

“Err, yeah? Thanks.” The shady smile disappeared from his face, replaced by confusion. He must not have been expecting to hear something like that.

“I heard the knights have been able to take out more dragons than usual by themselves this year since they’re using the paralysis agent,” said Nelly, chiming in. “Course, the Hunters also say it’s annoying that they get the stuff on them and end up suffering paralysis themselves every so often.”

Surprisingly, Nelly joined the conversation of her own volition. What’s more, what she’d said indicated that she’d spoken to some other Hunters as well, which made Sara pleased as punch. Moving to Hydrangea had clearly been a good change for her.

“We’re using paralytics, so paralysis is unavoidable. It’s the same for the knights. Besides, that’s what the antiparalytics are for.” Liam was defensive, evidently thinking he was being criticized. It was childish in Sara’s opinion.

“You’re using a stronger version of the paralysis agent for this experiment, right?” Sara asked him.

“That’s right,” Liam said dubiously.

“It’d be nice if you could develop a drug with a strong paralysis effect that also wears off quickly. Why not suggest something like that to the Apothecary’s Guild? They’ll work like crazy developing it, I bet.”

Chris was a no-brainer, but she could picture Ted, Josef, and even Chester the guildmaster all merrily developing the new drug, even if they might complain. That was just how apothecaries were, she supposed.

“I... Hmm.” Liam seemed unsure of how to answer, but Sara wasn’t expecting a response from him anyway. She’d just told him what she’d been thinking on her own.

“Oh? It’s Chris. Did something happen?” Nelly was craning her neck back to look behind them, so Sara turned around and noticed Chris coming up the hill

to them.

“Liam! No, Nef! I thought I might be able to see you if I came here. You’re beautiful as always today, Nef.”

“We saw each other this morning, didn’t we?”

He was here to see Liam, but was immediately distracted upon seeing Nelly. As always, Sara didn’t even register in his eyes. And Nelly was just as curt with him as always as well.

“Chris. What’s the matter?” Liam got things back on topic, unfazed. He must have been used to this sort of thing.

“Ah, Liam. That’s right. Have you noticed the wind today?”

“Yes. It’s blowing from the south, which is when we have to be most careful about using the paralytic. But this is precisely when it’s most necessary to experiment. We’ve hardly gotten any dragons to experiment on in the last few days.”

Sara looked up at Liam’s slightly sardonic comment. She didn’t know how things had been up until now, but today at least, Chris’s repellent didn’t seem to be doing much good.

Chris looked up at the sky like Sara. “We do have casters helping us, but our experiment relies heavily on the wind. It typically blows from west to east this season, but it’s really sinking in today that there are days when it blows differently as well. That’s enough of a lesson learned to make all this worth it, though.”

Sara decided to report what she’d noticed as they’d left the capital. “Come to think of it, we could smell the dragon repellent right away when we left town and entered the meadow.”

“Sara. I didn’t see you there.”

Of course he didn’t. Even though he was the one who’d gone and gotten permission from the Apothecary’s Guild for her to gather on the southwestern hills today.

“The wind makes it all but impossible for the casters to get the repellent to



move to the south today. There must be hardly any of it remaining in the air from yesterday either. As the day goes on, there are more and more dragons heading closer to the capital.”

“I thought so. But this is perfect. Since we were forbidden from hitting dragons that are too far away with the paralytic,” Liam said ruefully.

Sara shot him a glare. Maybe she’d been wrong to see him in a slightly better light earlier. He still didn’t understand the danger she and her friends had been in one bit. From how completely unremorseful he was, maybe he actually thought it would be fine if one or two commoners’ houses got destroyed.

Looking at them like this, it almost seemed as if they were cooperating amiably, but if you knew what to look for, it was clear that Liam was irritated that his own experiments weren’t going well as a result of Chris’s tests.

Chris, of course, was unruffled by Liam’s petty comments. “We’ll keep trying to disperse the repellent with our casters, of course, but you should proceed with your own work today as if there’s no repellent at all.”

“Very well. I appreciate the report.”

“We’ll have to look into how many days there are with wind like this during migrating dragon season. This experiment may go on for years yet,” Chris said to no one in particular before heading back down the hill. Of course, this was after moaning about how he didn’t want to leave Nelly’s side and receiving a stern scolding from her.

“O-Oh my goodness. That was Master Chris in the flesh.”

“Yep, that’s Chris...”

Sara didn’t understand why he had so many devotees in the Apothecary’s Guild. It wasn’t just Mona. Even Heather was captivated by him.

“He really is amazing up close, isn’t he?”

“Well, he is handsome, I’ll give him that.”

Nelly nodded in agreement, which just made Sara surprised that she even had such sensibilities. At the same time, she felt like she was having girl talk with the three of them, which thrilled her to bits.

“He’s handsome, but I more so admire him for all the work he’s done developing new medicines and improving old ones. It’s beyond cool how he left the capital without a shred of concern for his position of guildmaster and then came back with a new drug he’s been testing,” Mona told Nelly.

*Isn’t that just him being irresponsible?* Sara kept the comment to herself. He wasn’t irresponsible when it came to his work, at least. She was well aware of that.

“Yeah, he’s really devoted to his work.” Nelly was reacting as if she were the one being complimented, which made Sara feel all warm and fuzzy inside. She was just harsh on him because he was harsh on her, she decided. It wasn’t that she didn’t like him or anything like that.

“Well, guess we should get our afternoon work started. Looks like we won’t be able to laze around for much longer.”

Sara looked up at the sky. It *did* seem like the migrating dragons were more clearly visible in the sky than they’d been in the morning.

“As long as I’m here, those dragons won’t even get a chance to attack. And the same goes for all the other Hunters here.” Nelly looked out over the waiting Hunters. “If they’re here, it means they’re confident in their skills. There are a lot of knights around too, so that’ll help.”

Nelly had always worked on her own. It made Sara happy to see her relying on other people for help.

“I want you guys to be careful too, though. Allen?”

Allen nodded. Just hearing his name was enough for him to know what Nelly meant. “Yeah. I’m their guard today. I’ll make sure to do my part.”

“Good.”

With that, Nelly turned her eyes to the sky and went back to her post.

“Maybe I should pay attention too,” Sara sighed. Could she afford to stare at the ground all day picking plants like she had in the morning?

“No. I’ll do that,” Allen told her, keeping his eyes on the sky. “Just make sure Mona and Heather don’t leave your barrier, Sara. I’ll keep track of the situation

and let you know if things get dangerous.”

Allen parked himself somewhere where he could see both the apothecaries and the knights.

“Then let’s do some gathering to help out the knights tomorrow!” Mona was good and motivated after getting to see the knights up close, so the girls began their afternoon work as well.

They moved around the hill little by little, focused entirely on the ground, but it was still easy to tell when the knights started to get restless. A while later, Allen’s quiet voice reached her.

“Sara. We might see some action soon.”

“Okay. Mona, Heather? Let’s stop gathering and keep an eye on things.”

They gathered atop the hill and stood where they wouldn’t get in the knights’ way.

“Three dragons approaching from the west!” one of the knights called, and three archers stepped forward, nocking arrows with what she assumed was the paralytic on them. It was only a guess on Sara’s part, since it was small pots attached to the arrows and not the bottles she was used to seeing. Next to the archers waited knights who must have been casters.

“Fire!” Liam called, and the archers loosed their arrows toward the dragons. She wasn’t sure if they were using physical strengthening or wind magic, but the arrows flew much farther than she thought they would, the jars attached to their tips shattering when they got close enough to the dragons. The arrows then fell down to the meadow.

“So they work in teams, and they don’t hit them directly,” she muttered, recalling sourly that they’d used the same technique on her, Allen, and Nelly in the past. Now wasn’t the time to dwell on that, though.

The three dragons passed through the air where the paralytic had dispersed and nothing in particular happened. If anything, Sara felt like she could smell it down on the ground instead. This much was probably fine, but if the smell were any stronger, the people on the ground would have to be careful of being affected by the drug themselves.

That made Sara realize something. “My barrier lets wind and smells through. It blocks rain, but vapor can still get through. I should be careful of that.”

It blocked magic, but there were certain things Sara needed to get through like air, which could work against her in situations like this.

“I didn’t have to think about blocking the stuff from the seven-colored swallowtails, though. I wonder if my barrier was different then, because I was consciously trying to avoid getting their paralysis poison on me.” Since people she trusted could get through it, her barrier clearly reflected her feelings somewhat.

“Even if magic does what you want it to, it seems hard to block a paralytic being carried on the wind... I can’t really picture how to do it.”

She could defend against the dragons’ roars on the spur of the moment because she’d just blocked all sound from getting through, but this was a more difficult task. She decided to just make sure she had antiparalytics to use instead of worrying about blocking the drug with her barrier.

“More of the paralytic than we expected is getting back to us on the wind. Adjust the dispersal to be behind the dragons. Can you do that?”

The knights were changing their tactics as well.

“If they were closer, it’d be easier, but I’m not sure if we can do that while they’re still so far away. We can try, though.”

The wind really seemed to be an issue today.

“S-Seven dragons approaching from the west! They’re coming straight at us!”

When a knight announced seven dragons approaching, the Hunters began to move as well. Nelly and some people who Sara guessed were casters stepped forward. The ones hanging back must have been in charge of taking care of any dragons that made it to the ground.

Seven was, incidentally, the number of dragons Sara and Allen had encountered the other day in the meadow.

“Archers! Aim for their noses!”

The knights were moving to attack the dragons directly now. Sara stuck close

to Mona and Heather, strengthening her barrier. This time, five archers nocked arrows at the dragons approaching from due west.

“Fire!”

At Liam’s shout, the arrows flew. They soared toward the dragon in front, the jars attached to them exploding to its right and left and above it, creating almost a curtain of paralytic. The dragons all seemed to pass right through this curtain, but unlike before, this time there was a clear and immediate change in their behavior.

The dragon in front suddenly stopped moving and fell. The next two shook their heads, descending toward the meadow, and the two after that started heading down, aimed right for the hill where the knights were. The last two maintained their slightly southward course as if avoiding the paralytic in the air.

“You’re up, Hunters!” Liam called.

“I’ll take one.” Nelly stepped forward reassuringly.

“We’ll handle the other, then,” the other Hunters who had stepped forward with Nelly declared.

“How is she gonna take down a dragon from the sky?” Sara wondered. She’d seen her take down a wyvern before, but it had already been low to the ground so that it could hunt and she was pretty sure Nelly had used her sword to take it out. She wasn’t holding her sword now, though, and the dragons were still high up.

The knights and the rest of the Hunters were already approaching the dragons that were landing in the meadow. They probably had to draw the dragons’ attention quickly so that they didn’t get taken down by their roars like Sara had.

Nelly clenched her fist and swung it at the dragon in the air like she always did when she took out monsters in the dungeon. A moment later, the dragon’s head snapped back like something had hit it and it plummeted to the ground just like that. Nelly had one hand on the scabbard at her hip, but she just nodded as if satisfied and strolled down to the dragon.



“It’s dead. Didn’t even have to draw my sword.”

Sara was fairly certain Nelly had sneaked a glance her way then, but she was too busy looking back and forth between Nelly and the fallen dragon with her mouth hanging open to be sure. Nelly left the dead dragon and headed down toward the knights who were struggling with their own prey.

“Holy crap... She can punch monsters right out of the sky?” Allen was gaping at Nelly in wonder, and for what it was worth, Sara was one hundred percent on the same page as him.

This was no time to sit around being impressed, though. The casters hitting the other dragon with fire were struggling. They appeared to be a group working together to take the dragon down with magic and then finish it with physical strengthening, but too many of the Hunters had gone down to help the struggling knights.

“Tch. Why can’t we finish it off?!”

Three casters were frying the dragon with fire magic, but they weren’t able to kill it quickly, so it was thrashing around on the hill as it clung to life. Sara was just glad they were far enough away not to be in trouble themselves.

When the dragon stopped struggling, however, Allen gasped. “It’s just like before.”

The dragon’s face wasn’t pointed their way, but the three casters were absolutely dead in front of it.

Allen had been quietly watching the battle, his fists twitching, but he suddenly lifted his hands up and cast his own fire magic at the dragon. All it did was smack harmlessly against the back of the dragon’s head, but he’d succeeded at distracting it enough for its head to change direction.

Sara didn’t miss her chance. She slipped her barrier around Allen and extended it out to reach the three casters as well.

“Reflect sound too... Go!”

They hadn’t discussed anything, but Allen created a distraction, and Sara focused on defense as if they’d arranged to do so beforehand. Their bodies

moved naturally, like they were just breathing.

The moment she changed the nature of her barrier, she couldn't hear a thing anymore. She watched as the dragon opened its mouth wide, Allen rushing toward it out of the corner of her eye.

The moment the dragon closed its mouth, Sara removed her barrier from Allen and the Hunters, pulling it back around her and the girls. She changed it back to normal, and the world regained its sound. She could have kept the Hunters inside it too, but she never really knew what would happen with strangers inside it. She couldn't guarantee it wouldn't reflect their magic back at them if they tried casting something inside it.

When she'd defended herself against the roar in the meadow, it had bounced back on the dragon itself, but perhaps because of the strange shape her barrier had taken, the dragon was unaffected by its roar this time.

While the casters reacted in confusion to the dragon's silent roar, Allen got around behind it and punched it in the side of the head. He couldn't take it down in one hit like Nelly, but it was obviously rattled by his blow, so he could buy time at the very least. He then leaped back to stay out of the casters' way. Sara wasn't sure how they were going to take the dragon down on their own. She was shocked when they took out swords.

"I get it. They can use magic *and* physical strengthening. Guess these are strong Hunters."

Maybe they weren't quite as powerful as those who specialized in physical strengthening alone, but the fact that they could use magic and swords at the same time definitely made them formidable. They could shoot magic at monsters that flew in the sky and fight them with their swords when they came down to the ground. Even Nelly took that tactic sometimes. They probably only struggled against monsters that were excessively large or violent.

It took time for them to finish off the dragon; the sight was almost too cruel for Sara to bear, so she huddled back with Mona and Heather, reaffirming her decision not to become a Hunter herself.

When she saw the knights still fighting the dragons below the hill, she muttered, "I really am glad I became an apothecary."



The whispered words received an agreement she hadn't been expecting.

"I feel the same way."

"Me too."

The dragon culling was a lot more scary and a lot more graphic than she'd been expecting it to be. All three girls paled while watching it. Still, she thought it was rather impressive that they kept their guards up the whole time instead of collapsing to the ground.

All of a sudden, Mona started twisting her body left and right like she was doing warm-up exercises.

"Looks like we're up, Sara."

"Mona? What do you mean?" Sara cocked her head and Mona pointed down at the knights.

"The paralysis agent they use for the dragons is stronger than normal. That's one of the reasons they don't let the newbies make it. Look."

True, all the dragons were dealt with now, but there were a lot of knights and Hunters falling shakily to the ground.

"The paralysis hits right away after just touching a little of it. Antiparalytics are really meant for much worse paralysis, so it's almost a waste to use it on this. But that's where we come in. We can give them the right dosage," Mona said with a grin. "They've got apothecaries here, so we might as well do our job, right?"

Sara thought back to the first time she'd seen the knights back in Rosa. Vince had sent for someone from the Apothecary's Guild right away when he'd seen how injured they were. Sara had been shocked to see Ted carefully examining each one and administering them potions as well.

Sara had helped out treating paralysis poison herself in Stock with Chris as well, hadn't she? She hadn't just sold antiparalytics during the seven-colored swallowtail hunt either. She'd run around treating people who needed treatment back then too.

All that had happened before she'd become an apothecary, but now that she

was able to make potions herself and understood their effects better, she should be able to do an even better job.

Sara turned to Allen. “Allen?”

“You’re good. The dragons are all down. I don’t see any other dangerous monsters nearby either.”

Relieved, Sara removed her barrier from Mona and Heather. “I took my barrier off of you, so just be careful, okay?”

They nodded and the three of them headed toward the knights.

“We’re apothecaries. We’ll help anyone who needs treatment.” Mona took the lead, announcing their intention to Liam, who looked somewhat doubtfully at Sara. Mona and Heather were older than Sara, but they were all in their midteens, so she could see how they might not seem all that reliable.

Sara puffed up. “I’ve treated paralysis poison before. I may be a newbie, but I can help.”

“If you wouldn’t mind, then. We have antiparalytics there,” Liam said, going right back to watching the sky. Three more dragons were approaching, but they were taking a wide berth around the knights after witnessing the conflict down on the ground.

“Anyone who’s fit to, return to your posts. When you’ve recovered from the paralysis, return uphill as your condition allows you to,” Liam commanded briskly.

Sara looked around and took a bucket out of her pouch, filling it with warm water using magic. She got out some towels as well. Given the season, she couldn’t wash people off through their clothes, so she wanted to at least let them wash their hands and faces.

She left the people with more severe symptoms to Mona and Heather, handling the lighter cases herself. The people she helped out looked uncomfortable, but they could at least still sit up on their own.

Recalling the weaker antiparalytics meant for seven-colored swallowtails she still had on her, she took some out and gave them to the people with lighter

symptoms. These antiparalytcs were still only being manufactured and sold in Hydrangea.

“Huh? This antiparalytic isn’t hard to drink like they usually are.”

“It has a weaker effect, but it should be enough to help. How do you feel?”

“I think it’s getting better.”

The man she was helping was a Hunter, not a knight. He’d touched the paralysis agent directly since he used his fists to fight. He stood and swung his fists around lightly.

“You’re just like Nelly.” Sara put her fists up and grinned at him. For some reason, she felt a sense of kinship with people who fought the same way Nelly did.

“Nefertari, eh? I’m nothing like her,” the man spat. Sara was taken aback, but he hadn’t meant it in the way she’d initially thought. “I think I do pretty well in the capital’s dungeons, but I don’t think I’ll ever make it to the level she’s at. Did you see her punch that dragon right out of the sky in one hit? And how did she not get any of the paralytic on her when she was punching them just like I was?” He wasn’t complaining about her; he was just frustrated that he didn’t feel like he could ever be as strong as her.

“Nelly works with younger Hunters back in Hydrangea. You should ask her if she has any training tips or anything. Though you’re not likely to get advice from her that’s more than some sound effects.”

“O-Oh?” the Hunter said, evidently not expecting to hear something like that.

Sara gave him his final directions. “Please make sure to wash off all the paralytic from your hands and face using that water, okay? You’ll get dizzy again if you have any left on you.”

“Thanks, kid.”

She changed out the water in the bucket a few times, and by the time she was finished treating those with lighter symptoms, Mona and Heather had finished with their patients as well.

“We managed to save a lot of antiparalytic,” Mona commented, wiping the

sweat from her brow with a refreshing smile.

“You’re supposed to say the treatment went well, Mona,” Heather shot back.

“Right, right. I really do like seeing potions come in handy for people, though. Even if they’re not ones I made.”

They left any remaining cleanup to a knight who was in charge of the squad’s equipment and headed back up the hill. The wind caressing their faces had shifted to blow from the west instead of the south at some point. They looked up and found the dragons flying much farther away from the hills now, like they had been before noon. Sara sighed in relief. It looked like that would be all the violence she would have to see today.

When the sun started to set, the Apothecary’s Guild’s cart driver timidly climbed up the hill.

“Hey rookies, your ride’s here. Eep! That’s a lot of knights and Hunters... Scary.”

Sara decided not to tell him how many dead dragons had been lying around as well until just a short while ago. They’d vanished at some point while she was busy with her gathering, so the knights must have put them in storage bags or something.

The apothecaries decided to head back right away, Sara saying goodbye to Nelly, and Mona and Heather to Liam.

Riding on the back of the cart, Sara thought about everything that had happened that day. How the knights had been doing more work than she’d expected. How they still found Chris’s experiments to be a bother to them. How she’d been able to see Nelly in all her glory, but how the other Hunters might have been hurt if she hadn’t protected them with her barrier. How she’d done proper work as an apothecary with Mona and Heather.

Either she was just too tired or it was just too much to process, but her thoughts were going around and around in her head and she’d been quiet the whole ride back.

“Hey, Sara.” When Mona said her name, she jumped.

“Y-Yeah?” She focused on her fellow apothecaries and the two of them looked back at her, eyes serious.

“I want to go back to the southwestern hills tomorrow.”

“Me too,” Heather agreed.

They both took baskets out of the pouches on their waists as if they’d rehearsed the action. They weren’t baskets specifically for gathering plants, so they didn’t have the dividers Sara’s did and the herbs inside were only loosely clustered together, but they each had plenty of mana herbs, paralysis herbs, and healing herbs to show for their efforts.

“This is the first time I’ve ever gathered so seriously. And it felt really nice to pick mana herbs and paralysis herbs with my own hands when everyone’s always complaining about how we don’t have enough of them. But that’s not all...” Mona took a healing herb out of her basket and looked it over, then carefully set it back down. “We can do the sort of work there that we aren’t usually able to do as apothecaries. Captain Liam said that sort of thing doesn’t happen often, but I’d like to be there again in case it does.”

“Yeah, I agree.” Heather nodded. “You don’t usually treat patients directly at an Apothecary’s Guild. It was a good experience getting to see exactly how antiparalytics work in action.”

Sara felt her shoulders relaxing, listening to their apothecary-like comments. She was an apothecary herself, but her head had been completely full with thoughts of Nelly and her hunting, of Liam who kept trying to propose marriage to her, and of Chris who was doing his experiments nearby.

“Though we also learned that the knights seem too busy to actually protect us if something happens,” Mona said with a chuckle.

“I guess reality didn’t live up to your expectations. But with Sara and Allen and those Hunters there, I think we’ll be all right. Right?”

Sara had kind of come out here on momentum today, and hadn’t been thinking about what she’d do the next day yet at all. With the day’s experiences behind her, however, she was pretty confident that with her and Allen and Nelly, they’d be able to safely gather even if things got dangerous like they had

today.

“Yeah. I think I’ll stop by the Apothecary’s Guild again tomorrow, so if you want to, let’s come out here again together.” Sara nodded firmly. “Could I just ask you to tell Josef yourselves that you want to go back out tomorrow when you turn in your plants?”

“Sure.”

“Of course.”

“And one more thing...” Sara grinned. “I’d like you to tell as many of your apothecary friends as you can about today. How you were able to gather mana herbs and paralysis herbs, and how you got to do work you don’t usually get to as an apothecary.”

“So you want us to convince the others to come out too.”

“We’re the only ones volunteering now, after all.”

Unfortunately, it was true. She could also say that she already had two people willing to come gather with her after being in the capital for less than a week so far, however.

“It’s only my...fifth day in the capital...? Way too much has happened since we got here.”

“Pfft!” Allen burst out laughing.

Sara gave him a resentful look. “You laugh, but you’ve gotten caught up in the same amount of stuff I have!”

“I know. There’s just always some kind of trouble happening around you, Sara.”

“No there... Yeah, there is, isn’t there?” Sara sighed.

Allen gave her a pat on the shoulder. “But things are totally different than they were back in Rosa.”

“How so?” Sara asked, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

“In Rosa, you just got caught up in things, but ever since Hydrangea, you’ve been causing the trouble yourself.”

“That’s not true! I didn’t bring those migrating dragons down, did I?!” Sara protested.

“No, but you *were* the one who wanted to go out to the meadow.”

“Ugggh...” He had a point. Her protests died in her throat.

“Sara, you might be getting into trouble, but you’re also making sure you do what you came here for.”

“Yeah. It’s worked out to be some really good experiences for me, at least.”

“Mona! Heather! Thank you!” Sara wrapped the two of them up in a hug.

“You might want to live a boring life, but people with power can’t really do that, Sara. It’s the same with Nelly and Chris, right?”

“You think so?” Nelly’s life up on the Dark Mountain had seemed pretty boring to her, but what she’d actually done up there was impressive enough for other people to think of her as a monster, Sara supposed. Maybe she’d just have to give up on living a boring life, then. Still, it wasn’t all negative.

“But I’m glad I finally decided what I really want to do here in the capital today.”

“You went through a couple of ideas, huh?”

“Yeah.”

For the rest of her time here, she’d gather plants on the southwestern hills, watching her beloved Nelly as she did. If even more apothecaries came out to gather with her, she’d have no complaints.

She’d been pretty nervous about coming to the capital, and things had been awfully hectic since arriving, but she thought it was good progress that she was finally able to start following her own desires.

“I’m glad I came to the capital,” she said. It started with Caren sending her there by force, and once she got there, she was chased out into the meadow by a nasty senior apothecary and she ended up getting attacked by dragons, but she’d finally decided something for herself and managed to go through with it. “Now I should be able to do the stuff I want to do without letting other people jerk me around anymore.”

Allen grinned, seeing her pump herself up. “I wish you luck.”

“I’ll probably need it...” Sara said with a wry grin. Even after making her dramatic declaration, she wasn’t at all confident.

Surrounded by her quirky family and with her Invited status out in the open, it would definitely be difficult to do *exactly* as she wanted all the time. Still, the future seemed a lot brighter to Sara now than it had been before.

Starting from that one step she’d taken out of the caretaker’s cottage on the Dark Mountain, to the step she’d taken toward Rosa, and the step she’d taken to go help Allen... When she looked back on her journey now, all of those small individual steps had brought her where she was today. If that was the case, then the next small step she took forward would continue on into her future.

“Just gotta do my best again tomorrow.”

Even if this *was* a world with migrating dragons up in the sky and horned rabbits down in the meadows.



## Epilogue: Still Far to Go

After the tumult of Sara's first five days in the capital, the rest of her time there went by without too much trouble. More and more people wanted to join her gathering party by the day, to the point that they'd eventually had to put a limit on the number of people who could participate.

As in previous years, after another month went by, the dragons were done migrating. When the wind blew from the west, Chris's repellent did its job perfectly and the dragons detoured to the south, avoiding the capital. When it blew from the south, the repellent was completely swept away and the knights and Hunters had to step up to take care of the dragons.

For the apothecaries who gathered out on the hills, days with wind from the west were days when they could concentrate on gathering without worry, while days with wind from the south were days when they had to be careful as they gathered but also one where they could show off their skills as apothecaries, helping treat anyone affected by the paralysis agent.

The Apothecary's Guild bought plants even from people in their employ, so it was a nice source of extra income for everyone who participated. And with the Guild's plant shortage considerably eased, they were now discussing how apothecaries might continue to gather plants safely out in the meadows even after migrating dragon season. When Josef had told her that, clearly annoyed, Sara thought, *I win*, but she kept that thought to herself.

Sara was the one who'd taught all the new gatherers their techniques, so her reputation was improving by the day at the Guild as well. That was just among those who enjoyed going out and gathering, however.

Today, once again, Sara, Mona, and Heather found themselves getting the cold shoulder from the apothecaries working the sales counter.

"They really hate us, huh?"

"Oh, what's it matter? No one's liked by everyone, and some people just

don't like changing their ways."

The people who didn't like gathering plants were those who felt strongly that it wasn't a job for an apothecary to be doing. Apothecaries should be making medicine with the plants brought to the Guild; crouching out in the fields picking plants was a job for commoners who needed money.

"Picking plants is so much fun, though."

The receptionists who'd harassed Mona and Heather ended up suffering a pay cut for a few months for their troubles. It wasn't much of a punishment for what they'd done, but apparently there wasn't much more they could do to penalize young nobles. Still, they at least felt bad enough for endangering their fellow apothecaries (even if they were mere commoners) that they were taking time off from the Guild at the moment. The other receptionists were simply keeping them at arm's length to avoid getting caught up in any unwanted trouble.

"What really gets me is that a pay cut doesn't actually hurt them at all. And they clearly don't feel responsible at all, since they're taking time off at a busy time like this." Mona pursed her lips as the other receptionists avoided looking their way. "Rich people," she grumbled.

"Ha ha ha." Sara didn't really feel like she could talk, since the Wolveries, who had taken her in, were rich too. But now that she thought about it, she realized Ted probably hadn't gotten any worse than a pay cut for what he'd done to Allen and Sara either. And it wouldn't have hurt him a bit either.

She wondered why Ted was reflecting on his actions now, if only a little bit, and could only imagine that it was because he'd had fun traveling with them. All she could do was hope that the apothecaries in the capital would go through something similar.

"It doesn't bother me. I've always thought they were a little thick-skulled anyway. And they won't be able to get ahead in the Apothecary's Guild like that either. They only got special treatment when they joined 'cause of their families." Heather could be rather radical at times like this.

"That can't be. I mean, they're apothecaries too, aren't they?" Sara wasn't even sure why she was defending them.

“Well, if they’ve got ‘noble pride’ or whatever, then why wouldn’t they respect you, Sara? They know you’re one of the Invited.”

“Hmm.” All Sara could do was smile awkwardly.

“And even if you weren’t, you were recommended by Caren from Hydrangea and you’ve got the Wolveries backing you. Even if you look like nothing more than a little girl, they should realize they can’t be rude to you.”

“You *are* pretty little.”

Heather and Mona weren’t holding anything back. Still, Sara wasn’t hurt, because they were still acting the same way they had before finding out she was an Invited.

“But we’re done with all that trouble now. Migrating dragon season’s almost over, after all.”

“We’ll miss you, Sara.”

The dragons would be finished migrating soon. There were fewer dragons coming through now, so there was no need to scramble to make more antiparalytics, and the regional apothecaries were starting to go home one by one.

“Well, I plan to stay until Nelly and Chris are done with their work, but yeah... I’ll miss you too.”

At the start, there was a ton of trouble here just because it was a big guild in the capital, but as things got more comfortable, Sara really started feeling fulfilled, especially since she was able to have fun working with people who were around the same age as her. Since she’d had to go home right after school every day in her past life, she felt like she was finally experiencing something like an after-school club.

“I guess Hydrangea’s a little too far for me to tell you to stop by if you ever want to hang out, but I’ll make sure I stop by if I’m ever back in the capital.”

“Well, we *are* all apothecaries. I’m sure we’ll meet again somewhere or another.”

“Yeah. Maybe next year.”

She might be sent back again if they were going to keep experimenting next year. Sara smiled awkwardly as Mona and Heather gave her a hopeful look.

The reason for her awkwardness was because she was kind of hoping she *wouldn't* be sent back. Looking back on just the fun stuff, she *was* glad she'd come, of course, but there was plenty that had frustrated her here too.

Caren had sent her to help out, but it hadn't really seemed like the capital actually needed any help from the visiting apothecaries, and the people working on the stronger paralysis agent and the antiparalytics were mostly high-level apothecaries from the capital. Since they couldn't just have their visitors sitting around doing nothing, they'd put them to work, but that had meant there was nothing for the capital rookies to do, which had led to all the trouble Sara had gone through at the start of the season.

One part of it was probably because they didn't actually know how much of each drug they'd need, but now that they had this year's experiments to go off of, they would know exactly how much help they'd need next year.

As for the experiments themselves, Chris and Liam had both gotten ample data, but neither of them showed any intention of working with the other, each of them instead concentrating on their own results and nothing else. The whole thing had left a rather sour taste in Sara's mouth.

Nelly probably felt the same way. She wasn't the only Hunter who'd been summoned to the capital directly for the season, and all of them were feeling rather unsatisfied with the way things had gone for them.

"Well, it's best if they don't need our help at all," Nelly had said, but she had to have been bored with hardly any work to do. "I'd say it's an improvement over a few years ago, when the knights basically did nothing and let the Hunters handle it all themselves. I still feel like I've gotta be around in case something happens like with you, though, Sara."

Sara felt like it was overkill to summon her all the way from Hydrangea just for that.

The day she'd had that conversation with Mona and Heather, Chris was more relaxed at the townhouse than usual, so Sara quickly realized, "Is your experiment almost done with?"

“Yeah. There are hardly any dragons still coming and we’ve got pretty much all the data we could ask for, so I’m thinking of wrapping it up soon.”

Sara had been right on the money.

“Well, maybe I’ll see about heading home soon too, then. The last few dragons never come in a big group. I’m sure the guys they’ve got here in the capital can handle them. Now I’m remembering how I skipped town that year I left you behind, Sara...” Nelly said, looking a little uncomfortable. “But the knights seem to have gotten their act together since then. I’m sure they’ll listen this time.”

So they hadn’t listened last time. But Nelly seemed to think a lot better of the knights lately, so this time it would probably be fine for her to leave a little early.

They were kind of acting like they might just pack up and leave tomorrow, though Sara was sure there was still a lot of cleanup they had to handle. She was curious about something, so she asked, “So, Chris, who do you actually report the results of your experiment to?”

“The knights. Technically, my experiment is only an offshoot of theirs. I plan to submit a copy to the Apothecary’s Guild as well, of course.”

She thought she remembered him mentioning something about getting permission from a few different places back when they were in Hydrangea, but it was mainly the knights, apparently.

Sara nodded thoughtfully and asked, “So, will they not have to request Nelly’s help next year?”

“Well...” Chris seemed unsure of how to answer.

“The whole reason you started the experiment was so that they wouldn’t need to drag Nelly to the capital, right? Does it seem like that’ll happen?”

“I suppose...we won’t know until next year.” Chris was uncharacteristically irresolute.

Nelly spoke up instead. “Chris might have said that, but I don’t really mind taking on their requests anymore. I would if I had to leave you behind like

before, but we can come together now.”

Even on the Dark Mountain, she’d discussed bringing Sara with her and leaving her in someone’s care in the capital. She’d just been dragged off before she could actually make a concrete plan.

Normally, Sara wouldn’t have complained if Nelly was fine with it, but having seen Nelly’s work in person now, she had to wonder if *she* really had to be the one doing it. It was true that she was stronger than anyone else there, and better at taking migrating dragons down than anyone else. Everyone could be at ease with Nelly around. But aside from that first time, she’d never seen the Hunters of the capital really struggling with the dragons either. Up until the year before last, they’d not only had Nelly but the two Invited, Bradley and Haruto, as well. But not one of them had been there last year, and they’d made it through somehow, hadn’t they?

“But they only call Nelly just to be safe, right?” Sara murmured. “I could tell she takes her work seriously, and she looked really cool when she took down those dragons, but she didn’t seem like she was having fun like she does on the Dark Mountain or in the dungeon in Hydrangea.” She seemed like she was only here to fulfill her duty. “So they’ll keep calling her every year just to be safe? And she won’t be going ’cause she wants to like Kuntz did?”

“Sara,” Nelly started, but Sara wasn’t looking at her. It was Chris she was talking to.

“I think it’s really impressive that you made the dragon repellent and did all these experiments with it, Chris. But if you just turn in your results and leave everything else up to the knights, they’ll just keep using Nelly like they always have after this. She says she’s fine with it, but I’m not,” Sara said firmly. She finally looked Nelly’s way. “But if you see a recruitment poster and decide you really want to go like Kuntz, then I’ll support you as much as I can.”

“I...” Nelly looked down, hesitating. “I doubt I’d want to go if I saw a poster like that. I’ve been coming because I thought it was for the good of the people of the capital, and one of my duties as a noble, but taking out migrating dragons is no fun at all.” She got a dreamy look on her face. “I’d rather spend my time here in one of the capital’s dungeons. This was my home base when I’d just

started out as a Hunter. I'd like to see how strong I've gotten now after all that time on the Dark Mountain."

On the Dark Mountain, Nelly had always seemed like she was having fun when she went out hunting, but here in the capital, Sara got the feeling she looked forward to eating meals with her and everyone more than anything else.

Chris hadn't reacted at all to Sara's words, but he paled upon hearing what Nelly had to say. "So not only did I make you accompany me on gathering trips for my experiments for a whole year when you could have been doing something you enjoyed more, I also made you come to the capital with me where you've been bored this whole time?"

"No, that's not true. I know you only did all this so I wouldn't have to go in the first place." She sounded the same way she had when she'd said she only came to the capital out of a sense of duty. "And it was fun helping you out with your work too," she hastily added. She must have been aware of how she was coming across.

"I got so engrossed in my experiments, I forgot the whole reason I was doing them in the first place... I can't believe myself."

Sara was unsurprised. This was just how Chris was. It was just that Nelly was usually an exception.

Sara decided to get everything she was frustrated about off of her chest while she was at it. "Anyway, it's not just you, Chris. It's Liam and the Apothecary's Guild too."

Chris looked up in surprise, snapped out of his musings.

"Liam is only thinking about the results of *his* experiments. And the Apothecary's Guild is only thinking about the paralytics and antiparalytics the knights wanted them to make." When she put it into words, it became all the more clear to her. "I think the experiments this year were all successes, for you, for Liam, and for the Apothecary's Guild. Am I wrong?"

"No, you're not wrong. We all got very valuable data."

That made it sound like everything was great, but Sara was concerned with something other than their data.

“But what does this mean for next year?”

“What does it mean?” Chris couldn’t quite see what she meant from where he stood.

“If things just end like this, then the knights will want to keep experimenting with the paralysis agent again next year, right? You’d want to participate from the start of the season next year too, right, Chris?”

Chris nodded.

“Then the Apothecary’s Guild will have to make a bunch of paralytics and antiparalytics again, right? I think I’ve at least managed to help out a little with their plant stock, I guess...” There would at least be more apothecaries willing to go and gather themselves when they had need of more plants now.

Nelly and Chris were both looking at her as if to ask what her point was, so she explained, “But it seemed like there were too many people who were around ‘just in case’ this last month. The Apothecary’s Guild summoned people from all over the place to help, but they just ended up with a bunch of apothecaries who had nothing to do.”

Some of them went out and gathered now thanks to Sara’s suggestion, but before she’d done so, they really were just sitting around doing nothing.

“I really think they have too many Hunters out there too. The knights should have more people out there and they should either reduce the number of Hunters they recruit for help or stop recruiting them altogether. And...” Sara turned to Chris. “I think you should work for Liam, Chris.”

“He can’t do that, Sara. Chris came up with something groundbreaking; he can’t just start working for someone else.” Nelly was against it, as Sara expected. Chris was looking Sara’s way, but he seemed to be considering her words.

“If you want to take charge of the dragon migration countermeasures, I think you should. You could include Liam in your experiments and have the knights work for you. But you’re an apothecary. Do you plan on coming back to the capital every year to supervise the migrating dragon season?”

“No. I planned to step aside in the production of the repellent as well if it



proved effective.”

Sara nodded. She’d thought so. Once he’d been successful with one project, it was on to the next. That was the kind of guy Chris was.

“You’ll still be lauded as the inventor of the repellent, but you can give your results over to the knights in exchange for them handling the actual work. ‘Working for them’ might sound disagreeable, but really you’re just letting them handle all the annoying stuff.”

Sara had been thinking about why Liam was so prickly toward Chris all this time. The conclusion she’d reached was that dealing with the migrating dragons was the knights’ job, so maybe he would accept things if he were put in charge.

“I can’t help but feel like if you just turn in your results and leave, the same thing will happen all over again next year. Why can’t everyone involved just get together and talk about what we should do next year?” she grumbled. She was frustrated because she didn’t know who to blame for the poor organization that had led to this year’s events.

“If that’s what you think, then I have just the thing,” Ri suddenly piped up. He’d been listening silently this whole time with his arms crossed, but he seemed awfully pleased all of a sudden. “You’re up, Sara.”

“Huh?”

Before Sara even knew what was happening, she was dressed in her apothecary’s robes and brought to a room in the castle, where she was seated at the head of a fancy table. Nelly and Ri were at her sides for emotional support, but they weren’t seated. Instead, they stood slightly behind her like they were her guards.

“It’s as if you have two red-haired wolves serving you, Miss Invited,” said the person seated opposite her.

He was twisting his mustache and grinning, but Sara hadn’t been introduced to him and what he was saying was rather rude, so she decided to pretend she hadn’t heard it. From his disposition and how he was dressed, he must have been equally as important as the person sitting next to him, and Sara took a

quiet pleasure in the quiet way that person admonished him after his comment.

The person beside him looked familiar to Sara, but all she knew was that he was around the same age as the guildmaster of the Apothecary's Guild.

She *was* a little amused at how she found herself in the opposite position that she usually was with Nelly, where she and Allen would stand at either side to protect her.

"This time, we're your kin, Sara," Nelly whispered behind her, and Sara almost burst out laughing. It was no time for laughter, though.

When Sara had asked what Ri meant by "You're up," he'd responded, "You'll use your authority as an Invited to summon the Apothecary's Guild, the knights, the Hunter's Guild, and Chris together."

"Wh-What authority is that? I'm just a rookie apothecary!"

She'd tried to escape, not wanting to take on such a troublesome role, but Ri had given her a sharp look. "The Apothecary's Guild, the knights, and the Hunter's Guild are all separate entities that don't meddle with one another. That leads to uncomfortable situations like this, where they'll do their own jobs but won't proactively work together."

Sara had noticed the same thing, but she wasn't sure *she* should be the one dealing with this, since she'd always just tried to live a quiet life on her own.

"Chris may be an accomplished apothecary, but he has no authority to summon the knights, and at the Guild, he's nothing more than a single apothecary just like you are now, Sara." Now that he mentioned it, he was right. Before Sara could say anything in response, Ri went on, "The Apothecary's Guild and the knights have no intention of improving things. If you don't raise this issue, the same thing will just continue happening year after year."

"Mmmh... So what should I actually do?"

"Well, you can leave things to me for now. Will you allow me to speak on your behalf?"

"Please do," Sara said timidly, and as a result, she found herself surrounded by authority figures in a room in the castle. Allen and Kuntz, incidentally, were

standing by the door with the castle guards, serving as her escorts.

Moving clockwise from Sara's position were the knight commander and Liam, then the guildmaster of the Hunter's Guild. Across from her were the two old men she didn't know, and on the right were Chester, guildmaster of the Apothecary's Guild, Josef, and, for some reason, Ted. Finally, Chris sat directly to Sara's right. Incidentally, it was her first time meeting the guildmaster of the Hunter's Guild and the commander of the knights, so she couldn't help feeling a bit nervous in their presence.

While she was nervously deliberating how to begin the meeting, the person across from her (without the mustache) spoke up, evidently intending to do so for her.

"Well then, we're holding this meeting on migrating dragon countermeasures at the request of the Invited, Lady Ichinok Rasarasa, who is under the guardianship of the Wolveries. It seems she had some concerns after taking part in the proceedings as an apothecary. Please share with us your thoughts, Lady Rasarasa."

And he handed things right over to her. Sara wanted to cry, but she pulled herself together.

"I came to take part in things as nothing more than an apothecary dispatched from Hydrangea this year. At the start of the season, I was involved in a bit of an incident with some dragons in the southern meadow, but I've spent the majority of the time since then gathering medicinal plants on the southwestern hills and watching the knights' experiments while occasionally assisting with any treatment required after battles with dragons."

This should serve as a simple introduction. Sara and Allen's protection of the town was well-known, and no one interjected at any of this other than a nod from Liam, which put Sara at ease.

"Chris is my mentor, and he's like family to me, so I was able to see his development of the dragon repellent from up close the whole time, and I heard a lot about his experiments as they went on as well."

This much established her involvement with the Apothecary's Guild, the knights, and Chris.

“Nefertari here took me in on the Dark Mountain. She’s my family here in Trilgaia, and I know better than anyone how incredible her strength is.”

This was to indicate that she had a connection with the Hunter’s Guild as well, tenuous as it was, through the personal request that was made to Nelly due to her position as a Hunter.

“From my perspective, it seems that the knights’ experiment with the paralysis agent and Chris’s experiment with the repellent were both great successes.”

Liam nodded firmly at this as well, while Chris gave more of a light nod as if what she had said was completely natural.

“So my question for all of you is...” Sara looked over everyone at the table. “What do you intend to do next year?”

At this, no one nodded. Instead, an air of confusion settled over the table. Eventually, the knight commander cleared his throat to speak up. Well, he *was* a commander. He must have been used to taking charge.

“If you’ll pardon my asking, I have a question of my own. What exactly does this have to do with you?”

Sara recalled dealing with people like this in the workforce with much annoyance. People who immediately dismissed others for their age or gender and refused to even have a discussion.

“I have personal reasons for getting involved. I don’t want Nefertari, my family, being tied down for two months a year when she has no reason to be.”

The knight commander scoffed. “A personal request is an honor.”

“Is it an honor for the Hunter’s Guild in the capital to summon Nelly all the way from Hydrangea?” Sara turned the question on the Hunter’s Guild.

The guildmaster had been listening silently with his arms crossed, but he slowly opened his mouth and said, “No. There are plenty of talented Hunters in the capital. That said, we have no issue with Nefertari returning to the capital either.”

As she expected, the Hunter’s Guild understood Nelly’s strength and

answered pretty much how she had hoped they would.

“I’ve already been forcefully separated from Nelly once due to these personal requests. I was left alone on the Dark Mountain at the time. Honor didn’t do anything for me then.”

The knight commander opened his eyes wide at that, and Liam’s eyes dropped to his knees. She figured they were remembering just who had ordered such a thing and who had tried to do the same thing again later.

“But it’s not for my personal reasons that I called this meeting.” Sara got things back on track. “I hope we’re not forgetting why the knights decided to start using the paralysis agent on the dragons and why Chris developed his repellent in the first place.”

Liam’s head whipped up.

Sara started with Chris. “Chris, why did you develop your repellent?”

“Well, let’s see...” Chris began, running his eyes over everyone else at the table. “It started with the discovery of a plant that wyverns avoided in Hydrangea’s dungeon.” That was a whole year ago now. “I developed the repellent with the fervent hope that my beloved Nefertari would no longer have to be summoned to the capital to assist with the dragon culling. If the dragons could be repelled with a scent, then the knights could deal with them on their own, without needing to rely on the help of Hunters.”

“Thank you.” Sara thanked Chris for his concise explanation. “Then, Liam. May I ask how you came about the idea to use the paralysis agent?”

“Well...” Liam glanced at the knight commander, but he remained sullenly silent, so he decided to answer himself. “We struggle when we have to face multiple dragons at once no matter how many people we have. We thought we could deal with the dragons with fewer people if we could manage to immobilize them with the paralysis agent.”

“Thank you, Liam.” His response proved his intelligence, regardless of how he acted. “In other words, both experiments began with the intent of allowing a smaller number of people to deal with the migrating dragons,” Sara continued. “Yet if we all just go our separate ways without discussing anything, the same

thing that happened this year will just happen again next year.” She emphasized her point clearly. “Chris will simply keep on doing his own experiments, and the knights will continue to hire Hunters and experiment with the paralysis agent. The Apothecary’s Guild will struggle to produce enough paralytics and antiparalytics, and have to summon apothecaries from elsewhere. All of this year’s results will be completely wasted.”

The only one grimacing in response to Sara’s words was the knight commander.

“I just wanted us all to discuss what we’ve accomplished this year and decide on a course of action for next year, which is why I called this meeting. That’s all.” Sara let out a breath and leaned back in her chair. She’d said all she wanted to say.

“Ridiculous,” the knight commander spat.

Before he could continue, Chris dropped this bombshell: “I don’t intend to return to the capital next year.”

There was a second of silence before the guildmaster of the Apothecary’s Guild stood from his chair with a clatter. “Are you serious? What about your experiments?”

Chris shrugged. “I’ll leave that to Liam.”

“Huh? Me?” Liam’s eyes went wide.

“I only came to the capital this year to see whether the wyvern repellent also worked on dragons, and it went much better than I expected. As such, I feel I’ve more than carried out my responsibility as an apothecary. The knights, who head the migrating dragon countermeasures, can take charge of utilizing my findings practically.” Chris shrugged again as if to ask what the issue was. “I intend to make sure the repellent is delivered on time from Hydrangea, of course.”

Chester sank back into his seat at that.

“Personally, I would appreciate it if you could make do with Hunter volunteers only and not make any personal requests for assistance,” Chris told Liam. He didn’t spare the knight commander so much as a glance. His lack of trust in the

man was all too obvious.

“We’ll vow to recruit Hunters more proactively, then,” the guildmaster of the Hunter’s Guild promised. “I’m sure many of them think it won’t make a difference to have them around when there are people personally requested for the job.”

Chester shook his head resignedly, asking Liam, “Do the knights intend to make use of the paralysis agent again next year?”

“We haven’t discussed it among the knights, but I believe so, yes.” Liam sent a glance at the commander beside him, but the other man maintained his stubborn silence.

“Will the same amount of paralytics and antiparalytics that you used this year suffice for next year, then? If so, we can increase our acquisition of mana herbs and paralysis herbs and spend the year preparing.”

“That would be great. Just to be sure, I’ll get permission before making an official request with the Guild.”

Things were proceeding surprisingly well until the mustached man opposite Sara clapped his hands loudly.

“Well done, Miss Invited.”

Sara shot up from her relaxed posture, wondering just what it was she was being praised for.

“You got together a group that are usually at each other’s throats and got them all working together with only a few short words. It just shows what the Invited are really worth.”

“Truly.” The person next to him nodded with a grin as well. The shady smile reminded Sara of someone else, and she couldn’t help voicing the name that came to mind.

“Liam...?”

“I’m pleased to see that my son seems to have left a strong impression on you.”

Sara felt the color draining from her face. She was wondering who this guy

was, but if he was Liam's father, that meant he was the prime minister of this country. In that case, was the man with the mustache next to him...?

"You're the king...?"

The man with the mustache smiled. "Indeed I am. Just what I would expect from an Invited. You've a keen eye."

"I don't think being an Invited has anything to do with it." She was so surprised, she couldn't help making the comeback. (Later, she heard that this lack of restraint was proof more than anything of her status as one of the Invited.)

Eventually, the harrowing meeting came to an end, and after a few people left, only Liam, the prime minister, and the king remained at the table with Sara and her party.

"I figured we might get both the audience and the marriage matter settled while we were at it when I heard what you had to say, Sara," Ri explained with a grin.

"While we were at it, eh? I mean, it's fine with me..." She didn't have anything against getting all of the annoying stuff out of the way in one day.

"Well then, once again..." Ri straightened up. "This is the Invited, Ichinok Rasarasa, whom we, the Wolveries, have taken under our care."

Sara bowed her head. She hadn't learned the etiquette of this world yet, so she went with a Japanese gesture, once again all too aware of the things she still needed to study.

"And this is our king, Ferdinand III."

"Rasarasa. I know not why our loving goddess invited you to the Dark Mountain, but I applaud you for overcoming all of the trials in your way and making it all the way here. From now on, you may think of me as your father and ask of me anything you wish."

"Thank you."

Even the king didn't know why Sara had landed on the Dark Mountain. Later, they brought her to the place where the Invited usually showed up, but she



didn't feel anything when she saw it.

Sara had her own ideas about why she'd shown up where she had, though. She thought maybe the goddess had wanted Sara and Nelly to meet. Maybe the goddess had been fondly watching over Nelly as she worked so hard up on the Dark Mountain every day.

Sara was also able to officially turn down Liam's marriage proposal while she was here with him and his father present.

"Where I come from, it's normal not to get married until around thirty, and I would feel bad making you wait another sixteen years," was the reason she gave them.

Yet when she was finally ready to head home, Liam stopped her. He smiled awkwardly at her as she didn't attempt one bit to hide the annoyance on her face.

"I'll stay within earshot, Sara. Tell him how you feel," Nelly encouraged her.

"Okay."

Liam brought Sara to a conservatory inside the castle. She was thankful for the warmth of the room, since even if she had her barrier, it was midwinter now.

"Err...Sara."

When she'd first arrived in the capital, he'd called her "Lady Sara," but it was back to just "Sara" now. Sara found that a little funny, since despite everything, they *had* more or less interacted with one another enough to warrant the closeness. They saw each other almost every day at the southwestern hills, and they'd each watched one another work plenty.

"To be honest, I never thought you'd really turn me down."

Sara sighed, wondering just where that confidence of his came from. He *was* handsome the way he sat elegantly in his knight's uniform. Add to that his money and social standing, and the confidence started to make sense.

"I'm sorry." Sara figured she could give him the apology even if she didn't really mean it.

“Sara, we work together every day, don’t we? I’d like to at least hear why you’re really turning me down in the end. And I don’t mean the age difference or anything like that.”

For once, he didn’t have that slimy smile on his face, so Sara decided to be honest with him.

“I heard that you were in your twenties before you were invited here. So on the inside, you should be more or less a match for me, since I’m twenty-four,” he continued.

Sara gasped at this and then puffed her chest out, smiling smugly. “If you add the years I’ve spent here, then I’m over thirty,” she pointed out, taking pride in the fact that she was older than him mentally.

“Ha ha. I wish you’d smile naturally like that more often.”

“And I wish you’d wipe that creepy grin off your face.”

The smiles faded from both of their faces at the same time. Sara cleared her throat, recalling that she was supposed to be telling him her reason for turning him down.

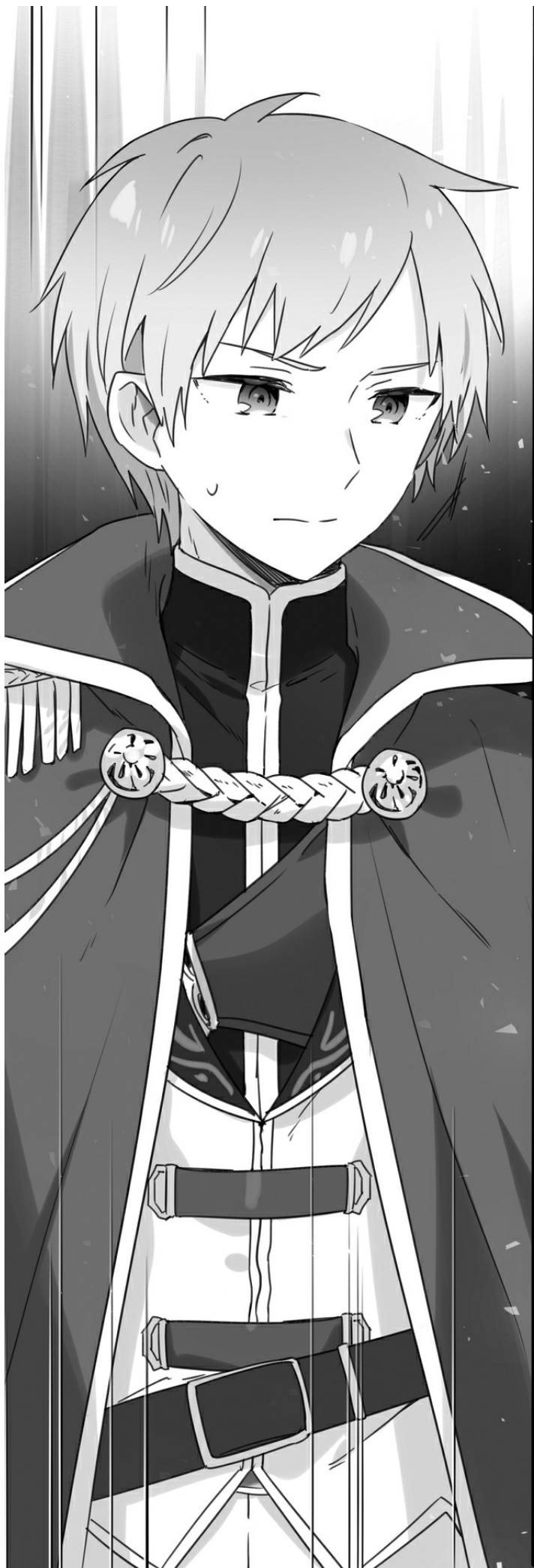
“You want to know why I turned you down, but what I want to know is why you’d think I’d say yes,” she started. It annoyed her when he raised an eyebrow in response. “I never liked you in the first place. I kept telling you I didn’t want to go, and you still tried to drag me back to the capital with you.”

“That’s because I thought both you and Allen had potential you couldn’t be wasting.”

“But I told you I didn’t want to go.” She was getting upset all over again remembering it. “You used your paralysis drug on my precious Nelly too. That’s no way to treat a human being.”

He must have felt *some* remorse about that, at least. Liam remained silent in response.

“You didn’t listen to a single thing I had to say in Camellia either. Frankly speaking, you haven’t given me one reason to like you.”



Sara didn't particularly enjoy disliking people or telling them to their faces that she disliked them, but she felt like if she didn't make her feelings clear to Liam, he would never understand her.

"I..." Liam started. After a moment, he quietly continued, "At first, I just thought I would propose to you for my household, since you're an Invited. That's just what marriage means for the nobility. I knew you, so I figured you'd be a better choice than some second or third daughter of some other noble. Your status as one of the Invited didn't hurt either. That was all I thought about the matter at first..."

Sara had assumed as such, so there was nothing particularly upsetting about what he'd said.

"But I really thought we would be a good match after working with you here in the capital. I felt that we could understand one another from the way you felt about your work and how you interact with people."

Sara had realized that Liam was a harder worker than she'd thought after seeing him do his job as well. But that had nothing to do with marriage.

"I can respect the way you work as well. But I don't think we'd have fun being together. I can't see us chatting and smiling with one another. And I don't think my heart will ever pound around you," she said.

"Is there any way I could change your mind?" When Sara shook her head, Liam sighed in resignation. "I wonder if things would be different if we were born in the same world and had spent more time together from a young age."

"Maybe."

Maybe if they had the same values. Sara answered ambiguously, not wanting to deny it outright even though she was pretty sure she would never like him, and not realizing what she was setting in motion by saying this.

With the marriage matter weighing her down finally settled, Sara was able to return to Hydrangea feeling rather refreshed. When they returned, they found that Zachary had become guildmaster of the Hunter's Guild while they were gone. Evidently, they had no use for the previous guildmaster, since he never

did come back from the capital.

“So, umm, Nefertari... I was wondering if you would serve as vice guildmaster.”

“Me? Is that okay?” The question was in part because Nelly had only spent a year in Hydrangea and in part because she was so clumsy with words, she didn’t do a very good job teaching people.

“Everyone in Hydrangea agrees. And in the end, it’s strength that’s most important for a Hunter.”

Zachary and Nelly grinned at one another. They seem to have finally cleared up the awkwardness that had plagued their relationship since their days as knights.

Allen and Kuntz returned to the dungeon and Sara returned to the Apothecary’s Guild with the dubious appellation of “apothecary back from the capital.”

“Now I can finally live my life without anything hanging over me,” Sara said with a smile, enjoying tea with everyone after a meal.

“Mm. About that.” Ri took out three envelopes hesitantly.

“N-No way...”

“They’re marriage proposals, I’m sorry to say.” He fanned them out as usual.

“Wait a second. Three of them?”

It was finally down to two last time, so why were there more now? She’d turned Liam down, so who else could they possibly be from?

“One’s from Andy in Hydrangea, as always.”

“So persistent!” Sara decided she’d have to make things clear to this guy as well. It would be easy enough at least, since he was nearby.

“The second is from House Hills in the capital.”

“Why? I turned them down!”

“They have a third son. He’s twelve. It seems he doesn’t mind waiting sixteen years.”

“So he’s younger than me?!”

She had no idea Liam had a little brother. With some shock, Sara realized his last words to her hadn’t been referring to him but to his brother.

“The third is from Rosa’s mayor,” Ri said, kicking her while she was down.

“Y-You don’t mean...”

“He wants you to marry his son Theodore. He’ll be the next mayor, but he’s working diligently in the capital as an apothecary at the moment.”

“That’s Ted! And it’s not happening!”

As Sara grew more and more heated with each new revelation, Nelly and Chris laughed. Sara noted with some glee that they were looking closer than ever.

Even if there wasn’t anything currently hanging over her, as one of the Invited she supposed trouble would always find her and she’d just have to do her best to respond to it. She looked down at herself and sighed. At least she’d grown a bit.

She had a body that wouldn’t fail her at the slightest effort now, and she had people she cared for like family around her, so she was confident she could continue to enjoy her life no matter what trouble found her in the future.

“I’d like to go back to the Dark Mountain at some point... I wonder how the wolves are doing.”

It was where everything had started.

“But I’ll do my best in Hydrangea for now.”

She’d take everything one step at a time like she always did.





# CHARACTER DESIGN



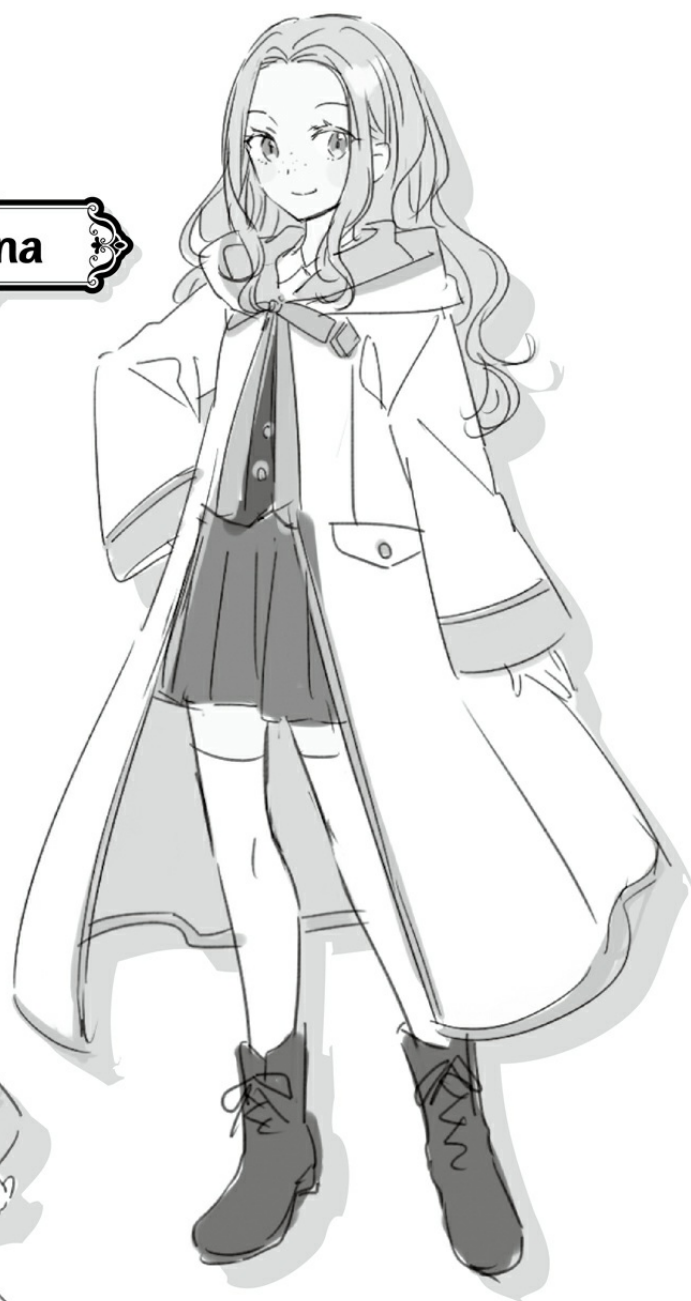
Sara



Allen



**Mona**



**Heather**

Liam



Migrating  
Dragon





# Taking My Reincarnation One Step at a TIME

No One Told Me  
There Would Be Monsters!

5

KAYA  
ILLUS. | NARU









“We’re all new apothecaries here anyway.”

Sara giggled, finding the way she’d said that funny.



“Oh yeah, my name’s Mona.”

“I’m Heather.”

“My name is Sara. I came from Hydrangea.”



5

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# Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue: Soon to Be an Apothecary](#)

[Chapter 1: Everyone and Their Uncle, Headed for the Capital](#)

[Chapter 2: In the Capital](#)

[Boys Grow Fast](#)

[Chapter 3: Plant Gathering](#)

[Chapter 4: Sara's Abilities](#)

[Epilogue: Still Far to Go](#)

[Character Design](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus High Resolution Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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Taking My Reincarnation One Step at a Time: No One Told Me There Would Be Monsters! Volume 5

by KAYA

Translated by Amy Osteraas Edited by Diana Taylor

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