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Management of a
★ Novice ★
Alchemist



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Prologue

“Well, what can I say... The view sure has gotten better, huh!”

It had been a few days since the hellflame grizzly attack.

Finally free from the muscle pain that had afflicted my entire body, I was heading out to survey the damage for myself.

Hearing this desperate attempt to remain cheerful, Lorea-chan and the others, who were tagging along with me out of concern, forced themselves to smile.

Hey, could you really blame me, though?

Without even opening my back door, I had a clear view all the way from my backyard to the forest.

There wasn't a door *to* open—or even a wall, for that matter!

The wall around my backyard, the gate that had been built into it, and the garden of herbs I'd gone to so much effort to care for had all been ravaged! Ha ha ha!

“Hahhh...”

I'd already known about it, but I still sighed at the disaster that was every bit as bad as I thought it would be.

The newly built walls and herb garden were a blow to the psyche, but the real blow to my pocketbook was the destroyed crests inside the wall.

How much is that going to set me back...?

Just the thought of how much the materials to repair them were going to cost was enough to make me want to clutch my head.

“Shopkeeper-dono, we've taken care of some of the cleanup for you, but we were unsure how to handle the herbs...” offered Iris-san, concerned about the gloomy look on my face.

“No, no,” I hurriedly shook my head. “It’s fine. Thank you.”

The kitchen had been a mess with debris scattered all over. I was grateful enough that they had tidied that up.

Besides, this is my house. Maintaining and repairing it is my job.

But where do I start...? Should I patch the holes in the walls, at least for the time being?

Since I wasn’t the only one in the village with damage, if I asked Geberk-san for help, he might not be able to get to it right away.

“This is a good opportunity, Sarasa-san. Let’s make a kitchen!” Lorea-chan said, thrusting her fist in the air.

“A kitchen? You want to work on the kitchen before we’ve fixed the walls?”

“No, I mean a *proper* kitchen. One where we can cook things. We didn’t have one before now, remember?”

Well, the magic stove had been removed, and we didn’t have an oven, so it was like having a kitchen/dining room combo that we couldn’t cook in.

I guess the lack of walls does make it a lot easier to do major construction...

“But I, uh, don’t cook all that much...”

I usually made do with the preserves and sundries available at the general store, or ordered takeout at Delal-san’s restaurant. Neither required a kitchen.

Plus, any time I spent on cooking was time I wasn’t spending on alchemy. Moreover, the price of ordering takeout was quite reasonable, and the food was delicious besides, so I would be going to great time and expense just to eat much more mediocre meals if I made them myself.

I kinda don’t need a kitchen, huh?

“But once the gatherers come back, the restaurant will get crowded again. Weren’t you just saying that was a problem a little while ago, Sarasa-san?”

“Urkh...”

She had me there.

When I first came to the village, it was easy to get a seat without waiting, but shortly before the whole incident with the bears, not only was it hard to get a seat but even ordering takeout was starting to take a while.

So long as I avoided the busy meal hours, it wasn't so bad, but...

"Do you think the guys who ran away because of the hellflame grizzlies are really going to come back?" I wondered aloud.

I didn't think there was anything wrong with a gatherer considering their strength relative to the enemy's, and then deciding not to fight. But in a village like this, where everyone knows everyone, being branded as someone who up and ran when things got dicey would be pretty rough.

If me, Darna-san at the general store, and Delal-san at the restaurant were to refuse them service, then they'd be left with no source of income, no roof over their heads, and nowhere to buy food.

Now, setting aside the question of whether any of us would do that, they'd definitely still feel like they were being judged.

"Shopkeeper-dono, while they themselves may not return, won't there be others who come in their place?"

"Hrm, once word gets out that it's safe now, I suppose they might."

The number of gatherers in this village had initially started increasing because once I opened my shop here, they were able to turn a profit.

That hadn't changed, so maybe it was a given that the gatherers would start coming here again once it was safe to do so.

"Actually, maybe even the ones who took off will come back too? I'm sure a lot of gatherers don't even care what people think of them."

"You have a point there. Honestly, it's deplorable," Iris-san said indignantly, her nose flaring. "How dare they show their faces after fleeing when the village needed them."

"Iris, you can't blame them like that," Kate-san countered, putting a hand on her partner's shoulder as she tried to calm her down. "Gatherers aren't knights, you know?"

“But they ran when they could have defended people. Is that any way for a person to act?”

It's not that I don't see where Iris-san is coming from, but I think I'm more on Kate-san's side here.

There were not that many people out there willing to risk their lives for people they weren't even that close to.

I mean, if I weren't so close to Lorea-chan, and the enemy had been too strong for me to handle, then I think I'd have considered running away too.

“They're grown men, and they ran away!” Iris-san continued loudly. “Why, even a little girl like Shopkeeper-dono stayed to...!” Glancing at me, she lowered her tone. “No, I suppose you're something of an exception, Shopkeeper-dono. Yeah.”

“I'd like to remind you, I'm an adult, okay? I'm just a little on the petite side!”

“I-I'm well aware of that! By no means do I think of you as a child!”

She was stuttering, and looking away as she said that, though...

“You definitely were thinking of me as one!”

Otherwise you wouldn't have said that like that!

I'm sensitive about it, okay?!

My development's just delayed a little!

“Now, now. Let's set that aside for now and talk about the kitchen, Sarasa-san. We can't leave the area around the door broken like this, so let's take the opportunity to do everything properly.”

Lorea-chan took hold of my arm, trying to calm me as I started angrily flaring my nose the same way Iris-san had been before.

Listen, that soft sensation I feel is just adding fuel to the fire, okay?

Things could get heated at this rate.

“Even if you won't use it, I will.”

I paused for a moment. “You will, Lorea-chan?”

“Yes. I’ll make lunches. It pains me a little, accepting the kind of wage you pay me when all I’m doing is watching the shop for you. I’ll cook breakfast and dinner for you too.”

“I’d...be incredibly grateful for that, sure.”

This news helped cool my temper a little.

I dunno how good of a cook Lorea-chan is, but if she’s offering, then...she’s gotta be confident in her skills, right?

Heck, even if she’s kind of bad at it, if it saves us a trip to the busy restaurant, that still makes things easier.

“I’m sure Iris-san and Kate-san would like that too, right? You’ve been having trouble eating, haven’t you?”

“U-Us? N-No, we’ve been eating properly. Yeah.”

“R-Right. A gatherer’s body is her most important asset, after all.”

The two of them had both insisted to Lorea-chan that they were fine, but the way they were acting was clearly suspicious.

Their eyes were wandering all over the place.

“Oh, really? What have you been doing for food while I’ve been stuck in bed?”

I had just been sending Lorea-chan out to buy food and then eating it in bed, so I had no idea what the two of them were doing for their meals.

Now that I asked, there was a brief silence, and then Iris-san slowly opened her mouth and ventured, “Bread...?”

“Bread? And what else?”

“Erm...”

“Well...”

The two of them were clearly being evasive, but Lorea-chan didn’t hesitate to reveal the truth.

“I don’t think I’ve seen anything but bread.”

“W-Well, we haven’t been out gathering these past few days! Yeah.”

The two of them had stayed around the house out of concern for me.

They didn't work, or even go out all that much.

On top of that, because they owed me money, they were trying to be frugal, but...no, this just wouldn't do.

"Okay! I'll make you a kitchen! And we're all going to eat together!"

"No, but—" Iris-san hesitantly tried to object, but I cut her off sternly.

"Let me state the obvious! I'm charging both of you for your meals. But if Lorea-chan cooks for all of us, it should be cheaper than dining out. Like Kate-san just said, your bodies are your most important asset. If you ruin your health, you'll ultimately fall behind on your payments. Have I made myself clear?"

"It's a good deal for us, certainly..."

"It is. But are you sure, Shopkeeper-san?"

"I don't mind. I'd been planning to make a kitchen at some point anyway. Oh, Lorea-chan, you don't have to pay. The work you do cooking cancels it out."

"I'm fine with the amount you already pay me..."

"Stop right there. This is extra work, not in your initial contract. I'm strict about observing that kind of thing."

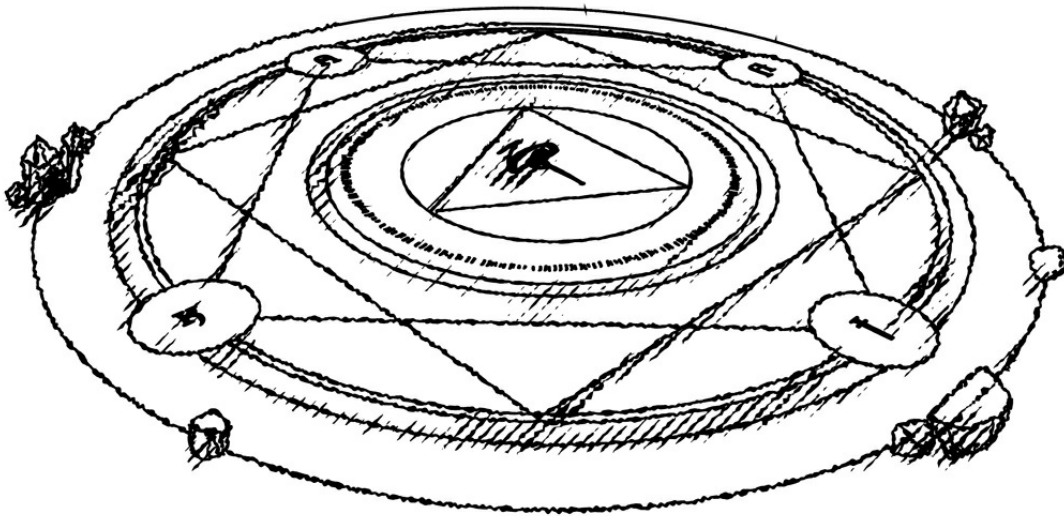
Pushing her to do more than she agreed to is not okay. I'm not running a sweatshop here.

I'd honestly have been fine with paying her extra to cook, but I doubted that Lorea-chan would be willing to accept the money.

"Okay, from now on, we all eat together. That's what I've decided! By my authority as landlord!"



Standard Price: ~32,000,000 Rhea



Tf hfi nff hft fh tff lfh

Let's Do Business

Episode 1: Leaving a Legacy (and Some Meat)

Now then, we'd decided to fix the kitchen, but there was actually something else that needed to take priority: the hellflame grizzlies that had caused this whole mess.

Working until I collapsed, I had managed to handle all of the preprocessing work somehow, but the stuff had all just been lying around while I was down.

Naturally, it hadn't turned into cash.

Yeah, that's right, money.

Andre-san and the other gatherers had stayed despite the danger, and some villagers' houses had been destroyed. I wouldn't feel right if I didn't get them their share promptly.

That was why I'd come to see the mayor, to discuss how the money ought to be distributed, but...I was surprised by his response.

"Huh? What do you mean there's no need?" I asked.

"Just what I said. You can do as you like with the materials you collected, Sarasa-chan. You killed more than half of the bears yourself, didn't you? Nobody will complain. In exchange, we took care of the rest..."

"Oh, well, I don't have any problem with that, obviously."

I had only left the bits that either couldn't be used as alchemic materials or just weren't that valuable. The meat and pelts, for example.

There were ways that I could have still gotten some use out of them, but I was in no state to do so at the time.

"All right. Well, there you have it. If we sell those things, we can more than afford to pay the rewards."

"I see..."

How many were there again? Over twenty, right?

If they sold all of the meat and pelts... Okay, yeah, that might be worth a fair chunk of change.

But can they handle all of that?

“Um, is it going to be all right? I can take on some of the work, if needed.”

“Hrmm... Well, the villagers are all working together to salt the meat right now, but Darna doesn’t really have the connections to sell everything...”

Darna-san from the general store handled basically all of the village’s trade with the outside world. He would go to South Strag to sell the village’s crops, and then return after buying goods to sell at the general store.

That accounted for the majority of his deals, so while he might be fine selling the meat since it was also a food product, he was going to struggle to find a buyer for the hellflame grizzly pelts, which were in another category altogether.

If he took valuable goods to a merchant he didn’t have any past dealings with, he was guaranteed to be taken advantage of.

The mayor knew that too, which was precisely why he was so unsure what to do about it.

“In that case, let me handle the pelts. The villagers may be in no hurry, but you need the cash right away so you can pay the gatherers who helped out, right?”

“Is that okay?”

“Yes, I can process them myself, after all.”

Normally, hide needed to be boiled to make leather, but alchemy could turn it into tanned leather—actually, something better than that. It might cost a little more, but alchemy could apply special effects to the leather as well. Even if I paid them a little extra for the materials, I could still make more than enough money back on the transaction.

“Then I’ll ask you to do that for us. I’ll have them delivered later, so look them over, and then you can pay us whatever amount you deem fair.”

“Got it.”

Once I had finished talking business with the mayor, I walked around the village to take stock of the situation.

I was incapacitated so soon after what happened, I'd only really heard other people talking about it, but...yeah, looks like Andre-san and his team managed to save the villagers' houses.

There had been a lot of damage to the houses that were rented out to gatherers, but those were the communal property of the village.

The village could pay for the repairs, and no one was going to be immediately bothered by it if they were left in their current state.

Lots of gatherers had left, so it wasn't like anyone was staying in them now.

The fences we had built hastily for the defense were dismantled, and new ones went up to replace them at the border between the forest and the village.

Maybe this incident made them more aware of the danger?

It's a really rare occurrence, though... Probably.

I don't know this village that well, so I can't say for sure.

As I walked around the village, there was one thing that I noticed *had* really changed.

"Thank you, Sarasa-chan!"

"Oh, don't thank me, we all worked together."

"Sarasa-chan, thanks to you, my husband came home safe! Here, take this with you!"

"Th-Thank you."

"You alchemists sure are incredible. Oh, what's that? That's not enough for a meal. Here, eat this too."

"R-Right. Thanks..."

I'd always made a point of greeting the villagers before this, but now they called out to me on their own. And it wasn't just the ones I passed on the road either. People would stop their work in the field to come over to talk to me. They even gave me stuff, like the crops they were growing.

Is this because of my hard work too?

Well, I'm just glad the village has accepted me.

This place isn't like the capital, so I don't know what to do sometimes, but that's not a bad thing, right?

Still... What am I going to do with this armful of produce?

"Welcome ho— What's all that you have there?"

"Okay, Lorea-chan! You handle these!"

Lorea-chan found me stuck, unable to open the door to my house. I promptly pushed half my burden into her surprised arms.

"Oh, I see... Everyone's really grateful to you. I think anyone who was there knows we couldn't have handled it without you."

"I'm grateful to hear it, but it's still embarrassing, being thanked that way."

I wasn't used to it. I'd never gotten involved with other people before.

"But we still can't cook here yet... Will you take them, Lorea-chan?"

"Okay. In that case, I'll cook these up, and bring them back. They're gifts people wanted you to have, after all."

"Thank you so much! I wasn't sure *what* I was going to do with the ones that can't just be eaten as is."

While I could bake a potato in the furnace I have in the workshop if I really had to... I'd rather not.

"But do try to make a kitchen soon, okay? Then I'll be able to cook here," Lorea-chan said emphatically.

"Yes, ma'am!" I answered with a salute.

"But I think processing the pelts has to come first. It'll rot if I just let it sit. This is going to keep me busy."

"You're processing pelts?"

"Yeah. Yeah, the mayor didn't know what to do with the hellflame grizzly pelts, so I decided to buy them off of him. They should be here any—"

Just as I was explaining the situation to Lorea-chan, Andre-san showed up carrying a big leather sack.

“Sarasa-chan, congrats on your recovery. I brought you the pelts.”

“Thank you, Andre-san. I’m all better now, as you can see.”

“Looks like it. I’d heard you weren’t injured, and it didn’t seem right for me to be visiting a girl’s house, so I refrained from coming to see you until now.”

“Oh, Andre-san. I wouldn’t have known you could be so considerate based on how you look.”

“Nice one, Sarasa-chan.” Andre-san grinned at my quip. “But while you might not think it to look at me, I’ve been around long enough to learn at least that much.”

“Is that right? Now, if you’d just learn to send along a get-well present through Kate-san or someone else, you’d be even more of a man.”

“Whoa! You’ve got me there! Ha ha ha ha! But there’s not really anything to give as a get-well present in this village, is there? I can’t just send you bread from the inn.”

“True, that’s not really a get-well present. It is tasty, though.”

Even if he’d wanted to send flowers, or nutritious food, Darna-san’s general store was the only other shop in town. It wasn’t easy to get your hands on those kinds of things.

Besides, if he were to ask for “nutritious food” right now, he’d probably be offered hellflame grizzly meat.

“So, are the hellflame grizzly pelts in that sack?”

“Yeah. Only some of them, though.”

With that, Andre set the bulging sack on the ground.

“Yuck.” Lorea-chan winced at the stench that wafted into the air. “The smell is pretty strong, huh? It’s like raw meat...”

“Sorry ’bout that,” Andre-san said apologetically. “Some of them were done by people who don’t know what they’re doing, so there’s no helping the smell.”

“No, it’s fine,” I assured him. “That processing is also part of my job as an alchemist.”

“Being an alchemist...can be pretty rough, huh?”

“We do have to work with a lot of things that smell strongly. You get used to it soon enough.”

Alchemists didn’t just deal with minerals; many of our materials came from plants and animals, and some of those materials were intensely stinky.

Like, to the point where we had to wear specialized masks or we’d pass out.

Next to that, this was no big deal.

It didn’t change the fact that they stank, though.

“Anyway, you really saved us. If you weren’t around, Sarasa-chan, we’d have been done for. I wasn’t expecting there to be so many of them.”

“I’ve heard enough thanks already. From the villagers too.”

“You’re the woman of the hour! It was really incredible, hearing the stories when things had just ended.”

“Was it that bad...?”

“Yeah! Your name was on everyone’s lips! They were all amazed you were able to kill those bears like that,” Andre-san said with a smirk.

I involuntarily slapped my forehead.

“It’s true,” Lorea-chan chimed in. “Things have settled down now that it’s been four days, but the size of those bears really left an impact.”

“I’m starting to think I’m *glad* I spent three days stuck in bed.”

Even after things settled down, they were still like that.

I was happy to know they were grateful, but it was exhausting to have them make such a big deal out of me.

“I’m sure they’ll calm down once everyone’s said their thanks,” Andre-san reassured me. “By the way, when are you opening the shop again? You know, your potions make a real difference to how safe our jobs are.”

“If it’s just potions you need, I can help you today. Would you like to buy some before you go?”

“Oh, are you sure?”

“Yes. Lorea-chan, could you handle it?”

“Sure thing! Let’s head inside the shop, Andre-san.”

“Sure. Sorry to put you out like this.”

I watched the two of them head into the shop, then carried the sack of pelts around back, into the workshop.

When I headed to the front, Andre-san had finished paying and was about to head home.

“Thank you for your purchase.”

“No, thank you. I’ll let the rest of the guys know you’re open again.”

“Sure. And I hope I’ll be seeing you again.”

Lorea-chan and I both offered our thanks as Andre-san headed out the door.



More and more villagers dropped by after Andre-san left, and I ultimately ended up with a total of five leather bags.

The total number of pelts inside them came to twenty-eight.

“The quality of the processing on these...varies, yeah.”

The ones that had been cleanly skinned were probably the work of Jasper-san, who was a hunter.

Are the poorer-quality ones the villagers’ or the gatherers’?

The one surprising thing was that, aside from injuries they’d received in battle, there weren’t any strange cuts in them.

Maybe they were cautious about that because it would affect the price?

The trade-off was that there was an excessive amount of fat left, but I could handle the processing for that.

“Okay, first I’ll handle the preprocessing. Because even if I’m used to it, they’re still smelly.”

I stuffed the twenty-eight pelts into my massive alchemic cauldron, then added one more.

That one belonged to the first hellflame grizzly, the one that had kicked off this whole thing.

I’d done just the preprocessing and then left it to sit, so now was a good time to finish it.

“Put in the water, put in the chemicals, put on the fire,” I sang to myself as I worked.

I then put the cauldron on top of the furnace and brought it to a boil.

As I stirred the pot, the unpleasant odor that had been hanging in the air all this time gradually faded away.

“Well, that should do it.”

Tanning was a really time-consuming process when it was done through ordinary means, but with alchemy it took less than a day.

I took the pelts out and washed them, checking the quality and sorting them as I did.

Only the very first was completely intact, with the head and everything.

But maybe they weren’t so bad, on the whole?

There were some in here that I’d decapitated personally, after all.

“I’d say seven of these are ‘excellent,’ ten are ‘good,’ and the rest are ‘fair,’ I guess?”

The “excellent” ones looked good and would sell for a high price. With a little repair, the “good” ones were just as usable as the “excellent” ones.

As for the “fair” ones, the quality was a little lower, even from the standpoint of usability.

It all depends on what you were using them for, though. Not everything uses the entire pelt.

Even after this sort of light processing, the fur would still be all fluffy once they dried, but they would make sturdy leather too. That already made them a desirable product, but since I was working on them anyway, I wanted to apply an effect of some sort too.

“They’re most suited to having the fire element applied to them, but...that’s not really the best thing in this season.”

It was only going to get hotter from here.

Nobody was going to be in the market for “superwarm fur.”

That said, it’d be a real waste if I were to ignore the unique traits of the material completely when deciding how to process it.

“Maybe I should stick it in the warehouse until winter? Oh, but before that, I think I’ll try contacting Master.”

I jotted down a quick missive about recent events, and sent it to Master via the transporter.

I then waited for a reply while the pelts were drying. It didn’t take long.

“Let’s see... ‘I’ll buy up to eight immediately with cash. Send them,’ huh? That’s my master for you! So dependable!”

If I paid the mayor market rate for these, the cash I have on hand would be enough, but it’s not good to use it all up, and I’d like to pay a bit of a premium.

I’ll sell her the first one I hunted myself, then the seven other ‘excellent’ ones. Then I’ll add in another ‘good’ one for an exchange...and a letter to explain it all.

“Let’s see, ‘Please send cash for the eight, and enough warmgrass seeds to pay for the other.’”

She wrote a number of pelts, but she never said anything about the quality!

Heh heh heh. It’ll be fine. Master won’t have a problem with it! I know I can’t sell those “excellent” quality pelts at my shop anyway!

As I worked on mending leather while waiting for a response, the transporter brought me a leather pouch stuffed with cash, warmgrass seeds, and a letter.

“It says... ‘Not bad.’ She didn’t even bat an eye!”

That's Master for you.

I thought, just maybe, she'd send a note saying, "Don't just send me the expensive ones," but she didn't do anything of the sort!

As for the cash... Hey, there's a lot in here. Was the warmgrass less expensive than I thought, and she did half cash, half seeds for that last one? Or maybe it's a tip? Well, either way, now I'll be able to pay the mayor just fine.

"Lorea-chaaan!"

"Comiiing... Did you need something?"

"Could you deliver this to the mayor? It's a bit heavy."

After calling in Lorea-chan, who had been watching the shop, I handed her a sack with the money for the pelts. She lifted it with one hand and then nodded.

"I should be fine. All right, I'll be right back."

"Sure. Take care."

I switched the sign in the shop to say "taking a break" and waved to Lorea-chan as she was leaving, then carried on processing the pelts.

"Put the remaining pelts back in the alchemic cauldron. Along with a handful of warmgrass seeds, and...about this much magic stone. Put in one flame sac and an eyeball... No, that would be a waste, forget that."

Putting them in would improve the effect, but it would also increase the market price, making it that much harder to sell.

"Oh, hey, I know. I'll have Master buy the eyeballs and flame sacs."

If it was just any eyeball, I could go out and get more if I went out hunting, but eyeballs in this frenzy state weren't so easy to come by.

We couldn't go around artificially inducing them to frenzy, so they were a very rare material. Which, of course, meant that they were expensive too.

Setting aside the issue of whether I could find a buyer, there were only a limited number of uses for them, so even if I put them out on the shelves here, nobody would touch them.

Well, I guess that went for any alchemic material. I didn't have other

alchemists coming to shop here, after all.

I guess I'll wholesale some of them to Leonora-san, and then just hoard the rest for the time being.

If I was in too much of a rush to get rid of them, she'd haggle down the price, and I might need them myself in the future.

There's no guarantee they'll be available at that point, so I should hold on to rare materials when I can afford to.

"Now just pour in magic energy as I stir, and... Voilà!"

The trick was to add the energy gently, without pushing it too hard.

Once materials in the alchemic cauldron melted together, leaving only the pelts, that showed that I was all done.

Now I just needed to wash them and dry them off again.

"Sarasa-san, I'm back." Lorea-chan returned as I was washing the pelts.

"Oh, welcome back. Were you able to hand it over?"

"Yes. It must have been more than the mayor expected. He was pretty surprised. Actually, I was too. I never imagined there was all that money in there... Say something next time! I was just walking around, holding it in one hand, you know!"

Yeah, it was a bit much for a kid to be carrying around, but...

"If I told you, then that'd have just made you more uneasy, right? For the whole time you were walking to the mayor's house."

"That's true..." Thinking back to it, Lorea-chan went a little pale. "I probably would've started acting pretty shifty."

"Right? I kept quiet for your sake, Lorea-chan!"

Actually, it had just never occurred to me.

Yeah. Next time, I'll have Iris-san or Kate-san go along to protect her.

It was safe now, but once more gatherers we didn't know came to the village, it could get dangerous.

“Really now...” she huffed.

I’m just imagining that slightly cold look Lorea-chan gave me, right?

“Well, I guess it’s fine. So, those are the bear pelts, right?”

“Yeah, they are. Want to take a look?”

I handed her one that had finished drying and Lorea-chan’s eyes widened as she touched it.

“It feels really nice. The smell’s gone too...and it’s slightly warm?”

“There’s an effect that does that. If you wear a fur coat made of that in the winter, it’ll keep you nice and snug.”

“That’s convenient. But...I’ll bet it’s expensive.”

“True, it won’t be cheap. The money you were carrying earlier was to buy these pelts, after all.”

“Yikes! And then you’ve performed alchemy on them on top of that, right...?”

As the price began to vaguely dawn on her, her hand stopped stroking the fur, and then she gently returned the pelt to me.

I chuckled. “Gloves and a hat made from the scraps wouldn’t cost that much, though.”

“Urgh, I think it’s still too much for my salary... Still, you’re starting work on them now, huh? When it’s only going to get hotter.”

Lorea-chan seemed a little mystified by this, but all I could do was shrug and smile. “I’ve already got them. And they’ll sell faster as materials for clothes.”

Fur coats wouldn’t start selling until fall, but the tailors who made those clothes would, obviously, start buying material before then.

They usually did that in summer, but the really popular places needed material in quantity, so I’d heard they might even start in spring, but...unfortunately, I didn’t have contacts at any place like that.

Maybe Master wholesales to those shops?

I mean, the stuff that I sent her was all high quality, so ordinary shops would

probably have a hard time handling it.

“There, we’re all set.”

Having finished with all the washing and drying, I started folding the pelts up one at a time.

“Oh, let me help you with that.”

“Thanks... Now we just have to put them away in the warehouse.”

I put them in a specialized wooden box so that they wouldn’t degrade, and then stored them in a corner of the warehouse.

I’ll have to think of a way to deal with them by fall, but... Oh, well. It can wait. I’ve got enough cash on hand for now.

“Now then, Lorea-chan, let’s think about what we want to do with the kitchen.”

“Oh, sure! I’m looking forward to it!”

Lorea-chan broke into a grin, looking every bit as delighted as she said she was.

The kitchen still bore the traces of destruction.

The first place we inspected was the back door. The backyard was clearly visible, and a breeze was blowing in through it.

It was warm this time of year, so I had been brushing it off as “enjoying our meals in the presence of nature,” but once winter rolled around that would be an exercise in austerity.

“I don’t think we’ll be able to reuse the door...”

“Right. It was completely destroyed, so we put it over there.”

Lorea-chan pointed to a pile of debris in the backyard. The door lay there, splintered to pieces.

“Yeah... Let’s give up on that one. As for the walls... They sure went to town on them, huh?”

One effect of the seals inside the walls was that they were sturdier than normal, on top of them being stonework to begin with. Even if an ordinary person had gone at the walls with a hammer, they wouldn't have been able to break them.

"Normally, even those bears wouldn't be able to break through, but that's just what their frenzied state does to them, I guess."

"They really forced their way inside, huh?"

"Sigh... I guess all I can do is work with Geberk-san and do the best I can to repair this."

Because the destroyed walls had seals inside them, I couldn't just leave all the work to a carpenter.

And as for the cost of the materials to repair said seals... I don't want to think about it!

"Now then, getting back on track. Lorea-chan, what are you looking for in a kitchen? You can just say whatever you want at this point! I'll show you what an alchemist can really do!"

Sensing the desperation in the way I thumped my chest with one hand as I said this, Lorea-chan answered somewhat hesitantly, and with restraint.

"Oh, well, so long as I have a stove... I'd like to try using a magical one."

"A magic stove. Got it, got it. Of course I can handle that much. How about water? Don't you want a system that automatically pumps water from the well?"

"It would be convenient to have, but are you sure? I think it's already a luxury having a well."

"I'm an alchemist, after all! I planned to make one eventually anyway."

If I'm doing this, I'm gonna make it as convenient as possible!

"W-Well... I'd like that, then."

"Next up... How about an oven? It'd make baking bread easy."

"Really?! You'd put in something so expensive?!"

“It’s *fine*! Just leave it to big sis! I’m gonna make a magic oven! Ha ha ha!”

I leaned back and laughed as Lorea-chan’s eyes widened with surprise.

Most houses don’t have an oven, after all.

Unlike the magic oven, which operated in a manner similar to the magic stove, an ordinary oven required burning lots of firewood to get it up to heat. Most people couldn’t afford to use that much firewood just to bake bread for their family, so normally ovens were only found at bakeries, inns, and other places that needed to bake a lot.

In some places, they had a village oven, used to bake a whole lot all at once...but not in this village. Because of that, having an oven that we could use casually for our own personal baking would be highly valuable.

Although, for all those reasons, there aren’t many occasions to use an oven, so whether we’ll be able to use it to the fullest is another question.

“Also... How about a refrigerator and a freezer? Those would be convenient to have too, right?”

“Th-They certainly would, but...Sarasa-san, isn’t this all way too much luxury?”

There probably weren’t many places that had a fridge, let alone a freezer.

They were pretty pricey after all, and while convenient to have, it wasn’t really a problem getting by without them.

“But Lorea-chan, you said we should make a good kitchen, right?” I cocked my head to the side.

Flustered, Lorea-chan waved her hands in the air. “I-I did, yes! But this is just too much...!”

“I’m just kidding with you.”

“O-Of course. You wouldn’t actually put in all of that stuff.”

Just as she breathed a sigh of relief, I struck again:

“No, I’ll still be putting all of that stuff in.”

“You will?!”

“I will. And don’t you worry about it. I’m doing it to practice my alchemy as well. You might not think it, but I’m still in training.”

“Oh, is that right? Well, that’s fine then... I guess?”

“Yep. Don’t sweat it.”

The refrigerator was in volume 4 of the *Complete Alchemy Works*, so I couldn’t move on to volume 5 without building one, and the odds of anyone ordering one in this village seemed really low.

Thinking about it that way, installing one in my kitchen wasn’t a bad move by any means.

“Now that we know more or less what we’re doing with the kitchen... The first thing to do is order the materials and repair the walls. Lorea-chan, could you mind the shop? I’m headed out for a bit.”

“Got it. Take care.”



I’d need a number of metal plates for the magic stove and magic oven.

I ordered them from Jizdo-san the blacksmith, then headed over to Geberk-san the carpenter’s place.

At first glance, Geberk-san might have seemed like a crotchety old man who was hard to approach, but he was a really good guy once you got to know him. I’d gotten to the point where I could just open the door and cheerfully call out, “Hello. It’s Sarasa.”

“Hey, little missie. You’re finally here. Let’s go.”

“Huh? Whuhhh?”

I still couldn’t get used to how impatient he was, though.

The moment I’d greeted him, Geberk-san was already trying to push me out the door, giving me a slap on the back for good measure as I blinked in confusion.

“Your house needs fixing. My pride as the village carpenter won’t let me leave your home in that state when you did more than anyone to help. But I couldn’t

very well force my way in there when you were still recovering!”

“Um, don’t you have other repairs in your schedule...?”

I thought we’d just be talking about what needed to be done today.

“You dolt! Of course your place goes straight to the top of the list! Now hurry along!”

“Y-Yessir!”

With another slap on the back, Geberk-san then began walking with a vigor that belied his age. I ran after him as he headed to my house.

He hurried me along, and we went around to the ruined back of the house.

“Gah! Look at what they’ve done to the place! Can I fix up the fence to how it was before?”

“Yes. I’ll let you handle that.”

While it wasn’t urgent, I *had* gone to the trouble of asking him to build a fence around the backyard before. It protected my herb garden, and more importantly my laundry, so it did need to be fixed.

But really, the house mattered more.

“There’s no rush with the fence, but the house...”

Much as I enjoy experiencing nature, I’ll be in trouble if it rains like this.

“Hmm, it’s not just the door. They wrecked your walls too, huh? I don’t know what’s up with these walls, but they’re more sturdy than normal, right?”

“You know about that?”

“I was involved in building this house, after all.”

“Ohh, that makes sense.”

Now that I think about it, of course he would have been.

Considering his age and the fact that he was the village carpenter, it might be harder to find a building around here he *wasn’t* involved in building.

“I remember something about seals, and it being a real pain.”

“Ah...”

Well, when you're putting seals inside, that means the carpenter can't just build it however he likes, after all.

It put restrictions on the shape, and there was alchemy that needed to be done at various stages in the construction, so it was probably frustrating for an impatient person to work with.

“I, um, think...I'll be causing you a hassle during the repair process too...”

“I know. A carpenter's job is to respond to his customer's requests, not just make things however he likes. That's what hobbies are for.”

“Right...”

That's a wonderful answer. He has my respect.

Even if you're a pro, you can't just ignore your customer's requests completely and say something like, “It's better this way, so that's how we're doing it.”

If there need to be changes, you've got to explain why, and convince them of it. Because this is a business that caters to the customer.

When he saw how I was looking at him, Geberk-san looked away, as if embarrassed.

“Hmph. So, can we get to work right away? What's your schedule like?”

“I should be fine. Lorea-chan is watching the shop, and it's important that we get this fixed.”

“Then let's get right to it. You girls aren't going to feel right as long as it's left like this.”

“Right.”

We got to work sealing up the holes in the wall. Geberk-san laid blocks and applied mortar while I was doing alchemist things, but...

“You're pretty used to this, huh, Geberk-san?”

“I've been working many times longer than you've been alive, little missie.”

“Of course.”

He did say he was involved in building this house too.

Repairing the seals proved harder than I'd have expected. Unlike a new design where I could have done things as I pleased, repairing existing seals meant working with what was already there and being careful not to deviate.

It exhausted my spirit and my expensive materials.

Urgh, it hurts. It hurts so much.

My wallet is in pain.

And by extension, my heart.

Honestly, I don't even want to think what the total cost will be.

After several hours of suffering, the walls were finally repaired.

Okay, I admit, a few hours maybe wasn't long enough for me to be using the word "finally."

Well, Geberk-san is a fast worker, and he had me helping him out with magic.

"It's a crying shame," he said. "If you weren't already an alchemist, I'd take you on as an apprentice."

"If I weren't an alchemist, I wouldn't be able to play at being a carpenter like this. I learned this stuff in school, after all."

"Schooling's got nothing to do with aptitude. I'd just have to teach you."

"Come to think of it, Geberk-san, you don't have an apprentice, do you?"

"That's just the thing. I can't find anyone who suits me."

He snorted, seeming dissatisfied, but he'd be a hard master to work for.

I could tell just from watching how hard he worked. That was great for a client, but it would be rough as an apprentice.

"Well, that's enough about that," he said. "Just an ordinary door will be fine, right?"

"Yes. Oh, but make it sturdy. Given what happened to the last one."

Geberk-san winced as he looked at the remains of my former door. "I don't think it'll be happening again, but... You've got it. I'll make sure to fix the

backyard fence sometime soon too.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

He had said “sometime soon,” but this was Geberk-san.

He’d apparently already worked out what materials he was going to need before I even arrived, and the door and fence were both repaired the next day.



“So, you’re starting work on the kitchen today?” Lorea-chan asked.

“Yeah. Assuming the iron plates I need are ready, that is,” I replied.

“I’m so looking forward to it!” she went on dreamily. “A magic oven... I wonder what I should make first...”

Iris-san and Kate-san stared at Lorea-chan in wonder. They were taking the day off—or rather, I had made them take the day off—so the pair was around the house today.

They had been delving into the great forest day after day, trying to make good on their debt as soon as possible, but if they ruined their health or got themselves injured in the process, it would defeat the entire purpose. Knowing this, I had invoked my power as their creditor, and given them firm instructions to take days off when needed.

On the other hand, if they were the type to default on what they owed, I would be pushing them to pay me back quickly. But, luckily, I had no fear of that with them.

“You know how to cook dishes that require an oven?” Iris-san asked. “Hold on, have you ever used an oven before?”

“She has a point.” Kate-san nodded to show that she was equally dubious. “I wouldn’t be able to make much in an oven besides bread.”

“Urgh... To be honest, it’s just something I’ve always wanted to do, so not really... Sorry.” Lorea-chan stuck her tongue out a little. Having told me she’d cook, it was probably a bit awkward for her to admit this.

“Well, I’m no good with one either, so that’s fine,” I reassured her. “Oh, come

to think of it, when I mentioned I'd be making an oven, Master sent me something. Here it is..."

I walked over to the shelf and picked up a book that she'd sent me the other day using the transporter.

That was Master for you, just casually sending expensive things like books. It hadn't come with a letter or anything, but I could only assume she was telling me to put it to good use.

It was titled *Dishes to Make in an Oven*, after all.

"Would you like to give it a read, Lorea-chan?"

"Huh?! Can I?"

"Sure, if you'll make good use of the knowledge."

"Of course! I'll make something delicious for you!"

"I'll be looking forward to it." Lorea-chan's eyes sparkled as she accepted the book, hugging it tightly.

I want to focus on alchemy for now, so I'll be grateful if Lorea-chan can use it to make us something nice.

"But why don't we go out for lunch today?" she suggested.

"Sounds like a plan," I answered.

"Yeah," Iris-san and Kate-san agreed.

Perhaps because she had an income now, making her somewhat financially self-sufficient, lately Lorea-chan tended to eat with me instead of going home. Sometimes those meals were just whatever homemade lunch she had brought with her, but she hadn't made anything today, so it made sense that we'd all go to Delal-san's place together. But before that...

"Do you mind if we swing by Jizdo-san's place? The iron plates might be ready."

We took a short detour to visit the blacksmith, but when we got there...

"Sorry, they're not all ready yet."

Jiname-san apologetically showed us a little over half a dozen metal plates, and judging by the sound of hammering coming from the back, Jizdo-san was actively working on the rest of them.

“Oh, it’s no problem. I’ll take just two of them for now so I can get started.”

The magic stove required two iron plates. So long as we had the stove, that would be enough to cook ordinary dishes, so the oven could wait until later.

“Will you be all right? They’re rather heavy...”

“Yeah, I can—”

“Shopkeeper-dono. Leave this to me.” I had been about to say I could manage them just fine, but Iris-san came up beside me and pointed to two of them.

“Will these do?” she finished.

“Ah, no, it’s the two on the bottom of the pile that I need. In terms of size. But I’ll be fine, really.”

Sure, they’re heavy. But they’re not too heavy for me.

“No, you’ve been doing a lot for us. Please, let me do it. I wouldn’t feel right if I didn’t do at least this much in return... Besides, consider what the villagers would think if they saw you carrying these iron plates while I was empty-handed.”

Everyone but me smiled wryly at what Iris-san was saying.

“Ahh,” Lorea-chan said, “considering Sarasa-san’s size, I see what you mean...”

“Everyone in the village knows that there’s more to you than meets the eye, but it still wouldn’t be a good look,” Iris-san explained.

“Even if you *are* the strongest in the village,” added Kate-san.

“Grr... I’m not a child.”

But if they insist, there’s no reason to say no.

I let Iris-san carry the iron plates as we continued along our way to Delal-san’s inn-and-restaurant. Fortunately—if it was okay to say that—with the decline in the number of gatherers after the incident, we were able to get a table for four

even though it was lunchtime.

“Whew...” Iris-san took a breath as she set the iron plates down on the table.

Once we were all seated, I called out, “Delal-san, we’ll have lunch for four!”

“Coming right up!” she replied without even looking at us. When she did come over, her eyes fell on the iron plates that were sitting on the table. “Oh, what are all these for?”

They’re not exactly the kind of thing you usually walk around with. Of course she’d be curious.

“These? They’re materials for a magic stove. I’m going to be installing one in the house.”

“Wow, a magic stove. Are you going to be eating at home then, Sarasa-chan?”

“Yes, although it’s Lorea-chan who’ll be doing the cooking.”

“Oh-hoh, Lorea, huh? Well, I guess I won’t be seeing as much of you around here.”

“Yeah, I guess not? If it wasn’t for Lorea-chan, I’d still be a regular. I’m not that good at cooking myself.”

My cooking skills had stopped developing before age ten, when I had gotten into the academy. Even looking at it from my own biased perspective, I couldn’t claim that the food I could make was all that good. I wanted to work on that a little, but...teaching myself would take time, and that was time I didn’t really have while also running the shop.

“Ha ha ha! Well, don’t you worry about it. With more gatherers coming in, it’s going to be packed in here. Still, a magic stove. I’m jealous. I’d love one of those myself, but they’re so expensive...”

“Yeah, when they go for a hundred and twenty thousand rhea, it’s a bit hard to put down that kind of money for one.”

It sure wasn’t the kind of thing an ordinary household would buy, at least. No matter how much they saved on firewood, it just wasn’t worth it. The story might be different in the city, where firewood tended to be more expensive, but not out here in the countryside.

“Oh! They can be had for a hundred and twenty thousand? But when I asked that Darna about it before, he told me they could cost up to three hundred thousand?”

“Ahh, well, I’m talking about one for domestic use, after all. What would you say is the size of the largest pot you use here?”

“Hmm, about fifty centimeters.”

That’s one big pot. Count on a restaurant to have something like that. The magic stove that I’m making can only handle up to around a thirty-centimeter pot, so she’d be looking at one that’s about twice the size.

“In that case...maybe around a hundred and fifty thousand?”

“That’s still pretty cheap! Has Darna’s place been taking that big of a markup?” Delal-san sounded upset.

“Whaa?!” Lorea-chan got a troubled look on her face as she tried to gauge both of our reactions. It wasn’t that Darna-san had been ripping people off, though, by any means.

“That’s because his prices have to include shipping,” I explained, so as to avoid causing him any undue reputational damage. “An industrial one could weigh over a hundred kilos. And if it got dropped on the way, it’d break, you know?”

I shuddered at the thought of causing discord between the villagers, and since Lorea-chan was Darna-san’s daughter, I’d feel doubly guilty about it.

The iron plates used in an industrial one were larger, and a little thicker, which inevitably meant they were going to weigh more. The effort of building one wasn’t that different, but shipping was another matter. So it wasn’t that Darna-san was overcharging or anything.

“Here, take a look at these iron plates. These are for a domestic magic oven. Now imagine something several times their weight, and you’ll see what I mean.”

“You’re saying that the reason you can charge less is because you don’t have to ship it, Sarasa-chan?”

“Exactly. But since you were considering a purchase, you’d be able to supply the magical power that one needs?”

“Yeah. If me and my hubby work together, we can manage it. Since we don’t need to use magic for anything else.”

The magic stove was powered by its user’s magical power. The strength of the heat was proportional to the power used, and an industrial magic stove that could handle a fifty centimeter pot would require more than twice as much magical power as the domestic version.

And unlike when you were using one at home, a restaurant needed to use theirs pretty much all day long. If they had a low magic capacity, they’d run dry in no time. Considering that, Delal-san and her husband had to have a decent amount of magic power.

“A hundred and fifty thousand, huh? If we work for it, then just maybe... Hrmm.”

“I’ll be ready to take your order any time. A magic stove is *really* convenient. It doesn’t take any fuel, and you can control the heat freely. And since there’s no fire, it won’t get too hot in summer.”

I launched into a bit of a sales pitch. I didn’t really need to push for the sale, but she was (going to be) a customer. Ordinary people without artifacts had no use for their magic power, so if it let her save on fuel costs, she’d definitely make her money back in time. Even if it would take a while.

“Hmm, I *do* want to buy one... Sarasa-chan, do you think you could cut me a deal?” Delal-san asked, putting her hands together pleadingly. However, as an alchemist, I couldn’t cut the price so easily...

“Erm, if I mess with the market rate too much, the authorities might get upset about that.”

“Ohh, so there *is* that sort of system in place,” Iris-san said with a nod, as if something had just made sense to her. “The prices never vary much from shop to shop. Even though the quality does sometimes.”

“Ah ha ha... That’s up to the alchemist’s skills. There are baseline prices for everything. Of course, since materials may be harder or easier to come by

depending on where you are, there's some amount of regional variation."

I had said they would "get upset," but as a matter of national policy, the state aimed to increase the number of quality alchemists, and were taking steps to accomplish that.

Establishing the Alchemist Academy, providing scholarships, and increasing the influence of alchemists. If I actually did something that worked against all of that, then the response would be more than them just "getting upset."

I'd be going up against the government. Naturally, I couldn't say what, specifically, might happen to me though.

"If that's the situation, I can't push you... What if I were to buy two of them?"

"Huh? Two? If you're serious, I could give you a ten percent discount..."

That's still within the allowable range—

"Sold! I'll have two!"

"Whaa?! Really? You're sure? You don't have to talk it over with your husband?"

She decided on the spot?!

Even after the ten percent discount, it was still two hundred and seventy thousand rhea. That was equivalent to the annual income of the average household. Even now that I was a working alchemist, I still would have hesitated a bit at that price.

"He's not going to mind! An inn-and-restaurant like ours burns through firewood like you wouldn't believe. Once you consider the cost of buying and storing all that firewood, and the time that we'll save not having to chop it anymore, it's not that expensive at all!"

That makes sense. I seem to recall the orphanage could go through an awful lot of firewood in the winter too.

The older children would go and gather firewood in the forest, and then we'd all split the wood together... It was a lot of work. It took up a lot of space too, so we had piles of firewood inside the hallways. For people who bought their firewood, there wasn't the need to let it pile up like that, but of course the

orphanage didn't have that kind of money.

"And we just had a windfall anyway. Those bears from the other day. You're the one who got us the money for the pelts, right, Sarasa-chan? I need to make sure at least some of it makes its way back to you."

"Oh, so the mayor already paid everyone."

"We've received our share too. Right, Kate?"

"Yeah. It was a pretty hefty sum. He said it was because we contributed so much."

They really had done a lot. They'd done so much that it was hard to believe they'd lost to a hellflame grizzly and wound up in debt because of it.

Although, I'm sure that only happened because they'd had people getting in their way at the time.

"Well, there you have it. Us villagers are all a bit flush with cash right now. Besides, I'll be able to go on using the magic stove forever, right?"

"Um, no, not forever. The magic crystal degrades over time. I can guarantee that it will stand up to being used all day for around thirty years, but you're going to need to buy a replacement once it breaks."

"If we get thirty years out of it, that's good enough! You're so honest, Sarasa-chan. If it lasts a whole thirty years, you might as well just say it'll last forever."

No, I plan to be honest and forthright in all of my business. Trust is valuable, after all.

To be fair, since only an alchemist could replace the magic crystal, if there wasn't an alchemist in the village when the time came, it might actually be cheaper to buy a new one. Repairs would incur the cost of shipping it both ways, while a new one only had to be shipped in one direction.

As you might have guessed based on the price Darna-san had quoted her, the cost of shipping was ridiculous.

"As for other things you need to consider... I guess there's the fact that the stove has a wooden frame that you'll need to replace occasionally? It wouldn't be an issue if you were able to keep it clean, but since you'll be cooking, it's

inevitable that it will get wet and other things will happen. It's just made of ordinary wood though, so I think Geberk-san will be able to take care of it just fine."

"Ah ha ha! Old Geberk'll have kicked the bucket by then!"

"Well, I'd like to think he'll probably still be alive and kicking."

I'd heard that he was seventy years old, so I couldn't disagree with her, but I wasn't going to just say, "Yeah, you're probably right." Not given the subject matter.

"Um, Delal-san?" Lorea-chan interjected. "Where's lunch? I'm hungry."

"Oops, sorry about that, Lorea. I'll bring it right on out. Okay, Sarasa-chan, I'm counting on you!"

"Sure, and thank you for your order!"

Delal-san retreated into the kitchen, and then, true to her word, she immediately returned with lunch for the four of us.

We smacked our lips at those lunches which were "reliably delicious, despite how inexpensive they were." Then, on the way back, we dropped by Jizdo-san's place, where I ordered the additional iron plates for Delal's stove before heading home.



It was surprisingly simple to make a magic stove. There were two iron plates, and all I had to do was paint a circuit on one of them using a special ink. If I was making the standard model, I could copy the pattern straight out of the *Complete Alchemy Works*.

"It's a simple enough process. It's just a pain to actually do it."

The difficulty lay in copying the pattern without making any mistakes, and ensuring a constant flow of magic power while doing so. Both were just a basic part of alchemy, so as long as I worked carefully, I wasn't going to mess up.

Once the circuit was finished, I bored a hole for the magic crystal. Then, once the magic crystal was in place, I fitted the two iron plates together.

If all I wanted was to generate heat, then I'd be done at this point, but it wasn't ready to be used like this. Or rather, you *could* use it, but you'd burn yourself. Because you'd end up having to touch the metal directly when you poured magic power into the magic crystal.

Pretty obvious, right?

That was fine when you were first heating it up, but it would be burning hot when adjusting the heat, or turning it off.

So I built a shallow wooden box that was about twice the size, filled the bottom with heat-resistant clay, and laid the iron plates inside it.

If I put it in the alchemic cauldron for processing, the clay would harden, but despite its heat-resistant properties, this clay had one drawback: it was quite brittle once it hardened.

One hard impact to the wooden frame and the clay inside would break to pieces. Obviously, that meant it had to be shipped carefully. That was part of why shipping it was so expensive.

The final steps were to fill the gaps between the iron plates and the clay with resin, apply a rust-proof coating to the iron, and treat the whole thing to be waterproof. With that, the standard-model magic stove, which was good for thirty years, was all done.

There were variants like the high-efficiency type for those with little magic power, or the high-power variety that Delal-san had ordered for her restaurant, but there was basically no chance of me selling either of those in this village.

Delal-san's probably my first and last customer.

"Even if I displayed them in the shop, they probably wouldn't sell. Not even the basic model would."

The basic type still cost a hundred to a hundred and fifty thousand rhea. Mine was projected to cost a hundred and twenty thousand. It would pay itself off over a period of ten to twenty years, the lack of soot made cleaning easier, and it didn't require firewood, which were all good things, but the price put it out of reach for the common people.

“Okay... It heats up. And I can adjust the temperature. It’s a success!”

I nodded to myself as I ran magical power through the stove, testing that everything was working as it was intended to.

“Now I just have to install it... Ack it’s as heavy as I thought!”

The thing weighed over twenty kilos. That wasn’t a problem once it was in place, but it was heavier than I could move without using physical enhancement.

I just accepted that fact and carried it into the kitchen using physical enhancement, then put it in the spot where I thought there had previously been a magic stove...

Yep, fits perfectly. I’d measured the space before I built it, so it wasn’t loose at all.

“Oh, Sarasa-san, it’s finished?” Lorea-chan asked.

“Yep. Sure is.”

Having noticed me mucking around in the kitchen, Lorea-chan and Kate-san came over to have a look at the freshly installed magic stove.

Oh, yeah. For mundane people like them, this is their first time seeing one, huh?

“As for how to use it... How about I make some tea to show you?”

“I’ll get things ready!”

Delighted at the prospect of using the magic stove, Lorea-chan immediately prepared the kettle by filling it with water drawn from the well and putting in the tea leaves before she handed it to me.

“Thanks. You put it in the center of the stove, and then... Fire it up!”

Well, since there’s no fire, I guess it’s strange to say that? Oh, whatever. The magic furnace doesn’t have a fire either, but I still talk as if it does.

“Mm-hm, so I just push here?”

“Yep. This part with the line. The left end is minimum, and the right end is

maximum. When you want to turn it off, press here. The magic power will automatically be absorbed, so you don't need to consciously do anything."

As I was explaining, the kettle came to a boil, and tea was ready.

"Now I just pour this into cups, and... Here you go."

A pretty green liquid poured out of the mouth of the kettle. This was suya tea, the kind of tea that people most commonly drank in this village. All you needed to do was throw the leaves of the suya plant, which grew everywhere, into the kettle. It tasted a bit green, but it was nice in its own way.

Despite its slightly quirky flavor, the cool, refreshing aroma wasn't half bad.

I can overlook its faults, considering it's free.

"Whew," Kate-san said after taking a sip. "I'd never had this tea before coming to this village, but it's not bad."

"I know, right? Although, it would have been nice to be able to serve it in proper cups so you could enjoy the color as well."

Lorea-chan got an awkward look on her face when I said this. "Sorry. For not selling proper teacups..."

Whoops, I bought these cups from Lorea-chan.

"Oh, I'm not faulting the general store. They're breakables, so I'm sure shipping them can't be easy. Besides, even if you did stock them, they wouldn't sell out here. So, yeah, it's understandable."

In the more affluent houses in the capital, they used glass or porcelain tableware. But those broke easily, and were a bit expensive, so they weren't that common in ordinary households.

Naturally, that had an impact on what merchants stocked. If a town didn't have a glassblower or a potter, then there were hardly any for sale.

"Hmmm, should I try making my own? I do have a glass furnace."

If I used the glass furnace that I had for making potion bottles, making cups would be a piece of cake.

And if they break, then I can just throw the pieces in the furnace and start

over, so maybe it's not even that expensive?

"Hey, that sounds like a great idea," Kate-san replied enthusiastically. "Drinking alcohol out of glass is a totally different experience... Assuming it's *good* alcohol."

"Is that a fact?" I asked.

"The tableware you use does a lot to set the mood. Porcelain cups are nice too, though..."

For some reason, my workshop doesn't have a pottery oven.

There's probably a reason for that, though.

I looked at the vacant space for a magic oven underneath the magic stove. Like the stove, the oven conveniently required no fuel, and the temperature was easy to adjust. It could do everything from warm something already cooked, to bake food at extreme temperatures.

Yeah, with the right settings, it could even be used for firing clay.

There was probably little demand for porcelain in a village like this, so the former owner had likely been using it in place of a pottery oven.

"Well, maybe I'll make some if the mood takes me. Do you want to try too, Lorea-chan?"

"Huh?! Isn't it difficult...?"

"Hmm, maybe if you were trying to make something using a potter's wheel, but just some cups shouldn't be that hard, I guess?"

You had to be careful of the heat when blowing glass, but shaping clay for pottery was just like playing with mud.

Once I gave her a simple explanation of the process, Lorea-chan thought it over for a bit before looking at me with upturned eyes and hesitantly saying, "Well, in that case... I'll join you when you do yours. Is that okay?"

"Sure. Let's try it together when we have time," I replied with a grin.

Kate-san raised her hand a little. "Do you think I could get in on this too?"

"You want to try it too, Kate-san? I don't really mind. The base materials are

cheap.”

“Thanks! I was a little bit curious. You sure can do all sorts of stuff, huh, Shopkeeper-san? I guess that comes with the territory, being an alchemist.”

“They don’t make the certification hard to get for nothing.”

“It’s that hard, huh? I only know about it through rumors.”

“Oh, you bet it’s hard. I’m sure it’s widely known how hard it is to get into the Academy, but even once you’re in, they’ll chase you out in no time if your grades are bad.”

Alchemy was connected to all sorts of trade skills. Glassblowing, pottery, woodworking, and more. While they didn’t demand a particularly high degree of ability in any of them, you couldn’t just say, “I can’t do it.”

If you weren’t at least up to the level of an apprentice in those trades, then you weren’t going to get the credit. Which, by extension, meant they’d chuck you out of the Academy.

The trade-off was that they provided a proper environment to work in, and even an orphan like me was able to practice there outside regular school hours without ever being charged for the usage of the facilities.

The glass can be reused, but I feel like the other materials must have cost them a fair amount... I have a lot to be grateful for.

“And the result of that is alchemists who can do all sorts of things, huh? You were even able to outdo us in our own field of expertise.”

“Ha ha ha... But wouldn’t you hate it if the alchemists that the state spends so much money training and has elevated to such a high position in society were actually no big deal?”

“Maybe it’s easier to accept when it’s someone so incredible? At least, compared to them giving favorable treatment to a bunch of incompetents.”

Possibly remembering something unpleasant, Kate-san said the last of those words in a quiet voice, spitting them out with distaste. But she was soon smiling again, as if she had never made the remark in the first place.

“That magic stove sure will be convenient, though. If we could carry it around,

it'd make camping a lot easier for the gatherers... Do you think it's possible?"

"Umm... Maybe if you have a lot of stamina?"

"Right, it's made with iron plates, after all."

My somewhat vague answer might have reminded her of the trouble Iris-san had had lugging around the iron plates. Kate-san's smile looked a bit pained.

If they didn't need much firepower, then it could be made a little more compact. Even at around a fourth of the size, it could still boil water, which would be enough for some simple dishes.

The issue was the price, though. Even at one-fourth the size, it wouldn't be a quarter the price.

The price might be the same...or even higher, maybe. The circuit was no less difficult to draw, and given that it was smaller, I'd have to be even more careful doing it.

"It'd break if you dropped it too. That only leaves...if you have the money, I guess? If you had a bag with the weight reduction or capacity enlargement effects, you could probably manage it."

"Shopkeeper-san..." Kate-san informed me in a somewhat exasperated tone, "anyone with that kind of money wouldn't become a gatherer."

"Yeah, go figure," I agreed with a wry smile.

I got one for free, though! From Master.

"Delal-san really is the only one who can buy a magic stove around here. My folks have money too, at least by this village's standards, but even we wouldn't be able to buy one," Lorea-chan said, shaking her head.

"Go figure." I had to nod in agreement.

Yeah, I'm not putting one of these on display in the shop.

"How about the basic antidotes that we put on the shelf recently? Have the villagers been buying those?" I asked.

They're good for bug bites and food poisoning. These potions are reasonably priced, and they're pretty convenient, so I'd like to see one in every house.

Even the orphanage had kept them on hand in case of emergencies. Not that I ever saw them used, though.

Those were for babies, or very small children. Because if you didn't have much stamina, then even food poisoning could be enough to kill you.

I was hoping that maybe now that the incident had enriched the villagers a little bit, they might be able to come to the shop more easily, but...

"Here and there. Mom spread the word about them, but it's still only one bottle per house. There have been more people coming into the shop for the first time, though."

"Urgh, thanks. Give my regards to Mary-san too," I said with disappointment. "But yeah, I guess that's right. They aren't something you'd buy frequently."

My potion-bottle return program made things cheaper, but not to the point where people would be using them on a daily basis.

It gives them a reason to come to the shop, but if I don't have anything else for them to buy, that doesn't do much good.

"Right... I'll have to think about it again later. Right now, it's time for tea... Oh, I know. I still have some of the sweets I picked up last time I was in South Strag. Would you two like some?"

"A-Are you sure?"

"It's been ages since I've had any treats like this. Thanks, Shopkeeper-san."

"Don't worry about it. I know I always want a sweet snack with my tea!"

Working requires nourishment for both the heart and the body. That was the excuse I made to myself as the three of us spent some time enjoying our little tea party...

...completely forgetting to invite Iris-san.

Until the door chimed as she came in, that is.

"Whew, I worked up a good sweat. Shopkeeper-dono, would you mind if I used the bath to... What?! Th-The three of you have been having tea time?! H-Have I been snubbed?!"

“Ah...”

Two of us let out an involuntary groan as a trembling Iris-san thrust a finger toward the snacks on the table.



Although we'd ended up sitting down for tea, Iris-san had been out training with her sword since early that morning.

I quickly turned to Kate-san, but she seemed to be actively averting her eyes.

Meanwhile, her hand kept subtly securing sweets for herself.

Obviously, Iris-san did not fail to notice this.

"K-Kate, you did this intentionally! Damn it! I'll get you for this!"

"Ahh!"

Iris-san seized Kate-san's stock of sweets, then began stuffing them into her own mouth one after another.

"Mmm! Delicious!" she declared, followed by, "Urgh!"

Kate-san sighed. "This is what you get for wolfing them down like that..." She offered Iris-san a cup of tea with a sardonic smile.

Her partner hurriedly took it and drank the whole thing in one gulp.

"Whew..." Iris-san brought a hand to her chest and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Um, are you okay?" I asked.

"Yes," she said with a nod. "It's not a problem. But Shopkeeper-dono, if you were going to have a tea party, I wish you'd have invited me." Iris-san sounded a little bit sulky.

"Sorry, at first we were just making a pot of tea..."

When I pointed to the magic stove, Iris-san seemed to understand what had happened, and she nodded again. "Is that it? Ohh, it's finished, then. In that case, so long as you take greater care in future, it's not a problem. You could start right now."

I smiled ironically as Iris-san plunked herself down with a big grin next to Kate-san. I got up and went to pour her a cup of tea.



The additional iron plates were ready a few days later.

Hearing my name, I headed out in front of the shop, where I found Jiname-

san drenched with sweat and leaning against the cart for support.

“W-Working hard today, Sarasa-san?”

“Sure am. Looks like you’ve been too.”

“Yes, these things are pretty heavy.”

The sixteen iron plates—four of which were the thicker variety used in industrial magic stoves—really weighed down the cart, causing it to leave thick ruts in the ground. It might not have been so bad if the road were cobblestone, but this was the outskirts of the village. Not only was the road not paved, but it also didn’t see much traffic, so it wasn’t in the best shape.

“I hate to trouble you, but could I get some help carrying these inside? Erm... Are Iris-san and Kate-san around?”

“They’re working today. But it’s fine. I’ll carry the plates by myself. Hold on for just a moment.”

I went and got some protective gloves from the workshop, then inspected the iron plates while they were still on the cart. The four industrial-iron plates were pretty big.

I should probably refrain from carrying these all at once. I mean, if they slipped out of my hands, or if I got a finger caught between them, that would probably lead to broken bones.

“Um, Sarasa-san...?”

“Upsy-daisy!”

As I picked up the twelve iron plates for the magic oven, Jiname-san’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Huh?! How...? It took me and my husband both working together to lift even *one* of them when we were loading the cart!”

It may have seemed mysterious, if one were to look only at how I was built. However...

“It’s magic. Besides, if I couldn’t lift them myself, how would I ever be able to work with them?”

“You have a point there, but...honestly, given your size, it just looks wrong...”

Ha ha ha... These iron plates easily weigh more than I do, so maybe it does look a little bizarre.

“I’m not the best at this kind of magic, but every alchemist needs to be able to do it. When we’re first starting out, even us alchemists don’t have the funds to hire help.”

It’d be pretty embarrassing to have to turn down a request for a reason like “That artifact’s too heavy for me to make.”

“Wow. I feel like it would help a lot at our smithy too... Is it hard to do?”

“It doesn’t take much magical power, but it’s still reasonably difficult.”

The delicate control of magical energy was key to the technique. It was the sort of magic that was well suited to an alchemist, but many mages prioritized firepower over control, so they couldn’t do it.

By the way, although I was actually quite skilled at controlling my magical power, there was another factor holding me back.

I just lack the basic muscle strength. That’s all.

If other people could manage with an increase of thirty percent, then I needed to use double the power and precision to achieve my goal of sixty percent.

I know, it’s my fault for not working out more.

In my life so far, I’d dumped all my points into intelligence while neglecting my stamina.

I’ve graduated now, so it’s time to slowly work on that.

For now, I was keeping up with the sword training that Master told me to do.

“And that’s the last of them... Oof. Thank you, Jiname-san.”

After three trips to the workshop and back, I took off my gloves and caught my breath.

“I should be thanking you. I ultimately ended up letting you carry them in yourself.”

“It’d actually have been harder trying to carry them through the hallway with

two people, so it's no problem."

The iron plates were fifty centimeters across, so as long as I could lift them up, it was easier to carry them myself.

"So these are going to become magic stoves for Delal-san's place, huh?"

"Yep, she put in an order."

"If magic can power a stove, could it power a furnace for the smithy too? After all, we go through a lot of fuel too, when smithing."

"It can."

"It can?!"

"Yes." I nodded. In fact, I even had a small one in my own workshop.

"If we had that, we wouldn't need fuel, right?"

"Yes, but you'll find that hardly any smithies use them."

"Is that right? I would think not needing fuel would be highly convenient... Is it because they're expensive?"

"There are some smiths who see the very idea of using a magic-powered furnace as heresy, but really, it's more a matter of magical power than of price."

While it didn't require charcoal to run, the issue was the magical capacity it demanded of the user. Unless some special work was done on the furnace, like how there were magic stoves designed for people who had less magic power, the heat generated was proportionate to the amount of magical power used.

The stove only needed to bring water to a boil, but a furnace needed to be able to melt metal. That took more than twice as much magical power. The reason we alchemists were able to use them was that, in addition to having a higher capacity for magical power than the average person, the furnaces we used were smaller, and we used them for less time than a smith would.

If they spent all day working the forge, even many alchemists would find that they didn't have enough magical power for it. It was theoretically possible to create a high-efficiency magic furnace, but considering the cost, it wasn't something any normal blacksmith could get.

When I explained all of this to Jiname-san, she nodded, looking disappointed. “I see how it is. Not everything can work out, I suppose.”

“There are some smiths with an overabundance of magical power who use them, but...they’re in the minority.”

I cast her a look that asked, *How about Jizdo-san?* But Jiname-san simply shook her head.

“Well, as you could probably tell from the fact you hadn’t heard about them, they aren’t exactly common. There are other artifacts that could come in handy for a smith, but craftsmen are particular about the tools they use, so I hear that they tend not to sell very well.”

“Ahh, I can understand that. My husband can be that way too.”

There were hammers that were light but had striking power, automatic bellows, and clay that would assume any form you could imagine. For larger items, there was even a sledgehammer that could repeatedly strike with power greater than any human could muster, but it wasn’t that popular with smiths.

I’m sure it’s convenient, but there are some things that they just can’t compromise on.

After watching Jiname-san depart with her lightened cart, I got right to work on creating the magic stoves.

These ones are bigger, but what I need to do is fundamentally the same.

“If anything’s going to be a problem, it’s my stamina...”

When drawing the circuits, I couldn’t move the iron plate while drawing, like I might with a piece of paper. Instead, I had to move around the table that the plate was sitting on, drawing the intricate design.

By the time I was fitting the iron plates together, putting them into a box with clay, and then dropping it all into the alchemic cauldron, it would easily weigh more than I did.

And there were two of them this time.

That’s super-duper heavy. I lifted one with a grunt of exertion, tenderly put it

into the mouth of the cauldron, and then leaned the rest against the side.

“Whew. I feel like putting plates into a cauldron that has a rounded bottom is already a mistake to begin with.”

It'd be easier if my cauldron was like a shallow pot or a frying pan. But that would be inconvenient when brewing potions, so the use of one like that would be limited.

Alchemic cauldrons were expensive, so having different cauldrons to use for different purposes was out of the question.

Once the stuff's in there, it's simple to process it. It just kind of takes a lot of magical power, that's all.

“And getting them back out will be even more trouble... Oh? Now that I think about it, isn't this...?”

I pulled the alchemic cauldron down off the magic furnace, and then turned it sideways. The magic stove slid out.

“Wow, that was easy... Why have I been making things so difficult for myself?”

Maybe I should've handled the processing with the cauldron on its side?

I wasn't adding any liquids, so it wasn't like that would present any problem.

“Next time I make artifacts, I'm using it sideways. Definitely.”

Actually, maybe I should even keep it on an angle when I'm brewing potions too? My height makes using a cauldron like this a little tough, you know?

“Wasn't there a potion that could increase your height...?”

Even though I was an alchemist, it wasn't as if I knew every single artifact and potion. In fact, it might be fair to say I only knew the ones in the volumes I could read.

Although, I was aware of others that were particularly famous or strange.

Like the balding potion. I hear that one's in volume 10.

Yes, volume 10. The one that was crammed full of useless stuff.

This particularly useless recipe had come to be when someone had failed to create a potion that cured baldness, and... Well, I'd bet that whoever had the dubious honor of creating it had been left in tears. They must have applied it thinking they would grow more hair, only for what hair they did have left to fall out.

And yet, there was surprising demand for this balding potion. It was easy on the skin and had a dramatic effect, so it was really popular as a hair removal solution for people who were too lazy to shave, or who needed to keep their head bald for religious reasons.

Anyway, that's all really niche though. If there's a potion for something like that, then I figure there's got to be a potion that can increase my height too.

But I was hesitant to use potions to modify the body my parents gave me. It wasn't like my height was an illness.

Maybe if it was one that promotes healthy growth, that might still be within the limits of what I'd be okay with?

"But more importantly, I need to finish up my work."

These were going to be used at a restaurant, where they would see more use than usual, so I applied rustproofing and waterproofing to them more carefully than I normally would have.

"Gotta cover the back too. Paint here, paint there."

Unlike my own magic stove, which was embedded in the counter, Delal-san's pair was being installed afterward.

If she would just be putting them on top of her traditional stove, then it seemed pretty likely that the bottoms would get dirty too.

I've gotta think of the person using them and take care of these things...

"Okay, all done. Now I just wait until tomorrow for it to dry!"

So long as I had the magic crystals prepared in advance, the total completion time was only a few hours.

Following nearly the same process, I quickly made my own magic oven, and that was it for work that day.



The following day, I waited until the restaurant's slow hours and then went to deliver the finished magic stoves. Lacking a cart of my own, I stacked the two of them and carried them on my back.

I must have made an odd sight, because Iris-san and Kate-san said things like, "Would you like me to carry them?" and "You're not going to get squished, are you, Shopkeeper-san?" But I told them it wasn't a problem and sent them off to work.

They're easily over a hundred kilos, but it's not like I can't carry them.

My destination was in the same village. I only had to take them so far. I had considered borrowing a cart, but they'd break if they fell off of it, and I was scared of the shaky roads.

But... Yeah, these are pretty heavy, in the end.

If I slipped up and dropped my physical enhancement, I'd definitely be crushed.

I walked for a bit over ten minutes with that threat hanging over me. Along the way, I had several villagers say things like "What's wrong, Sarasa-chan?!" and "C-Can I help you with that?" But it would be more dangerous if they got involved without being ready for it, so I stubbornly turned them down with a strained smile and somehow managed to make it to the restaurant.

"Good morning. Delal-san, I've got a delivery for youuuuuu."

"Good mor— S-Sarasa-chan? Set those down for a moment, would you!" Delal-san said in a panic, pointing to an empty table.

I did as she suggested and carefully set the magic stoves down. The table creaked under their weight, and my back was freed from its burden.

"Whew. I've gotta admit, that tired me out a bit..."

I let out a big sigh and wiped the sweat from my brow. Delal-san put her hands on her hips and looked at me with mild exasperation.

"Sarasa-chan, if you'd just sent word, I'd have brought along some young guys and come to pick them up myself. I mean, you're already giving us a discount!"

“No, if I accept an order, I’m going to see that it’s properly delivered.”

These things were expensive, so if they got damaged in shipping, I’d feel bad for whoever was delivering them.

“So, where do you want them?” I asked, pointing to the two magic stoves that were now sitting on the table.

“Oh, don’t you worry about that,” Delal-san replied casually. “If you’ll just tell us how to use them, we’ll get them installed ourselves. You can just leave them there, okay?”

But...

“You sure? These are really heavy, you know? They probably weigh more than you.”

“Ah ha ha! That’s some heavyweight equipment, then.”

Maybe she thought I was joking, because Delal-san casually laughed it off.

“Um, I’m serious. Would you like to try lifting one? They’re seriously heavy, so be careful you don’t throw your back out, okay?”

Once she’d been adequately warned, I stepped aside so that Delal-san could approach the table. She was probably assuming she could handle it because she’d seen me carry them in, but...I felt uneasy about it, so I got ready to step in if I needed to.

“Oof...! Hm? Nngh?!”

Delal-san tried to lift both stoves, but then she stopped moving entirely.

“They’re heavy, right? Their combined weight is easily over a hundred kilos.”

“Whaaa?! They’re that heavy?!”

“Yep. I doubt even you can lift them, Delal-san.”

“You’ve got that right... Dud, come over here a minute!” Delal-san shouted at the back, causing Dudley-san to poke his head out of the kitchen.

He was Delal-san’s husband, the man who was responsible for creating all the delightful dishes served here at the restaurant. He was a kind man with a mild personality, but was rather taciturn, so I hardly ever heard him talk.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I’ll carry them.” I held up a hand to stop Dudley-san as he started to come over, then picked up one of the stoves myself.

“Huh?! Sarasa-chan, you can lift... Wait, that’s right. You were the one who brought them here in the first place.”

“Yep, I’m an alchemist, after all. I can do physical enhancement. Dudley-san, do you mind if I come into the kitchen?”

I waited until Dudley-san nodded, then carried in the stoves.

“Let’s see, now where to put these...”

As I looked around the kitchen that I was entering for the first time, Dudley-san pointed toward the back. There were two traditional stoves there, side by side, each larger than what you would see in a home setting. Because there were fewer customers at this time of day, their fires had been put out.

I looked at Dudley-san, who immediately nodded, then set about removing the pots from on top of the stove. He then put a thick board that was sitting at the side over the top of them to cover the holes.

“Sorry for the trouble, Sarasa-chan. Can you set the two of them side by side there?”

“Sure thing. Upsy-daisy!”

As I might have expected given the size of the massive pot that they used, there was plenty of space for two magic stoves. I soon brought in the other one, placing it beside the first.

“Whew.”

That was the delivery complete. Now I just had to test that they worked.

“That looked hard. Thanks for your trouble.”

“No, thank *you* for buying them. I’ll explain how they work now.”

That said, using a magic stove was simplicity itself. Dudley-san soon mastered it. He put a pot of water on top of the stove, and nodded to himself as he adjusted the heat up and down.

“It sure is convenient to be able to control the heat,” commented Delal-san.

“When we were using firewood, it was a real headache.”

“It takes some time to go from ‘high’ to ‘low,’ though. The iron plate needs to cool.”

The downside was that you couldn’t go immediately from high heat to low heat when the food started to burn. In a home setting, you’d just pull the pot off the stove, but with a massive industrial pot like they were using...

“It’ll be fine,” Delal-san reassured me. “We just need to set the heat to ‘low’ a little while before we want it lowered, right? It’s just a matter of getting used to it. Right, Dud?”

Even when she turned to him for a response, Dudley-san was still silent, nodding magnanimously.

Dudley-san sure is a quiet one, isn’t he? It’s a good balance with Delal-san, who’s always chatty.

By the way, the heat on a wood stove was adjusted by adding or removing the logs that it burned. But that was a pro technique. In a home setting, people just took the pot off the fire, and cooked things like soup where the level of heat had minimal effect.

At the orphanage, almost all of our meals were either hodgepodge stew or bread. There was a decent amount of ingredients, but we had to cook it for ourselves, so it never tasted all that good.

Even if her skills were a bit lacking, Lorea-chan could do more than just boil; she could bake things too. So, compared to what I’d had at the orphanage, her food was more than delicious enough for me.

And she’s rapidly improving with the cookbook I gave her the other day.

“All right, Sarasa-chan. You’ve delivered the goods, so here’s your payment. Check that it’s all there, please.”

“Oh, sure.”

As I was recalling the meager meals that I’d subsisted on back then, and started tearing up a bit internally, Delal-san brought over a bag clinking with coins and held it out toward me.

I took the heavy bag and set it down on the table to count.

The price was two hundred and seventy thousand rhea. That would be twenty large gold coins and seven standard gold coins. But it was rare to use large golds in ordinary business, and this restaurant catered to the common folk, so even standard golds were uncommon here.

That meant most of the coins on the table were standard silver or small silver.

“Yep, it’s all there. Thank you for your purchase.”

“Sure thing. It’s a big help to us too, being able to buy one so cheaply. This will make life a lot easier. Splitting firewood can be such a hassle...”

As emotion crept into Delal-san’s voice, Dudley-san, who was behind her, already cooking on the new magic stoves, gave a deep nod.

I didn’t know how much wood a restaurant of this size went through in a year, but I could easily imagine it was no small amount.

And if they were splitting it all themselves... Ahh, I see now. Maybe that’s how Delal-san got those muscles?

“I do think the stoves are convenient, but the problem is I probably won’t be able to sell them to anyone else.”

“Not in this village. But recent events have put a little coin in all of our pockets, so if you have things that are convenient, but not too expensive, they might sell.”

“You could be right. I’ll put some thought into it.”

I had been putting off thinking about what to stock the shelves with for the villagers. *I really should have something for them, though.*

But I needed to think of ways for them to pay me too. It wouldn’t be good for the village’s development if I sucked up all their cash.

“Let us know if you come out with anything good. If there’s room in the budget, we’ll be sure to buy it!” Delal-san said, slapping her belly.

“Sure. I’ll be counting on that when I do.”

I said my goodbyes to her and then racked my brains over what to make as I

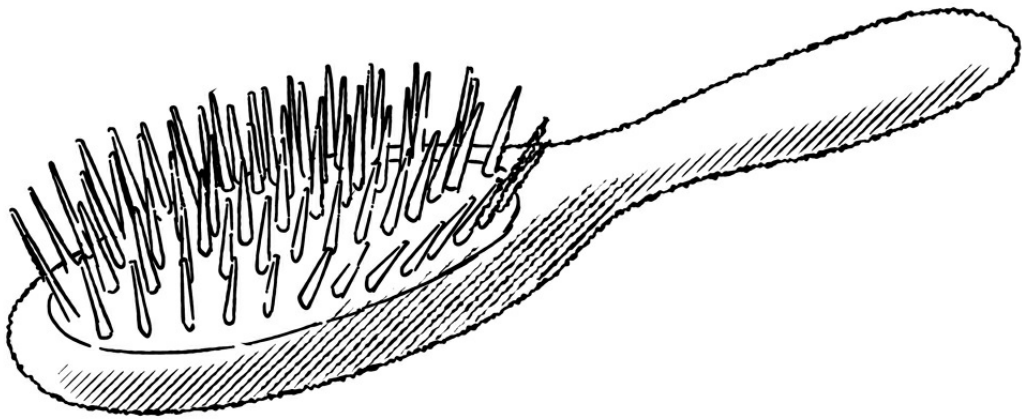
headed back to the shop.

No. 004

Appears in: *Complete Alchemy Works* Volume 4

Difficulty: Very Hard

Standard Price: ~25,000 Rhea



〈 Glosser Brush 〉

Glfssffflfk
Afkush

Does your hair lack bounce, moisture, and volume? You should give this brush a try. After just a light brushing, you can go out on the town with glossy hair that makes heads turn. But whether you have what it takes to take things one step further and elevate that gloss to true glamour will be up to you.

Episode 2: Developing New Products

“So that’s how it is, Lorea-chan. Do you have any good ideas?”

Having racked my brain to no avail, I turned to Lorea-chan for help.

“Products for the villagers? The way I see it, the things that you’ve already been making are good enough, Sarasa-san.”

“Like this? The water pump?”

I was currently working on part three of our Convenient Kitchen Plan, an artifact to automatically supply water to the kitchen and bath. (In case you’re wondering, parts one and two were the magic stove and oven.)

“It’s convenient, but there aren’t many houses with wells, are there?”

“Oh, right...” Lorea-chan stuck her tongue out in embarrassment. “I guess you’d only be able to sell a few here in this village.”

“Besides,” I added with a forced smile, explaining another problem with the idea, “it eats magical power too.”

I had enough magical power to handle it without issue obviously, and so did the other three who lived with me. But there were some people out there with practically no magical power. If we attached one to the common well, we might end up with people who complained, *“I can’t draw water!”*

“I can deal with that problem by including a magic crystal, but it would make them just that much more expensive...”

“So long as most people can use it, wouldn’t it be fine? I’m sure there will be someone in their family who can do it. They can send that person to draw water.”

“I see... That’s one way of looking at it, huh?”

It seemed Lorea-chan saw things differently. Even if it used magical power, the vast majority of people would still be able to draw a day’s supply of water for their whole family. Particularly in this village, where only a small handful of

people, like Delal-san, were using any other artifacts. It was hard to imagine them running short of magical power.

If I were to look for a problem, it would be that anyone who lived alone and had no magical power would be in trouble, but I feel like maybe that's not going to be an issue in this village?

There was almost nobody who lived alone, and the villagers all knew each other, so it would be easy to ask someone they knew to provide the magical power for them.

“Oh, but hold on. What if there's a pair of brothers, and only one of them can use it...? If he's always the one being sent to fetch water for the family, do you think he'd resent me for it?”

Lorea-chan just looked at me with exasperation. “You're worrying way too much. If drawing the water is easy, it's just a matter of carrying it. His brother can go with him and help carry it back.”

“Yeah, I guess he could, huh?”

I was an only child, and my lack of experience with this sort of thing was readily apparent.

Even at the orphanage, I'd left chores like drawing water to other people...

Come to think of it, has Master been sending them the money like she's supposed to?

I'd asked her to give ten percent of the sale price of any materials that I sent her to the orphanage. Once I was able to make more money, I wanted to pay them back for everything they'd done for me.

I'm sure all the kids my age, who helped out so that I could study, have mostly left, but the director helped me too, and it's the donations given by the older generation that keep the orphanage running for the younger ones.

“If I'm going to get one put on the communal well...I guess it's the mayor that I'd have to sell it to, then?”

It's the mayor's job to pay for that sort of thing, right? But he paid out the money I gave him to the villagers, so maybe he doesn't have much left. Our

mayor's not exactly living a lavish lifestyle.

"Oh, why don't you let me handle it, then? I know him better than you do."

"You don't mind?"

"Not at all. I think it'll go better if I talk to Erin-san about this sort of thing."

Erin-san is the mayor's daughter, right?

I don't really know, but if Lorea-chan says so, I'll let her take care of it.

"Well, can you do it, then?"

"Leave it to me! I'll do my best as an employee of this shop!"

With the pump and water pipes installed, our Convenient Kitchen Plan entered its final stage.

Parts four and five were a refrigerator and a freezer.

No, I guess there's no need to separate them?

It was just a difference in the cooling power setting, so I planned to make both of them at the same time.

The only problem was what size to make them, but since I was leaving all the cooking to Lorea-chan...

"Hey, Lorea-chan. About how big should the refrigerator and freezer be?"

"Erm... I've never used one, so I wouldn't know..." she responded, sounding bewildered. I nodded, understanding.

It's hard to give an answer about something you don't know.

"It's really just a question of how much stuff we want to be able to store..."

If she didn't have an answer, then the bigger the better. If I went out into the woods to hunt boars, they weren't going to fit in a tiny refrigerator, and if I went out to hunt bears, I was going to want one the size of a small room.

If I have cold storage, that will give me more time to process alchemic materials too... Oh, no, I guess that won't work. Because there are a lot of materials that I'd be pretty hesitant to put next to things that we're going to

eat.

“Sarasa-san, why don’t you decide based on where we’re going to put it? There’s only so much room in the kitchen, after all.”

“Ohh, good point, Lorea-chan. You’re already thinking like a housewife.”

“I’m not a housewife, but I *am* the one who’s going to be using the kitchen the most.”

“You sure are. Okay, Lorea-chan, let’s get measuring!”

There was actually a lot of spare room in the kitchen. All that we had in here so far was a table and chairs, along with some wooden boxes that were full of ingredients. Even when the dishes were washed, we were just putting them on the table with a cloth thrown over them to protect them from the dust... Maybe it was time to order some shelves for them?

“Need to think about that too...”

Space for the shelves, and for the refrigerator and freezer. I should factor in my height, and Lorea-chan’s too...

“If I make it about as tall as I am, a hundred and fifty centimeters wide, with two-thirds of it being the refrigerator, and one-third being the freezer. How does that sound? It won’t get in the way, will it?”

“Erm... It should be fine when I’m cooking. I can’t say anything more than that, though...”

Well, it is an artifact she’s never used before. If it’s not convenient to use, I guess I can always remake it later. Many of the parts will be reusable, so it’s not that big of a waste.

If I were to divide the parts into broad categories, there was the cooling unit, the insulation, and the outer shell.

The first two of those were made with alchemy, so I’d obviously be doing those myself, but the outer shell was pure woodworking.

Outside of the fact that it used thicker boards than usual, it wasn’t any different from making a normal shelf.

“I can ask Geberk-san to handle it. He’ll definitely do a better job than I would.”

It wasn’t that I couldn’t do it myself, but rather, that I knew the extent of Geberk-san’s skills. I wasn’t so conceited as to think that I could possibly outdo him.

“What about the cooling core? Do I use a magic crystal, or find another material...?”

“There are multiple ways to make one?”

“Yep, that’s right. I wouldn’t say there’s always several ways to do it, but there’s generally at least two. If there was only one way, then it’d be impossible to make it if even one material was unavailable.”

Take the potions used to cure specific diseases, for instance. Normally, we used the most efficient method for making them, but the necessary ingredients weren’t always available. If there was an outbreak, then they were likely to be in short supply.

If there were multiple methods of making them, then that made it all the more likely that we’d be able to use one of them. Although, when working with substitute materials, there were obviously the standard sort of problems, like costs going up or efficiency going down.

“For a cooling core like the one I’ll be making, I guess the most common method is to use a magic crystal. The drawback is that magic crystals are expensive and take some effort to work with, since you have to add the cooling function to them.”

I had to draw a cooling circuit, like the circuits I’d drawn for the magic stoves.

“The other method is to use a material that already has the ice element. It’s much easier. And generally, it comes out cheaper than using a magic crystal. In places where that sort of thing is available, that is.”

“And is there something like that in this village...?”

“Yep. I think I should be able to get my hands on frostbite bat fangs here...but nobody’s brought any in. I was just agonizing over what to do about that.”

If I post something in the shop, maybe someone will go out and get me some?

Or I could go myself?

If all I do is wait, there's no telling how long it'll take...

"Why don't you try asking Kate-san?"

"Yeah, that sounds like an idea."

It was an eminently reasonable plan. The two of them were professional gatherers, after all.

"Frostbite bats?"

"Yeah, do you know anything about them?"

"Not me... Iris, do you know?"

"Murgh, sorry, I'm afraid not."

I tried asking them at dinner, but that was all I got in response.

"Can these creatures be found in the great forest...near this village?" Iris-san asked.

"Yes," I answered. "There are caves not that far from the village, and I've heard that they live there."

"I never knew... It seems we still have much to learn."

"The two of us haven't been in these parts for long, after all. Maybe Andre-san and the other veterans could tell you more?"

"I think they probably could... But maybe not? If they did know, they might have brought some in by now."

The price of frostbite bat fangs tended to rise with the summer heat.

They're not hard to gather, and it's a good profit. If they knew, they'd be coming in to sell them.

"Would you like us to ask Andre-san and the others to come here tomorrow, Shopkeeper-san?" Kate-san offered.

"Hmm, I'd feel kind of bad making them come all this way..."

“They won’t mind,” Iris-san reassured me. “It’s no big deal for them to drop by this shop on the way to work.”

“You think so? Well, if they’re okay with it, then please do. But I don’t want you pushing them into it, okay?”

“Yeah, leave it to us,” Iris-san responded with a firm nod.

The next morning, I did up some posters while I was waiting for Andre-san.

“‘Seeking Frostbite Bat Fangs’ should do it.”

I scrawled out the title, then added additional notes with information on where they could be found and how to harvest them.

I mean, it sounded like Iris-san and Kate-san didn’t know any of that stuff.

Once the request was posted to the board, I looked at it and took a moment to think. The only things currently posted were my warning about that one dishonest alchemist, and the poster I’d just made. I hadn’t done more with it because I hadn’t had time, but...

“Maybe I should put out more requests? Let’s see... ‘Seeking Whole Spiteworms.’”

“What are you going to make with those?” Lorea-chan asked with fascination as she looked over my shoulder at the poster I was making. I considered my answer for a moment before responding.

“They have a variety of uses, but I guess right now I’d make insect-repellent veils. I think I could market those to the farmers. The current insect repellent is a bit pricey.”

“Oh, that sounds good. I don’t work in the fields often, but the bugs still come after me all summer.”

“These are veils we’re talking about, so they don’t really affect a wide area, but the upside is that I can make them cheap enough that the villagers will probably be able to afford them easily.”

As I was talking to Lorea-chan, I added some warnings to the poster.

“Warning: I will not purchase any that have the bottom half damaged.”

The material I needed was an organ in the lower half of the spiteworm. They were no use to me at all if they were damaged, and even I would have a hard time trying to extract them fully intact out in the forest, so it was safest to simply have people bring in the whole thing. They were only about the size of a person’s thumb anyway, so it wasn’t like a pile of them would get in the way.

They’re found widely, so no need to specify that. And as for a description... No need for that either, I guess. I don’t need anybody reading my lazy description and then bringing in the wrong kind of bug. Anyway, I’d rather the gatherers study up on these things properly on their own.

If they did that, it would increase the number of materials they could bring in, and they’d earn more as a result.

“Okay, that should be good.”

I put up the spiteworm poster.

“Was there anything else...?” I wondered aloud, thinking of any other materials that could be harvested this time of year.

That was when the door opened and a throaty voice announced, “We’re here, Sarasa-chan!”

I looked over to see Andre-san, Gil-san, and Gray-san come in with Iris-san and Kate-san behind them.

“Oh, hey there,” I greeted them. “Thank you for taking the trouble to drop by.”

Andre-san and his team just shrugged and smiled.

“There isn’t a gatherer in this village who wouldn’t come when you called.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Gil-san agreed. “You’ve got a monopoly on potions, and we’ve seen what you can do in a fight.”

“Aww, you’re making it sound like I’m scary.”

I wish they wouldn’t talk like a scary person called them in. I’m just a cute, dainty little girl—even if it’s just me saying that.

“You’re not scary, but you *are* the most capable person around.”

“Not you too, Gray-san. I’m just able to fight a little, okay? I’d be no match for a professional fighter.”

I think Master could take on a knight well enough, but at my level, they’d probably be able to handle me as if I was a literal child. The teachers at the academy were pretty tough too, I guess?

“If you can only fight ‘a little,’ then what does that make the rest of us?” asked Andre-san. “Baby chicks that can’t even fight at all?”

“Well, it’s not a gatherer’s job to fight,” I replied.

As the name implied, their job was to “gather.” Fighting was just one means of accomplishing that. While there were materials that couldn’t be obtained without killing creatures, killing those creatures wasn’t the goal. My view on the matter, however, didn’t seem to find support in the room.

“Uh, generally, gathering is seen as a profession where you have to be able to fight,” Andre-san corrected me.

“You measure things by a different standard, Shopkeeper-dono. At the very least, I can fight reasonably well... Or so I liked to think. Until the other day.” Iris-san’s shoulders slumped.

Andre-san clapped her on the shoulder and tried to encourage her, saying, “Well, I think you fought well enough, young lady.”

“Yeah, you’re quite skilled,” Gray-san agreed with him. “You can be proud of that. Kate too.”

“That was only because we all worked together. I was just supporting the rest of you,” Kate-san responded.

“No, no, your skills with a bow were really something,” Andre-san insisted. “There aren’t many people who can shoot like you did.”

Yeah, Kate-san was incredible. I mean, she was able to put an arrow in the eye of a moving hellflame grizzly. And as for Iris-san... Well, she’s definitely not weak, I guess?

Not that I’m so great that I’m in any position to be judging.

“We seem to have gotten off topic,” Andre-san tried to get us back on track. “So, I’m told you have something to ask us?”

“Oh, that’s right. Do you guys know about frostbite bats?”

“Frostbite bats...?”

My question left them looking at one another and cocking their heads to the side as they thought about it. After some time, Gil-san snapped his fingers as he recalled something and pointed at his gathering partner. “Andre, I’ll bet it’s those creatures! Y’know, the ones Drake-san mentioned.”

“Drake-san... Ohh! Those! The ones that live in the cave up north!” Andre-san clapped his hands together.

“So you do know, then? It’s about this...” I said, gesturing to the poster I’d just put up.

The guys nodded as they read the locations and how to harvest the materials.

“Yeah, these are the ones,” Andre-san confirmed. “We’ve never hunted them ourselves, though...”

It turned out that, while they had been told the creatures existed, they’d never gone along on a hunt, nor had they been taught how to harvest the materials.

This was something the senior gatherers usually taught to their juniors. It was how that sort of knowledge had always been passed down. However, because the village hadn’t had an alchemist for some time, knowledge concerning materials with a short shelf life had died out.

They probably didn’t want to bother gathering materials they knew they wouldn’t be able to sell just to teach the newbies.

Once that situation happened, the only place to learn old techniques was from books, but the issue there was that books were expensive.

Hmmm, I could buy the books myself, and lend them out...but they might get stolen, so maybe it’s better to just make them available to read in the shop?

After all, the more the gatherers knew, the more profit I’d make.

“Huh...? But frostbite bats are easy to harvest materials from, and they don’t degrade in quality before processing, so I would have thought they were a good, profitable target.”

It doesn’t make sense to me why this “Drake-san” never taught Andre-san and his friends about them.

Andre-san got a sour look on his face when I mentioned it. “Well, this is just a story I heard, but one guy who did hunt them could only sell them at a cut rate. The buyer complained, ‘I can’t use them like this.’ There’s apparently some sort of standard for valuing the materials, but we have no way of telling the difference ourselves. If they sell for so little it’s just not worth it, then nobody’s going to go and gather them.”

“Erm, could it have been *this guy*?” I asked, pointing at my poster about the alchemist who was ripping people off.

Looking at it, Andre-san’s eyes widened with realization, and his lips twisted. “I can’t say for certain, but it could’ve been. His shop *is* the closest to this village... Do you think he might have tricked that guy too?”

There was a growing ferocity in Andre-san’s expression. When I held up a hand, trying to get him to settle down, Gil-san and Gray-san each put a hand on his shoulder and said, “Calm down.”

Iris-san and Kate-san will be fine, but he’s scaring Lorea-chan, so I’d really prefer he not show that kind of bloodlust in here.

“I’d like to be able to say that’s what happened, but...I can’t be sure either,” I offered.

“You can’t?” Andre-san looked a little deflated. I nodded in response.

“Erm, Sarasa-san,” Lorea-chan interjected. “I’m sorry to jump into the conversation, but what *are* frostbite bats anyway? I’ve never seen one before.”

“Neither have I,” Kate-san added. “If you don’t mind, could you explain?”

“Oh, yeah, I can see why you might not know, Lorea-chan. They don’t usually fly as far as the village. And it certainly won’t hurt you to know, Kate-san, so... Sure, I’ll explain real quick.”

Frostbite bats were a variety of cave-dwelling bat with one slightly unique ecology.

What was so special about them? Well, it was right there in their name: when they bit a target, their fangs were capable of freezing it.

Although, that said, frostbite bats didn't go around biting people or animals. They primarily used their fangs to freeze fruit. They then cached the frozen fruit inside their caves, where the bats would stay all winter.

So, while they were generally harmless, if the bat population got out of hand, it would have an impact on the amount of fruit in the forest, which affected the other animals. In regions where people grew fruit, they were considered a real pest.

"And the price of their fangs varies based on the strength of their ability to freeze. To put it simply, frostbite bats aren't worth that much when they're less than five years old."

"So you're saying that the guy who was forced to sell them for cheap had caught some of those young ones?"

"I don't know. If he took his stuff to Leonora-san's place, I'd think that would be the case, but if he went to *this guy*..." I pointed at the poster again.

"Hmmm. Guess we can't jump to conclusions..."

There was something in Andre-san's expression that told me it still didn't quite sit right with him, but he crossed his arms, letting out a sigh as he tried to calm himself.

"Is there any way to tell how old they are, Shopkeeper-san?" asked Kate-san.

"Yes, of course. Once you get used to it, you don't have to be an alchemist to tell the difference, but...well, since I'm explaining things anyway, why don't I show you out in the field?"

"Huh? Out in the field? You're going out hunting, Shopkeeper-dono?" Iris-san said with a hint of surprise. "I'm sure that you're more than capable of it, of course..."

"Yeah. I need some frostbite bat fangs for myself anyway."

It'd be tough to explain how to tell them apart without any samples, so it's fastest if I go myself. Fortunately, I've got Lorea-chan to mind the shop.

“Andre-san, could I ask you to show me the way to the cave? Since I'll also be teaching you how to tell them apart, how does an even split of any fangs that we collect sound?”

“Well, that sounds like a good deal for us, and we wouldn't want to turn down a request from you, Sarasa-chan, but it's dangerous for you to...” Andre-san stopped himself midsentence and gave an exasperated shrug. “No, it isn't. Sorry, I always get tricked by your outward appearance.”

“Do I really look like I can't fight?”

“You really do.”

W-Wow, they all said that at the same time.

I'll have you know, I'd been training myself pretty hard.

I flexed my arm, and glanced in their direction, but they...just laughed.

I'll refrain from saying what kind of laugh it was, though.

“Murrgh.”

Maybe I ought to carry a sword around with me so that the new gatherers don't take me too lightly? I mean, none of the villagers are going to see me and think, “She looks suspicious!” at this point...

“I think you're fine as you are, Sarasa-san,” Lorea-chan tried to reassure me.

“She's right,” Iris-san agreed. “I think you're cute, you know? And it's not like you're a gatherer.”

“We need to show that we're at least somewhat capable, otherwise it can result in trouble,” Kate-san explained.

I guess Iris-san and Kate-san might attract unsavory characters, like what happened the time when Iris-san got so badly hurt.

But...

“I aspire to be like Master...”

I want to be a cool, independent woman—though I’ve pretty much given up on being tall like her.

“I’ve never seen your master, Sarasa-chan, but I’m sure that age is a part of it,” Andre-san said reassuringly.

“Indeed,” Gray-san agreed. “It’s best not to rush things. Now, is there anything we should bring on the hunt?”

I considered his question, recalling what I knew about frostbite bats.

“Well, I’ve heard that it’s a good idea to bring an umbrella.”

“An umbrella?”

“Yes. There’s going to be tons of bats hanging from the ceiling of the cave, right? You can imagine that *all sorts of things* might come falling down on us.”

Iris-san and Kate-san both frowned as it dawned on them what I was getting at.

Frostbite bats were nocturnal, so they would be sleeping in the cave when we went hunting during the day. They were known to defecate in their sleep too, so *that* would come falling down. On our heads.

“But I don’t own an umbrella.”

“Yeah, same. When it’s raining, I just put my hood up.”

Iris-san and Kate-san looked a bit troubled.

I glanced at Andre-san. He nodded with a look on his face that said that answer should have been obvious. “There’s no way we’ve got anything as fancy as an umbrella.”

“Yeah,” Gil-san agreed. “It’s probably only the merchants in town, and the nobles who’ve got stuff like that, right?”

Is that how it is? Not that I have one myself...

“It won’t be a problem this time. I’ll use Air Wall.”

The spell was meant to protect against incoming projectiles, and it could cover everyone.

It would have to, or we'd face a total disaster.

With you-know-what splattering everywhere.

"But if you go again in future, I think you'll be wanting to bring something, you know? It doesn't have to be an umbrella. It could be a specialized coat, or something else..."

"Yeah, we should probably get ourselves something. We don't want to get covered in bat shit either."

Aw, he said it.

And here I was trying not to.

"We had some beat-up old coats, right? Let's use those," suggested Gil-san.

"Ah, please don't wear them when you come to my shop, okay? Or I'll ban you."

I decided to take action before it happened. *I get that, by the nature of their job, gatherers are going to be a little dirty, but being totally covered in the stuff is a bit much...*

"Yeah, I know. I mean, either way, we're gonna need to wash it off. Is there any good way of handling it?"

"Why don't you think about that after seeing the place for yourselves? I think the answer will change depending on the state of the caves."

"You make a good point," Andre-san said with a nod. "And we have your magic to take care of the problem this time."



"So this is the cave, huh? It's pretty big," Iris-san said, sounding impressed.

The cave was twenty meters across, and ten meters high at the entrance. With Andre-san and his friends leading the way, we had made it to our destination without ever really losing our way.

"It's pretty close too," noted Kate-san. "That makes it easy to come out here, but...the issue is whether we can hunt them."

"They aren't strong, so you should be fine. It could get dangerous if they

swarm you, but that usually doesn't happen... Usually."

"Usually?" Iris-san echoed, inclining her head to the side. I nodded.

"If you're just hunting them a little, then their flight response will take priority. But if you block the cave mouth and try to wipe them all out, they'll fight back like crazy."

They were pests around an orchard, so there were people who tried that sort of thing, but if they did it without rounding up enough fighters, then they were in for a painful counterattack.

"There are people who've been frozen to death in the past."

"O-Okay... Guess we can't let our guards down just because they're bats." Andre-san and the guys got very quiet, their faces pensive.

"It's going to be fine this time. We'll just cull them a little. Now, let's head inside." I used Air Wall to cover everyone as we stepped into the cave.



The harsh stench immediately assaulted our nostrils. Iris-san and Kate-san both winced, covering their faces with their hands.

“Murgh! I-It stinks!” Iris-san complained.

Yeah, of course it does. The entire floor’s covered in you-know-what.

“W-Well, this certainly is something,” Kate-san managed. “Andre-san and the guys...well, they’re gatherers, so they’re used to it. But are you all right, Shopkeeper-san?”

Kate-san ignored Andre-san’s protest of “What do you mean, used to it?!” as she looked at me with concern.

“It’s not a pleasant smell, by any means, but us alchemists have to use a lot of materials that smell strongly, so I have ways of dealing with it. In fact, I’m using a potion that makes things stink less right now.”

“N-No fair! Let me have some of that too, Shopkeeper-dono!”

“It’s a bit pricey. Are you sure?”

Iris-san and Kate-san both fell silent as I grinned.

“Urgh!”

“O-Our debt...”

“I’m just kidding you. Just this once, you can have them for free. Here, take a whiff.”

I pulled out a small vial, removed the lid, and held it out to Iris-san and Kate-san. The two of them brought their faces closer, sniffed it, and their eyes went wide.

“It doesn’t stink...! Okay, no, it still does, but it’s still a huge improvement!”

“Yeah. This is a total game changer!”

“This potion blocks out any stench that exceeds a certain threshold. Because it would be dangerous to block them out completely.”

It was important to be able to smell if something was burning, or smelled weird in some other way, as a way of detecting danger.

That's why this potion blocked out smells that exceeded a certain threshold. It was what made it a potion, and what made it cost so much. If they just wanted to dull the sense of smell, there were simpler ways to do it.

"I can't provide this for free every time, so you're going to have to either learn to cope, or borrow more money. I'll leave that up to you."

"Murgh... It's a hard choice."

"Especially since we could just put up with it, if we really wanted to."

"Will you guys use it too?" I offered it to Andre-san and his team.

"Nah, we're good," he said.

"Yeah, this is pretty tolerable," Gil-san agreed, jokingly adding, "There are some gatherers who make you think, 'How long has it been since the last time you washed yourself?!'"

"There isn't anyone that bad, is there?! At least, not in this village..."

Huh? There are in other places...? I don't think I want gatherers like that coming to my shop!

If they're as stinky as this cave, I'm not going to hesitate to tell them they aren't welcome. I couldn't make poor Lorea-chan put up with that.

"Well, I'll think about what to do if any filthy gatherers show up. For now, though, I'd like you to all take a look up."

"Up... Whoa!" Iris-san exclaimed as she looked where I was pointing.

Andre-san and the guys' mouths were hanging open in surprise too.

"That's...a lot of them..."

The ceiling was so crowded with bats that you couldn't even see it. With the way one furry body overlapped with another, there was no way I could even hope to count them all.

"You want us to search through all of those to find the ones that are more than five years old?" Kate-san asked. "Isn't that kind of impossible, Shopkeeper-san?"

"It's a bit difficult, but not impossible," I told her. "Take...that one, for

instance.”

As I spoke, I used magic to attack one of the frostbite bats. Once it had dropped to the ground with a slight thud, I picked it up and showed it to Andre-san, but he and his team just cocked their heads to the side.

“Um, on what basis did you decide to attack this one, Sarasa-chan?”

“Magic capacity,” I answered simply. “You aim for the frostbite bats with more than a certain amount of magic capacity.”

“No, that’s impossible! We can’t sense that kind of stuff!” Gil-san protested loudly, and everyone else nodded in agreement.

“Yep, I know that. I’m not suggesting you use that method. First, there’s body size. This one is bigger than the others. Could you tell?”

Andre-san and the guys repeatedly looked from the frostbite bat that I was holding up in front of them to the ones on the ceiling and back again, but...they didn’t really seem to get it?

“Now that you mention it, they do look a little smaller,” Kate-san said hesitantly.

“No, there’s practically no difference, is there? I can’t tell,” Iris-san disagreed.

“I can’t tell at this distance...” Andre-san complained.

The frostbite bat that I had just hunted was a little over twenty centimeters from head to toe, while most of the ones that were still hanging from the ceiling would have been even smaller.

The only ones here who can tell are Kate-san, and maybe Gil-san? Kate-san is an archer, so maybe that’s why her powers of observation are so sharp?

“Well, let’s move on from judging based on outward appearance. Next I’ll explain how to tell from their fangs.”

I opened the bat’s mouth to reveal a pair of fangs that were each two centimeters long. They really were the defining feature of the bat’s appearance, being as large as they were compared to the rest of its body.

“First, there’s the color. The older they are, the deeper this blue gets.”

“Ohh, it’s rather pretty...” Iris-san remarked.

“This one is still a bit light, but when they’re more than ten years old, the color becomes dark blue, and it’s even prettier.”

I pulled the bat away repeatedly, as a fascinated Iris-san tried to touch the fangs.

“Next, there’s its freezing power. Once they’ve developed to the point that they’re so cold you can’t stand to touch them with your bare hands, they’re more than valuable enough.”

“I see, I see.”

I pulled the bat away again as Iris-san removed her gloves and tried to test it for herself.

She looked at me unhappily, but I shook my head to tell her she couldn’t do it.

“You can also tell by stabbing the fangs into something. After all, if it’s more than five years old, it should be strong enough to freeze a finger in seconds. Would you care to try it, Iris-san?”

“N-No, I’ll pass!”

Iris-san shook her head vigorously, then hurriedly put her gloves back on.

Yeah. It’s dangerous to touch when I’m not done explaining, okay?

In my alchemy classes, there was an ironclad rule to never try to get close during an experiment, and to never touch anything until we were given permission.

“The last method is to look here, at the base of the fangs. Can you see the lines?”

Andre-san and the guys looked where I was pointing with interest, while Iris-san seemed more hesitant.

“It’s a bit too dark to see,” said Andre-san.

“Ah, yeah, I guess it is. Light.”

Carefully, so as not to disturb the frostbite bats too much, I cast a soft light on the one I was holding as I showed it to the group again.

“Hmm, there certainly are lines there. Is the age determined by the number of them?” asked Iris-san.

“That’s right. There are five on this one, so that means it’s six years old.”

“I see. Even I can tell the difference using this method.”

“Now we just snap off these fangs and bring them back. If you hold them carefully, so you don’t stab your fingers, and bend them inward, they come out surprisingly easily.”

As I spoke, *snap, snap*, I pulled out the fangs, and then tossed them into the leather bag I had brought with me.

“The rest of the carcass is of practically no use, so we throw it away. But it’s probably best to do that outside the cave. If we leave it to rot here, that could cause problems for the next time we come.”

We were still in sight of the entrance, so it was easy enough to take care of. When I took it by the legs and gave it a good toss, the bat’s dead body vanished into the trees.

“It seemed simple enough, aside from determining their age,” said Iris-san. “Kate, do you think you can manage that?”

“It’s such a minor difference in size, I can’t be completely certain...” Kate-san replied with a frown.

“How about you, Gil?” asked Andre-san.

“No way. Besides, our attacks won’t even reach them from here. Not with these spears.”

Andre-san and his team had brought spears that could be assembled and disassembled in order to hunt the bats, but they obviously weren’t going to be long enough to reach a ten-meter-high ceiling.

“One method would be to use a bow, but as a general rule, in caves like this, the older frostbite bats tend to be toward the back. Naturally, they’re the most valuable.”

“Hm...? Then, if we hunt in the very back, we don’t need to worry about age?”

“Given that we were able to find one of this age so near the entrance, for the moment, you’re probably right.”

“For the moment... Oh, I see what you mean.” Andre-san nodded as he figured it out. “If we hunt at the back, the younger ones will gradually work their way there, right?”

“You’ve got it. So it won’t be a waste for you to learn how to tell them apart.”

“It won’t, huh? Not that I think *I’ll* ever manage it...”

“All I can say is try your best.”

“Go figure. Hey, Gil, try your best.”

“Me?! Well, I’ll do what I can, but...once we get to the point where there’s bats younger than five years old at the back of the cave, maybe it’s smarter to call it quits,” Gil-san said with an annoyed shrug.

“You have a point there,” I agreed. “In all honesty, there are more here than I expected, so if you brought them all in, I wouldn’t be able to buy them all. And since I can only buy so many, I’d prefer ones that are older.”

I didn’t know if it was because there had been no one to hunt them in a long time, but there were already so many bats just at the cavern’s entrance. I couldn’t even imagine how many must line the entire cave.

If we were to hunt all of them, I guess that would lower the market price of frostbite bat fangs in this country, huh?

“Okay, let’s start the hunt in the very back! I’m sure we’ll make lots of money!”

After we had started in such high spirits, it had been a little over two hours since we had begun walking toward the back of the cave, and yet we *still* hadn’t reached the end of the bats.

I know it’s a deep cave, but the frostbite bats shouldn’t go too far in...and considering how much the poor footing has been slowing us down, haven’t we been going for too long already?

I apparently wasn’t the only one who felt this way, because Iris-san called out

to me in a somewhat frustrated tone to ask, “Hey, Shopkeeper-dono, don’t you think this is far enough?”

“I-I guess so. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious about what’s at the very back, but the bats around here should be large enough.”

Having come this far in, we saw that the bats hanging from the ceiling were all at least thirty centimeters long. The bigger ones topped forty centimeters, so their fangs’ freezing ability would be more than potent enough.

“Even we can tell at this point,” said Andre-san. “They’re definitely huge.”

“Shopkeeper-dono, if we were to hunt every last bat in here, would it be enough to settle our debt?”

“Nope. But it would reduce it a little.”

“Go figure.” Kate-san let out a long sigh. “Your life didn’t come cheap, huh, Iris?”

“D-Don’t say that...” Iris-san slumped her shoulders, but it was the truth, so she was going to have to learn to live with it.

Those potions were too expensive to give away for free.

“Well, I think you got lucky,” Andre-san chimed in. “There aren’t many people who’d loan money to a gatherer, you know? And one they’d only just met at that.”

“He’s right,” Gray-san agreed. “Normally, you wouldn’t expect someone to go as far as using an expensive potion like that to save you the way she did.”

“I’m well aware of that, you two. Ahh, I’m sorry if I sounded ungrateful, Shopkeeper-dono.”

Iris-san bowed awkwardly to me, but I shook my head.

“Don’t be sorry. That kind of potion is expensive even for an alchemist like me, so there was really no helping it.”

“Oh, I see. I thought that might be— Hmm? But then why did you have something like that in the shop?”

“It was a parting gift from Master.”

“Gah!” Iris-san put her hand over her chest. “I-I made you use such a precious thing for my benefit—”

“Don’t sweat it,” I interrupted her, shaking my head. “It was a small price to pay for your life.”

And I’m getting paid for it anyway.

“Ohh, Shopkeeper-dono, you’re radiating holy light...”

“Uh, no I’m not.”

“No, I can see it, Shopkeeper-dono! I’ll work my hardest!”

“Right... You do that. Anyway, start by hunting me some frostbite bats.”

“Okay! I’m on it!!!”

Despite her enthusiastic response, Iris-san looked up at the ceiling for a while, then her shoulders slumped and she murmured, “Sorry, Kate. I’m useless.”

“Yeah, you don’t have any way of attacking them. I’ll do my best on your behalf, Iris.”

“I knew I could count on you!” Iris-san exclaimed, slapping her partner on the shoulder.

Kate-san let out a strained laugh. “It didn’t take you long to agree. Shopkeeper-san, is it okay to just attack them normally?”

“Generally, yes. But do try to get them in one hit. If they start flying around and making noise, we’ll be in for trouble.”

“Make every shot lethal, huh? It’s a tall order. I mean, I can’t aim for their heads...”

“Yeah, if the fangs go missing, it defeats the purpose. Andre-san and the guys can join in if their spears will reach, and if they won’t, then everyone who can’t reach should help collect the bodies.”

“Mm-hm.” Iris-san nodded. “Then allow me to do my best at collecting! I’m ready when you are!”

“You are? Well then, let’s get to it,” I said.

I used magic, Kate-san used her bow, and Andre-san and Gray-san used their spears while the other two collected the bodies. Out of the four of us, Kate-san had the most trouble because she was using a ranged weapon.

“Ah!”

Her skills were as impressive as ever, but after taking down about five or so, she messed up. Her shot failed to kill the bat, and as it fell to the ground, flapping and shrieking, the other bats that had been hanging from the ceiling around it started to take off.

“Sorry!” Kate-san apologized.

“Nah, it was impressive enough that you managed five,” Andre-san reassured her. “Hey, Gil, you join in too. You can probably reach them with your sword at this point.”

“Gotcha!”

Once I reduced the range of my Air Wall to only just barely cover us, the frostbite bats started flying right next to us. Andre-san had observed this, and got Gil-san to join in. Iris-san then joined in as well, and Kate-san switched to collection duty in her place.

Yeah, bats don't exactly fly in straight lines, and if she keeps firing arrows in this situation, she could hit one of us, so it's not a bad call on her part.

After some time, the frostbite bats vanished from the area, along with the incessant flapping of wings, and all that was left was a floor littered with their dead bodies.

“Whew,” I let out a sigh. “That didn’t go quite how I was expecting it to, but we should be able to collect a good amount. This should be enough.”

“Yeah,” Andre-san agreed. “We aren’t going to be able to carry much more.”

Like he said, we were right at the limit of what we could bring back, but we did manage to collect them all.

We headed back the way we had come, with bags of bat corpses slung over our shoulders. It was a few hours of carefully traversing slippery surfaces before, finally, we saw the light at the end of the tunnel, and stepped out into

the outside world.

“Whew...” I let out a sigh of relief. “Looks like we managed to avoid any major disasters.”

“Tell me about it,” Iris-san agreed with a shudder. “If we had tripped, we’d have ended up covered in guano and bat guts... I don’t even want to think about it.”

We all nodded in agreement, setting our leather sacks down on the ground and taking a deep breath of fresh air.

I’d love to just stop and rest here, but sadly we don’t have much time left before sunset.

“Okay, we may need to hurry a little, but let’s remove the fangs here. There’s no use bringing all of these bodies back.”

“That makes sense. So we just snap them?”

“Yep. As long as you bend them inward at the base, you should be fine. Oh, but do make sure you’re wearing gloves, okay? I’m assuming you *don’t* want to lose your fingers.”

“O-Of course,” Iris-san stammered. “I don’t need any more debt than I’m already in...”

I nodded. “Right. Regrowing fingers wouldn’t double your debt, but it *would* raise it by a significant percentage.”

Regrowth potions were *really* expensive.

“Urgh. I’ll be careful... Kate, we had some thicker gloves, right?”

“For harvesting more dangerous materials, yeah. Let’s use them.”

Being gatherers, Iris-san and Kate-san wore gloves to protect their hands at all times, but the ones they usually wore had to be flexible enough to let them wield weapons. They each took off their gloves and swapped them for another pair that they had been carrying in their bags.

I looked over to see Andre-san and the guys doing the same. It was all very professional.

Me? I was fine.

My gloves were thin, but I didn't have to worry about a frostbite bat fang piercing them. They were an artifact, of course, with a base price of three thousand, two hundred rhea. I'd had to make a pair for practice anyway, so they'd already been sitting in storage. Since I was used to living frugally, I always made an active effort to use anything that might come in handy. They weren't doing me any good collecting dust in the warehouse.

"Hm? Sarasa-chan, those gloves look awfully thin. Are you going to be okay?"

And using them like this gave me an opportunity to advertise too, you know?

"Yes, Andre-san. They're an artifact known as 'flexible gloves,' and they're durable enough that even a reasonably good blade wouldn't be able to cut through them. As the name suggests, they're flexible, so they're convenient to use for more delicate work, you know?"

"Hmm... Do you think I could borrow them for a moment?" Gray-san asked.

"Sure, I don't mind. Try putting them on."

I passed the gloves to Gray-san. He looked dubious that they would fit his hands, but when he cautiously shoved one hand inside, his eyes widened with surprise.

"They fit me easily. *And* they barely get in the way of moving my hands?!"

"Flexibility, and being thin enough not to impede the movement of your fingers. Those two things are what set these gloves apart. And since they're durable on top of that, I use them a lot when doing alchemy. Because there's a lot of risk I might injure myself."

Actually, the gloves I was using for my alchemy were one rank higher than these: the "thin and flexible gloves" which were listed in volume 4 of the *Complete Alchemy Works*.

As the name suggested, they were an even thinner version of the flexible gloves.

"The drawback is that, since they're an artifact, they do consume a minuscule amount of magic power..."

“Not enough that I can feel it, though? I’d have no issue using these, at least.”

As he watched Gray-san happily clench and unclench his fist, Gil-san got curious about the gloves too and tried putting the other one on his hand. “They’re this thin, *and* they can still block a frostbite bat’s fangs, huh? So, just how much does a pair cost?”

“Erm, I can manage three thousand...eight hundred rhea. Although, that’s assuming I can sell a number of them.”

The base price of three thousand, two hundred was what they cost in the capital. It was going to depend on how many I could sell, but considering the price of acquiring materials, three thousand, eight hundred was pushing it in this village.

If I only sell one pair I’d be in the red, but if I could move ten of them, then I might be doing fairly well?

Shipping costs were ridiculous, after all.

In my case, I can cheat by asking Master...but that’s really just me making her cover the shipping costs for me using her magic power, so I should base my assumptions around acquiring things the normal way.

“Thirty-eight hundred, huh?” Andre-san murmured. “If that buys us safety...it’s more than worth it.”

“I’m always ready to take orders. And I can give you a discount if you’re ordering enough to make that feasible, you know?”

“Hmm, there just might be enough. Fortunately, a lot of the guys are flush with cash at the moment, thanks to the incident. And if having gloves makes harvesting these fangs safer...”

As Andre-san was considering his options, we kept on collecting the fangs. In an hour, the leather bags were all empty, and we had a small mound of fangs.

Many of the frostbite bats had been older than I expected, so the deep blue of the fangs made them look a bit like gems. It was really pretty.

That meant the purchase price for them was a lot higher, so today’s earnings alone would easily be enough to afford a pair of flexible gloves.

“Let’s see, how about we divide them by the number of people?”

With this many fangs from older bats, I’ll still have enough for the refrigerator and freezer if we divide them that way.

After hearing my proposal, the guys looked at one another.

“We’d be grateful for that, but are you sure?” Andre-san asked.

“You definitely did more than any of us, Sarasa-chan,” Gil-san added.

“Let’s just say that any extra effort on my part was made up for by you guys showing us the way here.”

“Yeah? Well, okay.” Andre-san accepted it. “But we’re going to end up selling them at your place anyway, so could we ask you to just give us the cash later?”

“Oh, that makes sense. In that case, I’ll pay you at the shop. Now, as for Iris-san and Kate-san...”

“Put it all...” Iris-san began, then thought better of it and finished, “Ah, no, let us discuss how much of it we can put toward the debt.”

“Sorry, we don’t have a lot of room in the budget...” Kate-san explained apologetically.

I shook my head to let them know it wasn’t a problem.

“Okay, I get it. But you don’t have to strain yourselves, okay? If you try to cut your spending too much, I worry you might hurt yourselves.”

The two of them got their income from selling materials, which meant, as the person who purchased said materials from them, I had a look into what their finances were like. I knew they were at least eating properly now, but I was still a bit worried.

“Shopkeeper-san... Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. If you two die, I won’t be able to collect on your debt,” I said jokingly, earning a strained smile from the pair.

“We’ll be duly cautious until we’ve paid off our debts and repaid the favor, Shopkeeper-dono.”

“Right,” I replied, grinning. “I think you’ll be at it for a long time, you know?”



“All right, I’m heading off!”

“Okay, take care.”

A few days after we’d gone out to collect fangs, we were standing out in front of the shop as the other three saw me off. I was headed to Leonora-san’s shop in South Strag. I’d made the trip before, so I was taking it casually, but only Lorea-chan matched my cheer when she was saying goodbye. Iris-san and Kate-san both had anxiety written on their faces.

“Um, Shopkeeper-dono. Are you *sure* you’ll be safe alone? I know there are few dangers along the main road, but you won’t be able to sleep soundly if you’re by yourself, will you?”

“Yeah. You should at least take me or Iris along as a bodyguard...”

“Listen, I appreciate your concern, but I’m going to be running the whole way, so you’ll have a hard time keeping up if you can’t use physical enhancement. Besides, I’m going there and back in the same day this time!”

“Is that right? It’s true that *you* can likely make it there in one day, Shopkeeper-dono, but... Hmm? And back again?” Iris-san tilted her head to the side as she tried to process this.

“Yep!” I nodded firmly. “I’ll be back sometime later today!”

“Huh? A day trip...? Isn’t that a bit much, even for you, Shopkeeper-san...?”

“Nah, I’ve got a feeling I can pull it off this time! I’ve grown since experiencing muscle pain so bad I thought it would kill me! So, it should be okay, right?”

No, I have to be more confident. Based on what I learned from last time, as long as I don’t make any unnecessary side trips, it should be manageable!

“I suppose we’d merely be slowing you down, in that case.”

“Yeah. Take care, Shopkeeper-san.”

“I will, thanks... Is there anything you need? Snacks, maybe?”

“No, we’re fine. We already have a place to sleep and delicious food. All we need now are the things required for our work as gatherers!” Iris-san said,

clenching her fist for emphasis, but I could see her eyes were wavering just a little.

“Hee hee, I get you. I’ll bring back something nice as a souvenir. Anyway, I’m off now!”

I crossed mountains and valleys—okay, not really, I just ran really hard along the road—as I made my way to South Strag.

I didn’t know if it was because I was using physical enhancement more often, or if my unpleasant experience with muscle pain had had an actual effect on my body, but I was currently in good condition. For instance, I noticed that I’d been able to keep running past places where I had stopped to rest the last time.

It’s just a little farther to South Strag.

As I was debating with myself whether it was about time to take a break, the city gates came into view. Ultimately, I made it all the way there without ever stopping.

“I’ll take it as a sign I’m growing. Hee hee hee...”

Now if my body would just mature too, I’d have no complaints. Sadly, there’s been no sign of that for a while now, though!

I’d like just a little more height, at least. I’ve already given up on people not seeing me as a kid anymore, but it’s hard working like this.

“It’s okay. There’s still hope... But right now, the more important thing is that I need to hurry!”

My first destination was picking up the wood for the refrigerator and freezer. Geberk-san was the one who was actually going to be working with it, so my job was just to drop off our order with the lumber merchant.

I took care of that real quick and then moved on to Leonora-san’s shop.

“Welco...wait, it’s Sarasa. I knew you’d be all right.”

When I opened the door to the shop, which was kept as clean as ever, Leonora-san looked a little surprised to see me, but smiled once she did.



“Long time no see... What do you mean, you knew I’d be all right?”

“The gatherers from Yok Village were making a huge fuss. They said the place was done for.”

“Ohh, this is about the hellflame grizzly frenzy, huh?”

There were a good number of people who fled, so I guess it only makes sense that rumors like that would get around, huh? And as for the fact that we successfully fended off the attack... Huh? Has word of that not reached them yet?

“Yeah. Well, even if I didn’t put much stock in their stories, I knew that the village was definitely in danger, but I also knew that you were there. So I wasn’t all that worried.”

“I appreciate your confidence in me, but I can’t pull off the kind of nonsense that Master is capable of, okay?”

I’m sure her confidence in me must come from how famous Master is, but I’m not Master, so if she expects too much of me, I’m not going to be able to live up to that.

“By the way, what are you here to sell today?”

After a moment’s pause, I reluctantly said, “Hellflame grizzly materials.”

“I’ll bet. How many of them were there?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“And *you* killed them all, Sarasa?” Leonora-san asked in awed exasperation. I hurriedly shook my head.

“Hardly. I only killed eight of them. The gatherers and villagers worked hard to take care of the rest.”

“If you were able to kill that many, I think you did well enough. Well, whatever. All right, can I see what you have for me?”

“Sure. First there’s the pelts and the flame sacs, then the eyeballs...”

I had brought quite a large quantity of materials with me, so the counter was full in no time. Leonora-san examined them one by one, and calculated the

purchase price.

“Well, well... The processing is excellent, and these are valuable materials, so I’d *like* to buy all of it, but...if I did, you’d leave me flat out of cash.”

“I’ll take materials as payment too, if that’s all right? There are all sorts of things I want. Oh, and these aren’t exactly my prize product of the day, but I did bring them too.”

The last thing I laid out for her to see was the majority of the fangs that we had gathered the other day.

There was going to be increased demand in the season to come, but I expected I’d be getting more brought into my shop soon, and there were too many for me to use them all myself.

“Hmm, frostbite bat fangs, huh? The market price goes up this time of year, so it’s good to have them. And they’re from bats of a good age too, I see. I haven’t seen any coming in from that village recently, and it’s been a real problem. They require no processing and are easy to carry, so I can’t imagine why.”

“According to the gatherers in the village, it has something to do with them being forced to accept low prices on them in the past. They decided, ‘It’s not worth it!’”

“Was it *that guy* again?” Leonora-san asked, the look in her eyes a little harsh, but I just shook my head vaguely.

“I can’t be sure... With these fangs, the cheap ones really are cheap, after all.”

“If they come from young bats, that’s true. Hmm... I guess there’s no point dwelling on it.” Leonora-san sighed and shook her head. “So, can I assume you want me to buy all of these too?”

“Yes. They’ll be a solid seller as it gets hotter outside.”

“Well, I doubt I need to worry about them not selling,” Leonora-san agreed. “So, what do you need in exchange?”

“Well, for starters, the materials for flexible gloves...”

I expected orders for those, so I obviously wanted the materials for them.

Other than that, I also asked for materials for the artifacts in volume 4, as well as materials for any artifacts or potions in volume 5 I thought I might need.

There was some intense bartering over prices along the way, but we hashed out a deal with both cash and materials, and in the end, we shook on it with broad smiles.

“Well, I’d say this has been good business for both of us. So, will you be staying the night again, Sarasa?”

Leonora-san was sure I had booked an inn, but I shook my head.

“No, I’ll be heading home today. My goal is to make this a day trip!” I announced, clenching my hand into a fist.

It’s not even noon yet. I can make it back if I go now!

Leonora-san looked at me with awed exasperation. “A day trip? Well, considering what time you showed up here, it’s not impossible. You left the village this morning, right?”

“Yes. I ran all the way without stopping to rest this time.”

“You’re such a little trooper. You’ve even got an impressive sword in your belt.”

She’s got a sharp eye. This is just an ordinary sword at first glance.

I pulled the blade out of my belt, scabbard and all, then laid it on the counter.

“Heh heh, you want to take a look? Well, do you?”

“What’s this? You seem awfully pleased.”

“I got this from Master.”

“Really?! Let me see it!” Leonora-san instantly pulled the sword from its scabbard, then she let out a sigh as she admired the blade. “It’s not showy at all, but it’s still incredible...”

Even after all I’ve used it, I can still see my face reflected in the blade.

“Its cutting edge is amazing too. I was able to knock off a hellflame grizzly’s head with just one swing. Sure shows you what a sword made by a master class alchemist can do, huh?”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Huh?”

When I started saying it was because of how amazing Master was, Leonora-san was quick to disagree. “Even with this sword, I couldn’t pull that off. I wouldn’t even try to fight a hellflame grizzly with a sword to begin with. No *ordinary* alchemist would.”

“Ahh, alchemists do tend to be better with magic, yeah. I’m sure most just keep a sword on them for self-defense.”

That’s why the prize money was all mine for the taking.

“This goes beyond that, but...you know what, forget it. I mean, this is *you* we’re talking about, after all.”

“Is it just me...or did you just mildly insult me?”

“It’s a compliment. Really, it is...in a way. Anyway, you haven’t had lunch yet, right? Let me treat you as thanks for letting me see such a nice sword.”

Once she’d handed the sword back to me with that casual deflection, I stuck it into my belt with a nod.

“Murgh, I’m not sure I liked how some of that was worded, but I’ll let it slide in deference to the free food.”

“That’s the way. Don’t let it bother you.” Leonora-san turned toward the back of the shop and yelled, “Hey! We’re going out for lunch, so mind the shop for me!”

“Okayyy,” replied a small, female voice from the back.

Once that was taken care of, Leonora-san put her hands on my back and steered me out of her shop.



The place Leonora-san took me to was an upper-class joint. To explain it simply, compared to Delal-san’s place, the items on the menu here all had an extra zero next to them. It was the kind of place I’d never have chosen for myself, but today, I was eating on someone else’s dime.

Which meant I was invincible. Nothing would hold me back.

Since I'm the kind of girl who can never resist a good deal!

But what was really invincible was Leonora-san's smile, which remained unfaltering even in the face of my total lack of restraint.

Wow, veteran alchemists sure think differently! Even when I've got a bit of coin, I still have a hard time using it!

"Are you all full now, Sarasa?"

"Sure am! The food here is delicious."

I'd seriously chosen things with no concern for price, and stuffed myself until I was full, yet Leonora-san was still smiling.

"I'm quite fond of it too. I'm sure you're still going through a lot right now, but in time you'll find you have more room in your budget, and then you'll be able to visit places like this without giving it a second thought."

"Oh, but once I have that kind of money, I've been thinking of donating to the orphanage."

I don't know that I'd feel right eating so well when the orphanage is still having a hard time...

"You're from an orphanage, huh? You shouldn't give too much, you know? Maybe you should talk to the director and discuss what's an appropriate amount."

"You think so?"

"Well, if a high-level alchemist really goes all out with their donations, wouldn't the orphanage end up being incredibly comfy? How would the kids turn out, growing up in a place like that?"

"Ahh... I suppose that's one way of looking at it."

Take Master, for example. If she were to give just one-tenth of her income, then the kids in the orphanage would probably be able to live better than most kids in the world.

If I had grown up in that sort of environment, would I have been so driven to

study...? Probably not.

I had been able to work so hard because of my strong desire to change the current situation, but without that kind of motivation...

Also, I didn't think growing up in an environment like that would be good for them after they left the orphanage either. If they graduated without any particular skills, they couldn't possibly afford to pay the high rent in the capital, so their quality of life would rapidly decline...

"I'm from an orphanage too. What I do is keep my regular donations to a minimum, then send a larger lump sum when they need money for repairs and the like."

I guess there's more to repaying them than just sending money. I trust the director to use it well, but...I'll try talking with him about it.

"I see what you're saying. You're teaching me a lot here."

"I have been doing this for longer, after all. If you ever run into problems, you can ask me anything, you know?"

"I do. Thank you for that. Since we're neighbors, I probably will turn to you for help..."

"Yes, you're welcome to any time."

"It's a big help. Anyway, I'm going to get going now. I'd like to be home before nightfall. Thank you for the meal!"

Once we had left the restaurant, I thanked Leonora-san again, and she waved goodbye with a slightly strained smile.

"It's downright abnormal that you're able to make it home if you leave now, but...take care along the road."

"Sure. See you next time!"

After bidding farewell to Leonora-san, I quickly bought some souvenirs, and then raced back toward the village.

I've gotten enough rest and nourishment, so I shouldn't have any trouble using physical enhancement, but...

“Urkh... I had a little too much to eat.”

Not long after I started running, my overfull belly started to give me trouble. Even if the food had been free, it was really thoughtless of me to chow down without considering the fact that I’d be running right afterward.

But there’s just no helping it! I’ve been conditioned by poverty!

The idea of *not* eating as much as humanly possible when someone else was paying was just not an option for me. The end result was that I ran slower, and the sun had completely set by the time I arrived in the village.

I used the souvenirs I’d bought to cheer up Lorea-chan and the others who’d been worriedly waiting for my return, and then tucked in early for the night.

Episode 3: A Rival in the Market?

“Hey, Sarasa-chan. I’ve rounded them up!”

“Pardon? What did you round up?”

I cocked my head to the side, unsure what Andre-san was talking about.

“The gloves. You said if I could get together enough orders, you’d give us a discount, right?”

“Oh! Wow, you’ve rounded some other orders up already? It’s only been a few days.”

“Yeah. Once I told folks about how convenient the gloves were, and about the frostbite bats, they all wanted a pair.”

Apparently, after weighing the potential profit and the risks presented by the frostbite bats, nearly everyone whom Andre-san had talked to made an order.

“It’s certainly true that they’re a convenient item to have, but for this many orders to come in for the product sight unseen...is this because of how much they trust you, Andre-san?”

“Nah, I *am* a reasonably well-known veteran, but I’d have to say that it has more to do with their trust in *you*, Sarasa-chan.”

“Huh? Me...?”

Did I do something? I just asked Andre-san to get together a batch of orders for me.

“There’s the fact that someone as strong as you uses them, the fact that it’s you that’s making them, and the fact that they know they can count on you to buy what they will gather with them. Put that all together, and that’s where that confidence is coming from.”

The flexible gloves had my seal of approval for their durability; I had asserted that they could lose a finger if they messed up; and they knew I would buy the fangs at a fair price. In that situation, there was no reason *not* to buy a pair.

“I guess...I should be grateful. An alchemist can't get by if all gatherers desert them.”

Our business model relied on us being able to buy materials from gatherers. Especially in a village like this, most of our profit came from selling the materials they gathered to shops in the city, while the sale of potions and artifacts only accounted for a small amount.

In the cities, it was the other way around: they could generally get by without directly dealing with gatherers. But even there, if the gatherers disliked them, they wouldn't be able to hire them to go and get materials when they couldn't acquire them on their own, so it was still a problem.

“So, how low do you think you can go?”

“Let me think... Since you rounded up enough orders, how does dropping the price from the usual three thousand, eight hundred rhea a pair to three thousand, five hundred a pair sound?”

“Are you sure? For my part, I think they're well worth your original asking price.”

I'd knocked off almost one-tenth of the price. Andre-san seemed surprised, but I nodded.

“It's fine with me. I can still turn a profit at that price.”

That was thanks to my trip to South Strag to buy the materials. If I were ordering them in, it would be too much of a stretch; I'd end up in the red.

“I guess I'll take you up on your kind offer, then.”

“Yes, please do. It's more profitable for me if you gatherers are able to do your work safely and bring in lots of materials for me... Even if I'll sell fewer potions,” I joked.

“Ha ha ha!” Andre-san laughed with his mouth wide open. “We'll have to do our best, then!”

Flexible gloves weren't all that hard to make. I just had to round up the requisite materials, toss them in the alchemic cauldron, and then stir as I poured in magical power.

Once it all melted together, I had a goopy brown liquid. Next I needed the glove molds, which were made out of wood and modeled on arms from the elbows down. There were two of them, a left hand and a right hand, both with the fingers spread.

That said, the gloves didn't need to be fitted to the wearer's hand, so the outline of the molds was pretty rough.

While it was true that there was technically a right hand and a left hand, the outline was so rough that you could barely even tell the difference between the two.

I submerged the wooden molds up to the wrists, then pulled them out and left them to dry awhile.

After repeating this process about ten times, the base for the gloves was all ready. To avoid wasting time while I was waiting for them to dry, I prepared another two sets of wooden models, bringing the total to six. I'd use these to mass-produce the gloves.

It's ten times per glove. So twenty times per pair. That's two hundred times for ten pairs.

I emptied my mind and just kept on repeating the same simple task.

"Sarasa-san, did you want lunch— Whoa! What's all this?"

Just as I was making silly jokes to myself about how I felt like I was about to reach enlightenment, Lorea-chan came to the workshop and saw what was on the table.

"This? It's a mold for gloves."

Yeah, it's a bit creepy, huh? Like there's human arms growing out of the table.

"O-Ohhh, it's a wooden mold. Wow... So this is how they're made."

"Yep. Could I ask you to wait just a bit? If I stop now, it'll spoil them."

This liquid that was the material for the gloves would harden in no time if I left it. To be more specific, I needed to keep a hand on the alchemic cauldron, pouring magical power into it at all times.

If the supply of magic stopped, or I took my hand away, the materials would instantly be ruined, so I had to carefully determine how much I could make at any one time based on my magic capacity and how fast I could work.

“Oh, I see. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Hmm, it may look like I’m just dipping these, but there’s actually a trick to it...”

By running a small amount of magical power through the wooden mold, I could fuse my magic with the liquid, creating a film.

If I used too little magical power it would be too thin, and if I used too much it would be too thick. That would lead to a decline in quality. And it wasn’t like Lorea-chan could possibly control magical power...

“Oh, I know. Could you take the gloves in that pile over there and line them up on the table?”

“Sure thing!”

I used up the rest of the liquid while getting Lorea-chan to help me out a little, and then we headed to lunch. I enjoyed the short break as I smacked my lips over Lorea-chan’s cooking, which was as delicious as it always was.

When the gloves were finished drying, I threw them all into the alchemic cauldron, and went about putting on the finishing touches.

The last thing to do was wash them, and leave them to dry in the sun, and then the flexible gloves were finished.

“It’s that drying step that’s a real pain in the butt... Just how many of these did I make?”

Rubbing my shoulders as I spun my arms around, I counted the finished flexible gloves and found that I had sixty-two pairs. By extension, that meant I’d repeated the same process more than a thousand times.

“Yeah... Little wonder my shoulders hurt.”

Given that these gloves don’t wear out easily, I can’t really expect people to need to rebuy them, so...maybe I made a few too many?

“Oh, whatever. Andre-san’s order alone should cover the cost of materials.”

I’ll put the rest in the shop for regular price. New gatherers might show up, after all.

“But before that, I need to dry them.”

I tossed the finished flexible gloves into a basket, and brought them out to the backyard. I set up a clothesline, and hung them from it individually.

There’s sixty-two pairs here, for a total of a hundred and twenty-four gloves, and my shoulders are already aching. It’s not easy being me.

But Lorea-chan’s minding the shop right now. I can’t ask her to help out.

“And...that’s the last one! Whew!”

The sight of all those gloves dangling from the line was...

“Yep. It’s pretty creepy.”

There wasn’t even a hint of that refreshing feeling I’d gotten from seeing the environmental tuning fabric hanging out to dry. I mean, the gloves were light brown, after all.

“But they *do* need to be dried. And no one can see them in the backyard. So it’s no problem, right?”

The repairs to the fence were all done. Nobody could see anything I hung out to dry here. Nobody would get suspicious. It was safe.

Although, Iris-san and Kate-san *did* let out a scream when they got back that evening and saw the gloves swaying in the dark.



Some time after I sold the flexible gloves to Andre-san and the others, the number of frostbite bat fangs that were being brought in steadily increased.

I let Lorea-chan, who was quickly coming into her own as a shop attendant, handle the purchases, while I crafted artifacts targeted at the villagers and put them on the shelves.

The first was the insect-repellent veils that I had told Lorea-chan about before. They kept bugs away just by wearing them—convenient in the

summertime. The insect repellent that I stocked for adventurers cost twenty thousand rhea, and yet the veils were only two thousand, eight hundred rhea. In exchange for the greatly reduced area of effect, it was much cheaper in comparison.

I needed the spiteworms that I had put up an ad for on the bulletin board in order to make these, and those were coming in steadily too. The price of the worms was determined based on length and sex, so it was easy for the gatherers to tell which ones would be worth a lot, and simple for Lorea-chan to price them as well.

Although, how simple it was and whether she could do it were different questions.

I mean, these *were* caterpillars we were talking about. It had been pretty rough for me too, at first.

I had whispered, “reward money, reward money” to myself over and over inside my head until I’d finally been able to get through it somehow!

Nowadays, I could even grab them without making a big deal about it!

Humans sure can get used to anything...

Having been through that experience, I’d asked Lorea-chan, “*Are you going to be all right?*” But all she had said in response was, “*With what?*”

According to her, “*If you can’t deal with caterpillars, you can’t live in the country.*”

Even though she wasn’t from a farm family herself, she was still sent out to help pick bugs off of the crops, so caterpillars were no problem for her as long as they weren’t venomous.

And true to her word, she was touching them with her bare hands...

That’s a country girl for you. They’re *powerful*.

The second item for the villagers was the “cooling hat.” This artifact used the frostbite bat fangs to cool the wearer’s head and upper body. It was truly a savior to farmers in the summertime.

However, it was also a little pricier than the insect-repellent veil: seven

thousand rhea.

This required Level 4—unlike the insect-repellent veil, which only required Level 3—so there was simply no getting around the higher price. Seven thousand was the lowest I could price it without inviting all sorts of trouble.

It wasn't that I was raking in the cash with a ridiculous markup, okay?

Fortunately, it seemed that the villagers had accepted both artifacts, and sales were trickling in.

But this is just the money I paid for the hellflame grizzly pelts coming back to me, right?

I liked to think I was helping improve the villagers' quality of life a little, but they were only buying these things because of the windfall they'd received, which was not increasing the overall cash in the village like I'd hoped.

Now that I'd wound up in this village, I wanted the place to prosper, and if the village prospered, my business would too.

An alchemist's shop felt distant from the common folk, and they found it a bit hard to come in. But now that Lorea-chan, whom everyone knew, was minding the shop, it was at least approachable enough that they thought, *"Maybe I'll take a look."*

But if they came to the shop and there was nothing for them to buy, it was guaranteed they would drift away again. In order to keep things going in the current direction, I needed ideas...

"Can you think about it for me, folks?"

There was power in numbers, and four heads were better than one. So I rounded up Lorea-chan and the others to ask for their advice.

"You're asking about money?" Lorea-chan asked. "It's true that you don't need a lot of cash in this village."

"As for us, we only use cash at the general store and the inn," said Iris-san.

"And everyone but us gatherers just barter," added Kate-san.

Other than the general store and the inn, I was probably the only one paying

cash to the villagers for their crops and to Jasper-san for the game he hunted. And even at my place, the cash I had given Lorea-chan wasn't getting used very fast.

When Lorea-chan went to buy food, they would always give her more than she asked for, or Kate-san would bring back something she hunted in the forest.

The money that the gatherers brought in from outside got used in the village, at least, but even that got used to pay taxes, so cash never hung around long. Or so the mayor told me.

"Hrmm..." The other three thought about it.

"For anyone who comes up with a good idea, I'll be rewarding them with some of the *expensive* treats I bought the other day!"

As I laid the goods out on the table, their eyes all suddenly lit up.

"The biggest issue is that there aren't many jobs in this village which could bring in cash," remarked Iris-san.

"You're not wrong, but the fundamental problem is the lack of money in the village," Kate-san corrected her. "So we have to do business with people who bring cash in from the outside, but...the only ones in this village who do that are Shopkeeper-san and the gatherers."

"Right you are. That's exactly it."

I passed Kate-san a tasty treat which promptly disappeared into her mouth, bringing a smile to her face.

Seeing this, Iris-san desperately started racking her brain. "Businesses targeted at gatherers... How about increasing the number of inns and general stores...?"

"More stores, huh?"

As I picked up one of the sweets, Iris-san smiled.

"Y-You'll put my dad out of business!" Lorea-chan cried, waving her hands in desperation.

"Right." I nodded. "If the total amount of money doesn't go up, there's no

point.”

The snack in my hands went to Lorea-chan, bringing bliss to her face and despair to Iris-san’s.

“But if it’s a business that doesn’t compete, wouldn’t that work? Like a broth — Ahem. We’d need to figure out what kinds of businesses the villagers can run.”

“It’s not a bad idea. There’s demand from the gatherers, after all.”

Another treat went to Kate-san. The kind of business that she had almost suggested wouldn’t be good though.

I still had lots of treats in front of me. Iris-san was staring hard at them as she loudly cleared her throat, then raised one finger.

“Hrmm! Shopkeeper-dono, awkward as it is to have to tell you this, you are the one with the most money in this village, and the one who is best positioned to bring in more from outside.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.”

That’s what an alchemy license’ll do for you! All that hard work wasn’t in vain!

“That being the case, would it not be a simple matter for you to hire the villagers to do jobs for you?”

“I see... There’s some logic to that. It’s a good idea.”

I handed her two treats with a nod, and Iris-san quickly scarfed them down. A contented smile formed on her face.

I popped one in my mouth too.

Yep, they’re good. I can see why they cost so much.

“But aren’t old Geberk-san and Jizdo-san about the only ones who can do the sort of jobs you need done?” asked Lorea-chan. “The others are amateurs...”

“Yeah, you have a point. Geberk-san does hire a bunch of helpers, though...”

I gave Lorea-chan another treat. Iris-san looked a little upset at this.

“Hey, Shopkeeper-dono... Are you grading Lorea-chan’s ideas on a different

scale?”

“Can you blame me? Lorea-chan’s a cutie.”

“S-Sarasa-san...” Lorea-chan said, blushing. I nodded and gave her another.



“Besides, the meals she makes are always delicious.”

“I won’t deny that,” Iris-san said. “But setting that aside, is there any work that the villagers can do?”

“Most of them are farmers... How about growing herbs?” suggested Kate-san.

“That’s a job for a specialist,” I said. “It isn’t something an amateur can do in their spare time.”

I did it in my spare time, but that was only because I was an alchemist who already had the knowledge to do so.

A job that the villagers are already capable of, and that’s worth hiring them to do...

If I hire them to do pointless work, that’s just charity, so I need to be strict about what I choose.

After some time spent staring at the snacks, Lorea-chan suddenly raised her hand. “Come to think of it, you’ve been making the ‘hat’ part of the cooling hats yourself, haven’t you, Sarasa-san? I think someone like my mom could handle that sort of thing.”

“Ah! There’s a thought! They’re just ordinary hats until I add the cooling function, so... Oh, but the problem is that I’m getting close to selling as many as I can.”

Even as I handed Lorea-chan her treat, I was already pointing out the problem with her idea. The hats were selling fairly well, and just about every house in the village had one by now, but considering the price, selling one per person was going to be tough.

“Why not just sell them elsewhere?” Kate-san suggested.

“Elsewhere?” I asked.

“Even as things stand, you’re able to sell for a little below market price, right? What if you had Darna-san go sell them in town?”

I thought about it for a moment before saying, “Yeah. That’s not a bad idea at all.”

It helped that it was cooling hats we were talking about. They were lightweight, and didn't take much space, but were still valuable. And all anyone had to do to see their effect was put one on, so even a nonalchemist like Darnasan could sell them without customers questioning if they were fake.

"Hmm. In that case, we should probably think of a design," Iris-san suggested. "The kind of hats people want in a farming village aren't the same as the kind people will want to wear in town. I'm sure someone born and raised in the city like you already knows that, though..."

"Yeah, you're right," I agreed. "If we were going to sell them in other little villages though, straw hats would probably be fine."

"Urkh!" Lorea-chan let out a groan. "I feel like we might run into trouble. The older women in this village don't know anything about fashion..."

Come to think of it, when I first came to town, didn't she call me a "city girl" after just one look at me?

Despite my total lack of fashion sense.

"I'm not that knowledgeable myself, but I could make some examples and draw what the hats are supposed to look like," I suggested, before turning to Kate-san and Iris-san. "How about you two? Do you know anything about hat designs?"

"Urkh... I'm not good with that sort of thing..." Iris-san seemed at a loss for words.

"Iris has never been interested...and she can't draw," Kate said with a wry expression. "I'll help out with that part. I'm no great artist, but I think I can at least get the point across."

"Thanks, I'd appreciate it if you'd do that. All that leaves is running it past the mayor, I guess. Oh, you three can have the rest of these."

I helped myself to just two treats, and then hurried off toward the mayor's house—listening to the madcap scramble that unfolded behind me as I went.

"Hmm, you want to hire people to work for you?"

“Yes, do you have any thoughts?”

The mayor apparently had a lot of spare time on his hands, so I had been invited into the house as soon as I arrived.

Then, once he had heard my explanation, he smiled. “Not bad. You know, honestly, I think you’d be doing the village a favor. We don’t have enough cash, and I’ve needed to rely on Dudley and Darna for it so often...”

During the time when this village had no alchemist’s shop, the materials that the gatherers collected had been carried straight to South Strag more often, and so they had spent less of their cash in the village. The end result was that the mayor had turned to the two people in the village who’d had cash, giving them crops in exchange for the money he would need to pay the taxes. It wasn’t just once or twice that he’d needed to do this either.

“But you realize all that the women in this village can make are straw hats, right? Sure, they can sew, but they aren’t going to know how to make what you want.”

“The plan is for me to draw pictures they can use as a reference. They’ll need to figure out how to make them on their own, but...if necessary, I can provide some amount of guidance.”

“In that case, it sounds like you should be fine. So, how many do you need?”

“See, that’s the thing... What I was thinking of doing is a system called consignment sales.”

“Consignment? What’s that mean?” the mayor asked, cocking his head to one side.

I explained the idea I had come up with on my way over here.

First, the villagers would make the hats at their own expense, and assign a price of their choosing. I would then apply the cooling effect to the hats, add what it cost to turn them into cooling hats—the enchantment cost—to the price, and finally, put them up for sale in the shop.

Then, when the hat was sold, the person who made it would get the money.

“Because I can’t charge the same amount for a simple, practical hat as I do for

a stylish one that someone's put a lot of effort into."

"Hmm, I reckon you're right."

"I'm thinking that the enchantment cost will be five thousand rhea per hat. If a villager makes a five hundred rhea hat, then it would go on sale in the shop for five thousand, five hundred rhea."

"But if the hats don't sell, you don't pay? Isn't that a loss for the villager?"

"Well—"

"Not at all, father!"

Just as I had been about to explain, a sharp voice cut me off. I looked over, and there was a woman standing there with her arms crossed.

Who was it? Why, this was the mayor's own daughter, Erin-san.

She had been born when he was already an old man, so she was only around thirty. That put her at around the same age range as Lorea-chan's mother, Mary-san.

Erin-san looked at me somewhat apologetically.

"Oops, sorry to cut you off there, Sarasa-chan. It's just that I could hear you two talking."

"No, it's fine. Not a problem in the slightest."

This house was humble in size for the home of a mayor, so it wasn't odd that she would have overheard us, and we hadn't been talking about anything it would be a problem for her to hear.

On top of that, it was women her age who would actually be making the hats.

Maybe we should bring her into the conversation...?

"Um, if you wouldn't mind, could I hear your opinion too, Erin-san?"

"Of course!" Erin-san nodded firmly. Her sharp eyes turned to her father, and she leveled a finger at him. "First of all, father!"

"Wh-What?"

"This idea you were talking about before, it's something Sarasa-chan must

have thought really, really hard about for the sake of the village! It's not normal to have such favorable conditions!"

"D-Do you really think so?" the mayor responded vaguely, unable to contradict his daughter when she was so adamant.

Erin-san nodded firmly once more.

"I do! Sarasa-chan, even if a hat doesn't sell, you aren't going to charge the cost of turning it into a cooling hat—five thousand rhea, are you?"

"No... Although, if the same person keeps making hats that don't sell, I will put a limit on it."

While I was prepared to accept some losses, it would still be a bit of a problem for me if I ended up with too much dead stock. My answer seemed to satisfy Erin-san, and she nodded to herself.

"Of course. It only hurts you if you don't do that."

"Why's that?" questioned the mayor. "It's not like Sarasa-chan's buying them, right?"

"You're so stupid, dad!!! It costs her *five thousand rhea* to turn an ordinary hat into a cooling hat, okay?! So if the hat doesn't sell, Sarasa-chan's out several times the price of the original hat! Do you understand that?! I'll bet you don't! Figure it out!!!"

The mayor nodded vigorously as Erin-san tore into him.

If I can do it successfully every time, then the cost of applying the effect won't actually be five thousand rhea, but if you consider the cost of my labor, I don't think there can be any doubt that it's super cheap.

But you know, although I got a little worried at how unreliable the mayor seemed during the hellflame grizzly incident, maybe Erin-san does a lot to support him?

"Sarasa-chan, why not limit the number of items one person can put on display in the shop? Make people buy back their unsold stock if they want to put something else up for sale."

"I wouldn't mind doing that. But won't they struggle to afford it?"

“Well, if they make things that don’t sell, they should be prepared to take responsibility. Besides, depending on how you look at it, they’d be getting a cooling hat for themselves for just five thousand rhea, right?” Erin-san said with a mischievous smile.

“That’s...one way of looking at it,” I agreed with a nod. “Assuming they make the hat themselves, that is.”

Erin-san’s a quick thinker. Quicker than you’d expect in a countryside village.

Taking her argument to the extreme, a villager could bring me any hat they had, and get themselves a cooling hat for just five thousand rhea.

I sold the cooling hats that I made myself for seven thousand rhea, so there was a difference of two thousand. If they wanted a cooling hat that was more their style, they could use that difference to buy another ordinary hat elsewhere.

“I won’t say you can’t do that, but please don’t stop making them as soon as you’ve got one for yourself, okay? That’s not what I’m trying to accomplish here.”

“Of course not. You’re trying to help the village, right? We can bring in cash by having Darna go sell things, though, so...you’re not straining yourself to be able to do this for us, are you?”

“Um, I should be fine...?”

It was actually kind of a gray area, selling cooling hats for five thousand rhea. But since the frostbite bat fangs that I used as materials were harvested from the local area, and the price that the hats were actually being marketed at was higher than that, I was probably fine.

I won’t receive a warning or anything...uh, I hope?

Okay, maybe I’d better set a minimum price for when Darna-san sells them outside the village, just to be on the safe side.

Hearing the questioning tone as I trailed off, Erin-san looked at me with concern, but since I didn’t say anything more than that, she nodded slightly.

“Well, okay then... Got it. For now, I’ll talk to some folks and see what we can

do. Should we bring the hats around to your place when they're ready?"

"O-Okay, that's fine with me, but..."

I looked over at the mayor as if to ask him, *"Is it okay for Erin-san to just decide that?"* He'd been listening to us as if he were in a daze, and when he noticed I was looking at him, he hurriedly nodded.

"P-Please, go ahead with it. Yeah."

"Oh, you won't need to think about it much, dad. I think it'll be faster if she discusses the details with me from here on."

This may not be very nice to say, but...the mayor didn't look like he was thinking much at all as he picked up his teacup and drank from it.

Are you okay with this? Mayor-san...?

"Also... I'm going to have drawings of hats if you need them, so please come to the shop and pick them up."

"Really?! Wow, that sounds lovely! We don't see a lot of city fashion here in a village like this, but you're from there, so whatever you're going to draw will be the latest and greatest, right?!"

Being a woman with an interest in fashion, Erin-san leaned in closer, her eyes sparkling. Her enthusiasm intimidated me a little, and I pulled back as I nodded.

"R-Right, I wouldn't get your hopes up too much, but they *are* hats that people in the capital wear."

"I can't wait! I'm going to run off and let everyone know!"

"I'd appreciate that."

"Sure, you can count on me! I'm sure we'll make lovely hats!"

Erin-san confidently thumped her chest with one hand.

And so, a local industry was born—or at least I hoped it would be.

Is this going to work...?



It was now some time after I had talked things over with the mayor—well, I

guess with Erin-san—and the cooling hat project was well underway.

That said, it hadn't started out smoothly. Maybe the fact that people wouldn't be paid immediately acted as a deterrent, or they just didn't understand how the system worked, but most of the initial participants were personal acquaintances of mine.

Specifically, Erin-san, Mary-san from the general store, Jiname-san from the smithy, and my next door neighbor, Elles-san. I guess you could say that they were people who were used to handling money to some degree and trusted me personally.

But that was only for a short while. Under Erin-san's instructions, Mary-san spread the word that she'd "made good money," and after that, the other villagers were willing to make hats too.

Quality varied wildly, and they hadn't been used to pricing their wares at first, but recently, they had started to price the well-made ones for more and the not-so-well-made ones for less.

Darna-san took our cooling hats with him when he went to buy stock, and would sell them in South Strag, returning with foodstuffs and sundries, as well as material to make more hats.

I'm not making a profit, but... Oh, well. I can take the long view. I'm not taking a loss, so it's not a problem!

Or so I had thought...because then there was a problem.

That day, Lorea-chan came to work wearing a shallow basket on her head for some reason.

"Sarasa-san! Look! What do you think?"

It was more compact than an ordinary basket, fitting Lorea-chan's head perfectly.

Did she get herself stuck? She isn't developing strange new habits...right?

"Lorea-chan, what are you doing with that basket?"

"I-It's not a basket! Look closer! See!"

The happy look on her face quickly changed to one of dismay, and she thrust her head toward me. I put my hands on her shoulders as I examined the basket.

On closer inspection, it was a thick one, made up with two layers of interwoven straw.

“Huh? Straw... Wait, is this supposed to be a hat?”

“Yes! I made it based on feedback from the gatherers! It’s for people who wear helms.”

Lorea-chan popped the basket—er, I mean hat—off her head and presented it to me, so I took it and examined it inside and out.

It was maybe a centimeter thick. The two layers had been skillfully interwoven, and they didn’t get crushed when I applied a little pressure to them.

If it’s for people who wear helms... Oh, I get it. The gap, huh?

It allows air flow, preventing it from getting too steamy under their helm, huh?

That’s already valuable enough on its own, but if I make it into a cooling hat, then I can see how that would be a real boon to anyone wearing a helm during the summertime.

“This is amazing...”

“Heh heh heh, I know, right?!” Seeing how genuinely impressed I was, Lorea-chan got uncharacteristically smug.

But the idea itself, and the way she had skillfully woven the straw, were both things she deserved to be proud of, honestly. They more than justified that smug face.

“The problem will be durability. How is it for that?”

“I borrowed a helm and gave it a try, but it was able to take a bit of a beating, no problem.”

While it wasn’t able to stand up to actually damaging attacks, just taking the helm off and putting it on wouldn’t flatten it so badly that it eliminated the air

gap. It had handled that no problem.

“Maybe we should add a durability boost as an option, then?” I suggested.

“You can do that?” Lorea-chan asked.

“Sure. It’s a little extra work, though,” I replied.

When you were making an artifact from the *Complete Alchemy Works*, it was a simple matter of copying the circuit out of the books. Once you started customizing things, though, then you needed to understand the circuit properly or you’d run into trouble.

Any alchemist could do that—or so you might think. Unfortunately, that wasn’t necessarily the case. And that was because this wasn’t something the academy would fail you over. If you didn’t understand at all, then of course that was no good, but if you just struggled to deal with more complicated implementations, you could still get the credit. There was a shortage of alchemists, after all.

As for me...I could do it reasonably well. I wouldn’t have been able to get to the top of my class if I couldn’t, so I’d studied my brains out with some help from Master.

Not that applying something like a durability boost was even that difficult to begin with, though.

“Still, Lorea-chan, I’m impressed you came up with such a complicated method of weaving.”

“Oh, my great-grandma helped with that. Hee hee,” Lorea-chan explained with a smile.

Her great-grandma, huh? Is this what they call the “wisdom of the elders”?

“I’ve never met her. Does she live somewhere else?”

“She lives with us, but her legs are bad, so she hardly ever goes outside. Oh, but she’s still got a lot of energy. She does what work she can do while sitting, you know? More than half the hats my mom brings in were actually made by great-grandma.”

“Oh, that explains it...”

I'd been wondering how Mary-san had managed to bring in so many when she must have work of her own to take care of. I'd figured she was trying her best because Darna-san was the one who was going off to sell the cooling hats, but it turned out to be because someone else had been helping her out.

"She's been so happy to be able to make money, and it's all thanks to you, Sarasa-san. Thank you so much."

"Really? Then I'm glad we thought of this idea."

"Yeah!"

Lorea-chan must have really loved her great-grandmother, because she seemed genuinely delighted.

"So, Sarasa-san," Lorea-chan continued, her tone hesitant. "I wanted to ask, could you put this hat on display as a sample? They need to be shaped to fit the person's head, so I was thinking we'd make them on demand..."

"Ohh, yeah, I can see why. Sure, I can do that for you," I replied with a big smile.

If they're going to wear them under their helms, that makes perfect sense.

They look like a lot of effort to make too, so it'd be too much to expect them to make them for every size people might want.

"Thank you."

"If I were to point out one flaw, it's that many of the gatherers already have cooling hats, but...there will be new people too, so maybe it's not such a problem?"

"Oh, you have a point there. We *have* been seeing more people lately."

"If I had to guess, I'd say that maybe it's because the hellflame grizzly materials and the frostbite bat fangs made it to South Strag."

That demonstrated that the bears had been put down successfully, and that there was a source of frostbite bat fangs, which were in demand this time of year. It was no mystery why gatherers looking to make a profit would start to gather here.

I haven't seen any of the gatherers who ran away back then yet, though. I get how they must have felt, so I won't discriminate against them if they turn up again as customers, but it still rubs me the wrong way as a resident of this village.

The bells on the door rang.

"Excuse me."

"Oh, welcome."

As I was talking with Lorea-chan, our first customer of the morning came in. A somewhat slender man, probably around twenty years old. I was pretty sure that I'd never seen him before.

He didn't look particularly buff, so I could tell he wasn't a gatherer. But he didn't dress like one of the villagers either. That made him a bit unusual in these parts...

Noticing the suspicious look I was giving him, he began wildly gesticulating.

"Oh, eh-err, my name is Gretz! I'm your neighbor—Jasper the hunter's—son!"

Once he'd said that, I recalled Elles-san had told me about him. "Oh... You're the one who became a merchant instead of a hunter?"

"Urkh! Y-Yes, that's right..." Gretz-san sounded as if he felt a little guilty, stumbling over his words as he acknowledged it.

Well... Maybe becoming a hunter was never an option for him?

Compared to Jasper-san, he looked nothing if not weak.

"Oh, you're big brother Gretz. I didn't recognize you," Lorea-chan said, clapping her hands as it came to her.

"Y-You're awful, Lorea-chan," Gretz-san responded, his eyes drooping pathetically. "We used to play together all the time..."

Lorea-chan didn't seem to care, and she was blunt with him. "Well, you left the village *years* ago, and you never come back. If you don't want people to forget you, then you need to come by more often."

"Urgh, but this village has nothing to buy, and since Darna-san is here,

nothing I bring sells.”

“Oh, you don’t need to bring anything. You’d just be taking work away from my dad.”

“You’re awful! This, after telling me to come back more often?!”

“I never told you to come back, you know? Just said we’d forget you if you didn’t.”

Yep. She’s being pretty awful.

I forced myself to smile as I listened to Lorea-chan be totally merciless.

I’m sure it’s just because they’re childhood friends(?), though.

“So, why did you come back? Oh, did your business fail? Have you finally given up and accepted that Jasper-san’s going to put you through the wringer?”

“No?! Listen, I didn’t run away because of how hard my dad was working me, okay?! I heard this village was going to be attacked by monsters, so I rushed back to help.”

“Ohh, well you’re too late,” Lorea-chan said, nodding. “That’s all in the past now.”

Gretz-san sighed, his shoulders slumping. “Looks like it. And no one seems to have gotten hurt... Oh, that’s right.”

He suddenly seemed to remember something. He turned to me, correcting his posture and then bowing his head politely. “Sarasa-san, they tell me you were the one who protected the village. If you weren’t here, I’m sure my parents, and all the villagers, would have died. Thank you so much for what you did.”

“Oh, no, no,” I hurriedly waved my hand and urged him to raise his head. “I live here in this village too, so it was only natural that I should help. Don’t worry about it.”

It made me feel a little shy, having an older man like him bow his head to me.

“Wow, so you *hadn’t* forgotten the village, huh?” Lorea-chan said pointedly.

“How could I ever forget this place? You have no idea how shocked I was when I heard the news. I came back as fast as I could,” Gretz-san insisted.

He'd done that out of love for the place he grew up, or for his parents. Even if he seemed a little unreliable, if he took such efforts to come to a place he knew was dangerous, then he wasn't such a bad guy after all.

But Lorea-chan was harsh with him.

"You didn't make it here anywhere close to in time, though, did you?"

"Urgh..."

"And even if you had, you couldn't have done much..."

"I know that! Because I'm not like my dad!"

Lorea-chan really didn't hold back. This was totally different from how she usually treated us.

Gretz-san had tears in his eyes. I was starting to feel bad for him, so I forced myself to smile as I placed a hand on Lorea-chan's shoulder.

"Now, now. He came back because he was worried about everyone. Right?"

"Well, yes, but..."

Lorea-chan looked like she still had more left to say, but I smiled and shook my head. She let out a sigh, and her expression softened.

"So, did you just come here to thank Sarasa-san?"

"That is the main reason, of course, but my mom also suggested that I might be able to buy some quality goods here..."

Perhaps feeling a little guilty for bringing up business after saying he'd come to thank me, Gretz-san's eyes wandered awkwardly...

But the fact was that, if he was going to stock up on merchandise in this village, my shop was the only place he could do it. Darna-san took the village's crops to market, and we had no other locally produced specialties.

"You're a traveling merchant, so there's no need to feel bad about it."

"Thank you. Honestly, I kind of pushed myself a little too hard, trying to get back here, so I don't have a whole lot of funds left..."

If he had to change his travel plans, that'd happen, yeah. My parents were

traveling merchants too, so I sort of understand.

I felt a little sorry for Gretz-san, seeing the troubled look on his face.

“Let’s see. If you were to sell these materials in South Strag, you’d make some profit, but...if you want a guaranteed return, I would suggest buying the cooling hats you can see over there, and selling them in the other farming villages.”

“Cooling hats? This is definitely the season for them, but how much profit can I really... Huh? Aren’t these too cheap?”

Gretz-san had seemed somewhat doubtful when he first looked at the shelf I pointed him toward, but tilted his head to the side when he saw the price tags.

“They’re about thirty percent under the market price for this time of year. Even once you factor in shipping costs and your own profit margin, you’ll still be able to sell them for a little under market price. They should sell pretty well, I’d think.”

When a nonalchemist tried to sell alchemic materials, assuming that they were dealing fairly, they only stood to make a little more than it cost them to transport the goods. Frankly, the margins were thin.

These cooling hats, on the other hand, he could sell at the official price and still be making a hefty profit. And so long as he stayed within the acceptable range, he could even afford to sell them at a discount, so there was no worry of ending up with unsold stock.

“Y-You’re sure it’s okay? You’re not taking a loss, are you...?”

“I’m not making much of a profit, but it’s not so bad that I’m taking a loss. Don’t worry.”

“Then I’ll be happy to take them!”

“Grrr. Are you going to compete with dad for business?”

Lorea-chan shot a harsh glance at the delighted Gretz-san. He frantically gesticulated and tried to explain himself. “D-Don’t worry! I’m not going to be selling them in South Strag! Okay?”

“Well, okay then...” Lorea-chan still looked a little upset, but buried the hatchet for now.

Considering the size of South Strag, its market area probably overlaps heavily with the surrounding villages, so he can't really say he's not competing, but...this is for the good of the whole village, so she'll have to put up with it.

“But what you see on the shelf there is all the stock I have. The villagers make the hats themselves, so...”

I started to explain consignment sales to him, but as I probably should have expected from a traveling merchant, Gretz-san understood how it worked immediately and nodded with approval.

“I see, that's a good model. I'm sure it will get the villagers to work hard too... Okay! Leave it to me!”

Gretz-san was definitely a merchant, talking like that.

In fact, after leaving my shop, he immediately went into action. Using his advantage as someone born and raised in this village, he went door to door, commissioning people to make hats. He bought those hats for immediate cash, and, once they were finished, brought them back to my place.

From what I could see, he seemed to have specified the kind of hats he wanted made as well, because there weren't many of the sort of stylish hats that sold well in town. Most were the cheaper, more practical type that sold well in farming villages.

Normally, I wouldn't have wanted to accept a bunch of hats from someone outside the village, but this was Elles-san's son, and the hats had been made by the villagers.

Since it was in line with my goal of increasing the cash supply in the village, I took them. On top of that, I took his earlier comment about being short of cash on hand into consideration and let him defer paying half of my fee until later.

Because of the amount of money involved, this wasn't really because I trusted him. It was completely out of respect for Elles-san. Still, it allowed Gretz-san to buy a considerable stock of cooling hats for himself, and when he was finished staying in the village, he left with a grin on his face.

Lorea-chan complained, “Sarasa-san, you're being too soft!” But Gretz-san was a valuable source of cash for the village.

I can afford to give him this much favorable treatment, right?



With summer approaching in earnest, the plan to turn cooling hats into our village's specialty product was progressing smoothly. Darna-san was able to sell everything he brought to South Strag, and Gretz-san had already paid back what he owed me.

He's been back to restock a few times since then too, so sales must be going well.

As for Lorea-chan's basket—er, I mean special hat—it was way more popular with the gatherers than I had ever expected it to be. We'd sold tons of them, making the previously sweaty experience of wearing a helm super comfortable by comparison.

It also came with a lot of options, like a durability boost and a waterproofing effect, which made it more profitable for me. I was kind of happy about that.

You might think that Lorea-chan was making a tidy profit too, but the one who actually made most of the hats was her great-grandma. She had a lot of spare time as a retiree, so she could weave straw at speeds Lorea-chan couldn't hope to compare with.

Lorea-chan had received a lot of pocket money for finding her this job, but the expression on Lorea-chan's face was a complicated mix of happiness and disappointment.

But even that would only last until all the gatherers who wore helms had bought one. In a little while, we'd be back to business as usual.

If no one copied the idea, gatherers might come here from other villages to have us make one for them, but it was hard to see it working out that way.

Still, there was no doubt that cash had begun to trickle into the village.

We're still a long way from being called "affluent," but maybe this is a step in that direction?

It turned out that this growing prosperity also extended to Gretz-san, who maybe counted as half a villager.

One day, he came to me for advice.

“You want to give your parents something to show your appreciation?”

“Yes. I’m sure when I left the village, it caused them a lot of trouble, so...”

The one who was most surprised by this praiseworthy comment was Lorea-chan, who was beside me, listening to the two of us talk.

“The infamous prodigal son wants to repay his folks!” she exclaimed.

“Huh?! I’m famous for that?!” Gretz-san cried out in surprise, perhaps hearing this for the first time. Lorea-chan gave an incredibly deep nod in response.

“Yeah. I mean, they raised you, and then you left the village, and weren’t coming back. There was no sign of you sending money to support them either. The general view of you in the village is ‘He’s a prodigal son. No one should ever marry him,’ you know?”

“Eek! Then those awkwardly warm smiles, and the kindly looks they gave me when I went around asking people to make hats...”

“I guess they were probably thinking, ‘This hopeless kid is out here trying his hardest, let’s do what little we can to help him out.’”

“A-And here I thought I was doing a good job negotiating...”

Gretz-san hung his head, laid low by the unexpected truth that Lorea-chan was forcing him to reckon with.

But he did manage to get a lot of hats. Even considering the prior example set by Erin-san, and the advantage that he had in being able to pay them up front, he was still able to inspire that much pity from them... Well, maybe that’s not something he’d be too happy about after all.

If it only works in this village, it won’t help with business elsewhere. And it’s possible they don’t feel sorry for him so much as they feel bad for Elles-san and Jasper-san for being saddled with a son like him...

Thinking back to the attack on the village the other day, Jasper-san is highly regarded, after all.

There was no need for me to deliver a follow-up attack by saying any of this

to him, though. “Now, now. It’s not that bad. You’re making money, and people who can make money get respect. It’s true, you know? In a way.”

“Y-You’re right. I *have* been making money. I’m a success!”

My kind words helped him get back on his feet a little. But there was someone else here ready to pour cold water on him again:

“But only because of your connection to Elles-san, and Sarasa-san’s kindness.”

“Urgh...”

“Lorea-chan...”

Lorea-chan was strangely harsh toward Gretz-san. Maybe she resented him for abandoning the village.

Oh, maybe Lorea-chan had developed feelings for him, since he was an older boy living in the same neighborhood? And that love for him only made it worse when he left...?

“Hm...? What are you thinking, Sarasa-san?”

“Oh, no. It’s nothing.”

Yeah, no. That’s not it.

There was no hint of that in Lorea-chan’s eyes when she looked at Gretz-san. If anything, she looked at him like she might look at a son who was a failure.

“Anyway, you wanted to do something to pay back your folks, right? Let’s see. I’d recommend the fertilizer-making machine, ‘Harvester.’”

“Um, but my folks don’t do much farming...”

“Well, you see, it’s a matter of the material that goes into the Harvester.”

The Harvester was an artifact that turned whatever was put into it into compost. It could make quality compost fertilizer from dried leaves, branches, and table scraps.

And Jasper-san was a hunter. He butchered what he caught, but would undoubtedly always be left with a large amount of parts that he couldn’t do anything with. It would be a real pain to dispose of it all; it would rot if left out in the open, so he would have had to bury it or toss it somewhere where that

wouldn't cause a problem for him.

If he had a Harvester, he could just throw everything into it. He'd even be able to sell the compost for a bit of cash.

If there was one drawback, it was that it required a small amount of magical power to operate, but Jasper-san was my neighbor, so if he was ever short of magical energy, I'd help him out.

"It's an artifact that any hunter would do well to have, you know?"

And it's not just me thinking, "Here's a good opportunity to sell an artifact that I haven't made yet."

Gretz-san gave a deep nod after hearing my explanation, so it looked like it wasn't an issue.

"I see. That does sound pretty good. He was always making me help him dispose of the organs. It's part of why I wasn't keen on becoming a hunter myself..."

"Ahh, if he made you do that from a young age... I can understand."

Yeah, seeing the severed heads and blood-drenched organs of what were once living creatures would be traumatic for a child. Some kids might get used to it, but others wouldn't be able to take it at all. I feel like Gretz-san is probably one of the kids that got messed up by that kind of thing, and that's why he chose to become a traveling merchant.

"How expensive is a Harvester, by the way?"

"That depends on the size and efficiency. If you want it to be able to handle a large volume of material, while using less magical energy, that's going to be expensive. Even on the low end, it'll run you a hundred and twenty thousand rhea."

"That's a hefty chunk of change, huh?"

"It is an artifact, after all. But you make enough to afford it, don't you?"

"It's not that I can't pay, but I wouldn't have the funds left for trading... I'll work hard to earn some more, so could I put in a reservation for one?"

“Okay, I can do that. I’ll prepare the necessary materials and such.”

I’d been planning to make one in the near future, so I had most of what I’d need on hand already, but that was just for the one I was planning to use at home. It’d be way too small to handle all the waste when Jasper-san brought down something big.

I’ll get enough materials to make one that can process the waste from an entire bear.

“Big brother Gretz is acting like a good son... Maybe I ought to do something for my folks too?”

Lorea-chan started to think about it seriously.

“Uh, you do realize I’m about twice your age, right?” Gretz-san said, frowning a little.

“Yeah, but you’re a prodigal son.”

“I want to wash away that bad reputation! Now I definitely need to get dad a Harvester. Maybe once the fertilizer starts getting around, it’ll help people’s opinion of me too...”

If even Lorea-chan and the other girls her age felt that way, then I feel like that opinion’s already taken root pretty deeply. But once Jasper-san starts selling the compost fertilizer, word is bound to get around that Gretz-san gave him the Harvester, so maybe he’s not wrong to hope it improves his standing? I’m not sure it’ll be enough to wipe away his “prodigal son” reputation, though...

“Doing something for your parents, huh...” I murmured. “I don’t think you’re old enough that you really need to start worrying about that yet, Lorea-chan, but you never know...”

By the time I was her age, my parents were already gone.

It’s not bad to do what she can while she has the chance—no, it’s actually something I should encourage.

“Sarasa-san, did you ever—” Lorea-chan stopped herself midsentence and bowed her head. “Uh, sorry...”

“Don’t worry about it,” I reassured her, shaking my head. “Even I’ve heard of

buying something for your folks once you start getting paid.”

It's not like they're a replacement for my parents, but I'm doing the same sort of thing by sending money to the orphanage.

Oh, by the way, I had sent Master a letter asking her to “Please adjust the amount that gets sent to the orphanage to an appropriate level.” That was after coming back from South Strag.

I may only be making a small amount now, but I can count on someone as experienced as Master to take care of it.

“If you really want, I do have artifacts I could recommend for Darna-san.”

“Such as?”

“Well, there's an artifact called a spinny.”

“Come again?” Lorea-chan looked at me, her expression serious.

“Like I said, a spinny...” I blushed a little as I repeated the name.

“O-Okay. A spinny, huh?”

“That's the official name, okay? You attach it to the axle of a cart, and it makes it spin like the cart's really light.”

To be a bit more specific, it made it spin like the cart weighed half as much. That made it so you could have one horse pull a cart that usually required two horses, or you could save a whole lot of travel time by still using two horses.

It was a pretty popular artifact with people who used horse-drawn carts. The downside was they needed regular maintenance and broke easily.



“It’s not a problem, but...that sure is an odd name, huh?”

“I know, right? But you’d be surprised how many artifacts are like that.”

Naming rights for an artifact generally went to the alchemist who invented it. Most people just gave them simple names based on their function; the odor-control potion and magical stove were examples of that—the artifact did exactly what its name said it would. Other alchemists appreciated these kinds of names the most.

The flexible gloves were close to that standard, but their durability was just as important as their flexibility, so their name fell a little short of fully explaining them.

I feel like it’d be easier to understand if they were called flexible cut-resistant gloves, but they’re still on the good side.

The real problem was when somebody who had a weird sense for these things went with their gut feeling for what their artifact should be called. They probably thought their names were cool, but in most cases, it was completely impossible to tell what the artifact did from the name they chose.

Fortunately, when there was a common-sense person around, these names got fixed, or they had a helpful explanation tagged on to them, as in the case of the “Fertilizer-making Machine ‘Harvester.’” However, when nobody was there to fix things, it led to a lot of headaches. As in the case of the spinny.

“It’s cheaper than the Harvester, but I don’t think you can afford it yet with your salary.”

“Oh... I’ll have to work hard to earn enough, then. I think having one would make my dad’s work a lot easier.”

“Yeah. From what I hear, they’re pretty effective.”

I think Darna-san is making a decent profit selling the cooling hats, so I could sell it to him directly... But if Lorea-chan wants to give him a present, I’ll hold off.

“All right, Lorea-chan! It’s a race to see who can buy their present first!” Gretz-san declared with a big grin.

Lorea-chan met this with her usual cold response, the corners of her lips

turning up a little as she said, “Aren’t you embarrassed, challenging a child to a race at your age?”

“Gwagh!!!”

She’s really got a point there.

Gretz-san continued to be a bit of a disappointment. A shame, since he wasn’t bad looking.

“Well, I don’t *mind* racing you. Do at least *try*, though, okay?”

“R-Right. I’ll do my best...”

Which of them is the older one here? I had to think to myself as Gretz-san nodded.



When summer had arrived in earnest, and it was hot even indoors, the frame for the freezer and refrigerator arrived. It was a slow delivery by Geberk-san’s standards, but only because it had taken time for the ordered lumber to arrive. But once it did, he did the same fine work as always. It was made precisely to the measurements that I’d given him, without leaving the slightest gap.

“Honestly, his work is perfect. I don’t even need to adjust it...”

When I was making the insulation and the cooling cores, I had thought to myself, *Am I going to have to rework things once it arrives?* But they slotted in just like they ought to. From there it was just a matter of applying waterproofing and installing the appliances in the kitchen, and then the job would be done.

“All right, time for a test. The refrigerator’s probably fine, so...I’ll try making ice in the freezer.”

That got finished faster than expected, so I decided to use the time to make a light snack.

“Chop up the dried fruit, and put in a little sugar and water...”

I put the resulting mixture in a pot to boil, and a sweet smell wafted through the air once it got all syrupy. Lured in by the scent, Lorea-chan popped her head

in the door.

“Sarasa-san? Something smells good in here...”

“Yep. The freezer’s finished, so I thought I’d make something sweet. Do you want to have some?”

“Can I? Please!”

I opened up the freezer with a sideward glance at Lorea-chan as she gleefully took a seat at the table.

“Yep, looks like it’s frozen nicely.”

With ice from the freezer in my right hand, and a shallow bowl in my left...

Crunch! Sprinkle, sprinkle...

I made a pile of crushed ice in the bowl.

“Huh?! S-Sarasa-san! What was that?!”

“This? It’s magic. Master taught me how to do it.”

The magic crushed ice into fine, equal-sized pieces. It took a lot of careful control, so when summer came around she would say, “*Time for magic practice!*” and make me do it repeatedly.

I still had a long way to go, though. The texture of Master’s crushed ice felt totally different on my tongue.

“Now I just pour a whole bunch of this syrup over it, and...there’s your crushed ice treat! Go on, dig in!”

“H-Here goes.” Lorea-chan took her first bite. Her eyes went wide, and her face lit up with delight. “It’s cold! And sweet! I’ve never had anything like it!”

Yeah, because normal folks don’t get the opportunity to try frozen treats like this.

“Oh... Hey, Lorea-chan. Did you know it tastes *really good* if you wolf it down as fast as you can?”

“Whaa, but that feels like such a waste...”

“It’s okay. Really. There’s more where that came from. I mean, I can always

make more ice. Go on!”

Lorea-chan looked reluctantly at her crushed ice. I smiled and nodded for her to go ahead.

“Really? Well, if you insist...”

I grinned as I watched Lorea-chan crunch away.

“Huh?! Urgh! M-My head hurts! Really badly?!”

“Yep, I’ll bet it does. When you eat cold stuff too fast, that happens. Who knows why, though.”

I nodded sagely as Lorea-chan held her head and her eyes started to spin.

I’d never had the chance to try it, so I didn’t know at first either.

This was a lesson that Master had taught me too.

“Sarasa-san?!” Lorea-chan scolded, eyes wide with a look that said, *“I can’t believe you!”*

“Hey, I didn’t want you to have it happen when I wasn’t around and then confuse it for some serious illness, okay? It’s totally normal, so you don’t need to worry about it,” I explained.

I hadn’t just been pulling a prank on her, okay...?

“Urrrgh... Oh, it’s stopped.”

“Yeah, the pain goes away on its own after a while. If you take your time eating, you won’t have a problem.”

“Whew, that hurt. You could have just warned me...”

I averted my eyes a little from the resentful glare she shot at me. “I thought it’d do you some good to experience it. I mean, it’s not something that happens every day, right?”

“Well, maybe, but... Oh, whatever. I’ll forgive you because it tastes so good.”

Having said this, she held her bowl out for more. I smiled wryly as I crushed some more ice and poured sweet syrup on it for her.

“Keep your appetite under control. If you eat too much, you’ll get a

stomachache.”

“Okay... Mmm, it really is cold and delicious!”

Maybe because of the novelty, Lorea-chan’s still happily eating more, but I think maybe I’m fine with just one bowl.

“Anyway, why don’t we head to the shop? It’s not good to leave it unattended for too long.”

“Oh, that’s right!”

Lorea-chan and I took our crushed ice with us to the sales floor. This room was on the south side of the building, which meant the temperature was a little higher, but still cool compared to outdoors.

And that was because the entire house had air conditioning to help keep the temperature down.

Honestly, a system that could cool a single room would’ve been good enough, but oh well.

As I progressed through the *Complete Alchemy Works*, all that mattered was whether I had made an artifact before or not. But in this case, with the whole-home cooling system, I had simply had so many high-quality frostbite bat fangs lying around that I hadn’t been able to resist the temptation to craft something a little more extravagant.

It might not be the best thing for when we want to enjoy crushed ice, but, well, that’s a highly specific scenario.

Once I finished my own crushed ice, I relaxed a bit as I watched Lorea-chan enjoy hers at a more leisurely pace this time. As I did, Iris-san and Kate-san returned at what was, in a way, just the right time.

“Shopkeeper-san, we’re back,” Kate-san said.

“We’re back, Shopkeeper-dono.” Iris-san wiped the sweat from her brow. “Whew, it feels heavenly in here.”

They both took a deep breath. Then their eyes fell on the bowl in front of Lorea-chan.

“Oh, Lorea. What’s that?” Iris-san asked.

“It’s a frozen treat Sarasa-san made. It’s cold, sweet, and delicious.”

“Wow, sounds *lovely*,” Kate-san commented.

“Mm-hm, must be perfect on a *hot day* like this...” Iris-san agreed.

“Okay, okay... You want some, right? Let me go get it ready.”

Even if they weren’t going to come right out and ask, I could tell what they wanted from the looks they were giving me.

I rose from my seat, and headed to the kitchen to make more.

“Oh, Iris-san, Kate-san, did you two know? If you eat as fast as you can, it tastes *really good*.”

Hearing Lorea-chan say that as I left the room, I made sure to prepare extra large portions for them.

And of course, the end result of that was Iris-san clutching her head as she made a big scene.

“Whew, it finally settled down. You’re all awful, you know that?” Iris-san complained a little later.

“Sarasa-san already got me earlier,” Lorea-chan playfully stuck out her tongue.

With a pained smile, Iris-san looked in my direction. “You could have stopped me, Shopkeeper-dono.”

“And rob you of a valuable experience?”

“It’s certainly not one that comes along often... And somehow Kate was the only one spared.”

“I figured something *had* to be up when I saw the looks on their faces.”

Kate-san had simply watched, smiling, until Iris-san had eaten hers.

She hadn’t said a word to her partner.

That was kind of awful of her.

“This treat is good, I’ll give it that, but it does leave you feeling a little bit cold inside,” Kate-san noted.

“It’s because it’s so cool in here,” Iris-san told her. “The food is good, and it’s comfortable at night. I don’t think I’ll be able to go back to living out of an inn.”

“It even makes me a bit hesitant to go back home at night. I have the environmental tuning fabric sheets that Sarasa-san gave me, so I’m reasonably comfortable there.”

“Those sheets are amazing,” Kate-san said. “They make it so you’re actually more comfortable under the covers, which is the opposite of what you’d expect this time of year. Is it really okay for us to be using something so incredible?”

“I don’t mind,” I replied before adding, “I’d feel a bit awkward keeping them to myself.”

“Well, you shouldn’t feel that way!” Iris-san interjected. “We’re the ones who’ve been imposing on you.”

“No, no, really, you don’t need to worry about it,” I insisted.

The sets of bedding I had put together for any guests who might stay with me were now being used exclusively by these two.

That said, I wasn’t about to go and take the mattresses away from them.

It came down to this: if they were talking about how sweltering it had been the night before, while all I could say was that I’d been perfectly comfy... How was that any way for us to live together?

So, for that reason, I’d already finished making two more sets of bedding and ordered the beds to go with them. That would cover me if Master were to suddenly drop in, or if Lorea-chan wanted to stay the night. It wouldn’t be a problem.

“But while it’s nice that the shop is a comfortable temperature, there are some minor problems too,” Lorea-chan said, looking a little troubled.

“Really?” I cocked my head to the side at this. “It’s the first I’m hearing about it...”

“Yes. Some gatherers loiter inside the shop even after they’ve finished—”

“Whoa, you wouldn’t happen to be talking about me there, would you?” Andre-san interrupted her, almost as if he’d been waiting for the perfect moment to stroll into the shop.

He was a regular, and came almost every day, so it wouldn’t be unfair to say he was dropping by to get out of the heat.

“Oh, Andre-san,” I greeted. “Don’t tell me you feel like she might be describing you.”

“Of course I...do!”

He does?!

“Are you, Lorea-chan?” I asked.

“Andre-san is less egregious than some of the others.”

Ohhh, so he’s not that bad, but she still won’t deny that’s why he’s here.

“After all, if I just give him a cold glass of water, he’ll leave. And with that said, here’s your water.”

“Oh, thanks,” he said, instantly gulping it down. “Whew! That’s good stuff! Nothing beats a cold drink in this season!”

While he said it was cold, it wasn’t from the refrigerator. It had just been sitting in the air-conditioned shop, meaning it was merely cold relative to the air outside.

That’s perfect for drinking the whole cup all at once, though.

Lorea-chan took the cup back from Andre-san when he’d finished, and then pointed to the door. “Is that right? Okay, now please leave.”

“Sure! Hey, wait! I’ve still got business here.”

“Oops. That’s right. So, what is it today?” she asked.

“First, here’s today’s haul. I’d like to sell you these. Oh, and as for the potions —”

“Got it.”

The transaction must have been a familiar one, because Lorea-chan handled

Andre-san's order really fast.

She'd only been on the job for a few months, but she was a good worker, and she picked things up quickly.

It's not a nice way to say it, but I sure am glad I managed to dig up a treasure like Lorea-chan in a rustic town like this! I sure am glad I hired her!

"Will that be all?" Lorea-chan asked.

"Should be," Andre-san replied. "That's all we gathered today."

"Is that right? Well, then please come again."

"Sure... Hey, no! I had other business here too!"

"Oh, you did? You're not just here to cool off?"

"I'm not *just* here to cool off. Much as I do appreciate the temperature here... Do you think you could install the same thing at the inn?"

"You'll have to talk to Delal-san about that," I told him. "But it's not cheap, so I wouldn't count on it happening."

While I'd have loved for her to install a system, she'd already bought a magic stove from me just the other day. Whether she opted to install air conditioning on a room by room basis, or decided to cool the entire building, it was going to come to a hefty sum. And unlike the magic stove, she'd be using it for less than half the year.

It also consumed more magical energy than the average person could provide, so it would cost magic crystals or a substitute like frostbite bat fangs to keep it going. Unless another inn popped up, and she had to compete for customers, there was little hope of her buying one.

"So, what are you here for, Andre-san?" I asked. "Ordering something?"

"No, that's not it..." Andre-san trailed off, and then glanced at Iris-san.

Iris-san nodded. "Allow me to do the talking. Shopkeeper-dono, are you aware of the merchant who is currently staying in the village?"

"You mean someone other than Gretz-san? I haven't heard anything."

"This merchant is much older, and somewhat portly."

“He’s been renting a house for a little while now,” Kate-san added. “The guy seems to have a fair amount of money, and even brought servants with him.”

“Oh, I see,” I replied. “He’s not a traveling merchant, then. What makes you bring him up?”

Traveling merchants, as the name implied, were the kind of merchant who moved about from town to town. But to the best of my knowledge, none of them were able to put on the kind of excess weight that Iris-san was describing.

Now, it might have been different for the kind of merchants who ran large trading caravans, but it was hard to imagine a caravan like that passing through this area.

“The thing is that this merchant has been buying up frostbite bat fangs, offering a thirty percent premium over what you pay, Shopkeeper-dono.”

“Oh, he does? This is news to me.”

“Oh,” Lorea-chan murmured, raising her head in surprise. “Maybe *that’s* why there have been less people selling the fangs lately...”

“I’ll bet that’s it,” Kate-san agreed with a deep nod.

“Now that you mention it, I *had* noticed our stock of fangs was starting to get low.”

I think I would have realized something was up if the number coming in had dropped to zero, but Iris-san and Kate-san were still cashing theirs in whenever they came back, and Andre-san’s team had been coming to sell theirs here too.

Even if my stock was dwindling, there were still high-quality fangs from older bats coming in, and it didn’t take many to make cooling hats, so I hadn’t seen any need to worry.

I noticed that the number coming in hasn’t been increasing to match the number of new gatherers, but I had just assumed that they either weren’t going out to collect them, or that maybe they were going all the way to South Strag to sell them. It didn’t occur to me that they were just selling them to someone else.

“Shopkeeper-dono, you’re too relaxed...”

“Can you really afford to be so carefree about this, Shopkeeper-san? If he’s

offering a thirty percent premium, soon nobody is going to sell their fangs here anymore. Isn't that a problem for you?"

Iris-san and Kate-san seemed confused by my lack of concern, but...

"I'm curious whether it's *really* a thirty percent premium, but that doesn't really worry me in and of itself."

I'd already made the artifacts I wanted to make, and I still had stock, so I could go on making cooling hats for a while. Besides, I'd only been making a slight profit on them anyway.

Even if I can't make any more, it won't be all that big of a deal—not for me, at least.

It'd probably be an issue for Gretz-san and Darna-san, who sourced their cooling hats from me, and also for the villagers, who wouldn't be able to earn money making the hats anymore.

That was income they hadn't had before, so I doubted it would affect their lifestyles too much, but...they wouldn't be happy to lose that income now that they did have it, and I wouldn't be amused to see the system I'd gone to all the trouble of setting up get wrecked.

"Well, it doesn't take an alchemist to appraise frostbite bat fangs, and they're easy to preserve..."

"Yeah, even I was able to learn how."

"Yep. You've got real potential, Lorea-chan. You pick things up quickly."

"Thank you."

I watched Lorea-chan nod happily as I thought about it.

It was the sort of material where you could figure out the price through careful observation, so it was *possible* to add another thirty percent on top of that. But whether you could turn a profit at that price was another matter.

I paid lower than the market price in the capital, but that was because I was buying them in the area where they were produced. It was kind of questionable if I would be able to make a profit selling them in the capital after factoring in the cost of shipping at the rates I paid.

If he was adding another thirty percent on top...then even if he was an alchemist, and could add value by turning them into products of his own, he still might not be able to make a profit. And if he was just a merchant, wholesaling them to alchemists, then he was guaranteed to end up in the red.

If this was some sort of gray zone tactic to manipulate the market price, then considering that there were other areas that also produced frostbite bat fangs, it was essentially guaranteed to fail.

What is he thinking?

“Whatever the case, I think I’ll look into it and find out whether he’s *really* paying thirty percent more. Iris-san, I’ll give you some fangs I’ve already appraised, so could you go and sell them for me?”

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

“Thank you. And is this what you wanted to talk about, Andre-san?”

“Yeah, that’s right. You’ve taken care of us, so all of the old guard are still selling at your place, but I wanted to get your take on what’s happening.”

“Thank you for being so considerate.”

Now I get it. So that’s why there were still people selling here despite someone else offering higher prices. Business really is about making good connections with people.

“But if this merchant really is offering better prices, I don’t mind if you go to him instead. That goes for you too, Iris-san and Kate-san. I’m able to go collect them myself if I really need them.”

“Yeah, you sure can, Sarasa-chan,” Andre-san agreed. “Heck, you might be able to gather more all by yourself than every gatherer in the village combined.”

“But only if I had people to carry them for me.”

No matter how much I was able to enhance my body, there was still an upper limit to how much I could carry—one determined by the toughness of the leather bags I used, and the issue of my own size.

“I hear you. Give us a shout whenever you need us. Oh, and do you mind me

telling the other members of the old guard that you don't mind them selling elsewhere?"

"Sure, go ahead. If you make more money, and spend it in the village, you won't hear a word of complaint out of me. And be sure to spend some at my shop too, while you're at it, okay?"

"Sure! No worries there. You know we've all been drinking the good stuff every day at the restaurant, the new guys included, right?"

"Now that you mention it, my dad's been stocking fine wine lately. And since the number of people renting houses has gone up, the snacks to go with it have been selling too."

This village had been experiencing frostbite bat fever. If you could just cope with the awful smell, gathering their fangs was surprisingly easy, and the fangs sold for a relatively high price, so more and more of the gatherers were being loose with their money.

Delal-san's inn was already booked full of those sorts of gatherers, and the restaurant was overflowing with customers. Ultimately, that meant that the gatherers who couldn't secure a table for themselves often drank in the houses they'd rented.

I'd been taking advantage of this boom by keeping odor-control potions and flexible gloves on the shelves, but while the gloves had been selling fairly well, the potions weren't such a big hit. That had to be because, while the gloves had a direct connection with making the job safer, the stench was something they could just endure.

The potions are consumables and also a bit pricey, after all.

"You know, it really was the right call to get the kitchen up and running, just like you said, Lorea-chan. Thanks for that."

"It'd be a bit hard for the two of you to go to the restaurant with the way things are now," Kate-san agreed.

"We've been benefiting from the kitchen as well," added Iris-san. "Thanks, Lorea."

“Oh, don’t thank me. I’ve been enjoying cooking!” Lorea-chan bashfully shook her head as we all expressed our gratitude.

“Well, maybe it’s not the most inviting place for women,” Andre-san conceded.

“Is it really that bad?” I asked.

“Yeah. Lots of new guys come in having heard that they can make easy money on frostbite bat fangs, but then they go off without gathering enough info. Some of the idiots come back to the restaurant still reeking,” Andre-san grumbled, scowling with distaste.

“Yikes... If it’s like that, I wouldn’t want to go to the restaurant even if there *were* seats available.”

“Of course, Delal-san chases those guys out, and dumps water on them. ‘And don’t you come back until the smell is gone!’ she’ll say.”

That’s Delal-san for you. She doesn’t hold back.

Even so, I know it’s hot out so they’re not going to catch a cold, but...they’re still technically customers!

“But even if they tidy up before coming, they can’t get the smell out entirely, so you can imagine how that affects the restaurant...” Andre-san said with a deep sigh.

Iris-san nodded gravely. “Gatherers can be so unclean.”

“Tell me about it,” Kate-san agreed. “It makes me really glad we have this place. We get to take a bath every day.”

“Well, since I’m using it myself anyway, it’s really no extra trouble,” I explained.

Since the water was already heated, it cost me nothing to let my housemates use the bath too, and I felt better when they were clean. I was also encouraging Lorea-chan to take a bath almost every day, so she was squeaky clean too.

Since it involves handling potions, I really can’t let her mind the shop if she’s filthy.

“So that’s what the restaurant’s like now, huh?”

I felt a little bad for Delal-san, knowing that I was at least partially responsible for the situation. Sure, her business might be flourishing, but if that came at the cost of working in a place that reeked...

“Should I start selling deodorizer...?” I wondered aloud.

“Oh, Shopkeeper-dono, is that a thing that exists?” Iris-san asked.

“Yes. But while the deodorizer itself isn’t all that expensive, the container that holds it is a little pricey...”

The convenient spray bottle that it came in was much more expensive than a simple potion bottle.

Obviously, it was possible to sprinkle it around manually, but that was highly inefficient.

“In that case, why not sell it in bulk?” Iris-san suggested.

“Yeah,” Kate-san agreed. “I know I’m going to want some. So sell the bottles separately.”

Gatherers or not, they were still women, so the pair both snapped at the opportunity.

I’ve been carefully cleaning the ordinary potion bottles people return before reusing them, but there’s no need to be so thorough when it’s just deodorizer, so maybe that’s not such a bad idea?

“Hrmm, maybe I will. Lorea-chan, it’s going to mean a bit more effort on your part. Do you mind?”

“Not at all.”

“Thanks. What do you think, Andre-san?”

When I asked for his opinion as a veteran, he crossed his arms and groaned before saying, “Well, I think I’d buy it, but...I’m not so sure about the new guys...”

“Really?” I asked. “Aren’t they bothered by the smell?”

“It’s not that they aren’t, it’s just that...”

To put it simply, there were a decent number of gatherers who were just used to being filthy all the time. They always stunk, so the other guys' stench didn't bother them.

The old guard, who had been in the village for a long time, were considerate of how the villagers felt about them, but the gatherers who didn't plan to stick around didn't have to be, and so they'd cut whatever costs they could. It didn't matter to them if they inconvenienced others. If it wasn't a problem for them, they weren't going to pay to do something about it.

"Anyway, those are the kinds of guys they are. One of them even lost a finger... Served 'im right, if you ask me."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yeah. I've warned them, doing my part as a fellow gatherer, but some of these guys are cheap even when it comes to things where they shouldn't be. It wouldn't have happened to him if he'd just bought your flexible gloves."

It sounded like the guy had messed up while breaking off the fangs, leading to a frozen finger which he'd ultimately lost.

"Ohh, yeah, there was a guy like that."

"Serves him right. He never listens to anyone, and he hit on us too."

In contrast to Andre-san, who seemed to at least pity the guy somewhat, Iris-san and Kate-san were much harsher.

They're both beautiful, so maybe he was really stubborn about going after them?

"I'm sure that all of you will be fine, but if you *do* end up freezing your fingers, hurry over here, okay? So long as you still have them, I'll be able to heal you for a comparatively low price."

Potions to regrow missing fingers were incredibly expensive, but it was a bit cheaper when they were "just" frozen. They just had to make it back to my place.

Ideally, they would buy the potions before going and take them with them, but there was no point saying that to the kind of guys who were too cheap to

buy flexible gloves.

“Sure, if it ever happens, I’ll be counting on you. But once that guy lost his finger, pretty much everyone wised up and bought the gloves. He set a solid example of what *not* to do.”

“Come to think of it, there was a day when we sold a whole lot. Was that when it happened?” Lorea-chan wondered aloud.

“Probably,” Andre-san nodded. “Everyone rushed off to buy a pair.”

So that’s why my stock of flexible gloves took a nosedive, huh?

Well, it’s up to the gatherers to weigh the cost against the risks. It won’t do any good for me to tell them what to do.

“Anyway, we’ll investigate the prices tomorrow. I’m counting on you, Iris-san.”

“Yeah. I just need to sell the fangs and report back on how much I got, right?”

“Hey, if you’d like, I could help out too,” Andre-san offered. “The more points of reference you have the better, right?”

“You don’t mind? If not, I’d appreciate the help.”

I returned the items that Andre-san had just sold me, and recorded what they were worth.

Now, let’s see how much the merchant is going to buy them for...

I might have been just a little curious.



“Thirty percent was a bit of an exaggeration in the end, but it does look like he’s paying a bit more than ten percent higher than me.”

The next day, that was my impression of the price situation, once I had heard back from Iris-san and Andre-san.

I’m not sure if this other merchant is unaware of my prices, or if he’s deliberately hyping up how much more he pays...

Although, since I was already paying a little above market rates, maybe he

was around thirty percent over the market price, overall.

“Yeah. I was a little surprised,” Iris-san admitted. “I had expected that even if his prices were higher, it would only be by a small amount.”

“Still,” I mused to myself, “if an ordinary merchant is buying at these prices, I think it must be putting a strain on him financially...”

Even if he were to try to resell them at the same price, it was questionable if he'd be able to find customers in South Strag. He could likely sell them in the capital, but once he paid to transport them all the way there, he'd be in the red for sure.

“I can't see what his goal is. Buying them up like this, even at a loss.”

Would Lorea-chan... Yeah, she wouldn't know, would she? I mean, she's already shaking her head.

“I-I have no more idea than she does,” Iris-san stammered. “Figuring that sort of thing out is more Kate's job. Okay?”

With all of us turning to her, Kate-san stroked her chin as she thought about it for a moment. “Well, first of all, there could be circumstances that would make him want to acquire frostbite bat fangs regardless of the cost. Like if he had a contract for a certain number to fulfill, but wasn't able to get his hands on enough of them.”

“You mean the higher price for the items might be less painful than the penalty for violating the contract?” I asked.

“Yeah. The other thing it could be...is market manipulation. Like if he already bought a large stock with the intention of selling it in summer, when prices rise, but our supply kept the price from going as high as he'd planned for.”

“He's buying to stop our supply? But there aren't that many fangs making it to market from here...”

Aside from the first batch that I had sold to Leonora-san, I had used all of the fangs I'd bought, either to make cooling hats, or to keep them in storage so I'd have stock on hand.

They aren't making it out of town as materials. Maybe the gatherers have

taken some to town, but it can't have been in any great quantity.

When I pointed this out, Kate-san shrugged. "We're selling the cooling hats in South Strag and its outlying villages, right? Wouldn't that supply reduce the demand for fangs to be used as materials just the same?"

I thought about it for a moment. "Well, maybe you're right."

There are a lot of uses for fangs, but cooling hats have to be the main one around this time of the year. They can also be used in refrigerators and freezers, but those are luxury items, and only make up a small part of the overall demand.

"If we're still looking for another reason...could it be a grudge?" Kate-san suggested.

"Whaa?! I don't recall doing anything that would upset anybody!" I cried out, raising my voice without meaning to, but I was nowhere near as loud as Lorea-chan.

"That's right! No one could possibly have a grudge against Sarasa-san!" Lorea added.

Um, you know, I'm not sure I've been such a saint that you need to deny it quite that forcefully.

"Lorea-chan, there are people out there who'll harbor grudges against you even if you've never done anything to deserve it, you know?" I reminded her.

"That's not fair!"

Lorea-chan's nostrils flared as she balled her hands into fists and swung her arms angrily. Kate-san put a hand to her cheek and sighed deeply. "Yeah, life's not fair. Although, in this case, it might not be Shopkeeper-san that they've got it out for."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It could be Gretz-san or Darna-san, for instance."

"Huh? My dad?" Lorea-chan froze at these unexpected words, tilting her head to the side just a little.

“He’s made a good chunk of change on these cooling hats, hasn’t he?”

“Huh?! No, he hasn’t made *that* much. Yes, we have more cash on hand thanks to Sarasa-san, but it’s mostly gone to widening the selection of items we carry at the store.”

“Ohh!” Iris-san exclaimed. “So *that’s* why the selection at the general store has improved lately!”

“Yes. Up until now, we couldn’t afford to stock anything unless we knew for sure that it would sell. Now that the villagers have a little money, business has been picking up.”

What’s this? My hard work, coming to fruition so close to home?

“The one problem is that that’s not very noticeable,” I remarked.

Unless people were paying close attention, they wouldn’t see that was where the profit was going. And if their eyes were already clouded by jealousy, they might not realize it even then.

“Gretz-san, on the other hand...might be making money.”

He’d put in a formal request for a Harvester the other day. Since he could afford to do that, there was no question that he was making enough to put some aside...

“But only so many people know he’s making a profit, right?” Iris-san pointed out.

“That’s the thing. Darna-san sells them in South Strag, so if the merchant is from there, then it would be possible for him to have learned about it. But Gretz-san is traveling around to a bunch of different villages...”

Unless they had a mind for accounting like Erin-san, there were very few villagers outside of ourselves who could have guessed how much he was making. And it would have been even harder for an outsider. Obviously, if they went around interviewing the villagers it might be another story, but there was no way that doing something like that wouldn’t have drawn enough attention for me to have heard about it.

“Well, whatever the merchant’s motive is, the question remains the same:

what do you intend to do about it, Shopkeeper-dono?" asked Iris-san.

"Hmm, do I do something? Or just leave him alone?"

"If you do leave him alone, this will continue. Will you still be all right as far as the cooling hats go?"

"Like I said yesterday, I've still got a stock of fangs, and I can go gather more myself."

"Shopkeeper-dono, we'll go with you if you do, of course!"

"We can hunt a whole lot more helping you than if we go alone and only sell to the competition, so we'll turn more of a profit in the end," Kate-san added.

"Yes, that's exactly—*not* why we'd be going with you! It's because you've taken such good care of us! And besides...for some reason, I've never liked that merchant!"

"Ah ha ha... Thanks," I said. "I'll make sure everyone gets a fair share of fangs when we go."

"Shopkeeper-dono! I swear, I wasn't offering because of an ulterior motive!" Iris-san insisted desperately, moving in closer as she did.

"I know, I know," I reassured her, pushing her back away from me as I nodded.

Kate-san was just joking around, no need to get so serious about it.

"So long as you understand, it's fine. Yeah... So, if you choose to compete, how will you go about it?"

"There's a variety of ways...but I'd raise my prices to match his," I said, holding up a finger as I explained my first idea.

Iris-san and Kate-san nodded with satisfaction, but Lorea-chan cocked her head to the side and looked at me as if I'd said something strange. "Sarasa-san, is there any point in just matching him...?"

"Well, if the prices are equal, people will sell to Shopkeeper-dono," Iris-san stated. "Especially the gatherers who've been in this village a long time."

"Alchemists are just afforded so much more trust than ordinary merchants,"

Kate-san added. “And many of us gatherers have benefited from being able to buy potions cheaply from Shopkeeper-san.”

“That’s true. Even just minding the shop, I’ve seen how happy it makes people,” Lorea-chan agreed with a nod, her own interactions with gatherers having convinced her that the two women were right.

“But won’t you be taking a loss too, then, Shopkeeper-san?” Kate-san finished.

“No, not at current prices... Assuming I ignore the cost of my labor, and I never mess up.”

Even one failure would set me back enough to wipe out the profit from dozens of successes, though. And that’s calculating the value of my labor at zero, of course.

“Are you...sure that’s okay? Working for free, and with failure not even being an option,” asked Iris-san.

Lorea-chan seemed similarly concerned. “Sarasa-san, is alchemy the sort of thing you can do without ever messing up?”

“It’s really not. We mess up all the time. It’s so bad that most alchemists need to price their wares around a fifty percent failure rate or they’ll go bankrupt.”

That was why artifacts were so expensive. If everyone could succeed all of the time, prices would have been at least a little bit lower.

“That’s no good then,” Kate-san warned me.

“It’s fine. I’m not going to mess up something as simple as a cooling hat... Probably.”

“Probably...”

“No, listen, I haven’t messed up even once so far! You have to remember, I apprenticed under a master class alchemist!”

I’m not going to screw up a Level 4 magic item! And I mean, anyway, cooling hats are on the simpler side, as far as artifacts go.

“Oh, I see. That makes...” Iris-san cocked her head to the side. “Hm? You’re a

master alchemist's apprentice?"

I nodded.

"Yes. Wait, had I not told you this before?"

"Never! Not a word! Wh-Who is your master?"

Now that I think about it, the time Master dropped in to visit was before Iris-san and Kate-san came to my place, huh?

Seeing how panicked Iris-san looked, I told her Master's name: "Ophelia Millis. Do you know who she is?"

"How could I not?! If it's her... Hahh, I think I'm starting to see how you ended up so absurdly powerful, Shopkeeper-dono," Iris-san said with an exhausted sigh.

How rude. I'll have you know, I was at the top of my year at the Alchemist Academy.

"Um, I don't know anything about master class, or this Ophelia Millis person... Is she famous or something?" Lorea-chan asked, looking mystified.

"'Master class' is reserved for the very top alchemists. It's a rank so high that there are only a handful of them in the country. This is something anyone with even the slightest interest in alchemy knows," I explained.

"A-And someone like that was your master... That's amazing!"

"Yep, well, it *is* amazing and all, but... You know?"

Lorea-chan's eyes were glittering with wonder, but I had a feeling she'd be let down when she met Master in person. Master looked pretty young, after all. Her image had been so totally different from my own preconceptions of what a master class alchemist would be like that I hadn't even realized it was her until my seniors told me. If I hadn't been friends with them, I might have gone all this time without ever finding out who she was.

"So, about Ophelia Millis... Shopkeeper-san, what was your impression of her as an apprentice?" asked Kate-san.

"Huh...? I don't know what the general opinion of Master is, but...she's kind

of famous among us alchemists.”

“Dummy! You’re such a dummy, Shopkeeper-dono!”

Whaa?! Why the sudden verbal abuse from Iris-san?!

“Ophelia-sama is on a level far beyond ‘kind of famous’! She’s...! She’s...!!!”

“Okay, Iris. Settle down.” Kate-san tried to calm her. “Sorry, Shopkeeper-san. Iris’s reaction was extreme, but your master is *really* famous, even among nonalchemists.”

“Is she?”

“She is.”

I just replied to a help wanted ad, and more or less went with the flow until I ended up being treated as her apprentice...

Maybe that was actually super lucky?

I mean, I guess that checks out. My seniors were really jealous.

“A-Anyway, let’s drop the subject,” I said. “We need to get back on topic. Once I raise my prices, the other side will either raise theirs to compete, or they’ll give up.”

“It’s too important a subject to just move on from, but... I’ll ask you more about Ophelia-sama later,” Iris-san relented.

“No, I won’t tell you anything. There’s not really anything to say.”

She was an ordinary master. At least as far as I’m concerned.

“I’ll be asking you more about her later,” Iris-san repeated insistently before moving on. “If the other side backs down, that’s the end of it.”

I guess she really wants to hear more. Maybe I can share stories about the outrageous attitude Master takes toward nobles?

“Yeah, that’s right,” I agreed. “The problem is solved at that point.”

“Yeah. The issue will be if he chooses to raise his price in response.”

“If he does that, then I’ll boost the supply of fangs. Massively.”

“How?”

“I’ll go to the cave day after day, hunting them myself. Until I manage to run my opponent out of funds.”

If I really got serious about hunting, and had other people like Iris-san and Kate-san to help me out, I could reliably bring in hundreds of fangs a day. Even more if I brought Andre-san and his crew along too.

Each bat had two fangs, and the minimum purchase price for a five-year-old specimen was around a thousand rhea. That price only went up with age, and my opponent was paying a thirty percent premium, so I could soak up millions of rhea from him in a day. Unless he’d brought a considerable amount of cash along with him, I’d have an easy time running him out of it.

“Hee hee... It’ll just be a matter of whether the caves run out of frostbite bats, or the other side runs out of money first.”

Yeah, it’d be a huge headache for the gatherers.

If I went ahead with this plan, I was going to need to hold some sort of sale to give back to the community afterward or I’d be in real trouble.

“I’d have expected no less, Shopkeeper-dono! Have you no mercy?!”

“I’d prefer it if this could be settled peacefully. But hey, he’s the one who picked a fight with me.”

I don’t know why she’d have expected no less from me. I’d like to sit Iris-san down for just an hour so we can talk about her perception of me, but that would take us way off topic, so I’ll let it slide for now.

“Sarasa-san, is what the merchant’s doing really wrong? My dad was buying materials before...”

“Darna-san’s been doing it since before I arrived. But this guy’s come into a village that already has an alchemist, and he’s doing something that’s against established customs... Because, when an alchemist’s first starting out, they don’t have much of an economic moat.”

It was different in the larger towns, but in a small village like this, if a merchant wanted to buy up materials, it was basic manners to do it through the local alchemist, or at least got permission from them first.

There were materials that were in high demand and gave a hefty profit, and materials that were in low demand but were necessary under certain circumstances.

What would happen if alchemists only dealt in the former? And what if, because the materials sold so well, they harvested them until there was no more left?

It was part of an alchemist's job to adjust prices and place purchase limits on specific materials to avoid that sort of thing happening. If a merchant was allowed to come in and ignore those rules, managing the local resources would become impossible.

The frostbite bat lives in a relatively large number of areas, so there really isn't any fear of them being hunted to extinction. But that doesn't mean it's okay to break the rules, now does it?

"Well, there isn't a law against it, so he's free to do what he's doing," I said.

"Really? Even though it causes problems for alchemists?" Lorea-chan asked.

"Because no sane merchant would do it. The risks involved in making an enemy of us alchemists are too great."

If someone was going to deal in alchemic materials, then their main customer base was going to be alchemists. If they were breaking the rules to get those materials, then they'd be shunned by the local alchemists, and it would be hard to do business.

That's why I can't see the point of what he's doing.

"Well, Shopkeeper-dono. Which will you do, then? Leave him alone, or confront him?"

"Hmmm, I wonder which is better."

Leaving him alone was easiest. I'd make less profit, but not to the point that it would bother me.

The problem was that if he took me lightly—and looking at the current situation, he probably already was—he might go on doing things that would actually bother me in the future.

If I was primarily concerned with profit, I needed to confront him. The drawback was that this involved effort on my part.

Now, don't get me wrong. It wasn't that I was opposed to working. It was just that I didn't want to lose the time that I would otherwise be using to perform alchemy.

"Okay, let's vote on it," I suggested. "Can I get a show of hands from people in favor of confrontation?"

Three hands went up, instantly settling the matter.

"We won't stand for him getting in Shopkeeper-dono's way!" Iris-san declared.

"Yeah," Kate-san agreed. "If he's going to do business, he needs to consider how it affects everybody involved."

"You're in favor too, Lorea-chan?" I asked.

"Yes, for my dad's sake, and, um...because big brother Gretz has done a lot for me in the past."

Now that she mentions it, she did say they used to play together.

Lorea-chan said she didn't recognize him, and was pretty harsh to him in a lot of ways, but I guess she does care.

Based on how she'd been acting toward him all this time, it was probably not out of "love," but out of "pity," though.

"I see where you're coming from. Okay, confrontation it is, then. Iris-san, Kate-san, are you with me?"

"Yes, count on us!"

"I'll ask Andre-san and his team to spread the word too!"

"Uh, right. Thanks...?"

For some reason, the pair were more enthusiastic about this than I was. It was both reassuring and bewildering to see that as our plan got underway.

The effect of their promotion was dramatic, and starting the very next day, gatherers brought more fangs to my shop than ever before.

Surely, some of that was out of a sense of gratitude toward me, or a feeling that they owed it to Andre-san, but in the end, undoubtedly the biggest factor was that I was now offering equal prices.

Just as the new gatherers started to bring me their fangs too, lured in by my new prices, Iris-san rushed into the shop.

“Shopkeeper-dono! He’s raised his prices to compete!”

“Well, well. It would appear he has less foresight than I’d have expected. Heh heh...”

I rested my elbows on the counter, like some kind of devious mastermind, and let out the low laugh.

I look so cool right now.



“Shopkeeper-san... You know that doesn’t suit you, right?”

“Oh, it doesn’t? Well, I’ll stop then.”

Guess I can’t pull that look off yet.

“So, how much has he raised them?” I asked, taking my elbows off the counter. Iris-san thought about it for a bit before answering.

“He says it’s a fifty percent premium. But in reality, I question if his prices even went up ten percent. That’s just my sense of it, so I don’t know how accurate it is.”

“Even that has to be hard on him... I wonder why he’s doing it.”

I had no idea why he would be willing to go to such lengths to buy his materials in this village.

Surely, if he’s willing to pay twenty percent above market price, he could purchase them in a town that’s just a little farther away from here.

“No, actually, when I mentioned you, he said, ‘She’s finally hurting, huh? It’ll just be a little longer now.’”

“Me? Hurting?”

What’s he talking about?

“Maybe he thinks not being able to buy fangs is a problem for you, Shopkeeper-san?” suggested Kate-san.

“That must be it,” Iris-san agreed. “He probably doesn’t realize you can go collect them yourself.”

Hmm... So I actually am his target?

I still didn’t recall doing anything that would justify it.

Oh, but if it’s an unfounded grudge, that could be it—from that unscrupulous alchemist in South Strag, for instance. Maybe not being able to underpay the gatherers for their materials anymore is causing problems for him? I sure hope so.

Because if that’s it, then it means my warnings are serving their intended

purpose.

That said, while I couldn't totally rule out him having some connection to this merchant...the risk was probably too high for him...

Oh, whatever. It's no problem.

We go ahead with the operation as planned.

"Okay, I'm going to do the plan I told you about tomorrow, so I'll be counting on the two of you."

"Got it."

"Yeah. Do you want me to ask Andre-san and the guys too?"

"Let me think. It's going to depend on how many people we actually need, but let's reach out to Andre-san and his team for a start."

We need luggage carriers and fang removers. Oh, and...considering how many dead bats there are going to be, maybe we'll need people to dispose of all of them too?

I'd have to think about it more once we'd actually tried it.

"Lorea-chan, I'll need you to watch the shop for a while. Could you?"

"Sure. I can do that. If people bring in things I don't know, I can just turn them down, right?"

"Yeah. Unless they're a regular."

Recently, we had started trading on a credit basis when our regulars brought in materials. What that meant was that, if I was away, Lorea-chan would take their materials, I would assess them once I returned, and we would pay them their money the next time they came to the shop.

It wasn't something we were willing to do for first-time customers, or gatherers who were new to the village.

For the materials that Lorea-chan knew, I had her issue them claim tags with the names and condition of the materials written on them. Because it'd be a real headache if someone started complaining that, *"This was in better condition when I turned it in."*

“Okay, let’s all do our best tomorrow!” I said.

“Yeah!” the other three shouted in response.

Episode 4: Sales Wars and Behind the Scenes

Wrangling

After making various preparations, we headed to the cave the next day, and that was where I made my debut as the masked gatherer, Newbini.

It'd be no fun if my competition realized what I was up to, after all.

I was a super suspicious newcomer, wrapped up in cloth so that everything but my eyes was hidden, hanging out in front of the cave with all the other gatherers. I would have thought this would attract attention, but...surprisingly, no, I wasn't standing out that badly.

I had the wretched stench of the cave to thank for that. I wasn't the only one who'd covered her face in cloth, and the robe I'd chosen to mask my identity was run-of-the-mill attire around here. Most of the gatherers had chosen to wrap themselves up to protect themselves from falling droppings, so lots of people were dressed like me. Nobody was carrying an umbrella.

If I were to choose just one thing that set me apart from the others, it would have been that my robe looked maybe a bit more expensive, but that was about it.

"So, Shop—"

"Ngh!"

Iris-san had been about to say something that could have blown my cover when I interrupted her with a distressed grunt followed by some coughing.

"Oops, Newbini. Shall we head in?"

"Yes. Let's," I said in as grave a tone as I could manage, prompting Kate-san to cover her mouth with her hands to hide her expression.

But you could clearly see her shoulders shaking, so it was blatantly obvious she was trying to suppress a laugh.

It has to be this way! I'm trying to hide my identity!

Yeesh, take a hint from Andre-san and the guys!

Or so I thought, but...

Oh? They're laughing too?

They're slapping each other on the shoulders, making it look like they're laughing about something else, but that's totally not it, is it?

"Grr. Let's go."

I can't speak freely here.

I headed into the cave, in search of a place where there would be fewer people around, and the others quickly followed.

Our destination this time was the very back of the frostbite bats' living area, which we had failed to reach on the previous trip.

There were three reasons for our new destination. First, we wanted to minimize the effect on other gatherers. The vast majority of people here went after bats that were just barely five years old, so going to the very back of the cave, where the bats were older, would minimize competition.

Second, we wanted to preserve the resource. If we hunted down all the young bats, that would have an impact on harvests from next year onward.

Third, and finally, we wanted to collect the merchant's money in the most efficient way possible.

As mentioned previously, the older a frostbite bat was, the higher quality its fangs, and the more they were worth.

With bats like that living here, there's no reason not to hunt them.

"Still, Shopkeeper-dono. This cave goes deeper than I thought it would."

"I told you, I'm Newbini."

"Oh, what does it matter? There's no one here."

"Well, I suppose, but still."

Since we'd already passed the place where we had hunted frostbite bats the

last time we were here, there were no other gatherers around. That meant there was no need to hide my identity, but...

“I have a feeling you’re going to get it wrong, so we’ll keep it up.”

“Yeah, Iris probably *would* get it wrong,” Kate-san agreed.

“Murgh. I’m not that clumsy, guys!” Iris-san protested, looking offended, but look who was talking.

“The person who almost got it wrong before we entered the cave is saying something, Kate-san.”

“Yeah. You can’t trust her at all.”

We nodded to each other.

“Urgh!” Iris-san choked. “I-It’s true that may have happened, but—”

“Well, what’s it matter?” Andre-san interjected. “Why don’t we all just call her...uh, Newbini? It’s too much effort to go back and forth, don’t you think?”

“You said it,” Gil-san agreed. “Even we might mess it up if we did that. Right?”

“Yeah,” Gray-san concurred. “With no guarantee we’re alone, it’s best to remain cautious.”

“W-Well then... Okay, let’s do that,” Iris-san said with a nod.

It seemed the guys had convinced her. *But none of them ever got it wrong, you know?*

“By the way,” I said, turning to Andre-san, “none of you guys have gone all the way to the back either, right?”

“Right. Normally, we gather at an area that’s a little less far in than the time we came here together. It’s a pain hauling out the dead bats otherwise.”

That would be the bottleneck, wouldn’t it? Since all we need is the fangs.

If we could just leave the bodies where they fall, it would let us collect a whole lot more, though.

“Come to think of it... I haven’t seen any dead bats lying around. You’d think the less conscientious gatherers would leave theirs.”

“Ohh, that’d be because us veterans gave them some lessons.”

“You taught them...?”

“We just taught the clueless youngsters the rules.”

There was no emotion in Gray’s voice, but it made me a little curious how they’d gone about doing it.

I looked at Iris-san...who just shrugged silently.

With a rueful smile, Kate-san stepped up to explain, “You don’t need to worry. All that happened was that they found a group that had discarded their dead bats, then they surrounded them with three times as many people and pushed them around for a bit. No one got hurt—not badly, at least.”

“O-Okay then...”

Hrmm... Well, I’m just a temporary gatherer, so maybe it’s not my place to say anything? It feels a bit violent to me, but it’s obvious there have to be rules when gathering materials.

Mushrooms were a good example; even if you found some you could sell, you couldn’t just pick everything in sight. You were supposed to leave some behind so there would be more next year.

Or medicinal herbs. If all you needed was the leaves, you took care not to damage the roots. Or heck, even tree leaves. It would be absurd to chop down a tree just to harvest its leaves. Even when you cut off branches, you were supposed to think about it first, and choose ones that wouldn’t cause the whole tree to shrivel up and die.

I’d learned all this at the academy, but gatherers usually learned it from those who had more experience. If their seniors were gentle, then they were taught with words; if their seniors were harsh, then with fists.

In this case...well, the new gatherers had probably not been so good at listening.

Surely Andre-san and the guys wouldn’t just start beating lessons into people out of nowhere...right?



Another hour or so's walk from where we'd made it to on our previous trip, the stench let up a little, and another smell took its place.

The others seemed to have noticed, and their brows furrowed as they began sniffing the air.

"What is this...slightly sweet smell?" Andre-san wondered aloud.

"It's all the fruit that the frostbite bats have cached here," I explained.

"Oh, I've heard of this!" Iris-san exclaimed. "Frostbite bats freeze fruit before storing it!"

"I've heard that in some places, the fruit can sell for a pretty high price," Kate-san added.

"Yep," I replied. "Normally, they store the fruit at the very back of their living area, so we must be getting close."

While Iris-san and Kate-san seemed familiar with this idea, Andre-san and the guys had never heard about it before, and they groaned a little, with slightly confused looks on their faces.

"I get that they cache fruit, but do people really sell it?" Andre-san asked.

"Isn't it kind of dirty?" Gil-san added.

"Yeah. Honestly, I'm with you on that, but there's all sorts of people out there."

I know I wouldn't really want to eat fruit that's been lying around on the floor of this cave.

"Nobles will eat anything, as long as it's rare and unusual," Kate-san said, shrugging with mild exasperation.

"But they say it's supposed to be really good, you know?" Iris-san noted, sounding maybe a little curious... No, in all honesty, it was written all over her face that she wanted to try it herself.

"This *is* the season for it, so we may be able to find some, but..."

Fruit abounded in the forest from the end of summer going into autumn. Frostbite bats would cache food around that time and then consume it over the

period from winter until early summer—in other words, until around this time the following year.

The fruit wasn't just valued as a delicacy because it had been frozen, but because it fermented while it was cached, giving it alcoholic properties.

As such, this was the season when it was valuable. If we'd come in winter, it would have been worthless.

"Alcohol, huh? Now you've got our attention," quipped Andre-san.

"Yeah," Gil-san agreed. "If we can get some, I want to try it."

"I like the idea of selling it," Gray-san added, "but I also like the idea of tasting it first."

The mention of alcohol had the guys excited, but sadly for them, the world just wasn't that easy. I hit them with a harsh dose of reality: "On the other hand, a lot of what we find is going to be rotten."

There was a brief silence before Andre-san asked, "Really?"

"Yes," I replied. "Frostbite bats will eat fruit that's gone a bit off. It's the bits that, in the middle of all that rot, have luckily fermented, that people value so highly."

"So it's expensive for a reason, then, huh?" he concluded.

"That's right," I agreed. "Oh, there it is now. I think that's it over there."

The light that I was casting fell over a mound of frozen fruit as tall as a person. The scent rising from the pile was rotten, with a hint of sweetness. Even without taking a closer look, it was clear that the fruit on the outside had already turned and was unfit for consumption.

"Yuck! This is a bit much for me..." Iris-san said, recoiling.

No one had been expecting to have to retrieve the fruit from a pile in this state, so we were all a little put off by it.

"I know, right?" I said. "But if this is here, then we've reached the back of their living area. The cave keeps on going, though."

What that meant was that the frostbite bats here were the oldest in the cave,

and therefore the most profitable to hunt.

“By the way, the fruit that you want to collect isn’t on the surface, it’s in the middle of the pile, or so I hear. That’s where you’ll find stuff that’s fermented, not rotten. Although, if you go touching it...”

“Oh, yeah?” Gil-san cut me off. “Time to go digging!”

He started working on the pile—which was clearly a bad move.

“...The frostbite bats will attack,” I finished. “Well... Guess it’s too late.”

The cave was suddenly full of noise as a large number of bats descended on Gil-san for laying a hand on their food.

“You idiot! Don’t touch anything before the expert’s done explaining!” Andre-san shouted at his partner as he quickly moved in to help.

“S-Sorry!” Gil-san immediately apologized, tossing the fruit he was holding aside, and drawing his sword to join in the attack. The two of them, together with Gray-san, began cutting down all of the nearby bats.

But the bats didn’t only attack the guys. As they swarmed us all, I shot the flying frostbite bats with magic, and struck any that got too close to me using my sword.

“Wh-Why?” Iris-san asked, sounding a little confused, as she swung her blade. “They were asleep before, so why such sudden ferocity? We never attacked them!”

I told her a very basic truth: “If someone starts messing with their food, they’re going to wake up.”

“Makes sense,” Kate-san agreed. “Their lives could depend on it.”

Kate-san cleverly took up a position between me and Iris-san, leaving us to handle the nearby bats, while she aimed at the ones farther away using her bow.

“I can understand!” Iris-san responded. “But still—ugh, don’t you think there’s too many of them?!”

Even as we grumbled, we kept on slaying bats. Soon enough, there were so

many of them piled up on the floor that there was nowhere left to stand, and yet there was still no break in their attacks.

Iris-san was the first to start running out of breath.

“Huff, huff... I-Is it still not over?”

“Iris, keep doing your part!” Kate-san demanded. “Just look at Shopkeeper-san, using magic *and* fighting with her sword at the same time! How can *you* be the first one ready to call it quits?!”

“K-Kate, you’re at least able to rest a bit! I’ll agree that it feels pathetic that I’m losing to Shopkeeper-dono in endurance, though!”

“Oh, um, it’s really not a problem, you know?” I told her. “If you’re having trouble, would you like me to strengthen the Air Wall? Then the bats won’t be able to attack us through it.”

“Y-You can do that?” Iris-san asked.

“Yes, of course.”

“Come to think of it, the bats *were* bouncing off of it last time...” Kate-san recalled.

This spell was designed to deflect incoming arrows, not block falling bat droppings. If it had the strength to stop arrows normally, then with just a little enhancement, it could easily stop a diving bat. At least it could with the level of magical power I had.

The only reason I hadn’t done so was because we were here to kill frostbite bats, and if they couldn’t get anywhere near us, then that would put them out of sword range too.

“Urkh... I-I’ll tough it out a little longer!” Iris-san declared.

“You’re sure? Well, do your best,” I told her. “And do be careful. While I guarantee the toughness of my flexible gloves, I can’t say anything about the rest of your gear. The frostbite bats around here can pierce through soft leather, and once they’ve done that they’ll freeze your whole arm.”

“Eagh!” Gil-san cried out. “S-Sarasa-chan, do you think you could lower their numbers a little more?!”

“On it,” I replied cheerily, adjusting the power of my Air Wall.

“Thanks, that helps!” he shouted back.

“Yes,” Gray-san murmured. “Even I’d struggle to keep on fighting unscathed against numbers such as these.”

He was fighting with the heaviest weapon out of all of us, so he really wasn’t suited to a situation like this one.

I guess the reason it hasn’t slowed him down at all must just come down to the difference in natural stamina between us.

Still, there were just so many frostbite bats... Around the time when all of us, Gray-san included, were starting to show signs of fatigue, we finally ran out of bats flying around us.

“I-It’s over...?” Iris-san wondered aloud.

“Yeah, for the time being,” I answered with a nod, sensing for frostbite bats with my magic and finding no living ones nearby.

The rest of the group let out a sigh of relief, putting away their weapons and rubbing their tired arms, or spinning them in circles to loosen them up.

“After that, my arms are all swollen,” Kate-san complained.

“That was rough!” Andre-san agreed.

“There were way too many of them!” Gil-san added.

“Only because you got careless,” Gray-san chastised him. “You need to reflect on what you did, Gil.”

“You’ve got that right!” Gil-san immediately clapped his hands together and bowed his head to us. “Sorry, guys!”

I smiled and shook my head. “It’s fine, really. I had ways of dealing with the problem if I needed to.”

“Still, that really was impressive, Shopkeeper-dono!” Iris-san praised me. “Even while using all that magic, you were still able to swing a sword too!”

“It’s because I enhanced my body with magical power. I couldn’t hope to keep up with you with my normal strength and stamina. Also, please call me

Newbini.”

After an exasperated pause, Kate-san asked, “You’re going to keep going with that, Shopkeeper-san?”

“I mean, if the merchant finds out, it’d ruin my fu— Er, I mean, it might cause problems, don’t you think?”

Andre-san traded glances with the guys. “Newbini,” he said, “you’re *enjoying* this, aren’t you?”

“Huh? Oh, hardly. Do you think I’d wish for that greedy merchant to go broke? Only just a little.”

“So you *are* enjoying it a little?!” Gil-san overreacted for comedic effect.

Hey, can you blame me? A merchant needs to make more than just themselves happy. Other people need to benefit too.

“Just a bit. My family motto is ‘business has to be honest.’”

“Your family motto? Your family were merchants?” Iris-san asked.

“Yes. My parents were both killed by bandits, though.”

“Ohh, I’m sorry.” Iris-san awkwardly looked away.

“No need to apologize, Iris-san,” I told her, shaking my head. “It was a long time ago.”

Sad as I am to have lost my parents, living in the orphanage gave me the perspective to see that it’s not all that uncommon, and I don’t feel like I’ve been unhappy since then.

I had made good friends at the academy and had been blessed with a better master than I could have ever hoped for. While it was a little different from how my parents had done it, alchemy had given me the opportunity to become a “merchant” of a different sort. That was why I wanted to make my parents’ ideals a reality, and I wouldn’t hesitate to drive off anyone who got in the way of that.

Not *much*, at least.

For the moment, though, my growth as an alchemist was a higher priority, so I

wouldn't go so far out of my way that it affected my ability to focus.

"Well, this has given me the opportunity to test out the magic that I've been practicing lately in actual combat, so it worked out perfectly."

"You've been engaging in a bit of ecological destruction lately, after all, Shopkeeper-dono."

"Calling it 'ecological destruction' seems a little harsh. I've just been clearing some of the forest behind the house."

During the recent hellflame grizzly attack, I'd struggled a bit due to a lack of offensive magic variety, so I had since consulted with Master, and was now practicing attack spells pretty heavily...out behind the shop.

But I definitely hadn't been blasting away the forest with magic, or anything as dangerous as that.

I'd felled those trees *carefully*, one by one, using my magic, and then, not wanting to let them go to waste, I had given the wood to Geberk-san as a present.

Although, I *had* used all the remaining stumps as targets for a wide-area spell, so the ground was just a *little* torn up...

"If things got seriously dicey, I was planning to kill them all with an area-of-effect spell, but fortunately, it never came to that. Because using it here would have made a mess of the cave, and made it tough to retrieve the fangs."

We'd have been stuck picking the fangs out of a gory mess.

"Well, thank goodness for that," Andre-san said, sighing as he looked around. "It's going to be enough of a pain dealing with all these dead bats as is..."

He was right—the bats were piled up waist-deep around us, with yet more scattered across the wider area where they had been struck by my magic or Kate-san's arrows. And there was no small number of the latter.

"Looking at it with fresh eyes, it seems incredible," he added. "Why were there so many of them this time?"

"Because we'd gone after their food and weren't running away."

Normally, when part of a colony of frostbite bats was being hunted, the rest of the bats would run away. But this time, we had laid a hand on the food they needed to survive. Because of that, they had put up a desperate resistance, instead of giving up and running away after a little while.

This was still the time of year when they could forage in the forest, so we had gotten off more lightly than we might have otherwise. If it were winter, we would have had to face every bat in the cave.

“So, basically, it’s Gil’s fault!” Andre-san concluded.

“I said sorry, man! I promise I’ll listen first from now on! Okay?”

“I certainly hope so,” I chided him. “However, for now, let’s get to work on dealing with these bodies.”

“Yeah... I guess there’s no point blaming Gil,” Andre-san relented. “So, now what?”

“Well, I was thinking we’d do the same as last time, but...”

Looking at the sheer volume of dead bats, even with all of us trying our hardest, we weren’t going to be able to carry them all out in just one trip. But if we made several trips while removing the fangs out in front of the cave, then the other gatherers who saw that might start helping themselves to the dead bats here...

“How does removing the fangs here, and then making several trips back and forth to dispose of the bodies, sound?” I suggested.

“That’s probably the way to do it. Be sure to do your part, all right, Gil?”

“I’ll do my best, but...there’s only so much I can carry.”

“The bats in this area *were* pretty big,” I agreed.

They probably weighed more than a kilo each. And there were literally mounds of them. That meant their fangs were valuable, but considering just how far it was back to the entrance...

“Okay. Gil’s quota is a hundred bats a trip, then,” Andre-san decided.

“Seriously?! Talk about demanding... I can manage that twice, at most.”

“I believe in you. You can make three trips if you run!”

He was being unreasonable. Running through this cave carrying a hundred kilo bag was guaranteed to end in disaster.

Besides, considering how much time was left in the day, it was already going to take a lot of effort just to manage two trips.

“Okay. Let’s just focus on extracting the fangs for today. We’ll carry out what we can manage without it getting in the way of us going home on time, and then I’ll hire some people to help deal with the rest starting tomorrow.”

“You sure? We don’t mind you putting Gil to work. I mean, hiring people would cost money, right?”

“I wouldn’t mind, but...”

Seeing the sour look on Gil-san’s face out of the corner of my eye, I shook my head.

“There’s more here than he can possibly handle. Besides, we have to consider how the other gatherers will feel.”

We weren’t done hunting with just this one trip.

And, as you might be able to imagine from the sheer volume of dead bats, if we took things too far, we were going to make other people resent us.

“If you’re fine with it, Sarasa-chan, then we have no reason to object.”

“Well, it would be an issue if we were the only ones to make any money,” Iris-san noted. “I think it’s a good idea.”

“Yeah,” Kate-san agreed. “Well, shall we get to work, then? There are so many bats here that even just breaking all their fangs off will be no easy task.”

We started by deciding on one area of the cave to store the dead bats, then cleared it of bodies before starting on the work of extracting fangs.

At first we chatted as we worked, but eventually lost the will to keep talking. We all fell silent, working intently on the task at hand.

We had started out neatly laying the bodies in rows, but by then we were throwing them somewhat violently on top of what was now a sloppy pile.

“Is this what they mean by ‘no end in sight’?” Kate-san wondered.

“Ah ha ha...” I laughed. “There are kind of a lot of them, yeah.”

It was simple work, but in a way, that monotony only made it more exhausting.

Despite occasional grumbling, no one stopped working until...

At long last, the final bat was tossed on top of the pile.

“It’s over!!!” Iris-san shouted at that exact moment.

While nobody else reacted quite that strongly, we each let out a sigh of relief or smiled.

“Good work, Kate-san,” I said.

“You too, Shopkeeper-san—oops, I mean Newbini.”

“Ha ha! I’m pretty sure there’s no one else around, so it’s fine.”

“There were more than I ever imagined,” said Andre-san. “Just how many do you figure it was in total?”

“Who knows... I stopped counting at some point,” I admitted.

“Same,” Kate-san agreed. “It was getting exhausting to keep track.”

Looking back at us as he stood in front of the mound, arms crossed, Gray-san said, “There must be thousands here, Newbini. How many people do you want us to call tomorrow?”

“Thousands...” I repeated in amazement. “That’s going to take dozens of trips for everyone involved.”

Since I plan to pay significant compensation, limiting the number who can participate might cause trouble.

“Anyone who’s interested, and that you all feel is trustworthy. I know I’ve been hiding my identity, but I’ve got to consider how people will feel if the truth gets out.”

Hearing this, the guys exchanged glances, then let out a sigh.

“I mean, listen, there isn’t a member of the old guard who *wouldn’t* know,”

said Gil-san.

“One look at how you fight gives the game away,” Andre-san agreed. “No other gatherer in this village uses magic.”

“Huh? It’s that obvious?” I asked.

Everyone was quick to nod.

“But I went to so much trouble preparing a disguise...”

“I think that hiding your face, and making sure we didn’t say your name near the entrance, served some purpose, of course,” Iris-san reassured me.

“Yeah, for sure,” Kate-san agreed. “I’ll bet the gatherers who are new in town couldn’t tell.”

Oh, so all of the old guard could tell. All of them who were there in front of the cave were quietly laughing to themselves as they listened to me.

“Oh, whatever. I’m committed to the act at this point. Anyway, does an even split of the profit sound good to all of you?”

Andre-san shook his head at my offer.

“No, if we accepted that much, the other guys would get jealous.”

“What he said,” Gil-san agreed. “Just a little more than we usually make’ll be enough.”

“Yeah. Since we’re only able to defeat them safely with the help of your magic,” Andre-san added.

“You’re sure? Well, that helps a lot. I’m going to have to pay folks to haul all of these dead bats out of here starting tomorrow, after all.”

In addition to the hauling, I wanted to ask them to sell the fangs too, so they’d need to be compensated for that as well.

Because mask or no mask, if I just waltzed in with a massive quantity of fangs, it was going to look suspicious as all get out.

“How about you two?” I asked Iris-san and Kate-san.

“Urkh,” Iris-san groaned. “We can’t very well ask for an even share after

hearing that.”

“Yeah,” Kate-san agreed. “We’ll be fine with about the same as you’re giving the guys.”

“Got it. In that case, how does around three times what I usually pay for an average day’s worth of fangs sound? I know I’ve kept you out here for a fairly long time today.”

“That’ll do,” Andre-san replied. “But are we fine to leave the bodies here for today? I’m not sure that any of us are feeling up to carrying a heavy burden for the few hours it’s going to take to walk back...”

“Yes, of course,” I told him.

Come tomorrow, we’ll have plenty of help.

“Now, as for that mound of fruit... Who wants to bring it back?” I asked, pointing to the mountain of fruits that had been the cause of our murderous workload of bat slaying and fang collection.

We all looked at the pile, then looked at Gil-san.

As it dawned on him what the looks we were giving him meant, he raised his hand with a somewhat troubled smile.

“Um, so, I’m going to listen properly this time. Sarasa-chan, is it safe to touch it?” he asked.

“Yes, it is now,” I replied. “But I don’t think it will be tomorrow, once the frostbite bats come back.”

With the back of the cave cleared, younger bats that had previously resided closer to the entrance would move in deeper.

If we went and laid a hand on the food again once that happened, it would bring a repeat of the tragedy (?) which had unfolded today.

“I guess we ought to collect it whether we plan to eat it ourselves or not. It sells for a high price, right?” Andre-san said.

“If you can find someone to sell it to, sure?” I replied. “But transporting it will be an issue. It loses all value once it melts.”

Hearing this, the guys gave me a look that said, “*Huh?*”

“Doesn’t that mean it’s impossible for ordinary gatherers?” Andre-san asked.

“I happen to be selling a handy artifact known as a freezer at my shop,” I informed him.

If someone couldn’t use magic, then they would have a hard time collecting the frozen fruit without one.

“And would we be able to make back our investment if we bought one?” Andre-san asked.

After thinking about it for a moment, I replied, “If you can find a buyer.”

“Of course it comes back to that!” Andre-san slapped his forehead.

Hey, it’s a difficult product to deal with. You need to keep it cold at all times, and there are only so many people who are interested in buying it.

Unless they had a connection to a major merchant or to a noble family, it just wasn’t going to be profitable.

“But you would be able to bring it back, right, Newbini?”

“Yes, that would be possible. And as for storing it... Right now, I can manage that too, for a while.”

“Ah, the freezer you just made is still practically empty, after all. That’s just perfect!” Iris-san exclaimed with a grin.

“Yes... I suppose it is,” I replied, my expression somewhat wry.

Despite the trouble I’d gone to in crafting the freezer, Lorea-chan said she didn’t know what to do with it, so it was only being used to make ice and cool down drinks.

Well, given she’s spent her whole life up until this point without one, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.

“Because ordinary people don’t have things like freezers,” Kate-san reminded me.

“Of course,” I replied. “They’re so handy when you need to store meat, though...”

“Newbini, *ordinary* villagers can’t afford enough meat that they’d need to store it,” Andre-san added.

“Of course. I know that.”

I could only nod in agreement.

Jasper-san was the only hunter in the village, so outside of rare events like what happened with the hellflame grizzlies, there was no way that most of the villagers would end up with enough meat on their hands that they needed to store it for an extended period of time.

In our own case, Kate-san occasionally brought back something she caught while out hunting, so I expected the freezer to be of some use eventually, but for ordinary folks, it was a luxury they didn’t need.

“Much as I appreciate having ice in the summer, buying one *just* for that seems a bit much.”

“Andre-san, would you consider buying one to store this fruit?”

“I’m not going to make my money back without a buyer, am I?”

“Right,” I answered truthfully.

Andre-san shrugged and gave me a wry grin. “I can’t buy one, then. Do you think ordinary gatherers like us have connections with the nobility? How about you young ladies?”

Iris-san was silent for a moment, then said, “I’d struggle to afford it too,” shaking her head with a conflicted expression on her face.

“Go figure. In that case, the question is whether to enjoy it ourselves...”

“You’re going to eat in this situation?” I asked. “That takes some real courage, Andre-san.”

“Hey, even I’m a little hesitant,” he shot back.

“But it’s tasty, right? You’ve gotta be interested,” Gil-san countered.

“Especially knowing it’s such a rare delicacy,” Gray-san added.

Talk about veterans. That’s some real mental resilience. I certainly can’t see myself wanting to eat anything that comes out of this mound of mushy, rotting

gunk...

“Well, we might as well see what we can get,” I concluded. “Talking about it’s not going to do anything but waste time.”

“You’ve got a point there,” Andre-san agreed. “Hey, Gil, Gray, we’re doing this.”

“Yessir,” they replied in unison.

As the three of them began to demolish the mound of rotting fruit, a powerfully sweet scent wafted into the air, assailing my nostrils.

The sight was enough to completely rob me of any appetite, but surprisingly the fruit they unearthed from the pile was still frozen, and looked like it was still decent.

After considering for a moment, Andre-san said, “Maybe it’s still good?”

“Yeah, looks edible to me,” Gil-san agreed.

Andre-san looked a little happy as he stuffed some of the better-looking fruits into a leather sack.

There’s more than I expected, but... Well, I guess it’s fine.

“I’ll let you decide which ones you think are good, but do stick to the ones on the inside, okay?” I warned them. “Oh, but if you were to get stomachaches, and contribute to the sales of my potions as a result, I wouldn’t have an issue with that in the slightest.”

There’s people who sell this stuff, so it’s presumably safe...but the first person to try it must have been really brave. Because it certainly looks dangerous.

“I won’t be eating any until we get back,” said Kate-san. “It wouldn’t be funny if we got the runs out here.”

“Hey, with how much it already stinks here, you think anyone’s gonna notice the smell of your shit? Bwah ha ha ha... Sorry.”

That crude comment earned Gil-san sharp glares from the women in the group, and he instantly apologized.

Sure, this place is already covered in guano, but there’s still a difference, okay?

“He had a poor upbringing,” Gray-san said apologetically, but Iris-san shook her head.

“It’s not his upbringing; it’s his personality that’s the problem. You’ll never be popular with the ladies like that, Gil.”

“That’s harsh, Iris-chan!” he objected.

“If you feel that way, Gil, then you had best stop being so flippant and learn to be more considerate of women.”

“Urkh!”

“Honestly. Why must gatherers all be so crude?” Iris-san crossed her arms with a look of dissatisfaction on her face.

“Maybe because there’s so few women,” Andre-san answered with a wry grin. “It’s also why so many of the guys want to talk to beautiful young ladies like yourselves.”

“Is that how it is?” I asked him.

“I’d guess one in three of the new guys tries to talk to them.”

He came back with a much higher number than I’d expected.

“Is that how it is?” I asked again, turning to Iris-san this time.

“Much to our dismay, there really are that many,” she confirmed. “It’s a real pain.”

“You sure are popular, huh?”

“We’re not happy about it,” Kate-san told me. “If you had people hitting on you all the time at the shop, you wouldn’t like that, would you, Newbini?”

“I wouldn’t, no. Not that it’s ever happened.”

Not even once!

Well, it’s not like anyone cool has come in, so what do I care!

I’m not frustrated about it at all!

“Yeah, there probably aren’t that many gatherers who would try and hit on an alchemist,” Andre-san said.

“Right,” Gil-san agreed. “You’re one of the elite, and we’re the furthest thing from it. As far as that goes, Iris and Kate are gatherers, just like us. Probably makes it easy to talk to them.”

“I see. So there’s that side to it too.”

I don’t know if it’s a good thing or a bad thing. It seems like a total nuisance for Iris-san and Kate-san, and as for me...well, I’ll think about that at some point in the future. I mean, it’s not like Master’s married either.

“Now then,” Andre-san said, “we’ve gathered everything that looks decent, so now the question’s how we go about selling it. There’s no point trying to eat all of it ourselves...”

“No point trying to take it to a big merchant who doesn’t know us either,” Gil-san added.

“We couldn’t even get the stuff there by ourselves,” Andre-san conceded.

“Um... Would you like me to try my connections?” I offered, unable to bear watching them any longer, but Andre-san just gave me a sort of bemused look.

“Hm? But I thought you said you grew up in an orphanage?”

The implied question was probably whether I had connections despite growing up in an orphanage, but Iris-san quickly answered it.

“Oh! Right, your master! It’s true, a master class alchemist would certainly be able to take care of it...”

“Yes. I couldn’t do it myself, but Master might be able to sell it through her connections.”

Speaking of connections, my seniors from the academy were also high nobility, but they were in other rural towns now, so shipping, along with other factors, would make it difficult for them to help.

With Master, on the other hand, I could use the transporter to send her a letter and the goods themselves.

“So, basically, your master is a master class alchemist, then, Newbini?” Andre-san asked.

“Yes. And since she is, I suspect she’s decently well connected... She may still refuse, though.”

Knowing how Master was, it would be no surprise if she summarily dismissed our request with no more explanation than that it was “a pain.”

She was known to decline requests from nobles when they were a pain.

“Still, if there’s a chance, I’d like you to try,” Andre-san said.

“Yeah,” Gil-san agreed. “Even if this stuff turns out to be good, we can’t preserve it ourselves, so there’s no point in us holding on to it.”

“Ordinary booze is easier for us to deal with,” Andre-san concluded.

“Got it. I’ll try negotiating with her for some, then,” I told them.

Their only options if they wanted alcohol in the village were to order it at the restaurant or buy it from Darna-san’s general store.

I’ll bet if I asked Master, she’d be able to get them some stuff that’s not available in this village.

Having finished collecting the fruit, we hurried back to the entrance of the cave, only to find the sun had already fully set.

I took a deep breath of the crisp night air.

“Whew.”

As I breathed out, Kate-san, who was standing next to me, having just taken a deep breath of her own, shot me an exhausted smile.

“My sense of smell is mostly numb to it at this point, but it really does reek down there, huh?” she said.

“It sure does,” I agreed. “Let’s make sure to use deodorizer.”

Even if we couldn’t sense it ourselves, the awful smell was probably sticking to us. I pulled out the deodorizer and gave everyone a spray.

“Come to think of it,” said Andre-san, “I saw this stuff at the door to the restaurant. Was that the first place you went to try and sell it?”

“Yes. I told her that if the gatherers wouldn’t buy it, that was the solution. Since Delal-san seemed to be having real trouble with the situation...”

If the gatherers wouldn’t be considerate of other people, then another approach was necessary. The one she’d gone with was limiting access to the restaurant for anyone who didn’t deodorize.

But it was hard to get everyone to buy deodorizer, so by having it available at the entrance to the restaurant, we could collect a fee each time someone used it.

When I proposed this to Delal-san, she had promptly stated, *“I’ll ban anyone who doesn’t use it!”* and agreed to it on the spot.

“We’re all grateful for it too,” said Andre-san. “But are you making your money back?”

“Oh, I’m most definitely in the red.” I told him.

It was three rhea per use. Delal-san she’d be watching her customers like a hawk, so there probably wasn’t anyone using it without paying, but I only broke even if they just gave themselves a light spray. If they really went crazy with it, because the smell was so bad, then that put me totally in the red.

This was something I was doing for the gatherers, and for Delal-san—community service. Since, in a village like this, good relationships were incredibly important.

“Now we just need to get back home... Andre-san, would you like to take some of this fruit back with you?” I asked.

“I...guess so. Might as well try it,” he decided.

“Yeah. If we’re at the inn, then even if it’s gone off, we’ll be able to manage somehow,” Gil-san added.

“I think you’ll be fine, but if it really has gone bad, do come to my place, okay? I have potions available. For a price.”

I won’t give them away for free. I’m running a business here.

“Well, it’ll probably be fine. We’ve all got cast-iron stomachs.”

Having said this, the guys each took a couple fruits out of the leather sack I was carrying and put them into their own bags.

“I’ll keep the rest in my freezer for a while. Once you decide how to dispose of it—be that selling it or eating it yourselves—let me know.”

“Sure, and thanks—wait, I almost forgot. Is it okay splitting that fruit evenly between us? You’re the one going to the trouble of hauling it back, and preserving it, so it doesn’t seem fair.”

“Yeah, I don’t mind. You guys have really been helping me out.”

The magical energy it takes to keep them frozen on the way back is no big deal to me, and my freezer’s empty anyway.

“Are you sure it’s okay?” asked Iris-san. “I feel as though we didn’t do that much to help...”

“Well, uh, let’s just say it’s our thanks to you for putting up with Gil’s crudeness,” Andre-san offered.

“Me?!” Gil-san asked, pointing at himself and putting on a slightly exaggerated look of displeasure. “I won’t deny the crude bit, though.”

“Hee hee! We’ll gladly accept, then,” Kate-san said with a smile and a nod.

“We’re grateful,” added Iris-san. “I was a little interested, and even if we don’t eat it ourselves, it will go toward paying down the debt.”

“On that note, thank you all for your hard work today. I’ll be counting on you all again tomorrow,” I told them.

“Yeah!” they all enthusiastically agreed.



The gatherers Andre-san rounded up joined us the next day.

We handled slaying the frostbite bats and collecting their fangs, while the other gatherers were responsible for picking up the bodies, carrying them outside, and then burying them. At the end of the day, we sold the fangs.

I’d requested that the bats be properly buried because I was a little leery of just tossing their dead carcasses into the woods and trusting the forest’s natural

processes to take care of such a large cleanup from there. If they started to decompose in a massive pile, it would cause no end of trouble.

Despite how obvious and visible everything we were doing was, nobody interfered, and a whole week went by without the merchant ever refusing to buy our fangs.

That was when the newbie gatherer Newbini decided that, since she had amassed enough fangs, and had caused a noticeable decline in the population of frostbite bats in the cave, it was time for her to retire.

“Now then, Kate-san, how did things look with the merchant?”

The weak point of our current plan was that I wasn’t able to interact with the merchant directly. Because of that, I relied on Kate-san to pick up on the subtle details.

I can probably trust her more with subtlety than Iris-san, at least.

“I got the feeling he was getting impatient... But who can really say?” Kate-san reported, groaning to herself as she thought about it.

“I heard him say something like, ‘She’s being more stubborn than I expected,’” added Iris-san.

“‘Stubborn’? Me? Does he expect me to go crying to him because I can’t get any fangs? From where I’m standing, if anyone’s being stubborn here, it’s him.”

The fact of the matter was that I had made so much money selling fangs that it was hard to keep from smiling like a goof.

When I had shown Lorea-chan the amount, her mouth had just flapped open and closed, and she’d waved her arms around in a panic.

Then her face had gone pale and she’d collapsed.

I won’t tell you the exact amount, but suffice it to say, it was enough to buy several sets of the *Complete Alchemy Works*.

Even with great merchants, they kept less of their money in hard cash than you might expect, so I hadn’t expected I would be able to make so much in such a short time, but...what a stubborn guy he was.

“Shopkeeper-san, he’s probably taking the fangs to another town and off-loading them there,” Kate-san suggested. “I can’t imagine he would have brought this much cash with him.”

“That occurred to me too,” Iris-san agreed. “I’ve seen horses coming and going.”

“Frostbite bat fangs have a lot of value for their small size, after all. Hee hee hee...”

“Is something up, Shopkeeper-san?” Kate-san asked. “That laugh sounded really suspicious.”

“Oh, no. I was just thinking that it’s just like I predicted.”

I couldn’t help but grin at how he’d done just what I’d expected him to.

“What do you mean?” Iris-san asked.

“Iris-san,” I said to her, “if you were going to sell fangs you got in this village, where would you do it?”

“Ordinarily, South Strag. It’s the closest, after all. There are other small villages and towns, but it wouldn’t be as efficient to use any of them.”

“That’s right. And who would you sell them to there?”

“Regular folks won’t buy them. So I’d have to take them to an alchemist.”

“Right again. And one of those alchemists in South Strag is an acquaintance of mine.”

As soon as I said that, a look of realization came over Kate-san’s face.

“Did you let her know in advance?” she asked.

“Yep. As soon as I decided to confront him. I asked her to haggle him down as low as she possibly could.”

I’d had Darna-san deliver a letter explaining the situation to Leonora-san. This scheme would let her get the fangs cheaply, while also allowing me to whittle away at the merchant’s funds.

I had told her that if she went too far in haggling down his prices and he walked away from the deal as a result, I’d provide her with some fangs myself,

so she didn't have to worry about her own supply. He might have ended up taking them to the unscrupulous alchemist instead, but I had been prepared to deal with that myself, if it came to it.

Whether the two of them were in cahoots or not, any alchemist who did business the way he did couldn't have that much money.

I'd just keep upping the supply until he couldn't buy any more.

"That's impressive. You're so well prepared..." said Kate-san. "Even though you're so little."

"You didn't need to add that last part! I'm still growing!" I insisted, but the two of them just looked at me with warm eyes.

"That's...probably impossible," Iris-san said.

"Why?!"

"Well, it's because you're already a grown woman, Shopkeeper-dono. Even as short as you are."

"Excuse me?!"

"A person's height is usually determined by the time they reach adulthood," Kate-san explained. "There are some girls who keep growing after that point, but...they're the minority."

"How about we just say I'm part of that minority...?"

I tried to hold on to hope, but Iris-san rejected it with a pained smile.

"I hate to say it, but many of the girls who grow up in orphanages turn out short. It has to do with the lack of food they receive as children."

"Urkh..."

That rang true to me. I might not have been starving, but I had never been able to stuff myself until I was completely full either.

And I had also held back a little because I'd felt guilty over not working like the other kids did...

"It's all right," Kate-san told me. "You're cute just the way you are, Shopkeeper-san."

“That’s right,” Iris-san agreed. “It’s only a little thing, nothing to be concerned about. You have so many other positive qualities, Shopkeeper-dono.”

“You’re not comforting me at all! You two can only say that because you’re so big! Take that! And that!”

I attacked the bouncy bits of their anatomy.

Darn it! They’ve got so much more mass there than I do!

“Maybe if you can’t repay your debts, I can have these things as collateral,” I muttered to myself, causing the two of them to quickly back away from me, covering their breasts with their arms.

“D-Don’t say such terrifying things!” Iris-san cried.

“Yeah,” Kate-san emphatically agreed. “Besides, even if you did take them as collateral, they wouldn’t do you any good, would they?! Um... They wouldn’t, right? There’s nothing you can do with them as an alchemist, right?!”

“No, there’s nothing—well, no; actually, it isn’t something I can say for certain, but in my case it would just be out of spite.”

“Stop it!” Iris-san begged. “That kind of spite is terrifying!”

Seeing the serious expressions on their faces, my anger subsided, and I shrugged it off with a smile.

“I’m just joking with you. As a matter of fact, if I really wanted to, there are potions I could make that could do something about it. Both for my height and my figure.”

Hearing that, they both let out small sighs of relief.

I’d never do anything that awful to them.

“I should’ve known an alchemist could. You people are incredible,” Iris-san said.

“Are you going to grow up on us one of these days, then, Shopkeeper-san?” Kate-san asked.

“No? I have no plans to use those potions myself,” I replied.

At this point, my body is the only thing my parents gave me that I still have

left. I'm not going to go changing it through unnatural means.

That's why I was hoping it would grow on its own, but...not much hope of that, huh?

I guess I really am a little disappointed.

"Your parents must still be really important to you, Shopkeeper-dono," observed Iris-san.

"Yeah," I agreed. "I lost them at a young age, and they were away from home a lot, so I don't have many memories with them, but I feel they're deserving of my respect."

"You're amazing, Shopkeeper-dono," Iris-san said, tearing up a little. "Because of how important your parents are to you, you kept working hard even after being orphaned and managed to become an alchemist."

"That's right," Kate-san agreed, her voice also tinged with emotion. "They say it's every orphan's dream to become an alchemist, but it's not that easy to actually pull it off."

My face flushed red listening to the two of them. "Wh-What's this, all of a sudden? You're embarrassing me..."

I had worked hard, but it was all possible only because of Master, the teachers at the orphanage, the other kids, and so many other people who had helped me along the way. When Kate-san and Iris-san praised me in such a straightforward way, it just made me get all embarrassed.

"Ahem," I loudly cleared my throat. "Anyway, we still have *lots* of frostbite bat fangs. We're carrying on with the plan."

"Hee hee," Kate-san chuckled. "Gotcha. Just leave it to us. We'll shake that guy down for all he's worth."

"Yeah," Iris-san agreed. "He's our golden goose, with how well he pays."

"Yep. You two keep on going with that attitude. I'll be heading out for a bit tomorrow."

"Oh? Where to?" Iris-san asked.

“Off to South Strag for a strategy meeting,” I answered before chuckling to myself.



“Hello, Leonora-san,” I said in my usual chipper tone.

“Oh, Sarasa. It’s been a while. I’ve been making some good money thanks to you.”

Leonora-san was all smiles when she greeted me in South Strag the following day.

“Oh, so they did come here, then?”

“Yes. I’ve been haggling them down as low as I can. I drop the price a little more every time they come.”

“You must be making money hand over fist,” I said with a grin.

“Yes.” She smirked in return. “I’ve really been raking it in. I’m offering well below market price at this point, but they still sell to me, so I’d have to guess things are getting really bad for them.”

“Who can say? My only concern was that they might take their fangs to the other guy’s place...”

“Ohh, him? His place is long gone.”

“Huh? It’s gone?”

“He went under. That’s at least in part because he stopped getting materials from your village, but I also pulled some strings to make life hard for him.”

I was speechless.

Leonora-san smirked even harder.

While she wasn’t up to Master’s level, that expression was intimidating in a way that could only be earned from experience.

But if that’s true, he didn’t “go under,” you bankrupted him...

Well, it’s a good thing for the whole industry to have one less unscrupulous alchemist around, so he won’t get any sympathy from me.

“So I take it you have enough frostbite bat fangs, then?”

“I’d say so. Did you bring some with you? Sorry to make you go to the trouble.”

“Oh, don’t be. I had other materials to bring in anyway, and things I needed to buy too.”

Since I had asked her to cooperate with me, it was only natural that I’d do this much for her.

Besides, it wasn’t like the gatherers I had asked to sell fangs to the merchant for me were playing around either. They had been using their gathering time to collect other materials and had come to me to sell them.

I had laid out their materials on the counter, while Leonora-san and I bartered with them. Her shop had most of what I needed, and that was a big help to me.

“Hold on, you’ve got basically everything I want, huh?”

Leonora-san smiled as I called attention to it.

“Well, of course. There aren’t many requests for artifacts in a village like yours, are there? That means that if you need anything, it would be materials for the *Complete Works*...volume 4 or 5 around this point. Other than that, you need materials for potions used in the village. That’s about it, right?”

“You’re right on the money. I’m impressed.”

I never expected her to guess what volume I’m on.

“I’ve been in this business many times longer than you, after all! I’m no master class alchemist, but I *am* confident in my own skills.”

“It’s a big help, having such an experienced alchemist living relatively nearby,” I said. “I wasn’t sure how I was going to manage when I first set foot in this village.”

“But can’t you just go to your master for advice?”

“Of course, and she’ll help me out if I do, but I rejected the offer to work in her shop, so I wouldn’t feel right going to her all the—”

“Huh?!” Leonora-san burst out. “You rejected an offer to work for a master

class alchemist?! Really?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“If I’d gotten an offer like that right after graduation, she wouldn’t have had to ask me twice. It’s guaranteed stable work.”

“I thought the same thing, but if I’d taken her offer, I wouldn’t have been able to gain more experience... Oh, I’m sure I’d have gained tons of experience as an alchemist, I mean more general life experience...”

“What can I say to that? I guess the kind of person who gets chosen to be the apprentice of a master class alchemist is always going to be a little *different*.”

There was exasperation in the look Leonora-san gave me, but at the same time, also a hint of awe.

Why?

“Oh, forget it. Will you stay the night, Sarasa? I’ve been looking into this merchant of yours myself. I’d like to talk to you about it.”

“Oh, you have? Of course, I have no reason to decline, but...”

“It’s settled, then! Have you not had lunch yet?”

“Yes. I considered eating before I came, but I arrived at an awkward time for it.”

I’d had some things to think about, so although I’d left in the morning, I hadn’t headed out quite as early as usual. That meant I’d arrived in South Strag a little before noon. The restaurants hadn’t been open for lunch yet, so I’d decided to visit Leonora-san’s place first.

“Oh, yeah? We could go out to eat, but at this time of day...”

Leonora-san considered for a moment, then turned toward the back of the shop and called out, “Hey, do we have enough for three?”

There was a brief silence, followed by, “We do!” Leonora-san turned back to me with a smile.

“There you have it. We’re eating at home today. My staff can make some pretty tasty food too.”

I followed Leonora-san into the back, and a single woman of about the same age as Leonora-san was there laying out food on the table. She had a soft, quiet look about her, and was somewhat petite compared to Leonora-san. Her light-brown hair was tied into a ponytail at the back.

“Hello, my name is Sarasa. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said.

“Oh, there’s no need to be so formal,” Filione-san replied casually with a wave of her hand. “I’m Filione. As you can see, I work here in Nora...Leonora’s shop. She has me watch the place, do odd jobs, that sort of thing.”

Pointing to the table, she added, “Now, have a seat.”

“Sorry. Is it an imposition, dropping in so suddenly like this?”

“It’s fine. Nora makes a good amount of money, so we’ve got food to spare. I’m not going to claim it’s enough for a feast or anything, though.”

Though she said this, there was bread and soup on the table, along with a chicken sauté and some dish consisting of eggs fried with veggies.

It sure looked like a feast to me.

Especially the eggs. They weren’t easy to come by in the village.

“It looks delicious!”

“Yeah? Glad to hear it. Hopefully you’ll like the taste too... Let’s eat before it goes cold. You sit too, Nora.”

“Okie-dokie. Let’s dig in, then,” I said with gusto.

“Yes, let’s dig in,” Leonora-san agreed.

First...I’ll start with the soup.

I tried a spoonful of it.

Ahh, it’s got a light flavor, but I can taste the savoriness of the vegetables and the juices from the dried meat. It’s so good.

I took a bite of the bread and then moved on to the eggs. It was a pretty high-class dish, using a variety of chopped vegetables.

I took a bite. The mixture of veggies and eggs so fluffy it seemed like they

might fall apart was oh so delicious.

If Maria-san is like a pro chef, then maybe Filione-san is like a mother who's really good at cooking.

"Well? My cook is pretty good, isn't she?"

"It's delicious. You can't get food like this just anywhere."

"Thanks. I'm not a cook, though. So, is this girl the alchemist you were talking about, Nora? She's cute, and nice too."

"I know, right? We simply must protect her."

"Huh? You've been protecting me?" I asked, surprised.

Leonora-san scratched her head and smiled awkwardly. "Well, I felt uneasy, chucking you out into the world to fend for yourself. I worried you might stay at a seedy hotel."

Oh, so that's why she had me stay with her.

It suppose it's true though, I really don't have much experience with that sort of thing.

"Come to think of it, I didn't see Filione-san that day..."

"I was out taking care of some minor business that time. Was everything all right? She didn't feed you anything weird, did she?"

"Um, it was fine? The meal was a bit simple, though."

"I should have known." Filione-san shook her head with a sigh. "Sorry about that. Nora's terrible at cooking."

Leonora-san pouted at this.

"It's *fine*. I have Fii to cook for me, so I'm well taken care of."

"Honestly now. I know you want to focus on your alchemy, but I do wish you would do at least some other things too."

"I don't want to," Leonora-san said with a firm shake of her head. "That's the whole reason I hired you, Fii."

Filione-san arched an eyebrow at this. "You *do* know I could quit any time,

right?”

“You’re a huge help! Please don’t abandon me!” Leonora-san cried, desperately clinging to her.

Filione-san pushed her employer away with a sigh. “I’m sorry,” she apologized to me. “For letting you see a senior alchemist, and a grown woman at that, act this way.”

“D-Don’t be...” I replied, asking, “Have you two been together long?”

“Unfortunately, it has been a long time, yes.”

“Yeah, I’ve been with Fii since shortly after I opened up shop, so...” Leonora-san counted the years off on her fingers. “Over a decade now?”

“It would work out to that, yeah,” Filione-san agreed with a nod.

Master had been with Maria-san for ages too, so maybe this was just how it was between alchemists and their employees.

It required a lot of specialist knowledge, so letting go of someone after they had learned all of that would be a huge loss.

Once an alchemist got to a certain point in their career, it was easy for them to offer high wages, so their employees couldn’t really hope to find a much better workplace.

“I hired an employee of my own too, so I guess that’s just something that comes naturally once you open a shop,” I observed.

“When you’re just getting started, you don’t have a lot of financial leeway, and it can be hard to find the right person, but you definitely want the help if you can get it. Without someone to mind the shop, you just don’t have the time to focus on your alchemy.”

“Yeah, I figured. When I was watching the shop myself, I couldn’t work during the day, and even once the shop closed, I still had chores to do and meals to prepare. It was hard to make time to come to town and stock up on supplies like this too.”

“That’s right. That’s why it’s so *convenient* having Fii to do all sorts of things for me.”

"I was hired just to watch the shop at first, but now I do the cooking, cleaning, and even her laundry. Because Nora won't do a thing for herself..." Filione-san explained with a beleaguered sigh.

"Ah ha ha, you're a lifesaver. But when you find someone you're *too good* of a match with, that can bring problems of its own."

"It can?" I asked.

If you get along, and the shop's working well, I don't see the issue, though...

"Yeah. You start to think things are fine the way they are."

"And look where that got Nora, still unwed at her age."

"You're no more married than I am, Fii!"

"And you're the reason for that. Be careful, Sarasa-chan. If you start thinking to yourself, 'You know, this is nice and easy,' you're in trouble. It's the sound of marriage's footsteps as it leaves you behind."

"Ha ha ha..." I laughed wryly as the two of them shared a deep sigh.

Oh, so that's what she means... I'm starting to hear those footsteps already.

"Although," Leonora-san added, "if you choose someone you *don't* get along with, that's no good either."

"That's true too," Filione-san agreed. "There's a lot to learn, and you don't pick it up right away."

A poor match wouldn't stick around long enough to be of any use, but if you found a good match, and they hung around for a long time, then they would become such a prized employee that you couldn't let them go.

"Um, it sounds like there's nothing you can do about it," I concluded.

"Yeah. It's an option to just let them handle the shop, and do all the housework yourself, but..."

"I think, maybe, the better of an alchemist you are, the harder that becomes," Filione-san suggested. "Take Nora for instance. Once she really gets going, she'll forget to eat or sleep."

"Once I get into the zone, it just happens. It's the way alchemy is!"

“I couldn’t bear to see the house in the absolute state that it was, so I stepped in, and now it’s too late...”

“I’m completely dependent on her. Yeah.”

“Hahhh... You be careful, Sarasa-chan. If you ever want to get married, that is.”

Her warning got me sweating.

“I-I’ll keep it in mind.”

I’m still fine, right?

I’m still young, after all. Yeah.

“Now then. Back to business. Let’s talk about that merchant of yours.”

Leonora-san broached the subject once we had finished our food, and Filione-san was watching the shop.

“Sure. Please tell me what you know.”

“Okay. But since this could take some time, we should get drinks first... Is premade tea good with you, Sarasa? I’m completely dependent on Fii for this sort of thing too.”

After I nodded, agreeing there was no need to call Filione-san back here, she served me a well-chilled glass of tea.

Unlike the suya tea I had been drinking lately, this tea was light brown and fragrant. It wasn’t what I was used to, but I enjoyed it for what it was.

“Whew, that hit the spot,” I said, before adding, “I see you have a refrigerator.”

“Fii’s the one who made it, though. As for the fridge, I think just about every alchemist has one. After all, it’s an artifact that we all have to make if we want to work toward the higher levels.”

I nodded at the unsaid, “*You have one too, right?*”

“I thought so. If the timing works out, you can make one to sell, but if that doesn’t pan out, all that leaves is to use it yourself. And in your village...”

“Yep. There’s no sales there—or at least I didn’t see it as likely. So I gave up, and made one for my own kitchen. Along with a freezer.”

“Yeah, they always seem to get made as a set. Not that you’ll get much use of it when it isn’t summer.”

“True. Mine only gets used to—oh, wait, there’s frostbite bat fruit in there now.”

“You collected some?! Ohh, I guess it is just the right season for that. And if you’ve been going yourself, I’m sure you wouldn’t have any trouble bringing it back.”

“No one had been hunting in that cave for quite a while, so the colony had grown to quite the size. We ended up bringing back a lot of fruit. Would you like some?”

“You’re sure? It’s quite valuable, you know?”

“I’m not that interested in it myself, and don’t know who to sell it to, so I was about ready to ask Master to handle it.”

It’s currently just sitting there, untouched, in the refrigerator.

I was considering trying it myself at least once, but the reactions from Andre-san and the guys were less than encouraging.

“It was good...I think.”

“I’ll stick with ordinary booze.”

“It tasted expensive.”

None of that was convincing me there was any hurry to get around to it, and they hadn’t asked for more to eat, just told me to sell it off.

“Could I have some, then? I’d like to try it, if only so I have something to talk about.”

“I understand. Okay, I’ll bring it along with me next time. It’s not easy to send it with someone else, so it could be a while.”

“Oh, I don’t mind waiting. Bring it the next time you’re stocking up.”

It would melt in transport if someone carried it normally, so I needed to bring

it myself.

We talked about how much she wanted and what she was willing to pay, then got back to the main topic.

“First, his name is Yoku Bahru. He owns a reasonably large business here in South Strag.”

While he wasn’t one of the great merchants, he was still a reasonably large one. That had made it comparatively easy for Leonora-san to narrow it down.

“He seems to deal in alchemic materials, artifacts, and potions...”

“Not just materials, but *potions* too?”

“Right. That’s the sticking point.”

Many of the materials used in alchemy could be preserved without much degradation even when they were unprocessed, and there were ways to acquire them after they had been processed by an alchemist too. As for artifacts, when it came to ones like the cooling hat, whose function was easy to understand, I could see why a merchant might stock them. But potions were a bit of a different story.

There was no way to tell what they did just looking at them, and their shelf life varied depending on how they were stored. On top of that, it was common to use potions only after some time had passed since buying them. Even if the potion had no effect, or did something strange, there was no way to push back on it if the seller claimed it was because they were stored poorly.

For that reason, there was a lot of risk in buying potions from a nonalchemist, making it hard for ordinary merchants to deal in them.

“I also wonder who he’s selling them to, but could you tell me where he gets his stock first? Does he have an in-house alchemist or something?”

“You’re close. Yoku uses alchemists that he’s lent money—or rather, who he’s forced to go into debt. Under incredibly unfair conditions.”

“He *forced* them to go into debt?” I asked, concerned by the way she’d worded that.

“Yeah.” Leonora-san’s anger was apparent in the sour face she made. “I

looked into it, and it felt like he set them up to fail.”

“And he hasn’t been arrested?”

“From what I was able to find, what he did was underhanded, but not illegal, so it would be hard for them to do anything.”

Grr... She’s got a point there.

What he had been doing in my village wasn’t far from what she was describing, and appealing to the local lord was unlikely to be of any use.

“But the fact that they’ve all been young rubs me the wrong way.”

“You’re saying he took advantage of their lack of experience?”

“That’s what I think. When you’re just opening your shop, you don’t have much money, right? And materials are expensive, so even a small mistake can leave you with no capital left...”

“Ahh, yeah, that’s true.”

For instance, when you got a request for a somewhat expensive artifact, it was fine if it was something simple, but if you were pushing yourself to do something more difficult...a mistake could end very badly.

If you still had the funds, you could rebuy the materials and try again. Artifacts were priced such that you could mess up once and still come out of it without any loss as long as you succeeded. But what if you *didn’t* have the money? You either had to reject the order and take a loss on it, or borrow money in order to try again. And if you then failed that second attempt, all you’d have to show for it was debt.

“If it was their own mistake, then that would be one thing, but if he was the one who set it all up...”

There were ways to bait such a trap. If a merchant showed up when you were short on cash, offering the necessary materials for cheap...normally, you’d end up buying them. But what if he’d messed with those materials, making failure all the more likely?

Sure, failing to notice that was the mark of an inexperienced alchemist, but...

“You don’t like it, huh?” Leonora-san observed.

“No, I really don’t,” I agreed.

I might not know any of these people, but they were fellow alchemists, and around the same age as me.

“Hey, wait... Am I his next target?” I said as the thought popped into my head. Leonora-san sighed with exasperation.

“You just realized? You most definitely are. With a cursory investigation, you look like easy pickings.”

A novice alchemist, fresh out of the academy, living in a remote village, opening a shop she bought dirt cheap.

“She definitely has minimal experience.”

“My! How easy she’ll be to trick!”

It’s me I’m talking about, though.

“But he’s absolutely messed with the wrong person this time. He doesn’t stand a chance.”

“Whaaa...? You’re making me sound like some sort of villain...”

“You’re no villain, but you *are* a dangerous opponent.”

“Am I? But I’m just a novice, and with so little experience too. No more than a fledgling.”

I was offended, but Leonora-san just fixed me with a stare.

“A fledgling wouldn’t be here, laying the groundwork for her plans with me. If she did that at all, it would be inside her own village, at best. As for you, I know you’re working with my shop, but you wouldn’t happen to be reaching out to other towns in the vicinity too, would you?”

“Oh, hardly... I did think that if I sold a large quantity of fangs to you, it would effectively accomplish the same thing, though.”

Other than that, I also passed some fangs to Gretz-san, and told him to turn them into cash wherever his travels took him, but that’s all I did, okay?

“You’re certainly not missing any tricks... Yeah, I’ve been spreading them around too, of course. Thanks to that, the local market for frostbite bat fangs is in free fall.”

“Well, well. I certainly feel sorry for anyone who’s been buying them up.”

Yes, very sorry indeed.

Seeing my grin, Leonora-san shook her head with a pained smile.

“I’m amazed you can say that. Your smile is a little scary, Sarasa. But it seems the rise in the market price for fangs that we were seeing before this was Yoku’s doing, so he won’t get any sympathy from me.”

“Ohh, so he was involved even that far back, huh?”

That had led us to release a lot of fangs—or rather artifacts containing them—into the market, which must have been what brought him to my village.

“Honestly, when a merchant who doesn’t have the same restrictions goes around manipulating the price for alchemic materials, it’s a real headache,” Leonora-san complained.

“I know, right?” I agreed. “They’re just doing it for their own profit, which makes it all the worse.”

Alchemists had a lot of limitations, like not being able to sell things for cheap, and because it was a national policy, if we broke them too flagrantly, scary people would come along to do something about it.

“Right? That’s why I want to take this opportunity to really crush this Yoku Bahru character into the ground. You’ll help, won’t you, Sarasa?”

“Sure, I don’t mind. I’ll do whatever I can.”

Villainous merchants ought to be destroyed. Mercilessly.

After that, Leonora-san ran through a series of possible outcomes and came up with a plan to ensure we did decisive damage to Yoku. We decided what we would do in each scenario, and discussed it all in considerable detail.

“You know, I’m impressed, Leonora-san. You were really able to cover a lot of things I wouldn’t have thought of.”

“Oh, you’re pretty good yourself, Sarasa. You’re wise beyond your years.”

“Oh, really? Well, it looks like things should go well for us.”

As things stood, we were more or less guaranteed to win. Just how bad it was going to get for Yoku would be entirely up to how greedy he got.

I especially liked that detail.

“This is going to be fun, huh?” Leonora-san said with a villainous grin.

“Yes, it will,” I agreed with a cute smile of my own.

And when Filione-san, who had just walked in, muttered, “You’re so similar...” we pretended not to hear.



The day after I had finished formulating my cunning plan—after I had finished my *business talks*—with Leonora-san, I enjoyed a late breakfast made by Filione-san before setting out from South Strag.

With so many things going so well, I was racing along the road with a skip in my step—up until someone decided to rain on my parade, that is.

I was almost back to the village when around ten guys suddenly rushed out of the bushes to stand in my way.

“H-Hey, you! Stop!”

They were armed. I screeched to a halt, my heels digging tracks in the ground as I did.

The men let out a slightly relieved sigh when they saw me comply.

“A-All right, that’s good.”

The reason they seemed maybe just a little hesitant might have had something to do with the fact I’d been running faster than the average horse.

To be totally honest, I could’ve just kept running straight through them, but they’d gone to so much effort to meet me here...

Wouldn’t *you* feel bad for them, if the person in my shoes hadn’t stopped?

It wasn’t like there were *that* many of them anyway... Heh heh heh.

“Well, can I help you with something?”

“Whaddaya mean, ‘can you help us’? What about this situation do you not get, huh?”

“Geh heh heh! I never thought she’d be such a kid!”

“Well, hey! It makes our job so much easier!”

My small stature must have put them at ease, because these guys were suddenly a whole lot bolder.

Honestly, let’s just call them “bandits” at this point.

“It must take a lot of guts to attack an alchemist, huh?”

“Hah! Who cares if you’re some big shot!”

“Gyah ha ha ha! Even the nobility are nothin’ but easy pickings for us if they don’t got bodyguards with ‘em!”

I had tried to warn them, but all I got back in response was pure stupidity. I could only let out an involuntary sigh at their utter lack of forethought.

“Hahh... I suppose that’s all people think of us alchemists, huh?”

“Huh? What’s this kid’s problem?”

“Hey, hey, don’t go thinkin’ you can bluff your way outta this.”

“Yeah, you heard him. Now get out all of your money! You do that, and you’ll get out of this with your life, okay? That’s all you’ll be keepin’, though.”

“What, are you into scrawny kids like her? Heh heh.”

“*Scrawny?* Force Bullet.”

One sneering bandit went for a short trip through the air before crashing back to the ground. He rolled over ten meters before he came to a stop.

The other bandits who saw this fell perfectly silent.

“Alchemists can use *magic*,” I informed them with a smile. “Were you not aware?”

The bandits all readied their weapons.

“H-Hey, we’ll all jump her at once! She can’t cast spells if we break her concentration!”

“Not a bad call, but I can use a sword too. Force Bullet. Oh, and one more thing, I can also cast while on the move. Here, have another. Force Bullet.”

Two bandits flew, and I drew my sword.

Since I was able to enhance my own body with magic, my movements were already on a completely different level from these common brigands.

If they’d really thought about it, once they saw just how fast I was running, they wouldn’t have attacked me at all.

But if they were smart, they wouldn’t have become bandits in the first place.

I circled behind the onrushing brigands and cut some of them down, more than halving their number in a brief span of time.

That finally got the gang worried, and they cried out, “W-Wait! Hold on! A deal! Let’s make a deal!”

Those words made me stop for a moment.

“A deal?” I asked.

“Yeah! We only did this because we were asked to! Please, let us go!” one of the bandits said, slowly inching away from me as he made this completely selfish proposal.

“That’s not a deal,” I told him, shaking my head. “There’s nothing in it for me.”

“W-We’ll tell you who hired us! A merchant! He was a merchant!”

“That’s of no consequence to me. And I can’t imagine any statement you make would help me catch that merchant either.”

If he was hiring unsavory characters, he’d have taken some precautions. Between a merchant and a brigand, it went without saying whose testimony would carry greater weight.

Besides, there’s a grand total of one person who would have any reason to sic these guys on me now, right? I’d like to think I haven’t made that many enemies.

“Then we’ll give you everything we have! So, please, let us go! Okay?”

“Huh? Why? Once I kill you people, it’s automatically all mine anyway.”

“Is this woman for real?!” they all cried out in unison.



What I was saying was perfectly natural, though. They were ready to rob others, and yet they'd never thought the same could happen to them? How naive.

Besides, letting the bandits go was never an option for me.

"Sorry. We have a motto in my family: 'If you find bandits, eliminate them without fail.' Letting you go would just cause trouble for the next person."

Whenever my parents came back from stocking up on goods, they would always boast about how many bandits they'd exterminated this time.

Now, even as a kid, I'd thought that maybe talking about "exterminating" them was a bit much, but from the perspective of a merchant who had to travel from town to town, bandits really were vermin.

Dad always said, "Merchants work hard for their money, so I'll never tolerate anyone trying to steal the things they bought with that money!" He'd even lost friends who couldn't fight back against brigands the way that he could.

In short, eliminating bandits was a public good. Justice was on my side here.

"And on that note... Goodbye."

I smiled and waved my hand.

In the end, for all their talk about giving me everything they had, it turned out they didn't have much money on them.

But hey, it's not like I gave them a taste of their own medicine because I wanted their money, okay?

If a gang of bandits got themselves established here, Darna-san or someone else I knew might get hurt, so I was just making sure to eliminate them properly. That was all.

"But even so, pooling all their money, they only had a few thousand rhea between them... That's a little unexpected."

Here I'd gone to the trouble of burying them, but this wasn't even enough to compensate me for that effort.

Well, it's not like I did it for their sake. It's more that if anyone walking along the road were to see the corpses, they probably wouldn't feel very good about it.

In addition to their money, I also collected any equipment that wasn't biodegradable. Maybe these would make good gifts for Jizdo-san? The quality of them wasn't that high, though.

"Okay... Nothing else left. No problems here."

After making sure I had done all of the cleanup, I set off again.

Not long after that, the entrance to the village came into sight, and a rotund merchant was standing there. I'd never met him before, but based on everything Iris-san and the others had told me, I could tell this was probably the merchant Yoku Bahru.

He rushed over to me in a hurry as I entered the village.

"Are you...all right?" he called out to me in a panicked tone, but there was a slight hesitation as he spoke.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Oh, well, one of the members of my company said they had witnessed bandits along this road..."

"Oh, that's why you went to such trouble? For little old me, who you don't even know? Well, well. How very kind of you."

Seeing the way that I was all smiles, with nary a scratch on me as I politely bowed my head, the merchant scowled for just a second, then immediately smiled as well.

How very like a merchant to be able to switch gears like that.

"No, no, it seems my concerns were unfounded. I believe you are this village's alchemist, yes?"

"Yes, my name is Sarasa. And you are? I've heard that a merchant is staying in town."

"Oh, I should have introduced myself sooner. I am Yoku Bahru. But please,

just call me Yoku.”

“Yoku-san it is, then. Nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine. I don’t suppose you would happen to have been attacked by bandits, would you, Sarasa-san...?”

“Oh, yes, there were some people like that,” I told him casually. “I had them take their leave, though.”

“Ah... And they...left? Just like that?” Yoku asked, confused.

“Yes, because I had them take their leave—from this world.”

Yoku’s expression twisted as I smiled.

“Ah, ah ha, ah ha ha... I see. Well, you’ve done all of us a favor. Brigands on the roads are such a problem.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“Ah ha ha ha...”

Our incredibly dry laughter echoed around the area.

He’s got some thick skin, I’ll give him that. But his inability to hide how unnerved he is gives him away as nothing more than a small-time crook.

“By the way, Sarasa-san, would you happen to be in need of frostbite bat fangs? I’ve been buying them up recently for reasons of my own, but I’d be willing to make allowances for you if it would help.”

“Let me think... I still have some in stock, but if I ever run out, I’ll be sure to ask you.”

Yoku’s face lit up when he heard me say that.

Should I look favorably on his tenacity for not giving in at this point, or unfavorably for not knowing when to call it quits?

Either way, it was convenient for me that he wasn’t backing off. If he did, then all the plans that Leonora-san and I had come up with would go to waste.

Looking at his reaction, maybe I don’t need to bait him any further?

“Ohh, is that right? Please come to me whenever the need arises.”

“Yes, I’ll do just that.”

Now, how many more days can he hold out?

“I’m hooooome,” I said cheerily as I entered the shop.

“Welcome home, Sarasa-san.” Lorea-chan, who was sitting at the counter, greeted me with a smile.

Next to her were Iris-san and Kate-san, looking somewhat bored. I had asked the two of them not to go out to work, and instead to stay in the house in case anything happened.

While I wasn’t expecting a direct attack on my shop, in light of what had just transpired out on the road, maybe I’d been right to take precautions.

“Shopkeeper-san, welcome back,” Kate-san greeted me.

“How did it go, Shopkeeper-dono?” Iris-san asked, sounding like she was enjoying this a little.

I nodded in response. “Smoothly, I’d say. He seems to be in a real hurry. He even set bandits to attack me on the road home.”

“Huh?! Were you...yeah, of course you were okay. This is you we’re talking about, Shopkeeper-san.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you acted a little more concerned, Kate-san.”

Like Lorea-chan, who’s got an uneasy look on her face. Although, in her case, I doubt I’m the only one she’s worried for.

“But it was no problem for you, right?” Iris-san checked.

“Yes. I wiped them all out. So you don’t need to worry about Darna-san, Lorea-chan.”

“Thank you so much! Because my dad’s not very strong at all...”

Well, it did seem like the road between here and South Strag was pretty much always safe, at least. I’d never heard of bandits on it before.

Was that because of good law enforcement, or because they didn’t think there was enough work there for it to be worth their while?

Probably the latter...

The only ones who traveled that road were Darna-san and maybe some gatherers. It was risky for bandits to target gatherers, since they could put up a decent fight, and attacking the owner of a small village's general store wasn't going to get them much money either—or it wouldn't have until recently.

Now that Darna-san's carrying cooling hats, maybe I should take a bit of a look around...?

"Still, that merchant's a stubborn one," Iris-san noted.

"It's too late for him to back out," Kate-san explained. "With all the money he's sunk into this, perhaps he's at risk of going bust if he can't get the results he needs?"

"That is what we're aiming for, of course," I said with a smile. "I've laid all sorts of bait too. When I told him my supply of frostbite bat fangs was getting low, he looked positively delighted."

Lorea-chan looked confused.

"Low? But we still have so much stock."

"Yep. If I'm the only one using them, I've got enough to last over a decade."

This was, of course, including the ones I would use to make cooling hats to sell.

In short, no matter how things went, this village's industry was safe. There was no problem.

"The merchant's dancing in the palm of your hand, Shopkeeper-dono. I feel a little sorry for him," said Iris-san.

"You make me sound so sinister. Just to be clear, Leonora-san is in on this too."

If anything, taking into account the legwork she did gathering information, more than half of the plan could be credited to her.

That was my sense of it, at least. No clue what Leonora-san herself would say.

"Besides, I get the sense it'd be a *good* thing if we were to bankrupt that

merchant.”

Since we were already on the topic, I filled the others in on what Leonora-san had told me about him.

“So, yeah,” I soon concluded. “In light of what she told me, and also the bandit attack, I think he’s been using some illegal methods, and I don’t like the way he’s been forcing people into debt either.”

“Okay, let’s crush him,” Iris-san agreed.

“Yes, there’s no need to show mercy,” Kate-san added.

“He’s awful! Don’t let him get away with it!” Lorea-chan chimed in.

It was easy for us all to agree.

“Of course! That’s my intention,” I confirmed with a nod.

Not that their agreement changed anything about what I was going to do.

Another ten days or so after I had talked about it with the others, a rotund figure visited my shop.

“Welcome. Oh? Your name was Yoku-san, I believe. What can I help you with today?”

Yes, it was the merchant in question.

Okay, despite narrating that like it was a surprise, the fact of the matter was that I knew in advance that he would be coming. I had a trusty network of informants, after all.

And for that very reason, I was the one standing in the shop instead of Lorea-chan.

“Hello, Sarasa-san. Ahh, I was just thinking about your frostbite bat fang stock. If you are running low...”

“Oh, that? Thank you for being so considerate. But I’ll be fine. I spoke with an acquaintance, who was able to set me up with some more fangs on the cheap.”

Yoku was approaching me with a personable smile, so I smiled too.

And when I did, his smile twitched.

“Would that be from South Strag?” he asked.

“Yes. It’s the nearest town, after all. If you’re going to go shopping, it’s the place to go, right?”

“Urgh... B-But if you buy your stock there, you have to deal with shipping costs, don’t you? If you deal with me, I can help you with that, you know?”

“Oh, no. I needed to buy more than *just* frostbite bat fangs. Fortunately, the fangs don’t take up much space, and I don’t use that many of them, so just picking them up when I’m already in town should work well enough, for my shop at least.”

“I-Is that a fact...?”

“It is,” I said firmly.

Yoku blanched at this.

Yep, yep. It looks like he’s about to reach his limit.

I’d heard from Leonora-san that if he couldn’t get a large sum of money today or tomorrow, he was going to find himself in some serious trouble.

Where does she get her information? Some of the stuff she knew felt like it ought to be secret.

“To tell you the truth, I’ve been thinking it was about time that we packed up and left your village.”

“Oh, really? We’ll miss you. It seems you and your entourage have done a lot to bring life to the place.”

“Ha ha ha... Well, we do have other business to attend to.”

Which would be why you want to cut your losses somehow, but...I think it’s too late for that.

“So, on that topic, if you wouldn’t mind, would you take our stock of frostbite bat fangs off of our hands?”

That would be his move, yeah.

We put a lot of effort into bringing him to this. Both Leonora-san and myself.

“But I don’t need frostbite bat fangs at the moment...”

“Don’t say that! Please, do what you can!” he practically begged me.

I crossed my arms and groaned.

“Hrmm, well... Could I see what you have?”

“Yes, of course!”

When I made a show of *reluctantly* considering it, Yoku hurriedly set his leather pouch down on the counter with a heavy thunk.

I took a handful of fangs from the bag, inspecting them closely one by one, deliberately taking my time so as to further irritate Yoku as he impatiently tapped his foot.

Once I had spent long enough, I let out a deliberate sigh.

“Yeah, these aren’t very well-preserved.”

“Th-That can’t be right! Frostbite bat fangs are a material that doesn’t degrade even without processing!”

His expression was a mix of surprise, confusion, and anger. I could see the oily sweat forming on Yoku’s forehead as he pressed in closer to me, and I leaned back to put a little more distance between us.

“No, no, you’ve got it wrong. It *is* true that frostbite bat fangs don’t degrade easily.”

“In that case!!!”

“But that’s only for the time it takes a gatherer to hunt the bat and bring the fangs back to an alchemist. If you leave them untreated after that point, they *will* degrade. Their value just keeps on dropping.”

This wasn’t a lie, of course. It was just that, in ordinary usage, it didn’t have much of an impact, and inspecting them thoroughly was a major undertaking, so you could count on being paid based on a rough estimate.

Because if a nonalchemist, like Lorea-chan, was minding the shop, there was no way for her *to* do a thorough check.

“Th-Then how about these...?”

“They’re not very good. And with such a high volume, it would be quite some time before I got around to using them. Honestly, many of them would become worthless.”

If I didn’t do any processing, that is.

“O-Oh, no...”

Yoku’s face went a little pale, and a drop of the oily sweat from his forehead fell from his chin.

Gwee hee hee. Are you all right?

But you’re the one who did something beyond the pale.

“Well, since I do use some, I suppose I could buy ten...”

“Ten?! I have ten *thousand* here, you realize?!”

“Yes, you do. I see you were able to buy quite a lot of them.”

Yep, we sure had hunted a lot... Enough that I got a far-off look in my eye as I thought about it.

“Th-This is preposterous!”

“Well, I’m afraid yelling at me won’t help you... Obviously, you could take them to another town, but with this volume, I can’t see many people wanting to buy them off of you, and the price will only continue to drop... I wonder just how low.”

Without outright saying it, I hinted that the price would fall as he traveled.

In reality, the drop would be little more than a rounding error, but the part about him struggling to find buyers was likely true.

“Urghhh...”

“If you really insist, I could buy the whole lot, but...”

“Y-You mean it?!”

Yoku had a look on his face like he’d just found salvation. But do you really think I’d save him? The same man who’d arranged for bandits to attack me?

“Yes. However, with such a high volume, I won’t be able to use them up with normal methods, so I’m going to have to resort to somewhat inefficient uses for them. I can’t offer you a high price.”

“Urghhh, I-I’m fine with that. Please, just buy them!”

“You’ve got it. Now, I’ll have to get to work on assessing them... Could I ask you to return in another four days?”

“Huh...? Four days? That won’t be in time!”

With all of this blanching and flushing red, Yoku’s face was working overtime right now.

“I don’t know what to tell you. Do you think I can assess all of these fangs so easily? Please, use some common sense.”

“Mrrrggghhh...!”

Assuming there were ten thousand here, and I spent around ten seconds checking each of them, who even knows how many days that would take?

If I did my checks only during work hours, three days sounded about right.

When I explained that to him gently, not even Yoku could deny the validity of what I was saying. He just groaned repeatedly.

“If you’re in a hurry, I don’t mind buying them immediately, but—”

“P-Please!”

“Okay. However, the assessed price would be considerably lower. I’d be buying them without knowing what state they’re in, after all.”

“Urghhh!” Yoku ground his teeth as hard as he could without shattering them before finally managing to force out the words, “I-It’s fine! Please, buy them!”

“Understood. Give me just a moment,” I replied with a nod, counting the frostbite bat fangs as I tossed them into a wooden box.

The calculation from there was simple. I laid the coins on the counter, as if to say, *“This should do.”*

Yoku’s eyes bugged out and his jaw dropped when he saw how few coins there were. I smiled at him. His hands balled into fists as he trembled, but he

still nodded.

“And with that, we have a deal,” I declared.

“Dammit all!” Yoku cursed, snatching his money and putting it in a leather pouch.

The composure he’d had when he first entered my shop was gone now.

Of course. He’s got people who’ll be waiting to see him back in South Strag, after all.

“Thank you for your business. Please come again.”

I smiled and waved goodbye, but all I got in return was,

“Like I ever would!”

What an awful guy, am I right?



The moment Yoku was out of my shop, the door behind me opened. My three friends came out with strained smiles on their faces.

Knowing that I had made the bandits “go away,” they hadn’t been worried about what might happen to me if Yoku decided to resort to force. But they had still insisted, “We should be careful, just in case,” so I had let them stay in the back as bodyguards.

“Shopkeeper-san, you really put the squeeze on him, huh?” Kate-san asked.

“Whaa, no I didn’t,” I disagreed. “I mean, I even paid him a full tenth of their market value.”

“One-tenth?! I’m amazed he agreed to sell at that rate,” said Iris-san. “If you weren’t paying enough, he had the option of taking the goods to South Strag or another town, didn’t he?”

Sure. That *had* been a possibility at one point.

But not anymore.

“Heh heh heh...”

“Ah. Sarasa-san’s got an evil grin on her face.”

“Lorea-chan, calling my smile evil is rude. I just went around and talked to some folks.”

“Meaning?” Iris-san pressed for more details.

“Yoku already sold a large quantity of fangs in South Strag—and below market price too. So what do you think Leonora-san did with the fangs that went to her shop?”

“Seeing as she’s an alchemist, I would normally expect her to be buying them for her own use...” said Iris-san.

“Could it be that she spread them around the nearby towns?”

“Kate-san got it!” I said, snapping my fingers as I pointed to her.

Kate-san really is a smart one.

“They’re in demand during this season, and she bought them below the ordinary market rate, after all,” I explained. “Even after adding a slight profit margin on top of her shipping costs, she was able to price them cheap enough that she sold a lot.”

And after that, the people who had bought them from her had carried them on to yet other towns, meaning that demand for frostbite bat fangs in this area was saturated.

There might be people willing to buy a few more, but the amount Yoku was carrying was more than just “a few.”

“If he came here, it stands to reason that he’d already been to Leonora-san and she turned him down. But if he hadn’t liked my price, and went back to Leonora-san instead, that would have been fine too, in its own way.”

“It would have?” Iris-san asked.

“Yes. The only thing that would have changed is that she would have been the one buying them off him dirt cheap instead.”

“You two are absolutely colluding,” Iris-san concluded.

“You make it all sound so sinister. We just have a business partnership. We *are* neighbors, after all. It’s important that we get along.”

It's a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Yes, that's the way to put it.

We're definitely not rigging the market, okay?

"Even so, didn't he have the option to sell in some distant town? Considering the quantity that he had," Iris-san asked.

"Well, if you're asking whether it was *possible*, theoretically, I'm sure that it was. Yoku just didn't have it as an option available to him at this time."

Lorea-chan cocked her head to the side, mystified by how I could be so confident about that. "Why is that?" she asked.

"Even if he was a reasonably large merchant, do you think he'd have the kind of cash on hand that would make you literally faint?"

"C-Come on! Please, forget that happened! I was just a little surprised!"

Lorea-chan flushed red and started pounding on my shoulder in embarrassment. Iris-san, meanwhile, thought about the question for a moment and then shook her head.

"I am not that knowledgeable about the doings of merchants, but...I suspect that he would struggle to hold such a large amount of cash."

"Yep. An ordinary merchant won't have more cash than the scale of their business would suggest. That's setting aside whatever assets they might have, such as debts owed to them or goods on hand."

And since it wasn't that easy to convert those assets into cash, that meant that he had to bring in cash from elsewhere.

"It seems he's borrowed money from all sorts of places. And some of them are bad news."

"What do you mean, 'bad news'?" Lorea-chan asked.

"To put it simply, criminal gangs. Well, it's not like Yoku himself's all that much better than them. He did have ties to bandits, after all."

This ought to be obvious, but ordinary people couldn't go around hiring bandits. So if Yoku could, the only conclusion was that he had ties to criminals.

His creditors would be the same sort of people, and if he didn't pay them back by the time his loans came due...

"Those are the sort of people waiting for him in South Strag. He needed to get the money, no matter what."

Incidentally, all of this was intel I'd gotten from Leonora-san. Even if she wasn't up to Master's level, she still wasn't to be underestimated.

"Is the man who was just in here going to be killed if he goes back to South Strag?" Lorea-chan asked, sounding just a little sad.

You've got a good heart, but he's not worth worrying about.

"He'll be fine. Leonora-san has a solution all worked out."

"Oh, she does? That's good then."

How well it goes is going to depend entirely on how much debt he put himself into, though. Depending on the situation, it could still just be goodbye for him, and Leonora-san is aiming for it to go that way. After all, if we only do things halfway and then he recovers on us, that would cause all sorts of problems.

Even so, after seeing the relief on Lorea-chan's face, I had no intention of telling her that.

I glanced over at Iris-san and Kate-san... The two of them had probably figured it out, but it didn't seem like they planned on saying anything.

"Now then," I said. "There's just a little more cleanup to do, and then we can consider this whole affair settled."

"Cleanup?" Lorea-chan echoed questioningly.

"Yep. I've gotten help from all quarters on this, so I have to go settle accounts. That being the case, Lorea-chan, I'll be away for a little while again starting tomorrow, so I'll be counting on you, okay?"

"Uh, okay...? You've got it."

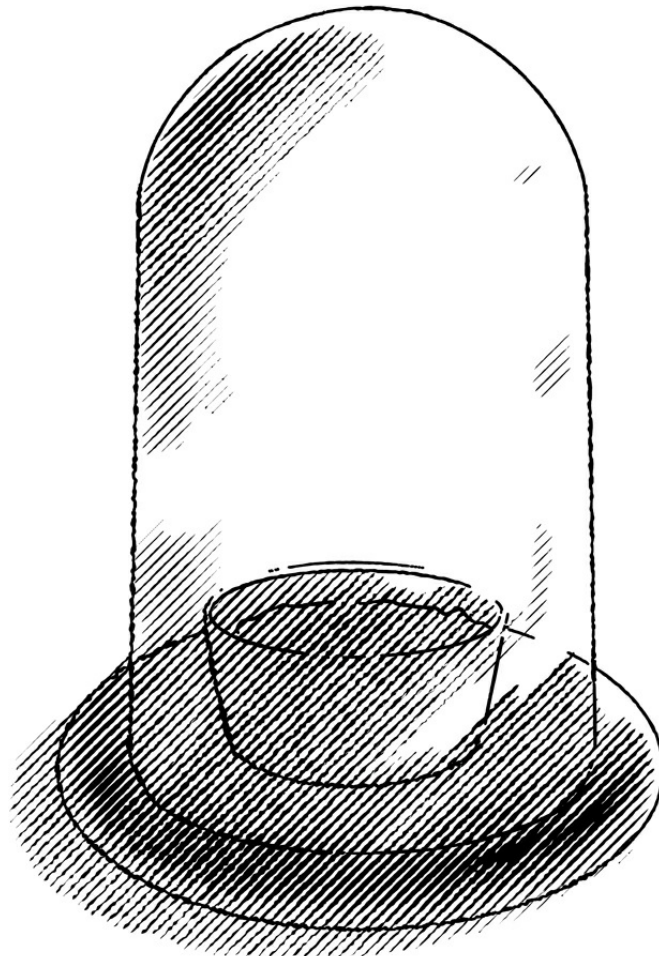
Lorea-chan cocked her head to the side a little at my mysterious pronouncement, but nodded readily regardless.

No. 005

Appears in: *Complete Alchemy Works* Volume 5

Difficulty: Hard

Standard Price: ~3,800,000 Rhea



〈 Power Grower 〉

Qffnfhffnf† Gfhfðffnfh

Do your flowers always die? This is the product for you! If you can just remember to keep it supplied with magical power, it will grow any plant, no matter how rare or exotic. People won't be able to call you careless anymore. Now you, too, can be seen as the kind of girl who loves flowers. *Only works with currently known varieties of plants. Seed pot sold separately.

Epilogue

It was about a week after Yoku Bahru pulled out of the village. Having finally finished tying up all the loose ends, I was enjoying my afternoon tea with Lorea-chan and the others. We were taking it easy, enjoying a package of Maria-san's homemade cookies that Master had sent us.

Treats this tasty were something of a rarity in these parts, so the others were all very happy with them.

They could hold back a little more, though. I don't get to eat these very often myself.

"Now we can finally relax," I said.

"We sure can," Lorea-chan agreed. "But Sarasa-san..."

"Yes?"

"Weren't things pretty hectic even before the merchant came? The hellflame grizzlies came out of the woods not long after you arrived too."

"I can't deny that... And all I want is to be able to practice alchemy in peace."

I let out a sigh. Iris-san took another cookie, popped it in her mouth, then smiled as she pointed out, "You were the one who chose to confront that merchant, weren't you, Shopkeeper-dono?"

"Well, yeah. All three of you put your hands up to say I should."

"True as that may be...you don't regret it, do you?"

"Not at all. On the whole, I made a bigger profit this way."

"Yeah, I'll bet it was bigger..." Kate-san grinned. "You made a lot of money on this, didn't you, Shopkeeper-san? You're not actually going to be using those fangs the way you told him you would, right?"

Lorea-chan's eyes widened with surprise.

"Wait, that was a lie?" she asked.

“It wasn’t a lie. There *are* ways to turn them into magic crystals.”

It was just incredibly inefficient. Because you’d be taking away the frostbite bat fangs’ greatest advantage, their cooling effect, and turning them into generic magic crystals.

For an analogy, think of it like melting ice because you wanted water.

There was a cost involved in melting them, and if I then used them to make an artifact like a cooling hat, I had to pay that cost all over again. What an incredible waste.

That was why, generally, you used frostbite bat fangs as-is. The problem would be if I had nothing to use them for and nowhere to sell them to, but just this once, I decided to off-load a large portion of what I’d bought onto Master.

Because, being far away from here, in the distant capital, she’d still be able to flog lots of them.

I’d also sent her most of the frostbite bats’ fruit, in return for which she had sent a large amount of money and alcohol, along with the cookies we were enjoying now.

It had been good alcohol too, but most of it had already gone to Andre-san and the guys, who’d carried it off with delight.

“So, you *did* make a lot of money?” Lorea-chan pressed me.

“I won’t deny it.”

Overhunting frostbite bats was easy money. I had sold their fangs for a considerable markup over the market price, making me a fat sack of cash. Then I’d bought them back dirt cheap. After that, I had pushed the vast majority of them off on Master at a significant discount from the market rate.

Honestly, when all was said and done, I was left with more money than I had ever seen before.

“So, um, what are you going to do with that cash?” Lorea-chan asked.

“Well, I’m an alchemist, so I do have plans to buy materials with it, but...I’ll be loaning most of it out.”

“Loaning it out?”

“To Delal-san, for one. You know she’s started building an extension on her inn, right?”

“That makes... Huh? *You* provided the funding for that, Shopkeeper-dono?!” Iris-san was surprised.

“Yes,” I told her. “The gatherers did a lot to help me out this time, so this is one way I’m paying them back.”

I had given wages and other compensation to those who had been more directly involved, but the expansion of the inn was my thanks for all the other ways they had helped. The inn had already been booked to capacity, and it sounded like many of the guests had been unable to use the restaurant, so I was investing to alleviate those issues.

I had even offered to just pay for it outright, but since Delal-san had stubbornly insisted, “I can’t accept that!” I had loaned her the money. I wasn’t charging interest, and we had agreed she could pay it back slowly, using the profits from the new building.

“Other than that, it’s also being used to bail out the alchemists who’d become Yoku’s victims.”

Obviously, it was difficult for me to do that directly, so I had pooled my money with Leonora-san, who’d profited just as much as I had in this affair, and she’d bought their debt from Yoku for cheap. He must not have wanted to die. With his time running out, she’d swooped in and ruthlessly bargained him down before buying up all of their debt... Or so I was told.

I wasn’t there myself, so I don’t know how it really went, but Leonora-san and Filione-san had come back from those negotiations looking incredibly pleased with themselves.

As for whether he was going to survive... Who could say, really? Leonora-san had mentioned that he “might come up a little short” in the end.

“Oh, I see,” Lorea-chan said. “So there’s not that much gold in the shop anymore? That’s a relief. I was worried the floors would collapse under the weight.”

She let out a sigh of relief. It seemed that, as far as she was concerned, the key thing was that the money had been spent.

“Lorea-chan, you’re exagger—”

“I am *not* exaggerating! I’ve been doing my best to stay away from the room where all the money was!”

Lorea-chan had already fainted at the sight of a small portion of it. What would have happened to her if she’d seen the pile when it was at its largest?

“You’re so kind,” Kate-san said. “I feel bad for his other victims, but surely you were under no obligation to spend your own money to help them.”

“They were all novices like me, so I couldn’t help but feel like it was my problem too.”

I was surprised how many more of them there were than I expected, though.

“But all of those ‘novices’ were older than you, right, Shopkeeper-san?”

“Well, yes. And older than you too, Kate-san. I mean, they did have their own shops, after all.”

I was an exception, opening my shop fresh out of the academy. Normally, it took years, training in another shop and saving up money, before an alchemist was ready.

“But it’s not like it was a loss for me, you know? From now on, those alchemists will be tied to me and Leonora-san. Heh heh heh...”

“Oh, there’s that evil smile again...” Lorea-chan noted with concern.

“It’s fine, Lorea,” Iris-san reassured her with a shrug and a wry smile. “She’s not planning anything that nefarious.”

“Yeah, this is Shopkeeper-san we’re talking about,” Kate-san agreed.

“Oh, I’m not so sure about that,” I told them. “They’ll need to pay us back properly, and depending on the situation, I plan on making all sorts of unreasonable demands of them too.”

“Oh, really? And how much interest are you planning on charging them?”

After a pause, I answered, “None, for the moment at least.”

I couldn't take anything from them while they're still crying about how penniless they are, could I? They've already been through so much.

“Is there even any need for you to go making unreasonable demands of alchemists who still haven't come into their own, Shopkeeper-dono? You have your master to turn to when you're in trouble, right?”

“Okay, you have a point there...” I admitted.

I mean, I have been doing my best to try and be better than your average alchemist.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Lorea-chan said with a radiant smile. “You're still the same Sarasa-san I thought you were.”

Unable to say another word after seeing that smile, I took a sip from my teacup to hide my face.

Afterword

Hey, it's been a while...only, no. I feel like it hasn't been long enough for me to greet all of you that way, but hello, I'm Mizuho Itsuki.

Thank you for purchasing this volume as well as the first.

In this printed edition, in order to keep it fun for those who already read the web version, I've pumped up the amount of silly Iris-san moments. It's chock-full of them.

Though, that sounds a lot like something I said in the last volume. Hrm... Does that mean I need to pump up the amount of Kate-san in the next volume?

I *hope* I'll get to put out a third volume, but that's all going to be up to sales numbers.

In this story, Sarasa-san shows off how she's absorbed her parents' *wonderful* lessons and can be a little harsh in how she implements them. She doesn't show mercy to bandits who attack merchants, or unscrupulous merchants who get in the way of honest businesspeople. The lessons we learn when we're young sure are important.

There's more to Sarasa-san than just how cute she is. She's able to live out on the frontier, running her own shop. Even if she does have her master's helpful guide on how to run a business, opening a shop of her own at fifteen is still badass.

Now, unlike in the previous afterword, I have nothing to say about the illustrations this time. Isn't that strange when they're so cute?

Why do I have nothing to say, you ask? Well, at the point when I'm writing this, I still haven't seen them yet.

But have no fear. There's going to be nice illustrations with this book. I believe it.

So, Fuumi-san, thank you, as always, for your lovely drawings!

And to the editor, proofreaders, and everyone else involved with this book, especially all of you readers out there, thank you for your support.

I hope we'll be able to meet again.

Mizuho Itsuki

Special Short Story: Girl Power and Making Sweets

“Unghhh.”

I emerged from my workshop after working through the night several days in a row. Bathed in sunlight, I gave a big stretch.

This postwork feeling of accomplishment mixed with exhaustion isn't half bad.

“Whew.”

After heaving a deep sigh, I felt my stomach let out a grumble of protest. I gave it a light pat, urging it to calm down.

It hadn't bothered me while I had been focused on work, but now that I had a moment to rest, I was suddenly hungry.

I could just snack on whatever, but I want to have something tasty to celebrate. And there's always such pleasant smells from the kitchen around noon, lately...

“Lorea-chan, is lunch ready yet?” I poked my head into the kitchen to ask.

“It's still a bit early for—hahh...”

When Lorea-chan turned around and saw my face, she let out an exasperated sigh.

Murgh. Isn't that a bit rude?

Okay, sure, pestering her for lunch *might* have been a bit childish, I'd admit that, but still.

“Whenever I see you come out of the workshop, it's like you've taken a massive hit to your girl power. You're always a total mess...”

“Oh, *that's* what the sigh's about? Hey, I'm clean, at least. As an alchemist, I've got to be.”

“There's a difference between just being clean and being pretty! You've got the perfect brush for it, so you could at least fix your hair.”

Lorea-chan asked me to wait a moment, then disappeared into the back for a while before returning with a brush in her hand, which she used to carefully brush my hair.

That was all she did, and yet my messy hair was soon under control and had even regained its glossiness.

That was the power of the artifact Lorea-chan was holding, the glosser brush. It was a wonderful item, letting even slobs have perfect hair all the time.

As long as we actually use it, that is.

Humming with delight, she said, “This thing’s incredible.”

“Well, it *is* an artifact, after all. They’re popular in the capital... Not that we’ll be selling many of them.”

Even as I agreed with the chipper Lorea-chan, my smile couldn’t help but feel a little forced.

Glosser brushes were expensive, which limited the number of people interested in purchasing one. They were also pretty durable. Even if I couldn’t say that a single brush would last a lifetime...it’d probably last about half of one.

That was why, despite their popularity, they didn’t sell well. So they weren’t that good of a product for us alchemists.

“I know I’d do a lot of scrimping and saving to buy one...”

“Yeah, but they aren’t really a must-have, you know?”

Every woman wants to have beautiful hair, but the price made it a tough sell for common folk who just wanted to look a little nicer.

The brush’s effect works on hair damaged by the sun while working in the fields, so I think there would be demand for them in farming villages too, if they were cheaper. The problem is that, unlike cooling hats, which have a demonstrable effect on safety and efficiency, the glosser brush is more of a luxury item. I just can’t see it selling at the current price.

“I guess it’s just not going to work in a village like this, where we can’t even sell trendy clothes, huh?”

“And they’re not heavy, like the magic stove, so I can’t offer much of a discount on them either.”

“But if they *were* cheap, the traveling merchants would buy them up.”

As we carried on talking, Lorea-chan skillfully brushed my hair, braided it a little, and then tied it back using a ribbon she produced from her pocket.

“There! All done!” she said, taking a moment to admire her work. “Yep, you’ve got a good base to work from, so if you just take care of yourself, you’ll look great!”

“Hrmm, but I think I’m more interested in alchemy than fashion for now. And there’s only so much time in a day... You work pretty hard on your appearance, though, right, Lorea-chan?”

Even compared to when I first came to the village, Lorea-chan had really refined her appearance.

That was partially because she’d been making use of the bath at my place, but the clothes she wore had gone up a level too.

To put it simply, she was “colorful” in a way the other villagers weren’t.

“You made that outfit yourself, right?”

“Hee hee, well, you did give me some things to work with, Sarasa-san, and I’ve had the opportunity to see various outfits.”

“I didn’t really give you anything all that impressive, but if you’re happy, then I’m glad I gave them to you.”

All I’d given her were loose scraps of fabric.

It was mostly offcuts from when I made environmental tuning fabric, but the vibrant colors it was dyed with made it very valuable to Lorea-chan.

They weren’t large enough to make a whole outfit, so she sewed the little pieces together to make ribbons or decorate another outfit. When she got larger pieces, she would sew them together to make skirts, shawls, and that sort of thing. I was impressed with how skillfully she used it all.

“By the way, Sarasa-san. Are you able to just dye ordinary fabric? In pretty

colors, and cheaply, if that's possible."

"Sure I can," I replied enthusiastically. "As for how cheap it will be... Uh, well, it won't be as expensive as the environmental tuning cloth, at least?"

In all honesty, I'm not so sure that I can dye it more cheaply than just ordering in already-dyed cloth. I'm a highly paid alchemist, after all.

"I guess it's not that easy, huh?"

"Lorea-chan, if there's something you want, I'll make it for you. You're planning to sell it, right?"

The cost of the base materials wasn't that high, so if I didn't factor in the cost of my labor, I could do it relatively cheaply.

But if she wanted to sell it at the general store, I was obviously going to have to insist on her paying the proper price for it.

"Of course not! But I'd still feel bad making you do that for me..."

"You don't need to worry about it. As long as it's only once in a while, at least," I told her with a laugh.

"Urgh, well, I do want some pretty fabrics..."

Lorea-chan seemed torn over what to do.

"Well, if you decide you want some, let me know. Because I'll make them for you."

"Th-Thank you... But Sarasa-san, you have all these things that could help you be more fashionable, like the cloth and the brush, so why don't you make use of them? It just seems like... That's it! A waste of girl power!"

"Err, really? Are you sure you aren't mixing up girl power and financial power?"

"Urkh... Having the freedom to pursue fashion is a kind of girl power too. And you're wasting yours! You have the basic looks, the materials, and the techniques all available to you, and you're doing nothing with it!"

Oops, I seem to have gotten Lorea-chan all fired up.

I'm not really interested in fashion, so I can't really carry on a conversation

with her about it. Is there any way to cool her back down...?

“That’s it!” I exclaimed as an idea came to me. “An acquaintance of mine sent me a book of recipes for sweets and the ingredients. Are you interested?”

“The problem with you is that— Did you say sweets?”

Having made her stop midsentence, I delivered a follow-up.

“Yep, that’s right. You’re a really good cook, so if you cook them well, I’m sure they’d turn out really good, you know?”

The sender was Maria-san, of course.

I’d told Master I had made a magic oven, so that was probably why.

“Making sweets! That’s such a city girl thing to do! I love it! Let’s make them together, Sarasa-san!”

That was one fire put out, and another one started.

Unlike talking about fashion, this was something where, under normal circumstances, I could actually keep up with her, but I didn’t really want to do it right now.

“Oh, I’ll leave it to you today. I’m a little short of sleep.”

“Aww, are you sure? You *have* been staying up late, though. Okay. I’ll make something tasty! Just you wait!”

“Yeah, you do that. I’m going to rest for a bit.”

I don’t know if making sweets is a “city girl thing,” but if Lorea-chan enjoys it, and I get to eat some tasty treats, I’m not complaining.

I sat down, resting my elbows on the kitchen table, and watched Lorea-chan from behind as she rushed around. The drowsiness of a night spent working instead of sleeping was catching up with me.

It’s kind of nice, living a peaceful life like this.

All I have to do is wait, and I’ll get to eat something tasty.

It’s absolutely wonderful.

I should treasure this moment.

However, as if time to disturb my bliss, the bell rang in the shop.

“Ah...”

Lorea-chan turned to look at me, her hands covered in flour.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll go take care of it.”

“Sorry. I’m the one who’s supposed to be minding the shop...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I’ll be looking forward to those tasty treats.”

I smiled at Lorea-chan, shaking off my drowsiness as I rose to my feet.

Argh, if this customer causes me any problems, I’m going to chase them right out the door!

The customer who came in was perfectly normal. That meant that handling their requests in a perfunctory manner just wouldn’t be right, so I handled things like usual, and it ended up taking longer than I expected.

During that time, whatever Lorea-chan was baking started to smell toasty, and I got worried, but...

Hmm? This smell goes a little further than toasty, doesn’t it?

Once I opened the door to the kitchen, I was very sure. It smelled burnt.

Lorea-chan stood there, looking ready to cry, holding a tray of charred cookies.

“I-I’m sorry, Sarasa-san,” she apologized the moment she saw my face. “I wasted the ingredients...”

“Aww, that’s no big deal,” I replied with a shake of my head. “It’s easy to mess up when you’re new to things.”

I made mistakes too when I was learning alchemy. The important thing is to reflect on where you went wrong, and improve on that in the future.

“Do you know what happened?”

“I don’t. I thought I did it exactly like the book said...”

I took the book from a dejected Lorea-chan and read it for myself.

This was a recipe Maria-san sent me. There shouldn't have been anything wrong with it, but...

"Let's see... Ahh, sorry, looks like it's my fault."

"Huh? Why would it be your fault?"

"It's the heating instructions. There's a problem with them."

Pretty much all magic ovens had a heat gauge that went up to 10, and the recipe for the cookies said to bake them "between 4 and 4.5."

That was where my oversight had been: Even if the gauge was out of ten, the settings varied from oven to oven. In an ordinary magic stove meant for cooking, there wasn't enough of a difference that it would matter, but the oven that I'd installed here could get hot enough to fire ceramics. On its highest setting, it could even melt iron.

For an alchemist, it was common sense to change the settings to adjust for that variance, and Maria-san was obviously aware of that too.

That's why she'd sent the recipe as is, but it was different for Lorea-chan.

It was only natural that she would follow the numbers written in the book unless someone told her otherwise. So it was my mistake for not explaining.

"Sorry about that. With this oven, let's see... If you use about a fourth of the number it says in the book, it should work out."

"Oh, so that's what it was. Erm... Do you mind if I try again?" she asked pleadingly, eyes upturned.

I nodded to say, "Of course."

"Do it as many times as you like. Fortunately, we were sent plenty of ingredients."

"Thank you so much! I'll keep on trying until they're delicious!" Lorea-chan declared with a big smile, hands clenched with determination, and she was true to her word.

She did try. Again and again.

Completely forgetting to make lunch.

Thanks to her efforts, she was getting a lot better at it, but...I was still kind of hungry. And I'd just finished working all through the night.

Wait, are we going to end up having cookies for lunch? I thought to myself as I took a bite of a slightly overbaked cookie.

DATE: 00 / ΔΔ

I'd always made a point of greeting the villagers before this, but now they called out to me on their own. And it wasn't just the ones who I passed on the road either.

People would stop their work in the field to come over to talk to me. They even gave me stuff, like the crops they were growing.

Is this because of my hard work too?

02

Management of a
Novice Alchemist:
Let's Do Business

Alchemist's
Shop





Management of a Novice Alchemist:
Let's Do Business

Kate Starven

Iris's partner. Works together with Iris to repay Sarasa.

Iris Lotze

Gatherer. Sarasa saves her life, but she is left with a huge debt.

Lorea

Daughter of the couple who owns Yok Village's general store. Helps out at Sarasa's shop.

Sarasa Feed

Novice alchemist. Opens up the alchemy shop in Yok Village that she received as a graduation present from her master.

DATE: 00 ΔΔ

Working requires nourishment for both the heart and the body. That was the excuse I made to myself as the three of us spent some time enjoying our little tea party...

...completely forgetting to invite Iris-san.



DATE: 〇〇 / △△

That day, Lorea-chan came to work wearing a shallow basket on her head for some reason. "Sarasa-san! Look! What do you think?"



— Author
MIZUHO
ITSUKI
— Illustrator
FUUMI



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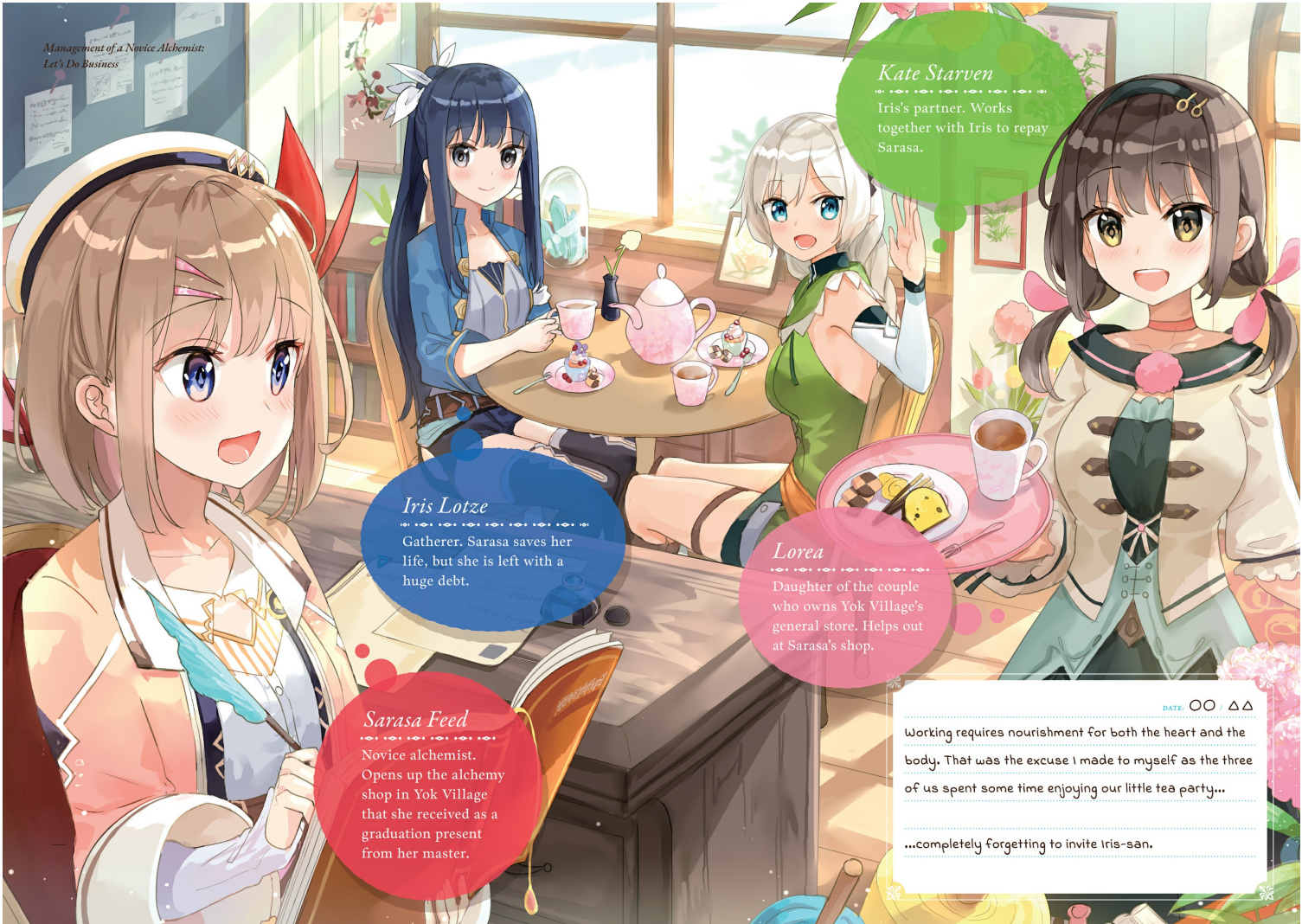
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Management of a Novice Alchemist: Volume 2

by Mizuho Itsuki

Translated by Sean McCann Edited by Thalia Sutton

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SHINMAI RENKINJUTSUSHI NO TEMPOKEIEI Vol.2 SHOUBAI O SHIYOU

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