
06
WHOA, I GOT AN APPRENTICE?!
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Management of a
Novice
Alchemist



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DATE: ○○ / △△

I knocked and entered the workshop, where I found Master sitting in a chair as she worked on something. She turned her head and greeted me with a smile. It was good to see she was doing well.


Management of a Novice Alchemist: Whoa, I Got an Apprentice?!
Iris Lotze
Gatherer. Sarasa saves her life, but she was left with a huge debt.
Misty Hudson
Sarasa's junior and friend from the academy. Her family runs a large maritime shipping company.
Sarasa Feed
Novice alchemist. Operates an alchemy shop in Yok Village that she received as a graduation present from her master.
Kate Starven
Iris's partner. Works together with Iris to repay Sarasa.
Lorea
Daughter of the couple who owns Yok Village's general store. Helps out at Sarasa's shop.
DATE: ○○ / △△
I gave everyone their souvenirs from the capital right away! With Misty's help, I had been able to buy some nice ones for them. I hoped they'd all be happy with their gifts.



DATE: ○○ / △△

I took a deep breath as I stood on the sandy beach, staring out at the blue sea under the summer sky, having changed into my swimsuit. Summer! The sea! Swimming!

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Prologue

It had been a year since I had come to Yok Village. Having overcome the severe winter and its attending troubles, springtime had finally come for me—in more ways than one.

Hmm? What do I mean by that, you ask?

When a girl talked about springtime, romance was obviously going to be involved.

Meeting a dashing young man. Love, sparkling memories, and then marriage. Yes—now that's what I'd call spring!!!

If I were to go out and poll other adolescent girls, I'm sure eighty percent would agree with me!

So, that being the case, I went and got married—to Iris.

Huh? What happened to my dashing young man? Where did the sparkling memories go? That had all been nowhere to be found, except for the "marriage" part.

Although, I do like Iris. That's true.

She might not have been the kind of storybook lover I had been dreaming of, but she had a bright personality and a forthright disposition, and she was a hard worker. Also, the way that she was a bit airheaded, to the point that I felt like I just couldn't leave her alone despite her being older than me, was kind of cute?

But do I love her romantically...? Hmm.

Maybe this was actually better for me in the long run, though? If I'd gone crazy and fallen for a royal like Prince Ferrick, my future would've been filled with nothing but trouble.

Besides, this marriage came with the added bonus of two adoring little sisters, and my new mother-in-law, Diana-san, was kind and a good person too, so all said, it was a really great deal. No one could blame me for having signed on the dotted line, right?

Yeah... It's no problem. This marriage wasn't a mistake at all!

But had it changed anything between us? Just what we called

each other, maybe?

Nothing in my daily life had changed!

And obviously, we had no plans for children! It had only been a year since I'd met Iris, so it was a little hard for me to imagine us doing that.

Maybe someday, but I currently lack the skills to craft the necessary potion, and I'm still having fun working as an alchemist!

That was how things were going for me. There were some minor changes, but a lot had stayed the same in my daily life. Spring found Yok Village little different from how it had been the year before.

The largest change had to be the number of gatherers. There was a slow trickle of new people coming in as the snow melted, then the numbers exploded once spring arrived in earnest. There was even a point when there weren't enough places to lodge all of them.

In response, there was a move to build new rental houses targeted at the gatherers, some of whom even bought their homes outright, which led to all the villagers being mobilized to help in the massive construction effort.

Between Delal-san majorly expanding the restaurant at her inn, taking on new staff, and even putting in an order with me for another magical stove, the village was seeing a period of special demand driven by gatherers.

And my shop was no exception to that. In fact, far from it—my shop was the cause of this boom, and a large factor in its continuance.

The season went by, with Iris and Kate helping Lorea-chan and me with the almost murderous workload of handling the sudden increase in gatherer requests. Before we knew it, it was nearly summer.

Alchemists were given a lot of favorable treatment. That started with free tuition, the guarantee of status as citizens of the royal capital, and financial assistance in purchasing a shop. There were many examples of it, but the most important of these for running the business was the exemption from taxation by the local lord, and

freedom from domain law.

That had been the only reason a commoner like me had been able to fight back against Baronet Kahku. But the trade-off was that I was required to travel to the capital roughly once a year in order to report my taxes.

And because of how big all the measures taken to favor us were, they were very strict about enforcing this. If I neglected to do it, they'd strip me of my license and immediately chuck me in jail. They were merciless!

However, because there were alchemists like me who lived out on the frontier, the reporting period was set up generously as "No more frequently than every one year, but no less than every two years." Normally, people reported at the capital before the year-and-a-half mark, though.

I mean, if they left it to the last minute, and then there was something wrong with their paperwork... Well, they'd be fine if they could deal with it then and there, but if they had to head back to their shop to check something, who knows what would happen.

If their shop was in a town a long way from the capital, they'd just die, right?

And so, I, who had a monthlong trip each way, was coming up on my own time limit...

That day, I was standing in front of the shop, wearing my travel attire.

"Okay, I'm heading out. Take care of the shop for me while I'm away."

There were four people seeing me off: Lorea-chan, Iris, Kate, and then Maris, who was there to help the others out. I'd asked her to come along when we'd visited the Lotzes too, but I was going to be away for even longer this time. There were a lot of gatherers this time of year though, and I knew they'd be in a bind without an alchemist here, so I'd asked for her again.

"Know that *this time* you're in good hands!" Maris declared smugly, puffing up her chest.

It's true that she didn't run my shop into the ground last time, but...wasn't that thanks to Lorea-chan?

“That’s unjustified slander!”

“Oops. Looks like I said that out loud.”

“You did! I’ll have you know, I took my work quite seriously. Isn’t that right, Lorea-san?” Maris-san looked to Lorea-chan with a smile.

“Yeah,” Lorea-chan replied with a slight smile. “And there are limits to how much I can do alone, so...”

Yeah, that was the thing: As much as I trusted Lorea-chan more than Maris-san, she obviously didn’t have Maris-san’s alchemical skills, nor anywhere near her level of knowledge. Lorea-chan was studying as best as she could, but alchemy wasn’t so easy that she could get up to speed with it in only a year.

However, Lorea-chan’s job was to mind the shop. Normally, that wasn’t a problem for her at all. It was just that on occasions like this, when I was going to be away from the shop, that left her in a bit of a bind. Especially in a village like this, where there was only one alchemy shop, it wasn’t easy for us to close up the business for long.

But I had tax obligations, and though it wasn’t an absolute requirement that I go myself, it was preferable that I be there in person.

Maybe this is a major part of the reason alchemists take on apprentices?

“Right... I trust you. As long as Lorea-chan’s with you.”

“So you don’t actually trust me at all?!” Maris-san balled her hands into fists and swung them around indignantly.

“It’s okay,” Lorea-chan reassured her, patting her on the back. “Sarasa-san seems to trust your skills as an alchemist.”

Oh? I thought Lorea-chan was the younger of the two, and by far, though?

“I wish she would trust me as a person...”

“I do trust you as a person, though? It’s your financial sense I have doubts about.”

Which was why I could trust her with the shop so long as she had the external financial sense unit known as Lorea-chan attached to her.

“Besides, I’ll be leaving Iris and Kate with you as well this time,” I

added.

"Yes." Iris nodded firmly. "Leave the shop's safety to Kate and I!"

Kate smiled a little wryly. "You're so honest, Iris, limiting it to just the shop's safety. I know you've been studying up a bit on alchemic materials, but why don't you follow Lorea-chan's example and study alchemy too? If you're going to be Sarasa's partner."

"I believe, as life partners, we should each try to make up for the other's shortcomings."

"Oh, yeah?" Kate replied in monotone. "So, what shortcoming of Sarasa's are you going to make up for, Iris? Even in your best trait, your martial abilities, you come up short compared to her."

Iris's eyes wandered awkwardly and she let out a frustrated groan. "Urgh! Is all I have to offer my voluptuous figure, which Sarasa doesn't have?"

"Whoa there, Iris. Are you *looking* to get into our first marital spat? I'll take that fight." I clenched my fists and squared up against Iris.

"Are you really so 'voluptuous' you can go boasting about it? I mean, sure, you've got Sarasa beat, but that's not saying much."

Apparently I was being attacked from behind as well. "You're getting in on this too, Kate?!" I said. "I'll grow soon enough!!!"

I think, even between partners, there are some things you just don't say!

Iris and Kate smiled at each other as I protested vigorously.

"It's a joke. Besides, I don't need to offer Sarasa my body; it already belongs to her."

"It's true," agreed Kate. "But if anybody here is the 'voluptuous' one, it's me, isn't it?"

"Well, well!" Maris cried, her eyes sparkling for some reason. "You've both already gone that far with her! Sarasa-san, I have new respect for you!"

Now even Lorea-chan was casting a questioning look my way, her cheeks tinged with embarrassment.

"Don't go 'respecting' me! We haven't done anything that indecent! Really now! You're such a bunch of jokers!"

"Oh? It was a joke? Nobles do that sort of thing all the time; it's

no big deal...”

“It *would* be a big deal! This is the problem with you blue bloods!”

It was nice that she didn’t have any weird prejudices about our relationship, but her reaction felt kind of off in its own way...

I let out a sigh, adjusting the position of the backpack Master had given me that I wore on my shoulders as I tried to regain some semblance of seriousness.

“All right! We got way off track there, but I’m going now, okay?”

“Okay!” Lorea-chan chimed. “Take care, Sarasa-san!”



"Take care, Sarasa," said Kate. "We'll look after things here!"

"Yes," Iris agreed. "We'll hold down the fort. Just forget all about the shop, and don't rush things."

"Take your time," added Maris-san. "By the time you get back, this will be *my* shop."

They were all sending me off with words of encouragement, though one person was being weird about it.

"It will not!" Lorea-chan pushed back on the person being weird, clenching her fists as she declared, "Sarasa-san, don't worry. I'll protect the place for you!"

I smiled and patted her tense shoulders. "Hee hee, you've got this, Lorea-chan. You're the shopkeeper while I'm away!"

Episode 1: At the Capital

It had been a long time since I'd been in the hustle and bustle of the capital, and it was making me feel strangely restless. There were far more people here than in South Strag, let alone Yok Village, and the difference in atmosphere was highly stimulating after over a year spent living a relaxed life in the countryside.

Nothing had changed massively since I was last here, but there were a number of shops I didn't recognize, and that fact caught my interest.

"I'll have to look around once I'm done with my business. I want to bring back souvenirs for everyone...I guess including Maris-san? I can't deny she's been helping me out."

Leonora-san had told me I ought to run Maris-san ragged a bit until she'd paid off her debts, but I'd have felt bad for her if she was the only one who didn't get anything. It was never fun being left out.

I had all sorts of other things I wanted to buy too, so making a round of the shops was going to be really important, but...

My first destination was already decided.

The closer I got to it, the faster I walked.

Eventually, unable to restrain my eagerness any longer, I took off running through the crowded streets.

"The place hasn't changed..." Feeling reassured by that stability, I pushed open the door and chimed, "Hello!"

"Oh! Hello, Sarasa-san. You've arrived?" I was greeted by a gentle voice that remained the same as the day I'd left.

"Yes! I just got here. It's good to see you again, Maria-san."

Yep, my first stop had to be Master's shop. It was no exaggeration to say that she was the only reason I had been able to go into business for myself; there was no way I wouldn't stop in

here first to pay my respects.

Of course, that doesn't change the fact I was totally bewildered when she made me set up shop way out in the hinterlands!

"Is Master in?" I asked.

"Yes, she's in the workshop. Go poke your head in and let her know you're here."

"Sure. If you don't mind, I'll show myself in."

I knew this shop like it was my own. I headed into the back and knocked before entering the workshop, where I found Master sitting in a chair as she worked on something. She turned her head and greeted me with a smile.

"Oh, Sarasa, you made it here all right, huh?" she asked.

"Yes. It's been too long, Master. I'm glad to see you're doing well."

"Yeah, kinda. So, tell me, how long did it take you to make the trip this time?"

"You're leading with that?! You're not going to act more happy to see me again?!"

I objected to the way Master had moved on to business without taking a moment to soak in the emotion, but she just shrugged and smiled: "There's no need for that when we've been exchanging letters all this time."

"Well, maybe you're right, but..."

It's still been a year since we've met in person. You could act a little happier about it, couldn't you? I'm your adorable apprentice after all, aren't I?

"What? Were you hoping for a more emotional reunion?" Master said, spreading her arms wide teasingly.

"Oh, of course not! Come on!" I replied, puffing up my cheeks.

"Heh heh." Master chuckled. "So, how about it? I'm not expecting three days, but did you make it in about a week?"

"Don't lump me together with you, Master! It took me over two weeks..."

"Hmm... That's faster than last year, though, isn't it? So you're improving."

"Well, yeah, it's less than the month it took me back then, but it's

not really that simple of a comparison, you know?"

Last year, I had been traveling to an unfamiliar place, switching from one carriage to the next in order to reach my destination. This time, I had run using my own feet, so it wasn't as simple as "I'm twice as fast now!"

"It's true, passenger carriages are slow, after all. I'll have to take a look at your swordsmanship too, then."

"Come on, let me savor the moment for a bit here! Why do you need to rush into that martial arts stuff?!"

I don't need an emotional reunion, but a few kind words to acknowledge I might be tired from my long trip would go a long way with a girl my age, you know?!

"I told you when I gave you that sword, though, didn't I? I want to see what you can do with it." Master smiled as she pointed to the sword at my hip.

Yeah, since I was traveling alone this time, I'd brought it with me for my protection, though I fortunately never had to use it.

Urgh! If I'd known, maybe I'd have left it at the shop?

Nah, it wouldn't have helped. This is Master we're talking about.

"Yes, I remember," I replied. "You said, 'The next time I come.' But *you* haven't come to see *me*! *I* came to *you*!"

"It makes little difference. Or have you been letting that sword get covered in dust all this time?"

"No, I've been getting some practice in. If anything, I've been letting it get covered in blood."

This sword had helped me out a lot, but I wasn't entirely sure that was the right thing for me as an alchemist. *Hasn't my lifestyle as an alchemist been a little too violent?*

"But I don't have anyone to teach me, so I don't think I'll have improved, you know?"

"That's why I'm checking, isn't it?" Master said.

"Right... If you have to check something, I'd prefer it was my alchemy. Though, I suspect I've said that already."

"I'm repeating myself too, but have you hit a wall? Isn't this the point in your career where every day is interesting because you get to try out all sorts of things?"

Come to think of it, she had told me she'd consider giving me advice if I ran into a wall.

"Murgh, I can't disagree with you. I *want* to try all sorts of things. I just don't have enough money or time."

"I know, right? It was the same for me," Master replied with a laugh. She looked around the workshop as if basking in old memories, then turned back to me.

"Well, let's set that aside for now," she continued. "Sarasa, have you decided where you're staying in the capital?"

"Not yet. This was my first stop after I got here."

"Then stay at my place. I'm sure the cost of staying at an inn wouldn't set you back much these days, but Maria would love it if you stayed with us. She hasn't been able to sit still since she heard you'd be coming to the capital."

"In that case..." I thought about it for a moment then bowed my head. "Thank you. I'll be in your care."

Master gave me a slightly relieved nod. "Ah, if you can afford to, then stay awhile. You've learned to relax a little, I hope?"

"Yes, I suppose I have. Compared to last year."

Back then, I wouldn't have been able to accept Master's kindness, and would have probably ended up staying at an inn. I had just graduated then, so I had been fixated on the idea that I needed to take care of myself.

But now that I had my own shop to go home to, and I'd met Iris and Kate as well, I was a little more confident I could get by on my own. It might have been weird that I was more willing to indulge in the kindness of others as a result, but knowing I didn't need to be stubborn about it was a major change for me.

"That's good. You're still young—you need to rely on people where you can. Your elders won't like it when you act weirdly reserved about it."

"Even you, Master?"

"I suppose not. If their own apprentice won't rely on them, that's harder on a master than you'd think."

Master smiled and patted me on the head.

"Now then," she said, gesturing to the chair beside hers. "There's

still time before business is done for the day. You help out too, Sarasa. I'm working on a slightly troublesome transmutation right now."

Master's lessons were always the hands-on type. I couldn't recall her ever giving me a lesson the way they did at the academy.

I immediately replied, "Okay!" and took a seat next to her.

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"Wow... What a feast this is!"

Once business hours were over and I'd taken a bath to wash off all the dirt and grime of my journey, I found a table loaded down with Maria-san's homemade cooking. There was more there than the three of us could eat, and many of the dishes I'd never seen before, but...even without eating them, I could already tell:

These are all totally delicious! No doubt about it!!!

Lorea-chan was a good cook, but Maria-san had more experience, and not by a small margin either. Plus, when considering the quality of the ingredients used, there was really no contest.

"Maria's been preparing for your arrival for a while, you see..." explained Master.

"Hee hee, I got a little carried away," Maria-san said with a smile as she filled up my plate. "Please, eat as much as you can, okay?"

"Okay!" I agreed with a big nod. "It's been a while since I've had your cooking, so I'd be delighted to!"

"Heh heh, I've got some good booze too," Master said mischievously, holding up a bottle. "How about it, Sarasa?"

"Nope! I'll have to pass on that." I rejected it with a firm shake of my head. "I apparently have no tolerance for the stuff."

I'm not going to have a repeat of last year's disgrace! Not that I remember any of it!

"Oh, yeah? I'd been hoping to serve some good drink to my apprentice. How about just a little?"

"Not! A! Drop! You know what you're doing when you're plying me with that stuff, don't you, Master?"

"Ah, what a shame it is when a master's love goes unappreciated.

And here I thought we'd get some entertainment."

"That's some love I can do without! I'm going to request that you stick to some more ordinary displays of love for your apprentice!"

With that firm of a refusal, Master didn't push the issue any further. She served herself and Maria from the bottle of wine, then poured me a glass of juice or something like it from another bottle.

I sniffed it cautiously. "It doesn't...smell like alcohol."

"Suspicious, aren't we? I wouldn't trick you like that with Maria watching."

"I see. We'll need to have Maria-san present for all our dinners!"

"Don't you worry about that. There wouldn't even be any food without her! Ha ha ha!"

Is that something to boast about, Master?

Not that I can remember you ever making food!

Having watched us banter for a while, Maria picked up her glass and said, "Now then, let's have a toast to our precious apprentice, who we haven't seen in far too long."

"Yeah. And to Sarasa having made it through her first year safely," added Master.

Having both offered something to toast to, they looked at me expectantly.

"Huh? Um, um... To Master and Maria-san's everlasting love?" I blurted out in the heat of the moment.

They smiled and raised their glasses.

"Cheers!" all three of us said in unison, and then I gulped down my drink.

"Pfwah! Cool and delicious!"

I didn't know what kind of juice it was, but it was sweet and had a refreshing, citrusy aroma. If this were an ordinary restaurant, I'd have been surprised that it came chilled, but here in Master's house, it was nothing out of the ordinary.

"Whew... Let me just say, while I did get through the year somehow, it wasn't exactly peaceful."

Given the location, I had known going into it that managing a shop in Yok Village wouldn't be easy. I'd expected my share of trouble in the first year, but the trouble that'd come my way wasn't

the sort I'd expected at all!

Iris's first appearance, the hellflame grizzly frenzy, a troublesome merchant, and then even more trouble (Prince Ferrick).

Is it like this at first for everyone? Or am I just special...?

Master laughed when she saw me sigh as I reflected on my first year. "It seems like trouble's taken a fancy to you, Sarasa."

"Oh, so my experience *wasn't* normal, then... Though, some of that's your fault, Master."

At the very least, Prince Ferrick getting involved had something to do with her. But then again, I was able to save Iris because Master sent all sorts of stuff with me. Looking at it on the whole, I had overwhelmingly benefited from Master's involvement, so it was hard to really complain.

But let me grouse a little, okay?

"I didn't really do anything, but...that helped you to grow, didn't it?"

"I'm sure it did. I'm not going to deny that. If anything, you did all sorts of things to help me out."

All of the materials from the great forest, including the ones from the salamander I somehow managed to defeat, would've been a lot harder to sell without Master, and I doubt I'd have been able to save the House of Lotze in that case.

"Don't worry about that," Master reassured me. "I'm making a slight profit on all the materials you send."

"Is that where this big feast came from, perhaps?" I asked, thinking that this meal was a little spendy if the only reason was that we hadn't seen each other in a while. "Like you're giving a little something back..."

Master and Maria traded glances, then smirked.

Urk, I've got a bad feeling about this.

"That's not really it, but you're right that we've spent a good chunk of change on this meal," Master acknowledged before adding, "It's to celebrate your marriage too, after all."

"Pfffwght!" I nearly choked on my food. Through my coughs, I asked, "How do you know about that?!"

I saw it coming, and I still couldn't take it!

During the trouble with Baronet Kahku, we'd considered the idea of using the transporter to send her our marriage paperwork if the situation called for it, but we'd never ended up going through with it, and I'd never talked to Master about it!

Do master class alchemists have information gathering networks that extend all the way out into the frontier?!

"I got a letter from Iris. It said that you two were getting married, and she hoped we'd continue to support you."

The leaker was closer than I thought!

"I-Iris," I wheezed. "I-It's true, though. I do remember asking her to send you a letter at one point..."

"She's such a good girl, isn't she?" noted Maria-san. "She wrote a very polite letter saying that, since you don't have parents, if there's anyone she should pay her respects to before the marriage, it was Ophelia and me. And that she'd like to meet us in person someday."

"Ngggh," I groaned. "How very courteous of her. I can't even complain..."

Master smiled a little at that. "Though, I already knew before she wrote to me, you realize?"

"Why...?" I asked. "Is Lorea-chan the traitor?"

I'm aware Lorea-chan sends letters to Maria-san occasionally, you know? That's why I let Iris's letter go through without even thinking about it...

"Oh, come on now, a traitor? Really...? Prince Ferrick was just very vocal about that particular development."

"Gah—!!!"

I couldn't go and commit lèse-majesté, so I stopped myself short of saying anything.

Oh, sure, it's fine that he knows. He's royalty, after all. He's in a position where he ought to be aware of marriages between the nobility.

But why would he go spreading it around? Is he some gossip-obsessed auntie? Is the diligent royal out chatting with folks around the local watering hole?

Master and Maria smiled awkwardly while I clenched my hands into fists and shuddered.

"The Alchemist Academy was created with the sponsorship of the royal family in order to make our country stronger. Despite being an orphan, you graduated from there with excellent marks and married into the nobility. That sort of story gives hope to talented commoners, and inspires a sense of urgency in the nobles who've been resting on their laurels. Is there any reason he wouldn't make use of it?"

"Urgh... I guess not, huh? It *is* a fact that the academy saved me."

If I hadn't gone, what would've happened to me after I left the orphanage? I'd have probably been unable to find proper work and been left in poverty. That being the case, I should probably put up with a small thing like this.

"Still, I never expected my own apprentice to get married before me... You were just a little girl when I first met you, but now you're not a maiden anymore. When are you expecting to have children?"

"I'm not! For a *long* time! And I'm still a maiden!"

Why'd she have to take the conversation there?! I get it's a noble's obligation to have kids, but still!

"Oh, yeah? Ohh, I guess that potion's still beyond your abilities. Should I make it for you in place of a wedding gift? I'll guarantee its efficacy. Which of you is going to be the man?"

"No! Thank! You! If anyone needs a potion, it's you, isn't it, Master? I mean, you *look* young, but you've got some years on you, don't you? You're not going to be able to have kids forever."

Master kept teasing me with a smirk, and I wanted to get some hits of my own in, so I took things in a slightly risky direction.

But Master maintained a composed smile, giving me a somewhat firm pat on the head. "Oh, look at the mouth on you. But when did I ever say I *don't* have children?"

"Huh? You do?! W-With who?! I was sure that—"

I hurriedly looked at Maria-san, trying to gauge her reaction, but she had the same gentle look on her face as always.

So, with Maria-san, then? No, or was it with someone else? Or maybe Master gave birth her—

"I haven't said that I *do* either."

"Which is it?! Come on!"

"It's a secret. Doesn't being a bit mysterious seem more fitting for a master class alchemist?"

"There's a fact I can't deny! I mean, you don't *look* like one at a glance..."

I didn't even know how amazing you are until somebody else told me!

"Say what you like. I'm not like those other geezers who make acting all important their reason for living."

"Oh? It's not like all master class alchemists are old, though, right?" Maria-san interjected, but Master met it with a derisive snort.

"Hmph. No matter how they look on the outside, it's fair to call most of them old."

I knew becoming a master class alchemist must take a long time —oh.

"Come to think of it, I don't know any of the others. What are they all like?" I asked as the question popped into my head.

Master gave me a slightly exasperated look. "You didn't know about me either, did you? If you're an alchemist, you should take more interest in these— Ah, you know what, no, you don't have to. Nothing good would come from you getting involved with people like that."

"Hee hee, Ophelia... Is that a self-deprecating joke?" asked Maria-san.

"I mean all of the master class alchemists *but* me."

"The way I see it, I think the others would say the same thing, though..."

Well, if they've been working as alchemists for a long time, I guess there's no way that they'd be easy to deal with.

"Oh, come to think of it, I don't think I've ever heard how old you —"

"Hmm? Sarasa, did you say something?" Master cut me off and brought her face close to mine with a fake smile plastered on it.

Gwah! Even Master's touchy about that?!

Time to change the subject! Um, er, uh... I know!

"S-So, there was a seed I didn't recognize mixed in with the

seeds you sent me before. What was that? I don't think you ever explained!"

It felt a bit forced since I was grasping for a question, but it *was* something I had been meaning to ask the next time I saw her. I hadn't been able to identify the plant when it was a seed, and I still had no clue now when it had grown a little. It wasn't in the books I had on hand, so I was curious about it.

But, maybe because of the abrupt change in topic, Master didn't seem to remember it right away. She had to think for a bit, then clapped her hands as it came to her.

She smiled at me in amusement. "Ohh, that. Did you try planting it?"

"Yes. It grew into some kind of tree. And it's a special kind that absorbs lots of magical power."

It was a strange plant that had drunk up the magical power in the Auxiliary Grower, and even now that it had taken root in the back garden, it still absorbed whatever magical power I fed it. The trade-off was that it grew quickly, but it probably wasn't an ordinary plant.

"Oh, it grew into a tree, you say? That's amazing."

"So it's an impressive enough tree to have you call it 'amazing,' then. It did feel like something a little different to me."

I'd usually have been more surprised, but it was something Master had sent me.

Even if it was a little strange, I was bound to write it off as "Well, it's from Master."

But what she said next blew away my composure completely.

"That was a soraum seed."

"Whuh?! You mean *the* soraum?! The celestial fruit?! The one they say a single bite of can transport you to heaven?! That soraum?!"

In contrast to my shock, Master just tilted her head to the side a little, looking extremely calm about all of this. "It won't really take you to heaven. I'm not going to try to tell you that it isn't delicious, but people oversell it."

"You've had it?! The fruit they say costs so much you could build

a house for the same price?”

“Nah, it’s not enough to build a house. Though, maybe it’s enough to have bought your shop.”

“That’s over ten thousand rhea, then, right? That’s more than expensive enough!”

On top of that, the fruit of the soraum was only three centimeters in diameter. Even someone as petite as me could finish that off in a bite or two!

Master smirked at the way I was blinking in shocked surprise.

“If anything, the soraum’s value comes from it being hard to come by. That’s why I thought I’d share it with you.”

“Share it with me... If you were going to do that, I’d have preferred it with the fruit still on.”

I appreciated the sentiment, but I couldn’t enjoy it as a seed.

Maria-san’s eyes drooped apologetically. “I’m sorry, Sarasa-san. Ophelia used the fruit in an experiment...”

“Oh, no, you have nothing to apologize for, Maria-san! Actually, I shouldn’t be complaining in the first place. I was just thinking it’d have been nice to taste it, that’s all.”

“You say that, but that soraum seed was valuable too, you know? I don’t know the exact ratio, but they say fewer than one in a hundred fruits has a seed in it. Isn’t that good enough?”

It’s even rarer than I thought?! She’s right! That’s more than enough! But still...

“Why did you just throw something so incredible in without saying anything?!” I demanded, casting a look of suspicion at Master.

“Hmm...” Master thought for a moment before returning the question. “How much do you know about the soraum, Sarasa?”

“Just that it’s really valuable, it tastes good, and it’s hard to grow.”

“That’s more or less correct, but it’s not that it’s hard to grow—it’s impossible. Like I said before, it’s hard to collect the seeds in the first place, and they don’t grow when planted. I’ve even tried it myself, and I had no luck.”

“Really...? It just grew like normal for me.”

“Which would be why I was surprised, yes?”

Ever since the soraum was discovered to be a rare material, there had been a number of attempts by alchemists to cultivate it artificially. But not only were wild soraum rare already, the seeds wouldn't grow when planted, and the seedlings would stop growing and then wither and die if they were transplanted from their original soil to a grower artifact.

"That's why the places where they grow are kept secret, and only select gatherers are allowed to harvest them. It's so that they don't die out due to overharvesting. That's where their value comes from."

"Huh? But harvesting the fruit doesn't hurt the tree, right? They just have to be careful."

"It's because the leaves of the soraum are also alchemic materials. You can see why plucking the leaves would hurt the tree, right?"

"Ohh, that makes sen— Huh? This is the first I'm hearing of this."

She said it so casually that I almost moved along without taking note of it, but I'd done a decent amount of studying. *If a fruit as famous as the soraum also had those properties, then there was no way I wouldn't have remembered it, right?*

"That's because it's a secret. Unlike the fruit, the leaves can be harvested any time. It wouldn't be good if any gatherers who happened to wander across a soraum went and plucked off all of the leaves every time, now would it?"

"If they don't know how valuable the leaves are, then they'll move along when they see that there's no fruit growing, huh. Um, Master, are you sure you ought to be telling me this?"

"Hmm... Sarasa, keep your mouth shut, got it?"

"Masterrrr! Don't I have a serious problem, growing a tree like that in my backyard?!"

"Yeah, and that's why I was surprised."

"Not nearly surprised enough! Not nearly, Master! You just went 'oh'!"

Master was talking about it casually, but this was clearly big trouble!

But I wasn't exactly going to go chopping the tree down now that I'd managed to grow it...

"Why'd you go and throw such a valuable seed in...?"

"Like I said before, normally, the soraum won't grow even if you plant its seed. If the seed germinated, then it was clearly meant to be. It was written in the stars. No matter what situation it was in."

So if it was fated to germinate, then it didn't matter if she just threw it in with my other seeds, then?

Her logic didn't hold up to even a cursory examination, but this *was* the mysterious soraum we were dealing with.

I guess that could be true, I started to think, but...

"That's all just nice-sounding justifications she came up with after the fact, though."

Maria-san went and upended that entire train of thought.

"Hey, stop that, Maria!"

"Hee hee hee! The truth is that it just happened to be sitting on the table with the seeds we were sending you, and it got mixed in by mistake," Maria-san explained, ignoring Master's complaints with a smile.

Master crossed her arms and got all upset. "Seriously, Maria... You're hurting my credibility here."

"Master... I want my admiration back."

I do admire her for it in another way, though. For being so composed she can treat precious goods with so little concern!

Unable to take my disappointed stare any longer, Master somewhat anxiously patted me on the shoulder.

"W-Well, it's all good in the end, right? If it grows well, you'll have all the soraum you can eat. It's a bit overblown to call it the 'celestial fruit' or whatever, but make no mistake, it *is* delicious."

"I just keep on attracting trouble! I'm looking forward to being able to eat the fruit, though... Do you know how long it takes to bear fruit? It's growing fast, so maybe in a few years?"

"Dunno. There are people who say it can take twenty to forty years, but—"

"Whaa?! I'll be an old lady by then!"

"The dominant theory is that it takes more than a century."

"Ah..."

I'd be more than just old by then.

"Though, that's with wild plants. If you raise it with care, maybe it'll bear fruit sooner."

"Reeeally? I'm having a little trouble believing you right now."

"That's harsh, Sarasa. But can you blame me for not knowing? There's no record of anyone growing a soraum. If you investigate thoroughly, you could be the foremost researcher on the topic."

"Huh...? I'm an alchemist, not a botanist, you realize?"

"If it's too much trouble, why not tell Nordrad? I'm sure he'd be happy to look into it."

"I see what you're saying. Going to him would be— Wait, you know him, Master?"

"Yeah. His books can be quite interesting."

It was true that Nord-san would probably be all too happy to come back to Yok Village, but he was the kind of guy who'd revive a salamander for his research. He seemed likely to do all sorts of unhinged stuff, so having him set up in the village permanently would be...a bit much to bear.

"I think I'll refrain from telling him. I wouldn't want him killing my tree for his research."

"Fair enough. I'll warn you, you'd do well not to let word of your soraum leak out."

"You're saying that when you sent it to me?! Fine, I get it..." I puffed up my cheeks angrily.

Even if people didn't know about the value of its leaves, it was already a big enough deal that the soraum, which wasn't supposed to be able to be cultivated, was growing so close to human civilization.

Master smiled before continuing. "I don't know that I'd say this is in exchange, but I'll teach you how to use the leaves later. Because I doubt you'll be able to find the information by researching it yourself."

"That's...helpful of you. I'd like to at least get some profit out of it, y'know?"

If the efficacy of the leaves was a secret, then there was no way the method for using them was public. If the only payoff for taking on such a troublesome plant was that it *might* bear fruit someday,

that just wasn't worth it...

"By the way, what did you use the soraum's fruit for, Master? You were saying it was for research, right?"

"Hm? Oh, nothing that special. I was just playing around."

This being Master, I thought that maybe she had been working on something incredible, but for some reason, she looked away and dodged the question. Maria-san chuckled.

"That's right. It's just juice, after all," she said.

"Huh, just juice? Really?" I asked. "With no special properties?"

"Maria... I bought it because someone brought it in, but there was no use for it. I could have just eaten it, but I thought it would be nice to try something new once in a while."

I see how it is. When you get to Master's level, you can't just say you're not able to buy something. I mean, if a master class alchemist can't buy it, where do you even go to sell it?

Besides, based on our earlier conversation, the fruits are really just camouflage for the value of the leaves. Maybe an alchemist doesn't have much use for the fruit...

"That's some *very* expensive juice, then," I observed.

"We mixed it with some other fruit juices, but...even then a cup's worth would still cost enough to buy your shop," explained Maria-san.

"Yikes... That's certainly never going to sell. I doubt I'll ever have anything to do with it."

The sorts of luxury wines that nobles drink probably get up to similar prices, but this is just juice we're talking about.

I took a sip of my own juice as I thought about it*. Yeah, this is more than delicious enough. I couldn't ask for better.*

Then Maria-san casually pointed at my cup.

"It's that juice, by the way."

"Urkh!!!"

I nearly choked when I heard this outrageous revelation, but knowing the price, there was no way I was going to spew it out!

As if I could do that!!!

I coughed and sputtered as I tried to recover.

"See, Maria," Master chided her, "I told you it'd turn out like this."

“But you went to all the trouble of making it, so shouldn’t you at least tell her? I thought it would be best if she knew before she finished drinking it.”

“Is that how it works? I don’t think the price changes how it tastes, though?”

The two of them went on talking like that as I forced myself to swallow and then kept on coughing.

I think one of you’s as bad as the other here!!!

◇ ◇ ◇

The next day, I visited the palace on my own. I wasn’t going to meet the king, and I didn’t have any business with the prince. Instead, I was here to report my taxes. The tax department in the palace would accept and check over my paperwork.

“I’m an alchemist. I’ve come to report my taxes,” I said, a little tense, as I showed my license at the gate.

“Thank you for coming. Do you know where to go? If you enter the building on your left, there are signs.”

The man on guard duty must have been used to dealing with novice alchemists, because his explanation was easy to understand.

I followed his directions to the relevant department and submitted my paperwork. The woman working with me went through it page by page. Some tense moments later, she smiled at me.

“Yes, this should be fine. There aren’t any issues. You did quite well for your first time.”

“Thank you. I had my master look over it for me...”

Yeah, I’d asked Master to give it a look-through the night before, so I’d known it was all in order—even though it was Maria-san who’d actually checked it over.

“Oh, I see. It’s good to ask for help where you can. Better than acting stubborn, and having to submit correction after correction, until you ultimately go crying to your master anyway like some alchemists... It’s less work for us too.”

“Ha ha ha... Thank you for your hard work. Do you have a lot of

people reporting around this time?"

Most people reported every year and a half. I thought they might cluster around the same time of year, but she shook her head. "No, not particularly. Apprentices all go independent from their masters at different times. You're about the only one who's done it upon graduation, Sarasa Feed-san."

"Do you know me...?" I asked a little cautiously.

My name was on the paperwork, so of course she knew that. But there were only so many people who knew I'd opened up a shop right after graduating.

She gave me a smile that said, *What are you talking about?*

"There isn't a person in this department who doesn't know Millis-sama's apprentice."

"O-Oh, I see..."

Urgh, I'd forgotten that angle. I guess Master's name recognition draws attention anywhere...

"I'm sure having such a great master is a lot of pressure, but it would seem that your achievements so far are up to those standards. Even I've heard about many of the things you've done."

"I'm a little scared to ask what exactly."

"There are some stories told with hints of jealousy, but that's not a bad thing, so long as they're evaluating you fairly."

R-Really? If I look at it with a level head, I could see how I might have earned myself a bad reputation, though...?

Doing things like killing thieves and merchants, crushing a nobleman, and causing a salamander to go on a rampage...

I only killed the bandits; the rest of those weren't me! It's just that it could look *like I did those things!*

Also, with the salamander, I definitely did nothing wrong!

I must've had quite the awkward look on my face.

The woman let out an amused chuckle, stamped my paperwork, and returned it to me. "Here. Thank you for coming in. Now we've determined how much you owe. Please pay your tax at the window over there, and receive a receipt of payment. Then go to the eighth lounge. You'll find it out the door there on the left."

"H-Huh? The lounge? Is there some problem...?"

"No, no, you'll just be asked some questions. You live out on the frontier, after all. You've learned about this, right?"

Ohh, now that she mentions it, this did come up at the academy.

Intellectuals (alchemists) who were spread out all around the country came to the capital to report their taxes.

For the palace, this was a prime opportunity to gather information on other regions. There was no reason for them not to take advantage of it.

Not everyone was called in, so I had forgotten it might happen, but I recalled them having mentioned that people living far away from the capital, like I now did, were often called in.

I thanked the woman who had been helping me, paid my taxes, and then left the room so I could head to the lounge. They were numbered first, second, and so on, and I knocked on the door of the eighth, which was the one at the very end.

"Please come in."

I went quiet. *I've got an incredibly bad feeling about this. I recognize that voice from somewhere, don't I?*

I couldn't just do an about-face and leave, so I steeled myself and went inside.

"Pardon me— Ah!"

My misgivings were on the mark. It was the most troublesome man of all, Prince Ferrick.

"Now, now, if you make a face like that, you'll hurt my feelings," he quipped.

Liar. You're not that sensitive, Your Highness!

He was a prince, though, so I plastered on a smile and acted agreeable.

"It's been too long, Your Highness. Have you been well since the last we met?"

"Yes, yes. You can see just how well I'm doing thanks to you."

His Highness ran his fingers through his hair repeatedly.

It was a very princely gesture, but I'd seen him do the exact same thing when he was bald up top, so... *H-Hang in there, my sides! Now's the time to show what you're made of!!!*

"I-Is that right? I'm relieved the, uh, *effect*...worked for you."

Yes, my sides are victorious!!!

His Highness looked a little disappointed as he motioned for me to take a seat. "The reason I've called you here is ostensibly to ask for information about the former Kahku Baronetcy, now administered as the crown domain of 'Lochhart'—but that's not really why."

"Oh, really...?"

"Yes, it's a crown domain, so I already have information on it. I'm simply taking this opportunity to summon you in a way that looks natural. I mean, royals don't go about gathering information like this themselves."

"Of course not. I'm sure you're all very busy people."

Seeing me nod in agreement, His Highness shook his head awkwardly. "That may not necessarily be true... But regardless, I have two things to talk to you about. This is the first."

With that, His Highness placed two thick tomes on top of the table.

Their title was *Salamanders: Their Ecology and a Discussion of Experimental Results*.

"Nord asked me to give these to you and Iris. They're contributor copies. He says he was able to finish his work thanks to your cooperation. Please, do him the favor of reading it."

Books were by no means inexpensive. But I felt like I was okay with accepting this one as a gift. *Because I can think of more than enough trouble that we went through to earn it!*

I took the volumes at His Highness's urging and flipped through one. Despite having been written with an expert audience in mind, it was more readable than I would have expected, and there were some impressive insert drawings. It was quite well produced.

And at the very end, there was a list of his many past works.

"He really has written a lot of books, huh. On botany in addition to monsters too..."

"Are you interested? I could give you an entire set of them."

"Oh, no!" I hurriedly shook my head. "I couldn't accept so many books."

His Highness smiled a little as he shrugged. "It's nothing to worry about. I have many copies of each of them. I'm sure Nord would be

happier if they went to someone who could use them."

Nord-san had told me before that he had been submitting the results of his research and receiving reward money in exchange. However, the resultant research manuscripts he authored were apparently stored at the castle, so His Highness was in a position to read them whenever he pleased. But, because the prince was also donating personally to the project, Nord-san gave him a number of contributor copies of the final published works.

"So I'll get a set together to give you sometime soon. Since you'll have them anyway, please do read them."

"Right... So is Nord-san actually more incredible than I thought? Master knew him too."

"You know that old saying about how the difference between being a genius and being something much less flattering can be paper-thin? I keep on funding him because he gets results that are more valuable than the damage he causes, but...I imagine, in your eyes, he was more of a walking disaster than a genius."

"In that case, next time he comes, I'll keep my head low and wait for him to go by."

When I suggested I wouldn't help him again, His Highness just gave me an inscrutable smile. "I think the most frightening thing about natural disasters is that they don't go as we might expect them to."

Huh...? Please don't say something so ominous...

But what he said next made that ominous feeling seem moderate in comparison. "Setting that aside, next is the main reason I've called you here. Sarasa-san, were you aware that public order has been on the decline in Lochhart, which includes South Strag, and that the number of bandits has been rising?"

"No, that's news to me. We haven't really noticed it in Yok Village..."

"I'd imagine not. What group of thieves would attack a village where there's an alchemist who could wipe all of them out, and she leads a group of gatherers who've fended off a hellflame grizzly frenzy?"

I see. Setting aside his comment about me leading them, the old

guard of gatherers in Yok Village are a trustworthy and reliable bunch. They'd send any bandits packing.

"But Yok Village is an exception. The other villages and merchants who travel along the roads have been suffering from banditry. As such, I would like to request your assistance in restoring public order."

I paused before asking, "Wouldn't that be the job of the local magistrate?"

When I asked why he was talking to me about this, His Highness gave me a slightly troubled smile. "He's a capable man, but somewhat shorthanded. After the former baronet was punished, the magistrate carried out a series of reforms, but it feels like he may have moved a little too quickly."

He'd fired all of the soldiers and officials engaged in wrongdoing. By working to purge South Strag of organized crime, he had been able to improve public order in the town itself, but it left him with fewer people working for him, and the villains he'd chased out had found new work as bandits, damaging public order in the domain as a whole.

Seen in that light, it was a failed policy, but the reason that the former baronet had been punished was for rebellion against the king. If he showed mercy to those close to the baronet, that would bring suspicion on those who remained, so, apparently, he had been left with no choice.

"The result is that we've lost a large number of the personnel who were maintaining order. And the Sixth Guard Platoon, who were trustworthy, all resigned together for some reason?"

Those were the guys from the snowy mountains, right? He says "for some reason," but he definitely knows, doesn't he?

I wasn't going to poke that hornet's nest, though. I decided to attack it from a different angle.

"I understand you're having a lot of trouble, but why me? I'm just a common alche—"

"But you're not, are you? What is your name?"

I didn't understand the point of His Highness's question.

"Huh? It's Sarasa Feed..."

"But it's changed now, hasn't it?" His Highness asked again, smiling.

"Oh... It's Sarasa Feed-Lotze," I replied as I suddenly recalled that fact.

I should have been calling myself Sarasa Lotze, really.

Since I wanted to keep the Feed name somehow, I had discussed it with Adelbert-sama, and we'd gone with the hyphenated name, but it was the "Lotze" part that was important here.

Once I'd corrected myself, His Highness nodded with satisfaction. "That's right. With the marriage certificate submitted the other day, you are a member of the House of Lotze. There was also a request to transfer the headship to you at the same time, which His Majesty has already approved."

Huh? I didn't hear about that. I know I got married, but I'm also the head of the house? And it's already gone through?

They said they were considering transferring it, but they actually went and did it?

"Um, so that means...?"

"Right now you are Knight Lotze. You are aware of the obligations of the nobility, yes?"

"Urgh..."

Landed nobility had a number of obligations placed on them in exchange for the domains that they had been given by the kingdom. One of those, naturally, was the duty to dispatch troops at the request of the kingdom.

That meant that, if he ordered me to send troops to restore public order on crown lands, then I had no choice but to comply.

Urgh! I'm getting hit with the responsibilities of being a noble before I've even gotten to experience the benefits!

"Now then, Knight Lotze. I am appointing you as an agent of the lord of Lochhart with plenary powers."

I was momentarily dumbfounded. "Come again? Huh? You're giving me authority to act with all the rights of a lord of the domain? Just to put down some bandits?"

His Highness nodded, never letting his smile break. "Yes. You are a lord, even if a minor one, so placing you under the command of a

magistrate would be problematic, but it would be irresponsible for me to tell you to just go around and kill bandits as you see fit. Lochhart is a troublesome region in many ways, so you will need a position that allows you to look at the full picture, and gives you the authority to act."

Urgh... I get that much. If I were to just run around killing bandits, there would be trouble if they fled into neighboring domains. I can't just focus on putting down bandits while ignoring how they relate to the roads and the flow of goods.

But...it's a lot of responsibility! Too much?! Making me a plenipotentiary!

"Y-You don't have to give this duty to someone young and inexperienced like me. There have to be other nobles in the area around Lochhart..."

"Unfortunately, our kingdom is incredibly short of hands. That's part of why we established the Alchemist Academy... Think about it. There are only petty nobles in that area. People like Adelbert Lotze, for instance. Do you think he'd be up to the task?"

"Well..."

I think he's a good lord, but only as far as ruling a small village. He's also my father-in-law, so I'd like to stick up for him, but the fact he pulled a fast one on me is getting in the way of that.

"Most of the others are of similar—no, even lower quality than Adelbert. But I have right here a good candidate who's studied both politics and the economy. How incredibly fortuitous."

He had a person he could use, and a valid reason to use them. That left him no reason not to.

I understood that. I'd have done the same in his position, and I'd recognize it was the right choice.

If it was anyone but me!

"I'm being considerate, you realize? I could have called you in to the audience hall, and had the king himself appoint you as acting lord, but you are Master Millis's apprentice, after all."

That really left me no room for objection. No response other than "I humbly accept" would be allowed.

That he was spelling it out for me like this showed that His

Highness was being considerate, just like he claimed he was.

"Besides, I'm told you have no forgiveness in your heart for bandits, Sarasa-san. If you take this job, you can go around killing every bandit you lay eyes on. Around Yok Village too."

I obviously wasn't going to ask His Smiling Highness how he knew about that.

But I wish he wouldn't talk about me like I killed for pleasure. I won't deny that I had no forgiveness for bandits, and considering the risk to people I knew, I couldn't leave them alone, though.

I had a duty, a reason, and it was in line with my beliefs.

With all avenues of escape cut off, I was left with no response but to say, "I humbly accept," and gain another reason to dislike His Highness.

◇ ◇ ◇

I left through the front gate of the palace, still nursing the headache that I'd been left with by His Highness's unreasonable demands, when I encountered...well, let's cut to the chase and call him a deviant.

"I am Hahjio Ka... Hahjio. Rejoice, commoner. I will grant you the honor of marrying me."

He looked...normal. He had a bit of a gut, but the clothes themselves weren't bad. I'll refrain from commenting on his fashion sense. I wasn't so closed-minded as to declare someone a deviant over their sartorial choices.

But he *acted* like a pervert. Proposing to someone he'd only just met was already out of line, and terming it an "honor" on top of that was beyond the pale. The world would forgive me for deeming him a deviant.

"I'm not sure I follow you..."

Way to give me another headache.

I made my feelings clear in my tone, but unfortunately the deviant didn't understand me.

He let out a sigh, fixing a disdaining gaze on me.

"This is the problem with you commoners," he said. "I, with my

noble blood, will explain it for you, so listen up, all right? You seem to have risen through underhanded methods, but you're still lowborn. And your partner in marriage, the House of Lotze, aren't far removed from commoners either. But I, however, am a pure-blooded noble. The addition of my blood would make your line a little less lowly. Oh, don't worry. Your body is underdeveloped, but I don't mind looking at your face, and your partner is fairly attractive as well. I'll take care of both of you. For one thing, a marriage between two women can never bear fruit, so—"

Wow! This guy's worse than I thought!

There wasn't any value in hearing anymore, so I stopped listening.

Not only was what he was saying totally messed up, the fact he was also weirdly familiar with my situation made it extra creepy.

Oh, yeah, His Highness was going around telling everyone, wasn't he?

Huh? So this is his fault too? The man's a plague!

Am I sure I can't get away with insulting him to his face at this point?

Yeah, that's not gonna fly... I mean, he's a prince, and kind of attractive.

I turned to look back at the guards, hoping someone was going to step in to rescue me, but unfortunately, they looked away and did their best not to see what was happening.

It's okay, though, I get it. You don't want to get involved in this, and I'm not actively being harmed as of yet.

But have a heart, would you? I'm just a frail little girl!

I shot them a look that said, *You'll never be popular with the ladies like that.* I had a feeling that the look I got back from them said, *You're an alchemist. There's nothing frail about you, okay?* But surely I was imagining it.

"...And so, in order to elucidate to you just how marvelous I am, I will..."

The pervert was still running his mouth, but I couldn't think of one iota of a reason to go along with it any longer.

I used my excess magical power to enhance my body as hard as I

could.

"You don't seem to be listening to— Hey, wait, where are you going?!"

Honestly, if there hadn't been any witnesses around, I'd have wanted to clobber him, but that obviously wasn't an option right in front of the palace. I put all of my frustration into running.

I left the deviant to his delusional rambling, and headed for...

"Hey, Master! Hear me out!!!"

In order to vent my indignation, I had run back to Master's place at top speed.

However, when I opened the door with a loud bang, Master remained unfazed.

"Ohh, Sarasa, welcome back. You get your taxes sorted out all right?"

"Oh, sure, thanks to your help, it went off without a— No, that's not it! A pervert! There was a pervert on the loose!"

The way she'd greeted me had taken a lot of the wind out of my sails, but I quickly recovered and gave her the details of my run-in with that deviant. I also tossed in some complaints about His Highness while I was at it, but Master didn't seem particularly moved by anything I was saying. She just nodded along disinterestedly.

"Master, aren't you being awfully cold to your apprentice? You could act a little bit more sympathetic."

I won't ask you to get mad alongside me. But I could do with some words of consolation.

Master just laughed a little and shrugged her shoulders. "I could have predicted you'd attract some weirdos. If you became a noble without weighing the costs and benefits, that's on you. Get through it on your own."

"Urgh... You're right. I know you're right, but still!"

"You'll run into more guys like that, you know? Although, I think that this one was a particularly rare breed of idiot. People will beg you to hire them or to provide financial aid. You look easy to push around, after all."

"I know that. I'm well aware I have no gravitas. But Master, you could help me out a little, you know? Lend a hand to your apprentice

who is going to be suffering in the future."

To be honest, having her as a backer was already a huge help.

But it's fine to ask for a bit more, right? I thought, looking at her with upturned eyes. Master put a hand on her chin and thought for a moment, and then began rummaging through a nearby shelf.

"You know, I think it was around here... Ah, found it. How about I give you this potion?"

What Master pulled out was a dusty potion bottle. It was larger than the standard type, and tightly sealed.

It looked dubious. Incredibly dubious.

"What *is* that? Not any potion that I know of, right?"

"If things get to be too much trouble and your hand slips, then use this to clean up afterward. Just a few drops will make it disappear entirely—I won't say what, though."

"That's a pretty extreme solution?! Wh-What do you think you're giving me?!"

"Don't worry. If you splash it on something living, the effect won't __"

"You've already basically said it, you know?!" I exclaimed, but noticing Master was about to withdraw the potion, I added, "I'm not passing up anything free, though," and politely accepted the bottle, then put it away.

Even if I never used it, as an alchemist, I wasn't about to pass up an unusual potion!

Oh, I have no clue idea what it does, though. Mm-hmm. None whatsoever.

So if somebody goes missing somewhere someday, it had nothing to do with me. I'm innocent. Got it?

"I always kind of knew this, but being a noble is a real pain. And Prince Ferrick suddenly goes pushing a huge job on me... Look at this, Master."

In order to show her just how awful it was, I showed her the written orders that His Highness had given me as I had been leaving.

"Hmm." Master's eyes widened a little as she read through it. "Ferrick's shown more consideration to you than I'd have expected."

"Huh? That reaction... Could it be that you knew?"

"Yeah. For all his faults, he's surprisingly conscientious. He talked to me about it first before doing anything."

"You could've stopped him...or no, I guess not. It's my obligation as a noble, after all."

I sighed and slumped my shoulders. Master smiled a little as she handed back the orders. "You can't only assert your privileges. Besides, Ferrick is giving you more than enough profit. Normally, with an order from the king, you'd just have to obey."

"Right. A mere knight can't complain, nor count on a share of the profit. The best they'll get is the expenses for dispatching their troops covered. I expect it'll be the same for me, so...what profit? I hope you're not going to give me the same line about how I get to go around killing all the bandits I want."

Yeah, it's a Feed family policy that bandits should be exterminated, but I don't like *killing people, okay?*

"As if I'd say that, silly. Read over those written orders more closely. It specifically says that the lord's plenipotentiary has authority over the magistrate. Which means you have power equivalent to a lord inside Lochhart."

"I guess it does. And...?"

I cocked my head to the side, unable to see where she was going with this. Master smiled.

"Well, you're a surprisingly good person, aren't you? To spell it out for you, until the matter of these bandits is resolved, you can use the Lochhart Domain's money freely. On the things that you, personally, want to."

"Huh? So I could dump Lochhart's tax money into my alchemical research?"

"You could, yes. Are you going to?"

"O-O-Of course not!"

It sounded like she was testing me, so I made the bitter decision to deny it. I was really tempted, but it'd definitely cause trouble for Master too, not just me!

"Didn't think so. And it's because you're that kind of person that he made you his plenipotentiary. But if it's for the benefit of

Lochhart, and to your benefit too, then showing a little favoritism in where the domain's funds go would probably be considered within the bounds of your reward. Sending financial support to a certain village, for instance."

Oh-hoh... So I could get away with expanding Yok Village, repairing the road between there and South Strag, or even building a direct road from Yok Village to the Lotze Domain...? I think Prince Ferrick may've just earned himself some affection points!

"But then he could've just said— Wait, no he couldn't."

"Obviously, he couldn't just tell you to do as you like with the domain's funds," Master said, wryly amused. "He probably felt bad making you work for free, and if anything happens, he'll likely take the responsibility for it, but do think before you do anything."

"Oh, don't be silly, Master. Sure, I'm annoyed at His Highness, but I won't do anything rash," I said, waving my hand dismissively. "I'd be too scared to."

If I was going to do anything, I planned to keep it within the bounds of what I could justify if I got called out on it after the fact.

"Although, I'm feeling more motivated now. I just have to put up with it for the few days I'm still in the capital!"

The people who are a pain to deal with probably won't follow me all the way out to the frontier. Besides, even if they know my name, most won't know my face. The capital's a big place; I should be able to go out shopping for souvenirs without anybody finding me.

That pervert was probably able to wait there to ambush me because he knew someone inside the palace, but that's about the only way someone who doesn't know me is going to be able to make contact. Even if it gets out that I'm staying in this shop, I've got Master here to protect me. Not many people will be willing to force the issue. Because Master's willing to physically kick nobles out if she doesn't like them! Hmph!

"Hmm. Looks like you were able to blow off some steam. Now then, there's someone who wants to see you."

Just as I was getting into a more sunny disposition, Master decided to rain on my parade.

"Master... Did you decide it was too much of a pain to turn them

away yourself, and it was easier to push it off on me?" I asked in an accusatory tone.

Master thought about it for a moment, and then nodded. "That's more or less correct."

"Masteeer, you're so cold... Use your intimidating aura to send them packing, pleeease."

"You say that, but this is clearly something you need to do. You're free to refuse, abandon her, or take her back with you, but at least meet her first. You're making this awkward for me."

I cocked my head at the way that, despite her words, there was a hint of amusement in the way that Master was looking at me.

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"Sarasa-senpai! It's been so long since I've seen you!"

"I wondered who wanted to see me. So it's you, Misty. You look well."

The moment I entered the reception room at Master's shop, one of my few friends from my days at the academy, my junior Misty Hudson, ran over and gave me a hug.

As I returned the gesture, I could feel just how much she had grown. Just a year and a half ago, the top of her head had been below eye level for me, and yet now it was higher than my own... Urgh!

"You too, Sarasa-senpai... You haven't changed a bit."

"Hold up. Hold right up. Where were you looking when you said that?! Actually, no, don't say it."

Because your eyes are pointed right at my upper body! Okay, sure, they've barely changed since graduation, but still!

"Nnngh... You've grown in a lot of ways yourself, huh?" I pointed out.

I was losing a bit in height, but it looked like the difference wasn't even small when it came to breast development.

Damn it! So this is societal inequality, huh?!

Back when I graduated, I was still winning slightly—or at least not losing!

"It's been a year and a half. Of course I've grown. I mean, after that long, anyone would— Oh!"

"Don't you 'Oh!' me! Yeah, yeah, I know my growing days are almost over!"

Misty was doing some dubious things with her hands as she confirmed my growth for herself, so I peeled her off of me.

"So? Did you hear I was coming to the capital and come to meet me? You sure are well-informed, huh?"

"That's part of it. I mean, you didn't come to my graduation, Senpai. That made me feel lonely."

"The capital's too far for that. Besides, Misty, you had juniors of your own to say goodbye to you, right?"

"Huh? Well, of course, they threw a graduation party to send me off, but... You weren't there, Senpai."

Ohh, "of course" she did. And they even threw a party for her.

But I was a loner!

Not that I felt lonely because of that at all!

"Well, anyway... Thanks for coming to see me. If you have time after this, why don't we go get something nice to eat? On me. Because I'm really raking it in these days!" I said with a smug look, trying to impress upon her I wasn't poor anymore.

Misty looked at me with upturned eyes, then started beating around the bush.

"Um, it's true that I came because I wanted to see you, Sarasa-senpai, but I actually had a favor to ask as well..."

"Huh? A favor? You? Asking me?"

If it was anyone else, I'd have been wary that she was after money, but Misty's folks ran a major maritime trading firm called the Hudson Company. I couldn't imagine she was hard up for cash like I had been in my student days. Which meant...

"Hire me, Senpai!" she said, bowing her head, and I got a little sad.

"Whaa... Even you, Misty? Just becoming a noble now doesn't mean—"

"That's not it!" Misty hurriedly cut me off. "I want to become your apprentice. As an alchemist!!!"

"Uh, as an alchemist?" I tilted my head to the side in confusion. "Huh? Come to think of it, where *do* you work now, Misty? You've graduated, so you must be training in somebody's shop, right?"

I was a rare case; it was customary to work in a shop for years before going independent. Naturally, I assumed Misty would be doing that, but she lowered her eyes and shook her head.



"I haven't been able to get in anywhere. I work part-time at this shop occasionally, which lets me keep food on the table..."

"Ohh, that explains why Master knew. But your folks live in the capital, don't they? You could just go back home—"

"I don't want to go back!" she exclaimed. "Um, how much do you know about my family situation, Senpai?"

"Just that the Hudson Company is a major maritime shipping firm, and that they've been setting the world on fire."

"'Setting the world on fire'? Really now, Senpai...? I'm not going to deny that we've been reasonably successful, though."

Misty gave me a look of exasperation.

Huh? Did I say something weird? I blinked in confusion before looking back at Misty.

She smiled a little before continuing. "The thing is, I have a half brother. People look at him as the heir apparent to the company, but technically it's my mother who's the first wife."

"S-So, there's a family feud over the succession, or something like that...?"

I've heard of this. It's a thing that happens in large companies!

I gulped.

"No, things haven't gone that far yet. But it's true that we don't get along very well. When I was still little, my big brother adored me, and he even encouraged me when I went to the academy, but..."

But after entering the academy she had been busy with her studies, and her elder brother had started working at the company in earnest, so they'd become slightly more distant. Then, after her graduation, there were moves inside the company to try to install her as the successor, but that had bothered Misty.

"I see. It's because you proved how capable you were," I observed. "I can see why some of the employees would feel that way, but..."

For the people inside the company, it was important to them that the company continue to develop and survive.

Looking at it that way, the blood relations didn't matter. As a person talented enough to graduate from the Alchemist Academy,

and who had developed personal connections there, Misty was the ideal candidate for a successor. Her skill at business was an unknown quantity, but at a firm as big as the Hudson Company, there would be people on staff who could support her there.

"But I went to the academy because I want to be an alchemist! Not a company president!"

"Then why didn't you just get a job like anyone else? You're a legal adult."

"Well, you see... I feel pathetic having to admit this to you, Senpai, but my family won't support me financially with my job hunt. Dad is demanding I come home. And people around here know I'm the daughter of the Hudson Company, so they just politely decline to hire me..."

"Ohh, finding a job takes money, right."

There were travel fees and lodging fees. That was money I hadn't had left over because I'd bought the *Complete Works*.

The result for me was that Master had given me a shop as a present. It worked out in the end, but that had only been possible because I'd had her support. I wouldn't laugh at Misty for being dependent on her family.

"And so that's why you're coming to me? Because you figure the Hudson Company doesn't have much pull out on the frontier?"

"No, that's part of it, but the biggest reason is because I've been wanting to work with you."

Seeing how serious the look in Misty's eyes was, she probably wasn't lying. Even if her family were getting in her way a little, she'd probably have been able to find a job anyway if she were serious about it. Alchemists like us weren't so low in status that a mere trading company could get in our way.

If she hadn't taken on work yet in spite of that...

"You know what, I think it would be fun to work with you, Misty, and you're someone I trust. And as an alchemist myself, I want to support your desire to be one too."

Besides, in some ways, Misty's offer was just what I needed. Now that I was head of the House of Lotze, I couldn't neglect my work as a noble. But if I went and closed up shop every time I had to, the

business would collapse, and I couldn't turn to Maris-san every single time. So it was true that I'd benefit from having Misty around.

What was worrying me was the idea of taking an apprentice. I mean, sure, I had more experience than Misty, but only so much. If I were to ask myself whether I could take on an apprentice...

Hmm, maybe I should talk to Master about it?

While I was thinking about that and agonizing over what to do, Misty spoke up hesitantly.

"Um, Senpai... I wouldn't want you to find out later and misunderstand, so let me say this in advance. It's really only my father who's calling for me to come back home. My brother has been telling me I ought to seduce you instead. Since you're connected to Ophelia-sama, and also conveniently homosexual."

"Come again?! Um, uh, Misty? Let me just tell you I'm not really homosexual, okay? I mean, yes, I know I married Iris, but—"

Misty clapped me on the shoulder as I started to ramble in a panic. "I know that. You never showed any signs of it at the academy, and I'm only interested in working with you. I'm not planning anything like that. But I worried that it might trouble you..."

"Hrmm, I see..."

Using Misty to build a connection with me now that I had become a noble, and by extension with my master who was a master class alchemist. There was probably a lot of profit to be had there, so it was the right decision for the successor to the company. And if it got Misty, who was his rival for that position, out of the house, then that was two birds with one stone.

Had her father called her back because he saw there was profit in having an alchemist inside the company, or had he simply not wanted to let his little girl go?

As for the effect this had on me, if I took Misty home with me, people were going to become completely certain I swung that way.

That would be... Hm. Actually not that inconvenient?

I'd given up on any hope of romance when I'd married Iris. Now that I had been made the head of the House of Lotze, I couldn't possibly divorce her, and I had no intention of doing so.

Since I was already married, I didn't need to worry about women

coming and proposing to me—although deviants like that guy from earlier were another matter. People like him didn't take the other party's situation into consideration to begin with, so there was no point in worrying about him.

"Would you be okay with that, though, Misty? Hopefully, people will see you as my apprentice, but if they think it's something more, I think you might have trouble getting married. Men might not approach you anymore..."

"I'd prefer that—no, that's not what I meant. My goal is to be like Ophelia-sama!"

Misty puffed her chest up in response to my concerns.

"Ohh, that's right. Master isn't married."

Is she? I have a bit of a hard time trusting her on that kind of thing lately.

"Hmm, hmm, you're aiming for master class, huh..." I mused to myself. "Okay, got it! Misty, come to my place! I can't promise I'll take good care of you, but let's both work hard together!"

"Sarasa-senpai... Okay! I'll be in your care, Master!!!" she exclaimed, her voice full of emotion as she seized my hand with both of her hands.

"Oh, none of that 'Master' stuff." I pushed her back gently. "I'm not full enough of myself to want to be called that."

Misty let go of my hand, though she seemed reluctant to.

"Whaa, but if I'm being hired to work in your store, you're my master, right?"

"No, we're not doing this." I shook my head firmly. "I'm still just a novice who's only a little over a year out of the academy, okay? If you go calling me that, my own master will laugh at me. I guarantee it."

I'm still just a beginner who's only partway through volume five of the Complete Alchemy Works*. I wouldn't feel right being called "Master" until I'm at least on volume seven or higher, which would make me an intermediate.*

"If you're turning a profit, I'd say you're more than qualified enough... You are, right?"

"Oh, sure. Enough to pay your wages, since I'm hiring you. I paid

a whole lot of taxes today, you know? Oh, but not any more than most people...just about the normal amount."

When I impressed upon her that I couldn't give her favorable treatment just because we'd known each other for so long, Misty smiled and nodded. "That's more than enough. I should have known you were doing so well, Senpai. But it's still a relief. Now I won't have to get in a fight with my brother."

"So, if I hadn't decided to hire you, were you going to go after the chairman's seat at the Hudson Company?"

"That wasn't the plan, but for as long as my position remained unclear, there were always going to be people trying to push me upward. If I go to your shop, I won't have to worry about that. Nice work, Senpai! You just protected the peace of an entire household!"

"Huh, I guess I did... Hey, wait, it's *your* house! Isn't there something weird about how you're talking about this?!"

"No, no, it's small-scale peace like this that leads to larger-scale peace. If you leave the coals smoldering, it can turn into a big fire down the line."

Her expression was extremely serious. What she was saying was correct too... Hrmm.

"Well, whatever." I shrugged it off. "More importantly, Misty, let's go get lunch. It's my treat. I want to go souvenir shopping after that, so I'd appreciate it if you could show me around. I don't really know what to look for."

"I'll go!" Misty immediately accepted and gleefully wrapped herself around my arm. "Hee hee! This is the first time you've invited me like this!"

"Ohh, that'd be because I was being frugal when I was a student."

"Right. I remember how Priscia-senpai and Lacie-senpai would drag you out because you never went outside except for work... Those are some fond memories."

"That's because we could eat for free in the dorms. And our uniforms were provided for us too."

That meant that the best way to stay frugal had been to not leave the academy. But frugality alone couldn't increase the amount

of money I had, so I had to either work part-time, or study hard and aim for the reward money if I wanted more.

Misty nodded deeply as I reminisced about it. “Our seniors were the ones who made you human!” she declared.

“Yeah, that’s— Wait, huh? You’re going that far? Isn’t that a bit mean?”

Is that how you saw me, Misty...?

“But have you ever gone clothes shopping on your own, Senpai?”

“I...haven’t, no. B-But our seniors always brought me new clothes before I wore out the old ones, so I never had the occasion to, you could say...”

“No. You’re the type who’ll go on wearing clothes past the point when ordinary people would have decided they couldn’t wear them anymore. And also the type to continue holding on to them after you can’t even physically wear them.”

“Y-You sound sure of that, Misty.”

“I’ve known you a long time. I know your good points, and I know your bad points too. Isn’t that right?”

I couldn’t argue back. Not when I’d brought the clothes I bought in my time at the academy with me to Yok Village!

“You’ve never gone to get your haircut on your own either, right?” Misty continued.

“The person at Priscia-senpai’s house would always cut it for me before it ever got long enough that I needed to...”

“I’ll bet. Your hair was an awful mess during the year after our seniors graduated, Sarasa-senpai.”

“You’re going that far?! I cut it occasionally! Just by myself, though.”

“I am going that far! If it weren’t for our seniors, you’d have gone around in worn-out clothes with shabby hair and given up on being human entirely! I’ll bet you’d have made a name for yourself at the academy in a whole different way then.”

“Wow! I’d have been famous, huh... Wait, you’re saying that?! I mean, it’s not like you’re that much better than—”

I took another look at her and noticed her neatly arranged hair and pricey-looking, fashionable clothes. The light-and-airy style, I

think it was called? It suited Misty. She looked really adorable.

When Lorea-chan talked about city girls, she probably meant girls like Misty.

Which meant that, when Misty came back with me, Lorea-chan's respect for me was sure to drop.

"I lost! Misty, will you let me call *you* Master?"

"Why?! I mean, compared to how you used to be, you've..." Misty trailed off for a moment before saying, "How about we go buy you some clothes? I think I've seen you wearing those ones before."

Yep, because I bought them with my seniors in the capital! So don't give me that, "Oh, I can't cover for her on this..." look.

"All right then, first we'll get lunch, then I'll have you pick out some clothes for me, and then we'll go buy souvenirs," I concluded.

Undeterred by my total delegation of my fashion choices, Misty pounded her chest with one hand and declared, "Okay. Leave it to me. I'll coordinate your outfit perfectly!"

"Y'know, it's been a while since I went clothes shopping. Thanks, Misty."

After eating lunch, Misty had taken me around to a bunch of clothing stores, and I had bought some new outfits. They hadn't been cheap by any means, but I was going to need them and I couldn't have bought similar things in Yok Village. So, with some serious encouragement from Misty, I made the decision to purchase them.

"Oh, no need to thank me. I had fun too. But when *was* the last time you bought new clothes?"

"Um, Priscia-senpai was with me at the time, so...maybe around three years ago?"

"Sarasa-senpai, as a girl, you shouldn't be okay with that..." Misty said, fixing me with a look of exasperation.

"No, listen!" I rushed to explain myself. "The ones I had were still wearable! I mean, look at what I'm wearing right now, okay? These are still fine, right?"

The clothes my seniors had picked out for me must have been good quality because they had held up to wear and tear really well. And, fortunately—although I'd only call it "fortunate" in this one

specific instance—I wasn't growing much anymore, so it wasn't like I was outgrowing them either.

So I have *to keep wearing them, right? It'd be a real waste otherwise.*

"Besides, Misty, that's just rich-person thinking, isn't it?"

"Not at all. At least in the capital, even commoners replace their old clothes with new ones. Just look around you. You don't see anybody wearing beat-up old clothes, right?"

I took a fresh look around at her insistence, and indeed, everyone was dressed rather fashionably.

Okay, no, there were *some* people wearing tattered clothes, but they were very much the exception to the rule.

"You have a point... But it's different in Yok Village... Huh? Is what I think is common sense actually not that common after all?"

I'd been a commoner myself back when I was little and my parents were still alive. But after they'd passed away, I'd been put into the orphanage. Then I'd gotten into the Alchemist Academy, where I'd lived a slightly different life from regular people, and then I'd moved out to the frontier immediately after graduating.

Come to think of it, I had only lived in the most urban of urban areas and the most rural of rural places in this country. Maybe it was only to be expected that my common sense was a bit askew?

"Normally," Misty explained, "when they start to get damaged, you would sell them at the used clothing store, and then they'd mend them there, or sell them as rags if that wasn't possible. There are some people who mend their own clothes, but they're in the minority."

"I-I see. I guess it makes sense to leave things to the professionals."

Though, I think that's a business that can only sustain itself here in the capital, thanks to the large population. The ones making the clothes in Yok Village are just the older women who live in the area, you know?

"But Misty, if you come to my shop, there aren't any clothing stores in Yok Village, okay? It'll be you whose common sense doesn't hold up there. Hee hee."

Yok Village was home ground for me, so I'd be the one who got to teach her there.

"Oh, of course. Should I have people from the company bring things out there for us?"

"Now *that's* definitely a rich-person idea! No doubt about it!"

Misty chuckled at how confidently I made that declaration. "I'm joking. We're a *maritime* shipping company, and there are no ships going to Yok Village."

"Whaa...? So if Yok Village were a port town, you would have asked them to?"

"No. If it were a port town with regular ships, then there would already be clothing stores, and I wouldn't have to ask."

That was a very different reason for not asking. But I couldn't let myself get overwhelmed by her wealth. I let it pass with a vague kind of laugh, and then we got back to souvenir shopping.

"Um... Should we play it safe and go with things they can eat?" I asked.

"That sounds good. If you're just acquaintances, then I think it's not a bad idea to choose a gift that won't stick around, but for those you're closer to, wouldn't it be better to choose something that suits them? It makes people happy to know you understand them. Though, it makes the choosing that much harder."

"I see. That makes a lot of sense. In that case, Lorea-chan is into fashion, so maybe some sort of accessory... Would a ribbon or hair clip work? I think she'd be hesitant to accept anything too expensive."

"Other options would be some pretty fabric, thread she can use for embroidery, or some wool maybe. Those would be hard to get in the countryside, and she can share them with other people she knows."

Hmm, that's a thought too.

I made a mental note of it, and moved on to the next person. "Iris would probably like...a nice sword?"

She's currently using the cheap one she'd bought as a replacement after hers broke during the hellflame grizzly incident. It's tough to find good swords out on the frontier, so I'm sure she'd

like—

"Hold on a moment. That's the person you married, isn't it?"

I was so sure I had a good idea, but Misty made me slow down a moment.

"If I recall, she's a young woman, not that much older than we are, isn't she?"

"Yeah, I guess she is? You're well-informed. But I should have expected that from you, Misty."

I was complimenting her, but she gave me a look that said, *Are you serious?*

"Are you serious, Senpai? Giving a girl a weapon as a present." She said this out loud too. "Normally, you'd give her a ring or an earring, wouldn't you? You just got married."

"Mm, I'm not sure Iris would accept either of those things."

Because I was now the head of the House of Lotze, the "house" was in debt to the "head," and since our "house finances" and "shop finances" were separate, the debt still needed to be repaid.

But it was the "head" who was obligated to make that repayment, so I could just redirect a reasonable amount of the House of Lotze's tax income toward the "shop finances" to repay it.

But Iris was insistent that *"I'll at least pay off the cost of my potion!"* So until she was able to finish paying me back for that, I was sure that she'd be happier receiving a weapon she could use while out gathering.

"Uhh, gender aside, I think she might actually prefer the weapon?"

"Ohh, so that's just how she is, then, huh. In a sense, that makes her a good match for you."

"Does it? I don't think I'd prefer a weapon to—"

"But if you could get a valuable alchemical material, you'd be way happier with that than a dress or jewels, right?"

"I sure would! Urgh, I guess we're more alike than I thought..."

I mean, I don't have any real use for a dress... I didn't like it, but she was right. I couldn't even argue back.

"Moving on, Kate may be hard to shop for. She's Iris's servant, and also something like a big sister to her, so as a hard worker, she

doesn’t tend to voice her own desires much... Oh, but maybe she likes cute things?”

In the time since I had married Iris, stuffed animals had materialized in Kate’s room, and I recalled Iris mentioning her room back at the main house was full of them...

“Hmm, sounds like she and I will get along, then,” Misty said. “I know a good place, so I’ll take you there later.”

“Thanks. That just leaves Maris-san. I think she can have something nice to eat.”

“Suddenly, you sound like you care a lot less... Who is she?”

“The alchemist who’s watching the shop while I’m away. She’s of noble birth, but she got swindled by a villainous merchant and lost her own shop, so now she’s another alchemist’s apprentice, and owes me money... She’s a bit of a pathetic character.”

“That’s a lot to take in! But, uh...yeah, that sounds good. If you give a noble a bad present, it may just go to waste. They can’t afford to be seen wearing cheap jewelry, after all.”

I felt like Maris-san wouldn’t care too much about that, but when I considered the balance of my relationship with her versus Iris and the others, yeah, getting her food seemed like the safest choice. I quietly agreed with Misty.

“Okay! I’m going to do my best in my first job as an apprentice. To make sure I’m welcomed with open arms!!!”

Unlike me, who only knew shops I had worked at part-time, Misty had a lot more options to choose from. If there wasn’t anything good at the first place we stopped, she knew several more with similar offerings. With her help, I was able to finish my gift shopping before evening, and we took a relaxed stroll around the commercial area.

“Thanks, Misty. If I didn’t have you with me, I’d have settled with what I’d found at the first shop.”

“Happy to have been of help. It was fun going shopping with you too.”

“I feel the same. It’s a lot of fun shopping in places like this, huh?”

I enjoyed the laid-back atmosphere in Yok Village, but I'd grown up in a much livelier place, so I didn't hate the hustle and bustle of the city. Plus, it was interesting seeing all sorts of unusual things.

But one building that caught my eye made me come to a sudden stop.

"What's the matter?" Misty asked before following my gaze. "The Feed Company? Wait, is this your..."

Misty looked at me inquiringly.

"Yeah, this house...used to be mine. But..."

After being placed in the orphanage, I had come back here just once—to see what had become of my home.

Back then, there had been an unfamiliar shop here; the Feed Company was already gone by then.

But that was only to be expected. With many of our employees dead and our cargo stolen, there was no way the company could have gone on without selling its shop and building. But even understanding that, it had been sad for me to see my house sold off, and I'd avoided this area ever since.

Fortunately, I'd heard that the Feed Company managed to survive somehow, but...

"But why is this the Feed Company?" I wondered aloud.

"Do you want to ask?" Misty suggested hesitantly. "We could talk to one of the employees."

On further inspection, the Feed Company was prospering. There were the merchants who'd come to talk business, the customers there to shop, and the employees interacting with them. Everyone was smiling vivaciously, with no hint of the despair that I remembered.

That made me happy, but also brought back some of the loneliness...

Misty was looking at me with concern, but I shook my head.

"Nah, let's head back," I finally said. "This isn't my home any—"

"Sarasa-chan!" a voice called out to me from behind just as I was about to start walking.

I turned to see a familiar old man down the street running toward us.

"Huh... Is that...the head clerk?"

"Hahh, hahh... Thank goodness! I was able to catch you. I heard you were in the capital, but when I went to Millis-sama's shop, I was told you'd headed out..."

Once he was standing in front of me, he put his hands on his lower back and wheezed as he caught his breath.

"Head clerk—oh, or maybe you're the company president now? What is it?" I asked, doing my best to keep my tone calm.

After several labored breaths, he shook his head. "N-No, I'm still the head clerk. But that's not important, Sarasa-chan. I wanted to talk to you about—"

"Hey! What are you planning to say to Sarasa-senpai?" Misty interposed herself between me and the head clerk, who had finally caught his breath. She cut him off with a glare. "Now that she's a successful noble, you want her to treat you favorably due to old acquaintances, is that it? After abandoning her for all this time. Senpai's a nice person, so maybe she'll tolerate that, but as long as I draw breath, I'm not going to stand for—"

"Wh-Whoa there, Misty, calm down! You're making a scene..."

I looked around, then quickly tried to calm the combative Misty.

We were right in front of the shop. There were people here who knew the head clerk, and they started whispering. Misty noticed, and shut her mouth as she realized what she had been doing. "Urkh, sorry, Sarasa-senpai..."

"It's okay. I appreciated the thought."

I gave the suddenly dejected girl a smile. She'd raised her voice out of concern for me, and it was just a fact that there were unscrupulous individuals like the Bahru Company looking to gain money and power. I wasn't going to get upset at her, but even if I wasn't involved anymore, this was still a business carrying the Feed family name. I didn't want bad rumors spreading about them.

"I should be the one apologizing," said the head clerk. "I seem to have been in too much of a hurry. But would it be all right to talk? If you leave now, then..."

"Ohhh, yeah..." I said, realizing the position he was in. "It would look like there was some trouble between us if I left after this, huh."

"Fine," Misty added. "But I'm coming along too!"

"That's no problem at all," replied the head clerk. "Now, please, come right this way."

At the head clerk's urging, Misty and I put on fake smiles and went inside the shop.

Some of the people there looked at us dubiously, others were audibly surprised, and some even started to tear up.

I didn't recognize many of them, but I couldn't tell if they were new hires or if I simply didn't remember them.

Hmm, well, I was eight at the time, so maybe there's a good chance I forgot?

We walked past all of those people to the house where I had lived, and which our employees had also used as a dining hall. It was a little different from how I remembered it, but I recognized the room, which brought back memories from back then.

The signs of places where the wall had been fixed, the patterns on the ceiling that I had thought were a bit scary when I was alone, the scribbles I had left—no, those had been washed off. Good. I'd have been embarrassed if those were still there.

"Feeling nostalgic, Sarasa-chan?" asked the head clerk.

"Yes. It's been something like...eight years, after all. I thought that this place had been sold, though?"

"Yes, that's true. We did have to let go of the building at one point, but we were able to buy it back a few years ago."

As he spoke, the head clerk offered me a chair, then sat across from me. His eyes narrowed as he smiled.

"You've grown so much, Sarasa-chan," he said.

"And you've...gotten really old, huh."

"Ha ha ha, I suppose I have. It truly has been a...busy eight years."

The head clerk pinched the bridge of his nose as he looked at me. His face was far more wrinkled than I remembered it, and I could tell he'd been through a lot. I don't think "busy" even began to describe what his days must have been like.

Normally, you'd have expected the company to have gone under. That's just how bad the damages it had suffered were. Yet they had

recovered and now were doing brisk business. I was still just a novice, but I could imagine how difficult that must have been, so I genuinely respected the head clerk's hard work.

"We've finally come this far. But you must resent us for—"

"I don't," I said, shaking my head as I interrupted the troubled head clerk. "I won't deny that I did feel that way at first. But once I entered the academy and learned more about the world, I was able to understand you put me in the orphanage for my own protection."

After the bandit attack, the Feed Company had been left with a massive debt for the cargo that had been stolen. Naturally, things weren't so easy that the debt would be absolved if the company went under.

But with the company president dead, the only ones they could collect from were the remaining officers of the company and the one surviving member of the Feed family—which meant me. But there was no way a mere child could repay the debt, and a little girl had limited ways of earning money. So the head clerk had put me in the orphanage to break my ties to the Feed Company.

"Thanks to that, I was able to become an alchemist, so I'm grateful."

"It's such a relief to hear you say that... Thank you."

The furrows on his brow loosened slightly, and the head clerk gave me a wan smile, looking like he might break into tears at any moment.

By contrast, Misty, who was sitting beside me, had suppressed her initial anger, but she was still dissatisfied. She puffed up her cheeks and pursed her lips.

"Murgh, I understand your reasons, but I still think it was awful of you to leave her alone for all this time!"

"I do feel bad about that. But it was because—" the head clerk started to say, but Misty cut him right off.

"None of your excuses!!! Because she had no financial assistance, Senpai spent five years cutting into her sleep schedule to take on part-time work...and had zero friends in her own year as a result! A shocking zero, you hear me?!"

Yeah. She's not lying. But does she have to emphasize it so

much?

"Even when you add in her friends in other years, there were only three of us, and that's including me! Just three!!! If you'd provided even a little help, Senpai might have been able to make more friends... She might have..."

Why do you sound so unconfident? It's not like I have some sort of communication disorder, okay?

Misty glanced in my direction before forcing herself to continue. "I don't think it was out of the question, at least... Probably... Likely..."

"No, say that part with confidence!" I protested.

"Sarasa-chan, I'm sorry! I didn't know you were leading that kind of life at the academy..."

"Look, now you've made the head clerk misunderstand! Apologize!" I protested, pointing at the man who had bowed his head so low that it was pressed against the table.

But she just looked away, turning her chin up.

"I had no idea it was such a struggle for you," the head clerk continued. "I was sure you'd be set once you got in."

"Um, I basically was. I had other reasons for working part-time."

The *Complete Alchemy Works*. If I hadn't bought all of the volumes in one go, I'd have been able to live a fairly relaxed school life and go out for tea with my classmates, at least.

I had simply chosen to build up my strength as an alchemist instead.

"Besides, thanks to Misty and my seniors, I don't think that I had a *bad* school life, you know?"

"I'm happy to hear you say that..." Misty said, then turned to the head clerk. "But you people could have supported her a little, couldn't you? From what I just saw, this shop is doing fairly well for itself."

The head clerk frowned and nodded his head. "Yes, if we had been aware of the situation, then I think we ought to have sent Sarasa-chan some financial support. But well...there were a lot of people who needed help, and it's true that we were struggling."

I wasn't the only one to lose my parents in the bandit attack.

Many of the employees who were traveling with them as guards died too, which left a lot of wives and children who had lost the family's breadwinner. The head clerk and the others had been working to support them while also paying down the company's debts.

"It's been eight years since then. With the remaining children having grown up and the Feed Company starting to grow in strength, we've only just recently started to have the leeway to look into things. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. The people in the company were like family to me too."

If that was the situation, then I think it only makes sense that they would have put their profits into paying off the debt and supporting the families left behind by our employees. At least before spending it on me, who was managing well enough on my own.

"But it's still called the *Feed* Company, huh? And who is the company president?"

"Though we had no choice, we essentially pushed you out of the company. We wanted to at least keep the name intact. And after talking it over among ourselves, we decided not to have a president. In the hope that someday we could welcome you into that position."

"You were thinking that far ahead..."

Even setting aside the details about the company presidency, I teared up a little at how much they'd been thinking about me. Misty, on the other hand, gave this news a much cooler reception.

"Hmm, I think that was an upstanding thing for you to do and all, but then why come to her now, when she's become a noble? Shouldn't you have come to her a year and a half ago, when she graduated?"

It was a reasonable thing to point out, and the head clerk gave her a troubled smile. "We did go to invite her, of course. But we'd never dreamed she would leave the capital the day after her graduation... And to set up shop on the frontier at that."

"Oh, I'm with you there," Misty replied. "I was planning to go pay my respects to Senpai as soon as I recovered, and then she was just gone! What was that about, Senpai?!"

Oops, did my ally just switch sides?

"Um, listen, Misty. It costs a lot of money just for people to survive, you know?"

"What are you getting at...?"

"Once I was out of the dorms, I didn't have the financial leeway to linger in the capital for days on end!"

"Oh, right. That's how things were for you, Sarasa-senpai."

If we're being totally accurate, I was being frugal with what little money I had so that I'd have more leeway when I got to Yok Village, though.

But unlike Misty, who just nodded in understanding, the head clerk, whose tear ducts must have been getting leaky in his old age, got all misty-eyed again.

"I didn't know it was that bad... Urgh, if I had only gone to you sooner! But I had heard that it was normal to celebrate with friends on the day of your graduation, and didn't want to be a bother..."

Stop it, please. You're just digging at old wounds.

"How about it, Sarasa-chan? Would you be willing to return to the company?" the head clerk asked hopefully.

"Not for now," I told him. "My own shop is still just getting off the ground, and I'm a noble now too."

"I suppose even if I told you we have no ulterior motives, that must be hard to believe after all this time... But you're welcome back any time, okay? This is your home, Sarasa-chan."

The head clerk looked a little sad, but I smiled and shook my head.

"I don't think you're out to take advantage of my position. I just don't want to betray the people of Yok Village who've put their trust in me. Isn't that only natural as a merchant?"

The head clerk's eyes widened at my words, and he smiled as if he'd just seen something that called fond memories to mind. "Ha ha, that's true. To think you'd be the one to teach me about what really matters for a merchant... Oh, how you've grown. But is there anything we could do to help you out, at least?"

"Anything you could do to help..." I thought about it. "Is the Feed Company still in the same business as before?"

"No, things have changed a little. We do less in retail sales now,

and have shifted to overland shipping for other merchants as our main source of income. Learning from our past mistakes, we hired a large number of strong bodyguards, and that's made it so that even when bandits attack, we deliver our cargo without fail. We started getting more shipping jobs as a result."

Generally, a company had to buy goods, transport them, and then sell them. The most dangerous part of that was the shipping, and the Feed Company was turning a hefty profit by handling that stage for other companies. That meant shouldering the risk, but as long as they were capable of guaranteeing safe delivery, they didn't have to deal with mistakes during stocking or the risks of maintaining an inventory, so it was a business model that offered a steady profit.

"Hmm, it sounds like the terrestrial equivalent to our company," noted Misty.

"Hey, you're right," I agreed. "Though I think your place has it harder, Misty."

Maritime shipping was more difficult than overland, and they needed the ability to pilot the huge investments of capital known as ships. That made entry into the maritime shipping industry difficult, and though they could expect profit just for delivering cargo, the losses when they failed were massive, so it wasn't easy money by any means.

Unlike me, who had simply nodded, the head clerk, who had been listening to us, cocked his head to the side questioningly.

"Your company...? Come to think of it, I don't believe I got your name. You were Sarasa-chan's junior at the academy, right?"

"Ohh, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Misty Hudson. Sarasa-senpai's darling junior who graduated from the academy just this year...and also the daughter of the Hudson Company."

This casual introduction caused the head clerk to freeze up for a moment. "Huh? The major maritime shipping company? What an impressive young lady!"

"No, no, I'm nobody special. I'm just the daughter of the company president. I'm small fry compared to someone like Senpai, who's the apprentice of a master class alchemist like Ophelia-sama."

"Small fry, really?" I interjected. "Uh, wait? You're not Master's

apprentice? You worked for her part-time, didn't you?"

"I did, yes, but it really was just a part-time gig. I mean, Ophelia-sama even came right out and told me 'You're not my apprentice.'"

"Whaa...? Master said that? That's harsh."

Even though she looks cold, Master's actually really nice, so I'm pretty surprised to hear that...

"My part-time job there was always a temporary thing until I could become your apprentice. I think she made it clear because she didn't have the time to train me as her apprentice, you know? That's just how much weight that position carries."

"Huh? You're going to say that to me, who's carrying that burden?"

"I think you're carrying it well, though? But maybe you just don't realize the weight. I was shocked when you told me you didn't know who Ophelia-sama was."

"That mistake's behind me now. At this point, I know, obviously. I've seen just how amazing Master is."

I puffed up my chest with pride over how I'd changed, but Misty looked doubtful. "Do you really? I feel like you're still underrating her, Senpai."

"That's not true at all...I think?"

"No, you are, I'm sure of it. Even when Ophelia-sama gives you some incredible gift, you just write it off as 'Well, it's coming from Master, after all,' don't you? Without considering that it's amazing she can just hand over that sort of thing so easily."

Urkh! I can think of too many examples.

The potion that had saved Iris, for one. I couldn't have bought something that expensive easily, given the price, but even if I'd had the cash for it, the difficulty of acquiring the materials meant it wasn't the sort of thing I could've just gone out and bought.

Not only had Master given me those materials as a parting gift, she'd even used them to make a high-level potion...

"See, Senpai." Misty smirked. "I knew you were. Come on, out with it. Show me what she gave you."

"Urkh... But I don't just have that stuff on hand. Just this sword, maybe?"

I pushed the sword that was hanging at my hip toward Misty as she was playfully jabbing me in the ribs with her elbow. She blinked in surprise, then accepted it.

"Come to think of it, you *have* been wearing a sword all day, Senpai," Misty noted. "Even though you always used to use the equipment provided by the academy."

"I have to travel armed, you know?" I replied. "Although, she gave me this after I'd already arrived in Yok Village."

"Then...what did you do for your first trip there? You weren't unarmed, were you?" Misty asked, her eyes wide.

"Nah. I had a knife—"

"What?!" the head clerk interrupted me, his face full of regret. "You were traveling with just a knife?! Urgh! I really should have done more to—"

"Um, to be honest, I don't think you need to worry about Sarasa-senpai," said Misty. "She slays bandits with her bare hands, and can use magic too. It's overkill really."

"Is that true...? Our Sarasa-chan does that?"

Maybe the head clerk's image of me was still heavily influenced by when I was a little girl.

I met his look of surprise and concern with a vague nod. "Uh, well, I mean, I am an alchemist..."

"Even for an alchemist, Senpai's an accomplished fighter. Though you wouldn't think it, looking at her."

"But even so, isn't it...careless for her to travel unarmed?"

I wasn't sure how much of a deterrent it was to see a girl like me carrying a weapon, but it had to lower the odds of me being attacked compared to going empty-handed.

But back then, I hadn't had the spare money to buy a weapon I didn't absolutely need, so...

"I'm sure Ophelia-sama must have been worried. But even so...I think this is excessive," Misty said with a sigh after drawing the sword that I had handed to her.

The head clerk took it from her to inspect for himself, and let out a sigh of admiration.

"Really?" I said in disbelief. "I didn't know swords that well.

Though, it's definitely durable. I can tell that much."

I had confidence in my ability to appraise alchemical materials, but weapons were not my area of expertise. There was some alchemy that strengthened weapons, so I could tell good weapons from bad weapons to a degree, but once it got up to a certain level of quality, I was out of my depth. The same went for appraising the aesthetic value of it.

"I'm no expert either," admitted the head clerk, "but you could build a house for the amount that this sword costs. I don't see a smith's brand on it anywhere, sadly, but if Millis-sama made it herself, and she had signed it, that would raise the price many times over."

"Hmm, it's worth that much? That's pretty impressive, huh?"

"There, that's just what I was talking about, Senpai!!!"

I mean, hey, I just drank multiple glasses of juice so expensive that "you could build a house for the price of just one glass" at the party yesterday, okay? I wouldn't be able to hang around with Master if I didn't have at least some *ability to shrug these things off.*

"Anyway, back to our early topic," I said. "If that's the Feed Company's situation, I do have something I'd like to ask you for. I'm willing to promise you'll be reasonably well compensated, of course."

"If it's for you, Sarasa-chan, then even if we take a bit of a loss we'll—"

"No, I can't have you doing that. And fortunately, I have the authority to make it so you don't have to."

I'd gained this authority in exchange for taking on some trouble, so there was no reason not to use it.

"So, you see, because I became a noble, I had a troublesome job pushed on me."

"A troublesome job?" Misty echoed. "Senpai, I don't think I've heard about this yet either?"

"Yeah, because I haven't told you. I suddenly had it thrust on me just this morning."

I explained how things had gone, and they both looked at me in shock.

"A-A direct command from one of the royals..." the head clerk

said in awe. “Sarasa-chan, when did you become so important?”

“Honestly, I wanted to find some way to turn him down, but—”

“You couldn’t possibly do that! Senpai, you have no idea what a merchant would do to be appointed plenipotentiary of a crown domain—it’s the kind of thing that we’d gladly pay enough money to ruin ourselves for, okay?”

“Maybe it is, but I only get the position while I’m slaying bandits, and I can’t do anything too reckless with it.”

My plan was to repair the roads and expand Yok Village, while also covering my costs for slaying the bandits and putting out bounties on them, but that was about it. There was a proper magistrate for the area, even if I technically outranked him, and it wouldn’t be good for me to get in his way too much.

“But I think I’d be forgiven for approving some trading rights. It would be convenient for me to have the Feed Company nearby, so would you be interested in expanding to South Strag?”

Up until now, when I bought materials at my shop, I had been sending the rarer things to Master, while the more ordinary ones had gone to Leonora-san. But with the recent increase in gatherers, the amount of materials I had to buy had increased many times over. I’d been thinking it was about time I expanded my distribution routes.

“If you can handle alchemical materials, you should be able to make enough profit. And you’ll be able to help me out a little as well.”

When I made this suggestion, the head clerk turned from a “caring uncle” to a “talented merchant.”

“I see your point. This is a good opportunity for us. Up until now, we hadn’t been dealing in alchemical materials because we didn’t have a source for them, but if you’re there, Sarasa-chan... It also helps that you can secure trading rights for us. And disposing of bandits is our specialty. We’ve actually wiped out several groups since then. At this point, the bandits run at the sight of our banner. Ha ha ha.”

“And you let them get away? That’s no good. You need to kill them properly. It’s the Feed family policy: ‘If you see a bandit, exterminate them.’ Okay?”

If they were going to carry on using the family name, I wanted them to uphold the family motto, at least.

"Of course, we'll wipe out any that we find. But we've stopped seeing them at all on the roads we travel."

"Well, that's all I can ask of you. I can't expect you to go out of your way to hunt them down and exterminate them."

While the head clerk and I were smiling and nodding in agreement, Misty looked a little weirded out by the way we were talking.

"Whaa... Senpai, that's a bit much... Does the Feed Company go that far?"

"We have our other family motto of 'business has to be honest,' so don't worry."

I'm sure we just became a little more radical in our beliefs after my parents and our employees were killed, that's all. We're not a bunch of muscleheads, I don't think. Not that I'm familiar with how the company is these days...

"But isn't the Hudson Company fairly aggressive too?" the head clerk pointed out.

"Urkh!" Misty groaned before laughing awkwardly. "I have no comeback to that. They're men of the sea, after all... At a glance, you'd think they're more vicious than the average pirate, but...they're really not bad people."

"The fact is, you can't defend your cargo or yourself without power," the head clerk said understandingly.

"Yes. Especially at sea. Because there's no one to help you out there."

The Feed Company had learned that through experience, while the maritime shipping industry always went hand in hand with danger.

It's sad, but in the end, what you need to stay safe is the power not to be overcome by the unreasonable.

"Well then, Sarasa-chan, we'll take you up on your offer. When are you heading back? I'll have some people accompany you to perform a preliminary analysis."

"Well, it's up to Misty, but I think we'll be able to leave by the day

after tomorrow. I don't want to leave the shop unattended for too long, and it takes some time to travel to Yok Village."

If I were going alone, I could make the trip back in a bit over two weeks like I had on the way here, but if Misty and the people from the Feed Company were with me too, then it would take longer. I was probably going to want to set out as soon as possible.

"I see. You don't have much time, then. Understood. I'll choose who to send immediately."

"Please do."

True to his word, the head clerk was already rising from his seat and bowing his head slightly as I turned to Misty.

"How about you? I know it's sudden, so if you need a few more days—"

"I've been waiting for you, so I'm good to go whenever. And I have an idea on how we can travel. I think it should shave some time off the trip."

"Oh, you do? But we can't ask the Feed Company people to do anything too reckless, okay?"

Ordinary people can't run while using physical enhancement, after all.

But Misty wasn't discouraged by what I said, instead giving me a smug smile. "Heh heh heh, look forward to it. I'm sure you'll be surprised too, Senpai."

No. 015

Complete Alchemy Works: Appears in Volume 5
Difficulty: Easy
Standard Price: ~13,000 Rhea



〈Hotmist Dragon〉

Hotmist Dragon

Put it in a pot and you'll have steamed food; put it in a room and you'll have steamed people! This artifact makes making steam baths easy, which makes it perfect for maintaining your health in two ways. Because of its high price, it's not often used for cooking, and is most often seen at public baths. Its appearance is a matter of the inventor's taste, and there are related Ice Dragon and Fire Dragon artifacts, but they don't live up to their names. Take a guess for yourself what they do.

Episode 2: Going Back Home

The wind blew across the blue sea, cool and refreshing against our sun-warmed skin. I gazed up at the white clouds above us; the way they stretched out, so high up, felt like the embodiment of summer to me.

In contrast, I turned down to observe the wooden deck below my feet. It was constantly unsteady, a trial for those unused to its rigors.

Yep, it had been a few days, and we were now on a boat.

"I didn't expect us to return by sea. Though, even with the additional company, we should be able to arrive quickly this way."

It had been half a day since we had set sail. Fortunately, we were blessed with fair weather, and I was standing at the bow of the ship, feeling the wind as we made steady progress toward our destination.

Misty stood next to me, an awkward smile on her face. "You say that, but you saw it coming, didn't you? I *am* the daughter of the Hudson Shipping Company, you know?"

"Hmm, it's not that it didn't cross my mind," I replied, "but it seemed like you were having trouble with your folks."

Her father was calling for her to come home, and she was at odds with her brother, so it had been hard to imagine we'd be able to use the company's ships given that situation...

"I did tell you there's a faction that supports me, though, didn't I? The captain of this ship is a part of it."

Though the Hudson Company possessed several ships, each ship belonged to an independent group headed by the ship's captain.

The president managed the company as a whole, but the captains had some degree of authority and were expected to make deals of their own, so if there was room in their hold, they could take on extra cargo. So, if Misty made the request and the captain

accepted it, there was apparently no problem with us riding along.

"Hey now, you know I could never turn down a request from you!" came a voice from behind us.

I turned toward it to find a man who *definitely* didn't look like a law-abiding citizen.

There was a scar from a sword wound running across his face, and he was so tall I'd have had to strain my neck to look up at him if he were standing closer.

He wore armor over his muscular body, and despite looking like a fierce pirate, he was the captain of this ship. Misty had introduced us to him as we'd boarded, so I knew that for a fact.

"You're really helping us out, Captain," I said gratefully. "Especially since we had people from the Feed Company with us."

The captain opened his mouth wide as he guffawed. "It's no big deal! But still, get a load of those landlubbers!"

The captain was looking at the corner of the deck where the people from the Feed Company who had tagged along with us were slouched over and looking incredibly seasick. One was in charge of handling business and the other was a bodyguard.

The bodyguard wasn't going to be much use in that state, but it wasn't really his fault.

"Seasickness is all about familiarity and constitution, and the Feed Company is an overland shipping company. But just think, if they could carry on acting like normal, then the Hudson Company's advantage would shrink, wouldn't it?"

"You're right there! Well, let's hope they stay as weak as they are, then!"

Though running a ship wasn't as easy as just avoiding seasickness, the captain still grinned at my joke.

"But you're doing pretty well yourself, Sarasa-sama," he continued. "Sure, the sea's calm today, but the ship still shakes a lot, doesn't it?"

"That's true," Misty agreed. "But she even seems to be enjoying herself. Do you actually have experience, Senpai?"

"Not at all, but...maybe it's my constitution?"

By the way, I wasn't keen on being addressed with *-sama*, but

Misty had told me, "You're a noble now, so get used to it. If you act bizarrely modest, you'll cause trouble for the people around you," so I had reluctantly resigned myself to it.

I mean, I get it. It'd be awkward if His Highness insisted I call him by his name with no honorifics too.

"But I'm glad. I mean, who'd want to see a pretty girl like you feeding the fish." Misty covered her mouth as she chuckled, but I cocked my head to the side in confusion.

"Um, I'll just ignore the 'pretty girl' part of that, but what do you mean by 'feeding the fish'?"

"Ha ha, look over there and see for yourself. There they go again."

I looked where the captain was pointing and saw the pair from the Feed Company leaning over the side of the boat...

"Oh, so *that's* 'feeding the fish.' Yeah, I'd definitely prefer to avoid doing that myself."

"Well, you'll get used to it in a few days," the captain said. "There's not much for you to do, Sarasa-sama, but you're free to spend your time however suits you best. Just be sure to follow the crew's directions, okay?"

"Of course I will," I replied before asking, "Around how long do you expect it will take us to get there, by the way?"

"That'll be up to the winds, but...if they're steady, four days. If we run into a continuous lull, it could be over ten."

"That's a long time. I can make the winds blow with magic, so just let me know if you need it."

"Ha ha ha, that could be a little useful, you know? If we need it, I'll ask!" With a casual wave, the captain went back to work.

Once he'd gone, Misty turned to me with an amused smile. "He's not taking your offer seriously. Even though you wouldn't just be a 'little useful,' you'd probably set a new speed record for him. Do you want to give it a try, just to see? We could save a lot of time."

"I'm not doing that. You'd be in trouble too if I accidentally broke the ship, wouldn't you?"

"Our ships are built to stand up to a little stormy weather...but I wouldn't put it past you to be able to do it, Senpai. I guess, in light

of the risk, we shouldn't do it all the time. I'll look forward to when there's a lull in the winds, then."

"Don't go looking forward to it. It's best if everything goes by without any trouble."

I let out a sigh before vigorously patting Misty on the head.

I enjoyed looking out at the sea for the first day, and exploring the ship while chatting with Misty on the second, but by the third, I was running out of things to do.

That was when Misty suggested I try fishing to help kill some time.

But this was strictly a shipping vessel. Unlike a fishing boat, they didn't follow schools of fish, or stop in places where they expected there to be fish.

For that reason, we couldn't expect to catch much, but I stood next to Misty as we dropped our lines together.

Fortunately, the pair from the Feed Company had stopped "feeding the fish" yesterday, so I wouldn't have any problem with eating whatever we did manage to catch.

"Still, nothing's biting, huh."

"Hee hee, looks like this is one thing that even I can beat you at, Senpai!"

Misty currently had three fish to her name, which wasn't a large number by any means, but it was a world of difference from the zero that I'd caught. And the fish were longer than the width of both my hands put together, so they were going to make some good eating.

"I want to catch something too... If the fish are that big, it seems like it'd be fun."

"With big fish, there's a trick to— Oh, I've got a bite. Want to try it, Senpai?"

"Nghhh... I'll do it. Pass the rod."

Much as I wanted to try fishing...I didn't trust myself.

But a little humiliation was a small price to pay for not having to keep staring at the end of my own unmoving pole. I pulled my line in and took hold of Misty's rod.

"Senpai, you can't stress it, okay? If you try to force it with your

strength, you'll either snap the rod, or break the line, all right? You need to let the fish swim and tire itself out."

"G-Gotcha! It's sure pulling hard, huh?!"

The rod flexed and the line went wild. Yeah, pure strength clearly wasn't going to work here.

"Don't let the line go slack, but don't pull too much either. You also have to let out a little more line too, sometimes..."

"This sure is more of a pain in the— Um, I mean this sure is more delicate work than I thought, huh?"

Hunting in the forest, I could just blast away with magic and then collect my dead quarry afterward, but that wasn't something I could get away with at sea—or at least not right now.

"Ha ha! It's a bit different when you're fishing, but this is also a game where you can enjoy the strategy of it."

"I see what you mean! Murgh... Ah, it's getting weaker, I think? So now's the time to go...*yoink*!"

After a fairly long time waiting, I felt the fish weaken, and I pulled hard.

There was a loud splash as I landed a fish that was more than twice as big as any Misty had caught.

It went *thunk* as it fell on the deck and then flopped around violently.

"Oh, yeah!!! It's a big one, Misty!"

"Congratulations, Senpai. It's especially big for this type of fish."

"Thanks! Though you're basically the one who caught it."

I had just been the one moving my hands. Misty was the one who'd cast the line and who'd told me how to pull it in.

"No, no, that's not true. It's because you were so tenacious, Senpai."

"Oh, yeah? Even if you're just buttering me up, I'm a little happy. But it sure is bigger than I thought it'd be, huh?"

The plump fish was still struggling energetically and looked unlikely to fit in the bucket Misty had ready for it. I was amazed I'd been able to pull it in without the line breaking.

"It sure is," Misty agreed. "But well, if we leave it to the pros, I'm sure they'll cook it up real good." She turned to a crew member who

was watching. “Could you?”

“Sure thing, little missy! Leave it to me.”

The tough-looking man skillfully finished off the fish, then carried it into the ship saying, “You can look forward to tonight’s dinner!”

Then, as if taking his place, the pair from the Feed Company came out onto the deck. They were looking a little sickly, but as of yesterday afternoon, they had at least gotten to the point where they could move around a little.

“I see you caught yourself a fish,” observed Morgan.

“It feels more like Misty used me to catch it, but yeah. How are you two doing?”

“The crew provided us with some medicine for seasickness, which seems to have helped, so we’re managing.”

“Same here, thanks to that medicine... Well, I’m holding up better than Morgan, at least. Still not feeling confident I’m in any shape to be protecting him, though. Sorry.”

Despite looking a bit exhausted, Morgan had replied first. He was a man who was pushing forty and had been with the Feed Company for a long time. I even had some faint memories of him.

The other man, Clark, was two years older than me and worked as a professional bodyguard. He had more energy than Morgan, perhaps thanks to his youth, but his legs were still looking unsteady on the swaying ship.

“You don’t have to worry about it,” I reassured him. “We’re not counting on you to protect us while we’re at sea, at least.”

“I’d feel awful about not being able to protect my great benefactor Sarasa-sama, though!”

I had been trying to encourage him to do his best once we got back on land, but Clark apparently didn’t take it that way. Misty gave him a somewhat exasperated look as he hung his head.

“Uh, the scenarios where you could do anything to protect Sarasa-senpai are pretty limited...”

“Hey now, Misty,” I chided. “Don’t talk like that. Even I have trouble facing large numbers of enemies.”

“Yeah, but it’s *just* a lot of trouble for you. If you set your mind to it, you can slaughter dozens of bandits, right? Like how you easily

killed a salamander."

"What is this slander?! I'll have you know, I barely won the fight with the salamander, okay?!"

And I'd had Iris and Kate helping me then too.

But Misty easily rejected my protestations. "Senpai, you do realize that *ordinary* people wouldn't be able to 'just barely win,' right?"

"Even we have to be prepared to take casualties when we face off against dozens of bandits, young mistress," Morgan chimed in.

"Even at my best, I can only take on a few guys, tops!" added Clark.

"Darn it, I can't argue with that... B-But still, you don't have to worry about it, okay, Clark? I mean, I'm not even sure you can call me your great benefactor. I wasn't the one who saved your parents."

My parents had been good to their employees, so quite a number of the people at the Feed Company felt like they'd been saved by them.

That apparently included Clark's parents, and they had felt a debt of gratitude to the company because of it, but his father had died in the same attack that had killed my parents. No matter how great a debt of gratitude he'd owed them, it didn't mean anything now that they were dead.

For my part, I felt bad about what had happened, but Clark shook his head and argued back, "I'm the one who should be sorry. My old man was with them as a bodyguard. It was his duty to protect the president no matter what came along, but he failed to do that...and yet the Feed Company kept supporting me."

His father had left behind Clark and his mother. Normally, they could have expected to be cast out because they weren't of much use to the company, but the company had protected them. His mother helped with the office work, while Clark had done odd jobs around the company as he was trained as a bodyguard, making that his profession once he came of age.

"I thought I was doing all I could to repay that debt, but I was being naive! Compared to the way you've been standing on your own...I feel pathetic! Urgh!"

Clark covered his face with one hand as he started bawling.

Yikes...

"I-It's really not something you need to worry about... Right, Morgan?"

"No, I've heard what your situation was like as well," he disagreed. "Looking back now, I can't help but regret that I couldn't have done with one less meal each day so that we could have sent you an allowance. Ohhhhhh..."

Morgan burst into tears too. *Wow, emotionally unstable much?*

But maybe they were just tired. *Yeah, they must be exhausted. I mean, they spent pretty much all of the last two days feeding the fish.*

Honestly, I wanted to just ignore them, but I was concerned how that would look to the crew who were watching. The way things were going, they might conclude that the Feed Company was made up of a bunch of weirdos...

"Misty, you say something— Wait, when did you go back to fishing?!"

"Well, I didn't think it would be good for an outsider like me to nose in," Misty replied, her back turned to us and her fishing line dropped over the side of the boat. "But I will say that it's true you were working harder than Clark-san. I know that, technically, the academy's doors are open to all, but it's exceptionally hard for an orphan to make the cut. And it's a miracle that you graduated with top marks on top of that."

"That's so true..." Clark agreed, hanging his head. "I couldn't have done it even with the Feed Company's support."

"We really should have been sending her an allowance—" Morgan started to say again, but Misty cut him off.

"But thinking about it again, I think you were right not to send her any financial assistance, you know? There would have been trouble if people knew that Senpai had ties to the Feed Company. Because a budding alchemist with connections to Ophelia-sama is a real golden goose."

"Ohh, you could be right about that," I agreed. "And I can't go troubling Master, so maybe it was for the best?"

Besides, it wasn't like there had ever been a time when I had

been in genuine financial distress. I hadn't had it easy in the orphanage, but I never starved, and that had probably been the time when the Feed Company had been in the most trouble. They hadn't been in any position to help me back then.

I had been able to get reward money for my results on the first exam after entering the academy, so money was really tight only in that period when I had just gotten in. Because, after that, I was constantly working hard to put money away.

"So I hope both of you won't dwell on the past, okay? I did my best, and I'm sure everyone else did too. And it's because of that that I'm here today. I think it all worked out fine. If I could ask for anything, it would be that the Feed Company carries on supporting my parents' ideals. That's it."

"Young Mistress Sarasa...!" the two men both cried out in unison.

There was such an intensity of emotion in their eyes that I looked away in embarrassment, only to spot Misty grinning at us as she reeled in a fish.

"You're a real charismatic leader, Sarasa-senpai. Is that where the Feed Company's strength comes from?"

"I don't know! And here you are blithely racking up more fish! Why you!"

"H-Hey, Senpai! That tickles! It's time for some payback!"

I had decided to go for the ribs in an attempt to mask my embarrassment, and Misty threw aside her fishing pole in order to fight back.

Morgan and Clark wiped their tears away as they watched us, smiling.

"Ha ha ha, at the very least, I can say that the Feed Company was able to get off the ground because of the president's—which is to say both of your parents'—personal magnetism," said Morgan. "That was what inspired so many people to stay on, even when the company was going through hard times."

"Really?" I asked. "Well...it makes me happy to hear you say that."

"But we have the same respect for you as well, young mistress. You'll have to pardon me for saying that we old guard in the

company think of you as our own daughter. We've been avoiding contacting you before now in order to avoid causing you any trouble, but...from here on, you can expect more of us to want to come to South Strag."

"There was a lot of competition for who got to come this time, after all," Clark piped in. "When the head clerk told us that only two people could go, there were a lot of complaints. He only got us to settle down by withdrawing himself from consideration."

The Feed Company had steady sales, but they were far from having a lot of spare time on their hands. This was an offer that had come along out of nowhere. It was hard to arrange things with only a few days till departure, so they had only been able to afford to send one businessman and one bodyguard without disrupting their other operations. The result had been a scramble for the two positions.

Naturally, the head clerk had volunteered himself, but that had met fierce resistance from the other employees. The bodyguards had wanted to decide it with a fight. The head clerk had rejected that idea because it would have affected their ability to work.

"In the end, we did a lottery, excluding the people who had already been assigned other jobs. And me and Morgan-san were the ones who won."

"So we have no idea what they'll say to us if we fail... I'm counting on you, okay, Clark?"

"Leave it to me! I'll be in just as much trouble if I mess up! My seniors would kill me!"

"Um, I don't think you need to get so worked up about it..." I said.

I had high hopes for the Feed Company as merchants who were also able to deal with bandits, but I was the one who'd been tasked with solving the bandit problem, and so I meant to proceed in a way that meant the Feed Company would be able to back out without there being any issue.

I tried to explain that they could take it easy, but they both shook their heads.

"No!" Morgan argued. "For one thing, if I were to fail with you

offering your full support as plenipotentiary, that would be disqualifying as a merchant! I cannot stay on at the Feed Company unless I make this work!"

"I'm still in training, but I'll work like my life depends on it too!" added Clark.

They had a surprising amount of passion mixed with just a hint of desperation.

How did things turn out like this? I clutched at my head as I tried to figure it all out.

Misty, meanwhile, simply looked on with amusement.

Our voyage was going smoothly. There were occasional lulls in the wind, but fortunately, never enough for my magic to come into play. We spotted our destination harbor on the horizon on the morning of the fifth day.

"Oh, this sure is a big port, Sarasa-senpai."

"It sure is. It's my first time coming here too, but there's more infrastructure than I would have thought."

This was the port town of Grenje, Lochhart's gateway to the sea. It was the farthest west of the ports in the Laprocian Kingdom that were able to take larger vessels, and though it wasn't as large as the domain's capital of South Strag, it was its second largest town.

The first thing that stood out were the three impressive piers where large ships could dock. It was clear from the harbor facilities adjacent to them that work had gone into making this a functional port town.

"This is our first time coming to the west of the kingdom, but...there are some prosperous places out in this direction too," Morgan observed.

"I dunno, Morgan-san," Clark disagreed. "Sure the town's big, but it doesn't look like the business is booming."

Yeah... As Clark had pointed out, they had an impressive port, but for some reason, no large ships were docked there. People had gathered around because our ship had come into port, but even then, it was an awfully small crowd relative to the port's size.

"Young Miss! Sarasa-sama! We're arriving soon!" shouted the

captain.

"Okay!" Misty shouted back. "Sarasa-senpai, why don't the four of us get ready to disembark?"

After heading back to our rooms and preparing, we returned to the deck and found the ship had already pulled up to the pier, with the gangplank being lowered.

"Alley-oop! Whew. Traveling by boat is great and all, but I feel safer with my feet back on land."

I jumped down off the gangway, setting foot on firm ground for the first time in a while. The others followed suit, but Morgan and Clark both looked a little unsteady on their feet still.

"Whoa... I feel like the ground's shifting!" cried Clark.

"I'll bet," Misty replied. "It depends on the person, but that feeling can last for a day or so. But hey, at least we arrived in one piece. And we didn't encounter any pirates either."

"Are there a lot of pirates?" he asked.

"A decent number, yeah," she told him. "When you've got big ships like ours, the small fry won't come after you, but that means when the pirates do attack us, it's in big fleets... It's not easy to defend ourselves."

"I hear pirates are hard to deal with," I chimed in.

On the smaller scale, pirates were hard to track down out on the vast sea, and they acted like trade or fishing ships usually, so it wasn't easy to identify them as pirates in the first place.

Larger-scale operations that had home bases were generally backed by nobles or countries, so they couldn't be treated like common criminals, and fighting them was closer to a feud or a war.

"If I think about it that way, then maybe I got off lightly when it comes to His Highness's unreasonable demands this time?"

Bandits showed up along the roads. They would be easier to search for there than hunting for pirates at sea, where there were no clearly defined paths, and I wasn't going to have to worry about the bandits having nobles or other countries backing them.

I just have to search near the highways, and eliminate any bandits I come across, so that's surprisingly—

"No." Misty interrupted my train of thought. "I think it was pretty

unreasonable to ask you to handle it when you're barely an adult. Even though we've been studying, it's not like we have practical experience."

"I guess I'll have to count on the magistrate and my father-in-law...'s assistant to help me out with that?"

I couldn't count on Adelbert-san to help anywhere but in battle. I'd have to count on Kate's father Walter or my mother-in-law Diana. Those were the two who actually took care of the domain.

But as we were talking about that, there was a sudden shout.

"Hey! Whaddaya mean we can't unload our cargo?!"

"I am telling you, you need permission to hire people from the dockworkers' union!"

I turned to see our captain red in the face as he argued with someone I assumed was an office worker from Grenje. It totally looked like the captain was trying to intimidate some poor victim, but the office worker must have been used to dealing with ruffians, because he was shouting right back at him.

"Is there some trouble?" I wondered aloud.

"Looks like?" said Clark. "They were just saying they were about to start unloading our cargo."

We looked at one another, unsure what to make of the situation, then headed over to talk to the captain.

"Captain Raban, is something the matter?" asked Misty.

"And where do we get permission to— Oh, young miss..." The captain turned to her with a troubled look. "This guy's saying he can't unload our cargo."

The equally troubled office worker explained, "It's not that we can't; it's that the dockworkers' union can't take the job. We'd be happy to do it if you could get permission. But until then, we aren't able to lend you the usage of our warehouses."

"That's ridiculous! How are we supposed to do business like this?!" the captain roared at the office worker's unreasonable demand.

The reason this was so unreasonable had to do with the way that the maritime shipping industry worked. Normally, when a ship brought cargo into port, it was unloaded by the dockworkers' union.

Then it was either shipped to the buyer or left in the warehouses for a time while looking for customers.

It wasn't impossible for the crew to do the unloading or to hire other people, but the dockworkers' union was guaranteed to interfere, so if they refused to take the job, then even if the ship was allowed to dock, they couldn't use the port's facilities.

"Those are the rules," the office worker said matter-of-factly. "If we break the rules, we won't be able to work anymore either."

"You say that, but look at this harbor! There aren't any other ships. You've got a bunch of workers loafing around with nothing to do. Looks to me like you're hard up for work yourselves, aren't you?"

"You're right. And we had been hoping that a ship with the proper permissions had arrived, so we're very disappointed. The union hires on a job-by-job basis, so the workers aren't an issue, but having the warehouses sit empty is a loss for us!"

"Then what's the problem? We're with the Hudson Company, so we can pay you."

The captain tried to tell him not to be such a stickler for the rules, but the man from the dockworkers' union frowned and shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but rules are rules."

"Damn it all!" spat the captain. "Do you know how much of a loss we're going to take at this rate?!"

The people in port watching all of this unfold—who, judging from their muscular builds were probably dockworkers—let out disappointed sighs.

He had let us board his ship because he'd had hopes of selling his products in the western part of the kingdom. If he couldn't do that, it was a wasted trip. The captain clutched his head in frustration.

"Umm, Captain, is this how ports usually work?" I asked.

"It's true there are ports you need rights to use. They manage access because it wouldn't be good for them if there were too many ships coming. But even in those ports, you're usually able to use them if you wait offshore until the piers are empty. Because the port gets to collect harbor fees, wages for the dockworkers, and warehouse usage fees."

"So usage rights are about priority—in normal ports, that is," I concluded. "So do usage rights here cost a large amount of money or something? Is that it? Um, I don't think I caught your name..."

"Ahh, I'm Dickens, from the dockworkers' union. That would have been the case before, but sadly you can't even pay for those rights now. The situation is such that permission can't be given."

"How did that happen? That has to be a problem for the port too."

"You're telling me! I'd like to have the issue settled quickly, but there's nothing I can do at my level... I don't know myself what the cause is, but the rumors are that it had to do with an alchemist."

"An alchemist, you say...?" Misty murmured. I felt a number of eyes glancing my way.

Hold up. We don't know anything for sure yet! It could be some other malicious alchemist for all we know!

"The Bahru Company was originally responsible for the usage rights and permissions in this port, but they recently sold off those rights to another company in order to improve their finances."

Gah! Looks like that settles it!

I could feel Misty, who I'd told about it because she was coming to work at my shop, and Morgan and the captain, who would have done their own research, all staring at me.

"But the company that bought the rights from them was recently indicted and went under..."

"Oh, that one had nothing to do with me. Thank goodness," I murmured before asking, "So, who holds those rights now?"

"Huh?" Dickens was momentarily confused by what he'd heard me say, but quickly turned to my question. "Um, the rights would be held by the lord, so I believe the magistrate would be the one in charge of it now."

"So you're telling me the magistrate's lazy?"

"I can't say anything in my position... But who are you anyway? Are you affiliated with the Hudson Company?"

"That would be her," I said, gesturing to Misty. "As for me... Let me just show you this."

It was a little awkward to introduce myself as the alchemist

responsible for all of this, so I pulled out my written orders instead.

"That's...the royal seal?! And it says...you're a plenipotentiary?! So..."

"I'm the highest authority in the former Kahku Baronetcy, now known as the royal domain of Lochhart."

When I spelled it out clearly, Dickens-san, and all of the other people of the port who had been idly listening to us, were struck speechless before excited murmurs ran through the crowd.

"Wha?! Then does that mean...?!"

"She can do something about the port situation?!"

"Hurry, please! We're at our limit here! We need work soon!"

The people of the port rushed in closer, but the Hudson Company ship's crew quickly formed a wall between them and us with their own bodies. I saw Clark among them, so I guess he was trying to do his part as a bodyguard, but...he was still looking a bit unsteady on his feet.

"Please remain calm! Dickens-san, bring me a pen and paper."

"Right awayyyyy!"

He took off running at full speed. I didn't know if it was my authority he had caved to or the piercing looks of all the people in the crowd.

He immediately returned with a pen and paper, which he handed to me reverently.

"Thank you. Um...what's the usual duration for usage rights?"

"In most cases, they're renewed annually," he explained. "But the Bahru Company would sometimes collect extra fees for the usage of port facilities under the threat of stripping those rights away."

"Hmm, well, we can't be doing that. It makes you question what the harbor fees are even for... For now, in my position as the lord's plenipotentiary, I authorize the Hudson Company to use the port of Grenje for a period of one year."

The gang of macho men surrounding us all gulped. The crowd was hanging on my every word.

Given my height, they were practically a wall of muscle. It was super intimidating, but I kept calm as I signed the paperwork.

At the same time, Dickens-san clenched his hand into a fist and

shouted, “All right! Get to work, you louts! Open the doors to the warehouses! We’re getting their cargo off of the ship!”

“The men have already gathered! Just tell us how many you want!”

“There’s no limits this time! But the pay’s not good! Just understand that when you take the job!”

“Yeahhhhh!”

I’d taken Dickens-san for more of an intellectual type up until a moment ago, but now he had suddenly turned into a macho man, and the genuine macho men gathered all around us erupted into cheers.

“Is this going to be okay, Sarasa-senpai? Making a decision like this without even talking to the magistrate first,” Misty asked, looking relieved, but also a little concerned.

“I have the authority,” I said, nodding. “It’s been made clear that I technically outrank him. That said, he’s not going to like it, so I’ll have to explain myself properly when I go see him. And if he still has a problem with it, then I guess I’ll have to have His Highness take responsibility for my actions, huh?”

“You can make His Highness do that, Sarasa-sama...?” the captain said in disbelief. “Well, anyway, this was a big help. Who knows what the president would have said if I’d had to turn back.”

“I’m the one who suddenly asked you to take the ship out, so it would really have been my fault...” said Misty.

The Hudson Company didn’t usually have any shipping lanes to Grenje. But the captain had come here on Misty’s request with the justification that there could be business opportunities.

If he’d had the time to investigate properly, we probably wouldn’t have landed in a situation like this.

“Hold on, is it okay for you to still be here, Captain?” I asked.

“I have someone else in charge of unloading the cargo. But more importantly, I need to see you and the young miss off. You’re going, right?”

He crossed his arms and smirked. I nodded.

“Yep. It’s still morning, and we were taking it easy while we were on the ship, but we can’t hang around in town forever.”

"You would say that, Senpai," said Misty. "I'm fine, but what about the pair from the Feed Company?"

"I am also used to traveling," replied Morgan. "My legs are still a bit shaky, but I'm more than capable of walking."

"I've got the stamina for it!" said Clark. "As for the shakiness...I'll just tough it out!"

"If our bodyguard's in that shape, then we— Oh, right, Senpai's here. I guess it doesn't really matter, then. So there you have it, Captain Raban. I'll be heading off now. Give my regards to dad for me."

Misty smiled awkwardly. The captain seemed to get a little emotional as he looked at her.

"Take care, little missy... Sarasa-sama, take care of our young lady for us. I'll be praying for your safe travels."

"You were a great help to us as well, Captain-dono," said Morgan.

"Hah!" the captain snorted. "You were just a couple of tagalongs. I'll be charging you the usual fare in future, got it?"

Morgan didn't seem particularly offended. "I wouldn't expect otherwise. If the occasion arises, we would happily use your services again. It was a pleasant trip."

"I'm amazed to hear you say that. You halfway died on the trip over here, right? Well, tell you what, I'll throw in a prayer for your safety too." With that, the captain grinned and turned back toward the ship before taking a deep breath. "Hey, you louts! The little miss is leaving! Give her a holler!!!"

"Yeah!!!" On the captain's command, the crew all shouted. Then they lined up on the side of the ship and burst into song.

Their loud, low, throaty voices enthusiastically beat out a unique rhythm. There were no lyrics, but it was a piece with a solemnity about it that stirred the emotions.

I listened half in a daze, and the dockworkers who had started unloading the cargo stopped working to listen as well.

Misty awkwardly took my hand, pulling me along as she started walking, and Morgan and Clark noticed and hurried to follow us.

"Um, Misty, are you sure? You don't want to listen to the end? It's a really good song," I asked as she continued to lead me along, but

she awkwardly shook her head.

"I can't bear to stay and listen," she said. "And that's supposed to be a funeral song, just so you know."

My mind blanked at this unexpected revelation. "Huh? Whaaa?! They're not blessing you as you leave on your journey?!"

"Oh, I'm sure they're doing that too. It's the nature of the business. We lose a lot of people to illness, accidents, and pirate attacks, so it's a song for sending off people too. Death is just a momentary parting, and a departure to the place where we'll meet again. So the song also comes with a wish that we can board the same ship again when that time comes."

"Oh, so that's why it's used for departures too..." I said. "But it's still kind of ominous..."

It's a touching story. Really, it is. But did they have to generalize it to ordinary departures too?

The song itself has real impact though, and I like it.

"I know, right? I appreciate the feeling and all," Misty explained. "But can you understand how I felt when I got into the academy, and then they started belting that out, right in the middle of the capital, with more than twice as many people singing?!"

"Yikes..."

That's a bit much.

It wasn't just me; Morgan and Clark reacted the same way.

Sailors tended to be macho men by default, so a large group of them sending off a ten-year-old girl would already stand out like sore thumbs, but once you added in the effect of the song itself, you'd have history in the making.

"I don't hate my folks. It's just they don't match my vibe..." Misty said, letting out a melancholy sigh.

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It was three days' walk from Grenje to South Strag. Yok Village was even farther on than that, but it could be reached from there in a day—provided that you were me.

But I had Morgan and Clark along this time, and the road to

South Strag was largely uphill. So, we didn't push ourselves *too* hard, instead moving at what might have felt like a determined march to an ordinary person. We stayed overnight in the town of Fergo along the way and arrived in South Strag after two days.

"This is a pretty big town!" Clark exclaimed, looking around curiously.

"The largest on the frontier, yeah. It gets a lot of business, so I'd guess you can buy just about anything here," I explained to him. "Now then, I'll need to ask around about bandits. What will you and Morgan do?"

We hadn't spotted any bandits on the way here, and this town was the very picture of peace. I couldn't see any problems, but given that word had made it to His Highness, there could be little doubt there was some trouble.

"We will secure lodgings for ourselves," said Morgan. "Would you like us to find rooms for you two as well?"

"Please do," I replied. "Also, if you're going to scope out the town, you should visit an acquaintance of mine. Things will go smoother that way. Let's meet up in the town's central plaza when we're finished."

Leonora-san kept up with what went on behind the scenes. If they checked in with her first, they could nip some trouble in the bud and get an overall picture of the situation.

I explained that to Morgan and Clark, then Misty and I left for the lord's manor.

Despite having visited South Strag many times before, this was my first time coming to the lord's manor. Based on the size of the town, I'd expected it to be a fairly impressive building. But, now that I was actually here, I found it even more grand than I'd expected.

The fact that it was bigger than the Lotzes' house went without saying, but it was even bigger than Priscia-senpai's place—Marquess Kirbress's second home in the capital. That mansion wasn't Senpai's main residence, so I couldn't make a simple one-to-one comparison, but this one, with its high walls surrounding it, looked like way too much for a mere baronet.

"H-Hey... It's a bit intimidating, huh?" I said, looking to Misty for

agreement.

But, coming from money like she did, all I got was a look of exasperation in return. “What are you saying, Sarasa-senpai? *You’re* the master of that house now, aren’t you?”

“Only temporarily! But I guess now’s not the time to be worrying about that, huh?”

I had a lot to do, and this was no time to be dawdling around admiring the architecture.

I showed the four men on guard my written orders. They initially were shocked by the royal seal, then shocked again when they read the contents, and then hurriedly led us inside—by themselves, for some reason.

We were taken to a luxurious parlor. Unlike the one at my shop, which was a pale imitation of what a reception room should be, it was decorated lavishly with expensive furniture. It was exactly what I’d expect from a noble.

But I’m going to have to dock them marks for not serving us tea.

At my place, Lorea-chan would have served up a fresh pot, so I felt like I was winning on that one point.

I kept working myself up with that pointless competitive spirit until, a short while later, there was a knock at the door, and an old man who was really getting on in years entered—with a tray bearing tea.

“I must apologize for making you wait. I’ve reduced my staff to the bare minimum, you see...”

Having said this, he set the tea down in front of us. Then, with an “If you’ll excuse me,” he took a seat on the other sofa.

“I am Clency, the one who currently takes care of this domain,” he finished.

Is he over seventy? I wondered. His short hair was stark white, and there were clear signs of exhaustion on his face, but his body was still holding up well, and he gave no sign of frailty.

“No, if anything, we should apologize for turning up so suddenly. I am Sarasa Feed, the one who has been entrusted with plenary powers over this domain. And this is my junior...”

“Misty Hudson. I have come to assist Sarasa-sama, who is very

busy, and also to train under her. It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Oh-hoh. Then you're also from the Alchemist Academy..." Clency smiled. "Yok Village will become even more prosperous."

"If I can help the village with that in some small way, I would be honored," Misty replied with a nod.

Hmm. I was worried, but he doesn't seem hostile, I guess? I breathed a sigh of relief. I took a sip of tea to wet my parched throat. *Grr. It's good. Very good.*

No, no, it must just be the price of the leaves he used. If they were both using the same leaves, I'd definitely prefer tea made by the adorable Lorea-chan to an old man. It's okay! We won't lose on the overall score!

I handed him the written orders without giving away that I was thinking such silly things. "These are my written orders. Please review them for yourself. I am sure you must have some reservations about having someone as young as I am above you, but those are His Highness's orders..."

After giving the orders a once-over, Clency smiled wryly and nodded. "You are a capable alchemist, Sarasa-sama. I see no issue with it whatsoever. His Highness already contacted me. 'I'm sending you a talented helper, so look forward to it' was how he put it, though."

"A helper... He, uh, didn't really adequately explain it, huh?"

"That's Prince Ferrick for you. Although, I would argue his free spirit is one of his charms."

The old man and I have a difference of opinion there.

I was worldly enough not to raise an objection, though, and instead asked him about something else that was on my mind. "Have you known His Highness long, Clency-san? He seems to trust you."

"I *have* been alive for a long time, after all," he replied. "Ahh, just Clency is fine. You outrank me, Sarasa-sama, so it would be best if we made that clear in the way we address one another."

"If you feel that way, then... Okay."

The man was many times my age. It felt wrong addressing him without an honorific, but clear hierarchical relationships were

necessary to make the job go smoothly. In light of how it would look to the soldiers, I accepted his offer.

"However, Sarasa-sama, while I have no issue with this arrangement, are you not, yourself, dissatisfied with it? I was Baronet Kahku's house steward. There has been bad blood between myself and the House of Lotze as well."

Huh? I haven't heard about this. You never told me, Prince Ferrick! That's kind of important info, you know?! The biggest victim in all of it was my spouse, okay?

I felt like I could hear the prince chuckling somewhere as I mentally ground my teeth in frustration.

"Then, the whole plan to take over the House of Lotze using debt was..."

"Yes, it was my idea. Although, the plan was so flimsy that you, who graduated from the Alchemist Academy with top marks, were able to see through it with ease."

"I think it'd have worked on most nobles around here, though. Weird as it is for me to compliment you on it."

"You are too kind. But it is a fact that I caused you some trouble. I was appointed as magistrate by His Highness, so I cannot step down from my post, but if you find my presence an eyesore, I could __"

"No," I cut him off, shaking my head. "If His Highness has decided it's not an issue, then I'm not going to make it one. The issue with the House of Lotze is settled, and I'll be needing your help. Let's let bygones be bygones."

He's probably the one I heard about from Leonora-san, who "kept Baronet Kahku's unreasonable behavior in check." He's caused me some trouble, sure, but there must have been people who were saved as a result of his actions too.

Clency breathed a sigh of relief. "It's a big help to hear you say that. Honestly, even now, I have my hands quite full."

"It sure sounds like it," I replied. "Oh, by the way, the port of Grenje was basically shut down, so I gave the Hudson Company, who brought me here, the rights to use it for a period of one year."

"Grenje... Understood. I had been hoping to do something about

that, but it had been more or less handed off to the Bahru Company before now, so I hadn't gotten to it yet..."

The domain was currently undergoing reforms. If they were going to officially grant port rights, they would need to investigate the companies that applied for them, but people were currently tied up with more pressing matters.

"I had hoped to start with the bare minimum of reforms necessary, but things were simply too far out of control," Clency explained.

He had started by expelling the officials and soldiers who had engaged in criminal behavior, but as he did, the criminal organizations that had been profiting off of Baronet Kahku went to work.

As he was stomping out organized crime, he also ended up crushing many corrupt companies. The company that had purchased the port rights to Grenje had apparently been one of them.

"With fewer officials and soldiers, it takes time to accomplish anything. But at the same time, I couldn't use criminals to fight crime."

The reason there had been so many guards outside, but those guards had also been the ones who had led us inside, and the reason Clency had ended up having to make tea for us himself, probably had something to do with that.

"The personnel shortage is that bad, huh? I've been asked to take measures against banditry, though..."

"If the House of Lotze could handle that, it would be a huge help; it would give me breathing room to take care of other things. I'd like to discuss your future plans, now. What are you thinking, Sarasa-sama?"

"I have a shop to consider, so I'm heading back to Yok Village first. I mean to have the former head of the house take charge of putting down the bandits, so I plan to gather the involved parties and consider our options."

I was nominally the head of the House of Lotze, but the actual power there still lay with Adelbert-san and Diana-san. Even if this was an order from His Highness, and therefore couldn't be refused, I

couldn’t just go around commanding them to do things.

I’d either need to have Adelbert-san come to Yok Village or go to the Lotze domain myself. Either way, we needed to exchange information and agree on a common policy going forward.

When I explained this, Clency nodded repeatedly, then said something unexpected. “I see, that’s all very reasonable. Then, allow me to also go to Yok Village in the near future.”

“You don’t mind?” I asked. “Surely you’re busy. Do you have that kind of time?”

“I have been thinking it would be best if I went and saw Yok Village for myself at least once, and I suspect that if I do not personally apologize to the former head of your house, it could cause issues with our future cooperation. As such, I should make the trip to see him.”

“I...can’t say you’re wrong. Well, as for the specifics of your trip...”

It was still going to take some time before Clency was able to find a break in his work and for me to contact Adelbert-san. Taking that into consideration, I proposed a date for the meeting in Yok Village, and then we rose from our seats.

“This has been a very productive meeting, and it’s taken a load off my shoulders,” said Clency. “Sarasa-sama, and also Misty-san, I will look forward to seeing you again in Yok Village.”

“It was a valuable meeting for us too,” I said. “Not only since I live in Yok Village, but also because I’m the lord of a neighboring domain. My role as plenipotentiary of Lochhart is only temporary, so I hope we can build a good working relationship for the future.”

“I’m relieved to know the local magistrate has his head on straight too,” added Misty.

Clency extended his hand with a smile, and we each shook it, smiling as well.

After the meeting, we immediately took our leave. Clency had offered to let us stay the night in the lord’s manor, but we’d already asked Morgan to find accommodations, so we declined.

He knew he couldn’t offer much in the way of hospitality when he was so short of staff, so he didn’t press the issue.

From there, we headed to a café with a view of the plaza where we'd agreed to meet.

Clency had served a good cup of tea, but there had sadly been no sweets to go with it, so Misty had dragged me here, complaining of an empty stomach.

"Whew, Sarasa-senpai, that sure was exhausting." Misty groaned, slouching over the table. She had just finished munching down the scones she'd ordered with a grin and washing them down with a cup of tea.

Her actions were a little at odds with her words, and I cocked my head to the side. "Really? Clency's just a magistrate, not some haughty noble, and we didn't really work out any concrete details at the meeting. He accepted what we did at Grenje without batting an eye too, so—"

"No, that's not how it works, Senpai! Him being a magistrate is already enough!!!" Misty sat up to protest before slouching once more. "For all your grumbling, you're not that affected by people in positions of authority."

"I don't...think that's true, though...?"

"Well, it *is,*" Misty replied emphatically. "Normally, if someone was called aside by a royal and given orders, would they have been able to chat with me right after that? You know, if I had been in your shoes, I'd have told me to come back the next day, because I'd have needed the rest of the day to recover."

"I couldn't have done that to you when you'd come to see me after so long, though."

If it were someone I didn't care about, that would have been another matter, but Misty was one of the few people I considered a friend.

"Just being able to be that considerate shows how strong of a person you are," Misty explained. "I'd have felt too pressured to be able to do it."

"I was pretty tired myself...and Master wouldn't listen to my complaints," I grumbled.

"Being able to gripe to Ophelia-sama shows—" Misty started to say, but then let out a resigned sigh. "Wait, you're her apprentice.

I'm incredibly jealous that you two have such a good relationship. I mean, she's *the* Ophelia-sama, after all."

"As far as I'm concerned, Master's just Master to me," I said. "Oh, looks like Morgan and Clark have arrived."

I waved to the pair, who were looking anxiously around the plaza. They noticed right away.

Once I saw that they had, I indicated to Misty that it was time for us to leave the café.

"Young Mistress Sarasa, Misty-san, have we kept you waiting?"

"No, not really. So? How was South Strag? Do you think you'll be able to open up a branch office here?"

"Yes, it won't be an issue. Fortunately, we were able to find some vacant premises that will suit us. But from what Leonora-dono had to say, it sounds like public order has worsened."

"We'll be fine, though," Clark added, puffing up his chest. "Because I'm here too."

The Feed Company operated in a lot of places where public order was not very good, and compared to that, the current state of South Strag wasn't a problem in the slightest.

"How about you, Young Mistress Sarasa? Did your talks with the magistrate go well?" Morgan asked.

"Yeah. It was more of a meet and greet for now. We'll head back to Yok Village tomorrow and start working out the details there. How about you two? Will you stay here to start working on opening the branch office?"

"We will continue accompanying you, of course," said Morgan. "It might be possible to open a branch in Yok Village as well, but we must do our due diligence before we come to a decision."

"Makes sense," I agreed. "But a branch office in Yok Village, huh... That'd be convenient, but..."

If they set up a branch office in Yok Village, that would make it easier for me to sell materials, and for the villagers and gatherers to go shopping. The downside was...

"Is something the matter? If there is, go ahead and say so," Morgan said, noticing the change in my expression.

"Well, you see, the village *already* has a general store. A little one

that clearly can't hope to compete with the Feed Company."

Normally, business was an open competition. As long as everything was above board, it wasn't their fault if their rivals went broke.

But this was Lorea-chan's family we were talking about. It'd put me in an awkward position if the Feed Company were the ones to put them out of business.

Morgan picked up on that and nodded deeply. "I see. I understand the situation. The owners of that general store are people you care about, yes? Leave it to us. We will not treat them badly."

"Um, that's not quite what I meant, but... Yeah, it's something like that, I guess?"

He didn't understand the situation, but he wasn't wrong.

"Got it," Morgan said, speaking rapidly. "Clark, it's a third shop. I'll have preliminary contracts in place by tomorrow. You contact the main shop. Explain the situation to them and request more people. Young Mistress Sarasa, the inn that we booked for you is in the south of town and is called 'The Wind Through the Trees.' Also, Leonora-dono asked you to stop in if you have time. Anyway, we'll talk later! We have to hurry!"

"Right!" Clark agreed. "We've gotta go, Young Mistress Sarasa!"

With that, Morgan and Clark ran off.

"Huh? They're going to decide on the branch office before we leave tomorrow? Aren't they rushing things a bit much? I mean, it's already close to evening..."

I hadn't even been able to get a word in.

I watched them go, feeling exasperated, but then felt an even more exasperated Misty's eyes stabbing into me. Why?

"You're going to say that when *you* bought a shop the same day you graduated?"

"Urkh! I just dug my own grave?! B-But that was...because Master pushed it on me."

When I explained to her that I hadn't bought it myself, Misty nodded.

"Oh, that makes sense," she said. "I can understand if it was

Ophelia-sama. It always seemed a little weird to me that someone as frugal as you made a decision like that in just one day. I was worried something had happened to you, you know?”

“Well...sorry? I did send you a letter, though.”

“Yeah, and I did get it. Long after the fact. But there was no real explanation in there.”

Well, it was after Master set up the transporter.

It was much too far from Yok Village to the capital for me to have sent letters regularly back when I didn’t have any money.

“I wanted to write a response too, but I couldn’t...” Misty said.

Priscia-senpai and Lacie-senpai had continued sending me letters after they graduated, but that was because they were affluent nobles and lived in towns near the capital. Even though Misty’s family owned a huge company, the frontier had just been too far away.

Misty’s eyes drooped apologetically, but she soon changed tack, indignantly placing her hands on her hips and glaring at me a little.

“Besides, what’s with that ridiculous transportation circle?! Are you picking a fight with what’s common sense in alchemy? And you and Ophelia-sama both use it so casually. Try to think about my position!”

“I just asked Master to deliver my letters to the Academy... Was that a problem?”

As a rule, deliveries for people living in the dorms went through the office, and then the recipient had to go pick it up themselves.

There’s nothing that should have affected Misty’s position there, right?

As I tilted my head to the side, not really getting it, Misty seized me by the shoulders. “It was! Whenever Ophelia-sama came, they summoned me immediately! Even if I was in the middle of class, the office staff would dash in! I was the talk of the school for a while!!!”

“O-Oh... Um, sorry again?”

That’s painful! Just imagining it is wearing a hole in my stomach!!!

“Well, I managed to put a stop to it by telling her I would come around the shop occasionally and to please hold on to them for me.

That ended up giving me more opportunities to talk to Ophelia-sama, which I was happy about," Misty said, averting her eyes a little shyly after I apologized.

"Hee hee! I see. Well, we should head off to the inn... But before that, I've got another stop to make."

"To see the Leonora-san you mentioned earlier? Who is she?"

"She's an alchemist in this town. This is a good opportunity for me to introduce you to her too. If you're going to be working in Yok Village, you'll be seeing more of her, and she knows a lot about what goes on both in the open and in the criminal underworld."

"The underworld too? That makes me a bit uneasy..."

"Oh, she's got nothing on the captain in that regard. Nothing at all! She's just an ordinary big sister type!"

"That's a weird comparison! If we're just talking about looks, he looks more like a criminal than some actual criminals, you know?!"

That was harsh. But I couldn't deny it.

I stifled a laugh that almost escaped, then put a hand on the hesitant Misty's back. With that, I began steering her toward Leonora-san's shop.

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Despite all the stuff that had happened along the way, we arrived in the village more or less on schedule, ditched Morgan and Clark at the inn, and then went back and opened the door to my sweet home.

"I'm home!" I announced.

"Welcome home, Sarasa-san!" Lorea-chan greeted me.

"Welcome home, Sarasa!" Iris and Kate greeted me too.

Hearing them, Maris-san poked her head out from the back.

"Sarasa-san, you're back early?" she said questioningly. "You could have taken your time a little longer, you know?"

"If I left the shop for too long, you'd have taken it over for good."

"Heh heh, Lorea-san is already in my grasp," Maris-san declared, wrapping her arms around her from behind, then adding, "This shop will fall too, soon enough."

Lorea-chan fought back playfully before puffing up her cheeks. “I am not! Come on, Maris-san, don’t say anything too weird.”

She denies it, but they’re getting along surprisingly well.

Then again, between this time and the last time, they have *spent a little over a month living together at this point.*

“What a shame. You’re so adorable, Lorea-san. Once I remodel the shop, I’ll— Oh? What’s this, Sarasa-san? Already bringing home wife number two? You work faster than I thought.”

Maris-san was looking at Misty, who’d been hiding behind me so as not to interfere with our reunion—although, since we were about the same height, she wasn’t actually hidden.

“Oh, this girl is—” I began to explain, but...

“What?!” Iris cut me off. “Infidelity, so soon after we married?! Is that what this is, Sarasa?! You’ve gone and laid hands on another woman?!”

She pressed in closer as she talked.

That brought a mischievous smile to Misty’s lips, and she hugged my arm from behind. “No, no, I was with her first, you know?”

“You’re making me sound bad! Don’t say that like we used to be going out!”

“Is it my age?” asked Iris. “Is that the problem?! Is a big-sister type not good enough for you?! Do you prefer younger women?!”

“You’re making me sound even worse! Misty is my junior from the academy! I brought her back as my apprentice, so she can work in the shop! And Iris, you don’t feel all that much like a big sister anyway!”

Iris backed away in shock. Then, for some reason, Lorea-chan joined her in wide-eyed surprise.

“Huh?! H-Have I been made redundant?!”

“Huh? Oh! N-No?!” I said, flailing my arms. “Lorea-chan! I’d never __”

“Ah ha ha, Sarasa-senpai, this sure has turned into a big kerfuffle, huh?” Misty said with an amused smile.

You’re the one who poured fuel on the fire, okay?!

Finally, the arsonist—Maris-san—stepped in to mediate between us. “How about we all settle down? You can discuss this at your

leisure outside of business hours.”

“Y-Yeah. You have a point. I’m not completely satisfied, but sure... You can be kind of like a big sister too, Maris-san.”

“I am always a reliable big sister, you know?” she replied.

I have some major objections to that statement. But I’ll let it slide for now. Poking fun at her would just complicate things.

We set the discussion aside for the moment and quickly sped through the process of closing the store so we could move to the reception room.

We all relaxed while drinking the tea Lorea-chan prepared. Even though it was a blend I’d made myself, drinking what I was most familiar with really helped put me at ease.

“Whew. Now then, let’s start over. I’ve got all sorts of things I need to tell you...”

I had only been in the capital a few days, but so much had happened that I needed to explain more than a few anecdotes from the trip.

As I was figuring out where to start, Misty interjected. “Senpai, maybe start with the souvenirs? That will lighten the mood.”

“Ohh, I think you’re right. Um, first up, Lorea-chan. I bought you some ribbons and a bunch of other stuff.”

Most of it was materials for making accessories, since I thought that it might be fun for her to make her own. Lorea-chan’s eyes sparkled at all the products she wouldn’t have been able to find nearby.

“Thank you so much! Ohh, I wonder what I should make with them...!”

“Heh heh, anything you want, okay? Next up, Iris. I really went and splurged on yours.”

Ultimately, I had gone with a sword for Iris’s gift. Misty had introduced me to a place where I had been able to buy one of the higher-end, ready-made products at a bit of a discount. It was probably a couple ranks above the one that Iris was currently using.

“You’re sure...? I think it’s a bit expensive for a souvenir.”

“You’re my partner, Iris. Use it to work hard and make us some money, okay?”

"Sarasa...! Thank you, I'll treasure it! And I'll make us lots of money!!!"

I nodded at Iris, who was hugging the sword tight, then moved on.

"I wasn't sure what you'd like, Kate...but here's what I got. Isn't it cute?"

I'd gotten her a stuffed animal.

But even once I'd decided on that, I'd still been torn on what *kind* of stuffed animal. I'd had Misty take me around to various shops, and the end result of that trip had been...

"Doesn't it look like a color-swapped version of Kurumi? The moment I saw it, I knew that I'd have to buy it."

Kurumi looked a lot like a stuffed animal to begin with, so the two had very similar silhouettes. The main colors of the stuffed animal were red and black, which wasn't the same, but both of them had white fur on their chests.

I had been confident that *"Kate adores Kurumi, so I'm sure she'll like it,"* but for some reason, she had a complex expression on her face as she looked at me.

"Um... Sarasa? I appreciate the gift, but I've outgrown stuffed animals..."

"Huh? But isn't your room full of—"

I was about to point out that she had an awful lot of stuffed animals for someone who claimed to have outgrown them, but she snatched the bear out of my hands as if to cut me off, hugged it tight, and squealed with some embarrassment, "Thanks, Sarasa! I love it!!!"

"Oh, you do? Well, I'm just glad you're happy. Oh, come to think of it, where is Kurumi...?"

I tried looking through Kurumi's eyes and saw Kate hugging the stuffed bear. *Hmm? Based on the angle...*

I turned to see Kurumi peering in through a gap in the door, looking a little sad.

"Grar, grarrr?"

I motioned to Kurumi, whose growls seemed to say, *What about me?* The little bear delightedly rushed over and jumped into my lap.

It turned over and showed me its belly, which I rubbed as I topped up its magical energy.

Misty let out a sigh that was a mixture of admiration and exasperation.

"Oh-hoh, so this is the homunculus you made... As I should've expected from you, Senpai, it's nothing if not an exception."

"Tell me about it," Maris-san agreed, nodding repeatedly. "I'm glad someone can understand how I feel. The baseline standards of the people here are all weird. I can't have them expecting the same things from me just because I'm also an alchemist."

It's true Kurumi's a bit special, but...did something happen when she was tending the shop for me?

"Finally, I have some sweets for Maris-san, who's been working so hard. I bought them at a popular shop in the capital."

"Oh...? For me too? I'll gratefully accept them."

They were the cheapest of the gifts I'd bought, but Maris-san took them with a smile.

"Now then, onto what happened in the capital—but first, I guess I ought to introduce Misty."

"Well then, I'm Misty Hudson. I'm an alchemist who was in the year below Sarasa-senpai," Misty said, bowing her head, before I could say anything more.

Lorea-chan shot Misty a competitive look. "I'm Lorea. I've been minding the shop for Sarasa-san since it first opened. I'm also in charge of cooking. She relies on me so much that I get souvenirs like these!"

"I can see that," replied the sociable Misty. "In that case, I hope you'll look after me as my Senpai too."

She extended her hand to Lorea-chan with a disarming smile.

"Huh? Oh, uh, sure..." Lorea-chan took her hand, blinking as if she'd been caught off guard.

"I'm Iris Lotze. I'm Sarasa's husband, or maybe her wife!"

"Kate Starven. I guess for now, you'd call me Sarasa's lover."

"And I am Maris Schlott. The poor alchemist whose job you're stealing."

What an awkward introduction! I can't deny it, though!

"I see, I see..." Misty nodded to herself. "Have no fear. I'm one of Senpai's *very few* friends, but we're just friends."

"That's true, but you're being kind of mean today, aren't you?!"

"Not really. It has nothing to do with you having made more friends, Sarasa-senpai."

The way she said that, it absolutely does!

"You're saying that, but you have way more friends than me, right?!"

"Huh? I don't have that many more than you, Sarasa-senpai. I do have a lot more acquaintances, though."

They think you're friends!

This was a surprising facet of Misty's. But I wasn't going to poke her about it—because something dark was bound to come pouring out!

"Ha ha ha, you don't have many friends either, Misty?" Iris laughed. "Well, I, I... Huh?"

Her face suddenly grew serious as she realized something.

Kate put a hand on Iris's shoulder. "Iris, I see you've just gone and realized it. The fact that you have no friends."

"Th-That can't be right... I must have some friends..."

"Well, you had two until a little while ago. But you married one of them, so you only have one left."

"My only friends were Sarasa and Lorea...?! Don't subjects count?! And what about you, Kate?!"

"Your relationship with your subjects isn't equal, so no," Kate told her. "And as for me, I'm more like family than a friend, right?"

"That's just how it goes, Iris-san," Maris-san said with a hint of resignation. "It's not easy for the daughter of a country nobleman to make friends."

"Maris! You're my friend, right?!" Iris said, clinging desperately to her.

Maris-san thought about it a little, then cocked her head to the side. "Am I...? If anything, we're coworkers—"

"Come on, just say we're friends!"

"O-Okay. Fine, we're friends. But there's nothing so great about having friends. None of mine helped me when I needed it."

Despite giving in to Iris's impassioned plea, Maris lowered her eyes a little sadly.

"I-Is that true? Don't worry, Maris. I'd never betray a friend..." Iris began reassuring her, but I had intel from Leonora-san.

"The way I heard it, they helped you several times before finally giving up on you."

"That...might be one way of viewing the situation, yes," Maris-san replied, awkwardly averting her eyes.

Misty shrugged. "So, as you can see, Iris-san, there's no need to go out of your way to make more friends. I think the clever thing to do is keep people at the level of acquaintances."

"Wowww, it sure is hard being in a position of power or having money, huh?" said Lorea-chan. "For me, all of the kids in the village are my friends."

"Uh, no, Lorea-chan, I don't think you can make generalizations like that..."

Being who I was, I wasn't able to make a strong counterargument, though. While Misty was picky about who she chose as her friends, I wasn't even able to choose.

"Hee hee, friendship comes in many varieties," said Kate. "But anyway, Sarasa, you had more to talk about, right?"

"Oh! That's right. Um, I'll start with...when I went to report my taxes. Thanks to everyone's help, it went off without a hitch. Thank you, everyone."

"Oh, my!" Maris-san exclaimed. "Without any corrections? It's always such a bother... I'm impressed, Sarasa-san."

"I had Master look over it, after all," I replied. "And I learned how to do it properly at the academy."

"Congratulations," said Kate. "I know it was hard work."

"Congratulations, Sarasa," said Iris. "Will you be able to relax for a while now?"

"That would've been nice. But Prince Ferrick called me aside as I was leaving."

Iris and Kate winced slightly as I said that. Meanwhile, Lorea-chan smiled wryly and Maris's eyes widened in surprise.

"First, let me hand you these," I said. "They're copies of Nord-

san's book."

"This is...the salamander book, huh?" Iris said, smiling a little as she flipped through it. "So he finished it successfully. I'm glad."

"We worked hard for it," Kate agreed. "If there was nothing to show for it after all that, I'd cry. But I take it you have more to tell us, right, Sarasa?"

"Right. I've been appointed plenipotentiary for the former Kahku Baronetcy, now known as Lochhart."

"Huh?" Everyone reacted with audible confusion.

"Furthermore, I've also been ordered to deal with the bandits that've been plundering Lochhart."

"Whuh?" They all reacted with further confusion.

"On top of that, I was contacted by the Feed Company, which my parents founded, and reconciled with them. They say they want to support me in some way, so they're setting up a branch in this region. Actually, two people from their advance team are already in the village. Also, the current magistrate of Lochhart used to be Baronet Kahku's steward, and is the one responsible for setting the House of Lotze up to fail. But I'm his superior now, so that's nothing to worry about. As an added bonus, I also brought back Misty, who wants to become my apprentice for a variety of reasons... Although, I think we already told you that."

"Wait, wait, wait!!!" shouted Iris. "That's too much to take in all at once, Sarasa! I'm swamped by how many new developments there were!"

Well, I think I've said everything I need to already.

"It's okay. That's all. Oh, right, the bandit slaying was an order to the House of Lotze. So, sorry, but I'll need Adelbert-san and the rest of the family to help out with that."

"Of course, that's no problem— Wait, that's not what I wanted to say! You've overloaded me with too much information!"

"Yeah, she kind of has," Kate agreed, putting a hand over her chest and taking a deep breath. "So to start out...this means you've been given power equivalent to the lord of the domain?"

"For a limited time only," I explained. "Dealing with the bandits is going to put some strain on the House of Lotze, so you can think of

it as my reward for that. They'll get upset if I do anything too crazy, but they'll probably let it slide if I push some policies that happen to benefit the House of Lotze."

"My, how incredible!" Maris-san said. "Since we're friends, you could give me a shop—"

"It's Prince Ferrick who'd be getting upset, Maris-san. Do you want to be the target of that?"

"—or so I was thinking, but I do believe I'll just keep working hard for it myself, yes."

Maris-san was quick to take back what she'd suggested.

I'm sure she was joking, but I don't need friends like that.

"But that authority is going to be important," Kate observed. "If the bandits flee into a neighboring domain while we're hunting them..."

"Right. If it were just the House of Lotze doing it, then pursuing them could cause a conflict. We needed the backing of a royal command."

There were six domains that bordered Lochhart, including the House of Lotze.

They were all about the same level, so while they could levy complaints against the House of Lotze, they had to quietly accept whatever the lord of Lochhart told them—although, obviously, I meant to do things as amicably as possible.

"As for the magistrate...I guess it doesn't matter," said Iris. "What's done is done."

This was something that I'd struggled with a bit myself. And yet Iris accepted it like it was no big deal. Misty cocked her head to the side a little.

"Huh? You let that slide awfully easy. From what I heard, he caused you a lot of trouble..."

"The fact is, the loan he extended to us saved my people. We struggled to repay it, but ultimately there was no harm to my house, and I was also able to find a wonderful partner in Sarasa. I think, on balance, I actually came out ahead from it."

Iris's sincere words and the smile on her face as she looked at me made my face flush hot.

Dammit. Iris is beautiful, and she can be kind of cool sometimes.

"Oh-hoh," Misty reacted. "You have a higher opinion of Sarasa-senpai than I'd expected."

"How many people in this country would have been a better partner than Sarasa? She's more than I could have possibly hoped for."

When Iris said that so definitively, Misty fanned her own face with her hand and let out an exasperated laugh.

"Uh, I think I've heard enough," she said. "I thought you were after Senpai for her money and status, but maybe I didn't need to worry."

"Well, no, I'm after those too, you know? As a member of the House of Lotze."

"Whuh?! You just came out and said it! Is that okay with you, Sarasa-senpai...?" Misty gave me a concerned look.

But I exchanged a glance with Iris then nodded. "I mean, she's a noble. What else can you expect? I was thinking about how it was going to benefit me when I agreed to the marriage too."

"Indeed. Sarasa is good for me because she satisfies both my feelings and my interests."

"Huh, is that a fact? Well, as long as Senpai's all right with it... But Iris-san, if you make her unhappy, I'm not going to let it go unanswered. More specifically, I'll rat you out to my friends in the house of a marquess and a count. Although, even if I don't, those two will come to take revenge on their own."

There was a half smile on her face, but Misty's eyes were serious.

Iris answered with an equally serious nod. "Murgh, that's scary. But if Sarasa is unhappy, then you can assume I'm already dead. That's the kind of determination I've come into this marriage with."

"My job is to support the House of Lotze," Kate added. "I know I joked about being her lover earlier, but it's true I care deeply about Sarasa and Iris. So I'm going to do everything that I can for them."

Um, do you have any idea how embarrassing it is to have you all talk about this right in front of me?

I cleared my throat deliberately. The three of them looked at one another, then laughed.

"Now that I think of it, there was no point worrying about Sarasa-senpai," said Misty.

"It's true," Iris agreed. "This is the same Sarasa who solved our house's troubles so easily."

"Yeah, tell me about it," said Kate. "Which just leaves us with the matter of the Feed Company, huh? You were saying you reconciled with them?"

"Oh, I was wondering about that too." Lorea-chan sounded concerned. "The Feed Company pushed you out and put you in an orphanage, right? You don't resent them for doing that to you?"

"Not at all," I replied. "I understand why now. If anything, they were protecting me."

I explained the details around why I was put in the orphanage, and though Lorea-chan didn't seem wholly convinced, she nodded and said, "Well, if you're okay with it, Sarasa-san."

"Yeah, I am," I told her. "But it seemed to bother the head clerk that he'd left me alone. That's why I made him a mutually beneficial proposal. You know how we've had more gatherers coming to Yok Village? It's gotten hard to sell all of the materials they bring me just to Leonora-san. I'll be happy to have another buyer, and the Feed Company will be happy to be able to deal in alchemical materials. Right?"

"Ohh, that will help," Maris-san said with a big sigh of heartfelt relief. "If I bring back all of the materials I bought over the past month, I'm sure to get a sarcastic comment from Master about it."

"So even Leonora-san was having trouble handling all the materials?" I asked.

"It wasn't an issue until spring. But it's more difficult now. There are a lot of gatherers, and transportation has been delayed— Oh, right, you mentioned that there were bandits, didn't you?"

"Yeah. In the near future, I'll be holding a meeting with the involved parties—that's the House of Lotze, the Feed Company, and the magistrate—to discuss countermeasures. Iris, how long will it take Adelbert-san and the others to come if we call them?"

"Here? If we contact them normally, it could be quite a while. I'll go with Kate. If we take the same route as last time, it will be three

days at a minimum, five if we travel at a more relaxed pace."

"They can make it here before the magistrate arrives, then. Also, Maris-san, thank you for all your hard work up to now. You were a big help this time too."

"It was no problem at all. I was free to try out all sorts of transmutations, so I had fun, you know?"

That was a slightly troubling comment. But I trust Lorea-chan.

"Good for you," I said, nodding, then continued, "so, when are you heading back? You're free to go now if you'd like..."

I'm sure she'd like to go home quickly.

That's what I was thinking when I said it, but she gave me a shocked look.

"You'd ask me to go home, all by myself, when there are bandits on the loose?! You fiend!"

"But we didn't run into a single bandit all the way from Grenje to here."

"You can't compare the experience of a single frail woman, traveling all by her lonesome, to that of a group of four people, including a bodyguard!"

"Is that how it works?" asked Lorea-chan. "You're an alchemist, aren't you, Maris-san? Bandits should be easy for you to—"

"I've told you, Lorea-san, you mustn't compare me to that walking exception. I am no expert at fighting. I could handle a few of them, perhaps, but any more than that and I would find myself subjected to the kind of experience restricted to adult literature!"

"So you *could* handle a few of them, then," Lorea-chan murmured.

"Hmm." Iris nodded. "If it was Sarasa, they could come at her by the dozen, and the resulting scene also wouldn't be fit to be shown to children, but for an entirely different reason."

"Did you have to say it that way?! Maybe I should show off the magic that I used to take down the salamander again?"

"Freezing people alive sounds like a horrific sight to me, in its own way," said Maris-san. "But that's beside the point. I'd like to stay here until I can travel safely. I'd also like you to contact Master about it for me."

"Got it. Would you like to accompany the magistrate on his way back?" I suggested.

Clency would probably come with guards, so if Maris-san went back with them, then there would be little risk of trouble.

"I'll do that," Maris-san agreed with a nod.

Starting the next day, I was pretty busy with greeting the villagers, taking care of all sorts of minor tasks, teaching Misty how to work in the shop, and showing Morgan and Clark around.

Before I knew it, the day of the meeting came. Gathered in my reception room were Clency the magistrate; Morgan of the Feed Company; Adelbert-san, representing the House of Lotze along with Walter, Iris, and Kate; and finally...

"Um, why am I here? I thought I was just serving tea?"

...Lorea-chan, who'd been about to leave when I took her by the arm and guided her to a seat. She looked at me, confused and a little frightened by her surroundings.

I get it. There's a lot of burly men in here. But still.

"I asked Erin-san to sit in, but she refused, saying she'd be out of place."

"Ohh, of course you wouldn't ask the mayor— Wait, I'm even more out of place!"

"But we need someone. Lorea-chan, you'll represent Yok Village, and also be a soothing presence for me."

"You're asking too much! And at the very least, I don't think you need a soothing presence here..."

What I liked about Lorea-chan was that, even though she said that, she wasn't making any attempt to get up out of her seat.

Having lightened the atmosphere a bit, I looked around at the others before I started speaking.

"Now then, let's start the meeting. I know the room's a bit small, but we don't have anywhere else, so bear with me."

There were eight people in here, four of whom were large men, so it felt a bit cramped.

Iris, Kate, and Walter were all standing. When I apologized about this, Morgan was the first to respond for some reason.

"It's true that it's a little bit of a tight fit in here. Young Mistress Sarasa, if you wish to expand the shop, just speak to me about it."

"If we consider the future, it might be good for you to have a conference room that can accommodate a large number of people," said Clency. "Would you like to have the domain pay for an expansion or the construction of an annex, Sarasa-sama?"

"I believe someone as great as you could do with a slightly larger shop," added Morgan.

"There isn't much work for them right now, so I could arrange to have some craftsmen come from South Strag. Even expanding this shop to twice its current size would not be much of a burden on the domain's budget."

"H-Huh? The shop? If you expand anything, shouldn't it be the mayor's house...?" I pointed out. I was extra confused about the way that the two had spoken in turn, as if they'd been waiting for this.

I mean, the mayor's house kind of blends in with all the others right now. To the point where, if no one told you, you might not realize that's whose house it is.

"That one...can be left as is, I'm sure. It's in line with the amount of work he does."

Harsh words from Clency. I couldn't disagree, though!

"But if you're thinking about the future, my position is only temporary..."

"Are you so sure of that?" asked Clency. "Knowing His Highness's personality, won't he find more work to push off onto you in the future?"

Could you please not foreshadow something so unpleasant? I can't deny you're probably right!

"Well, for the moment at least, it's just not possible. This house has a magic seal built into it, and it would take time to modify it. Besides, if we decide to do any construction, I'd prefer to ask the village's carpenter. But let's move on to the main topic for now."

Either way, it isn't relevant to this meeting.

"Then allow me to speak first," Clency said, raising his hand. He adjusted his sitting posture and turned to face Adelbert-san, bowing

his head deeply. “I wish to apologize to Adelbert-sama and everyone in the House of Lotze. Due to my position, I was unable to voice my contrition during the mediation, but now the House of Kahku has been abolished. I am terribly sorry for the trouble I caused you surrounding the matter of your loan.”

“I accept your apology,” said Adelbert-san. “I have to acknowledge that, if it wasn’t for the credit you extended us, my people would have starved, and I was naive in my handling of it. Now that it’s been settled through mediation, there’s no need to dredge up the issue again.”

“Thank you. Now then, let us move on to discussing the details.”

Clency bowed his head deeply again, then explained the present situation in Lochhart. It was clear and well-ordered, which spoke well of how capable a magistrate he was. Apparently, it had been more than his good looks that had kept the domain from collapsing while it had been under Baronet Kahku.

“And there you have it,” he concluded. “The issue before us is what countermeasures to take against bandits.”

“I’m the one whom Prince Ferrick ordered to take those countermeasures,” I said. “It was an order to the House of Lotze, so I’d like Adelbert-san and the others to help too...”

I looked questioningly at Adelbert-san, who immediately nodded. “You are the head of the house now, Sarasa-dono. Simply give the order. Given that it is also a royal command, we cannot possibly refuse.”

“Yes,” Walter agreed. “I have already begun preparing our troops. However, Sarasa-sama, as the head of the House of Lotze, I believe you should also take the interests of your house into consideration. What do you say about that?”

That was Walter for you. As the one who managed the domain on Adelbert-san’s behalf, he agreed, but at the same time, also said what needed to be said.

I nodded and turned to Clency. “Clency, I’d like to allocate some funds to expand the road from South Strag to Yok Village, build a direct road from Yok Village to the Lotze domain, and expand the village’s facilities.”

I tried leading with the most I hoped to get from him, but he let out a surprised, "Huh?"

I guess asking for a direct road was getting a little too greedy?

But what Clency said next caught me off guard. "Are you sure that will be enough? I can't see much profit for you in this, Sarasa-sama... Ah, hence the Feed Company. You wish to give the development rights to them. In that case—"

"Uh, no, I wasn't really thinking that at all..." I cut him off just as he thought he'd figured it out.

Clency now looked at me as if mystified. But why?

"O-Of course, I'll also be asking that you cover the cost of rations and wages for the troops we'll be using," I added.

"Of course you will. However, building and maintaining the roads is something that benefits all of Lochhart. I would expect an ordinary noble to demand more profit for themselves."

Really? I thought, my eyes wandering, but unfortunately, the only other noble present was Adelbert-san, who seemed far removed from that sort of scheming.

Urgh! If it was going to be like this, I should have asked Maris-san to sit in!

"But it's a noble's duty to send troops when the king commands it, right?"

"Formally, yes, but most find some way to make it profit themselves. Getting merchants they favor involved and expecting kickbacks, or coming up with some contrived reason to allocate part of the budget to themselves. In this case, you could go as far as constructing a mansion for yourself under the justification that it is necessary for you to command from. Although, as you are the plenipotentiary, you could simply use the budget for that without resorting to such trickery."

I see. So he was suggesting expanding the shop before I said anything ridiculous, then?

"You've...had it rough, huh?" I asked.

Clency looked at me with surprise, then gave me a tired smile. "Ha ha ha... Yes, I suppose I have. If left to his own devices, Yokuo-sama—no, I mean the former baronet—would have destroyed the

domain's finances. It was all I could do to redirect him to safer options."

Clency breathed those words out like a sigh, but then immediately followed up with the firm assertion, "But things have changed now," and I saw the sternness return to his face.

"If you can handle the bandits, I will see to the construction," he continued. "If it's just manual labor, we have an abundance of people who can do it. We will start by surveying the course for a direct road to the Lotze domain."

"Oh, that's been done. We've been using it already. Isn't that right, Adelbert-san?"

"Mm-hmm. Thanks to Sarasa-dono using the route, it's much easier to pass through now."

They had been the ones to choose the path, but my magic had made it easier to walk. If people expanded on my work, then it would function as a proper road.

When I explained this, Clency nodded, slightly taken aback. "The most difficult part is already handled, then? In that case, I'll have my people go to work immediately."

"Yes, please do. Now, moving on to the Feed Company, I plan to have them handle the distribution of goods inside the domain. Because a stable flow of goods is needed to prevent destabilizing the region."

"Sarasa-sama, I understand the necessity, but why the Feed Company?" asked Walter.

He wasn't the only one who looked confused why I would specifically use the Feed Company. Morgan puffed up his chest with pride and smiled. "One of our company's strengths is that we can ensure delivery when the roads are dangerous. I think we'll live up to your expectations. Of course, if you request it, we can also send people to fight the bandits..."

"No, while I do hope you'll kill any bandits you run into, there's no need for you to go looking."

"Very well. We will put all our efforts into shipping and the establishment of the new branch office. We have already purchased a premises in South Strag, and our people have arrived there. We

intended to open a branch in this village as well, but—”

“Y-You’re going to put my dad out of business?!” exclaimed Lorea-chan, who had been remaining quiet as she listened nervously all this time.

But Morgan smiled gently to assuage her unease. “I am aware of your concerns. We have proposed taking Mr. Darna under the umbrella of the Feed Company.”

“U-Um... What does that mean? It won’t be a problem for dad, will it?”

“If anything, it will make his life easier than before. The Feed Company will handle purchasing stock and shipping, so Mr. Darna will no longer need to transport the goods himself and can focus on selling them here in the village.”

“So he won’t be at risk of being attacked by bandits anymore...?”

“That is correct. He has not given us his reply yet, but regardless of his answer, we will not do anything to harm someone so close to Young Mistress Sarasa. Rest assured of that.”

Lorea-chan’s grandparents had been killed by bandits, just like my parents. That was probably part of why she breathed a sigh of relief, but then she suddenly raised her face and looked around the room.

“Oh! I’m sorry. I interrupted your meeting.”

“I don’t mind,” replied Morgan. “This is going to have a major effect on the village, after all. But it will mean that more products will be available than before, and at cheaper prices, so I would think that the villagers and gatherers should both be happy.”

For the Feed Company’s part, they could carry products into Yok Village and then carry alchemical materials back with them when they left, so it was very efficient and would be sustainable as a business.

“Moving on, let’s discuss the specifics of our bandit countermeasures,” I said. “This is a map of the local area...”

The map spread out on the table depicted an area centered around Lochhart. If we excluded the House of Lotze in the southwest, then there were five other domains whose borders touched Lochhart’s.

The domain of Baronet Heine lay to the north, Knight Kipras to the south, Knight Alhad and Knight Barker to the east, and Knight Baker to the southeast, while a large highway cut across Lochhart going from north to south.

"Clency, do we have any information on where there've been reported bandit attacks, where their bases are, or what areas are considered dangerous?" I asked.

"I'm terribly sorry. I haven't had the people to commit to investigating..."

"You haven't, huh? Well, the information I got from Leonora-san says the damages along the road heading north have been heavy. Things are maybe only half as bad along the southern road toward Grenje, and there haven't been many attacks along the other roads."

"You heard that from her, did you? Then the information should be trustworthy. She's so capable that, if she were not an alchemist, I'd want to poach her for my own staff. I also had her help with cleaning up the town."

"This is Leonora-dono we're talking about, after all..." said Iris. "But does that mean that the bandits are based north of South Strag, or possibly inside Baronet Heine's domain?" She ran her finger over the map as she spoke.

"Not necessarily," Walter interjected. "If they work next to their hideout, then that increases the risk of its discovery. It's possible that they're attacking people far away from their base in order to avoid that."

"So that's how it works," Iris said, nodding. "Then should we suspect this forest in the west, where there are no major roads?"

As she moved her finger to a point between Yok Village and South Strag, Lorea-chan got an uneasy look on her face.

"That said, if they move after each job, the odds of them being spotted increases. There is the method of attacking near their hideout, but killing everyone so as to cover it up...but it's difficult to completely prevent discovery."

Even if we couldn't pinpoint where an attack had happened, if the cargo vanished, then we'd at least have some idea that the attack had happened at all. The information Leonora-san had given me was

apparently based, in part, on that sort of surrounding information.

"Walter, what are you getting at?" Iris asked, sounding a little dissatisfied.

"It is important to be wary of places that have seen a lot of attacks, but if we are searching for their base of operations, then I believe we will have to broaden our information gathering further, and search over a wide area. Would that be all right, Sarasa-sama?"

"I see what you're saying... In that case, Walter, put your efforts into collecting information. I'll help out with the administrative work of the domain. I can do the paperwork here, or I can head to the Lotze domain if it's necessary."

"Understood. It's a big help just having you assist with the paperwork. Unfortunately, the House of Lotze has not always been so good at handling such things, and the lady of the house—no, Diana-sama—and myself have had many headaches as a result. It is some salvation to me that, now that you have become head of the household, I needn't worry about such things any longer."

"Yes, good for you, Walter! Ha ha ha!"

"You're going to say that, Adelbert-sama?!"

Walter's eyes widened at the way Adelbert-san was laughing as if it had nothing to do with him, but he quickly gave up and let out a resigned sigh.

"Umm, thank you for your service?" I offered.

"You're more than welcome," Walter replied. "Ohh, but you can count on Adelbert-sama in the areas he specializes in. Be assured of that. Also, I have taught Kate to handle some of my duties as well."

"I trust you on that. It's my first time taking over my official duties, so I'll be counting on you," I said, looking over at Iris and Kate, but all I got from them was an awkward smile from Kate when our eyes met.

For some reason, Iris is looking away... Okay, I get what that means.

"Also...if we're going to be moving troops near the borders of the domain, we should probably run that past the neighboring lords first. Clency, what are relations like with this domain?"

"Under Baronet Kahku, they were less than good. It would be

good to improve them, but because I worked under the baronet...”

Whether it involved debts or rights, Clency had been the one negotiating, so they had as bad an impression of him as possible. They had to know that the House of Kahku had been abolished, but Clency had put off any attempt to improve relations, reasoning it would be difficult to do so if he was the one who went.

“I’ll go to pay my respects, then,” I offered. “Our house was a victim, just like theirs. And if I use Prince Ferrick’s name, they shouldn’t treat me too badly. Where rights are involved, I’ll need to do a more thorough investigation, but we can make some changes to the conditions on their debt. You must be collecting a lot of interest, right?”

“Yes. So long as they repay the principal, it won’t be an issue. But are you sure?”

Clency gave me an apologetic look. Though it was a crown domain now, I would be going as an emissary of the territory once owned by the hated Baronet Kahku. They probably wouldn’t attack me, but I might get some spiteful comments.

“It’s part of my job. They may underestimate me because of my appearance, but in this case, I’m going to take full advantage of the titles I have. I don’t think many people would be stupid enough to make an enemy of Master.”

I was the Knight of Lotze, the apprentice of Master Class Alchemist Ophelia Millis, and I had been appointed plenipotentiary of Lochhart by order of the king. Normally, nobody would want to pick a fight with me openly. Although, turning that around, if they weren’t normal, they would.

I want to believe no one is as big a fool as Yokuo Kahku...

“Let me go and talk to Knight Kipras,” said Adelbert-san. “He’s an old acquaintance of mine. We can have him act as an intermediary with Knight Baker too. You work on the other three, Sarasa-dono.”

“That helps. I’ll leave them to you, Adelbert-san... Given my position, it wouldn’t be good for me to visit them alone, right? What should we do?”

“Would you like us to accompany you?” Morgan offered. “We can arrange for a number of men of suitable appearance, and present an

offer of commercial benefit."

In this case "suitable appearance" probably meant they looked intimidating. But we were looking to make peace right now. I wanted to approach it with a soft touch, if possible.

"Please have the Feed Company focus on its own business. That will serve to benefit Lochhart too. As for me... Iris, Kate, can I ask you to come along with me?"

"Oh, ohh! Leave it to me! I'll protect you properly!" Iris's face lit up with delight. Kate nodded deeply too.

"Okay then, everyone, I'm counting on you. If anything comes up, report it at once. If you contact Leonora-san's shop, she's able to get in touch with me instantly. Please prioritize safety over everything as you work."

"Okay!" Everyone agreed enthusiastically.

When it came to negotiating with nobles, I couldn't just handle it with brute force the way I might with bandits.

I had accepted the job of visiting the neighboring lords, but, in all honesty, I was reluctant. But once I actually went and did it, it was a bit of a letdown how easy it was.

The knights Alhad and Barker were sufficiently awed by my titles and were both deferential from the start. Once I suggested there might be financial benefits, they accepted quickly, and we agreed they would maintain good relations with Lochhart going forward.

I didn't threaten them, of course. It was all extremely peaceful. For sure, for sure.

I think I may have detected fear in the way they were looking at me for some reason, but that must just have been my imagination. I never physically decapitated Baronet Kahku. I firmly object to that strange rumor.

My main concern was Baronet Heine. Not only was he not in debt, he was also a higher rank than me. Even in my capacity as plenipotentiary, Lochhart had been a baronetcy, so I was still a bit lower in rank than he was.

I went in thinking this time, for sure, there was going to be trouble, but things got resolved in a way I never expected—and

thanks to Maris-san, of all people.

Leonora-san told me that bringing her along would make things easy, so I asked her to come, and suddenly the arrogant Baronet Heine was falling over himself.

She just had to look a little annoyed and he would go pale in the face. He said he would accept all of our demands, which was very cooperative of him.

I had to assume, in all likelihood, there had been some past trouble between them—Maris-san came from the house of a count, after all.

As for the other two knights, Adelbert-san and Walter handled the negotiations with them, and that concluded running things past the neighboring lords.

Now the bandit countermeasures could get started in earnest—but my daily life changed surprisingly little.

I was eager to get out and slay some bandits, but Walter cautioned me, "Why should the head of the house go out and fight on the front line? Please, focus on the work only you can do, Sarasa-sama."

Similarly, Adelbert-san said, "I'm finally able to act freely. Don't steal my work."

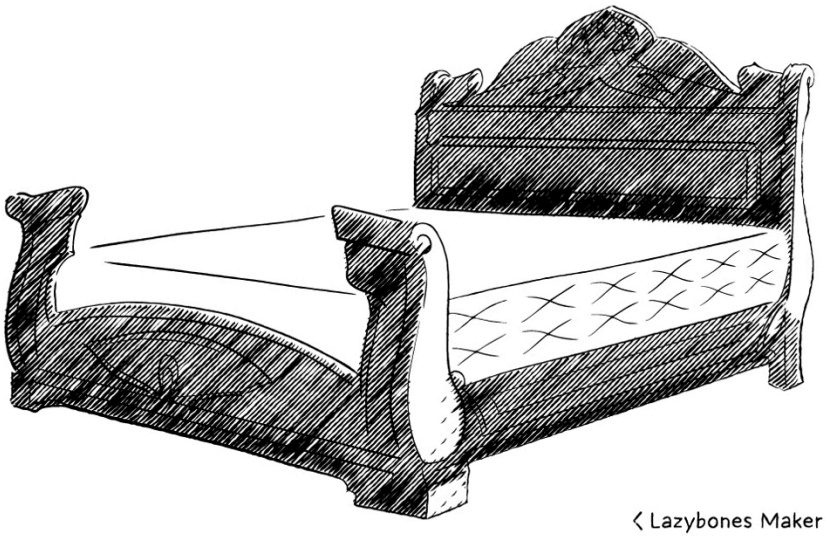
And even Lorea-chan said, "You're the shopkeeper, so it's not good for you to leave the shop unattended for too long..."

Murgh. I can't argue with any of that. I was a firm believer that there could be no forgiveness for bandits, but I was an alchemist now. *If I can delegate the job, I probably should, and stick to what I do best.*

That being the case, I wound up warming a seat in the shop while coming up with bandit countermeasures on the side.

No. 016

Complete Alchemy Works: Appears in Volume 6
Difficulty: Very Hard
Standard Price: ~200,000 Rhea



〈 Lazybones Maker 〉

Lazybones Mattress

When you get older, even sleeping is tiring. Have you experienced anything like that? Well, that's a thing of the past now. This may look like an ordinary bed, but its true strength lies in the mattress. No matter what posture you sleep in, it provides total support. Bid farewell to sore backs and sore shoulders. By the way, this item was named by the inventor's apprentice, who grew frustrated with their master refusing to get out of bed, and famously lugged master and bed in together to register it.

Episode 3: Dealing With Pollution

Some time had passed since we'd returned from the capital and it was now already midsummer.

"There sure are a lot more people in the village these days," I said as I poked my head into the shop during the slower morning hours.

"You're right. More than even this spring," Lorea-chan responded before adding with a sigh, "Maybe too many."

Misty had gotten used to working in the shop and between the three of us, we had the business running smoothly now. Recently, though, there was one thing that had been bothering us: the heat.

The shop was air conditioned, so there was no problem there, but it had changed something about the gatherers who visited.

To be a bit blunt... They stank. Badly.

Heading into the great forest in summer to gather materials, they were going to get all sweaty and covered in dirt too. Not to mention that some of them were out there for days, then immediately came in to sell their haul, so of course their body odor was atrocious.

I had gotten fed up with it back during the frostbite bat fang boom, but this time the cause was different—there were simply too many people packed into the shop. The growing population of Yok Village was something that, normally, I should have been pleased about, but if it meant they were going to dirty my lovely shop... Urgh, what a dilemma.

Because of the way things were, I'd been forced to remove the tables and chairs from the sales floor, so we hadn't been able to relax and enjoy tea time there lately.

"Was it like this last year, Senpai?" asked Misty. "I'm using magic to bring in fresh air pretty frequently, and even then it's honestly pretty unpleasant in here."

"It wasn't so bad last year... I appreciate you airing the place out,

though. Thanks."

It got hot in here if we left the windows and doors open, and there wasn't much air exchange if there wasn't a breeze outside.

With magic, though, that could be taken care of in an instant. Misty could cast Breeze, which we had all used regularly when cleaning the dorm at the academy, and she was using perfect control of it to circulate the air in the shop without blowing away any of the merchandise.

"Just so you know," Lorea-chan said, "Andre-san and the other longtime gatherers have been doing their best to be considerate. They're grateful to have had a young female alchemist come to the village, so they don't want to make things unpleasant for you."

They did things like bathing before they came into the shop or only sending a single representative for the group. Some of them even carried around the deodorant that I had started selling back during the boom for frostbite-bat fangs.

"But the newcomers aren't really thinking about that as much..." Lorea-chan concluded.

"Come to think of it, Andre-san once mentioned that gatherers are used to being filthy," I said.

"It certainly seems like it," Misty replied. "Not that that's anything we should be happy about. I guess this is the kind of problem that comes with running a shop. Senpai, would you make an air purifier? You can make one, right?"

"Oh, that's a good idea. I'll make a powerful one. I had been putting it off because of the cost and the need to gather the necessary materials, but now that the Feed Company's here, I can order what I need."

I didn't know if I could finish it before the weather cooled again, but I was getting close to finishing the fifth volume of the *Complete Alchemy Works*. The timing felt right, so I decided to go ahead and make one.

"The best thing would be if all the gatherers could just stay clean, though," grumbled Lorea-chan. "Maybe if there was a bath at Delal-san's place, that would change things?"

"I doubt it, Lorea," I replied. "If they were considerate enough to

bathe, they'd already be washing up before they came in."

Winter was one thing, but in this season, they couldn't complain that it was too cold to wash themselves with cold water. After all, there was a well in the village they could use freely, so if they had any intent of cleaning themselves up, they could have.

"But if they were willing to use it, I wouldn't mind making a public bath. We could pipe in hot spring water from the mountain... Well, no, I guess not. It's too far."

It was over a day's walk, so the water would have cooled by the time it got here.

"Wait, Sarasa-senpai, you have hot springs around here? I want to go!" Misty exclaimed.

"We do. I built them myself," I replied. "And sure, once it's a little cooler out, we'll go."

It wasn't a place ordinary people could go to easily, but Misty was no ordinary person.

"Yes, please! I'm impressed, Senpai. To think you'd even set up hot springs..."

"Yeah, it's something we sort of lucked into. It's a shame we can't use them for the village, though."

Misty's gaze of respect made me feel a bit awkward. Finding the springs had been a side effect of rescuing Iris and the others. I hadn't gone out of my way to try and dig them up.

"But Senpai," Misty continued. "If it's just a matter of making a bath, why not craft a magic heater? There's plenty of water around here, and it shouldn't take much to heat it."

The magic heater was a hyperefficient heater that took a small amount of magical power and turned it into a large amount of heat. They were incredibly convenient, so places with connections to alchemists—like the academy, large public facilities, and Master's place, for instance—always had them, but...

"Sorry. I'm not up to making one of those yet. It's in volume seven, right? If I recall."

"Huh? Was it? I see them a lot, so I assumed you'd be able to make one..." Misty said, surprised.

Heavy is the weight of my junior's expectations. I mean, sure, if

someone just gave me the recipe, I might be able to, but...

"You do see them around a lot, but it's generally intermediate alchemists or higher that are the ones making them," I explained to Misty, but ended up getting a further look of surprise from Lorea-chan.

"Um, you're not an intermediate-level alchemist yet? Even though you're so amazing...?" she asked me.

"I'll be reaching volume six in a little while, but the line for being considered an intermediate alchemist is volume seven."

"I think, with your skills, you're more than ready to be considered an intermediate, Senpai," said Misty.

"Nah," I disagreed. "In terms of ability, I'm still not there yet. I'm still just a novice, in my second year out of the academy, you know?"

I was just stating the obvious, but Lorea-chan blinked repeatedly. Then she clapped her hands together. "Oh, that's right. Somehow, it feels like you've always been in the village. But it's really only been a year and a bit since you came."

"Yeah, that's right. But I'm happy to hear you say that. When I first arrived, I was worried if people would accept me... I just want you to know, you've been a huge help, Lorea-chan."

Looking back on it now, the way I'd felt anxious about going to greet the mayor was just another fond memory.

As we were talking about that, Andre-san entered the shop with a casual greeting. "Heya. Oh, Sarasa-chan, you're in here today?"

"Yes, we're taking a bit of a break. Though, we can't break out the tea set like we used to," I said with a shrug, inclining my head toward the space where the table used to be.

Andre-san returned the shrug and laughed. "Ha ha ha! Yeah, I guess you don't have the time. You don't offer cold water anymore, so I can't hang around in the shop to cool down like last year—"

"Oh, so you *were* just coming in to cool down," Lorea-chan said, fixing him with an unamused look.

"Oops, shouldn'ta let that slip," he replied, grinning in response and theatrically covering his mouth. "But anyway," he went on, "what were you talking about? You seemed pretty animated."

But seeing as we had been complaining about the gatherers, it was a little difficult to just tell him that...

"This is hard to say, but we were talking about how the gatherers absolutely reek lately."

Hard to say, you say?

Misty said it brazenly, without any attempt to soften the blow.

I've known him a lot longer than you, and even I'd word it a bit more carefully!

But Andre-san didn't seem offended. "Yeah, sorry about that," he said, bowing his head apologetically. "We're trying to be careful, but it's sweaty weather out there. So, try as we might..."

"N-No! You and the longtime gatherers aren't the problem!" Lorea-chan hurriedly explained. "I won't say that I don't notice the smell, but it's tolerable! But all of these newcomers..."

Andre-san furrowed his brow as if troubled, then let his shoulders slump like he was tired. "Those guys, huh... If it was just gatherers, we'd be able to tell them more strongly, but some of them aren't. Those guys can be particularly bad, and we can't crack down on them..."

The non-gatherers that Andre-san was talking about were the laborers who had been brought in to work on the roads. They had their own temporary lodgings where they generally stayed, but when they had time off, they came into the village to spread their wings.

But this was Yok Village. There was nowhere for them to play around. The best they could hope for was to find good food and drink or to go shopping at the general store, which had recently expanded its selection.

The way they lived couldn't exactly be called sanitary, and they were stinking up the dining hall at Delal-san's place pretty badly as a result.

"We can't just go and tell them 'Keep yourselves clean,' y'know... Lately, the villagers have stopped coming to the inn to drink, and even we've been talking about maybe getting our own houses."

Andre-san looked troubled, but Lorea-chan's face lit up when he said that. "Wow! If you guys settled down in the village, that would be a big relief!"

"Oh, really? You'd welcome us?"

"Of course we would! We haven't forgotten how hard you all fought to protect the village when those frenzied hellflame grizzlies attacked!"

After saying this so cheerfully, Lorea-chan let out a dark chuckle, adding, "Of course, we haven't forgotten the guys who ran away either."

I didn't recall their faces, but apparently some of the ones who'd run away had slunk back into town along with the recent large influx of gatherers. Everyone had to put their own life first. The villagers wouldn't act snidely toward them over it, but they'd definitely treat them differently from Andre-san and the others who'd stayed.

"Uh, r-right. Well, if that's how you feel, Lorea-chan, we'll give the idea some serious thought!"

Though he was a bit put off by Lorea-chan's smile, Andre-san let out a shy laugh.

"We would also be happy to have capable gatherers stick around," Misty added. "Isn't that right, Sarasa-senpai?"

"Yep," I agreed. "Having regular customers helps keep a business stable. But I do feel sorry for Delal-san, not being able to escape the stench. Maybe I really should build a public bath...?"

It was hard enough for us just having a few groups of gatherers come in here, so I didn't even want to think what it was like having to deal with an even larger number of them around the clock. Since it was her job, she couldn't exactly refuse.

"Oh, what? Is that something you're looking into doing?" asked Andre-san. "We'd be pretty stoked to have something nice like that available. I'm pretty sure the guys building the roads would happily use a bath if there was one."

"Sarasa-san, I'd like to ask you for it too. I have friends working at the inn..." Lorea-chan said, giving me a look that was both apologetic and concerned.

"Oh, that's right," I said, clapping my hands together. "They brought in extra workers to keep up with the extra guests."

I had forgotten since I hadn't been there in a while, but Delal-san had been increasing her work force in response to the expansion of

the inn and increase in gatherers who were staying there. The new workers came from the village, so, naturally, they included some of Lorea-chan's friends. Of course she'd be concerned for them.

"Hmm... Misty, would there be any issue with building a public bath?" I asked.

"Let me think. We'll probably need a new well, but I think we can get enough water. Even if we can't use a magic heater to heat the water, I'm sure that you can come up with another artifact as a substitute, right? In which case, I suppose that the only remaining issues would be how to clean the water and make the venture profitable."

Misty was quick with her answer, as was to be expected from an alchemist. Unfortunately, neither Lorea-chan nor Iris could have done the same.

"Yep, that's more or less what I was thinking too," I concurred. "We need to at least make back our operating costs or it will be hard to keep it going. Andre-san, how much do you think you could pay to use a public bath?"

"Me? I'd gladly put down fifty rhea a day. But that'd be too much for the rookies. If you made it ten...no, twenty rhea, we could probably push them into going."

"Hmm, that's cutting it pretty close, but... Got it. I'll try looking into whether it's possible."

"Sure! I'll look forward to it. If there's anything I can do to help, just say the word!"

Having said that, Andre-san topped up his supply of potions as usual and then went on his way. After seeing him off, we immediately put our heads together and started considering what to do.

"In addition to an air purifier, we'll need a water filter and a water heater," I noted.

"Can you use the same type of water heater as in the bath here?" asked Lorea-chan.

"I'll need to scale it up and make it more efficient, but yes," I replied. "The air purifier and water filter have some parts in common, so the issue will be whether we can get the materials we'll

need."

The primary material came from a sea creature called an astellor. I could substitute it with other materials that were available in the great forest, but from an efficiency standpoint, I wanted to avoid that.

"What will you do about the building?" asked Lorea-chan. "Normally, we could just go to old man Geberk if it was an ordinary house, but can he make baths? There aren't any in the other houses, right?"

"I've heard Geberk-san built this house, but...did he work on the bath?" I wondered aloud. "If he can't do it, we'll have to call in a tradesman from South Strag, which raises our costs."

"If you think about it normally, there's no way to make the money back," Misty concluded. "Senpai, even if you were to eat the cost of your own labor working on the artifacts, we'd still be spending too much on construction alone. Do you want to take it out of Lochhart's budget?"

"If we do, I'd like to keep the cost as low as possible. If we build one in Lochhart, there'll be complaints if we don't build one in the other villages too. As the lord's representative, I'd like to avoid that."

There were seven settlements in Lochhart. Four of them were villages that were around the same size as this one, so I could at least be sure that none of them had public baths.

"Then let's collect donations!" Lorea-chan said, clenching her hands into fists in front of her chest and flaring her nostrils. "Those who can't afford to pay might be willing to lend a hand, and if you're working without compensation, I think the people of the village will put in just as much effort!"

The people of the village had profited from the increase in gatherers like we had, and they were being inconvenienced by it too. That being the case, Lorea-chan felt it wouldn't make sense for the villagers not to do anything.

"But building the bath isn't something that the village has requested... Maybe we should consult Erin-san about it, like usual?" I said.

"Okay! Then let's go right away!" Lorea-chan took off running

immediately.

It must've been tough on her, minding the shop all day.

It didn't take long for things to get moving after that. After receiving our proposal, Erin-san gathered the people of the village to hear their opinions, and folks were even more fed up with how badly the gatherers and laborers stank than I'd expected. The vast majority of them gave their full-throated support and those who didn't simply lacked the means to pitch in financially or with the work. However, none of the latter were actually opposed to it.

I decided to let Erin-san, the mayor—oops, I mean the mayor's daughter—handle arranging things in a way that everyone would feel was fair. The end result was that the decision to build the public bath went through with surprising ease.

A few days after that discussion, Iris and Kate returned from the Lotze domain.

"A public bath, huh? It's true that the smell's been bad lately... Oh, here's the current paperwork."

"Thank you, Iris. How were things in Lotze Village?" I asked as I accepted the paperwork and spread it out—on the kitchen table.

Hrm, maybe I'm going to need an office, after all?

"Things remain the same as ever—no, they're even better than before. There's no need for excessive frugality and we've been able to use magic to develop more of our land for agricultural use. The people's expressions have grown brighter...and it's all thanks to you, Sarasa."

"I think it's because they're all working hard. Even with more land opened up for cultivation, it's still up to the people to fertilize the soil and grow good crops."

"No, most of the effort is in turning it into farmland. It's an incredible amount of labor, you know? The women and children carry away the rocks, while the men mow the grass and cut down the trees. Just pulling up all of the roots is an eye-watering amount of work."

"Yeah," Kate agreed. "It can take ten people working all day just to remove one tree. But with your magic, it's over in an instant... It's

just incredible. I'm doing my best to help out too, though..."

"Heh heh, you won't be outdoing me for a while yet, Kate."

Because I'm your master when it comes to magic, I thought with a smirk, but Kate just shrugged her shoulders in exasperation.

"I'll never win," she said. "It's all I can manage to soften the hard soil. That's already helpful enough, but...to tell you the truth, the population has risen again, and we're running out of farmland to hand out."

"Huh? It has? I thought we still had a bit extra."

The Lotze domain was my personal domain now. I'd been developing the land without holding back, so...something was weird.

It was true that a new road was being put in, but that was between Yok Village and Lotze Village. It wasn't like that made the place that much more convenient, so what reason could there be for the population to grow?

"It's because of *you*, Sarasa," Kate explained. "A lot of the young folk started coming back when they heard you were the new lord."

"Because of me? Why?"

"You need to be more aware of how famous you are," said Iris. "Even if they don't know the name Sarasa Feed, you're famous as the alchemist who chased out an oppressive lord. If they heard that the same alchemist has been expanding the farmland, then of course people who'd left the village would start to return."

When young people left their villages, it was mostly for work-related reasons. If they were the children of farmers, there might be no land for them to inherit, and even if their family were merchants, only one of the children could be the heir. It made sense now that she explained it, but...

"They certainly move fast, huh? Why come so quickly?"

"That part is simple," Iris replied. "Our forces are traveling around Lochhart, remember? That means they stop by towns, and when they see the familiar banners, former residents come to talk to them."

Even though they were soldiers now, our men were still the neighbors that they'd known long ago. It made sense they'd want to chat a little. And then, once they learned how things had gotten

better in the village, if they were struggling in town, it was inevitable they'd think about returning home.

"Got it. I'll go develop more land for farming," I said. "Did you hear anything about the bandits?"

"Father's information-gathering efforts don't seem to be going well. Sorry, Sarasa."

"He's been able to put down some of the brigands, and there have been fewer reports of people being hurt, though," I replied.

What we knew currently was that there were three groups of bandits. The first were ex-soldiers that had been driven out when the House of Kahku was abolished. Though they had never been well-behaved, they were still ex-soldiers, so they could fight reasonably well.

The second group were from organized crime groups that had been broken up in South Strag. Though they didn't have the same potential in combat as the first group, they were far more despicable, and had been giving us trouble.

The third group were corrupt merchants like the Bahru Company who had turned to crime. Though some of them had been caught, most of them had fled with their fortunes, and it was their money that made them dangerous.

"Fortunately, these three groups don't appear to be coordinating their efforts," I explained. "From the perspective of stabilizing the domain, we've already more or less succeeded as things currently stand, but because we've been unable to find the bandits' bases of operations, we've still yet to reach a fundamental solution."

"Hmm," Iris responded. "We'd like to help too, if possible, but father was opposed to it."

"They've already got enough help, they said. Even my mom's been getting into it..." noted Kate.

"It's true," I admitted. "Besides, if they didn't have enough firepower, I'd head out myself. And we've got Misty too."

"Um, I'm not sure that they'd want that either..." Iris said, smiling awkwardly. "So, where is Misty? In the workshop?" she asked, looking in that direction.

"Yes. I have her making potions right now. You've got to start

with the fundamentals."

"Hmm, you're actually acting like a master, huh? I was sure that —" Kate started to say something, but was cut off when Lorea-chan poked her head in from the hall.

"Sarasa-san, the people from the Feed Company— Oh, Iris-san, Kate-san, you're back."

"Yeah, we just arrived," Kate replied. "We came in the back door so we wouldn't end up bothering the customers."

"Oh, yeah...?" Lorea-chan sounded doubtful. "You're sure it's not that you didn't want to enter the shop because of the smell?"

"Indeed, that was part of it too!" Iris said, puffing her chest up.

"You're boasting?! I have to work there, you know!" Lorea-chan protested, puffing her cheeks up and arching her eyebrows.

"Well, we're not smelling so good ourselves," Iris explained, waving her hands around. "It's been a while since we've been able to bathe—so, on that note, Sarasa, we'll be borrowing the bath. We're going to wash off all the grime from our travels. Let's go, Kate."

Kate blinked a little, surprised. "Huh? I'm going in with you...? Eh, I guess it's fine."

"Oh, so you're going to get in with her," I said. "Well, I guess I've taken a bath with Lorea-chan too..."

"Hee hee, I remember that," said Lorea-chan. "It's been more than a year now— Wait, that's right, the people from the Feed Company are here. I led them into the reception room for now..."

"Thanks, I'll be right with them," I replied. "Okay, Iris, you two take your time and have fun."

"Will do," Kate said with a chuckle. "We have to get along as your wife and mistress, after all."

"Wha?! I-I didn't mean it like that!" Iris hurriedly protested. "Don't misunderstand, Sarasa!"

"I haven't misunderstood *anything*. It's okay, I probably won't be back for an hour. And no matter how much you two fool around in the bath, we won't be able to hear it in the parlor."

I waved to the two of them, and then steered Lorea-chan out of the kitchen, letting the door close behind us with a bang.

Yep, this house is properly soundproofed. It was probably designed so that any loud noises from the workshop wouldn't be an issue.

"Well, it's not like I think those two are going to be getting up to anything during daylight hours that would cause problems if people overheard them."

"Ah ha ha... Huh? You're joking, right? They wouldn't do that at night either...would they?" Lorea-chan stopped laughing, and glanced back at the door behind us.

I smiled. "Who can say? I don't monitor them at night, so maybe there's a nonzero chance?"

"Whaaa... But my room's right next to theirs. I'm going to be so distracted thinking about it that I can't get to sleep."

"Don't worry; my room's next to theirs too! We'll be in the same boat."

"That doesn't make it better at all... Urgh, if I overhear them, it'll be awkward the next morning."

I smiled and slapped the blushing Lorea-chan on the back before sending her off to the shop. Then I headed to the reception room, where I found two men waiting for me.

One of them was Morgan, and the other was...

"Head clerk...? Why are you here?"

This somewhat surprising guest smiled at me as I blinked in confusion.

"This venture is so important that it could come to serve as a supporting pillar of the Feed Company's business. It's only natural I would come myself. I managed to find a break in my other work, and came running as soon as I could."

I wouldn't want the company to go under, so I hope he's not stretching himself too thin...but this is the head clerk, so I guess it'll be fine.

"So, how's it going? Well?" I asked vaguely.

Morgan was the one to answer my questions. "Business has been exceedingly smooth. The alchemical materials we are able to procure in this village have played a part in that, and their quality is guaranteed by none other than you yourself. I think even an upstart

merchant would struggle to take a loss in this situation. We were able to acquire a premises in South Strag at an incredibly low price too."

It went without saying that procurement was one of the more difficult parts of business. If you weren't able to appraise the goods you were buying, you could end up with fake or low-quality merchandise, and if you purchased too much, you would end up with excess stock.

It was especially difficult to appraise alchemical materials, and amateurs who attempted it often got badly burned. On that front, the Feed Company had me, a professional, to at least judge the materials' quality. The odds of them suffering a major failure were relatively low.

"Though, that's assuming you can defend the cargo from brigands. How are things on that end?" I asked.

"In a sense, things are also going smoothly there," said Morgan. "We've been attacked several times, but fended off all attackers. We don't chase them too deeply, so we haven't eliminated many brigands, though."

"Sarasa-chan, how are the people from the House of Lotze doing? Have they gone on the move?" asked the head clerk.

"It sounds like they're having a hard time with it," I said. "The brigands won't come out and attack them, and they haven't been able to find their bases... It sounds like they've gathered some information, though."

The head clerk nodded thoughtfully. "We may be able to help them gather information too. I'll write up a report summarizing what we know," he offered.

"That would help. If we can just find them, the rest will be simple."

Honestly, Adelbert-san was thrilled that he could train his men using other people's money and also that he didn't have to do his usual work. But as the head of the House of Lotze, I wanted this done and over with so that the soldiers could go back to their families.

"I'd like to have this done by the end of fall, at least..." I said. "By

the way, Morgan, this is a bit of a change of topic, but are you able to acquire alchemical materials from other places too?”

“If there are any you want, we will get them for you...is what I would like to say, but...”

“It’s difficult, huh? If you had connections like that, then you’d have been using them before now.”

As I’ve already mentioned before, I was their source for alchemical materials. There were gatherers and alchemists outside of this village, but it wouldn’t have been easy to make inroads with them in such a short time frame.

“It would be possible for us to go purchase them in the capital... Is there something you would like?” Morgan asked.

“Well, we’ve been talking about building a public bath. To deal with, how should I put this...? The problem of bad smells.”

I didn’t say it directly, but Morgan had been coming to the village periodically, so he understood what I was talking about. He smiled wryly and nodded a few times. “Yes, yes, very good. If there is anything I can do to assist, please do ask.”

“Then could I ask for some things that aren’t alchemical materials? We’ll be needing a large amount of construction materials, but I’ll get the alchemical materials myself. Since if you’d just be procuring them from the capital anyway, I have the transporter for that.”

This offhand comment made the head clerk’s brow twitch with surprise. “A transporter, you say? What is that, Sarasa-chan? Does it transport objects?”

“Yes. Oh, let me just tell you now, you can’t use it for ordinary trade. It requires a ton of magical power. Besides, there are a limited number of people who can set one up.”

“Is that right? Well, I suppose that’s to be expected. If it was that convenient, they’d be more widespread...” the head clerk said, disappointed.

As a fellow merchant, I could understand how he felt. My own business would have gone under without it, so I couldn’t say anything too strongly, but it just wasn’t going to be possible for him to use one.

Because, for commercial-scale transportation, even my large capacity for magical power wouldn't be enough.

"But more importantly," I said to the head clerk. "What do you think, now that you've seen the place for yourself? Did you notice anything?"

The head clerk was still hanging his head and mumbling, as if he couldn't give up on the idea of using a transporter, but he snapped back to reality and was quickly smiling again. "Huh... O-Oh, yes. When I was in the capital, I thought of this place as 'the frontier,' but now that I'm here in person, I'm surprised at how prosperous the area is. The villagers were all singing your praises too. Honestly, I have to admit, I was relieved."

"Th-They were? That's kind of embarrassing."

The head clerk's kindly gaze made me feel a bit ticklish.

Seeing the way I was mumbling, Morgan and the head clerk exchanged glances.

"Please, be proud of yourself," said Morgan. "This situation is the result of your own hard work."

"Running a business isn't a charity, so obviously you need to turn a profit, but if the customers aren't happy with you, then there's no point in it. You're only a good merchant once you learn to balance those two priorities," said the head clerk.

"Of course," I agreed. "I'll take those golden words from someone with far more experience to heart."

"Ha ha ha, I still have a long way to go myself. Every day we grow a little more. In order to protect the ideals of the Feed Company."

I nodded my head deeply. The head clerk gave me a big smile, then went on speaking, trying to gauge my reaction as he did. "By the way, Sarasa-chan, were you aware that the Hudson Company recently opened a branch store in Grenje? They took good care of Morgan and Clark, so I stopped in to pay my respects, and they entrusted me with a letter."

He set the letter down on the table. It was addressed to Misty, of course.

Hopefully they were just asking how she was doing, but knowing

her situation...

"How is the relationship between the Feed Company and the Hudson Company?" I asked.

"Well, I don't think it's bad..." replied the head clerk. "Morgan, what would you say?"

"The volume of deals between us has been increasing. Before, it was only when the Hudson Company ships arrived in Grenje, but in the time since they set up their branch office there, we've been continuously trading with them."

The Feed Company dealt in alchemical materials and crops from Lochhart. The crops weren't particularly unusual, but the company was able to guarantee delivery even in the presence of bandits, so sales were steady. In the other direction, the Feed Company could purchase items from the Hudson Company that weren't usually available around here and carry them all around Lochhart.

"In other words, you're not hostile to each other yet," I concluded.

"Not yet, no," agreed the head clerk. "I don't know how that will change if they expand into South Strag, but...hopefully, we'll be able to coexist in our separate domains on land and at sea. They're your junior's family, after all."

"Hopefully, yeah. Though, Misty seems to have her own issues with them."

The captain who'd brought us here had been a good guy, but I wasn't directly acquainted with Misty's older brother, and the captain and his crew were still merchants trying to push Misty into the position of heir. If they decided that opposing the Feed Company was more profitable than working with us, then that was probably what they'd do.

"It all comes down to the other side, then," I said. "Thank you. I'll pass the letter along."

I took the letter, and...

"Hmph!"

Misty crumpled it up into a ball and threw it down on the floor.

That was her reaction after one quick look through it.

She followed up by stomping on it for good measure, then cheerfully wiping the sweat from her brow with a "Phew!"

"Senpai, I have some kindling for you."

"Seriously...? You could have said that before you stomped it. Besides, we use a magic stove here. We don't need kindling. And if I want to start a fire, I can use magic for it anyway."

"That's all very true. I guess it's just garbage, then. Honestly, they went to so much trouble just to bring me garbage!"

Misty was so mad I could just imagine the steam coming out of her head.

"I guess I should ask you what it said."

"You don't need to hear it. I wouldn't sully your ears with that filth!"

"Uh, no, that's not going to fly. You're my apprentice, after all."

I moved Misty's foot aside and picked up the trampled letter, stretching it to get the wrinkles out before reading it myself.

Let's see here... Hmm... Maybe I can't blame her for getting angry?

It started by congratulating her on seducing me, then continued by expressing surprise at the capability she showed in getting them harbor rights at Grenje, and then concluded by demanding she redirect the alchemical materials that the Feed Company was trading in to them. Depending on how I read that last section, it could be interpreted as asking her to divert the materials without my knowledge. There was also a bare minimum of pleasantries in the letter, but it didn't show any real concern for Misty, who was working hard far away from home.

"Who's it from? Your dad? Or your brother?"

"It's not signed, but it's probably my brother. My brother's secretary would have written it for him."

"I see... So, what do you want to do about it?"

"Well, I suppose if I give it to Elles-san next door, she could use it as kindl—"

"That's not what I meant! Should we show some consideration to the Hudson Company?"

I was letting the Feed Company handle shipping, but I was still

selling the materials to Leonora-san, and to Master too, of course. I hadn't signed an exclusive contract with the Feed Company, so I didn't intend to forbid her from selling materials to the Hudson Company...

"There's no need to! Not for people who'd send me a rude letter like this!" Misty said indignantly, snatching the letter out of my hands to crumple it again. "And I'm not happy with the captain either! Giving the harbor rights to the company! I'm sure he wanted to give me the credit for it, but I have no intention of cooperating with my brother, or with the people who want to make me heir to the company! Senpai, you're free to strip them of those rights if you'd like, you know?"

"Mmm, I don't think I'd go that far. I gave those rights to the captain as a show of gratitude, but also to give work to the people of Grenje."

In all honesty, things weren't going smoothly for the port of Grenje. Because so many villainous merchants had been punished, many people were hesitant to do business because they were worried the authorities would invent a reason to punish them too. So, with new applications being slowed down, and also the need to vet any companies that did apply, there had been barely any increase in traffic to the port.

But even in that situation, the Hudson Company's ships made regular trips in and out of port. They also did business with the Feed Company, so if I suddenly yanked the harbor rights from them, it would have a lot of negative effects, and in my position as a holder of authority, it would have been a problem for me to go back on something I had already agreed to.

"Murgh, is that how it works? If that's your decision as lord, I won't say anything more. But if the Hudson Company tries to use me as a reason to ask you for anything, I'm not going to care if you refuse!"

"Right, got it. I'll just deal with them normally, then."

I smiled at Misty—who was snorting angrily—then quietly tucked

the crumpled letter into my pocket.

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Once the Feed Company brought in the materials, construction work on the public bathhouse began in earnest. It was funded by donations from the villagers, as well as by redirecting some of the funds meant for road building. We justified the latter on the basis that the laborers would be using the baths too.

Lastly, I put in some money of my own, using the money that Delal-san was paying me back for construction at the inn.

Geberk-san was the overall leader of the project, with two of his grandchildren who'd come back from the city working as his assistants—that said, because Geberk-san was so old, his grandkids were still a fair bit older than I was.

Geberk-san had complained before that the reason he didn't take on apprentices was because there wasn't anyone with any spine around. It turned out that these two had wanted to apprentice under him, but he'd been refusing.

He'd told them there was no future in Yok Village and they were better off building lives for themselves in the city.

But Yok Village wasn't like it used to be. There was now a boom in constructing rental properties for gatherers, and some of them, like Andre-san and the guys, were even starting to build houses of their own. That had convinced Geberk-san to call these two back.

Then there were the people in the village who didn't have the financial leeway to give money and some volunteers from the gatherers who supported the project with their labor.

The baths themselves, which had been a point of concern, were taken care of by one of the two grandchildren, who had specialized in plastering.

The only issue that remained was the artifacts that would be needed.

"So, there you have it, Misty. You take care of the water heaters. I've got the materials all ready for you."

The key component was flame stones. For a project of this scale, I wanted to prioritize efficiency. My kettle and bath also used water heaters, but those had only needed to heat a small amount of water, so the flame stones hadn't been necessary for them, but as a resource that could be found relatively close to the village, it probably made sense to use them here.

But when I explained this to Misty, she gave me a confused look. "Huh? Uh, what about you, Senpai? You're not going to make them yourself?"

"I've already made them before. You want to build experience, right? So that you'll be able to read more of the *Complete Alchemy Works*."

I didn't have the leeway to let her craft artifacts that weren't going to sell, but that wasn't going to be an issue here. We already knew where the heaters were going and only had to foot part of the cost, so there wasn't any reason not to do it.

"But I'm still only at level two. You know I can't read the recipe for water heaters that's in volume three, right? And you want to use the first ones I make in the public baths? Normally, wouldn't you start me out with making a kettle or something like that?"

"It's okay. I've copied the recipe out for you. Though it's a bit larger, the core parts aren't that much more difficult. If anything, the metalworking portions might actually be easier."

When making an artifact, there were the parts of the process that were handled using an alchemic cauldron, and then there was everything else. With a refrigerator, for instance, the wooden box was a part of that "everything else," and some alchemists left that kind of thing up to other craftspeople.

But unless there were extenuating circumstances (like me wanting to make the village's economy go 'round), I'd do it myself, and I'd expect the same of my apprentices—that was how I planned to do things, and it was how I was taught myself.

"Everything is experience. It's important to give things a try."

"I see... You're definitely Ophelia-sama's apprentice, Senpai."

"Oh, yeah? I may be a little happy to hear you say that... Oh, there's also the air purifier and water filter. I'll leave one of them to

you too. Because I'm trying to be a good master."

"I'm not sure that means the same thing to you as it does to— Hey, wait, those are level-five artifacts, aren't they?!"

"It's fine. Don't worry about it. I'll teach you how to do it. So do your best working on the water heater by yourself!"

I slapped Misty on the shoulder. She gave me a slightly forlorn look. "Um, you're not going to be instructing me?"

"We have materials to spare, so it's not an issue. I'm going to be heading off to the sea with Iris."

"That's not a good reason! You're abandoning your apprentice to go off on a honeymoon trip?! Well, I guess it *is* hot out, after all?!"

"Sadly, it's an apprentice's fate to get worked hard— Nah, I'm just kidding. We're heading there to acquire the materials we'll need for the air purifier. I *could* buy them, but I want high-quality ones, if possible."

It was hard to process astellors, which I would need to do for the purifier.

Gatherers couldn't do it, and even if they brought them to the shop for me to do it, they needed to be fresh or the effect would be reduced. If I wanted ones with a high purification ability, it was best to go out and get them myself.

"Murgh, if that's the reason, I can't even argue back," Misty grumbled before reluctantly nodding. "Okay. Lorea and I will take care of the shop. You do your best collecting materials, Senpai. And as many as possible."

"Got it. I'll work hard to bring back enough that it's okay if you mess up repeatedly!" I replied confidently, thumping my chest with one hand.

"Summer! The sea! Swimming!" I shouted.

I took a deep breath as I stood on the sandy beach, staring out at the blue sea under the summer sky, having changed into my swimsuit. The powerful scent of the sea reached the back of my nostrils, so thick I could almost choke on it, but I actually found that relaxing—having come from a village that smelled kind of sweaty recently!

And next to me were Iris and Kate, in their swimsuits too. We were all at a beach in the fishing village of Beizan, in the Barker Domain, where we'd come to harvest astellors.

"It certainly is nice out," said Iris. "But are you sure this is okay? The bandit problem isn't resolved yet."

"Iris, a woman can't live for bandit slaying alone," I reminded her. "And besides, gathering materials is also work. It wouldn't do to get so caught up on killing bandits that I neglect my main job."

"That's so true," Kate agreed. "Even if we work hard to keep the roads safe, it defeats the whole purpose if it ends up getting in the way of your work."

"Yeah. And we have another objective here too..." I added. "Though I wasn't expecting to have company."

I turned to look at the beach behind me. There was Diana-san resting under a tarp, and she had Caterina there with her. They smiled and waved when they noticed us looking.

They were wearing slightly more modest swimsuits than Iris and Kate, but they were both still young and had their daughters beat in the sexiness department. Obviously, I wasn't even in the running there. They were a real feast for the eyes. Pfeh!

"That's the thing about mother..." Iris began. "People don't notice it as much because of how father is, but she's actually a very active woman."

"I tried to talk her out of it," Kate added. "But she insisted that we were more likely to be attacked if she came..."

Yeah, our secondary objective was to act as bandit bait. The House of Lotze's forces had been out roaming all over Lochhart for a long time now. That meant the bandits had seen their companions killed or had their work interfered with.

Now there were women from the House of Lotze out on their own, without bodyguards. It wouldn't be surprising if someone decided to try and turn the situation around.

Maybe they'd heard the rumors about me, but people like them tended to interpret things in whatever way benefited them the most. They'd think that once they had captured us, they'd be able to make whatever unreasonable demands they wanted, and act on that

belief, simplistically assuming they could pull it off—wouldn't that be nice if it happened?

Well, the main reason we were here was to gather materials, so if we did manage to lure in some bandits, that would just be a nice bonus. That was how I was looking at it.

"Ria and Leya wanted to come too, but mother clearly wasn't going to allow that," said Iris.

"O-Of course she wouldn't!" I shouted. "What if something were to happen to them?! Tell them I'll bring them here once it's safe, okay?"

"That's fine with me, but...you sure are overprotective of those two, huh, Sarasa?" observed Iris. "You're going to make me jealous."

"They're my precious little sisters," I replied, then, looking at her with upturned eyes, asked, "If anything, you're the one who's going to protect me, right, Iris?"

"Indeed!" Iris nodded. "I swear by the sword you gave me—though, I don't have it on me now."

Iris reached toward her hip, but ended up grasping nothing but air.

She smiled a little shyly. Kate, who had been watching, shrugged. "You didn't exactly nail that one, Iris."

"How is it my fault?! As if I could bring an important sword like that to the beach!"

"And we're in swimsuits anyway," I added. "I did bring a harpoon along, though."

And there *was* a cheap sword and bow for the other two under the tarp with Diana-san. If any bandits showed up, my plan was to handle them with magic anyway, so it probably wasn't going to be an issue.

"But before we fret over bandits who might not even be coming, we should focus on the materials that we definitely can get," I concluded. "Lorea-chan and the others would be livid if we forgot. What we're looking for are sea creatures that look like this."

As I spoke, I drew an astellor in the sand.

My drawing was super simple, but Iris's brow furrowed as she looked at my highly distinctive art. "Sarasa... Is an astellor a variety

of starfish, perhaps?”

“Huh? You know about starfish? I didn’t think you knew much about the sea.”

If they were plants or forest creatures, it wouldn’t have been all that odd for her to have looked up information on them as a gatherer, though...

“Indeed. I read a book when I was a little girl, and they’re like stars that fell into the— Nngh! I’ve never seen one myself, but I know their shape! If astellors are that distinctive, then I feel like we’ll be able to find them in no time.”

She started out giving a pretty romanticized description there...but maybe I should be nice and just let it pass without comment? I thought, given that Iris was blushing slightly and averting her eyes, but...

“Well, isn’t this nice for you, Iris. Your childhood dream is coming true.”

I turned toward the speaker, a smiling Diana-san. She gave off a softer impression now than when I met her to talk about the marriage with Iris. Maybe that was because, with things having been sorted out and responsibility for the domain having been transferred to me, she’d had a load taken off her shoulders.

“M-Mother?! Wh-Whatever are you talking ab—”

“Oh, did you forget? You read that picture book, and then you said, ‘I’m going to go pick up stars in the sea!’”

“Mother! D-Don’t tell her things she doesn’t need to know!” Iris flushed red and jumped at Diana-san, trying to cover her mouth, but...

“It’s not that easy! There!” Diana-san dodged and then swept one of Iris’s legs out from under her, giving her daughter an extra shove in the back as she lost her balance.

“Wah! Guh! Th-The sand—! Wagh!”

The ground was sand, which Iris was unfamiliar with. Iris stumbled a few steps toward the tide line.

That’s where she lost her balance completely, falling into the water with a big splash.

Wow, those were some moves. I guess it’s no lie when they say

she lives an active lifestyle.

"Iris, not keeping secrets from one another is the secret to marital bliss," Diana-san lectured her daughter, holding up one finger as she spoke.

"That's not...the problem!" Iris immediately rose and protested as she coughed up seawater. "It's about my dignity..."

Diana-san let out a dismayed sigh. "You're not the dignified type, though, are you? The way you look reliable at a glance, but are actually a bit silly, is cute. Isn't that right, Sarasa-san?"

"Umm, I'm not sure I should answer that. But I think Iris is fine as she is, you know?"

I smiled vaguely. Diana-san returned the smile and patted Iris on the head.

"Isn't that nice, Iris. Sarasa-san is such a good person."

"Murrrrrrgh!"

With a smile at the childish way Iris was puffing her cheeks up, Diana-san turned back to me. "Sarasa-san, would I be able to catch astellors too? Since I'm here, I'd like to join you."

"Huh? You want to? It's fine as long as you don't touch them directly..."



Astellors had venom, so they could be a bit dangerous. It wasn't anything lethal, though.

I cast a questioning look at Iris. She shrugged in resignation. "Let her do as she likes. Mother hasn't had much occasion to leave the domain since I was born."

"Got it. Fortunately, we have extra pairs of flexible gloves. Make sure that you wear them, okay?"

"Thank you," Diana-san said with a smile. "Caterina, why don't you join us too?"

Caterina was sitting a short distance away and had been watching us with a smile, but now her eyes widened in surprise.

"Huh? Me too? I'm here as your bodyguard..."

"This beach is wide open. If there are any suspicious individuals, we'll see them coming. If we act too guarded, that will actually hamper our goal of luring in bandits, you realize?"

"I suppose you're right... And if Sarasa-sama is with us, there's no need for concern."

That was a lot of responsibility. I steeled myself as I handed everyone, including Caterina, who had gotten up and come over, a pair of flexible gloves, plus a net to keep their catch in.

"They're shaped like this drawing, and range from blue to purple," I explained. "The more brilliant a blue they are, the higher their quality as a material will be. They have venom, so be careful not to let them touch areas other than your gloved hand, like your arms or legs. They move slowly, and should be found on rocks on the sea floor."

"Understood," said Diana-san. "Well then, Caterina, let's go! Iris, it's a competition!"

"Yes, Diana-sama!!!" answered Caterina. "Kate, you do your best too, okay?"

The two daughters watched their mothers race off into the sea cheerfully.

I smiled awkwardly, then gave Iris and Kate, who didn't know quite how to react, a light shove.

"We should get going too. Iris, Kate."

"Yeah..." Kate replied. "I'd be ashamed to lose to mom at

gathering when that's my main occupation."

"It remains unclear if our experience as gatherers will help us here," said Iris. "But I agree. Let's go!"

The slightly chilly seawater felt comforting against skin warmed by the summer sun.

I walked out past the point where my feet touched the bottom, then quietly floated there while I waited for Iris and Kate to follow. I looked over at Diana-san and Caterina, who I could see were both good swimmers. I wouldn't have to worry about their safety.

"I see we can all swim," I observed.

"Our house may not be on the sea, but it does have a river," Iris explained. "And our mothers traveled to all sorts of places when they were young. It's not her first time at the sea, you know?"

"Yeah, I've heard all sorts of stories of their exploits... I think a large part of what led to us becoming gatherers was growing up on those stories," Kate said with a far-off look in her eyes. But she quickly changed gears and looked down at the sea floor. "Well, we'd better get started. I see our moms are already diving."

"Indeed!" Iris agreed. "We won't let them beat us!"

Iris took a deep breath, then dove. Kate followed suit.

The astellors were on the seabed. The two of them dove down headfirst, grabbing the rocks and walking around using their hands as they searched behind the rocks and in the seaweed.

Hmm, we're not finding them easily. But they are *valuable materials, after all.*

Instead, we found all sorts of other tasty-looking marine life, which we obviously stuffed our nets with.

Oh, this probably went without saying, but I had gotten permission from Sir Barker, so that wasn't going to be a problem.

He'd treated me to some delicious seafood the last time I was here, so the two of us weren't on bad terms—probably.

He hadn't just been being careful not to anger me, I hope?

Either way, I came up for air several times and looked around, but no one else seemed to have found them yet.

By the way, I could've used magic to eliminate the need to come

up for air, but...that'd have just been rude to the others, all right?

Then, on my fifth dive...

Oh, found one.

There was a brilliant blue in the shadow of the rocks.

I got a bit closer, and yep, it was an astellor. It was palm-sized, which was average for them, and the color was of good quality.

Having just warned the others about the dangers of the astellors, I made sure not to let this one touch my bare skin as I carefully put it in my net.

Then I swam back up. At the surface, my eyes met with Iris's. She'd surfaced at the same time.

"Oh, Sarasa, I've already got two of them. How's that?!"

She held up her net with a smile. It held two starfish.

They're both larger than mine, but...

"Sorry. One of those isn't an astellor. You see how it's more green than blue, right?"

"What?" She frowned and looked at them. "Now that you mention it... Argh, darn you for confusing me!"

She fished out the offending starfish and threw it back.

"But I've still got one," she continued. "And you... Ohh, yours is really pretty!"

"Yep. It's going to make a really good material. But we're nowhere near our goal yet."

This wasn't enough for the shop's air purifier, let alone the water filter for the public bath.

"Oh, I see. But if we can keep up this pace, then within a few days—" Iris was in the middle of saying when Kate's head came up out of the water.

"Pfwah! I caught a big one, Sarasa!"

It must not have fit in her net. Kate was holding up a big astellor that was larger than both her palms spread out. It was really meaty, and though its color wasn't as good as the one I had, it was close to blue.

"Hee hee, with this, we can beat mom—" Kate began to say gleefully, but Iris cut her off.

"No, Kate, it doesn't look like it," she said, pointing toward the

beach with a half smile.

I looked over there and saw Caterina helping Diana-san haul back an astellor. Given it was large enough that they needed to cooperate, it was pretty big. A person could've wrapped their arms around it.

The color was a brilliant blue too, so its quality also went without saying.

"Huh? What *is* that?" Kate said in disbelief. "They come that big?"

"It's my first time seeing it too," I admitted. "Generally, the one you caught is as large as they get..."

"That thing's at least twice the size of yours," said Iris. "I don't know what to say, other than...that's mother for you."

"Urgh! Iris, we can't lose!!! Sarasa, take this one for me!" Kate pushed her astellor toward me, then dove again.

"Sorry, Sarasa. I'd be worried about Kate on her own, so I'm going too."

"Oh, sure." I nodded. "Don't push yourselves too hard, though. The sea's dangerous if you let your guard down."

I watched Iris dive after Kate, then headed for the beach to drop off our haul.

Diana-san and Caterina had already headed back out to sea, and the big astellor that they'd caught was sitting in a bucket on the beach. It only barely fit in. Really just barely. If I added our catch too, it'd definitely spill out of the bucket.

"Maybe I should get to processing? Besides, if they're competing, it's best for me to stay out of it."

I took out a small alchemic cauldron and started processing the astellors.

I cut them, put them into the cauldron, and poured in magical power. This must've been a good spot, because the others carried in more astellors as I was working. Then, as evening approached...

"The winners of today's match are...Diana-san and Caterina!"

Iris and Kate slumped their shoulders at my announcement, while Diana-san and Caterina put their hands together and cheered.

"We did it!" they both shouted.

"Urgh! We lost..." groaned Iris.

“Even though we were winning in numbers... Mom’s just too lucky.”

It was true that Iris and Kate had caught more astellors, but their quality was, sadly, much lower.

That was just how big of an effect that first massive one that their mothers had on the outcome. Their latter catches had been normal-sized, but as Kate was saying, luck had been on their side.

“But when it comes to tasty seafood, I think you two won,” I consoled them. “I’m surprised you knew what to catch.”

Many of the sea creatures that Iris and Kate had brought in didn’t look edible at first glance. I knew that they were, of course, but I was surprised that the two of them had known and then had been able to catch them too.

“Indeed,” said Iris. “Once I heard we would be coming to the sea, I asked Misty all sorts of questions!”

“She told us that a lot of things are good to eat even if they don’t look it... I can’t deny we got distracted from the astellors as a result,” Kate added with a dry laugh.

Diana-san and Caterina peered into the bucket and then nodded.

“It’s true, they have caught a wide variety of things. Some of which we don’t see very often,” noted Diana-san.

“Nice work, Kate-chan,” her mother congratulated her. “These are delicious, aren’t they?”

“Okay, let’s have these for dinner tonight,” I suggested. “Since we have fresh seafood in front of us.”

The other four all nodded in unison.

After that day, in addition to astellors, we also caught shrimp, shellfish, crabs, and fish, which we cooked and ate on the beach.

Then, on our fourth day on the beach, we finally managed to catch what we’d really been fishing for.

“Ah—! Air Wall!!!”

My magic deflected the arrow that had suddenly flown at us.

At the same time, a little over ten thugs rushed toward us, brandishing swords.

We, on the other hand, were defenseless, wearing nothing but our swimsuits.

Or that would have normally been the case. But...

"Oh dear, I see we have guests. Sarasa-sama, will you be needing any assistance?" offered Caterina.

"Not necessary. I chose this place for a reason," I replied before shouting, "Quicksand!"

Just as the thugs had closed in to about twenty steps away, I activated my magic.

The beach sand swirled into a vortex, swallowing them up from below.

"Wha?!"

"What is this?!"

"H-Help!"

"I can't brea— Gwugh!"

Our attackers immediately struggled to escape, but it wasn't so easy to get away. People got their feet caught in the dry sand enough without any help, and I scarcely need to explain that the addition of magic made it worse. The men sank into the sand in mere seconds, rendering them unable to move.

"Murgh..." Iris groaned. "You'd told us about it, but the effect was even greater than I expected. Well done, Sarasa."

"Yeah," Kate agreed with her. "I've seen how you used magic against the salamander, so I'm not even surprised, but...it's still incredible."

"It's convenient for neutralizing them, right?" I said. "Though, as you can see, you can only use this magic in very specific locations."

If this weren't a sandy beach, it would have been harder to take them alive.

Though, it looks like some of them got completely buried, so I guess we'll only get to interrogate about half of them...?

"Taking all of them in would be—" Diana-san started to say before noticing, "Oh, my. One of them is running away."

Maybe I'd been a bit naive when I set the area of effect, because the man at the rear, who'd shot at us with his bow, crawled out of the sand.

But Diana-san acted before I could do anything.

She rapidly picked up a piece of driftwood and threw it with an

enthusiastic “Take that!”

The piece of wood whooshed toward the man, colliding with the back of his skull in an impact that belied her playful tone. It robbed him of his consciousness—and, uh, probably his life too.

Wow. That’s Adelbert-san’s wife and Iris’s mother, for you.

Diana-san went on talking as if she hadn’t done anything. “Taking all of them in would be too much trouble, so this is enough.”

“Wha?! N-No way, this was a trap?! That’s why you had no guards?!” their leader babbled, clearly panicking.

I nodded, of course. “It sure was. Thanks for coming. We went to all the trouble of asking the House of Lotze’s forces to stay away so you would. If you hadn’t turned up today, we were about to give up too.”

To tell you the truth, Adelbert-san had voiced his concern about the five of us heading out here alone. But he’d acquiesced after Diana-san had shouted him down. He was currently patrolling the area around Yok Village.

“Because you people were needlessly careful,” added Iris. “How was it? We must’ve looked like tempting bait, huh?” She looked down at them smugly.

“Screw you!”

“I’m gonna kill you!”

“That one wasn’t that tempting.”

The men caught in the sand hurled harsh language back at her.

“Murgh! How dare you insult my Sarasa!”

Iris kicked sand at the one who’d said someone wasn’t that tempting, but...

“Hold up, Iris. He didn’t specify who just now, did he?”

“Didn’t he...? Oops, well, there’s not really any point in listening to any more of their filthy language, so let’s tie them up.”

Iris tried to play ignorant as she pressed the man’s face into the sand with her foot to shut him up. Kate passed her a rope with perfect timing, and she used it to gag him. Grr.

“Iris-sama, the trick here is to blindfold them, and to tie the rope around their necks just tight enough that they don’t suffocate,” explained Caterina. “That will make it so you can silence them by

tugging on it."

"I see, I'm learning something new here. You're such a good teacher, Caterina."

Caterina skillfully tied up the men as she instructed Iris.

The bandits looked like they were suffering a little, but then again, they were just bandits, not worthy of any sympathy.

"We'll have to bind their hands and feet as well... Sarasa-sama, could you pull them up out of the sand with your magic? If not, I'll haul them up using the rope."

Um, Caterina, those ropes are around their necks, aren't they?

The blood drained from the bandits' faces because it was perfectly clear what would happen if she pulled on the ropes.

"That's no problem," I said. "I'll pull them up one at a time."

I didn't feel bad for them, but I couldn't let them die just yet.

Iris leveled her sword at the bandits while I pulled them up with my magic and Kate and Caterina subsequently tied them up with rope.

Through that division of labor, we tied up five bandits and concluded the other nine wouldn't need to be restrained.

I couldn't just bury their lifeless bodies on the beach along with their swords and bows, so I hauled them all up out of the sand and piled them up on the side for the time being.

"Whew... That's that. They sure did us a favor by showing up."

As I dusted off my hands and let out a sigh, Iris let out a beleaguered laugh. "You said it. We couldn't have hung in here for much longer. It wouldn't have been good for our bodies or for how we'd have looked..."

We had only worked really hard on collecting astellors on the first day. We'd taken it a bit easier after that.

That meant, to outside observers, we just looked like we were fooling around on the beach all day. Since I hadn't explained the trap to Sir Barker, I had wanted to avoid going home empty-handed.

"Now we just need to dispose of these... But let's get changed first," I said.

"We should," Diana-san agreed. "Thanks to the sunscreen you prepared, we didn't get burned, but at my age, long exposure to the

sun and sea breeze is a bit tiring."

She didn't look worn out in the slightest, but I was tired too.

I washed us all off using magic and then set up the floating tent so we could take turns getting changed in it.

Then, as I came out after taking the last turn in the tent, I found Diana-san and the others were already dragging the corpses away from the beach.

I'd thought about this earlier too, but the others didn't seem perturbed at all by this.

Normally, if a noblewoman saw a dead body, she'd go pale, and raise a fuss, but...

Huh? None of the people I know seem to freak out over seeing a dead body...

Not Priscia-senpai, Lacie-senpai, Maris-san, or even Iris. Maris-san had seemed the most likely to, but she was the type to scream when bandits attacked, but also brutally murder them as she did.

Was the idea of noblewomen who were disturbed by dead bodies just pure fiction...?

"Sarasa-sama? Um, Sarasa-sama!" Caterina called out to me. "I hate to be a bother, but could we ask you to dig a hole with your magic?"

"Huh? Oh, sure, I can do that."

I did as she asked and dug a hole.

And so, the truth I had begun to realize was buried in the darkness, along with the bodies of a bunch of bandits.

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The bandits' base had been found.

That was the report I received two days after handing the bandits over. I was in the lord's manor in South Strag, and the one who'd given me the report was Clency.

Yep, that's right, I haven't been able to go back to Yok Village.

I'd wanted to get back and use my new materials to make the air purifier quickly, but Clency had said, "There are a number of pending matters that I would like your decision on. Let us take the chance

while you are already in the area!" and kept me here somewhat forcefully, like a tout bringing in customers.

Iris and Kate had stayed with me, as had their mothers. But because the manor was short-staffed, there was no one to wait on us, and we even had to cook our own meals. Still, we were enjoying the novelty of looking around the luxurious manor, so it was a surprisingly fun stay.

Maybe I should bring Ria and Leya next time? While I'm still plenipotentiary.

Also, Diana-san was a solid cook, so we were all sitting in the office now, smacking our lips over the tea and biscuits she'd made.

"I see. Clency, have we learned anything else new?"

"The bandits that you captured were from the group that is mainly composed of gang members from this town. They have no ties with the other two groups, and don't know where their bases are."

"That's a shame, but it sounds like we can take care of one of them, at least. I'll head out to crush them right a—"

"No, I'd ask you to leave that to Adelbert-sama. He has sent word that he will be arriving today. Please continue doing the work that only you can do."

That killed my momentum. But I was at my best when I was killing bandits— Okay, no, that was an exaggeration. Even though "if you find them, kill them," was a family motto.

But I'm definitely better at it than my current work!

"Do I really need to be the one to do this...? I thought I was in charge of bandit countermeasures."

If it were something about how to assuage the negative effects of bandit activity, I'd understand. If it were paperwork related to building the roads, well, I was the one who requested them, so I'd do my best to help. And even if it were concerning the development of Lochhart's towns and villages...maybe that would still be in the range of what I consider acceptable? But making me come up with an action plan for the future of Lochhart is clearly not!

I told Clency as much, but unfortunately, there were traitors in our midst.

“But you’re going to be a lord yourself in the future, Sarasa. Isn’t this a good opportunity to learn?” suggested Iris.

“She’s right,” Kate agreed. “It’s not an opportunity that comes up often. Leave the bandits to us.”

“If you two are going to call yourselves my wife and mistress, isn’t this the point where you’re supposed to back me up?!” I protested.

“Yes, which is why we’ll do what we can to—” Iris started to declare, puffing up her chest, but...

“Oh? There’s no need for the two of you to come,” Diana-san interrupted her. “Especially you, Iris. You do what little you can to help Sarasa-san with her work. You’re not going to just be a gatherer forever, are you?”

“You too, Kate-chan,” Caterina chimed in. “Because you’re going to be her assistant in the future.”

Well, that sure backfired on them. After being remonstrated by their mothers, the pair both nodded and agreed to help me with my work, but...

Yep. I guess I was kind of glad about that.

Even if it did just mean that I now had the added task of teaching the newbies.

Three days later, Adelbert-san returned from the bandits’ base. However...

“It was empty?” I asked.

“Indeed,” he replied. “There were certainly signs that suggested it had been used as a base. But there was nothing left there.”

Not only had there been no bandits, their loot was gone too, so, frankly, we had nothing to show for it whatsoever. That was what the contents of Adelbert-san and Walter’s report explained.

We’d wasted hardly any time in between catching the bandits and sending a team out to deal with the rest of them. If there was any time lost, it was the two days it took to interrogate them, but that was still far too quick for them to have made the call to clear out of their base.

“Did they decide to cut loose the guys who got caught the

moment they didn't come back?" Iris asked after some consideration.

"That could be it." Adelbert-san nodded in agreement. "It's possible that the enemy is well aware of the risks of attacking Sarasa-dono. They may have thought that any failure could be ruinous."

"That's why they ran away instantly...? Then why not just not attack in the first place?" Kate asked.

She sounded doubtful, but Walter had an answer for her: "The bandit group in question is made up of multiple criminal gangs. They're not a monolith."

"Oh, it makes sense when you put it that way," said Kate. "It seems possible they were divided between those who wanted to turn the tables on Sarasa with an ambush, and those who knew that would destroy them, and fled the base without waiting to find out how it went."

"Is that why it took them time to attack us too?" wondered Iris. "I'd believe it, but then..."

"It means our trap didn't serve its purpose, yeah," I finished for her. "Hrmm..."

We'd definitely decreased their numbers, so it hadn't been completely pointless, but looking at the overall result, it was a failure.

Murrrgh! Fighting bandits in the domain is harder than I thought it'd be, huh?

Unlike a company, which could just fend off the ones that attacked them, in my role as plenipotentiary, that wasn't going to be enough.

We were seeing fewer reports of damages, and there were no major problems with the distribution of goods thanks to the Feed Company.

But keeping up these patrols was too big of a burden on the House of Lotze.

Just as I was racking my brain over what to do, there was a knock at the door.

"Yes, come in," I said, and then when they did, "Wait, huh?"

It was Clency. So far, so normal. He came frequently to drop off additional paperwork—something I was never happy about. But behind him was a slightly unexpected visitor.

"Leonora-san? What are you doing here?"

My door would never be closed to the woman who had done so much for me, but this wasn't a scheduled visit, so I was a bit surprised. Iris and Kate apparently hadn't known she was coming either, so they looked mystified by it.

"Hello, Sarasa—and everyone else. You have quite the gathering here," she said as she looked around at each of us.

"We have just returned. Unfortunately, without results," Walter explained with a sigh.

"I thought so," said Leonora-san. "I have some news you might be wanting to hear."

That made Walter arch an eyebrow, but she seemed unbothered by his reaction, instead turning to me with a slightly mischievous smile. "Hey, Sarasa. There's good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?"

"Um..."

This was news, coming from the well-informed Leonora-san. Because she was highly reliable, I was scared to find out.

I glanced at Iris, hoping she'd help, but she just shook her head in confusion.

After some indecision, I decided to get it over with and said, "Let's have the bad news first."

I'd prefer to end on a positive note for when we get back to work.

"A man calling himself the true successor to the Kahku Baronetcy has appeared, and he's joined forces with Hoh Bahru."

I didn't know quite how to respond to that. For starters...

"Oh, I didn't know Hoh Bahru was still alive."

"Yes, he hasn't died yet—though, the Bahru Company certainly has."

He was the direct cause for my marriage to Iris. You could look at him as our matchmaker—but no, it was nothing as beautiful as that.

I'd just left him alone after crushing his scummy plans, and he

apparently hadn't managed to rebuild the company after that.

"But Leonora-dono, is that *bad* news?" asked Iris. "When a noble house is abolished, there are often idiots who turn up like this. What difference does a failed merchant helping him make?"

"Yeah," Kate agreed. "The backing of a major merchant would give even the most obscure claimant credibility, but... If anything, isn't this good news for us, finding out that Hoh Bahru's fallen on hard times?"

He had put Iris and Kate through an awful lot.

The two of them exchanged glances and nodded, but Clency disagreed.

"That's not really true. This self-proclaimed successor—his name is Hahjio Kahku, for what it's worth—was, in fact, included in the Kahku family tree."

"Is it really him? Not just an impostor?" I asked.

"Given that we have already confirmed some members of the Kahku family have joined him, I would say that he likely is the genuine article."

Clency had apparently never met this Hahjio before, but there obviously had to have been other Kahkus who would have. If they were recognizing him as legitimate, then it was hard to assume that he wasn't.

But as for if that mattered at all...

"The House of Kahku had been abolished," said Adelbert-san. "What good can come of asserting that he's the rightful heir to it now?"

They had been held responsible for crimes against the state. Thinking about it normally, there was no way their house would be reestablished.

It was a reasonable thing to point out, but Clency gave me a troubled look. "That's true, but the abolition of their house was done somewhat forcefully. It is difficult for me to say this, Sarasa-sama, but there were those who felt that 'even if she was an alchemist, all he did was try to kill a commoner.'"

"Oh, I get it," I replied. "That does sound like something people would say."

The direct reason for the House of Kahku being abolished was his attempt on Prince Ferrick's life, but that had been brought about by his failed attempt to murder me. The country had a policy of protecting alchemists, but there were, of course, nobles who weren't supportive of that, and I was in the awkward position of being a former commoner.

It wouldn't be unusual for some nobles to think that, since no one had died, there wasn't any problem, which was precisely why the prince had provoked Yokuo Kahku into attacking him so that there would be a more decisive charge.

Naturally, me being the apprentice of Ophelia Millis, and the prince having been aiming to strip the baronet of his title all along, had played into it too.

"So what you're telling us is that, if they play their cards right, it's possible that the Kahku Baronetcy could be restored?" I asked.

"I doubt he has thought things through to the point where he could get that far, but I suspect he is looking to become magistrate of Lochhart."

"That's a bunch of rubbish after they tried to kill Sarasa! Okay, let's kill him," Iris said, looking really serious about it as she rose from her seat, but Adelbert-san stopped her.

"Now, wait, Iris. Clency, is that possible?"

"It is not. If there was a reason for it, a former lord who was stripped of his title might be named magistrate. But not in this situation. Though, perhaps my appointment has given them false hope..."

If the former steward, Clency, can do it, then we're even better suited to the task, is it?

"That sure sounds like something a noble who doesn't know what's up might think..." I said.

"But why support the bandits?" Kate asked. "That's the part that I don't get."

"Kate-sama, I don't believe you should expect straight thought from such people..." said Clency. "Perhaps they think that if they can become magistrate by force, the rest will sort itself out?"

If they became magistrate, it would be simple to sweep their

crimes under the rug—maybe. But magistrates had to be appointed by the king. It wasn't a position that they could just seize by force, so the whole plan fell apart right there.

"That said, it's a fact that the number of bandits has increased again. So it certainly is bad news," I concluded. "So, what's the good news? I'm hoping it's something that will cheer me back up."

"They've gathered up all the bandits and formed one big bandit gang," said Leonora-san.

"And that's supposed to be good news...?" I furrowed my brow.

Leonora-san shrugged and smiled a little.

"They've brought three separate groups together in one place, and with more people there, that will make it easier to find them."

"Hmm." I thought about it. "Our problem is that we can't locate their base, so... That certainly is good news, yeah."

Having more people meant going through more food. If they were sourcing that from inside the domain, it would be hard to hide their tracks.

In some ways, it was an issue that we couldn't pick them off individually anymore, but if this let us take them out all in one go, we'd have the freedom to deploy me, Iris, and our other heavy hitters.

"And it also means we can dispose of somebody who got in our way. I'm sure you're happy about that, aren't you, Iris?"

"I see... So you're saying we can legally take out Hoh Bahru and this self-proclaimed successor. Heh heh!"

There was a slightly dark smile on Iris's face, and it looked like she meant business.

But our main objective's to kill bandits, okay? Not that I'm going to stop you.

"But Leonora-san," I said, "it sure is impressive you were able to find this information, isn't it?"

Walter was doing his best, and he hadn't been able to find out. I looked at Leonora-san, wondering how she had been able to, but she just gave me an exasperated look in return.

"I've been putting down roots in this town since before you were born, Sarasa. And the Lotzes aren't from around here either. If

anything, I'd be ashamed if you'd beaten me at gathering information."

Now that she mentioned it, despite how young Leonora-san *looked*, she was still more than twice my age. That made her my senior as an alchemist and businesswoman by far, so of course she had way more experience, and connections, than I did... There was no way I could outdo her now.

Incidentally, the elderly Clency reacted with shock, saying, "I've been here since even before you were born, Leonora-sama..."

But really, it was a matter of specialization. He was going to have to give up.

"If you put it that way, I suppose I'll have to accept it," I said. "But I'm grateful for the help. How much do I owe—"

"You already shared some astellors with me, which is more than enough," Leonora-san said. "It's not like I'm not affected by this, anyway."

"You're sure it's okay? Thank you. Sorry for always relying on you like this."

"Hee hee, it's fine," Leonora-san practically sang before dropping another info bomb. "By the way, I have some idea where their base is... You want to hear?"

"I sure do! That's the best news yet!" I exclaimed, unable to help leaning in for more.

"Now, now," Leonora-san said to get me to settle down. She then pointed to a single point on the map that was spread out on the table.

"According to my investigation, this is the most likely location."

"Ruta Village...?" I asked.

It was a tiny village southwest of South Strag.

If you started along the road to Yok Village and then turned down a narrow side road that headed off to the south along the way, you would find yourself in Ruta Village. I knew of its existence from looking at the map, but I had no business there, so I had never gone.

"I was paying attention to the area around Fergo in the west and Narta in the north, but they slipped up this time," Leonora-san

explained.

Incidentally, the base that Adelbert-san and the others had come back from empty-handed was near Fergo. Looking at it that way, there was a high probability they had abandoned the base up north too.

"Walter, Clency, what do you think?" I asked, looking at the two who were in charge of information gathering on our side.

They both frowned and nodded.

"It's plausible..." replied Walter. "I was searching for them using the flow of foodstuffs, but I overlooked the food being carried to villages. If a villager came to make the purchase, then I wouldn't have picked up on them as suspicious."

"I'm terribly sorry, Sarasa-sama. This is my fault," said Clency.

"I don't think it is, but... I had overlooked the villages too."

Bandits were known for hiding. I hadn't expected them to be out in the open in a village.

Regardless, Clency shook his head and slumped his shoulders. "No, I should have been able to notice. Thinking back on it, the mayor of that town was cooperative toward the former lord. I should have investigated properly and punished him."

Leonora-san looked a little troubled by Clency's reaction. "Uh, let me just say, it's not clear that the villagers are collaborating with them," she added. "They may have been occupied by the bandits, and been threatened into helping... Sarasa, do at least check before you just murder everyone, okay?"

"Whoa, just how heartless do you think I am?!"

I firmly objected to this slander, but Leonora-san just looked at me with a half smile.

"I won't say you're heartless, but I *do* have information saying, 'When Sarasa sees bandits, she murders them with a smile on her face,' so there's that."

"That's fake news. Please update it to say that 'she treats even bandits with mercy.'"

"Got it. The mercy of the battlefield, you mean."

"Yeah, that's about right."

When I nodded, Iris gave me a dubious look.

"Um, that's a roundabout way of saying you finish them off, right...?"

"Even if I treat them both mercifully, it's only natural that I have different 'mercy' for bandits than I do for the villagers, right? That said, now I need to tell one from the other... It feels like it would be hard to investigate the village."

If someone new came to a small village, word would spread instantly. In Yok Village, we could have slipped in with the other gatherers, but Ruta Village wasn't like that.

Maybe a merchant wouldn't arouse suspicion?

I'd feel bad doing it, but asking the Feed Company was an option.

Or so I was thinking, but Walter raised his hand before I could speak. "Sarasa-sama, could you leave this to me?"

"Um... Of all the people here, you're the one I'd be most likely to ask, but don't we have anyone who's more of a specialist?"

It felt to me like nobles probably had squads of secret agents. But alas, my faint hopes were dashed when Adelbert-san shook his head.

"If you're talking about ordinary soldiers, then we're at the level where the ones we poached from South Strag just recently are among our best. If anyone's a specialist, it's actually Walter. Naturally, I can't go, and we can't send Caterina or Kate, now can we?" he said.

"If you give me the order, I'll—" Kate began to say, but—

"Not a chance." Walter and I both spoke over her.

But Walter seemed to quickly snap to his senses. He turned to me and deeply bowed his head. "I'm terribly sorry, Sarasa-sama! The House of Starven wouldn't disobey an order from our lord. If you deem it necessary, please use Kate as you see fit."

"Um, no need to act so stiff... I appreciate the sentiment. But in all honesty, I'd feel a bit uneasy making Kate do it."

I wasn't going to say Kate was unskilled. But she wasn't highly skilled either.

She could probably take on several common thugs, but it would be dangerous for her if she got surrounded by bandits like the ones at the beach, and we couldn't be sure which bandits might be

unexpectedly skilled.

"If it's truly necessary, I could go myself, but—" I started to say, but was shouted down with "No!"s and "Absolutely not!"s from everyone except Leonora-san.

"Whaa? I'll have you know, I'm the most equipped to deal with them," I insisted.

"Sarasa, consider your position!" Iris rebuked me. "It would be one thing for father to go, but we could never allow you, the head of the house, to go alone, right?! Besides, you're a girl!"

"I agree entirely," said Walter. "Give some thought to your subordinates. Leaving things to us is a form of trust, you know?"

"Yeah, it would be one thing for me to go, but—" Adelbert-san started to join them, but then raised an eyebrow in confusion. "Hmm? I used to be head of the house, though?"

He looked at the other two. But they just shared a glance, then sighed.

"I mean, you wouldn't stop even if we told you to, father..."

"Do you know how many times I complained? Although, in those cases it was wild animals, so the danger was lower."

Adelbert-san stood there with his arms crossed, unable to even groan in response.

Walter looked away from the former head of the house and back to me. "You may feel uneasy, but leave this to me for now. I won't do anything unreasonable."

"Well, if you put it that way... But do be suitably careful," I told him. "Clency, I'll be using Lochhart's troops this time too. Please make the preparations."

The total number of bandits was still unknown, but if the three groups had merged, then they had to be a reasonably large group. I felt uneasy facing that with just the House of Lotze's troops.

If Lochhart could send at least some of their forces, even that would be a big help.

"Very well," said Clency. "I will gather as many as I can."

"I'd like to avoid casualties, so prioritize the best-trained ones. Also, Adelbert-san, we're going to have to join you this time. That's fine with you, right?"

“I find it a little frustrating, but now’s not the time for stubbornness. If I consider everyone’s safety, I have to acknowledge that it’s the best option. Iris, protect Sarasa-dono properly—with all your heart, you hear me?”

“Father... It may not seem like much, but I’ve been improving,” Iris murmured, feeling let down by his reaction. But, in a moment, she steeled herself. “I’ll give it everything I’ve got, working together with Kate.”

“That’s right. Leave her to us, Adelbert-sama.”

“Indeed,” he replied. “Now then, Walter, hurry and investigate as much as you safely can.”

“Understood. I will get to work at once.”

And with that, we moved into action.

But before the investigation could bear fruit, things took a turn in an unexpected direction...

Episode 4: The Imprisoned Princess

There were documents piled up on the desk in the office. Most were things I couldn't imagine were my responsibility, but Clency, who normally would have been processing them, was running around preparing the military.

Meanwhile, all I was doing was waiting for the results of Walter's investigation. I wouldn't have felt right neglecting the task, so I was busily processing paperwork along with my two unskilled helpers.

But they were not much more useful than if I'd brought in cats to help. The first little kitty just looked on while groaning, while the second, slightly less useless kitty—Kate—wasn't moving her pen much either.

So, yeah, I was feeling a bit exhausted today.

Just as I was thinking it was time for a break, a visitor arrived.

"Thank you for your hard work, Sarasa-chan. A package of sweets arrived for you from the capital. I've brought them with me."

It was the head clerk of the Feed Company, and he came bearing gifts.

I couldn't help but smile at his excellent timing. "Thank you. I'll try them right away. I'll put on tea—"

"No, let me!" Kitty number one—aka Iris—immediately threw down her pen and started preparing tea.

Normally, she didn't volunteer for this kind of thing, but she was quick to act this time. I traded dryly amused glances with Kate, then set my own pen down and stretched.

"Nngh! Whew... You have a seat too," I said to the head clerk, gesturing toward the sofa. "It sounds like she's going to be making tea for all of us."

I got up and went over to join him.

“Sorry about this,” the head clerk said. “It sounds like you’ve been getting used to your work as a lord, huh?”

“I’m managing somehow, yeah. I’ve studied this stuff, but I never had any practical experience before.”

“From where I’m sitting, it looks like you’re doing more than enough...”

“Indeed,” Iris agreed. “And while we do nothing but hold her back. I feel horrible about that.”

Iris and Kate both looked apologetic as they prepared tea for us.

I shook my head, giving no indication I’d just been thinking they were as useless as if I’d asked a couple of cats to help.

“You’re new to this kind of work, so it can’t really be helped—Wait, whoa, I’ve never seen snacks like these before!”

Kate had brought a small tray of cube-shaped sweets. They were bite-sized and coated in a green powder. I was having trouble imagining what they’d taste like.

If I were to really reach for a comparison, they looked similar to the alchemical rations I’d made, but that couldn’t be what these were... Right?

“Because of the distance, I chose something that would last... I hear they’ve been selling quite well, you know?” the head clerk said.

“So these are popular sweets in the capital, then? I’m sure that means they taste good, but...” I hesitantly skewered one with my fork. It was gel-like, and more bouncy than I’d expected.

I put it in my mouth. It was really chewy. It was an interesting sensation.

The powder on the outside was sweet, while the chewy part had a strong savory flavor.

“Mmm-mmm. Was this made with nuts? It’s an odd texture.”

“Hmm, I wonder. I don’t know what that sweet green powder is,” the head clerk admitted. “It’s certainly delicious, though.”

“It sure is. I can’t imagine how they made the soft part inside of it.”

It was a strange sweet, but definitely good. I ate a second, then a third, then reset the sweetness in my mouth with some tea before having another.

The head clerk sipped his tea and watched contentedly.

"I'm pleased that you seem to be enjoying them," he said. "I'm not one for sweet things myself. How is work here treating you? Do you think you'll be finished soon?"

"Yes. The thieves only have seconds left on the clock at this point. I think I'll be able to go back to Yok Village really soon."

"Is that right?" The head clerk let out a sigh. "That's a relief. I know there's really been no helping it, given the situation, but while it's not so big of a problem for us, it's been hard on the gatherers that the alchemist's shop has been closed for so—"

"Hold on," I hurriedly interrupted him. "Huh? Is my shop closed?"

The head clerk's eyes widened, and his expression stiffened. "You haven't heard from Lorea-san? You're not going to tell me she hasn't arrived yet, are you? That can't be right."

"From the way you're saying that, Lorea-chan is heading this way?" I answered his question with another question.

There was a long pause. "It would seem I had best start over from the beginning."

The head clerk's expression grew serious, and he brought his hand to his chin. "It started...with us delivering a letter to Misty-san for the Hudson Company."

"Hm?" Iris reacted with surprise. "They're your business rivals, aren't they? But you're still delivering mail for them?"

I'd told Iris about the letter that Misty had received before. It had been a request to help them cut the Feed Company out of the loop while acquiring alchemic materials—and through slightly underhanded means. So Iris was a bit confused, but the head clerk shook his head.

"We can compartmentalize these things, Iris-san. We have deals with them not just to deliver letters, but parcels as well. It is not our goal to run other companies out of business."

Incidentally, the head clerk had come here on a Hudson Company ship, traveling from the main store in the capital to Grenje, and he had asked them to deliver his luggage too.

It was common for businesses to compete. So long as things didn't get too bad, they would still cooperate in domains where they

didn’t compete. That was just how things were.

“But villainous merchants are another matter,” the head clerk added. “The Feed Company will do everything in its power to ruin them.”

“Yeah, that sounds like Sarasa’s family, all right,” Iris remarked. “Oh, sorry for getting your story off track. Please, continue.”

The head clerk nodded, then resumed his story. “We successfully delivered the letter to Misty-san five days ago, but the issue is with what it said.”

“Did they ask Misty to do something unreasonable, maybe?” I asked.

“No, that’s not it,” the head clerk replied. “I didn’t read it myself, but it seems to have indicated that her brother had come down with an unknown illness and was in serious condition, so they wanted her to come see him in Grenje.”

“He’s seriously ill...? So Misty went to her brother’s place, then?”

“At first, she said it was none of her business and that she had work to do, but Lorea-san was insistent that she should go. ‘If he passes away, it will be too late for regrets,’ she said.”

“Well, she’s right,” said Kate. “Fortunately, our family is still healthy...”

“It’s painful not being able to go see someone when they’re dying,” I acknowledged. “And in Misty’s case, she might actually be able to help, after all.”

It sounded like their relationship had been getting worse lately, but Misty had told me they’d been on good terms back before she went to the academy.

If he was heir to the Hudson Company, then surely that meant he had access to good doctors, but Misty was an alchemist. She might be able to find an alternate solution.

“But this place is on the way to Grenje. Misty could have at least stopped in to let me know... Was she just in that much of a hurry?” I wondered before it dawned on me. “Hm? Lorea-chan? Don’t tell me...!”

I looked at the head clerk, remembering his earlier question. He nodded gravely. “Yes, she was traveling along with Misty-san. No

matter how much of a hurry they were in, it's hard to imagine she wouldn't tell you she had closed the shop..."

That meant there was a good chance they hadn't reached South Strag yet.

An unsettling feeling came over me as I imagined what that meant.

I tried to calm myself with a slightly cold sip of tea, which I slowly swallowed.

"But...why did Lorea-chan go with her?" I asked.

"I know, right?" Iris shared my confusion. "An alchemist can travel on her own... Well, no, I suppose Misty's not the same as Sarasa."

"Iris, I'm not sure I like how you said that. I'm not going to deny it, though."

In my case, if I put in the effort, I could make it here in half a day, and give any bandits that accosted me a taste of their own medicine.

There was no need for me to camp out, so the risk was limited, but Misty couldn't do the same.

"It seems that Lorea-san was worried about sending her on her own too," the head clerk explained. "At first, Lorea-san intended to send Kurumi—was that the name of the homunculus you made?—along with Misty-san as a bodyguard, but it wouldn't listen to her. So she decided to go herself. Misty-san was opposed to it, but..."

"I guess there was a conflict in its orders," I noted. "Misty hasn't been designated as a target for protection."

Although Kurumi was supposed to listen to what Lorea-chan, Iris, and Kate asked it to do, my own orders took the highest priority. I had ordered it to protect Lorea-chan, so even if she asked Kurumi to go, the homunculus wouldn't leave her side for a long period of time.

"So if Lorea-chan went, Kurumi would too, huh," I continued. "I can sort of see her reasoning, but still..."

"It doesn't boost their combat potential much," Iris agreed. "Though, being able to take turns sleeping at night helps."

"Though she put up a strong front, Misty-san was quite shaken,"

said the head clerk. “That may make up a larger part of the reason Lorea-san accompanied her.”

I understood the feeling. When a person heard a relative was seriously ill, it wasn’t easy to keep a level head. Having someone with you during a time like that would definitely be reassuring.

“I had proposed that they travel with the Feed Company, but it seemed that they wanted to depart immediately,” said the head clerk. “They left in a hurry the same day we arrived in Yok Village.”

“Well, you couldn’t change all your plans around just to suit Misty’s needs. And the two of them could probably move around faster on their own,” I replied. “And yet they still haven’t arrived here. Is there any chance you passed them?”

“There’s fundamentally only one road here, so I doubt it... If they happened to leave the road for a long time to rest, I suppose it’s possible? Lorea-san is not used to traveling, is she?”

“Right. But Lorea-chan’s got a surprisingly robust pair of legs. I think she’d be just fine walking along the road...”

She can at least manage better than Maris-san. She proved that in the mountains.

The head clerk handed over the letter five days ago; a normal person could make the trip from Yok Village to here in two to three days. That means they should’ve been here yesterday, at the latest—assuming nothing happened.

If it’s just minor trouble, like they were in such a rush that she pushed herself too hard and injured her leg or something, that’s still not so bad. But if they were attacked by bandits...

“Calm down, Sarasa,” said Iris.

“Oh, I am calm. Yes, my mind is totally clear.”

“Then start by setting down that cup. You’re going to break it like that, you know?”

Iris gently stroked my hand as she pulled the cup out of it. It was only then that I noticed I’d been death-gripping my empty teacup.

“We need to start by checking,” said Kate. “Let’s make sure Lorea-chan really hasn’t arrived.”

“We should also contact the Hudson Company,” suggested Iris. “It’s possible that they went straight to Grenje.”

"Iris-san, allow us to handle that," offered the head clerk. "I'll send Clark to do it."

"That helps," Iris replied. "Should we have father and the others act too? Fortunately, they should be ready to move at a moment's notice. We can have them head for Yok Village, and check the road."

Iris and Kate quickly pounded out a response plan, and the head clerk moved into action immediately too.

It was reassuring to see. I took a deep breath and got my emotions under control.

"Sorry to trouble you, and thanks for the help," I said. "It seems I was a little flustered there for a moment."

When I said that, Kate plopped her hand down on top of my head and smiled. "I don't blame you. Especially considering what happened to your parents. Besides, I want you to at least count on us in times like this. We're older than you, after all. Oh, and... Wait! If Kurumi's with them, then you can—"

"Hey, that's right! Um..."

When Kate started to point out something that I, as an alchemist, should've noticed long before she did, it made me realize once again how calm I *wasn't*. I hurriedly made an attempt to sync with Kurumi, but...

"It's no good... Looks like they're too far away."

"That rules out them being in the village, at least. Right?" asked Iris.

"Right," I replied. "As long as nothing's getting in the way, that should be correct. But it's not easy to interfere with my connection—oh, though I guess that maybe Leonora-san's place could do it?"

It wouldn't have been strange for Leonora-san's shop to have defenses against this kind of thing. And it was entirely possible that Misty and Lorea-chan might have dropped by to visit her...

"Then let me go there and check," offered Iris. "Kate, I'll leave you to talk to father about this."

"Got it," Kate replied. "Sarasa, you stay here. Because it's possible someone will come here."

"I'll go—" I started to say before stopping short. "No, I'll be counting on you."

“Leave it to us!” the two of them said in unison, both slapping me on the back, and then they rushed out of the room.

I watched them go, and took another deep breath. I clenched my subtly quivering hands into fists.

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I was confused by the young man sitting in front of me, and the older man standing behind him.

The head clerk had brought them in. That was why I had agreed to the meeting despite the urgency of the current situation, but I had another reason for being confused.

“It is an honor to meet you, Sarasa-sama. I hear you’ve been taking good care of my younger sister. I am Rainy Hudson of the Hudson Company. I hope you will do me the kindness of remembering me in the future.”

That reason was this self-introduction. Nothing about it was like I’d heard things were.

What happened to him being sick? And wasn’t he supposed to be confrontational toward Misty?

Considering he was a merchant, it was entirely possible that he was keeping a mask up, but his smiley, personable manner didn’t seem like it was an act, and I didn’t get any bad vibes when he mentioned Misty either.

Wait, does Misty have two brothers? I never heard that...

“I am also truly grateful that you arranged harbor rights at Grenje for—”

“Hold on a moment.” I cut him off. “Let me check one thing. You’re Misty’s only brother, right?”

He gave me a dubious look for just a moment, but immediately smiled and nodded. “Yes, I am. Unless our father has a mistress I’m unaware of. Ha ha ha...”

Perhaps sensing how tense we were, Rainy cracked a joke to lighten the mood, but nobody else laughed, and his own laughter trailed off awkwardly.

In the room with us were Iris and Kate; Adelbert-san, who had

rushed over when he heard the situation; and the head clerk, who had brought Rainy here. Each and every one of us looked deadly serious.

"Um... Have I said something to offend you...?" he asked.

"No, nothing of the sort, but...weren't you supposed to be suffering from some deadly illness?"

There was a lot weird about this, but I didn't have time to waste thinking about it.

When I hit the somewhat uneasy-looking Rainy with my suspicions, his eyes went wide. "Whaa?! Where did that story come from?! I just arrived in Grenje three days ago. I headed straight here, so I'm a little tired, but otherwise there's no issue with my health, as you can see for yourselves!"

"So it would appear," I agreed. "But the fact is that Misty received a letter to the contrary."

"Misty did? From whom?"

"Someone in the Hudson Company, of course. Isn't that right, Head Clerk?"

"It is," said the head clerk, stepping forward. "Rainy-dono, we've met once before. I am the head clerk of the Feed Company, Leroy Krad. Our employee, Clark, received the letter and delivered it to Misty-san."

Rainy bowed his head and said, "Thank you for your kind explanation." His brow furrowed as he considered what he'd just been told. "However, as you can see, I'm not ill. Could someone have been impersonating me?"

"It is possible; however...Clark's description of the man who gave him the letter is quite similar to the gentleman who is with you." The head clerk looked pointedly at the older man standing quietly behind Rainy. "May I ask who you are?"

He had not said a word since they had entered the office. His eyes were lowered and he seemed slightly nervous.

"He is my secretary," Rainy explained. "Zadok, do you have any knowledge of this?"

"None," replied Zadok. "Could a man who looks similar to me have impersonated the Hudson Company? This is most infuriating."

“It’s a basic skill for a merchant to remember people’s faces,” said the head clerk. “It’s true that Clark is a bodyguard, but—”

“A mere bodyguard, you say?” Zadok interrupted. “In that case, if he were mistaken, it would not be that—”

“But!” the head clerk forcefully continued. “He is an employee of the Feed Company. We do not skimp on training our people. I believe, of course, that he must have had adequate reason to believe that he was dealing with someone from the Hudson Company.”

Zadok looked away and shook his head.

“Is that right? Well, as I have no knowledge of the matter, I can say nothing more.”

“Sarasa-sama, Zadok is my trusted assistant,” said Rainy. “So if he says that’s how it is... Or do you have something you can show me as proof? The letter, perhaps?”

It was probably to be expected that Rainy would stick up for his staff. Still, I trusted the head clerk. I scrutinized Zadok closely. He fidgeted awkwardly, his lips trembling.

Hmm.

“Well, that’s not what’s important right now,” I said with a sigh. “Let’s leave it at that for the time being.”

Zadok showed clear signs of relief at this.

“By the way, Rainy,” I continued. “This is a separate matter, but I have *this* letter from you too. Any thoughts?”

I handed Rainy the crumpled letter.

Rainy accepted it with a dubious look. Zadok went from relief to shock.

“I’ll look it over at once!” Rainy said. “What is this?! E-Explain, Zadok!”

“Wh-Whatever is the matter, I have no idea what—”

With arched eyebrows, Rainy turned and questioned Zadok. The secretary awkwardly tried to respond, but the blood had drained from his face, and oily sweat was beading on his forehead. Anyone who believed him unconditionally after seeing that response would just be a fool.

“Sarasa, what is that letter?” Iris whispered in my ear.

"I guess I never showed it to you, Iris. It's kindling."

"Hm?" Iris cocked her head to the side.

I let out a little laugh at her reaction, then explained, "Misty received another letter before this. She got so mad she was going to burn it, but I held on to it for safekeeping. Misty understood it was from her brother—from Rainy, but..."

"This wasn't from me!" Rainy hurriedly defended himself. "And I can see why she'd have been upset at what it says... What is the meaning of this?!" he shouted at Zadok again.

"I-I was acting in what I thought was your best interest when I __"

"My best interest?! Sending a letter like this harms my relationship with Misty—and not just her, with Sarasa-sama, and by extension all of Lochhart as well. How did you not understand that?!"

"Well, you see... If the problem goes away..." Zadok murmured, but he was overheard by Adelbert-san, who had been keeping quiet until now.

"If the problem goes away?! What does that mean?!" he shouted with an intensity that put Rainy's to shame.

Zadok pressed his lips together tightly and maintained his silence.

"Don't tell me... You meant to harm Sarasa-dono?!" Adelbert-san continued.

"Is that true, Zadok?!" Rainy rose from his seat and seized Zadok by the lapels. "Answer me! What have you been doing without telling me?!"

Zadok kept his eyes lowered, not saying a word.

Seeing this, Kate thoughtfully said, "No... I don't think that's it. If they killed Sarasa, everyone involved would be executed. That's easy to figure out with even a little thought. Unless you're a total idiot."

"Indeed," Iris agreed. "Not only is she an alchemist, she's currently been appointed as His Highness's plenipotentiary. The country would execute them without mercy to protect its authority."

Kate and Iris were exaggerating a little, but they weren't lying. The killer would obviously be executed, and anyone even suspected of involvement risked the same fate. Of course, it went without

saying any company that the criminal belonged to would be crushed.

If he went through with it despite understanding that, it either meant he had a grudge against the Hudson Company that he was willing to give his life to satisfy, or he had some basis for thinking he wouldn't be executed...

"Hmm, let's sort through what we know."

I held my chin as I recalled the information we'd discovered. The bandits' movements, the actions the company had taken, the House of Lotze's situation, conditions in the domain, and much, much more...

First of all, it was a little hard to believe Zadok had been seeking my life. However, looking at his first letter, it was clear that his intentions toward Misty were not friendly, and if he had also been the one to send the letter saying that Rainy was seriously ill, then there could be little doubt of that.

Then what was his goal? Based on Misty's actions...

"I see, so that's how it is. You joined hands with the bandits, did you?" I glared at Zadok. His brow twitched. "One of the bandits is the self-proclaimed heir of the Kahku Baronetcy. If you could tear me down and get him installed in my place, then that would put the Hudson Company in a favorable position."

"No, Sarasa," Iris objected. "We already established that's not possible, right? Even if they were able to unseat you, the king would have to name the new magistrate or lord. He wouldn't choose the self-proclaimed heir."

"Then I guess that leaves...a threat?" Kate suggested. "They could leave Sarasa in charge, but control her using hostages..."

"That's possible. It at least sounds like a viable plan," I acknowledged. "Although, if they think that would make me bend to their will, I'm deeply offended."

There could be no compromise with bandits. If I took a single step back, I would be endangering many more people. I wouldn't bend on my principles. Not even to save people dear to me.

I would make my enemies pay for laying a hand on them, though.

"I'm sorry, but could I trouble you to explain?"

Unlike us, who had enough information to make sense of the situation, Rainy was new to this conversation, and uninformed about the larger picture. He looked around at each of us, his expression a mix of anger at Zadok and vague uneasiness over what he could imagine was going on.

"I mentioned this earlier, but Misty received a letter saying you were seriously ill. In response, she headed for Grenje, and has since gone missing. Based on your secretary's reactions so far, she was either attacked by the bandits that he's in cahoots with, or captured __"

"Say what?! Zadok, you cur!"

I was explaining as calmly as I could, but Rainy cut me off.

He glared hard at Zadok. He squeezed his left hand—which was holding the man by the lapels—tighter as he lifted him partway into the air.

Rainy didn't look like it, but he must have worked out a fair bit.

Zadok was struggling to breathe, but he desperately shouted, "Rainy-sama! I did it for the Hudson Company! If we get rid of her __"

That was a total confession. Rainy's emotions exploded, and he took a swing with his clenched right fist.

It connected with a dull thump. Zadok was thrown violently to the floor.

"You imbecile! What good's a position I have to hurt my own sister to get?! And how does it benefit the company if we make an enemy of Sarasa-sama in the process?! That can only ruin us!"

"I'm going to have to agree," I muttered. "You see, in addition to Misty, one of my employees, who's like a precious little sister to me, happens to have gone missing as well. If it turns out that the company has anything to do with it, I'm going to use every connection I have to crush them completely..."

That made Rainy's face rapidly go from red with anger to pale with worry. He immediately got down on his knees and pressed his forehead to the floor.

"I'm sorry! You can do what you will with me and this fool! If anyone else took part in it, I'll offer them up to you as well! But I

beg you, have mercy on Misty...and embarrassing as this is to have to ask, on the Hudson Company as well!”

“Uh, listen, I’m obviously not mad at Misty, and I’m not upset at the Hudson Company itself either. So, obviously, I’m not going to go and do anything that would leave its employees out on the streets without a good reason to.”

I knew firsthand how much suffering there was when a company went under.

When he heard me say this, Rainy looked like he felt saved. He bowed his head deeply again.

“Thank you! Misty truly respects you, Sarasa-sama. Her letters always talk a lot about you... I will do anything within my power. If Misty is still alive, I’m begging you, please save her!”

“Of course, that’s what I plan to do. I can’t imagine Misty would have gone easily, but if they did capture her, and they intend to use her as a hostage, then they won’t kill her right away.”

That’s being a bit optimistic.

Obviously, the best thing would be if they hadn’t captured her. But considering that Rainy was here, that meant there was no chance that Misty and Lorea-chan had headed directly to Grenje. They had to have run into trouble somewhere. We needed to act immediately.

“Now, as for you...” I looked at Zadok, who had fallen down after Rainy had punched him.

His body shook with frustration, and he shot a twisted glare at me.

“Damn it! If it’s come to this—!!!” he shouted as he got up and sprang at me. A knife he’d pulled from his pocket glinted in his right hand.

“Sarasa!”

“Sarasa!”

“Sarasa-dono!”

Iris, Kate, and Adelbert-san all moved at once, but they weren’t in a good position to do anything.

Rainy was on the sofa right in front of me, and Zadok had collapsed right next to him.

Kate and Iris were standing behind me, while Adelbert-san was behind Zadok. The head clerk tried to move too, but he was the oldest one here.

Rainy looked up in surprise as Zadok rushed past him toward me.

Was it just a basic thing that everyone who worked at a successful company worked out?

The man was pretty fast, and a common thug would've been no match for him.

But I'm no common thug.

I anticipated the movement of the incoming knife, sweeping it aside with my left hand, and then thrusting out my right fist.

Thump! My fist sank into his gut.

Wham! Zadok went flying into the wall. He slumped down, his strength drained.

Everyone was silent for a while.

Then, slowly, Iris spoke.

"Oh, that's right," she recalled. "Sarasa kicks hellflame grizzlies to death."

"Now that you mention it, yeah," Kate agreed. "Though, she's been using a sword more often recently..."



"Well, yeah. I didn't have room in the budget for a sword back then. Using my bare hands is cheap, though."

I wouldn't live long if I let a little surprise attack fluster me. This is just what it means to be an alchemist— Uh, wait, no, maybe not?

In the corner of my eye, I caught the head clerk rubbing his eyes and saying, "Sarasa-chan, you struggled so much..." But it was just another fond memory now. I mean, I was able to defend myself like this as a result, right?

"Ah! I-I'm so sorry! I never realized this guy was such a fool!"

Unable to keep up with a rapidly changing situation, Rainy had frozen when he was halfway to standing up, and now he got back down on his knees. You know...he was bowing his head an awful lot. I felt a bit sorry for the guy.

"I don't really mind. It's not like I was in any danger," I said casually, partially because of that sympathy.

"No, an ordinary person would have been in danger..." Adelbert-san said with a hint of exasperation. "But for now, let's throw this guy in jail."

"Sorry to trouble you, but please take care of that," I asked him.

Normally, it would have been a job for the guards, but sadly, this mansion didn't have any.

Once Adelbert-san returned to the office after carrying Zadok away, we got back to it. I had the kneeling Rainy sit down, and we resumed our conversation.

"So, given he just tried to kill me, there's no room for considering extenuating circumstances. I expect he'll be executed in line with the laws of this kingdom."

"I wouldn't expect otherwise. If I'm to be held jointly responsible, then you may do the same to me. But please...please, don't let the punishment extend to my little sister..."

As I looked at Rainy, his face lowered, struggling with each word, I shook my head.

"No, it's not like he attacked me using the power of the Hudson Company, and if you weren't involved, there's no need to hold you jointly responsible. Though, we'll be investigating to see if you truly weren't."

"Thank you... Please, investigate all you like. I have nothing to feel guilty about."

"Let's hope so. I'm sure Misty would be sad if you did."

Even after having seen that inciting letter before, Misty had still chosen to rush to his side when she heard he was seriously ill.

No matter what she said, she didn't really hate her brother. And from what I was hearing, Rainy cared deeply for his little sister too. Or it seemed that way.

It's not all just an act, right?

If it turned out that it was...I was seriously going to flip out. I'd douse him with the sealed potion I kept in my warehouse, and then string him up.

"Now then," I said. "It's not certain that Misty and Lorea-chan are missing because of the bandits just yet, but we don't have time to wait for Walter's report in this situation. We need to get people together in a hurry. Fortunately, Lorea-chan should have Kurumi with her. I'll be able to find out their situation when we get close."

"That's no problem," Adelbert-san said with a nod. "The House of Lotze's troops are already prepared."

"Sarasa-chan, take our bodyguards with you too," the head clerk offered. "There are only about ten of them in this town, but they won't lose to any mere bandit."

"That helps," I said. "I'm not too confident in the quality of South Strag's soldiers' training."

They were probably fine, but we still didn't know how many bandits there were. There was also the possibility that there were civilians in the village that we believed the bandits were using as their base. I couldn't just blow them all away with my magic.

"If we're considering Misty's and Lorea-chan's safety, it's good to have extra forces," I said.

"In that case, let us help you too! We're a rough-and-tumble bunch ourselves!" Rainy hurriedly offered, as if following the Feed Company's example, but I shook my head.

"I appreciate the sentiment, but we'd be worried about getting stabbed in the back..."

People from the Hudson Company went toe-to-toe with pirates,

so I was sure they would be more than good enough to be an asset in battle, but there was no guarantee that Zadok was the only one who had ties to the bandits.

"We don't have time to investigate each and every person. Besides, there's no time to call people in from Grenje—"

"Don't worry. The ones I'd be sending are Captain Raban and his men, who carried you on their ship. They'd never betray Misty. And fortunately, they're here in South Strag now to guard me, and as a bit of a vacation. If I reach out to them, they'll gather in no time."

"If that's who we're talking about...all right. I'll allow it."

I couldn't completely rule out the risk of betrayal, but they were trustworthy allies.

Besides, I didn't want to think the way the adoring looks they gave Misty were a lie.

"Thank you! I'll gather them together at once!"

I stood up and looked around at everyone.

"Our goal is to move within three days. We'll settle this before they have time to prepare."

◇ ◇ ◇

A group gathered in front of the lord's manor early the next morning. It mostly consisted of men, but there was a small minority of women too.

First and foremost, the group was made up of soldiers from South Strag. The equipment they brought with them seemed military-style, but the way they stood there looking kind of nervous spoke to a lack of experience. Though they were the biggest group here, they didn't feel terribly reliable.

Next were the soldiers of the House of Lotze. They were the second largest in number. They stood in orderly ranks and looked well trained, but their equipment was a bit varied. Plus, on an individual level, their strength was probably second from the bottom.

Then there were the Feed Company's bodyguards. At ten people, they were the smallest group, and each carried different equipment. There was also a wide variance in their level of training, but taken as

a whole, they operated on a fairly high level.

And finally, there was...

"The enemy is the filthy scum who kidnapped our young lady! I'm sure all of you louts know exactly what to do with them!!!"

"Yeah! Kill 'em all!!!"

...Captain Raban and the men from the Hudson Company.

They'd all come here when called, but well...it felt kind of sweltering to be around them.

Despite the summer heat, these guys had absolutely no chill.

The Feed Company bodyguards were a tough-looking bunch too, but after seeing this, they mysteriously started to look refined by comparison. That wasn't to say that the captain and his men didn't seem reliable, though.

Also, I was a bit surprised to see that Rainy was here with them, even though he was technically the heir to the company.

"Um, are you really coming along?" I asked him. "It's going to be dangerous, you know?"

"When my sister's in danger, is there any reason I wouldn't? And besides, this level of danger... Ha ha ha, it's nothing next to fighting pirates during a storm at sea. Isn't it wonderful, having stable ground under your feet to fight on? If I'd gone overboard, I'd have died right then and there... Ha ha, ha ha ha..."

The light had gone out of his eyes, and he let out a dry laugh.

I see, so he's not the pampered rich boy type.

"Got it. But do be careful, okay? Misty would be sad if anything were to happen to you. Captain, I'll be counting on you too."

"Darn right y'will! You're in safe hands with me, Sarasa-sama. I take pride in never having let my ship sink!" the captain declared, slapping his thick chest with confidence before adding, "Oops, I forgot this is land, though. Ha ha ha!"

It wasn't a particularly funny joke, but I knew for a fact he had a wealth of experience in battle.

"We're in your hands. But the overall commander of this operation will be Adelbert of the House of Lotze."

"I'm Adelbert Lotze," he introduced himself. "Nice to meet you."

The captain looked Adelbert-san up and down, nodding to himself

repeatedly, before extending his hand with a dauntless smile.

"Hmm, you look like you've been working out. All right, then. We'll follow your orders. But our top priority is the young miss's safety. We're not gonna do anything that compromises that, got it?"

"I'm aware. Rescuing her is our priority as well. I'll put you and your men to good use."

Adelbert-san took the hand he was offered with a firm handshake and dauntless smile of his own. He then looked at me before continuing.

"He's resting now, but Walter returned earlier. He's been able to confirm that Ruta Village is a bandit base, but it still remains unclear how involved the regular villagers are in that. We also haven't found Lorea-chan yet."

"I can't blame him for that," I said. "We only learned of Lorea-chan and Misty's disappearance after he left."

If he'd managed to find them despite that, then *that* would have surprised me.

Although, I had been holding out some hope he'd have encountered them by coincidence.

"Still, it's good news that Walter made it back safe," I added. "Pass my thanks on to him later."

"I'll do that," Adelbert-san replied. "How do you want to handle the villagers? It seems unlikely we'll be able to separate them completely from the bandits."

"We'll do a thorough investigation when things are finished. For now, take them all in. If they fight back, you're free to treat them like bandits and kill them. I can treat their wounds to some degree, so no need to go easy on them."

It was a tiny village. Short of being an infant, there was no way any of them could claim ignorance. Even if they were being threatened, between people who'd done no evil and people who had, it was clear which side's safety I would prioritize.

People might say it was cruel of me, but I wasn't going to allow excessive care for the villagers' well-being to cause losses on our side.

"We're going on ahead. Adelbert-san, you take care of things

here.”

“Leave it to me,” he replied. “We’re heading out! Is everyone ready?!”

“Yeah!!!”

The soldiers all answered Adelbert-san, then began walking at his command.

Their objective was to set up camp near Ruta Village within the day. That might have been hard for a bunch of ordinary people, but it was a distance that trained soldiers would be more than able to march in that time frame.

“Okay, Iris, Kate, let’s be off,” I said.

“Got it,” said Iris.

“Okay,” said Kate.

I waved to the head clerk, who watched us with a look of concern, and then we took off at a run.

We were operating separately from the main force to find a way to save Misty and Lorea-chan.

The first order of business was to find out if the two of them had actually been captured. After interrogating Zadok, we had learned for certain that he had lured Misty out for the bandits, but there was a possibility—unlikely though it was—that she had managed to escape.

But if we investigated and learned that both girls had been taken captive, then Adelbert-san and his forces would play decoy while the three of us carried out a rescue operation.

There had been some opposition to this plan, but it was my employee and apprentice that the bandits had gone after. I’d somewhat forcefully insisted that everyone go along with this idea, because I felt that it was my obligation to go and save my employees.

And so, after a few hours of running at a speed Iris and Kate could keep up with, we came to a stop after finding a small path that diverted from the main road.

The road between Yok Village and South Strag wasn’t terribly impressive, but this side road was even smaller. Large carts would have struggled to navigate it, and even some smaller ones.

There was a road sign for it, technically, but it was so plain that you were sure to walk right past without noticing it—just like I had on my many trips past here.

"This is the road all right. Good work keeping up, Iris, Kate."

There was just some labored breathing from behind me, no actual response.

I turned to see the two of them were standing with their hands on their knees, desperately trying to catch their breath.

"Hmm..." I cocked my head to the side. "Maybe I could have gone a bit faster?"

"A-As if!" Iris protested. "We barely made it as is! Surely you see that?!"

"I mean, you're still standing," I pointed out.

"By force of will alone!" Kate countered. "Sarasa, you're too hard on us... We can't fight in this state, you know?"

"That's fine. I've taken that into account. Fortunately, there don't seem to be any guards around here."

I had thought a cautious opponent might be monitoring this intersection. Either they were not that wary, or simply idiots. I didn't mean to underestimate, but it was always preferable to have incompetent enemies.

"First of all, sit down and take a drink of this. It'll recover your stamina. I'm breaking out the good stuff."

I wouldn't usually use these for simple exhaustion, but this was an emergency. Once we were off the main road and in the forest, we sat down and I handed Iris and Kate some stamina recovery potions.

"Thanks..." Iris said before gulping hers down. Her eyes widened. "Sarasa, this is amazing! I feel better already."

"Yeah," Kate agreed. "And it tastes better than I thought it would... This really is good stuff."

I nodded, having fully expected their response. "Yeah, it's the same as I used on Iris when we first met, plus an effect to make it fast-acting."

"I see— Wait, when we first met?!" Iris cried. "You mean when I was on the verge of dying, right?! Those potions left me in a massive debt! Aren't they outrageously expensive...?"

"I-I know you said you were breaking out the good stuff, b-but is it okay to use this...?" asked Kate.

The two of them were trembling slightly. I waved my hands as I explained, "The potion I used to reattach your arm was the one that was really expensive. These aren't *cheap*, mind you, but I don't skimp on necessary expenses."

They were only a few thousand rhea a pop. A small price to pay to save Lorea-chan and Misty.

"More importantly, if you've recovered, I'm counting on you to guard me. I'm going to connect to Kurumi."

"Murgh, I see," said Iris. "Leave it to me. I'll protect you, Sarasa."

"And so will I, obviously," added Kate. "Be careful—not that I'm sure you have to, but I'll say it anyway."

"Sure, I'm counting on you two."

If Kurumi's near Ruta Village, I should be in range from here.

I prayed as I closed my eyes, and...got a connection to Kurumi!

My vision was pitch-black.

As I started squirming around, there was a small "Eek!" from above me.

It suddenly got brighter, and then I saw Lorea-chan's face peering at me.

Apparently Kurumi had been stuffed inside of her clothes.

"U-Um, Sarasa-san?"

I answered the uneasy question with a "Grar" and a nod. Lorea-chan's tense expression softened.

"Th-Thank goodness..." she murmured, tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

"I-Is it Sarasa-senpai? Really?"

When "I" crawled out of Lorea-chan's clothes, I saw Misty had teared up too, and had her hands together like she was praying. When I answered with a "Grar," Misty let out a deep sigh and fell to her hands and knees as a weak laugh escaped her.

I patted her hand, then looked around.

This is...a small room, I guess?

It was so cramped a bed would only barely fit, and there were no

windows or furniture. It was clearly a storage room, or perhaps a room built for locking people up.

This is more or less as expected, I thought, nodding, when, for some reason, Misty bowed her head to me.

"I'm sorry, Sarasa-senpai, this happened because I wasn't reasonable..."

"No, it's my fault too," Lorea-chan disagreed. "I insisted on coming, and then we slept without anyone to stand watch..."

"But it's really my fault—"

"But I was only there because—"

They were both in a hurry to attribute blame—to themselves?

Well, now wasn't the time for that. We needed to figure out what to do next.

"Grar!"

When I raised a paw and shouted, the two of them snapped to their senses and looked at me.

And then Misty showed my faith in her was well placed by starting to talk in a calm voice.

"Let me explain the situation. I'll skip some of the details of how we got here, but we were caught by bandits and are being confined in their base at Ruta Village. Fortunately, we're unharmed."

It was true that they had no visible wounds, but they both looked obviously haggard. Their expressions were bright, maybe because they had made contact with me, but their stamina was definitely not in good shape, and days of captivity must have been mentally exhausting too.

"This building is at the very back of Ruta Village, and there are people in the area around it who keep watch on it."

The back of the village... Maybe the bandits are keeping them in a hard-to-reach place because they're worried someone will rescue them?

Or was that just where the only building suitable for holding people happened to be?

No... Maybe I should assume that it was built some time ago for this express purpose...

In that case, wouldn't it be natural to assume that the whole

village is made up of bandits?

"Grargrarrr, grargra, grargrargrarrr?"

I tried miming my question at the two of them, but Misty just tilted her head in confusion.

Urgh! I'm not going to be able to get complicated messages across, huh?

Just as I was considering whether to carve the questions on the floor with my claws, Lorea-chan hesitantly spoke up.

"Um... I think she wants to ask whether all of the villagers are in cahoots with the bandits."

"Grar!" I reacted to say, *That's right!*

Misty blinked before looking from me to Lorea-chan. "I-I see. You're amazing, huh, Lorea-chan? I didn't pick up on that at all."

"Hee hee! I've known Kurumi longer than you have, Misty-san! My relationship with Sarasa-san is pretty long too, and we've been protecting the shop together all this time!"

"I've still known Senpai longer than you..." Misty countered. "I guess it's the difference in the depth of our relationships with her, huh..."

Misty and I had lived in the same dorm, but Lorea-chan and I were living in the same house. In terms of our ability to understand each other without words, maybe Lorea-chan held the advantage?

Misty looked aggravated by the smug look on Lorea-chan's face, but she carried on. "I think it's only the mayor and a select few others who are active collaborators. I don't know the total number of bandits, but most of the villagers are unable to act against them because their wives and children have been taken hostage."

"They're being held in this building, like us," Lorea-chan added.

Hmm? They take women and children as hostages, huh? Yep, I'm gonna kill them.

Not that they hadn't *already* signed their execution orders the moment they abducted Lorea-chan and Misty.

What little mercy had been left in me, thin as mist though it might have been, had completely cleared now.

It was good news that only some of the villagers were working with the bandits, though.

If we could rescue the children who were being held along with Lorea-chan and Misty, that might make things way easier.

It'd be a problem if the hostages got in the way during the battle, though, so we'd have to be careful how we handled them...

"Grargraaar, grar, gragraaargrar!"

"You're nearby, so you'll come save us?" Lorea-chan translated. "Oh, that makes sense. Being able to synchronize with Kurumi shows you must be close!"

"Oh, I see, she's nearby— Wait, but this is Sarasa-senpai. Even if she says she's nearby, she can't be *that* close, right? No, listen, spreading your arms like that doesn't tell me how close you are!"

"Ha ha ha..." Lorea-chan laughed. "It's true, I feel like I can remember Sarasa-san having synchronized with Kurumi from really far away before... But it's still a relief to know she'll be coming for us. Sarasa-san, we're waiting for you."

"Grar!"

I nodded firmly to the pair—who had fresh sparkles in their eyes—then cut my connection to Kurumi.

"Whew..." I exhaled, my body feeling heavy all of a sudden.

My field of vision suddenly changed, and I shook my head repeatedly until I got used to it. I saw Iris and Kate standing on either side of me, looking at me with a little concern.

"Are you back, Sarasa?" Iris asked. "How was it? It seemed like you got a connection..."

"It went A-OK!" I answered with a smile and a thumbs-up. "They're both fine. And I was able to get some intel too."

I filled Iris and Kate in on what I'd learned from the other two.

"Hmm..." Iris murmured. "It seems we've avoided a situation where you'll be wiping a village off the map."

"I told you, I'm not going to do that—although, if it had turned out they were *all* bandits, that would've been another matter. But even then, I'd act like a domain lord. I'd be sure to advertise for new residents to take their place. It'd be such a waste not to."

"Isn't that just making another village in the same place as the old one?" Kate asked, looking somewhat appalled.

"That's another way of looking at it," I replied with a shrug. "But is a village of nothing but bandits *really* a village at all?"

It's just a bandit base pretending to be a village, wouldn't you say? There's no problem with me annihilating something like that, right?

"I...can't really say you're wrong," Kate conceded. "So, did you find out how many bandits there are?"

"Unfortunately, I didn't get that much," I admitted. "The two of them are locked up, after all."

"That only makes sense," said Iris. "But what could have happened to let them capture Kurumi and Misty?"

"I haven't heard the story in detail yet, but neither of them were all that used to traveling. I suspect they dozed off when they got tired, and were each taken as a hostage against the other."

The two of them had both been in a rush to take responsibility, but I suspected my reading was roughly what had happened. I'd made Kurumi as a countermeasure against thugs attacking the shop, and Misty had little in the way of actual combat experience, so they were both probably weak against underhanded tactics.

Iris and Kate seemed sold on the explanation too.

"They're both amateurs when it comes to that kind of thing, after all. Unlike you, Sarasa," noted Iris.

"We don't have much experience with camping either," admitted Kate. "And when we're gathering materials, it's wild animals we're guarding against. But the two of them lacked even that experience, and they were up against intelligent human beings..."

"Maris-san was saying it's old-fashioned for alchemists to harvest materials themselves too... Yep, I'm going to have to train Misty properly. Like Master did with me!"

I might not have been on Master's level, but I could wield a sword to some degree and was even better at martial arts.

Now that I'm Misty's master, it's important I teach her to fight, huh?

"But Sarasa, weren't you complaining before that you wished she'd teach you about alchemy, not the sword?" asked Iris.

I might've said something like that.

It would have been when Master had come to visit, but then inexplicably insisted on training me to fight with a sword.

After a long pause, I said, "This is how traditions are passed from master to disciple. It's a vicious cycle."

"Is that hyperbole?!" Iris cried. "Listen, if the tradition is bad, I think you should break free from it."

"The problem is that it's not a 'bad' tradition. I mean, there've been times this sword has saved me," I said, tapping the sword that Master had given me back then, which still hung at my hip.

The looks on Iris's and Kate's faces grew awkward.

"You're not wrong, but... Is that really something an alchemist needs to do?" asked Iris.

"I see," I replied. "You're telling me that it should wait until I can make a sword like this? Well said. I'll do my best once this incident is behind us. Misty's training can wait until then."

I nodded, thinking, *Yep! That seems like something Master would do.*

Kate furrowed her brow and asked, "Is that the problem...?" but quickly gave up, shaking her head. "You know what, it's fine as is. What are we going to do next?"

"We've gained new information, so do we wait for father to arrive before we attack?" asked Iris.

"No, we'll go ahead as scheduled," I said. "We'll confirm the location where the two of them are being held, then take them back if the situation allows for it. Once we join up with the main force, it'll be harder to move."

We currently had the advantage of being a small group that the bandits would struggle to detect.

If the bandits were watching the army, then they'd learn of our presence, and that would make rescuing the hostages more difficult.

"Understood," said Iris. "Then let us move at once. If father catches up to us, it will defeat the purpose."

"Yeah," Kate and I replied in unison.

There was just one little road that branched off the main road toward Ruta Village. It was hard to imagine the bandits wouldn't be

watching it, so we returned to the main road, walked in the direction of Yok Village for around half an hour, and then headed into the woods from there. We had chosen the spot that was closest to Ruta Village as the crow flies.

The small road we had stopped at earlier was actually a bit of a meandering path because the course had been decided prioritizing how easy it would be to build. If you turned that around, though, that meant the unbeaten trail we were taking to the village headed through some rough areas.

But Iris and Kate worked in the great forest, so they weren't going to struggle here, and with my magic on top of that, it was like we were going for a picnic.

After a few hours of light bushwhacking, we arrived at a spot where we could see Ruta Village.

"It's a small village...but some of those houses are unnaturally large," Iris observed.

"You're right," I agreed. "In Yok Village, all of the houses look similar...even the mayor's."

He was technically the leader of the village, so surely he could have built a slightly better house for himself, but either the village hadn't had room in the budget for it, or the previous mayors had been modest people.

But here, you could plainly see the difference between those who had power and influence and those who didn't.

"Anyway, there's no doubt there's bandits here," I continued. "There's no way *those* are ordinary villagers."

Even peering out of the woods like we were, we could spot obvious thugs walking around.

There were more of them than I had anticipated, to the point where they outnumbered the people who looked like ordinary villagers.

"It doesn't look like we're going to be able to sneak into the village and just take out the bandits. Let's continue on as planned, aiming to rescue Lorea-chan and Misty."

"Got it," replied Iris. "If it's in the rear of the village, then...that would be it, over there. Let's go."

As we proceeded through the forest, we kept our distance from the village so as not to be spotted by the bandits. We remained alert for alarms to detect attackers, lookouts lurking in the forest, and other traps, assuming it was a given they would have those things.

But the lack of such obstacles almost seemed to mock our caution, as we had an incredibly easy time reaching the back of the village. I felt totally let down.

"Murgh... Don't these people realize they're bandits?!" I grumbled.

"Sarasa, is that something to get mad about?" Iris countered. "It makes our life easier, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, sure, but... It makes me wonder why I'm wasting my precious time on them!"

If we weren't here, I could have been making the air purifier with the astellors we'd harvested, building the water heater with Misty, or enjoying the public baths with Lorea-chan and the others!

"But wouldn't you hate diligent bandits with a sense of self-awareness?" asked Iris.

"I agree," said Kate. "Bandits are just a bunch of scum who want to have a good time easily."

"You have a point there... But they won't have it easy much longer. They're in for hard labor until they die—if they're even lucky enough to survive. Gweh heh heh heh..."

When I thought this could be over soon, I couldn't hold back a laugh.

Let us give the unfortunate bandits eternal rest as the price of indolence.

And may we remind the fortunate bandits of the word diligence.

I mean, from what I hear, the ones we've already caught are working hard doing forced labor as part of the road crews.

"Your smile makes me question if it's the ones who survive that are lucky, Sarasa," remarked Iris.

"If bandits face me and survive, then they're incredibly lucky," I replied. "Oh, it looks like that's definitely the building there. I can sense that Kurumi's in there."

At the very back of Ruta Village, there was a relatively large one-

story building which faced onto the woods. It looked like a storehouse at first glance, and on closer inspection, I found that there were no windows and only a single entrance.

That layout seemed like it would be inconvenient for most normal uses, but if I considered it was meant for a specific purpose, it made sense.

"For confining people, huh?" I mused to myself. "If they've got a building like this, then this may never have been a proper village."

"It sure doesn't look like it was built recently," Kate agreed. "There are people watching it, but...not that many of them."

There were just two, near the entrance. And they were sitting in chairs, chatting.

They had likely never considered that their captives might escape or that anyone would be coming to rescue them.

"What's our plan of attack, Sarasa?" asked Iris. "Those guards aren't impressive, but I imagine it would still be hard to sneak past them, right?"

"They're at the only entrance, after all," Kate noted. "Do you want to take them out? I guarantee I can get a kill on one of them."

I knew Kate's skill with a bow, and combined with my magic, we could eliminate the two guards before they had time to cry out.

If we were going to grab the hostages and then immediately hightail it out of here, then that would've worked, but...

"Let's wait until dark," I suggested. "If we sneak in under cover of night and then rescue them at the same time as Adelbert-san attacks, we can make a full sweep of all the bandits."

From an efficiency perspective, it was hard to imagine every woman and child in the village had been locked up in there.

They only needed to take one or two per family. That would be enough to serve as hostages. Turning that around, even if we freed the current captives, if it was discovered before the attack began, they'd just take other kids hostage.

"If things are going according to schedule, they'll be setting up their camp near Ruta Village this evening, right?" I checked.

"Yes," Iris confirmed. "It wouldn't be odd for us to start seeing some movement inside the village..."

If they were watching the road to Ruta Village, then they couldn't miss the movement of troops. But given the lack of tension in the bandits here, they'd completely dropped their guard. These guys were apparently more incompetent than I'd ever considered.

Not that we get to laugh at them, though.

We had the sad distinction of having failed to locate this base for quite a long time...

"Hmm," Iris murmured. "I think, in this situation, we ought to be able to make contact without being noticed."

She gave me a serious look that asked what I wanted to do, while Kate's expression read as a little concerned.

"There's...time for it, yeah," I acknowledged. "But is it really best to let them know about the hostages?"

I was torn. Really...torn.

If our side fought without knowing about it, then some of the villagers who were just being threatened by the bandits might die. But if we pulled our punches because we knew about the hostages, that could mean casualties among our soldiers, and the bandits might pick up on it and try to use the hostages. It was hard to decide which choice would lead to fewer sacrifices.

"I want to keep sacrifices to a minimum... That would be for the best, but the ones I have a responsibility to protect are those who are currently acting under my orders, and fighting on our behalf. Even if that means some villagers are sacrificed as a result."

Still, the parents of some of the kids who were being held hostage might die because of the call that I made.

That weighed on me, and as I hung my head, Iris gently hugged me around the shoulders.

"Sarasa, there's no need to carry all the burden yourself, you know? Rely on me a little."

"But...I'm the one in charge here," I said. "I never wanted it, but now that I've been appointed plenipotentiary, it's my job to decide. No matter what the outcome is. That's how responsibility works, right...?"

I looked up at Iris. I was trying to convince myself as much as I was her.

But the words that had come out of my mouth sounded weak even to me.

"That's an admirable stance, but if you worry too much, you won't be able to act. Remember the previous lord. When monsters attacked Yok Village, he didn't just fail to help, he tried to raise taxes afterward."

"Uh, listen, I'm not sure he's the guy I want to be compared against..." I said, frowning.

"Indeed," Iris replied, nodding. "He's a good example of what not to do. But if a lord tries to go beyond what they are capable of in order to save people, they're always going to come up short in some way... Like the former head of the House of Lotze."

"Yeah," Kate agreed. "The former head tried too hard. And the result was that, though he was able to save people for a time, we ultimately would have ended up in a worse position—if you hadn't stepped in, that is."

Iris and Kate looked at each other, nodded, and then looked back at me.

"But even so, our former head isn't a total failure," Iris continued. "Despite everything else, he's quite capable when it comes to fighting. Let's just tell him about the hostages and let him figure out the rest. I think that'd be for the best, you know?"

"I feel the same way," Kate agreed. "If the need arises, he'll tell the men, and if it's better not to, I think he'll keep quiet. You can trust his judgment on that."

It had to be deliberate: The casual way they were talking helped lighten the burden on my heart.

"Hee hee! Then maybe I'll take you up on that...?" I replied.

"Sure!" they both replied in unison.

They might have picked up on the change, because their faces relaxed with relief.

After that, we headed back to meet up with Adelbert-san and the others. We shared our information with them and then headed back to near the place where the hostages were being held. There, we waited for nightfall.

Then, late into the night, we approached the building again, but the guards we'd seen during the day were no longer there.

It's hard to imagine they're just leaving it completely undefended, so I guess they've probably gone inside?

Whatever the case, they were being unbelievably lax considering there was an army moving in. I hadn't seen any signs of urgency in the village either, so they probably just didn't realize at all.

"I don't know what to say... They sure are sloppy bandits. They should at least have patrols."

I mean, sure, it's to our benefit that they don't, but still, you know?

"If someone took a ten-minute walk outside the village, they'd see our troops... They're so ill guarded it makes you suspect a trap, you know?" Iris remarked before frowning at her own words and asking, "This really isn't a trap, right?"

Kate shook her head. "As things stand, all the bandits could do in response is launch a night raid. They must have gotten complacent because we didn't find them for so long."

"You think that too?" I asked. "Well, that all ends tonight. I'm going to get this done with, then immerse myself in days of alchemy!" I declared hopefully, delighted at the prospect of being freed from this headache.

For some reason, Iris and Kate both looked at me in shock.

"That's an ill-omened thing to say! Are you all right, Sarasa?!"

"Sarasa, no letting your guard down until it's over, okay?!"

"Of course. What are you two talking about?" What they were saying was all so obvious. I stared back at the mystified pair.

They looked like they weren't totally satisfied with my response, but Iris quickly shook her head. "Well, it's fine... So, where do we go in through? The door?"

"There must be lookouts inside the door. Or I guess you'd call them guards," I replied.

"Hmm, I see," said Iris. "Then...how about quietly putting a hole in the wall?"

"That's not going to be possible," I told her. "There *is* an artifact that could keep the sound from leaking out, but, unfortunately, I

don’t have one. So we’ll enter from the roof instead.”

“The roof?” Iris asked, tilting her head to the side. “Are we punching a hole in it?”

This was apparently a surprising choice for her.

“Try to get away from the idea of bashing holes in things,” I replied. “We can just peel it off. You’d be surprised, but roofs tend to be a blind spot. Walls and doors are built sturdy, but roofs often aren’t.”

The weak point in this approach was that the sound of us walking on the roof would be pretty audible inside, but we’d just have to make it work.

That has to be better than knocking a hole in the wall, at least.

“Well, if the roof on that building *is* sturdy, I’ll knock a hole in it, regardless.”

“It all comes down to knocking holes in things, in the end, huh?” Kate remarked. “Can you do that without them noticing?”

“I can use magic to *try*,” I replied. “For now, let’s go and see how it works out.”

The building in question was one story; with my body enhanced by magic, I could get up on the roof easily.

I went up first, followed by the nimble Kate. Then we both helped to pull Iris up.

“It’s a shingle roof,” I observed. “And wow, it’s in bad shape! It must leak in the rain.”

The roof was made of thin, overlapping sheets of wood held in place by rocks. It was an exceedingly simple—no, *sloppy* construction. On top of that, the roof’s sheathing was full of gaps so large I could fit through them.

It was bad enough that we were going to have to worry about how to not fall through a hole, not how to make one.

“Watch your step, you two—or rather, please just don’t move at all,” I warned the two of them. “With the state of this roof, one wrong move could send you falling down.”

“U-Understood!” said Iris.

“G-Got it!” said Kate.

I then started moving stones and tearing up planks.

I don’t know if they had been trying to save on costs, but the roof had been built without any nails, which meant it wasn’t well defended, and I was able to make my way to the attic in no time. I lit up the area with magic and we crawled over to a spot above the room where they were keeping Misty and Lorea-chan.

“Sarasa, is it below here?” Iris asked, pointing to the ceiling boards. I nodded.

“Mrrrrgh,” I groaned as I concentrated. “Yeah, I think this is definitely it. So for now... Kurumi Slash!”

Slice!

Sharp claws erupted in front of Iris’s and Kate’s eyes.

They both had to hurriedly cover their mouth to muffle their cries of surprise, and then shot me disapproving looks.

“Hey, I carefully gauged the distance, okay? It was a whole thirty centimeters away, right?”

I had taken care to do it that far away from our faces.

I mean, if I’d attacked myself by accident, that wouldn’t have been funny.

“You could’ve said something!” Kate complained. “I thought I was going to have a heart attack!”

“Yeah! You tell her!” Iris egged her on.

“Now, now, this isn’t the time to get all worked up. I’ll listen to and disregard your complaints later.”

“Well, okay then...” Iris started to murmur before realizing, “Wait, you’re going to disregard them?!”

While I was smoothing things over with the two of them, I had Kurumi claw its way through the ceiling boards. Looking down through the hole, I saw a teary-eyed Lorea-chan and Misty staring back up at me. I’d seen them through Kurumi’s eyes already, but it was such a relief to see them safe that I almost relaxed.

But this was enemy territory. I got myself back in the right mindset and silently jumped down.

The moment I did, the tears overflowed and Lorea-chan and Misty both raced toward me.

“Sha-Sharasha-saaan!”

“Sa-Sarasa-senpai...!”

"Whoa there! It's going to be okay now, Lorea-chan. Misty. You both really hung in there."

They were my precious little-sister figures. I accepted their embrace with a tight hug.

Yeah, they're my little sisters. Even if our heights are about the same. And I'm losing in one particular area!

"I'm here too, you realize?" Iris said to the two of them.

"And so am I, of course," added Kate.

As they realized that Iris and Kate had come down after me, and had been watching the three of us with awkward smiles, Lorea-chan and Misty let go of me with a little embarrassment and wiped away their tears.

"Right, thank you. Both of you..." said Lorea-chan.

"You've done a lot for us," said Misty.

"Oh, it's only natural we'd come," Iris said, nodding and puffing her chest up. "But this sure is a small room, huh? You don't even have a bed in here!"

She noted that fact with some irritation. The room was bright thanks to the magic light I had cast, along with another floating light that was presumably Misty's, but...all the light revealed was a couple of blankets. There was no bed, or anything else fit to be called furniture.

It really is a confinement room. This might even be worse than a prison? Not that I've ever been in one...

"Fortunately, it isn't cold this time of year," Lorea-chan noted. "My body's still a bit sore, though."

"It was pretty hard on me," Misty admitted. "You sure are hardy, huh, Lorea?"

"I'm used to it from when I was poor! Though, that's really changed since Sarasa-san arrived."

Lorea-chan and Misty smiled at each other.

I was a bit worried that, after getting into this situation, they might've turned on each other, arguing over whose fault it was, but shared adversity seems to have actually made them closer?

While I was still feeling relieved over that, I explained the situation to them: that Adelbert-san would be attacking the village

tomorrow. That we'd be escaping at the same time. That we were going to rescue the other captives being held here with them.

And also...

"Misty, your brother was in good health. That letter was just a ruse to lure you out."

I said that hoping to put her mind at ease. But instead Misty got a sad look in her eyes.

"Oh, I see... The bandits showed up with such perfect timing, I'd kind of guessed. But he didn't have to resort to this... I don't even want to inherit the—"

"Ah." I realized I hadn't explained very well. "No, no, the letter was from your brother's secretary—uh, Zadok, I think? It kinda seemed like he was acting on his own initiative. You can ask your brother yourself for the details. Because he's coming here too."

Misty blinked with surprise.

"Huh? He acted alone? My brother wasn't in on it? And he's here?"

"Yep, you've got the gist of it. I think he'll be taking part in the attack tomorrow, along with the captain and his men."

"Wh-What does he think he's doing? It's not like he's that good at fighting..."

Confusion, glee, and suspicion. Misty's tearful smile was a mix of all three. As she hung her head, Lorea-chan gave her a comforting hug.

"Isn't this great, Misty-san? Your brother didn't betray you!"

"B-But we don't know that for sure yet..."

"Well then, let's go ask him to his face! You two haven't talked, right?"

"Y-Yeah... You're right. I think we need to have a proper conversation..."

Lorea-chan tried to cheer Misty up, and Misty nodded.

Murgh, is my position as Misty's master in a bit of jeopardy?

Just as I was thinking I needed to say something deep and meaningful as Misty's master, Kate raised her hand and whispered, "Quiet."

We all immediately shut our mouths.

I perked my ears up and heard footsteps—as well as men talking in the hallway.

What they said was incredibly unpleasant.

"Bro, y'sure 'bout this? Won't we get in trouble if ya lay a hand on 'em?"

"Like I care. We ain't gonna be handin' 'em back in one piece anyway. Let's just have our fun, and dump 'em in the forest like usual. The plants'll clean up after us. Then we just say they ran off or whatever."

"But won't they blame us for lettin' 'em get away?"

"The guys on day shift probably weren't watchin' that close either. We just gotta play stupid, right?"

"Hey, you're right! Mind if I get a taste of 'em too?"

"Sure, whatever you want! Sheesh, we finally manage to nab a girl who's my type, and then they go and tell me I can't lay a hand on her? That fatass just got here, and he's already actin' like he owns the place!"

There was a loud thud, like one of the men had kicked something.

Doing that kind of thing late at night was a real nuisance. There could be people trying to sleep!

Just like you guys, who're about to be put to sleep permanently.

"Aren't you glad, Lorea?" said Misty. "He says you're his type."

"No, no, he could be talking about you, Misty? I'm a total bumpkin, remember?"

"It's okay, Lorea, because you're cute. I know that for a fact."

"What are you two trying to compromise over..." Kate said with a hint of exasperation. Then she looked in my direction and her eyes went wide. "Wait, Sarasa, your smile is scaring me?!"

"Huh? It is? I was just thinking of some very merciful, and also peaceful, means of bringing their lives to a close."

"Sarasa, what happened to catching them and putting them to work?!" cried Iris.

"Ohh, right. I was going to work them to death. Bandits don't get mercy, after all."

I had been about to let anger get the better of me and end it all

for them in an instant. But they needed to suffer properly first!

"Thank you, Iris. You helped me return to my true self."

"I'm not sure how to feel about you thanking me right now— Oh, here they come."

I quickly put out my light and stood next to the door, fists clenched.

Misty and Lorea-chan moved to the very back of the room, while Iris fell into a fighting stance with her sword still sheathed.

The lock turned. The door opened. Two enemies came into sight.

I seized the first man and pulled him to the ground, then used my fist on the man behind him—or tried to, but a little shadow leaped out before I could.

"Gwegh!"

"Blargh!"

There were two dull thuds in quick succession, and the men went down groaning in pain.

"Grar!"

"Kurumi?!" everyone cried out in unison.

The little bear landed on the floor and held its arm up in a victorious pose.

"Huh?! S-Sarasa-san?!" Lorea-chan cried out.

"It wasn't me! I didn't do anything! Kurumi acted on its own!"

"Grargraaar!"

Kurumi stood with its legs spread wide and chest puffed out, patting its chest with one paw as if to say, *I'm so reliable!* I genuinely hadn't given it any orders, but...

"Were you upset because you couldn't do anything when I was captured?" Lorea-chan asked the bear.

"Grar! Graaagrargrar," Kurumi growled in what seemed like agreement to me.

"But back then, they had me as a hostage..." Lorea-chan said. "If you'd done anything reckless, they might have killed me, so I don't think there was anything you could have done differently, Kurumi."

"Grarrr... Grar! Grargraaar."

Kurumi hung its head a little. But it quickly raised it again as if to say, *I'll do better next time.*

While I was all for Kurumi doing its best, I also had the vague sense that this wasn't exactly the kind of job a homunculus was meant for.

"Um... Sarasa-senpai, isn't this homunculus too smart?"

"Yeah, Maris-san was surprised too. And even I'm a little surprised this time."

"A *little*?!" Misty exclaimed before letting out a resigned sigh. "Well, I suppose this is *you* we're talking about. For now, let's get these scumbags tied up."

Misty bound the men using a rope Kate gave her, then shredded the blankets on the floor with a vengefulness that would've made you think they'd killed her parents, and stuffed the rags into the men's mouths.

"You should've! Given us! Proper bedding!" she shouted.

Apparently sleeping on the floor with only one blanket had been especially hard on a well-to-do young lady like Misty.

I think she should've had to sleep in some pretty bad environments during the academy's practical lessons, though?

"Hmm, we sorted this out with surprising ease, in a way I didn't expect..." mused Iris. "What now, Sarasa? Do you want to save the hostages already? Or wait until tomorrow morning, right before we run away?"

After some thought I said, "Let's do it tomorrow morning. It'd be trouble for us if some of them aren't willing to listen."

Based on how the men now lying at my feet had been talking, they were probably the only lookouts here at the moment.

If we wanted to go around unlocking the other rooms, we probably wouldn't face interference. But who knew if the people inside would follow my instructions. If they were criminals, I could use force, but not against ordinary villagers.

"If they left on their own, that'd spoil our plan," noted Iris. "And it seems like there are children being held here too."

"Right," I agreed. "That worries me. So let's take a break until morning. Misty and Lorea-chan, you aren't hungry, are you? We brought food, just in case."

I temporarily chucked the men out into the hall and then spread

out the things we'd brought with us. Lorea-chan's and Misty's eyes sparkled while their stomachs growled in anticipation.

"Ah ha ha..." Lorea-chan laughed. "I'm glad you did, Sarasa-san. I'm famished..."

"These jerks didn't serve anything fit to be called— Eagh. Those are rations you have there, aren't they?"

Misty was much less thrilled to see the box I offered the two of them. Probably because she was aware of the different types of rations there were...

"Don't worry, these are 'white' ones."

"Ohh, they aren't 'green' ones, then."

I smiled with wry amusement as Misty let out a sigh of relief.

"I wouldn't bring anything yucky when Lorea-chan's going to be eating it too," I said. "Go on, dig in."

"Thank you," said Lorea-chan. "Oh, they're so sweet and delicious. Like candy."

"Indeed, the white ones are sweet!" Iris agreed. "It makes you want a second, and a third, but you have to hold yourself back, you know? Or you'll regret it later."

"It's one piece per day, after all," said Misty. "If you eat too many of them, you'll put on weight. Have you ever done that, Iris-san?"

"No comment!"

"Got it." Misty nodded sagely. "I understand everything."

Misty, who apparently had figured something out, took a seat beside me and popped a ration in her mouth.

The other three all sat down too, closing their eyes and resting quietly to recover their stamina.

Then, a few hours later, dawn finally drew near, and our anxious ears were greeted by a deep, sonorous sound, like some kind of large animal groaning.

"Wh-What is this noise...?" Lorea-chan was the first to ask, sounding uneasy.

Iris and Kate were warily keeping their eyes peeled.

"Do monsters show up around here...?" I wondered. "But I also feel like it sounds familiar somehow?"

I cocked my head to the side as something about it tugged at the

back of my head.

"Sorry, that would be my folks..." Misty said, her cheeks flushing red with embarrassment.

"Your folks...?" I asked, not getting it until, "Oh! We heard it on the ship! That, uh. What was it...?"

"Yes," Misty replied. "It's a funeral song. But to tell you the truth, they also sing it before battles too."

"Before battles?" I echoed. "Don't tell me it's their way of saying 'This is gonna be your funeral!'"

"Yeah, more or less," she said. "Of course, we sing that song to send off those close to us too."

Isn't that song a little too all-purpose? Like "when in doubt, just sing it"?

However, of the people here, only Misty and I knew about that song.

Iris and Kate, whose brows were knit with confusion, looked to me for confirmation.

"I don't really understand," said Iris. "But we can assume the attack's started, then, right? If so, we had best hurry. We ought to save the hostages before the two forces really collide."

"I agree," I said. "As for the men in the hall... I guess we'll shut them in here."

I had Misty and Lorea-chan move out into the hall and then kicked the men into the room to take their places.

Now we just lock the door, and I don't think they'll be able to get away... But I want to at least take some revenge first.

They'd been saying some very unpleasant stuff about "having their fun" and "getting a taste."

Okay! Since we've got them here, I think I'll have my *fun with them.*

I turned one of the men face up and the other face down—each facing the opposite direction with their crotches in each other's faces—then tied them together real tight.

"That about does it, I guess? No, maybe I should throw in a little something extra."

With a little flash of my sword, I spared myself the trouble of

pulling their pants down.

Now when you two wake up, you can have all the "fun" you want, and "get a taste" of each other if you like.

"That's good. Aren't I so merciful, not dumping these scum in the woods?"

Yep! I nodded to myself. But Kate and Iris, who had been watching, had awkward looks on their faces.

"Ohh, so you were super mad after all, Sarasa," said Iris.

"Of course," I replied. "They should die a thousand deaths for even thinking of laying a hand on those two. And I just know they've done it before. There's no way they should be forgiven. Don't you think they should understand their victims' feelings, if only a little?"

"I've no reason to stop you," said Iris, "but we're short on time, you realize? Sarasa, how do you want to split up our tasks?"

"Oh, that's right," I said. "I'll guard the entrance. The rest of you go around and gather up the hostages."

"Got it," the others all replied.

I handed the key rings I'd retrieved from the men to Iris and the others, then headed to the entrance to the building.

As I had expected, the room there doubled as an entrance hall and watch post. There were no other doors in or out, so people could only leave through this room.

This structure was very effective for keeping watch, but it was annoying me for another reason. I immediately swung the door open, and used my magic to get rid of the source of my frustration.

The bottles of booze and the unfinished food were blown out the door along with the stale air.

"Mm, that's a bit better. What crisp air we have this morning!"

Having forcefully ventilated the room with magic, the slightly cold air that filled the room actually felt comfortable by comparison.

With the door open, I could hear the funeral song more clearly too, along with the clamor that was spreading through the village.

"Looks like they don't have time to worry about us here... I hope things are going well."

"Sarasa-san!"

I turned as I heard my name. It was Lorea-chan with a group of

hostages.

There were about twenty of them. About a third were women, while the rest were children. Many of the kids were still small, and they were surprisingly willing to quietly follow instructions...

"This bear's so soft!"

"Let me touch it!"

"Me too! Me toooo!"

...Okay, maybe not so quietly, but they did follow instructions.

"Grarrr, grarrr."

Unfortunately, Kurumi became a victim in all this. I made a mental note not to synchronize with it no matter what.

"Iris, did you explain to them?" I asked.

"In simple terms," she replied. "But I don't know if the children understood..."

Iris's eyes were focused on the ever-popular Kurumi.

Hmm, that might be tough for them.

I stood in front of the door and started talking to the adults as well as the slightly older children who were looking at me uneasily.

I explained the village had been taken over by bandits, the army was here to put them down, and that even if they were being threatened to cooperate, anyone who attacked us with weapons would have to be killed.

"I'm hoping to spare as many villagers as we can. So, please, in order to save your families, persuade them to throw down their arms and surrender."

When I asked for their help, the adults naturally agreed, and surprisingly enough, even the kids who had been obsessed with Kurumi turned to me with serious looks on their faces and nodded.

"Also, if you find any bandits, the mayor, or people who have been working with them, tell me," I said, but the adults looked concerned about how safe they would be if they reported people, so I added, "You don't have to worry. From today onward, they're not going to be in this village anymore."

"We're going to head toward where the fighting is happening now," I continued. "We'll be protecting you, but hold on to the children so they don't run off."

“I won’t do that!” one little boy interrupted me, but he looked like the kind mostly likely to run off...

“Okay, then,” I said to him. “Can you hold hands with a little kid for me?”

“Okay!”

I looked around to see whose hand he’d take. It was a little girl who was nearby.

The boy flared his nostrils, snorting with satisfaction.

But although the girl was smaller than him physically...she was looking back at me with calm eyes. I gave her a small nod, then looked around to check all the other people’s expressions.

Then I looked to Iris and Kate, then stepped outside.

“Okay, we’re going!” I declared.

In the village, the battle had already begun. The air was filled with shouting.

The main battle was happening at the village entrance. The House of Lotze, the Feed Company, and the Hudson Company fought together at the front, while Lochhart soldiers moved to encircle the village.

There was a surprising number of bandits, and they even outnumbered us if you didn’t count the Lochhart troops.

But if you looked at the bandits from an overhead view, they were divided roughly into three groups. The first group stood on the front line with bitter expressions, fighting as though they weren’t really used to it.

The second really looked the part of bandits, but stayed behind the first group and didn’t participate in the fighting.

And the third and final group, who stayed at the very back, shouting, didn’t look like they could fight at all.

“So,” I said, “the ones at the front being forced to fight are—”

“Our husbands!” one woman interrupted me to answer. “Darling! Throw your weapons down!”

That led to a bunch of other shouts from behind me.

“Daaad!”

“Dad!!! It’s me!”

“Stop fightiiing!”

By the way, that little boy from earlier had already started running forward, but the little girl, who was being dragged along with him, was digging in her heels to stop him.

"Hey! How'd the hostages get away?!"

"I don't know! Hurry up and catch them! Or these guys'll stop listening to—"

Before the bandit could finish, one bald, muscular man fighting on the front line acted.

"Kiddo?! Outta my way! Take that!!!"

He threw his sword at the bandits and then started clobbering any that got in his way as he headed toward us.

His expression was as fiendishly intense.

Is it okay to let him get close?

Just as I was worrying about that, the girl let go of the boy. The boy took off racing toward the fiend—er, no, the man.

"Ohhh! Kiddo! You're safe!!!"

"Sure am, dad! Those girls saved me!"

The man lifted the boy up and then let out a feral roar of triumph.

That proved to be the turning point.

Most of the people who'd been fighting on the front lines threw their weapons at the bandits at the rear and took off running.

"Protect those who've thrown away their weapons!" Adelbert-san ordered. "Anyone still armed is an enemy! Kill them!"

"Yeah!" came the powerful response, the Hudson Company's men loudest of all.

"Oh, there's my brother," Misty said, sounding somewhat dazed. "He really is fighting."

I followed her gaze and found Rainy mixed in with the seamen, swinging his sword. He was holding his own better than I'd expected. Better than some of the soldiers.

"Sarasa, do we not need to join the battle?" Iris asked.

"Oh, right. Iris, Kate, let's get in there."

The battle had already been largely decided. There were unlikely to be problems at this point, even if we didn't involve ourselves, but the fewer people who got wounded, the better.

After calling out to Iris and Kate, I started walking, but a macho man blocked our way.

"Thanks for saving the kiddo! I'll help you too!"

With the moment of joyous reunion with his son now finished, he had remembered once again just how angry he was.

His face was filled with rage and he had a nasty-looking pair of fists on him. But bringing amateurs into this would just be more dangerous for us. So...

"You protect the children," I told him. "You can tell who's a bandit from who isn't, right?"

"I see... That's important, yeah," he acknowledged. "Sure! Leave it to me! I'll give those scum a clobbering!!!"

"Yeah, please do," I replied. "Misty...and Lorea-chan, stay here too."

"You know I can fight too, right, Sarasa-senpai?" Misty pointed out.

"I'm aware," I said. "So protect this place. You're exhausted, aren't you?"

Though they looked energetic enough at a glance, the two of them had been in captivity for days now. Misty could probably put up a decent fight still, but I wouldn't have felt right throwing her straight into combat.

My feelings must have gotten across to them, because Misty and Lorea-chan both nodded.

"Now then, time to get to it. I don't mind killing bandits, but I want to get back to managing my shop and doing some alchemy already! Humph!"

Crack! Snap! Crunch!

My fists took down the bandits that stood in my way.

It had been a while since I'd fought bare-handed, but I'd learned how back in my student days. My hands moved on their own.

"Sarasa, aren't you going to use that sword at your hip?" asked Iris.

"It's important to me, you know? It'd feel like a waste to use it," I explained. "Besides, if I chop off body parts, I won't be able to heal them."

I couldn’t imagine a bandit’s body was tougher than a hellflame grizzly’s neck. This sword would easily slice through arms, legs, and even torsos. If I had to use potions that could heal them after that, then no amount of forced labor I got out of them was going to be enough to keep me from ending up in the red.

Crush their spirits, not their bodies: Maybe that was the kind of control I needed?

“Hey! Why’s there an army here?! Did we already send our demands?!”

“Not yet! How’d they find this place...?! We should’ve had a few days still, at least!”

I could hear a few foolish bandits talking in the distance.

I’d thought it was weird they weren’t more alert, but apparently, they had been assuming I didn’t know about the kidnapping yet.

It was true that the timing of things had worked out to my advantage here. Things might have gone differently had the head clerk not known about the contents of the letter.

If the Feed Company hadn’t been heading to South Strag around the same time as Misty and Lorea-chan were...

If Rainy hadn’t been in South Strag at just the right time...

If Leonora-san hadn’t gotten the intel on Ruta Village...

And finally, if Lorea-chan hadn’t been able to hide Kurumi...

“Then it’s a coincidence they found us? Damn it! The lucky bastards!”

“You said it! We’re out here working so hard, but they have all the luck!”

Luck? No, I don’t think so.

I’d set up regular shipments between Yok Village and South Strag, Leonora-san had spent her time investigating, and I’d built Kurumi to protect Lorea-chan.

If I was going to reach for something that had been a coincidence, it would have to have been that Rainy had been in South Strag, but if we hadn’t had ties with the Hudson Company, then he wouldn’t have come to see me.

In short, this was the result of everything we’d been doing. It wasn’t just because we’d gotten lucky.

Besides, engaging in criminal activities was not "working hard."

Wanting to get a look at these idiots, I swung my fists and took down the bandits who were in front of me.

"Hm...? I think I recognize that face from somewhere," I said when I saw one of the men in the rear who had been making a fuss.

"Murgh! That's Hoh Bahru." Iris's brow furrowed with displeasure. "Sarasa, I apologize if my hand slips."

I nodded magnanimously.

"It's a battle, after all," I said. "These things happen."

"That's basically announcing you're going to murder him..." Kate murmured.

We had gotten close enough that the men must have heard us.

Hoh turned toward us, his eyes going wide. "Huh?! You're Iris Lotze!!!"

"Why, if it isn't the peasant alchemist! Damn you! This is all your fault!!!" the man with him shouted, pointing at me.

This guy had a height-to-width ratio that was all messed up. If I had to look for something to compare him to, it'd be Kurumi. Only unlike Kurumi, he wasn't cute.

"Sarasa, do you know that *thing*?" Iris asked, not hiding her contempt for the man.

"No, I don't recognize him," I replied, shaking my head. "And I'd like to think I wouldn't forget someone with such a distinctive appearance."

This made the man who wasn't Hoh erupt further.

"D-Don't be ridiculous! H-H-How could you forget *me*, Hahjio Kahku?!"

He was tripping over his words and sending spittle flying as he shouted.

"Ohh, you're the self-proclaimed legitimate successor," I replied. "But we've never met before, have we?"

"Yes we have, damn you! In the capital! In front of the palace!"

I had to think about that for a long time. "Oh. The pervert who said he was going to marry me? That was such delusional nonsense that I'd purged both it and the guy who said it from my memory."

Now that he brought it up, though, I remembered—but only his

name.

His face wasn't ringing any bells. I'd noticed he was rather plump back then too, but he was so heavy now that cute words like "pudgy" didn't even begin to cover it.

The man was a ball. That was what he looked like.

"Hmm, can a human being grow that much over the course of just a few months?" I wondered aloud. "He was still human in form back then... Now he's powered up from a human deviant to a nonhuman deviant."

"Wait, is that even growth?" Iris asked. "He's changed so much you didn't even realize it was him..."

"His body's gone from bad to worse, but I was actively avoiding looking at his face," I acknowledged with a shrug. "I had a headache from dealing with His Highness, so the last thing that I needed was to make myself feel worse by looking at the face of a man who was spewing such gross comments."

Hahjio stomped his feet and pointed at me again.

"Damn you! Damn you! Damn you!!!" he shouted. "Hey! I'll still forgive you, peasant! I'll even grant you the honor of receiving my noble seed. Don't think you'll ever get such an offer again!"

Um, who does he think would ever say "yes" to that?

But that's a deviant for you. An ordinary person like me could never understand how he thinks.

"What is he saying in this situation? Has he lost sight of reality?"

The hostages they had been threatening the villagers with had escaped, and most of the genuine bandits had already been taken down. The only people left around Hahjio looked like former merchants who weren't used to fighting.

"It's because he's the legitimate successor," I said. "I'm sure he looks at things differently from us."

I was being sarcastic, but count on a deviant to get it all twisted.

It wasn't just his point of view that was different from ours, it was the whole way his head had been put together.

For some reason, he gave me a smug, satisfied look, and then started spewing nonsensical drivel:

"Oh, so you *do* get it. Yes, I am the legitimate heir. In all honesty,

scrawny girls like you aren't to my taste, but rejoice, because I'm going to marry you anyway. So hand me the rights to rule this domain. I'll start by correcting that saucy attitude of yours."

I blinked slowly at him.

What did that ball just say? It's so hard to make out the words on an inanimate object.

"But that woman with you isn't so bad. Better than I'd heard, even. I'll play with both of you at the same time, so show your gratitude for my magnanimity by spreading your legs for—"

"Force Bullet."

"Gebwugh—!"

Hahjio coughed up blood as he flew through the air, bounced several times, and rolled across the ground. He stopped face down, twitching and quivering.

"Sorry. My hand slipped," I said.

"It did a whole lot more than just slip... But you sure said that pretty nonchalantly, huh, Sarasa."

Kate turned to look at me with an awkward smile, but strangely, once she saw my face, she shuddered and hurriedly averted her eyes.

Huh?

Iris, meanwhile, kicked the pervert with the tip of her foot.

"Mm-hmm," she said, nodding. "It seems he's still alive. I should've expected no less from the merciful Sarasa. Now then, Hoh Bahru, and all of you who are with him. Unlike Sarasa, I haven't much mercy to spare for you."

Iris smiled. She took a step forward, and...

"I-I surrender!"

"Spare my life, at least!"

"I don't wanna dieeeee!"

The men knelt down and began selfishly pleading—with Kate for some reason. With all of those eyes focused on her, she turned to me, unsure how to react.

"Uh, you heard them, Sarasa. What now?" she asked. "It looks like the others are wrapping up over there."

I looked over and saw Adelbert-san's battle was close to ending.

The villagers who'd discarded their weapons had moved away from the front line, while the fleeing bandits were being tied up by the Lochhart soldiers, who had the area encircled.

There were still a handful of men resisting, but it looked like it was taking a long time to take them down less because they were strong opponents and more because we were trying to take them alive. In other words...

"All that's left is to deal with those guys, huh? Oh, fine... Iris, would you mind doing the honors?"

"Yes, I think I will. And given I have such a rare chance, I think I'll cut it off..."

Swinging the sword in her right hand, Iris's sharp gaze focused on Hoh's lower half.

The color drained from his face as he realized what she meant. He broke into an oily sweat.

Iris stared at him for a while, then eventually sighed and sheathed her weapon. "I suppose there's no need to show Sarasa something so filthy..."

He was so relieved by this that his eyes rolled into the back of his head and he collapsed to the ground, where he lay on his back. At around the same time, Adelbert-san and his men arrived and bound Hoh's men with ropes.

"Whew," I let out a deep breath. "With that...it's finally over, huh?"

Iris and Kate smiled. Adelbert-san left the prisoners to his men and came over to us.

"Sarasa-dono," he said as he clapped me on the shoulder. "It would appear that things have gone well here."

"We managed somehow, thanks to your help. How were the losses on your end, Adelbert-san?"

"We didn't have any deaths. Some broken bones at worst," he answered before adding, "Some of the bandits died, though."

"If we didn't take any serious losses, that's good enough. I'd say that was thanks to your management, Adelbert-san."

"It wasn't a big deal," he said with a shrug and an awkward smile. "This about all I'm good for, you know? I wouldn't let a bunch

of bandits best me.”

When he spotted Iris and Kate—as well as Misty and Lorea-chan walking over to join us—his smile changed to a more genuine grin.

“Iris, and also Kate, good work,” he greeted them. “It looks like you were able to fulfill your duties.”

“All of the most important parts were handled by Sarasa, as you might expect...” Iris said. “But we managed somehow.”

“Thank you for your kind words,” Kate replied. “But I think we have it much easier working as gatherers.”

“Wa ha ha ha! I see, I see,” Adelbert-san said. “Yes, that’s best for now. Leave handling the bandits to us and go on enjoying yourselves while you can. Starting with enjoying your reunion, I suppose?”

Having said that, Adelbert-san waved to Walter, who was coming over, and then headed in the direction of the bandits. Walter silently nodded and followed him.

Then, as though they had been waiting for that, Lorea-chan and Misty both threw themselves at me.

“Sarasa-san!” Lorea-chan cried. “Is it over now? Are you okay?”

“Good work, Sarasa-senpai!” said Misty. “And thank you again for rescuing us!”

“Yep, it’s over now. The bandits all gathered in one place, so we were able to get them all,” I said. “I guess, in some ways, we should almost be grateful to Hahjio for that.”

“Whaa, that guy doesn’t deserve any thanks, Senpai.” Misty puffed her cheeks up. “He’s lucky to be alive! If it were me, my hand would’ve slipped even harder!!!”

She glared in the direction of Hahjio, who was still unconscious.

I could see the soldier who was checking on him shake his head—looked like the guy was really just barely clinging to life.

I didn’t like it, but I might have to heal him. We couldn’t interrogate a corpse, after all.

“Oh, yeah, I’m not actually grateful to him, you know? But I do think that, from the perspective of what benefits the Lochhart Domain over the long term, we’re lucky he acted like a bug lamp.”

Hahjio had no legitimacy, but he was still a blood relative of the

old lord. That meant he'd likely had some secret influence. If he'd used it to set up an underground organization, he could have been a real thorn in our side. Instead, he'd teamed up with bandits, stained his hands with crime, and stood out as a result.

Was that because he was a fool? Or were all of his backers fools too? Maybe they'd just been carrying on like they had back when Yokuo Kahku had still been the lord of this domain.

Someone would have to dig into Hahjio's background after this and clamp down on the relatives and supporters who had been involved—but it wasn't going to be me.

It'd probably be Clency, or Prince Ferrick, or some other poor sacrifice that the prince appointed to handle it for him.

I offered a silent prayer for whomever that poor sacrifice happened to be, and then pointed behind Misty.

"More importantly, Misty, there's someone here who's been worried about you."

Misty turned and looked. "Blegh!"

She frowned and backed away a step.

A group of suntanned men who knew how to make an impression was approaching us, with two in particular leading the way.

Yep, these were the folks from the Hudson Company.

If I didn't know that, I'd have tied them up with the bandits—Well, okay, maybe that would be taking it a bit too far?

But they looked like a rough-and-tumble bunch, so despite the big smiles on their faces, Lorea-chan, who was seeing them for the first time, hid behind me out of fear.

"Young miss! You had us worried!"

"Misty! Were you all right?!"

The captain and Rainy called out in unison as they approached, and then a moment later, they looked at one another.

The captain backed Misty as heir, while Rainy was the actual heir. They must have had a somewhat awkward relationship, but I'd already explained to the captain about Zadok and all of that stuff.

They were both united in their concern for Misty, so they weren't on terrible terms. But they weren't exactly on good terms either. It was an awkward moment.

Perhaps picking up on that, Misty furrowed her brow with concern, then inserted herself in between the two of them.

"Ha ha ha..." she laughed. "Thank you Captain Raban, and your crew, for coming to our aid."

"Hey, when our young miss is in trouble, of course we'd leave our ship to come help!" said the captain. Then, turning to his men, he added, "Isn't that right?!"

"Sure is!"

"Of course!"

"Young miss!!!"

Misty smiled at this with a mixture of joy and embarrassment, but when she saw Rainy standing nearby, looking awkward and out of place, her eyes wandered like she didn't know what she should do.

"And, uh...you came too, huh?" she finally said.

"Of course! My little sister was in trouble! I'd have walked away from any business meeting, no matter how important, to come to your aid!!!"

"Uh, I'm not sure you ought to do that, as one of the company's managers, and its future heir... But I guess that means you still sort of care about me, huh?"

"Sort of?! There's no 'sort of' about it! How could I feel any other way about my own little sister?!"

Though Rainy protested strongly, Misty kept her eyes averted as she continued.

"But...even though I sent you letters regularly after getting into the academy, you never wrote back."

"That's absurd. I *did* write to you... Urgh! That Zadok!" Rainy's voice shook with rage. "I'm sorry. I should have gone to see you in person. I was trying to be considerate and not get in the way of your studies, but it seems I ended up being *too* considerate."

Misty glanced in my direction. "Well, what about interfering with me finding work? I got rejected all around the capital, you know?"

"Interfere? I did nothing of the sort... In regards to your work, I did mention to some people I know that 'Misty wants to work in the shop of the senpai she admires so much.' But that was really all. I don't know what dad might have done about it, though."

Rainy was cocking his head to the side in genuine confusion.

Hmm, it doesn't sound like he's lying. Were the other people involved trying to be considerate?

Like, since he'd said she had a place she wanted to work, they had assumed he didn't want her to work anywhere else, and wouldn't let anyone else hire her?

Or was it like Rainy said, and their father wanted to make Misty come home, so he had pulled some strings to try and make it happen?

There was the matter of Zadok too, so Misty continued without contradicting him.

"Okay, what about when you told me to seduce Sarasa-senpai?" she asked.

"S-Seduce her?! I'd never say anything like that! I thought it would be nice if you could grow to be more than just friends, but that's all!"

I guess...maybe he'd meant 'more than just friends' in the sense of us becoming besties, or a master and apprentice relationship, while she'd interpreted it as a sexual thing? Or maybe whoever had passed on the message had twisted it in a malicious way?

"And the bit about sending alchemic materials to the Hudson Company...?"

"I did mention it would be nice if we could trade with Sarasa-sama directly, but I had no intention of making you do anything unreasonable. This must sound like I'm making excuses, but that was also Zadok acting on his own initiative. I've read the letter myself now. It was incredibly rude, and honestly gave me a headache when I read it. I'm truly sorry!"

Seeing Rainy bow his head so deeply, Misty murmured, "Huh..."

Now that she had answers to all her questions, the discord between them melted away, and she had a rather peaceful expression on her face, but the moment Rainy raised his head, she looked away and puffed up her cheeks.

"But if you'd had your act together, then some of those problems wouldn't have happened, right? Show some awareness of that! Because the Hudson Company is going to be resting on your

shoulders!!!”

“Well, as far as I’m concerned, you can take over if you want—”

“That is *not* what we’re talking about right now!”

It had sounded like that kind of conversation to me, but Misty was insisting she didn’t want to inherit the company.

She forcefully ended things there, crossing her arms as she glanced at her brother. “But...it’s also thanks to you that I was able to work for Sarasa-senpai. I’ll praise you for that, if nothing else. That’s why I’m going to forgive you.”

“Misty!!!” Rainy seemed overcome with emotion. He leaped toward Misty with his arms spread wide.

He probably felt the same way about her as he had when she was just a little girl, leaving for the academy, but...

“Stop it, brother! I’m not a child anymore!”

It was true. Misty wasn’t the same Misty she had been back then.

Perhaps owing to the combat training she’d received at the academy, her body instinctively reacted.

She seized her airborne brother by the front of his shirt, and with a twist of her waist, sent him spinning through the air, until...

“Gwegh!”

Seeing her brother impact the ground, unable to even try to break his fall, Misty let out a quiet, “Ah...”

But it was hidden under the roar of praise she received.

“Oh! Nice one, young miss! You’ve got Rainy beat when it comes to strength too!”

“I always knew our young miss was the only one who could inherit the company!”

“I-I’ve told you guys, I have no intention of—”

“Rainy’s not a bad leader, but he’s not much to look at.”

“We’re gonna have to tell the other guys this story.”

“All right, you louts! Let’s let her hear it!!!”

On the captain’s orders, the excited men of the Hudson Company started singing the funeral song again.

I didn’t know what it was supposed to mean this time, but Misty’s protests were drowned about by their singing.

Misty had a troubled look on her face. She slapped her hand on

the crew members, trying to get them to stop, but her open palm wasn't going to have much of an effect on their well-toned muscles.

And so, the song echoed through the forest, leaving the rest of us feeling like outsiders to whatever was going on.

It was a peaceful scene, though, so we looked at one another and smiled.

Epilogue

"Yeah, that's good. Keep up that level of magic power... You're almost there. Keep going!"

"Okay! Slow, but steady... There! It's done, right, Sarasa-senpai?!" Misty looked at me with sparkles in her eyes.

"Hold on a moment," I told her, taking the artifact out of the alchemic cauldron and scrutinizing it closely—as her master!

"Yep, it's all good! That's the water heater artifact all done!"

"Yayyyyy!"

When I told her she'd passed, Misty jumped into the air and cheered.

It had been a little over twenty days since the trouble with the bandits, and we'd managed to get back to our main line of work.

I had finished the air purifier, which was now doing wonders to improve the environment inside the shop, so we had moved on to the water heater that Misty was in charge of making for the public baths.

"What a relief..." Misty said with a sigh. "So many people have been looking me in the face and asking, 'When are we going to be able to use the public baths?' The pressure has been incredible..."

To tell you the truth, the bathhouse building had already been completed by the time we had returned to Yok Village. Now all we had to do was install the artifacts, and it would be ready right away.



So, basically, the whole village's bath situation was dependent on Misty's work... Little wonder they had such high hopes for her.

"Yep. And you're great for working hard and succeeding under that pressure, Misty!"

As a teacher, I believed in making people grow through praise. It had worked well with Lorea-chan, so I was aiming to repeat that success.

"Heh heh, thank you. But why did they know I was the one who'd be making it?"

"Ah, sorry, that was probably my fault. I told Andre-san that you'd be making the water heater. Word probably got around after that."

When I revealed how it had happened, the corners of Misty's previously joy-filled eyes arched upward, and she puffed up her cheeks while banging her fists on me.

"It was *your* fault, Senpai?! Sheesh! It made me feel like there was a rush to get it done! And I was already nervous enough because of all the expensive materials we're using!"

"Well, it's fine, isn't it? You succeeded, after all. And we had spares if you messed up anyway."

"Even if we did, that doesn't make them less expensive! You have spares because you harvested them yourself, right, Senpai?! Normally, you wouldn't be able to buy this many high-quality astellors!"

Yeah, freshness was incredibly important with astellors. If they were brought back to the shop while they were still alive, they could become expensive materials, but those still paled in comparison to ones that an alchemist processed on the spot after harvesting them.

But few alchemists went to the trouble to harvest them personally, and not much of what they harvested went into wider distribution. That was why Leonora-san had been so happy to receive some...

"But if you're going to continue on as my apprentice, this sort of thing will keep on happening, you know? Besides, you're going to have to harvest your own materials in the future too."

When I let her know the reality of the situation, Misty looked at me with wide eyes. "I-I can't! I'm not able to fight like you, Senpai!"

"That's fine. I'm going to train you up to the point where you'll have no trouble gathering materials, so don't worry about it, okay?"

"How can I not worry?! I never heard about this!"

"Master trained me too. It's probably a tradition."

Not that I would know, but I assumed that going to get your own materials was a tradition—maybe.

At least, that was how Master had built up her skills, so it was a proven method, at any rate.

"But your actual training is still a while off. First, I need to get to the point where I can make a sword worthy of my apprentice. So let's go and get these artifacts installed in the bathhouse for now. I'm sure the gatherers and villagers are eagerly waiting."

"Huh...? I'm a little hopeful, but super uneasy now..."

"Don't worry. I'm your master, and I've checked for myself that it's properly finished!"

"No, that's not what I meant..." she murmured.

After a little prodding from me, we picked up the water heater together and headed over to the shop space.

Not long ago, I hadn't really wanted to come in here, but now, thanks to the air purifier, it was a comfortable space again.

We walked in with a spring in our step now that the water heater was finished. Lorea-chan was sitting at the counter, arms crossed, looking grumpy for some reason. Before I could even ask what was wrong, Lorea-chan caught sight of us and the words just came rushing out of her mouth like an explosion.

"Oh! Sarasa-san! Listen to this! Dad still hasn't responded to the Feed Company! They gave him such a good offer, but he's way too indecisive!"

"Whoa, um— Huh? A response...? Ohh, to their offer to bring him under the umbrella of the Feed Company, you mean?"

I wondered what she was rambling about all of a sudden, but it was that offer the head clerk made before, huh?

Even as things stood, Darna-san was buying and selling products that the Feed Company transported, but that was sort of like a trial period arrangement— Wait, was he still in the trial period?

"That's it! He's taking too long to decide! That's fatal for a

merchant!!!" Lorea-chan was breathing heavily through her nose as though she were trying to vent her frustration.

Misty and I looked at each other. We set down the water heater for a moment and got ready to hear her out.

"I see how it is," I said. "I don't think the Feed Company will rush him, though..."

"Yes, and that's thanks to you, Sarasa-san," she replied. "But normally, he'd have already been taken out by natural selection!"

"Well, sure, normally, he couldn't hope to compete," Misty acknowledged with a nod as she tried to calm Lorea-chan down. "But Lorea. Don't you think Darna-san has some ideas of his own? I can understand this because my folks run a company too, but maybe he doesn't want to lose the company his ancestors founded, or he's worried what might happen to the village if their only general store were to become a subsidiary of another company and then that company pulled out."

Misty was actually correct—a large company might pull out of a business that didn't turn enough profit. And if they did, would Darna-san be able to start up the general store again without them? Even if it might not be impossible, it would definitely be really hard.

But Lorea-chan firmly shook her head. "Our family business isn't anything as grand as a company we can be proud of. Besides, it's already too late for that. Because, if we're abandoned by the Feed Company, that's the same as being abandoned by Sarasa-san. If that happens, there won't be a thing that Yok Village can do about it."

"No," I started to protest. "That's got to be an exaggeration...or maybe not?"

"It's not!" Lorea-chan insisted. "This village is totally reliant on the gatherers. If you go, Sarasa-san, then they'll leave too. We'll be right back to the desolate village that we had before!"

I couldn't disagree. But that was assuming no other alchemist came here.

"Well, even then, I think we'd still be better off than before," she continued. "The lord's changed now, after all. But they haven't officially decided on a new lord yet, right, Sarasa-san?"

"It's not that they haven't decided... It's a crown domain, so the

king is the lord. Though his magistrate Clency effectively runs the place like a lord. I don't think I've heard anything about him being replaced."

"Oh, I see... He doesn't seem that bad, unlike the last guy, but he hadn't done anything good for Yok Village either, had he? Until you got involved, that is." Lorea-chan pursed her lips in dissatisfaction.

Misty agreed with her. "Yeah, it felt like everything changed all of a sudden. Not that I really know what the village was like before."

Just as she said, Yok Village had changed a lot recently. Many people had come to the village to work on expanding the roads, and now that the roads were safer, the number of other people, mainly gatherers, who visited, was on the rise too.

The expansion of the village's public facilities that I had hoped for was also being carried out, new houses were being built, and with the return of young people who had moved out of the village, the population was rising. The village felt so full of life recently.

And outside of all that, the places closest to us were changing too...

"Well, I gave my dad a good kick in the butt, so I think he'll accept the offer next time the Feed Company visits. Could you please take care of him, Sarasa-san?"

"Uh, sure. I'm not directly involved, but I'll put in a word with the head clerk."

"I'd be grateful. Oh, by the way, Sarasa-san, you're still technically the lord's plenipotentiary, right?"

"Yeah, I guess. The bandits have been caught, but they're still being questioned. I don't know if my job's done now or if I won't be dismissed from my post until everything is over. But I've sent in my report, so the rest is up to His Highness."

Come to think of it, will I have to go in to return my written orders? Well, either way, I'm sure he'll tell me what to do.

"In that case, will you be going to the capital again?" Lorea-chan asked, lowering her eyes as she mumbled, "I've felt a little lonely with all of the times you've left me to mind the shop recently..."

Partially because Misty had come, it was true that I'd been leaving the shop more often recently. I felt a little bad for Lorea-

chan.

"Ohh... Sorry about that, okay? But I'll leave Misty and the others with you, so make do with them, okay?"

"Whaa, Sarasa-senpai. That's kind of a mean way to say it, don't you think?"

"It's reassuring to have the three of them with me, but that's not what I meant!"

Now I had complaints coming at me from both sides. Maybe saying she should "make do" with the others had been a mistake.

To top it off, the shop door swung open with excellent timing as Iris and Kate came home too.

But, fortunately, the two of them hadn't overheard us. Their eyes widened with surprise as they spotted me in the shop space, and then they burst into smiles.

"Oh, Sarasa, we're back!" Iris exclaimed. "We've got a big haul this time! I hope you'll be happy!"

"We're home, Sarasa," said Kate. "It was our first long trip in a while, but we brought back some of the bounty of autumn along with the alchemic materials. Let's all enjoy it together."

With that, Iris and Kate showed us a heaping pile of mountain and forest goodies. There were mushrooms, nuts, fruits, and even yams and yam bulbils.

I took the opportunity to change the topic. "Y'know, it *is* fall now, huh? Maybe we should all go hunting together."

The great forest is filled with the bounty of nature. Since I haven't been able to do alchemy in a while, I haven't focused on the forest much lately, but maybe I should take the chance to show Misty around it?

That was what I was thinking when I made the suggestion, but for some reason, Misty turned a suspicious look on me.

"Senpai...it's really fall veggies you want us to hunt for, right? Not monsters?"

"Of course. I wouldn't choose monsters when we have Lorea-chan coming too."

"I-I'm going too? Into the great forest?"

Lorea-chan's eyes widened just a little, but I nodded to say, *Of*

course!

"It's okay," I reassured her. "We aren't going to leave you out. You can think of this as a kind of employee benefit, I guess?"

"Are we supposed to be happy about it? Sounds like you're forcing it on us." Misty gave me another suspicious look.

Now she was just being rude. *I'm doing my best to think about what's good for my employee and apprentice!*

"Ha ha ha, don't worry," said Iris. "Sarasa wouldn't take you anywhere dangerous. Right?"

"Huh?" I reacted.

"Huh...?" they all reacted in return.

We all looked at each other, and then Kate seemed to remember something and spoke up. "Come to think of it, Sarasa took Lorea to the mountains in winter."

"An amateur like her? In winter?!" Misty was incredulous. "Senpai, that's beyond reckless!"

"Dangerous places and actual danger are two separate things, you know?" I countered. "I mean, even an ordinary well is dangerous enough if you fall down it."

"That's way too extreme of an argument! I'm amazed you went with her, Lorea!"

"It was exhausting, but I had fun, you know?" Lorea-chan replied. "Because there wasn't...that much danger."

"Oh, so there really was some danger..." Misty said, nodding to herself as she picked up on the way Lorea-chan had paused slightly.

Iris and Lorea-chan, meanwhile, were smiling at the fond memories.

"I never thought we'd fight snowglide centipedes..." murmured Iris.

"That was a real surprise, huh!" Lorea-chan agreed. "I'd never seen anything like them before!"

"They're smiling?! Smiling about encountering giant bugs?! I have to hand it to you, Senpai, the people around you aren't normal either..."

"If you're going to say that," said Kate, "then, as a fellow alchemist, aren't you the least normal out of all of us?"

Misty fell silent.

Kate had made a good point, and Misty had a look on her face like she was a little troubled by it, but also a little pleased. When Kate saw that, she smiled too before continuing.

"But anyway, it looks like the construction next door has really progressed while we were away, huh?" she prompted.

"Yeah," I said. "With the other houses finished, everyone's been working really hard."

Yeah, this was the other place close to us that was changing. There was a house being built right next door—or rather, an expansion for this house.

Apparently, Clency had arranged it while I was in South Strag. According to him, *"If you're going to work for the domain, you will at least need this much,"* but I was baffled by it. Still, he'd steamrolled past my objections, saying the decision had already been made.

That said, it wasn't often that a normal alchemist had the opportunity to build a house with a magical seal built into it. Once things got moving, I had been enjoying myself a lot with it.

"I think it's been good experience for you too, right, Misty?" I asked.

"Yes, certainly— Wait, Senpai! We're in the middle of construction, aren't we?!"

Having said that, Misty pointed to her feet.

"Oh!" Iris reacted with a raised eyebrow. "Is that the water heater? So the bathhouse will be working soon, then? Isn't that nice, Lorea?"

"Yes! The bad smells don't build up inside the shop so much anymore, but when there are people in here..."

It could clean up the air, but not the sources of the stench. Such were the limits of an air purifier.

"But all of that ends today, huh?" said Kate. "I suppose you'll be forbidding entrance to the worst offenders from now on?"

"Huh...? Is that okay?" Lorea-chan asked, looking a little confused.

"I'm fine with it," I said with a nod. "If people have ways to deal with it, and they choose not to, it's not my problem. For my part, I

think we can be a little picky about our clientele. I'm not going to start kicking out nobles like Master does, though."

"Ohh," Iris cried with admiration. "She doesn't pull her punches even with the nobility! Now that's Ophelia-sama for you! Lorea could also—"

"N-No, I couldn't! Not with people like that, um..."

Lorea-chan trailed off awkwardly. Iris nodded as if she understood.

"Murgh, it's that bad, is it...?" Iris asked. "Fine, then allow me to give my permission. Get 'em, Kurumi!"

"Grar?" Kurumi, who was sitting on the corner of the counter, cocked its head to the side as the conversation turned to it.

Lorea-chan hugged Kurumi tight and protested, "N-No! What if Kurumi gets hurt?!"

"Actually," I interjected. "I think you should be more worried about whether the gatherers would survive."

"Mrrrrrgh..." Lorea-chan groaned, unable to argue because she had seen firsthand how strong Kurumi was a number of times now.

I smiled at that. "Heh heh! Well, let's talk about how we'll handle any problem gatherers later. For now, we need to go do some construction. If we don't hurry, the people are going to have some harsh words for Misty."

"But you're the one responsible, Senpai!" Misty objected, pursing her lips.

Perhaps there's some truth to that.

"Now, now," I said to calm her, then lifted up the water heater once again.

"Sarasa-san, Misty-san, please take care, okay?" said Lorea-chan. "I'll cook up a delicious dinner for us with the autumn bounty that Iris-san and Kate-san brought back!"

"Okay, I'll look forward to it. Now, let's get going!"

That night, after testing the artifacts in the public bathhouse and watching people rush to use the facility themselves, I reflected on how grateful I was to have a bath of my own at home while smacking my lips over Lorea-chan's cooking.

It was a meal that was filled with the feeling of autumn, but that alone was not quite enough for young folks like us.

The autumn bounty was a brilliant supporting actor, but the main star was, of course, the meat—but then, when dessert came around, the fruits of autumn came back again as the main star. The tart flavor of all the different ripened fruits let us savor the taste of autumn, and all of us smiled as we did so.

We were in fine spirits and the conversation was lively—until, suddenly, there was a noise from the Shared Sound Box.

"Hm? Leonora-san? Did she sniff out our delicious meal, maybe?" I wondered.

"Ha ha ha, you mean to say she's calling to ask us to send some of this autumn bounty her way?" asked Iris. "Surely even Leonora-dono's nose can't be that good. Though, she has a fearsome talent for gathering information."

"You're right. It was a joke," I replied. "Hello, what is it?"

The harmonious conversation only lasted until that moment.

The info Leonora-san delivered would blow away the warm atmosphere in an instant.

"Sarasa, we have big trouble. A mysterious epidemic has broken out in Grenje."

Afterword

The other day (though, really, it was a while ago at this point), I received a handwritten fan letter for the very first time. In this day and age. Thank you so much.

This is Mizuho Itsuki, who wants to cry out, “Hooray!”

Now then, I’m told this sixth volume will be published just before the anime releases, so I wanted to write about that, but...they say it’s better to see things for yourself.

I could write a lot of words about it, but it wouldn’t matter, so I’ll say just one thing.

“There are anime-original stories, so make sure you watch!”

Now, changing topic, I’ll talk about volume six. This is already well-known to those who followed the web version, but this volume covers stories from after where the web version ended.

Yes! Sarasa and Iris’s lovey-dovey newlywed lifestyle!

On top of that, the older ladies get to strut their stuff!

And the junior who didn’t show up in the web version finally gets some page time here too!

It sure is nice, having a junior who looks up to you. Did I have one? There are some things you shouldn’t ask. You’ll make the author cry.

Okay, there may have been some hyperbole there.

This volume is also the series’ first with a “to be continued.” Yes, this is the one time I get to say “See you in volume seven!” It has to do with the anime airing.

I know that last scene was slightly worrying, but right now, I’m racking my brain to write it, so I’d be very grateful if you could buy volume seven as well.

Now, to finish, I’d like to say my thanks to the people involved with this series.

To Fuumi-san, the illustrator. Thank you, as always. This time, it

overlapped with your work on the anime, and I’m sure that must have been difficult for you. To Kirero-san, who works on the manga version. I’m always soothed when I see Sarasa moving around so cutely and full of energy. To all of the many people involved with the anime. Thank you so much for the very good job you’ve done.

And finally, to the reader. I hope you will support the manga and anime along with the novels.

Mizuho Itsuki

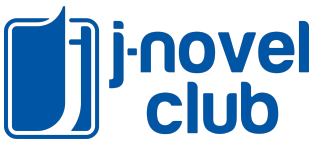


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FUUMI


06
Management of a Novice Alchemist: Whoa, I Got an Apprentice?!
DATE: ○○ / △△
I knocked and entered the workshop, where I found Master sitting in a chair as she worked on something. She turned her head and greeted me with a smile. It was good to see she was doing well.


Management of a Novice Alchemist: Whoa, I Got an Apprentice?!
Iris Lotze
Gatherer. Sarasa saves her life, but she was left with a huge debt.
Misty Hudson
Sarasa's junior and friend from the academy. Her family runs a large maritime shipping company.
Sarasa Feed
Novice alchemist. Operates an alchemy shop in Yok Village that she received as a graduation present from her master.
Kate Starven
Iris's partner. Works together with Iris to repay Sarasa.
Lorea
Daughter of the couple who owns Yok Village's general store. Helps out at Sarasa's shop.
DATE: ○○ / △△
I gave everyone their souvenirs from the capital right away! With Misty's help, I had been able to buy some nice ones for them. I hoped they'd all be happy with their gifts.


Management of a Novice Alchemist:
Whoa, I Got an Apprentice?!
DATE: ○○ / △△
I took a deep breath as I stood on the
sandy beach, staring out at the blue sea
under the summer sky, having changed into
my swimsuit. Summer! The sea! Swimming!



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Management of a Novice Alchemist: Volume 6
by Mizuho Itsuki

Translated by Sean McCann Edited by Thalia Sutton

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SHINMAI RENKINJUTSUSHI NO TEMPOKEIEI Vol.6 DESHI GA DEKICHATTA!?

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