
05
THE ARRIVAL OF WINTER AND GUESTS
Author
MIZUHO ITSUKI
Illustrator
FUUMI
Management of a
Novice
Alchemist


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Management of a Novice Alchemist: The Arrival of Winter and Guests

DATE: ○○ / △△

But speaking as a merchant, that aesthetic view could go in the trash for all I cared. It bothered me to no end that business was so dead that I felt like I could hear crickets chirping even though it was wintertime.


Management of a Novice Alchemist: The Arrival of Winter and Guests
Sarasa Feed
Novice alchemist. Operates an alchemy shop in Yok Village that she received as a graduation present from her master.
Lorea
Daughter of the couple who owns Yok Village's general store. Helps out at Sarasa's shop.
Kate Starven
Iris's partner. Works together with Iris to repay Sarasa.
Iris Lotze
Gatherer. Sarasa saved her life, but she was left with a huge debt because of it.
DATE: ○○ / △△
The young man shouted as he stormed in with five rough-looking guys in tow. Was he a wealthy merchant? Or a noble? Whichever it was, I could smell that he was going to be nothing but trouble.



DATE: ○○ / △△

"Come on, Shopkeeper-dono!

Sign the paper!"

With Iris-san shoving the document

toward me, Kate-san offered a pen

she had prepared in advance.

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Prologue

The snow had begun to fall a few days ago, and with it, silence descended over Yok Village.

Even when the sun was out, few people could be seen outdoors. The view from the second-floor window was desolate, yet tasteful in its own way. It certainly wasn't bad to take some time to savor it.

In short, it was highly aesthetic.

But speaking as a merchant, that aesthetic view could go in the trash for all I cared.

Even if it *was* winter, it bothered me to no end that business was so dead that I felt like I could hear crickets chirping.

"So, that's why I need to find a way to raise money," I said gravely.

For the past few days, the four of us had been having daily tea parties.

Hearing my pronouncement, Iris-san nodded her head repeatedly. "Ohh, so you're focusing on reality too now, Shopkeeper-dono. I know how that is. Oh, how I know it. I tried to avert my eyes from the size of my own debt at first too."

"I didn't choose to look at reality, I've been forced to... I sort of saw this coming, but the decline in gatherer activity has been even more steep than I'd expected."

"We haven't been out working in the past few days, so we can't really talk, but there sure are a lot of gatherers who just take the winter off, huh," Kate-san observed.

"Though, for those who do work, their profit is that much larger," added Iris-san.

There were considerable difficulties involved in gathering materials from the great forest in the winter.

Not only did the temperature, the snow, and the monsters that only came out during the winter months exist as direct impediments,

but the change in scenery in a forest that it was already easy to get lost in made things even worse.

But there were materials that could only be harvested in this season, so there was money to be made for those willing to work. If they had techniques suited to the season, the amount they could make would grow too—commensurate with the risks.

"Sarasa-san, are things that bad?" asked Lorea-chan, the corners of her eyes drooping with a little unease.

"Hmm, the shop's not about to go under, but...you could say my progress with alchemy has been stagnating, I guess," I answered vaguely, cocking my head to the side a little.

It wasn't that I was so swamped in debt I couldn't do anything. But I had blown most of my cash and materials on hand the other day on my rescue operation to save Iris-san and Kate-san. All I was left with now was a mound of artifacts and potions that I had no use for, and no one to sell them to.

Fortunately, the inn I had invested in was filled with gatherers, and Delal-san was keeping up on her payments. But y'know, although the amount was a lot of income for an average commoner, it was not going to be enough to buy a large quantity of alchemic materials. Once you got into the fifth and sixth volumes of the *Complete Alchemy Works,* the cost of the materials used went up.

"Then there's taxes. I'll need to think about those too once spring comes around..."

In exchange for all the favorable treatment that alchemists received, they were pretty strict with us where taxes were concerned. We had to keep a record of all our income and expenditures throughout the year, and then submit it along with our tax payment. In my case, I had opened my shop in the spring, so I'd have to do the paperwork and calculate my taxes at the end of winter, and have the money ready to pay them.

"Will the shop still be okay?" asked Lorea-chan.

"Yep. I mean, your wages and food are pretty much my only operating expenses."

I had bought the shop outright, which meant I didn't have any rent to pay, and Lorea-chan was my only employee. Her wages were

a bit high by the village's standards, but barely moved the needle next to the amount I spent on doing alchemy.

"There *is* a one-year grace period if I really need it...but I'd rather pay what I owe quickly. It doesn't leave a good impression if you're behind on your taxes, and at the very least, I'd like to have everything sorted out by summer."

"In that case, should we lower the quality of our food? You could reduce my wages too if that would—"

"Whoa there, Lorea-chan. You don't need to fret about that. Frankly, when it comes to food, whether I'm feeding you, or feeding ten people, it doesn't make any difference in the grand scheme of things."

I immediately shot down Lorea-chan's hesitant proposals.

Now that I have Lorea-chan, it'd be a crying shame if her cooking didn't taste good anymore.

Besides, the food that graced our table came directly from the producers, and at neighborly prices, all thanks to Lorea-chan. The four of us were able to eat for a month for the price of a cheap potion or two.

As for meat, my two rent-exempted lodgers occasionally brought back whatever they'd hunted, so it was essentially free.

Besides, even if I did go after Lorea-chan's wages, the amount I'd save would really be insignificant. The expenses I could cut only amounted to a drop in the bucket. And that was hardly enough to justify going without delicious meals.

"Maybe I should take a break from alchemy for a while, and go out to search for materials myself...?" I swirled my teacup as I let out a sigh.

I'd had a shocking zero customers these past three days. It was so dead in here that not only could I hear the crickets chirping, they were forming a massive choir.

If the customers aren't coming anyway, then going gathering myself is an option—although, I feel like I've been doing that about once a month anyway.

"Shopkeeper-san, if there's anything we can do, just let us know, okay?" Kate-san offered. "Because it's our fault you're having

trouble."

"Yeah," Iris-san agreed. "If there's anything we can go get for you, we will. And if you ask us to go with you, Shopkeeper-dono, we'll follow you anywhere."

"Thank you. Hmm, maybe I'll give it some serious thought. The snow has to let up soon, so maybe we'll be able to go out tomorrow."

Grinding tea leaves while waiting for customers who wouldn't come was a waste of time. If I was going to grind anything, then it should have been junk magic crystals, but my stock of those was rather poor at the moment.

"Shopkeeper-dono, I'm not very knowledgeable about the subject, so what can we expect to find during this season?" Iris-san asked.

"Give me just a moment," I said, rising from my seat, and went to fetch the *Compendium of Alchemic Materials* from the workshop, then spread it out on the table. "Something available locally, and not too hard to gather, but also high value. If I also add it has to be something I'd want to use, there aren't many candidates..."

I flipped through the compendium, showing them a variety of materials.

Winter monsters were not to be underestimated, so my choices were basically all plant-type materials. Hunting any monsters we thought we could handle was also an option, but finding and encountering high-value targets would be tough.

On that point, with plant-type materials we could get by with just the tenacity to endure the cold and some patience.

Sometimes, people get lost and die, though. You've gotta take the mountains in winter seriously.

"You said there weren't many candidates, but there are options," Iris-san noted. "Should we be targeting the valuable ones, then?"

"But we're not used to gathering in the snow, right?" Kate-san interjected. "Even if you're coming with us, Shopkeeper-san, wouldn't it be better to keep it simple to start out?"

"We have a long winter ahead of us, so that might be a good idea," I replied. "My experience is limited to having taken a number

of practical lessons, after all. That being the case, a good material to go for would be—”

Jangle, jangle.

As we were in the middle of our discussion, our heads all raised at a sound we hadn’t heard in a while.

“A customer...?” I wondered aloud.

“Oh, there was a gatherer in this village even more industrious than we are?” Iris-san said, sounding impressed.

“After what happened with the frostbite bat fangs, if they’ve been living normally, they shouldn’t need to work this winter, though.”

That last comment was brought to you by Kate-san, who also made a hefty profit selling frostbite bat fangs.

Well, I guess in these two’s case, they already had debt, so it’s not fair to measure them by the same standard.

“Well, it could be one of the villagers, so I’ll go,” I said, starting to rise from my seat.

“Oh, Sarasa-san, you keep talking,” Lorea-chan said, motioning for me to stay put. “I’ll go handle it.” She stood up with alacrity.

“You will? Okay, please do.”

“Sure. Leave it to me. I haven’t had any work in a while!”

Pleased to be able to do something, Lorea-chan took off with a smile on her face. But not long after we resumed talking, she returned, looking troubled.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Um... I don’t know how to say this, but there’s a suspicious customer...”

“Huh? Again? Nord-san’s not back, is he?”

“No, it’s not him. This one is even more suspicious.”

“How can someone be worse...?”

Hey, wait, hold on a moment.

Now that I think of it, Nord-san didn’t look *that suspicious, right? He was just a bit sloppy about taking care of his appearance. It’s all the other stuff he did that left us with a dodgy impression of him.*

Yeah, preconceptions are scary.

“Got it. I’ll be right there, okay?” I told her.

“Um, he seemed kind of self-important, so I saw him through to

the reception room. Was that all right?”

“Oh, you did? Yeah, that’s no problem. That room’s fine.”

I had some nice furniture in there, but the seal would keep anyone from stealing it, and the door from the reception room to the hall couldn’t be opened by strangers. Even if this customer was some sort of scoundrel, he couldn’t do much damage.

“A suspicious individual, hmm...” Iris-san mused. “Okay, Shopkeeper-dono, we’re going with you.”

“Yeah, we’d be worried to let you go alone,” Kate-san added.

“Thank you,” I replied. “Lorea-chan, can you mind the shop? I don’t expect that any other customers will come in, though.”

“Okay. Be careful.”

After watching an uneasy Lorea-chan head off to the sales floor, the three of us headed to the reception room.

Episode 1: The First Customer

The person in the reception room was certainly suspicious. He wore a hat low over his eyes, with a scarf wrapped around his mouth, and wore a thick coat that covered his entire body. But considering he had walked here through the snow, that wasn't unreasonable.

Still, he was clearly overdressed for this room, which had an artifact keeping it at a comfortable temperature.

He was leaning back on the sofa with enough swagger that I could see why Lorea-chan had described him as self-important. I could tell he was a man from his overall build, but I couldn't tell anything about his appearance, and I didn't like that. *Can't he at least show his face?*

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting."

"No, it's all right."

This suspicious individual showed no reaction to my somewhat overly formal tone. He looked at each of us in turn as we sat down on the sofa opposite him, before finally fixing his eyes on me.

"You are Sarasa Feed?" he asked.

This attitude is familiar for some reason... Oh, that's it. The nobles who came to Master's shop.

The more reasonable among them had acted this way.

"Yes, that's me," I replied. "Pardon me, but could I ask who you are?"

"Ah, I haven't given you my name yet, have I? It's Ferrick. Ferrick Laprocian."

"Huh?!" all three of us cried out involuntarily.

Could you blame us, though? Laprocian was the name of this country, and only members of the royal family could use it as their surname.

"I'm sure my name alone isn't enough to win your trust, so...will

this do?”

He pulled an ornate dagger from his pocket, the pommel of which certainly did bear the royal crest. Only a royal—or at least, someone recognized by one of them—would’ve carried such a thing.

That meant that even if he wasn’t royalty himself, he definitely had the same level of power and influence. We all instantly shot up off the sofa and bowed down before him on the floor.

“I-Is he for real?” Kate-san whispered.

“How should I know?! I’ve never even been to the capital!” Iris-san whispered back. “How about you, Shopkeeper-dono?”

“The name is correct,” I replied, also whispering. “But my understanding is that the royals all have golden hair, or close to it.”

I’d never had the chance to meet the royals either, but I’d seen them at a distance while living in the capital, and I’d heard more rumors about them than someone living in the boonies would have.

One of those things I’d heard about was their distinctive blond hair. However, this self-proclaimed royal, who was hiding behind a hat and scarf, had rather dark brown hair. Most of it was hidden from view, but it was so far from blond that there was no mistaking it.

At the very least, none of the current royals should have had hair like his...

“Oh, is it my hair? This is a disguise.”

Maybe he’d heard us whispering, because he put his hand on his hat, removed it, and then took off his scarf too.

This revealed bright blond hair and emerald eyes.

Iris-san’s and Kate-san’s eyes bulged in surprise at how fast not just the color, but the length of his hair changed, but I knew an artifact that could do it.

The “disguise hat.” Its basic function was to change the color of someone’s hair. It saved the trouble of dyeing your hair, or removing the color afterward, so it was a pretty useful tool for disguising yourself.

With high functionality models, they could even adjust the length of your hair and color of your eyes, although at the cost of raising the price to an entirely different level. But it wasn’t at all strange that a prince would have such a thing.

“Pardon our rudeness. Now then, Your Highness, just what business brings a person such as yourself out into the countryside?”

“Yes, about that... Oh, but first. Please, sit down too. As you can see, I’m traveling incognito. There’s no need to stand on ceremony.”

It was easy for him to say that, but he was royalty. I glanced at Iris-san and Kate-san, wondering what we should do, but they just looked back as if to say it was up to me to decide.

I could read it in their eyes. *“We have no idea how to handle someone this important!”*

I was a commoner. Iris-san was a noble. Normally, she should have been more used to this situation, but that was the House of Lotze for you. If we were to both count up all the nobles we’d met in our lives, I’d probably seen several times more than her.

That said, this was my first meeting with a royal, but...ignoring his command was probably considered an affront too.

“If you’ll allow it, then—”

I stood up, and the other two followed.

As I raised my eyes, instantly, I strained my facial and abdominal muscles like I never had before.

“Kh!”

Iris-san’s voice leaked out ever so slightly. But I couldn’t blame her.

I mean, we’d looked up to see there wasn’t a strand of hair on the peak of His Highness’s head! It was totally smooth!

If he was an old man, or even past middle age, it wouldn’t have been an issue.

And even for a younger guy, if he’d lost all of his hair, or if it had thinned evenly and he had average looks, we’d have been fine.

But this guy was handsome, and that was putting it lightly.

Normally, he’d have been super hot. Total prince material. What was left of his hair was long and sleek. It was just too much to expect us not to laugh when someone like that had a bald circle right at the top of their head.

“Hmm? Is something the matter?”

I didn’t know if he understood our struggle, but His Highness brushed his hair back over his shoulder. It swayed lightly, and he

flashed us a toothy grin.

No, he's got to be doing this on purpose. He's trying to make us laugh. But what's going to happen to us if we laugh at one of the most influential people in the country?

I contracted my stomach hard, slowly sitting back down on the sofa.

Iris-san and Kate-san managed to seat themselves safely as well, when...

"Oops!"

The hat slipped from His Highness's hands. He stooped to pick it up, showing the peak of his head.

"Pfft! Bwah ha ha ha!" Iris-san couldn't hold it in any longer.

But it wouldn't be fair to criticize her. I was pretty close to cracking up myself!

His Highness only has himself to blame!!!

That said, we couldn't just carry on as if she hadn't laughed. Iris-san threw herself down on the ground instantly, and Kate-san stood up, her face pale.

"I am so sorry, Your Highness! P-Please, let the blame fall on me alone! Spare the House of Lotze from—"

"Heh heh, don't worry about it. In fact, I don't mind if you laugh your hearts out, you know? In here, at least."

"N-No, we couldn't..."

His Highness was waving his hand dismissively, a smile on his face. Iris-san raised her head, eyes wandering with uncertainty. When he saw that, he touched his hair again, causing her to hide her face once more.

I couldn't hear her, but her shaking shoulders betrayed the fact she was laughing.

This guy's a menace!!!

"Ha ha ha! Nord laughed out loud the moment he saw me, you know?"

"Nord... You mean Nordrad-san?" I asked.

"Yes. He's one of the reasons I've come here. You there—Iris-san, was it? It must be hard to talk like that, so please, sit down, and don't worry about it."

"But..."

Iris-san showed some hesitance, but she couldn't refuse His Highness's request, and so she took her seat beside me once again. His Highness nodded once he saw she had, and then continued. "Now then, I imagine you've already guessed, but I'm here about this head of mine."

"Because your hair has...umm...taken leave of your scalp?"

I searched for an inoffensive way of phrasing it, but when he heard what I came up with, he snorted with laughter.

"Just say it like it is. I'm bald. I don't need you to be unduly delicate about it. Yes, that's right. Sarasa-san, I'd like you to make some hair regrowth formula for me. You can do that, right?"

"I can, yes, but..."

The hair regrowth formula was a potion that was listed in the fifth volume of the *Complete Alchemy Works,* so I was currently capable of making it.

It just so happened that one of the materials I had been showing to the others as an example of something we could harvest this time of year was the main ingredient. Oddly enough, he'd shown up with incredibly good timing.

But it was inevitable, in a way. That material, misanon root, could be harvested in any season, but only roots harvested in the bitterly cold months could be used to make "hair regrowth formula." Roots harvested in other seasons produced "hair growth formula" instead.

That meant that if his goal was to regrow his hair, it was logical for him to come this time of year, so it wasn't that odd he was here —aside from him being a prince.

"If you'd just put in an order, I could have delivered the materials to you..."

In fact, I wished that he had. It was so cruel of him to just show up all of a sudden, unannounced! I was somewhat used to handling nobles, but royals were different!!!

"Even without coming all this way, I'm sure there is no shortage of alchemists in the capital who would have been up to the task. Wouldn't going to one of them have been more convenient for you?"

"Like your own master, Master Millis, for instance?"

"Yes."

It went without saying, there was a vast gulf in skill between me and my master. I'd gone to her for help just the other day.

If she'd said, "Go pick some misanon root and send it to me," I'd have had no choice but to respond, "Right away!"

That was all it would have taken to save His Highness the trip out here.

Master was a little less than fond of the nobility, but I couldn't imagine her refusing His Highness's request... She wouldn't do that, right?

"It's true that, in terms of skill as an alchemist, I would have been better to place an order with Master Millis," Prince Ferrick agreed with a smile, then shook his head and continued. "However, things are not so simple. I am a prince, and Master Millis is a master class alchemist. Any order I placed with her would inevitably draw attention. With so many people living in the capital, it's hard to keep things secret."

Hair regrowth formula was a somewhat delicate topic. Hair was one of those things where some people didn't care at all, but those who did care about hair did so excessively.

For whatever reason, His Highness wasn't overly fussed about his hair—in fact, he'd been willing to use it to get a laugh out of us. But if you considered his position, he was the sort of person who should have cared.

Basically, if word of this leaked out, there would be all sorts of maneuvering behind the scenes. The factions who wanted to ingratiate themselves to His Highness might try to get their hands on some formula before him to make him owe them a favor, while those who were opposed to him might try to block him from getting any to embarrass him.

Even those factions that were still on the fence about him were highly likely to make some kind of move. If that happened, it would cause chaos in the market prices for alchemic materials, inconveniencing a large number of people.

"That is not something I would like to see. For my part, I'm not that troubled by my hair, but my father has said I'm not to go out in

public looking like this."

"Well, I can see why..."

Even if His Highness didn't care about it himself, he had a public image to maintain. It would be one thing if he were elderly, but Prince Ferrick was still young. Good looks held diplomatic value, and if His Highness couldn't go out in public, that was a mark against him as a prince.

If I recalled correctly, Prince Ferrick was the oldest son, but the king had yet to name him crown prince, so it was possible that one of the other princes or princesses might be named instead of him.

"And that's the situation. In order to avoid any interference, I want to acquire what I need in secret."

"A word, if I may, sir?" Iris-san raised her hand slightly, asking permission to speak.

"Yes, I don't mind." His Highness nodded magnanimously. "As I said earlier, there's no need to stand on ceremony."

"I'm much obliged," Iris-san said. "I understand the situation, but why have you come here yourself? You could have sent someone on your behalf, and they wouldn't have stood out. There wasn't any need for you to come to this remote village, was there?"

"I think that, as an alchemist, Sarasa-san can explain that better than I can."

His Highness looked at me, and I nodded.

"Well, you see, Iris-san, there are two types of hair growth formula. One is a generic hair growth formula. The other is a hair growth formula tailored to that person. For serious treatment, the latter is necessary, and there's no way to make it without the person who will be using it."

In the case of the former, it made hair grow, but it took longer, and the user often shed the hair they had grown after they stopped using it, so its efficacy was a little questionable.

The latter, by comparison, would last for several years once the hair grew, so even if it was a bit pricey, a tailored formula ultimately led to better end results.

That was why the tailored version had come to be called hair *regrowth* formula to distinguish it.

But making hair regrowth formula required an examination of the person who would use it, and that made it necessary for them to visit the alchemist personally or to have the alchemist come to them.

His Highness should have been able to do the latter, but that would absolutely have drawn attention. Which meant this time, it wasn't an option he could have chosen.

"Oh, I see," said Iris-san. "That sounds like a real pain."

"Yes. Making balding potions is really easy, though. They work on anyone and are highly effective."

I didn't know the recipe though, so I wouldn't have been able to make one even if someone asked me to. It was apparently listed in volume ten of the *Complete Alchemy Works*, where all the artifacts of dubious usage had gotten stuffed.

It wouldn't have been out of place in volume five or six, in terms of the difficulty of making it, but the reason it wasn't listed in them had to do with how it was created as a failed attempt at a hair regrowth formula.

If the inventor used it without realizing, they must have cried.

"Balding potions? Is there a demand for those, Shopkeeper-dono?" asked Iris-san.

"Yes, and more than you'd expect. It causes permanent hair removal, which is popular with some people." Like those who shaved their heads for religious reasons or women who had to deal with unwanted hair. It wasn't cheap, so not just anyone could use it, but Master's shop did sell it occasionally.

"So it's all a matter of usage. But in that case, they should change the name."

"Ha ha ha... The naming rights go to the first alchemist to make it."

This is actually one of the better names. The bad ones can get really bad.

Apparently a talent for alchemy didn't always come paired with good naming sense.

"That explains what His Highness is doing here," said Kate-san. "But there are other alchemists, so why did you choose Shopkeeper-san? Is it because she's Ophelia-sama's apprentice?"

"That's part of it, but it also has to do with Nord, whom I mentioned earlier."

"Nord-san?" Kate-san asked.

"Yes," His Highness confirmed. "The two of us go way back. And I'm told he caused you all quite a bit of trouble recently, right? He begged me to do something to help."

A few months ago, Nord-san had taken Iris-san and Kate-san with him on a trip to research salamanders, but then his insatiable spirit of exploration had gotten them trapped inside the cave.

If he had been the only one trapped, I don't think I'd have done anything. But unfortunately for me—and fortunately for Nord-san—Iris-san and Kate-san had been with him. As a result, I had paid out of my own pocket to rescue the two of them.

Fortunately, I'd succeeded in doing so, but the cost had been exorbitant. Nord-san had paid what he could, but that had only been a tiny fraction.

I still had the artifacts and potions I had created in the endeavor, but it had undeniably used up my cash on hand. So it was maybe ninety percent his fault I needed to raise money now.

"So that's why. I know Nord-san's not a bad guy, though..."

I mean, he *had* put in a word with Prince Ferrick for me, after all.

Although, honestly, it's too much trouble for me to be grateful for it!

Frankly, as a commoner, the royal family were so high above me they might as well have been up in the clouds. Even though I had gotten somewhat used to dealing with nobles between the ones who'd visited Master's shop and getting to know a marquess's daughter, I was still only a little used to them. This wasn't a public place, so His Highness had said we didn't need to stand on ceremony, but the stress was still making my stomach hurt, okay?

"He's blindly passionate about research, and a capable man, he's just... I'm sorry."

"N-No, you don't need to apologize for him, sir!"

"He's still a friend of mine, for all his faults. That said, I can't simply give you money for no reason. Hence why I've brought you a well-paying job. I'll be paying you two hundred gold coins in

advance, and a thousand more on successful completion."

Iris-san and Kate-san both audibly gulped at the amount he'd stated.

It was true that it was a little high of a price to be paying for a single potion.

Yeah, just *a little* high. The potion I'd used on Iris-san to reattach her severed arm was actually ten times more expensive, to tell you the truth.

"You're sure?" I asked. "That's almost twice the market price."

"Just how expensive is hair regrowth formula?!" Iris-san cried out in disbelief before hurriedly covering her own mouth.

His Highness nodded as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

"I'm fine with it. Can I ask you to do this for me?"

"All right, then," I replied. "But I'll need to gather materials, which will take a certain amount of time..."

"Not a problem. I intend to tour the surrounding area for the time being."

His Highness nodded, then pointed to his own head before continuing. "According to the doctor, this was caused by stress. I've been meaning to get away from the capital and use this chance to inspect the countryside while I also enjoy a relaxing vacation."

Prince Ferrick punctuated this with a handsome smile, but there was something that seemed insincere about it. I didn't know if there was any merit in inspecting the area, but I could only doubt that this region was suited for a vacation.

Beautiful scenery, a temperate climate, and wonderful places to relax—we didn't have a single one of those things here.

Well, if it was just a matter of scenery that he didn't usually see, there was any number of places in the great forest or the mountains beyond, but going to them would mean putting his life at risk.

He's clearly making the wrong choice, right?

But I was smart enough not to say that. I'd only say what I had to.

"Now then, if I could just brush your hair for a—"

But as I was speaking, I heard Lorea-chan's panicked cry from the shop space behind me. "S-Stop it! Eeek!"

"Take that!!!"

Bang! Crash! Thud!

The other voice was a man's, but I didn't recognize it. The sounds of destruction continued.

I turned toward the noise, and started to rise from my seat, but restrained myself, looking to His Highness for his reaction.

I wanted to go see what was happening immediately, but this wasn't an ordinary customer I was dealing with. No matter what he'd said about not standing on ceremony, it would be far too rude to walk out on him while we were still talking.

But His Highness understood, and nodded right away. "I don't mind. Please, go."

"Excuse me!" I shot up and opened the door to the shop space. The first thing that sprang into view was four ruffians, a cowering Lorea-chan, and Kurumi standing on the counter, arms crossed, as it protected her.

I didn't know the situation, but based on the fact that Kurumi was in combat mode, they'd clearly done something aggressive. But they snorted at Kurumi.

"Ha ha, what's this? A stuffed bear that moves on its own?"

It was true. Kurumi's form wasn't intimidating in the slightest.

But this was an alchemist's shop. If these guys were thinking straight, they'd have been more wary—but sadly, these guys didn't have brains that thought straight.

"Outta the way! Hah!!!" One man tried to sweep Kurumi aside with his arm.

"What a fool..." Iris-san, who had caught up and was looking over my shoulder, murmured almost at exactly the same moment as Kurumi burst into action.

Kurumi jumped up and unleashed a Kurumi Dropkick, the sharp blow sinking into the man's stomach.

"Gwegh!" As the man doubled over, groaning, Kurumi landed and jumped once more, one arm thrust upward, spinning in a Kurumi Corkscrew.

Taking it on the chin, the man was lifted up into the air, then fell over backward.

It was all a little surreal, and the remaining three men were left speechless.

The man on the ground had been knocked out cold. Not only was he not opening his eyes, I could see they'd rolled into the back of his head. He seemed to be breathing, though.

Yep, that counts as holding back.

Kurumi's tough claws could scratch through rock. If it hadn't held back, there would have been blood everywhere in my precious shop—no, that's not the point. The man would have been badly hurt.

"Huh?! Wh-What is that thing?!" cried one of the men.

"This shop's bodyguard," I said, stepping forward. "But more importantly, who are you people?"

"Bodyguard? Don't mess with us!!!"

The men's response was a violent one. One man raised his leg up high, ready to kick over a shelf in anger.

But in this shop, that was clearly a bad move.

Just before his foot could impact the shelf, a thin film of light appeared to protect it. The moment the man touched it, he collapsed like his body was paralyzed—or he would have if Kurumi's punch hadn't exploded into his solar plexus, laying him out flat next to the first guy who'd lost consciousness.

"Wh-What the hell is this?!"

The remaining two backed away, unnerved, but I wasn't about to factor that into my decision.

"Kurumi, get 'em."

"Grar!"

Kurumi moved instantly on my command.

One man took a sharp upward hook to the stomach, with a follow-up strike to his jaw on the way down as he collapsed.

As the last of them turned tail and fled, Kurumi used a shelf as a springboard before kicking off the ceiling to land a powerful strike on the nape of the man's neck.

The two men crumpled, while Kurumi spun around and landed softly. It looked at me, seeming proud of its handiwork.

"I took them out before finding out the situation, so... What happened?" I asked Lorea-chan as I picked up Kurumi.

"R-Right." She was a little pale as she nodded. "Um, I don't really know why, but they got violent as soon as they came in..."

I looked around and saw the table and chairs we used for our little tea parties had been knocked over.

Oh, that makes sense. If the furniture wasn't preinstalled, the anti-crime seal won't activate, so that's why they were still all right. But we trip over these chairs ourselves sometimes, so I couldn't make it apply to them anyway.

"They look unharmed. Thank goodness," said Lorea-chan.

Unlike the rest of us, who were used to a little rough stuff, Lorea-chan was just an ordinary village girl.

She had never left this village, where she knew everyone, so she had probably never had the chance to have real malice and violence directed at her before.

I set Kurumi down on the counter and went to hug Lorea-chan, who was quivering slightly. As I patted her on the head, her body relaxed.

"Lorea, was there any damage to the shop?" Iris-san, who had come in after me, asked as she began standing up the table and chairs.

"It's fine," Lorea-chan said with a nod, still resting against me for support. "They just knocked over the chairs and table, and then you all showed up."

Iris-san was followed by Kate-san and even His Highness, who looked somewhat amused as he looked at Kurumi standing on top of the shop's counter.

"Incredible. An anti-crime seal and a homunculus? I should have expected no less from Master Millis's apprentice."

"I'm flattered, but the seal was already here when I took over the shop."

"Even if you didn't make the seal, the homunculus is your work, right, Sarasa-san? Nord had told me you were a good alchemist, but after seeing this, I feel like I can rest easy with you handling things for me."

"Thank you." I turned back to Lorea-chan. "Did these guys not say anything before they got violent?"

"They didn't. It was as soon as I greeted them..."

Hmm, well, knowing Lorea-chan, it certainly couldn't have been because they thought she had a bad attitude.

In the time since I'd taken over the shop, there had been some rough and tough gatherers who'd come in, but maybe because of the hellflame grizzly incident, none of them had suddenly decided to get violent. Even the anti-crime seal had only gotten to show off when a slightly malicious gatherer had pounded his fist on the counter too hard while making false accusations.

Who would have guessed that Kurumi, who I only had as an insurance policy, would actually get the chance to be useful?

I've never seen these guys before, so were they just a bunch of gatherers who arrived recently trying to act tough?

I wouldn't give guys like that favorable treatment. I'd just ban them from the shop, though.

"I wonder why? Is there anything I've done that would cause anyone to hold a grudge against me... I don't think so? Maybe?"

As I tilted my head to the side in confusion, Iris-san gave an exasperated shrug. "No, you have, Shopkeeper-dono. Even if it's an unjustified grudge."

Yeah, I have. I have done some things. It feels a bit late for them to be acting now, though.

"Shopkeeper-san? What do you want to do with these guys?" Kate-san asked.

"Well... How about we chuck them outside."

Honestly, I'd have liked to have asked them what was going on, but unfortunately, I was preoccupied with His Highness for the moment.

I couldn't just leave them there, and then interrogate them while pretending to know more than I did to trip them up. So, Kate-san and I dragged the unconscious guys out and let them sleep on a comfy bed of snow.

It's cold, so maybe they'll get sick? Well, it's their own fault if they do.

If Lorea-chan had been hurt, I would have put a thick white blanket over top of them, but I decided to spare them from that.

Because I'm so nice.

"Sorry for the wait," I said, once I had returned to the reception room and seated myself across from His Highness once more.

"Oh, don't worry about it," he replied. "Do you get a lot of gatherers like that?"

I shook my head. "No, this is the first time. Some decide to try and intimidate me, but no one just suddenly gets violent... I've never seen those men before, so maybe they've just arrived in the village."

"I see... If you have any trouble, let me know. I'll offer enough help to make up for the trouble that Nord caused."

"It's kind of you to offer, but I think we'll be fine. As you just saw, I can handle that kind of riffraff."

The royals in this country had enough power that they could force the system to do what they wanted to some degree. But it smelled to me like no good could come of relying on that power.

You have to plan carefully when money is involved, so taking on debts you don't know the interest rate on should be avoided at all costs!!!

It was possible the debt might grow in no time, leaving me unable to move freely because of it.

My smile was twitching a little as I declined, but His Highness just seemed amused.

"Is that right? Very well, then," he replied. "So, I believe we were talking about hair?"

"Yes. If you could please put a few strands into this bottle. And then..."

I went on to ask about His Highness's magical power, his skin's condition, and a number of other health questions. The results would determine the mixing ratio for the materials I used.

I'd just be referencing the *Complete Alchemy Works* as I went along, so it wasn't terribly complicated. The book spent a lot of pages on hair regrowth formula, though. Just looking at how thick that section was, it wasn't hard to imagine just how much this problem had plagued the men of the world, how they had fought back against it, and how much money they had spent doing so.

The one thing in the *Complete Works* that seemed to compete with it was the amount of cosmetics for women. The amount that women would spend on their appearance was just as ridiculous as men's hair troubles.

"Thank you for your cooperation, sir. That's the last of my questions. Factoring in the time I'll need to gather materials, I expect it will be a few weeks before the product is ready... What would you like to do?"

"In that case, I'll drop by at another opportune moment. Please, take care of it for me."

"Yes, I will."

I rose at the same time as His Highness, and led him to the exit by myself.

What about Iris-san and Kate-san?

When I'd started asking him health questions, they had decided "there's nothing we can do here to help," and then run away.

The same went for Lorea-chan. But I wasn't going to say anything about that. If Lorea-chan, who wasn't used to dealing with royalty, had done something to offend His Highness, there would have been no fixing it, so I could understand how she felt! I didn't want to get involved with the ruling class either, if I could help it.

Though, I suppose Iris-san is part of the ruling class too!

"Please take care on your way home."

I bowed my head deeply, trying my best not to let it show how glad I was that he was finally leaving, and stood at the door until the sound of him treading through the snow faded into the distance. I then stood up straight and let out a deep sigh of relief that the visit of my very important guest had concluded safely.

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After watching His Highness leave, I switched the shop's sign to "Closed," locked the door tight, and then collapsed on a sofa in the reception room.

"Urgh, agh, dagh."

As I was letting out meaningless groans due to mental

exhaustion, Iris-san and Kate-san returned to the reception room with apologetic looks on their faces.

"I see that took a lot out of you, Shopkeeper-san," said Kate-san.

"Tell me about it," I moaned. "I mean, everyone ran off on me. Especially Iris-san. I think Iris-san needs to show me some appreciation for all my hard work."

She's the one with the highest social stature here!

"Of course, I'll do what I can...?"

"For a start, you can sit right here."

I patted the sofa next to me. Iris-san smiled awkwardly as she sat down. I then used her thighs as a pillow and relaxed with everything I had. *Yep, they're perfect.*

"I'm sorry about earlier, Shopkeeper-dono. But when I consider what could have happened if I'd shown any discourtesy..."

"Yeah, I wasn't ready to deal with His Highness either..." Kate-san admitted. "If anything, I'm amazed that you could, Shopkeeper-san."

"Well, Master's shop did get noble customers."

I'd also received lessons on manners at the academy, and the senior students I had been close with were nobles, so I had even met a high noble like a marquess before. So I was better off than the average person, but...

"Still, I never expected to get involved with royalty. I'm sure Nord-san meant well, but he really shouldn't have!"

"That's for certain. I'm sure you didn't have the option of refusing."

"Of course not! I couldn't possibly have told His Highness, 'Um, actually, I'd rather not take jobs from the royal family...' after he came all the way out here!!!"

The pay's good, but I'm not sure it's enough to make it worth all the stress. I mean, if I mess this up, my life's in jeopardy, you know?

"Sarasa-san, I made some warm tea. Would you like some?" offered Lorea-chan.

"I would."

I took a brief rest as I drank Lorea-chan's kindness. I also munched on the cookies she offered. Her sweetness soothed my heart.

"Whew. Thanks."

"Oh, you don't have to thank me. I wasn't able to do anything... So, that person was a prince, huh? I did think that he was cool."

"Oh, you did...? That's your type, Lorea-chan? Do you want to marry him?"

When I asked that of Lorea-chan, who was sort of staring into space, she hurriedly waved her hands. "N-No, not at all! We live in totally different worlds! I do think he's handsome, but I just can't see it... I can't imagine it working out..."

"Oh, huh. So that's how it is for you, Lorea-chan. How about you two? I mean, Iris-san is technically a member of the nobility."

"I'd say I feel the same. Because, as you say Shopkeeper-dono, I am only technically a noble."

"I couldn't even think about it," said Kate-san. "When we're talking about a prince, there's basically no difference between me and Lorea-chan in terms of social stature."

There were a lot of well-to-do young ladies in the academy cooing over their fantasy of a prince, but, well, maybe that was because a lot of them were high nobles?

Priscia-senpai, the one I was close with, was the daughter of a marquess, and the idea of her marrying a prince didn't seem so far-fetched—not that she herself had ever shown any interest in such a thing.

"What about you, Shopkeeper-san?" asked Kate-san.

"He doesn't do it for me either. I'd rather not get involved with people like him. I'm sure some of them are nice, but most are just exhausting to deal with..."

And having to deal with those sorts of people for the rest of my life was kind of something I wanted to avoid. Being born a prince was the kind of thing that could make a man go bald from stress.

Well, no, he didn't say it was because of dealing with people.

Even His Highness, who was affable enough at a glance, seemed to be hiding something behind his smile... You couldn't pay me enough to marry that.

"Hmm, even you feel that way, huh, Shopkeeper-dono?" Iris-san remarked. "But still, I never would have expected His Highness

Ferrick to visit this place without bodyguards. Maybe he's actually quite capable?"

"Oh, I'm sure he is, but I think His Highness did have bodyguards, you know? That's just a guess on my part, though."

Though they hadn't entered the shop, I had sensed something strange outside—probably the presence of his bodyguards.

Still, as you'd expect from people assigned to protect a prince, even with me thinking they'd be there and me paying attention, I had only been able to notice "Maybe something's different from normal?"

"He was also wearing a considerable number of protective artifacts on top of that. Probably made by Master," I added.

With all of that, he wouldn't get hurt easily, so he was safe even with his guards watching from a short distance away.

"Come to think of it, we never served tea. Was that all right?" asked Lorea-chan.

"Oh, that's not a problem. With nobles, it's normal not to serve tea unless you invite them to a tea party. Unless you're especially close."

People of such high rank couldn't put anything into their mouth when they didn't know what was in it, so if they needed a drink, they would bring their own servants with them to prepare it.

There were some who served tea as a show of hospitality, even knowing it would remain untouched, but...

"If anything were to happen to him—even just food poisoning, for instance—it could be a death sentence for us if we came under suspicion. And I mean that quite literally."

Heads would roll, and not just metaphorical ones.

"Being part of the nobility sure must be a pain, huh?" Lorea-chan said with a sigh, shooting a glance in Iris-san's direction.

Iris-san blinked repeatedly, then vigorously shook her head. "Hm? Our house is totally different. I don't mean to brag, but we never invite nobles over, and no one invites us either. I mean, this is the first I'm even hearing about this kind of etiquette!"

"Iris... You really shouldn't be bragging about that. Even if you've never had the chance to learn," Kate-san scolded.

"Oh, whatever. It's not like I'll ever have the occasion to use any of it," Iris-san said with a shrug and an awkward smile before continuing. "Still, the royals sure have it tough. Not even being able to buy a mere potion without worrying about public perception."

"Wait, Iris-san, are you taking everything His Highness said at face value?" I asked.

"Huh? Was he lying?"

"I don't think he was lying, but..." I turned to Kate-san. "Are you sure that it's okay for Iris-san to become head of the House of Lotze? She's so...innocent."

Kate-san smiled sheepishly. "I'm not counting on Iris being able to act like a noble. Her lady mother says we'll have to count on her bride at this point."

"Oh, her bride... Wait, bride?!"

"Yes, on you, Shopkeeper-san."

"They're acting like that's already decided?!"

"Oh, no. She said she'd be willing to accept you as a groom too."

"That's basically the same thing!"

"You're a promising prospect. I've been told we can use the Lotze name for anything involving you. It doesn't have much sway, but I think you can rely on us more than His Highness, you know?"

"Murgh, you have a point there."

I didn't even want to think about the trouble that asking His Highness to lend me his power could get me into.

"Besides, you don't seem entirely against the idea, Shopkeeper-san," Kate-san said, grinning as she pointed at my pillow.

"Oops..." I sat up, took a sip of tea, and swiftly got us back on topic. "The fact of the matter is, if His Highness wanted to call on Master quietly, I don't think it would be hard for him—assuming she was in the mood to comply."

With her superhuman abilities, it went without saying that it would be far easier for her to visit His Highness unnoticed than it had been for him to quietly come see me.

Besides, she could probably make a hair regrowth formula that worked on anyone, even without taking the time to examine them.

"Sarasa-san, you aren't fooling anyone, you know...?"

“Lorea-chan, I don’t know what you’re talking about?”

“Oh, it’s not that I mind.” I averted my eyes from Lorea-chan’s stare, then continued, “I think he had some other goal in coming to see me.”

“Another goal... Such as?” Iris-san asked.

“I couldn’t say. But whatever it is, I’ll bet that my taking the job was to his advantage...even if it’s probably not to mine.”

“Then shouldn’t you have turned him down?” asked Lorea-chan.

“Do you think I could have, Lorea-chan? With a member of the royal family asking.”

“No, I guess not. Sorry.” Lorea-chan hung her head.

I smiled and shook my head, trying to reassure her. “No, there’s no need to apologize. I wish I could have refused. But now that I’ve taken the job, I have to give it my all.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Kate-san agreed. “Failure or delays won’t be tolerated. Are you going to be okay, Shopkeeper-san? It’s a lot of pressure.”

“I’ll just take the work seriously, like I always do. The one point of difficulty is having to go harvest misanon roots, though.”

“Wasn’t that on the agenda?” Iris-san asked. “We were already talking about going to gather materials before His Highness came, and that was one of the candidates, wasn’t it?”

“Well, yes, but...”

Waiting for good weather, and heading out to gather with the attitude of “It’d be nice if we could find some” was way less dangerous than having a deadline, and going out to gather with the feeling that “We have to find it no matter what!”

“There’s no doubt that we can gather them, which was why I listed them as a potential candidate, but they’re a relatively difficult material, you see.”

I had limited experience gathering in the mountains in winter too, so I’d been hoping to build experience gathering relatively easier materials this year, and to only gather misanon roots if we were lucky enough to come across them.

“I’ve been to the mountains in winter as part of my practical lessons, and you really can’t underestimate how dangerous of a

place they can be. I know I need money, but it only does me any good if I'm alive. Have the two of you...?"

"No, I've never been there," Iris-san confirmed before I could finish asking.

"I may have made a day trip, but I've never stayed overnight," said Kate-san. "We haven't had the skill as gatherers to go to the mountains in winter. The equipment costs a lot of money too, right?"

"Yeah. The quality of your equipment has a direct effect on your survival. If we were going to go into the winter mountains in search of misanon root, I'd assumed it would be once we had years of experience gathering in the mountains ourselves, but...considering the situation, I can't keep to that plan. We'll just have to make sure we're properly prepared."

The problem was that that also cost money. Even with the advance payment that His Highness had kindly left me, all two hundred gold coins of it, I wasn't feeling confident.

"If I still had materials left, I could have prepared equipment, but..." I trailed off.

"So it's because we got stranded, huh? I'm sorry." Iris-san bowed her head.

She was right: The vast majority of my stash of materials had gone into making artifacts that seemed like they would be useful in the rescue operation or to make prototypes, and that had left the cupboard bare.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. It was in fact stuffed full—of bulky artifacts I had no use for and couldn't sell, that is.

"I have no regrets about rescuing the two of you, so it's fine."

"I know it's not enough to cover everything, but we'll pay off the interest with our bodies. Shopkeeper-san, you can do whatever you like to Iris."

"Yeah, that's right, use my body to— Wait, what?! Shouldn't you say we'll pay her back with our *labor* instead?!" Iris-san had been nodding along as Kate-san had casually sold her master to me, but then her head suddenly swiveled to seek out her servant.



"You think you can pay the rest of our debt with *labor*?" Kate-san continued. "It's so much money, you couldn't complain if she sold you off to a brothel to pay her back! I know that you won't get much use out of Iris as she is now, but that could change in the future, so why not use her like a hot water bottle on cold nights for now?"

"Use me?! Like a hot water bottle?! You're mistreating me horribly! Shopkeeper-dono, if you're going to use one of us like that, I recommend Kate. She's soft, and warm, and would make a good pillow to hug."

"Ohhh. Let me see..." It was true that Kate-san had some nice, soft bits on her.

I reached out to grab them without really meaning to, but someone seized my wrist.

I turned to see Lorea-chan there, smiling. "Sarasa-san?"

"Uh, it was just a joke? I just wanted to try touching—"

"An oversized hug pillow would just get in the way, you know? Don't you think that I'd be just right for you instead?"

"I don't really need one, okay?!"

When I slept next to Lorea-chan before, she touched my breasts, but she wasn't serious, right? She's not turning to girls just because there are no guys her age in the village, is she?!

"I'm kidding too. But having your way with Iris-san and Kate-san won't make you any money... Although, loaning them out might."

"L-Lorea?" Iris-san went a little pale. "That's another joke, right?"

Lorea-chan smiled sweetly.

"Oh, of course," she replied. "It's not like we have anyone who could pay what you're worth. Hee hee..."

"Hey, Shopkeeper-san. Lorea-chan's scaring us."

"You've been a bad influence on her, Kate-san. She was a simple village girl, and now look at her... Sob, sob..." I theatrically wiped the tears from my eyes.

Kate-san sighed deeply. "I think she's learned more from you, Shopkeeper-san. But oh well. Before we bemoan our lack of funds, let's figure out what we need."

"You have a point there. Before anything else, we need winter mountain gear. We'll straight up die without it."

That meant winter clothing, obviously, but preparations for if something went wrong were also super important. Being prepared was the only reason Iris-san and Kate-san had survived being stranded last time, after all.

"That goes without saying," Iris-san agreed. "I suppose the other thing we'll want is info. It's far too dangerous to roam the mountains at random in winter."

"Good point," Kate-san concurred. "But I have to wonder if we can gather information. I'll ask the other gatherers, but don't get your hopes up, okay? If they had that kind of knowledge, it wouldn't be so dead in here."

Kate-san was looking over at the shop space, where there were no customers. Not one person had come in to sell materials from the winter mountains. That probably meant something.

"Um, is there anything that I can do?"

"Could I ask you to cook for us, Lorea-chan?"

"Cooking... Do you want me to acquire the ingredients too?"

"That's part of cooking us delicious food. Oh, and some delicious candies too. We'd appreciate things that are sweet and easy to carry, I think? You can feel free to splurge on the sugar."

"Um, you want sweet snacks while you work? Wouldn't you prefer something more filling?"

"No, no, sweets are an absolute necessity on the winter mountains, you know? Because if things get bad, they'll affect our odds of survival—or more precisely, they'll give us the will to live. We'll need food we can eat on the go too."

The rations I could make with alchemy were great and all, but were just not enough to be mentally satisfying. Even if they hadn't had a choice, I think it must have taken a lot of mental fortitude for Iris-san and the others to survive for so long subsisting purely on those. And when they were trapped in a dark cave, with no idea if they could get out too... It was entirely possible they could have snapped mentally before the food ran out.

I obviously meant to take every precaution so that we wouldn't find ourselves stranded in the winter mountains, but I still wanted to be prepared to survive until spring if we had to, and having variety

in our diet would be important for that. I didn't want to spend the winter eating nothing but camp rations.

"You two will be wanting good food too, right?" I asked Iris-san and Kate-san.

"It's true that it was hard living on rations alone, but it was still better than the famine..." Iris-san said.

"Yeah," Kate-san agreed. "It didn't affect our ability to do things. Unlike back then..."

"And our hands never got shaky."

"And we didn't start seeing things."

Huh? I'd just been casually looking to them for agreement, but the light had gone out of their eyes, and they were staring into space. I'd heard they'd had a bad time during the famine, but just how bad had it been?

Iris-san, you're a noble, right...? Uh, well, that's not important now.

"See, Lorea-chan. They're both saying it's important to have delicious things to eat!"

"No, they aren't, though? If anything, they're lost in thought?"

"I'm counting on you, Lorea-chan, the girl who brought about a revolution in the village's food preserves industry!"

"Oh, so we're just moving on, then. Not that I mind. But what I did was only a minor improvement, you know? I was just trying to do my best so that we could use locally grown food. And other people helped out with it too."

"That's not true! It was revolutionary! You're a prodigy of the industry, Lorea-chan!"

Even though the preserved food industry in Yok Village was a cottage industry, it was still popular with the gatherers, and now that we were making preserved foods in the village instead of buying them from outside of it, it was a source of income for the villagers.

That was well worthy of praise, and I wanted Lorea-chan to really try hard at this new endeavor, so I encouraged her despite her humility. Lorea-chan smiled shyly.

"Y-You think so? Hee hee... Okay! Then I'll do the best I can!!!"

Lorea-chan's nostrils flared as she clenched her hands into fists.

That evening, Iris-san and Kate-san returned home from asking other gatherers our questions, but they weren't looking too happy and let out a sigh. I probably didn't even need to ask, but...

"I take it you didn't learn much?"

"It was no good," Iris-san admitted. "We tried asking Andre-san and some of the other veterans, but not one of them had any experience with gathering in the mountains in this season."

"When they were short on cash, they gathered in the forest, but they didn't go to the mountains," Kate-san added.

"Oh, I see. I'd expected as much..."

There's been a near total lack of gatherers coming in to sell materials, so it makes sense. I guess I'll just have to handle it with my own knowledge and experience, then?

The mountains we went to for our practical lessons had a much lower difficulty level than the ones deep in the great forest, so I'm a little uneasy about it, though.

"Now, hold on, Shopkeeper-dono," said Iris-san. "I'm not just a child you sent out on an errand. I've come back with other useful information."

"Oh, and what might that be?" I urged her to continue.

Iris-san proudly puffed up her chest. "The man who taught Andre and the guys lives in South Strag now that he's retired. If we ask him, maybe we can get some useful information?"

"...is what Andre-san told her," Kate-san added.

It seemed that it was less that Iris-san had thought to ask, and more that Andre-san had told them about the senior gatherer and suggested, "Why don't you go ask him?"

"Kate, you could have left that part out, couldn't you?" Iris-san said, pouting a little. "I was finally looking good..."

Kate-san shrugged nonchalantly. "That's just an illusion. You need to be precise when you report things."

"But still, this was my chance to act like a reliable big sister here..."

"Huh? Big sister?" I said, confused.

"I am! I'll have you know, I'm four years older than you,

Shopkeeper-dono!”

It took a moment for this to sink in. “Right you are. I’d forgotten.”

“Why the long pause?!”

Um, well, you don’t exactly feel like a big sister, Iris-san. I know you’re older, but it feels more like a year or two. If anything, you’re more like a troublesome little sister...

Kate-san, meanwhile, I could see as a big sister—in all sorts of ways. She looks so soft...

“A-Anyway, moving on,” I said. “If he’s in South Strag, that’s convenient. I’ll have to go there to stock up on materials anyway.”

“Murgh... Well, okay then. How were things on your end, Shopkeeper-dono?”

Though Iris-san grumbled a little, she quickly smiled and looked back and forth between me and Lorea-chan.

“I made some progress,” said Lorea-chan. “But the candies are a little too sweet, so they’re not suited to eating regularly.”

“I produced a fair amount of stuff with the materials I have on hand,” I said. “The rest will have to wait until I buy more... By the way, did you happen to get the name of that retired gatherer, or his precise address?”

“Urkh... I’m sorry. I only know his name is Marley...” Iris-san said, lowering her eyes apologetically.

Apparently Andre-san had only heard the man would be moving to South Strag, and didn’t know anything more about where he lived or what his current situation was.

But gatherers tended to move around a lot, so I couldn’t blame him for that.

“Hmm, it’ll be a bit of a bother for her, but I’ll try getting in touch with Leonora-san and see if she can look into it. Maybe she’ll be willing to buy some artifacts off me too.”

Even if I had no prospect of selling them in this village, there was a chance they might sell in South Strag, and rather than have them eat up space in storage, it was better to off-load them, even if I had to do it at below cost.

I feel a little bad doing it, but I’ll try asking Leonora-san.

“Would you mind if I came along this time, Shopkeeper-dono? I’d

like to be there to ask questions myself.”

“Let me think... I think you should be fine now, Iris-san.”

I had already been thinking it would be tough to do as a day trip, so it wouldn’t be a problem if it took a little extra time.

Iris-san is good at physical enhancement, so she should be able to keep up with me well enough.

“Okay, we’ll head out the morning of the day after tomorrow. Let’s use tomorrow for getting ready.”

With that decided, I contacted Leonora-san the next morning, packed the potions and artifacts I was going to sell her, and prepared a change of clothes since we would be spending the night in South Strag.

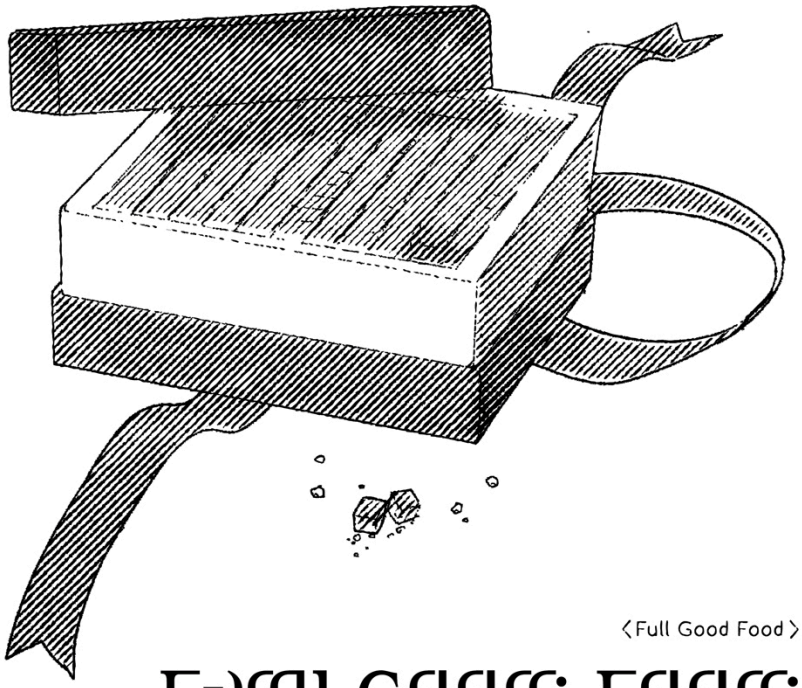
Kate-san and Lorea-chan spent the time preparing winter clothes and producing lots of preserved foods. In a total change-up from how relaxed things were before, there was a flurry of activity as we all ran around trying to get things done.

It was a bit of a pain, but this was work. If I looked at it as money coming in, and a chance to make new things, it was actually pretty fun.

But our preparations were about to be cut short against our wishes—by an uncouth visitor to the shop.

No. 012

Complete Alchemy Works: Appears in Volume 4
Difficulty: Easy
Standard Price: ~1,000 Rhea



〈Full Good Food〉

Evffl Gffffi Effffi

If there's one thing that plagues an alchemist working day and night, it's the need to eat. How many people are just gnawing on whatever they happen to have on hand because it's too much effort to cook? Well, you can't do that, okay? Maintaining a healthy body is essential for ensuring quality research results. So find yourself a partner who can make you delicious food! Huh? Don't ask the impossible? Oh, fine. Maybe people like you should just eat this instead?

Episode 2: The Second Customer

"Bring me the shopkeeper!" a young man demanded as he stormed in with five rough-looking guys in tow.

He looked to be in his early twenties, lacking in height, but with excess width. That unhealthy physique suggested a wealthy merchant or a noble. Whichever it was, I could smell that he was going to be nothing but trouble.

I stepped forward, subtly placing myself between him and Lorea-chan. Iris-san and Kate-san both moved up to stand next to me as well.

"I am the shopkeeper," I informed him.

"Oh, so you're the alchemist here, huh? Not bad."

Unable to fully hide the displeasure his grin made me feel, I did my best to fight off the frown that began to form on my face.

"Can I help you?" I asked, expression stern.

"I'm Baronet Kahku. I've received a claim there was some unjustified violence here yesterday. On further inquiry, one of the people involved was a faux noble of some sort. It all seemed a little much to expect the peasants to handle it themselves, so I took the trouble of coming all the way out here as your lord."

The self-proclaimed Baronet Kahku glanced at Iris-san as he spoke.

Could the "faux" noble be Iris-san, by chance?

I knew she might have been low rank, but as the daughter of a landed knight, she was very much proper nobility.

Still, she didn't give off the impression she was normally, and I couldn't imagine a bunch of random thugs would have known who she was. Also, the pained looks on Iris-san's and Kate-san's faces left me with no doubt that this was Baronet Kahku himself.

So those customers getting violent the other day had all been a setup by him, huh? What a pain.

Well, even if it's a pain, it's not that much of a problem.

I held up a hand to stop Iris-san, who was stepping forward with her eyebrows arched. "Unjustified?" I began. "Well, I have no idea what you could be talking about, then. I did kick out some thugs who got violent in here, but that was fully justified."

"Hey now, calling them thugs is harsh," Baronet Kahku said with a smirk. "They're just a bunch of poor victims here, y'know? And if those victims come to me with a claim, as lord, I've gotta enforce the law."

I intensified my business smile as I responded, "Why, I'm sure that must be quite a lot of trouble for you. But have no worries. This is nothing that a lord like you needs to concern himself with."

"Huh?"

"Domain law doesn't apply to anything that happens inside an alchemist's shop. As such, you don't need to fret over it."

Alchemists weren't subject to local laws created by the lord of their domain, only to royal laws.

This policy had been decided in service of the national goal of having alchemists all over the country, so that no matter how strange local laws might be, they would be unable to infringe on an alchemist's rights.

I explained as much in simple terms, so he had something to chew on, and then added, "Please, let the 'victims' know they'll have to make their complaint with the authorities in the royal capital." Baronet Kahku's face turned red, and he groaned.

Well, not that there's any way they'd go make a complaint.

If the local lord went out of his way to make an issue of something as minor as violent customers being thrown out of a shop, it was like loudly proclaiming there was something else going on. I had nothing to hide, and the authorities in the capital weren't so corrupt that they'd give him a favorable ruling in court.

Obviously, if I broke national laws, they wouldn't tolerate it, and I could face even harsher restrictions than those set out under local law, so it wasn't like alchemists were just basking in privilege or anything.

"Still, I must say, it's awfully diligent of you to move based on

such a minor claim. You must have been busy when we had our problem with the hellflame grizzlies."

As I needled him over having done nothing for us back then, even after the fact, the largest of the men behind him raised his voice in anger.

"You insolent little...! How dare you—"

But Baronet Kahku raised his hand to silence the man, the corners of his lips turning up as he regained some of his composure. "Of course, a busy man like myself wouldn't come here *just* for that. I only came to address it while I was here. I heard that there's an herb farmer who hasn't paid their taxes, and I came to see for myself."

I couldn't help but frown at this. I'd heard from Elles-san how taxes worked in Yok Village.

The agricultural industry wasn't exactly booming, so taxes were set at a fixed rate each year regardless of how large or small the harvest was. It was effectively a head tax, but it wasn't worth the effort of tracking and managing the population, so the taxes didn't change from year to year whether the number of people went up or down.

However, the amount was large relative to Yok Village's income, and rather high compared to the average combined land tax and head tax levied across the country.

It might have been fine in the past, but in recent years, as the number of gatherers had declined, it had gotten really hard for them.

That was exactly why Erin-san was planning to set up herb fields as a stable source of income, though...

"You can't be serious?! There's not supposed to be a tax on fields in this village!" Iris-san rounded on him as I stayed silent, but the baronet just snorted.

"Hmph. Big words from the daughter of an impoverished knight family. The lord has a right to set taxes. But maybe you wouldn't know that, not having a proper domain yourself? Are you out here playing at being a gatherer? It must be rough, not having any money."

Iris-san's clenched fists shook as Baronet Kahku moved in closer to her with a leering smirk, but I took her hand in mine to calm her down.

Because he was right: The lord could levy taxes on whatever he liked. Head taxes based on the number of villagers and business taxes based on the scale of economic activity in a village were common, but there were others like birth taxes, coming-of-age taxes, marriage taxes, and death taxes that were only levied in some domains, and all of that was decided by the lord.

They could also range from minor fees to exorbitant ones that were not easily paid. As a result, there were villages where people hadn't "come of age" even though they were elderly, where people worked to pay off their own birth, and where people "didn't die" because they didn't have the money for it.

So it wasn't really a problem that he had decided to tax the herb fields. Unfortunately, the thing about lords was that they could get away with being unreasonable within their own domain.

Not that it has anything to do with me, though.

"My, my, you certainly are a hard worker. And you're right, it certainly is a lord's prerogative to set taxes."

"Hm, I see you know a little more than that bumpkin over there. In that case—"

"However," I cut him off, "there aren't any herb fields you can tax in this village."

I smiled. He scowled at me.

"Huh? Of course there is. Right next door," Baronet Kahku said, gesturing in that direction with his chin.

"Yeah, that's right! That's clearly a herb field!"

"Did ya think you could hide it with that fence?!"

The men behind him joined in, but I simply chuckled and shook my head.

"Ohh, that's *my* field. Fields owned by alchemists are exempt from taxation."

Maybe I should have said I pay taxes on it to the state, so the lord isn't allowed to collect? It was treated the same as gatherers bringing in herbs. They would be taxed if I turned them into potions

and sold them, so there was no need to levy taxes on the field itself. The reporting requirements were more onerous than other industries, but when you considered the protections we received as compensation, that was pretty tolerable.

I mean, look how I'm able to push back against this annoying lord.

"Were you not aware, despite being a lord with a 'proper' domain?"

"*Nghhhh*...!"

My snide remark left the baronet at a loss for words, the blood rushing to his head.

With his face all screwed up and turned red, he looked horrible, but...hey, him mocking Iris-san had me angry too, all right?

The House of Lotze were poor, sure, but they were upstanding nobles who'd supported their people in their time of need. There was just no comparing them with Baronet Kahku here, who'd done nothing when this village was facing a crisis, despite having the money to—that said, it would be a pain if I got myself into a serious confrontation with the local lord.

His attitude was so out of line I'd gotten sarcastic without really meaning to, but I would prefer it if he decided to have nothing to do with us going forward, anyway.

Can he just go home now?

My hopes were in vain, because Baronet Kahku didn't know when to give up. "D-Do you think you can talk your way out of this like that? The people managing that field are residents of the village!"

"You say such strange things. If an alchemist's shop hires a store attendant, does the shop suddenly belong to that employee? It's a given that an alchemist will hire people to work for her."

"Enough quibbling! This is my land! You're my subject! Shut up and pay!"

"No, I am not. No matter where she lives, an alchemist is registered as a resident of the capital, and as such, I'm *not* your subject."

This was also a national policy. There was no way that the kingdom was going to let local domain lords take the alchemists they

had spent so much time and money raising, so basically all of us were registered as living in the capital.

That was also related to why we paid our taxes to the country. If the alchemist was a noble, they were exempted from this, but the trade-off was that they didn't receive money to help them prepare when entering the academy, and were more or less obligated to turn down the monetary rewards for good grades.

That said, if a noble alchemist opened a shop, they still had to pay taxes to the country, so it could be safely assumed that all alchemists were managed by the state.

"Did you understand that, Baronet Kahku?"

I was kind enough to explain to him that he couldn't be unreasonable with an alchemist, but the course of action he chose to respond with fell far short of what should be expected from a reasonable adult.

"Don't think you can give me lip just because you're an alchemist! You're still just fresh out of the academy! Watch your insolent mouth, you peasant!"

Baronet Kahku stepped closer to me, spewing vitriol.

"Murgh..."

Okay, so I knew I couldn't expect good sense from him, but if he's going to pull rank on me, it puts me in a bad spot.

Despite our legal protections and high social status, alchemists weren't nobility. Master acted brazenly even when dealing with nobles, but that was because she was Master. If I got into a real fight with a noble, it was questionable whether the country would prioritize a minor alchemist like me.

A proper noble wouldn't mess with an alchemist, but unfortunately, Baronet Kahku was not a very good noble, and considering my relationship with the village...

If I acted stubbornly, and people I knew got hurt as a result, that would defeat the whole purpose. It galled me to do it, but giving him some of my profits wasn't out of the question.

Just as I was thinking, *Maybe I should just give him a bundle of herbs?* Iris-san finished a hushed conversation with Kate-san, and stepped forward with a smile of composure on her face.

"Baronet Kahku, you called her a peasant, but Shopkeeper-dono and I are already engaged. I also intend to make her the family head once we are married. In short, Shopkeeper-dono is the future head of the House of Lotze. I believe it would be wise to watch how you speak to her."

"Wha?!"

"Huh...?"

This is news to me.

Fortunately, Baronet Kahku didn't notice my surprise, and started shouting. "You're both women! D-Don't be absurd!!!"

Yeah, I could understand why he'd want to say that.

While it wasn't forbidden, it wasn't exactly normalized. Especially when it came to peasants, who couldn't rely on super expensive potions, they couldn't even consider a homosexual marriage that wouldn't produce heirs.

However, after listening to him, Kate-san grinned with satisfaction, and took a step forward herself.

"Oh, should you really be talking like that? What would the House of Filmus think?"

"Gah?! *N-Nghhh*! M-My throat seems to be acting up!"

The moment Kate-san dropped that name, Baronet Kahku's eyes widened, and he backed away, making a show of clearing his throat as he looked around awkwardly.

"Y-You'd all do well not to spread around anything you might have misheard!" he added, talking very quickly, then turned to leave just as fast.

"I-I'll take my leave for today! Hey, guys, let's go!"

"Y-Yessir!"

His men were as confused by this turnabout as I was, but they hurriedly followed him out of the shop.

I watched, slightly taken aback, as they left, and let out a sigh once the door closed.

"Is...everything all right now?" Lorea-chan asked hesitantly.

"Uh, yeah, I think so," I replied. "You must have been scared, huh, Lorea-chan?"

"No, because you were all standing in front of me."

"Oh, okay."

She said that, but she'd been shouted at by a bunch of thugs. I turned to check on her, but...

"Wait, Lorea-chan, what's that you're holding there?" I asked.

In one hand, she had my sword, in the other, Iris-san's. Kurumi was perched on top of her head.

She was totally ready for a fight. "I thought you might need these."

"O-Oh. But I don't think we want any bloodshed inside the shop, you know?" I responded.

I'd heard some noise behind me. Was that her running off to get these?

That's some reaction. I don't think she'll be needing any psychological care from me.

"Nice work, Lorea," Iris-san said. "I'm sure Shopkeeper-dono would have managed, but I'd still have struggled to fight them bare-handed."

"Whaa, I couldn't take those buff guys bare-handed," I replied.

I'm a girl, so it'd be a bad look for me to go around pummeling guys like that with my bare hands.

A strong female knight was one thing, but a little girl who clobbers macho dudes? That was a pretty niche fetish right there. So I tried to protest, but...

"Hey, Iris. The person who kicks hellflame grizzlies to death is saying something," Kate-san snarked.

"They did look tough, but they couldn't compete with that..." Iris-san agreed.

Okay, sure, if you were comparing them to a hellflame grizzly, even the biggest, toughest man looked small and weak in comparison.

Iris-san and Kate-san had a point, so I decided to change course with my protest. "I mean, I'd get my hands dirty."

"Ohh, so winning wouldn't have been a problem. You're so amazing," Lorea-chan said with a convinced nod. I'd course-corrected in the wrong direction.



I was trying to say I'm not a violent girl!

I was trying to say that I don't punch people, and it wasn't worth getting my hands dirty!

If this gets out, I'll never find anyone who'll go out with me!!!

"I-It's not like that, okay? I don't resort to violence that easily, okay? I usually prefer to settle things with words, you know?"

Unless they're criminals. Bandits deserve death, not mercy.

"Yes, I understand entirely," said Iris-san. "It wouldn't be good to kill a noble's personal troops!"

"I-I can pull my punches, you know! Wait, no! I don't attack people that easily!"

"I seem to recall you chucking some ruffians out of the shop the other day, though."

"Th-That's just because I heard Lorea-chan scream..."

If they raise their hands against a girl, they can't complain if I punch them, right? They had it coming, so it doesn't count, right?

"Which means if someone lays a hand on Lorea-chan, you'll snap," Kate-san noted. "And even if you pull your punches, you could always mess up. Like with the lava lizard."

"*Urkh!*"

She means the one I decapitated...

The sword was sharper than I thought.

So, if I fight bare-handed, I don't have to worry about that... No, fighting bare-handed is no good!

Urgh! I'm caught in a double bind here!

"Well, my clever reaction sent them packing, though!" Iris-san said smugly.

"I guess I'll say thank you, for now... This engagement is news to me, though. We talked about it before, but I don't recall ever accepting it, okay?"

When I needled her over that, but Iris-san and Kate-san traded glances, then the corners of their eyes drooped.

"I'm sorry," Iris-san apologized. "But not only did you shoulder our debt, you also rescued us when we were stranded the other day. Even at great cost to yourself."

"And yet we haven't been able to do anything to pay you back,"

Kate-san added. “That’s why my lady said, ‘Even if we wrapped up Iris and gave her to Sarasa-san as a present, it wouldn’t be enough. About all we have left to offer is our name.’”

Uh, that’s not something it’s okay for you to give away.

It’s supposed to be the most important thing for a noble, isn’t it?

Not that I could accept Iris-san as a present that easily either.

“I meant to wait for a better moment to bring it up, but that piece of shit started mouthing off.”

“Um, Kate-san? Language? I understand why you’d call him that, though... For my part, I’m really glad to have you and Iris-san sticking around.”

They would go out and gather materials I needed, and help out when I needed an extra pair of hands.

And from a crime-deterrence perspective, having two gatherers like them around was at least somewhat better than just a minor like Lorea-chan, and me who had only just come of age.

Even if I was actually able to fight, and having an anti-crime seal on top of that meant that we were very safe here, having more people around would make any potential criminals more wary, and it was better to avoid that sort of situation.

“I appreciate you saying that,” Iris-san said, “but we need some concrete way of rewarding you that is visible from an objective perspective.”

“Even if they’re only petty nobles, it wouldn’t do for them to be seen as ingrates,” Kate-san explained.

“I...can sort of understand that, but still...”

If they were seen as not repaying their debts, people wouldn’t help them when they needed it, and it would be hard for them to get by in noble society where reputation was so important.

Even so, their family name is too much to ask. Maybe they feel that indebted to me, but... Honestly, I don’t want it.

“Urgh...”

As she watched me struggle to figure out what to do, Lorea-chan let out a sigh of admiration.

“Ohh, Sarasa-san, you’re going to become nobility? That’s incredible, isn’t it?”

"Yeah, I guess you could call it that? They don't mint a lot of new nobles in this country, after all."

There were countries where, if you had the money, you could buy a noble title, but here in this country, you'd have to have done something awfully impressive just to be considered for the lowest of noble titles.

But even if they wanted to distinguish themselves on the battlefield, a peasant could only accomplish so much there, and since there hadn't been a war in a while, there wasn't even the opportunity for them to try.

Technically, there *was* a work-around: If you married into a noble family that was mired in debt, like what had almost happened to the House of Lotze, you could essentially buy a noble title that way, but even that wouldn't increase the overall number of noble titles.

Of course, this was all natural from the country's perspective. If they went around bestowing titles when they didn't have any new land, that was just a burden on the national coffers.

Once someone became a noble, it wasn't easy to strip them of their title, so if they were thinking about the future, they had to be cautious about increasing the number of nobles.

"But being a noble's not all easy, you know? It comes with work and responsibilities."

That was especially true if you were a good noble. If you were unlucky, you could end up like the House of Lotze, taking on a massive debt to support the people of your domain. Of course, there was the benefit of social status, which meant you would be granted a level of trust far greater than any commoner.

"If it was a noninheritable title, there'd be some potential in it, though," I said.

"There are noble titles that are purely honorary, without even an annual stipend, but how valuable those are is...a little questionable," said Kate-san.

"C-Could it be the House of Lotze is actually one of those?" I asked.

"No, we're still lesser nobles. That hasn't changed," Iris-san explained.

"But the title is inheritable, right? Would the House of Lotze...really be okay with Sarasa-san becoming a part of that?" Lorea-chan asked.

"We trust Shopkeeper-dono's character," Iris-san replied. "It would be a problem if she were to marry someone else, and then their children were the ones to inherit the house, but that's not an issue if she has a child with me. If having a ceremony and acting as lord are too much trouble, it can just be for show. Even just taking our name would be—"

"No, there's no 'just' about that! It's a ridiculously huge deal!!!" I cried.

It'd be a paradigm shift for me, in so many ways, okay?

Unlike Iris-san, who'd been considering a marriage that she didn't want, I wanted to be like my mother and find a nice man someday, fall in love, and get married.

Well, at her age, that's pretty difficult, so I understand why a lot of people in Iris-san's position would choose a marriage based on personal benefit first.

Love is like dessert. If it's all you have to eat, and there's no main course, you're going to die.

"Shopkeeper-san, if that's really too much to ask, there's also the option of adopting one of Wisteria's or Cattleya's children. So you can consider the offer without worrying about that, okay?"

"It's not that easy... Um, those are Iris-san's little sisters, right?"

"Indeed! They're both rather adorable! I'd love to introduce you sometime! I'm sure you'd get along great with them, Shopkeeper-dono."

I hadn't met them yet, but Wisteria took after Iris-san and was already a very active ten-year-old, while her sister Cattleya, two years younger, was more quiet.

Adelbert-sama already had these two as direct descendants, so the family bloodline would be secure even if Iris-san and I never had children.

But if I married her, even just as a formality, it'd make it harder for me to marry a man later!

Status as a noble or a normal married life? If I weighed them

against each other, as a businesswoman, the scale tilted toward the former, but as a girl, the scale tilted toward the latter.

Murgh... I'm torn.

"I understand... Let me take some time to digest all this."

If they needed a visible way of showing their appreciation, and I wanted to be considerate of the House of Lotze's image, it wouldn't be good to oppose it too stubbornly, and it wasn't something I needed to act on right now.

I think the situation will change once they make some headway on repaying the debt, so I can put off dealing with it for now, right?

I planned to keep focusing on my work as an alchemist for a while, and it wasn't like I had anyone else I wanted to settle down with.

"More importantly, you mentioned something that caught my attention. The House of Filmus, was it?"

"Oh, that? The marchioness of Filmus married another woman."

"Huh...?"

While I had an academic knowledge of noble society, I wasn't an expert on it, and didn't have many acquaintances there. That's why, upon learning just now that not only was a noble involved in a gay marriage, she also held as high a position as a marchioness, Lorea-chan and I both reacted with wide-eyed surprise.

"She didn't just take her as a mistress, or a concubine?"

These are high nobles we're talking about here, after all.

I'd have understood if that was the case, but Kate-san shook her head gravely.

"They're legally married. And she doesn't have any concubines—though, I'm not sure that would even be the right word, given that the head of the house is a woman."

"That's unusual for a noble."

"It is, yeah. It's normal for them to have multiple partners. Although, once you've married someone of the same gender, I don't know what counts as normal anymore."

"That's true. There's not much precedent for it, is there?"

Regardless of how things ultimately went, as soon as talk of my potentially marrying Iris-san came up, Kate-san had gone and done

her research on it.

And what she had come up with was Marchioness Filmus, who'd married a woman after succeeding to her title.

It would be one thing if someone who'd already been in a same-sex marriage had succeeded to the title, but for one who already held a title, their marriage had a lot of relationships and rights intertwined with it.

Naturally, there'd been a lot of people who'd tried to interfere, and a lot had happened before the marriage had actually gone ahead. As a result, Marchioness Filmus was sympathetic to anyone in a similar situation and would provide support to same-sex couples that needed it. If anyone got in the way or insulted the couple, she wouldn't hesitate to apply intense pressure.

"She's apparently well-known in noble society. Lucky for us, he'd heard of her too," Kate-san said.

"He's only a baronet, after all," said Iris-san. "If it got out that he said something that insulted the family head of a marquessate, they might crush him."

"Because he wasn't just insulting Iris, he was insulting the whole idea of women marrying women."

"That's why he started pretending to have throat problems, so he could claim he hadn't spoken properly?" I asked.

If that was the reason, he had to play it off somehow, but still...

I sighed.

"It was a bit forced, yeah," Iris-san said with an awkward smile. "Especially after he spoke so clearly before."

"Well, there's no third parties here, after all," I said. "If he insists that he misspoke, then that's that."

"Wow, so there really are women who marry women," said Lorea-chan, a little taken aback and confused, like she didn't know what to think.

"There are men who've married men too, you know?" Kate-san added with a chuckle. "Although, they're less common than women who marry women."

"Nobles sure are incredible... But if there are people like that, it's reassuring. They'll probably help if we need it."

"Well, yes," said Iris-san. "But if we did rely on them for help, then my marriage to Shopkeeper-dono would be set in stone."

"Huh? It would...?" asked Lorea-chan.

"You can see why, right? If we ask for help because we want to get married, and then have no intention of going through with it, they might crush the house of Lotze."

"Of course they would. It might be one thing if we got married, then broke up, but just not marrying at all would be out of the question," I said.

Whatever the actual case was, it might look like we had swindled a marchioness. If we went and picked a fight like that, then they could easily make one insignificant knighthood go *poof*. That was just how high the power differential was between a marquess and a knight.

Seeing me nod, Lorea-chan hurriedly shook her head. "Th-That's no good. You'll have to manage without their help! You can do it, Sarasa-san, Iris-san."

"It's okay. I just dropped the name to keep him in check," Kate-san reassured her. "Still, I thought Baronet Kahku was more cunning than that... He seemed kind of shallow, didn't he?"

It was expected that a lord would know the laws concerning alchemists, but he'd been pretty pathetic. I hadn't felt any of the same cunning that I'd sensed from his loan agreement with the House of Lotze.

He was less like a noble, and more like—

"Like the head of a gang of thugs, or something like that," said Iris-san.

"Yeah! That's exactly it!" I exclaimed, clapping my hands.

Lorea-chan nodded in agreement. "The way he spoke was kind of all over the place too," she noted.

"Yeah, I felt the same. Is that guy really a noble?" I wondered.

There were times when he was trying to sound all grandiose, but it all fell apart whenever he got agitated, so he just looked like a thug. Even if you stripped away their titles, Baronet Kahku raising his voice to try to intimidate me was still much less scary than Prince Ferrick's inscrutable smile.

I think part of it was that the baronet was looking down on us, but even then, he wasn't very impressive.

"He's typical of a third-generation noble, Lorea-chan," Kate-san explained.

"Third generation?"

"Yes. The lord two generations ago grew South Strag from a backwater town into what it is today, the previous lord took that and ruled it without taking any risks, and now we have the present Baronet Kahku, who is mediocre, to put it lightly."

"Calling him 'mediocre' is putting it lightly?" I asked.

"Yeah. During the previous generation, about ten years ago, there was talk of raising their rank in recognition of the former lord's accomplishment. But the current baronet ruined all of that. He was already set to inherit at that point, and caused a problem that came very close to having their title abolished. If I wasn't putting it lightly, he's a fool."

"O-Oh..." I was a little taken aback by how she spat out those words.

I'm not sure I can argue with that assessment, though.

This was my first time meeting him in person, but it was clear he was impulsive. That was fine in someone like Iris-san, who was an honest person at her core, but with somebody twisted like him... It was a wonder he was able to keep his title. Especially in noble society, where tripping each other up was common practice.

"Well, to put it simply, he's a brainless moron, human trash, and an unworthy heir. We have to interact with him because our domain borders his, but if we didn't have to, I wouldn't want to get involved with him." Kate-san's nostrils flared as she laid into him without hesitation.

Iris-san flashed me another awkward smile before shrugging. "That just makes his loan agreement with the House of Lotze even more of a mystery," I said. "Even if he left the actual drafting of it to an expert, who was the one who came up with the idea?"

If I hadn't stepped in, the House of Lotze would have been effectively usurped, and even once I did, the contract was crafted in such a way that it did no damage to the House of Kahku.

Sure, an expert would have drawn up an agreement that did what he asked for it to, but I couldn't see a person like that suggesting, "Let's do it like this to trick them."

"Did someone put the idea into his head, or does he have a talented assistant?" Kate-san wondered. "Given that South Strag hasn't declined, maybe it's the latter?"

"That's probably it," Iris-san agreed. "He's clearly a shortsighted moron. Maybe this time...he acted on his own, without consulting that advisor?"

A talented advisor who helped Baronet Kahku make his stupid ideas a reality. Based on my impressions now that I had met the man in person, it seemed highly plausible—inconveniently for us.

"That worries me a little. We're going to be leaving this place unattended for a long time."

If we were just leaving for a few days to go shopping that would be one thing, but gathering misanon roots would take a week, minimum, and possibly a full month, during which time Lorea-chan would be holding down the fort by herself.

Attacking an alchemist's shop would be picking a fight with national policy. The attackers would be punished, and at worst, his house might be abolished. Even if he tried to cover it up, that would be practically impossible in a village where there were so many gatherers.

If he had even a marginal ability to think, he wouldn't go through with it, but was I ready to trust Baronet Kahku's brains...? If Lorea-chan got hurt, or he kidnapped her, it would be too late for regrets.

"You have a point... Shopkeeper-dono, what would you say to taking Lorea-chan along with us?"

"Take her with us? Into the mountains?"

It was true that I wouldn't have to worry about her if we did, but...

"Iris-san, aren't you underestimating the mountains in winter?"

"I've never experienced them myself, so if you say that I'm taking them too lightly, I can't argue with you, Shopkeeper-dono. But which is more dangerous? Taking Lorea into the mountains with you, or leaving her alone at the shop?"

"Murgh..."

Obviously, if there was no attack on the shop, leaving her there was safer.

But if there was an attack, it'd be really dangerous for her.

I had to weigh that risk against the risk of an accident in the mountains.

Given who we're dealing with, maybe the mountains are *safer?*

"Shopkeeper-san, why not ask her what she prefers?" Kate-san suggested. "Lorea-chan is the one who'll be most affected by the decision."

"That's true..." I agreed. "What do you say, Lorea-chan?"

Now that I think about it, if Lorea-chan says she doesn't want to go, then that would be the end of it.

I turned to Lorea-chan to take Kate-san's reasonable suggestion, and was surprised to see her face absolutely shining.

"I wanna go!"

"Huh...?"

I'd been so sure she'd say she didn't want to do anything dangerous.

"You're sure? There's a lot of risks, you know? And the mountains will be cold in winter too. You don't have to force yourself."

I checked to see that she wasn't just saying that to make me feel better, but Lorea-chan shook her head firmly, and looked me straight in the eye.

"Up until you came, Sarasa-san, I was sure I'd live my whole life stuck sitting behind the counter at the general store. But everything changed once you arrived." She smiled. "Now I get to work in this shop, and I've learned so many new things. You've been teaching me magic, and I can even use it a little now. That's why I want to keep challenging myself!"

"Oh, I see..."

If that was what she said, I couldn't deny her that. Lorea-chan was technically my apprentice, but it was my policy to help her grow through praise, not by telling her to do this or that. I wanted to let her do what she wanted.

"Okay. In that case, I'll have to explain to Darna-san."

Since when I hired her, it was supposed to be less risky than her taking over the general store, but now I'm going to be having her do something dangerous.

That's what I was thinking, but...

"Sarasa-san!"

"Y-Yes!"

I stood up straight in response to Lorea-chan's unusually strong tone. "I'm happy that you're taking my parents into consideration. But don't treat me like too much of a child! I'm an official employee of this shop... Right?"

As her initial confident assertion gave way to a slightly uneasy question, I gave her a firm nod. "Y-Yep, you sure are!"

"Well, if I am, then there's no need to check with my parents about every little thing. If someone is going to tell my parents, it should be me!"

Though she said that, I was still her employer. Wasn't it my responsibility to let them know?

"Iris-san, Kate-san, what do the two of you think?" I asked, seeing as they were the adults here.

"Lorea's probably right," said Iris-san. "If you ask for parental permission for every job, you'll never get anything done. Although, since Lorea is a minor, it's a little more hazy..."

"Darna-san understood that when he gave permission for her to get a job," added Kate-san. "Once you leave the house, you have to think for yourself. After leaving the orphanage, did you need anyone's permission to choose what you did with your life, Shopkeeper-san?"

"No, I didn't."

Ever since my parents had died and I was put in the orphanage, I had been deciding everything for myself.

When it came to taking the entrance exam for the Alchemist Academy, I'd talked to the director of the orphanage about it, but that was because I was going to need the other kids to help me.

Even then, the director had just offered enthusiastic support; it wasn't a matter of whether or not I had permission to do it.

Looking at it that way, maybe I was thinking about this all wrong.

Yeah, I'm not a hardheaded old man. I can be flexible and take in other people's opinions.

"Got it. Then from now on, I'll treat Lorea-chan like an adult, and I won't talk to Darna-san about what we're doing."

"Sarasa-san! Thank you!" Lorea-chan's face lit up.

"But!" I leveled a finger at her. "If you suddenly disappear, he'll worry, so when we're going away for a long trip, you need to tell him yourself, okay, Lorea-chan?"

"Yes, of course. Don't worry, I will."

"Okay, I'll leave it to you. Now then, Iris-san, I know we were rudely interrupted, but let's get to bed early so that we're ready for tomorrow."

I need you to be able to run properly, after all.

◇ ◇ ◇

The town of South Strag was bustling again today—so much so that you'd never imagine a guy like *that* was in charge. I had brought Iris-san—whose expression indicated she had some complicated feelings on that topic—with me. We went to Leonora-san's shop, where both she and Filione-san greeted us.

"Hello, Leonora-san," I said. "We'll be in your care."

"Welcome," she replied. "It's good to have you."

"Hello again, Sarasa-chan," said Filione-san. "And this must be Iris-chan."

"'I-Iris-chan'..." Iris-san blinked in surprise at being addressed that way. But Filione-san was so smiley and personable that Iris-san didn't say anything more about the name, and responded, "I-It's a pleasure to meet you, Filione-dono, Leonora-dono."

"It's our first time meeting in person, isn't it, Iris?" Leonora-san remarked. "I hear you've been doing a lot to help Sarasa."

"No, if anything, she's been the one helping me," Iris-san replied. "And besides...I don't think you would owe me any thanks for it even if I had been helping her, Leonora-dono."

"Hee hee, you think so?" Leonora-san said before turning to me. "Well, let's see what you've brought for me."

"Okay. Here it is..."

Using the backpack I'd been given by Master, I'd brought along the potions and some of the comparatively smaller artifacts.

I laid them out on the counter, and Leonora-san picked each of them up and inspected them one by one. "Hmm, I see... How does this much sound?"

"Leonora-san, isn't that a little too high?" When I looked at the number, it was about the same as if I'd sold them in my own shop. Even if she managed to sell everything that I'd brought her, she'd be making a pittance. And if anything went unsold, she'd absolutely be in the red.

That was why I had suggested she offer me less, but she gave me a troubled smile in response. "We have Nord-san, whom I sent to you with a recommendation, to blame for this, right? Let me give you a little support to make things right... Oh, I made sure to punish him appropriately, so don't worry."

Leonora-san mimed throwing a punch as she said that.

Oh, so that bit about punishing him in her recommendation letter really did mean for me to do it with my fists, I thought, glancing at Filione-san for confirmation.

"A few times, with good, solid hits," she said with a troubled laugh.

On further questioning, I was told that Nord-san had stopped by this shop on his way back to the capital, reporting in to let her know how things had gone because "It happened while I was acting with your recommendation."

Seeing his ability to follow up like that, it seemed he actually was a "proper adult"—at least at a glance.

Well, no, the problem was that, barring a few flaws, he actually *was* a proper adult, which only made dealing with him harder.

If he were just a nuisance and nothing more, it would have been easy to cut him loose, but he wasn't a bad guy, which made things more difficult. Maybe Leonora-san felt similarly, and that was why she kept dealing with him?

"Well, I feel bad about it, but if that's the case... Thank you, I'll accept this amount."

"Oh, please do. I'll feel awful otherwise. I'm sorry for what you went through too, Iris. It must have been hard, right? Putting up with that guy."

"Not at all...is something I'd struggle to say, because in all honesty, it wasn't easy. Even before we got stranded, he made us catch live lava lizards for him, and that was pretty rough too."

Iris-san got a far-off look in her eyes as she remembered it.

I'd heard the story, and I'd teared up a bit when she told me about how she'd had to pin them down with brute force. I know there hadn't been any other way, but it had been pretty awful of Nord-san to make them go ahead with it instead of just giving up.

Although, it turned out Leonora-san hadn't heard those details yet, because she raised an eyebrow and frowned.

"He even did that kind of thing? I should've given him another punch."

"Sounds good to me. He should learn a little restraint," Filione-san said.

Her mouth was smiling, but her eyes weren't.

Though she seemed quiet, Filione-san wasn't just here to look pretty. I'd learned that from the tough negotiations surrounding Yoku Bahru's debt that she'd apparently taken part in along with Leonora-san.

"Ha ha ha, I'll leave that up to you..."

We won't be having any more involvement with Nord-san, after all.

We won't, right? Like, definitely not, right?

I'd better keep my guard up, just in case...

I mean, for better or for worse, we're involved with Prince Ferrick now.

"By the way, has there been anything out of the ordinary in town recently?" I asked.

"Hm...?" Leonora-san thought about it. "Nothing comes to mind. There was a little trouble with the Bahru Company, but that's about it? That had to do with your family, right, Iris?"

"You're well-informed, huh?" Iris-san replied. "It wasn't exactly made public..."

Because things had gone to mediation, there was no avoiding some of the details leaking out, but it hadn't reflected well on the House of Lotze, so they had kept quiet about it themselves. They weren't famous nobles either, so there wasn't any reason for word to spread.

As for Baronet Kahku, no matter how he chose to present it, the mediation had effectively been a loss for him.

If she was aware of what had happened, despite no one making public statements about it, then I had to admit Leonora-san's ability to gather information was pretty good.

"Information is valuable, especially when doing business in a town like this. The Bahru Company was already on the decline after Yoku Bahru got erased, but..."

Leonora-san trailed off, allowing Filione-san to finish for her: "His heir, Hoh Bahru, tried all sorts of hopeless maneuvers. It finally became clear that they couldn't pay their debts a little while ago, and they lost many of their rights as a result."

Oh, that'd have been when the mediation finished, and he no longer had any chance of marrying Iris-san.

No matter how small and weak their house was, there was a world of difference between having a noble title and not having one. He'd probably been hoping to leverage the Lotze name to get the Bahru Company back on its feet, but if he'd been acting recklessly while relying on that, then, now that he'd lost that opportunity, he could only have been in even worse shape.

"Well, how are they doing now, then?" I asked.

"I don't think they've gone under. They're still surviving, somehow, as a small-scale operation," Filione-san said before adding, "They were a huge company a year ago, though," with a laugh.

Leonora-san shrugged. "Their decline started when they tried to lay a hand on Sarasa."

"Is that really the case?" I wondered. "If it was just me on my own, I don't think I could have done anything more than shake them up a little. You two deserve the credit for pushing them over the edge."

The best I could've managed was to chase Yoku Bahru out of the village. I'd only made a tidy profit doing so thanks to Leonora-san's cooperation, and it was these two who'd gotten rid of him and crippled the Bahru Company. I'd had no part in that.

"That's true. You don't have the experience yet to take on a crafty scumbag like that."

"But, you know," Filione-san interjected, "while we may have been the ones who pushed them over the edge, it was Iris-chan who showed up with a wooden pole to hit the Bahru Company with until they sank and drowned."

This sudden turn was met with a raised eyebrow by Iris-san, who thrust out both hands and waved them in denial. "M-Me?! I—or my family, rather—didn't do anything, okay? This is nothing to boast about, but Shopkeeper-dono took care of everything!"

"Which means Sarasa finished them off, then, huh?" Leonora-san observed.

"I wouldn't go as far as saying I finished them off. I just swept away their attempts to ensnare Iris-san," I countered. "That's nothing compared to you two, who drove them to that point in the first place."

"Oh, that's not true at all," Filione-san said. "And you've got Baronet Kahku on the ropes now too, don't you? It's not easy to do that to a noble."

"I didn't really do anything of the sort, I just mentioned some people..."

As the three of us carried on like this, Iris-san murmured, "From where I'm standing, it just sounds like you're a bunch of schemers competing to see who can act more humble..."

We exchanged glances with each other, awkwardly unable to deny the allegation.

In my case, I hadn't acted on my own. Other people had acted against me, and I'd just been forced to respond, but...maybe I couldn't help it if I'd ended up looking that way to anyone on the sidelines, the results being what they had.

"Oh my, Iris-chan." Filione-san smiled. "I wouldn't ask you to become a schemer yourself, but if you don't start acting more

cautious, you're going to get deceived again, you know? Although, I hear you've been trying."

Iris-san didn't know how to respond to this insinuation. "Urkh. Y-You know that much, huh? Our family really will need Shopkeeper-dono to—"

"S-So, anyway, he came barging into my shop the other day. Baronet Kahku, I mean."

It felt like it was already too late, but the conversation was going in a less than good direction, so I tried a somewhat forced course correction—moving things back toward the subject I had been wanting to ask Leonora-san about.

"He came to your shop? In person?" Leonora-san tilted her head to the side with a surprised look.

"Yes." I nodded. "He suddenly came, and tried to pick a fight, but...I dunno, he was like a small-time thug. He had none of the craftiness I'd expected from a guy who'd entrapped the House of Lotze."

"He went in person... Come to think of it, Fii, that old man...he isn't around right now, is he?"

"Yeah, I think he's headed off somewhere. That must be why."

Leonora-san and Filione-san both nodded, as if they'd come to a satisfactory explanation.

But Iris-san and I had no idea what they meant.

"Um, who is 'that old man'?" I asked.

"Baronet Kahku's advisor..." Leonora-san said. "I don't know if that's his official title, but there's an old man who served under the previous baronet too."

"The old man's sharp," Filione-san added. "He's essentially the one who runs that house and keeps the moronic Baronet Kahku in line."

"So, that guy's the mastermind?" I asked.

"Hmm, if anything, he's more of a restrainer?" Filione-san replied. "He takes Baronet Kahku's unreasonable demands, and then somehow keeps them within the bounds of what's actually realistic."

"Yeah, that's right," Leonora-san agreed. "It's no exaggeration to say that the old man is the reason this town prospers."

That was all a pretty damning assessment of Baronet Kahku, but after having met him myself, I couldn't say I didn't feel the same way. However, more importantly...

"Iris-san, did you know all this?" I asked her.

"No, it's the first I've heard of it," she replied. "I knew the current Baronet Kahku wasn't very good, but... Oh, come to think of it, father mentioned that it was an elderly man who came to the mediation."

"That was probably him," said Leonora-san. "The old man doesn't like to show himself in public that much."

"Oh, really?" I said.

"You know how he's away right now?" Leonora-san said. "If the baronet's enemies knew that his minder wasn't around, that would be the perfect opportunity for them."

"Since all it takes is a little bit of antagonizing, and Baronet Kahku shows his weakness easily, at least when he's alone, that is," Filione-san explained. "What happened this time was the baronet running off on his own again too, I'm sure."

"We can't rule out the old man having ordered it, though..." Leonora-san thought for a moment after saying this, but quickly shook her head. "Probably not. There's nothing to be gained. I can't see how he'd beat you."

"You say that like I'm some kind of monster..." I didn't really like that. "I'm just a cute, weak, little girl, okay?"

"That's a lie," Iris-san immediately denied it.

"Murgh."

"I don't disagree that you're cute, but you're not 'just' a girl, and you know that, right?"

Murgh. Well, if she's not denying that part, I'll let it slide.

Filione-san laughed at this exchange. "Sure, if Baronet Kahku didn't think about the consequences, he could do it. But it's clear that he would get crushed after that. Attacking an alchemist for no reason would be fatal enough on its own, but you're Ophelia-sama's apprentice on top of that. I think you can imagine how well that would go for him, right, Sarasa?"

"Well... I doubt Master would hold back. And he *is* just a

baronet."

This was the same Master who had booted much higher nobles out of her shop for saying something that she didn't like before, after all. If anything happened to me, her apprentice, she'd definitely take revenge.

I was happy she cared so much.

"That being the case," Filione-san continued, "if the old man were around, then in some ways, you'd have nothing to worry about, but if it's Baronet Kahku acting on his own, we don't know what he'll do on impulse... You may want to be careful."

"That's true," Leonora-san agreed. "He has a record, after all."

Yeah, the guy sounds pretty awful. He's basically what every peasant imagines when you talk about an evil noble.

"The previous baronet was a good lord, but the way things are now, I fear for the future of this town," Leonora-san said.

"Yeah," Filione-san agreed. "We've been gathering information, looking to see what we can do, but... Oh, it might be of some use to you, Sarasa-chan, so I'll put together some files for you, okay?"

"I don't know if I'll be able to make use of them, but... Thanks. Oh, and—"

Just as I was about to ask about the retired gatherer, a woman came out of the back of the shop.

"Master, I've finished the work you asked me to do," she said before noticing me. "Who's this?"

She looked to be about Kate-san's age and was a little taller than me. Her almond-shaped eyes had a somewhat strong-willed look about them. This was the first time I'd met her...I thought?

"Hey now, greet our guest properly," Leonora-san chastised her. Then she said to me, "This is Maris. Technically, she's my apprentice."

"Hello, I'm Sarasa," I introduced myself.

"Huh? *This* is Sarasa? A kid like her...?" Maris-san's eyes widened as she looked me up and down, her eyes eventually stopping on my chest area.

Grargh. I may lose out to her in the height department, but the difference in breast size isn't that... W-Well, I mean, it's not as large

as the difference between mine and Kate-san's is, okay?

"Maris, watch your tongue, would you? If Sarasa feels like it, you could find yourself serving customers in a brothel tomorrow. She holds half of your debt, after all."

"*Urkh*! I-I'll keep that in mind... Sorry, I'm Maris. It's nice to meet you."

Maris-san looked less than pleased as she bowed her head and apologized in a monotone, but Leonora-san delivered a fist to the back of her head that sent Maris tumbling to the floor with a loud, "*Argh!*"

"You have a bad attitude. You ought to get down on your knees and beg for forgiveness," she said before turning to me. "I'm sorry, I don't have her trained properly yet."

"Her debt..." I murmured. "Oh, from back then. You took her on as an apprentice, huh? Did you think that she had some promise?"

"No, quite the opposite. I set things up so she'd be able to repay you if she just worked normally, and yet...if I left things as they were, it seemed like she was going to inconvenience you, so I took her in."

"You're being so mean, Master!" Maris-san cried.

"Shut up, you ignorant girl! You failed on the very first inspection!" Leonora-san said, clutching her forehead like she was trying to fight off a headache.

"We had thought you'd be fine as long as we kept an eye on you, but it turned out the problem went well beyond that," added the usually kind Filione-san, her eyes drooping with the troubled look on her face.

"Normally, I'd want to throw you out on the street, but that can wait until you pay your debt... Maris, this is a good opportunity, so go harvest misanon roots with Sarasa. Learn a little about how harsh things can be."

"Huh? You want me to go? But gathering materials is a job for gatherers?"

"Don't act all soft. In my day, it was normal to go out and gather for yourself."

Leonora-san let out a sigh of dismay. Maris-san shrugged her

shoulders and let out an exasperated sigh of her own. “Hahh... This is the problem with old folks. Alchemists are intellectual laborers, okay? Your way of thinking is out-of-date.”

“Maris...?” Leonora-san said archly. “I take it that you’re looking forward to working at the brothel come tomorrow?”

“I’ll find you a place where the pay is good,” Filione-san offered. “You miiight end up ruining your health there, though.”

As she realized how serious the two of them were from the cold looks they were giving her, Maris-san broke into a sweat.

“I’ll go do my best,” she said, going pale. “The mountains in winter... I might just die...”

“Then make equipment so that you don’t die,” Leonora-san said without a hint of mercy. “You’re an alchemist, aren’t you?”

Iris-san and I exchanged worried glances.

“Leonora-dono... Are we really taking her with us?” asked Iris-san.

“Won’t you? Even as hopeless as she is, she should still be some use as a decoy, at least.”

“That’s so rude! I’m an elite graduate of the Alchemist Academy! The same as Sarasa!”

“How brazen!” exclaimed Leonora-san. “Sarasa was effectively at the top of her class, while you barely graduated at all! It’s shameless of you to act like you’re on the same level as her! *Hahh*... As you can see, she’s spoiled. Maybe being exposed to the harsh cold of the winter mountains will do her some good? And if not, you can throw her away.”

“Erm... Setting aside the idea of throwing her away, I understand. Maris-san, it’s good to be working with you.”

Even if she has some shortcomings, she still graduated from the academy.

I figured that meant that, at the very least, she wouldn’t be a burden, but as I extended my hand with a smile, Maris-san crossed her arms, and puffed up her chest with a defiant look. “*Hmph*, try not to hold me ba— *Argh*!”

She couldn’t even finish the line before Leonora-san dropped a fist on her head, sending her back to the floor once again.

After spending the night at Leonora-san's place, the next day, we went out into South Strag to search for Marley-san.

That said, Leonora-san's information network was as good as ever, and she'd more or less pinpointed where we would be able to find him. So, we asked around in the area near there, and were able to find his house without trouble.

"Helloooo? Is Marley-san hooome?"

It was a tiny little house with a small garden. Not long after I knocked, a bald old man with an impressive white beard poked his head out.

His long years were carved into his face as wrinkles, but his back was unbent, and his physique showed no hint of frailty—all of which spoke to his years working as a gatherer.

That hale and hearty old man turned a dubious look toward us, his sudden visitors.

"What is it, girls?"

"Um, would you happen to be Marley-san, the former gatherer who used to work in Yok Village? I'm Sarasa, the alchemist there now, and this is Iris-san, a gatherer."

"Now, there's a name I haven't heard in a long time." Marley-san broke into a huge grin. "You've got me, I'm Marley all right."

"You are?! Then if you don't mind, I have some questions..."

Once I explained what we were here for, Marley-san threw the door wide open. "Ohh, sure, sure. Come right on in."

"Excuse us," I said as I stepped inside.

"Excuse us," said Iris-san, adding, "He seems like a good guy, huh?" in a whisper.

I nodded in the affirmative. When I'd heard he was a retired gatherer, I'd imagined a crotchety old man, but this guy was nothing like that.

But when you think about it, maybe it's by necessity that he's so agreeable?

Gatherers didn't work alone. If someone was so much trouble that they couldn't get along with others, they couldn't expect to receive help when they needed it, and were bound to retire from life

before they could retire from gathering.

That said, gathering wasn't so easy that you could succeed while only taking jobs you could handle on your own.

In short, it might be fair to say that if he was able to live a quiet retired life in town like this, that more or less guaranteed he must be a reasonable person.

"Sorry to barge in on you all of a sudden like this."

"Don't worry about it. I'm not anyone so important you'd need to send me advance notice, and I was free anyway."

Marley-san roared with laughter, then gestured to two chairs for us before sitting down himself.

"So, what did you want to know?"

"About misanon roots. There sadly isn't anyone in the village with experience in gathering them..."

"Oh-hoh. If you're here this time of year, then that means you're going into the mountains in winter, huh? That's a wee bit dangerous. If there's someone in the current generation who could go... Are Andre and them still around?"

"Yes. They're the ones who told us about you. And I have a general knowledge of things myself, but..."

Once I added that I wanted to hear about it from someone who had practical experience with doing the work, Marley-san began rubbing his bald head, perhaps without realizing it.

"I see. So it was them," he said with a nod. "I never did teach them about gathering in the winter mountains, now I think of it. Give me a moment, would you?"

Marely-san rose from his seat, then returned with a large piece of paper.

"To say this is the culmination of my life's work—would be exaggerating a bit, maybe. Anyway, it's something I treasured almost as much as my life when I was a gatherer."

He spread it out on the table. It was a map of the great forest.

Available materials, dangerous locations, types of monsters—a whole lot of details had been written down on it. In many cases, it was closer to the reality on the ground than the books I had on the great forest were, which made it valuable.

Oh, it has the mountain where the salamander was... It says that hellflame grizzlies live there, though.

"I've been retired a long time, so my information's a bit out-of-date, but it should be of some use. This is where you'd want to go to gather misanon roots. But..." Marley-san pointed to a spot on the map, then slid his finger to an area circled in red. "The problem's right here. You can run into snowglide centipedes in this area."

"Centipedes, huh..." I murmured. "Hmm, those could be trouble."

"Yeah. Back when I was still active, going there in winter meant taking your life in your hands. I went a number of times when we were able to get a good group of gatherers together, but...it always came at a cost."

Marley-san scowled as he said that. I let out a groan at discovering a greater obstacle than I had been expecting.

But Iris-san, who was listening to us, just cocked her head to the side, looking confused. "Shopkeeper-dono? What are those centipedes?"

"You don't know, Iris-san? I suppose if you haven't had any chance to run into them, then you wouldn't have much of a reaction to the name."

The term "centipede" had actually been generalized to mean any giant insects. They were the kind of thing you wouldn't find where people lived, only deep in the untouched forest. The smaller ones were the size of a human baby, while the largest could be bigger than a house.

If there's any consolation to be found, it's that not all of them are aggressive, I guess? But bugs are bugs, and I'd rather not run into them if I don't have to.

"If we're talking about snowglide centipedes, they're the size of a small hut, and can slide along the top of the snow to attack their prey, so they can be serious trouble. They won't attack if we stay out of their territory, but they can be stubborn once they decide you're an enemy, so running away from them is hard."

"You've got it right, girlie. Whenever we ran into them, the only thing we could do was fight until we killed them, even if that meant casualties."

Marley-san let out a heavy sigh, perhaps remembering those "casualties."

"So they're fairly dangerous, then?" Iris-san noted.

"Didn't I just say they were?" I replied. "Well, next to a salamander, centipedes aren't even worth comparing as a threat, though."

"Hmm, when you put it that way—" Iris-san's expression softened with relief.

"Hey now, those aren't things you should be comparing, now are they?" Marley-san shook his head in exasperation. But what Iris-san said next made his eyes go wide.

"Well, Shopkeeper-dono's slain a salamander, after all."

"My word! Hmm, I guess that's an alchemist for you. The alchemist back in my time was an old man, so that hadn't occurred to me... I guess I didn't need to worry about you. In that case, you're welcome to take the map with you."

I couldn't help but stare at Marley-san after this unexpected offer. "You're sure that's okay? It's important to you, isn't it?"

"It's fine. I spent my life making it, so it'd be a shame for it to go unused. I considered leaving it to Andre and the guys, but...I wasn't going to be able to go with them and teach them on-site."

If he'd just given them the information, they might have underestimated the risks and done something crazy. He'd been too worried about accidents happening if he couldn't give them personal lessons, so he'd held on to it all this time.

"Thank you. This will be a big help. Is there anything I can do for you in return...?"

"Hm? I don't need anything. My old lady's past the age to care about that kind of thing."

Perhaps sensing my glance, Marley-san patted the top of his bald head with a guffaw.

"But you know...if it suits you, girlie, could you teach the information on there to the gatherers in the village? In the end, I was never able to pass on my knowledge properly... You said that Andre and the guys are still around, right?"

"Yes, they're veterans now," I said with a nod.

"Ho ho, those guys are veterans now... Time sure flies."

Marley-san let out a laugh, then furrowed his brow a little before continuing.

"But if you girls are coming here to see me, then it means they're still lacking experience. If I were ten years younger, I'd go and whip them into shape, but...girlie, if you have time for it, could you train them up a little more, for me?"

If the guys learn to gather more things, that's more profit for me.

I had no reason to refuse, so I nodded and said, "Okay."

No. 013

Complete Alchemy Works: Appears in Volume 5
Difficulty: Normal
Standard Price: ~28,000 Rhea



〈Capture Rope〉

Afifhfufkfff Mfffkfff

With this, you can easily capture the object of your affection. Huh? This isn't how you wanted to capture them? It's okay. High-end versions can also select their target. Just be sure to watch out for the authorities. *We take no responsibility for any result of using this item.

Episode 3: Challenging the Winter Mountains

About ten days after we talked to Marley-san, I found myself climbing a mountain path that was covered in a dusting of snow.

My party included Lorea-chan—who was carrying Kurumi—as well as Iris-san, Kate-san, and one more.

"E-Eek... H-Hold on, would you wait a moment?!"

"Maris-san, you can do this! We're almost over the ridge!"

That "one more" was Maris-san, who was walking with encouragement from Lorea-chan. She'd managed to keep up well enough in the forest, but things had been like this ever since we'd entered the mountains.

"Unlike that walking exception or the gatherers, you're just an ordinary person, are you not?!" Maris-san asked.

"I'll admit it's tiring, but we take a lot of breaks...thanks to you, Maris-san," Lorea-chan said.

Maris-san was looking at Lorea-chan in disbelief as she walked alongside her, but Lorea-chan was a healthy girl.

She'd also learned some magic recently, and there were signs of her being able to use it for a little physical enhancement. Even though Lorea-chan was the youngest one here, if she took breaks at the same time as Maris-san, she was more than able to keep up.

"By the way, would that 'exception' happen to be me?" I asked. "I was thinking of taking a short break, but how about you keep on pushing yourself until we're over the ridge?"



"Eagh! I should have left well enough alone!" Maris-san shouted.

Lorea-chan offered the young woman one of the sweet-tasting energy bars she had made. "Have this and keep doing your best. If we rest too much, it'll throw us off schedule, after all."

"Thank you... Oh, it's so sweet and delicious..." Maris-san teared up as she bit into it, but still kept her legs moving. Though she was a bit of a disappointment, she had a decent amount of perseverance.

"Sarasa-san's totally fine, though... I guess there's all sorts of alchemists, huh?"

"Listen, I'm telling you she's a walking exception. You have to put your all into getting the license, but once you become an alchemist, after that you can just wait in your shop to make money. That's the kind of trade alchemy is. It isn't normal to go out and harvest materials just because you don't have them, okay?"

Well, there are *a lot of alchemists like that. They can live a pretty good life without pushing themselves.*

"Is that right?" asked Lorea-chan. "But Maris-san, you didn't make money; you ended up in debt, right?"

This innocent observation touched a sore spot for Maris-san. "Urgh! Th-That was an expression of intellectual curiosity, you might say..."

"Hmm. So you're saying you were unable to balance your curiosity with your budget," mused Iris-san.

"It's the way of the alchemist to buy good materials when they're there! Every meeting is a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence!"

"Is that true, Shopkeeper-san?" asked Kate-san.

"We do tend to act that way, but it's normal to spend strategically, you know? If you buy stock you have no means of selling, or if you fail at transmuting it, your life's over," I explained, adding, "Like Maris-san's."

"Urrrgh! I can't deny it?!"

"Especially since you've messed up *twice* now... Anyway, we'll be over the ridge soon."

"F-Finally—oh, my...!"

The moment we crested the ridge, the scenery instantly changed,

revealing a slope covered in deep snow.

The mountain we were heading for stood beyond the bottom of the slope. It was hidden completely in what looked to be a blizzard, which illustrated how hard the trek there would be.

"W-Wow," Maris-san marveled. "*This* is the winter mountains... It's nothing like what we've seen so far, on the way here."

"I've heard it can be like this when you cross over a ridge, but...it's still impressive, huh?" I agreed.

The slope we'd climbed was maybe seventy percent snow, thirty percent dirt. But on the downward slope up ahead, even the trees were partially buried, so there had to be at least a meter of snow buildup there.

"This should be more than enough for skiing," I noted, then suggested, "Let's slide down to save ourselves some time."

The skis we had brought were short ones, about two boot-lengths long, in order to prioritize portability, but they were also artifacts, with the handy function of not sliding backward.

Even on a slight upward incline, we could still move faster on them than we could with snow boots, so there was no reason not to use them.

I had given the others a crash course in skiing, and they all had good reflexes, so they should be able to ski down a hill like this no problem.

"From here on, let's make sure to wear snow glasses and reapply our sunscreen," I instructed the others.

As we were preparing ourselves, Maris-san hesitantly said, "Um, Sarasa-san? I didn't bring skis with me, you know?"

"Huh? Even though you knew we were coming to the snowy mountains? I'm sure I told you... Lorea-chan, could you lend Maris-san your skis? I'll carry you on my back."

"I wasn't feeling that confident in my skiing ability, so I don't mind, but...will you be okay, Sarasa-san?"

"Um, I'll just walk down..." Maris-san tried to turn down the offer.

"That will take too much time, and Lorea-chan's light anyway. Here you go," I said, pushing the skis into her hands somewhat forcefully.

She accepted them with a slightly troubled look before slowly attaching them to her feet.

As for Iris-san and Kate-san... Yep, they're all ready.

"Now then, Maris-san can go first. I'll follow behind the rest of you."

When I indicated for her to go, Maris-san's eyes wandered awkwardly. "No, I'll let someone else lead. I mean, I *am* a bit concerned whether the artifact will work, after all?"

Murgh! You think I could mess up such a simple transmutation? That's offensive, you know?

"I've already tested them, so give everyone an example of how they're used. Go on, put some *oomph* into it!"

"H-H-Huh?! Wahhhhhh!!!"

I gave Maris-san a push, and she slid off with a cheer.

The slope wasn't that steep here, so just gliding over the fresh powder must've felt great. If we weren't here on work, I would have wanted to take some time to play around, but...alas, it was not to be.

"Ohh, she's making a straight descent?" I observed. "It's fun because you can build up speed that way, but I don't recommend it for beginners. It can make it hard to stop if you go too fast."

"No," said Iris-san, "I wouldn't dream of trying that right away... Oh, she fell over."

Maybe her foot got caught on something, because Maris-san lost her balance and pitched over, rolling for a while as she kicked up snow, then came to a stop with her face buried in it.

"Do you think she's all right...?" Kate-san wondered.

"On this snow? She'll be fine," I reassured her. "Oh, but I'd suggest that you two zigzag on your way down."

"Yes, I'm well aware," Iris-san responded. "Here goes!"

Though Iris-san and Kate-san started out cautiously, both had great natural athleticism. They quickly got the hang of it, and I saw no signs of trouble.

"Okay, I guess we'll go too. Hang on tight, Lorea-chan."

"Okay! Fwahhhhhh!!!"

I started out a little fast, quickly passing the two gatherers, and

stopping next to Maris-san. I called out to her as she was still lying in the snow.

"You okay?"

"I am not 'okay'! I thought I was going to die!"

Maris-san sat up angrily, glaring at me with upturned eyes.

"No need to exaggerate... There's no cliffs here, and the snow isn't exactly hard."

I obviously wouldn't have pushed her like that if this were a steeper incline or if there were the risk of her hurtling off a cliff if she went off the path, but this was what you might call a beginner's course. It'd have taken some fancy acrobatics to put her in any real danger.

"I am not exaggerating! I'll have you know I can't ski, okay?!"

"You can't...? Even though it's taught during our practical lessons in the winter mountains?"

"You definitely knew! I put all my effort into the things that I excelled at!"

Yeah, she was right, I kinda knew she couldn't ski.

But can you blame me? She mocked my artifacts.

She went on to explain that she'd focused solely on transmutation at the academy.

Well, if she wasn't trying to win reward money, like I was, then there wasn't any need for her to put all her effort into everything, after all.

In fact, most people only put effort into the lessons they needed to graduate. In order to make sure they did graduate.

"Um, what do you want to do?" I asked, "Walk on your own? Or..."

Maris-san's eyes wandered to Lorea-chan, who was on my back, then she was silent for a brief moment before making up her mind.

"*Urkh*... I-I'll practice. But, um...could you teach me?" she asked with some embarrassment.

"Whew. I managed to make it down without falling!"

"Maris-san, that's amazing! You've learned to ski in such a short time."

This boost of confidence from Lorea-chan got Maris-san to puff her chest up with recovered pride. “Of course I did! I am one of the elite, after all!”

Whatever else anyone might say about her, she was an alchemist who graduated from the academy. She’d have had to earn a passing mark in combat, even if it wasn’t her specialty, so her basic specs were on the high end.

“Skis sure are convenient, Shopkeeper-dono!” Iris-san cried. “We covered so much ground so quickly!”

“We did,” Kate-san agreed. “And we can move forward easily, even without a slope.”

“The anti-reversal function is kind of convenient, huh?” I replied. “You just have to slide your skis forward.”

When I turned to look back up the way we had come, the ridge we had come down from was lost in a white mist. *How long would it have taken to walk all this way in snow boots?*

“There’s still a long way to our destination, though,” I said. “Now, let’s keep on going.”

“Oh, Sarasa-san, I’ll walk. We’re on flat ground now,” Lorea-chan offered, trying to get down from my back, but I stopped her.

“It’s okay. This is still faster than having you walk, Lorea-chan. It’d slow us down.”

“Really? Tell me if you get tired, okay? I’m ready to walk anytime.”

“*Urkh*. I’m sorry.” Maris-san lowered her eyes. “This is all because of my lack of preparation.”

“No, I didn’t do enough to communicate things to you either,” I said, slapping her on the back. “Now then, let’s get going.”

Once I started skiing across the snowy plains, Iris-san, Kate-san, and even Maris-san soon followed.

Though it wasn’t as nifty as the anti-reversal function, the exceptionally low friction of these skis was pretty useful too, so once we built up a little momentum, we could slide quite a fair distance.

When we were at around the midpoint of the snowy plains, Lorea-chan pointed into the distance and, lowering her voice, said, “Wow! Look, a rabbit!”

I did look, and there was a pure-white rabbit bouncing along. It wasn't that big, but it had a pudgy body under all that fluff.

"Hm? Are we having sautéed rabbit for dinner tonight?" Iris-san responded gleefully, but Lorea-chan hurriedly shook her head.

"N-No! It's pure white, you know? Isn't it cute?!" she said, seeking agreement.

Behind her, Kate-san quietly lowered her bow.

Yeah, you were doing the right thing as a hunter.

Although, it turned out she didn't have the heart to put an arrow in the bunny just as Lorea-chan was squealing about how cute it was.

"Is this your first time seeing a white rabbit?" I asked Lorea-chan.

"Yes. I've only seen brown ones, or black-ish ones. Jasper hunts them occasionally," she said before lowering her eyes and adding, "They're delicious, aren't they?"

Cute was cute, but meat was meat. I guess she had managed to compartmentalize those two things.

"Do you want me to hunt it...?" Kate-san readied her bow, wondering if her time had come, while Lorea-chan agonized over it.

Then, after some time, she answered...

"I-It's up to you... If you catch it, I'll cook it."

"You will? Well then..."

Kate-san the hunter showed no mercy. Her arrow flew the moment Lorea-chan looked away, accurately seeking out the rabbit, and ending its life.

The bunny fell to the snow with a light thud, and Kate-san went to retrieve it.

She picked up the rabbit and cut its throat, and drained it of its blood right there. The white snow was stained red, wiping away the heartwarming scene of just moments ago.

"What frightening efficiency... You're a real hunter..." Maris-san commented.

"*Urkh*..." Lorea-chan groaned as she caught a glimpse out of the corner of her eye. I felt her arms tighten around me.

Kate-san greeted her with an awkward smile as she returned, holding the meat and fur of the speedily butchered rabbit.

"Now you're making me feel like I did something bad..."

"No, you've done nothing wrong, Kate-san," I reassured her.

It might not look good, but she'd done as a hunter should. The only difference between the two of them was that Kate-san did the hunting, while Lorea-chan accepted the fruits of her labor.

That said, maybe I did feel a little sorry for her, having to chop up an animal she'd called cute?

"Lorea-chan, if it's hard on you, how about I cook it instead?"

"That's a good idea," Maris-san agreed. "I know it made me a little queasy at first too. It's nothing a child should be forced to do. I wouldn't mind doing it for you either, you know?"

They flunk you out of the Alchemist Academy in the first year if you can't get over it, after all.

And Lorea-chan was older now than I was at that point.

"*Urgh*..." Lorea-chan only hesitated for a brief moment before shaking her head. "No, cooking is about all I'm good for, so I'll do it. Now that we've hunted it, it's only polite to enjoy eating it."

Is she saying we wouldn't enjoy it if I cooked it?

I can *cook, you know? I just don't do it usually.*

That said, Lorea-chan's cooked rabbit tasted really good.

It was five days later when we reached the area where misanon grew.

We'd run into a blizzard along the way, but that was well within the range of what we'd expected. I had a list of landmarks from Marley-san, so I was confident we'd arrived at our destination, but...

"Shopkeeper-dono...there's nothing here?" Iris-san said in a questioning tone.

"Yeah, I know," I replied. "Maybe it's because it snowed the other day?"

The blizzard that had delayed us had also deposited copious amounts of snow on the mountain. As a result, the only thing we saw at the point where misanon grew was a world of white.

The snow was piled so deep that not only was the ground covered, there was no trace of vegetation. I tried shoving a pole into the snow, and it was over a meter deep.

I was sure we had the right place, but just moving aside the snow so we could search...felt like it was going to be difficult.

"If there's any consolation to be found, it's that there isn't any ice, I guess."

If the temperature rose for a bit, it could result in a hard layer of ice, but it had been reasonably cold for the last little while, so all that had accumulated was soft, powdery snow.

Looks like I won't be needing a pickaxe.

"But with this much accumulation," I continued, "we may be in for a hard time digging through the snow to look for them, you know?"

"If that's the only option, we'll do it, but...how would you normally look for them, Shopkeeper-dono?"

"You look for dried-out stalks. If you break the ends of them off and sniff them, misanon has a distinctive scent—stimulating, and just a little refreshing," I explained. "But well, once the snow's piled up higher than the grass, you see the problem that causes."

Normally, we'd have been able to see dried stalks that looked like thin poles thrust into the ground, but there weren't any to be seen. All I saw was the pure white of a gently sloping field of snow.

In areas that received a lot of snow accumulation, it was common to check places where misanon grew during summer, and leave long poles as markers, but...back then, I'd had no idea I'd be needing the roots.

"Sarasa-san, can't you detect them?" Maris-san asked.

"Huh? Is there a spell like that?"

If there were a spell that could detect materials, alchemists would be over the moon with delight, you know?

"No, not that I'm aware of, but, I mean, you do defy all common sense."

"Now I'm a little disappointed... And Maris-san, saying I defy all common sense is mean. I'm not even that good at magic to begin with."

"That's a lie."

"Huh?! You all said that at the same time?! But I'm not lying... I mean, next to Master—"

"Your point of reference is all messed up, you know?! Compared

to Ophelia-sama, we're all amateurs!"

"Oh, you know about Ophelia-sama too, Maris?" asked Iris-san.

"Of course! Skills that give license to her outrageous behavior! The youngest...looking alchemist to reach master class! The object of every female alchemist's admiration! After worming her way into a position as her apprentice, Sarasa-san would have no right to complain if someone stabbed her!"

Oh, so we agree on her age being questionable—wait, hold up!

"Huh? Am I in that much danger?!"

"We're talking about *the* Ophelia-sama, you know? Of course people would get jealous. There are any number of alchemists who would give everything they have to apprentice under her. It caused a minor uproar in the industry when news came out that she'd taken on an apprentice."

"It did?! I know there were people at the academy who said they were jealous..."

"That place being insulated from the outside world is the only reason you got off so lightly. If you had apprenticed with her after graduating, it would have been a much bigger deal... Although, I'm sure she probably understood that too."

Come to think of it, the part-time job that led to me becoming her apprentice was only open to new students, huh?

Was it because, if that restriction weren't there, she'd have been swamped with alchemists...?

"Could it be that Sarasa-san's actually in a pretty dangerous situation?" Lorea-chan asked.

"I doubt any alchemist is so shortsighted that they would lay a hand on her when she's under the protection of Ophelia-sama... Probably."

"Probably?! Huh? But Leonora-san treats me well..."

"She's a clear-thinking adult with a great deal of forbearance. Enough that she's willing to put up with me."

"Oh, so you were aware of that." Kate-san nodded along, earning a scowl from Maris-san.

"Oh, stuff it. But if anything, she's an exception. If your shop were in a large town instead of out here on the frontier, I suspect

you'd have at least experienced some harassment, you know?"

"Alchemists sure have it hard... Wait, I guess it's not just alchemists," Iris-san said with a rueful smile.

"Yeah, you have it hard too," Lorea-chan agreed sympathetically. "It's commoners like me who have it the easiest."

I feel like...you've already come over to this side, though, Lorea-chan? You work in an alchemist's shop, and can use magic. That makes you a target for jealousy.

It'd be bad for me if you quit, though, so I won't say anything. Hee hee, we're in the same boat...

"Anyway, Shopkeeper-san," Kate-san interjected. "The main takeaway is that there's no convenient magic for this, right?"

"Yeah, there's no searching spell. It wouldn't be impossible to blow the snow away, but—"

"You're as amazing as ever, Sarasa-san!" Lorea-chan exclaimed, eyes sparkling, but I hurriedly shook my head.

"No, I'm not doing it, okay? If I did, it would cause an avalanche."

Loud noises were strictly against the rules on a snowy mountain. I couldn't blast the snow away with an explosion, and even if I used magic to raise the temperature without an explosion, there was no telling what might happen when the snow suddenly melted.

It might have been one thing if I were here on my own, but I couldn't take that kind of risk with Lorea-chan and the others all here too.

But misanon is supposed to have a strong scent, so maybe detecting it with magic's not totally out of the question...?

Just as I was thinking that, Lorea-chan rummaged through her bag, and something jumped out of it.

"*Grar!*"

"Did that stuffed animal just move?!"

Stuffed animals don't move, silly.

"No, that's Kurumi the homunculus. I made it. You'd have seen that if you'd looked closely, right?"

"It really is?! Huh? At your age, Sarasa-san? Did you make it yourself?"

Maris-san carefully scrutinized Kurumi, then looked at me in

shock.

But making a homunculus isn't that hard in and of it... Ohh, I guess she's more surprised by the money part of it? The materials are pretty expensive, after all.

"I was fortunate enough to have the materials and money. But what did you think it was? You've seen Lorea-chan carrying it around before, haven't you? Didn't you ever wonder about it?"

I had been having Kurumi move as little as possible to save power, so I could understand thinking that it was a stuffed animal, but if she'd thought it was weird and taken a closer look, an alchemist should have figured it out, right? Normally.

"It never stuck out to me as strange. I simply assumed Lorea-chan couldn't sleep at night without her stuffed animal."

"I'm not *that* childish, okay?!" Lorea-chan protested.

"There is nothing wrong with an adult liking stuffed animals!" Maris-san countered before following that up by hesitantly asking, "Can I touch it?"

"Umm, Sarasa-san, do you mind?" Lorea-chan looked at me in confusion.

I gave a nod to the eager Maris-san, and a moment later Kurumi had passed into her hands.

"Grr! I never knew a homunculus could be so cute... I'll have to save up for one myself," she mumbled, her voice full of bitter regret, as she petted Kurumi.

Yeah, if we're not careful, she'll bury herself in more debt. I'll have to warn Leonora-san the next time I see her.

"*Rrr, grar grar!*"

Kurumi, who had been letting Maris-san pet it for a while, let out a slightly discontented growl. It then slipped out of her hands and hopped down onto the snow.

But this was soft snow.

Not wearing snow boots, Kurumi sank into the snow and vanished out of sight.

"Ohhh! Sarasa-san, you're so mean!"

Normally, homunculi don't move independent of their caster, so I understand the reaction, but...

"Mean how? Let me just say, Kurumi did that on its own, okay?" I explained to Maris-san, who reacted to it with a perplexed look.

"It acts on its own...? I never realized homunculi could be so adva— Ah, I have to save it!"

Maris-san hurriedly crouched down, but a moment later, something stirred under the snow, and then burst out, sending snow everywhere!

"*Grar grarrr!*"

Yes, it was Kurumi, obviously.

Then, as the little bear landed, it sank in and vanished again.

I guess it's going to be needing snow boots, huh?

"Has Kurumi been wanting to play?" wondered Iris-san.

"That can't be it..." Kate-san replied with an awkward smile. "But now that I think about it a little more, Kurumi has a bit of your personality too, right, Iris? So we can't rule it out..."

Seeing the suspicious look on her childhood friend's face, Iris-san frowned discontentedly. "Listen, I obviously wouldn't fool around on the job, okay?!"

"I don't think you would either, so..." I walked over to the spot where Kurumi had fallen in, and reached my hand down to pick it up. "What's going on?"

"*Grar grar*." Kurumi pointed over to the first hole that it had fallen through.

"Are you saying we should take a look?" I asked.

"Let's see... Ah, Sarasa-san, there's something growing here!"

"Huh? Really...? Oh, could it be...?!"

At Lorea-chan's beckoning, I peered into the hole with her, and there was a thin, pole-like thing down there. I snapped the end off and gave it a whiff. It had the distinctive, stimulating scent.

"This is misanon all right," I confirmed.

"My word!" Iris-san exclaimed. "Does this mean Kurumi can find misanon under the snow?!"

"*Grar!*" Kurumi puffed its little chest up with pride as our eyes all focused on it.

"Huh? Did it just make a decision for itself after listening to our conversation? Is that even possible?" Maris-san wondered.

"I'm surprised too," I admitted. "I know I poured a lot of magical power and materials into it, but..."

It seemed possible enough that Kurumi's sense of smell was up to the task, but what caught me off guard was that the homunculus had acted on its own, without orders.

I had spotted it walking around the house occasionally, but homunculi were fundamentally passive beings. I hadn't heard many accounts of them thinking for themselves and then taking action based on the situation around them.

"Kurumi, can you find more?" asked Iris-san.

"*Grar!*" Kurumi responded, then dove out of my arms.

It swam through the snow, then erupted out of it a few meters away with a "*Grar!*"

Kate-san rushed over, and checked under the snow. "Shopkeeper-san, there's more growing over here!"

"Wow, Kurumi!" Lorea-chan cried. "You're not just adorable; you have such an amazing skill too!"

"*Grarrr!*" Kurumi waved its little arms bashfully as Lorea-chan scooped it up and gave it a big hug.

But listen, Lorea-chan? Being cute is a secondary trait, and having all sorts of abilities is what homunculi are for, okay?

Although, this ability had caught me by surprise too.

"It understands questions and can react to them?" Maris-san observed, asking, "Hey, Sarasa-san. How were you able to create a homunculus like this? Is it some secret technique you learned from Ophelia-sama or something like that?"

"No, I made it totally normally, just following the textbook... If anything stands out as unusual, it would be that I used good materials, copious amounts of magical power, and mixed in elements from each of the four of us?"

"The four of you... Is that how it can understand Iris-san? I know I can't..."

As was to be expected from an alchemist, though maybe it was a little disappointing, Maris-san trailed off mumbling to herself as she got lost in thought.

No, listen, I understand, okay? If she could see what she just

saw, and not think anything of it, she'd never succeed as an alchemist.

I'm of the opinion that the spirit of inquiry is the fundamental trait of an alchemist.

In fact, I wanted to talk with her at length on the subject, but we weren't in a position to do it right now. And we had someone with us who would stop us from getting carried away like that.

"Um, Maris-san," Lorea-chan interjected. "Can we put searching for misanon roots first for now? I think you already know this, but we took this job from a member of the royal family, so...we can't afford to fail."

After a pause, Maris-san reluctantly nodded. "I suppose you're right. I have no way of testing any theory I might come up with here anyway."

She then leveled a finger at me. "But Sarasa-san! When we do have time, I'd very much like to hear what you have to say about this!"

"Yes, I'll be up for that. I'm interested in it myself," I replied. "Now, let's get back to gathering. Kurumi's fortunately made the task of finding them easier, but it's still going to be a lot of heavy labor digging them up from under the snow. I hope you'll all cooperate with me."

◇ ◇ ◇

Kurumi's ability to search turned out to be perfect. It never missed, and there was zero need for us to search ourselves. I would clear the snow wherever Kurumi jumped out, then we'd all dig into the ground to find the misanon roots.

Digging through the frozen earth took a bit of effort, but with all of us working on it, we were able to secure more than enough roots in less than a day. That left us with little reason to hang around in the winter mountains, so we immediately set off back home.

Everything was really smooth up to this point, even considering that we had taken a longer route to avoid snowglide centipedes and been delayed by blizzards. Even if we ran into some trouble on the

way back, I'd still be able to finish the commission without issue.

That didn't mean we could let our guards down, though. We couldn't relax until it was over. Or so I was thinking, when...

"Gathering in the snowy mountains was no big deal!" Maris-san said in a lackadaisical manner, causing us all to turn and stare at her.

"Maris... You're going to say that? Really?" Iris-san asked.

"Huh? Should I not have?" Maris-san cocked her head to the side. "I mean, once we cross the next ridge, we'll be out of the snowy mountains."

Iris-san let out a sigh. "It's times like this when problems are most likely to happen. All the more so if you talk like that."

"You're simply imagining it. Words alone have no effect on reality."

Yeah, I agree with her there. You just don't remember the times when nothing happens, that's all.

But the one who'd brought it up was Iris-san, who had been through a lot of trouble. Even just in the last year, she had lost her arm and almost died, been trapped in a salamander's den, and nearly been forced into a marriage to settle her family's debt—yeah, that sure was a run of bad luck.

Her being the one saying it lent the words a certain amount of credibility. Perhaps she'd jinxed herself repeatedly.

"You're living up to your reputation, Iris-san," I said. "We've got a problem again this time."

"Huh? No, no, that can't be true... Right?" Iris-san started out laughing, as if I were telling a silly joke, but seeing my serious expression, she took on a look of disbelief and asked, "Are you serious?"

"Yes, we have monsters coming our way. And more than that... They'll come into sight soon."

"I'll go check," Kate-san said, climbing a nearby tree and looking in the direction I pointed.

"What is that...?" she said, dumbstruck. "A massive bug...and gatherers? They're coming this way!"

"I'd say it's probably a snowglide centipede. Iris-san's luck really is something, isn't it?" I whistled.

Considering the current season, it was unlikely to be any other kind of centipede.

"This is my fault?! It's just a coincidence, right?!"

"You *do* have a record for this kind of thing, you know?" I replied. "I mean, you managed to run into a hellflame grizzly on your first day in the great forest, and a frenzied one at that."

"Urkh!" Iris-san groaned. "But wait, this could also be Maris's fault."

"I have no history with monsters, though? Meanwhile, from what I'm told, you picked a fight with a salamander too, Iris-san."

"Th-That was Nord's—" Iris-san started to argue back, but Kate-san cut her off.

"Iris, this isn't the time. Shopkeeper-san, do you think we can get away?"

"They aren't usually that aggressive," I began, "but since there are other gatherers in its vicinity, it's quite likely they attacked it. It's going to be really stubborn after that."

We aren't the ones who attacked it, but we probably can't count on it making that distinction.

"That being the case," I continued, "we either have to run before it catches up to us, or dig a burrow in the snow to hide..."

We could run normally thanks to our snow boots, but as for whether we could go faster than a snowglide centipede when it was gliding...maybe Iris-san and I could? But if Lorea-chan and the others couldn't, then that didn't mean anything.

If we hid by burrowing into the snow, there was a high risk of being found anyway, and then it would crush us from above.

Iris-san might have imagined that happening, because she immediately shook her head. "I'm against that idea. It would be better to fight, and to save the gatherers if we can."

"Iris, you want to save them?" asked Kate-san. "I don't think it's anyone we know."

Generally, gatherers were expected to look out for themselves. Ideally, it was good to help others when they were in need, but most people weren't willing to take risks to do that for people they didn't know.

And out here in the snowy mountains, it was especially rare for anyone to have room to spare for helping others. It was normal to only bring as much food as you needed yourself, and getting involved could sometimes just result in becoming a victim yourself.

"I mean...we do have Shopkeeper-dono with us. Won't things work out somehow?" Iris-san suggested.

"Let me remind you, I'm an alchemist, okay?" I replied. "Fighting isn't my area of expertise."

"Sorry, Shopkeeper-dono," Iris-san continued, "but you don't sound very convincing saying that when you're stronger than I am..."

Hey, Lorea-chan, don't nod in agreement.

Okay, sure, I can fight when it's necessary, but...

"If possible, I'd prefer to count on you and Kate-san to fight. Oh, here it comes."

Right after I pointed, the snowglide centipede and the gatherers appeared.

The moment she saw it, Lorea-chan's eyes went wide, and she clung to my arm, shouting, "S-Sarasa-san! That thing! It's way too huge, isn't it?!"

"It *is* a centipede, after all. If it was small, it'd just be called a bug. Then we'd just take it out with a squirt of bug spray."

I wouldn't have bothered warning them if that was all it was.

"Even so!" Iris-san protested. "It's bigger than a salamander, isn't it?!"

In terms of form, it looked like a gigantic longhorn beetle. Long antennae, powerful jaws, and a long, thin body that had six long legs ending in somewhat flat feet.

Its body had a metallic luster, shining all the colors of the rainbow, but with a slight green hue. It stood out like a sore thumb on the pure white of the snowy plains, as though it were asserting it had no predators.

But maybe that was to be expected. Even just one of its legs was bigger than my whole body, after all.

"But don't worry," I said. "It's not as strong as a salamander."

"That's not reassuring, okay?!" cried Kate-san. "Maybe we should just run away? The people it's chasing don't look like gatherers."

“There’s around ten of them, and I don’t recognize any of them as being gatherers from Yok Village...?” Iris-san said, tilting her head to the side.

Yok Village wasn’t the only village on the edge of the great forest. So it was possible they were gatherers from another settlement, but something seemed off about their equipment.

“So, are we going to run away?” I asked.

“Wait, hold on just a moment,” Maris-san interjected. “Those are guards from South Strag?!”

“Guards from South Strag...? You’re sure?” I asked.

“I’m almost completely positive. I’ve had some interaction with them before.”

Maris-san was a resident of South Strag, so what she was saying sounded believable.

“This is only making me want to run more...” I murmured.

Listen. Normally, I’d help, okay? But it was their lord who picked a fight with me just the other day. I drove him off a little forcefully, and now his men are leading a dangerous monster right toward us. That’s too much of a coincidence, right?

“Heeeeeelp!!!”

They noticed us, and started desperately crying for help, but...

“This smells suspicious...”

“It does?”

“Lorea-chan, just because someone is asking for help, that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re a good person.”

Imagine coming across a person stranded on the highway. Sometimes, when you stop to help that person out of the goodness of your heart, the person turns out to be a trap laid by bandits. Most of us in the current party were able to protect ourselves, but I wasn’t going to let them get near Lorea-chan, who couldn’t.

“Honestly, the safest move is to hit all of them with a powerful spell from here...”

“Much as I’d like to agree with you, it’s a bit much to do that when we don’t know whether they’re friends or foes,” Kate-san objected.

“You really think so?” With Kate-san voicing her disapproval, and

Lorea-chan nodding her head beside her, I couldn't go ahead with it.

If they were obviously bandits, then I wouldn't have even needed to think about it... It's a bit of a shame.

"Um, if we can, I'd like to save them," said Maris-san. "They take their work seriously."

"But they work for Baronet Kahku, you know? Do you know the baronet?"

"Urkh! I have no response to that?!"

I guess she does *know Baronet Kahku.*

Maris-san frowned, at a loss for words, but soon turned to me with a serious look on her face. "But I'll say this anyway! I'll help too, so please save them!"

"Well, if you insist... I'd probably have trouble sleeping if I left them to die anyway."

I turned to look at Kate-san and Iris-san. Both of them nodded.

If I wanted to put our safety first and foremost, turning down her request would have been an option, but it wasn't one I could choose with Lorea-chan watching... *Oh, one of the men just got whacked by an antenna and went flying into the snow. I guess there's no time to spare.*

"Maris-san, can you use a weapon?"

"Better than an amateur!"

Not that well, then. But at a bare minimum, she's good enough to get a credit at the academy.

"I want you to attack from here using magic," I said. "Now let's do this."

I didn't have to tell the other three what to do.

Kate-san immediately nocked an arrow, while Iris-san shouted a warning. "You there, don't come any closer! Run to the sides!"

As soon as she finished speaking, Kate-san's arrow flew. It soared toward her target, one of the suspicious men—no, one of the snowglide centipede's long antennae.

Her arrow struck true, burying itself in the left antenna. The centipede let out an earsplitting screech.

Kate-san winced. Not at the screech, but the result of her shot. "Urkh! Can I not shoot through it with this bow?"

Reflecting on how ineffective her bow had been during the battle with the salamander, Kate-san had gotten me to make some minor improvements that allowed her to pump magical energy into it.

Because of that, her arrows now flew up to twice as fast, but...well, you've already seen the result. The arrow had lodged itself in the enemy, but hadn't been able to sever the antenna.

Because, for cost-related reasons, I had used Kate-san's own bow as a base.

"It managed to pierce it, so if you want more power, we may want to look into changing the arrows you use," I suggested.

"Urgh, the cost, the cost..." Kate-san moaned pathetically.

The ice arrows she'd used against the salamander had been especially expensive, but all special arrows cost a lot. Even if she collected them afterward, whether they were artifacts or arrows made through simple blacksmithing, they would still need maintenance before she could use them again. They weren't something she could invest in without having financial leeway because, if she took down her enemies but was in the red after the cost of arrows, there was no point.

"We can talk about it when it's time! Here it comes!"

The snowglide centipede had swung its antennae around in pain after her first shot had landed, but now it had turned and, identifying us as the attackers, began gliding in our direction.

"I'll go next! Wind Cutter!!!"

Maris-san fired off a spell from behind me.

It wasn't a particularly flashy one, but she had likely been taking the snowy mountains into consideration. The snowglide centipede tilted to one side as the spell cut its front right leg in half and left a deep cut in the leg behind it.

"Ohh, that's what I'd expect from an alchemist! If you keep that up..." Iris-san was impressed, but Maris-san was quick to shake her head.

"I've only slowed it down," she said. "I put most of my magical power into that spell."

"You sure are quick to commit, huh?!" I exclaimed.

"I only did as I was told. The rest is up to you."

Irresponsible much?! Well, in this situation, I guess I can't say that was the wrong move, though?

Snowglide centipedes were difficult to deal with because of their ability to move quickly over deep snow, which normally slowed down other creatures, as well as the long antennae that let them attack from a distance. If we could rob it of those things, then our snow boots would put us at a definite advantage.

Also, it was pretty dangerous to have someone who wasn't used to using offensive magic firing off spells while we were fighting.

So Maris-san's decision to bet everything on her first strike was unusually on point.

Of course, that was assuming the rest of us could finish the job.

"Shopkeeper-dono, let's go!"

"Okay!"

Iris-san and I charged in to do just that. We focused on the antenna and legs.

First we went for the heavily damaged right-hand side, but as we were heading toward it, the antennae came at us from above.

However, it was a highly telegraphed attack, and not hard to avoid, since our feet weren't trapped in the snow. Iris-san, who was running in front of me, picked up speed, jumping forward diagonally as she dodged. I lowered my speed a little, then watched as the antenna went by right in front of my eyes.

The antenna that had an arrow embedded in it buried itself in the snow, sending white powder dancing through the air. I charged ahead in spite of that, swinging the sword I already had drawn.

I only felt a slight impact, but that was all it took to bisect an antenna that was as thick as my leg. It came crashing to the ground, accompanied by a screech even louder than the last one.

Then the snowglide centipede lurched to one side, possibly as a result of losing an antenna.

"Nicely done, Shopkeeper-dono!" Iris-san praised me as she continued to move quickly herself.

She flowed without hesitation in response to the enemy's movements, and then swung her sword down at it.

Slam!

That loud noise was the sound of her destroying the joint on the centipede's injured second leg, causing its ski-like foot to come off. It was thrown even further off-balance.

Those feet were what allowed the snowglide centipede to support its massive body on top of the soft snow. In other words, if the centipede lost its feet, it couldn't glide, and without its antennae, it was just a big bug.

Well, being a big bug is threatening enough, though.

"Iris-san, keep going and take out the rear left leg!"

As I started running toward the right side, the snowglide centipede decided to focus on me. It swung its remaining antenna, which was also on that side.

If it remembered what happened before, you'd think it would be more careful, though?

Naturally, I dodged and swung my sword, severing its antenna once again with my slick moves.

The centipede's head seemed to tremble as I targeted its eyes on the backswing, but Iris-san was already swinging her sword too by that point.

"*Hyahhh!*"

Her blade struck like a flash as she let out her battle cry, tearing off a third leg with an even more powerful strike than before.

Balance completely ruined, the snowglide centipede slowly toppled to the left, its massive body collapsing into the spot that Iris-san hastily vacated.

Thump!

Maybe it was because of the snow, but it landed with a much lighter sound than I expected from its size, kicking up a cloud of fresh powder.

From that point on, the rest was just routine work.

We dodged its flailing legs as we lopped them off, then decapitated it once it could no longer move, and that was the end of our battle with the centipede.

"Well done," Lorea-chan congratulated us. "You beat it more easily than expected... I was just watching, though."

"Yeah," Kate-san agreed. "I thought centipedes were more dangerous."

Once the enemy stopped moving, Lorea-chan and Kate-san came over, but Iris-san responded to their opinions with a complicated expression, pointing at the creature's severed head.

"It was plenty dangerous, okay? Just look at those jaws. If we had struggled to get through the snow, then it would have been *chomp!* for us. We only managed because of Shopkeeper-san's snow boots..."

"The snowglide centipede is seen as dangerous because it can move quickly over the snow. But if you can do something about that, it's not so scary," I explained.

"I see what you mean. So if you don't have snow boots, you end up like those guys."

Kate-san had her eyes on a few guys—three, to be precise—who were awkwardly watching us. When we first found them, there had been around ten of them, but more than half had been taken out by the snowglide centipede and were lying in the snow.

Some were shakily rising to their feet, but others remained motionless. It was pretty clear they needed aid, but...

"I can vouch for their identities!" Maris-san declared, puffing her chest out.

"Uh, we know who they are, and that's kind of the problem..." I reminded her.

Her eyes wandered back and forth from them to us as this realization hit her.

"Oh, that's right! This isn't good..."

If they were gatherers, there would be no need to worry about it. We'd offer as much help as we could without endangering ourselves. But knowing that they could be enemies...

"Why don't we hear what they have to say for themselves?" I suggested, adding, "I'm noticing a peculiar smell."

"Why yes... I think you're right," Maris-san agreed. "It does seem we'll have to ask them some questions."

I'd noticed the smell while we were fighting. Once I pointed it out, Maris-san frowned a little, and then nodded gravely.

"Now that you mention it, something *does* smell," said Kate-san. "What's going on here?"

"This is a potion that attracts insects," I explained. "It's usually used to gather insects that can be used as materials in alchemy, but...of course, it works on centipedes too."

"Huh? That's a thing that exists? I'd rather not use it."

"I can handle a few bugs, but once there gets to be too many of them..."

Kate-san and Iris-san both frowned as they imagined a swarm of insects.

Yeah, I'd prefer to avoid using it if at all possible. Though I've made it, I keep it tightly sealed and store it in the warehouse. Because if I ever made the awful mistake of spilling it inside the house, it would be a total disaster.

It merited more careful handling than some poisons.

"I'm curious what that dangerous substance is doing here, and obviously the ones who used it were—"

"Them, I'm sad to say," Maris-san finished for me. "You lot! Come here this instant!"

"And leave your weapons," Iris-san added. "If you make any strange moves, you'll end up like this thing."

Iris-san punctuated this threat by kicking the snowglide centipede's severed head menacingly, but the men never even hesitated.

They instantly threw down their swords. Two went to help their fallen comrades, while the third raised his hands and trudged through the snow toward us.

"I'm Captain Madison of the 6th South Strag Guard Platoon. I am requesting your support. Please, save my men!"

"That is going to depend on you," I told him. "Because a bunch of Baronet Kahku's troops just so happened to come to the mountains at the same time as us, were coincidentally attacked by a snowglide centipede, and then by pure happenstance fled toward us—and that's not a very likely scenario, now is it?"

"If you try to hide things, it's only going to take more time," Iris-san warned him. "If you value your men, I would suggest you talk

quickly.”

We had snow boots, while they were buried up to their waists in the snow. I figured we would win in a fight, but these guys were professionals, so I kept my guard up as I questioned him. His response wasn’t what I expected.

“Baronet Kahku ordered us to sic a snowglide centipede on the alchemist. His alchemist gave us potions that would attract insects.”

Iris-san cocked an eyebrow at this man who was openly divulging information that, normally, he ought to have kept secret. “You’ve admitted to that awfully easily...?”

“If you were able to defeat that thing so easily, we’d only die if we fought you. No, even without us fighting, I’d lose a good number of my men. I have a responsibility to do my best for them as their captain.”

As he said this, Madison was looking at the men who were being rescued.

I didn’t know how badly injured they were, but many couldn’t walk properly, so if we abandoned them here, only a handful might make it back alive.

“Smart move,” I said. “But how were you planning to make us fight the snowglide centipede? Once you had led it to us, that is.”

“We were given another potion we were supposed to throw at you.”

Madison pulled out a small vial. Maris-san took it from him, opened the lid a little to take a whiff, and then immediately scowled.

“This potion is meant to excite centipedes. We’d have been in danger if you’d splashed it on us.”

I never heard the lord had an alchemist on staff... Could it be that guy? The one who used to run a shady business in South Strag. His shop went bust, so maybe he went to the lord’s place after that...?

“But you never showed any sign of throwing it at us. Why is that?” I asked.

I don’t think that we would have lost even if they had, but it would definitely have made the battle a whole lot more dangerous for us.

Madison gave a wan smile in response.

"Do you think I wanted to kill a girl young enough to be my daughter? If the lord didn't have one of his personal soldiers watching us do the job, we'd have bailed a long time ago..."

"Um, but you *are* the lord's personal troops? Aren't you?" Lorea-chan asked.

It was an obvious thing to question, but the man frowned as if he wasn't happy to have to answer it.

"We are, in the sense that we're on his payroll, but the guy who he had watching us was much closer to the lord—someone that he kept around to handle his dirty work. Our job is to keep the peace in town. We patrol, we catch thieves, and we step in to stop fights. We almost never receive direct orders from the lord... Or we didn't use to."

Madison let out a sigh once he'd explained this, and gave us a look that begged for sympathy.

"Our families are in town," he continued. "If we'd refused...you can imagine what would have happened, right?"

Despite looking upset, Lorea-chan was the first to nod. "That doesn't make it okay...but I can understand. It was an order from a nobleman, and your lord, after all."

"Not all nobles are like that..." Iris-san had a conflicted look on her face.

I had friends among the nobility, so I understood that there were many good nobles too—actually, most of them were good. But, sadly, it was the crooked ones that had the most impact on the common people. Even if there weren't that many of them in absolute numbers, they tended to leave a stronger impression. Thus, the common perception of the nobility matched Lorea-chan's.

"By the way, what happened to the person who was watching you?" I asked, wondering if it was all right for him to talk so much.

Madison smiled faintly. "Oh, when we picked a fight with the snowglide centipede, he accidentally died."

"Oh-hoh, accidentally." Iris-san cocked an eyebrow.

"Yeah, accidentally." Madison nodded without any change in expression.

Was that accident coincidental, or man-made? I guess there's no

need to press them on that...

If he answered "We offed him and made it look like an accident!" or "We figured we could kill him, so we did," I wouldn't know how to react anyway.

And given the circumstances, even if they didn't take an active part in it, it seems pretty likely they wouldn't have done anything to save the watcher once he got into trouble.

"Hey, I know this is a selfish request, but could we ask you to help us?" Madison asked.

"To help you with rescuing the injured and carrying them down the mountain, right? Hmm..."

Madison had told me everything, but I crossed my arms and groaned as I thought.

Having put their families' safety over that of strangers isn't really anything to fault them for.

Even if what they did was criminal—and given that they were acting under the lord's orders, I'm not sure it can be called a crime—I can understand their desire to protect their families, and it's understandable that they put them first.

Not that it makes being targeted any more tolerable. But hey, none of us were hurt, and there are other things to consider. Iris-san and Kate-san...yeah, they look troubled by all of this, go figure.

Even Maris-san, who was asserting she'd help them until just a moment ago, has gone all silent now.

In the midst of it all, Lorea-chan's eyes wandered indecisively, and she fidgeted nervously with both hands, trying to gauge my reaction before she hesitantly spoke.

"Um, can't we do anything for them?" she asked.

"Hmm, you sure are kind, Lorea-chan. They tried to kill you," I reminded her.

"But Madison-san was just following orders, and I didn't really feel in danger..."

I guess she feels sympathetic to them, since she's also a commoner who can't defy the nobility?

Well, just a few short years ago, I was basically as close to the bottom of society as you can get too.

If they had attacked us, I would have shown no mercy, but now that they were raising their hands in surrender, there could be some room for leniency. But there was an issue that needed to be addressed first.

It was Iris-san who pointed that out for me. "But listen, Lorea-chan. Even if they failed, it's still a heavy crime to try and kill an alchemist, okay? In most cases, the punishment is death."

"I-It is? I mean, of course, I realize it's a serious crime and all, but..."

How serious of a crime was what they had done, though, really? Setting aside the fact that he had deliberately provoked the snowglide centipede, looking at it objectively, all Madison and his group had done was get chased by a centipede, and then try to convince it to go after someone else instead.

That's pretty bad, but would almost never be enough to earn them a death sentence on its own.

That could vary a little depending on which noble ruled the area where it happened, though.

But an alchemist being involved changed things. Even if it was a pure accident, there was a good chance they would be sentenced to death if they killed me. And if it was premeditated, then even if the attempt failed, they would almost certainly be executed.

But this had less to do with the privileges granted to alchemists and more to do with the country's situation. The nation had paid vast sums of money to train up alchemists, so in some ways we were an asset of the state. If someone was deliberately trying to harm us, that would inevitably make the punishment for their crime heavier.

"If I may point one thing out, even though she's not much of one, Iris is still a noble. That's going to affect this in no small way."

"Yeah, that's right, even though I'm— Hold on, Kate, isn't it a little mean for you to say I'm 'not much of one'?" Iris-san grumbled.

But Kate-san simply shrugged and let out a sigh before she continued. "Well then, Iris, can you throw your chest out and proudly say 'I'm a nobleman's daughter'? If you ever get to that point, I'll be happy about it, you know?"

"Indeed," Iris-san carried on as if Kate-san hadn't said anything. "Because I'm a noble, if they are to be punished, they're sure to be sentenced to death. And their families may be subject to the same."

I guess she doesn't plan on improving.

Regardless, despite her calm tone, she was talking about some nasty stuff.

It was a heavy crime for commoners to attack a noble, but I guess Madison must not have known about Iris-san, because he blanched, with his pallor, which was already not great because of the cold weather, growing even worse until he looked ashen. "Normally, anything a soldier does—if they're acting under orders, that is—would be the responsibility of the one who ordered it, but... Do you think Baronet Kahku will take responsibility for this?"

Madison answered Iris-san's question with silence. He understood there was no way his lord would take responsibility. Nobody admirable enough to do such a thing would have resorted to measures that bordered on assassination.

"Damn it! So we were going to be sacrificial pawns either way!!!" Madison punched the ground in frustration, but the soft snow didn't stop his fist, it just went flying through the air. He found this unsatisfying and vexatiously kicked the ground too.

"It's possible he meant to have you finish all of us off to eliminate witnesses. Did he say anything to that effect?" I asked.

"If he had, we'd have refused—well, no, we couldn't have refused, but we'd have considered fleeing instead. At the very least, I wasn't told anything like that. I couldn't tell you what he might have said to his dead henchmen, though."

"Maybe they were going to spring it on you in the heat of the moment, in order to make you go through with it," suggested Kate-san. "Like, telling you that you and your family would be executed if you didn't kill us all."

"*Ngh*..."

Though Madison had said he would have run away before killing us, this brought a pained look to his face. I guess he couldn't say that he wouldn't have done it if his family's lives were on the line.

Seeing his reaction, Lorea-chan cocked her head to the side,

slightly confused. “But you clearly aren’t up to the task, right? Unless we were all already on the verge of death, making you fight against us would be pointless. I mean, you’d just get beaten, right?”

“Umm, little girl, we do have *some* ability to fight...”

When he heard a girl who was not yet an adult give him the unvarnished truth like that, Madison’s pained expression changed to one that was slightly pathetic, but it didn’t change Lorea-chan’s assessment.

“But you can’t even move properly, right? I think it would be impossible to dodge Kate-san’s arrows in your state. And even if all we did was run away, I think even I could outrun you.”

Though Lorea-chan was phrasing it as “even I,” growing up in the countryside had given her a fairly healthy pair of legs. It didn’t matter how much these guys had trained, if they were up to their waists in snow, they couldn’t catch her when she was wearing snow boots, to say nothing of Kate-san, who was used to combat. If she could keep her distance from them, then ten or twenty guys would just be targets for her.

When I explained as much, Madison gave an exhausted shrug. “Yeah, go figure... I’m not gonna say I wish he’d come up with a proper plan to kill you, but this sure was sloppy. No one told us you’d be this strong...”

Madison let out a deep sigh before slowly raising his face. It now bore a serious look, filled with determination. “Hey, do you think they’d settle for only executing me? My men were just following orders.”

“I couldn’t say... After all, I’m not the one who’ll be making that decision.”

I respected his willingness to give his own life to protect his men, but if this matter became public, I was just going to report the facts exactly as they were. Their punishment was a matter for the authorities in the capital.

But they probably won’t decide to show leniency due to the extenuating circumstances.

I had a feeling that they would decide investigating was too much work, and to simply execute the perpetrators. Commoners from far-

flung domains were all the same to bureaucrats in the capital. They wouldn't take the situation of each individual into consideration, they'd simply go through the motions and move on to the next one.

"That said, I'd take no particular joy in having your heads cut off," I continued. "There's no benefit in it for me. Now if I could have Baronet Kahku's head, that would be worth something."

"H-Hey now...young miss, you're saying some scary things there, you know?" Madison recoiled a little.

"Hee hee," I chucked. "I mean, he tried to kill me, you know? I think it's a natural thing for me to want."

I faced him head-on, but he tried to get rid of me using illegal methods. That makes him practically a bandit. Not only that, he basically took people hostage, then used them to force people who couldn't defy him to sic a centipede on me. It ended in failure, sure, but he also caused a ruckus in my shop, and then made all sorts of complaints. I'd say I might be justified in offing him at this point, you know?

"Calm down, Shopkeeper-san. I know he's trash, but he's also nobility. If you lay a hand on him, it'll mean trouble." Kate-san put a hand on my shoulder before the dark urges inside of me gushed out without me intending it.

"Th-That's right, Sarasa-san. When it comes to nobles—"

"If you're going to do it, you need to set it up properly, so nothing goes wrong. Direct methods aren't the only option," Kate-san finished.

"Kate-san?!" Lorea-chan's eyes widened.

But Iris-san only nodded. "He gave us a hard time with that loan, after all. And I also have a considerable debt of gratitude to Shopkeeper-dono, so I'll do anything I can to cooperate. And it would be convenient for my family if the baronet's power were to decrease."

"Even you, Iris-san... Are you sure it's okay for you to be doing that?"

"Lorea, I'd like you to remember that I'm also technically a noble."

"Ohh... That's right, you are. And it just came up a little earlier

too.” Lorea-chan nodded again, as if she had trouble connecting Iris-san with the idea of her being a noble.

Seeing her reaction brought a slightly pathetic look to Iris-san’s face. “Though my family hasn’t gotten involved,” she continued, “there are always power struggles between members of the nobility, you know? If someone has a failing, you relentlessly attack them for it, and even if they don’t, you look for any opening. That’s just how it is.”

“Wowww, noble society sure sucks, huh?” Lorea-chan remarked. “I’m so glad I have nothing to do with them.”

“But I’m a noble...” Iris-san awkwardly pointed out, once again.

“Oh... I’m so glad I don’t have anything to do with any weird nobles,” Lorea-chan slightly corrected herself.

Well, everyone is different, and that goes for nobles too. There are commoners I wouldn’t want to associate with, and there are good people among the nobility too. I guess the big difference between commoners and nobles is the amount of influence they have over those around them?

Seeing that Madison and his men had gotten jerked around by that, I couldn’t help but feel a little sympathetic.

“Umm, what did you *do*, Sarasa-san? I know Baronet Kahku isn’t the greatest, but would he normally go this far to get rid of one alchemist?” Maris-san, who had been staying quiet up until now, hesitantly asked, but I simply shook my head.

“Uhhh, he came to make complaints about my shop, so I sent him packing. Maybe that upset him?”

“Well now. He’s not supposed to be starting trouble in an alchemist’s shop,” Maris-san said.

He couldn’t lay a hand on an alchemist so long as they were operating within the laws set out by the kingdom. Maris-san frowned at the fact that Baronet Kahku had gone against that piece of common sense which every noble knew.

But she must have also found it suspicious, because she cocked her head to the side in confusion. “But is that all...? I think the risks of escalating to physical measures like this is much too high to do over something like that. Is Baronet Kahku just that lacking in

common sense?”

“There was also what happened with Iris, and all sorts of other stuff that overlapped, so maybe that’s part of why?” suggested Kate-san.

“Really? I’ve only done normal stuff, though,” I protested.

“You made herb fields he can’t tax,” Kate-san went on.

“That’s legal.”

“You led a merchant he was backing to ruin.”

“Also legal.”

“You got a high interest debt erased through mediation.”

“Once again, legal.”

It was all legal. There wasn’t any problem with any of it.

“Sarasa-san... That’s an awful lot...” Yet for some reason, Maris-san was looking at me with exasperation.

So I added another fact for her benefit: “Incidentally, the merchant I ruined was Yoku Bahru.”

“That’s legal! Sarasa-san was in the right!!!” Maris-san screeched.

She sure changed her mind quickly. Well, it did end up saving her, after all.

“Though, in a way, these men are victims of you, aren’t they?” Maris-san suggested.

“Uh, no? Baronet Kahku is the bad guy, and I haven’t done anything wrong, okay?”

It was true enough that if I hadn’t sent Baronet Kahku packing (?), Madison and his unit might not have been given such unreasonable orders, but I’m not sure how she expected me to react to being told that, you know?

“Yes, of course,” Maris-san acknowledged. “However, I would have a little trouble sleeping at night were we to abandon people I have a passing familiarity with. Can you not find some way to help them?”

“Hmm, I don’t have a personal grudge against them, so I’m not actually opposed to it, but...I’m sure you understand the situation is more complicated than that, in all sorts of ways, don’t you, Maris-san?”

Even if we settled the issues of treating the wounded, moving

those who couldn't walk, and feeding everyone, they were in an incredibly precarious legal situation. I didn't have the power to confront it head-on, nor did I have any reason to stick my neck out for them. That said...

"Well, I guess we can start with healing them. If they bled out while we were talking, that would be painful to see, and it looks like they've finished their part of the work."

When I looked behind Madison, he turned around to look too. He let out a relieved sigh when he saw his men gathered there.

"One, two, three... Is everyone accounted for?"

One of the men approached, and saluted Madison. "Captain, we've finished collecting everyone."

"Okay. What's the situation?"

"Fortunately, no one is dead," he said with a slight grin, before dismissively adding, "Oh, aside from that one shithead."

I had to assume the "shithead" was the lord's henchmen who'd met with "an accident."

The resentment in the man's voice told me a lot about what kind of personality the "shithead" must have had.

"I don't care about that piece of shit. Leave him to rot."

"Yeah, we took what we needed off of him, and then did just that," the man said with a smile and a thumbs-up.

"All right, that's good, then," Madison responded with a smirk.

Surprised, Iris-san murmured, "Um, is it really good, though?"

I may have shared her feelings a little, but I wasn't such a charitable person that I was going to propose "How about we at least bring back his remains?"

The guy did *try to kill us, you know?*

I could only extend my charitable spirit out to a radius of a few meters. That was as far as my heart reached.

"So, Captain... How's it looking?"

I guess he understands they aren't really in a position to expect help.

The man retracted his thumb, and looked at us trying to gauge his reaction.

"It seems she's willing to treat us. From there on, we'll be at

these girls' mercy...but it's better than trying to fight here."

"Obviously. I'll take a chance of surviving over guaranteed death. I prefer to only go at it with girls when I'm in bed. Y'know, giving them the old one-two thrust."

The man smirked as he thrust out his fist and added that unnecessary comment.

But Madison immediately punched him in response. "Carter! Watch your tongue!!! That's a nobleman's daughter."

"Bwughhhh!!!"

Carter doubled over and collapsed. Madison ignored the man and bowed his head in apology. "I'm sorry, my men's training isn't as good as it should be."

"Um, no, that's fine... Is he okay?" Iris-san asked, looking a little troubled.

"I'm fine! And sorry!" Recognizing he wasn't in a position to complain, Carter immediately got to his feet and bowed his head in apology. He then turned a pleading look in our direction. "U-Um, can we ask you for your help? Some of the guys are in pretty bad shape."

"Got it. But keep the crude remarks under control, will you?"

I mean, we have Lorea-chan with us—wait, she's totally unfazed?! Oh, right. Now that I think of it, she's a bit more used to that kind of innuendo than I am. They do marry early out here in the countryside, after all.

Still, it seemed that my complaint was more than effective enough to get the message to Carter, and he immediately said, "I'll watch my tongue!"

"Yes, please do. It looks like...you have nine wounded?"

Out of the twelve-man squad, only three, Madison included, were unharmed.

Five men were able to stand on their own, while the remaining four were lying down on top of the snow.

They were wearing fur to protect them from the cold, but the temperature out here in the mountains could change rapidly. It seemed like it would be wise to hurry.

"Okay, I'll examine them now... But don't make any funny moves,

okay? I may look dainty enough, but just know I can kick a hellflame grizzly to death."

Their futures were still uncertain, so if they caused trouble while I was treating them, assuming "maybe we can win now that she's unarmed," it would've been a bit of a problem—for them, because I wouldn't be able to hold back.

I didn't want to kill them, so I gave them a warning, but hearing it left awkward looks on their faces.

"Nobody's going to think she's 'dainty' after seeing that fight..."

"Hold on, she can kick a hellflame grizzly to death? That's wild."

"Seriously? She's practically a monster, then, isn't she?"

Hey, injured people, I can hear you whispering, you know? Don't blame me if my hand slips while I'm treating you, okay?

"I guess it's true what they say about beautiful flowers and thorns."

Well, I'm a kind person, so I'll forgive them with an open heart.

Once the medical examination was finished, I had two patients with relatively light wounds, just some bruises and broken fingers. Three patients had broken arms or legs, and the last patient, who was the most badly injured, had broken both of his femurs and an arm, plus a number of ribs. Fortunately, nobody was dead, though.

Hmm, Madison's guys may actually be surprisingly well trained?

If they had been a group of gatherers going up against a snowglide centipede, there was more than a small chance someone would have died.

They had greater numbers than an average party of gatherers, and their priority had been fleeing, so that changed the conditions a little, but they had still put in quite a good showing for a unit whose usual duties were patrolling in town.

"Is Lloyd going to make it? He's unconscious, and in really bad shape..."

"Please! Save him! The vice captain got hurt while he was covering me...!"

It turned out that the most badly injured patient's name was Lloyd, and he was also their vice captain.

It was the broken legs that looked the nastiest, but it wasn't a

compound fracture, and his ribs hadn't punctured any organs either, so the injuries didn't present any immediate threat to his life.

He'd gotten hurt badly while defending one of his subordinates, and the man he'd protected was currently begging me to save him. His teary face looked surprisingly young, maybe around the same age as me?

Perhaps because he felt guilty about his mistake getting someone else injured, the guy slid over next to me despite his broken leg, causing Madison to warn him, "Calm down, Patrick!"

"He's going to be okay," I reassured him. "His life's not in danger."

"He is?! Oh, what a relief..."

"That's assuming he's able to rest, of course. I'm going to start by treating those with light injuries."

I could have started with the heavily injured, but considering the location we were in, I needed to increase the number of people who could move, otherwise we'd be in trouble if the weather took a turn for the worse.

"That said, I can only treat two of you with my own healing magic."

"Even a mage like you can't treat broken arms and legs, Sarasa-san?"

"It's not impossible... I guess I haven't explained this to you before, Lorea-chan? Healing magic can treat injuries, but it also saps the patient's stamina."

The same thing went for healing someone with a potion, but potions generally consumed less stamina than magic, and the greater the potion's quality, the bigger the gap between the two was.

There was also a difference in the quality of the caster, with mages who specialized in healing magic putting less stress on the patient.

"If I push myself, even I can heal an arm or a leg, but..."

If I did that, the patient would exhaust all of their stamina and be left in a coma for days.

That wouldn't have been a problem if we were somewhere safe, but we were on a mountain in the winter. In the worst case, they

might freeze to death.

"Hmm, I see. And what about you, Maris?" asked Iris-san.

"I'm not even able to use healing magic to begin with!" Maris-san answered firmly.

Kate-san narrowed her eyes at her. "Which means Shopkeeper-san has to heal them herself... Despite you saying you wanted to save them."

"I know I am repeating myself, but she's a walking exception! I wouldn't want you thinking that all alchemists can use every kind of magic!"

"I'm a bit irked at being called an exception, but...it's true, magic's sort of like an extra bonus for alchemists."

Because it took up time they could be using to study alchemy, there weren't many people who could use a lot of different magics.

"I should add, I didn't study this as my specialty, so if people's lives aren't at risk, I'd rather avoid forcing myself to heal them with magic. It can leave aftereffects."

Healing someone with magic was akin to boosting their natural healing abilities. It wasn't anything to worry about for light injuries, but for heavy injuries, it was generally safest to limit it to five to ten times their natural speed of recovery.

So I healed the two people with light injuries first, then got to work on the ones who had broken limbs.

First up was young Patrick, who was close to me because he'd scooted over.

"Somebody go fetch wood to make a splint," I said. "You two, hold him down."

"R-Right."

"G-Got it."

Despite their confusion, the two lightly injured guys who I had treated first did as instructed. I then grabbed Patrick's broken leg, and began correcting the position of his bones.

"And twist!"

"Huh?! Gyaghhhh!!!"

The soldiers hurriedly held Patrick down as he let out a scream and started to thrash around.

"You're a boy. Suck it up," I told him.

"B-But i-it hurts!" he whimpered.

Yeah, of course it does. It's broken.

"But if you thrash around, it's going to hurt worse, right?"

Patrick's eyes were filling with a different kind of tears from before, but I couldn't afford to waste time being concerned about that.

There's more patients waiting, so I'm gonna get this done real quick, okay?

"Your treatment sure is merciless, huh," remarked Kate-san.

"There's a difference between careful treatment and slow treatment," I replied. "If I take time fixing his bones, it'll only drag out the pain over a longer time period."

Once the bones were set in place, I applied a painkiller and anti-inflammatory medicine to the injury. Then I used the wood that the soldiers had gathered to make a splint, which I secured with bandages, then applied a sticky translucent liquid over top of that.

"What's that, Sarasa-san?" asked Lorea-chan.

"This liquid is meant to harden the bandages. When you pour water over top of it, it'll make them stiff."

As I explained this, I used my magic to squirt it with water. There was a fizzing sound and some white bubbles as the bandages hardened. It would have worked with mundane water too, but water infused with magical energy would make it firm up better, and it would happen faster. Plus, it meant not having to deplete our supply of drinking water.

Now just finish up with some light healing magic, and...

"Okay, you're done. Now try to get some rest."

"Th-Thank you."

"Sure, you did pretty well."

As I flashed him a smile, Patrick's pale face regained its pallor, and even turned slightly red.

Maybe he was feeling relieved that the treatment was finished?

"Uh, no, Shopkeeper-dono. I think it's something else," Iris-san said.

"Huh? What would that be?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said. "I'd just be stirring up a hornet's nest."

"Hm...? Well, whatever. Okay, next person."

Though I had to tilt my head a little at Iris-san's odd comment, I moved on to treating the next patient.

Maybe because the other soldiers were older than Patrick, or because they had time to brace themselves for what was coming, they didn't thrash around the way that he had, and I was able to finish treating them in a short period of time.

That only left Lloyd, the most heavily wounded among them. He was still unconscious, and his breathing was labored. If we had to move him, his ribs were going to be a problem.

Even if I used that liquid, it could only do so much to keep his torso from moving, and it could be life-threatening if the broken bones damaged his organs. Ideally, I'd want to let him rest, but there was no way we could keep him out here until he was fully recovered.

"I should fix his ribs, even if I have to push my healing magic a little too hard. And as a trade-off, I won't use magic on his arms or legs."

The effect on his stamina worried me, but once his ribs were healed, he'd be able to breathe more easily.

I carefully cast healing magic on just his ribs, then treated his arms and legs without magic, and restricted their movement. Lloyd's breathing sounded less painful after that.

"I think he'll regain consciousness in a little while, but please take care not to let his body get too cold," I said.

"Right, got it," Madison replied before turning to one of his men. "Hey, bring all of the spare winter clothes."

I left them to it and went to wash my hands. Afterward, I stretched and let out a sigh. "Whew..."

"You really worked hard there, Sarasa-san," said Lorea-chan.

"Are you all right, Shopkeeper-dono?" Iris-san asked. "How is your magical power holding up?"

"Oh, my magical power is fine. There were a lot of people, but I wasn't using very advanced magic."

Some light healing magic and magic to produce water for nine

people. Compared to my usual transmutation work, this was nothing, at least as far as magical power went.

"But you still used a lot of stamina, right?" Kate-san asked. "It looked like a lot of work setting all of those bones. And it was exhausting mentally too, wasn't it?"

"That's true," I admitted. "I'm not an expert at this, after all."

Although alchemists were capable of healing, our primary job was alchemy—in other words, making medicine.

Though we received practical lessons on it, we had far less experience than a trained doctor, and had to be careful doing unfamiliar things.

To be frank, rather than apply medicine, wrap them in bandages, and do all that other time-consuming stuff, it'd have been easier to just dump a potion bottle on them—if I didn't have to consider the cost.

What I had treated them with just now was ordinary medicine, not potions, but the fluid I'd used to harden the bandages was a potion, and using enough to treat all of them added up to a considerable cost.

But they're commoners, so they probably can't afford to pay...

Even so, I couldn't afford to do it for free. I sighed as I wondered what to do.

"Um, since I was the one who said I wanted to help them, would you like me to cover it?" Maris-san, who knew the price of the potions, offered when she saw my furrowed brow, but...

"You don't have any money to begin with, Maris-san. You're indebted to us, right?"

"Urgh! Th-That's right! And that debt's been going up, not down!"

It's been going up?! I couldn't help but mentally retort. *Yeah, no wonder Leonora-san put her under management.*

As I pressed a hand to my forehead and sighed, Madison came over, having finished giving instructions to his men, and bowed his head deeply.

"You saved us. It looks like I'll be able to get all of them home now. So, about the treatment fee..."

It was pretty tough to talk about treatment fees at a time like

this. If they had come to the shop, and said, “Please, treat us,” then I would be able to just charge them the standard rate.

If we were in the same party, it would be normal not to charge for treatment at all, and even if I had to use potions, I’d only charge the normal rate, or a discounted one for them, and the group would split the cost.

But what about this situation, where some people I just happened to encounter asked to be treated?

Even if, on an emotional level, I wanted to help them, using too much magical power or medicine could leave us unable to treat ourselves. I had calculated how much medicine to bring with me based on the amount of luggage we were going to be carrying and how much risk I expected, so the price was totally different here than it was in town.

That meant that it was possible I would refuse them treatment, and if I accepted, that I would demand higher rates of compensation —but the thing was, the people asking usually didn’t have any money, which was how they had ended up in their predicament in the first place. Though, that’s not what happened this time.

“Let me think... If I ask you to pay the real price, that’s going to be hard on all of you, isn’t it?”

“Sorry. I have some savings at home, but not enough...” Madison began.

Even as a captain of the guard, he only got paid a little more than the average person, so no matter how frugal he was, he probably couldn’t afford to pay a treatment fee that was higher than normal.

Besides, it was questionable if they could even return to South Strag in their current situation. There was no point in a bill that went unpaid, and shaking them down for what little they had wasn’t going to do me any good.

“For now, let’s have you help with butchering the snowglide centipede and with transporting it back.”

It was going to be a lot of trouble carrying back something so big, and the materials weren’t that valuable, but they were worth at least some money.

If Madison and his guys lent a hand, that would increase our

profit a little.

It's pretty dicey whether that will be enough to pay for their treatment, though.

"If that's all, we'll gladly help. As long as you don't demand we abandon the injured to carry back more materials."

"Madison, are you disrespecting Shopkeeper-dono?" Iris-san asked him sharply, seeing how my brow furrowed at his hurtful words.

Madison shook his head and then bowed. "No, I'm sorry. That was rude of me. But it's the kind of thing that shithead might have demanded."

Did he mean the man who'd died here? Or the one who'd sent them? I didn't know which it was, but it gave some idea how Madison and his men had been treated so far.

Iris-san's expression softened a little. "Hmm. Well, if that's why you said it... But the problem is what we'll do after this."

We all fell silent, and I thought about it, but two individuals must have guessed it was going to be a difficult subject, and drifted away.

"I've never been any good at discussing politics. I'll go oversee the dismantling of the centipede," Maris-san said.

"I-I'll go with her! It could be educational!" Lorea-chan said.

Unlike with Maris-san, Lorea-chan might actually learn something.

It was better than having her listen to our sordid discussion, and it would speed along the butchering process, so I watched them go before speaking again.

"There were less serious injuries than I expected, so I doubt we'll have trouble moving."

"But we have people who can't walk on their own," Iris-san noted. "Are we going to carry them on our backs?"

"We'll build a sled for them," I replied. "We have four sets of skis that we brought with us, after all."

With both me and Maris-san around, it would be a simple matter for us to put together a makeshift sled.

And if I periodically cast healing magic on them, everyone but Lloyd should be walking again in the next few days.

"The problem's how we deal with Madison and his men... What

do you think will happen if we just send them back?" asked Iris-san.

"At best, they'll be imprisoned, and at worst, silenced. There's no benefit in keeping them alive, after all."

"You're a merciless little lady. But I can't say you're wrong..." Madison's shoulders slumped, possibly because he knew Baronet Kahku might well do it.

"If we could use this as an opportunity to take down the baronet, then that would solve the issue..." Iris-san murmured.

"They attacked you and Shopkeeper-san, so that gives us a justification, but it would still be difficult," Kate-san remarked. "Madison and his men would be the ones testifying, and we have less influence than the baronet. How about Ophelia-sama?"

"I think it would be difficult, getting her to support us in that way," I replied.

I don't think Master would act unless I was actually killed.

"In that case, I guess it would be a poor move to have Madison and his men stand in the line of fire," Iris-san concluded.

"Yeah," I agreed. "If we had them testify, they'd probably just be executed as the perpetrators."

"Whoa!" Madison hurriedly interjected. "We owe you a debt of gratitude, and we'll testify whatever you want us to, but we're not gonna accept you just cutting us loose to save yourselves, okay?!"

I nodded in agreement before continuing. "Yeah, there wouldn't be any point in that, so even if we did have you testify, it would only be after setting up a situation where it would mean something. That being the case, I think we should hide that this ever happened, but... What do we do with Madison and his men?"

"It all comes back around to that, huh?" Iris-san mused. "If we're going to save them, I think the only option would be to go with the story that they all died in the mountains, while they actually escape somewhere else... Kate, what do you think?"

Thanks to the common bond they shared as childhood friends, that was enough for Kate-san to pick up on what Iris-san wanted to say. Her eyes widened, and she paused to think about it. "Our place...? I'd normally have to tell you it's impossible, but right now... I think we might be able to make it work."

“I know, right? Madison, we have a proposal for you,” Iris-san said with a smile.

With a dubious look on his face, Madison lent her an ear.

Iris-san’s idea was to have them move to the House of Lotze’s domain.

Many commoners spent their entire lives without ever stepping foot outside the town or village they were born in, and the decision to relocate could be a matter of life or death.

But if Madison and his men refused, this really was a matter of life or death for them, and death seemed more or less certain, so they had to accept, and we started working toward that.

That being the case, we would need Adelbert-sama’s permission. Not even Iris-san, his heir, could make a decision on an important matter that might lay the seeds for conflict with another noble without first consulting the master of the house.

Kate-san went ahead to get permission, and Maris-san went with her. It would have been too dangerous for Kate-san to go alone. But sending Iris-san with her would have lowered our combat potential too much. We were more or less forced into choosing Maris-san, but things apparently went off without a hitch.

We had about another half a day before we reached Yok Village when Kate-san returned on her own.

“Welcome back, Kate,” Iris-san greeted her. “Did you get permission? And what happened to Maris?”

“We got the okay. And Maris went back to South Strag,” Kate-san answered. “She says she’s going to report to Leonora-san and make some moves. We have to think about their families and whatnot, right?”

“Oh, right, there was that to handle too,” Iris-san replied. “I’d be a little uneasy leaving it to Maris, but I think we can rest easy if Leonora-dono is involved.”

Since Madison and his men couldn’t return to South Strag, someone would have to arrange for their families’ relocation—basically, help them flee into the night.

Maris-san had volunteered for that, but while her skills as an

alchemist weren't bad, she had an exceptionally low level of trust from us. I agonized over whether we could leave it to her, but if nothing else, she knew the town better than any of us did.

I had let her handle it for lack of better options, but apparently she had planned to go to Leonora-san from the very beginning.

"Right then, Madison, get your men together," Iris-san said. "It's time to move."

"Got it. I'll have them prepare at once."

"Will the two of you be all right by yourselves, Shopkeeper-san?" asked Kate-san. "If not, I think it might be best if I stayed with you for now, and then joined up with Iris and the others later..."

We were going to be splitting the party here. Iris-san and the others would go to the Lotze domain, while Lorea-chan and I, who still had a job to do for His Highness, were going to head back to Yok Village.

Kate-san seemed worried for us, but I smiled and thumped my chest. "We'll be fine! There's less materials to deal with now anyway."

Along the way here, I had used what spare time I could find to process things, and I had already discarded the unneeded bits.

I was having Madison and his guys take the materials that could be stored normally to the House of Lotze, while Lorea-chan and I would just be carrying back the materials that were difficult to process without a workshop.

I couldn't say it was a small amount of stuff, but since it was only going to take half a day, we could lug it back to the village ourselves.

Once I explained it was no problem, the two of them looked at one another.

"Um, we were more concerned about Baronet Kahku..." Iris-san explained.

"Oh, that'll be fine too. I can put up a bit of a fight myself. If it's just more thugs, like at the shop, I won't have any problem with them. I mean, talented thugs are hard to find."

Maybe it would be different in the capital, but South Strag was a rural town.

I couldn’t see a talented person wandering into town and Baronet Kahku just coincidentally being able to hire them.

That wouldn’t happen...right...?

“No, I shouldn’t let my guard down. I’ll have to prepare artifacts that can reliably take down even a strong person...”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Iris-san shouted before I could start thinking about what offensive artifacts might be good. “This country’s not so violent that there are people who can beat you just wandering around, okay? We’re not thinking that you might lose. No, if anything, we’re more worried what will happen if you snap. At Baronet Kahku, I mean.”

“Snap? A mild person like me? I’m quite bighearted, I think?”

Bighearted enough not to get mad over little things, okay?

However, my self-assessment didn’t meet with much in the way of agreement.

“Hey, y’hear that?” one soldier whispered. “She says she’s mild.”

“The girl knocked the head off a monster the moment it showed up.”

“Yeah, we didn’t even have time to get our weapons out.”

“Maybe I learned the wrong definition for the word ‘mild’?”

Murgh. I was trying to be considerate of you injured people.

Their injuries had gotten better with each day, and now everyone but the badly injured Lloyd was able to walk on their own two feet. But only about half of them were back in fighting shape.

I had taken great pains to end the fight quickly, worried they might be in danger if it turned into a chaotic melee.

Yet listen to their opinions of me. I wasn’t going to get angry, though.

Because I was so mild!

“I know how mild and gentle you are, Shopkeeper-dono,” said Iris-san.

Right?

I knew I could count on Iris-san. Thanks for your accurate assessment!

“But you can be merciless at times, right?”

“Yeah,” Kate-san agreed. “Like what if you got back, and the shop

had been trashed?”

“Might you not snap, fly off the handle, and kill Baronet Kahku?” Iris-san suggested.

My lovely shop, with the garden I had put so much effort into, the fence I had rebuilt, the walls and roof I had repaired, the stylish sign I’d put up, and the interior decorated just the way I liked it.

I imagined all of that having been destroyed when I got back to the village.

“.....It’d be fine. Probably.”

“That was an awfully long pause?!” Iris-san objected.

“C-Calm down, okay? Shopkeeper-san,” Kate-san added.

“I am calm. Gosh. Ha ha ha,” I replied.

“Um, no, Sarasa-san,” Lorea-chan interjected. “I don’t know why, but I felt an incredible chill.”

Oops. I guess maybe they picked up on the fact that I was imagining Baronet Kahku’s unmoving body next to my destroyed shop.

“I’m begging you, Shopkeeper-dono,” Iris-san implored. “You’re a commoner. There will be all sorts of trouble if you lay a hand on a noble.”

Hey, listen, no matter how cheap it was, that shop is my castle. Anyone foolish enough to lay a hand on it doesn’t deserve to live, right?

They’d practically be bandits, wouldn’t they? They should apologize for it with their deaths.

Reading my thoughts in my expression, Kate-san let out a sigh. “Maybe we *should* have you marry Iris, even if it’s just as a formality? Then you’ll technically be a noble.”

“Urkh... I-It’s fine. I’ll restrain myself.”

For a moment there, I almost thought, *“That might be safest.”*

If a commoner killed a noble, they’d definitely be executed regardless of if their actions were reasonable.

That wasn’t something that could be overturned with a handful of backers and connections.

But if it happened between nobles, then even with a difference in rank, it was a completely different situation. If things were set up as

a “duel,” then there would be no one held responsible even if one of the parties died, and if it was treated as a “dispute,” they could expect a reasonably fair trial.

But even so, I wasn’t sure about marrying just for that...

“Shopkeeper-san, if it comes to it, don’t leave any witnesses,” Kate-san told me. “If we can buy enough time, that will give us room to maneuver.”

“Yeah,” Iris-san agreed. “We can say I was the one who did him in. I’m a noble, and I owe you at least that much of a debt of gratitude.”

“No, I’m not gonna do it, okay!” I hurriedly shook my head, seeing how serious the two of them looked.

Now that you’ve said that to me, I definitely can’t touch him!

But maybe I should prepare some nonlethal offensive potions, just in case? The sort that’ll make him want to run back home—no, that will leave him unable *to run back home.*

As I flipped through the *Complete Alchemy Works* inside my head, giggling to myself, Madison and his men started whispering among themselves, clearly weirded out.

“Captain, I think we’re hearing things we shouldn’t...”

“Ignore it. Our lives are already in their hands.”

“More than that, she treated our wounds, and saved our lives. All we can do is assist them to the best of our ability, and try to do something about the lord, okay?”

“You’ve got a point there. As long as he’s in power, our families’ lives are at risk...”

“I have no family,” one older soldier said, clenching his fist. “If it comes to it, I’ll deal with that lord, even if it costs me my life...”

“Senpai...!”

Three of the younger soldiers held on to him with tears in their eyes.

It was a touching story and all, but that was clearly not a good move.

Iris-san hurriedly interrupted them. “Hold on! Hold on! Don’t go making any tragic decisions on your own. I said I’d help you, didn’t I? Madison, didn’t you tell them about the relocation?”

"With things still up in the air, I didn't want to give them false hope. Is it really going to be okay? There's fifty of us, once you include all of our families, you know? It can't be easy for you to take in so many people."

"It won't be an issue," Iris-san said. "I don't know how much you've heard about us, but the Lotze domain will take your families as well. I don't plan on making your lives easy, but I will make it so you can live them. Rest assured of that."

Madison and his men looked at one another uneasily. "But the Lotze domain is a farming village, right? I can't imagine you have many jobs for guards... Some of us are from farming families, but most of us are total amateurs at it."

"Besides, ordinary farming villages don't have farmland to just hand out, right?"

"Which means we'd have to develop the land first. Sounds like a lot of work."

"But if it saves our families, it's a small price to pay. And fortunately, we have confidence in our stamina. If you'll just give us the land to work, we can all give it our best and..."

"Don't jump to conclusions! If you become farmers, I'll give you farmland." Iris-san jumped in again to break up the *"It's better than dying, so let's do our best"* mood that was starting to form. "I won't claim that you'll be able to immediately turn a profit, but you aren't going to need to clear the land yourselves."

"This...all sounds too good to be true, though?"

Madison was the one who spoke, but all of the soldiers looked equally suspicious.

As one of them had just said earlier, ordinary farming villages didn't have spare farmland to just give out. Normally, farmland was passed down in a family along with the house, but children who couldn't inherit either married the heir to another house, left the village to find work, or took their chances clearing new land. If there was spare farmland, it would be distributed to those sorts of young people, not handed over to migrants. So it made sense for them to be dubious.

"It's true that we don't currently have spare farm fields," Iris-san

acknowledged. “But just this once, Shopkeeper-san will help us with that. Don’t worry.”

“Little miss alchemist? Well, yeah, I guess I could see her being able to do that. Given everything else she’s done...”

The soldiers all looked at me, nodding in satisfaction.

I was a little curious what they were thinking, but... Well, whatever.

Incidentally, though Iris-san said I would be helping, it was actually Kate-san who was scheduled to do the work. We had agreed to do on-site training so she could try out the land development magic that I was teaching her.

So, as long as Kate-san didn’t screw up, I’d have nothing to do.

But they had said they wanted to introduce me to their siblings, and I had to check whether she was doing it right, so I didn’t mind tagging along to the Lotze domain.

“I expect you’ll still have your share of troubles, but it’s better than you and your entire families being executed, isn’t it?” Iris-san said with a smile.

Feeling a sense of relief now that they understood the situation, the soldiers’ expressions brightened and they spoke more freely.

“Damn straight! Thanks, sis!”

Uh, yeah, that’s a little too chummy. They stopped treating her like a noble—or rather stopped bowing and scraping around her while we were working together in the mountains, but I dunno about addressing her as “sis.”

“‘S-Sis’... I won’t ask you to address me as ‘young mistress,’ but if you’re going to be subjects of my domain, at least cut that out.”

Iris-san was clearly not a fan of it and corrected the jovial soldier.

‘Young mistress,’ though, huh? There’s something I don’t hear often.

It caught Lorea-chan’s attention, and she asked Kate-san, who was also listening in, “Do they call Iris-san ‘young mistress’?”

“Yes, she’s Young Mistress Iris. She *is* the heir to the domain, after all.”

“Young Mistress Iris...” Lorea-chan and I echoed in unison.

It’s not wrong—even if it does feel that way.

But Iris-san in a dress... Hm? Actually, it might suit her? And...

I might want to see her and Kate-san in dresses together.

"Got it. Young Mistress Iris it is, then!"

"No, I said—"

"Well, it's fine, isn't it?" interjected Kate-san. "It'll all be the same once we get back home, right?"

"That's true, but..." Iris-san sighed. "Oh, fine. Call me whatever you like."

Iris-san quickly gave up on trying to correct them again.

If that was what her people back home called her, then there wasn't much point in getting just these guys not to.

"What do they call you, Kate-san?" one of the soldiers asked.

"They just address me normally," Kate-san answered plainly, but Iris-san smirked.

"They call her Kate-sama," she said.

"'Kate-sama'?!" Lorea-chan and I shouted in unison.

That's not normal! But Kate-san is *a retainer, so it's not weird for the people of the domain to call her that, though!*

It's still not normal, though.

Being addressed with -sama isn't normal for us commoners!

I wanted to assert that, but...

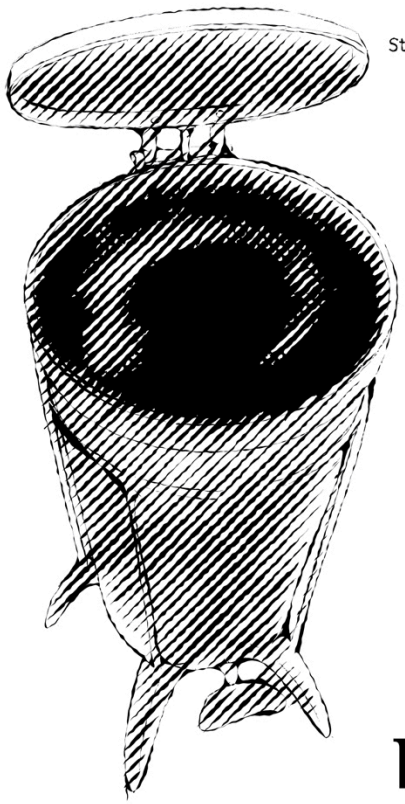
"It's *normal*, right?"

...when Kate-san turned to me, smiling, and said that, I could only answer, "Yep."

Because her eyes sure weren't smiling.

No. 014

Complete Alchemy Works: Appears in Volume 6
Difficulty: Very Hard
Standard Price: ~200,000 Rhea



〈Rubbish Annihilator〉

Rubbish Annihilator

Sometimes you fail at a transmutation, then have trouble disposing of the results. It happens, right? Well, this is the trash can for you. It might look like just an ordinary garbage pail at first glance, but it will annihilate everything you throw into it. You won't even need to take out the trash. Just erase it completely along with the memory of your failure. *Includes a safety feature that ejects living creatures

Episode 4: I Want to Be Rid of This Client

"Thank goodness, the shop is intact!"

After parting with Iris-san and her group, we returned to the village where I found my castle looking just the way I had left it. There was a break in the fence out front, but I could fix that easily on my own, and that was the only visible damage.

Frankly, I'd been ready for them to have smashed a window out of spite, so I was relieved.

Because window glass isn't cheap—though, I can fix it myself.

"Yeah, you said it," Lorea-chan agreed, but she was relieved for a different reason. "Now you won't have to do anything crazy."

"I already said I wouldn't," I insisted before unlocking the door and heading inside.

Even though we had been absent for some time, the shop had a cleaning seal, so there wasn't any dust anywhere.

Every house should have one. If the residents had the money and the magical power, I'd want to set them up with them.

"Wait, huh?"

The seal's magic was depleted more than I had expected. I'd left it almost completely full, but it was down to about half of its capacity. Even considering that I had been away and unable to top it up, it had still gone down way too much. I had to assume something had happened to make it expend magical power.

"Was it the security...?"

The seal in my shop had a security effect too. Just like it had activated when those punks had gotten violent inside the shop, it would also activate if someone tried to damage it from outside. I hadn't set it up myself, so I didn't know precisely how it worked, but perhaps that was the reason my windows hadn't been smashed.

"By the way, Sarasa-san. How much magical power was used?" Lorea-chan asked.

"Um, it's not easy to put into numbers..."

Take, for example, trying to heat up a pot of water. Using the same magical stove, you might expect it to take the same amount of magical power no matter who was doing it, but you'd be wrong.

If Lorea-chan and I both tried, I'd expend less magical power because I was more skilled at manipulating it, and even if I were to build an artifact that measured our power, the same thing would apply.

In light of that, while it was possible to measure someone's effective magical power, basically no research had gone into doing so.

It was a lot of effort to go to and wouldn't make any money. It's way more profitable to spend the magical power you would on that kind of research on crafting potions instead.

For that reason, I could only give Lorea-chan a vague answer. "This shop's seal has a high enough capacity that I could pour all of my magical power into it and it wouldn't be full. So I guess that would mean the amount of power it used was equal to more than half of my full power?"

"Um...when you blew away the forest out back, how much of your power did that use?" Lorea-chan asked, turning her eyes toward the section of forest that I had turned into an exercise area.

I thought about it for a moment before responding. "I think saying I 'blew it away' is exaggerating, but for the magic...just a little?"

I held up my index finger and thumb with two finger-widths of space between them. Lorea-chan's eyes went wide.

"It's a huge deal, then! Whoever attacked the shop is still alive, right?!"

"It's more efficient when I use magic directly, so you can't make a simple comparison like that."

Sure, if I dumped half of my magic capacity into an attack spell, I could probably pull off something pretty flashy, but the magic in the shop's security seal wasn't offensive in nature. It was strictly a crime

prevention system, so it fundamentally relied on nonlethal methods.

"No matter how they attacked it, it wouldn't just up and kill them...I don't think?"

"You don't think?! You don't *think*?! If Baronet Kahku was with them, then—"

"I-It's okay. I'm pretty sure it would immobilize him before he died."

"That's no relief..."

Lorea-chan was looking at me uneasily, so I patted her on the shoulder. "I wouldn't worry. The magic was used to protect the shop. Probably."

If they threw rocks, it had to block those, and if they set fires, it had to put them out. But all of that used stored magical power. It only launched counterattacks to deter further aggression; it wasn't the main function of the security system.

"As long as they didn't try to force their way inside, I'm sure it just shocked them until they couldn't move anymore. For sure."

"The way you've been hedging after everything you say is worrying me... But people have gone inside the shop before you came to the village. To take the furniture that was in there."

"Oh, yeah, you did mention that before."

And I'd heard that Darna-san and Mary-san had gotten really close in here, and Lorea-chan herself was the end result of that.

"That would be because the security was on its lowest setting."

Maybe the alchemist who used to live here set it to that before leaving?

He probably did it so that the magical power would last longer, but it was normal to take the furniture out of houses that were no longer occupied, so it would have been inconvenient for the villagers if they couldn't get in.

Maybe the workshop had been left untouched because he'd warned them it was dangerous, or he'd tweaked the seal to keep them out of just that area.

"Anyway, we don't need to worry about what happened to a bunch of criminals. Let's focus on opening up the shop, Lorea-chan. We've been closed for a long time, and winter or not, there may

have been people who had business with us!”

“You have a point... But I’m worried, so I’ll ask around and see if there are any rumors.”

“Yeah, please do. I’ll be working on the hair regrowth formula.”

That night, I was enjoying a proper meal for the first time in a while.

Lorea-chan had handled the cooking when we were camping too, but as was to be expected, she did better work with a proper kitchen.

Dishes with a taste of the wild were nice in their own way, but they started to wear on you after a long time with nothing else.

I savored every bite while she gave me her report on the business.

“How was the shop today? Quiet as usual?” I asked.

“While things weren’t as busy as they were before winter, we still had a trickle of customers coming in. It seems that the gatherers have been staying close to the village, and only going out when the weather is good, so we didn’t sell much.”

Since I didn’t have any competition, there was still a profit to be made during the winter if I handled things right. Not all of the gatherers were relaxing at the inn because they had enough put away to make it through the winter. Some of them were working.

Maybe I should put out a little info on how to gather in the winter? Marley-san did ask me to, so I could teach Andre-san and the guys.

If I didn’t teach people well, it might lead to accidents, but the guys would be fine, and since they were good at looking after others, I could expect them to spread the knowledge from there.

“Also, I asked around while I was buying ingredients for dinner, and like we thought, there was someone who messed with the shop.”

“Oh, so there really was? Did you find out how it went?”

“Not really. People only saw it from a distance, and they didn’t try to get closer.”

“Oh... Well, yeah, that was probably for the best.”

Bandits should be killed on the spot when found. If the situation calls for it, they should be hunted down and wiped out. But I know my views on that are in the minority.

Catching thieves is dangerous, especially armed ones. I can't expect the villagers to do that. And when the thief is a noble on top of that, choosing not to get involved is the right answer.

"I hear Jasper-san got his bow out, though."

"Huh?! He can't be doing that!" I shot out of my seat at this shocking revelation.

"It's okay. Elles-san had heard rumors that there was a noble involved, so she desperately convinced him not to do anything."

"Oh, thank goodness..." I sat back down, breathing a sigh of relief. "I can treat injuries, but I can't do anything if someone gets killed."

He was a reliable neighbor, but it would have been a problem if he'd gotten into a fight with the lord of the domain. "I should've gone around and let people know before I left."

"Most people knew you were having trouble with the lord."

"Oh, they did? Wait, you're not going to get ostracized, are you?" I asked her.

Going up against a noble, let alone the lord of the domain, could be fatal in a small village society. Unlike the free-roaming gatherers, or an alchemist who wasn't technically a subject of the domain, villagers couldn't run away easily, so it wouldn't be strange if people didn't want to get involved with me, or with Lorea-chan, who worked in my shop.

Lorea-chan chuckled at my question. "Really now. Everyone knows you saved our village when the lord did nothing to help. We may have to act differently when the lord's watching, but none of us would forget how much we owe you."

"Yeah? That's good to know. But tell them they don't need to risk themselves to side with me, okay? Because you and I can handle it ourselves."

If he resorted to force, I could respond to some degree, and also, though I didn't want to, if I fled to the capital, Baronet Kahku was just a petty noble from a rural domain.

I doubted he had the authority to cause trouble so close to the king.

"Got it," Lorea-chan replied. "But it's really okay. We're hardy folks here in this village."

Really? I think a lot of you are real softies...

Though, maybe Erin-san is rather hardy?

"How were things on your end, Sarasa-san? Did you finish the hair regrowth formula?"

"Yep, I got it done without any failures. Now it's just a matter of handing it over... He said he'd come around to pick it up sometime, but I wonder when that will be?"

"Who knows... We have no way of contacting him ourselves, right?"

"He *is* royalty, after all. Well, I guess we'll just have to wait."

I guess he'll probably come before spring?

◇ ◇ ◇

However, Prince Ferrick was back sooner than expected. Five days after I returned, to be precise.

He was so quick it was like he had been watching—well, one of his subordinates probably had been. He shouldn't have been able to come so soon unless somebody had tipped him off.

It was good to be able to hand over the goods quickly, but...also a bit troublesome. Iris-san and Kate-san hadn't come back from their domain yet.

How are we going to settle the current situation?

I had racked my brains over it, but ultimately had no clear answer. It would have been one thing if I only had to look out for myself, but I also had to think about Lorea-chan and the others' safety, so I wanted to find a way to keep Baronet Kahku in check. But if I was going to save Madison and his men, then I couldn't make what had happened public.

I had considered using his position as a noble against him, and spreading rumors of his misdeeds to damage his reputation, but unfortunately, none of us knew how to go about doing that.

As a last resort, I could go crying to Prince Ferrick, but the existence of Madison and his men limited how effective that could be, and I didn't know what he might do if I showed weakness. It was a bit scary dealing with someone I couldn't read.

If I could subtly let His Highness know what was going on with Baronet Kahku, and then he'd act on his own, that would be best.

But that was easier said than done. I could tell him straight out, but "subtly" wasn't in my toolkit.

That's beyond someone like me who doesn't have particularly good communication skills, okay?

I couldn't deny I lacked experience in this sort of thing, so I had been hoping for advice from Walter-san, the steward of House Lotze, but...as I already mentioned, those two weren't back yet.

Urghhh! Iris-san, Kate-san, come back! It's incredibly tough handling a royal on my own, okay?!

I wasn't asking them to shield me. I just wanted them to sit by my side and provide emotional support.

That said, I obviously couldn't ask Lorea-chan to sit in on the meeting.

It'd do some serious damage to her! Unlike me, she had no resistance to nobles.

Not that having a little resistance means anything! Royals' attack power is too high! It pierces right through it!

But there wasn't anything else I could do. This was better than telling His Highness "I'm not ready yet, so come back later."

This way, at the very least, the head that was feeling the pain in my stomach would stay attached to my neck.

In any event, that's how I ended up facing a royal on my own.

"It is good to see you again."

"Sorry to have kept you waiting. Is the potion ready?"

I wasn't waiting! I really wasn't!

But I kept what I was really thinking to myself, and placed the finished hair regrowth formula on the table.

"Yes, this is it here. Apply it in the mornings and evenings, and I expect that you should see ten centimeters of growth over the

course of three days or so."

"It doesn't rapidly sprout the moment I apply it, then."

"I could make one that worked that way, but I believe that this speed will be better for the quality of the hair."

If he wanted hair that was as good as if it had grown naturally, then this was about as good as it was going to get.

If he didn't mind it being a little dry, and a little thin, I could reduce the time it took. But the client in this case was a prince who was highly attractive, at least on the outside, so I had gone with this recipe because I thought shabby-looking hair would be a problem for him, but...

"If you prefer it that way, I can make another one," I offered.

"No, it's not a problem. I'm not in any real hurry," His Highness replied with a smile. He pocketed the bottle of hair regrowth formula and put a leather bag in its place. "You've done good work. This is your payment."

"Are you sure you don't want to check how it works first?" I asked.

"I trust it will work," he replied, his smile deepening. "And if it doesn't, then I just have to complain to Master Millis, and that should deal with it, I think?"

"Ha ha ha..." I let out a dry laugh. "I'm sure Master could deal with it right away."

I'm sure it's Master he has faith in, not me.

"But I don't think you should have any problems," I added. "I'm reasonably confident in my work."

The client was royalty, after all. I had worked as carefully as I could, so as not to damage Master's reputation, and as long as the recipe itself was correct, it was easy to tell when a potion had failed.

So long as he didn't ask for a bespoke potion of some sort, there was no worry that I'd give him a failed product.

"That's what I like to hear," he said. "Well, I did look into your grades at the Alchemist Academy. I wouldn't have come all the way out here if I didn't think you were up to the task."

My personal information's been leaked?!

Well, the academy was operated by the state, so maybe it was

only natural that a royal could look up my grades. But then again, Master had known my grades too. Before I even told her.

Maybe it's easier to look up than I thought?

I didn't get many grades I'd be embarrassed by, but for some people...

Without showing any sign that he had noticed my suspicion, His Highness sat back down on the sofa and crossed his arms.

"Now then," he said, "that's one of the things I came here to deal with..."

"One of them?" I echoed questioningly.

"Whenever I make a move, all sorts of people read into it, frustratingly."

"Yeah... I can imagine."

Although he wasn't the crown prince, His Highness wasn't in a position where he could just walk around casually.

Even if he traveled incognito, he couldn't possibly go out alone. There would be guards with him, openly and in secret, investigating before he went anywhere...or there should have been.

He shouldn't have needed to come here himself just to pick up the potion.

And yet here His Highness was.

"That's why I like to deal with all my business at once, in an efficient manner. Now, why do you think it is that I've come?"

He just said something incredibly annoying!

"How should I know?!" ...was something that I definitely couldn't say to him.

I racked my brains, trying to piece things together without sufficient information. The first time he had come, it had been so sudden that I hadn't been able to think clearly, but this place was a long way from the capital, and nobody other than a walking exception like Master would be able to just come out here casually.

Obviously, he must have had a good enough reason. He'd said it was to keep the hair regrowth formula a secret, but I didn't think that was really all that important to him.

If he was touchy about it, then he wouldn't have used his hair to try to get a laugh out of us!

Which was really annoying of him! Especially considering the difference in rank between us!!!

That meant there should have been another reason.

No, wait. It was another objective entirely, so it had nothing to do with the hair regrowth formula.

Did that mean...visiting this area had been the goal in and of itself?

Officially, he was hiding that his goal was to buy the hair regrowth formula, but that was actually just a cover...?

"Is it...Baronet Kahku you're targeting?"

"Oh? What makes you think that?"

His Highness's smile deepened with amusement.

"South Strag isn't a very large city, but trade with the Principality of Dorland to the south has expanded over the past few decades."

The capital was on the eastern side of the country, so the Laprocian Kingdom's largest trading partner was the country of Uvel, which was situated to the east.

By contrast, the more distant Dorland Principality to the southwest had, for a long time, only seen a small trickle of commerce—but that had changed in past decades.

The change was brought about by Baronet Kahku's grandfather.

He had built a highway from the Kahku Baronetcy to the Dorland Principality, and encouraged trade between them.

That had transformed South Strag from an inn town to a trade town. His son had taken over from there, and was responsible for expanding South Strag into a regional city. This trend would continue, and the town would keep on smoothly expanding—or so people had thought, but then the current baronet, Yokuo Kahku, had dampened all those hopes.

No, more than just dampened them, he risked ruining everything.

"It may not be on the same level as trade with Uvel, but it's not a small amount. It would be a shame for the country if it collapsed. Could that have something to do with it?"

"It's not a bad read. How does the current incident play into that?"

"This is partially speculation on my part, but..."

"I don't mind. Please, continue."

Honestly, I was hesitant to explain a theory I wasn't confident in, but I couldn't refuse when His Highness fixed me with a smile and a sharp look.

"It was a little while ago now, but the House of Lotze requested a mediation. Could it be that you thought you could make use of that, Your Highness?"

He wanted to continue trade with the Dorland Principality, but Baronet Kahku was likely to become an obstacle to that.

But if the king forcefully stripped the baronet of his rights, he'd lose the support of the nobility.

They'd been looking for an excuse of some sort when that mediation had occurred.

A duchess getting involved in a dispute between petty nobles like the House of Lotze and a baronet had been enough to turn heads, and with a little investigation they would have easily discovered that I had been involved too.

Of course, there was no need to elaborate any further on why my personal information would have been easy for them to find.

"Even Nord-san coming here was something you arranged, wasn't it?" I asked, thinking that the timing was a bit suspicious, and...His Highness's smile deepened with pleasure.

That scheming smile's kind of scaring me, you know?!

"You didn't get top marks for nothing. It seems we weren't wrong to build the Alchemist Academy," he remarked. "We are willing to forgive mediocrity in our nobles, but not stupidity."

It wasn't a direct confirmation, but I couldn't have been far off the mark.

I had some thoughts about the trouble that we'd been put through as a result, but I couldn't possibly say any of it.

"I will correct you on one point, though. I merely gave Nord some information. It was no concern of mine how he would act on it—or rather, I didn't expect him to cause you that much trouble. Your payment also includes enough to apologize for that. I'm sorry."

"N-No!" I hurriedly shook my head at the sudden apology. "He was a bit of a troublesome person, but not unreasonable!"

Was my dissatisfaction showing?!

His Highness wasn't the type to make an issue of it, but if I wasn't careful, it could be considered disrespectful.

His Highness chuckled as I hurriedly drew my lips taut. "There's no need to be so tense, you know? I won't make an issue out of little things."

"Oh, no, um..." He read me so easily, I could only babble incoherently in response.

"You're a quick thinker, but you're not used to dealing with nobility yet, are you? I'll give you a passing mark, considering your background, but...perhaps we should add that to the curriculum? If we were to send some royals with too much time on their hands, they could give practical lessons."

His Highness stroked his chin as he murmured something outrageous.

Stop it! You're going to make my juniors cry!

I had taken lessons on etiquette, but only with teachers and classmates. Many of those classmates were nobles, which had been nerve-racking enough, but now he wanted royals giving lectures?!

Were they going to be such *practical* lessons that heads would fly if someone made a mistake?!

"I-I don't think you need to trouble the royals with such things, sir..."

His Highness glanced at me as I hesitantly ventured an opinion, then offhandedly said something terrifying. "Hm? There are plenty of good-for-nothings—I mean, royals—with an abundance of time on their hands, but... Well, I suppose I'll have to talk to my father about it."

Thank goodness I already graduated!

Sorry, juniors, I'll be praying this idea never gets implemented!

I'd pray for them, but I wasn't going to say anything more on the subject.

I don't want to get in trouble!

"Anyway, we were discussing Baronet Kahku. As you imagined, I shook him up a little—no, not even that. I just applied a little pressure, you might say. That was all it took to make that fool start

acting rashly."

What did His Highness do exactly? He's not talking about the fact that he came to my shop, I hope...?

It was possible that he had some plan involving that, but in all likelihood, Baronet Kahku wasn't aware of His Highness's visit. Because if he had any brains at all, he wouldn't have picked a fight with my shop right after His Highness left.

"If he'd shown some restraint, my response would be different but...it went as I had expected it to. His father should have disinherited him when he caused trouble before."

"Um... Those rash actions put us in a dangerous situation, you realize."

I would be more than happy to have the troublesome baronet gone, but I couldn't accept that good folks like us were getting caught up in it. When I mildly complained that maybe he could pay a little consideration to us, His Highness's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Oh, did they? At the very least, I don't think you were ever in danger, though?"

Just how much does this scheming prince know?!

He knows about the attack in the mountains, at least. We were fine, but Madison and his guys could have died. I wish he'd show some care for them too!

Had he decided that removing a bad lord was better for the country, and by extension better for the people of the domain, than saving a few lives? Or did he just not think commoners' lives were a big deal?

As things stood, it was impossible to cover it up. I could only beg for Madison and his men's lives to be spared, but...was I going to do that? With a prince? For some guys who had no connection to me?

Well, I can't abandon them now...

If only Iris-san and Kate-san were here, I could push it off on them—I mean get them to help!

If you two were to walk in the door right now, you'd get a huge boost in affection points, you know?

Sadly, Iris-san was not known for having that sort of excellent timing.

I perked up my ears, but there was no sound of bells from the shop door.

Darn it. Guess I've gotta do it myself...

"Your Highness, the soldiers from South Strag were just following __"

"I'm not the kind of fool who'd make rank-and-file soldiers take responsibility when their commander is the one to blame."

His Highness cut me off as I hesitantly pleaded their case. It was true that when there was a conflict soldiers were almost never executed for following their superiors' orders. But on this occasion, they'd essentially tried to assassinate Iris-san and me.

And in the case of an assassination, it would take a very good reason not to execute the people who carried out the crime.

Oh, is he trying to have this treated as a conflict?

I cast a probing glance in His Highness's direction. He smirked evilly.

"I intend to thoroughly crush Baronet Kahku. However, if it doesn't look like I can, I won't lay a hand on him. I don't believe in doing things halfway."

He then fixed me with a look that seemed to be testing me.

Um... Is he ordering me to think of a way?

What an unreasonable request when I have no real info to work with.

If I had a boss like this at work, I'd be considering resigning!

If there's one salvation, it's that it's Madison and his men's lives on the line, not mine, I guess?

I went on thinking that sort of slightly awful thing as I mulled over some ideas.

"We can provide a witness to the ambush."

"That's too weak. If they had written orders, then things would be different, but the witness is a commoner, right?"

Yeah, I knew that'd be the issue.

No matter how suspicious they were, a noble couldn't be condemned based on the testimony of a commoner.

If he countered by saying "they acted without my permission," the only thing he could be held accountable for was poor

management. They'd execute Madison and his guys, and that would be the end of it.

Iris-san was a noble, but...even if they acknowledged that the ambush took place based on her testimony, we couldn't prove it was done on Baronet Kahku's orders.

"He seemed to have an alchemist working for him. How about attacking things from that direction?" I suggested.

"Joseph? He's technically a noble too. It wouldn't be easy."

"I'm sorry. I don't know his name."

I think it's the alchemist who was running a rip-off joint in South Strag, but I can't be sure of that, and I don't even know the guy's name.

I think Leonora-san would know, but I haven't thought about him since his shop went under, so I never asked.

When I explained that to His Highness, one of his cheeks rose in amusement. "Hmm. I'll bet he'd never imagine the person who ran him out of business doesn't even remember his name. He really hates you, you know that?"

"It's an unjustified grudge. All I did was warn people."

Yeah, that's all I *did.*

As for what Leonora-san did, I don't know about that.

"Heh heh, it sounds to me like his shop deserved to go under," His Highness replied. "The Alchemist Academy is running smoothly, on the whole, but is there no way we can do something about a certain number of them being no good."

Well, we aren't tested for our personalities or ability to cooperate with others. Not on the exams, at least. If someone is talented, but in a bad direction, they can still graduate.

And I'm not really in a position to talk about people not being cooperative enough.

"If possible, I'd like to strip Joseph of his alchemy license, but..."

I figured he was suggesting that he would need evidence.

"I have some potions he made," I offered.

His Highness nodded approvingly. "Nice work. Do you have anything on Baronet Kahku himself?"

"Sadly not, as far as the ambush is concerned. I'll mention that I

do have some documents investigating other problematic behavior, but no concrete evidence...”

I’d received those from Filione-san. I’d read through them, but while most of the allegations would have been enough to strip a noble of his title, there wasn’t anything definitive.

But His Highness smiled and extended his hand.

That means “show them to me,” huh? I understand.

“They’re right here.”

Once I had hurried and fetched the documents, His Highness flipped through them, saying, “Oh?” every once in a while as he did.

“You’d investigated this much? You’re even more talented than I gave you credit for.”

“That’s kind of you to say. But I’m not the one who investigated it.”

“Who investigated isn’t important. What matters is that I now have the information.”

I appreciate the compliment. But I feel like you’re kinda testing me here?

It was in my interest to see Baronet Kahku removed, but if His Highness wanted to do something, then he wouldn’t need to come to me for evidence and information, right?

“Hadn’t you already discovered all of this on your own...?” I asked.

“Not necessarily. There is enough value in having information from those who are on the ground.”

Really now? It may be rude for me to think this, but that smile of yours is looking suspicious, you know?

“Now it’s just a matter of catching him,” I said.

You’re not going to expect me to do that part too, right?

I could nab him if he came striding into my store again like last time, but that was sure to cause trouble, and if I tried to capture him in South Strag, I might have to battle a large number of opponents. This clearly wasn’t a job for an ordinary alchemist.

The members of the House of Lotze had martial prowess on an individual level, but I couldn’t count on them to back me up militarily.

"Don't you worry. I have a plan. Now then...all this talking really does leave a man parched."

Perhaps sensing my hesitance, His Highness shrugged. He then rested against the back of the sofa, and openly demanded a drink.

Go home already! I thought, but couldn't say, so I tried a somewhat more indirect method.

"This is a country town, so I'm afraid we only have low-quality tea."

"I don't mind. Even if it doesn't suit my palate, it can be interesting to try the local flavors."

That's a prince for you! He's brazen!

But show some care for the person who has to serve it!!!

"Very well..."

"Oh, and I'd like some snacks to go with it. Something sweet would be perfect."

That's a prince for you! He's shameless!

But don't expect much from a country village!!!

Does he know we don't have a confectioner here?!

Why don't I give him some unprocessed fruitrot bee honey?

Though, if I did...I'd be risking my neck, so I wasn't going to be doing that.

"I'm terribly sorry, but given where we are, I might not be able to prepare something immediately..."

"That's not an issue. I have time."

Well, I don't!

He apparently didn't get the message to drink his tea and leave.

If you're a prince, read between the lines!

I couldn't rule out the possibility he *had* read between the lines and was deliberately pretending not to have, though.

"Well then, please wait just a moment."

I felt the sorrow of being an underling as I rose from my seat.

"Hey, Lorea-chan. Do we have any extra cookies?"

When I headed out into the shop to ask Lorea-chan about the kitchen, she turned and gave me a confused look.

"Huh? Cookies? I made some for teatime today. Did you want to take a break? But His Highness hasn't gone home yet, has he?"

“Yeah. It turns out I need some snacks.”

“Huh?” For a brief moment, she didn’t catch my meaning, and just stared at me vacantly, until... “Wha?! Wha, wha?! You’re going to feed him my cookies?!” she managed to both shout and whisper at the same time as she came to her senses.

“I don’t have a choice. There are no sweets shops around here, right? I could try going to Darna-san’s place, but...”

“The stuff in dad’s shop would be even worse!”

That was a bit harsh to say, but because he got his stock from South Strag, they weren’t really fresh sweets, but closer to preserved food and emergency supplies.

“Yeah, so I was thinking we’d give him the leftovers from yester__”

“H-Hold on! I-I at least want to serve him fresh ones!”

Lorea-chan hurried to turn the shop’s sign to “Closed” and then dashed off into the kitchen.

“Oh, I don’t think we have time for—eh, you know what, it’s fine. I did tell him it might take a while.”

I felt like day-old cookies were good enough for anyone rude enough to demand a snack, but if he was going to get impatient and leave, nothing would have made me happier.



Let him wait, or let him go home.

With that, I followed Lorea-chan to the kitchen to prepare some tea.

"Tea leaves... I guess the cheap ones should be fine, right?" I murmured to myself as I was preparing. Lorea-chan, who had been busily making cookie batter, stopped and looked at me in surprise.

"Huh?! Let's use the most expensive ones. He's a prince, isn't he?"

"Well, maybe this will actually be a fresh experience for him, you know? Even the best tea leaves I have are only so expensive."

I currently had the tea we drank with meals, the tea we enjoyed with snacks at teatime, and the tea that I had splurged a little on that we drank on special occasions.

But even the last of those was still something that I, with my poverty-addled brain, had been willing to shell out for, so it wasn't incredibly expensive or anything. From a prince's perspective, the difference was merely a rounding error.

If he's going to think that it tastes awful either way, then the expensive tea leaves are wasted on him. If it were my seniors from the academy, who are also rich, I'd serve them the good stuff to be hospitable, but I dunno about His Highness...

"Maybe I should go all the way, and serve him homemade tea?"

That tea, which was made using a blend of leaves I'd picked from the forest out back, was the one that we drank with our meals.

Material cost: zero. My labor: priceless. He'd said it "could be interesting to try the local flavors," and this stuff wasn't for sale, so he couldn't compare the taste! Ha ha ha!

"That...might actually be good," said Lorea-chan.

"Oh? I expected you to push back on it..."

"Because your blended tea isn't like my mom's, where she just throws in a bunch of shredded leaves. It's more than delicious enough. Besides, at the very least, he can't call it cheap."

"Yeah, because no one's put a price on it," I agreed.

If I say, "This tea is ten gold coins a cup," then that's the price! Setting aside whether anyone would buy it... Yep, let's go with that. This is expensive tea.

If I say something like, "This tea was made with a special blend of carefully selected plants that were handpicked by the apprentice of master-class alchemist Ophelia Millis," doesn't that sound pretty luxurious?

Even if the brand strength is relying on Master's name, though.

"Well, that's tea taken care of... How are the sweets going, Lorea-chan?"

"I'm just making them the same as I always do... Do you think I should be more generous with the sugar, Sarasa-san?"

"Nah. Just go with the usual amount. Your cookies are delicious as is."

"Are they? Thank you." Lorea-chan smiled at the compliment. "Well, I'll just do the same as usual, then."

Then she gleefully went back to making the cookies.

I could hear her humming to herself as she worked. I had been worrying she would get all tense and fail, but it was apparently unwarranted.

It's not like making them a little sweeter would mean anything.

It was no lie when I said that Lorea-chan's cookies were delicious, but when it came to sweetness and appearance, they were always going to come up short compared to the luxury sweets on sale in the big city.

Obviously, there would just be no comparing them to the kind of things that His Highness was accustomed to eating. The cookies I'd had at Priscia-senpai's house before had been made with ingredients that you couldn't even find in South Strag, let alone this village.

Try as she might, Lorea-chan couldn't possibly have competed with those, so there was no need for her to try. His Highness was the one making unreasonable demands. If he didn't like the results, he didn't have to eat them.

I'd say that's about the right way to approach this, you know?

"They're warm and crispy. Not bad at all."

That was His Highness's opinion after tasting the cookies.

Of course. Lorea-chan went to all the trouble of making them for you.

If he'd said they tasted bad, I was ready to confiscate them and just accept that he'd think I was being rude.

Actually, why didn't he just say they're good? Because they are.

Normally, you'd say that, right?

He really ought to say it.

Maybe he read my thoughts in the way I was looking at him, because His Highness added, "They're simple, yet delicious."

Yeah, that's more like it.

Now, when are you going to leave?

I put all of my feelings into the stare I was giving His Highness, but this time he either didn't pick up on it, or ignored it, because he continued sipping his tea and even had the gall to ask for another cup.

There wasn't even a hint that he might leave.

Yet he didn't see fit to liven things up with some banter.

Silence from me.

Silence from him.

Time went by as we needlessly wasted tea and cookies.

Judging by how many he was going through, he wasn't lying that he thought they were good, but the silence was awkward, and if he had no further business, I was hoping he'd leave...not that I could tell him that.

Could somebody please do something? Like Iris-san and Kate-san returning at just the right moment.

As if in response to my thoughts, the situation changed.

"Come out! I know you're in there!!!"

There was a rude shout from out in front of the shop.

Yeah, this isn't what I was asking for.

Lorea-chan was recovering now—being forced to make cookies for a prince had made her freshly aware of the importance of her baking skills—so I was the only one who could answer the door.

But I had a very important guest with me who was still calmly sipping his tea.

My reserves of respect were about to run out, but I still had the good sense left not to simply walk out on His Highness. I gave him a probing look, and he glanced toward the front of the shop with a

smile.

"I don't mind. Go ahead."

"Pardon me."

With his permission, I quickly headed to the front, and of course it was Baronet Kahku and his entourage, just like I knew it would be.

Since he was here in person, maybe he'd been watching for my return?

It's not a short distance from South Strag to here... Does he have nothing better he could be doing?

"Can I help you?"

"Finally, you come out, huh?" The baronet paused dramatically after that line, then thrust a finger in my direction. "Sarasa Feed, I demand an apology and compensation!"

"You do? Um... For what?"

I'm the one who ought to be demanding compensation here, right?

"The other day, a number of my soldiers were badly injured when they came to demolish this shop. That is a grievous violation of my personal property."

"Huh...?"

I was momentarily dumbstruck by this unimaginable complaint.

Sure, I figured he'd tried it based on how much the magic seal's power had been depleted, but do people normally come right out and admit to their crimes?!

"Let me get this right... Your people tried to destroy my shop, and you're asking me to pay you compensation as a result?"

"So you do understand. For now, I'll settle for half of your sales as an inconvenience fee."

I was speechless.

"Also, the Lotzes owe you a debt, I hear? Perfect. Offer Iris up to me. If you use the debt as leverage, you can do that, right? Oh, and __"

"I refuse."

I cut him off, since there was no point in listening to any more of this.

"What?"

"I believe I told you this before, but an alchemist is under no obligation to pay taxes to the lord of the domain, and I am not paying compensation to a criminal."

If anything, I'd have wanted him to turn over the culprits, but I couldn't execute my own brand of justice unless I'd caught them in the act, and if I demanded a criminal punishment for them, it was the lord who was responsible for that.

There was no point in even bringing it up, so I didn't.

As for paying taxes, if it was Erin-san asking me to cooperate for the sake of the village, I could maybe think about going along with it. I did live here, after all.

But with Baronet Kahku, it was the total opposite. Not only had he not offered any help when the village was in need, he was actively causing trouble for us. I wasn't going to pay him anything I didn't have to.

And the bit about Iris-san was completely out of the question. Not even worth considering.

I shot him a harsh glance that said, *Maybe I ought to stuff your mouth full of rocks if you're going to keep talking nonsense like that,* but Baronet Kahku met it with a malicious grin.

"It's true, you're under no obligation to pay. But if you do it *voluntarily,* it's no problem, right?"

"What do you mean...?"

I furrowed my brow and squinted at the baronet, who smirked as he continued.

"You're close with people in my village, right? Like the general store. I can tax them however I like, you realize?"

I sucked in a sharp breath.

I had been afraid of this.

If he was going to try to directly harm Lorea-chan, I could protect her because she was my employee, and I was the one who paid her wages. But that was as far as I could reach. For anyone else, my options were limited.

No matter how heavily Baronet Kahku taxed the village, it was within his authority as lord to do so and not in violation of national law.

But if he did that, the villagers would abandon the village, and gatherers would stop coming too. If he were thinking straight, he'd see it could only hurt him, but...even setting that aside, did he actually think I was going to give in?

Sure, normally, once someone set up shop, it wasn't easy to relocate. But in my case, I had gotten this place dirt cheap. Because I had bought it with financial assistance, I'd get next to nothing for it if I resold the property, but my only real loss personally would be whatever I had paid Geberk-san and the others to remodel the place.

I might not immediately be able to find another shop, but Master would let me work in hers if I asked, so clearing out of the place wouldn't be that hard.

If I was totally lacking in honor and human kindness, that is.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm not going to take everything from you. I'll leave you with a little. I'm a merciful man, you see."

My silence had apparently put Baronet Kahku—no, this bandit who was worth less than a dung beetle—in a good mood, because he went on displaying his ignorance with a dung-eating grin on his face.

If he took half of my sales, I wouldn't even have enough left to pay my taxes to the national government. Obviously, I couldn't keep the shop going like that.

If he didn't even know the difference between sales and profit, then having him at the helm of a commercial hub was sure to ruin it.

But for now, he was still the domain lord.

Do I just feed him some nonsense and get him to go away, or...

"No witnesses, huh..." I murmured to myself.

"Hm?"

The bandit gave me a suspicious look.

I quietly checked the number of enemies. He had three men in his entourage.

They looked used to things getting rough, but they weren't exactly a threat to me.

No sign of anyone else around.

Maybe I can do this?

I was half ready to go for it, but fortunately, I didn't carry through with the idea.

"Baronet Kahku, this is quite the fascinating conversation you've been having. Do you have so much free time on your hands?"

Those words heralded the appearance of His Highness, who had been needlessly consuming my food earlier.

Maybe he was planning to work enough to pay for the tea and cookies, because he stood in front of me and turned a harsh look on the baronet.

"You're—"

"You are under suspicion of sending troops into the royal domain." His Highness immediately cut him off.

"Wha—?!"

Baronet Kahku was left speechless.

The men in his entourage gulped, each taking a step back.

Of course they'd be worried. It might be one thing if they had violated another noble's domain, but sending troops into the king's land was akin to an attack against the monarch and was a quick way to be branded a rebel.

It was a heavy offense that could get him and his entire house executed, and the same went for everyone else involved. If they were hangers-on of his, they would naturally be decapitated for complicity.

But had Baronet Kahku been doing that kind of thing? It was unclear to me why he would, but...

"There's no crown land anywhere around here..." the baronet protested.

"But there is, though? Right next to us."

His Highness gestured behind him to my shop.

It was true that because I had bought the shop with financial assistance from the state, it was half—no, more like nine-tenths the property of the crown, but calling it part of the royal domain was a bit... *Oh, I get it.*

His Highness was pointing even farther behind him, at the mountain range that was inside the great forest.

It was easy to forget this, since it wasn't like their direct holdings

which they ruled through magistrates, but most gathering areas like the great forest were crown land. The system was apparently set up that way because alchemic materials were considered a strategic resource, and so it wouldn't be appropriate for the lord of a single domain to hold them.

So when he'd sent his soldiers after us in the mountains, Baronet Kahku had been doing something that could be interpreted as a military invasion of the royal domain—strictly speaking, that was.

In actual practicality, the gathering areas were treated differently from the ordinary crown lands, and to the best of my knowledge, no one had ever been punished for sending troops into them.

"I-I have no idea what you're talking about! Who even are you? Interrupting me when I'm talking like that, what impertinence!!!"

Oopsie, looks like Baronet Kahku doesn't know Prince Ferrick's face.

He was wearing the disguise hat, like before, but it could only change the color and length of his hair, and the color of his eyes. If someone knew his face, then they could have recognized him by looking properly.

Iris-san and I have an excuse, but you're supposed to be a noble, aren't you?

Are you going to be okay? You're complaining about his impertinence, but you're being incredibly rude right now yourself.

It's like running through a forest of swords bare naked, okay? You're going to get cut.

But His Highness just looked at Baronet Kahku, his lips curling with amusement. "Oh, have you forgotten my face?"

With that, he stepped forward.

As the eyes gathered on him, he dramatically placed his hand on the hat whose brim was hanging low over his eyes, and took it off like he was brushing his hair back.

Took it off? Wait, he's taking it off?!

The potion I had made for him was slow acting.

And His Highness hadn't even used it yet.

The head that emerged from under that hat looked just like the last time I'd seen it.

A well-timed sunbeam reflected off it with a sparkle.

While he had a totally serious look on his face.

Not even Iris-san had been able to hold back in the face of this, so when he hit the baronet and his men with it with no forewarning...

"Pffft!"

Of course they all burst out laughing.

"And we can add a charge of lèse-majesté," he added with a satisfied nod.

"Wha?!"

Baronet Kahku was speechless yet again.

That's kind of harsh when you were angling for a laugh.

I had been able to hold it in because I had gotten used to it at this point, but there was no way that an ordinary person could have.

Although, he'd forgiven Iris-san for it, so whether the charge of lèse-majesté was applied was entirely down to how His Highness was feeling. Maybe it was special, just for Baronet Kahku and his men?

Sometimes it wasn't nice to be given special treatment.

"I'll add, for the sake of the gentlemen behind you, that my name is Ferrick Laprocian. I trust you understand what that means, yes?"

The blood drained from their faces when they heard the name Laprocian.

No matter how uncultured they were, every adult at least knew the name of the country they lived in, and could infer what it meant if someone carried that name.

"K-Kahku-sama, what's the punishment for lèse-majesté?!"

"I don't know! But the bigger problem is this bit about invading the royal domain! That's a way bigger deal than rubbing out one little peasant alchemist. Rebellion against the throne carries a guaranteed death sentence!!!"

There he went, casually confessing his crimes again. Maybe it was just because he was all shaken up, but wasn't he being a bit too careless for a noble? I mean, it was making it a lot easier for me, having him confess right in front of a member of the royal family, but still.

"I-I'll be fine, right?! I wasn't involved in any of that!"

"As if! If I go down, I'm taking all of you with me!"

"We were only following your orders!"

"You think you'll get away after all the time you've spent benefiting from me?!"

There was an ugly fight breaking out between Kahku and his thugs. But unlike Madison and his guys, who had been forced into it, these people had willingly cooperated, so they were going to have to take responsibility for their actions.

Them and the fools who laid a hand on my shop...

"It makes no sense for a royal to be out in this country village!" shouted one thug.

"Besides, you're trying to tell us this balding loser is royalty?!" added another.

"It's not possible! He's bald! Not a prince!"

As his entourage were holding their heads and being incredibly disrespectful, suddenly, Baronet Kahku had a flash of realization, and he smirked.

"That's right! No member of the royal family would be this far out in the sticks. So, he must be a vile impostor. Am I right?"

The baronet's entourage didn't get what he was saying. For a moment, they just stared at him, slack-jawed, but then they soon picked up on the implication, and twitching smiles formed on their faces.

"Huh? O-Oh, yeah! There ain't no royals out here. That's what it means, right?"

"Y-Yeah! There's no way that a royal would come here without his attendants!"

"Listen, you louts, I pay you good money," the baronet reminded them, stepping back before adding, "There's only two of them, so do your jobs properly!"

Despite showing some hesitation, his entourage reached for their weapons.

Well, that's not good!

I hurriedly stepped in front of His Highness.

Though he had weapons of his own, he didn't look all that buff,

and I didn't know how well he was able to use them. I didn't think His Highness was weak, but I couldn't make him fight for me.

Maybe being protected by a prince would have been a romantic scene if I were living in a fictional story. But here in reality, who knew what would come after it? I might survive now, only to be subjected to an inquiry later.

"What were you doing while His Highness was fighting?" they'd ask.

I might be forgiven for it if I were some dainty princess, but that wasn't what I was.

So I'll fight too!

For my own future!!!

Because it's definitely not for His Highness's sake!!!

"Your Highness, go inside the shop. You'll be safe there."

"No, no, I'll be quite all right," he reassured me. "And this way, we can add uttering solicitation of murder and attempted murder of a member of the royal family to the list of charges."

"You're taking this so easy..."

But my exasperation and concern for him proved unwarranted. His Highness casually raised his hand and then snapped his fingers.

The moment that he did, six men appeared from nowhere—*uh, I think that they're men?* They were dressed all in black, and had their faces covered, so I couldn't be sure.

Right, just as one of the thugs in the baronet's entourage had been saying, it was unthinkable that a royal would be traveling alone, so even if we couldn't see them, he had to have guards out there somewhere.

I'd vaguely sensed their presence; the fact that I hadn't been able to detect them more clearly until they showed themselves spoke to their capability.

Baronet Kahku's men were almost instantly knocked out and then tied up together with the baronet himself.

"Wha?! Wha, wha-wha?! What are you— *Mmph, mmph*!"

Too fast for him to process what was happening, they gagged the panicking baronet so that he couldn't say another word.

With their work done, the black-clad group knelt down where

they were, and a single member stepped forward to await His Highness's instructions.

His Highness looked cool, standing there boldly as his guard knelt before him, but...

I'm begging you, put that hat back on. You're ruining the scene. The gap is just too much to take.

Maybe he heard my wish, because His Highness put the hat back on before giving his people their orders.

"Take them away," he commanded.

"Yes, sir!"

Oh, that voice was a little high. Is it a woman? I guess she's a little petite, and her figure is kind of soft.

Sensing my eyes on her, she met my gaze for just a moment, and then immediately faded and disappeared. Together with the captives.

Oh, those black outfits were artifacts.

Black clothes were good for hiding in the night, but not so much during the day, so I guessed that whatever effect they had was what had allowed them to hide. Though, obviously, their own skill had played into it too.

I could tell the black-clad group must be special just based on the fact they had been given that kind of equipment, because artifacts like that weren't floating around on the open market, and even I hadn't known they existed.

"Now then, that's handled smoothly. Thank you for your assistance," His Highness said, clapping his hands together.

"Your Highness... You were deliberately provoking them, weren't you?"

I couldn't help but cast a dubious gaze in his direction.

The entire reason that His Highness had come here today, and wasted time overstaying his welcome, had been because he had known Baronet Kahku would show up, and he wanted to provoke him and stack up more charges.

Which means he was just having me talk to him about the baronet's corruption, misdeeds, and all sorts of other things to kill time, right?

Because soliciting the murder of a member of the royal family was already enough cause to execute someone on the spot.

Give some care to the trouble you're causing me!

"I don't think I did anything that could be called a provocation, though? Yes, I had been intending to provoke him, but he sort of went wild on his own... That was a bit of a surprise to me."

His Highness averted his eyes a little, perhaps sensing my unspoken indignation.

The prince had come in saying that he was here to pay me for the trouble that Nord-san had caused us, but he was actually the bigger nuisance. Just because of how much authority he could wield.

"Was there even any need to increase his charges? I'd forgotten until you brought it up, but him having sent troops into the royal domain should have been enough of a pretext to strip him of his rank."

His Highness hadn't needed to go to all this trouble and danger(?). If he'd just led an army to South Strag, he could have seized the baronet with little difficulty.

Not even Baronet Kahku would have attacked an army flying the royal standard.

He wouldn't have, right? Okay... Maybe I'm not so sure.

"Strictly speaking, you're correct, but I wanted to avoid that if at all possible. It wouldn't be good to have the other lords who border gathering areas hesitate in their vigilance against monsters."

"Well... You have a point there."

There were generally a lot of monsters in the places where alchemists could gather large quantities of materials.

It wasn't common for monsters to head out and cause damage in the surrounding areas, but it wasn't unheard of, like with the frenzied hellflame grizzlies.

Naturally, the lords of the surrounding areas had to be on guard against such things, and also send out troops as the situation called for it. But what would happen if there was a precedent for someone being stripped of their title for doing just that?

Most lords would hesitate to send their troops onto crown lands, and gatherers and their subjects would end up getting hurt as a

result.

"Besides, unpredictable things can happen when you move an army. Especially with someone like Baronet Kahku involved. I wouldn't have wanted any harm to come to the people of the domain."

Sometimes, when an army moved, there weren't just clashes with the enemy, but pillaging by the soldiers—and it was the people of the domain who would become the victims of that. Even I could understand it had been for the best that he had been able to avoid taking military action.

"And no one got hurt this way," he added.

"It was...a very wise decision," I conceded.

If we forget all about the harm to my wallet, and Lorea-chan's stomach, that is!

"I know, right?"

The smug look on His Majesty's face irked me a little. Prince Ferrick seemed easy enough to get along with at first, but he was actually using that affability to hide a darker side.

It felt reassuring to know there was someone like him in the royal family, but I didn't want us to get too close.

I prefer frank people like Iris-san...

Iris-san, Kate-san, hurry up and come back!

Episode 4.5: The Cleanup

The lord's mansion in South Strag was quiet now, having lost its master. Most of the servants had been dismissed, with only a skeleton crew remaining.

Normally, a flock of relatives both real and self-proclaimed would have descended on the mansion aiming to secure the position of family head or seize their share of the fortune, but given the list of charges against the baronet, they stayed away in fear that the punishment might extend to them.

Currently, there was a single old man seated quietly on a sofa in one corner of the mansion. Perhaps due to his years of toil, he looked terribly exhausted when seen from behind. There was a grave air about him that seemed to push people away, and yet, the very person responsible for creating this situation called out to him.

"Clency."

"Ah! Prince Ferrick... It's been quite some time."

Hearing the voice from behind him, the old man—Baronet Kahku's steward—turned to look, then swiftly rose before dropping to one knee in front of Ferrick.

"I believe you're already aware, but we've taken Baronet Yokuo Kahku into custody. He is charged with a number of crimes, and...he will not ever be coming back here."

Clency closed his eyes tightly upon hearing these words, then let out a deep sigh.

"Thank you for taking the trouble to inform me," he said after a long pause. "What will you do with the House of Kahku?"

"Have a seat first. I wouldn't feel right making an old man like you kneel while we talk."

Ferrick indicated to the sofa, but Clency shook his head.

"No, I am a man awaiting his punishment. Please, let me hear it as I am."

"Oh, there won't be any of that. I'll only punish those who willingly partook in his crimes. There will be no punishment for those who were only following Yokuo's commands."

In part because of Sarasa's request, he had chosen not to hold Madison and his men accountable for their crime. That would require that he distinguish between willful and unwilling participation when determining who was punished.

Furthermore, if he punished everyone, that would cause practical issues with the running of business here, so not many people were actually punished despite the grave crime of attempted murder of a member of the royal family being involved.

"I am grateful for your mercy, but could I ask that I be included among those to be judged? As steward, I was responsible for the management of the House of Kahku."

"I believe you did a good job of keeping the damage from Yokuo's unreasonable commands to a minimum. Now please, have a seat."

At this second urging by Ferrick, Clency replied, "Excuse me," then sat down on the sofa. Ferrick joined him before continuing.

"Now then, in regards to the Kahku baronetcy, I considered allowing it to continue to exist with the confiscation of lands and demotion to a house of knights, but...there's no suitable heir. Letting it continue to exist does not serve the interests of the nation, so there is no reason to do so. Please understand."

"No, it's simply that my previous two masters were far too brilliant. The remaining members of the family would only further besmirch their legacy."

Yokuo had been particularly egregious, but it must have run in the family, because the other remaining relatives were all similar in one way or another. When Ferrick read the reports, he had been mystified by how two great men could have been born from such a family.

Even if the house were allowed to continue, it seemed almost impossible that the others would reform their ways, and highly probable they would incite more trouble.

Even Clency himself had to acknowledge that if they were just going to cause trouble for the kingdom again, then it was better for

the house to be dissolved. He let out another deep sigh.

"If the current generation was just mediocre, it would have been fine, but...it seems your former master's greatness didn't show itself in his child-rearing."

"He was too busy focusing his strength into developing the town. It would have been good if he could have assigned his son a talented educator, but out here in the countryside..."

"There are precious few educators who can scold a nobleman's son. I was fortunate enough to have a teacher who would scold me harshly. I can't even count the number of times she punched me."

Ferrick chuckled as he thought back on it.

"Master Millis, yes? She is a unique case. There are other educators who would voice their complaints to a member of the royal family, but I'm not sure many would raise a hand against one... She is a greater teacher than this house could have hoped to find."

"I'm told she was quite reluctant to take on teaching me, you know? She kept on repeating 'If you don't like it, then fire me' like it was her catchphrase."

"But even then, you didn't fire her."

"I didn't have the authority to. Obviously, when she hit me, I went to complain directly to my father, but...all that did was earn me another bump on my head."

The king had listened to his son's complaint all the way to the end, only to then conclude, "You were in the wrong," and administer the royal fist of justice. "Now study harder," he'd said, and had ordered more study time be added to his son's schedule.

"Master Millis got cranky that I was taking up more of her time, and gave me all sorts of unreasonable assignments. But it's certainly true that they helped me to grow."

Ophelia hadn't been enthusiastic about taking on Ferrick's education. She had taken to giving him assignments in order to reduce the time she needed to spend giving lectures, but despite Ferrick's grumbling, he did do the work properly.

Because of that, Ophelia, who was good at looking after others despite all her complaints, was unable to reduce the burden on herself, and it only resulted in her raising a capable student.

"If only our house had been able to find an educator half as good as Millis-sama... Did you decide to act when he laid a hand on Sarasa-sama?"

"I'd had my eye on the problems Yokuo was causing before that, as it happens. I took an interest when he went after the House of Lotze's domain, and Sarasa-san was just one factor in my decision. A rather important factor, however."

Ferrick had been displeased by the situation with the House of Lotze's debt, but the royal family couldn't just shove their noses into disputes between the nobility, so he had been unable to weigh in on either side.

He had considered quietly offering some advice, but hadn't believed the Lotzes had anyone who could act on it and had given up, concluding he would need to wait for another opportunity. But then Sarasa had involved herself without him planning for her to.

He had continued watching, wondering what would come of it, and Sarasa had used her knowledge, skills, and personal connections to resolve the debt issue.

Seeing her accomplish that without his involvement had changed Ferrick's mind.

"I thought things might be reaching their limit, but I decided to 'test' him."

"And calling me to the capital was a part of that?"

"That's not entirely true. I summoned the person responsible for South Strag. If Baronet Kahku had come himself, that would have been fine. And if he had remained here, but done his job without taking risks, then that would have been fine too. But unfortunately, that was not the result."

Ferrick said he had been "testing" Yokuo, but he had more or less given up on him by that point, and taking Clency away was just the last thing needed to push Yokuo over the edge.

And just as he'd expected, Yokuo had quickly gone out of control, without ever realizing that Ferrick was active inside his domain. But his sudden attempt on Sarasa's life had been unexpected.

With the country trying to increase the number of alchemists, it should have been obvious, if he had given it even a cursory thought,

that it would be dangerous to go after a talented one. Ferrick had thought it would end with a little harassment at worst, but he'd had to hurriedly send for his subordinates, causing trouble he hadn't expected.

"I never expected him to be that much of a fool. If my plan had resulted in Sarasa's death, Master Millis would have killed me."

Ferrick was well aware of how fond Ophelia was of her apprentice. That was why he'd gone to Sarasa's place before Yokuo had arrived.

He knew Sarasa was capable, but she had been the only one there who could fight. With so many potential hostages around, there had been the possibility that Yokuo would drop all pretenses and harm the girl.

He hadn't counted on the baronet turning his weapon against a royal, though.

"Even I was surprised to hear he went so far... I'm terribly sorry." Clency bowed his head deeply, then, looking at Ferrick, he hesitantly asked, "So what will become of this town?"

"I expect we'll install a magistrate to rule over the area as part of our direct holdings for some time. After that...it might be interesting to leave it to Sarasa-san. She's quite capable, you know."

Ferrick said this with a smile, and it was impossible to tell if he was joking or not. Clency's eyes widened a little.

"She graduated from the Alchemist Academy, yes? But talented though she might be, I believe she's of common birth. I am sure that is in line with your own preferred direction for the country, but I do believe reforms undertaken too quickly will provoke pushback from the nobility."

"I'm not trying to abolish the nobility. I want them to take their studies seriously, and work hard to improve their skills. They need to get up to at least my level."

"Ha ha ha... It would be a tall order for them to match a man who was put through the wringer by Millis-sama."

Clency let out a dry laugh and shook his head. He knew that getting up to the same level as Ferrick was a greater effort than a mediocre individual could accomplish.

"They can at least make the attempt, can't they? I don't think we're a weak nation, but I'd hesitate to say we're a powerful one. They need to have a greater sense of urgency. And as for Sarasa-san, I wouldn't just be setting up a commoner as a noble. It won't be anywhere near that difficult."

"My investigations indicated she was of low birth... Was that incorrect?"

"It turns out, she's engaged to the heir to the House of Lotze. If Sarasa enters their house, she will be a noble, and it will be possible to promote her to a higher rank and give her this town."

A capable alchemist was just the kind of person that Ferrick would want to bring into the nobility.

In that case, a marriage is entirely possible, Clency thought, before a flash of realization reminded him of one discrepancy with his own data.

"I don't believe the House of Lotze had a son...?" he asked.

"She is engaged to their eldest daughter."

"T-To a woman, you say..."

"She is an alchemist, after all. If they can produce an heir, the country has no problem with it."

Though there was no ban on same-sex marriage, it was rather rare. Clency fell into confused silence, but Ferrick shook his head and shrugged, indicating it was no problem as far as he was concerned.

"Maybe she grew sick of men after seeing the worst of them," Ferrick mused to himself as he recalled the House of Lotze's situation.

He was actually correct. Having been born into a noble family, Iris had been prepared to be forced into an unwanted marriage. But then her partner had been Hoh Bahru. He had a terrible personality, and there had been the fact that he might take over the household if the marriage went through.

Then, in that hopeless situation, Sarasa had appeared. She had crushed the planned marriage with Hoh Bahru, resolved the family's debt issues, and would benefit the house even more if she married into it. She was capable, and what's more, didn't have a nasty

personality.

The difference between her and Hoh Bahru was night and day. It was little wonder that Iris would have fallen for Sarasa in that case, even if the two of them were the same gender—and even if it didn't go that far, you couldn't blame her for thinking, *Maybe I should marry her.*

"It's a shame, though," murmured Ferrick. "I thought that Sarasa-san might make a good wife for me."

Clency's eyes widened with a start.

"Wha?! I-I'm afraid that would be rather difficult. You would face even more opposition than you would bestowing a title on her."

"She was brought up in an orphanage. I could simply allege she's the secret child of some noble or other. And she certainly has talent. It wouldn't be impossible with Master Millis backing us up."

If he made her the "wild oats" some noble had sown and then had her adopted by a high-ranking noble family, that would remove the issue of her rank in marrying him, and it was actually not an uncommon story among nobles.

But even if it made it possible, Sarasa herself would have been the one most stridently opposed to it. She had dreams of marrying someone wonderful, and Ferrick didn't fit the bill. If the alternative was marrying him, she would absolutely choose Iris first.

Ferrick understood that too, so he let out a dry laugh and shrugged his shoulders. "Well, it's not going to be possible anyway. It seems she'd like nothing to do with me."

"Oh, is that right? I always thought your appearance was quite popular with women."

"It seems she looks deeper than that. I've grown tired of women attracted to my appearance and rank, yet I seem unable to find one who sees the real me and will still accept me. It's difficult."

He was saying some things that sounded good, but it was actually his subtle guile that made Sarasa distance herself from him. Women who learned of it and were still ready to accept him were likely to remain in short supply.

Clency knew what Ferrick was like due to their long association, but he made no direct remark on it, instead relying on pretty words.

"Your wisdom is quite difficult for a mediocre person to understand, sir."

"Heh, there's no need for flattery. Heh heh heh."

"Oh, no, I mean every word. Ha ha ha."

The two of them laughed with obviously fake smiles, then sighed in unison before returning to normal.

"Now, I wanted to talk to you about the magistrate position..." Ferrick began.

"Yes. As the last of the servants here, I will have the documents ready for him by the time he arrives."

Though Clency said this with a nod, Ferrick held up a hand to stop him. "No. That's the thing, Clency. Won't you take the position yourself?"

"M-Me, sir? But without the House of Kahku, I am only a commoner now. If I were to become the magistrate, the relatives of the family would raise a fuss..."

"There are commoners in the bureaucracy too. As for the relatives, anyone who could have raised an objection is gone now, so there will be no need to worry there."

He gulped slightly at the implication of those words, thinking, *Isn't this the kind of thing that made her avoid you?* But he remained silent.

"If you refuse, I will have to send a magistrate of my choosing. I intend to choose someone who'll do a proper job, but it will be up to that magistrate what kind of policies they pursue."

Clency lowered his eyes as Ferrick hinted that the new magistrate might take a different policy direction.

He thought back on his former masters. He had worked with them day and night, cutting into his sleep schedule, sweating profusely, and engaging them in debate, all in order to develop South Strag from a small inn town to what it was today.

Yokuo was already fading away in his memory, yet the other two still remained vibrant. The town they had built together might change away from the ideals that they had pursued.

Presented with the threat of that left, Clency was left with no margin for making any other decision.

“Will you accept the position of magistrate?” Ferrick asked once again.

“I humbly accept...” Clency responded, bowing his head deeply. Tears silently streamed from the corners of his eyes.

Epilogue

Iris-san and Kate-san, not blessed with impeccable timing, returned a little over three weeks after Baronet Kahku's arrest.

"Welcome home," Lorea-chan and I greeted them.

There were hints of exhaustion on their faces, but since all sorts of trouble had now been sorted out, their relief outweighed it.

"It's good to finally be back!" exclaimed Iris-san.

"Sorry for the wait," said Kate-san, adding, "and sorry for not being there when things got bad."

"Tell me about it. You're never around when I want you to be. That's a big negative for you as a fiancée. I had to handle His Highness all on my own, you know?" I joked.

Iris-san let out a relieved laugh. "Yeah, I'm terribly sorry about that. But I don't think I'd have been much help even if I had been here!"

"You say that, Iris-san, but aren't you actually thinking you're glad you didn't come back?"

There was an awkward pause. "That's not true, okay? Not at all."

I smiled at how obvious she was.

Yep. I'll gladly take Iris-san over Prince Ferrick.

"Well, there's nothing else you could have done. And we didn't come off any worse as a result. Isn't that right, Lorea-chan?"

The response I got wasn't the agreement I expected, but an unamused stare. She pursed her lips and nudged me in the side with her elbow. "My stomach suffered greatly, thank you very much. Having to serve my own homemade sweets to a member of the royal family is the most unreasonable thing you've asked since I started working here."

"Say what?!" Iris-san's eyes widened. "You served Prince Ferrick Lorea's cookies?"

I nodded deeply. "Yes, he openly demanded them. Count on a

royal to be so unreasonable."

"And so you pushed that unreasonable demand off onto me, Sarasa-san."

"I-It's fine, His Highness loved them!"

Probably. I'm not so sure.

But he didn't complain, so it's all good, right?

He said they were good too... Even if I may have prompted him a little.

"And if there was going to be any punishment, we'd have faced it together!"

I hugged Lorea-chan tight as I tried to dodge the issue. She got an awkward look on her face and patted me on the back.

"Mrgh... Fine. I'm sure you had it harder dealing with him directly, anyway."

"You understand?! That guy uses a gentle touch, but there's something weird about him! He's inscrutable, you could say... It's like he's some kind of super noble! Which makes sense since he's royalty!"

The vast majority of the nobles I had met were students at the Alchemist Academy. Them being children probably played into it, but I'd yet to meet anyone that good at making themselves hard to read.

I couldn't be confident that the emotions he showed, or the thoughts I believed I'd read were genuine, which made him kinda tough to deal with. Definitely not the kinda guy I wanted around me.

I'd prefer my interactions with someone like that to be at a distance.

"Well, I doubt we'll have anything more to do with him," I said, shaking my head.

Considering the difference in rank between us, this time was an exception. Kate-san gave me an insinuating look.

"I wouldn't be so sure. He's connected with Ophelia-sama too, right? I think you're being overly optimistic in assuming that this is the end of your connection with him."

"Don't say such ominous things, Kate-san! Besides, if that happens, Iris-san and you yourself are going to be in the same boat,

okay?”

When I pointed this out, Kate-san scrunched her face up like she’d just drunk something unpleasant, and pressed a hand to her forehead.

“That’s right... Yeah, we won’t have anything more to do with him. Let’s forget all about it.”

“Yes, let’s,” I agreed.

Kate-san and I shared a nod, ignoring Lorea-chan’s comment that, “I think you’re putting up a hopeless resistance, though.”

I had Iris-san and Kate-san rest for a while, since they looked tired from their journey, and then it was dinnertime. Lorea-chan had put a little extra effort into tonight’s meal, since the four of us were seated around the same table for the first time in a while.

Now that our lonely table for two had returned to its usual number, Lorea-chan was smiling even more brightly than usual.

“Now then, let me say, ‘welcome back’ again.”

“Thank you,” said Iris-san. “Being welcomed like this really does make it feel like ‘I’m home!’”

“Yeah, this really has become a home for us,” Kate-san agreed.

“I’m glad you’ve come to feel that way about my house,” I replied. “Though, I haven’t lived here all that much longer than you have.”

When my parents were alive, we had traveled from town to town a lot, and the last home we’d lived in belonged to someone else now.

My room in the dorms at the academy had just been loaned out to me, and the orphanage wasn’t quite what I’d call my own house... More like a family home I’d already moved out of, or a relative’s place, maybe?

Compared to those places, the time I had spent here was short. Not even a year. Still, the reason I felt so at peace here was in part because I owned the place, but also...

“Because Lorea-chan makes such delicious food, I guess?”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“The reason I can think of this place as ‘my home.’”

A home needed to be safe and comfortable, but the soothing effect of knowing that, after a hard day's work, there would be a warm and delicious meal waiting was also important.

Lorea-chan was definitely one of the reasons I could feel at ease here.

"Hmm, I know what this is," said Iris-san. "The fastest way to her heart is through her stomach."

"Huh? Have I seized her heart?" Lorea-chan cocked her head to the side.

"Hmm, I don't think I can deny it?" I replied with an ambiguous nod.

I don't think it's true in the traditional sense of that saying, but her food's definitely delicious.

There was no comparing it with the kind of lazy meals I had been making for myself.

"I used to think that anything that filled my stomach was good enough, but after eating good food like this every day...I've gotten used to the luxury."

So long as I could have delicious meals occasionally, then I didn't mind having simpler fare the rest of the time. That was how I used to think before Lorea-chan came along.

"I suppose this means mother was right in what she said."

"Iris, you need to have a little more sense of urgency, and do your best so that Shopkeeper-san doesn't toss you away."

No, I wouldn't throw her away—oh, wait, but since we're engaged, if we don't get married, that's kind of like me casting her aside, I guess?

But she's a noble and I'm a commoner. From an outside perspective, it'd look like I was the one thrown away.

"Um, well... I am a nobleman's daughter, after all. There's no need for me to cook for myself."

"Don't become a 'nobleman's daughter' only when it suits you," Kate-san scolded. "Hasn't your mother told you? We don't have the leeway to hire a chef."

"It's all about the appropriate distribution of responsibilities. I'll leave the cooking to you, Kate. After all, the two of us are a set

deal."

Iris-san puffed her chest up with a smug look.

I know you two already said something like that before, but you're making it sound like a bargain on goods... And I'm not sure you should be looking so smug about it?

"Urkh!" Kate-san groaned. "That was a valid move, huh? I'm not sure even I can beat Lorea-chan, though..."

"I'm not going to choose who I marry solely based on their ability to cook," I said with a sigh.

Maybe I wasn't so sure how I felt about them talking like they could marry me if they could just capture my stomach.

Oh, but Lorea-chan's cooking is more than just delicious.

Despite tasting way better than my lazy meals, it was cheaper too. *Maybe it's not the stomach she has me by, but the purse strings. A good wife has to be able to budget well, you know?*

Alchemists were big spenders by their very nature, so I'd be really grateful to have someone I could trust with the family finances.

"Shopkeeper-dono, did you just waver?" Iris-san asked.

"Not at all? But more importantly, what happened on your end? With Madison and his men, I mean. I did contact you about it..."

"Hmm. Well, our marriage is more or less a done deal at this point. I'll prioritize giving you my report."

"Huh...?"

Hold up. That's news to me. I agreed to the engagement, but I haven't decided to go through with the marriage yet, have I?

Iris-san ignored my confusion. "Go ahead, Kate," she delegated the task to her retainer. Kate-san smiled awkwardly as she began her report.

"Let's see. The trip to the Lotze domain went off without a hitch. The house was already making headway on preparing, after all."

Madison and his men had trained to be able to march through the snow, but living in tents over the winter would have been hard on them, let alone their families.

Adelbert-sama understood this, and had called on the villagers to all work together to build houses for the new arrivals.

That was around the time that Madison and his men had arrived. Moved by their new lord doing something like that for them, and the villagers' willingness to take on the task, they had joined in and helped build the houses.

"Meanwhile, I was plowing the fields. It was a lot of hard work. Because even though it's far easier than doing it by hand, I'm not used to the magic just yet. But I wanted them to be able to sow the fields come spring... And that's what we were doing when we received word of Baronet Kahku's arrest."

"Was that...bad timing?" I asked.

It's not just Iris-san; I'm not blessed with good timing either?!

"I don't know that I'd say that," Kate-san replied. "Madison and his men ultimately decided to move to the domain anyway..."

When news of the arrest had arrived, Madison and his men initially thought that they might be able to go home, but it hadn't been that simple. Even if Baronet Kahku had been arrested, that didn't guarantee he'd fall from power. And even if he *did* fall from power, it remained unclear how the town would be governed after that.

To an outsider's perspective, Madison and his men looked like Baronet Kahku's personal army, which left them in a delicate position.

Prince Ferrick had declared he wouldn't have them punished, but it was a little fuzzy how far that extended. Even if Madison and his men were fine, who knew what was going to happen to the other soldiers. If those soldiers ended up being punished, then how would they and their families look at Madison's men, who had been spared?

Adelbert-sama gave them the option to return to South Strag, but because they had experienced the kindness of the people in the Lotze domain, and because, thanks to Maris-san's—or rather Leonora-san's—quick work, their families were already getting ready for the move, they and their families ultimately decided to move to the Lotze domain.

"I'm glad to have more residents, but...it was a lot of work," Iris-san admitted.

"Yes, unlike Madison and his men, their families were regular citizens with no experience traveling."

"Well, they at least took care of their own families, so it was better than it could have been."

Though they hadn't ended up fleeing by night like we had originally anticipated, traveling through the cold of winter with women and children who weren't used to traveling must have come with all sorts of troubles. The two of them exchanged a glance and smiled awkwardly.

Even Adelbert-sama had apparently joined them on the trip, so if Madison and his men weren't already soldiers themselves, then he'd have needed to bring additional bodyguards.

"Wow, that all sounds like a lot of work," Lorea-chan marveled. "Not that I've ever traveled like that..."

Iris-san gave her a beaming smile. "Oh, if it helps the domain develop, then it's no big deal."

"And we got some trained soldiers in the bargain," Kate-san added. "My father was glad, because now Adelbert-sama won't have to go out himself to deal with dangerous beasts anymore."

The Lotze domain hadn't had any proper soldiers before now. They were apparently planning to take advantage of the situation by having Madison and his men spend half their time as farmers and half as soldiers.

But Iris-san's brow furrowed at what Kate-san had just said. "No, father seems likely to go out regardless."

After a long silence, Kate-san said, "Let's let the lady of the house handle that. Now that he no longer has a reason, she'll stop him. Surely." She was desperately clinging to a faint hope.

Then, turning to me, she asked, "How were things on your end, Shopkeeper-san?"

"I don't really have much to tell you."

Baronet Kahku had flown off the handle at Prince Ferrick, who had been there in order to pick up his hair regrowth formula. Then His Highness had speedily apprehended the baronet and taken him away.

In simple terms, that was all that had happened.

I was probably used as bait to lure out Baronet Kahku, right?

I think the biggest reason he flew off the handle was the charge of lèse-majesté against His Highness, while the fact that he sent troops into the royal domain and tried to have me and Iris-san killed has probably been swept under the rug.

"There are some parts of it I'm not completely satisfied with, but...South Strag seems to have settled down, so His Highness must have handled it well."

I had contacted Leonora-san yesterday, and she'd told me that Baronet Kahku had been removed without it causing much chaos, and the town was running normally.

"Well, if we're safe now, isn't that good enough?" asked Lorea-chan. "It means I can rest easy too."

"You've got a point... And he did pay me for my inconvenience. Good money too! So..."

Here I paused to look at each of them in turn. Then, after waiting, I clapped my hands together.

"Now I'm finally back in the black! By a good margin!"

"You did it!"



"Ah hah."

"Hmm."

"That didn't get much of a reaction..."

Except from Lorea-chan, who was clapping excitedly.

Come on, you two, you can learn from her example. It's okay to make me feel good, you know? It's okay to say, "You're incredible, Shopkeeper-dono!"

Feeling my eyes on them, Iris-san and Kate-san exchanged awkward glances.

"Well, I mean, despite her complaints, doesn't Shopkeeper-dono always seem to come out ahead?"

"Yeah. Unlike us, whose debt seems to grow with every big job we take."

"Huh? That's not true at—"

I opened my mouth to argue back, racking my brains, and combing through my memories.

There was the first big incident after I moved to the village, the hellflame grizzly frenzy. Back then, I had made some profit off of the grizzlies' parts, but if you factored in the price of the potion I had used on Iris-san I was definitely in the red there.

What was after that? The frostbite bat fang buy-up incident? Baronet Kahku had been involved there, so you could say that it was a troublesome incident that sparked the enmity between us.

My storehouse had been groaning under the strain of all the gold stuffed in it for a short while, but that money had largely gone to bail out the alchemists who'd fallen into Yoku Bahru's debt trap, or was invested in adding a new building to the inn, so there wasn't much of it left. I was slightly in the black there.

Next was the ruckus around Iris-san's marriage. I feel like we may have made a lot of money from slaying the salamander, but most of it had gone to paying off the debt, and I had spent an awful lot on the advance preparation, so on the whole, I had broken even.

More recently, there was Nord-san. That incident put me massively in the red. He had paid some money to compensate me for the artifacts I had used when rescuing them, and for the emergency kit that had kept them alive, but the money for all the

artifacts I'd made while testing had come entirely out of my own pocket. It was a distressing incident that had put even me in debt.

Well, most of what I put in the emergency kit was dead stock, and the vast majority of the artifacts that I made while experimenting were in the Complete Alchemy Works*, so I'd have had to have made them soon anyway.*

For that reason, I hadn't actually taken that big of a loss.

As for the other money, I had loaned it out, so I might be able to get it back...

Oh? I thought I'd taken a lot of losses, but maybe I'm actually good at business?

"W-Well, that's one way of looking at it. Although, I don't have much cash on hand."

They both gave me an apologetic look.

"Right? Not that we're in any position to talk when you've loaned us money."

"Sorry, Shopkeeper-san. The fall harvest was average, but it'll be some time before the money comes in. If you want to be paid in goods, we can hand them over immediately, but..."

"No, I'm happy to wait," I said, shaking my head. "I wouldn't know what to do with a large quantity of wheat."

By the way, the House of Lotze's debt was decreasing. Every time Iris-san and Kate-san helped me with a job, I was paying them market rate for their services. It wasn't that I was making them work for free. Their debt was just too huge.

It wasn't just the potion I had used on Iris-san. I had also put up the money to repay the Lotzes' debt when Iris-san was going to be forced into a marriage, so that heaping amount had gotten piled on top.

"Anyway, the inconvenience fee was honestly a big help. With it, I have a way to pay my taxes."

Even if I didn't have much cash on hand, I'd had a lot of sales. I had done some light calculations the other day, and there was a considerable amount of tax money due.

Because of the geographical limitations imposed by the location I was required to declare in by the capital, there was a grace period

for making the declaration, but without any money coming in anytime soon, I might have struggled to pay if not for this most recent incident.

"Hmm, I suppose that's another thing you have to be grateful to Prince Ferrick for," mused Iris-san.

"And he was able to get rid of Baronet Kahku without much trouble too," added Kate-san.

"I guess you're right..."

It was true that I had been able to avoid going into debt as a result, but it was hard to feel genuinely appreciative. Especially when I suspected he'd instigated Nord-san.

I dunno what it is. Prince Ferrick has that dashing young nobleman look (now available for a limited time only), but he doesn't make me go, "What a dreamboat!!!" for some reason...

"Speaking of Prince Ferrick, I heard a perplexing rumor in South Strag," Iris-san blurted out, as if she had just remembered it.

Kate-san blinked, then shook her head with an awkward smile. "Oh, that? It has to be a lie."

"A rumor about Prince Ferrick, you say?" I asked.

Did word get out that he's balding? Oh, but they already know that, so they wouldn't call it a lie, huh?

And if he's been using the potion I gave him, it's fixed by now.

"Well, you see, they're saying you're going to marry Prince Ferrick," Iris-san explained.

"Come again...?" Lorea-chan and I said at the same time.

Uh, wait, hold on. Where'd that kind of talk come from? I have no idea. Absolutely none.

"To be more precise," Kate-san interjected, "the rumor's that he's going to marry a talented young alchemist. So, as the only one who fits that criteria in this area, your name came up."

"I guess you've become reasonably well-known, Shopkeeper-dono," said Iris-san. "Let me be clear: I'm not the one who put your name out there."

"When was that decided, Sarasa-san?" asked Lorea-chan. "Did something happen between you when you two were alone together...?"

"No! Nothing happened!!!"

I forcefully shook my head in response to the uneasy look she was giving me.

"Besides, it could be Maris-san, right?" I continued. "I mean, she's a member of the nobility, and she's also far more—"

"Talented? Maris?" Iris-san interrupted me. "Even though she messed up and put herself in debt?"

"I mean, it's possible she has the skills, but... Her name didn't come up at all, by the way," Kate-san said.

I was silent. *Yeah, fair enough, I didn't think it was her either.*

"But it's impossible that he'd marry me, and I'm not happy to hear about it at all!"

If I married a guy like him, it'd grind my nerves down day by day! If I had to marry His Highness, marrying Iris-san would be way better! At least our household wouldn't cause me psychological stress.

"It's okay," Iris-san reassured me. "I made sure to correct the record."

"Thank you! You're a lifesaver!!!"

Marry His Highness? No way. Even if I was a suitable rank for it, I wouldn't want to. I don't need any prince on a white horse.

Iris-san met my relieved thanks with a firm nod. "Yes. I made sure to insist I would be the one marrying you."

"Whuh...?"

Okay, yes, I know we're engaged! But still!

"It's okay, Shopkeeper-san," Kate-san reassured me. "I haven't sent in notification of the marriage... Yet."

"*Yet?!*"

"Well, I have done the paperwork. With the date forged, so that we were ready if you had laid a hand on Baronet Kahku."

"We wouldn't have put it past you to up and kill him, after all," Iris-san added.

I was silent. Given I'd seriously been thinking about how there would have been no witnesses, I couldn't disagree with them. That would have been one possible outcome if Prince Ferrick hadn't come out of the house when he had.

Urgh... Prince Ferrick, you do some good work, huh? I don't know that I liked your deliberate, theatrical timing, though.

"Out here in the countryside, it's normal for paperwork to take time to reach the capital, right? If it came down to it, I thought maybe you could transfer it to the capital, and things would work out," Kate-san explained.

It was true that if I transferred it using the transporter, and had Master submit it, then we could probably get away with the date being a bit earlier.

My status as a noble wouldn't be formally recognized until the paperwork went through, but the authority to decide on marriages lay with the head of each house, and there was almost no chance the paperwork would be rejected unless there was some major interference by another party.

"I might add, we've prepared an application to make you the head of the house too," said Iris-san. "If you were head of the House of Lotze, then it would be considered a conflict between a baronet and a knight. If the other side is at fault, it can be settled relatively quietly."

"You did all that?! Ohhh..."

If they'd been that prepared to support me, I couldn't say anything.

No, maybe I should be thanking them?

"Murrrgh... Th-Thank—"

"Oh?! You're accepting! Then shall we send it at once? Well, I'm sure glad that the paperwork we prepared won't go to waste!"

Iris-san pulled out the paperwork in question as she talked over me.

She laid it out on the table. It was a formal document, in the proper format, and already bore both Adelbert-sama's and Iris-san's signatures. If I just added my own name, it would be complete—yeah, it would be a marriage certificate.

"Wait, why?! Why did you bring it with you?! And shouldn't you be saying, 'It's a good thing we didn't have to use it'?!"

"That was my intention too, but..."

As Iris-san awkwardly averted her eyes, Kate-san smiled wryly

and explained, “So, here’s the thing. When we went back home, the lady of the house insisted, ‘If you intend to continue as a gatherer, then go and make Sarasa-san yours. Considering your age, a normal marriage is going to be difficult,’ she said.”

“Y-Yeah, I’m already twenty, you know? That’s a difficult age for a nobleman’s daughter, and I’m not exactly a beauty. Combined with my low rank, it’s not going to be easy for us to find a groom who can conveniently pay off our debts.”

Many of the daughters of the nobility married as soon as they came of legal age, so some might say that twenty was already too late to get married.

Iris-san was beautiful enough that I thought she’d find enough takers if she made her debut in polite society, but there was more than looks involved in noble marriages. Most of the grooms who could pay off her debts were probably bad matches.

“If I’m thinking of the domain, I can’t give up gathering now... You understand, right?”

Seeing Iris-san flail her arms and hurriedly try to explain herself, I let out a groan.

Then Kate-san jumped in, as if trying to give me one last push. “Besides, while things worked out this time, when you consider that you could have trouble with the nobility again in the future, it would be convenient to have a rank of your own, wouldn’t it?”

“I’m not going to get into trouble that often! Probably...”

“Are you sure?” Kate-san kept pushing. “In under a year, you got into a conflict with Baronet Kahku and got involved with Prince Ferrick... This is just between us, but don’t you think Prince Ferrick is a harbinger of bad luck?”

She said the truth?! I just thought it! I never said it out loud!

“So, I think you’ll rest easier if you sign here,” Kate-san insisted.

“It’s just a little scribble with the pen,” Iris-san added.

“Urghhh... L-Lorea-chan, what do you think?”

They had given me some arguments that were hard to counter, and I unconsciously turned to Lorea-chan for help.

But Lorea-chan tilted her head to the side and grinned. “Um... Isn’t it fine?”

"L-Lorea-chan?!"

She just kicked the ladder out from under me?! Where did the Lorea-chan who was running defense for me earlier go?

"I mean, it's safer this way, right? And even if you get married, it sounds like you can keep on running the shop here, so I don't really have a problem with it..."

"Kate-san?!"

You ran this past her beforehand, didn't you?! I accused her with a glare, but Kate-san quickly averted her eyes.

I was sure she had gone on persuading Lorea-chan after the last time this topic had been shelved.

Nghhh... It's true that if there's no change in our current lifestyle, Lorea-chan has no reason to strongly object.

"Besides, I love Iris-san and Kate-san too. And we can all be together."

"Aww, you're so sweet. The feeling is mutual, Lorea-chan."

"Yes, I love you too, Lorea! Come on, Shopkeeper-dono! Sign the paper!"

With Iris-san shoving the document toward me, Kate-san offered a pen she had prepared in advance.

Lorea-chan sipped her tea as she watched the three of us.

I raised my eyes to the ceiling so I wouldn't have to look at them and agonized over whether to take the pen or not.

Afterword

Hey, it's been a while. It's Mizuho Itsuki.

To think I'd be seeing you with this series again... Honestly, it's a surprise to me too.

The anime was an even bigger surprise. Yes, an anime. This series has an anime.

When they first contacted me, I could've gotten up and danced for joy—I didn't, though. I'm out of shape, so if I tried to do that, I'd probably end up unable to move at all.

But really, my first reaction was, "Really now? It's not April Fools' yet, you know?"

But it's okay, because, apparently, they weren't kidding. It's incredible, isn't it? I was surprised. You readers may have been surprised too, but I was probably more surprised than anybody.

But thanks to that, I was able to put out a fifth volume. I'm grateful. If the series sells due to the anime, maybe I'll even get a sixth? I'm starting to have fanciful thoughts like that.

Now then, once an anime adaptation is decided on, it turns out the original creator can't just say, "Do what you like." There's all sorts of work to be done. This book was one part of that, but I was also working on another book that's coming out at the same time (please support that one too), so... Oof.

I let out a strange sound there.

But it was a new experience, and I enjoyed it. I was allowed to comment on the art designs, and listen to samples from the voice actors and say, "This person is good!" I don't know that much about voice acting, by the way, so I left the selection to other people, but I think all the characters were paired with actors that fit my image of them.

Aside from those sorts of checks, I was also there each week for script readings.

For a manga adaptation, I can just look at the finished proofs, nod, and say, "I like it!" (Well, no, I do sometimes make corrections too.) But it doesn't work like that for an anime. I got pretty involved in the plotting for each episode, though it was a simple, easy job where I just gave my opinion on things.

The writers really worked hard to bring together all sorts of opinions in a short time frame! I have to bow my head to how deeply they had read into the original work.

Because of the times we live in, one fortunate thing is that it's become commonplace for meetings to be held online. If not for that, someone living in another region like I do wouldn't have been able to participate in every meeting.

If there's one thing I feel sorry about, though, it's that my computer has no camera. Because of that, I always appeared as "SOUND ONLY." Urgh! If only I could have shown an image of a monolith, it would have changed the vibe I was giving off—nah, it wouldn't have mattered.

I guess my other job was writing short stories for promotional purposes. The first of those will come out in the issue of *Dragon Magazine* that releases around the same time as this book.

It's a what-if parody story with a school setting, which I probably wouldn't have written anywhere else. I don't know if there will be a second, so please read it. I'll do my best to come up with ideas, because, if it overlaps with my other work, I'll go from "every crisis is an opportunity" to "every crisis is a bigger crisis." Yeah.

Now then, I have four pages for the afterword this time. Let me use that extra space to tell you a secret (?).

Those of you who read the web novel will know this, but Iris was originally a blonde. But she's got deep blue hair in the novel version. Why is that? It's thanks to a word from my then-editor, who said, "It'd be better if the characters had different hair colors! For if there's an anime!"

I said, "Oh, yeah? Let's change it, then," but at the time, honestly, I was thinking, *I'd be happy to get an anime, but that clearly won't happen... Right? My work would never* actually *get used for an anime.*

I’m beyond shocked.

Well, though, my descriptions *were* already being used plenty in the novel art, I suppose. Fuumi-san, thank you for all of your wonderful illustrations.

Also, I’d like to thank the usual crew of editors and copy editors, the people at the printing company, and also the many people involved in producing the anime. This story is completed with the help of all of you. Let me take this chance to say thank you once again.

I think production on the anime is ongoing, so I will be looking forward to continuing working with you.

I’d also like to thank everyone who bought this book.

There is still time before the broadcast of the anime, but I’m sure it will turn out well, so please watch it when it’s available.

Mizuho Itsuki

Special Short Story: Let's Visit the Lotzes

Around the time the snow had melted and the cold had begun to subside, Iris-san, Kate-san, and I were busily preparing to visit the House of Lotze.

Our first objective was to help out with land development.

This most recent incident had put a pretty heavy burden on the House of Lotze.

It's questionable whether that had to do with me or the House of Lotze's own situation, but I had offered to at least help them increase their workable farmland in order to take a bit of that burden off of them.

Fortunately, they had extra land to work with. Kate-san had been doing her best, but of course she didn't have the kind of magical capacity that I did, so she'd told me that it hadn't gone as well as when I'd made my herb fields.

Our second objective was to pay our respects to Iris-san's and Kate-san's families. This was just something we were doing because we were already in the area, but I hadn't met Iris-san's mother, Kate-san's father, or the two little sisters that Iris-san called "incredibly cute."

I felt like maybe she was talking up her own relatives too much, but if she said they were that adorable, of course I'd want to see them, right? If Iris-san was anything to go by, there was no doubt they were, in fact, cute.

Well, provided they hadn't tragically inherited Adelbert-sama's looks, that is.

The issue was that I would be leaving the shop unattended for days, but I had an idea—and it's no exaggeration to say that idea was the reason I had decided on this trip in the first place.

That idea was...

"Okay, Maris-san, you know what to do, right?" I asked.

"Yes, you're in safe hands with me! Indeed!" she replied.

Yep, the idea was Maris-san. I had her on loan from Leonora-san.

"Lorea-chan, I'm trusting you with the shop, okay? Do your best as the acting shopkeeper!"

Though Maris-san had a beaming smile as she proudly thrust her chest out, I wasn't about to consider her "safe hands." She was just there to support Lorea-chan, who was actually in charge.

But Lorea-chan looked a little uncertain, and Maris-san cocked her head to the side with surprise.

"M-Me?" Lorea-chan squeaked.

"What? But if one of us is going to act in your stead, then shouldn't it be me, the officially licensed alchemist?" Maris-san asked.

"You're right! Or you would be, if you hadn't run your own shop into the ground!" I replied.

Maris-san had a greater knowledge of alchemy, but I trusted Lorea-chan more where the money was concerned. Maris-san must have understood this once I was so direct about it, because her eyes wandered awkwardly.

I sighed and continued, "You can use the materials we buy, and I'll allow you to use the workshop, but keep your mitts off of the materials in the warehouse, okay? I think you'll understand once you see them, but they're *very* expensive."

"Expensive materials... Now you have me interested!"

Maris-san's eyes lit up as soon as I'd finished speaking. I was nothing if not worried.

"Lorea-chan... If it comes to it, you can use Kurumi to stop her."

"I would die!" Maris-san protested. "Have no fear, I would never be reckless with someone else's shop, you know?"

"Now if only I could trust you on that..."

Maris-san wasn't a onetime offender. She'd been placed in Leonora-san's custody because she'd messed up twice.

I've got zero trust in her. Can I really count on her to show good sense?

"But Shopkeeper-dono," Iris-san interjected, "Maris is also an elite alchemist. She'll at least keep her word, won't she?"

After a pause, I admitted, "Yes, that's right. I can trust her regarding that. And Lorea-chan and Kurumi will be with her too."

"You don't actually trust me! Not at all..."

Give up. Your past accomplishments speak for you.

With an awkward smile at Maris-san, Kate-san said, "We should be on our way, Shopkeeper-san."

"Yeah, you're right," I agreed with a sigh. "Okay, let's go."

"Have a good trip! And take care!" Lorea-chan waved.

"You can leave the rest to me," Maris-san stated.

Lorea-chan's parting words felt reliable and energetic, while Maris-san's were more relaxed and didn't feel reliable at all.

Thus, we stepped out into the brisk morning air and set out from Yok Village.

"Now then, Shopkeeper-dono. There are two ways to the Lotze domain... Which would you like to take?" Iris-san asked not long after we had left the village.

"Two ways... Was there another road around here? Isn't it just the road that goes southward from South Strag?"

"Normally, yes, but there is a route over the mountains that is more or less straight," Kate-san explained. "If we go that way, we can make it there in two days, but..."

"It's really close, then, huh?"

Our initial plan was for five days of travel each way. This was shaving off an incredible amount of time.

"The danger rises enough to make up for the difference, though," Iris-san added. "If we take the route we were planning on, it's more or less flat, but the alternate route is mostly mountainous. Well, not that I'd expect you to have any trouble, Shopkeeper-dono."

"Let's take the faster route," I said. "I'd rather not be away from the shop any longer than I have to."

If we can shave a total of six days off the round trip's travel time, then that decides it right there, doesn't it?

"I think you can trust Maris, though?" said Iris-san.

"Oh, I do trust her, to an extent. It's just that I need to go to the capital to file my taxes soon. I plan to have Maris-san watch the shop while I'm away for that too."

"Oh, right, you had mentioned that. Does an alchemist need to go to the capital no matter where they set up shop in the kingdom? That sounds like a lot of trouble..."

"Generally, yes. There's also the method of giving the paperwork and money to someone trustworthy, and having them make your declaration for you, but it's a hefty chunk of change, and if they need to be able to answer any questions that come up, the only real candidate for a job like that is an apprentice working in the shop."

Once a person got used to making their declaration, they wouldn't make as many mistakes, so it became safer to let someone else handle the delivery over time. But this was my first time, so I planned to go myself. I wanted to check in on the orphanage while I was in the capital, anyway.

"Although, I doubt there are many people who've set up shop in an even more out-of-the-way place than I have."

Yok Village had to be near the top of the list for "most remote village in the kingdom."

In terms of simple distance, the town near the southern border with the Dorland Kingdom was a bit farther, but Yok Village had it way worse as far as convenience of transit went.

"Come to think of it, you're right," said Kate-san before adding, "though, if a shop cropped up in our village, they'd probably have it worse than here."

"We've got this place beat in terms of population, though. Won't someone consider coming?" Iris-san cast a meaningful glance in my direction as she said that.

"Not me... I opened my shop in Yok Village because the great forest is right there."

"Of course. I knew that," Iris-san conceded. "Oh, here's the place. We turn right here and then keep going."

"Okay!" I agreed before saying, "Wait, is this a road? I'm not sure I'd even be able to call it a game trail."

Iris-san had diverted off the small road connecting Yok Village to

South Strag and was heading off into the brush. There were signs that people had been this way, sure, but I certainly wouldn't have called a road.

"Don't worry," she reassured me. "People have used it before—just my father and Caterina, though."

"And they left markers, so we won't get lost," added Kate-san.

Those two, huh... If I'd never met them before, I'm sure I'd have found it reassuring, but now that I have, I feel nothing but uneasy about this...

"We've finally made it," I said with relief.

"Yeah, we did," Iris-san agreed. "And in only two days."

"Can you really call that a path?" Kate-san wondered. "I'm so glad that we had Shopkeeper-san with us."

Thanks to the unique markers that the House of Lotze had left along the route, we'd never strayed from the path.

Okay, it was more accurate to say we'd never lost our heading—because there was no path!

There were a lot of places where ordinary travelers might have lost their lives. I had been using my magic to help us forcefully progress past those spots over the past couple days. It may have been a shorter distance, but it had been way too exhausting.

"Well, we've made a bit of a path, so the return trip will be easier, but...when did Adelbert-sama and Caterina originally blaze this trail? They couldn't have done it in just one trip, right?"

It had been a difficult trip, but the direction and location of the route had been well thought out. If you were to chart an ideal path between Yok Village and the Lotze domain, it might not have looked much different from theirs.

"I don't know," said Iris-san. "But they must have been investigating how to make travel between here and Yok Village easier."

"It did come in handy, but...it's hard to be grateful after what we just went through. It's just too hard... Only a select few people could possibly use it," Kate-san said, letting out an exhausted sigh. Then, changing tack, she raised her head and added, "Now then! There's

no point in us just chatting here. Let's head on to the mansion."

"Good idea," Iris-san agreed. "Although, it's just a small house we happen to call a mansion."

Iris-san wasn't just being humble when she said that. The house that I saw through the gaps in the field looked like any commoner's house at first glance.

It might have been fair to call it a "big" house considering that it was two stories where all the other houses were only one, but in terms of actual size, it was no more than three times the size of my shop, so it was nothing compared to other noble mansions I had seen.

I'm sure it had enough room to live in, but considering all of the affairs of the domain were also conducted here, it was pretty small. The area of the yard that was fenced off around it was enough to be suitable for a noble's mansion, but that only made the small size of the house stand out even more.

"The house has a very...warm feeling about it, huh?" I reached for a compliment, but Iris-san smiled awkwardly and shook her head.

"Shopkeeper-dono, there's no need to be tactful. It *is* one of the better houses in this village, but as you can see, it's old and made of wood. We've done our best to maintain it, though, so it doesn't leak in the rain. Have no fear of that." Iris-san beckoned me while saying things that weren't really that reassuring.

"Now, let's go inside," she continued. "You are the savior of our house, Shopkeeper-dono, so normally, we would want to have the whole town come out to welcome you, but we didn't send word ahead. Please excuse us for that."

"No, I was never hoping for that kind of welcome."

I wouldn't have known what to say in response. And besides, being able to casually contact people like I did with Master and Leonora-san was the exception. Normally, long-distance communication involved a lot of time and expense.

That was why it was normal not to have anyone welcoming us, but...contrary to my expectations, the doors flew open and two little girls came rushing out.

One energetic ten-year-old girl looked like a smaller version of Iris-san. The other was younger still, and she had blonde hair that could almost look silver depending on the lighting. Unlike the first girl, who was wearing pants, she wore a long skirt, and had a slightly more refined air about her.

Iris-san beamed joyfully when she saw the two of them and spread her arms wide. "Ria! Leya!"

But the two of them broke to the sides, dodging Iris-san to come straight at me with a vigorous hug.

"Whuh?!" I cried.

They were smaller than me, but there were still two of them. I staggered backward a step as I tried to catch my balance, then looked down at the two of them. They were staring up at me with smiles on their faces.

"Sarasa-oneechan, we were waiting!"

"Sarasa-oneesama, we've been wanting to meet you! Welcome."

"O-Onee... Huh? Huh?"

The other kids in the orphanage had treated me like a big sister, but this was the first time I'd ever met these girls.

Seeing I was confused at how they'd addressed me, they cocked their little heads to the side.

"You'll be marrying Iris-oneesama, won't you? That makes you our big sister too."

"Erm, that's not decided just yet..." I stammered.

"It's not? Aww, here I thought we were getting another big sis."

"An intellectual big sister, unlike Iris-oneesama or Kate-san. I was so happy about it too..."

One girl pouted and the other lowered her eyes.

I thumped my chest, ignoring the sad voice behind me murmuring "I'm not 'intellectual,' huh..."

"It's not a done deal yet, but you're free to call me your big sister! Bring it on!!!" I roared.

They both squealed.

"Sarasa-oneechan!"

"Sarasa-oneesama!"

"Hee hee..." I grinned as they hugged me again.

I always wanted a younger sibling!

But my parents had been too busy to make any more children, and while the other kids in the orphanage looked up to me, that had been more of a senior/junior relationship. It was a bit different from having siblings.

I threw my arms around the pair, thinking how much I'd love to have little sisters like them.

But there was one person looking at us who was less than amused.

"Hey, you two. Don't you have anything for your *actual* sister?"

"Whaa, but you came home just recently, big sis."

"As far as the house is concerned, Sarasa-oneesama is a more important guest too."

When the two girls said this without moving away from me, Iris-san nearly dropped to her knees in dismay.

"H-How cruel... How could you say that to your big sister who's been working so hard..." she moaned.

"But it was Sarasa-oneechan who cleared our debt, right?"

"I've heard you actually *increased* it, Iris-oneesama."

"Gwagh!"

This dose of truth was more than Iris-san could take. She actually dropped to her knees this time.

"N-Now, now, you two," Kate-san interjected with a troubled look on her face. "It was Iris's hard work that built our connection with Shopkeeper-san. So in that sense, it is thanks to Iris, right?"

The little girls exchanged glances, then nodded in unison.

"You're right. I think that was good work on her part. Genuinely."

"Yep, the biggest accomplishment of big sis's life."

"O-Oh, yeah? Well, sorta! Hee hee!" It wasn't much of a compliment, but it got Iris-san back on her feet in an instant.

But are you really okay with that? I wondered.

"Oh, and also because she became Sarasa-oneechan's fiancée."

"That's right. If Ria-neesama or I had been born a boy, it would have been better, but... Well no, if Iris-oneesama can do it, then Ria-neesama or I can too... We might even have an advantage because of our age?"

"H-Hold it!" Iris-san interrupted them. "Don't steal my value, you two! I'm sure Shopkeeper-dono prefers me over the two of you, who she only just met. Right?"

"It's true," I agreed. "I mean, we haven't even been properly introduced yet..."

"Oh, that's right. I've talked about them before now, but my older little sister who is currently holding your right arm is Wisteria, and my younger little sister who is holding your left arm is Cattleya."

As she introduced them, her sisters backed away and bowed their heads to me.

"I'm Wisteria. Nice to meet you, Sarasa-oneechan! Call me Ria."

"I am Cattleya. Call me Leya, Sarasa-oneechan. Thank you for saving Iris-oneesama, and by extension our entire house. I look forward to our continued acquaintance."

"Yep, me too," I said in response.

Wisteria came off as a bit more free-spirited than Iris-san, while Cattleya came off as the most responsible of the three, despite being the youngest.

"But did you hear that, Ria-neesama? Iris-oneesama calls her 'Shopkeeper-dono.' There may yet be some chance!"

"Maybe! If we could sway Sarasa-oneechan, then the House of Lotze would be as good as ours."

"H-Hey now, you two. Are you serious? If so, I'm not hung up on being the heir... Oh, but if it means I can get married to Shopkeeper-dono, then... Urgh. Did you two want to inherit the Lotze domain?"

"Nah, not really," they said in unison.

"Wha?!"

"Ah ha ha ha! We're just kidding!" they both chimed.

"Hey!"

The two ran off into the house laughing, and Iris-san followed them in hot pursuit.

Kate-san watched them go with a look like she didn't quite know what to say, then turned to me with an awkward smile. "Sorry about that, Shopkeeper-san. Those three are pretty much always like that..."

"No, it shows how close they are, so... I think it's kind of nice,

actually?”

“You do? Thanks. That everyone, including our subjects, gets along is one of this domain’s nearly nonexistent good points, after all.” Having said this, Kate-san beckoned me, saying, “Now then, let’s head inside too.”

I followed Kate-san inside the house, and the place was filled with a sort of chaotic energy.

“Darling! We have an important guest, so go change into your best clothes! And tidy your hair too. And Leya and Ria, if you realized it was her, then you should have changed into your dresses before bursting out the door!”

“What? Even when big sis looks the way she does?” protested Leya.

“Iris only just got home! Of course I’ll be having her get changed too. But before that, Iris, go and get washed up.”

“I have to wear one too...?” Iris-san murmured.

“Of course. Ria, you go get changed too.”

“Can I really wear my dress? Normally, you tell me it’ll get tattered—”

“When would you wear it if not now?! The fate of the House of Lotze is at stake!”

“Madam, if you raise your voice, our guest might overhear you.”

Yep, I sure got an earful.

It wasn’t a big house to begin with, and the walls may have been thin on top of that, so I could hear a lot of what was being said deeper inside.

I gave Kate-san a slightly concerned look. She closed her eyes and clutched her head.

“Sorry, Shopkeeper-san. How about I show you to Iris’s room first?” she asked.

“I don’t mind, but...shouldn’t I say hello?”

“Please take a hint,” Kate-san said with a touch of exhaustion.

I couldn’t say anything to that.

Kate-san led me to the room that was missing its owner, then quickly left. I spent some slightly awkward time waiting, and then Iris-san came—nope, it was Ria and Leya instead, all dolled up in

their little dresses.

They were both airy dresses with a similar design and soft colors. Ria's was a light green, while Leya's was a light peach color. It really suited the two of them, which was a given for Leya, but even Ria looked like a nobleman's daughter dressed like this, even though she was a more sporty type.

"Wow, you're both so adorable!"

"Are we? Do they look good on us?" asked Ria. "They're big sis's hand-me-downs."

"Ria-neesama, don't say any more than you have to. If you say that, then my clothes are two-time hand-me-downs. They weren't made to suit me..."

"No, they suit you really well," I reassured them. "Your dresses aren't worn out at all. Maybe they've been well looked after?"

"Ah ha ha, we just never get to wear them. I could count on one hand the number of times."

"Come on, Ria-neesama, you're telling her too much... Um, Sarasa-neesama, mother and the rest are preparing a welcome party, so would you be okay with chatting with us for a while?" Leya suggested.

"Would I! What do you want to talk about?"

Perhaps because of their good relationship, Leya and Ria wanted to talk about Iris-san.

I told them stories about Iris-san's exploits in Yok Village, and they brought smiles to my face until Kate-san arrived to tell us, "The welcome party is ready."

We were led to a room where Iris-san was waiting, wearing a deep blue dress.

There were two other couples with her. I already knew Adelbert-sama and Caterina-san, which left Iris's mother and Kate-san's father.

"Sarasa-dono, thank you for coming," said Adelbert-sama. "It's our pleasure to welcome the savior of the Lotze domain."

"I am Iris's mother, Diana. Thank you for saving not only Iris's life, but her heart as well."

In contrast to her tone when I'd overheard her before, the Diana-san standing at Adelbert-sama's side was very graceful. Despite her being only a little taller than I was, there was a big difference in our bodies' curvatures. She was a beautiful woman who exuded a very womanly and motherly aura.

"It's been a while, Sarasa-san," said Caterina-san. "Thank you for everything you've done."

"I am Kate's father, Walter. As the one in charge of the practical duties of running this domain, I cannot thank you enough, Sarasa-sama. But nonetheless, let me express my sincere gratitude."

Kate's dad, who was standing beside Caterina-san, was, frankly speaking, a hottie.

He had dark gray hair that bordered on black, green eyes that resembled Kate-san's, and a relaxed smile gracing an unusually symmetrical face. All three members of the family were highly attractive. I had heard he was in charge of running the domain, so I had imagined him as a more slender, bookish sort, but he had a surprising amount of muscle on him.

I hurriedly waved my hands as these four adults bowed to me.

"N-No, don't worry about it. Things just sort of worked out the way they did..."

"Father, if you blow things too far out of proportion, you'll make it awkward for Shopkeeper-dono. I think it would be better to just welcome her normally."

"Would it? If you say so, Iris. We don't have much, but let us have a meal to welcome you."

Having said that, Adelbert-sama took his seat, and the others followed suit.

The food on the table was by no means luxurious. However, it had been prepared with great care, and as someone who was aware of their financial situation, this was more than enough to convey how much they were welcoming me.

They didn't make me stand on ceremony, and the food tasted good when eaten in a relaxed atmosphere, along with a lively conversation. Helped along by the fact that everyone felt positively toward me, I found myself able to talk to any of them easily, despite

not being particularly good at socializing.

During the conversation, Diana-san suddenly looked at Iris-san, as if she had just remembered something. "You've been calling Sarasa-san 'Shopkeeper-dono,' Iris? She's officially your fiancée, so why not do away with that cold manner of addressing her, and call her by her name instead? And Sarasa-san, there should be no reason for you to go on addressing Iris with a -san either."

"Well, I did try to change what we call each other once before, but..." Iris-san cast a probing look in my direction.

Come to think of it, there was a brief time when I called her that, huh? Back then, it felt like she was trying to turn it into a fait accompli*, and I was a bit hesitant because of that, but... Maybe it's a bit late to fret over it at this point. They're not forcing me into anything, and the arrangement comes with a lot of upside for me too.*

"I don't mind, Iris. I don't think we're going to be able to keep our relationship on a purely professional basis at this point anyway."

"O-Oh, yeah? Then, Sarasa... Now that I say it, it makes me feel kind of embarrassed!"

Seeing Iris-san smile shyly, Kate-san turned a grin in my direction. "Well then, Shopkeeper-san. Would you mind me calling you 'Sarasa' too?"

"Sure. You're a lot older than me, after all, Kate-san."

"Urkh! It's true I'm five or six years older, but I didn't want you to worry about that..." My offhand comment made Kate-san's shoulders slump.

Caterina-san chuckled. "Oh, my. Kate-chan is part elf, so her outward appearance won't age easily. Please, take her too. You can go ahead and address her without an honorific while you're at it."

"No, I'm not worried about that! Besides, addressing her that way wouldn't feel right..."

Iris was one thing, but Kate-san had a "big sister" aura about her, so it was a little hard to address her without an honorific. But with both mother and daughter staring at me expectantly, I couldn't refuse.

"Kate...?"

“Yes, please go with that. Sarasa,” Kate-san—or rather Kate—replied with a smile. Caterina-san looked satisfied too.

Near the end of that fun welcome party, Diana-san invited me to “treat this house like it’s your own and stay as long as you like.”

I thanked her, but of course I couldn’t just relax. I had a lot to do starting the very next morning.

Setting up Madison and his men’s fields...

“Captain, that big grassy field turned into farmland in a second.”

“It’s pretty wild, huh? Feel free to respect me for my previous decision to surrender unconditionally.”

“Thank you, sir!”

Visiting Kate’s little brother Neal...

“Sha-Sharasha-neeshama?”

“Kate... You put him up to saying it like that, didn’t you?”

“What could you possibly mean?”

“Isn’t it weird for such a small child to call me by my name when he’s meeting me for the first time?!”

“I don’t know about that... It’s not like I worked my hardest to teach him to say it the last time I was back here, or anything like that, okay?”

“Sharara-nee?”

“Urgh! Even knowing the truth, he’s still adorable!”

Teaching Ria and Leya magic...

“Your lessons are so easy to understand, Sarasa-oneechan!”

“Most of our people can’t use magic at all, and Caterina-san just isn’t suited to teaching others.”

“Heh heh heh! I took lessons on education at the academy! Leave it to me!”

Teaching Ria and Leya the sword...

“You’re so incredibly polished, Sarasa-oneesama. Totally different from father.”

“Father is strong, but with my current size, I can’t imitate him.

But even I might be able to use your techniques, Sarasa-oneechan!”

“I didn’t have a lot of strength either, and I’m not very tall. That’s why I prioritized improving my skills.”

Playing in the river with Ria...

“This way, Sarasa-oneechan! In the spring, there’s a reed with red berries that grows by the riverside. They’re so tart and tasty!”

“That’s acuvitis. It only grows during a short period, and near clean rivers, so it’s pretty valuable, actually! It’s healthy too, so I recommend it.”

“Wow, Sarasa-oneechan! You know so much!”

“Oh, it’s nothing special.”

Doing embroidery with Leya...

“It’s like you can do anything, Sarasa-oneesama. I was sure you’d have trouble with this kind of thing.”

“I’m an alchemist, after all. I can do all sorts of things, even if I’m not especially good at them.”

“I think you’re doing well enough you could say you’re good at it... The people around here are all about practical skills, so I’m happy you’d join me!”

“I’ll join you any time you ask!”

Huh? I’m spending all my time with her sisters?

Yeah, I kind of am. But can you blame me? They’re so cute!

To think I’d get myself the little sisters I’d given up on ever having! I sure am glad I came to the Lotze domain!

And after spending my time like that, we came to the last day.

Adelbert-sama had prepared another meal for us before we returned home to Yok Village. Like with the previous time, the whole Lotze family was in attendance, as well as the Starven family minus Neal.

They were all wearing their best clothes, which made me feel a little sad and out of place over being the only one in plain clothes.

“Sarasa-san, how did you find the House of Lotze after staying

with us?" asked Adelbert-sama.

"You have a very warm home, and treat the Starvens like family too... I think it's a really nice place," I explained.

"That's also thanks to you, Sarasa-san. If you hadn't helped us back then, this domain would have changed entirely. But as things stand, it looks like we'll be able to repay our debt."

"It sure does. And the domain seems to be running smoothly."

I hadn't just been playing around these past few days.

Okay, more than half of it was *playing around, but I was looking around the domain too.*

And what I had learned was that the House of Lotze managed their domain with a steady hand. Because of their past experience with famine, they had increased the number of drought-resistant crops that they grew, even if their commercial value was lower. But they hadn't lowered the yield of their primary crops, since they were also cultivating new farmland.

Normally, the people of the domain would push back against the hard work of cultivating new land for farming, but the people here knew how much the Lotze family had sacrificed in order to help them, so they actively participated in land cultivation.

With a domain like this, it would take a lot for them to end up unable to repay their debt.

"Now then, Sarasa-san. I will make my offer again: Would you become a true member of our family? I won't claim that I'm not hoping to introduce another skilled person into our family, but after meeting you in person, I genuinely came to wish that it could happen."

I was silent.

For someone like me, with no family of my own, it was a tempting proposal. I had people who were as close as family, but they weren't my real family. Maybe there are people who wouldn't be fussed about the formalities like that, but...

"There is no need for you to love Iris in a romantic sense. If you choose to treat her as a friend, or as a sister, that is fine with me. I believe that would still be a far happier marriage for Iris."

He probably meant in comparison to Hoh Bahru.

Yeah, I'm pretty confident I could make Iris a lot happier than that guy.

"There's no need for you to push yourself to produce an heir either," added Diana-san. "You could adopt one of Leya's or Ria's children, or if you'd like, I wouldn't oppose you marrying both of them."

Even as his wife said this, Adelbert-sama just continued nodding along in agreement.

That was because, as I'd learned in the days I'd spent here, Diana-san was the true power behind the House of Lotze. In fact, the title had originally belonged to her. Adelbert-sama could only call himself a knight because he had married Diana-san.

In other words, he married into it. Doesn't that put him in the same position as me?

As I thought about that to escape from the reality of Diana-san's more shocking comments, I suddenly found my hands clasped by two little sisters and one big sister.

"Please, Sarasa-oneechan. Be part of our family!" begged Ria.

"Sarasa-oneesama, won't you be my real big sister?" Leya pleaded.

"Sarasa, I know I've said this before, but having a title could serve to protect you. This is the only way that our family can hope to repay you. It's all right if it's in name only. Won't you marry me?"

Iris and her sisters stared at me intently.

I had thought their faces were quite different, but looking at them like this, there was a lot of family resemblance. I was feeling pressured by their symmetrical features and beautiful, unclouded eyes.

"You don't need to think about repaying me..."

Family, huh... It was something I wanted to have again eventually.

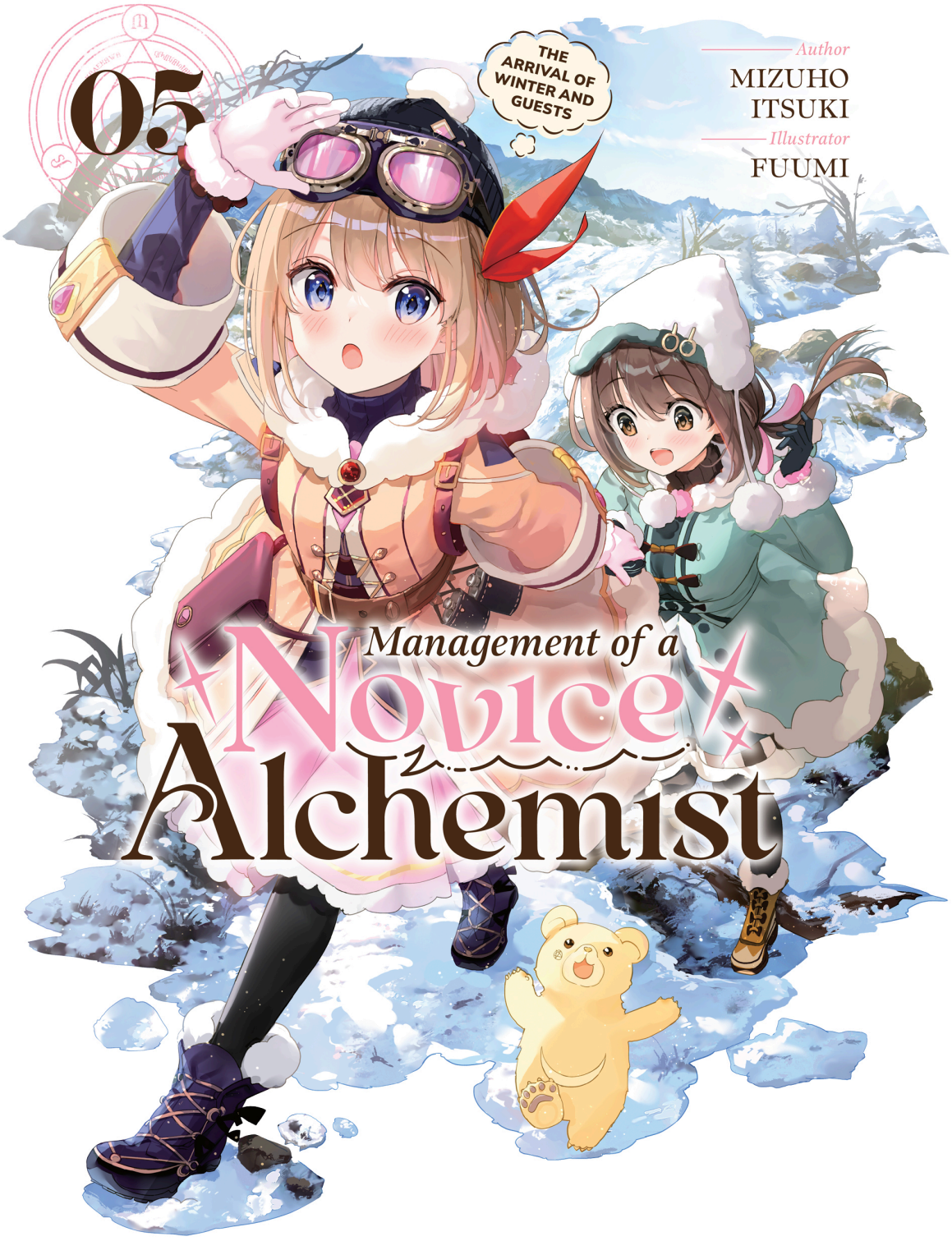
I didn't know if I'd find one in the future. And if I did, I didn't know what kind of people they'd be.

But if I reached out now, then I could have...

"Please! Big sis!!!"

"Please! Big sister!!!"

There’s only one answer to give at this point.



Author
MIZUHO ITSUKI
Illustrator
FUUMI

05

Management of a Novice Alchemist: The Arrival of Winter and Guests



DATE: ○○ / △△

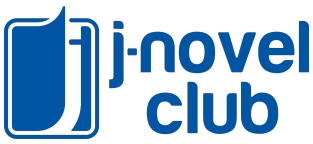
But speaking as a merchant, that aesthetic view could go in the trash for all I cared. It bothered me to no end that business was so dead that I felt like I could hear crickets chirping even though it was wintertime.


Management of a Novice Alchemist: The Arrival of Winter and Guests
Sarasa Feed
Novice alchemist. Operates an alchemy shop in Yok Village that she received as a graduation present from her master.
Lorea
Daughter of the couple who owns Yok Village's general store. Helps out at Sarasa's shop.
Kate Starven
Iris's partner. Works together with Iris to repay Sarasa.
Iris Lotze
Gatherer. Sarasa saved her life, but she was left with a huge debt because of it.
DATE: ○○ . △△
The young man shouted as he stormed in with five rough-looking guys in tow. Was he a wealthy merchant? Or a noble? Whichever it was, I could smell that he was going to be nothing but trouble.



DATE: ○○ / △△

"Come on, Shopkeeper-dono!
Sign the paper!"
With Iris-san shoving the document
toward me, Kate-san offered a pen
she had prepared in advance.



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Management of a Novice Alchemist: Volume 5
by Mizuho Itsuki

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SHINMAI RENKINJUTSUSHI NO TEMPOKEIEI Vol.5 FUYU NO TORAI TO HINKYAKU

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