

EVEN DOGS

Go to Other Worlds

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4

LIFE IN ANOTHER WORLD

WITH MY BELOVED HOUND

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Even Dogs Go to Other Worlds: Life in Another World with My Beloved Hound, Volume 4

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Even Dogs Go to Other Worlds: Life in Another World with My Beloved Hound, Volume 4

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Takumi
Training as an Apothecary

Leo
Training Table Manners

Claire
A Duke's
Competent Daughter

Tilura
Claire's Sweets-loving Sister

Cherie
Claire's
Rambunctious Familiar



**“Allow me to properly introduce myself.
I am Anrinnesse Bastler.
It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”**

Prologue

INTENT on tracking down the merchant whose orcs had nearly wiped out the small village of Lange, the three of us climbed on Leo's back and prepared to ride into the woods—myself in the front, the duke's daughter Claire behind me, and her bodyguard Johanna in the back. I'd noticed that Johanna had a pack of supplies with her, most notable of which was a length of sturdy rope. That would make apprehending the merchant much easier when we caught up to him.

"Take care, Mr. Hirooka, Lady Claire!" the head guard Phillip said with a wave. "I'll hold down the fort here!"

There were a number of injured villagers to attend to, not to mention disposing of all the orc bodies.

Claire nodded to him. "Please do."

"I'll keep a close eye on them," Johanna promised.

"All right, Leo. After that merchant, and hurry!" I said.

"Wuff!"

My former-Maltese-now-silver-fenrir companion Leo nodded intelligently and took off like a rocket toward the city of Ractos.

The merchant we were after had disguised a wagon full of orcs as supplies for making Lange's signature alcohol, intent on wiping the village off the face of the map. He had come directly from the domain of Count Bastler, a man with deep connections to the Yugard store and their fake medicines. We had to find the false salesman and extract whatever information we could from him. Perhaps more importantly, he had to pay for endangering Lange so heartlessly. If not for Leo's timely intervention, there's no telling what would've happened to the villagers.

"Takumi! Takumi?"

I turned back. From the look on her face, Claire had been trying to get my attention for some time.

“Claire? What’s wrong?” I asked.

“No, it’s just... You seemed off. More intimidating, somehow.”

“Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about that merchant.”

Was I thinking too hard about making him pay? Maybe I was getting too angry about it.

“I know how you feel,” she assured me. “Even if Leo slayed the orc that hurt you so badly, it’s ultimately that false peddler’s fault, and I doubt I shall ever forgive him. While your injuries healed, you lost so much blood...”

“I guess you’re right. Thank you, Claire. I’ll try not to get too worked up.”

I felt flattered that she was so worried about me. After one of the orcs hit me on the head, I bled a surprising amount. The loe I grew had healed the wound itself, but the blood I’d lost hadn’t magically restored itself—and as if to prove that point, I felt a light wave of dizziness hit me. Perhaps the blood loss was taking a greater toll than I’d thought.

“How about you, Leo?” I asked. “You ran all the way to Lange, fought off those orcs, and now you’re running again. You’re not too tired, right?”

“Wuff! Worf? *whine*” she replied, not sounding the least bit tired.

“Good, I’m glad to hear it. We couldn’t have done any of this without you. I’m doing fine, but thanks for worrying about me.” I looked behind me for a moment to confirm Claire and Johanna were doing all right before continuing. “Oh, and you can speed up some more if you want.”

“Bark!”

She seemed to be in top form and more worried about me than anything else. I reasoned I’d be fine as long as I didn’t push myself too hard, so it made sense to try and catch the villain we were after in one go. Leo obediently picked up her pace, and I could feel Claire tighten her grip on my clothes from behind me, emphasizing how hard-pressed we were to fit three people.

I took the time to explain the merchants’ misdeeds to Claire and Johanna,

from the plague-spreading doll in the wine cellar to the conversation before they released the orcs. After a while, I finally spotted a pair ahead of us on horseback. The sun had long set, but I still had the effects of a sight-enhancing herb, so I could clearly make them out.

“Wait, is that... That’s them! The merchants!” I spotted.

Each of them was on their own horse, and they were racing down the road toward Ractos.

“I’m impressed you can see them,” came Claire’s voice from behind me. “I can just faintly make out the horses, but I imagine they have to be our targets.”

“Okay. Leo, can you take us closer to them?” I requested.

“Wuff!”

It was far too dark already for Claire or Johanna to see anything. Fortunately, Leo seemed to see just fine in the dark, and she began to close in on the horses.

Once we got closer to them, I whispered to Leo, “Get as close to them as you can and see if you can spook the horses.”

“Ruff!”

There was probably a better way to stop them, but I couldn’t think of anything at the moment. I felt a pang of guilt for their poor horses. Leo panted briskly as she positioned herself right behind them.

“Hah, hah, hah... BARK, BARK!”

“Wh-What the...?! ”

“Steady now! Stea— Oop!”

The horses, terrified of the predator right behind them, began to buck and panic, desperate to get away. Both the merchants tried hard to stay in their saddles and bring their steeds under control, but they fell to the ground, one after the other.

I frankly didn’t care if they got hurt from their tumbles. They were unrelenting in their foul deeds, and not even I could bring myself to pity them now.

Leo chased after the horses and barked for a few more seconds just to make

sure they were both well out of the way before coming to an abrupt stop.

“Thanks, Leo.”

“Woof!”

“Don’t even try to get up!” Claire shouted at the pair. “Johanna, the ropes!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Johanna rushed at the pair of merchants, with Claire following a safe distance behind. She drew the blade at her hip and leveled it at the criminals, despite them being too stunned to stand. I could catch a distinct edge of anger in both the women’s voices, but I frankly couldn’t blame them.

“Gh... Who the hell are you guys?!” one of the merchants cursed at us.

“Ugh, that hurts... What is it now?!”



“Let’s just say we’re here on behalf of His Grace,” Claire replied coolly.

The merchants paled.

“Th-The duke?!”

“No way his goons are in a place like this!”

“Believe it or not, the truth remains unchanged,” Claire said.

Even if they didn’t believe us, Claire was one of the most powerful people in the region, and she had more than enough authority to arrest them both.

“Don’t move a muscle!” Johanna barked. “Resist, and... Miss Leo?”

“GROWF!” Leo snapped, emphasizing her point.

“C-Crap!”

“Wh-What is that *monster*?!”

Given the darkness, they couldn’t properly see her before now. Now that she was close enough, both men flinched away, cowering in fear. Neither of them tried to resist as Johanna bound their arms and legs.

I knew the rope was for tying them up!

While I was glad they didn’t give us any more trouble, I was a little put off by what they said.

“You’re no monster, Leo. You’re the sweetest little pup ever!” I encouraged her.

“Wuff~!”

I gave her a hearty pat on her flank, and she wagged her tail at me lovingly.

“No excuse you can make will absolve you of your crimes,” Claire told the merchants sternly. “You’re coming with us. Should you try to flee...” She glanced purposefully at Leo. “You know what’ll happen.”

“Gh...”

Her threat seemed to work as they both slouched over in resignation.

I was a little disappointed I didn’t have to so much as lift a finger since we

caught up to them. Johanna was better at tying people up and being physically threatening, and Leo kept them subdued in their terror. Surprisingly, even Claire cut an imposing figure as she lectured them, which reminded me of Sebastian at his most intimidating. I was lucky to have such reliable allies, but nonetheless, I felt more than a little useless.

After the merchants were securely bound, Johanna tracked down the frightened horses. “Whoa, there. It’s okay, you can relax. Sorry for threatening you. We won’t hurt you, promise.”

“Wuff...Woof?” Leo apologetically added.

Claire turned to me with a light sigh. “That should settle everything, Takumi. These two won’t be escaping anytime soon.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “I really appreciate it. I guess I wasn’t very useful after all... I can take them on Leo’s back, if you’d like.”

She shook her head. “I’d rather keep them both well away from Miss Leo. We may as well use the horses.”

“That makes sense. If they just see Leo as some monster, they’ve got no right to ride on her.” I agreed with Claire completely. It was nothing but a pleasure to ride Leo, and after all the harm the so-called merchants caused, they frankly didn’t deserve to experience it. “Let’s head back to Lange, then,” I suggested as I helped Claire onto Leo’s back. “I think they could use the help.”

“Up we go... Yes, I imagine so. But please promise me you won’t push yourself too hard.”

I couldn’t tell if she was worried about my injury, or how I barely stopped to catch my breath before riding out to catch the merchants. Probably both, to be honest.

I nodded. “I think I’ve pushed myself enough for today.”

There was no real chance of another orc attack or the like, but it was nice to know I had people who cared about me. Even Johanna nodded in agreement with our plans, and I smiled a little in the darkness.

“Worf? *whiiiiiiiiine*”

“Hahaha, I get it, girl,” I chuckled. “Sorry for worrying you. C’mere.”

I gave her a thank-you scratch behind the ears as I clamored back up and onto her back. She’d saved us a few times today alone, not to mention how she’d worried about me, and I wanted to make sure she was recognized for that.

“I will see these two into a proper holding facility,” Johanna informed us.

“And you’ll be fine alone?” I asked.

She nodded. “I’ll ensure they’re tightly bound to the horse. That should be more than sufficient.”

She’d done a very thorough job of binding them, I noticed, and they were still placid. Leo’s threat must’ve been more effective than I thought.

Claire’s lips pursed with worry. “We’ll see you at the village, won’t we?”

“Yes,” Johanna said. “It’d be foolish to make for Ractos at this hour, so I believe I’d best keep them in Lange for the night.”

That helped ease my worry somewhat. She was clearly used to transporting prisoners by horse, and I supposed she would be fine on her own. It was more than a day’s ride to Ractos, and I doubted she had the supplies for the trip on such short notice.

“Sounds like a plan,” I said. Just before we departed—Claire and I on Leo, Johanna on one horse, and the hostages on the other—I remembered something crucial. “Oh, wait, one more thing before we leave.”

“Is something wrong?” Claire asked worriedly.

“Do you remember how some of the villagers got hurt? Well, I thought I’d grow a few herbs for them here while I had the chance. I didn’t tell them about my ability, after all. Would you mind going on ahead to the village first, Johanna?”

“Oh, good idea,” Claire said, agreeing with my plan.

Johanna nodded. “Very well. In that case, I’ll go ahead with the prisoners. Lady Claire, you should be fine with Miss Leo’s protection alone. I hope to see you both soon, Mr. Hirooka, milady.”

“Bow-wow!”

“I will,” Claire replied. “Don’t let them out of your sight, now. Please do take care.”

“Of course. I swear that I shall see these evildoers back to civilization, where they will be punished. Now, without further ado.” At that, Johanna spurred the horses on, riding back the way we came. Given the burden the second horse was carrying, it’d likely be slow going.

Claire’s brow furrowed. “I had meant, take care that she doesn’t get hurt. I do hope she’ll be okay.”

I chuckled. “I’m sure she understood you.”

Honestly, there was very little that could go wrong. The merchants were bound tightly enough that they couldn’t escape unless the horse toppled over completely. I hoped Claire wouldn’t worry too much.

Ah, I’d better get cultivating. I don’t want to keep them waiting for too long.

As I dismounted Leo, I was hit by another dizzy spell. I was likely a little anemic. The sooner I grew the medicine the village needed, the sooner I could get back on Leo’s back and rest a little.

“Do you need my help, Takumi?” Claire asked.

“Don’t worry, you can stay on Leo. It’ll just be a little Herb Cultivation, and it’s too dark for you to see the ground anyways.”

She grudgingly acquiesced. “All right. But what about you?”

“I still have a bit of the sense-enhancing herb from the orc battle in my system. I can see just fine,” I reassured her.

It didn’t take long to grow a little loe, after all, and then I’d be right back on Leo to ride back to Lange. There was more moonlight slanting through the branches than during our trip to the Fenrir Forest, but it was still too dark to make out the roots and bumps in the road, and I didn’t want Claire to trip and fall.

“Keep an eye on Claire for me, will you, Leo?”

“Woof!”

I wouldn't be going far, but I wanted her to stay alert just in case.

I crouched low to the ground and struck my hand to the earth. Unlike when my head was still spinning from when I was attacked, I had no problem envisioning the loe I wanted. It readily sprung up from between my fingers, and I moved on to make a few more little plants.

“Let's see... I don't know how many people are hurt, exactly, but this should be enough.”

With that, I swiftly picked the leaves and stashed them away. There was enough to cover those with serious injuries, at the very least. I couldn't easily use Herb Cultivation in the village for fear someone would see me, so I was grateful for a quiet moment to grow a little.

“Ruff, ruff!”

Leo nodded eagerly at the amount I'd grown. It seemed as though she approved of the number, and she'd likely gotten a better look at the injured than I had.

“Okay, let's catch up to Johanna.” I turned to Leo apologetically. “Sorry for asking so much of you, girl.”

“Yes, let's get underway,” Claire said.

“Wuff!”

We'd probably catch up with Johanna easily enough, given how little time had passed since she left. The loe's soft spines were awfully uncomfortable in my pocket, but since I didn't have a proper pouch for them, I'd have to grin and bear it. With any luck, Johanna would have a better storage solution for me.

Interlude: Johanna's Speculation

I rode down the forest path under the limited moonlight. My chest swelled with pride in my work for the first time in ages, though I was careful to keep an eye on the prisoners. My official title was Special Guard in Service of the Duke, but I was only “special” because I was charged with the safety of ladies Tilura and Claire. Between the two, I tended to focus on Lady Claire, in part because I’d been assigned to her since she was a little girl. While I did, of course, see to Lady Tilura’s safety as well, Lady Claire kept me plenty busy.

“Mgh! Mmmgh!”

One of the criminals began grunting through the gag in his mouth and straining against his ropes with little success. Not only were his hands and feet tightly bound, but he was also strapped securely to the horse’s back.

“Just give up, cretin,” I said coldly. “You’d be better off saving your energy than flailing about.”

“Gh...!”

He shot me a grudging look, but the man—or rather, the merchants gave in.

“Resigned yourselves to your fate, I see. Did you really think you could escape just because Miss Leo was out of sight? We’ve only barely left her company.”

It had only been a scant few minutes since we set out, and even if either of the men struggled free, the silver fenrir could outpace any horse and catch them in moments. I supposed it made sense for them to try—they didn’t even know what Miss Leo was, after all—but it was laughably futile to my eyes.

As we rode, I carefully scanned the roadside underbrush.

Hm... No sign of anyone else here. Were these two acting alone? I’d best not waste my energy looking for more accomplices, then.

From what I’d heard of their plan from Takumi, however, I’d have imagined it would be more than a two-man job. They could’ve employed a lookout, for

instance, or someone to orchestrate their escape. That would indicate that the progress of the plan was more important than the men. I knew—or rather, I was taught as much during my intensive training to guard His Grace’s estates.

Hmm... Even if there were more culprits to be found, Miss Leo would’ve surely sensed them by now. No point in pushing myself, then. She would tell me if there was anything I should be aware of, I reasoned as I let the tension leave my shoulders. Since she hadn’t picked up on anything during the chase or after the merchants’ capture, I was likely in the clear.

“But I must admit, Miss Leo’s fur was divine. I’ve never ridden her before, and that was simply wonderful. I’ll have to ask to ride her again later. Even petting her—no, just touching her would be more than enough...”

It made sense why Lady Tilura was so obsessed with Miss Leo’s fur. I could still feel the lingering plushness beneath my fingers from my ride into Lange. I knew I looked horribly unprofessional, what with my dopey grin and dreamy muttering, but the merchants were too busy shuddering to notice or care.

Most people assumed I was a serious, cold woman, and I was told by friends and colleagues alike to “loosen up” more. I wasn’t like how I came across to people. I loved all plush, fluffy, cute things like none other. I simply act stern because I know such girlish fancies don’t suit me. Phillip would give me oddly warm looks whenever he caught me staring at Miss Leo, but surely, he hadn’t discovered my secret.

“N-No, it’s too early to relax my guard,” I told myself with a shake of my head. “I hope Lady Claire is managing on her own. If only Mr. Hirooka was a little more receptive to Milady’s feelings... Though I suppose that’s none of my business.”

I’d been at her side long enough to know exactly how she felt about the apothecary.

“Alone with him, on a beautiful night like tonight... Best of luck, Lady Claire!”

When Mr. Hirooka announced his intentions to stay behind for a while, all I could think of was Lady Claire’s golden opportunity. I was confident that Milady herself was none the wiser to my plan. Between the gloom of night, their being alone together, and the relief of such an ordeal under the bridge, I was

convinced that something would happen between them.

“Should I feign ignorance when I see Lady Claire next? Or should I try to tease the information out of her somehow?”

Finally, it occurred to me that neither of them seemed in the right mood, and besides that, they had Miss Leo with them, so they weren't quite alone. It was almost embarrassing that I'd forgotten the latter point, as I was thinking of Miss Leo up until that moment. I had only left them alone because of the silver fenrir. Perhaps I was struck with tunnel vision, much like Lady Claire or her father could be. It might have been that very similarity that made me swear allegiance to her in the first place.

At any rate, I had no way of knowing that Mr. Hirooka had already finished growing his loe and that they were already back on Miss Leo's back at that point.

I stifled a sigh when I realized it later. When it occurred to me that they weren't the type of people to prioritize their feelings during dire times like this, I let out a second, much deeper sigh from the very pit of my stomach.

Chapter 1: The Purchase of Greital Wine and Its Uses

“**WE’VE** returned, Phillip,” Claire announced as we arrived back in Lange. “How are the villagers?”

We reunited with Johanna on our way back and encountered Phillip coordinating the recovery at the village entrance. There were still orc carcasses scattered in the grass, but they were being dealt with little by little, and the stench of blood didn’t seem as strong as it was when we left.

“Lady Claire, Mr. Hirooka, I’m relieved to see you’re both all right. The village is, well...” he hesitated, searching for the words. “It could be better.”

“Did something happen? Miss Leo did defeat all the orcs, didn’t she?” Claire asked.

I remembered that many of the villagers had been injured, and I braced myself for the worst.

“Honestly, it’s a miracle that there were no human fatalities in a monster attack of this scale.”

Claire sighed with relief at Phillip’s words. “So nobody died, then.”

I didn’t know much about monsters, but that seemed like a miraculous outcome, given the nature of the attack.

He nodded. “We have Mr. Hirooka and Miss Leo to thank for that. Still, a few of the villagers were badly injured and will take some time to recover.”

I couldn’t take any credit, however. The villagers did an amazing job of defending themselves, and Leo’s timely arrival prevented things from getting too bad. If she was any slower, I would’ve fared significantly worse, let alone the others. I was glad nobody seemed to be fatally injured, at least.

“Some people can’t move an arm anymore,” Phillip explained. “Others can’t walk anymore, and that’s not the half of it.”

It sounded like some of them had broken bones. Even if they weren’t dead,

losing use of an arm would be life-changing, and it might even cause them problems in the long run after they went back to work.

“I see,” Claire said. “You can rest easy now, though.”

“Do you have a plan?” Phillip asked her.

“Takumi prepared some medicine while we were out.”

“So you can heal the villagers? That’s great!”

He let out a sigh of relief. Phillip had gotten pretty close to the villagers after all his drinking at the banquet, and I could see how much their well-being meant to him now. I felt the same—I couldn’t sit by and watch them suffer after they welcomed us so generously into their homes.

I turned to Phillip. “Can you start gathering as many of the injured as you can in one place? I’ll look at their injuries as soon as I can.”

“Of course, Mr. Hirooka. Right away!”

“Johanna, fetch Hannes for me,” Claire said. “We’ll need his help to find a spot for our impromptu field hospital.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

As the guards ran off to set things in motion, I couldn’t help but notice the merchants were still slumped across the back of the horse. They had both given up trying to break free and hung there, limp. That, I noted with relief, was one less thing to worry about.



“**THANK** you so much for your patience,” Lange’s mayor Hannes said as he welcomed us back. “We’ve already gathered our wounded into the village square.”

“Mr. Mayor—er, Hannes? Is there anywhere we can put these two for the night?” I gestured to the false merchants as I asked, and he squinted at them reproachfully.

“Ah, *them*.”

I wasn’t surprised he was angry at them, after they used his town’s precious

greital wine to spread the plague.

Finally, he nodded. "I believe there's an old house at the edge of the village nobody's using. You can keep them there. Oh, but there's no way of locking the door from the outside, so they may try to escape."

"No need to worry," Claire reassured him. "Johanna?"

Johanna snapped to attention. "Ma'am! Phillip and I will take turns guarding the prisoners. Besides, it would be difficult for them to get away, tied up as they are."

That made sense. Even if they could get the door open, they'd have to find some way to untie themselves first. They could barely stand, even, so if they wanted to get anywhere in the house, they'd have to crawl like worms.

How are they going to use the bathroom if they need to? Oh, well, I'm sure those two will figure something out.

"Please take the prisoners to this house," Claire told Johanna. "Takumi and I will attend to the wounded."

"Roger that."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Very well. Right this way, then," Hannes said, leading the way.

With that, Phillip and Johanna forced the merchants to stand and prodded them to follow the mayor. I was surprised he was being so polite and civil with the crooks, but given the mayor's kindly nature, I doubted he had it in him to be mean. Even if he did, it'd make sense not to cuss them out in front of the duke's daughter.

"Just let me know if they try anything funny!" I shouted after the group. "I can have Leo over there in a jiffy!"

"Bark!"

The merchants' eyes widened. "Mmph?!"

I had no idea what they were saying through their gags, but they were clearly terrified.

Hannes nodded. “Understood. Rest assured, I’ll call for you if these two so much as think of escape.”

There. They won’t be going anywhere now.

I turned back to Claire. “Let’s go see those injured villagers.”

“Yes, let’s.”

With that, I led Claire and Leo to the town square. It didn’t make sense to leave them waiting any longer.

At the edge of the square, Phillip greeted us.

“Right this way, Mr. Hirooka, Lady Claire.”

Claire gasped as he led us to the makeshift infirmary.

“My, how awful!”

There were ten-odd people there, all either lying or sitting on simple mats as other villagers tended to their wounds. Some of them only had scrapes and bruises, while others were wincing as their still-bloody injuries were rebandaged.

“*Whine...*” Leo sniffed at the blood in the air, so strong that even I could pick up on it.

“Are you okay to be here?” I asked Claire worriedly. It couldn’t be an easy sight.

She shook her head firmly, staring intently at each of the injured in turn as if to memorize their faces. “I’ll be fine. I hate seeing them suffer so, but I can’t turn a blind eye to them.”

Part of her duties as the duke’s daughter, huh?

“Miss Leo!” came a girl’s voice from somewhere in the square.

“Bow-wow!”

Rosalie seemed to have spotted us—or rather, Leo—and ran over to see her. She obviously hadn’t fought against the orcs, but from the blood on her hands, I guessed she’d been helping tend to the wounded. When she got closer, though, I could tell she wasn’t her usual peppy self.

“Miss Leo... Everyone’s hurt so bad...”

“Ruff?” She nuzzled Rosalie affectionately, trying to cheer her up.

“Don’t worry,” I told her. “I’ll make sure to heal everyone up.”

It didn’t seem fair that she had to deal with something so heavy. I hated seeing her so depressed.

“Woff!” Leo echoed with a confident nod.

“Really?” Rosalie brightened up a little. “You two can really do that?”

I nodded. “We sure can. You don’t have to worry anymore, okay?”

Since she seemed a bit more at ease, I decided to move right on to healing the wounded.

As I approached, one of the men looked up at me and forced a smile. “Ah, the apothecary. We’ve got you to thank for saving our village. Unfortunately, it looks like this is the end for my arm. Can’t get back to work like this...”

I recognized him from the battle. He’d fought close to me, and after taking a nasty blow to the arm, he’d dropped his weapon and been forced to retreat. I saw him looking at that arm now, wrapped up tightly in bandages with resignation. Blood had stained great swathes of the cloth red, and I knew it had to be incredibly painful. Given how his arm had been smashed, there was probably lasting damage to the bone underneath. With a little practice, he’d be able to eke by on his good arm alone, but he’d never work the same again. I wasn’t surprised he looked ready to give up.

“Don’t worry,” I assured him, “I can handle this.”

I pulled a leaf of loe out of my pocket and carefully shaved off the outer skin with a knife I borrowed from Johanna. Meanwhile, I had one of the other villagers unwind the bandage, revealing his broken and bloody skin.

“Okay,” I finally said, pressing the exposed gel of the leaf onto his wound. “Here goes.”

“Ghh!” He winced in pain as soon as I touched it, but before our very eyes the wound began to seal itself. “Th-The pain’s starting to go away...”

After a few short seconds, not even a scar remained, and the bloody discarded bandages were the only sign he'd ever been hurt.

I know I've seen loe at work plenty now—even on myself—but I can never get over how incredible it is.

"I-I can move it again!" he exclaimed, flexing his arm in wonder. Tears of joy brimmed in his eyes. "It doesn't even hurt now! Thank you! Thank you so much!"

"My pleasure, really. Do you think you'll be able to work again?"

"You bet!"

He seemed better than fine, and I stood up to stretch a little.

"All right, next is..."

"Takumi?" Claire gestured behind me. "Phillip's bringing you the ones too hurt to move, it seems."

"Mr. Hirooka, can you see to this one next?"

Sure enough, Phillip had a villager slung over his back. The poor man was groaning with pain, and he had several small, bandaged wounds. What stuck out to me most, however, was the bloody rags that had been wrapped all around both his legs.

"U-Ugh..." he groaned.

"Don't worry, you'll be okay," Phillip reassured him, carefully laying him to rest on an open mat with another villager's aid. "See, Mr. Hirooka, he can't move either of his legs. He must've been hit pretty hard, since he only just woke up a little while ago."

"Okay. Let me see what I can do."

"Please help him!" one of the villagers begged me.

I slowly unwrapped the bandages to find several deep gashes in either leg, most of which were still oozing blood. He probably had nerve damage with wounds like that. Beside me, Claire put a hand to her mouth in shock. I tried not to flinch away too much as I carefully prepped and applied the next round of

loe.

“Ow!” he cried, flinching. “I-It hurts... Huh? The pain’s starting to go away...”

His expression began to soften somewhat as his wounds stopped bleeding, then sealed. Once the work was done, his eyes flew open again, this time with surprise.

“That should do it,” I told him. “Can you move?”

“Why doesn’t it...? Y-Yeah, I can move.” He climbed to his feet in awe. “I can’t believe it! Thanks, apothecary—and you, too, Phillip!”

I smiled. “I’m just glad you’re better now.”

Beside me, Claire let out a sigh of relief.

“Glad to see you up again!” Phillip said with a grin.

“Yeah! I never thought walking would feel so good!”

From the look of it, the two were friends. He might’ve been one of the villagers Phillip drank with at the banquet a few nights back. That’d make the villager one of the people who drank the guard right off his feet, leaving Phillip to wake up in the wine cellar with a massive hangover and the plague, but I wasn’t going to call him out on it now. If Phillip hadn’t gotten so wasted, I might never have figured out that the doll in the cellar was the source of the epidemic.

“All right, who’s next?” I asked.

After that, Claire, Phillip, and some of the other villagers went around with me one by one to heal everyone who’d been hurt in the attack. Rosalie was so happy to see everyone back on their feet, she clung onto Leo the whole time while crying tears of joy. She must’ve been worried sick about them. Leo nuzzled her reassuringly.

When all the work was done, I let out a sigh of relief. “Good... It looks like I had enough loe for everyone.”

I was careful not to reuse the same leaf of loe on multiple people. Claire and Phillip seemed to think it was wasteful of me, since each leaf had more uses after I finished, but it was for the best. The leaves got bloody in the process, and

even though I was no doctor, I was afraid of accidentally spreading disease. Since I couldn't disinfect the leaves after each use, it only made sense to be careful.

There were some villagers absent from the square with much lighter injuries, but from the sound of it, none of them were injured enough to need loe. If they could still move everything fine and weren't getting sick from infections, I reasoned, they'd be fine recovering naturally.

I guess we should feel lucky only a dozen or so people got badly hurt, including me...but I'm not about to let those "merchants" off the hook so easily.



"THANK you so much for saving our village not once, but twice now!"

"As a representative of House Libert, I must thank you as well."

"N-No, it was nothing, really."

Hannes had welcomed me back into his home after locking up the criminals, and we were relaxing in his living room. I was just about to take a sip of the delicious-smelling tea Hannes's wife had brewed for us when not just the mayor, but even Claire bowed deeply to me in thanks.

"Nonsense!" Hannes insisted. "Without you, those orcs would've overrun us completely. We'd all be dead without your wisdom and guidance."

Claire nodded. "I believe I speak for Father in thanking you for your efforts in Lange. The whole Libert domain is better for your presence."

"Really? Uh... Ahaha..." I looked away and took a big sip of the tea. How was I supposed to reply to that?

Huh... I think I prefer the tea Laila makes back at the mansion. I didn't intend that as an insult to Hannes's wife, but it was a refreshing distraction from being thanked so earnestly.

The awkward mood persisted for a while longer before I finally decided to change the subject.

"So, uh, Claire? I can understand Leo coming, but can I ask why you're here?"

It's a perfectly reasonable thing to ask. I'm not being awkward and evasive, honest.

Although I was grateful for her presence—without her and Leo, the affair with the merchants would've gone far worse—she'd never told me why she came. She'd stayed behind in the first place to get a handle on the Yugard store situation.

“Well, it started back before Leo returned to the mansion...”

With that, she began to explain. She'd been looking into reports from people living in and around Ractos. One such report was from a small village on the border of House Bastler's domain, claiming that the number of orcs in the vicinity had plummeted recently, with no sign of them having been hunted. She'd thought it was strange and was considering the possibility of Count Bastler's involvement when Leo and Phillip returned. Upon hearing their story, her suspicions grew into fear, and she decided to ride back to Lange with Leo—and Phillip and Johanna as bodyguards, of course—to see the situation with her own eyes.

“I'm impressed Sebastian let you go,” I told her.

“Oh, he hated the idea,” she replied with a grimace. “But I was just so nervous... I just knew something bad was going to happen, and I couldn't simply sit and wait.”

Apparently, Sebastian had a similar bad feeling about the situation in Lange, and he didn't oppose her too strongly. He was also more lenient because unlike the foray into the Fenrir Forest, this trip wasn't half as dangerous. After waiting one short day to give Phillip and Leo time to recuperate at the butler's insistence, they set off once again.

“And when you arrived, there were orcs everywhere,” I supplied.

She nodded. “Miss Leo sensed something was off, even before we laid eyes on the village. She must have picked up on the orcs.”

“Leo did?”

That was a bit of a surprise, as she didn't have any sense-enhancing herbs, but it made sense she could detect the battle. She had plenty of experience sniffing

out orcs already.

“Leo seemed rather panicked,” Claire continued, “so the three of us dismounted so she could hurry ahead.”

“So that’s why you didn’t arrive at the same time as her.”

“Yes. Frankly, I was horrified to see my bad feeling was correct.”

She gave me a concerned look. If Leo had arrived at the battle any later, I might not have lived to see her again. At the very least, I would’ve been unable to grow the loe that healed me, let alone chase down the evil merchants. Her clever deduction and intuition were the true saviors of the village.

“I never imagined things would get that bad,” I admitted. “You saved us. Thank you, Claire.”

It felt better thanking her than being thanked, especially when she moved faster and more decisively than anyone to keep us safe.

Claire shook her head. “No, I didn’t really... I’m just glad nobody had to pay the ultimate price today.” She flashed me a small smile of relief before continuing, “Besides, you challenged the orcs head-on to buy all of us invaluable time. You’re the real hero.”

“And we couldn’t be more grateful!” Hannes echoed with another bow, and this time, even his wife joined in.

Don’t tell me they’ll keep thanking me like this? I’d better change the topic again...

I cleared my throat. “Uh, right, I almost forgot. What happened to the doll Leo—or rather, Phillip brought to the mansion?”

“We received it safe and sound,” Claire assured me. “It’s in Isabel’s hands now.”

“Isabel?”

She was the old woman I’d met in Ractos, the magic store owner who taught me about magic and my Gift.

“After all, despite looking like an ordinary toy, it possessed some rather

disturbing capabilities. We don't have the proper facilities for it at the mansion, so we passed it on to Isabel. She deals with all manner of magic items, and she's something of a specialist," Claire explained.

"Okay." I nodded slowly. "Magic items, huh?"

That made sense. It was best to leave it to a professional.

So are magic items in this world just that, enchanted objects or tools? That crystal ball Isabel used to figure out my Gift must've been one such tool. In that case, maybe the doll has even more to it than I could figure out?

I decided to ask more on the subject later. I was dying to learn more.

"Is Isabel going to be okay handling it?" I asked. "What if she gets sick?"

"Not to worry," Claire told me. "We took every precaution. We placed it in a box that can seal magic safely inside it—a box that we bought from Isabel herself, ironically."

"Huh. I didn't know they made those."

She nodded. "As the doll is presently unable to work its magic, there's no chance of anyone falling ill. Knowing Isabel, she won't open the box without having safety measures in place."

That made sense. The creepy feeling of her shop wasn't just a front—in fact, I wouldn't be surprised at this point if the store itself was enchanted.

"We can just leave it to her, then," I agreed. "Oh, but about those criminals..."

"For today, I'll have Phillip and Johanna watch them carefully," Claire said. "We can interrogate them tomorrow. I believe it'd be best to let everyone cool their heads a little."

I nodded. "Yeah, the villagers come first. It's not like they're going anywhere, and not everyone has fully recovered yet."

We had to get the merchants' side of the story, at least, and figure out all we could about their employers. For today, however, there was still the lingering shock and fatigue of the orc attack. I remember seeing Phillip and Johanna taking turns watching the house-slash-jail and calming down the villagers, and it would be unwise to push the people any further. Even Leo and Rosalie were

patrolling about to comfort people, especially the children.

“Exactly,” Claire said. “Oh, and one more thing. Sebastian should be arriving tomorrow.”

I blinked in surprise. “Sebastian?”

“He couldn’t fit on Miss Leo, unfortunately, but he should be riding in sometime tomorrow.”

Of course he wouldn’t send Claire out here and do nothing himself.

It sounded like we’d have his aid for the interrogation, then, and I was glad to have him.

“Wait, that reminds me...”

Talking about Sebastian reminded me of something strange that happened during the fight with the orcs. I still had no idea what had happened then, but I was confident that the butler could help me figure it out.

“Is something the matter, Takumi?” Claire asked.

“No, it’s just... Something weird happened with my Gift during the battle—”

“Do we need to discuss that now?” she cut me off briskly, shooting a sidelong glance at Hannes.

“N-No, I don’t. It’s not that urgent.”

I’d almost forgotten that to the villagers, I was simply an apothecary. None of them knew about my power, and it’d be better to keep it that way.

Some of the tension left Claire’s shoulders. “We’ll talk about it later, then.”

“Sure. I think it’d be better to talk it out with you before Sebastian gets here, anyways.”

That would let me get my thoughts in order, after all.

We stopped talking about my Herb Cultivation, and before long, Claire and Hannes left to address the villagers and assure them everything was officially under control. It marked the official end of the ordeal, and although Hannes and some of the other villagers wanted to mark the occasion with a banquet and some of the finer greital wine, we settled on a very late dinner instead.

Leo and Rosalie played with the village kids until they were all tucked out, and after Leo ate her fill of sausages, she sauntered into the stable to sleep with the horses.

Thanks, girl. You really saved us.

“Woof,” she replied simply, as though she could hear my thoughts. We really were in sync, and I let that simple joy carry me back to Hannes’s house to sleep.



“**PLEASE** pardon the intrusion, Takumi.”

“Claire? What brings you here?”

I’d only just laid down in bed after washing up when Claire arrived at the door. She was to stay in Hannes’s house as well, but she of course had her own room.

“It’s getting pretty late,” I remarked as she came in. “Is something wrong?”

“Well, once I started thinking about what you said earlier, I couldn’t stop myself.”

She giggled mischievously, and though I hadn’t seen her drinking, her cheeks were blushing bright red. My first thought was that she probably wouldn’t be allowed in any man’s room at this hour, but with nobody to caution her, I decided to stay quiet.

“It’s your fault for bringing up such an interesting topic,” she chided me playfully. “I know I was the one who stopped you earlier, but if I don’t get the details from you now, who knows when I’ll have the chance? I was dying of curiosity after our forest trip, after all, and I waited *ages* for the details.”

“Oh, right... About my Gift.”

Just one look at her face told me she wasn’t exaggerating. She was practically bubbling over with excitement. I remembered how long it took me to tell her about my Herb Cultivation research last time, what with the trip to the forest distracting us.

“You should probably come in and sit down,” I suggested, moving the only chair in the room closer to the bed. “Go ahead.”

“Oh, thank you.”

It'd probably be comfier for her on the bed, but with the two of us being alone and all...th-that's crossing the line.

As I became mired in my thoughts, Claire approached me and moved to sit. Her hand moved to the back of the chair, inadvertently brushing against my fingers in the process.

“Ah...”

I was *not* expecting that. My entire body flinched away as I pulled my hand back toward my chest.

“T-Takumi?” she asked worriedly, startled by my reaction.

I fumbled for words. “I, uh, um...”

“Did I do something to upset you?” She seemed to deflate a little as she took a step back and away from the chair.

“N-No, it's just...” I swallowed hard. “Sorry. You didn't do anything wrong, but it has to do with my Gift. I hope you won't think I'm weird because of it...”

“Of course I won't.”

She stayed sullen, however, as she sat down. I felt a pang of guilt. It wasn't her fault, really.

“So, uh... This happened during the fight with the orcs,” I started.

“It has to do with your Herb Cultivation Gift, correct?”

“Yeah.”

I sat down on the bed facing Claire with a short sigh. I'd had my Gift ever since arriving in this world, but sometimes I felt I was no closer to understanding it than I was back then.

“Basically, I touched an orc and my Gift activated.”

“Activated? How, exactly?”

“You know how I can grow herbs just by thinking of one and putting my hand against the ground?”

Up until that point, I'd grown most of my herbs in the back garden of Claire's home, a villa belonging to House Libert. I naturally assumed that the herbs, like the vast majority of plants, had to be in the ground. During the battle, however, I'd accidentally grown my plants somewhere else entirely. I couldn't remember the exact details, but I tried to remember as best I could.

"I made herbs grow *in* an orc—in its chest," I confided. "I just touched it there and herbs grew."

"In *what*?"

"I was thinking about plants, like I always do to activate my Gift, and it just... happened. Here, this is the plant I grew."

I showed her the herb, which I'd picked from the orc just in case before we went to track down the merchants. It was identical to the herbs I'd made before on our forest expedition, so I was convinced it had the same effect—not that I was keen on eating something that grew out of a living creature.

"Not only that," I continued, "it seemed like the orc died as soon as it started growing. I'm not sure it was the exact same time, of course..."

"It was the middle of a battle, after all. I'm not surprised you don't remember. Still, this is...well..." She grew silent as she began to think it over.

"Does anything about this ring a bell?"

"I can't say for certain, but all plants need nutrients from the soil in order to live, don't they?"

"Yeah," I nodded.

Technically, they needed fertile ground, sunlight, water, and carbon dioxide, but I wasn't going to correct her over every little science detail. She wasn't wrong.

"What if, when you tried to grow something on the orc, its 'nutrients'—you could even say its life force—was absorbed so the herb could grow? Would that explain it?" she ventured.

"Straight from the orc?" I paused. "But wait, what about the back garden?"

It made sense the herb needed nutrients, but if it needed enough energy to

suck an orc's life force dry, the back garden should be a nutrient-bare wasteland. When I left, however, there were even lush beds of native flowers growing there.

"I don't know about that," she admitted. "Maybe it works on soil differently? Or maybe..."

"Do you have an idea?"

"The sun had set completely at that point in the battle, hadn't it?"

"Yeah."

"What if that's the reason?" she suggested.

"So it killed the orc because there was no sun?"

That honestly didn't sound very likely. I'd used Herb Cultivation plenty after dark in the back garden, and there were no weird side effects then.

"Sebastian told me about some recent research he'd heard about—that plants require the light of the sun in order to grow," she said.

"Hm..."

That tracked with what I knew, of course. It didn't technically have to be sunlight, as some modern lamps could replicate the sun, but most plants needed one or the other.

"But what if the orc wasn't getting enough sunlight?" she continued. "The back garden is in the sun most days, after all."

"Sunlight, huh..."

"Orcs spend most of their time in deep forests, so it's possible they don't encounter the sun very often. Also, consider that they spent who-knows-how-long in that covered wagon."

"That *does* make sense..."

It still didn't quite click for me. Plants need direct sunlight, not indirect or residual light.

"The earth takes its energy from the sun's warmth, but because the orcs aren't in the sun enough, they must not have enough energy. Herb Cultivation

needs that energy to grow plants, so it sucked the orcs dry...or at least, that's my theory," Claire said.

"Okay... I think I get it."

Her theory didn't make a lot of sense scientifically, but that wouldn't be the first time this world worked differently from my own. Maybe in this world, instead of plants photosynthesizing, they took in solar energy through their roots?

"Again, it's only a theory," she emphasized. "The bigger question, though, is why it worked on the orc at all."

"Yeah... I never imagined growing herbs anywhere except in the ground."

Realization lit up in her eyes. "Oh! Is that why you flinched away from me so suddenly?"

"Well...it's never happened to anyone living before today, so I'm not that worried. Still, I can't imagine what I'd do if I hurt you like that. I guess I was more startled than anything. I'm sorry."

I'd never feared Herb Cultivation before, but now I couldn't stop thinking about it. I could never forgive myself if I hurt Claire—or anyone else, for that matter.

She let out a sigh of relief. "I must admit, I was afraid I'd done something to make you hate me. I think I understand your fears now. I'd be frightened, too."

"Yeah..."

In so little time, I'd gone from thinking my Gift was borderline useless to incredibly helpful, and now *this*. I'd never even considered that I could use such an innocuous skill to kill living beings so effortlessly, and it felt more unfair than anything else.

I might never be able to touch anyone ever again at this rate, at least not without a really good reason.

"I'm hardly an expert, of course," Claire added. "We should wait for Sebastian's opinion, or perhaps bring this up with Isabel."

"I can understand Sebastian, but why Isabel?" I asked.

“She’s surprisingly knowledgeable, especially when it comes to Gifts. She may know something we don’t—and we’ll have to visit her to ask about the doll anyway.”

“That makes sense... Talking to her about it can’t hurt. We’ll start by bringing it up with Sebastian, though.”

They both seemed the type to always have answers, after all.

With that, I glanced at the clock and realized just how late it was getting.

“Oh, we’d better get some sleep soon. I bet you’re tired after the trip here,” I said.

“Well, not as much as during our forest expedition...”

She hadn’t had to walk very much, so I wasn’t worried about the physical fatigue as much as I was the mental toll. It was a long trip even on Leo’s back, and chasing after the merchant likely took its toll as well. I didn’t want to keep her up too late and leave her exhausted in the morning.

“You can’t exactly sleep in my room,” I said. “Not like you did the night I left.”

I’d meant it as a playful joke, but the words caught in my throat, and my cheeks felt a little hot. Everyone had slept over that night, even Leo, so it felt more natural. This room was far more cramped, though, and the thought of sleeping in such close quarters with her made me lightheaded. I mean, there was only a single bed, not to mention I had to avoid touching her just in case my Gift acted up.

She averted her gaze shyly and began to mutter to herself. “Personally, I don’t see that as...”

“You what?”

Her eyes snapped open in shock, and she hurriedly stood to leave. “I— Nothing! Nothing at all! Good night, Takumi!”

“U-Uh, yeah. Good night.”

I’d barely squeezed the words out when she turned and bolted out of the room, hurriedly shutting the door behind her. I didn’t even know if she heard me wish her good night.

That joke didn't make her uncomfortable, did it?

Somehow, that didn't feel right—at least not from what I was able to see in the room's faint lamplight. If anything, she seemed bashful.

"I'll have to avoid crass jokes like that in the future," I chastised myself. "Sebastian would have a field day if he saw that. I'm glad Eckenhart isn't here, or he might rip me in half."

Claire's father, Duke Eckenhart Libert, was a kind soul, but the thought of the imposing man sent me shivering under my covers.

Today was hectic, and I've got Claire and Leo to thank for making it out at all.

With that, I faded into a deep slumber.



THE next morning, Hannes's wife made Claire and me breakfast. Our hostess seemed worried her cooking wasn't fit for a duke's daughter, but Claire ate it readily.

After we'd finished, I took Leo her food while Claire checked on the guards with Hannes, then continued on to patrol the village. Leo seemed to be getting along great with the horses, and after she'd had her fill of sausage, she went to play with Hannes's granddaughter Rosalie, along with Rye and the other village children.

Active as ever, I see.

Most of the villagers seemed to be relaxing, intent on recovering from the previous day's ordeal. Some of them were still slightly injured, and they all needed to de-stress after the near-invasion.

As an aside, the loe from last night was officially "brought by Lady Claire from the mansion," and she was intent on paying me in full for the villagers' treatment. I didn't want to accept the money, of course, but I was grateful for the loe alibi. Sebastian would be brokering a deal with the village itself, apparently.

I spent the morning watching Leo play with the kids until about noon, when Sebastian finally arrived. He was riding in the carriage typically reserved for

Claire's use and was accompanied by a full entourage of guards and servants alike. I'd thought he would want to get right to interrogating the criminals, but instead he asked us for a full account of what happened. It was amusing that for once, Claire and I were the ones explaining things to him.

"My, what an ordeal," he mused. "It seems Lady Claire's premonition was correct."

We had borrowed Hannes's living room to sit down for the discussion. It was only the three of us, as Hannes was overseeing the processing of the orc meat into preserves. They'd have pork for months, no doubt. We also discussed how we should question the merchants, but before we got to the interrogation itself, I changed the topic.

"By the way, Sebastian, Claire. I need to talk to you about something first."

The silver-haired butler arched an eyebrow. "Oh? And what would that be?"

"What about?" Claire asked.

I felt I had to discuss the contaminated greital wine with them. Isabel had yet to confirm that the doll was lacing the liquor with the disease, but since we were fairly certain that was the case, we had to discuss what to do with it. It felt wasteful to throw out such a wonderful drink, but there might not be any other choice.

"What should we do with the wine Leo marked as infected?" I asked.

Sebastian stroked his chin. "Hmm... *It is* a rather famous liqueur in Ractos..."

"The doll is the source of the infection?" Claire asked. "You're sure?"

"I don't know how it works, exactly, but yeah. The village's main stock is now plague-free, but we were too late to save some of it."

According to Leo's nose, a few barrels were spoiled. I was hoping they would know some way of purifying it, or at least putting it to good use somehow.

"It would indeed be drinkable if we were to remove the disease somehow," Sebastian said slowly, "but the wine *is* the indisputable source of the epidemic, both here and in Ractos."

Claire nodded gravely. "Whatever we do, we must be careful with it."

“So you don’t think it’s possible?” I asked.

It’d be fine without the contagion in it, but the publicity alone would make things difficult. Nobody would risk getting sick over a little booze, and if someone drank the infected stock by accident, the disease could begin spreading from person to person again. It still seemed a waste, but there were too many risks to do anything with it.

“Why don’t we buy the infected wine, then?” Claire suggested.

“Buy it?” I repeated with uncertainty.

“Dealing with it properly may prove difficult, and it’s no use to anyone in its current state,” Claire explained. “Besides, I can’t stand to watch the villagers throw away the fruits of their labor so easily. It *is* wine, after all.”

“It would be foolish to dispose of it wantonly,” Sebastian agreed.

Given the size and number of barrels to be thrown out, it’d be a hassle to transport them out, so they’d probably be thrown out close to the village. If any of the wine seeped into rivers, streams, or even groundwater, it could be disastrous. That ruled out just dumping it somewhere, and burying the barrels would likely contaminate the wells.

“Besides,” Sebastian continued, “it would be far more practical to find some practical application than devote precious time and energy to simply discarding it.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

They couldn’t do much to dispose of it, after all.

“We could store it safely until we can find something better to do with it,” Claire said.

“Yes, I’m sure none of our staff would use it without due reason.”

The mansion staff would no doubt be extremely careful in handling the infected wine, and while there was still the issue of transporting the barrels, it would buy us plenty of time.

“But is there any need to purchase it outright?” Sebastian asked. “The wine is as good as useless to the villagers and taking it off their hands would be a boon

in and of itself.”

“They’d suffer quite the blow financially,” she reasoned. “Though I’m not proposing we buy at regular market value, of course.”

Lange had lost a good many barrels to the merchants’ deception, and as it was, those losses were coming out of their own pockets. I couldn’t imagine it would bankrupt them or anything extreme like that, but they’d struggle to get by until the next batch sold, no doubt. Hannes himself had admitted they’d have to live frugally for a while.

“I agree with Claire completely,” I said. “I was considering compensating the villagers for their losses myself, if I had to.”

Not that I had any means of doing so, of course. I couldn’t transport the barrels and there was nowhere for me to store them, so I’d all but given up on the idea.

“You both think so?” Sebastian mulled. “I’ve no grounds to refuse you, then. In fact, I daresay my negotiation skills will be needed to settle the price!” He chuckled good-naturedly at the thought.

It’s hard to believe he was so against it just a minute ago...

Claire rolled her eyes at him. “You knew I was going to suggest it from the beginning, didn’t you?”

“Not quite. I thought it just as likely Mr. Hirooka would suggest it—though admittedly, it never occurred to me that you would *both* come to the same conclusion independently.”

From the way he averted his gaze and smirked, however, I knew he was teasing us again. He likely knew we would decide on that sooner or later—and knowing him, he would’ve suggested it himself if neither Claire nor I suggested it first.

“Did you, now?” Claire arched an eyebrow at him.

He chuckled. “Do you dislike agreeing with the young sir that much, milady?”

She pointedly turned away from the both of us. “I-I never said that!”

Obviously, she was trying to hide something, but I didn’t let it bother me.

“So, we’ve agreed to buy the infected wine?” I ventured, trying to bring the conversation back on track.

“I believe so. Leave all further negotiations to me,” Sebastian said. “I shall ensure the transaction suits House Libert and Lange both.”

“Just remember to restrain yourself,” Claire reminded him.

It would be all too easy to get carried away, after all, especially with the strife the village had gone through. Buying the wine for too much may cause problems for House Libert, but too little would do nothing to aid the village’s recovery. Claire’s warning seemed more like a formality than anything, though, and I didn’t doubt Sebastian would do both sides justice.

“One more thing,” I added. “I know my only income is from the herbs I sell you, but I’d like to pay for half the wine.”

Sebastian gave me a curious look. “Oh?”

“But this is a transaction between House Libert and Lange alone,” Claire reminded me. “There’s no need for you to have any hand in it.”

“I know, but I’ve never actually liked wine before the villagers treated me to theirs, and I want to do what I can to repay them,” I said. “Besides, I was the one who raised the subject, and it wouldn’t feel right to saddle you with the burden.”

I would’ve done what I could to help even if we hadn’t discussed it together, but that was neither here nor there. I felt I owed it to the villagers, given all the kindness they’d shown me—even though I wasn’t confident enough in my income to buy that much wine at full price.

Claire and Sebastian both tried to talk me out of it, but I was determined to hold my ground. In the end, Claire proved every bit as stubborn, and we finally settled on a 75-25 split of the cost.

Sebastian gave me a curt nod. “With that out of the way, we’d best discuss how to transport the wine.”

We hadn’t brought Hannes in on our plan yet, but it felt safe to assume the deal would go through one way or another. The issue with transporting the

wine was not only the size, but the number of the barrels. It was too far to roll or carry them by hand.

“I fear we must head for Ractos first,” the butler reasoned.

Lange had wagons and horses for transporting their goods, but we couldn’t reappropriate them for the full trip back to the mansion. There was the covered coach the merchants had carried the orcs in, but at some point in the struggle, it had broken such that we couldn’t use it for the wine. That meant we’d have to rent or buy wagons in the city first.

Claire did some mental math. “I suppose it would take ten days or so to ship it back to the mansion.”

“If we sent out a rider to fetch wagons from Ractos, yes,” Sebastian agreed.

It was a three-day ride to the mansion, two if one hurried. I could only imagine it would be slower with cargo-laden wagons, so ten days seemed like a fair estimate.

“I can ride Leo into Ractos,” I offered. “That should reduce the time spent getting the wagons ready, at least. Though there’s not much Leo can do to speed up the transport itself.”

Leo loved giving people rides, so she’d probably jump at the chance to ride to Ractos. Despite all the running she’d been doing lately, she seemed to have plenty of energy for another trip—though if she was tired or didn’t want to, we could easily find a workaround.

“You’re still recovering,” Claire chided me. “Shouldn’t you take some time to rest? Your injuries were quite dire.”

“From what I’ve heard, you lost a substantial volume of blood,” Sebastian added. “I believe you should rest for a few days, even if your wounds themselves have healed.”

As much as I wanted to push back against them, they were right. I couldn’t recover my lost blood with loe, and while I’d encountered no issues in my everyday life, the lightheadedness I’d felt during our pursuit of the merchants was a clear sign I had yet to fully recover. I thought Sebastian was overreacting a little, but I couldn’t see the harm in resting for the rest of today. Even though

I'd been pacing my Gift use properly, I didn't want to faint some other way and become a burden again.

"Besides," the butler continued, "there's no need for you to visit Ractos. Why, with Miss Leo's aid, we can have the next best thing."

"Oh? Like what?"

He grinned. "As long as *someone* makes the trip, we'll be golden."

Something about the look on his face gave me a bad feeling, but I was confident that he wasn't planning anything truly evil...at least, I hoped not.



"PHILLIP?"

"Oh, Mr. Hirooka...hahh..." he sighed.

Claire and I followed Sebastian outside after we finished our talk, and it seemed he'd already spoken with Phillip. He seemed outright exhausted.

"I was just asking Phillip to ride to Ractos for us," Sebastian started.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" I asked him. "I know that's what you were thinking, but Phillip looks exhausted."

"He's..." Claire cut herself off, realization dawning in her eyes. "Oh, I understand."

I wasn't following. It didn't seem as though he hated the idea of the trip to Ractos itself. Maybe he was just that tired?

"I'd give it up if I were you," Sebastian warned him evilly. "I've heard all about your little escapade."

"Guh..." Phillip grimaced.

I gave Sebastian a blank look. "His what?"

"Sweet, naïve little Takumi," Claire tut-tutted. "Don't you remember how drunk Phillip got the night you arrived in the village?"

"Wait... Is that what this is about?"

Not only did Phillip get drunk after the banquet the villagers threw for us, but

he'd wandered into the storehouse and passed out there. One of the villagers must have told Claire or Sebastian about it. I didn't bring it up because his buffoonery led to the doll's discovery, but it wasn't how one of the duke's guards should be acting on official business. The punishment itself was light, no doubt for the same reason I didn't mention it earlier, but word would surely get out to Johanna and his other subordinates if it hadn't already. That explained his sighing, then.

Sebastian shook his head gravely. "For one of the duke's own men to lose himself in drink... What a pitiful sight indeed."

"Gnnh..." Phillip shriveled up a little.

"I'll get Leo, then," I suggested.

"Please do—and should Miss Leo refuse to carry him, I'm sure I can find a horse to do so in her stead. I'll see to it that he arrives in short order either way," Sebastian said.

"I'll go with you to fetch her!" Claire offered readily.

I didn't think she'd turn down the chance to go for another run. I tried to ignore the pitiful look the guard captain cast me as I turned to leave. It wasn't my fault he drank himself silly, and there wasn't much I could do for him now.

With that, Claire and I left to recruit Leo.



"...**SO** anyhow, can you give Phillip a ride to Ractos?"

"Werf...woof?"

Claire and I called Leo out of the game she was playing with the local kids to explain the situation to her. She replied after a moment's thought, and I could tell from the way she tilted her head that she was worried about me. At a guess, she was worried I'd be attacked by orcs again while she was gone.

"Don't worry," I told her with a reassuring pat. "Stuff like that doesn't happen too often, and we've already caught the criminals responsible for the last attack. Besides, Sebastian brought tons of guards from the mansion, so I should be fine no matter what. Okay?"

With all the guards in the village, I'd have more than enough people to protect me even if there was another monster attack.

"Ruff."

"Okay, yeah, I guess I told you the same thing last time..."

When she carried Phillip back to the mansion, I'd reassured her in the same way, but I had no way of knowing there was an orc attack incoming.

I'm glad she's worried about me, but still...

"I understand full well that you're worried about Takumi," Claire told her. "When I arrived to find him injured, it felt as though a sword had been driven through my heart."

A sword...? Isn't she overreacting a little? I quickly dismissed the thought. I was in rough shape then, and I could only imagine how bad all that blood looked.

"But despite that...no, *because of that*, I will swear on the name of Duke Eckenhart himself that my men and I will defend Takumi with my life. I promise you that no harm will befall him in your absence."

"Boff..."

Their eyes met in solidarity.

I didn't think it was worth fussing so much over—especially since Sebastian made it clear he wouldn't force Leo to go—but I didn't say anything. Claire's words carried a gravity that implied she meant not just for this trip, but well into the future. It was a little awkward to have *her* swear to protect *me*, but I swallowed my pride.

"Wuff." Leo nuzzled me.

"Huh? Haha, easy, girl."

I was confused for a moment, but I got the message and started scratching her chin with both hands readily enough.

After enjoying my pets for a moment, she looked up and turned to Claire. "Whine... Woooo!"

“Miss Leo?” Claire started in surprise.

“She says ‘deal’,” I interpreted.

“Thank you very much, Miss Leo.” She bowed her head deeply.

“Woo-woo!” Leo eagerly rubbed her cheek against her in thanks.

“Oh!” Claire tensed for a moment, but quickly relaxed with a light chuckle and began stroking Leo with both hands. “Don’t worry, I’ll take good care of him.”

It appeared they understood each other well enough to not need me to translate. I was a little jealous, honestly, but it wasn’t hard to guess what Leo was getting at.

With that, the three of us headed to the village gates, where Sebastian and Phillip were already waiting for us. They had already made all the preparations for the trip, and I noticed they even had a horse tethered to a nearby fencepost just in case Leo wanted to stay. Johanna was also there, so I figured the other guards were watching the merchants.

“Now then,” Sebastian said to Leo, “you’re free to return as you please once Phillip is safely in town. If at any point you need to rest, simply inform him and do so.”

She nodded readily. “Ruff! Warf, arf!”

“She said she can run both ways, no need to rest,” I interpreted before turning to my sweet pup. “Thanks for worrying about me, but don’t push yourself too hard. Promise you’ll take a break if you need it.”

Even though she seemed full of energy, she’d been running a lot the past few days, and I was worried she was more fatigued than she was letting on. I gave Phillip a fatigue-relieving herb just in case she needed it, but that wasn’t a replacement for a proper rest.

“Woooo. Ruff, ruff!”

I’m not tired at all! she told me. Granted, it seemed like she’d be more than fine.

“Please take this as well.” Just as Phillip was about to mount Leo, Sebastian handed him a small barrel that held about a liter. “This is the aforementioned

greital wine,” he explained. “I thought you may as well take Isabel a sample of the infected drink while you’re there.” He paused to stare the guard captain in the eyes. “Under no circumstances are you to drink it. Understand?”

“O-Of course!” Phillip stammered awkwardly, tucking the barrel safely under one arm.

It was Claire’s idea to have him pass on a sample to Isabel, and the villagers readily did as she asked. Having a sample of the tainted wine could help Isabel understand the doll—and if she found a means of purifying the wine itself, that would be the icing on the cake.

With that, Sebastian nodded in satisfaction. “Very well, then. Remember, wagons for transportation and the barrel goes to Isabel. We’re counting on you.”

“Understood,” Phillip replied sternly.

I gave Leo a goodbye pat on the flank. “Have a safe trip, girl.”

Claire nodded regally. “Thank you once again, Miss Leo.”

“Ruff!”

With one last bark, Leo sprinted off into the woods with Phillip clutching onto her back. We stood together and watched the pair until they passed out of sight. Then, Sebastian was the first to turn and lead us back into the village.

“Next order of business, then—interrogating the merchants. I do hope they’ll entertain me!”

“Uh...S-Sebastian?”

He had a broad smile on his face, but his eyes were steely and hard. It sent a chill down my spine.

“For once, I won’t ask you to restrain yourself,” Claire said. “Milk them for every scrap of information they’re worth.”

“C-Claire?”

She was just as intimidating. If I could see auras like in action manga, I bet they’d be giving off great clouds of black energy.

Sebastian nodded firmly. “As you will it. Johanna, see that Mr. Hirooka and milady are properly tended to.”

“Understood!”

With that, he strode off toward the prison-house with a loud, echoing laugh. Judging from the looks on the surrounding villagers’ faces, they would be hearing that laugh in their nightmares for weeks to come.



SEEING as the interrogation was in Sebastian’s eager hands, Claire and I relaxed in the village square and watched the children play. I recognized Rosalie and Rye among them—all the kids, regardless of age or gender, were playing together equally. A few of the villagers had set out a table for us, and one of the mansion’s maids made us tea.

“They must be having so much fun,” Claire remarked. “Something about children at play puts me at ease.”

She took a sip of tea and rested her cup back on its saucer in a fluid, practiced motion. It was elegant in a way I couldn’t describe, and something about her smile as she watched the kids seemed genuinely fulfilled. Maybe because she had such a young sister, she seemed to love kids. I felt another small wave of relief that whatever intensity had possessed her and Sebastian when they talked about the interrogation was gone now.

I looked out into the square. “I bet some of the kids are sad to see Leo gone, but I’m just glad they’re all okay. It really makes fighting those orcs feel worth it...though I guess Leo saved us all in the end.”

“You can’t wash your hands of all the credit,” she reminded me. “The village would’ve been in far worse shape if not for your efforts. You saved these children as much as anyone else.”

I awkwardly looked away. “Haha... Yeah, maybe.”

Even back in Japan, Leo loved kids, and she played with them as often as she could. That must’ve brought out the love of kids in me along the way. If my actions helped them or their parents make it out okay, then maybe—just maybe—it was okay to feel a little proud of myself.

Claire watched me for a long time before opening her mouth again. “You sometimes—no, you almost always push yourself too hard. I’m as grateful as anyone for your efforts here, but please try to take better care of yourself.”

There was an almost pouting tone to her voice.

“Hahaha... Honestly, when I was facing down all those angry monsters, I found myself wondering what in the world I was doing there,” I admitted.

I’d been forcing myself to do the impossible ever since my days in the office in Japan. I wasn’t fighting for my life in the same sense, but I did work myself half to death. Still, I never imagined I’d try to buy time for a whole village to flee in the face of such a literally monstrous opponent. Even I didn’t understand how I did it. Maybe I wanted to repay the villagers’ kindness somehow? That was my best guess, and it still didn’t explain where all that courage came from.

“I... I think I was convinced that if I stood up to fight, everyone else might be saved,” I started slowly. “It didn’t even occur to me to run away. It just... happened that way.”

Claire nodded thoughtfully. “Self-sacrifice is a noble and virtuous thing, but you keep forgetting that there are people who would genuinely miss you if you were gone. Take Miss Leo, for instance, or the servants.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Johanna and the maid nod in total agreement.

I don’t know if I’m really self-sacrificing material, but thinking back on everything that’s happened up till now, I suppose she’s right. Even back in Japan, I took on my coworkers’ burdens like they were nothing... I guess I had the noble soul of a martyr this whole time.

It wasn’t anything to joke about, though. She was right, and I was genuinely grateful I meant something to so many people.

I dipped my head to Claire. “Thank you, and sorry for making you worry so much.”

I’d trained my body enough that I could take scrapes or bruises in stride, but I owed it to her and everyone else to avoid danger more proactively. It wasn’t fair to make them worry.

“Wait.” I stopped bowing and looked up at her. “So, *you’re* not worried about me?” Once I stopped to think about it, I realized she never said she herself was concerned for me.

Claire pointedly turned away from me. “O-Of course I’m worried,” she muttered bashfully. “How could I not be?”

Behind her, the maid rolled her eyes with a soft sigh.

I didn’t say anything wrong, did I?

“I’m glad to know that you care about me, but, um, sorry. I’ll keep my thoughts to myself,” I added hurriedly.

It was the truth, but for some reason, Claire pursed her lips and glared at me playfully.

“Oh, honestly!”

I could tell she wasn’t upset.

I’ll have to keep myself well out of danger from now on.

For now, though, I was content that the air between us had been cleared somewhat.

We continued to relax in the afternoon sun for a while, until one of the children whose name I didn’t know approached and tugged lightly on Claire’s clothes. She was smaller than Tilura—maybe not even out of kindergarten, by my world’s standards.

“Um, where did Miss Leo go?” she asked.

“H-Hey, don’t do that!” Rosalie called after the girl, breaking out of the game she’d been playing to scold the little one. “You can’t bother her, she’s important!”

Claire giggled. “It’s all right, Rosalie.” She gently took the toddler by the hand, sliding off her seat so that she could look the girl in the eyes. “I’m sorry, sweetie, but Miss Leo already left on an important mission.”

“Oh,” she replied sadly, drooping. “Um, is she coming back soon?”

Claire stopped to think. “Well...”

Leo had left only a short while ago, and it was a several-day ride on horseback. I doubted she'd be back for the rest of the day, especially since she couldn't run at top speed without shaking Phillip off. My best guess was that they'd arrive sometime that evening, and since she'd need to have dinner and sleep, I reasoned she'd be back late the next day if she left in the morning. Even at top speed, I doubted she could make the journey in less than three hours.

"She'll probably be back tomorrow evening," I told the girl in Claire's stead. "Can you wait until then?"

She thought for a moment, then nodded. "Okay! I can wait!"

Rosalie dipped her head apologetically once more. "I'm so sorry, Lady Claire, Mr. Hirooka!" She turned around and led the girl away by the hand. "Let's go play with everyone else while we wait, okay?"

"Okay!"

Oddly enough, I got the impression Rosalie was a little more mature than when she was at the mansion or with Hannes. She seemed almost like a big sister.

Claire smiled warmly after them as she took her seat once more. "Perhaps if I'd brought Cherie, she could've played with the children in Miss Leo's stead."

"Yeah." I thought of Claire's little white fenrir pup. "If the way she plays with Tilura or the orphans in Ractos is anything to go by, she'd have a great time here. I guess Sebastian didn't bring her, did he?"

"With both of us gone, not to mention Miss Leo, I was afraid Tilura would be as lonely as during our forest expedition."

"That makes sense. I bet she'll do a great job of keeping Tilura company while you're away."

The mansion was a big place to be without a playmate, and Cherie would help make it feel that much less intimidating. The two were great friends—so close, in fact, that Leo was jealous of the little dog at first. Tilura was attached to Cherie from the moment she laid eyes on her, after all.

With that, Claire and I continued to chat elegantly over our tea as we wasted

away the afternoon—although to be fair, Claire was the only one doing anything elegant.



AS the sun began to set and dinnertime quickly approached, Sebastian finally emerged from the prison-house. The kids had long since returned home by that point, and Claire and I had retired to Hannes's house.

"You were longer than I'd expected," Claire remarked as he came inside.

"My apologies, milady. It would likely have gone more smoothly with Miss Leo's aid, but I would be loath to recruit her for such dirty work in the first place."

Sebastian sat down, joining Claire, Hannes, and me around the living room table. Hannes's wife, Johanna, and one of the maids were also in attendance. Evidently, the merchants weren't eager to talk with Leo out of the picture. I was glad Sebastian and the guards had gotten the information out of the criminals, but I decided against asking for details. I didn't want to know whatever method Sebastian had used to make them talk, and I imagined Hannes and his wife were just as squeamish. He did mention that the merchants were to be sent to Ractos with a small envoy of guards.

He doesn't waste any time, does he?

Sebastian cleared his throat. "Allow me to impart what I was able to glean from the criminals. First of all, they fully intended to raze Lange to the ground with the orcs' aid."

"Good gods," Hannes muttered in horror.

That wasn't a surprise, but hearing it anew left Claire and I both feeling deeply uncomfortable. Everyone in attendance seemed disturbed, in fact.

"Their primary motive was to retrieve the disease-spreading doll in the storehouse," the butler continued. "It seems to be quite valuable to them, and they never intended to leave it here indefinitely. However, they also mentioned their shock at Lange's present state."

"How so?" I asked.

“The lack of disease, naturally. They had likely assumed the village to be hit especially hard, as the epicenter of the contagion.”

They were partially right, then—almost everyone was sick when I first arrived. If that were still the case when the orcs were released, I would’ve had to fight them alone, and I would’ve died along with everyone else in the village as they planned.

“Even so,” Sebastian continued, “the villagers’ health failed to dissuade them from releasing the orcs in hopes of retrieving the doll.”

It might’ve been possible to settle things more peacefully. I was right to hide from the wrongdoers in the beginning, but I should’ve focused on reaching the back of their wagon first to prevent the orcs from being freed. There was no point beating myself up about it, though, as I didn’t know the orcs were there until the last moment.

“I’m not surprised they wanted their plague-doll back,” Claire said. “An artifact like that has any number of unsavory uses.”

It had to be expensive as well, given how effective it was. They wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of catching and transporting so many orcs otherwise.

“The merchants had two objectives,” Sebastian explained. “The first was to give rise to a widespread epidemic. The second was to safely retrieve the doll for further use.”

Now, we’re getting to the heart of the matter.

My guess was that the epidemic was part of a ploy to get rich, paired with the monopoly the Yugard store held and the diluted, overpriced medicines they popularized.

“Now, as to the merchants’ motivations...”

“Why would they possibly do such a thing?” Claire asked worriedly.

“They were under the express orders of the count—Count Bastler, that is.”

Count Bastler was the lord of the neighboring domain, and the backer of the Yugard store. It didn’t surprise me that the entire plague was his fault.

Sebastian sighed heavily. “Regrettably, I was able to glean little else in the

way of reasons.”

“Didn’t the merchants know?” Claire asked.

“They were simply following orders, it seems. No tactic I used could produce anything more from them.”

“But why would the count do that?” I wondered aloud, grimacing.

“I’m afraid we can’t know for certain. However, I believe it may be as simple as a personal grudge toward His Grace, given the nature of the attack. The Bastler Domain has been languishing since before the present count took power, and his lands have oft been compared with our fair Libert Duchy.”

I blinked. “That’s it?”

“A duke is much wealthier than a mere count,” Claire explained. “I can’t imagine such a rivalry would change anything, of course.”

Sebastian nodded. “And judging from the precise tactics employed, I imagine the count also attempted to turn a profit.”

It was nothing more than shallow jealousy, then—a petty grudge that had driven the count so far. He was just upset the duke’s lands were faring better. That was no reason to spread disease, peddle fake medicine, and sic orcs on a village of innocents. Countless people were suffering from his selfishness over his money-grubbing grudge. The people of Lange deserved better, let alone the orphans and innocent citizens of Ractos.

He can’t honestly expect to get away with this! I seethed.

“Please take a deep breath,” Sebastian suddenly told me. “There’s no point in being so openly hostile here.”

I didn’t know what he was saying at first, but I realized I was gritting my teeth with rage, my brow furrowing into great, angry folds of skin.

“Mr. Hirooka?” The maid came forward to offer me a cup of tea.

“S-Sorry.” I took a few long, deep breaths, then took a sip of tea. “Mm, it’s very good. Thank you for helping me relax.” I could feel some of the tension leaving my shoulders. He was right; there was no point in getting so angry now.

“I understand how you feel,” Claire consoled me. “I could understand the hostility against House Libert, but that’s no reason to sacrifice innocent lives.”

I could tell from the look in her eyes that she was just as upset, and while Sebastian seemed perfectly calm, he had to be frustrated as well—that much was clear from his attitude when he went to interrogate the prisoners. It was something of a relief to know I wasn’t alone.

“Regardless of the count’s intent,” Sebastian continued, “this is nothing short of a personal attack on His Grace. I’ll advise him to respond quickly and decisively.”

Claire nodded. “I’m sure Father will be just as moved by his people’s suffering.”

Eckenhart was a boisterous man with a big heart to match. He’d stop Count Bastler in his tracks, even if he had to use his authority as duke to do so.

“We need to quash the Yugard store in order to put this whole matter to rest,” Sebastian asserted.

“So, are the merchants related to them?” I asked.

“Not directly, no. The merchants knew nothing of the diluted medicines flooding Ractos. I would imagine Count Bastler issued their orders separately.”

“Is that so?”

I was sure the merchants were from Yugard when I found the doll, but evidently, I was wrong.

Good thing Sebastian’s a lot better at sleuthing than I am.

“However,” he continued, “the merchants were instructed to go to the Yugard store once the doll was safely reclaimed. Perhaps there was a greater design for the pair once they arrived? Additionally, I believe Yugard has no direct ties to the count.”

“That makes sense... There’s no point in starting a plague if you don’t control the medicine, right?” I said.

The timing was a little too perfect to be a coincidence. They had to be in contact with the count somehow.

“Precisely,” Sebastian replied. “The count or a representative on his behalf was the instigator of their interference in Ractos, but that’s not all.”

“There’s more?”

“The count must be sponsoring them financially. Even with multiple agents in play, they couldn’t buy out every apothecary in the city without aid.”

That made sense. It’d take a noble’s wallet to buy a city’s worth of medicine, especially considering the price of some herbs and salves. They also needed to hire the necessary manpower. Nobody could throw around weight like that without significant support—except, of course, a noble born into old money.

“The Yugards receive funds from the count, and in turn, they send him a share of the profits. As a business model, it’s certainly feasible.”

Anyone who could foresee the spike in demand could make a killing on medicine.

“But if they only wanted to make money,” Claire said, “it would be far better to enact their plan on the count’s own lands, especially since it would reduce the chances of someone discovering the plot—though I suppose that would put a more definite limit on their profits.”

Right—the count could enact the same plan on a corner of his own domain and remain undiscovered for far longer. That would also prevent them from making enemies of a higher-ranking noble house. He could have decided against it in the end because of the decreased cost-effectiveness or not wanting to subject his own people to such strife. Targeting the duke’s domain, of all places, had to be an attack.

Or maybe I’m still not as calm as I thought...

“This is enough proof, right?” I asked. “I think this means we’re clear to shut down the whole Yugard operation.”

Sebastian shook his head. “I would advise against that.”

“But why?”

“You’re forgetting Count Bastler has a personal stake in that establishment. We’ve no hard evidence to confirm as much, but if the false apothecaries

themselves say as much, then we must take it as truth. If we attempt to shut them down now...”

“They’ll only have to prove that connection to walk free,” Claire finished for him.

He nodded. “Precisely. While Lady Claire and myself have been bestowed the authority of His Grace, we’re only his representatives. The guards cannot hold agents of the count on our word alone.”

“One’s proper lord and master always takes precedence over a mere representative’s word,” Claire added.

So, Claire still can’t oppose Yugard directly, huh? I guess she doesn’t have the true authority of House Libert yet...

I’d assumed that the local lord had the final word, or that Eckenhart’s higher rank would mean something, but that was just another facet of noble politics that went over my head.

“Importantly, a connection between our merchant friends and the count does not necessarily denote a connection between the Yugard store and the count,” Sebastian added. “It’s hardly sufficient reason to end their business altogether.”

The Yugard store could easily deny any knowledge of the orc attack, and knowing the merchants were going to visit them didn’t prove a thing. Worst case, the Yugards could claim they were simply following orders and slip away.

“First, we must report this to His Grace,” Sebastian announced.

“To Eckenhart?” I asked.

“Indeed. I’ve had no contact with him since Miss Leo brought us the doll, and I’d best supply our findings here.”

“Of course,” Claire agreed. “We’ll need Father’s word to do much of anything now.”

If Eckenhart formally ordered us to act, then we could expose the count’s evildoing and catch the Yugards in one fell swoop.

I don’t know if we can afford to wait, though.

“The Yugards are still peddling that fake medicine, right? They’ll just keep on hurting innocent people,” I said.

As we spoke, they were likely selling their diluted goods to sick townsfolk, making a profit while the people continued to suffer. I wanted to move as soon as possible.

“Ah, on the contrary,” Sebastian told me. “Your own medicine has begun to spread throughout Ractos. I also took the liberty of spreading a small rumor about the Yugard establishment.”

“What kind of rumor?” I asked.

“It’s simple, really—I told the truth. I spread about that the Yugards’ medicine is ineffective, and that Kales’s store—the duke’s own supply, in other words—was affordable and of far higher quality.”

That rang a bell. “Right. I think we talked about lowering the price of capwort before I left for Lange. Did that work?”

We had talked about temporarily lowering the price of capwort—the remedy for the disease—so that it was more accessible to everyone.

“I confirmed the situation myself before leaving the mansion, and it has indeed proved effective,” he informed me. “Rumors spread like wildfire, as they say, and many of the sick folk already know of your cheaper medicine.”

So Sebastian’s rumors worked, then... I’m glad to hear that.

“Some of them bought it simply to try, on account of the low price,” he continued. “That enabled the medicine and word of it alike to spread, and the epidemic has begun to abate. Rumor begets more rumors, as they say.”

In other words, the medicine was spreading faster than the disease now. The source of the illness had been removed, and thanks to Leo, no more infected wine would be sold. All it would take now was a little more capwort for the plague to come to a natural end. Word of mouth was a powerful tool in any society, it seemed.

“So even if we let the Yugards be, nobody else will suffer?” I asked.

He paused for a moment. “I’m afraid I cannot guarantee *nobody* will, but they

will be as close to harmless as is reasonably possible. The Yugard store should be in quite the panic over this latest turn of events.”

“That makes sense... Their sales must be plummeting just as fast as the sickness itself,” I said.

Just when business was supposed to be booming, all their sales dried up. Not only that, but the epidemic itself would also come to an end. Anyone would panic in their position.

“Are you hoping they’ll pretend to give in?” Claire asked.

If they panicked, they might make a mistake. He could be hoping they’d give us the evidence we needed.

Instead, he shook his head. “I’ve no intention of letting them ‘pretend’ anything. I wish to corner them completely.”

“How so?”

“Their sales are beginning to plummet, and worry is beginning to set in.” His wizened face split with a grin. “This is the perfect time for the greital wine Mr. Hirooka and Miss Leo discovered.”

“The wine?”

Claire seemed deeply uncomfortable with the turn the conversation was taking, and something about the look in his eyes made me break out in a cold sweat. The others could also tell something was amiss.

“We’ll bring the tainted wine, the source of this whole affair, to their very doorstep.” With that, he turned to the mayor with an unsettling smirk. “On that note, Hannes...”

“Y-Yes?!”

The little old man jumped in surprise. I couldn’t blame him. I never wanted Sebastian to look at me like that.

“The greital wine Miss Leo marked as tainted—House Libert would like to buy every last barrel from you.”

“All of it?! But it’s incredibly dangerous...”

“I’m well aware. You see, I believe I’ve found an apt use for some of it.”

That had to be the first Hannes or his wife heard of our intent to buy the spoiled wine, and they were both speechless. I was content to let Sebastian hash out the details, but I couldn’t imagine how it would help us now.

Does he want to infect the Yugard store’s staff? No, that’s too simple...it’s not his style. He has something more devious in mind.

Sebastian cleared his throat. “My apologies...We’ll have plenty enough time to discuss the details later.”

“Y-Yes,” Hannes nodded shakily. “Let’s.”

I could tell from the glint in the butler’s eyes that he was far more interested in revealing his plan.

“At any rate, I recommend we take the tainted wine to the Yugard store and have them drink their fill. Should they hesitate, or refuse to drink outright...”

“Then we’ll know if they know the wine causes the disease?” I asked.

Huh. Just as I guessed.

“Precisely. I imagine they’ll find some excuse to refuse, but if we make it out to be a personal gift from the duke himself, they’ll have to oblige. Perhaps we’ll claim the wine is a gift, for their efforts in quelling the epidemic?”

That would tell us if the count explained the greital wine was the source of the plague. They’d be foolish to refuse a gift from the duke in his own territory—something like the power harassment I’d seen back in Japan. You couldn’t refuse a drink if one of the top brass from a partner company insisted...though again, I wasn’t clear on the politics here.

So, he went a step further than what I was thinking... I knew that old fox was too sly for such a simple plan.

“In that case, I shall send a messenger to inform His Grace of our findings and intentions. We shall act as soon as he approves our designs.”

He was still planning on getting Eckenhart’s permission to shut them down directly, then.

“Please do,” Claire agreed.

“Yeah, sounds good,” I echoed.

With our next move against the Yugard store decided, we ended the meeting there.



THE mansion servants cooperated with the villagers to make dinner, and we ate together in the town square. I was hardly in the mood to sleep after that, so I wandered out to the village gates. I was still tired from the day before, but on top of that, I was so restless that I still hadn’t done my sword training for the day.

“I wish I could just sleep,” I muttered to myself with a sigh.

Outside the village entrance, I looked up at the stars and thought back to the meeting. Hannes and Sebastian had started discussing the details of the tainted wine purchase before dinner had even ended. Claire had joined them, and they’d all retreated into Hannes’s house once again to get more specific. I wasn’t doing any more than pitching in, so I wasn’t comfortable joining them.

From the small bit I’d heard, Claire had suggested buying the wine for a hefty sum, and Hannes was still insisting it was all but worthless and offered to sell for a fraction. They were constantly going back and forth about it, each feeling out the other’s arguments for weaknesses. For every time Sebastian insisted the sum was more than fair, Hannes would swear it wasn’t worth anywhere near that much. I got the feeling it’d go on a lot longer still.

“I’m glad I don’t have to be there, but it doesn’t feel right to just waltz in and go to sleep while they’re going at it like that.”

As such, I’d decided to go for a walk alone—or at least, as alone as I could. I’d let an armed guard and a maid follow a short distance behind me since I didn’t want anyone worrying I’d get into trouble.

“Come to think of it, this is where we fought the orcs...”

The small clearing was almost as it had been before I arrived, with only the odd groove in the ground or shattered fencepost to prove the battle had even

happened.

I still can't believe I faced off against so many monsters like that. The thought of it now made my legs feel weak. The adrenaline must've carried me every step of the way.

"Huh?" came a voice from behind me. "What're you doing out here, Mr. Hirooka?"

I turned to find a familiar face. "Oh, Rosalie?"

The better question would be, what's she doing alone in the dark like this?

"I couldn't sleep," I confessed. "You?"

"Hmm... Same, I guess. I know you said she'd be back tomorrow, but it feels like I'll see Leo sooner if I wait for her out here."

"Well, she *would* be coming through here ..."

"I'm not going to wait here all night, of course. I just wanted to see what the forest's like tonight, that's all."

"So that explains it." She was missing Leo more than I thought. It had to be well past her bedtime, but I decided not to mention it. "Did you tell anyone you're out here?" I asked instead.

"Yep! I wouldn't come here alone after what happened yesterday... Mom and Dad said it was okay as long as I stayed by the entrance."

That was fine, then. I was glad to have someone I knew to talk to, anyway.

"You really like Leo, huh?" I asked.

"Of course! Miss Leo's so nice, and she's so soft!"

"So you only like her because she's fluffy?" I asked teasingly. "I see how it is."

"Th-That's not it!" She pouted at me huffily. "She plays with me, too!"

"Hahaha, sorry, sorry."

I couldn't help myself.

I'll have to tell Leo about this when she's back.

"...Oh."

Suddenly, it clicked.

Rosalie looked up at me worriedly. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. It’s nothing.”

Leo’s the reason I could stare down those orcs.

If they’d killed the village children—Rosalie included—then Leo would’ve been heartbroken. She loved the children as much as they loved her. That wasn’t the only reason I fought, of course, but Leo was like the keystone that kept me from breaking down back then.

Maybe I’m not as quick to sacrifice myself as I thought.

I chatted with Rosalie a while longer, but just before I was going to turn and lead us back into the village, I heard something odd.

“Bark, bark!”

“Huh? I could swear I’ve heard that bark somewhere before...”

“It’s Miss Leo!” Rosalie shouted gleefully.

It had to be her, although it was far too dark to see into the forest.

“Awooooo! Ruff?! B-Bow-wow!”

Sure enough, Leo burst out of the treeline and into the village, but as soon as she realized she’d overshot us, she clumsily doubled back. I could practically hear her paws sizzle with friction-heat as she sat in front of me.

I hope she didn’t burn her little toe beans... Good, she seems fine. From the little bit I saw of her running, she was going far faster than any human rider could withstand.

“Hah, hah, hah, hah, hah...”

Her tongue lolled out of her mouth as she panted excitedly at Rosalie and me, her tail pumping back and forth with unbridled joy.



“Uh... Welcome back, Leo. You went really fast, huh? Good girl!” I praised her.

“It’s really Miss Leo!” Rosalie shouted giddily beside me.

I gave her a good scratch with both hands, and Rosalie glomped onto her big, furry friend.

Leo held her head high and huffed proudly. “Wumff!” *I ran as fast as I could!* she seemed to be saying.

“Is that right? Well, I’m glad to see you back so soon!” I decided to let Rosalie be and compliment Leo as much as I could. I made sure to stroke her fur so that she knew just how pleased I was with her.

“Woff! Hah, hah, hah, hah...” Her tongue flopped proudly out of her mouth once more, her tail wagging eagerly.

Maybe she’s thirsty?

“Hold on just a moment.” I approached the maid who’d been following me. “Excuse me? Can you please get Leo some water?”

“Wuff?”

She bowed readily. “Of course.”

Before long, she and the guard returned with a basin of clear water.

Of course Leo was thirsty after running all the way from Ractos. She started slurping it down as soon as it was ready for her, and after watching her drink for a minute or two, I told her again what a good girl she was before leaving to give Claire the good news. I considered telling Rosalie to go home, but she was clinging onto Leo’s side like glue, so I brought them with me to Hannes’s.

Negotiations seemed to be nearly over when we arrived, so Claire and Sebastian were able to come out and welcome Leo back right away. They were both shocked to see her back so soon.

As they greeted her, however, Leo nuzzled me plaintively.

“Sniff, sniff Whiiiiiiiiine...”

“What’s that? You’re hungry?”

“Rrmf...”

Without so much as a word, Hannes’s wife went back into the house to prepare something for her. I felt a pang of guilt that we were troubling them yet again.

As we waited, Leo told me all about her trip. She and Phillip had arrived at the city gates as the sun was beginning to set. The men there laid out some food and water for her, but she only drank a few mouthfuls and left the food as it was, deciding instead to head back immediately. She was too worried about me to wait, and while I wanted to tell her she was worrying too much, the orc incident was still fresh in all our minds. Besides, I appreciated the thought.

In the end, she left Ractos not long after nightfall. That meant she’d made the trip in just a few hours, while a horse would’ve taken days to cover that distance. No human could possibly keep up with speed like that, and I thought back to the blistering pace at which she’d burst into the village. She was easily faster than any car I’d ever seen back on Earth.

“Thank you for waiting.”

Soon enough, Hannes’s wife emerged with one of the maids, carrying plates with towering piles of sausages.

“Ruff!” With that, Leo eagerly scarfed down the food. “Gagh, gagh, gagh...”

“Slow down a little!” I chided her. “You’ll choke if you don’t at least chew first.”

Claire chuckled. “She must have been quite hungry indeed. I imagine she was worried sick about you.”

“Y-Yeah, I guess, haha...”

Sebastian stroked his chin, his eyes still wide with shock. “To think she traveled to Ractos and back in less than a day... As the legends say, silver fenrir can run like the wind, and this may well be proof.”

After Leo ate her fill, I gave her one last pet before leaving for bed. At that point, however, everyone noticed Rosalie in her fur for the first time. It was too dark to see her clearly, and she was sleeping buried so deep in Leo’s fluff I was

almost impressed. Hannes apologized to Leo and me profusely before prying the girl free with his wife's help, and they carried her inside so she could spend the night. His wife set out immediately afterward to let Rosalie's parents know.

Leo seemed much calmer after seeing my face, so she retreated to the stables to spend the night. Sebastian and the maids left as well—apparently, they were staying in an empty house on the edge of the village. Claire and I were left to climb the stairs to our respective rooms.

Good thing I finally feel tired enough to sleep now... I bet I have Leo to thank for that, too.



I awoke to the sounds of children playing and Leo barking. From the sound of it, she'd woken up early to play with them—Rosalie wasn't the only child who'd missed my fluffy friend, after all.

After I had my breakfast, I prepared Leo's food and watched the children play as I relaxed for a spell.

"I'd better get to work," I finally told Claire and Sebastian. "I'll be growing herbs behind Hannes's house."

"What will you be making?" Claire asked.

"I figured that since I've been away so long, I'd better make some herbs for Ractos."

Sebastian nodded sagely. "Very prudent of you. They'll likely run out in several days' time."

"Yeah. That's why I want to cultivate what I can now."

"Understood. Do take care to pace yourself."

I'd made extra before I left the mansion, but I had already been in Lange longer than we planned. I didn't want the Libert store to run out of medicinal capwort, so I wanted to prepare as much as I could so it'd be ready for Ractos anytime. Claire and Sebastian saw me off as I left to grow the herbs.

I didn't want anyone to worry, so I focused on herbs I was used to—mainly capwort and other common remedies. There wasn't any quota for me to fulfill,

so I did whatever felt best. Then, I picked them one by one and used the preparation ability of Herb Cultivation to dry, powder, or otherwise ready each plant in turn for maximum effectiveness. Then I sorted them by type in pouches I'd prepared beforehand and tied them all up in a leather bag.

"There, that should be enough for today. I don't want to make the others worry again..." I muttered to myself.

Not long after I finished, we all had lunch together, and I said my goodbyes to Claire and the others as they prepared to head back to the mansion.

"Oh, Sebastian?" I held out the bag. "Here's some more herbs. Please give Kales my regards when you see him."

He turned from the horses he'd been tending to accept the package. "As you will."

From the sound of it, Claire wanted to stay in the village for a while yet, but Sebastian insisted she leave as soon as possible. There was apparently a chance that agents of the Yugard store were tracking her, and while they obviously wouldn't have eyes and ears in Lange, it'd be all too easy to learn Claire was absent from her villa. She'd ridden right through the city to get to Lange, and she and Leo stuck out like a pair of sore thumbs. There was no telling what the Yugards would do if they found out, since apparently having a duke's daughter living nearby acted as a deterrent, and Tilura was too young to pose any kind of threat.

As an aside, Sebastian mentioned that he'd already sent a messenger to Eckenhart to report our findings. I noticed that a few of the guards seemed to be missing now, though I had no idea when they left.

"Please be careful," Claire told me as she prepared to enter her carriage. "Promise me you won't overexert yourself."

I smiled back reassuringly. "Don't worry. Leo will be with me the whole time, and I'll rest as much as I can."

The merchants had already been sent off to Ractos, and I doubted there'd be any more monster attacks—and if there were, I had Leo at my side to fend them off.

I intended to stay behind in Lange and get some rest until Phillip returned, and I'd use that time to recuperate. I also wanted to give Leo a chance to play with the local children some more. While Laila and Gelda were still at the mansion, one maid and one guard graciously stayed behind to look after me.

Appearing content, Claire nodded. "Promise me you'll return as soon as you can."

"Don't worry, Leo and I will leave for Ractos as soon as Phillip gets back."

"Good. Well, then..." She waved limply, and casting one last look back at me, she climbed into the carriage.

"Farewell, Mr. Hirooka," Sebastian said with a nod from the coach's seat.

"Have a safe trip."

"Rest well," Johanna told me with a slight smile from the back of her horse.

"Safe travels, Johanna."

With that, Sebastian spurred the carriage forward, and I watched them go until the envoy was well out of sight.

Chapter 2: Further Uses of Herb Cultivation

“MISS Leo, wait up!”

“You’re too fast, Miss Leo!”

After Claire and her entourage left the village, I returned to the square to watch Leo play with the local children. They were playing tag, it looked like, and the children were all trying to catch her. Rosalie and Rye were both there, as well as other kids who must’ve been happy Leo was back.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen the children so full of life,” came Hannes’s voice. “Miss Leo is truly a blessing.”

“Oh, Hannes.” I turned to find the mayor watching the kids beside me, a broad smile on his face as he watched his granddaughter.

“The disease put quite the damper on things,” he continued. “I’m glad to see life return to the village.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

“Even before the outbreak, the adults were constantly bogged down with work, you see.”

“So the kids didn’t have anyone to play with?” I ventured.

“Regrettably, no. Every able-bodied person was either harvesting lumber, crafting barrels, or processing greitals into wine. It was far busier than when I was a boy.”

I’d seen the plague’s effects with my own eyes, but this was the first time I had heard anything else about Lange’s history. It certainly sounded busy, but now, I could see a good number of adults relaxing in the morning light. Some of them were even playing with Leo and the kids. Not only were some people still recovering from their injuries, but there probably wasn’t much work to be done, what with the shipment of greitals in fact being full of orcs. The scene right now certainly didn’t seem as stiff or busy as Hannes described.

“We would rarely hear the children enjoying themselves,” the mayor continued. “Most of the chatter was reserved for work matters only.”

I gave him a strained smile. “I think I can relate to that.”

My old workplace back in Japan was on the lively side, but nobody wanted to be there. You could always hear supervisors chewing out new hires over nothing, or coworkers bickering for credit on this project or that. Even if Lange was never that bad, they clearly put more emphasis on their incomes than their children. It was an understandable sacrifice, but far from ideal.

“Perhaps every village needs a place for children to be themselves,” he mused. “No matter how well the work goes, if the children don’t grow happy and healthy, there won’t be a next generation to pass the mantle to. Sooner or later, the village would cease to exist.”

I nodded. “Even if everything’s going well financially, no children means no more people.”

All the money in the world doesn’t mean anything with nobody to inherit it. Just having children wasn’t enough—the kids had to be invested enough in the village to stay and make it a proper home. It was a tricky balance to maintain, though, and much easier said than done.

“I’ve no idea what will happen to our winery from here, what with our wine’s role in the plague,” he said. “What I do know is that thanks to your generosity, we have some time to explore our options. This will be an excellent time to rethink things.”

Even if nobody openly disclosed the wine’s role in the plague, word may still get out. If it did, their sales would naturally decline, even if their wine was the best in the world. The village would lose money, and their losses would only grow with the more wine they made.

“Will you be okay?” I asked him.

“Well, we’ve no means of importing new greitals at this point. We can make do with our savings while we consider our next move, both as a village and as a community.”

There was also the money that was supposed to buy the greitals this time

around, which would help soften the financial blow. I'd also heard from Claire that the wine we'd bought from Lange would be paid in several installments, further cushioning the village from financial fallout.

Still, while it was unclear if Lange would be able to continue their winery operations, they could never really go back to normal. Just importing greitals from where they were grown in Count Bastler's domain would be all kinds of stressful, especially given the count's personal role in their struggles. They couldn't even know if their regular greital importer was involved in the scheme. That was before even considering the political fallout between the duke and the count once this whole ordeal came to an end.

"We can, of course, continue to sell our lumber to other towns and villages," he said.

If they sold the wood that was currently being used for barrel-making, along with their usual lumber exports, they could likely eke out a living for themselves, albeit with less income than before.

"Before you're unable to sell greital wine at all, right?" I guessed.

"Yes, it'd make for a far smoother transition that way. I believe simply having a backup plan is rather important."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

As mayor, it was his job to always be one step ahead and keep the best interests of the townsfolk in mind. Brainstorming was an important part of his job, as was planning for the worst.

It's a real pity they won't be able to make that delicious wine for much longer... Another mark against the merchants and the count, I guess, but rumors are just as bad. They really tend to get out of control and can hurt everyone involved.

"Oh, but never you mind," the mayor chuckled. "Consider it the ramblings of an old man."

"Haha..."

I wasn't the type to dismiss him so easily, much less what I'd been through.

What he was describing reminded me of the corporate hellscape I'd been trapped in for so long, and I felt the need to help however I possibly could—that, and their wine really was *that* good.

If only there was a way for them to keep up their winemaking without anyone working to death, and ensuring it continues to sell... But I guess there's no way an outsider like me could stumble across the perfect answer.



LEO and the children continued playing, and before long, Hannes and I found ourselves joining them. That went to show just how much she'd missed playing with me. Hannes retired from the games not long after—he didn't have the stamina he used to, it seemed—but there were still plenty of ways I could entertain the kids.

"Does everyone have their sticks?" I asked.

"Yeah!" came the mob of tiny voices in reply.

The game was similar to what I'd played with Leo and Tilura not long after we first arrived at the mansion. Everyone had a stick in hand, ready to throw for Leo to grab in a group game of fetch.

Everyone had found a decently sized stick or two for the game. At first some of them had grabbed fist-sized rocks instead of sticks, but I made sure they were all put back. I didn't want to risk a hail of rocks damaging someone's house—or worse, hitting somebody—and the sticks were fortunately much harder to throw far enough to do damage.

"Are you ready, Leo?" I asked.

"Ruff!" She dropped her shoulders low to the ground, wagging fiercely. She could break out into a sprint at any time from that stance.

"And here we go... Fetch!"

"Fetch!" the kids echoed.

The volley of sticks went soaring through the air all at once. We'd aimed for height rather than distance so Leo would have to jump to catch the sticks.

"Worf! Woof-woof... Awoooooo!"

Leo sprung high into the air, spinning about to smack my stick away with a slap of her mighty tail.

Wait, she's not going to catch them?

With the force of that same spin, she swatted sticks away left and right with her fore and hind paws. In a flash, there was only one stick left, and she grabbed it gingerly in her great jaws before landing elegantly on the ground. If I were to rank her trick, it'd have to be a perfect ten.

"Whooooaaaa!" the crowd of kids shouted.

"That was amazing!"

"Miss Leo, that was so cool!"

I could only stare speechlessly at her superhuman...er, supercanine feat. She'd only managed to do it because of the height our throws afforded her, but it was a fantastic display nonetheless.

She eagerly dropped her now-broken stick at my feet and puffed out her chest. "Ruff!"

"Th-That was amazing, Leo! You're such a good girl!" I started eagerly scratching her big, fluffy chest before turning to the others. "C'mon, everyone, don't forget to tell her how amazing she is! Can you all give her some nice, gentle pets?"

"Okaaaaay!"

Everyone obediently clustered around and started petting her in their own ways. I watched them all carefully, but fortunately, nobody was pulling her fur, or anything mean like that. They were all careful not to be too rough with her. I'd figured that they had learned to be gentle from all the earlier playing they'd done together, but it was a welcome sight nonetheless. Some of the kids who'd tried to play with her when she was a tiny Maltese had tugged at her painfully, having never seen a dog before, but she'd never gotten angry at them despite the pain. She was a silver-furred saint, through and through.

"What next? What do we play next?!" a nearby kid pulled at my clothes, having had their fill of Leo's fur.

“Hmm... Let’s see...”

I looked around us at the mountain of discarded sticks from the last game. The kids would soon get tired of throwing them, and if we went back to playing tag, they’d run me ragged in no time. There had to be some other option.

“Miss Leo’s so fluffy... I wish I could keep petting her forever!”

“I’m tired of that! I wanna play with her more!”

“Hey! Stop pulling me! Just a little longer!”

“I-I’d like to keep petting her, too...”

“You guys are so boring! C’mon, let’s play!”

“Whiiiiine...”

The kids were starting to bicker, and Leo was at a total loss for what to do about it. She never was very good at handling this kind of situation. She obviously couldn’t talk to them, and if she tried to move, she’d send kids tumbling everywhere.

Why’re they calling her Miss Leo, though? Did they pick that up from their parents or something?

Regardless, I had to bail her out somehow.

“C’mon, kids, please don’t argue,” I said.

“But—”

“That’s no—”

“I understand you all have things you want to do, and it’s okay to not always agree with your friends. But why don’t we compromise?”

I suggested the kids who wanted to play could play with her, and every once in a while, we could stop to give the other kids a chance to reward her for being a good girl. They happily agreed to give it a shot, and the rowdier kids looked up at me expectantly as they waited for me to suggest the next game. The kids who just wanted to pet her were more reluctant, but none of them felt brave enough to go against the adult in the group. I felt another wave of relief that Lange had so many good kids.

All right, I think I know what we can play now...but I'm not sure it really counts as a game.

Basically, I thought we could do the same kind of training I'd done with Leo back at the mansion—a sort of mock combat where I'd try to hit her with my sword while she dodged around me. This time, though, I was using sticks, and I made sure to grab some extras in case my main “weapon” broke.

“Good luck, Miss Leo!”

“Don't let him get you!”

I sighed. “Of course nobody's rooting for me. I should've known.”

Leo nodded proudly. “Wuff.”

Crap... No sympathy at all, huh?

The rules were simple—if I could so much as graze her with a stick, I won. If she could dodge me for long enough, she won. She wasn't allowed to attack me back, like always. I seriously doubted I'd get anywhere, given that I'd never once “won” the training exercise, but that was fine since most of the kids wanted to reward her with more pets.

“I've been keeping up my training, though, and fighting those orcs has to count for something. You better watch out, or I might get a hit in!” I taunted.

“Wuff?” She grinned at me. “Woooo-woooo!”

“You say that now, but just you wait!”

I'd struggled quite a bit against the orcs, after all, and that must've been laughable to Leo. Maybe I didn't stand a chance after all, but that wouldn't stop me from trying.

“Knock him flat, Miss Leo!”

“Get him!”

“Woff, awoo!” Her wagging grew bolder, and she howled proudly in response to the children's cries.

It'd be against the rules to actually knock me flat, right, Leo? Leo? P-Please tell me you won't.

I tightened my grip. I'd just have to trust her—and with that, the game was on.

I struck out at her with everything I had, time and time again, but I never came close to hitting her. She even disarmed me a few times with deft flicks of her great fluffy tail, which was as impressive as it was demoralizing.

“Hahh... I just don't stand a chance, huh...?”

“Awooooo!”

After that, we alternated between playing and cuddling with Leo until the sun threatened to set on us. It was far more exhausting than my daily combat training. Of course, the kids liked watching me trying to land a blow on Leo as much as they liked playing with her themselves, so in a way, it *was* training.

I bet I'll sleep extra soundly tonight.



I spent the next few days training, playing with Leo and the village kids, and chatting with the villagers. I felt a little guilty for staying at Hannes's house for so long, but he insisted it was a pleasure to host their savior, and I was welcome to stay as long as I wanted—not that I wanted to impose any longer than was necessary, of course. I also made sure to grow herbs every day in the secluded space behind his house so that I'd have something to deliver to Ractos when we went. I'd given Sebastian plenty when he departed, but I figured Kales's store might be low on stock by the time I got there.

Despite myself, however, I found myself thinking about the greital wine once more. I knew there was precious little I could do to change anything, but that didn't stop me from thinking about it. I'd become a fan without even realizing, it seemed, and I'd been treated to the odd cupful over my stay.

I bet Phillip would go green from jealousy if he knew.

Eventually, a few horse-drawn wagons arrived at the village, with Phillip at their head. I was one of the first at the gates to greet them.

“I hope I didn't keep you waiting, Mr. Hirooka.”

“Not at all. Thanks, Phillip.”

We had the aid of the villagers and wagon-workers loading the wagons full of the tainted wine. Leo watched us carefully the entire time—the barrels were strong enough that they wouldn't break or spill easily, but we had to take every precaution against infection.

"That's the last of it," Phillip announced as the last barrel was loaded.

I sighed with relief. "Thanks... It looks like we're all done."

It was surprisingly hard work, as the wine-filled barrels were back-breakingly heavy. I did one last check, just to make sure there were no spills and that everything was secured, but that seemed to be the end of it.

"Do you want to leave right away?" I asked the guard captain.

"Well, I'd like a minute to rest first."

No wonder he was tired, what with all the traveling he'd been doing the past week or so. He even oversaw the disposal of the orc bodies and kept watch on the merchants when they were still held in the village. Especially after his good work readying the wagons, I figured he could use a day or two to relax before we got underway.

"It seems as though you could all use a rest," Hannes suggested. "Why don't you stay for a spell?"

"Thank you, and sorry for the trouble," Phillip replied.

The horses and wagon-workers he'd hired looked equally relieved to have a break. It was a several-day ride from Ractos to Lange, and they were no doubt tired.

"In that case, Phillip, you can leave as soon as you're fully rested," I said. "It's high time I left."

With the wagons' arrival, my work here was done. Claire had specifically requested I head back as soon as possible, so Leo and I were intent on getting underway. The maid and guard who had been gracious enough to stay with me would be traveling with the wagons.

Phillip's eyes brightened. "Oh, I almost forgot. Lady Claire and Sebastian have arranged for a messenger to inform them as soon as you arrive in Ractos, so

feel free to take your time in town.”

“Claire and Sebastian did?”

“We ran into each other on the road.”

That made sense—there was only one road connecting the two. Apparently, once they received word of my arrival, Sebastian would head out to meet me, and we’d consult Isabel together.

Come to think of it, I never told him about the latest quirk of Herb Cultivation... I’ll tell him when we get to Isabel’s, I guess.

I loaded a few things into the packing blanket I’d used when I came to Lange and tied it to Leo’s back.

“...And that does it. Let’s head out, Leo.”

“Ruff!”

“Please wait!” Hannes called out to me. I turned to find a small barrel in his arms, just large enough to be held in both hands. “This is hardly a proper thank-you, but please take this with you.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s a portion of our most finely aged greital wine. You seem to enjoy it, and while such a paltry gift is hardly an appropriate show of our appreciation, we hope you will accept it.”

“No, this is more than enough! Thank you! I’ll make sure to share it with everyone as soon as I get back to the mansion.”

It was a welcome gift, since I knew I’d miss the flavor in no time. I was hoping it would be a good souvenir for the others—though I didn’t know if Claire was the drinking type. Tilura and Milicia were too young for it, obviously.

I tied the barrel around Leo’s neck, making her look like one of the rescue dogs they’d use to rescue stranded skiers.

“You okay, girl?”

“Woff!”

I was a little worried it’d be too heavy for her, but she seemed just fine. With

that, I hopped on her back and took one last look at the village. I'd been staying there for quite some time, and it was a little sad to leave.

"Thanks for everything, Hannes."

"No, it was our genuine pleasure to have you. Thank you for all you've done for us."

I'll have to come back again sometime, preferably when they're not fighting off a plague.

"Bye-bye, Miss Leo!" the assembled children all called out to us.

"Awoooo!"

With that final howl of farewell, Leo ran out of the village gates and onto the forest road, carrying me at a decent clip toward Ractos.

"We'll have to come again sometime, huh, Leo?"

"Ruff!"

She'd enjoyed herself greatly with the kids. Tilura, Milicia, and Cherie were waiting for her back at the mansion, but that wasn't quite the same—and besides, Cherie was more of a daughter than a playmate.

"Take us straight ahead!"

"Awuff!"

Normally there'd be a turn in the path not far from the village gates, but I opted for a slightly more indirect path instead. I didn't want to startle any travelers we came across—though it was probably too late for that, given how many times Phillip and Leo had taken that path already. Still, no sense in stirring up more trouble than we had to.

Before long, however, she slowed to a stop and looked at me plaintively.

"Worf, woff!"

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"Whiiiine..."

I dismounted to investigate, but she was only looking more sad and pitiful

with every passing moment.

Wait, I know that look... She's hungry.

"Right. We kinda skipped lunch, huh?"

"Woo-woo!" Finally, you get it!

We'd been loading barrels ever since Phillip arrived that morning, and Leo and I left almost immediately afterward. I checked my pocket watch to find it was far past noon, and nearly time for afternoon tea. The thought made my own stomach grumble.

"I never would've thought of this back at my old job ... All right, Leo, let's eat."

"Ruff! Awooo!"

I barely had time to breathe back then, let alone have proper lunch breaks. I knew that eating properly was at least as important as taking regular breaks, but somehow it slipped my mind. Honestly, I was lucky I didn't have to worry about my own most days, and I still got three square meals. I was feeling stronger and healthier than ever.

I gathered a pile of fallen branches for a fire, then stepped back.

"Wanna do the honors?"

"Wuff! Grr...WARK!"

She used a bit of magic to start the fire.

Unlike the trip out to Lange, we didn't have a specially cooked lunch or anything, but I did have some bread and a skein of soup.

Thanks again for all the food, Mrs. Hannes.

"And for you, Leo...sausages."

"Ruff! Wuff, roooo!"

After lightly roasting each sausage in turn over the fire, I laid them out on the blanket for her to enjoy. Most of the luggage, in fact, was taken up by piles and piles of sausage for her. I was honestly a little surprised she hadn't gotten sick of them yet, but she eagerly gulped them down.

While she was occupying herself with that, I finished warming the soup and took a sip.

“Ahh... This stuff is good. It’s refreshing and warms you right to the bone.”

“Ruff?” She curiously sniffed at the veggie-laden broth.

“You wanna try some? Here, it should be cool enough for you.”

She lapped up a mouthful and let out a deep sigh. “Waff...”

“Good, isn’t it?”

There was a big skin full of milk for her, but I guessed she’d like it better if I warmed it up for her first. After warming it for a bit by the fire, I let her have some.

“Woof! Woff?”

“Now that you mention it, yeah...”

Just like she said, giving her hot milk really brought me back. It was the first thing I gave her after I’d taken her home, back when she was still a weak little puppy.

“Waof, woo?”

“Oh, fine, if you insist. Just don’t take my finger off, okay?”

I dipped my finger in the milk and held it out for her to lick. I was a little unnerved at the size of her mouth—not to mention I doubted she could taste anything except me—but it was the only thing missing from our little reenactment. She didn’t have the strength to drink on her own, given how tiny and battered she was from being out in the rain so soon after being born, so that was the only way I could think of to help her drink.

“Ruff! *slurrrrrp*”

“H-Hey, that tickles!”

She slowly ran her massive tongue over my fingers. Even though she’d grown a lot since then, in that moment, I knew she was the same little pup I took in.



AFTER Leo had her fill of milk and sausages, I put out the fire, packed our things, and hopped on her back once again. She eagerly stood up, raring to go.

“Ready to get back on the road? If we don’t hurry, we might not make it to Ractos before nightfall.”

“Ruff!”

We hadn’t stopped for very long, but I still didn’t want to risk being late.

“Sorry for pushing you like this so soon... Thanks for understanding.”

“Woof!”

I was a little bit worried she wouldn’t have enough time to properly digest her meal, and I heard that could make you sluggish, but she seemed full of energy.

Eating is important... Who knew?

We continued for a while until we hit another fork in the road. If we kept going straight from here, we’d wind up in the mountains north of Ractos and miss the city itself.

“I guess it’s all town roads from here... Leo, turn left here.”

“Ruff, ruff!”

We’d have to stick to the cobbled road leading to the city’s eastern gate. I felt a little bad for the people we’d be running past on the way, but there wasn’t much we could do about it.

“Not long now, girl...”

We didn’t meet many people on the road—perhaps because there weren’t many travelers leaving Ractos so late in the day—but those we did pass were just as shocked as I’d feared.

The sun was just beginning to set when we arrived at the east gates, and I dismounted my lupine steed. It wouldn’t be wise to ride her into town, after all.

“Okay, Leo, here we are. Thanks for the ride.” I gave her a rewarding scratch.

“Awooo!”

One of the gatekeepers noticed us and jogged over to greet us. I recognized

him as the same guard we'd met last time.

"Ah, Mr. Hirooka, Miss Leo."

"Good evening," I replied with a polite nod.

"Wuff, wuff," Leo echoed.

"I was surprised to see someone else riding her the other day, but it seems she's returned to you," he said.

"Ahaha... That time was special."

He must've seen Phillip riding Leo into town—not that I was surprised, since he was stationed at the east gate often.

I cleared my throat. "So, uh... I heard something about meeting Sebastian?"

He nodded. "I'll send out a messenger immediately. Would you care to rest at the gatehouse?"

"Hmm... Could I stay at the west gate, maybe?"

"Of course. I'll inform them that you're en route with Miss Leo."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

"Awooo!" Leo nodded imperiously.

I wanted to let Leo rest as soon as possible, but since Sebastian would be entering the city through the west gate—the side closest to the villa—it only made sense to stay there. I didn't want him to have to go all the way across the city just to see me. Fortunately, Leo was still full of energy, so we headed there right away.

I considered stopping by Isabel's store on the way, but Leo couldn't come in with me, and I didn't want to leave her alone in the street. That didn't seem fair to her, and I didn't want to bother anyone at the gate to come with us just for that.

As we strolled down the city streets, Leo's tail swished cheerily back and forth. She didn't so much as glance at the passersby and the fragrant street food in their hands, perhaps because I'd just bought her a snack of her own.

"Wuff, wufawoo~!"

“You’re sure in a good mood. Did it really taste that good?”

“A-woff!”

Neither of us were particularly hungry, but it seemed rude to walk by all those amazing-smelling stalls without getting her a little something. It was the least I could do after all the heavy lifting she’d been doing.

When we arrived at the small square in front of the west gate, however, I was surprised at who I saw.

“Ah, Mr. Hirooka. What splendid timing!”

“Wait... Sebastian?!”

“Woff?” Leo’s eyes boggled with just as much shock as mine.

Not only Sebastian, but a small cluster of familiar servants were there as well, including Laila.

I blinked, still unable to believe my eyes. “But... The guard at the east gate said he hadn’t even sent a messenger yet.”

Sebastian chuckled heartily. “We encountered Phillip on the road, you see, and surmised you’d arrive at roughly this time.”

“You mean you calculated it?”

“You could say that.”

In other words, he’d taken the time it would take for Phillip to reach Lange, load the barrels, and for Leo and me to depart, all to pinpoint the time we’d get here to an impressive degree of accuracy. It felt like something only he would be able to pull off.

“I’m glad to see you well,” Laila said with a deep curtsy. “Excellent work, Miss Leo. May I take your things?”

“Oh, thanks.”

“Ruff, ruff!”

The maid circled about to take my bags. I was more than capable of carrying it myself, but I decided to take her up on her offer this time. She didn’t move to take Leo’s packs or the sword at my hip, fortunately.

I'd seen Claire in Lange less than a week ago, but it felt like ages since I saw Laila. I'd been gone so long it came as a bit of a surprise I missed her as much as I did. I'd been busy since I left, that was for sure.

"Well, then," the head butler continued, "could we perhaps make for Isabel's establishment? Of course, I can have a room prepared should you prefer to rest."

"No, I'll be fine. Leo did all the running, so I'm still pretty energetic. How are you doing, girl?"

"Bow-wow!" *Let's go already!*

"Good, good."

With that, Sebastian headed straight for the item shop and arrived at its nondescript door. The outside walls were painted a plain gray, and the door was pitch-black. The only signage was a similarly black board out front with a pentagram splashed onto it.

"It sure looks...unique," I muttered to myself.

"Isabel is a woman of very particular tastes," he explained. "According to her, the store must be decorated in a specific manner."

I didn't know what the look of the place had to do with magic, but I figured she had her reasons. It surely wasn't just because she liked that sort of occult feeling—of course not.

We left Leo with Laila and the other servants as Sebastian and I approached the front door.

He opened it without hesitation. "Are you here?"

"Welcome to— Oh, it's you two. Takumi, was it? Sure been a while."

I nodded. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

The old woman was sitting in the back of the store, just like she had been the first time I came. She seemed irritated to see Sebastian, but there was almost a playfulness to her glare. She smiled at me readily enough, though.

Maybe she's lonely?

“So?” she prodded. “What brings you here today?”

“I wish to discuss the doll I entrusted to you the other day,” Sebastian said. “Have you found out anything yet?”

“Oh, that old thing. It’s quite the trinket. Not many casters out there could make a fetish like it.”

It sounded as though she’d already finished examining it, and she was almost impressed. I couldn’t imagine how hard it must’ve been to make.

“What are its effects?” Sebastian asked.

“Hold your horses, now. Let me put on some tea first, this’ll take a while. Go on, you two, sit.”

“Of course.”

“Right.”

Sebastian and I sat down as she disappeared into the back, a faint smile on her face. Once the tea was set out before us, she cleared her throat.

“Right, let’s get to it. The thing’s dangerous. If it winds up in the wrong hands, or if you don’t know how to use it right, there’ll be all kinds of trouble.”

“Is it, now?” Sebastian prodded her to say more with his eyes.

That wasn’t news in and of itself. It had infected a whole village with some mystery flu, after all, since the merchants knew exactly how to put it to use.

“Pour a bit of mana in the doll and it starts up right away, just like any old tool,” she said.

“Go on.”

That was news to me, but Sebastian seemed to understand. There wasn’t anything like it back on Earth, let alone in Japan, and the idea that the doll itself could “use” magic was still new to me. It made enough sense for now, though, so I decided to ask Sebastian later if I had any questions.

“The thing is,” she continued, “the doll automatically sucks mana outta whoever touches it without needing to be channeled, and it only needs a little power to work its stuff. Most people’d just feel a little funny if they picked it up,

let alone know it's on."

Sebastian nodded sagely. "Indeed, most magic items require a conscious effort on the part of the user. I'd never imagined it activated itself... How troublesome."

I sent him an appreciative glance.

Thanks for the explanation.

"It sucks out your mana, huh..."

It must have been repositioned and moved often during its time in the village storehouse, so it would've had any number of chances to activate. It fed off their mana little by little, so the villagers never realized, and it was always "on."

"But what, may I ask, is its precise effect?" Sebastian knew as well as I did that it spread the disease, but neither of us were professionals, and it couldn't hurt to be sure.

"It breeds and fosters the essence of sickness inside it," Isabel explained. "The stuff's everywhere, after all."

She's probably referring to germs.

"Then," she continued, "it instills that essence in whatever it can reach. It can't affect anything too far away, 'course, but it singles out food and drink."

"Can it make people sick directly?" I asked.

"Nope. But if you eat or drink something it's been growing sickness in..."

"Then anyone can get sick."

She nodded. "That's the size of it. Worse still is the sickness itself. You can get it by drinking something infected, sure, but then it jumps from person to person. The doll's specifically made to foster that kind of illness."

So it transmits by air, or maybe contact.

"I think I understand," I said.

I still didn't have a clue how it accomplished any of that, but the process was about what I'd expected. The doll infects the wine, so anyone who drinks it gets sick. From there, it spreads like wildfire from person to person.

If it transmits by contact, then those fliers I put out encouraging people to wash their hands should've helped.

“Would it be possible to detect said illness through its mana?” Sebastian asked.

“Nah, it’s not the type humans can pick up on. It’s fine enough you’d need a special tool for it—and you can’t run everything anyone eats or drinks through one of them tools.”

“No, I suppose not.”

That meant there was no practical way of telling if something was infected or not, at least not on a large enough scale to be worthwhile. I could only imagine how much food a town like Ractos needed.

I guess that makes Leo even more amazing for being able to sniff it out.

Isabel smiled wryly. “You were right to put it in that sealed box. If anyone laid hands on it, and if there was any kind of food nearby, you’d have a proper mess on your hands.”

I assumed the sealed box was some kind of container that safely held the doll’s mana inside it.

“Indeed.” Sebastian turned to me. “It seems your decision was correct, Mr. Hirooka.”

“It was?”

“You had a sharp enough eye to tell something about the doll was amiss, and even when Phillip was transporting it, you instructed him to keep it as far away from his other belongings as possible.”

“I guess...”

I only thought it was creepy-looking. Leo was the one who’d identified it, and I only warned Phillip because I guessed it could be germ-related, and they didn’t seem to know about bacteria in this world. Even that guess was a stretch, though, since nobody who touched it directly—myself included—got sick.

“Now that we know its full effects, I shall entrust you with disposing of it,” Sebastian said. “Please ensure it stays out of villainous hands.”

“Course I will. I respect the craftsmanship, sure, but I’m not gonna risk it causing another plague, or worse.”

I trusted that she would handle it responsibly and not put it to ill use, even if my only reasoning was that Sebastian himself trusted her.

He nodded, satisfied by her response. “On to the next order of business, then. I believe Phillip brought you some of the tainted drink?”

“Oh, that?” She snorted. “I half expected that to be a gift. I would’ve gulped the whole thing down if your man hadn’t stopped me.”

Phillip had taken a small barrel of the wine with him so that she could analyze it. I was glad to hear she didn’t drink any—that could’ve been bad. I would’ve healed her with capwort right away, but it was a risk I didn’t want her to take.

“I’m sure you’re glad you didn’t,” Sebastian replied with a whisper of a smile.

“You can say that again. I’m glad that Phillip, or whatever his name was, told me when he did. More importantly, I found plenty of the essence of sickness living in that wine.”

“I’d expected as much,” Sebastian said. “Would you be able to render it drinkable once more?”

With any luck, the tainted wine that was en route to the mansion could be purified so people could drink it again.

“Course you can. You just need to pull the disease out.”

“How so?”

“Easy. Just boil it up nicely and let the mana evaporate, and it’ll take the blight with it.”

“Wouldn’t that just put the sickness into the air?” I asked.

“Probably not. We’re talking mana here—boil it, and its properties go poof. Heck, the mana itself’ll dissipate with it.”

“Really?”

It sounded like a simple solution. I remembered hearing you could disinfect water by boiling it, so I imagined it was the same basic principle. I was still a

little fuzzy on the mechanics of it, but that didn't matter. Killing mana, then, was just like killing germs.

But if we boil the wine, the alcohol will evaporate.

"That would make it no longer wine, correct?" Sebastian asked.

"You got it. It's still plenty good, though. Just think of it like juice."

"You...*drank* some?" I asked.

"Just to try—and don't worry, I made sure it was mana-free before I did."

In that case, the greital *wine* could still be enjoyed. Losing the alcohol was a shame, but it was far better than letting it sit in storehouses forever or getting people sick. Hannes had mentioned greitals also made a pleasant juice, and even boiled, it would probably have a little alcoholic kick to it. It was far better than throwing it all out, and Tilura would no doubt welcome the change, even though boiling all that wine would be a huge undertaking.

"I shall inform Helena back at the villa," Sebastian said. "She will no doubt ensure the wine is properly boiled prior to consumption, and the barrels shall remain under stringent lock and key. I will ensure Phillip in particular is made well aware of the danger it presents."

"Haha, yeah..." I responded dryly.

I doubt Phillip is ever going to pull something like that again, though. Not even he would drink something he knows is dangerous, even if it's as good as greital wine... At least, I hope he wouldn't.

"Enough about that, now." Isabel turned to me and raised an eyebrow. "So? What've you got to ask me?"

"R-Right..."

Was it that obvious I had more questions? And here I thought I had a good poker face.

Sebastian shot me a curious look. "Mr. Hirooka?"

"I didn't get the chance to tell you about this, but something weird happened with my Herb Cultivation," I said. "Claire already knows."

What with buying the wine and interrogating the merchants, it never felt like the right time to bring it up.

“Ah, milady told me all about it on the return trip from Lange. She was rather relieved you hadn’t grown to hate her.”

“Really? I can’t imagine that ever happening... But yes, that’s what I want to talk about.”

She must have told him about what had happened with Herb Cultivation during the fight with the orcs.

I know I was trying not to touch her, but I didn’t realize I hurt her feelings that badly. Still, after all she’s done for me and all we’ve been through together, I could never hate her. I wish I’d apologized to her properly when I had the chance.

I explained what had happened to Isabel in as much detail as I could remember. She didn’t so much as bat an eye.

As soon as I finished, she opened her mouth. “I know what you’re getting at, but why now?”

“Huh?”

“I told you, didn’t I? I was pretty clear on what your little Gift there does.”

“Uh... You were?”

What were her exact words, again?

“You can grow any plant that folks don’t cultivate, and you can grow it *anywhere*,” she repeated.

That’s right... Anything, anywhere.

“So it doesn’t have to be in the ground?” I asked.

“Nope. If you can touch it, you can grow stuff there, even in an orc or what have you. ’Course, I can’t say I know the ins and outs of growing plants in living monsters.”

“That makes sense, I guess.”

“It truly is an...interesting power, isn’t it?”

Sebastian and I had both misunderstood her, it seemed. We'd thought she meant any soil, but she was being very literal. That looser definition included orcs, and maybe more.

"S-So you're saying I can even grow herbs *in people*?" I asked.

She nodded. "I bet you could. Humans are just as alive as orcs, y'know."

Sebastian shot me a dubious glance. "While your Gift is indeed useful..."

"...It can also be extremely dangerous," I finished.

I could start growing plants in people at a touch, and if the orc's fate was anything to go by...I shuddered to think of it. I looked down at my hands in abject horror.

"Oh, relax." Isabel gave me a sympathetic look. "You can't turn people into gardens that easily."

"Huh?"

"Orcs are alive, sure, but they don't have wills or proper minds like us. Try that on a human and you bet they'll resist."

"Resist?"

"You mean to say one can defy a Gift?"

"Well, you can't nullify it outright. It's a mite too strong for that. Think back to when you grew that herb in the orc's chest, though—you were wanting that herb more than usual, right?"

I thought back to the time. She was right—I'd been desperate to get my hands on that plant, and I'd been thinking hard about it and regretting not growing more herbs in preparation.

"Yeah, that's true," I admitted.

"Small wonder, then. The stronger your desire, the stronger your Gift tries to work its magic. I don't know much about that kind of thing, but that's one thing the old tales are nice and clear on."

Even Sebastian seemed shocked at her words—that was evidently one thing he didn't know. That was a little surprising, since he knew about the tool Isabel

used to determine my Gift in the first place. Then again, Sebastian knew a little about pretty much everything, but Isabel was a true expert in this field.

“The stronger I want it, huh...?” I repeated.

She nodded. “There’s no way you can start growing plants on people by accident. It’s not as though you’ve struggled with your friends in the past, right?”

“Well... Yeah, you’re right.”

I let out a big sigh of relief, and I could likewise see Sebastian relax beside me. There was no chance of me accidentally hurting anyone with Herb Cultivation, then. I’d still have to be a little careful, but I wouldn’t have to actively avoid people and I could live my life as usual.

“Course, that’s not all there is to it,” Isabel continued. “I read that mana has a lot to do with it, too, but nobody knows enough to say for sure.”

I nodded. “Okay. But as long as I don’t explicitly try to grow herbs when I’m touching someone I’ll be fine, right? That’s honestly a big relief.”

“Most things are like that—it all depends on how you use it, and you can use it to do a real number on people. I told you that last time, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, I remember. Don’t worry, I promise I’ll be careful to never use it on people.”

“Good, good. As it should be.”

Back when she first told me about Herb Cultivation, she’d said it was up to me how I used it. There was some danger in what I did with it even back then, of course, since I could grow poisonous plants if I felt like it, but the choice felt that much more important now. It felt a shame to hurt people when I could instead be saving lives, like with Lange.

“I’m glad we came to you with the details,” Sebastian said. “If we knew naught but Mr. Hirooka’s newfound capacity for harm, we may have been forced to separate him from others.”

Something about the way he said “separate” sent a shiver down my spine, but it made sense. I could’ve posed a significant risk, especially living in such close

quarters with Claire. The exact same thing would happen on Earth, I imagined, but they'd conduct all sorts of experiments on me to boot.

I gratefully bowed to Isabel. "Thank you so much for explaining that to me. I think I understand my powers a lot better now."

"Don't just thank me, go out there and show me what you can do! It's almost as exciting as getting a new magic item in."

"Thank you most kindly," Sebastian echoed.

With that, we stood to leave the store.

"Come back anytime you find new magic items!" she called after us. "Or for tea, if you like!"

Maybe she's lonely, after all? I know I shouldn't be rude, but I can't imagine she gets a lot of customers in a weird-looking shop like this... I might just take her up on that tea offer next time I'm in town. It couldn't hurt to ask her more about how magic items work.

"That was quite a profitable endeavor indeed," Sebastian said.

"Yeah. I'm glad we asked her."

What she'd told us was invaluable, from how to purify the greital wine to more pressing details on Herb Cultivation. I didn't fully understand all the details, but it was better than not knowing at all.

"I imagine the sun will soon set," the butler remarked. "We'd best return home. Milady must be simply beside herself with anticipation."

"Yeah, and I bet Leo wants to see Tilura, Milicia, and Cherie again."

I could easily imagine the trio dying to play with Leo, and I didn't want to keep them waiting too long.

We walked with the servants and Leo out the west gate. Leo laid down so I could climb on her back more easily. At that point, however, Laila approached us.

"Miss Leo? May I?"

She nodded her big, fluffy head. "Wuff!"

With Leo's permission, the maid climbed on behind me. Sebastian and the other servants were mounting their horses.

So we're finally going back to the mansion, huh?

It wasn't my proper home, even though I'd spent by far the most time there out of anywhere in this world. Lange was nice and relaxing, but nothing beat the Libert villa's familiar halls.

After the run to the mansion, I hopped off Leo's back and gave her chin a thorough scratching.

"Good girl, Leo! Thanks for taking us all the way here."

"Ruff, aruffa!"

She'd been doing a lot of the heavy lifting lately, and I wanted to make sure she felt appreciated.

After I'd finished petting her, I stepped into the villa with Sebastian and the others. The servants were all lined up and waiting for us, as well as Claire, Tilura, and Cherie.

The servants bowed in perfect unison. "Welcome back, Mr. Hirooka!"

"Welcome home, Takumi."

"Takumi, Miss Leo! Welcome home!"

"Arf, arf!"

I was a little surprised to see Claire and her sister there with the servants, but I didn't mention it.

"I'm back, Claire, Tilura, everyone—and you too, Cherie." As I greeted them, Laila and her junior maid, Gelda, took my things. "Oh, thank you."

"Did anything amiss happen after we left?" Claire asked me worriedly.

Tilura was practically vibrating with excitement. "They said you fought monsters! Did you really? Did you?!"

"Everything was fine," I reassured Claire. "And Tilura? Can you maybe calm down a little?"



Tilura stopped waving her arms around quite as much, but she was still humming with energy.

“Didn’t I tell you everything after I came home?” Claire let out an exhausted sigh.

The tiny heiress pouted. “But I gotta hear it from Takumi himself now!”

“Haha, yeah, I bet.” I smiled. I knew what she was getting at—hearing about the battle directly would probably be more immersive for her—but it wasn’t the time or place for that. My storytelling skills probably weren’t up to snuff, but I could at least try. “How about I tell you later?”

“Okay!”

“Let’s have your things put away and we can relax,” Claire said. “Helena, will dinner be ready soon?”

The chef bowed. “Right away, milady.”

All I wanted was to drop off my belongings in my room and relax. It’d been forever since I’d had a cup of Laila’s tea, and I was sorely missing it. Since it sounded like we could eat soon, we decided to reconvene in the dining hall.

On the way to our room, however, Leo and I were stopped by Milicia.

“Master, Miss Leo. It’s nice to see you again.”

“Oh, Milicia.”

“Ruff.”

It felt like ages since anyone had called me that, but it can’t have been *that* long.

“I studied medicine every day you were gone!” my apprentice declared proudly.

“Great! Can you tell me how far you’ve gotten?”

Milicia felt like a little sister to me, but not in the same way as Tilura did. We strolled down the hall as she told me about her studies. From the sound of it, she’d been making enough progress she might well have known more than me. I’d have to step up my game if I didn’t want to become her apprentice instead.

Once my luggage was back in my room, we met the others in the dining hall as planned. Dinner had already been set out on the table by the time we arrived.

“I imagine Takumi is plenty tired,” Claire announced, “so let’s eat first and go from there.”

“Thank you for the food.”

“Aruff!”

With that, we started eating. The food I’d had in Lange was good, but I had to admit Helena’s cooking was simply better. I noticed that Tilura was trying hard to keep her mouth as full as possible, and she cast repeated glances in my direction. It was taking everything she had to not talk about the orcs.

Claire finally broke the near silence herself. “Sebastian? How did things go with Isabel?”

“Ah, yes. Though you are all still eating, I suppose I can report her findings on the doll,” he replied.

“Yes, please do. I can tell there was some sort of development on that front.”

“Mr. Hirooka and I stopped in at Isabel’s establishment to assess her progress...”

It made sense to talk about it early, since the sooner everyone was made aware of the doll’s qualities, the better. Leo continued to munch away at her dinner, obviously bored, while Tilura seemed deeply disappointed we weren’t talking about killing orcs.

I’ll be sure to tell her all about it later.

The first thing Sebastian mentioned was the doll’s effects.

“It’s worse than I feared,” Claire muttered as he finished.

“Indeed. Had Mr. Hirooka not discovered the vile creation, we would be in dire straits indeed. To think that such a vile tool was being put to use in this very land!”

I chuckled nervously. “Leo’s the one who found it, actually. I can’t take any

credit.”

Leo’s ears twitched at the sound of her name. “Woff?”

Phillip was technically the first to literally stumble across it, but without Leo’s amazing nose, we might not have ever found out the role it played in infecting the wine.

Sebastian nodded approvingly. “Only a silver fenrir could detect such faint mana so easily.”

“Or perhaps it’s her extraordinary sense of smell?” Claire wondered.

“Ruff? Gwoff.”

If I remembered correctly, a dog’s sense of smell was something like ten million times stronger than a human’s—but that might have only been about smells they liked. Besides, her nose was even better now that she was a silver fenrir.

“With the source of the epidemic removed, the disease’s spread in Ractos should soon come to an end.”

Claire smiled at the butler’s words. “Especially with Takumi’s capwort remedies everywhere in the city. We’ve also managed to limit the spread to smaller villages.”

In other words, all we had to do now was wait. In the past, we’d always talked about the disease with a sense of unease, but this time everyone seemed optimistic.

“That’s really good to hear, honestly,” I said. “There was no reason for this illness to spread in the first place, so the fewer people that suffer over it, the better.”

Not that I want to see people suffer from perfectly natural epidemics, either.

Claire turned around to look at Sebastian, standing by the wall behind her. “Now we only need to deal with the Yugard store, correct?”

“As I mentioned in Lange, I think it prudent we go on the offensive, but we will need the explicit permission of His Grace to do so. The messenger should return from the main mansion in several days’ time.”

“Come to think of it, Phillip hasn’t returned yet, either. We’ll need the wine he’s transporting to execute your plan.”

The Libert estate proper was closer to Lange, it seemed, so it wouldn’t take as long for the messenger to reach there. My best guess was that Phillip would make it back to the villa at roughly the same time as the messenger, as long as everything went smoothly.

“Yes, indeed!” Sebastian let out a hearty chuckle. “Not only have those cretins disrupted the peace and prosperity of the realm, infecting countless innocents in the process, they attempted to destroy an entire village and our fair Mr. Hirooka along with it. The Yugard store deserves nothing more than complete and utter defeat, and their patron count along with them. I’m certain His Grace will grant us his blessing.”

“Oh, I’m sure Father would gladly sign off on your plan, regardless of whether or not it’s his place to be quite so gleeful over it,” Claire said. “He’ll gladly support our little campaign. All I ask, Sebastian, is that you’re *careful* in how you proceed.”

There was something about the way she emphasized “careful” that made me think she meant the opposite. They were both acting just like they had back at Lange when they were discussing the merchants’ interrogation. The Yugards were no better, of course, so I didn’t complain. Unlike Nick, they’d long run out of any sympathy I’d had for them.

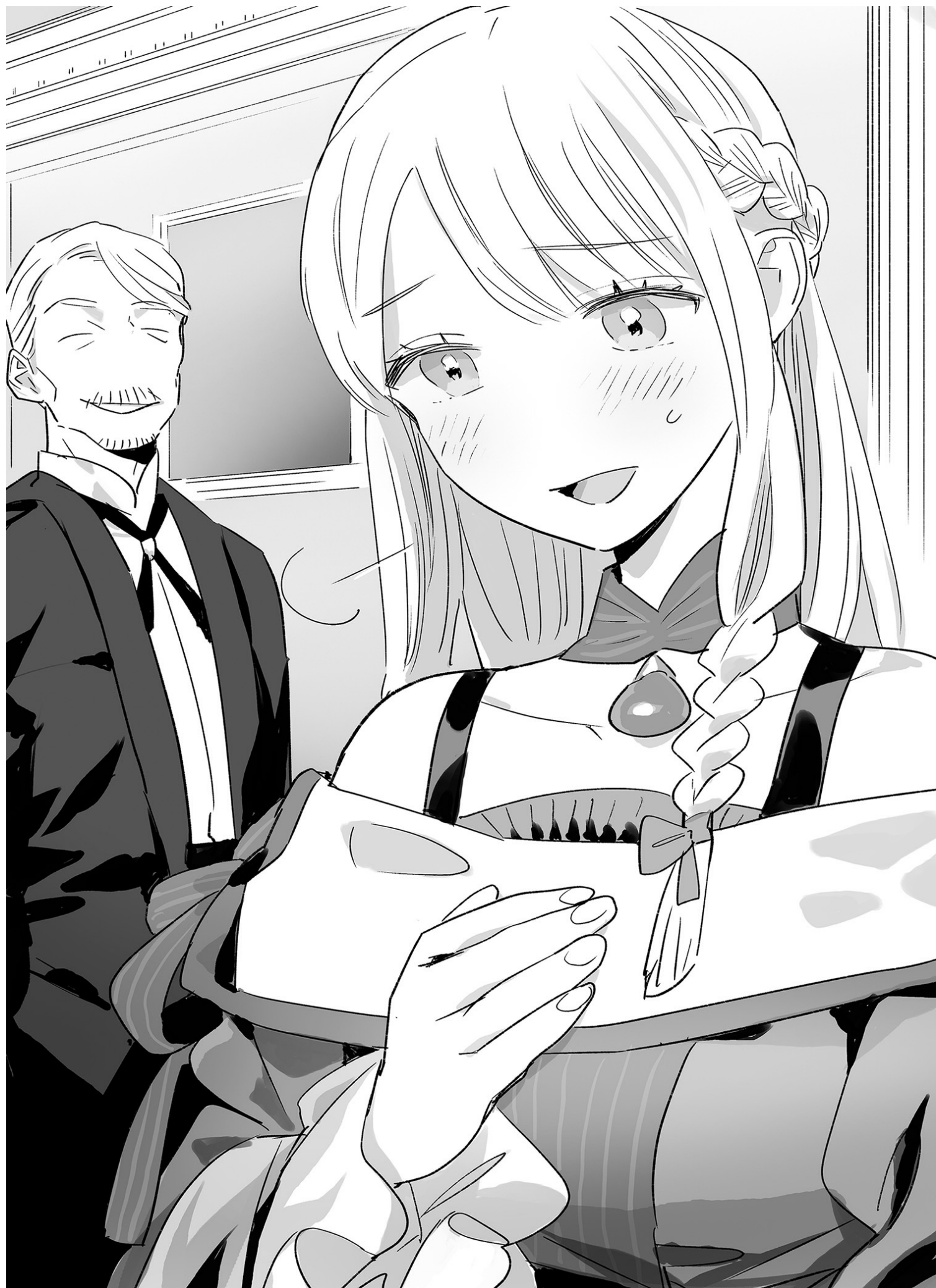
Fortunately, the pair began to relax soon afterward, but Claire seemed to recall something as soon as she had.

She turned to me. “By the way, did you ask Isabel about your Gift?”

“Right. Well...”

I wasn’t surprised she was curious since she only knew half the story. I readily explained what I learned, and Sebastian filled in any details I’d missed or didn’t explain well enough. As soon as I finished, she let out a massive sigh of relief.

She muttered something to herself that I couldn’t quite catch. “Oh, so we can... No problems there, then. Good.”



Sebastian seemed to hear her, and his face strained as he desperately stifled a laugh.

Is it really that funny?

By that time, dinner was over, and we were enjoying our post-meal tea. It was still the best I'd ever tasted by a large margin. It must've had to do with the leaves they used, or the way they prepared it, likely both.

"Oh, right." I turned toward Tilura. "Did you keep up on your training while I was gone?"

"Of course! I trained like crazy while you were gone!"

I wasn't too worried, since she seemed to love working out. Actually, I hadn't been able to concentrate as well while I was in Lange, so if anything, I was worried she'd overtake me entirely.

"More importantly, I wanna hear your story already!"

Tilura was practically vibrating out of her chair in excitement, and I chuckled at the sight. "Right. My battle with the orcs, was it?"

"Yep! So how did you beat them all?"

She'd been dying to know ever since I returned to the mansion, and it seemed like a great opportunity to finally tell her.

"I don't know exactly how many orcs there were, but there were at least a dozen."

"Wow! And you killed them all yourself?!"

"Hahaha, no, not even close. I'm not any better with a sword than you are."

"Really? So what did you do?"

Against numbers like that, it was all I could do to just try and buy time. I was, however, able to take on a few of them one-on-one, and I was proud of myself for pulling it off.

Tilura listened eagerly as I recounted the battle. Cherie had gotten tired already and was curled up in a sleepy little ball on Leo's back. Claire was also listening to my story, I noticed, but she seemed anxious, probably because she

knew I got hurt. I was more than fine, though, so I didn't understand why she was so uneasy. Laila, Gelda, and the other servants were all as composed as always, but I was pretty sure they were following along as well.

I didn't know they all wanted to fight monsters that badly...

"Right, Tilura, I almost forgot to mention— Never forget what Eckenhart said."

"What Dad said...?"

He'd given us quite a bit of advice, and Tilura paused as she sifted through it.

"Never stop moving on the battlefield," I told her.

"Never stop... What happened?"

In a one-on-one fight, you could probably afford to stand still and square off against your opponent. Against so many enemies, however, with friend and foe all mixed together in one big mob, doing nothing was suicide. I'd just killed an orc with Herb Cultivation, and I was too stunned to defend myself. I got hit hard in the back of the head, which was the reason Claire was so worried about me even now.

"I was really lucky I didn't just die outright," I said.

Tilura nodded gravely. "Oh... Okay."

I could hear Claire let out a sigh of relief. It must've been stressful for her to hear, even if she knew I was fine in the end.

"I guess I was 'lucky' that one blow to the head didn't kill me, but I was still effectively alone with the orc," I added. "Everyone else had their hands full, so they couldn't help me."

"What happened next?" Tilura asked anxiously.

"Well, I was too stunned to move. I saw the orc raise its arms for another attack, and I was sure I was a goner. I just shut my eyes and waited for the killing blow to come, when suddenly..."

"Suddenly?!" Tilura interrupted intently.

All around me, I could see all the servants and even Claire were hanging on

my every word.

“That’s when Leo came to the rescue.”

“Miss Leo did?!”

“Wuff?” She tilted her head curiously, assuming I was trying to talk to her.

“I’d have died if she was any later,” I continued, stroking her coiled body gently. “Thanks a bunch, girl.”

“Wuff-ruff.”

After that, I told them all about Johanna and Claire’s arrival, healing myself with the loe, and then our short trip into the woods to apprehend the merchants. It was quite late by the time I’d finished telling the tale, and we disbanded for the night just as little Tilura started nodding off.

I was a little too tired from the day’s travels, so I decided to skip my evening practice swings and head straight to bed.

“There’s nothing wrong with skipping just one day, right? I’ve been going pretty hard at it lately.”

“Ruff!”

I did make sure to take a proper bath, though, so I was warm and relaxed by the time I crawled under my covers. Leo half-splayed herself across my bed so I could use her as a pillow, but she deserved the rest even more than I did by that point. Instead, I simply laid down next to her and enjoyed her fluff just on the side of the bed.

This has to be the best way to sleep. She might’ve changed a lot since the old days, but we’ve always slept just like this, and it still can’t be beat.

Chapter 3: New Ways to Drink Greital Wine

THE next morning, after an excellent night's sleep with Leo's help, I got cleaned up and enjoyed breakfast in the dining hall. Afterward, I did some sword training in the back garden with Tilura and Leo, then went inside to study medicine with Milicia. She had studied so much since I was gone that, if anything, she had to teach me some new concepts.

Some master I am... I'll have to work harder to keep my title.

We had lunch after that, but just as I was heading back into the garden to cultivate some herbs, Sebastian stopped me.

"Do you have a minute, Mr. Hirooka?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"About the aforementioned greital wine... You arrived in Ractos the same day Phillip reached Lange, correct?"

"That's right. I helped him load the barrels and left right after."

"Hmm... I suppose it'll be several more days until he arrives, then." He sighed. Clearly, he wanted to know when the tainted wine would arrive. "By Isabel's summation, the only way to drink it is to boil it, bit by bit."

I nodded. "I wish there was some other way to do it."

Boiling the wine would get rid of the disease, but it'd also evaporate all the alcohol, meaning it wouldn't be a wine anymore.

I still wish there were some other way to deal with it.

An idea seemed to come to Sebastian as we spoke. "Do you suppose we could use herbs—capwort, that is—to nullify the illness somehow?"

"Capwort?"

"Yes. If capwort can remedy the illness the wine causes, then might it be possible to use capwort to purify the wine without boiling it?"

I understood what he was getting at, but it didn't quite sound right.

"I don't know," I told him. "I really can't say either way."

"Ah, how unfortunate. I've heard of medicinal teas and medicinal alcohols, so I hoped there was a chance."

Medicinal tea was made by boiling herbs, and I remember hearing about its benefits in the past. I was pretty sure I'd heard of medicinal alcohol as well, but I wasn't very clear on the details. I kind of remember some pharmacies in Japan selling that sort of liqueur in red boxes. It made sense, then, that the capwort could be combined with the wine to purify it, but I had no idea how to make either drink.

"Maybe a medicinal alcohol would work?" I guessed. "We had something like that in my old world, but I have no idea how it's made."

"Is that so? Perhaps we should consult Helena, then."

"Helena? Why?"

"She is our head chef, after all. She's quite well-versed in all manner of liqueurs."

I remember reading somewhere that food and booze are very closely linked, so it made sense to ask her. We'd have to ask for her aid once the wine arrived either way.

I nodded. "Okay, let's talk to her. Should we bring it up now?"

"It would be ideal timing, as she has just finished with lunch, but weren't you about to grow herbs in the garden?"

"Herb Cultivation doesn't take long, so I can do it anytime later when I have a minute."

"Very well. In that case, please accompany me to the kitchens."

With that, we departed to discuss our ideas with Helena.



BEFORE we headed to the kitchen, I stopped by my room to give Sebastian the funds I'd promised him and Claire for the wine. All the gold and silver coins

I'd received were safely stashed there, and even with the promised sum removed, I still had a staggering amount left. Loe was selling left and right despite its high price tag, and I was making more money than I knew what to do with.

I could really use a vault or something to store it in... I don't think they have banks here.

Nonetheless, I handed Sebastian the money and apologized for being so late about it.

"How very proper of you," he said with a hint of regret. "And here I was hoping you'd forget about the money altogether."

I couldn't just let it go. Once I made a promise, I couldn't relax until it was fulfilled.

Apparently, a messenger had already left for Lange with the money they and Hannes had agreed on, so I was repaying them for my share.

He sure does work fast.

With that, we finally arrived at the door to the kitchens. In all my time at the villa so far, I hadn't once stepped inside, and I was getting more curious about it by the minute.

"Pardon us," Sebastian called as he pushed the door open.

Inside, we found Helena with a small team of chefs eating lunch. Beside the great wood-burning stoves were large metal pots, and the many shelves I could see were full of knife racks, wooden cutting boards, and all manner of cooking utensils. Despite the lack of electric or even gas stoves, it was very similar to what I'd seen in restaurants back in Japan. Everyone was seated around a small table set in the corner of the room.

"Sebastian?" Helena started in surprise. "Oh, and Mr. Hirooka! What brings you here?"

"I do hope we aren't interrupting," Sebastian apologized.

She swallowed a large bite of food. "No, we were just finishing. What can I help you with? I can't imagine there would be much here for Mr. Hirooka."

Sure enough, the table seemed to be full of mostly empty plates, and the chefs were hurriedly shoveling the last few bites of food into their mouths just as Helena had.

It's nothing that urgent, really. You guys can slow down and enjoy your food.

"We have something we wish to discuss with you," the butler told her.

"Really? That's unusual. Is there something in my cooking that needs changing?"

She already seemed convinced there was something wrong. I imagined that wasn't too unusual in the service of nobles, and if their employers told them to change something, they were forced to comply.

That must be so hard...but I guess that's no different from running a restaurant and having to fight off complaints from customers.

Sebastian shook his head. "Rest assured, milady is most satisfied with your cooking. We wish to consult you on a different matter."

"I like your cooking, too!" I added. "No reason to complain."

She smiled at me, evidently relieved. "Oh, thank you. So what can I help you two with?"

"Within the next few days, a large shipment of barrels of greital wine will arrive at the mansion," Sebastian explained.

"Greital wine? You mean the slightly sweet alcohol?"

Apparently, she knew about the drink already.

"Unfortunately," he continued, "the wine we will be receiving is undrinkable as-is, and there will be...ten barrels or so, was it, Mr. Hirooka?"

"Uh, yeah. About that," I replied.

She blinked. "So all ten barrels have issues? I hope the village itself is doing all right."

"Rest assured, we've already attended to the root issue. They won't be producing any more undrinkable wine. However, that does indeed mean everything we will be receiving is undrinkable."

She gave Sebastian a strange look. “Why are you getting so much of it, then?”

“I shall explain that in full at a later date.”

We had our reasons for buying it, of course, but none of it had to do with the problem at hand. I was glad she’d be getting that answer eventually, though.

“I had the pleasure of drinking Lange’s greital wine,” Sebastian continued. “It was quite good—well worth the price tag.”

She nodded. “I’ve never had it myself, but I’ve heard the rumors, and evidently, they’re true. I’ve always wanted to procure some for the mansion, though since milady and Lady Tilura cannot drink yet, I couldn’t justify the price. I never did quite get around to it...”

So Lange’s greital wine really is that popular... No wonder it spread the disease so quickly.

“Although it’s undrinkable in its current state,” I added, “it’s possible to boil it first.”

Helena raised an eyebrow. “Boil it...?”

“Yes. Do that, and it’ll be purified so you can drink it without a problem,” I said.

“But wouldn’t that make it not a wine any more?”

“Precisely,” Sebastian said. “While it may lessen or alter the flavor somewhat, it’s crucial to boil it properly beforehand.”

Just heating it wouldn’t cause any problem—plenty of people drank hot wine—but Isabel made it clear it had to be *boiled* to the point where all the alcohol was gone. That wouldn’t make it much of a wine, and I could see Helena mull it over. She had to be a lot more familiar with cooking wine and the like than we were.

“In essence, it can be drunk as a nonalcoholic beverage only,” Sebastian concluded.

She smiled thinly. “I’m sure Lady Tilura would enjoy it, at least.”

It was sweet by default, so I imagined it’d make a good juice, if a little

unbalanced.

“We were hoping you knew an alternative method of rendering the wine potable,” Sebastian said.

“An alternative method, huh.” She folded her arms and bit her lip as she thought long and hard about it. The other chefs behind her seemed just as lost in thought. “You can only purify it with heat, right?” she finally asked. “That’d totally evaporate the spirits of the wine. Isn’t there any other way of making it drinkable or whatever?”

I wasn’t quite sure what she meant by the wine’s “spirits,” but I figured she must’ve been referring to the ethyl in the wine.

“This particular impurity is rather unique,” Sebastian explained. “At the moment, we have no other means of dealing with it.”

“So boiling it gets rid of the spirits and this contaminant or whatever at the same time... I can’t say I know a way off the top of my head,” she told us.

Sebastian sighed. “I feared as much. In that case, I suppose we only have the hypothesis Mr. Hirooka and I devised.”

“Um, excuse me?” One of the chefs raised his hand.

Sebastian nodded encouragingly. “Go on. Have you thought of something?”

He puffed out his chest, a little prideful. “I don’t know how it works, really, but I’ve heard you can boil wine to make a new liqueur.”

“You mean make a new wine?”

Helena’s eyes lit up. “I’ve heard of that! They make drinks like that in a distant land by boiling other alcohol. If I remember correctly, you just heat a wine to a low boil, allowing the components to split, and then you chill it and make it into a wine again.”

“Where have I heard that before?” I muttered.

“Is something amiss, Mr. Hirooka?” Sebastian asked me.

“No, it’s just... I’m pretty sure I’ve heard of that method before. Boiling, simmering, chilling...” Finally, it occurred to me. “I’ve got it!”

“What is it?” Sebastian asked.

Helena and the other chefs looked every bit as eager as he was.

“I think they’re talking about something called distillation. You heat something to split one liquid into two, as long as what you’re trying to split has different boiling points.”

That was what I could remember from my chemistry classes in school, at least. There was even a specific name for distilled fruit wines.

“I think it’s called brandy?” I ventured.

Sebastian gave me a blank look. “Brandy...?”

“Is that what it is?” Helena asked.

“That’s what we called it where I’m from, at least. You probably have a different name for it here.”

I wasn’t making brandy in my high school labs, of course, but my teacher mentioned it as a practical application of the process. She loved alcohol, and she told us not only about that, but the process of distilling whisky and vodka, too. None of the other kids seemed interested, since we were all underage, but I remembered some of the other teachers fiercely chewing her out over it.

After thinking for a moment, Helena shook her head. “I can’t say I’ve heard of this ‘brandy’ before.”

If they had distilled spirits somewhere in this world, though, that meant they had to have an equivalent, even if it had a different name. I wasn’t surprised the word itself didn’t ring a bell.

“Do you suppose we can conduct such a process here?” Sebastian asked me.

“I don’t know, to be honest. I know how it should work, but you probably don’t have any of the tools I’m familiar with. Even if we did, there’s far too much greital wine to distill it all.”

The experiment we did in class used laboratory flasks, and while they probably had vessels that would work, brandy-making probably had its own tools. We would also need a refrigerator or something similar, but I was hoping they had ice magic or something to accomplish that.

“Yes,” Helena agreed. “I doubt we could do it here. I seem to recall they needed a large, specialized device to process it correctly, but I don’t know the details.”

Each batch would probably take a few days, and we could probably only process a few cupfuls at a time. They didn’t have any local distilleries to handle it, either.

Sebastian sighed. “In that case, I suppose we must resort to our original idea.”

“Which is?” Helena asked.

“You see, Mr. Hirooka and I thought of a potential solution. We were also, admittedly, hoping you had an idea yourself.”

They did come up with the distillation idea, to be fair, even if we can’t pull it off.

“So? What can I help you two with?” she asked.

“We were considering mixing herbs into said wine,” Sebastian explained. “The impurity in the greital wine makes anyone who drinks it ill, but the illness can be cured with the correct medicine. We were wondering if combining the herbs with the wine directly could remove the disease altogether.”

Helena gave an intrigued nod. “So, you want to make medicinal wine?”

I’m not sure it would really turn out like that, though. It’s not supposed to make you healthier; it’s supposed to not make you sick.

“Precisely,” Sebastian replied. “While it would no doubt affect the flavor, the effect should be far less than boiling it outright. If the result is good enough, perhaps we could even sell it?”

I turned to him in surprise. “You want to sell it, even?”

He didn’t mention that before.

“Only if it works,” he added. “I’ve no idea if the result will be sufficiently good, but if it is, it can only improve Lange’s finances.”

If word got out that greital wine was spreading the disease, they could start selling the medicinal variant instead as a whole new product.

“There are plenty of people out there—myself included—who would much rather have it as a liqueur than a juice.”

I nodded. “I think I agree with you there...and I bet Phillip does, too.”

We exchanged small smiles. Even if we hadn’t tried the juice version yet, if it was created to be enjoyed as a wine, we should try to keep it that way. Adding capwort would change it to an extent, but it would still be alcohol.

“I think I understand what the two of you are getting at,” Helena said. “If you can purify it or otherwise make it so the wine can’t hurt people, it’ll be fine to drink. Unfortunately, we’d have to try it to know if it’ll have any effect.”

We couldn’t see the infected mana, either, making it harder to tell if it was safely removed.

“In that case, I propose we make several test batches once we are able,” Sebastian suggested.

Trial batches couldn’t hurt, since even in the worst-case scenarios, we could just boil the failures and drink them as juice. If they all failed, we’d just have to hope Lange had some other way to earn money.

“That’ll be easy once we have the wine,” Helena replied. “But do we have any way of knowing if it’s safe to drink?”

“We’ll simply have to recruit Miss Leo’s aid,” Sebastian replied.

I nodded. “She could tell us with just a sniff. If we promised to pay her in sausages, she’d be more than willing to give us a paw.”

Alternatively, we could ask Isabel to use the mana-detecting item she mentioned, but getting Leo’s help was faster and saved us trips into Ractos.

Helena shot us a blank look. “Miss Leo?”

“She can sniff out the essence of illness in the wine,” Sebastian explained. “Isn’t that right, Mr. Hirooka?”

“Yep. It’s all thanks to her that we knew the barrels were infected in the first place.”

She grimaced. “Essence of illness, huh... You definitely don’t want to drink

that.”

“Humans are incapable of detecting said essence,” Sebastian explained. “Trace amounts of mana too light to sense carried the disease.”

Helena seemed a little surprised at first that the wine was the source of the whole epidemic, but she was super quick on the uptake.

“We have this information on good authority,” Sebastian added. “Isabel, a magic item specialist, confirmed it herself.”

“Okay, then. We’ll have Miss Leo test the trial batches,” Helena decided.

I nodded. “That should be plenty enough to be sure it’s safe.”

I’ll ask Leo about it later.

“You can leave the winemaking itself to us,” Helena told us firmly. She glanced back at her assistants, who nodded readily in agreement.

“Please do,” Sebastian replied, taking out a small pouch from his waistcoat. “Here is the herb to be incorporated into the wine—or rather, the medicine.”

She took the bag and peered inside. “Powdered capwort, is it? This should make it easy to see if there’s an effect.”

“We have a few other things we would like to try as well.”

“Like what?”

“Unpowdered capwort, for instance, including both unprocessed and dried variants. Also...”

Sebastian continued to list various different types and states of capwort. I’d assumed that it would only work properly in powdered form, but he wasn’t of the same mind. By trying other forms, and even other herbs, it may be possible to create a variety of effects, including ones that make you healthier by drinking it.

“...Or at least, we will consider such options if the capwort does indeed work,” he concluded. “Please prepare a small batch of each.”

“Of course.”

With our request in Helena and her assistants’ capable hands, Sebastian and I

left the kitchen.

“Now we need only wait for Phillip to return,” he said.

“Yeah. I really hope it works.”

“As Helena said, there’s only one way to find out.”

We couldn’t guess the effect or draw conclusions without any evidence.

Who knew making new things would be this nerve-wracking?

“Well, Mr. Hirooka, I believe I’ve taken enough of your time. My apologies.”

“No, don’t apologize. It was a good idea.”

I quickly parted with Sebastian and headed into the back garden, intent on finally growing the herbs I wanted. There, however, I saw Tilura, Milicia, and Cherie relaxing on Leo’s back.

“Oh, Takumi!”

“Master!”

“Ruff, ruff!”

“Arf!”

At the sight of me, Leo plodded over to say hi, bringing the rest of them with her.



“So you’ve all been playing with Leo?” I asked.

“No, Miss Leo’s playing with us!” Milicia corrected me.

“It’s been forever!” Tilura giggled.

“Arf, arf!”

They all seemed beside themselves with joy. It’d been a while since they had the chance to play with her, after all. The last time she came back was to deliver the doll, and she probably didn’t have the time to play then.

I smiled and gave her a hearty pat on the flank. “Isn’t that nice, Leo?”

“Woff!” She wagged eagerly at me.

“Wanna play with us?” Tilura asked me.

“No, I’ve got herbs to cultivate. You can go ahead and enjoy yourselves.”

Milicia gave me a slightly guilty look. “Do you need any help?”

“I’ll be fine, but thanks for offering. It’s nothing urgent, so I’ll be taking my time and watching you four play.”

I headed into the back corner of the garden, where I often grew my herbs. I didn’t want to get in their way, after all, and I was hoping some of their energy would rub off on me and help me work harder. Sebastian was awfully broken up about taking my time, but since I didn’t have any plans to speak of for the rest of the day, I could afford to take my time and relax.

I made all sorts of different herbs for Kales’s store before finally standing up again and stretching my back.

“Nngh... This is enough for today, right?”

I had to bend over quite a bit, both to grow the plants and to pick them, so if I got too caught up in my work, my back would stiffen up. I was taking breaks to watch the kids, of course, but it was still a strain.

Now that I was done, however, I began to consider what herbs might work best in wine.

“I can’t let Sebastian and Helena do all the work, after all. I’d better come up

with some herbs to mix in.”

Capwort was the only obvious addition. Aside from that, I needed something that was good for you. Greital wine had a high proof, so drinking too much was out of the question, and the herb had to work well with that.

Maybe something to deal with common side effects of overdrinking, like herbs that boost your circulation or purify your internal organs?

“Whoops!” I hurriedly pulled my hand off the ground. “I almost made something.”

Brainstorming with a hand to the ground was just asking Herb Cultivation to fire off on its own. I’d succeeded in only making useful things to date, but that didn’t mean I could *only* grow good things.

I should probably focus on tried-and-true combinations for now.

“Let’s see... Medicine in general isn’t very advanced here, right?”

That meant I might think of herbs with effects nobody in this world could even imagine. It wasn’t guaranteed to produce results, but it couldn’t hurt to start with what I knew.

With that, I let the sounds of Leo and the kids playing entertain me as I grew more and more herbs to try out, being very careful not to create any strange abominations. Not much came to mind, however, and my brainstorming session ended with only a few small plants to show for it.



LATE the next morning, I found myself relaxing, since we still weren’t allowed to take out a certain evil pharmacy. I’d already finished my morning training with Tilura, studying with Milicia, and even growing all the herbs I needed, and I was thinking about the medicinal wine.

Just when I thought I’d be called for lunch, Laila came out into the garden.

“Mr. Hirooka, you have a guest.”

“For me?”

“Yes. Nick is waiting for you in the parlor.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll be right there.”

I headed into the villa but stopped on the way to the parlor.

“Whoops, can’t forget to take him that.”

I went to my room first to grab what I owed him before meeting Nick in the parlor.

“It’s been a while, boss!” he greeted me cheerfully.

“Yeah, it has.”

I hadn’t seen him the whole time I was in Lange, and it looked like his hair had grown out a little—he was no longer totally bald. It resembled the kind of buzzcut high school baseball players often got, but I didn’t mention it. It would’ve been rude, and he didn’t seem quite that young.

“Mr. Hirooka.” Gelda held out the bag containing the herbs I’d been growing.

“Thanks.” I turned back to the ruffian-turned-courier. “Here’s today’s shipment.”

“Roger that!”

I gave him the herbs, then gave him the small pouch I’d fetched from my room. “You should have this, too.”

“Coins?” He shot me a baffled look. “What for?”

The bag had a number of copper, silver, and gold coins inside.

“You deserve it for all the hard work you’ve been doing,” I explained. “It’s a raise, but I didn’t include the amount I’d already prepaid you.”

His eyes widened. “A r-raise? You sure you should be giving me this much?!”

He’d been working hard for about a month now, and it felt time that I rewarded his efforts. He was working hard—it would be cruel to keep him at the same flat rate forever. I’d already discussed it with Sebastian to determine how much of a raise was acceptable, of course.

“It’s really not that much, but consider this an investment in you. I hope you’ll continue your good work.”

“I-I never thought I’d make this much!” Tears brimmed in his eyes. “Thank you so much, boss! I’ll dedicate my life to you, honest!”

“It’s really not that big a deal.”

The pouch only had two gold coins, one silver coin, and one copper coin. That made his monthly wage a little higher than average by Ractos’s standards.

“I hope you enjoy your money—just try not to do anything illegal, okay?” I reminded him.

“Of course not! Whatever I don’t need, I’m gonna save good and proper. Kales taught me how important saving is!”

“That’s good to hear.”

You could never be certain what the future held, and it never hurt to put a little aside.

Apparently, this country charged income tax, which was the main but not the only way the kingdom gathered its funds. I remember hearing that the Liberts kept the taxes low since they made so much off of their own business enterprises, but other domains probably differed to varying degrees. It was similar overall to the income taxes in Japan, although it was uniform instead of graduated. I’d already paid both my own taxes and Nick’s, but that *definitely* wasn’t because it was too much of a pain to keep them separate. No, clearly not.

“Right, then. Can you take those back to Kales’s with you?” I asked.

“Sure thing, boss! I got it covered. See you later!”

He purposefully turned and strode out of the room, tears still glistening faintly in his eyes.

After I saw him off, it was time for lunch. Helena’s cooking was superb, as always. As I finished the last few morsels on my plate, a butler entered and approached Sebastian.

“Please excuse the intrusion,” he said before whispering something in Sebastian’s ear.

“Yes... What? Understood, I’ll head there immediately.” The butler hurried

out of the room as Sebastian turned to address us. “Something rather pressing has arisen, so I shall have to take my leave. With all due respect, I request that you all remain here until I return.”

“Is something the matter?” Claire asked him, worried.

“A messenger has arrived from His Grace. Given the distance at play, they are *far* earlier than expected,” he responded.

“From Father?” Claire’s brow furrowed. “All right, then.”

If I remember correctly, it was a six-or seven-day ride to the main mansion from here. We should only receive a reply from him in about two weeks’ time, but it hadn’t even been ten days. It was abnormally fast. Leo could probably make the trip that quickly, but making time like that on a horse should be impossible. Eckenhart had hustled on his way to the villa last time and only shaved off a day or two. I didn’t think traveling without a carriage would make that significant a difference.

“What do you think it means?” I asked Claire.

“I... I don’t know,” she responded.

Laila poured tea as we waited. “Help yourselves.”

“Thank you,” Claire replied as she held out her teacup.

Gelda poured some milk for the dogs. “Miss Leo, Cherie.”

“Worf.”

“Arf, arf!”

I was a little surprised to see Milicia approach me with a teapot, quivering slightly with anxiety.

“Y-Your cup, master?”

“Oh, thanks.”

“N-No, I’m still new to this... I really don’t think my tea’s very good yet.”

Laila probably taught her.

I took a small sip. “Hmm... It’s pretty good.”

“Really?! I’m so glad!” she cheered.

It was every bit as sweet and fragrant as Laila’s tea, but with a few small quirks I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Still, it was an amazing first attempt.

She must’ve practiced a lot for this.

“Milicia has been working very hard on her tea skills,” Laila told me politely. “She was so determined to brew a cup that would meet your tastes, she’s been working on it since she first arrived.”

“Really?” I turned to my apprentice. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

She instantly tensed up again. “No, it’s just... I know how much you like relaxing with a cup of tea, and I thought...”

She was right. I loved relaxing with good tea, and she’d no doubt noticed me reclining with a cup of Laila’s blend.

Roughly five minutes later, Sebastian returned.

“My apologies for the wait.”

“What did the messenger say?” Claire pressed him. By this point, she was beside herself with worry.

Even Tilura seemed to notice something was amiss, and she looked up at Sebastian with concern.

“I can scarcely believe it...but it seems His Grace will be arriving in three, perhaps four days’ time.”

“He is?!” Claire exclaimed.

“Why?!” Tilura echoed.

“Ruff?” Leo joined the chorus, looking up from her milk to see what was happening.

I bet she was just reacting to Tilura shouting.

“Eckenhart already left the main mansion?” I asked.

“So it would seem. Apparently, he departed not long after my report some time prior. He received the message sent from Lange on the road.”

If he'd left so quickly and received the messenger that early, it wasn't surprising the messenger was already back.

"But why is he coming here at all?" I wondered aloud.

"Apparently, he wishes to settle affairs with the Yugard store and Count Bastler himself," Sebastian explained. "Of course, that also means we have permission to quash that false apothecary whenever we wish, but his help will be instrumental in managing the aftermath."

After we caught the Yugard store's owner, there would still be the cleanup with House Bastler, and we'd definitely need him for that.

"Ah, and milady?"

Claire tensed at Sebastian's words. "Yes?"

He smiled. "His Grace wrote that we are to 'run the Yugard store out by any means necessary.' He swore that no amount of connections or support from the count would be enough to save them."

She relaxed. "Oh, wonderful! Now we can finally give those villains their just deserts for all they've done to our precious people."

They really seem to be enjoying this, and Eckenhart's just as eager. Like father, like daughter—and like butler, I guess?

"All we need now is for Phillip to bring us the infected wine, right?" I asked.

Claire nodded. "Yes, I think we'll go with Sebastian's plan."

Phillip would likely arrive before Eckenhart. All we had to do was take the wine to the Yugard store as a "gift," and use their reaction to prove their connection with the epidemic scheme at large. We couldn't prove anything yet, but between their connections with the count and their implied knowledge of both the fake greital merchants and the doll, they should give us something to work with. Of course, it'd be terrible news if it got out that the duke's servants were giving away infectious wine, so we decided to boil the wine we brought them to remove any risks, just in case. Claire and Sebastian had apparently worked out all the details since I'd returned from Lange.

No matter how evil they are, we can't use their methods and call ourselves the

good guys. We need to make it clear that some things are just wrong.

“Also,” Sebastian added, “it seems His Grace has a companion with him.”

“A companion?” Claire asked. “Who is it? I can’t imagine many people would be able to accompany him so easily.”

“It could be a servant of the main mansion, but I somehow doubt that. His arrival will be slightly delayed on account of that,” he said.

So he doesn’t know, either?

“That’s why he’ll be taking so long to arrive,” Claire concluded.

He nodded. “Regardless of his companion’s identity, that seems to be the reason he cannot make do with haste.”

Anyone with proper training would be able to keep pace with him, in other words. That meant he was taking the usual, somewhat slower paths.

“I’m not sure what to think of that,” Claire replied honestly. “Perhaps they’re a civilian of some sort?”

“Likely so.”

It was a little too sudden for anyone to guess what it meant. Tilura seemed happy to see her father again, perhaps because of all the progress she’d made with her swordplay. Leo and Cherie couldn’t care less, but since Leo technically outranked everyone in the kingdom—and they were both fenrir—I didn’t see why they’d care in the first place.

“I’ve no idea who it could be,” Claire said. “Father tends to ride a horse instead of using a carriage when he’s in a hurry, so whoever he’s bringing with him must have something to do with this incident.”

“I would imagine so,” Sebastian replied. “It wouldn’t make sense to bring an unrelated party with him, especially given how much slower it would be.”

Since he was specifically coming by carriage, his companion could be a noble, and one related to the Yugard store situation at that.

It’s not Count Bastler himself or anything, right? Not even Eckenhart would drag the count all the way here just to make him apologize for all the trouble he

caused...right? He wouldn't do something as crazy as that.

I'd only interacted with him for a few days, and he was the type to feel a lot and do even more.

"Regardless of milord's guest, we must prepare for both his arrival and that of his guest. Milady?"

There were likely all sorts of things to do, not least of which was preparing rooms for the duke and whoever he was accompanied by. His sudden visit last time left the servants scrambling to get it all done, but luckily, they had more notice this time.

She nodded. "Yes, by all means. I trust you to handle all preparations."

"Very good."

He bowed deeply before turning to leave, with Laila, Gelda, Milicia, and the other servants close behind him. Once they were gone, we all sighed with relief and sipped our tea.

"Honestly... You'd think Father could give us more notice," Claire griped.

Tilura nodded while pouting. "He never tells us beforehand!"

"I'll give him a piece of my mind as soon as he's arrived," Claire muttered under her breath.

I could only imagine how upset the sisters were at yet another surprise visit from their father.

He probably won't take their request seriously, unless they really play to his fatherly instincts or something.

At any rate, while all the servants prepared for the duke's arrival, I decided to get in a little more sword practice so that I could show him how I'd improved since he last taught me. I didn't want him to think I'd been slacking off.

I stood up. "Okay, I'm going to get some extra training in."

Tilura sprung to her feet. "Me too!"

"Don't push yourselves, now," Claire told us as we left.

"We won't!"

With that, the two of us headed into the back garden.



“I wanna surprise Father when he gets here!” Tilura declared.

I chuckled. “Even I can tell you’re way stronger now. I wouldn’t worry about that.”

“Ruff.”

“Arf!”

Both Leo and Cherie nodded in agreement.

“But I still can’t hit Miss Leo,” she told me sadly.

“Well, Leo’s a little...”

Eckenhart told us that if we could land a blow on Leo, that’d prove we’d become full-fledged swordfighters. Neither of us could come close, though, and the kids in Lange nearly ran me to exhaustion trying to pull it off.

Actually, if the way Leo cuts through trollds and orcs alike is anything to go by, we’d have to be master swordsmen to even come close.

A thought occurred to me. “Why don’t we ask him for a demonstration when he comes?”

“A demonstration?”

“Exactly. We’ll see if he can land a blow on Leo, and if he does, we can use that as a reference to get better ourselves. How does that sound?”

“Bow-wow!”

“Yeah, that sounds great!”



I hated to admit it, but neither of us could see ourselves winning his little game. It could just be a matter of us being novices and Leo being insanely fast, though, so having some kind of mental image could be beneficial. Since the duke was a real swordmaster, we had a lot to learn by seeing him in action, and both Leo and Tilura seemed to agree.

We redoubled our training efforts after that. The servants were working hard to prepare the villa, and since Milicia was with them, we wouldn't be doing any medicine studies that day. With all my other obligations already fulfilled, Tilura and I trained the day away.



“SO Eckenhart's on his way, huh?”

“Ruff?”

Tilura and I trained until Laila had to come out and practically force us to stop for dinner. I went back out for my evening practice swings after that, and I was now lying on my bed, pondering the changes the day had brought. My training made it so I could properly defend myself when I needed to, first against Nick and then the orcs. I had Eckenhart to thank for that—without his tutelage, I would probably be long dead.

The problem, however, was that I was even more aware now of how weak I was. I'd only been practicing for about a month, and I was obviously nowhere near his level. I was practically still a total novice.

“I hope he won't be angry,” I muttered.

I'd stopped in the middle of a fight, just like he'd told me not to, and got hurt. I knew that he was far more likely to celebrate my surviving the situation at all, but as my teacher, I didn't know how he'd feel.

“No point thinking about it now,” I sighed. “He'll be here soon enough, right, Leo?”

“Bwuff.”

I ran a hand through her fur, where she sat beside my bed, trying hard not to waste any more time thinking. I felt something odd in her fur, however, and

when I stopped to examine her, I realized her once-silver fur was now tainted with dirt, and she had a number of conspicuous mats.

“Wow, Leo... You’re pretty dirty.”

“R-Ruff?” *No, I’m not.*

“You can’t fool me. You’re caked in it. I guess you have been running around a lot, so that’s only natural... Okay, time for a bath!”

Even aside from just the running, she’d also been hunting orcs and sleeping outside.

“Gwuff! Woo-woo!” She frantically shook her head no.

She’s never reacted this strongly before.

“Do you really hate baths that much?”

“Woof! Wark!” This time, she strongly nodded yes.

This is the perfect chance to ask, then. If I can figure out why she hates baths so much, then maybe I can make it better for her.

“Why do you dislike baths so much, anyway? You love swimming and playing in rivers, right? Do you hate getting soap in your eyes that much?”

“Ruff... Woff, woo-woo, bow-wow!” *Hot water is just unnatural and wrong. I hate it when people put water on my face, and I work hard to cultivate my smell!*

That made sense.

“There’s not much I can do about getting water in your eyes...but still, I’m sorry. Can I ask why hot water is so bad?”

“Wuff! Ruff!” *Water isn’t supposed to be hot! That’s not normal!*

Technically, it wasn’t natural; the water was heated for baths, but what about hot springs? That was perfectly natural water. Even if I didn’t understand her fully, I could still try to improve the experience for her.

“How about this, then? I’ll only use lukewarm water or colder, and I’ll keep it away from your face altogether. I can get a barrel of water ready instead, and you can wash your own face in it when you’re ready.”

“Ruff... Boff.” I suppose I can live with that.

I wasn't expecting her hatred of baths to go away overnight, but at least she seemed willing to take one now. The more comfortable she was, the better it'd be for everyone involved.

“Woof? Woff, worf?”

“Sorry, Leo, I don't think I can avoid washing away your smell.”

“Whine...”

I had to use soap to clean her properly, after all. I didn't know if the stuff they had at the mansion was especially good for her fur, but I reasoned it was better than just letting the extra-tough filth accumulate over time.

Come to think of it, don't all dogs hate soap and cleaners?

Leo had an extremely good sense of smell, and while I could imagine losing her own scent would be unpleasant, there wasn't much I could do to help her on that front.

I led her down the corridor and into the bathroom, trying to ignore her pitiful moping.

“Okay, girl, here it comes. Ready for the water?”

“Wrmm...”

I poured a basin of cold water onto her back, watching as the dirt and dust were swept away. She must've been even dirtier than I'd thought.

“You're pretty filthy, huh?”

I could see some sand come loose, along with something very dark. It was probably monster blood—I didn't recognize the stuff on sight, but that seemed like a fair assumption.

“Let's finish this nice and quick, okay?”

I was starting to get cold without any hot water to warm me up, and I was sure I'd freeze if we took too long. Although the bathroom itself was decently warm, I was getting hit with a decent amount of backsplash. Honestly, I was just grateful the area around the villa wasn't too cold. If it was cold enough to snow,

I wouldn't be able to bathe her like this at all.

Maybe she'd be okay with warm water if it's cold out?

"Does this world even have seasons?" I wondered aloud.

I'd been here for some time now, and the temperature was always mild and pleasant. If this were Japan, I'd equate this weather to spring and start looking forward to summer. Since this was a whole new world, though, there was no guarantee there was a next season at all—and if there was, it could be winter as easy as anything.

"No point wondering about it now," I reasoned. "I'll just ask Claire or Sebastian about it later."

As I thought about that, I lathered Leo up with soap, getting every part of her body, including her face. Her eyes were clamped shut, and she was trying hard to stay very still—she might've been holding her breath, even.

"Ready to wash your face?"

She didn't reply, only lifting her head and plunging it straight into the barrel Laila had prepared. The barrel wasn't wide enough to stretch my legs in or anything, but it was as deep as a small bathtub. Honestly, I wasn't sure what to call it.

I strained to lift the barrel so I could empty it, but Leo helped lift it with the tip of her snout, and we managed to pull it off together.

"Hnnnngh... There. Thanks for the help."

"Ruff." *Don't mention it.*

I refilled it with cold water.

"Okay, all changed. Can you dip your face again?"

"Woof!"

She readily plunged her head under the water once again. For once, she seemed to be relaxing a little, and she had more energy as well. That was a welcome change—I'd nearly found myself in the great beyond more than once, trying to coerce her into the tub.

I couldn't ask her like that back in Japan, so I might've never figured out what was bothering her. That's another good thing about this world.

With a brush, I dislodged any remaining dirt she had.

“Now for one more little rinse, and...done!”

“Awooo!”

She eagerly began to shake her sopping-wet fur dry. I was drenched in an instant, like somebody dropped a full bathtub of water on my head.



“Leo, I told you not to do that when I’m standing right next to you! Especially since the water’s so... Achoo!”

“W-Wuffa...” She nuzzled closer to me apologetically.

I know you’re trying to warm me up with your body, but your fur’s still freezing cold!

“You’re all done, girl, so how about you get out? Laila’s probably waiting for you outside, and I *really* need to warm up.”

With that, I went to the main bathtub for a warm bath. The last thing I wanted was to catch a cold, which was ironic since I healed other people’s colds all the time.

“Worf...*Whimper*...” With heavy feet, she plodded to the door.

Maybe I should’ve asked her more nicely...

She nimbly opened the sliding door and stepped outside.

“Right this way, Miss Leo,” came Laila’s voice. “Is Mr. Hirooka still inside?”

“Ruff, ruff.”

I didn’t pay them much mind as I sank neck-deep in hot water.

“Ahh... This feels great.”

It was just what I needed, and it felt even better after getting drenched with cold water. There was no way I was catching a cold now.

After I was fully warmed up, I hopped out of the bath and headed back to the room with Leo. I was still so warm and toasty I could practically see the steam coming off my skin.

“Your fur’s so pretty after it’s been washed,” I said, running my fingers through it.

“Wurf.”

Laila had brushed and groomed Leo while I was in the bath, and her fur was now a sleek river of silver. She shone every bit as much as the name silver fenrir would suggest.

“You’re even more handsome than usual,” I chuckled.

“Woooo!”

She sat up straight and puffed out her chest with pride. I didn’t really understand why she liked being called handsome so much, but all that really mattered was that she liked it. I was just glad she didn’t hate her bath this time.

I stopped petting her for a moment.

“Leo?”

“Wmmf?”

“Thanks a lot for telling me why you hate bath time. I’ll try to avoid doing things you dislike from now on,” I promised.

“Worf... Woff? Ruff?”

She still didn’t sound perfectly content, but as long as we were living in Claire’s mansion and interacting with people as closely as she was, she needed good hygiene.

I started scratching behind her ears with both hands. “You’re such a good girl! Since you had such a good bath, I’m gonna give you all the attention you want tonight! Or would you rather just go to sleep?”

She nuzzled me hard. “Woof! Ruffa, awoooooooooo!” *I’m not tired! Not at all!*

“Hahaha, you’re still full of energy? You never get tired, do you?”

Leo had to be at least a little tired by this point, but the idea of playing with me was too much for her to resist, it seemed.

I’m pretty beat, so I might have to call it a night before she’s done.

“Ruff, ruff?”

“Huh?”

She rubbed her flank against me, wrapping herself around me in a big, furry hug. Then she stuck her snout under my arms and lifted them up. She’d done the exact same thing many times as a Maltese when she wanted to be pet, and she looked at me with big, sad, pleading eyes.

“You wanna be pet, here? You wanna be pet right here?!”

“Ruff, awoff!”

I began to rapidly pet the top of her head, and she flattened her ears and closed her eyes blissfully. Then, when I moved on to massaging the area right behind her ears, she let out a sigh of doggy contentment. A lot of dogs move their ears frequently, so the area right around there often gets cramped or sore.

“Woff...wuff...”

“You like that, huh? Good girl.”

“Wuuuff...”

I snickered a little at the sounds she was making and concentrated on petting her. Bath time in general would be a lot more pleasant from now on, and I had every intention of ensuring she knew how happy I was about that. We didn’t end up sleeping until late, but Leo was just too comfortable to stop. Unfortunately, I was the first to feel myself start to drift off.

That’s Leo for you, I guess... She has all the energy in the world for cuddles...



“**Hnngh...** Morning already?” I stretched as I slid out of bed. My body felt sluggish, no doubt from a lack of sleep. “Where’s Leo? Oh, still asleep. She must’ve had a ton of fun last night.”

I spotted her lying sprawled on her back. She let out a tiny, wheezing snore with every breath. This was probably the first time in ages she’d been able to sleep soundly, since there was too much going on in Lange for that, and I didn’t want to wake her.

I’m glad I stayed up a little later to give her more attention.

I opened the door to grab the bucket of water either Laila or Gelda prepared for me each morning. They left it out so that they wouldn’t risk waking Leo, but today, it was unfortunately light.

“There’s not enough water... I guess I’ll run and grab some.”

Then again, I *did* use a lot of water, so it was more of a “me problem.”

Taking the bucket in hand, I left to fill it up a little more. On my way back from my trip to the fountain, I greeted Claire. When I told her how Leo was sleeping, however, she insisted on seeing for herself.

“She’s sleeping so peacefully... Has she been especially tired lately?” she asked me.

“Actually, I think she can just fully relax here. No matter how tired she is, if she isn’t somewhere she trusts, she can’t sleep this deeply,” I explained.

I crept inside the room and got cleaned up.

“I’m all done,” I whispered when I exited the room.

“I almost don’t want to wake her when she’s sleeping so soundly,” Claire whispered back.

Leo still showed no sign of waking up. I could practically see the cartoon snot bubble on the tip of her snout.

“I know!” I turned to Claire. “Try petting here and there. I’ll do the same, so follow my lead.”

“Oh! I see what we’re doing.” She chuckled sweetly as she circled around and got into position.

Then, at the same time, we both started rubbing Leo’s gigantic silver tummy.

“Waurfff...zzzzzzz...”

“Hehe! She seems so content!”

“She’s always loved her tummy rubs. I used to do this all the time for her.”

When Leo was a Maltese, she’d let people she trusted rub her little belly. Whenever I tried to stop, she’d twitch her front paws slightly, as if beckoning me back in.

“What’s she doing with her leg?” Claire whispered, smiling at Leo’s little sleep-wave.

“Zzzz... Wermf...zzzzzzz...”

I stifled a laugh. “Even when she’s asleep, she’s a sucker for tummy rubs.”

Her “beckoning” was barely more than little twitches in her sleep, but that only made it cuter.

Claire sighed blissfully. “It’s like we’re a family, watching our child as she sleeps...but she’s a little big for a baby, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, she... Huh?!”

I only realized my mistake too late.

Wait... If we’re a family, would that make Claire and I, um...

She gave me a concerned look. “Is something wrong?”

“N-No, I— It’s nothing!” I looked away, unable to meet her gaze. I could feel my cheeks flushing.

S-She didn’t mean anything by that, right? She’s looking at me, but she hasn’t stopped petting Leo once.

I was now very aware of how close we were to each other—close enough that she’d surely be able to hear my pounding heart. She must’ve meant it as a joke, but it felt startlingly real. I could see us now—a smile on her face as she cradled a baby, me looking on warmly by her side, and Leo standing protectively over us. It was too fantastically far-fetched to be at all realistic, but my face only grew hotter, and my heart thrummed in my chest.

“Are you okay?” she asked again, this time visibly concerned.

“Y-Yeah, I’m great. Never better. Hey, would you look at that? It’s almost time for breakfast! I’ll wake Leo up, and we’ll be right there, so can you go on ahead?”

She blinked. “Oh. All right. Cherie *did* seem rather hungry when I left her with Tilura. Please don’t push yourself if you’re feeling feverish, though. Just let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“D-Don’t worry, I’m perfectly fine!”

I couldn’t stay with her, not now. It would be awkward at the very least—and maybe she’d think I was some skeezy pervert and start hating me. I felt guilty that I was making her worry so much, but it was for the best.

As soon as I was sure the door was closed, I let out a heavy sigh.

“Seriously, what on Earth am I thinking?! Becoming family would be one thing, but k-kids...?”

There were plenty of ways for us to achieve the first point—we didn’t have to be related to be family—but having a child was another matter altogether. I was sincerely glad I’d stopped my imagination there before it could do anything worse.

Leo let out a rough sigh. “Ruuuuff.”

“Wait... You’re awake?”

She looked up at me from her spot on the floor. Evidently, she’d been watching—or rather, listening to me and Claire for a while.

“Ruff. Wuff, woof.”

“Who’re you calling a coward?! I-I’m just not good at this kind of thing, that’s all! Besides, it’s plain rude to think about her like that!”

“Wroff,” she sighed, shaking her great furry head again.

I guess I can take Leo’s criticism to heart... I don’t want to upset her or anything.

“Is that so? Well, guess what I do to bad puppies! Take this! Mwahahaha!” I pounced on her, scratching her tummy like a madman.

“Woff! Warf, wauff!”

Soon enough, I forgot about my embarrassment, and we lost ourselves in play. Laila knocked to call us for breakfast not long after, and by that time, I’d almost forgotten what I was so shy about in the first place.

I only wish I could’ve forgotten my embarrassment instead of the time.



“**PHILLIP** has returned.”

It was the day after that, when we’d just finished our dinner and were enjoying our tea that a maid told us the good news. Claire, Sebastian, Laila, and I all headed to the entrance hall to greet him, with Cherie and Tilura riding Leo

not far behind.

We arrived to find that the servants had already split into small groups and were in the process of rolling the wine barrels inside. I assumed that there was a cellar or something they were taking the wine to. Sebastian called out to Phillip, and he turned away from the barrel he was attending to so he could greet us properly.

“Excellent work, Phillip,” Sebastian praised him.

The guard captain smiled. “I hope I didn’t leave you waiting long.”

“Not at all,” Claire replied.

“I hate to bother you so soon after your return, but could you kindly take one of the barrels to the kitchen?” Sebastian spied Helena in the crowd and flagged her down. “Helena? The boiling method, please, and remember to exercise extreme caution.”

She nodded. “Understood.”

“Leave the rolling to me!”

As Sebastian was coordinating the operation, I noticed Leo’s snout was scrunched up uncomfortably.

“You okay, Leo?”

“Wuff. Rauff!” *This all smells like danger...*

“Can you make sure none of the people smell like that?” I requested. “Just to be sure.”

She nodded begrudgingly. First at the orphanage and then during Hannes’s visit to the villa, Leo showed signs of being able to smell the sickness on people, so I thought it made sense to check. I could make capwort in a flash, but I didn’t want anyone collapsing all the same.

Fortunately, nobody smelled like the disease, so it probably couldn’t be transmitted through the barrel. There was no guarantee about drinking or even touching it directly, though. Tilura and I pet Leo for a job well done, as I thanked Phillip for his hard work. Then, once all the barrels were safely stored away, I decided to head back to the dining hall with the others.

Before long, Helena entered with the boiled greital wine—or rather, the greital juice—on a serving cart. There was a fair amount of it.

“Pardon the intrusion,” she announced. “I’ve finished processing the greital wine.”

“Thank you, Helena,” Claire replied.

“Does it smell okay?” I asked Leo.

“*Sniff, sniff...*” She neared her massive nose to the serving vessel, nostrils working. “Ruff!”

“She says all clear,” I added.

“Thank you, Miss Leo,” Claire said. “Well, then, let’s all have a drink.”

With that, Helena poured out a glass for each of us in turn. I accepted mine after I’d finished petting Leo, and was surprised to find the glass cool to the touch. The juice must have been chilled by what I assumed was magic—nothing else made sense timing-wise.

I took a sip. “Hmm... It’s good, but it’s a little lacking.”

It tasted blander than the original version. The greital’s signature sweetness lingered, but the aroma was somehow gone. It was still tasty, though, no two ways about it.

“I think it tastes well enough, and it smells quite nice,” Claire said. “It’s not a very strong smell, granted.”

“You think so, too? Maybe the smell’s why it doesn’t taste quite as sweet now, either,” I guessed.

You almost wouldn’t notice the scent unless you expected it to be there, which must explain why the whole flavor profile was off. Smell and taste were quite strongly connected, after all. Claire had never tried the alcoholic variant, so she didn’t seem to think it was lacking.

Tilura took a big swig. “This tastes so good!”

Claire giggled. “I’m glad to hear that.”

I even caught Sebastian smiling at her. Between the lingering sweetness and

smooth finish, it seemed tailor-made for children.

I figured she'd like it. I wonder what legit greital juice would taste like—not boiled wine, but the fresh-squeezed stuff? It's not like we can get fresh greitals very easily, though, so I guess I'll have to wait on that.

"Ruff, ruff!"

"Awf, awf!"

"What's that? You two wanna try?"

Maybe they like the smell?

"Ruff!"

"Arf!"

That was a yes on both accounts. Leo didn't seem at all interested in the greital wine back in Lange, but that must've been the smell of the alcohol putting her off.

"Excuse me, Helena? Do you have some for the dogs?" I asked.

She nodded. "I made plenty. I'll ready their portions right away."

Laila prepared a large enough bowl for Leo to drink out of, and Helena ladled a healthy amount into it from her pot.

"Woff!"

"Arf, arf!"

Both fenrir were beside themselves with excitement as they watched, wagging in eager anticipation.

"I want more!" Tilura declared, scampering up to Helena for a refill.

"Of course, Lady Tilura." Laila accepted her cup, then retrieved mine and Claire's as well. "There's enough for you all."

Helena ladled a bit of the scant remaining juice into our cups.

"Thanks."

"Thank you, Helena."

As soon as Cherie and Leo's portions were placed on the ground, they lapped at it for a moment as if confirming its flavor, then after a brief moment of contemplation, they stuck their faces in and started drinking heartily.

"Ruff? Woff! *Slurp slurp slurp!*"

"Awf, awf-awf! ***Slurp slurp*!*"

"Slow down a little, Leo!" I chided her. "You too, Cherie. The juice isn't going anywhere."

My words fell on deaf ears, of course. From the look of it, Claire, Tilura, and even Sebastian—who'd had a sip to try—all thought it was just as good.

Don't drink too fast, or the washroom'll get very crowded, very quickly... Not that I'm one to talk.

After Helena had returned to the kitchen and both Leo and Cherie finished drinking their fill, Sebastian cleared his throat.

"Since we've now successfully proven both the taste and the harmlessness of the converted greital juice, I daresay all our preparations are complete," he said.

"Yes, we'll be able to launch our attack on the Yugard store at any time," Claire agreed, her eyes fixed on Tilura and the now-sleeping dogs. "I'd like to be done with them by the time Father arrives. Would tomorrow work for everyone?"

The last piece of our offensive was in our hands, after all.

Sebastian nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose that would indeed be for the best. Once His Grace arrives, I should imagine he would want to lead the offensive himself."

"Yeah, I can see that," I muttered.

It would be better for everyone involved if he didn't even have the chance to do so. Besides, I could tell by looking at the two of them that they wanted the Yugard store out of business as soon as possible, and I wholeheartedly agreed.

Sebastian nodded. "In that case, I shall deliver them a cask of wine tomorrow, and—"

“I’m coming with you!” Claire announced.

Eckenhart couldn’t have said it better himself.

He shot her a troubled look. “You are more than welcome to accompany me to Ractos, but I must insist you stay away from the establishment itself.”

“But why?”

“There is a chance the situation will turn violent, and we cannot bring sufficient force into the store itself to guarantee your safety. The risk is simply far too great.”

I’d never laid eyes on the Yugard store myself, but most buildings in Ractos were on the small side, with a few exceptions, such as Hein’s general store. Logistics aside, they’d never let us in to give them wine if we had a mob of armed guards with us, especially as it was supposed to be a thank-you gift. They would likely only be able to bring two others with them at best.

Claire released an irritated sigh. “You’re right, of course.”

Strange... I wasn’t expecting her to back down so easily. I thought she’d insist on going, like with our trip to the Fenrir Forest. Then again, there are no fenrirs to be found this time.

“Just promise me you’ll give those wretches what they deserve, both for injuring Takumi and tormenting our poor citizenry so.”

“As you will, milady.”

I tensed up. “No, it really wasn’t that... You don’t have to.”

The orcs were the culprits, and we’d already caught the masterminds of that scheme, and they were awaiting their punishment even now. The Yugard store was connected, certainly, and Claire and Sebastian were conflating that connection with shared guilt.

“Ruff? Worf-urf?”

I shook my head. “No, Leo, you’d just tear down the whole building.”

She couldn’t even fit inside.

Sebastian let out a hearty chuckle. “I see Miss Leo is raring to go. I know the

feeling well.”

“Woff, warf!” I’ll never forgive them for hurting Takumi!

I guess it’s close enough to the same thing at this point...

For a while after that, we discussed who would be going with Sebastian.

Eventually, the butler nodded. “I believe Phillip and Nicola are the ideal candidates, then. While the opposition may find a mere servant with bodyguards strange, their prowess in combat may be essential.”

“We can even arrange for the city guard to wait nearby,” Claire suggested. “That way, you’ll have support should you need it.”

It seemed like it was decided, but it still didn’t sit quite right with me.

“Is it all right if I go?” I asked hesitantly.

“You, Mr. Hirooka?”

“Takumi?”

I was honestly a little upset about getting hurt in Lange, and that was perhaps my main reason for wanting to go, but I felt I was allowed to hold a grudge this time.

“I get the feeling I need to see this Yugard guy’s face myself,” I finally said.

He may be only a cog in the count’s plan, but he made countless innocents’ lives miserable for the sake of profit. I couldn’t let that slide so easily. Part of it was due to my own stake in people’s health, given Herb Cultivation, but I also couldn’t forget the sight of all those sick children at the orphanage. I needed some sort of closure to prevent my anger from eating away at me endlessly. It felt like ever since Claire and Johanna apprehended the merchants, I hadn’t been helping deal with the Yugard threat at all.

Sebastian stroked his chin in thought. “Is it not a tad too risky, though? Should you be injured again...”

“What if violence breaks out?” Claire asked me. “Sebastian should be plenty fine with both Phillip and Nicola, but they wouldn’t be able to protect the both of you.” The look in her eyes told me she was just as worried about me.

“Precisely,” Sebastian agreed. “You may think your battle experience from Lange will aid you, but I assure you, there’s a monumental difference between fighting monsters in the open and human beings in close quarters.”

I could swing freely against the orcs because there was so much room, and there was little chance of hitting a villager by accident because we could space ourselves out properly. Inside a building, however, there was no guarantee I’d have the space to swing, and there was always the chance of hitting Sebastian by accident. There were bound to be shelves and merchandise in the store that would get in the way, which would just put my sword at a greater disadvantage. Fistfighting would be a lot easier in that space, and a punch or a kick could be extremely painful and debilitating. I didn’t know any martial arts at all, though.

“I think I might be useful,” I protested.

Sebastian gave me a curious look. “Useful? How so?”

The cogs in my brain spun into overdrive as I searched for some reason to be there.

“The guards have been to Ractos many times before now, right?”

“They have indeed. Phillip and Nicola were born and raised in the city orphanage, such that they know the streets like the back of their hands. They often travel into town on tasks unrelated to milady’s protection.”

“Exactly. That means the Yugard employees might recognize them.”

If they were paying any attention to Claire’s movements in the city, they likely knew about many of the villa’s guards as well.

“Likely so,” Sebastian admitted, “and they would likely recognize me as well.”

“Exactly. They would be expecting someone like you to deliver the ‘thank-you’ wine, but not with two armed bodyguards.”

“Hmm... I suppose that would make them wary indeed.”

Sebastian wasn’t nobility like Claire or Tilura was, despite his close ties with House Libert.

I guess he could call them his guides to make sure he doesn’t get lost, precisely because Phillip and Nicola know the city so well, but I’m not going to mention

that now.

“That’s why I should go with you,” I concluded. “I don’t know if they’ll recognize me, but I can claim to be an apothecary. That’ll make them curious, won’t it?”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Ah, I see. As medicine peddlers themselves, they will surely show interest in you, if not animosity—we can expect some manner of reaction for certain.”

Of course, they could draw the conclusion that I must be the one supplying their main business rival in Kales’s store. If they suspect me, however, they’ll be just as likely to find our very presence there unusual.

I’m sure Claire or Sebastian will recognize that.

“It’s a bit of a gamble,” I admitted, “but I think we’d be more likely to get the reaction we want if they focus on me, not the guards.”

“Perhaps. At the very least, you may help mask House Libert’s intentions.”

“Why do you want to go so badly in the first place?” Claire cut in.

I wasn’t expecting her to ask that, not when I seemed so close to convincing Sebastian. There were plenty of reasons that came to mind, but frankly, the only one that mattered was that I was angry. I simply wanted to give that Yugard jerk a piece of my mind for causing so much strife, and not out of any sense of justice. The merchants and Count Bastler were both out of my reach for one reason or another, but I could let it all out on Yugard.

I hesitated for a moment. “I have a lot of reasons, but I’ll be honest. I want to make Yugard pay with my own hands.”

“With your own...? I understand how you feel, and I can assure you, I’ll make sure they pay for hurting you. But can’t you let me, Sebastian, or even Father take revenge for you?”

“Milady.” Sebastian calmly met her eyes. “Mr. Hirooka’s phrasing was a tad tame, and I fear his true intent may be slightly different.”

“What?” She blinked disbelievingly. “He just said he was being honest, and I doubt he’s lying.”

"I doubt it as well, but his choice of words was a tad...misleading, shall we say."

I averted my gaze and scratched awkwardly at my scalp. He'd seen right through me, despite almost being convinced mere moments ago.

He can be so sharp sometimes... Maybe he was pretending to believe me, even, just so he could spare my feelings?

"Wff." Leo snorted disapprovingly at me.

"Hahaha... I guess there's no fooling you two, huh."

"You make such an earnest effort to keep your words clean," Sebastian replied with a slight smile.

Leo nodded. "Ruff."

It didn't feel right to be impolite within earshot of a duke's daughter. I didn't have the guts to speak my mind in front of a lady like her, especially when I was in her home, and I even felt a little uncomfortable speaking my mind to Eckenhart.

Actually, Eckenhart is the duke, so maybe I should be more polite to him...

Sebastian nodded encouragingly. "By all means, speak your mind. Neither milady nor I will chastise you for your words." His smile strained a tad, and he continued in a mutter I could barely hear. "We hear enough...*colorful* language from His Grace."

With that, it felt as though my last bit of restraint fell away.

"I didn't want to say this, but here goes. I, um..." I took a deep breath. "I want to kick Yugard's butt! O-Or something like that, ahaha..."

"Kick his...*butt*?" Claire echoed.

Not just her, even Laila, Gelda, and all the other servants within earshot froze to stare at me. Only Sebastian was smirking, clearly amused.

Then, Claire burst out laughing.

"Hehehe... Hahahahaha!"

"Huh? Um... Claire?"

I was afraid she'd be disillusioned with me. A laugh that large was the *last* thing I was expecting. She had her hand to her mouth in an effort to remain polite, but I'd never heard her be so loose and free with her emotions.

Was it something I said?

"I-I'm sorry, Takumi..." She giggled as she dabbed her tears of laughter with a handkerchief, trying to rein herself in. "You never told me you were so foulmouthed."

"I, uh... Sorry?"

It wasn't that out of character for me, was it?

Sebastian chuckled bemusedly. "Your manners seem to have gotten the best of you, Mr. Hirooka, but I would be lying if I said your new side was unlike you."

"I don't think I was being polite at all, actually..."

I'd had manners practically beaten into me at work, but I didn't consider myself polite or composed at heart. My little outburst *did* feel pretty natural, but I tried to avoid vulgar turns of phrase wherever I could.

"Nonetheless," he continued with a poorly stifled smile, "if you so badly want to drop the hammer of justice yourself, then I am not one to refuse you."

"N-No, I just..."

I didn't want anything to do with hammers, metaphorical or literal, although it was admittedly close to what I'd said.

Claire nodded. "I agree completely. I was determined to do just that myself if Takumi didn't, but since he will be there, he'll represent me."

I blinked at her in confusion. "Didn't Sebastian just say you couldn't go?"

"Did he? I suppose you're right," she chuckled happily.

It was always a pleasure to see her laugh, but I didn't know how to feel about her laughing *at me*.

With that, it was decided I'd be attending the operation at the Yugard store, but with admittedly more levity than I was expecting. I was determined to convince them, yet somehow, this particular turn never came to mind.

Oh, well. As long as everyone's having fun with it, I guess.



"HAAHH... So tomorrow's the day."

"Ruff?" *You okay?*

After our war council finished, Tilura and I went out into the back garden for just a bit of practice for the night. I took a bath after that and was now lying on my bed in my room, staring up at the ceiling. Leo was peering into my face, concerned.

"I'll be fine, I think. Sebastian will be there, not to mention all the guards that'll be waiting outside if we need them."

Sebastian explained to me that there would be plenty of mansion and city guards waiting just outside, in case a fight broke out. He was apparently concerned because Yugard himself was short-tempered, and he could be unpredictable once cornered. That must have been why Sebastian was insisting it was dangerous—there was a risk of getting hurt, certainly, but he also needed to know I was determined enough to risk it.

"RUFF!"

"That's right. You'll be there, so I have nothing to worry about."

"Awoo!"

She was a little too big to hide outside the store like the guards, but she'd be nearby if anything came up. She'd rushed to my aid during my fight with Nick, so I didn't doubt her one bit.

"I guess I shouldn't stay up too late... 'Night, Leo."

"Wuff."

I had to be fully rested for tomorrow, after all. I gave Leo one last pet for the night, then lost myself in my dreams.



THE next morning, I awoke to find Tilura and Cherie playing Leo, having apparently come to wake *me* up. We headed to the dining hall together, and

after a hearty breakfast, I returned to my room to pack my things. It didn't take long, of course, since we hoped to be back before nightfall.

After leaving my room, I ran into Sebastian in the front foyer.

"Good morning, Mr. Hirooka. I trust you slept well?"

"Good morning. I'm fully rested and ready to go."

Leo's reassurance last night had put my fears to rest, and I felt positively raring to go.

Am I really that simpleminded? No, can't be.

"Thank you for waiting," Claire called from the top of the stairs.

"Milady, everything is ready to go," Sebastian told her.

"Where's the greital wine?" she asked.

"I have several bottles prepared in our luggage."

"Excellent work. Thank you."

With that, everyone was ready and assembled. Our party consisted of Leo, me, Claire, Sebastian, Phillip, Johanna, and a handful of guards. There were even several servants coming, including Laila. Nicola would be staying behind, but we had more than enough people without him.

"Good luck!" Tilura called out to us.

"Arf, arf!" Cherie echoed.

"We'll be back soon," Claire told them.

"See you later," I said.

As we stepped through the front doors, the remaining servants bowed and called out to us in unison.

"Safe travels, and may fortune favor you!"

I was used to their greetings by now, but something about what they said was a little off-putting. It was technically accurate, but it sounded like they were expecting a fight to break out. It wasn't a guaranteed thing, either.

I noticed that Milicia had joined in the call with the others, possibly practicing.

I'll have to convince her to let me try later. That looks kinda fun.

"Right this way, milady."

"Of course."

Instead of the usual two-or three-seater carriage they often used, there was a much larger and more extravagant carriage waiting for us. It was like a small, well-decorated room on wheels, and it looked like the exact kind of carriage I'd expect nobles to have.

"Will you be joining her?" Sebastian asked, gesturing to the carriage.

"No thanks. I'll just go on Leo."

"Awuff!" She wagged and panted happily.

I chose right, it seems.

"You ready to go, girl?"

"Awooo!"

I hopped on Leo's back as Claire, Johanna, and Laila boarded the carriage. Sebastian climbed into the coachman's seat, and the guards prepared their horses.

"Let's get going, then!" Phillip called with a flick of his reins from the very front of the procession.

"Awooooooooo!" Leo howled in reply.

"Don't get too excited, okay, Leo?"

"Wuff."

Since she was much faster than any of the horses, she often liked to weave in between the riders as we ran, and there were plenty of people who weren't used to her combined size and energy yet.

As we drew closer to the carriage to keep pace with it, Claire opened the window and smiled warmly at us.

Huh... I had no idea the windows on that thing could open.

"Hehe! Miss Leo is awfully fond of giving you rides, isn't she? She's much

happier than when I rode her.”

“Ruff, wooooo!” *It’s the most fun I’ve ever had!*

“R-Really, Leo? Well, I really enjoy it when you give me rides. Thanks,” I said.

Most dog owners dreamed of riding a giant dog at some point in their lives, and I could honestly say it was everything I thought it’d be and more. I think that’s what Leo enjoyed the most about her new size. I would often carry her in my arms when she was a little Maltese, but I couldn’t ride her—not without turning her into a puppy pancake.

“Awoooooooooo! Hah, hah, hah, hah!”

She suddenly burst into a sprint, her tongue lolling out of her mouth.

“Wh-Whoa, Leo, slow down! Can you relax?!”

“Werf...”

From the window, I caught Claire giggling.

I’ve been laughed at for two days in a row now. It’s a little—no, really embarrassing, but I guess I can live with it, just this once.

Chapter 4: A Visit to the Yugard Store

“**MY** apologies for the long ride, milady.”

“Thank you, Sebastian.”

We stopped just in front of the gate so that the carriage’s occupants could disembark. The carriage was a little too conspicuous, after all, and we wanted to avoid unnecessary attention. I was made painfully aware yet again of how easy Leo was to notice.

One of the gate guards approached Claire and saluted. “We’ve heard everything from your butler, milady. We shall surround the Yugard store immediately.”

“Please do, but make sure you’re not too obvious.”

“We shall exercise the utmost caution.” He saluted again, then departed at a jog.

So Sebastian already got things ready for us... This should help things go more smoothly.

I noticed that the guards were more than a little nervous, however. They must have found out that Eckenhart himself would soon arrive, and that they had to be on their best behavior.

“Well, then.” Claire turned to her butler. “Lead the way, Sebastian.”

“As you wish. We shall meet at Kales’s establishment first and foremost.”

Everything moved smoothly per Sebastian’s plans. We would hold one last war council at Kales’s to assess the situation before heading to the Yugard store. We would leave Claire behind there; she was officially the mastermind of the plan, working with Eckenhart’s explicit consent.

After we watched the gate guards salute one last time and file into the streets, Sebastian led the way to Kales’s. We found him at the storefront, beckoning crowds of curious customers inside.

I don't remember it being this crowded last time... Is it because we dropped the capwort prices?

"Ah, if it isn't Lady Claire! What an absolute pleasure it is to see you again! Thank you very much for taking the time to visit my humble establishment."

"Hello, Kales. Your business seems to be doing well."

"I assure you, it is! Mr. Hirooka's marvelous medicines draw crowds like nothing else, and my poor staff can barely manage it all, but it's a small price to pay. Oh, but where are my manners? Come in, come in! I've heard all about your ingenious designs!"

"Of course."

Leo sat patiently outside the store as the rest of us filed inside. She had already started to attract a crowd of the shoppers' children, but since this wasn't the first time it had happened, the staff were able to efficiently arrange everyone into neat lines.

"Right this way," Kales told us, leading the way up the stairs to the second floor.

Unlike the first floor, there were no customers to be seen—it seemed like an office space. We sat around a table in a small meeting room, and one of the staff served us tea. I made sure to thank them.

"Mr. Hirooka and I will be making our assault on the Yugard store immediately after this," Sebastian declared from his spot standing behind Claire. "Before then, I would like to touch base with everyone."

Claire nodded. "Go on."

We ran over the plan we'd devised at the villa one more time. Claire, Johanna, and Laila would be on standby at Kales's store. Leo and the other guards, including Phillip, would accompany us close to the Yugard store, but likewise hide nearby unless they were needed. Only Sebastian and I would be entering the store itself.

"Once we enter the store, I shall call out Yugard himself," Sebastian said. "I will claim to be a customer, but if he should refuse me, I will reveal myself as

being on business from His Grace.”

“Sounds plausible,” I said.

Our enemy probably knew what Sebastian looked like, so he wouldn’t doubt us. From there, we would give them the greital juice, claiming it’s greital wine, and if they reacted strangely at all, Sebastian would verbally corner them. I only had to be present, but if there was an opportunity, I could introduce myself as an apothecary.

As an aside, Helena had specifically modified the greital juice to smell more like the real thing since we noticed the scent was almost entirely gone after it had been boiled. It would still smell off to anyone familiar with it, but it was far better than having no alcoholic scent at all. The flavor was far, far worse as a result, but that hopefully wouldn’t be an issue.

After we’d finished running through the plan and were about to head back downstairs, Nick entered the room. From the look on his face, he was coming for a break. He must not have noticed us before because of all the customers.

His eyes brightened at the sight of me. “Hey, boss! What brings you way out here? I heard I don’t have to pick up herbs today, but that’s it.”

“Oh, Nick.”

“Nick, is it?” Claire smiled warmly at him. “I see you’ve taken to your work well.”

“Whoa, who’s the pretty lady?!” He gave me a knowing smirk and held up his pinky. “Oh, I think I know how it is. Right, boss?”

Wait, so that sign means “boyfriend/girlfriend” in this world, too?

He was wrong, but I was more confused by the fact that they hadn’t met before. He should at least recognize her from his many visits to the villa, even though I doubted they’d ever talked directly.

“C-Cut it out, Nick!” I hissed, hoping nobody else heard him. “She’s, uh...”

I hurriedly explained who she was to him. All the while, Kales glared at the man with a look that could surely kill.

Apparently, he was so floored by Leo the first two times he met her that he’d

forgotten pretty much everything else. He'd literally been stomped on by my happy hound, after all, so I couldn't exactly blame him, and he never stayed at the mansion long enough to meet Claire properly.

"I-I'm so sorry!" Nick cried as soon as he realized who she was, bowing so deeply his head grazed the ground.

"Don't worry. I don't mind at all," Claire reassured him with a smile.

Kales was as red as a tomato by that point, and I could tell it wasn't out of shyness.

I hope you live a good, long life, Nick...



"**DO** you think Kales is okay?" I asked Sebastian as we left the store.

He chuckled. "He seemed rather bent out of shape, but I imagine all will be well. That was a rather unusual turn of events, I must admit."

I looked up at the second floor of the shop from the street outside. Kales and Nick were probably still up there with Claire and the others. The manager was so livid with rage when I left that he could barely stand up straight. Nick paled in horror at the sight, but he'd known he was in deep trouble by the time he apologized to Claire.

I'll just pretend he didn't give me that pathetic, pleading look when I was leaving.

"I hope everything'll turn out fine..." Shaking my head, I turned to Sebastian, Leo, and the guards who had just joined us. "Here, everyone. You should all have these."

"What?" Phillip asked as I reached into my bag.

"Ruff?"

As I started passing out the herbs, I saw a few people's eyes light up in recognition.

"Aren't these...?"

Sebastian nodded sagely. "Strength-enhancing and sense-enhancing herbs, I

see. Thank you most kindly.”

“Just in case we need them,” I explained.

They were some of the first herbs I’d made by accident, which we’d all put to good use during our forest expedition. I took the time to cultivate them while preparing the day’s herbs for Kales. I figured it couldn’t hurt for even the people outside the store to have them.

Sebastian dutifully swallowed the oddly colored leaves. “You’re being rather cautious, Mr. Hirooka.”

“You could say I learned a lot in Lange.” I flashed him a strained smile.

I’d sorely regretted not growing more herbs before the orc battle, and I wouldn’t be caught flat-footed again. If I had been prepared, everyone might have walked away from the fight with fewer injuries, myself included. It was far better to be safe than sorry.

“Even should it come to a fight, I doubt I would prove very useful,” Sebastian remarked wistfully.

“It can’t hurt, can it? You could at least run outside to get help, or buy time until Phillip and the others can reach us.”

I felt for the sword at my hip just in case. My old one had broken during the orc fight, but Sebastian had a new one prepared for me when I returned to the mansion. It seemed to be of higher quality, too, which was a relief.

“I suppose so,” he nodded. “But why, may I ask, did you grow sense-enhancing herbs as well? There was no mention of it in our original plan.”

“I figured it might help us read their expressions. We’ll hopefully be able to hear anything dangerous deeper inside the store before it comes out, too.”

“Ah, understood. Very clever.”

Again, it may come in handy. Nick had mentioned the Yugard store had several armed bodyguards, so we could assume they were prepared for a fight. The more warning, the better.

Sebastian grimaced as he choked down the second herb. “Quite the unpleasant taste, as always.”

“Not much I can do about that,” I apologized. “Good medicine is always bitter, right?”

He gave a strained smile. “A saying from your homeland, I take it?”

“One more thing,” I reminded everyone. “Don’t look up at the sky with this. It’s bright enough out here as it is, but if you look at the sun by accident, I can guarantee you’ll regret it.”

“Tis rather bright indeed,” Sebastian remarked. “I’m rather curious as to what would happen, but I shall heed your warning.”

The herb made even a dense forest at night seem as bright as midday, so looking up at noon could only be bad. On the plus side, we could see everything around us with impeccable clarity, even down to the finest shifts in people’s expressions. It would really start paying off once we grew accustomed to our new sight and got inside the store.

Sebastian and I tried to keep our eyes low to the ground until we finally arrived at the street with the Yugard store.

“There it is,” Sebastian announced in a low voice.

“So that’s them.”

The shop barely stood out at all, naturally blending into the surrounding cityscape. The only odd thing about it was the complete lack of windows. It would be impossible to see inside without opening the front door. What struck me most unusual about it, however, was the total lack of patrons. The entire street was oddly quiet, in fact, making it feel totally different from Kales’s establishment. That was either due to the rumors Sebastian spread, or perhaps how cheap the medicine was at Kales’s now.

We had already left Leo and the guards behind, since we were close enough now that she’d draw attention for sure. The city guard was nearby as well, and we’d arranged to have them tell us if anything seemed amiss.

Sure enough, one of the guards approached us moments later. “Sebastian, Mr. Hirooka.”

“Excellent work so far. Anything amiss?”

“Uh, hi,” I stammered out.

“Someone occasionally emerges to check the street,” the guard reported. “Aside from that, there have been no signs of movement whatsoever.”

Sebastian nodded. “Excellent. Should I, Mr. Hirooka, or both of us emerge, you may take that to mean we require your presence. Please stay vigilant.”

He crisply saluted. “Sir!”

With that, he left, likely to inform the other guards.

“Let’s be underway, then,” Sebastian said. “All is according to plan.”

“I just need to back up what you say, right? I can do that.”

My voice was a little hoarse from my nerves, but I tried not to let it show as we approached the front door. I could hardly hear anything on the inside—it was almost as quiet as the street, but I could make out the sound of boots on wood thanks to my enhanced hearing. There was no conversation or anything, and the piercing silence felt almost painful to my ears.

Sebastian rested a hand on the door. “Shall I?”

I nodded. “I’m ready.”

With that, he pushed the door open and we stepped inside.

“Excuse me?” he called politely. “Is anyone in?”

He played the part of kindly old customer perfectly.

“What is it, old man?” came a rough voice from behind the counter. “Whaddya want?”

A heavysset man emerged from a doorway there. He seemed like an employee, but he was incredibly intimidating, not to mention rude. I couldn’t imagine they got many customers with service like that.

Then again, they’re intentionally making and keeping people sick, so they probably couldn’t care less what their customers think. Besides, they don’t really have any patrons to scare off now.

“Could I please examine your wares?” Sebastian asked. “Oh, and is your manager here, perhaps? I’ve heard his name is Yugard.”

The muscular man immediately tensed up. “O-Of course! My sincerest apologies for my rudeness! I’ll call for him right away!”

From the sound of it, he wasn’t expecting us to be customers at all, and he seemed especially keen to get in our good graces now.

I’ve dealt with enough clients to know that’s weird, though. Why wouldn’t he expect us to be here on business?

After a moment, the clerk returned from the back with a second person, who rubbed his hands together with a smile. “My apologies for the delay! I am the proprietor of this fair establishment, Yugard.”

My companion nodded. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I am Sebastian.”

Yugard was a stout, fat man with a greasy grin that made my skin crawl—though to be honest, that might have only been because I knew what kind of man he was. He had large jowls that quivered like pudding as he talked, and he wore over a dozen articles of tasteless gold jewelry. He came off as a nouveau riche CEO in all the worst possible ways.

“Sebastian, is it?” He paused for a moment. “Now, where have I heard that name...?”

Yugard had muttered the latter part under his breath, but I could hear him clearly with the sense-enhancing herb’s effect. Evidently, he didn’t recognize Sebastian on sight.

Sebastian got right to business. “I’ve heard many great things about the quality of your establishment’s wares, and I’d love to purchase a stockpile. It seemed high time I paid you a visit.”

Yugard’s fat face split in a grin—a genuine one, not the brownnosing business smile he’d plastered on his face. It was no less smarmy, however.

“Ah, splendid! I can assure you, we have no shortage of fine medicines for any malady! My customers can barely buy them fast enough!”

Sebastian had been lying about the store’s reputation, of course, but Yugard didn’t even consider correcting him.

“May we sit?” the butler asked.

“Yes, yes, of course you may! Make yourselves at home!”

The store had large shelves full of merchandise along the walls to the left and right of the entrance, while the central area of the store was mostly empty. The counter was on the far wall across from the door, and just to the left of it was a table and chairs, likely intended for business conversations. Yugard led us to the table and fervently insisted we sit.

I bet he spews this same nonsense to everyone who comes in here, all to make a quick buck...

“Thank you,” Sebastian intoned politely as he sat.

“Thanks,” I echoed.

“Who might your companion be?” Yugard asked Sebastian as he sized me up.

“My apologies for not introducing you sooner. This is Takumi, an apothecary friend of mine.”

I nodded a greeting.

“A-An apothecary?” Yugard repeated dumbly.

“Yes. He’s quite the talent, as it happens. His eye for herbs and remedies is second to none, and as I require several products, I have enlisted his aid.”

I smiled as warmly as I could manage. “You flatter me, Sebastian.”

That was true. I wasn’t a good apothecary by any conventional measure. I couldn’t identify a thing—or mix my own, for that matter. It was a decent cover, however, so I pretended to be humble.

Sebastian chuckled heartily. “Did I, now?”

“Ah. I see.”

Yugard was trying hard not to stare at me. If I could do half of what Sebastian said, he’d be terrified of his ruse being exposed. I noticed Sebastian smile just slightly at the sight.

“S-So,” Yugard cleared his throat stiffly, smiling like a perfect businessman. “What are you in the market for?”

Sebastian stroked his chin. “Let’s see... I’ve heard quite a bit about a disease in

town of late. Do you have anything that might be effective against it? We live some distance from here, you see, but we would like to be prepared should it spread.”

At that, I saw Yugard’s jowls twitch faintly with recognition as his grin widened. “Ah, and prepared you should be! We were quick to catch wind of this foul malady, and had a special elixir concocted for it!”

He gave no sign of noticing our suspicion, however, as he trundled to the shelf on our right and picked out a small glass bottle full of black liquid.

“This potion has herbal essences dissolved within it,” he explained smoothly. “Just one sip, and your maladies will be a thing of the past! It’s one of our most potent concoctions!”

“Oh?” Sebastian cast me a sidelong glance. “How does it look?”

I picked up the vial and pretended to study it carefully. “Hmm... It looks pretty good.”

Yugard’s eyes narrowed for only a moment with glee, but he was back to his greasy grin in the blink of an eye. “A true marvel of modern medicine, isn’t it? We sell all kinds of remarkable remedies!”

He probably thinks we’re pushovers... This could be good.

Sebastian pretended to be interested. “What other medicines do you have?”

Yugard proceeded to show us a handful of other herbs and concoctions. None of them seemed legitimate, from the violently colored potions to powders that had clearly been mixed with something strange. The worst of the bunch was an herb so old that it was little more than a brittle twig, despite Yugard’s adamant insistence that it was better dried out, in fact. I recognized the herb and knew it didn’t work well in that state, but I kept mum. Even I could tell that none of them were any good.

After the swindler’s presentation had finished, Sebastian nodded thoughtfully. “Hmm... And what do you think of his wares, Takumi?”

“I’ve never seen such a wonderful collection of medicine in my life,” I lied.

We’d agreed beforehand that I should pretend good medicine was trash and

bad medicine was amazing during the confrontation. I hated lying, and I could feel it settle in my gut like a clump of iron, but I tried my best to smile.

The ironic thing is, he probably knows more about this kind of medicine than I do.

Sebastian nodded appreciatively. “Excellent. In that case, I shall buy everything by the power invested in me by Duke Libert.”

Yugard did a double-take. “Th-The duke?!”

No wonder he’s surprised.

“You see,” Sebastian continued, “I am a humble servant of His Grace. Word has it that you have ties to Count Bastler, and we would both profit greatly from more significant connections. That is, in fact, my true purpose in coming here.”

Sebastian specifically didn’t mention what kind of connection so that Yugard would jump to his own conclusions.

“A-Ah, of course. I’m sure the count would be delighted to ally with His Grace!” He continued in a voice we weren’t supposed to hear, “I knew I recognized his name... The butler, eh? This is my chance.”

Yugard seemed at first to be wary of Sebastian, but he threw his caution to the wind just as soon as he’d found it.

“Let’s get this in writing, then!” the portly man bubbled. “Which medicines would you like?”

“Compose yourself, sir. We’ll need time to decide.”

“A-Ah, of course. Hahaha... I must’ve gotten carried away.”

“Hohoho! Don’t apologize, friend. A good salesman knows to strike while the iron’s hot.”

Yugard had jumped to the contract either because he was careful to get any conversation with the duke’s agents in writing, or because he could tell there was a great deal of money to be made and he wanted to seal the deal.

If he’s a merchant, though, shouldn’t he slow down and consider anything he signs carefully?

That wasn't important, though. From the predatory gleam in Sebastian's eyes, I could tell it was time to get to business.

"Ah, one thing before we go any further, Yugard. I was entrusted with a gift for you, to be delivered before we signed."

Yugard raised his guard once more. "From the duke? What is it?"

"His Grace thought you could wet your lips before you put pen to paper." Sebastian drew a bottle of greital juice from his bag. As it was, however, it looked identical to real greital wine.

"Wh-What?!"

Just as we were hoping, Yugard recoiled in shock.

"His Grace wishes to congratulate you for your fine establishment's contributions to the well-being of the realm. We would like to reward you with some of our famous local wine."

Sebastian's delivery was perfect, though I wasn't sure his reasoning made sense. Yugard didn't seem to hear a word of it. His eyes were fixed on the bottle in abject horror.

All according to plan. Time for the next step.

"Might I bother you for a couple of glasses?" Sebastian smiled innocently. "Duke Libert insisted you try some, as renowned a beverage as it is. I believe the situation calls for a toast, don't you?"

"B-B-B-But that's—"

"Is something the matter? His Grace procured the wine himself, and I can assure you of its supreme quality."

Yugard finally composed himself enough to nod. "Y-Yes, I'm sure it is." He turned back to the clerk. "Hey! Get us three glasses!"

"Roger!"

He couldn't refuse a direct gift without giving a good reason, after all, and the clerk obediently disappeared into the back.

I'm surprised he's playing along so well. Why would we walk into his store and

give him wine if he's never seen us before and we have no connections to him at all?

More important, however, was his reaction to the wine.

"Sebastian," I whispered. "His reaction..."

"Indeed. Yugard knows the wine is the source of the disease beyond all doubt."

We were barely muttering under our breaths, but we could each hear the other well enough to hold a secret conversation. Yugard's reaction was too exaggerated to miss.

"I must admit," Sebastian continued quietly, "these sense-enhancing herbs are truly remarkable. One can practically read another's mind, for all the information it yields."

"Yeah. Even the smallest changes look so obvious."

Yugard was trying hard to maintain a poker face, but we could see his emotions play out clear as day, let alone being able to hear him muttering to himself. The sense-enhancing herbs were putting in more work than I'd expected.

"Thank you for waiting," the clerk grunted as he strode back in. "Here are the glasses."

"That was most kind of you." Sebastian smiled at him before turning back to Yugard. "Shall we drink, then?"

"O-Of course."

Sebastian popped the cork off the bottle and filled all three glasses with the wine. The intoxicating sweet scent of the liqueur—or rather, whatever Helena added to make it smell so convincing—filled the room. Yugard didn't notice the deception, however, as Sebastian and I would've been fooled just as easily, even with our stronger sense of smell.

"A toast, then," Sebastian proposed. "To good medicine and good businesses, shall we say?"

"Yeah, let's. Cheers!" I said, clinking my glass against the others.

Yugard's smile was impossibly strained. "Y-Yes. Cheers."

While our opponent continued to stare uneasily into his glass, Sebastian and I drained our glasses in a single gulp.

"Ah! His Grace truly has divine taste in wine," Sebastian said.

"Yeah," I agreed. "He's so knowledgeable. Everything from the scent to the color to the finest notes of aftertaste is perfect."

It was all lies, of course. Whatever fragrances Helena had added made it taste...wrong. Even the chef herself had scrunched up her nose at the taste. It was deeply unpleasant to drink, but we had to stick to the plan.

Yugard was drenched in sweat by this point, the glass frozen in his hands.

"Oh?" Sebastian pretended he had only just noticed. "Is something the matter?"

"N-No, er..."

"Are you perhaps not a drinking man?"

"Th-That's it! I hate the taste of it, and, well..."

Sebastian dipped his head sorrowfully. "My deepest apologies. I had no intention of coercing you. How appallingly rude of me."

His acting was eerily perfect.

Sebastian's literally the last person I ever want to make an enemy.

"I'm sorry," Yugard apologized. "It smells lovely, but I'm afraid I simply can't."

That was his play to avoid the drink, then. He seemed a little relieved that he'd found such a perfect excuse, but Sebastian was far from done. I caught the butler smiling just a little before pretending to be bothered.

"While this *is* a deeply personal and meaningful gift directly from His Grace, I suppose there's nothing else for it. I shall report my failure to him. It's truly a pity—he was hoping to find other fans of fine spirits, but I suppose he shall have to be disappointed."

"B-But...er... Can't you tell him I drank his wine and enjoyed it?"

“I’m afraid that would be lying, wouldn’t it? I could never deceive milord. I can report only the unblemished truth, precisely what I witness with my own eyes.”

“Think of what that would mean for my reputation—not to mention the contract!” His eyes darted uneasily from the wine to Sebastian and back again. He seemed afraid that if he didn’t drink the wine, he’d be kissing the contract goodbye.

“This is my chance to get rich,” he muttered under his breath. “They’re getting suspicious, and if the count hears of this...!”

That was all but proof that he was a knowing part of the count’s cruel plan.

Sebastian smirked faintly. “On second thought...”

“Yes?!”

Yugard was dancing in the palm of his hand at this point.

That’s one evil-looking grin, Sebastian.

“Could we convince you at all to take but one sip?” the butler pleaded slyly. “Simply get a taste of it, that’s all we ask. Should you do that, I can inform His Grace that you did, indeed, drink it.”

“J-Just a sip?” Yugard licked his lips nervously as he stared down at his glass. “I’m sure I can do that... Yes, I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

Evidently deciding that such a small amount couldn’t hurt him, he slowly tilted his glass back and let the tiniest of trickles enter his mouth.

“Ngh... There! I drank it.”

He let out a contented sigh, his work evidently at an end. I wasn’t sure that a few drops could properly constitute drinking, of course, but it definitely went in his mouth.

Sebastian nodded in satisfaction. “Excellent. I shall have naught but good news to report to His Grace.”

“Is that so? Excellent. Please give him my sincerest thanks for such a marvelously delicious wine.”

Evidently, he hadn’t had enough of it to get proper stock of its taste, or

perhaps he was so convinced the wine was real he didn't consider questioning it.

"Of course. It would be my pleas— Gagh?! Koff!" Sebastian suddenly started coughing. That meant he was entering the last phase of his plan.

And here I am, sitting and watching for most of it. I'm impressed he came up with this at all.

"Gah, hack... Ugh..."

Yugard's eyes flew open. "A-Are you all right?!"

Oh, right. I almost forgot my cue.

"S-Sebastian?!" I exclaimed. "What's happening?!"

He smiled weakly between hacking coughs. "I'm f-fine— Gah, hagh!"

I held on to him to keep him upright as he flailed, pretending to be worried.

How is he managing to cough this convincingly? His acting's amazing.

"M-My apologies, Yugard— Haagh!"

"M-Medicine!" I stammered. "Can you get him some medicine?!" I gave Yugard my best pleading look, hoping I was convincing enough.

"Medicine..." he muttered, shuddering. "I'll be fine, won't I? I only had a little..."

Everything was proceeding smoothly so far.

Even if the wine was infected, though, there's no way Sebastian would get sick so quickly. If it was this sudden, people would've figured out the wine was the source much sooner.

"You have something here that can cure the disease, right?!" I pleaded with Yugard. "Sebastian won't last much longer at this rate! Please hurry!"

"O-Oh, yes, of course!" He sprung to the closest shelf as fast as his stubby legs would carry him and started rummaging through the merchandise, spurred by my panic.

I turned to Sebastian, lowering my voice as much as I could. "Isn't that a little

over the top? You're starting to turn red."

He smiled weakly. "It was a genuine act at first, but I'm genuinely struggling to restrain myself now. I'm getting rather old for this... Hagh, kaff!"

So he's really coughing this hard? Jeez, he really overdid it.

"My throat is awfully sore," he rasped. "Could I have the remainder of Yugard's glass? Gagh!"

"Hahh... If you say so. Try not to overdo it again, okay?"

I handed him Yugard's glass. Despite the terrible flavor, he clearly needed something to wet his throat.

"Thank you," he said, downing the glass's entire contents in a single swig. "I suppose this is a tad rough on my old body... Kaff, hagh!"

"S-Sebastian?!"

His cough suddenly worsened, and I was at a loss for what to do next. He discreetly waved his hand at me before I could really panic, however, signaling that he was just fine.

Is this more acting? I hope he's not pushing himself too hard...

"By the gods, his coughing's even worse now!" Yugard exclaimed as he hurried back to the table, a vial of mysterious liquid in hand.

I nodded, letting my actual worry for him show. "H-He was coughing so much, I gave him the rest of your glass. I thought it'd help him feel better."

His eyes grew wide with horror as he stared at his now-empty glass. "He drank *more*?!"

Sebastian feebly reached toward him. "Kogh, hagh... M-Medicine... Please, help me...!"

He's enjoying hamming it up this much, isn't he?

More importantly, his coughing sounded a lot less hoarse now, but Yugard was too flustered to notice the change.

"H-Here it is," Yugard stammered, holding out the vial.

“Kogh... Th-Thank you.” Sebastian smoothly sat upright as he showed me the elixir. “This appears to be the remedy for the illness, Mr. Hirooka?”

“Looks like it.”

Yugard froze in confusion. “Wha— Huh?”

“What an interesting shade of purplish red... What does it contain, I wonder?” He unstopped it and took a deep sniff. “It hardly smells like anything. The color would suggest capwort powder, as it turns this interesting hue in water.”

That was news to me. I’d been dealing with capwort a great deal as of late, but I’d never considered adding it to water. There was no need for me to mix it with anything else, so I just administered it as a powder.

I would’ve guessed it would be green, maybe brown.

“Okay,” I nodded. “Why do you think it smells so faint?”

“The lightness of the solution tells it all. There must only be the tiniest amount of the powder within it. Water limits the effectiveness of the medicine, and as such, it requires a greater volume of active agents. This is essentially useless.”

It was translucent, such that I could see clearly through the bottle, so I didn’t doubt Sebastian’s analysis. Powdered capwort barely had any scent, but if it was fresh, it should have a particular earthy scent.

“Wh-What are you doing?” Yugard stammered dumbly, baffled at the latest turn of events.

Now that we have some hard proof, it’s time to show our hand. This is it!

“You’re sure this is the right medicine?” I asked him.

“Y-Yes, of course it is. All our remedies are handcrafted in-house.”

“All right, then.” I turned. “Sebastian?”

“Gladly.” A sly, foxlike grin spread across the butler’s face. “Why, may I ask, did you bring this diluted mock-remedy to me?”

Yugard’s confusion deepened. “You were coughing, weren’t you? Also, I must insist that our medicine is legitimate.”

“Really? Each herb has its own purposes, which may be prepared a hundred different ways for each ailment—an adequate reflection of the wealth of maladies a person may find themselves with. It requires a great deal of proficiency to identify and administer the correct medicine.”

“Uh... Yes?” He hadn’t put it together yet.

“All I had was a cough, and yet you *immediately* brought me this particular medicine. That would imply you knew what I was afflicted with, would it not?”

From the immediacy and certainty of his response, Yugard must have known the greital wine could make people sick, and even the exact disease.

“How, pray tell, were you so certain this was the correct medicine?” Sebastian pressed.

“I... Er...” His eyes drifted back to the wineglasses, a slight shift only noticeable with my enhanced vision.

“You knew, didn’t you? That the greital wine must have been the source of my illness?”

The color instantly drained from his face. “What?!”

“I began to cough immediately after drinking the wine. From that alone, you knew precisely what would cure my sickness. You knew that this entire epidemic was borne by this wine.”

“H-How could I know that?!” Yugard snapped back, shaking his head vehemently.

“No amount of denial can save you now,” Sebastian said. “You immediately associated the wine with the illness. That was why you brought me this diluted mockery of a cure, wasn’t it?”

Yugard didn’t stop to check Sebastian’s symptoms before leaving, and he brought back only a single vial. He had to have known what Sebastian was sick with.

“And the elixir... The most effective application of capwort is dried and powdered, but this is far from it. While I do not doubt the use of capwort itself, the amount is clearly incapable of helping anyone.”

I nodded. “You had this ready to sell to people who knew capwort was the cure, right? You just had to lie and tell them it worked better dissolved in water like this.”

“Precisely,” Sebastian agreed. “Of course, should they prove particularly ignorant or gullible, you would sell them an utterly unrelated *cure*.”

Did Sebastian research all that? If he had that much proof, then why are we confronting Yugard like this in the first place? Aside from being extremely satisfying, of course. Just look at him sweat.

“This means you have to know greital wine is what’s spreading the disease,” I said. “That’s why you didn’t want to drink any when Sebastian offered it to you.”

“Wh-What could you possibly mean?” Yugard stammered back. “I have no idea—”

“We have it on good authority that the epidemic was caused by greital wine,” Sebastian cut him off. “His Grace’s own agents have confirmed it, so there’s no point in protesting so.”

Technically, it was Leo and Isabel who proved it, neither of whom worked directly for Eckenhart, but there was no point in splitting hairs over it.

Yugard went from ghostly pale to sickly blue. From the horror in his eyes, he knew he was in trouble. “B-But you can’t...”

“The illness passed from wine to person-to-person, then through the town like wildfire. It must make for excellent business.”

“H-How so?”

“Your establishment opened its doors at the same precise time the epidemic began. How incredibly convenient for you.”

“C-Convenient?” His eyes swam. “We only wanted to save as many of the townsfolk as we could! How could I have known people would get sick?!”

“Indeed, it could be nothing more than a coincidence. However...”

“There’s more?!”

I don't even need the sense-enhancing herb to tell he's panicking.

"As you are surely aware, there happens to be a village near Ractos that brews this greital wine. While an agent of His Grace was investigating the village, it came under attack by vicious monsters," Sebastian said.

Oh, he's talking about me.

I couldn't deny I was working for the duke—I'd been living with his daughter for a while now and cooperating with House Libert to deal with the plague, and I'd even volunteered for this operation.

Yugard's face was tense, as if he were trying very hard not to give anything away. "Er... What a tragedy."

Sebastian nodded slowly. "Oh, but it was. Luckily, our man's fervent efforts ensured the village came to only minimal harm. We learned, however, that the attack was orchestrated by a third party."

"Wh-What? Who in the world would do such a thing? That sounds simply horrible!" Despite his feigned ignorance, his expression soured slightly.

He knew about it all along, then.

"Would you care to hear who was responsible?" Sebastian's smile deepened as he explained about the merchants we'd caught outside Lange, and how they transported the orcs in wagons intended for greitals. He even mentioned the doll, and how the epidemic was engineered from the very beginning. "The merchants also told us something rather interesting—that they were under Count Bastler's command."

Yugard was too stunned to reply, so Sebastian simply continued.

"You mentioned this store is patronized by the count as well. I've heard plenty about your methods—how you bought every other apothecary and herb-peddler's stock to create cheap, diluted *remedies*."

"But... W-We only wanted to—"

"You might as well save your breath. From your reaction to the greital wine, you clearly knew it carried the essence of illness. That was why you were so hesitant to drink it," Sebastian accused.

“N-No, I just don’t like drinking, I swear!” Yugard had clearly been weighing the benefits of drinking it, and his excuse only sounded more fake now.

“Is that so?” Sebastian raised an eyebrow, wicked bemusement flitting across his handsome, old face. “And yet, I have it on good authority that you were blind drunk at a local tavern just the other night.”

“Th-That was, uh...”

“I’ve heard all about it. You invited a number of friends and drank until dawn. But if you *insist* you don’t drink, well...”

I hadn’t heard anything about that. From the sound of it, it was after I’d returned to the mansion, but Sebastian had kept that information to himself just for this. He had waited specifically to let that fact mature, the last piece he needed to completely shut down any excuse Yugard could make for himself.

“For an alcohol aficionado such as yourself, you must have known there was something amiss with the greital wine,” he said. “I can’t imagine you would decline it with such fervor otherwise.”

“Gh...” Yugard gnashed his teeth in irritation.

If he’d drank it more readily, he might’ve had more room to maneuver here. Sucks to be him, I guess.

“Y-Yeah, I knew the wine was the source of the epidemic,” he finally admitted. “But who cares? You can’t arrest me for that. Last I checked, selling medicine to sick folks isn’t illegal!”

“Indeed. You have done nothing but sell your *elixirs*,” Sebastian said.

“See?!” Yugard was getting steadily redder in the face, his voice rising. “You can’t pin anything on me! I knew a thing or two, that’s all!”

He was right—that knowledge alone wasn’t very incriminating. He could’ve easily overheard it from the count; it didn’t guarantee his involvement in the conspiracy at all.

“But you *are* selling poor-quality medicine to the citizens of the duke’s domain. You are deceiving innocents for profit. That is a rather grave crime, is it not?”

“And where’s your proof, huh?! All the stuff I sell works! And who wouldn’t want extra stock in an epidemic?!”

“Indeed. If you knew the disease was about to break out, you could make a great deal of money from such practices. Unfortunately, none of your products have the effects you profess.”

“And what makes you say that?” Yugard hissed.

He clearly wasn’t thinking clearly in his panic. Even if we were unable to prove our point here and now, it wouldn’t be hard to get the proof we needed elsewhere.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Sebastian said as he fingered the vial, “but this is your remedy for the illness, is it not?”

“Yeah. That’s it.”

“Unfortunately for you, we can prove quite definitively that it has no effect.”

“A-And how the hell are you so sure?!”

“Simple.” Sebastian turned to me. “Could you kindly show him some capwort?”

I nodded. “Can do.” I pulled out a paper pouch full of powdered capwort that I’d been keeping in my bag, unfolding it on the table so Yugard could see it.

His eyes widened. “I-Is that...?”

“I see you possess some knowledge of medicines, despite your thoroughly despicable business practices.”

“Grr...”

“This is dried and powdered capwort,” Sebastian explained. “Take a dose, and the disease shall disappear in minutes—*unlike* your elixir. The shade of the potion is sufficient to know it uses genuine capwort, but it is prepared so poorly and in such low concentration that it will provide no relief. I’m sure it would be enough to fool a layperson, but you cannot deceive us so easily.”

If the potion was a deeper shade of red—as in, if it had a higher capwort concentration—it would likely work, but I couldn’t imagine it’d have any effect

as it was.

“Will you still insist your business is legitimate?” Sebastian challenged. “You have simply bought real apothecaries’ stock and diluted it to increase both your profit margins and the length of the epidemic. That, I believe, is a willful act of evil that deserves to be punished.”

Yugard’s gaze dropped to the floor. He didn’t even try to argue.

“We must also consider that you consciously misled some customers to purchase non-capwort remedies. I have rather damning evidence on that front—though of course, the popularity of our own store’s legitimate herbs has reduced your success as of late, hasn’t it?”

“You... You rotten...!” Yugard was shaking with rage, but Sebastian didn’t even seem to notice.

“Said shift was especially effective after lowering our capwort prices. Why, we’ve never been as successful as we have been in recent days. No citizen of His Grace shall suffer from—”

“Shut the hell up!”

Sebastian jumped in surprise. The crooked merchant was red as a tomato, spittle flying as he raged. My ears rang with the sheer volume of his outburst.

Sebastian can’t keep it up through this, I guess.

“Hey!” Yugard shouted toward the back rooms. “Get out here and mulch these idiots! They’re the reason our business is failing!”

“Sir!” came the deep-voiced cries of several men from the back.

“A-Are you in your right mind?!” Sebastian asked, hands pressed hard over his ears to blot out Yugard’s raging. “We are agents of Duke Libert himself. I would think that very—”

Who’d have thought the sense-enhancing herbs would come back to hurt us like this?

“Shut up!” Yugard roared. “Once you’re outta the way, my lord will set things right! It’ll be easy as pie to fool that stupid duke of yours again!”

All pretense was gone now, and hatred burned in his eyes—although I couldn't tell if this was his true nature, or if he truly felt that threatened. Sebastian had warned me things might get violent, but I was half hoping the man would give up in the face of such overwhelming evidence.

Maybe it was a mistake to pressure him so hard.

Three large mercenaries in armor rushed out of the back rooms. Each had a club in one hand and either a sword or knife in the other, the exposed blades glinting in the light.

Even if they silence us, Eckenhart still knows everything. What exactly are they trying to achieve here? How is hurting us going to change anything?!

"Sebastian!" I shouted. "Hurry and get out of here!"

"As you will! I shall inform the guards immediately!"

"Go!"

As Yugard retreated into the back of the store and the mercenaries clamored over the counter, Sebastian ran for the door. All I had to do was to buy time for him to escape.

"You're not getting away that easily!" the thug at the head of the trio shouted, brandishing his knife.

I know he's trying to intimidate us, but why do all henchmen sound the same? Even Nick was like this when he and his friends first ambushed us. Is it just the aesthetic?

"You mess with Yugard, you get the knife!"

"I'm goin' after the old man! You two grab the shrimp!"

"Not so fast!" I shouted, flinging the table in front of me at the mercenary heading for Sebastian.

It was a heavy, wooden piece of furniture, but the strength-enhancing herb made it surprisingly easy to throw, sending vials and glasses flying with it. The table smashed into his breastplate, but it wasn't enough to even knock him off his feet. Luckily, he did turn to glare at me, forgetting about Sebastian.

“The hell are you doing?!” he shouted.

Good. Now they’re all focused on me.

The glasses and vials, unfortunately, shattered on the ground and only managed to make some noise. If they’d hit one of them, they might’ve done more.

“You little prick!” one of them hissed.

“He’s a cocky one! Get ‘im!”

“That’s my line!” I shouted.

I picked up the chairs Sebastian and I had been sitting on, throwing them both before putting some distance between us and drawing my sword.

“Gah?!” One of the chairs caught a mercenary head-on, sending him reeling.

“Enough games!” shouted the other. He used the club—or was it a mace?—in his hand to smash it off-target.

I don’t want to get hit by that mace... Not that the knives would hurt any less.

My actions were enough to forestall the mercenaries, if only for a second or two.

“I shall return shortly, Mr. Hirooka!” Sebastian called, throwing open the door and rushing out into the street.

“Got it!” I shouted back.

I readied my sword, eyeing the trio of attackers carefully. The two men I’d hit with the chairs were still on the other side of the counter, wielding a sword and a mace, respectively. The one on my side of the counter had a dagger and was comparatively much closer. The store was small, however, and there were no obstacles in the middle of the room. While that meant there was enough room to swing my sword without hitting anything, my opponents also had plenty of room, not to mention their superior numbers. I could have more things to throw if I made it to one of the shelves, but nothing there would give me a significant advantage, and they could likely just catch most things I threw.

“Don’t let him get away!” shouted one of the men in the back. “Corner him

and put him down!”

“Guh!”

The closest man—the dagger-wielder I’d thrown the table at—lunged at me from my right.

“Whoop!” I grunted with exertion as I blocked his blade with the flat of my sword and shoved him back.

“You little rat!” the mercenary hissed as he backstepped. He was clearly irritated that I’d thrown the table at him, and he seemed to have forgotten about Sebastian entirely in favor of taking me out.

“My sword isn’t just for show!” I yelled, trying to look intimidating. “I won’t let you take me out that easily!”

“You ain’t the only one with a sword!”

The sword-wielder vaulted over the table, swinging at my neck in a wide, horizontal swipe.

“Guh!”

I caught his attack by raising my arm and blocking with my sword point-downwards, but I didn’t even have time to recover before the mace-wielder followed his comrade over the counter.

“You got guts, stayin’ here alone!” he shouted. “Too bad this is the end for you!”

“Dammit!” I cursed.

His mace was less than a second away from crashing into my skull. I pushed back against the sword I was blocking, then backstepped out of the path. My heart skipped a beat as the tip of his lethal club came within less than an inch of my nose.

“Whuh?!”

“The hell?!”

I’m actually pushing their attacks back... That strength-enhancing herb is a lifesaver.

The limited space was also working to my advantage, as none of the mercenaries' movements had the brutal strength or ferocity of the charging orcs. I was still gravely outnumbered, however, and fighting humans who genuinely wanted to kill me was mentally taxing. There was no way I could survive for much longer, let alone take them out.

"Don't think you can use that same trick twice!" the dagger-wielder snarled, closing in with small, darting thrusts this time.

I dodged stab after stab, stepping back until I was getting dangerously close to the store's left wall. One of his jabs grazed my arm, filling my head with dull pain. Luckily, I was able to catch his blade against my hilt and shove him back before he could land a more significant blow.

"What're you lookin' at, rookie?!"

"Crap!"

No sooner than I'd knocked back the dagger-wielder, the swordsman swiped at me from the opposite direction. I wasn't able to dodge in time; instead, I pulled out the metal scabbard in my belt to block his strike. I wouldn't have had the reflexes to react normally, but even with the herbs, I was being pushed to my limit.

I lunged away from the swordsman, trying to head back toward the center of the room, but the mace-wielder was waiting for me.

"Forget someone?!" he sneered as he dropped another bone-crushing blow at me.

"Gh! Gah...hahh..."

I blocked his weapon at the top of the shaft with both my scabbard and sword, but the sheer force of the impact made my knees creak. The mace was much less flexible than the sword or dagger, though it made up for flexibility in sheer wrecking power. His stance was solid to boot—it was like getting punched by a mountain.

"Eat this!" the dagger-wielder lunged at me out of nowhere.

"Whoa!"

I managed to slide the mace strike to the ground, bending out of the way at the last moment so the dagger-wielder couldn't make contact. Unfortunately, I was caught enough off guard that I stumbled, nearly tumbling to the ground.

"The hell you doing?!" the mace-wielder shouted at his companion. "He was mine!"

"Stuff it! I had him right where I wanted him!" the dagger-wielder snapped back.

"Cut it out, you idiots!" the swordsman snarled. "I was trying to corner 'im, but no, you guys had to let 'im slip away!"

Fortunately, their quibble meant that my tripping went unpunished.

So they're not working together after all... Their coordination earlier must've been a coincidence.

If the swordsman wasn't so busy picking fights with the others, he could've ended me then and there. It struck me just how naïve I was coming into the store. Taking the herbs was barely enough, and I felt stupid now for thinking it'd come down to kicks and punches. I didn't have any room to properly maneuver, let alone run away, if they were all so lethally armed.

"Cut it out, you imbeciles!" Yugard barked from the back of the store. "Hurry up and kill him before he escapes!"

The dagger-wielder swore under his breath before glaring daggers at his comrades. "Hear that? Leave me the hell alone!"

"How about *you* leave *me* alone?!" growled the mace-wielder.

"Both of you, shut the hell up!" the swordsman snapped. "Let's get this over with and hunt down that stupid old man!"

Finally, the trio refocused their attention on me.

I wish I had just ten or so more seconds to catch my breath... Heck, I could've escaped if I had that much time.

It was clear I didn't have the chance now, however. Sebastian had left the door open so I could turn and run outside, but I wasn't dumb enough to turn my back to the mercenaries, and from the speed of their earlier footwork, they

could outrun me if it came to that.

What now? It'd be great if Phillip or the others were here, but it looks like I'm still on my own.

"Hah!"

"Take this!"

The swordsman rushed at me with an overhead cleave, which I deflected with an upward swing of my own. The mace-wielder swung at me like he was hitting a baseball, but I was able to suck in my gut to avoid the blow. The sword was plenty dangerous, but I couldn't even afford to block the mace too much, or I'd risk damaging my own weapon, and I did *not* want to have to fight with a broken sword again.

As if on cue, the dagger-wielder charged in from an unexpected angle, slashing and stabbing with ferocious speed.

"Hahh! Eat this! And this!"

"Gah... hahh... Hnngh!"

That tiny, flitting blade with its ceaseless attacks was the worst of all. I couldn't dodge or block them all, and I felt a few more lancing bolts of pain as it carved more gashes in me. With every attack I failed to block, my senses dulled, and I knew I was getting worn down.

The dagger-wielder sneered. "What's wrong? Can't dodge so well now, can ya? Just give in!"

"No... I can't surrender!"

But this can't keep up, either. I need a way out of this!

"Hahh...hahh...hahh..."

"Looks like somebody's outta breath!" came a deep voice from behind me. "Ready to get pancaked?"

It was the mace-wielder.

Dang it, he's the guy I can afford to get hit by the least... But wait, if his strikes are so heavy, he's got to have a lot of momentum, right? I've got it!

I grinned at him through labored breaths. “Hahh... Like I’d let a brute like you do me in.”

“Hyahahaha! You’re right there!” the dagger-wielder cackled. “I got the precision to end it real quick, see. I’m the only one good enough to even land a hit!”

The mace-wielder’s brow creased. “The hell you on about? I only need to hit the shrimp *once* and it’s game over! Why waste your time cutting away with a lame knife or sword when you got all this power?!”

“Like you could ever know how good hacking stuff apart feels!” the swordsman snapped. “Daggers are too tiny to do any actual damage, and *I* can actually hit stuff!”

It was the only plan I could think of, but turning them against each other seemed to have an effect. Any employee of Yugard’s was bound to be downright rotten, and I could use that very fact to get under their skin.

“Are you arguing again?!” Yugard groaned. “You have work to do! Get your acts together, or I’ll have you disposed of myself! Or did you forget I have the count on my side?!”

“Yeah, yeah, we heard you,” I heard one of the mercenaries grumble.

Yugard may have it rough with so many rowdy subordinates, but I still don’t sympathize with him at all. Or wait, are they his subordinates at all if he has to bring up the count like that? Not that the specifics really matter now.

It was only a few seconds’ respite, but I felt ready to put my plan into action.

“Swords and daggers are a pain, but you know what? Maces are so slow and easy to guard. Why’re you using one of those lame hunks of scrap metal in the first place?” I provoked.

“What did you say?!”

The mace-wielder seemed to have a shorter temper than the others, so I decided to provoke him first. All of them, Yugard included, seemed quick to anger.

The swordsman scoffed at me. “That’s the best taunt you’ve got? You’re right,

but still.”

“Whose side are you on?!”

I wasn't expecting him to help me out, but I'm not complaining.

While they were distracted, I shifted my position just a little—not enough that any of them would notice.

“Isn't it obvious?” I grinned mockingly. “Daggers are too fast to dodge easily, and a sword can really take a chunk out of a guy. Maces are way too clunky to be useful. I can see your sloppy swings coming from a mile away.”

I wasn't lying, either. It lacked the flexibility of the other two weapons, and it was the easiest of them to dodge, even if I couldn't actually see it from a mile away.

“I'll shut you up good!” the mace-wielder howled, a vein on his forehead nearly bursting.

I noticed that the other men had backed away so they wouldn't get caught in his strike.

Perfect!

I eyed my attacker carefully, readying my sheath in my off-hand once more. I held both pieces of metal together vertically—that would give me more leverage with my sword hand without holding the blade itself, and ensure that the mace-strike wouldn't hit me even if it shattered my sword.

“Hnngh!”

He swung his mace in a mighty horizontal arc, every muscle in his body driving the weapon faster through the air. If this were baseball, he'd hit me clean out of the park.

Oh, if only I were a baseball instead of a squishy human.

I focused hard on the incoming weapon, preparing for the very instant his mace connected with my sword. Bracing every last muscle and nerve in my body, I kicked off with my strengthened legs, throwing myself back and away from my assailant.

“Gh... Waaaaaaah!”

His mace smashed into my sword with a thunderous *KRANGGG!*, and I was sent tumbling and screaming away from him *and out the open door*.

“O-Oww... My poor back wasn’t built for this...”

I slammed awkwardly into the cobblestone street outside the store, the impact knocking all the wind clean out of my lungs. I succeeded in the first part of my escape. Now, I just had to hope I could stand up.

The plan was always to provoke the mace guy into attacking. Then, I could block his strike with as little resistance as possible to ensure I was knocked far enough away. I had to adjust my position slightly to make sure I wasn’t sent crashing into a wall by mistake, but I was lucky that none of them noticed.

“Guh... cagh, kaff... That was a dumb idea...”

Despite the searing pain all over my back, I tried desperately to climb to my feet by using my sword as a crutch—which, luckily enough, had not broken. I was worried that the whole backside of my attire had been shredded away against the stone street, but I couldn’t afford to stop and check my modesty. I was only about a few feet from the store’s entrance, and the goons would soon catch up, especially with my injuries. It didn’t matter how free I was to run if I could hardly walk.

Then, I heard her voice.

“*BARK!*”

Despite the sound coming from down the street, the bark’s owner bolted down the street faster than my eyes could follow, colliding with the trio of mercenaries just as they clamored out the door.

“Guh?!”

“Gah!”

“Ack!”

All three of them were sent sprawling in an instant.

This feels so familiar, somehow...

“L-Leo...? Leo, you saved me!”

Sure enough, she was proudly standing there, her glistening fur almost appearing golden in the sunlight.

“Woff... *Whine...*”

“Ow!” I winced as I stood up, the pain in my back flaring again. “Don’t worry, I’m not hurt anywhere near as badly as I was last time. I’ll be fine.”

A moment later, I heard the clanging of metal feet as a squad of guards charged in from where Leo had been.

“Thank you, Miss Leo!” one of the guards thanked her before turning to his men. “Grab those men!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Ruff!”

I let out a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness... Reinforcements!”

I didn’t have time to scan my surroundings when I left the store, but it looked like the guards had all closed in, and there were plenty in the street now. It looked like they were on the verge of storming into the store.

If I’d just stayed in the store a little longer, I might’ve been saved anyways. Still, ruined shirt and light injuries aside, I’d say everything turned out fine.

More importantly, I was a little worried about the mercenaries. Leo had tackled them pretty hard, though there was no real need for me to worry about my would-be killers in the first place.

“Ugh...”

“What the hell...?”

“Everything hurts...”

At a glance, none of them seemed too badly hurt. Leo must’ve held back, but even so, they had more than a few bumps and bruises.

“Are you okay, Mr. Hirooka?!”

“Oh, Phillip!”

The Libert guard captain hailed me and hurried to look me over.

“Hahh... Sebastian told us about what happened as soon as he came out, but Miss Leo beat us to the punch,” he said.

“I see. Well, it’s thanks to Leo that I’m okay now.”

She puffed out her chest. “Woff, ruff!”

Leo had been waiting with the guards when Sebastian emerged from the store to tell them what had happened. Instead of waiting, my furry companion rushed over to save me, arriving just in the nick of time.

“Thanks, Leo. That could’ve gotten ugly without you.”

“Awoff!”

I gave her a thank-you chin scratch. The pain in my back was already ebbing.

Maybe the guards would’ve made it to me in time, even without Leo... Not that I’m going to say that now.

The fact was that she’d saved my life twice in so little time, and I would always be grateful for her aid.

“What the hell is going on out here?!” Yugard had just stepped out of the store, jaw agape at the scene before him.

I almost forgot about him... Or rather, I was so busy with Leo and Phillip that I didn’t have time to think about him.

“There he is!” I turned to Phillip. “That’s Yugard. Sebastian exposed all his plots, but he sicced those mercenaries on us.”

“So that’s him... He certainly looks like a villain, doesn’t he?” Phillip commented.

Leo bared her fangs at him. “Grrrrrrr!”

“You shouldn’t judge a book by its cover, but I guess he’s done enough horrible things by now that I can’t really defend him,” I remarked.

It was then that Yugard finally spotted Leo.

“Agh?! A m-monster?!”

“Grrrrrrr... BARK!”

His legs gave out from fear as Leo raised a clawed forepaw threateningly.

“Stop that, Leo!” I scolded her. “I’m just as angry as you are, but that’s enough. Okay?”

“Wooo... *Whine, whine...*” She gave me a sullen look and let out a sad, apologetic whimper.

“Hahaha, don’t worry. I know you’re a good girl.” I rubbed her big doggy jowls with both hands to prove I still loved her.

Phillip shook his head at us and smiled. “You two get along so well. But now...” He began to approach Yugard, and the merchant’s eyes flared with rage.

“Stay back! Who do you think I am?!”

“Who?” Phillip chuckled. “You’re the villain who’s been putting all the poor people of this city through hell.”

“I-I haven’t deceived anyone!” Yugard lied, inching away from Phillip on his hands. “How dare you insult one of His Excellency’s faithful servants!”

“Enough bravado already. You can either come quietly, or I can smash in that ugly mug of yours first.”

“G-Gah?!” Yugard paled, scuttling away in horror.

Wow, Phillip’s kind of brutal. Is he always like this whenever he’s not trying to be polite?

That train of thought abruptly ended when Phillip shot me a knowing look. He knew our plans, then, and his threats were all empty intimidation tactics.

Besides, all of Yugard’s threats about bringing down the count’s power on us were every bit as false. Eckenhart had already agreed to deal with the count, and Yugard would be cut loose at best—not that he knew any of that. There was no need for us to stage this assault on the Yugard store at all, save that Claire and Sebastian, like me, were too upset over his evil methods to let someone else handle it all. It wasn’t enough to arrest him. We wanted to make him pay for his misdeeds personally... Though I at least had no interest in taking that too far.

“Hahh... Phillip is being rather too blunt, isn’t he? He would be far more intimidated by a silent, moldering kind of anger.”

I turned to face the voice at my side in surprise. “Sebastian? When did you get here?”

“Ruff.”

He must’ve come back to see me after reporting the situation to the guards. Leo was completely unsurprised, having probably known where he was the entire time.

Was I so relieved that I just...forgot to pay attention to anything around me? Or maybe the sense-enhancing herb finally wore off? The sunlight doesn’t seem anywhere near as bright now.

“Excellent work, Mr. Hirooka, Miss Leo... Oh? Mr. Hirooka, you’re injured. You should get that tended to immediately.”

I shook my head. “It’s just a scratch. I mean, it’s not even bleeding anymore. It’ll heal fine on its own. Honestly, I feel more sorry for my clothes than anything.”

The mercenary’s dagger had grazed me and only just broken the skin. It was hardly bleeding at all, and it barely hurt now. My sleeve had been shredded, though, and I didn’t like the idea of having to buy a new shirt. I could’ve worn it for a while longer at least, and unfortunately, I didn’t have the skills or know-how needed to repair it.

“You may give your shirt to Laila later,” Sebastian said with a nod. “I imagine she can have it mended in no time.”

“Oh, that’d be great. I’ll ask her about it after we get back to the villa.”

I felt bad for adding more to her plate, but I couldn’t wear it like this and just throwing the shirt away felt much worse.

She’ll probably have to repair a few holes in the back, too, but it’ll need a thorough washing first.

“Ruff... *Sniff*... Woo, woo, woooo!” After sniffing at my wound for a moment, Leo started licking the open wound.

“L-Leo, stop it! Ow! Don’t lick me there!”

I knew that she was worried about me and was only trying to help, but her doggy saliva was just painful.



“Woff? *Whine...*” Her head drooped sadly.

“Don’t worry so much. I’ll be fine, promise...and please don’t say you wanted to lick my blood. That’s all kinds of unsettling.”

“Ruff, woff-woff!” She shook her head no.

I know she was just joking. If there’s anything I’ve learned, it’s that silver fenrir aren’t bloodthirsty. I guess my joke didn’t get across...

Sebastian chuckled at the sight of us. “With Miss Leo’s blessing, I’m certain you shall heal quickly indeed.”

“Bow-wow!” She began to wag excitedly, and she looked curiously at my arm again.

“H-He’s joking, Leo! I really don’t need you to lick me anymore!”

She can’t actually have healing saliva, right? Legendary monster or no, that’s a bit of a stretch. Even if it was true, it hurt and seemed pretty unsanitary, so I decided to play it safe.

“Ah!” Sebastian looked past us to the Yugard store, his face lighting up. “It seems our work here is at an end.”

I followed his gaze to find that Phillip had bound Yugard, and the mercenaries were already being taken away by the guards.

“Damn you all!” Yugard seethed, despite not being able to move an inch. “How dare you defy the count?! You’ll all get what’s coming to you!”

Phillip shook his head with a sigh. “Want to shut him up for me, Mr. Hirooka?”

Even though I said I’d kick his butt, I firmly shook my head no. “I’m not going to hurt someone who can’t even defend themselves.”

Sebastian raised an eyebrow at me. “Are you certain?”

There was a bit of humor to his tone, and I got the distinct impression they both wanted to see me smack him.

“No,” I insisted, “I already got to see you rip him apart in the store. That’s enough violence for me.”

I'd seen Yugard panic and despair in a hundred different ways, and in the herbal equivalent of high definition, no less. Between that and seeing Leo scare him half to death, my lust for revenge was thoroughly sated.

As soon as he realized nobody would be punching him, Yugard started flailing around again. "You'll rue the day you messed with me!"

"Yugard!" boomed a man's voice from the dark depths of a nearby alleyway. "Your precious count is no more!"

"Oh?"

"That voice..."

"What...?"

"Ruff?"

I knew that voice from somewhere. Sebastian seemed surprised, and Phillip jumped anxiously. Leo seemed just as baffled as I did.

But... He can't be here.

"Indeed, Yugard!" came a second voice—a woman's. "Your precious patron has been summarily disposed of! Admit to your foul misdeeds and we may yet show you mercy!"

Yugard's eyes widened in shock. "That voice... It can't be!"

"Who is that?" I muttered to myself.

Her voice was young and boisterous, and while Yugard clearly recognized her, I couldn't begin to guess. It clearly wasn't Claire, but there was an oddly noble tone to her voice.

"Come on, Anrinnelesse!" the man complained. "That was my one chance to show off..."

The more he talked, the more certain I was of the man's identity, but the woman's name—Anrinnelesse—didn't ring any bells.

"Honestly, Father, you don't need to stand out any more than you already do," came Claire's disapproving voice. She sighed. "Can we please leave this alley?"

Wait... 'Father?' It must be him after all!

"Don't be like tha— Hey, don't push!"

"C-Claire?! Must you push me so? We were being so wonderfully dramatic!"

A moment later, Claire pushed the pair out of the shadows of the alleyway, looking very fed up with both of them.

Sebastian nodded thoughtfully. "Why, it is His Grace after all."

"Looks like," I agreed.

Eckenhart looked just as intimidating as always with that wild, bushy beard of his—or at least, he would've if not for Claire literally pushing him with just one hand. Regardless, he was still the head of House Libert, a duke with great power and authority in the kingdom, and both my and Tilura's sword teacher.

The other woman, however, was a new face to me. I had no idea who she was.

"L-Lady Anrinnelesse?!" Yugard cried in shock. "Wh-What brings you here?!"

The mystery woman cleared her throat pointedly, composing herself before literally glaring down at the bound criminal. "It certainly has been a while, Yugard. I haven't had the displeasure of your presence since last you spoke with Father."

So she and Yugard know each other? This still isn't making sense. What's she doing here with Claire and Eckenhart anyways?

"At attention!" cried a guard. "Bow before His Grace!"

"Sir!" echoed the assembled soldiers.

In the blink of an eye, the guards had all gathered in precise ranks in front of Eckenhart, each respectfully taking a knee in the face of their lord. Even Phillip had joined the formation, and beside me, Sebastian was taking a knee.

Wait, why am I the only one standing now?!

I wasn't worried about the criminals escaping, but everyone except me, Eckenhart himself, and the Anrinnelesse woman, were all prostrating themselves.

Even Leo was sitting politely, though she seemed equally confused about the pair. “Ruff?”

“U-Uh... I, um, sorry...”

I moved to take a knee as well, but Eckenhart extended a hand to stop me.

“No, Takumi, you may stand. It’s been a while hasn’t it? I see you’re doing well too, Miss Leo.”

“Ruff, ruff.”

He approached us with almost an air of deference, and the way he deeply nodded to Leo made me worry he was going to bow down completely.

Right, he was literally groveling to her when they first met.

I noticed the assembled guards and even Anrinnelesse gave him startled looks.

“Th-The duke? Um. My lord?” Yugard stared up in horror at Eckenhart. “Wh-What are you doing here with Lady Anrinnelesse?”

So she is important, then. From her title, she’s probably a noble.

“We’re here to end your reign of terror,” he replied.

“You Grace?” the noblewoman started. “Perhaps I should explain the rest?”

“Hmm.” He stroked his beard thoughtfully. “You may. My dramatic entrance has already been ruined, so—”

“Takumi?! Are you all right?!”

Before he could finish his sentence, Claire burst past him toward me, nearly knocking him clean off his feet. Beside me, I caught Sebastian chuckling.

“O-Oh, hi, Claire,” I greeted awkwardly.

“Your arm! Oh, look at you...!”

“I’m fine, really! It was just a scratch, and there’s hardly any blood, even.”

I felt a pang of guilt at making her worry, but I was glad I hadn’t been hurt worse.

“C-Claire?” Eckenhart tottered forward humbly. “I know you’re worried about

him, but I'd appreciate it if you held back a tad more." His eyes widened slightly when he noticed the gash on my arm she was fussing over, and he bowed deeply in apology. "You're hurt? I'm dreadfully sorry about that. I never intended to put you in any danger..."

H-He really doesn't have to do that... I can understand him apologizing to Leo like that, but he's really starting to spook his poor guards now.

"N-No, I'm only here at all because I insisted," I assured him. "If anything, it's my fault for putting myself in that kind of danger with so little training."

"Ah, Takumi. What a humble soul!"

Claire huffed angrily. "It's because Takumi's so gentle and earnest that we must punish Yugard, Father!"

U-Uh... Was that a compliment? I don't know what to say to that...

"Pardon me?" Anrinnelesse pursed her lips at the pair disapprovingly. She was clearly tired of waiting. "May we please return to the matter at hand?"

Eckenhart quickly nodded. "A-Ah, of course. By all means."

I noticed that the mystery noblewoman was glaring at me more than a little, but I could understand why. Claire had taken the wind out of her sails, after all.

But why is she glaring at me?

"That's Anrinnelesse," Claire whispered in my ear. "She's Count Bastler's only daughter."

"The count's daughter?!" I was unable to control my volume, between the shock of her identity and the ticklish awkwardness of Claire's breath on my cheek.

Count Bastler's the guy behind all this—the disease, the orc attack in Lange, the Yugard store, everything! What's his daughter doing here, of all places?!

The only sure thing was that she was on our side, for whatever reason. Anrinnelesse had an air of...dignity? Refinement? She felt like a count's daughter, somehow. She had dirty blonde hair and was a good deal shorter than Claire, and her movements had a practiced dignity to them that clearly belonged in high society. Her hair, however, stuck out most of all. Unlike

Claire's long, straight locks, Anrinnelesse's hair was fashioned into a pair of great, curled drills, like her hair came straight from a dig site.

No, that's a little rude... It's just hair, not machinery. I never thought I'd see such a stereotypical rich-girl hairstyle, though.

She was dressed in light, comfortable traveling clothes instead of any sort of dress, but considering she'd been on the road with Eckenhart until just recently, that wasn't a surprise.

Anrinnelesse swept one of her drills—er, pigtails behind her shoulder dramatically, her voice cold as ice. "Father has no interest in covering for your misdeeds any longer."

She talks like a rich heiress, too.

Yugard's mouth flopped open. "B-But... The count himself said..."

It was far too sudden for him to understand what she was saying.

"I suppose that's not quite accurate," she mused. "Rather, Father is *unable* to sponsor you any longer. He has lost all authority he once had."

"But... He's the count."

Wait, does she mean he lost his title? That sort of thing?

"You are pitifully dull, aren't you? You're all alone now. Father can hardly vouch for your actions when he himself is being tried for his villainy."

"Count Bastler's been tormenting his people for a while," Eckenhart added. "When he started putting my people through even more suffering, the royals had to do something."

"Th-The royals...?!"

They're the only people who outrank Eckenhart, right? This country's rulers.

I was pretty sure count was a decently high rank already, but Duke Eckenhart was above that, and there was even less chance for Bastler against the royal family itself.

"Now that you've lost your precious patron, you've no means of resistance. Surrender yourself peaceably." There was a shocking chill to her voice.

“Ugh...” Yugard went completely limp, all will to resist gone from his eyes.

“That’s that, then,” Eckenhart said with a nod. “Guards!”

“Sir!”

The assembled soldiers stood in unison, and one of them stepped forward—their captain, if I had to guess. His armor was slightly different from the others’.

Eckenhart gestured brusquely to Yugard. “This man is a dangerous criminal, responsible for enacting mass harm on the good people of Ractos and its environs. I’ll decide his punishment, but until then, let him rot in your worst cell.”

“Yes, sir!”

Three of the guards roughly forced Yugard to his feet and led him away.

As I watched, though, more and more guards began to emerge from the same alleyway Eckenhart and the others had come from. He must’ve brought a small army with him, though there were likely plenty of the gate guards who’d helped us in the mix.

Seeing Eckenhart and Anrinnelesse tidy everything up so neatly kind of makes what Sebastian and I did feel pointless, even though I know there’s no point dwelling on it now. Still, I feel a lot better about the whole Bastler situation now... Seeing that creep squirm really brought me some closure.

“There’s bound to be more of them inside the store still!” Eckenhart barked. “Bring out everyone you find, and bring me an account of their crimes! There’s bound to be more foul deeds at play than just bad potions and plague-mongering!”

“Sir! Yes, sir!”

A troop of guards charged inside the store.

Come to think of it, that surly clerk’s still somewhere inside...

“What if they escape out the back?” I worried aloud.

“No need to worry, Takumi.”

Before I could question his words, however, I could hear a clamoring from the

back of the store.

So that's it... He has men watching every exit.

"You sure came prepared," I remarked.

"You could say that—though most of the guards were already in place. My orders barely mattered. At any rate, we'd best get off the street. We've got a lot of talking to do."

"Where, pray tell, are you going?" Anrinnelesse asked.

"We can't risk anyone overhearing us. Come on," Claire urged her before turning disapprovingly to her father. "Honestly, what were you thinking, barging in so suddenly, and dragging poor Anrinnelesse along with you no less? You'd better have a good explanation for this."

"Of course I do! We made straight for Kales's store as soon as we heard you were in Ractos...but I suppose that doesn't explain everything. I owe you all explanations, particularly Takumi and Miss Leo for their noble efforts."

"I guess that makes sense," I reasoned. "There's a lot we still don't understand."

"Ruff! Woo, woo!"

"Let's go, then," Claire said.

With that, we left the cleanup of the Yugard store to the guards and followed Eckenhart to a secure place to talk. Claire seemed more curious than any of us, so she likely didn't have the time to get any details out of Eckenhart before leaving Kales's.

Between Leo's howling and Yugard's screaming, not to mention the army of guards swarming the street, a crowd had gathered as close as they felt comfortable watching from. Luckily, they readily parted and bowed for Eckenhart, so we had no problem getting through them.

He's basically a celebrity...

The duke himself seemed perfectly used to it, though he lamented as we went that they should've been bowing to Leo, not him. While she certainly could draw a crowd all on her own, she would've just cocked her head to the

side in confusion, much less known what to do with so many admirers.



FINALLY, we arrived back at Kales's store, where we would have plenty of privacy to talk. Leo waited outside with the mobs of children as we headed up to the same second-floor meeting room we'd used earlier.

"Allow me to properly introduce myself. I am Anrinnelesse Bastler, daughter of the head of House Bastler, Count Rupricht Bastler—or rather, former count. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

She curtsied before taking her seat once more. It lacked some impact since she was wearing trousers instead of a skirt and had to mime lifting its folds, but it was elegant all the same.

Rupricht, huh? Come to think of it, this is the first time I've heard the count's full name.

We were all seated around the large meeting table, with Eckenhart and Anrinnelesse seated together on one end and Claire and I on the other. Sebastian was standing at his usual post behind Claire, and standing behind Eckenhart was a bodyguard I recognized from his last visit.

"Anrinnelesse is Bastler's only child," Eckenhart explained to me. "She's about Claire's age, so they've met before. She's a little rough around the edges, but at least she doesn't torture innocents for fun and profit... I hope."

"I most assuredly do not! I simply despise my father's methods." She shot Eckenhart a dark look before haughtily sipping Sebastian's tea. "Oh. This is quite pleasant."

"I can hardly blame Father," Claire remarked, her gaze hardening slightly. "Everything you have a hand in goes sideways—though I know you mean well, of course."

"At least I don't charge into danger without so much as a plan," Anrinnelesse snapped back.

Do they always argue like this? It's like...the kind, considerate noble's daughter versus the heiress with the power-tool hair—er, the young lady with the unusual

hairstyle. Why can't I just be normal about her curls? I hope I don't say anything weird...

"E-Enough about me, now!" Claire turned back to Eckenhart. "So why did you bring Anrinnelesse with you? With House Bastler in its current state..."

"I know what you're trying to say. With the count's title revoked, she's no longer a noble by right."

I guess that makes sense, but wouldn't that mean if a noble commits a crime, their entire family pays the price? And with Count Bastler out of the picture already, wouldn't Eckenhart alone be enough to handle a crook like Yugard?

"It's more complicated than that," Eckenhart explained. "Anrinnelesse has been nothing but cooperative in exposing her father's schemes."

Claire's eyes widened. "She was? I recall her complaining about her father multiple times, but I never thought—"

"Father is a sadist and a coward," Anrinnelesse asserted. "I could never condone such horrific behavior—not that we've ever been particularly close."

So she's something like a whistleblower?

"She's been looking into Rupricht's crimes well before joining me here," the duke said. "Before Takumi and Miss Leo arrived here, even. She's been aiding me on and off for quite some time."

"But... But Father, why didn't you tell me?" Claire asked.

"You always seemed to have your hands full with Ractos, Claire. There was also Takumi to consider."

"M-Me?" I asked.

Not Leo and I, just *me*.

I guess I have been keeping them busy with the herb contracts and the like...

He nodded. "When I first met Miss Leo, I couldn't bring myself to mention the count's conspiracy, but more than that, I wanted Claire to focus on Takumi."

"Wh-Why?" Claire was so confused, she started blushing.

"You were barely prepared to govern the realm, but I knew you were doing

your best to watch over Ractos. When Takumi and Miss Leo entered the equation, I knew you had more than enough on your plate.”

In other words, he didn't want to make her worry about House Bastler when she was already so busy... I guess that makes sense.

“Then why didn't you tell us everything when you said the count was connected to Yugard?” I asked. “We're glad you said that much, of course, but still.”

“When I first received Claire and Sebastian's report on the store, I didn't know the extent of their connection. By the time I knew for certain, you and Claire had already begun to move, and I was curious to see what you'd do.”

He was testing her? I guess he wanted to see how she was maturing, since she's next in line to the dukedom, but that's one crazy test.

Eckenhart grimaced a little as he continued. “I wasn't expecting Takumi to force himself so far, either here or in Lange. I'm sorry for the harm I've caused.” He stood and bowed apologetically to me.

“Takumi's helped us plenty,” Claire agreed. “And thank you for finally giving us the full picture.”

“N-No, I didn't really... Um...” I stammered.

Everything I did was of my own free will. They didn't even ask me to help at any point, so Eckenhart had nothing to apologize for.

“A duke, lowering his head to—?!” Anrinnelesse shot me a baffled look. “Who exactly are *you*? For that matter, what gives you the right to sit with Claire as an equal?”

Right. I never actually introduced myself.

“As I'm sure you saw, he has a silver fenrir in his service,” Claire explained. “He also has some unique talents and has contracted with our House.”

I gave her a small nervous wave. “Um, I'm Takumi. It's nice to meet you.”

I guess I don't need to tell her my family name? Claire never uses it, anyways.

“Oh. So Takumi and Leo, his— His *silver fenrir*?! You couldn't possibly be

referring to that great furry beast accompanying him?!" she cried.

She didn't recognize Leo when they met earlier? I guess they're supposed to be legendary monsters, so she wouldn't even consider the possibility normally. Nick and his hooligan friends thought she was just an ordinary wolf at first, though I don't know how big normal wolves are in this world, so I can't say if it was a reasonable assumption or not.

Claire nodded. "The same as from the legends, a mythical creature said to obey no one and bring harm to no one. I'm sure even you have heard the tales?"

"Of course I have! Who do you think I am?!"

Even without the close familiar history that the Liberts shared with silver fenrir, that seemed to be common knowledge, especially among the nobility. That wasn't surprising, considering there was even one in the royal family's crest.

"Y-You mean she's real?" Anrinnelesse continued, a slight quiver in her voice. "I never could have imagined the duke had such a powerful weapon at his beck and call... Father was an absolute *idiot* for making enemies of you, of all people."

Why does everyone exaggerate about Leo all the time? Sure, she's supposed to be the strongest monster ever, but she can't be that strong, right?

Also, while I wasn't about to call her out on it now, Leo didn't serve me any more than I served her. We were equal partners, nothing more or less.

Eckenhart nodded. "That's right! I've no intention of using Miss Leo at all, but nobody can mess with Takumi and live to tell the tale!"

I blinked. "I-It's not like that, really. I mean, is it?"

"Of course it is," he dismissed me before turning to Claire with enthusiasm brimming in his eyes. "Aren't you forgetting something in your introduction of your 'friend' there?"

Claire's brow furrowed. "I haven't the slightest idea what you're referring to, but from the look in your eyes, it's clearly nothing good."

“Don’t be like that! Did anything happen between you and Takumi while I was gone? You must’ve been working quite closely on catching Yugard and Bastler. Something *must’ve* happened!”

Where have I seen that look before... Right, Sebastian gets that same teasing look in his eyes! They both get a little too interested in relationship stuff. Like two peas in a pod, I guess.

Anrinnelesse’s eyes widened in horror. “Don’t tell me you’ve been *f-f-f-fraternizing* with him?!”

She sure does shout a lot...but I guess that’s a fair response to Leo’s identity. More importantly, ‘fraternizing’ is a euphemism I haven’t heard in a while. Is it common here?

It didn’t matter what she said, though. Claire would coolly shut down the allegations either way. I had to anticipate that, in fact—if I hoped she’d respond in any other way, I’d be totally crushed when she flatly said no.

To my surprise, she turned beet red and looked down at her hands. “W-Well... Takumi and I aren’t, um...”

Wait. Is that...not a no?

That was simply impossible. I had to be reading her wrong. She was far too charming and far too beautiful for a crude guy like me. She deserved someone much, *much* better. I didn’t know the first thing about romance, and I knew better than to get my hopes up.

God, why am I such a downer sometimes?

I shook my head clear of my cluttered thoughts. Somebody had to get the conversation back on track.

“Wh-Why don’t we talk about that later?” I suggested nervously. “We’re here to talk about the count, right? Can you please tell us your side of the story, Anrinnelesse?”

“O-Of course!” Claire nodded firmly, her face still red. “I don’t think anybody wants to hear about that sort of nonsense!”

Eckenhart stroked his beard with a smirk. “Later, eh? I suppose we can do

that.” He glanced behind Claire at Sebastian. “Gives us something to look forward to, doesn’t it?”

“Certainly,” the butler nodded, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. “Why, I feel younger just watching them.”

You’re already plenty young, Sebastian! You don’t have to side with him for that!

“Takumi, master of the silver fenrir,” Anrinnelesse muttered to herself, eyes darting threateningly between Claire and me. “Claire herself denied it, but very well.”

I got a very, very bad feeling about her reaction, and I fervently hoped she wouldn’t draw any wrong conclusions.

Now I get what Claire meant by everything going amiss with her...

“E-Enough of that!” Claire protested. “Why are you accompanying Father in the first place?”

Eckenhart nodded. “I suppose it’d be foolish to prod you any further and risk making you *truly* angry. Let’s get back to it. Now, where were we?”

Finally, we got back to the topic at hand.

Count Bastler had been involved in far more than we knew. He had been dabbling in illegal business for a while, and the royal family had reined him in once already. He frequently used monsters, like in Lange, to attack merchant caravans and make off with their gold and other valuables. Several investigations were underway on that front, so even without his picking a fight with House Libert, he would’ve been caught sooner or later.

When his enterprising reached the Libert domain, Anrinnelesse reached out to Eckenhart to collaborate with him, and they gathered what evidence they could together. It would take another, far more in-depth examination of his affairs to uncover all his crimes, but so far there was no shortage of evidence, to the point where it was hard to believe he’d gotten away with it for so long.

The count himself was being transported to the capital, where he’d be put under royal surveillance and tried for his crimes. He was stripped of his wealth

and title, and there were plans to appoint a new count to replace him and rebuild his domain.

“Rupricht will lose everything one way or another,” Eckenhart finished. “Anrinnelesse, however, is another story. Given her active cooperation and the hard evidence she’s provided, only he will be punished instead of the whole of House Bastler.”

“I shall be exempted from responsibility, in other words. Assuming the royal family views my efforts favorably,” Anrinnelesse explained.

Kind of like she cut a deal with the authorities, then... Or maybe not, since it’s not like she was complicit in any of Count Bastler’s crimes.

“Wait, is that how it works here?” I asked Eckenhart the question I’d been holding on to for a while now. “The count commits all the crimes, but his whole family has to pay the price?”

“It depends on the situation,” he replied. “Most times, though, crimes against the people of a domain are leveled against the entire noble family. Only the perpetrators themselves will be punished, but they all lose their titles and, with it, their authority. That’s the most common punishment for families, at least.”

They don’t go to jail or anything, they just lose their nobility, then.

“Of course,” he continued, “treason or inciting civil war are treated much more seriously.”

“Most acts of violence against the citizenry are treated as the latter,” Sebastian added. “Especially in cases such as these, what with his weaponized monsters and purposeful plague spreading.”

I bet he was dying to explain something, knowing him.

When I envisioned nobles being punished, they generally got off scot-free unless it was an especially serious offense. In those cases, everyone was punished, even the servants. I was glad to hear not every crime resulted in such a thorough response here.

“Exactly,” Eckenhart nodded. “With Anrinnelesse’s evidence, however, it’s clear Rupricht acted alone. Factoring in how eager she’s been to cooperate with

us and the fact that she's his only blood relative, the royals made an exception."

"For especially grave crimes, punishing only the immediate instigators will often leave the others resentful and seeking revenge," Sebastian explained. "Consider it a preventative measure. Lady Anrinnelesse has quite thoroughly proved we have naught to fear on that front."

I could imagine many families would be resentful under the circumstances, and even agree with the perpetrator—especially if only the head of the family was punished. That could easily get sticky.

"What will happen to her, then?" Claire asked.

"Rupricht's replacement will inherit his lands and title, but she'll keep her status as a lady. It's all the royal family's idea, so it'll be a while until she can properly settle in again."

That wasn't much of an answer—especially the last half—but at the mention of the royals, Claire seemed content. They probably had their own ways of doing things that we wouldn't understand and they were busy enough finding a new count to rule Bastler's domain.

I hope they don't get tired of the cleanup there and forget about poor Anrinnelesse, though.

"At any rate, she's still young," Eckenhart continued. "Normally Rupricht would teach her how to govern his lands and prepare her to inherit his title, granting her responsibilities bit by bit, but he's obviously unable to do that now. Instead, the royals appointed me to mentor her."

Claire's eyes widened. "You, Father?"

"Yep. We're essentially neighbors, and I only need to teach her the basics of governance and how to be a proper noble. The royal family will be looking after Rupricht's old lands for now, but the populace is more than a little upset at House Bastler at the moment."

"So she'll be taking refuge with us?" Claire asked.

"Don't phrase it like that. It's a tad crude, Claire."

Even if Anrinnelesse were to take control of her father's lands, none of her

people would trust her—if anything, they’d be openly hostile for all the horrible things Count Bastler did to them. Eckenhart was her guardian now, in several ways.

“She’ll be studying hard under me, and when the Bastler lands are more under control, she’ll return as countess. I imagine the royals will have plenty to teach her as well.”

“Honestly,” Anrinnelesse sighed. “Why must I be sent from one ordeal headfirst into another?”

From the gleam in her eyes, though, I could tell she was up for the challenge. She’d probably expected as much ever since she first decided to rebel against her father.

Eckenhart turned to Claire with a smirk. “Part of the reason why she’s here, though, is because of you.”

“Me? Why?”

The sullen mood was instantly dispelled, replaced by a vague sense of dread at what the duke could possibly mean.

“She’s close to your age, and almost everyone in the whole kingdom loves you. I’ll always see you as my precious little daughter, even if you do have a reckless streak.”

“That’s not— Well, I suppose I can’t actually argue with that. I never knew I was popular, though.”

Sebastian and I exchanged small smiles.

Like father, like daughter.

“I know you’ve been working hard to inherit my title,” he continued. “That’s just proof people know how hard you work.”

“I only wanted to become more like Mother...”

From what I’d heard of Claire’s mother, she was a wonderful person.

“Everyone loved her, too, almost as much as they love you now. I’m sure that if people see you with more of a...dubious character like Anrinnelesse, they’ll

start thinking better of her as well.”

From what I’d seen of her so far, Anrinnelesse got full marks as a rich young heiress, but she could learn a thing or two about approachability from Claire. Everything about her was extreme, from her hair to her attitude, and she had something of a holier-than-thou superiority thing going on. While that was probably natural for a noblewoman, I found her more than a little intimidating.

The would-be countess gawked at Eckenhart. “Dubious, am I?”

I guess she wasn’t aware of that herself.

“You’ve never been around other nobles much, and while I’m sure your name has gotten around plenty, I’d wager most people don’t know the first thing about you,” he said.

Claire nodded. “You live only one province over, and even we’ve only talked a few times.”

She pouted her lips, like a child denied her candy. “I don’t care to leave my estate if I can help it. There’s nothing wrong with that, is there?”

Does she have a hard time getting along with others? No, I can’t quite picture that.

Granted, she’d barely talked to me at all so far, but the conversation was squarely focused on Claire and Eckenhart, so she likely didn’t have the chance. If anything, she seemed a little shy.

“Hahh... I would *much* prefer to enjoy a nice cup of tea in my chambers than converse with *people*.” She took a deep sip of tea as if to emphasize her point.

“You can’t do your duties like that,” Eckenhart chided her. “Even Rupricht was better than you on that front.”

She’s a shut-in, then?

“My, my. Anse the shut-in,” Claire muttered to herself.

Wow. No way she read my mind... Are we just that in-sync?

“Claire!” Anrinnelesse’s tone rose in a furious shriek. “Do *not* call me that!”

“Why not? You spend all your time locked in your room. Who doesn’t want to

relax, from time to time? Is there anything wrong with calling you what you yourself claim to be?”

“I... I suppose not?”

I think Claire's right on this one.

“Part of the problem is that's all anyone expects from her now,” Eckenhart interrupted. “Normally, I'd say listening to anyone else's opinions of you is a massive waste of time, but not this time. She needs to be out in the public eye, and to that end, she'll be living with us.”

Neither he nor Claire seemed to care at all what anyone else thought of them, but Anrinnelesse couldn't afford to do that now. The more people knew her and learned that she was a good person, the better. Alternatively, she might just be horribly ignorant about how the outside world worked, and it was finally time for her to learn.

“That's why she and I both will be living at the villa for the next while,” the duke declared. “I hope you don't mind the intrusion, Takumi.”

“Uh...”

Why is he asking me?!

From the way he phrased it, though, he wasn't asking. He declared how it would be.

“Honestly, Father, you never give me any warning!” Claire protested.

“Believe me, I wanted to! When I heard Sebastian's report about the Yugard store, though, I didn't have time for such pleasantries. I was too focused on what Takumi had uncovered in Lange, and—”

Claire cut him off. “You forgot, didn't you? I'm sure you've run poor Grandfather ragged by now.”

“W-Well...”

Eckenhart really is powerless against Claire, isn't he?

With that, the discussion at Kales's was at its end. All the major questions had been answered, and while there were still a few loose ends left to tie off, those

could wait until we were safely back at the villa.

Epilogue

“RUFFA, ruff!”

“Good girl! Did you behave out here while we were talking?”

After saying goodbye to Kales and Nick, we left the store. Leo was waiting outside, her tail wagging up a storm as soon as she saw me. I gave her a good chin scratch as a reward. The children were long gone, given how long we’d talked, and she’d put her house-sitting experience to good use.

“M-My, what a truly gargantuan creature... How frightening...” Anrinnelesse muttered warily.

“Are you scared?” Claire asked. “She may look intimidating, but Miss Leo is incredibly sweet.”

The ladies had just emerged from the store behind me.

I thought they didn’t get along at first, but maybe that’s not really the case. They can talk more openly because they’re close in age.

Leo cocked her head to the side curiously at Anrinnelesse. “Ruff? Wuff-wuff?”
I recognize her. Who is she?

“That’s Anrinnelesse,” I explained. “She’s Count Bastler’s daughter... Wait, didn’t Claire mention that back at Yugard’s?”

“Ruff... Woffuff.” Leo stepped closer to the count’s daughter and sniffed her intently.

“Ah?!” Anrinnelesse yelped and retreated a few steps.

She doesn’t have to be so scared. Leo just wanted to get a closer look at her.

“Woof!”

“Wah?!” She hurriedly retreated behind Claire’s back. “D-Do something! She’s trying to eat me!”

Claire shook her head. "If Miss Leo had any intention of harming you, you'd already be gone." She looked up at Leo. "I'm sorry she's being so rude."

"Ruff? Woff... *Whine...*"

I chuckled. "That's right. Leo's perfectly harmless."

Leo whimpered sadly, head drooping, and she retreated to my side. She started nuzzling her great, furry cheeks against me.

I think she's sad she was turned down.

"Gahaha!" Eckenhart laughed deeply as he stepped out of the store, the last of us to do so. "Miss Leo sure knows how to leave an impression!" He stopped to bow respectfully to her. "Pleasure to see you as always, ma'am."

"Bow-wow!" She seemed happy to see him again.

Behind him, Kales emerged to bow as a thank-you-for-coming gesture.

Does that mean he just left the customer we saw him with? I guess the duke would come before any customer...

"You seem pretty used to her now," I told Eckenhart.

"Of course. I'll admit being a little intimidated, since I'd almost forgotten just how big she is, but your 'exposure therapy' when last I visited hasn't worn off yet!"

"Hahaha, yeah..."

The last time he visited us at the villa, I made him ride Leo around the yard so he could overcome his fears. He was a little wary, but at least he felt comfortable enough to laugh.

Maybe I should do the same thing with Anrinnelesse? I'll bring it up when we're back at the mansion.

That method had worked for both Eckenhart and Gelda, but looking at the count's daughter now, I was afraid that would only traumatize her.

"Miss Leo is *very* sweet," Claire reassured her. "She loves being pet, and her fur is astoundingly soft. She'd never hurt you without good reason, and you can even ride her if you like."

“T-Touch a silver fenrir?! Why, I couldn’t possibly! My heart would stop before I could lay so much as a finger on her!” Anrinnelesse furtively peered at us, still hiding behind Claire as much as she could manage.

Yeah, she’ll be a tough nut to crack.

“Milord,” Sebastian said to Eckenhart as he approached. He’d left some time before the rest of us to prepare for our ride back. “I have sent word for the servants to receive you.”

He must’ve sent out a messenger to update them.

Eckenhart nodded. “Excellent. Let’s take our time on the return.”

“Of course, Father.”

“Makes sense.”

“Wruff!”

“Y-Yes, I suppose we shall,” Anrinnelesse said.

With that, we set off toward where the carriages were waiting for us. The villa guards and Phillip had also gathered at some point, and they maintained a protective formation around us—or more likely, around Eckenhart. There could be more people like Yugard around, after all, and half the city had to know the duke was in town after the ruckus outside the Yugard store. Better safe than sorry.

“Could you give me some space to walk?” Claire sighed at Anrinnelesse, who was entangled with her arm. “You’re suffocating me.”

“Y-You would cast me aside to perish so easily?!”

“Not this again... Miss Leo won’t hurt you, I promise.”

Logistics aside, if she wants to be away from Leo that badly, she could just walk either in front of or behind us. She’d get some proper distance that way.

Anrinnelesse likely saw Claire as the most dependable of the bunch. It wouldn’t be proper to cling to Eckenhart like that, after all, and she’d never met most of the rest of our entourage before.

We arrived at the west gate not long after, and everyone began to board their

assorted horses or carriages. Only Eckenhart lingered—I caught him staring at Leo as she lay down for me to mount her.

“Do you, uh, want to ride her?” I asked.

He looked up at me with guilt. “W-Well, I haven’t had the opportunity to ride her since last I visited...”

“I’m sure she’d love to give you a ride. I’ll just catch a carriage instead.” I looked around and found Sebastian sitting in the driver’s seat of Claire and Anrinnelesse’s carriage. “Does that sound okay, Sebastian?”

“As you will.”

That’s the go-ahead.

“Oh? Won’t you be riding as well, Takumi? I’m sure Miss Leo would be willing to take the both of us,” the duke said.

“N-No, um, the carriage will be fine. We’ll both have a lot more space that way,” I rushed to say.

The mental image of riding Leo with him hugging me from behind was disturbing to me in more ways than one, and I wanted to avoid it if possible. Since Claire’s carriage was large enough to even accommodate some of the servants, that would be much better for my mental health.

“Ruffff?”

Leo seemed deeply disappointed at my words. She loved giving rides, after all, and couldn’t see any issue as long as Eckenhart didn’t mind.

“Haha, don’t worry. I promise I’ll ride you later,” I said.

“Wugf.” *Fine. Have it your way.*

Maybe I’ll take her out for a run later—and not just around the villa’s back garden, but a proper one outside. It’ll be good exercise, and a great chance for her to blow off some steam. We can even take Tilura and Cherie... That’d be fun.

Eckenhart frowned at me. “I’ll admit, I’m a tad hurt at such a frosty reception, but I know better than to turn down a chance to ride Miss Leo. It’ll be a pleasure, lady fenrir.”

“Wurf.”

That wasn't entirely true; Leo would be willing to carry him whenever he wanted, but he seemed determined to make the most of the opportunity all the same. As soon as he was securely on board, Leo stood.

“Take good care of him, now,” I told her with a hearty pat on the flank.

“Awooooo!” She nodded eagerly, overjoyed at the coming ride despite my refusal to join.

I entered the carriage and inclined my head apologetically to Claire and Anrinnelesse. They were both seated already. “Sorry for making you wait.”

Both of them were sitting facing forward, so to speak, so my seat would be with my back to the horses. I was glad we wouldn't have to squeeze to fit. That would be incredibly awkward.

“Father will be riding Miss Leo, then?” Claire asked. She must've heard our conversation.

“Yep. He seemed determined to make the best of the ride back.”

“Honestly, Father, why can't you ride inside the carriage for once?” she muttered to herself, looking out the window at Leo. From her smile, though, I guessed she wasn't that upset. Finally, she turned back to Anrinnelesse. “You must be exhausted from having to put up with him for so long.”

Anrinnelesse slumped in her seat with a heavy sigh. “Why, you don't know the half of it. We had to ride *on horseback* and hardly stopped to rest once. I'm more sore than I ever imagined possible!”

“Hahaha...”

I'd never ridden a horse before, but I knew how rough even riding in a carriage could be, and it had to be much worse than that. Anrinnelesse seemed so utterly exhausted that she finally let her true feelings show now that there was hardly anyone else around. That, and she had to be relieved after being so stressed out.

“Gwoooooogh?!”

“Awoooooooooooooo!”

From outside the carriage, we could hear Eckenhart screaming in terror, and Leo howling along happily. She wasn't running at full speed, but she easily outpaced the horses and wove in and out between them with startling dexterity. Occasionally, she'd even do a few laps around the carriage.



“She has a *lot* of energy,” Claire muttered as she watched them.

“Yeah, sure does...” I agreed.

I would’ve told Leo to calm down a little if I was riding her, but I got the distinct impression Eckenhart wouldn’t do that.

At least she’s burning off some steam.

Anrinnelesse peered worriedly out the window. “Are you certain we shouldn’t help him?”

“He’ll be fine,” Claire reassured her. “Father’s having the time of his life.”

“It rather sounds like he’s screaming...”

“Gah?! GWAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

It *did* sound like a desperate plea for help, but there was a distinct sense of joy to it, like he was riding the most terrifying roller coaster of his life. If Claire said to leave him to it, though, I wasn’t going to defy her.

Anrinnelesse sighed heavily. “Oh, no matter. I suppose you’ve demonstrated she follows your orders.”

“I wouldn’t quite say that,” Claire replied. “They’re more friends than anything else. Honestly, I’m almost jealous of Miss Leo...”

“Claire?” I looked at her with concern. She’d trailed off at the end, but I was fairly sure of what I’d heard.

“It’s nothing,” she reassured me with a shake of her head. “Don’t Miss Leo and Takumi look wonderfully happy together, Anrinnelesse?”

She’s definitely trying to change the subject, but I won’t push her right now.

Anrinnelesse gave me an uneasy look, then glanced out the window at Leo. “Do they?”

“Oh, yes. The other day at the mansion, they...”

Claire began telling stories about Leo and me back at the mansion, but I was so embarrassed I adamantly trained my sights out the window and tried to ignore her. I heard enough, though—how I seemed so happy whenever I was

petting Leo, how much happier I looked when I was with her, and even the time I tried to ambush her while she slept, but wound up passing out in her fluff. It was awkward hearing Claire go on about my life like that.

She must've been paying a lot of attention to me if she knows that much, though...or maybe she was watching Leo and occasionally spotted me instead? That's got to be it. I know how much she loves those silver fenrirs.

In the end, almost the entire trip was filled with awkward anecdote after anecdote.

Maybe I should've ridden with Eckenhart after all...



BY the time we should be spotting the villa over the horizon, Claire was still telling story after story about Leo and me, and Anrinnelesse was staring at her, hand over her mouth and lost in deep thought. She was probably listening because of the way she'd tactfully remark every once in a while, but I didn't know what she was dwelling on so much.

"Oh, one last thing before we arrive," Claire added. "You should try to remember that House Libert holds silver fenrir in special regard, even more so than most places in the kingdom."

I guess that's what she was trying to get at?

Anrinnelesse removed her hand from her mouth and straightened her posture. "Of course I'm aware. Silver fenrir play a rather significant role in our nation's history, and any noble would be remiss to forget that."

That wasn't a surprise, given one was even on the kingdom's crest. The tales had to have spread to other noble houses, not just House Libert.

"You mentioned how your father was dabbling in things well beyond his control? Well, I feel I must make it clear that both Takumi and Miss Leo are allies of House Libert, but not members of our house proper," Claire asserted.

Anrinnelesse's brow furrowed. "What, pray tell, is the difference?"

"They agreed to aid us not because Count Bastler opposed House Libert, but because his actions threatened them personally. They're very kind, of course, so

we often accept their aid, but they don't follow Father's commands. Only Takumi and Leo themselves can decide if they help, and how much."

I'd been living in the villa for long enough that I felt obliged to help not only Eckenhart and Claire but also any other ally of House Libert who needed our aid. I didn't consider it kindness either—I was repaying a debt. Leo and I were far more determined to help each other in a more altruistic sense. I'd do whatever I could to help her whenever she needed it, and I was certain she would do the same. If there was no way to handle a problem peacefully or safely, we could even run away together if we had to.

"You mean to say you and Takumi are nothing more than business partners?" Anrinnelesse asked after carefully considering her words.

She's been lost in thought a lot since our talk in Kales's store... I wonder what she's thinking about?

"Yes... I believe that sums it up." Claire nodded in satisfaction. "Neither Father nor I have any intention of using either Takumi or Miss Leo for personal gain. If anything, we consider them our social superiors."

I remember Sebastian said something similar—about how a silver fenrir outranked a duke. Part of that was thanks to the legends about the house's founder and her own relationship with the silver fenrir, and everyone called her "Miss Leo" to reflect that. It didn't make very much sense to me, but I tried not to let the nuances of noble society bother me. Besides, I did *not* outrank anyone. I was good friends with Claire, and Eckenhart was my mentor, so I considered us equals at absolute best.

Anrinnelesse nodded to herself. "Yes... Yes, of course. How could I think otherwise?"

Claire leaned in worriedly. "Are you listening?"

Something about the way she keeps looking at Claire, then at me, and back to Claire is giving me a bad feeling.

Finally, she looked me square in the eye, ignoring Claire altogether. "I'll simply call you Takumi, then."

"Uh, okay. Works for me," I said.

Why's she bringing that up now, of all times?

"You are the master of that silver fenrir, are you not?"

"Partner, not master," I corrected. "I don't think she serves me at all—we're equals."

Again, why this? I know I didn't give her any concrete reasons or anything before, but Claire's mentioned it a few times now.

I could still feel something unsettling in the air, and my gut turned again.

"Equals with a silver fenrir... How very amusing..." She muttered something else, but I couldn't catch any of it.

Claire sighed in exasperation. "If there's something you want to say, then please just say it."

"Perhaps having such a capable companion will be enough?" she continued to ponder. "His looks are...well, average, I suppose."

She was staring pretty hard for just "average," for better or for worse. Seriously, what's going on here?

Anrinnelesse looked back up at me. "You aren't perchance married, are you?"

"Huh? Um...no?" I responded awkwardly.

I'd never been close to marriage at any point in my life—in fact, I barely knew anything about dating.

I've never been lonely with Leo, though. Nope, not once, and that's the truth! I know Leo mentioned something about me finding a mate, though...

Anrinnelesse nodded to herself. "No, of course not. And if Claire herself insists she doesn't see Takumi in such a light..."

Claire paled. "A-Anrinnelesse?! What in the world are you saying?!"

The young Bastler heiress simply ignored Claire, instead looking me square in the eye once more. "Would you kindly consider becoming my husband? Together, we shall rebuild the Bastler domain stronger and more prosperous than ever!"

"I... *What?*" I choked.

I-Is that what she's been stewing about all this time? I've never had anyone propose to me before... What am I supposed to tell her? Why is she even asking me that?!

Claire recoiled from her in horror. "A-A-A-A-Anrinnelesse?! Where did *that* come from?!"

"Did I say something amiss, Claire? What reason could one have for *not* marrying a perfectly good man like him?"

Oh, no. She doesn't even understand why Claire's upset. Of course she'd be confused if Anrinnelesse proposed to someone she'd only just met! That's just weird!

I was every bit as confused, of course, and it took everything I had to not show my mounting confusion on my face.

Wait, why am I trying to stay calm at a time like this?! I-I mean, what do I even say to that?! We barely know each other, but it's not as though I hate her... I guess she's pretty, too, just like Claire... Why can't I even think straight?!

"I can tell you're a quality man from your silver fenrir companion alone," Anrinnelesse asserted. "You shall usher in a new age of prosperity for House Bastler, no doubt!"

Claire's head was visibly spinning. "B-But... Takumi can't... Not the count's... no...!"

"I'm not sure I want to—"

"And of course you wouldn't possibly refuse me!" Anrinnelesse continued giddily. "Consider this an official proposal from the future Countess Bastler!"

"U-Uh..."

She's persistent, I'll give her that.

Fortunately, seeing Claire so ill at ease helped me regain some of my sanity.

Anrinnelesse was both beautiful and clever—to the point where most men we passed on the street in Ractos slowed to gawk at her—but there was something else about her that just felt...well, off. At any rate, I had no intention of making any big decisions out of the blue.

I'm still feeling lightheaded, after all.

"D-Do I have to decide now?" I finally asked.

She nodded understandingly. "I suppose it is a tad sudden. Very well, let's say... tomorrow. I expect to have your response by tomorrow."

Claire's eyes nearly popped out of her head. "*Tomorrow?! That's far, far too sudden!*"

There's no way I can decide by then...

"What are you saying, Claire?" Anrinnelesse challenged her. "Are matters of the heart not best decided by feelings? Or perhaps you've been visited by so many suitors you've lost your womanly intuition?"

Feelings can't be put into clear words all the time, though—and it's not like Claire wanted to be harassed by so many mystery men. That was all Eckenhart's idea, so I really don't think her emotions ever played into it... And what does Anrinnelesse mean by womanly intuition, anyways?

The more Anrinnelesse spoke, the less sense the conversation made.

"Half your decision is founded on Miss Leo!" Claire shouted. "How do your 'feelings' have anything to do with that?!"

"Really? I find a man with a silver fenrir to be rather fetching, personally. Don't you agree? You mentioned you saw him as naught but a collaborator, a partner with mutual interests. Wouldn't letting him marry into House Bastler and having him revitalize my domain be precisely what House Libert desires?"

Claire was growing paler with every passing second. "W-Well, yes, but... But Takumi is... He's, um..."

We all know I'm not that attractive of a candidate without Leo, though. I guess I have Herb Cultivation, but I don't think that does much for my manly charm...

"You just can't!" Claire finally asserted. "He's a poor match for you, I guarantee it!"

"And who, pray tell, are *you* to decide such things?!"

Jeez, it's getting loud in here...

My eyes darted back and forth between them as I tried to find something, *anything* to say.

How do I tell Anrinnelesse I don't want to help her rebuild her domain like that? I mean, will she even listen to me if I say so? Is this how Claire felt with all those random suitors coming out of nowhere?!

"M-Miss Leooooooo!" came Eckenhart's cry from outside the carriage.
"Waaaaaaaaaaaait!"

"Warf, awoooooooooooooo!"

I listened to Eckenhart's pleading screams as the carriage crawled through the villa gates, finally taking us home.

Extra: Sebastian's Lecture on Magic Items

“THANK you all for coming... Oh? I was not expecting to see you here, Lady Claire.” As I glanced about the parlor, I noticed that there were a few additional attendees.

“I’m only here to brush up on my knowledge, Sebastian,” she told me. “It never hurts to review.”

This was my second special lecture for Mr. Hirooka, and I was not anticipating the lady of the villa herself to be in attendance. Cherie and Lady Tilura were accompanying her and were already seated. The sight made my old heart skip with joy. It was a wonderful opportunity to deepen Mr. Hirooka’s knowledge of our world.

“As you please, milady.”

I imagined her primary objective was to spend more time with Mr. Hirooka, but as head butler, I believed regular review was important and that more was indeed merrier in such matters.

“I don’t know anything about this!” Lady Tilura informed me cheerily.

“Of course, milady. I shall endeavor to be as precise as possible in my description of magic tools and their applications,” I said.

She was a tad young to have acquired the knowledge naturally, after all, and while the mechanics of magic tools—also known as magic items—were still a tad advanced, I believed it could serve as an excellent preview.

“I’m ready when you are,” Mr. Hirooka informed me with a short bow.

“Ruff.”

“Arf!”

With that, all five of my pupils seemed prepared to listen.

“Now, about magic items... What comes to mind when you hear the term?” I

prompted. I focused my question on Mr. Hirooka. As he came from a place utterly devoid of mana, I would need to evaluate his existing knowledge first.

“Um... Some kind of tool that uses magic to work, I guess?” he ventured.

“Precisely. Each item can only function with magic present within it. That is the basis of it, at least.”

Technically, such items could only hold a fraction of any said spell, but I opted not to clutter our definition. Describing the function and nuances in proper detail would not only take us until nightfall, but at least through the following dawn. I wouldn't mind going into such detail, but we all had other work to attend to. It could wait until the Yugard store was shuttered at the very least.

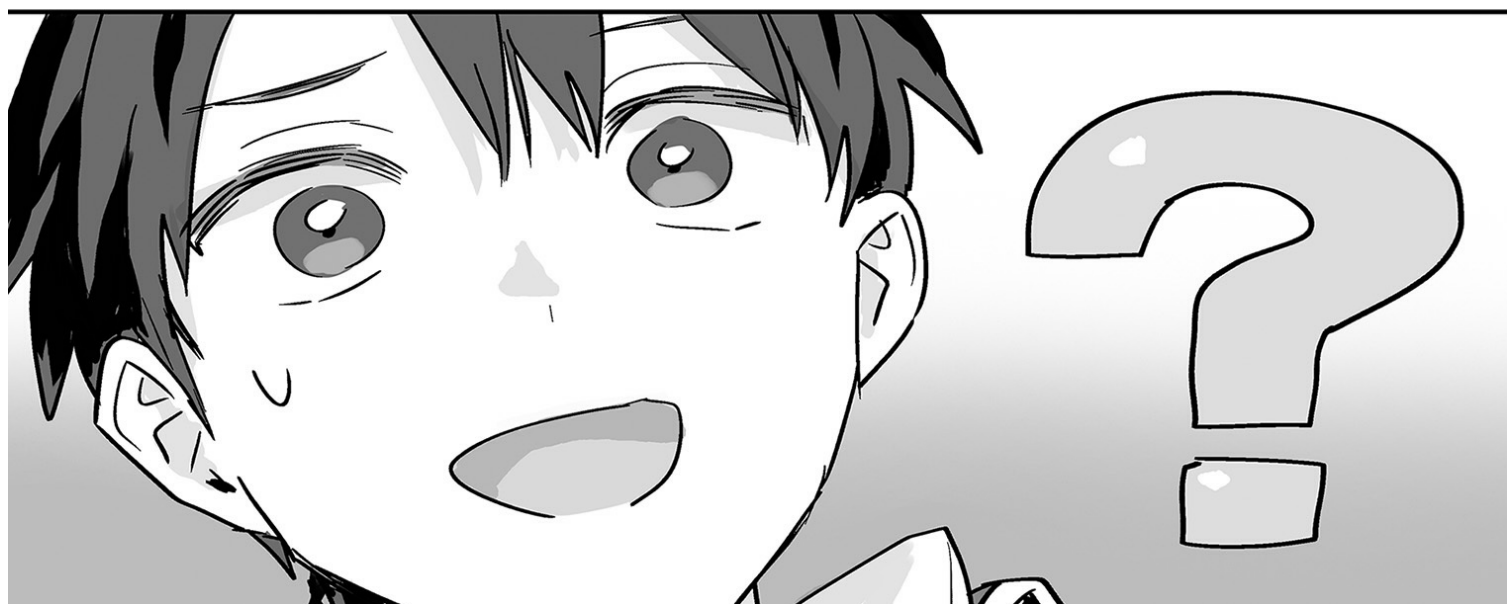
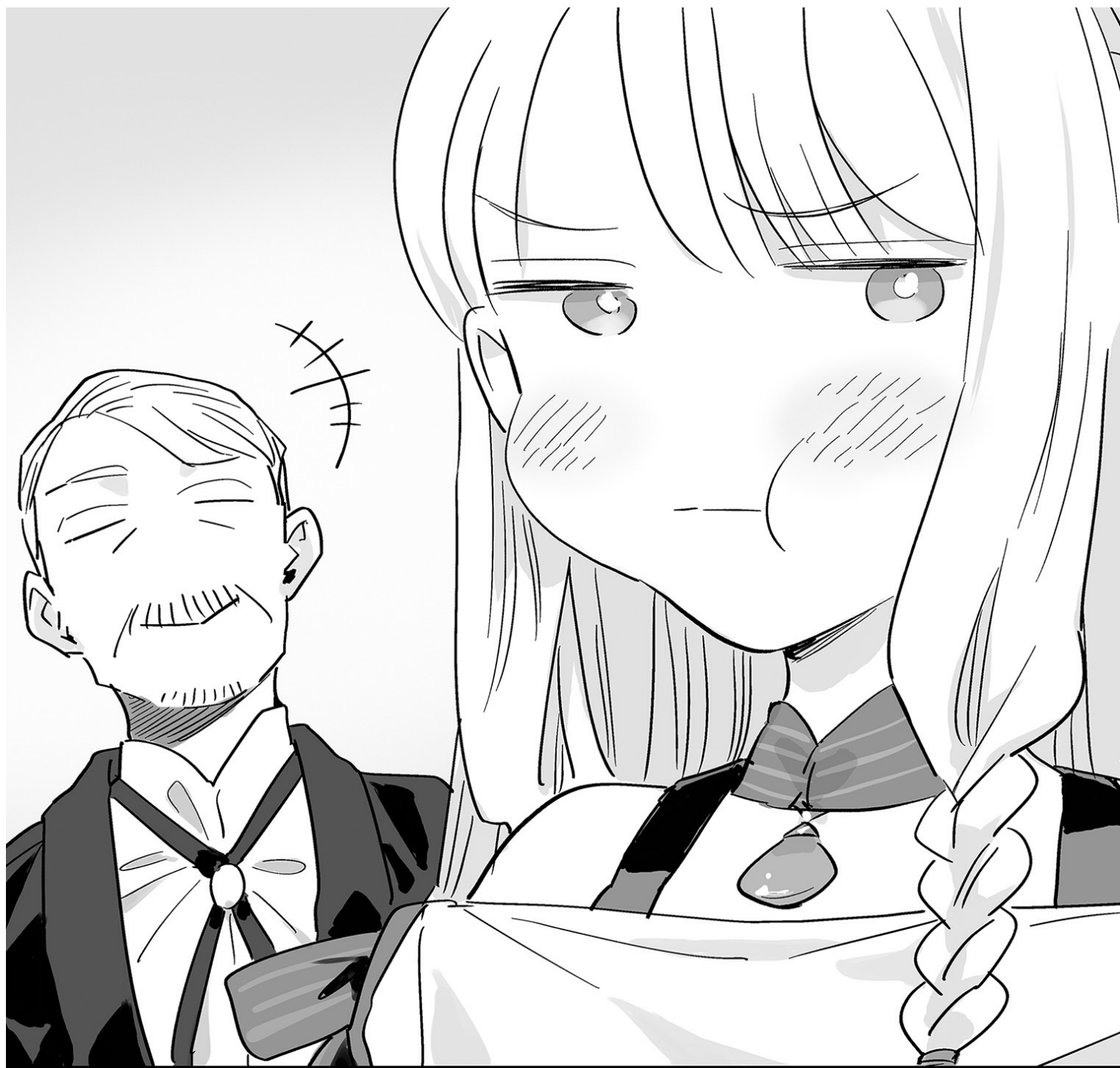
“As you are surely aware, Mr. Hirooka, magic requires both mana and an incantation in order to function,” I said.

“Yeah, I still remember that from when you taught me.”

Milady sighed a little. “I was hoping to teach you, though... I'd even promised as much during our forest trip.”

“Ah. I suppose you did say so, indeed. Rather unfortunate how the timing worked out.”

It was rather amusing how Lady Claire pouted even now, as though she had not aged a bit. She had indeed offered to teach him then, but what with taking Cherie home, His Grace's impromptu visit, and the entire debacle with Mr. Hirooka's herb contract to the Yugard incident, I needed to teach our otherworldly guest in short order as a defensive measure. Clearly, that was not to her liking, as she was not available to do so herself, there was little recourse.



“Hohoho! In that case, I shall promise to leave the remainder of the incantations for you to teach,” I said.

“...Promise?” she asked.

“Should time permit it, yes.”

Mr. Hirooka chuckled nervously. “Hahaha...”

There was plenty to teach him in the way of magic yet, and there was no need for me to be the one to instruct him.

“But back to the topic at hand,” I continued. “Magic requires both an incantation and mana to activate. Tools, however, need only mana to function.”

Mr. Hirooka nodded slowly. “I get why you need to give it mana, but why don’t you need an incantation?”

“In such cases, the incantation takes the form of a sigil engraved upon the tool itself.”

“A sigil? I don’t remember the disease doll having anything like that on it,” he said.

Quite an astute observation.

“The entire incantation hardly needs to be inscribed upon the item in question. One may consider the writing used in magic tools to function as a passcode, and by embedding such a code with the application of mana, one can embed magic within the item itself,” I explained.

“A code, huh,” Mr. Hirooka muttered to himself.

He seemed keen on that word in particular, but I hadn’t the faintest idea why.

Some scholars believed the inscription to be a form of voiceless incantation, but the precise mechanics of the process were a mystery to even the magic toolmakers themselves. There were also some unique interactions in the creation process depending on the precise type of mana utilized, but I felt it best to keep our basic course as brief as possible.

The sellers of such items were few and far between, and their costs rose regularly. Unusual items could even eclipse Mr. Hirooka’s loe in cost, and on a

surface level, I could understand the false merchants' desire to reclaim the doll from Lange—though their methods were, of course, utterly unconscionable.

“It shall suffice to say that the sigil serves as an incantation,” I concluded.

He nodded. “That makes sense.”

“Excellent. Now, when you channel mana into a magic item, it will activate. The key difference between casting magic and using a magic tool is how long said magic is sustainable.”

“Right... I think you mentioned something about that with my Gift, too,” he said.

“Precisely. While the energy used for your Herb Cultivation and mana are distinct, the principle is the same. Magic tools, however, are significantly more efficient than conventional magic.”

Again, the mechanics of this were largely unknown, but the literature indicates that this was a purposeful design feature on the part of the items' original creators. These creators' identities have long been lost to time, of course, and hardly anything is known about them or how they devised such technology in the first place. Regardless, their methods persisted, and people regularly make use of the fruits of their labor even now.

“This is a prime example of a magic tool,” I explained as I held out a small device.

Mr. Hirooka craned his neck to get a better look. “Is that one of the things that lights the inside of the mansion?”

“Right you are. This item can produce light, similar to the spell I taught you.”

Many like it were used across the mansion. It was prominent even among the citizenry, given its ease of manufacture and comparative affordability. Even so, they cost a gold piece each, give or take.

“It may resemble an ordinary candle, but it simply requires mana to light,” I said.

“Okay... It doesn't have a wick, does it?” he asked.

“There's no need. No fire is required. Feel it and you'll see.” I handed him the

device.

“Wow, it’s made of stone. It wouldn’t burn even with a wick,” he observed.

Different lighting implements utilize different materials, of course. Chandeliers and other hanging light fixtures, for instance, utilized such heavy tools only rarely.

“Precisely,” I nodded. “Inside the stone is a substance with the sigil engraved upon it, and the light emanates from the stone upon receiving mana. Could you perhaps demonstrate for us, milady?”

“Of course.”

She accepted it from Mr. Hirooka, but I noticed her fidgeting. She was dying to say something.

“I wanted to do it,” Lady Tilura sulked.

I chuckled. “It shall be your turn later, then. You’ve not even had classes on magic yet.”

It was too much to ask her to channel mana on the spot without proper instruction. Cherie seemed just as disappointed as Lady Tilura, but I was unsure she was capable of casting, either. It was something to explore at a later date—the tool would break if too much mana was channeled into it, after all, so Cherie and Miss Leo would be the last to attempt it.

“Here I go,” Lady Claire announced, standing up and holding the tool out to the others. “I only need to funnel a small amount of my body’s mana into it, and...”

“It’s glowing.” Mr. Hirooka was in awe. “It looks just like the lights in the hallway now.”

Lady Tilura’s eyes lit up. “Cool!”

It was only a faint glow, but that was due to it being noon, and the room was flooded with natural light. Most magical illumination had little to no effect outside of the darkness.

“As you can see, Lady Claire produced light without utilizing an incantation,” I explained. “Most magic tools operate on the same basis.”

Mr. Hirooka nodded. "So it's called a 'magic' tool because it casts magic for you... How long does a light like this last, though?"

"Excellent question. How much mana did you channel into it, milady?"

"About the same amount I always use to light them," she replied.

Hmm... I was convinced she would put in more to impress Mr. Hirooka, but Lady Tilura's and my presence must have tempered her enthusiasm.

"It should shine until tomorrow at dawn, then," I replied. "Under most circumstances, it will remain lit for the better part of a day, though of course it varies depending on the amount of mana within it. We often supply it with enough mana to remain lit through the night."

"That makes sense," Mr. Hirooka nodded before continuing to mutter under his breath. "I guess it'd be too dark if it went out in the middle of the night."

Should such a thing happen, we had servants to replenish the lights.

"Wait, what about the lights inside rooms?" he asked. "There are switches there, but not out in the halls from what I can see. How does that work? And if it needs mana to light, then how come it can turn on at all if nobody touches it to give it mana?"

"An excellent question," I said.

The hallways benefitted from remaining lit at all hours, but rooms that were not in frequent use could be extinguished. Some people also struggled to sleep in full illumination.

"While I am unable to bring such a device with me for demonstration purposes, I believe I can describe it in a manner that does it justice. The mechanism involves a second magic tool that supplies the bare minimum amount of mana to the light when activated. When it is switched off, the flow of mana ceases, and the light runs out of mana almost immediately."

"Okay," he nodded, convinced. "So that's why there's a slight delay whenever I turn off the lights. It's like...fantasy electricity."

I hadn't the slightest idea what "electricity" was, but his explanation of the delay was indeed correct. It seemed I would not have to describe it in any

further detail.

The mana traveled through the walls along pathways of magicopper wire, but the name was something of a misnomer, as they contained none of the metal in question. I had long wondered if it was perhaps *magiconducter* wire at some point in its history, but as there was no extant record of its etymology, I could only guess. It was also worth mentioning the mana-supplying tools were replenished regularly by servants, as they could not generate mana from nothing.

“And that’s how magic tools absorb mana to produce magic,” I concluded.

There was of course the matter of required mana and duration between true magic and magic tools, but there was hardly any need to go into such detail. My lecture was intended to cover the basics alone, after all.

“Let us practice activating these tools,” I said, producing several more from the pocket of my jacket. “I have prepared plenty for your use.”

Mr. Hirooka accepted one of the light-producing tools from me and examined it. “Okay. I just put in a little mana, right? Let’s see...”

After a moment, it began to give off a powerful glow.

“Woooo!” Miss Leo barked giddily.

“You made it light up!” Lady Tilura shouted.

He was indeed quick on the uptake, having no doubt benefited from my detailed description and Lady Claire’s example. Some people struggled to channel mana into objects, but he seemed to have a natural affinity for it.

“Me next!” Lady Tilura looked up at me expectantly.

“As you will. Allow me to teach you how to channel mana as well. Lady Claire, I shall leave Cherie and Miss Leo’s instruction to you.”

As I needed to teach Lady Tilura how to draw out and channel her mana, I deduced it would be better to spend more time with her teaching the basics. Given the simplicity of the task at hand, it should not take long for her to acquire the skill at hand. Lady Claire could guide Miss Leo and Cherie through the process, as they seemed every bit as interested in trying.

Lady Claire nodded readily. "Of course. I only hope Miss Leo doesn't break it by accident."

"Wurf?"

"Arf, arf!"

"Rest assured, I have procured these tools from Isabel for instructional purposes only. They are sufficiently old and would not be seeing further use in our halls."

"Oh, excellent."

Her concerns were perfectly legitimate, but I had of course come prepared. Tools that saw regular use, such as lights, were prone to degradation, and they needed to be replaced periodically. These lights were at the end of their natural life spans, and while it would be a tad wasteful to destroy them purposefully, we would lose nothing should an accident occur.

As I was instructing Lady Tilura, however, I noticed that Mr. Hirooka and Lady Claire had finished instructing their respective canine companions.

"Worf!" Leo touched the light with the tip of her nose. It flashed brightly once before bursting, half-collapsing in on itself. With the internal sigil ruined, it was quite thoroughly broken. "...Wuff?"

"That was fast," Mr. Hirooka remarked. "Maybe you should hold back a little more?"

"Ruff..."

"Arf!" Cherie pawed at it once, and it burst with the same zeal.

Claire jumped. "Ah! Perhaps you should take more care as well, Cherie."

As I feared. I'm glad I was prepared.

Personally, I was far more interested in watching Lady Claire and Mr. Hirooka collaborating so well together. I had to resist smiling and force myself to refocus on Lady Tilura, who was still tightly gripping the light in both hands and nodding solemnly at my every word.

The lecture ended naturally on a pleasant note, with all my students leaving

satisfied.

What knowledge shall I impart to them next, I wonder?

Afterword

IT has certainly been a while, but the fourth volume is finally here! I've rewritten nearly the entire story from the web novel. Readers of the web novel will notice a few characters' roles have shifted, as well as Takumi's actions and the bulk of the fight scene. I sincerely hope that you appreciate the changes I have made from the original for the official release.

Getting straight to business, I must thank the illustrator Ririnra for such wonderful art once again. The characters are as gorgeous as always, and Leo and Cherie in particular are so wonderfully unique! I would also like to thank Hana Ichika for the wonderful manga adaptation. Cherie's introduction was so wonderfully sweet, I have to give it a perfect ten. Last but not least, I must thank Mizushina Takayuki for his wonderful wraparound on the Japanese release of the novel. Leo looks so adorable and funny, I can barely contain myself! Thank you very much!

Speaking of the wraparound, I want to give special thanks to Tsuttsuu and the picture they sent in of their little papillon Kuu! Thank you for such a wonderfully sweet photo!

I sincerely hope we'll meet again in the fifth volume. Thank you very much. I hope you'll continue following my work.

April 2023



Third Loop: The Nameless Princess and the Cruel Emperor

By Iota AIUE Illustration by Misa Sazanami

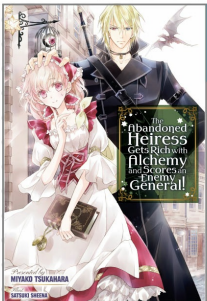
In all three of her lives, Princess That never received a name from the cruel emperor. But this loop, she has the support of dragons and tigers on her side!



A Young Lady Finds Her True Calling Living with the Enemy

By Syuu Illustration by Fujigasaki

A young lady with a hidden talent for business finds herself married off to a general known as The Battle-Crazed Savage. Misunderstandings and negotiations kick off their enemies-to-lovers romance!



The Abandoned Heiress Gets Rich with Alchemy and Scores an Enemy General!

By Miyako Tsukahara Illustration by Satsuki Sheena

A feisty alchemist gets a tsundere enemy general to help her collect resources! Will she be able to tame him and his dragon?!



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