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Management of a
Novice
Alchemist

01

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I GOT
MY OWN
SHOP!

Management of a
★ Novice ★
Alchemist

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Prologue

I was speechless at what I was seeing.

A rotten wooden fence. A yard overgrown with weeds. Walls that looked ready to crumble at any moment, and windows with foggy glass.

The sign that read “Alchemy”—marking this shop as one owned by a select few elites in the country—was tilted, almost ready to drop down from the roof.

“This...is my new frontier?”

I’d made it through many tough exams in order to finally achieve my government certification as an alchemist. After that, I’d followed my mentor’s advice and acquired a shop, setting off on a long journey from the capital with my heart full of hope.

It had taken a full month to get here. And yet...

“This is just too much...”

Well, something *had* seemed fishy about it. Even considering that it was in a rustic town on the frontier, this house had only set me back a mere ten thousand rhea. That wasn’t even two months’ rent for a studio apartment in the capital.

That’s just how little it cost...

Admittedly, that was after factoring in a subsidy from the government, so the actual price was a little bit higher. But even accounting for that, it had been suspiciously cheap.

“A shop all of your own.”

I’ve got to admit, I was lured in by those sweet-sounding words.

I admit it, okay?

But the truth is, coming here was never part of the plan. I was supposed to get myself hired at a shop in the capital, train for a while, and save up money as

I worked. I'd then use that starter capital to open up a nice little shop in some random town in the countryside.

I'm not the type that's looking to strike it rich and live in the lap of luxury. I just want to earn a decent amount, and be able to repay everyone who's ever looked out for me in the past.

Yet here I was, out on the fringes of a border town—no, not even a town, a little village—just standing there with nothing but my meager possessions.

It had all started a month earlier...

Episode 1: Graduation!

The Royal Alchemist Academy was the sole institution in this country where a person could get certified by the government to become an alchemist.

If they could just make it to graduation and get their certificate, that person would then be set for life. From graduation onward, they'd be living on easy street.

But competition was high, so getting in was hard, and graduating even harder. That's the kind of super prestigious school we're talking about.

Being an alchemist was synonymous with being one of the elite. It wasn't just that they were able to craft all the potions and artifacts that were essential to people's lifestyles, but also that demand always outstripped supply.

There were also price controls instituted by the state, which meant that no one could undercut the competition. As a result, profit margins were high, and so long as an alchemist was discerning in what they chose to produce, they didn't have to worry about items going unsold.

Simply put, they made bank.

So if a person could just manage to become an alchemist, they'd never go hungry again—no, more than just that, they could get by without working very hard at all.

One other unique trait of the Royal Alchemist Academy was that, if they worked hard enough, anyone—a commoner, or even an orphan—could get in.

There were textbooks that taught the necessary material for the entrance examination, and they were free to anybody who applied for them. What's more, taking the exam didn't cost anything.

Now, obviously, if a person was illiterate, then they were out of luck. But even in an orphanage, anyone who wanted to learn how to read could, so such a person could make up for what they lacked with a solid work ethic.

Furthermore, those who got good grades were exempted from tuition fees, and there were monetary rewards for each exam, leading to an environment where “all you need to do is study.”

However, because of how ideal that environment was, its gates were tightly guarded.

For a commoner or orphan, alchemy was more or less the only job that would let them move up in the world. That meant there were a lot of people trying to get in, and the exam naturally had to be difficult. Added to that, the children of the nobility, who had their own dedicated tutors, also took the test, so it was impossible to outdo the competition with half-hearted effort.

And even once a person got past the entrance examination, they still couldn't let their guard down.

There was an exam every four months. If a student's grade on it didn't meet the academic standards set by the school, they were expelled without mercy.

Obviously, there was no such thing as a makeup exam, not even for the nobility.

The end result, it was said, was that less than one in ten students who made it into the school would be able to attend graduation five years later.

That was the school that I, Sarasa Feed, would graduate from today.

Man, it sure was tough!

Was I excited to be graduating?

To be honest, I haven't had time to feel it. After all, I'd had the graduation exam to think about up until yesterday. The results had only been announced this morning.

If, by some awful stroke of luck, I hadn't passed, then I would have been in for the nightmare of showing up to school only to be unable to attend the graduation ceremony.

I don't know who came up with this schedule, but it is just wrong.

Well, not that I'd heard of anyone ever actually failing the graduation exam, since anybody with grades poor enough to do so was shown the door long

before it came to that.

If someone really let their guard down, that would be another matter, but just the thought of being left all alone in the classroom on graduation day had been enough to make us put more effort in than we would on any ordinary test.

The only real risk was getting sick, perhaps. Of course, everyone had known that, so we'd done our absolute best to take care of our health, and anyone who'd felt even slightly uneasy about it would take time off school to rest up.

For my part, I put in my very best effort too!

Thanks to that, I'd ended up receiving not just my diploma, but a monetary reward for my exam scores.

Yeah...and I'm really grateful for it.

Thinking back, in the time since I'd lost my parents at the age of eight and was put into an orphanage, with the exception of taking the bare minimum amount of part-time work needed to get by, I'd done nothing but study like mad, as if I was using it as a way to escape from reality.

I know that must have caused trouble for the folks at the orphanage, but there was an unspoken understanding that everyone there should support any child who was aiming to get into the Alchemist Academy, so no one had ever criticized me for it.

Although, the *other* unspoken understanding was that, if I did manage to become an alchemist, I was supposed to send donations to repay everything they'd done for me.

As a matter of fact, it was the donations from alchemists who'd once lived in that orphanage that had spared us from living in abject poverty.

Thanks to being such a study bug, I'd managed to get into the school with grades that were pretty impressive for a commoner. That had entitled me to be exempt from tuition, to be given a scholarship, and to live in the dorms, allowing me to move out of the orphanage when I'd only been ten years old.

From then on, my days had been made up of nothing but part-time work and studying.

Fortunately, I'd been able to get hired by an alchemist's shop, and the owner had taken me on as her apprentice. That had turned the job from work into study, and I'd been able to build up enough academic ability to earn exam performance bonuses. Sadly, I'd only been able to take the top score a handful of times, but everyone above me in the rankings had been a noble, you know?

So why was that situation "fortunate"? Well, it's because there was a custom—or maybe "tradition"—when it came to exam performance rewards. Normally, the reward money for highest exam scores was paid out to the top three students. If that rule were to have been strictly applied, I'd have gotten about half the reward money that I actually did.

But when a noble was in the top ranks, they were traditionally expected to forgo the money as a sort of "noble obligation," and they ran the risk of being mocked if they accepted it.

When they declined the monetary reward, it automatically went to the next-highest-ranked student. That tradition was what had let me earn reward money for the majority of my exams. It wasn't something that was enforced, of course, but the nobility had their pride and vanity. In the case of lesser nobles, some of them were even poorer than a wealthy commoner, so I think they must have had a hard time with it.

I was still super glad the tradition existed, though. Thanks to it, I was graduating with more than five million rhea saved up. The ordinary commoner couldn't even earn five hundred thousand rhea a year, and I had ten times that much saved up!

Yep, I sure did work hard! Go me!

After all, while a little more than half of it was from my scholarship and all the monetary rewards, the rest had come from my part-time job!

Even accounting for the fact that living in the dorms had meant I'd paid nothing for room and board, it had still been really, really tough to earn this much in the time I hadn't been busy with my studies.

Thankfully, my master had paid me a daily wage that was equivalent to what a commoner could earn for a full day's work. It was an exceptional amount; I'd only earned that rate because I'd been an apprentice alchemist.

I'd been able to make that much as a part-time apprentice who'd only been available for a limited number of hours, so you can imagine just how much a professional alchemist made.

And starting today, I'm one of those alchemists!

I pulled the alchemy license that I had received at the graduation ceremony out of my pocket and stared at it. It was made of a mysterious substance, like a thin sheet of metal, but incredibly light and flexible. It bore the mark of an alchemist along with my name, and a certificate of graduation from the Royal Alchemist Academy. In addition to that, it had my magic crest recorded on it, and was designed to stop displaying anything if someone other than me was touching it. In a way, this thing was an alchemical masterpiece in its own right.

I had to put my hand over my mouth to stop myself from chuckling and grinning like an idiot. I'd look pretty suspicious doing that all alone in front of the gate, after all.

Alone...

That's right, I'm alone.

With the graduation ceremony over, I was setting off on a new journey.

And yet here I was, in front of the school gates, all by my lonesome.

Yep, I sure did spend those five years doing nothing but study and work!

Thanks to that, even though I was leaving the school, there was no one who'd come see me off, and no one for me to go say goodbye to either.

As my classmates bid tearful farewells to their juniors, or chatted happily with people who'd come to pick them up, I seemed totally out of place.

No one even tried to approach me.

N-Not that I feel lonely or anything, okay?!

Okay, it's true, I feel just a little lonely.

I had almost no friends, after all.

But that was my own fault, so I had no one else to blame for it.

You don't make friends by studying all the time and hardly ever talking to

anyone. Go figure.

But, hey, the fact of the matter was, while I had *almost* no friends, that didn't mean I had absolutely zero.

Up until last year, two of the older students had always been looking out for me, and we'd gotten along pretty well. Through them, I had gotten to know one of the younger students too. But the two of them had both graduated last year and were working in another town, so they weren't in the capital.

As for the younger student, she had sadly taken ill a few days ago, and had had to sit out the graduation ceremony.

She had insisted, "I'll definitely be there," but the junior students had their regularly scheduled exam right after the graduation ceremony.

I couldn't let her fail the test on my account, so I'd been very direct in telling her, "No, you definitely will not! Stay home and rest!"

Because, after all, there was no understating just how much it'd impact her life if she failed the exam.

"Yeah... I should hurry up and go."

It was kind of rough, standing there in the middle of all of this.

I'm pretty sure I'm not imagining the occasional dubious glances being shot in my direction...

I turned to look back at the school I had spent five years at.

It had been an eventful period in my life. I didn't remember much other than studying, but it had still been fun.

At the very least, it had been a place where, so long as I studied, I never had any problems with my living situation, so I didn't think it had been a bad school life, on the whole.

But now I had to walk on my own.

With that sense of determination, I turned my back to the gates and went on my way.



After leaving school, the first stop was my master's shop. It would be discourteous not to pay my respects after everything she'd done for me, and anyway, I had business with her.

Master's shop was near the school, and in a fairly good location even within the capital. That had made it easy to go back and forth to and from school, letting me make economical use of my time.

I don't understand real estate all that well, but it was facing onto a major street, so it was probably a first-rate property? Back when I'd worked here part-time, there had pretty much always been a constant stream of customers.

"Hello, Master," I called casually, and then I headed into the back of the shop like usual.

I'd quit my job ahead of the graduation exam, so I wasn't really supposed to be in the back, but having worked with the people here for almost five years, they trusted me, so no one really tried to stop me. In fact, they waved me on through with a smile and a, "Congratulations on your graduation."

In the back of the shop, a super beautiful lady came out of the alchemy workshop to greet me. "Hey, Sarasa. Congratulations."

Her manner of speech was a little rough, feeling a bit out of step with her appearance. She looked like she was in her midtwenties. But I had a feeling her looks hadn't changed at all in the five years I'd known her, so her real age was a mystery to me.

This was my master.

Her skills were top rate—she was a master-level alchemist, with even greater influence than an ordinary alchemist. There were only a handful of them in the entire country, and they were all elderly, while my master still looked like this.

You can see why I'd say her age was a mystery, right?

But, well, partly owing to her physical appearance, she was especially popular, even by the standards of the capital, and so the work never let up.

I'm still amazed I was able to get her to hire me to work in this shop.

I won't go into the details, but it was, let's say...a product of happenstance

and good fortune?

“Thank you, Master. I managed to scrape by thanks to your guidance,” I said, bowing my head politely, but Master waved her hand casually in response.

“Don’t be so humble. I heard all about it. You were more or less top of your class.”

“Huh? Is that right?”

While I *had* gotten a lot of reward money, it was pretty rare for me to be in first place...?

They’d posted the grades of the top ten students after each exam, so I knew where I stood in the rankings. I’d made a habit of checking because it’d influenced whether I was going to get any extra funds, but most of the time there had been two or three students ranked higher than me.

I didn’t really remember any of those names in particular. However, I had always checked to confirm that the ones there were noble names (which was possible because it was immediately obvious from their family names), as it had been relevant to whether I’d be getting a monetary reward.

“When it comes to the nobles, well, you know how it is. They boost them up a little because of their titles.”

“Huh, never knew that.”

“Hm? You’re not upset about that?”

Seeing my plain-faced response, Master tilted her head to the side.

I did think it was kind of unfair, but it didn’t matter all that much to me. Honestly, so long as it didn’t affect my payout, I didn’t care whether I got to be in first place.

The nobility donated to the school, and they voluntarily declined any scholarships or other reward money. Considering that the money I was receiving came out of those donations, I probably ought to have been thanking them.

Please, go ahead and boost their grades as much as they want.

When I said as much, Master smiled and nodded.

“Once you’re an alchemist, your grades don’t matter anyway. Whether you can raise your level is all a matter of your own hard work—oh, but. When it comes time to decide whether to expel a student, nobles are graded the same as anyone else, so there aren’t any alchemists who fail to meet the school’s standards, okay?”

When it came time to look for employment after graduation, rankings did matter a little, but employers apparently knew all about how the nobles’ grades were inflated, so...

Maybe it’s actually harder for the nobles, not being assessed properly?

There had been some nobles who liked to act all big and important at the school, but nothing too terrible. Besides, one of the senior students who’d looked after me was the daughter of a marquis, so none of them had caused problems for me, and I didn’t have that bad of an impression of them.

“What about the year after your seniors graduated?” you might wonder.

There hadn’t been any problems then either.

The kind of nobles who’d cause trouble never lasted to the final year. Moreover, anybody who was still around by fifth year was more or less guaranteed to become an alchemist, commoner or not. Considering the social status accorded to the profession, the nobles had more to lose than to gain by making enemies of us.

Because we might become master alchemists in the future.

“Now then, Master. Are you able to go out right now? I feel uneasy walking around with this much cash for so long, so I was hoping to go buy the *Complete Alchemy Works*...”

“Hm? You want to leave already? I don’t have anything else scheduled after this for today though, so sure.”

The ten-volume compendium known as the *Complete Alchemy Works* was a bible for the professional that any practitioner worth their salt owned a copy of.

I’d once asked my master, some time after I’d begun working part-time in her

shop, “What is the first thing that I should get my hands on if I’m able to become an alchemist?”

Her answer had been this set of books, the *Complete Works*—an encyclopedic text that held the field’s deepest secrets. With just these volumes, which recorded all there was to know about alchemy, the path one should take as an alchemist would become clear.

Just as I had been wondering where I was going to find an incredible set of books like that, Master had helpfully added, “By the way, they’re available at the school store.”

The deepest arts, easily purchasable at the school store...

That was a reality I’d had trouble accepting, but the next day I headed there, hard-earned cash in hand and heart full of glee...only to have my hopes dashed.

The price that had been quoted to me by the old lady at the counter? A whopping seven and a half million rhea.

With that kind of money, I could have bought myself a nice, spacious house in the capital and still had some left over. It wasn’t an amount that a novice alchemist could fork over easily.

And when I’d been a student, there had been other things that needed buying first.

Is it really okay to go charging so much for something like that at a school store?

The gap between that book set and the hundred-rhea notebooks and ink pots I’d also bought was staggering. Being able to buy it there made things easy in theory, but that *price* sure wasn’t easy!

Obviously, I’d given up on the purchase and gone to gripe to my master.

With a sardonic smile, she’d said, “That’s why most people work in a shop as an apprentice. Besides, there’s no need to buy all ten volumes at once.”

Then she’d let me in on a little secret.

“If you go through me, you can buy them for five million. Save up the money by graduation, and I’ll help you get them for cheap.”

Five million! That was a whole two and a half million rhea off!!!

Which was *still* enough to buy a house, but hey.

Why was the *Complete Alchemy Works* so expensive, though?

One reason was that the books themselves were a special artifact. No one but an alchemist could read them. To an ordinary person, the book appeared completely blank.

Furthermore, even if you were an alchemist, depending on your level, the volumes you could read varied.

Well, no, the opposite, actually: your level was determined by how many volumes you *could* read.

A fresh graduate could only read the first volume, so in terms of level, they would be Level 1.

As the number of volumes they could read grew, their level went up, and once they could read all ten volumes they would be Level 10. Generally, up until Level 3 they were a novice, at Level 4 they became a beginner, from Level 7 they were an intermediate, and only when they reached Level 10 could they finally be called an advanced alchemist.

Only a select few managed to become advanced alchemists, and those who went even further, like my master, were called “master class” alchemists.

Because of the nature of them, it was hard to appraise if a set of books was genuine. To the untrained eye, the books appeared to be blank, so if somebody said, “this is the *Complete Alchemy Works*,” there was no way for the average person to confirm or deny it. That was equally true for a newbie alchemist, because even if every volume past the first looked blank, there was no telling if it was fake or not.

This necessitated a system to guarantee authenticity. A buyer would have an alchemist who could read the books witness the sale, and endorse the books as genuine. However, when it came to purchasing all ten volumes, that required an advanced alchemist or better.

Having one of those rare advanced alchemists witness the sale and endorse the books was, obviously, not something they could be asked to do without compensation, and that cost got added to the purchase price.

This was one of the reasons the *Complete Alchemy Works* was so expensive.

Incidentally, copies of the *Complete Works* sometimes showed up in used book shops, but Master had told me, “They’re practically guaranteed to be fake, so keep away from them.”

Obviously, it’s not like there was no chance whatsoever that an alchemist had gone out of business and their books had ended up there, but while that might be true for the first two volumes, it was totally out of the question for the tenth.

At least, Master had said she’d never seen a genuine copy at a used book store.

Particularly malicious sellers would take advantage of the fact that beginner alchemists couldn’t confirm the authenticity of the product, selling genuine copies of the first three volumes, then tricking them with fakes for the rest.

Even knowing this, because of how expensive it was to buy them through official channels, there were still alchemists who took the risk and got burned.

“Still, to think you’d really save up five million rhea...”

Master sounded somewhat impressed as she looked at me, and I completely shared her sentiment.

Because I had seriously scrimped and saved for it...

Despite having an amount that would generally be considered a fortune, I hadn’t bought any luxuries these whole five years.

Don’t I deserve some praise for that?

Yes, I do! Great job, me!

“By the way, I’m fine with going to buy them, but how do you plan to carry them home with you?”

“Huh? I’ll put them in here,” I said, spinning around to show her the bag on

my back.

The only thing it held, outside of my study supplies and cash, was a modest amount of spare clothes. Having avoided buying anything I didn't need, this was all I owned.

Frugal soul that I was, I'd chosen a bag that was sturdy, even if it wasn't all that showy. It still had space to spare and would be able to hold the books even if they were a little heavy!

That's what I'd thought as I'd confidently showed it to her, but Master was apparently not impressed.

"Sigh... Come into the back for a bit."

"Uh, okay."

I followed my slightly exasperated master to a room on the second floor which we didn't go up to very often.

It was a somewhat dimly lit room, filled with lots of books. There was a large table in the center, with things lying around it seemingly at random. It didn't look like she cleaned up much.

"Hold on for a bit."

I did as she said and meekly waited for some time.

"This is volumes three through ten of the *Complete Alchemy Works*. You've already seen volumes one and two, right?"

Master piled eight volumes on the table as she said this.

"Huh...? Little thick, aren't they?"

This was what eight volumes looked like?

The first and second volume, which I'd been able to read in my master's workshop, couldn't have been more than a couple centimeters thick at most.

The pile of books on the table, however, had to be fifty centimeters thick.

"Each volume is thicker than the last. Just try lifting them for a moment."

"Uh, okay."

I did as Master requested and tried to lift the tower of books.

“Ngh, ghhhhh. Th-They’re heavy.”

“I know, right?”

Even with my slender arms, it wasn’t impossible for me to lift them, and I could even manage to stuff them into my bag too... Probably.

But I was going to be searching for a place to continue my training after this, and I’d have to travel there. Wherever that place ended up being, it probably wouldn’t be in the capital. As for whether I could handle this weight for the entire trip...

“What do you say? Maybe you want to stay here, working for me after all? It’d save you the expense of buying the *Complete Works*, and the trouble of looking for a place to train, you know?”

“Murghhhhhh... I-It’s tempting... But no! I have to decline!”

I shook my head with heartrending grief as my master tempted me with a smirk on her face.

Honestly, getting the chance to apprentice myself to an alchemist of her level should have been practically impossible, and I was more or less guaranteed to be able to grow my talents if I kept studying here.

Master seemed to have a pretty high regard for me, and had been hinting at the idea since back when I’d worked part-time for her.

The reason I shook my head, despite all of that, was that I was well aware how narrow my world had been all this time.

I’d been put into the orphanage at a young age, and then done nothing but study alchemy right after that. Even once I’d gone off to school, all I’d done there was study and work part-time. My range of activity had been limited to the school, Master’s shop, the other shops I’d sometimes taken part-time work from, and that was about it.

If I stayed at my master’s shop now, I worried that I’d continue to grow up without knowing what the world was like. With that in mind, I felt I should set out on my own at least once.

“Hmm. I had a feeling you’d say that. It’s a shame to hear it, but, well, I’m sure it will do you good to get out there and experience things. With that in mind, here’s a graduation present.”

Since I had already turned her down multiple times before now, Master had apparently seen my answer coming, and casually nodded before handing me a backpack.

Compared to my own bag, which was a strictly utilitarian affair, this one had to be a full two sizes smaller, and was kind of stylish to boot.

It was dyed a pretty red color and looked just adorable.

It looked like the kind of thing I might take along for a short outing into town, but it couldn’t hold everything I’d need for a longer journey.

Was it going to take up space in my bag, waiting for its time to shine?

“Just so you know, I’ve applied the space expansion and weight reduction effects to it. If you put the *Complete Works* in there, it should be possible for you to bring them along on your journey.”

“Huh?! Really? You’re sure I can have it? It must be super expensive, right?”

“If you were buying it, yes, it would be, but I made this myself, so don’t fret about the price.”

“Thank you so much!”

I’d thought it was just a stylish backpack, but it turned out it was an artifact, and one that I was incredibly grateful for given my present situation.



Or rather, I couldn't bring the *Complete Works* along without it.

I made up my mind not to dwell on how much this backpack, crafted by a master class alchemist, must be worth. It was too scary to even consider.

"Oh, right, I applied an anti-theft effect too. No one but you can use it, so if you're going to give it away to someone, work hard to get to the level where you can change that first."

"No, I could never! This is a precious parting gift from my master!" I giggled to myself, putting my hand inside the backpack to feel around. "Ooooooh."

It looked like it would fit nicely on my back, but my arm could go all the way inside.

I tried putting my existing bag inside it, just to test it out, and there was still room left to spare. Even though, from all external appearances, my old bag was clearly larger.

"Wow, Master! It's incredible!" I gazed up at her with sparkling eyes.

"I figured this was the least I could do for you." She kept her expression composed, even as she averted her eyes and changed the subject. "Anyway, we're heading off to buy those books, right? If we leave too late, the school store will be closed."

"Oh, that's right. I need to buy them today, and then look for somewhere to train! I can't stay in the dorms anymore!"

Once in a while, I dropped by the orphanage where I was raised. I intended to report in to tell them I'd graduated, but it'd be awkward to ask them to let me stay there. So, for the time being, I was going to live in an inn while I searched for work.

But inns in the capital were pretty pricey. Of course, there were cheaper places, depending on location, but it was dangerous for a young girl like me to stay in them...or so I'd heard.

"You can stay at my place for a while, if you'd like..."

"No, I need to do this!"

I was an adult as of this year. I needed to stand on my own two feet!

If I wasn't careful, I'd get comfortable here, and before I knew it...I'd start dragging my feet on going anywhere.

I hurried my master along, and we rushed to the school store.

The idea of heading straight back to the school when I had just graduated lacked any real charm to it, but the truth was that it was just about the only place to buy alchemy equipment.

I hadn't known this when I'd first enrolled, but alchemy equipment was generally made-to-order, and there just wasn't a large enough customer base—that is to say, enough alchemists—for businesses to specialize in it. Supposedly, that was why the school store had ended up carrying everything.

"Excuse me," I called out as we entered the store, and the usual lady came out from the back.

"Oh, Sarasa-chan, congratulations on graduating," she said with a smile.

"Thanks. I was only able to do it with your help," I replied, bowing my head.

I was always coming here to buy writing supplies like pens, paper, and ink, so we knew each other.

Knowing my background, she had made a habit of hooking me up with items that were slated for disposal. She had helped me in other ways too.

Sadly, if you excluded my three friends and the professors, then this lady, along with the librarian, were just about my only acquaintances here at the school.

And the only ones who'd congratulate me too... Yeah.

"Um, has my order come in?"

"Yes. Wait just a moment."

She returned to the back room, and came out again with, you guessed it, all ten volumes of the *Complete Alchemy Works*.

The covers on these were newer than on the ones that I'd seen earlier in

Master's room, but they were just as thick and heavy.

They retailed for seven and a half million rhea—more than a small mansion.

“Erm, you said you don't need a guarantor, right, Sarasa-chan?”

“Right. I've brought along my master for that.” I stepped aside, gesturing for Master to do her thing. “Okay, Master! I'm counting on you!!!”

“Hrm. It's not like it's a particularly strenuous job.” Even so, a slightly sardonic smile came to her lips as she nodded in response, then began leafing through each of the tomes.

She signed off on the last page of each volume. The clerk put her stamp next to Master's signature, and after only a few minutes, the job was finished.

This would serve as proof they had been checked by a master class alchemist, and that the school recognized that fact.

By the way, if someone were to say they didn't need the books guaranteed, and then asked to buy them without a signature in the back, that wouldn't fly. Apparently, this was to prevent the existence of genuine books without official seals, because the lack of a consistent standard could cause confusion.

It didn't look like all that hard a job to me, but the pay's still two and a half million rhea...

Considering that, of course I would want to watch closely.

Although, had Master taken this on as an official job, it wasn't like all of the money would have gone to her. The school would have taken some of it as a coordination fee for arranging things with an alchemist of the appropriate level.

But the lion's share still goes to the alchemist, so... Wow, advanced alchemists sure have got it made, huh! They can make several years' worth of wages for a commoner in just one day's work—no, in just a few minutes!

Or so I thought, but when I asked about it later, it turned out this kind of work wasn't all that great.

First of all, the vast majority of alchemists would never have the chance to be commissioned for a job like this. The professors at the academy could handle up through volume six, so there was no need to bring in outside help for those, and

anything higher than that required an advanced alchemist. That already ruled out most practitioners.

On top of that, for those who did get the job, if the book later changed owners due to resale, or any other reason, they were obligated to verify the authenticity of any book with their name in the back.

The price was high because it factored in that kind of additional headache.

Although, almost nobody ever bought the full set, so the job itself was rarely ever available.

Huh? People don't buy all ten volumes?

Hold up, Master, you told me to buy them, right?

I saved up all this money because I trusted you, you know?

Or so I started thinking when I was told that, but I quickly recalled that Master had done the verification for me for free, and so I obviously kept my complaints to myself.

“Okay, it’s all done, Sarasa-chan. That’ll be five million rhea.”

“Right, I’ll be paying with these...”

I laid out fifty platinum coins on the counter. This was practically my entire fortune—the product of five years’ worth of blood, sweat, and tears.

I know I have to do this.

I know that, but still!!!

“Thank you for your business.”

I was absolutely quivering inside as I put down those platinum coins, and the lady just casually scooped them up. It was an incredible fortune, and yet it didn’t even faze her.

I’d only ever bought cheap things at the school store before this, but they did deal in alchemy tools, so she was probably used to seeing platinum coins.

“You sure worked hard, Sarasa-chan. Normally, graduates only buy up through volume three. It’s relatively cheap to do it that way.”

As the old lady was saying, if you only bought up through the third volume, you could ask one of the professors to do the verification for you, which saved the cost of hiring an expensive guarantor, and if you were close to one of them, they could negotiate the price for you.

That being the case, it was common for graduates who had a little money to spare to buy just the introductory books before leaving to train, and if I hadn't been able to work in Master's shop, I think I'd have chosen to do the same.

"Ha ha ha... It's all thanks to Master," I said with a pained laugh as I carefully packed the *Complete Alchemy Works* away in my backpack.

When I thought about how much I would've struggled to carry them without it, I couldn't have been more grateful to Master for the gift.

Once the *Complete Works* were in my bag, I stood up with vigor.

"Upsy-daisy! Wh-Whoa?!"

But the unexpected weight knocked me off-balance, and I only recovered because Master was there to offer me some support.

"Are you all right, Sarasa-chan?" asked the clerk. "They're pretty heavy, aren't they?"

No, they're ridiculously light.

I suppose I should've expected no less from Master. The level of weight reduction is incredible.

Still, it wouldn't do me any good to advertise that fact, so I just played it off like it was no big deal.

"Oh, no... I'm fine. Thank you for your help, ma'am."

"Oh, it was nothing. You've been working so hard, Sarasa-chan. Please, drop by again whenever you have the chance."

Bowing my head to the lady, who waved her hand as she saw us off, Master and I left the school store.

"I suppose you'll be searching for a place to train next? Since I'm already here, I'll tag along and pick out somewhere good for you."

“Uhh, thank you... Wait, no, that’s not what I wanted to say. Excuse me, but this bag feels super light!”

I hadn’t noticed before now, because all that had been inside it were things like spare clothes, which were light already, but even with the *Complete Alchemy Works* inside, it hadn’t gotten heavier.

Well, no, it *had* gotten heavier, but only by less than a tenth of the amount I’d have expected it to. I’d almost tripped earlier because I’d been surprised by how light it was.

“I told you I’d applied weight reduction to it, didn’t I? If I hadn’t, you’d never be able to take the *Complete Works* with you on your travels.”

“Yeah...you have a point there.”

It was embarrassing to admit, but I was weak.

Why?

Well, hey, if all you do is study, that’s what happens, right?

I was petite to begin with, so it was pretty obvious what would happen if I didn’t work out.

Oh, woe is me.

“Uh, thanks. Honestly, it’s a big help.”

After thinking about how much the enchantment on this backpack would normally have cost, I thanked Master for it once again.

I was a little scared to accept it for free, even as a graduation present, but Master probably wouldn’t take it back even if I tried to turn it down, and she would definitely be much happier if I took it.

She could come off a little brusque at times, but deep down she was an incredibly kind person.

“Hmm. Well, my apprentice *is* setting off into the world. It’s just a small gesture, so don’t let it bother you.”

As Master grinned and patted me on the head, I answered her with a wry smile of my own, and then we headed to the student support office.

This was where current students went to be introduced to part-time work, and graduates went for assistance with job hunting.

I had taken on a number of part-time jobs outside of my work in Master's shop, so I knew the girl here well enough that she remembered my name.

I entered with my usual, friendly "Hello" to the girl. She seemed to have nothing else to do at the moment, and replied with a casual "C'mon in."

The moment she saw Master, though, her back straightened, as if to hide her slouch from a few seconds before, and she put on a perfect customer service smile.

"What may I help you with today?"

"U-Umm, I'm looking for somewhere to train. Could you show me the help wanted ads?" I said, a little bewildered.

"Certainly. Please wait for just a moment," the girl replied, then got up from her seat and walked over to the nearby shelves.

She was suddenly acting all polite because of Master.

Right. I'm always interacting with her, so it's easy to forget, but Master's a super elite alchemist.

"Hmm. There's not many people around, huh?" Master noted.

There was just the girl at the counter, and no students. Usually there were at least a handful of them here, so this was rare.

"Ahh, that's because the graduation ceremony was today," the girl explained as she returned with a binder.

"Ohh, yeah. I went out to party with my friends after graduating too. I guess they'll come here in earnest starting tomorrow, then. But Sarasa..."

Master cast a glance in my direction, as if she wanted to say more, but I ignored it and reached out my hand toward the girl, asking, "Could I see the recruitment ads?"

Yeah, I know I've got no friends to party with! I didn't even get any invites!

My seniors invited me last year, but there were so many people I didn't know

that I was too timid to go, and I just had a four-person luncheon with them and our other friend in the year below me the next day!

Thinking about that as I leafed through the binder, Master cast a kindly glance in my direction and gently stroked my head...but I resolutely ignored her!

“Sorry to trouble you, but could you also show me the information on vacant shops?”

“Oh, certainly. That would be right here.”

The file was right next to her, so the girl handed it to Master.

“Huh? Were you planning to open a new shop, Master?”

Given that her business was booming, it wouldn't be all that odd if she wanted to open a new branch location, or find larger premises, but I'd never thought she'd be interested in that kind of thing.

“No, that's not it... Anyway, were there any good places in there?”

“No, not yet...”

The binder that I was looking through was full of alchemy shops that were currently able to take on new apprentices.

The general career path for an alchemist was to find one of these places that met your own requirements, interview for the position, gain experience on the job, and then go independent and open a shop of your own once you had enough money saved up.

Considering the costs involved in job hunting, ideally, I wanted someplace close to here.

But...there's nowhere in the capital, huh. I guess there's an excess of capable people, with the school being right here and all.

Most of these places were out in the countryside.

That's where my seniors went to find work too...

As long as I could get work, I wasn't going to be picky about location, but the issue was the time and expense of going there to interview.

If I paid for travel and lodging, then didn't get hired, those costs would have

been for nothing.

Even if I did manage to land the position, renting a room and paying for basic necessities still cost money. That had all been covered for me while I'd been living in the school dorms, but...after shelling out for the *Complete Alchemy Works*, I didn't have much left.

In light of that, the safest choice would be to use my connections to get in at a shop owned by someone I knew.

So, honestly, I was really lucky that Master had reached out to me. Because, even though she'd looked a bit disappointed after I had declined her offer, she'd still seen what I was trying to do. She'd even been a little bit happy about it, sending me off with the words, "Come back here if you have problems."

"By the way, how much do you have left to spend on your job hunt, Sarasa?"

"Urkh..."

As I was desperately calculating the distance to each of the shops, and what going to them would cost me, Master came out and addressed the elephant in the room.

Once I hesitantly told her my situation, Master let out a sigh of dismay.

"I had somewhat predicted this after you bought the entirety of the *Complete Works*... Well, that being the case, I have a suggestion for you."

Having said this, Master passed me the binder containing shops that were currently up for sale. They were generally the former premises of alchemists who'd gone out of business.

Because alchemy shops had a lot of features that, by their very nature, were of no use to ordinary people, the school also served as a real estate agency for those sorts of buildings.

"What is it, Master? Which one are you suggesting—whoa! That's cheap?!"

The price of the shop that Master had pointed out to me was, incredibly, only ten thousand rhea. Even with my current funds, greatly diminished as they were by the book set, I could still more than afford it.

"Wh-What's with this shop?!"

“The floor space is a bit cramped, but it also has a living area, a field of herbs, and comes with all the features and tools you’ll need. It’s out in the sticks, sure, but it’s still a bargain.”

Looking at the floor plan, it wasn’t as spacious as Master’s shop, but there would be fewer customers out in the countryside anyway, so I didn’t need all that much floor space. It was a two-story building, with a living space like Master had noted, and it even had its own well.

The fields out back looked fairly big, and I’d be able to grow whatever herbs I needed there.

“No, this is *too* cheap! It can’t be real!”

This went way beyond the level of it just being an inexpensive property.

That amount was only a month or two’s rent in the capital, and even the cost of going to one interview could pay for it with change left over.

Honestly, it made me start to suspect it might be a scam.

The school’s acting as an intermediary, so it should be safe, right?

“Well, you know how it is. There’s probably a considerable subsidy for it.”

“Oh, that makes sense. In that case... Well...”

The subsidy she was talking about was support provided by the government in order to help an alchemist set up shop.

The country wanted there to be an alchemist’s shop in every town, but every alchemist was free to choose where they did business.

The most popular place was the capital, of course, with its large population, and the large cities in the area around it were a close second. Nobody wanted to go out of their way to set up shop in the inconvenient countryside where there were few customers.

And that’s where subsidies came in.

The less people wanted to live in a place, the bigger the subsidies for specialists got, with absolutely nothing being offered to those in the capital or other major cities. It was the government’s way of securing workers.

For a novice alchemist still in training, it was pretty tough to save up enough money to purchase a shop, so many of those who wanted to do so quickly benefited from this system.

But turning that around...

“What I’m hearing is that this place is so far out in the boonies that the subsidies are big enough they’re willing to let it go for just ten thousand rhea.”

There was an address on the listing, but I’d never heard the name of the town.

At the very least, that means it’s a small enough place that I don’t know anything about it.

“This is a small town...well, a *village* next to the great forest.”

“The great forest... It takes a month by carriage to get there, doesn’t it?”

“It sure does. But alchemical ingredients are easy to come by there, so I don’t think it’s a *bad* place for you to improve your skills. You may not have many customers, though.”

The great forest was a frontier land in this country, growing at the foot of the great mountains that stretched north to south.

Its formal name was the Gelba Rohha Foothills Forest, and it was famous as a place where you could harvest all sorts of plant, insect, and mineral ingredients.

So Master was right that it was an ideal place for polishing my skills, but...

“Isn’t the lack of customers kind of a fatal flaw? I just coughed up almost all my savings, so I won’t be able to pay my living expenses without customers.”

Yes, that was right: even if being close to the source would mean ingredients were cheaply available, that didn’t do me any good if nothing that I produced sold.

If I still had the kind of money I’d had before buying the *Complete Works*, maybe training there for a few years would have been an option, but I wouldn’t even be able to live on what I had now.

“Hmm, I still think it’s good, though.”

“Besides, I only just graduated today. How am I supposed to just suddenly open a shop...?”

“You’ll have no problem there. If you were a total amateur, that would be one thing, but you’ve worked at my place for years, right? I think you’ll be able to get by. I mean, you’re level three, after all.”

“Huh? Three...?”

“Yeah. Sarasa, do you know how you raise your level as an alchemist?”

“Come to think of it...”

They’d talked a whole lot about “levels” this, and “class” that, but the school had never taught us how to *raise* our level—just that we had to devote ourselves to our studies, or work hard for it.

“Hmm. Well, once you’re qualified, you usually get taught after you become an apprentice, after all.”

What Master explained to me after saying that was that, your level went up once you were able to make everything in a volume of the *Complete Alchemy Works*. So, if you could make everything in Volume One, you were level two, and once you made everything in Volume Two, you became level three.

They’d apparently kept this detail from us while we were students so that nobody tried to raise their level faster, recklessly practicing alchemy before they were formally qualified to do so.

“Now that you mention it, you had me make all sorts of stuff at work. Huh? So, basically, I made *everything* in Volume Two without realizing it?”

“That’s right. That volume has a lot of the most commonly used items in it, after all.”

So it just sort of happened as I was making all those different things under Master’s guidance... Well, no, she probably did it intentionally with that in mind.

“So, I think you’re well set up to open a shop.”

“But...I don’t know the first thing about managing a business.”

If what Master was saying was right, then I wouldn’t have any trouble making

items that sold well. But all I had done at my part-time job was manufacturing; I hadn't been involved in sales.

That meant I was a total neophyte when it came to pricing, stocking, and anything else related to running a business.

"Hrmm, you have a point... Okay, here's what we'll do. If you periodically send me ingredients from the frontier, I'll buy them off you. That way you won't have to worry about your living expenses, at least."

I'll make enough to live on, then, I guess?

It's not like I want to live an extravagant lifestyle, and if I look at it as training, then, well... Hold on.

"Master, I hope that's not your real goal here, is it?"

"I'm always thinking about my apprentice's future."

Master gave me a pat on the head, and a sort of pleasant smile she didn't normally show me.

"Uh, thanks? Wait, but you didn't deny it just now, did you?!"

"Ah, you there. How do we handle the contract for this? I just pay you here, and you provide the deed? Yeah, that should do it."

Flat out ignoring my protests, Master pulled the gold out of her own wallet, and accepted the deed and key in exchange. She then folded up the deed, and inserted it into my pocket along with the key.

"There, now you're a proper alchemist with her own shop. Congratulations! Ah, this is a present from me. Please, take it," Master said with a smile as she slapped me on the shoulder.

"Wh-Wh-Whuhh!"

Somehow, my future had just gotten decided for me.

Huh? I came here to search for a place to work, didn't I?

And that changed to me having my own shop at some point?

"Master, I'm feeling super uneasy about this."

“Well, I’ll help you out, so give it your best shot. Just try not to go into debt, and if you fail, I’ll hire you when you come back.”

“Right...”

Well, when she puts it that way...I guess it’s okay?

I mean, so long as I hold on to enough money to make my way back to the capital, I can always work in Master’s shop and all?

She already paid me well enough even when I was still just a trainee working for her part-time, so I won’t have to worry about going hungry.

I’ve got an alchemy license now, after all!

“Okay, I’ll see what I can do!” I said to hype myself up, clenching my fist.

“Yeah! That’s the spirit!” Master nodded with satisfaction as she encouraged me.

Huh? Is Master taking me for a ride? Or am I just imagining it?



Once we headed back to Master’s shop, she held a graduation party for me.

Definitely not out of pity because I was a loner, but out of pure kindness... Or so I’d like to believe.

Everyone attending worked at the shop. Nobody else turned up.

They probably just couldn’t fit it into their schedules. Yeah, that’s it!

Even I’ve got people who’d come if they were invited!

Like coworkers at my other part-time jobs!

I hadn’t invited them, though. But that definitely wasn’t because I’d been afraid to see the awkward expressions on their faces as they turned me down.

“Still, Master. Wasn’t it tough organizing a party so suddenly like this?”

The tables were lined with an assortment of fancy food and drinks that I’d never had before. I’d already tried a lot of them, and they were all delicious. I felt like I could keep on eating forever.

Now, obviously, that wasn’t actually possible, but I was sampling all sorts of

different dishes.

It's basic knowledge that you should always start with the most expensive-looking ones first!

"This is nothing special. She's the one who made it all anyway," Master said, pointing to Maria-san, the girl who always stood at the counter and was in charge of customer service.

When I looked over, Maria-san smiled and waved.

Huh? She made this sumptuous feast?

But it looks like the work of a professional chef.

"B-But what about all the expensive ingredients, and the alcohol...?"

"Hm? We use this kind of stuff on a regular basis. It seems she did have to run out and buy a few things, though."

Ohh, once you get to Master's level, this kind of feast is just normal, huh!

It's nothing like what I'm used to, only eating at the dorm, but these are probably fancy dishes, right?!

"Aren't you scrimping and saving a little too much? I never had much money either back in my student days, but whenever exams were finished, I treated myself at a restaurant that served food of about this level."

Huh? They're not that fancy after all?

"Hold on, *you're* the one who told me to save my money, Master!"

"Was I? I feel like all I said was that if you saved up the money, I'd let you buy the *Complete Alchemy Works* for cheap."

"It's the same thing! If you tell me I ought to buy it, then of course I'd save up!"

What does this master of mine think she's saying?! If she tells me that, of course I'm going to save all I can! We're talking a two and a half million rhea discount!

"Well, you didn't have to buy all ten volumes in one go. Even if you were only buying up through volume five, you'd still have saved money with me there."

“Is... Is...that...right?”

“Just the amount of the guarantee. It’s not that much for up to volume five, though.”

I’ve never heard any of this. Never!

“Well then, you should have told me that! I worked so hard to save that money!”

“Well, I had no idea how much you’d saved. And it *is* cheaper to buy all ten volumes at once, you know? Even if you’re just looking to buy Volume Ten, you still need an advanced alchemist, so you spend more on guarantees in the long run buying them individually.”

That made sense. If the guarantor had to be there for just about the same amount of time, then maybe whether it was just one volume or all ten didn’t make that much difference.

I guess maybe it worked out in the end...?

“So, on a completely different subject, if you make everything in Volume Nine, you’re an advanced alchemist, right? Well, then what do you call someone who makes everything in Volume Ten?”

“Oh, they’re ‘an idiot.’”

“Come again...?”

Did I mishear her?

“An idiot. The contents of Volume Ten... I know you can’t read them, but do you remember how thick it was? Extra thick, right?”

“Now that you mention it, I do seem to remember it was.”

I recalled that, when I had been putting the *Complete Works* into my backpack, Volume Ten had been the only one so thick it was hard to hold in one hand.

You could easily bludgeon someone to death with that thing.

“Volume Ten has all the sort of high-level artifacts you’d expect, but most of the stuff in there is irrelevant, and only left out of the lower volumes because

it'd be pointless to include it. So, uh, yeah, even if they're not all that difficult to make, it's a waste of both time and ingredients. I'd say only an idiot would ever bother."

"That's true... Ah, but you're a master class alchemist, which is higher than an advanced alchemist, right? How does that work?"

I'd assumed that you had to do everything in Volume Ten to get to master class.

"Ah, yes... Being able to make all of the important artifacts in Volume Ten is one of the requirements for master class. But as for the others..."

"What are the others?"

Master trailed off, as if for dramatic effect, and when she finally spoke, what she said was...

"...They're a secret."

"Whaaaaa. Whyyyyy? Tell meeeee."

"Master class alchemists have a different role from advanced ones, and it's pretty important. If you show promise once you become an advanced alchemist, I'll let you in on it, so be patient until then."

"Mrrgh, you'd better keep your promise, okay?"

"First *you'd* better worry about making it to advanced level. Only a handful ever do, you know?"

"Well, yes, but..."

Smiling at the dissatisfied look on my face, Master downed the rest of her wine.

"Come on, Sarasa. You drink too. You're an adult now, right? You've got to learn to enjoy alcohol."

"I-I guess I should, huh? I'll try it for the first time!"

There weren't strict rules about it, but generally you weren't able to drink until you became an adult at the age of fifteen.

I had turned fifteen myself a little while back, but since I was trying to save

money, I had nothing to do with luxuries like alcohol.

Today's drinks are free, though. So it'd be a shame not to indulge, wouldn't it?

And it's probably the fancy stuff too.

I poured some of the alcohol that happened to be in front of me into a cup, then imitated Master by taking a big gulp.

The moment I did, there was a hot feeling deep inside my throat, and I saw Master panic, then...



The next day, I awoke in an unfamiliar bed.

I think...I was at a party with Master yesterday, right?

My memory cuts out somewhere in the middle of it, so I guess that means this is Master's shop?

I got up out of bed, then looked out of the room into a familiar hallway.

Yep, looks like I was right.

I'd never been in here before, but this was the guest room on the second floor of Master's shop.

I continued down the stairs and headed for the living area of the shop where I could hear people. There I found Master relaxing as she enjoyed a cup of tea.

"Good morning, Master."

"Hey. You woke up. You sure gave us a laugh last night. Collapsing face-first onto the table after taking one sip of alcohol—pfeh, heh heh heh heh... Ah ha ha ha ha!"

The memory of it was too much for her to take, and Master couldn't contain herself as she burst out laughing.

Now that she mentioned it, I had tried some alcohol for the first time last night, and...if what Master was saying was correct, I'd passed right out?

Uh, isn't this kind of mean?

Okay, sure, it's a little pathetic that I collapsed after just one mouthful, but she

doesn't have to laugh quite so hard, does she?

Seeing the sullen look on my face, Master managed to stop laughing for a moment, but she was soon smirking again.

"And even after what you said, you still ended up staying the night at my place in the end, huh?"

"Urkh... Well..."

She had me there.

While it had been due to causes outside my control, I'd still ended up suddenly imposing on Master the very same day that I'd resolved to stand on my own two feet.

I could try to explain it away as being unused to alcohol, but if I'd passed out in a tavern somewhere, there would have been no one to help me.

I was an adult now, and I had to take responsibility for myself.

"That alcohol was too strong..."

"You're right that it was a little strong. It's quite an expensive type too, you know? If I recall, the price—"

"Stop! Don't tell me! I'll have an even harder time recovering..."

I don't want to hear what Master considers "quite expensive"!

It's got to be so much no ordinary person ever drinks it, right?!

I had no recollection of drinking it, let alone the taste, and the thought of all that money going to waste hurt my heart.

"I don't think I'll be trying alcohol again for a while..."

"Good call. Next time you do, I hope you'll give me another good laugh!"

Master snickered after she finished saying that.

So she wants me to pass out again, right? I see how it is.

I'll refrain from drinking in front of anyone, at least.

I was a woman, so it could end in things that couldn't be laughed off.

“She says that, but last night, after you collapsed, the owner was awfully worried for you, you know? She carried you up to the guest room herself, and stayed by your side until she’d settled down.”

“Oh, Maria-san.”

As I was feeling depressed, Maria-san emerged from the kitchen area with a cup in her hand, and she spilled the beans.

“Maria! You didn’t need to tell her that!”

“Oh, but it’s the truth, isn’t it? You even went looking for potions in a hurry.”

With a smile on her face, Maria handed me a cup of water, saying, “Here.”

I was feeling parched, so I gratefully accepted it. Trying to gauge Master’s reaction as I took a sip, the earlier smirk was all gone now, replaced with a lopsided frown.

“H-Hey, I couldn’t exactly let someone die on my premises!”

Noticing my eyes on her, Master cleared her throat and said that with a scowl, but Maria just smiled wryly, seemingly unconcerned.

“You just can’t be honest with yourself. But that’s okay. Now then, breakfast is ready. Will you be joining us too, Sarasa-san?”

“Erm...”

“Eat before you go. No need to make a big deal of a little thing like breakfast.”

I had been a little hesitant to impose any further, but Master asked Maria-san to set the table for three.

“Thank you.”

Honestly, considering I was setting out today, it was a big help being able to save some time like this.

I said my thanks, ate a little hurriedly, and then started preparing for my departure at once.

Although, with all my worldly possessions already tucked away inside the backpack Master had given me, I only really needed to prepare food for the trip.

That was something I could buy at a store along the way, so once I'd tidied myself up, I shouldered my pack, and I was all done.

When I went to say my goodbyes to Master before leaving the shop, she said, "Take this. It's a parting gift," and handed me a set of alchemy tools, some of each ingredient, and a booklet with advice on managing a business.

I didn't know about the booklet, but alchemy tools weren't cheap. I knew they were at least expensive enough that ordinary citizens couldn't easily buy them.

After her giving me the backpack, and paying for my shop, could I really accept this parting gift on top of that...?

Seeing my hesitation, Master remarked, "Are you forgetting I'm a master class alchemist? It's not that expensive to me, so don't sweat it. While we may have gone about it in a somewhat unorthodox way, you're still my apprentice, and you're going independent to run your own shop. And for that occasion, a parting gift like this is almost too cheap."

The way that she was able to write off an amount of money that no ordinary person could hope to make as "not that much"—well, that was an alchemist for you. It was just incredible.

Later, just as I was about to go out the door, Maria-san quietly informed me that the booklet was something Master had stayed up all night writing after I'd gone to sleep.

Hmm, is that why she looked so tired this morning?

I guess I can forgive her for laughing in my face, then.

She had probably been a little high-strung from lack of sleep.

And hold on, I kept learning about more and more favors from Master that I couldn't repay...

If you factored in the help I'd gotten from her with the *Complete Works*, Master had essentially given me several million rhea worth of support, right?

Yeah, I've got to give this my best shot, and make it work. To repay her in what little way I can.

Holding that determination in my heart, I set out from the capital.

Completely unaware of the reality that awaited me on the frontier...

Episode 2: My Shop Is...

Back in the present, I was standing in front of a dilapidated shop.

I sighed. "I can complain all I want, but it's not going to help. I'm here now, so better make the best of it!"

Remember the resolve you felt back then, me!

I had to repay my debt of gratitude to Master, who'd... Wait. Master was the one who'd chosen this shop, right?

No, no, she can't have known it was in this bad shape.

But the one who'd decided to buy a shop instead of me working somewhere while I trained was...

No, no, no, this is Master. She's definitely thinking of what's best for me! Yeah, that's gotta be it. Otherwise my heart's going to break...

"A-Anyway, first things first! Time to verify the situation!"

Getting back on track, I took another look at the outside of the shop.

Sure, the sign was tilting and looked ready to fall off at any moment, but...on closer inspection, maybe the building itself wasn't in such bad shape?

It looked squalid because the yard was all torn up, the fence was rotted, and the windows were so covered with grime that you couldn't see inside, but the roof was solid, and while there were some cracks in the plaster on the walls, they weren't collapsing anywhere.

The door and windows were good, and if I just fixed the sign and cleaned up, the place might not be half bad.

"Yeah! Okay! I'm feeling a bit more motivated now! Let's take a look inside."

I pulled the key from my pocket and began trudging through the tall grass toward the door before stopping along the way.

"Isn't this...a medicinal herb?"

Even the path leading up to the door was overrun with plants.

Scrutinizing them more closely, I could see that some of them were medicinal herbs, which could be used as ingredients in alchemy.

Come to think of it, this house came with a field of herbs, right? Maybe the seeds blew here on the wind...

Most of the plants were just weeds, but there were just enough herbs that it made it awkward to walk without stepping on them.

There were some herbs growing off of the path too, so I could have just ignored the ones on the path and walked right through them, but to my eyes, there was money lying right there on the ground.

How could someone like me, with a serious case of poverty brain, step on money like that?!

“Collection, collection...”

I put off going inside the house for a little while and started collecting the medicinal herbs first. I pulled up the grass, clearing a narrow path.

“Trash, cash, trash, cash, trash, trash, cash...” I mumbled to myself as I sorted the plants I was plucking into weed and herb piles.

The individual herbs weren’t worth a terribly impressive amount on their own, but if I kept on harvesting all the way to the door, I might make as much as an ordinary person did for a day’s work.

Although, if they weren’t processed immediately, their quality would degrade, so they were more valuable to me because I was an alchemist.

I went on tearing up the grass like that for a while.

“Oh my, young lady. What are you doing there?”

When I had made it halfway to the door, there was suddenly a voice from behind me.

I turned to see a somewhat plump woman in her late forties standing there.

“Erm...”

If you looked at what I was doing from an objective point of view...there was a

strange girl in front of an abandoned house, mumbling to herself as she pulled up the grass.

Yeah, that sounds pretty suspicious to me!

I'd heard that small villages like this could be a little insular, so maybe she thought I was really dodgy?!



“If you have business with that shop...which it doesn’t seem you do, it closed down a long time ago...?”

“No! That’s not it! This is my house! Yeah. I bought it, and I’m moving out here!”

I hurriedly explained myself to the dubious woman.

First impressions are important when you’re trying to join an insular community!

It was okay being a loner at school, but I need to get along with the neighbors if I’m going to make a living out here!

You should never underestimate a middle-aged woman’s network, so I put on an unpracticed smile and greeted her properly.

“I-It’s nice to meet you!”

“You bought it? So then, you’re an alchemist?!”

“Y-Yes! Still just a novice, but I am! My name’s Sarasa.”

“My, my. I’m Elles, and I live next door. Which is actually a good distance away, but if you ever need anything, please, come around.”

The woman—Elles-san, pronounced “Elz”—pointed to the left of the shop, smiling as she responded.

Oh, thank goodness. I can give myself a passing mark for first contact with the locals, right?

I shoved the fact that I’d been sighted plucking the weeds in a suspicious manner off into the corner of my head.

“So, we’re going to have an alchemist’s shop in our village again. It’s been a bit inconvenient without one, so it’ll be a big help! Good luck!”

“Yes, and thank you... Why *did* this place close down, by the way?”

If it was because it was unprofitable, then I’m going to have to have a long conversation with myself. I can probably make the bare minimum I need to pay for my living expenses just wholesaling ingredients to Master, but as an alchemist, I’ve got to aspire to more than that...

“Ahh, an elderly man was running the shop, but his back gave out. His son got worried and took him away. So you probably don’t need to worry about a lack of customers.”

“Is that right?”

I feel like there won’t be much demand in such a small village, though.

Perhaps picking up on my feelings, Elles-san smiled with a wry sense of humor.

“Yes, we’re a tiny village, but potions are still a necessity. A lot of gatherers who enter the great forest stay here too, so if you stock the kind of potions they need, you should have steady business. If you buy the things they bring back too, wouldn’t that be a tidy profit?”

These “gatherers” were people who made their living going to all the places where the different alchemy ingredients could be harvested, and bringing them back to sell.

Those places were generally dangerous, which meant there were a lot of injuries. That made them a source of ingredients for alchemists, but also a stable customer base.

“I appreciate that there are gatherers, but I’ll have to see how things go before deciding if I buy their wares. I have to consider what I can sell, and how to ship it out of here, after all...”

“Oh, is that how it is? I’m just a simple woman who doesn’t understand how the alchemy business works.”

In a way, it was only natural that I would be able to acquire materials cheaply here, so close to the source, but if I bought them without thinking, that would be a quick route to bankruptcy.

First of all, most of the things they were selling couldn’t be stored as is. Left alone, they’d rot, or become unusable in other ways, so they needed to be prepared for long-term storage.

I was the one who’d be doing that work, of course, and so if I bought more than I could handle, I’d just be producing waste.

I also had to factor in shipping cost to the buyers, unsold merchandise, and damage in shipping when determining the price I was willing to pay...

...is what it said in the booklet Master gave me.

It even had a chart with the price of each ingredient in the capital, and prices for wholesale buying, but it came with a warning that if I simply followed that verbatim, I'd quickly find myself in the red.

"Well, setting the question of if you're buying things aside, when do you think you'll be opening up shop?"

"Erm, I have to clean up, and get ready, so...that's maybe a week off."

I couldn't say for certain, not having seen the inside of the place yet, but I would also have to make my products, so I figured it'd be about that long.

"I see, I see. If you ever need anything, just say the word," Elles-san said with a smile.

"Thank you," I replied, bowing my head once more.



After seeing Elles-san off, I went back to pulling up grass, and reached the door at my own pace. There, I pulled the key from my pocket and inserted it into the lock. Turning it, there was a slight click, and then the door opened. Contrary to my expectations, the door wasn't rickety at all. It moved smoothly as I pulled it outward.

"Less dirty than I thought..."

Right inside the door was the sales floor.

I had been ready for a cloud of dust to dance up into the air, but the shelves and floor were surprisingly clean.

"Oh, right. It *is* an alchemist's shop. Maybe it has a cleaning seal?"

Normally, when producing an artifact, you would put items into the alchemic cauldron and synthesize them. But was that the only way to make artifacts? No, it wasn't.

The other method involved "seals."

However, it was a more complicated process. You could make simple things by just drawing the patterns with a specialized paint, but more complicated things might require multiple artifacts to be embedded at specific points, and the items to be placed in accordance with the seal. It was a lot of work.

In the case of a house, the layout of the rooms and hallways, how they were going to be used, and the locations of windows and chimneys all had to be included in the seal.

Following this logic, you could even make an entire city into an artifact, but it had major drawbacks in addition to the increased complexity.

Firstly, it was inefficient: It required many times the skill and cost just to achieve the same effect as alchemy done using a cauldron. In addition, it required regular maintenance by an alchemist, so the technique didn't see much general use at this point in time.

Although, turning that around, it was well worth using for an alchemist's shop.

"In Master's shop, the core was on the wall..."

The core was the base of the seal, and its most important part.

That said, once it had been made, it was only ever really used when pouring magical power into it, so it was usually placed somewhere out of the way, but where it was still easy to pour power into it.

I started out by going around and opening all the windows in each room as I searched for the core.

In the back of the shop space, on the right-hand side, a door behind the counter led to a hallway. The hallway accessed a storage room, workshop, empty room, stairs to the left, and a kitchen at the end.

"Oh." There was a magic crystal embedded in the wall under the stairs.
"Here's the core."

It just looked like an ordinary stone at first glance, and there wasn't a seal carved into it or anything, but all of the magical power in the house flowed through it, so any alchemist would have recognized it instantly.

“But it’s almost out of juice...”

There was only the smallest amount of magical power flowing out of the crystal, and it was only barely managing to maintain the seal.

Another year from now, and it’d probably have shut down.

“Guess I’d better fill ’er up.”

Not to brag, but I had confidence in my magical power capacity. It was probably one of the reasons that Master had hired me.

Touching the core, I gently let my power flow into it, and the patterns of the seal appeared around the crystal.

“Yeah, I thought so, it’s got cleaning... Oh? And security too?”

I’d only ever taken the simpler practical lessons at the academy, and I’d never worked on anything as large as a house before, but I’d learned what I had to, so I could read what they were.

This was a fairly complicated seal, built by someone who must have been a good alchemist. I could see that cleaning had been included as the main effect, with security as a secondary one. There were some bits I didn’t quite understand, but there wouldn’t be anything in there that was harmful to the owner of the house, so I kept on pouring.

“Hrmm... It’s got a pretty high capacity.”

After pouring in about half of my total magical energy, I pulled my hand away.

As someone who was pretty confident in her own magic capacity, the fact that it still wasn’t full after all I’d put in was pretty shocking to me...

I might still only be a novice alchemist, but I’ve got so much magical power in me that Master was a little astonished sometimes, you know?

“Well, whatever. It’s running fine, so I can top it up bit by bit later.”

So long as the seal’s functions were restored, there was no need to force myself to fill it completely, and if I used up all my magical power, I’d lose the will to work too.

At the bare minimum, I had to clean up my bedroom and the kitchen today.

After all, I'd finally arrived at my new home!

There were eight rooms of varying sizes on the second floor, all empty. There wasn't a single thing to be found in any of them except the built-in shelves.

The only exception was the alchemy workshop.

That was the one place left untouched, and it looked like nothing had been taken at all when the previous owner had moved out.

With a little cleaning, it looked like it would be ready to use tomorrow.

"Normally, when people move out, they at least leave some furniture..."

If they were going to some place in the neighborhood, that was one thing, but if they were moving to a whole other town, then it was a lot of trouble moving large pieces of furniture. People tended to give them away to the neighbors, or just leave them behind in the old house.

The little chest in my room in the dorms had been left behind that way.

It was a bit of an expensive piece which I'd gotten from a friend of Master's, and I liked it, but I clearly couldn't bring it with me, so I had left it behind.

It'd make me sad if it got thrown out, so hopefully one of the new students finds a use for it... Oh, maybe there was a newly married couple in this village, or something like that?

I'd heard that, when people got married and built a new house, it was common for them to receive all of someone's unneeded furniture like this, and then buy whatever was missing themselves.

It's really rough, financially, having to buy a whole set of furniture all of a sudden when you get married, after all.

"Well, this simplifies the cleaning, I guess..."

The cleaning seal made cleaning easy, but it unfortunately had some drawbacks. One was that it had a hard time making any effect on the exterior—the outer walls, windows, and roof. It also only cleaned things a little at a time, so it couldn't keep up with the dirt on those parts that were constantly exposed to the weather.

The other thing was that it only affected the house itself. If there was furniture, it couldn't clean up any dust or stains on it.

That meant that, in this house, bereft of furniture as it was, there was a good chance the seal would have it more or less clean in a few days' time.

"Okay, this can be my room..."

I put down my luggage in the room on the south side that got the most sunlight, then headed back down to the kitchen on the first floor.

The workshop was what I was most curious about, but if I went in now, I was bound to lose track of time, so for now I was just going to have to be patient. Yes, patient.

"Let's look at the kitchen... Whoa, there's no stove or oven... I can't cook like this."

In most houses, heat was provided by a wood or charcoal stove. But this place, like most alchemists' houses, had at one point had an oven powered by magic. However...

All that was left now was the signs it had once been there.

"Okay, guess I'll be eating out for a while... Woo-hoo! There's a bath! Now that's what I expect from an alchemist's place!"

There were artifacts and potions that, when making them, you needed to be clean, so many alchemists' workshops came with an attached bath. Master's shop had one, of course—and I'd made use of it a number of times.

I love baths, so this place gets major points for having one!

But unless I made a water-boiler artifact like Master's had, I was going to burn through a ridiculous amount of firewood. I decided then and there to make that my goal.

I can't have my daily soak in the tub otherwise.

"Ohh, now I'm super motivated! This just leaves the backyard!"

I got back into gear, and then pushed open the door in the rear of the kitchen, which led out into the backyard.

Outside stood an undisturbed forest... Well, okay, that's exaggerating.

This was *supposed* to be a field of medicinal herbs, but it looked more like a whole lot of brush to me.

There was only a sad excuse for a fence left around the property, and it was rotting or broken in quite a few places.

The way that things were going, it was only a matter of time before the woods that had grown right to the edge of my backyard swallowed it up.

"The well's still fine, right?"

The area around the well, which was just outside the door on the right, was paved with stone, and had narrowly avoided being overtaken by the brush.

It was properly covered so that no trash fell inside, but there was also no bucket, so I had no way to draw water from it.

"Inside... There *is* water. It hasn't gone dry. I just need to buy a bucket, and then I can use it."

Okay, I think I have a grasp of things now.

First I need a bed, table, and chairs.

Then, in terms of sundries: tableware, a mattress, and that bucket. Once I have all that, this place will be livable.

Now as for where I can buy them... Okay, I'll turn to Elles-san for help.

I headed over to the neighboring house, which was about a one-minute walk, and called out to her.

"Elles-san, do you have a moment?"

"Sure, I'll be with you in a second," she called back. She soon came out, without making me wait much of any time at all. "Righty-o, what can I help you with?"

"Erm, I don't need help so much as I want to buy some things. Furniture and some sundries. Do you know where I could do that?"

Elles-san had an immediate answer to my question.

“Well, if you need furniture, you put in an order with the carpenter, and if it’s about pots and the like, you go to the blacksmith. You can buy some things at the general store, but anything but the best-selling items you’ll have to order in from the nearest town.”

Yeah, in a small village like this, I suppose that’s the case. You never run into problems like this in the capital, although there, I was only looking, never buying!

“Yeah, I thought that might be how it worked here. Could I trouble you to tell me where those places are?”

“I don’t mind, but...”

Elles-san seemed to think for a moment, then nodded.

“Sure thing. I’ll show you the way. Could you come into the house for a moment?”

“You don’t mind?”

“This is a tiny village, after all. You could use a familiar face to make introductions, right? Leave it to me!” Elles-san said with a reliable smile, thumping her chest with one hand.

“That’d be a big help! Thank you,” I replied, bowing my head.

“Don’t worry about it. Now, come on in!”

I entered the house at Elles-san’s invitation, accepting a warm cup of tea as I did so.

Thinking about it, I haven’t had a drop to drink since I arrived in the village, I recalled, relaxing for a little while until Elles-san returned.

“Okay, I’m all ready! Want to go?”

“Oh, yes! Please. And thank you for the tea.”

We headed out the door, and I followed Elles-san to another solitary house.

There was lumber lying around, and what looked like a work area, but no sign outside identifying the place.

Oh, thank goodness. If she hadn't brought me here, I'd have had a bit of a hard time talking to them.

"Is old man Geberk around?"

I hesitantly followed Elles-san as she strode into the house without the slightest hesitation of her own.

"What is it, Elles-san? Have some work that needs doing? Hm? The little lady behind you's a new face, isn't she?"

The man who came out from the back was rather old, and yet you wouldn't have been able to tell it from the vigor with which he still moved.

He had the slightly sharp eyes and harsh expression of a stubborn old craftsman, so for someone like me, who wasn't great at communication, I'd have been a bit scared to talk to him by myself.

"This here is Sarasa-chan, who just moved in. She's an alchemist, if you can believe it!"

"Ohh, for that shop? You're doing us a real favor. So, what'll it be? Repairs to the building?"

"Oh, no, I may need to ask for those too at some point, but today I'm here about furniture."

I can't do without a bed.

If I think of it as camping out, then I'd be fine sleeping on the floor, but doing that in my own house would just be sad.

I want a table and chairs too, but considering the money situation, maybe they can wait for now?

"Could I ask you to make a bed for me? As soon as possible. So long as it's solidly constructed, I won't complain about the particulars."

"Hmm. You'd have a hard time sleeping without one, I suppose. All right, then. As for the price..."

As Geberk-san thought about it for a moment, Elles-san slapped him on the back.

“Come on, old man! This adorable little lady’s done us the favor of moving out here, and as an alchemist at that, so how about you make her a bed or two as a moving-in present?!”

“Oh, no, I’ll pay you properly...”

“But Sarasa-chan, you’re still a novice, and you’ve just come out to the middle of nowhere. You must not have much money, right?”

“Urkh...”

“Besides, that house had no furniture *at all*, right?”

“Oh, that’s right... Young Kirik took all the furniture when he moved into his new place. Okay, got it. I’ll make you a bed free of charge.”

“Huh?! Um, are you sure?”

“Like Elles says, I wouldn’t be much of a man if I couldn’t give a girl who’s smaller than my own granddaughter a moving-in present. Just put in an order with me once you’ve got more money to spare.”

“Th-Thank you!”

In all honesty, I didn’t have much in the way of moving-in funds, so he was really helping me out.

As the generous old man, who really wasn’t so scary after all, cracked a smile, I politely bowed my head and thanked him.

Once we parted company with Geberk-san, the next stop was Jizdo-san, the blacksmith.

In light of my finances, this was just a meet-and-greet. We moved on to the general store without me placing an order.

“This is the only general store in the village. It’s run by a husband and wife, but they’re frequently away on trips to buy stock, so their daughter Lorea is often the one minding the place.”

It was a large building, maybe twice the size of the other houses.

The living area probably wasn’t any bigger than the others though, so maybe

it had about one house's worth of space on the sales floor?

My shop's only the size of a regular house, sales floor included, so I guess I lose...

Unlike at Geberk-san's place, there was a sign out front, which made it a little easier to just walk in. Elles-san did so immediately, and when I followed her with a cheerful "Hello," a girl who was probably my age, maybe a little younger, came out to greet us.

Her hair was cut short, and she looked like she had an outgoing personality, paired with a cute smile.

"Welcome. Oh, Elles-san. Hello! Here to buy something?"

"No, I'm showing this girl here around," Elles-san said, pushing me forward.

"I'm Sarasa." I introduced myself. "I'll be opening up an alchemy shop, so I hope we'll get to know one another."

"Oh, sure! I'm Lorea. And I hope so too! Wow, a city girl, huh?"

"Huh? A city girl?"

Me? How so? I always look like a bumpkin compared to the others. I mean, I was always too busy studying to get into fashion.

"Oh, no, it's just... Your clothes, your mannerisms, they're different from the girls around here, y'know...?"

"They...are?"

Okay, it's true, I had bought this outfit at a shop in the capital that my seniors had brought me to.

They must have felt bad about how completely uninterested I was in clothes, because they would take me places like that occasionally.

They were good role models, considering my financial situation when helping me put together an outfit. They would bring me to used clothing stores—which nobles like them wouldn't usually go to.

But as for my mannerisms... Were they noticeably different?

"Oh, come on! The clothes in this village are mostly handmade, and for a lot

of people, as long as they're wearable, that's good enough for them!"

"Huh? But, Lorea-san, your clothes wouldn't look out of place in the capital, you know?"

They're even a little stylish, I think.

And anyway, there's lots of people in the capital who are satisfied with just having something to wear. Like me.

"The capital! The *royal* capital! Wow, that's *totally* the big city! Hey, hey, whenever you have the time, come tell me all about it!"

"S-Sure..."

I nodded, a little intimidated by the way she closed in on me, eyes sparkling.

The big city... Okay, well, compared to this village, I guess that's what you'd call it, but is it anything to admire so much?

The poor in the capital still wear rags, and most parts of the city aren't that nice to look at, but is it okay to just tell it to her like it is?

"Hey now, Lorea, back to work. Sarasa-chan's here to buy things, remember."

"Oh, right. She is! What do you need? I'll do my best to give you a discount! ...To the degree I'm allowed to, that is."

"Erm, is that okay?"

"Yeah, I don't have a whole lot of room for haggling, but if it's just throwing in a little something extra, then sure."

"Thank you. All right, then. I'll need a largeish washbasin and a mattress. Oh, and could I get some food as well?"

"The basins are over here. The wooden ones are a bit cheaper," she said, pointing to a pile of washbasins that were large enough I'd have to hold them in both arms.

Some were made from metal, while others were wooden. Neither type was of poor quality.

If Geberk-san and Jizdo-san made these, then I have nothing to worry about in terms of their skill.

“We don’t have mattresses in stock, they’re made on demand...although, it’s just the old ladies in the neighborhood who make them. If you’d like, you could make one yourself. We do sell the materials.”

I see... I wonder if it’s normal to make your own in a village like this...

I could make my own too, as it happened. When I’d first entered the school dorms, I’d made one together with my teacher from the orphanage.

That was the only time I did it, but I’m good at sewing, so maybe I’ll make my own?

You know why that is, right? There were a lot of things I kept on mending until they reached their limit.

“When you say food...you mean ordinary food, right? We have a variety of different preserved foods for gatherers, but outside of that, we only stock cereals, I think? Around here, people go directly to the growers. We can act as an intermediary for you, if it helps, though...”

“Oh, I’ll handle that,” Elles-san interjected. “Sarasa-chan, you’re going to be living in this village, so it’d be good if you got to know people, wouldn’t it?”

Oh, now this feels like the country.

In the capital, food is something you buy at a store, and you’d never negotiate with the growers directly.

I asked why they didn’t stock food and was told that if they harvested it when they didn’t know it would sell, it didn’t last as long as it would if left in the field. If I made a request, then they’d harvest what was needed at the time and give me my share.

“That sounds good. Whenever you have time will be fine, so please do.”

I’m not set up to cook yet anyway.

After looking at various other products, I ultimately bought the wooden washbasin, a well bucket, cloth and ample stuffing for a mattress, as well as some tableware.

It was all a bit much to walk around with though, so I left it there for the time being, and would pick it up on the way back.

“Okay, I’m good now. Or I should be.”

“Well, if there’s anything you’ve forgotten to buy, come back whenever you like! I’m happy to help any time, so long as it isn’t the middle of the night!”

Wow, that’s the countryside for you.

Nobody helps you after hours in the capital, you know?

“Thank you. If I need help, I’ll be sure to ask.”

Saying goodbye to Lorea as she waved, we moved on to the restaurant.

My kitchen was in no state for cooking, so I’d have starved if I didn’t know where it was.

“There’s only one place in the village, but the food there’s delicious, so you’re in for a treat!”

“Okay! Oh, Elles-san, will you join me for lunch? I’d like to buy you a meal to say thank you for showing me around.”

It was around lunchtime, so I invited her to join me, thinking I needed to show my appreciation somehow, but Elles-san let out an uproarious laugh and slapped me on the back.

Yep, that hurts.

“Ha ha ha! I’d be a sorry sight, letting a girl young enough to be my daughter treat me like that! Let me treat you instead!”

“Huh?! No! You already showed me around, so making you do that for me too wouldn’t be right...”

“You don’t need to worry about it, kid! I can afford enough for both of us!” Elles-san said, slapping her somewhat generous belly.

True, I could see that she didn’t have trouble putting food on the table... But I wouldn’t have said anything if she hadn’t mentioned it. Really!

Elles-san led me to an inn-and-restaurant. The building was so large it looked out of place in a village like this, but I supposed that was a testament to the large number of gatherers who stayed around here.

Inside, we found a number of them at the restaurant, enjoying a meal.

There's probably even more of them still in the great forest at this time of day, so maybe my business is pretty safe?

"Delal, we're here to eat!" Elles called.

"Oh, Elles? How unusual to see you during the day." Another woman around the same age as Elles-san poked her head out from the back. She was charismatic, outgoing, and looked like she ate even better than Elles-san.

"Oh, cut it out, Delal. You'll make me sound like some sort of drunk who only comes here at night!"

"But you're such a good customer of mine!"

The two of them laughed and slapped each other on the shoulders.

Hmm, is that how the older women in this village communicate? By slapping each other on the shoulders... I don't know if my bones can handle that.

"So, what's this all about? You're not really here to do some day-drinking, right? Does it have something to do with the little lady behind you?"

"Yeah," Elles-san said, pushing me forward. "The little miss is our new alchemist! I've brought her around to introduce her, and get some lunch."

"U-Um, I'm Sarasa. I'll be opening up a shop in this village. It's nice to meet you!" I hurriedly greeted her, bowing my head.

"Wow, you're starting a shop when you're still so young? That's amazing. I'm the proprietress of this here inn, the name's Delal. Hope you'll become a regular here!"

"Well, I can't cook at home right now, so I expect you'll be seeing a lot of me for the next little while."

"Ahh, that happens when you've just moved in... Okay, got it! Let me give you a moving-in gift! Your meal's on the house today!"

"Th-Thank you."

I was genuinely grateful for the treat, but the heavy clap on the shoulder that came with it hurt.

“Thanks, Delal, sorry to put you out like this.”

“Elles, *you* pay properly!”

“What’s this? You’re such a skinflint. Isn’t this your chance to show how generous you are by treating me too?”

“Um, I’ll pay, as a thanks for showing me around and all...” I offered hesitantly, but Elles-san just grinned and pointed at me.

“Look, now you’ve gone and made the little miss feel bad about it.”

“Tch!” Delal-san clicked her tongue. “Looks like I have no choice. You eat free too.”

“Erm, are you sure it’s okay?” Much as I was grateful, I wasn’t entirely on board with being used to score a free meal like this...

The two of them looked at the troubled expression on my face, then looked at each other. They both burst out laughing.

“Don’t you worry about it. Elles and I go way back, and we’re always like this. Besides, Elles’s husband’s done a lot for me. A free meal here or there’s no big deal!”

“We’re just playing with each other. Sorry to make you feel bad like that.”

“No, I’m glad to hear that’s all it was.”

It turned out that Elles-san’s husband was a hunter, and he wholesaled meat to the inn. Sometimes, he threw in a little extra for them. It was a give-and-take relationship. They were so close that little squabbles like this were just how they communicated, or so they said.

Man, I don’t get it!

Maybe it’s just because I’m not used to dealing with people?

“Is there anything you don’t like to eat?” Delal asked me.

“No, not particularly... Among the things I’ve eaten so far, at least.”

I hadn’t exactly grown up living a life of luxury, so while I might like some things more than others, there wasn’t anything I’d turn my nose up at.

But I'd heard there were incredibly stinky foods, and things you could eat even though they were rotten, out in the big, wide world, and I was a little less sure I could stomach those.

"You'll be fine, then. We have deals with the gatherers. We only use ordinary ingredients in the food we serve here!"

Oh, well in that case... Hm? In the food they serve here?

"Do you have any unusual local specialties in these parts?"

"Hm? I don't know if I'd call it that. People eat a lot of things out in the countryside. Insects and caterpillars, sometimes even the hairy ones..."

Blech! Not happening! I'd have to be starving to death!

"Ah hah hah hah. Don't you worry. We don't serve them here, and there's only a handful of people in the village with unique tastes who eat them at all!"

"I-Is that so...?"

Thank goodness for that. If she told me that, "Guess what, there were bugs in your food after all!" after I finished eating, I might toss my cookies!

"But you do have *one thing* that's an acquired taste, don't you? You know, the pickles."

"Ohh, that. The people who like it really like it, so I do serve it on request."

"Hm?"

This sounded vaguely unsettling, so I asked them for more details. It turned out that the "pickles" Elles-san spoke of were a special type that were pickled in a barrel for over a year.

It was apparently made as an emergency food for when there was a bad harvest, but even the villagers struggled to eat it as is, so most of them let it sit in water for a while before eating it.

But some exceptionally brave folks had gotten addicted to that piquant smell, and would eat it straight out of the barrel.

This was something that both Elles-san and Delal-san said they couldn't recommend, and wouldn't eat themselves, so I was probably never going to

have an opportunity to find out for myself.

Please let things stay that way.

“Anyway, give me just a moment, and I’ll be back with something I *can* recommend!”

Delal headed back into the kitchen, and soon reemerged with food for two.

“This is more or less what lunch here looks like. Today’s on me, but usually it’s forty rhea. If you like it, come back for more!”

“Thank you. It looks delicious.”

She laid out a dish of thin strips of meat fried with beans, two buns, and a soup with plenty of veggies.

The smell wafted through the air... *Yep, this is going to be good!*

I had been traveling for some time now, eating nothing but salted fish, dried meat, and hard bread, with just water to wash it down, so I was already grateful enough just to have a hot meal.

“Sounds like it has your approval.”

“Yes! It’s delicious!”

“Glad to hear it! Take your time and relax.”

Delal slapped me on the shoulder again, then headed back to work with a hearty laugh.

Yeah, she’s a great person and all, but I think I’d like her even more if she’d show her affection a little less vigorously. I never did anything but study, so I’m not built for this!

“Sorry for being so rough. We don’t have twiggy girls like you in a village like this, so I don’t know how I’m supposed to interact. Our girls all toughen up while they’re still kids.”

She could tell what I was thinking, huh?

“No, no, I can tell it’s well-meaning,” I reassured. “Elles-san, do you come here often?”

“Hm? I drop by in the afternoons occasionally. My hubbie’s a hunter, you know. So I’m all alone during the day.”

“Um, do you have children?”

“Two daughters, and a son. My daughters have gone off to be married, but my son didn’t want to follow in his father’s footsteps and took off to become a merchant...”

“Oh, I see...”

What am I supposed to say to that? I don’t have the life experience to offer anything back!

“Oh, don’t you worry. He’s still healthy, and even comes by the village on business occasionally. It sounds like he’s doing quite well for himself.”

Thank goodness.

She’d gotten this far-off look in her eye, so I’d started imagining that she’d lost touch with him, or something like that.

“Well, small as this village is, we’ve been around to all the main places,” Elles went on. “When you’re done eating, I’ll take you around to see the mayor.”

“Oh, right! I do need to see him! To introduce myself. We don’t have a custom like that in the capital...”

“Ah hah hah, I’ll bet not! The top dog in the capital is the king. They’d never let you in just to say hello to him!”

I bore Elles-san’s raucous laughter with a strained smile.

In the capital, if you were going to greet someone after moving in, it was your new neighbors, and that was about it.

Seeing the mayor here had completely slipped my mind as a result. The kingdom’s laws recognized the freedom to move, but if you offended the higher-ups in a village like this, there was no way you’d be able to go on living there.

Yikes! I was this close to getting myself ostracized!

Thank you, Elles-san!

“Um, what is the mayor like?”

If he was the hard-to-please type, then I was in for a difficult time as someone with so little experience in dealing with people.

“Hmm, he’s getting on in years. He’s a little rickety, but he’s not ready to keel over just yet.”

“Is he scary...?”

“Huh? Oh, don’t worry! He’s a relaxed old man.”

“O-Oh, he is!”

Thank goodness! That’s one win for Sarasa-chan!

Whew, I was about ready to give in to despair when I first arrived, but you know what, the place seems pretty nice.

Maybe it’s just thanks to Elles-san’s introductions, but everyone’s been nice to me despite my lack of communication skills. There’s nothing better than a place that’s easy to live in!

“Look, that’s the mayor’s house over there.”

Elles-san pointed to a rather ordinary house, not noticeably larger than others. It was in a central location, but I wouldn’t have known it belonged to the mayor unless someone had told me.

“His only job in the village is collecting taxes though, so I don’t think you’ll have much involvement with him.”

“You may be right.”

The mayor’s job was to gather up the tax money, and then hand it over to the tax collectors.

But it worked a little differently for alchemists. We had to pay ourselves based on how much we made in sales.

It was basically a self-reporting system. Because of that, you could fudge the numbers to a degree—though that was illegal, of course. Normally, if someone was making the kind of money alchemists did, there was little incentive to do

that.

Even so, Master wasn't a fan of the system. In her opinion, "Keeping records is a pain in the butt. I wouldn't care if they raised my taxes if that'd just make it easier."

"But he's still the mayor," Elles-san continued. "He's well-connected, so he can be a little helpful when you're having trouble. You've got nothing to lose by going and paying your respects."

"Right..."

Is it okay to be so casual about it?

"Hey now, Elles. That's an awful way to put it."

As we were talking, an old man came out from behind the mayor's house, and walked toward us.

So, this is the mayor, then?

I was immediately worried that he'd overheard us.

"Oh, you were listening, old man?"

But Elles-san was unrepentant, responding to him as if it was no big deal at all.

"You used to be so cute, Elles-chan, and look what's become of you now..."

"Don't you '-chan' me! You ought to know better," she scolded. "This's Sarasa-chan, an alchemist who's moving into the old shop."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Sarasa the alchemist. I'll be living in your village from now on, so I hope you'll treat me kindly."

I hurriedly bowed my head, but the mayor just waved his hand in a friendly manner.

"Hoh hoh hoh. There's no need to be so formal. You alchemists are the ultra-elite. We're incredibly grateful just to have one of you in our village."

"Don't say that... I'm still so young and inexperienced..."

"No, no, having an alchemist at all is a big help to our village. We look forward

to having you. If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to say the word. I'm here to help."

"Thank you. I will."

While he might have been exaggerating a little for effect, the mayor wasn't totally off base in what he was saying.

For a small village without a doctor, having an alchemist could sometimes be the difference between life and death.

Even the most novice of alchemists could craft potions, and we had medical knowledge too. Heck, you could often trust an alchemist to know their stuff better than the average doctor.

But, well, if I let that go to my head, I'd get myself ostracized in no time.

That's why I was going to be humble. Yes, humble.



"Okay! I've got a lot to do, so I'd better clean up real quick!"

Having escaped from the idle chatter of an elderly mayor who had too much spare time on his hands, I tossed the dirty clothes that had built up over the course of my travels into the washbasin, filled it with water using magic, and then started doing my laundry.

Yeah, the fact of the matter is, in daily life, I can probably get by without using the well at all.

Why had I bought a bucket for it, then? When growing medicinal herbs for use in alchemy, or crafting potions used to treat people, the kind of water that could be produced using magic was less than desirable.

It wasn't usable in all cases, by any means. But it was good enough for laundry.

Once I'd finished washing my clothes, I dried them off with magic, then moved on to cleaning, where I put my magic to use once again.

I opened up all the windows, and then used the introductory-level wind spell Breeze—also known as the cleanup spell—to blow the dust off the shelves.

“Now I just need to wipe them... Oh, I don’t have any rags.”

I’d obviously thrown out the rags that I’d used back when I’d lived in the dorms, and it would be such a waste to make some out of the cloth that I’d just bought to make a mattress. Was there anything in my bag I could use...?

“I can still wear this. This one’s pretty, so I can probably use the material for something else. Which leaves...this, I guess?”

I picked out an outfit that was a little small on me.

I usually sold the clothes I outgrew to the secondhand store, or reused the cloth for something else, for example turning them into rags once the fabric was worn out. But this outfit had some memories attached to it, so I’d kept it around.

It was back when I had just gotten into school, and I was going to be moving into the dorms.

I was wearing one of my better outfits, since it was going to be my first day there, when the director of the orphanage said, “Those clothes are looking a little shabby. This is a special day, so why not wear something a little nicer?”

The director assumed I would have used some of my scholarship money to buy new clothes, so she wasn’t being snide or anything. But this was my best outfit.

That said, I didn’t want to go to school in something that would be seen as shabby, so I asked the director to come with me, and we went out and bought a bunch of outfits, one of which was this rag candidate.

At the time, I’d deliberately bought clothes that were a little big on me, since I’d grow into them in no time, but...

“I was able to wear this not so long ago...”

No, no, it was clearly too small for me to wear now, okay? I’d been ten when I’d bought all those, after all!

“They’re so worn out I couldn’t possibly wear them outside. But if it’s just as pajamas, then maybe”...was something that I was most definitely not thinking. Not a chance.

It's okay, I have been growing.

I'm sure I'm about average size for my age... Probably?

Come to think of it, I never asked Lorea-san her age. How old is she?

I was just a little underdeveloped compared to her... Just a little, though, all right?!

“Is there a potion that stimulates growth? Not that I’d necessarily use it...”

Thinking these idle thoughts, I quickly completed my cleaning, and finished the first day in my new home wrapped in a warm blanket.



“Nngh, that was the best sleep I’ve gotten in a long time!”

When I awoke the next morning, I stretched all the way, then relaxed.

It had been a while since I had been able to sleep soundly in a safe place, so even if that place happened to be the floor, I felt emotionally refreshed.

And the sunlight shining in through the two windows feels good too...

“But looking at it again... This room is pretty drab, huh?”

The room was twice the size of my previous one, and there wasn’t a single piece of furniture yet, so it felt even bigger than it actually was.

And here I was, sleeping in the corner, wrapped in a blanket. It didn’t make for a particularly impressive picture.

Honestly, it's super boring—well, no, I shouldn't look at it that way. This is something I can work on. Yeah! That's right: I've just bought my very own house!

My room in the orphanage had been a shared one, and I hadn’t had this kind of freedom in the dorms either. But here, I could decorate as I pleased. To the degree my budget allowed, anyway.

When you look at it that way, starting with nothing's not so bad, right?

“Well, be that as it may, today’s the day I finally move on to the workshop! Mweh heh heh...”

My very own workshop!

The words sounded so sublime. Any alchemist would feel the same, right?

I couldn't help but titter with glee.

With the last of my restraint, I scarfed down yesterday's leftovers in place of a proper breakfast, and only then stood in front of the door to my workshop.

"Onward!"

I opened the door, stepped inside, and turned on the lights.

"Ohhhhhh! Gwee! Gwee hee hee!"

I started squealing like a gremlin. Yikes.

But who could blame me!

This workshop is awesome!!!

First, there was the alchemic cauldron. It was so important, most alchemy couldn't be done without one.

I had considered the possibility that one might not come included with the place, but not only was it here, it was big enough I could climb inside of it.

If you considered that the alchemy set that Master had given me (a luxury item no commoner could afford) had come with a cauldron the size of a portable pot, then maybe that would give you some idea of just how incredible this one was.

Next was the glass furnace.

It was primarily used for making potion bottles, which was pretty important. The properties of the glass used in the bottle needed to be adjusted based on the type of potion, so sourcing them from elsewhere was a real hassle.

There were a number of smaller tools, and all sorts of ingredients. It felt a little weird—no, *incredibly* weird—seeing this place so well-stocked after how utterly bare the rest of the rooms had been.

It wasn't up to the level of Master's workshop, but it was a real luxury for an alchemist fresh out of the academy to have a facility like this. It was dizzying just thinking about how much it would have cost to buy all this stuff.



“This house was only ten thousand rhea, though...”

This may be stating the obvious, but the cauldron alone would have cost far more than that.

Even just selling some of the ingredients that had been left here would have easily brought in more than ten thousand rhea.

“Maybe this place was a really good deal, after all? No, it *definitely* was.”

I was disappointed by how it looked from the outside, but maybe the previous owner was a pretty high-level alchemist? I know they said he was an old man, but I wonder what he was like.

Being an alchemist, there’s no way he wouldn’t have known what this room was worth.

The building isn’t cursed or anything like that, right?

In the capital, when there was a horrific incident and a place became haunted, it sometimes got put up for sale dirt cheap, but... If that was what this was, then Elles-san’s attitude would’ve been different.

It bugged me, but considering the school had acted as an intermediary, there couldn’t be anything *that* strange about it.

Yeah, that’s what I’ll choose to think. Since it’s going to worry me too much to live here otherwise.

“This room...doesn’t look like it needs much cleaning.”

Since this was the workshop, maybe the cleaning effect was stronger here. It certainly wasn’t as dirty as all the other rooms.

“Oh, right! I need to put out the *Complete Alchemy Works*!”

In the corner, there was a bookshelf practically begging for me to lay the volumes out on it.

Actually, that’s probably what was on there before! This was an alchemist’s place, after all!

I went and fetched my backpack right away, then deposited the *Complete Works* on the shelf one volume at a time.

After that, I neatly arranged all the brand new tools that Master had given me, and the place was looking beautiful already.

“Hee hee... This is it! An alchemist’s workshop! This is *the best!*”

Don’t call me a weirdo!

I might have been acting a little eccentric, but acquiring your own workshop is a major life goal for any alchemist.

I couldn’t help being giddy about it!

I didn’t just giggle, I outright cackled! That’s how high on life I was!

“Hee hee, what should I make first?” I chimed in a singsong voice.

I walked around the workshop with a spring in my step, taking each tool in my hands and gazing at it.

Of course I was going to want to use them right away. It was the obvious thing to do, right?

But just making a simple potion didn’t seem right...

“Hrmm... Oh! That’s the perfect thing for this situation!”

I raced back up to my room, grabbed the bolt of cloth I’d bought yesterday, and dumped it into the alchemic cauldron.

I’d bought a large amount of cloth, more than enough, but the cauldron here was so large it could hold all of it at once.

The handheld cauldron that Master had given me wouldn’t have been able to handle this task, but it was just the thing for my first job in the new workshop.

“All that’s left to do is...”

Remembering how I’d made it the last time, I poured water into the cauldron and added a number of other ingredients, then fired up the magical furnace, stirring as it heated up.

Now, when I say I “fired it up,” I don’t mean that I burned firewood under the alchemic cauldron. It was just a matter of pouring in magical energy. But with the cauldron being as big as it was, the magical furnace used a proportionately large amount of magical power.

“Whew... I can see why large alchemic cauldrons aren’t the norm.”

It was exhausting even for me, someone with a lot of magical power, so maybe half of the alchemists out there would have struggled to use a cauldron of this size.

I kept on expending magical power, and after thirty minutes of boiling, I extinguished the magical furnace, pulled the cauldron down... Pulled it down... Pulled! It! Down!

“Agh, it’s too heavy for me to tilt...”

I’d underestimated just how heavy a cauldron full of water could be.

Well, this is just a failure of imagination on my part.

The metal cauldron was large enough for me to fit inside, and was now filled with lots of water, so of course it had to be easily over a hundred kilos. There’s no way I could carry that.

“No choice, then. I’m not a fan of doing this, but...”

I took a deep breath, then sent the magical power coursing through my body.

I psyched myself up, and then lifted the cauldron!

“Hungh!!!”

Oops, how uncouth.

No girl should let out a grunt like I just did.

Tottering over toward the sink, I overturned the cauldron and emptied it out.

“Whewwwwww.”

I heaved a big sigh, dispelling the physical enhancement.

Even if it was for a short time, it really wore me out. I wasn’t good at buffing myself up like that.

Well, there’s no helping that. I am but a stick, after all.

If it was just a matter of making myself a little stronger, then it wasn’t that tiring, but when I was lifting hundreds of kilos, the effect was massive. It required some pretty high-level control of my magical power.

Master said, "It's useful for self-defense. Do your best to master it," and could do it as easily as breathing herself, but most people couldn't.

I think I need to do something about my physique, or I'm going to run into all sorts of problems. Even just processing alchemy ingredients takes muscle, after all...

"Well, I'll get around to it! For now, I've got to deal with this."

As I sprayed the cloth in the sink to wash it off, the once-brown fabric turned to a pretty, sky-blue color.

"Yep! The color came out nice! Just like I thought!"

Obviously, this wasn't a simple dye job.

After all, I'm not a dyer, I'm an alchemist.

This was commonly called environmental tuning fabric, and it had an effect applied to it which adjusted heat and humidity.

It tuned the surrounding environment to be more comfortable for people, so any bedding made from it guaranteed sound sleep!

The color was just my personal preference, by the way. It cost a little more, but plain environmental tuning fabric was a dirty-looking brown, and I wasn't so keen on it.

If I was using it in my bedroom, I didn't want a mattress that looked like that.

Once I'd scrubbed the last of the alchemical fluids out, it was time to hang it out to dry.

It looks pretty, so I'll put it out in front of the shop.

I hung the cloth from lines run between the trees. The sky-blue fabric looked wonderful flapping in the cool breeze. With the fine weather we had today, it'd be dry in a few hours.

As I was nodding to myself, satisfied that the color had come out better than expected, I heard a cart rattling down the road.

"What's this? That's an awfully nice color."

"Oh, Geberk-san."

I turned to see him pulling a cart.

There was a bed-like object on it, but it looked like it was in pieces...?

“Is that a bed?”

“Yeah. It’s finished, so I brought it over.”

“Oh, really? But the shape seems odd...”

“It’s not assembled yet. It’d be hard to carry around if it was, right? Where do you want it?”

“Oh, that makes sense! Put it on the second floor, please.”

I led Geberk-san, who was carrying a large board—probably the part I was going to sleep on top of—in both hands, into the house.

We went directly to my room on the second floor, and I showed him where I wanted the bed. Geberk-san didn’t even give me time to help him before he was back again with his tools, and had the whole thing assembled in a matter of minutes.

When I tried sitting down, I found that it was solidly constructed and didn’t wobble one bit.

“It’s just an ordinary bed, so I don’t expect you’ll have any trouble with it, but if you do, you know where to find me.”

“I’m sure it will be great! I had you make it in such a hurry, but it’s still so good that you could sell it in the capital! Thank you!”

“Hmph, even if something’s a rush job, I don’t cut corners. I’ll throw in this as an added bonus too. You can’t mind the shop without a chair to sit in, can you?”

With that, he set down two chairs in the shop space. They were simple affairs, without any back, but just having something to sit on at all would make a world of difference.

I’m really grateful, but...

“Is it okay?”

“It’s no skin off my back. They’re just simple ones. Don’t worry about it, kid.”

I wasn't sure I felt okay accepting any more freebies, but Geberk-san just waved his hand casually to dismiss my concerns and then went on his way.

On closer inspection, while it was true that they were simple, just like the bed, the edges had still been carefully beveled and filed. The material was a pure wood that felt soft to the touch, and the bright surface had been treated with oil.

They hadn't been made carelessly by any stretch of the imagination. This was simple work, but it had a warmth to it.

"Mmm, this is truly professional work. You can tell he's a seasoned craftsman. I need to learn from his example!"

At that moment, my stomach began grumbling in protest.

"Ohh, it's noon already, huh? I've been hard at work since this morning..."

I was so ecstatic about having my own workshop that I'd lost track of time.

"I want to go eat, but will the fabric be okay?"

It might have just looked like blue cloth at a glance, but that fabric was actually rather pricey, so I was a little worried just leaving it out.

"Hrmm, what should I do? Do I bring it in? But it's not dry yet..."

"Hey there, Sarasa-san."

As I was agonizing over what to do, I heard a voice. It was Lorea-san from the general store.

"Huh? What's up, Lorea-san?"

"Well, since you just moved in and all, I was wondering if there was anything I might be able to do to help you out."

"Wow, you're a lifesaver!"

Here's just the person I need to watch the place! And what a touching display of human kindness! We only just met yesterday, and she's come here to help me? What a good person!

"I know! Lorea-san, have you had lunch?"

“Oh, no, not yet. I took off as soon as mom and dad got back...”

Lorea-san looked a little embarrassed, but this was perfect for me.

“I’ll treat you to lunch, so could you keep an eye on this for a bit?” I asked, pointing to the cloth that was still drying.

Lorea-san nodded, then tilted her head to the side a little.

“I don’t mind, but is this the cloth you bought yesterday?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I gave it a bit of a dye job. Pretty nice color, huh?”

“Yeah! I really like it! You work with dye too, Sarasa-san?” she asked with a radiant smile.

“This is actually alchemy too,” I answered with a somewhat wry grin. “I’m going to go buy lunch now! Be right back!”

Leaving things here to Lorea-san, I ran off to Delal-san’s restaurant.

Ten minutes later, when I returned with some take-out lunches from the restaurant, Lorea-san was earnestly waiting for me at the front door.

“Oops, sorry. I should have had you wait inside, huh?”

“Oh, no, it’s okay. The weather’s nice.”

“Yeah? Well, it may be a bit early for it, but let’s have lunch. And since the weather’s so nice, how about we eat here?” I suggested, casually holding up the meals. Lorea-san smiled and nodded.

I went inside to fetch cushions for us to sit on, laying them out on the porch. After that, I poured water I’d drawn from the well into cups I’d just bought yesterday.

Good job, me. Buying two sets of tableware even though I thought, “Maybe I’ll never have a guest I need to use them with.” Although, since I don’t have tea or a kettle, it’s just water...

“Sorry to only serve you plain water. I don’t even have a pot yet...”

“Oh! No need to apologize; I’ve always been more of a water-drinker anyway. Plus, the water around here tastes really good. In fact...this house has a well,

right? We have to use the common well, so it's always a pain, drawing water."

"Water *is* a necessity for alchemy, I suppose. So, you folks have a common well around here?"

"Yes, it's shared between several houses. I'd say only the inn, the blacksmith, and a few other buildings have their own."

Because we were so close to the great forest, water itself was plentiful, but the locals couldn't afford to dig wells for every house.

The wells they did have weren't going to run dry, so there probably wasn't any great need to dig more.

"Do people not drink tea much in these parts?"

"Well, it's a matter of personal taste and money. There's a tea made with the leaves of a tree called the *suya*, which you can find in the forest, but those who aren't fond of it have to buy their tea."

"I wonder if that's what Elles-san served me at her place. You're not very fond of it, Lorea-san?"

"Oh, I don't have a strong opinion one way or the other. Mom's the one who doesn't like it."

"I see how it is."

The person who makes all the meals always gets the biggest say in what ends up on the table.

I was a fan of boiled water, by the way. In the capital, tea was something I'd have had to pay money for, and being a luxury item, it wasn't cheap.

Although, since Master served tea at her shop, I was aware of just how delicious good quality tea could be. That was also why I didn't care for cheap tea. I couldn't help but compare it to the good stuff. But maybe a whole different variety of tea was worth checking out? It sounded fun, and nothing beat free.

"This fabric sure is beautiful, though. We don't often see cloth with such a vibrant color around here. It's too expensive for our place to stock."

“I guess it would be, huh? It’s not easy to dye things with vibrant colors using mundane means... Oh, I know! I’m planning on making a mattress later, and I could use some help. If you’re willing, I could give you some of this fabric in exchange. I dyed lots of it, after all.”

“You mean it?! Oh, but, you know, I can’t do much more than sew two pieces of fabric together.”

Lorea-san seemed delighted by the offer, but her expression quickly grew concerned.

It wasn’t an issue, though. Most of the work was just sewing straight lines.

“That’s totally fine. If you can just sew straight lines into the fabric, it’s all good!” I said, adopting the village custom and slapping Lorea-san on the back.

In the simplest terms, making a mattress was just a matter of making a bag out of fabric, and then stuffing it with cotton. That was it.

The cotton-stuffing part of the work could be pretty tough, though. You had to form the cotton into a neat mattress shape, and then shove it inside the bag, sewing it up without things shifting. There was a bit of a trick to it.

“Wow, so this is how mattresses are made...”

“This your first time watching, Lorea-san?”

“Yes. Embarrassing as it is to admit it, the mattresses we have at home don’t have this much cotton in them...”

“Ohh, I see.”

Cotton was more expensive than you might think, so it wasn’t easy to make a well-stuffed mattress if you didn’t have much money to spare.

During my time at the orphanage, we’d slept on thin mattresses, wrapped up in a blanket, nestling close to one another for warmth.

I’d only acquired a proper mattress once I’d gotten into the dorms, and even then it’d only been possible because of my scholarship money. Well, that, and because of the teacher from the orphanage who’d told me, “You got into a good school, so get together all the things you’ll need to not embarrass yourself!”

Well, whether it would've been embarrassing or not, I didn't have a single visitor in my room during my five-year stay at the academy. Heh heh...

Once we'd made the mattress and a comforter, all that was left were the sheets and a duvet cover.

These were just a matter of sewing, so we chatted as we stitched away.

Despite having claimed that all she could do was sew, Lorea-san was exceptionally skilled with her hands. Better than I was, to be frank. Were my sewing skills, which I had always thought were so special, really just run-of-the-mill?

Still, thanks to her help, we had a nice set of bedding finished by evening.

"Thanks! I'll be sleeping well tonight with this!"

I raised my arms over my head triumphantly, then wrapped Lorea-san in a big hug.

Honestly, I hadn't expected to finish in just one day, and had been prepared to sleep on the floor wrapped in a blanket again.

Praise be to Lorea-san. Seriously.

"Oh, no. I came to help, so this was no big deal," Lorea-san said somewhat shyly as I squeezed her tight. My hands were starting to hurt from all the work we'd done, so I was sure hers must have been too.

"All right, here's my thanks!"

Taking what was left of the fabric, I cut off enough for Lorea-san to make an entire set of bedding for herself, and then handed it to her.

Even if she didn't use it to make a full-on mattress, the environmental tuning fabric could do its job well enough as simple sheets or a duvet cover, so I was confident she'd get good use out of it.

"You're really sure? Fabric that's this pretty must be rather expensive."

"Don't sweat it. If I were selling it in the shop, I couldn't just give it away for free, but fortunately, I'm not selling anything yet. Oh, that's environmental tuning fabric, by the way, so I suggest you use it to make some bedding like

mine.”

“Whaaa?! That’s even more expensive, isn’t it...?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I only made it to use myself. Consider it a gift to mark us becoming friends.”

Seeing the look on her face that said, *Is this okay?* I casually waved my hand, treating her as a friend. That’s fine, right?

“You’re sure? Thank you,” Lorea-san said, sounding delighted.

Nice, she didn’t reject me.

I’m pretty sure it’s the fabric she’s grateful for, though.

“Oh, but wouldn’t it make comfy clothes too?”

“Hmm, the effect isn’t that strong, so maybe not so much? It wouldn’t be completely ineffective, though.”

The fabric functioned by using the magical power in the environment or of a sleeping person, so it didn’t have that dramatic of an effect. If it did, I wouldn’t have had to pack it with cotton.

I could make environmental tuning fabric with a heightened effect, but it cost more, and would expend more magical power, so I couldn’t suggest using it in bedding. After all, if you laid down to rest and then woke up even more exhausted due to magic consumption, that kind of defeated the purpose.

“Oh, I see. Got it.”

“We used a lot of cotton, though. Do you still have more in stock, Lorea-san?”

“Yes, about as much as you purchased yesterday.”

“I’ll come around soon to buy more, then. I’d like to make some cushions too.”

“Wow, big spender. I could never afford cotton on my allowance...”

Lorea-san sounded impressed, but... Whoa now, hold up.

“Lorea-san, I’m an adult, you know? I work for a living.”

Okay, technically, I still hadn’t opened my shop yet, but I think I still had more

spending money than whatever Lorea-san was getting to help out around the shop.

“Oh, I-I see. I just sort of assumed we were the same age.”

“Erm, how old are you, Lorea-san?”

“Thirteen, soon to be fourteen!”

Urkh! She's two years younger than me...?

“O-Oh, yeah? Wow, you certainly are *growing up fast*, aren't you?”

“Really? I feel like I'm growing slower compared to my friends.”

Lorea-san said this innocently, without the slightest hint of ill will.

No, it's okay. I already knew.

I lived in the city, with lots of other girls my age around, after all.

I'm developing slower than other people.

It's fine, though. I'm still going through puberty—it's just my imagination that I've hardly changed since last year.

“How about you, Sarasa-san?”

“Me? I'm fifteen.”

“Ohh, you are?”

Oh? Did I just sense you glancing somewhere, Lorea-san?

If it'd been just a little more blatant, I'd have had to designate you as an enemy—no, no, I can't go losing friends over something so trivial.

Smothering the dark feelings welling up from inside me under a smile, we carried on shooting the breeze like girls our age until the sun set.



The next day, I found that the fabric and cotton I'd used had been replaced, and then some, for some reason.

But, well, it's not as if it were due to some mysterious phenomenon. Rather, in the morning, Lorea-san's father had come around and dropped off a large

amount of fresh fabric and cotton.

When he'd seen the fabric I'd sent Lorea-san home with, as a merchant, he had known the value of it.

"We can't accept something so expensive for our little girl helping you out for just half a day," he had said, and then had practically forced me to accept the goods.



Now, to be fair, if I was selling it normally, it was still more expensive than all this fabric and cotton, but I'd figured it was fine because she had gone out of her way to help me and all.

Incidentally, the fabric that I'd given to Lorea-san had apparently turned into sheets for her and her family.

He'd thanked me, saying they were very comfortable.

Well, since I've gotten all this stuff, I'll have to get around to dyeing it another color later.

But first things first, I've got to open up shop. Otherwise I'm going to run out of money.

"I guess I can leave the inside alone for now, and take a look around the outside for today."

First, the roof. If there's damage to it, then that's already a fatal flaw for the building just as a house, but... It looks fine. The metal panels on the outside seem to have been strengthened with alchemy, so it's sturdier than I'd first thought. I think it should be good for now.

The shop's sign is in pretty bad shape, though, so I think I'll ask Geberk-san to fix it.

There's nothing fundamentally wrong with the outer walls, but they could use some light repairs, so I'll ask him to do that too.

"The issue is this overgrown front yard, and the fence, I guess?"

I don't need this rotting fence, so I could also just remove it... Wait, no. If I'm going to have a field of medicinal herbs, then I need a fence to keep animals out of it. I could yank up all of the grass at once, but for better or for worse, there are herbs all over the yard. Do I just ignore them and mow all of it?

No, I can't do it. Not someone with a case of poverty brain like mine.

"Okay, let's make a to-do list."

- Open the shop

- Make products to sell in the shop
- Do something about the fence
- Do something about the yard and herb garden
- Make the well easier to use
- Get the bath working
- Make a magic stove for cooking

“I think that’ll do it for the short to medium term.”

Now, I just need to rank priorities—not that it’s all that hard. If my top priority is opening up shop, then creating products has to come before that, because there isn’t much point in a shop without anything to sell. Maybe the fence and yard should come before that too? If the place doesn’t look good, then customers probably won’t come.

While I’m at it, I can use the herbs in the yard to make products.

As for the rest, there’s no need to hurry, so I can get to them when there’s time.

“I guess that means I’m doing the fence first. After all, I can still make products once the sun sets.”

I tried giving the fence out front a light kick. There was a cracking sound as it collapsed.

Yeah, it sure fell over easily... This is going to need to be rebuilt from scratch. It’s just a bunch of simple fence posts with crossbars though, so maybe it’s not worth calling a carpenter. Should I do it myself to save funds?

I’d learned some carpentry skills making alchemic artifacts, but I didn’t have a set of tools. At school, we’d used the ones provided in class, and at Master’s place, I’d always been able to borrow hers.

So, off to the general store I went.

“Hello,” I said in my usual, cheery manner.

“Oh, Sarasa-san! I have to apologize for yesterday! When I got home, and I

heard how much that fabric costs, I..." Lorea-san stammered as soon as she saw my face.

"No, I'm the one who should be sorry," I replied, waving my hand. "I meant it as a way of showing my gratitude, but I guess that it was just a teensy bit too expensive for a casual gift. And I ended up getting a bunch of fabric and cotton in return."

"Don't be sorry! And please, take them! Dad was saying that even that wasn't enough to make things even. But if you won't accept at least that much, we won't feel right using the fabric you gave us."

Ah, yeah, I could see how that could be a thing.

If I was going to sell that fabric in the shop in future, then my having given it to her in exchange for half a day's work might not be all that good for either of us.

"In that case, I'll gratefully accept it."

"By all means," Lorea-san insisted. "So, what brings you here today?"

"I don't suppose you have carpentry tools, do you? I'd like a full set."

"Oh, sure. If you just need the stuff you'd use around an ordinary house. If you want good ones, you're better off going directly to Jizdo-san, though. Is there something you're working on, Sarasa-san?"

"I was thinking I'd fix up the fence."

"Huh? By yourself? You're not going to ask old man Geberk?"

Lorea-san sounded surprised, but was it that surprising?

Fixing fences is easy, right?

"Hrmm, I think I can handle it myself."

"No, that's not it. Wouldn't you make more money spending that time doing alchemy?"

"Ohh... You're a clever one, Lorea-san."

On more careful consideration, she was right. I probably would make more money if I left the fence repairs to someone else, and focused on opening up

shop more quickly so I could sell alchemic items.

Ever since my days at the orphanage, I'd tried to avoid spending money, and to do things myself wherever possible. That was why my initial reaction had been to try and fix it by myself, but I was a fully-fledged alchemist now.

Yes, a high-earning alchemist, the envy of people everywhere.

That's me!

I worked hard! I'm a winner at life!

Okay, okay, time to calm down. It's kind of weird tooting my own horn that loudly, but I'm going to have to learn to delegate things that are outside my area of expertise to others. I mean, since that'll let me focus on things related to alchemy, after all.

"Yeah. You've got a point. I'll try asking Geberk-san to handle it. But I still need the tools either way, so I'll buy those."

"Sure thing! Thank you for your business."

"Hmm, so this is the fence? And you wanted the exterior walls of the house and the sign done too, right? Do you just want the same style of fencing as the shop had before?"

"Well, that's fine for the front yard, but could you make it a privacy fence, about two meters high, along the sides and out back?"

Having returned to the house with Geberk-san, I immediately started making my requests.

"I don't mind doing it, but why? Making it a full-on wall will just cost you that much more, you know?"

"Well, um, I am a girl, after all, so I'd really rather people not be able to see when I have my laundry hanging out to dry."

"Hah! Nobody out here in the countryside's gonna pay it any mind. And your nearest neighbor's house isn't even that close. But, hey, if that's what my customer wants, I'll make it!"

Yeah, he had a point, I could hang my laundry out in the backyard without all that many people seeing it.

Elles-san's house was a good distance away, and the area around the house was wooded, with a dense forest coming all the way up to the back of the lot, so it wasn't that visible.

Still, it's an emotional thing.

Also, to protect the herbs. Keep the animals out.

The front of the shop, conversely, I wanted to leave with a simple fence, so that it would be more welcoming to customers.

Taking my desires into consideration, we agreed to make a knee-height stone wall with a solid wooden fence on top of it along the back of the property and about halfway up the side yards, and then use a more open fence for the rest of the perimeter.

I didn't know much about signs and walls, so I left all of that up to him...along with all the other minor details.

I'm sure Geberk-san will handle it well!

When I told him as much, he snorted and said, "I'll get to work tomorrow," before leaving.

"I'll bet he...was just embarrassed. Yeah. I didn't offend him or anything... Right?"

It bugged me a bit, but... Well, no time for that now.

Geberk-san had been able to finish a whole bed in just one day, so construction might go really fast. And if that did in fact turn out to be the case, then the small fortune in herbs near the fence was going to waste!

"Gotta collect them!"

I fetched a basket from the house and went along the fence pulling up herbs.

"Oops, this is a pricey one!"

It would've been a shame to pick it, so I dug it up by the roots and set it aside.

I'll replant it later.

“I can just ignore the grass, right?”

Since we were making a rock wall, some of it would get dug up. There was no need to go to the trouble of plucking all the grass.

I went all the way around the house like that.

My whole day, aside from the times I went to eat or rehydrate myself, was spent doing nothing but pulling up grass.

It was awfully tiring work, but thanks to my efforts, by the time I was done, the overgrown yard had recovered to the point it was starting to look presentable, *and* I'd been able to harvest a whole bunch of herbs in the process.

“Whew, honestly, I think I may have worked *too* hard.”

I've still got to make products, though.

The herbs from today were still fine, but if I didn't use the ones from the day I'd arrived soon, they were going to lose their potency.

I had done some basic processing to make them last longer, so they'd still be fine until tomorrow, but tomorrow I had to handle the ones I'd picked today.

“It was a nice bit of serendipity that there were so many valuable herbs!”

Many expensive herbs were growing here. That was no doubt because the previous owner had planted them, but it was still impressive that they hadn't withered up and died.

Their price was on an entirely different level from ordinary herbs, so I gathered all of the ones I'd dug up and planted them elsewhere in the field.

Now the number of potions I could make for free would be much higher.

I do love the sound of that word, “free”!

“But it's time for a break. I'm beat...”

I headed into the house and wiped myself down, then headed to the kitchen in search of a warm meal.



The next day, I woke a little later than usual, and found some kind of ruckus going on in front of my house.

“Mnnngh? What was it, again?”

I had stayed up until fairly late the night before, so my head felt all fuzzy.

Initially, I had meant to do some potion-making and call it a night early, only to run out of bottles, which had thrown off my whole schedule.

After all, if there are no bottles, I’ve got to make more. And to do that, I need to fire up the glass oven, right?

Naturally, at that point, there was no turning back. Once I melted the glass, I needed to use it, or it would cause all sorts of headaches later.

So, I’d just kept on making bottles, pouring potions into them as soon as they’d cooled, and sealing them.

I’d repeated the process over and over, and by the time the glass had been all used up, it’d been starting to get bright outside.

That’d left me with plenty of product, but...

“Ungh...”

Sitting up sluggishly in bed, I looked out the window to see...lots of men.

Oh, right... He said he’d be starting on the fence today, didn’t he.

Man, that Geberk-san, he works even faster than I thought. He and his guys are all out there bright and early...and they’ve already got the materials all piled up!

I really do need to go out there and say hello, don’t I?

Forcing my exhausted body out of bed, I tidied myself up and headed out.

“Good morning, Geberk-san.”

“Hey, morning to you too, little missie. You sure cleaned the yard up a lot, huh?”

Geberk-san was pointing out that, thanks to my hard work yesterday, my “totally wild yard” had leveled up to a “slightly unkempt yard.”

I'd only pulled up some grass, so it was still a long way from becoming a "well-kept yard," but it was definitely a big improvement.

"Yes, well, I certainly gave it my best effort."

"And I reckon that's why you're so exhausted?"

"You can tell? It's one of the reasons, at least."

I'd tried to freshen up before coming out here, but apparently I still looked visibly exhausted.

It was the lack of sleep that was really getting to me, though.

"So, um, erm, who are these people...?"

"A bunch of men from the village. I call them in to help me with bigger jobs. I don't expect there to be problems, but if any of them tries to make a pass at you, and you don't like it, you come and tell me. I'll knock some sense into 'em."

Geberk-san had a big ol' hammer in his right hand, and he punctuated that last comment by casually swinging it around.

If he does that, he's more likely to knock the brains out of them than put any sense into them.

I didn't think I was imagining it when I saw some of the workers go pale at his words.

"Good morning, everyone. I'm Sarasa, the alchemist who just moved in. It's a pleasure to meet all of you."

I hadn't met these guys yet, so I took the opportunity to introduce myself with a polite bow of my head.

Once I did, they were all very friendly, and greeted me in return, but... Sorry, I don't think I can remember all those names.

"No need to strain yourself trying to remember all of them. Once you start cooking for yourself and sourcing food from the farms around here, you'll learn them all anyway," Geberk-san said reassuringly, perhaps having picked up on my worries.

It turned out that the men were usually farmers by trade, and had only taken this on as a temporary job.

These must have been the people that Elles-san had said could “wait until later” when she’d been showing me around the other day.

Yeah...I’ll do my best to learn their names.

“So, is it all right if we get to work?”

“Yes, please do. Oh! I’ve planted some herbs in the backyard, so please be careful of them.”

After going to all the trouble of transplanting those valuable herbs, I’d be devastated if they went and stepped on them.

“I’m a pro, and these guys are farmers. We know our stuff. All right, men, let’s do this just the way we planned!”

“Right!”

Following Geberk-san’s energetic commands, the men all moved into action.

The rotting fence was torn down before my eyes.

Meanwhile, Geberk-san went to check the house and the sign himself, so perhaps they had already agreed on the division of labor.

“Um, is there anything I need to do?”

“Huh? If you’re not particular about the details, then not really.”

“Is that right? Well, I’ll leave you to it, then.”

I had already entrusted the task to Geberk-san. I didn’t want to get underfoot by making all sorts of requests while they were working, and more importantly, I was tired.

I quietly returned to my room and crawled back into bed. When I awoke again, the sun was already high. It was almost noon.

I sluggishly got out of bed again, then looked outside of my window to see that the short fence out front was already finished.

“Wow! They sure work fast. As for the sides... Yeah, of course they wouldn’t

be done with those yet.”

Looking out one of the side windows, I saw they were in the middle of piling rocks to make a wall.

If they were done there too, it'd just be abnormal.

“For lunch... I guess I'll just have whatever.”

It was too much effort to go out to eat, so I brunched on some of the dried meat I'd purchased. Once I was done, I psyched myself up to go outside with an, “Okay!”

“Good work, Geberk-san. I see you've been making steady progress.”

“Hey there, little missie. I'd reckon we have, yeah. We'll complete installation of the supporting pillars today, put up the boards tomorrow morning, and then we'll finish up by building any gates.”

“You're so fast. It's a big help.”

“I've also fixed up your home's walls, but give me a few days for the sign.”

Looking over at the house after Geberk-san mentioned it, the cracks in the plaster had been neatly smoothed over.

“Hey, you're right. And got it, as far as the sign goes. It's in your hands.”

“Leave it to me!”

Moving away from Geberk-san, I went to take a look around the area.

It doesn't seem like there's anything I can do to help with the fence, so maybe I'll find a way to help the front yard level up into a “well-kept” yard.

I'd already collected the herbs, so now it was just a matter of pruning the trees, mowing the grass, and making some flower gardens.

If I'm going to have my own shop, it might as well be a cute one, right?

And if I plant herbs that have pretty flowers, then that's two birds with one stone.

That said, the kind of herbs where you harvest the leaves and flowers aren't really suited to a flower garden, so it'll have to be plants where the roots or

seeds are used once it's done flowering, instead.

“For now, I’ll start by pruning the trees.”

I sliced away the places that had grown too much...using magic.

I had purchased a saw, but I wasn’t that tall, so pruning the big trees manually was kinda tough. I couldn’t do detail work if I used magic, but I was also spared the trouble of climbing into the tree, or finding something to stand on.

I can even mow the grass with magic!

The kind of minute control that an ordinary mage would struggle with is no big deal for an alchemist!

“Hee hee hee! Magic sure is convenient.”

I went about my work, ignoring the wide-eyed way that people regarded my beautiful(?) use of magic.

Okay, setting aside how “beautiful” it may or may not have been, this kind of usage took a considerable amount of control, so there was definitely a limited number of people who could pull it off.

This is why us alchemists are the cream of the crop.

“As for flower gardens... How about one along the approach to the house, and another up against the wall?”

Once I’d settled on locations for the garden beds, I tore up the dirt and started making a border around them using logs cut from the forest out back.

I had checked with Geberk-san, and had gotten his confirmation that there wasn’t any problem with me cutting down trees first.

I got looks of shock from the men when they saw me emerge from the forest with a log over my shoulder, but I could only do it because I’d used physical enhancement, okay?

I don’t like to make a big deal of it, but I really am a dainty little thing without it.

“Okay, all done!”

Pruned trees, freshly mowed grass, and gardens with a rustic simplicity.

I think maybe I can call this a “well-kept yard” now!

“Which only leaves... What do I plant in the gardens?”

Using only what I had on hand, flowering herbs came to mind.

Most herbs had prettier flowers than you might expect, but the only ones I had seeds for were ones where it was the seeds that were used.

Because, strictly speaking, all I had were alchemic ingredients. For the ones where you used the leaves, all I had were those leaves, and for the ones where you used the roots, those roots were dried, so they wouldn't grow even if I did plant them.

“The weather's mild this time of year, so I should be fine growing most things...”

Fortunately, it was spring. A perfect time for planting.

If I was planting herbs whose seeds were the key element, then I could leave them in the gardens as decorations until the flowers were done.

For herbs where the flowers or leaves were what mattered, on the other hand, that meant tearing them up in the middle of the growing season, which was such a shame.

I thought for a little while, and then planted an herb with little white flowers along the approach to the house, and larger, bluish-purple flowering plants directly in front of the house.

“These ones grow on vines, so I should get poles ready for them before they sprout.”

Both of these are sturdy plants, so I don't think I have to worry about them failing to grow.

I smiled to myself as I imagined running a shop surrounded by flowers.

Episode 3: Opening My Shop!

“It’s finally time to open up shop!”

Geberk-san worked as fast as I’d always known he would. The fence had been done in a day and a half, and he’d finished the sign the day after, arriving in the morning to install it himself.

I had thought he was just going to refurbish the old sign a little, but the new sign gave off a totally different vibe—softer, and just a little cute.

In all honesty, the design was so good that I couldn’t believe Geberk-san had come up with it himself!

He says he used the old sign for materials, but it’s fair to say that this is basically an all-new product, isn’t it?

Entering through the door beneath where that sign now hung, the shelves—which were now stocked, albeit scantily—jumped into view. I had put sky-blue curtains up around the three individual windows, lending the shop a cheery vibe.

On the counter was my self-made sign that said, “Accepting Orders.”

I just needed to plop my butt down in the chair behind the counter, and I’d be all ready to go!

All right, customers! I’m ready when you are!



“Nobody’s coming...”

It had been an hour since I had officially opened.

I hadn’t been expecting much, but there wasn’t a single visitor.

With so little to do, I’d set up the alchemy tools Master had given me behind the counter, and was now making magic crystals to save time.

I can set this aside the moment a customer comes in.

“Grind, grind, griiiiiind.”

I took the junk magic crystals that served as the project’s raw materials and smashed them up with a hammer, then ground them using a rolling pestle and mortar.

Naturally occurring magic crystals were really pricey, so artifacts were generally made using ones created through alchemy. Still, it was a lot of effort to make a large one. You had to take the ground-up junk crystals and put them in an alchemic cauldron, where they’d melt and resolidify sans impurities. Each step of the process took magical power, so it was a lot of work for someone with less capacity to make even one of them.

Incidentally, using a larger cauldron expended more magical power, so some people had palm-sized cauldrons that they used exclusively for this.

I was doing it in the hand-sized cauldron that Master had given me, but in class we had learned while using teacup-sized ones.

“I. Want. An. Artifact. That. Smashes. Things!”

Junk crystals were cheap, but the more impurities they had, the more you needed to smash them up.

That, of course, meant there was a dedicated artifact for doing that.

The task could also be managed with manual labor, so it was hard to justify buying one until I had more financial leeway, like Master did.

And that was why I was swinging away with my hammer.

Bang, bang, bang!

“Good mor—what are you doing, Sarasa-san?!”

“Whew. Oh, hi there, Lorea-chan, welcome to my shop.”

Lorea-chan from the general store opened the door and came in.

After making mattresses together and chitchatting, the two of us were already friends, no doubt about that.

I’d gone from calling her “Lorea-san” to “Lorea-chan” as a way of showing our degree of closeness had gone up a notch.

I wouldn't have minded her addressing me with "-chan" too, but I was technically the older one, so "-san" it stayed. Maybe the reason she'd been so casual with me at first was that she'd initially thought I was the younger one...

"Right. Congratulations on opening—hold on, forget that, what were you doing just now?"

"This? Erm, preparing to do alchemy?"

Lorea-chan curiously peered at the fine powder on the counter.

You could call this doing alchemy too, but smashing up crystals was a manual task that anyone could accomplish.

"Hmm, I thought that alchemy was more like, '*Whoosh*, all done.' Or am I wrong about that?"

"What do you mean by that?"

Is she envisioning something more sophisticated?

I had a feeling that I knew what she was getting at. After all, when I had first gotten into the academy, I had been shocked by the breadth of things we learned.

"Well, I guess you could say that we do a lot more than the average person might imagine? We make a wide variety of items, so I had to learn carpentry, glassblowing, blacksmithing, cooking, and a whole lot of other stuff."

Whether I was any *good* at them was another matter. Particularly cooking. Since the taste never had any effect on how well it worked.

Strict as the academy was when it came to alchemy, they weren't so rigorous about things that weren't directly relevant. For instance, if you were poor at carpentry, you could just hire a carpenter to handle that part for you.

So, as long as whatever you made had no issues with the way it functioned, you could graduate even if it looked a little clumsily made.

"Oh, I see. It sure must've been tough to become an alchemist... Oh, is this fabric the same as what you gave me? The color's so pretty! Wait, it costs *how* much?!"

“Ahh, that’s actually on the cheap side, you know? It goes for maybe twenty, thirty percent more than that in the capital.”

Lorea-chan was looking at the bolts of light green, pale peach, and sky blue environmental tuning fabric, which I had put out as a featured product, but at a bit of a discount.

In the capital, the dirty-brown environmental tuning fabric went for about this much, and bolts that had been dyed went at a premium over that.

“Was it really okay to just give some to me?”

“I didn’t mind. I mean, I was really happy you came to help me out and all!”

And she’s even here to congratulate me on opening the shop too! Lorea-chan’s such a good kid!

“I feel like I got a real bargain, but... Thank you.”

“Oh, it’s partly to market my services, so if you’re ever in need of anything, you know where to come buy it.”

“Yes, of course!” She looked around. “Other than that, is it just potions right now?”

“In the shop itself, yes. Honestly, I don’t know what will be in demand in this village.”

“Hmm, most ordinary villagers won’t even know what there is beyond potions, so it’s hard to say what they might want.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

Unlike potions, which were commonplace, unless you already knew, “Hey, this kind of artifact exists,” you wouldn’t go looking for it.

In places like the capital, the clientele tended to be nobility or other rich folks, so they had the opportunity to learn about things, but here in this village... Had I just hit on a fatal flaw with my business?

“Maybe I ought to put out samples...”

“That would give people a chance to learn about things, but to be blunt about it, the folks around here aren’t exactly rich. About the only ones who’ve got

some money would be our place, Delal-san's place, and the mayor."

I guess that's how it goes in a village where people are able to live off the land.

If the only ones with any money are those who do business with gatherers and the mayor, then it may be difficult to do business with the villagers as things stand. Should I try to think of something?

"Huh? What's this sign?"

"Oh, that? I guess you could say it's a way of giving the villagers and gatherers based out of this area a bit of favorable treatment?"

Lorea-chan had found the sign next to the potion shelf. It said, "*Bring our bottles back for a discount.*"

I guess you might say it was something I'd come up with as a selling point for my shop?

Because potion bottles generally needed to be made with different processes depending on the specific variety, you couldn't simply collect bottles and reuse them, and though making new ones was kind of a pain, they were worth next to nothing.

You could melt them down for glass, so people *would* buy them, but they'd only pay chicken scratch. The vast majority of gatherers tended to decide it was too much trouble to bring them back, and would toss them on the spot.

But what if they were my own bottles?

If I made it easy to distinguish which was which, I could wash them clean and then reuse them.

Frankly, most of the effort that went into making potions was just the bottles. I could make a big batch of potion in a large cauldron, but the bottles needed to be produced one at a time.

It was a total pain. And for that reason, bottle-making was the first task most apprentice alchemists were entrusted with.

One of my senior's letters had complained, "All I make is bottles!!!" and I'd made my fair share in my days as a part-timer too.

But Master had been right there by my side, making them several times faster than me, and had let me do all sorts of other stuff too, so I had no real complaints about it.

I think it would have been tough trying to buy back only my own bottles if I was in the big city, but out here, the only ones buying them would be the villagers and local gatherers. Regular customers, basically.

So, what if I bought the bottles back at a high price—say, half the going rate for a basic potion?

That made potions essentially half-price, letting buyers use them more casually, which would make their work as gatherers safer.

Meanwhile, I was set free from the drudgery of bottle-making.

It might drive down profits a bit, but maybe it would be worth it in the end?

“I see, so that’s how it works. You’re right that it will make it easier for the villagers to use them. There’s no risk of us losing the bottles.”

“You’ll mostly be using them at home, after all.”

“I’m really going to appreciate this. We’ve been selling potions at our place until now, but when it comes to stocking the ones for illness, which are rarely used, there’s no way for us to avoid them being expensive.”

“Oh, am I edging in on your business, maybe?”

“No, no, not at all. We turn no profit on potions. We’ve been providing a free service for the village, selling them at the price we buy them for in the capital with shipping fees tacked on.”

The general store was one of the more profitable ventures in this village, so apparently they had to give at least that much back to the community in order to avoid trouble. Potions even got damaged in transit sometimes, so the general store was completely in the red on this.

With me selling potions, they wouldn’t need to anymore, so what she was saying was that I was actually doing them a favor.

Incidentally, the other big earner around here, Delal-san’s place, provided a venue to relax in the evenings, so they were fine.

Hmmm, village life sure is complicated...

Am I going to get myself ostracized if I don't come up with something too?

"Oh, you'll be fine, Sarasa-san."

"I will?"

Picking up on my concerned expression, Lorea-chan started hurriedly waving her hands and smiled.

"There's value just in having an alchemist in the village. It's reassuring, you might say?"

Ohh! That's alchemists for you. There's a reason people trust us more than doctors.

"Besides, no one would begrudge an alchemist turning a profit. If anyone's jealous, then they ought to try becoming an alchemist themselves."

"Oh, you've got a point there."

It was a complete meritocracy. Even an orphan could become an alchemist, and doing so was synonymous with success in this country. There was a strong image of us making a lot of money, but surprisingly little resentment over that.

The gates were open to everyone, so anyone jealous would be told to stop being envious and work for it.

If someone raised in an orphanage like me could get accredited, then nobody could blame their circumstances for not being able to.

Besides, more people had been saved by an alchemist when they were sick or injured than you might think.

"But being an alchemist isn't actually as profitable as you might think."

"I-It's not?!"

"Nope. Not as much as most people think, at least. Although the goods we deal in *are* pricey."

Lorea-chan looked surprised, but I had thought the same way when I'd first started pursuing this career, so I couldn't laugh at her for it.

The high prices of our products made it look like we were making bank, but it wasn't that simple.

"Let's take the fabric you said was expensive as an example."

"Okay."

"If I botched the transmutation, it would be instantly worthless."

"Wait, really?"

"Yeah. If you mess up, you can't use the materials anymore. You may have put tens of thousands of rhea into preparing everything, and it's all just gone at that point."

Once things went into the alchemic cauldron, there was no separating them. Although it depended on just how badly you failed, most of the rejects would be bound for the refuse pile.

"It's no joke when you slip up making an artifact worth a million rhea."

And once you had taken on the order, there was no getting out of it by saying, "I messed up, I can't make it for you." You had to buy all-new materials, and start over from scratch.

More than that, payment was generally on delivery. Unless you had the funds to buy all of the necessary materials up front, you couldn't even take on the job.

"That's why alchemists have to keep a certain amount of cash on hand to even be able to operate."

"Whahhh, so it's not exactly a dream job, huh?"

"I think the people who are good at it make money, but that goes for plenty of other occupations too."

Still, it was an occupation with an above average income that even an orphan could aspire to, so it was still a dream job for someone like me. Orphans faced serious disadvantages when searching for work, after all.

I understood how reassuring it must be for people to be able to fall back on their relatives to get them a job, so I couldn't really complain, though.

"Well, to be totally upfront with you, toiling away making basic potions may

be the steadiest way to make money. Since it's low-risk."

"Wow, this is destroying the image I always had of alchemists as people who make all these incredible things."

"Ah ha ha, if you want to hold on to that image, then maybe it's best to watch from a distance. It's not easy making incredible things. Not from a financial perspective, or a risk-taking one."

I felt like I'd just ruined a child's(?) dream, but this sort of gap between ideals and reality existed within every occupation, right?

Ultimately, by the time the first day ended, only a few groups of gatherers had turned up.

Other than that, it was just Lorea-chan, Elles-san—who'd dropped by to congratulate me on opening the shop—the mayor, and Mary-san (Lorea-chan's mother, who'd come to collect her daughter).

I'd only sold maybe ten or twenty potions, so the outcome was a bit questionable... Or maybe not?

"On second thought, this might not be so bad for a day's earnings."

The cheapest thing on my shelves was the basic potion, which went for five hundred rhea. I could harvest almost all of the materials in my yard, so I was making quite a bit more on them than I would in the city.

The gatherers were also happy to be able to buy them, and even happier once I explained the discount.

"Even at half price, there's still a two-hundred-rhea profit."

Ordering lunch at Delal's place was forty rhea. The portions were more than enough for me, and I didn't drink alcohol, so it never cost me more than that.

For breakfast and dinner, sometimes I kept it simple and just had bread, but sometimes I ate out. The price wasn't all that different regardless, so selling just one basic potion covered more than a day's living expenses.

It wasn't quite the same as what I'd been talking about with Lorea-chan yesterday, but if I kept at it like this, my living situation would be secure.

But I want to keep on growing, and I want to be able to send money to the orphanage, so I plan to keep trying to earn more.



Two weeks after I opened the shop, sales were rising fairly well, and I'd become acquainted with most of the gatherers who were based out of the village.

The discount program I was offering was well received, and I'd gotten many positive comments like "Now I don't need to be so worried about getting hurt" and "I spend more on using them now, but my earnings have gone up even more than that."

It made sense: since they couldn't work while injured, there were times when shelling out for potions was, in fact, the better deal.

But because they weren't cheap, how willing someone was to use them was dependent at least in part on their usual earnings. I liked to think that my discount program was helping to lower that barrier.

Also, with the gatherers starting to buy things at my place, they were able to gather a wider variety of things, and that was adding to their income too. Things that wouldn't last long enough for them to carry to the next town over, for instance.

As a shopkeeper, I tried making a variety of artifacts aimed at the gatherers and keeping them stocked on the shelves. Out of all of those, the bug-repellent artifact was selling the best. It cost a full twenty thousand rhea, so it definitely wasn't cheap, but almost all the parties who came in said, "This is cheap compared to in town!" and bought it anyway.

That just went to show how badly they were plagued by insects inside the great forest.

And I could relate. There were practical lessons in gathering on the academy curriculum. During them, we had learned the fundamentals of gathering and actually done the field work ourselves.

I'd experienced it myself, and...frankly, it was tiring.

Even if we had just been imitating what real gatherers did in the relative safety of the area around the capital, we were still going into the forest. That, of course, meant we had suffered from the heat, the cold, and all sorts of wild beasts and insects while we had been there.

We'd had a chaperone, so it hadn't been very dangerous, but it had still been a sort of survival experience.

Thinking back on it let me understand just how helpful the bug repellent must have been.

In contrast, the light artifact didn't sell at all. I'd thought it would come in handy, but the gatherers in this village generally did day trips. The basic pattern was that they set out in the morning and then returned before it got dark. No use for a light there.

There was a wealth of things to gather, so they could make plenty of money without going to the trouble of venturing in too deeply, but...that was a bit of a shame for me, as an alchemist.

The true rarities were only to be found deeper in the forest, so it was tough to get my hands on unusual materials to send back to Master.

Besides, rarities were very expensive, so gatherers who did well for themselves could make a fortune in no time.

But it'd be irresponsible to ignore the danger involved and egg them on, so I won't be doing that.

"Hey, Sarasa-chan, got a moment?"

"Yes, what is it?"

As I was sitting at the counter like usual, getting some simple work done, I heard a familiar voice calling from out front of the shop.

I stopped what I was doing and headed outside, and there was a ginormous bear just lying there.

In front of it stood Andre-san, a veteran gatherer, looking ever so proud of himself.

"Welcome back, Andre-san. That sure is an impressive anger bear."

“I know, right? We killed it near the village, then hauled it all the way back here without resting. Will you buy it off of me?”

He must have been serious about not resting, because two of his party members (Gil-san and Gray-san, I think?) had let go of the ropes wrapped around the bear and sat down next to it, exhausted.

“Yes, I can take it off your hands. The main wound is to the head. I can see one of the eyeballs is crushed. As for freshness... I see no issue there. The pelt is a little worse for wear, so how does forty-three thousand rhea sound to you?”

“Seriously?! It goes for that much?!” Andre exclaimed when he heard my price, and I detected a sparkle in his two partners’ eyes as well.

“Yes. Since I’m able to process this one myself, and it’s also been less than a day since it died.”

“Whoa, anything else we’ve struggled to kill before now has only been good for its meat...”

“If you do a poor job of butchering it, it can be absolutely worthless though, so it’s a difficult beast to hunt.”

The most valuable parts of the anger bear were its heart, its liver, and its three eyeballs. However, they couldn’t be used unless they were removed carefully.

If they brought in a whole specimen like this one, then an alchemist could process it, but given the massive size of the anger bear, it wasn’t easy to haul one back quickly. The best thing to do was have an alchemist tag along with the gatherers, but well...there weren’t many alchemists who’d feel charitable enough to do that.

After all, we were essentially knowledge workers, there weren’t that many of us, and we didn’t need to go out and brave such dangers in order to make good money.

“Forty-three thousand rhea... Sarasa-chan, thank you so, so much for coming to this village!”

“Oh, you don’t need to thank me. I’m making a profit here too.”

Andre-san and his team were all so overcome with emotion that they each took turns shaking my hand.

I was happy to see them so pleased, but their grips were strong, and my hand hurt a little.

I subtly used physical enhancement and endured it with a smile.

“Okay, I’ll go and get your money.”

I headed into the back of the shop for a moment, and handed Andre-san the money once I returned.

“Aww, yeahhhhhh! It’s booze time!” he declared, accepting it with a broad smile on his face.

“Yeah!” the other two emphatically agreed.

“See ya, Sarasa-chan! We’ll be back again!”

“Sure thing.”

The three men wasted no more time on pleasantries before dashing off.

Drinking while the sun’s still up?

Well, how they want to celebrate is up to them... I’d better hurry up and process this thing.

I was lucky to buy one in such good shape, after all.

First, I used a weak Frozen to cool the carcass.

If I actually froze it at this point, that would spoil it, so it was important that I carefully adjust the power.

Once it had been chilled enough, I dragged it around behind the house.

Not to the backyard, obviously, but outside the wall.

I didn’t want my neat and tidy yard getting dirty with blood, and putting on a live butchering in front of my shop would be way too stimulating. If Lorea-chan came over to play, she might cry.

Using the tools I’d fetched from the workshop, I butchered the carcass, taking the parts I needed.

It'd be a waste if I messed up here, so carefully, carefully...

First came the heart, of course, followed by the liver, then eyes.

They all needed immediate processing, so they were valuable items, rather hard to come by.

The stomach, intestines, and claws were also of use, so I got those too.

The fur and meat aren't so different from those of other beasts, so maybe I'll have Elles-san take the rest?

Placing the materials in the workshop, I hauled what was left over to Elles-san's place next door.

"Hello!" I chimed in my usual chipper fashion.

"Oh, Sarasa-chan. What brings—well, isn't that a big one."

Elles-san came out as soon as she heard me, but when she saw my anger bear, a hint of exasperation crept into her voice.

"Would you buy this off of me?"

"Ohhh, just the meat and fur, now that you've gotten out all the materials? I don't mind."

Elles-san had to consider my words for a moment, but she quickly understood.

"Thanks. I figured I should leave this to a professional. It's too much trouble for me anyway."

"Ah ha ha. I'll bet it is! All right, I've got you! How's eight thousand sound?"

"You're sure? I can go lower than that, you know?"

Frankly, this was just the leftovers as far as I was concerned, so I wouldn't be losing anything by giving it away for free.

"There's no need for that. It's not a popular meat if I sell it raw, but the gatherers buy a lot of smoked meat these days. With the right processing, even this meat can taste good."

"Oh, yeah? Okay, eight thousand it is. I'll carry it in for you."

“Sure, thanks for taking the trouble.”

Since Elles-san’s husband was a hunter, they had a hut out back for butchering what he caught.

I pushed the anger bear inside, then rushed back to my place where I put up the sign that said, “Ring the bell for service,” and locked the door.

I had put in a doorbell about a week ago so that I could shut myself away in the workshop even during business hours. With the current amount of traffic I was seeing, it just wasn’t efficient to mind the shop all the time.

I could do alchemy once the store closed, and had made progress on some work while sitting at the counter, but I could only work the herb field while the sun was out.

Once business picks up, I can hire someone to man the shop, but that’s a ways off still.

“Now then, let’s get this processed quickly.”

The claws only needed washing, but the other parts needed more thorough treatment or they’d degrade in value.

Processing the heart, liver, and eyeballs was particularly difficult.

“I sure have gotten used to all of this...”

When it came to dealing with organs like this, there were a lot of people who had turned pale or gotten sick during the practical lessons at the academy.

I hadn’t gotten sick myself, but I’d been pretty hesitant about handling them.

But that’d only been at first. After a while, we’d all adapted and learned to slice up animals without batting an eye, taking out their organs like it was no big deal.

Well, maybe not all of us? Since some people had failed the class and dropped out.

The school wasn’t so easy that they could have graduated while saying things like “I’m scaaaared” and “Ewwwww, this is groooss.” Although, the ones who’d spouted lines like that had been the most likely to actually be totally fine with it.

That's just them putting on an act for the boys.

The people who really couldn't handle it fainted on the spot with no time to say those sorts of things.

There was a girl in my class who had good grades, but had to leave because she couldn't handle it...

That'd been a shame, but her family was affluent, so she'd be fine even if she couldn't become an alchemist.

Us orphans didn't have that kind of leeway, so none of us would quit over such a thing.

"Yep, that's that all done."

I could bottle the heart and eyes, and dry the other materials or turn them to powder to prepare them for long-term storage without any degradation of quality.

I'd learned a whole lot about this sort of processing at Master's place, so you might even say it was my specialty.

"Come to think of it... Maybe she saw this coming?"

Master *had* said, "If there are any unusual materials, send them to me," but I wouldn't be able to do that if I couldn't handle the processing.

Hmm? Was Master already planning to ship me off to the frontier even back when I was working for her part-time...?

"Nah... I'm reading too much into it."

Buying materials was an important job for alchemists, and they couldn't do it without being able to process them for storage. That must have been why she had instructed me so carefully. It had to be.

"Now, what to do with these materials?"

I could use them to make potions, but there weren't many that required them, and almost no one would buy them if I just put them out on the shelves as is.

They weren't even in the average villager's price range.

“It’s fine making things just for the experience, but...I’m going to need to go sell some of this stuff soon or I may have a problem on my hands.”

Obviously, I couldn’t use up all of the materials I’d purchased by myself. That meant that they would pile up in my shop, while my cash on hand would keep on dwindling.

I didn’t trust my funds to hold out if I didn’t go and unload some of this stuff soon.

The first candidate for a place I might do that was the nearest town, called South Strag.

It was a two-or three-day walk. When I’d first come to the village, I’d caught a carriage that far, and then walked the rest of the way here, so I had some idea what kind of town it was.

It couldn’t compare with the capital, but it was a sizable town by frontier standards.

Oh, by the way, the place I now lived in was called Yok Village, not that anyone used the name. I’d only seen it in the shop information at the academy, and nobody had even heard the name when I’d asked for directions in South Strag. Once I’d added, “It’s a tiny village next to the great forest,” they’d gone, “Oh, that village, right,” and figured it out, so it wasn’t well-known.

I think even the villagers don’t think much about the name.

It can’t be that they don’t even know it...right?

Well, that was just how little-known the village was, so I figured I’d better make the trip into South Strag and negotiate with the alchemists’ shops there to buy my materials.

If I just put in an appearance this once, I might be able to send someone else after that.

If I asked Darna-san from the general store to do it while he was buying stock for his own place, and they took him for an amateur, then I ran the risk of them trying to take advantage of us, you know?

But so long as they know he’s representing another alchemist, it should be

fine...

I was still young, so there was a chance they might look down on me, but I wouldn't hesitate on borrowing Master's influence if it came to that!

"Okay, let's do it!"

With that decision made, I pulled out the backpack Master had given me and started packing up all the materials I'd bought up to this point.



My destination lay in one corner of South Strag, a small urban center on the frontier.

And yes, it was a trendy café.

I had passed up the opportunity to visit on my way through as I'd been moving in, leaving me with only tears of my own regret to drink.

What? Wholesaling materials? That can wait. First, I've got a belly to fill.

"It looked a little pricey, but that's okay, right?" I murmured, making excuses to no one in particular as I rushed into the place I'd set my eyes on.

It was a bit crowded at this hour, so they asked me, "It's going to be a bit of a wait. Are you all right with that?" but I decided I was feeling patient.

In the end, the place I'd chosen was on the large side, with many tables, so it wasn't long before I was seated.

"Black tea... Wow, there's so many types! Hmmm, I think I'll stretch myself a little...and go for one of the midrange options!"

You there! Don't go, "Huh? Not one of the expensive ones?" Just entering a place like this was already a lot of effort for me!

"I want to eat something sweet, but it *is* lunchtime... I think I'll order the 'flatbread topped with veggies and cheese.'"

I don't really get it, but it sounds kinda trendy.

"This is a hundred and fifty rhea, huh? I'm already splurging, but...mmmgh, I'm gonna take it one step further and order a fruitcake too!"

All told, it cost five times what my usual lunch did.

I really went for it!

I've got the money, but I think that, maybe, I'm going to feel like being frugal for a while after this.

Taking a breather after I'd placed my order, I looked around at the interior of the café.

It was clear they cared a lot about the vibe. The place was kept neat and tidy, and there were potted plants and paintings, as well as pretty curtains around the windows.

This should go without saying, but ordinary eateries didn't have such niceties. Not only had they spent a considerable amount on the interior decor, but in order to keep the place this clean, they had to be somewhat picky about their clientele too.

Delal-san did her best to keep her place clean, but the gatherers were always tracking muck in, so there was only so much she could do.

Although, when it got bad enough, she would chase out the worst offenders, shouting, "Take a bath!"

"This place is so wonderful I wish I could imitate it, but...maybe the potted plants are the only part of it I could pull off?"

Since my customers are mainly gatherers, this kind of ambience is just never going to be a thing for me, is it?

I already had curtains, and if I put up pictures too, people were bound to look at them and ask me, "So, what kind of effect does this artifact have?"

"I suppose I could put out a little table, though."

Lorea-chan's been coming by to hang out fairly often lately.

Now that I'd started buying materials, Darna-san no longer had to go into town to sell them, so he was in the village more often.

That, in turn, meant Lorea-chan spent less time minding the general store, and so she'd drop by my place to chat about the capital for a while.

I've got the chairs Geberk-san made me, but if I had a table too, then we could relax a little more and maybe have tea together.

If she's going to keep on coming around, maybe it's worth shelling out for...?

She won't ditch me once I run out of stories from the capital, right?

Should I bring back a souvenir for her to raise our friendship level?

Darna-san comes to this town regularly though, so is there really anything that Lorea-chan would want?

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

As I was thinking about all of that, the waitress brought my order.

Once it was all laid out on the table, she smiled and bowed her head.

"Take your time."

"Oh, right. Thank you."

Oh-hoh. Talk about value for money. The service here is top-notch too. It's on a different level from the places where they just go, "Here's your order," then quickly set it down on the table and leave.

If I could manage that level of service... I guess I don't need to, huh? My customer base is different, after all.

Oh, well. Time to eat.

"So this is the flatbread. It sure is flat all right. But it's freshly baked, and smells delicious."

Putting off the tea and cakes until later, I examined the flatbread, something I was seeing for the very first time.

The bread itself isn't all that unusual. Did they just press it flat and bake it that way?

I felt like, even lacking an oven, I could make it at home using a frying pan.

Wait, no, I don't even have a stove yet.

"It's topped with veggies and cheese, with thin strips of meat... And this red sauce is a little different too."

Turning that around, it was normal aside from the sauce. I cut it into bite-size pieces, and chowed down.

“Mmm, mmm... Yep! It’s good! Good enough to be worth paying nearly twice a normal meal for, to be precise!”

Not that I really understand, though! Still, it’s tastier than it looked.

The depth of flavor from the cheese, and the sourness of the sauce, are matched perfectly with the slight sweetness of the veggies and meat.

The bread’s like a reject that failed to rise, but that’s perfect for this dish.

“Is this tomato sauce mixed with spices? Hmmm, getting the spices right might prove tough.”

I tried licking just the sauce to figure out the ingredients, but not being much of a cook myself, it felt like it’d be a bit hard to reproduce. I’d have loved to be able to enjoy it in the village, though...

“Okay, if my materials sell for a high price, I’ll buy myself some of every spice that’s sold in this town.”

Oh, and cheese too. That’s not easy to come by in the village.

I drank the black tea (good enough to pay as much as an entire meal for) as a palate cleanser, then set to work on the cake.

I hadn’t been able to afford them myself before, so this was my first sweet treat in a long time.

The sweets that Master would serve during breaks were so good...

Wait. Maria-san was the one making them, right?

Being able to cook and bake sweets at a professional level, talk about talent!

“Whoops, got off track there. Back to the cake at hand...”

I cut the slightly firm cake with my fork and took a bite.

It was a moist type of cake, and a bit heavy. The mix of sweet and sour flavors from all the fruits packed into it was exquisite.

It didn’t wow me like Maria-san’s treats did, but it was good.

Good enough to pay as much as two meals for!

Okay... Time to stop describing everything in monetary terms. I've gotta put my penny-pinching student days behind me!

"I took the trouble of coming to a trendy café, so I ought to relax and enjoy it."

You're paying for the vibe, not just the food.

I'd scarfed down the flatbread fairly quickly, so I decided to sip my tea and nibble on my cake, enjoying the elegant atmosphere...but not for so long the staff started glaring at me.

It's fine, right? I mean, now that lunch is over, there's not many people in line.

Still, if I kept eating, I'd run out of cake, and tea wasn't as good once it went cold.

Besides, I was supposed to be here for work. After a little bit longer, I decided it was time to go, and made my exit from the café.

"Yep, that was delicious. Expensive too, though."

An occasional luxury? That's what the place felt like to me. It hit the wallet too hard for an up-and-coming alchemist like myself.

"I've gotta get to the point where I can come to places like this casually!"

Then, psyching myself up with an "Okay!" I took my first step toward being a profitable alchemist.

"Now then. There's two alchemy shops in this town, right?"

I'd already done my research through talking to the gatherers in the village. Strag had three gates, and one of the alchemy shops was near the gate closest to the village. The other was a short distance from the town's central plaza.

The gatherers didn't have much of an opinion on which was best; they stated that they "just went to the closer one"...

"I guess I'll start with the closest one too."

It was nearby, so I settled on that as my destination.

Arriving after a few minutes' walk, I saw that the shop was around the same size as my own.

The cost of real estate was obviously much higher in town than out in the countryside, so it couldn't have come dirt cheap like mine had. With that in mind, it was probably owned by someone who'd apprenticed somewhere for a suitable amount of time, then gone independent.

Hmm, I feel like the exterior's kind of dingy, but I suppose that's just how things must be when you're in town.

Master would definitely get mad and tell someone to clean it, though.

Having finished observing the storefront, I pushed the slightly aged door inward and entered the premises.

"Welcome," said the slightly brusque man in his late twenties who was minding the shop.

I don't like the way that he seems to be sizing me up, but...well, let's take a look at what he's selling first.

His main thing was potions, as you'd expect, the lineup being not so different from my own.

He had artifacts too, but not many, and none were high level.

Either he made things on order, like I did, or he was lacking in skill.

All right, let's do this! I psyched myself up and approached the counter.

"Um, I'd like to sell this."

"Huh? Lemme see."

I'd put a bottled anger bear heart on the counter.

He picked it up, his brow raising, then in a somewhat surly tone said, "It's a bit old, and hasn't been processed very well. I'd say it's worth twelve thousand."

Old you say? And not well-processed? Hmm, hmm...

Are you kidding me?

I forced myself to withhold comment as I laid the next material on the table.

“Oh, is that right? How about this?”

Next was the liver...

“It’s the same for this one. I’ll give you twenty thousand for the pair. Got it?”

Not a chance.

“Is that right? Sorry to have bothered you.”

I snatched both bottles back from the shopkeeper who was about to walk off with them, and stuffed them in my backpack.

“Ah! Hey! Wait!”

No way was I waiting. I shut out any noise coming from behind me as I strode out of the shop.

After I’d made it some distance, I turned to look back.

He’s not going chase me down, I guess.

Whew. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“I know they said that there was no difference between the two, but that place was the worst. I doubt many of the gatherers from my village will be using the place, but I think I’ll warn them anyway.”

Now that I’d opened up shop, there wasn’t any reason for them to come all the way here, but I’d feel sorry for them if they got taken advantage of, so it was okay to tell them, right?

I wasn’t just picking on this place because I didn’t like that shopkeeper, okay?

It was for the gatherers’ sake. Yes, of course it was.

“There’s still alchemists like that, huh?” I mused to myself. “Maybe he underestimated me?”

Did he think I just happened across the materials?

If he took that attitude realizing I was an alchemist, he was just stupid.

Did he think I’d go for it if he just acted a little intimidating?

He lacked any real impact, though.

I mean, my neighbor Elles-san's husband is more intimidating than that, even when all her husband's doing is just standing there.

I had backed away despite myself when she had first introduced me to him. I know now that he's a really good guy, but even so, if I ran into him on the road late at night, he'd trigger my flight response.

"Here's hoping the other shop is a good one. It won't turn out that the reason there's 'no real difference' between them is because they're both awful, right?"

I started to feel a little depressed as I walked toward the other shop.

When I arrived, driven onward by a slight feeling of uncertainty, I found that the second shop was slightly larger, and the front of the building had been kept clean.

"Maybe there's some hope?"

My spirits raised a little, and I entered the shop with a bit of a spring in my step.

"Welcome."

I was met by a woman who looked to be around forty. Seeing her soft smile as she greeted me, I reflexively bowed my head.

"Hello. I hope you won't mind if I look around."

"Please, take your time."

The overall trend in products is the same...but maybe there's a slightly greater variety of potions?

If there was one difference that stood out, it was that she carried full-recovery potions and sunscreen potions.

Setting the former aside, I didn't think the latter would sell in the village. You couldn't work the fields if you were afraid of a little sunburn.

Well, no, they might have wanted to use them, but they wouldn't be able to apply sunscreen every day on a farmer's income. This was a product for rich folks.

In terms of the artifacts here, there were hats and shawls, making for a slightly female-oriented lineup of products.

Depending on what they're used for, there might be some market for these in my shop...

The issue was with the design, and the products used as a base for them.

There weren't dedicated craftspeople for these kinds of things in the village, and I could only just barely make them myself. I didn't really trust my sense for such things.

Okay, that's enough product research. Now let's see how selling here works out.

"Um, I was hoping you could buy this."

"Oh, what do you have there...? This is an anger bear heart. It's fresh, and the processing has been handled reasonably well. How does a hundred and twenty thousand sound?"

After a pause I said, "That's rather high."

It was twenty percent more than I'd expected.

Unreasonably low prices are a problem too, but anything that strays too far from the market value raises questions...

"It's been hard to get our hands on them lately. Are you an alchemist?"

"Yes, have you heard of Yok Village next to the Gelba Rohha Foothills Forest? I opened up shop there recently."

"Wow! There?! You're doing us a real favor. Ever since the old man there closed his place, we've been having trouble with the flow of materials from there drying up."

"Would that be why you're paying so much?"

"That's right. We have a considerable shortage. And you processed these right away, didn't you? It's not easy to come by goods with such a high level of quality."

I couldn't have managed this quality without the good luck of them killing it

near the village, after all.

I was also a little happy to hear her compliment the quality, and by extension my own skills.

“You’re good for someone so young. Where did you train?”

“If you’re asking who was my master, that would be Ophelia Millis.”

When I spoke Master’s actual name for the first time in a long while, the shopkeeper’s eyes went wide and she shot up out of her seat.

“Huh?! Ophelia Millis... You mean *that* Ophelia-sama?”

“Probably? She’s a master class alchemist.”

“Really now? An apprentice of hers, coming out to the frontier?”

She seemed dubious, but I wasn’t lying.

I’d received a parting gift from Master because she saw me as her apprentice, and it was also a fact that she’d been teaching me.

Our parting had been a little different from how alchemists usually went independent, but if I said, “I started my own shop right after graduating,” then that didn’t sound quite so good. I could get away with omitting that bit, right?

“Yes, well. She told me, ‘I’ll give you a shop, so send back unusual materials,’ and also that, ‘It’ll be good training’...”

“Hmm, I guess that’s what it’s like, apprenticing under a master class alchemist. It sounds like she was pretty tough on you.”

The shopkeeper groaned and put on a strained smile when she heard what I said.

Okay, fair enough. If this was all you heard, it sounded like I’d been shipped off to the frontier.

“Oh, no, this was partially at my own request.”

“How ambitious for someone your age! I like you!”

“Ha ha ha...”

I’d never expected to be running a shop out in the countryside, though. All I’d

asked for was to find work at an ordinary shop someplace.

“I’m Leonora, the owner of this shop. And you are?”

“Oh, right, I’m Sarasa. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise. Maybe with a skilled alchemist like you around, the number of gatherers will pick back up again?”

“Ah ha ha, that *would* be nice.”

Because many alchemic materials needed to be processed immediately after harvesting them, if there wasn’t an alchemist there, either the quality would be massively reduced, or, worse yet, they would lose all value.

On foot, it was a few days from Yok Village to here. With that much time, there was no avoiding a degradation in quality, and the selling price would fall to a pittance. The end result was that gatherers had moved away from the village.

“It may be tough at first, but you’ll manage,” said Leonora-san. “Oh, this is taking me back. When I first went independent and opened my own shop, it felt so hopeless watching my savings dwindle by the day. If you have any trouble, Sarasa, you can come to me for advice. I’ll help you out however I can.”

“Thank you.”

“Well, if I’m able to buy this heart off you, you may not have any problems. If you have the heart, then you have the other parts too, right?”

“Yes, but there’s only one eyeball.”

I lined up the other anger bear parts on the counter, along with the other materials that I had bought. Leonora-san carefully examined each of them and then nodded.

“Yes, the processing is well done for all of them,” she noted. “That backpack of yours is quite impressive too.”

“Yes, it was a parting gift from my master.”

I’m really proud of it.

And no, it’s obviously not for sale.

“That’s a master class alchemist for you. Her work is on an entirely different level from what I can produce. Is it all right to assume you want me to buy all of this?”

“Yes. I’d also like to buy a number of materials for myself...”

Once I handed Leonora-san the list, she said, “Just a moment,” before disappearing into the back, and then returning once she had collected all of them.

After deducting the price of them from what she was paying me, I was ultimately walking away with around three hundred and eighty thousand rhea. The anger bear parts went for more than I’d expected.

“You’ve really helped me out, Leonora-san.”

“Hm? How so? If anything, you’re helping me here.”

Leonora-san, who was putting the materials she’d bought on the shelves behind the counter, turned to look at me, cocking her head to the side in confusion.

“I’d heard there wasn’t much difference between the alchemy shops in this town, and I was just at another place before coming here...”

“Oh, that guy’s shop, huh. And how did it go?” Leonora-san asked with a look of amusement.

“He said twelve thousand for the heart,” I answered with a wry smile.

Leonora-san cracked up. “Ah ha ha ha ha, he’s hopeless!”

“It’s no laughing matter. If this place had been the same, I’d have had to run to another town.”

“Ha ha ha, I wouldn’t stop you, but it’s a pretty long way. If you have anger bear materials, then you might be better off just sending the whole lot of them to your master in that case.”

“Yes, I was considering it if things didn’t work out here.”

Master *did* tell me to send her unusual materials, after all.

And anger bear parts of this quality, well...they probably made the cut.

“I try not to speak ill of my fellow alchemists too often, but from everything I’ve heard, he sounds a bit greedy.”

“A bit? He offered me less than half the going rate.”

“That guy looks at who he’s dealing with. Maybe he thought he could pull one over on you?”

“Sure, he *looks*, but he has no eye for things.”

I shrugged with a look of exasperation, earning a smile from Leonora.

“You’ve hit the nail on the head there! Ah ha ha. But I was able to buy some quality materials as a result, so here’s hoping he *stays* blind as a bat!”

“Well, I won’t be doing business with him, so it doesn’t matter to me anymore. Would you purchase materials off of someone else I send on my behalf?”

“Ahh, it is a bit far. I couldn’t ask an alchemist to come here every single time. Yes, of course, I’ll buy things from them for a reasonable price. We both stand to benefit from that.”

She extended her hand with a grin. I felt a sense of relief as I accepted it.

My negotiating position would be better if I came myself, but I couldn’t leave the shop unattended so frequently. Being able to ask Darna-san to come on my behalf would be a lot easier.

“By the way, I don’t think there’s anywhere to catch a stagecoach between here and your village. Do you own a horse?”

“Oh, no. I came on foot. It takes me half a day, but it’s faster than a horse. Uh, not that I have room in my budget for a horse, though.”

Not only were horses expensive, they also needed to be fed and cared for. Yet despite all of that, the horses that you could buy ran slower than I did...

If Master hadn’t given me the backpack, I might have needed a packhorse, though.

“Oh, I see... Hm? Wait, wait, that’s not a distance you can cover in half a day!”

“I was using physical enhancement, of course. I’m not that good at it, so I

pause every two hours for a break, and that's about what it worked out to be."

Even using potions, that was my limit for now. If I could get to the point where I could maintain it for twice as long, then I could consider day trips here, but as things stood, the sun would go down while I was still traveling if I tried that.

This area was comparatively safe, but I still wanted to avoid running along the highway at night.

"No, no, that's not normal either. Physical enhancement isn't something you keep up for hours at a time."

"Huh? But Master was fine doing it all day? While doing alchemy too."

"Don't lump us all in with a master class alchemist! Normally, you use it for less than a minute, maybe a few minutes at most. Controlling the magical power for physical enhancement while doing something else at the same time? Just what kind of focus does that take..."

Seeing the look of astonishment on Leonora-san's face, I cocked my head to the side.

Uhh, I always assumed I was kind of bad at physical enhancement, but it turns out by ordinary standards I'm actually good at it?

"Once you get used to it, it's something you can manage pretty much without thinking about it... Of course, it *is* tiring, so you have to take breaks."

"I think I can see why Ophelia-sama took you on as an apprentice."

"But since I'm not all that athletic without it... It would probably go a little bit better if I worked out more. I've been trying to lately."

I grunted as I flexed my arm, but no bump appeared.

Flabby as ever. I wasn't seeing any results yet.

I guess just exercising in the morning and evening's not enough?

"What, but you're such a cutie! It'd be such a waste to put muscles on you!"

"Uh, I'm not looking to end up super buff or anything. I just think that building up my base strength a little would make things easier."

“Well... Fair enough, Sarasa. You’ve got the look of someone who’s spent their entire life doing nothing but study.”

Yes, that was it exactly. I’d barely done anything outside except for during our practical lessons. I’d always been cooped up in the library studying.

By contrast, Leonora-san was a little on the larger side, with a fairly muscular physique.

“You must work out a lot, Leonora-san.”

“Well, yes. I went out looking for materials myself back when I was just starting out. Oh, I wouldn’t advise it, Sarasa. The great forest is no place for a beginner.”

“I know that,” I said emphatically. “I had a hard enough time in the woods we used for our practical lessons.”

Still, going out and collecting materials herself? Leonora-san was pretty active.

I don’t know about going gathering myself, but I guess I really should try to work out a little more.

I used to do it as part of my classes, but I’d been slacking off lately.

“Ahh, I know I’m changing the subject, but would you happen to know a safe place where I can spend the night in this town?”

“Oh, I see. This is an overnight trip for you. Hmm, how about my place? I have a room, if you’d like,” Leonora-san said after some consideration, pointing upstairs.

I guess this is both a shop and a house, with a guest room like my place.

“Erm... Are you sure?”

“I wouldn’t let a man stay, but you’re a girl, Sarasa. We’re going to be business partners in the future too, so I don’t mind. You can stay free of charge.”

“Well, it would certainly help, but...”

“If you’re worried about putting me out, then you can let me stay at your

place whenever I'm in the village."

"Do you have plans to visit?"

"Not as of yet, no."

And not in the future either, I'm sure.

With me already buying materials there, she's not going to have any need to come buy them herself.

But since she's offering, I should take her up on it. It's bound to be safer than any inn someone as unworldly as me would pick.

"Thank you. I'll be in your care."

"Oh, think nothing of it. I'm just helping out the next generation. Besides, I'd like to hear more stories about Ophelia-sama."

That night, I ended up staying with Leonora-san. We swapped stories, with her telling me about the town, and me talking about Master.

I tried asking her about the place I'd eaten lunch, and it was apparently well regarded, with Leonora-san saying she'd recommend it.

But there were also places that were even better, if you had the money for them, and she told me, "I'll take you sometime, when we have the chance."

You're paying, right?

I don't have the money to go anywhere that pricey, okay?

Yeah... I think I'm going to be good friends with Leonora-san.

For the tasty food!

Er, no, that's not it.

Because we alchemists have to stick together!

I'm not expecting her to pay for me, okay? No, not at all.

The next morning, I left Leonora-san's place early and headed to the morning market to pick up cheese, spices, and anything else tasty that caught my eye.

After that, I raced back to the village with a spring in my step.

Honestly, my stuff had sold for more than expected, so my heart was as light as my feet, and my wallet was heavy.

Can't complain about that!

Perhaps reflecting my high spirits, I made it back to town before noon. If you factor in the time I'd spent at the market, I definitely made better time on the return trip.

Since I was back early, I decided I might as well open up shop, even though I wasn't sure any customers would turn up.

"Oh, I know. Maybe I'll make a leaflet."

I'll put out a warning about that jerk alchemist trying to rip people off.

I'm not doing it for revenge or anything, okay? I'm just putting out information I think would be good for my customers to know.

"But if I'm going to be putting up leaflets, I'll want a bulletin board."

I could post them right on the wall, but that wasn't quite the vibe I wanted. While I might not have been up to the level of that café, I wanted to bring the shop closer to my ideal.

Not that I had anything specific in mind beyond wanting it to have a good vibe.

"I guess this is another job for Geberk-san."

I could tell from his work on the sign that Geberk-san didn't just have impeccable skills as a craftsman, but as a designer too.

If I just ask him for "something that fits the vibe of the shop," then I'm sure he'll give me something good! Right?

"Also, while I'm at it, I want a small table, and beds too... Two of them, I guess."

With two beds, Leonora-san could stay even if she brought someone with her.

I didn't think it was likely she'd be coming to the village, but I'd feel pretty awful having to tell her, "I don't have any beds," if she did. Because I'd

borrowed one at her place.

“I should make a mattress too. I’ve already got the cotton, and, how terrible, the environmental tuning fabric isn’t selling, so I can use some of that too.”

I still had the cotton Darna-san had given me as thanks, so I could make another two sets of bedding.

While I’m at it, maybe I can make the bedding match the curtains, and do one room in pale peach and one in light green?

And then change my pale peach curtains to sky blue to match my bedding...

Got to color coordinate.

I’m not the old me, who bought things because they were cheap, never considering the design!

“Mweh heh heh heh, this is getting fun!”

“Um, Sarasa-san?”

While I was still lost in thought, someone hesitantly tapped my shoulder.

I turned around to see a slightly troubled Lorea-chan.

“Huh?! L-Lorea-chan! When did you get here?!”

“Um, I called out to you before I came in.”

I hadn’t noticed. The door was set up to ring when opened as an anti-theft measure, but it was pretty pointless if I didn’t notice even when someone called out to me.

Lorea-chan met my awkward laughter with an unconcerned smile.

“Welcome back. That was a quick trip, huh?”

“Y-Yeah, my work went smoothly. Oh, I brought something back for you. Are you hungry?”

I hadn’t been sure that an expensive souvenir was really appropriate when I’d gone to town for work, so I’d just bought some fruit I hadn’t seen around the village while I’d been at the morning market.

They were round fruits, about five centimeters across, with a slightly hard,

green skin. They didn't look like they would be that tasty at first glance, but I'd tried some for myself, and the juice was very sweet.

"Wow, thanks."

They were tough to peel, so I made an incision with a knife before handing her one.

I then peeled my own and took a bite.

Mmm, that's sweet. And it was only a hundred rhea for fifteen of them (after haggling).

That's maybe a bit rich to be eating them every day, but as an occasional purchase, it's okay, right?

"Yum! I haven't had one of these in a long time. Dad brings them home with him sometimes, but only once in a really long while."

Lorea-chan was all smiles as she bit into the fruit.

If she looks that happy eating it, then it was worth the price.

"By the way, Sarasa-san, what was that about earlier? You seemed kind of giddy."

"Huh? Ohh, that? Nothing major. I was just thinking I'd make a couple more sets of curtains and bedding."

"Why? To sell?"

"Nah, I was just thinking that maybe I should get the guest bedrooms ready for someone to stay in. It's not like that fabric is selling anyway."

I smiled awkwardly as I pointed to the pile of environmental tuning fabric that was still sitting on the shelves.

"Once people experience how comfy it is, they'll want it themselves, but it *is* pretty expensive, after all."

From what I'd heard, in this village, the average family didn't even have a full set of ordinary cotton-stuffed mattresses for everyone.

Just having one sheet made of environmental tuning fabric was more comfortable than having a cotton-stuffed mattress, but it was also more

expensive than a full set of bedding, so, yeah, of course it wasn't going to sell...

"Do you have plans for someone to come stay the night?"

"Well, no... Not yet, but if they do say they're coming, it's not like I can whip up a bed and bedding on the spot."

"You have a point there. Everything is made-to-order in this village... Would you like me to help? It'd be a lot of trouble, making them on your own, right?"

"You sure? Don't you need to help out around the house?"

"It's okay! My parents are around right now, and our place doesn't have any fields that need to be taken care of."

They just had a vegetable garden, and it apparently wasn't big enough that they needed Lorea-chan's help with it.

In farming families, it was normal to say, "If you have free time, then help out," and the same thing went for families who ran a business. But the only work that needed to be done at a general store was running the place. If her parents were around, there was nothing for her to do.

The flip side to that was that, when her parents were away stocking up on goods, she was stuck minding the shop all the time, though.

"I guess it'd be good to have your help. I don't know if it's enough to call it thanks, but we'll get lunch at Delal-san's place, and you can order whatever you like. All you can eat."

From my perspective, Delal-san's restaurant was fairly cheap, but it wasn't so inexpensive that the village children could go ordering whatever they wanted. Maybe thanks to that, the promise of "all you can eat" was more than appealing enough as a reward.

"Let's hurry up and go, Sarasa-san!"

As Lorea-chan took me by the hand and happily pulled me along, I switched the sign in front of the shop to say, "Out to lunch."



Even if she was a growing girl, there was only so much she could eat.

That meant the bill came out to *only* three times the normal amount.

Once I had paid, we headed back to the shop, where I flipped the sign out front to, “Ring bell for service,” and then we went to my room.

“Could I get you to do the mattress covers, Lorea-chan?”

“Sure! Since I’ve already done it once, I’m sure I can do it a little better this time!”

“You were already doing well enough last time. You’ll be fine.”

I handled shaping the cotton again this time, and then we sewed the pieces up together while I explained how to do the curtains.

Honestly, it was wasteful to use environmental tuning fabric on the curtains, but dying more cloth would be a hassle, so I decided to splurge just a little... It wasn’t like it was selling, anyway.

We chatted as we worked, stopping to take breaks for tea as we continued at a relaxed pace.

By the time I noticed, the sun was already beginning to set outside.

“It’s getting dark, Lorea-chan. Is that okay?”

“Err, what should I do? Since I’m already here, I’d like to finish...”

The work was more than half done, but we weren’t so close to finishing that we could just make one last push to the end.

“Hmm, do you want to stay the night? I can only really offer you dinner, though.”

“Can I?! Okay, I’ll go let my dad know!”

No sooner had I suggested it than Lorea-chan stood up and raced out of the room.

“Oh, my...”

I guess sleeping over at a friend’s place must be fun? I have no experience with it, though.

She did help me out today, so I’d like to be able to offer her something tasty to

show my thanks, but I'm not blessed with Maria-san's ability for baking treats... I guess that leaves the fruits and cheese I bought in South Strag.

Maybe if I bring some nicer ingredients to Delal-san's place, she could make something for us with them?

"I'm back!"

Lorea-chan returned while I was still considering my options.

That had been fast. She was a little red, and out of breath, so she might have run the whole way.

"Welcome back. So, Lorea-chan, about dinner—"

"Oh. Should I have eaten before coming back...?"

As the look of glee on Lorea-chan's face rapidly darkened, I hurriedly waved my hands.

"No! I'm going to treat you. I really am. It's just, do you mind if it's at Delal-san's place again? It's not quite the same as if I made it myself."

"Yes! Of course that's fine! Delal-san's cooking is good enough for me!"

"Oh, yeah? Okay, since it's getting late, we'll order it to go. Hold on for just a bit."

The restaurant at night, with all of the alcohol being served, was not really a place for kids.

"Oh, should I go and get it?"

"It's fine. You just stay put, Lorea-chan. I'm sure you must be tired, right?"

"A-Ah ha ha..."

I left a blushing Lorea-chan to watch the house while I grabbed a few slightly rarer ingredients—ones that were hard to come by in this village—and headed to Delal-san's place.

Once there, I had her (or rather her husband, Dudley-san) make something with them. When I returned, I found Lorea-chan still diligently working.

"I'm back. Let's eat, Lorea-chan. It'll taste better while it's still warm."

“Oh, sure... Wow, it does look good!”

Lorea-chan smiled as she looked up and saw the unusual ingredients.

I just took stuff at random, but Dudley-san still managed to make a delicious-looking meal out of it. He's a really good cook.

“Well, are you ready to eat?”

“You bet I am!”

We eagerly tucked into the food, which tasted every bit as good as it looked. Then, once we'd polished off everything, even the fruits that we had for dessert, we got back to making bedding. Fueled by all that extra nutrition, we finished up the job in just a few hours.

Now all that's left is to get some sleep...

“You'll be wanting to take a bath, right, Lorea-chan?”

“Can I?! Not even the mayor's house has a bath, you know?”

“Yeah, of course you can. Every alchemist worth their salt needs to own a bath, after all.”

“I-I'd love to, then!”

When I asked Lorea-chan about it, she told me she'd never taken a bath before in her life.

Hmm, well, I guess that's just how it is for the common folk.

In my case, I had experience with bathing, since my parents had taken baths before important deals.

Dad had said, “If you don't look clean, you'll miss out on business deals that you could have made if you did.”

Of course, I'd been bathless the whole time I'd been in the orphanage after my parents had passed away. I hadn't been able to start bathing again until I'd entered the academy.

Although, even there, I'd only been able to once every few days.

To make up for that, Master had let me use the bath in her shop on a pretty

much daily basis. It'd been a necessity when we were brewing potions, after all.

"Okay! Well, I'll have to make sure you can enjoy a bath, then. I'm going to get things ready, so just wait a bit, Lorea-chan!"

I headed to the bathroom while Lorea-chan waited.

I hadn't made any of the related artifacts for the bath just yet, so I produced the water and heated it with magic.

While it did require magical power, the work itself was very simple. I quickly finished and headed back.

"Okay, Lorea-chan, you can get in!" I said with a grin, but she only looked confused.

"U-Umm... Sarasa-san, would you get in with me? I'm a little uneasy..."

It's her first bath, and in someone else's house. That's understandable.

"Ohh, I see, but are you sure you're okay with having me join you?"

"Yes, of course. I'd actually feel safer that way."

Although I was used to bathing with others from my time in the dorms, I was a little worried because Lorea-chan wasn't used to it...but it wasn't a problem.

"Okay then. Well, let's get in!"

"Whew, baths sure are nice, huh?"

"Yes, the water's nice and warm."

The two of us took a slow, leisurely soak in the tub.

I don't know if it had been built with an eye to making artifacts, or for some other purpose, but my bath was pretty big.

Although, with this much room to spare, I had a full view of Lorea-chan.

Yeah, she sure is well developed. Even though she's younger than me.

Huh? She's average? She only looks big when compared to me? I don't know a thing about that reality. And I don't want to either.

Okay, so if I took a calmer look, there wasn't *that* much difference between

us, but when you added in the fact that she was younger than me...

“Is something the matter, Sarasa-san?”

“N-Nope! Nothing at all!”

I shook my head rapidly to dispel whatever suspicions had crept into Lorea-chan’s head from noticing me staring too much, then sank into the water up to my shoulders and shut my eyes.

“Whew... Baths sure are great. Is this kind of thing normal in the city?”

“Not at all. Only rich people have one in their home. Other than them, I’d say it’s just alchemists, and other people who need one for their work, maybe.”

“Is that how it is?”

“Yep. But if you like my bath, you’re free to come use it anytime. I use it every day... Huh? Lorea-chan?”

There was no response, so I opened my eyes to look, and...

“Fwehhh, S-Sarasa-shan... My eyesh are shpinning...”

“Whaa?!”

Lorea-chan leaned against the side of the bath for support.

Wh-Why? Did the heat get to her? But we haven’t even been in here that long!

“Wh-What’s the matter? Are you not feeling well?”

“Nyooo, I’m feeling...all lightheaded and...floaty... Heh heh heh.”

I helped Lorea-chan, who was slurring her words in a suspicious manner, to sit up. Her face was flushed red, her pupils were dilated, and she had the goofiest grin on her... Ah!

“Don’t tell me you’re magic drunk!”

“Magic dwunk?”



It was a state caused when the amount of magic power inside of a person's body was greatly raised by being in a place with high magic density for too long, having too much recovery magic cast on them, or something similar.

The symptoms, just like what Lorea-chan was currently experiencing, were just things like elevated body temperature and lightheadedness. It wasn't all that harmful, really, but...

"This is the bath's fault!"

I had made the water in this bath and heated it with magic, which meant this tub was brimming with my magic power.

It would drain away on its own if left alone for a while, but we'd gotten in right after I'd heated it up, so Lorea-chan had ended up absorbing that power...

"Wait, I don't have time to be thinking about that!"

I used physical enhancement to scoop Lorea-chan up in my arms and hurriedly got her out of the bath.

"Fwahh, Sarasa-shan, you're sho shtrong. Heh heh," Lorea-chan squealed, hugging me tight.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm going to dry you off now, okay?"

I set her down on a towel, and then got her changed into pajamas. Then I put her into my bed.

The best thing to do to help the magic work its way out of her system was to have her rest somewhere normally.

Also, since my bedding used environmental tuning fabric, it was perfect for sucking some of the magic power out of her.

"Lorea-chan, it's time to go to sleep now, okay?"

"Okieeee. Aren't you going to shleep too, Sarasa-shan?"

"Oh, I am. Just, uh...on the floor, I guess?"

I did have a bunch of empty rooms, but I kinda wanted to keep an eye on Lorea-chan's condition.

“Awwww, join me in the bed! It’s a shleepover after all,” Lorea-chan pleaded, pulling on my arm.

“Erm... Sure, why not?” I went along with it, joining her under the covers.

Fortunately, the bed that Geberk-san had given me had been built large enough for one of the male gatherers to sleep in.

It wasn’t even a tight fit for a couple of petite girls like us, and the environmental tuning fabric helped maintain a nice, cozy temperature under the covers.

With a setup like this, I could sleep with my partner even on a hot, midsummer night! Not that I have anybody!

“Sheh heh, g’night.”

“Right, good night.”

After saying good night to Lorea-chan, who was still conspicuously slurring her words, I closed my eyes too.



A few days later, the order I had put in with Geberk-san for beds, a table, and a bulletin board arrived. True to his usual quality, they were well-made and designed to fit the overall vibe of the shop.

I put the board up on the wall right away and posted the warning flier.

That still leaves a lot of space. What else should I post...?

“Heya.”

As I was looking at my bulletin board and mulling over what to do with it, the door opened with a rattle of bells, and one of my regulars, Andre-san, called out with a casual greeting.

“Welcome, Andre-san.”

“Hey, you did me a big favor last time, paying so much for that bear. Here, I brought back my empties.”

Andre-san leaned with one elbow on the counter as he lined up some empty basic potion bottles.

They wouldn't treat more than a slight gash, but most injuries weren't all that serious, so these basic potions had the most demand.

"Oh, you did me just as much of a favor bringing it here. If you'd tried to butcher it yourself, the components would have lost all their value. Do you want the same potions again?"

"Yeah. That'll do. These potions have been a big help too. I wasn't able to use them so freely before, so I just had to put up with constant cuts and bruises."

Up until now, it had apparently been normal for him to let anything that wasn't too serious heal naturally. He'd reserved potions for injuries that impeded his ability to work.

But serious or not, they still hurt. There was no way that they weren't affecting him to some degree.

He told me that now he was treating all his cuts properly before heading back out each time.

"When your gathering goes well, I turn a profit too, after all."

"No, no, there's no other shop that offers this kind of service," he insisted. "Hm? What's this?"

I see he's found the bulletin board already.

Okay! I better promote it just a little.

"Oh, I had that installed today. For notices, I guess you could say?"

"What's this...? A warning? Was that alchemist that kind of guy?"

"All I'm saying is that's the kind of treatment I got when I went there. Maybe he thought he could look down on me because I'm a girl?"

Andre-san got a troubled look on his face as he looked at the warning that I'd posted.

I'd kept strictly to the facts to avoid any weird complaints over it. I'd only noted that I had taken the same materials to two different shops, and one shop had offered me ten times more for them. Obviously, I'd made sure to write clearly which shop had offered the better deal.

“Still, he only offered you a tenth of their value? That’s awful. In our case, if he tells us they’ve gone bad, we have no way to tell.”

“That’s exactly what he tried to pull with me.”

I was confident in my processing, and could assess quality myself, so I’d left immediately. The insidious thing was that, if he pointed out all sorts of “flaws” to the gatherers, they wouldn’t be able to tell if it was accurate or not.

“He couldn’t tell you were an alchemist, huh? Ha ha ha! What a clown. Now that this shop’s here, I won’t be going to sell there anyway, but I’ll keep it in mind.”

Yes, please do. And spread the word too.

Heh heh heh! I hope that crooked alchemist and his shop go under!

Whoops, let my real feelings slip out there.

No, but in all seriousness, as someone working in the same industry, having guys like that out there was a nuisance. If he hurt the reputation of alchemists, then all of us, myself included, would pay the price for it.

“Anyway, the fact is, ever since you came here, life’s gotten a whole lot easier for us gatherers, Sarasa-chan. I’m making twice what I did before! Although, the trade-off is that there’s more competition lately.”

“Ohh, is the number of gatherers picking up? I thought it might. As someone who lives in the village, it’s good to see things getting more active, but...”

“Don’t get me wrong, okay? I think it’s a good thing too. It’s just...some of these new guys are kind of amateurs, y’know?” Andre-san crossed his arms and groaned, a mildly concerned look on his face.

“Yeah... I did get some sense they might be,” I agreed.

They call it the great forest for a reason. This place’s actually pretty dangerous.

Dangerous enough that amateurs who showed up thinking they’d just “head in for a little while and make some money” might never leave.

The people who’d come to my shop initially were all veterans, but lately I was

seeing more who were a bit green... Well, if they overextended themselves and wound up dead, that was on them as gatherers. So long as they weren't causing trouble for anyone else, I couldn't say anything.

"I'm doing what I can to look out for them a bit, but a lot of the younger guys can be real rebels..."

"It's not easy being a veteran, huh?"

"Well, we were all like that once. If anything comes up, I hope you'll help too, Sarasa-chan. With whatever you can, that is."

"Got it. This village doesn't have a doctor, after all."

Having people rely on you when they were injured or sick was just part of the job as an alchemist. Like he was saying, I'd only be helping out with "what I could," but I had to respond if the need arose.

I don't want to have to make harsh decisions, so I hope "if anything comes up" remains a hypothetical.

After seeing Andre-san off with a fresh supply of potions, I was leaning on the counter, lost in thought, when the bells on the door rang again.

Jangle, jangle.

I looked up, and called out like normal.

"Welco— Master?!"

"Hey. Sarasa. You look well."

The person who had casually raised her hand in response was unquestionably my master, Ophelia Millis.

"I look well...? What are you doing here?!"

"Oh? Is it all that odd that I'd come to check in on my apprentice?"

"It's not odd, but... No, it *is* weird! Just how far do you think this place is?!"

Being one of only a handful of master class alchemists, to be completely blunt, she was very busy. Master was free to take as much or as little work as she wanted, but tons of people wanted to hire her. If you considered how long it'd taken me to get here, then a round trip was two months. There was no way

she could close the shop for that long.

“Yeah, you’ve got a point. It took me three whole days to get here.”

“I know, right?! It’s such a long trip! Huh? Three days?”

“Yeah. Three days.”

“How?! It took me a whole month by carriage when I came!”

“Well, I did run here.”

“How is running faster...? Okay, maybe it is for you. But it can’t have been three days?!”

“With enough training, it’s doable. Maybe you’re just not training enough, Sarasa?”

“Don’t start sounding like a warrior now... We’re alchemists, aren’t we?”

“Well, yeah. So use your head.”

“Oh, I get it. You must’ve used a special artifact or potion!”

“Nah, I didn’t use either.”

“Oh, give me a break.”

What she was saying was so absurd I couldn’t help but complain.

“But it *would* be good for you to train a decent amount, though? When there’s alchemic components you just can’t seem to get your hands on, sometimes you need to go and get them yourself.”

“You do that too, Master?”

“I used to a long time ago. Now that I’m master class, I have other ways.”

“Ohh, right. You’ve got customers who show up with their own materials.”

When I had been working for her part-time, there’d been quite a few customers who’d gathered hard-to-come-by materials and brought them in with them in the hopes that Master would accept their job requests. In many cases, those people had been nobles, and they’d been sparing her the trouble of hunting for materials, so they’d gotten favorable treatment.

Although, Master was still quick to turn down anyone she didn’t like, and she

could get away with it too, because of her level.

“Come to think of it, I never did teach you to fight, did I?”

“R-Right. We did learn a little in our practical lessons at the academy, though.”

Although I said “a little,” since we’d been going out into the wild to collect materials during the practical lessons, it had been enough for us to beat the wild beasts there. I was probably better than any brigand who didn’t have formal training.

“That’s not going to be enough. All right, since I’m here already, why don’t I give you some quick lessons?”

“Come again? Normally, wouldn’t you give me lessons in alchemy?”

“If you run into a wall, I’ll consider it, but you’re still doing fine, right?”

“Yes, I suppose I am.”

I was short on materials, but I’d yet to run into anything I couldn’t make because of my skill level.

If she told me to study on my own, then that was all there was to it.

“On that point, you’ll benefit more from a teacher in the martial arts. Okay, let’s go.”

“Huh? Wh-Whoa, Master, hold on!”

Master took me by the hand and led me outside the shop.

There was more than enough space between my shop and my neighbor Elles-san’s place for us to exercise a bit.

For better or for worse.

I ought to be grateful, but...

“What weapon did you use, Sarasa?”

“Erm, I used a sword, but... Oh, that’s right. I don’t *own* a sword. I had to *borrow* one for practical lessons. Aww, what a shame.”

I didn’t have room in the budget to buy a sword, after all. Since I’d had no use

for one outside of class, I had just made do with whatever the academy would loan me.

I *did* have a dagger that I carried for self-defense while traveling, but I was really just carrying it around. Fortunately, I'd yet to run into a situation where I needed to use it.

Oh, I was still top of my year when it came to sword fighting, okay?

Because of the monetary reward for sword fighting exams, obviously!

Since sword fighting didn't have much influence on your alchemy marks, those who weren't eyeing that reward tended to slack off on it. There was no way I'd pass up an opportunity like that!

Since I'd been so eager when many of my classmates hadn't taken it seriously, that'd gotten the teacher really fired up about teaching me.

Of course, I'd just been doing it for the money, so it wasn't as if I had any great love of sword fighting.

"What? You don't have a proper weapon? Well, that's no good."

"I know, right? So we'll have to—"

"I'll give you this. It's nothing special, but it should serve you well enough."

Before I could suggest we call it off for today, Master slid a sword out of the bag at her waist and tossed it toward me.

"Whoa!"

I hurriedly caught it, then removed the scabbard to find a blade that I could see my own reflection in. Since Master was giving it to me, there was no way it was just decorative.

"Are you sure? This looks pretty expensive."

"I won't miss it. It's a sturdy blade, but nothing impressive."

When Master's the one calling it "nothing impressive," it's hard to say that's entirely true.

I mean, it looks expensive, at the very least... Not that I'd turn it down, though.

“Okay, get into a battle stance. I’ll see what you can do.”

“Erm, using this sword?”

The other sword that Master pulled out had a blunted blade, obviously meant for practice, but the one she’d given me was the real deal. No matter how I thought about it, it wasn’t the kind of thing I should be training with.

“Oh? You think you’re going to hit me?” Master smirked.

“Urgh...” I had no response to that.

Fair enough! I can’t hit you!

But I’m still scared, okay? Like, what if you got hurt?

“Well, don’t worry about it. Even if you somehow managed to leave me dying, I’ve always got potions that can completely restore me as long as I’m still alive. So come at me, Sarasa. And don’t worry about getting hurt yourself.” She made a cocky beckoning gesture.

“I don’t like pain, okay?!”

Annoyed, I tried to catch her off guard with a sudden attack. It went about as well as could have been expected: she blocked it with ease.

I kept up the offensive, but she swatted away my attacks as if I was hitting her with a wet noodle. Even though I was using physical enhancement to boost my speed!

“Hmm, hmm, hmm. You’re better than I would have thought, Sarasa. Did you really learn this much from lessons alone?”

“It’s not! Very! Convincing! When you say that! While! Easily blocking! Everything I do!”

“Hrmm, if you got this good from lessons alone, then you might have a higher aptitude for this than I expected...”

Master was able to carry on talking normally even though I was desperately swinging at her the entire time. Yeah...

Honestly, I wanted to say, *“You’ve gotta be kidding me.”*

Was being top of my year in swordsmanship all just fun and games at the end

of the day? I'd worked pretty hard for it, you know?

"Whew, I think I'm going to enjoy training you!"

Master sounded happy as she knocked my sword around.

I was already past the point where I could talk, so I put some distance between us and sighed.

"Master, are you *really* an alchemist?"

"You're pretty impressive yourself. Better than the average soldier, I'd say."

Well, yeah. I had secretly been a little confident in myself, to be honest.

Confident enough to make my way this far into the countryside all alone, with nothing but a dagger.

She just demolished that confidence, though.

Incidentally, even after that intense exchange of blows, not only did the sword she'd given me still sparkle, I couldn't spot any chips in the blade.

"Sturdy" indeed.

"Are we going to keep doing this, Master?" I asked hesitantly.

"What are you talking about? I've only been able to see a little of your skill. The real lesson hasn't even begun. We're just getting started, you know?"

"Seriously...?"

Seeing the happy smile on Master's face, I held my blade at the ready, even though I wasn't all that keen on this.

"Well, give it half a day, and you'll see some results. Don't worry."

What was I supposed to not worry about?

I was up against Master, though. However, she had unquestionably done a lot for me, so if she said to do it, then do it I would.

First, she started with how to swing the sword, and we did a bunch of simple exercises.

Of course, no customers would show up at a time like this.

Well, no, they *were* coming. It was just that, when they saw Master and me at

a distance, they decided they shouldn't interrupt and turned back on their own.

No need to hold back on my account, okay?

Customers are never in the way! Honest!

But they couldn't hear my silent pleas, and so my training with Master went on until the sun set and it got too hard to see our swords.

"So, what *are* you here for, Master? You didn't come just to check in on me, right?"

"That *is* the main reason, you know? I did suddenly throw you out into the countryside and all. If you were struggling, I'd have to take you back. If things were going so poorly that you couldn't even afford the return trip, even I'd start to feel bad."

I scowled at the way Master said that while smiling.

"Murgh... Well, fortunately, I'm not having trouble feeding myself. But this place is so far out in the sticks that I am having a little trouble selling materials and handling cash, though."

With the harsh training finished, and no one injured, Master and I washed our sweat off in the bath, and then sat down for a meal together.

Most of the food on the table had come out of Master's bag.

The taste was impeccable. Probably Maria-san's cooking.

"I'll bet. If you're going into South Strag to sell things wholesale... For you, I'd guess it takes about a day?"

"Yes. It's still a bit too tough to manage a day trip."

"You'll need to focus on building your stamina first. Since, in your case, you've been able to compensate for a lot of things with your magic power. With a little training, you'll be able to make the trip in a few hours."

"Urgh!"

I wanted to cry out, "*That's impossible!*" But knowing that Master had come here from the capital in just three days, I couldn't say a word.

The fact was that I had been relying on physical enhancement whenever my muscles weren't up to the task, so Master was correct.

Even in situations where a normal alchemist would run short of magic power, I was able to use my greater reserves to enhance myself more than normal, so I'd always been able to manage without muscles.

"I'll do my best..."

"I know... How about I give you a potion that makes it easier to build stamina and muscles?"

"There's a convenient potion like that?"

Normally bodybuilding was hard, boring work.

"There is. It's not cheap enough for the general public to afford, but rich folks sometimes use it. Although, certain sweaty knights like to insist, 'that's heresy!' Those guys are just a bunch of masochists who get off on torturing their own bodies, after all."

"Um, maybe don't call them that..."

The knights are reliable people, always training hard.

I mean, people say that our country's knights are on a higher level, after all.

"So, are there any side effects?"

"Not really. I think I only have two or three on me, so you'd need to make more yourself once you run out... They're in volume six, if I recall. Sarasa, where are you at now?"

"I'm still only halfway through the third volume."

"Well, I guess that's to be expected. Practice costs money, and I'm sure you don't have time for it while also running the shop, right?"

"Yes, that's right! I'm grateful for the customers, though."

"Such are the troubles of an independent alchemist. Unlike with a regular shop, we can't let just anyone look after the place."

"I know, right?"

Just selling potions was one thing, but if they were going to buy materials, they needed to know what to look for. That ruled out anything only an alchemist could judge the quality of, of course, but even beyond that, there was a massive variety of materials. It would be tough for an ordinary person to appraise them all.

“It’s all a matter of education. If you hire someone who’ll be with you a long time and teach them, you can delegate a lot of tasks. If you have someone on the level of my Maria, it makes life much easier.”

“Maria-san, huh? Has she been working for you for a long time?”

“You could say that. I hired her right after I went independent, after all.”

“Wha...?”

No one can tell how old Master really is, so who even knows when she went independent...

There was no way a master class alchemist was as young as Master looked, so obviously it must have been the same for Maria-san if she’d been with her all this time.

Even though she just looked like a pretty lady who was a little bit older than me!

“Find someone like her for yourself, Sarasa. It helps, you know?”

“Maria-san lives in the shop and looks after your personal life too. I’ll bet your lifestyle would turn into a real mess without her, Master.”

“Ha ha ha! I can’t even deny it.”

Master was quick to agree with a laugh.

That’s no good.

I’d only seen how they lived on the very last day, the morning after we’d celebrated my graduation, but I’d been able to figure enough out from just that.

Maria-san was the one making breakfast, like a caring wife who looked after a workaholic husband.

Master was a woman, but she kind of reminded me of what my father had

been like all those years ago when he'd still been alive.

"Be careful Maria-san doesn't ever leave you, okay, Master?"

"It'll be fine. She's well compensated for her work."

"It's not just about money. It's about feelings too. It's important to thank her for all the things she does."

"Urgh... I'll keep it in mind."

Master got a slightly pensive look on her face as she seemed to reflect a little on her own behavior.

Well, if there was going to be a problem, it would have happened by now. Since Maria-san's stuck with Master for this long, I think she understands what kind of person she is.

"So, what was your other business here?"

"Ohh, right. My second goal is to lay down a transporter."

"A transporter?"

"Yes. You're familiar with the concept, right?"

"Well, yes, I do know what one is..."

A transporter, as the name implied, was an artifact that transported things between two points.

That might sound handy, but they weren't that practical, or at least that was the common view of them.

First, an alchemist had to go to both ends in order to connect the transporters. In this case, Master was connecting the transporter here to one in her own shop, but the "connection" wasn't easy... Actually, it was incredibly difficult.

The difficulty was proportional to the distance between the two points. The average alchemist would struggle to connect two points if they didn't have a line of sight between them, and even a fairly talented one had trouble if it was more than a town away.

Even if that hurdle was cleared, the next problem was with the amount of

magical power required.

The cost scaled with the mass of the items and the distance they were being sent, so only light stuff could be sent properly. Also, no matter how much magic power you spent, it was impossible to send anything living.

In addition, once the transporter was set up, it couldn't be moved. If you decided later that it was kind of in the way, and you wanted it in another room, you had to start over from scratch.

Because of all those limitations, we'd been taught that transporters existed, but the professor had come right out and said that we'd probably never have any occasion to use one.

"They *are* used in some places. But only for sending letters and such."

"Even if it's only a town away, it's still faster than sending a horse. But is setting up one connecting here and the castle—no, that's a silly question to ask if it's you, Master."

I couldn't possibly do it myself, but Master wouldn't bring it up if she wasn't able to...

"The magic power isn't an issue, right? Not for you, Sarasa. I've improved the design of the transporter a bit, lowering the amount required too."

"It's true that I have more power than most people. But why do we need a transporter in the first place?"

"I told you I'd buy your materials, but it must be a lot of trouble to send them to me, right? The transporter takes care of that in an instant. It'll also let me send you whatever materials you want."

"Honestly, I'm grateful, but..."

With a month's trip in between us, the cost of shipping was ridiculous.

Also, if I could have her send me difficult-to-acquire materials, that would make mastering the *Complete Alchemy Works* much easier. Frankly, it was all good for me.

"All right. In terms of location... Will a corner of the workshop be okay?"

“Anywhere that doesn’t get in the way is fine by me. Ah, but it’s better if it’s somewhere on the first floor. It’d be a bit tough to do one on the second floor.”

“A bit tough...? Normally it would be impossible.”

The best place for a transporter was right on the ground. Stone tiling didn’t have much of an impact, which was why I’d suggested the stone floor of the workshop, but...I guess “normally” didn’t apply to Master.

That said, there was no need to intentionally make her job harder, so I led her to the workshop anyway.

“How about here?” I suggested.

“Hmm, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

The work only took a few minutes.

After taking a job that was generally considered difficult and making it look easy, Master put a small bottle on the transporter and put magic power into it. The very next moment, the bottle vanished.

“Okay, it’s working. Sarasa, if you have anything to sell, send it over. I’ll buy it off you at the going rate in the capital. If you need materials, write me a note and send it. I’ll procure anything I can get my hands on for you.”

“Thank you. But are you sure? If I just send over whatever I want, won’t that affect your shop’s stock and your cash on hand...?”

“In the capital, I can dispose of stuff easily. Although, if you keep sending me a large volume of the same thing, I’ll lower the purchase price accordingly.”

Even at a slightly reduced rate, being able to sell at “capital prices” was extremely advantageous for me.

There weren’t many materials that could be harvested in the capital area. Most of them had to be brought in from afar, and those shipping fees were included in the prices. That meant that most materials were more expensive there than they would be in South Strag’s market.

Since Master was the one who’d set up the transporter, she could have made me knock down the price by the same amount as the shipping fees. But since she was buying them at capital prices, this was essentially her supporting me. I

was grateful for it.

“Okay, that’s my business here finished. We still have time before bed, don’t we? Why don’t you tell me about all the things you’ve accomplished out here.”

“I don’t know that I’ve done anything that big... Let’s see, where should I begin?”

Ultimately, I ended up chatting with Master late into the night.

The following day, Master bought everything in my storage with cash, and then said, “This is advance payment,” and gave me even more before she went home.

That resolved my cash flow issue, but...what a busy visit that had been, especially after she’d come all this way.

She can’t leave her shop unattended for long, so I guess that was inevitable, though.

Incidentally, as she’d been about to leave, she’d said, “Next time I come, I’ll have you show me your skill with a sword. Don’t slack off now, okay?”

Shouldn’t that be my skill with alchemy, Master?



“Huh? Your master came to visit, Sarasa-san?”

“She sure did. That’s why I’m so exhausted... My muscles are killing me.”

I was stretched out across the shop counter, melted into a big puddle of “bleh.”

I was generally pretty sedentary, so a full day of martial arts had left all my muscles aching. In that state, I told Lorea, who had come to hang out, about what had transpired the day before.

“Wow... Alchemists torture their bodies for their craft too, huh?”

“You’ve got it all wrong. Well, no—you’re right about alchemists abusing their bodies, but alchemy’s got nothing to do with my aching muscles.”

What a terrible misunderstanding.

I can't blame her for it, though.

"I was forced to train with a sword pretty much all day."

"Come again? So it wasn't your alchemy master, but your sword master?"

Lorea-chan tilted her head to the side with a look that asked, *"What do you mean?"*

Yeah, it makes no sense, right? Master coming and making me train with a sword like that. Seriously.

"No, of course it was my alchemy master."

After a pause, Lorea-chan said, "I don't understand what you're saying, Sarasa-san."

"I'm not sure I do either. Well, to make things simple, my alchemy master told me to 'train your body,' and then gave me some sword lessons."

"Erm... Is sword fighting something alchemists can do?"

"Yes, actually. There's a wide range of talent, of course. But we use it in our practical lessons on gathering at the academy."

Seeing the question mark floating over Lorea-chan's head, I gave her a rundown of the school's curriculum.

In the eyes of the general public, there was this vague image of alchemists as knowledge workers, but the fact was that there was more to the job.

"Incidentally, my master's on the high end of that range of talent. She's got some serious skills."

"Really?"

"Probably. I was a little confident in myself too, though..."

"It's a mystery to me that you can use a sword at all."

"Well, to be fair, I think there are very few alchemists who actually go out to gather materials for themselves."

If there was a request they couldn't fulfill without going out to collect materials, they could always just turn it down.

They could make enough money without that kind of trouble, and not everyone was that ambitious.

“Still, Master did give me a sword...” I said, pulling it out for her to see.

“Wow, it’s so pretty.” Lorea-chan’s eyes sparkled.

It was a purely functional sword, with no excess design flourishes, but even after the hard training session yesterday, the shine of the blade remained undulled. There were no scratches or chips in it either.

This thing definitely would have cost a pretty penny. It wasn’t *just* a durable sword.

“I can’t just let it gather dust, so I’m going to have to keep up with my training.”

“Even though you’re an alchemist?”

“Yep. Well, I’ve been slacking off a bit since coming to this village, so maybe it’s a good impetus to fix that.”

Delighting in finally graduating and becoming an alchemist, I had been taking things somewhat easy, but maybe I was being too lax.

Back when I’d been in the academy, I’d always been doing some amount of physical training. After all, if I had gotten sick, it could have been a deathblow to my academic career.

Treatment cost money, and illness wasn’t an excuse for bad grades. A smooth path to expulsion was how the Royal Alchemist Academy kept up their quality.

“Slacking off...? But I don’t think I’ve ever seen you playing around, Sarasan.”

“No, no, there’s plenty of time where I’m not getting anything done. Although, since I also have to watch the shop, there’s no helping that sometimes.”

I did what work I could at the counter, but there were many tasks I could only do in the workshop. That left me just sitting there much of the time.

In my school days, I would have been able to borrow books, but there was

obviously no place to do that in this village, and the only books that a poor person like me owned were the *Complete Alchemy Works*.

Anyway, I didn't have much to do while tending the shop.

Muscle training was an option, but it was a bit risky when I didn't know when a customer might arrive.

If they walked in to find the shop attendant doing sit-ups—that'd seem pretty dodgy.

I know I'd do an about-face and walk right back out. For sure.

"It'd be great if I could hire someone to run the shop... It'd be too much to ask of you though, right, Lorea-chan?"

"Huh? No, I'd be fine with it. Not that I'm sure I'd be any help."

I'd asked expecting to be turned down, so her response caught me by surprise.

"Wait, really? But don't you need to help out at your place?"

Lorea-chan came by to hang out pretty frequently, but not every day. I figured that was when she was helping out at home...

"My folks only leave to stock up maybe once a month now. If you can just give me those few days off, then I'll be fine. You'll be paying me, right?"

"Of course. Not an especially high wage, though."

"That's fine. I don't get anything for helping out at home. But since I don't have any siblings, I can't get out of doing it."

Yeah, it's common sense that kids have to help out.

Come to think of it, she doesn't have any siblings, huh?

It's pretty rare to see an only child in a rural village like this... But if there were others, and they've passed away, it'd be an awkward subject, so it's hard to ask.

"If you don't think it'll work, I can introduce you to someone I know."

"Oh, no. If you don't have any issue with it, Lorea-chan, it'd be easier for me. I mean, I already know you and all."

“Ohh, right. You don’t have any interaction with the other kids in the village.”

“Yeah, I really don’t. Is there really anyone in the village you could introduce me to?”

“Ahhh, if we’re talking about someone who isn’t already working, then they’d have to be pretty young. Usually kids my age have a job.”

Lorea-chan suddenly looked slightly abashed.

In a farming village, it was a given that anyone over the age of ten should be helping out around the house, and by the time they were thirteen, like Lorea-chan, they ought to be working like an adult.

If there was no work to be done at home, then they went to help out the other houses to make money, or to receive crops as thanks.

Lorea-chan had been doing her part by running the store until now, but with her parents taking over that responsibility, she needed to think of something new.

“Can I ask you to work for me, then?”

“Yes! Please!” she replied eagerly. “But is it going to be okay? Isn’t it difficult to work in an alchemist’s shop...?”

“Oh, yeah. It can be pretty rough.”

Lorea-chan looked uneasy when I said that, but I clapped her on the shoulder and smiled.

“You’ll be fine. I’ll teach you everything you need to know. But I’d like you to stick around as long as you can.”

I’d really love it if we could become like Master and Maria-san.

“Sure! I’ll keep on doing my best until you tell me to quit!”

“Yeah, if you’re diligent in your work, I won’t ever ask you to stop, so give it your best shot.”

Having said that, I extended my hand.

Lorea-chan took it with a slightly tense expression.



I know that Lorea-chan told me she'd do her best, but unfortunately, she was still a minor.

If she were an orphan like me, that would be one thing, but I couldn't hire her without her parents' permission.

That being the case, I visited them to ask about hiring Lorea-chan, and both Darna-san and Mary-san were all too eager to say, "Yes, please!"

They had apparently both been thinking they needed to find work for her too.

In regard to her watching the general store while they were away, they told me, "That won't be necessary, so have Lorea work hard."

If there was anything we argued over, it was how much to pay her.

Only, I was the one saying, "That's not enough," while Darna-san was saying, "That's too much."

I proposed a rate based on wages in the capital, taking into account that Lorea-chan could read, write, and do math. However, Darna-san was insistent that "it wouldn't be good for her to have so much money at a young age, and it would also create too large a gap between her and her peers."

Hmm, I know there's a wage gap between the capital and the countryside, but I guess the real issue is maintaining balance with those around her.

It was easy for people to accept that alchemists made a lot of money "because they graduated from a difficult school." But if all she was doing was tending the shop, then they'd feel, "I could do that too."

This was a small village, so one person who was making a lot of money could easily find themselves the target of jealousy.

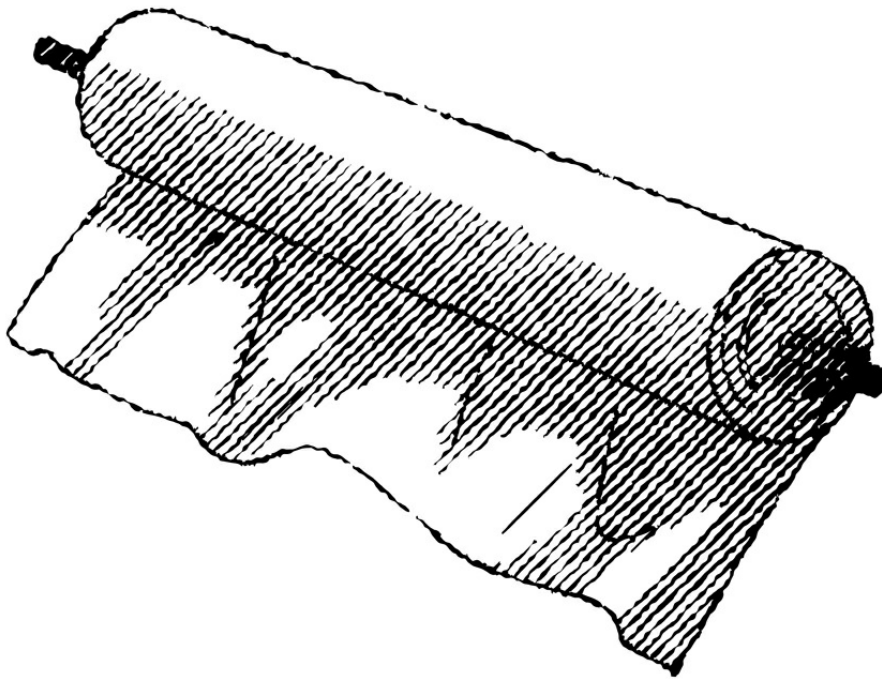
Once we had hashed out the details, we settled on an amount that was *just a little* more than the other kids her age. Darna-san had wanted me to only pay her the same, but I'd insisted.

That was part because I wanted to show my appreciation of her literacy and ability to do arithmetic, and also because I was calculating that if I paid her more, that would make it harder to quit.

The goal was for us to be like Master and Maria.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could be together for decades like that?

Standard Price: ~6000 Rhea



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 Alfth

I Got My Own Shop!

Episode 4: The Storm Comes Suddenly

“Welcome!”

I poked my head out onto the sales floor just as Lorea-chan was enthusiastically greeting a customer.

It had been a little over a week since I’d hired her. She was proving even more talented than I’d expected.

Her ability to do basic math meant she was fine handling sales, and she was also a quick learner, so I was already able to let her handle some purchasing decisions as well.

There aren’t that many different things the gatherers around here bring in, after all.

Obviously, she had to call me in to look at any materials only an alchemist could judge the quality of, but it didn’t happen often, so I could spare the time to work on my alchemy at a relaxed pace.

Thanks to her, I was rapidly making my way through the *Complete Alchemy Works*, and was almost finished with the fourth volume.

Of course, that was largely thanks to the materials that I’d received as a parting gift from Master. Once you got to Volume 4, it called for a lot of materials that were a little beyond my means at the moment.

Lorea-chan also showed some concern for my diet, offering to cook for me, but...the cupboards were still bare.

When I’d told her that, she’d told me, “Sarasa-san, that just won’t do...” with a look of dismay. Maybe it was about time to make sure that they were fully stocked.

“What do you think, Lorea-chan? Have you gotten used to the job?”

“Yes! I’m doing all right.” Lorea nodded cheerfully, but then her expression showed just a hint of concern, and she hesitantly added, “It worries me that I’m

handling a lot more money than I did at home, though.”

Yeah, products related to alchemy are expensive. And we need to spend a lot on buying materials too.

But because that was the kind of shop this was, there were protections in place.

“Ah ha ha, it’s okay. You remember how to work the security system, right? If anyone’s acting suspicious, you don’t have to hesitate to use it,” I told Lorea-chan, patting her on the head. “I hear it’s *super* painful, but it’s not going to kill them or anything.”

That got a shocked look out of the gatherers in the shop. I just smiled back at them.

If you don’t do anything naughty, we won’t have any issues, okay?

“If there’s any problems, call me, okay?”

“Okay!” she chimed.

Yep, good response.

Well, not that I expect any proper gatherer to cause us trouble. If they get themselves shunned by the village, they won’t have a place to stay, or even anything to eat.

And in a small village like this, word gets around fast.

“All right, I’ll see you—”

I had finished restocking the shelves, and was about to return to the workshop when the door swung open hard enough that I worried it might break.

“H-Help!”

Two men and a woman came in, with one of the men carrying a second woman over his shoulder.

“Eek!”

Lorea-chan couldn’t help but gasp at the sight.

The four were all badly injured.

The woman they were carrying had the worst of it. She was covered in a full-body rash, the blood had drained from her face, and her right arm had been torn off at the root.

They'd tried to stop the bleeding, but there was still a trail of blood dripping behind them.

"Set her down on the floor! Lorea-chan, have the customers go outside!"

"R-Right!"

Although Lorea-chan was looking pale and quivering slightly, she put on a strong face and moved into action immediately.

I moved over to the woman on the floor's side right away, examining her.

She's still alive, somehow, but very weak.

It looked like she had a bad stomach wound too. The tightly bound bandages were stained crimson with her blood.

Her left arm was scorched black, and I could see a red rash on the parts of her skin that weren't damaged.

"This isn't just an injury...she's poisoned too."

"Please! Save Iris!" the other woman pleaded.

The man who'd set the woman down on the floor and the other man both backed away a little, as if not sure what they should be doing.

"Where's her right arm?" I asked.

"We have it!" the woman responded, presenting a severed arm wrapped in a cape.

The limb had been forcefully torn off, so it was in really bad shape.

But it was still better than nothing.

"I can save her."

"Really?! Then—"

Seeing the woman's face light up, I raised my hand to silence her. I looked her

right in the eyes and checked.

“But! Are you sure? It’s going to be pretty expensive, you know?”

There was no time to spare, but as an alchemist, I had to be sure she understood what she was agreeing to.

“What are you asking during an emergency like—”

“Shut your mouth, amateur!”

One of the men had tried to interject, but the woman shut him down.

“We’re not ama—”

“The only reason Iris even got hurt is because you two rushed ahead!”

The men fell into an awkward silence, their eyes wandering.

I think I get it. Maybe these are two separate pairs who teamed up.

“Please. Help her.”

“Sure. There’s two ways we can do this. I can just save her life. Or I can fully treat her. I get the feeling you already know, but—”

“I’ll pay! So do everything you can!”

“Got it. All right, first of all, you—”

“Kate.”

“Kate-san, go and draw some water. There’s a well out back. Show her where it is, Lorea-chan.”

“I’m on it!”

Kate-san headed out back with Lorea-chan, who had returned from chasing out the customers, while I went to the warehouse to get potions.

There’s more than just injuries this time, so it’s going to be a bit of a pain to deal with.

First I’ll need a potion to reattach her arm and regrow any bits that are missing. Then I’ll need a potion to prevent illness and restore her stamina. Lastly, I’ll need a potion to neutralize the poison.

The way the one-two punch of injuries and poison is robbing her of her stamina is especially bad. If it were just one or the other, I could get by with just a potion or two, but...

As I packed the potions and equipment I would need into my bag, Kate-san and Lorea-chan got back with a bucket of water. I had them pour half of it into another bucket.

“Kate-san, can I ask you to wash the arm where it was severed?”

“Yes! I’ll do it.”

I think it’s the sort of thing that would be hard to do if you weren’t used to it, but Kate-san nodded bravely and took the severed arm. Her hands were surprisingly steady.

Meanwhile, I tore the clothes around the woman’s—Iris-san’s—shoulder, and began washing the opening of the wound.

Even as I was doing this, the fallen gatherer showed almost no response.

Her vitals aren’t looking so good. We need to hurry.

Taking the arm from Kate-san, I pressed the openings of the wounds together and poured half a potion over them, then gave her the rest of it mouth-to-mouth. The severed arm cleanly reconnected to its stump as we watched.

It’s my third time seeing healing of this level now, but I’m still amazed by how effective it is.

I followed it up by having her drink an antidote potion, and then a stamina recovery potion one sip at a time.

“Tch! Do you always wring money out of people when there’s a life on the line?”

“You absolute ghoul! This is the problem with you alchemists.”

Enough comments from the peanut gallery.

If you’re not going to help, then get lost already.

“Enough, you two! If you don’t cut it out—”

Kate-san raised her voice and was ready to seize one of the men by the front

of his shirt, but I stopped her and thrust a finger toward him.

“All right, buddy. From now on, you can just bring everything you gather in the forest to my shop. I’ll use all of it to better the lives of other people. You’ll do that for free, of course, right? Lives are on the line here.”

“Wha?! That has nothing to do with this!”

“Yeah, that’s right! We risk our lives going out there to get that stuff! There’s no way we’re giving it away for free!”

“What’s the difference? If word got out that I’d treat people for free if their lives were in danger, then do you have any idea how many would show up? Besides, you people only go into the great forest because we alchemists will buy the things you bring back at a fair price, right? If I tried to tell you, ‘I’m using these to help people, so I’m not paying you this time,’ would you be able to accept that?”

The men were speechless.

Do these guys think alchemists are a bottomless pit of money?

The materials in the potions that I’d just used would normally have been outside the range of what I could afford at this point in my career. I just happened to have made them with my parting gifts from Master. They weren’t the kind of potions I had in stock all the time.

“I’m sorry. They’re idiots. I’ll apologize, so go easy on them.”

“I don’t need you to apologize, Kate-san... But they’re not helping by being here, so maybe they ought to go somewhere else?”

The two men looked somewhat upset when I pointed to the door, but they dejectedly walked out when Kate-san glared at them.

Selfish jerks.

They were ready to complain to me, but when Kate-san said she’d pay, they didn’t volunteer to put any money in, or do anything to support her.

“Lorea-chan, lock the door and close the curtains.”

“Right.”

Lorea-chan moved fast, doing as I'd instructed.

The shop was a little dark when she was done, so I lit it up with magic. Then I cut up Iris-san's clothes with a knife, and removed the bandages that had been wrapped around her stomach.

"Are these claw marks?"

"Yes, it was a bearlike creature with four arms. It could even breathe fire..."

"Four arms, venom, and fire... A hellflame grizzly?"

That's not the kind of opponent you'd expect to find around here, though.

Although I had my doubts, I carried on washing her stomach wound.

Maybe her stamina had started to recover a little, because Iris-san responded just a little whenever I touched the wound.

"This is pretty bad, though. Looks like I'll need to use another."

The first restoration potion I used mostly healed her, but seeing that this wound isn't fully closed, did the hit that she took almost completely destroy her stomach...?

I sprinkled another potion over the wound, this one not as expensive as the first, but still fairly valuable.

"It uses up her stamina, so I'd prefer not to use too many."

Potions had incredible effects, but it wasn't as though I could just keep on using them endlessly with no consequences. Using several powerful potions all at once was, generally, a very dangerous proposition.

Their effects would all interact, risking unpredictable side effects.

That said, if the alternative was her dying, then I had to use them. All I could do was adjust things to minimize those side effects.

After sprinkling the healing potion over her, I gave Iris-san a few more sips of the stamina recovery potion.

As I did, Iris-san's rash subsided, and her pallor gradually improved too.

That must've finally reassured Kate-san, who let out a sigh of relief and

bowed her head to me.

“Those guys seem new at this. I bet they soured your mood, huh?” Kate-san’s tone was apologetic.

“No,” I replied, shaking my head. “I can’t really blame them for thinking that potions are expensive.”

Honestly, they had annoyed me, but it was a fact that alchemists charged a lot of money for their products, and those prices included a high profit margin.

But we couldn’t just cut our prices willy-nilly.

Like I’d been saying earlier, if someone cut their prices, people would all go to them, and then demand other alchemists drop their prices too.

If that kind of price-cutting happened, profits would fall, and that would sap the will of people to go through all the trouble of becoming an alchemist.

Since the country wanted to increase the number of alchemists, they couldn’t accept that, so obviously alchemists weren’t allowed to cut prices.

Besides, the more fundamental problem was that the materials used to make alchemic products were generally expensive. The gatherers had to risk their lives to go out and collect them, so of course they’d be.

If they weren’t, the gatherers wouldn’t be motivated to work, and then the materials wouldn’t be available.

As for the high profit margin, that was only if you looked at the products individually. If you also factored in the materials that were lost to failed transmutations, it wasn’t actually that high. If you considered unsold and warehoused stock, then we needed a seventy to eighty percent success rate to just barely make a profit.

If we wanted to handle artifacts made with expensive materials, then we needed to save up a considerable amount of capital first, and even then, one failure could bankrupt us.

That’s why the more successful an alchemist was, the stricter they were when it came to their bottom line. Unfortunately, the general public really struggled to understand that about us.

Up until I'd gotten into the academy and had begun studying there, all I'd really thought was "Alchemists really rake in the cash!"

Well, most people couldn't even do basic arithmetic, so there wasn't much point in even bringing up profit margins with them.

"Those guys weren't part of your party?"

"We only met them for the first time today. Iris and I are a pair, and we were heading into the great forest for the first time, so we teamed up with some guys who said they were used to the place... They were nothing but a hindrance."

"Had you seen those men before, Lorea-chan?"

"No, their faces were new to me. They must have arrived recently."

"I'll bet you're right."

I didn't recognize them either. There were few gatherers frequenting the great forest who failed to use our shop, so what they had said about being used to it must've been a lie.

At the very least, I could say that they hadn't been to the great forest from this village before.

"I thought that might be it, but do you really think so?" Kate asked.

"They weren't veterans, that much is for sure," I replied. "You sure pulled a couple of duds, huh?"

"We should've turned back when we saw how amateurish they acted," Kate-san said with a beleaguered sigh, one hand on her forehead.

"Well, just be glad they didn't run away and abandon you."

As we were talking, I finished giving Iris-san the stamina recovery potion, so I pulled out the sickness prevention one.

This one was safe to drink all at once, so I gave it to her mouth-to-mouth, then wiped her lips.

The wounds had sealed up, but Iris-san's face was still pale because she had lost so much blood.

Even so, the full-body rash had already subsided, and her breathing had

relaxed considerably.

Her pulse is...within the normal range, I guess?

Her magical power was a little low, but not so low it was a problem.

I gave her a light examination with magic, confirming there was nothing abnormal, and then let out a sigh of relief.

“Whew... I think she’s out of the woods now.”

“Thanks! I was sure she was a goner...”

Kate-san took my hand with a tearful smile. I smiled back.

Although I’d taken practical lessons, this had honestly been my first time seeing someone in such a bad state.

But I’d done everything I could to keep up an appearance of calm, following the principle that “the caregiver mustn’t panic, or look uneasy.”



I pulled it off, right? I'm sure of it. Yeah, it should have been fine.

"For now, let's clean her up and let her sleep. Does she have a change of clothes?"

"Erm, at the inn..."

"Okay, go get it, then. If you'd like, you can stay the night here. I have rooms."

"You mean it? Honestly, I'd like to save whatever money I can to pay you back, so I'd be grateful if we could."

"Yes. Besides, I think it would be best if I monitored Iris-san's condition for a while."

I think she's fine, but there are side effects to consider.

I'll feel a lot better about it myself if I can keep her nearby.

"Got it. I'll go fetch our stuff, then!"

No sooner had the words left her mouth than Kate-san was racing out the door.

As she did, I caught a glimpse of the two men waiting outside, but Kate-san completely ignored them. I didn't want them coming in and bothering me, so I went and closed the door tight.

"Could you go and wash the buckets, Lorea-chan?"

"Will do."

Before Lorea-chan could get back, I stripped Iris-san of her clothes. She didn't have any wounds, but I checked her over just to be sure.

While the potions would have cured ordinary wounds, if there was a stinger or anything of that sort still stuck in her, then the antidote potion wouldn't have done anything to it. I had to be careful.

It doesn't do any good removing the toxins from her body if more just get injected afterward. The hellflame grizzly's venom is in its claws, so I think it shouldn't be an issue, but I need to check.

"Yep... No problems here. That's one hell of a figure she's got, though. Must

be nice.”

I hadn’t had time to notice it before, but she was a real beauty.

Her body was as toned as you’d expect from a gatherer, and she had attractive facial features too. And, despite the blood caked in it, her hair was a glossy black.

Come to think of it, Kate-san was beautiful too.

I’ll bet those guys earlier approached them for their looks.

“Sarasa-san, I went and washed them.”

“Thanks. Just put them here.”

I used magic to fill one of the buckets Lorea-chan brought back with hot water.

I then used that hot water and a cloth to wipe Iris-san’s beautiful body clean.

What I really want is to put her in the bath, but Iris-san’s really big. If it was just a matter of lifting her, I could do that with physical enhancement, but there’s no fixing the size difference between us. So we’ll just have to wait until she can move by herself.

I did what I could to clean the blood from her hair, and then we laid her down in the bed on the second floor.

“Whew. Thanks for helping, Lorea-chan.”

“No, I don’t think I did anything that important...” Lorea-chan said with her eyes slightly downturned. She was still looking a little pale...

Now that I thought about it, it wasn’t normal to see injuries that bad.

Yet despite that, she hadn’t gotten dazed, or made a fuss. She’d done her job properly. That was incredible enough on its own. She was super talented.

“Was that all a bit much for you, Lorea-chan?”

“Yes, it was a real surprise,” she admitted. “Alchemists are able to handle that kind of thing too, huh.”

“Well, people do come to us for treatment. And we take practical lessons in

how to do it. It was my first time dealing with anything that bad, though.”

“Really? You looked calm to me,” Lorea-chan said, sounding mystified.

I just put on a strained smile.

If that was how I looked to her, then I’d kept up the act well.

“It was taking everything I had to keep it together,” I admitted. “But I’m glad Kate-san agreed to pay. I didn’t want to have to abandon them.”

“You wouldn’t have treated her if Kate-san had refused to pay?”

Lorea-chan was looking at me to see how I’d react. For a moment, I didn’t know quite what to say in response.

“It’s a tough question. But that’s what’s expected of me as an alchemist. In order to help more people in the long run.”

Even if I was able to save one person, if we lost the system of alchemists and gatherers, then even more people would become victims.

For that reason, there were cases when we had to choose not to save people even though we had the means to. Since those means weren’t infinite.

“Did I ruin your image of us?” I asked Lorea-chan, who seemed to be thinking about it.

I had no intention of changing my policy, and no ability to, but I wanted Lorea-chan to understand, if that was at all possible. So that we could keep getting along as well as we had been.

But contrary to my concerns, Lorea-chan quickly shook her head, and then nodded.

“Oh, no. I get what you’re saying, Sarasa-san. I think their line about ‘lives being at stake’ was just an excuse too. If anything, I was amazed that you could use so many potions with only a verbal promise... They’re expensive, aren’t they?”

“Huh? Ohhh, yeah. They were expensive. I’d say it’d take you...maybe ten years, working as hard as you could, to buy them.”

In fact, even if she had ten years’ worth of her salary, it wouldn’t even be

enough to afford the materials used to make them.

“I knew it. Using that many potions on someone you’ve just met... Did you never think they might just stiff you?”

“Hmm, I wouldn’t have done it for the two guys. But I thought Kate-san felt trustworthy.”

It was just a gut feeling. But she’d been ready to nod without a moment’s hesitation when it’d been for Iris-san’s sake.

That showed just how important Kate-san’s companion was to her.

“Well, if she does stiff us, that just means I was a poor judge of character,” I offered to Lorea-chan with a smile.

Iris-san awoke a little after noon the next day.

This was earlier than I’d anticipated, even considering that I had given her stamina recovery potions.

Normally, after regenerating from those kinds of wounds, I’d have expected her to sleep for days... Maybe her underlying stamina was just that incredible? My predictions *had* been based on an ordinary person, but, now that I thought of it, I’d seen her body while I was treating her, and she *was* pretty fit.

“I’m sorry to have troubled you, Shopkeeper-dono. Allow me to express my sincerest thanks for your assistance.”

Once Iris-san made her way down from the second floor with Kate-san’s help, she sat down in front of me and deeply bowed her head.

It was a graceful gesture, making me suspect that Iris-san might have had a good upbringing.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not like I did it for free. Kate-san is paying for your treatment.”

I looked at Kate-san as I said that, and she gave a firm nod in response.

“Oh, no, I should be the one who—” Iris-san hurriedly began to blurt out, but Kate-san cut her off.

“I’m the one who asked her to do it. So I’m the one who should shoulder the debt.”

“But I was the one who was injured.”

“And you got those injuries protecting the rest of us, right?”

“But—”

The two argued back and forth over who should pay.

Fortunately, each person was insisting it should be themselves, so I was grateful to see neither was trying to shove the debt off on the other. I wouldn’t want to see them fighting after I’d gone out of my way to help.

Although, it *was* a bit of an issue having them argue here. Besides, there wasn’t any need to insist that just one of them pay the whole amount.

“All right!” I shouted with a clap of my hands, ending their “discussion.”

That seemed to remind them of where they were, and both turned to look at me with awkward expressions on their faces.

“Ah! Shopkeeper-dono, forgive us.”

“Sorry, Shopkeeper-san.”

They both bowed apologetically, but I shook my head and offered them a proposal.

“For my part, Kate-san made the request, so she’s the one I’ll be invoicing. But I think it’d be best if you worked together. It’s not cheap, you know?”

“Yes. In all honesty, I find it hard to believe I’m still alive with the wounds I suffered. It’s only been a day, and yet I can move the arm that was torn off without any issue.”

Iris-san nodded repeatedly, rubbing her arm and moving it around.

Nothing looked out of the ordinary, so it seemed that the healing process had gone off without a hitch.

Even though I knew that she should be all right in theory, it was still a relief to see her fully recovered.

“I couldn’t believe what I was seeing either! Who’d have thought there’d be such incredible potions at a shop out in the boonies like this! Ah! S-Sorry, Shopkeeper-san.”

Although Kate-san quickly apologized for putting down our village like that, she wasn’t exactly *wrong*, so Lorea-chan and I just smiled and let it pass.

“No, in all honesty, this really is the boonies. I should mention, though—I don’t have any more of those potions, so if you come back with the same kind of injuries, I’m not going to be able to put you back together again.”

“Yeah, go figure. Now if you had a bunch of them lying around, that would be a real surprise.”

Well, I do still have another one, a rank higher than those, that I’m keeping in reserve.

The materials for making it had come from Master, of course. They were such expensive materials that, honestly, my hands had started getting a little shaky when it had come time to use them.

Although, there hadn’t been any point in just holding on to them, and it’d have been hard to explain myself to Master if I hadn’t used them, so I had.

“Incidentally...how much is it?”

Seeing the way Kate-san and Iris-san gulped, I hesitated for a moment, then decided to be honest about the cost of the potions I’d used.

“Let’s see... Normally, the treatment costs money too, but assuming I throw that in for free, the potions alone come to...”

I then told them the price. It left not just Kate-san and Iris-san speechless, but Lorea-chan too.

On top of that, Iris-san started going a bit pale again, even though she’d seemed to be on the mend.

“I-I see. Th-That is going to take some effort, yeah.”

“R-Right. Let’s work it off together, Iris.”

The two of them had been arguing over which of them should pay a moment

ago, but now they looked one another in the eye and shook hands, trembling ever so slightly as they nodded.

Friendship is beautiful, isn't it?

I'm giving you a serious discount, though, even at that price. It'd cost more if you bought them normally, you know?

"If your arm had 'just' been chopped off with a sword or something, I could have treated you with a slightly cheaper potion, but... Well, you had a pretty awful stomach wound too."

"Oh, no, Shopkeeper-dono. I've no issue with the price. I have nothing but gratitude toward you for bringing me back from the state I was in."

"Yeah. Even when I managed to collect her severed arm, I didn't actually think you were going to be able to reattach it."

"You have my gratitude for that too, Kate. I'm amazed you were able to do it in that situation."

Ah, I thought that too.

It sounds like things got really dicey, so I'm surprised she had the presence of mind to pick up the limb.

"I mean, I've always heard that it's more or less impossible to regenerate any body parts that are completely missing. But as long as we had your arm, there was still *some* hope... I'd have hated to see you lose your arm, Iris."

As Kate-san said this, she stroked Iris-san's previously severed arm, as if to confirm for herself that it was still there.

Iris-san placed her own hand over top of hers, saying, "Thank you."

Mm-hmm, friendship sure is beautiful. I like it!

Not having many friends myself, I might even have been a bit jealous.

"Um, Sarasa-san," Lorea-chan asked, "can you not grow back an arm that's missing?"

Ahh, she would wonder that, wouldn't she?

Ordinary people tended to think alchemy could do anything. But the two

gatherers, who knew a bit more than an average villager like Lorea-chan, both put on strained smiles that seemed to say, *“Yeah, that’s not possible.”* And yet...

“Uh, actually you can.”

“Wha?!” Even though it was Lorea-chan who had asked the question, Iris-san and Kate-san both cried out in surprise, then just stared at me.

I get why, though.

“But she’s not wrong that it’s ‘more or less impossible,’ I guess. You need an alchemist like my master—okay, maybe not quite her level, but still fairly high—and expensive materials. Obviously, the cost is on a whole other level from the price I just told Kate-san and Iris-san. That’s why, for ordinary people, it’s ‘more or less impossible.’”

Iris-san, who’d been listening to my explanation with a look of surprise on her face, nodded, convinced.

“That does make it impossible. Even the treatment you gave me is beyond my means, after all.”

“I guess that’s just how it is for the common folk.”

It wasn’t an amount that they could possibly put together on their own, and they couldn’t borrow that much either. Even if they resorted to selling themselves, it was still impossible. The price was more than they’d make in their entire lives working an ordinary job, so even if one of the common folk learned that there were ways to regenerate lost limbs, they had to give up on it.

You can feel as sorry for them as you want, but the fact was that it required expensive materials, and in order to acquire them, somebody—the gatherers, specifically—had to put themselves in danger.

Even if you went to them and said, *“These poor people need help, so work for free,”* they weren’t going to do it.

“Yeah, of course it would be that way. It almost goes without saying we couldn’t afford it...”

“Don’t worry, Lorea-chan, you’re my employee, so if anything happens, I’ll take care of you.”

“How would I pay you?”

“I’ll give you an advance on your wages.”

“I’d be working for free for the rest of my life!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll give you an employee discount.”

“I don’t think that’s an amount where a discount is going to help...”

Lorea-chan let out a long sigh. I just smiled wryly.

Well, yeah. It’s a price that would normally be impossible for you.

But Lorea-chan, if you can become like Maria-san, it’s probably possible.

So I hope you’ll really work your hardest. I wouldn’t want to lose you, after all.

“I’ll fix you up good and proper, so relax, okay?”

“Urgh... I don’t know whether to be happy or not...”

“Hee hee...”

I guess she’s happy I’d help her, but doesn’t want to be in debt? Well, don’t worry. Even if it comes to that, I’m not going to take all of your wages.

I’ve got to keep you not making enough to really live, but not so little it kills you, or I’ll never get my money back, right?

That’s just a joke, though.

“E-Excuse me, Shopkeeper-dono.” Perhaps worried by my smile, Iris-san raised her hand to hesitantly ask, “How quickly do we need to repay our debt to you?”

“We’ll need to discuss that. I don’t know just how capable the two of you are.”

“We’re reasonably good—or so I like to think...” Kate-san opined.

“That sounds less than convincing after I was carried in here injured. We’ll give it our very best effort,” Iris-san declared, her expression a little tense.

Since they’re going into the great forest, they must have been reasonably confident before coming to this village, but they got off to a bad start with those injuries... I imagine luck was part of that, though.

“Well, I don’t plan to push you harder than you can handle, so don’t worry too much.”

“O-Oh, I see. I apologize for the imposition.”

Just as she finished saying this with a look of relief, there was a loud rumbling sound.

Iris-san’s face turned bright red.

“Ahh, you must be hungry.”

“Uh, no, um...”

“Why don’t we get you something to eat? It’ll just be whatever we have lying around, though.”

“I really can’t ask you to do that for us!”

“Yeah! You’re doing enough just providing us somewhere to stay... We’ll eat out.”

“But you want to save money, right? It’s really not anything impressive, so please don’t feel you need to hold back.”

“Would that really be all right...?”

“Yeah. Could you get them something, Lorea-chan? Oh, and...”

After sending Lorea-chan off to the kitchen, I looked the two gatherers up and down. Erm, yeah... They were filthy.

“Iris-san... No, Kate-san too. Could you take a bath before eating?”

“No, we couldn’t impose on you that much...”

“If you’re living at my place, then don’t be such strangers—no, I insist you take one. I hate it when things aren’t clean.”

“Urkh... Am I dirty?”

I’d been so direct with Iris-san that I’d hurt her a little, and she started to tear up.

I wasn’t going to hold back, though. Besides, dirt was a real problem when it came to alchemy.

“You’ve been wiped down, but I’d hardly call you clean at this point.”

“Gwah! Was the one who did that...?”

“It was me. You were filthy, so I stripped you naked and wiped you off.”

“I-It wasn’t Kate-san, then?”

Iris-san looked at her pleadingly, but Kate-san shook her head.

“I just put your pajamas on for you. When I saw you, you were naked with nothing but a sheet thrown over top of you.”

“Urgh...”

Was being seen naked by others such a shock to her?

Iris-san’s shoulders slumped.

It’s not like she’d been seen by a man, though, you know?

Anyway, I left her to her depression and went to prepare the bath. Finishing the job up quickly with magic, I returned to find that Kate-san must have said something, because Iris-san had already recovered.

“Okay, the bath’s ready for you two.”

“I apologize for all the trouble I’ve caused... Which includes you having to give me a bath.”

“Well, alchemists are kind of like doctors, so it’s only natural for us to have to care for the sick and injured. You don’t need to worry about it.”

“No, I understand that, but...” Iris-san trailed off with a rueful smile.

Even if she understands the logic, it’s still embarrassing. I sort of get it.

I mean, I’d been embarrassed seeing other people naked at first too. But that hadn’t lasted long.

The practical lessons at the academy hadn’t been that easy. Once they’d thrown us into situations where we couldn’t afford to act all embarrassed, those feelings had quickly fallen by the wayside.

These days, I could see a man naked and think nothing of it—as long as it was in a medical context, that is.

“Iris, didn’t we just decide you’re not going to worry about it anymore? Anyway, Shopkeeper-san, we’ll go use the bath now.”

“Sure. Go get cleaned up.”

With that said, I watched as Kate-san helped Iris-san walk in the direction of the bath.

“Now then. Would you mind telling me about the beast you two encountered?”

After they’d bathed and had lunch, I decided to broach the subject while everyone was all relaxed.

I’ve already got a good idea what it was, though.

“Ahh. It looked like a bear, but had four arms. In terms of size, it was fairly large. I’d say it stood two heads taller than me,” Iris-san recalled, standing up and indicating its size with her hands.

The creature was two heads taller than the already tall Iris-san, and around two meters wide?

“Its fur was red, and it shot flames from its mouth. Iris tried slashing, but she was having trouble cutting it, and it easily knocked her sword away with those sturdy claws.”

“Ah! What about my sword?!” Iris-san blurted out, suddenly interrupting her partner’s explanation. But Kate-san just shook her head awkwardly.

“Sorry, but there just wasn’t time to retrieve it.”

“Of course not. Hahh... I never thought I’d lose it...”

For a moment, Iris-san seemed at a loss for words. She had a pathetic expression on her face as she sighed.

That Kate-san even managed to bring back her arm in that situation’s already impressive enough.

Still, with the traits they’ve described, I guess it really is impressive, huh...

“If I take the description you just gave, and add in the fact that it also had

poison, then there's no doubt it's a hellflame grizzly. How far from the village did you encounter it?"

"It wasn't that far, right?"

Iris-san tilted her head to the side, looking to Kate-san for confirmation.

Kate-san thought about it too for a moment, then nodded.

"Yes. If it was far from the village, Iris wouldn't have made it. We ran as hard as we could, but not for more than twenty minutes."

"That's pretty close..." Lorea-chan sounded worried. "Sarasa-san, is everything going to be all right?"

"Hrmm... It's not that strong, as monsters go..." I reassured her. The comment made Iris-san's eyes widen.

"Huh?! Even with all of that, you're saying it's not strong?!"

"Not as far as monsters go."

There were monsters, and then there were other beasts. There was no clear line dividing the two, but generally speaking, any creature that couldn't be killed by a hunter, and which was a threat to humans, was categorized as a monster.

To make it simple, if it was strong, it was a monster.

The hellflame grizzly was a type of monster, but the size that Iris-san had indicated was only medium size for a hellflame grizzly.

It wasn't that strong, so it wasn't a threat as far as I was concerned.

"Monsters sure are scary..."

"Was this the first time you two encountered a monster?"

"Yeah. We were a little confident in ourselves, but, well..."

The two nodded in response to my question, looking a little dejected. But if it really had been their first time, then maybe that was just how these things went? Monsters were recognized as a threat for a reason, after all.

"Normally, they live deeper in the forest, though... It'd be dangerous if it

entered the village.”

“Wh-What should we do, Sarasa-san?” Lorea-chan asked. “It won’t come here, will it?”

“Well, who can really say?”

“Whaaa?!”

I’d have liked to reassure her, as she was looking worried, but I couldn’t tell a lie. When I told it like it was, Lorea-chan got a nervous look on her face, and she started acting visibly flustered.

Even if she had never seen a hellflame grizzly for herself, she *had* seen the serious wounds it had inflicted on Iris-san. Considering that it had left someone who looked like they knew how to fight on the brink of death, I could hardly blame her for being shaken up.

“I-Is this something we should ask the lord for help with?”

“I think so, yes. But the question is whether he’ll act on it...”

As things stood, we were at the stage where “there’s a monster in the woods,” and the only people who’d been harmed were gatherers who’d gone into the forest. The gatherers knew the risks, so as far as the lord was concerned, it wasn’t that big of a problem.

Sending in soldiers cost money, so it was going to be hard to get him to act on something because it “seems like it might be dangerous.”

A competent lord would act before there was harm to the village.

An ordinary lord would act once the villagers were harmed.

An incompetent lord would do nothing even once villagers were harmed.

Although, if an entire village was lost, that would be a major failing on his part, and could lead to punishment from the king, so it would take some serious incompetence to leave it alone until it came to that...

“What is the lord here like?”

Lorea-chan shook her head.

Well, I guess at her age, she wouldn’t know that kind of thing.

Iris-san answered in her place: “This is only my impression, but he’s ‘ordinary, leaning toward incompetent,’ probably.”

“Oh, no...”

Lorea-chan’s expression darkened when she heard this fairly harsh appraisal of the man.

For me, this was a situation where people I knew might get hurt, but Lorea-chan had been born and raised here. The potential victims were people she’d known all her life...

That said, the odds of someone I know getting hurt aren’t that low... The most likely being Jasper-san. He goes into the forest, after all.

And I’d feel terrible just leaving my neighbor to his fate...

“Okay, how about we head out for a bit and turn it into materials?”

“Huh...?”

The three of them all looked at me, dumbfounded.

“No, no, Shopkeeper-san, that isn’t something you ought to be suggesting so casually... Right?”

Kate-san snapped to her senses, and began waving her hand as if to say, “*Don’t be silly,*” but seeing how calm I was about it, her expression changed to one of confusion midway.

But Lorea-chan was nowhere near as composed, and clung to me with tears in her eyes.

“That’s right! If someone got hurt...I’d really hate that, but I don’t want you to be in danger either, Sarasa-san!”

That pause after Lorea-chan said “hurt” probably was her realizing that if the hellflame grizzly entered the village, it might go further than that, but she was also concerned for my safety.

Sure, I was grateful for her consideration, but I didn’t know how to respond when she got all serious like this.

“Hey, it’s nothing to get so worried about...”

“Shopkeeper-dono... Are you strong, perhaps?”

“I’m nowhere near as good as my master, so I’d be too embarrassed to ever call myself that, but I don’t think one little bear’s going to be any trouble for me.”

The only thing to agonize over is how to kill it. I could do it with magic, but I did just start training with the sword again recently, so maybe I’ll hunt it with that?

But if I’m thinking about the materials, I need to take that into consideration when deciding how to kill it. If I stab it through the heart, I won’t be able to use it as a material, and if I strike it in the head, that could damage the eyeballs.

If I just slash it all over and let it bleed out, that’s not a bad method as far as the alchemic materials go, but it’ll thrash around a lot before it dies, and that won’t be good for the taste of the meat.

If I cut off its head so that I can drain the blood from it quickly, that will let me kill it fast, but the value of the pelt will drop.

It’s going to be difficult to get everything, so I need to decide which things I’m going to have to give up on.

As I explained all of that, the looks on their faces gradually changed from surprise to exasperation. But why?

“Hmm... So the rumors that alchemists are strong are true, then?” Iris-san asked.

“Oh, no, it varies from person to person, you know? Some of us only barely got a passing mark on our practical lessons, after all.”

Because alchemists required a high degree of magic control, everyone was above average when it came to magic, and their ability to control it had an effect on any offensive magic they used too. But whether they could fight depended on the person.

We hadn’t learned much in the way of attack magic at the academy. In contrast, how to use weapons had been properly worked into the curriculum, but it hadn’t been a major focus of it, so as long as you could defend yourself,

you'd get the credit.

The standard had been whether you could go out and gather materials with a bodyguard without getting in their way. Anything more than that had been up to individual discretion, so there had been a real diversity of skill levels.

"As for me... Well, I was one of the better fighters in my year."

"Y-You were...? But we can't make you go alone, Shopkeeper-dono..."

"Ah, it'd be a bit much for me to haul the corpse back by myself, so I'll be hiring some porters."

In terms of just the weight, I could manage it with physical enhancement, but there was nothing I could do about the size difference.

If I was going to the trouble of hunting it, it'd be a shame to have to chop it into pieces that fit in my backpack.

"Th-Then allow me to!"

"Huh? But Iris-san, you're still not fully recovered, right?"

"No! I'll be fine! Just carrying things shouldn't pose a problem."

"Erm..."

This was a little awkward. I looked to Kate-san for help. She nodded as if to say, "Got it."

Thank goodness. I can't bring someone who's recovering with me when—

"Leave it to us. I'll join you too."

"Whaaa?!"

No! That's not what I was asking for!

I wanted you to stop her!

As I was agonizing over what to do, Lorea-chan asked, "But Sarasa-san, you'll be all right, won't you? If it's going to be dangerous..."

Seeing her slightly worried, I hurriedly nodded to reassure her.

"Of course! That bear's going to be a cinch for me to deal with. I won't even break a sweat! Someone slowing me down's no big deal!"

“Slowing you down...”

“Ah...”

Iris-san’s face crumpled at my slip of the tongue.

“Ahhh, Shopkeeper-san. Maybe it’d be better if we didn’t go?” Kate-san suggested.

“Oh, no, I *do* need people to carry the bear... Erm, Iris-san, please take the rest of the day to relax. Let’s go tomorrow! I’ll be counting on your help! Go on, you’ve gotta rest up and recover your stamina!”

“H-Huh?”

This was one of those times when I just had to push on with sheer momentum.

I hurried Iris-san along, pushing her into bed to avoid discussing it further.

Then, turning my back on the strained smiles of Kate-san and Lorea-chan, I set about prepping for tomorrow’s hunt.



“Okay, let’s go hunt us a bear! Jasper-san, we’re going to be counting on you today.”

“Yeah, you can count on me. This is my problem too, after all.”

Our hunting party included me, Kate-san, and Iris-san, along with Jasper-san the hunter.

I’d added him to the team in part because he lived next door and that had made it easy to ask, but the biggest reason was because of his ability to track animals.

I wouldn’t have any trouble with bringing down the monster, but that didn’t do me any good if I couldn’t find it to begin with. I was a total amateur in that regard, and the two gatherers didn’t seem like they’d be able to do it either, so I’d brought in an expert.

Since he was the sole hunter in this village, I was confident that Jasper-san would help us out.

“Sarasa-chan, just checking, but you’re sure you can handle this? I know I’m a hunter, but while I might be able to handle a regular bear, there’s nothing I can do about a monster.”

“Yes. I’ll be doing all the fighting myself. If it gets dangerous, please run.”

“If I do that, my wife’ll kill me! I’m begging you, if things start to get risky, just run away, all right?”

“Ah ha ha... It’ll be fine. Really.”

You wouldn’t think it, but Elles-san really rules the roost at her place, huh?

Well, she’s a strong woman, after all.

“Now then, Kate-san, lead the way.”

“Got it. Let’s see... It was this way.”

I first had Kate-san take us to where they had been attacked.

She didn’t seem to remember it that clearly, but then again, her party had run away carrying Iris-san, who had lost an arm. That meant that there were drops of blood along the route they’d taken.

They served as useful trail markers for a hunter like Jasper-san, and any time Kate-san seemed unsure which way to go, he stepped in to assist.

About half an hour after we’d left the village...

“This is it! This is where we were attacked!”

Even an amateur like me could tell this had been the scene of the disaster.

There were broken branches, trodden-down grass, the traces of something having been burned, and dark bloodstains that hadn’t vanished yet.

“Well now... This is a real big one, Sarasa-chan. I can tell you right now, I won’t be able to kill it. And that’s even assuming it was *just* a huge bear.”

Jasper-san had been examining the claw marks on the nearby trees, and shook his head with a look of mild astonishment.

Iris-san had said it was two heads taller than her, but by Jasper-san’s estimation, it was definitely more than that.

“Well, I’m sure it’ll be fine. It’s just a matter of how cleanly I can kill—”

“I found it! My sword!!!”

At that moment, Iris-san, who had been frantically searching for something, shouted out with glee and emerged from the bushes carrying a sword.

Oh, yeah. They weren’t able to collect it before.

“Good for you.”

“Ah! Shopkeeper-dono...”

Iris-san had been happily cradling the sword in her arms, but when I spoke to her, she looked slightly abashed and began waving her arms around frantically.

“Let me explain! It’s not like I was thinking that if I tagged along, I might be able to get my sword back safely! I wanted to repay you somehow!”

“Huh? Ohh, I don’t really mind. You can’t work without a sword, after all.”

I’d wondered what she was so flustered about, but it turned out that was all it had been.

She doesn’t need to feel so guilty about it.

As you might be able to tell from the fact I’d come to this village without one, swords were pretty expensive, and it wasn’t easy to just buy one.

That was an especially serious problem for Iris-san, since she also had a debt to consider.

Without a sword, she couldn’t work, and not being a gatherer myself, I didn’t have a sword I could let her borrow.

I mean, I can’t go lending out the one Master gave me.

“Sorry, Shopkeeper-san. It had totally slipped my mind,” Kate-san interjected. “Iris, if you wanted to come get your sword, then wouldn’t it have been polite to say something about it first?”

“Urkh... I’m sorry, Shopkeeper-dono. I can’t deny that the sword *was* on my mind when I volunteered to help carry things.”

Iris-san bowed her head a little with an awkward look on her face, and Kate-

san bowed with her.

“Oh, no, you really don’t need to worry, okay? I’m just glad you were able to find it.”

“Ohhh, how could I deceive such a kindhearted shopkeeper...”

“No, I really mean it.”

Iris-san had the most pitiful look on her face, but I eventually managed to convince her that it was all right and got us back on track.

“Can you track it, Jasper-san?”

“Leave it to me. It’s huge enough I wouldn’t be able to call myself a hunter if I couldn’t.”

“That’s a big help. We’ll be counting on you, then.”

“Sure thing,” Jasper-san said with a big nod.

We followed his lead as he tracked the bear.

First it had headed in the direction we’d come.

But it had decided to stop chasing the fleeing gatherers relatively quickly, and had changed direction.

“I guess...we got lucky?” Iris-san wondered.

“I’d say so,” Jasper-san agreed. “Bears are stubborn once they decide you’re their prey. Though, I dunno if that applies to this...hellflame grizzly, was it?”

“Monsters can be pretty stubborn, you know? Many of them are aggressive, and unlike with normal animals, it’s really common for them to attack people.”

Usually wild animals run when they encounter humans. If you just make a bunch of noise while walking, they’ll avoid you unless they’re starving. But the creatures that get categorized as monsters are different. In a lot of cases, they’ll approach people on their own and attack.

The line between animals and monsters was pretty vague, but this was probably one of the clearer distinctions.

Obviously, the monsters didn’t just attack everything they encountered, but

their exact behavior wasn't well understood.

"Well, it's a good thing the hellflame grizzly gave up. It'd have been dangerous if it had followed you back to town."

"Our village doesn't have anyone who could deal with it... Except you, Sarasa-chan."

"I think the veteran gatherers could handle it no problem, but...whether they'd fight for the village is an open question."

"I-I'd fight."

"No, no, Iris-san, you got beaten, didn't you?"

"I have the spirit for it, at least!"

I'd rather you put your own life over that spirit.

Considering that even though they were just a temporary party, she didn't abandon those two gatherers who just got in the way, I think she's a really good person, but she's also a little danger-prone.

"This is taking us closer and closer to the village," Jasper-san noted.

"Yeah," I agreed. "It looks like it's a good thing we came."

Though the path snaked around a fair bit, it was headed in the general direction of the village. If we left it alone, there was a fairly good chance it would turn up there.

"Hrm, these are fairly fresh tracks. We'll need to proceed cautiously from here on."

"Oh, yeah? Okay then..."

If we're that close, maybe I'll pick up something?

I tried searching the area around us with my detection magic.

"Ah, there it is. I've found it. Okay, I'll be right back. You can come along if you'd like, but it'd be a pain if it finds us..."

I think Jasper-san would be fine, but as for the other two...

"You're really sure you'll be okay?"

“Yes. I *am* an alchemist, after all.”

“I’ve never thought of alchemists as being strong...”

I know how you feel. But the strong ones really are strong, you know? Especially my master. She’s so strong it’s unfair.

I’m convinced that, even if all she had to fight with was a sword, she’d still be better than a member of the royal knights. I’m nothing next to her, but if it’s just a short fight, where my stamina doesn’t come into the question, I’m pretty strong myself.

I headed in the direction I’d found with detection magic.

Jasper-san was following behind me at a distance.

The key thing is to catch it by surprise. If I’m going to get good materials out of it, that is.

Found it.

Its back was turned to me, and it was scratching the bark of a tree.

“How do you plan to kill it, Shopkeeper-dono?”

“If it was just a matter of killing it, anything would do, but...I think I’ll go for the neck this time.”

“The neck?”

“Yes. Breaking its neck will let me harvest the most materials.”

“Huh...?”

“Hah!”

As Iris-san cocked her head to the side in confusion, I leaped toward the bear’s exposed back.

My leg slammed into it.

A dull crunching sound echoed through the forest.

The hellflame grizzly’s thick neck twisted and broke.

I kicked its massive body over, then landed behind it.

The hellflame grizzly's body fell to the ground, not even twitching.

"Whew."

"Huh? Ehh? Whaaaaaa?!"

"Yes?"

"Unbelievable..."

Iris-san and the others looked back and forth from me to the motionless hellflame grizzly, confused.

"I told you it'd be a cinch, didn't I?"

"I mean, I know you *said* that. But I didn't think, well... You know?"

No, I don't know.

"I was sure you'd slay it with a sword."

"I did bring one, just in case, but not slashing it means that I can bring back more of the materials."

I'm actually better at fighting barehanded. Because I used to have no money.

Weapons wear down when you use them and cost money to repair.

That's what's so great about magic and martial arts: they cost nothing. Just stamina and willpower! How economical!

Well, anyway, I had usually killed things using martial arts during my practical lessons too. It'd let me keep their pelts in good shape.

By the way, my martial arts master had been the sword fighting instructor from the academy.

It hadn't been on the exams, but he was also an orphan, and had sympathized with my situation, so he'd been really passionate about teaching me.

"All right, let's get right to collecting the materials. They're better quality when it's still fresh, after all... Nice, it has lots of flame sacs."

The flame sacs were an organ in monsters that spat fire like the hellflame grizzly, and they were filled with a liquid.

In order to collect them, it was necessary to kill the creature in an instant.

Once it spewed flames, there was a chance that the sacs would be empty even after you went to the trouble of killing it.



It must not have used much in its battle with the gatherers the other day.

“You’re pretty good at that, huh, Sarasa-chan?”

“I *am* a pro too, after all. I couldn’t call myself an alchemist if I couldn’t at least do this much.”

At the very least, I was confident I could butcher a monster at least as well as Jasper-san.

“Urrrgh, the enemy I struggled so much against was reduced to materials so easily...”

Iris-san looked torn over how to feel as she watched me harvest the materials.

It wasn’t common to get them so fresh, so I was hoping that they’d fetch a good price.

Should I send about half of them to Master? Or maybe to South Strag instead...?

“Okay, that just leaves the eyes. I can do the rest once we get back.”

“You’re done already? You really do work fast.”

“The fresher it is, the more it’s all worth... Huh?! No way, it can’t be...”

The eyes of a hellflame grizzly were normally white.

However, the ones that I’d just extracted were a bright red.

“A hellflame grizzly frenzy?”

“Yes, it’s incredibly dangerous.”

As its name implied, this was when a pack of them attacked towns and villages. There were varying theories as to the cause, but the most persuasive was “a shortage of flame stones.”

Flame stones, as the name suggests, were stones that harbored the power of fire. Around here, they could be harvested on some of the mountain slopes deep inside the great forest.

Hellflame grizzlies liked to eat them, and if they couldn't get enough, for whatever reason they seemed to lose their minds and go berserk.

Red eyes were an early warning sign.

The one I had killed earlier had been something akin to a scout, so it wouldn't be long before the rest of its pack showed up.

According to what I'd heard, that meant at least ten bears at best, and possibly more than a hundred at worst.

"O-Oh no..."

The mayor was speechless once I explained.

Rushing back to the village after what had happened, we'd visited him at his home and told him about the frenzy.

If it were just one or two more, then that would just mean more money for me, but even I couldn't handle an entire frenzy on my own. I'm not proud to admit it, but I just didn't have the stamina for a long fight.

"Wh-What do we do...? Jasper, can you do something?"

"I can't even take down one of them. And even if we request support from the lord, there just isn't time..."

"They could be here as soon as tomorrow, and we should expect them no later than six days from now."

"It's hopeless! There isn't even time to get word to them... We don't even know that the lord will send troops at all."

The mayor clutched his head, pale with worry. Elles-san had mentioned he didn't have much in the way of work beyond collecting taxes, so he probably wasn't used to dealing with real trouble.

If there was one person in this room who felt overwhelmingly more reliable, it was Jasper-san, who both looked the part, and was keeping a level head.

"Isn't there anything you can do, Sarasa-chan?"

"Jasper-san, I know I made killing that one look easy, but it was alone, and I also caught it by surprise. You understand that, right?"

It was kind of like the difference between slaughtering one sheep versus having ten or more of them charge you at the same time. There was just no comparison.

“I’ll do what I can to help, of course,” I finished, “but can any of the villagers fight?”

“Frankly, just Jasper,” the mayor answered. “They probably won’t be any help.”

“Yeah,” Jasper himself agreed. “Most of them are just farmers, after all.”

“I think they should still be able to throw stones, or spray water at least, but you’re probably going to need to turn to the gatherers for help.”

“But the village doesn’t have the money...”

Seeing how troubled the mayor looked, Iris and Kate, who had come along with us, immediately jumped in.

“I-I’ll do what I can to assist! Little though it may be.”

“If there’s anything I can do, I’ll help too.”

“Ahhh, I’m glad. Perhaps some of the other longtime gatherers will help too, but...”

“As far as compensation goes, the materials from the defeated bears should be enough to cover it. I’ll be buying them, so use that money to hire people.”

The gatherers aren’t mercenaries, but when it concerns the village they’re staying in, I think they’d be willing to help if they’re being paid.

The issue is that they’d have to be veterans to kill a hellflame grizzly, but I’d say someone like Andre-san will probably manage it just fine.

“But that’s still not enough to defend the village, right?”

“Right. But there are ways to do it.”

I’d only read about it, but since hellflame grizzlies were fond of flame stones, you could apparently use magic crystals imbued with fire magic to lead them somewhere, at least to a degree.

If we can’t defend the whole village, then we have to gather all of the enemies

in one place.

“We’ll build a fence, lead them inside it, and then take them all out at once. If the people who can’t fight will help out with the preparations and stand on lookout, then we can make this work...maybe.”

Even if we couldn’t gather completely in one place, it was still better than having them come in from a bunch of different directions. Someone would have to go deal with the stray grizzlies separately.

“This is all down to your decision, of course, Mayor. If you want to take everyone and evacuate, I think that’s an option too, but...”

“We can’t evacuate,” the mayor said with a sigh. “Most of the villagers are farmers. They can’t live without their fields. And we can’t count on the lord here to support us...”

“He’s incompetent, after all.” Jasper-san didn’t mince words.

But if the village was going to be destroyed outright, an ordinary lord would provide support... Oh, but I guess there’s that option. It was kind of an extreme argument, but the village could theoretically go on with different villagers.

If the village gets depopulated, he could just bring in people from elsewhere.

If he charges them for the land while he’s at it, the lord would even turn a tidy profit...

“If anyone has a reason to take off, it’s you, Sarasa-chan,” said the mayor. “You only just arrived here. There’s no reason you need to stick around, is there?”

“Hrmm, I don’t think I could just bail on my friends like that.”

Lorea-chan’s one of my few friends, and Elles-san has been looking out for me.

If there was no chance whatsoever, maybe I’d feel differently, but as long as there’s some hope, I’m not going to run away.

“Thank you,” said the mayor. “It must be divine providence that you moved in when you did.”

“Sorry for the trouble,” said Jasper-san. “We’re in your debt. I love this village

too. I don't want to abandon it if we don't have to."

"Oh, no need to thank me, I'm only going to do what I'm capable of. But let's work out the details, shall we?"

After that, our talks went on for a while as we worked out where we'd build the fence, the battle area, and the method for leading the monsters into it.

I had learned about this kind of thing at the academy, but I was surprised to find that Iris-san and Kate-san both had a greater wealth of knowledge than I'd have expected. That was a happy miscalculation, and our planning went by even faster thanks to their contributions.

"Is there anything I can do to help, Sarasa-san?"

"Let me think. Oh, could you pick herbs from the garden and wash them?"

"Got it!"

After watching Lorea-chan take off out of the house as soon as she'd replied, I got to work on making fire-filled magic crystals.

These ones didn't need the same level of purity as the ones that I used making artifacts, so it was really just a matter of crushing junk magic crystals and then pouring magical energy into them.

Although, since we were going to need to scatter them over a fairly wide area to lead in the hellflame grizzlies, we needed a lot of them.

"If this doesn't work out, I'm going to be so far in the red..."

I was planning to make back the cost of the junk crystals and potions we used by collecting materials from the defeated monsters, but I could only do that if things went well.

If we failed and had to flee the village, then I'd probably end up going back to the capital and working in Master's shop. I really wanted to avoid that.

By the way, I'd explained what was going on to Lorea-chan, since she was going to find out anyway. She had grown very quiet for a moment, but I was impressed by how she had then quickly gathered her wits and committed herself to doing what she could to help.

As for Iris-san and Kate-san, I'd asked them to help with the fences. We were building a sturdy one around the area where we were going to gather the hellflame grizzlies, and a simpler one on the side of the village facing the forest.

How much they could build was going to depend on when the monsters showed up, but having seen how fast Geberk-san and his helpers had been able to put up the walls around my yard, I figured that there was no need to be too negative about our prospects.

As long as they're able to put a sturdy fence around the combat area, we'll manage somehow... Or at least I hope so?

No, stop it. No pessimism allowed.

I need to tackle this with confidence.

I bashed away at the junk crystals with my hammer, as if I were trying to crush my worries along with them.



"Sorry, Shopkeeper-dono, we have a problem." It was the second day after we had started preparing for the attack, and Iris-san had just returned to the house with those ominous words. "Almost all of the gatherers have disappeared."

"Huh...?"

On further questioning, she relayed that the majority of the recent arrivals in the village, and even some of the gatherers who'd been here longer, had left in a hurry.

Well, they probably ran away. After hearing about the hellflame grizzlies.

"It seems it was because those two guys with whom we partnered up before went around talking about how scary it was..."

Yesterday, the mayor had made news of the frenzy public and asked the gatherers for assistance. However, that night, the two guys had been at the restaurant, talking about their own experience in a slightly exaggerated manner.

Most of the gatherers who'd listened to them had gotten scared, and then

pulled up stakes and left this morning. The gatherers who hadn't bought everything the guys had said had gone to talk to Iris-san and Kate-san, and once they'd found out that it wasn't totally untrue, many of them had taken off as well.

Iris-san couldn't have exactly denied it after having had her arm severed.

"Everyone needs to put their own lives first and foremost, so I won't fault them for running away, but...this could be a little rough."

"Sorry. If only I hadn't been hurt so badly!" Iris-san grimaced and clenched her fists.

"No, it isn't your fault, Iris-san," I told her, thinking she was letting it bother her too much. "In fact, if you hadn't run into that one, there's a risk that the attack could have come suddenly. We're better off, being able to prepare as a result."

"That's right!" Lorea-chan agreed. "If anything, it makes us really happy to see you helping out, even though you're not members of the village."

"It's good of you to say that..." Iris-san's expression softened a little.

"But, Shopkeeper-san," Kate-san interjected. "Are you still going to be able to manage without them?"

"It's going to mean I'm in a bit more of a rush, but it'll still work out... Or at least, I sure hope it will."

My slightly worried tone made the others feel a bit uncomfortable.

But this really wasn't a situation that I could manage all by myself.

I'm not confident my stamina will hold up... Maybe I'd better make a whole lot of stamina recovery potions.



On the fourth day of prepping, the whistle warning of the grizzlies' approach blared. I immediately grabbed my sword and headed outside.

"Sarasa-san! I'll—"

"Stay on the second floor of the house, Lorea-chan! And blow the whistle if

the monsters get close!”

“Got it!”

Because we no longer had enough gatherers, we’d handed out whistles to the villagers and asked them to sound the alarm if they found any grizzlies that escaped the battle area.

The sound ran the risk of attracting them, but we just didn’t have enough combatants to position people inside the village, so we needed to work with what we had.

When I rushed to the battle area, the gatherers were already there, along with some of the villagers who were confident in their stamina.

Iris-san and Kate-san had both already arrived. Kate-san was on top of a building, holding her bow at the ready, while Iris-san stood in front of the fence along with the other gatherers.

I picked out some of the people from the group I was better acquainted with and went over to talk to them.

“Andre-san, and Gil-san and Gray-san too. You guys are sticking around?”

“Of course we are. We’ve been based out of this village for way longer than you have, Sarasa-chan.”

“Yeah, that’s right. We can’t take off when people we know are in trouble.”

“If a kid like you is sticking around and doing her best, then that’s all the more reason to stay.”

“Um, I’m an adult, just so you know... But thanks.”

When I thanked the three, Andre-san got all embarrassed and then tried to brush it off with a manly smile. “It’s nothing to thank us for. You supplied all of those potions, didn’t you, Sarasa-chan?”

“It was kind of a lot of trouble, but if we can just get through this, I’ll be able to recover the funds I used.”

In addition to ordinary potions, we also needed antidotes, so there had been a fair amount of work to do.

The real bottleneck hadn't even been making the potions themselves, but the bottles to put them in. I'd worked hard enough that, if I could just collect those bottles once this was all over, I wouldn't have to make any more for the foreseeable future.

It had been exhausting. But we'd done everything we could to prepare.

The fences still weren't totally complete, but the one around the battle area was solid, and we had stored up water in every container we had in order to fight fires.

The women and children were taking shelter in the sturdier buildings, so even if there was an incursion into the village, they'd still be able to hold out for a little while.

"Hey, hey, Sarasa-chan, it's not just Andre-san and his party. We're sticking around too, okay?"

"Yeah. We're not like those losers who turned up recently!"

"Not that we have any idea how much use we'll be! Ga ha ha ha!"

As you might expect, most of the gatherers who'd stuck around were the kind of veterans whose faces I remembered. Not all of them were all that strong, but just their experience alone made them feel more reliable than the rookies.

"It's going to be okay! If we take advantage of the fences in order to gang up on the enemy, it's entirely possible to kill them! Let's all do our best!"

"Yeah!!!"

When I called out to them, the crowd of gatherers gave a reassuring shout.

Huh...? When did I end up in charge?

I'm just a little girl next to all of them... Murrgh, so this is the position of trust we alchemists hold in society, huh? It's a lot of pressure, though.

That said, I'd be uneasy leaving it to the mayor. I wish I could entrust the task to Jasper-san or Andre-san, but maybe it's too late for that?

Using detection magic to check the situation, I was able to confirm the hellflame grizzlies were heading toward where I'd scattered magic crystals.

Wait, isn't this too many? There's twenty of them.

But given the situation, we were just going to have to go through with it.

“Everyone, they'll be showing up any moment now! Watch yourselves!”

Not long after, the monsters emerged from the forest.

One at first, and then another, and another...

The battle area was a semicircle with a sturdy fence built around it, and the magic crystals filled with fire magic had been left in the middle of it, but our enemies were more focused on us, standing outside the fence with our weapons drawn.

“Whoa, whoa... They're that huge?”

I wonder who let that slip.

These hellflame grizzlies weren't that different from the one I had killed the other day in terms of size, but they were massive compared to ordinary bears.

They no doubt looked plenty intimidating to any gatherer who was seeing them for the first time, let alone one of the villagers.

Perhaps sensing the way some of us had flinched, the lead bear let out a mighty roar and charged toward us.

Uh-oh.

The fence wasn't so weak that it could be broken through with one tackle, but if we were too afraid to attack, it would destroy it eventually.

Here's what I can do right now—break their momentum!

“Force Bullet!”

As the hellflame grizzly charged in with its head lowered, I slammed some magic into its face.

I'll break its momentum and its nose.

The grizzly's head jolted back, and its pace dropped slightly.

That was enough magical force to send a grown man flying and leave him with broken bones...

I was a bit shocked. Maybe I needed to practice my offensive magic.

But I needed to make it through this first.

I rushed forward, swinging my sword at the grizzly's neck as I drew it.

Shwing!

It was a clean cut. The sword Master had given me decapitated it without much resistance.

The head that had been parted from its body then rolled across the ground, coming to a stop only when it slammed into the fence.

Copious amounts of blood spurted from the stump.

"Wow..." I muttered reflexively.

Even knowing that I'd used physical enhancement magic, this result was still a bit unexpected.

I mean, I *had* been meaning to lop its head off, I just hadn't expected it to be so easy.

That was Master's sword for you, though. It meant business.

Everyone stopped. Not just on our side, but the grizzlies' too.

"Ah, ahem! We can beat these enemies! Don't be afraid to attack!"

Once I cleared my throat and shouted some words of encouragement, the rocks and arrows started to fly. As if in response, more enemies kept on coming out of the forest.

Even if only some of the attacks proved effective, so long as it made them falter even a little, there was some purpose to it.

Oh, nice shot. Was that Kate-san?

She was taking shots aimed at their vital points.

There's even an arrow sticking out of that one's eye... Hey, those eyeballs are worth a pretty penny, you know?

No, I get it. Just surviving this has to come first.

Some of the enemies were breathing fire, but we'd soaked the fence so it

wouldn't burn easily, and the noncombatants were splashing water on it, so there hadn't been any damage yet.

"Aw, yeah! If we take them on with numbers, we can win! If you're not feeling sure of yourself, then make good use of the fence!" Andre-san shouted.

He was making a good showing for himself so far. He'd already taken one down, working with Gil-san and Gray-san.

I was fighting hard too, but between my short reach, the reduction in the area I could move around in as more enemies showed up, and needing to support anyone who looked like they were in danger, I had only notched another three kills for myself so far.

And I wasn't able to pull off instant kills like the first one, so between having to dodge their flailing arms until they died and getting pushed back, it was pretty exhausting.

Even though I don't have the stamina for it!

On top of that, the corpses lying on the ground restricted where we were able to move even more. Around the point when I killed my fifth, we ended up having to fall back to the other side of the fence.

"What's the situation, Andre-san?"

"I dunno. We've only gotten two so far—"

"Half of them are down!" Kate-san shouted down to us from the rooftop.

With my height, I couldn't get a good view of the surrounding area, so it really helped.

"Thanks! Things are going smoothly so far. But..."

"Yeah. The fence isn't looking good," said Andre-san.

The accumulated damage together with the corpses in front of the fence were making it difficult to use it as a shield while we fought.

"Maybe we should have made a two-layer fence?" I wondered aloud.

"There wasn't enough time. And if we'd made a shoddy fence, it would have broken al—"

Kaboom!

Almost as if it had been waiting for the words, there was a roaring explosion as the fence was smashed to splinters.

Launched through the air, Iris-san rolled across the ground and came to a stop right next to us.

On the other side stood a hellflame grizzly more massive than any of the others. Standing on its hind legs, it was twice my size, with arms that looked thicker than my waist.

Kate-san volleyed arrows at it, but it swatted them away like twigs.

“Sorry! I couldn’t hold it back!”

“Iris-san, your sword...”

“Yeah, it broke earlier.”

The sword that Iris-san had retrieved from the forest had snapped and was missing about a third of its blade. There were also a lot of tears in her armor.

I’d given her a fairly large number of potions, so she didn’t have any wounds, but the blood still caked to her spoke to how intense the fight must’ve been.

“Think this one’s the boss?” Andre-san asked.

“Looks like,” one of his partners agreed. “The three of us aren’t gonna be able to take it alone.”

“Let’s all take it on together,” I suggested.

“I-I’ll fight too! Ah, but my sword!”

“Here, use this. It’s my spare.”

“I owe you one!”

We had the others stand back while the five of us—Andre-san’s party, myself, and Iris-san, with a borrowed sword from Andre-san—surrounded the boss.

The monster stopped moving as it eyed us cautiously.

We stared back.

Fweet, fweet, fweet!

The sound of a whistle.

Three times. The signal to tell us there was an incursion somewhere else.

“Ah! Andre-san, can you guys go?”

“You’re sure it’s okay?!”

“You’re the only ones who are reliably able to beat these creatures, and if I were to leave here...it’d probably end badly.”

Maybe because I’d killed that first enemy with a single blow, I had the feeling that most of the boss’s attention was on me. To the point where, if I tried to move away, it’d probably come after me.

“Looks like you’re right. Got it. We’ll be back as soon as we can! Hey, you guys! Don’t any of you dare let Sarasa-chan get hurt!”

“Yeah!!!”

The gatherers answered him with a throaty cheer.

But having them try to help me might actually be a bit more dangerous.

“Just make sure nothing gets in my way.”

“You heard her, guys! Keep the other enemies away!”

With that said, Andre-san and his team took off in the direction that the sound of the whistle had come from.

Fortunately, even with them leaving, the boss stayed focused on me. It didn’t move.

“Iris-san, you go fight the others too. In a situation where we can’t keep them under control with an advantage in numbers, it’s actually more dangerous having you fight with me.”

She was silent for a moment. With a frustrated nod, she finally said, “Got it,” and then slowly moved away from my side.

Maybe because I was the only one it was facing now, the boss started to move a little, but I retreated little by little, leading it away from the others and keeping my distance.

That must have made the monster impatient. It opened its mouth wide.

Fire breath.

It could be dangerous in some situations, but in a one-on-one fight, I was perfectly capable of dealing with it.

“Water Ball!”

A sphere of water the size of my head launched right into its gaping maw.

“Gurgle!”

The boss let out a cry of anguish as the water shot out its nose.

I used that opening to jump forward, and swung—

Too shallow.

It had four arms, and I managed to slash it about halfway up the bottom-left one, but I didn’t reach its torso.

Normally, I’d want to go for the neck, but its height put it far above my head.

If it lowered its head to charge, I’d be able to do something about it, but maybe it remembered what had happened to the first of its pack, because it didn’t show any sign of lowering its head even after I’d cut its arm.

Looks like now isn’t the time to be thinking about materials.

No matter how powerful my sword was, if I took even one blow from those big, thick arms, I was probably finished.

If I ran out of stamina and couldn’t use physical enhancement anymore, that’d be the end of me too.

I guess the one saving grace is that everyone is trying their best, and that’s keeping the others from interfering.

“Ah—!”

The boss moved.

Its arm swung down at me from high above my head.

I swiftly dodged, and its sharp claws tore into the ground. There was a loud bang as an explosion of dirt and rocks scattered all over.

I grimaced in pain as they hit me, but stood my ground, swinging upward with my sword.

The boss tried to pull back, but it was a little too slow.

I succeeded in lopping off its upper-right arm, and that limb, about as heavy as a child, fell to the ground with a thud.

“Roarrrrrr!”

Is that anger? Or pain?

The boss writhed in pain as blood spurted from the stump of an arm that was half as long as it used to be.

That only leaves two arms. So half as many attacks?

Nah, with how much blood it's lost, maybe even less.

But I wouldn't let my guard down.

Until it died, it was still all or nothing for me. The fact that a single hit would kill me hadn't changed.

If I'd known it was going to be like this, I would've prepared proper armor.

But it was too late now.

I needed to survive now in order to make use of the lesson next time.

“Force Bullet! Force Bullet!”

I put some distance between me and the boss then pummeled it with magic.

There was no overcoming the height difference, so unless it fell over, I was going to struggle to deal a killing blow.

Force Bullet packed a lot of punch, and both shots hit it in the face—the first raising its chin, and then the second sending it reeling backward.

I used that moment to get close.

My target was its exposed legs.

I completely severed the left one, and left a deep gash that went halfway through the right, then backed off to a safe distance.

Slump!

There was a dull sound, and then the hellflame grizzly boss fell over backward.

It had lost one arm and leg, and had cuts that went halfway through another arm and leg.

Copious amounts of blood pooled on the ground around it, the boss's movement slowing as its life ebbed away.

"Hahh, hahh, hahh...!"

I didn't look away. I put my hands on my knees to support the legs that felt ready to give out underneath me, and then pulled a stamina recovery potion from my hip pouch and knocked it back.

Mmm. Tastes awful.

It wasn't undrinkable, but I'd have preferred something sweet when I was this exhausted.

Maybe if I made it taste good, they'd sell better.

So this is what it means, looking at things from the customer's perspective, huh?

Feeling my stamina slowly recover, I confirmed that the boss had really stopped moving, then let out a sigh of relief as I looked around the area.

The battle was still ongoing.

They were surrounding the bears in groups of three or four people, so nobody had taken injuries that looked potentially fatal, but some were down.

Even if ordinary potions could heal them, they wouldn't restore their stamina, and the materials required had kept me from doling out too many stamina recovery potions.

"For now, I'll attack from behind to thin out their numbers, and then—"

Fweet, fweet, fweet!

"Again?! And this time it's—"

The whistle was coming from the direction of my place.

Jasper-san's house was that way too, but he and Elles-san were both here helping out. That meant the only one in that direction right now was...

"Lorea-chan!"

"Shopkeeper-san!" Kate-san shouted. "Please, go!"

"But!"

"Shopkeeper-dono, we can handle the rest!" Iris-san insisted.

"Yeah!" Jasper-san chimed in. "Anybody who can't handle this much isn't a real man! Right, guys?!"

"Yeah!" the other gatherers heartily agreed with him.

"I'm counting on all of you!"

I wove between the fallen hellflame grizzlies, heading toward the house.

I know I expected them to split up somewhat, but I didn't think they'd come for my place.

I mean, it backs onto the forest, so it's not like I never considered the possibility, but still...

I followed the edge of the woods past Elles-san's place until I came to the back of my own house.

"Ahhh!!!"

The brand new wall that Geberk-san and his helpers had built for me...

They'd put a gate in at the back so that it was easier to go in and out, but now it lay on the ground pitifully, smashed and covered in claw marks.

There were broken spots in the wall nearby too.

"Grr! After all the trouble they went to building it for me!"

I hurriedly charged into my backyard, taking in the scene of destruction.

The herb garden I had worked so hard to cultivate. All those valuable herbs I'd carefully replanted.

It had all been trampled—useless now.

And the culprits were the two hellflame grizzlies who had smashed in the back door of my house, and were poking their heads inside.

They were apparently trying to force their way through the narrow entrance, and it was damaging the walls around the door.

“My house...”

Those bears are dead meat.

I think that I may have moved faster at that moment than at any point prior in my life.

I hacked off all four of the legs that were facing me, then grabbed one of the bears by the pelt and cut off its head as I threw it to the ground.

I then sent the other one flying with a kick to the stomach, and decapitated it too as it hung in the air.

With that done, I chucked it outside the house.

“Lorea-chan, are you okay?!” I shouted as I raced into the devastated kitchen.

“I’m all right, Sarasa-san!” came her energetic voice from the second floor.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Lorea-chan, was it just two of them?”

“Yes! As far as I could see from up here.”

“Got it. You stay there a little longer!”

“Okey dokey.”

I downed another stamina recovery potion, and then ran off to survey the rest of the village.

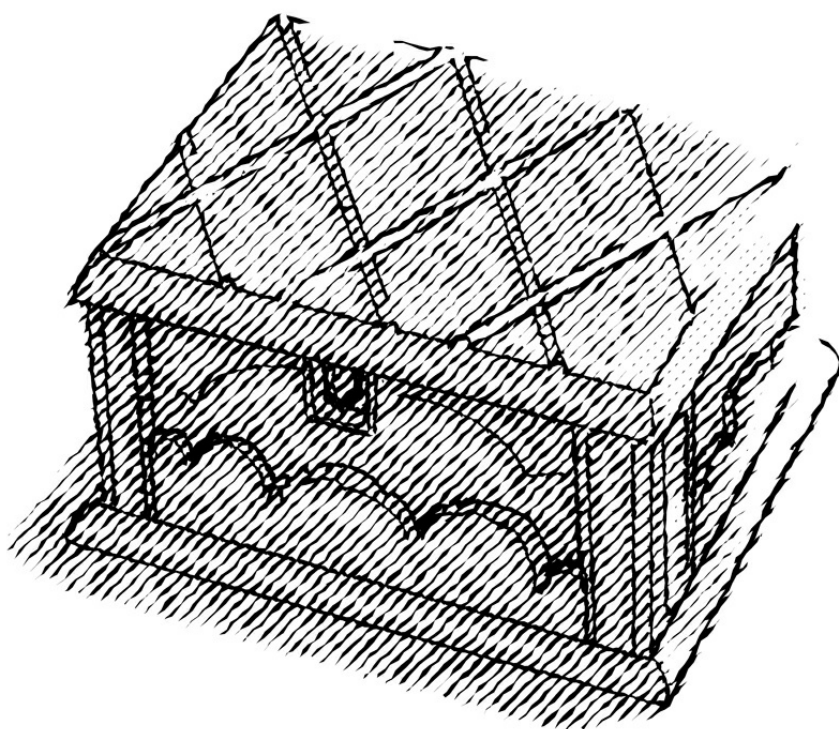
Fortunately, however, by the time I left the house, the rest of the hellflame grizzlies had already been put down, and my last burst of effort ended up being a total waste.

No. 002

Appears in: Complete Alchemy Works, Volume 4

Difficulty: Hard

Standard Price: ~500,000 Rhea



< Shared Sound Box >

Hfifhmfiofuf ßfufioffi Afth

When two people who care about one another live far apart and find it hard to send letters...this box is a lifesaver. With this pair of boxes, they can speak as if they were standing right next to each other. Their lonely nights will turn into precious times spent together. *Usable range is dependent on the users' magical power.

Management of a Novice Alchemist

I Got My Own Shop!

Epilogue

“Urgh, Lorea-chan, water please.”

“Yes, yes. Wait just a moment, okay?”

It was the day after we had driven off the hellflame grizzly attack with everyone’s help. Naturally, I was the sole person who had ended up bedridden.

Not that I was hurt or anything. It was just that my muscles were sore.

Throughout my entire body.

It was really rough.

While I had pushed myself through the entire encounter, the largest contributing factor to my current state had to be what had happened with the last two bears. There were limits to what my body could handle, and I’d forced myself past them, pouring a massive amount of magical power into physical enhancement.

This was the outcome.

The cause being what it was, normal potions couldn’t help me, and it would be a waste to go to the expense of using the ones that could. Thus, my current predicament.

I’d already finished collecting any hellflame grizzly parts that needed to be processed quickly, but by the time I’d finished that, my body had already been crying out in pain, so it’d been a close call.



I got through it with grit alone!

If I'd neglected that part, it would have had an impact on the amount of money available for reconstruction and paying rewards to all the people who had worked so hard.

That's right: reconstruction.

We'd been able to concentrate most of the hellflame grizzlies in one place and wipe them out there, but there had been another three that Andre-san and his team had gone to deal with.

They'd managed to take advantage of the houses that had been loaned out to gatherers to kill the grizzlies, but the price was that several buildings had been damaged, one was half destroyed, and another had burned down completely. It was pretty severe.

But my place had the worst of it, honestly.

If it was just the fence, that would be one thing, but they'd also torn up my expensive herb garden, and smashed my back door and walls.

Out of all those things, the walls were the biggest issue.

My house used seals, so repairing the walls that were part of them was going to cost many times more than fixing ordinary walls...

There was talk of the village distributing money to pay for the reconstruction of the damaged houses, mine included, but I clearly couldn't expect them to foot the whole bill, so I was worried I'd end up in the red.

Now, if you're wondering why the hellflame grizzlies had come to my place, it was probably because I had been making the magic crystals that were used to lure them in.

Now, just to be clear, I hadn't left any behind in the house, but I'd crushed them up into tiny chunks before transporting them, so it wouldn't be that odd if I'd left a trail from the back door to the gate, and then all the way to the forest.

So, yeah... I'd messed up. I couldn't be sure, though.

"Sorry for the wait, Sarasa-chan."

“Thank you. Ohh, it hurts...”

“Ah, let me help you.”

I winced with pain as I tried to sit up to drink the water that Lorea-chan had brought me, but she sat next to the bed and helped me.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t sweat it, it’s no big deal. You’re the one who saved our village, after all.”

“It’s thanks to everyone working so hard. And I’m sure the reason so many of the gatherers even stayed at all was because of how well the villagers always treat them.”

For guys like Andre-san and his team, who didn’t live here permanently, there had been nothing forcing them to stay and protect the village. No one would have faulted them if they’d chosen to leave for their own safety, like many of the other gatherers.

That they’d stayed at all showed that they hadn’t been able to bring themselves to abandon the villagers, and only the villagers’ own actions up until that point could have made them feel that way.

I mean, it had been the same for me. I had stuck around because Lorea-chan was here.

“You must’ve been scared too, huh, Lorea-chan?”

“A little. But you came in no time, and the walls were pretty sturdy, so I wasn’t *that* scared.”

“That’s because of the seals. They’re built strong enough that a human can’t break them.”

Although, they couldn’t handle the monstrous power of the hellflame grizzlies.

Well, when their arms are that thick, what can you really expect?

“But it’s thanks to you that no one got hurt really badly, Sarasa-san. I know there’s a number of us who would have died if it wasn’t for your potions.”

“Ahh, yeah, I put a lot of effort into those. Sure. You helped out with them too, though.”

I’d lost sleep staying up to make potions.

There’s no way to treat the poison without antidotes, so it was a good thing we’d had time to prepare.

Being able to distribute so many of them had helped us to avoid losing anyone.

Even if some people were still lightly injured, they’d been treated with potions, so I was probably the only one who was still immobile at this precise moment.

Kind of pathetic, huh?

But there was no helping it. I was kind of a knowledge worker, after all.

I had Lorea-chan help me lay back down again.

“Whew... It’s a little embarrassing, you know, having a younger girl look after me like this.”

“You don’t need to let it bother—”

“Then allow me to take on the task!”

The door flew open with a bang, and in came Iris-san, who was supposed to have been out helping with the cleanup in the forest.

She looked full of energy, to say the least. It was hard to imagine she’d almost died only days ago.

Given how hectic yesterday had been too, she sure was tough.

“Iris-san. Did you finish your work?” asked Lorea-chan.

“Urkh! I-In a way,” Iris-san replied, averting her eyes, but Kate-san came into the room and immediately contradicted her.

“What do you mean, ‘in a way’? They chased us off because you were too clumsy.”

“Urghhh... Can you really blame me? I’m not good at that sort of work.”

Once Kate-san spilled the beans, Iris-san was left pouting.

What was the work in question, you ask? Butchering hellflame grizzlies.

This morning, they had been taking down the fences that were no longer needed and cleaning up the damaged houses, but the work had been over quickly, and that had been the next thing that needed doing.

But the grizzlies were huge, and there had been a lot of them.

All told, there had been twenty-eight. Jasper-san had taken the lead, and all of the villagers had worked together to butcher them for meat and fur.

Iris-san had apparently joined in, but...as Kate-san had already said, she'd been chased off with the explanation "If we let you do it, the value will decrease."

Well, you do need to know what you're doing to skin them properly.

I don't blame her.

"You say that, Kate, but you came back too, didn't you?"

"Because I'd *finished* my work."

Kate-san's job was pickling the meat in salt, by the way. That work had been put on hold for a little while, for reasons involving the number of barrels available.

But how are hellflame grizzlies as food, I wonder?

The meat wasn't of any use as a material in alchemy, so I had no idea.

"You really did a lot to help out yesterday, Kate-san. You were a better shot than I expected, and it really helped having you up top, keeping an eye on the situation."

"This time we were able to detect them coming, and I was able to secure a good firing position. When Iris got attacked, we'd never have been caught unaware if those guys hadn't been wasting their breath trying to chat us up..."

"Ha ha ha... I'm sorry you had to deal with them."

"Tell me about it. But I doubt they'll be back again after this. Anyway, I'm sure we must have ruined a lot of the parts that were worth money this time, right?"

“There wasn’t really any way of avoiding that. The important thing is that we killed them.”

If the defending party had avoided hitting the bears’ vital organs, but then ended up dying themselves, that would have defeated the whole point.

There was no profit in that.

“You were able to vindicate yourself, weren’t you, Iris-san?”

“Well, yes. It’s a shame that I couldn’t defeat them on my own, but I did kill several!” Iris-san said, puffing up her chest with pride. “Even if it was at the cost of my sword. Urghhh...”

Her expression darkened as she recalled that last bit. She’d retrieved the broken tip after the battle and washed it until it was clean, so maybe the sword had some kind of sentimental value for her.

“It’s okay, Iris. We’ll be getting a reward for our work, so you can buy a new sword, right?”

“Maybe I can! But this sword means more to me than that!”

“Well, obsessing over something that’s already broken won’t do you much good, will it? Or are you going to fix it so you can use it again? Fix a broken sword.”

Kate-san shrugged her shoulders as if to say, *“It’s impossible.”*

Looking crestfallen, Iris-san replied, “No, I know it would be hard to repair.”

“Well, that’s your answer, then. It wasn’t that expensive to begin with.”

“Murgh! I know *that*. But you don’t need to say it like that, do you?”

“Come on, you two! Sarasa-san is tired! Don’t make such a racket!”

“But...!”

Weren’t you here to look after me, Iris-san?

Not that I really minded. It had gotten a little noisy, but I’d take this over feeling lonely as I lay in bed by myself any day.

Yeah. Coming to this village was the right move.

As I listened to the three of them banter, I pulled the covers over my head and tried to get some rest.

Afterword

Nice to meet you, I'm Mizuho Itsuki.

Alternatively, if you've been following along with the web version, or my other work, thank you for your continued support. It's thanks to people like you that I was able to get a second series published.

Now then, in order to make reading this published book an enjoyable experience for those who've also read the web version, I've upsized the amount of Lorea-chan cuteness. The book is brimming with it.

Particularly the illustrations.

Thank you for the wonderful character design, fuumi-san!

Of course, I've made her cuter in the main text as well, but if that's still not enough, please supplement it with the illustrations. Your imagination is being put to the test.

Conversely, the uncute elements have been downsized. Specifically, there are some gender-related things that I opted to leave out.

The other big change from the web version is that Iris got just a little more attractive...thanks to the illustrations.

Thank you for the wonderful character design, fuumi-san!!!

Incidentally, what changed was her hair color.

Huh? You didn't notice?

Well, it was only mentioned in a few places, after all. Unless you're the kind of reader who likes to visualize every scene, it's probably hard to notice.

And that's fine. That kind of freedom is one of the nice things about novels.

For some reason, I'm mostly writing about the illustrations, huh? Okay, let's talk about the text itself.

If I'm going to bring up anything, then perhaps it should be the protagonist,

Sarasa.

Having graduated at essentially the top of her class in the country's most prestigious academy, there are a lot of things that she's very capable at, but she's still not able to do everything.

Fundamentally, she's the type who's a genius of hard work, so she's the product of a good environment and her own effort. But she has overwhelmingly more knowledge than someone who didn't go to school, which makes her strong.

Ah, a stratified society!

Sarasa made use of the book-lending program in order to study and get into the academy, and that's a system that's available even out in the rural areas. However, it's handled by alchemists, so in places that don't even have an alchemist, like Yok Village...

Ah, regional inequality!

If Lorea had lived in the capital, she might have been able to go to the academy.

I've left this to the end, but thank you to fuumi-san, the editor, and everyone who worked to make this book, as well as you, the readers who purchased it.

This book exists because of all of you.

I pray we meet again in the next volume.

Mizuho Itsuki

Special Short Story: Lorea's Medical Examination

It was the day after Lorea had collapsed in the bathtub.

"Huh...? Where...am I?"

When she awoke in bed, for a moment, she couldn't figure out where she was.

Hurriedly sitting up, she found her new friend's face right next to her. Relieved, she promptly lay back down.

"Ohh, right. Last night, I was in the bath, and... Huh?!"

Having traced her memories back to that point, she hastily pulled back the covers, and peeked under...

"Thank goodness. I'm dressed."

She didn't remember anything after the bath.

She had some recollection of being carried, but everything else was a blur.

"I guess that must've been you, huh, Sarasa-san. You carried me here, and put my clothes on for me."

They were both girls, yes, so being seen naked on its own might not have been such a big deal, but making someone who she'd only recently met dry her off and change her into clothes was definitely a little embarrassing. Lorea blushed as she buried herself under the covers.

"Ohh... I never thought I'd get dizzy from the heat... Baths are dangerous."

This was a first for her, so Lorea couldn't tell the difference, but the actual cause of her dizziness had been Sarasa's lack of caution.

If Sarasa had filled the bath with normal water, then even with her lack of bathing experience, Lorea wouldn't have gotten dizzy so quickly.

"But the bath felt so nice... My skin seems prettier now too."

Lorea had only ever experienced playing in the water during the summer and

cleaning herself with a cloth in the winter before, so being able to use all of that hot water to wash herself and soak in the tub like that had felt like an incredible luxury.

Knowing that Sarasa could do it on a regular basis only made her respect her all the more.

“You’re so amazing, Sarasa-san. We’re only two years apart too... I wonder what I’ll be doing in two years?”

Lorea had an interest in fashion, but she’d never thought to head into town to become a tailor, or open up her own clothing shop in the village.

Her parents were merchants, So even at her young age, she knew that sort of thing was unrealistic.

From her perspective, Sarasa was someone who had gone much farther along the path of her life.

She’d learned a valuable skill, and had been able to achieve independence, opening a shop in a distant village where she didn’t know any of the locals.

Would Lorea be able to do even a fraction of that in just two years...?

“Even if I married someone in the village, and took over the general store...I’d be doing well just to be able to sell the clothes I made there.”

Not only could she not start her own shop, it would be a struggle for her to take over her own parents’ business properly.

The thought made Lorea sigh.

“Even though, just looking at you, you’d think you were the younger one...”

Sarasa didn’t have a baby face, but she didn’t look any older than her age.

Given her slight frame, and the fact her chest wasn’t very large, she certainly didn’t look like an adult.

Lorea, meanwhile, was a growing girl. If you looked at them side by side, it was probably hard to tell which of them was older.

“There’s no doubt you’re incredibly cute. And looking at it up close, you have such pretty skin... You’re an alchemist, so did you use some kind of potion for

that? Is it the kind of thing I could afford with my allowance?”

Lorea took advantage of the fact Sarasa was sleeping to touch her cheeks and compare.

Sarasa’s face moved a little, as if it tickled, but that was all.

Unlike the villagers, who went to sleep when the sun set and woke again when it rose, alchemists could create light with their magic, and work long hours into the night. Staying up late was a common thing for them, and so many of them kept strange hours as a result.

Sarasa had been at the academy until not so long ago, so she had a comparatively normal schedule, but with recent changes in her environment, such as preparing to open up shop, there was no shortage of things that had been exhausting her.

It was only natural she’d be a heavy sleeper.

“Your hair’s so silky too... Is it because you wash it so often?”

Seeing that Sarasa wasn’t waking up, Lorea got a little bolder and touched it.

From the moment they’d first met, she’d admired Sarasa’s polished appearance and was envious of her hair.

Lorea’s own hair was smooth too right now, since she’d washed it so thoroughly yesterday, but not as smooth as Sarasa’s. That depressed her just a little.

“Your lashes are so long, and your nose is so pretty... Even looking at your face up close like this, everything’s in the right place.”

Maybe she felt something, being stared at so closely, because Sarasa furrowed her brow and made a slightly displeased expression. That didn’t stop Lorea’s exploration, though.

“As for your chest... Maybe I win that one? My memories from yesterday are a little vague, though...”

Lorea wasn’t especially large compared to other girls in the village, but she put a hand on her breasts as she searched her memories of the bath.

“They don’t need to be enormous or anything, but when you have at least some, it really helps give off the impression that you’re a mature woman.”

After squeezing her own chest a little, she dived under the covers and examined Sarasa’s.

“It’s hard to tell.”

Sarasa was lying on her back, and wearing loose pajamas.

Her breasts weren’t large enough to be able to judge in that situation.

“Excuse me a second...”

Lorea placed her right hand on her own chest, and her left on Sarasa’s.

“I’m...a bit bigger, I think? But hers are soft, like they should be.”

Having satisfied her curiosity, Lorea nodded to herself, then shuffled around until her head popped out from under the covers.

Her eyes met with Sarasa’s—they were wide open.

“Oh... E-Erm... G-Good morning, Sarasa-san.”

“Yeah, good morning. Can I ask what you were doing just now, Lorea-chan?”

There was a long silence before Lorea finally managed to choke out the words, “A-A medical examination?”

Sarasa sighed.

“I think if one of us needs that, it’s the person who fainted yesterday.”

“A-Ahh...”

“Well, you’re at the age where you start to notice the differences between yourself and others, I guess? I’m not going to make a big deal about it.”

Back when she had been at the academy, Sarasa had compared herself to the other girls in the bath and gotten depressed, so although she felt Lorea had been acting shifty, she was willing to let it slide.

“S-Sorry...” Lorea apologized awkwardly.

Sarasa nodded, then placed her own hand on Lorea’s cheek and took a good look at her pallor.

“You’re not feeling strange anywhere, are you? Considering what caused it, you should be all right, I think.”

“Yes, I’m fine. But what *did* cause it?”

“Ohh, I made the water in yesterday’s bath with magic... If someone who’s not used to it soaks in it for a long time, they can get drunk on the magical power. It would have been fine if I’d left it a little longer before letting you get in. Sorry about that.”

“Oh, that’s what it was? It was my first time, so I was a little surprised, but it’s okay. I should apologize for causing you so much trouble.”

“It’s my own fault, so don’t worry about it. I’ll be careful next time, so just let me know whenever you want to use the bath again, okay? Oh, if we bathe together, you’ll be able to see me naked, you know?”

“I-It’s not like that. I don’t really like seeing girls naked, okay?!”

Lorea hurriedly denied it, but Sarasa just giggled before adding, “By the way, there *are* alchemic cosmetics, but this is my natural skin.”

“Huh?! S-Sarasa-saaan.”

Lorea let out a pathetic moan as she realized what it meant for Sarasa to be saying that.

DATE: 00 / ΔΔ

I was speechless at what I was seeing.

A rotten wooden fence.

A yard overgrown with weeds.

Walls that looked ready to crumble at any moment, and windows with foggy glass.

The sign that read "Alchemy" was tilted, almost ready to drop down from the roof.

"This...is my new frontier?"

01

*Management of a
Novice Alchemist:
I Got My Own Shop!*





Management of a Novice Alchemist:
I Got My Own Shop!

Iris Lotze

Gatherer. Sarasa saves her life, but she is left with a huge debt.

Ophelia Millis

Master class alchemist.
Sarasa's master.

Lorea

Daughter of the couple who owns Yok Village's general store. Helps out at Sarasa's shop.

Kate Starven

Iris's partner. Works together with Iris to repay Sarasa.

Sarasa Feed

Novice alchemist.
Opens up the alchemy shop in Yok Village that she received as a graduation present from her master.

DATE: 〇〇 / △△

On the counter was my self-made sign that said,
"Accepting orders." I just needed to plop my butt down
in the chair behind the counter, and I'd be all ready to go!
All right, customers! I'm ready when you are!

Order made at



DATE: DATE: 00 / ΔΔ

The two of us took a slow, leisurely soak in the tub. I don't know if it was built this way with an eye to making artifacts, or for some other purpose, but my bath was pretty big.



— Author
MIZUHO
ITSUKI
— Illustrator
FUUMI



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Management of a Novice Alchemist: Volume 1

by Mizuho Itsuki

Translated by Sean McCann Edited by Thalia Sutton

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SHINMAI RENKINJUTSUSHI NO TEMPOKEIEI Vol.1 OMISE O TENIIRETA!

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