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Management of a
★ Novice ★
Alchemist



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Prologue

It was some time after we'd run a certain troublesome merchant out of Yok Village. Between massively lowering my purchase price for frostbite bat fangs and the number of bats in the cave decreasing, the economic bubble that we'd been experiencing in the village had started to subside.

There had been some gatherers who'd complained, but once I had explained that I was doing it to protect the bat population in order to preserve them as a resource for future years, pretty much all of them had backed down without a fuss.

Most had already made good money, and there wasn't much for them to spend it on in this village beyond some slightly expensive alcohol anyway. In the end, they had been able to save up a bit, with their living expenses covered for the time being.

"It still feels like I did a lot of work for little reward, though," I said, shaking my head in dismay as I thought back on all my recent troubles.

Lorea-chan cocked her head to the side and blinked repeatedly. "Really?" she asked. "You didn't make it look that tough..."

"Huh? You think so?"

Despite being an alchemist, I'd had to go hunting in a cave, go back and forth to South Strag for meetings, negotiate with the merchant... It was a decent amount of work, okay?

I looked to Iris-san and Kate-san for support, but they nodded in agreement with Lorea-chan.

"I'm not going to deny that you did a lot, Shopkeeper-dono, but you made a considerable profit, right?"

"You don't have much cash left on hand, Shopkeeper-san, but you've become quite the little loan shark...erm, I mean investor, haven't you?"

“Well, yes, that’s all true, but...”

My profits from speculating in the frostbite fang market had largely gone into a joint venture with Leonora-san to buy up the debt of all the alchemists ensnared by that unscrupulous merchant, Yoku Bahru. We’d been able to buy that debt for fairly cheap because he’d needed fast cash, but it wasn’t an investment that was going to be profitable immediately...

“It’s going to be some time before I see any profit from that. In fact, I’m actually worried whether I’ll be able to collect at all. Those alchemists weren’t exactly business savvy in the first place.”

Normally, even if an alchemist was a little bad at business, they could take the slow and steady approach, build capital through repetitive, boring labor, and never have to worry about being plunged into debt.

And yet here I am, acting as their new creditor.

Leonora-san had looked into each of their situations, saying, “Due diligence is important!” But from what she’d told me...they ran the gamut, from people I had to genuinely feel bad for to those who just exasperated me. Because of that, the plan was for Leonora-san to handle the collection, being harsh to the ones who were just hopeless and easier on those who weren’t.

Distance is kind of an issue, so I have to leave it totally up to her.

“Still, Sarasa-san, I’m amazed you lent money to people like that.”

“Well, I bought their debt, so it’s a little different from loaning them money...”

She told me the inspections will be harsh and frequent for anybody who’s “just exasperating,” so I’d like to think it will work out. Because, while the investment is a bit speculative, it was made with money I worked hard to earn and all.

And these are people who managed to become licensed alchemists, so if they work diligently, they should be able to turn a profit.

“Well, even if I get burned a little on the investment, I got a lot of materials, so maybe it’s not such a problem? I ought to be able to focus on alchemy for a while, thankfully.”

The massive hoard of frostbite bat fangs that I had bought off of Yoku Bahru at the end had obviously been more than I could ever use myself, so I had used Master's connections to trade them for all sorts of other materials.

Thanks to those materials, my progress through the *Complete Alchemy Works* had gone from intermittent to constant. That alone was enough to make all of my hard work worth it.

And Yoku Bahru spent lots of money here, so it was a plus for the whole village too.

"Is the thing you're making now part of that, Shopkeeper-dono?" asked Iris-san.

"This is an artifact called a Shared Sound Box. But the materials for it came from Leonora-san."

"Oh? How does it work?"

"Just a moment. It's almost done... There, all finished."

The completed product was a wooden box that fit in my palm.

It may look like just a box, but there's obviously more to it.

"I put my hand on it like this and... *Testing, testing.* Leonora-san, can you hear me?"

"I hear you. It's a success. Feel free to get in touch any time you need me."

Iris-san's and the others' eyes widened at the sudden voice from the box.

"It's a success. *Okay, thanks. Talk to you later.* And that's how it works."

"You use it...to talk to people in distant towns?"

"Yes. But it eats an awful lot of magical power, so it's hard to use it for lengthy, long-distance calls."

Iris-san was staring intently at the box, so I passed it to her. "Oh, it's light," she remarked.

"You can do that with such a little box... Wow. You'd think they'd be more ubiquitous, though..." Kate-san remarked.

“Yeah, it’s a really impressive artifact,” Lorea-chan agreed. “Even if it just looks like an ordinary wooden box.”

They passed the Shared Sound Box around, each of them curiously turning it around and examining it.

“It’s a bit expensive, just so you know. The standard retail price is five hundred thousand rhea.”

“Huh?! Wh-Whaaa!”

Hearing this, Lorea-chan started shaking. The box slipped from her hands.

“Look out!” Iris-san shouted, acting fast.

Sliding across the floor, she caught the box, holding it tight to her chest. It was saved from the drop.

“Oh my gosh... I-I’m so sorry!” Lorea-chan blubbered, crouching down next to her.

“No, it’s fine. I caught it,” Iris-san reassured her with a handsome smile, offering Lorea-chan a hand and helping her to her feet. But...

“There was no need to worry. It’s not going to break from an ordinary drop. Not unless you get extraordinarily unlucky.”

“Which means if we get unlucky, it *could*, right?” Kate-san noted. “Shopkeeper-san, if you’re handing someone something valuable, you need to do it in a way that conveys that. Or you’ll startle them.”

“Oh, that makes sense. Gotcha.”

I still don’t know how to do it, though. I mean, if I’d gotten all antsy every time I handled something a little pricey, I could never have worked at Master’s place. It’s actually more dangerous if you do know, I think.

“Also, the other reason they aren’t more commonplace is that they’re a bit hard for ordinary people to use.”

The Shared Sound Box was low-energy compared to the transporter, but most people weren’t able to use it unless they spent magic crystals, and even those who had some magic capacity would struggle with distances as close as the next

town over.

That meant if they wanted to use a Shared Sound Box, there was either the cost of preparing magic crystals for it, or of having someone handy who was able to supply a lot of magic power.

With the high cost of purchase and usage, it was perhaps inevitable that the artifact hadn't seen wide adoption.

A large part of why I had made one came down to it being a necessary step for me to level up, and using it with Leonora-san cost so little I could more or less ignore it. In light of that, the Shared Sound Box was a fairly useful item for maintaining our current system of cooperation. When Leonora-san had provided the materials and suggested I create one, she didn't have to ask me twice.

"There are reasons it hasn't taken off, then," Iris-san concluded. "By the way, Shopkeeper-dono. There was something that I was hoping to consult with you about. Would you mind?"

"Sure, that's fine with me. What is it?"

Seeing how hesitant Iris-san looked with her eyes lowered, I gave her an encouraging smile and nodded. With some trepidation, she continued.

"Well... We're done with collecting frostbite bat fangs now, right? So I wanted to ask, are there any materials you could recommend gathering that would be an effective use of our time, even if they aren't quite as profitable as the fangs?"

"We're still indebted to you, Shopkeeper-san," Kate-san added. "So if there are any materials you'd specifically like to acquire and we can get them for you efficiently, then it would be good to know. I do feel bad for always relying on you like this, though."

"You're looking for something that would be efficient for you to gather? Let's see..."

There wasn't any need for them to be in a rush to pay me back, but I could understand why the two of them would want to hurry.

It's hard to feel relaxed when you're in debt.

"This is the great forest, so there are obviously things you could gather which would pay off your entire debt all at once, but—"

Once I'd said that much, Iris-san suddenly got a panicked look on her face, and she cut me off to clarify, "Ah! O-Of course, we're asking about things that we'll be able to come back from gathering in one piece."

"Y-Yeah," Kate-san agreed. "It would defeat the whole purpose of it if we got hurt so bad that we only increased our debt as a result."

"Of course, I understand that. So, taking your abilities into consideration..."

They can carry back a lot of spiteworms in one trip, and I tend to be low on stock, but it'd feel like such a waste to have the two of them gather those.

If there's a spot nearby, even Lorea-chan could gather them, and it's pretty tough to find them in large numbers. The time-to-value ratio won't be that high.

Flame stones are one material that there's rising demand for heading into winter, and they have a high purchase price, but the only place they could gather them around here would be in hellflame grizzly territory. It'd be dangerous for them to go there when we still don't know what caused the recent frenzy.

Jofeh fruit should be in season, but they're so rare that a single one is worth tens of thousands of rhea. Going hunting for them would be a real gamble. It's better to think of them as a bonus item you find when gathering something else.

Which leaves...

"Well, how about fruitrot-bee honey? This is the right season for it, and it's also an ingredient used to make an expensive processed honey, so I could pay you quite a lot. It will take some preparation, but if you find a large hive, you'll be making bank in no time."

After considering the various materials that came to mind, I proposed one that fit their current skills, but the two of them just looked at me funny.

"Fruitrot bees? Kate, have you ever heard of those?"

"No. Never. I'm sorry, Shopkeeper-san, but could you fill us in on the details?"

“Sure, I don’t mind. Hrm...”

Fruitrot bees, as the name implied, were bees that primarily fed on fruits that had spoiled. They were most active during the fall, but started working in the summer in regions where there were frostbite bats, going after the rotting fruit that the bats had cached.

Normally, since they were going after another species’ food stores, you would expect them to be enemies, but the bees only consumed the fruits that the bats couldn’t. The bats weren’t losing anything. What was more, the bees eliminated other intruders in their caves, so the two species had formed something of a symbiotic relationship.

In the end, the honey made from frostbite bats’ cached fruit was a highly valued delicacy and commanded a price far in excess of ordinary honey.

“By the way, nests near a frostbite bat cave tend to get really big. Because there’s lots of food for them.”

“I see... Hmm? So, if we were to enter the frostbite bat cave now, we’d be attacked by those bees?”

Iris-san had picked up on the part of the explanation about fruitrot bees eliminating other intruders. I nodded. “There is the danger of that, yes. If you have an insect repellent artifact, I think you should be fine. Oh, but when you’re collecting their honey, I recommend using insect repellent veils instead.”

“Is ordinary repellent not enough?” Iris-san asked. “The veils are more expensive, right?”

“No, it’s not enough. That artifact creates an area that insects want to avoid, but when their homes are under attack, do you really think them wanting to avoid the area is going to be good enough?”

“I see your point...” Iris-san conceded. “Is there anything else that we need?”

“The antidote to the bees’ venom, for sure. It can be lethal.”

As I stressed the importance of this, Kate-san’s eyes widened.

“Lethal?! Are the bees that dangerous?”

“If just anyone could gather from them, their honey wouldn’t be so

expensive.”

“Ngh...” Iris-san groaned. “Point taken. Maybe we should invite Andre and the guys instead of going by ourselves...?”

“I leave that up to you. It will depend on where in the forest the nest is, but if you want to put safety first, then inviting them along would be a good idea. But not if you want to prioritize your profit...”

Even if the bees were not much of a threat themselves, there were other monsters out there in the woods.

If they went deep inside the forest chasing after bees, I wasn’t so confident in their ability to take care of themselves there. But that was something they needed to think about for themselves.

They’re pro gatherers, after all.

“Thank you, Shopkeeper-dono. We’ll consider our options.”

“Yes. Please do be careful.”

Episode 1: Honey Gathering and the Payoff

“Now then, what should I make today?”

After seeing off Iris-san and Kate-san as they headed to work, I got back to working on my main line of business.

Opportunities and investments could be profitable and all, but my own growth as an alchemist had to come first. I only had a little more of volume 4 of the *Complete Alchemy Works* to get through.

That meant I'd be on volume 5 soon enough, and according to Master, that was where “things start to get tough.”

Tough or not, so long as I was working hard on improving my skills, the issue was more financial than technical, since I had to make items I had no way of selling just in order to level up. Unless I had a fair amount of breathing room in my budget, it was pretty rough holding a large amount of unmovable stock.

If you need an indication of just how rough...well, remember the potion I used when Iris-san was dying? That potion happens to be in volume 4.

As you might be able to infer from how much trouble Iris-san and Kate-san were having paying for it, the materials to make it were pretty expensive. Expensive enough that, even during the time when the floor of my warehouse was creaking under the weight of all the gold in it, I was still hesitant to buy them.

With my current cash on hand, I was...still short of affording them? But only just? Something like that.

In any event, if I pushed myself to make the attempt regardless and then failed, I'd go broke. But even if I succeeded, I'd be left without enough liquid assets, and that would be the end of me.

There were a number of artifacts like this in volume 4 onward, so it was reasonable for Master to say things got tough here.

If I hadn't had my parting gifts from Master, I would have taken even longer to get this far. But those materials were running dry. From now on, I would have to earn money myself to pay for the high-priced materials necessary to continue my training.

"Well, I won't have any more problems with volume 4, though. I was able to buy everything I need."

Now I just need to work through it one thing at a time.

"For today...how about I make a floating tent?"

True to its name, it was a camping tent that floated in the air. That probably made it sound pretty amazing, but it only hovered maybe ten centimeters off the ground, so it looked more plain than you might initially imagine.

But don't go underestimating the tent. By floating, it was able to avoid the bumpy, damp, cold ground, and all the critters that lived there, promising restful sleep to those inside.

For gatherers who didn't go on just one-or two-day trips but on longer expeditions, this was the kind of artifact they'd drool over.

"As for the size...I guess I'll make it big enough for four or five people?"

If I was just making it to check off the requirement, it only needed to be big enough for one, but then I'd really have dead stock on my hands.

It needs to be at least big enough for three so we can use it if I go out gathering with Iris-san and Kate-san.

I don't know if that'll ever happen, but I've got to make one anyway.

"I start by cutting the leather..."

The first step was to make a tent. At this stage, it was really just an ordinary tent, so all I was doing was stitching the cut pieces of leather together.

But it's still pretty hard work. I mean, this is leather I'm stitching.

Being able to use magic to physically enhance my strength gave me a leg up over your average leatherworker, so it wasn't as bad as it might have been, but it still took a lot of time. This was a tent that was supposed to sleep four or five

people, which meant there was a large area I needed to sew together.

Honestly, I wish I could just hire a leatherworker to do it for me, but there isn't one in the village.

"Isn't there an artifact that makes stitching leather easy?" I grumbled, among similar complaints, during the days it took to complete the tent.

Now, once I draw a circuit on the floor of the tent and add another thick layer of leather, the whole laborious process will be over.

"That said, since I'm doing this anyway, I want to add one more innovation. After all, it's not like I'm going to be selling this one."

It's for personal use, so cost doesn't matter. Plus, just floating on its own is a little bland, isn't it?

"I'll add in the functions of environmental tuning fabric and...insect repellent, maybe? What else...?"

Naturally, this raised the difficulty compared to making a normal one. But I liked it that way—okay, not really, but it would be good practice and make it easier to use, so it wasn't a problem.

Well, it increases the magical power cost while using it, so it's not all upside, but...these are luxuries I can afford because I'm the one using it.

"Okay, that's good. That just leaves..."

After I finished putting a layer of leather over the circuit I'd drawn to cover it, I stuffed the tent into my alchemic cauldron. I then poured in the various materials along with some water and heated the whole thing up.

"Stir, stir, stir. Yep, big projects definitely call for a big cauldron."

While I could make potions in a small cauldron, there were many artifacts, like this tent and the sheets I'd made before, that just weren't possible without a large one.

But large cauldrons cost a lot of money.

Yet you can't level up without one. Being an alchemist sure is expensive. It's thoroughly betrayed my expectation from before I became one that "if I can just

get qualified, I'll be able to make money easily!"

Of course, because it was so hard to qualify, I was still doing way better for myself than the average commoner.

"Now then. Is that about it?"

I pulled the cauldron off the heat, took out the tent, and gave it a good rinse.

Now I just dry it off, then...

"It's all done! Or should be... I'll check if it actually works."

I threw the folded tent over my shoulder and poked my head out into the shop. Lorea-chan was there, resting her elbows on the counter and looking a bit sleepy.

The locals dropped in more often now than they used to, but during this time of afternoon, they were busy with work. Almost nobody would be coming in.

"I see you've been working hard, Lorea-chan."

"Oh, Sarasa-san. Are you done with your alchemy work for the day? Want me to put on some tea?"

Grateful for something to do, Lorea-chan hopped to her feet. I showed her the tent.



“You could say I’m done, I guess? I was thinking of testing what I made.”

“Testing... Do you think I could go with you?” she asked.

“Sure, I don’t mind. I’m going to set it up in the yard. Let’s go.”

The shop had a bit of a front yard. As I laid the tent down there and then sent magical power through it, the tent deployed itself and lifted gently into the air.

“Wow! It floats... And it doesn’t need any tent poles to hold it up?” Lorea-chan marveled.

“Yep. Which makes it easier to carry too. How convenient does that sound?”

“Very! It’s amazing!”

That said, it was still a fairly large tent. And made of thick, sturdy leather. Because of its considerable mass, it wasn’t exactly light to carry around.

“And once you’ve been inside, you’ll see just how great it is,” I prompted. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Okay, pardon my intrusion... Oh, it’s cool inside! And it has this airy feeling to it!”

“Heh heh heh. Want to try sleeping here?”

“Whoa, this is more comfortable than my bed. It’s incredible! Ah ha ha!”

Lorea-chan lay down and rolled around with glee.

Yeah, it’s like sleeping in midair. Or rather, that’s exactly what you do with it.

And with the added temperature adjustment, it guarantees sound sleep. It’d even be a good bed replacement—if you just ignored the cost.

“How much is it, Sarasa-san? Will you be selling them in the shop?”

“At this size, over a hundred thousand rhea. So even if I tried, they wouldn’t sell. Not in this village.”

When I explained that ordinary folks had no need for one and that the gatherers in the village didn’t buy many expensive artifacts, Lorea-chan thought for a moment, then shook her head.

“I disagree. They might just sell. One thing I’ve found while interacting with

our customers is that gatherers don't have much knowledge of what artifacts exist. If you were to put it on display here and appeal to its convenience, wouldn't that attract interest? Many of them have extra room in their budgets right now, so I think targeting them might work."

"You know...that actually makes some sense."

This wasn't a nice thing to say, but the gatherers lacked education. They didn't really know much about artifacts, and surprisingly few of them were interested in changing their tools and methods to make their work more efficient.

On rare occasions, I got requests along the lines of "I want that thing that this other gatherer was using that seemed convenient," but it was unheard of for them to ask, "Is there an artifact that can do this for me?"

The sign I'd made saying "accepting orders" was gathering dust as a result.

Though, don't misunderstand. I keep it clean. That was just a figure of speech.

"And if it's just sewing tents, I can help, you know? I have a lot of free time while minding the shop, so if we get an order, I'll do my best to lend a hand!"

Lorea-chan clenched her hands into fists, looking at me with her eyes full of motivation, but...

"I'd appreciate that, but it's hard work, you realize? Sewing leather."

In my case, I had used physical enhancement and relied on pure force.

But that wasn't something an ordinary person could do. The boring work of using a punch to make holes and then passing the thread through them was waiting for her. It was a lot of hassle, so I'd feel bad making Lorea-chan do it.

"No, really, I'm asking you to let me. I have so much free time that it actually hurts a little when I think how much you're paying me... If there's anything else I can do, just tell me, okay?"

"Really? I'm grateful enough just to have you making meals, but...okay. If there's something I think I can ask you to handle, I will."

"Please do. I'll keep a close eye on the tent so nobody steals it too!"

“Sure. But there’s an anti-crime system, so you don’t need to worry too much.”

I was more worried about an enraged robber attacking Lorea-chan than I was about them making off with the tent.

Incidentally, I had already added a function meant for driving off any unwanted nighttime visitors, which was important when camping.

I’ll tinker with the settings a bit to make it go off if anyone tries to take the tent out of the yard.

It could result in life-threatening consequences if they’re unlucky, but...it’s fine as long as they’re a thief, right?



The next day, the floating tent was put out in front of the shop with a sign that explained what it was.

Oh—and a warning: “Try to take it, and I make no promises that you will survive.”

I have faith in the strength of the product, but given the price...I shouldn’t get my hopes up.

Or so I’d thought, but according to Lorea-chan, we had already received multiple queries about it by noon.

No one’s gone as far as placing an order yet, but maybe I can get my hopes up a little?

Many of them had expressed that they’d never known such a convenient artifact existed, so if I kept putting products on display like this, maybe that would lead to more sales.

I think Andre-san and the guys are probably making the most out of all the gatherers in the village, but I don’t see them splurging much.

If they’re seen using it, that might drive demand, so maybe I should pitch all sorts of different artifacts to them?

“Oh, that reminds me,” said Lorea-chan. “Iris-san said that they were going to

head out and collect the fruitrot-bee honey today...”

“Yep,” I replied. “They finally found a nest yesterday.”

Based on what they’d told me last night, they were able to find the bees easily enough by staking out the frostbite bat cave, but they’d had some trouble tracing them back to their nests.

Fruitrot bees flew fairly quickly, which meant they were active over a wide area, sometimes several kilometers wide.

The forest didn’t have any proper roads through it, so it wasn’t hard to imagine why it might have been difficult chasing the bees around.

Fortunately, the bees made regular trips between the cave and their nests, so with Andre-san and the guys helping them, they were able to place people along the path between the two and work out how to get there over the course of several days.

“Their hard work paid off, though,” I said, explaining, “it sounds like the nest they found was a pretty big one, so we can expect good results.”

“Sounds like it,” Lorea-chan agreed. “But Sarasa-san, don’t monsters go after the bees’ nests too?”

“Oh, that won’t be a problem. Because—”

Just as I was about to explain why, the door swung open somewhat hastily, and the pair we had just been talking about raced inside.

“Welcome ba—”

“Shopkeeper-san! I’m going to use the toilet!”

“E-Erm, go right ahead—”

Kate-san raced into the back of the shop without even waiting for me to finish.

Was she holding it? I can see why she wouldn’t want to go in the woods.

I cocked my head to the side and turned to look at Iris-san, who had a strained smile on her face.

“Let’s try this again. Welcome back, Iris-san.”

“Welcome back.” Lorea-chan joined me in greeting her. “Were you able to collect the honey?”

“Hey, we’re back. As for the honey, well... See for yourself.”

Iris-san laid her backpack down on the counter, opening the mouth of it. Lorea-chan’s eyes widened at the impressive pieces of honeycomb inside.

“Wow, it was a pretty big nest, huh? This is just half?” she asked.

“Of course. Shopkeeper-dono cautioned us against taking any more. And as gatherers, it’s only proper manners that we abide by that.”

“We wouldn’t want you to end up wiping them out. It would be a problem if there were none left next year, or the years after that,” I explained.

While it was true that they could have gotten a lot of honey if they took everything, without food, most of the fruitrot bees would die off. The result would be less honey to harvest in future years, which was a nuisance to the other gatherers.

That was why they had harvested only half the nest. As with other gatherables, it was important for gatherers to protect the source.

“Can I assume you’re selling all of this? I don’t see Andre-san and the guys.”

“Yeah, if you don’t mind. The guys—and Kate for that matter—seem to have upset their stomachs. They rushed straight back to the inn. I was completely fine, but maybe the food we took with us had gone off...?”

“Oh, is that what happened? Things tend to spoil quicker in the summer, so you need to be careful what you...huh?”

Upset stomachs?

“Andre-san and the guys...didn’t happen to lick the fruitrot-bee honey, did they?”

“Yes, we did sample a bit. It was every bit as good as you would expect expensive honey to be!”

Iris-san grinned as she recalled the flavor, but...

“They ate it?! And you did too, Iris-san?!”

“Y-Yeah. Should we not have? Was it wrong of me to partake of such a luxurious honey when I’m so mired in debt?”

Iris-san looked around uneasily. I shot to my feet without even meaning to.

“Don’t be silly, you dummy! That’s not important! You can’t eat raw fruitrot-bee honey! It’s toxic!”

This was the reason that no monsters went after the fruitrot bees’ nests. There were animals that fed on poisonous plants that only they could eat, and these bees were the same way.

“Huh...? But Shopkeeper-dono, you said it was expensive honey...”

“The *main ingredient* of an expensive processed honey! Augh! Who ate it, and how much?!”

“I-I think...we each had about a spoonful. No, Andre-san and the guys had more than that.”

Seeing the amount she indicated using her fingers, I let out a sigh of relief.

“If that’s all you had, then nobody should die. You’ll be signing a long-term partnership agreement with the toilet, though. Are you *sure* you’re okay, Iris-san? You had some too, right?”

“Y-Yeah, but fortunately it doesn’t seem to have affected— Murgh!”

Before she could say “me,” Iris-san got a very serious expression on her face. Her brow furrowed.

There was then a low, heavy rumbling sound.

To protect her honor, I won’t say from where.

“Shopkeeper-dono...would you mind if I went and sat down a moment?”

“That’s fine with me, but...Kate-san is already in there, isn’t she?”

Was the euphemism because of her good upbringing? Whatever the case, she couldn’t keep her composure for long. I watched as she raced across to the residential part of the shop, from which I then heard frantic banging and desperate cries.

“Kate! Hurry up and come out already!”

“I can’t. I’m going to be in here for a while.”

“Don’t say that! Please! I’ll only take a bit! Just a bit, really!”

I snuck over to steal a peek. Iris-san was holding her belly with one hand as she pounded on the door with the other. That was about what I’d expected.

“Sorry. Hold on just a little longer.”

“I can’t! I’m at my limit!”

“I don’t have it any easier. If I move right now... Urkh!”

“Kate! I’m practically begging you here!”

“Iris, when we left the house, you said we were equal partners now, right? If we’re equal, then I’m going to put my own dignity first! Ungh!”

“Grr... Can’t you budge on that?!”

“Th-There’s nothing I can do!”

“Fine, let’s compromise! You take half, and I’ll take half! We’ll share! We’re friends, aren’t we?!”

“Friends or not, this is one thing we can’t share!”

Iris-san looked like she was in dire straits. Her knocks on the door were getting harder, and she stood with her toes turned in, crouching down half way.

“Isn’t there anything you can do, Sarasa-san...? I feel bad for Iris-san.” Lorea-chan was right beside me, sneaking a peek too.

I slowly shook my head. “Lorea-chan... I get where you’re coming from, but I can’t whip up another toilet on the fly, and it sounds like Kate-san is having a bad time too.”

After hearing how much she was suffering, I couldn’t order Kate-san out of the bathroom immediately. But at the same time, I didn’t want Iris-san doing her business right where she was...

“This is the best I can manage right now, I guess?”

I went and fetched something from the warehouse. I then went and subtly handed it to Iris-san, who was at the point where she couldn’t even knock

anymore.

“Sh-Shopkeeper-dono...”

Iris-san was on the verge of tears. I smiled and opened the back door.

“Please take care of it in the corner of the yard.”

“Guhhh! Kate! I’ll remember this humiliation!”

With that parting comment, Iris-san headed for the backyard using the hoe I’d just given her as a crutch.

Her legs were unsteady, and I was worried she’d collapse at any second...

Feeling it was the least that I could do, I closed my eyes and quietly shut the door so that none of us would see her.



But Kate-san did nothing wrong, right?



“Now then, Lorea-chan. I know we just witnessed a minor tragedy, but we have to move on.”

“Yes, it was very sad.”

I could see the pain in Lorea-chan’s expression.

But y’know, that “tragedy” is continuing in the backyard as we speak.

If I’d created the portable toilet before the floating tent, these sad events might have been averted. But I hadn’t seen this coming, so...what can you do, really?

“I think Andre-san and the guys are probably having a miserable time too, so maybe we should deliver them some medicine? It can be lethal if untreated.”

Lorea-chan’s eyes bugged out at how casually I said this. “Huh?! It can? Sarasa-san, you just said they wouldn’t die...”

“Not of poisoning, no. But without treatment, they’ll be like that for a couple weeks. It’s manageable if they keep themselves hydrated and nourished, but it’s a miserable experience, and if they’re unlucky...”

“Th-That’s awful! Erm, potions fix it, right?” Lorea-chan hurriedly got up and was ready to rush off to the warehouse.

“There are potions that could fix it in one go,” I said, trying to reassure her. “But it’s a struggle to decide whether to use them or not.”

“Huh?! Why is that?!”

“They’re expensive.”

“Ohh... That makes sense. Money is important.”

“Yep. And if we’re not careful, they’ll end up in the red even after all the trouble of going out and collecting the honey.”

I hadn’t checked the quality of the honey yet, but affording potions for the five of them wasn’t going to be easy even with the profits from it.

If the alternative was them dying, then there was no choice, but the thing was that they could manage their condition without them.

“For that reason, I’m going to make them a specific antidote. That’ll be cheaper. And to get started...I’ll have to go harvest the raw materials. Will you come along and help, Lorea-chan?”

“Yes! I’ll do anything I can!” she agreed in an instant.

I went and got my harvesting tools and we headed out the back door toward the forest—only to do an about-face and leave through the shop-side door instead.

Then, closing our ears to Iris-san’s “suffering,” we walked along the side of the house and into the forest out back.

“The ingredients for this medicine are actually pretty easy to find. You just dig up the rotting leaves in the woods, and... Oh, look. They’re a bit small, but these are the bugs that we’re looking for. Can you help me search?”

The caterpillar that I’d dug up had a yellow-green color and was about a centimeter long. I tossed it into the box.

They weren’t rare, but we needed to make enough for five people, so it was going to take a bit of effort to find enough.

“Got it. How many would you say we need?”

“If they were all around this size, I’d want ten for each, so...since I’d like to make sure we comfortably have enough, let’s say sixty or so.”

Immediately putting the bugs we’d found into the box, Lorea-chan had the most indescribable expression as she asked, “These...are going to become medicine, right?”

I nodded in the affirmative. “This medicine is cheap, but it’s a pain to make... How about we cut some corners?”

“Cut corners? Is that okay? It won’t make it less effective...or anything like that?”

“No, no, as an alchemist, I’d never cut corners that way. It’ll just taste awful. The shelf life will be shorter too, but they’re drinking it right away, so that’s not

all that relevant.”

They’ll be drinking them the same day I make them, so it’s no problem.

The taste will be wretched, though—probably.

I’ve never drunk it myself, so I wouldn’t know.

“Well, if that’s all, who cares, then? They all ignored your warning, right?”

“Hrmm, I never said, ‘Don’t eat it!’ so that’s not quite true... If anything, it comes down to a lack of knowledge, I guess? This is part of taking responsibility for yourself that comes with being a gatherer, but I *do* feel sorry for them, you know?”

I glanced back in the direction of the house. Lorea-chan nodded in agreement.

Besides, as the one who’d recommended it, I did feel a little responsible for this. That was part of why I’d started making medicine for them on my own initiative.

Lorea-chan chatted about it as we worked for the next half hour or so.

Once we had enough caterpillars, we headed right back inside, and I got to work on making the medicine.

I moved the bugs into a strainer basket, then left them there for a while and waited for the bugs to poop. During that time, I prepared the other materials I’d be using, crushing them with my rolling pestle and mortar.

“You grind them under the wheel like this... Do you think you could handle it, Lorea-chan? I’m going to check on Iris-san and Kate-san.”

“Sure. Leave it to me!”

This was more the work of a pharmacist than an alchemist—manual labor. I let Lorea-chan handle it, since she seemed motivated to, while I went to see how the other two were doing.

First up was Kate-san, who was still in the toilet.

“Kate-san, how are you holding up?”

“H-Honestly, not well. I feel like everything is flowing out of me... How long is this going to go on for, Shopkeeper-san?”

“Well, that depends on how tough your stomach is and how much you ate. If I were to hazard a guess, maybe two weeks, I’d say?”

“Two—?! I can’t take this. I’m going to die...”

“I’m making you some medicine, so hang in there. Just make sure to keep yourself hydrated for now.”

I offered Kate-san, whose groans really did make it sound like she was going to die, a cup of water. Her hand was shaking as she reached out of the bathroom to take it.

“Thanks, Shopkeeper-san. I feel horrible even suggesting it, but could you go see how Iris-san is doing?”

“Yeah, I’m planning to do that next. I’m not sure she wants me to see her like this, though.”

“Tell her, ‘I’ve seen every part of you, even your guts. What do you have left to be embarrassed about?’”

“Oh, yeah... She was in that state when you first carried her in here, huh?”

I wasn’t convinced it would do anything to assuage her embarrassment, but I had definitely seen her in worse shape.

Besides, there’s no point in acting all shy around a medical practitioner.

“I think once you drink that, you’ll need to go again, so take it in small sips, okay?”

“Yeah, thank y... Urkh!”

Leaving Kate-san to her feeble groaning, I headed for the backyard.

I poked my head out the door, and... *Oh, there she is, in the corner.*

To protect Iris-san’s dignity, I’ll refrain from depicting how she looked.

“How are you doing, Iris-san?”

“Sh-Shopkeeper-dono?! Have some mercy. Don’t look at me...”

I heard what she was saying, but I couldn’t leave her alone. It’d be dangerous if she got dehydrated.

“This is nothing new to me. Here, I brought you some water. Drink it a little at a time.”

“You have my thanks. Ha ha... You’re always seeing me in pathetic situations, Shopkeeper-dono.”

“No...”

I wanted to say, *“That’s not true at all,”* but sadly, it kind of was.

But despite that, I really liked Iris-san. Because, quite simply, she was a good person.

Oh, and the fact that I could sometimes catch glimpses of ditziness despite how reliable she was. Though...maybe it was the other way around? She was ditzy but sometimes I caught her being reliable.

Well, anyway, the gap between those two aspects of her is charming, and I want to do whatever I can to help her out.

“I’m working on some medicine now, so hang in there just a little longer.”

“Thanks. I swear, I will repay you for— Urgh! Sh-Shopkeeper-dono! I’m terribly sorry, but could you—”

“Ohh, right. I’ll head back now. Once you’re feeling a bit better, you can come in too.”

“Under— Nghhhhh! H-Hurry, go!”

In order to preserve Iris-san’s dignity while she was desperately trying to hold it in, I hurriedly ran to the back door.

“Oh, Sarasa-san, welcome back. How were they?”

“Not energetic, but they’re fine. Now to check on the caterpillars... I’d say they’re good.”

I rinsed the bugs off, threw them all into the mortar, and crushed them up.

It was a pretty gruesome sight. Lorea-chan winced and averted her eyes.

“Yuck. Umm, you’re *sure* this is medicine, right?”

“Of course.”

“And they drink it, right?”

“Yep. It’s administered orally. Because the problem is in their bowels.”

“They’re going to drink *that*?”

Lorea-chan kept her eyes averted as she pointed to the mortar which now held a deep green...no, more of a brownish liquid.

It was kind of goopy... That could be fixed with a little water, but...

“I know I sure wouldn’t want to drink it myself. Lorea-chan, want to give it a taste test?”

“No! If you weren’t cutting corners, this would have been a little less awful, right?”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t have put in whole caterpillars, for one thing. But doesn’t dissecting them when they’re less than a centimeter long and then extracting just the parts that are necessary...sound like a lot of work?”

“Yeah, that sounds like it would be pretty annoying.”

And there were *sixty* of them. I know I sure didn’t want to deal with that.

“But it still works with whole ones,” I said cheerily. “Now add water and pour it into the alchemic cauldron...”

I moved the mixture, thinned somewhat with the addition of water, into my small cauldron and poured magical energy into it as I stirred, then...

“The medicine’s all done! Efficacy and bad taste guaranteed!!!” I declared, holding the little pot up with a big grin.

A slightly exasperated Lorea-chan replied, “Yeah, I don’t think anyone needed the guarantee for the latter.”



“Here it is! The medicine you’ve been waiting for! Uh, hold on...”

When we went to deliver the finished medicine, I found our pair of gatherers sprawled out over the table with dead eyes.

No, wait, there’s still some strength left in Iris-san’s eyes.

It's the strength of her resentment for Kate-san, but still.

"They've both slimmed down a bit since we last saw them, huh?" Lorea-chan noted.

"I don't know that I'd say they're slimmer, just more emaciated," I replied.

They had lost a lot of moisture, so they looked obviously unhealthy. There wasn't even a shred of their usual brave and courageous selves.

"Anyway, the medicine is done, but..."

"W-We can't thank you enough, Shopkeeper-dono!"

As Iris-san reached for the potion bottle, I pulled it away.

"Shopkeeper-dono...?" Iris-san looked at me, mystified.

"First, we have this one." I held up the bottle in my right hand. "With this potion, you'll recover in a day, but your debt will increase. Considerably."

"I-I see." Iris-san nodded.

Next, I held up the bottle in my left hand.

"Then, we have this other one. The effect is inferior, but your debt won't go up. Now, which will you choose?"

"Urghhhhh..."

For my part, I was fine with her choosing either... Well, no, I probably would have preferred it if she chose the one with a short shelf life, since I had gone out of my way to make it, I guess? In terms of the shop's profit, it was way better if she went with the first potion, but the second would be easier on their pocketbooks.

"Mmmmm... Th-The cheap one!"

"Okay. Here you are, then."

After some consideration of the state of her purse and stomach, Iris-san finally reached out for my left hand.

"And you, Kate-san?"

"I can't exactly go with the expensive one when Iris-san didn't."

Kate-san reluctantly chose the same bottle as her partner.

I turned to Lorea-chan, who had broken into a cold sweat as she watched.

“Lorea-chan, could you fetch them two cups of water?”

“O-Okay!”

Having seen how it was made, Lorea-chan immediately understood how important that water was going to be.

She quickly got up, poured two cups of water, and set them down in front of Iris-san and Kate-san.

“All right, now give it a swig. Don’t think, don’t look, just down the whole thing in one go.”

“R-Right... Gah! What is this stuff?! Is this really medicine, Shopkeeper-dono?!”

Here I’d gone out of my way to warn her not to think about it, yet Iris-san opened the lid hesitantly, only to reel back, pinching her nose at the smell.

“Iris-san, medicine generally tastes awful. But you can’t let that make you hesitate.”

If she did, it would only make it harder for her to drink.

“But the potions you usually provide aren’t this bad...”

“That’s factored into the price. Kate-san, you too. Hurry up and drink it.”

“E-Erm... It’s medicine, right? We’ll get better if we drink it?”

“Of course you will. I wouldn’t give you anything that didn’t work. If you keep dragging your feet, the next wave is going to come. And if it comes for both of you at the same time, whose turn will it be to go out to the backyard?”

“Kate’s, of course! Fine, I’ll drink it!!! I trust you, Shopkeeper-dono!”

Iris-san stood up, face full of determination. Pinching her nose and turning her face upward, she poured the whole thing down her throat all in one go.

“Sh-She drank it...”

Um, Lorea-chan, I see that “I can’t believe it!” look on your face, but it’s proper

medicine, okay? The ingredients are just a little gross.

“Mmp! Urgh! B-Blech!”

Despite looking like she wanted to throw up, Iris-san managed to swallow the entire contents of the bottle. She then practically slammed it down on the table in her rush to grab a cup of water, which she rapidly downed.

Apparently that still wasn't enough, though. She reached out and grabbed the cup in front of Kate-san, which she used to rinse her mouth out.

“I drank it! I really drank it!” she declared, holding up the cup triumphantly.

“Wowwww!”

Lorea-chan and I both started clapping without even meaning to. Even though all she'd done was drink her medicine.

“Now it's Kate-san's turn,” I said.

“I-I know that... Erm, Lorea-chan, could I trouble you to get me some water? Maybe three or four cups?”

Seeing Iris-san had finished, Kate-san found her resolve. After ordering a bunch of water from Lorea-chan, she held the bottle in her hand and gulped.

“Don't worry. It's not going to kill you, okay? As you can see from Iris-san. I'm not going to deny it tastes awful, though.”

“Yeah, it tastes *really* awful, but I'm fine. Oh, and my stomach already feels lighter somehow.”

Yep, that's gotta just be her imagination.

If she'd drank the other potion, that might be one thing, but the cheap one Iris-san drank wouldn't be affecting her so quickly. It'd take at least half an hour.

“Come on, Kate, you hurry up and drink too.”

“R-Right. I'm... I'm going... I'm going to do it...”

Holding the bottle in both hands, Kate-san gulped audibly once more.

Then she looked up at me with moist, pleading eyes and said, “Hey,

Shopkeeper-san. This isn't going to make us better immediately, right?"

"That's right. For the ordinary person, I suppose it would take about a week. But you two keep yourselves in good shape, so it may be a bit faster."

"Yeah... Yeah, that's right. Hey, Iris. One of the two of us will need to look after the other, don't you think? What I'm trying to say is, it would be better if I recovered immediately so—"

"Oh, Kate-san," I interrupted. "I can take care of both of you while you recover, you know?"

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm." Lorea-chan nodded. "And while I may not have any specialist knowledge, I'll help too."

Kate-san was still desperately trying to get out of it, but Lorea-chan and I cut off all avenues of escape.

After Iris-san did her best, we can't just let Kate-san run away, right?

"Urgh! B-But, umm, Iris, if I was looking after you, you wouldn't need to hold back at all, right? *Right?*"

Kate-san repeated and emphasized the last word, looking to her partner for support. Iris-san smiled.

Seeing this, Kate-san let out a relieved sigh, but the very next moment, Iris-san got up out of her seat and seized Kate-san firmly by the hand.

"Don't talk! Drink it! Are you trying to let Shopkeeper-dono's goodwill go to waste?!"

Iris-san popped the lid off of the bottle, seizing Kate-san by the chin and turning her partner's face toward her.

Iris-san fought with a sword on the front line, while Kate-san stayed back in the rear to provide support. It went without saying which of them would win in a simple contest of strength.

"W-Wait! I need to prepare myself emotionally!"

"Time's up! Open your mouth!"

Even as she ordered Kate-san to open her mouth, Iris-san was already prying

it open. She stuffed the potion bottle in there without mercy.

Or maybe the way she plugged her nose for her was merciful, in a way?

“Uogh! Egh! Guhuhuh!”

Kate-san was making some worrying sounds with her throat, but Iris-san paid them no heed whatsoever.

Once she confirmed the bottle was empty, she took it out of Kate-san’s mouth, which she immediately covered with her hand.

“Mmm! Mmmgh!!!”

“Oh? What’s that? Water? You want water? You greedy girl, you!”

There was a hint of sadism in the smile on her haggard face. Once Iris-san slowly moved her hand away, Kate-san immediately reached for a cup of water, then a second, and then a third before collapsing on the table.

“I-Iris, are you holding a grudge over what happened earlier?” she asked.

“What are you talking about? I was just giving you your medicine because you were throwing a childish tantrum.”

“Grr... Why you...!”

“Ha ha ha—*murgh!*”

The smile on Iris-san’s face, which could hardly be called cheery like her tone of voice, suddenly turned serious. Her brow furrowed, and she let out a groan.

“It seems I have another package to drop off. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

“Package...? Ah! Iris, hold on— Urgh!”

Kate-san tried to get up and race after Iris-san, but sat back down in the chair, moaning as she clutched her abdomen, unable to move.

There was the sound of a door closing.

Ohh, she went to the toilet.

Maybe their earlier roughhousing triggered another wave?

“Kate-san, just hang in there a little longer. It should start having an effect in just an hour. That will take care of the runs, and you won’t have to rush to the

toilet, okay?”

“Th-Thanks, Shopkeeper-san. But what’s in this medicine? It tastes really bitter and gross and raw.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet. As for the ingredients... No comment.”

Kate-san frowned uneasily as I dodged the question. She looked over to Lorea-chan, who turned away, mumbling, “Don’t ask...”

“I see... I’ll be happier not knowing what was in it, huh? I won’t ask, then. I mean, if I threw up once I found out, all that suffering would be for nothing.”

“It’s proper medicine,” I insisted. “Be assured of that.”

“Yeah, I trust you. You’re the only reason Iris is still alive, Shopkeeper-san.”

“I think her luck also played a part in that.”

Insomuch as she’d made it in time for me to be able to treat her, that I happened to be in the shop when they’d arrived, and that I had an expensive potion in stock that I normally wouldn’t have had.

If any one of those factors had been missing, Iris-san would no longer be with us.

“Now then, I have to deliver the medicine to Andre-san and the guys. Lorea-chan, could you make something easy to digest for Kate-san?”

“You’ve got it.”

“Sorry to put the two of you out like this.”

“No, no, we’ve got to be there for each other in our times of need. I was bedridden too after the hellflame grizzly incident, remember,” I reassured Kate-san with a smile, then stood up, bottles in hand.

Now it’s just a matter of if the guys will drink this...

Maybe I should bring along the expensive potions, just in case?



It took four days for Iris-san and Kate-san to make a full recovery.

Was it because they hadn’t eaten much of the honey, or because of their own

stamina? Whatever the reason, it was something to be celebrated, and that was exactly what we were doing—with a dinner party!

“Yum, yum! You’re so good at cooking, Lorea!”

Iris-san was absolutely pigging out. Maybe it was a reaction to not having been able to eat much of anything in a while?

“Iris, you’re forgetting to thank Shopkeeper-san and Lorea-chan. You two really saved us. Thanks.”

Yet even as she said this, Kate-san was busy munching away too.

And not slowly.

“Oops, you’re right.” Iris-san set down her plate, sat up straight, and then bowed her head. “Shopkeeper-dono, you really did save us. Thank you. I seem to have let you see me in a pathetic state yet again, though...”

“There’s no avoiding that when you’re sick. Right?” I looked at Lorea-chan.

“Yeah,” she agreed with a smile and a nod. “When I get sick, I’m totally dependent on my mom.”

“You’re still a child, Lorea, so that’s expected,” Iris-san replied. “But in our case, we got ourselves into that mess... Ha ha ha. If we had still been living at the inn, who knows what might have happened...”

“You said it,” Kate-san agreed. “Do you think Andre-san and the guys were all right?”

“If you’re wondering about them, Gray-san was the only one to take the expensive potion, but they’ve all recovered now,” I explained.

“Oh, they have? That’s a relief,” said Iris-san.

I’ll refrain from depicting the events directly, but when I’d gone to bring them the medicine, the guys had been in some pretty dire straits. They hadn’t had me and Lorea-chan looking after them, after all.

After an intense battle over the expensive potion, Gray-san had gotten it. He had instantly recovered, but in exchange, he’d had to tend to the other two.

Andre-san and Gil-san had drunk the nasty-tasting potion, so I guessed they’d

be recovering today, or maybe tomorrow. So long as they hadn't been too greedy with the amount of honey they'd eaten, that was.

"But listen, you two." I wagged a finger at Iris-san and Kate-san. "Don't go putting anything that's used as an alchemic material in your mouth too carelessly, okay? You survived this time, but next time, your lives might be at risk!"

They both looked down awkwardly.

"I'm ashamed of myself..." Iris-san admitted. "But it just looked so tasty."

"I figured since it was honey, it must have been edible. Sorry," Kate-san apologized.

"I know how that is! Sometimes, when you see something sweet, you just can't help yourself, right?"

"Not you too, Lorea-chan..." I said with a stern look on my face. "You can't go doing that, okay? You're not to lick anything found in this shop, no matter how harmless it may seem! And wash your hands after you handle anything, all right?"

They all nodded deeply, Lorea-chan included, as I forcefully made my point. Because some things really could be life-threatening.

But well, hardly any of those looked tasty, so I wasn't *too* worried.

"Yeah, I've learned my lesson after this," said Iris-san. "From here on, no matter how good something looks, I won't touch it until I've asked you if it's safe, Shopkeeper-dono."

"Good call," Kate-san agreed. "I sure don't want to end up taking a dump in the corner of the garden again."

"Ha ha... Yeah, I'd prefer you not have to do that here."

Yep. In the end, Kate-san had been subjected to the same experience.

It wasn't that Iris-san had been being mean to her, just that when they had to go at the same time, there really was no alternative. I only had one bathroom.

Even if they clean up properly afterward, having people do their business in

my backyard is...less than desirable, y'know?

“But don’t you have to go in the bushes when you’re out gathering?”

“Lorea-chan, we only do that out of necessity, and it’s easier to come to terms with because we’re healthy at the time,” Kate-san explained.

“I’d rather have been spared needing to do it in someone’s yard,” said Iris-san. “I’m endlessly grateful that the backyard here had a fence around it.”

Yeah, Iris-san had had it pretty rough that first day—even considering that my place was on the outskirts of town and she was in its backyard, with a fence around her so nobody could see.

If I’d found myself in her situation, without those mitigating factors, I would have been strongly considering leaving town.

“It’s a shame I hadn’t finished the ‘easy-to-assemble portable toilet.’”

“What?!” Iris-san exclaimed. “There’s an artifact like that?”

“Yes. I made one today,” I told her.

“Urgh! If only we’d had that back then...!”

“Shopkeeper-san... Why couldn’t you have made it just a little sooner...?”

“Uh, hey, I didn’t know we were going to need it.”

There weren’t many artifacts left in the fourth volume of the *Complete Works* that I hadn’t made yet.

Most of them were larger items, and I’d been putting them off due to either the materials or amount of effort they required.

That applied to the floating tent I’d made the other day, as well as the portable toilet.

I wasn’t planning on using any of them myself, so the order I made them in was really down to whatever caught my interest.

The portable toilet wasn’t something I was likely to use when just hanging around the house, and the techniques involved weren’t particularly fascinating. If it weren’t for what we’d just been through, I’d likely have left it to the very end.

But after Kate-san ended up taking a trip out back like Iris-san had before her, I had rushed to make it, but...well, it wasn't exactly a quick process. By the time it was done, the need for it had already passed.

"Mrrrgh... Should I buy that portable toilet, in case we need it again in the future?"

"Iris, it's hard for me to tell you not to, but you need to see what it's like first. Shopkeeper-san, could you show us later?"

"Yeah, I can do that. Maybe I should put it on display, like the tent. I mean, I'm even less likely to be using this one myself."

"Oh, that tent's really nice too!" Iris-san said enthusiastically. "I could sleep soundly in that, guaranteed."

"Yeah, it's pretty popular," I agreed.

Maybe putting it on display when the gatherers were flush with cash had helped? I'd already received two orders.

Lorea-chan was currently sewing together a tent that met the size specifications of one of those orders.

Iris-san's eyes sparkled as she said, "If we had that, camping would be no inconvenience at all! Kate, we—"

"Don't need it." Kate-san shut her down, shaking her head. "We always make day trips, so we don't even have to camp out."

"Urkh! That's right. We haven't camped while gathering once since we came to this village."

"If you can avoid camping, that's for the best," I interjected. "This *is* the great forest, after all."

They didn't call the Gelba Rohha Foothills Forest the "great forest" on a whim or because it sounded cool. It covered a vast enough area that there were parts which even a reasonably skilled gatherer couldn't go to and return from the same day, and even a brief lapse of caution there could cost them their lives.

For amateurs, even a few hours of walking into the forest would put their lives at risk. With bad luck, it was possible to encounter ferocious monsters

even on the outer rim of the forest—like Iris-san and Kate-san had with the hellflame grizzly.

When you think about it that way, it was very clever and responsible of the two of them to limit themselves to day trips. Because if anything happened, they could rush back to my place.

“Will you two be going back to work tomorrow?” Lorea-chan asked.

The pair exchanged slightly troubled looks.

“Well...” Iris-san began. “Even though we managed to avoid increasing our debt, we’ve been taking time off without making any money, so I’d like to, but...”

“We’re thinking we’ll play it safe and do a few days of rehab,” Kate-san explained. “We’re feeling better, but our stamina’s still not back to what it was...”

“Yeah... I’ll bet,” I agreed. “You’ve been looking a little underfed.”

They’d put very little into their bodies the last few days, but a lot had come out.

You might call it an “unplanned diet.”

The two of them looked dead set on making up for missed food with the way they were scarfing it down as we talked, but recovering their stamina wasn’t going to be as simple as eating a hearty meal and getting one good night’s sleep.

“Shopkeeper-dono, if you have time, would you join us while we’re training?”

“Sure thing. I could do with some practice myself. I can’t stay for long, though.”

In order to put the excellent sword Master had given me to good use, I’d been practicing with it whenever I could find the time to.

Since being an alchemist was my main job, there were times when I slacked off on my sword practice for a few days when I got caught up in working on something, but when it fit into our schedules, I would join Iris-san and Kate-san. A few hours here or there wasn’t going to be a problem.

“Then could I ask you to join us tomorrow morning?”

“Okay, got it. In the afternoon...I’ll be continuing work on the floating board, I guess.”

“I saw that you were working on something big. Was that what it was?” Lorea-chan asked.

“Yep. In the simplest terms, it’s like a cart without wheels, I guess? It works like an inferior version of the floating tent, so it’s not really all that interesting, though.”

True to its name, it was a board that floated. Even on bad roads, it could be used to move heavy loads with a light push. That made it an incredibly useful...*looking* artifact, but it wasn’t actually that convenient.

It’s just not efficient in terms of magical power.

That was fine for someone like me with an abundance of magical power, but for an ordinary person who was compensating with magic crystals, it would be far cheaper for them to simply hire porters instead.

It was handy when carrying bulky or fragile items, but there were limited uses for it, and the floating board itself was by no means cheap.

I hated to admit it, but it was no replacement for a horse-drawn cart.

“Is it just another thing that will collect dust in the warehouse? Even if I were to lend it out to Darna-san, I doubt he could use it.”

“Dad doesn’t have much magical power,” Lorea-chan agreed. “Oh, I just remembered. Sarasa-san, Erin-san said she wanted to talk when things settle down.”

“Erin-san? I wonder what she wants...” I said, cocking my head to the side.

I tended to be a bit of a shut-in, but Lorea-chan headed out all the time to buy groceries, so she ran into Erin-san frequently and thus had been asked to pass along the message.

A meeting with the mayor’s daughter? Smells like trouble to me.

“M-Maybe she wants to thank you for the money you brought into the village

with cooling hats? Like, ‘thank you for everything you’ve done for us’?” Lorea-chan suggested when she saw the look of worry on my face, but...

“If it’s to thank me, she wouldn’t say ‘when things settle down,’ would she? I mean, Iris-san and Kate-san might have been feeling unwell, but the shop was still open for business.”

“Okay, you’re right...” Lorea-chan conceded with a sigh, accepting the idea had been a bit of a stretch.

“Erin-san’s good at what she does,” said Kate-san. “That’s rare in a village like this.”

“Indeed,” Iris-san agreed. “She has what it takes to manage a much larger village, maybe even a small town.”

“The mayor is just a figurehead,” added Lorea-chan. “It’s Erin-san who really runs things around here.”

“I know, right? Here’s just hoping whatever it is, it’s not too much of a hassle,” I concluded.

I’m not getting my hopes up for that.

“Well, I’ll think about it again after Erin-san visits. The whole topic can be shelved for now, I say.”

Lorea-chan made us a delicious meal. It’d be a shame not to enjoy it.

I let out a sigh, and tried to focus on how good this dinner was for the time being.



“Hah! Yah!”

“Ngh! Yah! Urgh!”

Early the next morning, I was doing my sword practice with Iris-san.

If you were to compare the two of us, I had her beat when it came to basic swordsmanship, but she had a stamina advantage due to her larger physique.

Although, if we ever actually fought, I had access to physical enhancement, and that would give me the overwhelming advantage.

It gave me greater strength and speed than her, so that was inevitable.

Furthermore, in a real battle, I would also have the high-quality sword that Master had given me, as well as my magic, so there was really no comparison.

“There!”

“Ungh!!!”

With an upward swing, I sent the sword flying out of Iris-san’s hands.

Using the moment when she glanced away to see where it had fallen to the ground with a clatter, I leveled my sword at her. Iris-san froze for a moment, letting out a sigh as the tension drained out of her body.

“Whew... I really am no match for you, Shopkeeper-dono.”

“Your strength and stamina are still a bit lower than usual. Your moves weren’t sharp, and I don’t think that you would have dropped your sword like that a week ago.”

If I were to compare her to my classmates from the academy, Iris-san’s skill with a sword was above average.

It wasn’t that she was weak, by any means. No, she just couldn’t compare with me, since I was the top of my year.

How did my skills compare with people outside the academy, though? I couldn’t say.

I hadn’t been able to beat my teachers, and Master had easily swept me aside.

I didn’t think I’d lose in a fight with a common band of brigands, but I couldn’t possibly be stronger than a knight who trained every day, right? Probably.

This wasn’t the sort of thing you could assign a numerical value to.

There were tournaments held in the capital, but I’d never had any reason to go.

While the prize money was tempting, I had never imagined I could win. Besides, if I’d ended up getting hurt and had to miss class as a result, it would’ve defeated the whole purpose.

If I couldn't get licensed as an alchemist, then there was no point in saving money.

"It looks like we were right to set aside time for rehab. I hope we'll be ready to get back to work in a few days..."

"You're still young. You'll be fine. But if you'd like, I have potions that could help, you know?"

"Well, I appreciate the offer, but there's no point in spending money to make it happen sooner. Kate, how are you faring?"

"My stamina's clearly not what it was. The same goes for the strength I use to draw my bow." Kate shook her head, waving the hand that she'd been using to fire arrows.

From what I'd seen, she'd been hitting her mark, but apparently her abilities were degraded enough that she could notice it for herself.

Well, I guess there was no way that she wasn't going to be weakened somewhat after spending a few days sick in bed with an upset stomach. If anything, maybe the fact that they were already able to move so much only a day after they'd recovered spoke to how much the two of them usually worked out.

"Then how about we avoid any strenuous training for today and focus on exercises that will help with your recovery?" I suggested.

"Yeah, that makes sense," Iris-san agreed. "It may not be enough to satisfy you, though, Shopkeeper-dono."

"Don't worry about me. I'm an alchemist," I told her. "Which makes me wonder, why am I training with a sword so seriously?"

It was a mystery to me. I'd never seen learning the sword as anything but a way of earning prize money.

"I think that is the problem...no, the benefit of having such an incredible master," said Iris-san.

"Benefit? Well, she did give me a nice sword and some training," I conceded.

"We've benefited too, you know? And so has the whole village," said Kate-

san. “You’re the reason this village has the peace it enjoys today, Shopkeeper-san.”

“When you put it that way, I really do have to take my training seriously...”

If I was going to keep living in this village, then there was no guarantee there wouldn’t be more incidents.

I couldn’t abandon the village now, so I’d be drawn into anything that happened whether I liked it or not.

“I’ll be counting on you, Shopkeeper-dono. Both as someone I live with and as a master of the sword.”

“I’m not good enough for anyone to call a master.”

Someone as inexperienced as me, a “master”? I could never be so presumptuous.

But even as I thought that, I deflected Iris-san’s swing and continued training with her until around noon.



Erin-san came to visit that afternoon, just after we’d finished lunch, almost like she had planned it that way.

While it’s preferable to her showing up when I’m in the middle of working on something, if she’s showing up here on the day after Iris-san and Kate-san recover, that’s got to be intentional, right? Probably.

It didn’t seem likely to be a quick conversation, so I brought her to the dining room.

It’s not ideal for receiving guests, but she’ll have to put up with it. I mean, this is a small house. It doesn’t even have a parlor.

I’d asked Lorea-chan to mind the shop, so it was just me and Erin-san, along with Iris-san and Kate-san.

“First, let me thank you for your time today, Sarasa-san.”

“Oh, no. I don’t mind... What sort of business have you come here on?”

“Right. This is a bit hard to say, but I’ve come with a job request for all of

you.”

“A job? And if it’s not just me you want, but Iris-san and Kate-san as well, then it must not be related to alchemy, right?”

“Correct. I’ve also spoken to Andre-san and his party about this. They said they would take the job if you would.”

Out of all the gatherers in the village, these two parties had to be pretty high up there in the overall rankings.

If she’s coming to us for this...yeah, I knew I smelled trouble.

“To be honest, I want to turn it down.”

“Don’t be like that. Could you at least listen to what I have to say first?”

If I listen, that’ll make it harder to refuse, so I’d rather not.

Seeing me frown at this, Kate-san put on a strained smile and interjected, “Now, now, Shopkeeper-san. Erin-san is acting on behalf of the mayor, and she came to us. Even if you don’t hear her out, whatever it is will affect you so long as you stay in the village, right? Isn’t it time you gave up and accepted it?”

I looked at Erin-san. “Is that the kind of talk we’re having?”

“That is the kind of talk we’re having, yes,” she responded with a forced smile, looking troubled.

I crossed my arms and closed my eyes for a long while. Then, having come to terms with my situation, I nodded. “Understood. Let me hear it.”

A little while back, there had been a hellflame grizzly frenzy, and while the villagers and gatherers had been able to work together to fend it off without any major damage, the cause was still unknown. We could try to draw conclusions based on similar events in the past, but we couldn’t be certain, so there would definitely need to be an investigation done. The mayor understood this and had submitted a report on the situation to the local lord along with a request for them to investigate.

We’d received no support during the frenzy, but there hadn’t been time to send any, so that couldn’t really have been helped. This time, he was hopeful the lord would at least investigate. But the response that had come was, “If

there was no damage done, then I don't care. You are to pay the full amount of taxes, on time."

Not only would there be no subsidies, he wasn't going to send troops or look into what had caused it. In fact, there had even been a tone to the effect of "You made good money on hellflame grizzly parts, huh? Well, if you're raking it in, then your taxes are going to have to go up."

Iris-san was incensed when Erin-san told us that part. She slammed her hands down on the table, shouting, "Where does he get off writing something like that?! Shopkeeper-dono worked so hard she was bedridden afterward!"

"Oh, erm, that's just because I made a mistake..."

The hellflame grizzlies had been part of what caused it, but, really, I'd done it to myself.

I'd really rather she didn't bring it up. It's embarrassing.

"Even so! It's a lord's duty to protect the people of his domain. He's completely neglecting them!!!"

In contrast to Iris-san's anger, Erin-san let out a resigned sigh. "I'd love to have a lord who did that, but that's not the kind we have here. The only duty he's passionate about is collecting taxes."

"Um, since I don't really know, who is the lord around here?" I asked.

"Around here... For Yok Village and South Strag, that would be Baronet Kahku. He's rather adept at making money," answered Kate-san.

"Not that he uses any of it for the sake of his people!" Iris-san added indignantly.

"I see..."

I don't have much information, which leaves a lot of questions as to how good of a lord he is, but if he controls South Strag, then I can probably count on him having a reasonable income.

Having considered this, I could understand why he might think that it was better to leave a tiny settlement like Yok Village alone rather than deal with the hassle and cost of sending troops.

It was hard to accept as someone who lived here, but between the taxes he received from this village, and just keeping the money it would cost him to send multiple soldiers deep into the great forest, well, the latter probably won out. That was just how dangerous it was deep in the forest.

“Okay, I understand that Baronet Kahku’s a bad lord. So, what’s the job you have for us? Not that I haven’t guessed.”

“Of course you would, after all we’ve talked about. That’s right. I want you to investigate the cause of the hellflame grizzly frenzy.”

“I just knew it. Hrmmm...”

I felt bad for Erin-san, who looked troubled, but this was clearly not a job for an alchemist, right? At least, it wasn’t in any subject they taught at the academy.

As an alchemist living in a small village, I was already expected to act like I was a doctor and serve as a repository of knowledge.

I don’t want to be turned into even more of a jack-of-all-trades...

Seeing my hesitation, Erin-san turned to Iris-san. “How about you and your partner?”

“Hmm, I’d like to be of help, but...” Iris-san trailed off, turning to look at the woman in question.

Kate-san considered for a moment before saying, “Erin-san, if this is a job, I assume there will be compensation, right?”

“Yes, of course there will. It will depend on how many days the job takes, but I will do my best to find room in the budget to pay you twice what you would normally make.”

It was definitely going to involve spending the nights out there, and the compensation would reflect that. But given the danger, it might have been a little low.

Although, since Iris-san’s and Kate-san’s earnings were on the high end for gatherers in this village, it was probably right on the line of what was economically feasible.

“I’d appreciate it if you could return within a week. Money is a little tight...” Erin-san added apologetically.

Iris-san nodded her head deeply. “Hmm. I’m fine with accepting, but what about you, Kate?”

“I have no issue with it either. But only if Shopkeeper-san also agrees to take the job. We can’t handle this on our own. The hellflame grizzlies were pushed out of their usual territory, right? That means we’re at risk of encountering something just as dangerous as them, if not more.”

“Yeah,” Iris-san agreed. “If it’s just one enemy, we might be able to flee back here, but...”

The enemy was still a mystery. She crossed her arms and groaned.

“Erin-san, how do you plan to compensate Shopkeeper-san? Frankly, I don’t think the village can afford what it would cost to make her act.”

Seeing the glance Kate-san shot in my direction, I finally let out a pained laugh.

The fact was, money wasn’t all that appealing to me. Having provided most of the hard coinage that was in the village, I had some insight into roughly what their budget must be, and if they wanted me to act, pushing Lorea-chan to cry and beg me to do it would honestly be more effective than piling up stacks of cash in front of me.

Of course, if they did make her do that, there would be hard feelings between Erin-san and me.

“Yes, I’ve thought about that, obviously. I was thinking I would provide Sarasa-san with a field to grow medicinal herbs in, along with people to maintain it. What do you think about that offer?”

“A field for herbs?”

They didn’t call her the shadow mayor for nothing. I hadn’t expected this.

To explain, she was offering a plot of land the same size as the ones that the villagers generally used to grow crops. It would be set up next to this house of hers, and for as long as I lived in the village, they would provide people to take

care of it for me.

Being as busy as I was, I'd only partially restored my backyard herb garden after it had gotten torn up by the hellflame grizzlies. That made Erin-san's proposal quite appealing. Seeing that I was considering it, Erin-san knew she had something. She held up two fingers.

"There are just two details. The people have no knowledge of herbs, so we'll want you to teach them how to care for them, and we'll also want twenty percent of what they grow. What do you say?"

Well, well, I have to hand it to her. She's come up with a reward that benefits both sides, huh? It's a well put together proposal, given the village's limitations.

Kate-san looked a little surprised and also impressed. "I see... You've thought this through," she said.

"Hm? What do you mean?" asked Iris-san.

"Once they have the know-how required to cultivate herbs, they should make back more than the cost of providing a field and people. Because they'll be able to plant herb fields of their own."

There were a number of reasons why ordinary farmers didn't generally cultivate medicinal herbs, but environmental factors were not an issue here, since we were close to where the herbs grew naturally. Of course, it wasn't so simple that this alone guaranteed things would go smoothly, but the other issues could largely be solved by hard work, even without using magic.

On top of that, the value-to-weight ratio of herbs was high. That meant there was a good chance that, even growing them in the countryside, far from where they would be used, there was a high probability that the industry could still be competitive after the cost of transport was factored in.

There were still issues, though.

"Erin-san, I should let you know, most herbs don't keep for long without extra processing. I can't spend all my time processing herbs, and if you don't have an alchemist in the village, the whole industry falls apart."

"Yes, I've considered that. I have no intention of making this our primary

industry, and in the event that we find ourselves without an alchemist, we'll only grow herbs that store well."

Hmm, maybe it's fine, then? If we start with one field, then we can easily pivot based on how things go, and even if the cultivation fails, I can cover people's salaries myself.

I would have trouble sleeping at night if they invested a lot in it all at once, and it ruined the village's economy as a result.

For my needs, just one corner of a farmer's field would have been enough. As I agonized over it a little, Erin-san tried to gauge my reaction, then added one more request.

"This may be asking too much, but if you can teach them to process the things that even an amateur can handle, that would be much appreciated."

"Yeah... I'll bet. I don't know that there's anything 'even an amateur can handle,' but if we're talking about things 'you don't have to be an alchemist to handle,' then I don't mind. Assuming they take my lessons seriously."

"Thank you! I can assume you'll take the job, then?!" Erin-san said, clasping my hand with a smile.

"Mm..." I groaned, then nodded. "I suppose that's what it means?"

I feel a little like I was cajoled into it, but I'd say this still falls within the realm of being a good neighbor. This isn't like the big city. Getting along with others is important here.

"However, I think it will still be some time before we can go. Iris-san and Kate-san haven't fully recovered yet, and I suspect the same is true for Andre-san's team."

"Yes, of course, that's not an issue. Please take your time."

Erin-san smiled broadly and bowed her head.

Episode 2: The Expedition

After five days spent waiting for the others to recover, our six-member amateur expedition team was pushing on through the great forest.

“Sarasa-chan, are we heading in the right direction?” Andre-san asked.

“Yes, this way should be fine,” I answered before adding, “Probably.”

This was an impromptu investigation. None of us knew how to track hellflame grizzlies, and there wouldn't be any tracks left anyway even if one of us did.

For that reason, we had decided to start by searching the area where the grizzlies generally lived. While waiting for the others to recover, I had used Master's connections to gather information on the great forest and used it to pinpoint where that area was.

It was only a rough estimate, though, and the great forest wasn't so gentle an environment that we could venture into it with such a vague idea of where we were going. Even veteran gatherers risked losing their lives if they got careless out here. That was just the kind of place it was.

As such, it was vital to gather information beforehand.

“How deep into the forest have each of you been?”

“Only to the nearest areas,” Iris-san answered. “Although, I'm sure you already knew that, because we go back to your shop every day, Shopkeeper-dono. So we've been limited to places that we can go to and return from in a day.”

“Exactly right,” Kate-san agreed. “And since we have to take into account how long we'll work each day collecting materials, we really haven't ventured that far in at all.”

I guess that tracks. Since they moved in with me, there hasn't been a day they didn't come back home, so I guess they stick to places within a few hours' travel from the shop?

“We’ve been a bit farther than that. We even camp out from time to time. Right, guys?” Andre-san looked to his partners for agreement, but they shook their heads.

“More like once in a blue moon,” Gil-san corrected. “We’re not doing anything all that different from Iris-chan and Kate-chan.”

“Don’t try to make us look better than we are, Andre,” warned Gray-san.

Andre-san’s face turned bright red as they slapped him on the shoulders.

“Urgh... Oh, come on! Let a guy show off a little!” he complained.

“Now, now,” I said reassuringly. “You still have some experience, and that can make a big difference. I know I’ll be counting on you as veterans.”

When it came to camping, I’d only done it as part of my practical lessons at the academy. I didn’t have a lot of experience.

Andre-san awkwardly scratched the back of his head.

“S-Sure. But even if you call us veterans, it’s only among the low-level gatherers around here...”

The guys were on the high end of gatherers in the village, but they could be fairly accused of gathering the same stuff all the time. They absolutely lacked sufficient knowledge to be first-class gatherers, as evidenced by the fact that they hadn’t touched the frostbite bat fangs before I brought it up.

That said, it was hard to blame them. The gatherers in the generation before them—which was to say, those who’d been gathering back when the village still had the prior alchemist—had apparently ventured deep into the forest to bring back valuable materials, but once there was no longer an alchemist in town, that had put limitations on what materials they could sell.

Inevitably, the number of gatherers who were willing to brave the depths of the forest had decreased, and those older veterans never passed the knowledge down to Andre-san’s team.

“As far as knowledge of materials goes... Okay, this is a good time for it, so I’ll teach you what materials there are that you can sell. If you put the information to good use, I’m confident you can double your income, you know?”

“Sure, that’d be great,” Andre-san said with a grin. “We’re all ears!”

“You can count on me,” I told him with a nod and a thumbs-up.

I explained things as we continued walking, but it was slow going, and we weren’t making much headway toward our destination. Now, as for why that was...

“Th-This is narsnatch! It’s such a rare find! We sure are lucky!”

I carefully collected the brilliant yellow-green slime on the rocks into a bottle.

I couldn’t just leave it there. No way.

“There are tainiltacks growing here too! They’re easy to overlook, so be careful.”

I used a pair of tweezers to collect about half of the little pale-yellow mushrooms that were growing in a gap in a fallen tree. Each one was only a centimeter long, and they lost all their value if they were crushed, so I carefully put them into a box one at a time.

“This moss is called blue powder. It’s normally green, but it releases a blue powder at this time of year, which makes it more valuable.”

The key thing was the powder, so I held my breath as I used a knife to scrape it into a leather pouch.

“Wow, that’s the great forest for you! It’s a treasury of materials! At this rate, you stand to *triple* your earnings, Andre-san.”

“That’s great news and all, but...don’t we need to be investigating the hellflame grizzlies?” Andre-san asked with a slightly exasperated shrug.

“Whoopsie... That’s the main thing we were here for, yeah. I just couldn’t help myself with so many good materials around. Hee hee.”

Having recalled our original purpose in coming here, I tried to play it off with a giggle. But the fact of the matter was, with access to such a wealth of different ingredients, I could craft a wide variety of potions and artifacts. I was starting to see why Master had steered me toward this place.

If the gatherers don't bring in enough of this stuff, then maybe I should come back to harvest it for myself?

"But still, we don't know any of this stuff Sarasa-chan gathered. Have we been missing out all of this time?" Gil-san wondered aloud.

"We didn't know, so there was nothing we could have done about it," Andre-san answered him. "We still have a lot to learn."

"It's the same for us," Iris-san agreed. "Shopkeeper-dono, were these materials mentioned in that book on the great forest that you were reading the other day?"

"Well, it did talk about them a bit. I've been on the lookout for things I read about in there."

The blue powder and narsnatch stood out immediately, but if I wasn't thinking "there might be tainiltacks here" and actively looking for them, I'd never have found the little mushrooms while we were on the move.

But although I'd nearly forgotten it, our objective was to head to the area where the hellflame grizzlies lived. Not to take our time searching the areas around us along the way.

"Is that right? Would you mind if I gave it a read later, Shopkeeper-san?"

"Of course, you're more than welcome to, Kate-san. In my position as a buyer, it's in my interest to see the variety of materials brought in increase, so I'd like to see the knowledge spread to other gatherers too, but...it's not easy, huh?"

"Well, books *are* expensive," Gil-san agreed. "You can't lend them out to just anybody."

"That's part of it, but the other thing is that, while that book mentions the names of things, it doesn't describe how to spot them or other things you'd want to be aware of, so it's worthless unless you already have knowledge of the material in question."

The book would tell them where they could gather tainiltacks, but they wouldn't be able to find those tainiltacks without knowing what they were, and even if they did find them, if they didn't know how to harvest them properly,

they risked spoiling the materials they brought back.

Iris-san and Kate-san had the option of asking me, but that was difficult for other gatherers.

Basically, if I wanted to spread the knowledge in that book, I needed to also provide a lot of information about gatherables at the same time, and that was a whole lot of work.

Because it was like teaching one of the courses that I'd taken at the academy.

That wasn't something I was up to doing in my spare time, while also running a shop.

"The other thing is that people will get killed if they rush into the depths of the forest with only half-baked knowledge because they've been blinded by greed. So I have to be careful."

"So it really is dangerous deeper in the forest?" Kate-san asked.

"Yes, of course it is. To give you an example..."

I whipped out my sword and swung it past Kate-san's head.

Whoosh. Slash. Thud.

A snake twice as thick as my arm fell to the ground with its head separated from its body.

Kate-san's eyes widened and her lips quivered as she watched it thrash around, bleeding.

"Wh-When did...?"

"There are a lot of snakes around, you know?" I explained offhandedly. "They haven't been approaching us, so I've been ignoring them, but that one happened to be right next to you. They can be turned into materials, so we'll bring this one back. Oh, by the way, if they bite you, you'll die, so bear that in mind."

I tossed the dead snake into a leather sack once it stopped bleeding.

Andre-san, who had been watching all of this, hesitantly asked, "Wait, you said that pretty casually, but are there that many of these guys in this general

area?”

“A decent number? But it’s fine. They’re animals, not monsters. If we don’t bother them, then for the most part, they won’t attack us.”

And for that reason, I couldn’t find them easily without using magic.

Though, there weren’t that many uses for them, so it wasn’t worth going to the trouble of seeking them out so I could hunt them.

“And what if we do happen to get bitten?” Iris-san asked, gulping.

“You’ll have to accept luck wasn’t on your side and give up,” I said plainly.

“Seriously?” Gil-san winced. “Man, the great forest’s a rough place.”

“If you buy the antidotes I sell, you’ll be fine. There’s a few minutes of leeway before the venom starts to take effect.”

“Hold on, you’re not saying that it’ll buy us a few minutes, right? We’ll survive, right?”

I just smiled.

“H-Hey?!”

“I’m joking. If you have the specific antidote, you’ll survive. Other antidotes won’t do anything, though, so you need to know what kind of snake bit you.”

There *were* potions that would work in the vast majority of cases, but they were obviously expensive. Expensive enough to rule out using them casually.

“That’s rough. But I guess that’s just another part of what you mean when you say we’re lacking knowledge,” Andre-san concluded.

“That’s right. By the way, their fangs can’t pierce the flexible gloves, so I recommend wearing them just in case anything happens.”

“Hey, Andre! Get out the gloves!” Gray-san urged him.

“On it!”

Andre-san immediately dug through his pack and handed the gloves to his partners.

Iris-san and Kate-san already wore theirs all of the time, so they didn’t have to

worry.

“Oh, right. The venom is in their top fangs, so if you have to stick your hand in their mouths, make sure it’s on the top side. The best thing to do is seize them by the head *before* they bite, though.”

“That sounds difficult...” Kate-san noted. “Is there no other way to deal with them? Like a snake-repelling artifact?”

“I’m not going to say there isn’t, but the more appropriate response is to wear defensive gear that protects against their fangs, like the flexible gloves. Both from a cost and safety perspective.”

And so, as I lectured them on materials and the associated dangers, the sun started to set. Finding an open space in the forest, we decided to set up camp for the night.

I had prepared two artifacts to help us with camping on this expedition: the floating tent I’d made the other day and a miniature magic stove.

Andre-san and the guys had brought along their bug repellent artifact, but the tent had that function too, so it wasn’t necessary.

I hadn’t brought anything to detect dangerous creatures or create light, because those were things I could handle with magic.

The first step was to prepare the area where we would be sleeping and deploy the floating tent. Andre-san came over, clearly interested in it.

“Wow, so that’s your tent, huh? Everyone’s been talking about it.”

“Is it your first time seeing one too, Andre-san? I’m currently taking orders, so consider buying one for yourself, if you’d like.”

“Once I tried it, I knew I wanted one,” Iris-san reflected.

“I know, right?” Kate-san agreed. “It’s so comfy.”

“It’s that good, huh...? Would you mind if we went in for a bit?” Andre-san asked.

“Sure, go right ahead.”

I opened the tent flap and gestured for the guys to go in. They hesitantly got

onto the floating floor of the tent, then laid down.

“O-Oh, this is just the right amount of softness,” Andre-san said.

“Wow! Is this thing ridiculously comfy, or what?!” Gil-san agreed.

“Even better than the beds at the inn,” Gray-san added. “And it’s cool inside too...”

“I know, right? What do you think?” I asked them.

I hadn’t exactly designed it with being comfortable to sleep on in mind, but the perfect way that their weight sunk into the floor had that effect. By laying out a wool blanket in the winter, or something like a straw mat in the summer, sound sleep was guaranteed.

“But it must be expensive, right? An impressive tent like this.”

“Yes, it costs a decent amount. And adding features only raises that amount.”

This tent had bug repelling and air conditioning functions, but for people who couldn’t use magic, functions that alerted them when a dangerous creature approached or turned on the lights could come in handy.

Once the guys were out of the tent, I gave them a rundown of the prices by size and functions. They crossed their arms and started mulling it over.

“Nghhh...” Andre-san groaned. “It’s not exactly out of our reach, with how much we have put away, but...”

“You can’t even call it expensive, for an artifact like this,” Gil-san added.

“Indeed. And with this, our gathering will go much more—hm? Hold on. We don’t stay out overnight when gathering that often, do we?”

That brought the other two back to their senses, and they took a deep breath before turning to look at me.

“Ah, you noticed that, huh?”

Yep, this is an artifact that the vast majority of the gatherers currently living in the village really don’t need. If anyone, it’s the traveling merchants like Gretz-san and Darna-san who’d want it.

But Darna-san only made occasional trips to South Strag to stock up, so he

wouldn't get much use out of it. As for Gretz-san, who would get regular use out of it, he'd just bought his parents a Harvester the other day, so he probably didn't have the money left for a floating tent.

"Sarasa-chan, are you going to be okay?" Andre-san asked. "I know you, so I don't think you would push anyone into buying things they don't need, but..."

He was concerned I might get complaints from gatherers who bought the floating tent. I nodded in agreement with him.

"Oh, of course I wouldn't. It feels like a bit of a waste to have a tent you don't use often, so some people might complain...but that's why I want to spread information about what's deeper in the forest."

If the gatherers went in deeper, it meant more profit for them and more materials for me.

They would also end up camping out more often, and that didn't just mean me selling more floating tents, but all of the other artifacts that helped with camping too. Normally, this would be mutually beneficial, but...

"The issue is balancing the info you spread against the skills and knowledge of the gatherers you're spreading it to," Iris-san observed.

"That's exactly right," I agreed.

"Because Iris and I can ask you questions, but the other gatherers can't," Kate-san added.

Incidentally, it was pretty standard for gatherers to acquire that sort of knowledge and experience from the gatherers who came before them. But in this village, as I've already mentioned elsewhere, there had been a break in the transmission of that know-how.

"I've got my hopes pinned on Andre-san and the guys for that, you know?"

Andre-san's brow furrowed at this.

"Us, huh...?" he said. "Well, we did learn a little bit from our seniors, but we didn't have what it took to go very deep into the forest back then."

"Yeah," Gil-san agreed, equally concerned. "We just listened to them talk sometimes."

That meant Andre-san and the guys hadn't been given on-site training.

"Well, we'll just have to give it our best shot. We'll be doing for them what our seniors did for us."

"Yes, I'll be counting on you. And I'll do what I can to help with the knowledge side of things."

I just hope they get a little experience under their belts with this job.

Dinner that night was a soup made with dried meat and vegetables, served with crusty bread.

I could make the water with magic, which cut back on how much we needed to carry. It was incredibly convenient at times like this.

The downside was that the meal wasn't that tasty, but it was more than edible enough, so it wasn't a problem.

"I haven't eaten stuff like this in a while," I murmured without meaning to.

"In a while?" Gil-san raised an eyebrow. "So you've eaten this before, Sarasa-chan?"

"Yes. Fairly often."

"Oh, really?" Iris-san reacted with surprise. "I had the impression that you were always eating delicious food, Shopkeeper-dono."

"No. Embarrassing as it is to admit, after the crowds at Delal-san's place got to be too much, I was eating this sort of thing every day. Although, the bread was just normal bread."

"What? Really?"

"Yes. Maybe Lorea-chan started cooking for me because she couldn't bear to watch any longer."

The delicious meals that Iris-san was talking about had only materialized after the hellflame grizzlies gutted my kitchen, once I had repaired it and installed a magic stove. Before that, Lorea-chan had gone shopping for me, and brought me snacks, but my diet had really taken a turn for the better once she had

started cooking meals for me on a daily basis. Thankfully.

“Oh, you’re bad at cooking, Sarasa-chan?” Gray-san asked.

“No, I’m not *bad* at it. But I’m not very good at it either. I just wanted to spend the time I could have spent cooking on alchemy instead.”

“Indeed.” Gray-san nodded, satisfied with my answer. “Maybe that’s the kind of desperation it takes to manage a shop at your age.”

“Uh, sure, I guess?” I brushed it off with a vague response.

I’d been pretty desperate to stay at the top of my class and get certified as an alchemist, but the shop itself was something I had lucked into without even meaning to. The sequence of events being what they had been, I found it hard to fully agree.

“By the way, how are we breaking up the watch for tonight?” Andre-san asked. “Do three shifts with two people at a time work for you?”

“I’ll be using magic to set up an alarm, so there’s no need to stand watch, you know?”

“Magic, huh... It’s not that I don’t trust you, Sarasa-chan, but...”

“If you feel uneasy, I’m not opposed to someone standing watch.”

It was a natural precaution for veterans like them to want to take.

Iris-san, on the other hand, instantly shook her head.

“No, I believe in you, Shopkeeper-dono!”

“Iris, you just don’t want to stand watch, right?” Kate-san teased her.

“That’s part of it too!”

It is?! Well, not that it really matters.

“But I can say this much with certainty: Shopkeeper-dono’s magic will be far more reliable than having me stand watch.”

“You’ve got a point there...” Kate-san conceded. “What do you guys want to do?”

“For our part...we’ll take turns on watch,” Andre-san said after some

consideration. “Sarasa-chan, sorry, but can you leave a light on for us? It doesn’t have to be bright.”

I nodded.

“I don’t mind doing that. Well, good luck with it.”



On the third day of our trip, we reached our destination without any major trouble. Admittedly, last night, we’d been awoken by the alarm, but the monster that had showed up wasn’t particularly tough. The guys had made short work of it, and we had been back to sleep in no time. Also, thanks to the floating tent, each night was a restful one, and we now found ourselves in good shape.

“So, there are hellflame grizzlies on this mountain?” Andre-san asked.

I nodded, before offering a slight correction: “It would be more accurate to say there *were* hellflame grizzlies. Assuming the pack that attacked the village didn’t come from somewhere far away.”

We were at the base of a volcano located northwest of the village, one whose slopes lacked trees from around the midpoint upward. Out of all the areas that the book said the bears lived, this one was the closest to the village. The flame stones lying around the mountain were the grizzlies’ main food source; as weird as it sounded, they were something the bears needed to survive.

Because flame stones were necessary for their survival, the grizzlies wouldn’t normally travel too far from the areas in which they lived. But when, for whatever reason, they were forced to, it resulted in a frenzy like the one we’d experienced at the village.

“There’s no sign there was a landslide, or anything like that. Probably,” Kate-san noted.

“We don’t know what the mountain looked like before, though,” added Iris-san. “There’s smoke coming out of it, but...no sign there was an eruption.”

“Hey, Sarasa-chan, it’s not gonna suddenly blow up or anything, right?” Gil-san asked.

“I can’t rule it out, but we should be fine. It would take some really bad luck for that to happen.”

I’d had Erin-san ask the mayor for me, and there hadn’t been an eruption that affected the village at any point during his life, at least.

He wouldn’t know about smaller eruptions though, so that was still down to luck.

“Luck, huh...” mused Iris-san. “I’m not that confident in mine.”

“We almost died just the other day, after all,” Kate-san agreed. “Then again, we *did* survive. I’d say that counts as lucky, right?”

“We’ve got Sarasa-chan along this time. It’ll be fine,” Andre-san reassured them.

“Me? Am I lucky?” I cocked my head to the side.

It was bad luck that my parents died while on a business trip.

It was good luck that I landed in a not-so-bad orphanage.

And as for me becoming an alchemist...I’d like to think that was skill, not luck.

But maybe working at Master’s shop was good luck? Since I only found her “help wanted” poster by chance.

As for Yok Village, there are a lot of good people there. Especially Lorea-chan.

Taking it all into consideration, my luck is...reasonable, maybe?

While I was thinking about it, Andre-san shook his head with an awkward smile. “Nah, we’re the lucky ones,” he said. “Because you came to the village.”

“We made it through the hellflame grizzly frenzy without any major injuries. And you saved us after we ate the honey the other day,” Gray-san added.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Gil-san agreed. “We’re ridiculously lucky, huh?”

“Hearing you say all of that...makes me a little happy.”

I couldn’t help but smile. They felt meeting me had been good for them!

“Well, let’s hope our luck holds out and go for a climb,” Andre-san finished.

“That sounds like a plan to me. Oh, but remember, we’re here to investigate,

so don't go touching things carelessly, okay? Because there's a high risk something here drove off the hellflame grizzlies," I warned them, just to be on the safe side.

The guys nodded gravely, then began their climb.

Although there wasn't a proper path, it wasn't a very steep mountain. We spent around half a day pushing through the brush before reaching the halfway point, where the vegetation vanished. In this area, the ground was faintly warm, and we started to notice steam rising here and there.

"There should be flame stones lying around here, so pick up any that you spot. I'll pay you for them later."

The ones we'd been seeing weren't particularly large, so their value was on the low end. But because they were materials that could be used in alchemy, overall, they weren't cheap.

It'd be a shame to just leave them after coming all this way, or so I had been thinking when I told the group to pick them up, but Iris-san just looked at me a little awkwardly.

"Shopkeeper-dono, I've never seen a flame stone before..."

I looked at the others, and...yeah. They weren't exactly common, so maybe I shouldn't have been surprised?

"Erm... This is a flame stone."

I looked around until I spotted a flame stone, albeit a small one, and picked it up.

The stone was dark red, lustrous, and slightly warm to the touch. It wouldn't stand out at a distance, but if they kept a close eye out, then even a total amateur could tell them apart from the other rocks here.

The stone was as hard as it looked. It was hard to break one without using a hammer, so obviously an ordinary human's jaws wouldn't be able to crush them.

But hellflame grizzlies chowed down on them regularly. Monsters certainly were mysterious.

Shouldn't their teeth get weaker as they age?

"You'll usually find a bunch of them lying around at spots where the ground is hot."

"Oh, yeah?" Gil-san replied. "Well then, if we go over to that steamy spot—"

"Hold up!!!" I hurriedly called after Gil-san, who was cheerfully traipsing over in that direction. "Gil-san, please let me finish explaining things first."

"R-Right..."

"Those spots you see steam rising out of are hot, yes, but they might also have poisonous gasses that'll knock you out in an instant. They might suddenly shoot out super-hot steam and water too."

On top of that, those noxious gasses weren't visible to the eye, and there wouldn't necessarily be any warning before the boiling-hot water shot out.

While the risks were rare, the potential for danger was present in every one. Since I wasn't an expert on the subject, I couldn't tell which spots were the dangerous ones. How safe any of them might be was more or less down to chance.

"So, with that said...please, go right ahead."

I gestured toward one of the spots with the steam rising out of it, but Gil-san just frantically shook his head.

"Nah, after hearing that, even I'm not gonna go near them!"

"Darn right you're not," Andre-san agreed. "And even if you said you were going to, I'd stop you."

Aw, shoot. It looks like I won't be getting many flame stones.

"Shopkeeper-san, aren't there artifacts that can deal with those problems?"

"I've brought along one that can handle the gas just in case. For the steam, there's something called a 'heat-resistant suit,' but I haven't made one yet."

I'd made the gas mask right away because it was small, but the heat-resistant suit would require me to make a leather suit that covered the entire body before I even did any alchemy, so that one had been on hold.

At Master's shop, she always hired craftspeople to make these sorts of things for her, but...well, one drawback of the countryside is it's hard to order that kind of thing here.

Besides, there are kind of limited uses for a heat-resistant suit.

Even if it could stand up to steam and boiling water, most suits weren't strong enough to withstand fire breath, and since they covered the entire body, they made it hard to move.

On top of that, unless I added a cooling function, the suit got all steamy inside, so there really wasn't much use for one outside of a place like this.

"In other words, we have no way of avoiding those dangers, huh? That's a little disappointing," Iris-san concluded.

"Let's confine our gathering to the areas where it's safe for this trip," Kate-san suggested. "If we really need to, we can come back later with those artifacts. That's good with you, right, Shopkeeper-san?"

"Sure, I don't mind. Really, the amount of materials we're able to harvest today only really affects whether your compensation goes up or not."

The plan was for me to buy anything we gathered, and the payment would be divided evenly between everyone in the expedition, myself included. But that was just a side thing. It wasn't where most of their money was coming from.

No, for them, the majority of their pay would be the reward paid by the village, and for me it would be the medicinal herb field they would be providing.

I wanted to make all sorts of things, so I was mostly interested in acquiring a wide variety of materials. The volume wasn't actually that important. So I didn't feel pressed to gather a lot of any one thing if it was going to cause problems.

"So, it's safe to assume we're just picking up whatever we spot along the way that we can get safely?" Andre-san asked.

"That's right," I confirmed. "As for which way to go...let's head in whatever direction my detection magic points."

After another hour spent climbing the mountain, avoiding the steaming spots,

we encountered a massive, brownish-red lizard that was about a meter and a half from head to tail. It had a body thicker than my waist, the back of which was covered in tough-looking skin.

We had stopped a good distance from it, so it wasn't clear if it knew we were here, but its languid motions suggested that, at the very least, it wasn't alarmed.

"That sure is a big lizard, huh? What is it, Sarasa-chan?" asked Andre-san.

"That's a lava lizard. Also known as a mock salamander."

"Ohh, Shopkeeper-dono, that name sounds kind of strong!"

I couldn't help but smile bemusedly at how happy Iris-san sounded.

"There are stories about them swimming in lava, but..."

"Huh? For real? They're that tough?" Andre-san turned to me in surprise.

"Um, no." I shook my head. "I think those stories are probably made up."

In some volcanic regions, there were places where the hot water that welled up could be red. My belief was that someone had seen them swimming in that and misunderstood.

Although, it was certainly true that they had a high tolerance for heat. They wouldn't die from being doused in scalding water and even had a fair amount of resistance to fire magic.

Cold, on the other hand, they were extremely weak against, and even temperatures like you might see on a spring day would leave them unable to move.

In short, a place like this, where the ground was warm year-round, was their ideal habitat.

"Like I expected, I'm not seeing any hellflame grizzlies around here."

"Was it that lava lizard? Is that what chased them off?" Iris-san asked.

"Is it that strong?" Kate-san added.

"No, it's not strong. But it is hard. Really hard."

Even if it was only covering its back, the lava lizard had a tough skin that could deflect a hellflame grizzly's claws.

"They can also breathe fire and have higher heat resistance than the grizzlies..."

The flame stones which were the primary ingredient in the diets of both lava lizards and hellflame grizzlies were plentiful in spots where the ground was hot, like near the places that hot water spurted out of, or where there was flowing lava.

But if you were to compare the two, the hellflame grizzlies' ability to tolerate heat wasn't even close to what a lava lizard could endure.

"So what you're saying is that the lizards can eat all of the flame stones that the grizzlies can reach, but the opposite isn't true?" Iris-san asked.

"Exactly," I replied. "On top of that, they're not so weak that the hellflame grizzlies can wipe them all out, and if they take shelter in the hot water, the grizzlies can't lay a paw on them, so..."

"The hellflame grizzlies were outcompeted, and that caused the frenzy, huh?" concluded Kate-san.

"Yeah, I suspect that's probably it."

It was a theory that was reinforced by just how few flame stones we had been able to pick up on the way here.

It still left the question of why the number of lava lizards had suddenly increased, though. Had they come from elsewhere? Or was there some other factor that had caused them to start rapidly breeding?

It was still a point of contention whether monsters reproduced like ordinary animals did, so maybe there wasn't much point in dwelling on it?

What an alchemist needed was the knowledge of how to use the materials from monsters. There was no money to be had in studying monster ecology.

"So, that's it? The investigation's over? Feels kinda anticlimactic," Gil-san complained.

"Well, yeah," Andre-san acknowledged. "But it's not like there's anything

more we can do, right? I guess the report's going to say something like, 'The frenzy was caused by lava lizards. The likelihood of another such frenzy is incredibly low.'"

"That's right," I agreed. "It doesn't seem like there are any more hellflame grizzlies... Let's head home."

"Sounds good to me," replied Andre-san. "And I'm sure Erin would prefer it if we came back early."

With that decided, we were about to head back, but Iris-san pointed up at the peak of the mountain with a slightly mystified look on her face.

"Huh? We don't need to look any further? There's still more mountain to climb."

We were currently a little more than halfway up the slope. We'd only investigated a small fraction of the area presumed to have been the hellflame grizzlies' habitat, but...

"I think we'd better not," I told her. "Does anyone here know why the lava lizard is also called a 'mock salamander'?"

They looked at one another, then shook their heads.

"If you're asking that question, then it's not just because lava lizards have a high heat tolerance and can breathe fire, right?" asked Kate-san.

"Right. This is pretty important information, so it's mentioned in most books on the subject, but..."

There was no way to mistake one for the other if you knew what you were looking at, but lava lizards had come to be called "mock salamanders" because the two were frequently sighted in the same places.

It wasn't clear if the two had some sort of symbiotic relationship, or if it was pure coincidence, but there had to be some reason that hellflame grizzlies were not known to appear in the same place as a salamander, despite the grizzlies having a similar habitat to lava lizards.

"So, what? If we keep going, we might run into a salamander? Is that it?" asked Andre-san.

“Yes.” I nodded. “There would be a risk of that.”

“Murgh...” Iris-san groaned. “And not even you can defeat a salamander, Shopkeeper-dono?”

“Not with my current equipment, at least. If I came here, outfitted specifically for that purpose, instead of exploration...well, who can say? I’ve never thought about trying to kill a salamander before.”

If I were to bring armor that could withstand its breath and use a bunch of consumable artifacts, then...maybe I could manage it?

I knew from books that salamanders were dangerous, but it wasn’t like those books put a numerical value on the level of danger, so it wasn’t easy to decide if I could beat one.

“I’ve never taken on a salamander, so I’ll ask Master about it later.”

Hearing this answer, Iris-san hurriedly waved her hand.

“Oh, no, it’s not that I want to go slay one, or anything of the sort...”

“Of course not,” Kate-san agreed. “Shopkeeper-san, there’s no risk of a salamander attacking the village...right?”

“None at all. They’re not the sort of monsters that wander out of their territory. If there were a volcanic eruption that swallowed up the village, that would change things, but I think we’d have bigger problems than a salamander at that point, right?”

“You’ve got a point there. We and the villagers would have already hightailed it out of there by then! Ha ha ha!”

“Um, Andre, that’s nothing to joke about,” Gray-san said with a frown, but Andre-san just shrugged.

“Well, there’s no point worrying about it. So, anyway, Sarasa-chan, do you think there’s a salamander?”

“Probably, yes. My detection magic is picking up a particularly strong reading. And even if it’s not a salamander, it’s still a powerful monster.”

Which was why I’d decided against continuing onward.

Hearing my response, Andre-san immediately nodded. “It looks like this is as far as we go. I know I’m not risking my life for the amount we’re being paid. No one objects to that, right?”

“No problem.”

“It’s the obvious choice.”

Gray-san and Gil-san agreed instantly.

The other two nodded as well, but Iris-san offered a suggestion: “We have no issue with that, but seeing as we’ve come all this way and have Shopkeeper-dono with us, I’d like to hunt some lava lizards before we return... How about it?”

“I agree. It was quite a hike to get here, so I’d love to make a little more money... What do you say, Shopkeeper-san?” Kate-san cast a questioning look at me, cocking her head to the side.

I’d already gotten my hands on some fairly unusual materials, which had made the trip worth it from my perspective, but from a purely financial standpoint...maybe not so much.

Given that the situation had driven the hellflame grizzlies into a frenzy, this was probably only to be expected, but we hadn’t been able to pick up many flame stones. Once the money was divvied up, I had to question whether it would even amount to an extra days’ earnings for each of us.

I was willing to live with that, because it was just additional profit anyway, but I could still see how the others might feel they were missing out.

“I don’t mind doing it. It can’t hurt to get my hands on some lava lizard materials. The issue is whether we can hunt it safely... None of you have hunted one before, right?”

“Not me,” Iris-san admitted. “It’s my first time even seeing one.”

“Same goes for us,” added Andre-san. “We don’t come out this far.”

“I figured as much. So, I’ll kill the first one.”

I pointed to the first lava lizard, which was lazing about a short distance from us without a worry in the world, as I began my explanation.

“The first thing to be cautious of is their breath and tail.”

While their fire breath was an obvious threat, their tail attacks were nothing to sneeze at. It was hard to imagine from their usually languid movement, but their tails could move swiftly and had a lot of strength. If a hit landed in the wrong place, it could easily snap a leg bone, so anyone thinking they’d sneak up and attack a lava lizard from behind was bound to get tripped up.

“Their claws may look dangerous at first glance, but they’re actually not that big of a threat. Although, they will use them if you’re unable to move, so you still can’t ignore them outright.”

That might come up if, for example, the lava lizard managed to break an opponent’s leg with their tail, rendering them unable to escape. When they swung those claws, they could pierce through a hellflame grizzly’s furry hide, so it would take more than a little armor to stop them.

When a lava lizard fought a hellflame grizzly, it would make use of the difference in their heat tolerance and preferred terrain, luring the grizzly onto hot, muddy ground where the lizard could defeat it.

“So, never chase a lava lizard too far. And you have to watch your feet too, or you’ll get tripped up in ways you don’t expect.”

If we got caught in the mire, surrounded by multiple lava lizards all using their fire breath and claws on us, we’d be in trouble too.

The best thing to do was to use ranged attacks or weapons like spears that had a long reach, but only Kate-san’s arrows and my magic fell into either category. Everyone else was fighting with swords, which were hardly suited for the job.

That being the case, the easiest thing would be for me to kill it with magic, but this was supposed to be a demonstration for the others, so...

“Okay, here I go. You want to aim for the slightly soft underbelly. Their top side is pretty tough, so your swords won’t go through it.”

With my explanation concluded, it was time for battle.

I chose to use my sword out of consideration for the others. Starting at a fair

distance from the lizard, I leaped forward and rushed at its side.

If I took too long, I'd fall victim to its breath attack, so I swung my sword quickly, before it could turn its head in my direction.

"If you attack from above, like this, then..."

Slice!

Roll. Splurt, splurt!

"...That's about how it's going to go. So you either go for the sides, or the belly. If you can, what you really want to do is flip the lizard over and then attack it for an easy win."

"No, no! You totally managed to cut it! Its head's rolling on the ground!"

I'd been trying to just carry on as if I hadn't, but Gil-san called me out.

"Isn't that strange...?"

The demonstration was *supposed* to show my attack bouncing off, and yet my swing had sliced it clean in two. Alas, its head had bid a tearful farewell to its body.

Despite now being headless, the lizard's body continued energetically thrashing around...wait, no, it looked like it was just about done with that.

Uh, yeah. I blame(?) the sword Master gave me.

Come to think of it, this sword had also handily sliced through the thick, muscular neck of a hellflame grizzly too.

I guess Master didn't call it a "sturdy sword" for nothing.

"Erm, I think this should be obvious, but that's not what usually happens. But even if you can do the same thing yourselves, you really shouldn't. Because if you cut them here, it lowers the value."

"Ahh, does it really?" asked Iris-san.

"Yep. Ideally, you want them still in one piece. The hard skin on their top side has a lot of uses."

Non-alchemic armorers prized lava lizard hide because it couldn't be

scratched by a dull blade.

Turning that around, though, it didn't have a lot of non-armor uses, because softer leathers were preferred in more general-purpose applications.

"Okay, so who wants to go first? Or do you all want to go together?"

"Let's see... Sarasa-chan, would you mind if we used this head to do some practice swings?" Andre-san asked, pointing to the severed head of the one I'd just killed.

It wasn't as though there weren't other uses for it, but...oh, sure, why not. If it helped to make them safer.



“Sure you can. But you shouldn’t try to cut it too forcefully, okay? You could chip your blade.”

“Sorry to put you out like this. Well, here goes...”

With that, the guys took turns swinging at the severed head, but as I might have expected, it deflected their blows with a loud *clang*.

“Oh wow,” Andre-san said. “It’s harder than I thought!”

“Like a rock,” Gray-san agreed. “And Sarasa-chan can cut through this?”

He seemed taken aback, so I hurriedly explained, “It’s the sword! I just happen to have a high-quality sword, okay?”

I know I’ve done my fair share of training, but an ordinary sword can’t cut a lava lizard in two!

“Murgh,” Iris-san groaned. “You know...if I’m not careful, this could very well break my blade, huh?”

“Don’t even think that, Iris,” Kate-san warned her, brow furrowing. “We got you a new one just the other day!”

“I’m aware.” Iris-san duly nodded. “It wasn’t cheap.”

The sword Iris-san was using was one that Jizdo-san had made for her after the incident, but because he didn’t specialize in forging weapons, its quality was fairly average. I felt like she had gotten more than her money’s worth, but because Iris-san and Kate-san were mired in debt, every purchase was a hardship.

For my part, I want them to invest in their equipment, even if that means that their repayment is delayed, though.

“Well, the result is more or less as expected. Next, it’s time to try the flanks, then, huh? Here goes!”

Once they’d all finished their test slashes—not that any of them managed to slash through it—Andre-san took a swing at the skin on the lizard’s sides.

“Hmm...? It’s not hard enough that it’s able to deflect the strike, but it’s not easy for me to cut through either.”

“Whoa, seriously?” cried Gil-san. “Can we really kill these things?”

“My sword sticks into it, at least,” observed Gray-san. “Are thrusting attacks the way to go?”

Apparently the skin on the lizard’s sides was tougher than expected.

The swords the guys are using aren’t all that sharp, so they may not be well suited to monsters like this.

“Kate-san might just be the one best suited for this job, surprisingly enough,” I remarked.

“Huh? Me?” Kate-san, the only one who was not attacking the severed head, turned to look at me with some surprise.

“Yeah,” I continued. “In your case, you can aim for their eyes from a distance, right?”

Kate-san thought about this for a moment, then nodded.

“I guess so... The lava lizard didn’t react to you even when you were quite close, Shopkeeper-san. If that’s what it’s like, I don’t think I’ll have any problem.”

During the hellflame grizzlies’ attack on the village, she had been moving around on the rooftops as she shot them in the eyes, so a lava lizard that was just sitting there was probably nothing but a target to Kate-san.

The question was how effective arrows would be, but we were just going to have to try it and see for ourselves.

“So, why don’t you give it a try?” I suggested.

Because if anything goes wrong right now, I’m here to take care of it.

“Found one,” Iris-san said.

We had been looking around, trying to find another lava lizard on its own, when we spotted one near one of those spots where steam was rising from.

Like the one I’d killed earlier, it didn’t react to us as we observed it from a distance. The lava lizard remained unmoving, with its belly pressed against the

ground.

At a glance, it looked lazy and defenseless, but having seen for ourselves how tough its skin was on its top and even its sides, we could tell that it was in a highly secure posture.

“Right, so it’s okay if I go first, then?” Kate-san asked.

“Yeah. Kate, show us your skill with a bow,” Iris-san encouraged her.

“Don’t expect too much from me...”

After that back-and-forth, Kate-san let her arrow fly, and it struck true, skewering the lava lizard’s eyeball.

“Aww, yeah!” Gil-san cheered.

Twitch, twitch, the lava lizard started thrashing—ahh, now that I think about it, the other one had kept thrashing around even with its head cut off.

Even if the hit was lethal, a single arrow wasn’t going to stop the lizard from moving.

It might die on its own if we left it alone, but the situation continued developing before it got to that point.

“Ah! It’s running away!” Iris-san shouted.

“And it’s fast?!” Gray-san shouted too.

The lava lizard had only twitched and thrashed for a moment. After that, it had immediately started moving—in the opposite direction of us, and faster than anyone would have expected.

Iris-san immediately tried to give chase, but...

“Hold it!”

I grabbed her by the collar.

“Gwugh!” Iris-san coughed and sputtered. “Shopkeeper-dono, what was that for, so suddenly?!”

She looked at me disapprovingly, but it wasn’t my fault.

“Iris-san, do you remember what I warned you about earlier?”

Iris-san's eyes roamed awkwardly at the question.

"Erm...we're not supposed to chase them too far, right?"

"That's right. If a lava lizard is running away, it's generally going to run somewhere humans can't go. You're not allowed to run after it."

"I-I guess that makes sense...?"

There were places that looked flat, but were actually deep pits of mud. Hot mud.

It was important not to assume that we could walk somewhere just because the lava lizards had been able to move over it as if it was no big deal.

"So with that said, let's follow cautiously. It looks like it's already pretty badly weakened."

In the time I was talking to Iris-san, the lava lizard had moved a few dozen meters away and come to a stop after half burying itself in the mud.

That probably wasn't because it had gotten somewhere safe, but because it was too weak to move any farther. It wasn't hard to imagine what thrashing around might do to a creature that already had the shaft of an arrow buried halfway into its head.

"Actually, it's probably already dead... But why not shoot another arrow into it? There's no need to take chances, right?" I suggested.

"I-I suppose not," Iris-san agreed. "Kate, could you do that for us?"

"On it...!"

Kate-san loosed another arrow, scoring a perfect hit on the lava lizard.

But the impact of the arrow only made it shake slightly. There was no sign of it thrashing around the way it had before.

"Nice one! All right, now let me go pick it up!"

Gil-san flashed Kate-san a thumbs-up, then began approaching the lava lizard with a spring—but also a healthy dose of caution—in his step.

There were spots where water was flowing and it was rather hot, but we were all wearing thick boots that wouldn't absorb it.

So long as he didn't plant his foot in a deep quagmire, there was no risk of him getting burned.

And being the veteran that he was, Gil-san was diligently avoiding the spots that seemed like they might be unsafe. But, nevertheless.

"Ah! If you're that careless—"

"Yeeeowch!!!"

You can't say I didn't warn him.

The moment he seized the lava lizard's tail, Gil-san let out a cry of pain and bolted back over to the group with incredible speed.

"S-Sarasa-chan, m-my hand!"

"Yes, yes. Let me take a look at it."

After taking off the glove, we found his hand had turned a dark red, but it was just a superficial burn, not even serious enough to use a potion for.

Once I cooled his hand with magic and cast a light healing spell, the redness faded in no time.

Gil-san breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that, but Andre-san, who was equally relieved, arched an eyebrow before slapping Gil-san upside the head.

"You dolt, you're taking things too easy," he scolded. "Sorry, Sarasa-chan. Do you need us to pay for his treatment?"

"If you'd come to the shop, I'd have had to charge you, but we're working together on a job here. There's no need to pay me for anything I can handle with magic."

"Sorry," Gil-san apologized. "You really saved me there. But man...that was crazy hot!"

"Yeah, I'll bet. It's like it's sitting there in a bubbling pot of stew, huh?"

You had to replace the broth with mud in this analogy, but both were hot. Anything sitting half immersed in that heat couldn't help but be hot itself.

"The flexible gloves are tough, but they don't provide any heat resistance," I reminded him.

“They keep out frostbite bat fangs, so I figured it’d be okay.”

“Um, no, that’s an entirely different function.”

Frostbite bat fangs didn’t trigger their freezing effect unless they punctured something, so it wasn’t as though the gloves protected against intense cold either.

There *were* gloves that protected against the heat, but he’d have had to be wearing them instead.

Although, in my opinion, if he wanted to grab something hot, he didn’t need to resort to an expensive artifact. The thick gloves that blacksmiths used or even an oven mitt would do fine.

“That all makes a lot of sense. Let me go and handle it this time.”

Gray-san was the next to step up.

He couldn’t have had that much more experience as a gatherer than Gil-san, but perhaps because he was so quiet, he gave off a sense of stable reliability.

If Andre-san was the central pillar of the team, and Gil-san was the life of the party, then Gray-san was the solid foundation. He didn’t move carelessly, and when he did, he left no openings.

And having learned from Gil-san’s mistakes, Gray-san put on another glove over top of the flexible gloves, giving himself a thicker layer of leather protecting his hand. He grabbed the lava lizard by the tail and dragged it up out of the muck.

“Gray, are you all right?” Andre-san asked.

“Just fine,” he answered. “Sarasa-chan, if we leave this for a while, it will cool, right?”

“Yep. The heat hasn’t made it all the way inside, so I think it will cool quickly.”

“In that case, we can wait for it to cool before butchering it. I thought it went down awfully easy...”

“We have Kate’s archery skills to thank for that,” Iris-san said, nodding sagely.

“And because it was a solitary enemy,” I added with a tone of caution. “If you

go after a pack of them, then they'll attack instead of running away. You don't want to be fired to a crisp, right?"

One of them was manageable, but a pack could be a real threat. Lava lizards weren't affected by each other's breath attacks, so they could let loose on enemies without fear of a misfire.

The end result? We'd be roasted whole.

Iris-san went a little pale at the thought. "Right, I'll keep that firmly in mind."

"Well, we'll just have to pick off lizards that are alone," said Andre-san. "Other than that, watch your step and be careful they don't run away into places we can't collect their bodies from. Let's keep all of that in mind and see how well we can do it."

That was how our hunt started, but given the size of the lava lizards and the distance from here to the village, we could only bring so many back.

Ultimately, we hit our limit after another two lizards and called it quits early.

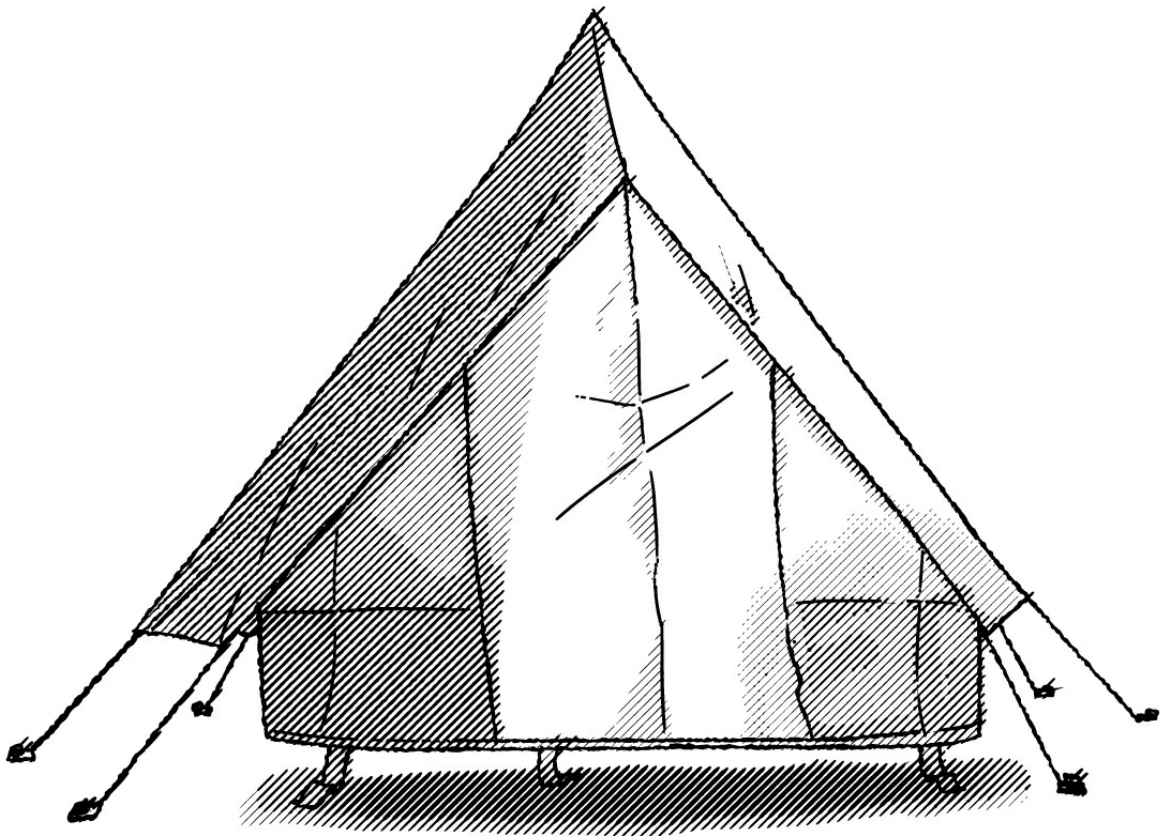
And with that done, we hurried back to the village.

No. 006

Complete Alchemy Works: Appears in Volume 4

Difficulty: Normal

Standard Price: ~100,000 Rhea



〈Floating Tent〉

Efficient Tent

Have you ever had to sleep on the bumpy ground? Well, if you sleep in midair, that problem will go away! Efficient gathering starts with a good night's sleep! Functions to repel insects and adjust temperature also available. *Please note that the required magical power must be supplied by the people inside the tent.

Episode 3: Compensation and Cultivation

“Huh? What...*is* this?”

Once our impromptu expedition had pulled out and I had hurried back home, upon my arrival I found that an impressive enclosure had appeared next to my house.

I’d saddled the others with the job of reporting to Erin-san—or rather, I’d asked them to handle it for me, because Lorea-chan would be waiting with a nice meal—and headed back by myself...

Oh, there was a reason for that, of course, though! It wasn’t just that there had been hardly anything to report. Unlike me, the others still needed to collect their payment from Erin-san, so...

“Hm? Could this be my reward?”

Erin-san had offered me a field for growing medicinal herbs (farmers included) as compensation for my services.

This was an awfully impressive fence to put around a field, though. It was taller than I was and left no gaps large enough for a person to slip through. But when I took a peek inside, it certainly looked like a plot of land for farming.

There was still long grass covering the vast majority of it, but three men were there, tilling the land.

“Sarasa-san?” came a cautious voice from behind me.

“Lorea-chan!” I exclaimed as I turned around. She was looking at me strangely.

“Welcome home,” she said. “I’m relieved you made it back here in one piece.”

“Yep, it’s good to be home! Thanks! And nobody got hurt—wait, that’s not what I want to talk about! Erm, what’s all this?”

“It’s a farmer’s field. I heard it was your payment for the job?”

“Uh, yeah, but this is bigger than I expected, and the enclosure around it is kind of incredible...”

Other fields in the village had fences to keep animals out of them, but none were as impressive as this. It might not be on the same level as the fence that had been installed on the boundary of the forest after the recent hellflame grizzly attack, but it looked nearly as sturdy.

“Is it to keep wild beasts out? Did they put in extra effort because it’s going to be my field?”

“Oh, you mean the fence?” Lorea-chan crossed her arms and nodded, a smug look on her face. “That’s not for animals...it’s for people. Specifically, it’s to keep out any unscrupulous gatherers.”

F-Fair enough. I can see how, from the gatherers’ perspective, these are going to be herbs they can get their hands on without entering the forest, but...

“Uh, are they really going to try to steal from the field next door to the shop? Is that normal?”

They couldn’t just waltz right in and demand I buy the purloined herbs off of them, right?

“Sarasa-san, normal people don’t do things like steal crops. Most of the folks here these days are good people, but I’m told that back when the village was really bustling with lots of gatherers, there were times when it did happen. I wasn’t even born yet back then, though.”

“O-Oh, is that right...?”

Listen, it wasn’t that I didn’t know there were people who might be unethical. It was just that I assumed they wouldn’t even have to think about it to realize what would happen if they did that in a small village like this.

“Well, anyway, the villagers and other gatherers caught those thieves, then gave them a good clobbering before tossing them out of town.”

“Y-Yeah... That’s more or less what I expected to have happened.”

The fields in this village were small in scale, so they were all either inside the village, or right next to it. There was basically no chance of anyone stealing

without getting spotted, and with such a small population, it wouldn't take much asking around before someone named the culprit.

And in a tiny village with no bureaucracy, the mayor was the highest authority. Fortunately, the mayor in this village was a good person, if a little unreliable. In some villages, there might not even have been a proper investigation, so...if those criminals got off with just a beating and were allowed to leave with their lives, then maybe they ought to be grateful for that.

"It's not something that happens often, but we're on the outskirts of the village here. It'd be awful if anyone were to steal everything in the field and flee to somewhere like South Strag, so they put in the effort to protect it."

"Oh, I see. Well, it means I can rest easy, so I'm grateful."

If the villains didn't stop at just a little pilfering and uprooted my entire field, I wouldn't even be left with seeds to grow more herbs, so that would be a real problem.

I guess if I'm planting valuable herbs, some people might be tempted, huh.

Depending on how things went, perhaps I would need to consider installing a security system.

"I think Erin-san will come around to explain the details to you later, but...Michael-san!"

When Lorea-chan called out to the other side of the fence, the workers turned to look, then stopped what they were doing and came over to us.

Oh, I thought it was three men, but one of them is a woman.

Not that I'd have been able to tell, since they were wearing straw hats and their backs had been turned to me when I looked earlier.

"Sarasa-san, this is Michael-san and his wife, Izu-san. The other guy with them is Gatt-san. I think you've met Gatt-san before, right?"

With suntanned skin and firm muscles, Gatt-san looked like the very picture of a farmer.

I was completely reliant on Lorea-chan when it came to food now, and it was rare for me to go and buy vegetables myself, but I did remember saying hello to

him while he was working in his fields.

In contrast, his younger brother, Michael-san, was of a more slight build. The difference was so pronounced I'd never have guessed the two of them were brothers. He couldn't be a farmer too, right?

Izu-san was also a departure from this village's uniquely tough women. She was still healthy, but not rugged in the way that someone who worked the fields was. If I had to guess, she was maybe a little older than I was?

"Hello, Michael-san, Izu-san. This is our first time meeting, right?"

I couldn't be too confident about that, but it was a small village. There probably wasn't anyone I hadn't at least seen in passing.

"Yes, we just moved back into the village recently," Michael-san explained.

"Ohh, I thought it had to be something like that. So the two of you are...erm..."

The sort of people who left a farming village were all more or less the same. The general pattern was that they were extra sons and daughters who couldn't inherit the family business or get married in the village, so they went to a larger town in search of work. Yes, there were those like Gretz-san, who left because they simply wanted to do a specific kind of work, but they were very much in the minority.

Most people like them leave because they have no other choice, so...maybe I shouldn't ask what made them come back...?

But despite my hesitation, Lorea-chan tossed caution to the wind and immediately spilled the beans.

"Michael-san left the village for South Strag. That's where he married Izu-san, but he couldn't find a good job. So, to put it simply, he failed to take off!"

"L-Lorea-chan..." Michael-san looked like he was going to cry, and Izu-san had an awkward smile on her face.

Gatt-san gave his younger brother a big old slap on the back.

"Hey, it's the truth, ain't it?! I heard you'd gotten yourself a wife, so I went to celebrate with you...but what did I find? You had no business getting married

without a proper income!!! You happened to get lucky with this offer from Erin-san, but what exactly were you planning to do if it hadn't come along, huh?"

"Urgh... I... I'm grateful for the opportunity. To Erin-san, and to you. Oh, and to Sarasa-san as well, of course!"

From the sound of it, Gatt-san had been delighted when he heard about his brother's marriage, thinking that he'd made it. But when he'd arrived in South Strag, he'd found the two of them barely scraping by. They'd both had jobs, so they hadn't been in extreme hardship or anything, but the situation hadn't left them with any opportunities for the future.

But that said, a farmer living the subsistence life in a small village like Gatt-san couldn't afford to offer them financial support, so at that time all he'd been able to do was leave them a wedding present and head back to the village.

Michael-san was the one who'd proposed, so I asked Izu-san, "Why did you marry him, given the situation?"

"I felt like he'd be hopeless without me to support him..."

Seeing the somewhat troubled, but also happy, look on her face, Lorea-chan and I both uttered an unintentional "Yikes..." at the same time.

This is a bad pattern!

The hopeless guy and his devoted wife.

It may look beautiful at first glance, but neither of them will end up happy!

Gatt-san seemed to have been thinking likewise, because he let out a troubled sigh. "You see how it is? I couldn't just leave them alone, so I went to Erin-san for help."

Just as Gatt-san had been agonizing over what to do about his younger brother, he'd heard that Erin-san was looking for people to work in the herb field, and had begged her to give them the job before calling the young couple back home.

Normally, when preparing new fields for cultivation, all of the costs were borne by the farmer, so they needed to have the money to keep themselves fed until they were able to harvest.

But this field was being prepared as a reward for me, so those costs were being covered by the village.

In addition to that, they would be covering the couple's living expenses too, so...even though the field wouldn't be theirs, it was still a pretty good deal for them.

"He's such a stand-up guy..." I murmured, seeing the way that, even though Gatt-san sighed, he still looked at his brother and his sister-in-law with such kind eyes.

There were families where the eldest child would pretend not to even know their siblings anymore once they left the house, or would even chase them out themselves, but he was going to such lengths to help.

"Heh. It's not like that." Gatt-san scratched his nose with embarrassment. "It's just, now that I've got a sister-in-law, I can't let her be unhappy, right? I may not have money, but I'm still gonna do what I can to help them out."

Although he said that, even the work preparing the field that he was doing right now was something he'd gone out of his way to come help with after he finished toiling in his own fields.

Doing agricultural work in the summer heat was hard enough without taking on more of it.

"Thank you for your effort, especially in this hot weather."

"It's summer, so there's no helping the heat. Though, it's not been so bad this year, y'know? Because we've got your cooling hats. I bet without one of them, this loser would've keeled over by now!"

Gatt-san punctuated this by jabbing his brother in the ribs.

Michael-san, perhaps recognizing there was some truth to it, nodded with a sheepish smile. "Yes, the hats have been a big help. We're just borrowing ours, though."

"I know I'd struggle to work in the fields in this summer heat without it. But you know, I never expected them to have artifacts out in a middle-of-nowhere village like— Oops, I'm so sorry!"

Izu-san rushed to cover her mouth, which had just let slip an undeniable truth, then apologized, but neither Gatt-san nor Lorea-chan seemed particularly offended.

“This *is* a middle-of-nowhere village. But it’s gotten more tolerable since Sarasa-san moved in here...” said Lorea-chan.

“You said it,” Gatt-san agreed. “We only have these cooling hats because of Sarasa-chan. You two’d better be grateful to her too, got it?”

“Of course,” Michael-san immediately replied.

“Yes, we’ve heard all about it,” added Izu-san. “Erm, Sarasa-san, would it be all right if I brought in hats for you to work on?”

“Yes. Everyone in the village is welcome to. And you plan to move in here, right?”

“Of course,” Izu-san replied with a firm nod before, more quietly, saying, “Yay, now I can get a stylish cooling hat.”

The straw hat she was currently wearing was a favorite among the village’s farmers, but I’m sure that, having lived in town all her life, Izu-san was just a little dissatisfied with it.

For my part, Izu-san seemed like she had a good sense of fashion, so if she were to bring in some marvelous hats for me to work on, that would increase the variety in the products we were offering. I was the one who ought to be grateful she was asking.

I didn’t have much hope of the villagers buying her hats, but maybe Gretz-san would.

“So, it’s all right for me to leave the management of this field to the two of you, right?”

“Yes. My brother is only helping until the field is prepared... I know it may be an imposition at times, but we look forward to your guidance,” Michael-san said, bowing his head.

“I’ll do my best too. Not that I’ve ever farmed before!” Izu-san said, clenching her fists to psych herself up.

I'd already guessed from the way she talked and her general appearance, but...

"Izu-san, you're not from a farming village, are you?"

"Nope, I'm from South Strag. Born and raised. This is my first time living in a farming village."

"I knew it. Michael-san, you at least have some farming experience, right...?"

He was Gatt-san's little brother. He had to have helped on the family farm as a kid, at least.

But his skin wasn't tanned, and his physique didn't even remotely suggest he'd done agricultural labor.

I didn't know what kind of work he'd been doing in South Strag, but he wasn't muscular like his brother, which concerned me just a little.

While I could instruct them on how the herbs were grown, I wasn't a specialist in agriculture. I was pretty sure that there must be differences between the kind of small-scale cultivation that an alchemist might do and mass production for agricultural purposes.

Perhaps picking up on my worries, Gatt-san somewhat hesitantly explained, "Ohh, he left the village as soon as he came of age... But I'll help him out with that kind of stuff, and even if he's a bit slow on the uptake, he's good at working himself like a dumb mule. Sorry, Sarasa-chan, but could I ask you to take the long view on this?"

"Oh, sure. I don't mind, but...will Michael-san and his wife be okay with it?"

For me, alchemy was my main job, so it wouldn't hurt me that badly if this herb-growing venture failed. I could still buy herbs from the gatherers, so it wasn't that big of a problem. But for them, it was going to be their livelihood...

"If things go badly, will you be able to cover your expenses and have somewhere to live?" I asked them.

"Right now, we're living for free in my brother's house," Michael-san replied. "Erin-san will be paying us wages, so I'm sure we'll work something out before then..."

“I’d like to build a new house for them somewhere over there eventually,” Gatt-san said, gesturing toward the side of the field that was opposite from my own house, “but that depends on how hard this guy works. I can’t have them staying with me once they’ve got kids, y’know?”

Currently, my house was on the outer edge of the village, but I guess if Michael-san’s house got built, that would mean the village had expanded a bit, huh? Erin-san had been saying she wanted to increase the number of herb fields if things went well, so maybe it would bring in even more villagers?

“Hrrmm, this is a big responsibility,” I mused to myself.

“Nah, you don’t have to sweat it. You know how to grow herbs properly, right, Sarasa-chan? If it doesn’t work out, then it’s Michael’s fault. Now, listen here. Don’t go popping out any kids until you’ve got a stable income to support them, okay?”

Gatt-san clapped Michael-san on the shoulder, eliciting an embarrassed, “B-Bro!” Izu-san was turning a little red too.

Oh, yeah. They are married, after all. I guess they could have kids.

“Well, it may be strange to call this a wedding present, but let me help you out with some magic.”

I figured the sooner we could see the results, the better, and I didn’t want them to feel they couldn’t do certain things with each other when they’d just gotten married. Not that I’d know about that stuff.

I mean, I’ve never had a partner!

“Once the soil is tilled, it should get a lot easier from there, right?”

The most labor-intensive part of opening up new land for farming was plowing the compacted soil and removing all of the rocks and roots. Fortunately, there had only been a bit of brush here, so there were no thick tree stumps to contend with, but where the grass was thick, it was still a lot of hard work to dig it up and turn over the earth. I figured if I softened the ground up for them, that would help.

“We’d appreciate it, but...can you do that?” Gatt-san looked at me, a little

confused.

“Of course,” I answered with a powerful nod. “Now, let me get right to—”

Just as I was about to use my magic, Lorea-chan grabbed my hand to stop me.

“Sarasa-san? Even if you can sweep away all the brush and weeds with your magic, it’ll be hard to use it as a field afterward if you blow away all of the soil too, you know?”

“Lorea-chan, just what do you think I am?”

Was she thinking that I was the kind of lazy person who’d say, *“Oh, this is a pain. I’ll just blow everything away!”*?

I stared at her, unamused by this insulting insinuation, but Lorea-chan stared back at me just as hard.

“Remember what you did over there, then try saying that again.”

Lorea-chan was pointing to the forest—er, ex-forest—next to my backyard. The trees were all gone now and the ground was bare, making it the ideal spot for training.

As I thought back to how it had ended up that way, I averted my eyes despite myself.

“Th-That was... I was testing my attack magic.”

“And what you’re about to use is different...?”

“It’s a type of it, sure, but—w-well, just see for yourself! I’ll try it on this row!”

Turning my back on the other three, who were looking increasingly worried after hearing Lorea-chan, I gently placed my hand on the ground.

I want to run my magic through an area about two meters wide and ten meters long. So aim for that and...

“Yah!!!”

I focused my magical energy into the ground. The surface rose, stirring up the soil.

This created a furrow that was around twenty centimeters high.

There were still grass and rocks mixed in it, so they would need to remove those, but I'd saved them the labor of digging up the hard ground, so this was going to save them a lot of effort.

The three farmers reacted with a "Wowwww!"

Lorea-chan's eyes sparkled. "That was amazing, Sarasa-san!"

"Huh? Aww, it was no big deal. It just takes a little magic to do," I replied, happy to see this total change in attitude.

"Magic... Is it something I could do too?!"

"Huh? Would you want to, Lorea-chan?"

"Yes!" Lorea-chan gave a surprising answer, her eyes still sparkling as she did.

She has a decent amount of magical power, so it's not impossible if she puts her mind to it, but...

"It'll take hard work, you know? Because it's magic. Are you still interested?"

"Well, if I could do that, I'd never struggle to find work again!"

"Huh? Lorea-chan, you don't like working in my shop?" I asked in disbelief, but Lorea-chan quickly shook her head.

"Oh, no, it's not like that... I was just thinking about if you ever fired me..."

"I have no intention of doing that, though..."

If anything, my plan was to never let her go.

There was no way I'd fire someone who was so easy to use. (I mean that in a good way!)

"Although, I guess it could be a good way for you to earn some pocket money. All right, I'll teach you how to do it."

This spell would leave any farmer drooling, after all. With the amount of magical power Lorea-chan had, she could earn as much as several laborers, maybe even ten if she did things right.

If she says she wants time off to go do that, I'm generous enough to let her.

"How about us, Sarasa-chan?" Michael-san asked.

“Uhh, I won’t say it’s *impossible*, but you’ll probably go faster doing it the old-fashioned way?”

From what I could sense of these three’s magical power, they were at the average level for commoners. That meant they weren’t suited for magic, and even if they pushed themselves to be able to use it, they would struggle to make it more efficient than just working by hand.

“Magic really is all about talent, huh...” Izu-san sighed dejectedly.

“Ha ha ha... It’s a big part of it, yeah.” Having perhaps too much of that natural talent myself, I couldn’t help but let out a dry laugh in response. “A-Anyway, Lorea-chan, how about we give it a try? For starters...”

So, to change the subject, I took Lorea-chan’s hand and led her away.



“And? Did it go well, Shopkeeper-dono?” asked Iris-san, who had returned from Erin-san’s place.

I nodded. “Of course it went well. Because I never fail!”

Not recently, that is! Back when I’d first become Master’s apprentice, I’d had my fair share of blunders—no, let me be honest, I messed up almost every day, and caused her no end of trouble.

But this time, I was telling the truth. Lorea-chan was even nodding in agreement.

However, Iris-san shook her head, looking a little troubled. “Um, actually, I was asking about Lorea.”

“Me? I was hopeless...” Lorea-chan said, crestfallen.

“B-But if you keep on practicing, I’m sure you’ll get there. Yep,” I hurriedly reassured her.

Even if she didn’t get the desired effect, I think she was able to use her magical power. That’s hard at first, so if she works hard, I think she’ll get somewhere with it.

“Oho. Then, when the time comes to develop new fields back home, perhaps

I'll ask Lorea."

"What? You don't trust *me* to do it, Iris-san?"

I've never messed up and blown away the fence or anything. I keep my power under control and only dig up the area inside the fence, you know?

"That's not how it is," Kate-san interjected. "It's just that we couldn't possibly afford to hire an alchemist like you, Shopkeeper-san. But if it's Lorea-chan, don't you think we could pay her an amount equal to the wages we'd otherwise be paying to the laborers?"

Apparently, even if they had to pay the same amount, the time they'd save still meant something.

"Preparing new land for crops is *such* a lot of work..."

I could tell Iris-san must have had experience, because she put her soul into those words.

Having been the daughter of merchants, I'd at least heard about how difficult it was clearing land for farming. It was one of the worst jobs that peasants were tasked with. If a lord made them do it too often, it massively reduced his popularity with the people.

In the longer term, it made the domain more prosperous, and the residents would share in the benefits, but the effect wouldn't be felt until later.

Perhaps the question of whether to put the people to work despite that was dependent on the lord's own abilities as a ruler.

"By the way, is that magic difficult?" Iris-san asked.

"It's not that easy, I guess? I used a variation on the spell Earth Needle. If you're looking at the power of the spell itself, it's not that difficult. However, modifying it to the appropriate degree of force requires delicate control of your magical power."

So much control that anyone who could do it could probably become an alchemist. Obviously, getting certified wasn't that easy, but magic-power fine-tuning was our most important technique, so it was fair to say that it was foundational enough that someone who could do it could become an alchemist

after extensive hard work.

“The combat version of the spell is easier, huh... I can see how it would be popular with the youth,” Iris-san said, nodding as though she understood. “After all, they have this image in their heads that magic is all about powerful attack spells!”

Maybe she was one of those who’d aspired to become a mage herself—especially judging by the look of exasperation on Kate-san’s face.

But I get it. I felt the same way as a kid!

“Lorea-chan, haven’t you ever wanted to learn offensive magic?” Kate-san asked. “You’ve never asked Shopkeeper-san to teach you before, right?”

Lorea-chan was quick to shake her head. “Even if I learned it, I have nothing to use it on. I think it would be better if I learned spells that can help the people of the village.”

“How are you so mature?! I know I’d have chosen the attack magic! Especially at your age.”

“Huh? Really? What were you doing at my age, Sarasa-san?”

“I was absorbed in my studies, but...that’s only because I was an orphan.”

If my parents had been alive, things would have been different.

Besides, if I was going to take up the family trade, traveling from town to town, then offensive magic would actually have been more useful to me. So it wouldn’t even have been the wrong choice.

Although, my own taste would still have been heavily factoring into that preference!

“Iris, you would have been focused on practicing your swordsmanship around that age, right?” Kate-san observed.

“Urgh! Well, um, unlike Shopkeeper-dono, I never had a master, so...”

“My mother could use magic, but...I had to spend so much of my time with you, I could never find the time to work on my magic. Hey, Shopkeeper-san, do you think I could learn that magic too?”

“You, Kate-san? Even though you’re a gatherer?”

“I’m not going to be a gatherer forever, so it can’t hurt to have other viable tools of the trade, right?”

“Huh? Is Iris-san going to be abandoned? Will Kate-san give up gathering to make her debut as a master of land development magic?” Lorea-chan said, looking back and forth from one to the other. Iris-san’s brow furrowed as she turned to look at her partner.

“Murgh, is that how it is, Kate? You wouldn’t do that to me, would you?”

“I wouldn’t. How could I ever abandon you? Just how many years do you think we’ve been together?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Kate would never leave me...” Iris-san breathed a sigh of relief.

“Not yet, at least,” Kate-san added, bringing a look of panic to her partner’s face. “I mean, it’s not as if I don’t have my grievances with you, you know?”

Iris-san reached out to her with both hands. “K-Kate! If you have any complaints, just tell me! I’ll do my very best to put things right!”

“Oh, yeah? Well...”

Smiling, Kate-san went on to list a number of points of dissatisfaction, but they were all things in their daily life, nothing to do with their work as gatherers.

It was like watching a wife complain about her husband, maybe...? Either way, it really showed the sort of relationship they had.

“The debt isn’t one of your complaints, Kate-san?” Lorea-chan asked, slightly mystified. “You two still owe a lot of money to Sarasa-san, don’t you?”

Kate-san immediately shook her head. “Not at all. If that was the sort of thing that I’d still be upset with her about, I wouldn’t have asked Shopkeeper-san to treat her in the first place.”

“Kate...”

Iris-san had been feeling down after being told all the things that were wrong

with her, but now she looked at Kate-san with an expression filled with emotion.

Yep, that's the carrot and stick approach for you. I should take notes for future reference. No idea who I'll be using it on, though.

"Besides, when we decided to work as gatherers, we accepted the risk we would get hurt," Kate-san said. "Although, you got hurt a bit worse than either of us expected."

"That's true," Iris-san agreed. "When we left home, I didn't think I'd almost die. I was fairly confident in my own skills, after all."

"Being a gatherer's more dangerous than we thought. And as we get older, our bodies will have a harder time keeping up. Which is all the more reason we can't keep doing it forever, right?"

"Yeah, and that's especially true for women..." I added. "Which I suppose is part of why you were saying you want to learn another trade."

Also, if they wanted to get married, they were both already around twenty, which was a bit late. Here in this village, there was practically nobody still unwed at their age.

Wait, no. Come to think of it, I've never seen Erin-san's husband. Could she be...?

But Erin-san has to be pushing thirty, so it's awkward to ask.

I think I'll dodge that land mine by asking Lorea-chan if she knows.

"By the way, Kate-san." I turned to her. "Do you have any aptitude for magic?"

"More than Iris, I guess? One of my parents was a black elf, after all."

"I thought that might be the case..."

"Oh, you'd noticed, Shopkeeper-san?"

"Yes. Your skin is slightly darker in tone and your ears looked long, so I had a feeling."

Even if it had caught my attention, I was hesitant to ask her to her face, so I'd

been ignoring it.

I'd seen people of nonhuman races in the capital and had no real prejudice against them, but in small countryside villages, that wasn't the case a lot of the time. That's why I'd deliberately chosen not to bring it up, but if she'd revealed it so casually, Kate-san was presumably not that concerned about her heritage.



“I-I’ve never seen someone of another race before!” Lorea-chan exclaimed. There was no malice in her tone. In fact, she was staring at Kate-san like she was some sort of oddity.

“I’m mixed, so it feels a bit awkward having you say I’m of another race, but...listen, I didn’t really inherit many of my traits from that side.”

Kate-san brushed back her hair to reveal one ear. It was different from a typical human ear, certainly, but as for her skin tone, it wasn’t outside the range you might expect to see. Many of the farmers, who worked out in the field all day, were more tanned than she was, so it wasn’t the sort of thing most people would pick up on if she didn’t say anything.

“Kate inherited her father’s looks and her mother’s personality,” Iris-san explained, sounding proud for some reason. “Ah, it’s her mother that’s the elf, just to be clear. They’re both quite attractive and reliable.”

“It’s a bit embarrassing to have you describe my folks like that,” Kate-san said, smiling bashfully. She must have been on good terms with her parents.

“Still, a black elf, huh?” I mused to myself. “Is that where you got your skill for archery?”

It was commonly understood that elves were good at archery and magic. That went for both black and white elves.

Incidentally, there was a time when black elves were called “dark elves.” But they’d said, “My skin tone’s a little darker, so ya call me dark? Screw that. And if I were white, ya’d call me light, huh? It’s almost like you’re sayin’ one of us’s good, ’n’ the other’s evil, isn’t it? Well?”

Or maybe they hadn’t. But anyway, in this kingdom, they were called elves regardless of color, and if a distinction had to be made, they were called white elves and black elves.

The term “dark elf” was still used in other countries, and it wasn’t necessarily with a negative connotation, but in this country, which pursued a policy of harmony and intermingling between the races, calling them “dark elves” in public would get you in trouble, so you had to be careful.

For that reason, among others, you generally didn't see open discrimination against nonhumans, but in villages in the countryside, although maybe not this one, it was all too common to be mistreated just for being an outsider. That probably contributed to why you didn't see many members of other races living in the countryside.

"It wasn't just archery; she taught me some magic too...it's just...mom's atrocious at teaching things, at least as far as magic is concerned... Not that I've ever been taught by anyone else."

"Yeah, she teaches you to do things by feeling. I learned a bit of archery from her, but if that method doesn't suit you, it's no good at all."

Iris-san looked up as if recalling the experience, then nodded as though she understood.

"When she was teaching me the bow, I could look at what she was doing and copy her, but that just doesn't work with magic, you know? And it wasn't like there was anyone else there who could use magic," Kate-san said with a sigh. "She could tell me 'You have to feel it!' all she wanted, but I have no idea what that even means..."

"Yeah, I can see why that wouldn't work," I replied. "Although, it *is* true that you need to 'feel' it..."

Well, there was a difference between being able to do something and being able to teach it.

Especially something like magic, which involved a lot of intuition.

The way the Alchemist Academy taught the subject—as you would expect from this country's top institution—had been highly systematic and logical.

Master was the one who had really helped pull me up to a higher level as an alchemist, but the instructors at the alchemy had definitely laid the foundation, so...although I hadn't been close to very many of them, I was still grateful to all of my educators.

"I understand. In that case, Kate-san can join us when I'm teaching Lorea-chan. I make no guarantee that you'll be able to master it, though."

“That’s only to be expected,” she replied. “It’s a big help that you’re willing to teach me at all. Who knows how much it would normally cost to hire an alchemist to tutor you...”

“Oh... I guess it wasn’t something I could ask for so casually.” Lorea-chan’s expression grew worried. “Um... Would it be better if I paid you? I think I can afford to spend about half of my wages—”

“No, you don’t have to!” I said, hurriedly waving up my hands. “I’m not going to charge my friends just to teach them a few things! It’s fine, ask casually for things. The trade off is that I can’t really spend a whole lot of time on it, though.”

It was true that hiring an alchemist as a home tutor would have cost all of an ordinary person’s income and then some, but I was still inexperienced.

This wasn’t really my main job, which was alchemy, so if Master found out I was taking money to teach people how to do it, she’d either get exasperated with me, or angry...

“Of course, that’s fine with me. I’d be happy even if all you did was watch me for a bit during your lunch break.”

“Sure. That actually might be better, you know? Practicing the control of your magic power is boring, and you won’t get good results from trying to cram too much practice in. Is that good with you too, Kate-san?”

“Yeah, you’re teaching us for free, so I can’t complain—it *is* free, right? For me too? We’re friends, aren’t we, Shopkeeper-san?”

Kate-san looked a little worried, but I smiled and nodded.

“Sh-Shopkeeper-dono, would you mind teaching me as well?”

“No, of course not. You’re a friend too, Iris-san!”

Yahoo! Look how many friends I’ve gained! It’s not all about money...uh, right?



The next day, Erin-san visited and immediately bowed her head to me.

“Sarasa-san, first, allow me to apologize. We were supposed to prepare a reward for you, and yet only caused you to exert more effort.”

“Oh... Is this about me tilling the soil? I did that on my own initiative, so don't worry about it. Think of it as my wedding gift to the new couple.”

“It's kind of you to say that, but as I've paid Andre-san and the others the amount they were promised, I need to do the same with the reward that was offered to you as well.”

“How conscientious of you. You really don't need to worry about it, but...I do wonder what the cause was. That wasn't what I expected to see with you calling the shots...”

If the mayor were in charge, he might have said, “Ho ho ho, we fell a bit behind schedule,” but Erin-san had always seemed more on top of things.

That was why I'd brought it up, but Erin-san sighed with a troubled look on her face. “There are fewer idle hands in this village than I thought... It took longer to find people than expected. That was my miscalculation.”

Currently, there were more gatherers in the village than in previous years. With more villagers working at Delal-san's inn and restaurant, or helping Jizdo-san the blacksmith or Geberk-san the carpenter with their increased business, the village was shorthanded like never before.

“I see how it is. So I'm at least partially responsible for the situation.”

“Partially? More like entirely. And we're grateful for it... Although, it seems we ended up inconveniencing you as a result.”

“I'd just heard Michael-san's story, and he seems to be struggling...when it would be so simple for me to just finish the job myself.”

“It certainly sounds like it was. By the way, if we pay you for your work, could we trouble you to help out from time to time when we're expanding the fields?” Erin-san asked with a smile.

I let out an awkward laugh. Her apology complete, she was already trying to take advantage of all the tools at her disposal. That was the effective mayor of this village for you.

“If I have time, I don’t mind. But maybe Lorea-chan will have learned to use that magic by then,” I replied with a chuckle. Erin-san’s eyes widened.

“Lorea-chan? Sarasa-san, are you teaching Lorea-chan magic?”

“She says she’d like to be able to use it. She’s still only just started learning, though.”

“I see... It would be easier to hire Lorea-chan than an alchemist like yourself.”

“Oh, if you do go with Lorea-chan, please make sure you pay her properly, okay?”

I trusted Erin-san, but felt I should say something anyway.

I’d feel bad if they decided to run her ragged because she was one of the villagers.

“Of course we will. Because if we don’t compensate talented people appropriately, they’ll leave the village,” Erin responded. “Although, this is all assuming that the herb cultivation is a success. Do you think it will be?”

“I’ll give them my guidance, but I can’t guarantee anything. I learned how to grow small quantities, so I suspect it will take some trial and error to apply that knowledge to growing larger fields of herbs.”

The first question was what varieties to plant.

Herbs came in all varieties, from those that would grow even if they were left alone, to others that were more difficult and required nearly daily attention.

Naturally, the former could be easily gathered from the forest, so they weren’t all that valuable.

As for the latter, they’d provide a large profit if we could harvest them, but even the seeds and seedlings were expensive for those sorts of herbs, so we’d be facing a huge loss if the crop failed. In a small garden, with only a handful of plants, it was possible to take the time to care for each one, but once you were dealing with an entire field, that was a lot of work.

Incidentally, the herbs I had been growing were the type that took more effort. Ones that were hard to find, or needed processing as soon as they were harvested, weren’t brought in to the shop often, so I had done my best to grow

them myself.

When the hellflame grizzlies had then gone and torn the place up, I'd seriously been ready to cry. If their hides weren't so valuable as materials, I would have let my anger get the better of me and sliced them into little pieces, then used them as fertilizer.

"If things don't go so well, you may end up with fields of nothing but cheap, easy-to-grow herbs. I hope that's all right. I can't imagine you'll be looking to expand the fields in that case, though."

If they took herbs that were already cheap and then mass-produced them, they might not even be worth buying at that point.

"I'll leave that to you as the expert, Sarasa-san. But if the crop fails because of Michael's laziness, do tell me, okay? I'll give him an earful."

"Ha ha ha, I'll do my best to make sure that never happens. Because I don't get the sense that you'd let him off with just words."

Erin-san had been clenching her fists as she smiled. I'd feel a little bad for the newlywed couple if she had to put those fists to work on them.



The field had been tilled, but it would still be some time before it was ready to be used.

In the meantime, I started working with the herbs that had survived the hellflame grizzly attack, doing things like splitting them at the roots for replanting or taking cuttings from them. I also asked my master to send me seeds. In addition to that, I obviously had to deal with the backlog of work that had come in while I was away.

It was pretty rough.

To tell you the truth, because I was going to be away, I had installed a large refrigerator for materials inside the warehouse. Obviously, this was to preserve any materials brought in during my absence.

I had given people a few days' warning before my departure, so I had briefly considered just having Lorea-chan reject anything she couldn't make a decision

on herself.

But that would have been such a waste, both for the gatherers who had gone to the trouble of collecting things and for me. That was why I'd built a refrigerator, which could delay the degradation of the materials' quality somewhat, and offered to hold on to the materials our regular customers brought in under the condition we would not be accepting any complaints.

By the way, there were storage artifacts that could genuinely stop things from degrading, but they were obviously out of reach for me, so I had gone with a refrigerator as the next best thing.

And fortunately, I happened to have an excess of the frostbite bat fangs that were used to make one.

Even if all it did was keep things cool, that was still an improvement over leaving them exposed to ambient temperatures in this hot season. I'd checked the condition of the materials on my return, and it wasn't as bad as I'd worried it might be.

That didn't change the fact that I couldn't store them for long, however, so I was now working at a feverish pace to process all the materials and establish a purchase price so that we could pay people the next time they visited the shop.

"So anyway, Lorea-chan, here is a list with the prices we will be buying the materials for and who to pay for them, along with the money you'll need to do that," I said, plopping down a heavy sack of cash.

"Got it... This is quite a lot of money, huh?" Lorea-chan said as she lifted up the bag and then cautiously hid it behind the counter.

It had been some time since she had started working for me, so she had gotten used to handling large sums of money, but when it was all in one place like this, it still made her a little tense. Her expression was a bit stiff.

"Well, that *is* a whole week's worth. It's putting a serious dent in our cash on hand, so I'll have to compensate for that."

"Oh, really?"

"Yep. I've been focusing on making things that we don't have much prospect

of selling recently.”

I was doing that in order to level up. I just had a few more artifacts to go before I could move on to the fifth volume, but getting there wasn’t going to give me a sudden influx of cash.

If anything, it would mean more materials I needed to buy, so I’d have less money, not more. For that reason, it was probably best if I put off leveling up and focused on things I could sell.

“How is the tent situation, by the way? We got a number of orders, right?” I asked Lorea-chan.

“Yes,” she replied. “I have some of the old ladies helping me to make them, but...it’s taking us longer than I had expected. I think that’s, in part, because they aren’t used to sewing leather, but many of them are busy too... I’m doing my best to get them made, though.”

Her tone was apologetic, but I waved my hand and said, “Ohh, Erin-san mentioned that too. That we have a shortage of people. Don’t let it bother you too much.”

I felt bad for the gatherers who’d be left waiting, but they’d just have to accept that we didn’t have any professional leatherworkers in this town.

There had been potions in Master’s workshop that could stick leather together. If I had those, they’d speed up the process, but...they hadn’t shown up yet as of the fourth volume, which meant they must have been some pretty high-level items.

Well, it was less like the potions made the leather stick together and more like it fused the two pieces, so that it looked like it was all one piece. Maybe it’s only to be expected that an effect like that would be difficult to produce?

“But we’ve had additional orders too...”

“We have...?”

“Yes. It seems that the people we already sold them to spread the word. There have been more people camping out lately because of lack of room at the inn. Although, Geberk-san and his team have been doing their best to build new

houses...”

“Ohh, yeah. They’ve been hard at work repairing the houses damaged in the attack too.”

“And on expanding Delal-san’s inn. You put up the money for that.”

“Right. I guess they can’t handle all of that construction quickly.”

Part of the issue was that Geberk-san was the only carpenter, but there was also a lack of construction materials.

That could be remedied by putting in an order in South Strag, of course, but there wasn’t usually such a high demand for lumber in this village. If he bought more than he needed, that could mean holding on to unused stock for a long time, so it was hard to order before he knew what he was going to use it for.

That meant that, after an order for a house was confirmed, he had to calculate what materials were needed, order them from South Strag, and wait for them to arrive. There was no getting around the time all of that would take.

“But are there really that many more people? It hasn’t felt like it to me.”

“Sarasa-san, you don’t get out much lately, do you? It’s easy to see the change. And there have been more new customers coming into the shop too.”

“Ohh, is that right?” I met Lorea-chan’s exasperated look with a vague smile.

She handled all the shopping. And she cooked for me too, which meant I didn’t have to go to Delal-san’s restaurant anymore. On top of that, she also minded the shop and could make judgments about the kind of materials most new gatherers would bring in on her own now, so I didn’t have to come out and appraise them myself.

If this shop were in the center of the village, I might have noticed the rise in foot traffic despite all of that, but we were on the outskirts.

Maybe I just hadn’t had the opportunity to get a sense for the rising population?

“Maybe I should go out into the village occasionally? I don’t have a lot I need to do there, but I could check in on people and say hi.”

I was still seeing my neighbor, Elles-san, fairly frequently, but I hadn't talked to Delal-san in a while. Hrm... Maybe not since we'd talked about expanding the inn, in fact? Obviously, with how busy Delal-san was running her own business, she couldn't come see me here.

"I'd recommend it," Lorea-chan agreed. "It's not good for your health to stay shut up inside all of the time, and...wait, I guess you *have* technically been going out."

"Yep. I've been keeping up with my sword practice. And in a little while, I'll be starting to give lessons on cultivating herbs too."

I had a lot of things I ought to be doing, so it was pretty rare to find myself in the mood for aimlessly strolling around the village.

If anything, it would look bad for a young person like me to shirk her work to go for long walks. At least, from the perspective of the farmers toiling in the field.

"You've been busy, Sarasa-san, so I guess you couldn't really help it. I mean, there was that order for a small refrigerator that came in too."

"Huh? Really? Did one of the villagers order it?"

The villagers don't have a lot of cash, so if they have the room in the budget for something like a refrigerator, that makes me happy...

"No, that order came from a gatherer," Lorea-chan explained. "They said something about wanting to enjoy a cool drink like at Delal-san's place. It's been hot out lately, after all."

"Now that you mention it, the inn bought one too."

For an extra fee, they served cold alcoholic beverages. Apparently, one of the gatherers who had tried it decided to order a fridge for personal use.

Nothing beats a cool drink on a hot day, after all.

I wasn't a drinker myself, but I could understand the appeal. Because even a cool glass of water tasted amazing.

"Hold on, I know I wrote it down for you. Haven't you looked?"

“Urkh! I’ve been a little busy...”

Lorea-chan kept careful records of the shop’s business transactions. If I’d checked them, I would have known about this.

I awkwardly averted my eyes and cleared my throat. “Ahem. Uh, yep, I’ll get to dealing with that in due course.”

“Okay, please do. Although, if there’s anything really urgent, I’ll make sure to talk to you about it, so you shouldn’t need to worry too much.”

“Thanks. I can always count on you, Lorea-chan. I’m so glad I hired you.”

“I-It’s no big deal...”

When I told her my sincere feelings, Lorea-chan blushed a little, covering her mouth as she turned to the side slightly.

But the fact was, Lorea-chan had her act together so well that it was hard to believe she was still a minor. She was good with numbers and an eager learner, so I could feel safe leaving her to watch the shop.

I hadn’t had that high of expectations for her, so her abilities were beyond anything I’d imagined.

Were we fated to be together?

When I thought about it, there had always been a lot of good people around me, from Master, to Iris-san, Kate-san, and even the villagers.

I wasn’t going to delude myself into thinking these bonds were my reward for being such a good person myself, but they weren’t the kind of thing you could find just because you wanted them.

I’ll just have to keep on treasuring my bonds with people, huh?



“I can finally, finally get to work on processing the lava lizards.”

It was about a week after we’d returned from the hellflame grizzly expedition.

After finishing processing the materials Lorea-chan had bought in my absence, filling the floating tent and refrigerator orders, and finishing other sundry tasks, I had gone out to offer my guidance on cultivating herbs yesterday.

In that particular case, it was just a matter of carefully explaining what I already knew to people, so it wasn't all that much of a hassle. When it came to growing things at an agricultural scale, they probably were better off asking Gatt-san.

If there was one thing I did know, it was that as a precaution against crop failures, they should keep a fifty-fifty ratio between cheap herbs that were easy to grow and more expensive ones that were difficult to cultivate.

Because, if they had no harvest at all, that was going to be trouble for Michael-san and his wife.

"I know I put the lava lizards in the refrigerator, but they wouldn't have kept much longer. If the ladies in the village hadn't helped out, I'd have been cutting it real close!"

Their work may not have been glamorous, but Lorea-chan and the women in the village had really helped out this time around.

Making tents was laborious and time-consuming, and they'd taken care of all of the needlework for me. I'd paid them for their time of course, which lowered my cut of the profit accordingly. But it was in line with my stated goal of finding jobs for the villagers, and we were still profitable, so that was no problem.

My cash on hand, which had been reduced by purchasing materials, had been somewhat restored by the sale of artifacts.

If there was an issue, it was that the cash was only circulating inside the village, not coming in from outside of it, I guess? If I wanted to remedy that, I would need to make things that would sell elsewhere.

"And for that, I'll need to make these lava lizards into products."

I had four lizards' worth of hide in the fridge. Thanks to an alchemist like me being on the scene, and Kate-san's skill with a bow, we had been able to bring them back in pretty good condition. Ordinary gatherers would struggle to bring in hides of this quality, so if I handled them well, they'd sell for quite a high price.

I've got to do my best to make something good!

“With lava lizards, the key point is their resistance to fire and heat.”

Even without me doing any work on the hides, they could already endure hot water and steam, but with the proper processing, they could live up to the lizards’ name and even give lava a run for its money.

“But to do that, I’ll need a good amount of fire-type materials... I guess there’s no helping it.”

The only thing I had a relatively healthy supply of for that was flame stones.

But those stones weren’t what I needed if I was going to process lava lizards. The materials I did need couldn’t be harvested around here, so no one would be bringing them in. If I wanted to get my hands on them, that meant purchasing them from Master, or maybe Leonora-san.

“A little money comes in, and then the money goes out again... Oh, well. If I can process these successfully, I’ll make my investment back.”

And if I failed...? Yeah, I’d be left crying.

I’d just bought the materials to finish the rest of volume four. If things went bad, I might have to go out and find a place to work. Somewhere deep inside the great forest.

“But it’s fine! I won’t fail! ...Or so I’d like to think, but I’ll do them one at a time.”

If I did all four together, that was less work, and I could save some materials. But it meant quadrupling the losses if I failed.

If I did them one at a time, a failure would only mean losing one set of hides. In my current financial situation, losing all four hides would put a serious crimp in my ability to go on buying materials from the local gatherers.

That being the case, rather than save on time and expenses, I chose to take the slow, sure approach.

“Wash the lava lizard hides and dump ’em in the cauldron. Put in a talboo root and a spoonful of ashplanda powder. Then add three drops of pehlgee extract...”

With some alchemic materials, the cost of a pinch of powder or a drop of

liquid could be silvers or golds.

Naturally, that meant I couldn't waste even the tiniest amount.

I continued working carefully, so as not to spill anything.

Episode 4: The Unexpected Visitor

“Come to think of it, Shopkeeper-dono, how have Kate and Lorea been doing with their magic?” Iris-san asked one day at lunch.

Her tone was full of expectation, but much as I hated to break it to her...

“They’re not going to get results that quickly. If it were easy, then there would be a lot more mages in the world.”

“Hmm. Is that how it is?”

Iris-san nodded. Kate-san and Lorea-chan smiled sheepishly.

“Yeah,” Kate-san acknowledged. “We do feel like we’re starting to get somewhere, though... Right, Lorea-chan?”

“Yes. But it’s still a bit hard to get a sense of.”

“How’s *your* training, Iris? Going smoothly?” Kate-san asked.

“Mine? I think it’s going fairly well, but...what would you say, Shopkeeper-dono?”

Iris-san had joined the other two for their magic practice at the very beginning, but while she did have magical power, she didn’t have much of a gift for releasing it.

Quickly changing course, she had turned to focus on physical enhancement, which she could do without letting the magical power out of her body.

Being athletic to begin with, Iris-san had shown potential in this new direction, but it hadn’t been that long since she’d started practicing it.

Iris-san looked smug, but if I were to give a summary of her performance...

“Maybe try a little harder?”

“Whuh?! A-Am I that hopeless?”

“You’re not hopeless, but you’re not up to the level where you can get practical use out of it... You aren’t able to do it at will, and even when you

manage to pull it off, you quickly exhaust all of your magical power.”

During our mock battles, she’d suddenly get faster, then just as suddenly collapse.

That was hard for me to handle as her sparring partner. I was worried I was going to injure her.

So long as I kept an eye on the movement of Iris-san’s magical power, I could sort of predict when it was going to happen. I even felt like the practice was helping me to improve my ability to see magical power.

“Don’t go trying to do it in an actual fight, okay? You could get badly hurt,” I warned her.

“I-I know that. If you weren’t my opponent, I’d likely have been hurt in our mock battles by now. Yeah. But forget that, let’s talk about *their* progress!”

With a wry smile at the way that Iris-san hurriedly tried to bring us back to the previous topic once she realized things weren’t going her way, I took a moment to consider her question.

“Well, the two of them can feel magic and are able to manipulate it. Now it’s a matter of learning detailed control and activation, but it will take them a while.”

The first stumbling block for anyone who hadn’t touched magic before was being able to “feel” it.

It was hard to perceive something you couldn’t see with your eyes, but everyone, Iris-san included, had easily met this requirement.

They probably had a natural aptitude for it, but regular contact with my artifacts and living in a house which always had magical power flowing through its seals likely had some influence on them too.

“I see. Do you plan on learning offensive magic, Kate?”

“Huh...? Learning both at the same time would be...hard, right, Shopkeeper-san?”

“I suppose that depends on what you mean by hard, but if you can get to the point where you’re able to use the magic you’re learning now, then I think

you'll be able to use offensive magic too, you know? Natural aptitude comes into play with offensive magic, but neither you nor Lorea-chan should have any problem on that front."

In the case of alchemy, the focus was on the ability to control magical power, but using offensive magic was all about the volume of magical power. The former could be improved with practice, but for the latter, that was almost entirely something you were born with.

Obviously, improved control of your magical power would let you use offensive magic more efficiently, but that didn't change the fact that having a lot of magical power was advantageous.

Conversely, as long as you had a large amount of magical power, you could brute force your way through even if your skill at controlling it was a bit lacking, so the kind of people who did that were more common than you might expect among those who became mages instead of alchemists.

"You both have high enough magical power capacities, and I think using magic offensively is easier to learn, so...do you want to change your focus to that instead?"

Kate-san considered the suggestion a moment, but was quick to shake her head.

"No... Let's go with our original plan. It doesn't help me with my goal."

"Yeah, you want a skill you can use once you retire. How about you, Lorea-chan?"

"It's the same for me. Like I told you before, I don't think I'm going to have a lot of opportunities to use offensive magic, and I'm not skilled enough to try learning a whole bunch of things all at the same time."

"Yeah, I think that's for the best..." I agreed with her. "Although, you're more than skilled enough, if you ask me."

I wouldn't want Lorea-chan doing anything dangerous, which was why I had no intention of pushing her toward learning to use attack spells, but she was good at cooking and watching the shop, so she was already managing to do multiple difficult jobs at the same time.

If Lorea-chan wasn't skillful, then who was?

"What about me, Shopkeeper-dono...?" Iris-san looked at me somewhat expectantly.

"Oh, you don't stand a chance, Iris-san." I unflinchingly confronted her with reality.

"Augh..." Iris-san groaned as she hung her head in dejection.

"I mean, you're just not suited for releasing your power. If you had a better teacher, maybe that would change things, but I'm not that good at teaching..."

"I think you're pretty good at it, Shopkeeper-san?" Kate-san offered helpfully. "You're better than my mother was, at least."

"Yeah!" Lorea-chan chimed in. "You make it really easy for me to understand too!"

"Really? I'm just regurgitating what they taught me at the academy, though."

"That academy is the top institution in this country, right? Maybe it's too much for me to handle..."

"..."

I couldn't deny it.

Because, in a way, the instructors at the Alchemy Academy were the finest teachers in the nation.

"B-But Iris-san, you're good at physical enhancement, so—"

Jangle, jangle.

Just as I was trying to reassure Iris-san, I was interrupted by the bells in the shop ringing.

"Oh? Do we have a customer...?" Lorea-chan wondered aloud.

Since she had taken over minding the shop, I hadn't heard anyone ring the bell for service in a while. The sound made us look at one another, cocking our heads to the side.

"How odd," I noted. "They don't usually come before opening."

“I know, right? Could it be someone new, maybe?”

We opened and closed the shop at the same time every day. The villagers all knew that, and so did the gatherers, so they almost never came outside of business hours.

If they were a new gatherer, it was conceivable that they might not know what times we were open, but if they were ringing the bell, knowing that we were closed, then...

“Shopkeeper-dono, couldn’t it be someone in urgent need of care, or some other emergency like that?” Iris-san suggested.

“Oh! That’s possible!” I hurried to my feet, remembering what had happened with Iris-san, but Kate-san shook her head.

“That’s probably not it,” she said. “If they had someone in need of emergency care, then they’d be in enough of a rush that they’d shout your name. Because there isn’t a person in this village who doesn’t know it.”

“You have a point...” Iris-san conceded. “Although, we’ll find out when we go and see. Shopkeeper-dono, I’ll go with you.”

“Me too, then,” Kate-san added.

“There might be something we can do to help, after all,” Lorea-chan agreed.

Even if this wasn’t someone in need of emergency care, they were still calling.

As I headed to the shop, everyone tagged along behind me.

It would be good to have helpers if this turned out to be a medical emergency, and if it was just an ordinary customer, then... Oh, well.

Jangle, jangle.

“Comiiing.”

With the sound of the bells urging me onward, I hurried and opened the door.

“Who is it...?”

Outside was a cool man who looked to be just a little past middle age, together with a young black elf woman who was dressed in gaudy attire. They weren’t villagers, but they didn’t really look much like gatherers either.

Merchants did visit the shop, albeit rarely, but they didn't look like that either...

No, seriously. Who are these people?

As I looked at them, mystified, the man took a step back, nodding slightly.

"Pardon me. Would we be correct in assuming that this is the shop of Sarasa-dono?"

"I am Sarasa. Can I help you?"

"You...?"

The pair's eyes widened with surprise. They stared at me closely.

"Uh, yes..."

I wasn't expecting visitors, was I?

Just as I was thinking that, the others caught up with me, and Iris-san and Kate-san shouted out loud when they saw who was at the door.

"Father?!"

"Mom?!"

"Come again...?" Lorea-chan and I said in unison.

Uh, so these are their parents?

Well, to be precise, the man is Iris-san's father, and the woman is Kate-san's mother. They're...not married, I don't think. Iris-san and Kate-san aren't sisters.

And hold on, Kate-san's mom looks so young!

That was an elf for you. If you stood her next to Kate-san, you'd assume they were sisters!

"Ohhh, Iris, Kate," the man said with evident relief. "You really were here, like we thought you'd be."

"Why have you come, Father?" Iris-san's tone, by contrast, was a little bemused.

They must not have known they were coming either.

Knowing Iris-san, it was entirely possible that she might have just forgotten, but Kate-san probably wouldn't have neglected to warn me in advance.

"Because we have business to discuss, of course."

"I'm sure you do, but..." Iris-san looked at me apologetically. "Ahh, Shopkeeper-dono, I'm terribly sorry, but could we invite them in?"

I'd never heard where exactly the two of them were from, but it was probably a long way away, and it seemed like Iris-san didn't expect their talk to end quickly, so I nodded.

"Oh, sure. Make yourselves at home. The place isn't very big, though, I'm afraid."

"You have our gratitude," said the man.

"We'll come in, then," added the woman.

We headed inside with our two new guests.

I didn't have anything fancy like a parlor, so we showed them to the kitchen/dining room, where we had been eating just moments earlier.

It felt like I'd had more visitors lately, so maybe it was time to seriously consider adding a parlor. I had gotten a new table with six chairs after Iris-san and Kate-san had moved in with me, so we had enough seats for our two guests, but...

"Hrmm. We've intruded on you when you were eating, have we? My apologies."

...it was still a bit awkward when things like this happened.

"Oh, no. We had just finished our meal."

We'd been taking a break for tea, so this was true.

I hurriedly cleared the table, then gestured toward the chairs.

"I'm sorry I don't have a proper room for this... Please, have a seat."

"No, no, it's our fault for arriving so suddenly," the man reassured me. "Don't worry yourself about it."

“Yes, we’re the ones who should apologize to you,” the woman agreed.

As the two of them took their seats, Lorea-chan, who was always on the ball, served them tea, then bowed her head. *“I’ll go get ready to open up shop,”* she whispered to me, then made her exit.

Once the three of us who remained took our seats, Iris-san’s father spoke.

“Let me begin by introducing myself. I am Adelbert Lotze, Iris’s father.”

“And I am Caterina Starven, Kate-chan’s mother, and a servant of the Lotze family.”

Adelbert-sama was a somewhat dour man with a mustache. His general demeanor made him seem older than he was. On closer inspection, he was maybe around forty or so.

Meanwhile, Caterina-san looked like she could have been Kate-san’s big sister, but she was an elf. If I considered the information that she was Kate-san’s mother, that had to put her age at least over thirty-five, right?

If I recalled correctly, Kate-san had told me she was twenty-one.

Incidentally, since Caterina-san was a pure elf, unlike her daughter, her ears and skin color were those symbolic of her race.

“Oh, right. I’m Sarasa the alchemist. I’m the owner of this shop.”

“I’ve heard that you have been taking good care of our children, Sarasa-dono. We thank you for that.”

“Thank you.”

“O-Oh, no, no, it’s no big deal...”

Seeing the two of them sit up straight and bow their heads to me slightly, I hurriedly bowed my own.

So, Iris-san’s a nobleman’s daughter, huh? I kiiinda had a feeling she was.

I glanced at Iris-san, conveying a little of that feeling. She threw up her hands, a little panicked, and hurriedly said, “Uh, listen, I wasn’t hiding it, okay? I just didn’t want you to act more guarded around me!”

“I never said anything, you realize?”

For one thing, knowing that she was a noble wasn't going to make me act more guarded around her. Maybe it would've a long time ago, but after working in Master's shop, I'd seen plenty of "nobles" get a boot in the rump as she'd chased them out the door.

Master's so fearless. Her rank as a master class alchemist isn't just for show.

"Besides, even if we are nobility, my father's just a knight with two small villages! Just a petty noble! Barely one at all, really! Yep!"

Even if she was panicking over what to say to me, that was harsh!

It might have been true, though. Adelbert-sama had a sour look on his face.

"Hey, Iris? I won't deny what you just said, but you could have worded it more diplomatically..."

"Ah! F-Father, I didn't mean it in a bad way! I just didn't want Shopkeeper-dono to let it bother her, so..."

Now Iris-san started making excuses to Adelbert-sama.

I thought it was a stretch to claim she hadn't meant what she'd said in a negative way, but Adelbert-sama just smiled weakly and shook his head a little.

"Yes, I understand. It's no problem, so long as you refrain from such statements in public. I have to consider how the other nobles see me."

Yeah, that makes sense.

Even if she was saying it out of humility, it was the same as saying anyone else with a knighthood was also just a petty noble.

Perhaps realizing that, Iris-san hunched her back dejectedly. "I-I'm sorry. I'll be more careful."

"Yes. Please do."

Kate-san had been watching Iris-san with an awkward smile, but she wiped it off her face and turned toward Adelbert-sama.

"What brings you here, Adelbert-sama? I was not informed you would be gracing us with your presence..."

"Well, you see..." Whatever it was, it seemed difficult for him to say. He

looked at Caterina-san and paused to take a short breath before he continued. "Iris. I've come today to bring you back home."

This garnered two contrasting responses.

"To bring me back home...? Huh? What are you talking about?" Iris-san seemed confused, unsure how to react.

Kate-san's response, however, was more strident. She practically shot up out of her chair, then slammed her hands down on the table and shouted, "Yeah! We've talked about this endlessly, so why would you—"

"Settle down, Kate-chan," Caterina-san said in a calming tone, putting a hand on her daughter's shoulder.

"But mom!" Kate-san shouted.

"You are in front of Adelbert-sama," Caterina-san reminded her.

"Urkh... I-I'm sorry."

Kate-san returned her gaze to Adelbert-sama, bowing her head to him slightly before readjusting her sitting posture.

"No, it was a natural response, Kate," he replied. "But the situation has changed."

His expression was pained, as was Caterina-san's. Maybe they really didn't want to be doing this.

"Um, should I leave the room?" I suggested. "It seems like this is a family matter..."

I began to rise from my seat, intending to give them some privacy, but Iris-san raised a hand to stop me.

"No, Shopkeeper-dono, I'd rather you stayed. If I am going to be returning home, we'll need to discuss the money I owe too."

"Yes... I suppose we will," I agreed.

I trusted Iris-san and Kate-san, but it would be a bit much to expect me to send them off with a "Take as long as you'd like, just send me the money, okay!"

Even by my standards, their outstanding debt was not a small amount.

“Now then, father. What exactly is this about? Kate and I would leave the house to find work, and send back money to help pay the debt. Wasn’t that the agreement?”

Oh, I see. So that’s what two young women like them were doing working as gatherers.

“Huh? Hold on. Iris-san, are you in debt to other people too?” I asked her.

“Urkh! Y-Yes, actually,” she replied. “I’m sorry!”

“Not Iris herself, but her family, to be precise,” Kate-san helpfully added.

Hearing this, I turned to look at Adelbert-sama.

“That is correct,” he said with a frown and a nod. “Pathetic as it is to have to admit.”

“But it was because of the famine! We had no—”

“Don’t say that,” Adelbert-sama cut his daughter off. “I hadn’t adequately prepared, and in that, I failed as a lord.”

Oh, I see. It was a famine.

Different lords reacted to a famine in radically different ways.

There were some who mercilessly went on collecting taxes even as their people starved, while others would lessen the tax burden, and some lords would even buy foodstuffs to provide them with relief. From the sound of things, Adelbert-sama had been the type to provide relief.

No matter how minor his title was, I couldn’t imagine him going into debt just to feed his own family, and knowing what Iris-san was like, I couldn’t imagine his excesses had bankrupted them either.

“So, Iris-san and Kate-san became gatherers to help repay what they could of the debt?”

“That is correct,” Iris-san confirmed. “We’re still inexperienced, but we thought we would do whatever little we could.”

“The way things were going, we weren’t even making a dent in it, after all,”

Kate-san added.

“Since you’re a noble...I can imagine that being the case, yeah.”

The nobility had two sources of income: an annual stipend from the country and the taxes they collected from their subjects. The annual stipend was based on rank and pretty much never fluctuated. If they were appointed to a position, there was an additional stipend for that, but a knight, especially a landed one, would hardly ever be offered that sort of opportunity.

The amount of taxes he could collect would rise as his domain developed, but if it was just two villages, he couldn’t expect them to develop that much. If the debt was a large one, then interest would accrue too. He was in a rough position.

There were nobles who ran a business on the side while also carrying out their duties, but it took a lot of talent to succeed at that. If anything, it was more likely to fail and result in more debt. In that regard, sending Iris-san and Kate-san out to make money had probably been the more realistic option.

“By the way, would it be all right if I asked just how much debt you’re in?”

“As someone who has lent me money, you have a right to know, Shopkeeper-dono. It is roughly sixty-five million rhea.” She looked at her father. “Isn’t that right?”

“Yes. I think your efforts have helped reduce it a little, but we haven’t gotten it down to sixty-four million yet.”

Adelbert-sama nodded gravely, but...

“Erm, isn’t that a bit much?” I interjected. “You only rule two villages, right?”

If a family of common folk were frugal, they could live for a year on one hundred thousand rhea.

Even if there was a famine, it wasn’t like he was going to pay all of their expenses, so he wouldn’t have needed that much, but even using that number, his debt was enough for 650 households.

It might have gone up with interest, but the debt was still a bit large for a domain of only two villages.

“On hearing of the support we offered, many refugees flocked to the domain... It cost even more money to deal with them.”

“I see. Refugees, huh...”

If there had been a famine in Adelbert-sama’s domain, then barring some kind of incredible mismanagement on his part, the same would have been true of the surrounding domains too.

If his land bordered domains with more oppressive rulers, then it was only natural that his generous support would have brought in refugees. Handling them wouldn’t have just cost food, he would have needed to prepare places for them to live as well.

“Then there’s the interest,” Caterina added. “We weren’t able to repay any of the loan for some time, so our current debt is even larger than the amount we initially borrowed.”

“It’s quite heavy...” Adelbert-sama said with a sigh that was just as heavy.

It seemed the refugees were the problem. Unlike the ordinary residents, whose lives went back to normal with the weather, there was nothing in place to support the lifestyles of the refugees.

They had required continuous funding, thoroughly delaying the repayment of the debt. The result was that it had ballooned with interest.

Now years later, when things had settled down and the lord’s family had begun repayment, the interest alone would have already been a significant sum. As such, though he continued to collect taxes to make the loan payments, the taxes wouldn’t have been enough to even put a dent in the principal.

“Iris and Kate’s efforts had begun to lower it a little, but...” Adelbert-sama trailed off.

“My injury put an end to that...” Iris-san finished for him.

“Because we have to pay you back first,” Kate-san added.

Despite the fact that I had lent them the money without any collateral or written contract, they had still put paying me back first and reduced the amount they sent back home to almost nothing.

“You’re such honest people,” I said. “Your loan with me is interest-free, so normally, you would want to pay it back later...”

“We could never! In our family, we believe in repaying favors owed! It’s only natural that your debt should be our priority!” Iris-san asserted strongly, then turned to Adelbert-sama for confirmation. “Isn’t that right, father?”

“Indeed. You’re absolutely correct,” he nodded firmly, looking proud of her.

But the next words out of Kate-san’s mouth turned that into a frown.

“Then why are you calling us back home? You know we haven’t repaid Shopkeeper-san yet, right?”

There was a pause before he said, “The situation’s changed.”

“We’ve been asked to repay the entire debt in one payment,” Caterina-san explained.

“No way!” Iris-san and Kate-san were left speechless.

“If they can demand that of a noble like yourself, then I assume your creditor must also be a member of the nobility?” I observed.

“Yes,” Adelbert-sama replied with a nod. “My debt is to the lord of this area—which includes South Strag and this village, among others—Baronet Yokuo Kahku.”

“Our domain borders the Kahku Baronetcy,” Iris-san added. “It’s an exceptionally small one, though.”

Oh, that makes sense now.

Iris-san and Kate-san had always seemed to have issues with the local lord. I guess this was what had caused that...

Then again, his treatment of this village was bad enough that I had issues with him too.

I mean, not only did he fail to provide support, he was shaking us down for more money.

“Baronet Kahku saw the weakness of our position and forced us to accept ridiculously high interest. Now he wants the money all repaid at once!”

Iris-san's voice was filled with indignation, but Adelbert-sama simply groaned and shook his head.

"We're past the repayment period. I can't complain. I did everything I could, looking to see if I couldn't find the money somewhere else, but with such a sizable debt for a domain of our size..."

Nobody was going to loan sixty million rhea to a knight who only ruled two villages. That had to be what he was implying.

"There was just one place that offered to lend us the money..." Caterina-san added before trailing off.

The look on the elf's face told Iris-san everything that she needed to know. She let out a resigned sigh.

"If you're asking me to return home in this situation, then the condition must have been a marriage with me, right?" Iris-san asked.

Adelbert-sama and Caterina-san answered this with silent nods.

"No way!" Kate-san objected. "What about her ladyship? What did she have to say about this?!"

"She's opposed to it," answered Caterina-san. "She said, 'I could never sell my daughter for money.' I'm not in favor of it either, mind you, but..."

"We are a noble family," Adelbert-sama finished for her. "The people of the domain must always be our first concern. If this is what must be done, then our personal feelings are immaterial."

"Yes, you're right," Iris-san agreed. "I was prepared for this to happen, but...well, I suppose there's no helping it."

"Iris!" Kate-san seized her by the collar. "Are you really sure you're okay with this?!"

"I am a daughter of the nobility," she answered with a wan smile. "Being forced into an unwanted marriage is an all-too-common fate. In fact, considering my age, you could even say it's a little late. Shouldn't I be grateful that there's still demand for me at all?"

"But...!!!"

“It’s fine, Kate. I must do what I can for the people of the domain. That’s what it means to be a noble, isn’t it? However, father, I still haven’t been able to pay Shopkeeper-dono back...”

“Yeah, that’s right!” Kate-san agreed emphatically. “Adelbert-sama, you wouldn’t do something as unacceptable to your pride as a noble as not repaying a debt of gratitude, would you?”

“Yes, I’ve heard about what happened. I gathered money from everyone in the house. This should suffice to cover your debt and provide some thanks on top of that.”

Having said this, Adelbert-sama pulled a small bag out of his pocket and placed it on the table.

Kate-san practically snatched it, then dumped the coins out. Then, after a quick count, her lips formed a subtle smirk.

“Adelbert-sama, this isn’t nearly enough. You couldn’t even pay half of it with this.”

“What?! That’s absurd! The money was to treat her wounds, right? If this isn’t enough, then... Don’t tell me...!”

I had kept quiet and listened, because it was a somewhat difficult subject, but now Adelbert-sama turned a sharp, even intimidating look in my direction.

“Huh?! E-Erm...” I reacted with confusion.

“It’s not like that, father! It was all my fault! So, please, don’t look at Shopkeeper-dono that way.”

Iris-san got up out of her seat and interposed herself between me and Adelbert-sama.

“Iris... No matter how you frame it, that’s an extortionate price for medical treatment...” Adelbert-sama mumbled, a little taken aback, but Iris-san slowly shook her head.

“There’s no question it was an appropriate price. If anything, she’s charging me far too little...”

“What do you mean?” Adelbert-sama cocked an eyebrow. “Explain yourself.”

Iris-san hesitated a little before resignedly telling him, “You see, what happened was I messed up while we were out gathering and almost died. My arm had been torn off, and I had also been poisoned...”

“My word!” Adelbert-sama exclaimed. “How have I not heard about any of this?!”

Caterina gulped audibly, her face going quite pale.

It seemed Iris-san had anticipated their reaction, because she just sighed a little and carried on. “I had recovered by the time I sent my letter, and I didn’t want to cause any undue worry, so I chose to omit those details.”

“Murrh... But it looks to me as though your arm works just fine now?”

“Yes, and that is thanks to Shopkeeper-dono. Had she not been in this village, I doubt that I would have survived, and even if I had, it would have been with the loss of my arm.”

“I can vouch for what she’s saying,” Kate-san interjected. “I thought we might be able to save her, but as for her arm...it was in such terrible shape, I had already given up any hope for it.”

Kate-san went on to explain the details of the situation. The looks on Adelbert-sama’s and Caterina-san’s faces were quite grim when she got to the part about how it had been caused by a pair of inexperienced gatherers, but that was replaced by looks of relief when the story moved on to her ultimate recovery.

“Shopkeeper-dono saved me. She used an incredibly expensive potion on me, when she was only seeing us for the first time, and she did it solely based on Kate’s word.”

“So that’s what happened... In that situation, this level of expense was only to be expected, and seeing as your arm is properly attached, it’s almost too cheap.”

Adelbert-sama touched his daughter’s arm, a mix of relief and awe in his voice as he spoke.

Then, turning back to me, he apologized. “Sarasa-dono, I’m very sorry. I’ve

been incredibly disrespectful to you.”

“Oh, no. I think it’s natural to feel that the price was high for medical treatment.”

It was more than a common person could hope to earn in their entire life. Since he hadn’t known the details, I couldn’t blame him for assuming she might have been scammed when he was told that she owed that much in “medical fees.”

“It’s kind of you to say that. Once more, I thank you, genuinely, for saving my daughter’s life.”

“You should thank Kate-san too. I was only able to use the expensive potion because she agreed without a moment’s hesitation.”

“Is that right? You’re a lifesaver, Kate.”

“No, I only did what anyone should have.”

Even as Kate-san said this, the corners of her mouth turned up with pride.

Her mother, Caterina-san, smiled and nodded.

“Still, this puts us in a pickle. I had thought we had enough... With the debt our house is in, it will prove difficult to raise any more.”

It seemed that he’d really strained his resources to find this money, because Iris-san’s marriage was going to pay off the larger debt.

He hadn’t expected to need it all, let alone that it wouldn’t be enough. If he used all of it, that would already be enough to put his domain in a difficult position.

Apparently, no matter what he tried, he wouldn’t be able to raise more money.

“Well, in that case—” Kate-san began, unable to hide her delight, but Adelbert-sama cut her off, his expression serious.

“Sarasa-dono, I am terribly sorry. I know how brazen it must sound to ask this of you, but would it be possible for you to wait a while for us to pay you? I will draw up a bond, of course, and pay interest.”

“Erm...”

For my part, I don't mind waiting as long as I get my money eventually, but...Kate-san, please, don't look at me with those pleading eyes! The man might only be a knight, but from everything I'm hearing, he seems like a noble individual, even by the standards of the nobility!

Master's been known to kick nobles out of her shop when they're rude to her, but I can only respond in a more common-sense manner!

“If you'll draw up a proper legal document, then as far as I'm concerned... Yes.”

“You will? It's appreciated.”

Kate-san eyed me silently.

Listen, Kate-san, giving me that “You traitor!” look isn't helping.

There was simply no way that I was going to tell a nobleman “Pay me back right now, in cash!” or “If you can't pay, Iris-san is mine!” or “Iris-san and Kate-san are staying here as free labor until their debt's repaid!”

Seeing my expression, Kate-san recognized the hopelessness of her situation and instead turned to Adelbert-sama in an attempt to persuade him.

“Are you sure this is what you want to do, sir? I know you're acting in the interest of the people, but Iris is the House of Lotze's heir. If you go through with the offer, it's the same as letting a merchant steal your title.”

However, if he had come here to call Iris-san back home, there had no doubt already been long discussions on that subject within the house, so his will would no doubt be firm.

Adelbert-sama frowned at what Kate-san had said, but shook his head, somewhat exhausted.

“Of course, it's not a happy outcome for me either. But he is offering money to a petty noble house like ours, even one burdened with a massive debt. He cannot be that bad of a person.”

His voice was weak, and he sounded like he was trying to convince himself. Iris-san smiled sadly.

“You could be right. If he has money, then if there is another famine, we may not need to go into debt again.”

“Iris...”

Kate-san looked like she was on the verge of tears.

I-I can't bear to watch this!

I couldn't help but feel that, because she was a noble, it was inevitable that she would be pushed into a marriage like this, but seeing it happen to a close friend was just...

Erm, would it be bad for me to get involved?

“Well, father. What is the name of my future partner?”

“Well, he's a young man who inherited the business after the sudden passing of his father. He runs a large company in the town of South Strag. I met him myself, and he seemed rather likable, you know? His name is Hoh Bahru.”

“Oh?” I uttered without meaning to.

I've heard that name somewhere before...

“Um, hey!” I held up my hand. “I know you're still talking, but could I ask you to wait?”

They all looked at me suspiciously.

“Uh, sure... We don't mind. We weren't expecting to make it back home today anyway. There's plenty of time.”

“Thank you. Then, if you'll excuse me...”

I bowed to Adelbert-sama, who seemed perplexed.

I looked at the table, then turned to Kate-san.

“Kate-san, could I ask you to get some fresh tea...and snacks? If I remember, we should still have some of the cookies that Lorea-chan made.”

“Oh, sure. That's a good idea. I'll get right to it.”

They had been talking about serious business for a while now, so thinking something sweet would help lighten the mood, I sent Kate-san to fetch snacks

and then left the room myself.



By the time I had taken care of what I needed to and headed back, the overall mood in the kitchen had mellowed somewhat.

Yep, this must be thanks to Lorea-chan's homemade cookies.

They were just that good.

I almost regret having shared them.

"Oh, Shopkeeper-san, welcome back," Kate-san greeted me.

"Thank you, good to be back."

"Where did you go, Shopkeeper-dono?" asked Iris-san.

"There was something I wanted to look into. Sorry to keep you all waiting."

I bowed my head slightly after sitting down, but Adelbert-sama merely shook his head. "Think nothing of it. If anything, you gave me time to ask the two of them about the details. Now then, Sarasa-dono. Allow me to express my gratitude once again. Thank you so much for saving Iris."

"I'd like to thank you as well," Caterina-san said, bowing deeply. "It's only thanks to you that Iris-sama is still with us, Sarasa-san."

"Oh, please, don't bow your head! You've already thanked me enough!"

It's super awkward having my betters bow to me like this!

"But we've been so rude to you, Sarasa-dono..."

As I frantically waved my hands and shook my head, trying to dissuade him from apologizing any further, Iris-san and Kate-san spoke up on my behalf.

"Father, you're troubling Shopkeeper-dono."

"You too, mom. Bowing your head like that just makes things awkward for Shopkeeper-san."

"Really? Well, in that case I'll stop," Adelbert-sama replied. "But she still saved your life, Iris. If there is anything I can do for her, she has only to say the word."

“Yeah. That goes for me too,” Caterina-san agreed before hesitantly adding, “Not that there’s much that I *can* do.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as Iris-san and Kate-san’s intercession(?) succeeded, and the two of them finally raised their heads.

“I’ll hold you to that, if the need arises, you know? But I think a large part of the reason Iris-san survived comes down to her own good fortune...”

It was seriously good luck that I just so happened to have had a potion in the shop that could heal Iris-san’s wounds right when she needed it.

If someone were to show up right now, with the same injuries, I don’t know if...okay, no, I probably could still treat them, but the ace-in-the-hole potion that I have now would be complete and total overkill, so I’d really struggle with the decision of whether or not to use it.

I’d have to charge way more for it than I had charged Iris-san, and if they complained that I used a more expensive potion than required, I wouldn’t be able to deny it.

But keeping enough potions in stock so that I had the perfect one on hand to treat any emergency patients who came in just wasn’t feasible out here in the countryside.

That’s why it would just be a nuisance if someone complained I used too powerful of a potion.

But at the same time, if I tried to tell them, “I don’t have a potion that’s just right, so I can’t heal you,” they’d hold a grudge over it. It was a tough problem, huh?

“So, Shopkeeper-san, what were you looking into?” Kate-san asked. “It had something to do with what we were talking about earlier, right?”

“Yes. I thought I remembered hearing the name you mentioned while Leonora-san and I were scheming together, so I went to check with her about it.”

I’m sure glad we have a Shared Sound Box.

After installing it the other day, we hadn’t used it for anything other than to

test that it worked, but it had just come in handy in the most unexpected of ways.

“Who is this Leonora?”

“Father, Leonora is an alchemist in the town of South Strag.”

“South Strag... But then how...?”

Though he initially nodded at his daughter’s explanation, Adelbert-sama cocked his head to the side in confusion as he was unable to figure out how I could have contacted Leonora-san just now.

“We’ve set up something called a Shared Sound Box. Are you familiar with them?” I asked.

After a brief pause, he replied, “I’ve heard rumors. I’m told some of the higher nobility have them. So, that’s how you did it?”

“Yes. Because we’re both alchemists.”

“My word!” Adelbert-sama’s eyes widened with surprise. The fact of the matter was, with the exception of high nobility like Adelbert-sama was talking about, the cost of installation and operation would be prohibitively expensive for anyone who wasn’t an alchemist.

That cost grew with distance, and yet if it wasn’t that far, then there was less reason to set one up. It was an artifact with that sort of dubious utility.

“So, what did Leonora-dono have to say, Shopkeeper-dono?” asked Iris-san.

“Well, about that...”

It turned out that the merchant who had been making money hand over fist by forcing alchemists into debt and had apparently decided to target me, hadn’t lasted long after we were done with him.

Leonora-san’s read on the situation was that, although he’d done the best he could, he hadn’t been able to find the money in time, and his shady creditors had made him pay the price.

Actually, she seemed confident about that, so she probably had a source. She knew an awful lot about what was going on for someone who was just an

alchemist, after all.

Taking over for his illfated father, Hoh Bahru had since assumed control of the Bahru Company. He was the merchant who'd come up in our earlier discussion.

Thanks to some hard work on the part of myself and Leonora-san, the Bahru Company was considerably smaller now than it once was, but they had been large enough to avoid going under completely and could still boast some degree of power.

On the surface, at least. In truth, however, the Bahru Company was in dire straits.

"According to Leonora-san, while it may not be completely impossible, she can't see how they could provide you with such a large amount of money..."

And with Baronet Kahku also involved, it feels like something's up.

That's just my prejudice speaking, though.

"Murgh, and he seemed like such a fine young man too..."

"No swindler worth their salt *looks* evil, Adelbert-sama."

"I...suppose you're right, yes."

As he let out a deflated sigh, the exhaustion on Adelbert-sama's face was readily apparent, but the sense of tension that had been hanging in the air since he arrived at my place dissipated somewhat.

He must have agonized over so many other options before resolving himself to make a decision which sacrificed his own daughter, but with a result like this, it must have felt like so much wasted effort.

"But then why did the Bahru Company approach us? We're a mere knightly family, without any money," Iris-san noted, seemingly mystified, but I shook my head.

"You still have a noble title. They must have calculated it would be useful to them in some way. Besides, while it's a little awkward to say this, the Bahru Company doesn't really have the resources right now to go after whoever it wants."

While Iris-san didn't seem to think much of it, the gap between commoners and nobility was huge, even with lesser nobles like them.

The point I'd made elicited a frustrated groan from Adelbert-sama.

"Murgh. And that's why he set his eyes on our house, is it? Even a little investigation would have turned up that we're short on money. I suppose that made us a prime target."

"Also, while I can't be sure of this, I think Baronet Kahku could be in on it too. He could have shared the information, or come to some agreement about repaying the debt."

The Bahru Company and Baronet Kahku. Taking recent events into consideration, I was more or less certain that there was some connection between them, but the baronet was a member of the nobility and our lord.

Even Leonora-san would struggle to deal with such an opponent, so the details remained unclear.

"Well, whatever the case, we can't very well accept the offer," Adelbert-sama concluded. "Even if he could provide the money, I'd never allow such a scoundrel into the House of Lotze!"

"Adelbert-sama!" Kate-san reacted with genuine glee.

As for Iris-san and Caterina-san, though they didn't put it into words, I could see the relief on their faces.

"But father, the debt..."

"That is the issue, yes. Although this forces us back to the drawing board, it would have been far more dangerous for the people, who must always be our first priority, had we taken money from a company like that."

Yeah, who knows what would have happened to the House of Lotze if they'd let a guy like Hoh Bahru become the head of the household.

One thing's for sure: he wouldn't go into debt to feed the starving people of the domain.

"But looking at the situation, it looks like I'm partially responsible for what happened."

“No, I don’t think it had anything to do with you, Sarasa-dono?” Adelbert-sama replied, looking rather confused. “I am the one who has put my house into debt, and am also the one who has lacked the power to repay it.”

I shook my head. “I think that my driving the Bahru Company to the brink played a part.”

That was assuming that Baronet Kahku and the Bahru Company were connected, and that was what had made the baronet suddenly call in Adelbert-sama’s debt.

There’s basically no other reason to demand it be repaid all at once.

With the high interest on the loan and Adelbert-sama’s inability to put a significant dent in the principal, it would have been far more profitable to continue collecting interest payments over a long period of time.

It was somewhat difficult to explain why Baron Kahku would have made this demand, unless something had put him in financial distress, causing him to need a large amount of cash quickly.

Seeing how I was struggling with this, Iris-san spoke up, her face marked with concern.

“While I won’t rule out the possibility, I don’t think you did anything wrong, Shopkeeper-dono. You don’t need to worry about it.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Kate-san agreed. “And we know that your actions definitely saved a bunch of people. Right?”

“It’s a relief to hear you say that,” I confessed.

“But it doesn’t change the fact we need to find the money somehow, huh?” Kate-san said.

“I wish there was something I could do to help, but...”

My profits from the incident had mostly gone to saving the alchemists, and I’d bought the materials to make large artifacts after that, so I was pretty short on cash at the moment.

Their debt wasn’t so great that I couldn’t raise the money by selling off the stuff in my warehouse, but if I did that, I wouldn’t be able to carry on as an

alchemist, and it also wouldn't be that easy to sell some of it. I'd likely struggle to find a buyer.

My stock was *technically* valuable enough. But if turning assets into cash were easy, Yoku Bahru wouldn't be dead now.

Iris-san and her family's lives probably weren't at risk, but things were still looking pretty grim for them. I couldn't abandon Iris-san, so I'd keep the option of selling off my stock at liquidation prices open, but before that...

"If possible, I'd like to check the loan agreement you signed with Baronet Kahku. Do you have it on you? If not, you can just tell me the details of the contract."

"The loan agreement? Well, I obviously don't walk around with it, but I do remember what it says. But how is that relevant to the matter at hand?" Adelbert-sama gave me a dubious look.

Not wanting to give him any unwarranted hope, I kept my answer vague. "There's something that interests me about it. Would you mind enlightening me?"

"Oh, of course not. First, the value of the debt is..."

Despite being a little too kind for his own good, Adelbert-sama was undeniably talented. He remembered the fine details of the agreement and could answer my questions without hesitation. Once I had finished clearing up all my points of uncertainty, I smiled broadly and nodded my head.

"Yep, there's a good chance that's illegal."

"Illegal? The debt, you mean?"

Adelbert-sama hadn't expected to hear that. His eyes widened with surprise. I nodded again.

"I mean the conditions of the loan. There are limits on debts between the nobility in this country. Were you aware of that?"

"No, I wasn't. Caterina, were you?"

"Unfortunately, I didn't know either..." Caterina-san replied apologetically. "As you're aware, we weren't originally from this country."

“Oh, that’s right. Sorry.”

“No, I’m satisfied with my current situation and grateful to you for it, Adelbert-sama.”

Hmm. Kate-san’s got mixed blood, so I’m a bit curious, but... I guess it’s not relevant now.

“Of course, I didn’t know either,” Iris-san declared. “Because I’ve never been taught anything about being a noble!”

“Iris, that’s nothing to brag about, okay? Not that I knew either,” Kate-san chastised her. “Shopkeeper-san, could you tell us what the conditions are?”

“Simply put, there are restrictions with regard to interest rates and length of the repayment period. Restrictions of which this loan is in violation.”

Laws in this kingdom could be broadly divided into two types: national law, which was set by the king and applied all over the country, and domain law, which was set by the local lords and applied only to their own domains.

Unlike national law, which was clearly laid out (though in some places it said things like “the details of which will be decided by the king”), domain law was entirely up to the discretion of the lord.

Not only was it not written down anywhere, there were even domains where the “law” was prone to regular changes based on the lord’s arbitrary whims.

But even in those domains, domain law couldn’t violate national law, and if the lord tried to put his laws above the king’s, he would be punished for it.

Naturally, that applied to contracts between individuals too.

The national regulations governing loans between the nobility covered interest, collateral, repayment period, and so on.

It was all meant to make repayment easier. This had been done to reduce the number of nobles mired in debt, which would by extension help to protect the authority of the king.

What would happen if a noble submitted to another noble because they were in debt to them? The king could never tolerate his nobles’ loyalty, which was sworn to him, shifting to another lord. And that’s how we’d ended up with

these laws.

Incidentally, it was also national law which governed the rights and responsibilities of alchemists.

That was why troublesome lords didn't usually bother alchemists, and we could feel confident in our position even when heading to unfamiliar domains.

"So that's what the law says, is it? It looks like Walter made a mistake." With a pained look on her face, Caterina-san bowed her head. "I'm sorry about this, Adelbert-sama."

"No, I can't blame him for it." Adelbert-sama shook his head. "I didn't know myself, and given the situation, we needed a loan no matter the terms."

Walter-san was Kate-san's father and Caterina-san's husband, and he was in charge of running the daily affairs of the House of Lotze together with Iris-san's mother Diana-sama while Adelbert-sama was away.

As the one who handled the day-to-day of the domain, Walter-san had arranged this loan.

Which meant he was *also* the one who'd tried to sell Iris.

Grr... I'm sure he didn't have any choice, but I'm still miffed about it. I really am, but I'll have to set it aside for now.

"I don't mean to cover for him, but it's hard to blame him for not knowing. If even some of the nobility don't know, then how could a mere retainer...?"

This isn't nice to say, but a retainer in the service of a mere knight was hardly going to have the opportunity to study the finer details of national law. The retainers of a larger noble family might pass such knowledge down from parent to child, but that wasn't going to happen in a house like Adelbert-sama's. It would be another matter if he'd hired a legal expert, but a knightly family didn't have that kind of financial freedom.

"Hmm... So that's how it is," said Iris-san. "But how are you so knowledgeable, Shopkeeper-dono?"

Adelbert-sama also nodded in satisfaction, but then stared at me, mystified.

I nodded to acknowledge their entirely reasonable doubt, then sighed and

explained, “They made us learn all sorts of stuff at the Alchemy Academy.”

The school was operated by the state, and in addition to teaching alchemy, it also imparted us with knowledge on a broad range of specialist subjects, including things that wouldn’t be of much use to someone who only intended to work as an alchemist.

It almost seemed like the school was less interested in creating professional alchemists and more interested in raising generalists with knowledge in every field...

But that was getting into national policy, and I didn’t know the details.

However, since the country did have a shortage of alchemists, they made the requirements to pass those courses relatively low so that nobody had to drop out because of low grades in them.

The inevitable result was that students put less effort into those courses than the ones focused on alchemy, which had made them prime targets when I was looking for places to earn reward money.

“That’s why many alchemists wouldn’t know about it either. Oh, they all definitely learn it at some point, but whether they retain that knowledge is another matter.”

I mean, if all they’re interested in is passing, they probably forget it as soon as they finish the exam. Because the information will pretty much never come up.

“So, what happens if the loan is found to be illegal?” asked Iris-san.

“It will be recalculated according to the regulations,” I answered. “If you’ve already paid a significant amount, then once the debt is readjusted, you may even receive money back.”

“Oho!” Iris-san cried out in delight, but I held up a hand to stop her before continuing.

“From what I’ve heard, it sounds like the conditions of the loan are illegal, but I am no legal expert, and you’re dealing with someone who is used to doing this sort of thing. It’s possible he’s found a loophole of some sort.”

All I had heard was Adelbert-sama’s understanding of the contract. With

scammers like this, it was common to set traps that were hard to understand, so the victim's understanding of the contract wasn't a reliable source of information.

"A legal expert, huh? Could we find someone like that in the capital?" Iris-san wondered.

"Yes, I've heard from Master that people have made an absolute killing working as specialists on this in the past."

I wasn't referring to specialists in law, but in loans—arbitrating illegal loans in particular. If someone limited themselves to that narrow subject, there wasn't that much that needed learning, and the work involved followed general patterns, so if they could receive just one-tenth of the money they reclaimed for their client as payment, they'd never lose out.

It was fairly easy money, so they would go around to any noble who looked like they might be in debt and offer to represent them.

"Although, there isn't anyone like that recently. For some reason, they had a tendency to die early."

"For some reason? Isn't it obvious?" Kate-san said with a hint of exasperation. "They went and made enemies of a large number of crooked nobles," she explained with a sarcastic shrug.

"Well, yeah, that's about the sum of it," I agreed. "So there aren't any of those specialists around, but there are people who specialize in settling disputes between the nobility, so if we hire one of them, it could solve the problem...possibly."

It would be down to the details of the contract, so I couldn't say for certain.

"That said, it could be a long time before you get a result from the arbitration, so you'll still need to make the repayment. Even if you'll be getting the money back in the end."

The loan agreement would remain in force until then, so they couldn't complain if Baronet Kahku used it as justification to make a move against the House of Lotze's domain.

They could get back money, but there were some things it was impossible to get back.

“So, this doesn’t change our need for money,” Iris-san said with a sigh.

“If the amount we owed were a little smaller, we could send all the members of the house out to earn money, but...”

Yeah, it’s not an amount they can earn with just a few workers.

They’d have to toil away for years to even put a dent in it.

“By the way, Iris-san, just how many people are ‘all the members of your house’...?”

“Urkh...”

It wasn’t just Iris-san who winced at that question. Everybody, including Adelbert-sama, awkwardly averted their eyes.

“Our only retainers are, um...the Starven family, you see?” Iris-san awkwardly admitted.

“The only adults are myself and my wife, Iris; the Starvens; and their daughter Kate,” explained Adelbert-sama.

“O-Okay...” I replied.

So, uh, what? There are a total of six adults, and the only ones not currently present are Iris-san’s mother and Kate-san’s father, huh?

Yeah, that’s no good.

No matter how hard they worked, there was simply no way that mundane jobs were going to earn them the kind of money they needed. Not in a short time, at least.

“Kate and I do have siblings, but they’re younger than us.”

It turned out Iris-san had two little sisters, while Kate-san had a little brother.

But the former were both under the age of ten, while the latter had just been weaned off his mother’s milk. They weren’t going to be of any help here.

“You...don’t know anyone who could lend you the money, huh?”

“Indeed. Shameful as it is to admit, Sarasa-dono, the money that we offered you earlier was all we were able to raise from the people we know.”

Yeah, go figure. If they knew someone, they wouldn't be in this kind of trouble.

“Now that it's come to this, I may need to consider returning my title...”

“Father! You can't...”

Iris-san hurriedly tried to dissuade Adelbert-sama, but he slowly shook his head. “This is the result of my inadequacy. If there is nothing we can do, then it's an option I must consider.”

“Father...” Iris-san murmured.

“Adelbert-sama...” Kate-san and Caterina-san sounded just as sad.

H-Hmm, is this a tragic scene?

We weren't such strangers that I could simply say, “*Yeah. I guess you weren't cut out to be a noble, so them's the breaks, huh?*”

“Even if you return your title, you'll still be in debt, you know? It'd actually make things worse.”

Even a petty noble with only two villages to his name had a higher income than any commoner, and the laws that regulated loans were only there for the nobility.

If he lost his title, the law wouldn't apply to him anymore, so he'd lose the ability to seek arbitration. From there, it would just be a matter of using noble authority to forcefully collect from a commoner. And if he couldn't pay his debts, then the fate that awaited Iris-san and Kate-san—plus Iris-san's little sisters—was not a happy one by any stretch of the imagination.

“Murgh... What can I do, then...?”

Adelbert-sama frowned as he thought about it. Iris-san looked at me questioningly. Then, after looking at her father's face once more, she hesitantly spoke up.

“Shopkeeper-dono, this is difficult to ask, but might it be possible...to borrow money from your master?”

“From Master?” I crossed my arms and thought about it. “Hrmmmmmm.”

“Sarasa-dono’s master? Even if she’s an alchemist, surely...this isn’t an amount she can lend us easily, right?”

“Well, you see, Adelbert-sama,” said Kate-san, “the thing is, Shopkeeper-san’s master is a master class alchemist.”

“My word!” he exclaimed.

It was true that Master probably did have the money. And it wasn’t just her. Any alchemist above a certain level was likely to have a lot of cash on hand, so it wasn’t an impossible ask.

I didn’t have the money, though, of course.

“If I were to ask her, it might be possible, but...”

If I went crying to Master, saying, “I’m in debt!” she’d probably make some sarcastic comments but would take on the debt without a fuss, then drag me back to the capital to work in her shop as free labor until I’d paid her back.

I mean, she did acknowledge me as her apprentice, after all, y’know? But when it came to helping people I knew... Who could say what she’d do?

“I swear we’ll pay her back. It pains me to have to ask this of you when I am already so heavily in your debt, but please, please consider my request! I’m begging you!”

“Please, Shopkeeper-san!”

Iris-san and Kate-san bowed their heads so low they were pressed against the table.

Beside them, Adelbert-sama and Caterina-san looked on, confused and unable to decide how to react.

To be fair, they had only just met me today. We didn’t know each other well enough for them to ask me to loan them money, and it was a lot of money that they needed.

And once you added to that the fact that I was younger than their own daughter, it must have been hard for two adults like them to ask me. Especially

when the request wasn't for me to lend them money I had, but to ask my Master to lend them hers.

For my part, I want to do what I can to help, but...

Perhaps sensing my hesitation, Adelbert-sama shook his head and spoke to the girls.

"Iris, Kate. You're troubling Sarasa-dono. Raise your heads."

"But father, we have nowhere else to turn..."

"We don't have any rich friends, after all," Caterina-san agreed with Iris-san. "Our house only associates with those that are in similar circumstances to our own."

The furrows on Adelbert-sama's brow deepened. "Murgh."

"Mom..."

What to do...

If I asked Master, she might loan them the money, but it was such a large amount that I was hesitant to ask her to do that. I'd have preferred to limit my request to something more similar to what she'd done for me with the frostbite bat fangs, buying up a stock of them far larger than I could possibly sell on my own.

And if I was going to try to earn a lot of money, it was better to do it in my own trade, rather than try something unfamiliar, so... Okay!

"Even if I don't ask Master...it's not like we don't have ways to get the money, you know?"

"Really?! How can we do it?!" Iris-san reacted instantly.

I nodded, then explained what I was thinking. "Iris-san, I'm an alchemist, and the two of you are gatherers. What is your job?"

"To gather materials! But hold on, it's far too much money to earn from that...although the lava lizards were more profitable than I thought they would be."

"But Iris," Kate-san interjected. "Mom and Adelbert-sama are here now, and

if we call dad to help too...”

“Even then, it would be too difficult to do it just gathering materials normally,” I said. “But if you could gather some rare and valuable materials, that might not be the case. Any ideas?”

“Valuable materials...?”

Iris-san and the others blinked in confusion, but Kate-san quickly had a flash of realization. She looked at me, half doubting, and hesitantly asked, “Shopkeeper-san, you don’t mean...the salamander?”

“Bingo! If we get our hands on that, we can make enough money to pay off your debt. The issue is who we would sell it to, but if I ask Master, I’m sure it can be taken care of.”

I’d still be asking her to indulge me, but there was a world of difference between “please lend me money” and “please help me sell these materials that I’d struggle to sell on my own.”

Besides, Master had specifically asked me to send her unusual materials, and I figured that something on the level of a salamander ought to meet her standards.

If she told me she couldn’t buy, then that was the time to start crying and kicking up a fuss, saying, *“But you told me to send you rare materials.”*

“But, Shopkeeper-san.” Kate-san gave me a dubious look. “Wasn’t the salamander supposed to be a dangerous opponent, one we’re no match for?”

“That’s right,” Adelbert-sama said with a frown. “Even I know how dangerous a salamander is. No matter how hard up for money we are, there is no point in getting ourselves killed. I hate to say it, but I can’t approve of this idea.”

“Yes,” Caterina-san agreed. “The idea of sending Kate-chan to a place like that...it worries me.”

I could see how worried they were for their children, but I immediately shook my head.

“Of course, I won’t be asking the two of them to fight the salamander. That would be tantamount to suicide.”

“Then...you’re going to do it yourself, Shopkeeper-dono? Maybe you can make short work of it...?”

Iris-san’s eyes filled with hope, but...

“No, I can’t handle it on my own. But I do have...a trump card of sorts. If I have some help, I might be able to manage it? I intend to check with Master first, just to be sure, though.”

If it sounded like I could pull it off, it was worth the attempt.

It sounded like Adelbert-sama had given up on the idea of marrying Iris-san off to Hoh Bahru at this point, but I still didn’t like the idea of letting her family go broke.

I want to do what I can to help, y’know? Since we’re friends now and all.

“Hmm, an alchemist’s trump card, huh?” Adelbert-sama murmured. “Is that a card you’re okay with using, Sarasa-dono? I appreciate that you’re concerned for us, but...”

“Oh, it’s no problem. But I won’t be able to move afterward, so I need someone who can bring me back safely, and if possible, I’d like people to support me when I’m fighting the salamander. It’s not impossible for me to pull it off alone, but it would make things safer if I had the help.”

“Shopkeeper-san, are you talking about something like what you did with the hellflame grizzlies?”

Kate-san looked concerned, perhaps remembering how I’d been immobile for days after the incident, but I shook my head to tell her it wasn’t a problem.

“No, it’s nothing as bad as that. I’ll be able to move again after some rest, so as long as you can protect me until then, it’ll be fine.”

That time had been seriously bad. I hadn’t even been able to make it to the toilet alone, and that had caused all sorts of...uh, y’know what, let’s just forget all about it. That’s something we should all just delete from our memories.

“Is that something I could handle?” asked Adelbert-sama. “If you are able to defeat the salamander, I presume you’ll need help carrying back the materials.”

“I’ll raise my hand too, then,” added Caterina-san. “This is a matter essential

to our house. We can't make Sarasa-san take care of everything."

I was grateful for their eagerness to help, but...

"If possible, I'd prefer to have Iris-san and Kate-san help. What do you say?"

"Of course, I have no objection!" Iris-san agreed instantly. "Let me help!"

"Me too, of course," Kate-san replied just as readily. "I don't know how much I can do, though..."

Despite the pair's eagerness, Adelbert-sama and Caterina-san looked a little concerned for their children.

"Why? I may have aged somewhat, but I assure you that I won't lose to Iris just yet."

"That's right. I think you'll find I'm more reliable than Kate too."

Fair enough. Adelbert-sama looked like he was keeping himself in shape, and Caterina-san was the one who had taught Kate-san archery in the first place.

"Iris-san, Kate-san, is this true?"

"Yeah. Because father takes pride in being a knight. I'm no match for him."

"It frustrates me to admit it, but maybe I'm not up to mom's level yet...?"

Wow... Setting Iris-san aside for the moment, Kate-san's skill with a bow was considerable.

Maybe Caterina-san was downright incredible?

I looked at the two of them with surprise. They were doing their best to keep their faces straight, but I could see that the corners of their mouths had turned up slightly at the compliments from their children.

But even so...

"Hmmm, is that right?" I said, nodding. "But you see, I'd still like to ask Iris-san and Kate-san."

Seeing that I wasn't going to change my mind, Adelbert-sama frowned again, but Iris-san looked a little relieved and tried to talk to him.

"Father. I'm sure you're aware that, when fighting alongside others, a

relationship of trust is important, yes? That's what I have with Shopkeeper-dono."

"Murgh. True enough, Sarasa-dono and I have only just met. I can't contradict you on that point."

Adelbert-sama didn't like it, but he seemed convinced. But while I felt a little bad doing this to Iris-san when she was looking so smug...

"No, that has nothing to do with it."

That wiped the look off her face, and she looked at me with shock.

"T-Truly?! But what of the trust between us?! Was it only in my imagination?"

"Oh, I trust you. Of course I do. It's just not the primary reason."

I assuaged her hurt feelings while explaining why it had to be her, not Adelbert-sama.

"If we're going to fight the salamander, we'll need equipment to counteract its breath attack and the heat, and I don't have a lot of materials on hand."

I had the lava lizard leather, which I had finished processing yesterday with the intention of selling it to either Master or Leonora-san as a heat-resistant material.

Using that, I could make the bare minimum equipment we would need to fight the salamander.

But we'd only hunted four lizards last time. If I was going to make boots, gloves, and a coat, then I just barely had enough to make a set for myself, Iris-san, and Kate-san, even with our smaller builds.

It might be possible to swap one of the other two out for Caterina-san, but the much larger Adelbert-sama was simply out of the question.

"Even if I use the materials I have on hand, plus those I've already partially processed, it's still going to take about a month to get ready. I don't think there's time to go out hunting for more... You still have time before your payment deadline, right?"

They'd come to pick up Iris-san because they were out of other options.

As I'd anticipated, Adelbert-sama frowned and let out a low groan. "Murgh, it could be difficult... Two months... No, if I drag things out, maybe three?"

"Well, that's no good, then. Even if we're able to slay the salamander, it will take time to convert it into cash."

With ordinary materials, a gatherer could cash them in the moment they entered an alchemist's shop, but in this case, I was the alchemist. I didn't have the cash to "buy" the materials on the spot, and if I did, we wouldn't have needed to go out and hunt a salamander in the first place.

But even if I took it to another alchemist, one who was Master's level, for instance, they probably wouldn't pay me what it was worth.

For starters, just carrying it all that distance while maintaining the quality would be tough.

Oh, that's right. Shipping. That's going to be the bottleneck.

"Um, Adelbert-sama and Caterina-san, if you don't mind, would you help us carry the goods?"

"By which you mean?"

"Even if we kill the salamander, bringing it back ourselves will be a bit tough..."

"I see your point. I'm the stronger one. Let me handle it."

Adelbert-sama nodded with glee, perhaps just happy to have a role he could play.

"Bringing gatherers from the village would be an option, but then we'd have to give them a share. I do feel bad making a noble like yourself do a menial task like carrying goods, though."

"Oh, think nothing of it. I'm no more than a petty noble anyway. But by that same token, Iris is technically a nobleman's daughter, you realize?"

"Father! The 'technically' was uncalled for!" Iris-san cried out in exasperation.

"But wholly justified," Adelbert-sama countered, shaking his head. "You learned the sword before you learned anything of etiquette."

This, however, earned him another look of exasperation. This one from Caterina-san. “Adelbert-sama. You were the one who was so delighted to teach her. You were beside yourself with glee when she said ‘I want to be like father!’”

“Was I? I don’t remember it like that.”

Adelbert-sama feigned a failing memory, but the way he averted his eyes told the full story.

“You most certainly were. Not only did you fail to chastise Iris-sama when she was swinging a branch around, you watched her with a big grin on your face. Your wife came to me, asking for advice on what she should do.”

“I remember that too,” Kate-san added. “That’s what led to me learning archery.”

Kate-san was older than Iris-san. If Iris-san had been old enough to start swinging branches around like they were swords, then Kate-san would have been old enough to have clear memories of it.

“Because Iris-sama would need someone to support her when she grew up,” Caterina-san explained. “If Iris-sama had developed the same interests as other young ladies, then I intended to teach you about that sort of thing instead...”

Caterina-san looked at Iris-san and let out a sigh.

“Urkh, Kate, I’m so sorry. For dragging you along with me,” Iris-san apologized.

“I don’t really mind. I had more fun learning the bow than I would have had learning etiquette. And fortunately, it seems I have a knack for it too, you know?” Kate-san cheerfully smiled and shook her head.

From what I’d seen of her skills, she wasn’t wrong in what she was saying.

Meanwhile, Adelbert-sama seemed to sense that this conversation wasn’t going in his favor. He loudly cleared his throat before trying to get us back on topic. “Now then, Sarasa-dono, when did you want to put this plan into action?”

“Let’s see... I’ll have to get the artifacts ready, so...we’ll set out from here, a month from now. Let’s work around that date.”

“I see. Then we’ll need to go back home and prepare. I need to give the order to delay things, and explain the situation as well.”

“That’s true,” Caterina-san agreed. “And when he hears, I imagine Walter will want to come too.”

“Not possible, I’m afraid. Walter has his duties as steward to attend to.”

Having shot the arrow of love through Caterina-san’s heart despite being a human himself, Walter-san was gifted both martially and intellectually, and handsome to boot. He’d messed up with the loan contract, but he was still talented enough to serve as Adelbert-sama’s representative and a vital support to the House of Lotze. In fact, without him, the house would be rendered immobile. He was going to be indispensable to the process of negotiating the payment deadline.

“Hold on? Then wouldn’t it be better for him to come instead of Adelbert-sama?” I wondered.

This time, considering their original goal of bringing Iris-san back home, it had made sense for the head of the household to come in order to explain. But what about next time?

He was just coming along as a glorified porter. If they were going back home first, then wasn’t there no need for Adelbert-sama to come himself? It seemed like a reasonable question, but everyone from the House of Lotze was silent.

“Huh?” *Was it an awkward question?* I cocked my head to the side. With a slightly troubled smile, Iris-san delicately tried to explain.

“Ohh, Shopkeeper-dono. This isn’t easy to say, but...while Walter is perfectly capable of standing in for my father, when it comes to the opposite, well...”

I glanced in Adelbert-sama’s direction. He frowned and crossed his arms, closing his eyes as if in an attempt to avoid my gaze.

Oh, I get it. I shouldn’t ask, huh?

He was probably hopeless at desk work. I mean, he *was* Iris-san’s father, after all.

Don’t worry. I know how to read the room.

I nodded my head. “W-Well, then! Let’s work out the details!”

I said I could read a room, not that I knew what to do about it.

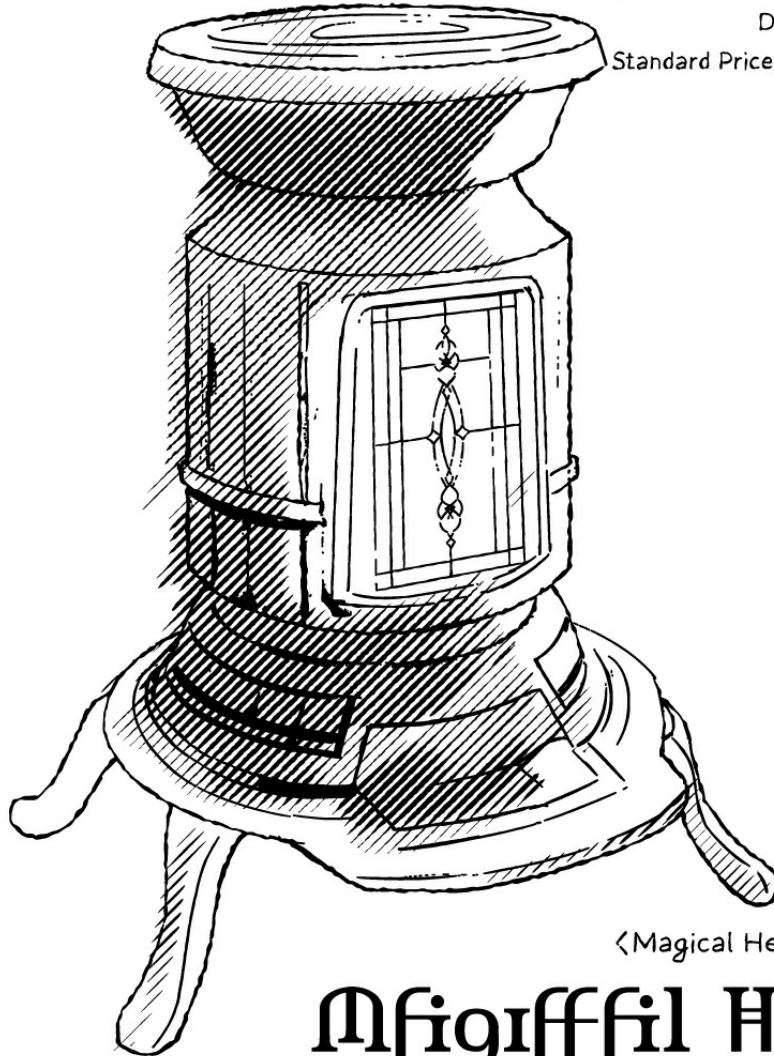
I somewhat forcefully changed the subject, and we began to discuss our future plans.

No
007

Complete Alchemy Works: Appears in Volume 7

Difficulty: Normal

Standard Price: ~600,000 Rhea



〈Magical Heat Chamber〉

Mfi9iffil Hfflit Ahfimffflk

Produces efficient heating even with the meager amount of magical energy that can be supplied by the average person. Just one of these can satisfy the heating needs of an entire house, freeing you from the heavy labor of chopping firewood. Can be used for heating, cooking, and hot water even in the middle of winter. Starting today, that indoor bath you've always wanted can be yours! *Attachments for heating water and cooking are sold as optional features.

Episode 5: Salamander

Now then, let's go over the premises we were working under.

First—and this was the most important thing, as there was no point in even talking about things if this wasn't the case—I had contacted Master to ask if I could handle the salamander, and she'd given me the highly reassuring(?) answer that “if it's of average strength, maybe you can manage if you try your best?”

If I try my best, huh?

I planned to do that, of course, but I felt a little less than confident about it.

I mean, I'm not a combat specialist, after all.

That was why I'd elected to do the best I could while taking advantage of my main trade.

Still, that was why the most important thing for the endeavor would be the heat-resistant coats that would protect us from the salamander's breath. To describe the coats briefly, the outside was made with processed lava lizard leather, and that was backed by hellflame grizzly leather.

Underneath that I would place more heat-resistant materials, with an inner lining made with whatever other leather I happened to have available.

The most important, obviously, was the lava lizard leather. I could have used a different leather for the backing if the budget had demanded it, but I was ignoring costs this time, so I'd chosen the hellflame grizzly leather to boost the effect as much as possible.

Fortunately, I have a stock of it.

The heat-resistant materials were repurposed from what I'd been using when I made the magic stoves, while the cooling function I was applying to the leather backing was similar to the one in the cooling hats.

In a way, this was the culmination of everything I'd learned making artifacts

before now.

Maybe that's why this artifact's actually recorded in volume five of the Complete Works.

And I'm still not finished with the fourth volume.

That was why I had been planning to just process the lava lizard leather and sell it as it was, but...given the circumstances, that was no longer an option.

And so, I was racing through the remaining artifacts in volume four at a feverish pitch.

I have the materials already, so I just have to put in the work! Even at the cost of some missed sleep!

It seemed my efforts had Lorea-chan concerned...

"Sarasa-san, are you okay? You've been pushing yourself pretty hard. If there's anything I can do to help..."

I had been shutting myself up in the workshop while Lorea-chan more or less ran the shop by herself. When she poked her head in to call me for meal time, she looked worried.

I'd already gone three nights without sleep. When I'd looked at my face this morning, there were dark circles under my eyes.

I'm sure that's what's worrying her, but I can take it.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Just having you cook for me is enough. If it weren't for that, I couldn't push myself so recklessly."

It was common for alchemists to lose themselves in their research to the point of forgetting to eat, but we were just as human as anyone else. We couldn't keep pushing ourselves like that for days on end.

I, however, had all my meals provided for me, so I could keep on doing my best for a long time without collapsing.

"Well, all right then... But please don't overdo it, okay? I'll try to make you something that's good for your stamina."

I'd made sure Lorea-chan was filled in on the situation this time. She was just

as indignant about Iris-san's situation and had promised to do everything she could to help out. So that was why, even after seeing me pull all-nighters in the workshop, she wasn't pushing me to rest.

"Yep, thanks. Your cooking is always delicious, Lorea-chan, so it's a big help," I complimented with a grin as we were headed toward the kitchen.

"No, I'm nothing special," she replied with a bashful smile.

"Shopkeeper-dono, is there anything that we could do?" Iris-san's voice came from the direction of the kitchen. "Although I know we can't cook as well as Lorea."

"And we don't know much about alchemy either," added Kate-san.

"Hmm... Then could I ask you to hunt a deer for me?" I asked.

Honestly, I'd just forced myself to come up with something because I'd have felt bad saying, "Nope, there's nothing." Iris-san and Kate-san looked at each other, tilting their heads to the side in confusion.

"A deer? Just an ordinary deer?" asked Iris-san.

"Not a monster of some sort?" Kate-san had to double-check.

"Yes, an ordinary deer," I confirmed, explaining, "I need its hide, you see."

The leather for the lining of the heat-resistant coats didn't need to be anything special, because it would pretty much only influence how comfortable they were to wear and their durability.

That was what made deer hide perfect, both from a cost and feel perspective. I had been intending to simply purchase the deer leather, but if they were willing to go out and hunt one, I could handle all the processing myself and get a slightly better result.

*I can't rule out that small difference being what saves one of our lives, so...
Yep, this might actually be a better job for them than I initially thought.*

"I see," said Iris-san. "If it helps you, Shopkeeper-dono, we'll head out at once."

"Yeah," Kate-san agreed. "I'm good at hunting, after all."

“The meat on our table was always hunted by Kate or Caterina.”

“Because if we didn’t go out hunting, there wouldn’t be any.”

It turned out that when she lived in the House of Lotze’s domain, Kate-san had sometimes gone out to hunt deer both to secure food and practice.

That was how she’d gotten so good with her bow.

I’m sure they’ll bring back a deer for me with ease.

“Okay, I’m counting on you. There’s no real need to rush.”

“Sure, just leave it to us!” Iris-san exclaimed, placing a hand over her chest as she nodded confidently.

Around the time I had finished making all the artifacts in volume four, they returned, having successfully brought down several deer for me. Deer weren’t that common around here, so the pair had made a trip back to the Lotze family’s domain to hunt on familiar ground where they were sure they could catch them.

“Will these work, Shopkeeper-dono?” asked Iris-san.

“Yes, they should be fine,” I answered.

“And this is for you, Lorea-chan,” added Kate-san.

“Thank you. I’ll use it to make something to go with dinner tonight!”

Iris-san and Kate-san had returned with five pelts and around five kilos of meat. I only needed the skins this time, so they had stayed at the family house while they were hunting and left behind whatever meat and antlers they couldn’t carry back.

“With another two weeks, I should be able to get ready... How were things back home?”

It had been their first time going back there in quite some time. When I asked if their folks had said anything, Iris-san somewhat awkwardly averted her eyes, and her response was deliberately vague.

“Oh, well... Mother was a little worried, but it wasn’t a problem or anything, really?”

“For my part, my dad gave me a pep talk,” said Kate-san. “He told me to get out there and do everything I can to be useful.”

I feel like Iris-san’s mother had the more common response to learning that her child is going to be challenging a salamander. Maybe the only reason she didn’t try to stop her is because they’re part of the nobility?

Sort of a “you’ve got to do it to protect our house” kind of thing. Not that I really get stuff like that, though...

“Father didn’t have any problems either,” Iris-san continued. “He whined a little, but it sounds like he’ll be able to come here like we planned.”

It sounded like Adelbert-sama was working hard to make up for the work he hadn’t been able to do when he’d come here before, plus the work that needed to be taken care of in preparation for the next time he was going to be here.

“Okay, for the next step, I’m going to take measurements of your hands. I’m sure that we’ll all feel safer with heat-resistant boots and gloves too.”

We kept on preparing like that for the next two weeks and change. Once Adelbert-sama and Caterina-san arrived, Operation Salamander Debt Repayment could commence.



Our party of five, which consisted of the three of us with the addition of Adelbert-sama and Caterina-san, traveled quickly, following the path we had taken with Andre-san and the guys before.

Our goal on this occasion was to slay the salamander and acquire its materials.

We headed toward our destination, without getting distracted—okay, getting only marginally distracted by stopping to harvest materials along the way.

Hey, if you saw something good, you’d want to collect it too, wouldn’t you?

I mean, I’ve spent a considerable amount of my funds preparing for this, and it’s not like Adelbert-sama and Caterina-san are complaining, so I don’t see any problem. Yep.

The downside to our current party, strange as it may seem, was that we only

had a single floating tent to share between four women and one man.

Beautiful young maiden that I was, it didn't matter if Adelbert-sama was Iris-san's dad, there was clearly no way I was going to let him sleep in the same tent as me.

We managed to solve the problem by having him share his night watch with Iris-san. I didn't have any issue with sleeping next to Kate-san or Caterina-san.

The enemies we encountered along the way also proved no problem.

And that was because...

"I had been somewhat worried, knowing that this is the great forest, but it's not so bad as I feared."

"You're right. I can handle them well enough on my own."

...just like Iris-san and Kate-san had told me, their parents really were even stronger than them.

Even if we weren't that deep inside the forest yet, Adelbert-sama and Caterina-san were chatting casually as they easily slaughtered every monster that dared show itself.

Of course, it was probably a mistake to compare a professional knight, who had received specialist combat training, with ordinary gatherers. Anyone could become a gatherer just by saying they were one. There was no accreditation process, nor was there an academy like there was for alchemists.

Some of them received training from the more senior gatherers, but even among those senior gatherers, the vast majority of them had never properly learned how to use a weapon. When it came to fighting techniques—not just gathering techniques—their level of ability was not high by any means.

Looking at it that way, it was only natural that a knight could boldly tread into areas that a rookie gatherer would hesitate to enter.

"Perhaps I, too, could make a living as a gatherer once I retire," Adelbert-sama mused to himself.

"No, father, I would think your health would have declined too much by then... And aside from that, you do realize that just being able to fight isn't

enough as a gatherer, right?” Iris-san protested, perhaps feeling as though the hard work she had put in was being denied.

“I’m aware,” her father replied with a wry grin. “I don’t mean to belittle the profession.”

The fact of the matter was, a gatherer’s primary skill wasn’t fighting, but “gathering.”

What could they sell? Where was it found? How could they harvest it? It was only through their knowledge and experience that they could make a living. If Andre-san and Adelbert-sama were ever to fight, the knight would almost certainly emerge victorious, but Andre-san and the guys could earn more as gatherers than he could.

“Regardless, this does put me at ease somewhat,” Adelbert-sama continued. “Even if we had no choice due to our lack of money, we had been a touch uneasy about sending the two of you out into the world...”

“But if this is all you’re doing, we didn’t need to worry so much,” Caterina-san said, similarly relieved, before glancing at Iris-san and adding, “Or normally, we wouldn’t have had to.”

“Urkh!” Iris-san groaned at this jab. “I’m ashamed of myself.”

“Sorry, it wouldn’t have happened if I had my act more together...” Kate-san apologized.

“Now, now. I’m sure that bad luck played a part in it too,” I tried to reassure them.

They’d been with two guys who weren’t a help but a hindrance when they’d encountered a hellflame grizzly that normally wouldn’t have been there.

It was the combination of those factors that had caused the accident. From what I had seen of Iris-san’s skills and performance since then, had it only been one of those two issues, she wouldn’t have been injured.

That said, it was fair to say that not being able to spot how bad those gatherers were, plus not turning back once she found out, was a mistake in judgment on her part.

“Sarasa-dono, have Iris and Kate been doing well as gatherers?” asked Adelbert-sama.

“Let me think...” I replied, glancing over at the two of them. “I can’t deny that they lack experience, but I think they’ve been successful enough.”

It wasn’t that I was giving into the pleading looks on their faces, but I decided to give a positive assessment.

I mean, setting aside their fighting abilities, they still had a ways to go when it came to gathering, but between my advice and Andre-san and the guys’ help, they *were* making a decent amount of money, you know?

“Hmm? They’re doing acceptably well, then?”

But it seemed Adelbert-sama saw right through me. He grinned, looking back and forth between me and Iris-san.

“They’ve been sending back money, so I don’t think she’s lying to you, Adelbert-sama.”

“But only because of the help of those around them. Right?” He looked to his daughter for confirmation.

“Yes, it’s as you say, father,” Iris-san admitted awkwardly.

But in contrast to her, Adelbert-sama nodded in good spirits. “Well, that’s perfectly fine. Even if you two can fight, you’re still new to gathering. It’s important to listen to and learn from those around you. Sarasa-dono”—he turned to me and bowed his head—“I’m sure that they’ll cause you trouble, but please continue looking after our girls.”

“Of course,” I responded naturally. “I also benefit from having them around, and they’re important friends of mine now.”



We hurried to our destination, arriving at the area where the lava lizards lived a few days later, which was a little faster than our previous trip.

Perhaps because it hadn’t been long since we were last here, things hadn’t changed, and there was no sign of the hellflame grizzlies returning.

All we saw were lava lizards moving around lethargically. If we were to reach for one thing that was different from last time...

“It’s rather humid around here,” Iris-san observed.

“That’s because it’s hot out today, and the ground itself is hot as well,” I explained.

Unlike last time, when we might have been able to delude ourselves into thinking it was still spring, we were now so deep into the summer heat that there was no denying it.

In addition to the high air temperature, the heat radiating from the ground, as well as the humidity from the steam and pools of hot water, were all causing the unpleasantness index of this place to skyrocket.

Frankly, it was no place to be during the summer. But for the lava lizards and the salamander, this was an ideal climate, which made them all the more active.

The place would have been more tolerable for us in the winter, but the House of Lotze’s finances wouldn’t be able to hold out until then, so...there was really no helping it.

“Having this hat helps a lot, but you can really feel the heat down around your feet,” Caterina-san observed.

“It would be even worse without it, huh? We have much to be grateful to Sarasa-dono for.”

“No, no. Iris-san and Kate-san paid me properly for those.”

Iris-san and Kate-san had given their parents the hats they usually wore.

That did mean that, while Caterina-san was fine, the design and size weren’t quite right for Adelbert-sama, but he had rebuffed my offer to loan him a new one.

Meanwhile, Iris-san, Kate-san, and I had already put on our anti-salamander gear.

That meant boots, gloves, and coats.

We looked like we must be sweltering, but because of their heat-resisting and

cooling properties, we were actually pretty comfortable. The coats had hoods too, so we weren't even breaking a sweat.

However, while Adelbert-sama and Caterina-san, who only had cooling hats, were protected from the sun beating down on them, the hats were less effective against heat rising from the ground. The heat they were enduring must have been even worse than their tone suggested.

Knowing that, we couldn't stay here long.

"Now then, Shopkeeper-san," said Kate-san. "Do we know where to find the salamander?"

"I only have a vague hint at the moment," I replied. "I've got some ideas, though."

In preparation for this trip, I had investigated the volcano in greater detail. Well, maybe that was overstating it. I mean, I hadn't even left the village. All I'd done was ask Master and Leonora-san if they had any information.

The result: Master had sent me a map of the local terrain.

I hadn't seen that one coming.

Where she'd gotten it was a mystery to me, but it had let me figure out the places a salamander might be lurking, so there was no doubt that it had been a massive help.

Obviously, Leonora-san hadn't been able to provide anything so convenient, but as if in an attempt to make up for it, she'd sent a message saying "Good luck!" and had Darna-san bring me some artifacts that would be useful during the battle to come.

Although I'd planned things out so we could win without them, a little extra help couldn't go wrong, so I'd brought them along with me, of course.

Leonora-san had helped out with the intel on Hoh Bahru as well, so if we managed to take down the salamander, I was probably going to have to send some of the materials her way.

"So we're headed toward one of those spots you think it might be, then?"

"Yes. But all of them are near the mouth of the volcano, so if you are

struggling with the temperature, you don't need to strain yourselves, okay, Adelbert-sama?"

It was already pretty hot where we were. If we climbed farther up the mountain, the fire magic would grow stronger, which would likely make the temperature rise too.



It was only a matter of time before it went from humid to scorching. I was just trying to warn him, but Adelbert-sama shook his head to dismiss the idea.

“Oh, I know I may have aged a little, but I never miss a day of training. You’ve no need to worry on my account.”

Hrmm, I don’t think this is the kind of thing training can help... I guess Iris-san’s slight stubbornness comes from her father.

I shot Caterina-san a look, but she simply smiled weakly and shook her head. If things got really bad, surely she’d make him stop...right?

The temperature aside, we were making smooth progress up the mountain. There weren’t many creatures that could live in these temperatures, and the lava lizards we spotted wouldn’t bother us if we didn’t attack them first.

When Caterina-san heard how valuable their skins were and that Kate-san had been able to take them down using her bow, she wanted to try it for herself, but Iris-san and Kate-san were able to dissuade her with some effort. We couldn’t go salamander hunting while carrying those materials with us.

It was only once Iris-san had suggested “Let’s do it on the way back, if we still have the leeway to,” that she had agreed to put it off, so it was looking like we might end up actually doing that...but the only way we were still going to have that kind of leeway was if we failed to hunt a salamander.

Because if we did manage to slay one, we were going to be so buried in materials there was no way we would have room left over to carry back lava lizards too.

Even with the preparations we’d made, I was uncertain we’d be able to bring home a whole salamander. Incidentally, if we completely failed here, then I was going to be dead anyway, so there wasn’t much point in me thinking about whether they could hunt the lizards or not at that point.

“Shopkeeper-dono, the heat is reaching rather serious levels... Have we still not reached our destination yet?”

Iris-san’s real reason for asking that question was probably her concern for her father’s health. Although the temperature around us had gotten rather

high, with our anti-salamander equipment, the three of us weren't really feeling it.

Adelbert-sama, however, had stopped talking a little while ago. Caterina-san seemed to be suffering too, but not quite as badly. She seemed torn on whether to make him stop.

If he went any farther, his life would be in jeopardy. It was technically possible to counter the heat for a short time with some disposable artifacts, but I had brought those to help with carrying the salamander's materials if we were able to defeat it. There was no point in wasting them to let him push himself harder now.

"We should see it soon. Adelbert-sama, Caterina-san, could I ask you to head back and prepare a campsite for us? We obviously can't sleep up here."

It was going to be impossible to head home immediately after the battle.

I'd need about a day to rest, but with how hot the ground was around here, even with the help of the floating tent, I wasn't going to be able to rest. Its air conditioning function had never been meant to deal with these kinds of temperatures.

"Hmm, that makes sense. I suppose there's no point in being stubborn."

Maybe giving him something to do had helped him get over it. Adelbert-sama raised his head and sought out his daughter's face.

"Iris, I'll be heading back now, but you stay focused and protect Sarasa-dono!" he said, clapping her shoulder.

Iris-san nodded firmly. "Yes! Leave it to me, father!"

Seeing this, Caterina-san turned to her own daughter. With a slightly worried smile, she hugged her and then offered some words of encouragement: "Kate-chan, do your best, but don't be reckless."

"I know, mom. You can count on me."

We watched as Adelbert-sama and Caterina-san took the artifacts we wouldn't need to fight the salamander, like the floating tent and the portable toilet, and began heading down to the foot of the mountain.

Some time later, we arrived at our first destination.

“This cave is the closest spot...but, unfortunately, it doesn’t seem to be the place.”

Using Master’s advice and the map she’d sent me, I had marked three caves with stars.

If the salamander had just been standing out in the open, then magic detection would’ve been enough to find it, but sadly things weren’t going to be that simple.

Generally, salamanders lived deep inside caves like these, next to the mouth of the volcano, or sometimes even in a river of lava. Just heading in the direction I detected magic wouldn’t necessarily bring us to it. If we could dig a straight line through the ground, that would be different, but that was impossible.

“Murgh, I see. It’s not going to work, huh?”

“Iris, we’ve only been to one place. Isn’t it a bit spoiled to be saying it’s not going well already?”

“But Kate, when you consider we need to carry things back...”

As the sour-faced Iris-san was saying, it was going to be rough having to carry our freight a long way across the mountain, all while enduring this heat. The ground heat up here meant there was no vegetation, but that didn’t mean it was easy ground to walk across, and Adelbert-sama and Caterina-san didn’t have heat-resistant coats like we did.

Kate-san must have considered that too, because she closed her eyes and screwed up her face for a bit, but ultimately sighed and shrugged. “We’ll just have to deal with it.”

“One bit of good news is that we can be almost certain there’s a salamander,” I said.

If it turned out there wasn’t one at this point, all of our planning and preparation would have been for nothing.

And then I’d be left almost bankrupt, just like Iris-san and her family...

Whew, seriously, thank goodness there's a salamander!!!

"Normally, they're troublesome monsters, but this one's going to be our savior—if we can slay it, that is."

"That's true. If it weren't for the salamander, who knows what might have happened to my family... I feel pathetic having to rely on you to defeat it for us, though, Shopkeeper-dono."

"You don't need to worry about that. It's not like I'm helping you for free... You *are* going to pay me back, right?"

I spent a lot on the preparations, so if I don't get paid back, I may be in a bit of a pickle.

That's going to depend on how much we're able to sell the salamander for and how much of the money is left once the House of Lotze's debts are repaid, though.

"Of course I will! You'll definitely get your money back!" Iris-san insisted.

"Yes, of course," agreed Kate-san before apologetically adding, "But if you could have some forbearance in regard to how long it takes, it would be much appreciated."

"Yeah, I know it will take some time," I said with a nod. "I'm fine with you not pushing yourselves and just paying me back when you can, obviously."

But how long is it going to take them to repay me? Their initial debt was already more than an ordinary person could ever hope to pay back.

Hmm, if they're unlucky, they could be working for free up until retirement... Well, no, I guess that for an average gatherer, it'd be tough to pay it off even then?

If a normal person worked as hard as they could their whole life, not even spending money on their own needs, they'd still need to reincarnate a number of times to be able to pay off this debt.

Skilled gatherers made a lot more than the average commoner, but even so...

That said, if the two of them are going to live with me the whole time, then that's fun in its own way, I guess?



“We’ll be reaching the second spot soon, and... Yeah, this is it. I can tell even from here.”

I could see the cave up ahead. I turned to the other two and nodded once I noticed magical power flowing out of it. The third cave was a bit far from here, so we were lucky this was the one.

“Is that...right? I can’t feel a thing. Can you, Kate?”

Iris-san cocked her head to the side doubtfully. Kate-san nodded, albeit a little vaguely.

“Just a little...? Could it be because I’ve been practicing magic?”

“I’d say so,” I agreed. “I think you’re more sensitive to magic than you would have been before, Kate-san.”

That was important when using magic. If she kept it up, she’d probably be able to use magic with a little more practice.

Many people gave up in frustration when they couldn’t get a handle on how to invoke magic, but it might have been fair to say that Kate-san’s training was going smoothly?

There were still many hurdles for her to get over before she would reach the point where she could use practical magic, but that was within the realm of what could be accomplished with hard work. I’d been able to tell while teaching her that Kate-san was a pretty hard worker, so I wasn’t concerned in the least.

“If you two say so, then it must be true. We’ll finally be confronting the salamander, then.” Iris-san’s expression grew a little tense. I looked at her clenched fists. They were trembling slightly.

Kate-san’s expression was tense too, though not to the same degree. She held her bow tightly.

Honestly, it was kind of contagious, so I wished they’d relax a little more.

It was important to stay alert, but getting too tense had a way of making people rigid.

“Iris-san, are you scared?” I asked.

“Yeah. Honestly, I am rather scared,” Iris-san answered, her hand on the sword at her hip. “We’re about to face an opponent I couldn’t possibly hope to defeat. I’ve never gone into a battle like this one before.”

“Um, please don’t try to fight it?!” I said, urgently shaking my head. “You’re only there to buy time and support me. If you try a frontal assault, that equipment is nowhere near up to the task, okay?”

These heat-resistant coats could handle being splashed with a little lava, but they weren’t necessarily going to be able to endure the salamander’s attacks. I expected that they could handle a few bursts of its breath, but when it came to simple defense, they were only a little better than a sturdy leather coat.

I’d enhanced the materials’ heat-resistant properties, not their hardness, so the coats couldn’t deflect swords the way the lava lizard’s skin had when they were alive. If she got up close and personal with the salamander and got hit by its attack, it would easily shred the coat.

The area around it was pretty hot. That would rapidly sap her stamina, and if she took a breath attack at that point, she’d be finished. But even before all of that, if Iris-san attacked, her sword would break, so it was completely pointless. I didn’t want her to even draw the weapon she was gripping the hilt of.

“I understand that, but...” Even if she understood, she felt restless.

As Iris-san let go of her blade, I smiled and puffed up my chest. “It’s going to be fine. It won’t even be a difficult battle.”

“Hrmm, really? I thought you said something about not being that good at combat magic, though...?”

“I may not be good at it, but that doesn’t mean I can’t use it, okay?”

According to Master, I had too much magical power. Normally, a person’s magic power grew as they practiced using magic. With the proper training, they would gain the ability to control their power, so they would never end up with more power than they could manage.

But in my case, I apparently had too much power from the beginning. That

was convenient for me as an alchemist, but if I'd become a mage, it would have been a negative instead of a positive—because even as my control grew, so would my magical power, and I would never get to the point where I had sufficient control of it.

In other words, it was like trying to pour a small glass of wine from a big barrel. It would be hard enough just lifting the barrel, and pouring from it without spilling any would be even more difficult. You could work on building your muscles, but if the barrel got proportionally larger as you did, then you wouldn't be able to do anything about it.

It's pretty clear why it would be easier to pour from a wine bottle.

"That's why I messed up a lot back when I first joined Master as an apprentice and caused her all sorts of trouble."

"You, Shopkeeper-san?" Kate-san was surprised. "I have a hard time imagining you failing at anything."

I just smiled and shook my head. "Well, yeah, because I've learned enough to stand on my own two feet now. And I've got the license to prove it. I only met the two of you after that."

Before I'd gotten my license, and after—there was no way that my rate of success would remain unchanged, and an alchemist running her own shop couldn't afford to be seen messing up often. The potions I made all of the time were one thing, but even now, I sometimes failed when making a new artifact. I just didn't tell people when I did.

"Well, this artifact that Master gave me made it a lot easier, though."

I held up the necklace I was wearing for them to see. Iris-san and Kate-san regarded it with curiosity. It just looked like an ordinary necklace at first glance, but it was actually super expensive.

"What is it, Shopkeeper-dono?" asked Iris-san.

"It's an artifact that regulates the maximum amount of magical power I can put out. To go back to my earlier analogy, it'd be like putting a lid on the wine barrel so it doesn't overflow, then making an opening in the lid so that you can pour from it more easily."

Obviously, I could handle my ordinary work without it, but it still made a world of difference.

In situations where I was just using a little magic, not having it wasn't so bad. It was when I needed to use a lot of magical power that things got really tough. It was difficult releasing a lot of magical power, but at the same time, making sure it wasn't *too* much.

And in the case of offensive magic or any other magic that used a large amount of magical power, that was incredibly important. Apparently, ordinary people didn't have to think about it; they could just let loose with everything they had. I was a little jealous of that.

"Does that mean if you take off the necklace, you can use powerful magic?" asked Kate-san.

"Yes," I answered. "But I have issues with control, so I can only use my full power."

"And that's why you say you're not good at it?" Iris-san asked.

"Yeah. I can't use magic that's greater than a certain scale while wearing this artifact, but if I take it off, I can't control myself, so...well, I guess you could sum it up by saying I lack sufficient training."

But if you'll let me make an excuse for myself, please remember that I'm an alchemist. Unlike a mage working in the military, going *boom*, *ka-boom* was not my job. What an alchemist needed was stable control of their magical power.

Our job didn't demand momentary bursts of high power, and at least at my level, I had never found myself without enough magical power for a transmutation whenever I wore the necklace.

Also, I wouldn't normally have the opportunity to practice using the sort of powerful offensive magic that I couldn't use with my output regulated.

Frankly, that kind of magic was so powerful that using it would be a nuisance to everyone in the neighborhood. The magic that I'd used to level the forest out back, which Lorea-chan had been needling me over ever since, was almost cute by comparison.

It's not like I can just go ask to borrow the military's training grounds.

"Well, even if I do lose control, I'll just exhaust all of my magical power, so it's nothing to worry about."

"And that's why you won't be able to move afterward?" Iris-san asked.

"Yes," I replied. "So it's all or nothing. I'll either succeed and kill it with ease, or fail and have to flee. One or the other. There's no second chance. Please, don't worry about it."

"We're supposed to be reassured by that...?"

"Isn't it reassuring, not having to think 'if I push myself just a little harder, we can win' during a battle?"

If I can't defeat it with magic, we can immediately decide to retreat. It's nice that there's no need to hesitate, like if our attacks sort of seemed to be working, right?

"If it comes to it, you'll need to carry me while you run away, but...I doubt it'll be completely unharmed after eating my magic, so you should be able to get away without issue. And if it seems risky, you can always leave me, you know?"

The salamander wasn't going to ignore me, a person it knew could and would hurl powerful magic at it, to go after the obviously nonthreatening Iris-san and Kate-san.

Even if I couldn't move, I could still serve as a decoy.

"We couldn't leave you behind like that, Shopkeeper-dono! You've been dragged into our house's business. No matter what happens, I'll make sure that I bring you back safe and sound. Please, trust in that."

"If it comes to it, I'll slow it down," said Kate-san. "I think your stamina makes you better suited for carrying her, after all."

"Uhh, listen, it's pretty much impossible for me to fail, so you don't need to prepare yourselves for it..."

I'd been half joking, but Iris-san's serious response and Kate-san's almost tragic determination made me feel bad about it.

“If it gets risky, don’t hold back, just scatter all of the ice stones you’re carrying, okay? That should slow it down at least a little so you can use the time to escape.”

Because Iris-san and Kate-san had no means of attacking the salamander themselves, I had prepared ice stones and ice arrows for them to use. They were disposable artifacts that could be made using frostbite bat fangs and similar materials.

They were also what Leonora-san had sent us to aid us in our quest.

Normally, they were meant to keep the creature in check, but I had made more than I expected us to need, so even if my calculations were off and we ended up fleeing, there would be a considerable number left.

Then there were the extras Leonora-san had sent, on top of that.

There shouldn’t be much need to worry...?

“Ice stones, huh? Those stones cost more than three thousand rhea each, right?” Iris-san asked.

“Yes. The shop price is thirty-five hundred, and the ice arrows Kate-san has go for four thousand.”

“But there’s so many...”

Kate-san looked at the quiver on her back and the leather bag Iris-san was carrying, then sighed.

“They’re awfully extravagant weapons,” Iris-san remarked.

“Well, ordinary gatherers don’t use them,” I agreed. “Because you have to be careful or you’ll end up in the red.”

It was clearly *not normal* to fight using things like this. It was almost like we were clobbering the enemy with sacks of cash.

If the situation wasn’t what it was, I’d have likely given up, saying, *“I’m not ready for this yet.”*

However, I wanted to do whatever I could despite that.

That’s all there is to it.



“It looks like we’re getting close to our destination.”

As we came to a somewhat more open area in the cave, I stopped to warn Iris-san and Kate-san.

I then removed my necklace, carefully wrapped it in cloth, and put it in my pocket. Master had given the artifact to me without much fanfare, but I knew it was absurdly expensive—and not just that, it was really hard to make—so if it got broken, I would likely be in the red even if I managed to slay the salamander. That was just how valuable it was.

Honestly, I would have preferred to leave it with Adelbert-sama and Caterina-san for safekeeping, but there had been no guarantee we wouldn’t encounter monsters on our way here, and it would have been a real problem if I couldn’t use magic when we did encounter any monsters.

“A-At last, we arrive, huh?” Iris-san clutched her bag of ice stones.

“It makes me feel tense.” Kate-san held her bow at the ready.

I nodded to both of them, then stepped out into the open area.

It was a broad cavern with red-stained walls. A pool of molten lava spread out before us, and the great heat that radiated from it burned our faces even with our heat-resistant equipment.

The good thing was that we had enough space here to move around. If the pool of lava had covered a wider area, there’d have been nowhere for us to fight.

Iris-san looked around. “Where is the Sala—”

“It’s coming!” I warned sharply.

Just as I did, the surface of the lava swelled up and a massive creature burst forth from it.

It flew through the air, splashing lava all around, then landed with a heavy thud.

It looked reptilian, but unlike the lava lizards, which had been charming in their own way, this creature's entire form was angular and menacing. It stood as tall as Iris-san and was easily more than five meters long from head to tail. The powerful heat radiating from its body made the air shimmer, and molten stone dripped off of it.

Unlike the lava lizards, whose name was essentially false advertising, the salamander really was capable of swimming through lava.

If we hadn't come prepared, we'd have burned up just trying to get close to it. That was the kind of monster the salamander was.

"Urkh! What a creature!!!" Iris-san exclaimed.

"Well, it *is* a monster, after all. I'm counting on the two of you to act as planned!"

"Got it!" shouted Kate-san.

Even though I'd explained in advance, the two of them seemed to falter a bit when they saw the salamander for real, but once I called out to them, they bravely moved into action.

Iris-san went left, Kate-san went right.

The salamander initially focused its attention on me, as the only one still directly in front of it, but once Iris-san's ice stone impacted its head, it slowly turned in her direction. Noticing this, I focused my mind and began chanting a spell.

"Winds of the frozen land."

Iris-san didn't flinch under the creature's gaze. She pulled a handful of ice stones from the leather sack, and chucked them in the general direction of its head.

The stones were coming at the salamander fast, but they were rather small relative to the size of its massive body.

Yet it was the magical power inside of them that mattered.

They unleashed a flash of light on impact, freezing the area around them.

But it only lasted an instant.

The ice turned to white steam so fast it was impossible to tell if it had frozen the salamander's skin.

Practically unscathed, but definitely annoyed, the salamander turned toward Iris-san, slowly flexed its legs—and sprang!

“Urkh!”

Slam!!!

It went faster than I would have imagined possible for something of its size.

The salamander had shot like an arrow, passing by Iris-san—who tripped in her panic—before smashing into the wall, shattering it.

“Does it not know how to stop?!” Iris-san shouted.

The salamander, which had run headfirst into the wall without slowing, shook off the rubble, then began slowly turning around.

It faced Iris-san again.

The way it charged in, unafraid of hurting itself—although, it was unclear if it had—would have made anyone want to complain, not just Iris-san.

Normally, if something hit solid rock at that speed, it'd get hurt, right?! But it's totally unharmed!

“Iris!”

The salamander was closing in on her.

While Iris hesitated, unsure whether to throw a freezing stone or not, Kate-san loosed an arrow from some distance away. It came in many times faster than the stones Iris-san had thrown, and the freezing effect of the ice arrow allowed it to stab into the salamander's body.

But that didn't last long.

I'm not even sure I saw the steam as the ice evaporated.

The arrow had burned away, shaft and all.

“In the dark of night, where even sound is forbidden.”

But still, it had probably hurt more than the stones.

The salamander emitted a growl, turning to cast an even angrier glare in Kate-san's direction.



What's it going to do next? Leap again?

It was a bit far, but with the speed it had shown before, it could probably make it to her.

Maybe Kate-san realized that as well, because the tension was palpable as she held her bow ready to attack, while also maintaining a posture that let her move at any moment.

But the salamander chose another course of action.

Its legs froze in position as it reared back a little and sucked in a deep breath.

The salamander's throat was exposed, and Iris-san was right beside it.

Normally, this would have been, like, the ideal moment for an attack.

But not for us.

Iris-san didn't make the seemingly obvious move of jumping in closer, but instead hurriedly backed away, adjusting her hood to bring it as low over her face as possible.

Kate-san and I did likewise.

After this, we each took an ice stone we were carrying and slammed it on the ground in front of us.

At almost the same time, the salamander's head came down and its mouth spread wide, spewing scorching-hot flames.

The temperature rapidly rose, and there was a stinging sensation as my skin burned.

My throat ached as even the air I was breathing felt like it was on fire.

Urgh! Whose bright idea was it to try and slay a salamander?!

Mine! Darn it.

If it weren't Iris-san, and it hadn't involved Baron Kahku, I could've stayed out of it!

I didn't want to speak. Didn't want to open my mouth.

But that wasn't an option.

Because the other two were trying their best.

“Cease all movement, and bring about silence.”

I continued my chant, forcing the words out.

The salamander’s breath attack was long.

Is this an average salamander? I began to wonder.

If it wasn’t, what Master had said about me being able to handle an average one might not apply.

Even as that slight doubt began to creep in, I threw another ice stone.

It got a little easier to breathe.

Three thousand rhea a pop.

I’ve come a long way from stressing over whether to buy notebooks and ink pots. I just hope Iris-san and Kate-san use them too, and don’t choose now to be frugal...

The salamander’s breath almost completely filled the area we were in, but Iris-san had been the closest to the source.

“Iris! Are you okay?!” Kate-san shouted, concerned.

“I’m fine! It just hurts a little!” her partner shouted back, her voice a little hoarse, but sounding better than I’d expected it to.

I was a little worried for her myself, but all I could do now was finish this spell.

I heard the increasing urgency in their shouts as they resumed throwing and shooting, but continued weaving my magic carefully.

Even if I felt pressed to hurry, I couldn’t afford to fail.

Everything hung on this spell.

“Bring sleep to those who are raging.”

Then, no sooner than those last words were complete, I raised one hand.

The moment they saw the sign, Iris-san grabbed the biggest fistful of ice stones she could from the sack, and Kate-san took some out of her pockets. They then both threw them at the same time.

Instantly, a violently cold wind blew through the cavern.

It would heat back up in no time, but it was enough.

The pair fled, putting themselves behind me. I instantly triggered my spell.

“Frozen coffin!!!”

Roarrrrrrrr!!!

On my word, a freezing wind blasted forth, centered on the salamander.

An air so frigid that the one produced by the earlier ice stones seemed like it had been nothing by comparison settled over the area.

This place had felt hot even with our heat-resistant coats, and yet now we were watching frost begin to form on the ground.

The red hot pool of magma lost its color, black gradually spreading across it.

And as for the target of my spell, white steam rose from the area all around the salamander, while its legs were now as languid as the lava lizards had been before we attacked them as it tried to chase after Iris-san and Kate-san.

“Wh-What an effect,” Iris-san marveled.

“Yeah, it feels cold even back here,” Kate-san agreed.

The two of them watched in awe as the scenery changed in front of us. The cavern was gradually being locked in ice. It was an almost fantastical scene, so I could understand where they were coming from.

I just didn’t have the leeway to share the feeling.

“This...could be bad,” I told them, dripping with cold sweat.

“Huh? It might?” Iris-san reacted with surprise.

“You mean it’s *not* a success?” Kate-san couldn’t believe it either.

I was rapidly burning through my magical power, and my reserves would soon run dry at this rate. That was as expected, so not a problem in and of itself. The unexpected part was the salamander’s current condition.

If things were going as planned, the salamander would have already been frozen solid at this point, leaving us with an “iced salamander.”

But here in reality, the salamander's heat was still rising, fighting back against my magic. It had stopped moving, but was a long way from being put on ice.

"It'll be fine as long as I can finish it off, but will my magical energy last...?"

If we were going to haul it back, I wanted it completely frozen.

If I could flash freeze it, that would minimize the damage to the components, which would be even better. But the way things were going, I was getting worried I might not even be able to freeze it to death.

"Murgh... Is there nothing we can do...?" Iris-san groaned. "Oh, potions! How about potions?!"

"Ha ha ha..." I laughed weakly. "It wouldn't make a difference. The potions I have on hand are a drop in the bucket compared to my own reserves of magical power. It would be like trying to quench that salamander by dumping buckets of water on it."

Even Master had been shocked by my magic capacity.

If I had a potion that could fully restore my magic power, it would probably cost enough all on its own to completely repay their debt.

Although, not being able to completely kill one little salamander despite having such a massive magical capacity just shows how horribly inefficient I am.

I'm confident in my skills at anything relating to alchemy, but this is offensive magic, after all.

"You're still calm, Shopkeeper-dono?"

"No, I've just emptied my head? Panicking won't make it so I have more magic left in reserve," I explained before adding, "It might be a good time for you to start getting ready to withdraw."

I don't have much magical power left. There's no more smoke rising from the salamander, and ice is starting to cover the surface of it, but it's still iffy whether I can keep going until I've snuffed the life out of it.

But since it's stopped moving, we can probably run away without Kate-san having to stall for time, so that's lucky, I guess?

“Urgh! But we’re so close! I-I don’t want to marry that scumbag!” Iris-san loudly complained.

“Yeah, I can’t approve of you getting together with someone like that either,” Kate-san agreed.

To tell you the truth, when the two of them went back to the family estate to hunt deer, they’d had the misfortune of running into Hoh Bahru there.

Adelbert-sama already had no intention of accepting the engagement but couldn’t afford to come right out and say so while they were still trying to buy time, so they’d had to play it safe in how they treated the unwanted suitor.

As a result, the two of them had both come back frustrated with the way Hoh Bahru had acted in an overly familiar manner, as if the marriage had already gone through, while at the same time being condescending.

I’d just heard the stories, and yet even I was like, “Wow, that guy’s a bit much...” It must have been seriously infuriating for them to have to deal with him in person.

And if she ended up marrying that guy, Iris-san would have to live with him as husband and wife, while Kate-san, who was a retainer of the House of Lotze, would have to serve him as her master.

It was natural that they both thought, “*Absolutely not!*”

“Shopkeeper-dono! Would it be all right if I used all of these ice stones?! I’ll pay for them, obviously!”

“Of course I don’t mind, but I can’t promise they’ll have much of an—”

“It’s better than not trying!”

My magical power was running out. We were short on time.

So the moment she heard my answer, Iris-san began grabbing ice stones by the fistful and throwing them. Kate-san shot off the rest of her ice arrows, then joined Iris-san in throwing ice stones too.

Even though we had come with quite a few more ice stones than I’d expected to need, our stock rapidly dwindled once they started using them like that.

But the salamander was starting to freeze, so it lacked the heat that it had earlier.

Our stock of ice stones was rapidly melting away, but in return, ice had formed on the salamander, and it was definitely getting thicker over time.

Then, just as our stock ran out, my reserves of magical energy were likewise exhausted, bringing the raging blizzard to an end.

In the silence that fell, I was assaulted by a feeling of exhaustion.

As the power drained out of my entire body and I crumpled, Iris-san was there immediately, holding me, and we pulled back to the entrance of the cavern. The two of them were staring at the salamander.

Now the sole useless member of the group, I stayed still in Iris-san's arms, unable to do anything beyond stare up at her face, so handsome and serious.

Like the female love interest in a story—yep, that was me right now.

Because I wasn't going to be moving for a while!

Darn it. If our genders were different, we could have gotten a real mood going—though, nah, maybe not. This wasn't a good spot for romance.

It had been scorching hot before, but was freezing cold now. I needed to remember that this wasn't a place where we could survive without heat-resistant equipment.

Even if, depending on your perspective, there's a fantastical scene playing out here.

With an ice-locked cavern, and a salamander that might start moving any moment.

"Did...we manage to kill it?" Iris-san asked hesitantly.

"Who can say?" Kate-san turned to me. "What do you think, Shopkeeper-san?"

Was it best to flee out of caution? Or was there no need?

Because if we had slain the monster, then we needed to get to work collecting the parts.

Though Kate-san looked down at me, unsure what to do, I shook my head weakly. “Sorry, normally I could tell you, but with my magical power spent like this...”

There were, broadly speaking, two ways of detecting the “presence” of a target. One involved sensing their magical power and the other searching for life signs.

The former method had the benefit of working over a long distance, and so it was this magic which I generally used when trying to detect enemies. However, the cavern was filled to the brim with energy right now as the result of us using a powerful spell and a massive number of ice stones. It would be tough to identify the magical power being outputted by a particular target in this situation, and monster parts had a lot of magical power in them anyway.

It wasn’t like that magical energy dissipated the moment they died either, and if it did, then their materials wouldn’t be of any use in alchemy.

The method that involved searching for life signs, on the other hand, wasn’t influenced by those factors, but could only be used at close range. This was close enough that distance wouldn’t be a problem, but in my current powerless state, I didn’t have the capacity left to cast the spell.

We waited in silence for some time.

It seemed my spell had packed more punch than I thought, because there was no sign of the dark, hardened lava turning red once more, or of the ice around us melting into water.

But that was evidence that I had blasted my power all over, not just into the target, so it was fair to say that I had been incredibly inefficient.

“Shopkeeper-dono... Do you think it’s okay to approach?” Iris-san asked, growing impatient, but I agonized over what to do.

If we were going to play it safe, the best thing to do was to pull out for now, and come back when my magical power had fully recovered.

If it was dead, then there was no problem. And if it was alive, as long as I had my power back, we would be able to run away.

“And for that reason, I think we should head back for today...”

“Without confirming if it’s dead or not?” Iris-san asked, looking from my face, to the frozen salamander, then back again.

It was almost totally covered in ice, so there was a high probability that it was dead. I could understand why it would be frustrating for her to have to leave it here and wait for me to recover when it was in this state.

But, although I could understand...

“It feels bad for me too, but since I can’t be sure it’s safe, I can’t approve of you getting closer. Just put up with it for today, and let’s head back.”

“I...see.” Iris-san cast a hesitant glance in Kate-san’s direction, but seeing her partner sigh and shake her head, she let out a resigned sigh of her own. “That’s right. If this salamander were still alive, then I would be placing you in danger, Shopkeeper-dono. Now is the time for patience, I suppose.”

“Yeah, because I can’t move now.”

I was more worried for Iris-san than myself, but if it helped her control herself, then I was glad to be a burden on her for now.

When I wrapped my arms around Iris-san’s neck and leaned against her, she gave me a sardonic smile, then turned away from the salamander.

“Let’s be on our way, then,” she said. “And let us be happy that we came out of this in one piece.”

“Yeah,” Kate-san agreed. “We survived fighting a salamander. That’s got to be worth something on its own... I’d rather not think about how much we just spent to do it, though.”

Seeing the inscrutable expression on Kate-san’s face as she looked at the now-empty sack and quiver, Iris-san frowned again.

“Please, don’t mention that. I know I said that I would bear the cost, but even one of those stones I was throwing by the fistful cost more than we earn in an entire day of work...”

“Don’t worry about it, Iris-san.”

“Shopkeeper-dono! Don’t tell me you’re going to—”

Seeing Iris-san’s face light up, I nodded and smiled. “I’ll give you a discounted price.”

“Shopkeeper-dono...”

She said she’d pay, so she’ll get no mercy from me. Because I’m compelled to save money wherever I can.

Noticing how deflated Iris-san looked, Kate-san and I exchanged a glance and a chuckle. The fact of the matter was, as long as the salamander was good and dead, the price of those ice stones was going to be a drop in the bucket.

We wouldn’t know the result until tomorrow or later, though.

Hesitant as we were to leave, we turned our backs on the salamander, now frozen and immobile, and headed to where Adelbert-sama and Caterina-san were waiting for us.

Epilogue

“Things have finally settled down.”

“Yes, they have...”

With the recent excitement having finally come to a close, I was currently enjoying a spot of tea with Lorea-chan on the shop floor.

Today’s snacks were some nut cookies that Lorea-chan had baked earlier.

These cookies were made to celebrate the resolution to our troubles, using a somewhat decadent amount of butter and sugar. They were still warm and tasted so, so good.

Honestly, they were so good I thought that Lorea-chan could go into business selling them, but...that wasn’t going to be viable in this village.

The cost of the ingredients probably made them too expensive for the locals to eat often.

“I caused a lot of trouble for you too, Lorea-chan.”

“Oh, no. All I was able to do was watch the shop, really...”

Lorea-chan shook her head humbly, but I grabbed her hand and disagreed.

“I’m grateful for that. My main line of business is as an alchemist. If I didn’t have you to mind the shop, I wouldn’t have time for anything else. You really are helping.”

“I’m happy to hear that.”

As I watched Lorea-chan smiling bashfully, I thought back to everything that had happened recently.

Back then, I had been unsure if the salamander was dead or not.

When we went to check the following day, with my magical power largely recovered, we had been fortunate to discover that it was very much deceased.

Around the time we went, it was about half thawed, so with the help of Adelbert-sama and Caterina-san, who'd come along with us using disposable heat-resistant equipment, we had butchered it on the spot, discarding the unneeded bits before refreezing it all and dividing the load among us.

For the parts we couldn't haul ourselves, we had assembled the floating board that we'd brought in case it'd be required and carried them back using it—with me pouring out magical power the entire time.

When I made it, I kind of expected that thing to sit in storage until the day I died, but it came in handy in an unexpected way... Although, I've already chucked it back into the warehouse.

By the time we got back home, even I had been exhausted by the massive demand that it had put on my magical power, so yeah, it really was an impractical artifact.

That said, the effort paid off, as Master had bought most of the salamander parts and we were able to get our hands on the money we'd needed.

With that, the House of Lotze's debts had been repaid...but unfortunately, things hadn't all gone smoothly.

Getting right to the point, the only thing that had changed was that I was now their creditor.

First, there was the matter of the money from the salamander parts. Our roles in the operation had been different, so it didn't make sense to divide it into "five equal shares," but I had still meant to give each of them a cut they could use to lower their debts.

Despite that, all of them had basically refused to accept the money.

Adelbert-sama had adamantly insisted, "It would be unacceptable for a knight such as myself to receive such a large payment for merely carrying goods!" Caterina-san had asked to be treated the same, noting, "We were the ones who dragged you into our problems."

As for Iris-san and Kate-san's share, Iris-san had said, "You provided all of the artifacts, Shopkeeper-dono, and I also offered to cover the cost of the ice

stones myself. In light of that, we'll take the heat-resistant coats and boots that you made especially for us. Those are more than enough compensation." After using their share of the money to pay for the stones, they had been left with only a small amount of cash.

The end result of all of this was that I had paid off the Lotze family's debt with my own funds, receiving a written bond in return.

I'd figured, *Well, it's only going to be relevant until we reclaim their money through arbitration*, but sadly things had not played out as I expected.

I had used the connections of one of my seniors from the academy, who was the daughter of a marquess, to find a mediator who was adept at handling debts. We put forward our case, but the enemy was a shrewd one.

Being the villain that he was, he had left traps in the contract. Because of that, it wasn't easy to reclaim the excess amount paid. As a result, I received a letter of apology from my senior, but I was the one who felt bad for her.

I don't really know how it worked, but the fact that the debt had been paid off came back to bite us.

From the King's viewpoint, it wasn't good to have a noble who was mired in debt—and therefore beholden to another noble—but as long as that wasn't the case, it also wasn't a good thing for him to involve himself in contracts between the nobility.

Basically, as far as he was concerned, *"If you've paid it off, then it's all fine, right?"*

But that said, if we had gone to arbitration without repaying the debt, the other side could have dragged things out, and there was no telling what might have happened to the domain in the meantime. With Adelbert-sama away from the domain, they'd have had a free hand to act against him.

But as you would expect from a mediator recommended by the family of a marquess, or more accurately a mediator who had the backing of their authority, our representative put up a good fight on our behalf and managed to claw back some of the money.

Although, that money had been used up by the mediator's fee, the fee for

registering the dispute, travel expenses to the capital, and the cost of our lodgings there, so there wasn't much of it left...

Regardless, Adelbert-sama had said, "It's no matter. I'm grateful for what you've done," and completely scrapped the engagement with Hoh Bahru, so the end result deserved a passing mark, at least, I guess?

Incidentally, Iris-san and Kate-san were currently back home, taking care of the aftermath of everything.

They'll probably be back sometime today, though...

As I was thinking about this while enjoying Lorea-chan's cookies, the door to the shop opened.

"Welcome to our sto— No, welcome home."

"Yes, it's good to be home."

"We're back, Shopkeeper-san."

It was Iris-san and Kate-san.

If they were back on schedule, that meant they'd been able to sort out their troubles without issue.

They'd had gloomy looks on their faces for the last little while, but now, for the first time in a long time, they looked bright and cheerful.

"I'll bet you two must be exhausted."

"It certainly was exhausting. Honestly, that merchant... Oh! Those cookies look scrumptious. Let me have one—"

Spotting the cookies on the table, Iris-san reached out, but I slid them away from her.

"No. Please wash your hands first."

"You sound almost like my mother, Shopkeeper-dono..."

Though she frowned, Iris-san went off to wash her hands, as did Kate-san, and the pair returned a short while later after dropping off their things.

“Okay, they’re all washed up!” Iris-san exclaimed.

Since they’d done as I asked, I couldn’t refuse.

It felt like a bit of a shame to let them go, but I placed cookies in Iris-san’s and Kate-san’s expectantly outstretched hands.

“Oh, it’s so good!” cried Iris-san. “That’s Lorea’s cooking for you!”

“Don’t say that... It’s all thanks to the ingredients Sarasa-san provides,” Lorea-chan replied bashfully.

“It’s true,” Kate-san agreed, observing, “She’s sunk some cash into these.”

I nodded. These did cost more than Lorea-chan’s usual homemade cookies.

“They’re to celebrate the end of all the things we had going on,” I explained. “Because it was a real headache this time around.”

Hearing this, the two of them froze as they were reaching out for another cookie. They awkwardly glanced at one another.

“We’ve caused you a lot of trouble, Shopkeeper-san,” acknowledged Kate-san. “Sorry.”

“We really have,” Iris-san agreed. “And we’ve also taken on another debt of gratitude we can’t possibly repay.”

“I don’t care about the debt of gratitude, but please do pay me back the money you owe, okay? Not that I’m going to demand payments you can’t afford to make.”

I extended the cookie dish toward them, but also said what needed to be said.

Despite finally reaching the fifth volume of the *Complete Alchemy Works*, I was presently short of funds and could hardly make any of the things recorded inside it. Even with the stock of materials I had accrued, I only had a small part of what I’d need; there weren’t many artifacts I already had all of the required materials for.

The battle with the salamander had cost me a considerable expenditure of money and materials, so if Iris-san didn’t pay up, I was going to struggle to keep moving forward in my studies.

“Of course, I’ll pay you back!” she declared before hesitantly adding, “Though, it may take me some time.”

“Yes, please do. Because I have to show my gratitude to my senior as well.”

I’d have felt horrible offering nothing more than a “Thanks, you really helped me out,” after she’d referred me to a mediator.

It was important to show proper gratitude, even with close friends. And to do that, I needed money.

“Ohh, yes, she was a big help. We didn’t have the connections to find such a mediator ourselves. I’m sorry to impose on you yet again, but let her know that we really are thankful for what she did. She is the daughter of a marquess, so the most we, as mere knights, can do, is send a letter of gratitude.”

“Yeah,” Kate-san said. “The result was disappointing from a monetary perspective, but being able to get an official judgment was valuable in and of itself. Baronet Kahku has less room to make strange complaints against us now.”

“Because even with the money repaid, there’s no knowing what he might say! That scoundrel!” Iris-san slammed her hands down on the table, her anger plain to see. Then she noticed the cookies were there and subtly snatched one of them.

“Hee hee!” I giggled. “Hearing you say that makes it worth having contacted her in such a hurry!”

No matter how close I had been with my two seniors, I wasn’t in the kind of powerful position where I could directly contact the house of a marquess.

For that reason, I’d contacted my senior who was in a distant town and asked for a referral to a mediator, then she’d contacted her house on my behalf... It had been an awful lot of work.

It would have taken way too long using the normal routes, so I’d used the transporter and had Master help me with it, so just imagine the cost of that... Normally, it would have been incredibly expensive.

Well, Master was in a good mood after receiving the salamander materials, so

I don't think it'll be a problem.

“Now everything’s settled, right? You won’t be going anywhere, will you, Iris-san?” Lorea-chan asked, her eyes quivering ever so slightly.

Iris-san gave her a beaming smile and a deep nod. “Yes, you can rest at ease, Lorea. I’ve taken care of the problem!”

“She really means it,” added Kate-san. “She broke that uppity merchant’s jaw.”

“Huh?! Did you kill him?!” Lorea-chan recoiled in shock.

Seeing this, Iris-san hurriedly shook her head. “I-I didn’t kill him! I didn’t, okay? But well...he may find it hard to get out of bed for some time.”

Perhaps feeling that he had nothing left to lose, Hoh Bahru had kept on claiming all sorts of things and refused to give up and move on. But without the debt hanging over them, he was just a common peddler while they were nobility, no matter how low.

From the sound of things, they’d sent him packing with brute force—both Iris-san and Adelbert-sama together.

“Even if he recovers from that, the House of Bahru won’t be having any... Uh, no, forget I said anything.”

Seeing the uneasy look on Lorea-chan’s face, Kate-san stopped herself with an awkward smile.

Uh, is Hoh Bahru really still alive? Not that I would feel particularly sorry for him.

“But it sure was a lot of money, huh?” Lorea-chan said with a sigh. “Your family’s debt was even more than the amount of money we had piled up in the warehouse before, right? I can’t even imagine it.”

“Indeed. Not even I’d seen that kind of money before,” Iris-san replied, puffing up her chest for some reason. “Not to brag or anything!”

The amount that the House of Lotze originally borrowed had been much smaller, so it was probably true she’d never seen that much money before.

For the purposes of repaying the debt, I'd handed the money Master paid me to Adelbert-sama, but because the total was as large as it was, she'd paid me in large gold coins and platinum coins. The coins were worth a hundred thousand rhea and a million rhea respectively, so even a sum of over sixty million rhea could fit inside a little leather pouch that easily rested in the palm of your hand.

If Iris-san had looked inside it, then that probably counted as her having "seen" that much money, but it was kind of different from what Lorea-chan meant.

"Will you be able to repay that kind of debt, Iris-san?" Lorea-chan asked. "It must be difficult, even for a gatherer, right?"

"Yes, that's true," Iris-san agreed. "As things stand, I will likely be in debt to Shopkeeper-dono for the rest of my life. The problem is whether it's all right for me to impose on her here for such a long time."

Uh, Iris-san. Just how long are you planning to stay a gatherer? Don't you ever plan on getting married?

Setting that aside, all of the debt, including the debt for the potion I'd used on Iris-san, had been transferred over to the House of Lotze now. There was no need for her and Kate-san to try to repay it all by themselves.

"We'll be paying her a portion of the taxes collected in the domain, so I doubt you'll be indebted to her for the rest of your life, but...it's still a hefty sum, yeah," Kate-san explained.

Yeah, that's right.

The tax revenue of a domain, no matter how small, was on a different level from what any one person could earn on their own.

Though, if they could repay the debt easily, it wouldn't have ballooned like it did, so I wasn't going to get my hopes up too high.

"But Kate, if we don't repay our debt of gratitude to Shopkeeper-dono, that would bring shame to the Lotze family name."

"No, really, you don't need to worry about—"

"So, about that, Iris. I have a good idea." Kate cut me off, a mischievous grin

on her face.

I had been about to say, “I got some good materials from the salamander, so it was worth my effort. As long as you pay me the money, that’s enough.”

“Oh, what is it, Kate? A plan that will let us repay the favor to Shopkeeper-dono?”

“Not just that. This nice idea will take care of the debt too. And the issue of you being too old to be marriageable.”

“Oh, now that’s incredible! Let’s hear it,” Iris-san said, leaning in. “Although, this is the first I’m hearing about that last one being a problem.”

Kate-san gave a deep nod.

Why do I have a bad feeling about this?

“It’s simple, really. You and Shopkeeper-san just need to tie the knot.”

“Come again...?” Lorea-chan and I both said in confusion.

But by contrast, “Hmm...” Iris-san was seriously considering it.

Um? Iris-san’s a woman, right?

“Erm, Kate-san? I have nothing against that, but I, personally, am not into women, okay?”

In the temples frequented by the upper class, same-sex relations weren’t uncommon for men or women, but having grown up in a completely average household, that was a bit far removed from my own reality.

And it’s not a world I plan on stepping into.

“Don’t worry about it. People’s tastes change all the time, you know?”

Er, I’m not so sure about that? It’s not like we’re talking about tastes in food here...

“Not a bad idea,” said Iris-san.

“Whaaaaa?!” Lorea-chan cried out.

“Wait, Iris-san?!” I said in disbelief.

“Shopkeeper-dono, if you marry me, I come with a title, you know? And a

domain too, even if it's not large. I think I'm a real bargain. I'll even throw in Kate-san."

"Huh? Me...?"

Ignoring all of our surprise, Iris-san went on like she was giving some kind of presentation. And Kate-san was being thrown in like some kind of bonus.

Kate-san's eyes went wide, but I had no sympathy. She was the one who'd started all of this.

"Um, Iris-san, I didn't support you because I wanted a noble title..."

"That's all the more reason! If you were after the title, it would be out of the question. But because of who you are as a person, I know I can entrust the domain to you!"

Uh, I wouldn't know what to do with it if you did...

"And besides, unlike with that crummy merchant, we have love between us!"

"No! We! Do! Not!"

"Not at all? Not even the love that exists between friends?"

"Urkh, okay, that...we do have."

I wasn't going to deny her that much. I wouldn't have helped her out if we didn't have that.

"Then the rest is simple. Let us nurture our friendship and change it into a passionate romance."

Passionate romance?! Now that just sounds lewd!

And hold on, is "passionate romance" even an extension of "friendship"?

"Besides, what will the House of Lotze do about a successor? Don't they need you to take a groom?"

"We can adopt. Besides, Shopkeeper-dono, I've heard there are potions which can make such things possible."

"Huh? Are there convenient potions like that?" Suddenly, Lorea-chan leaned in.

Why is she interested?

“Well, yeah, there are, but...they’re expensive, you know?” I replied.

It was true that there were potions that made it so that men could have children with men and women could have children with women. But they were ridiculously expensive, so the only ones who used them were nobles troubled by the fact their heir was homosexual.

Incidentally, unlike the potion that allowed women to have children together, which only needed to last a short time, the potion that did the same for men needed to last for the full duration of the pregnancy, so it was more expensive...but I guess that’s not important right now.

“I can only cling to you for that, Shopkeeper-dono. I don’t suppose you could make one for us, could you?”

“I can’t make it and the materials are expensive, and from a cost perspective, there’s not much point in... No, that’s not what I wanted to say. We’re not getting married!”

“Really? I know I’m getting on in years, but I think my looks aren’t bad. I wouldn’t mind becoming a man, if that helps, you know?”

Iris-san cocked her head to the side and brought her hand to her chin.

Urgh! With her looks, she might actually make a handsome man.

No, no! This won’t do at all!

“Th-That’s *not* the problem!!!”

Kate-san was just watching this bizarre exchange, seemingly amused.

Hey, don’t set her on me like this, then just leave us to go at it!

“Anyway! I’m not ready for marriage yet! I’m still only halfway down my path as an alchemist—no, I’ve only just begun to walk it!”

“Hmm, I see what you’re saying. If I wait, my day may yet come. You don’t mind if I stay by your side until you change your mind, right?”

“That’s! Not! What! I! Meant!”

“But in that case, it’s far too impersonal for me to go on calling you

Shopkeeper-dono. Should I call you Sarasa from now on?”

“I’m telling you...!”

Iris-san went on talking nonsense, while I pounded the table in frustration.

Lorea-chan and Kate-san burst out laughing, unable to watch any longer.

Their laughter made us both stop talking. We looked at one another without meaning to.

A moment of silence went by.

Then, as we calmed down a little and analyzed our situation, we were both overcome by the urge to laugh that rose up inside of us.



“Damn it! Why would a marquess intervene on behalf of a mere knight?!”

With a sweep of his arm, the papers on the desk scattered across the floor.

An elderly man watched this with calm eyes, then patiently responded, “But master, we’ve had more than ample return on the money we spent.”

“That’s just money! I didn’t get what I wanted, so it’s a failure! Hey, how did it happen?!”

“It seems...someone put the knight in touch with the marquess’s house—an alchemist.”

“Again! That alchemist, again! What an eyesore!!!”

The man slammed his fist down on the desk, his face a mask of rage.

Then, after some thought, he sneered and looked toward the old man.

“I want you to investigate.”

“You’re certain? There’s a risk of violating national law if we—”

“That’s why we’re investigating! Be smart about it. What do you think I keep a geezer like you around for?!”

There was a pause before the old man said, “Understood.”

The man watched as his servant bowed and departed, then sighed and leaned

back in his chair.

“Heh heh! I won’t let anyone do as they please on my turf. Ha ha! Ha ha ha ha!!!”

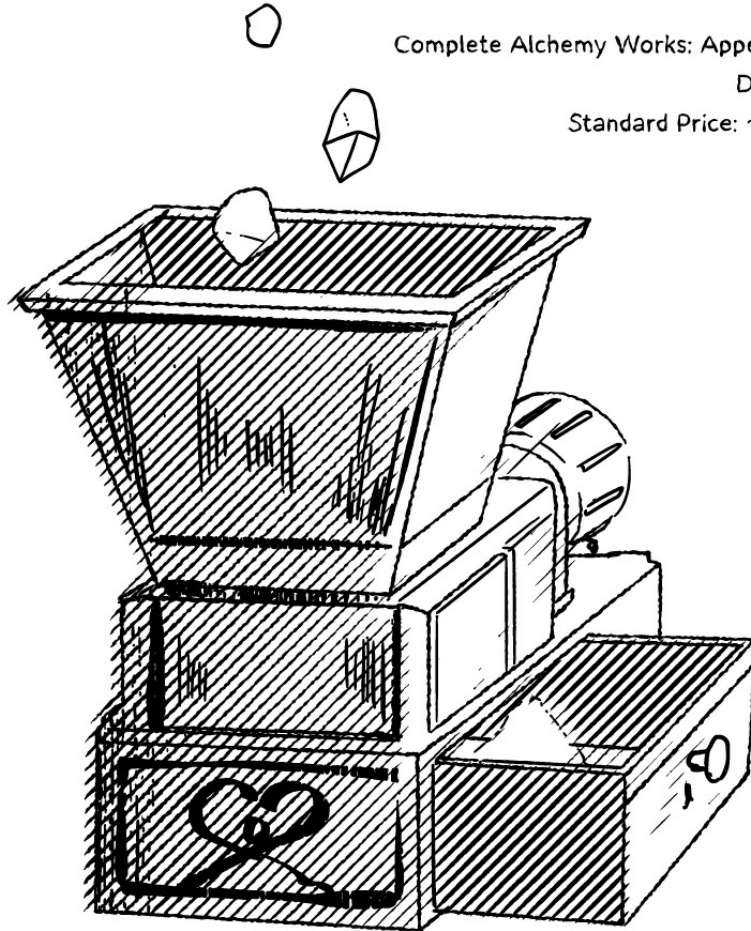
His face twisted with a hideous smile as he laughed out loud.

No 008

Complete Alchemy Works: Appears in Volume 7

Difficulty: Normal

Standard Price: ~1,800,000 Rhea



〈Magic Crystal Crusher〉

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Were you forced to spend long hours crushing magic crystals as an apprentice? It's such a pain, isn't it? If you can afford this, you maybe already have an apprentice of your own to do it for you, but...break the cycle of suffering! This crushes crystals much faster than by hand, supporting your production of artificial magic crystals. If you keep going on about how you had to do it, your apprentice will come to hate you,

Afterword

Thank you for your purchase. I'm Mizuho Itsuki.

Thanks to all of you, I've been able to release volume 3.

It feels like I'm walking a tightrope. Whether the next volume comes out or whether my period of inactivity continues is entirely up to you. I'm counting on you.

Huh? You don't know what I'm talking about?

In that case, take a look at my author profile.

Now then, as I advertised in the afterword of volume 2, this volume does...not really have an upsized serving of Kate-san.

If anything, she's treated as more of a side dish to Iris? Like some kind of set deal.

Well, from Iris's perspective, with her money and advanced education, Sarasa would be a serious catch. If she can get her to join the House of Lotze, it'd be a super good deal.

And for that cause, throwing Kate in as a bonus is no big deal. Kate would do it for the sake of their house. It's just what nobles do, after all. Their gender is the sticking point, but maybe potions can fix it...?

Will Sarasa get nabbed by Iris?!

Can Lorea turn things around?!

Or is some third woman going to come into the picture?!

Or is it the unlikely other option, and a prince on a white horse will come for her?!

Look forward to finding out!

Changing topics, the short story in this volume is from Sarasa's first year at

the academy.

I think this afterword is likely placed before it, so I won't go into details, but her two seniors who go unnamed in the main story make an appearance. They're two of Sarasa's few friends from school.

She has another friend, one of her juniors, but that one doesn't show up until her second year or later.

Erm, not that it's decided I'll be writing anything set in that year yet.

Incidentally, Sarasa may not seem like she had many friends, but she got along well with the other kids in the orphanage and even popped in to check on them occasionally when she was attending the academy.

She doesn't have some kind of communication disorder, okay?

By the way, everyone, do you know Twitter?

Yeah, there's no way you wouldn't, huh? It's famous, after all.

I had been aware of it, but never felt the need to use it myself, so I was only looking at other people's accounts from time to time, but...I went and made one of my own. It's @itsukimizuhō.

But I don't really get how to use it...? I'm not living the kind of fun life that I could brag about. All I do is post advertisements once in a while, but check it out if you don't mind.

Finally, some words of thanks.

To Fuumi-san, the illustrator, thank you for always providing cute drawings. They help motivate me.

To my editor, and everyone else involved with this book, thank you for everything.

And most of all, to all of you, the readers who bought this book, I'm truly grateful.

It's because of you that this volume came out.

If you'll keep on supporting me, nothing could make me happier.

And now, I lay down my pen, hoping that we will meet again.

Special Short Story: Sarasa Enters School

It had already been several months since I made it through the difficult exams and was able to enter the Alchemist Academy.

I was highly satisfied with my new lifestyle: a dorm room without a single draft. A bed all of my own that I could sleep soundly in. I ate till I was full every day, and the food was both free and delicious.

There was a twenty-four hour library stacked with books, and high-quality professors who provided advanced yet easy-to-understand lectures.

This was a huge step up from my life in the orphanage, where I had been eating food I couldn't possibly call delicious and blindly immersing myself in my studies with an air of depression around me. This was a satisfying academic environment.

Uh, though, when it comes to feeling isolated, it's actually worse here.

I had gotten along fine with the other kids in the orphanage, so even if we couldn't study together and they couldn't teach me, they still did all sorts of things that helped me out.

Also, it wasn't as if I had *no* complaints about my current situation.

First off, there was the fact that, even in an environment as blessed as this, I still needed a surprising amount of money. Most things I needed were provided, or loaned to me, but even then it wasn't always enough.

Right now, I was lacking notebooks and ink. We were given a fixed number, and I'd quickly run out of them while doing independent study.

I had more or less exhausted the money I had received before entering the academy, so I needed to work part-time. I also needed to win award money for doing well on exams. I was going to need more money in the future too, so I could never let up.

The other thing was...

“Hey, look! The orphan’s eating on someone else’s dime.”

“She’s such an eyesore. Although, I’d be willing to tolerate her existence if she’d just stay in a corner somewhere.”

“It’s such a waste, spending money on orphans like her.”

This. Perhaps because I came from an orphanage, I occasionally...no, pretty frequently was the subject of these sorts of spiteful comments. And it wasn’t just from these guys.

I know there are other people with similar backgrounds to mine, but I’ve never seen any of them treated like this.

For some reason, they had it out for me—oh, I guess in this case, the reason was no mystery.

That’s the guy I clobbered in our last swordsmanship lesson.

His name was Alvi. His cronies were Marcus and Orai. They were all nobles.

But what else was I supposed to do? It was a lesson. I had to take it seriously.

When it comes to grades, I’m not going to pull punches for those blue-bloods!

They can glare at me all they like, but I swear, I’m gonna be an alchemist!

“Is she stuffing herself? I always knew there was no place for orphans at this school.”

“Sh-She’s eating too much. We don’t have food to waste on poor people.”

I wouldn’t deny I was stuffing myself. We were provided three meals a day, but any snacks in between cost extra.

I don’t have the money for that.

But Orai, you’re one to talk! You must eat even more excessively than I do. Nothing else would explain how obese you are!

“Hey! Don’t you ignore me!”

I’d decided there was no point in arguing and just carried on eating in silence, but that apparently made Alvi snap. He reached out to grab me, but just as he did, a cool voice rang through the room.

“Oh my, Lacie, would you look at this. Listen to the little chicks chirping away so noisily.”

“This happens every spring, Priscia. They’re just a bunch of rejects who’ll drop out, unable to take flight from this nest. There is no point in taking them seriously.”

“Who’re you?! Hey!”

Alvi and the guys turned, raising their voices in anger at this obvious mockery.

There stood a girl with voluminous blonde locks and pale blue eyes, together with a slightly taller girl who had her dark, blue-tinted hair tied back.

Unlike the guys, who just looked like mischievous brats, the girls had an air of nobility about them—they were our seniors, probably. They sure didn’t *look* our age.

“Oh my, do you have any complaints? Need I remind you, it was the king’s decision to open the orphanages? Would you oppose that? People of your *lowly* stature?”

The girl smiled, completely unfazed by Alvi’s hostility.

Yep, she’s operating on a completely different level.

“Wha—”

Alvi’s face flushed red, but behind him, Marcus turned another color entirely. He hurriedly reached out to stop Alvi from saying any more.

“A-Alvi-kun. That’s Marquess Kirbress’s daughter. And the girl with her is Count Hayes’s...”

“What?!” Alvi shouted in shock before hissing, “You’re sure?”

“Not a doubt in my mind. I’ve seen them before. Th-This is bad. If we get on the wrong side of a marquess’s family...”

After hearing that, it was sort of impressive how fast Alvi made his decision.

“I-It’s sickening, having to eat in the same place as poor people. Hey, let’s go, guys!”

With those uninspired parting words, Alvi and his goons left the room like

they were fleeing—oh, wait, no, they were actually running away.

I dunno what their titles are, but they clearly don't measure up to a marquess. What a bunch of small fry.

But can they really just leave without apologizing to our seniors?

"Really now," the blonde girl said with a tone of exasperation. Then, turning to me, smiling, she said, "Would you mind if we joined you?"

"Oh, of course not, go right ahead."

I was sitting alone at a table meant to seat four, and the person asking had just driven off the guys who were causing problems for me. It made me a bit nervous, sitting with the nobility, but I had no reason to refuse.

"Um... Thank you?"

"Let me apologize for their behavior as a member of the nobility..." She tilted her head slightly. "My actions weren't unwanted, were they?"

My confusion over why she'd helped me might have been written on my face. I hurriedly shook my head.

"No, I was going to let their comments slide, because fighting would be a waste of time, so what you did really helped me there. For some reason, people are always picking fights with me."

Hearing this, the two of them blinked with surprise.

"You...don't realize why?"

"Uh...? Why?"

"You are Sarasa Feed-san, yes?"

"Y-Yes, that's me. I'm surprised you knew."

I'd have understood if they were in the same year, but it came as a little unexpected that older students would know the name of someone like me who had no friends and didn't stand out.

"Hmm," the blue-haired girl said. "You don't seem to realize it, but you're famous, Feed-kun."

“Come again...? Are you joking?”

“It’s no joke,” the blonde one replied. “You placed first in the overall results for this year’s entrance examination, did you not?”

“Huh? That’s news to me. Did I really?”

I looked at them with confusion, and they looked back at me with the same, but something seemed to click for them and they nodded.

“Why don’t you know this yourself...?” the blue-haired one wondered. “Ohh, I guess it’s because the listing is posted somewhere out of the way. It’s not like they announced it or anything. Maybe it’s only natural that you wouldn’t know, unless you happened to pass by the listing, or heard about it from a friend at the school.”

A friend at this school—I don’t have any of those.

“The academy is ostensibly a place where class is not supposed to matter, but...I suppose there were some people who were not happy to see the top spot go to an orphan,” explained the blonde one.

“Well, I wouldn’t worry about it too much,” said the blue-haired one. “Give it half a year, and their type will start to vanish. Expelled from the academy.”

Even among the nobility, having been admitted to the highest academy in the nation was seen as a source of pride. For that very reason, there were always a number of parents who would pay for expensive tutors and try to force their child into the school.

However, everything from that point on was down to a person’s individual effort. The school wasn’t so soft as to allow children who didn’t study like their life depended on it to remain enrolled, so kids like Alvi would be weeded out over the course of a few exams, and there would be fewer and fewer of them as time went on.

“One year from now, there will be hardly any of their sort left,” said the blonde one. “Oh, come to think of it, we haven’t introduced ourselves yet. I am Priscia Kirbress.”

“I am Lacie Hayes,” the other girl introduced herself. “A second year, like

Priscia.”

“Oh, okay. It seems you were already aware, but I’m Sarasa Feed. I entered the academy this year.”

I hurriedly introduced myself to the pair who were now wearing gentle smiles.

“Would it be all right if we were to call you Sarasa-san?” asked Priscia-senpai.

“Yes, you can call me whatever you like.”

“Thank you. So, anyway, you really don’t have to let what they were saying bother you.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t particularly bothered. It’s true that I study here for free and that I eat a lot. I’m going to eat well and get really big!”

“Ah, yes, Sarasa-san, you are a bit...on the petite side, aren’t you?”

Yeah, she’s putting it lightly to protect my feelings, isn’t she?

It felt more accurate to say I was a pip-squeak with meager proportions.

The reason for that was, well, I’d been through a lot after my parents died...y’know?

“Hmm,” Lacie-senpai said thoughtfully. “Well, at your age, you’ll keep growing. I’m sure that you’ll get much bigger still.”

“Yeah, I will, won’t I? It’s okay to keep my hopes up, right?”

“Yes, you certainly can,” Priscia-senpai agreed. “But I think you’re already quite cute as you are.”

“It’s kind of you to say that, but...”

“Oh, no, I don’t mean it that way. I think it’s good for you to eat a lot. But for me, the portions they serve here are a little too generous.”

“We have a lot of lessons where we need to move around, after all. Maybe it works out to just the right amount for the boys,” suggested Lacie-senpai.

Maybe it was part of the school’s policy to not discriminate between the nobility and the common folk, but everyone who ordered the same dish received the same amount.

Age and gender didn't change that.

That meant a ten-year-old girl and a fifteen-year-old boy got the same size serving... Uh, yeah. That was always going to be too much for me or my seniors.

Furthermore, because they couldn't serve everyone large enough servings to satisfy a fifteen-year-old boy, if a dish was provided for free, then extra helpings of it were also free.

"The taste is not bad, but I think they could stand to add a girls' menu," said Priscia-senpai.

"Honestly, I do wish they would reduce the quantity and raise the quality," said Lacie-senpai.

The two of them had paid extra and were enjoying a slightly expensive dish. My free meal tasted good, but theirs was blatantly different.

Look at those sweet, luxurious-looking desserts they get!

It seemed Priscia-senpai had noticed my gaze, and...

"Sarasa-san, would you like some?" she said with a chuckle.

"Are you sure? I'm not going to turn down your offer, you know?"

I was a little embarrassed, but chose my appetite over my pride.

"Yes, I am already full. Go right ahead."

"W-Well then, don't mind if I do!"

I reached out to the proffered plate and immediately took a bite.

"Oh, that's delicious! When was the last time I enjoyed such a sweet treat...?"

The two of them stared at me as those words slipped out of my mouth.

Stare all you want. You're not getting it back, okay?

From that day forward, we started eating together occasionally, and as a result, the number of people saying spiteful things about me rapidly dropped.



It happened one day, some time after I'd met my two seniors.

“Sarasa-san, I heard all about it!”

I was studying in the library, as per usual, when Priscia-senpai raced over to me.

But this was a library, where silence was important.

“Priscia-senpai, you have to be quiet in the library,” I objected, pressing a finger to my lips. She hurriedly covered her mouth, her eyes wandering back and forth between me and the librarian who was giving her a somewhat sharp look.

“Anyway, take a deep breath and sit down,” I said, gesturing for Priscia-senpai—and Lacie-senpai, who was standing behind her with an awkward smile—to take a seat. “Now, what is it?”

“Sarasa-san, they say you’ve been hired to work in Millis-sama’s shop. Is that true?”

Not long after she sat down, Priscia-senpai leaned in and grabbed my shoulders. I recoiled a little at her intensity as I cocked my head to the side. “Millis-sama? Who’s that...?”

“How do you not know?! I am referring to the master class alchemist, Ophelia Millis-sama!”

“Master...class...?”

“*That* is where you need me to start explaining?!”

The quiet we had regained was broken again as her shrill voice echoed through the library.

“Priscia...” Lacie-senpai said with exasperation. The librarian glared daggers in our direction and then loudly cleared her throat.

Yeah, this is no good.

If she keeps this up, it will be awkward for me to come here again.

“How about we take this somewhere else?” I suggested.

“Sorry to put you out like this...” Priscia-senpai said with a wan smile as we quit the library.

We relocated to the courtyard.

The place was well maintained, possibly because of the high number of nobles enrolled at the Alchemist Academy. There were a number of tables lined up, making the place ideal for a tea party.

We were now sitting at one of those tables. Ours was lined with some sweet treats that Priscia-senpai had bought in order to apologize, together with a somewhat pricey tea that Lacie-senpai had made for us.

This tea had changed my entire concept of what tea was. They had been serving it to me occasionally since we became friends, and I was a little afraid that I wouldn't be able to drink cheap tea anymore.

After taking a brief break over tea and sweets, I spoke up.

"So, what was it you were saying earlier? If I recall, the owner of the shop I was hired to work at is Ophelia-san, but...what's this master class business about?"

I was just voicing my honest confusion, but it earned me a look of subtle exasperation—not just from Priscia-senpai but from Lacie-senpai too.

"Sarasa-san, you aspire to be an alchemist, but you have no idea what 'master class' is?"

"Sorry..."

I had just been trying to work my way up in the world, even as an orphan, so I wasn't that familiar with how life actually was for alchemists.

This seemed like the kind of thing I'd have had to have heard about from those around me, and I'd only been surrounded by my fellow orphans and the orphanage staff. I'd had limited access to information.

"I-I suppose you're right. W-Well, anyway, it's fine."

It looked like she had picked up on that. Now, to paraphrase what she then went on to tell me in much more flowery terms, while awkwardly averting her eyes: "Master class is the highest level that an alchemist could reach. Only a select few can become one, and they deserve lots of respect," apparently.

“Millis-sama is an incredible person who worked her way up to master class even though she was still a young woman!”

“Sorry, Sarasa. Priscia is a fan of Millis-sama.”

“Yeah, I definitely picked up on that.”

Her tone and the sparkle in her eyes gave it away.

“Priscia, leave it at that. That’s not the key thing, is it?” Lacie-senpai prompted.

“Oops, you’re right. If at all possible, could you get me Millis-sama’s autograph and share some stories—”

“That’s not it either, is it, Priscia?” Lacie-senpai lowered the tone of her voice.

Priscia-senpai blinked repeatedly at this. Then she gulped and nodded.

“Right.” She turned to me. “Sarasa-san, you always wear your school uniform, do you not?”

“Yeah, I guess I do. It’s so convenient... And I save money this way,” I responded, confused by the sudden change of topic—or I guess it was a return to the original topic?

It was so wonderful that the academy provided us with school uniforms and track clothes. What’s more, if we wore them out, or outgrew them, we were provided with an unlimited number of replacements. That meant I paid effectively nothing for clothing.

Yes, it was free. Oh, what a beautiful word.

“That will not do!”

However, it seemed Priscia-senpai was not fond of my decision.

“Girls do not live on food alone. We must nurture ourselves with sweets and fashion! You have some room in your budget now that you have begun to work part-time, yes? Would you come shopping with me?”

It was true, the wages at the shop were much better than other places.

To the point I might make the mistake of thinking, *Maybe I can splurge a little, every once in a while.*

But I had a goal. I tried to shake my head, firm in my convictions, but...

“Sarasa, Priscia is the youngest child, so she always wanted a little sister. I know it may be a hassle, but could you please go with her?”

...Lacie-senpai whispered in my ear, a wry smile on her face. I took a moment to think.

They’re always doing so much for me, and they treat me to delicious snacks. So when I look at it that way...

“Okay. I’ll go with you.”

“Oh, my! Thank you so much. Then let us depart at once!”

“Oh, but I won’t be able to buy anything at the kinds of shops you frequent.”

“Have no fear. I’ve found a good place.”

Led along by a confident-sounding Priscia-senpai, I was surprised at where I found myself. It was a used clothing store.

The place dealt in clothes that, while pretty, were still within reach of a commoner who was willing to stretch the budget a little. Even I could afford it.

As I looked at all of the colorful outfits in the shop, honestly, my heart was dancing.

But Priscia-senpai was even more excited.

She practically danced around, gathering outfits, and handed them to me before giving me a friendly shove.

“Come on, come on, Sarasa-san. Try them on.”

“O-Okay.”

I was forced into the changing room, where I followed the instruction of Priscia-senpai—who had joined me inside for some reason—as I got changed.

“Yes, yes. I think a dress suits you, Sarasa-san. If we go with this bright color and combine it with a bolero jacket... It’s so cute!”

“Y-You think so...? Heh heh.”

“Oh, but short pants with a large jacket would work too. And it’s hard to pass up this hooded tunic...”

“I like this color. And the fabric seems like it will last too.”

I don’t hate dressing up. It’s fun to wear nice things, and I like clothes where I can’t feel the patches.

“Oh, my! They even have foreign styles. How exotic.”

“It’s not bad, but I’m not used to wearing things like this.”

I’d never had the money to spare when I lived in the orphanage, so I wasn’t confident in my ability to pick clothes, but it didn’t feel bad having someone pick them out for me.

“This long skirt is too good to pass up! I think a slightly more mature look could work. The sense that you’re a small child straining to look like an adult is just exquisite...”

But I had my limits.

We had already spent a considerable amount of time, and playing along with Priscia-senpai as her dress-up doll was pretty exhausting.

“L-Lacie-senpai...” I cried out for help.

“Hang in there!” she replied in a sing-song tone.

Um, that smile of yours is nice and all, but...would you mind saving me? I wish she’d take my place, but Lacie-senpai wouldn’t buy anything here.

The staff, unable to say anything to their noble customers, simply stood there with stiff smiles on their faces.

Then, once even more time had passed...

“Murgh... It’s a shame you can only choose one, but let’s go with this for today.”

“Th-Thank you...”

At the end of the day, the outfit that survived Priscia-senpai’s rigorous selection process was a knee-length skirt with a loose-fitting sweater. They were both quality items in good condition, and I would be able to keep using

them for a long time, even if I kept growing.

Because of that, I was concerned about what the price would be.

I took the ensemble to a relieved-looking clerk to ask, “How much are these?”

“Let me see. For the pair, it’s— Eek?!”

“Yes?”

Just as the clerk had been about to answer, his gaze drifted to something behind me, and his expression twisted, a sound escaping from his mouth like he was having a fit.

Was there a bug there? I turned to look, but only found a smiling Priscia-senpai.

“I-I’m sorry. I have the hiccups.”

“Ohh, is that right?”

“E-Erm, let me see. The price of those clothes, for the set, yes...”

The clerk’s eyes were wandering for some reason.

Oh, I get it! He doesn’t remember the price!

That’s no good. It’s the most basic of all basics that a merchant needs to know his wares.

You’ve got to be able to answer immediately when asked!

But I guess this kind of thing happens, I thought magnanimously as I watched over the clerk. He considered for some time, then answered with a number that was well within my price range.

Maybe he had gotten the price wrong, but as the daughter of merchants, I couldn’t let the chance to buy a product cheaply slip away.

I quickly paid, took the clothes, and left the shop at once...

“Well done. Please, accept this.”

“Bwuh?! Th-This is far too much!”

“Then give that girl a discount whenever she comes in.”

“I-I’ll do that...”

...Without noticing that little exchange going on behind me.

After scoring a nice outfit cheaply, my heart felt light but my body felt heavy.

Senpai’s passion had been way too much for me. I wanted to get back home and rest.

“Thank you for your help today, Pris—” I began to say, but she cut me off.

“Not yet! Sarasa-san, that hair of yours! It’s a mess...okay, perhaps not, but is it not too long? Your eyes are hiding behind your bangs.”

When she called attention to this, I brushed back my hair and checked its length.

“You’re right. If I don’t cut it soon, it will be in the way. Do you think the academy will loan me some scissors?”

There’s a pair at the orphanage, but they aren’t mine, so I didn’t take them with me. Scissors are expensive, so if I can’t borrow them from the academy, I’ll need to consider asking at the orphanage.

“What would you do with those?”

“Huh? Cut my hair, of course.”

“By yourself?”

“By myself.”

“I forbid it!”

“It’s that bad?!”

There are commoners without scissors who use a knife instead, you know?!

“I understand. I was meaning to return home to have my hair cut today. You come along with me, Sarasa-san.”

“Wh-Whaa? But your home is a marquess’s mansion, right?”

“Our house in the capital is nothing so impressive as to call it a mansion.”

I glanced over at Lacie-senpai, but all she did was smile and shrug, suggesting,

“Maybe it’s not that big by a marquess’s standards?”

I’m nothing if not worried!

“Now, let’s be off!”

Ignoring my hesitation, Priscia-senpai took me by the hand and led me to a large—no, massive mansion.

I entered the mansion, following behind Lacie-senpai, who was much more blasé about things, and there we were greeted by a young maid.

She looked in our direction, then bemusedly asked, “Hm? Young mistress...? You weren’t scheduled to—”

“Yes, I was. I’ve come to have my hair cut.”

“Your...hair? But just the other day—”

“Shut up! Summon my hairdresser immediately.”

“Very well...”

The maid meekly bowed and left to follow her instructions, even if she didn’t seem wholly convinced.

Priscia-senpai gave a satisfied nod, then continued leading us onward.
“Sarasa-san, Lacie, you’ll have yours done here.”

With that, I was led into the most luxurious room I had likely ever set foot in!

Whoa, the furniture’s so nice I can’t even imagine what it must have cost!

I froze in front of the sofa for a while, thinking, *I definitely shouldn’t touch it!*

Then another maid came into the room, carrying scissors.

“Pardon me. I was told the young mistress would like her hair done...”

“Yes, could you even out the ends for me?”

Hearing this, the maid looked at Lacie-senpai, then me, and gave a nod of understanding before spreading out a cloth on the floor.

“Very well. Right this way, then.”

Priscia-senpai sat in the chair, the maid went *snip, snip* with the scissors—and

it was all over in an instant.

“Now it’s Sarasa-san’s turn.”

“Please, sit down here.”

At this point, even I had to notice.

Her haircut was just an excuse.

But she wouldn’t have wanted me to refuse, so I obediently sat in the chair.

“How would you like it done?” the maid asked as she put a cloth around my neck.

“Nothing special... Just give it a good trim.”

That triggered an instant response. Not from the maid, but Priscia-senpai.

“You mustn’t be so uncaring about this!”

“Whaaa...? Fine, I’ll leave it up to you, senpai.”

I’d never had the luxury of caring what my hair looked like, so I didn’t know what to ask for. But I figured I wouldn’t end up looking weird if I let Priscia-senpai handle it, so I left it up to her completely.

“Oh my, can I? I think short hair would look good on you... What do you think, Lacie?”

“It doesn’t sound like a bad idea, but wouldn’t long hair suit Sarasa-san’s personality better? And she’d still look good even once it grows a little.”

“No, young mistress, given the nature of her hair, I would suggest—”

As the three began debating my hair, I just let things take their course.



Click.

Having walked back to the dorm with a spring in my step, I locked the door to my room and spread out the clothes I’d bought on the bed.

“Hee hee! I bought them!”

I grinned at the outfit that was prettier than anything I’d worn in forever.

“I only plan to wear it on special occasions, but...today’s fine, right?”

As the end result of the three-person (actually four, since the maid who initially greeted us joined in later) debate, they had decided to go with semi-long hair that was half tied-up.

They had even thrown in an expensive-looking ribbon, claiming, “We have extra,” so my hairstyle was now the best it had been since the day I was born!

And in front of me were these amazing clothes.

I had bought clothes before entering the academy too, but I’d chosen those for myself, so I hadn’t been able to really let go of myself like I had today.

There’s no way I wouldn’t try them on now, right?

I stripped out of my uniform and put on the newly bought outfit.

My heart danced over the way the skirt swayed when I moved my body and how the sweater felt so good against my skin.

Hey, I’m a girl too. There’s no way I wouldn’t enjoy dressing in cute clothes.

“Heh heh! I’m looking pretty good, aren’t I?”

Maybe even like a young lady?

I can’t match the real deal, like Priscia-senpai, but maybe I could manage “close enough”?

I looked down at the clothes I was wearing, then twirled around one more time.

DATE: 〇〇 / △△

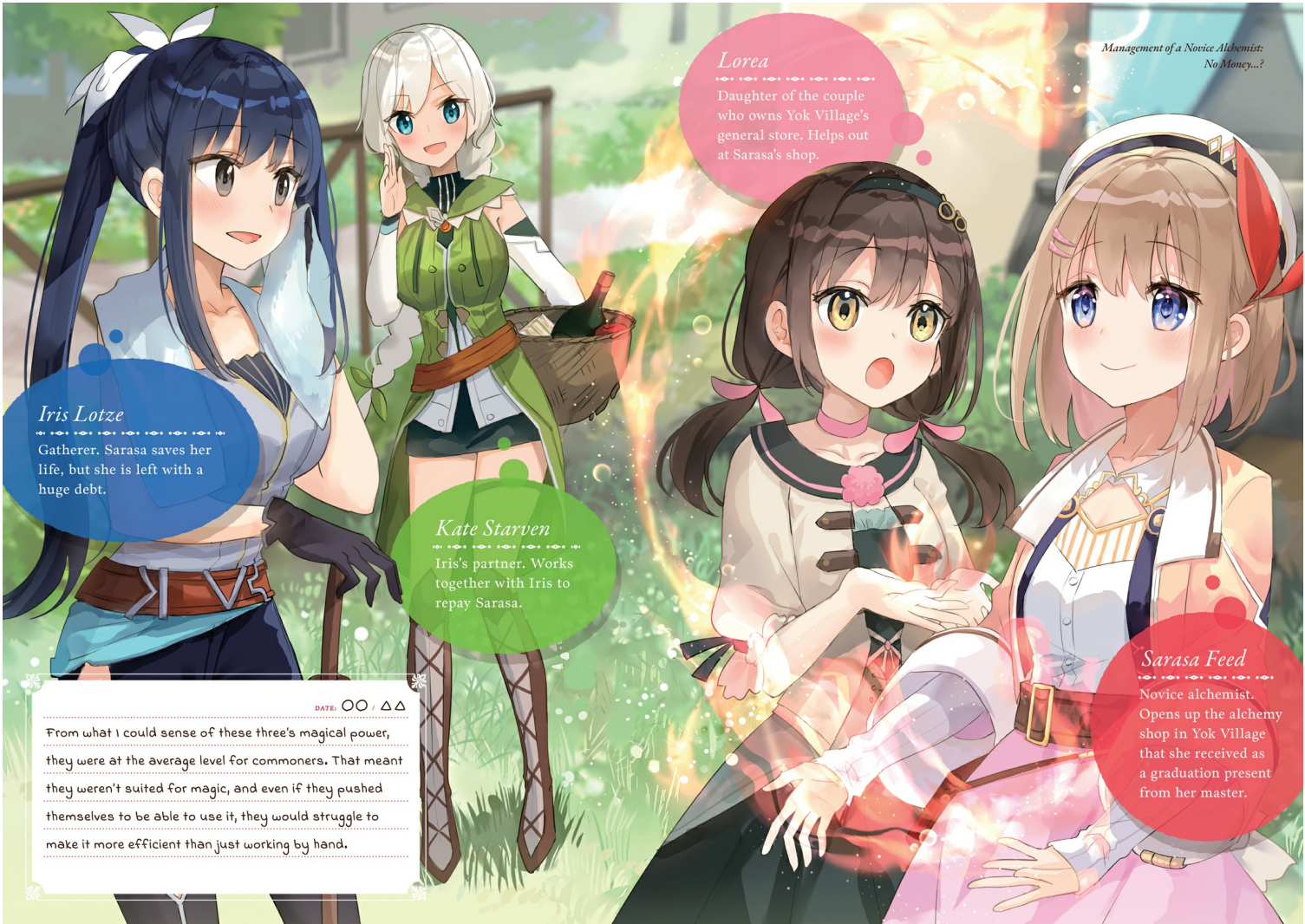
Dinner that night was a soup made with dried meat and vegetables, served with crusty bread. The meal wasn't that tasty, but it was more than edible enough, so it wasn't a problem.

"I haven't eaten stuff like this in a while."



03

Management of a
Novice Alchemist:
No Money...?



Management of a Novice Alchemist:
No Money...?

Lorea

Daughter of the couple who owns Yok Village's general store. Helps out at Sarasa's shop.

Iris Lotze

Gatherer. Sarasa saves her life, but she is left with a huge debt.

Kate Starven

Iris's partner. Works together with Iris to repay Sarasa.

Sarasa Feed

Novice alchemist. Opens up the alchemy shop in Yok Village that she received as a graduation present from her master.

DATE 〇〇. ΔΔ

From what I could sense of these three's magical power, they were at the average level for commoners. That meant they weren't suited for magic, and even if they pushed themselves to be able to use it, they would struggle to make it more efficient than just working by hand.

DATE: 00 / ΔΔ

The temperature rapidly rose, and there was a stinging sensation as my skin burned. My throat ached as even the air I was breathing felt like it was on fire.

urgh! Whose bright idea was it to try and slay a salamander?!



— Author
MIZUHO
ITSUKI
— Illustrator
FUUMI



DATE: 〇〇 / △△

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Management of a Novice Alchemist: Volume 3

by Mizuho Itsuki

Translated by Sean McCann Edited by Thalia Sutton

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