

# EVEN DOGS

Go to Other Worlds

5

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LIFE IN ANOTHER WORLD  
WITH MY BELOVED HOUND



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Hound, Volume 5

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Anrinnelesse

Still Afraid of Leo?

Leo  
Wants to Play!

Cherie

Enjoying Snuggle Heaven!







Takumi...

Claire...

# Prologue

**OUR** carriage passed through the mansion gates and stopped in front of Duke Liberte's villa, my temporary home. The earlier clamor within the vehicle had been replaced by an uneasy silence.

"Milady, Mr. Hirooka, Lady Anrinnelesse, we have arrived," Sebastian announced from the driver's stand.

Nobody replied, or even said a word, even though the other two passengers had to have heard him as clearly as I did. Beside me was Lady Claire, the oldest daughter of the Liberte family and the first person I'd met in this world. Across from us was Lady Anrinnelesse, the only daughter of House Bastler. The two heiresses were staring daggers at each other as if I wasn't there. It didn't feel like a proper argument, per se, but the silence was anything but peaceful. I tried not to sigh too loudly with relief now that I could be free of the situation.

The problem had reared its head on the ride back from Ractos, where we'd just resolved the source of the local epidemic spread by the Yugard store. Anrinnelesse had come up with a troubling idea while watching Duke Eckenhart Liberte trying not to get thrown off Leo's back as they ran—namely, she asked me to marry her. Not only was I startled by her offer, but Claire started interrogating her about her reasoning, which brought us to our current awkwardness. Claire insisted it was too sudden, while Anrinnelesse was confident in her noble intuition, putting the pair perfectly at odds. I, of course, was too flustered and confused by the entire line of questioning to say a thing.

*Frankly, I don't know how to cut in here without feeling like I'm trying to mansplain anything...*

Finally, I made up my mind and stood with as cheerful a smile as I could muster. "Claire, Anrinnelesse, shall we head inside?"

Claire nodded hesitantly. "I suppose."

“Indeed,” Anrinnelesse agreed.

I disembarked first, followed closely by Claire. By the time Anrinnelesse was on the ground, the sternness in both their expressions had dissipated.

*I wish I could put aside my feelings so easily. Is that a woman thing or a nobility thing?* I wondered as I stretched and limbered up a little.

“Awoooooorf!”

“Gwugh?!”

That was when my Maltese-turned-silver-fenrir Leo bounded into the courtyard with Eckenhart still clinging desperately to her back. Leo was energetic and eager as always, while the duke let out something between a greeting and a strangled cry for help.

Leo stopped obediently at my feet, and I gave her a good-job scritch behind the ears.

“Good girl, Leo! Had a fun run?”

*This is just what I need to get my mind off the whole carriage issue...*

“Wuff, woo-ruff!”

Eckenhart slipped weakly off her back, panting heavily. “Hahh... I-I would’ve preferred a steadier ride, Miss Leo.”

*That’s coming from a skilled horseback rider, too. She was going even faster at times than when she took me to the village of Lange.*

Sebastian chuckled at the sight. “Excellent to see you’ve enjoyed yourself, milord.”

I noticed that he and the guard Phillip were glancing at the two noblewomen with interest. Sebastian would’ve overheard the conversation in the carriage, and even now the ladies didn’t so much as look at each other. That was almost worse than the glaring.

Eckenhart grimaced a little, oblivious of his daughter’s standoffishness. “I could barely hold on, let alone enjoy it... Though I must admit I’m glad for the experience. She puts even a warhorse at full tilt to shame.”



*Full tilt? That means going as fast as it can, right?*

I remembered reading somewhere that a horse could only run about 40 miles per hour and for only a few minutes at a time, but it was nearly an hour from Ractos and Leo had been going even faster than that at times. I wasn't surprised the trip was rough on him.

"A truly unique experience, is it not?" Sebastian nodded sagely. "At any rate, we had best hasten inside. Lady Tilura and Cherie have been anticipating our return."

I had no doubt he was more concerned about breaking the ice between Claire and Anrinnelesse than he was about us standing outside.

"Most of my exhaustion is from Miss Leo at this point, but you're right," Eckenhart agreed. "I'm looking forward to seeing how much Tilura's grown."

I smiled thinly. "It really hasn't been long since you were last here... I'm not sure you'll see much of anything."

It had been less than a month since he'd last rode to the villa, worried about Claire's well-being as he was.

"Gahaha! Kids grow fast, Takumi, fast enough that even a day can make a world of difference!"

*Right... I guess they always say kids grow up too fast. I don't think a day would really be that big a deal...but then again, I don't have any kids, so who am I to say? He tends to be a bit of a worrier, too.*

Back in Japan, Leo would often play with the neighborhood kids, and whenever I saw one again after a while, they always seemed a little taller or spoke with a little more maturity. I could understand the theory behind that, at least.

On our way inside, Eckenhart finally noticed the friction between the two ladies.

"Hmm? What's the matter, Claire?" he asked. "You don't seem yourself now."

He was no doubt comparing her to how she was acting way back when we left Ractos. I wasn't sure whether to be happy he was paying attention to her now

or upset it had taken him so long to notice. Not that I'd be able to notice myself, of course. Women were still a mystery to me in many ways. Anrinnelesse in particular looked perfectly composed, but she was still pointedly staying away from Leo. Every time the big dog moved, she started uncomfortably.

"It's nothing," Claire asserted with a firm shake of her head and a soft smile. "Let's hurry inside, shall we?"

Her father frowned in confusion. "If you say so."

I noticed Sebastian roll his eyes at that. He'd explain the situation to the duke later, no doubt.

*I was a nervous mess on the way out to confront that Yugard guy, but this awkwardness easily puts that to shame.*

Leo cocked her head to the side inquisitively. "Ruff?"

I smiled and gave her a reassuring pat on the nose before following the others inside.

"Welcome home!" the servants announced in unison as we entered.

Eckenhart nodded. "Yes, very good."

"We're home." Claire sighed heavily. "The ride home took an awful lot out of me..."

Anrinnelesse looked at the assembled servants with equal parts approval and surprise. "My, a truly proper greeting! I'd expect no less of a duke's household."

"We finally made it back," I breathed with a smile.

*If Anrinnelesse is surprised, I guess that means only the duke's servants do these greetings? Not that it matters much to me either way.*

The head cook, Helena, approached Eckenhart and curtsied deeply. "Milord, shall I have dinner prepared?"

Sebastian must've sent word that they'd be having guests, probably before the conference at Kales' store. The formality of the assembled staff made that much clear.

The duke stroked his beard before nodding. "Yes... I'm rather tired, so I think

we'll eat and rest immediately afterwards."

"As you wish. Dinner will be completed presently."

The maids responsible for caring for me, Laila and Gelda, stepped forward to take my things. We weren't exactly shopping, though, so I only had a light bag with a few things and the sword at my waist.

Just then, a shadow darted forward from the back of the mansion.

"Welcome home, Sister, Takumi, Miss Leo!"

"Arf, arf!"

It was Claire's younger sister and second daughter of House Liberte, Lady Tilura—though titles like that really didn't fit the young girl. Cradled in her arms was Claire's familiar, a young fenrir named Cherie. They both seemed beside themselves with joy at seeing us again, and luckily that was enough to blow all the lingering awkwardness clean out of the air.

*Thanks, Tilura. We really needed that.*

Claire giggled. "Hello there, Tilura, Cherie. Did you behave while we were gone?"

"Awff!"

I smiled at the pair. "We're home."

"Worf, ruff!" Leo echoed.

Eckenhart nodded proudly. "I'm glad to see you're doing we—"

Before he could finish, Tilura ran past him and glomped onto Leo with all her strength. Cherie slipped from her arms at the moment before impact and began to run excited circles around Claire's feet. It was an adorable sight all told. I felt a pang of pity for the duke, but I honestly didn't expect him to win out over her giant fluffy friend. I wasn't sure she even noticed him with all the servants in the way.

"Tilura." He cleared his throat loudly, edging closer to her. "Tilura, I'm here, too, sweetie."

"Huh? Oh, Father!" Her eyes widened with surprise, but her grip on Leo's fur



didn't slacken.

"Yes, well... I know Miss Leo is very accepting of you, but you could jump into my arms just as easily."

"Nuh-uh! Miss Leo's waaaaaaay softer!"

"Guh!" He grasped at his chest in exaggerated agony.

*At her age, I'm not surprised she'd choose a giant fluffy doggy over her old man.*

"At least she noticed you." Anrinnelesse sighed from the back of the group.

I noticed her looking at Leo—no, at the way Tilura hugged her in jealousy.

*Maybe she likes kids?*

Claire rolled her eyes. "You've never even met Tilura before, not to mention you've put as much distance between yourself and Miss Leo as possible. You're literally asking the impossible of her."

"I-I haven't prepared myself to approach Miss Leo, that's all..." Anrinnelesse pouted.

*At least they're talking now...though I'm sensing a little hostility from Claire.*

"Arf?"

Cherie stopped running to look up at Anrinnelesse with curiosity.

Her eyes widened. "Oh my heavens! What a darling little creature! I-Is it a dog?"

She'd said the same thing to Leo at first, so they probably had domesticated dogs in this world—though that was beside the point. The way Cherie looked up at her with those large eyes and curly puppy lashes was incredibly effective, and Anrinnelesse reached out to the pup with eagerly trembling hands.







“Hwuff!”

With that, Cherie promptly stood and circled around to Claire’s other side. She didn’t seem afraid, but that was a clear and resounding ‘no’ all the same. Anrinnelesse’s shoulders slumped dejectedly.

*Weird, I’ve never seen Cherie react like this with any of the servants... Maybe she has a shy side?*

Claire giggled smugly as she knelt to tickle her familiar behind the ears. “Good girl! Looks like someone doesn’t like you, Anrinnelesse.”

Cherie wagged blissfully. “Arf, aruff!”

One of the servants, who had until then been watching Cherie and Tilura with warmth in her eyes, approached Eckenhart and bowed deeply. “Your Grace, I have taken the liberty of preparing your chambers. You may rest there if you wish.” She raised her head only momentarily before bowing to Anrinnelesse. “I have prepared a room for you as well, Lady Anrinnelesse.”

*I guess they’ve both traveled a lot today... The guards have quite a few things to unload, and I’d love to rest a bit in my room. They really thought ahead to get a room for Anrinnelesse, too.*

“Excellent.” Eckenhart cleared his throat, finally peeling his eyes from his youngest daughter.

With that, we split up to rest a little before dinner. Tilura climbed onto Leo’s back to follow us to the room I was using—and to my surprise, Anrinnelesse followed behind us. I couldn’t imagine she’d be sharing my room, so I figured her chambers were close to mine. Laila and Gelda took up the rear, and while that caused my fear that Anrinnelesse would mention marriage again to grow, she thankfully didn’t bring it up. Anrinnelesse spent almost the entire walk with her shoulders slumped from Cherie’s rejection, and considering she was still keeping her distance from Leo, we didn’t even walk together.

*I’m almost glad for that. The issue remains, though—she was serious about her proposal, so I’ve got to find a serious answer for her...somehow.*

# Chapter 1: Thoughts on the Anrinnelesse Issue

**“MGH...”**

I winced as I took off my dirty overclothes. My left arm still hurt from the fight at the Yugard store, and moving it in such a way sent a fresh jolt of pain up my arm.

Leo looked up at me sadly, nuzzling my wound gently. *“Whine...”*

“Haha, no worries, Leo. It’s only a little sore.”

I gave her a loving pat on the snout, hoping that would discourage her from licking it. I know she meant well, but right now doggy drool would only make it hurt worse.

“You got hurt, Takumi?” Tilura furrowed her little brow from her perch on Leo’s back.

“Yeah, though it was my own fault, really. I promise it’s only a graze. Moving it right now just stings a little.”

Laila frowned. “Gelda, boil some hot water for him.”

“O-Of course!” The younger maid scampered off.

“I’m okay, promise!” I tried to call after her, but too late. I’d cleaned it at Kales’ store, and it only bled now if I moved the skin around it. The last thing I wanted was for them to kick up a fuss over me.

“We mustn’t leave it as-is,” Laila insisted. “May I ask why you didn’t simply heal it yourself?”

“Well, I don’t want to keep relying on loe all the time... I know how much it costs.”

It would be easy to grow a little of it and heal my wound in an instant, but the overworked and underpaid corporate slave in me wouldn’t allow me to. It didn’t even matter if my Gift, Herb Cultivation, could make an infinite supply of

it at any time.

*I wouldn't hesitate to use it on anyone else, but I can't help feeling like it's a waste on me... It really doesn't hurt that bad. I'd forgotten all about it with all the chaos Eckenhart and Anrinnelesse brought.*

The maid bit her lip and frowned. "It's quite expensive, granted, and I can understand the desire to conserve it...in theory, at least. But—"

"I-I have the water!"

Gelda burst into the room, a steaming basin in her hands. It was impressive timing—though I learned later that they'd prepared it beforehand in case I needed to wipe myself off.

"Thank you, Gelda." Laila dipped a clean cloth into the basin. "Now, if you please."

She began to gingerly wipe my wound. The heat sent fresh pain shooting up my arm, but I was grateful and felt too sorry to protest.

"Mh... Th-Thank you, Laila. Sorry for troubling you like this."

"As long as you're well," she replied without even looking up.

She proceeded to reclean my wound. It was a little embarrassing, though I didn't know if it was the novelty of having someone wipe my arm or the fact that I was still half-undressed. I was still fully covered, of course, but the intimacy of the situation lingered with me long afterward.



**ONCE** my gash was dressed and I'd put on some proper clothing again, I thanked the maids and headed to the dining hall with Tilura and Leo. I hadn't meant to take my time, but by the time I arrived, Eckenhart, Claire, and Anrinnelesse were already seated.

*Wow, they were fast... Looks like they changed into entirely new clothes, too. I bet Claire and Anrinnelesse had help from the maids.*

"Thank you for waiting," I said politely as I took my seat.

Leo sat beside me, and Tilura slid smoothly off her back. She readily darted

around the table to sit beside Claire—or rather, beside Cherie, who was sitting diligently at her master’s side. Anrinnelesse sat on Claire’s other side beside Eckenhart, and I couldn’t help but notice Cherie was still avoiding her.

*Does Cherie hate her or something? I’ve never known her to hate anyone before...*

The important thing was, however, that Anrinnelesse now sat directly across from me.

“Uh...”

I fumbled for something to say to her. She was in a very utilitarian dress before, but she was now dressed in a much more opulent gown. Even Leo did a double-take at the sight. Her drill-hair...er, curls were as immaculate as before, making her the very picture of a young noblewoman. I had no doubt she could wear anything with aplomb.

“Yes?” she asked.

I hurriedly shook my head. “I-It’s nothing.”

*I don’t think I was outright ogling her, but I was staring... I’ll need to watch my manners.*

I didn’t need to add more fuel to the fire when things were already so tense, but I couldn’t stop thinking about how well that look would suit Claire. I couldn’t actually say that, of course, especially given that I’d only just met her earlier that day and didn’t want to risk being rude. In the end, I said nothing at all as Anrinnelesse was introduced to Tilura and the servants.

As introductions came to a close, Helena entered the hall with servers in tow.

“Dinner is served,” she announced.

Eckenhart nodded. “Excellent.”

With that, dinner began...and a new set of issues with it.

“My goodness! Do you have such delicious food every day?!” Anrinnelesse shouted in shock.

“Calm yourself, Anrinnelesse, it’s only food,” Eckenhart chastised her



between sloppy mouthfuls of meat.

Claire shook her head. "You should follow your own advice, Father."

"Hahaha..." Awkwardly laughing, I tried to focus on my own food.

Today's main course was a generous portion of steak. It was soft enough that it readily yielded to both fork and knife, and it was as juicy and easy to chew as it looked. The sauce had a sweetness to it that matched the meat to perfection, balancing the flavors such that I could never get tired of eating it. It was just the palate cleanser I needed whenever I felt overwhelmed by the fatty richness of the steak. The sour dressing on the vegetables was also an excellent bit of variety. Best of all, it was paired with soft bread, meaning I could easily turn it into a makeshift sandwich if I wanted to. I could easily understand Anrinnelesse's zeal for it.

*I wish I could have this meat on a hot bowl of rice...no chance of that in this world, though.*

Leo and Cherie wagged their tails the whole time they ate, and Helena presided over the scene with a smile. I could tell how much she loved to watch others eat her cooking.

Finally, our dinner came to an end, though with a good deal more noise and clamor overall given our two guests. It was great to see everyone enjoying themselves, manners aside.

Eckenhart looked down at the glass on the table in front of him. "Now, about our post-meal refreshment..."

There were identical glasses in front of Claire, Anrinnelesse, me, and even Tilura. I recognized the contents as greital juice. Leo and Cherie didn't have glasses, obviously, but there was a barrel of it placed by the wall.

*This is probably the treated juice... They had to boil off all the alcohol and germs, since this stuff was the source of the epidemic in Lange.*

Losing the alcohol was a little sad, but it still tasted delicious, and we'd all been enjoying a glass of it after each meal.

"That is greital juice," Sebastian explained to the duke. There was a twinkle in

his eyes as he spoke, very fitting for the grampsplainer himself. “It was procured directly from Lange as wine, then boiled to make it suitable to drink.”

“Really?” Eckenhart took a generous sip. “Mm, quite tasty.”

Anrinnelesse followed suit. “Yes, delicious indeed.”

I wasn’t surprised they liked it. There wasn’t any readily available sugar in this world, so they would’ve had limited experience with sweet drinks.

“Now if only it were proper wine,” the duke lamented.

Claire smiled thinly. “You’ve always had an impressive appetite for spirits.”

“You can probably hold your liquor quite well then,” I guessed.

“One could put it as such.” Sebastian frowned slightly. “Frankly, I wish milord would curb his thirst more.”

That wasn’t a surprise—he certainly looked the part. He was likely the type to encourage those around him to drink, too, and I made a mental note to avoid drinking with him.

*Then again, I can’t seem to get drunk in this world... Maybe I’ll be fine after all.*

“There’s no better chaser for a good drink than another good drink!” Eckenhart declared with a grin. “Don’t get me wrong, the juice is excellent. The flavors just feel a little lacking, somehow.”

I nodded. “Yeah, the boiling took quite a bit of flavor out of it.”

“Indeed, as I described,” the butler agreed.

“Hm... I suppose there’s not much to be done about it, is there.”

That explanation seemed to sate the duke somewhat.

*He’s talking like he’s had the wine before.*

“Eckenhart?” I asked. “You’ve had greital wine before, haven’t you?”

He nodded. “I’ve sampled every liqueur my domain produces—except for the small home brewers, of course.”

It was hard to tell if he’d done so out of a sense of obligation as lord, or if he just liked drinking that much. I also found it interesting that brewing at home

seemed to be legal here, but it made some sense, since it was a way of preserving drinks so they didn't spoil. Selling it probably still required some kind of license, though, since there seemed to be a liquor tax in place.

"Isn't there some way to drink it properly?" Eckenhart asked Helena.

The chef bowed politely. "Yes, actually. Mr. Hirooka has provided us with an herbal blend that may remove the disease without boiling it. The first batch will likely finish in the next few days."

The idea was to put capwort, the disease's antidote, into the wine bottles to let it purify the drink. It'd been several days since I gave Helena the herbs now, and I was glad to hear it was nearly done.

The chef looked at my companion. "Of course, we would appreciate Miss Leo's aid before any taste-testing is done."

"\*Gwarf, gwarf...\* Wurf?" Her ears twitched and she looked up from her juice, no doubt recognizing her name.

"She wants you to sniff the herb-infused wine before anyone drinks it," I explained to her. "That way we can make sure it's safe."

"Ruff!" Leo nodded firmly before eagerly sticking her face back into the juice barrel. Even Cherie seemed to be loving the drink.

"She can do that?" Eckenhart started. "No, she's a silver fenrir...of course she has a nose for impurities."

*He really thinks she can do anything, huh?*

There was some solid basis for that, of course. I remember reading back when Leo was a Maltese that dogs were sensitive to that kind of thing.

The duke turned toward me, stood, and dipped his head to me. Claire followed suit, as did Sebastian and the other servants. "I know I already thanked you, Takumi, but I'm grateful for your role in saving Lange."

"No, no, no, the villagers already did plenty for me in return," I said with a wave of my hand. "Besides, Leo handled the hard part."

This thank-you was specifically for the greital drink, no doubt.

*Sure, I pushed myself pretty hard to make sure the villagers were safe, but we would've all been killed if not for Leo. Besides, they already thanked us themselves. It was pretty fun overall.*

“Thank you as well, Miss Leo.”

“Worbff!” Leo replied through a full mouth.

I shot her a serious look. “Mind your manners, girl.”

Eckenhart let out a hearty guffaw. “Gahaha! Looks like Miss Leo’s a fan!”

Leo didn’t so much as look up at her name this time, and I let out a weak, bashful laugh.

“What a despicable thing to do to such lovely juice,” Anrinnelesse lamented into her glass as she got yet another refill. “Who would want to render such a treasure unsafe to drink?”

“Your father,” Claire replied curtly. “I’ll thank you not to forget his crimes.”

“Oh.” Her eyes widened. “Y-Yes, of course.”

*I can’t tell if she was playing dumb on purpose or if she really did forget... She sure seems to be serious about it, though.*

She took another sip. “Scrumptious food, decadent wine...or juice, rather. I simply must take all that I can back to the Bastler domain with me.”

“I think you’ll find you want this for your mansion, specifically,” Eckenhart interjected wryly. “Before that, of course, you’ll have your hands full learning politics and the art of leadership.”

She sighed. “It’s such a hassle, really,” she muttered under her breath. “I wish I never need to leave my chambers again.”

I felt a pang of sympathy at her words.

*Running a whole province can’t be easy, especially if she’s taking over from a tyrant like Count Bastler... More than that, though, I’m glad she forgot about her whole marriage proposal to me. Avoiding the topic like the plague seems to be paying off.*

After that, we told Tilura a bit about our escapades in town before heading



back to our respective rooms for the night. As I was leaving, I caught Claire staring daggers at me—but with no idea what to say or how to say it, we parted without another word.



“HAHH...”

After finishing my bath, I threw my still-damp body on the bed.

Leo leaned in closer towards me. “Ruff?”

I shifted around a little so I could pet her more easily.

“That Anrinnelesse... You don’t think she was serious, do you?”

“Wmff?” She cocked her head to the side in confusion.

*Right...she was giving Eckenhart a ride at the time. I bet she doesn’t know anything about the proposal.*

“Uh... This may come as a bit of a shock...” I began.

“Woo? Wurf...Woof, woof?!” No sooner than I’d finished explaining to her, Leo raised her head in shock. “Ruff! Ruffa-worf!!”

*What? “It’s a decent offer, so you should settle down and start a family”?!*

“Hold on, girl. I literally just met Anrinnelesse. I’m probably going to turn her down.”

*Where’d she learn about stuff like that, anyways? Not that her phrasing’s the only thing weird about all this.*

“Ruff?”

“No, I don’t hate her...I don’t know her well enough to have any opinion at all, really. She gave me some time to think—until tomorrow, actually.”

“Bowf-woff?” *So you’ll turn her down?*

“It’s the only answer I can give, really. Though I still don’t know what reason I can give her. I think she’s convinced I’ll accept already.”

“Mruff...”

I doubted she’d accept any reason to do with not knowing each other well

enough, especially since I didn't hate her by any means. She was also pretty like Claire, and would definitely get heads turning her way anywhere she went. Her drill-curls also had a unique kind of charm to them, though obviously not enough to marry her outright. Unless I was careful with my excuses, she was the type to try and prove herself, or want to start as friends, and then my hands would really be tied. I was too much of a people-pleaser to turn down a request, especially one from a woman.

"Gah... What do I do?" I groaned.

Leo put her chin on my bed and sighed. "Whimff."

No matter how long I thought, how much I pet Leo, I still couldn't come up with a good excuse. I could just be blunt and tell her no without elaborating, but I knew she'd ask for a reason, and I'd have the same crisis but with infinitely more pressure.

As I was mulling it over, there was a knock at the door.

"Hm?"

"Ruff?"

I sat up in bed. "Uh, hello? Who is it?"

"It's me, Claire. Do you have a moment?"

"Of course! You can come in."

*Why's she here at this time of night? Shouldn't she be asleep already?*

Nonetheless, I hurriedly moved to the edge of the bed and made myself presentable. I was dressed extremely casually, since I'd only just gotten out of the bath, but I convinced myself that I didn't look too bad.

"Pardon the intrusion." Claire gingerly opened the door and stepped inside. Despite her efforts to remain composed, she was visibly uneasy. "I'm so sorry for barging in at this late hour."

"No, it's fine. You aren't interrupting anything—I was just relaxing and stroking Leo, that's all."

I left out that I was thinking about Anrinnelesse. Something told me that

would go over very, very poorly.

She giggled. "I see Miss Leo is relaxing as well."

"Bwuff."

Claire didn't attempt to come further into the room, however, which caused the unease in my own mind to grow.

*Maybe it's because I'm alone with her in my room? Wait, Leo's here too.*

"May I sit beside you?" she finally asked.

"By all means, go ahead."

She took the spot right beside me on the bed, and the two of us pet Leo in silence for a few moments.

*Is she fresh out of the shower, too? I can smell her hair from here, and it's even nicer than usual.*

"Takumi?"

I started. "Y-Yes?!"

She giggled. "There's no reason to be so on edge. This is *your* room, isn't it?"

"No, er, yes. Y-You're right."

Another floral wave hit my nostrils.

*N-No, forget that! I'll just get myself worked up all over again!*

Claire seemed more at ease at least, either from petting Leo or because she could tell I was just as uneasy. "I have something to discuss with you," she began.

"What is it?"

She looked me squarely in the eyes, her expression serious. I tried not to lose myself too deeply in those sapphire depths.

"I caused you to injure yourself terribly—and that wasn't the worst of what's befallen you of late. I'm so, so sorry!"

"You...huh?"

“Roo?”

Claire bowed her head deeply, and I frankly didn’t know how to reply to that. When she looked up, I caught her gaze lingering on my injured arm.

*Oh, so this is about the fight at the Yugard store.*

“This entire affair should’ve been my and Father’s responsibility,” she explained uncomfortably. “You never should’ve been put in harm’s way.”

“W-Wait, hold on there. I volunteered to go, didn’t I? I don’t see why you’re apologizing.”

The original plan was for Sebastian to go to the Yugard store alone, after all. Claire could’ve turned me down, but instead she and the others respected my desire to help. She didn’t need to apologize for that. My arm was almost perfectly healed, anyways—the soap had stung a little in the bath, but it’d be back to normal in several days’ time, no doubt.

“It doesn’t matter how you feel about it,” Claire retorted. “I feel I must apologize to you, especially when I remember what happened in Lange...”

“Oh... I see. In that case, I’ll accept your apology. All is forgiven.”

“Thank you kindly.”

Lange was an entirely different matter, of course, but I’d been injured there as well. I could understand her worry for me. The wound I got there was especially bad, even, so I could only imagine how shocked she was to see me like that.

*Have I been worrying her all this time, then?*

Leo was worrying about me far less now that I wasn’t a wage slave, so I was frankly glad to hear Claire cared about me. The mood had gotten far too grave by that point, however, so I knew I had to deflect her attention somehow.

I forced a smile. “I really didn’t do that much, though—Eckenhart and his men did all the real work.”

Phillip and the other guards had locked down the store’s vicinity before I even stepped inside. They could’ve managed just fine without me.



Luckily, Claire seemed to understand and chuckled. "I still remember when Father burst into Kales's store while we were waiting."

The topic shifted to the situation at Kales's while I was away. Apparently, Eckenhart and Anrinnelesse arrived at the store not long after Sebastian and I left. As soon as the duke heard what was happening, they bolted out the door. They had been encouraging the guards to wait and see how the situation played out when Sebastian came running into the street. That explained why it took so long for the guards to intercede in the time before Leo arrived, despite being so close at hand. Otherwise, they would've stormed the place at the first sign of violence. That, and Phillip had been close to the edge of the perimeter at the time, and Sebastian had made straight for him when he came out.

*I was too busy fighting to think about it back then, but it makes sense... There was no reason for me to buy time for as long as I did.*

"However, that does mean that Father could've prevented your injury," Claire lamented.

"Right...so that explains the apology." I nodded.

*That makes a lot more sense now.*

A duke's family shouldn't need to stick their necks out to apologize to someone like me, but I appreciated Claire's sense of justice.

"Father insisted it was a prime chance to gauge your growth," she continued wryly. "There was quite literally no need for you to be in such danger."

*He was testing me? That sounds pretty on-brand for him.*

Claire added that he would've charged in anyway had I taken any longer, and I at least appreciated the thought.

I nodded thoughtfully. "I guess you're right, the guards could've stepped in and prevented this little scratch... I'd prefer to think of it as a learning experience, though. Thank you for worrying either way."

She shook her head. "I'd like to mention that I scolded him to no end upon our return. This won't happen again, that I can promise you!"

*They must've talked before I arrived in the dining hall... I guess Leo, Tilura, and*

*I were out, so it was a good time for it.*

I dipped my head to her. “Well, thank you for getting angry on my behalf.”

“Of course. Father was in the wrong, plain and simple.”

“Still, I’m grateful. It’s kind of nice to know I have someone worrying about me—fighting for me, even.”

She averted her gaze. “O-Oh. Well...of course.”

*Oops. Did I make this awkward?*

Back in Japan, I’d been yelled at for no reason any number of times, and even felt like yelling back on occasion. My coworkers had never stood in for me, only trying to keep the blame off themselves at best. I had no doubt Leo would be my biggest defender if the situation ever arose here, but I fervently prayed that would never happen. The fallout would be immense, to be sure.

I smiled a little. “Think of it this way—it’s a lot better that you talk to him, rather than me trying to confront one of the most powerful men in the kingdom alone. That’d be class suicide.” I was barely different from the average commoner, after all—not to mention that I couldn’t have been angry at him in the first place if Claire hadn’t told me these details.

“Class suicide?” She gave me a puzzled look. “I think Father likes you a good deal. He treats you the same as he would any of his friends. I’m not sure class even comes into it.”

“Still, he’s the lord of the villa and these lands. I can’t go complaining to nobles willy-nilly, let alone yell at him...right?”

“Well...” Her face fell a little. “Perhaps you’re right.”

*Great, I ruined the mood again. I’d better find a way to clear the air, fast.*

Leo yawned, teeth flashing in a blatant display of unease...or tiredness, I couldn’t tell which.

I laughed stiffly. “Er...I know I’m changing the topic a little, but I’ll do everything I can to avoid you yelling at me, too.”

“Oh, Takumi. I could never be angry at you.”

*I seriously doubt that. Sure, she hasn't been angry with me so far, but who knows what the future holds? Not that I'll ever try to upset her or anything.*

Leo raised her head. "Ruff, ruff?"

"Is that so?" I smiled and scratched Leo's chin. "Thanks, girl. I know I can always rely on you for help if I need it. You're so dependable!"

"Wooooo!"

Claire smiled at our rapport. "Miss Leo truly loves you, doesn't she?"

Leo stuck her snout proudly into the air. "Awooo!" *I try to!*

The conversation died down for a while as we both stopped to pet her.

Claire glanced at me. "By the way, there's one more thing I wanted to ask you."

"By all means, ask away."

I could tell from the gravity in her eyes that it was serious.

*So she's finally getting to the point.*

"It's about Anze—er, Anrinnelesse," she began. "How do you intend to reply to her proposal?"

"Right, that..."

"I know it's improper of me to ask when it doesn't concern me, but I can't seem to stop thinking about it."

*That's fair. My answer could change a lot of things around here, after all.*

If I agreed to marry Anrinnelesse, I wouldn't be allowed to set foot in the villa anymore, let alone live there. I'd also have to move to the next domain over and take over the countdom with Anrinnelesse. I had no idea what that'd mean for my herb contract with House Liberte.

*Not that any of that matters. I've already made up my mind.*

"Don't worry," I assured her, "I'm going to turn Anrinnelesse down. I was just wondering how to do it, that's all."

"Really?!" She froze, eyes wide. "You won't... Oh, I'm so glad..." She said

something I didn't quite catch, but her relief came across clearly enough.

*She must've been really worried about our herb contract.*

"The thing is, I want to find a way to do it that won't hurt her feelings too badly," I said. "I'm pretty stumped...is this what it was like when you had to turn down all those suitors?"

Claire was in a similar situation herself, when Eckenhart kept pestering her to marry.

"In a way," she nodded thoughtfully. "I had it much easier than you, of course. As the daughter of a duke, I received offers from other nobles and common folk alike, but I was never obligated to marry any of them."

"That makes sense... I mean, how's a commoner supposed to turn down a noble's offer?"

That went doubly so since the only family in the kingdom more important than them was the royals themselves. Claire outranked anyone who could want to marry her, which meant she could act however she pleased.

"I had my share of hardship from the sheer volume, of course," she added wryly. "I couldn't rehash the same excuse too much, after all. That would've been rude."

"Right, that makes sense."

*I'd get fed up with it, too, if I had to think of so many reasons to turn down total strangers...*

"What if a noble asks a peasant...no, let's keep it simple and just say someone who outranks you asks to marry you. How are you supposed to respond to that?" I asked.

"You're far from a commoner. Between Miss Leo and your Gift, you're decidedly above that."

I grimaced a little. "I'm really nothing special...er, let's not change the subject. Let's assume I'm just a normal guy for now."

Eckenhart did bow and scrape a little when he first met Leo, and I'd heard that silver fenrirs outranked dukes in this world. Having a Gift also made me

something of an outlier to the traditional hierarchy. I didn't want to focus on that, however, since I didn't see myself as any better than or even equals with nobility. I probably had Claire and her household's kindness to thank on that front, though. It was hard to think of myself as any less of an average Joe than I was in Japan, so I had every intention of acting that way.

"I suppose we can talk theoretically," Claire acknowledged. "Let me think... You normally wouldn't refuse at all, especially since we're talking about nobility to commonfolk, not noble to noble. Most commoners jump at the chance to become nobility."

I nodded understandingly. "That explains why Anrinnelesse was so forceful about it."

"Well...yes. I believe that's part of it, though she's always been...headstrong, shall we say."

*Headstrong? I didn't think that'd be common among noble ladies... though Claire was also incredibly stubborn when Sebastian and I were planning the trip to the Fenrir Forest. I'm pretty sure she was only so overbearing because she knows us all so well. She even apologized for it later, so I shouldn't assume she's always like that.*

What Claire said made plenty of sense, of course. In a world with such strict hierarchies, most people would never have another chance to move up in the world, and I couldn't blame them for wanting that. Most of them probably assumed being nobility meant living a life of ease and luxury.

*It's looking less and less likely I'll have the grounds to just turn her down...not that I want to accept her offer any more now than before.*

"It's incredibly rare for a noble to make such a proposition, of course, but it has happened," she added.

"Really? I would've thought nobles only married other nobles, as a rule."

I assumed nobles only married people with some kind of political power. Most of that knowledge was from stories, granted, but I was pretty sure Japanese history had many such cases. Bloodlines always seemed to be on nobles' minds, not to mention how ties with other powers could strengthen their own house.



There was also an undercurrent of “pure” noble blood that I thought would play into things.

Claire nodded. “It’s quite common for nobles to marry peasantry in this kingdom, especially for ducal houses. It’s quite the storied trend, in fact, to the point that more nobles marry commonfolk than other nobles overall.”

*I bet Sebastian would know all about that... I’m sure he’d give me all the details I could ask for if I get the chance sometime.*

“And none of them say no, ever?” I asked.

“I wonder? I’ve certainly never heard of such a thing. As I’ve said, very few would pass up nobility.”

“Yeah...that makes plenty of sense.”

*It’s a unique chance, after all... Plus, I doubt most people would turn down a direct proposition from the ruler of their own land.*

It did mean the line between commoner and noble was less distinct than I’d assumed, at least in this country. That wasn’t to say they weren’t on top, of course—I still remembered the way every guard in Ractos took a knee at the first glimpse of Eckenhart.

“That’s not to say one *can’t* turn down a noble,” she continued. “I’m sure that even if you do turn Anrinnelesse down outright, nobody would think less of you.”

“I’ll admit, that’s a relief.”

It was good to hear I wouldn’t have to worry about pressure from above once I’d officially rejected her. With that decided, all that remained was the question of how, exactly, I’d refuse her. I didn’t want to shock her too badly or hurt her, especially since she was already convinced I’d accept.

“So, uh...any ideas how I do it?” I asked.

“That’s the question, to be certain. I can sympathize with you on that front.”

The two of us sat and thought for some time, stroking Leo between us.

*Man, I’m glad she’s here to lessen the mental load on me...*

“I know!” Claire suddenly declared, turning to face me.

“Oh? What’s your idea?”

“You’ve already signed an herb contract with us, haven’t you? That would imply strong ties with House Liberte.”

“Yeah...that, and the fact I’m living here with you,” I agreed. Claire, Tilura, Eckenhart, and everyone else at the mansion had helped me in more ways than I could count.

“Should you join House Bastler, that contract would have to change,” she explained. “Instead of dealing with you as an individual, we’d be contracting with House Bastler proper.”

“Really? Is that how it works here?”

“It is indeed. Most noble families have some manner of business with each other, but it’s almost never ratified.”

I remember hearing that most nobles didn’t rely on taxes for their income and conducted some kind of business instead. That led to taxes staying low, while those in power could maintain their extravagant lifestyles. I liked that system a lot—except for cases like the former Count Bastler making a buck on others’ misery, of course. Some nobles might even raise taxes depending on how their business ventures were faring. It also meant that doing business in a neighboring domain could end up leeching money from that domain’s nobility, though that seemed relatively less common.

*Maybe nobles don’t have contracts with each other because they make more money without? I bet they could make more money if they dealt with other lands’ commoners directly.*

That would mesh best from my experience in Japan. It was almost always more profitable to buy and sell wholesale, though there were definite downsides as well.

“What if you tell her you can’t accept due to contract issues?” Claire suggested. “That might convince her.”

“Makes sense. She probably won’t be as hurt emotionally that way.”

“Exactly. If you justify yourself with her appearance or personality, you’re sure to hurt her feelings. I don’t think that would be a bad thing in this case, though...”

I laughed awkwardly. “Haha... I’m bad at turning people down in ways that hurt them. It’s a big flaw of mine.”

“Flaw? I’d call that one of your most attractive—” She cut herself off, clearing her throat. “You’d best look ahead to rejecting her. You *will* be turning her down, and she won’t be pleased to hear it.”

*Oh...I guess she’s right.*

She frowned at me, and I sheepishly looked away. I was always bad at turning down requests, especially when it came to things that really mattered to the other person. I could never be as immovable as I was in my head; Claire’s insistence when we went to the Fenrir Forest was still fresh in my mind. I always ended up fixating on how disappointed they’d be with me.

As for Claire, she must’ve decided that she’d lend me a hand because I was struggling so much with this...I assumed. Her stake in this was still a bit of a mystery to me.

I dipped my head to her. “Thank you very much. I think this is going to work better than what I could come up with.”

I probably didn’t have to put all this effort into sparing Anrinnelesse’s feelings, but after talking it out with Claire, I was still glad I did.

She shook her head. “I’m glad I could help you. But, um... Takumi?”

“Yes?”

“Perhaps you should consider her offer a little more after all? It would likely be better for you in the long run. You’ll be a count.”

“Well...I guess, maybe.”

It’d be rough for a while cleaning up after Anrinnelesse’s villainous father, but after that I’d be living in the lap of luxury. Even if work never got any easier, it’d be a hundred times easier than the hell I’d been through in Japan. There was one big problem with that, though.

“I’d prefer to stay here, just like this,” I told her.

“Like...this?”

“Yes. I can talk to you and the others whenever I like, and there’s more than enough room to play with Leo. I’m also really happy I can help both your family and your people with my plants.”

“You don’t need to worry about us, frankly...but I believe I understand.”

“Honestly, I’ve never been happier than when I’m here with everyone—you, Sebastian, Tilura, Milicia, you all mean so much to me. Things have been a little stressful lately, sure, but I even like learning swordplay and magic here,” I admitted.

“Oh... You like being with us that much?”

Becoming nobility was tempting, sure, but I wouldn’t trade my current life for the world. It was the exact opposite of the endless cycle of exhaustion I had in Japan. I could spend all my time with Leo, and I was surrounded by people who genuinely cared for me.

*I’ve gotta admit, though, the biggest reason is that I can’t imagine myself as some high-and-mighty count. I don’t have it in me for that life.*

“I know I might have to leave the villa someday and find my own place to live, but until then, I want to enjoy this life to the fullest.” I felt a little awkward spewing all my feelings like that, but the gratitude I felt toward Claire easily beat out my bashfulness.

“L-Leave?” Her eyes widened. “You can stay here as long as you want...f-forever, even, if you’d like.” She edged a little closer to me on the bed, tenderly resting her head on my shoulder.

“C-Claire?”

*Gah... If she’s this close, I can’t ignore how good she smells no matter how hard I try!*

She tilted her head up towards me. “Takumi... I, um...”

“Y-Yes, Claire?”

“I meant it when I said you could stay forever. From the day you saved me in those woods, the moment our eyes first met, I-I’ve...”

My heart was pounding so loudly in my ears that I could barely hear a thing. She was so close, to the point where even the slightest movement would cause me to brush against her. I couldn’t feel my arms or legs, and pulling my eyes from her beauty was just as impossible.

*I didn’t feel any of this when Anrinnelesse asked to marry me... I was shocked, but that was it.*

“Takumi,” she breathed, eyes fluttering closed, and as she nuzzled closer into me—

“BWARK!!”

Claire hurriedly pulled away from me. “Wah?!”

“Leo?! What’s wrong?!” I cried.

*That was close. If she’d interrupted us any later, we would’ve... What would’ve even happened?*

Leo stood up, huffing in irritation. “Bwuff... Roo, woo, roo.”

“You okay, Leo?”

“Is something the matter, Miss Leo?”

Leo plodded over to the door, letting out another hefty sigh. Then, she reared up on her hind legs and pushed it open. A pile of bodies fell inside as she did so.

“Bark!”

“Gwah?!”

“Oops!”

“Goodness!”

“Awwwf...”

*Leo can open doors? No, wait, more importantly...*

“Eckenhart?” I muttered in disbelief.

“F-Father? Sebastian, Tilura, what are you doing here?” Claire asked, aghast.



Sure enough, Tilura was at the bottom of the dogpile, with Sebastian and Eckenhart landing on top of her. Cherie energetically ran circles on the duke's back, as if this were some exciting new game.

"Gwehh!" Tilura moaned. "I'm getting smooshed..."

"S-Sorry," Eckenhart muttered as he picked himself up.

The butler frantically followed suit. "My apologies, young miss!"

Claire narrowed her eyes at her father. "You surely weren't spying on us, were you?"

"Haha, ha... Er, Sebastian? Care to explain?" Eckenhart deflected.

The butler shook his head. "How very ignoble of you, milord, to push the brunt of your sin upon me."

*I don't think he can complain, since he was doing the same thing... I'd definitely like a proper explanation.*

Leo just shook her head. "Bwoof."

*Wait. They haven't actually been here this whole time, have they?*

Claire glared daggers at the old men before standing and approaching her little sister. "Tilura?"

Panic overtook the small girl's face. "Y-Yes, um... Father said he saw you heading to Takumi's room with a super resolved look, and he thought something was up. He said we should all go watch you together!"

I couldn't see Claire's face from this angle, but I gathered she looked rather terrifying. I could practically see the anger radiating from her back—though I might've been imagining things. All I could see clearly was that the tips of her ears were bright red.

*I guess she was really embarrassed to be watched like that...or wait, maybe that's an anger thing too?*

"Arf! Awuff~!" Cherie added eagerly from beside Tilura's feet, but I doubted the little fenrir knew or cared what was going on. She probably just wanted to feel included.

“T-Tilura!” Eckenhart wailed. “Don’t tell her *that!*”

“Hmm.” Claire’s voice was deep and threatening, like the heart of a black hole. There was a tremble to it as she held back some other, stronger emotion. “So that’s why.”

It took everything I had just to process the situation, so I couldn’t stop Claire... but at that point she whipped about to face me.

“I’m so sorry for this, Takumi. We’ll have to stop here for today. I enjoyed talking to you, though.” Although she was smiling warmly, there seemed to be an unspoken threat beneath the surface.





“Uh. Me too?”

Still smiling, she turned back to face the interlopers. I could see the three tremble and quake from across the room.

“Arf?” Cherie innocently cocked her head to the side.

“Father!” Claire snapped. “Since when has it been acceptable for a *duke* to stoop as low as eavesdropping?!” She stormed towards him with movements that could only be described as majestic.

“W-Wait, sweetie, I-I admit it! It’s all my fault! I’m sorry! I’m sorryyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!”

Claire ignored his desperate pleas as she grabbed him by his collar and dragged him out of the room. It was almost frightening how she was able to move such a large man with her slender arms.

*Wait, he’s bound to be putting up some resistance... Has Claire secretly been ripped this whole time? Though I guess that train of thought is rude right now.*

Sebastian dropped his gaze, hand over his heart. “Godspeed, milord. Godspeed.”

“S-Sister’s scary...” Tilura quivered.

I let out a heavy sigh as soon as Claire and Eckenhart were both out of sight, half out of relief and half exasperation at the duke’s actions. My chest was still a bundle of too many emotions to process.

“Takumi?” Tilura looked at me quizzically. “Are you tired?”

“No...well, yes, but not in the way you’re thinking.”

*I’m mentally fatigued for sure.*

“Why would Eckenhart do something like that?” I wondered aloud.

Sebastian stroked his chin. “I informed milord of what had transpired between you and Lady Anrinnelesse. That would likely explain his motive.”

“Wait, Anrinnelesse and I?”

“Indeed. Specifically, her offer of marriage.”

“Oh...yeah, that would explain things.”

Eckenhart had noticed something was up with Claire outside the mansion, so Sebastian must have filled him in.

“It seems milord grew more concerned with his daughter’s state after that—though of course, I can only offer conjecture.”

*I guess it makes sense that he’d look into Claire and not Anrinnelesse at that point. He is her father, after all.*

“Of course,” he continued with a sigh, “his expression was one of juvenile curiosity, not concern. I believe he was simply amused by the situation.”

“Um... I get the feeling that’s not how a father should act,” I said.

“Verily so. One can only hope he acted as he did knowing how you would reply to Lady Anrinnelesse.”

“Fair enough,” I conceded. “I’ve known her all of what, a day?” He was perceptive enough to notice. I wouldn’t be surprised if my near-total silence during dinner was all the proof he needed. “So that’s why he decided to spy on his own daughter?”

“Indeed. He had attempted to visit her chambers, but found her trying to slip out unnoticed.”

“Shouldn’t she have seen him then?” I asked.

“No, he hid, recalling her earlier tirade.”

He was probably afraid she was still angry at him. I hadn’t gotten that impression myself, but it wasn’t impossible. It was a little weird to think of such a large man hiding, but with Sebastian’s knowledge of the villa, it wouldn’t have been hard for him to find a spot. Still, none of that explained his hiding.

“We then watched as milady furtively entered your room. The rest is as Lady Tilura described.”

I sighed. “So he did it because he was curious, after all. Wasn’t there anything else on his mind?” It didn’t seem like a good explanation.

Sebastian grinned—or smirked, rather. It wasn’t a pleasant smile. “Rest

assured, I shan't pry into what you discussed or what transpired within your room. It's far more interesting that way."

"You could at least try to hide it."

*Like master, like butler, I guess. I've been seeing a lot of this side of him lately...*

"Ah, I nearly forgot." Sebastian nodded at Tilura. "We encountered the young miss as we were pursuing milady."

She nodded. "Father said it'd be fun to watch, so I came along!"

"Right...of course he did." I sighed.

*At least Sebastian is consistent. He really doesn't care if I see through him.*

My guess was that Tilura was either headed to the bathroom, or unable to sleep and looking for someone to play with. Regardless, I couldn't believe Eckenhart brought her in as an accomplice to his scheme.

"It was quite fortuitous that Milady left the door open as she did. I imagine she was too nervous to close it fully behind her."

*Lucky for you, maybe. Leo would've noticed if they'd tried to open it...but then again, she'd probably sniffed them out from the very beginning.*

I could understand Eckenhart's concern for his daughter, of course, but I wished he'd show more restraint in the future.

"Well then," the butler said with a bow, "we had best leave you. It's rather late."

Tilura energetically waved. "G'night, Takumi, Miss Leo!"

"Ruff-uff."

"Goodnight, Tilura." I turned to Sebastian, narrowing my eyes. "You're just as guilty as Eckenhart since you didn't stop him, you know."

"Ohoho! I haven't the faintest idea what you could mean."

"Feel free to laugh now. I'll be telling Claire everything you just told me in the morning."



He instantly drooped. “M-My sincerest apologies.”

*He’s that scared of her, huh? Not that I can blame him after that last display. I hope she was only that demonic because he’s her dad.*

As soon as Leo and I were alone again, I sighed.

“All’s calm again, huh? Like a summer storm.”

Leo heavily exhaled, nodding. “Bwuff.”

I could tell she was thoroughly fed up with this whole affair.

“Claire, though... Oh, Claire...”

“Warf? Bowff, bwuff!”

“What? Of course I can’t! She’s a noble! There’s no way I could ask her that.”

She wouldn’t leave my head, especially not with Leo’s suggestion still fresh in my ears.

*I don’t want to think about it... How could Leo say such a thing? Do dogs—er, silver fenrir not get this kind of thing?*

Granted, Claire and I had talked at length about nobles and commoners marrying, but we’d talked exclusively about the noble proposing, like Anrinnelesse did to me. There was no way I could make the same offer to Claire, even if she was being especially antsy about it before we got interrupted. I’d always known she was pretty, but having her sit beside me like that—close enough to smell her, to touch her—drove that home even harder. She was tomboyish and assertive, but well-versed in her power and responsibilities without being arrogant. In fact, she hated that sort of thing. She didn’t even mind that I knew nothing about proper manners, and I’d no doubt showed that every time we ate together.

Claire had been so close to me, too, and I kept thinking about what might’ve happened if Leo hadn’t barked—if we hadn’t been interrupted. The ambiance, the mood—granted they meant the same thing, but I couldn’t help but feel scared, almost, by what that had all meant.

*Seriously, what would’ve happened? She was clearly setting the pace there. Don’t tell me she really feels that way about me?*

I shook my head. “No, I need to stop. I’ll never sleep at this rate. It’s late enough already.”

She wasn’t here, and I got the feeling I’d come to the wrong conclusion without her. My heart was already racing out of control, and it’d be difficult to calm down enough to sleep.

“Okay, bedtime, Leo. Look at the time already.”

“Ruff, wuff.”

Leo readily curled up beside my bed, and with one last pet, I crawled under the covers.

*The more sleep I get, the better... I’ve got a lot to do tomorrow. I should probably think of what I’m going to say to Anrinnelesse, but if I do that, I just know I’ll end up thinking about Claire again. No, it’s better just to sleep.*

I closed my eyes, and the fatigue from the day’s chaos set in all at once. I had little trouble drifting off to dreamland.



I awoke the next morning to Leo’s tongue on my face, just as I had so many times before in Japan. I must not have slept well the previous night, given how hard it was to get up, but luckily I was fully awake by the time I’d gotten washed up and dressed.

“Okay!” I slapped my cheeks a few times for good measure.

“Warf?!”

Leo jumped a little in surprise, but I was able to calm her down easily with an apology and a few head pats.

My mind was made up. I’d face the marriage offer head-on. I wish I had a little more time to think it over, but no amount of contemplation could change my answer. All that would change is potentially finding a way to let Anrinnelesse down more easily. I knew I was a chronic people-pleaser, and I couldn’t predict how that’d play into the events of today, but I owed it to myself to clearly and firmly turn her down. It wasn’t much in the long run, maybe. Still, it was a step to change, and I had to take it.

I stepped out of my room with Leo close behind. I started walking toward the dining hall, and I could feel myself going slower and slower the closer we got. It was a little pathetic.

*Thanks for pushing me along, Leo.*

When I finally stepped inside, everyone except Eckenhart was there. Tilura was rubbing her eyes, and Cherie was sleeping on a chair. I wasn't surprised, given how late they were up last night.

"Good morning, Claire, Tilura...Anrinnelesse," I greeted.

"Good morning," Claire replied crisply.

"Morning..." Tilura muttered.

"Good day to you, Takumi."

I took my seat at the table. Anrinnelesse seemed to have slept well, since both her curls and her posture were near-perfect.

"So...Eckenhart's not here yet?" I asked.

Claire nodded. "Still fast asleep."

He was never very good with mornings, but I imagined that went doubly so after Claire lectured him last night. Claire herself wasn't acting tired at all, but I could spot faint circles under her eyes.

*Just how long did she yell at him?*

Helena's food was carried out, and even Tilura and Cherie seemed to perk up from the smell. Cherie in particular stuck her nose up over the table's edge, sniffing intently.

Claire looked at everyone assembled. "Well, then, let's eat."

"Yeah, I'm hungry," I echoed.

"Ruff!"

"Arf!"

"Breakfast time!" Tilura chirped.

"Thank you kindly for the food," Anrinnelesse intoned.

With that, we all began to eat.

“My! How scrumptious!” Anrinnelesse exclaimed.

Claire smirked. “Of course! Helena—our head chef—is a culinary genius.”

Anrinnelesse was in an excellent mood after that, and breakfast ended amicably. That meant it was nearly time to get to business.

“How very filling!” the count’s daughter declared as the maids poured our post-meal tea. “I can hardly imagine having such pleasures every morning. At the risk of repeating myself, Claire, you’re astoundingly well-off.”

Claire shook her head. “We have a skilled chef, nothing more. Our ingredients are no different than what our people eat...though I suppose meals of this quality *are* something of a luxury.”

The entire time they talked, the gears in my head were spinning at full speed. I knew what to do and how I’d justify it, but I still struggled with how exactly to tell her.

*I’ll have to figure it out as I go along. Overthinking things now won’t help me at all.*

I cleared my throat. “I—”

“Oh, right!” Anrinnelesse cut me off. “Do you have an answer for me? About yesterday’s question, I mean.”

Being interrupted took some of the wind out of my sails, but I wasn’t going to falter so easily. Men were supposed to be bold and courageous...or something like that.

I took a deep breath. “About that... I-I’m sorry, but I have to refuse.”

She blinked. “What? You... I must have misheard you. Did you honestly just turn *me* down?”

“I did. I won’t marry you.”

The words came more easily the second time around. My hands were still clenched tight under the table, my palms slick with sweat. Claire smiled warmly at me, nodding in approval. Tilura was staring blankly at us.

*Right...nobody filled her in.*

“Y-You can’t be...” Anrinnelesse shook her head in disbelief. “This is a golden opportunity to become a count!”

“I know.”

Sure, most people in this world would kill for that chance, but it didn’t feel worth it to me.

The shock didn’t fade from her face. “Might I ask *how* you could refuse?”

“Of course. I have a contract with Claire and Eckenhart—all of House Liberte to provide them with herbs and medicines. That means...”

I thought back to the previous night and explained the contract and my situation to her. I made sure to emphasize I was determined to see my contract through. Both Claire and Sebastian nodded periodically throughout, so I was sure I hadn’t missed anything major.

Anrinnelesse could only gape. “Impossible... You would turn down this opportunity for such a *meager* reason? I’ve never met a man who hasn’t caved to my will before.”

She was admittedly quite pretty, which only sweetened the deal. There wasn’t even the matter of succession to deal with since her father was already out of the picture. Neither benefit seemed worth it to me. Anrinnelesse was perfectly nice, of course, but I couldn’t imagine marrying anyone so easily.

*I’ll admit, I want to play with those springy curls of hers, but not badly enough to marry her for them.*

“Y-You’re truly rejecting me... Nobles are privileged folk, revered across the land! Do you not want the masses to kneel at your feet?” she questioned, her eyes round with disbelief.

“No, actually. The thought hasn’t occurred to me, ever,” I said flatly.

Technically I already had that experience second-hand, since Eckenhart was outright groveling to Leo when he first met her, but I wasn’t going to mention that now.

“I’m so sorry it didn’t work out,” Claire told her with a bit too wide of a smile.

“You’d best let him be now. You wouldn’t want to lose more face than you already have, would you?”

*She’s really proud of me for standing up for myself, isn’t she?*

“To think any man would refuse my title...would refuse *me* so readily!” Anrinnelesse fell weakly to the ground, eyes still wide with horror. Her pupils were massive despite the brightness of the hall.

At that moment, the door burst open and Eckenhart strode inside.

“Gahahaha! Takumi’s a man of resolution! I’d expect no less of my favorite young man!”

Clearly, he’d witnessed the whole thing. From her post beside the door, Laila averted her gaze smoothly. My guess was that she’d stopped him and held the door open just enough for him to spy on us.

Claire sighed. “Again with the eavesdropping, Father? Haven’t you learned your lesson?”

The duke flinched. “I-I can explain. I arrived just as Takumi was about to turn her down, so I thought this would be best—you know, so I wouldn’t interrupt.”

She sighed. “Fine, I suppose. Better that than let his determination go to waste.”

“Right? See, I did the right thing!” He nodded, a grin spreading across his face.

*I don’t think he learned his lesson.*

“Never again, though,” Claire added frostily. “Am I clear?”

“Yes, of course.”

The duke arrived at the table, and Laila swiftly procured and poured him a cup of tea. I was genuinely impressed with the fluidity of her motions.

“Sorry it didn’t go how you wanted, Anrinnelesse,” Eckenhart intoned.

“Y-Your Grace... Why in the world would Takumi refuse my advances so utterly?” Anrinnelesse asked.

“Simple—the boy’s under my protection. Anyone would pick a duke’s favor over a count’s.”

“I see... So it’s because you outrank me.”

*Wait, that’s not right! I’m not that power-hungry.*

“Er, Eckenhart?” I started. “It honestly doesn’t matter to me who outranks who here.”

He blinked at me. “It doesn’t?”

Claire nodded proudly. “Of course not! Takumi would never be so shallow.”

“Hmm... Granted, it wouldn’t be like him.” He turned back to the countess-to-be. “Either way, you’d better give up peacefully.”

Being raised Japanese, I didn’t fixate on status like that, so it wasn’t even an afterthought to me. Granted, not all Japanese people were like that, and some probably would have leapt at the chance at more power and riches.

*Come to think of it, I don’t think being Japanese even factors into this at all...*

Anrinnelesse looked up at me in horror. “Power means nothing to you...? How?!”

Growing up in a count’s house, she’d probably been surrounded by servants and the like all her life. Authority must have meant everything. By contrast, my only real exposure to nobility was through Claire and Eckenhart, and they barely cared about titles and the like. Maybe this world was a lot more involved with noble relations and hierarchies than they let on—and as a Japanese man, that hit a little too close to home.



## Interlude: Claire's Struggle and Her Maid

**UPON** finishing dinner after my return from Ractos, I retired to my room. Despite the headache of the Yugard store finally being resolved, there was a new ordeal on my mind.

"Hahh..."

I couldn't help but sigh.

The maid helping me change raised her gaze. "Is something the matter, milady?"

"Perhaps." I exhaled heavily once more as I nodded.

Her name was Ermine, and she was both the head maid of the villa and my closest servant since birth. She was one of the oldest servants, surpassed only by the likes of Sebastian, and had consistently proven her competence in nearly every field. Her long, light hair was tied neatly back, and she was just a touch shorter than I was. She rarely served in the common rooms, and I doubted she and Takumi had ever even talked. I'd seldom seen him talk to anyone except Sebastian, in fact.

"Might I ask what's bothering you?" Ermine asked.

"Well...I suppose it couldn't hurt. It's about Takumi..."

I doubted that talking about it would solve anything, but it might well help get my feelings in order. Clinging to that faint hope, I told Ermine everything—if I didn't, Sebastian would no doubt inform the entire staff anyways by the next morning. It wasn't a secret, after all, and all would be resolved tomorrow.

Once I was changed and I'd explained the situation, Ermine nodded thoughtfully, arms crossed in front of her. It was rather amusing, watching her expressions shift ceaselessly as I talked.

"I see... So Lady Bastler has proposed to Mr. Hirooka. I can imagine how that would affect you, milady. Should he accept her offer...well, he will have to

choose one of you. This is a rather interes—er, grim turn of events.”

“I heard that, Ermine.” I rolled my eyes. “I’d forgotten how much you enjoyed this kind of thing.”

*Perhaps I picked the wrong person to consult... She’s always been overly interested in others’ romance.*

“At my age, you’ll understand how important it is to live vicariously through others’ youth.” She smiled wistfully. “There’s an old saying, you know... ‘Meddling in the romance of others may bring new hardships, but doing so is far more entertaining than dwelling on hearsay and lends to eternal youth.’”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’ve never heard such a thing. You made it up, didn’t you?”

“Oh, I’m sure someone very wise thought of it. Hehehe!” She covered her mouth and chuckled bemusedly.

I wasn’t sure about her claims of “eternal youth,” but given that she was even older than Father but looked no older than any other maid, there was likely a kernel of truth to her words.

*Right... Sebastian also enjoys this kind of thing, doesn’t he?*

“So?” I pressed. “I’ve told you all there is to this. Will you give me advice, or won’t you?”

Talking about it hadn’t helped as much as I’d hoped, and I was determined to get something out of the conversation.

“Of course, milady. But if I may...”

“Yes?”

“You said Lady Bastler would wait until tomorrow for an answer, yes? Won’t you receive your answer then as well?”

“Yes, I suppose...but I doubt I’ll be getting any sleep at this rate.”

“No, I suppose not.”

I fervently wanted to believe Takumi would turn her down, and I was exhausted with all that had happened in town and with Father and

Anrinnelesse, but none of it was enough to slow my spinning head. If nothing was done, I'd surely have a sleepless night ahead of me.

Ermine smiled. "You wouldn't want him to see you exhausted, would you?"

"Please stop reading my mind like that."

She chuckled. "I've known you since the day you were born, milady. I have a decent grasp of what you're thinking—*especially* now."

"Especially...? You mean Takumi might have noticed as well?!"

I couldn't imagine how to feel if he knew how I felt, how I always found myself watching him, the way I'd readily cling to the faintest trace of his voice... The very thought of it was too much to bear.

Thankfully, she shook her head no. "I highly doubt that, milady. Mr. Hirooka may be highly perceptive of others, but he seems rather dense about what others think of him. I would imagine it stems from a poor self-esteem."

"Oh...of course. I'm glad."

*Glad* wasn't the most apt turn of phrase, perhaps, but I could understand him not thinking much of himself. It felt almost as though he'd been denied what he needed all his life.

*I do hope he'll tell me more about his life from before I met him...but for that, I'll have to deal with Anrinnelesse's proposal. He can't answer any of my questions if he isn't here.*

"I would advise against any direct interference," Ermine advised. "I doubt Mr. Hirooka would appreciate such a thing. He may well take offense if you meddle in his personal affairs."

I hadn't even voiced that thought, but the maid thoroughly denied it. That made sense, though—I couldn't imagine he would appreciate that.

"I know that...but again, stop reading my mind."

"Your thoughts are written on your face, milady, plain as day. When it comes to Mr. Hirooka, of course, I imagine anyone could figure you out."

"I'll be sure to watch for that."

“Now, about Mr. Hirooka himself... I believe it may be best if you consult him directly about this.”

“D-Directly?”

“Luckily, he may still be awake at this hour. I would imagine you could have quite the fruitful conversation in his room while you both stroke Miss Leo—just as you did in that forest where you found Cherie.”

“Of course you know about the forest, too...”

I could still remember how I strongarmed myself into joining Takumi’s expedition into the forest, and how we talked by the fire in its depths. So much had happened since then, but everything about that time—the flickering of the flames, the stars and moon above—were still fresh in my mind. It didn’t even matter that I’d spent most of our talk apologizing for my selfishness in being there.

“Of course!” Ermine smiled. “Did you believe Sebastian wouldn’t tell me everything about you when we’re apart?”

“I suppose not... That’s very much like you.”

She puffed out her chest with pride. “It is, indeed!”

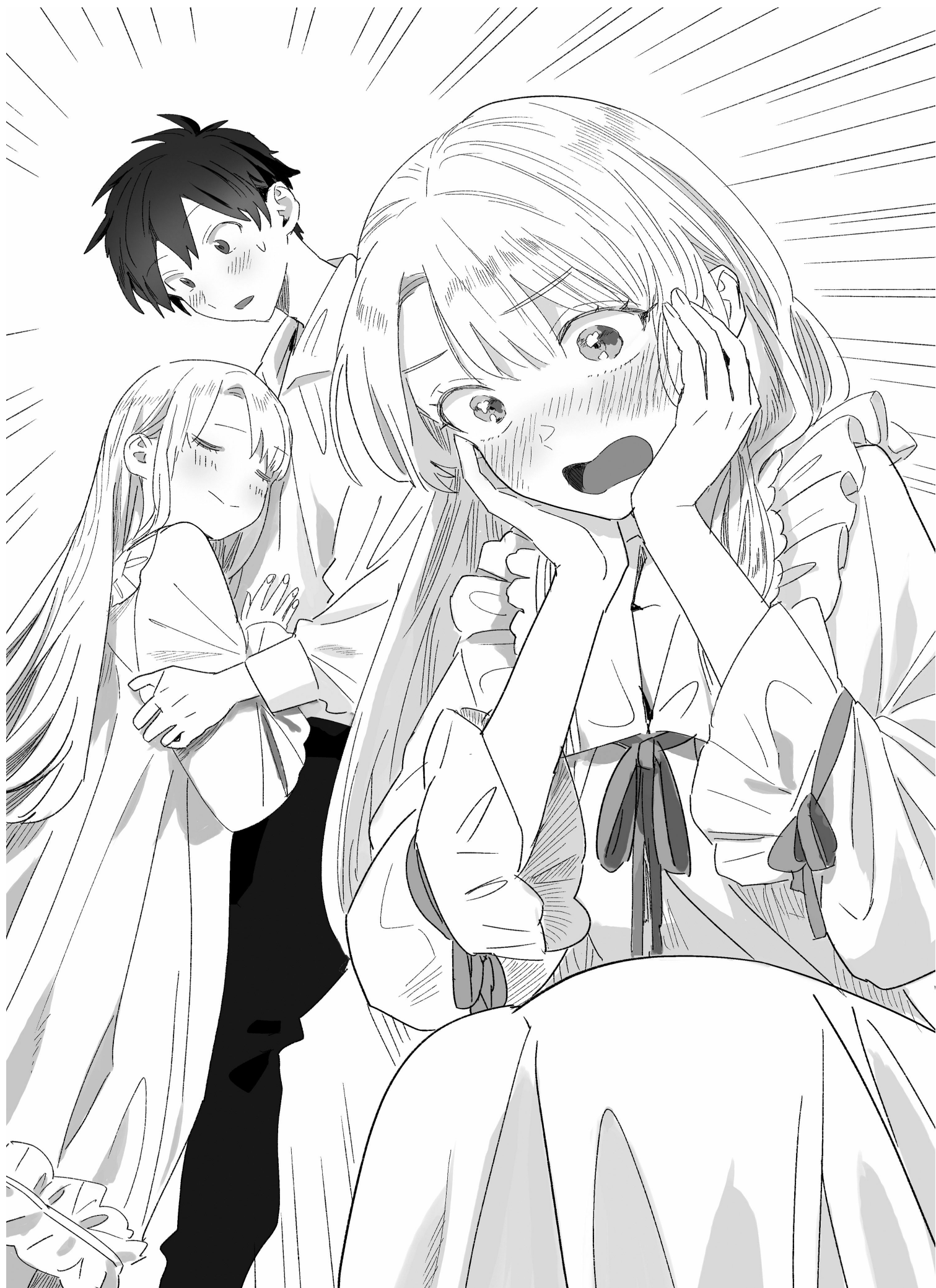
I sighed and shook my head. Of course Sebastian would tell her such things. I had to assume Sebastian had been awake during my entire conversation with Takumi.

“Enough about the past,” I pressed. “Are you sure I won’t be a bother? It’s getting rather late...”

“Do you remember how Lady Tilura barged into his room before he left for Lange? I can’t believe you would be any more trouble. Go to him, as though intent to leap into his arms! Honestly, I imagine he’d be quite enthused if you did.”

The thought of being held by him rose unbidden to mind, and my cheeks felt hot enough to give off steam. I frantically shook my head clear of the apparition.





“O-Of course not! I could never!”

“I should imagine not,” Ermine lamented. “If you could, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. Just remember, milady, confidence makes the woman! Mr. Hirooka would never see you as a bother, given his gentle disposition.”

“Confidence makes the woman...” I repeated.

*Isn’t it ‘confidence makes the man’ and ‘charm makes the woman’? I swear that’s an actual saying, even, not another of Ermine’s delusions.*

“Are you sure he wouldn’t be offended by me in particular? You’re positive?”

“I’d thought you were every bit as direct as His Grace, but it seems you have your share of irritating quir—ahem! Pardon me, milady.”

“Oh, I know I have my fickle, frustrating parts. I need to know he’ll accept me, though. I can’t imagine what might happen if he found me a nuisance.”

I wouldn’t have hesitated to visit anyone else at this hour, not even Anrinnelesse. He alone was different, and even though I knew precisely why, I couldn’t allay the fear that he would hate me for it.

“You’ve become quite the delicate maiden, milady, a true pleasure to watch over and serve. I shall be sure to pass this on to Johanna in the morning.”

“Why would Johanna, of all people, have any stake in this?”

“She and I are of a kind, though not in the same way Sebastian and I are. I must stress that talking to Mr. Hirooka directly is by far the best course of action you could take.”

“I suppose you have a point... Brooding all night shan’t help me, I’m sure.”

“Exactly,” Ermine nodded. “Of course, should you be asked about your motive by Lady Bastler or the like, you may need an alibi... Let’s say you wish to apologize for His Grace’s actions earlier today.”

“Father’s actions? I see...that would be just cause, wouldn’t it?”

Father could have stopped Takumi’s fight at the Yugard store far more quickly, but he intentionally held the guards back to observe his fight. Takumi

was injured as a result. Surely he wouldn't be opposed if I visited him to apologize for that, and if all went well, I could naturally ask him what he thought of Anrinnelesse.

"Excellent idea, Ermine! I'll make for his room—"

"After your bath, yes? It would be the only polite thing to do."

"What? I-I suppose... I *will* be visiting his room, after all. Wait, I'm not planning on making *that* kind of visit."

I wanted him to see me at my best, of course, but Ermine's tone implied a far more licentious meaning.

"Of course not," she assured me. "I simply wish for you to be presentable to Mr. Hirooka. Miss Leo will be there as well, so any untoward business would be out of the question. Come now, the bath is all prepared for you. Let's make haste."

"Already? That was fast— Wait, don't push me! I'm going!"

With that, I found myself on the way to the bath already, my things neatly bundled in Ermine's arms. I didn't realize how much of this was planned until I was already in the water. By that time, however, I was so busy trying to devise a way to talk with him that wouldn't leave a poor impression of me that I hardly cared.



**"THERE** she goes."

I sighed a little as I watched milady leave. She had stopped only briefly by her room after her shower to receive my help with her hair and clothes, and she was headed for her rendezvous with Mr. Hirooka now.

"Despite being decisive enough to regularly give the entire staff headaches, she's rather hesitant where Mr. Hirooka is involved. It's rather cute, in fact."

She was admittedly calmer in her adult life, but we all had our stories of her days as a true tomboy. Seeing her so tender and shy around Mr. Hirooka now was enough to bring a blush to even these old cheeks.

"I don't suppose milady herself has noticed yet, but I'd imagine everyone



*except* milady knows exactly what Mr. Hirooka feels for her.”

I continued talking softly to myself as I made milady’s bed.

Just as Milady would watch Mr. Hirooka constantly, he always watched for her. I couldn’t imagine him accepting Lady Bastler’s proposal, but I understood her unease all too well.

“Milady is too inexperienced and lost in her own emotions to notice his, and he seems perpetually dense when it comes to how others feel about him... I suppose they’re the same, in a way.”

I didn’t mutter this much usually, but thinking of them seemed to loosen my lips significantly. I decided to blame my age.

“Surely Mr. Hirooka has noticed he has feelings for her... I assume he’s simply refused to admit them yet.”

Either he had a sour experience in the past, or he was convinced that milady would somehow be better off without him. The latter seemed likely given his self-esteem issues. As for milady, she would likely—no, almost definitely accept his feelings outright. He was a difficult individual, certainly.

“I doubt he realizes that Miss Leo makes him the most influential man in the kingdom. With his Gift, even more so.”

He could wrest control of House Liberte in a single night if he so chose—perhaps even more quickly, given how readily His Grace groveled to Miss Leo.

“There, perfect,” I said with a nod as I finished tidying. “Now all that remains is to await milady’s return. She may need to relax, so I had best prepare tea for her return...though there’s a chance she won’t be back tonight, of course.” I smiled a little, content with my imagination. There was virtually no chance that would happen, of course. “Mr. Hirooka’s chambers have Miss Leo, after all, and I sincerely doubt he will...er, initiate anything with her on his own initiative.”

He seemed to believe that even we servants were his equals, and to respect all those around him. I could not imagine him attempting anything while their feelings for each other were still unclear.

“It is a relief, in a way, but I do feel a tad sorry for milady. I’ll be able to enjoy

their dance for some time yet. This is hardly a time to be growing old!”

Milady had much to learn yet, and I would enjoy every bit of it. I couldn’t stop smiling to myself as I headed down the hall to retrieve the hot water for tea.

*I simply can’t wait to tell Johanna and Sebastian of this latest development!*

## Chapter 2: On The Development of Herbal Wine

**“HAHH... I knew Anrinnelesse would take it badly...”**

I muttered to myself as I made herbs in the garden later that morning. Last I saw her, she was still muttering deliriously to herself. She hadn't doubted I would accept her offer in the least.

*I guess that's the thing about being raised a noble... Nobody ever tells you no.*

“That's probably one of the things she's here to learn about...”

Anrinnelesse was put in Eckenhart's care so she could become more like Claire, but she still had a long way to go on that front. Claire never boasted about her nobility, and she always treated others with respect. She didn't use her bloodline to pressure others into obeying her, either. I remember talking with her in the Fenrir Forest about how House Liberte hated abusing their power. Anrinnelesse wasn't the polar opposite of that, per se, but she definitely used her nobility to get what she wanted.

“She'll definitely need some kind of special tutoring...not that it's any of my business,” I muttered.

“That she will!” came a voice from behind me. “She'll have to learn a whole new way of life, totally different from anything she's experienced until now. There won't be any shortcuts.”

I turned around. “Eckenhart?”

*He must've heard everything I said... Man, am I glad I didn't say anything offensive.*

“How goes it, Takumi, my boy?” He clasped me on the shoulder. “Making herbs again?”

“That's right. Nick comes by to pick them up every morning. So, uh...how's Anrinnelesse?”

“She's locked herself in her room. Getting rejected must've been quite the

shock.”

“D-Do you think she’ll be okay?”

“If she isn’t, then we’ll *really* have a problem.”

I could understand her struggling with it—nobody had ever told her no so directly before, especially not when her nobility was in play. Eckenhart was no doubt expecting fallout like this, what with how differently the Libertes and the Bastlers ran things.

“Should I have really turned her down, what with her being a noblewoman and all?” I wondered aloud.

The duke raised an eyebrow. “So you wanted to be a count after all?”

“That’s not what I meant, per se...”

“Don’t worry about it, then. Not even a noble can force another into marriage.”

“House Liberte doesn’t misuse its authority...right?”

“Hm? Heard that from Claire, did you? You’re right, we avoid using our power as much as possible. That’s not to say we can avoid using it altogether, of course.”

“I guess that makes sense...”

Even if he tried to minimize its importance, he was a duke, and his family was immensely powerful. Anyone dealing with them would be careful not to offend them, no matter what.

“I’ve always known House Bastler did things differently,” Eckenhart continued. “I was expecting Anrinnelesse to have trouble adapting at first.”

“So the count did run things quite differently from you, then?”

“I never did see eye-to-eye with him—Count Bastler, I mean,” he said. “We’re very different men, you see, in that he ruled with his title as his main tool.”

That made sense. I didn’t expect every noble lord to run things the same way—they were only human, after all. Count Bastler seemed to value his power most and he ruled through that. He seemed to have no regard for the lives of

his people, judging from his sponsorship of the Yugard store and the attack on Lange. The commonfolk were pawns to him—not viewed as people in the way the Liberte family saw them.

“Ah, I nearly forgot,” Eckenhart suddenly said. “I didn’t come out here to talk to you about Anrinnelesse.”

“Oh? What’s up?” I asked.

*Is there something new that needs doing?*

“It’s about the conflict at the Yugard store...” He dipped his head. “I’m, er, sorry.”

“Huh? Oh, right.”

“Even with our preparations, I was careless. I put far too much faith in your growth, despite having trained so little.”

“Faith...in me?”

*Where did that come from? I’m pretty useless at everything except Herb Cultivation still... I can’t land a single hit on Eckenhart if I try, let alone Leo.*

He fidgeted uncomfortably. “I relied far too much on your role in Lange, on your herbs...even your swordplay. I was somehow convinced you could do anything and everything on your own, even though I knew you had very human limits.”

“I guess, yeah... I’m just a regular guy. That’ll never stop me from trying, though.”

“I know, and I appreciate that.”

With the Lange incident especially, I would’ve failed for sure if not for Leo. Herb Cultivation was useful, of course, but I didn’t even know how or why I had that Gift, so it didn’t feel truly mine yet. Similarly, I was able to practice swordplay more than most people with the help of my herbs, but I still had very little confidence on that front. It was good to have both against the orcs and the Yugard store, though.

“I put far too much pressure on you,” the duke continued. “I’m sorry for that. I’ll do everything I can to keep you out of harm’s way from now on.”

“Thank you...but I’ll still help you in any way I can.”

“Yes, and I’m very grateful.”

Given that he was bowing so deeply to a random commoner like me, I had no doubt that he was serious and would follow through on his promise. Of course, like he said himself, he didn’t put much stock in the difference between us.

He paused. “Now, about Miss Leo...”

“What about her?”

*Did Leo do something to him? I can’t think of anything...*

“Well... when I entered the dining hall this morning, you see, she was glaring at me.”

“Leo was?” I blinked in surprise. “She wasn’t like that last night, was she?”

He shook his head. “She was gracious enough to let me ride on her back, but we’ve barely interacted after that. I’m positive the change has been since this morning only.”

*I can’t imagine her attitude towards him souring so quickly...er, wait, I think I know.*

“I think it might have to do with when you were spying on Claire and me,” I ventured.

“Hmm... Before or after you stared deeply into each other’s eyes?”

“Forget that ever happened, please.”

Having her father bring that up made me feel deeply uncomfortable. I resisted the urge to apologize on the spot.

“It’s about the first thing we talked about...you know, what you came to apologize to me for,” I said, hoping to dodge the other topic.

“Ah... Right, I remember her mentioning that!”

There was a little too much enthusiasm in his voice, leading me to think he hadn’t learned his lesson even after Claire’s lecture. That also implied he *had* been watching us from the very beginning of our conversation.

*I'll have to start checking the doors and windows if I ever want to have a private conversation again...*

“That was the first time I’d heard what happened on your side of the Yugard store incident. Leo probably hadn’t heard about it before then, either. I think that might be the reason why she’s acting that way with you,” I said.

“Ah. I-I see...”

Claire had already chewed him out about it, but it seemed Leo might be holding her own grudge. She was worried sick about me even after we came home, after all.

The duke shifted his feet. “I’d like to apologize to her, but, well...I’m not sure I can keep my resolve when she glares at me like that.”

“So you’re scared of her?”

“Yes, exactly. We’ve worshipped silver fenrir for generations. The very thought of making her angry is, well...”

“I think I get it.”

I’d heard the legends about House Liberte’s founder and her partnership with a silver fenrir, so it made sense that he’d want to avoid upsetting Leo. Of course, I could also understand a more direct fear of the giant hound.

I nodded in understanding. “In that case, should I call Leo?”

She was playing with Tilura and Cherie, giving the pair rides around on her back. Although I felt a little bad for interrupting their fun, I knew Leo wouldn’t mind too much.

Eckenhart hesitantly nodded. “Y-Yes, you do that.”

I turned to her. “Hey, Leo!”

“Ruff?” She obediently stopped and turned.

“Come here, girl!” I called.

“Woff, woof!” She came running towards us, Tilura and Cherie still perched on her back.

“What’s wrong, Takumi?” Tilura called.

Eckenhart flinched, retreating a step. "Mgh."

"Sorry for interrupting your playtime," I apologized. "Eckenhart?"

"Y-Yes, err... Sorry, Tilura, but could you and Cherie play over there for a while?"

Tilura obediently nodded. "Okay. Cherie, come on!"

"Arf!"

*I bet he doesn't want his daughter to see him so scared...*

After a moment, the three of us were alone.

Leo gave me a curious look. "Worf?"

*Don't look at me, Eckenhart's the one who wants to talk to you.*

"M-Miss Leo?" he finally squeaked.

"Ruff?"

She didn't look that upset to me, but I trusted that Eckenhart found her intimidating all the same.

"I-I wanted to apologize for yesterday."

"Ruff? Bwuff, worf?"

"She thinks she knows what you're talking about," I interpreted.

"I-I'm sorry for putting Takumi in danger," he apologized. "I promise it will never happen again. Er...can you forgive me?"

"Bwuff...? Mrff, ruff."

He looked at me. "Er... translation, please?"

"Let's see... She believes you, but she won't tolerate this happening again."

"Of course! I solemnly swear that I will never again put Takumi in the same danger as he was in yesterday! Never!"

"Bwuff-uff... Wurf." She looked at me expectantly to interpret.

"Got it... She says she forgives you, but just this once."

"R-Really?!" Eckenhart's face lit up with relief and joy. "Thank you very



much!”

Leo had clearly been more bothered by the previous day’s events than I’d thought, but the important thing now was that they’d made up.

“Bworuff? Warf, urf!”

I nodded thoughtfully. “Huh, that’s a good idea... Can we ask something of you, Eckenhart?”

Essentially, she wanted Eckenhart to play with her, just like Tilura and Cherie were earlier. The duke was still a little sheepish, far more so than he was when riding Leo back from Ractos yesterday, but he nodded nonetheless. He likely assumed she’d be gentle if Tilura was going to be joining them.

I called Tilura and Cherie back, and Leo lay down so Eckenhart could climb aboard more easily.

“Go ahead,” I told him.

“Yes, Father, go ahead!” Tilura echoed, practically dragging him onto Leo’s back.

He swallowed hard. “A-All right...”

“Ruff!”

“Arf, arf!” Cherie wagged and yapped proudly from her perch on Leo’s head.

I patted Leo’s flank. “Okay, girl.”

“Worf!” She obediently nodded and stood, dashing for the place where she’d been playing with the girls before.

“Whoa?!”

“Wafoooooo!”

Tilura shrieked in delight. “You’re going so fast, Miss Leo!”

“Too fast!” the duke cried. “C-Could you slow down a little?!”

“Arf, awawff!”

I smiled from my corner of the garden as she took the trio to and fro. Even Leo was having a blast.

“That sure looks fun,” I muttered to myself. “No point watching them, though. I’d better get thinking about that herbal wine.”

I’d already finished with my usual herb-growing for the day, so it’d be a waste not to move on to the wine. Hopefully, I could turn all the greital wine we’d bought into a proper liqueur. It was plenty tasty as a juice, but I felt I owed it to the people of Lange to give them a new product.

“Hmm...healthy herbs, huh. I’ve never been one for traditional medicine.”

Japan was full of drinks and supplements that were supposed to be good for you, but I was always too occupied with my work to pay much attention to them. I’d tried plenty to remove some of my exhaustion, but none of them worked as well as advertised. To be fair, though, it was my fault for taking supplements instead of getting proper rest.

“It doesn’t matter how good your nutrition is if your schedule’s still a mess...” I sighed.

That was likely why the herbs I made in this world did a far better job of removing fatigue, though Herb Cultivation itself definitely played a role there. Not even that would work properly if I didn’t give myself the chance to relax, though.

*These herbs are basically magic, aren’t they?*

“Hmm... Removing fatigue...that medicinal wine in the red box back in Japan was supposed to help with that, right?” I muttered to myself.

I had no idea if my stamina-restoring herbs would mix properly with the wine, let alone taste good, but it seemed like a good place to start.

“First things first, capwort. I’ve got to remove the illness in the mansion’s greital wine before I add anything new to it.”

Nobody would drink a wine that made you sick, no matter its other effects. We were still working on test batches, so I didn’t know for sure if it was effective, but I’d have to assume so.

I started by making a wealth of capwort so Helena could work on more test batches, brainstorming the whole time. My last session had come up totally

empty, so I decided to focus on the fundamentals.

“Let’s see... Fatigue, nutrition, awakesness... No, scratch that last one. Sleeping’s an important part of recovery. Maybe I can flip that around and add a sleeping herb? No, there’s too many ways that could go wrong.” I continued mulling over my options as I started picking the capwort. “Wait... I guess I don’t need to make a single wine that does everything. That’d open my options up quite a bit.”

With the capwort all collected, I safely stowed it separately from the herbs that Nick would come to take later that day.

*I’m glad there isn’t anyone else around... I can only imagine how weird I look, huddled over weird plants and mumbling to myself.*

“There were multivitamins, right? That, and pills to improve circulation...but maybe I won’t put that in wine, that sounds like a bad idea.”

A circulation-improving wine could be viable if it was drunk only in small doses, but that would make the blood’s alcohol levels skyrocket—not that they had drunk-driving laws in this world. The bigger concern would be health-wise, and while most people would hopefully obey any guidelines, that was more work than I was willing to do, doubly so if the wine was sold anywhere.

“Maybe that’d be useful for people who just want to get drunk quick? No, it’s just too dangerous. Alcohol improves circulation enough as-is.”

I could experiment with that kind of booze in small quantities later. For now, I had to focus on recipes that could be applied to large amounts of wine at once. Anything less wouldn’t be any good to Lange.

“The three main effects I’m looking at, then, are fatigue-alleviating, vitamins, and more general nutrition. Judging from those three, this is looking like an illness-preventing wine. Good health makes it harder to get sick, after all.”

The healthier people are, the less need there should be for capwort. This wasn’t a universal vaccine or anything, though, so I doubted the demand for it would disappear altogether.

“I can use the stamina-restoring herbs I’m used to growing for that. The real issue, though, is vitamins and nutrients. Nutrients is such a wide term, I feel as

though I should narrow that down first.”

The idea was to create a healthy drink that would supply the body with everything it'd need to be healthy. A good nutritional base should hopefully make the vitamins easier to take in...at least, I hoped it would. I wasn't a nutritionist by any measure.

*What do I make, though? I know too much of some nutrients can be harmful, so I'll have to be careful how I approach this.*

“Since most nutrients will be coming from food anyways, I guess it just needs protein and vitamins...a bit of iron might be a good idea, too. I'll want to add only a little.”

Basically, I'd approach it the way I would any diet, and I could focus on shoring up minerals that were harder to come by naturally. I'd seen no end of vitamin and iron supplements in Japan, so those seemed like a safe bet. Protein was just an all-around good thing to have. Again, too much could be bad, but I felt more confident doubling up on that front. My only real frame of reference for vitamins was citrus fruit-related, but I chalked that up to not knowing enough. I barely had any interest in the field previously, and I certainly hadn't studied it properly. Worse, I doubted this world had a means of figuring out exact nutritional values or requirements.

“Okay, let's see... Healthy supplement herbs...”

After gathering my thoughts sufficiently, I put my hands on the ground to see what would grow. A few seconds later, I had a few small plants ready for harvest. I picked them one by one and trusted Herb Cultivation to prepare them properly. Some of them dried out, but many of them remained as-is, meaning they were already at their most effective state.

“Huh... This is the ‘super nutrition’ herb I was looking for? The rest of these are also pretty basic...” I observed.

The vitamin-rich herb looked a lot like parsley, and Herb Cultivation had perforated the leaf to let the yellow juices cover the plant and dry. That seemed to be it.

*I wonder what they call it in this world? I didn't think of a name, just an*

*effect... I mean, they called the aloe vera lookalike loe, and the effect was also way different, so who knows what this is or what it does?*

I resolved to either ask Sebastian or look it up in the herb encyclopedia later and moved on to the next herbs.

There was an entire cluster of herbs of all shapes and sizes. All of them were supposed to be highly nutritious, but since they'd all grown at once, I had no idea which had what health benefits.

*I guess I'll have to ask Sebastian about these, too...*

"This is probably enough for now. I'll take the capwort to Helena right away... If we don't have the purification process perfected, it won't matter what other herbs we put in it."

I gathered the herbs and made for the villa's back door.

"Hey, Leo!" I called. "I'm going to the kitchen real quick, so you can keep on playing out here!"

"Ruffa!" Leo panted in assent.

"Awf!" Cherie yipped excitedly.

"Good luck!" Tilura shouted.

Eckenhart paled. "W-Wait! You're not leaving me here, are you?!"

Despite the duke's pleas, I got the impression he was enjoying himself on some level, so I left him with Leo as I made for the kitchen to find Helena.



**ON** the way to the kitchen, I happened to spot Laila.

"Oh, Laila!" I called.

"Is something the matter, Mr. Hirooka?"

"I've finished with my herb-making for the day. Let's see...here, give these to Nick when he comes." I handed her the bundle of herbs for Kales's store. "I'm heading to the kitchen to give Helena the capwort she needs for her greital wine test batches. Wait, she is in the kitchen, right?"

“Yes, I imagine she is preparing lunch at this hour. Rest assured, I will see this medicine into Nick’s care myself.”

“Thank you, please do.”

*Sounds like she’ll be busy... I should probably wait until later to talk about my wine ideas.*

I poked my head inside the kitchen to find a team of white-aproned chefs hard at work. Choking down my guilt at interrupting them, I flagged down a young man who was bustling by.

He looked at me in surprise. “Mr. Hirooka? May I help you?”

“Do you know if Helena is anywhere around here?”

“Head Cook Helena? I shall fetch her post-haste.”

“Thank you...and, er, sorry for interrupting you like this.”

*If she’s too busy to see me, I’ll just come again later.*

It wasn’t long before Helena came out to see me.

“May I help you, Mr. Hirooka?”

“Er, I’ve got some more capwort for the greital wine. You’re not too busy now, are you?”

“We’re awfully busy now with lunch, but I can stop to talk for a minute. Thank you for bringing this for me. The first batch should be nearly ready to test.”

“Great! Just let Leo or I know when it is.”

“As you wish.”

According to the magic shop owner Isabel, we could check for the virus with a mana-detecting tool, but we didn’t have anything like that at the mansion. Our only shot was to ask Leo to test it by smell.

“One more thing,” I added. “I was hoping to talk to you about what other herbs to add to the wine.”

“Chef Helena!” called one of the cooks over the din. “I hate to interrupt, but we need you!”

“Got it!” she shouted back before turning to address me again. “I’m sorry, Mr. Hirooka, but duty calls.”

“N-No, I’m the one who should be apologizing,” I insisted. “I interrupted your work. I’ll come back later, when you’re not so busy.”

“My apologies,” she replied with a bow.

Not wanting to slow her down further, I hurried out of the kitchen and nearly ran smack into Sebastian.

“Ah, Mr. Hirooka! May I ask what you were doing in the kitchen?”

*I could ask the same thing... It seemed like he was just heading in there himself.*

“I was giving Helena capwort for the greital wine,” I explained.

“Ah, that would certainly explain it.”

“I also brought a few other herbs that I was hoping to try in the wine, but she was busy, so I’ve decided to just try again later.”

“I should imagine so. Lunch is nearly upon us. May I inquire as to what herbs, exactly, you were hoping to utilize?”

Since the butler seemed more interested in what I was doing than his own business in the kitchen, I opened my bag to show him.

“I tried making these when I was growing the store’s herbs for the day. I’ve never even seen most of these before, so I was hoping to get Helena’s opinion on them.”

“Intriguing. May I ask what these herbs do?”

“Well, I was trying to come up with ones that would help give the body what it needs to be healthy. My thinking was that a strong body could help prevent illness, but...”

“But what?”

“Er, are you sure you have time to chat like this? I thought you had something to do in the kitchen?”

“Ah, of course! I nearly forgot myself. My apologies, Mr. Hirooka, but I must

ask that we table this discussion until we can talk with Helena as well.”

I could tell he was still interested in the herbs from the way he was glancing into my bag, but I didn’t want to keep him any longer. There was a fair chance it had something to do with lunch, and the sooner he addressed that, the better.

“All right.” I nodded. “I’ll make sure to call you when I talk to Helena.”

“Please do. Now, pardon me.”

With that, he left, and I was alone in the hallway again.

“I guess I’ve got some free time now... Should I just head back into the garden to see how Eckenhart is holding up?”

Since lunch wasn’t ready yet and there weren’t any pressing plans for the day, I found myself with free time. I typically did my sword training after lunch and after dinner, and I didn’t have apothecary lessons with Milicia either, since she was so busy with her servant training. I couldn’t talk to Helena and Sebastian about the wine until after lunch, either, so I officially had no plans.

“I’ve already given Nick’s herbs to Laila, so I may as well hit the garden again,” I decided.

*If I’d known I’d be free, I would’ve given Nick those herbs myself,* I thought as I headed towards the back garden.

“Thanks a lot, lady!” came a familiar voice from a nearby room. “I really appreciate you taking the time like this, since Boss is busy.”

I heard a woman sigh. “Must I ask you once again not to call me ‘lady’?”

“Hm...?”

Thinking it was a couple of servants chatting, I peered into the entrance hall to find Laila and Nick talking.

“Oh. Hi Laila, Nick,” I greeted them.

“Mr. Hirooka?” Laila’s eyes widened slightly. “Have you already finished your business in the kitchen?”

“Hey, Boss! I thought you were busy?” Nick perked up.

I shook my head. “The kitchen’s swamped with preparations for lunch, so I



ended up putting it off.”

The two of them both looked surprised to see me, but Nick seemed excited—joyful, even.

*It can't be because he got to see me...right?*

Laila nodded thoughtfully. “Is that so? Rest assured, I have given the herbs to Nick, as instructed.”

“Thanks, Laila.”

“Yep! Got 'em right here!” He proudly grabbed his bag. “Gotta say, though, I wasn't expecting to see you! This day keeps getting better and better!”

“Um. Am I really that big of a deal to you?” I asked sheepishly.

*I guess I was wrong. It's weird to have him so excited about me, but this is way better than having him try to kill me again...*

“Of course!” Nick puffed out his chest with pride. “I respect you more than anyone ever, Boss!”

“Respect... Okay...”

Laila smiled bemusedly. “You seem to have an admirer.”

“Don't start on that, Laila,” I said. “I still don't know what I did to end up like this...”

“Come on, Boss, you saved me from getting punished big-time! You even hired me, and you pay me better than half the people in the city. Of course I'm gonna respect you to bits!”

“Oh...I guess. That's good. Just make sure you carry your weight, okay?”

“No need to tell me twice! Kales taught me well, and I'm learning all kinds of great stuff. I'd never do anything to drag your good name through the mud, never!”

While I thought he could turn over a new leaf when I hired him, it was mostly so that I could keep an eye on him. I was fully prepared to sic Sebastian on him if it came to it. As for his wage, I felt it only fair to reward his good work. I never expected him to thank me like this...though I had admittedly padded his raise a

little, since my herbs were selling insanely well and I was hoping the extra cash would help him stay on task.

“Trust me, Boss, anybody who knew about you would be begging to work for you! You’d probably wind up with a few slackers, though, so you might not wanna advertise, if you catch my drift.”

“I hadn’t even thought of hiring more staff...advertising didn’t even occur to me. Are you sure my conditions are that good?” I asked.

“Course they are, Boss! You pay regularly, and more than any job I’ve ever heard of, too. You and Kales are real good at teaching anything I don’t get. Anybody without one of those fancy ‘educations’ would love to work for you, especially folks like me with a history.”

Laila nodded. “Ractos is far from unique in this regard, but abusing one’s employees is unpleasantly common, even among the more respected professions. Few receive proper compensation, either. His Grace has naturally put laws in effect to curb such practices, but such legislation is still limited in its reach.”

“Oh...”

*I shouldn’t be surprised... this kind of thing seems to happen everywhere.*

Managers always seemed to treat their staff like trash, and they skimmed on things like wages and benefits constantly where I used to work. All that mattered to them was their bottom line. That isn’t to say all bosses are bad, but they always seem to outnumber the good ones. Even hearing how difficult administration was didn’t make it seem any more acceptable.

From what I could gather, the only other work someone like Nick could find would be with organized crime. He’d been left behind by society, in a sense, so any would-be employer would feel justified in treating him poorly and underpaying him, making his life worse. It was a vicious cycle. The only part I struggled with was that Nick likely started himself on this path of crime somehow, and I didn’t have a good solution to the problem. He had proven he could clean himself up with a proper job and proper pay, though, and his life was infinitely better for it. Maybe I was oversimplifying things, but I felt I should be happy for him.

“Okay, Boss, I better get going,” he said. “I’ll get these herbs straight to Kales, I swear!”

“Great. I know you will, Nick.”

“Take care,” Laila said with a small wave. Once he had passed out of sight, she turned to me. “May I ask what’s on your mind?”

I hadn’t meant to show my thoughts, but evidently she’d figured me out. *Maybe I should try to hide my thoughts more...I’ll never get to be as good as Sebastian is at it, though.*

I shook my head. “It’s nothing, I just... It’s hard to employ someone properly, and there’s a lot of people here who don’t even try.”

“Ractos is a thriving hub of commerce, you see, and any traders seeking the capital pass through there. The sheer amount of traffic ensures there are always people entering the city, not all of whom are savory. As for having employees, I’m afraid I know very little on that front. I’ve never been in such a position.”

That made enough sense. No matter how hard House Liberte tried to enforce decent employment laws, there were too many people for it to ever be truly effective.

“The more travel a city sees,” she added, “the more exploitative folks tend to take root.”

*I bet those people are kicked out more often than they move on willingly...*

I chuckled nervously. “Maybe it’s because I’m practically working for House Liberte myself... I still feel more like an employee than a boss.”

“I believe you may be mistaken... However, should you consider hiring more employees, please be careful.”

“Careful? Of what?”

I had a general idea of things to keep in mind when hiring someone, but I got the impression Laila had something specific in mind.

She hesitated for a moment. “I cannot claim to be an expert, and given how earnestly Nick has been working, I am in no position to criticize your actions. However, you should be cautious of those who refuse to work but insist on

being compensated regardless. Some may also attempt to deceive you, approach you only to rob you, or worst of all, take your life.”

“Yeah...”

“All I ask is that you exercise caution to avoid hiring such criminals. M-My apologies for speaking out of turn.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep it in mind. Thank you for that. I’ll be sure to choose carefully if I decide to hire anyone else...not that I’m planning on hiring anyone.”

Not many people in Japan would go as far as murder for money, but that type might be more common in this world. There weren’t any police here, and while each domain had its own guards, it was still worth being careful. I made a mental note not to forget Laila’s warning, just in case.

*Why would I want to hire anyone else, though? I’m handling my herbs fine on my own, and Nick’s all I need to make sure they reach Kales’ store in Ractos okay.*

I must have been thinking about employment and Laila’s words longer than I thought, as Gelda found me soon after to tell me lunch was ready.

*I guess Laila and I were talking for a while after Nick left...*

We ended up apologizing to each other, then hurrying to the dining hall for lunch.

“My apologies,” Laila announced when we entered. “I have brought Mr. Hirooka.”

Eckenhart, Claire, Tilura, and Cherie were all seated, and I spotted Sebastian by the wall. Whatever his business in the kitchen was, it seemed to be over.

“Ruff! Woo, woo, wooooo!”

As soon as I stepped inside, Leo charged at me, tail wagging fiercely.

“Hey, Leo! Looks like you beat me here.” I gave her a good scratch behind the ears.

“Bwoff!”

As nice as it was to have her greet me, though, the gale whipped up by her tail nearly flipped up the maids' skirts again.

*I wish she'd be a little more careful.*

When Leo had calmed down a little and I'd had a chance to sit down, Eckenhart nodded.

"Well, then, let's begin," he said.

"Yes, let's," Claire echoed.

"Thank you for the food," I intoned politely.

"Thank you!" Tilura called.

"Woff, wuff~!"

"Arf!"

I noticed that Eckenhart seemed exhausted, no doubt from all his time playing with Leo. Tilura seemed fine, despite playing with them, so I assumed the duke's nerves played a part.

Claire noticed his fatigue as well, likely because he wasn't shoveling his food into his mouth with the usual gusto. "Father? Are you all right?"

He nodded slowly. "More or less."

"Did something happen to you? I can't recall anything that would cause you such stress..."

"True, I've far less on my plate with that false apothecary apprehended. I was playing with Miss Leo, you see."

"Miss Leo?" She turned to the hound.

Leo stopped, sausages still dangling from her mouth as she perked her ears at the nobles. "Wuffa?"

*You can take your time, you know...*

The duke's face drooped. "Takumi set me up."

I smiled awkwardly. "I don't think I was that villainous about it."

"He did?" Claire glanced at me.

“I ended up playing with Miss Leo and Tilura both,” Eckenhart sighed.

Claire nodded in understanding. “That would certainly explain it. You hardly ever play with Tilura, though, so I don’t see why you’re complaining.”

He frowned. “Granted, I don’t... I wish you’d care a little more for your old man’s safety, though.”

“I do care! Why do you think I asked you in the first place?” Claire huffily turned from him to Tilura. “Did you enjoy playing with Father?”

“Yeah! It was sooooo fun!”

At that, Eckenhart clammed up. I would’ve been surprised if he’d continued to complain in front of Tilura under the circumstances. As he continued eating, however, I thought I heard him muttering about how she treated me better.

*Maybe it’s a dad thing, wanting your kids to care about you all the time? No wonder I don’t understand.*

As I ate, however, I became increasingly aware that Anrinnelesse wasn’t there. Since nobody else had mentioned it, I assumed she was still shut in her room, but I felt I had to make sure.

“Um... I noticed that Anrinnelesse isn’t here,” I remarked.

Sebastian nodded. “Lady Bastler is still in her chambers and has requested no lunch be sent to her. Your rejection shook her greatly, no doubt. She likely never considered you may not bend to her authority. I must agree with you, however, one must not attempt to court another through political power alone.”

I laughed awkwardly. “Haha... I guess not...”

I noticed Claire was gripping her fork and knife with white knuckles and she was muttering something under her breath, so I decided to let sleeping dogs lie. I simply laughed it off and focused on my food.



**WHEN** it came time for after-lunch tea, we avoided the greital juice for the first time in a while. Everyone had something to do, it seemed, so we disbanded right after eating. I was soon left alone in the dining hall, except for Leo and a

few servants who were cleaning the floors and table. Claire and Eckenhart apparently needed to discuss something about their domain, and Tilura took Cherie with her when she went to study. I was a little worried the young fenrir would only be a distraction, but I assumed she knew what she was doing.

I waved down Laila. “Hey, could I ask where Anrinnelesse’s room is?”

I was a little worried about her, and though I was the one who upset her so badly, I felt I couldn’t sit by and do nothing. She’d seemed oddly reserved even before I rejected her, so it didn’t seem out of the ordinary for her, but still.

“Lady Bastler’s room?” Laila blinked in surprise but told me where to find it readily enough.

“Great, thank you. I really appreciate it.”

“Would you perhaps like me to escort you there?”

I shook my head. “I’m pretty sure I won’t get lost at this point.”

She had escorted me everywhere when I was still new to the villa, and I didn’t want to bother her further. Anrinnelesse’s room sounded close enough to my own that I was confident I could find it. Most importantly, though, I had to check in with Helena.

I approached Sebastian as he gathered the cutlery off the table. “Excuse me? Do you have a minute?”

“Of course, Mr. Hirooka. What may I help you with?”

“I was just about to talk to Helena about the greital wine.”

“Ah, the new herbs, correct? Very well. Laila, Gelda, I trust you will clear the table in my stead?”

Both maids bowed. “Gladly.”

“Thank you,” I said.

I felt guilty for making more work for the maids, but keeping my promise to Sebastian felt more important. I wanted to talk to Helena as soon as possible—the longer I put it off, the greater the chances she’d be preoccupied with dinner. There were likely dishes to be washed, of course, but I hoped that

wouldn't be an issue.

"Ruff?"

Leo readily raised her head, her full stomach evidently not enough to keep her napping when I was on the move. I hesitated to bring her, though, since we were headed for the kitchen and I didn't want to risk her contaminating anything. Even though she hadn't shed at all since becoming a silver fenrir, that wasn't a risk I was comfortable taking.

"Uh... What do you want to do, Leo? I don't think you'll find it very interesting," I said.

"Ruff? Wmmff..." She thoughtfully cocked her head to the side.

Health concerns aside, I really didn't think she'd enjoy our conversation, given how uninterested she was in stuff like this. I added that it'd smell a lot like food, but there wouldn't be anything for her to eat for a while yet.

"Wuff, bwuff."

"Okay, sounds good. I'll catch up with you after your nap."

With that, she decided to head out into the back garden, likely to find a nice sunbeam to nap in. I almost wanted to join her, since the post-meal drowsiness was starting to set in, but I had work to do. I'd try not to think about curling up in her fur, surrounded by nature, the sun tickling my face...

Laila and Gelda curtsied politely to us.

"Allow us to watch Miss Leo," Laila offered.

"Worf!"

I nodded. "Sounds great. Make sure she doesn't get into trouble."

*This way, she won't get lonely.*

With that, Sebastian and I headed into the kitchen.

"Now then." The butler cleared his throat as soon as we were alone. "What are these new herbs you've mentioned?"

"Here, take a look," I said as I opened the bag for him.



Sebastian stroked his chin. "Interesting."

"This herb gives you supplemental nutrients, and the rest of them are more general nutrients."

"Supplemental? May I ask how?"

I chuckled. "I'll give more details when we're with Helena." It didn't make sense to explain everything twice, after all.

Sebastian led the way into the kitchen. "Pardon me. Is Helena available?"

One of the nearby chefs stopped what she was doing. "Oh, Sebastian. Please wait here while I fetch her."

A glance around the kitchens revealed that most of the cooks were relaxing. As I thought, they had some time after the lunch rush.

A moment later, Helena came to see us. "Sebastian! How was lunch? I'd altered the flavor profile as requested... I hope it was acceptable."

*So he was here about the flavors? It tasted just as good as always. Maybe he talks about meal plans and the like with her often? Or maybe it has to do with Eckenhart? He's the big boss, after all.*

Sebastian shook his head. "Rest assured, I've come for a different reason. Mr. Hirooka has procured some herbs he believes would pair excellently with the herbal wine."

"Mr. Hirooka?" She glanced at me in confusion. "I received the capwort from him before lunch."

"He believes a medicinal wine would be a fitting improvement. Here are the herbs he has grown for it." Sebastian gave her a quick explanation of the herbs in the bag as he passed them to her.

Helena's brow furrowed. "Supplemental nutrition? What kind?"

I cleared my throat. "You see, the human body needs a wide variety of nutrients, vitamins, and minerals to be healthy. These herbs were grown to help provide that balance."

She nodded slowly. "Interesting. You'd serve this with a meal, then? I believe I

understand.”

“You see, some nutrients need to be taken in a specific way, or else the body just treats them like waste. These herbs are prepared to be digested properly. The idea is that by shoring up any dietary deficiencies, it’d become harder to get sick.”

Sebastian’s eyes widened. “My word, what a notion!”

Helena shook her head in disbelief. “I’d never even considered that... Your former world must be a magical place.”

I didn’t know how the nutrients worked or why, but I was fairly sure I had the idea right. It probably would’ve been enough to say these herbs make the body stronger and more resilient.

As we talked, I noticed that a small crowd of kitchen staff had gathered to listen in. From the way they were nodding along, I could tell they were truly invested in their trade.

“Basically, I want to make the greital wine help keep people healthy,” I explained. “I don’t know how it’ll taste, though.”

“You called this herbal wine, did you?” Helena asked.

I nodded. It felt like a fitting name, since it was brief and self-explanatory.

Sebastian stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Have you tried any of these herbs for their flavor yet?”

“No, I only just finished growing them.” I hadn’t even thought to try, since I’d assumed Helena was the expert on that front.

“Let us begin from there,” the butler declared. “Is that acceptable?”

“Of course. I can make more any time. Honestly, I’m curious how they taste, too.”

Helena nodded. “Allow me to try them as well.”

“Great. I’ll divide them up, then.”

I took the parsley-like herb and gently tore it into several pieces, handing some to both Sebastian and Helena. Since there was plenty left, I passed some

to the assembled cooks as well. I could tell they were interested, and since we were only testing the flavor, it didn't matter if the pieces were a little small.

Sebastian took a bite. "Hngh? Wh-What in the world?"

Helena swallowed hers. "Oh. I see."

"Let me try..." I took a bite. "Blegh."

Around us, the others tried hard not to retch.

As soon as I bit it, a smell like kerosene filled my sinuses. Beneath the cloying, oily flavor was a rancid bitterness. I got the impression there was a faint sweetness to the leaf itself as I chewed, but it was choked out almost entirely by the rest of the flavors. The only thing keeping me from spitting it out was my manners, and even then I had to clamp my hands over my mouth and force myself to swallow. I couldn't imagine trying to eat a whole leaf—in fact, I was beginning to doubt it was edible at all. Looking around me, Sebastian and the cooks were also struggling not to spew their bits of leaf. Helena was the only one who managed to keep a straight face, chewing calmly and swallowing.

*Is she okay?*

Sebastian wrinkled his nose. "I'm not sure anything could make that palatable."

"Y-Yeah," I agreed weakly. "Does anyone have any water?"

A cook weakly held out a glass. "Here."

"Thank you."

I gulped it down, hoping it would get the bitter taste out of my mouth. Luckily, everyone seemed to survive the ordeal.

*There's no way we can use that in the wine, right?*

Helena pursed her lips thoughtfully. "This is passelry, isn't it? It's a medicinal reagent. Look, the yellow juice is the source of that foul, bitter taste."

"Passelry? You've seen it here before?" I asked her.

"Yes, once or twice. It isn't native to this area, but I was able to try it when I was learning to cook."

*My world's parsley is this world's passelry, then. That's pretty similar to my mugwort being this world's capwort, or my aloe vera being loe here. I still don't know its exact effects, though.*

Since this was the preparation method Herb Cultivation showed me, that meant it was at its most effective in this state.

*I've made my share of bad-tasting herbs before, but this one really takes the cake.*

"I remember hearing that passelry has many health benefits," she mused. "Should we incorporate it with the greital wine successfully, it will hopefully keep that effect."

"It would certainly soil the flavor," Sebastian protested.

"As it is, yes. We'll need some means of removing the worst of the taste if we want to incorporate it."

Given the intensity of the flavor, I doubted it was a matter of quantity, either. It'd likely overpower the wine itself.

"Mr. Hirooka is right, though," Helena added. "It's excellent nutrition."

"Indeed," Sebastian agreed. "Its effects are less than that of the stamina-recovery herb, but it would be a worthy inclusion all the same. To think that such a small piece has such a powerful effect!"

Looking around, it seemed like he wasn't alone in feeling the benefit of the herb.

*Are they getting some kind of placebo effect? No, the herb's probably a lot more effective than the vitamins in my world.*

"Do you have any more of this herb?" Helena asked me.

"I had to divide up most of them...there's only one left. I didn't make very many, since this was only supposed to be a trial run."

"That makes sense. Might I ask for it? I'd like to experiment with dulling the flavors."

"Of course."

Sebastian nodded thoughtfully. “You aim to make it more palatable without reducing its effect, correct?”

“Exactly.”

I passed her the last sprig of passelry. If the yellow fluid really held the bulk of the nutrients, it couldn’t be removed without losing its health benefits—but if there was anything in the leaf itself, preparing it would become that much easier.

Sebastian and I watched with bated breath as Helena prepared the herb. She rinsed it well, then let it boil briefly in a pot of water. Then, she cut off any hard or crusty portions until only a small amount of wilted, brown leaf was left.

Finally, she wiped her brow. “There, done.”

Sebastian studied it carefully. “Indeed, there seems to be none of the yellow parts remaining.”

“Now for the real test,” I said.

I was admittedly a little worried, since the water had smelled foul while the herb was boiling. The stench cleanly left the pot with the water, however, instead of lingering in the metal. It was an odd thing to behold.

“There’s hardly enough to share this time,” the butler mused.

Helena nodded. “You, Mr. Hirooka, and I will be the ones to try it, then.”

“You don’t need to give me any,” I insisted. “If you split it between the two of you, it’ll probably be easier to tell if it still has any effect.”

I had no confidence that I could tell its nutritional quality from a taste. Helena and Sebastian both seemed far better candidates for that job.

*I-It’s not like I’m scared it’ll still taste bad...no, not at all!*

“Very well,” Helena agreed. “The two of us, then.”

“As you will,” Sebastian echoed.

With that, they cautiously put their share of the leaf in their mouths, likely afraid of the same thing I was. Evidently, Helena had been just as affected by the taste as the rest of us, and she’d simply hidden it better.

Sebastian chewed his share thoughtfully. “Hmm... Intriguing.”

“How is it?” I asked uneasily.

“The smell and taste have vanished almost completely,” Helena replied. “The yellow juices must have been the source of that.”

From the way they both readily swallowed, I could tell they agreed. They didn’t pale or retch in the slightest.

“There is a bit of lingering bitterness,” Sebastian added, “but I imagine that is endemic to the leaf itself.”

Helena nodded thoughtfully. “I could easily mix this with the greital wine.”

*Now for the real question.*

“Do you feel anything?”

Helena paused to think. “It’s far harder to tell than before, but I can definitely feel something flowing through me.”

“I would imagine our bodies’ mana is reacting to it,” Sebastian explained. “It must be carrying out the strengthening benefits.”

I cocked my head to the side. “Uh... Mana?”

*What does mana have anything to do with vitamins?*

“Mana is a fundamental aspect of the human body,” the butler continued. “It is therefore quite similar to nutrients—the same, in a sense.”

*So they’re feeling the mana instead? I think I got that impression when I tried it before...it was faint, but recognizable. If mana and nutrients really are the same, it’s probably going to any part of the body that’s lacking the necessary materials to thrive.*

“Hrmm.” Sebastian closed his eyes in concentration.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“As I thought,” he finally said. “My mana seems more active than usual. I wouldn’t go so far as to call this a mana-increasing effect, but any experienced mage could tell the difference with ease.”

“More active?”

I’d barely begun my magic studies, so I didn’t know what that was supposed to feel like. Once I focused on my own mana, though, I thought I could feel a slight shift.

*I’m not surprised he can tell, though. He’s a far better mage than me.*

The butler nodded. “To put it another way, my mana is delivering energy to my body more efficiently. I can certainly feel the effect—though I cannot know specifics without a proper means of detection, such as Isabel has in her store.”

“Some meals do have the ability to energize one’s mana,” Helena added. “This is a valuable herb, indeed.”

*I guess they can parse the effect better now that the flavor isn’t as overwhelming. It’s bound to be less potent with the juices removed, but I’m glad to see they aren’t gone altogether.*

“It’s safe to conclude this herb would be an excellent supplement to the wine,” Sebastian announced.

“I agree,” Helena replied. “Though the pungent fluids enhance it, the benefits are in the leaf itself. Now we just need to make sure it still works when mixed with the wine.”

“Precisely. I should imagine proper test batches will be warranted on that front.”

“I agree.” The chef turned back to me. “Can I ask you to grow more of these for me?”

“Of course! I’ll make a few more of them later today.”

If the leaves still worked in the wine, our nutrient-rich wine would be complete. It wouldn’t be hard to make a few in my spare time, and I wouldn’t bother preparing them so the fluids would stay inside.

“Still, a meal supplement of sorts in wine form,” Sebastian mused. “A fascinating notion.”

Helena nodded. “I imagine it’ll be extremely useful, given its effect on mana.”

“Funny how that was a total accident,” I added with a wry smile.

I’d imagined the nutrients from the herb flowing throughout the body, sure, but I didn’t even consider the mana effect.

*If it’s good for the body, I’ll consider that a win.*

“That should be sufficient for a general health boost,” Sebastian said confidently. “You mentioned you brought nutrient-rich herbs as well?”

“Yes. I was hoping to provide everything the body needs and might not get enough of otherwise. All the health-enhancing effects in the world won’t matter if you’re malnourished.”

“Interesting. The idea, then, is for the former to hasten the effects of the latter?”

“Exactly.” I showed the two of them the nutrient herbs I’d made. The cooks peered over each other to get a closer look.

“What an interesting variety,” Helena remarked. “Do you intend to put these in a separate wine?”

“No, I’d like them to be together, if possible. I think the herbs are synergistic enough that they’d be a lot healthier that way.”

Otherwise, you’d have to drink two different glasses to get the full effect, and I didn’t see much point in that. Some people would only be able to drink a single glass at a time.

I pulled out three herbs and laid them out. The first was supposed to be high in protein, the second in minerals, and the third in dietary iron. Unfortunately, I had no way of confirming that, and it’d be significantly harder to tell by eating them.

“Several at once, I see,” Sebastian remarked. “It would be truly wonderful if we could combine them all successfully.”

“Adding more different types could certainly complicate things,” Helena remarked.

“Indeed. There’s no telling what issues we may encounter in mixing them.”



They had a point. The more herbs we added, the harder it would be to make their flavor profiles mesh nicely. The vitamin-rich herb looked like it would be exceptionally sour, and adding that to the sweet greital wine was bound to throw off the original taste. I couldn't imagine sweet-and-sour fruit wine would taste well, at least to most people.

"Could you perhaps compound these together?" Sebastian asked.

"Compound them?"

"Indeed. Mix them into a single medicine."

*Right, the book Milicia and I borrowed from Sebastian mentioned that.*

Through compounding, I could strengthen a single herb's effect to new heights or combine several effects into one. Some medicines could only be made from a variety of ingredients working in concert. Unfortunately, improperly mixed medicine could be poisonous or have no effect at all. The book stressed how important it was to be careful when mixing. When combining several medicines into potions, it was impossible to avoid introducing mana to the mix, and the results could be explosive. I doubted mixing these herbs would have that drastic of an effect, but I was genuinely shocked to hear mana could blow up like that.

"How do I compound them?" I asked. "Where would I even begin?"

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. "Is it not written in the textbook I loaned you?"

"It is, but what if I don't do it right?"

"I should imagine you won't, not on your first attempt. Practice is the key to any skill."

"Yeah... I guess you're right."

"I can make a wide variety of dishes, and serve large groups at a time," Helena said. "Do you think I became a master at it overnight?"

"No, you probably didn't."

I could only imagine how much practice and hard work went into Helena's craft, especially at her level. In fact, this would be the perfect starting medicine—none of these plants had any effects outside of their nutritional qualities, so

messing up shouldn't be *too* bad. The only issue was, once again, confirming the final product had the correct nutrients.

"What if you took on that project with Milicia?" Sebastian suggested.

"With Milicia?"

"Indeed. As fellow apothecaries in training, I imagine she could provide valuable support and insight."

We'd been studying medicine together, certainly, and I'd redoubled my efforts after my adventures in Lange. Asking Milicia for help couldn't hurt.

"Okay, I'll do that," I replied. "I'll ask her as soon as I can, and if she agrees, we'll make it together."

Sebastian smiled contentedly. "Please do."

"How do I know if the finished medicine is any good, though?"

"I shall be sure to purchase a device from Isabel to confirm that."

"She sells that kind of thing?"

She ran a magic item store, so I couldn't imagine her having what we'd need—unless there was a magic item that did that.

"The first herb you brought forward—the health supplement herb, was it?—demonstrated the connection between mana and proper nutrition. I imagine that there may be a tool to detect the active mana in nutrients," he said.

"Huh... I guess that'd make sense."

After all, Isabel had a tool for divining Gifts, which was infinitely more niche. I trusted that Sebastian would have a better sense for that kind of thing than I did.

*There's so much they can do with mana in this world, even if they don't have Earth's level of technology.*

"In that case, I shall inquire with Isabel if such a tool exists, and purchase one if possible," Sebastian declared. "We shall consider alternate means of measurement in case that happens to fall through. First, however, is the medicine itself."

I nodded. “Leave that to me.” If I didn’t have the medicine ready, how we measured it didn’t matter.

“Mr. Hirooka?” Helena asked. “Should we perhaps taste-test the herbs first?”

“Oh, right. That’s another good thing to check.”

“Indeed!” Sebastian chuckled jovially. “If they prove as foul-tasting as the first herb, we’ll no doubt need an alternate means of preparing the wine.”

I doubted any of the new herbs would be that much of an issue, but since one of them looked like it would have a strong citrus flavor, it made sense to check. I carefully divided the three herbs into sections small enough for everyone to try.

“Like this?” I asked when I was finished.

Sebastian nodded. “Excellent. I cannot imagine we will feel much effect, but it should be sufficient to gauge the flavor.”

“Right... I didn’t make very many, after all.”

I passed the portions around to Sebastian, Helena, and the curious cooks who’d gathered around us as well. I was confident enough in the potency to put that off for the time being.

Sebastian sized up his piece carefully. “Here goes, then.”

We all ate the first herb, the protein-rich grass. It was both distinctly bitter and sweet. The flavor was nothing to write home about, but I couldn’t call it unpleasant, either. It somehow sat right in the middle of the two extremes.

Sebastian frowned slightly. “I’m not sure how to qualify this.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It’s not inedible, but I wouldn’t want to eat it if I had the choice.”

Helena pursed her lips in thought. “The flavor itself is fairly muted, actually. It could be an accent or ‘secret ingredient’ of sorts...though I doubt it would improve the taste of a dish at all.”

*I bet the flavor profile’s too jumbled for that.*

“On to the next one,” Sebastian announced as he put a piece of golden, iron-

rich leaf in his mouth.

I hesitated for a moment because of the sharp metallic smell it had, but Helena and a good number of cooks ate their portions just as readily. After eating mine, I furrowed my brow. "That's a familiar flavor, but I can't say it's a good one."

The leaf tastes almost exactly like blood, like I'd somehow cut my lip eating it. It made some sense, given its supposedly high iron content, but it didn't taste good at all.

"Last but not least," Helena announced, "this sour-smelling one."

It was the vitamin-rich herb, the one that had a powerful citrus smell to it. Inhaling its scent made my mouth water. It was like a pickled plum in that I had a good idea of how it'd taste from that alone. Nonetheless, Sebastian and I both ate ours, followed closely by the others.

Sebastian's lips puckered. "G-Goodness, what a potent sourness... it's quite overpowering."

Helena nodded. "There's a fruity quality to it...no, there's more than that."

"I can't stop drooling," I muttered.

It was like a cross between a raw lemon and a pickled plum. All I could taste was overwhelming sourness, with no other flavors to be found. I hadn't expected it to be anywhere near that strong. Helena had apparently picked up on something else, but to me it was like a straight shot of citric acid.

*I thought I heard citric acid and vitamins aren't directly related? Either way, this should hopefully have more nutrients in it than just vitamin C. I think lemons and plums are both fruits, technically, so maybe that's what Helena's picking up on...not that this thing's any kind of fruit.*

"A potent taste, indeed," Sebastian said as he swallowed, reaching immediately for the water. "It's as though my entire mouth was filled with acid."

"It is," Helena replied thoughtfully. "There seems to be a wealth of different sour flavors... I'll have to make note of this."

The kitchen staff around her nodded readily in assent.

*She's always on the clock, isn't she?*

Helena turned back to me and bowed. "Thank you kindly for this wealth of flavors, Mr. Hirooka."

"Uh, sure."

*Here I thought it was nothing more than boring old sour... If it helps her compose a new dish, I'm all for it. I can't really think of any dishes that go all-in on sourness like that, though.*

She frowned slightly. "I'm not sure about adding this to the greital wine, though."

"Indeed," Sebastian agreed. "It would no doubt impact the flavor profile as a whole."

"I can try to prepare it so the sourness isn't as overpowering," I offered, "but I can't guarantee anything."

I had no idea how any of it would taste once compounded, though. They said that the best medicine always tastes the worst, and medicinal alcohol seemed to be the one exception to that. I'd have to hope for some chemical reaction to change up the flavors, though. I'd have to go back to the drawing board otherwise.

"I'd better be going, then," I announced to the group. "I've got to talk to Milicia and start studying compounding more. Oh, and I'll have more of that health-enhancing herb ready for you by tonight."

"As you wish." Helena's eyes lit up. "Ah, right! One more thing. The capwort-infused greital wine should be ready to test by tomorrow evening."

"Great, I'll look forward to it," I replied. "I'll make sure to bring Leo so she can smell-test it."

"I had best remain here to discuss plans for dinner," Sebastian told me. "I shall see you later."

"Right, later."

With that, I left the kitchen alone. I had more work on my plate now, what with needing to talk to Milicia and study compounding, but I was sure I'd manage.

I stopped. "Wait... I was planning on checking in with Anrinnelesse, wasn't I?" I doubted she'd spend her entire stay in that room, but I still felt a little guilty for making her hide like that.

I hailed a passing maid, one I didn't recognize by name. There were so many servants I had a hard time remembering them all. *I should really check in with them sometime and try to get an idea of who's who.*

"Excuse me!" I called.

"May I help you, Mr. Hirooka?"

"Er... Do you know if Anrinnelesse is still in her room?"

"She is indeed. I just finished seeing to her, in fact, and she expressed no desire to leave."

*I knew it... I really should check on her.*

"Okay... Thanks for letting me know."

After thanking her, I left for Anrinnelesse's room, keeping Laila's earlier instructions in mind as I walked.

I felt like kicking myself. When I'd turned her down, I was determined it would be the start of a new me, and that I'd be better about asserting myself. Instead, I was going out of my way to make sure she wasn't hurt too badly.

*No... I still said no when I had to. That must count for something, right?*

"Let's see, it's supposed to be close to my room... There it is!"

It took a while to navigate the corridors from the kitchen due to the sheer size of the mansion, but I arrived at my destination without getting too lost. I raised my fist to knock and paused.

*I've never visited a woman's room before... What if she gets the wrong idea? Guys don't normally visit girls alone like this unless it means something, right? I'm starting to get cold feet, but I can't come this far just to turn back.*

“Okay... I’ve got this,” I whispered to myself. I knocked shyly on the door, and the sound echoed worryingly loud down the corridor.

“Yes?” came Anrinnelesse’s voice. “Who is it?” She sounded cheerful, which was a relief in and of itself.

“I-It’s me, Takumi. Do you have a minute?”

“Takumi, you say?!”

I heard a frenzied clamoring from within.

*Maybe this was a bad idea.*

“B-By all means, come in,” she said a moment later.

“Okay...” I took a few deep breaths and opened the door gently, urging my feet forward with each step.

Anrinnelesse’s room was nearly identical to the one I’d been given, except that some of the furniture was arranged differently. It was likely the villa’s standard guest room, and I assumed that the guards who’d accompanied Eckenhart were given similar quarters.

Finally, I focused on Anrinnelesse herself, who was peering at me dubiously from her perch on the edge of her bed. “Have you been doing okay, Anrinnelesse? I heard you haven’t left your room in a while.”

“I didn’t expect such words from the very man who broke my heart.”

I chuckled awkwardly. “Y-Yeah, I guess not. You seem to be holding up fine, though.”

“I’ve no issue physically, to be certain. I’ve simply been trying to understand why in the world you would reject my offer.”

“You’ve been thinking that this whole time?”

“Of course! Why, I’ve never met a soul who wouldn’t gladly abase themselves at the mere sight of me. I could see the thirst for my rank and influence in every one of them. You, however, are different.”

“I, uh...had a very different upbringing from most people.”

I literally wasn’t of her world, after all, and my understanding of the noble

caste system here was shaky at best. That would be a sufficient explanation for the time being, at least, and would hopefully help her reason through her shock.

Speaking of shock, her magnificent drill curls were unfurled straight in parts, and her hair nearly touched the floor now. I had to assume her hair was naturally straight and she specifically styled it into gigantic looping curls. The clamoring I'd heard when I knocked was likely her attempting to hurriedly curl it.

Anrinnelesse noticed I was looking at her hair and pouted. "I suppose you've seen me like *this* now... This visit has brought me nothing but misery and misfortune."

I chuckled a little. "That wouldn't have happened if you'd properly gotten ready and come out with the rest of us."

"Bold words from the man who forced me into seclusion in the first place," she huffed.

"Me? I thought you were just scared of Leo... Guess I was wrong."

"Of course you are! I would never fear a mere monster, not even a silver fenrir!"

"Oh, okay. Should I call Leo in here, then? I know she's been looking for someone to play with."







“No! D-Definitely not!”

I knew I was the reason she was hiding, but it didn't feel right to apologize for something I didn't regret. I'd hoped she meant it when she said she wasn't scared of Leo, but I shouldn't have been surprised she frightened some people. Leo was a lot of wolf for most people to handle. Eckenhart and Gelda had both been terrified of her at first—which emphasized how brave Laila and Claire were. In Claire's case, though, Leo did save her life first.

“Well, forget about Leo for now,” I said. “Are you sure you can find the answer you're looking for, alone in your room like this?”

Anrinnelesse shot me a confused look. “What reason could I have for that? I've always solved my problems by myself. I even exposed Father's horrid deeds on my own initiative.”

“Really? I don't remember it happening like that.”

“I'm not sure what you mean.”

“You're probably only thinking that way because you keep isolating yourself like this.”

I didn't doubt that she decided to expose her father all on her own, but I know for a fact that she enlisted Eckenhart's help. She couldn't have gathered all the evidence she needed alone, either. My best guess is that she wasn't counting all the thought and effort that went on outside of her sight, leading her to believe she was alone in her actions.

*I guess she'll always be alone as long as she stays in her room, no matter how many servants she has working for her.*

I got the impression this wasn't the first time she'd confined herself to her room like this. It was no wonder she thought she could do everything alone. Now, if this were Earth, she could genuinely manage most things online from her room, but this world didn't even have computers.

“Do you have some issue with my being here?” she huffed. “I can organize my information properly here and think clearly without distraction.”

“Being alone may help you concentrate, but there's a very real limit to what

you can do without connections. Maybe talking to others could help you figure out why I rejected you?”

There had to be others in this world who’d turn her down just as readily as I did, no matter how few. She could only get to know other people, how they saw the world, and what they valued if she met and talked to them properly. Even if she couldn’t find the exact answer she was looking for that way, it would doubtlessly be a great help to her.

She wrinkled her nose. “Connections? I cannot imagine what use I’d have for such a thing.”

“Maybe you don’t see it now, but that might change.”

There was something familiar to her attitude, arrogance aside. I barely knew anyone either when I lived in Japan because I was so busy with work. I only realized how dire it was when I came here and had proper relationships with Claire and the others. Whether it was with friends or lovers, parents or siblings, getting to know people meant learning to care about them. It may be easier to shut others out, but she couldn’t hope to find a solution to an interpersonal problem without other people. I knew that was easier said than done for some, and I wasn’t about to force her to do anything, but I knew she could do it. She had no problem asking to marry me, after all.

“What need have I for connections, really? As long as I hold the reins of power, people will follow me,” she insisted.

“Sure, that’s one way to see the world—but I bet you’ll run into more people like me eventually.”

She probably wasn’t wrong, at least in a sense. As ruler of a domain, people would obey her one way or another. I didn’t want that to be her only view of others—though perhaps that was more my opinion than anything. I hoped she could be more like Claire and Eckenhart, and have a more measured relationship with her authority.

“Why?” Anrinnesse clenched her fists. “Why don’t you know your place?! Has being in the duke’s care truly inflated your ego that much?!”

“No! Even if you were a duke’s daughter and Eckenhart were only a count, my

answer would be the same,” I said flatly.

“Then...why? Why?” Her words drifted into weak muttering, just as they had in the dining hall. She clawed at her head, undoing her curls further.

*Aww, that drill hair’s so fun to look at, too...not that it matters now, of course.*

“If you can’t figure it out alone, then talk to someone about it,” I replied firmly.

We had a saying in Japan—better to ask and be embarrassed than not ask and never know. I felt it was doubly true when it came to others’ feelings. If they had that same saying here, Anrinnelesse clearly didn’t know it for all the weight she put on being “above” others.

“Talk to others...?” She shook her head. “You won’t give me the answer. I tried talking to Father, too, so many countless times. I’ve better uses of my time than that.”

I got the feeling that she was touching on some familial awkwardness she hadn’t mentioned before. It didn’t feel like she had disowned him, per se, but she’d belittled him in the past—though I’d feel the same if my dad was a cruel tyrant. That explained her insistence on doing everything herself, though. She must not have had anyone to rely on but her servants, and she didn’t even register them as equals.

“I don’t want to sound conceited,” I began, “but you might want to consider talking to people other than me. I can’t guarantee that’ll give you the answer, though you’ll get closer to it than you are now.”

I didn’t mean to lecture or patronize her, but I felt it had to be said. Sebastian or Eckenhart could give her some good advice on that front. After all, the duke was in charge of educating her now, and Sebastian would gladly tell her anything she wanted to know about any of the many topics he was fluent in—he’d enjoy it, too. Claire could even give her more pointed advice, since they were in very similar positions.

Anrinnelesse’s eyes widened. “I should go to others? For *help*?”

“That’s what I’m suggesting. Whatever Claire doesn’t know, I bet Sebastian does. There’s plenty of people worth talking to besides them, too.”

“Claire is...odd.” She frowned pointedly. “She never acts normal at any of the formal functions.”

“She doesn’t?”

I wouldn’t go so far as to say odd—though I guessed most noblewomen wouldn’t ride into the woods alone if their little sister got sick.

Anrinnelesse sighed in frustration. “It’s as though she refuses to claim her birthright proper. What use is power if one never uses it?”

“Personally, I don’t think noble blood means you *need* to use your influence whenever you can. Either way, I really think you should talk to people more and get their opinions on things.”

“You’re saying I can find the answer that way?”

I shrugged. “Maybe?”

Making that gesture felt just as odd as all the soft lecturing I’d been giving her. My head was starting to spin from acting so out of the norm.

*I wish I could pet Leo and calm down a little...*

In response, Anrinnelesse crossed her arms and turned up her nose. “Rather irresponsible, aren’t you? Am I or am I not asking about *you*?”

*Sure, but she’s got to find her own answer. Maybe she won’t find it by talking to people, but it can’t hurt her.*

“I’ll tell you one thing,” I conceded.

“Yes?”

“People will follow you even if you don’t force them to. Just look at Claire. The more you try to control people, the less likely they are to stick with you.”

She wrinkled her nose again. “Claire?”

“Talk to anyone in the villa, it doesn’t matter who. Listen to them, bond with them, and see if you can find what makes them follow her—and no, it really isn’t her position making that happen.”

With that, I turned and made for the door. The conversation was oddly exhausting, and I was about at my limit. I still didn’t understand how a simple

check-in turned into such an in-depth discussion.

“Very well,” she finally conceded. “I suppose it couldn’t hurt to try your methods.”

That was all the advice I could give her, despite even having Eckenhart’s words to rely on. I couldn’t give her an answer she’d be satisfied with, so she’d have to find one herself. She’d probably be fine, given that her moral compass seemed to be intact, but I needed to make sure she wouldn’t become a ruler like her father—though if she did, Eckenhart and the kingdom’s top officials would probably stamp out her family’s noble status altogether. I knew it wasn’t any of my business, but I felt I had some responsibility, given how involved I was already.

I nodded approvingly. “Don’t worry if you don’t succeed at first, either. I’m still learning this kind of thing myself. Good luck!”

“What is that supposed to mean? I’m not sure you’ve made any sense since you stepped in here.”

There was a lot more energy in her voice now than there had been, so I felt comfortable smiling at her.

“At least you’re doing better now,” I said as I left the room.

*Hopefully she’ll think before she acts now... I just wish I could’ve seen those drill-curls at their best again.* My thoughts still lingering on her hair, I left down the villa’s winding corridors.

## Chapter 3: First Attempts at Compounding

“LET’S see... First step, find Milicia.”

My conversation with Anrinnelesse had taken long enough that it was time for my sword training, but I had work to do first. I decided it would be best to talk to my apprentice Milicia about compounding, and after that I’d take a short break to be with Leo as I’d planned.

The dining hall was empty, but it didn’t take long to find her in a parlor. Laila was teaching her something.

“Oh, there she is. Milicia?” I called.

“Don’t forget that,” Laila instructed the girl, “when our masters and mistresses return, you must greet them in perfect coordination with the rest of the staff.”

She nodded firmly. “I’ll try!”

Neither of them seemed to notice me, maybe because their backs were to the door.

“First, however, let us practice for when Lady Claire leaves the villa.”

“Okay!”

*I knew it; they practice that stuff! As much as I’d like to practice with them, I should finish what I came for first...*

I walked closer behind them. “Um... Sorry to interrupt you.”

“Mr. Hirooka?”

“Oh, master.”

That was finally enough to get them to turn around, though I felt a pang of guilt for interrupting them.

“I hope you’re not too busy,” I said.



Laila shook her head. “Not at all. What may we help you with?”

“How may we help?” Milicia echoed dutifully.

“It’s nothing I need help with, really, I just wanted to tell Milicia something.”

The trainee blinked. “Me?”

I hesitated, unsure if I should be bothering her with apothecary work when she was already so busy, but I pushed on. “I’ve, um, made some new herbs.”

“You did?! Wow, that’s incredible!”

Even Laila widened her eyes in surprise at my words.

*It’s not really that big a deal, is it?*

“I-I didn’t do anything, it’s all my Gift... Anyhow, it turns out I need to compound them into medicine.”

Milicia’s expression clouded. “Compounding? But I thought that could be dangerous? We still don’t know enough for that...”

I got the impression she was interested, but she seemed to remember the same passage that had bothered me from our textbook. “We won’t be mixing anything dangerous,” I assured her. “There’s no chance of it turning poisonous or anything.”

“Really?”

“Taking too much of it might be bad for your health, but none of the herbs I’ve grown are at all dangerous.”

They were only nutrient herbs, after all. There wouldn’t be any issue as long as we didn’t make and eat large amounts at once—assuming they were exactly as I’d envisioned them, of course.

“You’re sure? That means we can practice mixing them, then!” she cheered.

“That’s right. I was hoping I could get your help with that.”

“Me? Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

I nodded. “You study hard, and you’re a quick learner. Sometimes it feels like you’re teaching me...”

“N-No, I’m not that smart, honest!”

Despite her humility, I knew she’d been continuing to study the herb textbook Sebastian gave us. She’d gone well past the parts I’d previewed, and she helped me with the odd concepts while we studied. I was beginning to feel like a failure of a mentor, and I didn’t want to use the other things I’d been up to as an excuse.

“We’ll keep it basic,” I assured her. “I don’t plan on trying anything complex, and if we fail, it won’t be a big deal. There’s nothing to worry about.”

I could always grow more herbs, after all. There were still plenty of challenges with compounding, like measuring the reagents and maintaining the correct temperature, but I was set on the absolute easiest mixing method. I hoped that would be enough to improve the flavor.

Finally, Milicia nodded. “Okay. I can’t turn you down if you’re relying on me!”

I laughed a little. “You don’t need to get that worked up about it. We’ll have the textbook with us the whole time, and we can always get more herbs.”

“Right. When do we start?”

“Let me think...tomorrow, maybe the day after? I’ll let you know when I have an exact time in mind.”

“Okay! I’ll review the textbook until then!”

“Great, I’d appreciate that.”

*I’d better take another look at the book myself... I don’t want her to end up doing all the work.*

“Good luck with your servant studies,” I told her. “Sorry for interrupting you, Laila. I’ll leave you to it.”

“Okay!”

Laila dipped her head politely. “I will teach her as best I can.”

My work in the parlor done, I stepped out into the hallway. I could faintly hear Milicia’s voice through the closed door, so I assumed they’d gotten right into practice. I had training to attend to, though, so I hurried on my way.

*I wish I could join them...maybe someday. I just hope they don't scold me for turning such an important part of their work into entertainment...*

"Ah, Takumi! Over here!"

"You're sooooo slow, Takumi!"

"Worf, woof!"

"Awuff!!"

When I stepped out into the back garden, I found Eckenhart, Tilura, and the fenrirs waiting for me. Eckenhart seemed perfectly at ease with Leo, so I took that as a sign that their playtime the day before did its job—even if he seemed more tired than usual.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting," I said. "My talk with Helena and Sebastian in the kitchen ran a little long. I had to talk to Milicia and Anrinnelesse for a bit too, and that also took more time than I expected."

Eckenhart frowned slightly. "Helena and Sebastian? Was something amiss? And what of Anrinnelesse? Milicia is the new maid-in-training, isn't she?"

"I was looking into some greital wine-related things in the kitchen, and I was a little worried about Anrinnelesse not leaving her room. Milicia and I talked about some herb things for a while," I explained.

"Hmm... It'd take a while to get all the details, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, probably."

"I'll get the details later, then. Training comes first."

"I'm ready."

I could see he was interested in the wine, but he looked content in talking to Sebastian about it some other time.

After we finished our basic movement exercises, Eckenhart sized me up again. "Your movements seem different now, Takumi."

"They do?"

"It's not a large change, granted—small enough I'm not surprised you haven't noticed."

Tilura trotted up to us eagerly. “What about me, Father?”

He thought for a moment. “Your blade is as honest and true as ever. A little too honest, perhaps, but there will be time to address that later. You only need to keep up your current pace.”

“Okay!”

I wasn’t surprised to hear that. Her swordplay fit her personality perfectly, and even I had to admit her movements had that earnest precision to them—not that I was good enough to judge.

*Wait, does that mean I’ve somehow become more jaded since I started training? I...don’t want to think about that.*

“I’d imagine your fight at the Yugard store has to do with it,” the duke continued. “Your movements are sharpened now, and it’s clear you’re taking your surroundings under consideration more—though I may be reading too far into it.”

“I think that sounds about right,” I said.

*The store was cramped, after all.*

“Of course, there are bound to be differences based on where you fight. This wide garden, for instance, is nothing like that cramped store,” he said.

There were so many shelves and tables in that building that there was hardly enough room to move. That had been a major saving grace at the time, but I could understand how that turned into a bad habit in an open place like this.

*Wide spaces versus cramped ones, huh...*

“If you continue to restrict your movements here as you would in a cramped space, you’re putting yourself at a disadvantage,” he told me.

“Yeah, I can see how.”

“I’m not saying the biggest movements are always the best choice, of course, but constricting your motions where there isn’t any need to can be very distracting. You’re limiting yourself unnecessarily and giving your opponent an edge.”

The more concerned I was with my surroundings, the more limited my avenues of attack would be, making my attacks more predictable...I assumed. A swordmaster like Eckenhart could probably push through that kind of disadvantage, but it wouldn't be hard to get used to my novice attacks. After all, varying attack patterns and keeping your foe guessing was one of the fundamentals of swordplay.

"Practical experience is always useful, of course, but I can't allow you to develop poor habits so easily," he said.

Leo flattened her ears accusingly at him. "Rooo!"

The duke retreated a step nervously. "P-Please, Miss Leo, I couldn't have known this would happen!"

"Ruff?"

He'd been watching me fight, granted, but he wasn't responsible for any habits I formed. No teacher could perfectly predict their student's growth.

"Leo, Eckenhart, please calm down," I intervened. "I'm not blaming anyone. If anything, it's my own fault for overthinking things."

Finally, Leo nodded and rested her head on the ground once more. "Pwff."

*Seriously, Leo, leave him alone. Getting on his case now won't change a thing.*

Eckenhart composed himself. "Er... We still have time until dinner, it seems. I'll work you twice as hard and train that bad habit right out of you."

"Please do."

"Me too!" Tilura chimed. "Train me super hard too!"

The duke looked down at her, frowning slightly. "You don't even have anything to fix."

With that, Eckenhart worked me extra harshly until dinner. I could barely stand by the time we were done, and I lost count of the number of times he'd smacked me chidingly with his wooden training sword. I had to grow us some fatigue-recovery herbs just so we could walk again.

"You still haven't beaten the habit completely," Eckenhart lamented, "but I've

at least seen some improvement.”

“Thank you for helping me with it. I wouldn’t have even noticed it if you hadn’t pointed it out.”

He snorted proudly. “I can’t have you fighting like a cornered rat, now, can I?”

I was relieved that he was giving me a passing grade. If I’d let this habit settle in too deeply, there’s no telling how hard it would be to shake. It made the hellish exercise worth it.

*I’m impressed Tilura kept up with us, too. Is she that hard a worker, or is it just youth? Wait, no, I keep forgetting I’m also young...sorta.*



**AFTER** finishing in the back garden, we walked into the dining hall to find Anrinnelesse and Claire already waiting for us.

Eckenhart brightened at the sight of her. “Ah, Anrinnelesse! Glad to see you could join us.”

She huffed a little. “I could hardly stay in my room forever, could I?”

*I’m just glad I didn’t turn her into a shut-in for life.*

“It seems Takumi convinced Anse to come out,” Claire added.

Anrinnelesse must’ve told Claire about the visit I paid her. I got the feeling Claire was glaring at me a little, but I decided it was only my imagination.

“Takumi did?” The duke shot me a surprised look. “Come to think of it, he mentioned paying her a visit this afternoon.”

I scratched my head. “Uh, yeah. I was a little worried, so—”

“He paid a private visit to my chambers,” Anrinnelesse interrupted triumphantly. Her strange boasting aside, she was in considerably better shape. She seemed full of energy, and even her drill curls had their usual spring to them. My makeshift lecture must have gotten through to her.

“So, what did you two talk about?” Eckenhart asked me. “I can’t imagine anything bringing her out of her shell so quickly. Did you threaten to sic Miss Leo on her?”

I stared at him in disbelief. “I’d never do something like that. I just suggested that she talk to people instead of trying to solve her problems alone.”

“Ah. I’m sorry, it looks like you beat me to the punch and did my work for me.”

*He’s probably right. Educating her is his job. I probably didn’t need to stop by to see her at all.*

“Of course he did,” Claire added testily. “He’s so kind, he would help anyone in need, even after rejecting them. I...I know that. He’s just being polite...”

*I’m starting to worry about her... She’s been weird ever since she found out about my visit.*

“What’s wrong, Claire?” There was a shadow of fear in Eckenhart’s voice. “Why are you so...intense?”

The dogs likewise gave her curious looks.

“Ruff?”

“Arf?”

She firmly shook her head. “It’s nothing. Nothing at all.”

*I guess there’s nothing wrong, then. I just don’t understand women...*

“A-Are you sure?” Eckenhart pressed. Sweat was starting to bead on his forehead. “I haven’t done anything this time, honest!”

“I think that’s the problem, isn’t it?” She glared at him. He must’ve struck a nerve, somehow. “Shouldn’t *you* have been the one to coax her out of her room? You’re strong enough to drag her out by force, if necessary.”

The duke froze. “Er. I...wouldn’t do that.”

*Yeah, I bet he could’ve talked to her way better than I could. He’s got a lot more experience and the like than I do. He probably wouldn’t have had to coerce her out...probably.*

From Claire’s words, though, I could tell the real issue was my visiting Anrinnelesse alone, not Eckenhart’s inaction.

*I knew it, it was weird for me to visit her alone. Maybe I should’ve brought*

*Laila or Gelda? Wait, Eckenhart's a guy too. Why would it be okay for him to go, then?*

"I think Takumi here was the only reason she listened at all," Eckenhart countered.

"Really?" I asked.

He nodded. "If Claire or I had gone, she may not have listened to us—we're nobles, after all. Since she seemed convinced her status means everything, she would've had to hear it *didn't* matter from someone like you. You think nothing at all of nobility, after all."

"I wouldn't go that far..."

It was more that I wasn't used to dealing with nobles. I had no issue paying respect to Eckenhart, or anyone else for that matter. I hadn't had the chance to correct him since our reunion outside the Yugard store, and even if I'd said as much then, he probably would've stopped me. That said, I preferred House Liberte's efforts toward fairness and equality over those who would abuse their power. The biggest issue was that I didn't know proper manners in this world, so I wouldn't even realize if I was being rude to them.

*I really need some basic manners lessons at some point...*

"No, he's right," Anrinnelesse said. "Only one with complete contempt for the aristocracy would refuse my most generous offer. I can understand how you would think that with your silver fenrir at your side... Miss Leo, was her name?"

*It might look like that from the outside, I guess... I don't hate the nobility, though, honest.*

Upon hearing her name, Leo turned to Anrinnelesse. "Ruff?"

"Weh?!" Anrinnelesse glanced back, then stiffly faced directly ahead, eyes wide with horror.

*Looks like it'll take time for her to get used to Leo.*

Claire cast me a reproachful look. "I still can't accept you visiting *her* room."

Eckenhart broke into a grin. "Ah, so you don't care that I didn't talk to her! You're just upset he snuck off to spend time with her!"



I blinked in shock. “I-I...what?”

“N-No, that’s not it at all!” Claire protested, turning to me. “That’s part of it, granted, but...I wish you’d at least brought me with you. That way, you and Anse...um... Y-You two wouldn’t be...” She trailed off at the end, but the message was clear. I’d messed up.

*I knew it... I’ll have to talk to Sebastian after this. I can’t keep making faux pas like this.*

Anrinnelesse furrowed her brow imperiously at Claire. “Why would I be convinced by anything *you* could say?”

“Now, Anrinnelesse, that’s not polite.” Eckenhart sighed before turning to his daughter. “Come now, Claire, let bygones be bygones. You saw Takumi reject her with your own eyes.”

Claire let out a heavy sigh. “I suppose.”

I wasn’t sure what Anrinnelesse was being so haughty about. I’d thought she and Claire were on good terms with each other, but it seemed they had some compatibility issues.

*Maybe I should talk about Claire less with Anrinnelesse... Oh, well. At least she’s out here and talking with people again.*

“I would’ve had a word with her if she hadn’t come out,” Eckenhart continued, “but I doubted I could get through to her for a few days. Takumi was the only one in any position to talk to her so soon. I think he did well, personally.”

With that, the duke made it clear he wanted to table the topic. Claire seemed peeved, but she obediently held her tongue, and I let out a sigh of relief.

Partway through the meal, Eckenhart’s eyes lit up. “Ah, Takumi? You mentioned discussing the greital wine with Helena, didn’t you?”

I nodded. “Sebastian was there, too.”

“Of course, I remember now.” He turned to the elderly butler. “Would you care to explain it all to me?”

*He knows Sebastian loves explaining things too.*

“Gladly, milord.”

We continued to eat as Sebastian giddily recounted what had happened in the kitchen. When he finished, Eckenhart stroked his chin amusedly.

“Interesting... So the capwort-infused wine will be ready tomorrow.”

“Just so, milord. We will have Miss Leo test it for the illness, and should it come out clean, you may all taste it if you wish.”

“Excellent!” The duke beamed. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Oh, right.” I turned to my furry friend. “Hey, Leo?”

“Ruff?”

“Could you please smell-test the wine Helena prepared tomorrow? I want you to make sure there’s none of that sickness left in it.”

“Woruff!”

Eckenhart looked at me in surprise. “You hadn’t asked her yet?”

I’d meant to talk to her right away, but I was preoccupied with all the other people I had to track down, and right after that was training. I was just glad she said yes.

I chuckled sheepishly. “I-I’ve been pretty busy...”

“I’m rather impressed she can detect the influence of that accursed item from smell alone,” Anrinnelesse remarked. “I’d thought it was only possible with a specialized mana-detecting tool.”

I nodded proudly. “Yeah, her nose is incredible.”

“Woff, wuff!”

“To think silver fenrir can do even that...Fascinating.”

Leo, picking up that she was still the topic of conversation, looked up from her food. “Ruff? Worf!”

“Weh?!” Anrinnelesse recoiled, her chair squeaking as it was forced back across the floor.

“Oh, Anse, are you still scared of her?” Claire asked with a hint of a smile.

“Miss Leo would never attack a person unless she had a good reason to.”

*That’s right! And yet, so many people are still scared of the poor, fluffy pupper...*

“I can’t help what I’m afraid of!” Anrinnelesse protested dramatically.

Eckenhart guffawed. “Gahaha! Maybe she needs some good old exposure therapy, like I had!”

“E-Exposure therapy? I don’t need anything so drastic, I assure you!”

Riding Leo had helped Eckenhart overcome his fear of her, granted, but I didn’t know about putting Anrinnelesse through the same thing when she was still so jumpy. While Gelda was in a similar situation before, she wasn’t as scared as Anrinnelesse. Far more could go wrong with her.

“It’s nothing scary,” I assured her. “All you have to do is climb on Leo’s back and let her go for a short run.”

The color drained from her face. “O-On her back?”

*Of course she’s scared... Talking about it when she’s already nervous is probably making things worse. It’s the fastest way to go about it, but still...*

“I promise you it’s safe,” Claire added. “You’ll see firsthand that she has no intention of harming you.”

“Ruff!” Leo agreed, wagging excitedly.

“Maybe we should let them spend time together normally first?” I suggested. “Leo can give Anrinnelesse a ride when she feels more comfortable.”

“Perhaps,” Claire said with a slow nod, “but don’t you feel sorry for poor Miss Leo? She doesn’t deserve to be feared like this.”

“I’d like to avoid that too, of course, but I don’t want to force Anrinnelesse to do anything she doesn’t want to.”

Claire narrowed her eyes at me slightly. “I’m glad you’re being *so kind* with Anse, Takumi.”

For a moment I was afraid she was angry with me, like she had been with Eckenhart, but the pout on her lips told me otherwise. *At least she isn’t angry...*

*I've never seen her make that face before, but I don't often look at women who are upset with me. That tends to upset them more.*

I hesitated, choosing my words carefully. "Er... I'm not being especially nice to her, I don't think."

Claire was right; I felt awful for having poor, cute little Leo treated like some monster. She probably felt the same and was just worried about Leo's feelings.

"I-I-I'd really rather not," Anrinnelesse stammered. "P-Perhaps another time?"

*I knew it wouldn't be good to force her into it...*

"Are you sure?" Eckenhart couldn't keep the smile from his lips. "I promise you it's the fastest way to go about it by far."

Claire smirked at him. "Yes, we all saw you shrieking with glee as you rode her."

"That was...ahem... The road from Ractos is quite harsh, you see."

They seemed to be joking, but Claire's eyes weren't laughing in the least.

Leo looked at me confusedly. "Ruff?"

"We don't want to force her," I explained. "Just try to spend time with her as calmly and unthreateningly as you can."

"Woff-wff." She relaxed immediately, backing away from Anrinnelesse.

Claire nodded reservedly. "If you insist, I suppose."

"Pity," Eckenhart remarked. "There's always next time, of course."

There was no harshness at all in Claire's voice, to the point that I wondered if I hadn't imagined it all. I hoped she understood how bothered Anrinnelesse was now.

"I'm not sure I could ever grow used to her," Anrinnelesse began uncomfortably, "but I'd do nearly anything to avoid your supposed 'therapy.'"

*Does she think we'll make her do it eventually if she doesn't get used to Leo otherwise?*

I chuckled a little. “Don’t worry, you’ll come around soon enough. Everyone sees how cute Leo is sooner or later.”

“Cute? That...wolf? You never cease to surprise me, Takumi.”

I decided to drop the thought of exposure therapy altogether. Gelda was at least a little interested in Leo at the time, after all. I just hoped Eckenhart and Claire would forgive me.

Claire glanced at Cherie beside her. “Strange that she’s fine with you, isn’t it?”

I shrugged. “Maybe it’s because she’s so small?”

“Arf?” The little fenrir’s ears perked up, and she looked at us for the first time since sitting down. Her plate was nearly clean, so I doubted she’d been paying any attention to us at all.

*Leo’s been following along, even though she’s scarfing down her food like there’s no tomorrow... Maybe Cherie’s just more relaxed?*

Anrinnelesse looked at us suspiciously. “What is that little darling, if I may ask? I don’t remember Claire keeping it when last we met.”

She’d seemed comfortable with Cherie since they’d first met, perhaps because we didn’t properly introduce the pup as a fenrir. She probably assumed she was a regular dog, especially since Cherie was only as big as a medium breed.

“Awf!” Cherie eagerly replied as she polished off her food.

Claire smiled warmly, scooping up the pup so Anrinnelesse could see her better. “She’s really cute, isn’t she?”

Anrinnelesse’s eyes lit up. “I can finally pet her?” She readily reached out, stroking Cherie’s soft, silky fur.

Cherie’s ears flattened uneasily. “Wawf...”

*Cherie’s always been a little shy, after all. I don’t think she’s used to Anrinnelesse yet.*

“Let me introduce you,” Claire began with a hint of pride. “This is Cherie, my familiar. She’s a fenrir.”

Anrinnelesse froze. “A fen...rir...? Are you sure?”

I could see the cold sweat on her face from across the table.

“Arf!” Cherie nodded.

“Ruff,” Leo agreed.

“She is indeed,” Eckenhart echoed.

Anrinnelesse began to quiver slightly. “B-By fenrir, do you mean the bloodthirsty monster fenrir?! They may be less feared than silver fenrir, but their ferocity is legendary! How—*why* in the world is such a beast your familiar?!”

Claire didn’t bat an eye. “I have Miss Leo and Takumi to thank. We found her in the woods, alone and injured, and they saved her life. She became quite accustomed to me on the way home, and not long after reaching the villa, she agreed to be my familiar.” She paused, glancing at me partway through.

*I’m guessing she remembers how I fainted right around then... Besides, the familiar contract happened a few days after that, when I woke up. It’s probably best to leave it at that, though, since I don’t know if Anrinnelesse should know about my Gift... I’ll leave that to Claire and the others to decide.*

“A fenrir as a familiar?” Anrinnelesse breathed in astonishment, hand still frozen on the little wolf’s head. “I can’t believe it.”

Cherie shot her a confused look. “Arf?”

“Believe it or not, that’s the truth,” Eckenhart told her. “I couldn’t believe it myself—though frankly, I was still stunned from meeting Miss Leo at the time.”

*Right, he was bowing and scraping like crazy... Even Claire and I were shocked by that, let alone Leo herself. I’m not surprised Cherie was easier to accept.*

“Wawff?” Cherie’s eyes grew large and sad, as if begging Anrinnelesse to keep petting her.

*I guess pets win out over anxiety... She’s just like a dog.*

Anrinnelesse continued to mutter worriedly to herself throughout the meal, even after tea had been served. “A silver fenrir *and* a fenrir?” she mumbled.

“What could His Grace be plotting?”

“Plotting?” Eckenhart snorted. “You make me sound so sinister. I’m not plotting anything, this is all coincidence.” He paused and looked at me. “This *is* all a coincidence, isn’t it?”

I shook my head in confusion. “Why are you asking me? I didn’t plan for any of this, honest.”

*I don’t even know how I got here, let alone what fate brought us all together.*

Leo and Cherie were already sleeping off their meals behind me, and Tilura was curled up with them. I was still a little worried that Leo was getting crushed, since she was sprawled on her back and both the children were on her soft belly, but she seemed comfortable enough.

Claire smiled a little too widely at Anrinnelesse. “Your father was the only one plotting anything, Anse.”

“Well, he...” She sighed. “I suppose he was.”

I continued to watch the two talk over tea until we eventually split up for the evening. Both Claire and Anrinnelesse seemed intent on continuing their conversation in the dining hall, though, which was a welcome change from the afternoon. I reasoned I could leave them to it.

“So, what’s your plan for the evening?” Eckenhart asked me as we left the room.

There wasn’t much point in making small talk, of course. I did the same things almost every evening, and today would be no different.

“I’m going to make a few more herbs for Helena, then I’ll get in some more practice swings.”

“I’m going to do sword practice, too!” Tilura chimed in.

“The herbs are for the wine, then?” Eckenhart guessed. “I’m looking forward to it all the more now. For now, I’ll be joining you two for training—you can never have too much of the basics, and I don’t want to lose my edge.”

“Of course.”

“Ruff!”

I doubted he’d lose anything over the course of dinner, but I didn’t protest. Having him there would help me focus on the task at hand.

We made for the back garden, accompanied by Leo.

“Mind if I make the herbs first?” I asked.

The duke nodded. “By all means. The sooner you deal with your chores, the better. I wouldn’t want you getting distracted.”

“I wanna watch him grow plants!” Tilura giggled.

“Ruff!”

I didn’t think of it as a chore, personally, but he was right that I should get it out of the way. Leo watched as I grew the nutrient herbs, with Tilura nestled deep in her fur.

Eckenhart stroked his chin thoughtfully as I worked. “It’s quite the sight, I must admit. I can’t imagine any natural plant growing at such speeds.”

“Yeah... I think it’s weird, and I’m the one doing it.”

I still didn’t know what kind of power was at work here, or how it actually worked, but I doubted understanding the mechanics of it would make it any less otherworldly.

“Okay, all done. I’ll drop these off with Helena and be right back.”

There was no need to rush with the herbs, but I was worried I’d run out of time to practice. I’d have to choose between practice and sleep if I took too much longer, not to mention the trouble I’d be putting Tilura and Eckenhart through.

The duke nodded. “Tilura and I will begin without you, then.”

“Bwu-wuff!”

As I headed inside, I noticed that Leo was following me. I still didn’t know if she’d be allowed in the kitchen, though.

I poked my head through the doors. “I hate to bother you again, but—”



“Ah, Mr. Hirooka!” came Helena’s voice. She must have seen me enter. “I’m right in here!” From the look of it, she wasn’t doing anything at that moment. My timing was perfect.

“Helena, I’ve brought the herbs.”

“My, you work fast. I thought you’d be a little later than this.”

“You always seem busy, so I figured the sooner the better.”

“Woo, woo!” Leo barked from just outside the room.

Helena started. “Oh? You brought Miss Leo with you.”

“I’m sorry... I know this is a kitchen and all.”

“No need to worry about that!” the chef chuckled with a shake of her head.

“Miss Leo’s welcome anywhere and everywhere she wants to be.”

*Still, I’ll make sure she stays near the entrance... I don’t want to risk her fur getting in the food.*

Leo stuck her nose in the air, nostrils flaring. “Wuff?” She seemed to have caught the scent of food, despite having just finished her dinner.

*All the food’s been put away already, and I can’t smell a thing... Her nose is really something.*

“Come on, girl, you just ate,” I chided her. “I don’t care how good it smells, you’re not getting snacks out of this trip.”

She flattened her ears sadly and let out a low, pitiful whine.

Helena chuckled. “What, did I not give you enough for dinner? Tell you what, Miss Leo, I’ll get some extra sausages for you.”

She started to wag. “Ruff, woff!”

“Sorry, she really shouldn’t get used to this...” I turned back to the hound. “No sausages for you.”

“Wnff...”

*I don’t want her gaining weight. It seems good smells always make her hungry, though, so I’ll have to limit how much I take her to the kitchens from*

*now on. I don't like saying no to her so much.*

I scratched behind her ear. "Don't worry, I'll make sure you get an extra-big breakfast to make up for it."

That was enough to get her wagging again. "Ruff, woof!!"

*I'm still too soft on her, aren't I?*

"Anyhow." I turned back to Helena. "Here's the herbs."

"Great, I appreciate it. I'll get these prepped as soon as I can."

That should mean they'd be good to add to the wine as soon as we made sure it was safe. I felt a little guilty that I hadn't even started compounding yet, but Milicia and I could surely catch up soon enough.

"Please do, but don't push yourself too hard," I told her. "I'd better get back to the garden...oh, and thank you for the food today, it was delicious." I turned to Leo. "Come on, let's go."

"Woff! Rooo..."

I urged her towards the doors so we wouldn't keep Tilura and Eckenhart waiting, but she kept looking behind her, no doubt still lured by the tantalizing smell of food.

*I wish I had a treat to give her... No, I'm supposed to be keeping her from overeating, not encouraging it!*

Telling myself to hold strong, we finally succeeded in breaking out of the kitchen.

*I guess Leo's not a dog anymore, so maybe late-night meals won't be bad for her... It might be fine occasionally, but even silver fenrir need to watch their calorie intake, right?*

Head full of questions about Leo's metabolism, we hurried back to the garden.

"Eckenhart, Tilura, we're back!" I called.

"Ruff!" Leo echoed.

Tilura smiled, though she was visibly struggling to breathe. "Hahh...hahh..."

Miss Leo! Takumi! Hahh..."

"Ah, good, you're back," Eckenhart replied with a nod.

*What's going on here? We're both used to these drills by now, to the point that we don't even sweat that much...*

"Can I ask why Tilura looks so out of breath?" I asked him.

Leo, sharing my concern, cocked her head to the side. "Wuff?"

"I thought I'd change things up a little. Tilura seemed a little too used to those old exercises, you know."

I blinked in surprise. "New training? At this hour?"

"Don't worry. It's easy to do alone, and very similar to practice swings in nature. In fact, it looks the exact same from the outside."

"I'm not sure I follow... What is it, exactly?" I wanted to try it as well, if possible.

"Practice swings are a form of strength-building," Eckenhart explained. "Of course, there's also the importance of giving your body muscle memory, but that's beside the point. This new drill hones your mind as well."

"Your mind?"

He nodded. "When you swing, you must envision an enemy before you."

"Okay... So instead of just lashing out, you're fighting an invisible enemy."

*Just like image training.*

"Exactly. Every swing must be made with your foe's movements and evasion in mind. You try to beat your invisible opponent."

"Okay..."

It sounded like what I'd heard about shadowboxing, and I could easily imagine a moving target being more exhausting to practice against. I wasn't surprised Tilura was already struggling to breathe.

"That sounds interesting. Maybe I should try it, too."

"I'd recommend it," Eckenhart agreed. "It's been a while myself, so I'll be

joining you two.”

“Great.”

With that, I got right into it.

*Let me think... The garden's big enough, so I'll envision the orc attack on Lange again.*

Tilura took a deep breath in, then out. “Okay! I’m not done yet!”

With that, we all set upon our respective imaginary enemies.

“Hup! Hahh!”

“Hngh! Rah!”

“Yah! Hiyah!”

It may have seemed like we were just swinging at open air, but we knew differently.

I was surprised by Eckenhart’s movements, though—not only were his swings powerful, but he was also incredibly fast and precise. It became laughably clear how much he’d been holding back during his last practice bout against Tilura and me. Even though I was still in the earliest stages of my training, I couldn’t help but make him my goal—not that I’d ever need to be *that* strong.

“Warmppff,” Leo yawned as she watched us, occasionally pausing to scratch her ear.

*You know you can go back to our room to sleep if you want, right?*

After what felt like about an hour I stopped, hands planted on my knees as I tried to regain my breath. I was just as exhausted as Tilura had been when I returned from the kitchen.

“Hahh...fuu...hahh... Putting your all into it’s even more tiring than proper training, huh...?” I said through gasps for air. “Not that I wasn’t serious about practice swings before.”

“Hahh...hahh...hahh...” Tilura was so tired she couldn’t even reply.

“You’ll be moving your whole body at times,” Eckenhart explained. His breath was as regular as always, and he was barely even sweating. “Drills may be an

oversimplification. It's only natural to be exhausted."

*That's how much of a difference experience and stamina make, I guess...*

"You did plenty well, my boy," he continued, "but you still need work, Tilura. You weren't able to imagine a proper opponent, were you?"

"I-It's really hard," she panted back.

I looked up. "Hahh...hahh... I did okay?"

"That you did. You were far from perfect, but I didn't doubt you had a clear mental image of your foe. I could practically see them as you fought, like a shadow."

"A shadow?"

"I could see how your 'enemy' was moving based on your movements," he explained. "That's what I mean by shadow. It's proof you envisioned them well."

"Uh...okay."

I didn't understand, but he seemed experienced enough to pull off that kind of thing. Moreover, I couldn't imagine having the time to watch Tilura and me so closely while facing down his own foe. He was so fast I could barely track him—though the dark of the surrounding night no doubt contributed to that.

"Woff, worf!"

I looked over to Leo. "What's up?"

"Gruwuff, wroof!"

My eyes widened. "You could see that shadow thing, too?"

"Bwuff, bow-wowrf!" There was a competitive note to her voice, as though she were determined to prove she was just as good as Eckenhart.

*I guess you were watching after all... Sorry for thinking you should go back to the room, girl.*

Eckenhart smiled faintly. "I should've expected as much from a silver fenrir."

"Yeah, Miss Leo's amazing!" Tilura echoed giddily.

Leo stuck out her chest with pride. “Awooooo!”

*I don't doubt her, but I am a little curious...*

“Let me ask you something, Leo... What was I envisioning fighting against?”

“Bwuff-uff, bwoo!”

“Wow, you're right. They were orcs.”

Eckenhart's eyes widened. “Orcs, eh? Not even I could tell that much... That's incredible, Miss Leo.”

*Does this mean Leo's even more skilled than Eckenhart? I guess I can't really compare them like that...*

“I recall you fought real orcs in Lange, yes?” the duke asked.

“Yes, there were quite a few of them. That's why I have such a good grasp of what they act like.”

Even though it was too dark back then to pick out the details of the orcs' actions, my memories of the attack were clear as day. It was more vivid to me than the fight at the Yugard store, even. Not only was it my first real fight to the death, I'd been hurt pretty badly.

Eckenhart nodded understandingly. “That would explain the difference between the two of you.”

“The difference?”

“Yes. Tilura has never been in a true fight before.”

*Right...the closest she's come is my retelling of the fight at Lange. It's a good thing she hasn't been on the battlefield at her age, though.*

“She's fought you, me, and even Miss Leo,” he continued, “but she was never in any real danger.”

“That makes sense.”

Tilura and I almost never sparred, and even then, we didn't hit each other with our training swords. That meant we'd never fought all-out against each other, but we were cautioned many a time against anything that could get her injured, especially at her age. Leo never attacked us in our sparring with her,

and the one time we fought Eckenhart, he'd held back plenty.

"She doesn't have real battle experience, like you had at Lange and the Yugard store. In both fights, your very life was at risk."

"It was, wasn't it?"

I could've easily died against the orcs if Leo hadn't stepped in to save me. I never stopped to consider it, though, especially since I couldn't spare even a second's thought in those fights.

*I guess I was prepared to die both times, though...*

"A real battle is nothing like sparring," Eckenhart asserted. "That's likely why you're struggling to imagine it, Tilura."

I nodded. "Makes sense."

"Yeah, it was pretty hard," Tilura said, "but I was thinking of fighting you the whole time, Father!"

"You mean *sparring* with me," he corrected, "when I wasn't even using my full strength. It's different from envisioning a threat on your life. Not that there's anything wrong with that at your age! Gahahahaha!"

He roughly tousled her hair. I got the impression he was telling her to keep at it as she was, but I couldn't tell for sure. What was clear, however, was the pout that had formed on the young girl's lips.

"It's better this way, at least until you've had your first fight," Eckenhart said. "You can keep going as you are, no need to rush. This kind of training will give you far better muscle memory than regular drills anyways, so no need to get upset."

She sighed, brow still furrowed. "Okay... I get it. I'll keep trying."

"That's my girl!"

I was sure she'd improve if she kept at it, just as Eckenhart said. She was young enough to pick these things up more effectively than I did, and she had the duke's blood coursing through her veins.

*I just hope I don't end up losing to her...*

“That’s enough for today,” Eckenhart announced. “I don’t want you pushing yourselves too hard, now.”

I bowed politely. “Thank you for the training!”

“Thank you, Father!” Tilura chimed.

We put our training swords back where they belonged. As we headed back inside with Leo, however, something occurred to me.

“Eckenhart, Tilura, hold on a minute.”

“What is it, Takumi?”

“Yes, Takumi, what’s up?”

“I have something for you for working so hard today... Here, Eckenhart, I have one for you, too.”

I handed them each a muscle-relaxing herb and a stamina-restoring herb.

Eckenhart’s eyes lit up in recognition. “Ah, thank you!”

“Thank you, Takumi!”

“This’ll have me refreshed in no time!” Eckenhart boomed.

I blinked in surprise. “I didn’t know you were that tired.”

Eckenhart had barely lost his breath at all since dinner, and he looked as energetic as always. He smiled sheepishly. “Er... I’m still a little fatigued from riding Miss Leo, I’ll admit.”

Leo shot him a surprised look. “Woo?”

I chuckled. “Did she really wear you out that much?”

The duke frowned. “Listen, Tilura and Cherie kept insisting she run faster and faster. I was made to ride with them the whole time! That, and I barely slept after Claire’s scolding last night...”

*I shouldn’t be surprised. Leo loves to sprint. Besides, I can’t blame him for not getting enough sleep and getting worn out from the day—I had to deal with that every day, once.*

“I have just the thing for you, then.” I rustled through my herb bag and pulled



out a different plant. “How about this?”

He studied it closely. “Hm... I’ve never seen this one before. What is it?”

“It’s a sleeping herb. You’ll rest much deeper than usual and wake up totally refreshed with this.”

“Ah, perfect!”

I hadn’t given out any of those herbs since our trip to the Fenrir Forest. The villa didn’t have any insomniacs as far as I know, and nobody had struggled with getting enough rest. I imagined it’d pair excellently with the stamina herb, and he’d wake up the next morning completely refreshed.

*This thing’s basically a sleeping pill in plant form, though. I’ll have to make sure nobody takes too much of it.*

“I’ll head back to my room, then,” I said.

“Thank you, Takumi. Until tomorrow.”

“Good night, Takumi! Sleep tight!” Tilura called.

With that, Leo and I returned to our room together. Since that evening’s drills were more intense than usual, I took one of the stamina herbs myself as we walked. I didn’t want to rely on my plants too much, despite how useful they could be, so I saved them for when they were really needed. I didn’t want to become dependent on them. I typically just used them to help others, and I’d never stop doing that. If anything, it was a matter of personal restraint.

I stopped by the baths to wash off my sweat before meeting up with Leo in our room.

“I’m done with my bath, girl.” I gave her some pets for being so well-behaved, then took a seat at the edge of the bed.

“Worf, wuffuff! Hahh, hahh, hahh, hahh, hahh!” She eagerly sidled up to me and started licking my face determinedly.

“Whoa there, calm down! I’ll keep petting you, promise!”

*She’s that glad she didn’t join me in the bath, huh?*

I kept giving her attention until late, then slid under the covers to sleep.

*Tomorrow consists of compounding with Milicia and testing the first treated wine... I'd better get plenty of rest.*



**THE** next day, I awoke to Tilura and Cherie, who'd come to wake me up by snuggling with Leo. We chatted as I got cleaned up and ready for the big day ahead of me. I'd finally gotten used to the little shaving knife, and I rarely cut myself anymore. I made sure not to get distracted nonetheless.

"Come on, Takumi, Miss Leo, it's breakfast time!" Tilura effused.

I laughed at her enthusiasm. "Someone's full of energy... Let's go, Leo."

"Woff!"

"Awff, awff!" Cherie enthused from atop her perch on Leo's head.

I chuckled and gave her a pat. "Don't worry, you're coming with us too."

Tilura kept looking back at us as we went, as if making sure we were still following her.

*Come to think of it, I never saw what happened between Cherie and Anrinnelesse after dinner... Are they okay around each other now?*

I wasn't too worried, given how enamored Anrinnelesse was from the beginning and knowing that Clair was with them.

When we stepped inside the dining hall, Claire and Anrinnelesse were already waiting for us.

"Ah. Takumi, Miss Leo, good morning."

Anrinnelesse nodded nervously. "Yes, good day to you, Takumi...a-and you, Miss Leo."

"Good morning," I replied.

"Ruff!"

I assumed Tilura had already said good morning to everyone there, as she gave Leo an affectionate squeeze before zipping up to the table. My eyes widened at the sight of Eckenhart in his seat as well.

“Morning, Takumi,” he said with a nod. “Sleep well?”

“Oh. G-Good morning, Eckenhart.”

The duke seemed wide awake, oddly enough. He’d never beaten me to breakfast before.

“Warf?” Leo, evidently of the same mind, sniffed curiously in his direction.

“I thought you weren’t a morning person?” I asked him. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Never better! I had the best sleep of my life thanks to what you gave me last night.”

*I’m glad the herbs helped. He’s probably not being more specific because Anrinnelesse is right there.*

Claire shook her head. “To think you would ever wake up early without a good reason to... It must be a sign of the end times.”

“I’ll say,” Anrinnelesse echoed. “I’ve never known His Grace to be so lively at this hour.”

Eckenhart frowned at them. “I’ll have you know I *can* get up early, if the situation demands it.”

I chuckled. “Sounds like that’s plenty rare, though.”

It was too unusual not to poke fun at. The closest he’d come to my knowledge was bursting in when everyone else had already finished.

Leo nodded. “Bowf-wowf.”

“Et tu, Miss Leo?” He sighed. “At least I know what you all think of me now... More importantly, it’s time we started eating.”

Claire smirked. “I’d say you’ve more than earned your reputation.”

*Is it just me, or is Claire harsher on him now than she was before? I don’t remember her acting like this the first time he visited. Maybe she’s just settling the score from the suitor hell he put her through...*

“Let’s begin, then,” Eckenhart announced.

“Yes, let’s,” Claire agreed.

I put my hands together. “Thank you for the food.”

“Yes, thank you!” Tilura echoed.

“Ruff!”

“Arf!”

Anrinnelesse blinked in surprise, looking around at us for a moment before following suit. “Er...Let us eat?”

I got the impression this was a novel sight for her. I had no way of knowing what her home situation was like or how she ate, but my guess was that she ate alone. That might mean she and her dad barely talked.

*I shouldn’t jump to conclusions, though. If I turn out to be wrong, that’s just plain rude to her.*

“Breakfast is as delicious as always,” Anrinnelesse muttered.

“All thanks to Helena,” Claire replied curtly before turning to Eckenhart. “Please, Father, remember to chew before you swallow.”

He frowned pitifully at her. “Food tastes better if you wolf it down, everyone knows that.”

“Yes, yes, you’ve told me before,” she sighed. “Do whatever you want.”

“Wurgff!” Leo agreed with a half-full mouth before continuing to inhale her food.

I chuckled nervously, eyes flitting between the father and daughter. *I suppose everyone has ways they prefer to eat...though I wasn’t expecting Eckenhart and Leo to overlap here.*

We continued to enjoy our meal in quiet for some time before Anrinnelesse eagerly leaned over the table toward me.

“Takumi, Takumi! Do you have any plans for the day?”

“Me?” I started in surprise. I couldn’t imagine why she was asking—I couldn’t think of any business she’d have with me. I averted my gaze awkwardly. “Well, after breakfast I’ll be checking on the herbs in the garden and picking any fresh

ones. Ractos still needs them, after all.”

I was again careful to avoid mentioning Herb Cultivation. It wasn’t much of a lie, even, as the herbs did technically come from the garden. I only hoped she didn’t pick up on my discomfort and get suspicious. My lying skills hadn’t improved one bit.

Eckenhart nodded readily. “The epidemic may be winding down in town, but it’s still out there. We need to be careful.”

As long as I kept supplying capwort, the disease would continue to diminish, especially since its source had been stopped already. I hated to play the waiting game, but sadly, there wasn’t any way of speeding the process up now.

Anrinnelesse’s brow furrowed. “You grow herbs here? At His Grace’s private villa?”

Obvious as it was, I wasn’t prepared for that question. There would be no need for such a thing normally. “I, uh...”

“Takumi is with us under contract as our private apothecary,” Claire interceded. “He’s able to grow a wealth of rare plants, and as such we commission him to grow some for resale.”

Behind her, I saw Sebastian deflate a little. He’d wanted to explain it himself, no doubt. *At least I know for sure that my Gift’s a secret from her... I’ll have to watch my words from here on out.*

“What about the compounding you mentioned yesterday?” Eckenhart asked me.

Anrinnelesse eagerly nodded along with his question, still determined to puzzle out my plans.

“Checking the herbs comes first. It’s part of my after-breakfast routine,” I explained. “I’ll talk to Milicia about compounding after that. Then, after lunch, Leo and I will check with Helena about the greital wine.”

“Understood,” the duke replied. “That means we might be able to try it at dinner, yes?”

“If all goes well, yes.”

Eckenhart was openly more interested in the wine than he was in me. I'd heard he drank some before, but that didn't dampen his enthusiasm one bit. Even I had to agree the wine was delicious.

"You want to try it that badly?" Claire asked him.

"Of course. The juice was fine and all, but it's nothing compared to a good, proper spirit. I can't wait!"

"I can tell," Claire replied flatly.

"A-Assuming it tastes okay with the capwort in it," I added, my smile straining a little.

Capwort wasn't particularly fragrant or flavorful on its own, but I couldn't guarantee the effect it—or the purification itself—would have on the drink. *I hope it'll still be good...it's sweet enough to overpower a little impurity, after all.*

"The juice is delicious indeed," Anrinnelesse agreed. "I'm rather eager to try it as a proper liqueur. Might I ask why you always reduced it to simple juice first?"

"I'm sure your father would know all about that," Claire replied, eyes narrowing. "He infected the wine so it would bear his little plague."

She tensed. "O-Oh. I suppose that was the purpose of that horrid little tool. For shame, ruining such a delicious drink."

"Hrm?" Eckenhart, who had been watching the pair peaceably, stopped and frowned.

"Is something wrong?" I asked him.

"I thought Lange shipped its wine to the count's domain as well," Eckenhart said. "Most was for the count himself, even. How did Bastler avoid the illness?"

"Ah, I get it now. It makes sense that you'd think that." I'd heard the same thing from Hannes, Lange's mayor. I doubted he and the duke had ever talked, but it made sense that Eckenhart would know his land's exports.

He raised a brow at me. "You know something, do you?"

"Um... You could say that." I thought back to when I'd asked Hannes the same question, back when Phillip was away getting carriages for the wine. "Hannes—

Lange's mayor, that is—told me that the count gave them specific instructions for the wine they sent him."

"Go on."

"They always sent him barrels from the back of the storehouse, the most fermented stuff. They were instructed to place the disease-spreading doll at the opposite end, near the entrance."

Eckenhart nodded sagely. "The newer wine would be infected, while the older stock he picked from remained untouched... Does that mean most of the older store is still safe to drink?"

"Exactly," I replied. "Leo only smelled the sickness in the fresher barrels."

"The count controlled the conditions so he could drink it unharmed, then."

Anrinnelesse shuddered. "I had no idea there was such an unsavory tale behind Father's favorite wine..."

"You didn't know?" I asked her.

"Not particularly. Father and I rarely discussed his taste in food or drink."

*That explains why she's never tried it, then. She and the count really didn't spend much time with each other, did they?*

"Anyhow, that's the best reasoning Hannes and I could deduce," I concluded.

It wasn't a flawless plan by any means, but it did ensure the count could safely drink the wine. There was also a chance that he had some means of purifying the wine on his end. That would ensure he could continue drinking the wine even after Lange was destroyed—but I could only guess. In the worst-case scenario, he could just take some capwort if he got ill, since there didn't seem to be any shortages of the herb in his lands.

Eckenhart stroked his chin thoughtfully. "To complete his plan, he orchestrated the attack on Lange, meaning he could recover the magic tool and take what he pleased from the village storehouse in the process. He no doubt had the equipment to detect infected barrels."

Isabel was able to detect the disease with some kind of mana detector, so the count wouldn't need Leo to do the same. He'd also be able to take his time

retrieving what he wanted after the orcs were done, since the village was far from the main roads and its fate wouldn't be known for at least a few days.

Anrinnelesse's eyes lit up. "To think, Father went to such lengths to further enjoy this wine... I can't wait to try it!"

*I guess she doesn't care how her dad did it, now that he's been dealt with...*

"You're not wrong," Claire replied. "Tilura's a little young for wine, but I know I'm looking forward to it."

Eckenhart let out a single, massive shudder.

"Um... Eckenhart?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

"Er... Yes." He forced a stiff smile. "Y-Yes, I'll be fine. Forget about it."

"Okay?"

He was obviously lying, but he didn't seem to want to discuss it. *Eckenhart started acting weird when the ladies were talking about trying the wine... Does he not want them to drink or something? I guess I won't know unless he tells me...*

"Ah, yes!" Anrinnelesse's eyes lit up as she whipped back to face me. "I had something to ask of you."

"What is it?"

I was impressed she could talk to Claire for so long without any issue, rude as the thought was, but whatever she'd remembered was clearly more important. She seemed hopeful—giddy, even.

"When you study compounding with this... Milicia, her name was? Anyhow, I'd like to be present when you mix the medicine."

"I don't see why no— Wait. H-Hold on a second. I need to think." I stopped myself from nodding. I was about to agree, thinking having her there would be harmless, if dull. That was without stopping to consider the other factors at play, however.

*She can't watch me with the herbs, since I can't hide my power. Compounding should be fine, I think, as long as I keep telling her I grew the herbs naturally. I'd*



*have to be careful, though...*

Luckily, Claire replied in my stead. "I think you'd be more of a distraction than anything, Anse. Takumi has important work to do, so why don't you play with Cherie instead?" With that, she reached out and planted the young fenrir on Anrinnelesse's lap.

"Awpp?!" Cherie's eyes flew open at the sudden change.

*I think I'm starting to figure it all out... Claire doesn't want me getting too close to Anrinnelesse. I turned her down, but if she's still looking to spend so much time with me, she might try something else to win me over...I think. This stuff is all way too new for me to tell.*

I was admittedly starting to get worried about Anrinnelesse. I was glad she'd come out of her room, but she seemed to be focused on me and my schedule. That wouldn't help her reach her conclusion, at least not in the way I envisioned. Talking to Claire or Eckenhart about it would be far more useful to her.

Anrinnelesse's hands flew up and away from Cherie, her gaze drifting. "P-P-Perhaps I'll play with her later?"

*I guess scariness trumps cuteness...and she was so eager to play with Cherie yesterday, too.*

Cherie blinked her big, dark eyes at the noblewoman. "Awuff?"

"I-I don't care what you say, not now!" Something like pain flashed across Anrinnelesse's face.

*Good, Cherie's too cute to resist for long... That's one less thing to worry about.* More importantly, I needed to reply to Anrinnelesse's request.

"Um... I should really check with Milicia first. If she's okay with it, then maybe?" I had to make sure my apprentice could work with an audience—and more importantly, that she wouldn't talk about Herb Cultivation by accident. "Oh, and Leo will be with us too," I added. "Is that okay?"

"Roooooo!" my hound proudly agreed.

Anrinnelesse paled, but nodded slowly nonetheless. "I-I'll survive, I'm sure."

*She'll have to get used to Leo one way or another... Maybe this is a good thing.*

"I imagine I'll be with you both, then," Claire declared.

Eckenhart shook his head. "You have your own work to do, young lady, same as me. There's still plenty of loose ends to tie."

She let out a heavy sigh. "I know... I know that, Father."

I'd heard there was still the aftermath of the Yugard store to tend to, not to mention a hundred other things prompted by the epidemic. I didn't envy them.

"Let me be clear on one thing, Anse." Claire looked the other noblewoman dead in the eye. "Do not, under any circumstances, interfere with Takumi's duties. Am I clear?"

Anrinnesse scoffed. "And why, pray tell, are you the one to warn me? Why so protective of young Takumi?"

"I...um..." Claire awkwardly glanced at me.

"Hm?"

*What? Is it something I did?*

"I-I'm worried you'll trouble him with some new nonsense!" Claire finally replied in a shout. "First you ask him to marry you when you've barely met—what's next? I have no idea what nonsense goes through your head!"

Anrinnesse turned up her nose. "It was a splendid idea, even if he didn't agree to it! I've resolved to table the matter for now, rest assured. If I have another stroke of brilliance, of course, I'll tell him if I wish."

"That's exactly what I'm worried about. Please, don't upset him any more than you already have."

With that, the two noblewomen began to bicker once more.

*I'd better leave them to it and get to work... I'll check with Milicia, and if she's fine with it, I guess we'll have an audience for our first-ever compounding.*



**AFTER** breakfast, I made my usual herbs and passed them off to Nick, then headed to the parlor to track down Milicia. I found my apprentice at a desk

covered in books and bundles of paper.

*Man, she's studious... I'll have to work harder to keep up.*

"Hey, Milicia."

"Master! I hope you're doing well!"

"Same for you. Listen, do you have a minute?"

"Of course! I've been waiting for you since yesterday!" Her gaze shifted to the bag in my hand. "Are those the reagents?"

"Yep. I just made some fresh ones."

The bag contained the three nutrient herbs I'd grown for Sebastian and Helena the other day, prepared so they could go right into the medicine.

I peered over her shoulder at the open textbook. "Let's see... What page was the compounding stuff on again?"

"Bwuff-uff, worf," Leo replied.

"Wait, you remembered, Leo?! I'm impressed!"





I knew she'd been looking over our shoulders while we studied, but I didn't think she'd have memorized the page numbers. *It's not just that I haven't been studying enough...right? N-No, I'll deal with that later. I need to focus.*

I relayed the page number to Milicia, who flipped through the textbook next to me to find it.

"Wow," she breathed. "You were right, Miss Leo. That's incredible!"

I peered at the text with her. "Let's see... It looks like the easiest method is just to grind everything up and mix it together."

That seemed to be a fundamental of compounding and was the final form of many remedies. There were sometimes other factors to consider while mixing, like heating or cooling reagents, adding them in specific orders, or adding water or other mediums. It didn't seem we'd need any of that this time, though, and I wanted to play it safe for our first time.

While we were looking at the book, I mentioned that Anrinnelesse wanted to join us as well—though I honestly didn't know if she was curious about medicine or hoping it'd be entertaining. I told Milicia that we couldn't let her know about my Herb Cultivation as well, and thankfully she readily agreed.

"Does Lady Bastler want to learn more about herbs and medicines like I do?" Her eyes were full of hope as she asked me. She was probably hoping she'd have someone new to study with.

"Um... Probably not, to be honest."

Anrinnelesse only seemed interested because she wanted to know me better, hopefully in a platonic sense as someone who didn't immediately kowtow to her authority. Her curiosity was what caused her to butt heads with Claire, I gathered, though part of that was my fault for not properly stepping in and addressing their arguments. As for Claire, I was beginning to suspect the way she felt about me wasn't as platonic as I'd thought—not that I'd mention that to anyone, especially not her. I'd die of embarrassment if I turned out to be wrong.

I turned to Laila, who'd accompanied me there. "Do you happen to have a mortar and pestle?"

She nodded. "I'll fetch it straightaway."

"Thank you. Oh, I'd also appreciate it if you let Anrinnelesse know we're here."

"As you wish."

*If I don't call her before we start, she'll probably lock herself up and start pouting again... She's a real handful.*

After a few minutes, Laila returned. "I have brought the mortar and pestle, as well as Lady Bastler."

Anrinnelesse followed Laila into the room, though for some reason she had both hands clamped over her mouth. I didn't know how to react to that.

"Thank you, Laila." I turned to Anrinnelesse. "Um. Are you okay?"

"Ruff?" Leo echoed worriedly, head tilting.

"Milady has issued strict instructions for her to follow," Laila explained apologetically.

Apparently, Anrinnelesse wasn't allowed to say anything that wasn't strictly necessary. I didn't think Claire needed to go quite that far, but Cherie had been glaring at Anrinnelesse with such intensity she felt she had to agree. I didn't think the little fenrir was trying to enforce her mistress's will, but if it meant we got to work in peace, I wasn't about to complain.

I introduced Milicia to her as my apprentice. Anrinnelesse nodded multiple times when she called me master, as if it were the most natural thing in the world somehow. Instead of questioning her about it, though, we got right to work.

Milicia still seemed nervous as we put all the herbs I'd brought into the pair of mortar bowls. We both tried grinding the plants down with the pestle, filling the room with the monotonous sounds of grinding.

"This takes a lot of strength," Milicia muttered as she struggled with her set.

"Yeah... It takes a lot to mash it down completely," I agreed.

The leaves of the herbs were still green and moist, making the grinding

process even more strenuous. I'd been training enough that it wasn't too much effort by any means, but young Milicia wasn't as lucky.

*I'm sure she'll get used to it... We're not in any rush, so she can take all the time she needs.*

"Look, master!" she exclaimed after a while. "It's starting to turn into paste!"

I glanced at the book. "Let's see...it says we need to keep grinding until it dries out completely. I wonder why it isn't good enough as-is?"

"I really don't know."

*It looks fully mixed now, but if we need to dry it out, we'll be at this for a while yet...*

Leo peered into my mortar, then Milicia's. "Woff?"

"What's up, Leo?" I asked her.

"Ruff, buff-uff."

"You want us to taste it? The book says we need to keep going until it's dry, though." I wasn't sure what she was after, but given how sensitive her nose was, I decided to obey.

Anrinnelesse, as it happened, was sitting politely by the wall in a chair Laila had brought. She gave no indication of coming closer, probably out of fear of Leo, but she never stopped staring at us—or rather, me. She was silent as before.

I turned to my apprentice. "Okay, Milicia, want to give it a taste?"

Her brow furrowed. "Are you sure it's safe? What if we didn't do it right?"

"It won't be bad for you, I promise. They won't mix poorly or anything, though I can't make any promises about the taste. Just a little taste."

"O-Okay."

We each stuck our fingers into the very edge of the mixture, getting just enough for the taste. Then, we slowly brought our fingers to our mouths.

As soon as it was on my tongue, I gagged.



“M-Master?!” Milicia coughed.

Instead of tasting like a mix of the three plants, it was pure, burning sour. We both strained to withstand the acidic onslaught, and I tried desperately to stop salivating too much to no avail. It was sourer than any pickled plum in existence, and while I had some resistance to the taste, Milicia wasn’t so lucky.

*Is it the vitamins that are doing this? It was sour before, sure, but this is on a whole new level.*

Leo looked at me expectantly. “Ruffa?”

I shot her a worried look. “No, Leo, it doesn’t taste good enough. Nobody could eat this.”

“A-All I can taste is pain, Miss Leo,” Milicia wheezed.

Leo let out a sad whine, ears flattening apologetically.

*I guess not even Leo can tell flavor from smell alone.*

Laila swiftly moved in to pour us both cups of tea. “Help yourselves.”

“Thank you, Laila.”

Milicia gulped down half her cup in one go. “Th-Thank you...hahh...”

“My pleasure,” she replied with a short curtsy before retreating to her place.

As we continued to drink our tea, Milicia shot me a worried look. “Do you think we failed?”

“I wouldn’t say that...it’s definitely not ready as-is, though.”

The sourness had only gotten stronger, after all, though I had no clue how. It was probably some unknown reaction from blending the citrusy herb with the others.

“Let’s follow the book and finish powdering it first,” I suggested.

“Okay. I don’t think that’ll fix the flavor, but we can try it.”

We still hadn’t determined if the medicine had its full effect, after all, and it made sense to finish the process before drawing any conclusions. While I doubted it would change the flavor enough to work with the greital wine, I

wanted our first compounding to be a proper one.

We continued to work at the mixture for some time.

“Maaaster, my arm’s getting sore,” she complained.

“Yeah... Compounding is harder work than I thought.” Even I was starting to feel tired, though I was pleasantly surprised that Milicia was still working at it so diligently.

“Ruff, ruff?”

“Hm? Leo?”

“What’s wrong, Miss Leo?”

She peered down at the textbook. “Bow-woff!”

“What’s wrong with the book?” I looked over at the passage she was reading and froze. “Oh.”

“Is everything okay, master?”

It was a passage I’d somehow missed before. It read: *“Expose the mixture to air flow while mixing to hasten the process.”*

“Uh, Milicia? It looks like it’s faster if we do this where there’s wind,” I said.

She stopped and stared at me. “R-Really?”

The sourness of the paste and the need to aerate it reminded me of mixing sushi rice, somehow, but I pushed those thoughts out of my head. It made sense that the moisture would evaporate more quickly if we introduced a bit of airflow.

“It’s kind of like laundry,” I explained. “It dries more quickly in the wind.”

She nodded. “That makes sense, I think?”

*The question is, how do we get a breeze in here? Maybe I should fan Milicia with some of these papers while she works?*

Before I could suggest anything, however, Leo made her move.

“Bark!”

“Leo? Wait, is this...wind?”

At Leo's bark, a gentle wind began to blow across the table from a short distance away.

*Wow... I didn't know she could do that.*

"You're amazing, Miss Leo!" Milicia praised her.

"Silver fenrir magic, is it?" Laila remarked in wonder. "How incredibly versatile."

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

Anrinnelesse, however, seemed more disturbed than usual. *Why's she so scared? It's a little wind, it can't hurt any of us.*

"This breeze feels so nice," Milicia remarked.

"Yeah, it does... Wait, no, we should be mixing!"

"Right! I'm ready!"

I turned back to my best friend. "Thanks, Leo."

Leo nodded. "Wooooo!"

It took some time, but finally the medicine had dried to the point where it was a coarse powder. I was a little surprised the paste had changed so much.

"Do you think it's ready?" Milicia asked me.

"Hmm...I think so. You can stop the wind now, Leo."

"Woff!"

It took longer than I expected—and would've taken longer still without Leo—but the medicine was finally dry. I didn't feel much like celebrating, though. Anrinnelesse was still staring at me, like she had been the whole time. She hadn't so much as glanced at our medicine once. It was a sharp contrast with the playful, bouncy impression her curls gave.

*At least she isn't bugging us directly... Thanks again, Claire.*

I peered into my mortar. "It's become pretty dark, huh?"

"Yeah," Milicia echoed. "It's completely black."

"Woo?"

I didn't know if it was the natural combination of the different plants or if there was a chemical reaction at play, but it had been slowly changing colors from green to black the entire time it dried.

"Think we should try it again?" I asked with a nervous smile.

Milicia nodded hesitantly. "I-I guess so..."

I didn't want to put the blackened powder in my mouth, even though it shouldn't be poison. Leo didn't seem thrilled by the result, but luckily, she didn't warn us either. I finally worked up my resolve and put a bit in my mouth, and Milicia followed suit.

We both stopped and exchanged glances.

"Milicia?"

"Master?"

"It doesn't taste sour now!" I cheered.

"Yes! It has no flavor at all!"

There was only the faintest hint of sourness to the powder now. I had no idea where all that flavor had gone, but the important part was that our compounding was a success. My best guess was that the mana inside the plants had changed, somehow.

Leo started wagging intensely. "Woff! Awoooo!"

My companion's howl made Anrinnelesse jump in terror, but I tried not to react. *She's harmless, honest...*

I looked around at the others. "You should try this, Laila. You too, Leo."

The maid dipped her head. "As you wish."

"Ruff!" Leo stuck out her tongue curiously, and I sprinkled a little powder on it. Her snout instantly wrinkled, however, and she started lolling her tongue in an effort to get it off. She let out a pitiful whine.

"Oops! Sorry, Leo, I didn't think you'd hate it that much... There, there, girl." I gave her a few scratches, especially since she was avoiding vomiting on the rug.

*She has sharp senses, so it's probably still too sour for her. Dogs don't*

*normally like citrusy things, right?*

Laila tasted the powder, then paused to consider its flavor. “I can still taste a hint of sourness, though I imagine it will interfere with the greital wine’s profile far less now.”

“You think so? Great.”

Milicia let out a sigh of relief. “I’m so glad... I was worried it wouldn’t be any good at all, with how sour it was before.”

I nodded. “Now all that’s left is the effect.”

I had to be sure the medicine worked the way it was supposed to. Otherwise, we’d have to come up with a new way of preparing the herbs, and even then, we couldn’t guarantee the flavor would turn out so well again. *How should we test its effectiveness, then?*

“Wuff? Worf, boff, borf, ruff!”

I looked at Leo in surprise. “Wait... You can tell?”

“Ruff!”

She seemed to be saying that the original effect of the herbs was still intact, even though she complained about the flavor more.

“You’re positive?” I asked again.

She held up her head proudly. “Woof!” Another resounding yes.

*How does she do it? Maybe the nutrients have mana, somehow, and she’s picking up on that? She seems to be extra-sensitive to mana in general.*

Laila glanced at me. “May I ask what Miss Leo said?”

“She’s claiming that the herbs—or actually, the medicine has the full effect of the herbs we put into it.”

Milicia’s eyes widened. “Wow! I can’t believe you can tell, Miss Leo!”

Laila nodded. “I’m not surprised she can pick up on such things.”

“Yeah,” I finally agreed, discarding my lingering doubts. “She can pick up on sickness from the smell alone, after all.”

*This is probably another silver fenrir thing...*

She seemed to have acclimated to this world far better than I had, and she had gained quite a bit of knowledge to go with her ability to communicate with me. All of her other abilities made medicine-testing seem tame in comparison.

"I guess this is a success, then," I said.

"Ruuuff!" Leo agreed.

Milicia's smile widened. "So we did the compounding right, after all!"

"Looks like," I replied. "I'm glad we can do basic compounding right, at least."

There were plenty of other compounding methods, but I was glad the simplest one succeeded. I didn't want to try more complex ones, and I doubted we'd get anywhere with them. The process was tedious but not too annoying.

*Maybe Herb Cultivation has something to do with this, too... Imagine if the herbs I made were guaranteed to make good medicine. That'd be too good to be true.*

"I'm glad to see you succeeded, Mr. Hirooka," Laila said. "Congratulations. May I suggest you leave the rest of the compounding to Milicia?"

"Thanks...but are you sure she can handle it all?"

"Of course. You need to take that medicine to Helena, as well as attend to... other obligations." She glanced purposefully at Anrinnelesse.

"Er...right." I followed her gaze to Anrinnelesse. For some reason, she swept one of her drill-curls back as soon as our eyes met. I had no idea what that was supposed to mean.

Milicia's eyes widened. "I-I have to do the rest of it alone?"

"There's not much left," I assured her. From the look of it, she'd only need to do two more batches. "Think you can do it?"

She nodded. "I-I'll try my best!"

"I shall provide wind for you," Laila told her.

I turned to the maid in surprise. "You mean you can cast magic, too?"

She shook her head. “There are several means of doing so without.”

“Oh...right.”

That was a dumb question, especially considering how I was ready to use a hand-fan myself. It would be more time-consuming, no doubt, but almost anyone could do it.

“Please do, then, if it’s not too much trouble. I’ll go see Helena right away.”

I decided my mortar would be a good enough container for it, and after adding Milicia’s completed powder to it, I was ready to go.

Laila curtsied. “I wish you the best of luck.”

“I hope it goes well for you, master!” Milicia added.

“Thanks. Good luck on the compounding.”

Leo stood up, evidently intent on following me. “Ruff!”

After helping Milicia get everything set up for the next batch, Leo and I made for the door.

“W-Wait!” called Anrinnelesse from behind us. I heard a rustling of fabric, then the grinding of a caught chair across the floor. “O-Ow! Honestly, the nerve of this infernal furniture... Wait for me, Takumi, I shall accompany you!”

“Finally, she talks,” I muttered before catching myself and clearing my throat. “I’ll only be delivering this medicine to Helena. I promise it’ll be boring.”

“Nonetheless, I have resolved to accompany you, no matter what.” She stuck out her chest with pride, though I had no idea what she was so proud of. “The voices were very insistent I do so!”

I stopped in the doorway. “I know I’m going to regret this, but...what voices?”

She blinked. “Well... Th-The voices of my prized curls, of course! I’ve noticed you eyeing my beauties!”

*God, this is awkward. She’s just noticing me looking at her hair now?*

“It’s a very...unique hairstyle, I’ll admit.”

It wasn’t that I was interested in her hair, but rather that they stuck out so

much it was hard *not* to look at them. There was also something about drills that set a man's soul on fire, so to speak. *I guess I can't blame her too much for the whole hair-whispering-to-her bit...*

Finally, I sighed. "Fine, you can come. Please remember that this *won't* be interesting, though."

Anrinnelesse's face brightened like a floodlight getting switched on. "Wonderful!"

"Wumff." Leo shook her head in exasperation.

The three of us walked to the kitchen together, though Anrinnelesse followed a good few feet behind so she wouldn't be too close to Leo. Inside, we found the cooks clamoring for the lunchtime rush.

"Excuse me!" I flagged one of them down. "Er... Helena's probably busy, isn't she?"

The chef awkwardly bowed to me, eyes darting between me and his work. "M-My apologies, Mr. Hirooka! Preparations for lunch have already begun!"

"That's okay, no need to stop on my account. I'm just here to drop off the prepared herbs for the greital wine, as we discussed the other day. If you could just pass this on to Helena when you have the chance, I'd greatly appreciate it."

"Of course, Mr. Hirooka, my pleasure!"

"Thanks." I handed the mortar to the chef, resolving not to interrupt them further. "We'll take our leave now." I turned to my hound. "Come on, Leo, let's go. Don't give me that look, it's almost lunch. Oh, you too, Anrinnelesse."

Leo stopped eagerly sniffing the air and nodded to me. "Ruff."

"That was rather quick," Anrinnelesse remarked.

Once we were out in the hallway, I stopped to consider my next stop.

"I think that's everything for this morning... There's still tons of time until training, too."

"Ruff? Bowuff, gruff-uff."

"That's a good idea, Leo, we may as well just wait in the dining hall. Lunch is



right around the corner, so there's not enough time to go anywhere else before getting called back." I could tell the kitchen had whet Leo's appetite. Lunch wouldn't be as soon as she thought, but I understood her impatience. Besides, I didn't want to make someone call us to eat when there was no real reason to.

"You have quite a bit of free time on your hands, don't you?" Anrinnelesse remarked, raising her voice a little so I could hear from her spot down the hall.

"Pretty much," I replied. "They generally let me do what I please here. Normally Leo and I would be playing with Tilura at times like this, but she's not around right now."

My only obligation was growing herbs, and that didn't take long. I could relax in the back gardens, rest in my room, or even take a trip to Ractos if I felt like it. They'd probably ask if I left the villa's grounds, but there frankly wasn't much I was interested in doing outside.

*I guess I'm a recluse too, even if I'm not at Anrinnelesse's level.*

Anrinnelesse and I continued to chat as we walked, with Leo wagging hopefully every step of the way. When we stepped inside the dining hall, however, I learned that we weren't the first ones there. Claire was already in her seat, apparently having finished her business with Eckenhart.

"Oh, Takumi and Miss Leo—and Anrinnelesse, too. Are you done compounding already?"

I nodded. "Luckily, it was simple enough that we didn't mess it up once. Milicia's handling the last of the mixing now."

"Good. I'm glad it went smoothly." Claire's smile shifted seamlessly into a glare as she fixed her gaze on the noblewoman behind me. "You didn't dare bother them, did you?"

"Of course not. I didn't breathe a single word, nor did I so much as approach them." Anrinnelesse frowned disapprovingly. "Just who do you think I am?"

Claire pursed her lips in thought. "An impulsive meddler with no concern for others. Or no, you're the type to throw a fuss and hide in your room, worrying everyone at even the slightest inconvenience. Sound accurate?"

*That's a little harsh, even if she did throw me for a loop by asking me to marry her as soon as she saw Leo with me. Wait, doesn't that mean Claire was worried about Anrinnelesse, too? Er, no, she's probably referring to the night she visited my room.*

Anrinnelesse's brow rose indignantly. "My, what harsh language! I've shown nothing but irreproachable conduct my entire life!"

Claire rolled her eyes with a sigh. "Oh, absolutely. You're so polite and regal."

We reached the table and sat down. Anrinnelesse sat across from me, in the seat beside Claire. Anrinnelesse pouted. "Really, what have I ever done to warrant such treatment?"

"This may take a while." Claire smiled wryly, turning to me. "You wouldn't believe all she's put me through, Takumi."

I started, not expecting the conversation to swing my way. "I-I wouldn't?"

Claire went on to tell me about their history together—though it was honestly more like a grocery list of things Anrinnelesse did to annoy her. Half of it was about as bad as the average prank a child might pull. Some of it was genuine, however, like how she'd spread romantic gossip about her servants to as many people as possible, just because she thought it was fun. Worse, Anrinnelesse had even done so at House Liberte's main mansion while Claire lived there, which was way over the line. She ended up getting yelled at by some adults and locked herself in her guest room for a couple of days, worrying everyone around her. That part sounded familiar, and with a past like that, I could understand Claire's attitude towards her over the past few days much better. Interestingly, Anrinnelesse was accompanied by her late mother for that visit, and the pair sounded very close.

The tales continued, each more bold—and more unsavory—than the last. She didn't seem to have changed, especially since some of the stories were from as recently as two years ago. Most of them ranged from worrying to deeply distressing, and I started to worry I was letting my reaction show on my face too much. I came away from the conversation with two key takeaways—Claire was perfectly justified in issuing Anrinnelesse such strict warnings, and the pair didn't hate each other nearly as much as they let on.

While Claire talked, Anrinnelesse played with Cherie, as the two of them seemed to have gotten over their awkwardness.

“Good girl! Who’s my good little girl?”

“Arf, awuff!”

Part of their playing was Anrinnelesse attempting to tune out our conversation, especially since I’d noticed her ears growing red with embarrassment at first. More importantly, all her unease with Cherie seemed to be totally gone now. She had either gotten used to the pup being a fenrir, or she’d stopped thinking about it.

“What’s that? You want to be pet here, do you?”

“Awooff~!” Cherie quickly locked on to Anrinnelesse’s bouncing curls, and she began swatting at them as if she were a cat.

*It’s like a teaser toy for a cat, even though fenrir aren’t cats. They...aren’t cats, right? Cherie looks like a dog, a wolf if you squint, even though she acts just like a lapdog. I’m not sure how I’d classify her, come to think of it.*

Still, Cherie and Anrinnelesse were closer now, and that was enough. I decided to turn around in my chair a little, just to see how Leo was doing.





I smiled a little. "Sorry, Leo, but I don't think she cares how cute you look like that. She only has eyes for Cherie now."

Leo was sprawled on her back, her soft belly exposed for all to see. It was intended as a display of harmlessness, but her target didn't so much as glance at her.

"Ruff? Aruff, woo?" She started pawing feebly at the air, this time in my direction. The sight was so adorable I had no choice but to get up and pet her.

"Okay, okay... Woah, your belly fur feels so soft! It's nothing like the rest of your coat."

It looked the same as all her other fur, but it had a cushiony, cloudlike quality that seemed eager to swallow me up altogether. I'd pet her countless times, but this was the first time she'd felt so unbelievably plush, better than any bed in the world. *I bet if I told Tilura about this, she'd want to sleep here...heck, even I want to sleep on her.*

"You're right! I've had the pleasure of petting her several times before, but I never expected she could feel so soft."

My eyes widened, and I whipped about to find Claire beside me. "C-Claire? When did you get here?"

"Bwuwuff," Leo sighed blissfully.

"Not long after you did," she replied. "You must've been completely entranced by her to not have noticed me. Frankly, I can't blame you."

"Y-Yeah...haha, maybe I was." I couldn't stop the anxiety from rising in my chest. No matter how warm, inviting, and wonderful Leo was, I couldn't believe Claire's face was so close to my own and I hadn't even noticed.

"I need someone to pet now that Anrinnelesse has Cherie, and I feel I don't give Miss Leo enough attention as-is," she added. "I'm not petting you too hard, am I, Miss Leo?"

"Ruff! Awooo~!"

She giggled. "I see what you mean now, Takumi. She truly seems content with herself."

“Y-Yeah, she is.”

*I guess I've talked about Leo being pleased like this a few times...but I can barely think about Leo when my shoulder is practically touching Claire's! Most distracting of all, however, was the way her hot breath tickled my ear every time Claire talked to Leo in that soft, sweet voice. Every word made my heart race faster and faster, and nothing I did seemed to calm it.*

“Hehehe!”

“Rooo, rooo, rooooo!”

Claire seemed to be enjoying petting Leo, completely oblivious to the state I was in. I'd never felt so bashful, embarrassed—I didn't know what was running through my head. Confusingly, I'd never felt such a strange rush with Anrinnelesse or any other woman.

*E-Enough with the why's and how's! I need to figure out how to avoid making this awkward! I'm flustered enough as-is, and I swear I'm not disappointed Claire isn't just as worked up! Seriously, I'm not!*

Finally, I managed to calm my racing thoughts enough that I wasn't as bothered by Claire's closeness to me, and I decided I needed a diversion. I let myself smirk a little. “Hey, Leo. You see how Anrinnelesse over there hasn't even noticed you yet?”

“Ruff?”

Claire raised an eyebrow. “That's quite a look, Takumi.”

“Isn't it? I feel a little bad for Anrinnelesse, but...” I trailed off as I whispered my plan into Leo's ear. I got the feeling Claire was a little put out by my shift in expression, but it was far better than letting her hear my heart race or feel the heat coming off my cheeks...probably.

After I finished explaining my prank, Leo nodded. “Ruff, woo-woff!”

“Good girl. You can do it, Leo.”

“Awoo!” Leo sluggishly rolled back onto her front and stood up, taking a moment to stretch.

Anrinnelesse didn't so much as notice, her attention was so fixated on Cherie.

“My, I never knew fenrir could be so darling! This is truly the discovery of a lifetime!”

“Arf, awuff~!”

I pretended to watch the pair amicably as I slipped back into my seat, as quietly as I could manage. Claire, either for the same stroke of whimsy Eckenhart had or the chance to get back at Anrinnelesse, stood at my side in what was usually Leo’s spot. She was already struggling not to laugh.

*I forgot there’s no chair because Leo sits here... I wish I’d remembered that and given her the seat.*

Nonetheless, I watched Leo slink around the table. She moved with her belly low to the ground in an effort not to stand out as much, but she was still painfully visible. Still, Anrinnelesse gave no indication of noticing her, and this time it was my turn to hold in a laugh.

When Leo had made her way just behind her, Cherie looked up and noticed her for the first time. “Arf?”

It was already too late for Anrinnelesse, though. Leo moved closer so her head was immediately above her, and—

“BARK!”

“Wahhhhhh?!” Anrinnelesse screamed, shooting out of her chair like a rocket. Leo had to lean out of the way to avoid getting headbutted.

“Pfft!” Claire covered her mouth, but it wasn’t enough to stop her laugh.

“Hahaha! Don’t laugh, Claire, I feel bad for her!” I said through my laughter.

“You’re laughing, too! Hehehehe!”

Anrinnelesse tried desperately to back away from Leo, despite her back already being at the table, hands flailing wildly. “Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you doing behind me? Oh goodness, I’m being attacked, aren’t I?!”

“Calm down, Anse,” Claire chided her. “I told you, Miss Leo doesn’t attack people...hehe!”

Predictably, Anrinnelesse showed no sign of calming down.



“Awf~!”

“Woff!”

Cherie jumped off Anrinnelesse’s lap at the last second to avoid being thrown off, barking eagerly as she landed on Leo’s head. She was not only unharmed, but she also seemed deeply satisfied with the whole turn of events.

“Relax, Anrinnelesse,” I assured her. “Leo won’t harm you.”

“Sh-She won’t?” She finally started breathing again. Maybe she put a hand to her chest—I couldn’t see anything through her curtain of curls. “Honestly... I wish she wouldn’t sneak up on me so suddenly.”

“I think Leo just wants to play with you,” Claire told her amicably. “She must feel left out, what with all the attention you’ve been giving Cherie.”

Anrinnelesse’s eyes swam. “I, er...y-you know it’s not so simple.”

“I’m sorry about that,” I apologized, the guilt from our prank finally kicking in. “Are you sure you can’t even try to get used to her?”

She bit her lip. “I realize full well that you wouldn’t permit her indoors if she were dangerous. She’s just... Miss Leo is simply too big.” Still shaking a little, Anrinnelesse sat down again, further from Leo this time.

“Ruff?” Leo was only asking if her size was that much of an issue, but unfortunately, Anrinnelesse jumped in surprise yet again at the sound.

*I guess Leo is a giant, rideable wolf... Some people might just need more time to get used to her, I guess.*

We all returned to our seats, and as we began to calm down fully, the dining hall doors swung open again.

“I’m done studying!” Tilura rushed into the room, full of giddy relief. Eckenhart, Sebastian, and a few other servants followed closely behind her—they must’ve met in the corridors on their way there. “Miss Leo, Cherie, I’m here!”

“Ruff!”

“Awuff!”

Tilura ran to Leo and Cherie, who were still on Anrinnelesse's side of the table. They both greeted her cheerfully.

Anrinnelesse watched the girl dubiously. "Surely you don't expect me to act with *that* level of abandon, do you?"

Claire frowned. "Admittedly, no."

*Yeah, I can't imagine that... Leo would probably freak out if Anrinnelesse started playing with her so openly.*

We watched the trio play as Eckenhart found his seat and servants began to file in with lunch. Their timing was perfect—Sebastian probably made sure of that.

Once everything was laid out, Eckenhart cleared his throat. "Well, then, let's eat."

"Gladly," I nodded.

"Ruff!"

With that, we started lunch the same way we would on any day. Eckenhart dug into his main of meat with gusto, and Claire sighed at the sight. Tilura paid no attention to anyone else and fixated on her own meal. Anrinnelesse smiled to herself as she watched Cherie eat, though she stiffened every time she glanced at Leo. Speaking of which, my canine companion was digging into her food so fiercely I was convinced she was trying to compete with the duke.

*Maybe Anrinnelesse is just scared because she's imagining Leo eating her like that?*

Lunch came to an end, and as we started with tea, Sebastian approached Leo and me with a polite bow. "Mr. Hirooka, Miss Leo, Helena has entrusted me with a message for you. She has prepared the greital wine for testing, so she would appreciate your assistance at your earliest convenience."

I nodded. "Great, we'll go see her after tea." I could probably finish before sword practice. There probably wasn't much to test, because it was only a test batch. If it started to drag on, I could just leave Leo with her and start practicing on my own.

“Ah, so the time has come!” Eckenhart eagerly rubbed his hands together. “I’ll be counting on you, Miss Leo.”

“Ruff!”

Anrinnelesse raised a brow. “How, exactly, does a silver fenrir detect illness?”

*She doesn’t trust Leo at all, does she?* I was glad that the people of the villa seemed to trust Leo immediately, likely due to the connection House Liberte had with silver fenrir in old times. Anrinnelesse’s reaction seemed more typical for people who didn’t know the legends.

Eckenhart gave her a sharp look. “Do you doubt Miss Leo?”

“A magic tool planted the disease, so logically, only another magic tool could detect it,” Anrinnelesse replied smoothly. “That—er, the silver fenrir couldn’t possibly produce the same results.”

*That’s fair enough. I’d doubt it myself if it were anyone except Leo.*

Claire smirked. “Sound like you don’t want any greital wine, then.”

“I-I never said that!”

Eckenhart let out a hearty chortle. “I can understand your doubt well enough. If Miss Leo couldn’t tell, however, the disease would’ve rooted itself far more deeply in Ractos by now—not to mention that we never would’ve found the plague-spreader without her.”

She frowned. “That’s...a fair point, I suppose.”

Sensing that she was still reluctant to believe Leo, I turned to Sebastian. “How is Ractos doing?”

“The capwort you have been so generously selling has pushed the epidemic into its final stages,” he reported. “The cases seem to be dropping by the day. After pinpointing the origins of the disease, we safely retrieved all infected wine still in the city, and that seems to have greatly reduced the spread.”

“Granted, that doesn’t prove Miss Leo can detect the sickness,” Eckenhart added. “But it does mean the spread has been limited thanks to her efforts, along with yours, Takumi. The whole city might’ve been a plague zone by now without you.”

*I had no idea they'd gotten the wine in the city... They probably didn't get it all, of course, but I think that was an important step to culling the disease.*

"The demand for capwort at Kales's store has declined," Sebastian informed me. "He will return the herb to usual prices when the conditions are right."

Eckenhart nodded. "We reduced your cut to account for that, as requested." He turned to face Sebastian. "Tell him to be careful when the time comes. I don't want there being a fuss over it."

"As you will, milord."

*Right, they're only selling it for cheap because of the epidemic. I don't care about my cut of the profits that much, so that's fine. I'm just glad Kales succeeded in getting the medicine to everyone who needed it, especially with the Yugard store out of the picture.*

The duke nodded contentedly. "Now, Anrinnelesse," he began, turning to look her in the eyes. "I understand you're still unsure, but I assure you, I trust both Takumi and Miss Leo completely for the part they've played in this."

"I believe in them," Claire added.

"Arf!" Cherie agreed.

Tilura looked up at us and grinned. "Me too!"

"Thank you, all of you," I told them.

"Ruff!" Leo echoed.

It felt unexpectedly good to be trusted by them all, and I had to struggle to stop myself from blushing. I had to bow my head to hide my face.

"I suppose I understand," Anrinnelesse finally relented. "If you all feel so strongly, I should trust them as well. I will say this, however—if I get sick from your wine, you had best have plenty of capwort prepared for me!"

Claire rolled her eyes. "You don't trust them at all, do you?"

The duke chuckled. "Let her have her doubts. She'll have her proof soon enough, if Miss Leo rules the wine safe to drink—and should the worst come to pass, we have enough capwort for everyone."

“Yep, I’m positive we do.” I turned to Leo. “Better make sure it’s safe. Right, girl?”

She nodded. “Wruff!”

I was sure I could make enough capwort for anyone and everyone if it came to that, so I doubted there would be any issue there—not that I doubted Leo’s nose in the least.

Cherie tilted her head, as if asking to help. “Arf, arf?”

Eckenhart grimaced. “Er... Perhaps you should leave this to Miss Leo, Cherie.”

Her ears drooped sadly. “Auf...”

Anrinnelesse immediately pet the little fenrir, assuring her it was all okay. *I only hope she gets to that point with Leo someday...*

## Chapter 4: The New Herbal Greital Wine

**AFTER** tea, Eckenhart left the room to discuss something with Sebastian, followed close behind by Leo and me. Cherie was still a little upset, but with both Claire and Anrinnelesse fawning over her, I doubted that would last long.

*I'm sure they'll make her feel better. Tilura said she wanted to play with her outside before sword training, too. Anrinnelesse didn't seem at all interested in that...*

Leo and I peeked inside the kitchen. "Um...hello?" I looked around, then flagged down a cook. "Excuse me, is Helena around?"

"Ruff?" Leo echoed.

He didn't have time to reply, as Helena herself had noticed us and strode over. "Ah, Mr. Hirooka! Perfect timing, we've just finished setting out the wine for you." Helena directed us to a table where five barrels were laid out, each small enough to be carried under one arm. They must've parcelled out one of the large barrels from Lange for testing.

"Thank you. Um... How much capwort is in each of these?" I inquired.

"Let me explain. We made batches based on how much capwort it would take to cure the average person. From your right, the barrels contain a quarter of a dose, a third of a dose, half a dose, two-thirds of a dose, and a full dose."

"So the only thing different between them is how much capwort you added?"

"Exactly."

That made sense—it was a lot more methodical than I was expecting, but it would give us a good idea of how much capwort was needed per barrel to purify it. It was a very chef-like approach.

"Okay, Leo, you know what to do."

"Ruff!" She nodded, then began to inquisitively sniff the barrels one by one. Helena and the others watched with bated breath as she tested each in turn.

“Wuff?” Leo’s ears flattened sharply. “Bark!”

“Okay, so the rightmost barrel is still bad,” I interpreted. “What about the others?”

*“sniff sniff... Wuff-uff, awruff.”*

“The rest are safe? Great.” I turned to the chefs. “So, Leo just finished...” I passed on what Leo had told me. All of them were disease-free except for the barrel with only a quarter-dose, it seemed.

Helena nodded thoughtfully. “As I thought, the amount added affects the purification process. Thank you for your aid, Miss Leo.”

“Woooo!” she replied, pride in her voice.

*I knew I was right to leave this to Helena. If I’d been making the test batch, I probably would’ve just tossed in a big handful of capwort and called it a day.*

“Just in case, we’ll only drink the wine with a half-dose or more,” Helena declared. “That means a half-dose per barrel—no, let’s simplify it and say one dose per two barrels is safe.”

There wasn’t much of a difference between a quarter and a third, so it made sense to err on the safe side just in case there was some lingering illness present. It seemed straightforward enough, all told.

“I think that’s good,” I replied. “Now all that’s left is to test the flavor.”

She nodded. “The capwort may well influence the taste, so we’ll test all three of the safe barrels. There’s one issue with that, however.”

“What is it?”

“Well...to be blunt, I’ve never tried regular greital wine before. I wouldn’t know if this differs at all.”

“Right, that makes sense... It’s hard to compare if you have no frame of reference.” I was the only one of us who’d tried the wine at Lange, and while we had some unmodified wine here, it’d be foolish to run the risk of infection for that.

“We’ll have to gauge it against other wines,” Helena concluded. “I’m afraid

you'll be our only judge in terms of authenticity."

"I don't really trust my palate," I admitted, "but I'll try."

"Please do. Let's get to it, then."

It crossed my mind to call Phillip or Eckenhart for their opinions, but I quickly discarded the idea. Getting them drunk would take them away from work for the rest of the day, so that would have to be my absolute last resort.

*Besides, I know Helena and the chefs have had the greital juice, and the flavor is pretty much the same.*

She poured out a set of three glasses and set them in front of me. "Whenever you're ready, Mr. Hirooka."

"Right...is there a reason they're all different colors?"

"It's most likely the color of the dissolved capwort. The more herb it contains, the darker its hue."

Greital wine was a thick red, but none of the three glasses matched that. The half-dose wine was nearly pink and had an odd translucency to it. The two-thirds-dose was a dark purplish red by comparison, and the full-dose glass was a rich, opaque purple. I remembered Sebastian mentioning that capwort turned purple in water—that would explain it. The half-dose was strikingly similar to a rose wine, and came across even more beautiful in its clear crystal glass.

I picked up the pink wine, resolving to go from right to left like the barrels. "I'll take just a sip, then."

Helena nodded as she and the others picked up their corresponding glasses. "At your lead, Mr. Hirooka."

I was careful to take only the smallest of sips from each of the three glasses. Even though the alcohol hadn't hit me at all in Lange, I couldn't guarantee that would still be the case—and besides, I had sword practice with Eckenhart as soon as I was done here. As soon as they saw me taste the wine, Helena and the others took sips of their own.

"Huh... Okay," I nodded as I processed the flavor.

Helena stroked her chin. "I don't know exactly what it's supposed to taste



like, but the capwort is having an effect. They're different from the juice."

"That's what I thought," I said. "Which one do you think tastes the best?"

"The one with the least capwort, easily—the half-dose wine."

"Yeah...from what I can remember, it tastes the closest to what I had in Lange."

Not only did it look the most appealing, but there was also only the faintest hint of bitterness from the herbs—if anything, that only served to emphasize the wine's strong fruity tones. It had the distinct sting of alcohol to it as well, unlike the juice. *I doubt most people would even notice the bitterness, unless they were specifically looking for it.*

"In that case, we'll proceed with the half-batch variant. Increasing the amount of capwort only makes it more bitter, after all."

The other chefs nodded in agreement with Helena's decision. It tasted the best, and the pink hue was the most pleasing to look at.

"I will be sure to serve glasses of the half-dose wine after dinner," Helena announced. "The rest of the tainted wine will be prepared with the same ratio."

I nodded. "Please do. I know Eckenhart will appreciate that."

"Now, as for the rest of it..."

The kitchen staff carried away the rest of the drinkable test wine, volunteering to finish it for us. I was glad it wouldn't simply be thrown away. The less-concentrated wine was going to have more capwort added, which meant it should be drinkable as early as tomorrow.

*This means all the tainted wine we bought from Lange won't go to waste... I'm glad we don't have to turn it all into juice from now on.*

"Oh, but make sure you give Tilura juice as usual," I added.

Helena chuckled. "Of course."

*I hope that won't be too much extra work for her.*

Leo looked at me. "Ruff!"

"What's that, Leo? You want juice, too?"

“Bruff-woff!”

“Okay.” I turned to Helena. “Could you serve some for her at dinner, please?”

“Gladly. I’ll prepare enough for her, Lady Tilura, and Cherie.”

*I guess she’s a big juice fan now. Contented at her coming drink, Leo happily followed me out of the kitchen. They’ll need more capwort soon, but I gave them plenty the other day... That can wait for tomorrow.*



“**AH**, Takumi! There you are!”

After finishing my business in the kitchen, Leo and I found Eckenhart and Tilura already waiting for us in the back garden. Cherie was in Tilura’s arms, and I noticed that Claire and Anrinnelesse were watching from one of the hall windows.

*Anrinnelesse has really taken a liking to Cherie, huh?*

Gelda was also there, waiting by the side of the mansion with towels for us to wipe our sweat with. The only one missing was Laila, who I assumed was elsewhere lecturing Milicia.

“Time to train!” Tilura beamed at me.

I chuckled. “You sure seem ready.”

“Yep! I love exercise!”

“Worf!” Leo barked in agreement.

Cherie tilted her head questioningly. “Arf?”

*Huh... She seems to love playing too. That doesn’t seem very fenrir-like of her...*

“Did the wine turn out well?” Eckenhart asked, interrupting my train of thought.

“Right, yes. It’s safe to drink now. Helena said she’ll serve it after dinner.”

His face split into a wide grin. “Excellent, I’m looking forward to it already! I can put my all into training now!”

*Was he that worried about the wine?* His smile was oddly similar to Tilura’s,

even though his had a roguish quality to it that the young girl still lacked.

“Let’s get to it, then,” he declared.

“All right,” I replied.

“Yeah!” Tilura shouted.

“Ruff!”

“Arf!”

Training swords in hand, we began to work out with Eckenhart.

*I’m not sure the dogs needed to get that excited about it, though... Leo runs with us, but Cherie only ever watches. Wait, I stand corrected. There she is on Leo’s head again...*

“All right, that’s enough for today!” Eckenhart barked. “It’s nearly time for dinner.”

I bowed deeply to him. “Thank you very much!”

Tilura mimicked me. “Thank you, Father!”

“Ruff!” Leo echoed.

With that, training came to an end.

Cherie had hardly joined us at all; after a short stint riding on Leo’s head, she returned inside the mansion to Claire’s side. I wouldn’t have thought twice about it if she were a regular dog, but she was supposed to be a fenrir, one of the fiercest monsters in the world. It was a little worrying.

Eckenhart tipped his head to Leo. “I must admit, Miss Leo, you’re even better than I thought. I never stood a chance.”

She puffed out her chest, wagging proudly. “Bruff!”

Leo and Eckenhart had held a mock battle, like what Tilura and I had done with her. It was more of a game in that Leo only dodged while we tried to land a blow on her, but as he’d promised Tilura before, it was the duke’s turn. Despite being far faster than me, Eckenhart barely fared any better than we did. He had only made contact two or three times out of his dozens of swings, and just as Leo herself had told me, her fur seemed to harden with every impact. Eckenhart

seemed more shaken each time than she was, as if he'd swung into a metal pole.

*I guess it's official...no human could ever beat Leo. Silver fenrir really are something.*

"Shouldn't you be heading inside now?" Claire called from the window. I could see through the window that Anrinnelesse was at Claire's side, holding Cherie. They both seemed immensely pleased with themselves.

The duke nodded. "Yes, I believe it's time."

"C'mon, Leo, inside!" I called to my companion.

"Ruff!"

Leo and Eckenhart led the way as I trailed behind. When we reached the hallways, however, I noticed something. There were splotches of mud and dirt on the floor that were unmistakably in the shape of Leo's paws.

"Hm? Hold on, Leo."

She turned back toward me. "Ruff?"

"What's wrong, Takumi?"

"What's up?" Tilura asked me inquisitively.

I pointed at a splotch. "Look at Leo's prints."

Eckenhart's eyes widened. "Impressive! Why, those are bigger than my hands!"

"Uh...they are, but that's not the point."

The villa's floors were meant to be walked on with shoes, and they had no real custom of being barefoot indoors here. Instead, they had a metal scraper by the doors to help remove dirt and mud, though it was dull enough that it barely hurt if you put your full weight on it barefoot. I'd used it along with everyone else before going back inside, and I used the boot mats the servant had set out, too.

"Did you not clean off your feet?" I asked Leo.

She flattened her ears pitifully, eyes wide and pleading. "W-Woff...whiiiiine..."

“N-No, it’s okay!” Gelda hurriedly assured me. “It’s our job to clean, after all!”  
*I get it now.*

“So what you’re saying is, it *is* an issue,” I concluded. “Leo?”

“Bwuff?” She dropped her head sadly with a low whine.

“I don’t care what excuse you have, you’ve got to clean your feet. You don’t want to make trouble for everyone else, do you?”

“W-Wuff? Ruff...bwoff?”

“Oh, it tickles? I guess your paws are sensitive...” I said.

The scraper was rounded to not hurt human feet, but I could understand that not being comfortable on her paws. It didn’t feel right to make extra work for the servants, though.

As a kid in Japan my parents would leave out a rag to wipe my feet down with when I came home, and that turned into a habit by the time I lived alone. They made sure I was aware of the mats when I first came here, and even Leo seemed to understand the importance of it. I was so confident she’d been doing it that I never checked, let alone noticed the mess she was leaving behind.

I turned to Gelda. “Could you please bring me a rag or something? I’d like to clean her paws while they’re still wet.”

“A-Absolutely!”

As she ran off to fetch it, I turned to Claire and Eckenhart, bowing apologetically. “I’m sorry for the trouble she’s been causing.”

“Gahahaha! I never would’ve thought you’d be worried about a little mud! Even a mighty silver fenrir has her flaws, after all. I don’t mind at all!”

“Exactly.” Claire nodded in agreement. “Miss Leo is welcome to live however she pleases here. She’s not any trouble at all.”

I was glad they weren’t upset, but it didn’t feel right to back down now. It didn’t make any sense to clean the floors instead of wiping her paws off, especially since Gelda and the other servants already did so much for us.

As an aside, Anrinnelesse seemed content to continue doting on Cherie

without so much as glancing at us. Tilura was as lost in thought as she was watching Leo and Eckenhart spar, no doubt trying to figure out what her father had that she lacked.

“Still,” I insisted, “it’s better that the floors never got dirty at all. I’m going to stay here with Leo and wait for Gelda to get back, so the rest of you can go ahead to the dining hall.”

Eckenhart nodded. “If you insist.”

Claire smiled sadly at me. “Okay. Try not to worry yourself too much over this.”

“See you at dinner, Miss Leo!” Tilura called to us.

Leo sorrowfully watched them leave, letting loose a new chorus of pitiful whimpers and whines.

*Stop being so dramatic, Leo, they’re not abandoning you! You’ll see them all soon enough.*

Now alone with her, I scratched my head. “Look, Leo... I know your paws get sensitive, but you should’ve told me you were bothered by it sooner. I don’t want to cause trouble for everyone else.”

“Ruff...buw-wuff. *whiiiiine*”

“Huh? You didn’t want to overburden me when I was still getting used to life here? You thought I’d be too busy to hear you out?”

She nodded pitifully. “Woo...”

*I guess there has been a lot to get used to...there’s training, herb-growing, studying medicine, and everything else that’s been happening lately. I’ll always have time for her, though.*

“Oh, you silly dog! I’d do anything to make sure you’re comfortable, promise. We’ve been partners for ages now, and you always help me whenever I need it. This kind of thing is nothing, trust me.”

“Mwoff?” With a happy whine, she started wagging, stepping closer to me so she could lick my face.

“Blegh?! H-Hold on, Leo, stay still! You’re getting mud everywhere!” After a moment’s flailing, I managed to get a hand on either side of her face, prompting her to stop in her dirty tracks. I met her soulful gaze. “I get it, I get it! Just remember, you can always come to me about this kind of thing. I’ll do whatever I can—and even then, I doubt I could come close to repaying you for all you’ve done for me.”

“Woo, woo, wooooo!” She kept wagging fiercely, wagging with such ferocity that I was afraid she’d take out a wall if she hit it. Luckily, the corridor was big enough that it wasn’t an issue.

Finally Gelda returned, rag in hand and breathing heavily. “Hahh...hahh... M-My apologies for the wait!”

“Thank you, Gelda. You didn’t have to run the whole way, though.”

“N-No, it’s the least I can do for you!”

Leo shook her head apologetically. “Woff.”

*It sounded like she said, “My sincerest apologies for the inconvenience”... That can’t be right, can it?*

Once I’d made sure all the mud and grit was out from between Leo’s toes, we started walking again.

“I’ll make sure to ask someone for another rag or something the next time we’re coming in from the garden,” I told her. “Make sure to let me know, okay?”

“Ruff!”

*That should help keep the corridors free of Leo-related messes. I’m sure it’ll still happen every now and then, but hopefully they’ll understand.*

When we were almost at the dining hall, however, I heard a voice from behind.

“There you are, Mr. Hirooka.”

“Hm? Oh, Laila!”

“Ruff?”

We stopped so Laila could catch up to us.

“I have a report for you regarding Milicia’s compounding.”

“What’s up?”

“She successfully divided the herbs for the next batch, and I confirmed they were in the same state as the herbs you prepared with her. I sent her to the kitchens to deliver the finished product.”

“Really? That’s great! Thank you for your help.”

She shook her head politely. “I merely fanned her while she worked. Milicia deserves your praise far more than I.”

“I’ll thank her too, of course.”

I made a mental note to praise my apprentice as Laila joined us on our walk to the dining hall. She shared how Milicia did during the process as well, which I appreciated. By the time we reached our destination, everyone else was already seated and the food was already served. Leo and I hurried to our spots.

“Let’s eat, then,” Eckenhart declared.

“Please,” I added.

“Thank you for the food,” Claire said.

“Thank you, indeed,” Anrinnelesse echoed.

“Thank you!” chimed Tilura.

“Woof!”

“Awuff!”

Most of the dishes were meat, no doubt to suit Eckenhart’s tastes. The dogs were overjoyed at the sight, and I was grateful for the protein after all the exercise I did, but I was worried it was too heavy for the ladies. Fortunately, Claire and Anrinnelesse both ate without any issues, and Tilura was every bit as hungry as me. Study well, exercise well, eat well, the saying went, and it seemed to apply to Tilura even if she hated her textbooks.

Eckenhart swallowed a large mouthful of steak, eyes flitting to the wine bottle. It was full of the same pink wine I’d tasted earlier. It was every bit as



pretty in the fine crystal as it was in my glass earlier. “So, this is the greital wine?” he asked me curiously. “It looks quite different from the juice.”

“Oh, let me explain why.”

Sebastian’s eyes lit up for just a moment before realizing that I’d be doing the talking.

*He’ll have to let me have this one, I think.*

“This wine was purified by adding dried capwort to it,” I said. “The herb changed its color.”

Claire and Anrinnelesse both stopped to listen as I talked, keen to hear my explanation. They seemed more interested in the unusual color, rather than the purification process itself. The juice for Tilura and the dogs was also laid out close to them, in its own pitcher.

“Leo checked this carefully to make sure there’s no sickness in it, so adding enough capwort is all it takes to make it drinkable.”

“How much is ‘enough’?” Eckenhart pressed.

“It takes about half a medicinal dose for the average person to purify a small barrel,” I replied. “Anything less than that, and the illness doesn’t get totally removed. Right, Leo?”

She looked up from her food. “Ruff!”

Eckenhart studied his wine. “Hmm... I wouldn’t have thought it would change color so dramatically.”

I nodded. “Different concentrations of capwort lend to different hues and opacities, but this is the result of a half-dose. Any more than this and it turns darker and more cloudy.” I looked at Sebastian. “You said capwort always changes color in water, right?”

The butler lit up like a bulb. “Indeed it does. Ordinarily, it yields a pleasant purple color. I would imagine the result here is due to the water itself having been processed first, but this is no doubt the same reaction.”

*He was waiting for that, huh?*

Claire tilted her head to study it from a different angle. "It's so beautiful."

"Indeed," Anrinnelesse agreed. "It catches the light in such a pleasant manner."

It was extremely clear and had a satisfying pink shade, so I could understand their fascination with it.

"I imagine it'll be quite popular with ladyfolk," Eckenhart remarked. "I'd call it a success for that alone. How does it taste now?"

"Well... I can't say for certain," I admitted. "It's a little different from the wine Lange produces."

"Is it, now?"

I nodded. "I had the chance to drink some when I visited the village, but I'm not very well-versed when it comes to wine. I think it's a little more bitter because of the capwort in it, but it emphasizes the sweetness of the wine well."

I'd heard that bitterness and sweetness were antagonistic flavors, but they worked to emphasize the wine's best features somehow. Putting salt on watermelon made at least a little more sense to me, since the contrast made them stand out better. I couldn't even imagine how the wine tasted sweeter, though. It might just be another facet of this world I didn't know about yet.

Eckenhart stroked his chin. "Bitterness...interesting. Let's have a taste, then."

"Yeah, let's."

As soon as we finished eating, the servants poured the adults glasses of the wine, and Leo and the others got their juice.

Claire studied her glass in awe. "It almost feels like a shame to drink it."

Anrinnelesse nodded. "I feel like I could watch it forever."

*Eckenhart said it first, but it really does seem popular with the ladies...*

"Er...everything in moderation now, Claire." The duke then turned to me. "Is it ready, Takumi?"

"Of course. At your leisure."

I wasn't sure what his warning to Claire was supposed to mean, but I readily

bid everyone drink with a nod. The other three wine-drinkers picked up their glasses as I did, and as we sipped, everyone's eyes widened.

"It's sweet!" Claire exclaimed, turning to me eagerly. "I've never known a wine to be so easy to drink!"

Anrinnelesse nodded eagerly. "I couldn't agree more! This wonderful appearance, sweet body, and smooth aftertaste...it even has the wonderful tang of the liquor!"

The two ladies seemed to enjoy the flavor so much, they didn't mind the bitterness. *Also, Anrinnelesse did a much better job describing the taste than I did... I suppose that goes to show the difference in our upbringing.*

Eckenhart smiled. "Delicious, to be sure. I can taste some of the bitterness Takumi mentioned, but it only serves to draw out the flavor of the fruit."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Some people may be bothered by it, but I personally think it tastes even better than what I had in Lange."

"Is that so? Sounds like you did well."

Tilura, Leo, and Cherie all continued to sip at their juice without even glancing at the wine, but they seemed more than content.

"Well, Sebastian?" Eckenhart asked. "What do you think?"

He bowed politely. "I had but a small taste before it was served, but I do believe it's usable."

"Good, good."

*I can trust him to explain the taste, then... though I guess I already did that.*

Eckenhart stroked his beard in thought. "Capwort in wine, eh? Now that's an idea. The color is a little odd, but not unpleasant, and I have no reservations about the taste." Finally, he looked at me. "Takumi."

"Yes?"

"How do you feel about asking Lange to mass-produce this?"

I started a little at the thought. "Lange? Personally, they're the only ones I'd trust to make the wine, but are you sure they can still get greitals like they used

to?”

“They import the fruits from Count Bastler’s land, don’t they?”

I nodded. “Their importer changed, though, and he was the one who gave them the disease-spreading item in the first place. I’m frankly not sure if things can go back to normal on that front.”

Count Bastler ordered the merchant change, but I didn’t know any of the details. If Lange’s usual merchant partner was in on the scheme, I doubted they could be trusted again, and there was a good chance Hannes would agree with me.

“You’ve no need to fret,” Anrinnelesse assured me. “Frankly, I had no idea fruits from Father’s lands were used in such a delectable drink. I will gladly arrange a new transport myself, in the spirit of restoring our house’s reputation. Their new merchant will be a man I’m sure I can trust.”

Claire scoffed. “*Restore* your name, Anse? That’s not any way to regain trust. You need to redeem yourself, good and proper.”

“Er...I-I suppose you may be right.”

*Claire’s right, but wouldn’t fixing all the issues with the old merchant system and improving the process regain their trust, too?*

Eckenhart thought on it for a moment. “We’ll have to examine the former greital more closely, but there don’t seem to be any issues with the fruits themselves. I’ll arrange for that, since Anrinnelesse still hasn’t had her authority returned to her. House Liberte will spare no expense when it comes to producing fine wine.”

*Right... Eckenhart said something about managing Count Bastler’s lands for the time being, as a representative of the royal family. I’m sure Hannes and the others will trust any solution he comes up with.*

“I think Lange will be able to recover more quickly if you had a direct hand in it,” I told him.

“Yes, especially since the count’s lands are some distance from them. There’s not much a village of their size can do on their own. Worst case, they may be

unable to continue their winery altogether. I'll have to investigate this right away... Sebastian!"

"As you wish, milord." Sebastian hurried out of the room with a bow, likely to get started right away.

"Now Lange won't lose its livelihood," Eckenhart declared.

"Losing this wine would be an absolute disaster," Claire agreed.

Hannes had explained the winery was more of a side job, but it would be a shame to see the wine become a thing of the past. I was glad the villagers I'd come to know during my stay there would be okay, and Claire seemed just as relieved. It really was a good wine.

*I bet Phillip would heartily agree with her, given how drunk he got when we were there...*

"All that remains is how to market it," Eckenhart sighed. "I doubt anyone would notice if we sold it normally."

Claire nodded sadly. "I suppose so."

"How do you typically do it here?" I asked.

"By the barrel, mostly. Pubs and taverns go through the most liquor, and they want to pick it up as cheaply as possible. Aside from that, there are smaller barrels sold directly to the citizenry."

"Oh... You can't pack and sell it in bottles instead?" I asked. That would cost more, though, so I could understand why that wasn't the norm.

"Bottles, eh?" the duke mused. "It'll be pricier than barrels, but that may work in our favor. It'll seem more highbrow that way."

"Exactly. They'll get to see the color of the wine themselves, too. I bet it'll be worth it."

It was especially important to distinguish it from regular greital wine, since the appearance was a big selling point.

"It's so pretty, after all," Claire breathed.

Eckenhart smiled as the noblewomen both stared into their glasses. "I can see

its popularity with women now.”

I nodded. “Just like rose wine. The appearance is a big part of the appeal.”

“Rose...what?”

*Oops, I didn't mean to say that. This isn't technically a wine, even...*

“Where I’m from, we call alcohol with this kind of color to it rose wine,” I explained. “I’m assuming you don’t have a name for it here?”

Eckenhart nodded. “Wine is wine, plain and simple. We don’t complicate it if there’s no need to.”

*So they don't distinguish between whites and reds here? Not that I know the distinction myself, of course. I don't even know what technically constitutes a rose wine, aside from the color, I'd assume.*

“This is just an idea, but we should come up with a new name for it,” I suggested. “It’s not quite greital wine anymore, and we’ll need to distinguish it if we’re going to sell it.”

Eckenhart paused to consider it. “Yes, I see... It’s certainly a different enough flavor, and it looks nothing like other greital wines. It’ll seem more novel that way. Some will notice it’s made with the same fruit, I’m sure, but it’ll stand on its own as a distinct drink.”

Sebastian, who had returned only a minute before, nodded approvingly. “Indeed. The epidemic may be drawing to a close, but some have begun to connect the disease with greital wine already. They’re nothing more than rumors at the moment, but should this escalate, greital wine may become unmarketable altogether.”

Eckenhart nodded at the butler’s words.

The disease was widespread enough that such a conclusion was possible, even if there was no concrete evidence. They had no way of knowing of Count Bastler’s involvement, and if they ever found out, that could be disastrous. Lange’s best hope of supporting themselves was a new product that was similar enough to the old one to not cause any major issues.

“Not only will people not associate it with greital wine,” I continued, “it’ll

probably sell quite widely with looks like this.”

Claire nodded. “The taste is excellent, but we do need to ensure people pick it up in the first place.”

“It bears further investigation, but it seems reasonable enough,” the duke mused. “Now, what will we call it?”

*Names, huh...*

“It’s not a proper wine, so we can’t call it a rose wine,” I said. “We can’t use ‘greital’ in the name, either, if we want to distance it from greital wine.”

*That’d defeat the whole purpose of renaming it.*

“Let’s keep it simple,” Eckenhart suggested. “Can we call it rosé?”

*Rosé... that’s simple and easy to understand, sure, but it’s too close to the flower. It’d be better to clarify it’s a drink.*

I frowned at the duke. “Why are you asking me at all? You can give it any name you want.”

“I could, yes, but we can only make it with your aid,” he replied. “Besides, I think having the man with a silver fenrir name it would be more interesting.”

“So you’re making me do it because you feel like it,” I sighed. “I guess it doesn’t matter that much, since the name won’t be the first thing people notice.”

“Exactly. The color alone will sell plenty.”

I let out another heavy sigh. It really was up to me, then. I could understand wanting me to name it in theory on account of Leo, but Claire and Anrinnelesse both seemed beside themselves with anticipation as they waited for me to christen it.

*Great... I’m awful at naming things.*

“Wait for a minute, I’ve got to think about this,” I said.

“We don’t need the name now,” Eckenhart assured me. “We can’t sell it right now, after all.”

I shook my head. “If I don’t come up with something now, I might never make

up my mind.” If the name wasn’t crucial, I wanted to get it dealt with as soon as possible.

*Let’s see... I can’t use ‘greital’ or ‘wine,’ so what can I use? The only other component is capwort—and effect aside, it’s just like mugwort. The color comes from the herb, so it’d be fair to name the wine after it. So going from mugwort... Rosewart? Rosecap? Rosemug? No, none of those fit at all.*

*I think most Japanese liquor uses other names and puts either ‘moon’ or ‘snow’ or something in front of it, so maybe mugwort has a different name I can use? I think some kinds are called wormwood, so...roseworm? That’s even worse. I could also leave out the ‘rose’ part altogether, so... Mug? Cap? Just as bad. Isn’t there some other name I can... Wait, I’ve got it!*

“What about Artemisia Rose?” I finally said.

Eckenhart stroked his beard. “Artemisia, eh? That’s a pretty name. What’s it from?”

Looking around, it seemed to resonate with everyone else, too. The only exception was Tilura and the dogs, who were still absorbed in their juice.

“Artemisia is a different name for mug—er, capwort.”

Artemisia was named for Artemis, goddess of hunting, the moon, and darkness. The mugwort that I was most familiar with was Artemisia indica, and from there I made the leap to Artemisia Rose—a stroke of brilliance, especially with my track record. I wasn’t especially interested in botany or anything, but I was interested in mythology for a while when I was younger, and Artemis stuck out to me for some reason. It felt like a normal thing for a young boy to get into, but I’d never expected it to come in handy like this.

When I described my thought process, I made sure to gloss over the details of where I came from, glossing over Artemis as a beautiful woman who resembled mugwort—even though I was sure Artemis herself was a deer. There was a bit of irony to giving the alcohol a name from a legend when Leo herself was legendary to House Liberte, but I convinced myself I wasn’t being vain. Besides, I wasn’t calling myself as beautiful as a Greek goddess or anything. That would be ridiculous.



“I thought, if it’s going to be popular with women, it had better have a pretty name,” I sheepishly explained. Artemis was also famous for her hatred of men, but for this, I was referring to her feminine beauty as it related to the drink.

“Centering capwort for a liquor that uses it, eh? I like it!” Eckenhart declared. “Most alcohol isn’t marketed to women, but it fits here just right. I can’t imagine men will pass it up on looks alone, either.”

Claire nodded. “I’m rather fond of the name, personally. I think it fits perfectly.”

“Loath as I am to admit it, I must agree with Claire,” Anrinnelesse said. “A beautiful drink needs a beautiful name. It fits perfectly.”

I let out the sigh of relief I’d been holding in. “I’m glad you like it so much.”

*I’m glad I went for something with meaning this time, unlike with Leo. I gave her that name on a total whim... I’m so sorry, girl.*

Leo looked up from her drink and looked at me. “Bwuff?”

I reassuringly patted her snout. “Don’t worry, I’m okay. I’m just relieved.”

With that, Artemisia Rose was officially born. Claire, Sebastian, and Eckenhart started talking details while I continued to give attention to Leo. Even Anrinnelesse chimed in from time to time, which didn’t feel right to me because it was House Liberte’s business, but I didn’t say anything. She was a guest like me, and I voiced my opinions plenty. I reasoned the duke was generous enough to hear her out as he would anyone else.

When the talk about Artemisia had wound down and Sebastian left again, Eckenhart turned to me. “By the way, Takumi, could you take Miss Leo to Ractos sometime when you’re free?”

“Leo? Why?”

“Ruff?” Leo turned to look at the duke, interrupting her play with Tilura and Cherie.

“Surely you’ll be going to Ractos again at some point,” the duke continued. “Most of the city guards are accustomed to her, but plenty of the townsfolk don’t know about her yet. I’d like to get them as used to her as possible to

prevent any future issues.”

“Okay, that makes sense. I’d love for people to get more comfortable with her, though I doubt I could make it there every day or anything.” I didn’t know what the goal was, per se, but I had my herb work and training to do.

“Not to worry, even once a week would be plenty,” he assured me. “If you have other work to do, less frequently than that is enough.”

That felt more than doable. “Okay, I’ll make sure to go into town when I have the time. Sound good, Leo?”

Leo started wagging. “Wooo!”

*I bet she’d love going for a run.*

“Excellent,” Eckenhart nodded. “If you have any business in Ractos besides, you’re welcome to count that as well.”

“Understood. I think I might go for some sightseeing soon.”

“Ruff, wuff!”

I’d been to Ractos many times, but I never had the chance to properly relax. I felt more familiar with Lange, even, despite only having visited the village once. They were very different sizes of course, and I had different goals in visiting Lange, but still.

“Feel free to ask Sebastian if you have any questions, even basic directions,” Eckenhart continued. “Plenty of the guards and servants were raised there as well.”

“Okay. Honestly, I don’t remember where anything is, so I’ll be sure to ask when the time comes.”

I remembered Kales’s store, the orphanage, the tailor, and Isabel’s magic shop, but that was it. I’d been to a few other places, including the general store, but Sebastian had always led the way, and I honestly wasn’t paying that much attention. *I’d love to visit Isabel’s again, though. She’s fun to talk to, and I would love to hear more about this world’s magic tools.*

“I suppose that settles it, then.” Eckenhart paused, eyes hurriedly scanning the room. “It’s rather quiet, isn’t it?”

“I...guess so?”

Tilura was still clinging to Leo, though she seemed tired enough to fall asleep at any moment. Cherie was already asleep in the silver fenrir’s fur. Claire and Anrinnelesse were focused on their glasses of Artemisia Rose.

Claire stuck out her glass. “Laila, another glass.”

“But milady, I’m not sure that’s—”

“I said, another glass. One more for Anse, too.”

Laila begrudgingly curtsied. “As you wish.”

Anrinnelesse swayed in her seat, cheeks cherry red. “I’m not sure I can drink another...”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Claire slurred back at her. “You can take another glassh or two, can’t you?”

I could see sweat begin to bead on Eckenhart’s forehead. “Oh, no... Wh-When did Claire get drunk?”

“While we were talking, I guess,” I said.

At first glance she seemed normal, and she wasn’t even pale or flushed. When I looked closer, however, there was an odd look on her face, and something about the way she carried herself was like a different person altogether. I didn’t even notice she had Anrinnelesse’s arm gripped tight, preventing her from fleeing.





“Hm?” Claire turned to squint at us. “Father? Takumi? What’s wrong?”

Eckenhart swallowed hard. “H-Haven’t you had enough to drink, sweetie?”

She frowned. “What’re you saying? I’m nobility! I can take this much liquor!”

“Er...if you insist.”

The exchange gave me flashbacks to being coerced out drinking after work, where someone would always insist they were sober when they clearly weren’t. I knew greital wine was a strong drink from my time in Lange, and Artemisia Rose was clearly no different. It went down almost too easily in spite of that.

“M-My apologies for the wait,” Laila said as she filled Claire’s glass.

“Good.” Claire downed half of it in a single gulp. “This is so good...it tastes just as good as it looks, and I love the name, too.” She paused to peer at her companion’s glass. “Wait, Anse’s glass is empty! Laila, fill her up!”

Anrinnelesse’s eyes flew open in horror. “C-Claire?!”

“My sincerest apologies,” Laila muttered as she obediently poured her another glass.

Eckenhart grit his teeth. “Gah, I’m such a fool! I should’ve been prepared for this!”

I could only stare blankly. “How in the world...?”

I’d been in Anrinnelesse’s shoes too many times to count, though obviously never with Claire. There was always one person who kept forcing everyone around them to drink, and the poor soul sitting next to them would be put through the worst of it. Some poor, quiet soul would drink too much, get drunk in a bad way, and make things awkward with all their coworkers for days. I had far too many experiences like that in my short stint as a wage slave, and the memories haunted me still.

Eckenhart turned to me, fear creasing his brow. “T-Takumi, we should leave now, while we still can.” His voice was barely a whisper, to prevent his daughter from overhearing.

I nodded fervently. “Absolutely.”

Leo shuddered beside us. “Wurf...”

The three of us exchanged glances before slowly standing and sneaking away from the table.

“Go on, Anse, bottomsh up!” Claire shouted. “The night’s shtill young!”

“D-Delicious as it is, I’m really not much of a drinker... Please, release me!”

“Shtop talking nonsense! You don’t want all this delicious Rose to go to waste, do you?”

*I’m not following... They can’t drink all the Artemisia Rose tonight if they tried, and it’s not like it’ll go bad if they don’t.*

While Claire was distracted keeping Anrinnelesse in her seat, Eckenhart and I quietly retrieved Tilura from Leo’s fur. She started a little when we woke her, but fortunately she stayed quiet when she saw us holding our fingers to our lips. Cherie also woke up quietly, somehow, and I resolved to give her a treat later for her efforts.

Finally, we reached the door and slipped into the corridor undetected.

“I’m so sorry,” Eckenhart whispered to the maids as he brought the door almost completely closed. “Laila, Gelda, the rest is in your hands.”

Laila nodded grimly. “As you will, milord.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“Ruff,” Leo quietly added.

As soon as the door was closed, I heard Claire from within. “Huh? How’d it get to be just the two of ush, Anse? Ngh... Go on, Anrinnelesse, another ship!”

“Anse, Anrinnelesse, make up your mind... Wait, you’re quite right! They’ve abandoned me!”

“Enough chatter! Bottoms up! It’s delicioussh, I promise you’ll enjoy yourself after another glasssh!”

“What? N-No, I— Wagh?!”

Eckenhart lowered his gaze. “I’m sorry, Anrinnelesse.”

I grit my teeth. "If only we'd noticed... She'd still be with us if I had!"

"Awoo," Leo lamented.

As we walked away from the scene of the carnage, Eckenhart took a deep breath. "At least we made it out of that hell alive."

"Was losing Anrinnelesse really worth it, though?" I asked grimly.

"It was a noble sacrifice, one I'll never forget."

*He's right... Thank you, Anrinnelesse.*

"Oh?" Sebastian stopped to look at us quizzically, apparently on his way back to the dining hall. "Is something amiss?"

"Stay away from there," Eckenhart warned him, pointing shakily at the dining hall's door. "We were careless, and Claire had too much to drink. Anrinnelesse is still trapped there."

The butler shook his head sadly. "How truly tragic... I shall avoid it until morning, then."

I looked at them. "You knew this would happen?"

Eckenhart nodded somberly. "Unfortunately."

"Milady cannot be reasoned with once she's begun to drink," Sebastian somberly explained. "I had thought a single glass would be harmless, but it appears I was gravely mistaken."

*Am I overthinking things, or is that why I've never seen alcohol of any kind served with dinner?*

"It seems she downed several glasses while Takumi and I were talking," Eckenhart said. "Clearly, it was a little *too* delicious."

Sebastian shook his head sadly. "What a pity."

*I guess they can't deal with her when she's like this, either.*

"Milady lets her curiosity get the best of her at times, but she acts a perfect noblewoman," Sebastian explained. "The stress must affect her in ways that are made clear only at times like these."



Eckenhart nodded. "The alcohol brings it all out of her."

"I cannot imagine it's healthy for milady to find her only relief at the bottom of a bottle."

*Yeah... I can understand complaining while drunk, or drinking a little on especially hard days, but addiction can be a horrible thing.*

"I keep warning her not to drink too much," Eckenhart added with a sigh.

"I was out of the room, and it seems she failed to keep caution in mind. Milady has seemed rather stressed as of late."

Eckenhart nodded firmly. "I'll watch her more closely in the future."

*So Sebastian makes sure to watch her alcohol intake... I can't blame him, if she acts like that when she's drunk.*

Sebastian hardened his lips into a line, recomposing himself. "For tonight, we shall consider ourselves lucky the casualties were minimal. She will recover with time."

Eckenhart shuddered. "I'm glad we saved sweet Tilura, at least."

The three of us let out a collective sigh, punctuated by a soft "Wubff..." from Leo. It was surely an odd sight, three grown men clutching their heads and sighing in the corridor.

Tilura looked up at us in genuine confusion. "What's going on?"

"Arf?" Cherie mimicked her, tilting her head from her place in the girl's arms.

*I don't want her to lose all respect for her older sister, so I'll let that question go unanswered, I decided.*



**"SO** that's what Claire's like when she's drunk... I can't believe she's still at it."

After parting ways with Eckenhart and Sebastian, I took a bath and returned to my room to relax.

*I was drinking, so I'd better skip practice for this evening.*

Leo tilted her head in surprise. "Wuff?" *Still?*

“Yeah, I passed by the dining hall after my bath. She’s still drinking in there.”

The ladies’ combined laughter and crying was loud enough to reach the corridors loud and clear. I was sure the crying was coming from Anrinnelesse—she was probably a crying drunk.

“Ruff.” Leo shook her head as she curled up at my bedside.

I let out a heavy sigh. “I wasn’t expecting to run into that in this world, too.”

It happened far too often after work. Alcohol didn’t interest me much, but my seniors forced me to go out with them whenever they decided they’d like my company. I’d seen countless people in Claire’s shoes, and while I wasn’t often the unlucky soul forced to placate them, I knew how miserable it could be. I was glad Eckenhart was with me in wanting out of there as soon as possible.

*I’ll have to watch her whenever she drinks, just in case she gets carried away again.* With that, I let the faint heat of Artemisia Rose in my chest lull me into a pleasant slumber.



**THE** next morning, Tilura and Cherie came to call me for breakfast while I was getting cleaned up, and we headed to the dining hall together with Leo. When we arrived, I was surprised to see that Sebastian and Gelda were the only ones there.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Good morning to you, Mr. Hirooka.”

I scanned the room once more, just in case. “Claire and Anrinnelesse aren’t here yet?” Eckenhart was probably sleeping in, as usual. I didn’t know how Anrinnelesse usually handled mornings, but it was unusual for Claire to be absent.

“Milady is still sleeping off last night’s drinking binge,” Sebastian replied. “I would not expect her to awaken before noon.”

“Oh...okay.”

*I guess she’s sleeping straight through her hangover, then.*

“Lady Anrinnelesse is feeling unwell and is resting in her room,” he continued. “Laila likewise was granted the day off, on account of how late she worked.”

“Yeah... I can imagine they got it pretty bad, especially Anrinnelesse.” Both of them were left with Claire, so that wasn’t surprising. Anrinnelesse was at least awake, though I could only imagine the size of her hangover.

*Eckenhart and I should probably apologize the next time we see her.*

“I hope Laila gets plenty of rest,” I said. “You’re doing okay, though, Gelda?”

She nodded. “Y-Yes... Laila let me leave before it got too late.”

*Laila took it all on alone? Now I really feel guilty... I hope she recovers well.*

“Shall I have breakfast served?” Sebastian prompted me.

“Yes, please.”

With that, breakfast began, though it was a little more lonely than usual.

*This isn’t a bad change of pace, I guess.*

Breakfast ended uneventfully, as did tea. On my way out to the back garden, however, I happened to run into Milicia.

“Oh, master! Good morning!”

“Morning.” She seemed full of life as always, but I noticed she was massaging her right arm and wrist a little. “I know Laila probably told you already, but I’m really grateful for your help compounding.”

“My pleasure! My arm still hurts a little, though.”

“I bet, after all that grinding you did.”

*I knew it, I thought with a strained smile.*

“Right, Helena has a message for you,” my apprentice added. “She’s going to try to mix the medicine we made with the wine tomorrow, and she’d like your help testing it when it’s done steeping.”

“Great, thank you.”

*Helena sure works fast...or rather, her team does. She can’t be doing all this alone, after all.* More importantly, I was curious how the completed wine would

turn out now that we knew for a fact the herbs were effective.

Milicia and I chatted a little while longer before parting ways, and I wasted no time starting on my herbs in the back garden. I finished well before noon, though staying doubled over the whole time had been unexpectedly rough on my back.

“That’s enough for today,” I declared as I stood and stretched. I gave Leo an appreciative pat where she sat beside my work.

“Ruff!” she agreed.

“Gelda?” I called, getting the younger maid’s attention. “Can you pass this capwort on to Helena for me? Please tell her it’s for the alcohol.”

She readily nodded as she accepted the herbs. “Gladly.”

I was sure to make some for Helena in addition to the usual batch for Kales’s shop. The demand for other herbs was slowly declining, which I took as a sign that things were returning to normal without the Yugard store to buy up everyone else’s stock. Even with the shrinking order sizes, however, Artemisia Rose would need a steady supply of herbs, not to mention I wanted to make enough for my medicines to spread beyond just Ractos. My contract was more general than the city alone, after all. The only issue was making sure I didn’t make so many herbs I fainted again. I’d have to be careful to avoid that unknown limit while growing as many herbs as possible.

*Maybe I should start a proper garden so I can grow tons of herbs all at once? That’s another thing to discuss with Eckenhart and Sebastian, I guess.*

“Um... Takumi?”

I was brought back to the present at the sound of Claire’s voice from the mansion doors.

“Oh, Claire! What can I help you with?”

Her complexion was healthy and she seemed wide awake, so she wasn’t suffering from a hangover, somehow. Claire bowed deeply to me in apology. “I’m so very sorry for the state I put myself in last night. I’ll be careful to ensure that never happens again.”

The apology felt more for dragging Anrinnelesse into her drinking than the act itself. I was impressed she still remembered the night so clearly, though—she must not have gotten quite that drunk, despite how many glasses she had.

I chuckled. “It’s okay, I can understand wanting to unload occasionally. I’m not too bothered by it, honest.”

“I’m still very sorry, but...thank you.”

Maybe from her perspective it was a major embarrassment to her noble name or whatever, but I didn’t see the point in making such a big deal of it. She had to release stress sometime, after all.

“You should probably apologize to Anrinnelesse instead of me,” I suggested.

She frowned. “Anse still hasn’t left her room yet. I think she may still be feeling the effects of the drink.”

“Ahaha... She probably has quite the hangover.”

*So Claire avoided the hangover, but not Anrinnelesse... Maybe Claire can hold her drink better than I thought.*

“I’ll be sure to say sorry to her, of course,” Claire continued. “Still, I swear I won’t touch another drop of alcohol! I don’t want you to ever see me like that again!” She seemed plenty determined. I hadn’t seen her drunk even once since coming to live in the villa, so I assumed it had been a conscious choice.

“That’s an admirable goal, but the new herbal wine is almost done... I’d love for you to try it.” It should be good for the body, so I reasoned there wouldn’t be any issue if she watched her intake. Sebastian and Eckenhart were also going to watch out for her, so I wasn’t worried.

“I suppose you did make it yourself...” Her cheeks reddened, and she pointedly turned away. “Still, I can’t embarrass myself like that again.”

*She’s always been conscious of her image, I guess. It’s probably not because of me personally...no, definitely not.*

“I’m sure just a small drink would be fine if you wanted it,” I urged her. “I know you’ll be careful not to overdo it. It looks like it’ll turn out great, so it’d be nice if you had even just a little of it.”

She didn't seem to hate alcohol itself by any means, and I didn't want her to force herself to remain sober and stress herself out more. Eckenhart and the others would likely be drinking at the table with her, and I wouldn't blame her if that was too much to bear.

Claire pursed her lips tightly before finally letting out a sigh. "If you insist, I suppose I can try a little. You can't change my mind on any other drink, though, especially not Artemisia Rose. It tastes so good I just know I'd overdo it again."

"Sounds like a good idea to avoid that, then," I agreed.

Phillip had the same issue in Lange, though he fully leaned into his binge-drinking. *That's the problem with good alcohol... Still, I'm glad she won't be getting that drunk again.*

## Chapter 5: Sightseeing in Ractos

A few days after Claire's apology, I was putting the finishing touches on preparations for my trip into town. I was headed to Ractos with Leo, just as Eckenhart had requested. Rather than tie myself up with what I would or wouldn't bring, I was just choosing what I'd wear and making sure my sword was maintained and ready if I needed it. It didn't take any more than a few minutes in the end.

"Okay, Leo, time for us to get some—"

A knock came at the door, cutting me off. Whoever it was, they were a little apprehensive. Leo was already alert and looking at the source of the sound.

"Who could that be?" I muttered before raising my voice. "Yes?"

"It's me, Takumi. Er...do you have a minute?"

"Eckenhart? Sure, come in."

"Pardon me, then." The duke opened the door and slipped inside. We'd been together until the end of evening practice a short while ago, and I couldn't imagine what he'd need to talk about at this hour.

"I hope I'm not intruding," he apologized, noticing I was by the bed. "You weren't asleep, were you?"

I shook my head. "No, I just finished getting my things ready for tomorrow."

"Wruff!" Leo agreed emphatically.

I was ready to sleep, but I wasn't tired enough that I couldn't spare some time for him. Leo was similarly relaxed, lying beside my bed.

"What can I help you with?" I asked him.

"Well, er... I know I was the one who asked you to visit Ractos, but something has come up."

*Come up? I already told both him and everyone else about my plans, and there didn't seem to be any problem then...*

"Is something wrong?" I asked. I'd been planning on leaving for the city as soon as I'd finished growing the day's allotment of herbs. That way, I could make it to Kales's store and deliver the day's merchandise personally before Nick left.

"There's nothing wrong," he assured me. "It's, er...more of a personal request."

It took a while longer for him to get it all out, but essentially, he wanted me to take him along on my trip. He didn't have any formal business in town, so he was hoping to go discreetly, without even informing Sebastian or the other staff. Most of his prior trips were with a whole entourage of guards and servants, since he was lord of the land, but he seemed intent on making this a quieter, more personal visit.

At first I was dubious, since going into town unprotected seemed like a bad idea even undercover, but he quickly persuaded me otherwise. Leo would be with us, and Eckenhart was more than capable of taking care of himself. I had also shown that I wasn't totally useless in a fight, and thus the chances of any of us getting hurt were slim.

I didn't like the idea of not telling anyone else, but he was so insistent that I ended up folding. It seemed I was still the same weak-willed man I always was, even though I persuaded him to at least let the town guards know he was there. They wouldn't be accompanying us directly, of course, but they'd at least be aware should anything go wrong. I also insisted that he stay close to Leo and me at all times, and since he was more familiar with the city than me, he agreed to show us around. That was honestly much appreciated—I'd considered asking Nick to be my guide when I arrived, mostly because I didn't want to wander aimlessly, hoping I'd run into something interesting.

Eckenhart nodded. "See you tomorrow, then."

"See you then."

"Ruff!"



With that, he left with a spring in his step. Leo seemed just as happy as he was. She loved giving people rides even more than she liked to run, after all.

“Sightseeing with Eckenhart, huh?” I muttered to myself. “I guess I can make that work.”

Leo gave me a quizzical look. “Woo?”

“I mean, he’s a duke. Of course I’m nervous. On that note, we really should sleep.”

“Woff!” Leo agreed.

I slipped into bed, chatting with my canine companion a little while longer before drifting off to sleep.



**“CH-CHERIE’S** mad at me...”

The next morning, Tilura was muttering sadly. She’d been quiet all during breakfast, and after she finished, she’d reached out to pet the fenrir pup. Her hand must have strayed too close to Cherie’s mouth, however, as the pup barked sharply in response. She must’ve thought Tilura was trying to steal her food.

I chuckled a little. “That’s probably because you keep trying to pet her as she eats.”

“Ruff!” Leo nodded in firm agreement.

“Sorry, Cherie,” she muttered somberly.

“Rawf!” Cherie retorted, pointedly turning her back to the girl before continuing to stuff her face.

Tilura’s eyes began to water. “Cherie hates me now!”

“Don’t worry about it too much,” I assured her. “She just needs some time. I’m sure she’ll be her usual cheerful self in no time.”





Plenty of animals got food aggression if they weren't specifically trained out of it, and it seemed Fenrir were no different. I'd made the same mistake with young Leo and nearly got bitten for it. She'd gotten to the point where I could at least pat her head while she ate, and now that we could properly talk, I doubted we'd have any issues on that front at all. I couldn't blame Cherie for still struggling with it, given that she was a young wild animal—or rather, a monster.

"I guess I'll apologize later," Tilura said with a dejected sigh.

I nodded. "Sounds like a good plan."

She looked up at me. "So what're you going to do today? I think you said you were going into town..."

Tilura had been dozing off in Leo's fur when I announced my plans the night before, so I was surprised she remembered that at all. *I guess she pays more attention to our conversations than I thought.*

"That's right," I told her. "Leo and I are headed into Ractos today, though we won't be leaving until after I make all my herbs for the day."

"Okay. I've got to study until lunch, but I hope I can apologize to Cherie and play with her after that. I didn't get to do my evening practice yesterday, so I'll do that while you're gone, too!"

"Hahaha, good luck."

"Thanks!"

*She doesn't even need Claire to tell her to study anymore, and she's eager to train... I'm impressed. I hope she doesn't totally leave me in the dust, though.* I wouldn't have time for my afternoon training, so I resolved to make up for it later. Additionally, I noted that Cherie eagerly turned to Tilura as soon as she mentioned playing, so I figured the pair would make up without any trouble.

After breakfast was over, I quickly made the herbs Kales needed, then stopped by my room to collect everything I required for the trip into town.

"All right, Leo. Ready to go?"

My partner wagged at me eagerly. "Ruff!"

I checked to make sure I had everything, then made for the villa's entryway. I found Sebastian waiting for me in the front foyer.

"I trust you're prepared for your outing?" he asked me with a polite bow.

"Yeah, we're just about to leave."

"Ruff!" Leo confirmed, tail still wagging impatiently.

*Calm down, girl, we'll be going soon enough.*

"Milord requests your presence before you leave," Sebastian continued. "Miss Leo, in the interest of keeping panic in the city to a minimum, I request you compose yourself as best you can."

Leo nodded. "Woouoooo!"

"I don't think she'll be any problem with the kids," I told him. "The adults, however, are another story."

"Indeed. I should imagine most will simply watch from afar, but some may be far more reactionary in their responses. I have already informed the city guards of your visit, but I urge you to exercise caution nonetheless."

I shrugged. "If something does happen, I promise I'll hop right on Leo's back and run away."

"A wise decision. While I am of the opinion anyone foolish enough to attack Miss Leo deserves to be punished, we cannot risk her utilizing such violence in public."

"We'll be careful."

Leo nodded dutifully. "Ruff."

Leo could easily handle any monster I'd ever seen, and even a swordmaster like Eckenhart stood no chance. No random person off the street could possibly pose a threat to her—but on the flipside, if she retaliated, there was no telling how much damage she might cause to the surrounding city. Sebastian had every right to be worried on that front. I didn't think anyone would try to hurt her, but fleeing would undeniably be the better option. If she could outrun a horse, she could outrun any number of people on foot.

“Shall I assign a guard?” Sebastian asked. “I should imagine Miss Leo could take a second or third rider without difficulty.”

“No, that’s okay. We’re just looking around town, and I wouldn’t want to trouble anyone.”

“It would be no trouble at all, I assure you, but I shall respect your decision nonetheless.”

I doubted anything serious would happen in Ractos, and there was nothing a bodyguard or two could provide that Leo couldn’t.

“I’ll be back later, then,” I announced.

“Please take care, Mr. Hirooka.”

A smattering of assembled servants, who’d been waiting for me with Sebastian, all bowed. There weren’t as many as when Claire or Eckenhart left, but it still felt like too much. None of them seemed worried, so I assumed Eckenhart’s plan was still a secret. That was quite the relief.

“Safe travels, Mr. Hirooka!” they called in unison.

With that, I opened the door and we headed into the courtyard.

“Okay, Leo, let’s get going.”

“Wruff, wuff!” She hurried ahead of me, sitting politely facing the villa gate.

“Hahaha, you’re that excited, huh?”

“Awrooff!”

The garden was a little small for her to properly run in, and this trip to Ractos doubled as something of a walk for her. I hopped on her back and we were off, but a few minutes after passing through the front gates...

“Leo, stop!”

She obediently slowed to a halt. “Ruff!”

There was a figure by the side of the carriage road leading into the city, one I recognized as Eckenhart. He strolled out of the shade to meet us as if it were a mere coincidence.

“Why, Takumi! Fancy running into you here!”

I smiled thinly and let out a sigh. “Come on, we talked about this already. You even came all the way to my room just for this.”

“Gahaha! We’ve got to stay true to form, haven’t we? Remember, I ‘happened’ to run into you and accompany you into town.”

“You did?”

“Ruff?” Leo seemed every bit as confused as I was.

*I don’t get why he’s putting it like that, but it’s frankly not worth fighting him over.*

Eckenhart sat behind me on Leo, and not long after we were underway, I heard his voice in my ear. “I’m sorry for all this, Takumi.”

“It’s nothing, really. I was going into Ractos anyway. Er...nothing for me personally, I should say. I’m glad to have someone with me who knows their way around, though. I wasn’t really looking forward to wandering the streets aimlessly.”

“I suppose there’ll be some trouble if I’m found out,” he admitted. “But that’s not what I’m referring to.”

“It’s not?”

“I’m sorry you have to ride with a big, burly man like me,” he muttered. “You’d rather have Claire behind you now, wouldn’t you? Laila, maybe?”

“What?!” My voice hitched. “Wh-What are you talking about?!”

“Come now, you’d rather have a pretty woman clinging to you right now, wouldn’t you? Unless, er...you prefer men?”

*Uh... I’ll admit, it’s not all that arousing to have a guy pressed up against me like this. I’m not sure he should be offering his servant instead, though, much less his own daughter.*

I cleared my throat, choosing my words carefully. “I’m a man, so...I guess I’d prefer to have a woman?”

“See? There’s no fun to be had with two men clinging to each other! That’s

why I was apologizing.”

“You don’t... I mean, there’s nothing to be sorry about.”

*I guess Claire and Laila have more significant breasts than he does, at least. If they clung onto me like he’s doing now...* I hurriedly shook my head clear of my dirty thoughts. It felt wrong to be thinking about them so lewdly behind their backs—not that it’d be any better if they were right in front of me.

Eckenhart chuckled. “You imagined it, didn’t you?”

“It’s your fault for putting all these weird thoughts in my head.”

*Anyone would start fantasizing if he brought it up like that.*

“Gahaha! That’s what it is to be a man!” He trailed off, his words becoming a whisper. “Besides, I imagine Claire would be glad to.”

“Wait, she...what?”

*I must’ve misheard that.*

“Nothing, forget I said anything.” He paused for a moment. “Speaking of, I noticed Claire’s been wearing a new hairpin as of late. Was that from you?”

“Um...yeah, I gave that to her. I saw it in the general store on my first trip to Ractos, and I bought it as a present for her on a whim. I gave Tilura something, too.”

“Tilura? Ah, that necklace, was it? She’s rather obsessed with wolves, so I imagine that went over well.”

“It did. She seemed to like it a lot.”

It made sense for Eckenhart to be asking about it. Any father would at least be curious if his daughter suddenly had a new favorite accessory.

He was silent for a long moment. “If you try to make a move on *both* my daughters, I won’t stand idly by.”

I nearly choked on my own saliva. “Make a what?! O-Of course not! They were thank-you presents, really! Nothing more!”

“Really, now?”



*What is he even saying?! I've never even had a girlfriend before, and I wouldn't be able to date two girls at once if I wanted to! Even if I was more experienced, I'd never dream of it. Besides, Tilura's way too young, and Claire is beautiful, kind...and we seemed to click the other night, and if we hadn't been interrupt—gah, no!*

“What are you even saying? And about your own daughters, no less!” I huffed. “Aren't fathers supposed to be more protective of their daughters?”

“I suppose,” he shrugged, “but I've been prepared for them—Claire especially—to have a man or two for a while now. Remember all those suitors I found for them?”

“I guess... I remember thinking you were trying to force them into it.”

“It was Claire's idea in the first place,” Eckenhart reminded me. “At any rate, I've been prepared to see my daughters married for some time now.”

*I guess that makes sense...he's made it clear how much he loves them both. Maybe that explains why he's so comfortable talking about this kind of thing.*

“I'll accept any man Claire deems worthy of her love,” he declared. “I've taken a liking to you myself, so I'd gladly welcome you into the family.”

“I'm glad you're so fond of me, but again, it's Claire's decision.”

“That it is. She's made her decision very clear, in fact.”

I sighed and shook my head.

“Don't worry,” he continued, “I'm not factoring Miss Leo into it, nor am I thinking about using you to bolster House Liberte's wealth and legacy!”

“I get it, you don't have to spell out that you're not like Anrinnelesse. A-Anyhow, I'm not comfortable talking about this right now, so let's please find some other topic.”

*Why does he keep trying to push Claire on me? I'm glad that he's not opposed to whatever Claire wants, mainly because that'll make her life that much easier, but it's still a weird conversation to be having with him right now.*

Eckenhart harrumphed behind me. “I suppose Anrinnelesse is also an option, though if you're interested in her, you'd better move quick—”

“Leo! Full speed ahead, please!”

“Ruffa,” she seemed to sigh. “Gruff, bark!”

I didn’t even bother to let him finish his sentence, knowing the only way out of this hellish conversation was to hurry to Ractos. Leo didn’t seem thrilled by my request, but she obeyed nonetheless.

*Leo was also talking about how I should find a mate soon, wasn’t she? First Sebastian, now these two...why is everyone around me so interested in my love life?*

“W-Wait, Takumi!” the duke cried from behind me, tightening his grip on me. “We’re going too fast! I’m going to fall!”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine... A little slower, please, Leo.”

“Ruff!” Leo obediently slowed her pace just a little.

Eckenhart gasped for breath behind me. “How can you stand it when she goes that fast?”

“I thought you were used to her,” I jabbed back.

“I am, mostly, but I’ve never gone that fast before... She’s far faster than any horse I’ve ever ridden.”

“She is?”

“Wurf?”

I’d never ridden a horse before, but I thought they were decently fast. Then again, I was used to Leo’s speed since I rode her to Lange.

We rode for a short while longer in silence before coming up outside the gates of Ractos.

“Okay, Leo, you can stop here!”

“Wruff!”

Eckenhart let out a sigh of relief as he dismounted, his legs somewhat shaky beneath him. “I knew she was fast, but I didn’t expect that... She’s even faster than the last time, faster than any warhorse I’ve ever ridden.”

Despite that, Leo ran a lot more smoothly than Phillip and the other guards seemed to on their horses. I assumed he just wasn't used to it.

I patted her reassuringly on her flank. "Thanks for the ride, Leo. We'll be counting on you for the ride home, too."

"Wooo, wooo!"

"I-I'd appreciate it if you slow down a little when the time comes," Eckenhart added.

Leo cocked her head to the side in confusion. "Ruff?"

*Looks like we'll be riding just as fast on the way back.*

"Y-Your Grace!"

A handful of guards ran towards us, having evidently noticed our arrival.

One of them turned to another. "Get the captain!"

"No need for that," Eckenhart told them. "I'm here for leisure, not any sort of business. Carry on as usual. While I'm here, though..." He briefly explained what we were doing there and let them know we'd be relying on them should something go awry.

As we passed through the gate, I bowed briefly to them. "Thank you for understanding."

"Ruff," Leo echoed with a nod.

The guards watched as we left, none of them moving to alert the others or stop us. I imagined Leo was the main reason, especially since I recognized a few of them, though I didn't know whether it was out of trust or fear.

As soon as we entered the city proper, however, Leo stopped. "Ruff?" She confusedly sniffed at the air. "Bruff?"

"What's up, Leo?"

"Is something wrong, Miss Leo?"

"Bow-worf, wruff, ruff."

"She says there's something in the air she doesn't recognize. It's not more of

the sickness, is it, girl?”

“Ruff! Bwuff-uff.”

“Okay... She says it’s nothing dangerous, at least.”

Eckenhart stroked his beard. “Hrm...”

“Worf...” She raised her snout again, nostrils flaring inquisitively, but shook her head in frustration. “Bruff.”

“Huh...she says the smell’s already gone, whatever it was,” I explained.

“Is it, now?”

“Woo, roo, growuff.”

Apparently she’d only caught the smell for a moment. With all the people moving through the city, not to mention all the food for sale on the main street, it was a miracle she’d picked up on the mystery smell at all. There was only so much even her sense of smell could accomplish.

“I’ll admit I’m curious what caught her attention,” Eckenhart said, “but there’s not much we can do about it now. Where should we head first, Takumi?”

*I guess it’s not a priority if it doesn’t pose a threat to anyone...*

“I’d like to head to Kales’s store first,” I told him. “I need to drop off some herbs there.”

“Of course. That’ll be our first stop, then.”

I had to drop them off before Nick left for the mansion, and it made no sense to carry the herbs around longer than we had to.

Just as we arrived outside the store, Nick came out and spotted us.

“Oh, hey boss! Wait, is that the duke with you?!”

“Hello, Nick.”

Eckenhart squinted at him. “Hm? I think I recognize you.”

“You *and* His Grace?” Nick quivered, frozen where he stood. “Wh-What are you both doing here?”

Apparently, he and the duke recognized each other from the last time we

were in Ractos. I was relieved he was making such an effort to avoid being rude. He'd met Claire several times, after all, and said something off nearly every time.

"I wanted to take a walk around the city," I replied. "Eckenhart here decided to come along."

"Gahaha! No need to act so nervous!" the duke chuckled. "What brings you out of the store, then?"

"Not much. I was just heading out to pick up the herbs."

"Excellent." I held out the bag of herbs I'd brought. "This is today's portion."

He beamed at me as he took them. "Mission accomplished!"

*I'm glad we ran into him like this... I'd hate it if we arrived after he'd already left.*

Eckenhart peered around him. "Is Kales around?"

"Yep— Er, I-I mean, yes! One moment, please!" He hurried back inside the shop and emerged a moment later with Kales, who looked every bit as flustered.

"Ah, Y-Your Grace!" The merchant bowed deeply. "My sincerest apologies for making you wait in such a humble place!"

"I don't mind," Eckenhart assured him.

"Nonetheless, I solemnly swear I shall give Nick a stern talking-to for treating you like a common peasant."

*Is it really that big a deal Eckenhart stood outside for a moment? He doesn't seem to care, but maybe I should've said something... Not that I can blame him—I can't imagine Nick has much experience with the nobility.*

"Now," Kales rubbed his hands together, "may I ask what brings Your Grace to my humble establishment? Inside, of course, I wouldn't dream of discussing such matters in public."

"Nothing major, really," Eckenhart replied. "I came to show Takumi around the city, nothing more. We'll be leaving right away, so no need to invite us in."

“Ah, of course, I see. Er—without a guard?”

Eckenhart shrugged. “Sebastian doesn’t even know I’m here, frankly. On that note, don’t tell anyone at the villa I’m here. Miss Leo is more than enough protection.”

“Yes, of course. Whatever strikes Your Grace’s fancy.”

“Very good.”

*Am I the only one who thinks Sebastian will figure it out right away, no matter how secretive we are?*

“Ah, one more thing.” Kales turned to me. “If I may, Mr. Hirooka, I have a request to make concerning Miss Leo.”

“Yes? What about her?”

Leo tilted her head curiously. “Ruff?”

“I don’t suppose you recall how she played with the children in front of the store, do you?”

I nodded. “I remember. It was the first day we sold capwort, right?”

“Yes, yes, that day. Ever since, I’ve had children come by to ask if Miss Leo might come by to play with them again.”

“Oh, I get it.” I turned to my canine friend. “What do you think, Leo?”

She began to wag eagerly. “Wooooooo!”

*That’s a clear yes.*

“We’ll come by again sometime to play if you can get the kids back here,” I told Kales. “She loves kids.”

“My sincerest thanks, Mr. Hirooka! I shall be sure to inform them of your most magnanimous decision. Kindly let me know when you plan to arrive, and I shall make sure to prepare.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Wruff!”

Nobody could guarantee the kids would find us on their own, after all. Letting

Kales know ahead of time would give him time to get the word out. Similarly, Leo would have a lot more fun if there were more children to play with. She was a little flustered last time when they just swarmed her, but she had a lot more fun after we'd taught them how to play with her properly. I didn't see that, of course, since I was fighting Nick at the time.

"Shall we go, then?" Eckenhart asked me.

"Lead the way."

Kales's eyes lit up. "Ah, one moment please! If you'll be walking about town, I encourage you to take this with you." He reached into his pockets and gave Eckenhart what looked like a bundle of handkerchiefs. "I should imagine you'll be recognized if you walked about town as you are. Covering your face will ensure you elicit no unwanted attention."

"Ah, excellent idea. Thank you."

Eckenhart tied the kerchief about his face, covering the lower half of his face. I could understand the concern, and I agreed that some kind of disguise was a good idea, but the result was somewhat unnerving. He had always been a large, rugged-looking man, and he was never in the habit of wearing fine clothes. With half his face concealed and only the sharp glint in his eyes visible, he looked more like a highwayman than a townsman.

*The guards aren't going to give him trouble now, are they? Hopefully they'll recognize him since he already talked to them...hopefully.*

"Let's go, then, Takumi." With that, the duke happily strode off down the street.

I let out a nervous sigh. "Okay, um... Thank you for your help, Kales. I'll see you again later."

"Ruff," Leo agreed.

"Please do take care," Kales told me with a polite bow.

I returned his farewell with a nod before Leo and I followed after Eckenhart.



**AFTER** parting ways with Kales, the three of us strolled down a wide street

together. About half of the people we passed gawked at Leo and hurried out of the way, but the rest were surprisingly calm about it. Some were still looking at her, but more out of curiosity than fear. My guess was that they'd met her on one of our earlier trips to Ractos. I was glad to see people were already growing accustomed to her.

Partway down the road, I spotted a stall by the roadside that seemed to be selling grilled meat, and I was curious, though not to the same extent Leo was. They had a charcoal grill set up and claimed to use a secret sauce for their beef-like cuts. Turns out, it tasted as good as it looked.

Eckenhart blew on a mouthful of meat to cool it before slipping it beneath his bandana and gulping it down. "Mgh, delicious! Street food isn't bad!"

"It's really good," I agreed. I cooled a bit of meat before passing it to Leo. "Here you go, girl."

"Growrf!"

I was careful to make sure all the meat Leo got was cooled and that the wooden skewers were removed, but I probably didn't have to worry. She was large and agile enough that she could handle it on her own if she had to.

"As nice as having a personal team of cooks is, there's something special about this," the duke remarked after we finished and as we walked past more street food.

"It sounds like you've had it before."

"I have, though not for ages. I was Claire's age...no, younger at the time."

"That's quite some time ago."

My best guess was that he'd slipped out and into town before as a kid. His bodyguards never would've been so lax with him if he was duke. Perhaps he wasn't even watched very closely at that age, and it was easy to slip away from the mansion.

"By the way, Takumi, what do you think of Anrinnelesse?"

I sighed, frustrated he was returning to that topic instead of telling me more about his youth. "Are you going to start talking about my love life again?"



“What? No, of course not!” He stopped at a stall that seemed to catch his eye. “Three portions, please.”

“Coming right up!”

As he accepted the food from the vendor and gave the man a few coins in exchange, he turned back to me. “This looks delicious... I’m simply curious about your thoughts on how she thinks and acts.”

I took two portions from him. “Chicken, huh? Er, right, Anrinnelesse. Is my personal opinion okay?”

“Definitely.” He put a piece of piping-hot meat in his mouth, eyes widening. “Mmm, delicious!”

The vendor nodded and grinned. “Glad you like it!”

*Anrinnelesse, huh... I can't say I know her well, but I learned a few noteworthy things from our talk in her room.*

“I think she’s a little too used to her title and tends to spend too much time thinking about things on her own.” I took a bite. “Mm, you’re right. This *is* good.” I blew on Leo’s chicken until it was cool before holding it out to her. “Here you go.”

“Wruff!”

The grilled chicken had only a simple salt seasoning, but it was still remarkably good. I could tell just from the way Leo wagged while she waited that she agreed.

“Alone, eh?” Eckenhart mused. “I wouldn’t call that something all nobles do, though.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. All I meant is that she really sees herself as superior to almost everyone else. I think that’s why she was so comfortable proposing to me out of the blue.”

“Ah, makes sense. Some noble families still marry off their daughters for political means, or so that a man can inherit the title—not that women can’t, just that it depends on the current head’s own beliefs. That means that if another party has something that can benefit their house, some nobles will

gladly marry to gain access to it—regardless of who the other party may be.”

“I can’t imagine it’d be all that common if women can inherit titles, but I can understand that approach, I think.” The same thing happened in Japan all throughout its history, even if it had become less common in the modern age. “I got the impression she bought into that kind of thing so strongly and was so used to being on her own that she was used to jumping to conclusions. It was like she didn’t even care about what others thought, or that other people had any depth to them.”

Eckenhart stroked his beard thoughtfully. “I can see that, yes. Her father Rupricht is surely to blame for that.”

“Her father?”

He nodded. “Several decades ago, the former Count Bastler failed quite badly in his business endeavors. That’s common enough, of course, and he made enough on taxes to scrape by if he didn’t overspend. Few nobles are born with business sense, you know. It takes skill to know what to sell and how. He, like so many before him, decided to mark up his goods far too much.”

“Oh... No wonder his business failed.”

It wasn’t easy to explain in brief, but the price of goods always depends on supply and demand. Demand is necessary for anything to sell at all, and if you want to increase it, the easiest way is to decrease the supply. If you ignore that balance, especially by overcharging for goods that aren’t in demand, you won’t sell much. Trying to force it leads to high-pressure salesmanship. The only way to make a decent profit is to price things well, even if it means making less of a profit per sale. There’s nothing quite as unforgiving as the free market.

Eckenhart continued, “He panicked at his first failure and dove into a new venture, which only birthed further failures.”

“A vicious cycle, huh?”

“Exactly. Soon House Bastler had drained its coffers to the point where their taxes couldn’t account for their losses. Making a profit by any means became their biggest objective, and their actions defied the will of their people. The count thought nothing of the commonfolk as he wrought suffering and broke

every law he wished.”

“So he became a criminal to pay off his debts?”

“Gahaha! You’re not wrong there! Rupricht inherited his father’s debts, and he all but ignored his own daughter in favor of dirty business practices aimed at regaining his family’s wealth. The poor fool didn’t even realize he was trapped in the same miserable cycle as his father.”

“Okay...so that’s how Anrinnelesse got used to spending most of her time alone.”

“It seems so. Granted, this is all hearsay of another lord’s land. House Liberte was a close friend and ally of House Bastler once, but we only spoke once a year, if that, this past decade. Claire may well have been Anrinnelesse’s only proper friend in all that time.”

“The count didn’t meet with any other nobles?” I asked.

“I’m sure Rupricht did, he just didn’t take Anrinnelesse with him. Too focused on business and improving his reputation, no doubt. At the risk of sounding crass, he may have had better luck if he’d used her more in his schemes.”

The implication seemed to be he might have been able to marry his daughter off and make money that way. If she had a child, the father’s family might be obligated to support them financially.

“The thought crossed Rupricht’s mind, to be sure,” Eckenhart added with a sigh. “He’d mentioned in passing how Anrinnelesse was going to regain him his rightful wealth. Only the man himself could tell you why he never did.”

“Is that why she asked me to marry her as soon as she saw Leo?” I asked.

“Just so. While House Liberte is exceptionally so, the entire country reveres silver fenrir as gods. Just having Miss Leo around would ensure House Bastler’s return to wealth.”

“Oh... I didn’t think of that.”

“Wruff?” Leo shot us curious looks at the mention of her name, and I gave her a firm scratching behind the ears.

*I guess that explains her sudden proposal in the carriage... I can sympathize*

*with her a little more if it was all for her family. There's still no way I'd use Leo to become nobility, though.*

“That’s why she hardly ever left the comfort of her mansion,” Eckenhart added. “She was always meant to be a pawn, a tool for political gain—though there are other reasons why she never tried to leave of her own accord. As you said, she grew too used to thinking alone.”

“I guess she’d only have her servants in that case... This is just a guess, but it seems most nobles don’t take their servants’ thoughts or needs into account. She must’ve seen them as just tools, or maybe extensions of herself, and stopped thinking about other people altogether.”

It was easy to assume all nobles were kind souls like Claire, Tilura, and Eckenhart, but that wasn’t realistic. Most of them probably assumed they were blessed with their rank and power out of some natural superiority. I was all too familiar with that line of thinking even in Japan, especially amongst the managers and executives at my old workplace.

“I’ll never sympathize with Rupricht or forgive him for his crimes against his people,” Eckenhart told me. “He had any number of options available, and he made his choice. I’m sure he would’ve realized the villainy of his actions if he’d ever stopped to consider it.”

“Yeah... I’d like to think so, too.”

Count Bastler had made his own citizens suffer long before he moved on to Eckenhart’s land. I had no way of knowing how long he’d been at it, but there had to be any number of opportunities for him to realize the path he was on could only end in his destruction.

The duke sighed. “Poor Anrinnelesse is different, though. She had the resolve to turn against her father’s wrongdoing, even if she made her own mistakes in not stopping to think of others.”

I nodded. “I think a good part of it is just how she was raised.”

“I believe so, too. Rupricht should have taught her the right way far sooner. Now, I have the royal family’s permission to teach her myself.”

“Wait...what?”

“Is something wrong?”

*Did he just insinuate he'd asked the royals for permission?*

“You told me before that they appointed you her instructor,” I reminded him.

“Yes, well...that wasn't the entire truth. I was told that if she failed to become a proper countess, she and her entire domain would become a thing of the past. She'd be stripped of her title, that is—no harm would come to her personally after her aid in taking down her father.”

*She only has another chance at all because Eckenhart stepped in, then...*

He continued to mutter under his breath how much of a pain it'd be to appoint and wait for a new noble family to take the reins of the former count's territory, but I chose to believe that kindness was his main motivator.

“You believe that she's a victim of her circumstances, then?” I asked. “You think she could become a good ruler if she learned to rely on and think of others?”

“Exactly,” Eckenhart nodded. “I'll need to think of a reason for her to leave the mansion and talk to regular people more, like I do.”

*I don't think you're the best role model, given you snuck out without even telling anyone to be here... It's dangerous enough for you, let alone someone with no combat training like her.*

Given that I was an accomplice to his crime, however, I held my tongue.

“What happens next is up to her, of course,” he continued. “Ah, and don't mention this to Claire or Sebastian. I'd rather not have to go through that.”

I chuckled. “Claire would get angry at you again, wouldn't she?”

“That she would.”

Leo shook her head. “Worfff...”

The way I saw it, Claire and Anrinnelesse were good friends despite often being at odds with one another. Claire would be furious if she learned Eckenhart had invited her to stay with them, though, especially with all the trouble that had happened already.

*Claire lashes out at Anrinnelesse a little too much sometimes, though... I wonder if there's something they're feuding over that I somehow missed.* Their antics were admittedly a little funny at times, but I wished they valued each other's company more. Neither of them seemed to have any other female friends their age, after all.

"Enough chat," Eckenhart finally said. "It's time we focused on filling our bellies. Look, they're grilling more meat right over there!"

I smiled a little. "Yes...yes they are."

Leo began wagging fervently. "Rooooo!"

We left the much heavier topic of Anrinnelesse behind us as we made for the next stall. No amount of talking now could resolve her issues, as good as it was to consider how I should interact with her going forward. For now, I wanted to focus on seeing and tasting all Ractos had to offer. Leo was of the same mind as she eagerly stared down the next meat-seller on the street.

*Speaking of the same mind, she and Eckenhart are both going after the meat with the exact same intensity... I guess there aren't many vegetable stalls around, but this can't be a coincidence.*

"Mm, delicious!" Eckenhart exclaimed. "I forgot how much food there is here, and how great it all tastes! Go on, Takumi, take a bite!" His hands were soon full of all kinds of grilled meats from several different stalls, and he ate them with gusto since Claire wasn't around to scold him.

"Yes, I know," I told him before taking a bite. "You're right, this is good. Here's your share, Leo."

"Wruff! Ruff, borf, worfa!!"

I wasn't outright upset at their choices since it all tasted great, but I was getting a little tired of the endless onslaught of protein. Leo and Eckenhart showed no signs of slowing down.

"Can we get something more refreshing as a palate cleanser?" I finally asked. "There's plenty of food here that isn't meat."

"Hmm... I suppose that's fair. I'm prepared to have nothing but meat this

whole trip, myself.”

“Wooo, haa, wooo!” Leo panted in agreement.

We broke off from the meat stalls we were buying from in search of something else. I wasn’t surprised they were both content with our meal so far, but my mouth was already coated in charcoal-flavored grease.

“Wait...what’s that over there?” I asked.

A stall with a slightly different look to it caught my eye. They were pushing meats as their main dish, both presentation-wise and in terms of smell, but their grill hosted all kinds of other ingredients.

Eckenhart peered at it curiously. “That one does indeed look different. Want to go see?”

“Please, let’s.”

When we approached the stall in question, a familiar scent hit my nostrils.

“Hey there!” the man behind the griddle greeted us.

Eckenhart frowned at the hot metal. “Is that pasta? It’s all black, but I’ll admit it smells good...”

“Yakisoba?” I muttered in disbelief. “Why here, of all places?”

I knew I recognized the smell from festivals and seaside grills alike. *That’s Japanese food, though. Why—or rather, how is it in this world? I guess they’d have the ingredients for it here...*

“Pardon me,” Eckenhart said to the chef. “What is that you’re grilling there?”

“This? I call it *yackysoba*. It’s noodles and a special sauce, cooked piping hot with fresh veg! There’s not much meat to it, so I can’t recommend it if that’s what you’re after, but I promise it’s delicious!”

Eckenhart’s brow furrowed. “Yackysoba? Can’t say I’ve heard of it.”

*Of course he hasn’t, but no Japanese person isn’t familiar with that!*

“Wuff-ruff?” Leo wagged at me, glancing expectantly at the grill as she drooled. She seemed to remember it as well.

“We’ll take three,” I told the cook.

“Thank you kindly! Coming right up!”

Eckenhart gave me a dubious look. “You’re going to eat *that*? Are you sure? It doesn’t look that appetizing.”

The pasta was nearly pitch-black with sauce, granted, and I couldn’t directly account for that. Perhaps the sauce they used in this world was a lot darker than what was typically used in Japan, or maybe he was using extra sauce. Whatever the case, I knew I had to try it.

“Of course. It’s delicious,” I assured him.

“Is it? Have you ever had it before?”

“Yes, actually. I ate it plenty where I came from.”

“Really? Interesting.”

“Ruff-ruff!” Leo agreed with me eagerly.

As soon as I mentioned it was from my old world, he seemed a lot more interested in the noodles. Leo was also oddly excited despite never having had them before, though I’d eaten them around her plenty.

*Please stop barking, though. You’re going to give the poor man behind the griddle a heart attack.*

“Thanks for waiting!” the cook declared as he handed me three small paper bowls.

I handed the man the money as I took the food and passed it on. “Thank you very much. Eckenhart, Leo, here’s yours. It’s hot, so eat slowly.”

The duke accepted his with a hint of caution. “I can try it, I suppose.”

“Wroff!”

I felt a little guilty putting Leo’s on the ground, but I couldn’t hold it and eat my own portion at the same time. I picked up the fork in the bowl and scooped up a bit of the yackysoba. I would’ve preferred to eat it with chopsticks, but I wasn’t about to get picky now. I doubted Eckenhart would’ve been able to use them, after all.



“Let’s see...” I loudly slurped down a forkful of noodles, eyes widening as I did so. “Mmm, this is amazing!”

Eckenhart furrowed his brow. “I’m no Claire, but it’s rude to eat so noisily.”

“Ahaha...yeah, I guess so.”

I knew it was only considered polite to slurp down noodles like that if they were in soup—and that it was only considered that in Japan—but I couldn’t help myself. It was pasta instead of the buckwheat soba noodles I was used to, and the sauce had a slightly foreign flavor to it, but I was just glad to run into something I could call Japanese food.

“I suppose I can’t lecture you for eating with gusto. Claire’s not here, so I’ll follow suit!” The duke eagerly mimicked me in gulping down his own noodles, and I saw his eyes go wide as saucers.

“Isn’t it good?” I prodded him.

“It’s delicious!”

“Worf, ruff!” Leo agreed, scarfing down her own bowl as soon as it was cool enough for her.

*I’ll admit, I never thought I’d see a wolf eating noodles, though that’s far from the weirdest thing she’s done.*

I felt a little sad there was no dried seaweed topper. I was pretty sure it counted as a plant as far as Herb Cultivation was concerned, but I doubted I could grow it on my own. Kelp didn’t grow the same way terrestrial plants did, after all.

Nonetheless, as the three of us moved to a more secluded place to finish our food, I silently resolved to come back to enjoy their yackysoba again.

“Ahh, that yackysoba stuff was delicious!” Eckenhart declared. “Was it black because it was full of flavor? Regardless, the vegetables and meat alike gave it exceptional balance.”

“You can easily change the proportions, too,” I told him. “It’s easy to add less vegetables, for instance, or more meat.”

“Hmm... I should really ask Helena to try her hand at it. We’ll have to make

sure to watch our manners more around Claire, though.”

“Yeah, making a lot of noise seems to be rude here,” I noted. “And hold on, Leo, your face is messy.”

“Mruff!”

Eckenhart sat and chatted for a while after the yakisoba was done as I cleaned Leo’s face with a handkerchief. I was glad Eckenhart liked the food. I wasn’t having much luck cleaning Leo even after soaking the handkerchief in water. She’d have to take a proper bath when we got home.

“I don’t think even Helena could recreate the sauce, though,” I said.

“Really? Why not?”

“The sauce is the lifeblood of the dish, and it’s what gives everything its flavor. It’s not that easy to recreate.”





“You don’t suppose we could ask for the recipe?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think he’d share his secrets that easily.”

“I suppose not... I could force him to tell me, but I’d rather not abuse my power like that,” he said.

“Good.” As Claire had said, House Liberte didn’t like to throw its power around.

“It seems we can’t underestimate these city folk,” Eckenhart declared grimly. “Let’s search for our next morsel, shall we?”

“Sounds good to me. There’s no telling what we’ll find next.”

“Ruff!” Leo barked in agreement.

There was no telling if we’d find more Japanese-like food hidden in Ractos’s streets. I could tell we’d already lost sight of our original objective in town, but I wasn’t complaining. Leo and I were both enjoying ourselves, and this seemed as valid a way to explore the city as any other. More importantly, though, I doubted I could redirect Eckenhart if I wanted to at this point.

The three of us continued to stroll the street on the hunt for food until all of us were full. At that point we decided to take a break in a quieter café on a side street. It had an open patio, so even Leo could comfortably sit with us. The owners turned out to be the parents of one of the kids Leo had played with outside Kales’s store, and they were more than happy to serve us. They didn’t think my fluffy friend was a threat for a second.

Eckenhart stretched and sighed. “We’ve walked a fair deal already.”

“Yeah, we have.”

“This trip has made me realize just how big and full of life Ractos is. I’ve rarely been able to relax like this, so this has all been new to me.”

I nodded. “There’s so many different stalls, and I bet the sheer number of travelers they get here only helps that.”

“Gwaf, glawff!”

“Calm down, Leo!” I chided her. “Your drink isn’t going anywhere.”

“Glawf, gaww!”

I didn’t know if she didn’t hear me or if she was ignoring me, but she kept on noisily drinking the barrel of milk they’d served her. Shaking my head, I took a sip of the tea I’d been offered and relaxed.

Eckenhart was still wearing his bandana, and amazingly just covering the lower half of his face was enough to prevent anyone from recognizing him. I assumed it was working just because his distinctive beard was covered. I was just glad we hadn’t had any trouble yet from anyone thinking he was a burglar, either.

“The yackysoba was definitely a highlight,” Eckenhart remarked, “but we had more than our share of excellent food.”

“We really did,” I agreed.

I thought back to our little culinary tour as I sipped my tea. One place had sold fried dumplings, while another did grilled salted salmon. Eckenhart had remarked how badly he wanted a drink while he snacked on the salmon skin. I even found a seafood-like soup with udon-like pasta in it, and fried chicken in a very Japanese style. None of it was as good as what I’d had back in Japan, but since I never thought I’d have any version of those flavors again, I wasn’t complaining.

*All I need now is someplace that does rice...* It was such an essential part of my meals before that it felt only natural to seek it out here. I intended to make that my primary focus on my next trip into town. There was no way I could grow rice with Herb Cultivation, after all.

“Thank you for today, Takumi,” Eckenhart suddenly said. “I’ve never enjoyed touring a town this much.”

“My pleasure. I’ve had my fill of fun, too, even if we’ve spent the whole trip so far eating.”

“I suppose we have, haven’t we?”

We’d done nothing but walk and eat since leaving Kales’s store. We were lucky that our walk aligned with our goal, since Leo had been on busy streets all day long. I wanted to explore a little more, though I was content to leave that

for another trip.

“One more thing, Takumi.” The hint of seriousness in his voice snapped me out of my reminiscence, and I turned to give the duke my full attention.

“Yes?”

“I plan on going to Lange one day,” he told me. “The business with the greital wine and Artemisia Rose is part of it, but I also want to applaud them myself for surviving that horrible orc attack.”

“Sounds good. I think that’d be a great idea, especially if they start winemaking again.”

“Exactly. I feel I should discuss Artemisia Rose with the man in charge personally.”

I gave him a strained smile. “I agree, but try not to give them too much work.”

“Hm? Why not? Being busy is a good thing, isn’t it?”

“Well...” I tried to explain what Hannes had told me before I left town. Essentially, having to divide their time and energy between both barrels and wine left them too busy to properly raise their own children.

“I suppose you’re right,” Eckenhart mused. “Children are this country’s greatest treasure, and our future. It’d do no good to have them neglected. Very well, I’ll ensure that their workloads are limited so they have proper time for family.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

I was concerned about Lange’s youth first and foremost, but part of my request had to do with my own past. As important as it was to save for the future, overworking to the point where you couldn’t do anything else was deeply unhealthy. I didn’t want anyone to faint from exhaustion like I did. Overwork had left my brain numb and my will shattered, and the laborers of Lange deserved none of that—not that I thought Eckenhart or Hannes would let it get to that point, of course.

“Anyhow,” Eckenhart continued, “I would like you to come with me when the time comes.”

“Me? Why?”

Even though I had a role to play in making Artemisia Rose, I didn’t see any need to be there personally. I figured there would be someone to deliver the capwort to Lange in my stead when the time came, like how Nick took my herbs to Kales’s.

“I guess I know the villagers personally,” I continued. “It might make it easier to strike a deal if you’re with someone they trust.”

“I suppose that’s part of it, yes.”

“Wait, you had something else in mind?”

“I want you to focus on growing your herbs in Lange.”

“My herbs?”

He nodded. “Your Gift has limits, yes? Claire told me you’ve fainted in the past.”

“I... Just once, yes. We’ve only theorized that was the cause, but it seems likely.”

“That’s why I want you to start a proper herb garden there. You’ll have to use your power less, they can provide herbs across my lands, and they can produce Artemisia Rose while they’re at it.”

“I guess that makes sense... A big enough herb garden would make my job a lot easier.”

There was a limit to what I could grow and how much. I had only avoided fainting since saving Cherie because I was aggressively limiting how much I grew. If Sebastian was right and there was a limit to how much I could use my Gift before fainting, if there was ever a real chance of my fainting again, I’d cause Claire and the others no end of trouble.

“It would, wouldn’t it?” Eckenhart leaned in closer. “Granted, growing plants the natural way takes time, but that would allow us to mass produce them. The only question is, do herbs you cultivate behave like normal plants once they’re grown?”

“That’s a good question. Do you know of any current herb farms?”



“There aren’t any. Maybe they do it somewhere, but nowhere in this kingdom, I can assure you. The only herbs on the market are those found and picked in the wild. That’s why so many herb sellers have unreliable stock.”

“I see. Why don’t we try growing them at the villa first as a trial run?” I suggested.

“I’d considered that. With Claire and her servants there, it’d be trivial to keep it maintained. The only issue is space.”

“Right... Leo uses the whole back garden for playing.”

A small herb garden may be possible, but we couldn’t test the kind of large-scale affair Eckenhart wanted that way. Asking Leo to run around less wasn’t fair to her, either, and I doubted that anyone would willingly limit a silver fenrir like that, given how important they were to House Liberte.

“Not only is Miss Leo’s comfort a concern,” Eckenhart continued, “but we also can’t increase the garden’s size should it prove successful. Growing it outside the villa’s grounds comes with its own issues.”

“I can see how,” I agreed. “Having it anywhere near the villa would be very limiting space-wise.”

“Exactly, though none of that would be possible unless we tested the herb-growing itself. Another reason to pick Lange is that you surely know people you can trust to tend the garden.”

“People I can trust?”

He nodded. “A small hobbyist’s garden is one thing, but you can’t tend to an entire plantation on your own. You can’t hire staff at the villa, either. Lange is perfect in that anyone you hire can live there.”

“I guess you’re right.”

*Hire people to grow herbs, huh? I think I talked with Laila about that kind of thing a while ago...* There was plenty of groundwork to be done before then, of course, so I wouldn’t have to worry about that for a while yet.

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves,” Eckenhart said with a sigh. “We don’t know when we’ll be able to begin, so it’d be wise to focus on a test garden at

the villa first.”

“I guess you’re right... After we get back, I’ll see if I can find some free time to test if herbs I make can take root and grow normally, and if I can grow more from their seeds.”

“Please do. I’ll talk to Sebastian right away and get the legalities in motion.”

I smirked a little. “‘Right away?’ I think you mean after you get chewed out for sneaking off.”

He swallowed hard. “It’s going to be bad, isn’t it?”

“Definitely.”

*Knowing Sebastian, he would’ve found out Eckenhart’s gone ages ago.*

“I left a letter explaining where I am,” he protested.

“That might make them less worried and not send out search parties, maybe.”

He sighed heavily. “They’ll be furious I left without telling anyone, much less without a guard.”

“Absolutely. I bet Claire will have a few words for you, too.”

“Er... I-I can deal with her. All I need to do is mention her getting drunk and she won’t say another word.”

*I’m not sure it’ll be that easy... Sure, Claire doesn’t want to think about getting drunk, but that would only work if Sebastian doesn’t have her back. I should probably get ready for a scolding myself, honestly. It wasn’t my idea, but Leo and I were both willing accomplices.*

A thought occurred to me. “By the way, Claire can hold her liquor well, can’t she? It didn’t look like she had a hangover at all, despite how much she drank.”

Eckenhart nodded proudly. “She takes after me in that regard. She may be a difficult drunk, but she’ll always be fine come morning...physically, that is.”

“She doesn’t get hungover? No vomiting in the morning or anything?”

“I’ve never seen her do that, no. She always remembers when she’s drunk as well, but she sleeps so hard afterwards, she’ll be out until noon at the earliest. The real issue, though, is when she wakes up.”

“Let me guess. She regrets everything she did while drunk?”

“Exactly. Claire herself swears not to drink so much ever again, but that Artemisia Rose broke down all reservations she had. It’s beautiful, goes down like a dream—it’s no wonder she had too much the first time. It could also be because she hasn’t had a single drop of booze since moving to the villa.”

*Honestly, I don’t know what’s worse—a hangover or that much guilt. One’s rough on the body, the other on the mind. If she doesn’t drink too much, of course, she can avoid both.*

I was the type to get hangovers after even a little alcohol, so I could sympathize with Anrinnelesse on a very personal level. I never noticed my behavior changing while I was drunk, either, though that mattered even less now that I was seemingly immune to being drunk and hangovers both. That might be a demerit for some if they were looking for that high, but I never was.

My brow furrowed. “That might be an issue, then. The herbal wine will be done tomorrow, and we were going to try it together.” Milicia had informed me of that before I left, and I was torn between wanting Claire to try it and not wanting her to regret her decision.

“Ah, yes, the new drink. There’s no telling just how deeply she regrets her drunkenness, though I would imagine you seeing her in that state left a considerable mark.”

“Me?” I blinked in confusion. “Not you, or Anrinnelesse?”

“I don’t know how she feels about Anrinnelesse’s suffering, but I’ve seen her in that state several times now. Claire prides herself on being a proper lady, however, and you’re the first man who’s neither blood nor servant to see her like that.”

“I see... I won’t blame her if she opts to go with greital juice like Tilura, then.”

He nodded. “Perhaps that’s for the best.”

*A proper lady, huh... I don’t know what that means by my old world’s standards, let alone this one’s, but I can understand being embarrassed. I’ll admit I’m a little sad that means she won’t get to try the fruits of my labor, but the last thing I want is to force her, even if she tentatively agreed to the other*

day.

“Enough chat, though,” Eckenhart declared with a stretch. “Where to next?”

“Good question. We can’t go inside any stores with Leo, and we don’t have anyone with us to stay outside and keep an eye on her.” There weren’t any stores the size of the mansion, after all, and I didn’t want to risk squeezing her into anywhere smaller.

“We won’t go inside anywhere, then. Let’s simply walk the streets a while longer,” he suggested.

“Sounds good to me. How about you, Leo?”

“Ruff!”

With that, we left the café to wander the streets a while longer.

*This seems like a good chance to grasp the lay of the land...*

“Halt!”

“Hm?”

The second we stepped into a smaller street, we heard a man’s booming voice from somewhere ahead. Whoever it was, they clearly weren’t talking to us.

Eckenhart pointed ahead of us. “It came from over there, Takumi.”

I looked ahead to see a small shadow slipping into a gap between two buildings, and a moment later, a large man chased after it. He was the voice’s owner, no doubt.

“Seems like trouble,” Eckenhart observed.

“It sure does... Wait, Leo?” As the duke and I exchanged glances, Leo began sniffing the air vehemently, nose pointed down the alley after the pair.

“Wruff! Wrowff!”

“Huh? It’s the weird smell from before?”

“Bruwuff! Gawff!”

There was no mistaking it. Whatever she’d picked up on when we first

entered the city, it had gone down the alleyway. It seemed likely one of them was the owner of the odd smell.

“Ruff? Gruff-wuff.”

“You want to follow them?” I glanced at Eckenhart. “What do you think?”

“Hmm... It doesn’t seem to be anything serious, so I’m not sure it’s wise to go sticking our nose in it. If Miss Leo’s curious, however, it bears investigation.”

“Leo seems really interested...so am I, actually.”

“I suppose it couldn’t hurt to track down the smell.”

I nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

“Awroof!”

If there wasn’t a big fuss being made, that meant it would be even less risky for us to investigate. We let her lead the way until we eventually ran into the man we saw earlier, sitting and gasping for breath at the road’s edge.

After asking him what happened, we determined he was the owner of the greengrocer. He related through shivers and nervous glances at Leo that he had been robbed, and that he was trying to chase down the thief.

*Just relax, buddy. Leo’s not going to hurt you.*

“A thief, eh?” Eckenhart mused. “Have you gone to the guards yet?”

The man shook his head. “No...not much got stolen, and I think some kid did it. They got away, and I’m content enough to let them run.”

“Fair enough.”

*A child stealing food, huh?*

We determined that only two vegetables had been stolen, and the man was far from broken up by the loss, content to let the perpetrator go without further hassle. Nonetheless, we continued to follow Leo’s nose onwards down the winding web of alleyways. The shopkeep wasn’t the source of the smell, it seemed, which instantly ruled out anything food-related. If it was, he surely would’ve carried the same smell on him.

“By the way, Eckenhart... What’s on the north side of the city?” I finally asked.

The duke's eyes hardened. "I suppose that's where we're headed, isn't it?"

We used the west gate coming from the villa, and Kales's store was slightly south of that. The east side of the city held the Yugard store, if memory served, as well as the orphanage. I'd passed through the east gate to get to Lange as well. The south and east gates were connected by Ractos's largest roads, and the south seemed to house the city's central governing bodies and other civil functions. There were certainly enough guards in the south for that, at the very least. Not once had I been to the north end, however, or even heard about it.

Eckenhart bit his lip. "I hate to put it so bluntly, but...do you know what a slum is, Takumi?"

"It's where the poorest people in a town live, right? The place that typically has the most crime?"

*I guess this world has those, too...* It was a definite issue on Earth, even in Japan, though I couldn't say for sure how safe they were. Most Japanese people weren't even aware of such places, if I had to guess.

"You're mostly right," he replied with a nod. "Of course, there are enough guards on patrol there that the crime situation is mostly under control. Still, it's less safe than the rest of the city."

"Right...and that's what's on the north side, is it?"

"Exactly. I try to address the issue wherever I can, and the town around the main Liberte Mansion has no slums to speak of. This place is far from my seat of power, however, and there are far too many travelers to police them all. I still haven't managed to deal with these slums entirely."

"I see..."

That would make sense, all things considered. Distances were far more of an issue here than in Japan, and it took more than a couple hours to travel a hundred miles. Not only that, but the amount of traffic Ractos saw would only make the issue worse, and it was far too dangerous of an issue for Claire to tackle on her own.

"Visiting the north should be safe enough, mind you," he continued. "We'd best be careful, however, even with Miss Leo at our side."

*If even Eckenhart wants to avoid this place, I definitely don't want anything to do with it.*

"Leo's heading north, though," I pointed out.

He nodded grimly. "Straight for the very heart of the slums."

"Maybe we should stop if it's so dangerous there."

"Ruff? Gowf, groff!" Leo seemed vehemently against turning back, protesting that she'd protect us. I passed her words on to Eckenhart.

He paused to stroke his beard thoughtfully. "Normally I'd take a squad of bodyguards with me, but I don't want to defy Miss Leo's will. I'm curious to see what's captured her interest so."

*I guess that's another result of his whole noble house worshipping silver fenrir... I don't think Leo would mind too much either way, though.*

I was curious too, and I figured that if it did turn out to be overly dangerous or anything, we could easily hop on Leo's back and run away. I saw no harm in forging ahead.

I nodded. "I also want to know what Leo found. You should probably stay away if it's so dangerous, though."

"Absolutely not! I'm going with you. I can fend for myself, and even these slums are better than what you'd find elsewhere in the kingdom. It probably won't end poorly."

"Okay, just make sure you're ready to move if you need to."

"Of course."

I let my hand slip to the hilt of my sword as we followed Leo through the winding backstreets. I didn't want to draw my weapon in the city again, but I had to be prepared. Leo was likewise more vigilant than usual, sniffing the air constantly, eyes roaming. She seemed hellbent on finding the smell's source.

*What could have her this worked up? It had better not be sausages...if it is, she'll have a real scolding coming.*

Her nostrils flared. "Roooooo!" she declared before confidently leading our

party onwards. She was wagging cheerfully, for some reason, so I assumed that she was excited about whatever we were tracking.

As we walked north, the buildings grew increasingly older, and most of them were in some state of ruin. Some were clearly stores, though they seemed devoid of shoppers, and I doubted most of them were even open.

“So these are the slums,” I muttered to myself.

Eckenhart gave me a sidelong look. “Noticed, have you?”

“Well, it seemed pretty clear to me.”

There was no mistaking it now. The further we walked, the more people I could spot huddled in the streets or through gaps in the walls. Most of them wore rags or filthy furs, and every one of them was eyeing our group carefully. Almost all of them ranged from surprised to scared, though that much was to be expected with Leo leading the way.

“I suppose we stand out quite a bit in our clean clothes,” Eckenhart mused.

“I guess, yeah.”

The duke’s clothes were immaculately clean and seemed to be quite well-made. Leo stood out even more, I assumed, because of how well-groomed she was—and, you know, the whole giant hound aspect. There wasn’t much we could do to dissuade the looks, so we remained cautious as we went.

Leo suddenly stopped in her tracks, spinning about to face us. “Ruff? Wruf, buh-ruff!”

The slum-dwellers around us jumped, but I ignored them. They were likely just startled.

“What’s wrong, girl?” I asked her. “Is something up?”

“I’d rather not stay here long,” Eckenhart grunted as he looked about. “What’s Miss Leo saying?”

“Wooo,” she told me quietly, pointing with both her nose and a foreleg into a hole in a wall.

I looked where she directed me to. “Is something there?”



“Let’s see,” the duke murmured as he peered through the gap.

Once I got closer to the wall, I could hear muffled voices, at least two of them.

“Sounds like an argument,” Eckenhart muttered. “Are they fighting?”

“Maybe, but if someone was in any real danger, Leo would’ve jumped in to save them already.”

“Wuff-ruff. Gawff!”

“Wait, a kid? You want to help her?”

“Ruff!”

*If a kid’s in trouble, though, why is Leo asking for my permission? She loves children, and I can’t imagine her not helping one.*

I realized the issue a moment later. The gap was narrow enough that we’d have to squeeze through single-file, and there was no way Leo would fit. We’d have to go in alone.

I sighed. “We don’t have a choice, do we... Eckenhart?”

The duke nodded firmly. “I don’t want to butt into anyone’s private lives, but if Miss Leo wants us to intervene, then intervene we shall.”

“Okay. I’ll go first, and I ask that you follow behind me.” I looked up at my companion. “Leo, see if you can find a different way around.”

“Got it. Be careful, Takumi.”

“Ruff!”

After quickly hashing out our plan of action and confirming everyone knew what to do, I stepped into the narrow gap. Eckenhart unsheathed his sword behind me, prepared to handle anything that might come at us from behind. Meanwhile, Leo had run off to circle around the building.

*Now then, what awaits us on the other side?* I wondered as I peered into the opening ahead.

“Worthless, cur! This is all ya snatched?!”

“Be a little more useful, would ya?! Remember who ya have to thank for

keeping ya around!”

“C’mon! Stop with the silent treatment and say something, brat!”

“...! ...! ...!” A series of near-silent cries followed.

Beyond the gap was a large, open lot about a hundred feet square, likely where a building had once stood. The arguing voices came from there—or rather, it sounded like men railing on someone. A child sat crouched in the middle of the space, surrounded by four boys who looked to be middle- or high-school-aged, punching and kicking the smaller one. The child in the middle seemed to be enduring their abuse, trying not to make a sound.

“Hey! What are you doing?!”

“T-Takumi...!”

Unable to watch, I flew out of the gap between the buildings without a second thought. There was never a good reason for several people to gang up on a small child. I heard Eckenhart call out to me from behind, but there wasn’t much I could do after I’d already acted on instinct.

The four bullies shouted at me for interrupting them.

“Huuuh? What’s yer problem, old man?!”

“Butt out! You ain’t welcome here!”

“We’re in the middle of disciplining this man-eating monster!”

“What man-eating monster?” I asked.

I was more than a little hurt that they called me an old man at my age, but that should be the least of my concerns right now. I wasn’t sure how to interpret them calling their victim a “man-eating monster,” because all I saw was a small girl cowering between them. I couldn’t see her face because she was crouched with her back to me, but she looked smaller than Tilura.

*I’m pretty sure she’s the kid who stole and fled with the food. I only saw her fleeing figure for a second, and she might be the owner of the scent Leo was so interested in, but I can dig into that stuff later.*

“That’s no reason for you to gang up on a small child!” I shouted.

Just because the girl stole something didn't give them the right to surround and beat on her. And judging from the conversation I overheard, they were the ones who had forced the child to steal for them. In fact, the exact vegetables I was informed had been stolen were in the hands of the one young man who was not directly laying a hand on the girl.

"What's this old man on about?"

"This monster here eats people!" another boy shouted. "That's why we gotta knock some sense into it while we still can!"

"Don't be deceived by its size! It's the same as any other monster out there!"

"That's no excuse for your actions," I argued. "It's not your place to do anything. If this child really does eat people, you should entrust her to the city guard."

No matter how I looked at her, the child cowering with her hands protecting her head looked like any other girl. As someone not versed in the monsters of this world, I had no idea if there were monsters who took on human form, but even if there were, would there really be a monster in the middle of town like this? Besides, even if she is a monster, the guards would have done something about it. I'm sure the guards would act if monsters had infiltrated the city slums. It's not right for a bunch of kids to gather together and take care of the problem by doing something akin to bullying.

"Ha!" one of them snorted at me. "Ya talk big, but it's all just an excuse so ya can use it for yerself, old man!"

"No, that's not true," I refuted. "And I'm not an old ma—"

"Enough!" another cut me off. "Get outta here already! We've already claimed this monster for ourselves!"

"If ya don't butt out, yer gonna be in for a world of pain, old man!"

*What do they think I want to claim her for? To get her to steal food for me to eat, or something? At any rate, they interrupted me before I could get them to stop calling me an old man, and they seem like they have no intention of stopping what they're doing. Even if I wanted to resolve this peacefully, it doesn't look like they'll let me.*

Keeping my eyes firmly on the children, I quietly uttered Eckenhart's name, since I knew he was watching over the situation from behind me.

"Hmm... Takumi, I know it's not ideal to use force when facing children, but it might be our only option here," he whispered back. "Though I can't really recommend getting into combat in a place like this..."

"Yeah, it's bound to provoke the people watching..." I said. There were quite a few people inside and outside the buildings watching us—they had been watching the boys bully the girl since before we'd even arrived.

"Indeed. One wrong move might lead to a fight with the people from the slums."

More people had gathered to watch as I was having this whispered conversation with Eckenhart. As obvious outsiders, the locals would likely view us as the enemy. The bullies seemed surprised to see the burly Eckenhart looming behind me, but they were still glaring daggers my way and shouting profanity.

"But we can't just ignore this..." I protested.

"No, we can't. I agree with you, Takumi." Eckenhart shrugged. "All right, shall we just throw caution to the wind then? But restrain yourself, the boys are unarmed."

"...True enough. I won't do anything that would take their lives."

I wasn't brimming with confidence, but I didn't think I'd lose to a bunch of kids who'd gang up on a little girl—especially when they didn't have weapons, and I had Eckenhart as support. *I'm not keen on putting Eckenhart in danger, though... I feel like I'll be in for an earful from Sebastian and Claire later.*

"Arooooooooooooooooooooo!!" A monstrous roar interrupted my thoughts just as Eckenhart and I had decided to rescue the girl. Leo came charging into the open space from the opposite direction of us.

"Wh-What was that?!" one of the boys cried.

"What the?!"

"It's a m-monster! A giant wolf monster!"

*Wow, that was fast, Leo.*

“Grrrrrrrrrr... Raaaaaaaaaaarrr!” Leo growled and roared at the children, sending not only them, but the adults watching from the sidelines running and tripping over their quaking legs.

“Eeeek! Somebody save us!”

“It’s a monster!”

“Monster’s gonna eat us!”

After the dust cleared, it was just me, Eckenhart, Leo, and the crouched girl left. Well, aside from the one person who froze with fright at the thought Leo might eat them. *Leo would absolutely never eat a person!*

“...They fled faster than the sewer rats,” Eckenhart said.

“Sure did. Thanks to Leo, it looks like we avoided any unnecessary confrontation... Right?” The last part of my statement turned into a question because I couldn’t be entirely sure.

“Looks to be that way,” Eckenhart agreed with my assessment.

While I was busy reveling in my relief that everyone had fled without a fight, I heard a proud “Hruff!” from Leo. She seemed to be saying, *“How did I do?!”*

“That’s my girl, Leo! You’re such a good girl!” I lavished her with praise and ample pets and scratches in all her favorite spots. She deserved all the praise in the world for putting an end to things before they got started, keeping Eckenhart out of danger’s way in the process. *I’ll just ignore the fact that I almost put him in danger with my actions.*

“Now, what to do with that child?” Eckenhart whispered, his gaze on the girl as he sheathed his sword.

“She’s bound to be targeted by those kids again if we just leave her here,” I said, my gaze drifting to her as well. She remained crouched, her whole body trembling. She might have been frightened further by Leo’s howl and growling.

And then there’s the whole theft thing—even if she was forced into it. We’d better hear what she has to say. We might have to speak with the guards on her behalf, after all.

“Ruff? Woo, woo?” Leo slinked up to the girl, brought her big snout down close to her face, and whined. The girl lifted her head and was racked with a new bout of shudders upon seeing Leo’s big face right in front of her.

“...Eeep!”

I can’t blame her for being frightened of having a big hound’s giant jaws that close to her face.

“Worf! Ruff, ruff. Rooo, ruffa, rooo!” Leo seemed to be trying to say, *“You don’t have to be afraid,”* but it wasn’t getting through to the terrified girl.

“I-I’m gonna be eaten!” she cried.

“Wruff?! Ruff, ruff! Worf, borf, roo, woo!” Shocked, Leo tried to insist she wasn’t going to eat her by nuzzling her with her snout and poking her with her forepaw’s squishy pads—to no effect. Granted, I also thought Leo was going to eat me the first time I saw her up close in this world.

I sighed. “Leo...you’re only scaring her further. Give her some space.”

“Rooo...”

I felt bad telling her that, but I had Leo give the girl some space for now.

“Ruff... *Whine...*” she whimpered.

“I understand exactly how you feel, Miss Leo,” Eckenhart sympathized.

*Oh no, Leo has gone to a corner of the vacant lot to sulk... She’s got her back to me with her ears flat against her head.* Seeing her depressed state, Eckenhart went to comfort her. *Thanks, Eckenhart.*

“Um,” I began, crouching down in front of the girl and talking as gently as I could, “it’s all right. No one is going to beat or eat you. You can raise your head now.”

The quaking girl seemed a hundred times more frightened of Leo than the boys who had been attacking her, but I decided to shelve that matter for the moment. For now, I needed to help her calm down and let her know the danger had passed.

Clocking that Eckenhart was patting Leo’s big back out of the corner of my

eye, I continued to speak to the girl. “No one here is going to say mean things to you or lay a hand on you. It’s all right now. You’re okay now...” In the softest voice possible, I repeated that she was okay.

I wish I knew how to soothe a frightened child, but I unfortunately lacked experience in that department. Then again, it would be better if encountering abused and hurt children was not a common thing people gained experience in.

“...ly? R-Really...?” she finally muttered in the quietest of voices. Maybe she just needed a little more assurance.

“Really,” I assured. “There’s nothing scary anymore.”

“...Rea...lly?”

“Really. Look for yourself. There’s nothing scary here.”

She stopped shaking, and seeming to believe my assurances, lowered her hands from her head and slowly looked up. I gasped. I wasn’t surprised by her face, but by the pair of *objects*? that shot up on the top of her head after she removed her hands. I promptly caught myself and smiled at her. I was more than a little worried my shock had shown on my face and that my smile had faltered, but since her eyes were staring right at me, I schooled my features the best I could.

“See?” I said. “None of the mean people are around. It’s okay now.”

“...Um, what about the big wolfie?” she asked.

“Ah, er...” I faltered.

The big wolfie obviously referred to Leo. The girl’s frightened eyes began to scan our surroundings for Leo. *I wonder if it’s okay to introduce them now?* Leo was currently watching the girl with Eckenhart behind us. She was still keeping her back to us and had just her head turned over her shoulder to watch. It seemed having a child think she’d eat them was quite the blow. *Leo adores children, and every child has come to love her so far, so I can see why this stings.*

“Did the wolfie...go away too...?” she asked.

“N-No. Er, you see...that wolfie won’t eat or hurt you in any way,” I promised.

“...Even though it’s so big?”

“She won’t do a thing, even at her size,” I assured her as I kept eye contact with the young girl. “She’s a kind wolf, even if she looks a little scary.”

“...Really?”

Leo’s whole body jolted when she heard me say she’s a little scary-looking. *I’m sorry, girl. I’ll apologize later, so forgive me for now. A huge wolf with giant jaws is just plain scary up close. Not that I ever thought Leo was scary. And now I’m making excuses in my thoughts... I need to stop this and focus on the girl.*

“Yeah, she’s actually a nice wolfie. She doesn’t eat or attack people. If she did, she wouldn’t be able to frolic into town, would she? The guards would catch her!”

“...Would...they? I don’t know...”

“Well, it might be hard for them to catch her,” I conceded. “But if you think you can trust me, take a look behind you. It will be all right. She’s not as scary as she looks.”

“O-Okay...I’ll try...”

I had no idea if the girl would still be as scared when she saw Leo pouting in the corner, but we couldn’t get anywhere without them interacting first. Leo couldn’t leave this space without being seen by the girl, and it’d be dangerous for us to separate from Leo here too.

Although we had only just met, it seems speaking to the girl kindly had earned some trust. She nodded and timidly turned around.

The girl locked up the second she saw how big Leo was, even huddled in the corner like that, but she worked up her courage and tried to speak to her. “...U-Um, hello, w-wolfie?”

“*Whimper....*” Leo whined pitifully in response to her.

I thought it was funny the lengths she was willing to go to try and not be scary, but I could understand how it’d scarred her to have a little girl so terrified she thought she’d get eaten.

As I was thinking about such things, my eyes shifted from Leo to the girl and I was surprised to see something fluffy jutting out of her lower back that humans



didn't possess. I cleared my throat to hide my surprise and addressed the girl again. "Ahem! See? She's not dangerous. She's a nice wolf. She won't hurt you."

"Uh-huh. I guess so... I'm sorry, wolfie," the kind girl apologized to Leo for being scared of her.

*"Whimper, whimper."*

In an attempt to prove how safe she was, Leo slowly turned toward the girl and brought only the tip of her snout close. Leo's whimpers were about the most pathetic as I'd ever heard them, but I was more amused by how she'd torqued her body towards the girl without ever rising from her sitting position.

Despite being relieved they might be able to get along now, I still couldn't keep my expression from growing serious when I looked at the girl. Perched atop her head was a pair of triangular canine ears, much like what sat atop Leo and Cherie's heads. And on her lower back, which faced me, swayed a tail covered in fur so fluffy, it could measure up to Leo's luscious tail.

The word beastkin—often used only within fictional stories—came to mind.





# Afterword

**THANK** you very much for picking up a copy of *Even Dogs* Volume 5. This is Ryuuou, checking in to say that I've been searching for good doggy videos to fill the lack of dog-related content lately.

Did you enjoy the fifth volume of *Even Dogs*? I had a lot to consider with this volume, what with writing about the interactions with Anrinnelesse, who made her first appearance in volume 4, and the massive rewrites that came with the change in setting from the web serialization. To compensate for those changes, the relationships between Claire, Eckenhart, Takumi, and Leo have slightly changed, but I had fun writing these new parts, and I hope that I was able to convey as much to the readers.

Aside from that, while it might have only come into play during the very last part of the book, this volume introduces fluffy animal ears. You might be thinking, "What do you mean? We've already got adorable animal ears with Leo and Cherie." No, no, I've personally confirmed that people sporting animal ears is incredibly rare (according to random sources).

They even come with the fluffiest of tails, so it's ten times as good of a deal! The more fluffy friends and cuties there are, the better! That's my style, so I'd like to keep writing even more fluffy and cute stuff with an extra helping of fluffy fluff. You might be wondering what I'm talking about—not even I'm sure anymore, so let's just leave it at that.

On that note, the newly added interlude chapter introduces head maid Ermine sooner than the web version does. I hope you enjoy the additional character development that wasn't present in the original version, along with Claire feeling anxious about Anrinnelesse's presence.

Little by little, Takumi is not only making Claire blush, but Takumi's reactions to her are also changing. It's exciting to see what the future holds for the two of them and the new fluffer—I mean, girl—as well as what's in store for Anrinnelesse.

On another note, the day after volume 5 is released in Japan, volume 4 of the

manga will also be released. This new volume features Leo and Cherie in Hana Ichika's adorable art style. We are also bound to see the exploits of Eckenhart, who appeared at the end of volume 3! I hope you can enjoy the manga series along with the light novels!

Now, I'd like to express my gratitude to everyone involved in making this book possible. First, I must thank Ririnra for depicting Anrinnelesse with absolutely gorgeous drill curls and for designing our newest fluffy friend. In that vein, I'd also like to thank Hana Ichika for their manga edition. And then, to my editors N, W, and K, as well as the GC Novels editorial department and all the other companies involved—it is only thanks to all of you that we have been able to publish five volumes. Thank you so much.

Thank you to everyone who submitted photos of dogs and cats for the wraparound when we made the request on X (formerly Twitter). A special thanks to Kita, whose submission was chosen. The way your Golden Retriever Veena pokes just her head around the corner is so precious, it makes you want to give her a good head pat. Thank you so much!

Last but not least, I want to express my gratitude to everyone who has supported the online serialization and the readers who picked up a copy of this book. I sincerely hope we'll meet again in the sixth volume. I hope you'll continue following my work.

December 2023







**Rising from Ashes: My Dear Emperor, You're Putty in My Hands!**

By **Makino Maeburu** Illustr **Yoko Matsuoka**

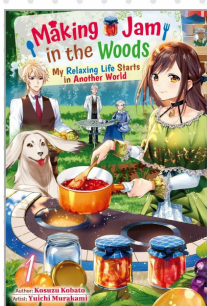
When Sai reincarnates into an otome game as an NPC destined to die, she's saved by the winged Orient Emperor who shares a similar fate! How'll they rewrite their story?



**I Guess This Dragon Who Lost Her Egg to Disaster Is My Mom Now**

By **Suzume Kirisaki** Illustr **Cosmic**

A gender bender fantasy series about a betrayed adventurer who ends up not only turning into a girl, but being raised by a powerful dragon too!



**Making Jam in the Woods: My Relaxing Life Starts in Another World**

By **Kosuzu Kobato** Illustr **Yuichi Murakami**

What Awaits Her In Another World Is Delicious Food And A Relaxing Life Surrounded By Spirits!

Margaret's life is cut short when she gets into a fatal accident at her workplace, except instead of the afterlife, she finds herself in another world!



**APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA**  
-WORLD CONQUEST STARTS WITH THE CIVILIZATION OF RUIN-

Author: **Fehu Kazuno**

illustr: **Jun**

**06**



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