

6

Taking MY Reincarnation One Step at a TIME

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

KAYA
|ILLUS. | NARU



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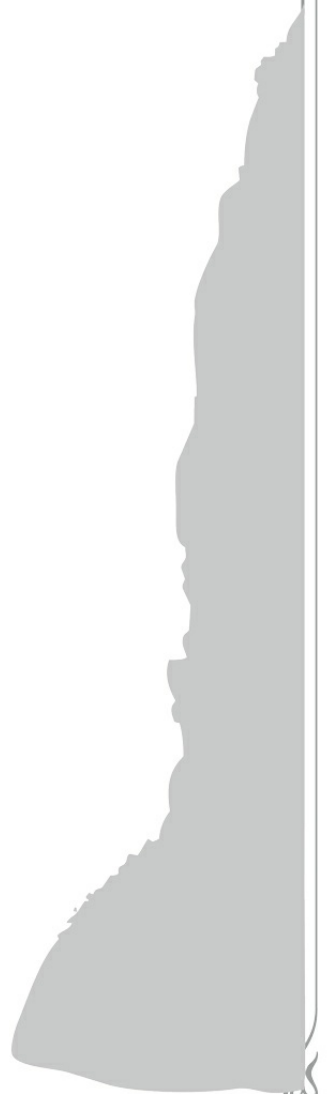
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Prologue: Hellhounds, Incoming!

Sara crouched down in the grass, gathering plants under the spring sun. The gentle wind still carried the chill of winter, but the sunlight warmed her back.

“It’s so nice not having to worry about monsters—not that I’d drop my barrier, though.”

She was back in Hydrangea, behind the mansion belonging to Riot, Nelly’s father and the lord of the region. The Apothecary’s Guild wasn’t open today, yet Sara was still out diligently gathering. She laughed at herself a little for being such a workaholic, but she was also always thankful that she had a body that didn’t tire so easily now. It helped that she wasn’t the only one out here working too.

“Sara! Want to take a break?”

“Sure! Let’s do it.”

It was Mona, her apothecary buddy, who’d called out to her with a grin. Heather stood up behind her as well, but the two girls weren’t the only ones out here cheerfully gathering with her.

“Sounds good. I was getting curious about what’s in that basket,” said a boy whose voice hadn’t changed yet.

Sara turned in his direction, squinting in the bright light. The blond-haired, blue-eyed boy positively glittered in the spring sun and fresh verdure all around him. Sara sighed surreptitiously. Had Liam looked so cherubic and clever at that age?

“Can you lay out the blanket, then, Noel?” Heather asked him. Whether she was aware of the thoughts going through Sara’s head or not was anyone’s guess. Though he was younger than them, Noel was the son of a count—the prime minister no less—so he should have been a rather intimidating figure to Mona and Heather, who were commoners, but they’d made friends with him in no time at all.

“Got it.”

Noel laid out a blanket and set out the contents of their picnic basket on it so efficiently it was hard to believe he was a pampered noble. He was just a little bit shorter than Sara, which made him feel a bit like a younger brother to her. That only made sense, since Sara had turned fifteen last fall and he, at thirteen, was two years younger than her.

Though they were now in Hydrangea, Sara felt like she was back in the capital with the four of them sitting around their picnic lunch. She thought back to the fall when she'd just turned fourteen and had been sent to the capital, after she'd just become an apothecary. It had been about a year and a half since then.

She'd met Mona and Heather there, at the capital Apothecary's Guild, and they'd become friends after overcoming various trials and tribulations together. But Sara hadn't really wanted to revisit the capital after all of that, so once she'd returned home, she thought she might never see her new friends again.

As Sara expected, she hadn't been called back to the capital the next fall for migrating dragon season, and Hydrangea had sent a different apothecary instead. When that winter ended, however, the apothecary they'd sent didn't return. Instead, Mona, Heather, and Noel had come to take his place.

According to the two of them, things at the Apothecary's Guild had slowly started to improve thanks to some suggestions from Sara. They no longer needlessly called apothecaries to the capital from afar, instead engaging in a sort of personnel exchange so that capital apothecaries could study out in other regions at the same time.

“Hydrangea was one of the proposed locations, so we volunteered right away. After all, the trip would be paid for, and we'd get to learn from Master Caren, and even see Sara while we were at it.”

“I was an afterthought, huh?” Sara had smiled wryly at the frank admission, but she was genuinely happy to have friends she could joke around with like this. She'd reacted with a bit more apprehension when she met the new apothecary, Noel, who had been dispatched with the two of them. He hadn't even had to introduce himself, as he was identical to Liam, who'd been such a

persistent thorn in her side.

Liam's much younger brother Noel had proposed marriage to Sara the year before. Naturally, she'd turned him down as soon as she was able to. When Sara had been in the capital, Noel hadn't been at the Apothecary's Guild, so he hadn't even been an apprentice at that point. Yet there was a shiny brooch on his lapel marking him as a proper apothecary now. The same brooch it had taken Sara so much effort to earn.

Sara eyed the brooch surreptitiously while they chatted, and Noel grinned when he noticed. The two brothers *did* have nice faces and smiles, Sara was forced to admit. Though they were also both shady characters in her opinion.

"Finally getting curious about me after two weeks, are you?"

"Nah. Well, maybe," she responded.

"Which is it?" he asked with a guileless laugh. She'd been avoiding him for the whole two weeks he'd been here, but she gave up and decided to hear what he had to say for now.

"I believe Lord Riot received a letter last year," he began. Sara grimaced when he decided to start with something completely unrelated to being an apothecary, to which he grinned. "I'm a candidate to be your fiancé, Sara. There's not much I can say about myself before that."

"I've already rejected your proposal," Sara said, holding her hand out at him in a gesture to stop. Being ambiguous didn't work with these brothers. It was best to say exactly what you meant.

"Which is why I'm still nothing more than a candidate." He was smiling with ample confidence, but Sara was just as confident that the word "still" was completely unnecessary, as he would *never* be more than a candidate. "Of course, there's no point in a child like me making a fuss about who I should be marrying. I just happened to be thinking about my future at the time, and I settled on becoming an apothecary."

"So that's why you came to the Apothecary's Guild. I guess it *was* right after Sara went back to Hydrangea, wasn't it?" Heather nodded to herself.

"Wait a second. I thought you were engaged to Sir Liam, the knight." This was

Mona. She had an admiration for the knights and had met Liam when they were gathering plants outside the capital, so she was very interested in this topic. Sara hurried to correct her misunderstanding. It was a big problem if rumors like that were still going around the capital.

“I’m not! I never was engaged to him! I rejected his proposal too!”

“Unfortunately for the prime minister’s family, and fortunately for me,” Noel added. Just like his brother, he was aggressive to a fault, and all Sara could do was try to keep her distance as much as possible.

“The seat of prime minister isn’t an inherited position, but my eldest brother is quite brilliant. He’s already considered the next prime minister, and my other brother will likely be the knight commander one day. I was a surprise, and being the third son, I’m somewhat of a spare of a spare. Unlike my brothers, I have a certain amount of freedom where my future is concerned. As such, I thought it might be fun to be an apothecary.”

It was a bit unsettling to Sara how nonchalantly he called himself a “spare of a spare,” but she was also a bit impressed that he had such a solid grasp of his own position. At the same time, however, she feared a bit for her future. And she was curious about something else too.

“So, you decided to become an apothecary, err...”

“Yes, last spring.”

“And that badge...?”

“I received it last fall.”

Sara’s mouth fell open. Even the brilliant and talented Chris hadn’t become an apothecary that quickly.

“It was really impressive. Not only did he learn everything in no time at all, he made practically no mistakes making potions. He could pretty much do everything just after seeing it once. Everyone was saying it was like the second coming of Master Chris.”

“It’s silly to compare me to Chris. I’m glad I could learn from him so soon after becoming an apothecary, though.”

Chris was an idol to many young apothecaries, and most of them called him “Master Chris” out of respect, even though it wasn’t at all rude in this world to simply address people by their names. Sara found this sort of annoying, since, put one way, she was being “strictly trained by him,” and put another way, she was at the mercy of his whims. Noel, however, simply called him Chris, and Sara was forced to admit she liked him a little better because of this.

Incidentally, it wasn’t just Sara who was exempt from a capital visit this winter. Nelly hadn’t received her usual request either, so she’d been able to stay home as well. Chris had been the only one to make the trip. He’d intended to let the knights handle further experimentation with his dragon repellent, but the Apothecary’s Guild had insisted he handle the experiments himself. They were simply unwilling to hand over the fruits of his labor to the knights as apothecaries themselves, apparently, so Chris had been forced to go back to the capital again this winter to oversee and direct his experiments.

After much whining and moaning about “not wanting to leave Nef,” he reluctantly made his way to the capital at the start of winter and returned with Mona, Heather, and Noel in tow at the end of it—in other words, two weeks ago.

Anyway, all this was to say that Noel had become an apothecary in little more than half a year. He’d trained with Chris for a few months in the capital and had headed for Hydrangea immediately afterward.

“It’s pretty incredible to learn all that and be able to put it into practice in just half a year,” Sara admitted honestly. She didn’t consider him a rival or anything, so she was able to compliment him easily. “As I heard, it wasn’t even that easy for Chris to become an apothecary.”

Noel shook his head. “I do think I have a better memory than most, but it was only thanks to luck and Chris that I was able to become an apothecary so quickly.”

“Cause of Chris, huh?” Sara asked.

“Yes. It’s thanks to Chris that it’s finally starting to sink in for people that holding talented people back will only harm them in the long run. He’s flipped all sorts of practices that have been common up until now on their heads.”

Well, that *was* just like Chris. Sara nodded along.

“With the precedent he set, it was easy for someone with my family’s standing to become an apothecary.”

“Oh, now that can’t be true.” Sara casually patted Noel on the knee. “I know how differently people are treated depending on your status in Rosa *and* in the capital.” She looked Mona and Heather’s way, giving them a nod. If Noel benefited from his status, then the two of them suffered for it as commoners. “But becoming an apothecary isn’t just about social status and knowledge. You have to be able to use your mana skillfully as well, right? It took me a while to master mana elixirs, you know.”

“That’s not true...”

Sara, Mona, and Heather all watched warmly as Noel’s ears burned with embarrassment. Whatever excuses he made, he was still a “fiancé candidate” sent by the prime minister’s household, so Sara was more than a little annoyed at his presence. But she also couldn’t help but feel like she had a new younger brother.

Up until now, Sara and Allen had always been the youngest wherever they went. They’d been through plenty, but they’d also had people looking out for them as well. Even back in Japan, Sara had always had people looking out for her because of her poor health, but now she had someone younger she could fuss over. If they were in a school club, he would have been two years her junior. And she would be the reliable upperclassman.



“Anyway, let’s eat. This golden trout quiche is good, and you’re still growing.”

“G-Golden trout...”

“You too, Mona, Heather.”

As the three of them trembled before the luxury fish dish, Sara put a hand to her chest proudly. “Don’t worry. I caught plenty of them on the Dark Mountain, so I’ve still got more. And—”

“Heeey! Sara!”

Sara turned around with a grin at the voice. “Allen! Kuntz!”

Allen and Kuntz were jogging down the path from the mansion toward them. They’d grown even more in the last two years, which did frustrate Sara a bit. Allen still had a rascally quality to him, but Kuntz was practically an adult at this point.

“Better leave the dungeon early if we’re gonna get some golden trout for it!”

“Man, I haven’t had golden trout in a while!”

To Sara’s relief, their comments, at least, were still plenty childish. She pursed her lips. “When was the last time I had a day off? You could have just come gathering with me instead of going into the dungeon like you always do.”

“Well, y’know...”

“Yeah.”

They exchanged a look and grinned. The two of them were tried-and-true Hunters of Hydrangea now.

“Huh? But you’re gathering even *on* your day off,” Noel interjected as if on reflex.

Allen gave him an impressed hum. “Looks like you’re fitting in, Noel.”

Maybe it was rude to talk that way to a noble he didn’t know very well, but Sara had to look away and grin to herself when she saw the little smirk on Allen’s face. *I get it! I get it!* She understood exactly how he felt. He was happy to have a junior just like she was.

Allen was fifteen just like her, but although you could register at the Guild at twelve, there weren't many kids who actually did so. Noel wasn't a Hunter, but as Sara's junior, he was basically Allen's junior too.

"Man, you really do look exactly like Liam," Allen said out of nowhere.

Noel got a bit of a sullen look on his face. "Do I? My brothers and I all look alike. We take after our mother."

Sara recalled Liam resembling his father, the prime minister, as well. So his father and mother must have both been attractive people.

"That's good, isn't it? I mean, Liam had a nice face, and he was popular, wasn't he?"

"So I'm..."

Sara cocked her head, wondering how he would have ended that sentence.

"I mean, my brother's really nice, and he's popular with girls. I know that, it's just that...the way he's so *pleasant* all the time kinda rubs me the wrong way..."

Sara and Allen were completely taken aback by that.

"I mean, of course I love my brother, and I respect him," Noel hurried to correct himself. "It's just that one part of him that I don't really like. So when someone tells me I look like him, I just..."

"Ha ha ha! I know exactly what you mean!"

This time, Sara almost shot up from the ground. Noel was family, so he could say there was something about Liam he didn't like, but surely it was rude to agree with him.

"Allen! Don't you think you should, err..."

"What?"

This blithe attitude Allen had had always been a comfort to Sara, but it could get them in trouble sometimes too.

Allen and Kuntz plopped down onto the ground next to Noel and Allen put his arm around the younger boy's shoulder, peering into the basket in front of him. Noel froze for a moment, unused to Allen's friendly attitude, but he quickly

smiled bashfully.

Sara glanced over at Mona and Heather, smirking and whispering, "It's like *Allen's* Noel's fiancé candidate."

"Huh? You say something, Sara?"

"Nope." Sara smiled.

"Now, let's eat!" On her authority as the eldest, their lakeside lunch began with Mona's rallying cry.

Sara thought back to the time they'd spent gathering together in the capital. Back then, Sara had thought of Mona like the president of a school club, and that hadn't changed. She looked over each person around the basket in turn. Their little club had only been three people then, but they had a new student and two classmates join this year, so it had grown to six. That meant Sara wasn't the newest member this year. It was fun to imagine things that way.

"I don't even get to eat golden trout all that often. It's delicious!" Noel cut up the quiche on his plate with a fork, while Allen ate with his hands beside him. It might have been impolite, but this was a picnic, so Sara didn't fault him for it.

"We're gonna finish all of it while you're taking your time with your manners over there."

"Well, I don't want that..." Noel hesitantly picked up a piece of quiche with his hands and tossed it into his mouth. "Ish's gud." He chewed and swallowed. "I think it's been about three years. I remember it 'cause everyone was making such a big deal about how long it'd been since they'd last been able to get ahold of some."

Allen glanced over at Sara. "You think it was the stuff you sold to the Guild, Sara?"

"Oh, back then?"

It was a bit strange to think that the golden trout Vince had convinced her to sell to the Guild back then had ended up in Liam and his family's stomachs.

"Sara, this is amazing!"

"What is this? What is this?!"

Mona and Heather were clearly enjoying themselves.

“See? There’s benefits to knowing an Invited, aren’t there?”

“There really are. We’re getting special treatment right now for sure.”

Sara was happy to hear it. Back when she’d told them she was one of the Invited, Mona had playfully told her to give them some special treatment down the line. Sara had found their lighthearted reactions incredibly comforting, and neither of them had changed in the year they’d been apart.

In addition to the golden trout, they had all sorts of tasty morsels whipped up by the chefs at Ri’s mansion. When they’d finished everything, they put away the empty dishes and took a little postmeal rest.

“We’re gonna do a little more gathering this afternoon. What about you?” Sara asked Allen and Kuntz.

Kuntz, who had been tossing stones in the lake, turned back to her. “We’re going back to the dungeon.”

“Again?”

They sure were passionate.

“I mean, yeah. Nelly and Chris are both down there.”

“Right. The dungeon’s been weird lately or something? She hasn’t been taking many breaks ’cause of that.”

“Nelly? Well, she *is* the vice guildmaster.”

“Kuntz, do you know what’s going on?”

At times like these, it was best to ask Kuntz. She could just ask Nelly herself, but there was a chance she wouldn’t get much out of her since Nelly was so bad at communicating.

“Well, there was the thing with the seven-colored swallowtails two years ago, right?”

“Yeah.”

Sara had gone into the dungeon herself to help out back then.

“The habitats of the monsters inside the dungeon have been slowly shifting since then, with monsters that are supposed to live on the lower floors coming up to higher ones. All the veteran Hunters are talking about how they can’t rely on their common sense training anymore.”

“Huh.”

Since Nelly and Allen were the standard Sara judged things by, she didn’t have a great sense of what monsters belonged where, but hellhounds, for instance, were supposed to be pretty strong, and they were showing up on the first floor now according to Kuntz.

“You’ve been to the dungeon, so you remember, right, Sara? Between floors, there’s a safe zone, and it’s safe because monsters can’t get in.”

“Yeah?”

“She doesn’t get it...” Kuntz muttered before turning his whole body to face Sara. “So how are the monsters getting to the higher floors? If they’re not just appearing out of thin air, then they’ve got to be getting past the safe zones in between floors, right? But they shouldn’t be able to do that.”

What if you were resting in a safe zone and a hellhound from a lower floor suddenly came out of nowhere? Sara finally understood the gravity of the situation.

“So the safe zones are weakening?”

“We don’t know. At least so far, no Hunters have come across any monsters inside a safe zone.”

So they knew something that shouldn’t be happening was happening, but they didn’t know why.

“It’s dangerous right now, so they want...” Kuntz paused there and smirked. “They want stronger Hunters to be in the dungeon as much as possible, culling monsters and observing the situation.”

When Sara had first met Kuntz, he was only a step or two above being a rookie, but with all that he’d experienced in the last few years, he’d built up quite a bit of confidence.

"I see. Pretty impressive."

"Yeah, I guess so."

She left it at that for now. It *was* impressive. Allen and Kuntz were definitely the strongest of the younger Hunters in Hydrangea.

With the conversation more or less over, Allen stood up. "So we might not be back in time to pick you up from work for a bit, Sara."

He looked apologetic, so she shook her head. "Nothing's gonna happen to me here in Hydrangea. You don't need to worry about walking me home."

Whenever Nelly and Allen could make it out of the dungeon in time for Sara to get off work, they always walked her home. It made Sara happy, but she was also a little embarrassed about it.

Allen laughed and shook his own head. "Maybe I said that wrong. It's not that I'm worried, I just like to pick you up because I want to see you. There's so much I want to talk to you about every day."

"Yet it seems like *I'm* the one who usually does most of the talking," Kuntz grumbled as he stood as well.

Allen ignored him and continued, "I'll miss you, but I want to do my part as a member of the Hunter's Guild, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. Keep up the good work."

"I will."

The two of them made a congenial exit, waving as they left.

"I just can't beat Allen. How frustrating," Noel murmured with a hand on the tidied picnic basket.

"I get it."

"I so get it."

Why were Mona and Heather nodding along so vehemently?

"I mean, Allen and I are rivals for Sara's affection, right?"

"Uhh, no, you're not," Sara interjected, but no one was even listening to her.

“But he just treats me like a little brother. He’s not even letting me stand on the starting line with him.”

Sara was too scared to ask, “What starting line?”

“I mean, he says stuff like ‘I just want to see you, Sara’ like it’s no big deal!”

“That’s like the number one thing you want to hear from the guy you like, right?”

“That’s because Allen and I are like family.” Sara muttered an excuse to Mona and Heather, who were holding their cheeks dreamily. She had no idea why such a normal exchange between the two of them was being interpreted through such a romantic lens.

“I see now why my brother had no chance.”

“That has nothing to do with it.” Sara was just retorting by habit now. She didn’t know what she’d do if this conversation went on any longer, so she hastily stood up and suggested, “Hey, do you want to make some potions with the plants we gathered in the morning?”

“Good idea!”

“Let’s do it!”

Mona and Heather agreed right away, since they knew Sara could brew potions outside.

“We could do it outside, but the Apothecary’s Guild has a little branch office set up in the knights’ barracks, so let’s go there.”

To be more accurate, it was a room Chris had pretty much commandeered to produce his dragon repellent. At some point, they’d just decided that the Apothecary’s Guild might as well use it for whatever it wanted.

Mona’s, Heather’s, and even Noel’s eyes sparkled with excitement and Sara couldn’t help grinning along with them. If your face lit up at the prospect of brewing potions, you were really meant to be an apothecary. That meant Noel truly enjoyed what he did, regardless of the reason he’d started it.

They headed for the apothecary’s office in the barracks, dodging slightly annoyed looks as they went, and were met with a flowery scent. Migrating

dragon season was over, so production of the repellent had stopped for now, but the distinctive odor still lingered.

“You came all the way here to learn, so Caren said she’d have to teach you how to handle white moonlight mushrooms and silver dragonmint. I haven’t done anything with them yet either, so I asked her to teach me with you guys,” Sara told them, remembering because of the smell.

“Me too?” Noel asked, surprised.

“Lucky you,” Sara told him with a grin.

Noel seemed a little baffled at that. “You’re not frustrated that someone with less experience than you gets to do something like this first, Sara?”

Sara exchanged a look with Mona and Heather. “Things are more unfair than you might expect. Especially for commoners. I’m an Invited, so I’m treated pretty well because of my mana. I’d expect things would be more frustrating for Mona and Heather.” She posed the statement to them like a question, though she knew how they would answer.

“This sort of thing happens all the time in the capital. But we were able to become apothecaries even though we’re commoners, and we get to do the work even if it might take a little more time for us than for other people, so it’s more productive to be thankful than to complain about every little thing. Especially this time, since we’re the ones getting the special treatment.”

Sara was impressed by how practical Heather was.

“Anyway, let’s use the fresh plants we just picked to make some potions!”

“Yeah, let’s do it.”

They all stood at their tables and used their own methods for making potions.

“Now to sample,” Sara announced to Noel’s bafflement.

“We did everything how we’re supposed to, so I don’t think we need to sample them.”

“Mm...maybe, but I still think we should.”

If she were on her own, she’d just taste whatever was left in the pot or on the

spoon, but she couldn't do that in front of everyone else.

"Everyone please submit one potion for sampling."

Sara tasted one drop from all four potions. Mona's and Noel's were textbook, while Heather's was a little strong and Sara's was extra strong. She nodded in satisfaction. They'd come out pretty much how she'd expected them to.

"Huh? Why?! We all made them in the same way, so why do they taste so different?!" Noel cried.

"Mainly because of the mana you put into them. Personality's also a factor, I think." That was Sara's theory.

"Personality? What do you mean?" Mona asked.

"Mona's potions are textbook, because it's the most efficient way to make them. In other words, you want to save on healing herbs as much as you can when you make potions."

"Well, you're right about that. That's my current goal. I'm not sure what that has to do with my personality, though."

"You're surprisingly consistent and economical. Am I wrong?"

"I guess not..."

Sara nodded thoughtfully once more. "Heather tries to get as much as she can out of her healing herbs. You want to draw out their full potential. The researcher type."

"You're right. Pretty impressive, Sara." Heather gave her a grin.

"Noel's potions are literally textbook. You don't do a single thing different from how you were taught."

"Well, yeah... Isn't that how you're supposed to do it?"

"Sure. There's nothing wrong with that."

"So why are your potions so strong?"

Sara chuckled and stirred her spoon in the air. "That's 'cause of the quality of the mana I put into them is high, and the amount stays consistent the whole time."

Mana manipulation had been drilled into her on the Dark Mountain. She'd gone through a ton to be able to make her barrier and keep it active at all times...

"You tend to put the element you're good with into the mana you use, so it helps to picture the sort of mana you use when you use physical strengthening, and practicing using your mana regularly will help too. But I guess it doesn't really matter as long as you're able to make potions."

Sara finally realized that there was no need to teach this kind of stuff to a kid who was talented enough to become an apothecary at thirteen. She just wanted to act like a senior now that she had a junior.

But Noel didn't mock her for what she'd said. He picked up his spoon and stared at it frustratedly. "Physical strengthening... I never needed it, since I wasn't planning on being a knight or a caster. I've mastered every other spell, but I've never even thought about physical strengthening..."

"O-Oh, really?" Sara felt like Nelly had told her to learn physical strengthening even if she was going to use other kinds of magic.

"I have no idea what you mean when you say to 'picture' physical strengthening, though... I can't believe *this* of all places is where I'd get tripped up."

"You're not tripped up... I just mean you should use the same mana physical strengthening uses—mana without an element attached."

"I don't know what that means," Noel said, quietly putting away his brewing set. "Umm, do you mind if I head back first? I just remembered something I have to do."

"That's fine. This is our day off, after all."

"I'll see you tomorrow at the Apothecary's Guild, then." With a polite nod, Noel trudged out of the room.

Mona and Heather were staying at Caren's house, but Noel was staying with Nelly's brother, the Guild Director. As the prime minister's son, he should have been staying at the lord's residence, but as Sara's "fiancé candidate," they'd decided he'd stay with Ri's son instead, since the two of them couldn't very well

stay under the same roof.

“Looks like you hurt his pride. He’s a good kid, but he’s still a noble, I guess.” Mona shrugged, but Sara wasn’t sure that was what it was. He was incredibly talented, but he still tried hard. Sara thought he was the type to never neglect preparation so he could always perform the best he could.

That night, Sara went over everything that had happened today with Noel at the dinner table, with Nelly and Chris present.

“I hope he realized the Guild Director can probably teach him about mana manipulation. Do you think he’s just stressing about it on his own?”

“You’re awfully concerned for him. That’s rare, since you’re usually so cold to your fiancé candidates.” Ri held a napkin over his mouth, but it didn’t hide the interest on his face at all.

“Well, he’s younger than me and he’s away from home, working hard all on his own.”

“That may be so...” Chris had been eating so quietly Sara wasn’t even sure if he was listening to her or not, but he stilled his hands and said, “But thirteen is older than you were when you came to Rosa, Sara. You and Allen were already supporting yourselves then, weren’t you?”

“Now that you mention it, I guess we were.” Sara thought back to how hard Allen had worked to support himself at twelve. She’d never looked in a mirror back then, so she didn’t really remember how she’d looked, but she could remember Allen.

“You remember?”

“Yes.” Sara nodded, feeling nostalgic.

“Now picture the current Allen.”

“Umm...” Not only had he grown a lot taller than Sara, there wasn’t even much boyishness left in his features. He even set Sara’s heart fluttering sometimes.

“That’s how old Noel will be in just two years. If you let your guard down now

because he's cute, he'll have you in his clutches in no time."

"That's rather salient for you, Chris. I'd thought you had no interest in such things."

"Ri, I'm not joking."

In what things? Sara wanted to interject, but it was true that Chris didn't tend to give advice on things like relationships.

"I know how this sounds coming from me, but to become an apothecary at thirteen, you need not only talent but an incredible amount of effort as well. Do you think a boy capable of that would simply do as his parents say and pursue the fiancée they've picked for him?"

"Err, I'm not really sure, but...I'll be careful?"

Chris sighed exasperatedly. "Nef, will you say something to Sara? Nef?"

"R-Right. What were we talking about?"

Sara was surprised to see Nelly so out of it. Now that she thought about it, she'd been the only one talking for a while; Nelly and Chris had just been quietly listening to her. Normally, Nelly listened to whatever Sara said with a big smile, like she was genuinely interested, so this was pretty rare.

"Neffie, are you that worried about the dungeon?" Ri stopped eating as well, looking at Nelly with concern.

"No..." Nelly shook her head first, then she must have figured there was no point hiding it, so she nodded instead. "Yes. I am."

"Monsters from lower floors are appearing on higher ones, yes?"

"Yes. We've stationed Hunters in all the safe zones in shifts, but so far, we haven't caught any monsters passing through them. Yet monsters that weren't there yesterday are there today. It's unclear how they're getting there, so they could just be appearing spontaneously on those floors, but it doesn't sit right with me..."

Nelly wasn't the only one worrying about this. Many people at the Hunter's Guild were considering the problem together and they still couldn't figure it out.

“All we know is that when something like this happens, it means there’s a possibility monsters could escape from the dungeon. But...”

Sara had heard about this herself. It was the reason the castle walls in the capital had been built, and the whole reason Nelly had been on the Dark Mountain was to watch the population of monsters there so that they didn’t spill out.

“The number of monsters in the dungeon isn’t actually increasing, but we don’t know how they’re appearing there, or how they’re moving,” Nelly ruminated.

“Are there any paths between floors other than the ones in the safe zones?” Sara asked her.

“There shouldn’t be. But it’s not as if we’ve inspected every wall.”

Sara thought it would be pretty noticeable if there was a hole somewhere big enough for monsters to get through. She pictured the dungeon back when she’d helped with the seven-colored swallowtail extermination.

“I might be able to find a hidden path like that in the dungeon with my barrier.” Sara’s barrier would stop when it hit the wall of the dungeon, but it would just pass through any hole that might be there, she explained to Nelly.

Nelly’s face lit up, as did Chris’s. “Will you come into the dungeon with me, then, Sara? I can’t imagine there are secret passageways like that, but it’d definitely help to make sure.”

“Okay.”

Thus, Sara had an unexpected trip to the dungeon planned, and on her own suggestion, no less. She was fine going in to pick medicinal plants, but she didn’t really like being there for anything monster-related.

“W-Well, I don’t want to see Nelly so stressed out. And there weren’t that many bugs in the dungeon last time,” she told herself. As always, the crux of her entering a dungeon rested on whether or not there were any big bugs to be found inside.

They all decided there was no time like the present to test Sara’s theory, so

she took the next day off of work. Now, she stood in front of the dungeon with Zachary the guildmaster, Nelly the vice guildmaster, Chris, and a few other people.

“I’m taking the day off from the Apothecary’s Guild, but I’m still working...” she muttered. It was her own idea, so she couldn’t complain, and she had to admit she was happy to hear she’d still be paid for her labor today.

“Stop grumbling and let’s go into the dungeon already.”

“I don’t see what you’re so excited about. All I’m going to be doing is pushing my barrier into the wall.”

Sara sighed at Allen’s eager smile and glanced over at the small figure he and Kuntz would be protecting.

“It’s fine. Our job today is protecting Noel. I know it’s not hunting with you, Sara.”

Standing between the two older boys, Noel looked a bit nervous but determined as well. He was a noble, and he was not a Hunter, so Sara wasn’t sure whether they should really be taking him into a dungeon.

Chris answered her unasked question. “When we left, the Hills family asked us to give him as many experiences that he couldn’t have in the capital as possible.”

The prime minister’s family is pretty harsh, Sara thought. She wondered if going into a dungeon was really the sort of experience they meant. At the same time, she was a little sad that *she* was no longer under Allen’s protection at the moment.

“Okay, let’s get going.”

With that clipped phrase from Zachary, the group set off. From the middle of the group, Sara thought back with some nostalgia to their seven-colored swallowtail hunting. Just as she remembered, as soon as they left the passageway that led into the dungeon, they emerged in a wide-open field with a forest nearby—a scene that was hard to imagine existed underground. The last time Sara had been here, there had been seven-colored swallowtails all over the place. Now, there were only a few of them fluttering in the air near the

forest.

“I’d like to start at the entrance and move in a circle to the left checking the walls. That okay with you, Sara?” Zachary asked her.

Sara nodded firmly. “Yes. Let me just see if I can actually do what I was planning on first,” she said, spreading out her barrier to cover the entire group. “I don’t know if you can tell, but I put my barrier around everyone.”

“I can’t tell at all,” Noel said quietly.

Before Sara could reply, Allen pointed toward the forest and said, “Look. The seven-colored swallowtails are coming this way. Sara’s here, after all.”

Sara’s shoulders slumped at his words. She didn’t know why, but seven-colored swallowtails always seemed to flock to her. *Just like mountain wolves*, her mind supplied, but she pretended she hadn’t thought it.

“Th-They’re coming closer and closer. Will we be okay?”

“Just watch.”

Noel had never seen dungeon monsters before, so Sara was impressed that he could simply nod quietly and do as Allen said. Seven-colored swallowtails were beautiful, after all. If you didn’t know better, you might find yourself reaching toward them unconsciously.

The swallowtails fluttered closer but were suddenly repelled by something a slight distance from the group.

“It’s like there’s an invisible wall there,” she explained to Noel. “Like glass.”

“Yep, Sara’s barrier is just like an invisible wall.” Even as Allen took over the explanation so Sara could concentrate on her work, the seven-colored swallowtails bounced against her barrier like bugs attracted to lights in the dark.

“You good, Sara?” Zachary asked her.

Sara nodded and turned to face the wall, slowly expanding her barrier. “It just hit the wall,” she announced.

At the same time, Noel cried, “Wow! They’re being pushed away!”

Sara was capable of expanding her barrier in just one direction, but it was

easier to just expand it out in a circle. As she amused herself with Noel's reaction, she concentrated on the sensation of her barrier against the wall. Her barrier could repel whatever she wanted, and if she concentrated, she could either sense what she was repelling or not sense it.

"Can you feel the wall, Sara?" Nelly asked her.

"Yeah. It's all bumpy. Let's head around the floor from here," Sara announced.

She started moving, concentrating on the feeling of the wall. It was kind of funny the way they shuffled along as a group, but everyone was paying close attention to the state of the dungeon. Noel's occasional cries of amazement kept things from getting too tense, of course. Both the scenery in the dungeon and the monsters that appeared from time to time must have been rare sights for him.

After walking for a bit, they entered the forest. Sara felt like she saw some sort of large, black creature out of the corner of her eye, but as it was repelled by her barrier and fled into the trees, it was as if it had never even been there. It had almost looked like a large centipede, but Sara decided to pretend she hadn't seen a thing, instead concentrating on the feeling of the wall.

"Why do the trees not get repelled?"

"Because they're not a danger to Sara."

If she thought too hard about what to repel and what not to repel, her barrier would end up repelling anything and everything, so Sara didn't tend to put too many conditions on her barrier. As they proceeded through the trees, the only things Sara's barrier repelled were monsters and the wall.

Sara saw something black out of the corner of her eye again, but unlike last time, Nelly and Zachary both tensed up at the sight.

"Hellhounds. Keep your guard up," Zachary cautioned.

"Got it," Kuntz replied, well aware that he was the only Hunter in this group who couldn't take a hellhound down on his own.

Rookie Hunters who were just starting out came to the first floor of the

dungeon. If they ran into a hellhound, any injuries they came away with would be more than just mild.

Nelly slid out of the barrier. She must have been heading off to take down those hellhounds. Normally, the sensation of someone slipping out of her barrier wouldn't bother Sara, but she felt something give on the wall side at the same time, so she stopped moving. Her heart gave a great *thump* at the sensation.

"Something's...weird." Sara pushed the barrier a little harder at the strange part of the wall. When she did... "My barrier goes right in... There's something like a hole here."

"There couldn't be," Zachary said reflexively. He must not have taken Sara's idea that there could be a hole in the wall seriously, and he was only going along with her plan because there was nothing else they could do about the situation.

"It's right here. Let's get a little closer." Sara moved toward the "hole" in the wall. She weaved through the trees and came out in the grass next to the wall. Nelly must have beaten the hellhounds by now, because she slipped back into the barrier just as quickly as she'd left it. "This is it."

All Sara was pointing at was the wall, but she could definitely feel her barrier going through it.

"It doesn't *look* like there's anything there..." Zachary muttered, and Chris, who'd been silent up until now, pointed down at the ground.

"Look there. The grass is flattened like an animal trail."

Everyone focused on the ground. It *did* look like something had flattened the grass where he was pointing, but while everyone was looking down at the ground thoughtfully, Sara alone was preoccupied by something else.

"Ur...kh..." She took a step back reflexively and Nelly caught her, holding her up.

"What's wrong, Sara?"

"Something's...hitting my barrier up ahead. Like... Like..." The sensation she

normally didn't let herself feel was grossing her out. "It's like something's tackling it... Ugh... Can I hit it back?"

Nelly considered it for a moment, but she came to a decision quickly. "Sorry, but no."

"What...?" Sara was a bit thrown by Nelly saying "no" to her.

"Can you slowly bring your barrier back this way?"

"O-Okay." She pulled her barrier back little by little, like the thing bumping into it was pushing it back. "It'll come out soon. Careful, everyone."

Sara didn't really want to remember what happened after that. As she slowly pulled her barrier back from the wall, the face of the thing that had been tackling it appeared, wiggling around like it was trying to get out from between the wall and Sara's barrier.

"Eugh... I'm good on wolves, seriously..."

"A hellhound. So this is where they were coming from..."

Sara wished Zachary would hurry up and decide what to do with the thing instead of standing there sounding impressed. It was creepy seeing just the head and front legs of a black wolf writhing around like that, and the sensation of it scrabbling against her barrier sickened her.

Nelly quickly stepped forward to the left of her and told Sara, "Let it go right here."

"Ugh, okay..." Sara pulled her barrier to the right, opening up some space on the left, and several hellhounds jumped out only to be instantly slaughtered by Nelly.

Nelly then strolled over to the hole the hellhounds had come out of and punched it out of nowhere.

"Eep!" Sara had a feeling she hadn't really been forming words properly for a while now. If Nelly wanted to check the hole, couldn't she have just stuck a hand inside instead of punching it like that? If it was actually a wall like it looked like it was, she would have been hurt, wouldn't she?

It looked like Nelly's fist was jabbed into the wall. "Hmm. There's nothing

here. It's just empty space."

"Nef, you can't go inside it."

Before Sara knew it, Chris was at Nelly's side, sticking his arm out in front of her to block her way.

"Why not?"

"Just because monsters could get through it doesn't mean people can. And who's to say where it even leads?"

"Hrm..."

That was Chris. Sara was relieved he'd prevented Nelly from doing anything rash.

"For now, we'll set up some protection cases here and have some veteran Hunters keep watch, but how long is this gonna last...? Not to mention, this isn't necessarily the only hole in the wall, so finding this has sort of only made the problem worse..."

Sara felt a bit sorry for Zachary, who had quite a headache to deal with now, but her job here was done as far as she was concerned. She sighed in relief until Zachary gave her a rather pointed look.

"Well, sorry, Sara, but..."

"Huh?" She had a bad feeling about this...

"We'll check the rest of the first floor today, and tomorrow we'll do the second-floor walls, and so on. Thanks in advance."

"R-Right."

This was something only Sara could do, so she had no choice but to do it. Her commute into the dungeon with Nelly had just been extended by a few days. All the while, Sara wished she could be working on white moonlight mushroom extraction.

By the end of it, Sara had gone down even deeper than she had during the seven-colored swallowtail incident. She was glad she got to see the field of

silver dragonmint, but between being surrounded by hellhounds and attacked by wyverns (just like old times), it was a bit of a harrowing experience. Of course, she repelled every attack with her impregnable barrier, but since she was checking the feeling of the walls, she also felt every impact on the barrier; it was a literal shock to her senses.

However, while Sara was enduring this discomfort, Zachary, Nelly, and everyone else associated with the Hunter's Guild were enduring far more worry, so she couldn't exactly whine and say she wanted to go home.

"How is there a hole in the lowest floor too? Is there something under here?"

"And why only here? Thed says all the nearby dungeons are normal."

"Guess we'll just have to keep sending reports to the capital."

As the two of them discussed the problem in the dungeon, Sara thought back fondly to Rosa's Hunter's Guild. The pair of them were just like Jay and Vince. In Rosa, she'd sort of felt like the general attitude had been "The capital's the capital and Rosa's Rosa." They hadn't seemed to have many ties to the capital. So what about Hydrangea, then? Sara asked Nelly on their way home that night.

"Well, Rosa's not governed by a noble like Hydrangea is. They don't have much loyalty to the crown 'cause of that."

Now that she thought about it, they hadn't treated the knights very well there either, though that was just at the Hunter's Guild.

"There's a pretty solid skill difference between the people in the Hunter's Guild here and there as well. They can handle pretty much anything themselves without help from the capital, and they're proud of their strength there too."

"Does Hydrangea need help from the capital?"

"Well, not really..." Nelly's mouth quirked up into a smile. "But Zachary and I both don't really like trouble. And pride won't fill your belly. So we tend to make the capital deal with all the annoying stuff."

"I see."

The two of them were earnest though awkward, but they were also both Hunters who had no experience doing anything other than hunting. It finally

made sense to Sara why they were sending so many reports to the capital.

Chapter 1: Continental Tortoise

After checking all the way to the depths of the dungeon, Sara's job was done for the time being, so she returned to her apothecary work the next day.

Mona wasted no time telling her, "We came all the way to Hydrangea and I almost thought we'd have to go back without even getting to do any work with you."

"Huh? Are you leaving soon or something?" asked Sara.

"No, but I didn't know how long you were going to take. I missed you a little."

"Really?" It was nice having friends who missed her. Sara's heart warmed.

"I missed you too."

"Ha ha ha. Thanks, Noel." Sara gave Noel a pat on the shoulder, all smiles. She couldn't complain about having juniors who missed her either.

"Okay, let's get to work," Heather briskly suggested. "We already started training with white moonlight mushrooms while you were gone, Sara."

"It's like *you're* the apothecary from Hydrangea," Sara said. Though she pouted a bit, she was happy to join in on their training. She *was* curious about what was going on in the dungeon, but she was an apothecary when it came down to it. All she could do was leave the dungeon to the Hunter's Guild.

Thus, she set about doing her training until one day, when Noel suddenly looked up from a table across from her. A couple other people turned their heads toward the front of the guildhall at the same time. That was when Sara finally noticed the commotion coming from the streets outside.

"What could that be?" Caren, the guildmaster, furrowed her brow when a salesgirl from the shopfront ran into the back.

"This is bad!"

"What's going on?" Caren asked her calmly, but the young apothecary's face was white as a sheet.

“Monsters... There are monsters outside...”

Monsters, outside. Sara cocked her head. The meadow outside Rosa had been swarming with horned rabbits, so she didn't find that particularly odd. She didn't see them all that much here, but there *were* horned rabbits and meadow wolves near Hydrangea as well. So what was the big commotion for?

“Th-There are huge black wolves out on the streets!”

Black wolves. Hellhounds? From the dungeon? Putting things together in an instant, Sara set down the mixing spoon she was holding. “I'm gonna go check it out!”

“Sara!” Noel tried to stop her, but she ignored him and rushed outside. She was met with an unbelievable sight. As people fled through the streets of Hydrangea, pitch-black wolves wandered about the streets like they were sightseeing.

Sara grasped the situation at once. It was unbelievable because this was Hydrangea, but what if it were the Dark Mountain? She closed her eyes and pictured what she might see after opening the door to the caretaker's cabin on the Dark Mountain.

There would be mountain wolves lounging about, groups of elk passing in the distance, and wyverns flying in the sky. She opened her eyes and tilted her head back, blinking up at the sky.

“Yep, it's just like home...”

She wanted to close her eyes again after seeing the wyvern in the sky, but there was no time for that. At least the hellhounds wandering about were weaker-looking than mountain wolves.

“Guess I'll round 'em up for now...” Sara made sure she had her barrier up around herself and then formed another layer of it around that one. “I'll repel people and let wolves inside...” It wasn't the sort of way she usually used her barrier, but she'd probably be able to make it work.

“To the invisible kennel with you guys. I'll start with one...”

She slipped her barrier around the closest hellhound and swiftly changed

things so that it wouldn't be able to pass through.

"Growl!"

The hellhound was surprised when it tried to move forward and was repelled by the barrier.

"Hmph," Sara snorted with satisfaction. "I've leveled up! Check out what I can do with my barrier *now!*" Of course, after her little outburst, she glanced around in embarrassment. She really didn't want anyone hearing that.

She raised her voice this time and called out to the townspeople, "Everyone, get inside!"

The hellhounds could ram themselves at the buildings, but people could buy some time by hiding inside.

The rest happened in no time at all. Sara expanded her barrier out around all the hellhounds she could see like a cast net and then shrunk it down around her. She kept the inner barrier around herself a decent distance away from her, of course.

"Growl!"

"Growl!"

She kept the hellhounds at a distance, so she didn't flinch too much when they lunged at her. Once she had them in a small area, she lowered the height of her barrier so that they wouldn't move around as much.

A few minutes after she'd rushed outside, it was like she had a pack of hellhounds lying down in front of her at her command.

"Ugh... Hunters...please come soon..."

Of course, this was the reality.

Sara thought she was a decently imaginative person. She could think of any number of ways to take the lives of the hellhounds with her barrier, like when she'd (reluctantly) wiped out all those seven-colored swallowtails.

"But I'd like to leave that to the professionals..."

Sara was an apothecary. It was too much to expect her to take down

hellhounds that were outside of the dungeon for some reason. But when she turned her hopeful eyes toward the dungeon, all she saw was another group of hellhounds coming toward her.

Fortunately, the people of the town had taken refuge inside at this point. Unfortunately, she saw a lot of people sticking their heads out of second-story windows, so Sara's heroics would no doubt stick in quite a few people's memories after this. There were even voices cheering for her coming from the Apothecary's Guild.

"Oh well... Hellhound capture round two..." Sara made up her mind, but right then, the hellhounds running at her stumbled and fell. There were only a few at the front, but then the rest running after them tripped over those wolves and fell themselves. Only two of them actually made it to Sara. She threw her barrier over them like a net.

When she looked up, she saw Allen and Kuntz. The fallen hellhounds were trying to get up and attack them, but for some reason, they kept slipping on the ground and falling, at which point Allen hit them and sent them flying.

Hunters started to gather at that point and Sara was able to let the professionals deal with the hellhounds she'd captured.

"Good thing they showed up right by the Apothecary's Guild where you were, Sara. Thanks."

"Don't mention it. I just did what I could to help."

Most Hunters knew Sara's name ever since the business with the seven-colored swallowtails. After the hellhounds were all taken care of, she was chatting with the Hunters on the scene when...

"Sara! Look up!" Allen shouted.

"Up? Whoa!" She looked up and found the wyvern, which she'd thought had flown off somewhere, diving straight toward her. "Why me?! Ugh!"

She hurried to the center of the street, expanding her barrier up to about roof height. "I can repel anything with my barrier! I'm not the weak little girl I was back on the Dark Mountain, you know!" She said the cool lines quietly, once again hoping that no one could actually hear her.

“Gyeee!” The wyvern cried in anger when its prey noticed it, dive-bombing Sara.

Wham! Boom!

It slammed into the barrier and broke its neck, crashing down to the street.

“They really are scary...” was Sara’s only opinion.

The crowd broke out into cheers and the nearby Hunters patted Sara on the shoulders and back.

“No surprise from the vice guildmaster’s daughter!”

“Daughter? Eh heh heh...” Sara laughed dopily. She was happy to hear Nelly called the vice guildmaster, and happy to be treated like her daughter, even though the two of them didn’t look a thing alike.

“You okay, Sara?” Allen and Kuntz were by her side before she knew it as well.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Man, I haven’t seen your barrier in action like that in like a year. Impressive as always,” Allen said sunnily. Now that Sara thought about it, she hadn’t used it for much since enduring the attacks of the migrating dragons last winter, so it really had been that long.

“Ri made a big deal about how your absolute defense could even repel wyverns, but I guess he wasn’t joking.”

“That’s so embarrassing... Could you cut it out?” Sara waved her hand in front of her face, turning the conversation on Allen instead. “What was it you were doing to those hellhounds, Allen? It looked like they were just tripping over themselves.” She wanted to change the subject, but she was also genuinely curious to hear his answer.

“That was me.” Kuntz pointed his thumb at himself proudly. “I’m good at wind magic, remember? That’s a little spell I whipped up for when I team up with a physical strengthening-type Hunter like Allen.”

“How do you make them trip with wind magic?” Sara wanted to know his technique.

“I make little twisters at the hellhounds’ feet. You know, like when the wind spins around dry grass out in a field.”

“Huh...” Sara had never seen a whirlwind like that in real life. She didn’t know it was a common occurrence around these parts.

“Then the monsters get their feet knocked out from under them. Works really well when they’re running like they were earlier.”

“I see.”

“And then I take ’em down,” Allen added.

“Yep.” Kuntz fist-bumped him. “It’s pretty hard for a caster like me to take down a hellhound on my own, but Allen can take out twice as many as he’d normally be able to with me around. Works out well, right?”

“Yeah. That’s pretty cool.” Sara was genuinely impressed.

“Course, I make sure I’ve got a way to take ’em down on my own too, just in case I get any personal requests.”

Sara clapped quietly until she saw Noel burst out of the Apothecary’s Guild, headed straight for the wyvern. She froze.

Allen followed her gaze and strode over to Noel with an uncharacteristically stern look on his face.

“Oh, Allen. I’ve never actually seen a wyvern before!” Noel exclaimed, eyes twinkling. Allen grabbed him by the collar.

“Uh-oh. He got me with that one once,” Kuntz said with a wry grin.

“Yeah, I remember that,” Sara said, exchanging a look with him. She wouldn’t forget what had happened in Ri’s townhouse in the capital for a long time. And just as she and Kuntz remembered, Allen picked Noel up and tossed him away from the wyvern.

“What was that for, Allen?!” Noel barked from the ground. He wasn’t stunned like Sara had been, so he must have been pretty gutsy.

“Get back inside. It’s still dangerous.”

“But—”

“Get back inside.”

“...Okay.”

Allen wasn't taking no for an answer, so Noel reluctantly stood, sending Sara a pleading look. Sara just shook her head back at him. All the monsters they could see had been taken down, but that didn't mean things were safe yet.

“Thanks, Allen.”

“You don't need to thank me.”

After Noel had gone back into the Apothecary's Guild, Allen jogged back over to Sara. He had his usual gentle expression on his face again.

“Let's head back toward the dungeon, Allen. The Hunter's Guild may have some instructions for us by now.”

“Sure. We'll see you later, Sara. Be careful.”

“Okay. See you.”

Sara probably had the highest defensive power of anyone else here, but it still warmed her heart every time Allen told her to be careful like he really meant it.

“Wait a second. Sara?” Caren had come outside at some point.

“It's still dangerous out here,” Sara told her. When Caren crossed her arms and snorted in response, Sara almost laughed. She looked so scary, hellhounds would probably run away from her.

“You can go with them if you want. In a situation like this, your skills will come in more handy at the Hunter's Guild than here.”

If this were a year or two ago, Sara probably would have been shocked and disappointed, wondering if they didn't *want* her at the Apothecary's Guild, but now she understood that Caren was only being truthful. She valued her skills as an apothecary, but looking at Sara's abilities objectively, she was of more use to Hydrangea at the Hunter's Guild right now.

“Okay. Umm...”

“You can go back tomorrow and keep helping out for however long you need to, of course. And...” Caren uncrossed her arms and smiled. “I'll make sure you

get some practice with white moonlight mushrooms when you have time.”

“Okay! Thank you.”

She was happy that Caren understood just what she was frustrated with. Sara ran over to Allen and Kuntz, who were waiting with curious looks on their faces, and they all headed toward the dungeon together.

A slight distance from the dungeon, they found a group of Hunters huddled together. Kuntz headed for them without hesitating, calling out, “Hey! What’s going on?”

“Kuntz, eh? Allen and Sara too.” The Hunters turned around and greeted them with relief. “Look.”

But when they moved aside, all Sara could see was the meadow.

“There’s nothing there,” Kuntz said to the Hunters curiously.

“So it seems, but if you look close, the air’s quivering a bit. That’s where the monsters are coming from. Be careful.”

“It’s the same thing that’s happening inside the dungeon,” Kuntz murmured thoughtfully.

The Hunters nodded. “Zachary and Nelly sure are late, though... They’re in charge of the Guild, but they’re both always rushing into the dungeon...”

“Better than the old guildmaster who up and left us for the capital. At least they come back.”

It wasn’t like Sara could do anything about how Nelly did her job, but she felt a little bad even so. As for what she *could* do, she’d be able to feel around the strange air with her barrier to see what was going on, but she wasn’t sure she should do so without someone in charge around.

The Hunters remained standing there, unsure of what to do besides taking care of the monsters that appeared out of the air every so often. That is, until they noticed someone approaching them at an incredible speed. He must have been using physical strengthening.

“It’s the Guild Director!” someone with sharp vision shouted, and a wave of relief washed over the gathered Hunters. They could handle a few monsters,

but everyone had been a bit on edge with no one around to call the shots.

“What’s the situation?”

“Monsters are coming out from here,” one of the guards Sara recognized from the entrance of the dungeon reported to the Guild Director. “I was on watch and saw when the first one emerged. The first was a wyvern, and after that, it was a pack of hellhounds. They’ve all been taken care of now—the hellhounds by nearby Hunters on their way back from the dungeon and the wyvern by Sara.”

He was able to serve as a guard at the entrance of the dungeon because he could remain calm and report what he observed even under these circumstances, Sara supposed.

“Sara? Ah, I see.”

Sara raised her hand quietly to alert Thed to her presence. The Guild Director’s expression softened just as it would if he had laid eyes upon his niece. He gave her a nod in greeting.

“Where are the guildmaster and vice guildmaster?”

“They should be in the lower floors of the dungeon.”

“Have you contacted them?”

“Yes, we sent a runner down.”

The Guild Director got a quick handle on the situation, and just when it seemed like they’d be freed from the deadlock they were all in, a young Hunter burst out from the dungeon and, spotting the group, ran over to them.

“Oh! Guild Director!”

“That’s not the guy we sent,” the guard murmured. What had happened, then?

“I have a message from Zachary! There’s... There’s a giant turtle in the depths of the dungeon!”

When she heard “giant turtle,” Sara thought of the tortoises she’d once seen at a zoo. The big ones were over a meter long, so large a child could ride on

their backs. She had a memory of watching them lazily munching on mustard spinach. But it didn't seem like that was what the Hunter was talking about.

"It couldn't be...!" someone blurted before the report continued.

"It's as large as a house! It's likely a continental tortoise!"

As large as a house. Sara couldn't even imagine that. As her mouth hung open, a wave of despair went through the gathered Hunters.

"That can't be... I know continental tortoises come out of dungeons in the south, but one's never emerged from Hydrangea's dungeon before." Thed sounded like he couldn't believe what he'd heard. That jogged Sara's memory.

"The things Rosa's walls were built for...?" She thought she'd heard that Rosa's walls had been erected to protect the town from continental tortoises.

"Right, you and Allen came here from Rosa, didn't you, Sara?" Thed must have heard her. He realized something a moment later. "That's right. If it's really a continental tortoise, then it should leave the dungeon and head for the Dark Mountain in the north."

The Dark Mountain. The mountain wolves. Sara pictured the nostalgic sight in her head. But Rosa was right in front of the Dark Mountain. Would Vince, the vice guildmaster, and everyone else in the Guild, and everyone in town be okay?

"This isn't good. I think they came from a dungeon more to the east last time. The capital's right to the north of Hydrangea."

So not only was Rosa, where she had people she cared about, in danger, but the capital would be in danger first.

"First, we'll need a messenger. Who's fast?"

"Here!"

"Us!"

Allen and Kuntz responded to Thed's question immediately.

"Tell the guildmaster and vice guildmaster that the monsters on the surface have been taken care of. They're to leave someone else behind to observe the

situation and return to the guildhall at once. We have much to discuss.”

The two boys gave Sara a signal that they were going in and ran off for the dungeon. Thed didn’t even spare them a glance, immediately turning to the remaining Hunters.

“You said there was a wyvern?”

“Yeah. The monsters from the bottom of the dungeon were the wyvern and hellhounds. Some other monsters came out too, but they were things rookie Hunters could take care of, so we handled those easily enough.”

Thed nodded and looked over the Hunters. “Okay. Have people who can take down wyverns and hellhounds keep watch here on shift. How many do we have?”

Sara wasn’t sure whether she should raise her hand or not, but in her case, it was less like she could take them down and more like she could incapacitate them, so she decided not to.

Thed gave some more brisk orders and Sara thought with some admiration, *So this is what a Guild Director does.*

“And Sara.”

“Y-Yes?” He called her name last.

“You took down a wyvern, huh?”

“Oh, not really. It just ran into my barrier on its own.”

“Still, thank you. There’s not much we can do about wyverns once they escape the dungeon and head out into the world. It was a good thing you were here.”

“S-Sure.” Sara’s only thought about the dead wyvern was that its face was scary, so she was a bit flustered when Thed thanked her.

“I’m sure there will be things we’ll need your special skills to help with, but you can go home and rest for today. It sounds like the first big wave is over with now. Could you return to the mansion and explain things to Ri? I’ll go and make a report myself as well later.”

“Okay, I can do that.”

The nice part about Hydrangea’s Hunter’s Guild was that they didn’t try to make use of Sara for every little thing.

Sara turned around and headed toward town, where she saw the knights she hadn’t seen hide nor hair of until now. They were stationed here and there in town, on alert and glancing toward the direction of the dungeon every so often while the citizenry hurried home under their protection. It was a relief to Sara to see them looking out for everyone. A Hunter’s job was to hunt monsters, not to protect people. So as soon as all the monsters were taken care of, the Hunters all left town right away. That was when the knights stepped in to protect and guide the confused and frightened townspeople.

Sara watched the knights and townspeople as she hurried toward the mansion until she caught sight of Ri. He was giving orders to a group of knights. As he should be, Sara supposed, what with him being the local lord.

“Ri!”

“Oh, Sara!”

“Thed said he’d come and give you a report later.” She told him the most important thing first.

“Thed’s here, eh?” Ri asked, looking relieved to hear it. Some of the tension left his shoulders. “I sent messengers to everywhere I thought Thed might be as soon as I heard monsters had left the dungeon. I’m glad they made it.”

“Nelly and Zachary were down on the deepest level of the dungeon, so all the Hunters were relieved when Thed showed up too. Oh...” Sara realized something important then. He’d heard that monsters had left the dungeon, but he hadn’t heard Nelly and Zachary’s report. “Umm, we got a report from them, actually. It seems there’s a continental tortoise down in the lowest level of the dungeon.”

“What...?” Ri looked like he hadn’t understood what Sara had said. He put a hand to his temple.

Maybe he didn’t know what that was, Sara thought, so she added, “Umm, it’s like the size of a house.”

“No, I know that. My head just refused to comprehend what you said.” Sara knew very well what he meant. “I see. A continental tortoise. Why from *Hydrangea*?”

She supposed it was a reasonable question for the town’s ruler. But he wasn’t asking anyone in particular, and there was no one to answer him either.

“Thed asked the same thing.”

“I’m sure he did.”

“And he said that the capital is right to the north of *Hydrangea*.”

Ri’s eyes bulged like that information had blindsided him. “Sara, I’m sorry. I was planning on going back to the mansion with you, but I’m going to head to the Hunter’s Guild. Go ahead and have dinner and get some rest without me.”

“Okay.”

She felt a little forlorn at the idea that neither Thed nor Ri needed her, but she nodded obediently all the same.

Ri gave the knights some more orders and then began to head in the direction of the Hunter’s Guild before turning around and coming right back. “Sara.”

“Yeah?” Sara cocked her head and Ri suddenly wrapped his arms around her. “R-Ri? What’s wrong?”

Ri loosened his grip on her and put his hands on her shoulders instead, peering down at her face and smiling. “Sara, I heard you took down a wyvern.”

“Oh, it just hit my barrier. I didn’t take it down.”

Ri shook his head, still grinning. “I said you had absolute defense from even a wyvern, didn’t I? I was right. I heard you ran outside to protect the townspeople without hesitation as well. I’m proud of you, Sara.”

“Oh.” Sara felt tears welling in her eyes at that.

She was just kind of heading home like she always did, but this was not the Sara she always was. This was a Sara who had jumped out into the street to protect the townspeople and had fought monsters despite not being a Hunter. She might have been an adult in her old life, but this day had been a bit too

much for a fifteen-year-old girl to handle, and she finally relaxed some when Ri showed appreciation for her actions. It felt rewarding to hear his praise.

“Andy, sorry, but could you escort Sara back to the mansion?”

“Yes sir, I’d be happy to.”

“Escort, Andy. Nothing more.”

Ri even had a knight walk Sara home. Though he also seemed to caution the young man for some reason.

“I’m sorry. I know keeping the townspeople safe is more important,” Sara told her escort.

“Not at all. It’s just as important to keep the lord’s precious granddaughter safe. Besides, I’ll go back and guard the townspeople as soon as I’ve finished escorting you.” He said the words somewhat playfully and Sara looked up at him, recognizing him from somewhere. “We spoke once in the dungeon. It was over two years ago now, though.”

Sara remembered. “Oh, the knight with too much time on his hands from the seven-colored swallowtail contest.”

“So that’s how you remember me, eh?”

Sara giggled at the way he craned his neck back remorsefully.

“I don’t suppose that’s the reason why you keep rejecting my proposals?”

Once again, Sara remembered. Andy was the name of the guy in the noble house in Hydrangea who had proposed marriage to her several times. Was he a viscount’s son? Ri must have known who he was when he sent him to escort Sara. He could be a bit of a busybody at times. She was sure he’d give her an excuse later, like he thought it was good for her to keep her options open or something.

“I won’t marry someone I don’t even know,” Sara told the miserable-looking knight firmly. “And don’t even think about saying something like, ‘Well, let’s get to know each other now, then.’”

If she wasn’t perfectly clear with the nobles in this world, it would only be trouble for her later.

“I’ve turned down everyone else too,” she continued. “I want to continue my training as an apothecary for at least the next fifteen years or so. I’m not thinking about marriage at all right now. That’s why.”

“Fifteen years, eh? I suppose it does take about that long to master a profession if you set out to do so.”

He was more understanding than she expected he’d be. Sara’s appraisal of him rose just a bit.

“Am I not allowed to say ‘I’ll wait patiently, then’ either?”

“It would weigh on me, so please don’t,” Sara told him frankly.

“I see.”

Seeing how disappointed he was, Sara relaxed her expression somewhat. It wasn’t because she felt bad for him. It was just because it felt so surreal to be chatting about marriage like it was a casual conversation topic when something so serious was happening.

“Did you hear what I said earlier? About the continental tortoise?”

“Yes, I did. To be honest, I thought they were a myth, so I was pretty surprised.”

“Me too. But I lived in Rosa for a little. It feels a little more real for me since I’ve seen Rosa’s three walls, I guess.”

The situation was probably also why she could blow past the marriage talk so easily when it normally would have upset her more.

“I’ve only seen the castle walls in the capital,” the knight told her. “Rosa has *three* of them?”

“They’re not like the capital’s wall. They’re about three stories high and really sturdy. There’s even a protection field around the whole town outside of the walls.”

They arrived at the mansion in no time when Sara actually started enjoying the conversation.

“Well, I should get back to town,” said Andy.

“Right. Be careful.”

Seeing the knight off, Sara really started to feel like she’d grown. Before, she hadn’t even liked *hearing* the word “marriage.” It wasn’t just that it was too soon; it upset her to think that people only wanted her because of her special status as one of the Invited.

But now that she had an idea of how she wanted to live her life, it was as simple as turning down any marriage proposals she received. It was still a pain, but she didn’t get quite so upset at the mere sight of them.

Sara put the thought of marriage out of her mind and headed inside, waiting for Ri, Nelly, and Chris to return home, but the three of them never returned to the mansion that day.

As soon as she woke up the next day, Sara checked Nelly’s bed on the other side of the room. When she saw the bulge under the covers and the red hair spilling out from the blanket, she breathed a sigh of relief. It was already past midnight by the time they got back, but they’d at least managed to return before daybreak.

They’d slept in different rooms back on the Dark Mountain, but ever since coming to Hydrangea, Sara and Nelly had stayed together in that room in the eastern tower they’d slept in on their first night here. She felt a little like she should probably get her own room sometime soon, but she was taking advantage of Nelly’s lack of comment on the matter to continue rooming with her.

Sara got out of bed without making a sound and quietly changed her clothes before leaving the room. She found Chris sitting alone at the dining room table, sipping a cup of tea. He must have been sleep-deprived, yet his glossy silver hair was tied back as neatly as ever and he was just as handsome as he always was.

“Good morning, Chris.”

“Ah, Sara. Good morning.” He got up and poured her a cup of tea himself. Then he smiled. “I heard you took down a wyvern yesterday.”

“Everyone keeps saying that. It just crashed into my barrier on its own.” How many times had she said that now? She was getting a little tired of it.

“However you did it, it doesn’t change the fact that you protected the people of the town, so just accept the praise.”

It was just like Chris to finally praise her in a way that didn’t feel like praise at all.

“Well, you’ll probably hear it again later, but let me tell you what happened yesterday.” Chris sat down opposite Sara and crossed his legs. “The continental tortoise climbed two floors in one day using the warped walls in the dungeon.”

“Two floors in one day... So...?”

“Hydrangea’s dungeon has fifteen floors. It will emerge outside the dungeon on the eighth day.”

Sara wasn’t sure whether that was fast or slow, so she didn’t know how to respond. Chris paid her no mind and continued his explanation.

“It doesn’t seem to move at night. As soon as the sun set, it went completely still. We haven’t observed it in the morning, so we haven’t confirmed this yet, but I assume it will start moving again when the sun rises and stop when it sets. I believe that matches the legends about them. Someone should be watching it now to make sure.”

Sara nodded along, listening.

“Eight days from now—no, today, it’s seven days—it will leave the dungeon and head straight toward the Dark Mountain to the north. It won’t turn no matter what lies in its path, so it should graze the east side of the capital. So we sent a messenger to the capital yesterday as well.”

He said “graze,” but just how much damage would it end up doing?

“At its current speed, it should reach the capital in two weeks, then Rosa in another two weeks, and from there, it should take it two days to get to the Dark Mountain.”

It actually moved pretty fast. It must have been because it was so big.

“Now that I think about it, though, it shouldn’t be much of a problem.”

“It shouldn’t?” Sara asked, not expecting to hear that.

“No. Not for Hydrangea, at least.”

“So, umm...”

“Once the continental tortoise leaves the dungeon, all we’ll have to do here is keep an eye on it while it leaves. Then we just have to keep watch over the dungeon walls until the holes close up.”

“Right.”

There was a big commotion the day before when the wyvern and hellhounds had shown up, but that was the worst their trouble was likely to be.

“So if the continental tortoise is the cause of the stuff happening in the dungeon, the trouble will stop when it goes away?”

“Exactly.”

They must have returned home last night after coming to that conclusion.

“But...” Sara thought about Rosa. She thought about the people in the Hunter’s Guild, the woman running the eatery, the people living outside of the town walls, and all the food stands set up there too. She had a lot of memories of the place both inside and out.

“You’re worried about Rosa?”

“Yes.” Sara nodded.

“I have to say I feel the same way. I might have only gone there chasing after Nef, but I spent a long time at the Apothecary’s Guild in Rosa.”

Sara had had nothing but distrust of Chris when she’d first met him, but he *had* been the person in charge of the Apothecary’s Guild there. He had to have some attachment to the town.

“But this is exactly what Rosa’s Third District is for.”

“But if the people who can only live in the Third District have their homes and businesses destroyed, won’t it be difficult for them to recover?”

“I suppose it will.” It was a cold response, but that was just the way Rosa was.

“Is there anything I can do to help? Caren told me to prioritize helping out at the Hunter’s Guild.”

“She did, eh? Huh.” Chris’s eyes widened a bit in surprise. “And you don’t mind, Sara?”

“No. I’ll have time to continue my apothecary training in the future. There’s no point in rushing it.”

When Sara had received her ID at the Hunter’s Guild in Rosa, she’d finally felt like she had a right to live here in this world. After that, all that mattered to her was becoming independent and being able to be with Nelly, and she didn’t care so much about anything else.

“Personally, there’s nothing I really want to ask you for,” Chris told her. “It’s interesting to be able to witness the arrival of a continental tortoise, but all an apothecary can really do about it is make sure we have enough potions on hand. So this won’t contribute to your growth as an apothecary at all.”

He told her that the Hunter’s Guild might ask something of her and that she should do as she wished if they did. All Sara could do was smile wryly at this characteristically flippant remark. He was acting like it didn’t concern him at all, which made Sara want to tease him a bit.

“Is there really nothing else an apothecary should be doing?” she asked him.

“What do you mean?” he responded dubiously.

“Where I come from, turtles and lizards are part of the same family called reptiles. So they’re related.”

“Related? Even though they look so different?”

“Yep. There weren’t any wyverns or migrating dragons in my world, but I think they’re a kind of lizard too.”

Dragons were just a legend in her world, so maybe it was strange to call them reptiles, but Sara thought they were basically just big flying lizards.

“Lizards and turtles are related. And dragons are just big lizards. Which means?” she asked Chris.

“Turtles may have the same characteristics as dragons...”

“So...?”

Chris looked off into space for a moment thoughtfully before muttering, “The repellent might work on them, just like with wyverns and migrating dragons...”

“It’s worth investigating, don’t you think?” It was just a guess on Sara’s part, but it felt pretty good to point out something that hadn’t even occurred to Chris.

“Migrating dragon season is over. We sent all of our stock of repellent to the capital.”

There was no need to use the dragon repellent in an ordinary dungeon, so they had no need to keep any stock here. And if you were hunting wyverns, then making them run away was counterproductive.

Sara nodded and Chris stood up. “Would you tell Nef that I’m at the Apothecary’s Guild?”

“Huh? Oh, okay.”

“Pardon me, then.”

“Okay?”

The somewhat formal way he spoke now was likely an indication that he didn’t even perceive Sara anymore. She assumed he wanted to test Sara’s theory after talking to her about it.

“Chris isn’t Chris if he’s not being self-centered, though.” Sara giggled and drank her cooled tea. “Well, I haven’t trained at all with white moonlight mushrooms or silver dragonmint yet, so I doubt I’ll be any help at the Apothecary’s Guild...”

“Sara! Morning.”

“Nelly!”

Nelly walked into the dining room, still looking half asleep. She refused help from the maids at almost all times, so her hair was a little messy in its ponytail. She must have rushed to get dressed because Sara wasn’t there when she woke up.

When Sara stood, Nelly hugged her tightly like she had when Sara was younger, a big smile on her face. “I heard you took down a wyvern. That’s my

Sara!”

“It just hit my barrier like always.” Sara repeated the same excuse, but Nelly shook her head.

“So what? That just means your barrier is both your shield *and* your sword. Just like these are for me.” She showed Sara her fists and Sara’s eyes sparkled.

“You really are cool, Nelly!”

“A-Am I?” She was cute getting all red with embarrassment too.

“Come on, let’s have breakfast.”

“Sure.”

The servants who had been hanging back while Chris and Sara had tea began busily moving about.

“I heard more or less everything from Chris.”

“Oh yeah? Come to think of it, where is he?”

Chris was always clinging to Nelly to an almost annoying degree, even first thing in the morning, but it had taken her this long to realize he was missing.

“He headed to the Apothecary’s Guild a little while ago. We were talking about whether the repellent might work on continental tortoises.”

“On a turtle? They’re pretty different from dragons, aren’t they?”

“So you might think, but...” Sara repeated the explanation she’d given Chris earlier.

“You Invited really do think about things differently.”

“Well, I don’t actually know if turtles and dragons are the same in this world.”

Ri arrived while they were talking.

“Morning, Neffie, Sara.”

“Good morning.”

“Good morning, father.”

He plopped down into a chair, not hiding his fatigue at all.

“Certainly takes a toll, staying up late at my age. Did this continental tortoise really have to show up in *my* generation?”

“I know, right? Oh, I mean about the continental tortoise, of course.” Sara nodded in agreement.

“Thanks, Sara. Now, I imagine you’ve heard from the other two, but...” She hadn’t heard anything from Nelly, who’d prioritized praising her, but Sara waited for him to continue regardless. “For Hydrangea’s part in things, once the continental tortoise leaves the dungeon and begins to head north, I imagine we’ll be escorting it on its way to the capital.”

“Escorting it?” That made it sound like they would be trying to keep it safe as it moved northward.

“That’s right. Just like the migrating dragons, the goal is to see it on its way while avoiding hurting it as much as possible.”

“Is that how it works?” That made sense to Sara. If there were a turtle as huge as a house near her, she’d rather let it go on its way, *far* away, than kill it.

“According to the records, no attacks or magic have ever worked on them. But all accounts agree that soon after entering the Dark Mountain, the continental tortoises just vanish. Personally, as long as the south remains safe, that’s enough for me.”

Sara didn’t disagree. That was probably the right attitude to have as the lord of the region.

“The Hunter’s Guild wants to strengthen our management of the warped space inside the dungeon and send a few skilled Hunters along with the knight corps to escort the turtle.”

Sara nodded thoughtfully. Ri hadn’t heard what Chris had told her, yet his explanation had perfectly filled in the gaps in Chris’s story.

At that point, Ri gave Sara an apologetic look. “I’d like you to accompany Neffie on the escort to the capital, Sara. What do you think?”

“I don’t mind,” Sara said reflexively. She *did* mind, of course, but she figured she’d be roped into doing *something* as one of the Invited. She just didn’t think

it would be escorting the turtle, so bewilderment was her primary reaction. She'd reflexively assented when she heard she'd be with Nelly. She was a little worried, but she was sure she'd be fine. There was something about what Ri had said that bothered her, though.

"Umm, Ri... I assume my job will be to use my barrier if the situation calls for it, but you just said magic doesn't work on continental tortoises, right? Will my barrier work on it?"

"Hrm. I will admit we were somewhat counting on the idea." He twisted his mustache thoughtfully. "Well, they managed in the past when there was no such thing as your barrier. For now, all I ask is that you make a show of participating so Hydrangea doesn't get accused of holding back any powerful assets."

"As an Invited, right? If that's all I have to do, then okay."

Sara wasn't hiding the fact that she was one of the Invited anymore. She didn't mind people knowing as long as that was better for Ri and the people close to her.

"I guess I'd like to see if my barrier does work on it or not, though..." Sara murmured.

Nelly, who had been listening to their exchange quietly up until now, smirked. "Sounds good to me."

"Huh?"

"I said it sounds good to me," Nelly repeated, adding, "We've got about seven days until the continental tortoise is supposed to leave the dungeon. I feel a bit bad for it, but we plan to see whether physical and magical attacks really don't work on it before then."

"But isn't it dangerous if it gets mad?"

"That's why we're doing it while it's still in the dungeon."

She couldn't say it to her face, but Sara was kind of impressed Nelly was actually using her head. She figured she'd say something like "Just push it with physical strengthening and it'll work out somehow."

Nelly frowned, seeing Sara go quiet. “Sara. I’m not *that* bad.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“It got across anyway.”

“Ha ha ha, you’re imagining it.”

It was rare for Sara to have Nelly glaring at her like this, so she took the time to enjoy the experience until Nelly dropped the cross look.

“Well, you’ll understand when you see it. That thing’s not something you can handle with brute strength or cheap tricks. It’s pretty much a natural disaster.”

Sara finally understood what she meant when she went into the dungeon with Nelly later that day. She’d raced down to the lower levels with Allen, Kuntz, and some veteran Hunters, and the deeper in they got, the more she could feel the whole dungeon shaking in heavy *thuds*.

“That’s not...?”

“It is,” Nelly responded. “That’s the continental tortoise’s footsteps.”

“It’s crazy that you can feel it on different floors.” Kuntz whistled, impressed.

“Hmm...” Sara glanced around as they jogged. She’d only seen the odd hellhound here and there on the higher floors, but here there were packs of them chasing elk in the distance. Wyverns were flying in the sky too. “It’s like the Dark Mountain down here. How nostalgic!”

“It may look the same, but the monsters here are weaker,” Nelly told her.

Kuntz shook his head in exasperation. “The way you guys talk is crazy. You two really come from a unique environment, huh?”

Sara wasn’t sure what to say to that. Until she’d made it to Rosa, she didn’t even know her situation was unique.

Eventually, it wasn’t just shaking. When they arrived on a floor where they could *hear* the footsteps too, Nelly stopped.

“Floor twelve. It stopped on the thirteenth floor last night, so by now it’s probably on this one. See?”

With each booming *thud*, winged monsters took off into the sky. They met up

with the Hunters who had been watching the turtle since last night.

This would be Sara's first time seeing it. Were the loud crashes she heard now and then trees falling over?

"Ready?" Nelly asked her.

Sara, Kuntz, Allen, and the Hunters all nodded. They pushed forward toward the noises until they could see a grey mountain poking up above the trees.

"That mountain's...moving."

It was a strange sight. With each thud and crash, the mountain poking up above the trees moved forward.

"Caw!"

"Ack!"

A bunch of enormous chickens burst out from the trees and ran past them. Sara could block them with her barrier, but she couldn't prevent the surprise.

"Their tails...were snakes."

"Those were cockatrices. You used to stew those tails all the time, remember? If we had time, I'd hunt one. It's too bad." Nelly was operating as normal.

"It really is heading right for the warp in the wall. Okay, let's get ahead of it and wait for it to come out of the forest."

The vibrations seemed to shake the very air along with the ground. They headed for the edge of the forest and waited a slight distance away from it. As Sara watched the trees, she heard a groan from beside her.

"Urgh..."

"Kuntz? What's wrong?" Allen asked, sounding curious, but it wasn't just Kuntz. A few of the Hunters with them also seemed to be feeling something unpleasant.

"You don't feel that, Allen? You really are strong..." Kuntz smiled wryly even as he endured whatever discomfort he was feeling. "It's pressure."

"Pressure?"

“Mana pressure. Nelly and Zachary might not have felt it, but I sense a ton of mana. Like more than I’ve ever felt from a person before.”

The other Hunters nodded in agreement. Needless to say, Sara felt nothing. She gave Nelly a curious glance but found that she was just standing there coolly. Allen was the same.

“If it’s too much for you, you can back up. You should be able to see it from pretty far away.”

It wasn’t like they needed to be near it. They were only observing it today, so Nelly directed the affected Hunters to stay back. Zachary and Chris were debating with some others in the Hunter’s Guild what sort of experiments they should run with the continental tortoise.

The rumbling in the forest quickly grew louder. The first thing to emerge was a head on a long neck. As it slid out, Sara felt shock seize her heart.

“A-A snake?”

With its legs and shell still hidden in the trees, it looked like a thick snake emerging from the forest. And they were a little far away still, but she could tell that the head was emerging at a height taller than a two-story building.

Before her surprise could abate, the front left leg emerged, then the right. Eventually, the shell followed, towering over everything else.

“I-It’s huge,” one of the watching Hunters murmured, voice quivering with surprise and awe. It definitely looked like a turtle, but it was bigger than some of the larger buildings in town, so it was a rather otherworldly sight.



“It’ll head straight for the warp in the wall. It keeps going all day without eating and without sparing a glance for anything around it, just proceeding at a regular speed the whole time.”

“Wow...”

The head and legs under its huge shell should have been softer, relatively speaking, but it was like a moving stone. Sara couldn’t even imagine attacking it. She understood what people meant when they called it a walking natural disaster. Yet Nelly was watching it with her arms folded and her eyes narrowed, almost as if she was trying to find its weak point.

“Most things with hard skin are vulnerable at joints and places that are softer.”

“I knew it...” Sara sighed, but she supposed it was only natural for a skilled Hunter to consider how to take down any sort of monster.

“But even if you could get a blade into one of its softer spots, its skin is so thick, I dunno if you’d even be able to reach any meat.”

To the continental tortoise, humans were like insects.

“What about the eyes, Nelly?” Allen suggested. He was observing the turtle carefully with his arms crossed as well.

“Yeah. The eyes or the inside of the mouth. A caster might be better suited for something like that.”

“The eyes... You might be able to take out the eyes, or hurt it inside its mouth... I don’t think you could do fatal damage with magic when it’s that size, though.” Kuntz was participating in the conversation even through his discomfort.

“That’s a caster’s opinion, eh? Oh, we should get moving too.”

The continental tortoise’s individual movements were slow, but its stride was so long, it was moving at the same pace as a human with physical strengthening activated. Even as they spoke, the turtle sped right past them.

Running alongside it, Sara realized this was what escorting it to the capital would be like. It might be pretty hard to spend all day running...

Eventually, the dungeon wall came into view. Still running, Nelly murmured, “Don’t you want to see it from up close, Sara?”

“Huh? Me?” She didn’t think so...

Nelly nodded. “Yeah, you want to get right up close to it too, don’t you?”

“Err, no, not really... Ack!” Sara tried to deny it, but it was too late. Nelly pulled Sara to her. Being so much shorter than her, Sara’s legs lifted right off the ground.

“Let’s go.”

“Huh? I don’t wa—waaah!”

Just like that, Nelly ran right up the continental tortoise. From up close, it really did just look like a rocky cliff face. Or maybe ancient ruins. Sara was aware she was making these observations to try to escape from reality.

“I’m gonna jump.”

Sara knew there was nothing she could do at this point to stop her, so she simply let Nelly do what she would. With a firm step forward, Nelly jumped high in the air. *Wow, so you can use physical strengthening for jumping and not just for running*, Sara thought as she flew in the air. The turtle’s shell approached rapidly. Then they started falling.

“Okay!”

It’s not okay, is it? The words weren’t even leaving Sara’s mouth at this point.

Nelly landed on one of the turtle’s front legs, but as soon as she set down on it, she jumped again, so Sara was left floating and falling in the air with no idea what was going on.

“That should do it.”

Do what? Sara wanted to say, but they’d finally landed on solid ground, so she sat down with some relief.

“Ha ha ha! I can see so far away!” The strangely cheerful voice was Allen’s. Sara looked up to see him gazing into the distance, a hand held up to shade his face. Sara followed his gaze and was almost struck with vertigo.

“I-Is this...?”

“Yeah. We’re on the continental tortoise’s shell.”

“That’s a little *too* close, isn’t it?”

Nelly *did* say she wanted to get closer, but this wasn’t close. This was *on*.

“Good one, Sara.”

For some reason, Allen was up here with them. Sara wanted to ask if he was really enjoying himself as much as he seemed to be. He must have followed after Nelly. He really was athletic.

“You were pretty shocked just now. Sure your barrier’s still up?” Allen asked teasingly.

Sara glared at him pitifully. “Are you really saying that as the person who shocked me out of my barrier first?”

“Sorry, sorry.” Allen scratched his head awkwardly.

Anyway, Sara *did* still have her barrier up. Even if she normally just worked as an apothecary, she never neglected to practice her barrier. It didn’t come off now unless something really crazy happened.

“Huh? It should still be up...”

She could feel the heavy thuds of the turtle’s feet on the ground, and see its head down beneath her. In other words, Sara was in fact on top of the continental tortoise. And her barrier still existed around her, but it seemed to have vanished somewhere around her feet.

Still sitting, Sara put her hands down on the ground—or rather, the turtle’s shell.

“It’s gone...” The barrier around her hands vanished.

Sara thought for a moment, then made her barrier larger. “It’s fine on top, but the part where it touches the turtle disappeared...”

“Gyeee!”

A wyvern that had sneaked up on them hit Sara’s enlarged barrier and tumbled down off the turtle’s shell.

“Ah, what a waste! Oh, the Hunters down there picked it up. Good.” Allen followed the wyvern with his eyes, looking relieved, but Sara could hardly pay attention to that at the moment.

“My barrier just vanishes whenever it hits the turtle’s shell. Why? Because magic doesn’t work on it?” Sara kept trying to hit the shell with her barrier, paying attention to how it felt when it disappeared. “It’s less like it doesn’t work... It feels like...it’s sucking it up.”

“What’s the difference?”

Sara couldn’t answer Nelly’s question right away. “Umm... It’s not that the magic has no effect, or is breaking down... It’s like the mana is disappearing as soon as I make the barrier.” She wasn’t sure how to describe what she felt.

“Hmm.” Nelly looked down at the turtle’s shell. Suddenly, she knelt down and touched it. Then she slowly brought her hand up, formed a fist, and rammed it into the shell.

“Ouch...” She looked down dazedly at her fist, letting out a rare grunt of pain. Sara looked over and found that her hand was red and scraped.

“Oh, Nelly... That’s not good!” She scrambled to hold Nelly’s hand in hers, then gasped and pulled a potion from her pouch, sprinkling it over Nelly’s fingers.

“A-Ah, Sara. Thanks.” Nelly opened and closed her fist, testing her hand.

“Physical strengthening is magic, but you cast it on the thing you want to strengthen. I thought maybe it wouldn’t dispel it even if magic doesn’t work on it, since you’re casting it on yourself. We got onto the shell with physical strengthening, after all.” Nelly spoke like she was talking to herself. “But when I hit the shell with my fist, it felt like the physical strengthening went away just from the surface of my hand. I get what you mean now, Sara.”

Watching her, Allen closed his own fist and hit it against the turtle’s shell a few times experimentally. “It’s not getting dispersed... Disappearing? Close... Yeah, I think it’s getting sucked out.”

He stood up. “Nelly, Sara.”

They gulped, waiting to hear what he would say next.

“We’re about to reach the wall. Let’s get back down. Everyone’s calling us.”

“Oh, that’s it?” Sara deflated a bit, but she was glad that at least one of them could make rational judgments in this situation. If they got caught up in the wall warp with the turtle, they had no idea what would happen.

To her chagrin, Sara, who had been carried up here like luggage by Nelly, was once again carried like luggage back to the ground.

“Hard to imagine this is the kid who’s taken down two wyverns.” Kuntz laughed as she staggered over to him, but she couldn’t help it. To her, physical strengthening was for running, not jumping.

“You’d understand how I feel if you let someone jump around with you like that too, Kuntz. And what do you mean, ‘two wyverns’?”

“You got another one just now, didn’t you?”

“I got it right here for ya,” one of the Hunters told her, indicating his bag.

“It just hit my barrier on its own...” Sara grumbled.

With some exasperation, Nelly said, “Didn’t I tell you, Sara? Your barrier is your shield *and* your sword.”

“That’s right. All us Hunters acknowledge your skill, so don’t put yourself down,” another Hunter added.

“Anyway, take a look at that.”

Everyone turned around to find the continental tortoise walking straight into one of the dungeon’s walls.

“Aah, it’s gonna...*not* hit it...?”

Even if she knew it would go right through, she couldn’t help bracing for impact. Without a sound, the continental tortoise buried its head in the wall, then its left leg, then its right, then its shell, and finally its tail. It was incredibly strange watching it all disappear like that.

“It really moves through floors like that...” Allen muttered. Even if no one else said it, they were all thinking it.

“Come on, let’s get back up to the next floor,” Nelly said, and they all took off running again.

It was a busy day.

The continental tortoise proceeded forward every day at a steady pace, while the Hunter’s Guild tried out every kind of attack against it they could think of. Of course, they weren’t actually trying to take the tortoise down. They were merely trying to see if they could hit it at all with magic or with physical attacks, and if they could, *where* they could. But no matter what sort of attack they tried and where they struck at the tortoise, they couldn’t inflict a single wound on it. The single time the tortoise showed any response to an attack was when its eye was hit, but all that response amounted to was a white film covering the tortoise’s eye for perhaps a second or two.

“A third eyelid, eh? And it’s solid...”

The turtle had a nictitating membrane, also known as a third eyelid, to protect its eyes.

“Well, if it closed its third eyelid, that means it’s at least acknowledged that it’s being attacked. That’s it, though. It hasn’t shown any other reaction.”

Thed, the Guild Director, was growing frustrated at this lack of results. “We can’t lift a finger against it. For as much offensive force as we have, we may as well be the turtle.”

Clever, thought Sara, but it didn’t seem like the time for witty comments, so she kept it to herself.

“It’ll leave the dungeon tomorrow, but who knows if Chris’ll have his repellent ready in time...”

Since they didn’t have any stock of the repellent remaining, Chris had had to start from scratch gathering the silver dragonmint, so it would be a while until he was finished with the drug.

Thed had been sulking, with his eyes to the ground, but he suddenly looked up, his expression brightening. “Oh wait, he made it!”

Sara could see Chris walking toward them from the entrance to the floor.

He'd been getting back to the mansion late at night recently, and Sara hadn't crossed paths with him at all, so it felt as though she hadn't seen him in ages. Of course, Chris being Chris, he wasn't even perceiving Sara in that moment, she was sure.

She *thought* he was here to deliver the repellent, but he headed straight for Nelly instead, reaching his arms out as if to embrace her. "Nef! I've been so busy, I haven't gotten enough of you!"

"Yeah, yeah. Hand over the repellent." Nelly mercilessly swatted away Chris's hands and then delivered a line like a mugger or something, which Sara had to admit amused her.

"Oh, fine. This was a lot of work, you know," Chris grumbled, reluctantly pulling two bottles out of his pouch.

Nelly took them and showed them to Thed. "What do you want to do with these, Thed?"

"Well, let's see... What do you think, Chris?"

If he was just going to ask Chris about it, then there was no reason for Nelly to be in between them. Still, after wiping the lovestruck look off of his face, Chris turned to face Thed properly.

"Sending the smell their way with a bonfire at a considerable distance was enough for the migrating dragons, but we don't have time to experiment now."

"Yeah. There's just no time..."

"In which case..." Chris turned to face the Hunters nearby. "I believe we should follow the example of the knights in the capital. Umm, those here who observed the knights' use of the paralysis agent would be...?"

"Me."

"I did too."

Nelly and Kuntz spoke up in response to Chris's question. Nelly was the only one who had been called directly to the capital, and Kuntz was the only person there who had responded to the capital's general call for Hunters.

"I didn't participate, but I saw them from up close as Sara's guard," Allen

supplied. “But the knights used bows and arrows with the paralysis agent attached to them. I don’t think there are any archers here.” He seemed to think it would be difficult to follow their example.

“True, it would be difficult to use arrows, but casters could launch them like they do with stones, yes? They could also be thrown using physical strengthening, I believe,” Chris suggested.

Thed shot a look at the tortoise’s tail. It had moved a fair distance from them by now. “Veteran Hunters should be able to handle that. That’s only if that thing stops, though.”

“Hrm.”

Even people using physical strengthening to run could barely keep up with the beast. It was hard to imagine anyone being able to accurately toss a bottle at a head two stories high while running.

“No, sorry, Chris. Your job was making the drug, and figuring out how to use it is what we Hunters should be doing. I didn’t mean to sound like you should be responsible for figuring all this out.”

Thed apologized and shook his head as if trying to dislodge something from his skull. His urge to push responsibility onto someone else, Sara supposed.

“Then I’ll—”

“Then I can—”

Nelly and Allen spoke up at the same time. They exchanged a look.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. You’re still just my student. Let your mentor handle this.”

“You’re the one who should start considering your health a bit more.”

“Eep!” Sara couldn’t help yelping. She didn’t know why a mentor-student showdown had suddenly started, and she didn’t know what to do about it. To make matters worse, both of their voices were harsh in a way she rarely heard from either.

“Nelly. Gimme one of those bottles.”

“You don’t understand. This is far too dangerous.”

She didn’t know what either of them planned, but they each clearly wanted to be the one to take on the dangerous job.

“I *do* understand. So let’s do it together. Only one of us needs to hit it.”

“Hmm.”

The two of them were having a conversation no one else could understand. Sara certainly couldn’t keep up with it.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

“Wait a second!” Thed finally stopped them. “What exactly is it you two are planning?”

Nelly waved the hand that wasn’t holding the repellent. “We’re just gonna go up on top of the turtle.”

“The top of a continental tortoise is not the sort of place you say you’re going to as though it’s a destination for a Sunday picnic,” Sara wanted to tell her.

“We won’t have to run if we’re throwing from the top of the shell, right?”

It was also not a place to go just so that you didn’t have to do any running.

“Wha—?! That’s too reckless!”

Thed reached out to try to stop them, but they dodged his hands effortlessly, sprinting at top speed over to the continental tortoise.

“Those stupid muscleheads!”

“Pfft!” No matter how nervous the current situation made her, Sara still burst out laughing at the words “stupid muscleheads.”

Chris cautioned her, however. “This is no time to be laughing, Sara. We need to catch up with Nef before she throws the repellent. There’s no telling what could happen.”

“Oh, right. Also, please don’t forget about Allen,” she said. It was troubling how everything that didn’t have to do with Nelly fell right out of Chris’s skull.

They all hurried to make it to somewhere they could see the tortoise's head from. Looking up at it as they raced beside it, they could see two figures atop its shell. The figures turned toward one another, nodded, and wound up to throw. The onlookers couldn't hear anything over the thud of the tortoise's footsteps, but one of the bottles clearly hit its head. They could just barely make out the drops of liquid sparkling in the air.

The tortoise took two more thudding steps forward before stopping.

"Oh, it finally stopped!" Thed shouted, halting at the same time.

Chris didn't share his joy, however. "Nef! Allen! Get down, right now!" he called to the two of them, who were still observing the tortoise from atop its shell. Alerted by his voice, they exchanged a look and nodded again, when...

"FSSSH."

There was a sound like air escaping from something and the tortoise whipped its head back, slamming it against its own shell at an impossible angle. Nelly and Allen had already been readying themselves to jump, so they avoided taking a direct hit, but they instead lost their balance and fell from the shell.

"Nef!"

Unlike Chris, Sara just watched them fall silently. It must have looked like she was frozen in shock, but there was actually quite a production going on inside her head. Unfortunately, she'd had many encounters with danger of this sort by now.

"Don't just stand there. Figure out what you can do," she told herself. The two of them had lost their balance and fallen, but they would be able to right themselves in the air. She was sure of that. But what if the tortoise moved as soon as they hit the ground? They would land right by the tortoise's front legs. If it started rampaging that close to them, they wouldn't stand a chance, even with their physical strengthening. Sara couldn't even protect them with her barrier, since it would disappear the moment the tortoise touched it. What she needed to do, then, was get Nelly and Allen away from the tortoise as quickly as possible.

"I did it with the seven-colored swallowtails before... I can catch the two of

them in a net!” It didn’t even take a second for her to come up with the idea and make a decision.

Sara extended her barrier out around Nelly and Allen, who had fallen in a jumble from the tortoise’s shell. At the same time, the tortoise’s head returned to its original position and it raised its front leg.

“Make sure the barrier doesn’t touch the turtle... Okay! Come here!”

She pulled her barrier back toward her, lowering it gently to the ground. When she released it, Nelly and Allen immediately stood, if unsteadily, and got ready to move again, knowing the danger hadn’t passed yet.

“You saved us, Sara.”

“Thanks!”

The tortoise was whipping its head around, rubbing its face against the ground and its shell and stomping its feet so loudly that it was hard to even hear the two of them thanking her.

“Everyone, move back!” Thed shouted, and everyone began running, only stopping once they were far enough to escape if anything else happened. At the same time, the tortoise retracted its head and legs and stopped moving.

“We would have gotten trampled or squashed under that shell at that rate...” Nelly said, wiping some sweat from her brow.

Sara figured their athletic abilities would have saved them even if she hadn’t done anything, but she was still glad she’d acted so quickly.

“Let me thank you again, Sara.”

“Yeah, seriously. It was a weird feeling being pulled through the air, but I really understand how the seven-colored swallowtails felt now.”

It drained the energy from her somewhat to see them acting so normal in a situation like this, but she was relieved they were safe regardless.

“This isn’t looking good, though.” Chris crossed his arms, observing the now-motionless tortoise.

“Why? We know the repellent works on continental tortoises now. And pretty

effectively.”

They’d stopped its movements completely with just two bottles of repellent. Why shouldn’t they be happy about finally finding something effective against a creature completely immune to magic, physical attacks, and even Sara’s barrier? Everyone else seemed to agree with Thed’s thinking.

“It’s true that it was effective. It managed to stop the continental tortoise. But look at it,” said Chris. “The tortoise is just sitting there. It hasn’t actually changed direction at all.”

“True... It just writhed around in place and then sat down.”

“And why has the Hunter’s Guild been experimenting with what might affect the continental tortoise?” Chris asked, and Sara gasped. It wasn’t to hurt it or to hunt it.

“To change its course so it doesn’t hit the capital...”

It was because the continental tortoise would surface in Hydrangea, so it was likely to graze the capital as it headed north to the Dark Mountain. The whole point of this was to see if they could harass it into changing its course, however slightly.

No one said anything for the next half an hour or so as they just observed the tortoise. Suddenly, it planted its legs on the ground and stood back up loudly.

“It was ramming its head into its shell not to attack us but to try to wipe the repellent off of it,” Nelly murmured. Just as she observed, the continental tortoise showed no interest in Nelly and Allen, who had hit it with the repellent, or anyone else in their group. It just started to move again in the same direction it had originally been headed in.

“It might be meaningless to hit it directly with the repellent if all it does is buy us time. It’s good to know that there’s pretty much nothing we can do to it that’ll make it attack us, though,” Nelly said.

Thed nodded. “We’ll probably just have to evacuate the residents beforehand. It seems like there’ll be some damage to the eastern part of the capital no matter what we do.” He sighed. “With this, we’ve tested everything we can test inside Hydrangea’s dungeon. I’ll get it all together and send my

report to the capital, then we'll escort it there, and that'll be that."

The capital would just have to handle things there itself. Once the continental tortoise left, in a sense, it wasn't Hydrangea's problem anymore. Their experiment with the repellent had been successful. They didn't know if this success would mean anything, but everyone there was satisfied for now that they'd done what they could.

The next day, the continental tortoise left the dungeon. A bunch of people had gathered around the rift in space where the wyvern and hellhounds had emerged, hoping to catch a glimpse of it.

"Please stay back! It's big enough that you'll be able to see it plenty well from a distance!"

The southern knight corps was doing its best to keep the rubberneckers at arm's length. At first, Riot had wanted to evacuate the residents of Hydrangea until the continental tortoise was well on its way to the Dark Mountain just to be safe, but after all their observations in the dungeon, they'd determined that almost nothing could make it stray from its path, so he decided people would be able to watch its journey as long as they stayed a certain distance away. It was a decision that would likely never have been made in modern Japan, but then Japan didn't have monsters, Sara figured, smiling wryly.

"Feels pretty weird to be seeing this. It's like something out of a movie. Even weirder that I'm somehow one of the main characters." She'd always wanted to avoid having anything to do with monsters, and here she was heading to the capital as part of a transport squad for a *huge* one.

"What's a movie? And are you not scared, Sara?" Noel asked in response to her murmured comment.

As to why a thirteen-year-old like Noel was in this same transport squad, this too was an "experience." He wasn't particularly good at physical strengthening, so he would be confined to a carriage for the majority of the trip, unfortunately. Still, he'd insisted on being able to see the continental tortoise's journey through, and Ri had relented, so he was coming with. Chris didn't argue either, since the prime minister's family had asked him to supply Noel with

experiences. Sara had no room to talk as someone who spoiled him somewhat as his senior apothecary, but she really did think everyone indulged him too much.

Sara gave him the gist of what movies were, then explained why she wasn't scared. "I saw a whole lot of it inside the dungeon, and all it wants to do is go north. It has pretty much no interest in us."

"No interest? Even though there are so many people here?"

"What do you think when there are a bunch of ants at your feet, Noel?"

"Ants? Huh? Where?" He glanced down at his feet before realizing, "Oh, so we're like ants to it?"

"That's what I think. We don't even notice the ants at our feet when we're walking to our destination, right?"

"But that can't be! Humans rule the world!"

Sara gave him a wry grin. This was the first time she really saw him as Liam's brother. The presumptuous idea that humans had to take charge of everything themselves was just like Liam. People thought humans were the rulers of the world back on Earth too. Because of that idea, they'd used up the Earth's resources, changing the environment however they liked, and had only just been starting to figure out that that way of thinking was problematic when Sara departed.

"We don't rule it. Dungeons and such are just sharing their blessings with us. That's what I think, at least."

"But...!" Noel didn't seem to accept that, so Sara decided to explain further.

"If we ruled the world, we wouldn't be bothered by migrating dragons so much, and we wouldn't need protection cases to defend ourselves from monsters either. Don't you think it's more like we all exist in this world, us bothering them and them bothering us?"

"There's no way we're on equal footing with monsters."

Sara had no intent to force her way of thinking on him, so she just waved her hand to end the conversation. "Anyway, I think it'll be coming out soon. Do you

feel the shaking getting stronger?”

It was the same way when the tortoise was going between floors. As the huge group of people watched with bated breath, the continental tortoise revealed itself, just like it had when Sara had first seen it down in the dungeon. Its head appeared first, poking out of empty space like a snake. Even from a distance, it was easy to tell how huge it was. Especially since Nelly and some other Hunters were waiting at the spot where they thought it'd appear.

And just like Sara back then, the group of people were all speechless. They were probably all too surprised to even scream.

Next, the tortoise's front leg appeared, then its shell, its other front leg, and the rest of it. And as soon as its entire mountainous form was visible, they could already see its retreating tail. That was how quickly it moved.

The Hunters and knights waiting for it took off at once, following after it.

“Come on, let's go too.”

“Right!”

Sara climbed into the carriage with Noel and a few others, heralding the start of a two-week trip to the capital.

Chapter 2: Capital Combat

Though they were using physical strengthening to chase after the tortoise, it wasn't as if they had to race as fast as they could. Since it would take it two weeks to reach the capital, it would be a rather leisurely trip by carriage. But in fact, keeping up with the continental tortoise, which kept a steady march from sunrise to sunset, was more difficult than they'd anticipated.

The tortoise was heading straight for the Dark Mountain. It would avoid any mountains or other steep rises in its way, but beyond that, it would continue moving in a straight line. At times, it strayed from the roads or cut across them, so they had to constantly predict its route and do their best to keep up.

Sara and the carriage group started moving before the sun rose to get in front of it so they would be able to stop later in the day. They were constantly being overtaken by the tortoise and then rushing to catch up. The Hunters and knights racing alongside it would ride in the carriage at times so they could rest, and even with Sara's stamina, she was collapsing into her bed in utter exhaustion when they stopped to rest at inns.

Noel was even more tired than Sara, but he couldn't hide his excitement every time he caught sight of the continental tortoise, not to mention the horned rabbits hopping about and the faraway flocks of cotton sheep in the distance. He was clearly enjoying the ride regardless of the circumstances. Since there was nothing to do inside the carriage otherwise, however, he asked Sara to teach him how to use physical strengthening. When he bragged about this to Allen, the older boy, whose philosophy was "put it into practice," dragged him outside and made Noel run with him for a bit. He really was just like Nelly, Sara thought with a wry grin.

Despite all the exhaustion, their job amounted to nothing more than watching the continental tortoise as they moved, and they got to spend the time with those close to them, so the trip seemed to fly by. Around the halfway point, however, a horse came charging toward them at high speed from the road that

led to the capital.

“That doesn’t look like our regular messenger. I wonder if something happened,” Noel commented.

Sara and the carriage contingent were resting ahead of the continental tortoise at the moment, so they were the first to notice the horse. It was a rather monotonous trip, so Noel got excited when something out of the ordinary occurred.

“A rider from the capital, eh? Can’t say I have too many pleasant memories of the place...”

More specifically, of the knights and Hunter’s Guild in the capital, who were handling the capital’s response to the continental tortoise. She felt a little bad saying it in front of Noel, but Sara had no positive feelings associated with the knights of the capital.

While she continued getting the most out of her break, since they had to rest when they could, the rider approached Sara with the leader of the southern knight corps.

“Ugh, I have a bad feeling about this... I hope they’re just here to bring Noel home or something...”

“I don’t want to go home! I’m having fun!”

They’d become close enough to complain to each other about what they didn’t want. Of course, Sara’s hopes were dashed as the messenger approached with his gaze fixed firmly on her. She stood reluctantly and waited for him to say his piece.

“I take it you are the Invited, Lady Ichinok Rasarasa.”

“Hm?! Oh, I mean, yes, that’s me, but just Sara is fine.”

She was taken by surprise for a moment, since she hadn’t heard Nelly’s mistaken name for her—well, not mistaken, she supposed, just “Trilgaianized”—in a while.

“I’m to deliver this to you first, as Lady Nefertari and Lord Allen are running alongside the continental tortoise at the moment.”

Letters from the capital never had anything good in them. It was suspicious that there were letters for Nelly and Allen too as well. The envelope she received was from the Hunter's Guild, however, so she relaxed a bit as she opened it.

"Blegh..." Her honest feelings slipped out of her mouth after she scanned the letter, and the messenger's gaze grew a bit sharper.

"A personal request is an honor. You may be one of the Invited, but you're still rather young, so perhaps you should have a bit more awareness of your position."

If this were right when Sara had arrived in Hydrangea, she'd probably have shrunk from his words and sulked over them. But Sara was different now.

"I think the knights should think about *their* position, trying to rely on a young apothecary even if she *may* be one of the Invited." She was able to talk back to him that much, at least.

The messenger was taken aback for a moment before processing what she'd said to him. "What did you say?!" he fumed. Sara expanded and strengthened her barrier just in case.

"I heard from Nelly that it's up to the recipient whether or not they accept a personal request. But I'm certainly not in the mood to accept when the request was brought to me by someone with your attitude."

"Ugh..."

"I'll decide after I discuss it with my guardian, Nelly. Thank you for your service."

Sara thanked him politely and got back into the carriage. She saw Noel say something to the messenger before hurrying after her.

When she sat down in the carriage, she noticed that her hands were shaking. She was able to talk back to him, but she didn't exactly like the things she'd said. She'd talked back because she knew she'd be taken advantage of if she didn't stand up for herself, but she'd fled into the carriage because her own words had caused tears to well in her eyes and she didn't want anyone seeing that.

“Sara! Please quell your anger! I gave him a stern warning about being so rude with an Invi— Huh...?”

She tried to tell him she wasn't angry. If anything, she felt pathetic for not being able to stop herself from talking back to him like that. She should have expressed her frustrations more amicably, or simply ignored the comment.

“The personal request upset you enough to cry... Yes, I suppose that makes sense. You're just a frail girl... I mean, I saw you take down a wyvern... I've been with you long enough to know that you're not actually frail, but...”

It embarrassed her as his elder to be seen getting emotional and crying. It wasn't for the sake of hiding that embarrassment, but Sara read aloud the simple letter she'd received.

““Lady Ichinok Rasarasa. We request your participation in the capital knights' subjugation of the continental tortoise.””

She'd thought those from Hydrangea would be done with their part of the job after escorting the tortoise to the capital. If they wanted her help for what came after that, she wasn't opposed to helping. But did it really have to be *her*?

“I really don't mind doing what I can to help, but if magic doesn't work on it and my barrier is useless, what's the point in asking me for help?”

“Umm, I think it's...for peace of mind. It feels reassuring to have the Invited around. It was really fun hearing rumors about them back when there were two in the capital. I especially liked hearing about Lord Haruto's exploits, since he's close to my age.”

“Haruto, huh? And Bradley, right? That takes me back...”

Sara's expression brightened again when she heard the familiar names of some other Invited. Still, the personal request had really brought her mood down.

“I don't really like the idea of devoting my time to someone else's peace of mind, though. I mean, I'm an apothecary...” She was expecting to hear agreement from Noel, so when he didn't say anything, she gave him a bit of a suspicious look.

He seemed to be choosing his words carefully. “Listen, Sara... I’m sorry I’m not doing a very good job of comforting you. I know I could just tell you I understand what you mean, but frankly...putting aside the contents of the request, I just can’t understand having the sort of abilities that warrant you receiving a personal request, and then turning it down. I’m not sure what else to say...”

When he said that, Sara finally realized that she was just complaining to Noel in the hopes of getting him to comfort her, which just made her feel *more* pathetic. She hung her head, looking down at the letter in her hands. Subjugation of the continental tortoise. Subjugation?

Sara’s head snapped up. The Hydrangea group was *escorting* the continental tortoise. They were just traveling alongside it until it reached the capital on its way to the Dark Mountain. They weren’t *subjugating* it.

“Huh? Subjugation? Wait, the knights in the capital want to *subjugate* the continental tortoise? That can’t be, right?”

The unsettling word was all that filled Sara’s mind now, her embarrassment forgotten.

“Can Nelly and Allen come back soon...?”

Sara left the carriage to wait for the continental tortoise and its escorts. When the tortoise did in fact pass them by, the messenger watched it dazedly before shooting Sara a chilly look and handing Nelly and Allen their personal requests.

Nelly seemed to have an idea what the letter would say before she opened it and read it, but Allen reacted like Sara had, wide-eyed with surprise.

“A personal request? For me? Not just Nelly?” He glanced around as if unconsciously seeking Sara out. She waved her hand at him, her own letter still clasped in it.

His face brightened when he saw it. He must have been relieved to see that she’d gotten the same request as the two of them. Personal requests usually came through the guild, so the fact that these ones had come by messenger meant they had been issued rather suddenly.

All Nelly told the messenger was, “Thanks,” so Sara regretted everything

she'd said to him anew. She should have just done the same herself. There was no need to tell the messenger whether or not she was accepting. If she was going to participate, all she had to do was join in when the knights in the capital had their strategy meeting. Of course, nothing in the letter said what she should do if she *wasn't* participating.

"Sara! You got a personal request too?" Allen bounded over. His enthusiasm was only natural. A personal request was a sign of acknowledgment to a Hunter.

"Yeah. You did too, right?"

"Yep. See?" They showed each other their letters, which said exactly the same thing.

"Man, I'm jealous... I want to work hard enough to get a personal request someday too, but I'm feeling less and less confident lately..."

Kuntz, who'd come over with Allen, wore a sad smile. It was probably pretty hard to be in a party with someone when only the other person received a personal request.

Sara looked over at Kuntz and did a double take when she saw how pale he was. "Kuntz, are you okay?"

"I'm pretty beat, exhausted, even," he sighed. He sat down on the spot, shoulders heaving as he caught his breath. Allen sat down with him, looking concerned.

"Kuntz automatically gets paired up with me, but we're doing the stuff that takes the most stamina."

"Yeah. It's hard work keeping up with all these muscleheads. The continental tortoise's mana is no joke either. It really takes a toll..."

Sara remembered she had something special in her pouch and took out some chilled bush strawberry juice for Kuntz.

"Whoa, this is awesome!" His complexion improved right away, to Sara's relief. "Don't misunderstand, Sara. I'm grateful that I get to do stuff a bit above my level working with Allen. I'm getting a lot stronger doing it. But I've never

had all that much mana, and that's not something you can build up much with practice." Apparently, your mana didn't increase with experience like it would in a game. "So, to be honest, there are times when work is really hard. But I'm still happy to be doing it. I know I'm not at the point to be getting personal requests yet, so I'm not too down about it. I'm just jealous."

Allen had always been alone since he was in Rosa because he had so much more mana than other people. The only people who could be around him were adults who also had a lot of mana, and Sara. Even now that he could suppress the pressure his mana exerted on other people, he was so talented that there were hardly any people around his age that could compare to him. Kuntz didn't really measure up when it came to raw ability. What Kuntz had was a drive to improve that he didn't let his pride get in the way of, which made him an important partner to Allen.

"Don't worry about me, just go ahead and do your personal request. And sorry I have even less stamina than I thought." As someone with a good grip on his personal feelings and the ability to laugh at his own shortcomings, Kuntz really seemed indispensable to this group of bottomless mana pits. That was what Sara thought, at least.

"Can I have some bush strawberry juice too, Sara?" was Nelly's ultimate contribution to the conversation after silently listening to everything up to that point.

"Sure. Here you go."

"Been a while since I've had some of your juice, Sara." The short huff of breath was likely a sign that Nelly was tired too, even if she was acting like she always did. "By the way, was there something bothering you about the personal request you got?" Unlike Allen, Nelly had noticed that Sara wasn't happy about the letter in her hands.

Sara nodded. "Yeah. I don't want to accept it." Everyone around her was silent for a moment.

"Wh-Why not? You're not happy to get a request, Sara?" Kuntz gave her a disbelieving look. Nelly and Allen, on the other hand, didn't look surprised.

"Well, I'm not a Hunter," Sara said, and everyone from Hydrangea nodded as

if to say it was a good point.

“But you’re one of the Invited,” butted in the messenger from the capital.

“Have there been any apothecary Invited who accepted personal requests before?”

“W-Well...”

Maybe there were, but the messenger couldn’t possibly know. There *were* apothecaries who ran around on special requests, like Chris, but they were doing apothecary work for the Apothecary’s Guild. She might have had an ID from the Hunter’s Guild, but Sara was, first and foremost, an apothecary. She could have asked if there were female Invited accepting personal requests in the past, but she didn’t want to be treated differently because of her gender, so she kept that question to herself.

“Is that the only reason?” Nelly asked. She knew that Sara was the type to do whatever she could to help when someone was in trouble, Hunter or not, such as what had happened in town recently in Hydrangea.

“I don’t like the contents of the request,” Sara said honestly.

“What is that supposed to mean? You’re already participating in the subjugation mission, Lady Sara. Or are you saying that the capital has nothing to do with you?”

“Sir Messenger! You cannot keep being so rude to one of the Invited!” Noel scolded the messenger, who seemed to be completely unable to stomach Sara’s attitude. It was funny seeing such a young boy reprimand the older messenger, but that showed just how important Noel’s family was.

“I am *not* participating in a subjugation mission,” Sara said flatly. She got another confused look in response, so she went on, “This is an *escort* mission. All we’re doing is watching the continental tortoise as it heads for its destination. We’re not subjugating it.” Maybe she was just splitting hairs, but she turned the question back around on the messenger. “In fact, why don’t you tell me? This letter clearly says ‘subjugation,’ but are the knights of the capital really planning on attacking the continental tortoise?”

“I-I haven’t heard the details myself. Is there really such a big difference

between the two?”

Sara wasn't disappointed, since she didn't think the messenger had the answers she wanted anyway. "Of course there is. If attacking the turtle is what they want of me, then I'll turn them down. If they just want me to keep doing what I'm doing, then I'd probably accept. I guess I can't say whether I'll do it until I have more details about what the job actually is." She'd been frustrated, but it felt good to make her feelings on the matter clear.

"Sara..." Nelly started, but she didn't say any more than that. As Sara's guardian, Nelly had a right to an opinion on what she did, but she'd likely decided to simply respect Sara's wishes, however she might feel.

The messenger pressed his lips into a thin line. "Well, whether you accept or decline, I would ask the three of you to accompany me back to the capital as soon as possible."

Sara wasn't really doing much in particular, so she didn't mind going on ahead, but if Nelly and Allen went, the Hydrangea team would lose a lot of their firepower. Nelly went to the person in charge to consult about it.

Left behind with the messenger, Sara felt extremely awkward, but the two of them maintained an uneasy silence. Well, silence other than the blithe voices of Allen and Kuntz.

Noel timidly opened his mouth as well, asking, "Sara, I heard the Hunter's Guild in Hydrangea tried attacking the continental tortoise too. Why are you against the knights in the capital attacking it?"

Sara wasn't sure where to start explaining. Allen answered instead, looking unconcerned about the argument. "They were attacking it to help the capital."

"To help the capital?"

"The continental tortoise might graze the capital on its current route, so we were attacking it to see how we might be able to get it to shift direction a little. We weren't trying to kill it."

Sara didn't think she'd be able to convince the messenger or Noel from her position of being one of the Invited, so she was grateful that Allen stepped in to explain instead.

“But won’t it help Rosa *and* the capital if we kill it?”

The messenger nodded at Noel’s question as if what he’d said was obvious.

“Well, Sara?” Allen didn’t seem to have an answer to that one, so he tossed the conversation her way.

“Well...” Sara took a deep breath to settle her nerves. “Allen, do you remember when the migrating dragons changed their course, and because of that, there were more horned rabbits in the western meadow than there usually are?”

“Yeah, now that you mention it.”

It was dangerous out there because there were a bunch of horned rabbits where there usually weren’t any.

“If we cut down the number of migrating dragons, that wouldn’t do any direct harm to the capital, right?” Sara didn’t want to talk to the messenger, so she posed the question to Noel.

“Right. That’d be a good thing.” Noel nodded innocently.

“But if there are fewer migrating dragons, then there will be more horned rabbits, because the dragons aren’t eating them, right?”

“Right. But if there are too many horned rabbits, we can just have Hunters cull them.”

“Well, if Hunters are busy dealing with horned rabbits, what happens to the monsters the Hunters are usually fighting?”

“Umm...there would be more of those?”

Sara nodded, giving him a passing grade. “I don’t know if it would take years or decades for the migrating dragon population to get back to what it was before, but the horned rabbits would increase that whole time, keeping Hunters busy with them. While it’s still manageable, that’d be fine, but if it became *unmanageable*...”

“Monsters would spill out of the dungeon,” Allen answered like he was having fun with the thought experiment. A Hunter to the core, he was likely just thinking something along the lines of, “I’d get more work if that happened.”

“Culling dragons instead of just shooing them away a bit might cause problems in the future. The balance between living creatures is just that important.”

“But continental tortoises don’t eat anything.”

“Yeah... I’m not really sure how to explain this fully.” Sara was getting tired of trying to get her point across. “The point is, I’m against subjugating the continental tortoise until we have some proof that doing so won’t have any consequences in the future.”

Sara wasn’t really sure why she was going into all this detail herself, but it was starting to get tiring. That was when Nelly returned.

“We haven’t had any trouble escorting the thing thus far, and there’s nothing that’ll be a huge obstacle between here and the capital. We should be fine to go on ahead.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“Me too!”

Noel and Kuntz raised their hands and volunteered.

“Then, you can ride your horse back,” she told the messenger. “Allen, Sara, and I will use physical strengthening, and Noel and Kuntz will take the carriage. We’ll leave you behind if you can’t keep up, though. That okay with you?”

Once things had been decided, Nelly gave swift instructions. Sara was a little surprised she was okay with Kuntz coming along, let alone Noel. Her gaze was directed at Kuntz as she asked if they would be okay being left behind. Sara interpreted this to mean she was asking if Kuntz would be able to take care of Noel on his own.

“We can’t guarantee the safety of a son of House Hills...” The messenger looked annoyed to even be considering the question.

“I will look after them,” said a new voice tinged with fatigue.

“Chris!”

All of a sudden, Chris, who should have been making dragon repellent in Hydrangea, was right there. There was no sign of a carriage or a horse, so he

must have come by physical strengthening. His usual cool demeanor was nowhere in sight; he was panting, his shoulders heaving, and his hair was a mess, his good looks ruined by dust and dirt.

“I brought with me all the repellent I just finished making. Someone had to take it to the capital anyway. I only heard the tail end of it, but I can head to the capital in the carriage with Noel and Kuntz.”

The messenger looked at Chris in surprise. That was only natural. Even Sara had been surprised to see him. What mystified her was that no one else was surprised.

“Master Chris! For you to deliver the goods yourself... I suppose you really have to be dedicated to serve as guildmaster of the capital’s Apothecary Guild.”

Sara couldn’t stop her mouth from twitching listening to the messenger. It only made him look worse to her that he continued to regularly be so sharp with a fifteen-year-old girl.

“It’s not a matter of dedication. It’s a matter of practicality. There’s no one else in Hydrangea who could get the stuff here as fast as Chris,” Nelly said matter-of-factly.

“That is part of it, but I mostly just wanted to see you as soon as possible, Nef. And I’m not the guildmaster of any guild right now.”

Sara could have guessed that, so the comment went in one ear and out the other, but...

“So humble...” the messenger said admiringly. All Sara could do was look off into the distance.

“Sorry, but I’d like to rest in the carriage right away. If we’re going to get going, could we do it quickly?”

It was just like Chris to show up after everyone else and still act like he was in charge. Travel by carriage wasn’t the easiest thing either, so Noel and Kuntz wore somewhat strained expressions at the idea that they would get to rest while they moved, but Sara didn’t want to hear any more of the messenger’s commentary, so she agreed wholeheartedly that they should get going.

Sara wasn't a Hunter, so she couldn't run as fast as Nelly and Allen. Still, all the stamina she'd built up on the Dark Mountain, in Rosa, and after that hadn't waned a bit. The three of them were able to travel fast enough that the messenger had trouble keeping up on his horse.

"I went overboard and started going way too fast since I was so excited it was just the three of us. But it's not like there's a point if the horse and carriage can't keep up."

As Nelly said, they had been running, but it was relaxing since it was just the three of them together.

"Let's take a break and wait for them here. I dunno about the messenger, but the carriage has gotta be having a rough time keeping up. They should just run; it's way easier."

"Only for you and Nelly," Sara told Allen, who gave her a look as if to say, "But not you?"

They looked back and waited for the messenger and carriage to come into view, and Allen asked, "Hey, Sara, are you really that against the request?"

"Hmm... It's not that I'm against doing requests in general." Sara could be honest with Allen without worrying about what he might think of her.

"Then you just don't want to do subjugation requests?"

"Yeah. But it's not 'cause I feel sorry for the continental tortoise or anything like that, okay?"

She did, of course, but she wasn't about to complain about how people did things in this country, since they were the ones who had to figure out how to coexist with monsters.

"Listen, I can't help but feel like there's a *reason* it goes so far as to break a dungeon's walls to get outside and then travels from the southern end of the country to the northern end."

"A reason?" Nelly asked.

"I mean, I don't know what it is, but continental tortoises aren't like other monsters, right? Not just their size; they've got way more mana than any other

monster, and physical attacks and even magic don't work on them, right?"

"True, there are monsters that are more resistant to magic, but none that are completely unaffected by it."

"Right. It's the first time my barrier has ever been canceled out like that." Sara wasn't sure how to explain the vague unease she felt. "But if they come out regularly every couple hundred years, don't you think it might be because it's something that needs to happen?"

"Needs to for who? Migrating dragons migrate to move somewhere where it's warmer and there's more food in the winter. So the dragons move because *they* need to, but there's no reason *we* need them to."

Sara was surprised that Nelly was thinking so deeply about her question, and the question she'd asked in return was a reasonable one.

"Well, like, people and monsters, or maybe the world itself? Maybe it's like rain or snow," Sara said, explaining the vague idea she had.

"Rain that falls once every couple hundred years, huh? That's a long dry spell," she said teasingly. Still, it was clear that she understood what Sara was trying to say.

"Something like rain, something that's necessary, huh?" Allen was taking her seriously too. "Maybe it's mana or something."

"Mana..." Sara felt like the vague feelings inside her had taken shape, clicking together like puzzle pieces. "What was it the goddess said to me...?" She hadn't thought about when she'd first reincarnated here in a long time, but she considered the memory now. "She said this world was so full of mana that it was a problem. They needed people to come and absorb some of that mana. So..." Sara hesitated to state her suspicions. It wasn't like she was totally confident in them.

"So, what you're saying is..." Allen voiced them for her instead. "The continental tortoise is absorbing mana up on the surface and returning it to the dungeon."

"Or at least, I think there's a possibility of that..." The goddess hadn't said anything about what would happen if the amount of mana got out of control.

“So you think if we kill the continental tortoise, the world will be left with too much mana? What’ll happen then?”

Sara didn’t know how to answer Nelly’s question. “I don’t know. All this is only a guess, anyway.”

“Hmm. There’s a limit to how much the three of us can figure out on our own. We can ask Chris, but I’d like to hear what some other people think too.”

Sara’s heart felt warm watching Nelly think about her qualms seriously, her chin in her hand.

“I wouldn’t really be able to argue about something that really had to be exterminated, but since I don’t think that’s the case with continental tortoises, I don’t want to accept the request,” was Sara’s ultimate answer to Allen.

“Even if it’s the royal family asking?”

“Yeah.” Sara pictured the king’s face. She didn’t have a hard time saying no to him, since she was one of the Invited.

“Makes sense. I hadn’t thought about it that way. I mean, I hadn’t thought about saying no at all, so...”

Sara looked up at Nelly after hearing that. She’d said no to a personal request in order to care for Sara when she’d first reincarnated into this world.

“I wasn’t planning on saying no this time either,” Nelly said. “Being strong comes with a certain responsibility.”

“But you’ve turned them down before, for me.”

“Well, of course. There’s nothing more important to me than you, Sara.”

“Nelly...” Sara broke out into a grin, thrilled to hear it.

“But even though I was planning to accept, I don’t think we’ll actually be *able* to take down the continental tortoise.”

“Yeah, I don’t think it’s happening either,” Allen agreed.

“If *my* attacks did nothing to it, who exactly is gonna be taking it down?”

“Yep...”

Sara felt kind of stupid for even going into why they shouldn't take the turtle down so seriously when the two of them were being so realistic about their chances of doing so. She could have just stayed silent this whole time and she wouldn't have had to listen to the messenger's retorts.

Nelly smiled wryly and gave the moping Sara a pat on the shoulder. "I think you're cool when you say what's on your mind, Sara. You don't need to worry about people who nag young girls about stuff."

"It's pretty embarrassing for an adult to pick a fight with a kid, huh?"

Sara wasn't sure if she could really be called a young girl, but she knew Nelly and Allen were on her side, at least.

The messenger on the horse and the group in the carriage eventually caught up to them.

"Ha ha ha. Why's everyone so tired?" Allen laughed, not looking the least bit exhausted.

"You're the weird one, Allen. You know, I might have preferred running to riding in this carriage, though..."

"Same here."

It was pretty funny seeing Kuntz and Chris stretching out their aching backs.

"I still can't run for a long time with physical strengthening, but I swear I'll master it after all this is over," Noel announced, giving Sara a frustrated look for some reason. At least the carriage ride hadn't bothered him, since he was young.

Pitying the messenger, Chris and Nelly took turns riding the horse (a skill that seemed to come standard with being a noble), and when the thoroughly exhausted group finally made it to the capital, they were about three days ahead of the continental tortoise.

"I managed to see my mission through somehow..." the messenger murmured as he brought the group to the castle. Sara had been here once before already.

“Ugh, I bet this is gonna be a pain...” She opened her mouth when she shouldn’t have one more time, receiving one last glare from the messenger. She regretted not being able to correct the mistake she’d made a few days ago, but that was just how tired she was.

An unexpected person greeted them when they arrived at the castle.

“Sara! Allen! Long time no see!”

“Haruto!”

It had been over two years since they’d last seen him, when they’d parted ways on the Dark Mountain. Haruto had that same rascally look to him, but he’d gotten a bit taller and more mature-looking as well.

Beside him was Bradley, still as quiet as ever. Sara didn’t know much about him, but she felt a fondness for him as a fellow Invited, so she broke out into a huge smile at the sight of the two boys.

“What do you think, Sara?” Haruto ran over to her, chest puffed out with pride. She wasn’t sure exactly what he was asking, so she used the tact she’d honed as a former Japanese person to list some things she thought a Hunter would be happy to hear.

“Wow! You’ve really grown up! And you look strong too!”

“Right? You, umm, you haven’t really changed much, but...y-you look prettier.” Haruto looked away, his face reddening, and Sara almost burst out laughing. He didn’t have to compliment her if it made him uncomfortable, but she wanted to give him points for trying.

“And Allen! Dang, why’d you have to get so tall? That’s not fair! And I was feeling like I’d finally reached average height too...”

“I don’t think I’m *that* tall. I’m pretty average myself, aren’t I?”

“Is it ‘cause I’m Japanese? It’s not my fault I lost; it’s just genetics,” Haruto lamented. Sara understood well where he was coming from. She thought she was of pretty average height herself, but Trilgaiaans were taller than Japanese people, so she looked small to them. “The goddess should’ve given us some more height as a bonus.”

“I agree!” Sara said with a big nod. At the same time, she realized how relaxed she felt.

With the appearance of the continental tortoise, a monster Sara’s barrier didn’t work against, and their grueling trip here escorting it, she’d been tense for weeks before that personal request became the straw that broke her back. She might have been with her friends the whole time, but the stress of the situation had been getting to her even before the messenger’s nasty attitude pushed her over the edge.

Now that she was in the capital, she could expect more annoying conversations to take place shortly, but here she was making a fuss about height of all things with Haruto and Allen. The mood between them was completely relaxed, like they were seeing each other at school or something. It made Sara feel like a normal fifteen-year-old girl instead of an Invited with a heavy responsibility to contribute to grave matters.

“Long time no see, Nefertari, Chris.”

“Hey, Bradley. How have you been?”

The adults were having a bit more of a mature conversation, but there was still a comfortable closeness between them as well.

“How’s the Dark Mountain?” Of course Nelly was curious about her old home.

Bradley shrugged and said quietly, “Haruto’s having a lot of fun hunting all the monsters. I’m enjoying all the time I get to spend reading up there.”

“That’s good.” Nelly had spent a long time there all by herself. Who knew what kind of attachment she had to the place. “It’s a pretty fun place with all the mountain wolves up there. The scenery’s great too. I bet you’d enjoy taking some longer trips out and about up there,” she told Bradley.

“It’s not like I’m cooped up inside all the time,” he said with a chuckle. Then he schooled his expression and continued, “Things have been a little strange lately, though. Some mountain wolves appeared in the eastern meadow a little while ago. That was a bit of a pain.”

Just like hellhounds and wyverns had appeared in Hydrangea, it seemed mountain wolves were leaving the Dark Mountain as well. Apparently for

Bradley, it had only been a pain and not so much a problem, though.

“Did you find warps in space like we did?”

“No, I heard about what you guys found in Hydrangea, but we figured out that at the Dark Mountain, it was the barrier around the entrance that was weakening. Though maybe that’s the same thing, really.”

They’d managed to incorporate an exchange of information into their small talk.

“So, if you two are here despite the trouble occurring in Rosa, then...?” Chris asked the important question.

“Yes, we received personal requests as well. Just Haruto and me, from Rosa.”

“Nef, Allen, and Sara were requested from Hydrangea.” Chris wasn’t among that list, Sara realized with a start. “I’m here on request from the Apothecary’s Guild in Hydrangea, in case our dragon repellent is needed,” he explained. Sara was grateful to Caren for giving Chris an official pretense for joining them.

“Hey, you guys have been escorting the continental tortoise here the whole time, right? What’s it like?” Haruto asked, still excited.

“Well, it’s just a big turtle, but it’s the size of a three-story building.”

“Whoa! I could definitely see that breaking down those walls in Rosa. I wanna see it so bad! Ooh, I’m itching to fight it!”

Sara was surprised that an Invited like Haruto had no qualms whatsoever about the subjugation of the creature.

“Haruto, the continental tortoise isn’t like other monsters. Listen to me,” Nelly started.

Now that Sara thought about it, Haruto and Bradley had both fought against migrating dragons before. They were also Hunters like Allen, so they probably had no problem with doing personal requests as a rule.

“Its body is like stone, and you can’t attack it with physical strengthening. Magic doesn’t work either. And worst of all...” Nelly emphasized each word carefully. “Sara’s barrier doesn’t even work against it.”

“That lame barrier that repels anything that touches it?!”

“It’s not lame,” Sara couldn’t help interjecting. She didn’t want to hear that from Haruto with his lame skill names like “Stardust” or whatever.

“What do you mean when you say it doesn’t work?”

“It feels like it just sucks up your magic,” Sara explained. “My barrier disappears as soon as it touches the shell, so I can’t repel it or protect myself from it either.”

Haruto crossed his arms, looking over at Bradley. “Then even if the three of us invited all teamed up to protect Rosa if it came down to it, there wouldn’t even be anything we could do?”

“I didn’t think we could make a plan until we heard from you, Sara, but if magic and your barrier really don’t work against it, then I wonder what we should do?”

Sara thought it was a little funny that they were talking about protecting Rosa and not the capital. She supposed they were all concerned about their own homes first and foremost, just like how she’d protected Hydrangea without any sort of Hunter’s Guild request.

“It’s not an official request, but the guildmaster wanted Sara, Allen, and Nelly to come and help with some stuff in Rosa too. Since it’s an emergency and all.”

She already wasn’t sure if she wanted to do the capital’s personal request, so Sara wasn’t sure what to say about heading right to Rosa afterward. When she pictured the faces of everyone at the guild and in the town, though, she realized there was nothing to hesitate about.

“Okay. Let’s go.” Sara wasn’t the only one to agree right away either. Nelly and Allen both nodded firmly as well.

“Even though you were so against the official request from the capital?” the messenger, who was still there, grumbled.

“Nelly on the Dark Mountain and the people of Rosa were the first ones to help Sara out when she first arrived here.” Allen leaped to her defense right away despite only quietly observing Sara’s exchanges with the messenger up

until now. “It’s only natural to treasure your hometown. And Rosa’s only *asking* Sara for help. They’re not forcing a request on her through a messenger with a nasty attitude. Sara’s a girl, you know. Normally, she’d be treated like a treasure in the capital; she wouldn’t be getting anywhere *near* monsters.”

The messenger did a double take and looked at Sara with a gasp. She was sure his first impression of her had been nothing more than a little Hunter covered in dirt. A Hunter who should have been honored to receive a personal request but instead impudently proclaimed her refusal. Even though she *wasn’t* a Hunter. She was an apothecary.

“You knew Sara was one of the Invited, and she said herself she’s an apothecary. That means she *should* be treated like a princess, but she put in the effort to become an apothecary herself, and she’s been participating in the escort of the continental tortoise despite not being a Hunter because she’s a hardworking girl who cares about other people’s well-being.”

Sara was still dirty from travel, but since she’d relaxed a bit, she probably looked more like a normal girl her age when she smiled.

“Sara works in Hydrangea, she came here to the capital, and she’s planning to go all the way to Rosa too. If the capital won’t respect her for that, then I won’t respect the capital.”

“I-I’m sorry. I’ve been terribly rude. Please forgive me.” The messenger hurriedly bowed his head.

Allen jerked his chin toward Sara. “Don’t apologize to me. Apologize to Sara.”

“Lady Rasarasa. I apologize for my behavior toward you.”

She thought they’d be parting right away once they reached the capital. She hadn’t expected him to apologize, so Sara was a little thrown. “Umm, it’s okay. Thanks for the delivery and everything.”

Saying she forgave him would have felt like talking down to him, so she just thanked him for doing his job instead. She watched as he left, his shoulders slumped, and Haruto gave Allen an impressed pat on the back.

“Man, it wasn’t just your height, Allen. You’ve really grown up on the inside too. I’m impressed.”

“Have I? I thought I was just saying stuff that was obvious. Sara’s too nice, so people get the wrong idea about her and mouth off to her like that sometimes.”

“Thanks, Allen,” Sara told him, genuinely grateful. She was a little surprised, since he didn’t usually treat her like a girl, but she was happy that he watched her so closely.

“I didn’t realize this until I went to Hydrangea, but the people of the capital really only ever think about the capital, don’t they?” Noel said quietly, watching the messenger leave. He’d been quiet all this time, perhaps not wanting to get in the way of the impromptu reunion the group was having.

“Oh, hey, I was curious about you.” Haruto looked Noel over, eyes glimmering. Sara suspected his excitement was due to Noel being shorter than him. “I’ve seen you before somewhere, right? I don’t think I know that many people younger than me, but we must have met in the capital, right?”

“Oh, I’m...” A starstruck Noel was about to introduce himself when he was interrupted by a voice Sara knew well.

“I see the Invited are all together.”

“Hey, Liam. I couldn’t wait, so I went to meet them.” Haruto spoke like he knew Liam well himself. “Ah, I thought I recognized you. You look a lot like Liam.”

“Well, of course he does. He’s my brother.” Liam didn’t seem surprised one bit to see Noel there, as if his presence was only natural among the group.

“Brother.”

“I heard you begged to come along. I know you were there to gain experience, but our father doesn’t want you causing trouble for Hydrangea in such a time of crisis. Have a little more understanding of your place.”

Noel looked down in frustration at his brother’s harsh tone.

“The adults in Hydrangea gave him their permission. They could have said no if he was asking too much. Don’t make him someone else’s responsibility and then complain about how they treat him.” Allen spoke up for Noel. He was standing up for people a lot today despite usually minding his own business.

Liam turned to look at him. “It seems my brother is fitting in quite well in Hydrangea. Unlike you, however, he has parents and a family name, so he can’t be going around acting in a way that makes him seem uneducated.”

“Yikes...” Unlike Noel, who was hanging his head in shame, Sara craned her neck back with an audible groan. He was scolding Noel and demeaning Allen and Sara at the same time, though who knew if he was even aware of how rude he was being. He probably wasn’t, with his head so full of noble this and noble that. Sara was sincerely glad she hadn’t married him.

“That you, Sara?” Liam smiled after hearing Sara’s voice. “It’s been a while. You’ve gotten prettier.”

Allen burst out laughing at the indescribable look on Sara’s face. The scowl she was wearing was definitely rude, but he’d been rude first.

Anyway, as covered with grime as she was, there was no way Sara could look “pretty” at the moment. That was why she didn’t like people like Liam, who said that sort of thing without really meaning it. It made it impossible to know what they really felt.

“It has been a while,” she said flatly. At times like these, it was best to just ignore the empty flattery and reply in an innocuous way.

“And you’re as cold as ever too. Have you had any luck getting your fiancée to open up to you at all, Noel?”

“I have no need for a fiancé,” Sara told him. What a frigid conversation.

“Are we about finished with the greetings?” Bradley got in between Sara and Liam. He must have sensed the sparks flying between them. “We’ve only got three days until the continental tortoise reaches the capital, yes? I don’t think this is any time to be exchanging ‘pleasantries.’” He was subtly protecting her from Liam.

“You’re right. Come with me, then. I know you’re probably tired, but I think we should make sure we’re all on the same page before anything else.”

In the end, they all moved to the meeting room before Sara could say anything about whether or not she was going to accept the request.

“Rasarasa, I haven’t seen you since that dragon migration season.”

“It’s nice to see you, Your Majesty.”

Even Sara would not forget the king’s face. She had no idea if her greeting was appropriate for the situation or not, but she hadn’t been expecting to see him here, so it wasn’t like she’d been able to prepare herself. They’d been led to the same meeting room where Sara had once raised the question of whether migrating dragon season should continue on as it always had.

She scanned the room and found all of the faces she’d seen last time: Chester the Apothecary’s Guild guildmaster, the guildmaster of the Hunter’s Guild, the knight commander, and the prime minister. There were also some people who looked like personifications of the term “veteran Hunter.”

She guessed they were Hunters from the capital who had received the same personal requests their group had. When they saw Nelly, they began to buzz, whispering among themselves when they saw Allen and Sara too. The room was just about what she’d expect of a “continental tortoise subjugation squad HQ.”

She’d thought they’d get started right away, but instead she found herself the subject of a rather scathing look from the prime minister. She wondered for a second if she’d done something wrong before she noticed Noel wincing beside her. He must have been looking at Noel, then.

“Noel, you’re not involved in the proceedings here, so I must ask you to leave.”

“But, I...!”

“Noel.”

No one had really noticed Noel, because he was right next to Sara, and they looked like they were the same age, but his father had clearly seen him. Other eyes finally landed on Noel when the prime minister called him out by name.

“Huh? Should I leave too, then?” Kuntz had sneaked in with them as well, so he was glancing about guiltily now. Sara almost laughed, but she controlled herself on account of the gravity of the occasion.

“Prime Minister.” Surprisingly, it was Chris who spoke up. He smoothly

indicated the group from Hydrangea. “Nefertari, Allen, and Sara are here in response to the personal requests they received. I’m here on request of Hydrangea’s Apothecary’s Guild, and Kuntz the Hunter and Noel the apothecary are serving as my aides. I understand that they are not to interfere with the proceedings, but I ask that they be allowed to sit in.”

Kuntz and Noel were both startled when Chris called them his aides, which made Sara a bit nervous. They should have discussed this beforehand...

Now that she thought about it, Noel *was* a proper apothecary, one who’d set a new record as the youngest one yet at that. It wasn’t as if his presence here was completely unjustified.

“If Lord Chris, who has lent his expertise to our migrating dragon subjugation more than once, says so, then I have no further comment.”

Sara was relieved when the prime minister gave in quickly. She was still wondering exactly why Chris wanted Kuntz and Noel to sit in on the meeting, of course.

“Well, now that everyone’s present, let’s begin our discussion on how to subjugate the continental tortoise that will arrive at the capital in three days. I’ll turn it over to the knights first.”

“Yes, sir.”

Liam left Sara’s group and walked over to a map displayed on the wall. It was a large, detailed map of Trilgaia, the likes of which Sara had never seen before. She assumed the spot with the red pin in it was where the continental tortoise currently was. From the line that indicated its route, it really did seem to be heading straight from Hydrangea to the capital, then Rosa, then the Dark Mountain in one direct line.

“According to our records, it emerged from a dungeon east of Hydrangea last time—here.” Liam indicated a point on the map east of Hydrangea. “It proceeded to the Dark Mountain, passing by the capital far enough outside of it to avoid damaging it. There was very little damage to Rosa as well.”

“Very little damage” probably meant just part of the Third Wall had been destroyed. Sara was reminded once again of the threat the continental tortoise

posed. She finally saw what a serious response to the creature was like here as well, since Hydrangea hadn't had to worry about incurring any damage from the turtle's emergence.

"It's proceeding along the expected route toward the Dark Mountain once again, meaning when it reaches the capital in three days, it will destroy an eastern section of the city."

Sara was concerned about the people living in that section.

"We're evacuating the citizens in those districts," Liam continued. "But if we just sit back and do nothing, part of the capital will be destroyed, and who knows how long it will take to rebuild it? Thus, the knights have proposed a course of action."

He paused and took a deep breath.

"The subjugation of the continental tortoise. If it does not reach the capital or Rosa, then there will be no damage."

He was right about that. He was definitely right. Just like he was right when he'd tried to take a couple of homeless kids back with him to the capital. But Sara couldn't help thinking his "rightness" was too one-sided. The Hunters were nodding along until Chris spoke up.

"I'm assuming you read the report we sent you from Hydrangea."

"Of course."

It wasn't just Liam—the king, the prime minister, and the guildmaster of the Hunter's Guild all nodded as well.

"So you propose subjugating the continental tortoise, even knowing of its size and the fact that physical attacks and magic, as well as the barrier of the Invited, Sara, all don't work on it?"

"That's right."

That seemed to satisfy Chris for the time being. "Let's hear what you have to say, then."

Liam picked the topic back up. "The report states that magic and physical attacks have no effect on the continental tortoise, but that is data from a small

number of individuals in Hydrangea, where Hunters have limited capabilities. Setting aside the matter of magic, I also believe the consensus on physical attacks was not that they have no effect but that a sword is unable to penetrate the tortoise's thick shell and skin."

Chris shook his head and looked up at the ceiling. It was a rare display of emotion for him. Sara knew exactly what it meant too.

"The blind leading the blind," Sara muttered, fairly certain that only Noel and Allen, who were right beside her, heard her. Noel looked at her in surprise while Allen tapped his foot in agreement.

"Migrating dragon season is done, but we have a large stock of strong paralysis agent still remaining due to Chris's efficient use of his repellent. We'll use the paralysis agent to immobilize the continental tortoise before waging all-out war on it with all the Hunters we can muster. We plan to borrow the strength of the Invited as well, of course."

The Hunters here were strong enough to have received personal requests for the job, so they'd surely participated in migrating dragon hunts before. They knew how effective the paralysis agent was, so they all seemed to think they'd be able to do something about the continental tortoise using it.

"Can I add something, Liam?" Nelly asked. Liam gestured for her to continue and Nelly said, "I couldn't get a sword through what's likely the softest part of the continental tortoise, its neck, with my physical strengthening. You're aware of that as well?"

"We're aware. We plan to aim for its eyes."

Sara felt uncomfortable hearing their concrete plans. They'd tried attacking its eyes in Hydrangea.

"When we attacked its eyes in Hydrangea, it closed a hard third eyelid to repel further attacks. You read that part as well?"

"Of course. If the continental tortoise is paralyzed, it won't be able to close its third eyelid."

Nelly closed her mouth in frustration. She'd only asked to add one thing to the conversation, and it seemed she didn't intend to contribute more at the

moment.

Liam began to move on since Nelly had no more questions, but there was something Sara couldn't ignore any longer.

"Liam, can I ask something too?"

"Sara?" Liam gave her a surprised look, but he must have remembered how she'd spoken for herself the last time they were in the room. He quickly allowed her to speak. "You're an Invited who can repel attacks from migrating dragons, after all. Please, ask whatever you'd like."

Sara took a moment to organize her thoughts before beginning, "I have three questions. One is, what are you going to do if the paralysis agent doesn't work on it?"

"We don't think that's likely, as the dragon repellent worked on it. In fact, I hear the one who came up with the idea to try that was you, Sara."

It made sense. If the repellent worked on dragons and tortoises, then the paralytic, which worked on dragons, should work on the tortoise as well. She didn't like him pointing out that it had been her idea to try the repellent, though. That made it sound like their plan with the paralytic was her idea too.

"Then I just want to make sure everyone understands that when we used the repellent on the continental tortoise, it wasn't effective for long and the tortoise went berserk when hit by it."

"Understood."

The conversation moved on.

"Number two: Even Nelly couldn't damage its skin, so how do you plan to attack it?"

Even Sara wasn't quite sure why she cared this much. She just felt an instinctual sense that she couldn't let this happen, having participated in Hydrangea's experiments with the creature.

"We will not be attacking its skin but its soft eyes. You're not a Hunter, Sara, so you might not know this, but all monsters as well as living beings that aren't monsters will die if your attack reaches their brain through their eyes."

“My third question, then.” Sara didn’t want to argue every single point, so she moved on. “What will you do if you’re not able to finish it off?”

“Once we’ve decided on a concrete course of action, we’ll head south about a day from the capital, where we’ll wait for the continental tortoise. If we can’t finish it off, we’ll be a day away from the capital, so it should be fine even if it fights back. It’s likely to simply continue its journey northward, in which case, we’ll have to accept the destruction of the eastern region of the capital. At that point, we’ll have done all we could do, so the damage is inevitable.”

Liam looked toward the king, who nodded, so he wasn’t just charging ahead on behalf of the knights and only the knights, he was giving the country as a whole’s consensus on the matter.

Having watched the continental tortoise on its whole way here, Sara couldn’t help feeling their plan wouldn’t work. Even if the paralysis agent worked on it, she didn’t think it would do so for long, and she didn’t think they’d be able to get a sword deep enough into its eyes to reach its brain. All she foresaw was them giving the continental tortoise a marginally worse injury than it had suffered thus far, and no one could say how it would react to that.

Considering all the information they had at their disposal currently, however, it seemed more likely that Liam’s plan would succeed than for Sara’s vague misgivings to pan out. She didn’t know how to express those misgivings or her suspicion that they shouldn’t lay a hand on the continental tortoise at all, so that was where her resistance came to an end.

“Does that satisfy you?”

It didn’t. Not for a second. Why was this guy so infuriating?

“We’d like the Hunters who specialize in physical strengthening to handle the attack, and Haruto, we’d like to ask the same of you.”

“Hmm. Me? Well, Bradley is more the caster type, I suppose. Guess that makes me a better fit.”

Sara was pretty sure she recalled Haruto saying he was itching to fight the continental tortoise just a moment ago, but he didn’t seem quite as eager now.

“I’m more of a caster as well, though. I’m fine when I’m up against a bunch of

normal monsters, but in a one-on-one fight, I can't compare to the Hunters who use physical strengthening. I think it'll be better if I stay back and let the Hunters handle things this time."

Sara's mouth fell open. Didn't you have to listen to the person in command when you accepted a personal request? She was mystified by Haruto's easy refusal.

"However, Haruto..."

The commander of the knights cut in between Liam and Haruto. Sara gasped, remembering that Liam *wasn't* the commander. He was the leader of some small unit when they'd first met, she was pretty sure. During migrating dragon season two years ago, he had been in a commanding position, and he had taken control of the Apothecary Guild's experiments this year too, but there was someone more important than him among the knights. Sara's irritation with Liam had been growing all through his explanation of the plan, but she had no idea if he had been the one to come up with it or not.

"You were the one who suggested to us how to use the paralysis agent, were you not? You're welcome to experiment with existing magic and attack methods. We have three of the Invited here. Someone must have a way to effectively attack the continental tortoise."

Sara felt like she understood why they had been called there when she heard that. The Invited had limitless mana, so they could achieve great success as Hunters, but Haruto simply used magic because he enjoyed it and Bradley worked as a Hunter out of nothing more than a sense of duty. If either of them fought Nelly, she would probably win. That was just how tough Hunters who used physical strengthening were. So they would mostly be counting on their own Hunters for this plan.

The reason they'd called them here even after receiving a report that Sara's barrier didn't work on the tortoise was because they wanted the knowledge and flexible thinking of the Invited. It made sense, but Sara was kind of disgusted by the knight commander's naive notion to simply rely on the Invited when they had need of them.

Also, Haruto's expression had clouded when he'd brought up the paralysis

agent. Haruto still regretted giving them that idea, not anticipating that they would use the drug on human beings.

“I’m sorry, but...” Bradley, who had been silent until now, spoke up. He was the oldest of the Invited, so he acted as their representative. Sara straightened up and listened to what he had to say. “I think the three of us will work on a different plan.”

“Wh-What do you mean, a different plan?!”

Sara was just as surprised as the knight commander. She hadn’t heard one word about this, after all. She looked up at Bradley and he looked down at her. He wore a gentle expression that seemed to say, “Will you leave this to me?” so she nodded quietly. She decided to hear what he had to say, since whatever it was, it had to be better than the knights’ plan.

“Before receiving these personal requests, Haruto and I were planning a defense of Rosa. We accepted the requests thinking we couldn’t overlook damage to the capital either, but I am against the subjugation of the continental tortoise.”



He said it! She did a little dance in her heart when someone finally said what was on her mind.

“A-Against it...?”

In addition to the knight commander, the Hunters were all murmuring among themselves as well.

“Wait a moment. If it’s not subjugated, Rosa will absolutely be damaged. Are you still against it?” the king asked Bradley. He must not have been able to keep quiet after that.

“I’m still against it,” Bradley insisted.

The king spread his arms in a gesture that seemed to say, “Explain yourself.”

“I believe that there is an important balance between the living beings in this world. For example, what happens when the number of meadow wolves, which prey on livestock, decreases?”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it? It means we don’t have to worry about losing as many animals,” said the guildmaster of the Apothecary’s Guild. From the calm expression on his face, he seemed to be genuinely answering Bradley’s question rather than simply being belligerent.

“But the deer and rabbits increase, and they eat all the grass and smaller animals. With their prey depleted, the deer and rabbits then start to die.”

“That’s never happened before.” This was the guildmaster of the Hunter’s Guild.

“I assume that’s because you’ve never gone so far as to completely wipe out a species in this world. But it’s happened countless times in our world. Isn’t that right, Sara?”

“Yes. Even just in my country, plenty of animals were wiped out just like that.”

The words “wiped out” must have had a strong impact on the gathered people. There was a buzz among the crowd.

“Every several hundred years, the continental tortoise comes *out* of a dungeon, travels from the southern end of Trilgaia to the north, and then

returns to a dungeon. I believe this process is something necessary to the workings of this world. Rosa's Hunter's Guild shares this belief."

Maybe this was an odd idea to the people of this world, but Sara wanted them to consider the possibility.

"That's why Rosa shares Hydrangea's thinking. They wish to safely escort the continental tortoise to the Dark Mountain while avoiding as much damage as possible."

Sara was relieved to hear that Rosa wasn't planning on subjugating the continental tortoise.

"I understand what you're trying to say, but this meeting is about the subjugation of the continental tortoise."

Things were finally going in a direction that Sara agreed with before Liam shot them down completely. Of course, it could be said that he was just making sure they didn't get off topic. Just another sign of his oh-so-extraordinary leadership skills.

"At the moment, we don't have the time to discuss the possible meaning of the continental tortoise's journey. At this point, all we'd like to know is what the Invited's plan is."

Bradley nodded obligingly and walked over to the map, pointing at a spot to the south of the capital. "Our plan is the same as Rosa's. By building three walls, Rosa has attempted to shift the continental tortoise's path away from the city center. Our plan is to build walls before it reaches the capital to shift its path in the same way."

Sara had heard that Rosa's walls had been built from the inside out, but she'd never known they were built for that purpose. Allen was the one who'd told her about them, and he'd only heard rumors, so she supposed that was only natural.

"But we only have three days until it reaches here. I know you can make walls with earth magic, but there's no way you can build barriers to shift the continental tortoise's path in that time." The knight commander stood, his chair screeching behind him.

“We practiced in Rosa,” Bradley went on coolly. “I’ve already told you that I’m against subjugating the continental tortoise, but I have no authority to prevent you from doing so. For that reason, we’d like to carry out our own plan alongside yours. May we have permission to do so, Your Majesty?”

It awed Sara how casually he asked for the king’s permission. But then, Bradley had lived in the capital for some time, so he might have been more familiar with the man than Sara was. They might have even been close.

“It would help if you could provide us with some talented earth magic artisans as well,” he added.

“You’re normally quiet, but your ideas astound me when you choose to take action, Bradley...”

From how the king responded to him, they really must have been close.

“Umm, my dad’s an earth magic artisan. I could ask him to put word out to the artisan association.”

It was rude to butt in on the king’s conversation, and Kuntz wasn’t supposed to be participating in the discussion in the first place, so Sara worried he would be reprimanded, but the king just nodded magnanimously.

“Mm. I’ll provide you with a letter if you’ll serve as a messenger for us.”

“So then...”

“You have my permission. It won’t interfere with the knights’ plan, so you may do as you wish.”

Bradley smiled with relief. Maybe he’d only looked so expressionless before because he was nervous.

In any case, Sara quickly curbed her enthusiasm. They’d only gotten permission to try at this point. They still hadn’t built a single millimeter of the sort of sturdy walls it would take to shift that enormous creature’s route.

Liam sighed in front of the map. “Very well. Let’s just wish each other luck, then, shall we?”

Where Liam pragmatically relented, however, the knight commander wasn’t so easily convinced.

“This is ridiculous! Why are you just going along with this?!” he shouted at Liam. “Where is the sense in dividing our fighting strength when the capital is in peril?! The Invited should just support the knights without complaining!”

The king had already given them his permission, but the knight commander was so infuriated Sara could practically see fire coming out of his ears.

Liam shrugged at him. “The king’s already given them his permission. And the Invited have chosen not to cooperate with us. Rather than trying to persuade them, I believe it’s more practical to plan with the fighting strength we currently have available.”

“Have it your way!” the knight commander said before storming out of the room.

Sara couldn’t imagine working for someone who behaved like that, but Liam just went right on as if used to it.

“If by some chance we fail, then Bradley, we’ll be counting on you.”

“Right.”

“Let’s split into two groups, then. Everyone but the Invited, come this way.”

Nelly raised her hand. “Sorry, but I’ve decided to decline the request. I’ll be protecting the Invited instead.”

Sara’s eyes bugged out of her head. Hadn’t Nelly said she’d be accepting the request? That it was the responsibility of the strong?

Liam frowned, clearly vexed. “Nefertari, we’ll have our work cut out for us without you, since you’ve observed the continental tortoise this whole time.”

“I’ll participate as someone from Hydrangea.” Allen stepped forward.

This surprised Sara too. Allen had listened so intently when Sara had explained why she didn’t want to eliminate the continental tortoise, so she felt a little betrayed that he was going along with the knights’ plan to subjugate it now.

“I’m not as strong as Nelly, but I’ve been on the continental tortoise’s shell and tried attacking it, and I threw the repellent at it too. I think I can help.”

“Have you? That *will* help.”

Seeing how Allen looked Liam in the eye and advocated for himself, Sara got the feeling she understood what was going through his mind. He’d listened to what she had to say, but all the same, as a Hunter of Trilgaia, he wanted to face the continental tortoise himself. If that was the case, then there was only one thing she could say to him.

“Good luck, Allen.”

“Yeah. You too, Sara.”

Sara smiled at him and he smiled back.

“I-I’d like to join the subjugation team too.” Noel raised a hand, his voice quivering. Sara didn’t think it was because he was scared of the turtle. He was probably scared to speak up, since he hadn’t been given permission to, like Kuntz.

“Noel,” Liam said disapprovingly, but Noel shook his head to say it wasn’t what he thought it was.

“I went to Hydrangea for my apothecary training, and if possible, to become Sara’s fiancé. I was having fun there until one day, space warped inside the dungeon and monsters flooded out into town. At that time, I saw Sara take down a wyvern and subdue a pack of hellhounds.”

Sara gave him a suspicious look. Why was her name coming up all of a sudden? Also, she really wished people would stop saying she took down a wyvern and subdued a pack of hellhounds. People were going to get the wrong idea.

“I had thought Sara was just a normal girl until then, but I realized she really is one of the Invited, and I learned how amazing that really is. At the same time, I realized I’d unwittingly become the first witness to this continental tortoise incident.”

The first witness. What did he mean by that?

“I asked to go into the dungeon as well, and saw the moment the continental tortoise emerged outside. I’ve watched as it’s been escorted from Hydrangea

too. And I plan to continue on to Rosa and see it safely escorted to the Dark Mountain.”

Noel clenched his fists and asserted himself, and Liam glared down at him.

“So I want to watch as you try to subjugate the continental tortoise, brother, and I want to watch as the Invited try to build walls to stop it. I want to see all of it.”

So that was what he meant, Sara realized. It was true that Noel might be the only one to see everything that happened in Hydrangea, the capital, and Rosa, if everyone in each place was solely focused on protecting their own home.

“And as someone who observed the situation from the beginning to the end, I want to leave records behind. I think that’s my role in things. Brother, please let me observe.”

Noel trembled, waiting for his brother’s response.

Liam looked to the prime minister. “Father?”

“Fine.”

He looked to Chris next. “Chris?”

“It sounds like a necessary role.”

Liam sighed. “Very well. Noel, you’re going to have to look after yourself out there.”

“I will!”

Thus, Noel was permitted to accompany the subjugation team.

“Well, then I’ll go with the Invited.” Chris moved to Nelly’s side.

“You’re not going to say you just want to be with Nefertari, are you, Chris?” The guildmaster of the Apothecary’s Guild seemed to understand Chris well.

“It’s true that I wish to remain at Nef’s side always, but that’s not my reason for accompanying her this time.”

Nelly gave him an annoyed look for the unnecessary comment and Sara had to hold back her laughter.

“The Invited will be erecting walls. In which case, I’ve determined that it will be more useful to cover the walls with the repellent rather than hitting the continental tortoise with it directly.”

It seemed Chris *had* in fact been carefully considering his role in things.

“Then the Apothecary’s Guild will deploy equal apothecaries to help Chris on the Invited’s side of things and the knights as well. We’ll make sure they’re all equipped with a variety of potions as well, of course.”

Thus the two groups split cleanly into their own teams to deal with the continental tortoise.

Sara’s group, who had run all the way to the capital, couldn’t exactly put their plan into motion right away, so they were given some rooms within the castle to rest. Of course, Kuntz still had to take the letter to his father, and Allen and Noel just rushed through a meal and a bath before changing clothes and heading out with the subjugation team.

“Sheesh. Makes me feel my age watching those two. I don’t think I could move right on to another job like that right now.”

Nelly came out of the bath wiping her still-wet red hair with a towel. Sara, who had bathed and changed first, took the towel from Nelly and got around behind her after she plopped down on the couch, wiping her hair and generating a warm wind with magic until it was all dry. It was something they only did when they had time, but she found it calming to dry each other’s hair like this.

“I think the schedule *we’re* on is rough enough. I’m glad we at least get to rest today and just have to get back to work again in the morning.”

“Yeah. I think it’d be more comfortable in the townhouse, but it’s probably a good experience for you to stay in a guest room in the castle.”

“It’s super fancy, isn’t it?”

Sara sat down on the couch next to Nelly and looked up at the ceiling. There was art of people wearing old-fashioned clothes on the ceiling—it must have been some myth or something—and the furniture in the room was ornate and

polished to a shine.

“A big princess bed with a canopy and a decorated balcony outside the window... I’ve gotta enjoy this, since I don’t get to stay in a room like this all that often.”

The Wolveriés’ mansion was impressive as well, but it was less lavish and showy and more stately and comfortable, so this might have been the first time she’d seen a room as fancy as this.

“Sara, if I’d brought you to the capital sooner, you would have been staying in a room like this all the time. You only had to live in that little cottage surrounded by monsters because I was the one who found you. I’m sorry.”

Sara turned to look at Nelly in surprise. “What are you talking about? If not for you, I’d be in a mountain wolf’s stomach. It was the goddess who dropped me on the Dark Mountain. You just protected me. And you still protect me now.”

Sara clung to Nelly like she used to when she was smaller. “I finally have a body that’s not tired all the time, and I have fun doing all sorts of stuff every day. I don’t want you to regret finding me.”

“Of course I don’t regret it. It’s all thanks to you that I’m able to enjoy my life now when I had to give up on so many things while I was growing up.”

Sara hadn’t done anything for Nelly, but she was glad that Nelly didn’t regret finding her.

“Man, I can’t believe I spent so much energy trying to figure out whether or not to take the personal request and whether we should subjugate the continental tortoise or not and it was all pointless.”

Sara sank back into the couch resignedly, thinking back to the meeting they’d had earlier that day.

“Even if we are both Invited, I guess adults really think about things differently. We should be around the same age mentally, but still...”

Bradley was probably almost thirty, so he shouldn’t have been that much older than Sara.

“It probably makes a difference how much time you’ve spent in this world. Bradley’s been here for almost twenty years, but you’ve only been here for five, Sara. Not to mention, Bradley’s been wielding the authority of a noble for all that time. He’s used to making use of other people.”

It *did* seem less like he was close to the king and more like he felt it was only natural for people to take his suggestions.

“You could say the same about Haruto. But you don’t like ordering people around even if it’s for their own good, do you, Sara?”

“No, I don’t. It’s a pain too, so I’d rather avoid it.”

Nelly put her arm around Sara’s shoulder and pulled her closer. “You have such a calming presence, Sara. It’s always nice and comfortable wherever you are.”

“Eh heh heh.” She couldn’t hide how happy it made her to hear that.

“But that’s why people try to take advantage of you sometimes. And why people take you lightly, like that messenger who brought you the request.”

What she was saying was that Bradley and Haruto weren’t taken lightly like that.

“I don’t think it’s pointless for you to try to figure out what’s right for Trilgaia even in a situation where you can’t use the full extent of your own abilities.”

Nelly’s voice, which Sara could feel directly through her as she was sitting right up against her, helped to wash away some of her frustration.

“And,” Nelly said, voice softening. “I was able to turn down that request thanks to you too.”

“Thanks to me?” Sara looked up at her and met Nelly’s gentle green eyes.

“As you know, I’m a Hunter now, but I used to be a knight. So even though I’m a Hunter, I tend to act out of loyalty to my country instead of my own personal interest. It’s just how I was raised.” Her father Ri being the former commander of the knights probably contributed to that a lot. “That’s why I tend to take any requests I get if the country’s asking, no matter how reckless they are or how much I don’t want to do them. It was just so obvious, I never even thought

about whether that was good or bad. But I finally realized that I *should* be thinking about it.”

Nelly did tend to have a simple way of looking at things, so Sara was aware that she didn’t put a lot of thought into complicated matters, but it wasn’t like that was necessarily a bad thing.

“I’ve been watching the continental tortoise since Hydrangea. I attacked it and participated in the Guild’s experiments, but I got the feeling it wasn’t something that we should be trying to defeat. That’s why I agreed when Hydrangea was just planning on escorting it to the capital.”

“So you thought the same thing, Nelly.”

“Yeah. Wyverns are the hardest thing to beat in a dungeon...”

“R-Right.” Sara finally understood why everyone kept making such a big deal of her defeating one.

“But you can beat wyverns with physical strengthening and magic. Things that you take down with your own hard work are a blessing from the goddess. Hunters make their living off of those blessings, and materials from the monsters help out in everyone’s lives. But what about the continental tortoise?”

Sara gave it some thought. “We did eat turtles where I came from.”

“Ha ha. It’s just like you to go straight to food.”

She couldn’t deny that she’d wondered just how much meat there was on a turtle that big.

“First of all, it doesn’t feel like we can beat it no matter how hard we work. Then even if we managed it somehow, I can’t imagine we’d be able to process it.”

If they couldn’t process it, it would just rot, its shell serving as its headstone. Sara pictured it with some disgust.

“I was thinking it’d be pointless, but I’d have to accept the request anyway. But then you turned it down like it was only natural.”

“Eh heh.” Sara hunched her shoulders bashfully, but Nelly, Allen, Noel, *and*

the messenger had all been pretty shocked that Sara wanted to say no. Once again, she was only realizing that now.

“And it wasn’t just you. It was Bradley and Haruto too. All the Invited declined. Instead, you’re making another plan that lines up with your beliefs.”

Among the five people from Hydrangea and Rosa, four of them had declined the request. Now that she thought about it, that was kind of amazing.

“So I thought I should trust my instincts and do what I want to do. That meant the only thing I *could* do was turn down the request.”

It was rare for Nelly to talk this much.

“My heart was really pounding when I said no. I didn’t know what would happen.”

“Ah ha ha. So even you can get nervous, Nelly.”

“Sure I can.”

Nelly had lived up on the Dark Mountain like she was hiding from other people. She didn’t open up to anyone in Rosa and carried out her duty without emotion. Yet now she was thinking for herself and doing what she wanted to do. Her turning down that request felt like she was taking off the final shackle she’d put on herself.

Despite the hard work they’d have to get right back to the next morning, the smile on Nelly’s face was as bright as the sun.

The next day, they met up with Chris, who was also staying in the castle, and hurried to the meeting place they’d agreed to beforehand. They were just south of the capital, close enough that they could still see the city if they turned around—the part of the city that the continental tortoise would destroy if it kept moving straight forward. A bit to the west, they could see the building that marked the entrance to the dungeon.

“This close?” Sara asked.

“Yeah. If it gets through here, reconstruction will probably take a while,” Bradley replied without much enthusiasm. Nothing about him suggested he was desperate for them to succeed at all costs, and Sara couldn’t help looking up at

him curiously. “I know what you’re thinking, Sara.” She could tell from his tone that he was smiling. “But what did the goddess tell us when we came to this world?”

“Err...?” All sorts of things had been said in the short span of their conversation, so she wasn’t sure exactly what he meant.

“She told you all you had to do was be here, right?”

“She told *me* that. And that I could live however I wanted,” Haruto answered in Sara’s place, watching all the artisans busily setting up the foundation for their wall.

Bradley smiled. “Even if we can do whatever we want, I still want to repay the people who have helped me. I just didn’t want to be tied down by them, which is why I ran away to the Dark Mountain.”

“Same here. I got sick of falling for people’s flattery and being used by them.”

They’d said the same things back in Rosa once upon a time, so Sara understood what they meant. Living the way you wanted didn’t mean being selfish. Sara was doing her best to live in this world in her own way, and she thought she was repaying the world in her own way too.

“That’s why I’m doing everything I can of my own will this time, instead of just doing what they tell me to. I hope we can succeed, and I’ll give it everything I’ve got, but this is really just a bonus tactic. It’s enough for us to hope it goes well. We don’t need to be more concerned than that.”

“If you get too hung up on being useful, you’ll just be taken advantage of like I was.” Haruto in particular must have done a lot of thinking about his role in this world up on the Dark Mountain.

“So it’s enough if we just do what we can...” They were essentially telling her not to get too worked up. Of course, that was when Sara realized there was something more fundamental she should be worrying about before that. “Right, more importantly, can you explain your plan and what exactly I should be doing in it?”

“Of course. Look over there first.” Bradley pointed at where the earth magic artisans were working. “We’ll put up three walls at a diagonal slant, each three

stories high, to match the height of the turtle's shell."

The plan had proceeded while Sara had been resting last night, and there were already foundations for the walls in a neat line built up to around her knee height.

"Do you know how buildings are built in the capital? They put bits of earth magic all of the same size together like bricks and then harden it into walls. It's really sturdy."

Sara had used earth magic herself to make little platforms she could sit on when she didn't have chairs. She could shoot rocks out at a distance too. But she had no experience crafting cups or, needless to say, erecting buildings, so she wasn't sure if she would be any help here. There was something else she was curious about as well.

"Umm, there's something I'm wondering about with building walls like that."

"Yeah?"

"Magic doesn't work on the continental tortoise," Sara told Bradley. "Or like, it stops working when it touches the tortoise, or gets absorbed into it or something. Will the walls not fall apart as soon as the tortoise touches them?"

"I see. Well, I think it'll be fine." Bradley's confidence came from Rosa. "We actually came up with this plan for Rosa's sake, and in Rosa, there are still scars on the First, Second, and Third Walls from where they were destroyed in the past by a continental tortoise."

"Wow, I've never even been to the First Wall. There's a wall even in there, huh?" Sara regretted anew never being able to do any sightseeing in Rosa since she was so busy just trying to get by.

"We investigated the parts of the walls that were previously destroyed and it doesn't seem like they took anything more than physical damage from the continental tortoise hitting them. Even if it's made with it, I don't think that the magic remains in the structure afterward."

That made sense to Sara. But it didn't match up with what she knew of the experiments they'd performed on the continental tortoise.

“I feel like they used fire, wind, and rocks when they were testing attack magic. If there’s no magic in the rocks anymore, wouldn’t they have still worked against it?”

Bradley hummed contemplatively. “You use earth magic to make the rocks, and you sling them with wind magic, right?”

“Right...”

“I imagine the continental tortoise’s skin is simply so thick that a rock hurled at it with even a decent amount of force just isn’t enough to hurt it.”

“I see...”

Bradley had a quick answer ready for each and every one of her questions, so she was starting to think she would have figured all this magic stuff out a lot faster if he’d been with her from the start. Sara thought back to all the silly little mistakes she’d made when first learning with a rueful embarrassment. Of course, that would mean she might not have come up with her unique barrier.

“Then, what if you made a big, sharp rock and...” Sara started before abruptly stopping and looking around. The only people nearby were Haruto, Bradley, Chris, and Nelly. It was all people she was close to, but she suddenly realized she didn’t want Chris and Nelly hearing what she’d just said.

“Right,” Haruto said, giving Sara a neutral look. “I know what you’re saying, and I think we *could* do that. A little while ago, I probably would have suggested it myself. And I would have happily let that knight commander order me around however he wanted.” Haruto’s tone was darker than it usually was.

“Frankly, I’ve come up with all sorts of magic that’s probably a lot more gruesome than what you’re thinking, Sara. I don’t know if I should say this in front of Trilgaiaans like Nelly and Chris, but we Invited could *absolutely* take down the continental tortoise,” he stated definitively. “We could prevent the capital and Rosa from taking any damage whatsoever.”

When he mentioned Rosa, Sara thought of Vince and Jay. “But I don’t think Vince and Jay would ever ask you to do that, unlike the knights.”

“Yeah.” Haruto nodded. “Vince asked us to come up with a plan that they could pull off on their own, without any Invited. Since Jay said they wouldn’t

always have Invited they could rely on.”

Haruto grinned. “Vince was like, ‘I don’t see what’s wrong with getting their help,’ and Jay was like, ‘Are you an idiot?’ and slugged him. I bet Vince only said that ‘cause he knew it’d make Jay mad, though.”

“I can just picture it,” Sara said with a grin of her own.

“Getting back on topic,” Bradley interjected. “I think making walls with magic will be effective. So I want you to practice that for now, Sara.”

“Okay!” Sara knew what to do now.

“Can you ask Kuntz if he can help us out too?” There Chris went, giving her an errand to do. She looked where he was pointing and found Kuntz among the artisans crafting blocks with them.

“Sara and I are over there, then,” Haruto said. “I’m guessing Bradley and Chris’ll be making a plan with the repellent.”

Sara waved at Nelly, who was staying behind with Chris, and followed Haruto over to a spot near where the artisans were working.

“Excuse me. Could you teach Sara—this girl here—how to make construction blocks?”

“You’re an Invited, eh? I’d ask why you wanna learn at a busy time like this, but I’m guessing you’ve got your reasons.”

The artisan he’d asked appeared to be in charge of the block production. He produced one after another as he answered his own question. The blocks he made went into a storage bag, which was then brought over to one of the foundations. Kuntz appeared to be in charge of block transport.

“Well, there’s two ways to make ‘em. One is using this...” The artisan held up a mold as he began his explanation, concentrating on it. “You pour your mana into it to make a block.”

Earth filled the mold and hardened as if it was being packed tight. The artisan flipped the mold over and hit the bottom of it and the block fell out.

“The other way’s with this.” This time he picked up a mold without a bottom and placed it on the ground. “With this, you pull dirt from the ground into the

mold and harden it. It's quick, and you can make a lot of 'em even without a lot of mana."

Dirt filled the mold and hardened. He jiggled it above the ground and lifted it away from a block that looked pretty much identical to the other one he'd made.

"What do you think?"

"I'll try it."

Before taking the mold, Sara gave the completed blocks a feel. "They're not rough like bricks... And they're hard and heavy." She lifted one up and set it on her knee, knocking her fist against it. "Dense. Like you're packing earth together. Okay."

Sara nodded and set the block down, picking up the mold and placing it on the ground. "Move the earth into the mold..." This was the same as when Sara made a seat with dirt. The earth slid up into the mold. "Then harden this..." She concentrated on the shape of the mold and packed the dirt in. Then she jiggled the mold and lifted it up, revealing a block that looked no different than what the artisan had made.

"You got it in one try?!"

"She's an Invited too, after all," said Haruto.

"Ah! I think I heard about you! You're the fiancée of the prime minister's son."

"No, I'm not." Sara swiftly corrected him. She couldn't hide her irritation that that rumor was still around, but she'd have to deal, since it allowed the man to understand that she was one of the Invited.

She used the mold with the bottom to make another block, telling herself she only had to keep making the same thing she'd just made.

"Got it." She flipped the mold over and revealed another finished block. "All right!" Sara clenched a fist triumphantly and excitedly asked Haruto, "So, do I just have to make a ton of blocks with all my excess mana?"

"Nope." Haruto gave her a look of pity for some reason. "We're having the

earth magic artisans make foundations for the walls we're gonna build. With our excess mana, what we're gonna do is..."

"Is...?"

"Build the walls up to three stories high in one go."

Sara choked for a second. "Won't that be hard?"

"Yeah, I'd say so. But we won't make it in time if we don't do that."

The artisan nodded in agreement. "Even if the lot of us worked all day today, we'd only finish half of one of the walls."

"So then..."

"We'll each be in charge of one wall."

"That sounds hard..."

This was no time to be feeling relieved that they didn't have to attack the continental tortoise. A cold sweat dripped down Sara's back. If she couldn't do her job, Bradley and Haruto would have to handle her part for her.

"That's a ton of responsibility!"

"Yep." Haruto shrugged nonchalantly. He was already long prepared for this.

"Hey, Sara!" Kuntz ran over from the foundation he'd been working on.

"Kuntz! You're working here too, huh?"

"I'm no help against something magic doesn't work on. I'm just doing what I can to help here." He thought about how he could be helpful and was doing what he could. Allen and Kuntz were both good at that.

"Oh, Chris wanted your help."

"Huh? I wonder what he wants..." Kuntz cocked his head, then waved to Sara and ran off to find Chris.

"He called Kuntz and Noel his aides, but I guess it wasn't just a spur-of-the-moment excuse. He really meant it..." Sara mused as she watched Kuntz go. "Well, that's my errand done with, so I guess I should practice building a wall from the foundation now."

The artisan who'd taught her how to make the blocks gave her a sympathetic look as Haruto took her to her next practice ground.

Now that she thought about it, it must have been Haruto and Bradley who'd gotten the artisans together, instructed them on where the walls would be going, and got them started on building the foundations. In which case, Sara had no place to be complaining. She'd just have to do what she could.

From then on, Sara practiced making a wall from the foundation. First, she tried building up a wall to her eye level from a base that was a one-meter square.

"It's hard to even start..." Sara was hesitating, and Haruto's advice wasn't particularly helpful.

"You just gotta picture it."

"I know that..."

"I'll try first." Haruto held his arms out in front of his chest. "Wall!"

Earth rose up from the base of blocks and before Sara knew it, there was a wall up to her eye level. Well, less a wall and more just an oversized block. Sara's mouth fell open in surprise.

"How do you like that?" Haruto said, brushing his bangs back with a grin. Sara's shock faded, replaced with a stubborn desire not to compliment him.

"What a sloppy incantation," she sniped.

"*That's* what you're commenting on?!" Haruto's shoulders slumped and Sara grinned, but she understood that he was probably working hard enough that he didn't have the time to come up with a cool incantation.

"Are you tired?"

"I'm nervous, but I'm not tired. I think we really can use as much mana as we want."

Sara wasn't a Hunter, but she'd used magic up to her very limit a few times in the past. But it was less like her mana was limited and more like her willpower, concentration, and energy had hit their limit first, so she knew what Haruto meant.

“Yeah. You run out of energy and concentration first.”

“Right.”

It felt odd to be talking to Haruto as a fellow Invited like they were friends, when Sara’s first impression of him had been as a spoiled brat who couldn’t read the room. She found his presence comforting now, though.

As he spoke, Haruto pressed his hands against the wall. Sara was wondering what he was doing when he said simply, “Undo.”

The wall suddenly dissolved into sand and faded away.

“Holy *moly*!”

“Cut it out, Sara.” Haruto doubled over with laughter when Sara shouted.

“Well, I was really surprised! Why? Why’d you erase it?”

Sure, it was in the way, but why would he erase something he’d built? Then she realized when she made seats with earth magic, she erased them when she was done too.

“Well, I figured you might want to try.”

“Oh, well, thanks.”

She needed to try to make a wall herself instead of getting surprised and making a scene. Sara took a deep breath and held her hands out in front of her like Haruto had. Like how she’d first pictured her barrier, she pictured a wall rising up from the foundation. She could still remember how Haruto had built his wall just a second ago.

“Wall!”

“You just said the same thing!”

A wall appeared in front of her with Haruto’s comment serving as a sound effect.

Sara hit the wall with trembling hands. “I-I did it.”

“You did! So the incantation’s fine.”

“Even if it *is* lame.” Her voice was still trembling, but the wall was made. It

seemed solid too. But...there was something off about it...

“It’s kinda...slanted.”

“Yeah.”

Their strategy was sound, but with amateurs carrying it out, this was the best they could manage.

“If only we had a mold like the ones that artisan used.”

“Seriously. It’s not realistic to make a mold so huge, though. I guess that’s why they make everything out of those small blocks.”

Though she knew it was hard to get something perfect on the first try, all Sara could do was stand in front of her slanted wall dejectedly. She could easily imagine the wall crumbling when it was hit with the way it was slanted.

“A mold, huh? If only we could make one that could be enlarged or shrunk and could change shape all we want.”

Huh, just like my barrier, Sara thought to herself before gasping in surprise.

“My barrier!”

“It sounds stupid as always.”

“Right back at you!” Sara said reflexively before giving Haruto a serious look. “My barrier. I don’t care how stupid it sounds. I can make a wall with my barrier and then fill it with dirt.”

“With the bastion, eh?” After changing “barrier” to “bastion” for no reason, Haruto folded his arms and went quiet, considering it without saying anything in the affirmative or negative. Sara was starting to get impatient when he finally said, “No, if we’re using it like that, I guess ‘barrier’ makes more sense than ‘bastion.’”

“The name’s not important!”

“Ha ha ha, I know.”

Sara sighed. For better or worse, he was a bit tiring to talk to since she never knew what he was going to say next.

“Guess we’ll just have to try it. Sara, can you make something this shape

somewhere where there's not a foundation?"

"I'll try it." Sara moved a bit away from where Haruto was. "I'll make a rectangle with my barrier first..."

Separate from the barrier surrounding her, Sara made a rectangular barrier in an empty patch of grass. She left the part touching the ground open.

"I think right around here..."

"You can make it away from yourself? You really can do whatever you want with it. Err, you may know where it is, but I don't, so I'm not sure what to do. It'd be nice if you could make it half-transparent or something."

Haruto was making unreasonable demands. But it was true that other people couldn't see her barrier, so they didn't know where it was. What should she do, then? Sara searched her mind for an image she could use. What she found was...

"I don't know how to make it half-transparent, but if I think of it like glass, I might be able to make it frosted. I saw some at my grandma's house."

"Frosted glass, huh? I've never seen it myself, but I know what you're talking about."

"I'll try it."

Sara tried making her barrier look like frosted glass.

"Whoa! I can see it now!"

It was less like frosted glass and more like glass with smoke inside. Her barrier turned completely white.

"Let's see if I can make it a little more see-through..."

She tried imagining the smoke thinning and her barrier gradually became more translucent.

"How's that?"

"That's good. I'll try filling your barrier with earth, then."

"I'll make sure it doesn't reflect anything and just acts as a mold, then... Okay!"

“Wall!”

With an impact, the frosted glass mold instantly filled with earth.

“Okay, I’ll take my barrier off!”

“Yeah!”

Sara removed her barrier and a wall not too different from the one he’d made before was revealed.

“Sara! We did it!”

“Yay!”

The two of them spontaneously high-fived. The artisan who’d shown Sara how to make blocks earlier wandered over to them.

“You two are really something.” After running his hand over the wall, the artisan took a small hammer from his belt and tapped it against the wall in a few places. “Nice and hard. That’s a good sound. This is a great wall. Hey, you two.” He put the hammer away and turned to face them. “Come work for me, would you? You’ll be great artisans.”

“Wow, I’m flattered!” was Sara’s first reaction. “But I’m an apothecary. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, I’m a Hunter. Sorry.”

The two of them apologized and the artisan waved his hand. “It’s fine. Just had to ask. Now that I think about it, you two are both Invited anyhow.” He laughed and went back to crafting blocks.

“Hey, instead of each of us making one wall, what if I made a mold with my barrier and you and Bradley made the walls inside it?”

“That might be more efficient. Okay, let’s go suggest it to Bradley.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

The two of them got ready to go find Bradley but jumped when they heard his voice from just nearby. Nelly was also there, giving them an indescribable look.

“What’s up? Aren’t you guys busy?” Haruto gave them a suspicious look, since they weren’t supposed to be checking up on the two of them. Bradley was

holding his temple like he had a headache.

“I thought all I had to do was limit Haruto’s tasks. Is reinventing the wheel just a Japanese thing or something?”

“Huh? What are you talking about?” Haruto asked him guilelessly.

“I *was* busy over there, but with you doing crazy stuff over here, of course I’m going to have to come investigate. What was that you just did?”

“Crazy stuff?” Haruto looked like he had no idea what Bradley was talking about. “Oh, with Sara’s barrier? That’s what we were just gonna go report to you about.”

“Well, thank goodness for that.” Bradley sighed for some reason and Sara explained with Haruto the experiment they’d just done.

“So we were thinking maybe we should make all three walls like that.”

Bradley didn’t look convinced, so Sara made the same sort of frosted glass barrier she’d made before to show him. Once she’d figured out how to do something once, it was easy enough to do it again.

“See?” She changed the shape of the mold a few times. It was hard to make anything too pointy, but she could make all sorts of rounded shapes. “You can fine-tune it before you make the wall,” she said proudly. She felt a little like she was giving a presentation.

“Oh, and I just thought of this, but if we make a big platform in front of the spot where we’re making the wall, it might be easier to build the wall from up there,” she added. The platform could also probably be made with earth magic.

“Let’s make it right now, Sara!”

“Yeah, let’s go!”

“Wait. Wait a second. Seriously, wait.” By now, Bradley had his head in his hands. “You’re going too fast for me to follow you, but just because you *can* do something doesn’t mean you *should* do it as soon as you can. We have to consider the negatives, and safety, and things like that.”

Sara and Haruto had already turned toward the nearest wall, so they hurriedly spun around when Bradley called them back.

“You’re exactly right. Putting thought into things is important,” Sara said with a nod. Haruto was already thinking, his arms crossed.

“Safety, eh? Well, for the platform, we can make stairs going up to it, right?”

“Huh? I just thought I’d have Nelly jump me up to it. Right, I suppose it’s not good to rely on other people. Right, we should make stairs.”

“Hold on, you two. Would you calm down already?” Unable to bear the way they stared back at him blankly anymore, Bradley started grumbling to Nelly. “Frankly, I’d be lying if I said I’d never envied you for having a quiet girl like Sara to look after, Nefertari. But I think I’m finally starting to understand why the two of you keep getting wrapped up in so much trouble.”

“Well, it *is* pretty nice living with Sara. I don’t mind you envying me.” Nelly answered with a completely straight face. It was comically obvious that she didn’t understand Bradley’s grumbling one bit. Of course, all this just reaffirmed Sara’s love for her.

“I feel like Bradley’s saying something seriously rude about me,” she remarked.

“What a coincidence. Me too,” Haruto agreed.

It seemed they were in agreement.

Nelly thought for a moment before adding, “I don’t remember getting wrapped up in any particular trouble.”

“Y-You don’t, huh? Well, I guess that’s good, then...”

Sara could remember plenty of trouble herself, but if Nelly and Bradley were fine with that, then she was too.

“Anyway, realistically speaking, what’s the problem with Sara and Haruto’s plan? When you get an idea, you’ve gotta try it first, right?” Nelly got right to the heart of the matter. Sara was well aware by now that practical application was the pillar of Nelly’s training methodology.

“What’s the problem? You should think things like this over for as long as time allows.”

“Are you sure? What’ll change by thinking about it?”

“Ugh...”

It was pretty fun watching Nelly and Bradley go back and forth like this, but Sara decided she should really try thinking about the negatives and safety concerns Bradley had brought up.

“Well, we’re making something way bigger than the test walls we just made, so I guess we should be worrying about what might go wrong if we mess up,” she mused.

“I guess so. Like, could it fall if it’s not strong enough?”

Neither Sara nor Haruto had been concerned about not being able to create the wall at all if it was too big.

“We’ll be building them on top of foundations, though, so we can’t suck the earth up like earlier. We’ll need to create earth inside the mold. I feel like that’ll be harder...” Sara continued musing.

“I mean, I think if we sucked up that much earth, we’d change the topography around here. I think it’ll work better if we make our own dirt and harden it inside the mold,” Haruto added.

“Should we try that with the practice foundation, then?”

The tilted wall Sara had made earlier still sat atop their practice foundation.

“Get rid of this...” Sara pictured the wall coming loose from the foundation and poured her mana into it, and the structure quickly crumbled. “Move the earth somewhere...” The crumbled earth slid into the ground and disappeared. “Okay, Haruto. I’ll make the mold. Umm...”

Sara glanced over to the adults and Bradley was now crouching on the ground. She gave Nelly a nervous glance, but all she got in return was a firm nod.

“I hear a lot of the Invited behave in strange ways—not you, though, of course. Just don’t pay him any mind and continue.”

“Okay.” Sara ignored Bradley as she’d been instructed to and formed her barrier above the foundation. Just putting up a barrier over it was definitely easy. “Should I close the bottom? Or leave it open?”

“Leave it open.”

“Got it.”

Haruto took a deep breath and held his hands out. “Wall.”

There was a loud *whump*, and the mold filled with earth.

“Haruto, stand back just to be safe.”

“Sure. You know, that’s way easier than pulling earth up from the ground.”

Sara expressed a little more safety consciousness than she had before and Haruto backed away from the wall, coolly analyzing his work.

“Okay.” Sara erased her barrier, revealing a wall that looked pretty much the same as the one they’d created before.

“Looks like I’m up.” The artisan had been watching them, it seemed, and he went up and tapped against the wall again with his hammer. They hadn’t asked him to help, so they appreciated this immensely.

“Ah, be careful. You know, for safety.”

“That’s what I’m checking it for.” The artisan tapped against the wall with a shrug and then gave them a passing grade. “Normally, we stack blocks up and then harden them all together, but you’ve done those two steps all at once. Very efficient. Only thing I’d mention is the weight.” The artisan knelt down and tapped at the foundation. “This size is fine, but if you build something three stories tall, the weight might cause the whole thing to sink, which will throw off the balance.”

“Then we should start by strengthening the ground underneath the foundation,” Sara suggested.

“Probably. That’s about all I can think to do.”

They just had to make it like an apartment building that wouldn’t fall over in an earthquake, Sara thought before turning red and kneeling down like Bradley, clutching her head.

“What’s wrong, Sara?” Nelly was reaching a hand out and pulling it back in worry.

“I just remembered the first time I tried to make my barrier.”

Nelly averted her eyes and hummed in understanding before looking back toward Sara. “Your eternal roll down that hill, eh?”

“It wasn’t eternal. It was just to the bottom.” She had to refute the point even if at the time she *had* worried that it might be eternal.

“Not that, when I drove barrier stakes into the ground so that it *wouldn’t* roll.”

“Ah. When you couldn’t move at all.”

“It wasn’t that I couldn’t move. It was just that I had to replant the stakes every time I moved.”

She was happy that Nelly remembered all this, but it was also rather mortifying for her.

“Huh, I didn’t know the barrier had a backstory like that.”

“Shut up, Haruto. It doesn’t matter!”

Sara ignored Haruto’s comment and told Bradley about what she’d remembered. “I stuck my barrier into the ground like stakes and it didn’t budge when mountain wolves rammed into it. How about adding underground stakes when we make the walls?”

“I’ll try it.”

Sara had made the suggestion to Bradley, but when he heard it, Haruto went and put his hands on the wall he’d just erected. “Send stakes down from the bottom of the wall... No, harden the ground in the shape of stakes. Okay!”

Haruto let out a satisfied breath. “That’s harder than making the wall. I tried connecting them to the wall and putting them in each corner, but I’m not sure if it’s any sturdier or not.”

“Should we try hitting it with a *big* hammer?” That was all Sara could come up with.

“This is when it’s time for my magic!” Haruto rolled up his sleeves. “How about a little Thor’s Hammer action?”

“Isn’t that electric?”

“It can be physical too. Now that you mention it, though, I should probably hold off on the lightning. Looks cooler with it, though.” He seemed disappointed that he couldn’t add any lightning, but he nevertheless gestured for all the people who had gathered to see what all the commotion was about to stand back.

“I’ll hold off on the incantation ’cause Sara’ll laugh at me. It’s super cool, though. Okay, here I go!”

Haruto muttered something under his breath before manifesting a sharp, spinning rock atop his held-out hands. It was just like the magic Sara had been about to suggest earlier.

“No lightning this time... Thor’s Hammer!”

She thought the rock had disappeared until she heard a *boom* and little fragments of earth and sand went flying everywhere. When the dust finally cleared, the top of the wall was gone, but the bottom was still right where it had been.

“Look, Bradley! This might work, right?”

Bradley sighed heavily in response to Haruto’s self-satisfied smile. He shrugged. “Fine. I got it. You’re right. I was the one who was wrong.”

Sara and Haruto just looked at him, both unsure of exactly what Bradley had been wrong about.

“Don’t look at me with those innocent eyes. It *is* important to consider safety and possible negatives, but I only said that because I couldn’t keep up with how fast you two were moving.”

Sara still didn’t think Bradley had been wrong about anything.

Nelly seemed to agree. “Hard to say you were wrong about anything when you came up with this grand plan and put it all into motion in one day.”

“Ugh...” Bradley was strangely affected by Nelly’s words. His face might have even been a little red. “I only came up with this plan because I *did* have time. Seeing the two of them come up with all this stuff and put it into practice so

quickly has just made me realize how indecisive I can be. That's why I couldn't agree with them right away."

Nelly folded her arms and cocked her head. "Isn't that only normal?"

"Ugh..." Bradley was lost for words again.

Haruto gave him a surprised look. "I'm getting to see all these new sides to Bradley today. It's pretty fun."

"Haruto!"

"Oops, made him mad." He shrugged, unconcerned.

Bradley cleared his throat a few times to calm himself down. "We'll try Sara and Haruto's plan, then."

"Yes!"

"Okay!"

Next to the wall farthest from the capital, where the foundation was already done, Sara decided to make a sort of watchtower. She was picturing a slide you could climb up to a second-story height. For some reason, a slide was all she could picture when she thought about a platform with a set of stairs with railings that you could climb safely.

"I can just consider this practice for making big structures, I guess. Okay, first I'll use my barrier..."

She made a barrier in the shape of a big slide. "Let's see... This side is stairs."

"Oh, that's nice and easy to understand."

"Maybe I should get rid of the slide part."

"No, don't!"

By Haruto's request, she left the slide in. "Okay, ready."

The artisans had all stopped to watch whatever they were doing with bated breath. Sara's lackadaisical signal to Haruto made for a strange contrast with their observers.

"All right! Wall!" There was that loud *wham* she was used to by now.

Sara made sure there was no one nearby and removed her barrier.

“Ooh...” the artisans all exclaimed in awe.

“Ta-dah! A brand-new slide! I mean, a watchtower!”

“Let’s go up it!” Haruto raced up the stairs, ignoring the railings. Sara lamented the pointlessness of them.

“Whoa! This is high! I can see way far away!”

“Haruto! Is it stable?!” Sara called from below.

Haruto jumped on top of the platform.

“How are we supposed to tell from that?” Artisans gathered and started tapping at the stairs and jiggling the railings.

“Hey, kid, if you can, you should make the base a bit more stable.”

True, she’d only built atop ground this time.

“Got it! Hmm...” Sara grabbed the railings and visualized stabilizing the base of the structure. “There we go.”

“Good work. I’d say it’s a success.”

When she had the approval of the artisans, Sara grabbed the railings and climbed up the watchtower herself.

“Wow, it really is high. I can see all the foundations from here. And that’s not all...” Sara turned away from the capital and stretched up. “That’s Hydrangea! You can see really far up here...”

Though she’d imagined a playground slide, she’d made the tower big enough at the top that five adults could stand up there comfortably. Before she knew it, Nelly, Bradley, Chris, and even Kuntz had joined her and Haruto up there. It was a bit cramped with all of them, but it was fun having a bunch of people she knew up there with her.

“This is nice. You can see so far you’ll be able to spot the continental tortoise before anyone else.” Chris seemed satisfied, gazing out toward Hydrangea as well.

“Okay, should we try the real thing now?” For some reason, Nelly made the

suggestion and Bradley hastily stopped her.

“Wait a second! I swear... We’ll make sure everyone below is out of the area and I’ll wait below. I’ll instruct you on where to put the walls from there, so that’s when your job will start, Sara. Then it’ll be Haruto’s turn. You two okay on mana?”

Sara and Haruto had both already used a lot of mana today. Sara paid close attention to how she was feeling, but she wasn’t particularly tired and she didn’t sense any significant loss of mana. She had been way more tired after rounding up all those seven-colored swallowtails.

“I’m fine.”

“No problems here.”

Bradley was relieved to hear their answers. He headed for the stairs.

“Wait a second, Bradley.”

“What is it?” He turned back to Haruto with one foot on the stairs.

“If you’re going down, you gotta use this side.” Haruto pointed at the slide.

“You can’t be serious. I’m not a child.”

“It’s got nothing to do with being a kid. Come on, Sara.”

“Huh?” Before she could question what he wanted, he grabbed her arm and sat her down on the slide side. “You’re not—”

“I’m going too. Let’s...go!” He pushed Sara’s back.

“Waaah!” She slid down the slide with a yelp as the artisans watched them warmly.

“Ha ha ha!” Haruto was laughing next to her like he was having the time of his life, but this was something you should only do when you’ve got the time to mess around, in Sara’s opinion.

They hit the ground and Sara stood, maintaining her balance. Haruto suddenly slapped her on the back.

“That was super fun! Thanks, Sara.”

“S-Sure.”



She wanted to complain to him, but she couldn't really get mad with him thanking her for making the slide.

She trudged over to the stairs, the artisans' lukewarm gazes burning a hole in her, and found that Bradley and Kuntz had descended as well—using the stairs. Sara's little example had been meaningless, it seemed.

What about Nelly and Chris, though? Sara glanced around.

"They're up there. Or...not."

Sara followed Kuntz's dead eyes to see Nelly and Chris arriving at the bottom of the slide. "Huh...?"

"Those two are over forty, right? I mean, it's fine. You shouldn't judge people for their age. Yeah..." Kuntz's eyes were still distant. When Sara and Haruto had slid down, the artisans had watched them lukewarmly, but now they all seemed to be trying to find something else to look at as soon as possible.

Nelly strode over to them. "Great idea, Sara. Not only is it quicker to get down, it's kind of exciting."

"Isn't it? Should we slide down together when we're all done with everything?" Looking at Nelly's grinning face, Sara was starting to feel like there was no point in sweating the small stuff.

Now that she thought about it, Sara hailed from a country where adults happily rode roller coasters and got pictures with mascots while wearing fake ears. A slide was nothing to make a fuss about. Especially considering she was the one who'd made it.

"Anything's fun with you, Nef," Chris said with his usual nonexpression. It was hard to say whether he'd really enjoyed it or not from his face, but he seemed satisfied, at least.

Bradley called out, unconcerned by the shenanigans occurring around Sara. "Okay, everyone please get back from this wall!"

Watching the artisans shuffle off, Sara and Haruto climbed up to the top of the slide again. Once everyone was done moving, Bradley raised his arm. He didn't say anything, but Sara took it as the signal to make her barrier.

“Here I go.”

Sara concentrated on the shape of the foundation and started by driving stakes into the ground. She was picturing an upside-down kenzan, so there were a bunch of stakes driven into the ground. Since the structure was so big, the ground rumbled as the stakes took shape in the earth, which was kind of scary.

“Next, the barrier.”

Sara let a big, rectangular barrier form above the foundation, then again made it half-transparent like frosted glass.

“Whoa...” The artisans started to make a commotion. Bradley had told them to stay back, but they all ran up to the barrier and started giving directions to Sara to adjust it in spots.

Sara listened to each one and adjusted her barrier in turn. She’d just made a crooked wall herself, so she was more than happy to take their advice.

Eventually, they must have been satisfied. No one was giving her any more directions. Bradley raised an arm again, and once everyone had cleared out from around the foundation, Sara turned to Haruto. He had his eyes closed and looked like he was concentrating on something.

“Looks like you’re up, Haruto,” she said quietly so as not to disturb his concentration.

“Right. I thought as hard as I could, but I really don’t think I can do it.”

“What?!” Sara was shocked at his sudden surrender.

“I wanted to do a cool incantation, but it’s hard to think of one on the spot.”

“That? That’s what you meant?”

“Ha ha ha.” Haruto laughed and grinned as Sara’s shoulders slumped. She let them relax, thinking it suited Haruto much more to be cocky like this instead of quiet. She made sure her barrier stayed firm, of course.

“Let’s do this, Sara.”

“I got you.”

They exchanged a glance and nodded, then turned to face the barrier.

“Wall!”

There was an impact that was nothing like the ones earlier and Sara tottered back a few steps. She was worried she would fall down the stairs until something soft caught her.

“Don’t worry. I’m here.”

“Nelly...” She looked to her side and saw Haruto on his knees, his hands still held out in front of him.

“This is rough... I totally drained myself.” He set his hands on his knees and carefully stood up. “And I’m recharged. Mana’s back to normal.” Aside from the sheen of sweat on his forehead, it was the same old Haruto as always.

“I’ll remove my barrier, then.” Sara let her barrier fade away.

“Whoa...” This time, it wasn’t just the artisans. A sigh of wonder came from everyone present, Sara and Haruto included.

There was a huge, thick wall in front of them, like a barge flipped on one end.

“It’s incredible, but the continental tortoise might break even this, huh?” Haruto asked.

“Yeah. It definitely seemed like it could.”

They would make their walls in a diagonal line so that the tortoise changed its route ever so slightly when it hit them. After that, everyone could only pray that it would work. They wouldn’t have to worry about it if the knights defeated the tortoise, but Sara just didn’t see that happening.

“If everything goes as planned, the continental tortoise should arrive the day after tomorrow. Let’s make the rest of the walls as soon as we can,” Haruto said.

“Yeah.”

Sara looked out from the watchtower toward Hydrangea. Allen was out there somewhere. Sara was one of the Invited herself, but there were two other Invited here with her. That meant this was pretty much the safest place you

could be on Trilgaia. Sara wanted to respect Allen's decisions just like he always respected hers, but right now, she really wished he was safe by her side.

Tomorrow, the knights would clash with the continental tortoise. Sara put her hands together in front of her chest. She prayed that he'd be safe.

"Okay, let's get going on the next one," she told Haruto.

"Right."

For now, all she could do was her best.

By that evening, they'd crafted one more wall, and by the next morning, they'd made another one. By day two, all three walls were complete.

"Now we just wait for the continental tortoise to approach, and when it does, Kuntz and the other casters will spray the walls with repellent. We can't set it too early or the smell will disperse."

It was Chris's job to figure out how to use the repellent with the walls they'd erected. Unlike the Invited, who had nothing to do anymore until the continental tortoise arrived the next day, he was busily running between the walls.

Freed from her responsibilities, Sara found her mind wandering to Allen again. As she dazedly looked out from the watchtower toward Hydrangea, Haruto suggested, "Hey, Sara, if you're so curious, you know, we do have all this mana we don't know what to do with. What do you say to putting some of it to use?"

Sara was a little suspicious of the suggestion, but she did appreciate having something to do, so she took his bait. "What do you have in mind?"

"Want to build another slide—*ahem*—watchtower on the other side of the third wall?"

"You just said 'slide,' right?"

"Did not."

Sara gave him a look, but didn't comment further. "You want to build another watchtower? Besides this one?"

“Yeah. If we made it taller, we’d be able to see even farther away, right?”

You don’t just want another slide to play on? Sara asked him with her eyes.

“Listen!” Haruto waved his hands in front of his face. “It’s just, well... If these things aren’t destroyed by the continental tortoise, I thought maybe families from the capital could come out here to play with their kids.”

Sara pictured families enjoying a picnic outside of the capital. They’d point at the walls and tell their children that the Invited had made them, and then after lunch, they’d play on the slides.

“That sounds nice...”

“Doesn’t it? They could call this Wall Sara and the middle one Wall Haruto and the one over there Wall Bradley.” Haruto chuckled.

“I don’t think so.” Sara didn’t want them talked about like that. Though they’d most likely be destroyed, so she didn’t really have to worry about it. “It would be nice to have a taller watchtower, though. And we can just get rid of it if it’s in the way after all this.”

“Okay, let’s put it a little to the west of the walls so it doesn’t get in the way.”

Sara and Haruto slid down from the watchtower and headed for their destination.

“I don’t think it’ll be in the way here. How tall should we make it?” Sara asked Haruto.

“Well, it’d be dangerous if it was *too* tall. Maybe just a little taller than the walls?”

“Sounds good.”

Sara pictured a watchtower a story higher than the ones she’d already made. She set her barrier in that shape and then gave it the frosted glass coloring.

“Make it a little bigger. And maybe the slide should be less steep.”

“So you want a slide after all.”

“I’m telling you that’s not it. Oh, crap. Sara, hurry!”

Haruto rushed her and Sara made the adjustments to her barrier.

“Ready.”

“Okay! Wall!”

The ground rocked around them, but Sara was already used to the sensation. She released her barrier and there was a splendid watchtower, complete with stairs and handrails.

“Haruto! What do you think you’re doing?!” Bradley flew over, out of breath despite the stamina he should have had as one of the Invited.

“Heh heh. Well, it’s already done, so...”

“I can’t believe you...” Bradley sighed. Sara could tell that this was a frequent interaction between the two of them.

“If it’s just Haruto, all he gets up to is a little mischief, but the problem gets way bigger when Sara gets involved. Yes, I’m talking about *you*, Sara.”

Sara hunched her shoulders, suddenly caught in the cross fire.

“Aah! Nefertari! Don’t just climb up there!”

Sara turned around to find Nelly climbing up the watchtower’s stairs without even using the handrails.

“Why does no one listen to me?!”

Nelly had finished climbing the tower while Bradley was ruffling his hair. She looked out toward Hydrangea just like Sara had when she’d first climbed Watchtower #1.

“Huh?” Sara had been smiling watching her until she noticed Nelly tense. She was starting to worry something had happened when Nelly turned around and shouted.

“Bradley! Get up here!”

Hearing the urgency in Nelly’s voice, Bradley took a second to compose himself before racing up the steps. Sara just watched, flustered, until Haruto stuck out his thumb at her and gestured to the stairs.

“Let’s go.”

“Right.”

They ran up the stairs and turned to look toward Hydrangea. Sara thought she could see something like a cloud of dust in the distance.

“Holy crap...” Haruto took a step back atop the cramped watchtower. “So that’s the continental tortoise...”

“It was supposed to reach the capital tomorrow! What happened?!” Bradley slammed his fists down on the handrail. “I’ll send a messenger to the capital right away. Then I’ll have to tell Chris to speed things up...” He slid down the slide without worrying about appearances.

“He’s pretty good in a crisis, huh?”

“Yeah.”

It was no time for such nonchalant observations, though. Underneath the tower, people were already hurrying to meet the continental tortoise.

They watched a horse race off toward the capital and, though they couldn’t see it from where they stood atop the tower, they could sense people scurrying about on the other side of the walls.

“Whoa, what the heck’s that? It smells like there’s old ladies all around suddenly.”

The scent Haruto somewhat rudely described was, to Sara, the nostalgic scent of the southern knights’ barracks. In other words...

“That’s Chris’s dragon repellent. It smells like flowers ’cause it’s made of silver dragonmint.”

So Chris had wasted no time using the dragon repellent. Haruto hadn’t participated in the migrating dragon hunts since Chris had started helping out, so he had never smelled the repellent before. He was sniffing the air curiously.

Squinting out at the continental tortoise, Nelly told him, “Haruto, I have a question for you.”

“What is it?” Haruto looked back toward the tortoise instead of the walls.

“You have good eyes?”

“Yeah. I feel like they’re even better after living on the Dark Mountain too.

They're better than Bradley's, anyway."

Sara's eyesight had gotten better since coming to this world too, but her eyes weren't as good as Nelly's, and Allen's were better than both of theirs.

"Take a look at the continental tortoise's head for me, would you?"

"You can already see the head? That seems bad." Haruto held a hand over his eyes and squinted out toward the dust cloud in the distance. "The head... Wait, do continental tortoises have, like, a horn or a bump on their heads?"

"They don't. They're smooth like snakes' heads."

"So what's stuck to its head?"

Sara stretched up onto her tiptoes but couldn't see whether there was anything on the head of the tortoise. She could see the head shaking left and right, though. Like it was trying to shake something off.

Sara thought back to when they'd used the dragon repellent on the tortoise in Hydrangea's dungeon. "It shook its head like that and rubbed it on the ground when it was trying to get the repellent off of it, right?"

"Yeah. But Chris should be the only one who has the repellent. It couldn't be..." Nelly narrowed her eyes even more, straining to see what was happening.

That was when Haruto rocked back a step. "It's...a person."

"What? A person?"

"It looks like a person is clinging to its head."

Is that why it had looked like there was a horn or a bump on its head? Sara wondered dazedly.

"Nef! What's going on?!"

Chris and Kuntz raced up the stairs, out of breath. Bradley couldn't even be bothered to take the stairs; he just jumped up the slide side of the tower with physical strengthening.

"There's a sword in its right eye. And someone's clinging to the sword. Someone young. Small. With sand-colored hair," Nelly said haltingly.

The blood drained from Sara's face. There was only one person that could be.

There were young people in the knight corps and among the Hunters, but they were probably all in their twenties, with large builds.

Nelly opened her mouth and closed it without saying anything, gripping the railing. She knew who it was too, but she didn't want to say.

Kuntz pushed her aside, however, and when he saw who it was, shouted, "Allen!"

Sara almost sank to her knees.

"What... What happened?!" Bradley repeated, but no one there had the answer to his question.

Nelly quietly surmised, "Allen was the only one who could carry out the knights' plan, and when he did, the continental tortoise went berserk. That's my guess."

"You're probably right," Chris replied coolly.

Sara was trying to figure out what she could do, but all her mind could manage to produce was a panic.



“Chris. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Yes, I know.”

Nelly laid a hand on Chris’s shoulder and looked Kuntz’s way. Chris was already taking greater potions out of his storage pouch and handing them to Kuntz.

“Huh? Me?”

“Kuntz.”

Reflexively putting the greater potions into his own pouch, Kuntz turned to Nelly when she said his name.

“I’m going to save Allen. I need a wind magic caster. It’ll be dangerous. Can I count on you?”

“You can,” Kuntz answered firmly even as he continued hurriedly stuffing potions into his pouch. “I can keep up physical strengthening for that distance, and I think I can withstand the turtle’s mana.”

“Okay. Sara?” Nelly turned to her with kind eyes. “Just leave Allen to me. Stopping that thing will be up to you, okay?”

“Got it.” All Sara could do was nod, whether or not she was still trembling. “That thing” likely referred to the continental tortoise. Sara didn’t know of any way to stop it, but she took Nelly’s words to mean “Stay here and do your best.”

“Let’s go.”

“Right.”

Nelly and Kuntz leaped down off the watchtower and sprinted toward the continental tortoise like the wind.

“It’s Allen?! What is Nefertari going to do?!”

Chris grabbed Bradley’s arm and pointed him toward the continental tortoise. “Bradley. What you need to be worried about right now is that. Focus.”

Bradley’s eyes shifted from Nelly to the continental tortoise and the color drained from his face. “No way... It’s off course. It’s coming from farther west

than we thought! At this rate, it'll go right past our walls and hit the capital head-on!"

Sara looked back toward the continental tortoise as well, but she had no idea what course it had been on in the first place, so she could do little more than bluster.

"The walls we have now won't do any good anymore. What do we do...? What do we do...?" Bradley was muttering to himself.

Sara gasped. If their current walls were useless, they could just make new walls. "Haruto!"

"Wilco!"

"How old are you again?" Sara laughed as she and Haruto slid down the slide. Her body was chilly with fear, but she felt something warm welling up in her stomach.

"Sara! Haruto!" Bradley was trying to stop them, but they couldn't stop now.

"We'll be right back!"

"Just leave it to us!"

They were headed for the midpoint between the three walls and the continental tortoise. They ran with physical strengthening farther west than the direction Nelly and Kuntz were heading.

"Is the plan to just make walls in the continental tortoise's path and make it hit them?" Sara asked Haruto.

"That's what I was thinking. It's not gonna be easy doing it while we run, though."

Sara didn't have much confidence in that area either. She was also pretty scared to be running straight at the continental tortoise.

"We need a place to stop and figure out where to put the walls."

"Over there! We can make a watchtower a little to the west of the tortoise. As fast as we can."

They stopped so quickly there was almost a skidding noise and Sara swiftly

crafted a barrier the same size and shape as Watchtower #1. It would take too much time to make it bigger.

“Ready!”

“Okay! Wall!”

She hadn’t thought a short incantation would come in handy at a time like this. She wasn’t worried at all about who was nearby or how perfect the watchtower was, so it came out a little crooked, but it would more than suffice for its purpose.

“It’s so close! Eep!” If she didn’t yelp like that, she would probably have cowered in fear at how close the continental tortoise was to them now.

“Let’s do this!”

“Wait! Sara!” Haruto stopped her.

“Why?!”

“If it hits a wall now, Allen will be in trouble!”

Sara was so panicked she was only looking at the whole continental tortoise, but Haruto had his eyes focused on its head.

“Allen...”

If they could see half the sword sticking out, it meant it was only half in. Allen was clinging to it, both hands on the blade’s hilt. The continental tortoise was close enough that even Sara could see all this now.

“Is he unconscious?”

“Seems like it. What do we do, Nelly?”

Nelly and Kuntz were closing in on the tortoise, having gone around it to the east.

“Whoa...”

They watched the two of them jump up from its front leg to its shell, then crouch low to keep their balance.

“She brought me up there like that back in Hydrangea too...”

She wasn't too worried about Nelly since this was her second time doing this. While Kuntz clung to the shell, Nelly was already leaping toward Allen. She grabbed him from behind and put her hands over his on the sword.

"Ah..."

She pulled and the sword came out. The tortoise swung its neck in pain and flung Allen and Nelly back, but Nelly caught her balance on the shell and disappeared down the other side of the tortoise.

"All right!" Haruto exclaimed in Sara's place since she was speechless.

But there was no time to relax. Thankfully, the continental tortoise had slowed down a little, but Kuntz was still on its shell. He was currently taking greater potions out of his bag one after another and tossing them at the tortoise's right eye with magic.

"I didn't even think of that! They're healing it!"

Nelly and Chris had instantly come up with the idea that if they healed it, the continental tortoise might go back to its original behavior, and they'd put that idea into practice without a moment's hesitation. Sara was seriously impressed. That went for Kuntz, who was carrying out the plan, as well, of course.

The wind was making it difficult for him to hit with the potions, but eventually he got a few of them on target and the continental tortoise's pain seemed to lessen. Sensing that himself, Kuntz leaped down off the shell in the same way Nelly had.

"Okay, now!"

"Right."

They couldn't make big walls like they had before. They were going for two-story creations now, that would just barely hit the tortoise's shell.

"I'll go as fast as I can, okay?"

"Got it."

Sara picked a spot the continental tortoise would hit on its left side. "Barrier!"

"So lame."

“Hurry!”

“Wall!”

A two-story wall appeared before the turtle, but it just crashed right into it without even attempting to get around it. The wall crumbled with a loud *boom*. The impact hadn’t seemed to affect the turtle’s heading or speed at all.

“One won’t be enough! We’ll just have to make as many as we’ve got mana for! Barrier!” Sara had already erected her next barrier.

“Roger, Wilco! *Wall!*”

Loud *whams* sounded as the turtle slammed into their walls. Sara and Haruto had no idea at this point how many walls they’d made and whether they were having any effect or not. All they could do was watch the continental tortoise’s progress and keep making walls to try to divert its course.

“Next!”

“Got it!”

Warm hands wrapped around their stomachs.

“That’s enough. You’ve done enough.”

“But...!”

“No, it’s not!”

They had to keep going, no matter who tried to stop them. Though their heads were full of only that thought, the last “wall” they’d made had amounted to little more than a pile of dirt. There might have been no limit to their mana, but their stamina couldn’t last forever. Had there even been a point to what they’d done? They clung to the arms around their waists with one hand, reaching out the other one in front of them.

“Barrier...”

“Wall...”

“It’s enough. It’s okay. The continental tortoise has changed course. Look, it’s going to hit the original walls.”

Chris’s calm voice directed Sara and Haruto to the first wall they’d crafted

together.

“There’s the first one.”

With a heavy *wham*, that huge, solid wall they’d built crumbled. But only the top half of it.

“Aah...”

“There’s the second. This is good. It looks like the repellent is working too.”

That heavy *wham* came again, but the second wall seemed to crumble a little less than the first.

“Now, number three.”

Wham. The wall shook, but it didn’t crumble. The continental tortoise’s heavy footsteps grew more and more distant. In exchange, they could hear people crying out in awe from the direction of the capital.

“It appears our strategy was successful.” There was relief in Chris’s voice. “From that position, if it changes trajectory toward the Dark Mountain, it should just barely miss the capital. I’m sure Bradley is already running alongside it just in case it changes direction to head into the capital.”

The ever-composed Bradley was running alongside the continental tortoise. That fact managed to penetrate Sara’s exhausted brain and she finally felt herself relax.

Chris knelt down, still holding the two of them.

“So...it’s okay now?”

“Yes. You two saved the capital.”

Sara and Haruto leaned back into Chris and exchanged a look, raising a hand and high-fiving one another.

“Yay.”

“Yay.”

She was always so tired in Japan, she never had any interest in group activities, so she’d never experienced this kind of satisfaction of having accomplished something with a friend before.

Sara was exhausted right now, but it wasn't the exhaustion she'd been born with. It was proof of how hard she'd fought for her friends, for the capital.

"Thank goodness. Really, thank goodness..."

"Yeah. We can rest now, right?"

They looked back toward Hydrangea and saw the wreckage of the walls they'd made, as well as Nelly and Kuntz, the former carrying Allen and all three of them covered in dust.

Sara looked up and the sky was blue. The wind was cool on her skin.

For now, the work that had been asked of her in Hydrangea was done.

Chapter 3: Back Home to Rosa

She felt bad for Bradley, but Sara was out of stamina. Nelly and Kuntz, however, took off after the continental tortoise like nothing had happened after handing Allen over to Chris.

“I feel bad for Nelly, but I’d be kinda worried about Bradley if he was on his own, so I’m relieved she’s with him.” Haruto put his hands together gratefully in Nelly’s direction. Sara was always reminded of little Japanese things when she was with him.

But Allen came before Nelly at the moment. A carriage had been prepared for the exhausted Sara and Haruto, but before getting into it, they had to treat the unconscious Allen’s injuries.

“I know she means well, but Nef really doesn’t know what she’s doing with potions.”

Sara was a little relieved to see the wry smile on Chris’s face. He wouldn’t be smiling even in jest if Allen was so badly hurt there was nothing that could be done for him.

Chris carefully laid Allen down on the ground. His hair and clothes were wet like someone had just dumped all the potions they had on them over him.

First, Chris checked his breathing, then examined his injuries from his head downward. When he pried Allen’s tightly clenched fists open, Sara almost had to look away. The skin of his palms was peeled and red from how tightly he’d been gripping the sword. Chris gently applied a potion to them.

“Ugh...”

Allen tried to escape from the pain unconsciously, but Chris held him down. Sara might have been an apothecary, but she had hardly ever been present for serious injuries like this, so there was a lot for her to learn in the moment.

“It hurts even with potions, huh?”

“Of course it does. It’s painful for the body to knit itself back together.”

Sara wanted to ask Nelly if she’d ever seen anything like this, since she always acted like potions could solve anything. She decided once and for all never to trust Nelly when it came to potions.

“It seems like he cracked a couple of ribs as well, but that’s all. Thanks to Nelly’s liberal use of greater potions, he’ll have to stay in bed for a few days and he may still be tired after that, but he should return to normal soon enough.”

“Thank goodness.” This time, Sara was able to be relieved from the bottom of her heart.

Chris picked up Allen and set him down in the carriage, shaking his head exasperatedly. “I don’t know how many hours he was clinging to the head of the continental tortoise, but it’s hard to believe he managed to avoid getting thrown off and only suffered minor injuries. I’ve never seen someone so sturdy. He’s on Nef’s level at least.”

If he was comparing Allen to Nelly, that meant Chris was giving him the highest praise possible.

“Now, let’s return to the castle and let him get some rest.”

Sara and Haruto were happy to head back in the carriage.

After seeing them back to a guest room, Chris told them, “I’ll handle the report. I want you all to focus on getting some rest.” With that, he left.

Sara was in a different room than the one she’d stayed in with Nelly the night before, but she didn’t care. All she wanted to do was lie down and stretch out. She reached a worried hand out toward Allen, who was sleeping on the bed, but Haruto shooed her away.

“I’m worried about him, so I’ll sleep here too.” They’d slept next to each other in Rosa, so she was used to it.

“You can’t do that. I’ll keep an eye on him, so go rest in your own room,” Haruto told her, dragging her to the neighboring room. “Take a bath, okay?”

“And brush your teeth,” Sara retorted.

The mundane exchange relaxed Sara and she dragged her heavy body to the

bath, washing off all the dust and sweat before finally getting some rest.

She slept dreamlessly, like she'd been sucked into the bed, before later waking to some sort of commotion and finding that it was already morning.

"What's going on? Is that next door?"

Sara got up, rubbing her eyes. She'd gone to sleep without drying her hair, so she could tell that it was a total mess. She felt like she'd gotten enough sleep, but she was still sluggish.

But Sara had gotten a request from Rosa. Even if she hadn't, people who were important to her were there, so she couldn't just leave them alone. The continental tortoise had already gotten a day ahead of her, so she'd have to get going today and do her best to run with physical strengthening all day.

Since Nelly wasn't with her, she might be sleeping in another room, or she might have just gone after the continental tortoise and headed toward Rosa already.

Sara clenched her fists in front of her to psych herself up and took one step out from the bed when she heard Haruto yelling.

"Cut it out! He was only just rescued after spending all that time clinging to the continental tortoise yesterday! He broke bones, and his injuries were only just treated! He probably can't even move right now anyway!"

The commotion had clearly moved from the neighboring room to the hallway, where Sara could hear it much better. She didn't like what she was hearing, though. Haruto was clearly angry for Allen's sake.

Sara was still in her pajamas, but she threw open the door to her room anyway, telling herself that she might have been able to call this a dress back in Japan.

What she saw was two knights dragging Allen away by the arms. There were several other knights nearby as well.

"Allen!" she shouted without thinking.

He looked the same way he had the night before. His clothes were worn and covered in dust, torn in places and stiff from dried potion. His face was at least

clean, since Haruto must have wiped it for him, but he looked like a criminal being dragged away by the knights like that.

“Sara... Thank goodness... I made it back...” He was out of it, but he seemed to perk up some when he noticed Sara. “You shouldn’t be dressed like that, though. Hurry and go change. Hey, you guys better not look at Sara!”

He’d been behaving himself until now, but suddenly shook off the knights’ grip, causing their eyes to turn harsher.

“Don’t resist!”

“What? What’s even going on here?” He’d been practically unconscious until a moment ago. Allen glanced around and one of the knights grabbed his arm again.

“You’re suspected of causing the continental tortoise to go berserk.”

“What?” Allen shook the knight’s grip off again, his jaw almost on the floor. “All I did was attack the continental tortoise’s eye like Liam told me to. How am I in trouble for that now?”

“If you didn’t think you could do it, you should have pulled the sword out and gotten away. You clinging to it like that caused the continental tortoise pain, which made it go berserk.”

Allen opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. He closed his mouth and looked up instead. It couldn’t have been as easy as the knight made it sound to pull the sword out and get clear of the continental tortoise.

“Are you joking?!” The outburst came from Haruto. “How can you treat a Hunter who was just following instructions like this?! You should be treating him like a hero! He’s the only Hunter who’s ever managed to wound a continental tortoise! Why are you treating him like a criminal?!”

The knight’s response was cold, however. “We’re just doing our job.”

They wore shiny, polished swords and their hair and clothing was perfectly neat. On the other hand, Allen was filthy; he looked every bit the part of the guilty criminal. In reality, however, this was the difference between knights who had been relaxing here in the castle and a Hunter who had been fighting on the

front line prepared for death.

“Screw you!”

“Haruto. It’s fine.” Allen straightened up and quietly stopped Haruto. “The truth will come out eventually. This is only temporary. Don’t worry about me.” He lowered his arms to show that he would no longer resist.

Sara had seen Allen’s eyes like this before. When he was lied to about the price of healing herbs. When he was tricked into going into the meadow at night by Ted. When he couldn’t work in Rosa due to other Hunters’ envy. When there was nothing he could do about something, Allen would give up on it without a fight. It was a much more mature way of handling things than most adults were capable of.

But it had to frustrate him. How much abuse had he been put through just because he didn’t have parents or social status? Even if he got mad or argued the point, he couldn’t change his situation. And so, his best option was to simply get through the present and look toward the future. That was how Allen did things.

Sara had always respected him for that, and tried to respect his decisions. But she couldn’t let this stand. It was just too unfair. Her fists were clenched beside her body, trembling with her anger.

“Ugh... What?” One of the knights who was about to grab Allen’s arm stepped back.

Sara stepped forward. The knights took another step back.

Haruto was looking between them in surprise, but Allen grimaced and turned to Sara.

“Sara, calm down. You’re letting your mana run wild.”

“I am calm. Don’t worry,” Sara said, voice low.

“You shouldn’t be out here dressed like that anyway. At least go and get dressed first.”

“It’s not the time to worry about that.”

It really wasn’t. How was Allen worried about what Sara was wearing when he

was about to be dragged away on false charges?

“Ugh... It hurts... What is this?”

As Sara got closer, the knights raised their arms in front of their faces like they were trying to block a bright light or something.

“This should be nothing compared to going up against the continental tortoise. You’re oh-so-important knights, aren’t you? You can handle some mana pressure.” Sara’s low voice resounded through the corridor. “It’s nothing compared to attacking the continental tortoise’s eye as ordered and clinging to it until you lose consciousness even as your ribs crack.”

“Ugh!”

By the time Sara reached Allen, the knights were on their hands and knees in the hallway under the pressure of Sara’s mana.

“And you didn’t even fight. Pretty pathetic.”

“Sara, leave it at that. This is hard even for me.”

“Sorry.”

Unlike the knights, Sara took Allen’s arm gently. At the same time, she let him into her barrier and erased the pressure of her mana.

The knights stood, sweat on their foreheads.

“Milady Invited, this goes a bit far for a joke. I don’t know if we—ack!” He reached out and was repelled by Sara’s barrier. “What? What did you do?”

He signaled and the rest of the knights all jumped on Sara and Allen at once.

“Agh!”

Of course, they were all repelled.

Sara looked down at them coldly. “You can’t have Allen.”

“Sara, I—”

“Be quiet, Allen!”

“...Yes, ma’am.”

Sara backed up, keeping her barrier wide around the two of them. The knights

couldn't pass them in the hallway because of it, and they looked frustrated, but it served them right as far as she was concerned.

"Haruto." Sara backed up to where Haruto stood, observing. He was free to enter or leave her barrier at will.

"Yeah."

"Allen and I are going to be inside this guest room."

"Oh yeah?" Haruto was starting to find the situation amusing. He grinned and gave them a thumbs-up.

"We're not leaving until someone reasonable shows up."

"Got it. I'm gonna go get Chris!"

Sara and Allen went into the guest room, Haruto watching them until the door shut behind them. Sara immediately spread her barrier out to cover the whole room.

"The door, the windows, the bathroom... I've set my barrier to the size of the room, so no one else will be able to get in, Allen."

"Okay." Allen knew what Sara was saying was true, so he practically collapsed onto the bed, sighing as if to expel all the feelings he was keeping bottled up until now. "I was sound asleep when they woke me up and told me to come with them." He let out a hoarse laugh and let his head drop to his bent legs. "What did they mean 'I made the continental tortoise go berserk'? Anyone could guess it'd go berserk if it got hurt, right?"

Sara sat down next to him and lay down on the bed. "Yeah," she replied.

"I knew it was a reckless plan, but I wanted to do it since it was my first personal request. I had to give it my all since I accepted the request, right?"

"Yeah." Sara just nodded again.

"I was the only one who'd ever gotten on the continental tortoise's back while it was moving. Most of the other people were too scared to try even if they could probably make it. And if they couldn't do that, they wouldn't be able to get on its head and stab a sword into its eye as hard as they could, even if it was stopped by the paralysis agent."

“Yeah.”

“I’m Nelly’s student, and I wasn’t scared, and I could plan out how to go about it. There weren’t any other Hunters that could do that the first time they were seeing the continental tortoise. I was just used to it since I’d been following it all the way from Hydrangea.”

“Yeah.” Sara nodded firmly.

“And look what happened. It’s so lame, isn’t it?” Allen shrugged with resignation. “But I’m fine, Sara, really. Even if they throw me in prison for a little while, once everything’s over, they’ll find out the truth. I have plenty of allies now, after all.”

“But...” Sara set her hand on Allen’s knee. “I didn’t want them to take you away. I don’t want you to be treated like a criminal for even one second.”

Allen put his hand over Sara’s. “It would upset me more if you got in trouble because of me, Sara. This’ll all blow over if I just put up with it for a little while.”

“I’ve always admired you for putting up with stuff in the past, but this time, *I’m* not going to put up with it,” Sara said, looking up sharply at him.

Just then, there was a rumble, and Allen held his stomach.

“Way to ruin the moment,” he complained to his stomach.

“What moment?” Sara asked, almost bursting out laughing.

“I haven’t eaten anything since yesterday, and...” Allen suddenly jumped away from Sara. “I haven’t bathed either. Sara, don’t get too close to me.”

“Bit late for that, don’t you think?” Sara said with a smirk. She got out a guild lunch box from her storage pouch. Inside was one of her homemade meals. There was a table and some chairs in the room. It had a full bathroom as well. But she felt like sitting on the floor and eating first was probably the right thing to do.

“Let’s save everything else for later and fill our stomachs first.”

“Oh man, I haven’t seen one of those in a long time.”

“It’s stewed cockatrice.”

Someone was banging on the door to the room, but they didn't let that bother them.

"Now that I think about it, this might be from three years ago."

"I dunno if you should keep stuff for that long even if it won't go bad. I mean, I'll eat it, though."

As Allen shoveled Sara's lunch into his mouth, Sara got out some cups and made bush strawberry juice.

"This is the last of my bush strawberry juice for real this time."

"Yes!"

As Allen rejoiced, Sara got out another lunch for him and started eating her own. As she chewed, she stoked herself up.

"We've got a bathroom with a tub and I have three months of food in my storage pouch. We're not coming out until they apologize to you."

"We really should be getting to Rosa, though." As always, Allen never lost sight of what needed to be done.

"Now that you mention it, if we want to leave, we can just leave in my barrier."

"Then—" Allen started, eyes sparkling, but Sara shook her head.

"Let's at least wait and see what happens for a day."

Sara had started the day in a rage, but now that she'd calmed down, she was finally able to think things through. "I'm sure Liam and everyone else got back yesterday too. I'd like to think those who fought alongside you wouldn't try to get in your way."

The knights who had come to get Allen hadn't shown an ounce of fatigue from travel. That meant they were knights who had stayed behind in the castle and were trying to arrest Allen to avoid taking responsibility for their failures themselves.

"Chris and the king are here too. If Haruto can tell them about this, they should be able to clear up the misunderstanding," Sara explained to Allen.

“Couldn’t I just have gotten arrested, then?”

“I told you I didn’t want you to.” Sara might have been being selfish, but she wasn’t going to back down this time.

“Now that I’m full, I’m really sleepy.” Allen yawned and Sara pushed him toward the bathroom.

“I know how you feel, but you’ve gotta take that bath you’ve been putting off before you go back to bed.”

“That part of you hasn’t changed since Rosa,” Allen said with a grin before vanishing into the bathroom.

“Well, maybe I should get changed too.”

She was in the castle, but that didn’t mean she was going to put on a dress. Instead, Sara put on an outfit with good mobility so she could go out at any time. On top of that, she put on her apothecary’s robes.

She’d told Allen she wasn’t leaving this room until they apologized to him, and she *did* have more than three months of food in her pouch. She could make water with magic whenever she wanted. But the continental tortoise wasn’t going to stop its march to the Dark Mountain, so they couldn’t just stay in the castle forever. If things didn’t come to a conclusion Sara was satisfied with today, they’d have to leave just like Allen said.

“Whew. I feel nice and refreshed after that.”

Allen came out of the bathroom with his hair still half-wet. Though he’d said he was sleepy, he was dressed in his usual manner. Allen pretty much always dressed for dungeon diving, so he was ready to leave at any time just like Sara was.

“I’ll dry your hair for you.”

“You don’t mind? Man, it’s been a while.”

Allen sat down in a chair, grinning, and Sara dried his hair with magic. They hadn’t done this since Rosa. Still, Sara didn’t like how close her head was to Allen’s while he was sitting and she was standing behind him.

“You’ve really grown.”

“I’m not really all that tall yet, though. It’s just that you *haven’t* grown, Sara.”

“I know, but still...”

As if to interrupt their lighthearted, everyday conversation, the banging on the door was growing louder, and they could hear voices calling to them now too.

“Well, your hair’s dry now.”

“And I’ve got my storage bag.”

Sara and Allen looked at each other and grinned.

“Should we go see what’s going on out there?”



They sat down in chairs where they could see the door and Sara shrank her barrier down around them. The door suddenly flew open and she sighed.

“Things have just gotten more out of hand if they’re being this rude. I think it took a good amount of time to eat and take a bath and stuff...”

Sara was disappointed by the way the castle was handling things, and when she saw who’d opened the door she was even *more* disappointed.

“Sara, please don’t get in the knights’ way.”

“Liam.” She was disappointed in herself for having even the slightest of expectations for Liam as well.

“We have our reasons.”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses.” Sara cut him off. “Hydrangea’s southern knights...” He must have thought she’d bring up Allen, so he stopped to listen when she unexpectedly mentioned the southern knights instead. “...have escorted the continental tortoise to the capital as they promised. So, what will the capital’s knights do now?” Sara asked him quietly. “How will you escort the tortoise to Rosa? Nelly and Bradley are already following it of their own accord, so what about the knights? Why are you still here in the castle?”

“The capital has sent a squad of knights after the continental tortoise. I’m not in charge of the whole operation; I was only responsible for the subjugation plan just before the tortoise reached the capital.” Liam swung his fists down at his sides as if that frustrated him.

“So your work is done, since you couldn’t subjugate it.”

“Sara!”

Why was he getting mad at her?

“We can leave the castle, then, can’t we? Unlike you, whose work is done, we’ve got a request to handle from Rosa. We don’t have time to play along with your stupid blame game.”

“Urgh...” Sara’s sharp comment seemed to have finally silenced him.

Sara hadn’t been expecting to say anything this harsh to anyone, but she was

so upset about the whole incident that it was pushing her to change her behavior.

Liam had several knights behind him, and Sara could see no one who seemed like her ally. Still, she didn't stop.

"Liam. Is it Allen's fault that the continental tortoise went berserk?"

"No!" He hastily denied it, which was a relief to Sara, but then he continued, "No, I can't say that it *wasn't* his fault either. Allen was the only one who was able to injure the continental tortoise, and it's true that it went berserk as soon as he stabbed it with his sword. Ugh!"

Sara's mana burst out of her.

"Sara, please calm down," Liam pleaded, grimacing from the pressure of Sara's mana, but she was so angry she didn't even know if she *could* suppress it. She didn't want to anyway, so she continued to press him.

"Whose strategy and whose orders were Allen following when he attacked?"

"Th-The knights' strategy, and my orders."

"So who does the responsibility lie with?"

"W-Well..." Liam started to say something, but Sara's mana swelled up even more until Allen softly grasped her hand.

"Sara."

"Allen..." Distracted, Sara felt her mana pressure subsiding.

"He can't answer you if you're letting that much pressure out. Mana pressure is painful."

"R-Right." Sara calmed down quickly with the ever-mature Allen at her side.

Liam had collapsed to his knees in pain, but he stood, biting his lip. It took him a moment to get any words out, however, which showed how much inner conflict he had.

"I'm sorry."

Sara was relieved when the words he finally mustered were an apology. She'd been a little worried they would be going back and forth pointlessly forever.

“The continental tortoise went berserk because the knights’ plan was naive. And the responsibility lies with me for knowing that and not saying anything to stop them.”

“Captain!”

Liam had evidently gotten over his internal conflict. The knights behind him tried to stop him as he asserted that the responsibility was his. They must have thought the almighty knights shouldn’t be seen admitting their mistakes.

Liam held up a hand to stop them and said sourly, “Before I could explain that to the commander, he laid the blame on Allen and ordered me to arrest him. And until that order is officially rescinded, we knights must obey it and carry it out.”

Sure, maybe Liam was only in charge of carrying out the operation and he wasn’t the knights’ ultimate authority, but Sara still didn’t think it made sense to treat someone who’d worked so hard like a criminal for even a moment.

“I swear... I swear I will prove his innocence. Innocence is understating it, in truth. He’s the only one who actually succeeded at the mission the knights put forth. I swear I will prove that and set him free, so will you just come with us peacefully for now?”

“‘Come with you peacefully’? He will *not*. You people dragged him out of bed and were hauling him away like a criminal!”

Liam looked behind himself in surprise and a couple of the knights had the decency to look guilty.

Sara was firm in her decision, but Allen shook his head. “I understand why they have to do it. Even if Liam thinks I’m innocent, if they let me go, they’ll be disobeying orders and then they’ll be the ones getting in trouble,” he explained to Sara. “It’ll be easiest if I just go with them.”

Allen moved to stand, but Sara grabbed him and held him down. The calm air in the room thickened with tension once again.

“Sit, Allen.”

“But—”

“Sit.”

Allen reluctantly sat back down and Sara stood instead.

“Liam. Stop acting so spoiled.”

Liam’s eyes went wide at Sara’s harsh words and tone. For Liam, this could have been considered a hard-won compromise, but Sara wasn’t satisfied.

“Why does the person who worked the hardest have to be locked up just so things are easier for you? That doesn’t make any sense. It’s not a question of what’s easiest.” This time, Sara made sure not to let her mana get out of control, no matter how angry she was. “I don’t care if it’s the prime minister or the king or the former knight commander or an Invited or whoever. If you can’t do it, then just find someone who can. Stop trying to take the easy way out and get that order rescinded right now!” She glared at Liam fiercely. “If you know your superior’s in the wrong, then it’s your job to fix it as a subordinate, isn’t it?! Stop making excuses and go do it already!”

She didn’t know if it was just the shock of having a younger girl say all that to him or if she’d truly hurt his pride, but Liam went white and then slowly turned red, tightly clenched fists trembling at his sides.

But he remained silent, simply spinning around and signaling the knights before striding off. Aside from two lookouts, the rest of the knights hurried after him.

“Phew...” Sara sank into the chair. “I’m more tired today than I was yesterday...”

“Sara! Allen!”

Noel leaped into the room, looking rather flustered. He’d managed to get dressed, but from his messy hair, it was clear that he’d rushed here right after waking up. It had only been a few days since they’d last seen him, but it seemed like a long time.

Sara glanced at the knights standing near the door, who were frozen with their hands stretched out. They must have been surprised that Noel had passed so easily through the barrier that had repelled Liam earlier.

“I saw the whole thing! The paralysis agent only worked for a short time, and while the rest of the knights and Hunters just panicked, Allen was the only one... Allen was the only one who was able to calmly get on top of the continental tortoise. He was on the shell, and the tortoise started moving, but he jumped up to the head and stabbed his sword into its eye... Allen is without a doubt an incredible Hunter! He’s a hero!”

Noel was always calm and collected, but he was shouting now, his face wet with tears.

“Even when the continental tortoise went berserk, he clung to the sword and didn’t let go! It started moving so fast I couldn’t keep up with it and didn’t see it myself, but I heard that he clung to it the whole time until it was right in front of the capital! How could he... How could he be arrested like a criminal?!”

Sara had never seen Noel get so emotional before, so she was starting to panic herself, unsure of how to comfort him.

“I’ll testify as a witness! First I’ll go to my father. Then... Then...” Noel rubbed his eyes with his sleeve. “They can’t arrest someone who worked so hard! They just can’t! I’ll go talk to them!”

Just like he’d entered, Noel left the room like the wind.

“Err, huh?”

“Well... I guess I’m kinda happy about that.”

The Hills brothers made quite the contrast, but Allen had always treated Noel kindly, so it was nice to see how angry he got on Allen’s behalf. Allen looked a little bashful at the intensity of the emotions Noel had just shown them, and he looked at Sara like he wanted to say something. It was a little strange, though, since he didn’t actually look her in the eye.

“Sara, umm... Thank you.”

“Yeah. You’re welcome.” She folded her arms and puffed her chest out. “You always think things’ll work out if you just put up with stuff, Allen.”

“Yeah, I guess I do, don’t I?” he agreed easily.

“That’s why people look down on you and take advantage of you... Huh?”

Even as she said the words, Sara felt as though she'd heard them somewhere before.

"That's what I said to you."

"Oh, that's why it sounded so familiar."

It was kind of embarrassing to think that they both thought the same thing about each other and were always frustrated about it.

"Want some tea?" Sara said, perhaps to avoid dwelling on that feeling.

Over the tea, she told him about what had happened when he was unconscious and how Nelly and Kuntz had saved him.

"I only remember bits and pieces of it. I remember feeling really relieved when Nelly put her hands over mine and pulled the sword out of the continental tortoise. I can sort of remember jumping down from the shell and how it got farther and farther away after that too."

"It's too bad you didn't see how hard Kuntz was working just after that."

Sara told him all about it to fill in the gaps in his memory.

Something finally happened right around when they were finishing their second cup. There was a quiet knock on the door.

"Can I open it?" Sara asked Allen.

"Your call," he said resignedly, leaning back in his chair.

"Come in."

When the door opened, Liam was standing behind it, so Sara was pretty sure she made a super annoyed face when she saw him.

"Pardon the intrusion."

Still, he was being polite, unlike earlier, so Sara invited him inside. "Please come in."

Of course, she still had her barrier around her and Allen so that he couldn't touch them.

Liam cleared his throat and clasped his hands behind his back. "I came to clear

up a misunderstanding.”

“Did you?” Sara responded coldly.

“I believe some knights arrived earlier to arrest Mr. Allen.”

“You ‘believe’? You were there yourself.” Sara was without mercy.

Liam cleared his throat again. “That order has been rescinded. It became clear that it was a misunderstanding based on unclear reports.”

Sara said nothing, simply waiting for him to continue.

Liam unclasped his hands and pulled one leg back, kneeling. “Mr. Allen, you accepted our request and fought valiantly and yet we almost arrested you due to a misunderstanding. Please accept my sincere apologies.”

Sara had nothing to say in response. She was too surprised to say anything. She’d thought this wouldn’t be resolved without a scolding from the king or the prime minister, so she’d never expected the knights—let alone Liam—to come and apologize like this on their own.

Allen stood quietly and knelt in the same way before Liam. “I was a little worried when you came to take me away, but Sara got angry on my behalf, so it’s fine now. I’m used to putting up with crap like this.” He laughed dryly. “You’re making me uncomfortable. Could you stand?”

Liam hesitated a moment but eventually stood. “You were the only one able to face the continental tortoise calmly at the time. No one else was able to lay so much as a scratch on it, yet you hit its eye with your sword just as the plan called for. And you clung to the sword without panicking, never letting go of the continental tortoise. All of this is worthy of the highest praise.”

Liam spoke from the heart, yet Allen shook his head, his expression dark.

“No, it’s not worth any praise. I don’t think I should have done anything when the people with more experience than me had already failed, with or without orders.”

Liam’s eyes widened slightly at Allen’s unexpected words.

“I was excited to have my first request, and I just wanted to accomplish something. I should have been more mindful of the fact that the plan was

intended to protect the capital and Rosa.” This was what Allen himself had been reflecting on. “No one knew it would go berserk, and I don’t think I should have to take responsibility for that, but I’ve learned how inexperienced I still am as a Hunter. I did cause trouble for people, and if Nelly and Kuntz, and Sara and Haruto, hadn’t saved me, I might be dead now.”

He must have wanted to get his feelings across to the person in charge of the operation.

“I still have a long way to go. I’ll keep working at it.” Allen bowed his head, probably to himself as much as anyone else.

Sara crossed her arms and puffed her chest out. She might have even raised her chin up for good measure. Never led astray by social standing or greed and always working to better himself as a Hunter. That was Allen. He shined brighter than anyone here—no, even people who weren’t here couldn’t compare to him.

Liam opened his mouth to say something to Allen before noticing Sara behind him and bursting into laughter. “Why do *you* look so proud, Sara?”

Allen turned around in surprise, then smiled happily and with a little embarrassment. “Well, should we get going?” he asked hastily as if to disguise the bashfulness he was feeling.

“Yeah!”

They’d been ready to go for some time now.

“Go...?” Liam asked curiously, but it wasn’t Allen or Sara who answered him. Instead, a boy’s voice said, “To Rosa, of course.”

“Noel? What are you doing here?”

Beyond the door was Noel in his apothecary’s robes. He was all ready to travel, the bedhead he’d had earlier perfectly groomed now as if it had never been there in the first place.

Chris stood behind Noel, also in his apothecary’s robes, and for some reason Haruto was there making the same proud face as Sara. Like Allen, he was dressed for dungeon delving.

“We’ll be heading to Rosa as well. Of course, we’ll be traveling by carriage, though.”

If it were just Chris, he could come with them using physical strengthening, but he must have decided to go by carriage for Noel’s sake.

“It seems you were rather insistent with the knight commander, brother, but I did my part as well. Just by putting pressure on father, though.”

“And I went to His Majesty.”

Noel and Haruto might have been more alike than they seemed. He didn’t add anything, but Chris had most likely been working behind the scenes as well.

“Well, we should hurry. I think the continental tortoise and Nelly are both pretty far ahead of us by now.”

With Sara’s declaration, she took a step forward together with Allen. And before leaving the room, she looked straight up at Liam.

“I have a better opinion of you now. You were pretty cool, just then.”

“Ugh...”

He must not have been expecting to hear something like that from Sara. For a moment, he didn’t seem to understand what she’d said, then he turned red.

Finally, he told them, “I wish you luck,” and left, just like that.

Sara, Allen, and Haruto joined Chris and Noel in the carriage and left for the capital’s northern exit. They couldn’t run through the crowded city with physical strengthening unless it was a real emergency, after all.

“We’ll catch up with you later!”

“Tell Nef I’m on my way.”

Noel and Chris saw them off from the edge of the city, Noel waving and Chris with nothing but Nelly on his mind as always, and the trio set off at a quick trot.

When she’d left Rosa, they’d been heading west to Camellia, so this was Sara’s first time taking this road from the capital to Rosa. There were hardly any other people or carriages on the road, probably because people were being

cautious of the continental tortoise.

Haruto had been in a party with Allen back in Rosa, so was perhaps more comfortable with the other boy than he was with Sara. They traveled at a steady pace, having fun conversations and enjoying Sara's food on the way, and by the next day, they could see the continental tortoise in the distance.

It was traveling to the east of the road, while the only people on the road itself were a few knights keeping pace with it and a carriage accompanying them.

"I think I can see Nelly there with the knights."

She was shorter than the knights, but her beautiful red hair tied up behind her head swayed like a tail, making it easy to pick her out from the crowd. They couldn't see Bradley, but maybe he was inside the carriage.

"I think Bradley's gone ahead to get to Rosa first," Haruto said in response to Sara's speculation. "The knights probably sent a messenger, but who knows whether they'd actually explain what was going on or not. And..." Haruto pointed a thumb at Sara, then himself. "He probably wants to tell them how we made those walls so fast. Rosa should be working on some walls of their own, but there aren't a ton of people who live there in the first place, so I doubt they have enough manpower."

Rosa had tall walls around it, so there was a limit to the number of people who could live inside the town. That was why they imported a lot of things from outside of town and why the cost of living was so high there.

"Bradley didn't head up to the Dark Mountain right away? Does he have a lot of attachment to Rosa?" Sara asked even though she knew it was a rude question.

"Well, he can't stay up on the Dark Mountain without Rosa."

"I guess that's true."

"Plus the vibes of Rosa's Hunter's Guild just can't be beat."

"I know what you mean."

They might have seemed cold at first, but Sara and Allen owed a lot to the

Hunter's Guild in Rosa.

As they chatted, they caught up with the knights in no time at all.

"Nelly!" Sara called out.

Nelly's ponytail bounced up in surprise. Sara could see the knights running with her reflexively go for their swords.

"Sara?" She looked back without stopping and spotted the three of them in an instant. "Allen! You're all right now?"

She looked relieved to see Allen running like nothing at all had happened. The knights removed their hands from their swords when they saw the look on her face. Sara was comforted to see that they had some amount of trust in her.

"I'm totally fine. Nelly, thanks for saving me. Seriously."

It made her wonder what the heck they had been doing, but they all updated each other on the last day as they ran. They left the details about what the knights had tried to pull for later, of course.

"Well, Bradley went on ahead, but what do you three want to do? I plan to stick with the tortoise until we get to Rosa."

"Sara and I will go on ahead. We can make walls real fast, after all." Haruto answered for the both of them. Sara had been planning on the same thing, of course, but it kind of annoyed her all the same.

"I think I'd be of more use keeping an eye on this thing. Also, Chris and Noel are on their way in a carriage."

Haruto and Allen had assigned the work. The knights were giving them a bit of a confused look, but Sara figured Allen could explain anything else they needed himself, since he was staying behind.

She didn't want to leave Nelly, but she had to do her part. Sara waved to her and hurried on ahead with Haruto.

Though they were pressing on ahead, they stopped to rest at night, of course. They both put tents up. The first night was a bit awkward, since they weren't used to traveling together, but they had to prioritize getting enough rest so they could make progress. As they shared nostalgic stories of Japan and Haruto told

Sara about when he'd first come to this world, they'd made it halfway to Rosa in what felt like the blink of an eye.

"We can make it there in another two days. No, three, I think. There's no need to hurry that much," Haruto mused.

Now that Sara thought about it, the two of them had changed the continental tortoise's course in front of the capital in only a few hours. They'd completed the first three walls they'd made in only a day as well. As long as they had a day to prepare for the tortoise's arrival, they should have more than enough time.

"Bradley knows what's going on and he's ahead of us, so let's take our time so we don't get too wiped out."

"Taking their time" would still get them there more than twice as fast as a carriage. Physical strengthening was a powerful thing.

"Huh? Doesn't that person look like a Hunter?" Sara asked, spotting someone alongside the road.

There was barely anyone on the road at the moment because of the continental tortoise, and no one else who was around was standing in one place and looking out toward the capital like the person in front of them.

The two of them lowered their speed and stopped, intending to talk to the person, but he called out to them first.

"Hey, you're the girl who used to warm up lunches at the Guild kiosk."

And he was talking to Sara. He looked young, and when he recognized her, she thought back and seemed to recall seeing him as well.

"Are you a Hunter from Rosa?"

"Yeah. You remember me?" He seemed happy about that.

"Yeah, a little," Sara said somewhat awkwardly. "What are you doing here?" That was the main question.

"Oh, if you two came from the capital, did you see it? The continental tortoise."

"Of course. We're messengers, more or less."

That *was* true, wasn't it?

"Same here. Anyone with halfway decent skills as a Hunter who's quick on their feet is out here on watch. If we see the continental tortoise, we run to the next messenger, then that one runs to the next one, and so forth."

"Wow! Vince thought of that, didn't he?"

"Yep."

Even if you weren't the best at physical strengthening, if it was only short distances people were covering, they could just run as fast as they could until they made it. It was smart planning.

"Anyone who can use magic is helping with the walls, whether or not they're from the Hunter's Guild, and the veteran Hunters are watching out in the eastern meadow on the way to the Dark Mountain. Everyone in Rosa is helping out in some way. I've gotta do my part too."

The Hunter had stars in his eyes and clearly wanted to hear about the continental tortoise from them, but Sara and Haruto had to hurry themselves, so he'd have to settle for waiting and seeing it himself.

Without thinking, Sara reached into her storage pouch and took out one of her homemade lunches, handing it over to him. "Here, have this, and do your best. You should see the continental tortoise in another three days or so."

"Man, I can't decide if that's soon or not. Thanks for the warm lunch."

They looked forward to seeing the rest of the messengers on their way to Rosa. Before they knew it, the town was right in front of their eyes. Rosa's tall walls stood out at a distance, but there were new walls at a diagonal slant outside the town now, making it look like some sort of historical site.

"It's just like the capital."

And unlike the capital, where they only had the foundations laid out, the walls here were almost completed. In fact, the only way they could tell that they *weren't* completed was because there were so many people wandering around them, clearly still working on them.

"Bradley based the walls in the capital on these ones. Of course they look the

same.”

Sara turned around. When she’d seen it, the continental tortoise had been east of the road, but if it kept heading straight toward the Dark Mountain, it *was* going to graze Rosa. She turned back toward Rosa and found that the stands usually outside of town were still there, serving the people working on the walls now.

“I wonder what happened to the people living in tents outside the walls.”

They continued forward and people called out to them as they got closer just like the first messenger had. It felt a little strange.

“Hey! Haruto! And Sara! What happened to Allen?!”

Bradley’s voice came from Rosa. He didn’t seem the type to raise his voice, so he must have been anxious for Haruto to arrive. Sara figured it’d be pretty hard to be the only one in charge of the walls to stop the continental tortoise.

“Allen’s fine! He’s with Nelly and the continental tortoise!” Haruto answered as he ran over to Bradley. Sara took her time, looking over the food stands with nostalgia. There was the bread and soup she and Allen had often bought.

“Hey, Sara. Long time no see.”

She heard a nostalgic voice next.

“Vince!”

She turned around and found Vince standing next to Bradley and Haruto, looking somewhat casual like he always did.

“Well, aren’t you a pretty little thing now? And you were just a little shrimp this high when you were here in Rosa.” Vince held his hand up at a height Sara *had* been once—back when she was five.

“You let a little kid like that work in the Guild, Vince?” she retorted.

“You got me there.”

Vince looked thrilled to see her, like an uncle who was seeing his niece growing up. And Sara was so happy to see him that she felt like crying, but this wasn’t the time for a teary reunion.

“Nelly and Allen are on their way, but the knights only sent a few people to keep an eye on things. Think we’ll manage?”

“You managed in the capital with just three Invited there, right?”

“I guess we did. We’ll do what we can.”

She’d come because she was worried about Rosa, but with three Invited here, something pretty serious would have to happen for anything bad to occur.

“I hear you got the continental tortoise to change its course before it hit the capital, so you avoided the worst-case scenario, right? And...” Vince jerked his chin in the direction of the stands with a grin. “We had more earth magic artisans than I thought working at the stands. Turns out most of ’em make their disposable dishes themselves.”

“So you don’t import those from the capital.”

“Nope. Those guys’ve been churning out blocks and stackin’ ’em up. We *did* have about two weeks to work on this, after all. Then Bradley strengthened the walls we got done, so we’re more or less ready, I think.”

Sara felt her shoulders relaxing.

“I’m thinking we’ll wait until we can see it and add more walls if we need to based on its current trajectory,” Bradley added. “What do you think?”

“I think it’ll be easier if we start with a watchtower,” Haruto suggested.

The plan was moving on without her, but Sara was still curious about something.

“Umm, what happened to Kuntz?”

He hadn’t been with Nelly, so she’d been expecting to run into him when she found Bradley.

“Ah, that one?” Vince said with a bit of a smirk for some reason. “He said he got some repellent from Chris and handed it over all serious-like. Then when he was talking about how he’d never run that fast before and he was completely wiped out, Jay kidnapped him.”

“Kidnapped?”

That sounded ominous, but with the way Vince was smiling, Sara figured he was probably fine.

“Yeah, he said something about how the kid had average potential as a Hunter, but it was cute how hard he was working. Then, ‘I’ll train him up since he’s here in Rosa.’” Vince’s half-smile turned to full laughter.

“Is the guildmaster at the guildhall right now?”

“Nah.” Vince shook his head, stifling his laughter. “He’s taken some veteran Hunters to keep a lookout at the entrance to the Dark Mountain. That Kuntz kid is with them.”

Sara remembered the hellhounds showing up in town in Hydrangea. “Is the entrance to the Dark Mountain weakened right now?”

“It’s nice talking to you, Sara—you catch on quick. Steel armadillos and mountain wolves have been popping out every so often. The Dark Mountain’s a fair distance from Rosa, so no one’s gotten hurt yet, but we can’t fight the continental tortoise even if we’ve got Hunters here, so we’re having ‘em keep watch over there.”

“Kuntz said he couldn’t beat hellhounds on his own yet... I hope he’s okay...” Sara couldn’t help stretching up and looking out toward the eastern meadow. She wondered if it was still full of horned rabbits.

“It’s normal for a caster to not be able to take out a hellhound on his own. You guys expect way too much of people.”

He could be exasperated with her all he liked, but Sara had been raised by Nelly, so she didn’t know what was normal and what wasn’t. Still, Vince had picked up on her anxiety.

“The eastern meadow is still full of horned rabbits, but thanks to Ted, we finally got the road over there fixed up. No one’ll get hurt running errands out there anymore.”

That reminded Sara of the incident with Allen and the knights, but that had been Ted’s fault in the first place. She was surprised to hear that it was thanks to him that the road had finally been fixed.

“Thanks to Ted?”

Vince shrugged. “Surprising, right? I guess he did some reflecting after his trip with you. He’s still got a bad attitude, but ever since he came back last year, he’s been doing some pretty decent stuff, helping out the mayor.”

“Helping the mayor. He’s not working as an apothecary?” It was unexpected news to Sara, who had thought that Ted wanted to prioritize his work as an apothecary over everything else whether or not he was the mayor’s son.

“He’s doing both. The guildmaster of the Apothecary’s Guild right now was the vice guildmaster when you were here.”

He *had* seemed more reasonable the last time they’d met in the capital. Though his attitude was also as bad as always just like Vince had said.

“Even the mayor spoils his kid, after all. We could tell him he needed to do stuff over and over again and he’d drag his feet, but as soon as Ted said something, he’d give permission right away. Then when it was done, he bragged to everyone about what his son was accomplishing. I’ve got my complaints about it, but the results are all that matters, really.”

As always, Vince was a practical guy. As long as the stuff that needed doing got done, he didn’t care who got the credit for it.

“I’m glad the road got fixed too, no matter how it happened. By the way...” Sara decided to ask what she’d been wondering about for some time now. “Isn’t the area where we used to stay out in our tents, and the food stands and everything out here, in danger?”

“Oh.” Vince waved his hand dismissively. “I’ve asked them to leave. We announced they were to evacuate to the northwest side of town, but they’re all determined to make money while the walls are being built, so they’re sticking around until the last possible minute.”

Merchants were tough.

“The northwest...” That was the exact opposite side of town from where she and Allen had stayed, so she’d never even gone there to gather plants.

“The protection field around the town won’t do jack if the continental

tortoise destroys the Third Wall—or worse, the Second. We set up some areas with protection fields around them on the northwestern side of town. People who do business or live in tents outside of town aren't officially recognized by the town, so the Hunter's Guild took care of all of that. The stands are only out here selling stuff 'cause of the dungeons, after all."

But the town is profiting off of them, Sara almost said in response.

"Now, Sara." Vince smirked for some reason. "That mayor's got a standing invitation for Invited to stay at his house. What do you want to do?"

"Eep!" Sara flinched.

"What do you mean, 'eep'? Have you only grown on the outside? You still want to avoid trouble as much as possible, I see." Vince's smirk changed to full-on laughter.

Ignoring the rude man, Sara turned to Bradley for help. "Bradley!"

"Oh, I've been staying there myself and have had some pleasant conversations with the mayor Conrad and his son Theodore."

"No way. Pleasant conversations with Ted?"

Sara was almost dizzy trying to picture having a pleasant conversation with the always rude, sour-faced Ted. More than Ted himself, however, Sara was having trouble picturing living in the same house as the mother and father who had raised Ted. But anyway, if Bradley wasn't going to be any help, then she'd just have to take a stand for herself.

"The guild inn is fine with me. I couldn't possibly stay at the mayor's house."

"Yeah, I figured. Not sure the mayor will allow that, though. He probably doesn't want anyone talking about how he wasn't a good host to one of the Invited. At least stay in a fancy inn."

She wanted to tell the mayor that it was his son who had made it impossible for her to stay in town in the first place, but she'd put up with a fancy inn if Vince wanted her to.

"I guess that's fine..."

"I can stay with you 'til Nelly and Allen show up," Haruto offered.

“That’d help.” She finally had her destination for the night decided, then.

“He’ll still want you to come for dinner, though.”

“Whaaat?”

“Ha ha ha. I’ll join you for that.” For some reason, Vince was coming with them to dinner, it seemed.

She’d come here all enthusiastic after receiving the request from Rosa, but she was deflating now thinking it was all leading up to a visit to Ted’s house. But she shook her head, trying to convince herself that it wasn’t that bad.

True, he was the worst when she was living in Rosa. But on their way to Camellia and when they’d reunited in the capital, he hadn’t done anything mean to her, he’d just been a bit curt. At the time, she’d been able to think of him as just another traveling companion.

She should stop thinking about all this random stuff just because she was back in Rosa, Sara told herself. “I just have to think of it as my duty as one of the Invited to rub elbows with the important people wherever I go.”

After that, she was guided to an inn in the Second District. She took a relaxing bath in a single room without Nelly and by the time she was dressed again, it was time to head to the mayor’s house. She put on the dress Ri had gotten her for more formal occasions and waited for Vince to come pick her up.

Eventually, there was a knock on the door, and she opened it to find a more neat-looking Vince than usual, his hair combed back. Haruto was next to him.

“We’re here to get you, Sara. I know I said as much earlier, but you really have gotten pretty.”

Sara smiled, accepting the compliment without argument. “Well, should we get going?”

They headed from the Second District to the First. Sara had never been there before. They headed through the gate of the slightly shorter inner wall to find a small noble district at the heart of the town.

“Wow, look at these mansions!”

They were a lot smaller than Ri’s mansion in Hydrangea, and the mansions in

the noble district of the capital were fancier, but Rosa didn't have much land to work with, so each building had to be relatively small. Still, the mansions in this district all had spacious gardens and fences with big, fancy gates.

"It's nothing like the Rosa I know."

No matter where she looked, there were no buildings that looked particularly small or cheap, and the people walking around the district looked just as fancy as all the nobles she'd seen in the capital.

"Even in Rosa, if you lived here, you might not believe there were people living outside the walls."

"Yeah. Hard to say if there's a bigger gap between the rich and the poor anywhere else," Vince said with some chagrin. "Come on, it's the fanciest mansion, there. They wanted to send a carriage to pick you up from the inn, you know. It was a lot of work getting them to back off."

The mansion Vince indicated was even more gaudy than the ones around it. There was a guard at the gate, and in the garden there was a fountain. And when they knocked on the big door and were led inside, they were greeted by the whole household.

It was a bit strange to see Bradley waiting there with a smile like he was part of the family, and Sara had never expected to feel *relieved* to see Ted's face. She almost burst out laughing, and her voice came out kind of strange because she was trying to hold her mirth back.

"Ted's...smiling... His eyes are dead, though," she said quietly and Vince elbowed her.

"Keep it to yourself. I don't think he's happy about this either."

Between Ted and a beautiful lady who must have been his mother was the stern-faced mayor. He almost looked like an actor in a movie.

"It pleases me greatly to finally meet you, young Invited. And may I say, you are quite the beauty." The mayor spread his arms in an exaggerated welcoming gesture. "I am the mayor, Conrad. I hear you're on good terms with my son Theodore."

“My name is Sara. He helped me out in the capital.” They were absolutely not “on good terms,” but Sara was enough of an adult that she knew how to respond in a tactful way.

“I’m glad to see you as well, Haruto. And it’s been far too long since you’ve visited, Vince.”

“Well, we see each other enough at the Guild, don’t we?”

Haruto had eaten here a few times already, so he seemed comfortable here, and Vince seemed to be on good enough terms with the mayor as well.

“Well, Ted?”

“Right. This way, Sara.”

After they exchanged greetings with the mayor’s somewhat timid-looking wife, it seemed Ted would be guiding them to their dining location.

Though Ted had a smile on his face, before reminiscing over their reunion or anything like that, he cautioned Sara, “Don’t say anything unnecessary. And the engagement or whatever might come up, but it wasn’t my idea. Just ignore it.”

“Well, I don’t really have anything to say in the first place, unnecessary or no. I’m turning down all of my marriage proposals anyway, so that’s fine.”

“Good.”

The blunt words were just like Ted. Sara was actually relieved to hear them.

She’d thought she’d be nervous, but it seemed Sara had gotten used to dining with nobles from living in Ri’s mansion, because she didn’t have any trouble with the food or the conversation. Of course, it helped that Bradley, Haruto, and Vince were there too.

Vince and the mayor were doing most of the talking, and Vince was leading the conversation so that Sara would be able to find out what was happening in the town, so she learned a lot about what everyone was doing to counter the continental tortoise.

“If by some chance the protection field fails, at least monsters won’t be able to get into the First District. I was surprised when Ted suggested evacuating the townsfolk into the First District when the continental tortoise comes, but if I

think of it as him coming to terms with being the next mayor, it doesn't feel too bad."

So he hadn't just suggested fixing the road to the Dark Mountain. When Sara learned he was thinking about evacuating the people of the town too, she had to admit Ted's stocks were rising considerably in her mind.

The pleasant conversation continued for some time after that until it was finally time to wrap things up.

"I'll take Sara home," Ted announced.

She almost said that she had Haruto and Vince so she'd be fine, but she agreed after realizing it looked like Ted wanted to talk to her about something.

They left the grounds of the mansion and Sara thanked him. "I heard you got the road to the Dark Mountain fixed up. Thanks."

"It's nothing you should have to thank me for."

This curtness was what made Ted, Ted. Walking beside Sara, he spread his arms like the mayor had earlier.

"Just look at this place. It's like a little terrarium. Before I went to the capital and met Master Chris, this was my entire world. Lavish, perfectly neat streets, a tiny slice of sky, and only a few neighbors to have any sort of interactions with. I always did exactly as my father said, like his little doll."

It was incredibly rare for Ted to talk about himself like this.

"The people in town on the other side of that wall were like garbage to me. I'd been raised for my entire life hearing that they were nothing more than tools to enrich the lives of the people who lived in the First District."

Sara was easily able to picture that after meeting Rosa's mayor. If Sara wasn't one of the Invited—if she had lived in Rosa for her whole life, for instance—she might have never even met the mayor of her own town.

"I went to the capital believing that, and never paid attention to anything but Master Chris and medicinal plants, so those ideas only solidified inside me when I became an adult. It's no one else's fault but my own. And because of that, I caused you and Allen a lot of trouble."

“I think Allen would tell you that’s all in the past now.”

She wasn’t sure if this could be called an apology or not, but it at least pleased Sara to know that Ted could openly admit that he’d been at fault.

“We’ve got more than enough money. My father plans to leave Rosa to me one day and go live in the capital, so we have enough to waste it on whatever we want.” Sara wasn’t sure why he was talking about money all of a sudden, but she understood when he continued, “So we had the money to fix up the road.”

“Uhh... *Ahem*.” Vince cleared his throat rather exaggeratedly from a slight distance away. “I’m here too, you know. Don’t say anything you don’t need to. I don’t want to hear about how the mayor’s got money to spare, but he wouldn’t spend it on anything anyway.”

“Then just pretend you never heard it,” Ted said flatly. “We won’t have the Invited up on the Dark Mountain forever. At some point, Hunters from Rosa are going to have to manage the Dark Mountain on their own. And I don’t want people getting hurt out there and blaming Rosa like what happened with the knights.”

“Wow, you’re really thinking about this, huh?”

“Oh, shut up.” Ted was finally starting to act more like himself.

“Are you gonna quit your job as an apothecary, Ted?”

He was only talking about things that had to do with being the next mayor, which wasn’t like him at all.

“Of course not. Even here in Rosa, I want to do work that will help Master Chris in some way.”

Sara was a bit surprised when his tone suddenly changed, but it was just his usual Master Chris worship.

“He can only make that dragon repellent of his in Hydrangea right now. My current goal is to find a way to manufacture it in Rosa.”

“Wow, that’s impressive. I think that really will help him.” Sara nodded beside him.

They arrived at the inn in no time as they spoke.

“It’s you, so I’m sure you’ll be fine, but...” Ted cleared his throat like something was stuck in it.

“But?”

“But, well... Don’t do anything reckless.”

He had already turned around and was walking away before he even finished speaking, but Sara definitely heard it.

“Don’t do anything reckless, huh?” She smirked at the very un-Ted-like sentiment.

Vince was smirking too. “How bittersweet.”

“No, there was nothing bittersweet about it,” Sara asserted.

“I don’t get it. What’s bittersweet about it?”

Sara didn’t think she’d ever be happy to hear one of Haruto’s oblivious comments.

“Ha ha ha. Things are fun when you guys are around. Ha ha ha.”

Vince went home in high spirits, and Sara was relieved to have her Invited duties over with for the day.

Epilogue: Whenever, Wherever

The next day, they started practicing building and demolishing walls quickly while Sara hunted the ever-abundant horned rabbits in the eastern meadow with Haruto. Since Sara didn't like to hunt proactively, she was basically just there watching Haruto, but she must have looked like easy prey sitting snugly on the grass, so even without her doing anything, she ended up with piles of horned rabbits around her after they charged into her barrier all on their own.

Compared to the tumult in Hydrangea and the capital, things were so peaceful here it was like there was no continental tortoise at all, but there was, of course, and news of its appearance reached them eventually.

"The continental tortoise will arrive at Rosa before noon tomorrow!"

The air in Rosa tensed immediately following the messenger's announcement.

"Okay, all the stands and people staying in tents are to evacuate first thing tomorrow morning."

Anyone working as a Hunter in Rosa had a storage pouch no matter how new they were, so everyone could travel light and move quickly. The townspeople were more or less the same, so everyone living on the eastern side of town in the Second and Third Districts packed all their belongings into storage boxes or bags and evacuated to the First District, and everyone living outside of the Third Wall moved to the western side of town.

The evacuation proceeded solemnly, and when everything was more or less ready, everyone involved with defending the city had gathered atop the gate on the Third Wall. Everyone, that is, save for Sara, Haruto, Bradley, and for some reason Vince, who stood atop a newly constructed watchtower waiting for the continental tortoise to come into view.

"Where else would I be? This is *my* plan." He seemed fairly full of himself, but Vince was a talented caster, so no one could really argue against his being there.

“I see it! There’s the continental tortoise!” Haruto squinted toward the capital. His vision was probably the best of all those stationed on the watchtower.

“You kids sure have good eyes. I can’t see a thing. No, wait...” Vince clutched the handrail with both hands.

Sara could see it now too, and the heavy *thuds* of its feet were getting louder.

“No way... These walls aren’t gonna stop something that huge...” Vince was leaning out over the handrail, utterly engrossed in the sight of the continental tortoise.

Bradley nodded lightly. “I thought the same thing when I saw it in the capital. But I was the only one who got that nervous. Haruto and Sara moved to immediately begin building new walls.”

True, Bradley had been a bit panicked when he’d finally caught sight of the continental tortoise back in the capital. But Sara hadn’t really been thinking anything at all. Her body had moved on its own to start building those walls.

“Since I have that experience, however, I can offer you my assurance. We managed just fine in the capital, so Rosa, which has been preparing for some time now, should be fine too. These walls are ready to do their job. Of course, I’ll defer to you, Vince, as to whether things really will be fine. Just watch the tortoise’s current trajectory and give whatever order you think is best.”

Vince had been gripping the handrail so hard his skin had gone white, but he let go now, arms hanging at his sides, then started stretching his shoulders.

“Whoops. That wasn’t very befitting behavior for a vice guildmaster, was it? Sheesh...” Now that he was a little more relaxed, Vince’s usual fearless smile returned to his face. “It’s heading in the exact direction we predicted. If it keeps going on this course, it will hit the first wall, but by the third it should veer away from Rosa.”

Sara felt the same way from what she’d seen in the capital.

“So Haruto, Sara, could you go up on top of the central gate and serve as the final wall if things don’t go according to plan?”

In the capital, they'd had to correct the tortoise's course before it even reached the three walls they'd prepared beforehand, but here they were merely to serve as the final bastion if their existing walls didn't serve their purpose.

"Looks like it's time for our training to pay off!"

"Yeah. Let's go!"

Haruto and Sara slid down from the watchtower and ran for the central gate.

"Oh jeez... Come on, Sara."

"Huh? Gyah!"

Haruto wrapped an arm around Sara's waist and leaped up to the top of the central gate with her in tow. This was the second time Sara had been transported in this manner.

"We would have made it up the stairs just fine!"

"Sorry, but look."

Sara had been protesting in a volume unusual for her, but Haruto paid it no mind, looking out toward the continental tortoise.

"Yeah, it's the tortoise... Wait, what's *that*?" Sara froze with surprise and fear for a second, but she quickly relaxed, her shoulders slumping with relief.

"They're waving."

"That they are. Hey!"

Sara waved back as hard as she could. The figures perched atop the continental tortoise must have been happy that she noticed them, because they waved even harder as she did.

"I guess the two of them have been on top of the continental tortoise's shell a few times now..." she sighed, looking at Nelly and Allen. "I suppose I was even on it once myself in Hydrangea. But still..."

"Whoa! You've been on it?!"

"You can jump up the front legs to get to the shell."

Normally she was happy when Haruto's eyes shined with respect, but right now, she wasn't too pleased about it.

"I bet while they were running alongside it, they realized it'd be way easier to just get on top of it."

"I can see that happening."

Rosa was on high alert for a threat that could possibly topple its walls, but the air atop the central gate, their last line of defense, was decidedly not tense.

"Still, I don't think they should just let it crash into the walls like... Whoa, they jumped off! How casual can those guys be?!"

"Right... I was distracted by Nelly and Allen, but we've gotta get ready to build more walls."

Sara pictured another wall directly behind the final wall in front of them.
Boom!

"That's one!"

The top of the first wall crumbled. *Boom!*

"That's two!"

The continental tortoise slowed a bit after impacting the first wall, but it still crashed into the second with enough force for the top of that one to crumble as well.

"And three..."

Boom.

With a duller sound than the first two impacts, the third wall shook but maintained its form.

"Is it changing course?!"

"It moved! It went off course!"

The continental tortoise spared Rosa not a single glance as it shuffled into the eastern meadow, passing just by the Third Wall.



“Is it over?” Sara breathed a sigh of relief. She hadn’t had to do anything this time around.

“No. There’s still a bit more to go. We’ve gotta keep an eye on it ’til it gets to the Dark Mountain.”

“Nelly!”

Nelly and Allen were suddenly right next to her, as though they’d been there the whole time, despite having been on top of the continental tortoise just moments prior. They must have climbed up while Sara was watching the tortoise.

“Sara!”

She looked down when she heard her name called and found Noel practically spilling out of a carriage. Chris stepped out slowly after him.

“Master Chris!” This shout came from Ted.

“Save the reunions for later! It changed course, but just barely! We’re going after it!” Vince shouted after getting down from the watchtower. He took off after the continental tortoise immediately afterward.

“Okay, just a little more work left,” Nelly said, not sounding tired in the least. She stretched, then wrapped her arm around Sara’s waist.

“Wait, you’re not...”

“Let’s go!”

Why was everyone so desperate to carry Sara around? Would it really take *that* much extra time to use the stairs like normal?

Ted’s scream followed Sara’s. “Agh! What are you doing?!”

“You want to see Chris right away, don’t you?” Allen said, mirth obvious in his voice.

Sara turned around right when she hit the ground and gaped at what she saw. Allen had his arm around the waist of a wheezing Ted. He must have jumped down from the gate carrying Ted.

“Ha ha ha. It’s pretty refreshing to hear you panic like that.”

“Dammit... And since when are you taller than me, Allen?!” Apparently *that* was what frustrated Ted more than being carried.

“Ted.”

“Y-Yes, Master Chris?!” When Chris called his name, Ted acted like nothing had happened. But Chris frowned slightly at Ted’s response.

“I’m not the guildmaster anymore, Ted. Do I still need to tell you to call me Chris?”

“I’m sorry, M—Chris.”

“Good. Now, I want to hear all about it as we follow the continental tortoise. Get in the carriage.”

“All about...m-me?”

This time, Chris frowned clearly. “About *Rosa*. You’re the next mayor, aren’t you?”

“Y-Yes!”

The rear guard could handle themselves. Haruto and Bradley had come down to the ground at some point, so Sara took off with them, Nelly, and Allen after the continental tortoise.

“Whoa, there’s a flock of cotton sheep over there!”

“It’s a lot smaller than the one we got caught up in.”

Back when she’d come down the mountain chasing after Nelly, and when she’d run through it in the dark after Allen, the eastern meadow had always been Sara’s enemy. But she didn’t feel that way about it now. Horned rabbits still attacked her like always, but she wasn’t scared of them anymore. Rosa had seemed interminably far away from the top of the Dark Mountain, but now she could make the trip in no time at all.

Before she knew it, the Dark Mountain loomed high in front of the continental tortoise.

“Growl!”

“Growl!”

“Mountain wolves?”

Sara’s gaze dropped down to the ground after she stared up at the Dark Mountain. There she saw Hunters fighting mountain wolves. They looked up in shock when they noticed the continental tortoise, but they currently lacked the luxury of leisurely taking in the sight.

“Kuntz!” Allen called and Kuntz turned around, his face looking miserably tired.

“Allen!”

“Kuntz! Don’t get distracted!”

“Yes, siiir!”

Kuntz sounded relieved when he called Allen’s name, but the guildmaster was quick to reprimand him, his expression uncharacteristically serious.

It was no wonder, with all the mountain wolves attacking the Hunters out here. Sara didn’t think she’d ever seen so many of them at once before. Some of the Hunters were so exhausted they were just sitting defeated inside the protection field around the road—an unusual state of affairs for the typically quite formidable Hunters of Rosa.

Sara hadn’t seen mountain wolves in a long time, but these ones were so ferocious it almost made her doubt her memories of the docile wolves she was used to seeing around the caretaker’s cabin. Still, they registered as little more than pets to her.

“My barrier will disappear around the continental tortoise, but it should be plenty effective otherwise. I honed it up on the Dark Mountain, so where better to put it to use?” Sara stopped, determined. “Everyone, fall back! I’ll round up the wolves!”

The Hunters all looked at her like they had no idea who she was, but the guildmaster swiftly raised his hand.

“Everyone retreat to the road!”

Sara stepped forward as the Hunters pulled back, grateful that Rosa had finally fixed the protection field around the road. She left her personal barrier

around herself and cast out another barrier like a net, allowing the Hunters to pass through it.

“Hunters are okay, but wolves are not. We’re good on wolves over here.”

“Growl!”

“Yap!”

The wolves chasing after the Hunters crashed into Sara’s barrier one after another.

Sara was still following the continental tortoise, so the wolves had no choice but to trot alongside it as well, pushed forward by her barrier. They almost looked like knights protecting the continental tortoise. And Sara, pushing them along, looked like she was chasing both the wolves *and* the continental tortoise into the Dark Mountain.

“So that’s the mythical...”

“Yeah, she’s a Tamer...”

“No, I’m not!” Sara shouted to the Hunters making their unnecessary observations, but she wasn’t sure if they heard her or not.

The continental tortoise had walked all this way without stopping, but it finally came to a halt at the entrance to the Dark Mountain, where its mouth opened with a snap.

“Puy! Puy!”

“Too cute! *That’s* what it sounds like?”

After two short cries, the continental tortoise took one step into the Dark Mountain.

Thud.

Another step, and another.

Thud, thud.

It walked into it like there was no protection field around the entrance to the mountain at all.

The guildmaster watched it go, his arms crossed. “Vince. I’ll leave the cleanup to you.”

“What are you gonna do, Jay?”

“See it off. I might be gone for a while.”

“Got it. I’ll leave that to you, then.”

The guildmaster was going to see things through, it seemed.

“I’ll go too. I know a lot about the Dark Mountain, after all.”

“Nefertari. Honestly, that’d help.”

“I’ll come too.”

Everyone turned around at the boy’s voice. It was Noel.

Nelly shook her head. “Not even the knights can make it up there. Your role is done here. You’ve done well making it this far.”

Noel’s shoulders drooped as he looked at the pack of mountain wolves. He must have realized that the Dark Mountain was no place for him after seeing the way they’d attacked the Hunters earlier. He nodded obediently. “All right...”

“I’ll see it off as well.” Bradley raised his hand. “I *am* the current caretaker of the Dark Mountain, after all.”

“I’ll go too!”

“Okay. Be careful.”

Allen went with the group as if it was only natural. Sara decided to cheer him on with all her heart.

“Could you maybe ask permission from me instead of Sara? I’m the guildmaster, you know,” Jay grumbled, so Allen asked him with a laugh.

This wasn’t a request, and it was something that would be impossible for people with no strength like Noel. But even without anyone asking him to do so, Allen always strove to do the things he wanted to do and the things he thought he *should* do. Sara’s heart filled with pride thinking that he’d grown into a person like that.

Thus, Jay, Nelly, Bradley, and Allen disappeared into the Dark Mountain after the continental tortoise.

“Whine...”

“Whine...”

The mountain wolves’ miserable whines gave her no time to bask in her sentimental feelings. They were being repelled by the protection field at the entrance to the Dark Mountain like it was Sara’s barrier.

“What? The protection field’s already recovered? I mean, that’s a good thing, but...” Vince scratched his head awkwardly. “Well, should we take care of these things while the Tamer’s keepin’ ’em held down?”

The resting Hunters began to stand.

“Wait. Wait a second. And I’m not a Tamer.”

Sara knew monsters were things to be defeated, but she didn’t think the mountain wolves deserved to be put down for simply wandering out into the meadow when the protection field around the Dark Mountain’s entrance stopped working. It definitely wasn’t because they were like pets to her or because she’d cared for them at all, though.

“I’ll take the wolves back into the Dark Mountain.”

The protection field at the entrance to the dungeon repelled monsters, but could she get them through it while they were inside her barrier?

“Come on, let’s go.”

“Growl!”

“Growl!”

The wolves quietly followed Sara like they knew what she was trying to do. Of course, it might have simply been Sara’s barrier pushing them along.

Sara stopped at the entrance to the mountain. She didn’t know if this would actually work until she tried it.

She took a step forward and her barrier moved with her. She proceeded forward along the path she’d once come down without looking back. When she

finally did turn back, it was like she had dozens of mountain wolves following her, at her beck and call.

“Growl!”

“But not really, right? You really want to eat me, right?” Sara muttered, looking at the drool dripping from the wolves’ open mouths. She gently released the barrier keeping the wolves trapped in.

“Okay, back to the Dark Mountain with you.”

“Growl?”

“Growl?”

One of them took a wide path around Sara and then the rest of them bounded up the Dark Mountain, realizing they were free. When the last one made its way past Sara, she let out a sigh.



“I guess if I did the opposite of that, I’d be able to take living monsters out of dungeons. My barrier really is versatile...”

Relieved that she’d managed to return the wolves to the mountain, she tottered down to return to the others.

“I sent them home,” she reported, and Vince pointed for her to look back at the mountain.

“Huh?”

She turned around and found all the wolves that *should* have run back up the mountain lined up and waiting near the entrance to the dungeon.

“Growl...”

“Growl...”

“Grr...”

“Growl!”

The mountain wolves howled as if saying goodbye to Sara.

“Growl.”

“Growl.”

And they went back up the mountain one by one.

“You *are* a Tamer.”

“No, I’m not.”

Thus, the curtain closed on the continental tortoise commotion that had begun back in Hydrangea.

The four who had gone up the mountain after the continental tortoise returned a week later. In the meantime, Kuntz and Haruto had been gleefully delving into the dungeon. And as for Sara...

“Three potions, yes?”

For some reason, she was selling items at the Guild kiosk.

“This is weird, right? I’m an apothecary. Noel’s at the Apothecary’s Guild, so why am I selling stuff at the Hunter’s Guild? I mean, at least I’m not peeling potatoes, but...”

She swiftly moved the products on sale at the kiosk even as she grumbled to herself. What with the continental tortoise and the monsters getting loose from the Dark Mountain, the Hunters in Rosa hadn’t been able to get into the dungeons enough lately, so the Guild was pretty busy now that it was all over.

“What do you want from us? We’re perpetually understaffed here,” Vince grumbled, rubbing his stubble, even though *Sara* was the one who wanted to grumble. “Besides, you don’t actually want to go to that Apothecary’s Guild, do you? Be honest.”

“Well, I guess not...”

She’d reconciled with Ted, so he didn’t bother her anymore, but she still remembered how no one in Rosa’s Apothecary’s Guild had helped her back when Ted was being terrible, so she didn’t really want to have anything to do with them. It was nice that Vince understood that.

“It’s Chris’s old haunting grounds, and that Noel kid doesn’t have any beef with them, but you’ve got some bad memories there, right? Oh yeah, that kid’s Liam’s brother? It’s funny how much he looks just like him.”

She was enjoying her time at the Guild when there was a commotion from the entrance.

“Hey, Jay. Good work out there.” Vince raised an arm and gave an entirely too casual greeting to the guildmaster, who’d been away on the Dark Mountain for a whole week at this point.

If he was back, then that meant Nelly and Allen would be with him. Sara went to turn toward the entrance, full of anticipation, when...

“Sara!”

“Gyeh!”

Before she could turn around, Nelly’s arms were already squeezing her.

“Ugh, Nelly! I’m fifteen already! I’m not a little kid!”

“Wipe that grin off your face before you complain, Sara.”

Vince made an unnecessary comment, but the two of them had been apart for more than a week now with all the work they’d had to do with the continental tortoise. How was Sara supposed to stop herself from grinning?

“Listen to this, Sara.” The look on Nelly’s face was oddly grim.

“What’s wrong?”

“The three of them ate up all your lunches.”

“Huh?” Sara’s mouth fell open.

“What were we supposed to do? No one was planning for an extra week of work. What? Did you want me to eat nothing but meat from monsters on the Dark Mountain for a week?” the guildmaster grumbled awkwardly.

“Huh? But don’t you keep at least a month’s worth of food in your storage pouches? Nelly does, right?”

The guildmaster crossed his arms, giving her a look like she’d said something strange, which annoyed Sara a little. “Any Hunter with that much room in their storage bag would bring back monsters instead.”

“I’ve heard that before...”

It was something Nelly used to say back when Sara had first come here. But Nelly herself looked rather affronted.

“I normally keep stocked up on Sara’s precious lunches, but we’ve been apart for so long ever since Hydrangea.”

“Oh yeah, I haven’t been able to give you any more!” Sara felt bad for not realizing.

“Yet Jay and Bradley didn’t hesitate at all to eat them, and even asked for seconds since they’re so good...”

“They really were delicious. I appreciate all the meals.” Bradley thanked Sara, awkwardly looking to the side afterward.

“There, there.” Sara gave Nelly a pat on the head. “I’ve still got three months’ worth on me. I can restock you later.”

“Really?!” Nelly’s face lit up, but at the same time, the guildhall went completely silent.

“Is that really the Red Goddess...?”

“I can’t believe it...”

“I think she’s kinda cute...”

People started whispering about Nelly. *That’s right. Nelly is cute.* Sara held her head up high with pride.

“Come on, the issue’s not the food...” Vince got the conversation back on track. “What happened with the continental tortoise?”

They decided this wasn’t the place to have the conversation, and sent a messenger to the Apothecary’s Guild to summon Chris and Noel. Eventually, everyone gathered in the guildmaster’s office. It had been a while since Sara had been here. For some reason, Ted was there too.

“So, the continental tortoise...” The guildmaster leaned back in his chair pompously. “...disappeared into a deep pool of water in a valley.”

“Disappeared?! ” That was the only reaction Vince could muster to the guildmaster’s brief report.

“Sara knows the place. It’s the one we used to get golden trout from.”

“Oh, there!” Sara knew what Nelly meant right away. It was a large, deep pool of water a stream flowed into. The kind of place that looked like it would have a legendary fish people were always trying to catch. “I didn’t think that pool was big or deep enough for the continental tortoise to fit in it, though.”

“It fit in like the pool was the exact right size for it and then vanished,” Nelly said, digging some golden trouts out of her storage pouch and tossing them onto the table. “They all jumped out of the pool like the turtle chased ’em out, so it was all-you-can-catch. I brought some since I thought you’d like ’em, Sara.”

“Thanks! I can’t wait to eat them!”

“Hey, that’s my table! You’re gonna make it smell like fish in here!”

“Hey, Nefertari, can you sell us a few of those?”

The guildmaster was still grumbling, but Vince went straight to a business transaction with Nelly. He quickly realized the conversation wasn't over yet, though. "Wait, this isn't the time for that. So, then everything wrapped up fine and you even figured out where it was ultimately heading to?"

Sara watched warmly as Noel asked to hear more details later so he could write about it in his report.

"I guess that about does it. Oh, Nefertari. You got somethin' else to show off?" Vince asked, and Sara glanced down at Nelly's hand. If it was food, she would have given it to Sara, but it must not have been.

"Chris. Here."

"Silver dragonmint! So there *is* some on the Dark Mountain!"

"Yeah. I thought I remembered seeing it up there, but I wasn't confident at the time."

Chris gingerly took the bundle of silver dragonmint and handed it to Ted.

"So this is silver dragonmint. For the dragon repellent."

"That's right. And if it's on the Dark Mountain, there's a good chance it's in Rosa's dungeons as well, since the distribution of monsters inside them all is similar."

"Understood. I'll put out a request to Hunters so that we can gather it in Rosa as well."

Ted had really grown from the days when he let Chris coddle him.

"Send some apothecaries to Hydrangea eventually so they can learn how to make the dragon repellent."

"Huh? Could I...come, then...?"

"I'll welcome any able apothecary," Chris responded without emotion, notably not forbidding Ted from coming. He must have been appreciating Ted's growth in his own way.

Nelly was watching the scene just as Sara was. She stretched and said, "Well, after our reports are all written, should we head back to Hydrangea?"

“Yeah!”

Vince leaned back in his chair with a sigh when Sara gave her enthusiastic answer. “Going back? So Hydrangea’s your home now, huh?”

“Yeah. I’m a vice guildmaster just like you are now.”

“Oh, right. Guess I can’t just rest on my laurels, can I?”

“Hey, don’t go after my position. I’m not giving up being guildmaster.” Everyone laughed and the guildmaster leaned back in his chair. “Come to think of it, we don’t need to buy Nefertari’s fish. I caught some myself. Well, I just picked ’em up, really.”

“Let’s see ’em,” Vince said impatiently.

The guildmaster guffawed, his hand not moving toward his storage bag at all. Then he grinned. “You know, we just survived a disaster that only comes every couple hundred years. We should have a party with these golden trouts as the main dish.”

“A party? You think we can use golden trouts for that?” Vince narrowed his eyes at the guildmaster, whose own eyes were sparkling like an excited kid’s.

“But we can have the party, right?”

“Well, yeah, I guess. *Ahem.*” Vince nodded after clearing his throat somewhat awkwardly. “Fine. Just leave some golden trouts to send to the capital.”

“All right! It’s party time!”

Thus, the guildhall began preparing for a party.

“Sara, potato duty.”

“I knew it...”

Sara felt like she was one of the key figures in escorting the continental tortoise to the Dark Mountain herself, but her contributions hadn’t really stood out much in Rosa. As the head chef Mize dragged her away to the kitchen, Noel ran over to them.

“I’ll help.”

“And who’re you?” Mize looked down at Noel with his arms crossed.

“My name is Noel Hills. I work as an apothecary in Hydrangea.”

“You’re part of the Hydrangea crew, eh? Wait... Hills, Hills... That face... You’re related to that loser knight, aren’t you?!”

Mize was surprised before he had to start struggling not to laugh. Sara waved her hands in front of her chest in a panic at Mize’s disrespectful comment. That “loser knight” was the prime minister’s second son, and Noel was his third.

“Just what did my brother do? I know he’s a little too confident and he has trouble listening to people sometimes, but he’s got a good reputation in the capital. How strange...”

Noel just cocked his head curiously. Liam’s harassment of Sara and Allen in Rosa had nothing to do with the Apothecary’s Guild, so he must not have heard about it.

Now that Sara thought about it, she’d never explained to Noel why she’d turned down his brother’s marriage proposal. She couldn’t imagine Liam had told him about it himself. While she was considering this, Allen’s voice came from behind her.

“He tried to kidnap us from Rosa.”

“Huh? My brother did?” Noel was shocked to hear such a disturbing accusation.

“Yeah. He said he was worried about strong kids living in Rosa without any guardians, but we weren’t having any problems. He was really insistent, so it was hard to fight him off.”

“Fight him off? It sounds like he was a monster...”

“Wah ha ha! I like you, kid. Come peel some potatoes for me.” Mize laughed loudly and clapped a hand onto Noel’s shoulder.

“I’ll help too. Not like I can drink yet, after all.”

Allen was referring to the adult Hunters, who had already started drinking despite the party being nowhere near started yet. Any young Hunter out there was bound to become a target for drunken harassment.

So Sara ended up in a line with the two boys, who were also surprisingly

handy with a potato peeler.



“Come to think of it, I didn’t get to hear the details. Did the continental tortoise really sink into the pool at the end of that creek?” Sara asked Allen. Nelly only ever explained the gist of things, so she hadn’t gotten a detailed version of the story from anyone yet.

“I’d like to hear about it too. You were there, so how would you describe it?”

“Well, let’s see... It *did* sink into the pool. I guess it was like when it went through the dungeon’s walls. It looked like it was disappearing into the surface of the water.”

If that was the case, then why had the golden trouts jumped out of the pool? Sara found it strange until she decided that maybe it was like when she’d shocked them. They must have felt some sort of impact from the turtle’s intrusion.

“The thing I really realized following it was that the roads up there are really convenient.”

“*That’s* what you noticed?” Sara asked him.

“Well, I went up there prepared to have to travel through places where there wasn’t any road. Even *on* the road, steel armadillos came rolling at us and mountain wolves were attacking, so I was a little scared wondering what we’d have to deal with *off* the road.”

“I’d think you’d be excited about that, Allen.”

Allen smiled and shook his head. “You know I’m the careful type, Sara.”

This time around, Allen was the hero who had clung to the continental tortoise even after losing consciousness, but Sara realized that back in Rosa, he’d always put his life and his livelihood ahead of any kind of glory.

“Now that you mention it, I guess that’s true. You were so reckless with the continental tortoise that I forgot.”

“I *was* reckless, wasn’t I?” He could laugh about it now, though. “Anyway, the reason I thought that was because the continental tortoise followed the road the whole time.”

“That was nice of it... Or does that just mean the road is where it’s easiest to

travel?” Sara decided.

“We went up to the caretaker’s cabin and then turned toward the pool where the golden trouts are right before hitting it. We didn’t get why we were turning at the time, though.”

“Huh. That must have been rough.”

“No, not really. I mean, we were all riding on top of it. It really wasn’t hard at all.”

Sara regretted worrying about them.

“I guess it would have been hard for Kuntz or Noel, though.”

“Why’s that?” Noel asked, looking a little peeved.

“Because the mana pressure was way worse up there. It was like this.” Allen released the mana pressure he usually kept suppressed. Well, Sara assumed he did, anyway. She could never sense it herself.

“Hey, cut it out, Allen. I’ll throw you out of the kitchen,” Mize’s low voice cautioned. Sara looked up and saw everyone in the kitchen giving them a sour look.

“S-So that’s mana pressure. Yeah, I might not have been able to handle that...”

“Right?” Allen bowed his head apologetically as he drew his mana back in. “I was on the thing’s shell three times, in Hydrangea’s dungeon, outside the capital, and right before we got to Rosa. Inside the Dark Mountain was the fourth time.”

He spoke about it like it was a vehicle or an amusement park ride, but the continental tortoise was a monster people compared to a natural disaster. As they worked, everyone in the kitchen gave Allen exasperated looks, and Sara thought they were absolutely right to do so.

“So I can tell. Sara...” Allen said, still peeling. “The turtle’s mana was climbing the whole time until it reached the Dark Mountain. I think it was even hard for Nelly to handle at the end. We still rode on the shell, though, since we were sick of chasing it with physical strengthening.”

Sara almost laughed, thinking, *So even Nelly and Allen can get sick of physical strengthening.*

“But it got better on the Dark Mountain. It was like the mana was going out of it. I think it felt the same as it did in Hydrangea’s dungeon at the end.”

Noel looked like he wanted to write all this down even as he also continued peeling.

“Do you think that means it was transferring mana from dungeon to dungeon? While sucking up mana on the road the whole way there?”

“That still leaves some questions, though. I wonder why it moves from south to north.”

“Yeah...”

Sara wondered why the goddess did things in such an annoying way, but maybe it wasn’t any more annoying than having to invite people into the world from elsewhere.

“It’s kind of like the Invited since it can suck up mana and make use of it.”

“You’re practically a natural disaster yourself, Sara.”

“Rude,” Sara huffed.

“You’re a good natural disaster, though.”

“I don’t think it can be a compliment if it has ‘disaster’ in it,” Sara said grumpily.

Mize’s voice came from deeper in the kitchen. “You don’t have to be anything that dramatic, Sara! You should just sit right there. It helps us out and you fit right in.”

“Huh? I do help out, don’t I?! See, Allen?” Sara prodded Allen with her elbow, cheerfully exclaiming. “It might be nice to stay in Rosa too.”

“I’ll stay in Rosa too, then.”

“Huh?” Sara hadn’t been expecting Allen to say that, since he was fitting in so well in Hydrangea. A strange silence settled in the kitchen.

“Ugh, we’ve got enough potatoes! Go and help set up the party!”

Mize was rather selfish, telling them to peel potatoes and then telling them to get lost.

“Yeah, you two can’t get a nice mood going all on your own. Where does that leave me? Come on, Allen, help me write my notes.” Noel pulled the wryly smiling Allen away somewhere, leaving Sara alone with the potatoes.

“Huh? Wait, what about me?”

“You can finish those.”

“That’s no fair...”

Sara sat back down and picked up a potato, going over what Allen had said one more time. She didn’t know what role continental tortoises played and why protection fields weakened around them, but maybe this world had so much mana that just calling a few Invited over every so often wasn’t enough to handle it.

“No, maybe I’m thinking about that wrong... Maybe they bring the Invited here because the continental tortoise can’t suck up all the mana...”

It would be an eternal mystery since she’d never have a chance to talk to the goddess again, but she could at least hope that no one would be as stupid as the knights the next time the continental tortoise showed up in the south.

She looked up and found that Mize was preparing the golden trout. Sara felt like she’d gone back to the time when she was working hard to earn her Hunter’s Guild ID.

“I wanted to go up to the caretaker’s cabin with everyone, but...” She was sure the mountain wolves were lying around in the sun and trying to eat anyone who came out of the caretaker’s cabin at the first chance they got. “I saw them for a little bit, so I guess it’s fine.”

Mountain wolves could stay confined to her memories as far as she was concerned.

“I’m good on wolves,” Sara murmured to herself.

“Sara! Can you help out over here too?!” Vince’s voice carried to the kitchen.

“Mize?”

“Yeah, go ahead. And Sara,” Mize said in a much gentler voice than he usually used. Sara turned around to face him. “I’ll hire you here anytime. Something happens, come on back to Rosa.”

Sara wanted to answer, but she felt a knot rise in her throat and the best she could manage was a big nod.

“Sara!” This time, Nelly called her.

This wasn’t her last day here or anything. If she wanted to, she could go wherever she wanted, be it Rosa or anywhere else. For now, all she wanted to do was enjoy the peace after the chaos with her friends.

“Coming!”

Sara left the kitchen and took a step out into the guildhall.

Taking ^{My} Reincarnation One Step at a TIME

No One Told Me
There Would Be Monsters!

6

KAYA
ILLUS. | NARU





Allen

Noel

Sara

Characters





6

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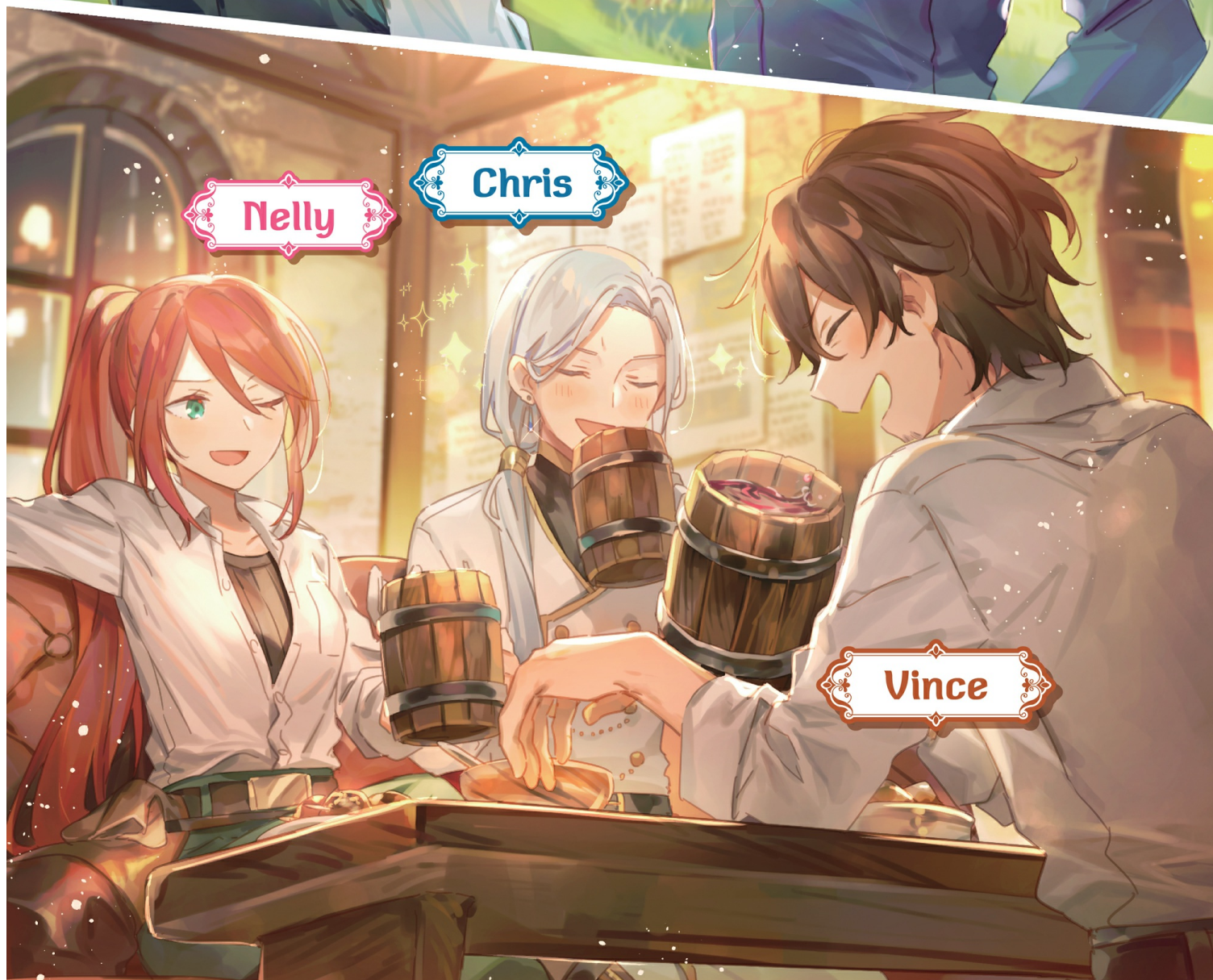


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Taking My Reincarnation One Step at a Time: No One Told Me There Would Be Monsters! Volume 6

by KAYA

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