

EVEN DOGS

Go to Other Worlds

LIFE IN ANOTHER WORLD
WITH MY BELOVED HOUND

2

Author
RYUUOU
Artist
RIRINRA



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Even Dogs Go to Other Worlds: Life in Another World with My Beloved Hound, Volume 2

Ryuuou

Translation by Mittt Liu

Illustration by Ririnra

Title Design by Arbash Mughal

Editing by Tom Speelman

Proofreading by Charis Messier & A.M. Perrone

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Even Dogs Go to Other Worlds: Life in Another World with My Beloved Hound, Volume 2

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Takumi
Enjoying His Life
in Another World

Claire
Duke Libert's Daughter

Leo
Takumi's Partner

Eckenhart
Doting Duke Libert

Tilura
Claire's Little Sister
Who Hates Studying



Prologue

AFTER nearly a week of exploring the forest I had first woken up in, we'd finally found a fenrir pup. It was badly wounded after being ganged up on by trolks. But thanks to the power of my Gift, Herb Cultivation, I'd managed to heal it back to health just in time. Now with Claire, the wealthy Libert family's eldest daughter, and Leo, my Maltese-turned-silver-fenrir, we decided to break camp the next day and head for home. After all, who knew when other monsters might show up? After watching the fenrir pup energetically eat its fill, we fell asleep, eager to face the new day.



THE night passed uneventfully; even my time on watch was uninteresting. When I sat up and stretched the next morning, I found myself utterly refreshed without any of last night's lingering fatigue.

I must be getting used to camping out.

I crawled out of my sleeping bag to freshen up. From outside, I could hear a dog's high-pitch barking.

Is that the puppy? I guess a full night's sleep after a nice, filling meal put the spring back in its step.

I poked my head out of my tent to find Claire sitting outside. The fenrir puppy was running around her legs in such tight little circles, I was surprised it wasn't dizzy yet. Leo was sitting obediently nearby, watching the pup play.

"Good morning, Claire," I said.

"Good morning, Takumi!"

"Arf, arf!" yipped the puppy.

"Morning, Leo. And good morning to you too, little one."

"Ruff, ruff!"

“Arf, arf!”

Both Leo and the puppy returned my greeting.

Wait...does that mean the puppy can understand humans, too?

As I puzzled over the pup, Claire’s old butler, Sebastian, approached us from the river. He’d helped Leo and I out time and time again since we’d arrived in this world.

“Good morning, Mr. Hirooka.”

“Good morning, Sebastian.”

“We plan on breaking camp once we’ve finished breakfast,” he said with a short bow. “I trust you’ll be ready?”

“Yeah, of course.”

With that, he headed into the men’s tent, likely to wake up the sleeping guard captain, Phillip.

Come to think of it, Phillip was on watch after I was...he must be pretty tired still.

“I’m going to go wash up in the river,” I said to Claire. “I’ll be back soon.”

“All right,” she nodded.

The fenrir puppy suddenly broke away from Claire to sit at my feet. “Arf-arf!”

“Ruff?” Leo cocked her head to one side.

I leaned down to look the pup in the eyes. “Hm? What’s up?”

“Arf... Arf, arf!”

I can’t understand a word it’s saying...

“Ruff, ruff, woooo...” Leo leaned over to sniff the pup, then wrinkled her nose in disgust.

Does the fenrir smell that bad?

“Do you wanna come down to the river with me, little guy?”

“Roooo!”

That sounds like a yes.

Come to think of it, the pup was pretty much coated in dirt and blood yesterday. And it hadn't had a proper bath yet. Now that it was light out, I could tell it was still filthy. It probably wanted to wash all that off, especially since it had a much better sense of smell than a human.

It really can understand me! Even though I haven't spent enough time with the pup to understand it, I have Leo to interpret, which makes things easier.

"All right, you can come with me."

"Arf!"

"Ruff."

Leo stood behind the puppy, as if watching over it.

"Do you mind if I come along, too?" Claire asked.

"Uh... I'll be getting cleaned up. But...sure, why not."

"Thank you very much. I'll...try not to look at you too much..."

I don't exactly like having people watch me wash my face and shave. But...I guess it'll be okay this once.

With that, we headed down to where the river ran, a short distance from the camp. The puppy jumped right in, splashing around and playing in the shallows. Leo quickly followed suit—deeper into the river, of course.

"Arf!"

"Ruff! Ruff!"

You two better make sure you're actually getting clean instead of just fooling around, I thought.

Claire was watching them play with a smile, which meant this was the perfect chance for me to shave. I'd been using this straight razor for several days now, so I could almost do it without cutting myself.

After I'd finished cleaning up, I rejoined Claire in watching Leo and the puppy play. Before long, one of the guards, Johanna, came to join us.

“Breakfast is ready, you two!”

“Arf!”

“Ruff!”

The second the words were out of Johanna’s mouth, both dogs bounded out of the river like their lives depended on it.

Jeez, there’s no rush, is there?

Leo was the first out of the river. She gave herself a strong full-body shake to dry off. And as soon as the little puppy came out, it followed suit.

They’re just like mother and child... I thought, grinning.

When we returned to camp, the breakfast that Laila, the maid, had prepared was ready, and we gathered around the campfire to eat.

The fenrir ate the orc meat with just as much gusto as last night, but it didn’t eat nearly as much this time. It must’ve been trying to regain its strength last night because now, it was energetic enough to start running around Claire again while everyone else looked on contentedly.

It really seems to like her, huh?

After we’d finished eating, we began taking down the tents and getting ready to head back. All the tools were neatly packed back where they belonged, and the fire was put out with river water. Every pot was given a thorough washing and returned to its carrying bag. It felt almost sad to break camp after spending so much time there. But we couldn’t stay in the forest forever. With everyone working together, it only took us an hour. As soon as we’d divided the load amongst us, we headed for the edge of the forest.

Sebastian led the way as always, with Phillip right behind him in case any monsters appeared. Behind him came Claire, Laila, and the puppy, with Johanna watching Claire’s back. Then came Leo and me. At the very end was Nicola, the guard who spoke like he really *had* lived hundreds of years before us. Despite the fatigue we’d all built up after a week of camping, we knew the trails now and made better time on the way back.

The fenrir puppy spent almost the entire trip running around Claire and

sniffing everything remotely interesting by the trailside as we went. Claire and Laila watched it with warm smiles as we went, while Leo occasionally barked to scold the little pup back into formation when it tried to go too far.

She really is just like the pup's mom.

When we'd first come to this forest, I was still trying to cope with Leo suddenly growing huge and the shock of seeing real-life orcs. But now, as we returned home, I felt more confident about my place in this world.

Chapter 1: The Side Effects of Herb Cultivation

WE reached the other camp at the forest's edge when the sun was already high in the sky. When we'd headed into the forest, the journey had left Claire tired and out of breath. Now, though, there wasn't even a hint of fatigue on her face. She must've *really* gotten used to hiking, or at the least, she was so focused on the fenrir pup that the trip was that much more pleasant.

Come to think of it, I've gotten pretty used to hiking myself...

We found a group of five people waiting for us when we reached the forest's edge. One of them was the guard we had left to watch the horses, and after a moment, I recognized the other four from the Libert mansion. Three of them were guards, and the last was a butler.

They must've come to greet us—well, greet Claire, really.

"Thank you for coming all the way out here to see us home," Sebastian greeted them.

"I'm glad to see you all came back safe," the younger butler said as he bowed. "Nothing pleases me more than to see milady again."

"The feeling is mutual," Claire nodded.

The butler shot a pointed look at the fenrir pup before turning back to Sebastian. "I couldn't help but notice you stayed longer than we had originally discussed. Was there a problem?"

"Quite the opposite," Sebastian explained. "We found so little that we stayed a bit longer to continue searching."

"I see... And that monster?"

"Oh! I assure you, that fenrir pup is quite harmless. I shall explain later."

The other butler bowed and stepped back. "Very well."

We handed our bags to the guards, who loaded them into the carriage for us.

After that, Laila made us all lunch. The butler had brought fresh ingredients for us, so we had plenty to go around now. Apparently, if we'd taken any longer, they were going to bring us supplies, if necessary. It almost made me want to stay out camping a while longer. But I knew that would've been too much to ask.

Claire and Sebastian were sorely missed back at the mansion, and even though I could heal their physical exhaustion with my Herb Cultivation, I couldn't cure their mental fatigue. Nothing could quite compare to those soft, warm beds back at home.

After we finished eating lunch and cleaning up, we got ready to head back to the mansion. At the last moment, though, I remembered what that would entail.

I'm going to get smushed into the carriage with Claire and Laila again, aren't I?

Claire caught the look on my face. "Is something wrong, Takumi?"

"Uh... I don't...uh..."

I can't just tell her how embarrassing it would be to go through that again...

"I-I think I'll just ride Leo back. Y-You and Laila can h-help yourselves to the carriage," I managed to say.

"Are... Are you *sure* you want to ride the whole way?" She looked down at the fenrir she was cradling in her arms.

Is there something wrong with it?

"Mr. Hirooka," Sebastian cut in, "I believe milady is trying to say that she wouldn't feel comfortable with just herself and Laila in the carriage with the fenrir pup. Might you accompany them?"

Why would that be a problem?

"The pup seems to like Claire just fine, though. I don't get what the problem would be," I said.

The fenrir cocked its head to the side in confusion. "Arf?"

Huh... Just like Leo...

At that moment, the fenrir squirmed out of Claire's arms and jumped at me.

"Whoa!!!"

"Arf!"

It banged into my chest and seemed like it was about to fall, so I wrapped my arms around the fluffball to hold it in place. It was lighter than it looked. But having such a muscular canine ram me like that really hurt.

"See?" Claire chuckled. "The pup wants to be with you."

"Does it?"

"Arf!"

"Ru-ruff." *Just give up already*, Leo seemed to be sighing...

It's not like I don't like being in such close quarters with Claire and Laila. I mean, I'm a guy. But I'd rather they never know the kinds of things that went through my head last time...

"Ruff." *Oh, fine*. Leo shook her head at me, then plodded over to Laila and turned around to show her back. "Ruff. Ruff-ruff-ruff!"

"What? You want to give me a ride?" Laila asked.

Leo nodded, then crouched down so Laila could get on more easily. "Woooo."

Laila cast me a look. "You wouldn't mind, would you, Mr. Hirooka?"

I shook my head. "If Leo says it's okay, then go for it."

"All right, then."

Nice one, Leo! Now I won't have to go through all that...uh...discomfort...

I gave Leo a thankful look. But she just shook her head and let out a heavy sigh.

C'mon, you don't have to be that disappointed in me...

With that, Claire, the fenrir pup, and I boarded the carriage. There still wasn't a huge amount of room inside, but it was better than last time. The puppy kept peering around with wide eyes, no doubt having never ridden in a carriage

before. But after a little bit, it settled down on the seat between Claire and me.



I chuckled. “Look who found their spot.”

“I bet they like tight spaces,” Claire grinned. “If you’ll notice, they fit perfectly snugly.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

I’d never really thought about it before, but dogs *did* seem to like tight places like that. When Leo was small, I’d find her sleeping nestled in between the sofa cushions all the time. She also loved sleeping squished right between my legs on my lap.

“Well then, let us depart!” Sebastian called from outside.

“We’re good to go,” I said.

“Please do,” called Claire.

With that, the horses started forward. Out the windows, I could see the guards set off on their horses, as well as the other butler in a second carriage.

Wait, there’s a second carriage? Why didn’t I just ask to ride with him, then? I don’t especially enjoy being in close quarters with another man. But it’s nowhere near as embarrassing as being stuck up against Claire and Laila. Man, am I dumb...

The fenrir puppy looked right up at me and let out an adorable “Arf!”

Well, maybe getting to ride with this little one isn’t that bad. Claire and Sebastian wanted me in here, too. I think its cuteness might be clouding my judgment...

As the puppy looked up at me curiously, we left the forest and hit the road leading back to the mansion.



JUST like on our way to search the forest, we stopped at the halfway point for a short rest. As soon as Claire and the fenrir got out of the carriage, the pup started running circles around her again.

“Arf, arf!”

“Hehe! Well, *someone’s* full of energy!” she exclaimed.

It really is full of life now, nothing like back when we found it.

The pup bolted over to where Leo was resting.

“Ruff, ruff?”

“Arf!”

It then ran right back to Claire and started prancing around again. Leo watched it play protectively.

“What’d it say to you, Leo?”

“Roo?” She cocked her head to the side a moment before replying. “Ruff.”

“The pup’s having a lotta fun...” or something like that. That’s a relief.

“I daresay it’s high time we depart,” Sebastian called out to the group after a while.

With that, we climbed back into the carriage, and the puppy nestled between us once again.

Claire giggled. “It really *does* like tight places, doesn’t it?”

“Haha, yeah. Looks like it,” I said.

“Arf!” The pup nodded its little head up and down.

It can understand us, can’t it? I wonder if all puppies can?

As I pondered this, Sebastian snapped the reins, and the horses took off once again.

Claire and I spent most of the rest of the trip petting and fawning over the fenrir as the carriage bounced along. I learned later that Laila had decided to board the second carriage at the halfway point. She had seemed genuinely pleased to ride Leo, but after all the little detours Leo took and her zig-zag running, Laila must’ve been too worn-out to continue.

It was my fault she had to ride Leo in the first place... Sorry, Laila!

Finally, we spotted the mansion just as the sun was beginning to set. We were just about to pass through the mansion’s gates when Leo suddenly turned toward the sunset and began to howl. The horses stopped, startled at first, but

their riders were able to calm them without too much hassle.

“Arooooooooooo!”

The noise woke up the little fenrir, who got up in its seat and started howling along.

“Arooooooooooo!”

“Awooooo!”

“Arooooooooooo!”

Their cries echoed after each other again and again, almost like they were talking. Then, when it was finally over, Leo went around to each horse and gave it an apologetic nuzzle. Even the puppy gave Claire and me an apologetic little bark before nestling between us again to continue its nap.

What was that about?

“What do you think Miss Leo was doing?” Claire asked.

“I imagine something of great import must have occurred for a silver fenrir to howl so,” Sebastian answered from the front of the carriage.

“I remember reading something about the reason for canines howling,” I said. “What was it again?”

It had something to do with marking territory and calling for lost packmates. Basically, to communicate with other canines.

“Maybe...” I said slowly, “she was talking to the fenrir?”

Claire nodded. “It *did* sound like they were talking.”

I stopped Leo as she finished apologizing to the horses. “So, Leo? What was that about?”

She cocked her head to the side. “Ruff?”

“You were howling to the pup, right? What were you saying?”

She nodded. “Ruff. Ruff, ruff. Woo, ruff, woof.” *This is my territory, so I had to give a proper welcome*, she seemed to be saying.

Oh, so it was a territory thing. Why howl into the sunset, though? I guess you

did *look pretty cool, lit up in the orange sunlight like that.*

“What did the fenrir say back?” I asked.

“Woo-woo-woo. Ruff.” *I’m your packmate now, so let’s get along well!*

Sounds like somebody knows their manners...provided nothing’s lost in translation, that is...

“So...you and the fenrir are official packmates now?”

“Ruff. Roo-roo. Ruff! Wuffa.”

So basically, Leo welcomed it into the pack, and the fenrir said thanks...more or less. Did they have to howl that bit, though? Man, these fenrirs are just full of mystery...

“Oh, right.” I remembered I was the only one who could understand a word of any of this. “So, Claire, Leo was basically welcoming the fenrir into the family, and it said thanks.”

“Is that so? I’ve heard that fenrir have a strong sense of pack belonging, just like wolves. I imagine howling must have a sort of symbolic meaning for them.”

“Sounds like it, yeah.” I nodded.

We looked down at the Fenrir pup to find it already sound asleep, looking even more relaxed and at home than before.

After a few minutes, the horses were finally calm enough to go on, and we passed through the mansion’s gates. We were honestly close enough that we could’ve walked the last bit by ourselves, but I decided not to say anything. The carriages stopped in front of the doors, and at Sebastian’s word, Claire and I disembarked, the sleeping fenrir in her arms.

At that moment, the mansion’s doors flung open.

“Sister! Takumi! Miss Leo! Welcome home!”

Claire’s sister, Tilura, flew out at us. She must’ve heard Leo’s howling and realized we were here.

“We’re home, Tilura,” Claire smiled. “But don’t be too loud. You’ll wake our new friend.”

“It’s good to be back, Tilura,” I added.

“Ruff,” Leo greeted.

After a moment, Tilura seemed to notice the bundle in Claire’s arms. “Sister? What’s that?”

The fenrir was so fluffy it was hard to make out what exactly it was.

Claire giggled. “It’s a fenrir puppy. We found it in the forest.” She leaned down a little to give Tilura a better look.

“A *fenrir* puppy?!” Tilura’s eyes shone with joy. “It’s so *cuuuuuute!*”

Yeah, it really is, isn’t it?

“Now, Tilura, not too loudly,” Claire chided. “When we found the pup, it was terribly wounded. It might not have fully recovered yet, so we’d best let it rest.”

“Oh... I’m sorry...”

I chuckled. “It was running around a lot earlier, though, so I think it’ll be fine.”

Given how it’d acted this morning, I doubted it was in any danger still. It was even full of energy during our break. If anything, the fenrir probably just needed to recover its stamina now.

“Even so, we mustn’t wake it up. It deserves its sleep,” Claire said, looking down at it with a motherly smile.

“It’s really cute and all when it’s asleep,” I added. “There’s no need to wake it just yet, right?”

“Yeah... It’s soooo cute...” Tilura chimed in, eyes still glittering.

Leo cast Tilura a pouty look. “Rooooo.”

Uh-oh. Looks like somebody might be jealous. Try not to let it get to you, Leo; Tilura’s still a kid. Of course, she’s going to fixate on new things, especially a puppy. I know she still likes you, so I’m sure the three of you will be playing together in no time.



I gave Leo a reassuring pat on the flank as she kept pouting.

“Milady?” Sebastian called from the doorway. “Could you perhaps come inside now?”

“Oh! Of course,” Claire responded.

With that, we left the horses and carriages to the guards as we headed into the mansion. The second we stepped inside, the assembled servants all bowed at once.

“Welcome home, milady, Mr. Hirooka, Miss Leo. We are overjoyed to see you return safely!” they all declared as one.

I know I've been through this before...but do they have to say that in unison? Can't they have a representative come forward or something? I mean, how much practice would they need to pull that off, even? The thought of them practicing talking in unison is just...weird.

“Thank you, everyone,” Claire said. “But could you please try to be a little quieter? This little dear is trying to sleep.”

“Our apologies,” one of the butlers replied in a hushed voice with a bow. Behind him, the other servants dipped their heads in apology.

It's not like they could've known Claire would come home with a sleeping fenrir puppy, though... And doesn't just one person talking and everyone bowing make more sense, anyway? Or maybe the whole chorus thing is in the job description? That's another thing to ask Sebastian about, I guess. I've got a whole list of things for him to explain now. Not that I think he'd mind teaching me.

“I'll put the pup to bed in my room, then,” Claire announced.

She seems totally comfortable with it now... Just a few hours ago, she didn't want to be alone in the carriage with it. With the way it ran around her and played, I'm not surprised she got attached...

“Very well,” Sebastian bowed. “And what will you do, Mr. Hirooka?”

“Let's see... I think I want to drop my things off in my room and then go to the parlor for some tea,” I said. “I'd like to relax. You don't mind, right?”

“Understood. I’ll have the tea prepared right away.”

Claire headed back to her room, followed closely behind by Tilura. Leo watched Tilura leave with a sad, pouty look.

“C’mon, Leo, let’s go.”

“Wuff...”

There wasn’t any point in dawdling. Sebastian was probably working on my tea already. The servants could move around the mansion so quickly, it was like they teleported from room to room. There was a chance he’d have my tea ready before I even got to the parlor. The last thing I wanted was cold tea.

With that, Leo and I headed back to our room. I noticed that Leo, however, was still casting lonely looks down the corridor Tilura had taken.

Don’t worry, girl. I’ll give you plenty of attention as soon as we’re in the parlor.

As soon as we got to my room, I dropped off my things and got changed. The clothes I was wearing were filthy after all that camping. Laila and Johanna had been kind enough to wash my other clothes whenever I was off exploring, but I didn’t exactly trust the river’s cleansing powers, and they hadn’t had any soap. On top of that, there was the dirt from the hike back to consider.

I finished changing and started toward the parlor with Leo in tow. As we walked, I noticed her fur was dirty enough that it looked more like tarnished silver now.

Looks like someone needs a bath... Not that I’ll tell her that yet. I don’t think she could pout any more than she is now—but I’m not going to try and find out...

As I passed through the parlor doors, I noticed Gelda was waiting there with a teapot and cup for me.

“W-Welcome home, Mr. Hirooka. Y-Your tea is ready,” she stuttered.

I gave her a polite nod. “Thank you. It’s good to be home.”

“Ruff, ruff,” Leo said, walking up to her.

I sat down at the table, and Gelda poured me a steaming hot cup of tea.

“And welcome home to you too, Miss Leo!” Gelda exclaimed. “W-Would you be interested in a bowl of milk?”

Leo beamed and nodded. “Ruff!”

Gelda's gotten a lot more used to Leo, huh? She used to be so scared of her, but now they're like friends. I guess letting her ride Leo in the backyard the other day paid off. She seems a little nervous still... Then again, I don't think I've ever actually seen her relax. I hope she doesn't slip and spill the milk everywhere.

As I watched her give Leo some milk, I took a sip of my tea.

“Ahh...” I sighed. “This is just as heavenly as I remembered.”

“Th-Thank you very much,” Gelda blushed.

Now it feels like I really am home. This tastes like pure comfort.

Gelda carefully rested a bucket-sized basin of milk down in front of Leo.

“G-Go ahead, Miss Leo.”

“Ruff-ruff,” Leo nodded appreciatively, then stuck her face in the basin and started slurping it down.

I know you didn't get any milk in the forest, Leo, but do try to slow down a bit! I'd rather you didn't go nuzzling people with a faceful of milk.

Gelda retreated to the doorway to wait in case we needed anything else. Leo and I took some time to enjoy our respective drinks and relax.

After a short while, Claire and Tilura entered the parlor with the fenrir pup close at their heels.

“Thank you again for your assistance in the forest, Takumi,” Claire said with a curtsy. “You’ve well earned a break.”

“Oh, no!” I said, maybe a bit too hastily. “You did great out there too.”

Claire took a seat at the table and Gelda poured her a cup of tea. Tilura and the fenrir, on the other hand, made a beeline straight for Leo.

Looks like those two are fast friends. I don't know why, but kids always seem to make friends so quickly and easily.

"I see the fenrir's awake," I said brightly.

"Yes. It was already awake by the time we reached my room." Claire giggled, as if remembering something.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing. It's just that...you know how the pup fell asleep while we were in the carriage? Well, when it woke up, it was so confused to be somewhere else entirely. It was so cute, trotting around, exploring everything. Hehe!" Claire smiled at the fenrir as it played with Leo and Tilura.

Yeah, that must've been quite the surprise! I thought warmly. I'm sure it'll get used to the mansion soon enough. I almost wish I could've been there to see it wake up... I bet it was sniffing around everywhere, just like a little puppy. Sure, it'll probably get a lot more wolf-like as it gets bigger and older. But I can never imagine it not being cute. I mean, just look at Leo! Well...maybe I only think she's so cute 'cause I raised her?

"By the way, Takumi," Claire said suddenly. "About your Herb Cultivation..."

"Yeah? What about it?"

"Well, I was just wondering... You spent so much time experimenting in the garden...so I was wondering if you'd be willing to tell me more about what you found out?"

"Oh, right. I never *did* tell you, did I?"

All this time, I'd just...forgotten somehow. Well, now seems as good a time as any. I decided to tell her everything.

But at that moment, I felt a wave of dizziness, and my mind went white.

Wait... Why am I only seeing white, too? Wh-What's going on?

"Are you all right, Takumi?" Claire's voice was filled with worry.

"Ruff?! Woooooo! Roooooo!"

"Takumi? Are you okay?" Even Tilura sounded worried.

"Arf?" the fenrir whined.

But even as voices rang out around me, I couldn't see a thing. Everything

gradually grew dimmer, and the voices seemed to get further and further away.

Wh-What's happening to me? No, wait... I remember this feeling! I felt this way right before I fainted...that last night back in Japan...

Then everything went black and I felt nothing.



I felt like I was floating.

Huh...? What's happening? Did I fall asleep?

It was almost like waking up from a long dream. I could finally think clearly. But I'd no idea where I was or what I was doing.

Wait...I can feel my body now...

I tried moving my hands and feet a little. They moved as I directed, and I could tell I was lying down.

"Mm...?" I groaned.

I opened my eyes.

Hey! I can see...

I recognized the ceiling. It was the room they had given me in the Libert mansion. I turned and saw Claire at my bedside.

No...there's Sebastian, too. And Laila, Gelda, Leo, Tilura, even the fenrir pup...

"Takumi?!" Claire cried out.

"Ruff?!" Leo barked.

"Oh, thank goodness you've awakened, Mr. Hirooka!"

Huh? Why's everyone talking so loud? Why was I asleep? Why are all of them in my room anyway?!

"What're you all doing here?" I managed to say.

Claire's expression was once again tinted with worry. "Don't you remember, Takumi?"

"You collapsed in the middle of the parlor," Sebastian said.

The parlor... Right, Claire and I were talking there. We'd just gotten home from the forest.

My memories came back bit by bit, up until I'd fallen unconscious. *After that, someone must've carried me back to my room...*

"Well, um... Good morning?" I finally said.

Claire let out a heavy sigh. "Oh, *honestly*, Takumi... Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

"It seems we were worried for naught," Sebastian sighed. "Good morning."

"Wooo..."

Wow, even Leo's sighing... "Good morning" is the right greeting when you wake up, isn't it? I exchanged greetings with everyone else there as that thought crossed my mind. *Y'know what...who cares what time it is? It's morning to me.*

"Ruff! Ruffa-ruff! Ruff!" Leo took the opportunity to jump on me, placing one massive paw on my bed beside me as she leaned over and gave my face a fierce licking.

"H-Hold up, Leo—pbbt!"

I couldn't even talk with all the tongue in my face.

This is a lot more intimidating than I thought it'd be. I really wish she'd stop so I can talk again!

"That's just how worried she was about you," Claire giggled. "She never left your side this whole time."

"Really? That's—pbbt! Leo! Sto—pfft!"

"Hehe! You're talking funny, Takumi!" Tilura giggled.

"Ah, a man and his dog!" Sebastian laughed.

"Arf, arf!" the fenrir joined in.

For whatever reason, it seemed like I'd really had Leo worried.

All right, girl, I'll apologize! Just give the licking a rest!

Everyone was laughing now, and the puppy was trying to hop onto the bed to join in the fun.

“Maybe you should stop now, Miss Leo,” Claire said as she rested a hand on Leo’s flank.

“Rooo! Ruuuuuff...” Leo obediently backed away, stepping off my bed. She looked smugger than I’d seen in a long time.

Why do you like licking my face so much anyway? It doesn’t taste good or anything...right?

“Do you think you can get up, Takumi?” Claire asked.

“Y-Yeah... I think so.”

With that, I sat up and got out of bed, still panting from trying to fend off Leo’s lick attack.

That’s got to be her most powerful attack...or maybe not, I mused.

Sebastian looked visibly relieved. “It seems you’re quite all right, then.”

If anything, I felt refreshed, like after a good, long rest.

“Ruff!” Leo nuzzled up against me.

I gave her an affectionate pat on the head. “Good girl.”

She really was worried about me, huh...? I don’t know how this happened, but I’ll try not to let it happen again.

“Perhaps we should continue this talk in the parlor?” Sebastian suggested. “I would love to confirm the particulars of your falling unconscious.”

“All right,” I agreed.

He was right, of course; it would’ve been hard to hold a proper conversation in my room, after all. There weren’t any chairs in here, so we could only all stand around or sit on the floor or bed.

Claire gave me another worried look before telling me she’d wait in the parlor. Then she left with Tilura and the fenrir pup in tow. Having only just climbed up onto the bed, the puppy seemed indignant at being picked up again. But now wasn’t really the time for games. Sebastian and Leo seemed

determined to accompany me to the parlor, just in case I passed out again.

After quickly making myself presentable, the three of us made for the parlor. Sebastian knocked at the door, and after receiving Claire's permission, we went inside. We found Claire and Tilura seated on the sofa, the fenrir perched on Tilura's lap. Laila and Gelda were standing flanking the door, and Sebastian quickly took up his place standing behind Claire. As I sat down, Laila came forward to pour me a cup of tea.

It was Claire who spoke first. "Do you remember what happened before you fainted?"

I took a grateful sip of tea as I pondered that. "Well...I remember coming to this room after returning from the forest."

"Yes, you were relaxing here with Miss Leo. And after that?"

After that?

"You and Tilura came in and...we were talking, right?"

"Good, you remember. Do you remember fainting while we talked?"

"I...think so?"

I was just about to tell her about what I'd learned about Herb Cultivation, I think. That's when I started seeing white.

Just thinking of it filled my body with that odd floating sensation once again.

"Are you all right?" Claire asked suddenly. "You're turning pale."

"N-No, I'm fine. I was just remembering when I fainted."

"Oh, yes! What did you feel, exactly? O-Of course, you don't have to tell me if you'd rather not dwell on it any longer." I could see her brow crease with worry.

It wasn't a pleasant feeling by any means. But it wasn't bad enough that I wanted to avoid thinking about it. Besides, I owed them that much, after all the worrying I must've put them through.

I think I'm getting used to this feeling now. Yeah, I'll be fine.

"It's okay, I don't mind," I said.

“Ruff?” Leo cocked her head.

“Thanks for worrying, Leo. I’m fine.” I gave her a quick scratch behind the ears.

“As long as you’re sure,” Claire said doubtfully.

“Of course. Let’s see... First, everything went white.”

“White? So...you couldn’t see anything?” Claire prompted.

“Not a thing. My ears were still working, so I could hear you all calling to me. But I don’t remember exactly what you said.”

“I see... That must’ve been awful.”

Claire and Tilura went pale just thinking about it. Suddenly going blind wasn’t normal by any stretch. The thought of it still spooked me.

“After that, everything went from white to black and I fainted. Next thing I knew, I was in bed.”

“All right. Well, thank you for telling us.”

“No, not at all. It’s helped me put things in order for myself, too.”

Just remembering it was enough to send a chill down my spine. But talking about what had happened helped me break it down and understand it better. *I don’t want to ever go through that again, of course. But at least I feel a little more comfortable now that I remember what had happened.*

“Why did it even *happen*, though?” I wondered aloud. “I don’t think I was that tired or anything...”

I’d built up some fatigue from the constant hiking and camping out we’d done, yes. But the herbs I’d made with my Gift should’ve negated most of it.

Unless, of course, it was mental fatigue?

Once after work, I’d fainted in the same way. At the time, I’d been only getting two or three hours of sleep per night...if I was lucky. I’d only come home to feed Leo before heading right back to work.

Seriously, what was I thinking back then?

Eventually, I'd hit my limit. One night after returning home, I suddenly couldn't see anything, and then I fainted. Leo's worried barking woke me up a minute later. But even I could tell that was a bad sign, so I'd phoned in sick to work and gone to the hospital. Of course, my manager had been furious at me when I'd come in the next day—not from worry, but because I used up one of my MANY sick days.

No, never mind that! I need to think about the why.

I didn't feel that tired, physically or mentally, after coming back from our expedition. Looking around the room, everyone else was equally puzzled—except Tilura, who looked like she wasn't following our conversation at all.

Wow, even Leo looks so deep in thought. I didn't know she could even make that face.

The fenrir, on the other hand, looked just as baffled as Tilura, its head cocked to the side as it looked up at me. It *was* just a puppy, after all.

Sebastian finally broke the silence, a somewhat strained look on his face. “Mr. Hirooka? About that...”

“Yes?”

“I have a theory... One without concrete evidence, mind you. But a possible explanation nonetheless...”

I shifted my posture as I turned to give him my full attention.

“It *might* have something to do with your Gift.”

“My Gift? But I've been using it a ton so far without any side effects or anything.”

Besides, I wasn't even using my Gift when I'd collapsed. The last time I'd used it was the day before we'd returned, even. If that was true, I should've passed out then.

“I can't say for certain, of course,” Sebastian continued. “But I found an old tome with some pertinent information. ‘Excessive usage of one's Gift may result in loss of consciousness. Caution must be exercised with use. However, some cases indicate continuous use with no side effects is possible. Whether the

determining factor lies with the Gift or the Gift-holder remains unclear.’ Or so it says.”

“So...people *have* fainted like that in the past?” I asked.

It definitely had some similarities with my case.

But some people don't faint at all? Why?

“Well, we know for certain that Gift usage does not consume one’s mana. Mana loss may also cause loss of consciousness, but that simply cannot be the case here. My theory is that there’s some other font of power inside you that you use for your Gift and *that* depleting is what prompted you to faint.”

“Power? Like what?” I asked, curious.

“I’m afraid I don’t know. As I’ve said before, Gift-holders are exceedingly rare, so we know very little concrete information about them.”

I guess I shouldn't be surprised...

To put it in video game terms, then, my stamina was like my HP and my mana like my MP. Given that, this “different power” would be like my SP.

I guess it'd be GP for Gift Points or something. Well...maybe not. That sounds like some kind of cheesy currency from a gacha game.

“I propose, then,” Sebastian continued, “that using your Gift so much during our expedition is what resulted in your losing consciousness.”

“But why didn’t I faint in the forest, then? I haven’t used my Gift for a while, so it’s weird I’d only suffer the consequences now,” I pointed out.

“Well, at first, I thought the same thing, and I’d ruled out that possibility for some time. However, when I decided to look further into the literature on Gifts for thoroughness’ sake, I found an account that changed my mind.”

“What was that?”

It sounds like Sebastian was doing research the whole time I was unconscious. I feel kind of bad for putting him out like that.

“It was an extremely old account, so I’m afraid I had to take a few liberties with its interpretation. The crux of it was that the longer time one spends with

an active Gift, the greater the burden they shoulder.”

“The longer it’s active...?” I repeated.

“Yes. Now the majority of the time, *your* Gift seems to only be active while you are growing herbs.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

Herb Cultivation requires me to put my hand on the ground. Using it, pretty much any herb I want will grow within a few seconds or so. It should only be active during that short time.

“That still doesn’t explain it, though.” I shook my head. “Shouldn’t I have fainted in the forest?”

He hesitated for a moment. “Do you remember the herb you cultivated to heal the fenrir’s wounds?”

“Huh? Of course. I had no other options, so I did what I could.”

“I propose that *that* herb was the cause.”

Wait, what?

“I’ve seen you use Herb Cultivation a number of times now. But that one instance stood out as peculiar.”

“Peculiar?”

“Yes. If you’ll recall, shortly after you put your hand to the ground, there was a brilliant flash of light.”

“Light...? Oh, yeah, I remember that.”

“Then, when you applied the herb to the fenrir’s wounds, that same light shone once again.”

“Yeah... I think it did...”

I hadn’t thought about it, but Sebastian was right.

And here I’d assumed I just grew a magic herb or something.

“The herb you grew closely resembled loe. But as you know, of course, loe doesn’t glow like that.”

I'd been picturing Ioe at the time, yes. But I'd wanted something with even more healing power, something that could heal even mortal wounds. So, I'd imagined something that glowed, and that'd work like magic. But that was all the thought I'd put into it.

"One other important thing to note," Sebastian went on, "is that not long after *you* collapsed, the fenrir similarly grew lethargic."

At his words, the fenrir looked up at him curiously. "Arf?"

"As you can see," he continued, "the pup's fine now. But when you first fainted, it was as tired and unresponsive as when we'd first found it in the forest."

"Really?" I was surprised to hear that.

"Fortunately, it regained its vim and vigor after a day's rest, likely thanks to its wounds having been healed. That was the last support I needed for my theory."

"And that is?"

"The herb you made *didn't* heal its wounds in an instant. Rather, you kept it in a healthy state while slowly and continuously restoring its stamina. The *actual* healing came later and was far more gradual than it appeared."

"You mean...?"

"In essence, you had been using your Gift constantly since that first moment, up until you finally reached your limit."

In other words, the fenrir wasn't totally healed when I gave it the herb. I'd just temporarily relieved its injuries, and I'd been slowly replenishing its stamina ever since. It *wasn't* an all-powerful healing herb; rather, I'd basically been using my Gift for almost two days straight to heal it.

Come to think of it, the herb disappeared after I used it on the fenrir...

If Sebastian was right that the burden on my body increased the longer I used my Gift, then that would explain why I had collapsed.

"Mind you, Mr. Hirooka," he cautioned, "this is only a theory."

"No, I think it makes sense," I replied. "I get the feeling you're right."

I didn't know why, exactly. But I strongly felt Sebastian was right. Even though I had no way of being sure, we didn't have any other possible explanation, so it couldn't hurt to use this as our working hypothesis.

Claire gave me a worried look, then spoke for the first time since Sebastian had started talking. "If that's true," she said worriedly, "then you should probably avoid using Herb Cultivation for a while."

I could see everyone nodding around the room.

Come to think of it...nobody else has said much this whole time. They were all so focused on listening to Sebastian...except Tilura and the puppy, I guess. They look just as lost as before.

"Thank you for your concern," I replied. "But there's still so much I want to do with my Gift."

"But what if you faint again?" Claire asked.

"I'll be fine. I only need to avoid cultivating any herbs that need a continuous stream of power from me to work. I've spent whole days in the garden making herbs before, you know."

"I suppose you're right," she conceded. "Just *promise* me you won't push yourself too hard, all right? Miss Leo isn't the only one who would worry if you collapsed again."

Everyone in the room—even Tilura and the fenrir—nodded in agreement.

Everyone here is so nice.

I smiled and gave them all a polite bow. "Thank you, everyone. Don't worry, I'll be sure to pace myself."

"Promise?" Claire asked, her eyes pleading.

"I promise."

I've never worked anywhere that's actually cared about my health and needs before... Good bosses really do exist. Not that I work here, of course...

"Oh! And one more thing," Claire continued.

"Yeah?"

“You got cut off last time. But, if you don’t mind, I’d love to hear what you found out about Herb Cultivation during your experiments.”

“Oh, right!”

I’d fainted right before I could actually tell her. *I didn’t mean to put it off this long, but oh well...* Everyone here knew about my Gift already, so it was the perfect opportunity to tell them what I’d discovered.

“It’s nothing too fancy, really,” I began. “Basically, when I was first trying out Herb Cultivation, I managed to grow an herb I’d never even seen before. I think I showed that one to you and Sebastian, right?”

Sebastian nodded. “Indeed! Why, I’d never seen such a thing.”

Looks like he’s interested in this stuff, too... As I looked around the room, I could see he wasn’t alone.

I went on, “Well, I’d never seen it before, either. I even checked the encyclopedia you lent me, and I couldn’t find any sign of it.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. I decided to put it aside for the time being. But that night, Leo found it and ate it.”

“Miss Leo did?” Claire asked.

All eyes turned to Leo.

“Ruff?” She cocked her head to the side in thought a moment before nodding. “Wu-ruff.”

“It was thanks to her that I figured out what it did. But Leo? Next time, don’t go eating weird stuff you find lying around, okay?” I cautioned her.

I didn’t want her getting sick, after all. I was just glad the herb wasn’t poisonous.

“Hruff...” *No promises*, Leo seemed to be saying

Sebastian leaned forward a little as he tried to keep the excitement in his voice down. “So? What did the herb do?”

It was hard to tell if he was more interested in the herb itself or my Gift,

though it could've easily been both.

“Basically, Leo got energetic as soon as she ate it. She said it filled her with energy or took away her fatigue or something. Right, Leo?”

She nodded. “Ruff!”

I remember having to stay up late playing with her just to let her burn off all her energy. That was a real pain. It took everything I had just to keep her from tearing through the halls. Who knows what she would've broken?

“Removes fatigue...? Could that possibly be similar to the herb you shared with us in the forest?”

“Yep, exactly! That one could also help you feel less tired.”

“My! What a useful little plant!”

I nodded. “One of the better ones I've found, I think. If you're only a little tired, it can leave you feeling refreshed in minutes. During my tests, I exercised to the point where I was totally out of breath. But after eating it, I felt fully rested.”

Claire's eyes widened. “Your Gift's more impressive than I thought.”

Realization dawned in Laila's eyes. “That would explain why I saw you running around and jumping all over the place.”

I guess that would've been quite the sight, watching a grown man do that... I don't think going for a run is that weird, though...

“There are still a few things I don't know, though,” I added.

“Oh?” Sebastian raised his eyebrows. “It sounds to me as though you have tested it quite thoroughly.”

“Well, I don't know exactly *how* much fatigue this herb can restore. It might partially depend on who's taking it, too... But I guess it at least has the same effect on everyone, since you all took it in the forest. That isn't the only herb I was testing, though.”

“It wasn't?”

“Do you remember the herbs I gave the guards to help them carry the orcs

early on?”

Claire thought for a moment. “Yes, I remember. Miss Leo had defeated them not long after we first entered the forest.”

Sebastian nodded. “I believe they claimed the orcs felt lighter after that, correct?”

“Yes, I remember that...” Claire paused. “So that wasn’t a fatigue-reducing herb, then. Did it make them stronger, maybe?”

That was one of the herbs I was most curious about. I’d tested it enough to know that it wasn’t harmful, but I still didn’t know much about it.

“What Phillip and the others told you is right,” I said. “It gives you extra strength.”

“It does?” Claire asked. “It doesn’t just make you feel less tired?”

“Nope. From what I can tell, it actually enhances your body for a short period of time.”

“Astounding,” Sebastian mused. “To think such an herb could exist.”

“When I was testing it, my body felt lighter, and I could move quicker. That’s why I thought it could help the guards carry the orcs.”

Claire’s eyes glittered with excitement. “So that’s why you gave it to them?”

“Exactly.”

It was hard to tell if they were interested in my strange new powers or only thought they sounded useful, but I felt a small swell of pride either way.

“There’s still plenty I don’t know about that herb, though,” I admitted.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Specifically, I don’t know how much it increases the consumer’s abilities. It might even depend on who’s consuming it. To put it in numerical terms,” I went on, “let’s say someone with a physical score of 10 ate the herb. If their score increased to 20, then that could mean the herb either increases their base ability by ten or doubles it. That would make a big difference for someone with a score of 20; if it was a flat increase, they’d be at 30, and if it

doubled, they'd be at 40. The issue is, of course, that I've no way of measuring a person's abilities like that to start with, so it's hard to know anything for certain."

"Anyhow," I continued, "that opened my eyes to one of Herb Cultivation's biggest strengths."

"What would that be?"

Claire leaned forward in her seat and Sebastian followed suit. Even Tilura, I noticed, seemed excited.

It looks like Claire's enthusiasm is contagious.

"Well, when I grew those herbs, I was only thinking about the effect I wanted. I didn't have any specific herb in mind, and yet they still grew," I said.

"What do you mean by that?" Sebastian asked, his brow furrowing.

"Basically, I was able to use Herb Cultivation to grow things I wasn't even sure existed. I mean, I might just be getting lucky—or maybe I really *can* grow an herb with pretty much any effect I can think of. As long as nobody's farming it somewhere, like Isabel at the magic shop said."

Realization dawned on Sebastian's face. "I see... That sounds more amazing than I ever thought possible."

The others didn't seem quite as fast to catch on, so I decided to summarize it for them. "Basically, I can create an herb with any effect I can think of, so long as it can reasonably *be* an herb or weed."

"Because you can't grow vegetables, right?" Claire asked.

"Nope! Nothing that takes human effort to grow. I spent the whole day before we left testing that out."

"Is that so? I was wondering what you were doing," she admitted.

I'm not surprised. No wonder she'd want to know, especially since I kept dodging her questions at the time.

I chuckled nervously. "Sorry... I didn't know half as much then as I do now, so I didn't think I could give you a satisfying answer even if I tried."

“Please don’t let it bother you too much,” she said. “Granted, I was worried you were keeping me in the dark on purpose. But I understand why now.”

You were? I really hope I don’t come off as that type of guy to you. Here I was trying to be a gentleman...not that I particularly care if I don’t succeed...

Claire smiled. “That’s why you had so many useful herbs to share with us on our expedition, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t have been able to do it otherwise. I’m glad they were useful,” I said.

Sebastian nodded. “Why, they were invaluable.”

“Honestly, I think all the hiking would’ve stopped me from continuing otherwise,” Claire said. “It’s all thanks to you that I was able to keep going and that we eventually found the fenrir puppy.”

Tilura bounced out of her seat. “The herbs were *that* amazing?!”

Claire nodded. “He even used herbs to save the fenrir’s life.”

“Wow! You’re so cool, Takumi!” She looked up at me in adoration.

“Arf?” the fenrir barked quizzically.

It’s not like I deserve that much credit, though! I had no idea if I could even save its life. I just got really, really lucky. And besides, I ended up fainting because of it.

“But if our hypothesis is correct,” Sebastian cut in, “you’ll have to be a great deal more careful from here on out.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said. “I guess I need to figure out what kind of herbs need me to continuously activate my Gift first. Oh! And I need to make herbs for Claire’s family to sell, right?”

Claire paused for a moment. “You mean...?”

In the past, Claire had offered me a business contract. I’d provide herbs for the Libert family and they would sell them. I had put some thought into it during my experiments. But I hadn’t had a chance to tell Claire my reply, what with everything else that had happened since then.

If I accepted the contract, though, I could experiment more with Herb Cultivation and earn money at the same time. I'd be killing two birds with one stone. I could probably earn more money if I sold the herbs myself, but I still had a debt to Claire I had to repay. I was more than willing to give her family a hand—provided, of course, that I didn't end up in overtime hell, like in my old world. I wanted to take it easy for once.

"I'll be careful not to faint again," I added. "But if your offer still stands, I'd like to sign on with you."

Claire dipped her head low. "In that case, let me thank you on behalf of the entire Libert family."

"Oh, no need for that! You'd actually be doing me a huge favor by selling these herbs for me. I imagine figuring out the logistics and marketing will be a lot harder than growing the herbs. As long as I'm paid okay, I certainly won't complain. It sounds like easy money."

"Of *course* you will be! We don't mistreat *any* of our business partners! Besides, now we know that your Gift comes with some strings attached. It's certainly *not* easy money!"

I get what she's saying, but Herb Cultivation basically just fell into my lap. Making money off it seems a little cheap. I hope I can get used to this feeling...

Claire turned to Sebastian, her smile straining a little. "I suppose I'll have to talk to Father about this, won't I?"

"I'm afraid so, milady. Especially since the Liberts have had no herb-related dealings to date, we will need his explicit consent. But are you quite certain you wish to proceed?" he asked to be sure.

"Yes, I suppose so. I'll just have to think of new ways to turn down the suitors he'll no doubt have lined up," she said sadly.

Sebastian nodded, a faraway look in his eyes. "Remember, you came here in the first place to spend time away from him. I imagine he has crafted quite the impressive list by now."

"Don't worry, I'll turn them down... I'll turn them all down! All for Takumi and the Libert family!"

“That’s the spirit, milady! In turn, I swear I will spare no expense in this endeavor! We owe Mr. Hirooka a great debt, and the time has come to repay it!”

Wow, they look ready to rumble. I know she told me about him before, but her dad can’t be that bad, right? Do they need to be this pumped to turn down arranged marriages? Then again, I’ve never had one, so what do I know?

Laila and Gelda were both rolling their eyes and shaking their heads. Leo and the fenrir seemed utterly nonplussed. Tilura, on the other hand, was slumped face-down on the table.

Come to think of it, Tilura’s supposed to have suitors, too, right? Maybe that’s why...

At that moment, however, a low, rolling growl like thunder echoed throughout the room.

Oops.

Claire stopped and looked around the room. “What was that?”

She immediately turned to look at Tilura, but she just shook her head without peeling her nose away from the tabletop.

C’mon, don’t blame Tilura. Oh, well, guess I’d better come clean.

“That was, *uh...* my stomach,” I confessed.

The room went so quiet I could hear a pin drop.

This is torture enough as it is, guys... At least I was able to clear Tilura’s good name.

Claire was the first to regain her composure. “So that was you, then. Um... I’m sorry.”

Sebastian shook his head. “Hardly surprising, considering he spent the past two days asleep. It’s high time we got him some food.”

“Yeah, I *did* sleep a lo— Wait, did you just say *two days?!?*”

He nodded. “Nearly to the hour, in fact.”

No wonder I feel so hungry!

“Let’s eat, then,” Claire announced. “Laila? Gelda?”

“As you wish.”

“O-Okay!”

I looked out the window to see that the sun had already begun to set. If they were to start cooking now, they’d be done just in time for dinner.

“Why don’t we eat in here?” Sebastian suggested.

“Sounds good to me,” I said.

I wasn’t so hungry that I couldn’t move, but I was feeling sluggish enough that it was a welcome change of plan.

I might be sluggish from sleeping too much. Or maybe I haven’t fully recovered from overextending myself yet? Either way, it’ll be good to get some nutritious food in me.

Laila stopped to fill my teacup before leaving the room, and I took a deep sip.

“I’m sorry, Takumi,” Claire apologized. “We should’ve gotten you something to eat before talking for so long.”

“No, no. I woke up at an awkward time for a meal, so don’t worry about it. Besides, I thought we managed to cover a lot of ground.”

“Yes, Sebastian seemed positively entranced.”

“Haha! Yeah, he did!”

Sebastian cleared his throat loudly. “Milady, I never!”

“Oh? Who was it that pored over every Gift-related book in the villa after Takumi fainted? I seem to recall you leaning in while you were listening to him talk as well.”

And you weren’t, Claire? I wasn’t about to steal her thunder, though, so I didn’t say anything.

Claire continued teasing Sebastian for a while until finally, Tilura cut in. “I thought *everybody* was really interested?”

Nobody said anything after that.

Leave it to kids to say what no adult has the guts to.



BEFORE too long, Laila and Helena, the head chef, carried dinner into the parlor. Dinner was light, consisting of oatmeal wrapped in a cabbage-like vegetable. Given how long I'd been asleep, I was grateful for something that'd be relatively easy on the stomach. I wasn't normally a fan of sweet oatmeal, but the mock cabbage rolls went excellent with the consommé they'd made. I ended up eating nearly twice as much as anyone else. Leo even let out an exasperated sigh when she saw how quickly I was scarfing it down.

D-Don't give me that! You outeat everyone most of the time!

After dinner, it was time for tea. Laila's tea was as delicious as ever, but Tilura and the puppy opted to play with Leo instead.

"By the way, Claire, I was wondering..." I started.

"Yes?" She gracefully set her teacup to rest on the table.

I wonder if she had lessons on how to properly handle teacups? She always does it so elegantly...

It took me a moment to realize I'd stopped talking and that Claire was watching me confusedly. Sebastian gave me a sly grin, but I pretended not to see it.

"Have you decided on a name for the fenrir yet?" I finished.

"No...but I suppose it'd be more convenient if it had one."

I guess just calling it "the fenrir" is clear enough, since we know we're not talking about Leo, but still. Leo only really started feeling like part of my family after I named her...even if I didn't bother to check her sex first. Sorry, girl...

"Convenience aside," I said, "a name would make the pup feel more like family and help us to stop using 'it' as a term of address."

"I suppose so. We'll need something to call her." She put her finger to her lips in thought. "What kind of name do you think would suit the pup?"

Names are never easy to come up with. Trust me, I know.

“Well, what were you thinking about when you named Miss Leo?” Sebastian asked me.

“Me? Uh...”

I cast a sidelong glance at Leo.

I guess I've gotta say it.

“It was just the first name that came to mind. Plus, it's a boy's name, and I only realized later Leo was a girl.”

“O-Oh...”

Leo shook her head and sighed. “Hruff...”

Sorry, girl... B-But I really think it fits you, now that you're all big and cool! You're still not very feminine, though...

Claire turned to Sebastian. “Do you have any ideas?”

“Hmm...”

Yeah, not surprised she's getting a second opinion. I'm a little hurt, but I couldn't agree with her decision more.

“Or no,” Claire continued, “I suppose we should find out if it's a boy or a girl first.”

“Excellent idea,” Sebastian nodded. “I haven't bothered to check myself.”

“Well, then, that comes first.”

I'm glad they both agreed to do that first. I wish I was that smart.

“Fenrir!” Claire called. “Come here!”

“Arf?”

The fenrir stopped playing to trot right up to Claire.

It sure seems obedient... That'll make training easier later. I guess Leo's been doing that ever since we first picked it up, though.

Claire scooped the pup up in her arms and pointed its belly toward Sebastian.

So much for a dangerous monster. I wonder if it's that mellow because it's just

a baby or because it likes Claire? Or maybe it's because Leo is here?

"So? Can you tell?"

Sebastian looked. "Hm... It appears to be female."

"Just like Leo, then," I said.

"Ruff," Leo nodded, as if she'd known all along.

"And just like me!" Tilura chimed in eagerly.

I shouldn't be surprised Leo could tell. They're both fenrirs, even though Claire and the others say they're different species.

Claire looked down at the pup. "A girl... Do you want down now?"

"Arf, arf!"

As soon as she was put down, though, the puppy jumped up on the chair beside Claire and tried to get her attention again.

Claire giggled as she petted her. "Oh, what am I going to do with you?"

"So, does anyone have any good names?" I asked.

"Names..." Claire wondered aloud as she stroked the pup.

"Names..." mused Sebastian.

The fenrir herself seemed perfectly content to just be petted.

"Ah!" Sebastian suddenly exclaimed. "What about Roly-poly?"

Uh...

"How about not?" Claire replied instantly. "She's a girl, so her name must be suitably cute."

"I-Is that so?" Sebastian slumped dejectedly against the wall behind him.

At least we know Sebastian is no good at coming up with names now. I guess he's only perfect as far as being a butler goes.

I could see Laila and Gelda both trying very hard not to laugh at him out of the corner of my eye.

C'mon, show him a little mercy...

“How is Roly-poly not cute enough...?” he muttered to himself.

“Uh... Sure, it’s cute. Yeah. Cheer up, Sebastian!” I said to encourage him.

Claire suddenly raised her head. “Oh, I know!”

“What’s it going to be?” I asked.

“I’ll name her Cherie. I heard it means ‘beloved one!’”

Cherie, huh? That’s really cute. At least one of us has good naming sense.

“It’s decided, then,” she said as she patted the fenrir. “Your name is Cherie!”

Cherie nodded energetically. “Arf!” Then she began to glow.



“Cherie?!” Claire stared at the pup in her arms, frozen in shock.

“Ruff?!”

“Milady!” Sebastian stepped closer to Claire, ready to defend her with his bare hands if necessary.

“It’s so bright!” Tilura cried.

I was too shocked to say a thing.

“Awooo!” Cherie howled as the light grew to fill the entire room. As Cherie’s cry died out, the light also dimmed and then faded altogether.

Claire looked at Cherie in shock. “Wh-What was that?”

Cherie only cocked her head to the side innocently.

No, really, what was that?

“Leo? Any idea what that was?” I asked her.

Nothing like a silver fenrir when you’ve got a fenrir mystery on your hands.

Leo, however, looked just as confused as I did. “Ruff?”

I guess I can’t expect her to know everything, though.

“C-Could it be...?” Sebastian stammered.

That’s our Sebastian! Of course he knows what just happened! At least his memory is better than his naming sense.

“So?” Claire asked. “What happened?”

“Well, I’ve heard a contract between master and familiar is formed when one bestows a name upon a monster and said monster accepts the name. If the contract is successful, they say the monster gives off a brilliant light.”

“A familiar...contract...?” Claire repeated, hesitant.

Didn’t Claire mention something about that when we first met? And again, wow. Is there anything Sebastian doesn’t know?

“Cherie?” Claire looked back at the fenrir. “Does that mean you’re my familiar now?”

“Arf!” She nodded, then squirmed to get closer and lick Claire’s face.

“O-Oh! Down, Cherie! Come on! No jumping on people!”

“Arf! Arf!”

Even as Claire warned her, though, she kept stroking the pup affectionately. Cherie squirmed and whimpered with glee in her arms.

Sebastian shook his head in disbelief. “To think milady would establish a contract with a familiar...”

“There’s nothing wrong with that, is there?” I asked.

Maybe there’s a problem because Claire’s nobility?

“No, nothing of the sort,” he replied. “If anything, this could be to her advantage. While not as strong as a silver fenrir, fenrirs are strong and noble monsters in their own right. She could hardly ask for a more capable protector.”

“Oh, yeah, I bet Cherie could be a good guard dog,” I laughed.

The longer I watched Claire fawn over Cherie, though, and the more I saw Cherie squirm and squeal with glee, the less sure I was about her being “noble” in any sense.

“Awww, you’re so lucky, Big Sister!” Tilura said, jealousy plain on her face. “I want a fammy-lee-ar, too!”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to just play with Cherie for now. Isn’t that right, sweetie?”

“Arf!”

Claire let Cherie trot over to Tilura and, after a moment’s hesitation, they started playing together again, Leo joining in moments later.

I bet they’re being extra nice to Tilura now just to prevent her from getting too upset. Okay, maybe not Leo, the way she’s licking both of them...

“At any rate, I suppose I’ve got you to thank for this, Takumi,” Claire said with a smile.

“No, I wouldn’t say that. I had hardly anything to do with it.”

I got the feeling she'd been thanking me a little too much recently, and frankly, I wasn't used to it.

"On the contrary, we never would've found Cherie without your help. And without your Gift, Cherie wouldn't even be alive today."

It wasn't a bad feeling to have a beautiful woman like Claire thanking me. But, for some reason, it was hard for me to look her in the eye.

M-Maybe I should try to get more used to being around women... Not that I have any idea how to do that.

With that, our day came to a busy but productive end. I was a little worried that I wouldn't be able to sleep, what with all the time I'd spent unconscious. But after a quick bath, I found my eyelids fell quickly shut as soon as I hit my bed. Leo even sat partially on my bed to give me an extra-fluffy pillow, probably because she was still worried about me.

Thanks, Leo! Now I know I'll have sweet dreams...

Chapter 2: Claire's Father Pays a Visit

THE next morning, the sun was almost *too* bright. I sat up, took a moment to stretch, then sprung to my feet.

Leo really does make the best pillow ever, but I don't really remember if I had any "sweet dreams."

I only sometimes remembered my dreams. Usually, I'd forget them as soon as I woke up. Sometimes, I would remember that I had a dream but not what it was about—and sometimes, I wouldn't even remember that much. I had heard that most people dream every night, and there were all sorts of ways of analyzing a dream's contents, but I didn't know much about that stuff.

My mind kept pondering this as I got ready for breakfast. Leo woke up as I was washing my face. She extended her forelegs out in front of her in a full-body stretch, then watched me wash up with a slow tail wag.

Looks like someone's in a good mood...

Figuring it was about time for breakfast, I headed to the parlor.

"I think I'm getting used to living here," I said to Leo as we walked.

I'd had a bit of a hard time at first, given the mansion's sheer size; I always needed Laila to guide me from place to place. Now, though, I had a general grasp of where the rooms I visited often were and could navigate on my own. To be perfectly honest, though, I hadn't even *seen* the rest of the place.

As we made for the parlor, however, I spotted several maids frantically running about. I turned to Leo.

"What do you think's going on?"

"Woo?"

I don't remember hearing about anything special happening today.

Shortly after that, Leo and I arrived at the parlor. Inside, I found Claire already

sitting down and Sebastian at his post behind her. Laila was right beside the door, but I didn't see any sign of Gelda.

Maybe she's busy, too?

"Good morning, Claire, Sebastian, Laila," I said as we walked in.

"Good morning, Takumi."

"Good morning, Mr. Hirooka."

"Mr. Hirooka, good morning."

With morning greetings out of the way, I took my usual spot, and Leo sat right beside me.

"I don't see Tilura this morning," I noticed. "Where is she?"

Come to think of it, she didn't visit my room earlier, either. Normally, she comes by first thing to say hi to Leo...

"She slept in," Claire replied. "Don't worry, Gelda's waking her up now. *Honestly*, that's what she gets for staying up late to play with Cherie."

I laughed. "That sounds about right."

I noticed Cherie herself was curled up in a little white ball on the floor beside Claire.

Looks like Tilura isn't the only sleepyhead...

"So, Claire, do you mind if I do some more Herb Cultivation experiments in the backyard after this?" I asked.

Since I was going to have a business contract soon, I wanted to be sure my Gift was up to snuff.

Claire's expression turned serious. "About that...there's actually something rather...*important* happening today."

Is something wrong? I wondered. I looked around the room and noticed that Sebastian and Laila's expressions were equally grave.

"You saw the hubbub in the corridor, didn't you?" Claire asked.

"Yeah, I did. The maids all looked really busy."

It's obvious Claire would know what's going on around here.

"Well...they're getting ready to welcome a very important person..." she continued vaguely.

"Who is it? A guest?"

Judging from all the hustle and bustle, it must be someone important. Maybe I should stay in my room today? I really don't want to get in Claire's way... Any guest of the duke's family must be important, and I don't even know the basic etiquette of this world.

"They're not a guest, exactly... It's someone who'll be rather important to you, too."

"Okay, I give up!" I said, throwing my hands in the air. "I have no idea who that could be."

I only knew the people in the mansion, most of whom were in this very room. I *had* technically met several merchants and townsfolk in Ractos, but they didn't seem important enough to cause such a commotion.

Come to think of it, I have that tailored suit waiting for me at Harton's. What with the forest expedition and everything, I haven't been able to pick it up yet...

As my thoughts wandered, however, Claire's expression turned even more grave.

Okay, seriously...who is it?!

With a great deal of gravitas, Claire finally opened her mouth. "We're being visited...by my father."

"...Come again?"

"Yes... My father's coming."

Sebastian nodded seriously. "Indeed. Duke Libert, the current head of the Libert family and Claire's father, is coming today."

Okay...

The mansion technically *belonged* to the duke, so it wasn't strange that he'd want to pay a visit. But that'd also explain why the maids were in such a hurry

to get things ready.

“So, uh... Why are you two acting like it’s the end of the world, then?” I asked.

“It’s my *father*, Takumi!” Claire shouted. “I just *know* he’ll arrive with a few dozen more potential suitors in mind!”

“Indeed,” Sebastian joined in her lamenting. “This spells trouble for both milady and Lady Tilura. Given how long they’ve been apart, there’s no telling *how* many proposals milord has in store for them.”

Claire suddenly grew silent as her gaze dropped to the floor and Sebastian looked dramatically off into the distance.

Right, I remember now... Claire said it was a real pain turning them all down.

“Well...you’re just going to turn them all down, right?” I asked.

“Of course!” Claire exclaimed. “Just think of how young poor little Tilura is! What does he think he’s *doing*, trying to find her a husband?!” She cast a few uneasy glances at my face and her cheeks turned bright red before she continued in barely more than a whisper. “And besides, I have—”

Sebastian cleared his throat. “Milady.”

What was that about? There’s nothing on my face, right?

“O-Oh!” She suddenly cut herself off, returning to her senses. “M-More importantly, this is your chance to meet him!”

Sebastian nodded. “If you wish to have a business contract with the Libert family, you’ll *have* to discuss it with milord in person.”

“Right... I guess that makes sense,” I said.

Of course, I’ll have to meet with the person in charge. I really hope I don’t make a fool of myself. This is a pretty big deal for me.

“S-So, uh... I don’t know the first thing about manners. Should I be worried? How do you *meet* a duke, anyway?” I asked.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry too much,” Claire reassured me. “He cares about formalities and the like even less than I do.”

“His Grace is a...‘free spirit,’ shall we say...” Sebastian smiled bitterly. “Perhaps

one might say he'd do well to remember his position more often and that he could at least attempt to *act* like the nobleman he is."

A free spirit, huh... I wonder what he's like? From what Claire told me in the forest, he at least sounds like a good father, especially given how much he used to spoil his daughters. He probably isn't too bad of a guy, all the marriage talk aside...

Claire let out a heavy sigh. "I wonder how long I'll spend going through the list of suitors he's composed this time?"

"I'd prepare for the worst, milady..." Sebastian said ruefully.

That sounds really rough, actually... Especially considering this is her own father we're talking about. I bet she has to come up with ways to not hurt his feelings or his social standing every time. I can only imagine the headache that comes with so many suitors.

Come to think of it, though... Why's he coming now?

Instead of just asking out of the blue, though, I decided to wait until their moods improved a little.

"So...why's your father coming today?" I eventually asked. "Is there something important he has to do here?"

"Well..." Claire hesitated. "Would you like to take this one, Sebastian?"

He nodded. "As you wish. You see, we received a messenger early this morning, telling us to prepare the mansion for his arrival at once. By all estimates, he should arrive around noon."

Oh. So important people send messengers so the people receiving them can get ready. That sounds really nice of him, actually. Especially in this case, since he's visiting his own mansion. No wonder the maids are busy getting ready...not that they're not always ready, but with last-minute preparations to receive the head of the household.

"Under normal circumstances, it takes a week on horseback to reach here from the main mansion," Sebastian continued. "For him to arrive so abruptly and with so little notice, I can only imagine he wishes to confirm milady's

safety.”

“Her *safety*? But why now, all of a sudden?” I asked.

The mansion was filled with servants, not to mention a small garrison of guards. Sebastian was probably sending regular updates to the main mansion too. So it didn’t make sense that the duke would come all the way here just for that.

Then again, I don’t have kids... Maybe this is normal?

“About that...” Sebastian said simply. “Do you remember what happened the day you and milady met?”

“Of course! How could I forget?”

Tilura had been bedridden with a fever, and Claire had left the mansion on her own to look for medicinal herbs in the Fenrir Forest. Thinking back on how many orcs we had run into on our last visit, she had been really reckless.

Just goes to show how worried she was about Tilura. Between how pretty she was and how she was the first person I’d met in this world, I remembered our meeting very well. *I don’t think I could ever forget, actually...*

“At that time, in addition to forming a search party ourselves, we’d also sent word to milord,” Sebastian explained.

“Okay...”

“Honestly, Sebastian...” Claire said, shaking her head.

I couldn’t blame him, though. He was only worried about Claire’s safety, and I didn’t see anything wrong with keeping her father in the loop. I could tell she wasn’t mad at him over it, either. There would only be an earful waiting for her if she argued the point with him.

“I’d imagine,” Sebastian went on, “that His Grace departed from the main mansion as soon as our messenger had arrived. Even so, he’s making excellent time—I assume he and his men are moving as quickly as possible.”

If the main mansion was a week’s journey away, I reasoned, then they must be moving quickly. Not that I know how you can save time on horseback or anything, but still...

Come to think of it, I've spent almost two weeks in this world now... I can hardly believe it...

"I did, of course, send another messenger as soon as milady returned safe and sound. But it seems he paid it no heed."

Claire sighed. "Knowing Father, I imagine he had already left by the time the second messenger arrived."

Sebastian nodded. "I'm afraid that does sound like him."

I couldn't tell if he was the quick and decisive type or if he cared about Claire just that much, or both.

Either way, I think he could stand to think things through a little more. He could've at least waited until the second messenger... Not that I'm in any position to say. I don't even know the guy...

Claire sighed again. "Well, knowing him, I don't doubt that he stopped to collect his list of potential suitors on his way out."

"Hold on," I said. "He was really worried about you, right? Maybe he did forget it?"

"I'm afraid that isn't possible, Mr. Hirooka," Sebastian butted in. "Milord would never forego such an opportunity."

"Really?"

They trust him so much, in the worst possible way. But really, who'd ride across the country to see if their daughter was okay but bring along a hefty list of marriage suitors just in case...?

At that moment, Tilura finally arrived in the dining hall with Gelda in tow. As soon as she sat down, breakfast was brought out. Cherie finally woke up, and Leo seemed relieved to have something to do other than listen to boring human talk as we all began eating.

About halfway through the meal, Tilura asked Claire about the clamoring maids she'd seen in the hall. As soon as she heard the duke was coming, she froze. When she finally started eating again, it was with a sense of sad resignation. Breakfast ended on a depressing note.

And breakfast tasted so good, too... It doesn't look like she even ate half of it. I feel bad for Helena, but I feel even worse for Claire and Tilura. It must be rough, dreading seeing your own father this much...

After breakfast was cleared, Sebastian, Claire, and Tilura headed to another room to discuss strategy. I was a little confused as to why they needed to go *that* far, but I figured that they knew best, so I didn't question it.

I headed right back to my room without experimenting around with my Herb Cultivation. I was planning on talking to Claire and Sebastian about what kinds of herbs they'd need so I could practice with those, but that didn't seem possible now, what with everything else going on.

I stroked Leo idly as she lay beside my bed. "So...what should we do now, girl?"

She looked at me, confused. "Ruff?"

It would be some time yet until Claire's father arrived. But I probably didn't have time to get any practice in. I could take a nap or play with Leo, of course. But I felt too antsy to relax. It was my first time meeting someone with real authority in this world, and I was nervous. Claire also had authority, of course, but she didn't act that way with me—not to mention she wasn't the family head.

Come to think of it...

I turned to Laila, who was kneeling beside Leo. Supposedly, she was attending to me, but it looked like she was trying to pet Leo without being too obvious about it.

"Laila?" I asked. "What kind of clothes do you think I should wear to meet Claire's father?"

"As milady said before," she replied simply, "His Grace doesn't like to stand on formality. What you're wearing now will be fine."

She says that...but first impressions are important. If I don't look my best, this might not go over well... Of course, that might just be my inner businessman talking.

I always wore a suit and tie to work, and we'd had a company rule that you could never "loosen up" your outfit. Just the thought of meeting someone important in my everyday clothes made my skin crawl.

Laila seemed to notice my discomfort. "If you're worried, I recall Sebastian mentioning that you were having a suit tailored in Ractos."

"Yes, that's right..."

"Why don't you pick that up and wear it, then?"

If I remembered correctly, I'd ordered the suit in the same style as the clothes I'd borrowed from Sebastian. It was the closest thing to formal wear I'd seen in this world yet. Of course, I *could* just borrow the same clothes from Sebastian again, but I didn't want to disturb him now. I had nothing to add to their strategy meeting, and the last thing I wanted to do was get roped into it.

"But if you'll be heading into town," Laila continued, "I would advise you to hurry. Otherwise, you might not return before His Grace arrives."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that too much. Right, Leo?"

"Ruff!" *Leave it to me!*

"Thanks, girl! I knew I could count on you."

Laila nodded in understanding. "I see. I imagine if you rode Miss Leo, you wouldn't be pressed for time."

Leo was much faster than any horse or carriage, so I'd be able to make it there and back with time to spare.

With that settled, we left our room. Near the entrance hall, I found Gelda hurriedly getting things ready with the other servants, so I gave her a message to pass on to Claire. I didn't want to leave without saying anything at all.

As soon as we were outside, I hopped on Leo's back.

Wait, hold on a second...

"Laila? You're not coming *with* me, are you?" I asked, suspicious.

"Of course, I am!" she enthused. "I was entrusted with your care. Gelda can pass on your message on her own. Besides, how else will you pay for your

clothes?”

Oh. Right. Money...

Sebastian hadn't paid for the suit when we were in town last time. Provided the contract with Claire's family panned out, I'd hopefully have an income soon. But until then, I was just as broke as when I'd first arrived in this new world.

Laila climbed onto Leo's back behind me, and the three of us headed to Ractos together. Normally, it'd take an hour by horse, but on Leo, it should take less than half that time. *If she runs the whole way, we might make even better time—but she might knock us off her back by accident if she did that.* As an aside, Laila seemed perfectly used to riding Leo now, and she kept her balance easily by grabbing hold of Leo's fur instead of me.

N-Not that I was looking forward to her grabbing onto me! Not at all!

I had Leo stop when we reached the village gates, and then we entered Ractos on foot. The guards moved to stop us but backed off when Laila showed them the Libert family crest.

Come to think of it...I have no ID, either! I'm just some random guy with a really big magic dog. I could hardly blame the guards if they stopped me... I guess it's good Laila's tagging along. Maybe I'll ask Claire for this world's equivalent of an ID card or passport or whatever later...

We passed through town without difficulty, though we attracted plenty of strange looks. Leo took great interest in a few of the sausage stalls we passed. But fortunately, Laila and I were able to calm her down.

I guess I never really taught her restraint. I mean, I trained her not to snack, but she's never really had to say no to her beloved sausages before. She seems to understand me better now than ever, so it probably wouldn't be too hard to teach her.

While I was thinking about these things, we arrived at the tailor and left Leo sitting outside. Fortunately, there weren't any food stalls here, so I could trust her to behave.

Harton, the tailor, came out of the back as soon as he heard us enter. “Welcome. Oh, if it isn't Mr. Hirooka! It truly is a pleasure to see you again.

Come to pick up your freshly tailored new suit, have you?"

"Yes," I said.

First, I tried it on to make sure it fit. The sleeves were a little long, but Harton was able to tuck them in on the spot. With that taken care of, Laila paid my bill.

That's a pro for you. And sorry, Laila... I swear I'll pay you back later!

After that, I walked out in my new suit.

Leo greeted me with an enthusiastic wag, still sitting just where I had left her. "Ruff!"

"Well, aren't *you* a good girl!" I gave her a good scratch behind her ears.

"Good girl," Laila echoed as she petted Leo. She was still a little uncertain about how to best approach Leo. *Just like Claire was at first.*

"Oh, Laila?" I said. "She really likes it if you scratch her neck. And put a little of your nails into it. She loves that!"

Laila nodded, doing as I said. "Like this?"

"Ruffa~!"

"Yeah, just like that! See, she loves it."

"Hehe! She's rather cute."

With the petting session out of the way, we headed back through town.

"I think that suit fits you well, Mr. Hirooka," Laila complimented.

"You think so?"

She's just being polite. It feels like the suit's wearing me...

I couldn't help but feel a little pleased, though. I wasn't exactly *trying* to be fashionable or anything, but it still felt nice to be noticed.

"I *really* do," she added, her eyes narrowing slightly.

"O-Oh... Um... thank you..." I awkwardly looked away.

So...she wasn't just being polite...

I had *no* idea how to respond to that, but I still made sure to thank her.

Man, I wish I could respond like a normal guy...

For some reason, the path home felt a little longer. As soon as we'd left town, we got on Leo's back once more. Judging by my pocket watch, Leo had made excellent time on the way there, so we could afford to stop and smell the roses. At this rate, we would be back just in time for lunch.

"Why don't you slow down a bit, Leo?" I requested. "Let's enjoy the ride home."

"Ruff? Roooo!"

"What did Miss Leo say?" Laila asked.

"She said she'll run nice and slow. She still wants to run, though."

Leo couldn't run inside the mansion, after all, and it seemed to be a good stress relief for her.

Still, I'm glad we came early. If we had thought about it any later, we might not have had enough time to go, even with Leo. Even if the duke wouldn't mind how I'm dressed either way, I sure would. I'm glad I let Claire talk me into getting some proper formalwear. Maybe she knew it'd come to something like this?

As the villa came back into view, I offered Claire a silent word of thanks. All that was left now was to meet the duke himself.

We arrived at the mansion soon after, and I gave Leo an affectionate pat on the neck as I got down.

"Ruff!"

"Good girl, Leo! Thanks for the ride! You're a lifesaver."

"Good girl." Laila followed suit.

Leo puffed out her chest with pride. "Ruuuuff!"

As we walked through the front doors, I could see the fruits of the morning's preparations. The floor and stairs seemed to shine with polish, and I caught a few maids admiring their good work. *It seems they finished everything in time.*

I returned to my room to drop my old clothes off. Just as I was about to leave,

however, there came a knock at the door.

“Come in!” I said.

“P-Pardon me,” Gelda said as she cracked the door open and poked her head in.

“Oh, Gelda! I just got back.”

“Welcome home. I passed your message on to milady.”

“Thank you.”

That’s good to hear.

“I wasn’t expecting you to return so soon, though,” Gelda continued, a hint of confusion in her voice.

“Well, that’s all thanks to Leo.”

“Ruff!”

Come to think of it, I never told her we’d be riding Leo there. I was in such a rush, I was only thinking about my message for Claire.

The surprise vanished from Gelda’s face. “If you rode Miss Leo, then that makes sense. O-Oh, right; I’m supposed to tell you that lunch is ready. You can come down to the dining hall anytime.”

“Thanks, I will.”

With that, she and Laila left the room, leaving Leo and me alone. I gave Leo another affectionate scratch.

“Thanks again for everything, Leo. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Leo seemed almost a little bashful. “Ruff! Woo-woo-woo!”

I wasn’t going to start taking her for granted just because we were partners. She deserved every thank-you she got and more.

With one more head scratch, we left for the dining hall.

I hope Claire’s done with her strategy meeting...

Just as I thought that, I spotted her leaving a room along the corridor. Tilura and Sebastian were with her, and they seemed to be heading to the dining hall

as well.

Maybe they're taking a break from their war council?

"Ah, Mr. Hirooka!" Sebastian called out to me. "I see you went to Ractos."

"Those clothes suit you well," Claire said, smiling.

"Really well!" Tilura chimed in.

"Thank you. Laila and I just got back from the tailor's."

Claire nodded. "Yes, Gelda told me. Do the clothes fit all right?"

"They were a little long in the sleeves before, but they fit perfectly now," I told her. "They're surprisingly comfortable."

Sebastian nodded. "I daresay milord won't be able to complain, either. Not that he's the type to mind what anyone wears. Not even himself..."

"No, Father isn't exactly...*mindful* about his wardrobe..."

Tilura wrinkled her nose. "Sometimes he smells bad."

That's one less thing to worry about, I guess. But I'm still glad I picked these up.

Still, they said the duke was laid-back, but I wasn't expecting it to be to that degree. I just hope Tilura doesn't call him stinky to his face, for his sake. I bet that's in the top three list of things no father wants to hear from their daughter. I swear that if I ever have kids, I'll at least try to smell okay!

We entered the dining hall, where Laila and Gelda had already started laying out lunch. According to Claire, they'd finished their meeting, so we were able to unwind a bit over lunch.

Afterward, as we were relaxing and chatting over tea, a maid came in to announce that all preparations to greet the duke were finished.

I hope they can rest now. They sure deserve it. Now all that's left is to await the man himself.

Claire took a deep breath. "I suppose it's almost time."

Sebastian nodded gravely before speaking in a low voice, "Remember the

plan, milady.”

She nodded. “Of course.”

Tilura started to fidget. “I’m getting kinda nervous...”

You and me both, Tilura...

Even if he *was* a free spirit, he was still one of the most powerful nobles in this kingdom. First impressions mattered, and I was determined not to make a fool of myself.

Leo cocked her head to the side in confusion. “Fruff?”

Cherie, perched on Leo’s back, copied her motions perfectly. “Arff?”

Looks like they’re getting along well. Man, I wish I could be as relaxed about this as they are.

At that moment, the door to the dining hall opened, and a butler stepped through.

“His Grace has arrived,” he announced.

A wave of tension rippled through the room. Everyone from the servants to me to Claire and Tilura gulped. Even Leo and Cherie stood up to stand beside their respective partners.

“This is it,” Claire announced. “Let’s go, everyone!”

“I’m with you, Claire,” I said encouragingly.

“As you wish,” Sebastian said.

“O-Okay!” Tilura squeaked.

“Ruff?”

“Arf?”

Leo and Cherie still seemed confused as to what we were so worried about, but nobody paid them any mind as we left the dining hall.

I imagine this is what it’d feel like to be facing a boss fight in real life...not that we’re going to be fighting him. Probably.

We arrived in the foyer to find twenty-some maids and butlers assembled

there. This was likely the entire staff. I spotted Helena among the maids, and even Phillip and Nicola stood at attention near the doors. It was quite the sight.

Just as we took our places, a man's voice rang out from just outside the door.

"His Grace, Duke Eckenhart Libert, has arrived!"

Everyone, from the maids to Claire, took a moment to adjust their posture. I suddenly felt glad I was standing behind Claire with Laila and the other servants.

Come to think of it, this is my first time hearing his first name. Eckenhart, huh? Sounds like a fancy nobleman's name. I bet he looks like a real gentleman.

Phillip and Nicola opened the doors. In came three guards in full armor, followed by the duke himself.

"Duke Eckenhart, we humbly welcome you!" the servants said in unison.

"Very good," he replied in a deep voice with a curt nod of his head.



Eckenhart looked nothing like the noble gentleman I'd been imagining. He was ruggedly handsome with a wild beard that covered most of his face, and his eyes had a piercing quality. His clothes were just as casual as his reputation suggested and were simple enough that I wouldn't think him a nobleman if I saw him on the street. He was wearing leather armor on top, likely because he'd been traveling. But even that was simple and unornamented. If he had an axe, I might almost mistake him for a mountain bandit.

It only took him a moment to spot Claire.

"Claire..." he muttered.

She and Tilura took another step forward, with Sebastian and Laila following close behind.

Claire dipped low in an elegant curtsy. "Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to visit us, Father. My sincerest apologies for worrying you so."

Claire really is pretty, huh... I thought as I watched the scene from the sidelines.

"Welcome, Father," Tilura echoed.

"I'm glad you're all right, Claire!" Tears brimmed in Eckenhart's eyes. "You too, Tilura! Why, you've both become so beautiful in so little time! You've made your old man so very proud!"

Um... This is quite the turn. He, uh...doesn't look like the crying type. And here I thought he'd be a perfect middle-aged dandy if only he'd trim his beard a little...

I could feel the mood ease up a tad. I could tell from his voice alone that he was a genuinely nice guy.

Of course, he's ripped enough that he could probably punch me clean through a wall if he wanted to. Not that he'd ever want to...right? And it looks like Claire and Tilura both take after their mother, at least in looks.

"Um, Father...? We're in public, so could you try to stop crying?" Claire requested.

Sebastian cleared his throat. "I daresay, milord, that you should've received word of their wellbeing already."

“Oh... Right. Of course.” The duke roughly wiped his eyes. “Yes, I ran into the second messenger on my way here. I knew the girls were safe, but I figured since I’d come so far already, I might as well pay a visit. What, does a man need an invitation to see his own daughters?”

Claire shook her head. “Oh, Father...”

I could understand why he’d want to see his daughters. What still didn’t make sense, though, was why he seemed so desperate to marry them off so soon, especially if he was so protective of them.

Or wait...maybe it’s because he’s so protective of them that he wants them to have a husband he approves of?

“Oh?” He finally seemed to notice me. “I haven’t seen this young lad before.”

“This is Takumi, Father,” Claire introduced me.

“He is, in fact, the man who saved milady’s life,” Sebastian said.

Oh! Looks like they’re talking about me...

I took a step forward and bowed, trying my best to copy what I’d seen the male servants do. Claire would’ve been an even better role model, of course. But I was a man and wasn’t even wearing a skirt to curtsy with.

Leo, as it happened, was still lying down some ways back, being petted by Laila. I figured it’d be rude to bring her forward right away.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said. “My name is Takumi Hirooka.”

A broad smile burst its way through the duke’s beard. “Oh, so it’s *you*! I owe you my thanks for saving my daughter. Sebastian told me all about you in his letter.”

He walked right up to me and gave me a few powerful whacks on the back. I could tell he was genuinely happy...but now, I was genuinely in pain.

“Oh?” He raised an eyebrow. “You’re *quite* the man, aren’t you? You didn’t so much as flinch!”

“N-No, i-it’s not that...” I wheezed.

It hurts too much to move, that’s all! Besides, what exactly can you learn by

smacking someone on the back like that?

“Father, stop! You’re hurting him!”

Eckenhart finally stopped. “Oh, sorry. Did I overdo it?”

“N-No...it’s okay...” I wheezed some more.

My back isn’t all red now, is it? I’ll have to check when I bathe.

At that moment, Leo decided to stand up and put herself between Eckenhart and me, pushing him back as she did so. I couldn’t tell if she was upset that he’d hit me or if she just wanted to make herself known. But either way, she seemed determined.

“Ruff.”

“O-Oh.” He looked her up and down in surprise, paling slightly. “Y-You’re the silver fenrir, are you?”

Claire nodded. “That’s right, Father.”

Sebastian must’ve also mentioned Leo in his second letter—or maybe her sheer size had tipped him off. I could see Eckenhart trying to inch away.

I guess she would be kind of scary at first...but she’s so cute! Or maybe he knows more about silver fenrir since he’s the head of the family?

“A-A real silver fenrir...” he stammered. “C-Claire, Tilura, everyone! What do you think you’re doing, standing?!”

“Father?”

“You okay, Father?”

“Milord?”

Everyone stared at him in confusion.

“It’s a silver fenrir!” he cried. “How dare we *stand* before her?!”

With that, he got down on all fours and bowed, his forehead pressed to the floor.

Wait, what?!

Even Leo seemed baffled. Claire and Sebastian looked on in a mixture of

confusion and surprise.

“Uh...” I started.

“My deepest apologies, O Great One!” Eckenhart shouted. “How *dare* I be so bold as to thump a man with a familiar as noble as yourself, test though it may’ve been?! I was too lax in my relief to keep my wits about me!”

Sure, that hurt a little... But it’s really not that big a deal! It would have been nice if he held back. But I was worried about being rude myself, so I can’t blame him.

Leo cocked her head to the side. “Roo?”

Eckenhart flinched. “I beg of you, Great One! Please forgive my rudeness! I beg you!”

“Um...Father?” Claire seemed just as confused.

“What in *blazes* are you thinking, Claire?! On your knees! Everyone, kneel!”

Sebastian cleared his throat. “Miss Leo has no wish to harm anyone, milord. Provided they bring no serious harm to her master, that is.”

Leo nodded. “Ruff, ruff.”

We’re not master and familiar, though, really... We’re partners. I mean, we never established one of those contracts like Claire and Cherie had yesterday.

I sensed, though, that now wasn’t the time to complicate things by saying this.

“So, uh...Claire?” I asked. “What now?”

She looked just as thrown as I did. “Takumi... Oh, I don’t know! Get *up*, Father!”

He shot her a blank look. “C-Claire?”

She grabbed him by the arm and tried to pull his massive body upright without much success. “Get off the floor already, will you? Takumi and Miss Leo aren’t upset with you at all!”

“B-But...”

“No buts! Stand, I said! Honestly, can’t we talk like civilized people?!”

He obediently shut his mouth and stood up. “Okay.”

I guess even in this world, no father can say no to his daughter. Not even if he’s a powerful nobleman.

Something about their exchange felt oddly familiar.

“Why don’t we continue this over a relaxing pot of tea?” Sebastian suggested. “I’ll have it brought straight to the parlor.”

The duke nodded tamely. “Okay.”

Claire turned to me. “I’m so sorry about this spectacle...”

“N-No, it’s okay.”

“Ruff.”

With that, several servants—including Laila and Gelda—moved to get things ready.

I think we could all use a nice, tasty cup of tea after that...

Eckenhart finally seemed to compose himself. “A-At any rate, I’ll take this up with Miss Leo later.” He then turned to Cherie, who was sitting primly by Claire’s feet. “But who exactly is this?”

“Oh, this little one? This is my familiar, Cherie.” Claire picked her up and held her out. “She’s a fenrir puppy. Say hello, Cherie!”

“Arf!”

Tilura beamed. “Cherie’s *super* cute! Just like Miss Leo!”

“A *familiar*?” Eckenhart muttered. “Is this thanks to Sir Takumi as well?”

Claire nodded. “He saved her life when we found her, injured and alone in the woods.”

“Very good. I see we’ll have plenty to talk about, then...”

He certainly doesn’t seem bothered by the fenrir puppy, but I bet seeing his daughter holding her helps.

I could tell from the way he still shot Leo sidelong glances, though, that he

was still scared of her.

Really, though, neither of us bite. I promise! I guess I'll have to help him get used to her, like I did Gelda.

At that moment, one of the maids came in and bowed. "The parlor is ready for you, milord."

Eckenhart nodded. "Good. We have a great deal to discuss, so we'll take it up there." He turned to the three guards who came in with him. "Good work, lads. Now you may rest."

"Thank you, milord!" they bellowed, bowing deeply before leaving in the direction the maids had left in.

Maybe they have a break room down there? Either way, I hope they rest up. Rushing all this way can't have been easy...

I noticed that Claire, Tilura, and Sebastian all seemed tenser than ever now.

I guess they're afraid Eckenhart's going to bring up the arranged marriage talks.

"All right, then, Father," Claire said with a strained smile. "Let's go."

He nodded. "You should join us, Sir Takumi, Miss Leo. You can tell me about your own circumstances."

"All right."

"Ruff."

I wasn't used to him talking to me yet; Leo seemed just as unsure.

As we left the foyer, I could hear the soft clamoring of the servants behind us as they returned to their posts.

Thanks for sticking around, everyone. Promise me you'll let me watch your coordinated greeting practice some time.

Along the way, though, I noticed Eckenhart turning around to glance at Leo several times.

Don't worry, she won't attack you from behind! She's a good girl.



ECKENHART cleared his throat. “All right, where do I begin... Er, I’m allowed to sit, aren’t I?”

“Of course, Father. We can’t have a proper conversation if you’re the only one standing.”

“A-All right, if you say so...”

We were all now sitting around a table in the parlor. Eckenhart sat in the middle, Claire on one side and Tilura on the other, with Sebastian behind the duke. I was sitting right across the table from them, and Leo was sitting beside me, though the servants had had to clear several chairs to make enough room. Laila and Gelda were both waiting at the side of the room with teapots at the ready, in case anyone needed a refill. Cherie, of course, was in Claire’s lap.

Eckenhart cast another uneasy look at Leo. He still seemed to think she was the most important person in the room. But since she couldn’t exactly lead the conversation, I was content to leave things as they were. The only problem was, Eckenhart was now looking me square in the eye. Our first order of business was explaining who Leo and I were and what we were doing there, and since his beloved daughters’ safety might hinge on what I said next, he wasn’t fooling around.

I’ve been through worse in job interviews, but...boy, is he serious!

“Well, then, let’s begin,” he started. “Explain to me why you have a silver fenrir. I’d heard they’d never obey a human.”

“It’s kind of a long story...”

I did my best to explain everything that’d happened up until now. I explained how I’d come from another world where I’d taken Leo in as a pup, how I’d fainted one night and woke up in the middle of a forest to find Leo had turned huge, and how we’d come across Claire being attacked by an orc. At that point, Eckenhart practically broke down. Then when I told him how Leo had saved her, he nearly burst out crying as he thanked us.

I guess Claire really does mean the world to him. I never thought I’d see a grown man who looks like some bandit cry like that... I don’t know how to feel...

After that, I told him about my Gift and about our expedition back into the forest. Eckenhart nearly broke down again just then. But through their combined efforts, Claire and Sebastian managed to calm him down. I honestly wasn't *too* surprised, though, given what I'd told him Claire had been through there before. I then told him how we found Cherie, and I finished with Sebastian's theory as to why I'd collapsed afterward.

"I see now," Eckenhart said as he stroked his beard. "You've made your situation very clear, Sir Takumi. Yet I can't help but feel touched at the compassion Claire showed, both toward Tilura as she lay ill in bed and to the injured fenrir pup. And, of course, I couldn't be happier to hear Tilura recovered so smoothly."

I get that he cares about his daughters, but doesn't he have a whole domain to look after? I really hope he doesn't get behind on his official duties or anything...

"Given Lady Leo's presence, I'll accept your tale as truth," Eckenhart continued. "As I'm sure you know, our house has a storied history with silver fenrir."

According to Claire, the first head of the Libert family had a silver fenrir companion. As far-fetched as some parts of my story were, Leo's presence there was proof enough.

Thank goodness for that. I could've shown him my Gift to prove I have one, but I really have no proof I came from another world. There are all sorts of random facts about my original world's technology I could tell him, but that doesn't really prove anything.

"But, er..." he hesitated. "More importantly, Sir Takumi...are you sure she doesn't attack humans? Positive?"

I smiled and nodded. "Of course not. Leo's a good girl. She'd never try to hurt anyone without a good reason. Isn't that right, Leo?"

"Ruff!" Leo nodded.

"You're *sure*?"

"Honestly, Father! Miss Leo's been very gentle with all of us. I *promise* you

she won't hurt anyone!"

"Plus, she's *really* cute!" Tilura added. "She lets me ride her, too!"

Eckenhart did a double-take. "You *rode* her? And you're all right?"

"I'm okay! She's *really* nice, so she didn't shake me off or anything!"

"Ruff, duff!"

Huh, I didn't realize Tilura had noticed how much care Leo was putting into that.

"And here I thought I was paying my daughters an ordinary visit," he said with a shake of his head. "I wasn't expecting to meet a silver fenrir, let alone for my own daughter to have a fenrir for a familiar..."

Yeah, that'd be a shock, and that's coming from the guy responsible. I mean, having a random guy (well, his dog) save your daughter, and that dog also happens to be unbelievably strong, would be shocking. As if that's not bad enough, the guy finds your daughter a killer monster that acts like a fluffy little housepet. Sounds like a migraine to me.

I sipped the tea Laila poured me as we chatted about other small things that had happened recently. Claire, Tilura, and Sebastian pitched in every once in a while, and sometime later, it seemed as though we got Eckenhart's mind off his troubles.

He seems to like me, though! That's a relief...

After all the time I'd spent worrying about being rude or not dressing appropriately, he opened up to me readily.

"Still...I wasn't expecting you to get down on all fours like that," I said.

Claire nodded. "I know that we're supposed to respect silver fenrir, but even I thought that was a little much, Father."

"I've never seen you act so funny!" Tilura giggled.

Eckenhart shook his head, his cheeks reddening faintly in embarrassment. "It seems I've made something of a fool of myself, but I don't regret a thing. Noble or not, I couldn't forgive myself for disrespecting a silver fenrir like that. Er,

rather, since I had already offended her, it was important that I apologize.”

Claire looked confused. “What do you mean, ‘noble or not?’”

“In the face of *true* power, the wealth and titles we humans clad ourselves in are mere trifles. I don’t even possess the right to speak her name.”

Uh... I think you’re overreacting. Well, maybe that’s just because I potty trained Little Miss “True Power” here when she was a puppy. That might be why it’s still so weird to me that they all talk to Leo so formally. I guess I should expect as much, though...

“Please, feel free to speak to Leo normally,” I said. “I’m sure she’d prefer that.”

He blinked at me in surprise. “You’re sure?”

“Ruff, ruff!”

The tension visibly left his shoulders. “All right, then. Miss Leo it is.”

“Ruff!”

At the sound of Leo’s bark, though, he jumped.

I still wish I’d given her a more feminine name, but...I guess I’m glad Leo likes it. It certainly fits her new look, after all...

Eckenhart cleared his throat. “All right, then. On to the next order of business.”

At that moment, Claire, Tilura, and Sebastian all froze. Their eyes were filled with a mix of fear and anticipation.

“I’ve brought you girls a list of fine young lads I handpicked myself. I’m sure you’ll find one you each like!”

Claire sighed. “Father...”

Tilura slumped in her chair. “Not again...”

Even Sebastian shook his head and sighed quietly enough that only I could hear it. “Milord...”

“Father? About that...”

“Come now, Claire, isn’t it time you met one of these chaps? There’s only so much you can learn from me, after all. Meeting one’s the best way to know!”

Even Tilura looked resigned to her fate.

Wow, I wasn’t expecting him to be so pushy... I take back anything rude I said about their strategy meetings earlier. Really, though, why is he so desperate to marry them off if he cares for them so much? Is this a dad thing?

If anything, though, he seemed the type to chase off any wannabe boyfriends who’d dare get too close to one of his girls.

Maybe I should just ask? It’d help me get to know him, too, and he seems the open and friendly type. I just hope he won’t think I’m weird.

“Um... D-Duke Eckenhart?”

“Just Eckenhart, Sir Takumi. You don’t seem one for courtly nonsense—and by all rights, Lady Leo here outranks me.”

Oh yeah...I think Sebastian mentioned something like that before. I really don’t want to act like some stuck-up jerk, though. So I’ll at least try not to be too casual with him.

“So, uh, Eckenhart. Why do you want to marry off your daughters so badly?”

“Hm?” He blinked at me. “Didn’t Claire tell you?”

“She told me you’re very...‘determined,’ but not why.”

He nodded wistfully. “Ah, I thought so. It seems she’s forgotten...”

Claire gave him a baffled look. “Forgotten what? I don’t recall you ever telling me why before.”

“Come now, Claire. You *asked* me to find you a husband in the first place.”

“I... I did?! I don’t recall ever saying that!”

Well, well...the plot thickens...

All I’d ever heard from Claire and the others was how much of a pain this arranged marriage business was. I never thought it had come from Claire herself.

“I’m not surprised you don’t remember,” Eckenhart smiled sadly.

“What do you mean, Father?”

“It was many years ago now... Tilura had just been born, so it must’ve been a full decade ago. You just couldn’t get enough stories of the first family head’s adventures.”

“Come to think of it...I do remember that...”

That must’ve been when the servants were spreading rumors about Claire being the founder’s reincarnation. Given the connection she felt to silver fenrirs, and how curious she is even today, I’m not surprised she’d want to know more.

“Well, it was around that time that I told you the first family head had had an arranged marriage.”

She did? I mean, I’m not too surprised. If she was able to become a duchess, she might’ve had to marry for political reasons.

Sebastian and Tilura both seemed eager to hear more. But Claire seemed more confused than ever.

“It was then that you told me you wanted an arranged marriage, too. I tried to stop you, of course. I wasn’t about to marry off my little girl—especially not so young!”

Claire blinked. “I-I really *said* that?!”

Sebastian and Tilura both shot Claire sharp looks.

“Really, milady?”

“Sister...”

It sounds like Eckenhart’s not that different from the dads I know, after all.

“When I tried to stop you, of course, you bolted out of the mansion, shouting about how you were going to find a husband yourself. You were *far* too young to choose a husband responsibly, so I took it upon myself to search for a trustworthy man in your stead.”

“I... I don’t remember any of that!”

Sebastian shook his head. “To think milady herself brought this calamity upon

us...”

Not to mention that it's not an arranged marriage if she finds a husband herself... Taking the initiative is good, but it looks like it can backfire on you like this too...

I couldn't help but stare at Claire, dumbfounded.

Eckenhart chuckled. “You even said you were going to find a husband for little baby Tilura. I couldn't let that stand of course, so I decided to handle *that* as well. You never *were* the type to listen once you got an idea in your head.”

Claire stopped to think for a moment. “I think I remember hearing of the founder and her spouse, yes. They got along famously and led happy lives together. I don't remember anything else, though...”

“I'm not surprised. You see, your mother passed away not long afterward, and you cried for days on end. I wouldn't be surprised if the shock was bad enough you don't remember much else.”

“You mean...that was when Mother...?”

He just nodded.

That bit about the founder aside, I didn't know Claire's mom passed away...

Thinking back, though, I'd heard plenty about Eckenhart, but nothing about their mother. It sounded as though Tilura was far too young to remember, and Claire probably didn't want to dig up sad memories. This might even explain why Claire seemed so protective of Tilura and even Cherie.

Especially when Tilura got really sick...

Tilura slumped a little in her chair. “I don't remember Mother at all.”

Eckenhart smiled kindly. “I'm not surprised. She left us shortly after you were born.”

I could see faint tears forming in Claire's eyes.

Eckenhart looked right at both of his girls as he continued. “She... Your mother was born frail. She was sick for some time after giving birth to Claire, but she held fast. But after Tilura, she just couldn't hold out any longer.” He

paused for a moment. “But listen to me, girls. She was so proud to have given birth to you two.”

“She *was*?” Tilura asked.

He nodded. “In the end, she told me she didn’t regret having had either of you, not in the least. It was then that I swore to raise you into fine young women. Fortunately, you were both born healthy like me.”

So, they do take after him—in endurance, at least. Maybe not in looks...

“Mother...” Tears began to stream down Claire’s face.

Tilura wasn’t crying. But she didn’t seem herself; it was like all her energy had been drained from her body.

I never could’ve imagined the arranged marriage issue’s roots ran so deep.

Looking at them, I remembered my own experience with my parents and the people who took me in.

I’d lost both my parents when I was too young to remember them. I heard later that it was a traffic accident that took them, but I didn’t remember any of the details. My uncle—my father’s brother—took me in, and his family spoiled me like I was their own child. But they weren’t my real parents, and as I grew up, I felt awful about making them go through so much for me.

When I entered high school, my rebellious phase hit, and I never missed my parents more than in those years. I moved out and took a part-time job to support myself. My uncle and his family were always worried about me, of course, so I buried myself in work to avoid them. I’d always pretend I was fine, but I think, deep down, I was lonely. When I’d found little Leo quivering and whining in that cardboard box, I was honestly relieved. Thanks to her, I never felt alone again.

Now that I thought of it, though, I realized I’d never repaid my uncle. I’d always planned on thanking him and his family properly for all they’d done for me. But in the end, all I did was work. I could never shake the awful feeling that I’d taken advantage of their kindness.



AFTER everyone had had some time to process this conversation, Claire turned back to Eckenhart.

“I still don’t remember all that, Father. But I’m sorry for the trouble I’ve put you through.”

He laughed, planting a large hand on her head and affectionately tousling her hair. “I know just how interested you were in the first founder, Claire. No need to fret about it now.”

Even if he looks terrifying, I guess dads are dads. Not that I’d call him terrifying to his face, though...

“But about those arranged marriage talks, Father,” Claire continued. “Could you please forget what I said back then? I think I’d like to choose my own husband.”

“If that’s what you’d like, then I’ll abide by it. I’ll go ahead and reject this last batch of suitors for you.”

“Thank you. I’d appreciate that.”

“And what about you, Tilura? Would you like me to turn down your suitors, too?”

“I don’t know about marriage yet, Father... But I don’t want one now.”

I’ve heard teenage girls can be pretty mature for their age, but I guess Tilura’s still too young to worry about that stuff...

“Of course, I was also using this as a chance to teach you how to turn men down,” Eckenhart continued with a grin. “Even though you’ve never met any of them, I see you’ve grown up fine without my lesson. It looks like I have nothing to worry about.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “There’s plenty I can’t teach you, Claire. But nonetheless, you’re acting like your mother more and more every day. Of course, the thought had crossed my mind that you’d find a man on your own, and I’d like to think I was prepared for it.”

So, he really was thinking of Claire after all. I’d say he really needs to work on

his communication skills...but I guess it's none of my business.

It sounded like they had both gone through their share of grief after Claire's mother passed. Because of that, their relationship seemed a little awkward. But given my own relationship with my uncle's family, I was in no possession to say anything on that front.

"Thank you, Father. I think I understand now. But...right now, I..." Claire shot me a sidelong glance.

"Hm?"

Why's she looking at me?

He raised an amused eyebrow. "Ah, I see."

"F-Forget I said anything!" Claire's gaze snapped back to Eckenhart. "At any rate, I won't be needing an arranged marriage. I'm sorry for all the trouble I've put you and the suitors you found through." She bowed.

"I don't need one, either!" Tilura chimed in, dipping her head as well.

"Very well. Don't worry, I won't push the matter anymore now that I see you're both not interested." He turned to Sebastian. "Is my room ready yet? I barely had a chance to rest on the way here, so I'd like to take a nap."

"Of course, milord. But before that, there's one last topic I wish to raise." Sebastian turned to look at me.

Is this about the herb selling?

"Oh? How unusual. What is it?"

"You recall Mr. Hirooka's explanation about his Gift, correct?"

Eckenhart nodded. "Herb Cultivation, was it? And I thought having a silver fenrir was surprising enough."

You're telling me...

I'd mentioned having a Gift before but had avoided getting into detail about it.

"Takumi can make any herb he wishes," Claire said.

“Oh? Can he, now?”

She nodded. “First, he created some capwort to heal Tilura, and after that, he grew some loe.”

“Loe?! *The* loe? The pricey stuff?!” Eckenhart boomed in surprise.

“The one and same! It was easy for him, too! I saw it with my own eyes, and Tilura and Sebastian were there, too. There was no mistaking it.”

Huh, I guess even Eckenhart’s surprised by that one. I heard loe was really rare, but I didn’t know it was this big a deal...

“He made many other herbs, too,” she added.

Sebastian nodded. “You see, milord, Mr. Hirooka has been, as of late, researching his Gift’s different applications. I’ve even witnessed him create herbs the likes of which I’ve never seen or heard of. Milady and I confirmed their potency ourselves.”

They were right: I could create virtually any herb that came to mind, even ones that might not exist under normal circumstances. I did, however, have to make sure I didn’t overexert myself and collapse again.

“I see... It seems this Herb Cultivation is quite the useful little power. So, what do you expect me to make of it? You’re going somewhere with this, aren’t you?” Eckenhart asked.

“I think you should sign a contract with Takumi so we can sell the herbs he grows,” Claire suggested.

“Mr. Hirooka has already expressed his interest,” Sebastian added. “I trust you know how profitable it would prove to be for the Libert family, milord.”

“Is that true, Sir Takumi?” Eckenhart asked me. “I’d certainly welcome an arrangement like that, but only if you agreed to it.”

I’m relieved he took the time to ask me. I know he loves Claire and trusts Sebastian, but it’s nice he still cares about my opinion.

I’d witnessed my old workplace practically force other firms to accept terrible terms on contracts just so we could get ahead, so I was surprised to see Eckenhart so willing to accommodate me. *If I’d had a boss like him in Japan,*

maybe I would have had a proper work-life balance.

“I’m fine with that arrangement,” I replied. “It’s just as Claire and Sebastian told you.”

“And it’s not just because they asked you to do this, is it?” Eckenhart asked to be sure.

“No, Claire took the time to explain all the benefits and disadvantages to me. I don’t have any interest in maximizing my profits or anything like that. Besides, I’d love the opportunity to give back to your family, after all you’ve done for me.”

“I see.”

Eckenhart stared right into my eyes, deep in thought. I couldn’t tell if he was appraising me or trying to discern if I was telling the truth. I tried my best to look right back at him. But honestly, it was borderline terrifying.

If there’s one thing working in Japan taught me, though, it’s that confidence is key.

Suddenly, he burst out laughing. “Bwahahahaha!”

“Father?”

“Milord?”

“Ruff?”

“Arf?”

Everyone turned to look at him like he’d lost his mind. Even Cherie and Leo were confused.

“You’ve got *guts*, Sir Takumi! You didn’t look away once! I like that!”

Claire’s expression brightened. “Does that mean...?”

“Yes! I’ll sign that contract. Honestly, you’d be doing me a favor. Still, to think you’d lock eyes with me so readily... You’re really something!”

Claire let out a small sigh. “I’m not surprised, since you keep dressing like that.”

I guess he knows he's terrifying, then. To be honest, it was pretty hard looking him in the eye like that.

More importantly, I'd soon be making my own money for the first time since coming to this world. *It won't be long until I can pay Claire back for my last shopping trip.*

"Sebastian, draft a contract and present it to Sir Takumi right away," Eckenhart said. "Don't dawdle now. This is a huge opportunity for us."

"As you wish, milord."

"Make sure you compensate Takumi properly, Father."

"Course I will. I don't want to bleed the poor man dry! No Libert would be caught dead doing such a foul thing; it'd blacken our good name. Why, I'll make sure Sir Takumi has enough money to buy his *own* mansion when I'm through with him! Bwahahaha!"

"U-Um... Just normal pay is fine...!" I interjected.

I'm glad he likes me, but I don't know what I'd do with that much money!

Either way, I could finally relax now, knowing I'd be able to support myself in this new world.



AFTER I'd finished talking with Eckenhart, Leo and I returned to our room.

"Whew... I'm glad that's over," I said with a sigh.

"Ruff."

He was nice enough once I got to know him, but he was still one of the most powerful people in the country. I had a hard time totally relaxing around him, and my shoulders were still tense.

It's been a while since I've felt this sore... I wonder if there's an herb that can fix this? No, maybe I should hold off on Herb Cultivation for now.

I didn't want to risk fainting again, after all.

"Ruff, ruff."

“Hm? What’s up, Leo?”

As I massaged my shoulders, Leo put her head in my lap.

“Ruffa-fruffa?” *Pet me. Please?*

“All right, all right.” I started petting her and she began wagging happily.

“Ruff, ruff!”

We’ve got time before dinner, so I think we can play for a while. But come to think of it...

“When we were in town, you were a little too keen on those food stalls, weren’t you?”

“R-Ruuuff?” Her tail drooped sadly.

“You stopped when Laila and I told you to, though. Yeah, you were a good girl!” I gave her a good scratch behind the ears.

Her eyes lit up and she started wagging more fiercely than before. “Woo-woo-woo!” *I was! I was!*

I’ll definitely need to teach her more restraint. But it’s important to recognize what she did well first.

I wrapped my arms all the way around Leo, just like Tilura did, and tickled her behind her ears and under her chin. Then I gave her a good hard scratch all over her body. Leo seemed in absolute heaven.

As I petted her, though, I realized she was still dirty. The last time she’d had a proper bath was back in the forest when she was playing in the river.

“You’re pretty filthy, huh?” I remarked.

“Wruff?!”

I could feel her jolt in surprise. She knew exactly what that meant.

I know she doesn’t like it. But dirt is dirt; it’s got to go.

“Looks like you’re getting a bath right after dinner.”

Her head drooped. “Mruff...”

As I gave her reassuring pets, a knock came at the door.

Hm? It's still too early for food...

"Who is it?" I called out.

"Mr. Hirooka?" came Sebastian's voice. "Do you have a moment?"

"Sure. Come on in."

I wonder what's up?

"Pardon me." He opened the door but stopped as he saw what we were doing. "Oh, am I interrupting?"

"No, not at all! I just haven't had a lot of time to play with Leo recently, so I thought I'd give her some attention. She was looking a little attention-deprived."

"Ruff."

"That's quite generous of you. She doesn't seem particularly happy now, though," Sebastian observed.

"Yeah, that's because I just realized how *dirty* she is. I just told her she'll have to have a bath."

He chuckled. "There's no helping that, is there? Proper hygiene *is* rather important. Besides, Miss Leo looks her best when her coat is clean and lustrous."

"You heard him, Leo. No more moping about your bath now."

"Hruff..." She nodded resignedly.

Last time we'd taken a bath, I got a good idea of what exactly it entails. So, with some practice and luck, I should be quicker at it this time.

But wait, Sebastian didn't come in to talk about Leo, did he?

"So...what brings you here?" I asked.

"Oh my, yes, of course. I came to deliver this."

"What is it?"

He held out a few rectangular sheets of parchment bound together as a small booklet. Each parchment was filled with writing from top to bottom. I didn't

recognize the language, but somehow, my brain translated it into Japanese.

Come to think of it, I've had no language troubles at all since coming here. Maybe this is another one of my abilities, like a second Gift?

Just thinking about it wouldn't give me any answers, though, so I put that concern aside and focused on the booklet.

"That, Mr. Hirooka, is your contract with the Libert family. It contains the precise extent of your herb-producing duties as well as your compensation. After all, we had neglected to discuss such specifics in our earlier talks. As such, should you consent to its contents, the contract will be complete."

"Thanks. I'll make sure to read it over."

And here I thought our talk in the parlor made it a done deal... I guess having it in writing is better, though, just in case we have a disagreement at some point in the future.

I took the contract from him and sat down on the bed.

"Please ensure you read it carefully," Sebastian implored. "If you have any questions or would like anything changed, feel free to let me know—" Sebastian suddenly paused. "Milord...?"

"Y-Yes?" It was Eckenhart's voice. I looked up from the papers to see the duke standing in the doorway, peeking nervously out from behind the door frame.

"Can I help you, Eckenhart?" I asked.

He's not still scared of Leo, is he?

"O-Oh, Sir Takumi. Let me thank you again for saving both my daughters."

"Don't mention it! It was really Leo who saved Claire, after all, and saving Tilura was a happy accident. You don't need to thank me, really."

He cast a few uneasy glances at Leo, and he seemed to be hunched over a little. But I decided not to draw attention to it.

"R-Really?" He took a few hesitant steps into the room. "Regardless, I owe you a great debt. Please accept my thanks."

"All right, I guess I will."

Not accepting it would make things awkward...

“And, um, one last thing... Lady Leo isn’t upset at me, is she?”

“Leo, upset? I don’t think so. Right, girl?”

“Ruff.”

“O-Oh... Thank you. That’s a relief.” He let out a heavy sigh.

Is that why he’s acting so weirdly?

“Milord, as I told you earlier, both Mr. Hirooka and Miss Leo are forgiving and generous individuals.”

“Well, yes, but...had to see for myself, you know. I didn’t want to come off as rude. Again, I’m sorry to bother you both.”

“No, we don’t mind. Do we, Leo?”

“Roooo!”

“That’s a good girl!”

“Ruff!”

Sebastian smiled. “As you can see, milord, nothing for you to worry about.”

“Seems you were right. To be honest, I still feel uneasy after my earlier rudeness. But I’ll try to accept this reality.”

Wow, he’s really feeling bad about the whole clapping-me-on-the-back thing... I guess Claire and Leo both stepped in to stop him, and it might be hard for him to determine Leo’s feelings about it now.

Either way, Eckenhart turned and left the room looking a lot less guilty than before.

Sebastian shook his head, muttering to himself, “And here I’d *told* him it was fine... Though given all he knows of silver fenrir, I’m not surprised he’d be so nervous.”

I guess all the silver fenrir legends are pretty grim, huh?

He turned back to me and smiled. “Well, milord should be more at ease now. If you’ll excuse me, I have other business to attend to.”

“All right. I’ll look over the contract before dinner, and I’ll ask you any questions when we eat.”

“Very well. Please excuse me.”

With that, Sebastian left the room, and I began poring over the contract. Leo seemed to have remembered her upcoming bath, as she was now curled up with her back to me, pouting.

Well, I’m sure dinner will put her in better spirits.



“**OKAY**, I think I get it,” I said at last.

I’d seen my fair share of contracts in the past, so I had a good grasp of what I was reading. Compared to those, though, the Libert family was quite accommodating. There were a few points that seemed exclusive to this world, though, so I’d have to ask Sebastian about those later.

I don’t have any experience with these bandit raid or monster attack clauses, after all...

It sounded like it was about my compensation if the goods were lost in transit. But I wanted to make sure before signing anything. If they were going to draft a formal contract like this for me, it was only polite to try to understand it to the best of my ability. I’d have to note any questions I had or points I didn’t understand.

I wish I had something to write with... Oh, right! I bought a pen when I went shopping with Claire!

I stood up from my bed to grab it from my desk. It was a writing quill paired with a little pot of ink, rather than the ballpoints and fountain pens I was used to. It felt very high-class, but I’d never used anything like it before. Nonetheless, I managed to mark any passages I was unsure of as I read through the contract. By the time Laila came to call me for dinner, I had a pretty good idea of what it entailed.

I woke up Leo, and with the contract in hand, the three of us headed to the dining hall. Inside, I saw that Claire, Eckenhart, and Tilura were already sitting at

the table, with Sebastian attending them. With a little urging from Laila, I sat in my usual seat across from them.

When it's just Claire, Tilura, and I, it's one thing, but I don't want to be rude to Eckenhart. What's the proper seating order for formal occasions again?

"Have a seat, Sir Takumi," Eckenhart called out to me. He must've noticed I was nervous. "None of that manners nonsense, now."

"O-Okay..."

If none of them mind, I guess it's okay. I thought Claire was just being considerate before, since I don't know proper etiquette here. But I guess she might've been raised that way.

As soon as I sat down, Helena wheeled in a trolley laden with food. With an air of professionalism, she introduced every dish to Eckenhart one by one. Tonight's main course was a hearty steak with a mouth-watering sauce. It was decidedly more meat than we'd been having lately, so it was likely a welcoming dinner for the duke. Leo, of course, had a small mountain of sausages. There were also York puddings on the side, and for dessert, York puddings with sweet buttercream.

I bet that was at Claire's request.

"Well, then. Let's eat," Eckenhart announced.

"Thank you for the food."

With that, dinner began. I started with the steak, cutting off a small piece of the soft, grilled flesh. It was more tender and juicy than any meat I'd had before in my life, and it made a beautiful harmony with the rich sauce. I couldn't tell whether the meat was an especially good cut or if Helena was just a wizard in the kitchen. But either way, I knew she must've worked hard to pull it off.

"Father?" Claire stopped after a minute. "Could you please try to show some manners?"

I looked up to find Eckenhart wasn't even using his knife. Instead, he'd skewered the steak on his fork and was tearing hearty chunks off it with his teeth.

“Bwahahaha! Come on, now! Meat tastes better when you let your stomach do the thinking!”

Uh... I think I see what they meant when they called him a “free spirit” earlier.

Leo was wolfing down her sausages with every bit as much gusto; snout plunged deep into her bowl. For her part, Cherie was perched on a little stool beside Tilura so that she could reach her dish on the table. She had her own steak, just like everyone else, and was biting off neat little pieces to gobble down one by one.

I wish Leo would take a page out of her book. She’s got hardly any sauce on her face.

Claire sighed. “Sometimes I wonder why I bother with manners when eating with you, Father.”

“Hahaha! Oh, come now! Good food deserves to go down fast and hot! And don’t worry, I can eat like a gentleman when I need to.”

“I should hope so...”

I bet he does have good manners, if he’s a duke.

Helena bowed from where she was standing by the wall. If anything, she seemed genuinely pleased he was enjoying her cooking. Even I had to admit I was cutting a few corners with my manners; it was so good! But I was taking care to avoid getting too sloppy. I made sure to save plenty of room for that sweet York pudding, though.

I get the feeling I’ll get fat if I keep living here.

After dinner, Laila poured us some tea as we sat down to relax.

“Mr. Hirooka?” Sebastian asked. “Did you read the contract I gave you?”

“Oh, yeah. I did.”

I almost forgot about that after seeing Eckenhart eat.

“Did it meet your expectations?”

“Mostly, yeah. I had a few questions, though.”

“Of course, ask away. If there’s anything that you would like changed, I shall

attend to it at once.”

“All right.”

After that, Sebastian, Eckenhart, and I worked through the questions I had, double-checking to make sure we saw eye to eye on every point. In the end, there wasn’t anything that I wanted to change. But there was one point that still weighed on my mind.

“Um... Can I ask one thing?”

Sebastian nodded. “Ask away.”

“Well, I noticed that this contract seems to give me a lot more benefits than it gives you.”

“I see.” Sebastian stopped to consider my comment for a moment. “Would you care to answer that, milord?”

“Well...looks like someone read between the lines. I’d expect as much.”

I’ve done this before, after all. I know better than to sign something I don’t understand.

Not ironing out the contract beforehand would only cause problems down the road. In fact, I’d run into such problems before—technically, it’d been my coworker’s fault back then, but still.

“Sebastian and I drafted that contract together,” Claire said. “We even had Father look it over before sending it to you.”

Sebastian nodded. “It simply goes to show the extent to which the Libert family would profit from your assistance.”

“Herb sales are an entirely new field for us,” Eckenhart added. “With your Gift, we could have access to quality herbs and as many as we could realistically need. This contract proves the extent to which we are willing to go to secure you.”

“Really?”

“With your powers, Sir Takumi, any merchant or noble would fall over backward to secure your services.”

Claire smiled. “We’re simply offering you what we believe you’re worth, and we hope it’ll be better than what any other patron might offer.”

“So, Mr. Hirooka? What say you?” Sebastian asked.

After all they’d done for me, I was planning on signing the contract even if the conditions hadn’t been as favorable.

I guess if they insist, though, I’ll stop looking a gift horse in the mouth.

There was one thing I wanted them to add, however. Something that wasn’t directly related to business but was critical to me.

“Well, I’ll be honest. This is *way* more than I was hoping for. But, uh...if you don’t mind, could you add one more thing?”

Sebastian nodded. “Of course. We’ll endeavor to accommodate you however we can.”

“See, that’s the thing. It doesn’t have to be for a long time, of course, but could you, uh...‘accommodate’ me at the mansion for a while longer?”

It sounded a lot more pitiful than I expected. But given how guilty I felt about staying there already, it was the best I could do.

All three of them stopped and stared at me blankly, and the room was almost totally silent. The only sounds were from Leo slurping down her milk and Cherie delicately lapping up hers while Tilura watched.

After a few agonizingly awkward seconds, Eckenhart burst out laughing.

“Bwahahaha! *BWAHAHAHAHAHA!*”

Claire sighed. “And here I was worried for a moment.”

“I suppose it *was* rather in character for Mr. Hirooka, though,” Sebastian remarked with a chuckle.

Wait, it came across as that weird? It’s not like I have anywhere else to go!

I was still penniless, so I couldn’t go to an inn, much less afford food. If I had to, I could live in a tent in the forest, and Leo could hunt orcs for me every day so I wouldn’t go hungry. But I wanted to live comfortably, not just survive.

“You’re quite the funny fellow, Sir Takumi!” the duke laughed. “Of course, you

can stay here. Stay as long as you like! The maids will attend to your every need...unless, of course, you'd rather live in the main mansion?"

Claire nodded in agreement. "Feel free to use your current room as long as you like. Since Cherie's still so little, it'd be quite a relief to have you around."

Sebastian bowed. "And I believe I speak for all the staff when I say we'd be delighted to have you here, contract or no." He turned to Eckenhart. "Do you suppose we should add it to the contract, milord?"

"No need! I like him, and that's enough reason for him to stay here or even in the main mansion as long as he wants. I'll pass word of this on to the old man myself."

"As you wish, milord."

"Um... Are you sure?" I asked.

From the sound of things, I was already more than welcome—they seemed to have even assumed I'd keep living there, contract aside. Given all the time and money they'd spent keeping us around, especially given Leo's appetite, I'd been mentally preparing myself to get kicked out sooner or later.

They're even nicer than I thought.

Sebastian nodded. "I take it you will be signing the contract, then?"

"Of course."

With that, I signed the document Laila brought to me, and the deed was done. As an aside, I wrote my name in Japanese, but they had no problem reading and understanding it, just like I had no problems understanding their writing.

Seriously, when is this going to make sense? I guess I can ask Sebastian about it later... I bet he'd love to help me solve this little language mystery.

After that, we chatted and relaxed before everyone headed back to their own rooms. Eckenhart seemed to still be tired after his long trip, so he went right to bed. Claire and Tilura wanted some time to play with Cherie, but I hoped they wouldn't stay up too late and sleep in again—especially Tilura.

I, on the other hand, still had to bathe Leo. *I already told Laila my plan, so the*

water and towels should be ready for us when we arrive. Leo was slowly wagging her tail as we headed back, stomach bulging. She seemed so content, she didn't even notice we weren't heading back to our room at all.

"I guess you forgot, huh, Leo? It's bath time."

"Ruff?! Ruh-ruh!" She violently shook her head from side to side.

"C'mon, don't give me that. If you don't clean up, then how're you supposed to be a good role model for Cherie? Be a good girl."

"Ruff...wuff."

Mentioning Cherie seemed to calm her down. I couldn't tell if it was sisterhood or motherhood, but Leo seemed especially protective of her, even when she was scolding her.

I feel kind of bad for using that against her, actually...

With that, we headed into the bath.



AFTER about an hour in the bath, Leo was finally all clean. I asked Laila to dry Leo off like she did last time while I soaked in the water myself. I'd been taking towel baths every day, even when we were in the forest. But a wipe-down with a cold towel was nothing like a steaming hot bathtub.

There's nothing so Japanese as a nice bath.

I finished up, and with Leo in tow, we headed back to our room. I petted her for a while to congratulate her on a job well done, which seemed to cheer her up a little, then I crawled into bed.

First shopping, then meeting Eckenhart, and even signing the contract... Man, I'm beat!

As soon as I lay down, sleep hit me like a wave, and I surrendered myself to its current, letting it carry me into dreamland.

Chapter 3: On Currency and Swordplay

THE next morning, Tilura and Cherie paid Leo a visit after I finished washing up. I greeted Laila, who was waiting outside of my room while they played. Then the four of us headed to the dining room. Tilura rode there on Leo's back with Cherie cradled in her arms, which looked like a lot of fun for everyone involved.

"Ruff-ruff!"

"Arf-arf!"

"Miss Leo's so clean and *pretty* this morning!" Tilura ran a hand through Leo's silky fur.

I'm glad I gave Leo that bath yesterday. Her fur really is much better off when it's nice and clean...

Come to think of it, Cherie isn't supposed to grow as big as a silver fenrir, but she might still grow big enough for Tilura to ride. I bet both girls would enjoy that.

I imagined Tilura riding Cherie as we headed down the corridor. I had a hard time picturing an adult Cherie looking any different from Leo, though, and Tilura was just Claire with red hair in my mind.

Okay, so maybe I don't have the best imagination...

When we entered the dining room, I noticed Laila was waiting by the door, a tea set already prepared.

Wait...wasn't she just outside my room, though? I remember saying good morning and everything. Really, how do the servants get around so fast?

"Good morning, Claire, Sebastian," I said.

"Good morning, Takumi."

"Good morning, Mr. Hirooka."

As I sat down at the table, the servants brought in breakfast, and Laila came forward with our tea.

“Oh,” I said, noting an obvious absence. “Where’s Eckenhart?”

Claire sighed. “He’s sleeping in. It seems he’s quite tired from his travels.”

“Milord is not a morning person,” Sebastian added. “He often skips breakfast altogether.”

“Really?”

“Father’s a sleepyhead,” Tilura said cheerily.

I guess it’s not rare for older men to take extra long to recover from stuff like that—not that I’m calling Eckenhart old! With a daughter Claire’s age, he’s probably in his forties...which isn’t too old, I guess. I didn’t know they had the term “sleepyhead” in this world, either...

“Since Father likely won’t be coming,” Claire went on, “we can start eating.”

“If you say so,” I replied before pressing my palms together in gratitude. “Thanks for the food.”

I wasn’t exactly eager to start without the man of the house, but there was no telling how long we’d have to wait otherwise.

Claire seems a little hard on the guy. But maybe that’s how all women her age treat their dads?

“Let’s eat!”

“Ruff!”

“Arf!”

Tilura and the pups seemed more than ready to start eating, so we dug in.

Wow, this is good as always! Thanks, Helena.

I ate my fill, and afterward, more cream-filled York pudding was brought out for dessert.

I’m guessing that was Claire’s request... Doesn’t she ever get sick of it?

After that, we settled down for tea. Just then, however, the door burst open.

Leo and Cherie both sprang to their feet.

“Ruff?!”

“Arf?!”

Eckenhart barged in with a broad grin on his face. “Morning, girls! Ah! And Sir Takumi’s awake as well, I see!”

Claire shook her head. “Good morning, Father.”

Sebastian looked equally unamused. “Good morning, milord.”

“Good morning, Eckenhart.”

I thought he wasn’t a morning person? He was so loud, it made me jump a little too.

“Good morning, Father!”

“Arf!”

Both Tilura and Cherie seemed excited to see him, at least.

“Ruff.” *Oh, it’s you...*

Leo sighed and curled up with her back to him.

C’mon, Leo, he’s the most important person in the mansion. You could at least say good morning.

“Would you care for some breakfast, milord?” Sebastian asked.

“No need.” He then turned to me. “I need to have a word with you.”

“Me?”

My heart was still pounding from the suddenness of his entrance. I put down my teacup as calmly as I could manage and turned to face him.

“It’s about this Herb Cultivation thing of yours,” Eckenhart continued. “Could you show it to me? I just realized I didn’t check it out before signing our contract.”

Claire and Sebastian both let out heavy sighs again.

“*Really*, Father?”

“Milord...”

“Of course, I don’t mind.” I didn’t have anything to hide, especially not after signing with him.

His lips parted into an even broader grin. “Really? What’re we waiting for then?!”

Seeing his eyes glitter with excitement like that would’ve made it impossible for me to say no, even if I wanted to. I tried not to look at Claire and Sebastian, who were shooting him disapproving looks.

I’m not sure I’d call him free-spirited. He’s more like a little boy in a grown man’s body. He knows what he likes and nothing else really matters.

I got the feeling Claire inherited her curiosity from him. Even Sebastian could get a little too focused on things that captured his attention.

I hope the Libert family doesn’t get too sidetracked and forget their noble duties altogether. I know it’s none of my business... But still, I don’t want them to get into trouble.

After enjoying Laila’s tea for a good half hour, we all moved into the back garden.

Sebastian gave me a piece of parchment. “If you please, Mr. Hirooka.”

“What’s this? An order form?” I asked, looking it over.

“Precisely. I would ask you to cultivate these herbs for us.”

The parchment listed several herbs and how much of each was wanted, along with my compensation per herb.

Five gold coins per a loe leaf, huh... I’ve no idea how much that is. I’ll have to ask him later.

Something about the number of herbs struck me as off, however.

“Are you sure you only want this many? I could make you a lot more, you know.”

Each herb would only take a few seconds to grow, half a minute at most. Sebastian knew that, no doubt. The form, however, only listed ten loe leaves

plus twenty-odd herbs of eight different varieties. I could finish the request in no time.

Sebastian nodded. “We thought it best to start small, as you’re only just recovering.”

“We don’t want you to collapse again,” Claire added. “You don’t know how much you can safely use your Gift at once, after all. Besides, we thought we should leave you with plenty of time to do some more of your ‘research’ if you would like.”

“Wow... Thank you. That’s very generous of you.”

They’re all so kind and considerate, even outside of the contract. I could never thank them enough.

Judging from my earlier research, I was pretty sure I could handle a bigger load than this. But I decided to accept their generosity. I didn’t want to burn out again like at my old job.

Eckenhart raised an eyebrow at Claire. “Looks like somebody’s soft on Sir Takumi...”

Claire flushed red. “I-I am not! Sebastian and I decided on it together! Right, Sebastian?!”

“It was *your* idea, milady.”

“Oh, shut up, Sebastian!”

“Hahahaha! My apologies!”

Both Eckenhart and Sebastian were smirking at her for some reason.

They’re surprisingly similar, those two. They’re real trouble.

“Uh... So should I show you Herb Cultivation, then?” I asked.

“Ruff!”

Leo took a worried half-step toward me. I could tell she was still a little worried.

I’ve got to do this, though...

“How about you go play with Tilura and Cherie, Leo?” I suggested.

Leo’s ears and tail drooped. “Fruff...”

“I want to play with Miss Leo!”

“Arf! Arf!”

Tilura and Cherie both glomped onto Leo from behind. With that, Leo turned away and started running around with the pair on her back.

Eckenhart watched them in amazement, then leaned over to whisper in my ear. “So...your silver fenrir *does* give people rides.”

I nodded. “Oh, she loves people, especially kids.”

“She often plays with Tilura,” Claire added.

Eckenhart still seemed scared of Leo, maybe because of all the silver fenrir legends he knew.

I hope he gets used to her soon. She must not like being feared this way.

“Anyway...I’m going to use Herb Cultivation now.”

“Let’s see it,” he said with a nod.

I flipped open the herb encyclopedia I’d borrowed from Sebastian as I stepped away from the others to get some room. I still didn’t have a perfect grasp of all the herbs on the list, so I needed some references. I decided to start with the loe, since I didn’t even need the book for that one.

I put my hand on the ground, envisioning its characteristic shape and healing properties. After I’d finished growing it, I went down the list Sebastian gave me, looking up the unfamiliar herbs in the book as needed. Thanks to all the practice I’d put in before now, it only took a few short minutes for me to complete the little herb garden.

I stepped away from the herbs, careful not to tread on any of them. “I’m not missing anything, right?”

Sebastian pulled out a list identical to the one he gave me. “Allow me to confirm.”

“How are you feeling, Takumi?” Claire asked, sounding worried.

“I’m good,” I said with a reassuring smile. “I was making more herbs than this when I was experimenting.”

My little herb garden was decidedly bigger the last time. But between the experimenting I had done and the herbs I’d taken with us on the forest expedition, nothing of it was left now.

Eckenhart shook his head with amazement. “Incredible... To think you could make loe grow before my very eyes!”

I didn’t know exactly how rare loe was, but apparently, just seeing ten little sprouts was a big deal.

To be fair, I’d be pretty shocked if someone could make plants grow at will, too.

“I knew from the moment I first heard of your Gift that you could do a great deal for our family. Let me thank you again, Sir Takumi, for signing a contract with us.”

“Don’t mention it. Honestly, I’m just glad you trust me enough to give me a place to live. Besides, you’re paying me so well. If anything, I should be thanking you.”

I couldn’t think of any better use for my Gift than repaying the debt I owed them. Besides, I really needed the money and a place to live.

Sebastian nodded and looked up from his list at me. “It seems you’ve grown every herb on the list without exception. Thank you very much.”

“Glad to hear it. I didn’t mess up the number or grow the wrong thing by accident, did I?”

“No, it’s all precisely as we requested.”

I was a little worried since I didn’t know all the herbs personally. But it all turned out okay.

All right, time to get these ready.

“I’ll go ahead and pick them, then, Sebastian,” I said.

“Please do.”

Eckenhart shot me a puzzled look. “You’re picking them yourself?”

“Yep,” I said as I crouched down by the herb garden. “Saves time that way.”

I explained my Gift to him last night, but it seems like only the growing herbs bit really stuck. There was more to it, of course. But at this point, it would be a lot faster to just show him.

With that, I started picking the herbs.

“What am I looking for?” Eckenhart asked, confused.

“Oh, just watch him, Father.”

“You’ll soon see the true extent of his powers, milord.”

Do they all have to stare at me like that? I’m starting to get nervous.

I tried to stay calm as I picked the plants. Loe didn’t require anything special—I just had to pull the leaves off and put them aside. For the others, I consulted the book on how they were best used. All it took was a touch; some of them I dried, others I ground to a powder. In the end, all of them were neatly prepared. Partway through, though, I had an idea and decided to make and prepare another herb, one that wasn’t on Sebastian’s list.

I wish I could pick them faster, though.

Eckenhart seemed no less confused than before. “What did you *do*, Sir Takumi? I could’ve sworn I saw one of those herbs dry out in the blink of an eye.”

“Shocking, isn’t it?” Claire added in half-disbelief.

Sebastian nodded. “His additional ability serves to reduce the time needed before an herb is ready for the market.”

Come to think of it, it does save a lot of time. No need to wait for the herbs to dry or hire people to grind them up.

After handing the prepared herbs to Sebastian, I gave Eckenhart the extra herb I’d grown. “Here’s a sample for you. Give it a try.”

“What *is* it? I’ve never seen anything quite like it.” He looked at it, dubious.

“Oh!” Claire seemed to recognize it. “It’s that herb from the forest, isn’t it?”

It was a green leaf with vivid purple splotches on it. Eckenhart clearly didn't seem eager to put it in his mouth.

I'm not surprised. We only met yesterday, after all.

It was the same stamina recovering herb I'd given the others on our forest expedition. I'd heard that at his age, it was hard to get rid of all the fatigue your body built up, no matter how much you slept. Especially considering how long and hard he'd been riding to get to the mansion, I figured he could use it.

"Both milady and I have consumed that same herb," Sebastian told him. "It's quite safe, milord, I assure you."

"If you say so."

After hesitating for a moment, Eckenhart clamped his eyes shut and stuck it in his mouth. He winced as the unpleasant flavor hit his tongue and he swallowed it as quickly as he could. He opened his eyes and gave me a questioning look. But as I watched, his eyes grew wide in astonishment.

"What...?! I don't feel tired anymore!" he boomed. "It's like all my energy's back... How is this possible?!"

"According to Mr. Hirooka, this herb is of his own invention," Sebastian explained on my behalf.

"A new herb...?! I never dreamed of such a thing!"

"If that wasn't astounding enough, he possesses the ability to turn any herb into the state in which it will be most effective," Sebastian continued. "In other words, he can have an herb ready for optimal use in mere moments."

I could practically see the gears turning in Eckenhart's head as he tried to process what that might entail.

Watching his reactions is actually pretty fun. I hope I'm not overstimulating his brain or anything... Maybe this was too much to take in at once?

He might even be thinking of new applications for my Gift or how to open up new markets. Either way, I was glad I was able to show him what I could do. I trusted him enough for it. He didn't seem the type to try and exploit me.

Or maybe I just get that impression because he's Claire's dad.

“I never dreamed of such a thing...” Eckenhart muttered. “I owe you my sincerest thanks, Sir Takumi, for your assistance. Gifts are truly amazing.”

“Milord, there’s still much we don’t know about them,” Sebastian interjected. “Not all Gifts may be as useful as Mr. Hirooka’s.”

“You’re right. Sir Takumi, I have to say that I admire your resourcefulness, having come up with such unique uses so quickly. Why, I think I like you even more now! Bwahahaha!” He gave me a hearty thump on the back.

I’m really glad that I can use my Gift to help people. But I’m still just getting started. There’s still so much to learn and try... I kind of wish he’d stop hitting me, though.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Leo narrowing her eyes at Eckenhart disapprovingly.

Don’t mind him, girl. Go play with Cherie and Tilura.

I didn’t say anything out loud, though, so she didn’t get my message.

“Father, stop that!” Claire admonished. “Don’t you see you’re hurting him? Why don’t you fix that habit of yours?”

“Oh, sorry.” He sheepishly withdrew his hand. “I keep meaning to do better. But when I’m happy, it’s like my arm has a mind of its own!”

I knew it! He’s not doing it on purpose! I should watch out for that in the future. I wonder if I can wear armor under my shirt or something?

For a while after that, Eckenhart kept praising Herb Cultivation while Sebastian brainstormed new potential uses. Partway through, Claire cut in to remind them not to overwork me, which felt like a breath of fresh air—not that I thought they would, of course.

When lunch was ready, we all headed back inside. Sebastian left to put the herbs I’d made into storage, and Eckenhart and Claire continued to brainstorm marketing as we walked. I chatted with Tilura, Cherie, and Leo as we followed them in. Leo seemed thoroughly pleased with her playtime and she was wagging her tail contentedly. Then we all sat down inside to eat the delicious lunch Helena had made us.

As we ate, however, Eckenhart started mumbling to himself. “I wonder if Sir Takumi can use a sword? Not that it has to be a sword, of course. It could be any other weapon...”

“Father? What *are* you talking about?” Claire asked.

“A sword...?” I repeated.

I had never even held a bamboo kendo sword before. The closest I’d ever come was a wooden sword my parents had bought me as a souvenir when I was a kid. But that experience wouldn’t exactly help in a real fight. I had used a kitchen knife before, obviously, and Sebastian had technically given me a short sword during the forest expedition. But all I had used that for was cutting through the undergrowth. None of those experiences really counted toward much.

“I can’t say I’ve ever used a weapon before, no,” I replied.

“*Hm...* I see...” Eckenhart stopped scarfing down his food to stroke his beard in thought.

Claire’s eyebrows furrowed with worry. “What are you thinking about, Father?”

There’s nothing wrong with that, is there?

Eckenhart didn’t touch his food for a while after that exchange. When everyone else had nearly finished, he picked up his fork and knife again and turned to me.

“I think you should learn to use a sword.”

“I-I *should*?”

He nodded. “You have Lady Leo to protect you. But there’s no guarantee you’ll always be together.”

Leo took a step closer to me. “Ruff.” *Nope, I’ll always be here. Always.*

I gave Leo a thank-you pat on the neck.

“Let’s assume our herb venture’s a success,” Eckenhart continued. “Honestly, I can’t imagine it’d fail after what you just showed me. But when that succeeds,

someone will come after you sooner or later.”

“Wait, really?”

“Who *wouldn't* want an herb-growing golden goose? We'll do all we can to prevent word of your Gift from spreading, of course. But, *er...*”

“Word always gets out,” Sebastian cut in. “No matter how carefully we guard the information, people will learn sooner or later.”

That certainly seemed to match what I knew from my world. They say rumors have wings, after all. Even if only the people at the mansion knew right now, the secret would get out sooner or later.

“I know that people will find out,” I protested, “but it's just herbs, right? Why would anyone come after me for that?”

“*Only* herbs?” Eckenhart scoffed. “Those herbs are what most people in this country rely on for medicine for broken bones to fevers. Not to mention, of course, that you can produce an unlimited supply of anything you like.”

Sebastian nodded. “Not to mention your talents also include the ability to produce poisons.”

“Poison...”

I had never tried making a poisonous herb before, but it sounded possible. Some medicinal herbs could be lethal if prepared incorrectly, after all. So poison-making wouldn't exactly be a stretch.

“There's no telling what kind of thug might want you as a poison-maker, should they learn of you. You'd be lucky if they *only* wanted to make a profit,” Eckenhart stressed.

“Of course, you might also find yourself the target of rival herb-sellers,” Sebastian cautioned.

Basically, there's no shortage of people who'd want to get their hands on me, huh?

“As such, Sir Takumi,” Eckenhart went on, “you should learn how to defend yourself, or at the very least, how to get to safety should you be assaulted. You'll have the guards to protect you here, of course. But whenever you leave

the mansion, you might be in danger.”

“Milord is right,” Sebastian nodded. “Furthermore, there’s a possibility your assailants would wait for the moment Miss Leo leaves your side. Even a moment’s opening might be enough.”

“I suppose he *should* learn to fight, then,” Claire said, agreeing with their logic.

Leo nodded in agreement too. “Ruff! Woo-woo-awoooo!” *I’ll still protect you whenever we’re together, though! I swear!*

I gave Leo a grateful pat on the flank.

I guess that makes sense...

In Ractos, for example, Leo had to wait outside whenever we had to go into a store. If I’d been attacked then, I’d be totally defenseless.

“Besides,” Eckenhart continued, “you might have to protect Claire one day.”

“What do you mean, Father?”

“Well, if you two end up together, it’ll be his duty to defend you. Besides, you can’t use any weapons yourself.”

“F-Father!” She flushed bright red. “Wh-What do you mean, t-together?!”

Us t-together?! I can’t see that happening. She’s way too pretty for a nobody like me! It looks like it’ll take some time for him to break his marriage-arranging habit.

Tilura beamed at us. “I think you’d be great together!”

“Not you, too, Tilura!” Claire groaned.

I noticed even Sebastian wasn’t even trying to hide his smirk.

Really...why does everyone want us to get together so badly? How’d we even end up talking about this?

“Back on topic,” I quickly cut in, “how should I start learning to fight?”

Seeing the topic had changed, Claire let out a sigh of relief while Sebastian cast me a disappointed look.

Geez, what a troublemaker...

“Let me think...” Eckenhart paused. “What if I taught you a bit of swordplay?”

“You would do it personally?” I asked.

Claire sighed. “This again, Father?”

I wasn’t surprised he could use a sword, given how he looked. But I didn’t know how to feel about such a direct offer.

“I’m sorry, Takumi,” Claire continued. “He has a bad habit of trying to teach anyone who looks like they’ve got even a little potential. Why, he even trained a few of our guards here for a while.”

“That’s pretty amazing. He’s *that* strong?”

Sebastian nodded. “Oh, yes. He even bested the captain of the capital’s royal knights in a duel once. I daresay he’s one of the strongest men in the kingdom.”

“Hahaha!” Eckenhart let out a loud belly laugh. “Maybe if the captain spent more time training and less time on paperwork, it would’ve been a better fight!”

“Milord, I would like to remind you once again that the captain has a great many administrative duties. Paperwork is important in and of itself.”

Whoa... So Eckenhart’s a regular swordmaster, huh? I guess I should be glad he’s willing to teach me. I just hope he doesn’t go too hard on me...

I didn’t know how strong the knight captain was, exactly. But I imagined they’d have to be pretty strong to earn that position.

“The sword is the most fundamental weapon there is,” Eckenhart explained. “Learn it, and you’ll be able to pick up any weapon more easily.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “According to you, maybe.”

I didn’t know how true that was. But it made sense that learning one weapon would make learning others easier. If anything, it’d make me more comfortable holding anything bigger than a kitchen knife.

Eckenhart clapped his knees. “It’s settled, then! We’ll start training right after lunch!”

“Don’t forget, Father, Takumi already used his Gift for a while today. Didn’t I tell you what happens if he overexerts himself?” Claire chastised him.

“Oh, right... Don’t want him fainting, do we?”

“Precisely,” Sebastian agreed. “Given how little we know of his Gift still, perhaps it would be best to let him rest for today?”

Eckenhart stroked his beard. “Maybe...but you can never start training too early.”

Even though I had made those herbs earlier, I didn’t feel tired at all. That being said, I had felt the same way right before I fainted, so I couldn’t be certain.

Maybe I should rest for today...? I don’t even know if my Gift’s at all tied to how physically tired I am.

Eckenhart continued to argue with Claire and Sebastian over when I should begin my training. They talked about it all through lunch. But, by the time we’d finished our after-meal tea, he had grudgingly given up. Sebastian urged me to leave before Eckenhart changed his mind, and heeding his advice, Leo and I headed back to our room.



I sat on the edge of my bed, giving Leo some attention as she panted and wagged her fluffy tail at me.

“Good girl!”

I ran my fingers through her plush fur as I thought back on the lunch conversation.

“Sword lessons, huh? You really think I should give it a whirl?”

Part of me had always wanted to be able to use a sword like some fantasy hero. But now that my chance had finally come, I was having second thoughts. It’d mean learning how to hurt others and being prepared to get hurt myself. Just like Eckenhart said, though, I needed to know how to defend myself. I couldn’t go and leave Leo all alone, after all.

“Ruff, ruff, mruff. Roooo!” She nodded and licked my face before pulling back

a little and nodding again, this time more firmly.

Sounds like she wants me to learn to fight.

She couldn't come with me everywhere. Besides, I didn't want her to have to protect me all the time, especially after all the time I'd spent protecting her.

"I guess you're right. Eckenhart seems to be looking forward to it, so I should make the most of it."

She wagged her big tail. "Ruff, ruff!"

I guess she's been worried about me, huh...?

"Thanks, Leo. Don't worry, I'll work hard so I can fend for myself soon. Just you watch."

She shook her head. "Ruff, ruff, ruff." *Don't sweat it too much.*

It wouldn't be fair to rely on her for everything, though. If I was going to do this, I was at least going to be positive about it.

I don't know how far I can go, though... I know nothing about swords. I hope I can at least get the basics down.

As I was thinking that, there was a knock at the door.

"Mr. Hirooka?" came Sebastian's voice. "Do you have a moment?"

"Sure. Come on in."

I wonder if he needs something? Now that the contract stuff is out of the way, I can't think of anything else he'd need from me.

Still puzzling over it, I stood up and opened the door for him.

"Ruff!" Leo greeted him.

"I take it you're doing well this afternoon, Miss Leo?"

I'm surprised he can tell... I guess being a butler means you need to be good at reading emotions—even dog emotions.

I chuckled. "She's been in a good mood ever since I decided to train. Apparently, she's been worried that I can't fight for myself."

"I see. Well, I hope you can allay her fears somewhat." With that, he held out

a cloth-wrapped shaft to me. “Since you’ll begin your lessons tomorrow, I’ve come to deliver you this.”

“Is that the sword I used on the expedition?”

“Yes, the same one I’d lent you.”

The blade was fairly short, so it wasn’t difficult to handle. But in my hands, it seemed extremely heavy.

“Take this as well.” He held out a small leather pouch.

“What’s that?”

Taking it in hand, I found it was decently heavy, and I could hear the faint clinking of metal inside as it moved.

“This is your payment for the herbs you cultivated for us earlier. I must apologize for the delay—your contract stipulates payment upon delivery. But since demonstrating your Gift to His Grace took precedence, it was delayed somewhat. Would you care to confirm the amount?”

“My payment... O-Oh, yeah...”

I was so busy with Eckenhart, I almost forgot.

I emptied the pouch’s contents onto the desk, letting all the gold and silver coins spill out.

Uh... I have no idea how much this is...!

“Would you mind telling me more about the money you use here? I’m not very familiar with it yet,” I admitted.

This is the perfect opportunity to learn a little more.

“Of course.” He beamed. “I’m afraid I’d nearly forgotten your otherworldly roots. I’d be delighted to teach you.”

I knew I could count on him!

“Thanks. You can probably go ahead and sleep, Leo. This might get complicated.”

“Ruff!”

“Let me start from the smallest denomination. Let’s see...” Sebastian paused for a moment to spread out the coins on the desk, then picked up a gray coin. “Here it is. An iron piece.”

Iron, huh?

“It’s made from compressed scrap iron, you see...though I imagine we can leave such specifics aside for the time being. With a hundred of these, you can purchase a loaf of bread. A hundred iron pieces also makes a copper piece.” He pointed out a second coin.

“I see.”

“Ruff,” Leo nodded along.

“You’re not sleeping? Wait...you understand money?!”

“Ruff!”

I didn’t know how financial knowledge was going to be of any use to Leo, but she seemed to enjoy Sebastian’s lecture all the same.

“As far as copper pieces go,” Sebastian continued, “ten to twenty of them is enough for a day’s worth of meals—though that may differ, of course, depending on your appetite and where you choose to procure your food. A hundred copper pieces are then equal to one of these silver pieces.” He held out a silver coin so I could see it.

“Silver, huh?”

It looked like pure silver, not just plating. Since it had probably passed through many hands before, it wasn’t very shiny anymore. But a proper polishing could probably fix that.

“Now, here’s where the pattern diverges somewhat. Only ten silver pieces are needed for one of these gold pieces, the most valuable coin we use. It’s also worth noting that most people receive their wages in silver and copper pieces, not gold.”

“Really? Why is that?”

By Japanese standards, that’d be like receiving your wage in thousand-yen bills instead of ten-thousand-yen bills. Maybe getting more coins makes them

feel richer?

“Most stores don’t deal in gold pieces, you see. Consider paying for a loaf of bread with a gold coin. Not only would that result in an immense amount of change, but it would also be terribly time-consuming.”

“Ohh... That makes sense.”

Unlike bills, coins took up space, and I bet most people wouldn’t want to haul around a massive bag of coins. There was also weight to consider.

After that, Sebastian took the time to flesh out his explanation, and soon, I had a decent understanding of their monetary system. It wasn’t too hard to get a grasp of it, since judging from the cost of bread, one iron piece was probably about one yen. That meant a copper piece was probably about one hundred yen, a silver piece was ten thousand, and a gold piece was one hundred thousand yen.

Wait... If I remember right, I get paid five gold pieces per leaf of loe. Wouldn’t that mean I get half a million yen per plant?!

I ran over to the desk to count the coins, just to make sure I wasn’t imagining things.

Let’s see... Iron, copper, silver...here we go. About fifty-five gold coins. So just using Herb Cultivation for a little bit made me five and a half million yen?!

I swallowed hard. “Y-You said just one loe plant would be enough for a house, right?”

“I did, indeed. It would differ somewhat depending on the size and location, of course. For instance, wood is cheap and plentiful in Ractos. If you were to build a house there, you would require five to ten gold coins for a house big enough for a family of two or three.” He paused awkwardly for a moment. “I realize your compensation might be lacking somewhat, considering shipping and handling costs, as well as the cut our stores take. Perhaps we should raise your rates a tad?”

“Oh, no, no, no! Th-This is *plenty!* Really!”

Suddenly it made sense why Claire and Sebastian were both shocked the first

time I'd grown loe. Its healing properties were impressive, sure. But its cost was way above and beyond that.

I should've figured it out when they first mentioned being able to build a house... Man, rare herbs are crazy!

"S-Sebastian?"

"What is it?"

"Are you *sure* I deserve this much?"

I'd never been paid so much before; even my savings looked like pocket money in comparison. My monthly wage in Japan was less than a tenth of this.

"I assure you, Mr. Hirooka, the herbs you cultivated *are* that valuable. I might also mention that milady is afraid we're undercompensating you."

"Of course not! This is way more than enough!"

"But you see, the market price for loe is ten gold pieces and even higher at times. Considering that, it hardly seems fair to pay you only five gold apiece..."

He still seemed to be mulling it over as he bowed to me and took his leave. With that, I was left alone with the small fortune on my desk and Leo, who was clearly proud of her newfound understanding of money.

Uh... I guess this means I can pay Sebastian back earlier than expected.

I was struck again by just how useful my Gift turned out to be. But the last thing I wanted was to get full of myself, so I decided not to think about it too hard. The money was nice, of course. But the main lesson here was that I could be in real danger if and when the secret got out. That much was certain, even if the money itself didn't quite feel real yet.

I took a few deep breaths as I looked at the desk and idly ran my hands through Leo's plush fur.

She gave me a contended look. "Ruff."

I wonder if she really understood all that, though? It sure looks like she had an easier time making sense of it than me.

I spent some time trying to relax with Leo until Gelda knocked on the door to

call me to dinner. It felt like only a few minutes had passed since Sebastian left. But apparently, I'd spent several hours spacing out. I had Gelda wait a few minutes while I looked myself over in the mirror to make sure I didn't look too wild-eyed. Feeling satisfied, Leo and I followed Gelda to the dining room.

We found Tilura and Cherie there already, and while the two of them played with Leo, Claire and Eckenhart arrived.

I took Sebastian aside as he came in. "Sebastian? Just out of curiosity, how much did you spend during our last trip to Ractos?"

He frowned. "There's no need to worry yourself with that, Mr. Hirooka."

I can't just let him spend that much money on me, though! I could only stay calm back then by telling myself I was just borrowing the money. So, I've got to follow through, even though I know they were gifts.

Eckenhart noticed our conversation. "Hm? What's that about worrying?"

"It's about the items I received from our first trip to Ractos."

I explained to him all that'd happened.

Claire shook her head. "Didn't I tell you not to worry about that?"

"Still, that was just a loan as far as I'm concerned," I said. "I can't relax until I know I've paid you back."

"How very...*moral* of you..." Sebastian remarked.

Eckenhart chuckled. "I like that in a man. And, well, I have to admit I feel the same myself."

But it's not all that weird, right? Doesn't everyone want to give things back to their rightful owners as soon as possible?

"It's thanks to you all that I even have a place to stay," I said. "Please, at least let me do this much."

Claire sighed. "Oh, all right..."

"But only since you insist," Sebastian added. "Considering the amount of money you'll be bringing in for the Liberts via your contract, that shopping trip was hardly of note."

“If Sir Takumi wants to pay us back, I say let him do it already.”

Even if it wasn't a big deal for them, it meant a lot to me. If not for that trip, I'd still be borrowing Sebastian's clothes and I would've been far too underequipped for the forest expedition.

Sebastian leaned forward to whisper in my ear. “Now, about the total costs...” He proceeded to tell me how much everything cost. Saying it aloud probably would've come off as rude.

“All right, then...”

I fished the amount he mentioned out of the bag and handed it to him.

Having clothes tailored really is expensive, huh?

I didn't understand just how much they'd cost until Sebastian explained the currency here to me. Now that I knew, my clothes were about as expensive as getting an order-made suit from a luxury brand back in Japan.

I'll make sure to take really, really good care of that suit!

Having resolved the money issue, we sat down, and dinner was brought out. Eckenhart dug into the meat with the same gusto as last night, and we spent most of the time on small talk. By then, I'd gotten over the shock of my small fortune and I could relax a little better without having to worry about owing the Liberts money.

During after-dinner tea, Eckenhart turned to me. “So, Sir Takumi, I heard you got your sword from Sebastian?”

“Yeah, I did. It was the same one I used during our forest expedition, so I'm kind of familiar with it already.”

“Is that so? Grand! That should help your training go a little more smoothly.”

Tilura looked up from Cherie, who was nestled in her arms. “Father? Takumi? You're doing sword stuff tomorrow, right?”

Eckenhart nodded. “That's right. I'll be teaching him personally.”

“Um... Can I learn how to use a sword, too?”

Claire's jaw dropped. “Tilura?!”

Eckenhart gave her a serious look. “And why would you want to do that?”

Wow, I wasn't expecting that... I guess most kids like the idea of sword fighting, too.

“I want a familiar, just like Sister. I *need* one. Just looking at Sister and Cherie, I can tell. For that, I need to be able to fight!”

“Oh, Tilura,” Claire shook her head. “Having a familiar is serious business. I was only able to get little Cherie here thanks to Takumi and Miss Leo’s help. Besides, Takumi’s only learning how to fight because he needs to be able to protect himself—and there’s no guarantee you’ll get a familiar anyhow.”

It made sense that fighting and getting a familiar were connected, though. Most monsters seemed to attack humans on sight. So, if she was going to be close to monsters at all, she’d have to be able to defend herself. In that sense, Claire and Cherie were kind of a special case. Claire had looked after Cherie when she was hurt, after all, and there was no way Cherie was stupid enough to attack her with Leo close at hand. Besides, it almost felt like they’d had a special connection from the very beginning.

“Why do you *want* a familiar?” Eckenhart asked. “I know you admire what Claire and Cherie have. But if all you want is a fluffy little dog to serve you, you know I won’t teach you a thing.”

That gave Tilura pause. “I...I don’t know why... I just know that I *need* one! It kinda feels that way. Um... Do I need a better reason?”

A feeling, huh? Like fate?

“You don’t know, eh?” He smiled wistfully. “That reminds me of your sister.”

Claire’s eyes flew open. “Father?”

“I know *you’ve* always felt a special connection to fenrir. Maybe Tilura feels the same way about familiars?”

“You... You knew?” Claire asked, astounded.

“Of *course* I knew. I’m your father. I know you better than anyone...not to say I know everything, of course.”

I guess that makes sense. Claire isn't that hard to read sometimes. Even I

could tell something was on her mind when we spoke about the forest expedition and when she got angry at Sebastian

“So...can I, Father?” Tilura asked again.

“Just to be clear, Tilura, you need to be *strong* to have a familiar. You’ll be dealing with a monster and no monster would obey someone weaker than themselves.”

“I know! I’ve been studying that ever since Sister came home with Cherie!”

Really? She has? How?

I could see a faint twinkle in Sebastian’s eyes from where he stood behind Eckenhart, though, and I got the feeling she might’ve had a little help.

“Learning the way of the sword is serious business,” Eckenhart continued. “I’ll try to go easy on you. But there’ll be times when you *will* get hurt. Especially for someone your size, it’ll be hard work.”

“I can handle it!” she insisted.

Tilura was still only a child. She could probably pick up some things more easily than me, but since she’d have to account for her growth in her training, it’d be hard on her, nonetheless. Judging from the fire burning in her eyes, though, I could tell Eckenhart’s warnings weren’t going to dissuade her.

“All right,” Eckenhart finally said. “Familiar business aside, it can’t hurt to teach you some self-defense.”

“So...you’ll teach me?!”

“Yes...but remember one thing.”

His expression turned grave and he looked at her the same way he’d looked at me when I signed our contract. A chill went down my spine just thinking about it. Tilura flinched a moment. But she regained her composure a moment later and stared right back at him.

Wow... She really is Claire’s sister! I bet Claire would do the exact same thing in her position.

“Let me be very clear,” he continued. “Training will be hell. It *has* to be, or you

won't grow stronger. Are you absolutely certain this is what you want?"

She swallowed hard, hesitating only a moment. "I am!"

I've never seen this side of her before... I thought she was just a carefree little girl...

"Very well. I'll train you and Sir Takumi both, then."

"Thank you, Father!"

"But Tilura?" Claire cut in. "Don't forget to keep up on your studies, too."

The look on Tilura's face instantly turned to despair. "Aww!"

Now that's the Tilura I know! I guess the more a kid likes running around outside, the less they like sitting cooped up indoors with textbooks.

"Come now," Claire went on, "it's your duty as a daughter of the Libert household. Or did you think sword training would replace your studies?"

"No...but I *was* hoping I'd kinda maybe have to study less..."

Eckenhart laughed. "I see some things never change! Well, you're still young, so I can't blame you. I won't let you replace your regular studies, however."

She slumped in her chair. "Fiiine..."

Everyone at the table laughed.

"Ruff, ruff." Leo gave Tilura a reassuring nudge.

Cherie leaned up to lick his face. "Arf!"

Look, even Cherie's trying to cheer her up... Er, no, maybe not...looks like she just wants to play.

Come to think of it, though, I was a little worried about how I might hold up in training myself. I'd been running around quite a bit since coming here. But I'd barely done any exercise back in Japan.

Maybe I'll take a break from playing with Leo tonight and get to bed early.

After advising Tilura to do the same, I stopped by my room before taking a quick bath and crawling into bed. I could tell Leo wanted me to pay more attention to her, but she seemed to realize I wanted to be well-rested for

tomorrow. She quickly gave up and curled up right beside my bed.

Sorry, Leo. Next time. Maybe we'll go into town soon and Tilura and Cherie can come with us.

Thoughts wandering, I drifted off to dreamland.



THE next morning, I woke up as the sunlight hit my bed and got ready quietly, taking care not to wake Leo.

Good thing I went to bed early. I feel so well-rested now. Maybe I got up a little too early, though...

Training wasn't going to start until after breakfast, so I had some free time. Just as I was softly stroking Leo, I heard a knock at the door.

"Takumi?" came Tilura's voice. "Are you awake yet?"

"Yeah, I'm awake. Come on in."

She opened the door, but as soon as she realized Leo was sleeping, she was careful to come in quietly.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"I just woke up too early. I would've been so bored if you weren't awake... Cherie's sleeping, too."

Claire and Sebastian were likely already up, but they were probably busy. Tilura was probably hoping Leo was awake.

"Sorry, Tilura. Leo's still sleeping."

"No, that's okay! I like watching her sleep. She's really cute, isn't she?" She smiled contentedly at Leo as she snoozed.

Come to think of it, she's never really seen Leo sleep before, has she?

Leo usually would've woken up before Tilura even knocked. It seemed like she was getting more used to the mansion now and was starting to let her guard down a little. Somehow, she looked just like she had when she was just a little Maltese, despite her new size.

“Did you sleep well?” I asked Tilura in a hushed voice.

“Yes, I went to sleep early, like you said. I’m ready. But...I’m kinda nervous.”

“This’ll be your first time using a sword, right? Don’t worry, I’m nervous, too.”

Her eyes opened wide. “You are?”

“Of course. I held a sword back in the forest, sure, but that’s different. I didn’t actually learn how to use it.”

“Yeah, I guess so... Hehe, just like me!” She beamed.

Starting something new is always scary, I guess.

Leo finally looked up at us blearily. “...Wuff?”

“Oops!” Tilura put a hand to her mouth. “We woke her up.”

“Morning, Leo.”

“Sorry about that, Miss Leo.”

“Ruffa-ruff!” She readily began nuzzling Tilura. “Ruff, ruff, ruff.”

“Hehe! Good morning to you, too, Miss Leo!”

Huh...she laughs just like Claire.

After saying good morning, Leo began to stretch.

“Wow! I didn’t know you stretched in the morning, too!” Tilura exclaimed.

“Ruff!”

Just watching them put a smile on my face. I was glad Leo seemed to dispel some of Tilura’s anxiety, too. We spent some time fawning over Leo together and relaxing until Laila came to call us for breakfast. With that, we all went to the dining hall together.

“Good morning, Claire,” I said as we walked in. I took a quick look around the room. “Is Eckenhart sleeping in again?”

“Good morning, Takumi. I’m afraid he is.”

“Good morning, Sister and Cherie!”

“Ruff, ruff.”

Cherie looked up at them and blinked slowly, sleep still in her eyes. “Arfff.”

Breakfast that morning was simpler than usual, since Helena apparently had the day off. Nonetheless, it was tasty and filling.

As we enjoyed our after-breakfast tea, the door burst open just like yesterday and Eckenhart swept in. Nobody was surprised this time. But Claire shook her head and sighed.

“Good morning, everyone! I see all hands are on deck. Sir Takumi, Tilura, morning.”

“Good morning, Eckenhart.”

“G-Good morning, Father.” I could see the tension pop back into Tilura’s expression.

And just when she could finally relax, too... Oh, well. I guess a little stress might help the training along.

“You’re all done eating, are you?”

“Yeah, we are.”

“I ate a ton!”

Sebastian cleared his throat. “I hate to ask again, milord, but will you partake?”

“No, not this morning.” Eckenhart turned back to Tilura and I and nodded contentedly. “Well, look at you two, all ready for training! Let’s get right to it. Now where should we start?”

“Would the back garden be sufficient?” Sebastian asked.

“Yes, that’ll do. All right, let’s move!”

Tilura and I nodded with determination.

“All right.”

“Okay!”

There’d be plenty of space to swing a sword around there, after all; no need to worry about hitting anything fragile.

Now I'm starting to have second thoughts... What exactly has he got in mind? Are we going to start with practice swings? Or no, maybe how to properly hold a sword?

Head full of questions, I stopped by my room to grab the short sword Sebastian had loaned me before heading out to the back garden.

As I stepped outside, however, I saw Nicola, the guard, sitting there sipping tea. I hadn't seen him since we got back from the expedition.

"Nicola? Is that you?"

"Oh, Mr. Hirooka! I heard you would be learning the blade from the master himself."

"Yeah, but... Is that a *yunomi*?"

He nodded. "Verily so. The noble shape of this cup draws out the tea's noble flavors."

"Uh... Okay."

I didn't know they *had* those clay Japanese teacups here. It was nothing like the porcelain teacups I'd seen used in the mansion. Nicola certainly talked and acted like he came out of an old samurai drama, and his features were more Asian than anyone else I'd met here. But his longsword and metal plate mail—plus the fact that I could smell the black tea from here—made the whole scene feel wrong.

Maybe if he was at least in samurai armor and had a katana, it'd be better. Then again, him calling Eckenhart "the master" just feels so off from how the rest of the staff refer to him...

"Ah, pay me no mind," he said. "Sipping tea and appreciating the sights of the season is but a hobby of mine. This *yunomi* simply makes it all the better."

"Uh, okay."

I guess I'll just try not to let it bother me...

He looked maybe a little younger than Phillip, so he couldn't have been that much older than me. But the way he spoke and acted made him feel decades older to me. That and the fact he was still in full armor and just sitting on a chair

in the middle of everything was just plain weird.

Well, I guess I'll leave him to it...

Not wanting to bother him anymore, I left for where Eckenhart and the others were just leaving the mansion.



ECKENHART slapped his hands together. “Well, it looks like we’re all assembled. Are you two ready?”

“Yeah!” I replied.

“I’m ready!” shouted Tilura.

We were gathered in a remote corner of the garden. Tilura and I were standing side by side facing Eckenhart. Claire, Sebastian, and even Laila and Gelda were standing off to the side to watch. Leo was sitting beside Claire, and I could spot Cherie nestled on her back.

It looks like somebody’s enjoying herself...

“All right, first things first,” Eckenhart said, “how to hold a sword. You’re both right-handed?”

“That’s right.”

“Yep!”

He drew the sword at his hip and showed us how to hold it properly. It was a proper longsword, so it was a lot bigger than my weapon. The hilt was finely decorated and the blade seemed to shine as it caught the sun’s light.

That’s one expensive-looking sword.

Tilura, of course, had a short sword like me. She seemed to be struggling with its size and weight a bit. But I doubted they had any smaller swords than that. Even if they did, the fighting technique would likely differ from what Eckenhart planned to teach us today.

Using Eckenhart’s grip as an example, the two of us copied him.

“Good. Just like that,” he said. “Now swing! Focus on the tip of your sword at all times. Keep the arc of your swing clear!”

He swung his sword to demonstrate. It had such speed and power that if your average kid saw it, they'd probably run away in tears.

Even if I never get to his level, I'll still have to swing, huh... I can tell this'll be tiring already.

"Like this?" Tilura swung like Eckenhart had. But maybe because she wasn't used to the weight yet, the sword fell out of her hand at the end of the stroke. I could see her hand tremble faintly. "Ow! That hurt!"

"Not like that, Tilura. You're forgetting the arc. Put your whole body into it. If you don't, then even the best sword in the world will be scrap metal in your hands."

We both swung a few more times, making sure to follow his directions as best we could. Just as our swings were starting to look decent, though, he stopped us.

"Good. Now you know how to swing. It looks like the sword's swinging *you*, though, not the other way around." He shook his head. "Don't worry, most greenhorns are like that."

"Sorry," I apologized.

"Yeah...sorry," Tilura echoed.

The sword's weight was enough to deal with, let alone controlling the path of the tip through the air. I certainly didn't feel in control yet.

"Well, we'll put that aside for now," Eckenhart announced. "Let's move on to some more basic training. It looks like Tilura especially could use some more stamina."

"Basic training?"

"So...what're we gonna do?" Tilura asked.

Is he talking about strength training or something?

Tilura seemed more confused than ever.

"I taught you two the proper grip and swinging technique first, so you don't develop any bad habits. Don't go forgetting them. For the rest of today,

however, we'll focus on honing your bodies."

"All right."

"Okay."

After that, we just plain worked out. We covered everything from push-ups to squats to sit-ups, as well as a few back exercises since those muscles were important for swinging a sword. Most of it was body-weight exercises. It wasn't anything fancy, exactly, but I'd heard it was effective even when I lived in Japan.

We even put the entire back garden to use with some endurance running. Leo and Cherie were big fans of that part, and they ran alongside us most of the time. Even as we were panting and gasping for air, they seemed just fine.

I know their bodies are built differently. But I'm still jealous!

Just as Tilura and I started to get worn out, we were called in for a lunch break. Tilura was so exhausted, she didn't even seem to have an appetite.

"Eat as much as you can!" Eckenhart encouraged her. "If you don't get your energy back, you won't last in training!"

After hearing that, Tilura cleaned her plate.

We went back outside to do more strength training after lunch. Partway through, however, I had an idea.

"Eckenhart? Can we stop for just a minute?" I asked.

"What is it, Sir Takumi?"

"I'd like to Cultivate an herb or two, if you don't mind."

He stopped to consider it. "I suppose it's all right, so long as it doesn't interfere with your training."

We paused to take a short break. I made two blue-leaved herbs for Tilura and me, then a third when I realized Eckenhart was dying of curiosity. I handed them their portions.

"What's this, Takumi?" Tilura asked.

"It's supposed to relieve your fatigue... I hope," I said, sounding a little unsure.

I popped the herb into my mouth and Tilura and Eckenhart followed suit. The sharp, bitter flavor spread throughout my mouth in an instant, and I quickly washed it down with the water Laila offered me.

“This doesn’t taste very good,” Tilura complained.

“This is foul,” Eckenhart agreed. “Not foul enough to vomit...but close.”

I didn’t exactly enjoy it either. But it only took a moment for the herb to have the effect I had hoped for. I resisted the urge to jump for joy.

Tilura’s eyes lit up. “Wow! I feel ready to do way more!”

“Impressive... But this isn’t the same herb you gave me yesterday, is it?” Eckenhart asked.

I shook my head. “They both relieve fatigue. But this one is especially good at dealing with sore muscles and such.”

The one I’d given him yesterday was better for recovering energy. It would’ve still worked for today, too. But given that this was a different kind of fatigue, I’d thought up a new herb to handle it. Already, I could feel the soreness in my muscles fading away, but I noticed it didn’t do as much to replenish the energy I’d spent.

Eckenhart nodded approvingly and grinned. “Good. I hope you’ll keep making this. All right, are you both ready to crank it up a notch?”

“...So soon?”

Tilura narrowed her eyes at me. “Takumi...”

After that, Eckenhart made our training even more intense. He doubled the amount of strength training, added even more practice swings, and he’d scold us constantly unless we ran at near-top speed.

At least Leo and Cherie are enjoying all this running...

I had to keep making muscle-recovery herbs the whole time in order to keep from exhausting myself. Even with that, though, the amount of energy I was burning made all the exercise hellish.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have brought Herb Cultivation into this...” I muttered to

myself.

For his part, Eckenhart seemed to be enjoying all the progress we were making. It was only at dinnertime that he finally let us go and we all moved to the dining hall.

“First things first,” I said, “I’d better wash up.”

I stopped to wipe myself with the towel and warm water that’d been set out for me before going inside.

It doesn’t beat a full bath, of course. But I don’t want to have dinner in a pool of my own sweat.

That aside, I was surprised to see that Claire and Sebastian had chatted and watched us train the whole time.

My legs felt shaky as I headed to the dining hall. They weren’t in any sort of pain now, but I was so tired that all I could manage was a slow, limping walk. Even Tilura had to catch a ride from Leo.

While we were training, I tried eating both the stamina-restoring herb and the muscle-relieving herb at once. But strangely enough, neither of them took effect. *They must’ve canceled each other out somehow.*

“Sir Takumi, Tilura, I’d say you both show a lot of promise,” Eckenhart said between mouthfuls of meat. “Of course, those healing herbs *are* helping things move along much faster than normal.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” I replied.

“I’m gonna get even stronger!” Tilura boasted.

Claire smiled at me. “I wasn’t expecting you to pick up swordplay so quickly, though.”

Sebastian nodded. “Swords, magic, and even a Gift... You’re a man of many talents indeed.”

“Don’t get too full of yourself,” Eckenhart warned. “You’ve got a long road ahead of you.”

“Of course,” I replied.

“We know!” Tilura chimed in.

“Oh, I know!” Eckenhart slapped the table like the most brilliant idea had struck him. “Why don’t you do a few more practice swings before bed? Best to get used to it as soon as possible, eh?”

I blinked. “Come again?”

Tilura shifted in her seat. “More...?”

I know swinging practice is important. But we already had extra training today. That’s going to be rough...

After dinner, Tilura and I went right back out into the garden.

“I guess I’ll make a few more herbs for us both,” I mumbled.

I made a small stockpile of them, and after giving Tilura her share, we silently got back to work. Our only audience this time was Leo, who quickly got bored of just sitting and watching. But that didn’t change what we had to do.

I swear, after this I’m going to take that bath and go right to bed. I bet tomorrow’s going to be just as busy...



I bent over, hands on my knees as I panted to catch my breath.

“Are you all right, Takumi?” Claire asked, holding out a glass of water and a towel.

“Hahh...hahh... Yeah, I’ll be fine... I think...” I panted.

Save me!

Several days of Eckenhart’s swordplay bootcamp had come and gone. Normally, Laila or Gelda would be the ones bringing me water or towels, but it looked like Claire wanted to attend to me herself this time.

I guess this is for my own good, though. I can’t rely on Leo to save me all the time. Besides, my pride wouldn’t let me complain in front of Claire, anyway.

I downed the glass of water in one long gulp, then wiped the sweat off my brow. “Thanks, Claire.”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing, really.” She watched me dry off for a moment in silence. “Are you *sure* this is what you want?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Learning how to fight, I mean. I know I wasn’t able to stop my father from pressuring you into it, but... I-I can’t fight, you know...but I have bodyguards for whenever I go out. I’m sure we could arrange some guards for you, too. You don’t *need* to put yourself through all this.”

I could tell from the look in her eyes she thought I was pushing myself too hard.

I mean...I am. But I wouldn’t be doing this if I didn’t think it absolutely necessary. How do I explain that to her?

“Well...I *could* get some bodyguards, sure,” I conceded. “They’d keep me plenty safe if I ever had to be apart from Leo.”

“Yes. I know Leo does all she can to protect you. But having a few other protectors couldn’t hurt, could it?”

I didn’t doubt Leo’s ability to keep me safe and I trusted her with my life. We were partners, after all—that’s why I felt so uncomfortable letting her fight for me all the time. But we were supposed to be equals; she shouldn’t have to act like some guard dog. I had plenty of money if I wanted to hire someone to protect me. But using my money like that didn’t sit well with me. I was just an ordinary guy deep down, and I had some seriously mixed emotions about having a security detail like I was some billionaire.

“Either way, though,” I explained, “my safety would wind up being someone else’s problem. It might be kind of weird of me to care so much about this kind of thing, but I don’t even want Leo to have to save me all the time.”

“It wouldn’t be a problem at all, though!” Claire argued. “Besides, I don’t see anything wrong with letting Miss Leo keep you safe. She’s one of the strongest monsters alive! I’m sure she’d have no problems doing so.”

Maybe saying it would be someone else’s problem would be going too far. But nonetheless, I’d be paying other people to protect me. I had a hard time accepting that, and I wasn’t sure a duke’s daughter like Claire could understand

how big of a deal that was to me. Having bodyguards was likely all she ever knew.

I guess she did ride into that forest alone, though... Maybe it's not totally second nature.

"That's exactly the problem," I protested. "Looking at Leo now, she could take down anything she wanted to without a problem. But... You remember how I told you she used to be tiny, right? Back in my world?"

"Yes. You said she was small enough to curl up in your lap, didn't you? I can't say I have an easy time imagining that."

"Well, back then, *I* was the one looking out for and protecting her. In exchange, though, she gave me the comfort and companionship I needed. We looked out for and supported each other."

Leo was smaller than Cherie was now, even, and Cherie was just a puppy. I had never planned to bring her into my life, but I believed she'd saved me just as much as I'd saved her. Japan was generally peaceful, so I never had to *physically* fight for her, per se. But we looked out for each other all the same. That's why even now, I couldn't see her as anything less than my partner.

"*You* protected Miss Leo?" Claire's eyes flew open. "I can't even imagine that."

"Hahaha, yeah, I bet. Not looking at her now, at least. But honestly, I had to be careful when she was running around my legs, or else I might've stepped on her. But anyway..."

Sometimes she'd get up on her hind legs to put her paws on me, which made it hard for me to walk. The real challenge, though, was when she'd try to rub herself against my legs as I walked. Time and time again, I'd half-tripped over her. She probably knew she could've gotten really hurt if I'd stepped on her, but she trusted me enough to know I wouldn't. And I could never get angry at her for that.

Or maybe that was because she was so cute, looking up at me and wagging her tail like mad...

Claire giggled. "I can't quite picture it. But I imagine she was rather cute. You

always have such a gentle look in your eyes when you talk about her.”

“U-Uh... Yeah.” I looked away in embarrassment, then cleared my throat. “Anyway, that’s why I can’t just let her protect me. If I did, we wouldn’t be partners.”

“Partners... You really don’t see her as a familiar, do you?” Claire sounded surprised by that.

“Honestly, the whole idea of having someone serve me is new. Even if she counts as a monster by this world’s standards, it’d be weird to give her orders or anything of the sort.”

“Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you command any of the servants, either. You always ask politely.”

I wasn’t a manager or anything at my workplace in Japan, after all. I had a few underclassmen friends back in school, but I wasn’t especially close to any of them, and I never joined any school clubs, so I never learned to be bossy. As an adult, taking care of Leo and my job took up most of my free time. *I don’t think I could bring myself to command someone to do something, even if I wanted to.*

“I’ll never be as strong as Leo, of course,” I said. “But I at least don’t want to have to rely on her for everything. It’s like...my pride as a man wouldn’t allow it.”

“Your pride?”

“Yeah. Basically, I need to be at least a little independent so I look cooler.” I smiled wryly.

Claire gave me a baffled look. “If you say so...”

That was honestly my second biggest reason. Right now, my sense of pride, however small, was the main thing pushing me through this grueling training. Thinking back on it, the thing that’d stirred my pride most was hearing Eckenhart say I had to protect Claire.

There’s no way I can say that to her face, though...so that’ll stay my little secret.

A few of my friends back home often called me old-fashioned. But I wanted to

at least try to protect the women in my life. Now I didn't think for a second that I could do much to protect full-fledged guards like Johanna, of course—she was strong enough to fend for herself and protect others, to boot. I was referring to women like Claire, who might benefit from my assistance depending on the situation. That wasn't to say Claire wasn't the only person I wanted to protect, either. If I fell in love someday, I wanted to be able to fight for that person and my future family too.

Th-That's gonna stay a secret, too...!

"Oh, and don't tell Eckenhart," I added.

"Why not?"

Eckenhart would probably be able to read between the lines. Sebastian too, for that matter, and *he* was the type to tease me about it. I got the feeling I shouldn't tell Claire that, either.

"If you tell him, he'll probably make my training even harder," I said, settling for a different truth.

"Yes, I could see that. *Hehe*, all right, then," she giggled.

"Yeah. It'll be our little secret. Just the two of us."

"O-Our little s-...?! " She suddenly cut herself off and turned away.

"Are you okay?"

I didn't offend her or anything, did I?



“A-Anyway, I think I know how you feel now,” she finally said. I could tell she was flustered. “I’ll, um...I’ll do what I can to support you!”

“Uh, thanks. I really appreciate it.”

I’m no expert, but I think she might be trying to hide something. I wonder why?

For some reason, though, having Claire’s blessing made me want to work even harder.

I guess guys always want to work harder when they have a woman supporting them.

“Takumi!” Tilura shouted from where she was resting. “Father says break time’s over!”

How does Tilura have so much energy? I bet it’s ‘cause she’s a kid...

“Come on, Sir Takumi!” Eckenhart called. “You’ve had a chance to rest. Let’s get back to it!”

“Ruff, ruff!” Leo barked in agreement, wagging her floofy tail enthusiastically.

It looks like Leo’s ready to join in. I always have to go faster when she’s running with us, though... Not that it’s a bad thing to get extra motivation!

“Be right there!” I turned back to Claire. “Well, looks like it’s back to the grind for me.”

“Good luck!” She smiled at me. “I think you’ve inspired me. I want to look into what I can do to improve, both as a person and as a noblewoman.”

“Haha! There’s no need to get so serious about it. Let’s just take things at our own pace!”

She nodded. “Yes, let’s!”

With that, I headed back to where Eckenhart and Tilura were waiting with a smile on my face.

Claire said I inspired her. But I wasn’t talking about anything as big or dramatic as her bloodline. I was just telling her what I wanted to do.

Claire probably had her own reasons, though. And, if anything, I was glad she felt determined. But for now, I had to focus on getting stronger—strong enough to fight for myself.



A few days after my conversation with Claire, I was starting to get used to training. It was then that Eckenhart told me we'd be holding a mock battle.

"A mock battle?" I asked.

He nodded sternly. "You'll be fighting me one on one. Be ready for me to fight back."

Tilura instantly tensed up. "F-Father...?"

Real fighting practice, huh...

I had kept up with all my exercises and could tell I'd improved since I'd started out. Even so, I could feel anxiety grip my chest. The sword Eckenhart was holding was a fake wooden one. But he was just as intimidating as he would've been with a real one.

I can tell at a glance that he's a real master.

Claire seemed equally unnerved from where she was watching a safe distance away with Sebastian and Leo. "Are you sure about this, Father?"

"Don't worry, I'll hold back. I only want an idea of what these past days of training have given you."

He flicked his sword back and forth a few times to get a feel for its weight. I could clearly hear the blade whistle powerfully through the air, even from where I stood. Tilura and I both took a half-step back.

"All right, then!" Eckenhart barked at me. "Let's see what you've got!"

"O-Okay!"

I tightened my grip on my short sword. For an instant, I worried I might hurt him since I had a real weapon. But he was so much stronger than me that even just thinking that was an insult. I lowered my stance and got ready to strike.

This is just like training. Just remember how to swing.

After taking a moment to visualize my attack, I came at Eckenhart with an overhead swing.

It's not like I learned how to do anything else yet...

"Take this!"

"Not bad form," he mused. "But you've still got a ways to go."

With a single powerful swipe, he diverted my blade's path, making it bite into the earth beside him. The force was enough to send tremors up my arm and numb my fingers.

"I'm not done yet!"

I averted my eyes to focus on pulling my sword out. But then Eckenhart seemed to flicker out of the corner of my eye and my wrist suddenly burst with pain. My weapon hit the ground again with a dull thud.

"Ow!"

Eckenhart's swing was so quick, it took me a moment to realize he'd even moved.

"You're unarmed and helpless." He took another lightning-fast swing at my neck, stopping a hair's breadth away. "And now you're dead. *Never* take your eyes off your opponent."

"...Thank you for the lesson."

My biggest mistake was following my sword tip with my eyes, even when it got knocked off-target.

Not that I could've beaten him if I hadn't, of course.

"BARK!"

"Leo?!"

"Miss Leo?!"

Leo now rushed in like a hurricane, swatting the sword out of Eckenhart's hand and stamping on it with her forepaw. It was so fast, I couldn't even see her move.

She bared her fangs at him. “GRRRRRRRRR...!”



“L-L-Lady Leo?” Eckenhart was sweating bullets. “I-Is everything all right?”

Now that he was unarmed, there was nothing he could do. All he could do was shake in his boots.

“Stop that, Leo!” I shouted.

She glanced back at me before facing Eckenhart again. “Bark, bark! Grrrrrrr!” *I can take this chump! Leave him to me!*

Suddenly it clicked.

She thinks he’s really trying to hurt me, doesn’t she? At this rate, though, Eckenhart will never get over his fear of her! At least she won’t actually hurt him... I hope...

“Calm down, Leo!” I said firmly. “We’re just training! He doesn’t want to hurt me. I’m still learning! So, it’s okay if I lose! Okay?”

“Grr?” She stopped and turned back to me, head cocked to the side. “...Fruff?” *Huh? Training?*

I was honestly kind of glad she’d jumped in to save me like that. But I wished she could better understand when my life was actually in danger.

“I’m so sorry about that, Eckenhart!” I apologized to him.

“N-No, it’s, um... Is she all right?”

“Don’t worry, she just got a little confused, is all,” I reassured him. “C’mon, Leo, this is just practice. It’s like play fighting.”

She turned back to Eckenhart and dipped her head. “Ruff. Woo-woo. Rooooooooo...” *Sorry. I thought you were trying to hurt him.*

“N-No, that’s all right.” Eckenhart’s voice squeaked a little and I could practically hear his knees knock together. “I-I-I barely noticed.”

I guess they’re good now...I hope.

As I took Eckenhart’s sword from under Leo’s paw and handed it back to him, I noticed Claire and Sebastian walking toward us.

Claire shook her head in disbelief. “I thought she was with us the whole time.

I didn't even see her move."

Sebastian stroked his chin. "The legends say the founder's silver fenrir would ride the wind to appear at her side... It would seem they were true."

"Ruff?" Leo cocked her head to the side.

I guess she was that determined to "save" me, huh... Sorry for making you worry, girl. And thank you. I swear that one day, you won't have to cover for me all the time.

As I laughed and Claire took a look at my swollen wrist, I could feel my resolve harden once more.



"NOW it's your turn, Tilura."

"Okay!"

After Eckenhart had regained his composure somewhat, it was Tilura's turn to fight him.

She stepped forward and swung her blade down at him at full strength, just as I had, and he deflected her attack just as easily. The sudden blow was enough to make her lose her balance. He thrust at her, stopping an inch from her face, and with that, it was over.

It looks like neither of us did that well...

After watching Tilura's loss, I realized how completely overpowered I was. It wasn't surprising that Leo jumped in to intervene, especially since animals move more on instinct than humans do.

"That's that," Eckenhart announced. "You had some decent power behind that swing, Tilura. But if you stumble like that, all the power in the world is meaningless. Understand?"

"Thank you, Father!"

I know we only just started, but it still kind of sucks we both failed pretty epically.

Eckenhart then turned so he could address us both. "I hope you both realize

now just how far you still have to go. It shouldn't come as a surprise, given how little you've trained so far."

"Yes!" we said in unison.

"In order to use a sword well, you need enough experience that it becomes second nature. But more than that, you need to think."

"To think?"

"Yes. Envision what your opponent will do next. Picture your next move. Then you'll need the skill to carry it out. Of course, there's a lot more to it than that..."

Each opponent would have their own rhythms and strategies, after all. Whether or not I could handle that would depend on my training from here on out. It sounded like he was teaching us the fundamentals of fighting. I didn't have a lot of background in such things, of course. But having lost to him firsthand, he was plenty persuasive.

"I'd love to continue training with you two," he continued. "Unfortunately, I'm a busy man. Today's probably the last day I'll be able to train you."

Tilura's face drooped. "You're leaving, Father?"

Well, he is a duke, after all. I should just be grateful he took the time to train us thus far.

Tilura looked especially disappointed, despite how much she'd dreaded seeing him again. She was still a young girl, and she genuinely loved her father, even if she hated all the arranged marriage talks.

Eckenhart nodded. "I'm afraid I can't stay here forever. I've got to arrange Sir Takumi's herb sales, after all."

"Thank you again for that," I bowed.

"Don't thank me. If anything, you'll be doing me a favor."

With that, he tousled Tilura's hair affectionately and laid out our training schedule for the rest of the day. It wasn't as packed as the past few days had been, but it sounded plenty difficult. We were then told to continue that plan even after he'd left and keep up our practice swings every night after dinner. He

told us that if we kept it up, we'd be regular swordmasters in no time. I remembered the way he'd fought during our practice match, and by trying out a few of the swings I'd seen him make, it felt like I was able to practice more efficiently.

After that night's practice, I took a quick bath to wash my sweat off and climbed into bed. As I drifted off to sleep, my last thought was that I hadn't played with Leo very much these last few days.



THE next morning, I was surprised to see Eckenhart at breakfast with everyone else. Apparently, he was going to leave for the main mansion later today. All through breakfast, he discussed how to best market the herbs I'd produce with Sebastian.

"I'll be taking home what Sir Takumi made the other day," Eckenhart said. "However, I'd like you to start selling at the store in Ractos right away."

"As you wish," Sebastian said. "I'll have Mr. Hirooka sell them to us wholesale and then I shall handle the rest."

"Good. With all the traffic flowing through that town, I'm sure word will spread quickly."

"Perhaps word of his merchandise will reach the main mansion before you do?" Sebastian teased.

"Hahaha! I wouldn't be surprised!"

I didn't have a problem with making more herbs for them right away, but I still had no clue what to do with my first paycheck.

I'd better think of something soon.

"Are you thinking of using the Libert store there, Father?" Claire asked.

"Yes. They carry all sorts of things, so adding herbs to their lineup shouldn't cause any confusion."

What store are they referring to, exactly?

I'd only been to Ractos twice, but I had no idea the Liberts had their own

store there. It sounded like I'd have a chance to see it for myself soon enough.

Even after Claire joined in their conversation, all Tilura and I could do was listen and enjoy the food. I didn't understand half of what they said, so I couldn't exactly join in. By the time breakfast was over and the tea brought out, they seemed to have finished hashing out the details, and we spent the rest of the time chatting.

"Ahaha, Miss Leo!" Tilura giggled.

"Ruff, ruff!"

At the sound of Leo's bark, Eckenhart visibly twitched.

I guess he's still scared of her, huh? The training incident must've just made that worse... I wish there was a way to teach Leo some restraint. I'm glad she's there for me. But still, I don't want that kind of incident to happen again.

"Claire? Can I ask for a few sausages?" I asked.

"Sausages?" She blinked at me. "You think Miss Leo would like seconds?"

Leo suddenly perked up. "Rooo?" *I get more food?!*

"No. Er, I guess she'll be eating them eventually. But not as a meal."

If I'm going to train her, sausages are the only option.

I was a little surprised Leo was already hungry after just stuffing herself. *It's like trying to feed a black hole sometimes.*

"I'd like to teach Leo a little restraint," I explained. "I don't want a repeat of what happened to Eckenhart."

"Restraint?" Claire considered it for a moment. "I suppose you have a point. By the time any of us realized she'd even moved, she was ready to attack Father."

Eckenhart nodded. "I'm ashamed to admit that not even I could've reacted in time."

Back when Laila and I had visited Ractos, Leo was overly interested in the food stalls we had passed. I was glad that we were able to keep her in check then. But if we'd lost control, there's no telling how bad things could've gotten. Laila

and I both would've been powerless to stop her.

It's times like this that I'm glad we can understand each other so easily.

Claire suggested that I teach Cherie as well, since she'd be easier to train while she was still just a puppy. With that, it was decided we'd start training right away.

"Can you really hope to train a silver fenrir?" Eckenhart wondered aloud. "I feel as though you might end up getting trained instead."

"That'd never happen," I laughed. "Besides, Leo's a good girl and she already knows to listen to what I say. Right, Leo?"

"Ruff!"

"If you say so," he said dubiously.

If Leo was native to this world, he might be right. But Leo was different. I could tell she was already glowing because I complimented her.

Leo really likes it when I talk to her, huh? Of course, I like talking to her, too.

Looking at Claire and Sebastian, I could tell they weren't sure about my plan, either. Tilura still looked a little confused.

"Do you mind if I watch for future reference?" Eckenhart asked. "P-Provided I wouldn't get in Lady Leo's way, of course."

"No, that's fine. Right, Leo?"

"Ruff!"

Not long after that conversation, we all arrived at an open section of the back garden. Since I had to talk to Leo about it first, we were still sausageless. From the way she was already wagging her tail and drooling, I was afraid she'd pounce the second they came out.

"Calm down, Leo. If you think waiting is hard now, you're in for an unpleasant surprise."

She cocked her head to the side. "Ruff?"

"Listen closely. Laila's going to bring out some sausages. But you're not allowed to eat them until I say so. That goes for you, too, Cherie."

“Ruff, ruff, hruff!” Hah, that’ll be easy! Just like at dinnertime!

Come to think of it, she does wait to start eating her meal until everyone else has started.

This time would be a little different, though. I was going to be doing more than just putting it in front of her. I didn’t know if she’d be able to handle it, honestly.

Actually, she’d better be able to.

“Arf, arf!”

Cherie was sitting primly beside Leo, tail wagging politely. She looked ready, at least, even if I had no idea what she said.

“All right, Sebastian, Laila. You know what to do,” I said, giving the signal.

“Understood.”

“As you will.”

I had taken Sebastian aside and explained my plan to him as we were heading outside. Leo’s hearing was extremely good. But she was playing with Tilura and Cherie at the time, and I had made sure to distance myself from her.

Basically, I wanted to teach Leo to “wait.” I was going to be adding in an extra factor to make it harder for her, however, which is where Sebastian and Laila came in. She’d probably have a pretty hard time of it, especially given how good her sense of smell was. But it was for the good of everyone in the mansion.

“Without further ado, then... Fire Elemental Candle!”

Sebastian cast some fire magic on the end of a torch-sized branch. Then Laila pulled out a number of sausages lined up on metal skewers and she held them out over the flame. Sausages were fine eating as-is, but there was a secret to unlocking their true potential.

“Arf! *sniff sniff*... Arf-arf!!”

The smell of sizzling fat caused Cherie to stand up and bolt toward Laila. The sausages were a few yards away, but the wind must’ve carried the scent right to her.

Leo seemed to be perfectly composed, but as soon as I looked away from her to focus on Cherie—

“Ruff!”

“Arf?!”

“What?!”

“Ah!”

There was suddenly a gust of wind powerful enough that I had to flinch away, and I could hear Sebastian and Laila cry out. A moment later, when the wind died down, I opened my eyes to find Leo exactly where I’d last seen her. Laila’s skewer, however, was mysteriously sausage-free.

Did... Did Leo just run fast enough to create all that wind?

“Mmruff, mmruff!”

From the way Leo was contentedly munching away, that must be it.

“Really, Leo?” I gave her a skeptical look.

“Ruff?” *Who, me?*

“Don’t give me that. I told you to wait, didn’t I? And look at what you did. You didn’t even leave any for Cherie!”

Cherie stamped her little paws in anger. “ARF!”

“Ruff? Wooooo...*whine*...”

“I don’t care *how* cute you are. You’re not getting off the hook that easily!”

I guess Cherie can’t complain too much, since she disobeyed first. Still, I’m glad we aren’t in town right now. The lure of the sausages is too strong for them as they are now.

“Did you see that, Claire?” I asked.

“Not at all, actually. The wind got in my eyes, so I couldn’t even see her move.”

Even Eckenhart nodded. “First during practice and again now... It’s as though the founder’s legends have come to life.”

“Yeah... Although I guess she isn’t riding the wind. She’s making it.”

I had to admit it was impressive. But I doubted any of the old tales involved a silver fenrir being unable to wait for her din-dins.

I hope they don’t turn this into a legend... I guess it’s my fault for not training her better when she was younger.

I stood in front of Leo and looked right up into her eyes. “You can’t just let your stomach do all the thinking, Leo. You’ve got to know when to hold back.”

“Wroo...”

“That goes for you too, Cherie,” Claire added, following suit for her fenrir. “There are all sorts of tasty temptations in town. But that doesn’t mean you can do whatever you like. You’ve got to behave.”

“Whine...”

Even though Cherie wasn’t big enough yet to cause as much mayhem if she got loose in town, it was good to see she looked genuinely sorry.

I guess just because they can understand me perfectly doesn’t mean they’ll listen. We’ll have to do this the old-fashioned way.

I gave Sebastian the signal to bring out more sausages, then led Cherie and Leo back to where they’d been before and started the process all over again. After multiple attempts, they finally learned to stay sitting the whole time. I could see their eyes dart back and forth between me and the sausages, and they were both fidgeting with impatience.

For now, it’s enough that they don’t bolt off as soon as they smell it. Besides, there’ll be plenty of time to do this again later.

“That should be good enough,” I announced. “Leo, Cherie, go get it!”

“Ruff!”

“Arf!”

I took the sausages from Laila and gave them their well-deserved treats. I gave Leo a scratch behind the ears as she ate and Claire stroked Cherie.

I’m glad Cherie lets Claire touch her while she’s eating. Maybe it’s their

instincts, but I've heard a lot of dogs get overprotective of their food and I was afraid Cherie would be especially conscious of that. I'm glad I was wrong.

"Is that it for today, then?" Claire asked me.

"Hm... I'd like to try one more thing."

They could resist smells now, which was a big step forward. But I wanted to see how they dealt with more up-close temptations. Eventually, I wanted them to be well-behaved even if there was food right in front of them. But we weren't going quite that far today. I didn't want to wear them out, after all.

"Sebastian? Can I have some more sausages?" I asked.

"As you wish."

Sausage in hand, I walked right up to Leo.

"Okay, girl, now don't move."

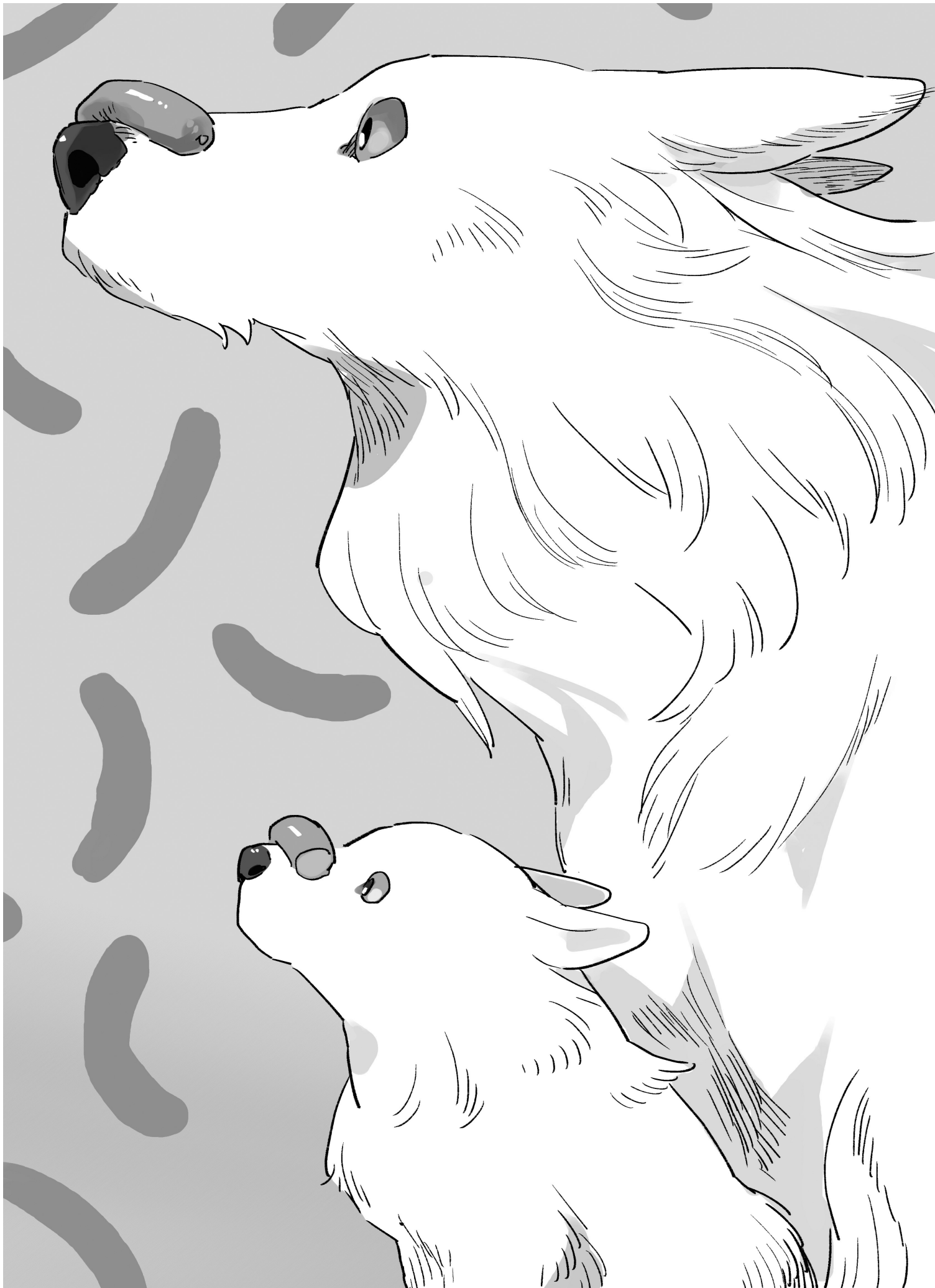
She started wagging her tail expectantly but didn't budge. "Ruff?"

I reached out and placed one of them—a big, eight-inch bratwurst—squarely atop her snout. I was afraid for a moment that she might not be able to see it if it was too close. But she didn't seem to have any problems staring it down. The idea was that if she could hold back when she could see nothing but sausage, she could handle pretty much anything.

She's, uh...she's really staring holes in it, isn't she? This might end up working better than I thought.

Beside us, Claire was trying to balance half of a similarly large sausage on Cherie's nose. "This might be a little big... Can you wait like a good girl, Cherie?"

"Arf!"



“Woo-woooooo.” After fidgeting for a moment, Leo seemed to reach her limit. “Uff!”

With a quick upward flick of her snout, she sent the sausage spinning into the air and then caught it in her mouth.

“Hey, Leo!”

“Arf? Arf!” Cherie watched Leo with interest, then tried to copy her. She wasn’t able to get the same air, however, and the sausage awkwardly fell off the side of her snout. She did manage to snap it out of the air before it hit the ground.

Honestly, you’d think I was trying to train circus dogs or something...

Tilura clapped excitedly. “That was so cool, Miss Leo! You too, Cherie!”

Eckenhart’s eyebrows furrowed. “What are we watching, exactly?”

Sebastian chuckled. “You volunteered to watch, milord. Honestly, I feel quite honored to have witnessed such a majestic display.”

Just because a silver fenrir did it doesn’t mean it was majestic, y’know...

“Leo?” I turned to her, a stern look in my eyes.

“Wuff?! Ruff! Ruff! Rooooo!”

“No, it’s *not* the sausage’s fault for looking so tasty! The whole point was for you to leave it alone until I said so!”

Claire nodded in agreement. “You too, Cherie. If you don’t start behaving, there’ll be no dinner for you.”

“Arf?! Arf-arf! *Whine...*”

“That’s actually a pretty good idea,” I said. “That goes for you too, Leo. Try something like that again, and it might be the last sausage you ever eat.”

“Ruff?! Woo-woo-woooooooo!”

“Then you’d better show some restraint this time, okay?”

“Wuff...”

“Arf...”

I wasn't *actually* going to cut off Leo's sausage supply, of course. But it seemed to motivate her for now. Cherie didn't seem to like the idea of going without dinner, either. But she seemed more resigned to her training than encouraged.

I guess that's not surprising. She's just a puppy and she hasn't been with Claire very long, either.

"All right, are you ready?" I asked Leo as I put another sausage on her nose.

"Ruff!"

"I know you can do it," Claire said as she did the same for Cherie.

"Arf..."

For a long while, neither of them moved or made a sound. Ten seconds passed, then twenty. Then thirty. I could see Leo's forelegs start to tremble and her eyes were practically bulging out of her head, she was staring at the sausage so hard.

I think we're making progress. Let's keep this going just a little longer...

I glanced down at my pocket watch. "All right, that's one minute. You can eat the...er, I guess you're eating them already."

"Ruff-ruff!" *You better believe it!*

"You too, Cherie?" Claire shook her head, smiling. "I suppose you deserve it."

"Arf! Mrf-arf!"

"Hahaha, yeah, they sure do."

They'd technically started before I told them it was okay, but I wasn't about to split hairs now. As Leo and Cherie enjoyed their well-deserved rewards, Claire and I exchanged smiles.



WITH training done, Claire and I petted Leo and Cherie as they had their second, then third helpings of rewards. It was only fair that they got plenty of treats for holding back so long.

Wow, they're really digging in... I hope they don't get stomachaches.

Eckenhart shook his head in disbelief. “I can’t believe you managed to tame them so effectively, Sir Takumi. I never thought I would see *anyone* tame a fenrir, much less a silver fenrir.”

“Well, technically, Claire trained Cherie,” I said.

Besides, Leo wasn’t a silver fenrir to me, and I had no intention of training Leo to do anything she didn’t want or need to do. I was only teaching her restraint in the first place because it’d make trips into Ractos easier for everyone.

“Leo doesn’t mind people,” I continued. “Actually, she’s a big fan of kids. If she ever makes a mess or anything when I’m not around, please feel free to scold her.”

“Bark!” How rude! I’m not messy!

Come to think of it, though, Leo was clean even as a Maltese. I guess she was pretty proud of that, huh?

Eckenhart flinched, paling a little. “O-Oh, no, I don’t think I could scold her. Actually, I-I’m not sure I could even get that close to her...”

At this rate, Eckenhart would end up going home without getting over his fear of her.

That’d be a shame. She’s so cute!

As if reading my mind, Claire gave Eckenhart an impish push from behind. “Why don’t you try to make friends with Miss Leo before you leave, Father?”

“I-I know she’s sweet for her size. But...but she’s so *big*.”

I guess that’d be a bit of a turn-off for some people, especially considering all the legends. Maybe I should put him through the same paces I put Gelda through? He’s leaving soon, so I’d better move fast.

“Leo, c’mere a minute,” I called.

“Ruff?”

“What are you doing, Takumi?” Claire whispered to me.

“I thought it’d be nice for Eckenhart and Leo to spend a bit of quality time together,” I whispered back. I turned to him and smiled. “Did you know that

Leo's big enough that even you can ride her? Leo, lie down."

"Ruff!" She obediently turned away from him, then crouched down low enough for him to get on.

"Go on, Eckenhart. Climb aboard," I urged.

"On Lady Leo?! N-No, I couldn't!"

"It'll be all right, Father," Claire reassured him. "She's very gentle. She'll make sure you don't fall off."

With that, she half-shoved him up onto Leo's back. I caught Sebastian giving him a nudge with an amused smirk on his face. But I decided not to point it out.

Are you sure you should be treating your master like that, Sebastian? Not that I'm complaining...

"A-Are you sure I'll be safe?" Eckenhart stammered as his eyes swam. I could see his entire body was as taut as a bowstring.

"Perfectly," I replied. "She's not holding a grudge against you or anything. Isn't that right, Leo?"

"Ruff."

With that, Leo slowly stood up. Eckenhart immediately flattened himself forward against her, grabbing fistfuls of fur as though holding on for dear life.

I thought he rode horses, though?

"Ruff!"

"Arf, arf!"

Leo started plodding around the yard, even more slowly and gently than she had the first time she'd given Tilura a ride. Cherie followed behind them, barking excitedly.

She probably thinks they're playing. Oh well, it's good exercise for her.

Claire smiled as she watched them. "This was a great idea, Takumi."

"This was how I helped Gelda overcome her fear of Leo, after all. I figured it might work twice."

“Is that so? I’d noticed Gelda had calmed down somewhat. But I never did learn why.”

Come to think of it, Claire wasn’t there at the time, was she?

As we watched, Leo slowly started to pick up speed until she was moving at a slow run. He didn’t have too much time to ride, but by the end of it, Eckenhart seemed to loosen up a little and he even sat upright on her back.

Wow... Seeing a man his size on a giant monster dog is something else.

“Leo! C’mon back!”

“Ruff!”

Upon hearing my voice, Leo picked up a little more speed as she ran toward me. She sat down in front of me, letting Eckenhart dismount. He looked a little tense right at the end when she’d sped up. But it was nothing compared to how scared he was before.

“*Hahh...* That was...something,” he sighed, shifting his feet as if making sure the ground was the same way he’d left it.

“How do you feel now, Father?” Claire asked.

“To be honest, I feel like a fool for having been so scared of her.” He nodded to Leo respectfully and even reached out to stroke her. “Thank you for the ride, Lady Leo. It was a pleasure.”

“Ruff!” She wagged her tail at him.

I bet he’s still not totally over his fear, but it looks like this little exposure therapy paid off.

“And thank you, Sir Takumi,” he continued. “You were a little forceful, granted. But I doubt I would’ve overcome my fear of Lady Leo alone.”

I laughed awkwardly. “Yeah, maybe I *did* force you into it. I’d feel bad if you left without making up with Leo, though, and we didn’t have a lot of time left.”

“Ah, I’m sorry. I knew she wouldn’t attack anyone. But every time I remembered she’s a monster, I couldn’t help myself.”

I’m not surprised, especially considering what had happened when they first

met. I'm glad he can look past that to see how cute she is, though.

Sebastian pulled out his pocket watch and cleared his throat. "Milord? The time?"

"Oh, right."

With that, we started back for the house. As we walked, I knew I had to say one last thing.

"So, uh, Eckenhart. Thank you again for the herb contract."

He nodded and smiled. "My pleasure."

When we arrived back in the entrance hall, we found the servants all gathered there once more to see him off.

Sebastian bowed to Eckenhart. "Safe travels, milord."

Claire smiled. "Don't take any risks on the way back, now."

He returned a joking grin. "Don't worry, I've got my guards to babysit me."

"Even so, be careful. I *mean* it."

It was a week's journey back to the main mansion, and with monsters wandering around out there, I had no idea how safe his trip would be. I didn't think there'd be much out there that could threaten a man of his skill, but there were no guarantees.

"Take care of things while I'm gone," he said as he clapped his hand on my shoulder. "Sebastian should keep things running smoothly, but I'm counting on you, too."

"A-All right," I nodded.

Though if anything does happen, I bet Leo will be at least twice as useful as I'd be...

"I pray you'll reach home safely," Claire told him.

"Take care, Father!" Tilura chimed in.

"Thank you again for everything," I said.

He nodded. "Sir Takumi, Tilura, don't forget to train."

“We won’t.”

“I’ll try super hard!”

“All right, then,” he said as he turned on his heel. “Until we meet again. I’m looking forward to it already!”

“Safe travels, Your Grace!” the servants called out in unison. This time, even I joined in as best I could. “We pray for your safety on the road!”

Wow...it’s actually fun to say things in unison.

We followed Eckenhart out the front doors and watched him get into his carriage.

“Giddyap!” shouted the coachman, and with a snap of the reins, they were off, flanked by his guards on horseback. We stayed to watch them leave until they passed through the gate and out of sight.

After that, Tilura and I got right to training while Claire and Sebastian started discussing how best to start selling the herbs in town. Cherie curled up on Leo’s back, and they both watched Tilura and me while we did form drills, and they joined in for a bit of exercise as we ran.

We were called in for dinner just as we finished training. Claire was already waiting for us when we arrived in the dining hall.

“I hope your training went well,” she said as we sat down.

The fatigue from the exercise had left us both starving and we dug into our meals with gusto. Claire didn’t say a thing about it, though, possibly because we still weren’t half as impolite as Eckenhart. After dinner, we relaxed a while over tea, then Tilura and I headed back out for more practice swinging. Even though Eckenhart was gone, we had no intention of slacking off. It was for our own protection, after all.

“Ruff, ruff!” Leo barked encouragingly.

Tilura was practically humming with energy. “Yeah! Let’s do this, Miss Leo!”

Seeing her get so fired up, I was determined not to get left behind. I still made sure to make herbs to help us out every once in a while. When all our training was done, I took a quick bath to wash off my sweat before heading back to my

room to sleep.

With all this hard work, I bet I'll sleep like a baby.

Chapter 4: Selling Herbs in Ractos

ONCE Tilura and I had finished our morning training, Claire came out to remind Tilura to study. Tilura was far from happy about it, but there was little she could do to resist, and she ended up pouting every step of the way.

I decided to do a little extra training on my own while Laila and Gelda watched. According to Eckenhart's schedule, we were to start a new exercise routine tomorrow, and I wanted to make sure my body was up to it. He said if I could fit my full regimen into one day, I'd be ready for the next phase. I did feel like between my Herb Cultivation and all the time I was putting into working out, I was starting to slowly put on muscle.

When it came time for lunch, I ate with Claire and Tilura. For almost the entire meal, Claire chewed Tilura out over her studies.

"Honestly, Tilura," Claire sighed, "I wish you'd study as happily as you train."

"It's not my fault studying is stupid," Tilura sulked.

Tilura's really proactive when it comes to training... I guess she prefers moving her body over her mind.

"Tilura?" I cut in.

"What is it, Takumi?" Tilura asked.

"Why don't you try thinking of studying as a part of training?"

She blinked. "But it's not, right? If I wanna train, then training's better."

I guess she's still stuck on the physical aspect, huh...

"Remember what your father told us, though? Thinking's an important part of fighting. Don't you think that if you study more, you'll be better at reading your opponent while you're wielding a sword?"

"I guess so..."

Knowing more could never hurt in a fight. Besides, even if something wasn't directly applicable to swordplay, it might come in handy just as well somewhere else in her life. If you didn't think on your feet, then you might not be able to imagine your opponent's next move or even what you yourself should do next. I still remember how when I fought Eckenhart, I was so focused on just swinging my sword that I didn't think ahead, and he wiped the floor with me.

"Knowing more is never a bad thing," I insisted. "Don't you think you should try to learn more for the sake of the training you love so much?"

She hesitated for a moment before nodding. "Okay. I *guess* I can study if it actually helps with my training."

I could tell she didn't totally believe my reasoning. *But at least she should be less stubborn about it now.*

"Thank you for that, Takumi," Claire said with a smile.

"No need to thank me. I was the same way at her age, and I don't want her to regret the choices she makes now."

I often regretted not studying more as a kid. Once I started working, I realized that if I had, I might've been able to work somewhere better than the exploitative hellhole I'd wound up in.

Even though the lunch table felt emptier without Eckenhart there, our meal was still accompanied by conversation. Then, after tea, I went back to training. I made sure to make a few herbs while I was at it, so I was able to make good progress. Since I was training alone this time, I even managed to buckle down and finish more than I was usually able to.

Or maybe I'm just getting more used to it.

I finished all the training I had planned for before dinner, so I had enough time to take a bath and still wound up in the dining hall early. It felt like a different room entirely now that it was mostly empty. Apparently, what I'd said to Tilura worked, since I was informed that she was busy doing some extra studying in her room.

Claire must be thrilled seeing Tilura work this hard.

Laila approached me with a tea tray. “Would you like some tea, Mr. Hirooka?”

“Yeah, sure. Thank you.”

I waited for her to pour me a cup, then I took a sip. Gelda, on the other hand, poured Leo a basin of milk. Leo and Cherie both seemed to be enjoying it a lot.

Suddenly, Cherie raised her head. “Arf, arf!”

Leo followed suit. “Ruff!”

A split second later, the door to the dining room swung open, and Claire, Tilura, and Sebastian came in.

I guess they must’ve heard their footsteps...

“Claire, Tilura!” I called out. “How was your afternoon?”

Claire looked surprised to see me. “You’re here early, Takumi. Finish your training already?”

Tilura grinned at me. “Guess what? I did all my studying!”

The servants poured them tea as they sat down.

“Claire said I did really well,” Tilura continued, sounding extra excited. “So I get a few days off!”

“Really?” I glanced at Claire.

She nodded. “I almost couldn’t believe how fast Tilura was getting her work done. She covered several days’ lessons in one afternoon. If only she’d always studied this hard...”

I smiled wryly. “Hahaha, kids need outside motivation sometimes.”

I still didn’t know if Tilura was just taking my word for it or if she really saw her studies as a part of her training now. But either way, I was glad to see her working hard. She really seemed to enjoy the past few days of training under Eckenhart, even if it was difficult for her to keep up.

I hope she can continue applying that to her studies and make everything in her life more enjoyable.

“Father said we’re to start a new kind of training tomorrow,” Tilura added. “I

wanna focus on that for a while!”

“Oh, okay. That makes perfect sense,” I said with a smile.

So that’s her motive. I can relate.

“Yes, I remember him mentioning that,” Claire said. “Don’t be too hard on them, Miss Leo.”

“Roooooo!” I’ll whip ‘em into shape!

As soon as dinner was over, Tilura and I finished our practice swings out in the garden. I then gave her a sleeping violet to make sure she’d get a good night’s rest, then took one myself and crawled into bed.

I’ve got to be ready for tomorrow, after all. It’ll be Leo’s first day of “training” us.



AFTER I’d eaten breakfast and waited until it had settled nicely in my stomach, we all headed out into the back garden. Today was the day Tilura and I had been waiting for.

We put some distance between ourselves and the servants, then stretched and drew our swords.

“All right, Leo!” I called out.

“We’re ready, Miss Leo!” Tilura shouted.

“Woooo!”

Leo sauntered forward, facing us head-on.

Eckenhart’s new training was extremely simple. All we had to do was try to land a single hit on Leo.

I swallowed hard. “She, uh... She looks a lot more intimidating from here.”

“You’re kinda scary, Miss Leo...”

“Grrr...”

Suddenly it made perfect sense why everyone was so afraid of Leo. She really *was* huge and the light glinting off her fur had an almost chilling quality to it.

Even from where I stood, I could tell her claws and teeth could tear through me like wet newspaper if she felt like it. A chill ran down my spine, despite knowing she wouldn't be attacking us at all.

The point of Eckenhart's training was for us to work on our speed. If we could keep up with Leo, that would mean we had surpassed what most people could achieve. While her fur was normally plush and relaxed, it became as hard as a dragon's scales when she was ready to fight, so she wouldn't get hurt even if we hit her.

I remember when Eckenhart suggested this, he was still too scared of Leo to do anything more than whisper the idea in my ear, which was kind of funny.

Sebastian took a step forward. "In that case, I shall give the signal to begin."

"Please do," I said.

Tilura and I both lowered our stances, ready to swing as soon as an opportunity presented itself. I could feel cold sweat running down my back, making my shirt sticky. But I had to focus. I didn't even have to look at Tilura to tell that she was every bit as nervous as I was.

"Begin!" Sebastian announced.

As soon as he gave the word, both Tilura and I charged forward and swung.

"Take this!"

"Hahh!"

I wasn't trying to test Leo or anything. I had no idea how she'd dodge, after all, and I didn't have enough skill or experience that stopping to think would've done much to help me. Instead, I figured my best shot was a full-frontal assault with everything I had. I could strategize later, depending on how that went.

"Wuff." *Really?*

She leaned out of the way with ease, my blade coming nowhere close to connecting. I might as well have been attacking in slow motion.

"How about this?!"

On the backswing, I flicked my wrist, stepped forward to account for her shift

backward, and unleashed a second attack, this time an upward slash.

“Ruff-ruff-ruff!”

Again, she dodged my attack with perfect ease and almost seemed to be laughing at me.

I... I didn't even see her dodge! She moved so quickly.



For a while after that, Tilura and I swung time and time again, but to no avail. Leo simply pranced circles around us, keeping us constantly guessing where she'd be next.

"Hahh... hahh... Wow..." I panted.

"Hahh... Miss Leo's too fast..." Tilura wheezed.

"Wruff!"

Leo was so serious before, but we posed so little threat to her that she now seemed to think we were playing with her.

It's a little frustrating that we can't even come close to being a threat, but I guess silver fenrir are infamous for a reason.

I wasn't surprised that we came nowhere close to hitting her, but I wasn't going to stop trying. I swore to myself that one day, I'd get to the point where I could land a hit on her.

"Are you both all right?" Claire asked from the sidelines, a hint of worry in her voice.

"Hahh... Yeah, I'll be fine," I managed to say after I caught my breath.

"I-I'll be fine too, Sister."

Both of us were completely winded, however. Laila and Gelda brought us some water.

"Here you go, Mr. Hirooka," Laila said as she held a cup out to me.

"Thank you... *Ahh*, that hits the spot."

"H-Here's yours too, Lady Tilura!" Gelda echoed.

"Thanks..."

Within seconds, Tilura and I had drained our cups. As we regained our breath, Sebastian and Leo came over to us, Cherie perched on Leo's back.

"How're you that fast, Leo?" I asked. "We didn't even come close."

"You're amazing, Miss Leo!" Tilura gushed.

"Pruff!" Pfft, I was barely trying.

“Arf!”

“If I may,” Sebastian cut in. “Mr. Hirooka, Lady Tilura, I didn’t notice any flaws in your technique. The important thing now is to consider how to make your attacks connect.”

“Yeah... Leo was going so fast, I couldn’t even follow her with my eyes sometimes,” I admitted.

I was nowhere near being able to match her speed. That would mean swinging faster than I could see. No, I had to find some sort of weak point that would give me an edge.

“I’m hardly an expert,” Sebastian continued. “But you might wish to consider working on your swinging speed.”

“My speed?”

I was never going to match Leo’s speed, but that might give me enough of an edge to figure something out.

“Either way,” I said with a scratch of my head, “I’ll need a lot more practice.”

Sebastian nodded. “I imagine you shall.”

“I’ll try harder, too!” Tilura exclaimed.

No matter how I was planning on keeping up with Leo, I’d need a lot more experience to make it work. Even with my herbs helping things along, I was still wet behind the ears.

“I’m looking forward to training more with you, girl,” I said to Leo.

“Ruff!”

Now that I had something to work toward, I could put even more effort into training. I could tell Tilura was every bit as pumped as I was.

This is gonna be fun.

After taking a short break, we moved on to more basic training. Just sword practice wouldn’t be enough, after all. We ended up running almost the entire morning. Leo ran with us every step of the way and enjoyed every second of it, but I could tell Tilura was struggling to keep up by the end.

I'm not surprised. She's still so young.

"Takumi!" Claire called from the door. "Come in and have lunch!"

At Claire's voice, I realized the sun was already high in the sky.

"All right...*hahh*...be right there!"

We wound down for lunch. Pushing ourselves too hard wasn't going to help us improve, after all. After wiping down with the hot water and towels Laila had prepared for us, we headed into the dining hall for a quick meal and then went right back outside.

Before we got back to training, however, I made a couple of strength-replenishing herbs and handed one to Tilura.

"Thank you, Takumi!"

"Just remember, it'll help your soreness, but it won't restore all your energy. Don't push yourself too hard."

"I won't!"

With that, we packed the afternoon with as much training as we possibly could. At dinner, Tilura and I ate with the same vigor as Leo.

"Takumi?" Claire asked as we ate. "Would you mind taking the day after tomorrow off from training?"

"Yeah, I think that should be fine. Why, is something wrong?"

I wasn't a workout junkie to the point where I had to do it every day. Eckenhart mentioned that even just one day's break could take several days to make up for. But I'd been doing so much lately that one little day off couldn't hurt.

"We're going to start selling your herbs in Ractos," she explained. "I think you should be there when it happens."

"Oh, okay. Sure thing." Overseeing the herb sales and the like wasn't in my contract, but I had to admit I was curious. It couldn't hurt to be there the first day. "I'll go with you to Ractos the day after tomorrow, then."

"Thank you very much," Claire said with a dip of her head.

Honestly, I should be the one thanking her for handling the administrative side of things.

Tilura stuck her hand up in the air. “Me too! Me too! I wanna go too, Sister!”

She couldn’t come with us the last time we all went into town, so I wasn’t surprised she didn’t want to get left out again.

Claire shook her head. “Don’t you have studying to do? Even without training, you’ve got more than enough on your plate.”

“I’ll study extra hard tomorrow, promise! Please, please, *pleeeeee* let me go into town with Miss Leo!” she begged.

“We’re *only* going to the store to see how the herbs sell, though. We’re not going there to have fun,” Claire stressed.

“I know, I know. But I never get to go anywhere anymore!”

Come to think of it, she didn’t come on the forest expedition with us, either...

A monster-ridden forest was one thing, but we’d only be going into town. Besides, I could understand wanting a change of pace.

“Why don’t we take her?” I suggested. “It’s not as though she’ll be in any danger.”

“You’re saying stuff like that too, Takumi?” Claire sighed. “Oh, all right. Tilura, you can come.”

“Yay!” She bounced up in her seat, beaming. “Thank you, Sister! Thank you, Takumi!”

I didn’t expect her to be so happy... I should’ve found an excuse to take her into town sooner.

Even Leo and Cherie seemed to get caught up in Tilura’s good mood.

“Ruff!”

“Arf-arf!”

“It looks like Leo and Cherie want to come, too,” I said with a laugh.

Claire paused a moment. “I know Miss Leo would behave, and the townsfolk

didn't seem to mind her too much the last time. Cherie, though..."

Leo seemed relieved. "Ru-ruff."

Cherie cocked her head to the side in confusion. "Arf?"

I could tell Cherie was worried about getting left behind.

It wouldn't really be fair to leave her out.

"If I may, milady," Sebastian cut in. "Even though she is only a pup, Cherie is still a fenrir. I imagine she could protect you quite aptly if the need arose, and with Miss Leo to keep an eye on her, I can't imagine she'd misbehave."

"Arf!"

That's a good point. Even though Leo should be able to protect both Claire and me, Cherie could fight in a pinch.

She had been injured pretty badly by trolks when we first met her, but she was surrounded and badly outnumbered. Besides, I doubted most people would even notice her since Leo commanded so much attention.

Claire turned to look at Cherie. "Are you sure you'll be all right? There will be a lot of people there. But you can't bite anyone or run wherever you feel like."

Cherie nodded. "Arf!"

"Ruff, ruff." *Don't worry, I'll watch her.*

"Leo says she'll make sure there's no trouble," I interpreted.

"Well... All right, I suppose Cherie can come with us," Claire gave in.

Cherie started wagging up a storm and running around Claire's feet. "Arf, arf, arf!"

"Cherie's coming too!" Tilura cheered.

"Roooo!"

They seem to be enjoying themselves already. They do remember this is a business trip, right?

"Oh, before I forget," Sebastian said to me, "I have a few more things I'd like you to Cultivate before we head into town."

I had grown everything on the order form he'd given me earlier. But, since Eckenhart had taken some of those herbs back to the main mansion with him, there probably weren't enough to sell in town.

"Okay," I replied. "Do you have another order form? Or you can just tell me what you need now and I'll remember it."

"I'll have the form ready for you by the end of dinner."

"All right. I think I'll make half after dinner and the other half tomorrow."

He nodded. "That should work splendidly."

I should have time to Cultivate a few things around the evening's practice swings. Since I had already made quite a few herbs for both Tilura and myself, I didn't want to risk overextending myself and fainting again.

Claire shot me a nervous look. "Please don't work yourself too hard, now."

"Hahaha, don't worry. I've got stamina to spare now. I shouldn't be collapsing again anytime soon. But I'll be careful just in case."

Her worries didn't seem to disappear completely, however. "If you say so," she said, still a little concerned.

She seemed to be worrying about me a lot more since I had collapsed. To be fair, though, I *did* faint right in front of her. Sebastian shot me a questioning look—he seemed to doubt my physical stamina having anything to do with my Gift as much as I did—but I pretended not to notice and kept eating. The last thing I wanted was for Claire to worry more.

After dinner, while we were all relaxing with our tea, another butler came into the dining hall with a sheet of parchment and handed it to Sebastian. He read it over, then gestured for the butler to go back to work. The other butler bowed once and then left. Sebastian passed the parchment to me.

"This is the list of additional herbs I would like you to Cultivate," Sebastian explained.

"Okay. Let me take a look."

It was in the same format as the last order form he'd given me.

Let's see...two loe and a few others, huh?

While the amounts were all different, the types of herbs were all the same as in the last order. It looked like they were the most common medicinal herbs around here.

I was hoping to see something new and rare on here... I guess that'll have to wait.

"Are you sure you only want two more leaves of loe?" I asked.

He nodded. "We have some in stock already from the first time you used your Gift. Besides, it wouldn't do to suddenly flood the market with such rarities."

Come to think of it, I remember him mentioning something about that before. If they want to control the price, we'll have to limit the supply.

"This amount shouldn't be a problem," I concluded. "It's even less than last time, after all."

Claire smiled with relief. "Good. I'm glad to hear that."

Is it just me, or is she worrying a little too much?

It seemed like they still had plenty of herbs that Eckenhart hadn't taken with him. I could probably even fill the complete order after practice. But I didn't want to stress Claire out anymore, so I resolved to stick to the original plan.

I've got to figure out my exact limits for using my Gift one of these days. Considering there's the whole "continuous activation" thing, it'll probably take a while to really learn the ins and outs. Factor in that I can't tell if I'm even tired before I collapse, and it's one big recipe for stress. I wish there was a way of testing my limits without making Claire worry...

"All right, Tilura," I said, changing gears. "Let's get to practicing."

"Okay!"

Order form still in hand, I stood up and retrieved my sword from Laila. I didn't have it with me at the table, of course—that would've been horrible manners. After Tilura picked up her own sword, we went into the back garden.

We finished our evening exercises, and after I made us some stamina-

recovering and deep-sleeping herbs, I took another look at the order form. I gave Tilura her share of the former, then gave Laila today's part of the order.

"Thanks for watching us practice, Laila," I told her.

After that, I took a quick shower, ate the sleeping herb, and crawled into bed. Leo seemed to be in a good mood, since she leaned on my bed and let me use her as a pillow.

I bet she thought we were playing when Tilura and I were training with her.

Smiling, I drifted off to a deep and restful sleep.



THE next morning, we started off by training with Leo again. Despite giving it all we had, neither of us came close to landing a hit.

"C'mon, Leo, isn't this a bit unfair?" I groaned.

The worst part was, I knew she wasn't moving even close to her top speed. It wouldn't make for good training if she was too easy to hit, but it was still frustrating to be on the losing side. As Tilura and I went on our daily run, we strategized about how we might get the upper hand on Leo next time.

"Takumi! Tilura!" Claire called from the door. "Lunchtime!"

"Thank you! We'll be right there!"

"Coming, Sister!"

Somehow, we'd both completely lost track of time again.

Running outside with a kid and our dogs, then having a beautiful woman my age call us in for food... It's almost like we're a family.

We headed inside to have lunch, after which Tilura and I went our separate ways. I had some more herbs to Cultivate for Sebastian and Tilura had studying to do. She promised she'd finish before we left for Ractos tomorrow.

"There, I think this should do it," I said to myself.

After making sure I had Cultivated everything on the list, I set about harvesting the herbs. It felt totally natural now, and though I knew I could wind up in a bad spot if I pushed myself too far, I was well within my limits. If

anything, I was more efficient than when I showed Eckenhart my Gift.

Sebastian approached me as I worked. "How goes it, Mr. Hirooka?"

"Great. I think I just finished."

I handed him the herbs of my labor.

After inspecting them for a moment, he smiled. "As I expected, the quality is superb."

"I'm glad you think so."

He seemed to know everything about everything, even if herbs were good or bad. Receiving his stamp of approval meant a lot.

"I'll see that you receive your wage before long," he said with a bow. "Thank you for your services."

"Oh, no, anytime. I've gotten pretty used to Herb Cultivation, after all."

The money didn't really bother me, since I already had more than I knew what to do with. Knowing Sebastian, though, I would have another plump bag of coins on my desk before the day was out.

After that, I got right back to training. Since I was going to take tomorrow off, I wanted to get in as much training as possible. It didn't take long for fatigue to set in, but fortunately, I had no shortage of strength-replenishing herbs ready and waiting for me.

Before I could finish my training schedule, Leo and Laila stopped me.

"Roooo."

"Perhaps you should rest for a while, Mr. Hirooka?"

I guess even with my herbs, it looked like I was going a little far, huh...? I'm on the road to becoming a gym bro...!

I thanked them both and cut off my training there.

Man, pacing myself is hard.

With that, I followed Leo and Laila into the dining hall. There, we found Tilura and Claire waiting. Tilura had a huge grin on her face.

“Takumi, Miss Leo, guess what? I did all my studying! I can go into town with you tomorrow!”

“Wow, you must’ve worked really hard! Good job!”

“Ruff, ruff!”

“You should’ve seen her study,” Claire said with a smile. “I’ve rarely seen her so focused.”

As we sat down to wait for dinner, Sebastian walked over to me. He held out a pouch of coins. “Here is your pay, Mr. Hirooka.”

“Oh, thank you.”

Oof, this is heavy... I’ll have to try not to think about it.

“Thank you again for your help,” Claire said. “Now we can start selling tomorrow without a hitch.”

Food was brought out shortly after that, and following a relaxing dinner and teatime, it was time to hit the hay early. I decided to skip my evening practice as well, since I didn’t want to be too tired for our trip the next morning.

“Goodnight, everyone.” I yawned.

“Good night, Takumi,” Claire said.

“Oh, and Tilura?” I added, noticing she was still buzzing with excitement. “Make sure you sleep soon, okay? Good night.”

“Ruff!”

“Arf, arf!”

With that, Leo and I headed back to our room.

“All right, girl, I’m gonna take a quick bath.”

“Mruff.” She disinterestedly curled up on the floor.

She doesn’t care as long as she’s not the one taking a bath, huh...? Come to think of it, I wonder why she hates baths so much?

Since we could understand each other a lot better now, I could probably just ask her. If I knew what the problem was, then maybe I could fix it.

After a quick bath, I took a sleeping herb and crawled into bed while I still felt warm and toasty.

“Make sure you behave in town tomorrow, okay, Leo?”

“Ruff!”

With that, I drifted off to sleep.



AFTER an early breakfast the next morning, I got my things together and headed to the entrance hall with Leo. Since we were going to be helping the store open up, we had to arrive in Ractos nice and early.

“Sorry for making you wait,” I apologized.

“Ruff.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Claire smiled. “Tilura still isn’t here yet.”

She’d been up for breakfast, so she was probably just taking a while to get her things together. As we were talking, I could hear the pitter-patter of feet running down the corridor.

“Sorry I’m late!” Tilura shouted as she burst into the entrance hall, Cherie cradled in her arms.

“Arf!”

“Calm down,” Claire chided. “We’ve got plenty of time still.”

“Oh...sorry.”

“Is everything all right?” I asked.

“I almost forgot this!” She turned to show me the short sword at her hip. “I had to run back and get it!”

I can’t imagine she’ll need it. But I guess it doesn’t hurt to have; I brought mine, after all.

“It seems as though we’ve all gathered,” Sebastian said as he shouldered our luggage, the herbs included. “Let us get underway.”

“Let’s,” Claire nodded.

“All right.”

“Ruff!”

“I can’t wait!”

“Arf, arf!”

“Safe travels, everyone!” the assembled servants called in unison.

Huh... I think I’m used to these send-offs now. Funny how that works.

Two guards, Johanna and Nicola, were waiting for us by the carriage.

“Milady, Mr. Hirooka,” Johanna said with a bow. “We’ll be your escorts in town. It’s an honor to accompany you again.”

“Same,” Claire said with a polite nod.

It’s great to see them again.

Johanna turned to me. “Would you like to ride Miss Leo? Or would you prefer to ride with milady?”

“Let’s see...” I contemplated it. “I think I’ll take the carriage this time. Tilura can ride Leo.”

“As you wish.”

I was still a little nervous about being in such close quarters with Claire, but it would only take us an hour to get there. Besides, I wanted Tilura to enjoy the trip as much as possible.

“Take good care of Tilura, okay, Leo?”

“Ruff!”

“I can really ride her?!” Tilura’s eyes sparkled. “I can’t wait!”

“Arf!”

Leo crouched down in front of Tilura, who readily climbed on. Cherie followed suit, hopping on right behind her.

Claire smiled at me as we climbed into the carriage. “Thank you, Takumi.”

“No problem. I’m just happy if it makes Tilura’s day.”

I'd been really enjoying watching Tilura and Cherie play recently. I think I finally understood how grandparents felt watching kids play.

I'm still young, though. Honest!

"All right, then, let us depart!" Sebastian announced from the driver's seat.

With a quick flick of the reins, we were on our way. The guards were flanking us on horseback, as usual. Leo stood up to follow us. But by the time we passed through the gate, she'd already run past the carriage and then doubled back to weave between the guards' horses.

I stuck my head out the window to shout. "Don't get too carried away, Leo!"

"Wooooooo!"

I knew Tilura would be safe, but I didn't want Leo to use up all her energy on the way there.

"Someone seems to be enjoying themselves," Claire giggled.

"Yeah... With all the training I've been doing, Leo hasn't had much time to really run like that. I bet she's blowing off a lot of steam."

"I wasn't talking about Miss Leo. I was referring to you."

"Me?" I blinked in surprise and turned my attention away from the window to her.

Does it look like I'm having that much fun?

"Ah...ahahaha," I laughed nervously. "I guess I just like watching them have fun... all three of them, I mean. Kids are a lot of fun, but I don't really know why."

"Is that so?" Claire smiled, giving me a knowing look.

Wait...what? Am I missing something here?

I could hear Sebastian chuckling from the driver's seat.

Seriously, what's with them?

I was still mulling it over by the time we arrived in town.

"We've arrived," Sebastian announced. "I will park the carriage, so please

wait here.”

Claire and I disembarked, and together we watched Sebastian and Nicola take the carriage and horses toward the stables. Johanna, of course, stuck with Claire. Tilura got off Leo’s back to wait with them while Leo plodded over to me with Cherie still on her.

“Good girl!” I said, giving her an affectionate scratch behind the ears. “Did you have a good run?”

“Ruff!”

“Arf, arf!” Cherie spun in excited little circles on Leo’s back.

Cherie sure loves riding Leo, huh? You’d think she’d be plenty capable of running by herself.

After a few minutes, Sebastian and Nicola came back.

“My apologies for the delay,” Sebastian bowed. “Let us be on our way.”

“Okay.”

He led the way to the main street like last time, but we only went a short distance before turning down a side street. Moments later, we arrived at the store in question.

“This is it,” he announced.

I looked up at it. The building was made of stone, unlike the wooden construction of the rest of the town. It had two full stories from the look of it, and apparently, the second floor was for smaller independent vendors as well. While it wasn’t quite as large as the general store we had visited last time, it was still the size of a small supermarket.

“So, this is the Libert family store, huh?” I commented.

Sebastian nodded. “We have others in town, naturally. But this shall be the only one offering your herbs.”

With that, we headed inside. There wasn’t enough room for Leo, of course, so she waited outside with Cherie and Nicola.

I hope they don’t make trouble for Nicola.

“Excuse me?” Sebastian called out as we entered.

“Well, if it isn’t Sebastian!” A middle-aged man came out of the back to greet us. He unconsciously stroked his balding head as he bowed to us. “I’ve been expecting you. Oh, and Lady Claire, always a pleasure. Thank you so much for stopping by.”

“My pleasure,” Claire said. “This is a rather big step for the Liberts, after all.”

After a moment, the man spotted me, and his eyes widened. “Is that him?”

Sebastian nodded, then spoke in a low voice. “Remember, not a word.”

“Oh, of course not. I wouldn’t dream of it!” He walked right up to me and bowed deeply. “It’s an honor to make your acquaintance, good sir. I am Kales, the humble proprietor of this establishment. I take it you’re the renowned Mr. Hirooka?”

“I am, but...how do you know that?” I asked.

“Why, Sebastian has told me all about you.”

“We told Kales everything about your role with the herbs,” Claire added with a knowing look. “Your secret will be safe with him.”

“Thank you for letting me know,” I said. “It’s nice to meet you, Kales.”

He bowed again. “I swear on Lady Claire’s high name, I won’t breathe a word. I’ll take what I know to the grave if I must!”

I guess he’d have to know about my Gift if he’s going to oversee all the herb sales. He might be overreacting a little, but at least he seems serious about confidentiality.

I knew the Libert family wouldn’t just tell anyone my secrets, so I decided to trust whoever they thought was best. After all, I didn’t know who should be kept in the loop when it came to this stuff.

Sebastian held out the bag of herbs. “This is today’s merchandise.”

“Let’s see now.” Kales wasted no time in inspecting the herbs, letting out short gasps and coos as he looked them over one by one. I couldn’t help but get a little antsy. “Quite nice...quite nice indeed. I must confess I’ve never sold

herbs before. But I've been in the business long enough to know quality when I see it. These, good sirs and madam, are unlike any medicinal herbs I've seen in a long while."

Sebastian puffed out his chest with pride. "Aren't they?"

Why are you getting so proud about it? Not that I mind, of course.

I was finally starting to feel like my Gift was mine, after all. It felt good to be complimented about something I had a hand in making.

"No, I don't think I'll have trouble selling these at all." Kales nodded to himself before turning around. "Hey! Get out here!"

"Right away!" came a voice from the back.

Moments later, a handful of uniformed men and women came out from the back of the shop. He handed them the bag of herbs before giving them precise instructions on how he wanted them displayed.

"You have your orders. Now hop to it!"

"Yes, sir!"

The staff emptied the herbs out onto the table and began sorting them.

I cast a sidelong look at Sebastian. "What are they doing?"

"They're dividing the herbs into more marketable packages," Sebastian explained.

"Oh, for individual sale, right?" I guessed.

"Precisely."

I watched as they took the neatly bundled plants, divided them into smaller units, and wrapped them in cloth. Further into the store, I could see Kales pulling out a long, thin table.

"What's he doing?" I inquired.

"Let's see..." Sebastian paused for a moment to watch. "That seems to be a display table. Given that this is new merchandise, it would appear he wishes to sell it out front."

That way, he can advertise it more easily, too? I bet most people don't even know Kales is going to be selling herbs yet.

We watched as he hauled the hefty table out the front door. A moment later, however, we heard him shriek.

Claire shot me a concerned look. "Maybe we should check on him."

"Yeah."

Both Nicola and Leo were right outside, though, so I doubted anything bad had happened.

Sebastian, however, only sighed. "I specifically told him not to be surprised..."

Just in case, though, Claire and I went to check on him.

"Kales? Are you all right?"

"Th-There's a silver fenrir! A-A huge one!"

We stepped outside to find Kales a stammering mess on the ground, cowering behind the table he'd been carrying. Leo was sniffing at him worriedly.

Claire let out a sigh of relief. "Oh, it's just Miss Leo."

Sebastian followed us out and shook his head. "I was very specific in my letter, Kales, that Miss Leo would be accompanying us. Mr. Hirooka takes her everywhere he goes."

Kales's eyes darted between Sebastian and Leo. "Y-Yes, I believe you did..."

Does he have to be that scared, though? Sure, Leo's big, but she's not exactly threatening anyone.

"Miss Leo wouldn't harm a fly," Claire reassured him.

As if to prove her point, she patted Leo on the head.

"Ruff!"

Cherie's ears flattened in jealousy, peering down from her perch on Leo. "Arf!"

"Oh, don't be like that. Come here," Claire cooed.

"I wanna pet Cherie, too!" Tilura said.

Is it just me, or is Cherie spending more and more time on Leo's back lately?

Kales cast Claire a dubious look as he slowly got to his feet. "You're sure they're safe?"

"Of course," Claire assured him. "Aren't they, Takumi?"

I nodded. "Why don't you try petting her, Kales?"

There was no better way to get him used to Leo than to let him pet her, after all. After a little more urging, he finally reached out to touch Leo.

His eyes suddenly lit up in wonder. "Oh, my...she's so soft! And I'm not dead!"

Leo nodded. "Ruff." *'Course you're not.*

Kales still seemed a little weak in the knees, but I didn't expect him to get used to Leo instantly. That kind of thing took time. Letting him ride her could help hurry things along, of course. But we weren't in a rush, and there wasn't enough room for that in the middle of town anyway.

I can only imagine what would happen if Leo started running around here... total chaos!

After a minute, Kales seemed to have regained his composure. "Well! I'm dreadfully sorry about that, Mr. Hirooka."

"Don't worry about it. A lot of people find Leo scary at first. Give her a little while and I'm sure you'll get along great."

With that, Kales went back to getting the storefront ready. He stood the table up then set out a number of signs with the effects and prices of various herbs listed on them. It wasn't in Japanese, of course. But I'd no trouble decoding it all the same.

Kales noticed I was reading the signs. "Some customers might not know the herbs' effects by name alone," he explained.

That makes sense. I don't think anyone would buy medicine without an idea of what it does.

According to him, there were some people in town who couldn't read, but all his employees knew each herb's effects well enough to explain them directly.

After the table was set up, the staff came out.

“Preparations are complete, sir,” one of them announced.

“Excellent. Now, to your places.”

“Of course.”

With practiced ease, each employee took up their spot in front of a different herb display. After a moment, however, I realized one herb was missing.

“Where’s the loe?” I asked Kales.

“Loe is a premium ware,” he explained. “It will be safely tucked away behind the counter unless a customer specifically requests it. After all, there’s no telling if some ruffian might try to pocket some when nobody’s looking.”

Sebastian nodded. “Theft is indeed a serious concern.”

That makes sense, especially considering how pricey it is.

I had experienced how rough this town could be firsthand, after all. The last time Claire and I came into town together, we’d been attacked by thugs.

“Now,” Kales said as he stretched, “we wait for the customers.”

Claire and I opted to wait inside the store. We couldn’t see outside that well, but it was better than being in their way. Leo, Cherie, and Nicola were all out front still. But Kales seemed to think they could help attract customers, so he had them wait beside the display. Fortunately, Leo seemed content to sit and be quiet, so I wasn’t too worried.

The employees were uneasy at first, but that only lasted until they had petted Leo.

“I wish I could keep petting her forever!”

“I never thought a silver fenrir would be so calm and quiet...”

“I wonder if I can turn her fur into a pillow?”

Their worries went right out the window with that.

I’m the only one who can use her as a pillow. I guess Tilura’s fallen asleep on Leo a few times, but she’s the only exception.

The six of us enjoyed tea inside the store as we waited for news of the sales outside.

After a while, Sebastian looked at the door. "It sounds as though it's getting rather busy outside."

Claire seemed to hear the commotion as well. "Do you think they're attracting many customers?"

I decided to try to listen too. I could hear a fair bit of the hustle and bustle outside. Judging from the time, people were probably out on their noon shopping trips.

I turned to Claire. "Do you mind if I go take a look?"

"Be my guest."

I can't wait any longer... I need to know what people think of my herbs.

I pushed the front door open a touch and peeked out. An entire crowd had formed around the display table.

"Wow," I muttered. "Who knew herbs were so popular here?"

I could see Kales calling for order from Leo's direction. It sounded like he was trying to get them to form lines. Leo herself was surrounded by children and a crowd of parents stood a short distance away from them. It looked like they'd already had to back away from the table somewhat due to the sheer size of the throng.

With that, I softly closed the door and returned to the table.

"It looks like Leo's really popular with the kids," I reported.

"Miss Leo is?" Claire's eyebrows furrowed. "But why?"

Hey, yeah...aren't most people scared of Leo when they first meet her?

Sebastian smiled. "It seems as though Kales is shrewd as ever."

"What do you mean?"

"I imagine it's no different than when Lady Tilura first met Miss Leo."

"Really?"

Tilura looked up from the teacup she was nursing and cocked her head to the side. “Is it?”

He nodded. “Miss Leo is remarkably good with children, and children similarly seem less afraid of her. I would imagine that Kales is using that to gather children and then sell herbs to their parents.”

“So...he’s marketing Leo to kids then selling medicine to their parents?”

“Precisely. He likely got the idea when he saw how readily Miss Leo obeyed your command. It was a gamble between attracting customers or scaring them away, of course. But it seems that children’s curiosity won the day.”

So...he was after families specifically. That sly fox!

The place Leo had last met with a crowd and let them pet her wasn’t far from here, so word about her had likely spread. That would’ve helped things along, too.

I stood up again. “I’m going out.”

Sebastian nodded. “Take care, now.”

I was starting to get a little worried about Leo. She loved kids, of course, but I didn’t know how she’d handle such a huge crowd. It took a moment to get through the throng, but I finally arrived beside Kales.

“How’re things out here?” I asked.

“Ah, Mr. Hirooka! I’m afraid our lovely poster dog might’ve attracted a little too much attention.”

I looked over at Leo. There were several dozen kids clustered around her, all stroking her fur or glomping onto her. She sat perfectly still the whole time, frozen as she sat. As soon as she noticed I was there, however, she cast me a pitiful look.

Looks like she might need some help. I don’t think she’s ever seen so many kids before in her life.



“Uh-oh. Looks like she might need help,” I pointed out.

Kales suddenly paled slightly. “Really? I was afraid that she might get upset...” He raised his voice to address the crowd. “One at a time now, boys and girls! No crowding!”

The throng of children didn’t so much as falter, however. With a giant fluffy doggie right before their eyes, they would not be denied. Not even their own parents’ pleas could stop them now.

I’m still surprised they’d look at something that’s clearly an apex predator and decide it’s a friend. I mean, she’s not dangerous or anything! But still...

Leo had been surrounded by children before, but never like this. Worse, with her sheer size and weight, she ran a serious risk of hurting someone if she tried to get away or even moved a little too much.

“Let me try to reach her,” I said.

“Please do... Hey! No pushing! I said one at a time!”

With that, I started wading through the crowd. As soon as Leo realized I was coming to save her, she started to very slowly and gently wag her tail. I gave her a reassuring pet as soon as she was within arm’s reach.

“You were a good, calm girl, huh? That’s my Leo!”

“Woooo,” she replied as quietly as she could.

The real question, though, is how to get her out of this mess.

“Can you try barking, Leo? Just once, nice and loud.”

“Ruff? Ruff-ruff?” *With these kids all over me? Are you sure about that?*

“Yeah, I’m sure. I’ll handle the rest from there.”

She nodded. “Roooo.” *If you say so.*

Leo then took a deep breath in.

“AWOOOOOOOOO!”

Suddenly, it was dead silent. Leo was a little louder than I’d anticipated, and my ears were ringing. But I tried to ignore that as I looked out at the crowd. The

employees, the customers, Kales, the children; everyone had stopped to look at Leo.

All right, now's my chance.

I cleared my throat. "Uh... All right, everyone! I need you to back away a little bit! Parents, make sure your kids are with you!"

I wasn't anywhere near as loud as Leo, but because it was so quiet, everyone seemed to hear me. The children all obediently backed away from us and I saw a few parents pull their kids back.

"Her name's Leo! If you'd like to pet or hug her, then line up by Kales! One at a time, and seriously, no pushing!" I looked directly at a few kids right in front of Leo who were still hesitating. "Everyone gets in line. No exceptions!"

I walked back over to Kales. "That should do it."

"Uh... Y-Yes, that seems to have worked splendidly." He turned to address the growing group, leading Leo off to the side so they wouldn't block traffic too much. "If you'd like to touch Miss Leo, line up here, please! Single file, everyone! And for parents and guardians, we have an exclusive sale on all manner of miraculous medicines! Just ask one of our sales associates for details!"

Wow, marketing at a time like this? He's a salesman through and through.

"Hey there!" I said to the first kid in line, a young girl. "Make sure you're gentle with Leo, okay? She might look kinda scary, but she's a big softie."

"Can I hug her?"

"Of course, you can. Be nice and slow, though. You wouldn't want to startle her. You'd be pretty startled if someone just walked up to you and hugged you, right?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

I gave each and every kid instructions on how to pet Leo without bothering her, then let them through a few at a time. That way, Leo wouldn't get overwhelmed. The line was still growing a few hours later—there were so many kids.

What, is every kid in the kingdom here?

I noticed that there were a few adults mixed into the hugging crowd as well. But they seemed to know how to be gentle with Leo already, so I didn't have to give them much guidance.

This might take a while...



MANY hours later, I was still directing the children when I felt something tugging at the back of my shirt.

"Hey, mister?"

"Hm?" I turned around to find a little boy roughly Tilura's size standing there.

I don't see his parents around... Did he come to see Leo alone?

He seemed to guess what I was going to ask and shook his head. His grip on my shirt tightened. "No, I don't wanna pet her. You gotta come over here."

"Me? Uh...okay." I turned back to Leo. "I'll be gone just a minute, okay? Play nice with the kids."

"Ruff!"

With that, I followed the kid away. He led me across the street away from Kales's store and onto a different side street. After we'd gone half a block in, I started to get curious.

"So, where are we going?"

"Umm..." He looked around this way and that, still holding onto me.

Is he looking for something? Wait, maybe he's lost?

"Are we looking for your mommy and daddy?"

He shook his head. "No... There he is!"

"Hm?"

The little boy pointed down an especially dark side alley, and as I watched, a man emerged.

"Nice work, kid!" The man sneered as he held out a handful of meat skewers.

I recognized them from one of the barbecue stalls on the main street. “Here’s your pay. Now scram!”

“Okay! Thanks, grandpa!”

The kid eagerly grabbed the meat and ran off.

Did he use the kid to get me out here?

The man scowled and muttered after the kid. “‘Grandpa?’ Dumb brat... I ain’t half that old.” He shook his head, then turned to look me in the eye. “Well, look who it is! Been a minute, ain’t it? Remember me?”

“Uh...”

It took me a moment, but I recognized his face. He was one of the ruffians who’d attacked Claire and me the last time we’d been shopping.

I thought the guards took him away, though? Maybe this country’s pretty lenient when it comes to stuff like that...

He had a striking mohawk and was wearing black studded leather armor with matching oversized shoulder pads. Even his leather gloves were studded with spikes.

Seriously, you’d think he came right out of a post-apocalyptic manga... How stereotyped can you get?

“I thought you got arrested?” I asked.

“Hehehe!” An evil grin spread across his face. “They let me go after a few days for good behavior!”

“Uh... Yeah, I’m not sure you’re rehabilitated yet,” I said as I scratched my head. “So...what do you want? I’m guessing you didn’t lure me out to this remote alleyway so we could trade jokes.”

“Course not! I’ve come for my revenge!”

“Revenge? On me?” I blinked. “I didn’t do anything to you.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll start with you. You’re the first one I saw in the crowd. ‘Sides, that dumb mutt can’t save you here!”

Just like getting lured behind the gym with a love letter, only to come face-to-

face with a bully...except this is in the middle of the street. I mean, it's not even deserted.

"That's right; you're all alone," he sneered, tongue curling out of his mouth as he drew the knife at his waist. "No friends, no dog, nobody!"

"What, do you want to fight?" I cocked an eyebrow at him.

I guess Eckenhart was right. There are times when I'll have to fend for myself. It's got nothing to do with herbs or my Gift. But I guess it still counts.

"Hah! Like I'd call you out here then let you just walk away!"

"Yeah, makes sense..."

I considered running, but the thug was blocking the path between me and Kales's store. A quick glance around told me there weren't any alleys I could run to, either. The only place I could go was directly behind me. But I had no grasp of the area and I doubted I'd be able to get away.

It's almost the perfect spot for an ambush... He really thought this through.

It took me a moment to realize just how calm I was, though. If I'd been put in the same situation right after coming to this world, my mind would've gone totally blank. Eckenhart's training was already paying off.

The thug cast an irritated look at the passersby. They'd noticed the weapon in his hands.

"Okay, enough chit-chat. Time to get stabby!"

He rushed at me; knife held high in the air.

"Thanks for the heads up," I said as I drew my short sword and swiped to meet his blade. Metal bit metal as his weapon stopped in its tracks.

His eyes practically bulged out of his skull. "The hell?!"

"Didn't you know I had a sword with me? I mean, didn't you look?"

I get the feeling he was so focused on getting his revenge that he didn't think to check. I bet all the kids in the way would've made it hard to see, though. Good thing we didn't forget our swords at home, huh, Tilura?

The thug quickly backed up, scowling. "Why, you...!"

“Don’t expect me to just roll over and die, now.”

I could tell he was very aware of my short sword’s longer reach. According to Eckenhart, weapons with more reach were more threatening. He warned me specifically against fighting a longsword or spear head-on.

It looks like I’m the one with more reach this time, though.

“Don’t think havin’ a sword means you win!” the thug sneered. “Just holdin’ that thing won’t do you any good! Take this!” He took another full-swing overhead chop at me.

I am trained, though. Even if I’m still just a total beginner.

I twisted my body to the left, and his blade met only air. He stumbled forward an awkward step or two before cursing under his breath and raising his knife for a third swing. But we’d effectively changed places now, meaning I could make a run for Kales’s store.

No... I can’t risk turning my back on him. If he throws his knife after me, I’m good as dead. I’ve got to see this fight through.

“Eat this, fancypants!” He grabbed his weapon in both hands, raised it over his head, and took a big overhead slash at me. It was almost too easy to read, and compared to Eckenhart’s attacks, it was laughably slow.

“Hah!” I tried to knock his weapon off-target with the flat of my sword. But I ended up hitting him square on the wrist instead.

“Ow!!!” The knife flew out of his hand and it clattered to the ground a short distance away.

Oops. Yeah, I shouldn’t have tried to aim for something so small. I’m just glad I didn’t use the edge... I would’ve hated to cut his hand off and see all that blood.

Either way, he was wide open now and his momentum was still carrying him forward toward me. I decided to counter by kicking him hard in the gut.

I’m surprised I can still think so clearly, though... I’ve got to thank Eckenhart and Leo for all their training.

“Oof!” He coughed and clutched his gut, awkwardly collapsing to the ground.

Oh, that must've hurt...

I watched him for a long moment before realizing I should probably do something else. At a bit of a loss, I pointed my weapon down at him.

“Uh...was that enough, or are you hungry for more?”

He looked up at me with a scowl. But his expression turned to terror when he saw the wavering tip of my sword.

“C-Crap!”

“Don't move, okay? I don't want to stab you.”

“D-Dammit...”

I'm not too close, though, right? I really, really don't want to end up stabbing him by accident. Man, am I glad he's not resisting anymore.



I took a few deep breaths while the thug silently glared at me. It didn't look like he was keen on moving while I had my sword in his face.

What do I do now, though? I bet he'll either try to attack me again or run away if I put my sword away.

"Excuse me!" I shouted at a group of people who'd been watching our fight from a safe distance. "Can you help me, please?"

About half of them turned tail and fled.

Yeah, that's about how I'd react if a man with a sword was shouting at me.

After a little more shouting, however, someone came forward to lend a hand. I thought I recognized them from back when the fight first started. They probably knew, then, that I was only trying to defend myself. I told them my name and asked them to go to Kales's shop for help right away. As they ran off, I let out a sigh of relief.

"Now all that's left is to wait for help. I swear, this is the last time I go anywhere alone. Leo's often with me, I guess. But—"

"GOTCHA!"

"What?!"

I must've let my guard down just enough to let the thug escape. He rolled back away from me, then sprung to his feet and started scanning the ground. He was probably looking for his knife.

Just as my body tensed up for round two, however, the sky seemed to turn dark.

"BARK!"

"Wha— Leo?!"

"HOLY CR—gweh!"

A split second later, Leo hit the ground in front of me. The thug tried to cry out, but all it took was one mighty paw to pin him to the ground. It sounded like Leo wasn't pushing too hard, though, so he could still breathe easily.

"Thanks, girl." I patted her on the flank. "But what're you doing here?"

“Ruff! Woo-woo-woooooooooooooooooo!”

“You heard me calling for help? Oh, that must’ve been when I was trying to get someone to come...”

“Rooo!” *Probably! I wasn’t here, y’know.*

I was surprised by just how good Leo’s hearing was, especially since she could tell it was my voice right away.

“S-Stupid mutt!” The thug started flailing around and trying to squirm out of Leo’s hold.

She bared her teeth at him. “Grrrrr!”

The thug suddenly froze, then slowly tried to get comfortable right where he was lying.

“It doesn’t look like he’s going anywhere,” I chuckled as I sheathed my sword. “Really, Leo, you’re a lifesaver.”

Leo wagged her tail at me. “Ruff-ruff.” *I’m just glad you’re okay.*

Moments later, I could hear familiar voices from behind me.

“Takumi?!”

“Mr. Hirooka!”

I turned around to see Claire and Sebastian running toward me while Kales and Johanna trailed behind.

I guess my message got through to them.

“Takumi...” Claire panted. “Are you all right?”

“Are you unharmed?!”

“I’m fine, both of you.” I grinned and raised my hands to show them I was unharmed. “I’m really glad I took up sword fighting, though.”

I can’t thank Eckenhart enough for training me. I never would’ve thought to take it up on my own. Without it, I wouldn’t have been able to think clearly, and who knows how badly I could’ve gotten hurt.

Claire let out a heavy sigh of relief. “Oh, I’m so glad!”

Sebastian nodded. "Indeed. Had you been hurt, I would never have forgiven myself." He turned to face the thug. "I must say, though, this hooligan looks familiar."

"Do you remember the bandits who attacked us the last time we all came to town? He was one of them," I explained.

"Ah, now I recall." Sebastian turned to look down at the pinned thug. "Let alone the affront to milady, you also dared threaten Mr. Hirooka and Miss Leo. Perhaps you're harboring something of a grudge, hm?"

From the way Claire and Johanna were looking at the thug, I could tell they remembered him too.

Not surprised, given how he's dressed like a weirdo. His motive was crystal clear, too.

I nodded. "After he spotted me in that crowd of children, he bribed a little boy to lure me over here so he could attack me alone. So...what should we do?"

The ruffian sneered, squinting slightly through his discomfort. "How 'bout you drop dead?"

It doesn't sound like he's sorry about it.

Leo probably wasn't pressing on him too hard. It wasn't hard to imagine what'd happen to him if she put her full weight on him.

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. He crouched down to look the thug square in the eyes. "Is that so? We should 'drop dead?'"

"What do you think we should do?" Claire asked.

Sebastian didn't reply to her. His attention was still fixed on my attacker. "Did you attack us knowing we were of Duke Eckenhart Libert's house?"

"The duke?!" The thug paled. "How the hell was I supposed to know?!"

"Really, now? Why were you so intent on harming us, then? Did you really believe us helpless fools without Miss Leo's aid?"

"D-Dammit..." Beads of sweat started forming on his face.

He told me the same thing before. He really seemed to think that he could just

call us out and pick us off one by one.

I didn't say anything, though. All Claire and I could do was watch as Sebastian interrogated him, even though it was hard to see much of anything with Leo's massive body in the way. Kales seemed to look almost sorry for the guy.

The thug, clearly in a panic, started shouting. "G-Go to hell! All of you!"

"As I thought," Sebastian said with a small nod. "You realize what it means to assail nobility, don't you? And not just once but *twice*. We have every right now to punish you however we see fit."

Realization dawned in the man's eyes, and he began to flail around. "S-So what?! What're you gonna do, huh?!"

Oof... I don't know the first thing about this country's laws. But I can imagine he's not getting off with a slap on the wrist this time.

I wasn't nobility, of course. But Sebastian seemed to consider me close enough to count. Besides, the contract I'd signed put me more or less under their direct protection.

Sebastian's voice was low and cold. "I'm *sure* you know the price traitors pay. But no, sending you to the gallows would be far too lax a punishment."

"Wh-What?" The man froze, finally realizing how deep a grave he'd dug for himself.

I-Is it just me...or is Sebastian enjoying himself?

Suddenly I understood why Kales seemed to pity the thug.

"Finally realized, have you?" Even though I couldn't see Sebastian's face, I could practically hear him smirk. "Don't even *try* to escape. Miss Leo is a silver fenrir. You wouldn't make it one step."

"Grrr!"

"Sh-She is?!" Finally, he realized how much trouble he was in.

Sebastian's really going the whole nine yards...

From the way he'd talked about Leo earlier, calling her a mutt and the like, the bandit seemed to think she was only a big wolf or something. The common

folk didn't seem to really know what silver fenrir looked like, after all.

I don't think I've ever seen anyone so pale before.

"C-C'mon, don't be like that! I wasn't serious! Honest!" the man pleaded.

"In that case, perhaps you should've thought things through."

"I'm sorry, okay?! I'll do anything! Please, j-just don't kill me!"

Claire's brow furrowed slightly, and she shot me a sidelong glance. "Do you think he's going a bit too far?"

I couldn't agree more.

Sebastian stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Yes, what *do* we do with a traitor?"

"Don't kill me! I don't wanna die!"

Okay, that's enough.

"You can stop now, Sebastian," I said, stepping in.

"Mr. Hirooka?" Sebastian turned back to face me. His voice was still low and he had ice in his eyes. "You would forgive this cretin so readily?"

I swallowed hard. I would've never imagined Sebastian could be so terrifying. There was something to the way he spoke that I had never seen from him before.

"I-I mean, even *I* could handle him on my own, right? Besides, I don't think he'll try to bother us again."

"Is that so?" Sebastian stood up and dusted his clothes off, then let out a small sigh. "I suppose if you insist, I have no choice."

Was he just waiting for Claire or me to step in and stop him this whole time? I've got to admit, though, he's a really good actor.

At that moment, we heard the tramping of heavy feet running toward us. Turning, I saw a group of guards arrive.

"Looks like this is where the fight is... Wait, L-Lady Claire?!"

I bet the guy I asked for help earlier got the guards for us.

"Ah, perfect," Sebastian said. "I shall explain the situation to them."

The mighty Sebastian the Explainer saves the day again.

After a minute or so, he came back to us.

“It appears this hooligan is nothing more than a common pest,” he explained. “While he has a history, this is the first time he’s attempted anything so brash—and I imagine that was only because he knew nothing of milady’s involvement.”

“Really?”

“Really and truly. According to the guards, his bark is far worse than his bite. It would seem that even the attempted highway robbery the other day wasn’t his idea; his...*colleagues* merely roped him into it. Naturally, he had attempted similar extortion on his own, but...”

“But?”

“He never succeeded. Not once. Despite his roguish facade, he’s simply been caught and released over and over again, hence why his punishment on each occasion has been so lax. The harshest punishment he had ever received was for his attempt to rob us prior—they had kept him locked up for several days to allow him to repent.”

“So basically, he’s just a nuisance? He’s not a real threat to anyone?”

Sebastian nodded. “Mind you, I would imagine getting off easily was what prompted him to be so brazen this time around. Given the gravity of his crime, the lightest punishment he could receive would be total exile from Ractos. However, he could easily be banished from the country altogether, or worse.”

“Yeah... I guess that makes sense,” I said.

It suddenly felt like all the fatigue from our fight hit me at once.

I guess he was just a small fry, after all.

He was a pain in the neck for everyone involved, of course. But it was hard for me to see what actual harm he’d done. It was as though he was fated to be a failure of a crook. Maybe Sebastian was right. Maybe if he’d been punished more harshly in the past, he never would’ve attacked me.

“You can move your foot now, Leo,” I said.

“Ruff.”

I turned to Johanna. “Would you mind tying him up?”

She nodded. “Gladly.”

Leo took a step back and Johanna quickly tied him up the same way she had before. The thug didn’t even try to resist.

“It looks like you understand what you did now,” I said to him. “Are you really sorry?”

He mechanically nodded over and over again. “O-Of course I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry... I didn’t know...”

He sounds like he means it...but I can’t take him seriously with his mohawk swaying back and forth like he’s a giant bobble-head.

The real question now, though, was what to do with him. He was all but helpless as he was now; he was tied up so tightly, he could only move his head.

“Claire? Sebastian?” I called back to them. “I know you said your family gets to decide his punishment, but do you mind if I decide?”

Claire thought about it for a moment. “I don’t mind. You and Miss Leo were the ones who caught him, after all. I don’t see why you shouldn’t decide his fate as well.”

Sebastian nodded. “As he assaulted you, it seems only fair that you decide. We cannot transfer the legal right to decide to you, of course. But we shall honor your decision, as neither milady nor I was present at the time of the crime. I take it you have no qualms with this, Kales?”

Even Kales nodded. “Why, of course not. I’ll be sure to explain everything to the customers and staff later.”

Looking around, I could see that Johanna, Nicola, and even the gathered passersby seemed to agree with them. Granted, Claire had just agreed there wasn’t any collateral damage, and I had Leo on my side, so it wasn’t a big surprise. With that, I turned back to the man to decide his fate.

“Let’s see... Are you hungry, Leo?”

The man nearly wet himself. “Wh-What?!”

Leo firmly shook her head. “Ruff.”

“Don’t worry, I was joking. What *should* I do with you, though?”

I could just hand him over to the guards. But then, I wouldn’t be deciding anything for myself. Besides, given how many times the guards have punished him already, they almost certainly aren’t going to solve the root of the problem. No, it’ll be best to put him somewhere I could keep an eye on him.

“Kales?”

“Yes?”

“You’re not low on staff right now, are you?”

He blinked in surprise a moment before replying. “I suppose that if I’ll be selling herbs from now on, I’ll need to take on another salesperson or two—though that of course will depend on how business is from today onward.” He hesitated, and his eyes went to the mohawked thug. “I certainly hope you aren’t thinking what you seem to be...”

“What if you put this guy to work? If you don’t mind too much, that is.”

“This...gentleman wouldn’t be my first choice, no.”

I’m not surprised, especially with his criminal record.

“How about this, then? I’ll hire him myself to oversee the herb sales.”

“You will?”

Claire shot me a worried look. “Are you sure about that, Takumi?”

Sebastian hesitated. “That would certainly be an interesting choice. Though not, if I may add, a particularly wise one.”

I guess most people wouldn’t hire someone who just tried to kill them, huh...?

“Think of it this way,” I said. “Someone will need to take the herbs from the villa to the store every day, right?”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“Seeing how sales have gone today, I’d say we’d need to restock at least that

often in order to meet demand,” Kales said.

I could just make a huge pile of herbs all at once and send off a few days’ worth at a time. But I doubted Claire would let me, considering I might faint again. Besides, I also had to make herbs for my training.

“The trip takes a lot of time, though, right?”

I didn’t have the time to come to Ractos that often, let alone Claire or Sebastian. We were only able to all come together this time since it was a special occasion.

“That’s why I’m going to hire this guy to make the supply trips to and from the mansion. The rest of the time, I guess he can work at Kales’s store.”

Kales slowly nodded. “You make a good point, certainly. But are you sure you can trust this man?”

Given how much we’d scared him, I doubted he’d ever try to hurt us again. But there was still a chance he’d run away as soon as he got a chance. I didn’t have an easy solution for that, though.

“So, Mr. Hirooka?” Sebastian pressed. “What will you do if he tries to flee?”

“I, uh...didn’t think that far ahead.”

“I see. In that case, might I offer a solution?”

“What is it?”

“First, I would like to make it very clear that I support your proposal. Keeping him close at hand would make it quite easy indeed to determine if he is truly ready to change. Should he attempt to run, however, I should think Miss Leo could help.”

“Leo could?”

“Ruff?”

Both Leo and I cocked our heads to the side in confusion.

“Indeed. It is said that once a silver fenrir has caught the scent of prey, it will track it to the very edge of the world. Can you perform such a feat, Miss Leo?”

Just like Cerberus, huh...?

She nodded. “Ruff, ruff!”

“She says she can. So...wait, you’re saying we can ask her to track him down if he runs away?”

If I had to, I could even make her an herb to sharpen her senses. That’d probably make it easy to track him no matter where he tried to run.

“Roooo! Rooooo! Grrrr!” *Yeah, no problem! If he tries to make a run for it, I’ll get him!*

“All right, then,” I said. “Let’s go with your plan, Sebastian.”

“What did Miss Leo say?”

“She said she could hunt him in her sleep.”

She was faster than any horse, too, so he couldn’t outrun her.

“May we rely on you, Miss Leo, should it come to that?”

“Ruff!”

“Thanks, Leo. I really appreciate it.” I gently stroked her flank.

“Wooo.” *No problem.*

I felt a little bad for making her the backup plan when this was all my idea to begin with.

“Is that clear?” I said to the thug, mimicking Sebastian’s threatening voice. “If you try to run, you know exactly what’ll happen—and Leo won’t be so nice this time.”

“Grrrr!”

He paled. “D-Don’t worry! I won’t run! I won’t! Just don’t kill me!”

I know Leo wouldn’t hurt him that badly, though, let alone kill him. She’s a sweet girl.

“All right, so it’s settled,” I announced. “You’d better work hard.”

“Wait...what?” He gave me a blank look.

“I said, you’re hired. And don’t worry, as long as you don’t do anything stupid, I’ll pay you well.”

“You... You really mean it? You’re really gonna hire a piece of trash like me?”

By this country’s standards, turning against a noble family not once but twice was a capital offense. Fortunately for him, I wasn’t from here; I was Japanese. If there was any chance of him redeeming himself, I felt he deserved it. Nothing he did so far was irreversible, after all. And he’d never actually crossed the line in the sand. I wouldn’t have offered him a chance like this if he had.

“Just make sure you live life on the straight and narrow from now on. You know what’ll happen if you try to make a break for it.”

Leo gave him just a peek of her fangs. “Grrrr...”

“I-I won’t! I’ll be good as gold, I swear!”

I didn’t totally trust him yet, of course. His work would show me what he was really like, and I knew he wouldn’t try anything weird with Leo around.

“Here’s the real question,” I continued. “Do you *want* to work for me?”

There was no hesitation in his eyes. In fact, he looked moved half to tears. “If you’re really gonna hire me, then I’m really gonna work! You better believe it!”

“Well, that’s that.” I turned back to the others. “Sorry for all the trouble.”

Sebastian gave me a stern look. “Are you certain? This man attempted to kill you.”

I nodded. “I think he can turn over a new leaf if he tries. If he doesn’t, well... he’ll have Leo to answer to.”

“I must say, I feel you’re a tad naïve. But, to be honest, it’s somewhat endearing. It reminds me of my own youth.”

Maybe he was right. The man was a criminal, and if he didn’t repent, there’s no telling who he might hurt next. But even so, I couldn’t just watch him get executed like that.

“Wait... What does this remind you of, exactly?”

Sebastian chuckled. “Oh, pay this old man no mind. It was a lifetime ago, after all.”

He’s not going to explain it to me? Who is he, and what did he do with the real

Sebastian?!

He turned to Leo. "If you please, Miss Leo."

"Ruff!" She stuck her nose right up against the man. *"Sniff sniff...Gruff!" Okay, I got his scent!*

"I'm going to untie you now," I said. "Just to be clear..."

He glanced at Leo. "I know! I won't do anything stupid!"

He'd have to be a real idiot to, honestly.

"All right, there. You're free."

"Thanks a ton, boss!"

"Boss?"

"You saved my life, right? Lemme call you boss!"

"Uh, okay. Just make sure you work hard."

He grinned and nodded. "Okay!"

Being called boss by a post-apocalyptic biker thug sure feels weird, though.

"Oh, one more thing. Kales!" I called out.

"What is it, Mr. Hirooka?"

"This guy will be in charge of the shipping from here on out. But when he's not doing that, you can have him do whatever you want around the store."

"Let me ask you again—are you *certain*? I'd be more than glad to take on new staff. But this man doesn't strike me as the customer service type, per se."

"Don't worry, I think we've scared all the delinquent out of him already. Besides, Leo can give you a hand with him if you need it." I shot the thug a hard look. "You'll work hard, won't you?"

"Course I will! I won't sully your good name, boss!"

"I must admit, he certainly seems like a different person altogether," Kales said. "All right, I'll take it upon myself to employ him."

With this, the man at least had a job.

I guess I'll have to pay his wages, though. I've got plenty of money to cover it, but I don't have the faintest idea how much labor costs here. I'll have to ask Sebastian about it later.

Kales clapped his hands together. "Well, I'd best put you to work. What'd you say your name was?"

"I'm Nick!"

"Very well, Nick. Let's return to the store."

"Okay!" The man turned back to me and waved. "See you later, boss!"

"Yeah, see you. You'd better work hard, now!"

His name's Nick, huh? I guess I forgot to ask before hiring him.

After watching Nick and Kales head back to the store, I gave Leo a pat for being such a good girl and walked back toward Claire and the others.

Claire gave me a worried look. "Are you sure about this? He *did* attack you, after all."

"I'm sure. I think that instead of punishing people when they do something wrong, it's better to give them a chance to redeem themselves. Maybe I *am* just being naïve, though." I smiled thinly.

"Oh, there's no doubt about that," Sebastian replied. "However, I must admit I admire and respect your optimism. As members of the duke's household, we would be bound to punish him for his crimes."

Claire nodded. "If we gave the same amnesty to all wrongdoers, there's no telling what chaos might break out."

"In that sense, I am rather glad we let you decide his fate, Mr. Hirooka. What happens now, of course, will depend on Nick himself."

I smiled. "I wouldn't worry too much. Even if things go south, we've got Leo."

"Ruff, ruff!"

As rulers of the realm, it made sense that the Libert family had to be harsh but fair. I trusted that Nick wouldn't try anything funny, given how badly we'd all scared him—but if he ever decided to return to his wrongdoing, Leo would

be ready for him. Since even I was able to beat him, I trusted he wouldn't be trying his luck anytime soon.

Epilogue

“**WELCOME** back!” Tilura called out as soon as she saw us come back into the store. “Whatever you were doing outside sure was noisy.”

Leo was still meeting and greeting the kids, but I doubted she’d have any more trouble with them. Kales and his staff were quickly learning how to deal with the crowds.

As an aside, it turned out Claire and the others had followed Leo when she sprinted off. They met the person I’d asked for help along the way, and Sebastian had asked them to get the guards. I made sure to thank the good Samaritan properly before coming back to the store, of course.

“Thanks for waiting so long,” I said to Tilura.

“You won’t *believe* what Takumi did.” Claire grinned.

She told Tilura the whole story, with Sebastian occasionally chiming in. One of Kales’s employees was even kind enough to pour us tea as we talked.

Just as Claire finished, Nick came into the store.

“Hey, boss!” he shouted. “They’re done selling your plants!”

“Thanks.”

I bet Kales asked him to report back to me... His first job, I guess.

It seemed a little early for them to wrap up sales unless this was when the shop always closed.

“Ah, Mr. Hirooka!” Kales called out to me as soon as he saw us leaving the store. “We just sold the very last herb.”

There weren’t any customers around the display tables anymore. I could see a few families over by Leo still, but that was it—and it wasn’t even noon yet!

It’s great that sales went well. But maybe I should’ve made more...

Sebastian's brow furrowed slightly. "I must admit, I wasn't expecting such high demand."

Kales's expression turned grim. "Yes, well, I've been hearing some rather unpleasant rumors of late. Apparently, a rather rotten apothecary has set up shop here in Ractos. They've been selling diluted and impure remedies and marketing them as conventional cures."

Leo probably helped draw a crowd. But, if what Kales said was true, then it'd make sense that demand for real medicine would be up enough to sell out in no time.

Sebastian's expression turned grim. "A rotten apothecary, you say?"

A doctor who pushes fake medicine, huh...?

There were plenty of people like that back in Japan. But it never occurred to me they might be in this world, too.

"To think such a fool would attempt something so bold in Libert lands." Something about the bemused glint in Sebastian's eyes sent a chill down my spine. "I daresay I'm going to enjoy this."

Claire shot me an apologetic look. "Sebastian rather likes hunting down evildoers like that. It's a...hobby of his."

"Nothing of the sort, milady. I simply believe that all merchants should be completely above-board in their dealings." He chuckled darkly. "I'd best notify His Grace right away..."

I get the feeling Claire's right on this one.

"More importantly," Kales cut in, "I'd like to have a word with Mr. Hirooka about the herbs."

"Of course."

From how today had gone, I had a pretty good idea of what Kales wanted.

"I'd greatly appreciate it if you could increase the volume of the next order," he said. "In particular, we'll need a lot more capwort."

"Why? Is there a shortage going around?"

I had Cultivated capwort many times before. *As long as I don't try to make too many at once, it shouldn't be an issue.*

Kales nodded. "You see, there's something of an epidemic going on, both here in Ractos and in the surrounding villages. Capwort provides an easy cure, but with the sheer number of infected, I'm afraid supply hasn't been keeping up with demand. That rotten apothecary has only been worsening the situation, meaning most of the ill folk are without medicine."

"I see... An epidemic, huh?"

"Fortunately, my establishment is sponsored by Lady Claire herself, and I've confirmed your herbs' quality with my own eyes. I've no doubt that with your help, we can not only choke out the disease, but we can also spread the good word and drum up business like you wouldn't believe."

The medicine I made with my herbs was pure and undiluted, after all. And I could make lots of it with just a little bit of effort on my side. The more my medicine got out, the more both the duke's family and the Libert store would profit.

"Allow me to work out the finer details of this exchange on Mr. Hirooka's behalf." Sebastian's glee was gone and he seemed to be all business now.

"Please do," I said.

I still don't know a thing about business in this world, so it's best if he handles the finer details.

With that, Claire, Tilura, and I left the men to their business to check on Leo. She was still playing with the remaining children, and she seemed to be enjoying herself immensely, wagging her tail all the while.

I smiled. "Looks like somebody's having fun."

"Woof!"

Claire giggled. "It looks like the children are rather fond of her, too."

"Of course!" Tilura grinned proudly. "She's super cute and super friendly!"

Why's Tilura bragging about it, though? Maybe she's just that happy her big fluffy friend is a hit.

As the children climbed on her and hugged her, I gave Leo a good petting.

You did good today, girl. Bringing in customers, keeping the kids happy, even helping me with Nick... I couldn't have done it without you.

"Boss?" I turned around to find Nick there. "Sorry for butting in and all, but I gotta have a word with you."

"What's up?"

I stopped petting Leo to give him my full attention.

It's still so weird that he calls me boss, though. He looks way older than me and everything.

"You and the manager were talking earlier 'bout that bad medicine, right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Well, take it from me, those folks ain't from around here. They've got a noble backing them, and it ain't the duke."

"A noble?" I blinked in surprise. "You've met these apothecarists?"

"Once, yeah." He paused for a moment, cheeks flushing. "I was, uh, breaking stuff outside their store."

"Really, Nick?"

That's not a funny story! That's a crime! Maybe I'll have to keep a closer eye on him than I thought.

"Don't worry, I feel bad and everythin'!" He cleared his throat a little, trying to look innocent. "Anyhow, about these guys..."

"Just don't pull anything like that again. So...?"

"I won't! Anyhow, a bunch of guys in heavy-looking armor came out of the store when they saw I was there. They looked kinda like that." He pointed to where Nicola and Johanna were standing.

So...they were heavily armed guards, then.

"What happened then?" I prompted.

"Well, I was gonna beat the living crap outta those sissies. But then another

guy came out. And boy, did *he* have an attitude! He said they had a noble's blessing and everything, so if I didn't clear out right away, they'd really let me have it."

Wait, he was really going to take on a full squad of guards? That's really reckless...no, just plain stupid.

"So...they threatened you away with the noble's name?"

"Yep. I wasn't dumb enough to go against a noble, though. So I got the heck outta there."

Does Nick really want to get in trouble that bad? It's not like he's doing it on purpose. But still, this seems to happen to him a lot.

I didn't know if that store really had a noble's blessing or not. But it didn't surprise me that there might be nobles who'd misuse their power.

I'll have to tell Sebastian about all this later.

"Thanks for telling me, Nick. Just make sure you behave from now on."

"Course I will. Just watch, boss, I'll make ya proud!"

It felt weird to have him act as my underling, but I *was* technically his boss. As long as he didn't slack off, I could overlook it.

Having finished our conversation, I headed back to where Claire was.

"What were you two talking about?" she asked.

"Nick just told me something interesting."

"Well, go on!"

Fortunately, Kales and Sebastian had just finished their own conversation and were heading over to us, so I was able to explain the situation to everyone all at once.

After I finished, Claire's expression darkened. "A *noble's* backing that awful medicine?"

Sebastian stroked his chin, deep in thought. "This might be a bigger issue than I'd thought."

I didn't know the ins and outs of politics in this world, but it didn't sound like it'd be as simple as Claire just slapping them on the wrist and sending them away. It sounded like it could become a major problem.

"At any rate, we had best inform His Grace post-haste."

"But Father won't be back at the main mansion for days yet," Claire pointed out.

"No, I'd imagine he's only halfway."

"What if we send a messenger after him, then?" Claire suggested. "They might be able to catch him."

Sebastian paused to consider it. "It would be asking a lot of the messenger. But a grave problem calls for grave measures. I trust milord will devise a fitting response in no time."

"He'll have time to think it over before he arrives at the main mansion," Claire added. "I just know he'll have an answer."

"At any rate, we had best move quickly. Nicola?"

Nicola snapped to attention. "Yes?"

"Gather as much information on the situation in town as you can. Once you've finished, you are to report your findings to the mansion via messenger and follow after His Grace immediately."

"It shall be done!" Nicola turned to leave.

It sounds like he's got quite the ride ahead of him.

"Wait just a moment, Nicola."

He stopped and turned back to me. "Yes, Mr. Hirooka?"

I fished through the bag at my belt, and a moment later, I found what I was looking for. I handed him a pair of herbs.

I knew I was right to take extras with me.

"Take these with you. This one will relieve your muscle pains and this one will remove some of your fatigue."

“You would bestow upon me such a gift?”

“Of course. We’re asking a lot of you, after all. Oh, but don’t eat both of them at the same time, okay? If you do, neither one will work.”

He nodded solemnly. “My thanks. I swear on my honor: I will not fail.”

“Have a safe trip, okay?”

With one last nod to Sebastian, Nicola spun around and ran down the street.

Thanks, Nicola. We’re counting on you. But seriously, where’d you learn to talk like that?

Kales cleared his throat. “Lady Claire, Mr. Hirooka? It appears that lunch is ready, should you wish to partake.”

“Oh, thank you.”

Since Leo couldn’t fit inside the store to eat, Tilura suggested we all eat outside. This time, Sebastian, Johanna, and even Kales ate together with us. All the food laid out for us were things the staff had bought from stalls lining the main street. It didn’t match up to Helena’s cooking, of course, but it was tasty in its own right.

I’d love to eat my way through main street someday.

As we ate, Claire turned to me. “Do you have any plans after this, Takumi? Would you mind accompanying me someplace?”

“Sure, I’m free. Where are we going?”

“I’d like to visit the orphanage. What with all this talk of bad medicine and epidemics, I’m starting to get a little worried about the children.”

An orphanage, huh?

They had orphanages in Japan, of course. But I’d never been to one. It couldn’t hurt to take a look, especially if Claire was worried about their well-being. If they were sick, well, it’d be Herb Cultivation’s time to shine. I wasn’t eager to stand out and play the hero. But I didn’t want to sit by and watch as people suffered, either.

I hope everything’s okay, though. With any luck, I won’t have to do a thing.

Afterword

HELLO! It's certainly been a while. Thank you for picking up this book.

The previous volume marked my first time having a book published, and I was more than a little worried as to how it would go. When I heard they called for a reprint just after the book went on sale, I honestly didn't know if I should be more happy or surprised. In the end, I seem to recall dancing around with a mix of both emotions. But I honestly felt so elated, I don't remember it very well! For all of you who purchased the first volume and decided to follow the series, you have my deepest thanks. Without your support, I wouldn't be able to keep writing like this.

Now, I believe it's time for a little commercial break. Before this volume's release in Japan, the manga version started serializing. The mangaka, Hana Ichika, draws Takumi, Claire, Leo, and the others every bit as charmingly as the novel illustrator Ririnra does. I'd be thrilled if you would consider picking that up as well! It presents a slightly different side of Takumi and Leo from the novel, but I assure you that Leo is every bit as cute. Publication started in the June 2021 edition of *Comic Ride*. It also has a digital edition, so please give it a try if you haven't already.

Now then, about this volume. Takumi met a few new friends and even started learning how to fight. Takumi and Leo have been supporting each other since day one. But I didn't feel it was fair that Takumi should have to rely on Leo for help all the time or the other way around. That's why I put some limits on Takumi's Herb Cultivation, like his fainting. After all, given how powerful it is, it'd be too much of a leap if he could just use it infinitely. I believe that every coin should have two sides, so to speak. Besides, all that energy had to come from somewhere and leaving that unresolved was bugging me.

In the end, though, as long as you enjoyed reading about how cute Cherie and Leo are and had a chance to relax, I'll count this volume as a success. If you were expecting more heroic antics or grand plans from Takumi, though, I'm afraid this is the wrong series for you. The point is, Leo is cute. All doggies are

cute. No, all animals are cute! That's one of this world's few absolute truths. I realize that making Takumi the main character, when really, it's all about how cute Leo is, might come across as a little...strange, but I assure you, I'm perfectly normal (I hope).

At any rate, my editor will yell at me if I keep rambling like this, so I'll end this section with my thanks.

First of all, I'd like to thank the illustrator Ririnra for their continued hard work on this series. Thank you very much for taking the time out of your busy schedule for me. Your drawings were wonderful, as always.

Second, I'd like to thank the mangaka of the manga adaptation, Hana Ichika. I truly appreciate all the work you put into making the characters look so adorable. I know writing for manga is entirely different from writing novels, so please, don't push yourself too hard and take some time to enjoy the process. Don't worry, I'll work hard to write more scenes you'll enjoy drawing!

Next, I'd like to thank my editor, Kawaguchi, and the rest of the staff at GC Novels. Without you, this entire series would've been impossible. I can't possibly thank you enough.

I would also like to thank all the Twitter users who contributed pictures of their dogs and cats to the Japanese wraparound covers. They were all adorable, and while picking just a few was a challenge, I'll enjoy all the photos I received for a very long time! Congratulations to Pero and their owner Gyobei for being selected! The way Pero's licking their lips is just adorable and makes me want to give them their favorite treat on the spot. Thank you very much for the photo! Also, congratulations to Jin and their owner, Zinfandel, for being the second selection! The way Jin seemed to be bolting right out of the photo nearly took my breath away. Thank you very much for your photo as well!

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who has been supporting my writing since my web novel days, as well as everyone who read this volume. I'm glad to have met all of you.

All right, then. I hope I'll have another chance to meet you in volume three. Until then, take care.



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