
04
A SLIGHTLY TROUBLESOME VISITOR
Author
MIZUHO ITSUKI
Illustrator
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Management of a Novice Alchemist

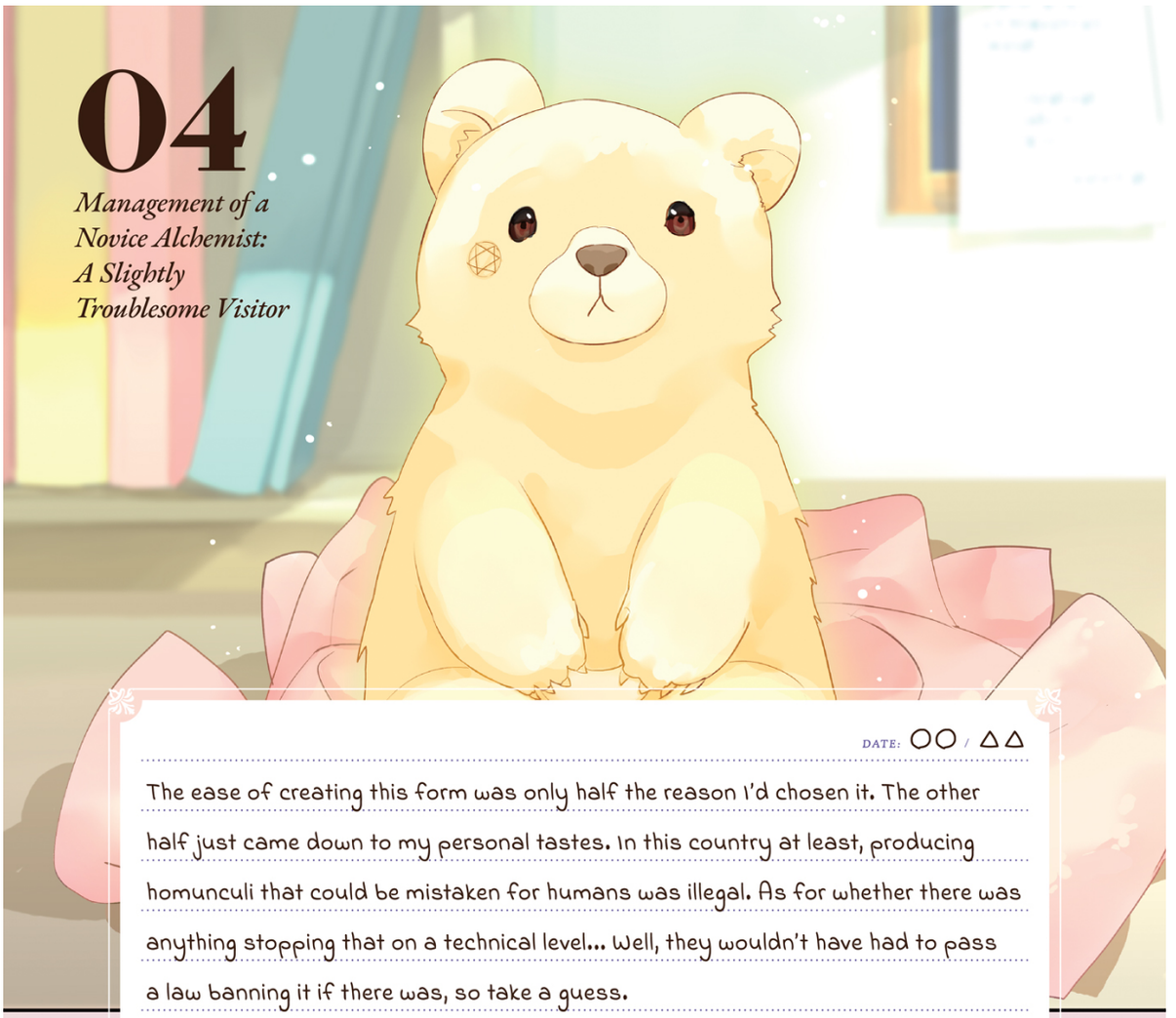


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DATE: ○○ / △△

The ease of creating this form was only half the reason I'd chosen it. The other half just came down to my personal tastes. In this country at least, producing homunculi that could be mistaken for humans was illegal. As for whether there was anything stopping that on a technical level... Well, they wouldn't have had to pass a law banning it if there was, so take a guess.




Management of a Novice Alchemist:
A Slightly Troublesome Visitor
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.
Lorea
Daughter of the couple who owns Yok Village's general store. Helps out at Sarasa's shop.
Sarasa Feed
Novice alchemist. Opens up the alchemy shop in Yok Village that she received as a graduation present from her master.
DATE: ○○ / △△
When I synchronized with the homunculus, it meant neglecting my own body.
Honestly, it was best to do it while lying down in bed, but seeing Lorea-chan's
eyes wavering with uncertainty, I didn't have it in me to tell her, "I'm going to go lie
down!" I sat down in my chair and placed both hands on the table for support
before slowly beginning to temper my magical power.



DATE: ○○ / △△

Meow...

"I wanted to make Iris-san say a cute line."

"Sarasa-san..."

Lorea-chan's exasperated look made me feel just a little guilty. But you could say I had made the resonating stones for precisely this purpose!

Contents

Management of a Novice Alchemist:
A Slightly Troublesome Visitor

Prologue
Qfkftlftgufff 1

Episode 1: The Researcher's Visit
Thfff Mfffffffifkffhfffkf's Vifit 3

Episode 2: To The Salamander's Lair
Tft Thfff ffilfimfiuffffffkf's Lfuffk 29

Episode 3: Meanwhile, Sarasa...
Mfffifudhulfff, ffiffkfiffi... 69

Episode 4: The Rescue Call
Thfff Mffffufff Afill 85

Epilogue
Afhulftgufff 135

Afterword
Aftfffkdftkffi 141

Special Short Story:
Reward Money, Savings Boxes, and Magic Manipulation
Aftufttfff, ffimufgf Aftxfff, ... 145
fiuffi Mfigiff Mfiuifhulfitfta

Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Prologue
4. Episode 1: The Researcher’s Visit
5. Episode 2: To the Salamander’s Lair
6. Episode 3: Meanwhile, Sarasa…
7. Episode 4: The Rescue Call
8. Epilogue
9. Afterword
10. Special Short Story: Reward Money, Savings Boxes, and Magic Manipulation
11. Bonus High Resolution Color Illustrations
12. About J-Novel Club
13. Copyright

Prologue

Some time after the trouble with the House of Lotze's debts, we had gone through the arbitration process and sent our thanks to everyone who helped out. With all of that sorted, we were able to get back to our peaceful lives.

The slaying of the salamander had made my heart race a little, but at the end of the day, I had a little cash and some rare materials left over, so maybe it was a positive in the end?

We did succeed in our primary goal of saving Iris-san, after all.

And no longer burdened with repaying the family debt, Iris-san and Kate-san...

"Sarasa, we're back."

"We're home now, Shopkeeper-san."

"Welcome home, both of you. I'm glad to see you're all right."

...were living in my house, as before, and continuing their activities as gatherers.

I had told them they could pay me back over time from the domain's tax revenues, but according to Iris-san, "repaying the debt of gratitude we owe you is separate from paying you back the money."

In all honesty, I'd have felt lonely if Iris-san left, so I had been kind of thrilled to hear her say that.

Apparently, even Adelbert-sama had started saying things like, "I'll become a gatherer too, and repay the debt..." But obviously his wife had stopped him, and he'd reluctantly given up.

He probably had the skills for it, but it was pretty obvious he couldn't be allowed to. He was the lord of a domain, even if it was just a small one. He might be useless at his duties (as Iris-san attested), but that didn't mean he could spend all his time away from home.

If there was one thing that caught my attention, though...

"Iris-san, are you going to go on calling me by name like that?" I asked.

There was a pause before she replied, "Can I not?"

"Well, it's not that you *can't*, but..."

I didn't know if it was all in jest, but the other day, they had

brought up the idea of Iris-san marrying me, and she'd addressed me this way since then. If it was tied to the marriage thing, I wanted to put my foot down and say no, but when Iris-san looked at me with those sad eyes…

"I don't object to you calling me 'Sarasa,' but I have no intention of marrying you, okay? And it's not that you hate men, or prefer to be with a woman either, right?"

"Well, no. But when I think about that scumbag, maybe I have started to hate men a little."

Iris-san shook her head as she let out a deep sigh.

I never asked her for details, but she'd apparently had a really bad time when she went back to the family home. There hadn't even been a hint of levity on Kate-san's face when she'd said, "If it weren't for the money, we wouldn't have let him walk out of there alive," so even if she was just saying that, it still must have been pretty bad.

"If *that's* the alternative, marrying you would be a hundred times less awful— No, it's rude to say it that way. I'd be a hundred times happier… I guess that's not right either. One hundred times a negative is still a negative. Hrmmm."

Having dwelt on it for a while, Iris clapped her hands and looked straight at me.

"Yeah, I want to marry Sarasa. Let's go with that!"

"Wh-When you're so direct like that, it gets me all flustered…"

The way Iris-san looked at me, completely serious—damn, was she handsome.

Thank goodness she was a woman.

If she had been a man, I'd have fallen for her right there. Yep.

"I-Iris-san, it's not that I hate you or anything, but listen, I'm just an innocent maiden hoping that a wonderful man will appear for me one day."

I won't get greedy and wish for a cool prince or anything.

"Murgh. Do you suppose you could compromise, and settle for a 'wonderful individual' instead?"

"Even if I did, Iris-san…you come up short! Just a little!"

"How so?!"

"Uh, well, normally, you are a wonderful individual, but…"

Her appearance…was good. She was cute, and at times could be cool in a masculine way.

But her weaknesses showed occasionally, and when you averaged all the positives and negatives out, she landed at

slightly positive. That was not exactly the stuff dreams were made of.

In terms of her social status, she was of noble lineage, no matter how minor. The fact that, if I married her, I would get that as part of the bargain did make it a significant perk for me as a merchant.

As for my relationship with the parents… Adelbert-sama was an earnest knight, and seemed easy to get along with, and I heard it was her mother who'd dropped the hint about "if she married me," so I wasn't likely to see any opposition from her either.

Yeah, she's a winner all right. If I just ignore her sex, that is.

If I just ignore her sex, that is!

That was the most important thing, though.

The annoying complication was that I had ways of doing something about it.

"Well, setting aside the issue of gender, I could accept a woman as my partner, assuming there was no marriage involved, but then I'd want someone who could support me both in my public and private life."

In my line of work, there were a lot of women who never married. You could make a lot of money as an alchemist, even as a woman, and it was common to spend all of your marriageable years slaving away in someone else's shop, so they often missed their chance—or so I had heard. It was sad, really.

"What sort of support would it take for you to accept me?" Iris-san asked hesitantly. "I think I could handle gathering materials."

"It's not a bad offer, but if I'm going to all the trouble, I'd want someone who complements the areas I'm weak at."

I could gather materials myself if I felt like it, so that wasn't a weakness of mine. The time it would take was an issue, yes, but I could also just buy them—actually, for ordinary alchemists, that was the main way they got their materials. If there was something I wanted in a partner…

"Someone who can make delicious food, maybe…? And if they did the cleaning, laundry, and other household chores as well, even better. That would let me focus on my alchemy."

"C-Cooking, huh? I'm not so good at that." Iris-san's eyes wandered as she considered my request, then, putting a hand on Kate-san's shoulder, she pushed her forward. "Could we

perhaps leave that to Kate, who'd be part of the package? Kate could handle the household chores too, you know?"

Kate-san blinked, unsure how to react, then turned to look at Iris-san.

"Huh? You were serious about that, Iris?"

"Kate-san, huh? She's not bad, but Lorea-chan doesn't just cook; she also minds the shop, so she's sort of a two-for-one there."

Iris-san and I carried on with this silly argument, ignoring both of the other people involved.

"M-Me?" Lorea-chan recoiled slightly. "Um, Sarasa-san. I appreciate your feelings, but I don't swing that way either..."

"I-I'm just kidding, of course? I'm strictly talking about you as a partner. It's true that you're a big help, though," I hurriedly explained.

Things had gotten so much easier since Lorea-chan turned up, so while I wasn't running the risk as badly as Leonora-san, I needed to be careful, or I was scared I really would miss out on my chance to get married.

"Iris, if you did marry Shopkeeper-san, that would make her a member of the house, so I would obviously do all I could to support her both in public and in private. But maybe I'm not so happy that I'm being treated like just an added bonus," Kate-san objected with a slightly troubled look on her face.

Hearing this, Iris-san thought for a moment, then nodded with understanding. "Then let me be the added bonus. Although, in light of my position, I cannot give up on the position of head wife."

"That is *not* the problem! Oh, for goodness' sake. Shopkeeper-san isn't even interested."

Yeah, you tell her, Kate-san.

"First, you need to get her in the mood, don't you?" she went on.

Oh...? I'm not liking where this is going.

"Hmm. That's a sound argument. I suppose it was presumptuous, trying to sway her with talk of an added bonus."

"Yes, that's right," Kate-san agreed. "First, you need to improve your own appeal."

"N-No, that's not the issue..." I protested.

You sound like you're encouraging her, but are you serious, Kate-san? Isn't it your duty as a retainer to discourage her here?

Though, maybe her being in debt to me makes it so it's not that simple.

"Hmm..." Iris-san murmured. "It seems I've hurried this a little too much. For now, I will go back to addressing you as I did before, Shopkeeper-dono."

"Uh, no, that's not the core of the—"

"I will better myself as a potential bride, so that you might choose me, Shopkeeper-dono. Please, look forward to it!" Iris-san said.

"E-Erm... G-Good luck...?"

Even though it felt weird to me, the firmness of Iris-san's declaration made me encourage her despite myself.

I can't tell her, "You don't have to try!" when she looks at me with those sparkling eyes!

"Mm-hmm! Ah, but in this case, perhaps I should be training to become a better potential groom? What do you think, Kate?" Iris-san asked.

"Well, while I think you'd make a lovely bride, I feel like Shopkeeper-dono being the groom feels a little off."

"But surely Shopkeeper-dono will have the higher income, right? It's not as though our domain brings in much revenue."

"You have a point. Why don't we have both of you be the groom?"

"I see. That *is* an option. And then we'll have you join us, Kate!"

"Let's leave that to future discussions..."

"Hm? What? Would you like to be a groom as well, Kate?"

"That's not it..."

The two of them had started discussing plans. If they just decided all this stuff, I wasn't sure what to tell them.

While I was still confused, someone clapped their hands. I turned to see Lorea-chan with a gentle smile on her face.

"It must be hard, being so popular, Sarasa-san," she said.

"You say that as though it has nothing to do with you, Lorea-chan." I shot her a slightly annoyed look, but Lorea-chan smiled and shrugged.

"Because it doesn't. I wish you all the best, Sarasa-san. It sounds like you'll have your hands full."

But she wasn't able to stay uninvolved for long.

"Oh, what's the matter, Lorea?" Iris-san asked. "Why do you seem so— Ohh, I see how it is. How thoughtless of me."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

“Of course you’d feel lonely, being the only one left out. It’s okay. I don’t see any problem with us bringing in one more person.”

“N-No, I plan on having a normal marriage—”

“You don’t need to hold back on my account, you know? Our house doesn’t fret the small details. Although, if possible, I’d like for Kate to be the second wife…”

“Oh? I wouldn’t mind, you know?” Kate-san interjected. “Lorea-chan can be the second wife.”

“I-I would mind!” Lorea-chan objected.

“I can see why you would. If Kate, a retainer of the house, were ranked higher than you—”

“That’s not the problem!”

As Lorea-chan got increasingly flustered, I quietly stood up and then silently faded out of the scene.

Cheering *“Fight on, Lorea-chan!”* as I left…

Episode 1: The Researcher’s Visit

Setting aside that sort of silliness, we were more or less back to business as usual. The whole bride discussion was shelved due to Lorea-chan’s efforts, allowing me to seclude myself in the workshop once more, obsessively pursuing my alchemy.

As I was doing that, Lorea-chan poked her head in with her brow furrowed. “Sarasa-san, could I have a moment?”

“Hm…? Sure, what is it?”

Having gotten used to the job, Lorea-chan could now assess the purchase price of most ordinary materials, so she didn’t need to call on me as often anymore… *Is it an order for an artifact?*

“There’s a customer with a letter of introduction from Leonora-san…”

“Leonora-san? I’ll have to meet with them, in that case. I’ll be right there.”

Leonora-san scratched my back, and I scratched hers. That was the kind of relationship we had… Well, maybe she scratched my back a little more often? Either way, if this person had an introduction from her, they needed to be shown some consideration.

I tidied up as quickly as I could, then headed over to the shop area. There I found a man in his mid-twenties with a scar over his left eye waiting for me. He was slender but strong, and his face was nicely symmetrical.

Not a bad start, but his ashen red hair was messy despite how short he cut it, and the clothes he wore—which were of the practical, durable variety—seemed a bit worn out. He didn’t look like a gatherer to me.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” I greeted.

“No, no, I apologize for the sudden imposition.” He smiled, not offended by the slight delay.

“Thank you for your understanding. So, what can I do for you today? I’m told you have a letter of introduction.”

“I do, yes. Maybe it’s fastest to have you read that first.”

“I’ll take a look.”

I read through the letter he handed me. *Mm-hmm, mm-hmm…*

“It says you’re a researcher of monsters? And you want

assistance with your field research?”

“Yes. I’m Nordrad Evans—call me Nord. Can you help?”

Hmm, this could be a little bit troublesome. Since he has an introduction from Leonora-san, I’m not against offering him some assistance, but it does bug me that the letter says, “If he asks for anything unreasonable, you don’t have to listen.”

“Wow, I never knew there were people who studied monsters,” Lorea-chan marveled.

“There aren’t many of us,” Nord-san explained, nodding. “And that I study their ecology makes me an even greater rarity.”

In general, the study of monsters was primarily focused on which of their materials could be used and in what way.

That being the case, it was often pursued by alchemists who had reached the intermediate level and had a little extra room in their finances.

It was rare that they had anything to show for their work, but if they found a use for some material that was previously just thrown away, they stood to make a massive profit and also a name for themselves.

Nord-san’s study of monster ecology, on the other hand, didn’t have much potential for profit in it, so hardly anyone chose it as a topic of research.

“That’s why most researchers are nobles, doing it for their own amusement, huh?” Nord-san mused.

“Does that mean you’re also a noble, Nord-san…?” I asked.

“No, no, I’m one of the few exceptions, because I also get results. I’ve written a number of books. Maybe you know them?” The corners of his lips turned upward with pride.

“Sorry, I don’t…” I said, averting my eyes.

“O-Oh.” His shoulders slumped a little, but he quickly recovered. “Well, it looks like I still have a long way to go. I’ll have to try even harder,” he said with a smile.

I really wasn’t the one to ask when it came to expensive things like books. Because, living as frugally as I had, I couldn’t possibly have bought any.

That said, I was still an alchemist. I’d done more research on monsters than your average person, but it was all weighted toward how they could be used—that is to say, what materials they had.

The books in the academy’s library were largely of that disposition as well, and if they didn’t have Nord-san’s book there,

then no matter how well it sold, I'd never have seen it.

Not that I could see a book like that ever having mass-market appeal.

It seemed Lorea-chan easily came to a similar conclusion. "Erm, did you sell that many copies?"

"Of course! My recent publication, *The Ecology of Grimeteeth and Their Secrets*, sold a whole twenty-eight copies! It's the talk of the industry!"

Nord-san clapped his hands together gleefully, then spread his arms wide. Lorea-chan shot me a troubled glance, but I just gave her a slight shake of my head in response.

There were many different forms that publishing could take, but I couldn't see how twenty-eight copies could be a large number for a book being sold for profit. Furthermore, that he was able to keep track of the number of copies sold down to the last digit was a little painful.

Even if it was as expensive as the *Complete Alchemy Works*, he must have been taking a loss once you factored in his research expenses.

"Oh, even with as many sales as my books get, it's still not enough to provide research funding. The main source for that is something else. There are research grants for those studying monsters, did you know that?"

"I was aware, yes..."

Monsters lived right next to us, but we knew so little about their ecology. One policy the kingdom had undertaken to gather more information was a system of research grants.

But it wasn't that convenient of a system to use. The money was paid out in the form of a reward, but only after the results had been presented as a research paper.

You couldn't apply for funding in advance, and the amount paid out depended on the content of your paper, with no consideration given to the cost of doing the research. In short, without some initial funds, you couldn't get started as a researcher, and if your research was poorly received, you might not even make your money back.

It was such a gamble that people couldn't make a living off of it. The only thing that it had accomplished was to persuade the nobles who had been researching things for their own amusement to publish their results rather than hoard them.

"So, are you wealthy too, Nord-san?"

“No, I’m an exception there too. Because I’ve never once ended up in the red!”

According to Nord-san, who puffed up his chest with pride, he had started with inexpensive research, and always received more in reward money than he spent.

“You might not think it, but the thing is, I’m actually quite famous in the world of monster ecology researchers,” he boasted.

“That sounds like an incredibly narrow world,” Lorea-chan replied, not mincing words.

Nord-san fell silent for a moment before acknowledging, “Well, yes. Since ordinary folks know nothing about it,” with a reluctant nod.

“Not even a specialist, like Sarasa-san, seems to know about it, though?”

“Well, yes... I wouldn’t expect anyone but a fellow researcher to.”

“And just how many researchers are—”

“I-It sure is amazing that you’re able to make a profit on research! Normally, it’s assumed that you’re going to take a loss!”

Even without knowing much about the subject, I could tell that the number of researchers wasn’t that large. But he was still a customer. When I cut off Lorea-chan’s relentless interrogation and changed the topic, Nord-san looked at me like I had just saved him.

“I-I know, right?! There are many subjects where, even if you present your findings, they won’t be worth a single copper, you know?”

“I’ll bet. But why choose a super minor monster like the grimetooth?”

The average person had never even heard the name, and even those who had didn’t take much interest in them. They were of such minimal importance that even alchemists would take some time to remember whether any of their parts could be turned into useful materials.

If he was making money from that kind of research, then either the screening process for research grants was fairly loose, or his research paper had been incredible enough to make up for that.

But shouldn’t he study something a little more common, at least? Like, a monster that people have heard the name of, but isn’t well

understood?

"Yeah. The screening committee pointed that out. Which is why, this time, I'm focusing on a well-known monster."

I'll bet! If no one on the committee had pointed it out, I'd think they all ought to be fired.

Receiving a report on new ways to use grimeteeth would be one thing, but a report on their ecology must have bewildered the people who had to check over it. They're the sort of monster that's easy to catch if you just go where they live.

"That's probably for the best. So, what have you chosen?"

Nord-san grinned at my question, then calmly said the name. "The salamander. That is the topic of my current research."

"Um, okay? You're studying salamanders?"

"Yeah. There's an area nearby, right? A habitat."

"There was. But the salamander's gone now, you realize? Because I killed it and turned it into materials."

It was inevitable that the information would get out now that I had sold the materials, but conversely that should have also meant that people knew it was already dead. There was no way to investigate its ecology at this point.

Or was he looking for me to give him some of the parts?

As I raised a suspicious eyebrow, Nord-san wildly gesticulated. "Oh, that's fine. I've already finished part of my research in other areas where they live. I want to investigate the cave where the salamander lived as a sort of supplementary source of information."

"Oh, is that right?" I asked. "In that case, I think you could have continued your research wherever you were doing it before..."

Nord-san scratched his head and smiled awkwardly at the unspoken question, *Why would you change locations?*

"Well, the bodyguard I hired got injured, you see. I looked for a replacement, but no one in those parts would take the job."

Doesn't that mean he had trouble of some sort...?

If the job had been a tempting offer, there should have been takers.

The words from the letter—*If he asks for anything unreasonable, you don't have to listen*—flashed through my mind.

"I was offering proper compensation, of course, and I think at an appropriate rate? But going into the nest of a salamander requires specialized equipment, right? And I'm obviously not

wealthy enough to cover the cost for all of it."

"Yes... I suppose that's true."

It was impossible to even approach the place where a salamander lived without artifacts to protect against the heat. It was a bit much to expect people to assemble a full set of equipment when all he was offering was a somewhat good daily wage.

"Besides, if I want to do a thorough investigation of a salamander's habitat, it's more convenient to do it when the salamander is no longer around. But they're not simple opponents to defeat..."

"And that's what brings you to my place, huh? We've already defeated our salamander, and because that's true, you can infer we already have the necessary equipment."

"Right. That said, Sarasa-kun, I understand it won't be easy to rope you into this, as you have your own shop to attend to. As such, I was hoping you might introduce me to some collaborators. You have people like that here, right? Gatherers, I mean."

I never gave Leonora-san the finer details about how we had slain the salamander, but it was natural for her to have assumed I didn't do it alone and had outside help.

It was also reasonable for her to have inferred that those helpers had been gatherers from the village.

After pausing to consider, I said, "Understood. I will set up a meeting for you, but that's it. Whether they take the job is up to them, and I will not be pushing for them to do so. Is that all right?"

Even now that the salamander was gone, that area still wasn't safe by any stretch of the imagination. The lava lizards were one thing, but it wasn't impossible that the hellflame grizzlies had returned, so I didn't really want Iris-san and the others going there.

But even if I refused, he could find out who had gone with me if he looked into it. That being the case, it was better that I be there to hear his offer along with them.

"I don't mind that at all. It's only natural that I, as a researcher, be willing to negotiate on the details."

Seeing Nord-san's confidence as he nodded, I felt just a little worried.

Once he left, I got in touch with Leonora-san using the Shared

Sound Box. Not only did she repeat that *“I only ask you to help him as far as it’s reasonable for you to,”* she also said, *“He’s the sort who can be blind to his surroundings when research is involved, so if he’s being unreasonable, you can firmly reject him, and if he does something strange, I won’t mind if you punish him for it.”*

Well, that’s…not reassuring at all!

This only reinforced my sense of uneasiness, and I couldn’t see the whole thing as anything other than smelling of trouble.

I’d gotten that sense from him even without Leonora-san saying so, but even if I had her permission, how was I supposed to go about punishing him…? With my fists? Was I supposed to do it with my fists?

Once Iris-san and Kate-san got home, I told them all about what had happened and then asked for their input.

“Monster ecology, huh?” Iris-san murmured. “I never knew there were people who studied that.”

“It’s the first I’m hearing of it too,” Kate-san agreed. “What was your impression of him, Shopkeeper-san?”

“Let me see… He was a stereotypical researcher, in a way.”

He put his research first, and had great passion for it, but was unconcerned when it came to anything else. He paid no attention to his hair and clothes, not caring at all how shabby he looked.

There’d been a number of professors and instructors at the academy who were of a similar variety.

Though, since it was a school, none had been quite so unclean.

Hmm? I’m one to talk, you say?

Now, come on, even I put some thought into my appearance when I’m going out at least—or I like to think I do.

Although, I was just wearing the outfits that my seniors had picked out for me… Because I didn’t have the fashion sense to mix and match the clothes I had!

“I suppose we’ll have to meet with him,” Iris-san concluded. “We’re free to refuse, right?”

“Of course you are. And if you think it’s too much for you, please do so without a second thought.”

I felt obliged to help Leonora-san, but Iris-san and Kate-san were more important.

◇◇◇

I had recently put in a reception room at the shop. That said, though, all I had really done was remodel the warehouse behind the shop, so it wasn't like I had added on an expansion.

For the vast majority of customers, just sitting down at the table in front of the front counter was enough. Because of how rarely I had an occasion to use a full reception room, I couldn't justify spending much on creating it. All that being the case, Nord-san was the first guest to ever use the room.

"Hello, I'm Nord. Are you the ones who took part in slaying the salamander?"

Nord-san didn't look much different from the day before. He wasn't unclean, but his unkempt hair and unrefined clothes were the same as ever.

"I'm Iris. Let me start by saying that we were just tagging along with Shopkeeper-dono."

"I'm Kate. We barely contributed anything to slaying the salamander, so don't be under any illusion that we did."

They both wanted to disabuse him of the notion that he could expect too much from them, but Nord-san shook his head to say that it wasn't a problem.

"I want to ask you to keep watch during my investigation," he said. "I'll have you know, I actually keep in quite good shape myself. If you can't even beat the monsters along the way there, that would be an issue, but you can handle that much just fine, right?"

"I would think so, provided they don't swarm us," murmured Iris-san. "But do you even need protection to begin with? You look like you work out?"

"Oh, you can tell?" Nord-san smiled, noticing her eyes on him. He put his hands together, and flexed his muscles with an audible "Hungh!"

That's pretty impressive, but please, stop, it's too much for me to take. I'm not some kind of muscle fetishist.

I didn't know if he heard my plea, or simply recovered his common sense, but Nord-san quickly relaxed his muscles and shook his head.

"But combat techniques are another matter," he stated. "I do have confidence in my stamina, and my ability to run away, though I can't do detailed examinations while also remaining alert to my surroundings."

"I see," Iris-san replied. "That all makes a lot of sense."

If he was focused on his investigation, that would inevitably distract him from his surroundings. Even if he had the ability to run, it would do him no good if he didn't notice until he was attacked. Looking at it that way, just having someone around to keep an eye out for him must have made a huge difference in how safe he felt.

"Hmm, if it's just a matter of standing watch…then whether it's profitable for us will come down to the compensation," Iris-san noted.

"Yes, that's true." Nord-san stroked his chin as he thought about it. "I can't offer you much, but since there are two of you…"

Unlike if they were going out to slay monsters, there weren't going to be any materials to be had in a simple survey of the area, so Nord-san's ability to pay was going to depend on his own pocketbook.

"Hmm, all right. As payment for your time from when we leave the village until our return, how would you feel about twenty gold a day each?"

"Done!"

"Whoa, Iris?!" Kate-san's eyes widened at her partner's instant response.

But the amount that Nord-san was offering was so generous that I could understand why she'd snap at it so quickly.

Forget the countryside or far-flung cities; even in the capital twenty gold was more than the common person could expect to make in an entire month. By comparison, gatherers made a lot of money, but only a select few could consistently bring in twenty gold every single day. I daresay that Iris-san and Kate-san were doing those kinds of numbers back when we were overhunting the frostbite bats, but that had been an exceptional circumstance.

The bats had bred to excess because they weren't being hunted, and they'd had my magic, as well as a higher purchase price than normal, working in their favor too. That was just how unusual the situation had been.

In other words, the pay he was offering was high. More than you would usually expect for bodyguards. If he weren't here with an introduction from Leonora-san, I'd have run him out of the shop at this point for being way too suspicious.

"Erm, Nord-san, are you sure that's all right?" I asked.

"Well, I think I can manage it? It's a rather dangerous place I'm

asking them to go to, so I feel I need to offer at least this much. The trade-off is that I expect them to provide all of the necessary equipment."

That made more sense. If I factored in the cost of the heat-resistant equipment, maybe it was a fair wage?

"Although, it does mean that if my current paper isn't approved, I'll need to save up by doing other work for a while before I can move on to my next study. Ha ha ha!"

From the sound of it, he was using all of his earnings from research grants, as well as the sales of his books (though that didn't amount to much), to fund his current research. But he must have been paying similar compensation at his last research site, so...

"You must receive an awful lot of grant money, huh?" I remarked.

"When my research is recognized, yes. But if I go in expecting that to happen and take on debt to fund my research, then my life will be over if it doesn't work out, so it's pretty tough."

"Yeah, I kind of figured..."

This kingdom didn't allow slavery, but it wasn't so soft on people that they could escape their debts. It was commonplace for people to be essentially forced to work.

So long as the work itself wasn't illegal, they weren't in a position to refuse it, so many young women were forced into brothels, and men could be too if the demand was there. I'd heard rumors that, if the debt was large enough, people were sent to places that really skirted the edges of the law. There were no small number of kids who left the orphanage only to be unable to support themselves.

Debt's scary!

"By the way, do you have any debts, Nord-san?"

"I'm fine there. I have the restraint to keep it so that if I fail, I'll be left penniless, but nothing worse than that."

Can you really call that "restraint"?

"So, what do you say?" Nord-san asked. "Will you take the job?"

"As I've already said, I'd like to," Iris-san answered. "What do you think, Kate?"

"Well... Shopkeeper-san, how risky do you think it is?"

"I think the level of risk is low. Based on our previous experience, there likely aren't any hellflame grizzlies, and I

wouldn't expect you to encounter any dangerous monsters on the way there or back."

Hearing my response, Kate-san crossed her arms and considered it. After some time, she slowly nodded. "Then I approve too, I suppose. I'd like to pay off our debt quickly, after all."

"I don't want to rush you, but…I would appreciate it," I replied.

Lords who ruled over farming villages, like the House of Lotze, paid their taxes after the fall harvest. These were mostly collected in the form of produce, which went directly into storage, or was sold at market to turn it into cash.

However, just after the harvest was also when market prices were at their lowest. Previously, they had been forced to sell immediately in order to make their debt payments, but that had changed now that I was their creditor.

I had told them, *"Wait for the right time to sell, then repay me,"* so I hadn't been paid yet. But I wasn't really having any troubles…aside from Iris-san's awkward romantic advances.

"Well then, Nord," Iris-san said, turning to our guest. "We formally accept your offer."

"Thanks! Whew, it's a big help," he said, relieved. "At the last place, they wouldn't take the job even with me offering so much for it."

"Hmm…?"

As Nord-san smiled and extended his hand to shake on the deal, he let slip a comment that was kind of worrying.

But before I could press him on it, he got to his feet. "Well then, let's be off!"

"Huh?" Iris-san was nonplussed for a moment. "No, no, we have to prepare before that, you know? And you do too, don't you, Nord?"

Nord-san gave a self-satisfied smirk. "Heh! Any researcher worth his salt is ready to delve into his studies at a moment's notice, and to that end I already have a supply of trail rations on me! Oh… But I guess I do need to prepare a tent? Because, surely, you don't want me joining you in yours."

When Kate-san shook her head, Nord-san turned to look at me. "My previous bodyguard was a man, so I was able to use his, but… Sarasa-kun, you sell tents, right? Since this is an alchemist's shop."

"Yes, I do have floating tents. They're made to order, so it will

take some time. But if you want to pay extra, it can be made faster.”

Most of the time that went into making tents was spent stitching the leather. I had some of the older women in the village handling that part now, which was faster than me handling it all myself, but it still took more than a few days. The women had their own plans, and I wasn’t so unoccupied that I could just spend all my time stitching away, focusing on nothing but tentmaking.

But I had the perfect item to solve that issue all at once! The leather adhesive “Leatherick”!!!

Yeah, weird name. I know. But it was wonderfully good at what it did. Put on a little dab of the stuff, press two pieces of leather together, and once it dried, they’d have merged into one. And I meant that literally, not just figuratively—it left no gaps, and there was no pulling them apart.

If you put them together right, it would look like it was one piece of leather all along, allowing you to make complicated shapes out of leather without any stitching whatsoever.

If there was one weakness, it was the price, I guess? If you used it when trying to make cheap, practical items, the Leatherick alone would raise the cost many times over.

With something like a floating tent, where the base price was high, and there was a lot of sewing involved, it had the effect of lowering the relative cost, but it still wasn’t cheap. It cost enough that the gatherers in this village would choose the traditional sewing method instead.

“How much would it cost to make a tent for one as quickly as possible? Oh, and how many days would the work take to complete?”

I named my price, wondering whether he could even afford it, but Nord-san nodded without seeming to struggle with the decision.

I was a little surprised, but started to mentally rearrange my schedule. If I set everything else aside, and focused solely on the tent, it’d be less than three days, but…

“Five days, I suppose. That would be a reasonable expectation.”

I had some reservations about doing that, so I gave a response that left me some leeway, and this time Nord-san nodded immediately.

“I don’t think that presents an issue. Although, I do want to get to my field work quickly.”

“So it’s all right?” I checked.

“Yeah. The truth is, this is my first time coming to the great forest. I’ll try walking around near the village until things are ready. Maybe I’ll find a subject for my next research!”

That’s a researcher for you: greedy for knowledge.

Maybe it was the key to his success, but it was probably rough on those around him.

“Well then, I expect I’ll be at the inn most of the time, so if you need anything, just come calling. Ah, I mean the new inn. It’s a good place, you know. It almost seems out of place, here in a rural village.”

We all forced ourselves to smile at Nord-san’s rude remarks.

“Ha ha ha… It was just built, after all,” I said.

“You timed your visit well,” Iris-san added. “If you’d come a little earlier, it would have been hell, you know?”

“Or you’d have had to camp out,” Kate-san noted.

“I’d rather not have to rough it,” he replied. “I don’t mind at all when I’m doing it as part of my field work, but I’d like to be able to take it easy and rest when I’m back in the village, at least.”

For all the excitement there was before, ever since the frostbite bat fang bubble burst, the village had seen a dip in the number of gatherers.

However, rather unexpectedly, there weren’t that many leaving, and the new building at the inn was seeing enough use that Delal-san hadn’t fallen behind on her payments. According to Andre-san, it was apparently because *“This was always a good spot for gatherers to base themselves out of, plus they now know that there’s a trustworthy alchemist’s shop here.”*

If they could make enough money, and there were no issues with their quality of life, maybe it was only natural they would choose to remain in the village?

The one drawback to the village was that there was no entertainment, but I couldn’t do anything about that. I couldn’t exactly set up a pleasure quarter, so they’d have to go play in South Strag when they had time.

Besides, if there was something like that in the village, it would be a bad influence on Lorea-chan’s education, you know?

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“Now then, we’ve taken the bodyguard job… It’s going to be okay, right, Shopkeeper-san?” Kate-san asked me.

“Yes, I think so—if everything goes normally.”

From what they’d told me, this was apparently the first time they had taken a job as bodyguards. But that was only to be expected, because it was exceedingly rare for anyone to have the occasion to hire gatherers to guard them.

If they were just traveling the roads, there was no need to choose a gatherer, so the only time someone would deliberately make that decision was when they were going somewhere like the great forest, where gatherers were the only option. After all, ordinary people had no business there.

Come to think of it, there *had* been gatherers who had accompanied us on our practical lessons at the academy, but that job was only available to a very select few working in the area immediately surrounding the capital.

“If everything goes normally?” Lorea-chan echoed. “Sarasa-san, is there a problem?”

“I mean, we’re dealing with a nutty researcher, right? We need to be careful.”

If he were just looking for guards because he wanted to pass through the forest, I wouldn’t be worried. If he was some rich guy who just wanted to see where the salamander had lived on a whim, then I’d be slightly concerned, but it wouldn’t be so bad. He might make some unreasonable requests, but he’d put his safety above all else.

But this guy was a researcher. The kind of person who might put his safety second. Depending on the situation, his actions could be even harder to predict than those of somebody who was a total amateur.

“You could say researchers…are kind of like alchemists, huh?” suggested Kate-san.

“That’s exactly the problem: You don’t know what he might do for his research. It’s just how researchers are.”

If it was a simple trip to the salamander’s den and back, there wouldn’t be much danger. But how would the unpredictable variable of having a researcher along change things?

It definitely meant more risk. I was as sure of that as I was sure that Lorea-chan would snap up any sweet treats I offered.

“So it’s not that dangerous,” I concluded.

“But it is dangerous,” Iris-san and Kate-san said in unison.

“Yes,” I agreed. “The bit where he said he ‘gets results’ seemed pretty suspicious to me. If he was doing what everyone else does, he’d never get his work recognized.”

“I-I’m not a glutton, okay…?” As Lorea-chan waved her hands around in protest, reading the thoughts on my face, Iris-san san spoke up.

“Then would it be best if we were to turn him down after all?” Iris-san wondered.

“No, if I really thought it was dangerous, I would have stopped you. I can’t rule out the possibility of danger, but I’ll arrange some insurance, so that you may be able to get out safely even if you end up in a crisis.”

“Insurance? Are you coming with us, Shopkeeper-san?” Kate-san’s voice was full of hope, but I raised my hand and shook my head.

“That’s obviously not possible. I have a shop to run, after all.” Outside of exceptional situations like last time, Iris-san and Kate-san were gatherers, and they needed to be able to handle themselves alone. “In my place, I was thinking I’d prepare an alchemic item for you.”

“Ohh!” Iris-san leaned in eagerly. “Is it some sort of incredible artifact?!”

I pressed a finger to my lips, thinking for a moment, then nodded. “This one’s a little special, but you could still call it an artifact. Have you ever heard of a homunculus?”

“Just the name, but yes,” answered Iris-san. “I don’t know the details.”

“It’s the first time I’m hearing it,” said Lorea-chan. “What is that, Sarasa-san?”

“There are several different types, but the one I’ll be making, well…to put it simply, maybe you can think of it as a sort of familiar? It’s not without its limits, but it shares its senses with me, so I’ll be able to keep track of your situation from here.”

“It can do that?” Iris-san asked, surprised. “Then is there really any use for an artifact like the Shared Sound Box…?”

“If all I’m doing is talking, a Shared Sound Box is much easier to use. No matter how inconvenient it may look.”

For the same cost in magical power, the Shared Sound Box would allow me to speak to someone at a far greater distance than I could share my senses with a homunculus. The homunculus was taxing to use, even compared to the Shared

Sound Box, and on top of that, it would break down if the creator didn't provide it with magical power on a regular basis.

There were ways to extend how often it needed to be done, but considering the cost necessary, it just wasn't practical to leave it a long way away from me at all times. Homunculi were generally meant to serve at the alchemist's side.

"Besides, homunculi are hard to make to begin with."

If I got Lorea-chan and the others to help, and used Leatherick, the tent could be made in...about a day? Even providing for the time it took to dry, the total time was probably about three days. I could definitely find time to make a homunculus then.

"Also, one more thing in addition to the homunculus. I plan to make resonating stones too."

This artifact consisted of a pair of stones, which, when one broke, the other would too, causing a sound that echoed. They were disposable, and couldn't be used for communication like the Shared Sound Box, but in addition to not needing magic to use them, they had a fairly long range. Just how far was up to the alchemist's skill and the amount of magical power they put into the stones, but the ones I made would be usable between here and the salamander's den easily.

"So if anything goes wrong, we just break the stone?" Iris-san asked.

"Yes. Once you do, I'll check on you with my homunculus. But as for whether I can help...that will depend on the situation."

"Of course... Shopkeeper-dono, if it should arise that there is nothing you can do for us, you don't need to let it weigh on your conscience, okay? If you'll just pass my last words on to father and the others, that would be more than enough."

Hearing this, Lorea-chan shot out of her chair with a clatter. "Whaa?! I-Is the place they're going to that dangerous?!" she stammered, her lips trembling.

"Lorea, we're only talking about if the worst should happen." Iris-san reassuringly put her hands on her shoulders and gently sat her back down. "Ever since I left home to become a gatherer, there has always been the risk I might wind up lying dead somewhere. Indeed, the only reason I'm still here is because I had the good fortune of meeting Shopkeeper-dono."

Kate-san joined in, rubbing Lorea-chan's back soothingly. "That's right. By all rights, Iris should have died back then. But

we already said our goodbyes when we left home, so if we can't send along our last words, it's fine."

"Indeed. It's just that I would be happier to be able to say something."

"O-Oh, no..." The blood drained from Lorea-chan's face as she was forced to grapple with the danger involved in being a gatherer.

Seeing this, Kate-san smiled and shrugged, as if trying to change the mood. "Well, we've been back home a number of times since then, so it's all a bit awkward. We can't act out a dramatic scene every time we leave, you know?"

"Indeed. Because even after that, we still come back with a casual 'We're home.'"

Perhaps imagining that scene, Lorea-chan's expression softened a little.

"You don't need to worry so much," I said. "I don't think there will be much danger, you know? This really is just a 'just in case' sort of thing. I mean, last time, when we went to slay the salamander was way riskier..."

"I'm sure it was, but...I don't worry so much when it's you, Sarasa-san. I mean, you killed those huge hellflame grizzlies like they were nothing."

Ohh, that makes sense. Lorea-chan didn't see the salamander herself, so it doesn't feel as real to her, huh?

"Having seen how unstoppable you are, I can relate to what Lorea's saying," Iris-san added.

"There's no comparison between a salamander and a hellflame grizzly, though..." I objected.

"From an ordinary person's perspective, they're both strong. Maybe that's just how it is?" suggested Kate-san.

"Hrmmm... Is that how it works? Well, okay."

Continuing this conversation was just going to cause Lorea-chan undue anxiety, so I decided to move back to the main topic. "It's really just insurance, so use the resonating stone if you want help. Even if I can't intervene directly, I may be able to provide advice."

"Is the reason that you won't be checking the homunculus regularly because of how much magical power it costs to do so?" Lorea-chan asked.

"Yep. At that distance, it's not easy to synchronize with the homunculus. And I need to have magical power for my usual

work.”

I hadn’t made a homunculus before, so I was going off of what I’d heard from other people here, but even at a distance of a few hundred meters, it cost a lot of magical power.

I planned to limit the senses I synchronized to save on magical power, but even then, it would still be difficult to check in on them frequently.

“All of that said, this is all a lot of hot air if I can’t make the homunculus. It would normally cost a lot of money to gather the materials, but fortunately, I have all I need on hand, and this feels like a good opportunity to test it.”

The essential ingredient was a material imbued with great magical power. I could satisfy that requirement with salamander scales and the eyes of a frenzied hellflame grizzly. That would tilt the elemental balance toward fire a bit, but I could adjust that by using frostbite bat fangs. Having it be fire-type would be convenient where they were going, so I could tolerate a bit of bias.

Having prepared the materials in advance so that I can make something really expensive like this when I need it is a major win for me!

“One slightly odd thing is that it uses hair. I’ll need mine, and someone else’s…”

Incidentally, there were also methods that used blood, or certain things from a man that it was difficult for an innocent maiden like me to acquire.

If I used the latter of those two, the difficulty of making it would go way down. But the difficulty of gathering the materials would go way, way, *way* up.

Blood wasn’t that different from hair, but I wasn’t considering the other stuff. Because I was an innocent young maiden.

“Sarasa-san, will mine work? I don’t mind cutting some for you,” offered Lorea-chan.

“Thanks,” I replied. “It only takes a few strands, so just give me whatever falls out when you brush your hair.”

“Okay. But this creature is going to be born from the hair of both of us? It’s kind of like our child, huh?”

When Lorea-chan said that with a mischievous smile, Iris-san raised an eyebrow, and then thrust her head, with its luscious locks of hair, toward me.

“What? That won’t do. Shopkeeper-dono, allow me to offer my

hair! Go on!”

“Iris… You don’t need to get worked up over such a little thing,” Kate-san remarked.

“No, Kate. The smallest of cracks can lead a dam to collapse. I can’t let my guard down,” she replied.

“Let your guard down…? It’s not like Lorea-chan is your rival. Right?”

“Yes, that’s…right?” Lorea-chan agreed, but seeing the way that Lorea-chan cocked her head to the side a bit, even as she nodded, Iris-san’s eyes widened in response.

“This is dangerous! Dangerous, I tell you, Kate! For the sake of the House of Lotze, I cannot back down on who will be the head wife!”

“Whaa?!” exclaimed Kate-san. “Wait, really?”

With the pair of them staring hard at her, Lorea-chan vigorously shook her head. “Oh, no, it’s not like I want to marry Sarasa-san. It’s just that I was thinking I’d be in trouble if she got married and decided to close up shop. I’d be out of a job.”

“Ohh, I see,” said Kate-san. “Yeah, having a job at an alchemist’s shop can completely change your life.”

“Now I get it,” said Iris-san. “The wages are in another class entirely. Especially in a small village like this one. It’s okay, Lorea. Our house has excellent retainers. Shopkeeper-dono won’t need to do anything as lord.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Kate-san agreed. “If anything, we’d be grateful to have her work harder as an alchemist.”

“Is that right?” Lorea-chan said. “Well, I guess my future’s secure, then.”

“Indeed,” Iris-san said. “And if I become Shopkeeper-dono’s spouse, it will be even more secure.”

Iris-san put her hands on Lorea-chan’s shoulders as the girl breathed a sigh of relief.

Huh? Wasn’t all of that talk from the other day supposed to have been shelved thanks to Lorea-chan’s efforts? If I let things continue to develop, the defensive wall that is Lorea is going to break.

Maybe she’s in need of immediate repair?

“U-Um! It’s fine if I use my hair and Lorea-chan’s, right?” I asked.

“Hm? Oh, right, that’s what we were talking about. Why do you need to put the hair in, by the way?” Iris-san asked.

“Um, well. Normally, a homunculus acts independently. The

hair is said to influence its personality, or behavioral tendencies."

If you used hair from a restless person, the homunculus would be restless, and if you used hair from a calm person who wasn't very active, the homunculus would turn out that way too.

There were theories that it affected the outward appearance as well, but that was largely determined by the creator. Plus, I wasn't making a humanoid one this time, so it was more or less irrelevant.

"And if you put in hair from multiple people?" asked Iris-san.

"In that case, it should become the average between them. You could say that it lacks individuality, but conversely, it means it is more well-rounded."

"Then let's put hairs from all of us in it," suggested Kate-san. "If you just use Iris's and get a reckless homunculus, that would be no good."

"Harsh much?! Am I really that reckless?!" Iris-san squeaked.

"Reckless enough that you chose to take on a risky job like being a gatherer despite the fact that you're the heir to a knight, yeah?" she shot back.

"Urkh!"

Kate-san's smile left Iris-san at a loss for words.

But it made sense: Even if her family was only a minor noble house, it wasn't normal for the heir to leave home to take a dangerous job. In short, she was plenty reckless.

That Adelbert-sama even allowed it was part of the problem, though.

"Ha ha ha..." I laughed. "Okay, I'll take some from each of you. Now I just need beans, some salt, and a rusty nail, all of which are easy to get, so I should be able to start work right away."

"Beans? Salt? It sure uses some...odd ingredients," said Lorea-chan. "It's a bit like cooking."

"Yeahhh, you'd be surprised, but this is just sort of how alchemy is, you know? I mean, using the leaves of common plants and fragments of ore is kinda similar."

This was something that occurred to me because we were in the kitchen, but a lot of the alchemic materials used in potions were edible.

Actually, most potions meant to treat illness and injury were able to be administered orally, so you couldn't put anything that wasn't edible in them.

"You know the fruitrot-bee honey from last time? That's a

material used in alchemy, and if you neutralize the toxins in it, it's edible."

"Urgh!"

Iris-san and Kate-san both scowled in unison, possibly reminded of the humiliating predicament that eating fruitrot-bee honey had left them in.

Come to think of it, although I had bought the honey, it was still sitting in storage. It was tasty, and had a lot of applications as a material, so it felt like a waste to sell it.

"Sh-Shopkeeper-dono, I'd appreciate it if you'd kindly forget all about that... I'm still unwed, you know?"

"Oh, are you sure you want to forget? That honey is tasty, you know?"

It wouldn't spoil, so it was fine if I forgot about it for a while, but I couldn't just forget it completely. I'd set aside some to use as materials, then sell the rest, or we could eat it ourselves...

It's a bit of a shame, but if thinking about it makes Iris-san and Kate-san feel bad, then maybe I should sell it instead of us eating it at home?

"I was thinking we'd eat about half of it..." I said.

"Wh-When you put it that way... I'm torn," Iris-san replied.

"That honey was so delicious," Kate-san agreed. "Even if what followed it was hell."

Kate-san's face looked delighted as she remembered the taste, but her spirits sank quickly.

"I haven't eaten it..." Lorea-san said. "Sarasa-san, is that honey expensive?"

"It is, yes," I told her. "Especially compared to ordinary honey. Because while it's edible, it can also be used as a material for alchemy."

For someone like me, for whom even ordinary honey had been a luxury, it was something that had always seemed far out of reach. But when I went to Master's place, it was just there, on the table, like it was ordinary... That was why I knew how it tasted.

"Maria-san made a treat called a canelé using fruitrot-bee honey and beeswax. That was good too. The outside was crunchy, and the inside was moist, and sweet..."

Lorea-chan audibly gulped. "Is it that delicious?"

"Yep. Ordinary honey is good too, but fruitrot-bee honey has a nice hint of alcohol in it."

Honestly, they were the best treats I'd had in my life, and I was sure it was because of the combination of Maria-san's transcendent skill at cooking and the honey itself.

But that was probably to be expected. Given the price of the honey, those canelés had been super luxurious sweets. Maybe I could afford them now, but back then? Not a chance.

However, now that I had that honey on hand... *Is the recipe in the cookbook Master sent me?*

"I-I want to try it!" Lorea-chan exclaimed.

"But if it makes Iris-san and Kate-san uncomfortable—"

"Ahh, Shopkeeper-dono?"

"What is it, Iris-san?"

"It's true that it's a bitter memory, but I think we can overcome it. Right, Kate?"

"Yes, you're right. In fact, I think we should overwrite it with happy memories. What do you say?"

In short, they wanted to try the canelés.

Their expressions were incredibly easy to read, but their eyebrows quickly drooped.

"Oh, but if you need the funds..." Iris-san murmured.

"No, no, it's fine. Fortunately, I have room in the budget."

I could afford to add some color to their diets as a reward for how hard they had been working.

"Hee hee, okay. Let's eat about half of it after all." The moment I said that, three faces lit up, and I let out another laugh in response.

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"Now then. Let's start with the homunculus."

With our overall plan decided, I got right to work preparing.

Out of all the things I was going to be making, the homunculus was the most time-consuming. Unlike the resonating stones or floating tent—which I could just work on until they were done—I needed to give the homunculus time to grow.

"The one I'm making this time should be fine with three days to make it, but..."

Because it was my first time making one, I was a little uncertain. After all, if I failed, the damage would be massive—to my wallet.

“If I just take it step by step, it’ll be fine, right?”

I gave the section on it in the *Complete Alchemy Works* a thorough reread, then prepared the alchemic cauldron.

This time, I would be using the handheld cauldron. I put in salamander scales, a hellflame grizzly eyeball, and some large frostbite bat fangs, then added magic crystals and a little water.

I stirred for several minutes while pouring my magical power into it, until the materials that had been rattling around inside the cauldron lost their forms, turning into a thick red liquid.

“So far so good. Now I add more ingredients…”

I snatched the materials lining the workshop’s shelves and tossed them in. Then I stirred until those too had dissolved, and added the other things that I had brought from the kitchen, like beans, salt, and rusty nails.

“Stir until fully melted, and…”

At this point, it just looked like a bean soup that failed to win any awards for artistic presentation.

But this was alchemy. As I kept on tenaciously stirring, eventually the beans dissolved, and the muddy red liquid gradually turned more clear.

“Once it all vanishes, move it to the cultivation tank, and dilute it with well water.”

When that was done, the cultivation tank—which was a cylindrical glass tube about thirty centimeters long—was filled with a light pink liquid.

“Now I put in my hair, and a hair from each of the other three.”

They fluttered into the tank, melting instantly with a bubbling hiss.

This liquid’s clearly dangerous. I know I’m wearing gloves and all, but it still scares me a bit.

“Put a lid on it to prevent spills, and just keep on pouring in magical power!”

I put my hands on either side of the cultivation tank and poured in the rest of my power.

The more I gave it now, the higher the quality of the homunculus, or so I was told. I had been using magical power while working, so I wasn’t in top condition, but this was a chance for my needlessly high magical capacity to shine!

As I poured in the power, the liquid began emitting a faint light that shone on my face.

Even though I had just stated “the more power the better,” whether the mixture could actually accept the magical power I was pouring into it depended on the materials used, and this light could be used to determine that limit.

Basically, once the volume of light stopped increasing, I had hit the limit. Anything more than that would be a waste of magical power, but…

For some reason, it just keeps getting brighter! Is this really okay? I can’t even look directly at it anymore!!!

“Hrmmm. I guess that’s what you can expect from materials from a salamander and frenzied hellflame grizzly. They’ve got a crazy-high capacity!”

I’m happy my magical power’s not going to waste, but maybe not that happy.

The light was so powerful I could see it with my eyes closed. I couldn’t judge where the limit was like this.

“In that case, I’ll just give it all I’ve got.”

My magical power would recover after being used, but there were no do-overs when making a homunculus. I lowered my head with my eyes still shut and endured the brightness. I could still see it even then, as I wrung out every last drop of my magical power.

“There, I’m at…my…limit!”

Having done all I could, I fell flat on my backside.

I opened my eyes a crack. The cultivation tank was still shining enough to light up the entire room, but it gradually subsided to a warm pink glow.

“Did it work?”

I sat there observing the cultivation tank, but there was nothing inside. Just the occasional bubble, rising to the surface of the liquid.

The water didn’t get cloudy, and the light didn’t go out—which had both been included in the book as examples of failures—but I couldn’t confidently say I had succeeded yet either.

“Well, I’ll just have to watch and wait, I guess.”

From here on, I just had to add more magical power occasionally and then in three days, I would presumably have a finished homunculus.

Conversely, if it wasn’t done by then, I’d have failed. The expensive materials I had used would have gone to waste, and the team’s first piece of insurance would have gone up in smoke.

No, more like “in bubbles”? I mean, that’s all that’s in the tank right now.

“As for their second piece of insurance…I’ll get to it tomorrow. It’s clearly not happening today…”

I collapsed backward and lay there on the floor.

While I wasn’t going to pass out like after I fought the salamander, I had exhausted all of my magical power again, so honestly, I was having a hard time even sitting up.

The floor was a bit cold, but I didn’t want to budge until my power recovered a little.

Then, after more than twenty minutes like that…

“Sarasa-san, dinner’s ready.”

There was a knock at the door, and I heard Lorea-chan’s voice.

“Thanks. But go ahead and start without me. I can’t move right now.” I had recovered a little, but it still hurt to move.

After hearing my response, panic crept into Lorea-chan’s voice. “You…can’t move? Sarasa-san, do you mind if I open the door?!”

“Go ahead,” I answered her cheerfully.

“Pardon me!” Lorea-chan entered the workshop, where she saw me sprawled out on the floor. “Erm…”

Our eyes met, and a long silence passed between us.



But Lorea-chan quickly recovered from her surprise and crouched down to put her hand on my forehead.

“Sarasa-san, are you all right?”

“I’m fiiine. I just overused my magical power. I’m not sick or anything. I’ll be up and moving again in no time.”

“Well, okay then. Don’t push yourself too hard, okay?” she said. After a moment she added, “What’s this shining stuff?”

“That liquid is going to be a homunculus. If I’m successful, that is.”

The faintly glowing cultivation tank stood out like a sore thumb. Lorea-chan peered into it, cocking her head to the side in confusion.

“But I don’t see anything inside...?” she asked.

“Because it’s just getting started. It’ll be a day before we see any change.”

“Oh, I see... Sarasa-san, isn’t it cold in here?”

“It is a bit, yeah. It’s already winter. The seasons sure do change quickly.”

I had come to this village in spring. The time sure flew by.

“You’re taking it so lightly. You’ll catch a cold, you know? Do you think you can move if I help?”

“Yeah, maybe I could manage that?”

“Then let’s get you somewhere else. It’s not good to let your body get too cold.”

“Thanks. Sorry to trouble you.”

I took the hand Lorea-chan offered and got to my feet.

The table in the dining room was lined with delicious-looking food.

Iris-san and Kate-san were already seated, waiting for me to join them.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” I said.

“No, it’s no issue at all,” replied Iris-san. “But is something wrong, Shopkeeper-dono?”

Seeing Lorea-chan help me, Iris-san and Kate-san both moved as if to get up, but I stopped them before plopping myself down in my own chair.

“Whew, thanks, Lorea-chan.”

“No, it was no trouble at all.”

Once the smiling Lorea-chan joined us at the table, Kate-san asked, “So, what happened, Shopkeeper-san? You’re not feeling

unwell, are you?"

"No. I'm just out of magical power."

"You, out of magical power? Making a homunculus must be tough."

"Oh, not at all. If I'd just been trying to make a homunculus, it wouldn't have been so bad...I think. But the instructions said the more magical power I put into it the better, so..."

"You poured in everything you had?"

"You got it."

When I nodded, I got three looks of exasperation in response.

But if it says more is better, of course I'm going to push it to the limit, right? It makes you want to test it. There's no way you wouldn't, if you call yourself an alchemist!

I would even say that the fact I didn't go until I passed out actually shows restraint, don't you think?

"Well, this is Sarasa-san, after all," Lorea-chan said.

"You're right," Iris-san agreed. "I suppose there's no point in us telling her how to do her alchemy."

"Yeah," Kate-san also agreed. "Now let's eat."

The three began their meal with a resigned sigh. I wasn't completely satisfied with their reaction, but I decided to let it slide and dug into the meal.

Oh, this is good. We can always count on Lorea-chan.

"You two were preparing for the expedition today, right?" I asked.

"Yes, we were," Iris-san answered. "Although, that said, we're relying on your goodwill to provide the tent, so there wasn't much to do..."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I'm not using it, so lending it out is no big deal."

"It's a huge help," said Kate-san. "Painful as it is to admit, now that we've experienced the comfort it provides...there's no going back. That just left ordering some preserved food, which I've talked to Darna-san about."

Lorea-chan smiled at this. "Thank you for being such regular customers."

"No, we should thank you for offering such affordable prices," replied Iris-san. "Are you sure it's okay?"

"Yeah, that's right," Kate-san agreed. "Lorea-chan, you must be making barely anything on the sale."

Considering the volume of sales in this village, Darna-san's

stocking prices couldn't have been much different from retail prices in South Strag. That meant the general store was keeping their prices pretty low.

Being a shopkeeper myself, I immediately realized that after accounting for the cost of transport, the risk of trouble along the way, and the cost of defective products, their profit margins had to be extremely thin. Wouldn't one emergency leave them bankrupt...?

"It's true that we're struggling. But if we raise prices too much, the villagers won't be able to afford things, and we won't be able to get gatherers to stay in the village..."

It was apparently their way of giving back to the village. But the village chief—or maybe it was Erin—had thought of that, and had arranged things so that all of the village's produce was sold through Darna-san, and the profit from that went a long way toward keeping his business profitable.

"I suppose that's the kind of cooperation you find in a small village," Iris-san observed.

"Because free competition isn't enough to get by, really," agreed Kate-san.

"It's the same with alchemists, in some ways," I added.

Even knowing that I wouldn't profit, I kept a stock of potions that were rarely used, and bought materials that seemed likely to remain as unused stock when people brought them in.

That helped to support the system of gatherers and meant I was ready in the event of an emergency.

This is why merchants who ignore the rules are such a problem—because the powerless are the first to suffer for their actions.

Incidentally, they taught us about these sorts of rules at the academy. They weren't semimandatory like the regulations on artifact pricing, but breaking them would get other alchemists mad at you, so most people went along with it.

In the past, these "rules" were more unspoken agreements, or things handed down from master to apprentice, but eventually, someone with influence said they didn't like the ambiguity, and insisted they be taught formally. Or so I'd heard.

I don't know who made that decision, but it's good to make things easier to understand, right?

"But recently, we've been able to make preserved food in the village, and the number of gatherers has increased, so I hear business has gotten a bit easier. And it's all thanks to Sarasa-

san!”

“Oh, because of *that*, huh? I know I provided the artifact, but don’t you think the credit goes to Erin-san, and to you who put in the hard work, Lorea-chan?”

I looked at Lorea-chan, tilting my head slightly, as I remembered what had happened a few weeks ago.

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It happened on a day much like any other working at the shop.

The mayor—well, the acting mayor—well, not even that, the mayor’s daughter (although, she practically was the mayor) Erin-san arrived.

Erin-san must have timed her visit, because there were no customers in the shop, and I ended up listening to her request at the table in front of the counter while enjoying tea with Lorea-chan.

“So, Erin-san, what can I help you with? Is it about the herb fields?” I asked.

“No, things are already going quite well there, thanks to you.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. But it’s because of all the hard work done by the couple managing the fields, you know? Because no matter how carefully I explained things, it would all amount to nothing if they cut corners.”

The field next door was technically my property, but it was managed by Michael-san and his wife. Unlike alchemists, who could cheat with magic, they had to do all of the tiresome work by hand.

But the couple was very diligent, and not just Michael-san, who was originally from this village, but also his wife Izu-san, who was born in a larger town. They both worked out in the fields every single day.

The time hadn’t come to harvest yet, but the way things were going, it was more or less assured they would have a decent crop. I was incredibly grateful for that.

“But if it’s not about herbs… Is there some sort of trouble?”

“No, no trouble… Do you know about the preserved food they sell at the general store?”

“Yes. I’ve bought some of it myself in the past.”

Dried vegetables and dried meat. Neither was very tasty, but

it was convenient that all you had to do was boil them.

Up until when Lorea-chan had come to work for me, I'd subsisted on them when it was too much effort to make anything else.

"Then you also know that he buys all of it in South Strag?"

"That, I didn't know. Although, I thought it might be the case. I've never seen anyone drying meat in this village."

The village wasn't large. If someone was making dried foods, even someone like me, who didn't get out much, would have noticed.

"We do make enough for our own use, but not enough for it to be noticeable. They usually do it in their backyards, or hang it from the eaves of their houses."

Okay, so apparently they were making some... W-Well, it's not like I had been going for walks anywhere other than the main street, okay? I don't look in people's backyards, so can you really blame me for not knowing?

"Up until now, there weren't very many gatherers based out of this village, so it had never occurred to me before, but you know how there've been more of them in town recently, right? Don't you think it's a good opportunity?"

"For the villagers to make money, you mean?"

"Yes! We have more people making money while working at home now thanks to you, Sarasa-san, but for my part, I'd like to take things a step further."

The primary industry in this village was agriculture. They mostly grew grain, with only a small amount of other crops left over once you excluded the amount they consumed themselves or which was used at the village's inn.

That small surplus was sold by Darna-san in South Strag, but because of shelf life, weight, and the cost of transportation, he couldn't take all of it there.

"Up until now, we've been pickling the leftover vegetables, but no one likes them very much, with the exception of a very small number of people. Were you aware of that, Sarasa-san?"

"I've heard stories..."

If I recalled correctly, Delal-san and Erin-san had mentioned something like that on my first day in the village.

Fortunately, I hadn't had the opportunity to try those pickles myself, but if they had such a limited number of people who liked them, it was a failure as far as making preserved foods

went.

Of course, there were poor regions that couldn't afford to be picky about food, though.

"If we had more delicious preserved food, I'm sure that the gatherers would appreciate it," I said.

"I know, right?" Erin-san agreed. "It would stop our vegetables from going to waste, and make our diets over the winter months a little more tolerable. If the product is well received, I'd like to boost vegetable production, and increase the village's income. If we can get our hands on enough cash that way, then we'll be able to hold on to our grain and then sell it when market prices are higher!"

"I-I see..."

I guess the worries are the same for every village.

The House of Lotze was tackling those problems in their domain, but our local lord only accepted tax payments in hard currency—so he was pushing the risk of market fluctuation off onto his subjects.

But if they had the money to pay their taxes already, that would change things. Obviously, it would require them to build a new granary, but it spoke well of Erin-san as the shadow mayor that she was looking at realistic ways of improving things.

"I think it's a good idea. If you can produce dried vegetables in the village, that will mean less money going out, and more money coming in. That's two birds with one stone."

I didn't know much about the subject, but drying vegetables was probably as simple as cutting them and then leaving them out to dry.

They weren't the kind of thing that would become a regional specialty, but on the other hand, that also meant that no matter where you bought them from, they'd be more or less the same.

But to make an extreme argument, if Darna-san, the owner of the only shop in the village, were to sell dried vegetables made only in this village, the gatherers would have to buy them. If the quality was downright awful, or the price way too high, things might be different, but South Strag was too far to make the trip over a minor difference.

"But...none of this has anything to do with me, does it?" I asked.

"No, of course not," Erin-san replied with a laugh. "I wouldn't take up an alchemist's precious time for something as trivial as

asking how to make dried vegetables."

"Ha ha ha..." I laughed dryly. "Even if you did ask, I don't know anything but the normal way to do it."

Lorea-chan was the one to ask about stuff related to cooking.

I was a merchant's daughter. I had seen preserved foods as products, but we'd never made them at home, so with the exception of what I'd learned in the academy, I only had general knowledge of the topic. If anything, the average child of a farming family probably knew more than me.

"I wanted to ask if there was any artifact that makes dried vegetables... No, I'll be more general and ask if there's one that makes preserved foods instead."

"Oh, of course that'd be it. But let me think... Just a moment."

I ran off to get the *Complete Alchemy Works,* then returned and slammed those heavy tomes down on top of the table.

The artifacts were sorted into types, so I wouldn't have to read the whole thing, but the annoying part was that things weren't always categorized where you expected them to be.

For example, if there was an artifact that made dried vegetables, you would think it would be in the food section, but it might be under agriculture, or dryers, or even industrial equipment... You could never let your guard down.

Still, as long as it had a name that said what it did, it would still be easy to find because I could spot it while flipping through. But if the creator had gotten too creative with their naming, I had to stop and read the blurb every time I came across an odd name, which was a bit of a pain.

Honestly, alchemists with an excessive desire to express themselves are a real nuisance. It's what's inside that counts, I say.

"Ah! Found it. Here's what you want."

It was an artifact called a "dried food maker."

Now there was a name that, while uncreative, would be appreciated by the vast majority of people.

Thank goodness it was invented by a sane person. A practical item like this doesn't need a cool name that serves no one but the creator. If it doesn't actually do what it says, that would be one heck of a trap, but... Yep, it does exactly what it says on the tin.

"Erin-san, here's what it does..."

I showed Erin-san the *Complete Alchemy Works*, but she just furrowed her brow.

"Um, I can't see anything?"

“Oops, that’s right. No one but alchemists can read this.”

There was nobody ordering custom artifacts, so I had completely forgotten.

And after I went to the trouble of putting up a sign too.

In a sense, Erin-san was my first customer. I’d have to really give this my all.

“This is an artifact that makes dried food, and it can make dried meat in addition to dried vegetables. Although, it does say that the meat needs to be processed beforehand.”

“I understand. When we make dried meat in this village, we remove the fat and salt it first. Although, it’s rare for us to have enough meat that we need to preserve it, so I don’t have a lot of experience with that.”

“Would you like me to leave this feature out, then? It will make it that much cheaper.”

We’d had a lot of hellflame grizzly meat left over not that long ago, but that was a rare case.

In a village like this, where Jasper-san was the only hunter, it was normal to not have enough meat that it needed to be preserved.

“No, while we haven’t had that much meat in the past, recently the gatherers have started to hunt. If we buy the meat from them and process it, that could be another job for the villagers to do.”

“And then you sell it back to the gatherers, huh? Let’s see what else… It says it doesn’t just dry raw vegetables, but cooked food as well. Although, only specific dishes.”

“Could you give me some examples…?”

“It doesn’t go into much detail, but it sounds like it can do bread and soup. Although, the more moisture in the dish, the higher the running cost.”

The “running cost” here referred to the cost in fuel. If someone with magical power was using it, they could use their own magic, and if they didn’t have magical power, or the amount they had wasn’t sufficient, they could use junk magic crystals instead.

Between bread and soup, it was pretty clear which had more moisture. As for whether it was worth paying the cost—well, that wasn’t my concern, was it?

“It even does soup? That’s an impressive artifact. I think it would normally be impossible to preserve soup like that.”

“I couldn’t say… I’m no expert on food, so please ask Delal-san or Lorea-chan, or someone else who is an expert.”

I looked in Lorea-chan’s direction as I said this, but she had been busy quietly nibbling on biscuits and sipping tea, and gave me a blank look. She pointed at herself and tilted her head. “Huh? Me?”

“Yep. Because your cooking tastes great. I think you’d be more than capable of giving advice.”

“Uh, thank you…?”

Lorea-chan’s mother Mary-san had taught her to cook, but recently she was mostly cooking with the cookbook Maria-san had sent us. So when it came to her knowledge of cooking, it was no exaggeration to say that she had already surpassed her mother…maybe?

“I see. You’re saying that, since many in the village are used to only making the same dishes, they may not be able to make dishes that are suitable for the artifact?” Erin-san bowed her head and asked, “Lorea-chan, do you think you can help?”

“S-Sure! If it’s something I can handle!” Lorea-chan sat up straight and gave a tense reply.

It brought a smile to my face to see her like that, but I looked back down to the book. “Now it’s just a matter of me making the artifact, but not having suitable fire-type materials on hand is going to be… Huh?”

My brow furrowed as I looked at the instructions, and I had to check them a second time.

Yeah, I’m not misreading it. And I bought this book from an official source.

“It doesn’t need many fire-type materials? There’s more wind-type…and ice-type, for some reason…?”

As far as ice-type materials went, I had plenty of frostbite bat fangs left. Even though summer was almost over. I’d thought they were going to be hogging space in storage until next year, but it looked like this would let me use up a decent amount of them.

For fire-type materials, I had what we’d gotten from the salamander, but those would put the price well outside of what Erin-san could afford… The fire stones we’d picked up the other day would work, though.

“I’ll need to procure some wind-type materials, but I think I can make it for you cheaper than I’d thought.”

“You can? That would be a big help.”

“It’s still going to be fairly expensive… Is that okay? I think that it’s going to be a little more than the farmers in this village can afford.”

“That’s fine! I’ll buy it. And then I can collect a fee each time they use it.”

Hearing the strength with which Erin-san asserted this, Lorea-chan nodded. “Oh, that makes sense… Because right now, the villagers can afford to pay the usage fee.”

“Yes. Previously, they would have hesitated to spend the money, but right now paying taxes isn’t a problem. And if it comes down to it, I can always collect money from every household to pay for it!”

The mayor’s job was to collect taxes. Until now, he had gathered the crops and then had Darna-san sell them. When that wasn’t enough, he had supplemented it by borrowing money from Dudley-san at the inn and the handful of other villagers who tended to have cash on hand.

But now the number of gatherers had increased, and the previously empty houses were all filled up. Those were the communal property of the village. The rent was divided equally among the villagers, so as long as they weren’t splurging, every household would have some amount of cash on hand.

“Got it. I’ll take the request. It will take me some time to gather the necessary materials, though…”

“Of course, that’s fine. I know we’re out in the boonies. If you have to prioritize time or cost, I’d prefer you prioritize cost… Is that all right?” Erin-san put her hands together and winked at me.

“Hee hee, I get you,” I said with a smile and a nod. “I’ll do my best to keep the price low.”

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“We’re the ones who went and got those wind-type materials…” Iris-san said with a far-off look in her eye.

“And you have my thanks for it,” I said, bowing my head in gratitude, as I remembered their tale of woe.

“No, we told you we’d do it,” said Iris-san. “You don’t need to feel bad, Shopkeeper-dono.”

“Yeah,” Kate-san agreed. “You tried to stop us, but Iris-san

insisted…”

I knew there was a place near South Strag where we could get wind-type materials, but my original plan had simply been to purchase them. Being so close to the area where they were produced, I’d figured that Leonora-san’s shop would have stock, and the price wouldn’t be too high.

But when Iris-san heard about it, she’d raised her hand and said, “I’ll go get you some!”

I knew the location and had the information. With her skills, it wouldn’t be impossible, but…I was a little worried. That’s why I had subtly tried to dissuade her.

I’d suggested, *Wouldn’t it be better if you went with Andre-san and the guys?,* fully aware that they weren’t in the village just then.

“I-I thought it would be fine!” Iris-san insisted. “I did my research, you know?”

“Well, it’s true that it worked out; we just had a hard time,” Kate-san said.

“A-Adversity builds character. It’s a good thing!”

“Do you really think that…?” Kate-san fixed her with a stare.

Iris-san was silent for a moment, then awkwardly averted her eyes and said, “I’ll admit, I might have gotten a little ahead of myself… I’m sorry.”

Hearing her apology, Kate-san’s expression softened and she let out a sigh.

“Well, it’s fine. It’s my job to be there to support you when you do that kind of thing, after all.”

“B-But thanks to your efforts, the village now has all sorts of preserved foods,” Lorea-chan chimed in. “And my dad’s profits…haven’t actually changed that much, but sales are up!”

The truth was, Darna-san was selling the preserved food with practically no markup. The reason for that came down to the division of profit: The increase in gatherers in the village had benefited the inn and blacksmith, but the farmers hadn’t seen much of an increase in their incomes. In order to make up for that, he purchased the preserved food from them at a slightly inflated price.

That reduced his profit margin, but he didn’t need to carry the food back from South Strag anymore, and the villagers had more money, which resulted in them buying more from the general store. If the preserved food was tasty, the gatherers would buy

more, and the overall increase in sales meant that running the shop had gotten a little bit easier.

“It’s gratifying to hear that,” said Iris-san, “but the reason sales are up is due to your hard work, isn’t it, Lorea? I was told that you had a lot to do with the new preserved foods.”

“Yeah,” said Kate-san. “You helped with most of the dishes other than basic dried vegetables and dried meat, right, Lorea-chan?”

“I heard that too…” I said. “In fact, I was there to help out. By providing magical power.”

When preparing samples, the dried food maker was an absolute necessity. But ordinary folks didn’t have the magical power to operate it repeatedly, and if they used junk magic stones every time, it would cost way too much.

It seemed even Erin-san wasn’t prepared to subsidize that, so she’d come to me to ask for help with the magical power—after already winning Lorea-chan over first.

Since Lorea-chan was asking with her, I couldn’t refuse. I had provided the magical power required to make all of the test products. In return, she had provided all of the ingredients for free, and the products we made as well as anything left over would end up on my table, so it’s not like I had taken a loss on the arrangement.

The magical power I had used was only a small amount for me, and Lorea-chan had looked like she was having so much fun.

Incidentally, the only thing I had helped with other than providing the power was to act as a taste tester, so I hadn’t been involved in the cooking at all.

“We were grateful for your help. In the end, you weren’t paid, were you?”

“Neither were you, right, Lorea-chan? We were just supplied with ingredients.”

“Because it was for the good of the village. And if you look at the bigger picture, my family and this shop will benefit from it.”

“Ohh… You’re sharp for a thirteen-year-old!”

“I’ll be fourteen soon enough. I’m not going to be a child forever.”

Lorea-chan thrust out her chest with pride.

Yeah, she sure is growing up! Especially her chest! It’s bigger than mine!

“But this also means that, from now on, we’ll have something

good to eat while we're out camping, so we're grateful," remarked Iris-san.

"The difference from how things used to be is night and day," Kate-san agreed.

These two are even more grown-up. There's no point even comparing.

"Is something the matter, Shopkeeper-san?"

"Nuh-uh, nothing at all."

I'm not jealous. I mean it, okay?

"It doesn't feel like it's nothing...but oh well. We have some free time as of tomorrow, so is there any way we can help out?"

"It's not like I don't have anything you could do, but if you're free, why not go gathering nearby?"

"That was my thought too, but Kate..."

Iris-san trailed off, looking at Kate-san, who nodded, then furrowed her brow in consternation.

"Nord-san's been roaming around outside the village again today. If we go out into the forest, we're bound to get involved..."

"And that's a problem?" Lorea-chan asked. "You'll be working with him a few days from now either way."

"Yeah, that's true. But Lorea-chan, he's bound to cause us trouble. My sixth sense is telling me so."

They had taken the job because it paid well, but the guy seemed like a pain. That's why they didn't want anything to do with him outside of work.

"I know how you feel," I said. "Guys like that have a way of causing trouble for those around them without meaning to, and they do it naturally, with no ill will whatsoever..."

There had been people like him at the academy. Many of them. Despite being talented, they caused problems, and yet for some reason, they never got fired for it.

No, maybe they weren't fired because they were talented? If they were incompetent and caused problems, they wouldn't be allowed to stay.

"Then how about you two help me with tentmaking tomorrow?" I offered.

"Sure, just tell me what to do. But leave all the delicate work to Kate!" Iris-san said.

"Hold on, Iris. I have basically no experience stitching leather either, you know? And it takes strength, so if anything, this should be your area of expertise."

“Murgh. I’m not good at sewing…”

“Hahh… You’re a girl, aren’t you? Maybe it would be one thing if you were a high noble, but how does the mere daughter of a knight get away without being able to sew? That’s a fatal flaw.”

“It’s fine, Kate-san.” I held up a hand to stop her, who was in the middle of an exasperated sigh, and let out a giggle.

“Ohh, I can leave it to you, Shopkeeper-dono?” she teased. “Then, in order to be a good husband, I’ll—”

“No! This is strictly about making tents!”

I didn’t know how nobles divided their duties when they were in a same-sex marriage, but that was not what I was talking about here.

“Ahem.” After clearing my throat, I moved us back on track: “I have a secret plan.”

I giggled.

Well, all it involves is sticking the tent together with Leatherick, though.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Here’s the homunculus!”

Having completed the floating tent with help from the others, I’d carried on providing the cultivation tank with magical power while quickly producing potions and resonating stones for the journey. Now, on the fourth day, I was showing off the fully grown product.

It had taken an additional day beyond my original expectations, but because it was my first time making one, I didn’t know what had caused it.

Was it my inexperience? My overoptimistic expectations? Or some issue with the materials I used?

Well, whatever, it’s successfully completed. Isn’t that good enough?

When I set the homunculus on the table, wrapped in the towel I had been using to wipe off the cultivation fluid, it began to stir and poked its head out from the towel.

“It’s s-s-so cuuute!” Lorea-chan squealed.

“Y-Yes… Far cuter than expected?!” Iris-san leaned in for a closer look.

The little bear cub crawled out of the towel and stood there on the table. Its fur was a light brown, but with a touch of gold

depending on the lighting.

It was so small it could fit in the palm of your hand, and incredibly fluffy.

“I didn’t see this coming either,” said Kate-san. “Maybe this is just what homunculi are like?”

“That’s all up to the person who makes it. I opted for this form because it was relatively easier to create.”

That was only half the reason. The other half just came down to my personal tastes.

The alchemist could control what form their homunculus took, but the difficulty was also influenced by the materials they were using. In this case, I had been using salamander and hellflame grizzly parts. That made using a form similar to that of a bear or lizard easier, but if I had tried to make it a fish, for instance, that would have been relatively difficult.

Conversely, by adjusting the materials, it was possible to make a wide variety of different homunculi.

But humanoids over a certain size were not allowed. In this country at least, producing homunculi that could be mistaken for humans was illegal.

As for whether there was anything stopping that on a technical level… Well, they wouldn’t have had to pass a law banning it if there was, so take a guess.

“In short, your options were a bear or lizard, then, huh?” Iris-san said.

“Yeah. And with those options, obviously I’d choose the bear, right?” I replied.

Some people might think lizards were cuter, but I was definitely on the bears’ side, and apparently everyone was with me on that, because they all firmly nodded.

“Yes, of course,” Iris-san agreed. “And what about the size? It seems awfully small for a bear.”

“It’s not meant for combat, so wouldn’t it get in the way if it was too big? It’s not like I can just dispose of the poor thing when you guys are done with it.”

“Y-You can’t do that!” Lorea-chan cried.

“I won’t,” I reassured her, smiling. “With this form, it wouldn’t look out of place next to you when you’re minding the shop.”

I picked the homunculus up and offered it to her.

“I-It’s okay for me to touch it?!”

“Yep, of course. Go ahead.”

When I placed the homunculus on her hand, it rolled over to lie on its belly.

“Wowww, it’s so cute and fluffy,” Lorea-chan said, her face melting with joy as she hesitantly stroked its back.

“Me! Me next! Give it here, Lorea!” Iris-san reached out and tickled its throat with her finger, grinning.

“H-Hold on! I want to savor the moment a little longer first!”

The homunculus let out a contented growl, its eyes narrowing happily.

“Shopkeeper-san, is that okay?” Kate-san asked uneasily. “It’s a *bear*, isn’t it? And one that moves on its own, not because you’re controlling it, right?”

“It’s fine for us to touch it,” I replied. “It looks like a bear, but it’s a homunculus, and basically our child.”

It was only bound magically to me, but it had received elements from each of us, so I could at least be sure it wouldn’t suddenly attack any of us. Maybe you could think of it like a very tame pet?

“That’s a little reassuring… What about other people, though?”

“Sometimes it’ll be fine, I guess. Its personality comes from us, so I don’t think it will suddenly start biting…unless one of us is secretly aggressive.”

“Aggressive…” Kate-san’s gaze drifted between me and Lorea-chan. Her brow furrowed slightly. “I’m a little worried.”

There was no need to go out of my way to ask whose personality she was worried about.

And it was probably just my imagination that her gaze settled on a certain nobleman’s daughter who’d left home to become a gatherer.

“W-Well, it’ll be fine,” I said. “It’s not going to go freely roaming on its own.”

It looked like an animal, but it was powered by my magic, so it wouldn’t leave me unless ordered to.

“Sarasa-san! What’s its name? What are you going to call it?” Lorea-chan asked.

“Huh? A name? I haven’t given it one…”

“Let’s do that, then!” she continued. “I’d feel bad for it not having one!”

“That’s right!” Iris-san nodded emphatically. “We’ll have to give it an adorable name!”

What should I do? They’re way more into this than I thought.

I thought it was cute too, but for me it was more like a stuffed animal. Homunculi were meant to be used practically, so it'd be a problem if they got too attached to it. Its original purpose was to scout out dangerous places, or defend the others with its life, so if their attachment to it made me hesitate to use it like that, it'd defeat the whole purpose—like, what did I even make it for in the first place, then?

That said, I didn't feel right taking it away from the two of them while they were adoring it.

I shot Kate-san a glance, begging for help, and she nodded as if to say, *I've got this.*

"Hey, you two," she called out.

Thank goodness. I can count on Kate-san to get them to calm down and—

"Isn't it my turn next?"

Whaaaaa?!

"Wha?! No fair, Kate!" Iris-san protested. "I haven't gotten to hug it yet!"

"Well, I haven't even been able to touch it," Kate-san countered, taking the homunculus from Lorea-chan, then began stroking its body with both of her hands. "Wow, it's fur is so soft. It's nothing like those hellflame grizzlies."

"Kate, let me have a turn!"

"You can let me have it a little longer. This fur is addictive. Tickle, tickle."

"Grrr, grrr!"

When Kate-san turned the homunculus over and tickled its belly, it waggled its arms and legs around, its eyes narrowing with contentment.

The corners of Kate-san's mouth twitched as she resisted the urge to smile.

Yeah, this is hopeless. I can't rely on Kate-san.

But seriously, she should just go ahead and grin. There's no one here she needs to keep up appearances in front of.

Of the two of them, Iris-san was more open with her feelings. She wrapped her arms around Kate-san from behind, reaching.

"Me! It's my turn next!" Iris-san insisted.

"Whaaa, this little cub would be wasted on someone like you, who gets all giddy over receiving a sword for her birthday, Iris."

"Th-That's not relevant! And you kept on sleeping with the stuffed animals you were given long past the age of ten, Kate!"

“Urkh!” Kate-san blushed for a moment, unsure how to respond, but quickly recovered, saying, “Wh-What’s the harm in that. Girls like stuffed animals. In fact, I’d say that was the way any girl ought to behave. Right, Lorea-chan?”

“I agree with you. So give it back, Kate-san,” Lorea-chan said.

“Oh, but this cub is like our child, isn’t it? It’s weird for you to ask me to give it back,” Kate-san teased.

“I keep telling you two, it’s my turn—” Iris-san interjected.

This was going nowhere fast.

“Hahh…” I sighed. “Iris-san, it’s going with you two on your trip tomorrow, so you can adore it all you want then.”

“That’s right!” Lorea-chan agreed. “You’ll have it all to yourself tomorrow, so I should get it today!”

“Uh, no, that’s not what I was saying…”

“Exactly!” Iris-san said. “The important thing is to decide on a name for it!”

“That’s not it either! Um, listen, okay? If you give it a name, you’re going to get attached to it, right? Homunculi aren’t toys, and depending on the situation, it could die, so—”

As I hesitantly tried to explain it to them, all three turned to look at me, their eyes wide.

“No! You’d make such a cute little thing do something dangerous?!” Lorea-chan gasped.

“How could you be so cruel, Shopkeeper-dono?!” Iris-san scolded.

“I think there’s something wrong with that too, you know?” Kate-san said.

Receiving criticism from all three, I faltered under the pressure. “I-It’s easy for you to say that, but…”

That’s what it’s for! Don’t blame me! I made it to lower your risk as much as I could! If you die to protect the homunculus, what was even the point?

“You’d sacrifice such an innocent little creature, Shopkeeper-dono?!” Iris-san held the homunculus she had seized from Kate-san in both hands, thrusting it out toward me. The homunculus seemed to understand—well, maybe not—but it looked me in the eyes and tilted its head.

“Grr?”

“Urkh! Guhhh…”

I think you’re cute too, okay?

I’m just resisting, because I know I shouldn’t get attached!

“Come on, Shopkeeper-san, be honest with yourself,” Kate-san teased.

“It’s warm, soft, and cute,” insisted Lorea-chan.

“It feels good petting it, you know?” added Iris-san.

“Urgh…”

I know it’s cute.

I mean, I made it take a form I thought would be cute!

The homunculus that Iris-san was thrusting into my face was fluffy and warm.

“It’s so fluffy.”

“It’s so fluffy.”

“Isn’t it so fluffy?”

“Fi—”

“Fi…?” Kate-san prompted.

“Fine! I’ll be as careful as possible! You can give it a name! But if it comes down to it, all of your lives come first, okay?!”

“Yay!”

The three of them all clapped. I felt a little left out.

And here I was, forcing myself to be cruel for their sakes… Urgh. I’m so sad.

“What would be good for a name? Do you have any requests, Shopkeeper-dono?” Iris-san asked me, since in her mind I was its parent.

Being an alchemist, I would have preferred to be called its “manufacturer,” but I was outnumbered here, so I gave up on pushing back on that point.

“Oh, just do whatever you want at this point. I’ll be holding on to this in the meantime.”

I closed my eyes and turned my will toward the homunculus. Under my control, it slipped out of Iris-san’s hands, jumped, and spun through the air to land in front of me before sitting down.

“What?! I-It can do that?!”

“I was controlling it just now, but yes, apparently it can.”

I could see, hear, and feel through it, as well as control its body.

It was easy enough now, because I was sitting down, but maybe doing it while I was moving myself would be a little tough?

With practice, I’d heard it was possible to control a homunculus while fighting. But for someone like me, who had to close her eyes just to keep her field of vision from getting all

confused by the extra information, that seemed hard to believe.

"Wow, I guess it's not your average bear after all," said Lorea-chan.

"Right?" I asked. "Do you want to give up on naming it?"

"No, when you aren't controlling it, it moves on its own, right? It still deserves a name," Lorea-chan insisted.

"Yeah, that's right. Names are important," Kate-san agreed.

"Indeed," said Iris-san. "Just like every one of Kate's stuffed animals has its own name."

"Huh? Do they really?" asked Lorea-chan.

I know Iris-san had already brought up the stuffed animals earlier, but did Kate-san really have that many? That was a bit of a surprise. I'd assumed it was just something from when they were kids.

Sensing Lorea-chan and me staring at her, Kate-san held up her hands and blushed. "O-Of course that was just when we were kids! I don't have them now, obviously..."

"But back at the house, her room is filled with—"

"I couldn't throw them away after mom made them for me!"

This comment from Kate-san also surprised me, but...maybe it shouldn't have?

Caterina-san was a strong woman, like you'd expect Kate-san's mother to be, but there was also a kindness to her as well.

"You know... I get it," I said. "You can't throw that kind of thing away."

"Right? It's normal to treasure them, isn't it?"

I'd had dolls my parents gave me, and they'd all had their own names.

Unfortunately, those dolls had gotten lost somewhere along the line when my parents had died and I had been put into the orphanage, but if I'd lived a more normal life, I think I'd still value them even now.

"I have a doll I got from my mom too..." Lorea-chan admitted. "In that case, why don't we let Kate-san choose the name?"

"It's not likely to come up again, so let's all suggest ideas," Kate-san suggested. "Shopkeeper-san...doesn't seem interested, so just the three of us."

Mmm-hmm. Give it a good name, please.

Meanwhile, I made the homunculus dance.

It spun around, stepped, and struck a pose.

It was kind of neat, looking up and seeing myself with my

eyes closed.

“Hey, Shopkeeper-dono. Those sharp dance moves are ruining our image of it,” Iris-san objected on behalf of the trio, who had the most indescribable looks on their faces. But I had my reasons for doing it.

“Pay it no mind. You’re heading out tomorrow, so I have to get some practice in.”

I’d never controlled a homunculus before, so I needed to get used to all sorts of different things. If I couldn’t handle it properly when the time came, or couldn’t synchronize with it, that’d be bad.

“You make it hard to argue against you,” Iris-san conceded. “I’ll have to remember the more gentle, fluffy impression I had before as I come up with an idea…”

The three of them considered for some time, being distracted by the homunculus all the while.

The first to come up with an idea was Lorea-chan. “I want to call it ‘Kurumi.’ Because it has walnut brown fur—although I guess it’s more golden brown.”

Yeah, I guess that’s cute?

“Then for my idea…how does ‘Mark’ sound?” offered Kate-san.

That’s pretty normal, I guess? Although, it’s a male name, and homunculi have no gender.

“You always pick names like that, Kate,” Iris-san said. “I can’t say I understand why.”

“I’m just going on vibes. But since you’re commenting on my suggestion, what about yours, Iris?”

“I say we call it ‘Salmon’!”

Hold up.

“I-Iris-san? Where did you come up with that name?” I asked.

“Heh heh, I guess not even you know, Shopkeeper-dono. That’s the name of a bear’s favorite food, which can be caught up north!”

It was kind of cute how smug her smile was.

But that’s a fish’s name, isn’t it? Well, I guess Kurumi is a food name too, so maybe it’s fine, but it’s not what I’d go with…

“Erm, I’m not sure—”

“That said, I don’t know much about it myself,” she went on. “I wonder what kind of nut a salmon is. Do you think it’s like an acorn, or a chestnut? Or is it a fruit like a persimmon…? Don’t you think that mystery suits a homunculus?”

“Ah…”

She can smile at me all she wants, but I have no idea how to respond to that.

At times like this, we need Kate-san to step in—but I guess she wouldn’t know either, huh? At least judging by her lack of response to what Iris-san said. It’s not a fish that lives in these parts, or even gets shipped here, after all.

The only people who would know were those like me, who’d gone to the academy and acquired a wide range of knowledge, or someone who looked it up because they were curious. So of course Lorea-chan didn’t know either…

“Well, let’s pick one of our three options,” Lorea-chan said. “How should we go about choosing?”

“It’s Salmon’s name. Let’s let it decide for itself,” Iris-san suggested.

“Iris, it’s not settled yet, okay?” Kate-san reminded her. “Shopkeeper-san, do you mind?”

“Erm… Okay.”

It didn’t feel like I could disagree here. I wasn’t going to cheat to get my way, so…I just had to pray.

I controlled the homunculus and had it stand an equal distance from each of them.

“Kurumi! You’re Kurumi-chan!”

“I think you’d make a good Mark.”

“Salmon! You’re Salmon, aren’t you?”

As they each called their preferred name and beckoned to it, the homunculus turned and gave me a questioning look.

I nodded, and after some time, it wandered around the table until…

“Grr, grr.”

“Yay! It picked me!”

The homunculus, henceforth known as Kurumi, leaped into Lorea-chan’s waiting hands.

Oh, thank goodness! It didn’t go to Iris-san.

“Hrmph, Kurumi, huh? Well, it’s not a bad name. You didn’t make it choose that, did you, Shopkeeper-dono?”

“Nope. I let it choose freely. I couldn’t tell you if it understood it was picking its name, though.”

Homunculi didn’t have a very high level of intelligence, but their intelligence wasn’t low either.

They could follow orders to a degree, and remember a series

of actions, then carry them out. But it wasn't smart enough to pick up on how I felt and avoid Iris-san... Or it shouldn't have been.

It was looking cleverer than I thought right now, but I was just imagining that, right?

"Well, that settles it. Its name is Kurumi," I said.

"We'll be looking forward to working with you tomorrow, Kurumi," said Iris-san.

"Grar!"

Kurumi raised one paw while still sitting. How cute.

Well, whatever. It being too smart won't be a problem...right?

No.009

Complete Alchemy Works: Appears in Volume 4
Difficulty: Normal
Standard Price: ~6,000 Rhea



〈 Imagination Clay 〉

Homunculus Clay

A special clay that takes the form of whatever you imagine. You're not thinking "Is that all?", are you? This item can come in handy in all sorts of surprising ways, like when explaining an artifact to customers, coming up with design ideas for new artifacts, or practicing giving form to a homunculus.

Episode 2: To the Salamander’s Lair

“Well then, Iris-kun, Kate-kun. I’ll be in your care for the near future,” said Nordrad.

“You can count on us,” replied Iris.

“We’ll do what we can,” agreed Kate. “But…that sure is a lot of luggage you have.”

After being seen off by Sarasa and Lorea, Iris and Kate had left on schedule. But when they’d seen Nordrad at the entrance to the forest, they’d become perplexed by the large pack on his back.

This was going to be a longish expedition, so the pair had packed a large amount themselves, but their packs were nothing compared to Nordrad’s.

He was somewhat on the tall side, and it went all the way from his hips up to above his head. It was a massive backpack, and it was stuffed full.

And yet, despite carrying such an obviously heavy burden, Nordrad walked without difficulty. This could only be because of how much he had trained.

No, perhaps it was carrying such burdens that had trained him.

Either way, he was a cut above your average researcher.

“Oh, this? I need all sorts of tools when I’m investigating. It’s a good thing that the tent Sarasa-kun made for me was smaller than I’d imagined. I’ll be able to carry it with me everywhere.”

A tent made of leather could be surprisingly heavy. There were tents that prioritized being lightweight, but for gatherers, who often had to camp on uneven ground in the forest, from a cost and durability perspective, there was no alternative to a leather tent.

In response to their needs, the tent that Sarasa had made used alchemy to raise the durability of thin leather, allowing it to be both tough and portable.

The trade-off was that it was only just large enough for a grown man to sleep in, and it also cost more than an ordinary tent, but that allowed it to be the size of a water bottle. Only an artifact could’ve been so compact.

“Hmm. In that case, shouldn’t you have bought one sooner? You go out on research trips frequently, right, Nord?”

When Iris all but said that he shouldn’t have had to sleep in other people’s tents all this time, Nordrad looked at her as though she had said something strange.

“Huh? Do you think an artifact like this can just be bought anywhere? Let me be blunt, this is actually quite special, okay?”

If it was just a matter of it being made to order, there were many shops that offered that service. But those shops could only make artifacts that were listed in the *Complete Alchemy Works.*

To use the floating tent as an example, it only had the floating feature, and a few size variations. But not many alchemists could do what Sarasa had on this occasion, which was to make an artifact of custom size, function, and material.

“And even of the alchemists who could take such an order, hardly any could do it with such a short turnaround time, you realize? Because anyone who is that capable usually has many orders on their plate. There are alchemists out in the countryside with a lot of time on their hands, but when it comes to them, it’s their capability that’s in question, see.”

Even if Sarasa’s shop was an extreme example, the cost of running a business in the city was overwhelmingly higher than out in the countryside. By extension, that meant that alchemists operating in the countryside were those who couldn’t afford to have a shop in the city—which meant their skills were inferior in many cases.

Obviously, there were some high-level alchemists who, due to circumstances or whim, chose to move to the countryside for an early retirement, but there weren’t many of them.

“So, you mean to say that Shopkeeper-dono is rather special?” asked Iris.

“She graduated from the country’s sole academy at the top of her class, and is also apprentice to a master class alchemist? What else would you call her? It’s a mystery what she’s doing out here.”

“When you put it that way, yeah, it kind of is, huh...?” remarked Kate.

For Iris and Kate, who were mired in debt, an alchemist’s shop had just been a place for them to sell whatever materials they had gathered. They hadn’t had the financial leeway to buy artifacts or become close to an alchemist.

They might have had a broader perspective than Lorea, who had never left the village, but having grown up in the small domain provided to a knight, their knowledge of alchemists was limited, and Sarasa had become their benchmark for how they thought about them.

While they were aware that she was special, they didn't understand just to what degree. To be frank, even now that they were aware, their understanding was still somewhat askew.

"You certainly seem to know a lot about Shopkeeper-dono, Nord... Ahh, come to think of it, you came on an introduction from Leonora, didn't you?" Iris asked.

"That's right. I'm curious about that one too, by the way."

Nord was looking over Iris's shoulder at Kurumi, who was peeking out from behind the bag on her back, which it was clinging to.

Iris had hugged Kurumi when they'd first left the house, as if to say, *Finally, it's my turn.* It had only been once Kate had persuaded her that she couldn't act as a bodyguard with her hands full that she had reluctantly moved the homunculus to her bag.

"That's a homunculus, right? Is it Sarasa-kun's?"

"That's right. I'm surprised you could tell. Shopkeeper-dono made it out of concern for us."

"I *am* a monster researcher, after all. I have a lot of interactions with alchemists, so I know a homunculus when I see one. Although, this is the first time I'm seeing this form."

"Cats are more common, right?" Kate asked.

"They're more popular, yes. Birds too. Because they can be used to scout ahead. I think some people also use wolves in combat? It's uncommon, though."

The reason that larger homunculi were so uncommon was that most alchemists had no occasion to fight, and larger models were more difficult to produce.

First, there was the cultivation tank. While it wasn't absolutely necessary for their growth to finish inside the tank, their growth decreased to something more akin to an ordinary creature once they were removed from it, which could make it take anywhere from tens to hundreds of times longer.

Kurumi was complete at its current size, but if the goal had been to create a normal-sized bear, that would have required years of frequently supplying it with magic. That was just how

long it could take.

Of course, it went without saying that creating a bear-sized cultivation tank would be difficult. Because not only did you need to make the tank, you needed somewhere to keep it too.

Then there also was the magical power on top of that. The amount required was proportional to the size of the homunculus, and if an adequate amount couldn't be provided, the process would fail, causing the homunculus's body to disintegrate.

In addition, they still required periodic refueling after they were completed, so if you made too large of a homunculus, it would have an effect on your daily work as an alchemist.

That was why the most common types were birds and mice, followed by cats for those who had a bit more magical energy to spare.

"To tell you the truth, there's more that's odd about that homunculus than its size," Nordrad said.

"Hm?" Iris reacted. "What would that be? It may be an unusual variety, but it's cute, isn't it?"

Nordrad smiled awkwardly as Iris proudly held out Kurumi on the palms of her hands.

"I won't deny that, but it's beside the point. That thing is moving autonomously, right? Normally, homunculi aren't allowed to do that when their master isn't nearby—or maybe they simply can't."

The farther a homunculus was from its caster, the more difficult it became for the caster to control it, share senses with it, or provide the magical energy to sustain it. The homunculus needed to run off of the magical power stored up inside of it, and once that was depleted, it would cease to be.

Nordrad's common sense told him it was unthinkable to send a homunculus along on a trip that would take them a considerable distance away and might last for weeks.

Was Sarasa fine with it disintegrating along the way? Or was she confident she could maintain it, even over that distance, for that length of time?

"So, I was hoping I could inspect—"

"N-Not a chance! You can't have Kurumi!"

Iris hugged the bear protectively, backing away from the obviously mad scientist. Kate also stepped forward to protect Iris.

“Nord-san, we were allowed to take Kurumi along because Shopkeeper-san trusts us. We clearly can’t hand it over to you to experiment on.”

“Oh, of course. It’s only proper that I ask Sarasa-kun when we return.”

It seemed he’d never expected them to allow it.

Nordrad backed down easily, nodding and smiling.

“Then shall we be off?” he said.

“I suppose we should… Nord, you follow behind us.”

Having put Kurumi on her back once more, Iris walked into the forest, remaining slightly wary of Nordrad.

Three days into their trek into the forest, things were going smoothly in some ways, but the team had gotten bogged down in others. Fortunately, they had managed to avoid encountering too many monsters, but…

“Ohh! This is a riftshroom! How unusual! Hrm, the rift is three centimeters across, the tree is a nucrite, humidity is high, and the surrounding moss is—”

“Hrm! I see there’s brefcario growing here. The rhizome is…quite thick. Is the soil responsible?”

“Oh my?! There are meonidies growing by the waterside! Let’s see… No flowers yet. We should be approaching the flowering season, though, so is the location to blame?”

This was the source of the delays: Nordrad’s research.

Any time he stopped, it could be more than an hour before they got moving again. They couldn’t travel far like this, but thus far, Iris and Kate had been quietly waiting for him to finish.

They were being paid by the day, so it wasn’t a loss for the two of them no matter how far behind schedule they ended up. But after three days of this, they couldn’t help but get impatient.

They only had so much food with them, and monsters sometimes attacked if they stood around in one place for too long. If they slew those monsters, the smell of blood would draw more in, but even then Nordrad made no effort to move on, and it took considerable effort to drag him away from whatever he was doing. It would have been too much to expect them not to complain—but he was still their employer.

“Hey, Nord. I hesitate to say this, but don’t you think you’ve been taking entirely too much time? You were investigating the forest while we were preparing to set out too, weren’t you? Haven’t you had enough…?”

Despite how tepid Iris's protest was, Nord pushed back hard. "I did survey the area around the village, but the vegetation here is different! As a researcher, *not* investigating it would be unthinkable for me!"

"Murgh... I don't know about research, but I do know that food is becoming an issue. Considering the length of time we intend to spend once we arrive, I don't think we can afford to dally too long along the way, you realize?"

"She's right," Kate chimed in. "We have the trip back to consider as well, and at the pace we're going, we're not going to have a lot of margin left for error."

"When you put it that way..." The pair's reasonable arguments left Nordrad at a loss for words. No matter how passionate he was about his research, he wasn't so far gone that he could go on researching without food or drink, and he understood that Iris and Kate would be even less eager to tolerate such a situation. "I suppose I can't force the two of you to survive on weed soup..."

"You've eaten such a thing?!" Iris was aghast.

"Depending on the state of my research, yes?" Nordrad replied, as if it were no big deal. "It's quite edible, you know?"

"Keep an ample margin in our food stores while doing your research! For one thing, there aren't even any weeds growing in that area, okay?!" howled Iris.

"Would that have anything to do with why you've been investigating so many plants?" asked Kate. "You're a monster researcher, aren't you, Nord-san?"

"A little bit. Honestly, I've always wanted to research plants and insects rather than monsters."

"Hm? Then why don't you?" asked Iris.

"Life would be much easier if I could. But even I can't subsist on weeds alone... Do you think anyone would pay for me to research insects?"

Kate thought about it for a moment before replying, "It doesn't seem likely," with a shake of her head.

Nordrad smiled wryly and shrugged his shoulders.

"Right? And it's almost impossible to get ahead of what alchemists already know about plants, so it's hard to make a living pursuing that line of research. That's why I investigate insects and plants as a hobby whenever I have free time during my research on monsters."

Kate couldn’t help but feel like he was doing it too often to say that he was just doing it in his free time, but she felt obligated to nod in agreement. There were many alchemists pursuing practical research—meaning research that would actually lead to them making money—on plants and insects. In contrast, there was a relative paucity of research on ecology, but it was hard to turn that knowledge into profit.

The reason there was reward money for monster research was because the kingdom had decided it would contribute to public safety, so the odds of insect or plant research being similarly recognized were next to nil.

“Research for profit, huh…” mused Iris. “How about studying the growth of plants? If you could establish methods of growing herbs that currently only alchemists can grow, then wouldn’t that lead to major profits?”

“Making it so that ordinary people…can grow medicinal herbs…?”

Nordrad stopped walking as he considered Iris’s idea. Having only ever considered his scholarly papers before, it was a bold change of perspective for him.

“But even if I grew them myself, the profit would be… Ohh, but you were talking about establishing methods for growing them, huh?”

Iris and Kate also came to a stop as they watched Nordrad cross his arms and start murmuring to himself, but, deciding that letting him finish his train of thought might make their lives easier later, they waited without saying anything.

“So, if I were to hire people, and have them raise the herbs, I wouldn’t have to do anything, and I could devote myself to my research? And it would give me continuous income, not just when I write papers?” Nordrad looked up. “Ah, yes! I’d never thought of that before! Thank you, Iris-kun! You’re a genius!”

He seized Iris’s hand and shook it vigorously with a broad smile.

“Oh, well, I should say, I wouldn’t expect it to be easy, you know? Since nobody does it—well, no, I can’t say that for certain, but since it’s not widely done…”

“I realize that, of course! But I have a record of successful research under my belt. It’s all been for my interest so far, but once my salamander research is recognized, I expect to receive a considerable payout. I’ll use that to get started on trying it!”

Seeing the way Nordrad's eyes sparkled as he continued grasping her hand, Iris pulled back a little, perplexed by his passion. He let go of her hand.

"I-I see. Well, give it your best effort," she offered. "But you'll need to get results in your salamander research first, then, huh?"

"That I will! Now, let's make haste!"

The change in Nordrad's focus gave a major boost to their traveling speed. The party made up for lost time in a few days, and arrived at the area where the lava lizards lived more or less on schedule, though the elevated temperatures gradually slowed Nordrad's pace.

Naturally, he was wearing heat-resistant equipment, but unlike Iris and Kate, who were still cool, Nordrad was sweating profusely and repeatedly had to stop to wipe himself off.

"Whew, it's a bit hot, huh?" he said. "What kind of temperatures can your equipment stand?"

"According to what Shopkeeper-san told me, even if we accidentally step in the lava, we'd still be fine for a few seconds," Kate replied.

"Yes," Iris agreed. "But she also said that it wouldn't do anything for the parts it doesn't cover, so we have to be careful, right?"

"That's...even more incredible than I imagined," Nordrad remarked.

His eyes widened with surprise at their response, but their equipment had been prepared by Sarasa with safety as her first priority, and cost removed from the equation. It had been created to a totally different standard from ordinary heat-resistant equipment, in the hope that it would let them survive a salamander's breath attack. It allowed them to fight while standing right next to a pool of lava, so it was completely over-specced for any ordinary usage.

Naturally, the price would have normally put it out of reach for Iris and Kate, but Sarasa simply didn't explain that part when she handed it over to them as a reward.

"But we're going to investigate a salamander's den," said Iris. "Your equipment must be fairly decent too, right, Nord?"

"Yes, my equipment is just that: fairly decent," he replied. "It's the sort you can buy at an ordinary shop, so I should just barely be able to manage to fight while near lava. But if I step into a

pool of it, I'll die just like anyone normally would."

The sort of heat-resistant equipment sold in stores was only good enough to allow the wearer to operate in the sort of area where lava lizards lived. But when it came to the high temperature areas where salamanders were found, the equipment was only really able to allow the wearer to survive there. It would be difficult for them to operate there for a long time or engage in combat.

Nordrad's equipment had been created by a high-level alchemist, but there was a clear difference between Iris's and Kate's customized gear and his off-the-shelf equipment.

"Well, I'm not planning to go for a swim in the lava, so it's not a problem. I've got the stamina to handle it," Nordrad concluded.

"You're sure you'll be all right?" asked Iris. "Even with our equipment, the salamander's den was still unpleasant…"

"Really?" Nordrad said with surprise. "In my case, I just lost waterfalls of sweat, got dizzy from dehydration, and almost passed out once or twice a day, you know?"

It was true. If not for the escorts he'd brought with him, Nordrad would likely have died of either dehydration or heat stroke at his last survey site. The reason that he hadn't been able to find any more guards after that was, obviously, because of his erratic behavior.

"So I'll be fine. Because I work out."

Nordrad seemed proud of his muscles, but no sane person would have been convinced.

"No, that's clearly not going to make it fine, okay?!" Iris objected.

"I'm sure you've worked out a lot, Nord-san, but that doesn't solve the problem," Kate pointed out helpfully.

"Hrmm, but things worked out last time…"

That was merely because he had gotten lucky. Neither dehydration nor heat stroke could be overcome with muscles. Those conditions required not muscle worship, but water and sodium.

"I'm amazed you've survived this long like that," said Iris. "Fortunately, we have more than enough water to spare, though…"

Having already scouted out a watering hole at the foot of the mountain on their last trip here, Iris's and Kate's waterskins were full. But given the location, and Nordrad's current state, it was

hard to say they were prepared for anything.

“There’s nowhere to refill our water up ahead, is there?” Kate asked.

“There’s hot springs, but it’s unclear to me whether the water is drinkable. Nord, are you able to check that?”

“If you’re asking whether it’s possible, it is. But I wouldn’t get your hopes up.”

As might be inferred from the number of muddy spots created by hot water, there were many springs on this mountain. But even ignoring the high temperature of the water, it was fairly unlikely that it was potable.

The majority of it was obviously not, even at a glance, and Nordrad knew from experience that even if the water looked clean, they couldn’t let their guard down.

Just getting an upset stomach wasn’t so bad, but if they were truly unlucky, the results of drinking it could even be life-threatening. It might be all right in small quantities, but using the springs as a long-term source of drinking water was something they were best to avoid.

Incidentally, the reason Nordrad had survived his last expedition, in addition to the efforts of his bodyguards, was that he was fortunate enough to have had a spring of cold, potable water nearby.

“Well, it’ll probably be fine. I mean, it was last time, after all,” Nordrad said with baseless optimism, earning a sigh from his protectors.

Despite their misgivings, they followed him, accepting it as part of the job.

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Arriving in the area where the lava lizards lived, Nordrad observed the area with his notes in one hand. He measured the temperature of the mud and took gas readings using an artifact, making a vigorous survey of the area.

Iris and Kate stood nearby to protect him, but just like during their previous trip, the lava lizards weren’t actively aggressive toward them.

If the area had been inhabited by hellflame grizzlies instead, it would have been another matter, but despite the time that had passed since Sarasa slew the salamander, there hadn’t been any

change to the local ecology. At least not as far as Iris could see.

"Hmm, there really aren't any hellflame grizzlies around," Nordrad observed.

"According to Shopkeeper-dono, they were likely pushed out," Iris explained. "Although, that's what led to the attack on the village."

"I can't speak to the attack on your village, but it seems that, similar to what happened with these lava lizards and hellflame grizzlies, it's quite common for monsters to lose their habitat to another type of monster. There were lava lizards living near the salamander at my last survey area as well."

"Nord-san, are there no other monsters that live near salamanders?" asked Kate.

"Hrmm, I suppose you could say I'm still investigating that? Thus far, I haven't seen anything but lava lizards, but my sample size is still small."

"And investigating that sort of thing is what a researcher does?" Iris asked.

"Yes, that's right. I'm not exclusively studying salamanders. It's my attention to other related monsters in the area that will get my work recognized—and by extension, get me the reward money."

Nordrad was being a bit too open about his financial motives, but what he was saying was incredibly important. When Iris nodded to show she understood, he grinned and carried on explaining.

"At the previous site, I didn't have the chance to do that—and so, Iris-kun. Do you think you could capture a live lava lizard for me?"

"Come again...?" Iris and Kate both said, cocking their heads to the side in confusion.

Nordrad shrugged. "Now, come on, don't you find it strange that lava lizards can survive inside pools of boiling hot mud?"

"Isn't it because they're monsters...?" asked Iris.

"If that was a good enough answer, we wouldn't need monster researchers. Ideally, I want to uncover the underlying principle, but failing that, I need to test up to what temperature they can tolerate, and what happens when you set them on fire."

"So this isn't purely an ecological survey, then," Kate said.

"Correct," replied Nordrad. "Simply writing what I observe won't get my research recognized. And even if the information is

well-known, I need to experiment and confirm it for myself. Even if that means I get the same results."

He sounded incredibly reasonable—like a model researcher, in a sense. But what he was asking for was pretty unreasonable.

Even Kate, who was used to picking off lava lizards by shooting them in the eye from a long distance, couldn't capture one easily. Or rather, her ability to shoot them was meaningless. Capturing one live would be completely down to force.

Without Sarasa's magic at their disposal, it was strength and stamina that mattered. But lava lizards were so hot that they'd burn anyone who touched them with normal equipment. It was impossible to wrestle one without heat-resistant equipment.

"Are we doing this, Iris?" Kate asked, looking for confirmation.

"It seems we'll have to," Iris replied, frowning as she nodded. "He's paying us above market rate. We can't turn down the client's request."

"Yeah, go figure. If the job were easy, it wouldn't pay so well. Iris, can you do physical enhancement?"

"If I don't have to think about what comes after, I can keep it up for five minutes. But I can't afford to become immobile here. Two or three minutes is more realistic. How about your magic, Kate?"

"I can soften the ground a little, but that's about it."

While Kate and Lorea had been learning magic from Sarasa, Iris had been learning physical enhancement. Unlike with magic, she had shown a surprising aptitude for it. While she still had a long way to go, even at her current level, she could outmatch the strength of a burly man for short periods of time. That meant it wasn't impossible she could capture a lava lizard, but they were short of hands.

"I think my only option will be to hold it down and tie it up with a rope..." Iris said.

"The question is how we get to that point, huh?" Kate replied. "Would traps work...?"

"But even if I can hold its upper body down, it still has a tail. Those tail swipes are pretty powerful, you know?"

"I can't do anything about that by myself... Nord-san, will you help?"

"If there's anything I can do, certainly," he answered. "I'm not much of a fighter, but I can lend you my muscles."

That was reassuring—if he could keep up with Iris and Kate

while carrying so much luggage, he had to have considerable strength and stamina. There was no doubt he'd be useful when it came to capturing a lava lizard.

As such, Kate decided to ignore the details, and make her original request. "That would be appreciated. But I was hoping to borrow your knowledge as a researcher too?"

"My knowledge? Not my muscles? Ah, I see what you must mean. I have a net that I always use when capturing live specimens, so let's use it. It's specially made, so I think it should be able to handle a lava lizard."

If he had that, I wish he'd brought it up sooner, thought Kate.

Wasn't being a researcher intellectual labor? thought Iris.

They both held their tongues and got to work figuring out their plan of action.

Kate's arrow plinked off the lava lizard's head.

But that wasn't a problem. A lone lava lizard would choose flight over fight. They already knew that from repeated experience.

"Iris! It's headed your way!"

"Right! Hahhh!"

Iris was lying in wait, and applied a light attack to adjust the lizard's direction. They were chasing it toward a muddy spot of ground that Kate had created where they had hidden Nordrad's net.

There had been a lot of hard work before this—finding a lizard that was relaxing on its own, which they could lead toward a trap they had set—but we'll omit that part. There had also been frustrations when the lizard they found moved before the trap was set, or ran in a direction they hadn't expected, but we'll leave that part out too.

After many struggles, the two of them finally chased a lava lizard into the trap.

"Nord(-san)!!!" they called out in unison.

"Leave it to me!"

Nordrad pulled the rope, raising the hidden net, and snagged the lava lizard.

The trapped lizard thrashed around, trying to escape, but Iris rushed in and pressed down on its head.

"Guh! It's hot! Hurry!!!"

Iris's equipment was able to handle actual lava, so a lava

lizard was no problem. However, it didn't help her exposed face much, and if she touched the lizard, she was sure to get burned.

Taking care to avoid that, Iris held the struggling lizard down, but even with physical enhancement on her side, there was a considerable size difference, and it slowly dragged her with it.

Kate rushed to her aid, trying to tie a rope around the lizard's hind legs, but its claws were sharp, and any scratch from them would cause a serious injury.

"I-Its tail is pretty strong too, huh?!"

Nordrad hugged its tail, but the lava lizard was putting up the fight of its life.

Fwump, fwump, it slammed its tail against the ground hard enough to smash the rocks that were lying there. If it landed a square hit on any of the team, they would easily be crushed.

"Nghhhhhh…"

Nordrad braced his legs against the ground, desperately trying to dig his heels in, but…

"Gwagh!"

His feet slipped ever so briefly, and he flew up into the air.

Nordrad came down again with a loud bang as he slammed into the rocks.

"Nord! Are you all right?!" Iris shouted.

"J-Just fine… If it weren't for my well-toned muscles, I'd have been in trouble, though!"

He was lucky he'd been thrown, not struck by the tail. Nordrad sat up and shook his head. Like he claimed, he was unhurt. The researcher exhaled, then flexed his biceps to show off.

A vein bulged on Iris's temple. "Then use those muscles to grab the damn tail!"

The reason that lava lizards hadn't been a significant threat to Iris and Kate in the past was because they had been engaging the lizards under advantageous conditions. They weren't normally so easy to kill.

Iris was holding her own thanks to physical enhancement, but once it wore off, the balance would be broken, and her own life might be at risk. It was only natural that she'd speak harshly.

"If you can't do it, I'll kill it!" she warned. "And possibly you too!"

"W-Wait, wait! I'm on my way!!!"

Seeing Iris reach for her sword while uttering threats, Nordrad hurried to his feet, then jumped on the lava lizard's tail.

“I-It really is quite tough! Grr, why you…!”

Perhaps having learned from his recent failure, he avoided the tip of the tail, where its ability to swing was the strongest, and grabbed as close to the base as he could. But even for him, the lava lizard was astoundingly strong.

Though considering that, unlike Iris, he was managing to hold it with his own unaugmented strength, perhaps Nordrad *was* the one whose strength was astounding.

Even then, he was only able to keep the struggle at a deadlock because of the other two’s efforts.

“I-Is this strength what let them drive out the hellflame grizzlies?!” wondered Nordrad.

“You’re researching even now?!” Kate cried out in surprise.

“Guhhh! If all we had to do was kill it, I could do that easily!” complained Iris.

“Hang in there, Iris! We’ve almost got it!” Kate reassured her.

Having finished tying the legs, Kate looped the rope around the lizard’s torso as well, limiting its movement. She then further wrapped the net they had used to catch the lizard around it, flipping it over and rolling it.

And so, after a struggle that felt like it had lasted an eternity…at long last, the lizard was completely rolled up, unable to do more than writhe.

“W-We did it!” Kate exclaimed.

“Yeah! We sure did!” Iris agreed.

They sat on the ground, smiling radiantly, and gave each other a high five.

Their faces were dripping with sweat from the heat that their equipment couldn’t fully block, as well as the exertion of battle, but even that felt good now that the lizard was caught.

Kate took a swig, then passed the waterskin to Iris. She pulled back her hood to wipe away the sweat.

Her eyes met with Iris’s as her partner was also wiping her sweat, and the two shared a smile, and a sigh of relief.

“That was exhausting,” said Iris.

“Yeah, you said it,” Kate agreed. “But we’re finally—”

“Yep,” Nordrad interrupted. “Now we just have to keep it up, and catch some more.”

“Huh…?”

Iris’s and Kate’s faces froze in disbelief. They slowly turned to look at him.

“Well, I mean, every experiment needs a control group. And I’ll need multiple lizards for that, right?”

Despite having exerted considerable effort himself, Nordrad said this with a smile, as though it were no big deal.

The pair were both silent.

They stared at Nordrad, recalling just how much time it had taken to get a lizard to fall into their trap, and the struggle once it did, but his smile was unfaltering.

“Nord-san, since you said ‘some more,’ just one isn’t going to do it, right?” asked Kate.

“Of course not. There’s not much point in comparing just two specimens. I’ll be wanting at least three, and if possible five or six. That’s how many I need to get accurate results.”

“Nord… Have you ever heard of restraint?” asked Iris.

“That word isn’t in a researcher’s dictionary. There’s an entry on ‘thoroughness’ in its place.”

Hearing him say this unabashedly, Iris and Kate gazed up to the heavens with no life in their eyes.

Their trial was not yet at an end.

“I hear that lava lizards lay their eggs in especially hot mud. Kate-kun, could you dig around for them?”

“In the boiling mud?!”

“Well, aren’t you curious why they don’t turn into boiled eggs?”

“Curious or not, it’s dangerous to get close…”

“I’ll lend you this net with a long pole.”

“Boiling hot water can shoot out without warning, you realize?!”

“With your heat-resistant equipment, you’ll be fine! Probably.”

Iris and Kate both went very quiet.

“Were you aware that if you attack a lava lizard on its own, it will run, but if you attack a group of them, they’ll fight back?” asked Nordrad.

“Yes… I have heard that,” Iris replied warily.

“How about testing how big the group has to be before they fight back?”

“Wait, wait! Do you realize we’ll be in danger if they fight back?!”

“Hrmm, well, good luck with that!”

“You’re asking a bit much…”

“While you’re at it, I’d also like to test how far apart they can be and still consider themselves a group.”

Iris and Kate both went very, very quiet.

“Ah, yes. I need to investigate flame stones too. I’m sorry to trouble you, Iris-kun, but gather as many as you can.”

“Even though there are barely any around because the lava lizards eat them?!”

“It will be fine. Look, over there, near that geyser. There are quite a few left, aren’t there?”

“Listen, even if I can handle the heat, there could be dangerous gasses—”

“I have an artifact that detects toxic gasses, you know?”

Iris and Kate both went very, very, very quiet.

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“Finally, we can start the main exploration…” said Kate.

“Yeah… With emphasis on the ‘finally,’” Iris agreed.

After the long ordeal they had been through, their words were filled with emotion.

The past few days, they had been made painfully aware of why Nordrad had run out of gatherers willing to work for him, and why he was paying them so much higher than market rate.

Now, as they descended through the cave that led to the salamander’s den, the two of them were struggling with every word they spoke, and yet Nordrad, who was walking behind them, had a spring in his step. In his right hand he held a light-emitting artifact, while with his left hand he dragged the rolled-up lava lizards behind him, smiling with glee as he did.

But of course he’d be in high spirits: Iris and Kate had sweated and bled in order to help him perform all the research experiments he had wanted to do at his previous survey location but had been unable to, because his gatherers back then had refused.

“Whew, you two are a big help. There shouldn’t be much hard work left now!”

“Really? You mean it?” asked Iris. “Even though we’re only just starting the main exploration?”

“Of course! The important thing with a survey like this is to

have prepared in advance. It's going to go fine!" Nordrad replied cheerfully, giving the pair a thumbs-up.

Iris was deeply suspicious based on her experience up to this point, but in all honesty, Nordrad wouldn't have forced them to do anything they had adamantly refused. Nonetheless, it couldn't be denied that once he saw that, despite their grumbling, they did what he asked, his requests had escalated somewhat. He even felt that he might have overdone it a bit—which was rare for him.

That alone spoke to how unreasonable his requests had been.

It was fair to say that Iris's and Kate's good breeding and serious attitudes had ended up working against them, and also to Nordrad's benefit.

"This is work, so we'll do all we can, but…"

"Unlike Shopkeeper-san, we're just ordinary people."

If Sarasa could have heard them, she'd have protested, *"I'm an ordinary person too!"* even if no one agreed with her, but sadly, there was no one present who would speak up on her behalf.

"Ha ha ha, if all goes well, I'll pay you a little something extra, so hang in there."

"Murgh," Iris grumbled. "Normally, I would tell you that we don't need more than stipulated in our contract, but in this case…"

The pair had actually felt bad for him at first, receiving such high wages for such easy work, but once they had entered the area where the lava lizards lived, he'd made enough ridiculous demands to make up for the easy time they'd had up until then. These requests, which befitted the high wage—no, which made it feel like they weren't being paid enough—had ground down their spirits and stamina.

"Honestly, if we didn't have Kurumi with us, I might have developed an urge to kill you, you know that?" said Iris.

"Tell me about it," Kate agreed emphatically.

"Grar?" Hearing its name, the little bear cocked its head to the side.

Kurumi hadn't done anything in particular, but having the furry little creature along had helped to soothe their frayed nerves.

The bit about having an urge to kill might have been a joke, but if not for the homunculus's soothing presence, the two of them would never have stuck with Nordrad long enough for him

to finish his experiments.

Nordrad broke into a cold sweat under their surprisingly harsh gazes. “I-I should be thankful to Sarasa-kun, then!” he said nervously.

“And to Kurumi,” Iris added. “Oh, looks like we’ve arrived. This is where the salamander was.”

Having reached the bottom of the cave, they came to a scorching hot space lit up with red light from the shining magma. The place was so hostile to human survival that it would have been difficult to come this far without heat-resistant equipment.

However, as Nordrad looked around, he spread his arms wide and gleefully said, “Yes, yes. This is the typical abode of a salamander!”

“Not surprising, since there was one here,” Iris responded. “Nothing’s changed…as far as I can tell.”

The only difference from the last time that they had been there was that there was no longer a salamander.

“Yeah, this will be perfect for experiments. Let’s get right to it.”

Nordrad laid his lighting artifact on the ground, then dragged his lava lizards over to the lava before dipping their tails in it one after another. This was the beginning of his animal cruelty.

Obviously, the lava lizards twisted their bodies around, but he held them down, and then…pulled their tails back out of the lava.

“It would appear they’re fine for short periods. Little wonder they’re called mock salamanders.”

“Erm, Nord? What are you doing?” Iris asked, cringing a little as she saw the man was enjoying this.

“Testing the lava lizards’ ability to withstand lava, of course,” he answered plainly.

“Um, that’s just their name, they can’t actually survive inside lava, you realize?”

At the very least, that was what Sarasa had told Iris.

“I’m aware of that, but it’s not like that’s something I’ve confirmed for myself. If I were to just write, ‘That’s what the books all said,’ I wouldn’t have much of a research paper, now would I?”

“Hence the experiment?” asked Iris.

“A research paper without experiments to prove its assertions is nothing but the author’s idle delusions.”

With that, he dunked their tails again. This was repeated

several times with increasing durations, and by the time the lizards' tails were turned to ash, their resistance had weakened.

"They're more resistant to heat than I expected... Now, let's move on to trying it with their lower bodies!"

With those merciless words, the lizards began struggling again as he dunked them into the lava, but of course he held them down so that they couldn't move.

"Even if it's with some difficulty, they're able to move in the lava... I wonder why?"

Iris and Kate went silent.

He went on repeating his cruel, dispassionate experiments. No matter how you looked at it, this was animal—no, monster abuse. It was nothing short of torture.

The lava lizards' surprisingly beady little eyes beseeched Iris and Kate, *Please, just kill us already!* The sight offended their consciences, and they had to look away.

As they did, their eyes fell on the control group.

Seeing those lizards cling to what little desperate hope they had, trying to wriggle away somehow while still all wrapped up, the two couldn't hold back a tear or two.

That said, when they thought about all the effort they had put into capturing the creatures, they never considered freeing them, and their tears soon dried up.

They might have acted differently if they were dealing with animals, but the lava lizards were monsters. If anything, what they really wanted to cry over was that so many lizards were being used up without even being able to collect their materials.

"Hmm, maybe that will do for now?"

Regardless, the experiment was certainly not pleasant to watch, so Iris and Kate both breathed a sigh of relief when Nordrad said that. But the very next moment, he nodded with satisfaction, and tossed the heavily injured lava lizards into the lava as if to say he had no more use for them.

The ropes that had contained their movements obviously couldn't withstand the heat, so they burned off in an instant, freeing the lizards, but only briefly.

They writhed in the pool of lava before eventually burning up, and slowly sinking.

Nordrad watched all of this with calm eyes, keeping careful notes of the result.

Iris and Kate were silent even longer this time.

This was beyond cruel. Obviously, they understood the idea of healing the monsters was unthinkable, but...

"Now then. I'll have to do it once more for a control experiment."

Seeing Nordrad reach for the tied-up lizards as he said this, Iris and Kate turned away so that they wouldn't have to watch.

"Sorry for the wait! Whew, that was an enlightening experiment! I learned some new things from it."

"That's great..." muttered Iris.

"Yeah, it's great...that it's over," added Kate.

The lava lizards' mouths had been bound with rope, so the pair had been spared from hearing any heart-wrenching shrieks, but they still had to suppress the feeling that welled up inside them when they saw the shining smile on Nordrad's face.

"I don't think we're cut out to be researchers," said Iris.

"Though we don't have any trouble with dispatching them normally..." said Kate.

When Iris and Kate defeated monsters, they would skin them or butcher them for parts afterward, even plucking out eyeballs to be used as materials, so they were used to seeing some gore, but that wasn't like what this researcher was doing.

"Listen, it's not that I enjoy doing this, okay? I just believe that if my research into monsters can save even one human life, there's value in what I'm doing."

Seeing the pained smile on Nordrad's face, Iris and Kate realized how much their distaste for him had been apparent in their words. They exchanged awkward glances, then bowed their heads.

"Well, yes... I suppose you're right," Iris conceded. "We're sorry. The books we use when gathering have to be researched by someone, and that work is what allows us to do our jobs more safely."

"That's right," Kate hesitantly agreed. "Sorry, Nord-san."

"Ah ha ha, don't worry. It's a researcher's lot in life to not be understood by the common person. I'm well aware how dubious this all must look."

Even if he felt he was doing something a little cruel, he was largely inured to it by now, and he couldn't help but smile when he got new results.

If somebody were to see Nordrad without understanding

that, he'd look like a madman who got off on tormenting monsters. But even though he realized that fact, he had no intention of stopping, so it couldn't be denied there was some disconnect between him and an ordinary person.

"Now then! Getting back on track. Now that we've finished the appetizer, it's time to move on to the main course."

Nordrad clapped his hands, trying to change the somewhat awkward atmosphere. Iris went along with it and smiled, but she still made sure to ask the question that was bothering her.

"It was an awfully heavy appetizer, wasn't it?"

The fact was that they had already spent several days studying the lava lizards that just happened to live near the salamander, so it was a reasonable thing to bring up.

But Nordrad waggled a finger at her as he tut-tutted, grinning.

"If you slack off when preparing the appetizer, your meal won't be well rated even if the main course is good, you know? In fact, you could even say that it's the people who have everything from appetizers to dessert properly arranged that get the reward money."

"Hmm, so that's the trick, huh?" mused Kate.

"I don't know that I'd call it a trick," replied Nord. "It's just that only doing the parts you want to do isn't enough to get paid, which should be patently obvious. It's a question of what the other side is looking for."

Nordrad said this easily enough, but it wasn't actually that simple.

It was obvious that if the country was offering reward money, then there had to be some reason they were doing it. If just anyone could produce research in line with whatever that goal was, then more people would be earning the reward money.

In that situation, Nordrad was getting paid for his work every time, so they had to recognize he was capable—at least as far as research was concerned.

"I think I put it in here... Found it."

While they were talking, Nordrad dug through his pack, taking out a box that was smaller than the palm of his hand and staring at it.

"What do you have there, Nord-san?" asked Kate.

"This gauge measures magical power in the area around it. It's an expensive one that can also identify the type of magic.

But…why is the element tilted toward water? This place should clearly be fire… Could it be broken?" Nordrad frowned and gave the gauge a shake, but the value it showed didn't change. "The value for fire-type magic is high enough, but the total amount of magical power hanging in the air is absurdly high…"

"Oh, maybe it could be a lingering effect of the battle we fought here," Iris suggested as the idea occurred to her.

Nordrad looked up, a dubious expression on his face.

"An effect of the battle?" he echoed. "You mean when you fought the salamander?"

"Yeah. Shopkeeper-dono was using some strong ice magic at the time. Right, Kate?"

"Yes. It was pretty powerful. She froze this entire area, after all."

Nordrad's eyes widened. He looked around, then pointed to the lava.

"Even the lava over there?" he asked.

"Yes, even the lava," Iris confirmed.

Nordrad stared a little longer before letting out a deep sigh. "Incredible. It's little wonder she's the apprentice of a master class alchemist."

"Is it that incredible?" asked Iris. "Ah, I mean, I already knew that Shopkeeper-dono was amazing, though."

"Yes, it's just that incredible," replied Nordrad. "I mean, yes, ice magic is effective against salamanders, but it's not realistic to use it here in this sort of environment. But not only did she freeze the chamber, she froze the lava too? Just how powerful is she? If I'm being quite frank, it's abnormal."

Hearing the awe in Nordrad's voice, Iris and Kate looked at one another.

Although they were nobility, the House of Lotze's domain was a small village, far away from any major city.

Having come from a place like that, the two of them were, to put it quite simply, a couple of bumpkins. Their work as gatherers had helped them to gain experience and knowledge, broadening their horizons, but they didn't have much opportunity to see magic, so their main point of reference for it, as was the case with alchemy, was Sarasa.

"It's that incredible?" Iris asked again. "Isn't that just what powerful magic is like?"

"No, it isn't. She graduated essentially at the top of her class.

She's probably the most capable person her age in the entire country. At least as far as overall power is concerned."

If you were to limit the conversation to just swordsmanship, just magic, or just one specific field of knowledge, then there were probably people Sarasa's age who were better than her, but it would have been incredibly difficult to find someone who was at such a high level in all of those things.

In fact, if somebody did have that degree of ability, then there was no way that they wouldn't have enrolled in the Alchemist Academy, since just graduating from there granted a high social status. The entire purpose of the institution was to cultivate those kinds of people.

Consequently, whoever graduated at the top of their year was also the top among people their age.

"Even among people like that, I'd say Sarasa is probably a once-in-a-decade prodigy. That's why a master class alchemist took her on as an apprentice. I'm sure there was no shortage of people who would have wanted to."

"She's that amazing..." Kate said, eyes wide. She let out a sigh of admiration.

Once you set aside his personality, Nordrad had a depth of knowledge as a researcher, which lent credibility to his statements.

"In fact, I have to wonder what a girl like her is doing out here in the middle of nowhere... Do you have any idea?"

"It's not that we don't know, but...it's a secret. And I'm not one to blab."

Iris pressed her lips shut, but Nordrad didn't seem to mind. "Well, I'm not going to force you to answer. I was just curious, not trying to pry into a girl's secrets or anything. Anyway, the point is that what Sarasa-kun has done defies common sense and wouldn't normally be possible."

"We always knew she was incredible," remarked Kate. "By the way, how would you normally defeat a salamander?"

"First, you would lure it away from its den. That's the most basic step. Because, even with heat-resistant equipment, you'd struggle to keep up your stamina in a place like this. For the salamander, though? This place is comfy. That obviously puts you at a disadvantage, right? And while I haven't been able to prove this yet, there's a theory that they can recover just by entering the lava."

“Lure it away, huh?” echoed Kate. “That makes a lot of sense now that you say it, so why didn’t Shopkeeper-san…?”

“That would be because it’s too hard for just three people,” Nordrad explained. “Because you can’t maintain your stamina unless you do it with a large group. That’s how you have to beat it.”

The area around the mouth of the cave was plenty hot, but it was nothing compared to right next to a pool of lava. It went without saying which was the better place to fight. The same went for using ice magic. Who even knew how inefficient it was to freeze everything including the lava?

“Actually, why *did* you three take it on by yourselves? I’m sure Sarasa-kun had to be aware how risky it was.”

It was a natural thing for Nordrad to question, but his words were painful for Iris to hear, and she frowned. “I can’t go into details, but it was probably in order to save me.”

The time it would have taken to gather more people, the cost of outfitting them all in heat-resistant equipment, and the smaller share each individual would have received. Sarasa had considered these things, then decided that going to slay the salamander with just the three of them was an acceptable risk if they could save Iris that way.

But explaining it that way would have reflected poorly on the House of Lotze, so Iris had no choice but to be vague.

“Hmm? Well, it doesn’t matter. For my part, I’ve gotten a good environment for experimenting out of it, and I’m grateful for that.”

Nordrad had the rough outline of events, and for someone like him—who didn’t care much about anything outside his research—the smaller details were unimportant. Having said his thanks for Sarasa preparing this environment for him, he set about getting his equipment ready.

“Oh, this could take a while, so you two can relax,” he told them.

“Oh, really?” Iris responded. “Well, we’ll take you up on that, but…is there any point in researching this place with its salamander gone?”

“You have it backward, Iris-kun. If I want to research a salamander, I can just go to where there is one. But if what I want to research is its den, then having one around is inconvenient. They’re dangerous, after all. And not easy to

defeat.”

This place, where the salamander had already conveniently been defeated, and not long had passed since, was a valuable safe source for gathering data. Or that seemed to be what Nordrad was saying, at least.

“That’s how it is, so just hold tight for a while, okay?”

It had already been three days since Nordrad began his research on the den. Despite dripping waterfalls of sweat, his face was positively filled with vitality.

Iris and Kate, meanwhile, were bored out of their skulls.

If his research had been a little more interesting, that would have been great, but what he was up to now was rather plain. At a glance, it looked like he was just doing the same things over and over, so it wasn’t much fun to watch.

The only reason the pair continued to endure the heat and boredom was because they were getting paid twenty gold a day just to stand there. However, even that patience was close to running out of stock. Iris called out to Nordrad, who was still engaged in his research.

“Hey, Nord.” Her tone was slightly fed up. “How long are you going to keep doing that?”

There was a pause before he absently responded, “Oh, sorry. This will be my last experiment, so wait just a little longer.”

Nordrad had a black box set up on the ground. It was thirty centimeters to a side, and there was an opening the size of about three fingers on the top.

He poured something inside that rattled, and then it immediately started making a whirring noise.

With that sound drawing their attention, Iris and Kate came over. They leaned in to peer at the thing Nordrad was holding.

“Would those…happen to be frostbite bat fangs?”

“Yeah. I could have used junk magic stones, but for some reason, these were available at a more affordable price. That was fortunate.”

“Affordable, huh?”

The reason was blatantly obvious to Iris and Kate, but no matter how cheap the fangs had been, he was still using a lot of them. They would have cost him more than any ordinary person could have casually afforded to pay—or they should have, but Nordrad was grabbing fangs by the fistful and just chucking

them in.

Just thinking about the cost was enough to make Kate sigh, so she kept asking questions so that she wouldn't have to think about it. "What are you doing with them?"

"This is an artifact that boosts the magical power of the area around it using these sorts of materials."

Kate had been asking about his objective, but what she had gotten instead was an explanation of the device's effect. She couldn't imagine that boosting the magical power of the surrounding area was his end goal, so the key thing was what he was hoping would happen as a result of that increased magical power.

However, Nordrad offered no further explanation. He measured the level of magical power with his gauge, noting down the values. "Water element is up, volume of magical power is up. Looking just at the volume of magical power, I feel like it could cause some kind of change, but...nothing, huh? Is it not enough yet?"

The next thing Nordrad pulled out was the flame stones that Iris and Kate had worked so hard to gather for him. He casually tossed the bag they were in into the top of the box.

There were crunching noises as the stones were sucked into the black box and then it began making even louder whirring noises.

It was a dizzying thought for Iris and Kate just how much value was being used up right before their eyes, but Nordrad seemed not to care as he rechecked his gauge.

"Water, down slightly. Fire, up. Magic power level, more than sufficient...I guess?"

"Nord! What are you planning to do?!" Iris asked, raising her voice loud enough to be heard over the sounds coming out of the box. She had been struck by an incredible sense of unease.

Nordrad turned to her and answered in the same tone as before, "Testing the conditions for spawning a salamander! Even when one is defeated, another sometimes appears in the same place, or nearby. I believe the volume of magical power in the area has a major effect on that!"

Eventually, the sounds stopped coming out of the black box, and silence returned.

Iris and Kate were murmuring to each other:

"Magical power...makes it appear...?"

“Does that mean…?”

“The water is stronger than I thought,” Nordrad observed. “That’s partially because I have so few flame stones, but…I guess I’ll have to use that, huh?”

His explanation finished, Nordrad began rummaging through his pack once more.

This time he dug out a number of red scales, each as large as the palm of his hand. The way those translucent scales gleamed crimson was beautiful, but what caught the pair’s attention even more than the scales’ beauty was how familiar they looked.

“D-Don’t tell me those are…” Kate asked hesitantly, praying that she was wrong, but her hopes were about to be betrayed.

This could not end well.

“Yep. They’re salamander scales. My expenses are piling up, so I had wanted to avoid using them, though.”

“Wai—”

“But it looks like I have no choice. In they go.”

There was no time to stop him. The scales slipped through the opening in the box, and the sounds started again, louder this time, and the box itself began to rattle and shake.

“H-Hey! Is that shaking normal?” Iris asked.

“I don’t think it’s a problem? Look, the readings for the fire element are going up.”

Nordrad nonchalantly showed Iris the gauge, but that didn’t matter to her right now.

“No, that’s not what I’m asking! Isn’t that artifact of yours going to break?!”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I bought this in South Strag. It’s too soon for it to break.”

“South Strag…you mean from Leonora?”

“No, another shop. I stopped by before coming here and it had shut down. Do you think it was due to financial troubles?”

Iris and Kate said nothing. They had a bad feeling about this—a feeling they shared without having to say a word. If Sarasa had been with them, she would have strongly agreed.

As if responding to their worries, the black box’s shaking gradually intensified. It had been stuffed with items containing the magical power of a salamander. What would happen if it went out of control?

That sense of fear made Iris and Kate back away a step or two.

Rattle, rattle.

Clack! Clack! Cla-clack!

It sounded almost like something was stuck, and then—

Pop!

The board on top burst off, flying into the air, then came back down with a clatter.

Then red light and something that sparkled erupted from inside the box.

Seeing this, Nordrad cocked his head to the side.

“Hm…?”

“H-Hey! Is this all right?”

Iris was a little relieved that the results hadn’t been catastrophic, but this was very clearly not how the box had been meant to operate. She couldn’t relax yet.

“Ohh, sure. It’s fine. The volume of magical power has risen, and the values for the fire element are even higher than I’d hoped for, so—”

Iris rounded on Nordrad who, even at this point, was still checking his gauge.

“That’s *not* what I meant! Your artifact broke, and it’s spewing out something, you realize?!”

“It shouldn’t have any immediate effects on the human body, I think?”

“*Immediate*?” echoed Iris.

“You *think*?” echoed Kate.

Iris and Kate fixed their eyes on Nordrad as they seized on these ominous words.

Their intensity made him hurriedly wave his hands. “Th-There won’t be any! It’s just magical power! It might make you feel sick if your tolerance for magical energy were unusually low, but any ordinary person should be totally fine!”

When someone with a low magical capacity or who didn’t often come into contact with magic was suddenly exposed to a large volume of magical power, it caused a syndrome known as being “magic drunk.” The person would feel ill, or intoxicated, and it could sometimes even result in loss of consciousness.

It didn’t have any lingering effects on the body, but falling unconscious in an unsafe location came with dangers unrelated to being magic drunk.

Fortunately, however, the pair had a decent amount of magic power, and they also had an ordinary degree of tolerance for it.

“Oh, I see,” said Iris.

“You should have just said that, then,” remarked Kate.

Once they knew it wouldn’t affect them, they both breathed a sigh of relief. The amount of magical power in the air here had been high to begin with, and had been rising for some time now, so if either of them were going to get sick, it would have happened already.

“So, your artifact breaking isn’t a problem?” Iris asked. “You were saying that the readings for magical power are higher than you’d hoped.”

“Ohh, yeah, that’s right. It’s a shame it broke, of course, but it did the bare minimum that I needed it to, so for now, I think the experiment can continue without issue?”

“Can you give us more details? You were saying some things about the volume of magical power, and elements and so on, right?”

No doubt thrilled to be able to expound upon his ideas, Nordrad smiled and began speaking with pride.

“Monsters appear in places with a lot of magical power. That should be the case, at least based on past research results, but unfortunately it has yet to be confirmed. Magical power quickly dissipates, so even if we know the areas where it’s ‘easy for monsters to appear,’ we can’t figure out the exact location they’ll do so.”

“Oh…?” Iris said thoughtfully.

“But the conditions for a salamander’s den are fairly limited. That’s why I’ve predicted that the conditions for them to appear are the same.”

Once again, this was not inspiring any good feelings about what was coming. Iris and Kate both cringed and exchanged another look of shared dread.

And again, their worries were not betrayed.

Up until now, the lava had been still aside from some slight waves. But now it started bubbling, and an ominous presence hung in the air.

“Ohh! Look at that!” Nordrad said, excitedly consulting his gauge. “The magical density just rapidly dropped—”

“Is this the time to talk?!” Iris cut him off. “Whatever it is, it’s clearly dangerous!”

But Nordrad seemed unconcerned, looking back and forth from gauge to lava pool.

Then, the surface of the lava suddenly swelled up, and…

Sploosh!

Out burst the massive, red-scaled monster that had caused Iris and Kate so much trouble not so long ago.

It reared its head and glared at the group.

“Aw, yeah! A salamander!!!” shouted Nord.

“There’s nothing ‘Aw, yeah!’ about this!” Iris warned him.

“We need to get out of here!” Kate added.

Kate put on her pack and rushed over to Iris, who quickly got ready to flee too.

Nord, however, stepped forward. He seemed to shrink into himself.

“Huh…?” Iris and Kate both said in confusion.

“Hungh!”

Then, suddenly stretching, he launched into an uppercut.

Crunch!

His fist impacted the salamander’s jaw, knocking its head back with a dull noise.

“Whaaaaa?!” Iris and Kate blinked with momentary disbelief, taken aback, but Nord remained calm.

“Yeah, I guess that was never going to work,” he said.

He then quickly proceeded to lift up his pack, and took off running in one smooth series of motions—leaving Iris and Kate behind.

“Huh? Uh, what…? Ah?! W-We’ve gotta run, Iris!”

“Y-Yeah, we do, don’t we?!”

Quickly coming to her senses, Kate grabbed Iris’s hand and dragged her along as she ran after Nordrad.

Nordrad’s actions might have seemed heartless if you looked only at the result, but they were the ones who were supposed to be protecting him.

Their job was to get him out of there first, so they should have been grateful that he ran on his own. He’d done nothing wrong—aside from the uppercut.

“Iris, hurry!”

Having made it to the passage that headed up to the surface before Iris, Kate turned around just in time to see the salamander, which had recovered from Nordrad’s attack, taking a deep breath.

Kate had seen it do that just the other day. She’d never mistake what it meant.

“Its breath attack is coming!”

“Nyuhwhuhhhhh?!” Iris raced past Kate, screaming incoherently.

And at the same time…

“Urghhh, we’re gonna go further into debt!” Kate wailed as she took a stone out of her pocket and threw it.

It was an artifact that Sarasa had lent her under the excellent terms of “If you use it, please pay for it.”

It was an item that Kate normally should have purchased, but had to give up on because of how expensive it was, and its effect was commensurate with its price.

Plink!

With a light, clear noise, the passageway was sealed off by a thick layer of translucent ice.

Immediately, it turned a shade of red, but she didn’t feel any heat from it.

Still, Kate had experienced the power of a salamander’s breath. Thick though the ice was, it wouldn’t hold against the breath attack, and the air down here was already hot to begin with. It was only a matter of time before it naturally melted.

Kate immediately turned and ran to catch up with the other two.

Having fled from the salamander, the group came to a stop in a side path off the passageway that led up to the surface.

It went without saying that, from a safety perspective, it was best to get out of there as soon as possible. But in a cave where they might die of heat exposure if they removed their equipment, and given that they were also carrying heavy packs with them to boot, they didn’t have the inhuman stamina that kind of endurance running would demand.

“Whewwwww. I-I’m exhausted…”

Iris slumped down against the wall, wiping the sweat that was dripping from her chin.

Heat-resistant equipment was generally intended to protect against intense heat like the kind produced by flames. It was designed to keep the inside of the suit at a comfortable temperature so that the wearer could work normally even in high temperatures, but that wouldn’t stop them from sweating under heavy exertion.

Iris pulled her waterskin out of her pack and gulped down the

contents to make up for lost hydration, then, after catching her breath, she turned her eyes angrily toward Nordrad.

“I have a lot I want to say right now, but…Nord, why did you do that?”

“By ‘that,’ do you mean reviving the salamander?”

Unlike Iris, Nordrad had pulled out his notebook instead of water, and he looked up from writing in it to respond to her question.



“Yes. You knew that would happen, right?”

“It’s certainly true that I had predicted it might come back to life, yes.”

“Then why? You knew it was dangerous, didn’t you?”

“Because that was the theme of my research? If I hesitated just because it was dangerous, I’d be a failure as a researcher, don’t you think?”

If he had wanted to avoid danger, then he wouldn’t have become a monster researcher in the first place. Iris and Kate were at a loss for any counterargument to that.

They were here to guard him precisely because his work was dangerous, so they weren’t really in a position to complain about the danger. That said, there was room for argument over whether the target of their protection should be doing things that put himself in danger.

“Murgh,” Iris groaned, “I’m not wholly convinced, but…”

“For my part, I want to ask whether that experiment was even necessary,” said Kate.

“It will certainly be of use, or at least I think so, you know? For instance, when there’s a need for materials from that monster. While it’s comparatively easy to acquire materials in this country because we have the Gelba Rohha Foothills Forest, that doesn’t mean that every material you might need is available at all times.”

“Well, sure, that makes sense,” Iris acknowledged. “But if it’s not available in the country, we can import it from elsewhere, right?”

“That’s risky. For the country, I mean. Obviously, what I just did is beyond dangerous, and it’s not something that should normally be done. But there was meaning in doing it.”

While the Laprocian Kingdom, where Iris and the others lived, was not *currently* at war with another nation, that didn’t mean there was no need to prepare for such a conflict.

Even if they had no intention of being the aggressor, if they didn’t make it look like attacking them would be a risky proposition, that would be a failure from a national defense perspective.

The favorable treatment that this country showed to alchemists was part of that, and the availability of artifacts and potions would play an important role in their strategy.

However, that was dependent on the materials used to make

them. Alchemists were highly capable even when they weren't doing alchemy, but their value was greatly diminished if they couldn't.

"You think like a ruler, Nord... Are you a noble?" asked Iris.

"Hmm, well, just barely? But I'm only thinking about what my sponsor would like."

It was all for the prize money. Iris and Kate could only smile awkwardly at how up-front Nordrad was about that.

"Still, I don't think you needed to experiment with a salamander..." Iris argued.

"But if I did it with a salamander, then it wouldn't inconvenience anyone even if it did come back to life, right?"

Salamanders almost never left their dens unless provoked. They didn't assault nearby villages, so maybe it was true that they were a suitable subject for this sort of research—if the safety of those involved in the experiment wasn't considered.

And so, it was only natural that Iris and Kate, who had become involved in the experiment at some point, would want to voice their complaints about it.

"We were *this* close to getting fried by its breath, you realize?" Kate griped.

"Even if we have the coats that Shopkeeper-dono prepared for us...they won't do anything to protect our luggage," added Iris.

They carried their packs on the outside of their coats. The coats could save their lives, but if they lost all their things, it would be a dodgy proposition whether they could make it back to the village in one piece.

"You were scared too, right, Kurumi?" Iris asked.

"Grar? Grar, grar!"

The little bear clinging to Iris's pack cocked its head to the side and waved one arm back and forth.

"See? Kurumi says it was dangerous too," Iris said.

"Really? Because it looks to me like it's saying it was no problem?" Nordrad disagreed.

"You're imagining it," Iris insisted. "And what was that attack you used on the salamander? Aren't you a bit too strong, Nord?"

"Well, I do work out to some degree. I mean, I study monsters, after all. If I couldn't approach them myself, I wouldn't be able to investigate properly. It's a victory for muscles."

If he observed from a distance, then he could get by with just bodyguards. But if he wanted to get closer to living monsters,

combat abilities were a must. If he couldn't withstand a few attacks, that would clearly be dangerous. There was no way he could do research like that.

"So you had more than just stamina, huh?" Iris said. "You don't carry a weapon, so I just assumed…"

"I can fight a little, I suppose. I generally just dodge, and wait for my guards to handle the rest, though. I need guards either way, to be able to focus on my research."

Incidentally, the reason Nordrad didn't carry a weapon was because he fought using martial arts. Why martial arts, you ask? Because he didn't want to harm the subjects of his research more than necessary.

In all things, his research was always top priority. That was just the kind of man Nordrad was.

"Well, it's fine. So, have you finished with the experiments you wanted to do now?" Iris asked.

"I guess I have," Nordrad answered. "I was more or less able to do all of the research that I wanted to do on a live salamander at my last location. I wasn't able to slay the one there, though, and that was why I still had this experiment left to do."

"Then let's get out of here quickly once we've rested and recovered. We'll be in trouble if the salamander comes after us."

"Tell me about it," Kate agreed. "I feel uneasy just being in a salamander's den."

True to her words, Kate kept anxiously looking back the way they'd come, but Nordrad was more composed, sitting on the ground and sucking on a candy he'd pulled out of his pack.

"It takes a lot to get a salamander to come out of its den. To the point where it's difficult to get them to come out in order to slay them."

"So, we're safe?" asked Kate.

"Wouldn't that be nice?" Nordrad smirked and tossed another candy into his mouth.

"A lot could be read into how you said that, huh?" Iris said.

"It won't leave its den, but how far do you think that extends?"

"So, what? Are you suggesting that the inside of this cave might be considered a part of the salamander's den, and it could be roaming?"

"It seems like a possibility, doesn't it?"

"I don't like it as a possibility." Iris furrowed her brow. "But I can't deny that it is one."

As if trying to reassure them, Nordrad smiled and shrugged, then dug a bag of candies out of his pack, which he offered to Iris and Kate.

"Well, the odds aren't very high. I suggest you suck on one of these and calm down. We're not important enough for the salamander to bother—"

"Gwoarrrrr!"

A roar echoed through the cave, as if to disagree with Nordrad.

He froze. Iris's and Kate's cold glares stabbed right through him. They were clearly blaming him for jinxing it.

"No! This has nothing to do with anything I said, okay?!"

"Setting your words aside...*somebody* here went and punched that salamander in the jaw, didn't he?" Iris said. "Not naming any names, of course!"

"Oh, yeah, *somebody* did," Kate agreed. "Not naming any names, of course. But normally, that'd be something to get mad about, right?"

"But listen! If it weren't for that attack, don't you think we'd have been in danger from its breath attack?!" Nordrad hurriedly tried to justify his actions, but the pair didn't stop staring at him.

"If anything, it made it suddenly attack, putting us in danger, you know?" said Kate.

"We lost the initiative, after all," Iris agreed. "Although, you could blame that on our inexperience."

The ability to act calmly in any situation was important, but Nordrad's actions had been so out-there that it was hard to blame them for having been dumbstruck. Who would go and punch a creature so hot that it burned anything that touched it?

Well, there was one person right here, at least. As lacking in common sense as it was to do that.

"And it did blow its flaming breath toward us," added Kate. "If I hadn't had that artifact from Shopkeeper-san, we'd have been in trouble."

"I only caught a glimpse of it," said Nordrad. "What was that?"

"It was a magic stone with the Ice Wall spell sealed inside it that Shopkeeper-san loaned me."

"And it had so much magic in it... I have to admit it was impressive."

Most alchemists could modify a magic stone to hold a spell, but it was limited to spells they themselves could cast, and the

power was dependent on the stone's size, quality, and the skill level of the alchemist who worked on it.

That "skill level" included their skill with alchemy, of course, but it also included their skill with magic, and the amount of power that they could put in was limited by the amount of power they could manipulate.

In short, an alchemist who could seal powerful spells was also a powerful mage.

"But I only had that one," Kate said. "Also, I should add, my ears detect the ground subtly shaking."

"Th-They do? I can't hear anything..."

Nordrad tilted his head to the side in confusion, but Kate's ears heard the heavy noises of some large creature walking around.

And in this situation, it didn't take much thinking to guess what creature it was.

"You can trust Kate's ears," Iris interjected. "It's probably safe to say that the salamander's broken through that wall of ice."

"Given the temperature here, it would have melted on its own," Kate added.

"What do we do? Should we bolt for the exit?" Iris asked.

"By the way, Nord-san... You wouldn't happen to be able to defeat a salamander, would you?"

Kate looked at Nordrad somewhat hopefully, but obviously he quickly denied it.

"No, that's clearly beyond me. You saw, right? My fist did almost nothing to it. That was the best I could manage. If I was just trying to provoke it, that would be one thing, but doing actual damage to it would be another thing entirely. I should also add that my heat-resistant equipment can't endure the salamander's breath."

"Yeah, go figure," said Kate. "Frankly, I can't believe you decided to punch the salamander while wearing equipment like that, though."

"I feel the same," said Iris. "But Nord, you knew the salamander would be revived...or were at least trying to get it to come back to life, right? What was your plan once you succeeded?"

It was a completely reasonable question, but Nordrad averted his eyes. "I never really thought about it... I thought we could just run away."

“You had no plan?!” cried Kate.

“Nord, you’re actually an idiot, aren’t you?!” Iris shouted.

Nordrad just shrugged and laughed as their eyes bugged out. “A researcher needs to act like a bit of an idiot if he wants results.”

“I can understand being stupidly obsessed with your research, but this was just you being an idiot who didn’t think things through! That’s a different kind of stupidity!”

“I don’t think there’s much difference, though. Insofar as causing trouble for other people is concerned.”

“If you have that much self-awareness, then think things through better!”

Iris stomped her feet in anger. Kate, who was holding her own head with one hand, said, “Now, now,” to try to calm her down. “But more importantly…” She turned to Nordrad, asking, “Nord-san, do you think we can run away from it?”

Kate and Iris were both getting emotional, but taking their frustrations out on Nordrad was not going to change their predicament.

Despite the question, Nordrad shook his head after having thought about it for a moment. “Its breath is dangerous in these narrow passages. You two might be fine with your equipment, but the packs that you’re carrying would be in danger, and so would I.”

Hearing this, Iris and Kate shared a smirk.

“Hmm,” Iris said thoughtfully. “Losing Nord would be one thing, but I wouldn’t want to lose our stuff.”

“Yeah,” Kate agreed. “Some of it was borrowed from Shopkeeper-san, after all… Losing Nord wouldn’t be as bad as that.”

“You two are my bodyguards, aren’t you?! I’m paying you, right?!” Nordrad cried.

“If our charge does something reckless, we can’t be responsible for that,” said Iris.

“Besides, you haven’t paid us yet,” Kate added before realizing, “Oh, I guess we’ll have to bring him back safely if we want our money.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Nordrad said with a hint of relief. “The job includes the return trip too.”

But Iris tilted her head to the side, then made a proposal with a serious expression on her face. “But you know, the job’s more

than half done. Wouldn't it be all right to request a little payment now?"

"That's true," Kate agreed. "We agreed to a long-term contract. It's only natural that there would be partial payment along the way."

"You're not even hiding that you want to abandon me?!"

It would have been one thing if they had brought this up before accepting the job, but if they were bringing it up here, it was only natural he would read into it.

As she watched Nordrad panic, a smile formed on Iris's face. "It was a joke..." she said. "Or about twenty percent of it was."

"You were eighty percent serious?!" Nordrad exclaimed.

"You pull any more funny stuff and it'll be ten percent. So be careful," Iris warned him.

"U-Understood. I wouldn't want to be unable to bring back my research results, so I'll focus on escaping too."

Perhaps satisfied at having given Nordrad a hard time, Iris nodded and said, "I hope you will," before turning to her partner. "Kate, let's be selective in what we take with us. As for Nord's pack..."

"Shouldn't he leave it behind?" Kate suggested. "If he wants to run in front of us."

"There are some expensive artifacts in there...but so be it. I'll leave everything but my research results."

In terms of simple stamina, Nordrad could last longer than Iris or Kate, but he was carrying far more than they were.

There was no way he could run faster than them like this.

That said, Iris and Kate didn't want to have to lower their speed to match his when they were running for their lives. It was only natural for them to demand he throw his stuff away.

While Nordrad rescued his notebooks and papers from his pack and stored them in his pockets, Kate also quickly sorted through her things.

"We'll leave behind the heaviest items, while also bringing back as much of what we borrowed from Shopkeeper-san as we can. The floating tent is obviously a lost cause, though."

"That alone is going to drive our debt up..." Iris moaned. "Hey Nord. Will you compensate us for what we're losing here?"

"I can pay for any normal items, but...we'll have to talk. When it comes to artifacts that Sarasa-kun made, I can't predict what they cost. And I'm going to be leaving behind my research tools

too.”

“There’s no helping that, huh?” said Kate. “For water, we’ll just take what we need to get back to the watering hole...”

“How much food do you think we need?” asked Iris. “How many days will it take to get through the forest?”

“I can identify nontoxic plants, you know?” Nordrad offered. “Although, just knowing they’re not toxic says nothing about the taste.”

“I guess we’ll have to rely on you if the situation calls for it,” said Iris. “It’s better than dying, at least.”

With their luggage reorganized, they stood up, ready to go—and that was when they heard that noise.

Suuuuuck...

“Wha—”

Booom!!! Rumble, rumble, rumble!

There was a low rumbling and a sharp, thrusting impact.

That was followed by continuous tremors.

The group all cowered, instinctively covering their heads.

The next moment, they were assaulted by a thick cloud of dust.

Episode 3: Meanwhile, Sarasa…

“I guess they’re on their way now,” Lorea-chan said.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Here’s hoping they make it back safely…”

On the day that Iris-san and the others headed out, after watching them go, I was hanging around out on the sales floor for the first time in a while.

Lorea-chan had been doing all the work of minding the shop lately, but since things had been hectic the past several days, I was chilling out here while enjoying my after-breakfast tea.

“You’ll be all by yourself for the next little while. Won’t you be lonely, Sarasa-san?”

“At night, you mean? Hmm, maybe not *that* lonely?”

In my youth, my parents had been away from the house most of the time. Then in my years at the orphanage, I’d spent day and night studying to get into the Academy, and once I did, I was so busy working and studying that I had never made many friends.

I had been living with Iris-san and Kate-san for a long time now, but I’d spent most of my life all by myself—so, no, them leaving for a while wasn’t that bad.

Though, I did like having good friends around to have fun with—*oh, hey.*

“Ahh, maybe I am…just a little…lonely, I guess?” I said, suddenly changing my mind.

“Y-Yeah, of course you would be,” Lorea-chan replied gleefully, offering, “I-If you’d like, how about I sleep over with you?”

Yeah, of course one look like that from Lorea-chan would be enough to get me to reverse my previous position.

Actually, if she wants to stay the night, she doesn’t need to hold back so much.

“Really? Well, maybe I’ll take you up on that.”

“Leave it to me!”

I’m not sure exactly what I’m supposed to be leaving to her, but Lorea-chan looks happy, so maybe it doesn’t matter?

Lately, she’s been here for breakfast and dinner a lot of the time, and makes frequent use of the bath, so all that’s changing is where she sleeps, really.

“Erm, do you mind if I go tell mom, then?” she asked.

“Huh? Right now? I don’t mind, but—”

“Thanks! See you later!”

Lorea-chan’s face lit up and she was out the door before I could tell her there was no rush. Something about her behavior made me uneasy as I sat down in the chair behind the shop’s counter for the first time in ages.

That evening, Lorea-chan brought a slightly fancier dinner than usual.

But it definitely wasn’t like we’d decided “Okay, Iris-san and Kate-san aren’t here, so let’s break out the good stuff!”

Lorea-chan usually made dinner after closing up the shop, ate with us, cleaned up afterward, and then went home. Even though her house was inside the village, there were gatherers who didn’t come from the village out there, so it wasn’t good for her to be out too late.

But tonight she was staying here. That meant she had more time to work with, within limits. Thus the fancier lunch.

“Well…?” Lorea-chan asked.

“Today’s food is great, Lorea-chan,” I told her with a big smile. “Thank you for everything you do.”

Lorea-chan let out a sigh of relief, then began eating. “I’m glad. This is a new recipe for me, so I was a little worried.”

“It’s so good I’d never have known if you didn’t tell me.”

I didn’t know how the dish was supposed to taste, but I definitely liked it, so that was good enough, right?

“It’s been a while since you’ve stayed over, huh?” I said.

“It sure has,” she agreed. “Come to think of it, that was the first time I used the bath.”

“Oh, yeah, that time you passed out totally nake—”

“C-Come on, Sarasa-san! Forget about that!”

“Nuh-uh, it was far too memorable to forget.”

Lorea-chan turned beet red and slapped me on the arm, but I just smiled and shook my head. Besides, it had happened because of a mistake on my part, so I couldn’t forget about it.

I panicked pretty hard back then.

Things had worked out because I was there, but if she had been all alone…

“That happened because of the magic power in the water, right?” Lorea-chan asked.

“That’s right,” I replied. “It’s because I made the hot water

using magic. Ordinary people aren't used to magical power, so their bodies get surprised by it...or something like that?"

If they lived in an environment where there were artifacts around them on a regular basis, they would get used to it as they grew up, but there had hardly been any artifacts here in this village before I arrived.

Lorea-chan had probably never come into contact with so much magical power before she had gotten into that bath.

"Does that go for me too?" asked Lorea-chan.

"Hmm, I think you'd be fine now, maybe?" I replied. "You've changed since then."

She used my artifacts regularly, and practicing with magic had also helped her get used to magical power.

She could probably immerse herself in a tub filled with magic-rich water without losing consciousness, I guess?

"If you'd like, we could try it out together. See if you can handle a bath made with magic."

"Yeah... I'd like that," she replied. "It would help cut down on costs, *and* I'd get to bathe with you."

I had two methods for drawing a bath: One was to create the hot water with magic, and the other was to heat it up using an artifact.

The former was free, obviously, but left magical power in the water, while the latter cost a small amount in magic crystals.

For that reason, Iris-san and Kate-san had said, "It's a waste to draw more than one bath!" and we had since made a habit of bathing two or three people at a time.

But because Lorea-chan couldn't get in right after I drew the bath, we had to work around that, and as a result the two of us ended up in different groups.

"Well, let's do that later, then," I said. "By the way, Lorea-chan, why did you want to stay over tonight? I don't mind, of course."

There was a pause before she said, "You could tell that after all, huh?"

"Well, yeah?"

I mean, the whole bit where she was asking if I'd be lonely felt like an excuse.

Lorea-chan looked at me a little bashfully with her eyes upturned. I smiled.

"Um, Iris-san and Kate-san have been having so much fun living with you, and I was a bit jealous..." she began.

“You were?”

“Yes. I mean, they’ve moved out and are living…okay, I guess not quite on their own. But they’re supporting their own livelihoods…no, maybe that’s a bit questionable too, but anyway, they feel kinda…like adults? I guess?”

Yeah. Iris-san and Kate-san didn’t have me doing *everything* for them, but they did have me doing a *lot*. Lorea-chan knew that too, which was what made her hesitate, her eyes wandering awkwardly.

But I could see what she wanted to say. It was sort of like the way that children looked up to the adults around them.

My two lodgers weren’t able to stand on their own yet because of their debt, but it wasn’t their fault. They had the skills to be self-sufficient otherwise.

“Besides, I’ll be an adult soon too, so I should start thinking about moving out of the house… Although, today I just wanted to sleep over at your place, Sarasa-san.”

“Yeah, it’s just a year away, after all…”

Heck, on appearances alone, she looked older than I did. Much as it galled me to admit it.

“Hrmm… It’s not too soon for you to move in, you know?” I suggested. “I’ve got the spare rooms, and it wouldn’t be putting me out in the slightest.”

“You mean it?” Lorea-chan responded, a little surprised, but with eyes filled with anticipation.

“Sure.” I nodded slightly. “If that’s what you were planning on in the future, then one year’s not a big difference. Although, if you do, you may find yourself working in my shop for the rest of your life. Are you okay with that?”

With the exception of day laborers, and those working in unskilled trades, when the common folk found a job, they tended to stick with it permanently.

Walking away from a highly specialized position that paid above average was practically unthinkable, and being staff in an alchemist’s shop definitely qualified as a specialist job.

“I’ll warn you in advance, I might not keep running a shop in this village forever…”

It was a good village, but I still hadn’t decided whether it would be in my best interest to stay here if I wanted to improve as an alchemist. If I moved the shop at some point in the future, would Lorea-chan come with me?

Lorea-chan puffed up her chest and nodded like it was the most obvious answer in the world. “That’s okay. I’ve already talked it over with my folks, and if you’ll keep me on, they want me to continue working for you once I reach adulthood. They were actually happier with that than me taking over the general store.”

Wow, she’s got her ducks all in a row. But…is that how it usually goes in this situation?

I didn’t have parents of my own, and my future had been decided at the age of ten when I had entered the Alchemist Academy, so I didn’t have any experience to draw on here.

“But what about the general store? You’re an only child, aren’t you?” I asked.

“I may not have any siblings, but we do have relatives in the village, so I expect my parents will adopt one of their children into it. Whoever it is won’t have to leave the village for lack of any prospects here, so they’ll be happy to accept.”

The job situation in a farming village with no industry was surprisingly harsh. There were costs involved in opening up new land for agriculture, so anyone without a plot of land to inherit had to move out. That was exactly what had happened to Michael-san, my herb farmer.

If Lorea-chan’s parents adopted someone in a similar situation, then the village wouldn’t need to worry about losing its general store.

“Besides, once I’m out of the house, I may get a little brother or sister. Mom’s still young, so maybe they’re already hard at work on it today?”

The way Lorea-chan put a thoughtful finger on her cheek and said that with a straight face absolutely shook me.

In order to keep up appearances as the older one here, I decided to calmly nod along…

“O-Oh, yeah? H-How about that…”

…and, nope, I failed hard at that.

I-I’ve heard rumors that they’re more, uh, open about that kind of thing in the countryside. Maybe it’s true?

By the way, I was well aware how innocent I was when it came to those sorts of things. I mean, I had been too busy studying all the time at the Academy, and the few friends I did have were daughters of the nobility!

I’d talked casually with the other staff at Master’s shop

sometimes, but maybe because of the age difference, they'd never brought that kind of topic up around me.

If they did, it had always been something like, "Don't you have anyone you like, Sarasa-chan?"

Then I'd honestly answer "No, since I only have two friends" and then the whole room would freeze into an awkward silence. They stopped asking after that. (Later on, I befriended another girl who was my junior at the Academy, bringing my friend count to three.)

Well, anyway, that's how I'd gone through my teenage years without experiencing *that sort* of crude humor.

Wait, I was still going through my teenage years… Hm? Is this leading to me having the chance to talk about that kind of stuff?

Iris-san and Kate-san were technically from the upper class, but Lorea-chan was a total commoner. If someone like her mingled with us, then…

"Hm? Sarasa-san, are you not good at having conversations like this?"

"Huh?! Oh, no, no!" I denied it, eyes wandering. "Th-That's…not true…at all, okay?"

"Really?" Lorea-chan tilted her head slightly and pressed a finger to her lips thoughtfully. A mischievous smile formed on her face. "Did you know my mom had me when she was about my age?"

"Bwhuh?! Uh, w-wow…"

What were you thinking, Darna-san?! Isn't that illegal?!

Forget marriage! I haven't even been on a date with a boy!

"They were childhood friends, and loved one another. The marriage was already something everyone assumed was coming, but they still got yelled at for having a child so early."

"Y-Yeah, I'll bet, huh? That's not normal out here in the countryside, is it?"

"No. It's a little early."

"A…*little* early?"

"Yes. Normally, people have had a child by your age, Sarasa-san."

Marrying as soon as they were adults, starting to have *mumble, mumble* right away, and then giving birth.

Yep, I see how it's possible—but it sure makes me feel awkward!

For the people around me, we didn't graduate until we were fifteen, and most of us were bound for on-the-job training after

that, so the topic of marriage never came up.

"I heard this from one of the ladies in the neighborhood, but —oh, no, I shouldn't say anything."

"Whaaa?! If you just stop like that, it makes me super curious!"

I firmly protested the way Lorea-chan was dangling a tasty tidbit in front of me before yanking it away just as quickly.

But her former mischievous smile vanished, and she awkwardly averted her eyes. "Erm… I think it might be better if you didn't know, Sarasa-san?"

"Me specifically?! Now I'm even more curious!"

"You're…not going to regret asking?" Lorea-chan double-checked.

"Urgh…" I hesitated for just a moment, but then said, "I might, but tell me anyway!"

If she held out on me now, I'd probably regret that more.

"Um… I might have been made in this house?"

"Come again…?"

Made? Uh, what?

"Well, um, you see, back then, this house was abandoned, and so my parents would sneak in here to have se—"

"Stop right there, Lorea-chan!!!"

The words were basically out of her mouth already, but I still hurriedly tried to silence her. If she told me exactly where they did the deed, I'd get all squicked out. It'd keep me up at night.

Falling silent, Lorea-chan and I looked one another in the eye, then blinked.

Maybe realizing she'd been too immodest, her cheeks flushed red. I felt mine burning too.

"L-Let's change the subject, Lorea-chan," I proposed awkwardly.

"G-Good idea," she was quick to agree.

"Erm… Oh, that's right. We were talking about your job, Lorea-chan. Is there anything you wanted to ask about? Or anything you wanted?"

"No, I'm satisfied as is. You take good care of me. Oh, but…"

"Hm? What? You can tell me anything. I think we're going to be together for a long time."

In fact, I want to corral you to make sure of it.

We'll be like Master and Maria-san.

Having a reliable employee like Maria-san would let me work diligently on my alchemy.

Lorea-chan didn't respond at first, but hesitantly opened her mouth at my urging.

"Um, I admire you so much, Sarasa-san... I couldn't, um, become an alchemist myself...or anything like that, could I? I mean, I'm too old to be starting school now, right?"

"An alchemist, huh? They're not that strict on the age thing, but..."

Her unexpected answer inspired a mix of pleasure and slight hesitation.

Officially, the entrance exam for the Alchemist Academy was to be taken at the age of ten.

But that age was self-reported.

The country might keep track of noble children, but there was no way they knew the age of a commoner's child living in a farming village, and they had no way to verify it. So, sometimes, first-time test takers could get away with being a little too old.

"But...that's not happening for you, Lorea-chan."

She'd already been well-developed for her age when I had first met her, and had only grown since. Now that she was almost fourteen, it was already fair to call her an adult.

Besides, that exam took years of onerous studying to pass. That was why, although commoners were allowed to take the test, pretty much the only ones who passed were children from families who were affluent enough they could afford to devote themselves to studying, or children who were in an orphanage where the other children were willing to help them.

No matter how naturally smart Lorea-chan was, by the time she amassed the knowledge she would need to pass, she'd have grown to the point where it would be difficult for her to try to claim she was ten years old.

"Yeah, I figured..." she said dejectedly.

"But if you just want to be an alchemist...that's not impossible."

"It's not?" Lorea-chan's eyes widened as she leaned in.

I held up a hand to calm her before saying, "Yeah. So here's the thing. Normally, you can't get an alchemy license without graduating from the Academy, but there might still be talented alchemists out there."

The country had set up the Academy to increase the quantity and quality of alchemists, but if they had shut off all other pathways to becoming one, that would have been

counterproductive, at least to the quantity part of their goal.

That was why, as a fallback measure, they allowed those with a recommendation from a high-level alchemist (at minimum an intermediate alchemist, but usually an advanced alchemist or higher) to take a licensing exam that was held once every few years.

But truth be told, this method was even harder than going through the Academy. At the Academy, students spent five years studying day and night, with repeated practical lessons and tests. Who even knew how much it would cost and how much time it would take to replicate that amount of learning?

On top of that, there was the need for a teacher. Not everyone who graduated was going to be able to impart what they learned to others. The professors and instructors of the Academy each had a field they specialized in, so for one person to take on teaching all of those subjects? Normally it would be impossible.

Furthermore, because the licensing exam was administered for those who hadn't been evaluated through standard classes, the difficulty level was set even higher than the Academy's regular exams and graduation exam.

If someone showed up at a level the Academy's testing standards might consider "barely passable," they stood basically no chance of passing. It was only if there was a noble or rich person dead set on making their child an alchemist, and they were willing to pay for multiple private tutors over a period of years, that it even started to look remotely possible.

That was how I described it to Lorea-chan presently.

"So basically...it's impossible, huh?" She let out a resigned sigh.

"No, maybe not?" I shook my head. If there was no chance at all, I wouldn't have said anything to give her hope in the first place. "Maybe I could teach you? Not immediately, but over the longer term."

I'd received close to the top marks in every subject. That meant I'd have the knowledge to teach her...or so I liked to think.

"In that case!" she beamed.

"But I have next to no experience teaching, you know?"

Because studying with friends and learning from one another was never a thing for me!

I'd participated in study sessions, sure, but since we were all fundamentally capable people, we were just sitting around the

same table. Even if someone had been struggling on a point and we tried to teach each other, it only took one or two points of advice for them to figure out the rest themselves. It hadn't felt like teaching.

Obviously, I had absolutely no experience in how to instruct a beginner. Even if I took on Lorea-chan as an apprentice, could I raise her up to the level she'd need to be at to pass the alchemist licensing exam...? Frankly, I wasn't confident I could.

"One more thing. Your magic capacity isn't all that high, so even if everything works out, you don't stand much chance of becoming a huge success as an alchemist, okay?"

The most important factor for an alchemist was their fine control over magical power, but if they only had a small absolute quantity of magical power available to them, then that would place limitations on how many transmutations they could perform. They wouldn't be able to create anything that required a large amount of magical power.

There were artifacts like that listed in the *Complete Alchemy Works*, which meant they would run into a brick wall when they came to one of them, and wouldn't be able to raise their level any further. It wasn't impossible that she would continue to grow, but inborn factors made up a large part of a person's magic capacity, so she couldn't count on it happening.

That said, up until the fifth volume of the *Complete Alchemy Works*—which would put her at intermediate level—nothing called for too much magical power, so if she was fine with being an average alchemist, it wouldn't be that big of an impediment.

"I'm fine with that," said Lorea-chan. "Really, what I want is to be able to do some work, and be of more use to you."

"O-Oh, I see."

I couldn't help but grin on hearing her say that. Even though I didn't really mind it, maybe the fact that she spent a lot of time just sitting idly at the counter bothered her.

"But...studying to be an alchemist is pretty hard, you know? You have to be diligent. Even after making it through the difficult entrance exam, ninety percent of the other students still gave up in frustration. That's the kind of world we're talking about. Are you still going to do it?"

In Lorea-chan's case, she could still work for me if she failed to become an alchemist, but if, after spending a long time—possibly even a decade—she were still unable to pass, that'd be a

huge shock to her.

And the odds of that happening are by no means low. In fact, it might be nearly impossible for her to pass.

But even after all of that was explained, Lorea-chan firmly nodded her head. “Yes. I won’t claim to understand just how hard it’s going to be, but I swear I won’t give up. Will you make me your apprentice, Sarasa-san?”

Seeing the determined look she fixed me with, I made up my mind. “Okay. I can’t promise I’ll make you an alchemist, but I’ll take you as my apprentice.”

“Thank you!” Lorea-chan squealed with glee. Then, looking at my face again, she smiled a little. “Erm, Sarasa-san…”

“What is it?”

Lorea-chan smiled mischievously. “May I call you ‘Master’?”

“Stop it.” I immediately shook my head. “It makes me feel a little too responsible.”

Here I was, fresh out of the Academy, and she wanted me to let her call me ‘Master’? I could never.

If Master heard…I don’t think she’d get mad, but she would *laugh her butt off, I guess?*

Yeah, I’m not letting that happen.

“Things are fine as is. Just address me like you always have.”

“Okayyy, got it. Sarasa-san. I’ll be in your care from now on.”

“And I’ll be in yours. Let’s both give it our all!”

That said, training to be an alchemist starts with the acquisition of knowledge. I’ve been teaching her things all along, so maybe I just need to do more of that? Practical lessons are a long way off in any event, so nothing’s going to change immediately.

Or so I thought, but…

“I brought my things!”

The next morning, Lorea-chan was standing in front of me with a single cloth sack.

Her smile, shining in the newly risen sun, was radiant.



“Erm… Already, Lorea-chan? The very next day?”

“Yes! They say to strike while the iron’s hot, after all.”

Incredibly, Lorea-chan had swung back by her house before the shop opened, quickly packed her belongings, and then brought them with her as she came in to work. It all fit in a single large sack.

That’s not a lot of stuff to be moving with—though, wait. Maybe not? Come to think of it, I came here with less.

On top of that, Lorea-chan’s family lives nearby. I have the basic necessities here already, and she can always go back and get anything she needs. I guess she probably just got some changes of clothes, that sort of thing?

“Um… Should I not have?”

Maybe because she could see my thoughts on my face, that gleaming smile of hers dimmed slightly.

“No, it’s not that, okay!” I hurriedly tried to dispel her worries. “It’s not, but if you’re going to move in with me, I need to go give my regards to Darna-san first?”

I was taking her in as my apprentice, after all. It would be one thing if she lived in another town, but her parents were right here in the village, and not that far from my place, so I couldn’t be so impolite as to not pay them a visit.

Whenever one of the kids at the orphanage had gone off to become an apprentice, their master had always come to the orphanage to give their regards.

My age was still in the single digits back then, so I don’t remember much of what happened, but I assume that’s what was happening.

But Lorea-chan just looked at me like she was confused. “Huh? Give him your regards? I told him about it, so there’s really no need, you know? I doubt my parents will mind. If anything, they’ll want to come give you their regards instead.”

“That’s not going to fly. I’m taking their daughter into my care, so I have to be the one who goes and sees them. It’s my responsibility as an adult.”

“As an…adult?”

Why the questioning tone?

“I’m an adult! I may only be two years older, but I am. Lorea-chan, you’re a minor. I can’t budge on this!”

You there! No saying that Lorea-chan looks like the older one!

This isn’t about appearances, okay? It’s about my position and

responsibility. I'm accorded a high social status, after all! This alchemy license of mine isn't just for show, okay? Heh heh.

"Okay. In that case, let's get it over with, I guess. We don't have much time before opening, after all."

"Huh? Uh, I don't think it'll go that smoothly, so it's fine if we open late today..."

I feel like taking half a day off might be appropriate? I mean, I'll want to mentally prepare myself before I go. Should I bring a present with me? Can I leave it until tomorrow...?

"No, that won't do," said Lorea-chan. "I can't have my situation affecting the shop. Let's hurry!"

Lorea-chan tossed her bag into her room, then put her hands on my hesitant back and started pushing me toward Darna-san's place.

At that point, I had to do the mature thing and prepare myself for it.

I strode into the general store and asked Darna-san and Mary-san, "Would you be all right with leaving your daughter in my care?" And yet unexpectedly—although it should have been expectedly since it was exactly like Lorea-chan said—they were both quick to agree, and even replied, "She may cause you some trouble, but please take good care of her."

Lorea-chan had told me this before, but the two of them weren't actually that keen on having her take over the family business. It was a job someone in town had to do, but the frequent trips between here and town were not safe by any stretch of the imagination. The previous owners, Darna-san's parents, had been killed by bandits, and Darna-san and Mary-san had seen their fair share of danger too.

Even so, they had been uneasy about sending her to work in town with no guarantee she would be able to find a job there. They had been talking about finding her a strong husband when my offer came along.

If their daughter could have safe, stable, well-paid work in an alchemist's shop, then what more could her parents wish for? They said they couldn't think of a single reason to refuse.

But still, bandits showing up even on the seemingly safe road between here and South Strag?

I had been attacked before, but those guys had been hired by Yoku Bahru. With a trade city like South Strag in his domain, highway safety was Baronet Kahku's lifeline. Letting bandits run

loose would have been a fatal error.

If you have time to be scheming, focus on that first instead.

Was he a useless second generation noble or something? I got that sense when I considered the current state of South Strag.

If it was really that dangerous, maybe I ought to go out and clean up the area once in a while. For Darna-san's and Mary-san's sakes, and by extension Lorea-chan's too.

It feels unsatisfying leaving garbage lying around, you know?

Anyway, when all was said and done, I had secured myself a capable staff member.

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"Sarasa-san, what are your plans for today?"

Paying my respects to Darna-san had taken far less time than expected, so we ended up opening the shop at the usual time. Once the preparations for that were finished, Lorea-chan had asked me about my plans for the day.

"Erm..." I thought for a moment. "For a start, I'll check in on the herb field next door, and give them advice as necessary, I guess?"

Lorea-chan nodded happily. "It's going well, isn't it? That's what Michael-san tells me."

"Sort of, yeah. Because we're focusing mainly on things that are easy to grow."

Lorea-chan's so well-informed. Unlike me.

I suppose that's because she goes out shopping all the time, while I barely ever leave the house. Because I have no reason to.

More precisely, I do go out occasionally, but to South Strag or the forest more often than the village, I guess? Thanks to Lorea-chan, I haven't been to Delal-san's place in a while.

"After that," I went on, "maybe I'll do something about the herb field out back that I've been neglecting?"

"Huh? Are you going to till under that field?"

"No, no. I'm thinking I'll plant something else there. There's no need for me to grow herbs that Michael-san can grow for me."

"Oh, that makes sense. It's kind of redundant for you to grow the same things."

"Now you're getting it. So I'm thinking of growing something more difficult...but the seeds will be pricey."

“Which means…?”

“If I mess it up, I’ll be eating a huge loss! One that’s painful even for me.”

But having those herbs would make a huge difference in the kinds of potions I could make, so I needed to get my hands on them eventually.

I knew that they ought to be out there in the great forest, but they’d be in places too deep for this village’s gatherers to reach without risking their lives. I couldn’t ask them to do that, and even if I could, while it would be cheaper than ordering them in from elsewhere, the purchase price would still be expensive.

“Is there any easy way to grow them with alchemy?” Lorea-chan asked.

“There is an artifact called a ‘Perfect Grower,’ which can grow any known plant perfectly if you just supply it with magical power, but…”

Ah, more precisely, that should be any known plant for which there’s an established method for growing.

It couldn’t handle any plants that even an alchemist with botanical knowledge couldn’t grow.

But despite that drawback, it was still a really incredible artifact that didn’t require water, fertilizer, or even sunlight.

I’d even heard of really wealthy nobles using it to raise decorative plants. I had a hard time believing that, though.

“Uh, isn’t that kind of amazing? If you had one, wouldn’t your herb problems be solved?”

“No, no, I wouldn’t be struggling so much if it was that easy. It’s beyond my ability to make one now, and it’s a ridiculously expensive artifact too, so I don’t have the funds to buy one from another alchemist. I might add that there aren’t many who can make one, and the costs involved for them make it not worth their time.”

The artifact was listed in the ninth volume of the *Complete Alchemy Works*, and was truly a rare one. On top of that, it used a glass dome, so if you wanted to grow tall plants, the Perfect Grower had to be massive in size. That increased the cost of making it, as well as the upkeep cost in magical energy.

How expensive were we talking here? So expensive that you could buy several houses for the price of one that fit a small potted plant. It went without saying that the cost of any herbs grown in such an artifact was high too.

Maybe now you can see why I found it so unbelievable that nobles would use one to grow decorative plants?

"So there was that kind of pitfall…" Lorea-chan said with a sigh. "What happens if you put in unknown plants, by the way?"

"At that point, it's no longer 'perfect.' Whether it grows them properly or not comes down to…luck?"

I'd never used it myself, so I didn't really know, but apparently if it was just a variant, the artifact could adjust fairly well.

But for an unknown plant, the odds were fifty-fifty—or worse.

New types of seedlings are expensive, so it's pretty risky, huh?

That was why ordinary people would choose to raise them themselves.

"Well, none of that has anything to do with me. Since I can't buy one," I concluded.

"So to sum it all up, you have to go to the trouble of looking after them yourself."

"Yeah, basically. Although, there's also an artifact called an 'Auxiliary Grower' that I can make, and I plan to make use of one."

This artifact was useful for growing potted seeds until they took root. From there, I had to transplant them to the field. That might seem like extra effort, but it raised the chance of success.

With plants that were difficult to raise, the first bottleneck was whether you could get the seeds to germinate, and if you could just get them to take root inside a pot, it was pretty manageable from that point on.

Of course, I would still have to be careful of the temperature, frost, snow, dehydration, fertilizer, magical power, and other things after transplanting them to the field, though.

"It still sounds so useful, though," Lorea-chan remarked. "I bet farmers would love that kind of artifact."

"If it didn't cost money, yeah," I agreed. "While it's not expensive next to the Perfect Grower, it does require the user to provide magic crystals or their own magical power, which is a bit much to ask of an ordinary farmer."

"Aha, so an ordinary farmer would be taking a loss on it."

"You've got it. Even someone like me, who has no shortage of magical power, wouldn't use it just to grow any old medicinal herbs. It's not easy to make your money back."

I was only making one because it was listed in the *Complete Alchemy Works,* and therefore I had to.

Ideally, I'd sell it if there were a buyer, but I can't expect to find one in this village. It's the kind of artifact only someone who researches plants would be interested in.

"Anyway, that's what my plans look like, I guess? So, I'll be heading out now. Look after the shop for me while I'm out, Lorea-chan."

"Okay, you can count on me. Take care."

Michael-san and Izu-san were working hard in the fields again today. As Gatt-san had said previously, the couple was very diligent, and they did everything I told them without slacking off. I appreciated the fact that, even if they lacked the skills now, I could trust them to put in the work.

"Good morning. I see you're working hard."

Izu-san looked up as I greeted her. "Oh, Sarasa-san. Good morning." She returned my greeting with a smile. "Nice weather we're having, wouldn't you say?"

Michael-san, who was working a little farther away, rushed over as soon as he noticed me.

"How are things?" I asked.

"Not bad, I think... But would you care to take a look?"

He sounded a little uncertain, but when I looked around, checking different parts of the field...there were no signs of illness, and the plants were growing without any issue. No bugs either.

"Yeah, it seems fine to me," I said. "Just a little longer now... You should be able to harvest before the first frost."

"Finally! This will be our first harvest, so I'm really excited!" cried Izu-san.

Unlike her husband, who had helped out on the family farm, Izu-san grew up in town, so this was genuinely the first crop she'd ever helped raise. Her eyes were brimming with emotion as she looked out over her herbs.

But then, suddenly seeming to remember something, she turned to me.

"By the way, once we've harvested these, will there be nothing until spring? Is there anything we can grow over the winter?"

"There *are* winter herbs, but they're tough to grow, you know? If you don't look after them carefully, they'll die."

"We'll work hard even in the cold! Isn't that right, Michael?"

At Izu-san's urging, Michael hurriedly nodded.

“O-Oh, yes! Of course! Would that be all right, Sarasa-san?”

“I can prepare some for you, but…is there something going on?”

“Erm… W-We’re having a baby…”

“Huh? Izu-san is pregnant?”

As my eyes widened, Izu-san blushed and nodded. “Yes. We’re expecting the baby in spring.”

“Congratulations! But I think that will make it even harder on Michael-san. Are you sure you want to go ahead with this? I think you already have enough to keep yourself fed, right?”

Erin-san was paying them a salary for the time being, and some portion of the harvest was going to be theirs, so the more they harvested, the more money they’d make. So I could understand their motivation, but they didn’t need to push themselves…

“Um, I can still do a little too—”

As Izu-san started to volunteer, I firmly shook my head. “No. I can’t allow a pregnant woman to work on the farm in winter. If you need Izu-san’s help, then it’s not happening.”

“Izu, it’s fine. I may not be the most skillful person in the world, but I can put my nose to the grind and work. I’ll do my job properly even on my own. So you just focus on having a healthy baby.”

“Michael… Okay. You do your best! I’ll be waiting for you in the house!”

The couple held hands and gazed into one another’s eyes.

I was happy for them, but it was awkward to watch, so I wished they’d do it in the house.

And then— *Hey! Don’t bring your faces closer!*

“Ahem! I’ll be going now. You two keep at it.”

The two of them hurriedly separated as I exaggeratedly cleared my throat.

With that, I turned my back to them.

Considering that they’d gotten married before he found stable employment, I’d already known they were passionate, but I wished they’d keep that stuff indoors. By the way, when I told them to “keep at it,” I meant farming, okay?

Don’t get it twisted!

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While handling my usual tasks, I also took care of the garden out back on the side, and then moved on to the flower garden out front, which had been a bit neglected.

It had been full of flowers in spring and summer, but now, deep in autumn, those flowers had finished, and their leaves had started to brown a little. I dug up their root bulbs, planning to save half for next year, while using the other half as materials.

This garden served both a decorative and practical function. I wasn't one to let space go to waste. So, now that the garden was empty, I planted herbs that flowered in fall and winter. They weren't particularly showy, but it was better than nothing, right?

As an additional selection criteria, I chose ones that had relatively pretty flowers, since their value as herbs wasn't *that* important.

"Well, I am a girl after all. I need to act at least a little feminine. Yep."

This sort of forced appeal to my femininity was probably better than nothing, since I was losing out to Lorea-chan on that front in more ways than one.

But, I was still beating Iris-san at least—if you excluded our looks.

I'd already given up that battle. I wanted to love myself the way I was, the way my parents gave birth to me—or so I lied to myself as I moved on to my next task.

"Next up is making the Auxiliary Grower."

This artifact was a milky white board, with largish magic crystals in the four corners, and a line of slightly smallish magic crystals in a row on one side.

It was easy to use: Just place pots with seeds sown in them on top of it. It wasn't as infallible as the Perfect Grower, but as long as I kept it powered, nearly one hundred percent of the seeds would germinate and grow into seedlings that I could plant in the field.

If you just overlooked the cost, which was easily over a hundred thousand rhea, it wasn't a difficult artifact to make, so I made one real quick. I laid out the pots on it, and then planted the slightly expensive seeds that I'd ordered from Master the other day.

"This one's chireinove, this one is jivaway and sharnils, and this one is vancao... I'll be in real trouble if I drop any of these."

The seeds all looked similar, so I was careful to label them as I

planted them... Huh?

"This seed... I wonder what it is."

In the bottom of the bag that had held the smaller bags the seeds had been separated into, there was a single seed I didn't remember.

It was slightly larger than the others, and looked hard.

It looked a bit like some sort of grain, but also like an apple seed. I didn't really have any clue what it might be.

"Maybe I'll look it up... I did buy the *Compendium of Alchemic Materials*, after all."

I'd ordered the book from Master along with the seeds to help Lorea-chan study. Since I already owned it, I took the seed with me and went to identify it.

Lorea-chan was sitting behind the shop's counter with the *Compendium of Alchemic Materials* sitting open next to her as she took notes.

When I poked my head in, she immediately noticed me, and stared at me, mystified, before checking what time it was.

"Sarasa-san, what's the matter? It's still early for lunch..."

"I've got something I want to look up," I explained. "Would you mind if I borrowed that book?"

"Sure, of course you can. Here you go."

"Thanks."

I took the compendium and flipped through it.

At the same time, I glanced at the notes Lorea-chan had been taking. "How are things going on your end, Lorea-chan? Smoothly?"

What she was currently in the process of was reading the *Compendium of Alchemic Materials*, learning the materials recorded in it, and writing that information out onto another piece of paper—but she wasn't copying it verbatim.

"I want you to take just the information needed to gather the materials, and then summarize it in a way that's easy for people to understand."

That was the task I had given her, and there were two reasons for it.

The first was to spread the knowledge of materials that were unknown to gatherers in this village so they could begin gathering them. I was hoping it would help to boost those gatherers' incomes, while also diversifying my selection of

products.

The other reason was that the act of summarizing the information would help to deepen Lorea-chan's own understanding of it. An alchemist needed to know how to gather materials herself, so this was pretty important. I was sure that the mechanical task of writing would help her to retain what she learned.

"I…wonder about that. Here's what I have so far."

"Yeah, you're doing okay—actually, more than okay. You're pretty good at this, huh?"

My eyes widened a little as I flipped through her stack of notes. They weren't detailed like the entries in the compendium, but she had honed in on the key features, and her skillful drawings were rich with information on how to harvest the materials. I hadn't expected her to have this sort of talent.

In addition to that, her descriptions of herbs were distilled down to just the necessary information for gatherers who weren't good at reading.

"It looks like I can expect a good outcome," I said.

"You think so? Thank you," Lorea-chan replied. "How have things been on your end, Sarasa-san?"

"Hrmm, I'm trying to look up this seed…but it's not in here."

I'd read this book cover to cover many times in my student days, so I more or less knew everything inside it. But, it only contained plants that could be used as alchemic materials. So, it didn't cover mundane plants, and it only had illustrations of the seeds when it was those seeds themselves that were used as materials.

Even when it came to plants I'd used myself, I couldn't say with confidence that I remembered what all of their seeds looked like.

"It can't be that the seed from some fruit Master was eating, or that Maria was using in a recipe got mixed in with the others…could it?"

Since it had just been one seed, sitting all by itself in the bag, I couldn't discount the possibility…

Just in case she knew, I tried showing the seed to Lorea-chan.

"I've never seen this type either… I can tell you it's not anything we grow in this village, at least."

"Yeah, go figure. What should I do with it…?"

I could consult with Master about it, but for as casually as I

seemed to be using it, the transporter actually used a not insignificant amount of magical power.

With the distance from here to the capital, someone with only a slightly above average magic capacity wouldn't be able to send even a piece of paper, so I felt bad making Master use up so much magical power for such an unimportant question.

"Why not try planting it?" asked Lorea-chan. "If it sprouts, you'll be able to find out what it is, won't you?"

"That's a thought... It's not like adding one more pot is going to be much trouble."

And if it turned out it was from some fruit that Master was eating, then it might be interesting to grow it out back anyway. Maybe I could look forward to a delicious harvest?

"Yeah, I think I'll do that. Thanks, Lorea-chan. Keep up the good work with your note-taking."

"Leave it to me. If these flyers end up being useful to the shop, it'll all be worth it!"

Lorea-chan smiled and clenched her hand into a fist. I clapped her lightly on the shoulder and then headed into the back to fetch another pot, which I soon planted the seed in.

"And that's that. Now I just activate the Auxiliary Grower and..."

I placed my hand on the board and ran my magical power through it. The four corner crystals lit up in red, blue, green, and yellow. I continued pouring in more power, and the row of smaller crystals lit up one by one. Once all of them had turned white, the artifact was fully powered.

It would depend on the surrounding temperature and humidity, but I could expect this much magical power to last about a month.

"Now then, where do I want to put it?"

The milky white board was semitransparent and looked kind of pretty with its lights, but the planter pots that were meant for agricultural use looked more utilitarian, which kind of spoiled the effect.

Well, it's meant to be practical, not a piece of interior decor.

"I'll want to put it somewhere that keeps it out of the rain, and with a certain amount of light... That doesn't leave me many options, huh?"

The rooms on the first floor included the warehouse and parlor, as well as the workshop—which didn't get any sunlight—

the sales floor, and the kitchen/dining room.

There were empty rooms on the second floor, but those were technically guest rooms, so I didn't want to put it in there. Iris-san's and Kate-san's rooms and the warehouse were clearly not being considered either.

That left my own room on the second floor, or by the window in the kitchen.

If it has to be one of the two, then I guess I prefer the one that's closer to the field in the backyard.

"Put it on top of a wooden crate, and... Yep. Now it's just a matter of waiting."

The following day, I was using my lunch break to teach Lorea-chan the basics of manipulating magical power.

It was an important first step. Neglecting it would be very dangerous.

In my case, I'd moved straight on to practical training without doing this first, and it had almost had disastrous results.

Well, more precisely, I had been *forced* to move on, I guess? Because I had just been doing whatever Master had told me to.

Thinking back now, I understand that it was important to make me understand just how much magical power I have, and the danger that entails, but it still spooked me at the time. Enough so that I desperately practiced how to manipulate magical power.

Although, thanks to that, I got through my practical lessons at the Academy without any trouble.

In short, if she did it properly, it would benefit her greatly.

"Yeah, that's the way. You've got potential, you know that, Lorea-chan?"

"You mean it? Thank you."

"Your magic practice has been going smoothly too, so you may have nothing to worry about on that front too."

"Wow, I'm glad to hear it!"

Naturally, this all assumed she kept up the hard work, but it was my policy to help my apprentices grow through praise!

Hm? Is this my first time teaching, you ask?

Yep! Which is why I'd decided on that policy today. I figured it would work well for a diligent girl like Lorea-chan.

I didn't have any plans of taking another one on, but if I ever ended up with an apprentice who tended to get full of themselves, I'd rethink my policy then.

“Manipulating magical power feels kind of plain as far as training goes, but it’s really important. This may sound extreme, but so long as you can do this one thing well, you’ll be able to get by as an alchemist.”

Obviously, she’d also needed the bare minimum of knowledge and technique that was necessary to get an alchemy license, though. We were different from mages, where the more magical power they had, the better.

“Oh, but I should say, even if you get to the point where you can do alchemy, you can’t just go transmuting things, okay? They’ll arrest you if you get caught. And if you’re unlucky, your head might just end up bidding a tearful farewell to your body.”

That wasn’t a joke. We stared into one another’s eyes until Lorea-chan gulped.

“I wasn’t planning on it, but…is that right?” she asked.

“It is, yes. The alchemy license isn’t just something you get for show.”

It wasn’t optional. The laws of the kingdom would come down harshly on anyone practicing alchemy without a license.

The only exception was when a person was operating under the supervision of an officially licensed alchemist.

There were a lot of people who dropped out of the Alchemist Academy, and occasionally those people were caught performing unlicensed alchemy…apparently.

I’d only heard stories of it happening from others.

As for why they were so strict, it was because it was incredibly dangerous. Defective artifacts could cause accidents, but the real problem was potions. Unlike artifacts, which tended to not even work if they were of shoddy craftsmanship, there was no way to tell what a potion did just by looking at it. That meant there was a risk of potions with horrible side effects going into circulation.

That was why the penalties for unlicensed alchemists were so harsh. We were given stern warnings about that during our lectures at the Academy, and anyone expelled after failing an exam would be given the warning again and forced to sign a pledge.

Fortunately, that was not something I’d ever experienced myself. Although, I wasn’t sure what to say about the fact that some licensed alchemists still engaged in underhanded practices. I mean, if they’d just taken their work seriously, they would have been able to make money the normal way, you

know?

"So, there you have it. Even if you give up on becoming an alchemist, you'll still be bound by those rules, Lorea-chan. So keep that in mind, okay?"

"Of course I will. But I'm not going to give up!"

"Yep, that's what I'm hoping."

Everyone thought that when they enrolled in the academy, but only some of them would be able to go on to put it into practice. That was just how tough it was to become an alchemist.

Well, in Lorea-chan's case, she wouldn't flunk out because of a failed exam, so as long as she didn't lose heart, I figured she'd be able to make good on her claim that she wouldn't give up.

"Now then," I said. "I guess that does it for today's practice. It's not effective to do it for too long. The key thing is to keep at it every day."

"I understand. Thank you," Lorea-chan said, bowing her head.

"And thank you for your hard work," I replied with a nod before stretching and sighing.

"Looks like you've still got some time left on your break... I'll put on tea," said Lorea-chan.

"Sure, thanks," I replied.

Even though I wasn't doing the work myself, watching her practice manipulating magical power was exhausting.

Actually, it was probably more exhausting than doing it myself. Because I had to "watch" her magical power to see if she was controlling it properly.

As I was softly massaging the area around my eyes, I heard the clink of a teacup being set down in front of me.

The fragrant odor tickled my nostrils, helping me to relax.

I thanked Lorea-chan and then took a sip. It had just the right temperature and level of astringency.

"Whew, that's delicious," I said.

"It's nothing special," Lorea-chan replied humbly before asking, "Um, is there a good way to improve my control over magical power?"

"This should be obvious, but the most basic way is to keep on practicing. Using magic precisely can be effective too, but the spells you know so far aren't well suited for that, so I guess it'll have to wait? Using artifacts can also have an effect. Because you get a feeling for the flow of magic."

"Artifacts... Would the magic stove count for that?"

“That sort of artifact has been designed to be easily used by the average person, so you won’t see that much of an effect, but…in some ways, the magic furnace that you melted a frying pan in before might be ideal for it.”

This had happened before I put in the magic oven. Seeing the poor, lazy meals that I had been making for myself, Lorea-chan had declared, “I’ll make you something!” and then set about cooking with the magic furnace in the workshop.

It wasn’t a large one, just a small one meant for blacksmithing, but it still had the ability to melt metals. Because her control of magical power was still underdeveloped at the time, she’d poured more in than she’d needed to, and the result was that she’d ruined the pan she’d brought from home, and came close to burning herself badly.

I’d fixed her pan for her, but I’d panicked a little when it happened.

There had been another slipup as well, so we’d obviously stopped trying to cook using the furnace after that, and now that we had the kitchen set up, there was no longer any need to.

Perhaps remembering all of this, Lorea-chan lowered her eyes and frowned. “Th-That’s…a bitter memory for me.”

“Yeah, I’m not in the mood to let you touch that thing again just yet. As for what else you could use… Oh, I know. The Auxiliary Grower over there isn’t dangerous, so it might be a good fit.”

“That thing? It sure is a pretty artifact.” Lorea-chan set down her cup and stood up. She walked over to the Auxiliary Grower and observed the pots sitting on top of it. “The seeds…still haven’t sprouted yet, huh?”

“It’s not going to happen overnight. It just provides support, so it doesn’t do anything to stimulate growth.”

The Auxiliary Grower only served to provide a more ideal environment, so the time it would take the seeds to germinate wasn’t that different from if they were planted normally.

There were some fast-growing seeds that would sprout overnight, but I’d chosen expensive seeds this time—which meant they were all difficult to grow. I couldn’t expect them to sprout easily.

“Oh, but the Auxiliary Grower looks a little different from when I saw it yesterday,” Lorea-chan observed. “Like the light has gotten a bit dimmer…?”

“Wait, really? It shouldn’t have gone through enough magical power for there to be an obvious difference yet…”

“But isn’t this part different?”

Lorea-chan was pointing at the row of magic crystals. They were clearly less bright than yesterday, which was a sign that some of the magical power had been expended.

“You’re right… Hmmm?”

Knowing that there might be times when I was away from the shop to buy supplies, I had designed this Auxiliary Grower with the ability to store a slightly higher amount of magical power. There should have been no way that it had gone through such an easily noticeable amount of power in just one day. And yet, here we were…

Did I mess up when making it?

“It bothers me a little, but…I guess I can just refill it. It doesn’t seem to be having any effect on its functionality.”

“Oh, Sarasa-san. Would you mind letting me do it?”

“Hey, that’s a good idea. Let’s give it a try. Place your fingers here.”

“Murrrgh, you were right… This sure is different from using the magic stove.”

“I know, right? But you’re managing to do it properly.”

She was a bit awkward, but the artifact was filling with magical power. I watched until Lorea-chan took her hands off the artifact.

“Whew… I guess that’s as much as I can handle,” she said.

“Yep, don’t push yourself too hard. It’s pretty much full now anyway.”

I filled up the Auxiliary Grower the rest of the way with a touch, then helped Lorea-chan—who was looking a little unsteady on her feet after using so much magic—into a chair before sitting down next to her.

“It’s important to get a sense for how much you can use before it impairs your ability to act, and how long it takes you to recover afterward. Sit down and rest for a while.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

I kept a supportive hand on Lorea-chan for a while, sipping my now slightly lukewarm tea. She leaned against the table lethargically, staring at the empty seats.

“I wonder how Iris-san and Kate-san are doing right now…” she murmured.

“Hmm, since there’s no salamander, there shouldn’t be much risk. If things have gone smoothly, I imagine they should be on their way back about now, but…they do have a researcher in their party, after all.”

I thought researchers were prone to putting their interests first, and looking into things that weren’t originally part of the plan.

That view may come across as prejudiced, but I’d yet to meet a researcher it didn’t apply to. Taking that into account, it was entirely possible they had gotten massively sidetracked along the way, and were only arriving at the site now.

“Well, either way, they’re constrained by their provisions, so I’m sure they’ll make their way back here before those run out.”

I’d like to think that they won’t resort to acquiring food out in the field so that they can hang in there even longer.

There wasn’t much to eat near the salamander’s cave other than lava lizards. It was fine for Nord-san to put his research before everything else, but I’d feel sorry for Iris-san and Kate-san having to go along with it.

“Well, if it’s not dangerous, then that’s reassuring,” Lorea-chan said.

“Yep, well, if anything does go wrong, I’ve prepared for—”

Then, as if it had been waiting for just that moment, a voice echoed through the house.

“Save us, meow! Save us, meow!”

Lorea-chan and I both fell silent. It was a familiar voice, saying words that the person in question would never say on her own.

Lorea-chan’s cold glare stabbed right into me. “Care to explain, Sarasa-san?”

“These are resonating stones. It’s a distress signal from Iris-san and the others. They’ve run into some kind of problem they can’t resolve on their own.”

“No, that wasn’t what I was asking about. I mean, yes, it’s important, but what’s with that line?”

“This? I thought I might miss it if I just used an ordinary bell sound, so I had Iris-san help me give it a sound I would definitely notice.”

“And that’s your excuse?”

“I wanted to make Iris-san say a cute line.”

“Sarasa-san…”

Lorea-chan’s exasperated look made me feel just a little guilty.

But you could say I made the resonating stones for precisely this purpose! I had all sorts of fun coming up with her lines! Oh, the sight of Iris-san blushing with shame was just—ahem.

Listen, I gave her the stones free of charge in exchange, so it's fine, right?

"I didn't expect her to actually have to use them, though."

"Ah! Doesn't this mean that Iris-san and the others are in danger?!"

"I suppose it's possible they broke one accidentally, but...they probably are, yeah?"

"Th-That's awful!!! What can we do?!"

Lorea-chan hurriedly got to her feet, then staggered. I supported her and helped her to sit down again before calmly telling her, "Settle down, Lorea-chan. This is what I sent the homunculus with them for."

"That's right! H-Hurry and check on them!"

"I'm on it. They're a little far away, so it'll be a bit hard, but—"

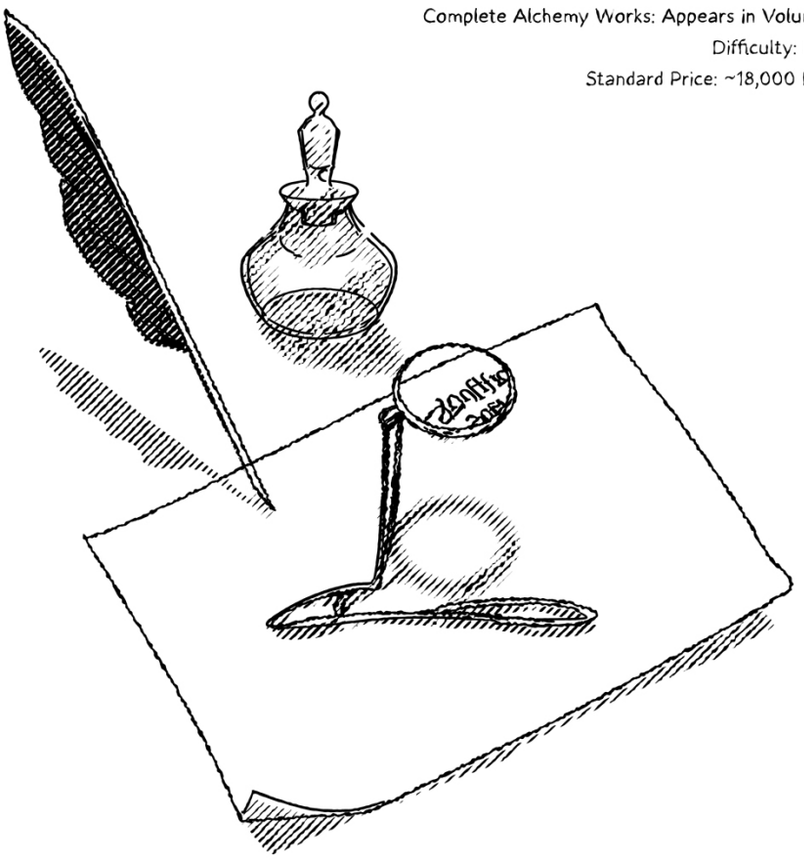
When I synchronized with the homunculus, it meant neglecting my own body.

Honestly, it was best to do it while lying down in bed, but seeing Lorea-chan's eyes wavering with uncertainty, I didn't have it in me to tell her, "I'm going to go lie down!"

I sat down in my chair, and placed both hands on the table for support before slowly beginning to temper my magical power.

No. 010

Complete Alchemy Works: Appears in Volume 8
Difficulty: Hard
Standard Price: ~18,000 Rhea



〈 Invisible Ink 〉

Hornfirfliff Hog

The inventors of this item were looking to make see-through ink, but it turned out invisible. That may make it sound like a failed invention, but with special glasses, you can see it properly. That makes it useful for writing secret missives, and so it's recommended for anyone carrying on a relationship they can't divulge to others.

Episode 4: The Rescue Call

The tremors stopped, and the sound of rock crumbling ceased. Eventually, the dust cloud around them settled, and a painful silence followed.

It hadn't lasted long, but it had felt like an eternity for those who'd experienced it.

"I-Is it over?" Iris, who had been cowering and covering her head, slowly began to move again. "I-Is everyone all right?"

"I'm fine," answered Nordrad. "It doesn't look like anything collapsed near here."

Their things were covered in dust that had blown in from elsewhere, but there weren't any other traces of the cave-in nearby.

Iris nodded at Nordrad, then looked in the direction that the sound had come from. "The collapse was back the way we came from, huh? I have a bad feeling about this…"

"Same," Kate agreed. "Although I don't know if this is any consolation, but I don't hear the salamander's footsteps anymore."

"Here's hoping it's turned back…" Nordrad said before adding, "Now then, we'll have to confirm the situation before we can formulate any sort of plan. Shall we go take a look?"

He wasn't wrong.

Leaving his pack where it was, Nordrad headed back the way they had come. Iris and Kate followed, and the group didn't have to go far before they found what they were looking for: The walls and ceiling of the passageway that had previously been wide enough for them to walk three abreast had collapsed.

Even though they could only see as far as their light allowed, the extent of the damage was still readily apparent. They'd more or less expected it, but their faces still darkened at the difficult situation this put them in.

"It's…collapsed pretty badly," Iris remarked.

"Nord-san, can you turn up the light?" Kate asked.

"If I turn it up too much, it eats more magical power, but…sure," Nordrad replied.

Despite his grumbling, he recognized the necessity, and

adjusted his artifact to greatly increase its light output.

This revealed a mound of rock and sand that stretched all the way up to the ceiling.

The scale of the collapse was so massive that they never even entertained the hope that there might be a gap somewhere.

“It’s completely blocked off, then,” said Iris.

“And it looks like the blockage is pretty thick,” added Kate. “Do you suppose this could be the reason that we’re not hearing footsteps anymore?”

“That’s plausible,” Nordrad replied. “Clearing this out seems a bit unrealistic.”

Iris arched an eyebrow at the way Nordrad sounded like it wasn’t really his problem.

“You can’t do anything, even with those muscles you’re so proud of?”

Iris was being uncharacteristically snide, but who could blame her? She couldn’t imagine the revival of the salamander and the collapse of the cave were completely unrelated.

Whether her target picked up on the sarcasm was another matter entirely, however.

“Yeah,” Nordrad replied. “I can move the rocks, but I can’t stop more from falling in.”

Whether he noticed it or not, Nordrad carried on as if it didn’t bother him. Iris frowned a little, but after Kate gave her a pat on the back, she sighed and set aside her annoyance.

Fighting among themselves could only bring them harm, and Iris was still levelheaded enough to realize that.

“I appreciate not having to worry about the salamander coming after us, but I guess this will make it hard to get out,” she said.

“We could dig our way through it, but we’d have to worry about it caving in,” Nordrad noted. “Kate-kun, you can use earth magic, right? Do you think you’d be able to harden the dirt?”

“Sadly, my magic is only good for softening the ground…”

Kate had been learning magic that was useful for farming. The spell did dig up the earth, but that was for the purpose of softening it, which in this situation would be the opposite of what they wanted.

If she had Sarasa’s knowledge and control of magical power, she’d have managed to make it work somehow regardless, but trusting their lives to the magic of a beginner like Kate was a bad

move no matter how you cut it.

“Then digging our way out is unrealistic, like I thought,” said Nordrad. “Why don’t we turn back for now?”

Returning to where they had been before, the group made themselves some warm tea in an attempt to help themselves settle down.

Even though they’d gotten lucky and it was blocked off by the cave-in, they were still stuck in a cave inhabited by a dangerous salamander. Unlike Iris and Kate, who both seemed restless, Nordrad seemed unhurried as he leisurely sipped his tea.

This was far preferable to him panicking, obviously, but you couldn’t fault the other two for not understanding why he was like this.

“You’re rather calm, huh, Nord?” Iris asked.

“When you research monsters for a living, you find yourself in danger all the time. I built these muscles so I could get out of those situations alive,” Nordrad answered. “Well, not that they’re any help now.”

“For my part, I wish you’d reflected on the way you act instead,” Kate grumbled.

This accident wouldn’t have happened if Nordrad hadn’t carried out his weird experiment, so Kate’s comment was entirely reasonable.

But despite her critical tone, Nordrad laughed cheerfully. “Ha ha ha, that’s not happening. I’m a researcher! If you take my spirit of exploration and adventure from me, I wouldn’t be one anymore.”

“I’d like you to temper that spirit of adventure with some caution,” Kate countered. “You’ll run out of people willing to help you if you don’t, you know?”

“You think? Not many people agree to guard me a second time. I don’t think the pay is an issue, though.”

That’s because they learn their lesson the first time, Iris and Kate thought in unison. They knew saying it would do them no good, though, so they looked at one another and sighed deeply for the umpteenth time.

“Why don’t we think about solutions for now?” Kate suggested.

“Good idea,” Nordrad said. “The way we came is out of commission, but this path goes deeper. Would you happen to know where it connects to, by chance?”

“No, since we didn’t come this way on our last visit,” Iris answered him. “I won’t rule out the possibility that it leads somewhere, but following it also seems risky.”

This was the sort of place where hellflame grizzlies had once lived.

If all they had to do was slay them, lava lizards were no threat to Iris and Kate, but that was because it was a good matchup for them, and they could prepare the battlefield. If they fought without thinking about it first, the lizards were powerful opponents, and facing other monsters of the same level could also involve significant danger.

The reason they’d accepted this bodyguard job was that the types of monsters they could expect to encounter were limited, and there wasn’t going to be a salamander.

“If we can’t go back, we have to go forward, right?” Nordrad said. “Or is there another way? If you have any ideas, I’m open to hearing them, you know?”

“But we’re not confident we can protect you…” Iris murmured.

“Don’t worry, I won’t hold it against you if I get killed. Because it feels like we’re more likely to survive if we move rather than stay put.”

Maybe it was only proper for a researcher to be so logical even when his life was at stake, but as one of the ones who had to protect him, Iris couldn’t agree so readily.

Seeing her partner’s concern, Kate looked toward their bags as if remembering something. “Come to think of it, Iris, didn’t Shopkeeper-san give you a resonating stone?”

“Urgh… That thing? We’re really…going to use it?”

Kate tilted her head to the side, confused by Iris’s hesitance. “Hm…? What’s wrong? Shopkeeper-san gave it to you for free, right? When else *would* you use it? Or is she going to give us a bill for it if you do?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. I’ve already checked with her that she doesn’t want any money for it,” Iris said before murmuring, “but I ended up selling her something important in exchange.”

“Huh? What did you say?”

“No, nothing.” Iris shook her head gravely.

Incidentally, what Iris had sold to Sarasa was her sense of shame. In addition to that line which had made the final cut, Iris had been forced to say all sorts of other slightly embarrassing things. It had really ground her down.

When she considered that her words would be played back at Sarasa's house, where they would be heard by Sarasa and Lorea, as well as any customer who happened to be in the shop, it was only natural that she would hesitate to use the stone.

That said, their situation was not good. And as Kate had just pointed out, there weren't many situations that would call for her to use the stone more than this.

Slowly extracting the stone from her bag, Iris let out a heavy sigh.

"Oh, fine!" She slammed it against the ground out of desperation.

While it just looked like a stone, it was actually an artifact that was meant to be broken. The resonating stone easily crumbled, disappearing into midair as if it were evaporating.

It looked so plain that Kate blinked, slightly taken aback by it.

"That's all...? No sound or anything?" she asked.

"Y-Yeahhh, I guess not," Iris replied, relieved that nothing had happened.

If that recording had played here too, the emotional damage she would have taken would've been immeasurable.

But while the effect looked kind of plain, there was a reason for that. If she was in a situation where she needed to use the resonance stone, it might be because she was being pursued by an enemy, or was imprisoned somewhere and needed rescuing. Raising a loud noise in those scenarios could get her killed.

There was no difference between the stones on the sending and receiving side, but for the reasons already explained, the one that broke first wouldn't play the recording.

"Is that an artifact for contacting Sarasa-kun?" Nordrad asked.

"Yes. Shopkeeper-san should know we're in trouble now...right?" Kate looked at Iris.

"Yeah," Iris replied. "If she gets the message, I think she'll check on us with the homunculus..."

Having never used the artifact before, Iris didn't sound confident. She went over to their luggage and picked up Kurumi, then set the little bear down in front of her.

After that, she and Kate observed it closely, but Kurumi seemed unbothered by their stares. The bear rolled over, and let out a big yawn.

The pair didn't know what to say.

Regardless, they didn't look away, and after a long wait,

Nordrad hesitantly said, “Um, you two? I don’t think she’ll be able to synchronize her mind with it immediately.”

“Hm? She won’t?” Iris responded. “It seemed instantaneous when she showed us before.”

“That would be because of the short distance,” Nordrad explained. “Well, normally, even at close range, it would take some time, but maybe that’s down to the skill of the user? I mean, it already seems impossible for the homunculus to be operating at this distance.”

“Now that you mention it…Shopkeeper-san did say it was near the limit,” Kate recalled.

“It’s impressive that it’s moving despite that, though,” Nordrad noted. “Maybe the reason it doesn’t move much is to save on energy?”

“Hm, is that it?” Iris mused.

Having figured out that it was going to take some time, Iris was idly rubbing Kurumi’s belly. Kurumi responded by flailing its little arms around.

“Hee hee, that’s cute… Wait, Iris, could that be Shopkeeper-san?”

Kate had been watching with a smile, but at some point she noticed a change in the bear, and hurriedly grabbed Iris’s hand to stop her.

“Huh? Already?” Iris said, quickly withdrawing her hand.

With very human motions, Kurumi sat up and began looking around the area with a demeanor that could be read as exasperation.

“Is that you, Shopkeeper-dono…?” asked Iris.

“Grar,” Kurumi growled, nodding.

“I-I’m sorry!” Iris bowed her head. “I’d heard it would take you time to synchronize, so…”

Kurumi shook its head as if telling her not to worry about it, then looked around and tilted its head to the side.

“Grar?”

“There was a cave-in. Probably because of the salamander,” Iris explained.

“Nord-san performed a *really amazing* experiment, you see,” Kate added.

“Aww, you’re making me blush.”

It should have been obvious she was being sarcastic.

“Grarrr…” Kurumi growled.

“Hahh…” Iris and Kate both sighed.

Even fixed with three cold stares, Kurumi’s included, Nordrad’s iron psyche was unaffected. That may have been a valuable asset for him as a researcher, in a sense, but it must have made his life difficult in many other ways. But now wasn’t the time to talk about that.

“Grar, grar, graaar.”

With a resigned air, Kurumi gestured as if trying to tell them something, but…

“I’m sorry, Shopkeeper-dono. I can’t understand what you’re saying…”

Unfortunately, Iris and the others were not gifted with the ability to understand “animals” (?). Kurumi wandered around with a troubled look, but then eventually started scratching letters on the ground.

Do you have magic crystals? I’m running out of power.

For a homunculus, even just existing used magical power. Kurumi had been in energy-saving mode, simply hanging off of their backpacks, but if the homunculus switched over to active mode with synchronization, it was obviously going to eat up a lot more magical power.

And naturally, if it ran out, the homunculus would shut down.

Kate and Iris both hurriedly dug through their packs to find the requested crystals.

“I should have a few left…” Iris said.

“I only have a small amount too…” Kate said.

“Magic crystals? I gathered them for my experiments, so I have quite a few left over still.”

Nordrad began digging through his pack too, pulling out a leather pouch which he handed over to Kurumi. The homunculus pulled out a single magic crystal, tossed it in its mouth, and crunched down on it.

“It’s things like this that remind me it’s not a normal animal…” Iris murmured.

Kurumi glanced at her while eating another crystal, and then began scratching another message out on the ground.

Thanks. I miscalculated a little.

In Sarasa’s predictions, her magical power would have lasted until the party made it back, but this was her first time making a homunculus. Her estimation of how much magical power it took to synchronize with one over long distances had been naive.

Although she had supplemented her magical power with crystals, there was a vast gulf between the amount of power she could supply in person and the amount she could get out of crystals, so she didn't exactly have an abundance of power to work with.

For that reason, she held on to the pouch.

"Sarasa-kun, while I recognize that this is an emergency situation, and I won't object to you using my crystals, I need them for the lighting artifact, so do try to leave at least some, okay?"

"Nord-san, that can run on magical power too, right?" asked Kate. "If you'd like, I can power it. My magic is practically useless anyways."

"Oh, you'd do that? Thanks. I don't have the magical power to keep it running myself. It's a bit special, you see."

Lighting artifacts were relatively common, but there were a wide variety of them, including streetlights used in towns that could make a wide area as bright as day.

Nordrad's light was one of the more expensive sorts. It was powerful enough to light up the whole area around the cave-in earlier, but it had the drawback of eating a lot of magical power.

"It's convenient to be able to conduct research in dark places, but...I wish I had shelled out for a more efficient model," he said.

"I'm pretty sure the one you have is already far beyond what we could afford," Kate groaned with a mix of envy and exasperation.

Kurumi tapped her leg trying to get her attention. "Grar, grar!"

Time is short. Give me more details.

"Ohh, right. Erm, well to start with..." Kate explained the situation.

Understood. Will consider what can be done and contact you again. Check your emergency pack.

Once she'd heard what she'd needed to, Sarasa cut the connection to conserve magical power.

Kurumi rolled over like a puppet with its strings cut, but quickly got back up again as if nothing had happened, still holding the pouch of crystals tight.

"Are you back to being Kurumi?" Kate asked.

"Grarrr," the homunculus growled in response.

Feeling a little relieved, Kate picked Kurumi up and hugged it.

Nordrad was staring at the homunculus with academic

curiosity. “Hmm. How fascinating. Not only can she see and hear while synchronizing at such a long distance, she can even make it move as she pleases.”

“Nord-san, now’s not the time,” Kate warned him, holding Kurumi tight to protect it from his probing eyes.

Though she fixed him with a cold stare in return, Nordrad didn’t seem all that bothered, and simply shrugged and shook his head. “I won’t do anything. But more importantly, what is this ‘emergency pack’ she mentioned?”

“Ohh, that thing, huh?” Iris said. “Before we left, she handed it to me saying, ‘Open this if anything goes wrong.’ I don’t know exactly what’s in there either…”

Iris dug through her bag to find the box stowed in the very bottom of it. The metal box was around the size of an open notebook, and about as thick as a person’s fist. Kate and Nordrad looked on with interest as Iris opened the tightly sealed lid.

“There’s all sorts of stuff in there, huh?” Kate remarked.

“There is,” Iris agreed. “This potion is…an antidote, and this one’s for illness, and this one cures wounds. It’s meant to be an all-purpose kit, so she put some slightly expensive ones in, she said.”

“‘Slightly expensive’ even in Shopkeeper-san’s mind, huh? I’m a little scared.”

“Indeed. Unlike with the resonating stone, she said, ‘I’ll only charge you for what you use.’”

“So just like that magic stone with the Ice Wall spell sealed in it, huh?”

Not having to pay unless they used them meant that they could have the options available to them as insurance in an emergency free of charge, so it was an incredibly good deal for them.

However, when they thought about the price they’d be charged if they did use them, Iris and Kate, who were already mired in debt, both shuddered in terror.

Because of the urgency of their situation, they both hoped and dreaded that there would be some good stuff in there.

“Nord, could we ask you to foot the bill?” Iris asked.

“Hmm, I do bear some responsibility for our current predicament, so I wish I could offer to pay for everything, but…those potions are rather expensive, right?”

“Are they?” Iris returned the question.

“General purpose ones are, yes. They can cost several times what a potion for a specific illness or poison might… No, in some cases, it could even be tens of times. I won’t deny they serve a purpose, though.”

Although general purpose potions were less effective, it was hard to carry around the right potion when you didn’t know what illness or poison you might be afflicted by. That made them valuable, but the difficulty and cost of creating a potion that remedied many symptoms was high, and that meant the price had to go way up as well—to the point where it put them a little out of Iris and Kate’s price range.

“Well, we might need to treat our injuries, but I can’t see us needing to use the potions for illness or poison.”

“Iris, when you say a thing like that, I think it’s called foreshadowing?” Kate warned. “We wouldn’t need to worry about it if we were just staying here, but there could be venomous snakes and insects up ahead, okay?”

Setting aside that bit about foreshadowing, this was an unfamiliar cave, one that they had never explored before. The odds of there being venomous insects and the like were by no means low.

Iris groaned a little at Kate’s perfectly reasonable criticism. “If it comes to it…we’ll do our part to negotiate with Shopkeeper-dono too.”

“Please do,” said Nordrad. “I’m not exactly rich myself.”

“Right,” Iris replied. “Now then, next we have…a spring bottle. She’s shown me one of these before.”

“That’s good to have,” said Nordrad. “We’ve got some food left, but I wasn’t feeling optimistic about our water situation.”

It might have looked like an ordinary water bottle at first glance, but this was a proper artifact. It was the size of a tall cup, and would fill with water when you poured magical power into it. It was a convenient item that would let even a person with an average magical capacity travel without carrying water with them.

That said, no matter how much magical power was available, the spring bottle could only make so much water in a given amount of time, so whether it was Kate or Sarasa using it, they would end up with the same amount of water.

If someone used it for a full day, they could secure several

bathtubs' worth of water, but the average person would exhaust their magical power in less than ten minutes, so that wasn't a realistic thing to actually do.

"There's another one that's orange. What's it for?" asked Kate.

"That one produces water too, but...it's sweet and tasty," Iris answered.

"But why?"

"Uh, don't ask me. Shopkeeper-dono's the one who made it..."

Iris trailed off, not sure how to answer Kate's question, but Nordrad's eyes widened with surprise.

"That's not an artifact you see often. They're hardly ever produced."

"Really?" Iris asked. "Shopkeeper-dono was pretty casual about it, saying she just made it because she was already making the other one."

"It's partially because of the difficulty of making one, but more due to the lack of demand. It takes far more magical power to produce water with it, and you wouldn't want that sort of luxury in a situation where you're relying on a spring bottle, right? And if you're already in town, then you can just buy juice."

For reference, it took ten times the magical power to produce one tenth the water. That was beyond inefficient if they were just looking to hydrate themselves.

However, it had the benefit of having some sugar content in addition to the water, so it felt like it might have some application if they were stranded somewhere—but it wasn't actually all that convenient. Using this orange spring bottle, an ordinary person could only make a cup or two a day.

Generating enough to keep yourself nourished was pretty much out of the question unless you had an awfully high magical capacity.

Sarasa had included it in the pack anyway because she had thought that a sweet drink might provide some relief in a stressful situation.

"I guess that one's just an extra, then," Iris said with a little disappointment as she looked at the spring bottle Kate was holding. "It was so sweet and tasted so good, though..."

The next thing Iris pulled out of the pack was a magic crystal—but since this was an emergency pack, these weren't just any magic crystals.

"Is that like the one that made that ice wall earlier?" Nordrad

asked.

“Yeah, it is,” Iris answered. “Although, I understand there are a variety of spells sealed inside them.”

“They’re expensive too… Nord-san.”

“I know. Don’t hesitate to use them if the need arises. I’ll foot the bill.”

“Thanks,” said Iris. “If we had to pay for it ourselves, I doubt all the wages you’re paying us would cover it…”

Iris and Kate checked what each magic crystal did before pocketing them. There weren’t many, so they could only really use them as trump cards, but since they didn’t have a powerful magic user along on this expedition, they were a reassuring lifeline to have.

Finally, there were three little boxes, each small enough to rest in the palm of one hand.

“These are…trail rations,” noted Kate. “I’ve seen them before, but I’ve never eaten them.”

“I have,” said Iris. “One or two pieces will feed you for a day.”

“That’s all it takes?” Kate marveled. “Well, we won’t be starving, then. That’s good news.”

The paper boxes contained one-centimeter cubes.

There were piled up three deep, for a total of three hundred cubes per box.

“The remaining two boxes are… Urkh, there’s three different types, huh?”

Iris had looked a little happy when she saw the white cubes in the first box Kate had opened, but she frowned as green and yellow cubes appeared in the other boxes.

“What’s wrong? Are these ones different somehow?” Kate asked.

“Yeah, the ones you’re holding there are the best variety. They taste good, and are full of nutrients. Like I said before, one piece will last you a day.”

However, that estimate was based on a grown man living an ordinary life in town. For people who moved around a lot like day laborers or gatherers, one piece was not quite enough, so they had to eat another or supplement it with other food.

“Next are the yellow ones,” Iris continued. “They’re also sweet and tasty. They’ll give you enough energy to get through the day, but if you eat nothing but them, you’ll eventually get sick. I don’t really get how it works.”

“I think I do,” Nordrad piped in. “It’s like how you can fill your stomach with nothing but bread, but it’s not good for you if you don’t eat meat and vegetables too.”

People knew from experience that eating nothing but grain was unhealthy and could stunt a person’s growth, but only a select few really understood why, like alchemists who played at being doctors, or educated people like researchers. That was why even Iris, who was more educated than the average person, had only a vague understanding of how it worked.

“I see,” Iris said. “It makes sense now that you put it like that… Though, it’s a mystery to me why the white ones are okay.”

“Those shortcomings must have been worked out,” Nordrad replied. “Not cheaply, though.”

“So the white ones are expensive?”

“They are. They’ll cost five times what the green ones do. Guaranteed.”

“Five times… If you’re saying that, then do you know about these green ones, Nord? And how awful they taste?”

“Huh? They’re not so bad. I’m not going to try and tell you they taste good, mind you, but they’re fine aside from the taste, and you can get a day’s worth of eating done in ten seconds. They’re useful when you’re in a hurry.”

The green rations cost only a little more than a commoner spent on food for a day.

Factoring in the time saved and ease of carrying them, they weren’t that expensive for someone engaged in intellectual labor, but the common opinion of their taste was more in line with Iris’s. It was like eating dried biscuits made out of bitter grass.

Hardly anyone, with the exception of oddballs like Nordrad, would eat them by choice.

The yellow ones were priced somewhere in between the white and the green. As such, these three boxes contained a small fortune in rations.

“Well, let’s forget about the taste for now. With nine hundred of them in total, even eating two each, we can survive for another hundred and fifty days.”

Kate sounded a little relieved as she closed the boxes of rations, but…

“Hrmm, I don’t know about that?”

Nordrad groaned with a difficult look on his face as he called

her conclusion into question.

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“Whew.”

“H-How were they, Sarasa-san?!”

The moment my mind returned to my body, Lorea-chan, who was sitting in the chair next to mine, started shaking me.

“Ahh, sorry, give me a moment…”

“O-Okay.”

Synchronizing over a long distance when I wasn’t used to it had taken more out of me than I’d expected it to. Feeling lightheaded due to the disconnect with my own body, I held my head to support it and took a deep breath.

“Um, are you okay?” Lorea-chan asked.

“Yeah, just a little tired,” I answered. “Okay. So let me tell you what happened.”

Once my senses had recovered, I went over the situation that had been explained to me. The blood gradually drained from Lorea-chan’s face and she started to tremble.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What do we do?!”

“Calm down. The situation’s not good, but it could be a lot worse. They’re trapped, but not currently in danger, and no one is injured. I don’t know if that will continue to be the case, but there is a path that leads deeper, and as far as food goes…they should have plenty left.”

The emergency pack I’d given to Iris had rations in it. If they just put up with the taste, they could survive a long time on them. And since I’d seen this coming, I’d included all sorts of other stuff too—okay, no, that was a lie.

After making the resonating stones, I’d been struck by pangs of conscience over how bright red Iris-san’s face had flushed with shame, so I had included some nicer stuff in the pack than I had originally planned to. That included some things I’d made but had no real use for myself.

“That said,” I went on, “if they don’t have a plan for getting out of there, that’s only going to buy them time before they eventually die.”

“That’s terrible!!!”

“Yeah. Which is why we need to come up with a plan.”

There was nothing to be gained by panicking. As I maintained

a deliberately calm tone, Lorea-chan leaned back and adjusted her sitting position in her chair, nodding in agreement.

“Is it impossible for you to go save them, Sarasa-san?”

“That’s a reasonable suggestion, but it would be hard for me to do it all by myself, and the situation and location aren’t helping matters.”

First, there was the location. It required specialized equipment to operate there, which was why only Iris-san and Kate-san had been able to come with me the last time. This time, I only had enough for myself.

Second, there was the situation. If it was just a cave-in, I could go rescue them myself if all else failed, but there was also the revived salamander to contend with on top of that.

If I went, I’d be in danger myself. In rescue operations, securing your own safety had to come first and foremost, because overextending yourself could lead to secondary accidents, which would only serve to increase the number of victims.

“Could you defeat the salamander again…?”

“Not likely. I brute-forced my way through it last time, and even then, it was close.”

It was fair to say that I’d only pulled it off because we’d had an abundance of frostbite bat fangs at the time. Naturally, there was no way I could gather the same amount in a short time frame.

“W-Well, then how can we…”

“Fundamentally, they’re going to have to try to get themselves out, I guess? There’s a path that leads in deeper, so we’ll have them explore it… They’ll probably need some support.”

“What can you do?”

“For one example, there’s an artifact that would show the way out—or more precisely, an artifact that can show whether a path in the cave is connected to the outside, but…”

The problem was that it only showed if it was connected to the outside. Once they got there, the opening might be too small for a person to pass through, they might find themselves at the bottom of a deep hole with the sky up above, or they might come out of a hole in the side of a sheer cliff—none of which were conducive to escape.

I should also add that, unless it was a particularly high-quality one, it would struggle to even tell them that much, instead only

saying that there were no dead ends ahead for a set distance.

"That still sounds pretty useful, but it won't do them any good if you can't get it to them."

"Oh, I do have a way of doing that. Because they've got Kurumi with them."

Originally, artifacts were developed as a way of letting everyone use magic. That meant that anything that could be done using an artifact could also be done using magic—in principle, at least.

It wasn't that simple in practice, however. For example, when it came time to just start blasting away with attack magic, that was easier to do directly, but for intricate, complicated magic, you had a higher chance of success if you took the time to draw out the magic circuit, and use valuable materials to make an artifact. It was all situational.

Neither method was better than the other across the board. If artifacts did have an overwhelming advantage in one area, I supposed it was that they could be used even by people who couldn't use magic?

"So, um...that searching magic, was it? You're going to use it through Kurumi?"

"Good guess, Lorea-chan. There are some things that make that difficult, but you're close. I think it would help them. But..."

"But?"

"I can't make that artifact yet, you know?"

"Well that's no good, then, is it?!"

I think it was in volume six or seven.

An alchemist's level determined which volumes of the *Complete Alchemy Works* they could read, and it just wasn't realistic for me to finish up all the remaining artifacts in the fifth volume right now.

"Hrmm, there is a work-around, though..."

I could ask someone who *could* read it to copy out the instructions, or teach me how to do it themselves. That would let me make any artifact without depending on the *Complete Works.*

"Um... Is that allowed?"

"It's not great that people do it, but...uh, it's sort of allowed."

Alchemy was a business, and not one that was so easy that an alchemist could afford to let their new apprentices make items they had no plan for selling. That being the case, the senior alchemists or master would have them make whatever orders

came in, regardless of the volume number the artifacts came from.

Back when I worked in Master's shop, I hadn't made things starting with the first volume and going from there. Instead, I'd made what Master had told me to, and the end result was that I'd made everything up through volume three. I was sure that Master had probably—no, definitely—adjusted some things to make that happen.

"But this time...it's a little questionable. If she says no, I'll think about other options then."

It was a measure that was accepted because the person responsible for overseeing your work could step in to help you if you messed things up, after all.

"Anyway, I won't know until I ask."

Keen to act quickly, I set about writing a letter to Master. I figured she'd say no if I didn't explain the situation, so I was careful to include the details.

"Um, is there anything I can do to help?"

"Hmm, I think the biggest thing you can do is watch the shop like normal. Unless I have somebody to do that for me, I can't completely focus on rescuing them."

"Of course I'll do that, but is there anything else...?"

"Let me think..."

I could sympathize with her desire to do something for our imperiled gatherers, but despite being wiser and more creative than other girls her age, Lorea-chan was still just a minor. It wasn't like she had a ton of stamina, and she wouldn't be any more useful than any other average person in battle. If I considered the dangers involved in sending her into the forest, and the risk that she herself would also become stranded, I couldn't have her do anything directly.

"Oh, I know. Can I ask you to power the Auxiliary Grower? I'd like to conserve my own magical power."

It wasn't that big a drain considering my total reserve of magical power, and the odds that it would mean the difference between life and death for the others—yeah, it was pretty unlikely.

But I couldn't rule it out one hundred percent, and it would let Lorea-chan feel she was helping, while also helping to train her manipulation of magic.

In fact, she was flaring her nostrils as she psyched herself up

to help right now.

"Got it! You can count on me. And if there's anything else, just say the word, okay?"

"Sure. I'll be counting on you if there is."

Master's response came faster than I expected. In addition to the details on the artifact I'd asked her about, the "escape route detector," she'd also included a note saying, "If all else fails, contact me," but I wanted to avoid doing that.

I mean, normally, if I were paying a master class alchemist like her to rescue them, it would have cost an insane amount.

We were talking so much that the Lotze family debt, which we'd managed to pay back the other day, would be nothing by comparison.

That said, Master's a nice person, despite her grumbling, so I think she'd let us off with an amount we could afford... I mean, obviously.

But I also understood that, given the influential position that master class alchemists held in society, it might not be that simple.

"But if their lives are in danger, I'll have to consider going crying to Master."

Whatever the cost, it can't be greater than Iris-san's and Kate-san's lives.

And Nord-san? This may sound cold, but maybe I don't care what happens to him.

Actually, I want him to take responsibility for all of this. I put my alchemy above everything, so I can understand him wanting to put his research first. But don't get Iris-san and Kate-san caught up in it. I don't care how much you're paying them, it's not enough for this.

"Well, I guess I need to analyze this first."

Master had sent me notes on how to make an escape route detector. I needed to break down the structure, and extract the magic used.

It was normal for the magic to be built into an artifact, so I was working backward from that, which wasn't very difficult. It was much easier to take something apart than to put it together, after all. The issue was going to be how to make it so Kurumi could use it...

"I guess the thing to do would be to use Kurumi's magic circuit? I have to consider how much power is needed to keep

Kurumi running, and we'll need to use magic crystals, though, huh? Hrmm, this is much more difficult than just casting it myself…"

And even after all that effort, it would only tell us if a route *might* lead outside. It was too optimistic to assume this alone would be enough to get them out. I'd need to consider several options, including going there to rescue them personally.

"Are there any other useful artifacts…? And should I maybe prepare some potions in case they're needed…?"

I considered and rejected a number of ideas, racking my brain over how we were going to bring Iris-san and Kate-san home safe and sound.

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"Nord, is there a problem?" Iris asked, her brow furrowing with concern and a little irritation.

Nordrad had contradicted Kate's assertion that everything would be all right for the time being. "Well, you girls don't seem to be too bothered by it, but this area is quite hot."

"Huh… Oh!"

Once Nordrad pointed this out, Kate had a sharp moment of realization: Iris's and Kate's heat-resistant equipment was high enough quality that they could have stood next to lava without really noticing the heat, so they didn't even feel uncomfortable here. But Nordrad's equipment was a few grades below theirs.

Looking at him more closely, his brow was sweaty, and it occasionally dripped. That was just how hot it was around them, which would inevitably increase their consumption of water and stop them from resting properly.

"So there was that kind of issue… Are you all right, Nord?"

"I do work out a lot, after all. Fortunately, the floating tent that Sarasa-kun made for me had a temperature adjustment function, so I can rest in there if I don't worry about my magical power. It'll be fine."

"I see…" Iris said with a relieved nod, but then cocked her head to the side in confusion. "Hm? What's the problem, then?"

"Like I said, my magical power. My heat-resistant equipment makes constant use of it too. Especially when it's hot in the area around me."

The equipment made use of highly insulating materials, but

that wasn't enough for the wearer to exist comfortably in a high-temperature environment. It had to be backed up by an internal cooling system powered by magic.

That magic power was drawn from the wearer, and was proportional to the surrounding temperature. Even when the cost was low, continuous magic usage put strain on the body.

"No matter how good your equipment is, it must be using some power, right?"

In fact, Iris's and Kate's heat-resistant equipment was so highly efficient you would never see anything like it being sold in a shop.

It was made to be comfortable enough that even Sarasa, who was confident in her combat abilities and magical power, but not her stamina, could keep going for a long time. She had made theirs to that standard, while also making it efficient enough that they could work alongside her with their lower magical capacities.

Sarasa had made them that way because she would have felt guilty being the only one who was comfortable, and the result was that their equipment was such high quality that, normally, they wouldn't even have to think about how much magical power it used. But they had to question if it would stand up to tens of days operating in a high-temperature environment.

Iris and Kate met this realization with grim expressions.

"Y-You're right, that is a major problem," Iris conceded.

"Right?" Nordrad agreed. "And if we can't fight off the heat anymore, our ability to recover our magical power will slow down, and we'll use more water."

"And we'll be making that water with magical power too..." Kate noted. "It's a vicious cycle."

"Yeah. For my part... Well, I won't move more than necessary, but I need you girls to keep up your stamina enough that you can fight."

"If we were to take these off... Ahh, that wouldn't work," Iris thought out loud. "Even without fighting, it's questionable whether we'd last a day here without them."

The surrounding air wasn't so hot that it would be immediately life-threatening without heat-resistant equipment, but if they went to sleep here without doing anything to prepare, they wouldn't wake up the next morning because they'd be dead of heat stroke.

Iris tried taking off her coat to test it, but quickly shook her head and put it back on.

"So basically, if we run out of magical power, we run out of life," she concluded.

"That's what it means, yes," said Nordrad. "We can cover some of it with magic crystals, but we'd be finished the moment they ran out. Unless your magic recovers especially quickly, that is."

"No, I think you're probably right, Nord-san," Kate acknowledged.

At a bare minimum, their magic recovery would have to keep up with the demands of their heat-resistant equipment and the spring bottle just to maintain the status quo, but in this environment, it was questionable if even Kate, who had the most magical power of the three, could meet that requirement.

If they ended up exhausting themselves in battle on top of that, that would also impact their magic recovery, and their consumption of water too, of course, which would mean using yet more magical power.

"Murrrgh..." Iris groaned. "I'd bet Shopkeeper-dono would have no problem at all..."

"But we're not her," Kate said. "Although, I think we're lucky to be doing as well as we are, given the situation."

It was incredibly fortuitous that they had the emergency pack, and this was a problem that, normally, the three would have had to confront alone.

"With all of that in mind, how about we decide on our policy, going forward?"

Nordrad looked a bit haggard, but smiled as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

The party talked for some time, but found they had almost no realistic options. If they stayed here and waited for rescue, Sarasa was their only hope, but she wasn't obligated to come save them. She'd do her best for Iris and Kate, of course, but they weren't so shameless that they could bring themselves to rely on her completely.

That said, since they couldn't dig out the collapsed tunnel, they could only travel in deeper.

There was a risk of dangerous encounters, but they had no other options, and even finding somewhere cooler than this would be beneficial to them. For those reasons and more, the

group started walking, but…

“Don’t you…think…it’s starting…to get hotter?” Nordrad groaned between breaths half a day later.

While the path had taken them up and down, the cave had generally been stretching upward. But eventually that had reversed, and now they were at an even lower elevation than where the cave-in had been. That probably had something to do with the rise in temperature.

Kate and Iris hadn’t even noticed the change in temperature thanks to their better gear, but thought better of telling him that.

“Do you want to stop and rehydrate?” Kate offered instead.

“That would help…” Nordrad replied, wiping his sweat and then handing an almost empty waterskin to Kate.

Kate took the waterskin and tilted the spring bottle toward it, running her magic through the artifact to produce water.

“Kate-kun, is your magic holding up?” Nordrad asked.

“For now, at least… I suppose I have Shopkeeper-san to thank for that.”

This was already the fourth time Kate had refilled his waterskin.

Considering the average person could produce fifteen to twenty liters per day, and she was continuously using her heat-resistant equipment at the same time, it felt like Kate should’ve been starting to struggle, even with her higher capacity, and yet she wasn’t even feeling the exhaustion that came with expending magical power.

“That’s excellent news. If I needed to start conserving water, my muscles wouldn’t be able to take it anymore.”

Iris and Kate were both silent. They wanted to poke fun at how he should be saying his body, not his muscles, but Nordrad wasn’t entirely wrong.

Unlike the path that had taken them from the cave mouth to the salamander’s lair, this was a natural cave. They had to climb over boulders and up rock walls, crouching as they moved through areas where the ceiling was too low, and taking off their packs and turning sideways to get through spots that were too narrow.

Not only were they not covering much distance, it was often an intense strain on their bodies, so as the one carrying the most, Nordrad’s limbs were starting to tire.

“This road is more precipitous than I’d expected,” said Iris.

“It’s pretty different from the path we came through initially,” Kate agreed.

“That must’ve been the route the salamander used to come in and out. Given how easy it was to walk along,” Nordrad explained.

“In turn, that means the salamander didn’t come this way, huh?” Iris noted.

Reassuring as that was, another way to look at it was that that made it unclear whether this path would lead them outside.

But even if they realized that, nobody was going to say it.

“How’s your stamina, Nord?” Iris asked hesitantly.

“Honestly, I’m reaching my limits. The survey work was fine, but between being chased by a salamander and blazing a trail through this cave, it’s been a rough day.”

“Yeah, it sure has…”

“Tell me about it…”

Iris and Kate looked at one another, nodding with wholehearted agreement.

Despite how eventful things had been, not even a single day had passed. If not for an unintended—no, an intentional accident, they’d have been on their way home.

That thought caused awkward, dark feelings to rise up inside of them.

Iris pushed them back down into the recesses of her heart as she asked Nordrad, “Do you know the time? It’s probably about time we got some rest.”

“Oh, give me a moment. I have a clock, since I need to observe things at different times of day.” Nordrad dug the timepiece out of his bag before saying, “Let’s see… The sun should already have set outside. It’s still a little early to sleep, but do you want to rest?”

Iris nodded. “That sounds like a plan. You must be reaching your limits too, right, Nord?”

“Honestly, yes. I might be fine for a few days, but pushing myself like this won’t work over a longer period.”

“All right. Then let’s have dinner,” suggested Kate. “We’ll probably want to eat any food we have other than the rations sooner rather than later.”

“You have a point there,” Nordrad agreed. “It’d be a shame to let it spoil… Although, considering the temperature here, that might actually not be much of a problem. Ha ha ha…”

“I couldn’t say one way or the other, but…let’s eat anything that could be at risk quickly. Even if that means dinner’s a bit more luxurious as a result.”

“We’ll just have to hope it’s not our last supper…” Iris murmured.

They all fell deathly silent at this unfunny comment.

Then, once they’d finished the sumptuous dinner Kate prepared for them, they all turned in early for the night.

Camping out with the combination of floating tent and heat-resistant gear was even more comfortable than they had imagined, but either because of their continuous use of magic, or the psychological impact of being trapped in an enclosed space, they didn’t wake up feeling well rested.

Shaking their heavy heads, the party crawled out of their tents, ate a much leaner breakfast than the day before, and then continued deeper into the cave.

The path was as bad as ever, but fortunately there were no forks in it. They did see some gaps here and there that they couldn’t possibly fit through, but whether those led to the outside was irrelevant to them. It was convenient not being able to get lost.

That good luck only lasted until around noon.

“Looks like there’s a fork in the road here,” Iris said.

“Yeah,” Nordrad agreed. “Not that this is much of a road, though.”

“I feel like we could go down any of them without needing to talk it over,” Kate said.

The trio had come to a place where the path split into three narrow rifts, each only just large enough to barely accommodate one person.

These gaps, which cleaved deep into the earth, weren’t even wide enough at the bottom for both of their legs, requiring them to support themselves with their arms as they advanced.

That difficulty was the same no matter which crack they chose, so Kate was right that the difficulty of any given one wasn’t going to be a deciding factor.

“There’s no point dwelling on it,” Iris said after a long pause. “We’ll have to try them one after another.”

She let out a long sigh as she thought of the troubles that no doubt awaited them.

From the second day onward, the party didn't make much progress.

The path through the cave had already been treacherous enough, but with the added trouble of branching paths, most of which came to dead ends, they were exhausted both mentally and physically, requiring them to stop for breaks.

That meant less time exploring, and they only made marginal gains in distance traveled.

Then, on the fourth day, when they had all grown taciturn from the stress of wasted effort, Kurumi, who was hanging onto Iris's pack in energy saving mode, started to move.

"Grar, grar!"

"Oh...? Ohh, what is it, Kurumi? Are you hungry?" Iris asked, her brain too tired to think properly.

"Don't be silly, Iris! It must be Shopkeeper-san!"

Kate grabbed Iris's arm and pulled her to a stop. Kurumi jumped down to the ground, nodding as if to confirm what Kate was saying.

Then, after looking at each of them, the homunculus started writing on the ground.

"Tired?"

"Pathetic as it feels to admit it, yes," said Iris. "Even though we've been managing to endure the heat, thanks to you, Shopkeeper-dono, and we haven't fought any intense battles..."

Though she didn't show it often, Iris had grown up as a nobleman's daughter. She'd grown used to harsher environments after becoming a gatherer, but even then she generally only headed out for day trips. She had minimal experience with serious gathering, where a group might camp out for days on end.

The trip to slay the salamander last time had been a hard one, but they'd had Sarasa with them, whom they could rely on in battle, and their guardians, Adelbert and Caterina, had come too. That had been hugely reassuring.

But now? They could only rely on themselves in battle. Nordrad needed to be protected, and they didn't know how they were going to get out of their current predicament. The psychological stress was weighing down on them even more than the physical.

On that point, with his inferior equipment, Nordrad should

have had it even worse physically than Iris and Kate did. However, he had experience with worse environments from his monster observations, and experience dealing with crisis situations too, so he had more room left psychologically than they did.

"Honestly, I have my worries on the magical power front," he said. "The spring bottle and heat-resistant equipment are our lifelines, so if we run out of magic, we'll immediately find ourselves in grave danger. Any thoughts, Sarasa-kun?"

Kurumi tilted its head to the side at this question, then started scratching its response out on the ground.

"You won't have trouble with your magical capacity. As long as you don't overuse the orange-colored spring bottle."

"What?! Do you mean it?!" Iris asked.

"I thought it was much closer than that, though?" Nordrad was confused.

"Not at all. In this temperature, you'll be fine as long as you don't try to take a bath."

After reading that message, everyone's shoulders fell as they breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well, I'm not going to be trying to take a bath here, obviously, but...can I take that to mean that we can use the heat-resistant gear, sleep in the floating tents, and produce more water than we'll ever drink?" Iris asked.

"Yep. It's not just Kate-san who has a large magic capacity, Iris-san. You do too."

"I never realized... Well, I'm suddenly a whole lot more relieved now."

"You can also use the orange one for up to a cup a day, no problem. So drink something sweet to refresh yourselves."

That was the reason Sarasa had included the orange spring bottle. Even if they ran out of rations, and were forced to rely on gathering food, just having that one sweet drink a day could do wonders for the psyche.

"But that only goes for the artifacts I've given you. I don't know about the ones other people made."

"That's fair," said Nordrad. "Artifacts vary in their efficiency, and you can't compare those made by someone who apprenticed directly under a master class alchemist with those made by an alchemist you might find anywhere. Still, that level of efficiency is impressive, I have to admit."

“The floating tent can also run on materials from monsters. It’s a bit of a waste, though.”

Normally, an artifact needed magical power or magic crystals, but if you had materials with a lot of magical power in them, like frostbite bat fangs, it was possible to use those as fuel too. But unless the artifact and material were a good match, like frostbite bat fangs in a refrigerator, doing so would be horribly inefficient.

In terms of the value of those materials, it was even more wasteful than converting the fangs to magic crystals, which Sarasa had considered doing at one point.

“I see. If we need to, we’ll use them. We can’t sell expensive materials if we don’t survive to bring them back.”

“Ominous much?!” Iris protested.

“But it’s true, isn’t it? I’m alive now because I’ve always put my life first. When I have to, I’ll throw away valuable research equipment to escape. You have to be able to make those kinds of decisions to make it as a monster researcher.”

Nordrad sounded proud of himself, but Iris and Kate had sour looks on their faces.

“Then I wish you’d be a little more careful with your experiments…” Kate grumbled.

“Nord, you realize you’re responsible for this mess, right?” Iris said pointedly.

“I’m aware,” he replied. “But my experiments take priority. And if my experiments endanger my life, I’m prepared to sacrifice other things to save it.”

It seemed somewhat contradictory, but if his own life was his top priority, then he wouldn’t have been able to do something as risky as researching monsters in the first place. Nordrad probably had some sort of criteria for assessing the importance of an experiment and the risk it posed to his life, but no ordinary person could have understood it.

It was definitely beyond Iris and Kate, at least. With a sigh at the way Nordrad was puffing his chest out with pride, Iris turned back to Kurumi.

“Anyway, Shopkeeper-dono. I don’t suppose…there’s anything you can do to help?” Iris asked hesitantly, the situation being what it was.

Kurumi nodded. *“That reminds me. I have an escape route detector for you.”*

Iris and Kate just sort of cocked their heads to the side at this

message, but Nordrad seemed to recognize the name.

"Hmm, an escape route detector... I've heard of those."

"Oh, you have? I don't know anything about them," said Iris.

"That would be because it's not the sort of thing most people would ever need," Nordrad said. "Its use cases are rather limited, such as exploring unfamiliar caves, or when there's been a mine shaft accident."

Nordrad only knew of them because he'd had occasion to hear the name when looking into researching monsters that lived in caves.

"That saves time, then. You explain."

"Sure," Nordrad agreed. "Just as the name suggests, it's an artifact that finds a path leading outside. In short, we'll be spared heading down any more paths that just come to a dead end. The more treacherous the path, the worse the feeling of wasted effort ends up being, so it's valuable to be able to avoid that with this."

"But there's drawbacks too."

"It's true," Nordrad concurred. "It can only tell us if there are no dead ends within a certain range. It won't know if the path branches, or how long it goes. That range is dependent on the performance of the artifact and the magical power used, so what should we expect as far as that goes?"

"It's not going to be very good. Because this is a highly irregular way of doing things."

"Go figure. I mean, how are we even planning to use it? I've heard nonsense stories about how a capable alchemist can use magic through a homunculus."

"That's not nonsense. It's real. Difficult, but real. So I'll make it here."

When they read what Kurumi had written, not just Iris and Kate, but also Nordrad, who had considerable knowledge as a researcher, gulped.

"Make it... You mean the artifact? I've never heard of that being possible..."

"I asked Master for help. It's not impossible."

"Oh, I see. So, with a master class alchemist's experience, it's possible, then...?"

"But it won't be a proper artifact, more of a support item. Kurumi will be the one that uses it."

"Kurumi... You mean you'll be using it through Kurumi,

Shopkeeper-san?" Kate asked, seeking confirmation, but Kurumi shook its head.

"No. Kurumi will use it itself. I can't synchronize whenever you want to use it, and even if I could, there's not enough magic power. You're cutting it pretty close, by the way. Time for a magic crystal."

As soon as Kurumi finished writing, it stuck out its paw. Iris and the others stared at it briefly, but then it hit Kate what was meant, and she hurriedly dug out a magic crystal and handed it over.

Kurumi tossed it in its mouth. *Crunch, crunch.*

"Oh, right. We have to maintain Kurumi's body..." murmured Iris.

"And we have a limited number of magic crystals," added Kate.

As things stood, even just having Sarasa synchronize with Kurumi massively increased the magical power it consumed. In light of that, having her stay connected continuously was obviously out of the question.

It was difficult enough for her to connect periodically for short periods to check on them.

"We don't have much time. I need materials to make it. Lay out whatever artifacts and materials you have on you."

"O-Okay!"

Iris and Kate laid out the materials they had managed to gather, while Nordrad laid out the tools he used in his experiments. Kurumi walked in between them, picking up a number of items.

"Do you mind if I break them?"

"Not one bit," said Nordrad. "Our lives are more important. It's a painful blow to my wallet, though."

"Thanks," Kurumi wrote, then hurriedly got to work.

With brilliant claw work, the homunculus dismantled the artifacts, combined them, and scratched a magic circuit into the result.

The trio watched as Kurumi did work that seemed impossibly detailed for its little bear paws. After it had consumed another three magic crystals, the pseudo-artifact was complete.

"All done."

At first glance, it was a board with some patterns drawn on it, attached to an awkward assortment of other parts. Not being alchemists, the party had no clue what to make of it, but if

Sarasa said it was done, then they had to take her at her word.

"Can we…use this?" Iris asked.

"It'll be fine. Just say, 'Identify a path,' and Kurumi will. It's not very durable, so handle it with care."

"Okay, I'll carry it, then," Nordrad volunteered. "I have…a lot less to carry now, after all."

His eyes were on the wreckage of his artifacts. There was a lot more material in the discarded-parts pile compared to what had been picked out and used to make the pseudo-artifact, so he had probably just lost a lot of value.

"Is there no more use for all that, now?" Iris asked, sounding a little disappointed as she looked at the discard pile.

"It's trash," Kurumi replied simply.

The fact was, artifacts were such intricate pieces of equipment that, when a transmutation failed, the only option was to throw out everything. The work of pulling anything usable out of them was extraordinarily difficult, and it tended to be closer to shaving the unneeded bits off of the artifact than removing a specific part. It was just not possible to expect those shavings to maintain their value.

"Okay, so we can leave all this stuff," Kate concluded. "Thanks, Shopkeeper-san."

Kurumi nodded, then hurriedly scrawled, *"I'm cutting the connection now. I'll be avoiding full synchronization as much as possible from here on. Good luck,"* before rolling over like before.

"Huh? Already? Shopkeeper-dono…? Did she cut the connection?"

"Grar," Kurumi growled, as if in response to the question. Iris was surprised by this, and hugged the little bear tight.

"She seemed to be in an awful hurry… I hadn't even been able to thank her yet."

"I think she was pushing her limits," Nordrad suggested. "If you consider the distance and the complexity of the work she did."

"That's true," Kate agreed. "She was doing some pretty advanced stuff there… Looks like we've put ourselves in Shopkeeper-san's debt once again."

"Indeed," Iris said. "We'll have to make it back. Both to thank her, and so we can repay the debt of gratitude. Also, she wrote that she wouldn't do a *full* synchronization, but…"

Was there an incomplete synchronization? Nordrad had the

answer to that: “She can synchronize just her vision and hearing. That reduces the consumption of magical power a little, but we’re also going to need Kurumi’s power to use the escape route detector. I suspect she won’t be synchronizing unless something big happens.”

“So we can’t count on any more help from Shopkeeper-san, then,” Kate concluded with a hint of disappointment, but Iris shook her head with a serious expression on her face.

“This is a situation where, normally, there would be no help at all. She’s done more than enough just giving us this emergency pack and artifact. We need to work with what we have and get ourselves out of this mess now. We’re counting on you, okay, Kurumi?”

“Grar!” Still cradled in Iris’s arms as she looked straight into its eyes, Kurumi raised an energetic paw.

The party were somewhat worried whether they would actually be able to use the pseudo escape route detector that Sarasa had created for them remotely, but they soon had a chance to prove it for themselves.

Following Sarasa’s advice, they took a rest and enjoyed a drink from the orange spring bottle. Then, ten minutes after they resumed exploring, they came to a triple fork in the path.

One was a passage Iris had to duck to walk through, another was a crack she would need to turn sideways for, and the last looked like she’d have to get down on all fours and crawl.

“Up until now, we’ve had to try the largest path first, but…”

“We should probably give it a try, yeah. Shopkeeper-san did make it for us, after all.”

“In that case…I guess I should set this down?”

Nordrad set the pseudo escape route detector down on the ground before turning back to Iris and nodding. She returned his nod, then looked at Kurumi.

“Okay, Kurumi. ‘Identify a path.’”

“Grar!”

On Iris’s command, Kurumi jumped down to the ground and stood in front of the pseudo escape route detector. It placed its hands on the device and let out a growl.



At the same time, the pseudo escape route detector began emitting a faint light. Kurumi removed its hands from the device and immediately began the next step.

“Grarrr, grarr, gra-grarr!”

Kurumi circled around the pseudo escape route detector like it was performing a dance.

It went around it once, twice, three times. The light grew with each circuit, and then...

“Gra-graaar!!!”

With that cry, Kurumi struck a pose with both arms raised.

With that ritual (?) completed, noticing that Kurumi was no longer moving, Iris hesitantly asked, “Are you...done?”

“Grar!” Kurumi answered confidently.

It pointed to the largest tunnel. “Grar.” It crossed its arms.

“This path is a dead end, you’re saying?” Iris asked.

“Grar.” Kurumi nodded.

It then went to the next opening and did the same.

Then, coming to the hole they would have to crawl through, it raised both hands over its head to form a circle...or something approximating one, but its arms were too short for a proper circle.

“Pfft...” Iris cracked up a little before asking, “I-I guess this means we can go through here?”

“Grar.” Kurumi nodded.

“I see. Thanks. I’m very appreciative, but...we’re going through *here*?”

Though Iris smiled as she thanked the homunculus, she let out a depressed sigh as she looked back to the small size of the hole.

It was tight enough that they were bound to get stuck if they went through wearing their packs.

Obviously, she would have preferred to avoid going down a path like this, where she couldn’t even see what was up ahead.

“We’ll have to,” Kate said. “As for our stuff...I guess we have to pull it along using ropes.”

“I suppose...” Iris let out a sigh and began taking off her pack.

“Iris-kun, would you prefer I lead the way?” Nordrad offered, but Iris shook her head without hesitation.

“No, I clearly can’t ask you to do that. We’re technically here as your bodyguards, after all... Okay!”

Having psyched herself up, Iris got down on all fours, but

then Kurumi stopped her, standing in front and tapping its own chest lightly.

“Grar, graaar.”

“Hm? What?” Iris asked.

“Are you…suggesting you want to go ahead of us?” Kate asked.

“Grar!”

Kurumi pointed at Kate as if to say *You got it!* Then it headed down the hole ahead of Iris.

“Graaarrr!”

There was a confident growl after not too long. The three of them exchanged glances.

“Sounds like it’s safe, I guess?” said Nordrad.

“Is it telling us to come…?” Kate wondered.

“In all likelihood, yes,” said Iris. “You know, this is a little reassuring. We’ll have to be grateful.”

Iris crawled after Kurumi as it led the way into the hole.

It had been a little over twenty days since the party had become trapped in the cave. Learning that they didn’t need to worry about running out of magical power had made things a lot easier on them psychologically, but their current situation had both good and bad aspects to it.

For instance, Kurumi’s assistance had greatly reduced the amount of effort needed to find an exit, but the pseudo escape route detector had limited functionality, so it hadn’t eliminated the frustration of backtracking completely. What’s more, the temperature in the cave had gone down around the tenth day, but that in turn had meant monsters had started to appear.

Fortunately, they were all monsters that Iris and Kate could handle, and there hadn’t been very many of them. But some, like black vipers, were highly venomous, so they hadn’t been able to relax. They had managed to avoid relying on their expensive potions so far, largely thanks to their sturdy heat-resistant equipment also standing up to the black vipers’ fangs.

But even with things getting a little more comfortable, there had been yet another change about half a day ago.

“It feels like it’s getting hotter again. Are you girls feeling it too?” Nordrad asked.

“I’m noticing a change in the humidity…” It was hard for Kate to judge shifts in temperature while wearing her heat-resistant equipment, but the air around her felt damp. When she looked

to Iris for confirmation, her partner nodded back at her.

“We’ve gone down a fair distance,” Iris noted. “Maybe there’s groundwater seeping through? The passage has broadened, and I’ll be happy if that’s a good sign…”

“Hopefully, it leads us straight outside,” said Kate.

“That’s probably expecting a bit much. There’s too little airflow here for it to be close to the outside.” Nordrad immediately dashed her hopes with a dose of realistic thinking.

With a sigh at how he didn’t mince words, Kate shook her head. “I was aware. But it’s hard to keep going without that kind of optimism.”

“It’s a researcher’s job to make predictions based on observations. Although, while we don’t have an exit here, there does seem to have been a change.”

Nordrad turned up the power on his lighting artifact, shining it down the gentle slope ahead. It opened up into a wide-open space so expansive that even the heightened output of his light didn’t illuminate all of it. The light reflected off a large pool of water on the floor.

“It’s an underground lake,” Iris surmised.

“No, from the look of it, the temperature is clearly elevated,” Nordrad observed. “Wouldn’t that make it more of an underground hot spring?”

As he had pointed out, there was white steam hanging in the air around the water. Owing to the temperature of the air around it, the air might not have been thick enough to obscure their vision, but it was enough to make it clear that the water here was hotter than most underground reservoirs.

“So this is why it’s been getting more humid, huh?” Kate noted.

“So it would seem,” Nordrad agreed. “But a hot spring… Is it an underground lake that was warmed by its surroundings, or does it well up from somewhere deeper? It’s fascinating.”

“For my part, I’m more curious whether we can use the water… Can you investigate that?” asked Iris.

“I can, but our drinking needs are already adequately served by the— Oh, I see. You two are women, after all. You must not like it when you smell bad.”

Nordrad was momentarily confused, but clapped his hands together as he quickly found a satisfying answer.

His lack of tact earned him cold looks from both Iris and Kate.

“Nord... Even if that’s true! Even if! Should you really be saying it?” Iris said pointedly.

“Ah, sorry, sorry. I’m not trying to say you stink, you know? I mean, I smell the same, so it doesn’t bother me in the slightest!”

He wasn’t making things any better. Following up his statement that they didn’t stink by saying it didn’t bother him really ruined any consolation his words might have offered.

But between Nordrad and the girls, the one who smelled the worst—owing to his lack of expensive heat-resistant gear—was clearly Nordrad.

In addition to this, after Sarasa’s assurance that they would be fine so long as they didn’t try to take a bath, they had been wiping themselves off before going to sleep.

They’d at least supplied Nordrad with water to do the same, but he was a monster researcher. For a man who could sit in the bushes watching monsters for more than ten days straight when the need arose, this wasn’t enough to bother him yet—even if it was a considerable nuisance to those around him.

It wasn’t enough to be an actual problem for Iris and Kate either, but that wasn’t the point. They had been able to wipe themselves off, but hadn’t had enough water to wash their clothes, and that bothered them.

“Nord-san, you’ll never be popular with the ladies if you don’t learn to be just a little more delicate, you know? It’s a bit of a shame when your looks aren’t bad.”

“Hrmm, I can’t say that’s ever bothered me. I mean, I’m having enough fun just doing my research.”

It was no exaggeration to say that Nordrad was a handsome man. Though his face bore the scars of his fieldwork, they weren’t bad enough to disfigure his appearance, and his tight, muscular body was another point in his favor for women who were into that sort of thing.

His success as a researcher meant he held a certain social status, and his finances weren’t terrible by any means. If he had a point against him, it was that his work took him to dangerous places, but if he were to change his research focus to botany in the future, that would no longer be the case.

Of course, if he himself wasn’t interested, then none of those charms was going to do him any good.

“I can, however, see the importance of earning some points with you two. For my own safety, that is. I’ll check out the hot

spring for you.”

“We’d protect you either way, but…it’s appreciated,” said Iris.

“Leave it to me. Fortunately, the artifact I’ll need for it survived Sarasa-kun.”

With a shrug, Nordrad pulled an artifact from his pack and approached the steaming pool.

The result came back that it was unsuitable for drinking, but excellent for bathing.

The water was clear, they had a good line of sight to ensure there was nothing suspicious around, and on top of that, they could use it to do laundry. There was no way Iris and Kate were going to pass up the opportunity.

They sent Nordrad away and immersed themselves in washing themselves and their clothes. Once the work was done, Iris let out a big sigh with a look of bliss on her face.

She obviously wasn’t going to let her guard down to the point of entering the hot spring, but even just being able to do laundry and dip her feet in the hot water was enough to relieve her weariness.

Kate sat down next to her, kicking her feet in the water. The tension melted out of her shoulders.

“Whew, I feel alive again…” Iris murmured.

“Yeah,” Kate agreed. “We were able to wash all the clothes and underwear that were bothering us too.”

“Indeed. And conveniently, the rocks around the spring are fairly hot.”

While the rocks weren’t hot enough to burn at a touch, any water poured on them quickly dried, which was exceptionally useful when drying their clothes.

Naturally, they had made full use of that, and their laundry was lying on the rocks around them.

On top of that, Iris and Kate were practically naked. They could never let someone of the opposite sex see them like this.

Beside them, Kurumi was playfully splashing around. Then, apparently satisfied with having had a good swim, the little bear climbed up onto the rocks and flashed its claws.

“Grar, gra-graaar,” it sang happily as it carved the rock.

The rocks around here weren’t soft, but Kurumi’s claws didn’t show any sign of chipping, and were leaving their marks.

But Iris couldn’t see the point of it. She blinked and cocked her head to the side in confusion. “Hey… What is Kurumi doing?

Sharpening its claws?”



“Do bears sharpen their claws?” Kate wondered.

“Well, I wouldn’t know, but they leave their claw marks on the trunks of trees. To mark their territory.”

“That’s not something a homunculus needs to do, though, right? It’s been doing it occasionally in other places too, by the way.”

“It has? I never noticed…”

“There may be some reason, but it’s not like Kurumi can explain… If it interests you, why not ask Shopkeeper-san when we get back?”

“That’s a good idea,” Iris said with a nod, then, after a long silence, added, “Hey, Kate. Do you think we’ll make it back safely?”

Kate turned to look at her, markedly surprised. “Oh? You’re sounding a little timid?”

“Can you blame me? We’ve traveled quite a distance, but how far do you think it would be as the crow flies?”

They’d often had to crouch or turn sideways, which wasn’t so bad, but there had also been more than a few times they could only proceed by crawling, which limited their speed.

If you factored in the ups and downs, and all the times the path doubled back on itself, you couldn’t really say that they had been progressing smoothly in any one direction.

“Honestly, I’d rather not think about it,” Kate admitted.

“I know, right? I’d like to think we’re getting closer to an exit, but…we also need to consider there may not even be one.”

“It’s a naturally formed cave, after all. But let’s save the despair until we run out of food. You’re getting ahead of yourself.”

Kate was doing her best to keep a positive tone, and Iris could only smile awkwardly at that. “The rations, you mean? We still have *months’* worth.”

“No, I mean when there’s absolutely nothing left to eat. Fortunately, we’ve been encountering monsters, you know? They may taste awful, but at least we have Shopkeeper-san’s orange bottle to wash the taste out of our mouths.”

“Well, that’s all true… In short, you’re saying don’t give up hope.”

“Absolutely. You need to struggle to your last breath,” Kate said. “If he finds out you gave up when you could have survived, Adelbert-sama would scold you. And then mother would kill me.

It’s going to be bad enough as is.”

While Iris and Kate were friends, they were also master and servant. As the eldest daughter of the Starven family, whose loyalty hadn’t faltered even when the House of Lotze was on the verge of going broke, Kate’s parents had raised her firmly so that she would be of service to Iris.

Her duties obviously included providing Iris with emotional support, so in some sense, of the three of them, she was the one under the most stress here.

“Hmm. When the time comes, let me speak in your defense.”

Hearing this, Kate thought for a moment, then raised her face with a sudden realization. “No… Let’s tell them that you insisted on taking this job over my objections. If we do that, Adelbert-sama and Diana-sama will feel sorry for me being ‘forced into it,’ and mother and father won’t be able to be too harsh!”

“You realize that means I’ll be scolded by father, right?” Iris gave her an unamused stare.

But Kate met it with a beaming smile. “Iris, we’re *friends*, aren’t we?”

“We are…and so you’re telling me to sacrifice myself?”

“It’ll be fine. For all his grumbling, Adelbert-sama is soft on you. Besides, who was it who said they’d take the job without hearing the details, I wonder?”

“Urgh! You’ve got me there.”

“And if we get home safely, you probably won’t be chewed out too badly. I’m sure.”

“Maybe not, but… Oh, that’s right. Why don’t we just not tell them about this?”

Iris’s face lit up as if she’d had a brilliant idea, but Kate sighed and shook her head. “Hey, Iris. I don’t know for sure, but I suspect Shopkeeper-san’s spending a considerable amount of money this time. She said she’d asked her master for help. Do you think that came free?”

After a long pause, Iris said, “Having a master class alchemist help would normally require paying an incredible sum. Even if her master only makes her pay for out-of-pocket expenses, I’m sure it’s still going to cost her an awful lot.”

“Right? No matter how great Shopkeeper-san is, I can’t imagine she came up with that escape route detector on the fly, and there are probably other things she’s done for us too. We can’t just choose not to pay her back for all of that, can we?”

“Of course not. I repay all of my debts. As a daughter of the House of Lotze, that’s something I’ll never budge on.” Even if Sarasa were to say they didn’t have to pay her back, Iris wouldn’t be able to accept it. Iris had enough pride for that, and so did Kate.

“Yeah,” Kate agreed. “And if we’re going into more debt on top of what we already owe, then…”

“We can’t just keep that from father and the others, I suppose.”

“You got it.”

“Urghhh. Do you ever get the feeling we lose more money as gatherers than we make?” Iris asked.

“I do. But if you factor in the relationships we’ve built, I think we still come out ahead? Our debt may not have decreased any, but we were able to save the House of Lotze.”

“It’s all thanks to meeting Shopkeeper-dono, huh? Including the fact that I’m still alive,” Iris murmured, her voice full of emotion. She let out a long groan as she thought about it.

Then, from off in the distance, Nordrad shouted, “Hey, you two! Could I trouble you to let me have my turn?!”

“O-Ohh, sorry! We’ll finish up!” Iris shouted back. “Anyway, Kate, let’s save the rest of this discussion for once we get back.”

“From my perspective, if you’d just sacrifice yourself—”

“We’ll talk about it once we’re back! Come on, Kate, wipe yourself off, and get dressed. Nord is going to see you!”

Desperately cutting Kate off, Iris pulled her feet out of the hot spring and began hurrying her partner along.

“Okay, okay. I get it,” Kate replied casually, breathing a sigh of relief over how much more lively Iris’s expression was now.

It had been over thirty days since Iris and the others had become stranded. In addition to the psychological aspect, they were confronting other troubles too.

“Kate, how many magic crystals do we have left?”

“We’re down to about a handful. If we lose Kurumi…”

“We’ll lose the ability to identify paths, which is a problem, but we’ll also never be able to face Shopkeeper-dono, and Lorea may break down in tears.”

If they ran out of magical power, Kurumi would stop moving in short order. It was up to individual interpretation whether that counted as death, but for those like Iris and Kate, who had been

working alongside it for a long time now, it wasn't just that they'd feel bad for ruining Sarasa's property; they didn't want to lose Kurumi.

Just as Iris slapped her hand to her forehead and gazed up to the ceiling in dismay over a situation that just wasn't going their way, Kurumi stood up on top of her pack and hopped to the ground.

"Grar!"

"Huh?! Kurumi?!" cried Iris.

"Wh-What's gotten into you?!" Kate asked.

Kurumi clung to their packs except for when they stopped to rest, and didn't do anything unless they told it to, so this sudden action confused Kate and Iris. Kurumi glanced in their direction, and then took off running.

"What in the—" Iris stammered.

"Ahh, shouldn't we chase after it?" Nordrad suggested.

"Y-You have a point!" she replied.

The group immediately ran after Kurumi, but to be perfectly blunt, the little bear's mobility far outstripped their own. It could easily fit through tight spaces, and could dig in with its claws to scale steep rock walls with ease. Even on the flats, it possessed a speed that seemed unbelievable for its small size and short little legs.

If Kurumi had meant to lose them, it would have done so easily, but that wasn't what it was trying to do here. Whenever they caught up, it began running again... This game of tag carried on for about an hour.

"K-Kurumi, are you done?" wheezed Iris, clutching her knees.

"That was a real workout..." Kate groaned, in slightly better shape than her partner.

"I-I'd certainly appreciate it if this was the end of it. I-I don't know that I can take much more... Urgh!"

When it came to Nordrad, his shoulders were heaving intensely, so he sat down.

"Did it want to bring us here?" Kate wondered.

"In all likelihood," Iris replied. "But there's nothing here?"

Kurumi had stopped at an unremarkable passageway. It was wide enough for them to spread their arms out, and tall enough that Iris could probably reach the ceiling if she stretched. If there was anything different to point out about it, this was a bend in the passageway, which twisted hard to the right.

“K-Kurumi-kun. I-Is there something here?” Nordrad asked, still unable to catch his breath.

“Grar.” Kurumi tapped its paw on the wall beside it.

The other three looked, but stare as they might, it only looked like an ordinary cave wall.

“Is something valuable buried there?” Iris wondered.

“Like what?” Kate asked her.

“Like…a vein of gold, maybe?”

“That would be valuable, sure, but I doubt that’s it. Not in this situation.”

“Yeah, it’s not,” Nordrad agreed with Kate. “The walls here aren’t the sort you would expect to find gold deposits in.”

His commentary was a little off the mark.

“Grar, graaar.”

Noting the confused way in which the other three were cocking their heads to the side, Kurumi slowly raised and lowered its paws, as if gesturing for them to calm down.

“Murgh, I’m sure there’s something, but it’s hard to settle down when I don’t know what,” Iris remarked.

“True…” Kate agreed. “Wait, do you hear something…?”

Iris arched an eyebrow at Kate’s twitching ears, then hurriedly began looking around.

“Something… Don’t tell me the salamander’s nearby?!”

“Or is it another cave-in?!” Nordrad cried, hurrying to his feet moments before…

Bang! Crunch, crunch!

With a somewhat understated noise, the wall Kurumi had been patting crumbled, revealing a hole. It was roughly a meter across.

The cold air blowing through it stroked three shocked faces. Each explorer gulped at how different this air felt from anything else they’d come across in over a month of searching.

“Ah! Could it lead outside?!” Iris cried.

“That’s right, Iris-san.”

The dust cleared with the sound of a voice they hadn’t heard in far too long.

The moment the speaker’s face was revealed, Iris teared up despite herself.

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“It’s been a while, Iris-san, Kate-san. I’m here to rescue you. Oh, and Nord-san too while I’m at it.”

“Shopkeeper-dono!”

“Shopkeeper-san!”

Iris-san and Kate-san pounced on me the moment I was out of the narrow hole.

I managed to take the impact, then looked at Nord, who was behind them. He was smiling sheepishly, but also looking a little relieved.

“Ha ha, I’m just along for the ride, then?” he asked.

“Yep, that’s right,” I replied. “I wouldn’t have come to save you if you were on your own.”

You may think that’s harsh, but could you really blame me? It was clear as day that Nord-san was at fault for this mess. Sure, he was a researcher, and Iris-san and Kate-san were his bodyguards, but that could only excuse so much. If he was going to do experiments, he had to make sure they were safe first.

But I was also well aware that there were some exceptionally troublesome people out there who were incapable of doing that. And the fact that they were the ones who generally got results made it all the worse.

Maybe they got those results because they were doing things that others wouldn’t be willing to, but if I had my say, I wanted them to go find success somewhere where it didn’t involve me.

“Sh-Shopkeeper-dono, to tell you the truth, I thought we were done for…” Iris-san said as she moved away from me, her voice tremulous.

“It did take me quite a while to get here, I’ll admit,” I said. “But it’s going to be okay now. I know it looks like a tight fit, but this hole goes all the way to the surface.”

I wiped Iris-san’s tears away with a handkerchief. She gave me a wan smile in return.

“Thank you so much, Shopkeeper-san,” said Kate-san. “It must have been a lot of trouble, huh?”

“Well, it did take some effort. But I couldn’t abandon the two of you. Now, let’s hurry and head outside—oh, but first.”

I picked up Kurumi, which was sitting next to me, and topped up its magical power.

Yep, we were cutting it pretty close.

Thank goodness. I wouldn’t have wanted to lose you.

“Sarasa-kun, were you the one controlling Kurumi just now?”

asked Nord-san.

"Yes, I was. But let's save the rest for once we're outside. There are people waiting."

"People waiting? You didn't come along, Shopkeeper-dono?"

"It's hard to camp out alone in the forest for a long time, even for me. Now let's get going."

I crouched down and began leading them back toward the outside. It was doing a number on my back, but digging a larger hole would have been more costly and time-consuming, so I was going to have to put up with it.

Not only was the sort of digging artifact I'd used to make this hole fairly expensive, this rescue mission wasn't going to turn a profit, so…it was hurting me really bad.

But hey, I had to do it for Iris-san and Kate-san.

"And we're out!" I declared.

"Ohh, finally…the light of day…" Iris-san said, stretching as she emerged from the hole. She spread her arms out wide and squinted her eyes.

Kate-san was covering her eyes to protect them from the bright light too. "Fresh air…at long last. Ohh, that's cold. Wow, it's already winter…"

"Sure is," I replied. "We had a little snow yesterday, so if things dragged on any longer, we were going to be in for some trouble ourselves."

"'We'… That's right, you did say there were others…" Iris-san noted.

"Yes, they're right over there."

It was the three gatherers we were so used to working with.

"Hey, little miss Iris, looks like you're all right."

"And you're looking energetic enough."

"I'm glad to see you're unhurt."

"Andre! Gil! Gray! You came to save us?!" Iris-san exclaimed.

"Thank you so much!" Kate-san added. "I never expected anyone other than Shopkeeper-san would come for us…"

"To be fair, it was Sarasa-chan who asked us along," Andre-san explained.

"Just to do some simple manual labor. We haven't done anything that impressive," added Gil-san.

"Oh, don't say that," I disagreed. "Without you guys, I wouldn't have been able to get things ready. Your help was important."

They were acting all humble, but their assistance had been

absolutely essential.

How far away Iris-san and Kate-san were had put some serious limitations on what I could do. If I was going to synchronize with Kurumi, the closer I was the better, and that would also allow me to respond to anything that happened more quickly. But I was an alchemist; my artifacts and potions were my biggest strength, but once I left home, where I had access to my workshop, that immediately limited what I could do.

The idea I had come up with to deal with that was setting up a base nearby. That meant carrying materials out here, setting up a hut, and installing a magic furnace and alchemic cauldron. I could have done it by myself if I'd had the time, but time was at a premium.

I'd had Andre-san and the guys handle transport, communication with the village, keeping watch in the area, and a whole lot of other tasks. I was paying them a daily wage, but the amount they had asked for was by no means high and wasn't worth the work they were putting in. In the end, I think they were cooperating because they knew it was to save Iris-san and Kate-san.

"In short, you were aware of our situation in the cave and were formulating a plan to rescue us. How very fascinating," surmised Nord-san, who'd been outside stretching while we had our tearful reunion, and was poking his head into the hut now that it seemed we were done.

However, his easygoing tone was met with stern looks from the three gatherers.

"Hey, is this guy the high-and-mighty researcher who was responsible for all this?" Andre-san asked menacingly.

"I hear you put Iris-chan and Kate-chan in a lot of danger, huh?" added Gil.

However, their barbed words had no effect on Nord-san, who smiled cheerfully. "Ha ha ha, you sure said it. It seems my muscles weren't up to the task this time. If I had strength like yours, maybe I'd have managed."

"Hmph..." Gray-san stared at Nord-san, who was flexing his biceps. Their eyes met, and there was an unspoken moment of understanding. "If you understand your fault, then I have no more to say on the matter."

"Uh, no?!" Gil-san shot back. "From everything Sarasa-chan told us, a little more muscle wouldn't have fixed anything, man?!"

Gray-san ignored him and patted Nord-san's pecs.

"You've got some good muscles yourself. Not what I'd expect from a researcher chained to his desk."

"I place an important emphasis on field work. Of course I need to build muscles for that!"

Nord-san flashed a toothy smile, which Gray-san answered with a nauseatingly masculine smile of his own before crossing his arms and nodding sagely.

Gil-san, meanwhile, slapped his forehead and gazed up to the heavens, and Andre-san shrugged as if to say there was nothing he could do.

"Erm…is Nord-san a big fan of muscles?" I asked confusedly, looking at Iris-san.

She thought for a moment and then nodded. "I'd say so. That was the vague impression that I got."

"Uh, I don't think there's anything vague about it, though?"

Hrmm, did he have a formative experience where his muscles saved him when he was in danger or something?

I do think that his slim, muscular physique is attractive for those who are into that sort of thing, though.

"Although, it might be true that Nord-san's buff body helped us survive," noted Kate-san. "The road here wasn't easy."

If they'd needed to babysit a more frail researcher, they probably couldn't have managed it.

"It really wasn't an easy road," I agreed, nodding.

"You could tell, Shopkeeper-dono?" asked Iris-san.

"Yes, to some degree. Thanks to Kurumi. Isn't that right?"

"Grar, graaar!"

Although I'd refrained from full synchronization, once the base was set up here, I'd occasionally connected some of my senses in order to update myself on what Kurumi had learned and also gather more information.

One of my important tools when doing that had been the pseudo escape route detector. A high-quality escape route detector would have been able to figure out the shape of the paths up ahead, but obviously, my makeshift one didn't have that functionality.

Instead, by incorporating Kurumi into the spell, I could use it together with an artifact that located my own homunculus to get an idea of the layout of the tunnels on my end.

But considering their remaining magical power, it had been

impossible to communicate that to Iris-san and Kate-san. For that reason, I'd created a rough map, and then figured out a spot where it'd be possible to rescue them.

I then dug toward that point, while having Kurumi guide them there at the same time.

"So that's how you were able to save us," said Kate-san.

"Yeah, I clearly couldn't just start digging holes willy-nilly," I replied.

This plan was pretty intricate and had been thrown together in a hurry. Because, while they were fine in terms of food, their remaining stock of magic crystals was getting hazardously low.

"But from everything you're saying, it sounds like this must've been incredibly expensive…" Kate-san noted.

"Well, it wasn't cheap…that's for sure."

It cost enough that I kind of don't want to think about it.

I averted my gaze from Kate-san's inquiring eyes. I wanted to forget about it for at least a little longer while I basked in the joy of their survival.

"Let's set that aside for now and think about getting back home quickly. Lorea-chan is worried too. I want her to see that you're all right. Let's start packing things up and—"

"Get ready to go," I was about to finish saying when I looked over at Gray-san and the others—and was met with an incomprehensible scene. I don't know how it happened, but Gray-san and Nord-san were both naked from the waist up, and seemed totally pumped.

They kept on striking poses like that. It was the sort of scene that, if someone wasn't careful, might end up getting age-restricted. Like, no minors allowed.

"Uh, what…?"

As I blinked in disbelief, Andre-san came over with an awkward smile on his face and tried to explain.

"You see, Gray and Nord, they're having a dispute over whose muscles are more practical."

"I'm afraid I don't comprehend…"

His explanation isn't making it make sense.

"Weren't those two getting along great just a moment ago?" I asked.

"The two of them found common ground on muscles in general, but Gray says muscles that have been toned in combat are the best, while Nord says that's illogical and doesn't lead to

balanced muscles, so they weren't able to come to an agreement on the finer points."

"I thought Gray-san was a serious person..."

I'm even more confused now.

Gil-san gave up on poking fun at the two of them and came over. "Nah, he's not that different from us, y'know? He keeps quiet, so people tend to miss it, but you've gotta remember we're the kind of guys he hangs out with. Ha ha ha!"

"I see. I understand now."

If he was going to put up with Gil-san, who was easygoing to the point of frivolity, he had to either have an incredible amount of tolerance, or they had to have something in common. I'd assumed it was the former, but apparently it was the latter.

Still, I couldn't just watch them put on their performance forever. I mean, it wasn't to my taste, at least.

"Hey, Iris-san, Kate-san. Could you make them stop?"

"I'm sorry," Iris-san said apologetically. "Young maidens like us don't want to go anywhere near that."

"Yes, that's right," Kate-san agreed. "You have to remember, she's a nobleman's daughter and I'm her companion."

Huh? I thought I remembered them saying before that they had participated in training with the knights, so they were used to seeing men naked from the waist up. Or was I misremembering?

But if I looked only at their backgrounds, what Kate-san was saying wasn't off base.

"Gil-san, Andre-san, could you—"

"Those guys aren't gonna listen to us." Gil-san shot me down before I could finish.

"Talking to them about muscles is too much of a pain," added Andre-san. "Sarasa-chan, tell 'em off for us, would you?"

They weren't any help either.

I sighed, then approached the two sweaty men with much reluctance. "You two! Your muscles don't matter, so please get ready to head back!"

"Don't matter, you say? Muscles are important. They're so convenient to have," Nord-san argued. "Sarasa-kun...you look a little feeble, you know that?"

"Indeed. She could use a little more meat on her bones," Gray-san agreed.

"Yes, that's true. And more than just muscle."

“Urkh…”

I was well aware of that.

Maybe because I’d grown up in an orphanage, my growth was a little slower than other people’s, and I was a bit small. The lack of muscle mass that came along with that was bad enough that, if I didn’t use magical power to enhance myself physically, it affected how well I could do my work as an alchemist. But I didn’t want to turn into a macho man like Nord-san.

Nope, as a girl, I *definitely* didn’t want that.

Also, I wasn’t going to let that comment about not having enough meat on my bones slide.

“Heh heh heh… Nord-san, Gray-san, if you’re both so confident in your muscles, you can carry the alchemic cauldron and magic furnace with you on the way back, can’t you?”

When the guys had brought them out here, they’d used a cart borrowed from Darna-san, but that had obviously been returned to its owner at this point, and going back to borrow it again would delay our return.

But surely, with their vaunted muscles, they’ll be all right.

That was what I was feeling as I smiled at them. Nord-san, who had no direct knowledge of the situation, raised his eyebrows in confusion, while Gray-san, who’d helped carry them out here, was at a loss for words.

“Your alchemic cauldron and magic furnace…?”

“Th-Those things…”

“You’re not going to tell me you can’t carry them, right? Even with my lack of muscles, I can!”

Having said this, I carried the two items out of the hut, and set them down in front of the two of them with a couple heavy thuds—using magical power for physical enhancement, of course.

“But it will take us days to reach the village…” Nord-san protested.

“Don’t worry. We can be there in a day if you run the whole way,” I tossed back airily.

“That’s the kind of thing that makes me nothing but worried, though?!”

“Oh? Are your muscles not up to the task, Nord-san? What do you think, Iris-san?”

“Hm?” she asked. “Well, if you ask me, muscles are for using, not for showing off.”

I passed the baton to Iris-san, who did a natural job of antagonizing him further.

Kate-san snickered before getting in on the action too. “There’s no point in muscles that you can’t use. Or are those muscles of yours just for show?”

“No—wait, is that really safe to say right now?” Nord-san asked.

“Hmph, is that all that muscles that haven’t been trained in battle are good for, in the end?” Gray-san teased him.

“What are you—”

“If I’m wrong, then put your muscles where your mouth is! Hungh!”

Gray-san grunted as he lifted up the alchemic cauldron. It was big enough for me to fit inside, and made of metal, so it was pretty heavy.

“Hey, that looks like the lighter one, though?!”

Yeah, the magic furnace was even heavier, so Nord-san’s complaint wasn’t incorrect. But its shape made it the easier of the two to hold on to, so it was up in the air which would actually be the easier one to carry back.

“You’re imagining it. Now, let’s head back. If those muscles of yours aren’t a lie, you’ll be able to keep up with me!”

“No, this one’s clearly heavier, okay?! I can see it on Sarasa-kun’s face!”

Oops. I guess I’d let it show.

But despite his complaining, Nord-san lifted up the magic furnace and chased after Gray-san.

Yep. I don’t care for all their muscle talk, but if they can lift those up, they’ve definitely got the right to be proud of how buff they are.

“Hahh…” Gil-san let out a belabored sigh as we watched them go. “Sorry to trouble you, Sarasa-chan.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Gray-san surprised me a bit, but it was nothing compared to the way you act all the time.”

When I let that comment slip out, Gil-san turned to me with a look of shock on his face.

“Huh? Harsh much?! Am I that annoying?! How?!”

“You just…kinda are?”

“The lack of anything specific makes it even worse!”

The fact of the matter was that he handled the jobs I gave him competently, and could be reasonably reliable, but his occasional offhand remarks were giving a debuff to my overall

impression of him.

I dunno...he wasn't a bad guy, but fell a step short of being a good one, I guess?

"It's your own fault, man. You're old enough it's time you should learn to settle down a bit, okay? Sarasa-chan, I've got our luggage packed."

"Thank you, Andre-san. You're always so much help."

This guy, on the other hand, knew what he was doing. It was little wonder he was the leader of the trio.

He was too old for me, though.

"How about we check once more to make sure we haven't missed anything, and then we can head home," I suggested.

"Good call," Andre-san agreed. "It'd be a pain to have to come back for anything."

"'Kay, I'll look over there," said Gil-san.

As we split up to begin checking, Iris-san somewhat hesitantly looked from the pair who were already receding into the distance, then back to us, before asking, "Hey, don't we have to follow the other two? They've gotten pretty far ahead already..."

"There's no need to rush," Andre-san told her. "They can't keep up that pace for long anyway."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I can't see them making it all the way back to the village in a single day while lugging those things around with them."

I let the slightly confused Iris-san, as well as Kate-san, get some rest, and then once we had thoroughly checked everything, we closed and locked the door of the hut we had been using as our temporary base here.

Since we'd gone to the trouble of building it, I didn't want wild animals or monsters getting inside and tearing the place apart.

"Now, let's head back," I said, clapping my hands.

I hefted up my pack and then extended a hand to Iris-san and Kate-san, who were sitting somewhat tiredly on the ground.

Maybe because she had been constantly on edge, exhaustion had caught up with Kate-san now that she was in a situation where she could feel safe. She let out a sigh of relief as she took my hand.

"Ohh... We can finally go home now, huh?"

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," I apologized.

"Oh, don't worry about it, Shopkeeper-san."

"Hey now, Kate. You're acting pathetic!" Iris-san chided her.

She immediately rose to her feet, puffing her chest out. Kate-san let out a deep sigh. “Hahhhhh… And you were crying a little while ago because you weren’t sure we’d make it back.”

“Wha?! (That was a secret, Kate!)”

Iris-san was casting glances in my direction as she whispered something to Kate-san, but…well, I was more or less aware of anything that Kurumi had heard.

Kate-san seemed to understand that, but she said nothing, and patted Iris-san’s back. “I’m happy to forget about that part, but now that we’ve made it out safely, we’re going to have to think about what to report to Adelbert-sama.”

“Urgh, I’d forgotten about that…”

“Don’t worry. It’ll take more than a day to get home. We have time to think,” Kate-san said before adding, “of a report that puts none of the blame on me.”

“So it’s my job to get chewed out, after all?!”

Iris-san and Kate-san’s conversation was a bit noisy, but cheerful. Andre-san, Gil-san, and I smiled at it as we walked into the forest.

The wind blew between us, rustling the forest.

Iris-san put a hand on her cheek, perhaps affected by how chilly the breeze felt. “It’s winter already, huh? It sure is different out here than it was in the cave.”

“It sure is,” Kate-san agreed. “We missed out on autumn,” Kate-san murmured with a hint of melancholy as she looked at the trees around us.

“You were trapped down there for a long time, after all,” I noted.

“It’s a small price to have paid for keeping our lives…” said Iris-san. “But the snow will fall soon, and then it will be hard to enter the forest.”

“It’s a rough season for gatherers,” Kate-san agreed.

Almost as if in response to their comments, something white began falling from the sky.

Epilogue

On returning to the village, Nord-san stayed for just one night and then left.

According to him, *“If I don’t head home and summarize the results of my research quickly, I’ll start running out of money for daily necessities.”*

And yeah, that story checked out.

His research activities had gone well beyond the expected schedule, but he’d still paid Iris-san and Kate-san their promised daily wages, plus a little extra. He’d even coughed up almost all of the other cash he had on hand to cover the costs of the emergency packs I’d sent with them.

Honestly, I wasn’t sure he’d be able to make it back with what money he had left, but Nord-san had laughed it off, saying, *“It’ll be fine. If it comes down to it, I have these muscles, after all! Ha ha ha!”*

Was he planning to keep himself fed by hunting? He did have the knowledge, so he could probably provide for himself by playing at being a gatherer.

Regardless, his generosity and toughness were probably two of the reasons for his success.

If he were a skinflint on top of all his other failings, we’d have probably been left with the worst impression of him possible.

Unlike the energetic Nord-san, Iris-san and Kate-san had come down with a fever soon after getting back, and were bedridden for days.

It happened the day after their tearful reunion with Lorea-chan, who had been waiting anxiously all this time for their return. So, naturally, Lorea-chan had gone into quite a panic over it, but my diagnosis was that they’d just overworked themselves. I couldn’t find any signs of sickness or poison, so I prescribed them both some potions that would help to restore their stamina.

I figured their condition mostly stemmed from psychological causes, so there was the option of using potions that treated those, but…some of them could be dangerous, so it was best to wait and let them recover naturally.

It wasn't like there was any rush.

Then, a week after the two of them got back, having finished sorting various things out, I waited until I saw they had largely recovered and then made a suggestion.

"Let's give you the hot spring treatment!"

When I dropped this idea on them at dinner, Iris-san and Kate-san looked at me with confusion. By the way, I'd let Lorea-chan know about my plan in advance, so although she looked slightly exasperated, she said nothing about it.

"Hot spring treatment? Um, you mean you want to take us to the hot springs?" Iris-san asked.

"Yes."

"Wait, hot springs?" Kate-san said. "I don't remember there being any hot springs in this area. Shopkeeper-san, I'm not sure we're up to traveling far..."

"Oh, one opened up the other day. While you two were trapped in the cave."

"My word!" Iris-san's eyes widened in genuine surprise.

But Lorea-chan narrowed her eyes and took a jab at me, saying, "No, Sarasa-san, it didn't just open up on its own, you *made* it."

"What does she mean, Shopkeeper-san?" Kate-san asked suspiciously.

"Ohh, well," I responded evasively. "It's just, um... Well, do you remember any hot springs you might have encountered recently?"

"Hm? Wait, don't tell me... The ones in that cave?"

"That's right. After a bit of this and that, I was able to draw the water from the hot springs there outside."

"A bit of this and that... Am I the only one who thinks that's not something so easy that you can just sum it up like that?"

"Oh, it wasn't easy," Lorea-chan piped in. "She spent a crazy amount of money on it. Isn't that right, Sarasa-san?"

"No, no, it was a necessary experiment!" I argued. "Even if it was a direct hit to my wallet..."

Because the mining industry was so important to the development of a nation, there were lots of artifacts related to it. The excavator artifact I had used to rescue Iris-san and Kate-san was one of them.

But there was no way, under normal circumstances, that there

would be any demand for an artifact like that in this village. The standard-sized one was exceptionally large and heavy too, which made taking it to another town to sell difficult.

For that reason, the one that I'd made and kept in storage was a palm-sized model. In fact, they knew that it was a bit much to expect us to make a full-sized one, so the instructions for the smaller versions were also included. The one I'd made was especially small, though, which had led to other problems that were unrelated to the cost of it.

"First, I had to check that I could safely dig a hole down to where you were," I explained.

"And you chose that hot spring to test it? But how did you know the location of it?" Iris-san asked.

"Because of Kurumi. Did you notice it was drawing things occasionally?"

"Oh, that's what that was! When it was sharpening its claws!"

"It wasn't sharpening its claws, but yes. Anyway, I could have chosen anywhere as my destination, but that place was convenient."

After the artifact was tested, it had just been a matter of remaking it to create holes that were large enough for a person to pass through.

Because of my past efforts, I was able to create the one I'd used to rescue them in a short period of time. I'd ended up going with a hole that was only large enough for us to pass through when crouching in order to cut down on costs, and even then it was still pricey enough to leave Lorea-chan aghast at what I'd paid.

This was an artifact used in mining, where success was met with massive returns, after all. They laughed at that kind of cost —usually, at least.

"Anyway, since I was able to draw water from the hot springs, it would be a shame to let it go to waste, so I set it up so we could bathe in it."

"You mean at the base you were using near there, right? I never even noticed..." Iris-san said.

"That would be because I did it at a spot a short distance from there," I explained. "For reasons relating to the location of the spring's source."

"I see. So that would be why we never saw it. So will all of us be going, Lorea included?" she added.

“Of course. I wouldn’t leave Lorea-chan out. We’ll close up the shop temporarily.”

“You’re sure?” Kate-san asked. “You must have spent a lot of time away from the shop when you were working on rescuing us, right?”

“I don’t mind,” I replied. “Lots of gatherers take the winter off anyway.”

In addition to there being fewer materials to gather in winter, the cold dulled their movements, making accidents more likely. Camping out overnight while gathering in the winter could have life-threatening consequences.

For that reason, among others, there was no small number of gatherers who took the winter off, and when they lacked the breathing room financially to do that, they moved to warmer climates to work there.

All of that was to say that, even if we opened up the shop, we couldn’t expect many customers.

“Sarasa-san, I won’t push back anymore, but are you sure it’s okay? I mean, you used a lot of money, and even took on a debt from your master, right?”

“Urkh…”

She was right. I’d really overextended myself this time, trying to save Iris-san and Kate-san. I’d performed a lot of transmutations.

First, there were those involving the homunculus. While I was seeking a way to rescue them using Kurumi, I had tried making every related artifact in the fifth volume of the *Complete Alchemy Works* that seemed like it might be of some use.

Because the fifth volume was the one that introduced homunculi, there were a lot of those artifacts in it, and that had eaten a lot of materials.

On top of that, I had prepared potions for the worst scenarios. Even though they’d ultimately gone unused, I had prepared quite a variety of potions to treat whatever poisons or illnesses Iris-san and Kate-san might be afflicted by.

Naturally, I hadn’t had all the necessary materials on hand, so I’d had to buy them, borrow them from Master, or have her buy them for me.

You can see just how reliant I was on her. Pitiful, huh?

“W-Well, it’ll work out…somehow, I guess? It will, right? I’m sure. Yep.”

“Oh! Th-That’s right!”

Seeing me struggle to convince myself, Iris-san hurried to her feet and left the room. She soon returned with a leather bag.

“Shopkeeper-dono, I’m sure this isn’t nearly enough, but please take these.”

“Oh, right. The reward money Nord-san paid us. I’m sure it’s nothing next to your expenses, though…”

“We’d appreciate it if you could wait some time for the rest. Because I swear we’ll pay you back!”

Because of all the extra days they spent down there, the sack of money looked pretty hefty.

But even so…

“Nghhh, I’m grateful for the thought, but compared to my debt right now…”

“Did you use that much money…?” Iris-san asked, gulping. I nodded.

“Well, it wasn’t a small amount.”

“But you’re also lending out money, right, Shopkeeper-san? So maybe there’s no need to worry?” Kate-san suggested.

“Yeah, that’s right, isn’t it?” Iris-san agreed. “There’s our house, obviously, and also the alchemists in South Strag.”

“Oh, and also the construction at Delal-san’s inn,” Kate-san added.

“Ha ha ha… I could collect all of that money, and it’d still only be a drop in the bucket.”

Seeing the rueful smile on my face, the two of them both fell silent. Their heads tilted to the side in disbelief.

“Huh? You’re serious?”

“You’re not pulling our legs?”

“Yes, I’m really serious. I mean, well, calling it a drop in the bucket is a bit much, but it would still be far from enough.”

The money they were offering me right now, however, really was just a drop in the bucket. If I had been able to gather all of the materials I’d needed by buying them off of gatherers who had come to the shop to sell them, I’m sure it would have more than halved my costs.

But due to seasonal factors and market prices, trying to gather a lot of materials quickly caused those prices to skyrocket —because it’s a lot easier to buy something that people have than something they don’t.

The materials I got from the frenzied hellflame grizzlies were

that way too. If I took them to someone, I wouldn't be able to sell them for that much money, but if I had to go looking for them, they would cost an incredible amount. They were rare materials that were only available when a frenzy occurred.

Now just imagine needing multiple materials like that... That outcome was obvious.

"Oh, that's not good..."

"I don't know what to say..."

Once they'd imagined just how much I must have spent, the two of them couldn't say "we'll pay for all of it" anymore.

But I was the one who'd made the decision, and it had helped me build experience, so I had no intention of invoicing them for my costs.

"It's fine! I'll forget about the debt for now. No, please let me forget about it!" I cried.

I had to forget, or I wouldn't be able to carry on. Given how much of my personality had been shaped by poverty.

Fortunately, it was Master I was indebted to, not some unscrupulous merchant, so she wouldn't come to collect what she was owed forcefully, and I didn't have to worry about being forced to sell myself to pay her back.

There was the worry that Master would come to collect *me* if it came to it, though.

But it'd be fine. It was an amount I could afford to pay back once I became self-sufficient as an alchemist!

And I was going to do that!

"W-Well, we clearly can't promise to pay back all of it, but we'll do everything we can to help. Right, Kate?"

"Y-Yeah, th-that's right. We'll do our best...okay?"

The way Kate-san trembled as she nodded was kind of cute. And so earnest.

Which was why I'd wanted to save them in the first place.

"Thank you. When the time comes, I'll be counting on you. But let's relax and put it out of our minds for now. That's what we need to do!"

I was exhausted emotionally, and they were exhausted physically.

"So anyway, we're going to the hot spring. It's decided. And we're going to forget about all that unpleasant stuff for a while!"

I somewhat forcefully ended the conversation, and pushed the issue out of my head.

◇◇◇

“Fwehhh.” Lorea-chan made a cute noise. “Getting in a hot spring feels so *good*. I’ve never been in one before.”

“I know, right?” I replied. “You can feel your tiredness and worries just melt away.”

It was just a few days after we’d decided to go, and we were already taking it easy as we soaked in the hot springs.

I had already been in the hot spring here several times before, but I hadn’t been able to really relax because I was worried about Iris-san and Kate-san at the time. This time I could really take it easy, though.

“It’s my first time in a hot spring too,” Iris-san remarked.

“And it’s an open-air bath at that,” Kate-san added. “This is a real luxury, when you think about it.”

“Well, yeah,” I agreed. “Normally you’d only be able to experience this kind of thing at a spa.”

“We got into the hot springs while we were in the cave too, but…I’d never have thought I’d be enjoying that same water again with such peace of mind,” Iris-san said.

“Kurumi looks just as happy as it did back then too,” Kate-san said with a chuckle.

“Grar, graaar.” Kurumi sang, clearly in high spirits. It was kicking up water as it swam around.

Kurumi’s elemental affinity was tilted toward fire, so maybe that was why it felt so comfortable in the warm water of the hot spring.

“Like you were saying before, we can’t see this spot from the hut,” Iris-san noted.

“Right,” I replied. “I had to think about a lot of things, like the location of the hot springs inside the cave, before I settled on this spot.”

I hadn’t known for sure if the spring would rise to the surface when I made the hole, but I’d prepared for the possibility, and considered the surrounding area when choosing a location. Things like boulders to block the view, and terrain that would help make it harder for wild animals to get in.

Obviously, that wasn’t enough on its own, so I’d done other things too.

“This place sure does look solidly built, though?” Kate-san observed.

The bath had been dug into the ground, reinforced with rocks and mortar, and then a stone wall had been built all around it. In the areas where there were no natural barriers, we had put up a sturdy fence for privacy and to keep out animals.

It wasn't going to completely repel a hellflame grizzly, but monsters of that level weren't that common, and so long as it gave us time to react, we could deal with them.

It'd be dangerous for someone who couldn't fight at all to come here for a dip in the springs, but so long as they had some combat ability, everything was in place to allow them to relax.

"I got the rough layout set up, but most of the work was done by Andre-san and the guys. They had a lot of free time on their hands."

I'd asked them to come along to guard me, but the area wasn't all that dangerous, so I didn't need all three of them with me all of the time. That meant there was usually one or two with nothing to do, and they had made use of their spare time to set up this hot spring.

We were living at the base as the winter cold was setting in, and they'd done their part to make that harsh lifestyle a little better.

"Andre and the guys, huh?" said Iris-san. "We'll have to thank them too."

"And Geberk-san and Darna-san," I said. "They helped out too."

"I don't think you need to do much to thank dad... Sarasa-san already paid him for his work. And you paid Andre-san and his team too, right?"

"Well, yeah, but it's important to thank people too," I said.

"Of course," Kate-san agreed.

"Hrmm, but when you put it that way, I have to be even more grateful to you, don't I, Shopkeeper-dono?" Iris-san asked.

"I don't think you need to worry about it that much..." I replied.

"But it was our fault that you ended up going into debt," Kate-san noted.

"That's right," Iris-san agreed, her tone filling with emotion. "So Shopkeeper-dono is living the debtor's life too now, huh?"

"Why so emotional, Iris-san?" I asked.

She turned and looked at me. "Why, you're just like us now!"

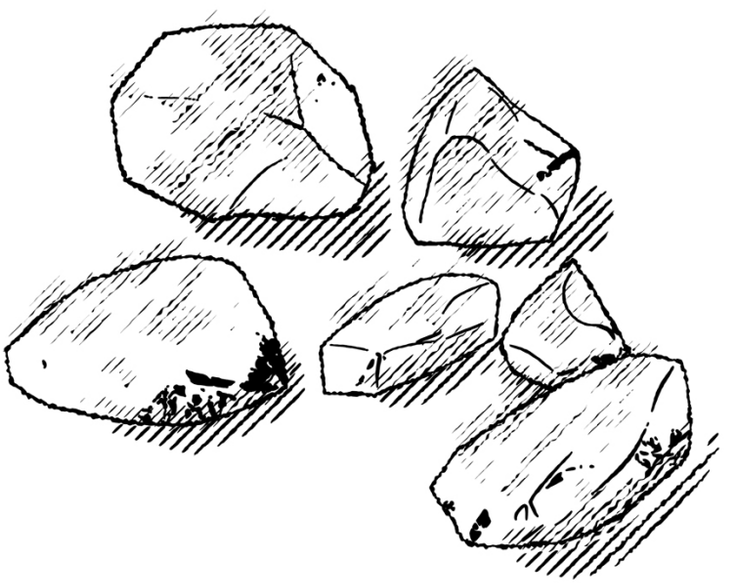
"Isn't that great, Shopkeeper-san!" Kate-san added.

“I-I’m not happy about it one bit!!!”

As the two of them said silly things with big grins on their faces, I let out an involuntary cry that echoed through the forest.

No. 041

Complete Alchemy Works: Appears in Volume 5
Difficulty: Normal
Standard Price: ~10,000 Rhea



〈 Resonating Stone 〉

Trouble Notifier Stone

Premonitions? You can't count on something so unreliable. If you're ever in trouble, these resonating stones are guaranteed to let the other party know. They're created in pairs, and when one is broken, the other makes a sound. If you rush to the other person's aid, that's sure to win you some affection points! *How far the stone will "resonate" is dependent upon the skill of the alchemist who makes it.

Afterword

Thank you for always buying my books. This is Mizuho Itsuki.

How are all of you doing these days, when everyone is yelling about social distancing? Or are things back to normal by the time this is being published?

I can't help but hope so, but at the same time, I think some change may be necessary.

Lately, there's been people talking about how people greet each other differently in other countries than they do in Japan. I'm talking about things like kisses and hugs, handshakes, and bowing.

As a Japanese person, a handshake is about as far as I'm willing to go my first time meeting a person, but...it sure is tough for people who are higher up, and may not have a say.

Maybe it will become more common to greet each other at a distance in future, though?

When it comes to writing novels, I often struggle over greetings. They have historical and cultural backgrounds, so different people will interpret them in different ways.

What if I were to have a male character hug a female character he's meeting for the first time? Or kiss the back of her hand?

If I were to describe him as "a serious man" after that, then there are probably people who would beg to differ.

So that's why, ultimately, I need to go along with the readers, and have my characters act in accordance with modern Japanese norms.

Incidentally, Japan didn't have a custom of shaking hands until after the Edo Period, and even the modern *saikeirei* bow, where a person bends forty-five degrees, wasn't enough to show the utmost reverence and respect. They had to bend even further, and put their hands on their knees or the tops of their feet.

That thing you see sometimes in period dramas, when peasants are greeting samurai... It was like that, only they bent even lower.

Sounds pretty rough, huh? You'd need to build your leg

muscles just to be able to bow correctly.

I wonder if people were executed for their rudeness if their legs wobbled and they fell over?

Anyway, that digression aside, let's talk about the main text. This time the highlights were Kurumi and Iris-san as a catgirl.

Huh? That's not in the text? It's Fuumi-san's wonderful illustrations?

Why, yes, you are correct. Okay, how about this, then?

The part where Lorea-chan said, "I'm here," and then moved into Sarasa's house as her bride.

Huh? There is no such scene? How strange. Maybe I'm misremembering it.

Don't worry. I'm sure there's a similar scene. Please go read it.

Now then, to finish off, I would like to express my gratitude to all the people who were involved in the publishing of this book. In the current situation, it was only possible with their hard work. Not all of the labor can be done remotely, so I'm sure it was much harder for them than usual.

The other reason we were able to put this volume out is because of everyone who bought the third volume. Thank you all so much.

I will look forward to seeing you again.

Mizuho Itsuki

Special Short Story: Reward Money, Savings Boxes, and Magic Manipulation

With the first scheduled exam after my enrollment finished, the season of dropouts that my seniors had told me about was behind us. With so many little birds having fallen out of the nest, it was a little quieter around me now.

What's more, thanks to all my hard work, I now had a heavy leather bag in my hands. I'd known that there was reward money for good grades, but the amount was more than I'd imagined.

I've never held this much cash before in my life! Its golden gleam is making me quiver!!!

"So there you have it, Master. Any ideas on what I should do?"

"Reward money, huh? I'd forgotten they did that."

I'd brought my sack of cash to her cradled in my arms, acting ever more shifty. Master remained blasé even once she spotted it, and only took a brief, disinterested peek inside to verify the contents.

"I could hold on to it for you, but—"

"You'd do that?! Please—"

Master raised a hand to interrupt me, then continued speaking. "Not so fast. You're an alchemist, aren't you? Think of a way to solve the problem with alchemy."

"I'm barely even an alchemist in training, so I'm not sure how I'm supposed to..."

It was a pretty tall order. But since it was Master asking, I racked my brains looking for an idea in what I already knew.

"Like transmuting it into a material that's too heavy to carry?" I suggested after some thought, causing Master to raise a slightly surprised eyebrow.

"It's a novel idea, I'll give you that. Turned to steel, even that amount of gold would be fairly heavy, but...Sarasa, how do you intend to carry it back with you?"

"Using the free shipping service?"

Like the kind they give to customers who buy a lot?

"We don't offer that kind of service. And if you were to hire

someone to carry it normally, you'd use up half of that money doing it."

"Th-That'd be a real problem!"

I didn't even know what I'd have worked so hard for in that case. Without parents, part-time wages and reward money were my main sources of income.

"Besides, if you brought something that heavy into the dorms, it'd put a hole through the floor."

"It's no good, huh?"

"Yeah, it's no good. Instead, you should think about how to solve the problem with an artifact. There's a perfect one for you. It's called a 'savings box.'"

It was a box with a slot to put coins in, and once you put it on the ground and filled it with magical power, it was fixed in place and couldn't be moved or destroyed.

"In order to break the box, you have to use an equal amount of magical power to counteract it. With your magic capacity, all you'll need to do is power it occasionally, and no one will be able to steal it from you."

"That's handy! By the way...what do I do when I want to take the money out?"

"Hm? It doesn't come out. Because it's a savings box."

"Well, that's no good, is it?!"

"No, it's fine. You can get it out by smashing it—or rather, you break it when you need the money."

"I-I see. There's no risk of wasting money that way."

It basically forced you to save money. But even setting that function aside, I liked that it eliminated any fear of the money being stolen.

"I should warn you, don't put *all* your money in it, okay? You may not spend much at the Academy, but you will need it sometimes. Once they start having you do outdoor practical lessons, for instance."

"Got it. I'll plan my usage of it carefully."

"Good." Master nodded. "So, do you want to try making it?"

"Yes, please!"

And so, under Master's tutelage, I set about making the savings box.

"Hit it! Hit it to make it stronger!"

"Yes, Master!"

"Bend it! Bend it into a box shape!"

“Yes, Master!”

“Carve it! Carve along the lines I drew on it!”

“Yes, Master! Ah! I carved outside the lines, Master!”

“Tch, pass it here. I’ll fix it for you.”

◇◇◇

“And so, after some back-and-forth, I ended up with this savings box.”

“I-I am so envious of you!”

That was Priscia-senpai’s reaction when I showed her the little savings box I had set up in the corner of my dorm room.

“Ohh, you two are both nobility, so even if you get good grades, you don’t get reward money.”

“That is not what I meant! I have no use for such a paltry sum. I’m envious of you receiving personal lessons from Millis-sama!”

A paltry sum… But it’s more money than I’ve ever had in my life…

W-Well, she is a noble, after all. So…yeah, okay.

“I don’t think it’s that paltry a sum… But I guess I’m also more jealous of you getting the opportunity to learn from Millis-sama.”

“You too, Lacie-senpai? Hrmm, I don’t know about lessons, but if you just want me to introduce you…”

“Do you truly mean that?!” cried Priscia-senpai.

“A-All I can do is introduce you, okay? I have work today, so she probably has some time…”

Master could be brusque, but she was a kind teacher. If I was just introducing my seniors to her, she wouldn’t treat them badly.

“Even that on its own would be delightful! Lacie, I assume you will be coming too, of course?”

“Yeah, I will. It’s not often you have the chance to get acquainted with a master class alchemist.”

So that was how I ended up bringing my seniors to work with me.

After some comments from the staff, like “I didn’t know you had friends, Sarasa-chan!” I led the two of them to where Master was, and introduced them as the seniors who’d been looking after me.

“I am Priscia Kirbress. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Ophelia Millis-sama.”

“I’m Lacie Hayes. Pleased to meet you.”

Prisicia-senpai was super tense, while Lacie-senpai was less tense but still nervous. It was scenes like this that reminded me how amazing Master actually was.

“Hmm, the daughters of a count and a marquess… Well, there’s no need to be so uptight. You’ve been looking out for Sarasa, right? You’re welcome to just call me Ophelia. Let me think… Do you two have time right now?”

“I am sure you must be quite busy, so we will take our leave,” Priscia-senpai said, shaking her head reservedly, but…

“Oh, okay. I was just thinking, if you were free—”

“As of this moment, I have just become completely free!”

She didn’t even wait for Master to finish before changing her mind.

“I mean, if you have other things to do, I don’t mind… Oh, whatever. Just wait a moment.”

Having said that, Master brought a rectangular board with handprints drawn on either end of it facing each other. Lines stretched out from the fingertips, connecting the two.

“What is that, Master?” I asked.

“It’s a tool that makes practicing magic manipulation fun. You put your hand here, and pour your magic in equally across your five fingers, like this…”

Blue lights ran along the five lines drawn extending from the tips of her fingers, all of them moving at the same speed, but they vanished as soon as she withdrew her hand.

“I thought I might play with you, but…it wouldn’t be much fun for Sarasa to lose all the time. You two would be more fitting opponents, though. Sarasa and…Priscia. Sit across from each other, and put your hands on the board. Yes, like that. Now try doing like I did.”

“O-Okay.”

“Understood.”

She was suddenly giving us orders, but when those orders came from someone like Master, not even Priscia-senpai could disobey—in fact, she seemed delighted as she sat in the chair and did as she was told.

Red lights stretched from my side, and blue lights from hers. They met in the middle, and pushed back and forth for some time. Eventually, the blue lights gained the advantage, and…

Zap!!!

“Waugh?!”

A numbing shock ran through my palm that made me jump up out of my seat.

“S-Sarasa-san! Are you all right?!”

“U-Um… I’m fine? Probably.”

I looked at my palm and there was nothing wrong with it.

Seeing me blink at this unfamiliar phenomenon, Master let out a chuckle. “Interesting, huh? If the flow of magic from your five fingers is unbalanced, then that’s what happens to whoever’s balance is worse. Think of it as a minor penalty.”

“A penalty…? What even is this?”

“I told you, it’s a tool that helps make practicing magic manipulation more fun. It’s pretty effective, yeah? People who use it develop their skills quickly. I originally had it set up to make the loser’s clothes explode, but stripping Sarasa wouldn’t be all that fun, so I modified it.”

Those unsettling words made me stare at Master despite myself.

Well, yeah! If I was up against you, I’d be the only one to end up naked!!!

“Master, who *would* it be fun to strip? Who were you using this thing with?!”

“It’s a secret,” she responded. “Now that you have opponents, I could have left it as it was. You want me to change it back?”

“That’s quite all right! Leave it as is!”

If I went and stripped a count’s or marquess’s daughter, I’d be in serious trouble!

“You’re sure? If you collected bets on the matches at school, you could make a profit…”

At this point, Master trailed off, looked me up and down, and then shook her head.

“Maybe it’s still too soon for you, Sarasa,” she concluded.

Yeah, I’ll bet! My magic manipulation is still underdeveloped!

“Okay, next let’s do Priscia and Lacie. Give it a try.”

“A-All right…”

Perhaps because she’d seen what happened to me, Lacie-senpai was a little hesitant, but she couldn’t turn down Master’s request, and sat down to take my place. And the result of her battle with Priscia-senpai was…

“Eek!!!”

That was Priscia-senpai’s scream.

“Well, there you have it,” said Master. “Sarasa, I don’t have

anything for you to do right now. Use that to practice magic manipulation."

I had to wonder if that was okay when I'd come in to work, but those were Master's orders.

We did as we were told and put our all into playing—no, *training*.

I kept on losing in the beginning, but by the end of the day, I was able to beat my seniors a number of times, and when Master came to check on us, she judged that I'd done "not bad."

"I'll give you that board. If you put your hands on both sides, you don't even need an opponent. You can use it to practice by yourself, or with your friends. It's up to you."

"Thank you, Master. I'll take it."

It seemed like a joke item, but it was probably a relatively advanced artifact. Since she was giving it to me, I gratefully accepted—and like Master said, it worked wonders.

Through our repeated matches, my seniors and I greatly improved our magic manipulation.

This artifact would contribute to raising all of our grades.

◇ ◇ ◇

By the way, about the savings box in my room.

Thanks to my diligence in supplying it with magic, I made it all the way to graduation without my property ever being stolen from me... But I discovered a problem shortly before graduation.

You see, the requirement of providing the same amount of magical power to break it open applied to me, the owner, as well.

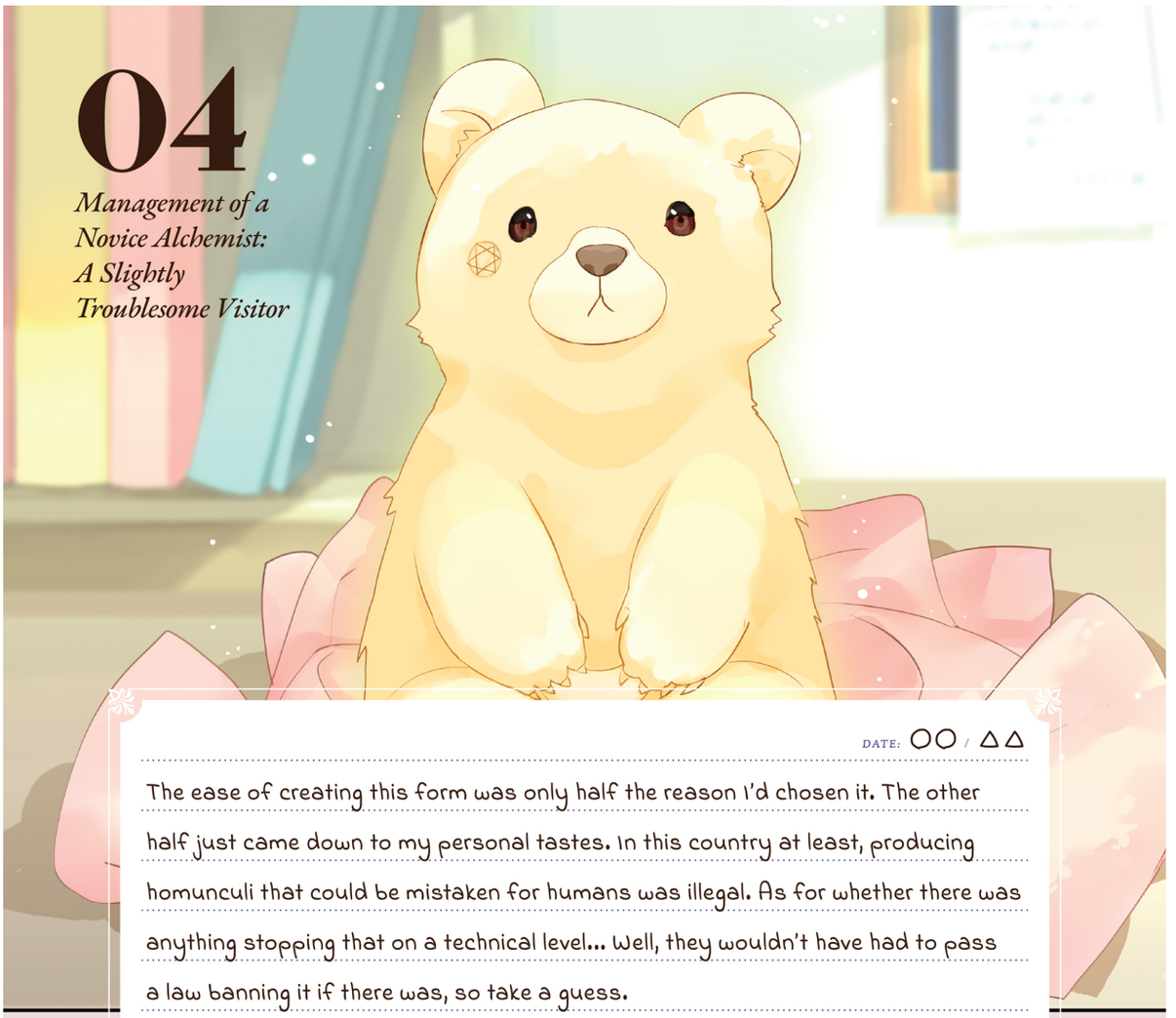
I was left with graduation closing in and a savings box that I couldn't move.

Thus, I was tearfully forced into pushing my magic consumption to the absolute limits.


04
A SLIGHTLY TROUBLESOME VISITOR
Author
MIZUHO ITSUKI
Illustrator
FUUMI
Management of a
Novice
Alchemist

04

Management of a Novice Alchemist: A Slightly Troublesome Visitor



DATE: ○○ / △△

The ease of creating this form was only half the reason I'd chosen it. The other half just came down to my personal tastes. In this country at least, producing homunculi that could be mistaken for humans was illegal. As for whether there was anything stopping that on a technical level... Well, they wouldn't have had to pass a law banning it if there was, so take a guess.





DATE: ○○ / △△

When I synchronized with the homunculus, it meant neglecting my own body.

Honestly, it was best to do it while lying down in bed, but seeing Lorea-chan's eyes wavering with uncertainty, I didn't have it in me to tell her, "I'm going to go lie down!" I sat down in my chair and placed both hands on the table for support before slowly beginning to temper my magical power.



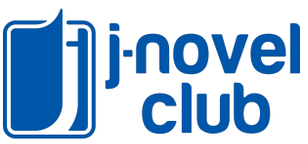
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Meow...

"I wanted to make Iris-san say a cute line."

"Sarasa-san..."

Lorea-chan's exasperated look made me feel just a little guilty. But you could say I had made the resonating stones for precisely this purpose!



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Management of a Novice Alchemist: Volume 4
by Mizuho Itsuki

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SHINMAI RENKINJUTSUSHI NO TEMPOKEIEI Vol.4 CHOTTO KOMATTA HOMONSHA

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