

7

# Taking <sup>My</sup> Reincarnation One Step at a TIME

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

KAYA  
ILLUS. | NARU





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# Characters

Sara

Nelly

Chris









# Map

Dark Mountain

Eastern Plains

Eastern Mountains

Rosa

Gardenia

Capital

Stock

Lake

Hydrangea

Sea





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## Prologue: News Always Comes Unexpectedly

The spoon clanked against the edge of the pot.

“Phew. It’s done.” Sara wiped the summer sweat from her brow with her sleeve and happily waited for the sediment to sink to the bottom of the potion solution and for the liquid to turn clear. “No matter how many times I experience it, I love this moment.”

“I agree.” Even the apothecaries who’d tested her when she’d first come to Hydrangea had long since acknowledged her strength and were amicable colleagues now.

“I learned how fun gathering plants is from you, Sara, but making potions like this is the true fun of being an apothecary.”

Other apothecaries busily making potions here and there at the different tables all nodded in agreement.

“You learned how to handle white moonlight mushrooms and make dragon repellent this winter, so you’ve grown into an apothecary we can lend out anywhere, Sara. You even talk like a full-fledged apothecary now.”

“You really think so? I think so too!” Back in Japan, she might have been humble, but there was no need to be modest here in Trilgaia. Still, when Sara lifted her head high, one of her senior apothecaries gave her a cautioning look.

“Don’t get full of yourself!”

Someone laughed at the exchange. Sara wondered if the atmosphere would be so friendly if this were Rosa’s Apothecary’s Guild. What about Camellia’s or the capital’s? All the other Apothecary’s Guilds she’d visited had been a lot more tense in atmosphere.

“In the capital... No, never mind.” She was about to voice the thought, but she decided against it. No matter how comfortable she found her current workplace, it didn’t feel good to bad-mouth other guilds.



“It’s fine. I know what you mean.” The apothecary who responded to her with a faraway look was one who had gone to the capital last fall to help out with the dragon culling and had just gotten back. Sara had gone herself two and a half years ago when she was fourteen, but since then they’d been sending other people.

“Unlike here in Hydrangea, there’s a big difference between nobles and commoners in the capital, and there are a lot of people in the guild trying to get a better life for themselves however they can. It really wasn’t the kind of place where you could talk about how much fun you had making potions.”

It seemed Sara wasn’t the only one who’d found the air in the Apothecary’s Guild in the capital to be tense.

“I’m really glad Mona and Heather were there in the capital. And Noel too, of course. Speaking of which...” The apothecary gave Sara a pointed look. “Your rumored fiancé, Liam?”

“He’s not my fiancé.”

Noel had marched into Hydrangea last year as Sara’s new fiancé candidate, yet for some reason that old rumor was still circulating in the capital. This frustrated Sara immensely. Everyone in this guild knew neither Liam nor Noel were her actual fiancé, so this apothecary was only teasing her, but Sara had to reflexively deny the allegation nonetheless.

“I was surprised to hear he’s already the vice commander of the knights.”

“That *was* surprising.”

Sara and her senior apothecary were likely surprised about different things, however. Her senior, she guessed, was simply surprised that he could achieve vice commander at his age, but Sara was surprised that he’d been *promoted* instead of *demoted* despite not accomplishing much of anything during the dragon culling and the continental tortoise incident.

“I guess that’s just how powerful the prime minister’s family is,” Sara mused.

“I’m sure that’s part of it, but they probably also just don’t have anyone else who can do the—*ahem, ahem.*”



The apothecary had a coughing fit while answering for some reason. Sara didn't think there was any need to worry. They were all apothecaries here, after all.

It seemed the reason Liam had been made vice commander was simply because the knights were short-staffed.

"Sara! We're back!"

"Hey, Sara."

The door swung open without any knocking and Allen and Kuntz strode in. They were allowed such a transgression because they showed an un-Hunter-like consideration for the Apothecary's Guild. They never neglected to bring white moonlight mushrooms along with them to keep the apothecaries happy despite the fact that no other Hunters ever wanted to gather them. They were up-and-coming Hunters with a lot of expectations on them not just in Hydrangea but in Trilgaia at large.

"Allen! Kuntz too. Welcome back."

They were also Sara's good friends, and whenever they had time, they picked her up from the Apothecary's Guild and walked her home to the mansion of the local lord, Ri, where she resided. She knew that when they didn't come to pick her up, they were staying late in the dungeon or even spending the night down there, so she would quietly wish them well-done on their day of work and head home on her own.

Sara was one of the Invited, a guest in this world from another one, and she could use barrier magic to protect herself, so her defensive capabilities were probably better than anyone else's in the country. For that reason, she really didn't need an escort, but she still enjoyed chatting with her good friends on their way home.

"We saw Chris at the Hunter's Guild. Looks like he's finally back from the capital." As always, Kuntz got the conversation started.

"Oh yeah? The apothecaries who went with him just got back too. I bet Chris is going into the dungeon, stuck to Nelly like a bur."

"You 'bet'?" Allen laughed, but how was Sara supposed to know what Chris



was doing, whether or not he was another guest of Ri's?

"Well, it's Chris. He's got no interest in anything but Nelly, so all I can do is assume he's wherever she is."

"True, he didn't seem to notice us at all at the Guild."

He was probably the most talented apothecary in Trilgaia, but he became completely useless anytime Nelly was around.

"I heard he only became guildmaster of the Apothecary's Guild in Rosa because it meant he could be near her."

"But he's in such high demand that he keeps getting pulled here and there, so he can't be with her all that much anyway. If you think about it that way..." The three of them all exchanged a glance and nodded. "It makes sense he'd want to be with Nelly as much as he can."

"Even if all he can think about is her."

Sara laughed at everyone's opinion of Chris. As a fellow apothecary and someone who'd traveled with him, she knew very well how talented he was even with his one-track mind.

"When are they gonna get together anyway?" Kuntz asked a question that was none of his business, but everyone in Hydrangea was thinking the same thing.

"Nelly seems happy enough with the status quo, so nothing's gonna change without some kind of impetus," was Sara's opinion.

"I'd be frustrated leaving the person I like somewhere someone else could snatch her away."

Sara looked up at Kuntz. The three of them had never talked about romance or marriage before, so she was surprised he was getting so into the topic. She was surprised he thought Nelly was in a position to be snatched away too.

"Do you mean there's someone else who...well...likes Nelly?" she asked him.

"I'm curious too. I never noticed anything like that." Allen was just as surprised as Sara.



“Why are you two so clueless? There’s nobody who’s being obvious about it, but Nelly’s popular at the Hunter’s Guild here. There are any number of single Hunters and plenty of opportunity for someone’s interest in her to turn to attraction.”

“Y-You think so?”

“H-Huh...”

It was the moment Kuntz first truly looked like an adult in Sara’s eyes.

True, Nelly was so youthful it was hard to imagine she was over forty, and she was beautiful regardless of her age. In Rosa, her strength was the thing that stood out about her most, but here in Hydrangea, it wasn’t only her ability as a Hunter people took notice of. They liked her for her blunt and surprisingly caring personality, and her looks as well, of course.

“So—waugh!” Sara was about to ask Kuntz a follow-up question when someone tapped her on the shoulder from behind and she shot into the air. She had her barrier up, of course, so she only felt the sensation of someone tapping the protective wall around her.

“Ha ha ha. I’ve been behind you this whole time, but you never noticed. Aren’t the three of you supposed to be ‘promising young Hunters’?”

Nelly looked thrilled that she’d pulled off her little prank. Sara found her adorable as always, but this much, she had to say first: “Don’t count me as a Hunter.”

“Ha ha ha.” She was cute laughing Sara’s comment off as well. Sara couldn’t help giving her an indulgent smile in return.

“You should have said something if you noticed us. I spotted you at the Guild too.” This was Chris, who was stuck to Nelly like her shadow.

“You saw us? It sure didn’t look like it.”

“Of course I did. I’m always keeping a lookout to make sure Nef’s not in any danger.” He made this unfortunate remark with no change in expression whatsoever.

Kuntz gave him a wry smile. “Why couldn’t you have just said something to



us? No, I know why..." He schooled his expression. "You didn't want to leave Nelly's side for even a moment. I understand." He nodded as if reminding himself that it was meaningless to make such a suggestion to Chris. "I'll make sure I say something from now on."

Chris nodded in satisfaction. "Very good."

They had worked together during the continental tortoise incident a year ago, so Kuntz got along surprisingly well with Chris. Sara still lashed out at Chris reflexively sometimes, so Kuntz was apparently much better than her at handling the man.

"By the way, what were you guys chatting about just now?"

The trio faltered at Nelly's question, but luckily Ri's mansion was right in front of them. They avoided answering and when they arrived at the mansion, they were met by a stern-faced Ri.

He had letters in his hand and Nelly's brother Thedias stood beside him. Ri was the lord of Hydrangea and Thedias was the Guild Director who managed the various Hunter's Guilds in the area. He was also slated to be the next lord after Ri.

There had never been good news in any of the letters Ri received. Sara got a bad feeling about this.

"We're back, father. By the way you're displaying those letters so obviously, I presume you wish for us to ask about them?"

Nelly would have never spoken like this back in Rosa. It warmed Sara's heart to hear it. Back then, she'd been somewhat reserved even with Sara. She'd kept everyone at a distance, so the way she'd teased Sara earlier and wisecracked with her father was a real improvement in Sara's opinion.

"Indeed. Let me start by saying it's good news. Though there is some trouble as well."

Thed nodded beside him, so he must have been telling the truth about it being good news. Sara relaxed. The trouble, they could just consider after hearing about it.



“We received word from Lati. From Latifah, rather.”

“From sister? That’s rare.”

Sara was shocked, listening to their conversation. “Sister”? She had no idea Nelly had an older sister. She hurriedly went through her memories. No matter how taciturn Nelly was, she was fairly certain she’d at least told Sara about her family at one point. Then she finally remembered.

“Two older brothers and one older sister...” She did recall hearing that, now that she thought about it. Meaning it wasn’t just the sister; she also had a brother other than Thed and Sara didn’t know either of them.

Sara felt dizzy from how careless she’d been. She knew Nelly wasn’t one to talk about herself without prompting, but since she’d given Sara the structure of her family, shouldn’t Sara have shown some interest in the topic?

“Oh yeah, I’ve never told you about her. My sister’s the wife of the lord of a big town in the east of Trilgaia. Oh, and my second older brother’s a Hunter. He roams around, so even I’m not sure where he is right now.”

Sara was glad Nelly had heard her murmuring and explained things to her.

“It’s rare to hear from her because the area where Lati lives is hard to get to. We don’t contact one another very proactively,” Ri added. He probably wanted to get to the point, so Sara appreciated him taking the time to explain things to her.

“But even if she doesn’t visit, I thought she was doing well there.”

“Yes, there’s no need to worry about her. Ed is a good man.”

Ed must have been Nelly’s sister’s husband. This conversation was a treasure trove of information.

“Let’s discuss the matter in detail over dinner.”

Kuntz hurriedly said his goodbyes. “We should get going, then.”

“Why? We have places set for you two as well.”

Taking Sara home and having dinner at Ri’s house was something Allen and Kuntz looked forward to, but Kuntz’s remark was entirely reasonable.

“But shouldn’t you discuss family matters with the family?”

“Oh, you’re practically part of the family anyway. Don’t be so reserved.”

So they ended up having dinner with the usual suspects. And partway through the meal, Ri got the ball rolling.

“Do you know about Gardenia, Allen, Kuntz?”

It was a name Sara had only just heard for the first time, but Allen and Kuntz both nodded as if it were common knowledge. Sara felt like she’d been held back a grade. She wanted to shift responsibility onto Trilgaia for her lopsided knowledge since there were no schools here.

“It’s directly east from the capital, but there’s a mountain range in between them, so people don’t travel there and back much. It’s a breadbasket. And there aren’t a lot of dungeons or monsters, so there’s not much point in Hunters going there.” Allen listed off what he knew about it, counting on his fingers. It was just like him that he came at it from a Hunter’s perspective. “My uncle and I never went there, since he said it was a pain crossing the mountains and there wasn’t any money to be made there for Hunters.”

“I’ve never been there either.”

It seemed Allen and Kuntz both only knew *of* the town.

“Neither have I. Sister’s marriage was in the capital, and I haven’t seen her since then.” If Nelly hadn’t been there either, then it was so difficult to get to that even family didn’t visit.

“I’ve been there on an inspection. After you cross the mountains, it’s all flat and there are no monsters around anywhere. It’s like a paradise.” Thed was the only one among them who had ever been there. Even his father Ri had never visited Gardenia.

“I’m a local lord and Lati is the wife of one. We may visit the capital sometimes, but other than that, we don’t spend a lot of time away from our domains. I’ve seen Lati in the capital a few times, but not for a while now,” Ri said wistfully. From how he treasured Nelly, it was clear that he greatly valued his family. He just had a bit of a muscle-headed way of thinking about things.



In the world Sara was from, she thought it was pretty easy for people with wealth and importance to cross borders. But in Trilgaia, if the fastest ways to travel were carriages or running with physical strengthening, then it might have actually been harder for more wealthy people to get around.

In any case, Sara butted in, curious about what Thed had said. “Umm, if it’s really like a paradise there, then wouldn’t there be a lot of people who want to live in, err, Gardenia instead of the capital or Rosa? Is it really unpopular for some reason?” Why hadn’t Sara ever heard of Gardenia before?

“I would say it *is* rather unpopular. It’s a bit paradoxical, but since there aren’t many dungeons and monsters, you see...” Thed seemed to consider his words for a moment. “Dungeons and monsters may be trouble, but they’re also resources. Merchants and Hunters are the people who travel the most in Trilgaia, so with nothing but crops there, there’s not much reason to travel.”

Dungeons were profitable. That was why Rosa functioned despite the high cost of living there. It made sense.

“The people from the east don’t have any reason to leave, and the people in the west don’t have any reason to go there. So there’s not much traffic there, but it’s a safe, bountiful breadbasket. That’s the sort of place it is.”

“That makes sense.”

They had explained everything thoroughly all for Sara’s sake, since she didn’t know anything about their world.

“So, father, what did sister have to say?” Nelly moved the conversation along, judging that things had been sufficiently explained.

“Mm. Lati and I exchange letters regularly, so in my last one, I mentioned that you had finally settled down in Hydrangea, Neffie.”

Nelly and Sara had first come to Hydrangea over two years ago, but they had been busy for a time afterward, being summoned to the capital and whatnot. They hadn’t gone anywhere for the last year, so Ri must have decided they were finally settled here.

“She was thrilled to hear it, and she said she wanted to see her adorable little sister again, and so she said I should send her to Gardenia. I was considering

when might be a good time to do so.”

Sara nodded along. It all sounded good to her so far. Sara couldn't see her real family anymore, so she strongly supported seeing family when you got the chance.

“I haven't heard a word about this, father.”

Though of course the person in question's feelings were most important.

“Is that all that letter says?” Nelly asked flatly.

“Well, err...” Ri avoided eye contact. “Lati was practically a mother to you, wasn't she, Neffie? So, you see...” As Ri avoided Nelly's eyes, he caught Sara's. She almost jumped out of her chair. Ri seemed to be desperately trying to communicate something to her, but Sara had no idea what it was.

“Ughhh...” Nelly sighed beside her. “I thought she gave up on that a long time ago. She wants to talk about marriage, I assume.”

“So you figured it out...”

“You know I would have found out when I looked at the letter later, father,” Nelly said calmly, ignoring Ri, who looked like he still had something to say. She turned to Thed instead. “So, what are you doing here, brother?”

Sara blinked, not understanding the meaning of her question. Hadn't they gathered to enjoy a family letter together? And were we not going to go back to that marriage thing? Thed, however, seemed unconcerned about any of this.

“Well, I just happened to receive word from the Hunter's Guild in the capital today.” Word from the capital was never a good thing. Sara tensed up again. “They said there was a possibility of a green grass locust infestation in the Gardenia region.”

Hearing “green grass locust,” Sara pictured a small, thin grasshopper. She used to see them in the grass around where she lived in Japan. They were called longheaded locusts there, she thought.

“That happens every few years, doesn't it? Is it bad enough to send Hunters over it?”

Alarm bells went off inside Sara's mind at Nelly's response. Locusts that



Hunters had to get involved for couldn't be the same cute little grasshoppers they'd had in Japan. Based on her previous experiences, she could be almost sure of it: they were *big*.

"The last time was over a decade ago, you know. They're docile on their own, but it sounds like there are a lot of them this year."

She'd heard this song and dance before.

"Can I ask a question? How big are they?"

She'd gotten pretty used to the creatures in this world, but she figured it didn't hurt to ask.

"Oh, they're nothing to worry about." Nelly answered her question cheerfully. "They're not as big as seven-colored swallowtails or poison bog frogs or horned rabbits. They're not even monsters, after all."

None of those were small enough for Sara to wrap her arms around them, so she didn't take much comfort in Nelly's words.

"Green grass locusts eat plants, so if there are too many of them and they eat up all the wheat before it can be harvested, it'll lead to a food shortage in the capital. I think the last time that happened was over a hundred years ago."

Didn't they have a few too many of these every-hundred-years disasters? Sara recalled the continental tortoise incident last year with a faraway look in her eyes.

"The capital sends Hunters over there so this doesn't happen, but I guess the turnout was bad this year. They're requesting Hydrangea and other towns in the south send some Hunters too."

Thus, they'd contacted Thed, the Guild Director for the southern region.

"What about Rosa?" Since Nelly asked, maybe they usually asked Rosa for reinforcements first.

"Rosa's still dealing with their horned rabbit problem. They don't have the personnel to spare."

Sara figured the Hunters of Rosa probably just didn't want to go to the unprofitable east when they didn't even like to hunt horned rabbits since they

weren't worth much money.

"Is there a bonus?"

"Of course. Those locusts have pretty much no use as materials, after all."

Hunting monsters granted not only their magic stones but materials that could be sold like pelts and meat, for instance. Hunters made their living selling those magic stones and materials.

"No one'll go across the mountains to hunt these things without magic stones or materials to sell from them. We couldn't get anyone to do the job if we didn't provide a bonus."

Sara was about to ask about the local Hunters when she remembered what they'd just talked about. If there weren't many dungeons or monsters in the east, then there couldn't be many Hunters over there either.

"You'll be posting the job in the Hunter's Guild tomorrow, then?" Kuntz asked eagerly.

"I'll have to discuss it with Zachary first, but that's the plan."

"Okay!"

From how Kuntz was clenching his fist, Sara assumed he would be participating. It was just like the migrating dragon culling in the capital—Kuntz never hesitated to try out new experiences. He was a different creature entirely from someone like Sara, whose only thought on the subject at the moment was that she didn't like bugs, so she was a little hesitant about being anywhere near them.

"You're not going to tell me you figured this would be a good opportunity, so I should take the green grass locust request while I'm over there to see sister, are you?" Nelly asked Thed exasperatedly.

Thed nodded without hesitation. "That was exactly what I was thinking. It'd be better for you as well, wouldn't it, Neffie?"

Sara wasn't quite sure in what way it was "better."

"You'll be able to see Lati, but you can also use hunting as an excuse to get out of any unpleasant socializing she'll want you to do."



“Hmm.” Nelly didn’t turn him down right away, so she must have been considering it. “Sara, err...” She turned to Sara and gave her an awkward but expectant look. “You’re an apothecary, so you wouldn’t need to do any hunting. The most you’d have to deal with is my sister using you as a dress-up doll. So, well...”

She wanted Sara to go with her. Sara beamed, finding it absolutely adorable how she couldn’t just come out and say it. There was still the matter of just what kind of creatures green grass locusts were, but it seemed that Sara wouldn’t have to have anything to do with them. In which case, this was a perfect opportunity to see new places just as she’d wished to back on the Dark Mountain.

“I’ll have to ask Caren, but if I can take time off from the Apothecary’s Guild, I’d love to go with.”

“You would?! Well, I’ll have to talk to Zachary about it as well, but...” Nelly turned to Ri and Thed, a big smile on her face. “I don’t mind going.”

“Great!” Thed said, relieved. Ri looked relieved as well, but Sara found it strange that he was looking her way instead of Nelly’s.

“I’m busy enough inspecting the nearby dungeons, so frankly, I don’t want to go to the east even to see family. I’d like to avoid long trips at my age anyway, so it’ll really help if you’ll go and represent House Wolverié, Neffie.”

Thed was busy overseeing all the small dungeons here and there in the south of the kingdom, but when his family asked for help, just sending Hunters over to help wasn’t enough, Sara supposed.

“Thed, err... I’m sorry,” Ri said suddenly.

“What for? I’m not going.”

“Yes, I know. That’s fine, but I think I might go.”

Sara recalled what they’d just talked about. Regional lords and their families couldn’t leave their domains for long periods of time, so Ri and Latifah hadn’t seen each other in a while.

“Father. No, my lord. It’s one thing to visit the capital, but you can’t just leave

like that.”

Thed was even insisting he stay. Sara figured she had the right idea.

“Actually, I was thinking it’s about time I step down from the position.”

“You don’t mean...” Thed pulled back in surprise.

“As the next head, you can simply watch over the domain in my absence.”

“What?! I’m busy enough as it is! I can’t possibly serve as acting lord at the same time!”

“Well, what else can we do?” Ri asked, stroking his mustache. “I wanna go...”

“You ‘wanna,’ father?”

Sara had been expecting Nelly to draw the short stick in all this, but it turned out that that honor went to Thed in the end.

Allen and Kuntz headed home after their meal, Sara following them out to see them off. There was something she just had to ask.

“Allen, you didn’t say anything. What are you gonna do?” A year ago, she probably would have refrained from asking.

“I’ll go too. I want to get as many experiences as a Hunter as I can just like Kuntz.”

“Oh, good,” Sara said, relieved.

Allen gave her an impish smile. “You and Kuntz are really something, being able to speak up in all that. I couldn’t find a time to jump in and say I wanted to go.”

“Well, everyone’s chatty in my family, so I’m used to stuff like that. I wasn’t sure how to talk to all these nobles at first, but it’s been two years now. I’ve built up a decent resistance at this point.”

Kuntz might have gotten wrapped up in even more stuff than Sara had, so his words were persuasive.

“Well, you’ll be at the lord’s residence and we’ll be out in the fields. I imagine we’ll be doing different stuff once we get there, but we’ll be together on the way there and back. I’m looking forward to seeing a new place.”



“Yeah!”

The Hunter’s Guild would probably put up a notice recruiting people either tomorrow or the next day.

Sara was thrilled at the prospect of an area where there were hardly any monsters.

“The knights have been the source of most of our problems up until now, but they won’t be there this time. There’ll be monsters, but I won’t have anything to do with them. I’m looking forward to this trip with everyone!”

Sara returned to the dining hall excitedly, her steps light in the hall.

“Huh? I feel like I’m forgetting something... Oh well, I’m sure I’ll remember what it is at some point.”

Sara was surprisingly carefree. She’d forgotten that the day wasn’t over yet, however. When she made it back to the dining hall after seeing Kuntz and Allen off, she was met with the real news hidden behind what they’d already discussed.

“Huh?! An Invited appeared in the east? Over half a year ago?”

Ri beckoned Sara over after she saw Allen and Kuntz off, and immediately dropped a huge bomb on her. Sara was confused for a second, wondering if he just meant that Haruto and Bradley had gone over there, before Ri went on, a serious look on his face.

“Two Invited in a row now have shown up in remote locations when they’ve only ever appeared in the palace before. Err, well, Gardenia isn’t exactly remote, I suppose.”

“Well, I’m just jealous this one showed up somewhere without any monsters.”

When he said “two in a row,” Sara realized it must be a new Invited, and she couldn’t stop herself from making a joke about it.

“So Trilgaia has four Invited right now, huh?” she said, not particularly cognizant of the fact that she was one of them. But unlike Sara, other Invited were protected by the government when they appeared, and this one had

shown up in a place without any monsters, which Thed had described earlier as being like a paradise. If this one wasn't dropped on the Dark Mountain like Sara was and so was saved some hardships, then what was the problem, exactly? And this was true for Sara as well, but almost all of the Invited had been sickly in their previous lives and unable to do as they liked. Even if they were sad to be separated from their families, it was hard to complain about a body that they could finally move freely. Once this Invited got used to their circumstances, they should be pretty happy, Sara figured.

"Three is unusual enough, but four..."

Though the Invited were considered a blessing from the goddess, it seemed their arrival was rather infrequent.

"When I saw everything you all did during the continental tortoise incident last year, I was impressed. I figured this was what the goddess gave us the Invited for. But now that I think about it, there are more Invited who don't perform any particular feats. And it wasn't as if you were guaranteed to act, so now I'm really wondering what the Invited are actually for."

"Well, we were only told to be here, so isn't it just coincidence?"

Sara thought it was pointless to try to divine the will of someone who could be called a god. Besides, if she started ascribing meaning to everything, her grudge about being dropped on the Dark Mountain would show on her face, so that wasn't a productive line of thinking.

"But this new Invited came a whole half a year ago and this is the first I'm hearing about this. It was the same for me, though. Is it just something people don't announce publicly?"

"I imagine it depends on the location. When they come to the capital, word spreads quickly, but Gardenia... Of course, now that it's been six months, the capital is expecting a visit, but it seems the Invited refused the invitation."

Well, it was very Japanese to want to avoid trouble. When she had that thought, Sara realized that she hadn't actually heard anything about the new Invited yet. Haruto was Japanese, but she was pretty sure Bradley was from England.

“I’m sorry. I kept just asking things I was curious about and now the conversation hasn’t gone anywhere.” Sara bowed her head in apology.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Ask anything you wish. Aimless conversations like these are just the sort family should be having, don’t you think? *Ahem, ahem.*” Ri cleared his throat as if he was embarrassed as Thed looked on bemusedly. In other words, *he* was having fun chatting. “*Ahem.* But let’s get to the main point of the matter for Sara.”

“Right.” Sara was curious what he meant, so she decided not to interrupt him until he had explained things.

Ri took a letter out from his jacket. It was a different one than the one he’d been waving about earlier, written on expensive-looking paper with gold trim. This must not have been a simple family update, then.

“Let’s see here... The Invited comes from a country called Nihown, and her name is Yoshicowa Anzoo. No, Anzoo Yoshicowa?”

“Anzu Yoshikawa is what we would say back home. So she’s a Japanese girl.”

Sara was happy about that, but she felt a twinge of sadness as well. Just like with Haruto, she was happy to have another person from the same place she was from, but she knew that the girl might have given up all sorts of things she wanted to do and maybe precious family members in exchange for a healthy body. She was also worried about how the girl was adjusting to a place with such a different culture than Japan.

“She appeared in the front yard of Lati’s mansion last fall. They’ve contacted the capital already, but...” Ri sighed. “They say she behaves herself, but she can’t get used to life here and keeps them at a bit of a distance.”

Sara let out the breath she hadn’t known she was holding. She must have been nervous. And Sara had been right to be worried, it seemed.

“Lati’s two sons—my grandsons—are already adults. The Invited is a young girl, so Lati was delighted as if she had a new daughter, but the girl hardly ever comes out of her room and spends her days looking out the window and sighing.”

She knew it was cold of her, but she wasn’t sure what this had to do with her.



Was that just because she was used to her life here now, or was she jealous of the girl for being dropped somewhere where she didn't have to go through any trouble? No, no, that couldn't be it. Sara shook her head.

"So, what does that have to do with Sara?" Chris asked when Ri continued to beat around the bush. "Unlike Sara, she landed in the mansion of a regional lord. It may not be the capital, but she should be guaranteed a life free of hardship either way. Latifah doesn't want Sara to come all the way to her residence, does she? She's still only sixteen, and she has her own job and life to consider."

Sara's mouth fell open in surprise. She was an apprentice to Chris, and family through Nelly, but he'd never worried about her or coddled her in any way, yet he was standing up for her now. Sara's shock was only natural.

"Well, the thing is, you're exactly right." Ri must have felt his daughter was being a bit unreasonable as well. He accepted Chris's harsh words without complaint. However...

"Then please decline," Chris insisted, but Ri slowly shook his head.

"It's an official request from one regional lord to another. It's up to Sara whether to accept it, but you'll have to at least let me read it out."

So they were finally getting to the main subject now.

"If you'll permit me to skip over the embellishments, 'This is a request from the lord of Gardenia, Edmond Greif, and Latifah Greif to the Invited of Hydrangea, Lady Ichinok Rasarasa. We would like you to help the Invited Yoshicowa Anzoo to acclimate to Trilgaia.'"

Sara found she couldn't answer right away. She'd never hesitated before when it came to helping people. She didn't like trouble, but if it was within her power to do so, she didn't see anything wrong with helping someone. In fact, she was surprised at herself for not being able to answer more quickly.

Chris had leaped to her defense, but she had already been discussing visiting Gardenia with Nelly. There was nothing wrong with stopping by the lord's mansion while they were there and doing whatever she could to help the girl who was from the same place as her currently staying there. She wouldn't be

pushing herself in any way.

So then, what about the side making the request? Nelly was family, so there was nothing strange about asking to see her or asking for her help as a Hunter or even asking the Invited who lived with her to come along too. And if she was already planning on going to Gardenia with Nelly, then it would be ridiculous to not see her family or help this girl.

Sara looked up, ashamed by how long it had taken her to answer. “I...”

But Nelly cut her off. “Sara, forget what I asked you earlier.” Sara looked over to her, not sure what she meant. Nelly was looking away from her, her expression harsh. “About coming to Gardenia with me. This was a request to me as a Hunter, and to me as a member of this family. I’ll go alone. Now that I think about it, I can’t let you interrupt your apothecary work just for this.”

“But...”

“It’s fine. All of the Invited who have come here until now have been cherished, and I’m sure they all eventually acclimated to this world. It’s only been half a year since this Anzoo came here. She’s still got time. This is nothing to warrant you taking months out of your apothecary training. She’s got plenty of people looking after her, and there should be plenty of children her age around as well without needing to summon them from Hydrangea.”

Chris nodded beside her.

“So, I’m sorry, but would you mind staying behind this time, Sara?” Nelly smiled, but the look was rather intense. It was obvious she was forcing herself so that Sara wouldn’t worry about her.

When Chris saw her, he tried to smile as well, but his face just ended up looking scary.

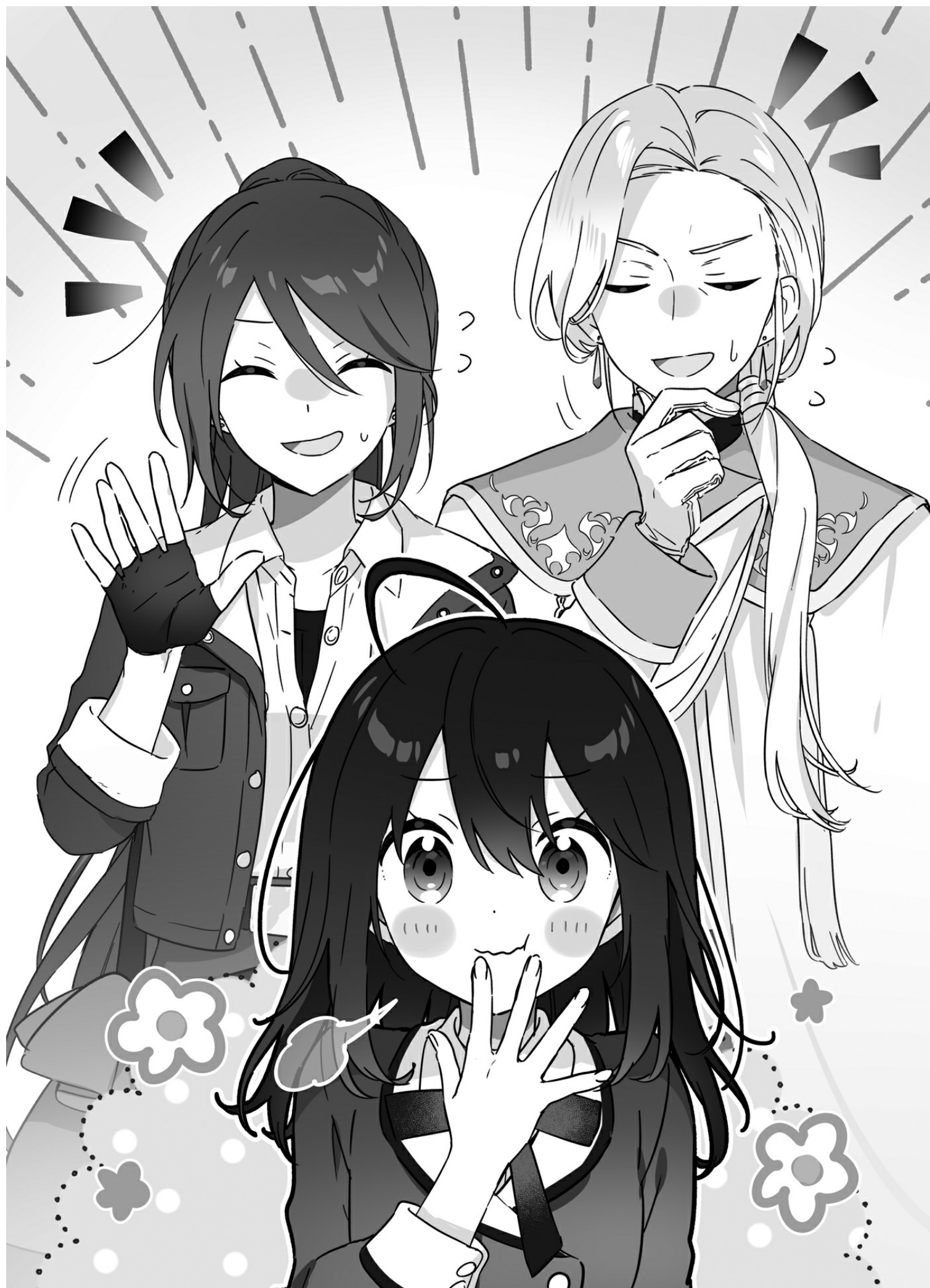
“Pfft. You guys are making really weird faces.” Sara burst out laughing, tears in her eyes for some reason.

The Nelly who’d invited her to come with her to Gardenia was her best friend who’d been with her ever since the Dark Mountain. But the Nelly who had asked her to stay was probably acting as her mother. She was being considerate, since she knew Sara was responsible and didn’t want to burden

her with things she didn't need to concern herself with.

Chris, who'd decided to follow Nelly anywhere and who normally never seemed to spare Sara a thought, was her apothecary mentor. He'd told her to reject the request from Gardenia, as a family member who was watching out for her—even if Sara wouldn't go so far as to call him a father.





Sara looked away from Nelly and Chris, who were still making those strange faces, and rubbed her eyes, looking at Ri and Thed instead. They both wore kind expressions, telling her that she could do as she liked whether that was accepting or rejecting the request.

Just when did they all come to treasure her so much? Before she knew it, Sara had put down firm roots in this place and had gained a family even if they weren't related by blood. She felt that keenly now.

They all understood how hard she'd worked since landing on the Dark Mountain and didn't take what she'd made of herself for granted. And they'd sensed the unease she hadn't been able to put into words and were trying to protect her. In that case, she had to face things herself. She made up her mind and opened her mouth.

"It's okay. I'll go with you, Nelly. I *want* to go."

She'd always wanted to visit all sorts of places if she could do so without wearing herself out. She'd done quite a bit of traveling already, but she had another opportunity to go somewhere she'd never been before right in front of her. There was no reason to avoid doing so just because she might be a little anxious about it.

"But frankly speaking, Ri, I think that request is a little too much responsibility for me."

"All it says is that they'd like help acclimating the girl to this world."

But it also said she didn't leave her room and kept everyone at a distance.

"From what you've told me, it sounds like she still hasn't accepted this world after living here for half a year. The things she left behind in our previous world were probably too important to her. I assume that's why she's rejecting this world."

"Even though her life would have been short in your previous world?"

Ri's question was harsh, but it was the truth. The goddess had told Sara that she wouldn't live long as well.

"Sometimes the present is more important than the future. If you were told

you had a month left to live and asked if you would rather live a long life in a place you didn't know anything about or spend the rest of your time living the best life you could with your family, I think different people would answer that question differently. But the goddess didn't even give us that choice."

Sara was able to adapt to her new environment because she was an adult and she'd been able to believe in the strength of her family, but she couldn't imagine the same would be true for everyone.

"That's why I don't think her feelings can be changed that easily. That being said..." Sara looked Nelly's way and gave her a grin. "I can listen to what she has to say and tell her about myself. I don't know how much help I'll be, but...if it's not a formal request and is just part of our trip, I'd be able to do that."

"I understand." Ri nodded, twirling his mustache. "You cannot accept it as a request, but you can visit with the girl as part of your trip. Shall I tell them that in my response?"

"Yes."

It wasn't written in the letter whether she had come here at ten like Haruto had or whether she had been returned to the age of ten when she came here after experiencing a bit of life as an adult like Sara and Bradley had, so she had no idea how she would need to interact with the girl. But now that she was here, she would have to live in this world. Sara just hoped she would be able to ease the mind of this Invited named Anzu however she could.

When Sara timidly knocked on the guildmaster's office door at the Apothecary's Guild the next morning, she was given permission to take time off without even having to ask twice, much to her relief.

"Honestly, what do you think I am, Sara? I'm not some kind of hard-ass that doesn't let people take vacations. It's not like we have any pressing orders at the moment."

"Yes, I know..."

Caren was a rarity among guildmasters in this world as a woman, someone who wasn't averse to trying new things, and someone who carefully considered



various benefits for her employees. Perhaps because of all that, however, she was particularly strict when it came to the actual work. It was thanks to this, of course, that Sara felt like she was steadily improving as an apothecary.

“I just thought since I was heading east, you’d find some work as an apothecary for me to do while I’m there and force—I mean, request that I do it.” She’d almost let the truth slip.

“Well, aren’t you quick on the uptake.”

“Ah, I dug my own grave.”

Caren grinned, so Sara was sure she was in trouble, but the guildmaster just shrugged her shoulders.

“That being said, there’s not much for an apothecary to do out east. If anything, they’ve got more medicinal plants over there than they know what to do with, so I really wish they’d send some this way, but it just never happens. I really hoped when Master Chris’s mentor became a guildmaster over there, but...”

The main reason she was going east in the first place was to tag along with Nelly, who would be exterminating green grass locusts. She knew there was an infestation of locusts in the area, but her impression of the eastern region was entirely too vague aside from that, so she had no idea what she should hope for or dread at all. Caren’s vague words were only adding to her ambivalence.

That last bit caught her attention, though.

“Huh... Wait, what? I thought Chris’s mentor was the current guildmaster in the capital?”

“I’d say Chester is more like Master Chris’s rival.”

Chris might have been capable, but there had to be someone who’d taught him. And he was only the same age as Nelly, so now that she thought about it, it made sense that his mentor would still be working.

“If they’re Chris’s mentor, then they’re my mentor too. I’m kind of nervous...”

“Eh, you’ll be fine. He’s a real stand-up guy.”

*A stand-up guy mentor does not a stand-up guy pupil make, I suppose. It must*

have been because she was thinking something like that...

...that there came a knock on the door. It opened before either of them could respond to it. Sara almost flew out of her chair in surprise.

“Oh, Master Chris... I mean, Chris.”

It was a rather rude way to make an entrance, but Caren’s tone still jumped up two levels in friendliness.

“Ah, Caren, I apologize. I had something I wanted to ask Sara.”

“By all means.”

Sara was offered up as a sacrifice with or without any say on her part. It was rare for Chris to come all this way looking for her, though.

“What is it?”

“Right.”

Though no one had offered it, Chris sat in the visitor’s chair like it was his own personal seat before getting to the matter at hand.

“The request for the green grass locusts came to the Hunter’s Guild. You’re aware nothing was requested of the Apothecary’s Guild, correct?”

“Err, well, I am now.” Sara hadn’t been aware of that, so she checked with Caren before answering.

“Therefore, I am only going to Gardenia to accompany Nef.”

She realized then that Chris hadn’t said anything about what he would be doing in last night’s discussion. Sara felt like she finally understood how Caren felt when she heard that Chris would only be going to accompany Nelly.

“What a waste,” Sara murmured.

“Isn’t it? It is, right?” Caren agreed.

“Yes... But I still don’t like having to take on extra work.” She had to make this clear before Caren got any ideas.

“Yes, I also prefer not to have any extra work to do, so I can concentrate on my time spent with Nef.”

The slight smile on his face made it obvious just how much he was looking forward to this trip to the east. But Chris quickly shook his head as if to clear his mind of such worldly desires and crossed his arms.

“But that is that. It doesn’t agree with me to go to a problem area without any sort of preparation as an apothecary. Especially considering the events of these last few years.”

Sara thought back on those events. Even with just the ones she knew of personally, there was the abnormal increase in horned rabbits, the mass outbreaks of poison bog frogs and seven-colored swallowtails, the migrating dragons’ change of course, and the appearance of the continental tortoise. There were practically too many to count. Sara realized something else at the same time, though.

“But weren’t half of those just ’cause the knights screwed up?”

“You’re exactly right.”

“Can’t deny that.”

It seemed they were all in agreement.

“But the knights only aggravated the scale of the incidents. They weren’t responsible for the increase in the number of monsters.”

“Oh, right.”

She might have been fed up with the knights, but she couldn’t make them the fundamental cause of every problem in the world.

“This time, it’s green grass locusts. Of course, there have been a couple of infestations of green grass locusts since I first became an apothecary. The last time, I was serving as guildmaster in Rosa, and a request came to the Hunter’s Guild there, but they declined. For the last hundred years or so, we’ve gotten through these infestations with little issue by letting the capital send people to take care of things.”

It was sounding more and more like there was no reason for the Apothecary’s Guild to get involved.

“But what if the knights got involved?”



Sara thought about everything she'd seen the knights do so far and tried to figure out how they would respond to the situation.

"They're used to using the repellent and paralytic on the migrating dragons now, so I assume they'd try to use those."

"There's a good chance of that. Of course, it's unlikely the knights would be dispatched to eliminate green grass locusts, so maybe this is all needless worry on my part."

From the grim look on his face, it was clear that Chris at least assumed it *wasn't* actually needless worry.

"I'd like to consider what might happen if the knights come along with the two of you," Chris told them. "Then I'd like to do whatever preparations we can before we leave to deal with what we come up with."

"It would be an honor." Caren's eyes were practically sparkling, and Sara felt the same way. She was thrilled that a brilliant apothecary like Chris, her mentor, would rely on her for something like this.

"Keiligh's in the east—Ah, Keiligh is my mentor." He realized Sara didn't know who that was and gave a brief explanation. "But he's not the most adaptable person. I'd like to get as much as we can done here in Hydrangea."

So he wasn't a very flexible person, but he must have been capable for Chris to consider him his mentor. Still, it was probably a good idea to consider what those good-for-nothing knights might do before they left. For Sara's part, she was pretty confident in what she'd said earlier: that they'd probably try to use the dragon repellent and paralysis agent.

"If I think in terms of my old world, locusts would be considered insects. They'd be in the same category as seven-colored swallowtails."

"Butterflies and locusts are in the same category, eh? It's just as strange as dragons and tortoises being related to me."

Sara wasn't sure how much her categories meant in a world with monsters anyway.

"Well, your dragon repellent worked on both of them because they're

related, right? What about the seven-colored swallowtails?”

Chris folded his arms and thought back to his time in the dungeon. “I feel like they flew all over the place without concern when we were testing the repellent on the wyverns. Besides, seven-colored swallowtails feed on flower nectar and tree sap, not just mushrooms. The repellent is made from silver dragonmint, so I doubt it would have any effect on them.”

“What do green grass locusts eat?”

“Anything as long as it’s a plant. They’ll eat roofs if they’re made of straw.”

After listening to Sara and Chris’s conversation, Caren chimed in with a suggestion of her own. “How about testing whether the repellent and the paralytic have any effect on bug monsters that eat plants in Hydrangea’s dungeon, then?”

“I agree. It will be particularly useful to know if the paralytic affects them.”

They had a plan already.

“Is there anything else you can think of?”

Sara raised her hand. “Umm, this isn’t about the paralytic but about the substances they use to kill bugs back in my old world...”

“Oh? You have substances like that in your world, eh? Something like a poison, I assume? I don’t know if you feed it to them, but if you use them externally, the poison will remain. For whatever reason, the effect of the paralytic fades if you dilute it, so people are typically fine after washing it off, but poison isn’t used much on monsters here.”

Apothecaries like Sara typically only made and used poisons in order to make antidotes, and the effects of paralytics were temporary, so they weren’t too much of a problem.

“If you use too much poison to kill bugs, they start adapting to it right away. So, umm, the poison will become less effective.”

If they’d been using the same thing on monsters for hundreds of years, then it wasn’t likely that they’d start adapting to it now, but this was about all Sara could come up with based on her knowledge from her previous world.

“So instead of the usual paralytic, we’ll need a stronger one.”

Chris grimaced. Sara didn’t like the idea of using the paralytic since it had been used on Nelly, and since Chris had seen that with his own eyes, he was probably even more against it. The amazing thing about Chris was that he’d created an improved antiparalytic just on the off chance that something like that happened again.

“Most of our stronger paralytics are in the capital right now for the next migrating dragon season. We don’t have much stock in Hydrangea. And they won’t have any in the east.” Chris thought aloud. “I don’t want to go straight to using the paralysis agent, but since we’re considering what the knights might do, we’ll have to try it no matter how foolish it is. Okay.”

Sara didn’t have the guts to come right out and call the knights foolish like he did.

“So in addition to our experiments on the monsters, we’ll need to create strong paralytics and antiparalytics.”

There were more things that needed to get done than Sara was expecting.

“You can leave the drugs to the Apothecary’s Guild. If we think of it as starting our preparation for migrating dragon season early, it’ll be fine. If you don’t use it, you can just give it back to us.”

Sara was practically rolling up her sleeves in anticipation. She hadn’t made paralytics in a long time, so she wanted to participate in the crafting to get some practice.

“That’ll help a lot, Caren.”

“Oh, don’t mention it. I’d do pretty much anything for you, Master Chris.” She wasn’t hiding her Chris fanaticism at all.

“Well, we’ll be experimenting in the dungeon in the meanwhile, then.” Chris stood and set a hand down on Sara’s shoulder.

“Huh? I want to make paralytics as an apothecary.”

“There’s no time. We’ll be heading out now.”

“Caren?”

Sara looked Caren's way for help as Chris began to push her toward the door, but Caren just shook her head as if saying, "Give it up."

"But I don't want to go to the dungeon... Aaah!"

It was just like Chris to not take no for an answer. Sara looked back at the Apothecary's Guild with regret. She'd only just changed her opinion of Chris yesterday too.

But it would take three weeks to reach Gardenia by carriage, and they only had one week until they left, so they needed to do their experiments sooner rather than later. Sara sighed and chased after Chris.

Luckily, Kuntz, Allen, and Nelly helped out. They repeated the mind-numbing process of looking for bug monsters and testing the dragon repellent and normal-strength paralytic on them over and over again until the day of their departure came. By then, Sara felt nothing but relief.

"I specifically had Ri send a letter saying I wasn't taking their request, so I'm just going along with Nelly this time. I'm not even doing any work over there, so why am I already so tired...?"

Sara couldn't help grumbling to Allen as they stood next to the carriage just before leaving.

"Ha ha ha. I wonder why."

"Jeez... You were working just as hard, weren't you?"

Allen's cheerful mood relaxed her as well.

"Nope. I got to go into the dungeon with you for the last week, so it was fun for me."

"R-Really?"

Well, if he was fine with it, then she supposed she was too.

"It was fun watching you spring into the air every time you saw a monster you didn't know."

"I can't believe you."

No, she *wasn't* fine with it.



“I’m glad you two are having fun, but you should probably get in the carriage already,” Zachary said. He was there to see them off.

“Okay.”

“I’ll be in that one.”

The two of them responded obediently.

Sara got into Ri’s carriage and Allen got into the one the Hunters were using.

It was the beginning of their exciting three-week journey to the east.

## Chapter 1: Reunions Should Be Merry

The carriage exited from the south of Hydrangea, heading toward the capital before turning toward the eastern mountains after passing a town along the way.

Though Ri, a regional lord, was present, this was not a noble's leisurely trip to the capital. They traveled at a quick clip to keep up the motivation of the Hunters on the job. They were doing nothing other than moving from point A to point B on this trip, so Allen and Kuntz ran around in the meadow hunting the still-abundant horned rabbits to stave off their boredom.

Sara didn't have any particular desire to hunt rabbits, but she found it more tiring to sit still in the carriage, so she did some running around of her own as well, gathering healing and paralysis herbs when she could find them.

"We'll be entering the Beltran Mountains tomorrow. There won't be any inns for the next three days or so, so we'll be camping out at night."

"Camping," Sara repeated. "It's been a while since we've camped out!" She excitedly pictured the tent tucked away in her pouch, but when she thought about it, she realized they'd camped out during the continental tortoise incident last year, so it had only been a little more than a year.

"It's fun enough when you're traveling for a vacation, but I can see why people wouldn't want to make this trip regularly, especially if it means traveling through narrow mountain roads without any inns to stay in at night."

"It's only Sara, Ri, and Chris who are on vacation here. *We're* traveling for work," Allen pointed out.

Sara and Chris had worked pretty hard to prepare antiparalytics and other things for the trip, but that was just as a precaution; it wasn't as if they'd accepted any kind of request this time around.

"We did work before we left, at least," Sara mentioned.

"You two are apothecaries to the core, huh?"

“It’s cool, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Even if she didn’t fight, she thought it was impressive enough that she felt a sense of responsibility toward her work. Sara puffed up with pride. Then Allen made an unexpected suggestion.

“By the way, do you want to go hunting together tonight?”

“Hunting? I’m not gonna hunt horned rabbits.”

“Not horned rabbits. Flame bats. I thought I’d show them to you sometime, Sara.”

“Umm, I think I saw some of those at the guild in Rosa.”

It was when Allen had sold his first monster materials after obtaining his Guild ID, she was pretty sure.

“There are caves here and there along the mountain range, and flame bats come out into the meadow at night. But no one would come all the way here to hunt them, right?” Allen smiled wryly. Maybe he was remembering a time his uncle had brought him somewhere out of the way to hunt them. “It’s boring doing nothing but travel, so we were all talking about getting one big hunt in on our last night in the meadow.”

Frankly, hunting steadily in Hydrangea would make more money than going to the east, so the Hunters who’d accepted this request were all experienced and not in any particular money trouble, either looking for excitement in a place they’d never been before or simply wanting to take it easy for a little while.

“I know you don’t really like monsters, Sara, but they’re a part of Trilgaia. Don’t you think it’s just as important to see a bunch of different kinds of monsters as it is to travel to all sorts of places?”

“Hmm... I guess you might have a point...”

She wasn’t entirely sure she agreed with him, but she couldn’t resist the allure of a trip out at night, so after dinner that evening, she ended up out in the meadow with the Hunters. There were only ten or so of them, including Allen and Kuntz, and they all spread out throughout the meadow.

Ri and Nelly had disappeared somewhere, of course, so Chris was the only one left at Sara's side. Sara watched the Hunters disperse and then sat down in the grass, wrapping her arms around her legs. Chris just stood beside her quietly. It was pitch-black out in the meadow, so she found herself looking upward in search of light.

"Wow, just look at the stars..."

There weren't any large towns nearby, and even if there had been, they wouldn't have been lit up brightly like in Japan. The darkness of the meadow was like a layer of ink over everything, and the stars glittering in the sky made it look like there was a river above them.

"So that's why they call it the River of Heaven back home... I didn't get that until I came over here."

"A fitting description. Here, they call it the Goddess's Blessing. That's the Goddess's Vase over there." Chris pointed and explained that the goddess was tipping the vase. "It flows down and reaches the land, giving us a bountiful harvest." Chris's finger traced a path, finally arriving at the ground. Behind them, there was a lamp flickering a short distance away that served as a marker so they didn't get caught up in anyone's hunting.

"So Trilgaia has its own constellations. Huh?" She thought for a moment that there were stars twinkling in the air above them as well, but then realized they were shadows flitting across the sky.

"Sara! There they are!"

She heard Allen calling out to her, so she expanded her barrier a little.

"Anti-wyvern size should do it... Wow, they really do move in a weird way like bats. Ack! What the heck?! What is this?!"

One of the shadows suddenly changed direction and flew into her barrier, igniting and sliding down to the ground just like that.

"That's a flame bat."

"That's not what I meant! Why are they on fire?!"

"Because they're flame bats?"



Well, Chris wasn't any help.



She looked over toward Allen and saw numerous black shadows flying in irregular patterns all around. Here and there, they would light up and then fall to the ground. They created so much light that Sara could see all the Hunters out in the meadow who had been invisible to her until now.

“Isn’t it pointless if they burn up as a defense mechanism?”

“They don’t burn up. Look at the flame bat at your feet.”

She glanced down at the bat that had hit her barrier and saw that it was just lying there, not looking particularly charred.

“They light on fire when they’re attacking or when they impact something, but it doesn’t burn them. That’s why they make good heat-resistant material.”

“I see.”

Sara had just assumed that they *breathed* fire and hadn’t done any research to the contrary. Now all she could do was call herself out for being too disinterested.

Eventually, the final flame lit up the night sky and their hunting came to an end. As the burnt smell slowly began to fade from the meadow, blown away on the wind, the Hunters collected the flame bats and put them away in their storage pouches before returning.

“It’s way easier to hunt flame bats when you’ve got a lot of people around.”

“Yeah, it sucks when you get caught off guard by them when you’re alone.”

Sara could see Allen agreeing with the Hunters’ grumbling, since he’d been made to hunt the bats all on his own by his uncle.

“You can’t just hunt one flame bat. When you take one down, a whole bunch of them start swarming. That’s why people usually hunt them in a group like this.”

“And casters who can attack from a distance like me really come in handy.”

Allen and Kuntz returned, looking satisfied. It seemed they’d gotten in the hunt they’d been expecting.

“That makes sense.”

She realized suddenly that there were three flame bats lying around her barrier.

“I didn’t even notice the ones behind me...”

She timidly spread the wings of one of them. The flame bat was no longer hot, and it was big enough that it just barely fit inside her arms. It was light for its size, and didn’t look like any part of it was edible.

“You always do pretty well for how scared you act, Sara,” Kuntz said as Sara carefully observed the flame bat.

She let go of it at his words, then hastily stuffed it into her pouch. It was technically her prey, after all, and Nelly had taught her never to waste the monsters she hunted.

“That’s not it at all. I was just checking to see if any of it was edible. Oh, that was so scary!” she groaned, her tone only slightly wooden. His dubious look in response hurt.

“Unfortunately, hardly any of it is edible,” Nelly explained when she got back from hunting with Ri. “They were on the Dark Mountain too, but I never brought any home to you since you can’t eat ‘em.”

“They were?!”

“Most monsters in normal dungeons are up on the Dark Mountain too, but only strong ones come near the caretaker’s cabin, so you wouldn’t have learned anything from them. Still, I should have brought you to more places up there.”

Nelly sounded regretful, but they really hadn’t had the time, and the Dark Mountain wasn’t a school or a tourist attraction.

“We *did* go hunt gargoyles and cockatrices.”

“Yeah, those are tasty. That was fun, wasn’t it?”

They were talking about it like they’d just gone to pick fruits or something, which made Sara nostalgic for Japan. A smile naturally rose to her face, and when she turned around she noticed the Hunters all staring at her. They looked kind of taken aback too.

“I-I just went along with her. Y-Yeah, that’s right.”

She really had just been along for the ride, so she didn't think their reaction was really merited. She didn't like the way Allen was clutching his stomach laughing next to her either.

"Ah, this is so much fun. Traveling by carriage is such a bore, but it's nice to be able to go hunting with my adorable daughter and everyone else," said Ri.

Several people there probably thought "hunting" and "adorable daughter" didn't belong in the same sentence, but none of them had the courage to point that out to him.

The next day, they finally entered a mountain trail so narrow only one carriage fit on it at a time. It was maintained properly with earth magic, so no matter how few people actually used it, it wasn't overgrown or bumpy. Still, Sara chose to walk, since she didn't want to burden the horses on the incline and she figured she could enjoy the mountain scenery that way.

The carriages were moving slowly, so the Hunters walking with Sara didn't even have to use physical strengthening to keep up. It was tough walking uphill, but the fresh springtime greenery was comforting to the eyes and the sunlight was refreshing, even if it did cause them to work up a bit of a sweat.

Amid this calm, however, Chris was rather restless.

"Want to slip out, Sara?"

"Out from what?" Sara asked. He hadn't given her enough to go on.

"Ah, right." Chris cleared his throat. He was acting uncharacteristically impatient. "Do you want to slip out of the line to go gather plants?"

"Okay!"

Chris knew a lot about plants that could be used to make potions outside of the usual types like healing, paralysis, and mana herbs, and he taught Sara about them sometimes. As an apothecary, she couldn't let a learning opportunity like this go.

"I'll be back, Ri."

"Right. Be careful."



If they fell behind, they could just catch up with physical strengthening.

Sara followed Chris from the mountain path down toward a valley.

“I wonder if you can eat these buds. I feel like I’ve had these in tempura before.”

“Tempura? That’s the thing where they fry it in oil, right?”

They’d had it several times while they were traveling to Hydrangea, so Chris knew what she was talking about.

“Well, we could gather plenty of it just in case and look into it later,” he suggested.

“All right!”

Sara was mostly focused on things that could be eaten, while Chris was looking for medicinal plants. She was so into it that she didn’t notice Allen, Kuntz, and Nelly behind her until she turned around to tell Chris she’d found bush strawberries.

“Eep! What are you doing?”

“What did I tell you? It’s a good thing we went with them, right?” Kuntz shrugged and looked over at Chris. “Even Chris is so into it that he hasn’t noticed Nelly’s here. Question for you, Sara. Do you know the way back?”

“Err...”

Sara hurriedly looked around her. They’d headed downward, so surely all they had to do was go back up, but there was so much vegetation everywhere that she couldn’t tell which direction the path was in anymore. Sara thought she had a decent sense of direction, but the truth was that she’d figured since Chris was with her she didn’t need to pay attention to the way back and so she hadn’t bothered.

“I got a little worried when I saw how Chris was acting. Being smart doesn’t necessarily mean you have a sense of direction. Look.” Kuntz pointed and Sara saw several branches broken at eye height. “If you follow those, you’ll get back to the road. You’re the only one you can count on in an unfamiliar place, got it?”

“Ugh... I got it. Thanks.”

Kuntz was older than her, but since he'd been raised in the capital, he couldn't possibly have much experience on mountain roads. He must have thought about things himself and come up with a way to not get lost.

“I got a bit too excited.”

“I figured. It *is* pretty fun up here.”

She wasn't on a job that didn't match her position and she could travel leisurely with people she knew well and got along with. There were even unusual events like the flame bat-hunting the night before. It might have been inevitable that she got a bit too excited, but she realized she should make sure to be careful on these mountain roads.

“Chris.”

“Nef?”

Chris was crouched down inspecting the plants at his feet, but he stood in surprise when Nelly called out to him. Sara, in turn, was surprised because it was so unusual for Chris not to notice Nelly. Stranger still, Nelly's gaze as she looked at him seemed softer than usual, when she was normally so quick to act like he annoyed her.

“Think it's about time we headed back,” she told him.

“Yes. You're right.” Chris looked up at the sky, stretching his back, and Sara followed his gaze to find that the sun was directly above them. “It's that time already, is it? Wait, where's Sara?!” The way he whipped his head around looking for her showed that he at least seemed to feel some responsibility for bringing her out here.

“Right heeere,” she called.

She could only laugh at the way they'd both been so engrossed in their gathering that they'd completely lost track of time. She was relieved they'd at least stayed within visual distance of one another.

Still, she couldn't just leave the bush strawberries she'd discovered a moment ago. That would be a waste!

“Can I at least pick the bush strawberries if I hurry?” She thought they’d make fun of her for being a glutton, but Allen raised his hand right away.

“I’ll help. You make those into juice, right? Just let me have some later.”

They had a good time picking the bush strawberries and returned to find lunch already eaten, but getting a scolding for that ended up being a good memory.

Their trip continued enjoyably after that, with Sara making sure she didn’t get lost, observing plants she didn’t recognize, and occasionally getting spooked by giant caterpillars.

Though there were wider spots on the road occasionally where carriages could pass one another, they only ran across two other carriages in their two days of traveling over the mountain path. Of course, one carriage could be transporting far more goods than it looked like since people had storage bags, but there really wasn’t much travel through these mountains.

Sara almost fainted when she saw bees and flies that were the size of her head flying around, but she thought it was fortunate that she was able to steel herself for the size of the bugs she would be seeing even outside of the dungeon.

There were still some upward stretches, even after crossing the peak, but the carriage moved slowly down the mountains until it finally came to a stop. Sara had been dozing inside, but she woke up when they stopped and looked out the window to see what was going on.

“It’s a sea of green...”

Between the breaks in the trees, she could see a field of green with a river languidly snaking through it. When she looked more closely, she saw carefully leveled fields dotting the landscape, the road cutting a clean path through them. It was quite a different scene from the capital and Hydrangea, where there were only fields right near town.

They seemed to have stopped on a hill with a good view for a rest.

“So this is the region Lati moved to. To think that you could cultivate so much land just because there aren’t any horned rabbits...” Ri observed thoughtfully.

“Looks like there would be a lot of medicinal plants around here too.”

“It would be nice if we had time to do some gathering, Sara.” Chris looked far more at ease than he usually did since he wasn’t on any sort of job this time around. Maybe their fun travels were the reason he didn’t seem as selfish as he always did to her.

A huge shadow passed across Sara’s field of view.

“Wah! It’s a big bird! No, wait...”

She knew better from her time on the Dark Mountain. Just because something looked like a bird and was up in the sky, that didn’t mean it was actually a bird.

“But there shouldn’t be wyverns here and migrating dragons live farther south, right? So what is that?”

The large creature zipped this way and that across her view with a twang like a guitar string being plucked. If it hit the carriage, it would surely punch a hole in it, and when Sara looked up, she spotted several of the creatures flying about.

“Dragonflies?”

“That’s right. How unusual. You don’t see them too often around Hydrangea. Or in dungeons, since they’re not monsters. From the color, I’d say they’re violet darners. They’re good bugs that eat harmful ones like flies and bees.”

“Right... They’re just as big as seven-colored swallowtails... Eep!”

One of the dragonflies caught a big bee and took a bite out of it as if to back up what Chris had just told her. Even good bugs were scary if they were big. And they were even scarier if they were preying on some other creature right in front of you. Sara renewed her resolve to try and avoid the locusts while she was in Gardenia.

“Come to think of it, why are they called dragonflies in the first place?”

“I suppose they *do* resemble dragons somewhat... An interesting question, to be sure.” Chris considered the question Sara had offhandedly raised.

“I feel like in my old world it had more to do with them being sinister or

something like that, but there were a lot of people in my country that liked them. They were only about this big, though.”

Sara didn’t know enough to answer her own question, and when she showed Chris how big they were with her thumb and forefinger, he looked at her like she was crazy.

“If all the creatures in your world are so small, how do you even walk on the ground?”

“I guess it *is* easier to avoid them when they’re this big.” Looking at things from Chris’s perspective was kind of funny to Sara.

“A fly that resembles a dragon, hmm? Sara, what are dragonflies related to in your country? Their bodies are divided into three sections and they have six legs, so are they another relative of seven-colored swallowtails?”

Chris was impressive as always. Sara had only mentioned two things that were related and he’d already grasped the similarities between them.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“They would suit our experiment, then. But this isn’t a dungeon and dragonflies aren’t monsters; they’re helpful creatures. What should we do?”

They’d been experimenting in Hydrangea’s dungeon up until they left to see if paralytics and the dragon repellent worked on bug monsters. Sara had put those experiments out of her mind completely, so she was once again impressed by Chris’s focus.

“If you’re curious, why not just use an antiparalytic after you paralyze them?”

With Nelly’s suggestion, they got started experimenting right away.

“Listen, Kuntz. These things are faster than some monsters. Don’t try to hit them directly, just break the jar above where a few of them are flying and spread it that way.”

“Right. We’ll start with the repellent.”

They transferred the dragon repellent into a clay jar, the disposable sort used by food stands, and had Kuntz use his wind magic to break it above where the dragonflies were flying. Sara poured the repellent into the jar, careful not to



spill a drop, and closed the lid on it, handing it over to Kuntz. She hadn't spilled any of the repellent, but her hands still ended up smelling like flowers afterward. She couldn't help sniffing them after she did this every time. She still liked the smell.

"It hasn't worked on bugs so far, right? Well, it's a waste, but...eek! Ack, it's too low!"

Kuntz sent the jar flying with his wind magic, but the dragonflies were higher up than they looked, so it only reached one of the ones flying lower.

"Oh well! I'll break it!"

Sara had never used wind magic to attack, so she wasn't sure exactly how it worked, but Kuntz smashed the jar in midair. Some of the dragonflies darted about in surprise, but the repellent didn't seem to have any effect on them whatsoever.

"It didn't work, huh?"

It really did seem to be *dragon* repellent and little else. In the dungeon, it hadn't worked on seven-colored swallowtails, centipedes, horned rabbits, or hellhounds. In contrast, it was surprising how far away wyverns were when they started avoiding them during their experiments.

"We'll try the paralytic next—eep!"

"Ack!"

"What the—?!"

There was a high-pitched buzz as the other dragonflies swarmed around the one that had been hit by the repellent. Naturally, it wasn't too happy about that and sped away from the swarm, after which the rest of the dragonflies began chasing it around the sky. It was a sight the likes of which Sara had never seen before.

She didn't even know how many there were at this point. The swarm changed shape, black against the sky like starlings in the winter, until they eventually sped off somewhere else.

Sara watched all this with her mouth hanging open, but Ri and Nelly with their

ample life experience and the Hunters who were used to seeing monsters all the time seemed just as dumbstruck. That must have meant it really was an unusual sight.

Chris was the only one who watched it all calmly.

“I guess dragonflies like the dragon repellent? They’re like the *opposite* of dragons. Wyverns run away from even a single drop of the stuff.”

He must have been recalling the same thing Sara had just been remembering.

*Wait, a single drop?*

Sara looked down at her hand, which still smelled of sweet flowers.

“Th-There’s no way...right?”

She wasn’t confident, what with the cacophony they were making, but she sort of thought she could hear that high-pitched buzzing coming from behind her as well.

“S-Sara...”

She wasn’t even sure who said that.

“Barrier!”

There was no time to even turn around. It was just her intuition, but Sara spread her barrier out wide around her like she had on the night when she’d watched the flame bat hunting. She could feel something impacting against it like rocks hitting it.

“Eek! Horned rabbits break their necks when they hit my barrier like this... Even wyverns do when they hit it this hard...”

She turned around timidly. Several dragonflies smacked against her barrier again and again like the impact didn’t even faze them, their rainbow compound eyes looking right at her. Their razor-sharp teeth looked like they could chew Sara’s head right off her neck.

“S-Smells! I have to block smells too! S-Strengthen my barrier!”

*Bzzz, bzzz.*

The dragonflies hovered there for a second as if confused before eventually

flying off.

“Sara, hurry and wash your hands! And rub some healing herbs into them! That should mask the scent somewhat.”

“R-Right...”

“I-I should too, right? I feel like I probably smell too.”

“Yes, you too, Kuntz.”

Even after washing her hands, she was a little scared to shrink her barrier back down to its usual size, and even after she finally did so, she twitched every time a dragonfly flew near her. But who could blame her?

“The east is scary even without any monsters...”

“That really was surprising. I wonder how my fists would work against a dragonfly. No, they’re not monsters, so I can’t hunt them.”

She really couldn’t let her guard down in Trilgaia. But of course something that had terrified Sara was only a curiosity for Allen. She was finally able to calm down at that point, but the experience had been a bit too thrilling to call it a fun travel memory.

They walked down the road for a while after descending from the mountains, and flat land spread out all around them. Sara enjoyed the view, unable to stop herself from keeping an eye out for medicinal plants along the way. The grass along the roadside was a treasure trove.

“Chris, look at this...”

“Yes, it’s not just healing herbs and greater healing herbs.”

“There are paralysis herbs and mana herbs.”

Sara and Chris exchanged a look and both nodded before hopping down from the carriage at the same time.

“We’ll see you later!”

“We’ll catch up!”

Nelly, Allen, and Kuntz tagged along with them as their exasperated guards

once more, which again Sara and Chris completely failed to notice.

“I’m sorry, Nef.”

“It’s fine. It’s a nice role reversal.”

It wasn’t often she got to see Chris deflating and Nelly happily patting his shoulder. Sara’s eyes went wide at the sight.

“Hey, Nelly?”

“Yeah?”

She even seemed to be having fun somehow after they had returned to the carriage, so Sara decided to just ask her. Conveniently, it was only her and Nelly inside the carriage at the moment as well.

“It seems like you’re being nicer than usual to Chris.”

“To Chris? Hardly.” Nelly laughed Sara’s question off. “I don’t think I’m acting any different to him than usual, but I do think he’s a bit more likable than normal on this trip.”

“Likable,” Sara repeated. Did that mean she *liked* him? Sara’s heart pounded at the prospect.

“He seems selfish, but he’s responsible when it comes to his work as an apothecary. Maybe it’s strange for me to say this, but he’s sincere with me. He didn’t come through with you back in Rosa, but that was partly my fault. I think he’s generally a trustworthy guy.”

So she was aware that he gave it his all when it came to Nelly, Sara thought warmly. Still, Nelly’s next words were harsh.

“This may sound cold, but it’s a little suffocating how he’s so devoted to me and puts himself second. Do you get what I mean by that?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

There wasn’t much difference between Nelly and Sara when it came to romantic experience.

“But since he’s not on the job this time, he’s doing whatever he wants to do freely. And sometimes he doesn’t even notice I’m there. That’s why I feel like

this is the first time I've really gotten to get a good look at him. It's the opposite of how it usually is."

Nelly chuckled, a rare thing for her.

"Now that I really get a look at him, he's a pretty weird guy."

"He really is. So you finally noticed, Nelly."

They'd strayed from love talk at some point, but Sara had fun listing off all the ways Chris was strange with Nelly. She felt like she was chatting with a friend after school. Once again, she found it strange how she was able to do all the stuff she hadn't been able to in her old world here in this one, and she was grateful as always for the experience.

They passed through a few small towns, and after about a week, the group had finally arrived at their destination of Gardenia. They hadn't passed many people on their way through the mountains, but once they arrived in the east, the roads were well-maintained and there were even more people and carriages passing by them than there were around the capital.

"There were protection fields around the roads, but I feel like there were still a lot of people in the capital and Rosa and Hydrangea who never left town. I guess people are more free to travel here if there are no monsters around."

Sara glanced about outside the carriage, unable to hide her worry at the sight of children frolicking in the meadows outside the bounds of the roads.

"Even if I know they'll be okay, I have this urge to tell them to stay out of the grass because there might be horned rabbits..."

"Yeah, you'd never see something like this in Rosa."

It was rare to even see children within the walls of the Third District in Rosa.

"Nothing looks all that lavish, but the people look happy," Ri remarked as he looked out at the streets of Gardenia. "Short, traditional structures on large lots... Hydrangea's a more relaxed place than the capital, but this place seems even more tranquil. Lati picked a good place to settle down."

They entered the town from the south and headed for the east, where the lord's mansion was.



“So there’s a noble district here like there is in the capital.”

“The roads and houses are so big, and the gardens are large and well cared for too. It almost feels like we’ve come to a different country.”

The mansion that was bigger than all the others at the end of the road had to be the lord’s residence. The gate was open invitingly, but there was a guard stationed there, so they stopped their carriages before heading through.

“We’re Latifah’s—no, the lord and his wife’s guests, from Hydrangea. I’m Riot Wolverié.”

“The madam’s father, yes? I knew right away from that hair you have, like a burning flame. Wait just a moment, would you?”

The cheerful, aged guard who seemed neither particularly polite nor rude sent a messenger into the mansion.

“We just got some visitors from the capital as well, actually. The master and the madam are both busy as bees.”

“Oh? From the capital? On green grass locust business, I suppose?” Ri leaned forward with interest. The gate guard took a look at the mansion and then brought his face up to Ri’s conspiratorially. There was no one in Hydrangea who acted so familiar with the lord and former knight commander, so Ri grinned with amusement.

“Not just that, no. Some rich kid from the capital brought a few knights with him to handle the locusts. Even though they won’t be any help at all...”

Sara froze in the corner of the carriage, wondering if it was really all right for him to be speaking like that.

“You don’t suppose he’s...?”

“Yep. He’s here for the Invited. Well, seems like some of them are decent enough and not just knights in name only.”

Sara covered her mouth before she could scream. Still, the Invited in question couldn’t be *her*...

“Oh?” Ri wasn’t even hiding the smile on his face anymore.

“Seems the prime minister’s family in the capital already has the Invited who landed in Rosa under their protection.”

*They do not!* Sara wanted to exclaim loudly.

“They brought some young noble lads around Lady Ann’s age— Oh, the Invited here is called Lady Ann. But I’m sure those boys are some uninvited guests for our Invited! Bwa ha ha!”

“A-Ah. I see,” Ri said, evidently unsure of how to take this news as the gate guard cracked himself up.

In any case, they had quite a wealth of information now. But if the guard had been told about Ri, shouldn’t he also have been told about Nelly and Sara?

“Oh yeah, I heard two younger sisters of the madam’s were also coming. Will they be arriving later?”

Sara exchanged a look with Nelly. The two of them each pointed at one another wordlessly to confirm their suspicions. Two younger sisters? Was that supposed to be Nelly and Sara?

“One of ’em’s supposed to be the spitting image of the madam, so the folks in the mansion and everyone in Gardenia are all looking forward to seeing her.”

Nelly sighed and put a hand to her temple. “Sister hasn’t changed, I see.”

“It seems so.”

“What do you mean?” Sara asked Nelly and Chris.

Nelly whispered to her, “I think my sister will always see me as a child...”

“Okay, everyone! You may proceed to the mansion!” The gate guard’s loud bark cut off whatever Nelly had been about to say next. The messenger he’d sent must have returned.

“I’m a little nervous about meeting your sister, but I’m nervous about meeting the Invited too... Oh!” Sara exclaimed, having come to a belated realization.

“What is it?”

“Chris and I are all dirty from gathering medicinal plants on the way here, and you’re wearing your Hunter’s clothes, Nelly. Shouldn’t we have changed before

we got here?”

“Well, I thought about it, but I didn’t want to keep the Hunters waiting just so we could freshen up.”

“I guess so... Then at least...” Sara hurriedly patted out the wrinkles in her clothes and made sure her hair wasn’t too messy. She and Chris always wore their apothecary’s robes in front of Ri, so she figured her clothing wouldn’t be impolite.

While they discussed their appearances, the carriage arrived at the mansion’s front door. Typically, Ri would throw open the door and hop out all by himself, but this time he waited for it to be opened, a bemused look on his face. Sara and Nelly chuckled.

The door opened from outside and Ri slowly exited the carriage.

“Father!”

“Ah! Lati!”

Sara could hear a joyful reunion taking place outside. It sounded like they were hugging.

“Where’s my cute little Neffie?”

“Coming.” Nelly stood, hearing the woman’s calm, deep voice and took Ri’s extended hand, slowly lowering herself from the carriage.

“Ah! Neffie! My darling sister! You haven’t changed at all.”

“Neither have you, sister.”

Sara took Ri’s hand and quietly left the carriage as she listened to them chat. Chris came out after Sara. Allen and Kuntz were in the Hunters’ carriage.

Sara’s eyes were immediately drawn to the loving way the woman looked up at Nelly. Just like Nelly, she was a beauty with bright red hair that practically glowed under the sun. The crow’s feet at her eyes did make her look older than Nelly, but the curly hair framing her face and her big green eyes gave her a youthfulness that made it hard to imagine she could be in her late forties.

“So her sister looks just as young,” Sara muttered to herself as her eyes

moved to the figure beside Nelly's sister.

A small-statured man with brown hair and a mustache the same color, who seemed to be in his early fifties, watched the two sisters warmly. The two of them certainly fit the image of a lord and his wife. When Sara glanced around at the other figures nearby, she had the sudden desire to run and hide.

There were well-dressed people who must have been other nobles or important local figures spilling out of the mansion. Some looked at Nelly, some looked at Sara, and some looked at Chris or the carriage behind them the Hunters were climbing out of. They all seemed to be more surprised or appraising than welcoming.

"Err, should we have changed after all?" Sara murmured.

Chris answered just as quietly, "We're wearing our apothecary's robes, but anyone who looks at us and sees only that isn't worth humoring. Now prepare yourself and hold your head up high."

"If I needed to be prepared, I wish you would have told me sooner." The words did little good to her now.

An uncomfortable feeling overtook Sara then and shifted her eyes to focus behind the lord. In the group of adults who'd come out to meet them, there was a small, thin figure who looked out of place. Her wavy hair fell neatly to her shoulders and she wore a dress that went down past her knees lined with fancy-looking frills. Her face looked Japanese, but she also looked like a young noble lady who was well taken care of.

Chris gulped beside her. "Goodness. So *that's* what an Invited girl is supposed to look like. She certainly wouldn't be able to set foot outside her cottage for fear of monsters..."

She'd heard something like that in Rosa before. Sara half-smiled and followed up with, "But there aren't any monsters here, right? What else was there, a 'delicate, adorable girl with black hair'?"

Such was the description of the young Invited Nelly had left behind at the cottage on the Dark Mountain.

"So she really exists... Does that mean that's what Nelly saw when she looked

at me?” Part of her wanted to ask what Chris meant by “supposed to look like,” but she was too distracted by the differences between the girl and her to do so. “It was Yoshikawa Anzu-chan, I think.”

The girl must have heard her name. She looked up with a start and stared at Sara. Sara smiled to put her at ease.

The girl covered her mouth in surprise, and when she spoke, it was with a childish, cute voice. “You were able to say my name the right way? C-Could it be...?”

“Even her voice is adorable,” Sara couldn’t help snarking, and the girl began trembling like a frightened kitten.

“I don’t believe it...”

“Wh-What’s wrong? Err, are you okay? Aah!”

Right before Sara’s eyes, the girl crumpled to her knees like she was anemic.

The lord was looking their way as if he intended to greet them next, but when he saw Sara’s and Chris’s flustered expressions, he turned around to see what they were looking at. Then he ran over to the girl. “Ann!”

“Ann? Goodness!” His wife followed him and knelt down beside the girl.

“I’m all right. I just felt faint for a moment.” The girl insisted she was fine, but her face was as white as a sheet. Maybe she really was anemic, like Sara had thought.

As the lord and his wife panicked beside the girl, a tall young man and a small boy approached them. The boy quickly crouched down and assessed the girl’s condition, giving swift instructions.

“I believe the heat got to her. She should lie down inside the mansion for a while. Brother, if you would?”

“Yes. Pardon me.” The young man wrapped his arms around the girl and lifted her up.

“Oh, he’s carrying her like a princess.”

“That’s what you’re paying attention to? You should be asking what those two

are doing here.”

“Right you are.”

Sara and Chris were muttering to one another to disguise the wistfulness, exasperation, and various other things they were feeling at the appearance of this particular duo.

Noel turned to face them. “Sara! Chris! How have you been?”

Sara couldn’t help smiling back at the boy’s unreserved grin. She waved at him.

“Now, go ahead and get the girl inside. Let’s head inside as well, Lati, Edmond.”

“Of course.”

Ri’s comment was the ticket to getting them out of this ordeal and inside the house. Sara was worried about the girl herself, but they hadn’t even been introduced yet, so she figured it wasn’t her place to intrude on her privacy. Besides, if she wasn’t feeling well, it would be better to have Chris take a look at her. On that note, she was impressed at Noel’s ability to step forward and examine a sick person himself when he was right in front of Chris.

“If you could show me to her room,” Liam said before the girl in question stopped him.

“No, I’d like to remain. I’m sorry, but could you bring me to the couch?”

Sara was relieved. If she could make her feelings clear to Liam like that, then she was probably fine. If Sara were picked up like that, she would probably panic and be completely unable to say anything.

Yes, it had indeed been the two Hills brothers—Liam and Noel—who had rushed to the collapsed girl’s aid.

“I’m terribly sorry, everyone. I’ll introduce my sister to you at a later time, over dinner.”

At the madam’s indirect request for only family to remain present, the gathered nobles gradually dispersed. Some of them shot looks at the Hills brothers as if to ask why only they were allowed to remain, but they had been



the only ones able to respond to the girl's trouble, so there was little anyone could do to argue.

Still, Sara could only marvel at the space and money they must have to put up this many guests in their mansion.

"I'm sorry. You're finally able to see your family again, and I ruined it." The Invited girl apologized in a tiny, chime-like voice.

"It's all right. I shouldn't have brought you outside with me just because I was excited to see my family." The lord's wife gave the girl on the couch a gentle pat on the knee. Idly watching them, Sara wondered if the goddess hadn't bothered to give the girl a healthy body even after bringing her here.

"Nothing's ruined at all. We *are* hoping we can be introduced to your lovely girl, though, Lati. And on that note..." Ri speedily moved things along. "I am Riot Wolverié, Latifah's father and the lord of Hydrangea. This is my daughter Nefertari. She's Lati's younger sister and serves as the vice guildmaster of Hydrangea's Hunter's Guild."

Ri faced the girl and gently yet clearly introduced himself to her. She listened intently, her eyes going wide when he got to Nelly's introduction.

"You're Lati's sister...?"

"You can call me Nelly." Nelly did her best to pull the edges of her mouth up into a clear smile.

"This is Chris. He's a skilled apothecary who served as guildmaster of the Apothecary's Guilds in both the capital and Rosa."

"I'm a traveling apothecary now. My name is Chris Deltmont."

"I've heard about you from Mr. Keiligh."

"I'm glad to hear it." Chris didn't attempt a smile, but he spoke in a more gentle tone than usual so as to avoid giving her a rough impression of him. Sara surmised that Chris's mentor was looking after the Invited's health.

"And this is the Invited, Ichinok Rasarasa. She works as an apothecary in Hydrangea."

Sara took a step forward, appreciative of Ri's concise introduction. "My name

is Sarasa, but I go by Sara. I came here six years ago, to a place called the Dark Mountain, and Nelly's been taking care of me since then. A lot's happened in all that time, but I'm an apothecary right now. Umm, it's nice to meet you."

Sara awkwardly held her hands out toward the girl. The two of them would likely both hesitate to shake hands or hug as Japanese people, but she felt like just bowing might seem too distant. The girl hesitantly reached out her own hand in response, so Sara grasped it with hers and gently shook it up and down. Her own hands looked awfully tan compared to the girl's porcelain-white skin, thanks to all the time she spent outside gathering plants.

"Ah... I'm Yoshikawa Anzu. I was always called Yoshi or Anzu."

"Yoshi? Ah ha ha, right."

A lot of Yoshikawas ended up being called Yoshi. Sara couldn't help laughing when she remembered that fact from back in Japan. The girl, on the other hand, got teary-eyed, her lips trembling.

"Ugh... *Snff...*"

"Wah! Are you okay?" Had she said something mean just now? Sara had never thought of herself as particularly uncouth, but if this delicate girl could be thought of as silver dragonmint that only grew in the depths of the dungeon, then Sara was surely tough enough to be the sort of healing herbs that grew anywhere and everywhere. *Wow, I'm really a Trilgaian now, aren't I?* she thought to herself after making that comparison. She realized she was avoiding reality somewhat, but what was she supposed to do about a girl who was about to cry?

"Oh, don't cry..."

Latifah wrapped her arms around the girl protectively and looked up at Sara. Her eyes were so harsh that Sara couldn't help taking a step back. She raised her hands in capitulation and took another step back nervously. It was frankly difficult to have such hostility directed at her from so close-up. Especially when the person glaring at you was a family member of someone important to you.

"Uhh, I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to be mean or anything..."

"You've already been here for six years, right? This girl has only been here for

half a year. You could have a little compassion, couldn't you?"

She must have really loved the girl in her arms. She was just like a mother trying to protect her child.



Sara felt like she probably could have been a bit more tactful, but she was deeply hurt at the same time. Why was she being rebuked like this when she had come all this way? Someone's hand landed softly on her shoulder then.

"Nelly..."

Nelly smiled gently at her, then wrapped her arm around Sara's shoulders and gave Latifah a harsh look. In fact, it could almost be described as a glare.

"Please apologize to Sara, sister."

"Neffie... What for?" Latifah cocked her head as if she couldn't understand what Nelly was saying.

"You don't understand? You've gotten awfully foolish in your old age, sister. I'm disappointed."

"Goodness!" Latifah exclaimed. Sara was shocked too. This might have been the first time she'd ever heard Nelly say something so harsh to someone.

"Sara is an apothecary who works hard at the guild in Hydrangea every day. She came all this way to Hydrangea, taking time off of that job. Just what about that suggests to you that she lacks compassion? You say it's already been six years since she came here, but it's *only* been six years. She's still just a sixteen-year-old girl. Not to mention..." It was rare for Nelly to say so much at once. "After just *half a year* on the Dark Mountain, Sara was doing housework in our cottage, keeping the place running, and gathering medicinal plants as she practiced her magic."

"Magic..." the little Invited murmured. Sara was relieved to see that her tears had dried.

"That might be the case for *her*, but..." Latifah was only holding the girl in her arms more fiercely, almost as if to say *her* Invited was special.

"Sister, I'll ask again. Please apologize to Sara, who came all this way and has been nothing but kind while she's been here."

Latifah's tightly pursed lips seemed to say that she had no desire to apologize to someone who'd made her adorable child cry.

"I see. We'll be leaving, then. I'm glad I was able to at least see that you're

doing well, sister,” Nelly said, voice low. She spun Sara around and pushed her toward the door.

“Nelly...”

“Come on, let’s go. Sorry to have put you through that.”

“But...”

“Well, I suppose I’ll go as well. A traveling apothecary goes where the wind takes him, after all.”

Chris turned around to join them. The wind wasn’t taking him anywhere—it was all Nelly. She wanted to tell him that, but she was also comforted to see the two of them were acting just the same as they always did.

That made her realize that she was even more hurt than she thought she was. It was terribly rude to leave so soon after they’d arrived, but maybe that was the only way to keep herself from getting hurt any more. She looked up resolutely.

“Let me go! Please, let me go!”

When she did, she heard the Invited girl’s voice behind her.

“Calm down, Ann,” Latifah said soothingly.

“I’m fine. And wait! Please, Sarasa-san!”

Sara stopped when she was called Sarasa for the first time in a long while.

“I’m sorry! I really am sorry for crying! It wasn’t because I was hurt! You haven’t done anything mean.”

She hadn’t cried because she was hurt? Then why did she get so teary-eyed? Sara wanted to turn around to ask, but Nelly’s arm was still around her shoulder, preventing her from doing so.

“Ann, you...?”

“I’m sorry! Please don’t leave...”

After the girl’s heartfelt plea, Sara was determined to turn back around even if Nelly was going to try to prevent her from doing so, but before she could, she heard Latifah sigh.



“Ichinok Rasarasa. I apologize sincerely for being so unkind to you after you came all this way to meet us. Please accept my apology.”

Sara looked up at Nelly, who finally nodded. She turned around and said, “Apology accepted.”

The Invited girl seemed to want to walk over to Sara, her face still pale, but Latifah was holding her in place. She remained there, struggling to speak. “I...I was just...happy.”

“Happy?” Sara tilted her head, not understanding.

“That you called me Yoshi, like my friends. That you were able to laugh about it.” Tears rose to the girl’s eyes again. “I was happy that someone understood me enough to talk like that in this world.”

“Ah, I get it.” Sara was relieved that she hadn’t come off as mean. Still, she didn’t really want to get any closer to the girl while she was in Latifah’s arms like that.

“Honestly... It’s a bad habit of yours to hold the things you treasure so close to you, sister.”

“Neffie... But—”

“But nothing. Sara and your Anzoo are both Invited. Don’t forget that they’re *both* treasured.”

“Umm...” The girl spoke up, getting in between the two sisters. “This is all my fault, for being so easily misunderstood. I’m sorry for being all weepy. Thank you for bringing Sarasa-san here.”

“Oh, Ann, you’re such a good girl.”

“And my Sara is just as good as well,” Nelly said with a huff.

Latifah looked up at her, eyes crinkling. “I never thought we’d be competing over our children like this, Neffie.”

“We’re not competing. It’s just plain truth that Sara is a cute, good girl.”

“Oh my... Ho ho ho.” Lati laughed and turned to Sara, lowering her head politely. Face-to-face like this, she realized the woman was quite a bit shorter

than Nelly but still taller than Sara, so she had to look down at her a little bit.

“I really am sorry for being so rude to you. It’s just like Neffie said. It seems I forgot that you’re only sixteen years old yourself. I do appreciate you coming here.”

She seemed sincere, but Sara still wasn’t able to smile at her in return. After all, it was clear to her that she’d apologized not out of respect for Sara but to placate the angry Nelly. She felt like if the other Invited started crying again or collapsed, Latifah would just glare at her like that again, and she didn’t need a repeat of the experience.

“Now, since the misunderstanding’s been cleared up, why don’t you go back to your room and rest, Ann? You’re tired from yelling like that, aren’t you?”

“No. I’ll stay.”

“But, you know...”

“I want to stay.”

Listening to the two of them, Sara couldn’t help but think that things were different than they’d heard. The letter Sara had received had said the girl hardly ever left her room and just stared out the window sighing all the time. Would a girl like that refuse to go back to her room so strongly?

“Do you mind if I ask you something?”

Sara really didn’t want to get involved in this, but she couldn’t stop herself from asking. Just as she expected, she received a harsh glare from Latifah in response. She was already exhausted. But she’d already decided to leave and then turned around and decided to stay, so she couldn’t back down until she was satisfied.

“Did the goddess not give you a healthy body, Anzu-chan?”

Latifah opened her mouth to complain, but Nelly stepped forward as if to shield Sara and she closed her mouth again, cowed. Sara was never sure how openly she should talk about the goddess, but everyone here was related to one of the Invited, so she figured it was fine. Well, everyone except a pair of brothers, she thought as she flicked her eyes over to the Hills brothers. Liam

was watching the proceedings with amusement, while Noel was observing everything intently.

“Umm, I think she did. It’s not hard to breathe, and I feel like I don’t get as tired now. But I can’t do everything I want to do. I want to be healthy enough to run around outside and stay awake all day.”

“I see.”

So she wanted to be more active, but she got teary-eyed at the slightest shocks and was still weak enough to collapse from anemia. There were all sorts of things she wanted to say, but Sara decided to start over from the beginning for now.

“Well, let me introduce myself one more time. I’m Ichinokura Sarasa.” It must have sounded like a spell in this world’s language. Noel was murmuring it to himself for some reason. “People here call me Sara. I’d like for you to call me that too. What about you?”

“I’m Yoshikawa Anzu. I’m called Ann here, but there were people who called me that in Japan as well, so I don’t mind it.”

She was still pale, but at least she was speaking a bit more clearly now. Sara held her hands out again.

“Would you mind if I took a look at you? I haven’t been one for long, but I *am* an apothecary, so I think I can assess your condition somewhat.”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

Sara held Ann’s hand gently and checked the condition of her skin and muscles, then put her hands on the girl’s shoulders and had her turn her face this way and that. It felt a little strange to do so, since when she did this, she was usually checking for poison or paralysis, or to see if someone was injured in some way that they hadn’t realized. But she didn’t see any symptoms like that, and apart from being skinny, there was nothing wrong with her body that she could tell.

Next, she wanted to check the girl’s movements.

“Would you mind walking around with me a little?”

“Okay.”

Sara removed her hands from the girl’s shoulders and held one out for her to take.

“Hold my hand and we’ll go slow.”

“Okay,” Ann said a little more hesitantly this time, taking Sara’s hand.

“Ann...”

“Sara is an apothecary, sister. Just let her handle this.” Nelly stopped Latifah.

There didn’t seem to be any problems with the way Ann moved either, but Sara had never had a younger sibling, so she found it kind of fun to walk around with the smaller girl like this. She couldn’t help swinging their clasped hands a bit too hard. Ann looked up at her curiously and when she realized what Sara was feeling, she smiled along with her.

“Want to walk a little more? However you like to do it.”

“Okay.”

Ann lengthened her stride a bit, slowly traversing the spacious hall.

“You seem okay. Are the stairs hard for you?”

“I run out of breath, but I can go up them.”

Ann’s eyes were twinkling with anticipation, so Sara decided to take her toward the stairs. She hadn’t asked if they could leave or anything, but Nelly had conveniently placated Latifah earlier, so she started heading up the stairs.

“Hfff, hfff, whew... I’m like an old person, aren’t I?”

“Maybe a little.”

“Ah ha ha, hfff...”

At a landing, the stairs branched to the left and right, almost like at a fancy hotel. The pair paused at the landing, then continued up to the second floor. Ann seemed to be having fun. She ran out of breath right away, though.

“Just doing this makes me run of breath like when I used to run around during club activities...”

They looked down from the stairs and saw the people from the mansion looking up at them worriedly, and the group from Hydrangea as well as the Hills brothers just watching them calmly.

“You were in an athletic club?”

“Yeah, I played handball. But I got weaker and weaker after starting high school, and I was in the hospital for the whole last six months. They never figured out what caused it, so I just spent all that time sleeping in bed.”

“I see...”

Sara had been born weak, but it had never been bad enough for her to be hospitalized, and Ann had been healthy until she weakened suddenly. Sara wondered vaguely which of them had it worse.

“I didn’t want to leave my family, but the goddess said I would just die if I stayed there. I figured if I could get a second chance at life, I should take it, but now I can’t move like I used to be able to...” Ann clenched her fists in frustration. “I don’t know if the goddess was telling the truth or not, but I wanted to make the best of things. At least I wasn’t thrown out into the middle of a forest where I was attacked by wolves and bandits like in a novel or something. I mean, I have a house and food to eat, and they really treasure me here.”

“Ha ha ha. Yeah, it seems like they do.” Sara laughed dryly. She’d almost been attacked by wolves just like in one of those novels herself.

“But I can’t run. I want to run around and jump like I did all through middle school, but I just can’t...”

“And you’ve been depressed because of that?”

“Yeah. You’re sixteen, right, Sara?”

Sara wasn’t sure exactly how to answer. “Yeah. I turned sixteen last fall.”

“You look it. You’re like I was when I was at my healthiest. I kind of gave up, thinking I’d never be that healthy here in this world. I thought maybe I’d just live a quiet life like Lati, but then an Invited just like me showed up, looking exactly like how I wanted to be. It was kind of a shock to me.”

“How you wanted to be...”

Sara looked down at herself. She was wearing clothes that were easy to move in and her apothecary’s robe. Her skin was tanned from traveling in the sun. She figured she was a perfectly average-looking sixteen-year-old girl. And not a noble one, but one closer to a commoner.

“But I’m just normal. I shocked you so much, it made you swoon?”

“You might think you’re normal, but you’re not the kind of normal Lati wants me to be. She says you’re a failure as a lady if you’re so energetic and tan and ready to run off at any moment. She said all the Invited in the past settled down in happy marriages to nobles. But I’m not supposed to be a fragile girl like this...”

She must have found it incredibly frustrating to go from being in an athletic club to not being able to move the way she wanted to.

Sara knelt down in front of Ann. “Can I be honest with you?”

“Yeah. What is it?” Ann looked nervous to hear what Sara was about to say.

“Listen, I took a look at your physique and the way you move just now.”

“Do I still not have enough mana?” Ann asked, tearing up again. She rubbed her eyes with her sleeve as if annoyed at herself. So she’d listened to the goddess when she’d said her body was weakening due to lack of mana. Sara could see Latifah fretting at the bottom of the stairs, but Ann hadn’t noticed.

“I don’t want to cry, but my eyes keep tearing up all the time. I hate it.”

“It’s okay. It’s just your age and condition getting the better of you.” Sara gave Ann a consoling pat on the shoulder. She no longer gave off the fragile impression she had at the start. They’d only talked for a short while, but Sara could tell just how strong her will was and how frustrated she was. Sara’s desire to stay uninvolved had completely evaporated at some point.

“From what I can tell, you don’t have anything to worry about. You’re completely healthy. I’d say the cause of your troubles is a simple lack of exercise.”

“Really? But I get so out of breath from so little.”



“It was the same for me in the beginning. I ran as hard as I could and was totally out of breath. And I got blisters right away and couldn’t walk anymore. That really hurt... But I couldn’t do any of that stuff back in Japan, so I was still happy about it.”

Sara herself was incredibly relieved that Ann seemed healthy. The job of an apothecary wasn’t just to gather plants and craft potions. The people of this world were extremely robust, and most things could be fixed with potions, so there weren’t any doctors. It was apothecaries who examined people when they weren’t feeling well.

Sara had started doing work like that ever since she’d become an apothecary and she was becoming more and more confident about when potions were needed, but she wasn’t a veteran like Chris, so she couldn’t be *completely* confident.

“I think if your ideal body is that of a healthy high schooler, then it’s only natural you’d feel like you can’t move like you want to in a ten-year-old body that’s only just reincarnated. What were you like when you were ten back in Japan? Were you active?”

“I think I was pretty normal. I wasn’t doing sports then, just hanging out with my friends, going to cram school, and playing games at home,” Ann said before looking at Sara in realization. “You’re saying I need to work out?”

“You’re only ten, so I don’t think you need to *work out*. It’s just that you won’t have any stamina if you don’t do anything with your body.”

“I get it... Is that why...?” Ann seemed to understand what Sara was telling her.

“Should we head back down? Miss Latifah looks like she’s about to collapse with worry.”

“I don’t want to go back... I’m eighteen on the inside, but they all treat me like a child.”

“Eighteen, huh? I guess that’s an adult in Japan... I reincarnated when I was twenty-seven, so I guess I’d be thirty-three now... Oof...” Sara held her head at the realization. “I’ve felt like I was twenty-seven all this time, but six years have

passed, so I guess I'm thirty-three... Hmmm... But it's not like I've been acting twenty-seven. I've just been acting sixteen..."

For now, Sara was just grateful that Ann didn't comment on her muttering.

"Then you're older than me here *and* back home, huh?"

"I guess that's true." She couldn't very well stay shocked forever, could she? "But we're getting a do-over here, so our old ages don't really matter, right?" she said, more to herself than to Ann. "A-Anyway, regardless of your mental age, you've gotta act the age you are over here. If you're ten, that means getting a healthy amount of exercise."

"Right!" Ann nodded firmly.

"Okay, let's go."

"Yeah."

Ann held out her hand to Sara like it was completely natural. It didn't quite match how she'd just insisted that she was eighteen, but she probably just longed for company. It warmed Sara's heart that she was so happy about meeting someone from her homeland in a foreign place like this.

There was no sign of Ann paling or collapsing as she went down the stairs, all eyes on her. She found it a little pathetic that she was more relieved about that fact for the sake of avoiding Latifah's ire than out of actual concern for Ann, but she couldn't change her own feelings.

Still, Sara spoke directly to Latifah when she reached the bottom of the stairs. "I took a look at Ann as an apothecary and she's a perfectly normal, healthy ten-year-old girl."

"My. That's wonderful news. But you mustn't push yourself, Ann."

"About that..." She really didn't want to, but Sara had to finish what she'd started. "She's healthy, but I believe she lacks stamina due to a lack of exercise. Children this age should be running around outside, moving their bodies. Is she doing that?"

"She's one of the Invited! The Invited were sickly in their original world. All nobles know they must be brought up with the utmost care."

“If you’ll forgive me for saying so, I think you’re expressing that care in the wrong way. You don’t need to be overprotective of her.” Sara didn’t back down. Wasn’t it rude for her to explain to Sara, an Invited, what the Invited were? “Please don’t forget that I’m one of the Invited myself. And just count the number of Invited currently in Trilgaia. You’ve heard of Bradley and Haruto, I assume. They’re famous as Hunters, after all. They might have been sickly in their previous world, but they’re not here.” People in this world needed to be told things clearly to understand.

“As Hunters? The other Invited are?” Ann asked, looking up at Sara.

“Yeah, that’s right. They’re really strong too. Haruto’s from Japan. I hope you can meet him sometime.”

“Yeah!”

Latifah wasn’t convinced, however.

“But they’re men. It’s not the same for girls.”

“It *is* the same.” Sara pointed her thumb at herself. “We can be Hunters, apothecaries, people who use magic tools, people who work at stores. We should be able to be anything we want. I just chose to become an apothecary to support myself.”

Nelly set a hand on Sara’s shoulder in support.

“I believe staying fit is important for Ann to be able to choose the future she wants.” This was the most important point. Sara was relieved she’d been able to say it.

Ann turned to Lati as well, doing her best to convey exactly how she felt. “I want to be more active, Lati. I want to go outside and run around. I don’t want to just sit around inside all day, and I want to know more about this world too.”

“Ann...” Latifah didn’t seem to know how to handle the situation.

The lord put his arm around her, but he was pale for some reason, and couldn’t seem to meet her eyes. Still, he rubbed her back and told her, “This is a good thing, isn’t it, Lati? When she’s speaking loudly like this, Ann looks much healthier than when she’s quiet. Let’s let her do as she likes.”

“Ed... All right, I understand.” It seemed less like she accepted it and more like she felt she simply had to acquiesce to the lord.

“I suppose we ought to introduce ourselves as well, then.”

Ri had taken the lead and introduced the party from Hydrangea, but now that Sara thought about it, the Gardenia side had yet to make their introductions.

“I am Edmond Greif, the lord of Gardenia,” the man started off. “This is my wife, Latifah, and the Invited, Ann. And...” Edmond indicated the Hills brothers. “I believe you’re already acquainted, but this is Liam Hills, vice commander of the capital knights, and his brother Noel Hills, an apothecary. They’re here to assist with the green grass locusts.”

The two of them stood from their seats and bowed. Sara had been surprised to see Liam earlier, but she’d been even more surprised to see Noel.

“Noel... Did the Apothecary’s Guild in the capital send you?” Chris asked helpfully.

“No. I had a personal interest in the outbreak of green grass locusts, so I took a break from the Apothecary’s Guild and availed myself of House Greif’s hospitality. I only just got here, but I suppose Sara already has me beat as an apothecary.”

He must have been frustrated that he hadn’t been able to accurately gauge Ann’s condition.

“Well, I *have* been doing this longer than you.”

Sara knew Noel was talented, but she had to keep up appearances as his elder.

Next to open his mouth was Liam, who wore that same smile he always did, which Sara found so disingenuous. He always had to be so disgustingly handsome, didn’t he?

“You seem well as always, my former fiancée.”

“I am, though we’ve never once been engaged.” Sara wasted no time refuting his claim. She really had learned to speak her mind, hadn’t she? She was, of course, also curious what Liam was doing here, so she decided she might as well

find out. “Are you here on behalf of the knights?”

“That’s right. We decided we’d try out the paralytic we use on the migrating dragons.”

Sara exchanged a look with Chris without even meaning to. It was exactly as they expected. Well, it had worked on the poison bog frogs, so as long as they were careful about the direction of the wind, nothing too terrible should happen. Things would probably be fine, but there was no reason not to be prepared for trouble. The two of them were instantly of one mind.

“Ahh, Liam... We’re only here to accompany Nef—Nefertari—but do you mind if we observe alongside Noel?” This was a more roundabout question than Chris would normally ask, but he was seeking approval for them to “observe the knights.” Now that Sara thought about it, she’d been wondering how they would participate since they weren’t Hunters or knights, but Liam being here solved that problem rather handily.

“I don’t see why not. It’ll be reassuring to have you there if something goes wrong. The same goes for you, Sara. After all, you *were* highly involved with escorting the continental tortoise to the Dark Mountain safely last year.”

Sara’s mouth fell open. Sure, she’d done her part as an Invited escorting the continental tortoise to the Dark Mountain and making sure it didn’t hit the capital or Rosa on its way, but when she’d returned to Hydrangea, there hadn’t really been any fanfare, so she didn’t think it was that big a deal. Everyone had complimented her, Allen, Kuntz, Chris, and Nelly for traveling far and getting the job done, but that had been that. She considered all that a thing of the past by this point.

“Uhh, right. That was pretty tough...” It was nothing more than small talk to Sara. The knights, Liam included, had come off rather badly in the incident, so she hadn’t been expecting Liam himself to bring it up.

“I heard the Invited were a big help back then, but did a young girl like yourself really participate in the subjugation?” Edmond asked her excitedly.

If he’d dismissed the idea scornfully, she probably would have snapped at him, but he seemed to be nothing more than genuinely curious, so Sara nodded her head.

“That makes it sound like we fought it, but all we did was build big walls to divert its course. In that sense, I did participate, yes.”

She didn’t think she could describe how difficult the whole thing had been to someone who hadn’t been there, but Liam’s next words informed her that the results of their labor could still be seen today.

“Those walls are still there, to the south of the capital. They’re a bit of a sightseeing attraction now, so if you ever visit the capital, you should go see them.”

“Wow! Really? That’s kind of embarrassing...”

Haruto had said something like that as a joke, but apparently he’d been right on the mark.

Sara was a bit surprised to find she was enjoying a conversation that included Liam. When she’d first met him in Rosa, he’d given off the impression of a self-righteous jerk who didn’t listen to a thing people said to him, and that impression hadn’t changed since then. It was a bit strange that she could have a normal conversation with him now.

“I know you’ve only just arrived, but I was thinking we would throw a modest party tonight. I’d love to hear more about it then,” Edmond said, beaming.

With their greetings done, everyone headed to their various guest rooms. Ann seemed to want to talk more, but since she’d collapsed earlier, she was persuaded to rest in her own room for now.

After washing off the grime of travel and changing clothes, Sara sat on her bed next to Nelly (they’d requested the same room) and gave her a hug.

“We just got here and we’re already so busy.”

“Sorry. The more my sister cares about someone, the less she tends to listen to other people about them,” Nelly said with a wry grin.

“Was she like that with you?” Sara couldn’t really imagine it. If Nelly had been protected so fiercely, how would she have grown up to be so strong?

Nelly heaved a sigh. It took her a while to say any more. “I don’t think you noticed, but my sister has a ton of mana.”

“A ton of mana...?”

Sara remembered when she'd first met Nelly and Allen. She also thought of Rosa's guildmaster and vice guildmaster, who each had a lot of mana as well. Nelly and Allen hadn't been able to control their mana, so they'd gone through a lot because of the pressure other people felt around them. Jay and Vince *had* been able to control their mana, and they'd put it to use working at the Hunter's Guild. She wondered which one Latifah was.

“She was always way better than me at controlling it, but when she got emotional, she would release so much of it that even father couldn't handle her at times.”

“I've never seen Ri have trouble with mana before.”

Sara hadn't even thought about the topic in a long time since Nelly and Allen had learned to control theirs quite a while ago.

“Did you notice that Edmond seemed uncomfortable when my sister was glaring at you and trying to protect Ann?”

“Now that you mention it, I guess so.” She could recall his complexion being rather poor, on reflection.

“I'm guessing he had the least amount of mana out of everyone there, so it was pretty uncomfortable for him. The Hills brothers didn't bat an eye at it.”

It was indeed a pretty formidable group they'd had there, wasn't it?

“I've got a lot of mana too, so it never bothered me when she let off a lot of pressure. I heard from my father later that my sister was pretty dependent on me and didn't really want to let me go when I was little.”

“Huh. So she feels the same now, since the Invited aren't bothered by mana pressure?” She *had* seemed a little *over-overprotective*.

“My sister was still young when we lost our mother. It must have been hard on her. But she gave her love to the whole family, not just me, so I never felt lonely when I was little.”

“Aww, that's nice.”

“She taught me what I needed to know as a woman. I've got nothing but



gratitude for her, really. It's just that as I got older, all her affection and trying to get me to be feminine began to feel stifling. I liked being active with my brothers more, so that was a bit hard for me."

"I see."

Nelly's father was the former knight commander and current lord of Hydrangea, and her other family members were all hard at work in various important positions, but they still had their fair share of troubles, it seemed.

"It was around when I found out that I was good at physical strengthening and I started to get really into training with my father and brothers that my sister fell in love with Edmond, and all of a sudden she was gone. Having a lot of mana really doesn't have to hold you back as long as you can control it."

"But didn't you say she loses control when she gets emotional?" And judging from what had happened earlier, she still had that problem now.

"Apparently a beautiful, innocent girl is even more appealing with a weakness like that that comes out only every once in a while."

"What? Is that how it works?"

"Yeah. I recall she was pretty much inundated with marriage proposals back then, all of them claiming that they could 'accept all of her.'"

"Wow." Still, it was persuasive when she thought back to how Edmond had stayed by her side earlier even though he must have been in pain.

"It's all the same mana, but when someone strong like me has it, I'm shunned, and when someone cute like my sister has it, she's loved for it. I think that's all the more reason why she wanted me to become more feminine." Nelly let out a short laugh. "Well, that didn't work out. But my sister kept trying to instruct me from Gardenia, arranging marriage meetings and going to all sorts of other pointless efforts..."

"You're more than appealing enough as you are now, Nelly. Chris is proof of that, isn't he?"

"Ha ha ha. I guess so."

It was a bit of a heavy topic, but Nelly had stayed fairly bright throughout it

all. In fact, she even bragged to Sara about herself.

“It’s thanks to my sister that I can sew, even with how clumsy I am.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.”

“But it’s not like sewing or dancing or etiquette helps to look after a cottage on a mountain, ha ha.”

“Yeah... So that’s why the cottage was such a mess.”

She’d thought it was just because Nelly didn’t know how to take care of herself at all, but it was actually because she was a noble lady.

“No wonder you needed someone to help out around the house.”

Sara sighed, remembering the shock she’d felt when she’d first set foot in that place.

“Well, I think we’ve got some time, so I’m gonna go see what Allen and Kuntz are doing.”

“Maybe I’ll see what the Hunters are doing, as their representative from Hydrangea.”

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Sara said, and several maids bustled into the room.

“Well then, we’ll begin getting you ladies ready for the party.”

“Huh? Err, no, I have to go see my Hunter friends...” Sara said, rising from the bed. She wasn’t sure what “getting ready for the party” entailed, but she assumed it would be best to flee.

“The Hunters will be attending the party as well, so you will be able to see them then. Now...”

Nelly had also been getting ready to flee, but with their escape route cut off, the two of them found themselves being massaged and rubbed with various creams, after which their hair was done up and they were changed into dresses. Soon, their preparations for the party were complete.

“Just what I’d expect of the madam’s sister. You’re very beautiful.”

At the maid's comment, Sara looked over at Nelly and saw her wearing a white blouse with airy sleeves and a subdued dark green overdress that hugged her frame. Her red hair, which was usually tied up in a simple ponytail, was gathered in a bundle behind her neck, several loose strands framing her face. Maybe due to the light coat of makeup on her face, her green eyes were even more striking than they usually were.

"Nelly, you really *are* beautiful!"

Nelly was embarrassed by Sara's words, but she couldn't scratch her head like she always did with her hair done up like that, so she just tilted her head awkwardly—which was, of course, just as adorable.

"You look beautiful as well, young lady."

The maid brought Sara to a mirror and when she saw herself in it, she held both hands to her cheeks.

"Is this really me?" she said, in perfect clichéd fashion.

Her tanned skin had been whitened with face powder and her hair, which she usually wore down, was tied up high, the opposite of Nelly's. Her dress was buttercup-yellow, a color she loved, and the bits of lace here and there gave it a girlish quality that made her look rather adorable, if she might say so herself.

Of course, she'd worn makeup before, back in Japan, so she knew what to expect to a certain degree. Sara felt she had a good grip on reality. Dressing up really was fun, though.

"You're always cute, Sara, but you're even cuter than usual today."

"Thanks." She knew better than to be humble for no reason.

Eventually, their escort arrived—Chris, who as usual saw nothing but Nelly, and Ri, who could only grin bemusedly at the other man's antics—and they headed downstairs where there was already a large gathering of ladies and gentlemen present.

When they saw Nelly gracefully descending the stairs, her hand in Chris's, everyone stopped chatting and stared her way, entranced. Part of that was because of how beautiful Nelly was, Sara was sure, but it was probably also

because she was the spitting image of the lord's wife, Latifah.

The guests crowded around Nelly simply to gaze in awe at the resemblance between her and her beautiful, graceful sister, and just like that, Sara was separated from her. She looked up at Ri with a chuckle.

"I knew Nelly was pretty, but I've never seen anything like this before. It's pretty amazing, huh?"

"Yes, my daughters are both absolutely striking."

"They are. I'm even happier to see this since I know how Nelly was back when she was avoiding people. So this is how people see her when they don't have any weird preconceptions about her."

"Yes. She's probably not all that happy about it herself, though. Neffie may be a lady, but she's a Hunter at heart."

From the glimpses she could catch through the crowd, Nelly's expression didn't look the most comfortable, but Chris was with her, so Sara figured she'd be fine and instead tried to spot Allen and Kuntz, who should have been somewhere in attendance as well. She eventually found a table in a corner of the spacious hall where the Hunters had gathered, all looking rather uncomfortable in the setting.

"Ri, I'm gonna go see Allen."

"A splendid idea."

Sara wove her way through the more experienced partygoers and headed for the Hunters.

"Allen! Kuntz!" She called out to the pair and Allen looked her way and grinned, Kuntz giving her a relieved look.

"Sara! That looks good on you."

"Thanks. You look good too."

Allen and the other Hunters were only looking a bit more formal than they usually did. Sara knew he and Kuntz had the sort of clothes nobles wore, but it seemed they'd deliberately chosen not to wear them.

“Ugh, thank goodness you came, Sara. It’s hard to get used to these gatherings of nobles when you’re a commoner...”

Kuntz was somewhat used to being around nobles from visiting Ri’s mansion, but he still found parties like this uncomfortable.

“You really look like one of the Invited in that getup.”

“It looks good on you.”

The other Hunters casually called out to her as well, evidently also relieved to see her.

“Man, looking at her like this, Nefertari really *is* pretty.”

“The lord and his wife came to say hello a few minutes ago and the wife looked exactly like her.”

“She really did.”

Sara felt more comfortable with the Hunters watching the nobles from afar. She was comforted to know that the lord and madam were being courteous to the Hunters, though.

“How are your rooms?” she asked them. Sara and Nelly were in a guest room, so she wondered where the Hunters were being put up.

“We’re in a different building on the same property, but the rooms are nicer than inn rooms, so you don’t need to worry about us.”

“We’ll be heading out to take care of the green grass locusts first thing tomorrow anyway.”

The Hunters weren’t here to fool around. Even if coming to a new place was fun, they wouldn’t stay longer than they needed to. They’d get their work done and head home as soon as they could.

“Hello, Hunters.”

“Ugh.”

“Hey, Noel.”

She wasn’t sure exactly who had said “ugh,” but it was likely that it was in response to the knights in general and not just Liam. Everyone turned to Liam

and Noel innocently. Noel had been friendly with the Hunters in Hydrangea, so they exchanged affable greetings.

“I’m looking forward to working with all of you tomorrow,” Liam said, and the Hunters all shrugged in response.

“We never heard anything about working with the knights. Nefertari’s in charge of us, so if you want to work together, you’ll have to talk to her. We’ll do whatever she wants us to.”

“Understood. We won’t be getting a look at the situation until tomorrow, so we’ll have to determine how we want to handle things then.”

Liam paid no mind to the Hunters’ curt response to him and they started talking about work. Meanwhile, Sara and Noel excitedly updated one another on their lives, until Noel looked up at the top of the staircase in the hall and reluctantly turned to his brother.

“Are you done, brother? We should probably be on our way.”

“We’re fine here, aren’t we?” Liam replied irritably, still facing the Hunters. “Sara’s here too.”

Sara wasn’t sure why her name was coming up. She followed Noel’s gaze to the top of the stairs, where she saw Ann descending in a cute dress. Her silky black hair had been curled slightly to frame her small, pale face. Her neck and limbs, where they poked out of her dress, looked small and fragile.

“She looks exactly like the kind of Invited girl you hear about in the capital. I wonder if you looked like that at first too, Sara. The first time I saw you, you were already an apothecary,” Noel said as he watched Ann.

“She kept herself clean, but she wore baggy clothes so that you couldn’t tell if she was a boy or a girl, and she was camping out outside town. She’d buy her dinner from food stands,” Liam said with nostalgia, which made no sense to Sara. His actions at the time were far too forceful for him to be reminiscing about them like they were good memories now. And he shouldn’t have been talking about her like that right in front of her!

“I was already twelve then. I’d been in this world for two years at that point,” she clarified, wanting to imply the possibility that she’d been a dainty girl

herself when she'd first come here. The reality, of course, is that she was just an energetic kid like anyone else.

"And you lived on the Dark Mountain for those two years, right? Even though *she's* here being treasured in a noble's mansion." Sara suspected that Noel spoke like this because he cared about her, but his feelings were no different than the ones that had caused Liam to try to take her back with him to the capital.

"No matter where and how someone lives, if she's okay with it, then it's fine. It was hard living on the Dark Mountain, but I'm really glad Nelly was the first person I met." Would they understand what she meant?

"That's just the kind of person you are, isn't it, Sara?" Noel said. "Now, since we've been removed from Sara's list of potential suitors, I suppose we should at least introduce ourselves to this new Invited."

"I think I'll remain clinging regretfully to Sara. I'm definitely too old for that girl. House Hills will be satisfied as long as you introduce yourself to her properly, Noel. She may not remember much from earlier today, after all."

Sara was a little annoyed at his wording, but she didn't sense any actual attachment to her in his tone, so she let it slide.

Before she'd had time to have a proper conversation with Allen and Kuntz, Ri was walking over to them with a frown on his face. It looked like there was a problem.

"Is something wrong?"

"Ah, Sara... It seems word got out that there's another Invited in attendance tonight. There are some people who'd like to meet you." Ri grimaced. "I did imply that we weren't looking for a fiancé for you, but they're still rather insistent on meeting you. Also..." Ri indicated Nelly. "There's someone I'd like to introduce you to. Maybe you've heard about him from Chris? He's the guildmaster of Gardenia's Apothecary's Guild."

"Umm, Mr...Keiligh?"

"That's right. Keiligh Hanes. Do you mind?"



“Hmm...” Sara didn’t want to do anything annoying. There was Liam and Noel to consider, and she didn’t like people going on about marriage with her, but she was already sixteen in this world. She couldn’t keep hiding behind Ri forever, and she *should* probably meet Chris’s mentor. “Okay. I’m coming.”

All she had to do was meet some people and say no if they brought up getting engaged. Sara told Allen and Kuntz she would be going and headed off with Ri.

“Is Ann doing okay?” she asked Ri.

“For now. Noel seemed to think she looked all right when he greeted her a moment ago, so I think she’s fine.”

They arrived at a crowd that must have been gathered around Ann and the people gradually parted as they noticed Ri. They quickly made their way to the other Invited, who had Latifah standing behind her protectively with a smile.

Ann was doing her best to greet everyone she was being introduced to. She was quiet, but not out of shyness, and Sara smiled, thinking that she seemed rather responsible.

“Lati, Ann, I brought Sara.”

“Ah, welcome!”

“Thank you for the invitation,” Sara said politely, holding out her hand to Ann, who looked up at her a little nervously. The younger girl took her hand and smiled with relief, and the boys around them all started muttering to one another.

“Wow, they’re almost identical.”

“Huh?” Sara and Ann both said together. Neither of them had thought they looked particularly alike, but they did both have black hair and brown eyes.

They exchanged a glance and both giggled, finding the comment funny.

“You look like a pair of sisters.”

They must have, smiling and holding hands like they were.

There were a couple of boys around Ann’s age, but some were Sara’s age as well, and they were able to have more fun than Sara was expecting chatting

about the capital and Gardenia.

Even after Sara introduced herself, no one breathed a word about marriage to her. Instead, they merely suggested she come visit their houses the next time she was in the capital.

When introductions were complete and the boys had left, Sara said, “I see. The Hills brothers are rather pushy, aren’t they?”

“That’s just my brother. I’ve always been courteous, haven’t I?” Noel pursed his lips. At fourteen, he was now considerably taller than Sara and handsome just like his brother. His personality wasn’t bad either.

“So we don’t need to be engaged just because we’re invited?” Ann asked, looking up at Sara.

“Yeah. You can if you want to, of course.”

“Thank goodness.”

Latifah’s expression said she thought things would be easier with an engagement than without one, but Sara decided to pretend she hadn’t noticed that. She remembered how annoying it had been to think about it before she’d decided she wanted to be independent as an apothecary.

“I learned magic and physical strengthening because I didn’t really have a choice not to, living where there were a lot of monsters and wanting to be independent. But you shouldn’t have to do that living in Gardenia. Is there something you want to do, Ann?”

“Magic? Physical strengthening?” Ann’s eyes were wide with surprise.

Sara gestured toward Allen and the Hunters. “The guys over there hunt monsters. Some of them fight with magic, and some use physical strengthening. Those are knights over there.” Liam was with the Hunters, but the other knights were elsewhere, participating in the party. “They use swords, and they also use magic to strengthen themselves. There are more of them around than you might— Oh, right. Gardenia doesn’t have any monsters, so there *aren’t* any around, are there?”

There weren’t any knights or Hunters in Gardenia. She couldn’t help

forgetting that there actually were people in this world who didn't have to deal with monsters. Even the people in Rosa who weren't Hunters didn't have to. Sara was the one in a special position.

"By the way, have you eaten?" Noel asked Ann. "You might feel better with something in your stomach."

"No, I haven't..."

"Let me bring you something, then."

Noel told Ann to sit in a nearby chair and quickly returned with a plate that had a little bit of everything on it.

"If you can eat some of this, then you can do as you like for the rest of the night."

*Now that's what a considerate noble should be like*, Sara thought, satisfied. She was done chatting with the people who wanted to meet her, so she finally had time to look around for Nelly. She spotted her red hair among the largest crowd of people, just as she expected.

"I'm gonna go see Nelly, okay?" Sara told Ann before making her way over to Nelly.

Nelly's face was rather tense. She was getting to the limits of her social capabilities as far as Sara could tell. In a rare occurrence, Chris was standing a bit away from Nelly, similarly surrounded by women. Sara figured he was probably still keeping an eye on her, but it wasn't like him to do so from a distance, so Sara found the sight a bit strange. She assumed if Nelly was this fatigued, then Chris would bring her somewhere else or do *something* to alleviate her exhaustion.

"Nelly," Sara said, giving her a hug at the same time.

"What's wrong, Sara? Are you tired?"

"No. I just missed you."

"You did?"

Hearing Nelly's satisfied voice above her head, Sara finally realized that there was someone else in the spot next to Nelly where Chris usually was.

It was a man who looked to be somewhere between Chris's and Ri's ages. His silver hair was tied behind his head and he had blue eyes. He kind of resembled Chris. Sara looked down from his face; he wasn't wearing an apothecary's robe, but he did have a brooch on his lapel that indicated him as one.

"Umm, Nelly?"

"Yeah, let me introduce you." Nelly turned a bit to the side. "This is Keiligh Hanes. He's the guildmaster of the Apothecary's Guild in Gardenia and Chris's mentor. And this is Ichinok Rasarasa, an Invited and my family."

Sara was happy to be introduced as Nelly's family.

"So you're the Invited apothecary. I've heard the rumors. I want to thank you for choosing to be an apothecary," the man said with a deep, gentle voice that was easy on the ears.

"Nice to meet you. Please call me Sara. I heard Chris learned a lot from you, so I was looking forward to meeting you."

"Oh? Chris said that, did he? I didn't know he thought of me that way." His tone was joking, but he looked a little sincerely surprised as well. Sara looked for Chris, wanting him to join in on their conversation, but all she saw was unfamiliar people. It seemed a crowd had gathered around her and Nelly before she realized.

"Whoa, it's all silver foxes."

Only pleasant young men and boys had been around Ann earlier, but around Nelly were adult men ranging from their twenties to their fifties. She hoped the meaning of her outburst had been lost on the Trilgaiaans around her, but it must have gotten across that she was surprised by the number of them at least.

Keiligh smiled and explained, "It's only natural with Nefertari's charms. I've known you for a long time, but I couldn't hide my surprise at how much you've grown since your days as a knight."

"The Apothecary's Guild was a big help to me back then since I was always getting injured."

"No need to thank *me*. It was all Chris."

Sara got excited when the topic of Chris and Nelly's past came up again, but there was no time to ask about it since now she was having to be introduced to people as Nelly's family, and when the people around them realized she was an invited guest, they began to tell her that she should meet their little brothers and sons and relatives and so forth, and it all became rather annoying.

Still, Sara had decided at this point that she would go out with the Hunters tomorrow. Since Ann simply lacked exercise, she didn't see a reason why she would need to stay at the mansion. So she decided to put a vague smile on her face and just get through the night, but all the socializing *was* starting to get to her. And Nelly had looked tired before she even came over.

This was precisely the sort of time when Chris should be making an appearance, but he just wasn't showing up. Having no other choice, Sara decided to raise her voice a little.

"Chris!"

"What, Sara?"

Just when she thought he was taking his time appearing, he was right by her side. Behind him, the women who had been crowding around him were staring dumbfounded at his back.

"What do you mean, 'what'? It's not me you should be concerning yourself with anyway."

Sara grabbed Nelly's hand and pulled the two of them closer. Chris hesitantly offered her his arm and Nelly placed her hand on it. Actually, she seemed to be gripping his sleeve hard enough to crease it.

"Ugh... Are you finished, Nef?"

"Am I finished? Where have you been?"

Nelly's voice was quiet but obviously irritated and Sara hoped that she was the only one who'd overheard it. To her, seeing Nelly only able to be selfish with Chris was nothing but cute, but she realized Nelly probably came off as too blunt to other people.

"I'm thirsty. And hungry. I don't want to talk anymore."

A few gentlemen made expressions as if to say they hoped they'd misheard that, so it seemed Sara's wish had not come to pass. Oh well. It was impressive that she'd endured so much when she disliked being social, in Sara's opinion. She must have wanted to let her sister save face.

"This way, then."

"Yeah, yeah. Hurry up."

The two of them headed for the food and drinks.

"Good grief," Keiligh said with a smile.

Sara nodded. "I'm sorry. We just arrived in Gardenia today. I think she's a little tired."

Sara was the one who had called Chris over to them so that Nelly could escape, but she played dumb. She also didn't mention that Nelly was probably the one in their party who was the *least* tired. She hadn't said *she* was tired, but the gentlemen around them all took the hint and casually departed.

"Here, Sara."

"Allen. Thanks."

Sara had thought Allen was still with the Hunters, but he'd brought her a drink.

"Don't push yourself," he told her.

"I know."

He went back to the Hunter table just like that. She watched his back as he retreated. He was slender still, but he otherwise didn't look much different than an adult at this point.

"That's the only Hunter who was able to wound the continental tortoise with a sword, hmm?"

"Yes. Are people talking about that over here?"

"No. The little apothecary from House Hills came over to introduce himself. I just heard about it from him."

Noel should have only just arrived too, but he was already up to all sorts of

things. Sara was no match for him. It hadn't even occurred to her that she should greet Chris's mentor after arriving in Gardenia.

"He's talented in a different way than Chris is. I heard he became an apothecary faster than Chris did. He might reach guildmaster in the capital faster than Chris did as well."

"I wouldn't be surprised. I've worked with him myself, and he really is talented."

"I came to the east thinking it was pretty much retirement after raising some apothecaries of the next generation, but to think while I was relaxing over here the *next* generation's already coming into their own." Keiligh looked deeply touched by the idea. "That Hunter just now, the youngest Hills child, you... There's those Invited in Rosa as well. Seeing the shining stars of the new generation really makes me feel like my time has passed..."

"Shining stars" felt like a bit of an exaggeration to Sara.

"And unlike Chris's generation, these young people seem able to properly grasp the feelings of other people."

"Mmh..." Sara couldn't deny it, but she couldn't agree either, so all she could do was keep her lips zipped. Chris, Nelly, Zachary... There *did* seem to be a lot of people lacking in communication skills in their generation. There were plenty of people who weren't, however, like Rosa's guildmaster and vice guildmaster, which was why things had been able to function for her own generation, Sara supposed.

"Still..." Keiligh chuckled like he simply couldn't contain his mirth. "To think twenty-five years after they met, the object of his desire may finally return his feelings..." His eyes were on Chris and Nelly over at the food table. "But Chris himself hasn't even noticed! No, it wouldn't be Chris if he had."

So it wasn't just Sara who had noticed. Other people could see Nelly's changing feelings as well. She sighed. "What's the point if Chris doesn't notice?"

"Oh? Are you in favor? I think it would be rather troublesome to have Chris as family."

Sara decided to interpret Keiligh's teasing as affectionate.



“Chris is my mentor. I know he’s self-centered and stubborn, but I do really respect him as an apothecary. And you may not believe this, but he does think about me every once in a while.”

“Ha ha ha. That hardly sounds like a compliment. Maybe they need a little encouragement in order to cross the finish line...”

What exactly did he mean by that?

In any case, the two Invited had been successfully introduced and Sara planned to go see the green grass locusts’ habitat tomorrow with Chris and Nelly. She was relieved that the lavish world of this party was one she only had to live in for tonight.

It would take two days of travel by carriage to reach the green grass locusts’ habitat. That meant they could get there in half a day if they used physical strengthening, but since it wasn’t an emergency, there was no reason to tire themselves out doing that.

After a night of rest and some breakfast, Nelly set out in her usual traveling attire, but Latifah stopped her before she could board her carriage. This meant Sara, who was traveling with her, and all the Hunters and knights were stopped as well.

“You’ve only been here for a day, Neffie! We haven’t seen each other in so long! You can’t just go straight to work!”

True, before she’d accepted the request officially, she’d just been planning on coming along to visit her sister.

“I have a responsibility as Hydrangea’s vice guildmaster, sister. This is something the southern region Guild Director has asked me to do, so I can’t just slack off.”

“Oh, but Thed will understand, won’t he? Do you know how many people are here to see you?”

“Sister...” Nelly was weak to persuasion like this, since she tended to find it too much trouble to assert her own will when people were being persistent with her. “Once the job is finished, I’ll stay around for a little longer before we go.”

“But the people who are here to see you will leave!”

Nelly went silent. This was where she would usually just ignore the other person and go, but she couldn't very well do that now.

Sara watched nervously until Ri sighed and stepped forward. “Neffie, why don't you let Lati have this one? I'll go in your place. I *am* Hydrangea's representative, after all. If I go, someone from House Wolverié will still be along to supervise things, so Thed won't be able to complain.”

“But...” When Nelly continued to protest, someone suddenly approached her.

“Nefertari.” It was Chris's mentor Keiligh, whom Sara had spoken with the night before. Today, he had his apothecary's robes on.

Keiligh walked over to Nelly and put his arm around her waist, pulling her to him. He'd done it so naturally that Nelly hadn't even been able to react. The two were so close to each other that they looked like lovers.

“It's just for a few days. Besides, I've been wanting a chance to deepen my relationship with you.”

“H-Huh? Keiligh, what are you...?”

Even Nelly couldn't jab an elbow or a fist into Chris's mentor, so she just stood there with her hands moving restlessly in the air.

Chris, meanwhile, wore a look of surprise seldom seen on his face, one arm reached out halfway toward Nelly as he stood frozen in place.

“Chris,” Keiligh said quietly.

“Y-Yes?”

“I'll look after Nefertari. Don't worry about her. Go ahead and go with them.”



Chris looked between Nelly and Keiligh hesitantly until he clenched his outstretched hand into a fist and looked down. He had no choice but to comply.

Sara stepped forward, unable to accept this. “Wait a second!” Someone had to point out how strange this was. “Let me speak on their behalf.” She raised her pointer finger. “Nelly took a request from the southern region’s Guild Director. Chris, on the other hand, is only here to accompany Nelly. He would only be going with the Hunters to observe, so there’s no reason for him to go with them if Nelly’s staying behind at the mansion.”

Normally, Chris would have been coolheaded enough to point that out himself. It was strange that he hadn’t. If he felt like he had to listen to Nelly’s family and his mentor, then Sara would just have to speak up for him.

“Chris. I’ll go with them and keep an eye on things. It doesn’t make any sense for you to go if you’re only here to be with Nelly.”

This might have been the first time she’d ever seen Chris look so obviously relieved.

“Excuse me.” Latifah was the next to cut in. The Hunters and knights had all been annoyed by the interruption at first, but they were gradually starting to enjoy the spectacle more and more, to Sara’s chagrin.

“You’re staying too, Sara. You have to look after Ann.”

“Huh?”

As for Ann herself, she hadn’t come out to see off the Hunters, maybe because it was so early in the morning. It was the same for the other guests staying in the mansion.

“I believe I explained yesterday that she’ll be perfectly healthy as long as she gets some exercise every day. Making sure that happens should be the job of her guardian, shouldn’t it?”

“That’s so cold... Since you’re in the same position, I believe it would please Ann greatly if you served as a companion to her for even a short while.”

She was about to point out that *they* were the ones who had called for Hunters to come all the way from Hydrangea to deal with their locust issue

when Nelly sighed heavily.

“I’m sorry. I’m supposed to be in charge of this expedition, but my irresolute attitude has caused our departure to be delayed.” She raised her head and faced the Hunters and knights. “I’ll be a few days behind you for personal reasons. Please consider Ri my stand-in. Chris?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be fine. You should go with them.”

“Right. I’ll go. You can stay, Sara. Please.”

Even if it wasn’t his job, there was the possibility that something might go wrong, so he had decided to go with them. It was his mission as an apothecary. If he was determined enough to do so and he wanted Sara to stay, then she would be happy to do as he asked.

“Okay.” And she wouldn’t feel bad about it either.

“We’ll be waiting!” Allen and Kuntz waved their hands cheerfully. Sara and Nelly had made the situation out to be rather dramatic, but they had people around them to let them know that it wasn’t so serious.

And so, after a bit of hubbub, the green grass locust hunting party finally managed to set off.

“It’s not that I don’t *want* to hang out with her. I guess it just feels like it shouldn’t be such a big deal.”

Sara was killing time enjoying some tea in a spacious parlor until Ann was ready for the day. Next to her, Nelly sat staring irritatedly out the window after declining to change into a dress. Keiligh watched her with amusement. Sara found it a bit frustrating not to know what he was up to.

Even good friends were fully satisfied just by talking for a few hours together on their days off, weren’t they? Just what was Sara supposed to do with Ann for multiple days in a row? She wracked her brains over the subject for some time, though ultimately it was something she didn’t need to worry so hard about.

“Good morning.” Wearing an adorable dress as always, Ann appeared with a

steadiness that made her seem like an entirely different person than she'd been the day before.

"I heard that you stayed behind for my sake. Thank you." Ann bowed her head to Sara, then turned to the beaming Lati next to her. "I'd like to speak with Sara one-on-one for a bit. Can we go for a walk outside?"

"My..." Lati looked a bit sad. Sara interpreted the expression to mean that she simply wanted to be with Ann, and maybe that she felt she might have to protect Ann from anything harsh Sara might say to her.

"This is perfect, sister. Why don't we go for a walk and do a little reminiscing? You come too, Keiligh. You can stay here, Sara."

A rather sour-faced Nelly took Lati away with her, so whether she liked it or not, Sara ended up alone with Ann.

"Lati really *is* a nice person," Ann said apologetically. That she was a bit annoying as well was left implied.

"I'm six years older than you for now, but you don't need to worry about being polite or anything," Sara told her breezily.

"For now? Won't you always be six years older than me?" She laughed impishly.

"Wow, you look like you're doing a lot better than yesterday. You've got plenty of energy today, don't you?"

"Yeah. After hearing all that stuff you said yesterday, I figured I need to start using my head a little."

It was nice to be able to chat like friends. Sara felt the same way when she was talking to Mona and Heather.

"The first thing I realized was that I need to face my body properly. I guess I didn't really believe that I'd actually been given a normal body. I gave up before I even tried, thinking I was probably just as weak here."

It had taken Sara a while to get used to suddenly having a ten-year-old body as well.

"After I took a nap, I tried breathing deeply and lifting my knees high and

jumping. Then I stretched and I realized that I really could move like normal. I mean, I ran out of breath jumping around a bunch, but that's not because I'm weak. It's just because I need to get more exercise, right?"

"I think so."

Even if Sara had given her a push in the right direction, she was impressed that Ann had come to the same conclusion on her own as well.

"I did sports once, so I know how to get in shape. I can figure out how to train myself up on my own, but..." Ann took a notepad out of her pocket and opened it up on the table in front of them. "All this time, I've just been focusing on my health and I really haven't done anything else. I figured things here were more or less the same as they were in Japan even if I was reincarnated, but they're not, are they?"

Sara shook her head, thinking back to the huge dragonfly she'd seen a few days ago and the terrifying sound of its wings. "They're pretty different."

But what would Sara think if she lived *here*? In the garden she could see from the window, there were plants that looked no different than the ones back in Japan, and the food here wasn't that different. The ingredients were different, but they ended up in pretty similar dishes when prepared. For instance, when it was in a stew, you couldn't tell that the meat in this world came from monsters.

In other words, it was clearly different from modern Japan here, but if she'd been told she'd reincarnated into Europe one or two centuries earlier, she probably wouldn't have questioned it. And if she were told that the Invited were like nobles and all she had to do was stay healthy and find happiness in marriage at some point, she wouldn't have given it any more thought.

Thinking that far, Sara shook her head again. "No. It's different. Didn't the goddess tell you it was a world of swords and sorcery or something like that?"

"I think so... But no one carries a sword around here, and I didn't even know Hunters existed until yesterday."

"Have you seen really big bugs or monsters?"

"I know there are bunnies with horns from a picture book, but what was that about bugs?"

Sara pointed at the window. "They don't fly by around here?"

"No."

"Are there at least slimes around here?"

"Slimes?"

Sara made the round shape of a slime with her hands.

"I've never seen one..."

"Wow... If you want to, you really *can* live just like in Japan here in Trilgaia. *That's* surprising to me." Sara sank down into the couch.

"You've mentioned magic, but I've never seen anyone use it before."

"That can't be...can it...? What about magic stones? You know, like in the appliances. They're like batteries."

"Magic stones? I haven't seen one."

"Right, I guess it wouldn't be a kid's job to change them..."

She had no idea where to even start.

"Just from what you've told me so far, I'm really glad you came, Sara." Ann wrote down "big bugs," "slimes," and "magic stones" in the corner of her notepad. "So first of all, I need to figure out the differences between this place and Japan. I need to see them with my own eyes and become able to do what the people here can do."

Ann slapped the notepad down on the table with a smacking sound, her eyes shimmering. "I was watching you during the party last night, Sara. You went over to all sorts of people and spoke with all of them on even footing. Even though you're only six years older than me."

"You know, I didn't really think about it, but I guess I'm not all that timid anymore."

"I was just handed a drink and a plate of food and asked how I was doing. But that's not what I'm really like at all." The way she shook her head was just as cute as it should have been for a girl her age, but as Sara looked up at her, she saw a calm in her eyes that made her seem like they were actually around the



same age.

“Lati said that you came here for my sake, but that’s not actually true, is it?”

“It’s not like it’s *not* true, but I guess there is something else I was a bit more concerned about.” She didn’t think she’d be able to say this to the Ann of yesterday, who had looked like she might collapse at any moment, but now that there was a steadiness in her expression, she figured the other girl would be okay. “The Hunters and knights from yesterday are all here to take care of the green grass locust infestation in this area. Nelly came for that too, and Chris and I came because we thought we might be able to help.”

“Locust infestation... Like a plague? Isn’t that like a disaster where they eat all the crops and people starve because of it?”

“Yeah. It’s not that serious yet. I think we’re basically here to cull their numbers so that that *doesn’t* happen.”

Ann really was a good girl when Sara sat down to talk to her.

“I bet you really wish you were with them, then. I’ll have to work hard to be like you six years from now, Sara.” It was so cute how she balled both hands into fists as she said that. “But it’s not up to me when you leave...” She hung her head for a moment, but quickly looked back up. “So I’d like to ask as many things as I can while you’re here. Is that okay?”

“Of course.”

“Well, the first thing I want to know about is magic!”

“I thought it might be!”

If Sara was going to talk about magic, then she had to get out her treasured magic textbook from her storage pouch.

“No way! A magic bag! I haven’t seen one of those before!”

“That’s where we’re starting? I guess that makes sense, actually...” Sara was surprised too, but since she was the one who’d come from a place where hunting monsters was an everyday thing, *she* was the one who had unique circumstances here.

“Let’s start with this book about magic and this one about medicinal plants.”

“Okay!”

Sara and Ann spent a very fun morning sitting next to each other with a book spread open between them.

They had lunch and when Ann was sleepy but didn't want to sleep, she said, “I'm just gonna lie down. I heard it's good to rest even if you don't sleep,” and headed back to her room.

Sara returned to the parlor, where Lati took her hands joyfully. “I've never seen Ann eat so much! And she was talking so much too.”

Sara hadn't gotten the best first impression of her, so she wanted to pull her hands away a bit, but she was relieved to see Lati was happy with her and not angry.

“She said she was in a sports club before. That means she likes sports enough to spend a lot of her free time on them. I think Ann was originally a lot more active.”

“I've always heard that when the Invited come in the form of young girls, they're often quiet and reserved, but I guess they're not all like that. I mean, you were as bold as a grown man at the party last night. I can definitely believe that Neffie was the one who took you in. Oh, and I don't mean that in a bad way, of course.”

Sara smiled a bit awkwardly. She really didn't like to stand out like this... She'd been careful in Rosa as a child who didn't have a home to live in, but as she'd gotten drawn into more and more trouble that her abilities as an Invited had been helpful in fixing, she'd figured out that staying quiet didn't tend to solve anything.

“She always does what she can when she comes up against some sort of trouble. She's quiet, but when there's something she needs to say, she won't hesitate to say it even in front of His Majesty. My Sara seemed so fragile she might disappear at any moment just like Ann, but she's grown so much in the last six years.”

“Nelly...”

She really *had* looked that fragile to Nelly, hadn't she?

“The Dark Mountain, where we lived, really was an unforgiving place. Sara couldn’t even take a single step outside the cottage at first. It took her two years to be able to travel to Rosa, and she really worked her way there one step at a time.”

“Goodness. So she wasn’t this tough to start with, then.”

Sara figured it was more accurate to say that she’d started out tough but had gotten a lot tougher in those two years. By the time she’d made it to Rosa at twelve, she no longer fit into the category of “fragile little girl.”

“But you know, I haven’t changed my mind about marriage being a woman’s happiness,” Lati said. Sara was relieved that she’d let her hands go. “People often think I’m weak because of how I look as well, but being the wife of a lord is a lot harder than you might think. But being married affords me a certain protection in society, and I think that’s very important.”

“I know, sister. It must be difficult to keep a big mansion like this functioning, and it takes talent to entertain all the guests who visit you.” Nelly looked at Lati kindly. She understood that what Lati was saying wasn’t wrong. “But I’ve achieved enough success as a Hunter that no one can dispute my position as one. The same goes for Sara.”

“Oh, but...”

“Sister.” Nelly’s voice was quiet, but firm enough to prevent Lati from saying any more. “I came to see you to show you that I’ve grown and that you don’t need to take care of me anymore. And I came to tell you that you don’t need to find me someone to marry.”

Lati didn’t seem to know how to respond to such a firm rejection.

Nelly stood and spread her arms. “I’m not lonely anymore, sister. I have Sara and Chris, who are practically family, father and brother, and some adorable students I’m mentoring. I’m happy. Come here...”

Lati rose and embraced Nelly, who held her tight in her arms.

“You’ve grown so much...”

“You just never realized, sister. You don’t need to worry about me anymore.”

Sara watched them, eyes misty. When Lati got married, she must have been so worried about the little sister she was leaving behind, who was still young at the time. That worry had only festered in the long time they'd spent apart, so Sara was thrilled to see it relieved now. The next words out of Lati's mouth, however, dried the tears in Sara's eyes.

"By the way, what's going on with Chris?"

It took Nelly's sister to bring up the topic no one in Hydrangea had ever broached.

Nelly just raised an eyebrow. "Nothing's going on with him. He's the same as always."

"He looked a little different, though... From how he was acting yesterday, I was thinking I'd be hearing some good news soon without even having to get involved myself."

"Good news?"

As always, Nelly was somewhat slow on the uptake, and for some reason, Edmond and Keiligh were just sitting there with bemused looks on their faces.

*"Ahem.* You know. Marriage."

They'd been talking about it the whole time, so why was she being so coy about it now?

"Marriage. With Chris?" Nelly looked like the thought had never occurred to her before. "He's never brought it up."

Silence fell over the room.

"You can't be serious."

"I knew it."

"What in the world is he doing?"

To the commentary of the crowd, Sara could only add in a whisper, "I guess it's a good thing you went ahead without her, Chris."

## Chapter 2: Green Grass Locusts

Lati might have been convinced, but the people who had gathered in the hopes of discussing marriage couldn't very well be told, "It's not happening," and shooed away. Especially after so many of them had been charmed by Nelly's beauty at the party.

"It seems I'll have to spend the next few days letting all the people here know that I'm not interested in marriage. I'd rather head straight to the site, of course..."

"I'll serve as a temporary partner for you. If I'm always by your side, anyone who lives in Gardenia will likely assume we're involved and give up."

"Keiligh... I thought you were married," Nelly said, and Keiligh smiled a bit sadly in response.

"She passed away shortly after moving here. There are some sicknesses even an apothecary can't cure."

"I'm sorry to hear that..."

There wasn't much illness in this world, but that didn't mean everyone lived long lives. Some people were naturally frail like Nelly's mother and some were killed by monsters like Allen's uncle.

"But Keiligh, I may respect you as Chris's mentor, but I don't intend to enter into a relationship with you, even temporarily."

"Of course, I don't mean for real. I just mean to say you can use me as a shield."

His sincerity eventually won Nelly over, if reluctantly, and from that point on they were always together for meals and other events. Nelly's potential suitors caught on and began to leave one by one.

"What's different from Chris always being around her?" Sara wondered.

"Umm, I only saw them together for one day, so I don't know if I've got the

right idea or not..." Ann said in response to her question. "But if you compared them to dogs..."

"Dogs, eh?" Sara said with a laugh. She couldn't help picturing Chris with little dog ears.

She'd gotten a lot closer to Ann in the last few days, mostly through magic training. She was still a bit concerned about the green grass locusts, but she was having more fun here than she'd expected to.

"Chris is like a really friendly dog. Like a retriever," Ann said, creating a small flame atop the palm of her hand. Her magic training was proceeding at a frightening pace.

"Hmm, hmm." Sara considered it.

"But Keiligh's like a guard dog. Like a German shepherd." She created another flame atop her other hand. Sara had never even thought of practicing by making two flames at once, so Ann's progress truly surprised her.

"I see..." Sara thought those were both cute, cool dogs, so she didn't really understand the difference.

"I think the difference is how well they get across that they don't want anyone else getting close to Nelly."

"That's it!"

Since Ann had grown up healthy until her first year of high school, she might have had more experience with romance than Sara had.

"'Mana will empower you in whatever way you imagine. Keep your mana level in mind and don't push yourself as you picture the magic you want to cast...' Flame, become a dog!" The fire in Ann's hand took on the vague shape of a dog. "Okay!" She extinguished the flame above her hand.

"Wow, you're way better than me with fire magic."

"I've got a long way to go. I can't make it turn like you can, and I can't figure out how to make a barrier no matter what I do."

"Honestly, my barrier is pretty difficult..."

Sara thought it was more impressive to be able to do as much as Ann could after only three days of practice. Sara had only figured out magic herself because she'd lived on a mountain with monsters and it had been a necessary skill for her to have.

"I figured it out because I needed to protect myself. I think you'll be able to do it eventually. There's no need to rush."

"Right."

"Man, Keiligh's really a mature guy, isn't he?"

He was sticking close to Nelly and serving as her escort casually, without causing Nelly any undue stress.

"You think so? Ed's like that too. It's just normal, isn't it?"

"Your normal is completely different from mine..."

As they chatted together and practiced magic, the boys who had stayed the longest as Ann's potential marriage partners came by to say their farewells. Of course, though she thought of them as only boys, most of them were around Sara's age.

"Ann, and Sara."

Sara had just been planning to watch, so she was surprised when her own name was called after Ann's.

"I was attracted to your gentleness at first, but after seeing the two of you with one another, I've decided that the Invited are just as charming when they're full of energy. I've met Haruto before too. I really respect him." The boy was a count's son who had come from the capital. "Ann, Sara, I hope you'll visit me if you're ever in the capital. I have an older brother as well, and lots of cousins you could meet."

"Sure...?"

Apparently, they'd earned some points for liveliness. Ann was just smiling in response to the boy, so Sara took it upon herself to respond, and the last of the younger suitors finally departed.

After seeing the boy from the capital off to the gate, Sara stretched and

looked off in the same direction. “I guess everyone’s probably started the locust hunt by now.”

“You wanted to go with them, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. I just wanted to see how it went, though. I didn’t want to participate. I bet Nelly’s really itching to go. She’s a Hunter through and through, and she has a strong sense of responsibility too. I doubt those locusts would be enough of a challenge for her, though.”

While they chatted, Sara thought she caught sight of a figure on the road in the distance. It was smaller than a carriage, but it seemed to be getting bigger as she watched it.

“Is someone coming this way?”

“That’s unusual. I’ve never seen someone using physical strengthening to get to the lord’s mansion so fast,” the old man at the gate remarked with amusement.

Sara suddenly realized she recognized the way the figure was moving. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen him do it that I forgot he could move like that! It’s Chris!”

Since Sara was sixteen, that meant that Nelly and Chris were forty-three this year. They’d all run from Hydrangea to Rosa last year, so she knew he had the stamina for it, but she had to question if someone who had served as the guildmaster of the Apothecary’s Guild in the capital could really be sent off as a messenger so easily.

“Chris!”

“Sara!” Chris turned his head to respond to her, but kept going and ran past her into the mansion.

“That...looked like a person, but did I just imagine it?” Ann said, and Sara realized that if you weren’t used to seeing people move with physical strengthening, it was hard for your eyes to follow it.

“Ha ha ha. That’s physical strengthening. If you master it, you can run faster than an Olympic athlete, I think.”



“Hwaaaah?”

“Wait, this is no time for explanations. Something must have happened if he was in such a hurry. Let’s go!” Sara ran back into the mansion with Ann.

“I’ve never even come out to the gate before, so I really must be making progress if I can get back without collapsing. It’s only been four days...”

It was cute how Ann ran behind her, out of breath but still managing, but Sara was looking for Chris. And if she wanted to find Chris, then she should find Nelly. She hurried to the parlor, where Nelly was usually reluctantly attending a tea party at this time.

There, she found Nelly, who had stood from her chair, and Chris, who was breathing hard, his hands on his knees.

“What happened, Chris?!”

“Hahh, hahh...” Even using physical strengthening, you’d run out of breath if you pushed yourself too hard. What was the reason he’d pushed himself so hard to get here so quickly?

“Chris, catch your breath and have some tea,” Keiligh said calmly.

Chris took a cup of tea that had gone cold and gulped it down. He had probably run straight here without even stopping to rest.

“I know you’re a traveling apothecary now, but someone who’s served as guildmaster shouldn’t be letting people see himself like this.”

“I’m sorry.” Chris apologized after Keiligh scolded him. “I just wanted to see Nef as soon as I could.”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to tell you to be careful about.”

Sara had been worried something had happened, but her shoulders slumped when she realized that it was just Chris being Chris. Keiligh really must have been his mentor to understand that.

Now composed, Chris elegantly sat down in a chair. “Sorry, but could I have another cup of tea? Hot this time.”

“I gave you a cooled one on purpose, you know. I can’t believe you.”

They were conversing casually, but Chris seemed concerned about why Keiligh was hovering next to Nelly like it was only natural for him to be there.

“Keiligh. Don’t you think you’re a little too close to Nef?”

“I’m perfectly comfortable at this distance,” Keiligh said, and Nelly interrupted them, evidently irritated by the exchange.

“Will you hurry up and tell us what you came for, Chris? What happened?”

“Right. The green grass locust situation is a bit more pressing than we expected. I volunteered to come back because we didn’t want to spare a single capable fighter.”

“What do you mean by ‘pressing’?”

“According to a local Hunter, there are more of them than we were expecting. It seems a second generation has already hatched from their eggs.”

Chris sensed someone at the door as he spoke. He turned to face that way and stood, bowing his head. “I was just about to have someone go fetch you. Edmond, the green grass locusts have reached a dangerous level. I want you to gather as many people who can hunt them as you can, to be sent to the front lines and prepare for the possibility that those lines are broken through.”

“Oh no...”

At the front lines, they’d met a Hunter who observed the state of the green grass locusts each year and was tasked with contacting the capital for assistance if he deemed it necessary. The capital would further contact Rosa if they thought they needed to. A request had been sent to Hydrangea as well this year due to the connections of the lord’s wife, but the Hunter who had sent the initial request had been pale as a sheet when his assistance had arrived.

“The locusts have already changed to their aggressive, black forms, and they’ve grown wings for traveling to new feeding grounds. The Hunters and knights are working as hard as they can to reduce their numbers, but it might not be enough.”

Chris said he’d been chosen as messenger because he couldn’t hunt and he wanted to see Nelly, but that wasn’t strictly true. He was strong enough to

travel to the depths of dungeons, after all. As a person with a certain amount of authority, he'd been chosen to convince the lord of the gravity of the situation, and had run back so quickly that he'd arrived out of breath.

"Understood. Thank you for returning so quickly. I'll make the arrangements immediately."

As Edmond swiftly moved to carry out Chris's instructions, Nelly stood as well.

"I'll head there myself right now."

If she was going, then Sara would have to go too.

"I'll go with you."

Sara and Nelly immediately began preparing to depart before Keiligh stopped them.

"Calm down. You can leave tomorrow morning."

"Why? We'll be able to make it there by tonight if we leave now. Then we can start helping out tomorrow morning."

"Take a look at Chris."

He must have been planning to turn back around and return with Nelly. He'd already stood, but his features were heavy with exhaustion.

"I'm fine."

"You'll be the primary apothecary on-site. You won't be able to do your job if you're that exhausted. You should spend the rest of the day resting and head out at first light."

Chris hesitated for a moment, but he eventually sank back down into the chair with a thud. He must have really been exhausted.

"I'd only slow Nef and Sara down if I went now. I'll leave first thing in the morning, like Keiligh suggested."

Keiligh nodded approvingly and stood in Chris's place. "I assume you don't have enough paralytics. I'll arrange for some."

Keiligh was guildmaster of Gardenia's Apothecary's Guild. He had a fire in his eyes that seemed to say if Gardenia was in trouble, then the people of Gardenia

would have to do something about it.

“Chris, rest in your room. I’ll wait until tomorrow to leave as well. We’ll go together. Okay?” Nelly took Chris’s hand and pulled him up from the chair, turning to a maid waiting in the doorway and telling her, “Bring him some food and water. A lot of it.” She dragged Chris off to his room.

“Well, I guess I’m leaving tomorrow morning too, then,” Sara murmured, left behind in the parlor.

“I want to go too,” came a small voice from beside her. It seemed at least one person had heard what she’d said.

“We can get there in half a day with physical strengthening, but they said it takes two days to get there by carriage,” Sara told Ann. “And they’re not as comfortable to travel in as cars, so I don’t think you’ll be able to do it with your current stamina.”

She explained things to Ann seriously, since she didn’t think Ann was treating it as a simple vacation.

“Right... Plus I wouldn’t be any help... I’d just get in the way.”

“Well, if you could use a barrier, you might be fine. No, wait, you might be fine if you just use some protection cases.”

“Protection cases?”

Protection cases could defend someone against monsters. She hardly ever used them these days, but they had certainly come in handy back on the Dark Mountain. But Sara shook her head to dismiss the thought. She couldn’t give Ann false hope.

“No, I don’t think it’ll work out. But I’m gonna go back to my room and get ready, so do you want to see how protection cases work? I can show you some other stuff in my storage pouch too.”

“Okay!”

This was around when she usually took a nap, but she didn’t seem sleepy today, so she must have been building up some stamina slowly but surely.

“I feel stronger now, ever since I started using magic.”

“I wonder if mana circulation makes you healthier. That’d be nice. We can use as much of it as we want, after all.”

They headed to Sara’s room, chatting as they went. Nelly didn’t seem to be back yet.

“One wyvern fits in this storage pouch.”

“I have no idea how much that is.”

“Right...”

It was fun talking with Ann. She felt like she was redoing this world from the perspective of a newcomer.

“So, I’ve got a table, and some chairs.”

“You’ve got all that in there?”

“Yep. Sometimes we make potions while we’re out and about. These are lunch boxes you can get at the Guild.” Sara set some lunch boxes on the table she’d taken out.

“Oh, they’re so cute! They look good!”

“These ones are cockatrice.”

“No idea what that is.”

“Their tails are snakes... Oh.” Sara’s hand touched the most recent thing she’d put into her pouch. “This is...”

“Gyaaaaa!”

“Whoa!”

Ann screamed, so Sara jolted in surprise and dropped the flame bat she was holding.

“Gyaaa! It moved!”

“It didn’t move! It just fell!”

The door flew open.

“What’s going on?!” Nelly looked around cautiously and Sara pointed down at the flame bat nervously.

“I just took this out of my bag on accident.”

“What, just a flame bat?”

Ann had leaped up onto the bed at some point and was holding her hands over her mouth like she might scream again at any moment.

Nelly gave her a sympathetic look and smiled to try to reassure her. “It’s okay, Ann. It’s already dead.”

“Noooooooo!”

In the end, the commotion even reached the lord and his wife, who already had enough to worry about with the green grass locusts, and Sara deeply regretted her mistake.



“I’m sorry, Ann.”

“No, I’m sorry... It was black, so I ended up thinking of one of *those*. Now that I think about it, it was the first monster I’ve ever seen, so I’m glad that you showed it to me. There weren’t bats that big back in Japan.”

Sara sighed. “I should have at least warned you first.”

She ended up apologizing again at the dinner table that night. Chris had retired to rest as if collapsing earlier in the day, but he’d gotten up in time for dinner and bathed, appearing for the meal looking refreshed. He wasn’t seated next to Nelly like he usually was, however. Instead, he sat next to Lati.

Keiligh had been the one beside Nelly for the last several days and he made no effort to give up his spot to Chris now. Chris looked like he had complaints about the matter, but he couldn’t be rude to the mentor he owed so much to, so he could do nothing but grudgingly accept the situation. Sara felt unbearably itchy watching the adults maneuver like this.

Nelly’s last marriage candidate also remained at the table.

“I would have liked for you to stay a little longer, but it seems it’s hardly the time.”

“Well, this is what I came to Gardenia for in the first place. I’ll just be going back to work tomorrow.” Nelly was able to respond without too much awkwardness, having gotten used to these conversations in the last few days.

“I thought I’d stick around as long as I might have a chance, but I can’t compare with Lord Keiligh, can I? I’ll return home as soon as this green grass locust business is taken care of.”

“No, no, I enjoyed our time together.”

Chris’s expression remained the same as he quietly moved his cutlery, but Sara could tell how he was feeling.

“He’s hanging on by a thread,” she muttered, leading to a quiet exchange with Ann, who heard her.

“Sara?”



“It’s nothing.”

The extremely awkward (for Sara) dinner ended and after a short discussion about tomorrow’s plans, they all returned to their rooms.

“Nefertari, I’ll walk you to your room.” Keiligh held out his hand to escort Nelly as he’d been doing for the last several days.

“Wait. I’ll do that.” Chris stood up with a clatter on the other side of the table.

Keiligh raised his eyebrow, hand still held out. “There’s no need. As her partner, I shall do it.”

*“I’m Nef’s partner!”*

Sara’s eyes went wide. She’d never seen Chris raise his voice and cut someone off like that before.

“No, he interrupts people all the time. He hardly ever listens to anyone, after all,” Sara murmured to herself. Luckily, things were so tense that no one seemed to have heard her.

“What gives you the right?”

“The...right...?”

Nelly wasn’t hiding how annoyed she was between the two of them one bit. Yet Keiligh and Chris kept right on going.

“Nefertari is an independent woman with no fiancé or husband. What gives you the right to call yourself her partner?”

“I...”

“In point of fact, she faced no issues, social or otherwise, while you were gone for the last few days. Will you kindly stop making a fuss over this?”

Sara was shocked that there was actually someone who could have Chris at a loss for words.

In between the two of them, Nelly heaved a sigh. “Just when I finally got my sister to realize that I’m an adult who doesn’t need taking care of anymore. What is wrong with the two of you? Am I a bone that’s still got some meat on it?”

Sara could just picture the mountain wolves fighting over bones she'd tossed out to them back on the Dark Mountain. She desperately resisted the urge to burst out laughing at the image.

"I don't need anyone's help." Nelly stood without taking Keiligh's hand. "Keiligh. I appreciate you serving as my shield for the last few days. But my marriage candidates have left now. That's enough." She headed for the second floor on her own.

Keiligh shrugged and sat back down as if nothing had happened. When Chris took off to go after her, he called after him, "Chris. Are you going to make her repeat herself?"

"Ugh..." Chris bit his lip, but left the room after Nelly anyway.

In the awkward air that remained after all that, Keiligh murmured, "Was that too harsh of me?"

"I think it's possible he still doesn't understand," Sara said, pumping herself up as she stood from the table. "Okay, as their precious daughter, I'll go light a fire under the two of them."

She felt too bad for Chris to leave him be, so she followed him out the room. Of course, since Nelly's room was also Sara's, you could just as easily say she simply went back to her own room as well.

In front of the room, she spotted Chris, his forehead pressed against the door. "Nef..." he muttered quietly. He'd gone after her, but he hadn't been in time to catch her before she went into her room, and now she wasn't coming back out.

"Chris."

"Sara..." Chris looked up from the door, utterly bewildered. He was usually so expressionless, but Sara had seen all sorts of unique looks on his face today.

"Nelly won't come out?"

"Yes. I don't know what to do..." Leaning his back on the door, Chris slid to the floor. Sara sat down next to him, leaning against the door as well. Now even if Nelly *wanted* to leave the room, she wouldn't be able to.

"What were you going to say to her if she did come out?" Sara asked him.

“Well, I...”

Perhaps because of her barrier, Sara was very sensitive to presences around her. She could sense Nelly sitting down on the other side of the door.

“I suppose I would tell her she’s beautiful, and charming, and wonderful, and that I’d like to be by her side.”

“Hmm... Won’t that be the same as always, though?”

Chris just looked down at his knees without responding.

“Kuntz told me...” Sara apologized to Kuntz in her heart for putting this responsibility on him before continuing, “There are a lot of people in the Hunter’s Guild in Hydrangea who like Nelly too.”

“There are?!”

To be precise, she was pretty sure he’d said there were people whose interest could turn to attraction with the right opportunity, but she hoped he would forgive the slight embellishment.

“Is it Zachary? No, I didn’t get that sense from him... Someone who’s on this trip with us?”

“What would you do if you knew?” Maybe Sara was just as mean as Keiligh. “Are you just going to stay by her side like you have been, keeping anyone else from getting too close?”

“Well, Nef has a right to choose... There’s sure to be another opportunity like this one at some point in the future. I want to respect Nef’s wishes.”

“So it’s okay if she chooses someone else?”

“Of course it...” Sara assumed he meant to continue with “is,” but the word seemed to get stuck in his throat.

She made up her mind and told him, “It looks to me like you’re just using Nelly’s right to choose as an excuse to run away.”

“I’m...! I’m not running away! I’ve never run from anything in my life. I’ve always done exactly what it was I wished to do.”

Sara didn’t deny that. However... “You’re just scared of confessing to her in

case she turns you down, because then you won't be able to stay by her side like you always have."

There were plenty of people who didn't confess their feelings to those they liked so that they could stay by their side as friends for longer, and Sara didn't think there was anything wrong with that. But wasn't it a cliché in romance for those people to lose to a rival who showed up out of nowhere one day and end up separated from the person they liked anyway?

"Back when she lived on the Dark Mountain, Nelly was alone even in Rosa, but that's not the case anymore. In Hydrangea, everyone has accepted her as the vice guildmaster, and here in Gardenia, she was totally popular with all the men, right? Nelly's always been an amazing person. That hasn't changed, but people are finally starting to see it now. She's not just *our* Nelly anymore."

Something stirred on the other side of the door, but Chris didn't seem to notice. Nelly probably wanted to say she would always be Sara's.

Chris curled in on himself, still looking down at his knees. "The green grass locusts..."

"What?" Why was he bringing those up?

"I should be concerned about the potential harm the green grass locusts could be doing to the people, but my heart is full with thoughts of Nef and I can't calm down. I want to cling to her legs and beg her to let me stay by her side, but I feel like that won't be enough and it scares me..." Chris looked up suddenly. "I'm scared..."

"Yes, I think so."

Things couldn't stay the same as they'd always been. Chris understood that, so he was afraid since he didn't know what he should do.

"I'm scared, so I want to run away."

"Yes. But whether you run or not won't change anything."

It really wouldn't. It was likely that Chris and Sara would continue to be the ones Nelly allowed to be closest to her. They'd won her trust, after all.

"Then, after the green grass locust trouble is cleared up... When it's done

with, I'll tell Nef..."

"No, no. We call that a death flag where I come from. Don't say that."

She didn't think he knew what she meant by that, but he'd at least sensed how against it she was from her tone.

He went silent until the door suddenly opened behind them and Chris and Sara both tumbled back through it.

"Waugh!" Sara yelped, looking up at the ceiling to see Nelly standing there with her arms crossed intimidatingly.

"You're so annoying."

"I-I'm sorry."

Nelly glared down at Chris when he apologized reflexively. She'd probably give Sara as much time as she wanted for something like this, but she was harsh with Chris. Just like usual.

"You've always been by my side, haven't you, Chris? Why do you think I wouldn't want you there anymore?"

"Well, because Keiligh..."

Sara didn't think she'd ever get to see Chris fidgeting down on the floor like this again, so she burned the sight into her eyes.

"What about Keiligh? I respect him because he's your mentor, but I have no other feelings for him."

"Really?" Chris spun around and sat up, looking up at Nelly with both hands on the floor. He looked like he was about to kowtow to her.

Sara sat up as well, assuming a proper seiza position with her legs underneath her. There wasn't any reason for it, really. She just felt like it.

Nelly stood with her arms crossed, looking down at Chris. Chris looked up at her with both hands on the floor. This described the power dynamic between the two of them to a tee.

Sara was starting to wonder just how long the silence would go on when Chris pressed his lips together and raised one knee, kneeling before Nelly with his

back straight.

“Nef.”

“What.”

It was the same sort of exchange they always had, but Chris seemed to have finally made up his mind.

“I want to stay by your side for the rest of our lives, as your partner. I want to be your husband, your family.”

Nelly turned her head to the side peevishly and Chris’s expression became rather pathetic.

“Who else would I ever have by my side?”

Sara was prudent enough to keep her response of “me” to herself.

“Y-You mean...?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself.” The one ear that was visible with Nelly’s head turned to the side was faintly red.

“Nef!” Chris shot up and embraced Nelly.

“Give it a rest...”

“Right.”

For her supposed annoyance, of course, Nelly didn’t push Chris away like she usually did.

There was no place for Sara in this exchange now that things had turned out this way. She did her best to stay as invisible as possible down on her knees, but without meaning to, she let these words escape her lips: “Does that mean I’m Chris’s daughter now?”

The two of them flew apart, both of their ears red.

“Of course.”

“Naturally.”

“Eh heh heh.”

Sara had given Chris the push he’d needed, after all. She wanted to get in

between the two of them just a little bit.

As she was still seated, Nelly plopped down on the floor next to her and Chris sat down with his legs crossed on her other side. They wrapped their arms around her and pulled her close. With the three of them all snug together like this, there was no way for Sara to know what the two of them might be doing up above her head. Or so she decided to say, anyway.





The next morning, they told Lati that Chris and Nelly would be marrying, which caused such a commotion that Sara worried they would be late departing for their mission. Lati was in tears of joy at the news.

“It’s all thanks to my encouragement. I expect to be shown even more respect from now on,” Keiligh ribbed.

Chris’s smile twitched a bit at this. Keiligh had certainly provoked him a great deal, so while “respect” might have been a bit much to ask, he probably at least deserved some thanks, considering this proposal might have taken another hundred years to happen without his intervention.

Sara decided not to mention to Chris how if he’d just made up his mind sooner, all of Lati’s worrying could have been avoided.

“I know dealing with the locusts is more important right now. Let’s talk once again after you’re back and things have settled down,” said Lati.

They said nothing about how Lati should have just done that from the first place as the lord’s wife.

Even Ann had done her best to get up while it was still dark out to see them off. “Would you be mad if I did my best to make the trip so I can come see everything?” she asked Sara. An Invited with no stamina and no ability to help coming to the scene would only be trouble for the people trying to work there, but Sara didn’t want to discourage Ann’s feelings.

“I think it would be fine if you can persuade Lati, Edmond, and Keiligh, but the others might be a little bothered by you being there. I think it’s really important to see a bunch of different aspects of Trilgaia as one of the Invited, though.”

Sara said all this so that everyone else could hear as well. Meeting Ann was the first time Sara had learned that it was possible to live in Trilgaia without having anything to do with monsters, though the other Invited *was* particularly sheltered. It had thrown into relief exactly how unique Sara’s circumstances were in this world.

That was why, if Ann herself wanted to know about the parts of Trilgaia she wasn’t familiar with, Sara thought she should be encouraged to learn, no matter how many people were inconvenienced by it, since it would help lead

her to however she chose to live her life in Trilgaia from this point on.

“Well, we’ll go on ahead.”

It was time for Nelly, Chris, and Sara to head out. Nelly was their main firepower, but Chris was strong enough to make it to the depths of a dungeon on his own, and this was precisely the sort of time when Sara should be using her wyvern-repelling barrier to its full effect. They were also all capable of reaching their destination in half a day with physical strengthening.

“Okay, see you later!”

With a cheery goodbye, Sara took off like the wind with Chris and Nelly. She didn’t even notice Ann watching her go with sparkles in her eyes.

“Mind if we get a little serious?”

Nelly and Chris were running even faster than they usually did, though they were making sure Sara was keeping up. Sara had run straight from the south of Trilgaia to the north last year while escorting the continental tortoise, so she’d had to improve her handle on physical strengthening whether she wanted to or not. She could now manage half a day at max speed.

Running alongside the two of them like this, Sara suddenly remembered that Nelly and Chris were engaged now and broke into a dopey grin.

“What is it, Sara?”

“Well...” She still couldn’t stop smiling. “It just makes me happy to think we’re a family now.”

“Wha—?!”

“Ugh!”

Nelly and Chris suddenly stumbled and then increased their speed like they were trying to run away from something, leaving Sara eating their dust.

“Huh...? Wait for me!”

The pair regained their cool quickly and waited for Sara with some embarrassment; she decided then not to tease them carelessly anymore. It was

driven home to her that day that although she was pretty well accomplished at physical strengthening by now, she was still nowhere near Nelly and Chris's level.

They were careful to keep an eye on their surroundings as they proceeded as well. The situation had still been in control the day before when Chris had come back to contact them, but they knew it was all too easy for circumstances to change within a day.

"Seems like things are still okay," Chris remarked as he observed their surroundings carefully.

"Were things that bad?" Nelly asked him. They knew that the situation was serious, but neither Sara nor Nelly had heard many details since they were all so preoccupied with simply getting there quickly.

"I don't know if I'd say that... It's just that there were so many of them that it felt a bit futile trying to cull their numbers. It sounded like things would be fine so long as they stayed where they were."

The local Hunter who had been observing them must have told him that.

"But if one of them takes off, it could spur the whole swarm into taking off with it. When that happens, they'll begin moving, eating up anything in their path. I don't see any that have come this far, though."

They were passing by fields of grass and crops, but they were all lush and green so far. They could see some big butterflies and dragonflies in the distance, but there were no green grass locusts in sight yet. It was still a bizarre sight to Sara for there to be no horned rabbits in the meadows they were running by.

"I feel like it's kind of amazing that they can keep such a close watch on the locusts every year when it's so peaceful here and they've been without a disaster for more than a hundred years..."

"Now that you mention it, I guess it is. If you're working as a Hunter or an apothecary for a long enough time, you're bound to hear about the green grass locusts in the east every so often, but no one really reacts to it like it might be a real disaster. I guess that's why these requests from the east tend to get passed

around before someone actually handles them.”

They’d ended up all the way in Hydrangea this time around.

“Then all the healing herbs and mana herbs over here should get sent to the capital and Rosa. If they were relying on the east for that stuff more regularly, they’d have to help out over here when they need help.”

“That’s pretty crafty of you, Sara.”

“Well, don’t you think it’s a waste to have all this and not use it?”

She might not have known the names of the flowers blooming by the side of the road, but her apothecary’s eyes always spotted medicinal plants when she went by them.

“There’s not much demand for potions where there aren’t many Hunters. Just like the west doesn’t take green grass locusts too seriously, the east doesn’t know much about the west’s need for medicinal plants.”

The lack of travel between the two regions surely didn’t help.

As they discussed these trivial things, before they knew it, the mountains in the distance had become a lot closer. At the same time, the fields around them began to look barren, with rocks covering more and more of the visible terrain, fertile soil covering less.

“These mountains are what keep the green grass locusts confined to the north of the eastern region. There’s not enough vegetation to feed them here.”

“But once they grow wings...”

“They can fly over ’em no problem.”

As if to emphasize the point, a dragonfly flew over them with a loud *buzz*.

The rocky terrain continued for longer than Sara had expected it to, the path they were on then narrowing before expanding out again.

“It looks like the dry area is bigger than usual due to the drought up north this year. It’s hard to tell what’s happening in places you’re not familiar with just hearing it from other people.”

Chris seemed frustrated that he was only able to give hearsay about the local

situation.

“I see it,” Nelly said. She had the best eyes of the three of them.

When they arrived, there were about a hundred local Hunters, a squad of fifteen knights, and ten Hunters from Hydrangea present. Even over a hundred people didn’t feel like enough when they were spread out over such a large area.

In the center, a man with the same red hair as Nelly stood like a pillar, keeping watch over everything.

“Father!”

“Neffie! That didn’t take long. Oh, you came too, Sara.”

Ri turned around, greeting them with a grin, but there was a heavy fatigue on his face.

“I’m sorry, father. This should have been my responsibility.”

“There’s no need for that. If you’re going to say that, then it should have been *my* responsibility to get Lati under control. I should have known she would react like she did. At the very least, I should have made an effort to see her before something like this happened.”

It seemed Ri had been reflecting on recent matters himself.

But that wasn’t important at the moment.

Sara was speechless at the sight in front of her. She didn’t know if it was coming from their wings, their mouths, or their legs, but there was a grating *chk chk, chk chk* sound like rocks endlessly scraping against one another, and the ground before her was made up of a wriggling, black, mottled pattern of locusts as far as the eye could see.

“Eep!”

She’d heard that their appearance had changed, but Sara was still expecting *green* grass locusts to be green.

“Don’t they have green in their name?! Even if they changed colors, you’d think they’d still have a *little* green on them...”

The chittering black locusts were being punched by some, stabbed by others, sliced, and pummeled with magic... That was how Hunters fought. But the knights were different. They were divided into three groups of five, using the paralysis agents to stop the locusts in place before finishing them off.

Ri must have been at the edge of the fighting. It looked like he had some casters near him who were ready to use magic if any of the locusts took off into the air.

“I’ve reported the situation to Ed and he’s taking action. But the three of us decided we should come here first.”

“I appreciate it.” Ri relaxed a bit after Chris made his report.

“For now, we should try to reduce their numbers as much as we can. Are you good, Nef?”

“Yes. I’ll get started.”

The Hunters from Hydrangea gave a small cheer when Nelly joined the battle, though they didn’t take a break from their own fighting. Sara could see Allen among them, sending locusts flying with his fists.

“Chris! Do you have any spare paralytics?” Liam called when he saw Chris. His knight’s uniform was looking significantly less crisp than it usually did.

“I got some spares from Keiligh!”

“Thanks!”

Chris wove through the locusts to Liam’s side as Sara considered what her job should be. No one was going to give her orders, so she would have to figure it out herself. That was when she realized that Noel was crafting potions at a table just next to Ri.

“Noel!”

“Sara! I’m glad you’re here!”

She was impressed at his ability to keep concentrating on his potions as he greeted her.

“I’m keeping an eye on everything as I work. The situation is rather serious,

but I find it very interesting as well. By the way, Sara, have you noticed?”

“Noticed what?” Sara asked as she took out a stuffed-full medicinal plant basket from her pouch. She had fresh paralysis herbs and mana herbs she’d gathered on their way to Gardenia.

“I thought you might have some of those. That’ll really help. I hadn’t imagined we’d need so many paralytics. The knights did plan to use them, but it seems they’d only intended to experiment a little on the green grass locusts.” After thanking her for the paralysis herbs, Noel continued his explanation as he worked. “I was wondering if you’d noticed how the knights are moving.”

The locusts were so busy looking for plants to eat that they didn’t attack people even when they got pretty close. The knights were using this fact to launch paralytics over groups of them from a low height. They’d dispersed the paralysis agent from pretty high up back during the poison bog frog hunts and had ended up paralyzing themselves when the wind turned against them. They’d gotten a lot better at handling the drugs since back then.

“I heard about that time from you, Sara, and I watched the knights during migrating dragon season and with the continental tortoise. I feel bad for my brother saying this, but I sort of felt like it didn’t even matter that the knights were there in both instances, but they’ve really turned things around.”

His voice was full of pride toward his brother. Sara turned to observe the knights once more after hearing that. They were taking the lives of the paralyzed locusts with the least amount of effort possible. That would have been a lot less exhausting than chopping at them or punching them with all the force they could muster.

But the paralysis agent’s effects weren’t guaranteed. Locusts at the edge of the paralytic’s range became able to move again right away. Sara would be able to trap all the locusts in range of the effect inside her barrier... Should she use the paralytics she had on hand and fight too? Or should she help Allen or Nelly?

Sara shook her head. If you punched a paralyzed locust, you’d get paralyzed yourself. So what could Sara do with her barrier? She couldn’t just say she didn’t want to fight if she didn’t have to if the people of the east and the capital were in danger of suffering a famine.

Should she trap them all in a barrier and let the air out of it? Should she pin them to the ground like she'd done with the wolves? She'd have to work together with the Hunters to do either, and she didn't think she could get everyone on board quickly even if she knew some of them from Hydrangea. It was a bit late, but she realized she had been naive to assume she could just wait to consider how she could help once she got here.

"Sara, if you're trying to decide what to do, I could use some assistance making paralytics here. Fighting isn't your job, right?" Noel, who was in fact utilizing his *own* strengths to make himself useful, must have noticed Sara deliberating. "I only mentioned the knights because I wanted to improve your opinion of my brother if I could," he said with a jovial tone that didn't match the gravity of the situation.

Maybe he was trying to make Sara more comfortable, but his consideration just served to strengthen Sara's resolve to do what only *she* could, even if she really didn't want to.

"Oh well." Sara heaved a sigh. "Guess I'll go fight with the knights."

"Sara?"

Sara wove through the chittering locusts just like Chris had earlier.

"Kuntz! Are you there?" Kuntz's name was the first she called as she ran toward the knights.

"Sara? Gimme a second!"

She'd figured Kuntz must have been nearby if she'd spotted Allen, and she'd been correct. The next person she called was: "Liam!"

"Sara! You're not a Hunter! Please, stay with Noel!"

Sara shook her head. "Listen, Liam," Sara said, close enough that he could hear her but far enough away that she wouldn't get in the knights' way. Kuntz had just caught up with her, so she explained to him as well, "My barrier can make the paralytics more effective. You know I can repel the drug, right?"

Liam should, considering he was the one who had ordered the knights to attack Sara and Allen with it in order to bring them back to the capital from



Rosa.

“You’re bringing that up again? You really are ruthless, aren’t you?”

“As long as you remember it.” It was no time to be arguing over this. “The point is, if I can repel it on the outside, I can confine it to the inside too. Then Kuntz...” Sara gave Kuntz a look. “You can make little twisters with your magic, right? That means you should be able to disperse the paralytic effectively inside the closed area of my barrier.”

“Yeah, I can do that. My attack magic isn’t too good against the locusts, so if I can help out over here, I’ll be glad to.”

Kuntz agreed right away, but Liam was another story.

“But...”

“Liam, we have a limited stock of the paralysis agent. I know Noel’s making more, but we *will* run out eventually.” Chris pointed out the reality of the situation.

Back in Hydrangea, they’d only been considering what would happen if the knights screwed up or the locusts began to resist the paralysis agent, but now that they were here, the situation was such that they had to do whatever they could to help. There were simply too many locusts not to.

Sara decided it would be faster to show him than argue about it.

“Barrier. Frosted glass version.” Sara considered the range a single bottle of paralytic would probably affect and shaped her barrier over a group of locusts like a bowl. “If I cover an area this size, we could use the paralytics more effectively, don’t you think?” She’d used the semitransparent barrier she’d developed back during the continental tortoise incident.

“Wow...”

The knights hadn’t seen how Sara and Haruto had made the walls back then. It was the first time Liam was actually seeing Sara’s barrier with his eyes, so he looked a bit shocked at the sight. He quickly recovered and considered the suggestion, however.

“It’s more than two times the area we’ve been covering so far... I’d say it’s

worth trying if you think you can affect all the locusts in that area.” This time Liam looked Sara’s way without hesitating. “Can I ask you to help?”

“Yes. Let’s do it. As soon as Kuntz scatters the paralysis agent, I’ll put my barrier up.”

Sara stood with her legs at shoulder width, relaxing and holding her arms up in a ready pose. Kuntz tossed a bottle of paralytic, broke it with a pebble, and dispersed it with his wind magic. It was difficult to use different types of magic at once but, unfortunately for the green grass locusts, Kuntz could do it just fine.

As soon as he activated his wind magic, Sara put her barrier over the locusts like a bowl. The paralytic whipped up by Kuntz’s twister spun in the air inside the barrier, freezing the chittering locusts in place after a short while.

“Wow... Every single one in the area stopped moving.”

“Okay, I’ll take the barrier down now.”

“Got it. Do it.”

While the knights were finishing off that group of locusts, Sara and Kuntz moved to the next squad and did the same thing. They went around to all three groups and the number of paralyzed locusts climbed higher.

Eventually, the sun set, and when the chittering finally stopped, they could rest. The locusts stopped moving at night, and the Hunters needed a break.

They headed to the lodgings prepared for them near the front line of the fighting, washed their sweat off with hot water that had been prepared for them, ate, and relaxed in the dining hall, utterly exhausted. Some even went straight to bed.

Sara had only joined in halfway through and wasn’t as exhausted as the Hunters, but she got a new appreciation for how hard it must have been for them to respond to these requests.

“Sara.”

Allen came over to her, looking refreshed after a meal and a bath. Sara was having after-dinner tea with Nelly and Chris. The lodging house was old, but

well maintained, and staffed with enough people to keep over a hundred guests fed and clean. She'd asked one of the kitchen staff about it and heard they were short-term hires, but the pay was good, so they couldn't complain.

"Good work today, Allen. Has it been like this every day?"

"Yeah. It's rough, but I consider it good practice for dealing with large numbers of monsters. Everyone from Hydrangea's kinda the same way, I think." Allen shrugged.

"You're always like that, Allen. With the poison bog frogs and the continental tortoise last year, you're always just focused on doing your job as best as you can. You don't really complain, do you?"

"You won't find many Hunters who do."

The other Hunters still in the dining hall were nodding along like they agreed.

"Let's see, how do I explain it...? As a Hunter, the hardest things to take down are wyverns, right? Migrating dragons won't attack you if you just leave them alone, so they don't count. And continental tortoises are out of the question."

She didn't know who had started it, but rumors of Allen's attack on the continental tortoise were spreading like the telephone game around the local Hunters. As Sara listened to Allen, with her other ear, she could hear the rumors spreading further even now. After he showed her a clenched fist, however, she turned back to devote her full attention to him. All this had started from a comment she'd made to him, after all.

"I'm confident I can take down a wyvern if they get close enough for me to hit them."

Teasing whistles sounded here and there in the dining hall. That seemed to finally clue Allen in that everyone else was listening to what he was saying and he gave them a "lay off" look before continuing to Sara.

"But that's not the end goal or anything. Trilgaia has a bunch of different monsters and creatures, and there are a ton of different jobs for Hunters to do. Like taking down as many seven-colored swallowtails as you can even though they're not really good for anything or taking down as many poison bog frogs as you can or taking down as many green grass locusts as you can. And we've done

all of those, right?”

“There were way too many of all of them,” Sara said with a nod.

“I want to be able to defeat any monster and do any kind of job. I want people to be able to say, ‘Just ask that guy, he’ll handle it.’ Like with Nelly.”

“Me?” Nelly gave Allen a surprised look. She’d just been quietly drinking her tea up until now.

“Right? You’re my mentor after all.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Kind of a pathetic mentor, though, considering I wasn’t on time to the mission since my sister was trying to get me engaged.”

It was rare for Nelly to crack a joke, and it wasn’t really a laughing matter, so an odd silence descended on the dining hall. Sara felt pretty awkward herself.

“How’d it go? You get engaged?” Kuntz said as he showed up looking like he was right out of the bath.

“Hey, don’t ask her that,” Allen said, ever the gentleman.

“Sorry. Just curious.” Kuntz was usually a gentleman too, but he must have been too tired to be considerate.

“No worries,” Nelly said graciously, but the silence that followed throughout the whole dining hall seemed to indicate that everyone else wanted to know the answer to the question too. Even Nelly noticed and ended up saying, slightly embarrassed, “Well, uhh... I guess you could say it went well.”

“What?!”

One of the Hunters from Hydrangea rose from his chair with a clatter. From the shocked look on his face, Sara came to the conclusion that this was one of the individuals Kuntz had mentioned might be interested in Nelly.

Allen looked between Nelly and Chris, who was sitting next to her with his arms crossed, and glared at Kuntz.

“Err, sorry. I really shouldn’t have asked.” Kuntz apologized, unable to endure Allen’s accusative look. He must have determined that the damage was done at this point, because he stood upright and said, “Well, congratulations!”

That set off a round of warm congratulations throughout the dining hall.

“Thanks. Thanks.”

Back when Sara had first met Nelly, she would have never imagined her surrounded by so many people, responding to their congratulations with a bashful grin and a single hand raised.

Kuntz took that moment to lob another bomb at the situation. “So who’s the lucky guy?”

“Are you stupid?! Cut it out already!” Allen raised his voice at Kuntz, a rarity.

Chris raised his hand just like Nelly. “That would be me.”

“Huh?”

“It’s me.”

The dining hall went silent again after Kuntz’s dopey response. It was he who broke the silence as well.

“You came all the way to Gardenia to get set up with someone by your sister and *then* you picked Chris?”

It wasn’t just Sara thinking, “You’re not supposed to bring that up.” She was pretty sure everyone else was thinking the same thing.

“I guess it did end up that way.”

“What do you mean it ended up that way?! What took you so long?!”

Sara was fairly certain the quiet dig at Chris had come from the Hunter who had stood from his chair earlier, but she couldn’t be sure.

“Congratulations, Nelly and Chris!” Sara raised her cup of tea and congratulated the two loudly to try to mask the awkwardness of the situation.

“Congrats!”

“Congrats!”

Another cheer went through the dining hall and a long stream of Hunters came by the table to pat the two of them on the back. The ladies in the kitchen even brought out more tea and sweets for everyone to celebrate.

“Why’d you keep quiet?” Allen and Kuntz questioned Sara later, but...

“I couldn’t say anything before *they* did, could I? And when was there time to tell you two anyway?”

“Fair, but if you’d told me, I wouldn’t have asked something like that!”

Even in the face of Kuntz’s pathetic protests, what Sara couldn’t do, she couldn’t do.

“It’s crazy that you’d ask a woman a thing like that anyway. I mean, if it *hadn’t* gone well, she would have been hurt by that, right? You were in the wrong this time, Kuntz.”

“Ugh, you two are both so mean...”

In the end, Kuntz’s careless questions led to everyone finding out about it pretty soon, but when Ri heard about it from someone else the next day, he was furious with the three of them for not telling him first. Even getting scolded by him as a group was sure to become a fond memory for them one day...

Sara, Nelly, and Chris’s participation in the fighting definitely seemed to help. Over the next few days, the number of green grass locusts visibly declined.

“It seems like there are still eggs underground that are hatching, but we’re taking them down faster than they’re increasing now.”

After almost ten days of that, the Hunters and knights were finally able to relax a bit. And that wasn’t all.

“Heeey! Young miss!”

Sara thought she heard the cheerful voice of the gate guard at the Greif estate, then several carriages arrived a moment later.

“I wonder what’s going on?” Sara wondered as a particularly fancy-looking carriage pulled up in front of them. Gardenia’s lord, Edmond, stepped out from it, turned around, and held out his hand, and Ann the Invited poked her head out next, apparently dressed like a boy so she’d be able to move around more easily.

Sara was surprised to see her. She wasn’t surprised that she’d decided to

come, but that she actually had the stamina to make it here.

“Sara!”

“Ann! Are you doing okay?”

“Yeah! I was even able to practice my magic on the way here. I realized I don’t get tired if I practice.”

It had only been a matter of days, so she was still just as scrawny as she’d been when they’d first met, but she clearly had more vitality now than she had then. Sara had practiced her barrier every day on the Dark Mountain, so she hadn’t even realized it might have made her healthier.

“Sara, Neffie, Ri, Chris. Liam too. I’m sorry. It seems Sara heading to the front lines provoked Lati’s overprotective tendencies. She insisted that bringing Ann here by any means necessary was for the best.”

“Sister...” Nelly put a hand to her temple like her head hurt.

Everyone in a position of authority had gathered near Ri to find out the reason for the large number of carriages suddenly arriving. As Sara watched them out of the corner of her eye, she suggested what she’d already considered regarding Ann’s presence here.

“I thought Ann might show up, since she has no opportunities to see monsters or Hunters back at the mansion. How about setting up some protection cases and letting her watch from inside? She’ll have enough room to lie down if she gets tired that way.”

“Protection cases...”

“Oh yeah, I never actually got to show you them, did I? They make something like my barrier. They’ll repel monsters and animals, so you’ll be safe if something happens. Just don’t panic and touch the four cases at the corners.”

“Okay!”

The little girl who’d suddenly arrived out of nowhere got some odd looks, but that was fine as long as she wasn’t bothered by it. Also, it seemed Ed hadn’t just come to bring Ann here either.

“Local Hunters and those who respond to our requests have always been

enough until now, but I heard we didn't have enough people even with the knights this time, so I brought some people who might be able to help. They're not Hunters, but they should have more than enough muscle to contribute."

The people spilling out of the carriages behind him were farmers, if Sara had to guess judging from the pitchforks and hoes they all carried.

"Green grass locusts raid the fields near Gardenia sometimes too. You might think they can't do much damage if there aren't that many of them, but you can see how big they are. Just one of them can do plenty of damage to our crops, so most farmers have some experience dealing with them."

Ed had spoken to some of the nearby farmers and they'd volunteered to come help with the culling before the locusts reached their own fields.

"I thought they might be able to help thin the locusts' numbers while staying out of the Hunters' way. I've brought more food and bedding for them as well, of course."

All Sara had seen the lord do thus far was smile lovingly at his wife, so she was surprised by his initiative. She then realized that it was only because of him that such careful watch was kept on the green grass locusts at all, even though it might not seem necessary.

"In that case, I'd like you to help us make paralytics today, Sara."

Sara looked to Liam for confirmation when Chris told her that.

"If you can't stay with us, then I'd at least like Kuntz to keep helping us out. He can still help us disperse the paralytic much more effectively."

Liam requested Kuntz's help and Edmond nodded in assent.

"Okay," Sara said. "Then, Ann? You can watch us make potions and also watch the Hunters from here. I'll set up the protection cases right here."

Sara added her own table beside the one Noel had set up and he and Chris took one while Ann and Sara took the other. She got out a chair for Ann as well, then she set up the protection cases around her. She realized she might need to move around, so she couldn't guarantee Ann's safety with her own barrier.

"This is your first time seeing green grass locusts, right, Ann?"



“Yeah.”

Sara thought she might explain things, but Noel was already doing it. Once again, she was impressed by his ability to keep working as he spoke.

“They might look small from a distance, but they’re big enough that you couldn’t hold one in your arms, Ann.”

“I can tell. They look huge compared to the people hunting them...even though they’re shaped the same as grasshoppers in Japan.”

“I can tell you two come from the same land. Sara said the exact same thing,” Noel said with a smile before schooling his expression. “To hunt means to kill. Do you feel all right watching it?”

“I’m all right so far.”

He was doing a good job keeping Ann company, so Sara got to concentrate on potion-making for the first time in a while. It was much more fun crushing up paralysis herbs and pouring her mana into her potions than helping cull locusts. And as she did so, Noel explained to Ann what potions and paralytics were in detail.

He was so good at explaining things that at a break in the conversation, Sara asked him, “Did you get some juniors in the capital, Noel?”

“Oh. Yeah, but I’m only teaching apprentices who aren’t apothecaries yet. There are a lot of newer apothecaries who are older than me, so it’s a little hard to call myself their senior.”

No matter how much skill he had, there was nothing he could do about his age.

“No matter what I do, I get talked about behind my back just for being the youngest person there, so I just decided I’d do what I want. If I can use my name, then I’ll use it. It’s convenient for going places I think it’d be fun to go, like this time.”

“You really are Liam’s brother, huh?”

“I wish you wouldn’t put it like that. And you have a bit of a better opinion of my brother now, don’t you?”

“Hmm...”

It surprised Sara to admit this, but she hadn't clashed with Liam at all this time around. Even with the knights here to continue testing the paralytic, they were being a lot more efficient with it than they had with the poison bog frogs, so she honestly couldn't complain. Sara had only been helping them to raise their efficiency even further and not because they were actually lacking in any way. It was nice that he didn't make any unnecessary comments to her anymore either. He must have finally lost interest in her.

“I don't have any complaints about his work,” she said. “The best thing is that I don't have to hear people calling me his fiancée anymore, though.”

“My brother is pretty popular, you know. I think there were more than a few noble ladies wetting their handkerchiefs with tears when they heard rumors about him marrying one of the Invited.”

“That means there are more than a few people who must be thrilled that that rumor was false, right? He's even the vice commander of the knights now. That's great, isn't it?”

“I have my suspicions that he came out here to the middle of nowhere because he's not loving that new position of his, if I'm honest. There shouldn't be any need for him to come out to places like this personally if he's vice commander, right?”

Ann was looking at Sara with little stars in her eyes, but there was no romance here for her to be excited about.

“I'm not engaged to anybody, just so you know.”

“Aww!”

Sara smiled wryly, but she wasn't upset. She was pretty sure she'd look exactly the same way if she heard a friend of hers was engaged.

She almost screwed up her potion when she heard the next thing out of Noel's mouth.

“If you want a fiancé, Ann, what about me?”

“You, Noel?”

Noel smiled faintly. Unlike Sara, his hands were perfectly steady as he worked.

“Of course, it was an objective for House Hills to come meet the Invited in the east. I wouldn’t mind jumping straight to fiancé from there. But just so you know...” Noel smirked. “I’m another one of Sara’s former fiancé candidates.”

“What?!”

Ann’s shocked face was so funny, Sara almost burst out laughing.

“I guess there are a lot of people like Lati in this world who want to keep the Invited safe at home. It’s a lot better than being ignored or treated coldly, I suppose. You’re sure to get a lot more proposals in the future, so you should start preparing for that now.”

Noel followed up Sara’s advice with an absurd proposal of his own.

“I could be a temporary fiancé just to fend off other offers if you’d like as well. I don’t have any intent to get married for a while yet either, so it would benefit both of us.”

“Huh...” Ann responded somewhat unenthusiastically.

This made Sara grin. “It’s true. I don’t want a fiancé myself, but it’s fun hearing about friends getting engaged.”

“Jeez.” It was cute how Ann puffed up her cheeks in annoyance. “*Ahem*. Let me answer you seriously, Noel.”

“Of course.”

After clearing her throat, Ann sat up straight and Noel responded with an equally serious expression.

“I want to be able to say that I love someone with pride when I actually fall in love. So I don’t want a temporary fiancé. I’m sorry.” Ann bowed her head.

Sara watched warmly, thinking it was nice that she didn’t want to be unfair to anyone.

“Aww. I wonder if I’m the only guy who’s ever been turned down by two Invited,” Noel said jokingly. It was nice of him to take it well too.

“It’s fine to be good friends, isn’t it? That’s still a connection with one of the Invited,” Sara pointed out.

Noel didn’t seem to know how to react to that. “Do you think so? I suppose you’re right.”

“Me too! I want to be friends too!”

As the apothecaries cheerily made their potions, the number of green grass locusts seemed to shrink even faster now that there were more people to help with the culling.

“Hmm? Wait, how many do we have to actually get rid of to fulfill the request?”

Sara decided to ask Nelly the question that had just occurred to her later.

They went back to their temporary lodgings when the sun set and had a lively meal with even more people present than before. Even Ann, who had been treated like a princess back at the mansion, sat at the same table and ate the same food as everyone else. She wore an odd expression when she was praised for tidying up her place setting herself, since it was something everyone would have expected her to do in her old life.

“You’ve only been apart from Lati for a few days, but you seem a lot more comfortable doing things on your own. Lati wasn’t this overprotective with our sons, so even I was surprised that she’d act so different with a girl instead of a boy. Maybe this isn’t the time to be discussing such a thing, but...”

Edmond sat at the same table as Ri and Sara, looking at Ann with gentle eyes.

“I figured children just grow up as they will no matter what their mothers are like, so I assumed Ann would become independent one day, just like Nefertari. Our sons grew up fine as well. But I *was* starting to think Lati was perhaps taking things too far with Ann.”

“Is that why you asked Neffie and Sara to come?” Ri asked.

Edmond nodded. “I wasn’t thinking about concrete solutions or anything at the time, but I was hoping it would be some sort of catalyst for Ann’s condition to improve. But things have gotten so much better than I expected. I really am

grateful that you came all this way. I think Sara may pave a way for future Invited girls to choose all sorts of paths without having to feel stifled like Ann did.”

“I wonder... I think views on women have been changing in the country we came from even just in the last ten years, so the people who come later than us might think even differently than we do.”

The Invited who came here a hundred years ago were probably a lot more conservative than they were, Sara figured. They might have been perfectly fine with being locked inside and pampered all day.

With her stomach full, Ann was a little tired now, so she went back to her room early. Afterward, Sara was able to ask Nelly the question that had been on her mind.

“When is the job over?” Nelly repeated. “Either after we reduce their numbers enough or the locusts go back to their original forms.”

“Their original forms? You mean turn green again?”

“It seems like it.”

She said “seems like it” because they had never returned to their green coloring on any previous requests. It was usually too late when they turned black.

“I was starting to relax since we’ve gotten rid of a lot of them now, but we can’t forget that the situation’s still pretty dangerous.”

Ri agreed. “We should be prepared for a long fight. At least Ed’s making sure we stay supplied. He’s a good lord, a good husband, and a good father. Lati must be happy with him.”

As a lord and father himself, Ri was frank in his opinions.

“Well, let’s do our best again tomorrow.”

The exhaustion was finally starting to creep up on everyone, so they decided to head to bed and save up their strength for the hard day’s work ahead.

After spending a few days like that, Sara going between the apothecaries’

table and the knight squads, Ann was starting to get used to the flow of things and even helped out here and there. Since she had already been in high school before reincarnating, she now had her feet planted firmly on the ground and was able to handle the same sorts of things Sara had been helping with on the Dark Mountain.

Her interests were starting to point in more specific directions too.

“Mm... It’s too bad.”

Sara watched Ann bringing water to the Hunters who were currently resting as she made potions with Noel and Chris.

“What is?” Noel asked her.

“It doesn’t seem like Ann is very interested in being an apothecary.”

“Ah. Yeah, it doesn’t seem like it.”

Sara had fun both gathering plants and making them into potions, but not everyone felt the same way. Ann seemed to feel the same disinterest in apothecaries that Sara felt for Hunters.

“I think I was subconsciously expecting we might pick the same job, since we’re both Invited and both girls. That’s why I’m kinda disappointed.”

“Apothecary is an elite job, so it’s only logical to consider it if it’s available to you as an option. It’s not something just anyone can become either. But if she has no interest in it, then there’s nothing we can do. We don’t know how precise her control over mana will be at this point anyway.” Noel didn’t seem to care one way or the other whether Ann became an apothecary or not.

“Her eyes light up at dinner whenever hunting comes up in conversation... I wonder if I should introduce her to Allen and Kuntz, since they’re around her age...”

“Hmm. You really think about other people a lot, Sara. I probably wouldn’t want to be introduced to anyone during a busy time like this. I’d rather spend my free time resting.”

“Says the guy who was offering himself up as a fiancé.” Sara pursed her lips at Noel’s distant attitude.

“That’s that and this is this. If it’s just chatting, I’ll be happy to do so, but I’d rather not have to teach her every single step of potion-making in detail, starting from grinding up the herbs.”

“I guess not.”

They were still hard at work, with no end to the job in sight. Sara had to remember that this was no time to be thinking about entertaining Ann.

“But don’t you want to do something for younger kids?”

“Nope,” Noel responded simply.

“Ha ha ha.”

Sara continued her potion-making until Allen arrived some time later.

“Sara, I’m back.”

“Hey, Allen. Taking a break?”

“Yeah.”

Sara liked exchanges like these. They made her feel like they were back in Hydrangea together.

Allen plopped down in the chair Sara had set out for Ann without hesitating.

“You don’t usually take your breaks over here.”

“Guess I’m really starting to get tired.”

Allen glanced over at the rest station set up for Hunters, which was furnished with tea and light refreshments, then he leaned toward Sara, still sitting.

“Hey, Sara. Can I have some bush strawberry juice if I don’t tell anyone else?”

“I haven’t made any more, but I have another kind of juice this time.”

“Okay. I want some of your cockatrice sandwiches too.”

“Sure.”

He really must have been tired. There was sugar for the tea in the rest area, so he could have had an equally sweet drink over there, but he must have wanted something different every once in a while. She surreptitiously took out some Juneberry puree and diluted it with water, chilling it and handing it to

Allen. She quietly set out a cup for Noel too, of course.

“This is so good. I feel like I’m coming back to life.”

“My emergency food stores in my pouch are still coming in handy, huh?”

There was no need to keep months and months of food on her in her pouch anymore, yet Sara still made sure to carry around food and drinks anyway.

“If I’d known you had such good stuff in there, I would have asked for it myself much sooner,” Noel said, chagrined, after a sip of his juice. “Can’t get any rest over there?” Noel asked Allen as he took another sip.

“No, it’s not that,” Allen said right away, but he gulped down the rest of his juice, seeming slightly frustrated, before setting the cup down on the table.

“Well, a little. I’m the youngest of the Hunters, so it kind of bugs me that they all act like it’s my job to babysit the kid.”

Sara didn’t think there was really any reason to babysit Ann as she did her best to make tea for everyone, but maybe the other Hunters were just teasing Allen.

“Since they’re all acting like that, and maybe ’cause we’re close in age and I’m easy to talk to, she keeps asking me stuff about being a Hunter. I think she could wait until this is all over to ask about that stuff at the guild, though. We’re not exactly on equal footing here.”

“I think this is her first time out of the mansion, so she must be interested in all sorts of things. She might become a Hunter like Haruto.”

She probably found it easy to talk to Allen because he was close to the age she’d been back in Japan. And Allen probably *wasn’t* used to talking to people younger than him since there weren’t many Hunters that young.

Sara was a little excited thinking about Ann’s future. There were plenty of female Hunters like Nelly. It was far from an unachievable goal. At the same time, Allen’s tone felt a bit prickly to her.

“If she wants to be one, I’m sure she can. She’s got a house and rich foster parents. She doesn’t need to do odd jobs to make money like us. If she wants to be a Hunter, I’m sure House Greif will do whatever she needs to make that



happen.”

“Allen...”

It seemed the prickliness hadn't just been Sara's imagination. After Allen's last offhand comment, he began biting into the cockatrice sandwiches Sara had gotten out for him like he didn't want to say any more.

“Okay, I'm gonna get going.”

“Be careful out there.”

“Yeah.”

Allen ran back out into the fields somewhat awkwardly, like he might have thought he'd said too much. Sara watched him hesitantly.

“Now that I think about it, he hasn't been eating with us at night anymore, has he? I feel like we haven't been able to talk like that in a while.”

Ever since the farmers joined in on the hunting, Allen and Kuntz had been eating with other Hunters instead of with Sara. Instead, it was Edmond and Ann who had been joining her at the table.

Sara's mind must have been so full of thoughts of the small, easily fatigued Invited that she hadn't noticed some things recently. She hung her head dejectedly.

“Yesterday was the first time I wondered when this job would be over.”

“That's pretty late for you, Sara.”

“Yeah. I've always hoped for these monster exterminations to end as soon as possible and for no one to be hurt, but I haven't been thinking about that at all this time.”

She'd also assumed that everyone else would be interested in Ann's growth and would readily help her out just like Sara was.

“I was totally distracted by meeting an Invited with similar circumstances showing up, and I couldn't think about anything else,” Sara murmured.

Noel shrugged, seeming to say there was nothing either right or wrong with that. “You normally wouldn't have allowed a child who had no way to defend

herself to come to the front lines like this, even if she *was* one of the Invited.”

“You might be right...”

Now that she was hanging out around the Hunters’ rest area more often, the protection cases had been moved there, but Ann wandered around sometimes, leaving their bounds, and Sara found that she wasn’t really bothered by this. Part of it was because there were fewer locusts around now, but they were definitely still dealing with culling them. It was true that Ann was one of the Invited, but Sara might have let it slip her mind that the girl was still powerless, unlike her.

“Ugh... I feel bad now...”

“But just because you’re not acting like yourself doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with that,” Noel said plainly. “You weren’t the one who invited her to come here, and it was House Greif who actually brought her here. It’s House Greif who are ultimately responsible for her safety, so there’s nothing for you to feel bad about. Plus...” Noel looked out at the hunting grounds. “You don’t need to take the sulking of a certain Hunter so seriously when he’s just in a bad mood because you haven’t been hanging out with him lately.”

“Right...”

It was hard to believe Noel was younger than Allen with the way he dismissed the other boy so brutally.

“If I may make one other comment, any adults too distracted by giddiness over their recent engagement are just as at fault. There’s no need for you to be the only one concerned about Ann just because you’re both Invited.”

“Right...”

Apart from the job request, so much had happened with Nelly’s relatives that Sara wasn’t sure what the most important part of all this was to her. She had to be grateful to Noel for setting her straight and lifting the burden from her shoulders.

“What’s the most important thing about all this to you, Noel?”

“Me? Observing how this business with the green grass locusts ends and

leaving a record of it, of course. I'm taking notes on my observations every night when we go back to our lodgings. I took a break from work to do this of my own volition, after all." Noel held his head high with pride. "I'm going to make copies of past records and compile everything into a report, and then provide a copy to anyone interested in it." He listed off all the steps remaining excitedly. "This may be inappropriate to say, but so much has happened since I've met you and it's all been so exciting."

She didn't want to ruin Noel's fun, but this much had to be said. "You know the continental tortoise and this thing with the locusts have nothing to do with meeting me, right?"

"I suppose that may be true."

Noel didn't seem as convinced as Sara.

He must have told Allen something later that day. "Can we talk?" Allen had asked her after dinner. Sara had tilted her head at the question, but she always liked talking to Allen, so she went with him right away. Everyone around them was used to the two of them being together, so no one paid their wandering off any mind.

Sara might have thought he was a little prickly earlier in the day, but it wasn't as if he'd said anything mean to her, so she wasn't angry with him at all. She was just curious what he wanted to talk about.

They left the lodging house and walked side by side. It was dark, so Sara made a small light and surrounded it with a barrier. She had it float above them like a balloon so that it automatically came along with them.

They walked slowly all the way over to the area where Noel and Sara had set up their tables. They used them every day, so lately they had just been leaving them there without bothering to put them away every time.

Right on the edge of the range of her lights, she could see the black glint of the unmoving locusts, so Sara did her best not to look in that direction.

"Sorry for taking stuff out on you earlier today." Allen bowed his head.

"It's okay. I just thought you must be tired."

“It’s hard to fight like this when you don’t know when the job will be over.”

“Yeah.” Sara felt a little idle, so she made another light and let it float above them.

“This might sound cold, but...”

Allen paused, leaving Sara wondering what he was about to say.

“I don’t really think I can be friends with Ann.”

Sara hadn’t been expecting him to bring up Ann all of a sudden like this.

“Well, you’re free to be friends with whoever you want, but you’re not going to be mean to her or anything, are you?”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

Allen grinned wryly and hopped up onto one of the tables, looking up at the lights above them. It wasn’t good manners to sit on a table, but Sara hopped up alongside him.

Allen had grown a bit more since the continental tortoise incident the year before. On the other hand, Sara seemed to have already reached her full height. She thought she could have at least gotten a bonus to her height when she reincarnated, but she knew there were convenient things about being the size she had been back in Japan, so she couldn’t complain too much.

“Everyone seems to think I’ll get along with Ann since I get along with you, Sara. And it’s not just me. They’re acting like that with Kuntz too.”

“Well, it’s pretty easy to become friends with your friends’ friends.”

Allen made a light above his own head as well. “Kuntz doesn’t really think of Ann as one of the Invited. He gets along with her like she’s just another kid in the same neighborhood, but I can’t do that...”

Sara didn’t really understand what Allen was feeling yet, but she nodded along, figuring that you didn’t like what you didn’t like.

“It’s not her fault, but when I see her, I end up thinking about how hard we were working in Rosa to make money so we could join the Guild and comparing us to her.”

“Allen...”

Allen wrapped his fist around the light he had just made. “Sure, some of it was fun, but I can’t help thinking about it when I look at her... Going hungry to save up money, sleeping all by myself outside the walls, being treated like garbage by the people in town... Looking at her just makes all these bad feelings well up.”

Allen was a subject of admiration now for being the Hunter who stabbed the continental tortoise with a sword. Everyone acknowledged his abilities and he was making more than enough money for himself despite only being sixteen years old.

“But she’s been separated from her real parents and she was really sick back in her old world, right? I know she’s not just some rich kid. But you were never pampered like she is, Sara. You never had everything given to you and got driven around by carriage and could just curl up with a blanket and go to sleep whenever you wanted.”

“Allen, things weren’t really that hard for me. I’m not the type who wants to be pampered anyway. The only hard thing for me was being separated from Nelly. And all the apothecary stuff...”

“I know. I don’t know why, but... It’s just hard for me. It makes me angry for some reason.”

Allen tapped his chest with his fist like it hurt there.

“You were supposed to be treated just like she was, like a princess, so why...?”

They’d been so close during that hard part of their lives that he probably felt her unhappiness like it was his own. It was rare for there to be multiple Invited at once, so it was natural to compare the two of them and feel frustrated at their different circumstances. But Sara had been able to come to terms with these feelings right away since she wasn’t actually unhappy at all.

“But I wouldn’t want to switch lives with Ann just because she’s treated like a princess,” Sara told Allen, putting her hand on his fist and making a light appear above it. She prayed that a light would also be lit in his chilled, hardened heart.

“If I had her life, I wouldn’t have met Nelly, and I wouldn’t have met you. I’m who I am today because I ended up on the Dark Mountain. There’s no reason for you to feel bad about it, Allen.”

“Yeah. I know that...”

They’d had no time to think about whether they were suffering or not when they’d had no choice but to simply survive. Now that they had so much abundance in their lives, they were able to think back on that time and realize how much it had hurt. They were the only ones who could cozy up to their past selves and comfort them.

“Things weren’t easy for us, but we did our best, right?”

“Yeah.”

“We worked really hard in a situation we couldn’t change, right?”

“Yeah.”

Sara made the light above Allen’s hand float up into the air like a balloon.

“Now there’s three lights. It’s kind of fun, isn’t it?”

Allen reached out to the lights above them. “No matter how many Invited come, *my* Invited will always be you, Sara. Just you.”

It was like an oath. Sara didn’t know how to respond, so she just reached up to the lights with him. Their arms bumped together, which sent the two of them into a fit of giggles. Then she figured out what to say right away.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah.”

That was enough of an answer for now.

The two of them slid off the table at the same time like they’d planned it.

“Should we head back?”

“Let’s.”



They headed back to the lodging house with the three lights in tow, smiling. Nelly was waiting for them at the entrance with her arms folded.

“You satisfied?” she asked Allen.

“Yeah.”

“Good.”

She must have waited up for them because she was worried. Sara gave her a happy grin, then noticed Kuntz standing behind her looking guilty.

“What’s up?” she asked him.

“Well, I’m curious, you know?”

Sara cocked her head and Chris appeared from behind Kuntz.

“They’re fine.”

Sara inclined her head even more, wondering just what was fine, and Chris gave her a reassuring nod.

“We could see everything thanks to those three lights.”

“What?! No, I...!” Allen looked behind Chris and turned bright red, something Sara had hardly ever seen before. She didn’t think there was anything to be turning red over, but he yelled, “Augh!” and ran off somewhere.

“Chris, the truth hurts sometimes. Learn when to keep your mouth shut,” Kuntz told him.

Sara looked behind Chris too and saw a bunch of Hunters loitering around, obviously trying not to make eye contact with her.

Maybe she shouldn’t have made those lights.

“Well, I wanted us to be able to see where we were going in the dark...”

“It’s fine, Sara.” Nelly gave Sara a pat on the shoulder before turning to the Hunters and saying simply, “Dismissed!”

“Err, yeah!”

With that incomprehensible response, the Hunters dispersed.



“This job is taking so long, everyone’s starved for entertainment,” Kuntz said by way of explanation.

“Entertainment?” Sara repeated with a wry grin. At least she felt a lot more grounded now than she had all day before this.

“Let’s just keep up the hard work tomorrow...”

They were all determined to get rid of as many locusts as they could the next day to get this over with as quickly as possible.

## Chapter 3: No-Fly Zone

Of the many Hunters present, Ann would hardly notice if one of them started avoiding her. The rest of the Hunters even seemed to be watching over Allen warmly as Allen did his best to keep fighting day in and day out.

The others all must have been influenced by his renewed motivation; the locusts' numbers were reduced by quite a bit that day. And a day after that they all started to think maybe they'd be able to finish this job up soon...

"Bad news!"

The voice of a local Hunter who had gone out to scout the fields rang through the dining hall as everyone was having their early breakfast, just as the sun began to rise.

"Eggs! There's a bunch of eggs that are starting to hatch!"

The farmers who had arrived later stood with a clatter while the Hunters remained seated, bolting down their breakfasts. Eggs had been hatching the whole time they were here, so this was nothing new, and if they knew they would be hunting even more locusts for the rest of the day, it was a prudent decision to fill their stomachs now.

The Hunters eventually finished eating and left the lodging house one after another. Sara finished eating as well, hurrying to the tables where she did her potion-making.

"Noel. And Chris."

"Sara. This is amazing. I've never seen anything like it."

Noel was already at the table when she got there, but he would usually have been working already by now. Instead, he was staring dumbfounded at the hunting grounds before them.

Chris was watching the hunting grounds as well, his arms folded, but he looked calmer than Noel. Sara followed their eyes.

“Whoa!”

She didn't know where all these eggs had been hiding before, but from them, light-green locusts were climbing to the surface one after the other.

“Smash 'em while they're still right out of the eggs and soft!”

It was cruel, but it was their only option, so Nelly shouted the order. The knights could hardly be leisurely using the paralysis agent at this point as well.

“Since we can't fight, let's just make as many paralytics as we can for when they'll be needed.”

“I guess that's all we can do.”

They risked being overwhelmed by sheer numbers. All they could do now was smash as many of the newly hatched locusts as they could, mechanically repeating the process over and over again.

“When did they even lay these eggs?”

“Most likely earlier this year. Some green grass locusts lay their eggs before winter, but there's another variety that lay them and hatch in the same year. I read about them.”

“So a bunch of locusts that hatched this year already laid a bunch of eggs? Doesn't that mean there's a whole bunch of them?”

Her lack of vocabulary amazed even her.

“Indeed it does.”

The situation was bad enough that even the clever Noel didn't have any more words for it.

“Sara.”

“Yes?! What is it?”

She'd been distracted by the locusts in front of her, so she spun around in surprise when someone called her name from behind her.

“Mr. Edmond. Ann.”

This was really an emergency, so Sara had thought Ann would have stayed

behind at the lodging house today, but it seemed Edmond had brought her with him.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think Ann can stay with the Hunters today. Can I leave her with you?”

Up until yesterday, the Hunters hadn’t been busy enough that they couldn’t look after Ann, and she’d been able to help out as well, but it was hardly the time for that now. A small child would only get in the way in their rest area.

“Frankly speaking, the locusts won’t have any interest in a brick building. She’ll be safe inside, so she should stay in the lodging house today,” Noel said firmly before Sara even had to open her mouth.

“But I’ll be busy outside arranging various things today, so I won’t be able to be with her. I’d feel more comfortable leaving her with another Invited.”

She understood how he felt, but thought he was being a bit naive as a child’s guardian. Now Sara knew why Noel had told her that Ann’s safety was House Greif’s responsibility and not something she should have to worry about. It wasn’t just Lati whose treatment of Ann was somewhat problematic.

“Sara may have to join the fighting if she’s needed, and she’ll be busy making potions otherwise. There’s no guarantee she’ll be able to stay here all day, so please don’t be so reliant on her.”

“I understand.” This firm response came from Ann herself. “I only came here under the condition that I would do as I was told. I’ll head back to the lodging house right now and stay there with the staff.”

She knew that it would be dangerous for her to be on her own.

“It’s a bit of an emergency right now, so that would help.”

“Right! I’m going to go back, Ed. I’ll stay inside, so don’t worry about me,” Ann said, trotting off toward the lodging house. She seemed a lot more levelheaded than Edmond.

“Mr. Edmond, I’m sorry, but could you see Ann back to the lodging house?”

“R-Right. I should still have plenty of time to do that before getting to work...”

As one of the people responsible for overseeing this job, he was probably

busy procuring supplies and doing this and that. Still, he turned around to chase after Ann, when...

*Buzz.*

Sara looked around at the unfamiliar sound. It was a low sound like something rubbing against something else, and she could hear it from all over the hunting ground.

“But locusts make a chittering sound, right?”

As Sara puzzled over the mysterious sound, Noel gasped.

“Sara! The locusts!”

“Locusts? Ah!”

With a sizzling sound like water hitting hot metal, a black shadow passed by Sara’s face as a wind rustled her hair. It was a green grass locust.

“It jumped? Where’s Ann?!” She turned around and expanded her barrier out horizontally.

“Aah!” The locust was repelled by the barrier just before it could hit the crouching girl.

“I made it! Ann! Close your eyes!”

Sara wrapped her barrier around Ann and tugged it over to her—and Ann along with it. Ann landed softly at her feet.

“Huh? How’d I get here?”

“What’s going on?”

Noel could explain to them what had happened later. For now, everyone near the tables was protected by Sara’s barrier, but all around it, locusts were jumping up into the air with loud buzzing noises.

“It’s started... The disaster we all feared...” Noel muttered, and Edmond fell to his knees.

“How could this be? It’s over...”

There were clearly fewer locusts than there had been before, so they

wouldn't blanket the skies or anything, but this was sure to devastate this year's crop yields.

But there was still something Sara could do. She hurried and set her protection cases down around the tables.

*Wham!*

A locust slammed into the field and fell to the ground right away, so the cases were working, she determined with a sigh of relief.

"Please don't leave the range of the protection cases," she said before going over to the other side of the desks.

This situation was just like the one back in Camellia with the poison bog frogs. The Hunters before her were desperate to take down as many locusts as they could before the bugs took off flying. At this point, they had to leave the freshly hatched locusts for later, and no one had time to go chasing after the ones that had already flown off.

"So I'll buy them some time..."

Back with the frogs, she'd created a barrier like a backward shield to keep the monsters in place.

"But the locusts would be able to fly around a shield like that... It doesn't need to be high, but it needs to be wide... What should I...?"

She didn't think she was thinking for *too* long.

"I'll use wings to combat wings... Wings for my barrier!"

Sara spread her arms wide, imagining wings extending from her hands. Big, flexible wings to cover the entire area where the green grass locusts were jumping about.

"Magic will empower you in whatever way you imagine... Barrier!"

Sara's barrier didn't make a sound, but she almost felt like she could hear giant wings flapping as it expanded out around the hunting ground.

*Wham! Wham, wham!*

When the locusts hit the barrier, some of them fell to the ground and flipped

over, some wandered around like they'd lost their sense of direction, and some stopped moving altogether.

"My barrier is the ultimate defense! It can even repel wyverns!"

Sara's voice echoed across the hunting ground. How many locusts had already taken off in the time it had taken her to raise her barrier? But they were done for now. Sara raised her voice again.

"I won't let another one get away! Please take care of them now!"

"Yeah!"

The immediate replies likely came from the Hunters from Hydrangea.

Nelly's voice rang out at the same time.

"Hydrangea team! We're going after the locusts that have already flown away! Those from Gardenia, clean up the ones that remain here!"

"Hey! You'll hit the wall if you go that way!" one of the local Hunters called, seeing the locusts crashing up against Sara's barrier, but the Hunters from Hydrangea didn't stop running. "Wait! No way... Why does it not repel Hunters?"

It repelled her enemies but not her allies. The Hunters from Hydrangea knew that Sara's barrier worked differently from a set of protection cases.

"I'd estimate five hundred locusts took off just now," Chris muttered. Sara was shocked. She'd thought he'd been quiet. She had no idea he'd been counting the locusts. "I'm going to follow them as well."

Chris took off after the Hunters from Hydrangea, his apothecary's robes fluttering in the wind. For some reason, his going with them reassured her.

Sara lowered the arms she'd raised to visualize her barrier and relaxed her shoulders, getting ready to maintain her barrier for the rest of the day.

"Sara, do you want to sit?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Noel brought her a chair, so Sara sat down carefully. It was a race against time now. If Sara got tired and couldn't maintain her barrier anymore, the locusts

would all take off for Gardenia.

“Wow, Sara...”

She didn't even have the wherewithal to respond to Ann's sigh of amazement. Noel spoke up in her place.

“Shh. It might look like she's not doing anything, but she's concentrating on maintaining her barrier over a wide area right now. Let's keep quiet so we don't distract her.”

What was fortunate was that now that they'd started to move, the locusts were all gathering on one side of the barrier.

“Ugh... It's kind of gross seeing them all up close...” There was a staggering number of locusts and Hunters ruthlessly culling them right in front of her eyes. “But there's no choice... For the crops, so the people don't starve... Concentrate, concentrate...” she told herself.

She remembered the chaos with the continental tortoise the year before. “That was tiring too, but I got to move around a lot and make a bunch of those walls, so it definitely wasn't boring,” she muttered to herself so she didn't drift off and lose her concentration.

“Sara, it's noon. Do you think you can eat?”

She snapped back to reality when Noel asked her that. She might have been half-asleep at that point.

“My barrier?!”

“Don't worry, it's still up. It's amazing that you're still concentrating on it after six hours.”

“I think I was dozing off,” she confessed. As a habit from her time on the Dark Mountain, Sara could maintain her barrier even in her sleep. Her normal barrier was like a thin layer of skin she always kept around herself. She must have been so used to maintaining it for a long time that she could even handle a big barrier like this.

“If you can keep it up while you're sleeping, you should be able to eat, then.”

Still, she kept her eyes on the hunting ground as she munched on the



sandwich Noel handed her. She really *must* have been tired if a foodie like her didn't even check what was inside it before eating it.

"There's a lot fewer locusts now," she said.

"Well, they're gathering in one place now, so they don't have to go looking for them."

"Oh, where's Ann?"

"With your barrier, the way to the lodging house is safe now, so she went back."

Sara sighed in relief. A tackle from one of those locusts could do more than injure something if it landed wrong.

"Your barrier really is handy, though. My report-writing is going great today."

Noel smiled in satisfaction, telling her what he was writing about. She wished he hadn't.

"Then Sara the Invited declared, 'I won't let another one get away!'"

"Gyaaah! Cut it out!"

Her barrier wobbled for a second, her shock was so great. Of course, the locusts had been pounding on it like hail at first, but now they only crashed against it on occasion, so their numbers had fallen quite a bit.

"It's a depiction of exactly what happened with no dramatization."

"That's why it's embarrassing!"

Sara threw her head back to stare up at the sky. She had a new embarrassing memory to haunt her now.

"Heeey! Heeey!"

She could hear Nelly's voice coming from behind her.

"Are they done?"

She was curious to find out, but she still didn't want to take her eyes off the hunting ground.

"We finished off all the locusts that took off!"

A cheer came from the remaining Hunters. As for how she could be sure they'd gotten all of them, it must have been because Chris had been keeping count of them. He really was impressive to take care of something so important in a situation like that when such a thing hadn't even occurred to anyone else.

Ten people had taken care of five hundred locusts that had flown off in a wide range. Hydrangea's Hunters really were impressive.

"Okay, let's finish off the rest of them!"

They'd only just returned, but Hydrangea's Hunters joined the rest without even taking a break. Even Sara was starting to wobble in her chair with exhaustion when one of the local Hunters called out to her.

"Hey, Miss Invited. I think you can take the field down now. There's hardly any flying ones left now."

"Really?" Sara took a look out over the field and confirmed that there weren't any more locusts jumping into the air before letting her barrier fade away.

"Ahhh, I'm so tired..."

She crumpled to the ground, her strength sapped.

"There's no limit to my mana, but there's definitely a limit to my stamina and concentration..."

"You've done more than enough. It was very impressive. Good work."

She was grateful for Noel's generous appreciation.

As he quietly made potions with Chris, who had returned at some point, Sara dozed at their feet, hugging her knees, when a commotion came from the hunting ground. She kept her eyes closed, but her ears picked up shouting.

"No way... Gimme a break..." Sara finally opened her heavy eyelids.

"Locusts! They're flying back over there again!"

Sara was unsteadily getting to her feet when she heard Liam shout next.

"Knights! Head that direction! The wind is with us! We'll spread the paralysis agent in a wide area to bring them down to the ground!"

Sara was worried over whether they'd be okay, but Chris told her to relax.

“You’ve seen their improvements, right, Sara? I think they’ll be okay this time.”

Sara sat back down, relieved. She *had* been working with the knights on and off with Kuntz, and they hadn’t shown any lapses in judgment or excessive arrogance this time around.

“Guess I’ll go give them some more paralytics.”

Chris stored some freshly made paralytics in his pouch and another shout came from the hunting ground.

“They’ve adapted to the paralytic, the vermin!”

“I’ll go see what’s going on.”

Watching Chris run off, Sara finally got to her feet again. This was no time to be complaining about how tired or off-balance she was.

“Barrier! Huh?”

She tried to expand the barrier around her out like wings again, but it fizzled out halfway there.

“Sara, what’s wrong?”

“My barrier won’t spread out. What do I do?”

“Hmm. You’re on your feet, but you look like you could collapse at any moment, Sara. I don’t think you have the energy left to concentrate.”

“But...”

Everyone was relying on her barrier in a crisis. She didn’t want to tell them she couldn’t do it anymore all of a sudden, and she didn’t want the locusts getting all the way to Gardenia either. Sara desperately tried to summon the energy to put her barrier up once again.

“Please just get as much rest as you can for now. Look, the sun is starting to set. If the Hunters can handle things for just a little longer, night will come.”

She looked up and found that the sun had just hit the top of the mountains near the hunting ground. There was still some time before it would set completely, but evening was clearly on its way. She spotted something else

flitting through the evening sky as well.

“Oh, dragonflies. They really are big.”

She was able to make this carefree comment because the sky was so tranquil compared to the chaos on the ground.

“It’s gotten cooler, so their prey is probably out now.”

“There really are a lot of them.”

She’d been so busy, she’d had no time to look up at the sky lately. No, there was still no time to be looking up at the sky now.

“We don’t have enough paralytic! Just hunt as many of them as you can!”

The knights and Hunters were doing everything they could to continue driving their tired bodies forward, taking care of as many locusts as they could.

“No, wait...” Something was tugging at the back of Sara’s mind. “Evening. Dragonflies. Prey. Violet darners.”

“Sara? What’s up?”

Noel looked at her worriedly when Sara started muttering to herself.

“Hey, Noel. Do you think dragonflies would eat locusts?”

“They’re probably the right size, I guess...”

The green grass locusts were big, but the violet darners Sara had seen were a lot bigger. Sara tried to take a big step forward, but stumbled and ended up clinging to Noel to stay standing. But she had to get these words out at least.

“Chris! Chris!”

“What is it, Sara?!”

Chris heard her from where he was helping out the knights, but Sara was too frazzled to put together a full sentence.

“Up! Dragonflies! Silver dragonmint!”

“Silver... The repellent!” Chris grasped the meaning behind Sara’s incoherent string of words quickly. She should have just said “the dragon repellent,” but the words hadn’t come to her tongue quickly enough.

“A little bit should be enough! Just spread it out over a wide area!”

“Right! Knights! And Kuntz!”

Sara tried to head toward them on her unsteady legs as well. Even if she couldn't make the massive winglike barrier, she should at least be able to make a barrier over the locusts on the ground. They could disperse the dragon repellent more effectively with Sara's barrier.

“Sara, here. Get on my back.”

“Allen.”

Allen had been hunting this whole time, but all of a sudden, he was at Sara's side. He put her on his back without taking no for an answer and jogged over to where Chris was.

“Disperse the dragon repellent so that it hits as many locusts as possible. Sara, strengthen the effect with your barrier, but you don't need to push yourself if you can't do it.”

Sara nodded from Allen's back. “I'll do what I can.”

“I've got questions, but I'll ask them later. Do it.”

Liam was aware that there was no time to talk as well. Sara appreciated him cooperating without asking for details.

Unlike the paralysis agent, they just had to hit the locusts with a bit of the smell of the repellent. The knights threw the bottles as high and far as they could and Kuntz and some other wind magic casters dispersed the repellent over as wide an area as possible.

“Barrier.”

Sara pressed a barrier down over the locusts, trapping them on the ground with the repellent.

“Ugh, I feel like it's about to pop...”

“You can do it, Sara!”

“Right...”

She waited until the repellent had circulated throughout the barrier before

letting it fade. Suddenly, the floral scent of silver dragonmint filled the area.

“Aah, the locusts are gonna take off again...”

The repellent only gave them a scent. Once the barrier pinning them down was gone, the locusts began to chitter and move once again.

*Bzzz.*

*Bzzz.*

Loud twangs like strings being plucked sounded.

“What the...?”

“What was that sound?”

The Hunters looking left and right didn’t notice. The sound was coming from above.

Eventually they noticed Chris staring at the sky and one by one they started looking up and freezing.

“Dragonflies? Why?”

No one else knew why this was happening, but much more repellent than the tiny amount they’d experimented with back on the mountains had been dispersed in the area, and the sky was almost black with the shadows of the dragonflies swarming above them now.

“Everyone get back, slowly. To where Noel is.”

Chris’s voice carried well across the silent ground.

The Hunters slowly backed away, and once they’d gotten a good distance from the locusts, one of the locusts finally jumped into the air.

*Bzzz.*

*Bzzz.*

The dragonflies descended on the locusts all at once.

“Run!”

“Waaagh!”

When the Hunters fled to the area near Noel, Sara covered them all with a barrier that would repel smells. The Hunters and knights would all have the silver dragonmint scent on them now. They could easily become victims of the dragonflies too.

“I think I can manage this area.”

“It’s just for a bit longer. Night is almost here. You can do it, Sara.”

“Yeah.”

The over a hundred Hunters all huddled together watching the dragonflies’ evening feast. The larger locusts and the larvae only just emerging from the ground alike were grabbed by the dragonflies’ huge legs and jaws and lifted up into the sky.

“Wow...”

They watched the locusts shrink in number visibly, and before they knew it, there wasn’t a single dragonfly left in the sky either.

“Is it...over?”

She didn’t even know who had asked that, but by the time the last rays of the sun had faded beyond the horizon, she thought she heard a great cheer go up from the hunting ground. She only *thought* this because some time in the middle of all that, she’d lost consciousness and had fallen asleep on Allen’s back.

“Mmn...”

Sara leaped up when she saw sunlight streaming into the room through a gap in the curtains.

“I have to get up!”

“You can keep sleeping.”

“Huh?”

Ann sat on the next bed over, smiling at Sara.

“Where’s Nelly? Am I late? The locusts... Nngh...”

Just as she tried to recall what had happened the day before, Sara felt an

uncomfortable sensation somewhere around her stomach and sank back down onto the bed.

“I think you’re dehydrated. Here.” Ann poured some water into a cup and brought it over to Sara. This time she sat up slowly and took the water, feeling it slowly fill her stomach. “You’ve been sleeping since evening yesterday. Are you hungry?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“I’ll go get you something to eat, then.” Ann opened the door and left.

“The last time I passed out, it was Ted watching me, wasn’t it?” When Sara remembered that, she burst out laughing and felt a lot better. “So it’s Ann this time. I guess I was just sleeping, so it’s fine.”

She was pretty sure she’d fallen asleep on Allen’s back, so things could have been better, but they could have been worse. She was a little embarrassed about how childish she must have seemed, though.

“Come to think about it, Ann said using magic made her feel better, right?”

Sara tried making a light above her hand.

“Hmm... I don’t feel any different.”

Now that she thought about it, she was always using her barrier magic, so creating one light probably didn’t make much of a difference.

“I don’t feel as bad after drinking water anyway.”

All that remained was a heavy, sluggish fatigue.

There was a knock at the door and Ann returned, this time with Noel.

“How are you feeling?” Noel asked her.

“Okay, I think. The water helped.” Sara returned the cup to Ann. “You two are acting like I’m sick, but I’m just a little tired. How’s the situation, though?”

Everything that had happened the day before made her feel like the whole thing was over now, but it was likely that more eggs were hatching today or more locusts were arriving from farther north. It might not be bad enough that she would have to use her barrier again, but Sara was still prepared to head out



into the field as well after getting a little rest.

“The number of locusts seems much smaller than it was yesterday. The Hunters should be able to take turns resting today.”

Noel smiled and took Sara’s hand, observing her condition. Ted had done the same to her before, and it was something she did herself as an apothecary, so she wasn’t particularly surprised at the gesture. He really was Liam’s brother, though... Her heart skipped a beat from how handsome he was up close.

“You don’t look like you’ll need a potion. I think you really are just tired.”

His examination over, Noel let out a sigh of relief. Sara relaxed as well. It didn’t seem like she’d have to rush outside to help.

On the other side of the room, Ann was setting food out on a small table.

“There are a lot of things I’d like to ask about yesterday. The barrier... Well, I suppose I should expect as much from you, Sara, so that’s fine.”

“You shouldn’t expect it. It’s not fine.” Sara felt she had to at least respond to Noel’s outrageous accusation.

Noel just smiled in response. “I’m also curious about the dragonflies, but all that can wait. I have some news for you.”

He was giving her an update, so Sara decided to stay quiet and listen instead of making more retorts.

“Keiligh arrived from Gardenia last night.”

As Noel spoke, Ann pulled Sara from the bed over to the table. She sat her down in a chair and gestured for her to eat.

“Go ahead,” Noel told her. “So, Keiligh...”

Sara wasn’t expecting Keiligh to come all this way, so she was a little surprised. She picked up the slightly warm bread before her and tore a piece off. When she tasted the bread and the butter, her appetite returned in full force.

“He brought not only antiparalytcs and potions but a large amount of feed as well.”

“Feed,” Sara parroted curiously, so Noel elaborated.

“Dried food for livestock in the winter and all sorts of freshly harvested plants. He kept pulling out one thing after another, so it was almost like he was just showing off what a storage bag could do.”

Noel’s eyes shimmered like he was remembering something amusing.

“It was his thought that if the locusts adapted when they didn’t have enough to eat, maybe we should *give* them food to eat, so he went around harvesting all sorts of weeds and grasses. He’s feeding the remaining small number of locusts as an experiment now. If you’d like, we could go and watch when you’re done eating, Sara.”

Noel must have been restless because he was eager to go and watch himself. Sara couldn’t say that she wasn’t interested herself. Up until yesterday, they’d all been hunting so intently without even time to rest, but now things had calmed down enough that they could experiment a little. She was happy to hear it.

She ate as fast as she could without being impolite and found herself holding hands with Ann as they left the lodging house. If things really had calmed down as much as they said, it should be fine to bring Ann with them.

No matter how Allen felt about it, or what Noel thought about it, as one of her fellow Invited, Sara wanted to show Ann whatever she could and let her have as many experiences as she could as well.

“Sara! Good work out there!”

“It’s the Invited! You were amazing yesterday!”

The people they passed by called out in greeting as they went.

“Thank you,” Sara replied with a smile. This might have been the first time she was complimented so openly before, maybe because she tended to do things quietly so that she didn’t stand out.

They headed for the area where they’d left their tables and found that the place looked completely different than it had the day before.

“So they’re still hunting.”

Light green larvae were still hatching and black locusts could still be seen chittering away here and there, but there were far fewer of them than there had been up until now.

The Hunters had been frantically culling as many locusts as they could the day before, but today, about half of the group were sitting around on the ground, resting.

“No, *some* of them are resting, but it looks like a lot of people have gathered in one place...”

There was a group of people on one end of the hunting ground. Sara thought she could see some apothecary’s robes, so Keiligh and Chris must have been over there as well.

“Let’s go.”

Sara hurried after Noel, still holding Ann’s hand. As they got closer, they could hear a rustling sound that was different from all the noises they’d heard so far. Knights stood at each corner of an area where a huge amount of grass and straw was piled up, and a couple of the black locusts were devouring the plants with everything they had.

“Chris.”

Chris turned around and gave Sara a quick once-over, then relaxed. “Looks like you’re okay.”

“Yes.”

“Good. You were a hero yesterday, Sara. Nice work keeping them here like that.”

It was rare for Chris to give someone such unreserved praise.

“I did my best, but so did the Hunters who went after the locusts that flew off, and the ones that stayed behind too. And the knights scattered the paralysis agent and you counted the number of locusts, and then in the end, the dragonflies carried off the rest of them, right?”

This was Sara’s recollection of events.

“You really are humble, and you pay attention to what happens around you.”

This compliment came from Liam, who had walked over after noticing Sara's arrival.

"If you hadn't stopped them there, we would never have been able to finish off all the locusts, and they would have done a lot of damage to Gardenia. We were only able to hunt the locusts like we did thanks to your barrier. And..." Liam spread his arms, apparently not finished. "I heard about the dragonflies from Chris. He said if you hadn't been here, he wouldn't have remembered your experiments on the mountain and he wouldn't have thought to make use of the repellent either. In other words, we wouldn't have the peace we have today if not for you, Sara."

It was rare to be complimented by Chris, but it was unbelievable to receive such praise from Liam, so Sara was starting to panic. But more and more Hunters came by to sing her praises as well.

"But I had no idea the dragonflies would show up like that, and I didn't know if they'd eat the locusts or not either... It was a coincidence, really..." Sara murmured quietly enough that her voice was drowned out by the furious munching of the locusts.

"The Invited really are something. Everyone's so impressed. I've heard so much about what happened yesterday that I wish I could have shown up just a little earlier to see it for myself. If only I'd gotten here about three hours sooner."

"Oh, come on..."

When even Keiligh started piling on the praise, Sara went red, not knowing what to do anymore.

"By the way, Keiligh, what are you doing here?" Her only choice was to change the subject.

"Mm. Well, all we apothecaries can do is make potions. We're healers, essentially."

Sara nodded intently. In a world without doctors, it was the apothecaries who healed the people and treated Hunters' injuries with their potions.

"When I heard Chris was researching paralytics and antiparalytics,

experimenting with making stronger ones, I wondered why he would do something so pointless, but I was speechless when I heard about the dragon repellent. I didn't even like the idea of improving on original potion formulations, so it had never even occurred to me to try to invent new ones."

"It was in no way a disrespect to your teachings to value the fundamentals. It was necessary to protect someone important to me."

Keiligh had been speaking to Sara, but Chris must have felt admonished in some way. Sara was a little surprised by his excuses. He was normally never bothered by anything someone else said to him.

Keiligh gave him a gentle smile. "I don't consider it a disrespect. I'm just mocking my own hardheadedness."

"You're not hardheaded, Keiligh. You were the one who taught me how to be an apothecary when I was determined not to fit in with anyone around me."

Keiligh slowly shook his head. "You could have become an apothecary much sooner. You had the ability to become guildmaster sooner as well. I think the fact that you didn't shows the actual extent of my ability."

Chris's interruption was getting the subject further and further away from the question Sara had asked, but she figured it would be pretty fun to hear about Chris's past as well. She leaned forward without thinking, listening raptly to the two of them.

"No, it was me. I didn't care about being an apothecary or the guildmaster as long as I could make potions."

"Until you met Nefertari, that is."

Sara leaned forward even more. She *needed* details.

"Yes, I suppose so. But this is no time to be talking about that. I'm sorry, Sara."

Sara was aghast. If they ceased this line of conversation, she wouldn't be able to hear any fun stories about Nelly and Chris.

"Right. Sorry. So anyway..."

She couldn't deny that she was a bit disappointed when things got back on

track.

“As you can see, I’m a bit hardheaded and old-fashioned, but I don’t dislike Chris’s open-minded way of doing things. In fact, after hearing about the success of his dragon repellent, I realized this was no time for me to be just living out a carefree retirement.”

From what he’d said so far, it seemed that Keiligh thought of himself as old-fashioned, but Sara saw him only as an apothecary who wished to nurture his young student’s talents instead of being jealous of his accomplishments. The way Chris respected him as his mentor only lent credence to that. Sara had never seen Chris express much in the way of caring to anyone other than Nelly, but here he was showing Keiligh the utmost respect.

“As an apothecary, all I could do during this crisis was provide as many potions as possible to the people here. But when I wondered if there was anything *else* I could do to help, this is what I came up with.” Keiligh indicated the green grass locusts devouring the mountain of plants. “If they adapt when they don’t have enough food, I wondered what would happen if they *were* given enough to eat. Of course, it’s not an experiment that’s going to yield results particularly quickly.”

Keiligh started gesticulating a little as he went on. The more he spoke, the more he seemed to resemble Chris to Sara, and she had to stop herself from laughing about it.

“Even if it does succeed and a couple locusts go back to their original forms, what would that mean? And if we find out that feeding them can make them revert, where would we get the vast amounts of fodder we’d need? It’s not a realistic plan. I know that, but...” Keiligh stopped gesticulating and dropped his arms.

“But you have to try things to learn, right?” Sara continued for him. “I think experimentation and verifying results is important.”

“Exactly. You’ve got a fine apprentice, Chris.”

“I do.”

Sara wanted to shout it out to the whole world. *Chris* was agreeing. The Chris

who seemed to think of her only as a useful extra hand to have around. *He* was agreeing that Sara was a fine apprentice.

She wanted to do a little dance about it, but Sara was a mature young lady, so she merely cleared her throat and decided to observe the green grass locusts instead. Aside from their menacing black color and how big they were, they didn't seem like a threat at all as they munched away on the pile of feed.

"They look so normal now. Is it something like an illness that makes them like this?"

"That isn't quite right. It's more like since they've starved almost to their limit, they've gone into battle mode to try to extend their lives as much as possible to give birth to a new generation. In a way, it's worse than an illness."

It wasn't that humans had invaded their territory or anything like that. It was just that different weather conditions this year had starved them and forced them to adapt. Still, if they were left alone, they would cause *humans* to starve.

If the green grass locusts starved and their numbers were reduced, or if humans starved and their numbers were reduced, time would solve that problem. It didn't matter to the world what manner of creatures inhabited it. Sara almost thought she could hear the goddess saying, "It matters to me," but she'd probably just imagined it.

But when she thought of the goddess, Sara remembered the continental tortoise incident the year before. In the end, they'd never figured out the reason for the creature's trip from the south to the north, but they'd speculated that it had something to do with regulating the mana in the world just like bringing the Invited over did.

The most shocking thing to her about that incident was seeing Allen passed out clinging to the continental tortoise. But Chris's idea to have Kuntz hit the tortoise's eye with a potion had also left an impression on her. It would never have occurred to her to use a potion on a monster, and it was a shock to realize that even other apothecaries might have entirely different ways of looking at things. It made her feel all the more immature that it was her mentor who thought so much differently than her.

"If they were hurt or paralyzed, we could do something about it with potions.

You know, like you did with the continental tortoise last year.”

At Sara’s nonchalant comment, both Chris and Keiligh glanced over at the green grass locusts in realization and started taking potions out of the pouches on their waists. Sara was shocked by the swiftness of their reactions.

“W-Wait a second!” She ended up stopping the two of them, who were clearly ready to try it out already.

“Why?”

“Experimentation and verifying results, right?”

She wished they wouldn’t turn to look at her at exactly the same time like twins. Sara moved her hands as she tried to convince the two of them.

“I’m sorry, but you’ll ruin your *current* experiment! I mean, those locusts have already eaten a ton of feed, right?”

The munching had died down at this point and there were even some locusts who were taking a break from eating at this point.

“I-If you’re going to experiment, you’ll have to pick locusts who haven’t eaten and who have and you’ll have to give potions to some and not give them to others.”

She hoped her hasty explanation had gotten her point across.

“If you don’t, it’ll ruin Keiligh’s experiment, which I think would be a waste.”

Sara’s mention of potions was just something that had occurred to her on a whim after hearing about Keiligh’s experiment. His actual experiment, on the other hand, was something he’d come up with after considering the ecology of the locusts, and on top of that, it was already underway.

“You have a point.”

“We got a little too hasty.”

Sara was getting dizzy. It was like there were two Chrises.

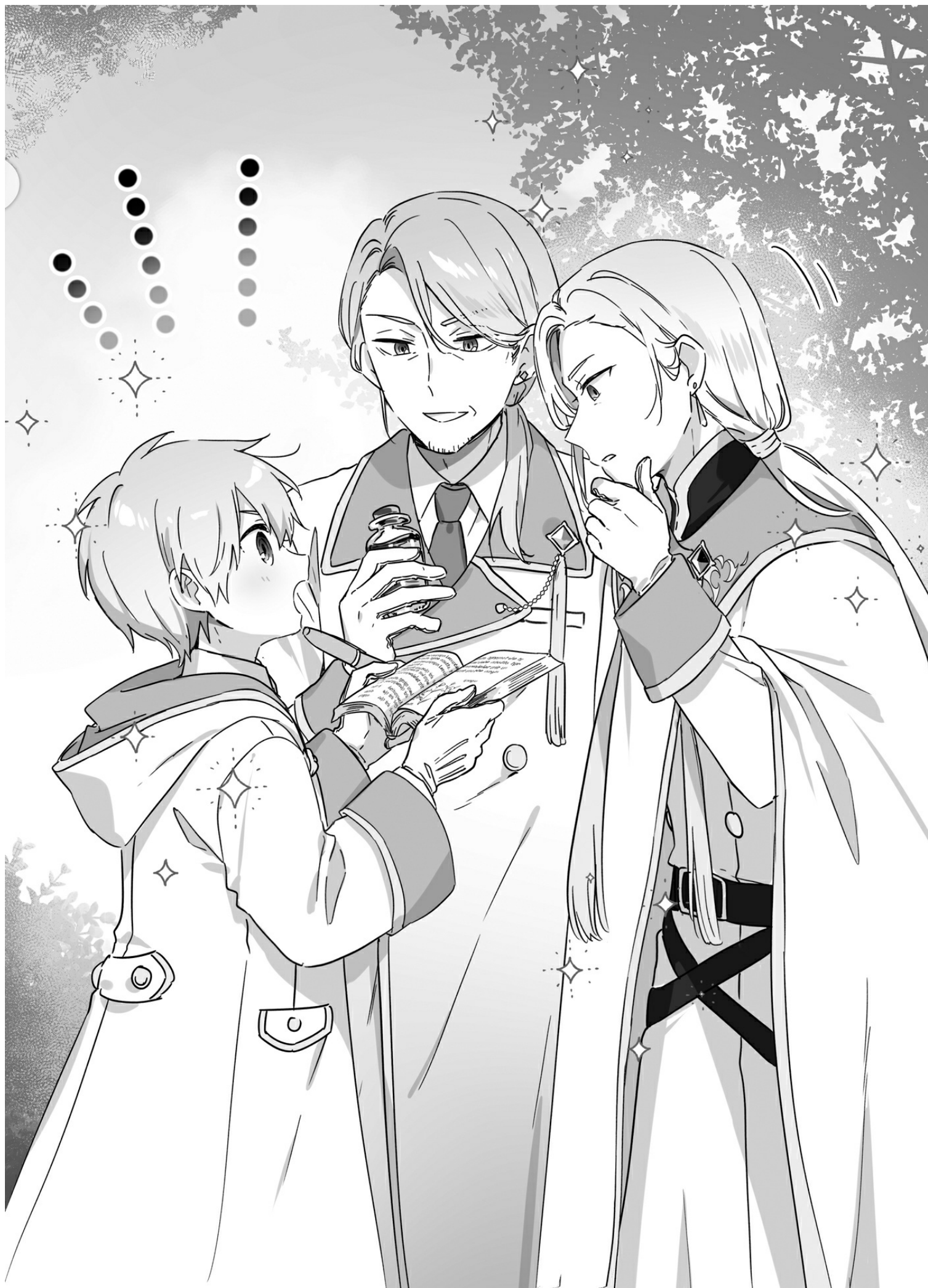
“Here’s a list of variables. How would you like to experiment?”

Sara turned around in surprise when a new voice joined them and found Noel making a list in a notebook. He’d been listening silently this whole time,



considering the experiment in his own way. It was another display of his frightening competence.

The three apothecaries began a discussion without any more input from Sara. At this point, she could just help out when it was time to get started with the actual work.



With this going on, she lost interest and instead took to absentmindedly watching some locusts eating grass, when she noticed Ann taking a notepad out of her pocket and making her own notes.

“Learn the writing system here...”

It was Ann’s own to-do list.

“Oh, it’s Japanese. Haven’t seen that in a while.”

“Yeah. I’ve been here for half a year, but I haven’t really studied how to read or write. I was thinking I might be able to help out by taking notes just now, but it was kind of a shock to realize I couldn’t read what Noel had written.”

“Yeah... You can understand what people are saying, but reading and writing’s different.”

For her part, Sara tended to be bored without things to read. When she’d realized the translation function the goddess had given her didn’t work with writing, she’d had Nelly teach her right away, so she figured out reading and writing pretty quickly.

“A book on medicinal plants is one thing, but magic textbooks will be useless if you can’t read, so you’ll have to learn.”

“Mm-hm. I can move around all I want now, so I’ll be able to do whatever I want to do. If I learn to read, I can study whatever I want too.”

Seeing Ann getting pumped up, Sara started to feel like there *had* been some meaning in her coming to Gardenia.

“Come to think of it, how’s your health lately?”

At Sara’s words, the three apothecaries all turned to them at once, perhaps conditioned to respond every time they heard words like “health” and “injury.”

“Why are you asking about *my* health? You’re the one who pushed yourself too hard and passed out, Sara.”

Sara might have done that, but she was always healthy otherwise, so Ann’s neglected health was more worth worrying about as far as Sara was concerned.

“I’m fine,” said Ann. “I was worried about whether my stamina would hold

out, but training with magic here and there is really giving me a lot of energy. I go to bed early too.”

This report was not just for Sara’s benefit but to placate the other three apothecaries as well.

“Ed doesn’t seem worried at all anymore. He’s completely left you in Sara and Noel’s care lately. I guess in that sense, I can see why Lati worries so much,” Keiligh said.

Now that he mentioned it, Ann had almost been tackled by a locust just yesterday. She’d been fine since Sara was there, but Ed wasn’t concerned about her at all even after something like that happened and was letting her do as she liked. Sara got the feeling that no one should tell Lati about this.

“I think I’m fine now,” Ann said confidently. “When my spirit was weaker, Lati’s concern weighed so heavily on me it was almost scary, but now that I know what it is I want to do, I think I can accept what she feels for me as consideration. And...” Ann smiled. She no longer looked quite so fragile, but she was still an adorable girl. “If I get healthier and start having fun, I think Lati will be happy too.”

Sara felt herself relaxing. From her perspective, she had almost considered Lati an enemy with the way her overprotectiveness was smothering Ann. She had been starting to wonder if it was okay to leave the two of them as they were. But if Ann had grown to care for Lati as well in the last six months, then the two of them would probably be fine from now on.

“I’m okay. I’ll stay out of trouble and keep myself amused, so you can do your experiments.”

Ann’s curious and lively personality was on full display as she decided how she’d spend her day without worrying too much about getting in people’s way.

“With how relaxed things are today, you can probably walk around on your own. If you’re going to be alone, though, you shouldn’t come over to this side of Noel’s table.”

Chris gave Ann that piece of advice before going back to discussing their experiment.

“I think I’ll go see how the Hunters are doing.” Sara was curious about Allen and the knights, so she made to head for the hunting ground.

“Sara.”

“Y-Yes?”

“Do you think any of the apothecaries here can afford to be so idle?”

“Yeah, I thought you might say that...”

Maybe Sara really was just a handy assistant to Chris.

And so, Sara ended up joining in on the experiments as the fourth apothecary. She watched Ann a little enviously as the other girl wandered around, enjoying whatever she took interest in.

As the locusts munched on their grass, the Hunters steadily reduced their numbers.

“Well, there was no change in one day.”

They decided not to give any of them potions until they’d been fed for a full day and continued with their observations, making paralytics when they had spare time. Even if there was no longer any need to use them, they still had to replenish the stock they’d used up. And they didn’t actually know if they wouldn’t need any more at this point either.

Even at dinner, the four apothecaries sat at the same table.

“When they change and start moving, they continue on as they eat up all the crops in their way, right? It’s not like they stop once they find somewhere with enough food.”

“Yes, they keep moving until winter, when they no longer can. It’s a matter of luck whether or not the locusts that hatch the year after will change or not.”

Once the locusts turned black, they kept moving until they died. There were no records of black locusts becoming green again according to Keiligh.

“But it’s not like we know exactly how detailed the records are. It’s unlikely that anyone ever observed them after their change to see if they would change

back.”

“I haven’t seen those records yet myself. Maybe I should have looked at them before joining in,” Noel said regretfully.

“No, it was a big help, you being here from the beginning and making so many paralytics on-site. Since the knights were here more to test their paralytics than take part in the extermination, they really went through more of them than I expected.”

“Thank you.” He seemed happy to have his hard work acknowledged. As a rule, apothecary work tended to be monotonous and wasn’t usually complimented, so having someone praise you for your work really did feel good. That went double if the person doing it was someone like Chris.

Naturally, Nelly was also at the table where Sara was. Or maybe it was better to say that she was at the table where her fiancé, Chris, was at this point. But it was Sara she was looking at with amusement.

“What’s up, Nelly? You look pleased.” She was being so obvious Sara felt like she had to ask.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just thinking that you really are a full-fledged apothecary now.”

“Really? I look like a real apothecary?”

In Hydrangea, Sara was still nothing more than a novice. She straightened her apothecary’s robe, puffing her chest out with pride.

“Of course you do. You’ve grown.” There seemed to be a faint bit of loneliness in Nelly’s otherwise happy tone.

“Nef. I know you must feel lonely now that your baby girl is growing up...”

Chris stood right away and put a hand on Nelly’s shoulder. Part of Sara had to wonder if Chris really understood the feeling of loneliness, but as always, he was quick when it came to Nelly.

“But I’ll always be with you, so there’s no need for you to be lonely.”

“You’re so annoying.”

Though they were engaged now, Nelly still brushed Chris off. Quiet laughter filled the dining hall, the tension from the last few days finally eased.

What would tomorrow bring? It might have been a bit imprudent, but as an apothecary, Sara went to bed excited to find out.

“Okay, we’ll start with a black locust that’s transformed,” Chris announced, pouring a potion onto a black locust that had been distracted with feed.

“What a waste...” Allen, who’d come to observe, muttered frankly. The other Hunters joining him all seemed to agree.

For a young person who had just become a Hunter, just buying a single potion was a difficult feat. Even currently well-off Hunters couldn’t forget the difficulties they’d faced when just starting out. Sara’s heart stung a little when she thought back to everything that had happened back in Rosa.

When the potion was poured on it, the locust froze in surprise for a moment, but its color didn’t change and it quickly went back to eating the grass in front of it.

“No change. Next.”

Even without results, Chris and the other apothecaries weren’t discouraged, moving on to the next locust.

“This one was given food all day yesterday. Its color is black. Let’s see...”

Chris poured a potion on the locust munching away on a mountain of feed. The locust suddenly stopped eating, looking a bit confused.

“Ohh...”

“It’s...”

Eventually it turned from black to mottled green, then returned to a full green color.

“Hmm. Its color changed, but it still has wings. In other words, it’s still capable of flight, so this doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s no longer a danger... Okay, next.”

Ignoring the impressed cries of the watching Hunters, the apothecaries moved on to the next black locust. They had given food to about twenty of them to observe them, and they planned to give half that number of potions.

“The second, changed color. Next.”

The effects of the potions were so consistent that by the tenth locust, the watching Hunters had all gotten bored and wandered off somewhere else.

“Speaking realistically, it’s more work to feed the locusts and then give them potions instead of simply hunting them,” was Noel’s conclusion.

“Yes,” Keiligh agreed. “If we were to implement something like this, it would take more people than hunting them would. It helps that they wouldn’t all have to be Hunters, though. We wouldn’t have to call people here from other regions. It would take a lot of potions, but it might not be as costly as hiring Hunters. We’d have to do some calculations.”

Keiligh’s point of view was rather administrative, befitting his experience as a guildmaster, but Sara was curious about something else.

“We’re only experimenting on individual locusts right now, but what would happen if the ones who changed back rejoined the other locusts? Do you think the other black locusts would turn green again too?”

When the locusts turned black, it started with one, which caused the rest to follow like Othello pieces. Could the same happen in reverse, then?

“Hmm. Let’s move one of the reverted locusts over to the black locusts.”

“It’s finally my time to shine, eh?” Allen, who had been watching silently, perked up and grabbed a green locust, hefting it up.

“Eep!”

Huge locusts were definitely not cute, even held up in someone’s arms. Ignoring the locust’s chittering, Allen moved it to where a few black locusts were gathered as per his instructions, then gently set it down in the middle of them.

The green locust twitched its antennae as if in annoyance, but didn’t move from the spot where it had been set down.



“Aww.” A disappointed sound escaped Sara’s mouth. “It turned black again...”

It seemed just one locust wasn’t going to do the trick.

“Okay!” Allen exclaimed enthusiastically. He crouched down slowly and this time picked up a locust that had been black to start with. “You want one of these next to the green locusts this time, right? There’s no time to mope around.”

“You deserve your reputation as a hero. You’re quick-witted, aren’t you?”

Allen looked bashful in response to Keiligh’s praise, hurrying over to where the green locusts were.

“I’ll put this one in the middle of five of the remaining nine, and then I’ll put the one that turned black again in the middle of the other four.”

The experiment had gotten rather complicated and confusing, and their results were somewhat awkward as well. The black locusts Allen had carried over just wouldn’t turn green again. By evening, the one they’d poured the potion on that had gone back to black finally became green again, but the one that had started out black never turned green.

“It seems that once they sense danger and transform, they won’t change back just because they’re given enough food to eat,” Keiligh said with some disappointment.

“I think it’s useful to know that they will turn back with a potion after feeding them for a day, though,” Sara told him.

It was rare to get results from experiments like this in a single day. Normally, something like this would take years of experimenting, yet they’d gotten results in a mere two days.

“I suppose you’re right. An apothecary’s work is the repetition of simple tasks. I should be satisfied with simply taking a single step forward for now instead of contenting myself with merely creating the same potions we’ve been making for hundreds of years. Besides, it’s just like you said. We did get *some* results,” Keiligh said as if trying to convince himself. He was staring off into empty space, likely planning the continuation of the experiment for the next day.

“I was thinking I might retire soon, but now, thanks to you young apothecaries, I’ve got the task of observing the green grass locusts again next year. I appreciate it.”

Sara and Noel were simply bashful when Keiligh bowed his head to them, but Chris had a different reaction.

“If you’re feeling grateful toward us, then how about exporting some more medicinal plants from the east?” Chris immediately began negotiating.

Keiligh raised an eyebrow. “Oh? There haven’t been any orders for plants from Hydrangea in the last two years.”

“Not to Hydrangea. We collect enough medicinal plants on our own. I want you to send more stock to Rosa and the capital.”

Both were places where Chris had served as guildmaster in the past.

“What reason do you have to look out for guilds where you no longer reside?”

“Rosa and the capital have both started efforts to procure their own medicinal plants. As long as they’re making an effort, I don’t mind lending them a hand.”

“They haven’t changed the amount they’re ordering, though.”

“They’ve had shortages for so long, I imagine they want to keep their stock as full as possible.”

Just like Keiligh did, Sara found it surprising that Chris would propose something to benefit other towns’ guilds.

Keiligh considered the matter silently for a bit as other people conversed around them, eventually nodding to himself when he made up his mind.

“With the continental tortoise and now the green grass locusts, we’re seeing an inordinate number of disasters recently. I suppose this isn’t necessarily the end of them.”

Sara wished he wouldn’t glance at her when he said this. She’d been coincidentally involved in both incidents, but neither of them had been her fault. And she wasn’t the only one either. Nelly, Chris, and Allen had all been involved too.

“I suppose I’ll suggest the various guilds all increase their stock of ingredients and potions for the time being, and volunteer to increase imports of plants from the east for that purpose. I’ll have to consult with Ed first, of course, since it will mean hiring more gatherers.”

Edmond was sitting with Ann at the knights’ table, wrapped up in a lively conversation with them.

“He’s better than dealing with a lord who has to be involved in every little thing, but I’m shocked at how little interest he has in our experiments,” Keiligh said exasperatedly.

Now that she thought about it, Ann hadn’t hung out with them at all today either, Sara realized somewhat belatedly.

“I’m not interested in the least either,” Nelly said proudly. Sara wasn’t sure exactly how they were supposed to react to that statement.

“Ah, the way you listen even when you’re not interested...”

“Yes, it’s very charming, isn’t it?” Noel said, humoring Chris.

Sara looked around and noticed that Allen and Kuntz were nowhere in sight either.

Nelly shrugged. “I’ve always thought this while watching Chris, but apothecaries really are a little weird, aren’t they?”

Sara almost burst out laughing. She had to stop herself from pointing out that Nelly was just as weird herself, only in a different way.

“Listen. Most people aren’t interested in locusts in the first place. We’re here because we’re Hunters on a job, but the only thing we’re interested in is how to complete that job more efficiently.” It was a refreshingly Hunter-like take on the subject. “The average person has no interest in locusts unless they happen to like bugs. So it’s only natural that Ann and Ed have no interest in your experiments. And the knights probably don’t think much differently than Hunters.”

Sara followed Nelly’s gaze to the tables where the Hunters and knights were sitting, all engaged in pleasant conversation. The whole place seemed relaxed

now that they were over the hardest part of the job. True, for that bunch, all that was left was cleaning up the rest of the locusts—an easy task.

The apothecaries' table was the only one where they were reflecting on the day's events and having a serious conversation about future countermeasures and experiments.

Nelly smiled. "I respect the way you apothecaries do things. I think it's great that you're always thinking about what to do next. But that's all the more reason why I think you might want to relax sometime soon."

"It's great..." Chris seemed to have plucked out only that part of what Nelly had said. Sara really thought he should pay more attention.

She had a point, in any case. Chris and Noel in particular had been keeping the knights stocked up on paralytics from the very beginning of the job.

"You've more than fulfilled your obligation as apothecaries. You have no responsibility to do any more. If there *is* something you should be doing, it's not regretting or making deals, it's enjoying yourself a little bit."

It was rare for Nelly to be so talkative, but maybe she was right. Maybe they were still too preoccupied with their experiments when the job was finally almost over. But thinking about this just made Sara realize that she cared more about finishing their experiments than the end of the job.

"I suppose so. There are far fewer locusts now and we've managed to keep them away from Gardenia. If we cull their numbers just a bit more, the local Hunters should be able to take care of the rest... I see." Keiligh looked toward the knights and Hunters who were enjoying themselves in the dining hall. "The danger has passed."

*The danger has passed.*

Keiligh's words sank into Sara's chest. Culling the green grass locusts hadn't been a request for Sara or for Chris. Even Noel's desire to record the event could be interpreted as nothing more than a vacation for him.

In other words, aside from Keiligh, all the apothecaries here were taking part in the job of their own volition, and they were the ones most passionate about it at this point.

Sara had decided of her own will to become an apothecary after coming to this world, but when she thought back on her life thus far, she'd done a lot of going with the flow. But this time, she'd seen the plight of the local people and gotten involved of her own volition. She'd used her power as an Invited and she'd collaborated with the other apothecaries to do all she could as one of them too. And as a result, the danger had passed.

Sara looked up, sat up straight, and turned toward Nelly.

"You're all grown up. I'm proud of you."

"Yeah!"

For being a grown-up apothecary, her response might have been a bit childish. But she felt like she'd become someone who could stand at Nelly's side now.

## Epilogue: Things Left Undone

The danger might have passed, but there were still some black locusts remaining, and more locusts were hatching from their underground eggs every day. It wouldn't be easy to find the eggs and dig them up, and when tensions were starting to rise again, with Hunters wondering how long they would have to keep fighting, Ed finally declared the job over.

"There are hardly any adult locusts left, and the Hunters in the east should be able to take care of the rest of the larvae hatching from their eggs."

Even non-Hunters could easily dispose of freshly hatched locusts. The farmers were planning to return to their fields, since they had their summer work waiting for them, and Ed planned to hire people temporarily to clean up the rest of the locusts until they went dormant in winter.

"Ann seems to be doing fine now, so I think I'll stay behind and do a little more on my own. I won't be able to go and see you off, but I hope you'll get in touch if you're ever in the east again."

Keiligh still had some experiments he wanted to do, so he returned to the hunting ground in high spirits with some apothecaries he'd summoned from Gardenia.

The knights had gone back to the capital as soon as they'd determined that there were few enough locusts left that Hunters would be enough to take care of them.

"We weren't fighting monsters this time, but I still feel like we got some incredibly important data here for the use of the paralysis agent against monsters."

Liam had left in high spirits, his entirely selfish motivations obvious. It was almost refreshing how honest he was about it.

"Noel wants to stay, so I hope you'll look after him."

Now that he was no longer interested in Sara, Liam no longer annoyed her. In

fact, she almost found him pleasant to be around. But he was still selfish, of course.

Still, when the locusts had been at their most numerous, it was the knights who had culled their numbers most efficiently. No matter what their motives had been, they were more than deserving of gratitude for their part in things.

They'd received Ed's thanks and went straight back to the capital, going around the north way without returning to the mansion.

Noel, on the other hand, had gone back to the mansion with Ed instead of staying with Keiligh.

"I have some reading to do in the lord's mansion, after all. I apologize for imposing, but I'll be staying for a little while longer as I look over your records."

No matter *his* motives, if Noel hadn't been there as an apothecary, it was very likely that there wouldn't have been enough paralytics and potions to get the job done. He had contributed more than enough as well.

"Stay as long as you like. I'm sure Ann will be pleased to have the company as well." Ed was happy to let him stay.

Ann had stayed at the hunting ground for as long as Ed had. Lati had sent messages telling her, "I think it's about time you came home," several times and had even almost visited personally, but Ed had managed to persuade her not to.

"Who would run things back at the mansion if even Lati came up here?"

Sara was a bit relieved that that had been enough to convince her, but she kept that relief to herself. She just couldn't be comfortable around Lati after the bad first impression she'd gotten of her.

In the carriage on the way back to the mansion, Sara had finally gotten to have a long chat with Ann. She'd only been able to spend time with her in the beginning, at the mansion. After the threat of the locusts had passed, they still hadn't spent much time together, since Ann was running around doing whatever she felt like at that point.

"You seem like you're doing a lot better."

"Yeah. I'm able to eat a lot more now, and I feel like I'm getting more stamina

the more I move around.” Ann curled her arm, flexing her muscles. She was still thin, of course, but her complexion looked a lot better, and there was a nimbleness to her movements that she hadn’t had before.

“I’m sure Lati will be thrilled when we get home. You really look a lot better.” Ed’s eyes were full of affection as he watched Ann.

Ed, Ann, Nelly, Sara, and Noel rode in the carriage. Ri and Chris had said they’d had something to do and were in one of the Hunters’ carriages.

Ann was seated next to Sara, practicing putting up a barrier.

“You can make a dog out of flame, so I think you understand how important visualization is to magic.”

“I do, but it really is hard to do things you can’t see.”

Everyone’s imaginations were different, and Ann apparently struggled with the image of an invisible soap bubble that Sara used to conjure her barrier.

“Hmm... I still think barriers are the best way to practice magic. I mean, there are times when you can’t use fire or water, but you can always make a barrier.”

“In that case, you could say the same about physical strengthening,” Nelly said with a smile as she watched over them. But Nelly wasn’t good at teaching, so Ann wouldn’t be able to learn anything from her. At least, that’s what Sara thought...

“Want to try it? First, concentrate on your muscles.”

“Okay.”

Sara had no interest in muscles, so she didn’t have much luck when she tried concentrating on them, but Ann stuck her right arm out right away.

“I can picture how arm muscles move when you grip something.”

“Good. Now run mana through them and use it to support your muscles.”

“Right.”

Nelly was glancing around, in search of something to grab, Sara realized. She took some hard brown bread out of her storage pouch. It was bread that Sara couldn’t squeeze with both hands. She sliced it into thin pieces when she ate it.



“Here.”

“Thanks, Sara. Here, Ann, try to squeeze this.”

“Okay. Whoa, I feel really strong!”

The hard brown bread traveled from Sara’s hands to Nelly’s and then to Ann’s, where it was crushed like a soft roll.

“Wow! You got it on your first try!”

Sara had taught Ann magic, but physical strengthening had seemed dangerous to her, so she’d skipped it. She’d learned magic quickly, and she seemed to have picked up physical strengthening in an instant.

“Oh, what a waste...” Sara lamented.

Ann looked down at the bread in her hand before bringing it to her mouth and chewing on it.

“It’s hard, but it gets more flavorful the more you chew. I like it.”

“I like it too, but are you really eating that?”

“Well, it’s a waste otherwise, isn’t it? And I crushed it with my own hand.”

Sara was the one who’d handed over food without thinking, but then Ann was the one who went and ate it. It was in this moment that the two of them really felt that they were both Japanese.

“Thanks for the snack. And muscles are easy to visualize, since you can see them.”

“Is...is that right?” Nelly didn’t seem to know how to react either. Her smile was a little strained.

“I’m really glad I got to go to the hunting ground,” Ann said, extending her left arm this time even though no one had told her to. “Hmn... Yeah, I think I did it. It’s all thanks to your bread’s sacrifice, Sara.” She nodded to herself. She must have been able to strengthen her left arm as well.

Wasn’t it because of Nelly and not Sara’s bread? There were too many comebacks to make. If she took time for each and every one of them, the conversation would never get anywhere. Sara focused.

“You’re glad you came?” she asked instead. She knew it was better than being cooped up in the mansion, but she was curious what Ann had enjoyed about the experience specifically.

“Sara, Noel, Chris, Keiligh... You guys are apothecaries. Nelly, Kuntz, Allen... They’re Hunters. And Liam’s a knight.” Ann put her arm down and counted on her fingers this time. “There were the people who worked in the kitchen at the lodging house. The people cleaning and doing laundry. The people cleaning up the locusts. And Riot and Ed, who were giving directions to everyone.”

Now that Sara thought about it, there were a lot of people who had been temporarily hired to work at the lodging house as well.

“I’d only interacted with a limited number of people at the mansion, so I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do in this world. But I got to see a bunch of people doing a bunch of different jobs. And there were people who used magic and physical strengthening or skills like making potions to contribute. I learned that cooking and cleaning aren’t too different from what they were like in Japan too.”

As Ann spoke, she clenched and unclenched her fist as if testing out her physical strengthening even more. She looked like she was really enjoying what she was discussing.

“Honestly, everyone seemed kind of annoyed with me at first. I think they were being careful not to be rude to me since they knew I was one of the Invited, though.” Ann smiled a little glumly. “But I might not have an opportunity like this again, right? I went everywhere and watched everybody work until I was satisfied. Even though I was probably safest just staying with you, Sara.”

“I don’t know about that. Sara has a tendency to rush headlong into danger, after all.”

Sara couldn’t believe Nelly would say that about her.

“Yeah, I can see that. I was super impressed when the locusts started flying and she stood in the middle of everybody to be a shield.”

“Aww, it was nothing, really.” Sara only remembered then that Ann had been

next to her at that time.

“Noel told me that no one else could replicate your wide-area barriers, Sara. He said you’re more gentle than anyone and you hate fighting, but you always run right ahead when you have to protect someone.”

“Well, it’s true,” Noel piped up.

She wasn’t sure if she should be happy or embarrassed by Noel’s estimation of her.

“But that really got me thinking. You lived all alone with Nelly at first and came up with your barrier magic all on your own, right? It’s really impressive, but it made me think if I were in that same situation, I probably wouldn’t have been able to come up with something like that.”

“Yeah, the Invited all kind of have their own way of doing things. Haruto especially.”

Of course, when they got together, they could teach each other their specialties, so Haruto could use Sara’s barrier and Sara could use Haruto’s wide-area fire magic. But neither of them were as good at it as the person who’d first come up with the magic.

“I think if I’d ended up on the Dark Mountain, I would have become the type who used physical strengthening like Nelly.”

“Yeah, maybe...”

From the practice she’d been doing earlier, it certainly seemed to Sara that Ann was better at physical strengthening and offensive magic.

“Getting back to what I was saying earlier, after seeing all the different work everyone was doing, what interested me the most was...”

Sara’s heart pounded when Ann paused there. She was pretty sure she wasn’t going to say “apothecary,” but what *would* she say?

“It was the knights.”

“Wh-Whaaat?!” Sara practically jumped out of her seat, she was so surprised, but Nelly was perfectly calm.

“It’s nothing to be so surprised about. I was a knight myself when I was young.”

“I-I know, but...we’re talking about the knights that *Liam* is a part of. Oh, uhh, sorry, Noel.”

She was aware that she’d just said something incredibly rude, so Sara apologized right away.

“Liam was wonderful. It was fun to talk to him, but he was like a real commander when he was working. The way the knights carried out their mission under their commander, all in crisp uniforms, was so cool. They were like the police.”

“Hmm...”

True, Liam might have seemed that way to Sara if they had no past history and she only knew him from this incident. She found solace in the fact that Noel was holding back laughter. She was reasonably certain he understood her plight.

“Also, knights are civil servants, right? They work for the country. And from what I hear, there are a decent number of women serving as knights too.”

“Yeah, they mostly do bodyguard work, but there are female knights. Of course, the Invited are usually the ones being guarded, so there might be some confusion at first if you’re on the guarding side.”

Nelly’s words were convincing, since she’d been a knight herself.

“However, they’re made up of only nobles, so there’s a considerable difference in status between them and the common people. And it’s not the citizenry that they work for but the king and the nobility. That’s probably why Sara never got used to them. If you want to try for it, you should go into it knowing that.”

“I see. So that’s why Sara had such an odd reaction.”

“Sorry, but yeah.”

After she’d become a Hunter, the knights had caused Nelly no end of trouble, but it was clear from how she was talking that she wanted Ann to know both

the positives and the negatives about them. Sara thought that was really amazing.

“Also, the knights’ work includes keeping the peace, but Hunters just fight monsters, right? Hunting monsters means killing them. I didn’t think I’d be able to keep up that job for long.”

True, there were options even if physical strengthening was what you were best at. Sara didn’t consider being a Hunter appealing either, so she understood what Ann meant very well.

“You’re exactly right. Though for Hunters, their power correlates directly to their results and income, which is interesting in its own way.”

If what she wanted to do was keep the peace, then choosing the knights made sense.

“I think being an apothecary is a wonderful job, but I don’t think gathering plants and making potions is for me.”

“If Allen were here, I bet he’d agree.”

Allen and Kuntz were with their Hunter buddies as always.

“But now that I have a goal, I can focus on building my stamina and learning to read and write and practicing magic and physical strengthening, right? Then, if I change my mind halfway through and decide I want to do something else, I should have enough skills to make the switch.”

Sara nodded. “I think that’s a great idea.”

“I’m really glad you came, Sara.”

“Aww. I haven’t even really done anything, though.”

Ann had only taken interest in so many careers because of the trouble with the green grass locusts.

“That’s not true. You act like it’s nothing, but even just saving me when that locust was about to hit me was huge. I mean, you literally saved my life!”

Noel nodded along as if to say “Well done.”

“I was able to leave my room because you came. I was able to face Lati. I

faced the outside world and even started practicing magic thanks to you.” Ann counted off the reasons she was thankful to Sara. “You said it was okay that I came with you to the hunting ground even though I don’t have much stamina yet. You let me go wherever I wanted even though it was dangerous. I only did any of that because of you, Sara.”

Sara wasn’t the only one watching over her, so she felt somewhat bashful having all this praise heaped on her.

“You helped me each step of the way. Thank you. I mean it.”

She could only respond to such honest appreciation honestly herself.

“You’re welcome,” Sara said, holding her head high. It wasn’t a bad feeling at all.

It took them two days to return by carriage, but the journey was very well spent. In particular, Ann, who was interested in being a knight, listened very intently to Nelly’s stories about her own experiences, and Sara took advantage of the opportunity to hear about when Nelly was young at the same time.

It was a bad habit from their time together on the Dark Mountain, but Sara still usually didn’t ask Nelly many questions about herself. She was trying to ask more questions now, since she knew there had been misunderstandings between them in the past, but she couldn’t break the habit completely.

Ann, on the other hand, was incredibly curious and didn’t have the odd hang-ups Sara had, so Sara learned a lot of things about Nelly she hadn’t known yet from their conversations.

Ri, Chris, and Nelly switched between their carriage and the Hunters’, so their conversation partners changed at times. Ri had been thrilled to hear of Ann’s interest in becoming a knight.

“You used to be the commander of the knights, right?”

Sara was sure Ann’s gaze of admiration put Ri in a good mood.

“I’m sorry to say I couldn’t show Sara many of the knights’ good points, but I promise they do have plenty of them. They should certainly be the subject of a

young girl's admiration. Although you'll be joining them instead of just admiring them. Ha ha ha."

Sara *wished* she could have seen the good points of the knights from the start.

"I really got off to a unique start here, didn't I?"

"Well, with you arriving on the Dark Mountain and your first town being Rosa... There's not much the knights can do when you're comparing them to Hunters in Rosa. But with their leadership changing, I'm sure there will be some changes for the better in the knights soon."

Apparently the knights had been stronger back during Ri's era, before they started relying on Nelly for requests every year.

"I do believe Liam has the abilities to be commander at his age as well. There's no problem with his household either, so there's talk of him potentially becoming the youngest to ever assume the position of commander. If you look at Chris and Noel, though, you can see that it's not always a good thing for the youngest in history to have control of an organization."

Sara took Ri's words to heart since she knew how much life experience he had.

"That's why it seems to me that Liam has chosen not to depose his commander but wait for the man to self-destruct instead. He's cunning, but he seems to have the will to reform the knights, so I'm looking forward to seeing what he'll do."

"Hmm... You think so?"

Sara wasn't good at that kind of maneuvering either. Ri's opinion of Liam had always been rather favorable, though. He hadn't forced her or anything, but the way he'd tried to get Sara to consider the man had been a bit troublesome.

Right now, Liam was vice commander of the knights, but he would likely be commander sometime soon. Sara didn't really want to have anything to do with him anymore, but if Ann ended up joining the knights, she supposed she'd have to hope that her personal impression of them would improve.

“If you’re joining the knights, physical strengthening and magic will be important, but learning how to wield a sword will be the most important thing. You should find a retired knight or Hunter to teach you the basics... Ed, do you have anyone in mind?”

“I could probably think of a few, but don’t you think you’re being a bit hasty?”

Unbeknownst to her, a plan to forge Ann into a knight was already underway.

Meanwhile, Ann was whispering about something with Nelly, which made Sara feel a bit left out.

Still, after practicing magic together and chatting with Ann and gathering medicinal plants with Chris and Noel while they were taking breaks from traveling, the two-day journey came to an end in no time.

After the meadows, fields appeared, and then they could see the town of Gardenia, and when the gate of the mansion finally came into view, Sara let out a deep breath. It wasn’t her own house, but she felt like she was finally home.

“Welcome back!” It seemed the jolly gate guard who had accompanied them to the hunting ground had arrived back at the mansion before them. “The madam eagerly awaits you all.”

“I’m glad we’re returning with good news. If we weren’t, I imagine I would be receiving quite the scolding over Ann.”

With Ed’s somewhat pathetic greeting, the guard grinned broadly and opened the gate up for them. In front of the mansion, a beautiful woman with wavy red hair stood just as she had the first time Sara had arrived, only this time she was alone and clasping her hands in front of her in worry.

“Lati! Ugh...”

Her husband Ed left the carriage first and immediately clutched at his chest, turning his head away from her. The pressure of her mana must have gotten to him.

“Lati... Everyone’s okay... Calm down, calm down...” Evidently used to this happening, Ed forced himself to face Lati again and raised both hands, speaking to her softly.



“Ed... Thank goodness you’re safe...”

Lati took several deep breaths, after which her mana pressure must have subsided, and she settled into Ed’s open arms.

Ann and Nelly got out of the carriage next, watching the two of them warmly.

“And Ann! Oh, you look so much healthier! Are you all better, then?”

Lati turned to face Ann and embraced her excitedly. There were guardians who thought weak children should remain weak. Sara was relieved to find out that Lati wasn’t one of them.

After hugging Ann until she was satisfied, Lati next turned her smiling face to Sara.

“I received word that you saved Ann’s life. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Oh, no, I just did what anyone would have.” She still wasn’t completely comfortable with Lati, but she received her gratitude without worry.

“Father, Neffie, Sara, Chris, Noel, and all of you Hunters, I must thank you for saving Gardenia.”

A warm air of satisfaction settled over the space after the madam’s heartfelt thanks.

“Now, everyone, please come in and get some rest. You’ll allow us to treat you to some delicious food tonight, won’t you?”

Sara definitely wanted to have a long soak in a tub and sleep on a soft bed. When that thought occurred to her, she realized they really had been working hard all this time. The Hunters would be heading back to Hydrangea after only one night of rest, though.

“I’ll head back with them. I’m glad I got to see my daughter holding her own here as the lord’s wife.”

Nelly was representing the Hunters, but she still had things to do here in Gardenia, so she had asked Ri to return in her place.

“I don’t want to leave Sara, but I don’t think there’s anything for me to do here. It’s not like Liam’s around anymore.”

Unfortunately, Allen and Kuntz would be going back as well.

“It was a rare experience and the pay wasn’t bad, but honestly, the dungeon in Hydrangea is more interesting and pays better. If I were ever gonna leave Hydrangea and train somewhere else, it’d probably be the capital or Rosa.”

“Then why did so many people come to Gardenia?” Sara asked somewhat belatedly.

“For the Wolveries,” Kuntz answered in a hushed voice. “Ri’s a good lord, and Thed and Nelly are respected by the Hunters in Hydrangea. No one’s really interested in Gardenia, but we’re all willing to pitch in if one of the Wolveries is in trouble.”

“I get it.”

Ri had probably known that from the start, but Sara assumed Nelly hadn’t noticed, so she looked forward to telling her about this later.

After seeing off the party heading to Hydrangea, Nelly, Chris, Sara, and Noel remained at the mansion.

“I have some records to read,” Noel said, swiftly excusing himself.

The remaining three were left behind.

“Hey, Nelly. I thought we were gonna go home now too.”

The sisters were seeing each other for the first time in a long while, but Nelly had taken care of all the social pleasantries required of her before dealing with the locusts, so Sara thought she and Lati would be satisfied by now.

“Well, there’s something I’ve still gotta do.”

“Something you have to do?” Sara cocked her head and Ann trotted over to them.

“All ready, Nelly.”

“Right. Shall we?”

What were the two of them conspiring about? Sara tilted her head even more, confused.

“Sister, please come here.”

“Oh? Neffie? Ann? What is it?”

Lati walked over to them, a smile on her face, and Nelly firmly grabbed her sister’s arm. Ann held the other one.

“O-Oh? Wh-What’s gotten into the two of you?”

Nelly gave her sister a grin. “It’s nothing, really. I just think it’s time for you to do some training, sister.”

“Training?” Lati looked between the two of them nervously. Sara wasn’t sure what was going on either.



Nelly and Ann brought Lati out into the yard, gently, but brooking no argument.

“To put it simply...” Nelly said.

“To put it simply?” Lati parroted.

“The reason you’re so clingy with Ann is because she’s not bothered by your mana, right?”

“That’s not true. It’s because she’s so adorable.”

“Sister, please think back to when I was little,” Nelly said quietly, and Lati hung her head.

“You might...have a bit of a point.”

“I thought so. I’m grateful for how much you treasured me, and I don’t doubt that you do find Ann to be adorable. But you simply cannot remain like this any longer.”

“Why not?” Lati asked quietly. She was ignored.

“Now, let’s practice controlling our mana.”

“What are you saying, Neffie? I’m a grown woman.”

Nelly heaved a sigh. “I only learned after becoming an adult as well, and now I can control my mana fairly well. And if I can do it, I’m sure that you can too.”

“Isn’t it a bit late for this?”

“It most certainly is not. This is for Ed’s sake as well.”

“Ed...”

However strong Lati’s mana was, Ed did his best to endure it though he might have wanted to turn his face away. Lati must have noticed that as well, and her resistance weakened. That was when Ann struck the final blow.

“Ed loves you, so if your mana doesn’t bother him anymore, I think he’d like to be even closer to you than he is now.”

“My. Even more than he is now?” Lati put a hand to her cheek like a blushing maiden. Sara was happy for the loving couple.

“Even I learned how to do it, and I had so much mana I had to leave the knights because of it. I’m certain that you’ll be able to do it as well, sister. No...” Nelly put a smile on her face that Sara was relatively sure she could describe as encouraging. “We’ll practice until you can.”

“Err...” Lati still didn’t seem convinced.

Ann nodded firmly as well. “I’ll practice with you.”

“Y-You will?”

Sara smiled, watching them. Nelly hadn’t told her anything, so she’d been just as surprised as Lati at first, but she understood now that *this* was the reason they’d stayed in Gardenia.

Chris’s hand landed lightly on Sara’s shoulder. “Want to read up on the locusts with Noel and me?”

“That sounds fun. I’m actually pretty interested in stuff like that.”

“You *are* an apothecary, after all.”

“I am indeed.”

Lati might have thanked her for helping with Ann, and she was Nelly’s sister, but Sara still couldn’t get over her bad first impression of the woman. So to be perfectly honest, she wanted to go back to Hydrangea right away. But if Lati was going to change, maybe Sara would become more comfortable around her.

Nelly had suffered because of her mana, but Lati had been treasured even with it. As a result, Nelly had grown into a responsible adult, but Lati had just become a much bigger girl. Nelly must have realized that herself.

“I know they’re sisters, but I never thought I’d see Nef looking after someone like this.”

“She’s always been nice, though.”

“I’m sure it’s for Lati as well, but I imagine it’s for you and Ann as well.”

“For me?” Sara looked up at Chris in surprise.

“Since if Lati doesn’t grow a little, she might lash out at you again, Sara.”

“Is that how it came off to you too, Chris?”

“Yes. She was out of line then.”

“You should have said something.” Sara pursed her lips.

“I didn’t need to, did I? Nef handled it.”

“I guess so.”

“*You’re* her precious family now, Sara. And, *ahem*, m-mine as well.”

“Please don’t turn red. It’s not like you.”

Why was he more embarrassed and bashful now that he was engaged to Nelly?

“I’m not nervous being apart from her now. Since we’re already family now.”

“So you *were* following her around because you were nervous.”

Sara accidentally raised her voice with exasperation, and Chris put a finger to his lips, glancing around to see if anyone had heard. He must have been embarrassed.

Chris cleared his throat again and changed the subject rather overtly. “We have no reason to rush back to Hydrangea. I assume this training of Lati’s will take some time.”

Sara wondered why he would assume that, then came to a realization. “Because Nelly and Ann aren’t especially good teachers?”

“Indeed.”

They both seemed to be the type who thought with their muscles. They’d pulled Lati outside confidently, but it would probably take them some time to teach her how to control her mana. And for one reason or another, neither Sara nor Chris felt the slightest desire to help.

“As fellow apothecaries, let’s study with Noel and gather plants.”

“And have fun!”

“Indeed.”

Sara had gotten wrapped up in trouble several times in the past, and she’d always been frustrated in some way by these events. But this time, she had

made decisions on her own and acted on her own will from the beginning to the end. As a solitary apothecary. She felt like she'd been desperately trying to keep up with Chris all this time, but before she knew it, she was walking beside him now.

"I've really grown up, haven't I?"

"You're still just sixteen."

"I'm talking about my attitude! Come on!"

Even if she never grew another inch, each step she took forward now was full of confidence.



7

# Taking My Reincarnation One Step at a TIME

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

**KAYA**  
| ILLUS. | **NARU**





# Taking <sup>My</sup> Reincarnation One Step at a TIME

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



**KAYA**  
|ILLUS.| **NARU**





# Characters

Sara

Nelly

Chris











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Taking My Reincarnation One Step at a Time: No One Told Me There Would Be Monsters! Volume 7

by KAYA

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