

# EVEN DOGS

## Go to Other Worlds

LIFE IN ANOTHER WORLD

WITH MY BELOVED HOUND



# 1

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# Even Dogs Go to Other Worlds: Life in Another World with My Beloved Hound, Volume 1

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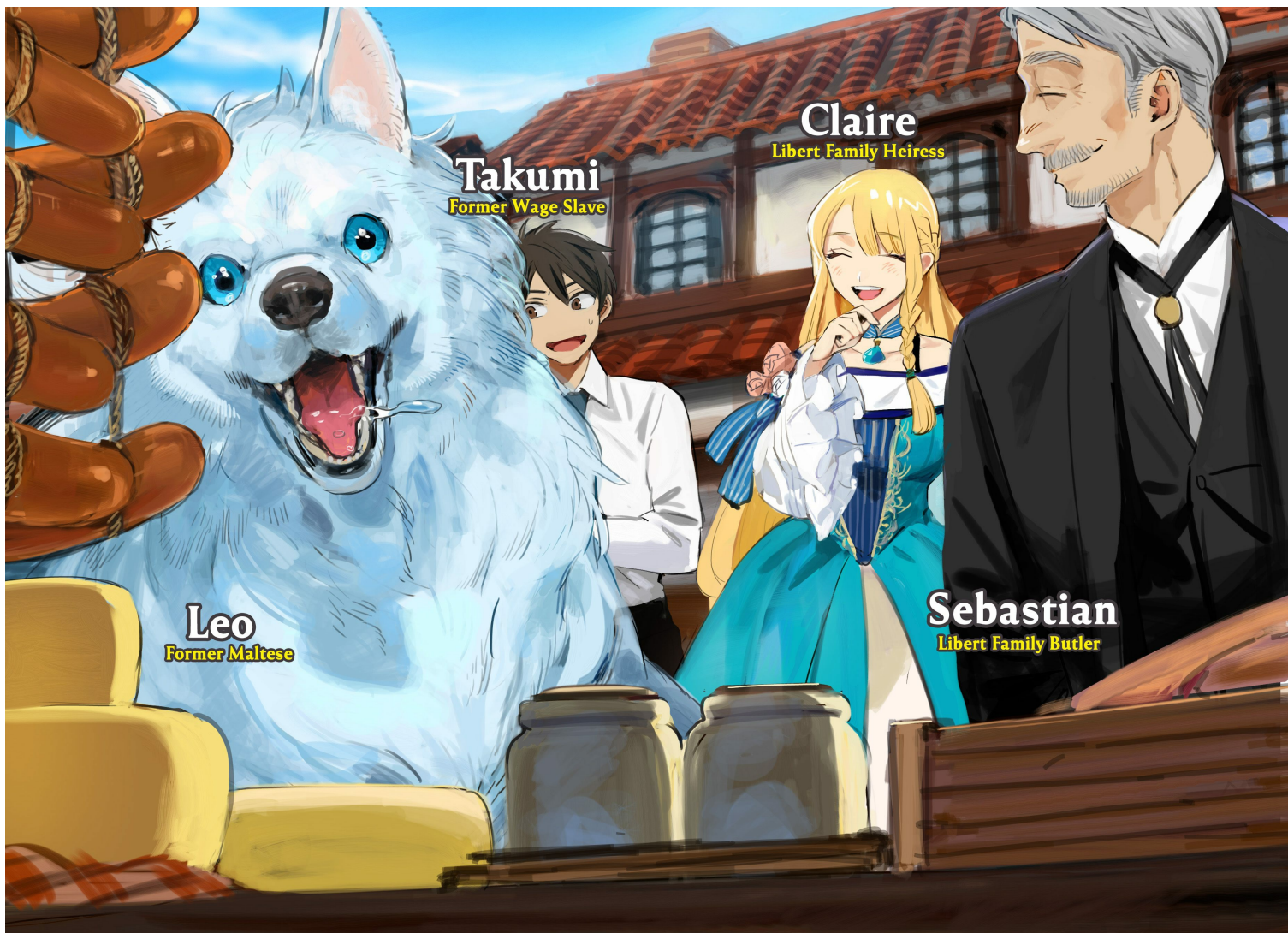
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**Leo**  
Former Maltese

**Takumi**  
Former Wage Slave

**Claire**  
Libert Family Heiress

**Sebastian**  
Libert Family Butler







# Prologue

***“HNGH...*** Finally, I can go home...”

By the time I finished the day’s work, it was almost midnight. I couldn’t remember the last time I got to go home at a decent hour. I’d been putting in unpaid overtime almost daily for the past two years, without being afforded so much as a single day off. I *knew* they were exploiting me, but since I didn’t have the time to find a new job, I had no choice but to keep slaving away.

“Ugh, why won’t my head stop spinning?”

Once, after three straight months of what felt like nonstop work, I ended up blacking out at home. I woke up soon enough afterwards, but I took the next day off to see a doctor just in case. I still remember that, when I’d arrived back at the office the day after, not only were my superiors furious with me, even my coworkers had iced me out. I didn’t feel as bad now as I had then, but I could tell I wasn’t walking in a straight line.

I hadn’t been drinking, of course. Despite technically being old enough to, I didn’t find the taste of alcohol all that pleasant. On the days when I worked relatively little overtime, my superiors would coax me out for drinks, and I had vivid memories of forcing down beer after beer to keep up with them and bolting to the bathroom whenever I saw an opening.

“Seriously... What’s *with* those jerks?” I mumbled, stumbling out of the station in the direction of my apartment. “Wait, gotta stop by the convenience store first. I’d better eat *something* today. Maybe I should grab something for her while I’m at it...”

After dully realizing how hungry I was, I stopped at a convenience store to pick up a random boxed lunch and a pack of sausages. I felt bad for leaving my girl alone so often. She deserved the occasional treat for all the waiting I put her through.

I lurched out of the store and back onto the street, then continued trudging home. After about ten minutes, I arrived at my apartment. I stopped in front of the nameplate engraved TAKUMI HIROOKA, fished my keys out of my pocket, shakily unlocked it, and pushed the door open with a creak.

“I’m home,” I called out as I stepped inside the small corridor-like foyer. Behind the door at the far end, I could hear her begin to scratch at it enthusiastically, as if she believed she could open it through sheer excitement.

“Sounds like *someone’s* full of energy today! Hold on, I’m coming.”

I took off my shoes and opened the inner door. The second I cracked it open, a little white bundle of energy bounced out at me.

“Arf! Arf!”

“Hahaha, *there* you are! Were you a good girl?”

My little Maltese, Leo, looked up at me. I’d found her several years ago, abandoned in a cardboard box as a puppy. I was a college student then and I’d just moved out on my own. But, thanks to her, I never felt too lonely. The little pup had struck me as a “Leo” from the moment I saw her, and I’d only realized later that she was, well, a she.

*Sorry, Leo. I wish I’d given you a more feminine name.*

“Look, I’ve got your favorite sausages!”

“Aroo!”

As soon as she laid eyes on the pack of meat, she began pumping her little tail back and forth through the air. I brought it closer to give her a smell and she reached out to clamp her teeth around it.

“Haha, hold on, there! Let me unwrap them first. Okay...go get ’em!”

“Arf arf!”

As soon as I put the open package on the floor, she began to scarf the sausages down with gusto. I decided to follow her lead, taking the still-warm boxed lunch out of the plastic bag and placing it on the coffee table. I popped the lid off and brought a mouthful to my lips.



*Huh... They must've changed their recipe. I can barely taste this.*

I kept on eating nonetheless, my empty stomach urging every bite along. Leo finished a little before me and she popped up beside me where I sat.

"Arf! *Whine...*"

"What's up? You wanna play? Just give me a minute. I'm almost done."

"Ruff!"

After patting her head, I polished off the last of the rice. I gathered the trash in the plastic bag then left it in the corner of the room.

*Tomorrow's the day they pick up the non-combustible trash... I'll put it out when I leave for work.*

"C'mere, Leo!"

"Arf arf?"

"What, don't you want to play?"

*"Whine..."*

She proceeded to nuzzle and lick my face even more than usual.

*Maybe she knows I'm not feeling so well.*

She was acting a little odd, but I didn't have the energy to think about it. I only wanted to sleep.

"No, wait... I guess a bath comes first."

Even I knew better than to just crawl into bed.

At the word "bath," Leo shied away from me. I smiled thinly.

*She sure hates baths, huh?*

I stood up to start the water, only to have the world around me start swimming.

"This an earthquake...?"

*Why is everything shaking? No... It's just me?*

"Bark! Bark! Bark!"

Leo barked at me from out of the corner of my blurry vision, but before I could do anything, I realized I was on the ground.

“Bark, bark, bark! *Whine, Whine!*”

I could clearly make out Leo scampering up closer to my face. But, unable to even respond to her, I blacked out.



“HUH...?”

“Ruff! Ruuuff!”

I awoke, feeling a light breeze caressing my body.

*Wait... I don't remember falling asleep. And is this fluffy thing on my face Leo?*

“Sorry, Leo, I need you to get off... Jeez, when'd you get this heavy?”

“Ruuuff!”

Her bark sounded a few octaves deeper than I remembered...

I opened my eyes...to find a forest all around me.

“I guess I must still be asleep.”

“Ruuuff!”

*I was definitely in my room. I remember eating dinner, but nothing after that. I can't imagine that I've somehow gone from there to the middle of some forest.*

I pinched my cheek, thinking that I must be dreaming. It hurt.

“So...this *isn't* a dream? But how...?”

“RUFF! RUFF!”

*And wait...isn't Leo's bark way louder than usual?*

She seemed determined to get my attention, so I finally turned to face her.

I froze in shock.

“Wait, **what?!** You're not Leo!”

“Ruuuuff!”

Sitting there beside me—head cocked slightly to the side curiously as it stared down at me—was the biggest wolf I’d ever seen in my life.

“Holy crap!”

I tried to scramble to my feet to run away. But, as it’d just woken up, my body refused to cooperate. As I fumbled and flailed, the behemoth brought its massive mouth up to my face. I clamped my eyes shut.

*I’m dead! It’s gonna eat me...!*

“Whine...”

A moment later, I heard a familiar whimper and felt a massive tongue run itself across my face.

*Wait... it can’t be...*

“You... You *are* Leo?”

“Ruff! Ruff, ruff!”

*That’s right!* she seemed to say, nodding as she barked.

“But how are you so...*big?*”

The first thing I’d seen after opening my eyes in this strange new place was my precious little puppy—now several times bigger than me!







# Chapter 1: Starting Life Anew with an All-Powerful Pooch and a Gift

**MALTESES** are small dogs. Leo *was* a small dog. Now, however, she was way bigger than me, with a mouth full of giant, knifelike teeth. Even her snout had a wolfish length to it.

*She was so much cuter before...*

She *was* undeniably cooler now. That tracked with all the pictures of wolves I'd seen, but it didn't make the change easier to swallow. Even her once-dainty claws looked like lethal weapons.

"How'd you even *get* so big?"

"Ruff?" She cocked her head to the side, as if in thought.

*I suppose she's always been a little on the strange side.*

I'd heard that Malteses were supposed to be smart, but ever since she was a puppy, all her little tics and gestures had an almost human quality to them. At times, it seemed as though she could understand my every word. I'd never met a dog that seemed so intelligent.

"Aren't you way too big now, though? No *way* I can pick you up like this... Heck, I bet I could *ride* you if I wanted to..."

"Ruuuff? Bow-wow!"

She sprang to her feet, turned around, and crouched with her back to me, as if inviting me on.

*She really can understand me, can't she?*

"M-Maybe later, okay? First things first, I need to figure out where we are."

"Ruff!"

She obediently stood back up and turned to face the wilderness around us. I followed suit and climbed to my feet.



*Come to think of it, I got really dizzy before I fell asleep...not that I remember actually falling asleep. Oh, well...*

My top priority now was figuring out where in the world we were. After all, my boss would blow a gasket if I was late for work.

“Dang... There’s way too many trees to see much of anything. I guess...we should just pick a direction and go.”

“Ruff, ruff.”

I turned in a random direction and began walking. Leo started heeling obediently.

*I hope the trees here don’t bother her too much...*

Before I had a real chance to worry, however, she started nimbly weaving around them.

We walked at a fair pace without seeing so much as a small clearing. I soon lost track of time, as the thick canopy made everything look the same shade of dusk. Only the occasional ray of sunshine falling through the trees told me that night hadn’t fallen yet.

*I hope we aren’t totally lost... My chances of getting to work on time are shot either way, though.*

“We’d better find something soon... I’m starting to get thirsty. I hope there’s a river nearby.”

“Ruff? Bow-wow!”

Leo turned to me and seemed to nod.

*So...she can understand me. I guess I might as well follow her, then. I don’t have any brighter ideas. She won’t start leaving pawprints on clues for me, will she?*

Chuckling to myself, I followed her deeper into the woods. Looking at her more closely, I noticed that her once-white fur was now a glossy silver that seemed to shine when the sun hit it.

*She really is cooler now...*

After a few minutes, she stopped and turned back to face me. “Aroo!”

I realized I could faintly hear the trickle of running water coming from up ahead.

“You really found a river?”

“Ruff.”

We continued in the same direction to find a small clearing. A broad river of crystal-clear water flowed through the center of it and, maybe because there were relatively fewer trees, the sunlight shone through more strongly.

“Wow, I can even see the sky... Looks like it’s about noon.”

“Ruff,” she barked matter-of-factly, before trotting up to the stream and starting to drink. I’d been a little worried about whether or not it was safe, but after seeing her lap it up with such gusto, my worries faded.

I followed her up to the stream and stuck my hands in it. It felt even cooler and more refreshing than I’d hoped. Realizing again just how thirsty I was after all this walking, I cupped my hands and began to bring handful after handful to my lips.

Even that wasn’t fast enough, though, so I plunged my face in to drink my fill directly, only coming up after I was satisfied. Water had gotten on my face, but it tasted so good, I honestly didn’t mind. If anything, my face wash left me feeling thoroughly refreshed.

I let out a hearty sigh. “Feels like it’s time for a break.”

“Wuff!”

I plopped myself down by the riverside and crossed my legs. Leo shook the excess water from her jowls after she finished and sat down right beside me.

“Pillaloo.”

She scratched her ear a moment, then laid her head down in my lap.

“You used to curl up in my lap all the time before, but I guess you can’t now. Even your head feels like a sack of bricks.”

“Rrrr-hrrrr-mrrrrr!” she retorted grumpily.

*Yeah...I guess no girl would like being told they're heavy.*

"All right, then. What next?"

"Arf?"

I looked up at the crack of sky above me as I pondered our situation. I'd no idea how we'd even gotten here, not to mention that there seemed to be no way out of these woods.

*We might never get out at this rate.*

Finding drinkable water was a big weight off my shoulders, but there was no sign of food around. I knew nothing about wild plants, and I wasn't about to start eating things at random. Since the trees didn't seem to have any fruit either, I couldn't count on that to sustain me.

"What do we do now?"

I was never much of an outdoorsman—if anything, I was an indoor kid. I'd never even been camping, except on a field trip with my class once. Hiking and such had never really interested me, not to mention that I was so busy with work I just didn't have the time for it.

"The air out here's super fresh, though."

"Ruff!"

I took in a lungful of the crisp forest air. It tasted nothing like the stale city air I was so used to.

*I can't remember the last time I was able to relax like this...being stranded aside, that is.*

Even when I was in school, I'd had to sacrifice all my free time to my part-time job just so I could eat. It seemed only natural that I got just one day off every few months at my full-time job. On top of that, since I was often stuck at the office until after midnight, I spent what little free time I *did* have sleeping.

*This might be the first time I've ever really enjoyed nature.*

"Sorry, Leo... I guess I really *did* leave you home alone a lot, didn't I?"

"Arf? Ruff."

Looking back, though, I felt awful that I'd had so little time for Leo. Ever since I'd picked her up that day, she'd been stuck in our tiny apartment. I never forgot to feed her, of course, but I could only afford to give her one or two long walks a week.

*Not to mention I always got back so late... If I ever make it back home, I'll find a job that gives me more free time, I swear.*

I ran my hand through her fluffy silver coat, and she raised her head to give me a huge, wet lick across my cheek.

"Arf, arf."

"Don't sweat it,' you say?"

"Ruuuuff."

*Thanks, Leo. At least I've never been lonely with you beside me.*

I let my thoughts wander a while as I idly stroked her.

Just as I decided to get up and start walking again, Leo jumped to her feet.

"You okay, girl?"

"Rrrrrr...!"

She fixed her eyes on the woods we had come from moments before, hackles raised.

"Is something there?"

"Grrrrrrrrrr!"

Her growl only grew louder. I turned to see what the problem was, but I couldn't see a thing with all the trees in the way. After a moment, I heard something from somewhere in the underbrush. Something was approaching, steadily tramping closer as it shoved branches and shrubbery aside.

"Grrrrrrrrrr-hrrrr!!"

Leo bared her fangs as her growling reached a crescendo, and the noisemaker emerged.

I'd never seen anything like it before. It was about the size of a human and it

trudged forward on two legs. Even its big, bloated belly could've easily belonged to a person. It almost could've passed as human, except for one thing: its face was that of a pig's.

"Wait...a pig? How can a pig walk on two legs?"

I was totally lost. Waking up in a mysterious forest was one thing, but a bipedal pig was too much. I'd no idea what was happening.

*No, wait...I think I've seen something that looks like this before. What was it called, again? Right, it was in a video game! It's an...orc, I think.*

I wasn't much of a gamer. But I did know a thing or two, and it helped that orcs were so well-known.

"...An orc? A *real* orc?!" I cried.

*I'm still in Japan...right?! I thought they were made-up! I never heard of any orcs being discovered on Earth...*

Granted, I had a colleague who'd mentioned orcs were common in the books he liked reading—"light novels," he'd called them—but that was fantasy. This was reality.

"Grrrr!! Wooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

As I sat there in bewilderment, Leo suddenly lunged toward the orc.

"Rrrr! Arrrrahaha!" she snarled.

"Squow? Squeeee!"

One of her forelegs swung wide before slamming into the creature with frightening speed.

*Wait...can a dog's legs even do that? I mean, I guess she's a wolf now, but still...!*

Her claws ripped through the orc's body with ease. Then, without missing a beat, she lunged forward and clamped its neck in her jaws. It let out a shrill, inhuman squeal, then fell to the ground, unmoving.

*Wow, she's strong!*

"Woo-woo. Ruff-fuff!"



She then picked the carcass up in her massive teeth and deposited it on the ground in front of me. Tail wagging expectantly, she stared at me proudly.

“Ruff, ruff!”

“...You want me to...*eat* that?”

“Aroooo!” she nodded.

*B-But it was walking on two legs just a minute ago... I mean...it probably tastes like pork. But still...*

Leo continued to stare right at me. My stomach let out a low growl, totally emptied from all that walking.

“...Can I at least...cook it first?”

“Wooo? Roo-roo!”

She paused to think a moment, then began gathering fallen branches on the stream’s bank.

“Oh, I see. And then I just have to light it?”

“Ruff.”

*How? I can’t just make fire out of thin air, y’know! But there’s no way I can eat this thing raw...it doesn’t even look clean. I guess I’ll have to try either way.*

We were in a forest, after all, and there wasn’t any sign that it’d rained recently. I helped Leo gather all the branches and dried leaves I could.

“All right. Now comes the hard part—lighting the fire.”

*I remember that on TV, they’ll put a stick in a hole in a branch and spin it really fast to light a fire. Maybe that’d work?*

“Ruff.”

As I sat wondering how to light it, Leo drew her face up close to the wood.

“Arroooooo!”

A small flame shot out of her open mouth, causing the wood to burst into flames.

“Leo? What did you...?”

“Woo? Ruuuuff,” she replied smugly.

I honestly didn’t know what to say. So much had happened since I woke up, my mind couldn’t keep up.

*One thing at a time, though. Food first.*

“Think you can butcher this thing for me, Leo?”

“Ruff!”

She nodded, and after swiping at the carcass a few times, the supposed-orc’s flesh came apart in neat slices.

“...Meat is meat. There’s no point deciding some’s good to eat and some isn’t.”

*That’s pretty utilitarian of me, I guess...*

I decided I wouldn’t even think about how Leo had gotten so good at cutting up dead bodies.

“Thanks, Leo! Now, let’s get cooking.”

“Ruff, ruff.”

I took a few pieces of meat from the cleaner parts of the creature, then purposefully turned my back to it.

*No way I can eat if I have to look at that mess.*

I gave the meat a quick wash in the stream, then skewered a few pieces on some long, thin sticks Leo had found. Noticing that they’d started to bleed a little, I gave the shish kebabs another wash before taking them to the fire and sticking them in the ground so they hung over it, but not too close. I didn’t want the sticks to catch fire, after all. Now I had a nice set of skewers cooking.

*I really hope they taste okay.*

“Voff-voff.”

Leo licked her chops as she watched the meat sizzle away.

*It’ll be done soon enough; don’t worry.*

After a few minutes, I took one of the skewers off the heat. They looked like

regular grilled pork, at least. I offered a few pieces to Leo, then grabbed another from the fire for myself.

I hesitated for a moment, remembering how the orc *had* looked almost human, but the instant I put it into my mouth, my hunger took over.

“Hmmm... Not bad.”

“Moof... *Crunch, Crunch.*”

Leo scarfed the meat down with gusto. It *did*, in fact, taste just like pork. If anything, it tasted more expensive than what I usually ate.

*Appearances aside, it really is just meat.*

“*Munch munch.*”

*It could use some salt, though...and maybe a little pepper.*

It looked like Leo and I wouldn't starve, at any rate. That made our new priority finding some way out of this forest.

“So, Leo? Which way out of here?”

“Woo? Ruuff.”

I was hoping that Leo might be able to pull another solution out of thin air, but unfortunately, she just cocked her head at me.

*I guess I can't expect her to know that...*

“Maybe following the river'll get us somewhere?”

“Ruff!”

*We'll at least have water that way.*

I roasted as much of the leftover meat as I could carry in both hands. After finishing with the fire, I doused it with water, and we started off downstream. There must've been a slope, given the flow, but it was gentle enough that I couldn't even feel it.

*We don't seem to be in the mountains. We might have a chance...hopefully.*

“Ruff, ruff!”

Leo seemed to be in high spirits. *Probably thanks to her full stomach.*

“You’re a lot stronger than before, y’know.”

“Ruff!”

Her face was full of pride now but, back when I first met her, she’d been trembling with fear in her little cardboard box. Now, even though being in this strange forest full of strange creatures had me worried, Leo made me feel as though it’d all be okay.

*Come to think of it, I’ve never really felt lonely, thanks to her. I thought I was saving her back then, but maybe she saved me. She adopted me as much as I adopted her.*

“I know I said this already, but... Thanks, Leo.”

“Woo? Arooo!”

*No, thank you, she seemed to be saying as she nodded at me.*

We kept on walking in peace. After a while, however, I noticed something off about the trees around us.

“Hey, Leo... Do any of these trees look familiar to you?”

“Ruff?”

I was no botanist, but I knew a few common Japanese trees. There was clearly something...*wrong* with these ones, though. Not that they seemed sick or damaged. Rather, their heights and leaf sizes seemed different from any tree I’d ever seen before.

*Maybe I just don’t know these trees. Or maybe...*

“Maybe...this isn’t Japan, after all?”

“Roo-roo!”

*No, it can’t be! No way something like that could happen overnight, and Leo did not just tell me this isn’t Japan. Definitely not...*

I had my hands full trying not to think about how we’d gotten here in the first place...or you know, about what I’d just eaten...

*I’m not just escaping reality, am I?*

“...elp...!”

“Hm?”

*I thought I heard something...*

“...one, please...”

*A person?!*

There was no denying it. Someone was calling out, not too far ahead from where we were.

“Let’s go, Leo!”

“Arooo!”

*They might know how we can get out of here!*

With that, Leo and I both started running toward the voice—well, *I* started running. Leo kept on trotting but managed to neatly match my pace. I’d dropped the meat I was carrying in order to get up to full speed, though.

*If we can hear someone, then we’ll probably be saved soon! But my poor dinner...*

“Someone, please!” the voice—a woman’s—cried out. “Please help me!”

The closer we got, the clearer I heard her. It sounded like she was in trouble.

*I really hope she’s not lost. If she is, then we’re both screwed.*

Either way, I knew I had to hurry.

“Ruff!”

I started to run out of breath, but Leo seemed perfectly fine.

*Man, I’m outta shape!*

“Someone! Anyone!”

“Over there!” I called out to Leo.

Finally, I could hear the voice clear as day. Just ahead of me was a broad, meaty back that looked like the creature Leo had killed a short while ago.

*Another orc?*



After a moment, I realized what it was doing. A young blonde woman was lying prone before it, her eyes wide in terror.

*...Wait...a blonde?*

She had long, golden hair, the kind that I rarely saw in Japan.

At that moment, the orc raised its meaty arm to strike her.

“Leo! Help her!”

“Woooooooooooooooooooo!”

At my command, Leo bolted toward the orc.

“Grrr... Bark!” she bayed.

With a single swipe of a massive, clawed paw, she tore the creature clean in half. Before it could so much as squeal, it slumped to the ground in two meaty pieces.

“Hahh... hahh... Nice job, Leo...”

“Rooooo!” she howled proudly.

A few moments later, I caught up to her, wheezing. As I caught my breath, I turned to look at the young woman.

“Hahh... Are you okay?”

“Y-Yes... I believe I’ll be fine now.”

She looked about twenty years old and she had elegant facial features that were as pretty as her long, flowing hair. She was a beauty the likes of which I—or probably most people—had never seen.

*She’s definitely not Japanese, though...even though her Japanese is amazing.*





I stared at her for a few solid seconds without saying anything.

“Um... Is something wrong?” she asked.

“O-Oh... Uh, it’s nothing. Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Barooooo...”

*Dang... She’s so pretty, I almost forgot to breathe for a minute there. I hope she doesn’t think I’m weird. And Leo, stop giving me that look.*

“Thank you very much for saving me,” the woman said as she got up and dusted herself off. “Um... Am I correct in assuming that silver fenrir’s your familiar?”

“Silver fenrir? Familiar?” I repeated.

“Wooo?”

*What’s she talking about? Leo’s a Maltese...though I guess she isn’t anymore... Aren’t fenrir videogame monsters, too?*

Leo also cocked her head to one side quizzically.

“Um... What’s a familiar?”

“Pardon?” She gave me a baffled look. “It’s a monster that you’ve bound to your will, of course.”

*Monster? Huh. Did I fall asleep playing an old RPG or something?*

I cleared my throat, a little embarrassed. “Um...what do you mean by ‘monster’?”

“You mean you honestly don’t *know*?!” She raised her voice in shock.

*Wait, is it really that surprising? It’s not that weird a question...right?*

I could feel my head start to spin.

“Th-That’s not what I meant... I meant, uh, what’s a silver fenrir?”

“Why, isn’t that what your dashing companion there is?”

“Uh...yes! Yes, she’s my silver fenrir.”

“Woof!”

*So...Leo's a silver fenrir now. Whatever that means... I'll just play along for now.*

“I'm very impressed! How'd you manage to tame her?”

“I-I didn't do much, really. It wasn't a big deal.”

“Oh, but it is! Silver fenrir are the strongest monsters in the world, you know. You almost never hear of one becoming so friendly with a human, although many have tried to tame them. They're far stronger than any human could ever be. Why, they're famous for being the number one monster to avoid!”

I cast a sidelong glance at Leo. “*You're* that strong, girl?”

“Arrroooooo!”

Leo gave me a smug look.

*A Maltese? The strongest at something? Really?*

“Didn't you know?” the woman continued excitedly. “They're as fast as the wind, they breathe fire, their claws can cut through anything, and they can crush anything they please in their mighty jaws!”

“.....”

*Leo did start that campfire, I guess. And her claws and fangs certainly seemed strong enough against those orcs... So...she's really a silver fenrir now?*

“They're quite well-known for their shining silver pelts, too! They say it's a symbol of their strength. Why, our royal family's crest is a silver fenrir for that very reason.”

“Wait... Really?”

“The old stories claim that they can use any magic in existence, though nobody's seen them and lived to tell the tale.”

“Nobody?”

“Not a soul. No one's walked away from a wild silver fenrir, after all.”

“But...I'm still alive.”



“That’s what’s so amazing! You’ll go down in history for making one your familiar, I imagine!”

“...Huh?”

*Go down in history for having a dog? And what did she say about a royal family? I’m confused...*

She’d told me so much so fast, after all. What I *did* know, though, was that Leo was my partner, not my pet. I still didn’t know just what a “familiar” was, but I wasn’t forcing Leo to do anything.

“Her name’s Leo, actually—and silver fenrir or not, we’re partners. Nothing less.”

“Ruff!” Leo barked as she licked my face.

“Partners...? I’m sorry, but...who are you?”

“Um... Just your average guy, I guess...”

“No need for modesty. I know you can’t be *that* average, after all.”

“I’m not being modest, really.”

“Well, Mr. Not-So-Modest, mind telling me your name?”

“Not at all. It’s Hirooka Takumi.”

“Ta-ku-mi...Hi-ro-o-ka? You’re right! I can’t say I’ve heard of you.”

“Right? I’m not famous or anything.”

*Why’s she pronouncing my name like she’s sounding out a foreign language? And come to think of it, I don’t know her name...*

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I caught your name.”

“Oh, my apologies.” She stepped back and dipped low in an elegant bow. “My name is Claire Libert. Thank you for saving my life.”

*Wow, she looks just like an old-fashioned noblewoman... I’ve seen and done my share of bows and stuff at work, but I’ve never seen someone do it so... gracefully.*

I found myself utterly captivated by her.

“...Is something the matter?”

“N-No, it’s nothing, uh...Miss Libert.”

“Please call me Claire, Mr. Hirooka.”

“Okay... Claire. Oh, and feel free to call me Takumi. No ‘mister,’ okay?”

“If you say so. Takumi it is.”

*Her name sounds so foreign... I knew she wasn’t Japanese!*

“So, Claire? What are you doing out in these woods?”

“I’d intended to pick a few plants to make some medicine, but I must have wandered too far in by mistake. I was too engrossed in my search, it seems, and that orc frightened my horse away.”

“I see.”

*A horse, huh... Sure, she’d look great on one, but doesn’t she have a car?*

“And what, may I ask, are you doing here, Takumi?”

“Hmm... What *am* I doing here?”

“Woo-woo?”

“What?” She gave me a confused look.

“I just...found myself here when I woke up. I was just looking for a way out, actually.”

“...You woke up here? Why? How?”

“No idea.”

“I see...”

Part of me still thought I was dreaming. *My cheek hurt when I pinched it, but that could just mean this is a very vivid dream.*

*Wake up already!*

“Takumi?” Claire suddenly said, her eyes wandering. “If you don’t mind, I have a request to make of you.”

“What is it? I’ll help you however I’m able.”

“Remember how I said I was looking for a plant? I’d greatly appreciate it if you would help me find it.”

“A plant? I don’t know how much help I’d be, but I can try. Let’s take a look.”

*It must be fate that we met—and besides, I couldn’t turn down a request from such a beautiful woman.*

“Really?! Thank you so much! With you by my side, I won’t have to worry about running into any more orcs, either.”

“Hahaha... I really didn’t do anything, though.”

“I’m sure that Miss Leo is with you through your own strength.”

“...That true, Leo?”

“Ruff.”

*All I did was pick her up and give her a home. Even Leo herself seems to agree with Claire, though.*

“So...what kind of plant are you looking for?”

“It’s called capwort. It looks like...”

She explained its characteristics, and then the three of us started searching for it. From her description, it sounded a lot like the mugwort that used to grow in my old neighborhood. A nice old man had lived nearby and taught me a little bit about wild herbs and the like, but I wasn’t very interested back then. I only remembered mugwort because I saw it so often.

*I think it grows near flowing water, and it’s good for lowering fevers...but I don’t even know if the capwort she wants is the mugwort I remember.*

According to Claire, her sister was sick, and the apothecary told her that only capwort could help her.

*I bet she meant doctor, not apothecary. And wait...why doesn’t she just go to the pharmacy and get some pills?*

“I don’t see any,” I said after a while.

“That’s odd. I was told capwort grew here, in this forest by the stream...”

“Bow-wow! Woo-woo!”

Leo, apparently tired of looking, had decided to play in the water instead.

*I guess it'd be hard to look for a little plant at her height.*

I thought that she might be able to sniff it out, but she'd probably never smelled it before.

*She can go ahead and play, then. I was never able to take her to a stream like this before, after all.*

After what felt like an hour, there was still no sign of the capwort. Not only that, all the stooping and rooting through the underbrush made my back hurt.

I stood up and stretched. A moment later, Claire followed suit. She likely felt as bad as me, considering she seemed equally unused to this kind of work. Our eyes met and we exchanged small smiles before getting back to work.

After a while longer, I sat by the riverbank for a short break.

“Still no luck,” I sighed.

I leaned back, sticking my hands out into the grass behind me as I went over what the capwort looked like. It was supposed to have a hard stem and leaves covered in a soft white fuzz. According to her, the flowers were supposed to be the medicinal parts.

“...Hm?”

I lowered my gaze to find a plant matching that exact description sprouting from the ground between my fingers. As I watched, more popped up until there were five little treelike plants with tiny flowers. Finally, I came to my senses.

“What the heck?”

I'd never even heard of any plant that could grow that quickly, but there was no denying what I saw.

*I knew it! I'm dreaming.*

Dream or not, though, I had to let Claire know.

“Claire! I found some!”

“Really?!”

“Ruffu?!”

Claire stopped searching and hurried over to my side. Even Leo jumped out of the river, shook herself dry, and bounded over to me.

“This is it, right?” I pointed the plant out to Claire.

“Yes, there’s no mistaking it! That’s capwort.”

“Good. I’m glad we finally found it.”

“*You* found it, Takumi. Thank you so much!”

“Oh, no. I bet I would’ve given up long ago if I was on my own.”

“Ruff.”

First things first, though, we had to pick it. We carefully harvested all five of the little plants and placed them inside Claire’s small leather pouch. She then politely bowed to me.

“I don’t know how I could ever repay you, Takumi. I don’t think I could’ve found it without you.”

I laughed awkwardly. “Don’t worry about it, really. I’m just glad I could help.”

“Truly, thank you. Now I just have to get home, but...”

“But?”

“My horse still hasn’t come back yet. That orc must have frightened her terribly.”

“Oh, right... I guess you’ll have to walk, then.”

“I suppose so... I just wish there was some way of getting this to my sister sooner...”

“There’s no point in worrying about it, though. Just do what you can.”

“Yes... You’re right.”

“Woo? Ruff, ruff!”

“*Hm?* What’s up, Leo?”



Leo suddenly got to her feet, spun around to show Claire her back, then crouched down low.

*She's not telling us to get on, is she?*

"You sure, Leo?"

"Ruff!"

I wasn't sure if it was really safe to ride her, but there at least seemed to be enough space to fit both of us.

"How about we ride Leo back to your home, Claire?"

*"R-Ride a silver fenrir...? Are you sure?"*

"Arooooo!"

*Sure, I'm sure!* Leo seemed to say with a howl. Claire faltered a moment, then swallowed hard and gave Leo a short bow.

"...In that case, Miss Leo, I'll take you up on your most generous offer."

"Arf."

*It looks like I'm riding Leo after all, huh?*

I climbed onto Leo's back first, wrapping my arms around her massive neck. Judging from how fast I'd seen her run, I'd get tossed right off unless I kept an iron grip.

Claire then followed me up. Since there was nothing else to grab hold of, she hugged me from behind, wrapping her arms tightly around my chest. I'd been trying *very* hard not to focus too much on her shapely breasts, but now they were being squished squarely against my back. I felt my face grow hot in an instant.

"I'm sorry about this, Takumi."

"N-N-N-No, n-no problem. I-It's all right. Go ahead, Leo."

"Yes, let's go."

*I guess Claire doesn't care that much...no, wait, I'm the weird one here for turning it into such a big deal. How embarrassing...*

“Woo? Ruff!”

*All set? Then let's go!* Leo seemed to say before bolting off.

*Wait a second!*

“Do you...know where we're going, Leo?”

She skidded to a halt. “...Awoo.”

*She really thought just picking a random direction would work? No way we'll make it like that...*

“Claire? Could you please navigate for us?”

“Of course!” She giggled. “Miss Leo *is* rather cute, isn't she?”

“Haha, yeah. A cute little...er, *big* airhead.”

“Woo-woooo!”

She woofed in defiance, prompting another round of giggling from Claire and me.



**THANKS** to Claire's expert directions, we were about to leave the forest without too much trouble.

“Please turn left here and take the first branch in the road you see!”

“Ruff!”

I hadn't said anything in a while—I was too awestruck to. After leaving the forest, we found ourselves in the middle of a grassland. There was nothing to see but a smattering of trees in the distance, and the road Leo was running on looked like it was formed from packed gravel. I hadn't heard of anywhere in Japan even remotely like it. Even remote country roads were paved with asphalt. I hadn't seen an actual gravel road since I went on a mountain hiking field trip as a kid.

“Seriously, where *am* I?” I muttered to myself.

*I've been trying hard not to think about it, but...what if this is like one of those light novels, and I'm in another world now?*

No one would believe me if I told them that I just somehow woke up in another world—and with Leo, no less. But the more time that passed, and the more I saw, the less likely it seemed that this was all a dream.

*If this isn't a dream...if this is reality, then what? Am I really in another world now? Was I transported here like some light novel protagonist? Me, of all people? If that's true, though, I should have some sort of overpowered skill... Maybe Leo? Yeah, right.*

I decided to stop thinking about it. I wasn't about to "waste my brain cells on nonsense," as my colleague used to say.

"We're almost there, Miss Leo," Claire said behind me. "Can you see my house over there?"

Some ways ahead of us, I could see a small building. I let out a sigh of relief. Seeing some trace of human life was oddly relaxing, after all the untamed nature we were just in.

*It looks pretty small, though. I'm kinda surprised.*

As we got closer, though, I realized it only looked small from far away.

"...That's not a house. That's a mansion."

"Oh no, this is only our country villa. It's not that impressive, really."

*Claire has to be a rich nobleman's daughter or something. That would explain where she'd learned to bow so nicely, too. If this is "only" her villa, she must be rich.*

While I was lost in my thoughts, Leo carried us closer to the villa. Soon I could make out the red brick wall surrounding it, then the individual bricks.

"Please stop right there, Miss Leo," Claire said as she pointed out the front gate with her slender hand.

"Wooo," Leo howled in response.

Just as we were approaching, a group of four people in heavy armor were coming out. They readied their spears as soon as they saw Leo approaching, lining up to block our way in. Leo didn't so much as bat an eye, though, and simply sat down where Claire had directed.

“Stand down,” Claire commanded the guards. “It’s me.”

“M-Milady?!” One of them looked up in surprise. “You’re all right! But...what is that *monster*?”

“*She* is a guest. Treat her well.”

“As you wish.”

All four lowered their spears and parted to let Leo through. I’d assumed we would ride Leo on through, but to my disappointment, Claire dismounted. I followed suit a moment later.

*I really hope Claire has a chance to ride behind me again... That was pure bliss. And Leo, stop giving me that look!*

“Let’s go, Takumi.”

“Okay.”

“Ruff.”

The guards parted, two to a side. As we passed through the gate, I could see the looks of awe on their faces.

Beyond the gate lay the massive stone-brick mansion. It was so different from all the buildings I’d ever seen that I couldn’t help but feel intimidated. Well-maintained flowers and shrubs lined the neat cobblestone path to the front door, giving off the impression of a high-class garden.

When we were about halfway up the path, the mansion’s front door flew open and a well-dressed elderly man with snow white hair ran out.

*Wait...who’s that?*

“Milady! Thank goodness you’ve returned! I could not even imagine *what* I would have told your father, had the worst happened to you. Are you hurt?”

“Hello, Sebastian. I’m sorry for making you worry, but I’m perfectly fine. Not a scratch, as you can see—and I have this man, Takumi Hirooka, to thank for it.”

“Ah!” the man exclaimed as he turned to face me. “How could I *ever* thank you for saving milady? I am her humble butler Sebastian, and on behalf of my master, I offer you my most profound gratitude.” He bowed deeply.

“N-No, I was just passing by, really...”

*Leo did all the work, after all. But Sebastian...I wonder if he became a butler just because of his name? I guess it could just be a coincidence, though.*

“Sebastian?” asked Claire. “How’s Tilura doing?”

“No better than when you left, I’m afraid. She’s still in bed and her fever hasn’t improved.”

“I *knew* it. She needs proper medicine.”

“But we’ve no such thing in the mansion. Nor is there any in town.”

“That’s why I went to the forest. I *was* attacked by an orc, yes, but Takumi saved me!”

“An *orc*...?!” Sebastian’s eyes grew wide as he turned back to me. “How can we *ever* repay you for your kindness? When we found milady’s note and learned that she was bound for the forest, we were beside ourselves with worry! I’d just dispatched a group of guards to find her.”

*He must mean the four we ran into at the gate.*

“*Hahaha*... It was nothing, really. Besides, you should be thanking Leo, not me.”

“Ruff!”

*I barely did anything.* I gave Leo an appreciative pat on the flank as I explained exactly what had happened.

“So...your familiar saved milady, then? But unless my eyes deceive me, that’s...”

Claire nodded. “I saw her slay an orc with my own eyes, Sebastian. Only a silver fenrir could’ve moved as she did.”

“She certainly *resembles* one, but I never dared imagine... I-I never dreamed I would see one with my own eyes.”

“Me neither.”

“Silver fenrir are symbols of power and grace, representing our very country. And to think, Mr. Hirooka, that you successfully tamed her!”

“No, it’s nothing like that. I just took her in a few years ago. She’s not my familiar—if anything, we’re partners.”

“Roo-roo!”

Leo leaned down to nuzzle me and I scratched her giant cheek.

“You...took her in?” Sebastian blinked in disbelief. “I’m not sure if you’re aware, but...as a species, fenrir famously value their family. No pup would simply be left to her own devices. It’d be a far more impossible task than you believe.”

“Really?”

*I mean, I think she’s technically still a Maltese.*

She was in a cardboard box by the side of the road when I found her. There was no parent in sight, of course, and anyone who’d abandon such a young puppy must have had their reasons.

“Just who *are* you, Mr. Hirooka?”

“Oh, you can ask him later,” Claire huffed. “Tilura comes first. Her fever’s as high as ever, isn’t it? Takumi found some capwort for her, so she’ll be better soon.”

“Capwort, even? Kind sir, I haven’t the slightest idea how...”

“You can thank me later. Can we come inside first?”

“My sincerest apologies. On behalf of all the servants of the Libert estate, I am honored to welcome you.”

With that, Sebastian bowed once again and led us through the impressive double-doors. Claire followed him as though it were only natural, and Leo sauntered in after her.

*I’ve never been welcomed inside anywhere this fancy before, and definitely not by a butler... There’s got to be proper manners for this, but I don’t even know where to start.*

I took up the rear, trying very hard not to look too nervous. But as soon as I passed through the door, I heard...



“Welcome home, milady!”

Sebastian, alongside a full entourage of other butlers and maids, called out in perfect sync. It was even more impressive sight than the building itself. Sebastian had implied there were other servants, but I hadn’t expected so many.

*There must be about twenty of them!*

“Thank you for greeting us, Sebastian,” Claire smiled as she held out the capwort. “Take this.”

“As you ask.”

“Everyone, this is the man and fenrir who saved my life. Treat them as you would me.”

“Yes, milady!” the servants replied as one. More than half of them dispersed to carry out their business. Two of the maids, however, approached us.

One of them, a pretty woman in her twenties with long black hair, curtsied. “Thank you for saving milady. I ensure guests at the villa are properly attended to. You may call me Laila.”

“I-I’ll be looking after you, too. My name is Gelda,” said the freckled maid beside Laila. She was much younger—probably still a teenager—and her short brown hair neatly framed her nervous expression.

*I wish she’d calm down a little... I won’t bite...*

“Yeah...nice to meet you both.”

I didn’t know the first thing about real-life maids, let alone how I should react.

*I wish I’d visited a maid café while I had the chance.*

The entrance hall itself was plenty intimidating, too. It was large enough to fit all twenty-plus people here without difficulty, after all. A plush red carpet ran from the front doors through the center of the room and up the grand staircase. It felt...oddly familiar somehow.

*Right, that’s it. From that zombie survival horror game.*

It was rather famous and my colleague had highly recommended it, but I was

scared stiff of horror games—not to mention I had basically no time, thanks to my horrid job. Even when I *had* any free time, I cared for Leo first and foremost.

This entrance hall didn't feel *that* scary to me, though. Perhaps because of all the people there. If anything, it felt warm and inviting.

*I'm glad everyone seems so friendly...and not undead.*

Nonetheless, I made a mental note to avoid coming here after dark.

"Takumi?" Claire stepped away from Sebastian to address me. "I'm going to see Tilura—my sister."

"Okay."

"Laila, Gelda, treat him well."

"As you ask, milady."

"I-I'll do my best!"

With that, Claire headed up the staircase.

*She really cares for her sister, huh... That's always nice to see.*

Laila bowed. "Allow us to show you to the parlor, Mr. Hirooka. Right this way."

"P-Please follow us!"

"Ah...wait a second. What about Leo?"

"She may accompany us. It's plenty large, I assure you."

"Y-Yes, she can come, too!"

"That's a relief. Lead on, then."

"Ruff!"

With that, we were led down a corridor and through an elegant door. The room beyond was easily big enough to comfortably fit ten people. A large chandelier—the first one I'd ever seen in person—hung from the ceiling. I could only imagine how hard it must be to light each little candle so high up.

"Please, feel free to relax. I shall return with tea shortly," Laila said. "What should I bring for Miss Leo?"

“Let’s see... Water, or maybe milk if you have any.”

“As you wish. We’ll return shortly.”

“Yes, just wait here!”

“I’ll be okay, though. You don’t need to rush on my account.”

Laila and Gelda curtsied and left the room.

*Politely refusing at a time like this... Jeez, how Japanese am I? I need to read the room better.*

I could see Gelda smile before she closed the door, however, so I at least helped her relax a little.

I decided to sit down for a bit at the table in the center of the room instead of just standing around. Leo came up beside my chair and laid down. If she was relaxing, too, then that meant this place must be safe. She seemed to have great senses, after all. I wasn’t expecting Claire to try to harm me or anything, but it did feel like this was all a little too good to be true.

*Right...this could still all be a dream.*

“Woooo?” Leo cocked her head to the side curiously.

“I could be dreaming all of this, y’know. I still can’t believe you’re so big now.”

“Ruff, ruff.”

“Wait...you wanna play?”

“Ruff!”

“Uh... Maybe not in here.”

“Ruuuuuuff...” she seemed to pout.

I petted her head as I scanned the room. As we were both seated, we could comfortably see eye-to-eye, but she was taller than I was at the shoulder. We were lucky the mansion was big enough to fit her. Playing here would’ve been pushing it.

*Maybe we can play out back later. We’ll still have to be careful to not break anything, though.*

I was ruffling Leo's fur, deep in thought, when someone knocked on the door. It opened a moment later to reveal Laila and Gelda.

"We have brought you your tea," Laila announced with a curtsy, the white porcelain cup staying neatly on its saucer.

"A-And milk!" Gelda stammered.

"Please, come right in."

"Thank you very much."

Laila walked reservedly across the room and silently set the teacup on the desk. Gelda hesitated a moment before hauling a large basin of milk over to Leo.

*I guess Leo is pretty intimidating... No wonder she's so scared of her.*

"Make sure to thank the nice lady, Leo," I told her with a pat.

"Aroooo! Ruff-ruff," Leo told Gelda as quietly as she could manage.

Gelda flinched visibly at Leo's ruffling, but seeming to understand Leo's intent, she mumbled "H-Help yourself" in reply before stepping back.

Leo started lapping up the milk with gusto and I decided to try some tea myself.

"Mm. This is really good."

"You are too kind, sir."

"Ruff!"

"...Th-Thank you."

The tea was so good that I nearly drank the whole cup in one sip. Likewise, Leo had nearly finished her milk by the time I looked up.

*Maybe what they say about owners and pets being alike is true... Gee, this is embarrassing.*

Laila stepped closer. "Would you care for another cup?"

"Oh, yes, please."

"As you wish." She poured me a second cup of tea from the pot that she had

brought with her. The alluring scent filled my nose again.

I was by no means an expert, but I was pretty sure this was some type of black tea. I had it from a bottle or can every once in a while, but this smelled a hundred times more fragrant and had the flavor to match.

Even though the tea was great, I couldn't relax as long as Gelda was watching Leo drink in terror.

*I bet she just needs to get to know Leo a little better.*

"Your name was Gelda, right?"

"Y-Yes!"

"You don't need to be so scared of Leo. She won't hurt you or anyone else, I promise."

"R-Right... I'm sorry."

"My deepest apologies, Mr. Hirooka," Laila cut in, shooting Gelda a stern look. "Gelda! You know better than to treat our guests so rudely!"

"I-I'm sorry..."

"Oh, no," I said. "I'm not angry. I think most people would find Leo scary, after all."

"Is that so?" Laila asked curiously. "I happen to find her rather adorable."

"Really?"

"Certainly. She seemed to be following you as if to protect you. Not only that, but she was considerate enough of Gelda to thank her in a lower voice. She is rather big, but I can't help but find her endearing."

"Hahaha, I guess you're right. She's big, but she's really sweet at heart."

"...Leo is a she?" Gelda asked in astonishment.

"Yep," I replied. "She's a cute little girl, just like you. So please, try not to be too afraid of her."

"I-I'm a cute little...? O-Oh, of course! I'll try!"

Laila smiled slightly. "You have quite the way with words, Mr. Hirooka."

“Not really. I just say what’s on my mind.”

Maybe because Gelda seemed so nervous all the time, she came across as a newbie desperate to do a good job. That counted as cute in my books...and, of course, she was quite pretty. Every person I’d seen so far was very attractive, to be honest. Even Sebastian was quite the striking older gentleman and so were the other butlers. Honestly, I felt rather plain amongst them.

“Woo... Ruff, ruff.”

“What is it, girl? Trying to comfort me?”

“Bow-wow!”

She nuzzled her big wet nose into my shirt.

*Thanks, Leo. But next time, maybe you can wipe all the milk off your lips first?*

I pulled out my handkerchief and cleaned her up as best as I could. Laila and Gelda watched us with soft smiles. I tried not to feel too self-conscious.

“Oh, right! Laila?”

“What may I do for you?”

“Is there someplace nearby with a lot of room, like a garden? I’d love to play with Leo later.”

“I believe the garden behind the mansion should suit your needs perfectly. Miss Leo should have all the space she will require there. I will show you the way later.”

“Thank you so much.” I turned back to Leo. “Isn’t that great, girl? You can play all you want!”

“Ruff! Ruff, ruff!”

She started eagerly wagging her big, fluffy tail.

*Maybe you shouldn’t wag so hard, though. You keep almost flipping up Gelda’s skirt.*

I averted my gaze just in case.

After I relaxed for a while, there was another knock at the door. Laila went to

open it, and Claire and Sebastian stepped inside.

“I’m sorry for making you wait, Takumi.”

“No problem at all. I had the chance to drink some wonderful tea in the meantime. So please, don’t worry.”

“I’m glad you’re so understanding,” she said with a warm smile as she sat across from me. Sebastian left and came back with a teacup a moment later, which Laila filled.

“So how is your sister doing, Claire?”

“As Sebastian said, she was doing no better than before I left for the forest. With the capwort you found, however, we can make the medicine she needs. She should be better soon.”

“That’s good to hear. I hope she makes a full recovery.”

“I hope so, too. Really, I don’t know how to thank you for all you’ve done.”

“No, I haven’t done much of anything. Honestly, you’ve thanked me far too much already.”

“Oh... My apologies. I’ll make this time my last.”

“Yes, please do.”

*I honestly didn’t do that much, did I?*

“So, um... Takumi?” Claire asked hesitantly.

“What is it?”

“If you don’t mind, could you please tell me more about yourself? Where you’re from, for instance?”

“Where I’m from?”

“Yes. I already know that you’re by no means a bad person, since you’ve been so willing to help us. But you knew almost nothing about your own familiar, let alone monsters in general.”

“Yeah... You’re right about that.”

“Anyone living in this country would *surely* have heard the legends about

silver fenrir. My guess, then, is that you aren't from here."

"You could say that."

I wasn't surprised she was suspicious of me. There was so much I didn't know myself.

*Especially if this really is a whole new world...*

"I'm sorry, Takumi. I didn't mean to pry at all. Even if you don't wish to tell me, my debt to you remains. You're welcome here all the same."

"You really don't mind?"

"Of course not. I can understand having a secret or two. Besides, I was simply curious. I won't pressure you to say anything you don't want to."

"Wait, really?"

"Yes. Your waking up in that forest and Miss Leo are extraordinary enough, not to mention that your clothes are unlike anything I've ever seen."

"Oh, right."

I took another look at what I was wearing. Since I hadn't had the time to change after getting home, I was wearing a white dress shirt and black dress pants. I'd taken off my coat and tie before I started eating, so they hadn't been with me when I'd woken up.

"I talked with Sebastian, and he agrees that your clothes are very unusual."

"It's as milady says," Sebastian nodded. "Never have I or any of the other servants laid eyes on such eclectic attire."

"Huh. Okay..."

*That certainly supports the alternate world theory. But on the other hand, this could all just be part of my elaborate dream.* I waffled back and forth between the possibilities for a moment before deciding that this probably *was* real after all.

"All in all, Takumi, I would say that you have more than a few mysteries to you. I'd love to get to know you better," she chuckled.

"R-Really...?"



I'd never met someone as charming as her before. I seriously doubted that any man could've avoided falling for her after seeing that smile.

*It's not like I have anything to hide... I may as well tell her everything. I just hope she believes me.*

She seemed perfectly trustworthy, after all.

"Well... I don't know if you'll believe me, but..."

"After meeting Miss Leo, I would accept anything you told me."

"I guess you're right. I'll tell you everything, then."

"Thank you, Takumi. Please, go ahead."

"First of all, you remember how I told you I'd just *found* myself in that forest, right?"

"Yes, of course. Do you have any idea what might have happened to you while you were asleep?"

"An abduction, perhaps?" Sebastian guessed. "But no, I suppose that would be utterly impossible with Miss Leo at your side. ...My sincerest apologies for interrupting you. Please continue."

I couldn't have been abducted. I had no wealthy relatives or any other money to speak of—I was just an exhausted salaryman. There would've been no point. If someone had wanted to kidnap me, though, they wouldn't have to worry about Leo getting in their way. Not at her former size, anyway.

I'd no better explanation as to why I was in that forest, but I had to be clear with them on one thing first.

"The thing is...when I first woke up, one thing really surprised me."

"What would that be?"

"Leo had gotten bigger."

"What? Hasn't Miss Leo always been this big? She seems about a normal size for a silver fenrir."

"That's just it. Before I went to sleep, Leo was this tiny little dog who I could've picked up pretty easily if I felt like it."

The room went silent.

Not only Claire and Sebastian, but even Laila and Gelda stopped to stare at Leo.

“Woooo?” She cocked her head to one side.

“Takumi?” asked Claire after a long moment. “Are you sure about that?”

“Yes, I’m positive. I took her in several years ago, sure, but I swear that just last night she was lap-sized and fully-grown.”

“And you’re positive you didn’t take in a baby silver fenrir?”

“Positive. Besides, didn’t you tell me yourself that silver fenrir would never abandon a pup? Leo was definitely abandoned. There was no parent, pack, or anything anywhere to be seen.”

“...I see.”

“I’m pretty sure that she somehow became one overnight.”

“I think I understand now. So...she used to be a regular dog?”

“Exactly.”

“But I’ve never heard of anything turning into a silver fenrir like that.”

“Well, about that...”

*This is where it gets weird.*

I didn’t completely believe it myself, but having said that much already, I had to tell them everything.

“I think I’m from another world.”

“...Another *what?*”

“You know, a world other than this one. Almost everything I’ve seen since I first opened my eyes in that forest has been totally new to me. I’d never even *heard* of silver fenrir before this morning. Even orcs are nothing but stories where I come from.”

“I suppose that would explain why you didn’t know about monsters. Everyone in this country—no...perhaps I should say this world—knows all about

monsters, including orcs, of course. Are you sure you meant another *world*?”

“I won’t blame you if you don’t believe me. I’m still half-doubting I’m here, even.”

“You are?”

“Yes. Honestly, I’m still half-convinced this is all a dream, including this conversation.”

“.....”

“Well, I’ve done a lot since I woke up today, so I’ve been believing that theory less and less. Besides, I’m positive I’ve never met anyone like you in real life.”

“Yes... I certainly *hope* this isn’t just your dream.”

“Me, too. But then *that* would mean that I somehow got transported here from my world. You see, there were all sorts of stories in my old world about people who could cross from one world to another, though. Supposedly, anyone who crosses over winds up with a special power or two.”

“Special power?”

*What did my light-novel-loving colleague call them again? “Cheat skills” or something? And they’re supposed to make me overpowered, right?*

I’d seen the same idea in manga and anime too, though I hardly knew those any better. The only thing I remembered for certain was the “special power” bit.

“I think that my ‘special power’ might be Leo.”

“Miss Leo?”

“Yes. She somehow turned into a silver fenrir on the way over here, and now she’s more or less unstoppable.”

“You...might have a point there.”

“If that’s true, though, I feel kind of sorry for her. She shouldn’t have gotten wrapped up in my mess like this.”

“Ruff. Ruff, ruff!” Leo suddenly turned and began licking my face.

“H-Hey, cut it out! I get it, I get it! You like it here!”

*I guess she doesn't regret coming with me.*

I felt that I could understand her a lot better since coming here. Judging from Leo's reaction, it seemed she could understand me more, too.

Nonetheless, I convinced her to stop licking my face and started giving her a thorough petting.

“Milady... About Mr. Hirooka's story...” Sebastian started.

Claire shook her head. “I know that what he's saying makes hardly any sense, Sebastian. I *really* think we can trust him, though, no matter how incredible it may seem.”

“...I see your mind has been made up, milady. If that is your decision, then I shall not utter another word to the contrary. If nothing else, you are an excellent judge of character, after all.”

“Thank you, Sebastian.”

“I think I will trust you as well, milady,” Laila said with a nod. “You were the one who chose us, after all, and permitted us to work not only here but in the Libert Mansion proper. I won't doubt you.”

“I-I trust you, too! You hired me, and, um, I want to try even harder! I promise I won't let you down!” Gelda chimed in.

“Laila, Gelda... Thank you, all of you.”

“Ruff!”

“*Hehe*, you trust me, too, Miss Leo? Thank you very much.”

Claire seemed to be quite popular with her servants. I wasn't surprised, though—not after she risked life and limb for her little sister. I couldn't help but smile.

*It must be nice...having a boss you can trust.*

At my workplace, the managers would make demand after demand and my colleagues were always cursing them behind their backs.

“Oh, Takumi?”

“Yes?”

“If what you say is true, then you have no one here you can rely on for support. Is that right?”

“Yes, that’s right. I don’t know anyone except the people in this room right now.”

“In that case, why don’t you stay with us awhile? I’d very much like to thank you properly for your aid.”

“I don’t need thanks, really... Are you sure I can stay here?”

“Of course. Stay as long as you please. I would imagine Tilura would like to thank you as well, once she’s feeling better.”

“Okay... Well, I don’t know how long it’ll take for me to get my bearings here, but I’d appreciate it if I could stay until then. Thank you.”

“Of course! Sebastian, Laila, Gelda, you heard him. Takumi is now our guest and you are to treat him as such. Prepare him a room at once.”

“As you wish.”

“Of course, milady.”

“O-Okay, I will!”

The three servants then filed out of the room. Laila lingered behind a moment to refill Claire’s and my teacup.

“Thank you for the refill, Laila,” I said before she left.

*I really don’t need a full room... I thought. I mean, the sofa over there looks plenty comfy.*

“Oh, that’s right,” I realized. “How is Tilura doing? Is her medicine ready yet?”

“Oh, if only. You see, the capwort flowers need to be finely chopped and dried before they can be used in medicine. I was told they won’t be ready until tomorrow afternoon at the earliest.”

“I see... But there’s enough, right? I remember we picked five.”

“Oh, it’s certainly enough. Tilura only needs one plant’s worth, so it seems

we'll have extra." Claire pulled the remaining four stalks out of her bag and placed them on the table, a sad smile on her lips.

*I guess there wasn't any point in taking it all if we only need the flowers, huh?*

"Well...at least now you'll have backups in case someone else gets sick."

"Yes, we'll definitely be holding onto these."

"Ruff...ruff?"

While I continued to chat with Claire, Leo sniffed the capwort with great interest.

"That's *not* food, Leo," I warned her. "Don't eat it."

"She may only be hungry. It is nearly dinnertime, after all."

I looked out the window. "You're right. It looks like the sun is about to set."

"I'll have the chefs prepare something for her. I'm also quite famished. I was so determined to find that capwort, I totally forgot about lunch."

I chuckled. "No wonder you're hungry, then. I haven't eaten since that first orc Leo killed, and I think that was a little before noon."

She smiled. "Well, then, I'll inform the staff right away. We have to welcome you both properly, after all."

"Just don't serve anything too fancy, please. I don't know the table manners around here."

"Oh, no need to worry about that. It'll be only myself and the servants, after all. What should we get for Leo?"

"Let's see... Do you have any sausages?" Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Leo perk up. "They're her favorite. It's a highly seasoned minced meat usually stuffed in casings of prepared animal intestine... You have them here in this world, right?"

"Yes, we do." She giggled. "I think I *like* finding the differences between our two worlds. I hope you'll tell me more sometime."

"Of course. Did you hear that, Leo? You can have sausages!"

“Ruff! Wooo-wooo-wooo-awoooooooo!”

“You’re that happy, huh?”

She began wagging up a storm, then she tried to jump up on me in glee.

*W-Wait, stop! Down, girl! I don’t wanna die!*

“...Wooo?”

I managed to calm her down at the last second, right before she could bring her full weight down on me.

*Crushed to death by my cute little pup after finally getting a chance to start anew...that’s not even funny!*

I reached out to give her a comforting pat on the head, and she nuzzled her head up into it.

At that moment, however, the capwort that was resting precariously at the edge of the table fell. It must have gotten knocked loose by Leo’s wagging.

“Ah!” Claire exclaimed.

“Got it!” I called out.

I managed to snatch up three of them right before they hit the floor. Claire reached out to grab the last.

Before putting the plants back on the table, though, I stopped to look at them. It was so hard to imagine those little flowers becoming medicine. Back in Japan, I never had the chance to see the plants before they were processed. The pharmacies and hospitals only sold pills or powders or the like. I’d never seen mugwort in action, but I hoped that the capwort at least could bring a fever down.

*Just cutting up the flowers and drying them has that much of an effect, huh?*

“Takumi?” Claire shot me a worried look.

“Oh, sorry. I just spaced out a moment there.”

I reached out to put the capwort back on the table when I realized something amiss.

“Huh... This is weird.”

“What do you mean?”

I opened my palm to show her.

“Oh.” She noticed almost immediately. “They’ve dried out.”

“Right? I could’ve sworn they were normal before they fell off the table.”

“Did you perhaps do something to them, Takumi?”

“No, I just picked them up.”

“I see... That’s certainly what it looked like to me as well.”

“Ruff?”

We all exchanged puzzled glances.

“Oh, that’s right!” I exclaimed. “Can’t you use this for medicine now?”

“Ah, yes! Why, they look practically perfect! I’ll let Sebastian know right away!”

She took the dried capwort from me and ran off to find him. Leo and I were left alone in the lounge. There was utter silence, except for the growling of my stomach.

“I guess dinner comes later, huh? Getting Tilura her medicine comes first. I wonder how that capwort dried so quickly, though?”

“Rooo. Ruff, ruff, ruff?”

“C’mon, Leo. If I can wait for my dinner, you can, too.”

“Wooooo...”

I gave her a comforting pat as I continued puzzling over how the plants could have dried so fast, waiting alone in the lounge.



**NEARLY** two hours passed—or at least, it *felt* like it. There didn’t seem to be any clock in the room to check. Laila and Gelda had each stopped in several times to refill our milk or tea, but no matter how much I drank, it failed to fill my stomach properly. It *did* fill my bladder, however, and I had to ask Laila to



show me the way to the bathroom at one point.

I was dismayed—but not especially surprised—to find they had no indoor plumbing. I also let Leo into the back garden once so that she could do her business as well. It certainly seemed big enough for Leo to play in. I'd no idea how much such a massive house and garden might cost if I was back in Japan.

*I bet I come off as a real peasant, huh?*

I spent most of the time, however, just petting Leo and admiring the parlor's décor. Finally, I heard a knock at the door, and Claire and Sebastian came in.

"Thank you so much, Takumi," Claire smiled. "I had the dried capwort you found turned into medicine, and Tilura took it just a moment ago."

"I'm glad to hear. Do you think the medicine works?"

"Oh, yes. As soon as she took it, she began sleeping far more soundly. Her fever has also begun to go down."

"That's great! I hope she makes a full recovery soon."

"Me too."

"Mr. Hirooka," Sebastian cut in. "From what Milady told me, it would seem that the capwort dried out the moment you laid hands on it. Is that true?"

"Yes, I guess so. I caught it as it was falling off the table, and by the time I put it back, it had dried out."

"Is that so?"

Claire turned her head toward him. "So? Do you think it's possible, Sebastian?"

He nodded.

"Indeed. Though we have no proof now, I suspect he may have a Gift."

"A gift...?" I wondered.

*What's that? It sure doesn't sound like they're just calling me talented...*

"Nobody could do what you did, you see," Claire said.

"Perhaps you would like a proper explanation?" Sebastian asked.

“Yes, please,” I nodded.

“Very well.” He cleared his throat. “It is said that Gifts are blessings from the gods. Some even say that only one in a million children are born with such amazing abilities.”

“From the gods...?”

“Neither Sebastian nor I have ever met someone who really has one before. It’s said, though, that they have special talents in a given field that allow them to do more than any ordinary human could accomplish.”

Sebastian nodded in agreement. “Presently, there is not a soul in our entire kingdom that is known to possess a Gift. Only records of past Gift-holders exist now.”

“Okay...” I said, trying to wrap my head around it. “What do you mean by ‘special talents’? What kind of things can they do?”

Sebastian stroked his chin. “Well, each Gift-holder is said to possess supernatural abilities. For instance, an individual with a blacksmithing Gift might create a sword that could cut through anything. A water Gift-holder may be able to produce clean drinking water anywhere at any time. A magic Gift may give its holder the ability to cast any magic they please to great effect. Someone with a sage Gift may be able to understand how any given object or principle works at a glance and have great insight into the inner workings of the world. Those are all, of course, merely examples.”

“...Magic?”

*I guess the tropes were right. Other worlds really do have magic.*

“There is, of course, no capwort-drying magic,” Sebastian continued. “At best, one might be able to dry it more quickly with carefully applied fire magic, but you managed it in an instant. Such a feat is thought to be impossible.”

“And if you *had* used magic, I would have noticed it,” Claire added.

“.....”

“In other words, you accomplished something that is quite literally impossible. A Gift is the only possible explanation.”

“Didn’t you mention something about a special skill earlier, Takumi?”

“Yeah... I did, but...”

It was one of the few consistent points across all the otherworld stories I’d seen.

“Then I think Miss Leo becoming a silver fenrir must be only part of it,” she concluded. “You must have a power of your own.”

“Yes... A blessing from the gods themselves,” Sebastian mused.

“I know it must sound like a Gift, but...capwort drying? Is there even a Gift like that?” I asked, a little skeptical.

“Not in any of the old records, I’m afraid. It would seem as though each Gift is utterly unique to its holder. No two Gifts are the same.”

“Or maybe, Takumi...drying things out is only part of your Gift? There may be more to it than that.”

“More to it?”

“Oh, yes,” Claire nodded. “There’s a device for determining Gifts, actually. If you try it out, we could figure out just what your Gift is fairly easily.”

“Wait, you really have something like that?”

“Well, we use it for detecting how much mana a person has, but it can also detect if the person has a Gift.”

“Some say it was invented by a Gift-holder,” Sebastian added. “I imagine that would be the reason why.”

“Okay... Let’s try it out, then.”

*If I really have a special ability like that, I’d love to know about it. Who knows? I might be able to put it to good use once I know what it is. I just hope I can do more than dry plants...*

“I’m afraid we don’t have it here, Takumi. Next time we go into town, though, we’ll make sure to take you along.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. Thank you.”

*A town, huh... I wonder what towns are like here? Since this world looks to be medieval European, I bet they're something like that.*

"At any rate, Takumi, dinner is ready. I'll have the servants bring it right away."

"Oh, right! I almost forgot how hungry I was. Thank you so much. Please do."

"As you wish," Sebastian said with a low bow. "I shall have it served post-haste."

With that, Sebastian left the room.

"I'm so sorry about this, Takumi." Claire gave me an apologetic smile. "The medicine ended up taking all my attention, even though you must have been starving."

"No, don't worry about it. Helping Tilura get better is the most important thing right now. Maybe I *did* drink a little too much tea, though..."

"Oh, Takumi, you shouldn't go drinking on an empty stomach like that. I'm plenty hungry as well, so why don't we both eat to our hearts' content? That includes you, too, Leo."

"Ruff!"

*Finally, it's time to eat!*

Leo was also in high spirits, sausages filling her doggy mind.

*Come to think of it, though, I never did ask about magic in the end... I guess there'll be time for that later, though. For now, I just need to focus on the food. I can't wait to see what they'll serve. It's gonna be great!*

I resolved to wait for Sebastian with bated breath.



**AFTER** we finished eating, Claire and I decided to relax in the parlor over tea. Sebastian and the maids stayed standing behind us respectfully.

*It must be rough, never getting to sit down.*

I had invited them to sit with us, but they'd each firmly refused in turn. I imagined they had their pride as servants to consider.

“That food tasted amazing, Claire.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. I’ll make sure to let the chefs know.”

“Ruff, ruff!”

Even Leo had had her fill of sausages. In fact, she ate so many that I’d tried to stop her partway through the meal, but Claire insisted that Leo keep eating. Apparently, sausages were common enough here that she was free to eat out their entire storehouse, should she feel like it. After trying a bite, even I felt like eating them forever. It was far above and beyond mere convenience store food.

Just like a real banquet, all manner of dishes had been served for dinner, from hams to soups to salads. It all tasted absolutely heavenly, but there was so much of it, I felt a little guilty for not being able to finish everything.

“I had the chefs prepare plenty of food to make it feel like a proper celebration, but the dishes themselves were all rather commonplace. You *did* tell me to not prepare anything too fancy, after all.”

“No, I’d call that plenty fancy as is.”

*Claire really gets to eat like that every day?* I mused. *I bet she’s never gone hungry a day in her life. Not that I was expecting any less from a lady who calls a mansion like this “just a villa,” of course.*

“By the way, Takumi, I noticed you’ve been holding back asking any questions since before dinner. Might I ask what you’d like to know?”

“Oh... You could tell?”

I’d been curious about magic ever since Sebastian first mentioned it. Magic didn’t exist in Japan, of course, even though some of the technology could certainly come across as supernatural if you didn’t know the science behind it.

Both Sebastian and Claire had mentioned magic and mana, and I, of course, wanted to use them. Even I knew how much of a staple magic was in fantasy stories. They all differed in how they presented it, but I always liked the idea of being able to use it. I didn’t know if I *could*, of course, but I at least wanted to look into it.

“Well... You mentioned magic before, right?” I began. “Do you actually have

magic in this world?”

“What? Why, yes, of course,” Claire answered. “Almost everyone uses it here.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Most daily applications include lighting fires or creating small gusts of wind. What about it?”

“No, it’s just...we don’t have magic in my world.”

“You don’t?!”

“What?!”

Both Claire and Sebastian cried out in alarm. Neither of the maids reacted audibly, but the shock on their faces was clear as day.

*I guess that goes to show just how big a role magic plays in their lives, huh?*

“Hrrr.”

Leo let out a short, disinterested snort from where she lay curled up in the middle of the floor. Even all balled up, she took up an immense amount of space and her flank was still pressed right up against my seat.

“You’re sure there isn’t any magic in your world?” Claire asked again. “Not even a little?”

“No. We have many stories about it, but we can’t actually use it ourselves.”

“Is that so?”

“In that case,” Sebastian mused, “perhaps I should offer a proper explanation of magic as well.”

“Please do,” I replied. “I’d love to know whether or not I could use it myself.”

“Why, *anyone* has the ability to use magic—though the specific effects of said magic differ depending on the individual, of course.”

*Anyone can use it? I might have a chance, then!*

I’d always dreamed of being able to use magic, but I knew that I should wait to hear all the details first. *There may be a cost attached, after all.* I

remembered all the stories where magic was something like a contract and it could only be used if the caster paid a steep price.

I turned to Sebastian, only to realize that he also seemed rather excited, as though he couldn't wait to explain.

*He really likes explaining things, doesn't he?*

He'd never looked more alive than when he was explaining Gifts to me. It was almost like it made him younger. I was tempted to call him out as a grampsplainer, but I didn't want to risk sounding too rude.

"So...what can you tell me about magic?"

"Go ahead, Sebastian," Claire nodded. "You can tell him everything."

"As you wish, milady. Oh, but how to best phrase this...?" He began to smile wistfully.

*I knew it! He really does like this stuff!*

"To put it simply, magic is the act of putting the mana in one's body to use. All living beings possess such mana. In fact, nothing can survive without it."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing," Sebastian confirmed. "There are trial records of people who used every bit of mana within their bodies, and without exception, they all perished. Mind you, these were old experiments. Such trials are not held anymore."

"Oh, okay."

*So, it's kind of like water? People die if they don't get enough? I bet they had to stop the experiments because of the high body count...*

"Magic requires mana to use. However, one simply cannot use magic by virtue of that alone. It requires an incantation: a catalyst of sorts to shape one's internal mana and put it to use."

"So you cast magic through incantations?"

"Correct. Each type of magic has an incantation that is largely similar. Each of the four principal elements—fire, water, air, and earth—possesses its own unique cant and means of activation. In the literature, there are even instances

of such large-scale magic that the incantation takes a full day and night.”

“*That* long...?”

I couldn’t imagine keeping anything up that long.

“The incantation establishes not only the element, but the specific effects. The more potent the magic, the longer the incantation. Thus, the longer it takes to cast.”

“So...how long is the shortest incantation?”

“Let’s see... Perhaps it would be best to demonstrate. May I?”

Claire nodded. “By all means.”

“Very well, then... *Fire-Elemental Candle.*”

The second the last syllable left Sebastian’s lips, a tiny flame about the size of a candle’s lit on the tip of his finger.

*Whoa... With a trick like that, he won’t ever need a lighter. It looks about as useful as one, though.*

“As you can see, the incantation converted my mana into fire to produce a small flame. Such simple magic, however, would serve little use beyond lighting firewood and so on. It is mostly used around the house. Should I desire a more powerful flame, I would need to intone an incantation two to three times longer. Does that not strike you as too long, however, should I need to fight off a monster or the like?”

“Yes, I guess so. You might not be able to take your time casting.”

“Precisely. In the heat of battle, one may not have the time to spend on such a lengthy incantation. For that purpose, we have voiceless incantations.”

“Voiceless?”

*In other words, incantations you don’t say aloud? But I thought you couldn’t cast magic if you didn’t say an incantation?*

“Just as it sounds, it is an advanced technique that invokes magic without an explicit incantation. It requires a great deal of practice to perform. Furthermore, the longer the incantation in question, the more natural skill is required. *Ah*, but



I can see the question in your eyes now—how is it possible to cast magic at all without saying an incantation?”

“I was wondering that, actually. You need one, but sometimes you don’t... It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Oh, but it will. You see, in order to properly utilize a voiceless incantation, you require—”

A knock at the door suddenly cut him off.

*And just when it was getting good, too...*

“Come in,” Claire called out.

At that precise moment, the door flew open and a small figure rushed into the room.

“Wowff?!” Leo barked in surprise as she scrambled to her feet, but the figure didn’t stop as it barrelled toward Claire and wrapped its little arms tightly around her.

“Sister!”

*Sister? So...is she the one who’s supposed to be in bed with a fever? Claire said she was feeling better, but...*

“Tilura?” Claire said in disbelief.

“Yes, Sister! It’s me!”

She looked about ten years old. Her hair was bright red, almost like a live flame, offering a different sort of beauty to Claire’s blonde locks. Even though her face still had the telltale marks of a child’s, she looked similar enough to her sister to come off as quite pretty.

*I can tell she’ll be a real beauty when she grows up...is everyone here this pretty?*

“What are you *doing* here, Tilura? You should still be in bed!”

“But Sister, that medicine made me feel all better!” Tilura grinned.

*That’s good, at least.*

“I’m so sorry for interrupting you two, Takumi,” Claire said with an apologetic look.

“Oh, no, don’t mind me. I’ll have plenty of time to take this up with Sebastian later.” I turned to face Tilura. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Sister, who is this gentleman?”

“He is our guest. His name is Takumi and he saved my life. Not only that, he also found your medicine.”

“Really?!”

“Nice to meet you, Tilura. My name is Takumi Hirooka. Please, feel free to call me Takumi.”

“Okay, Takumi! I’m Tilura Libert. Call me Tilura!”

Having finished our introductions, I turned to find Sebastian practically drooping with disappointment. Laila wordlessly patted him on the back.

*Wow, getting cut off was harder on him than I thought. He was just about to get to the good part, after all.*

“You’re still recovering, Tilura. You ought to stay in bed.”

“But Sister, I’ve been sleeping for so long! I’m too *tired* of sleeping to sleep!”

“I guess it *would* be hard to fall back asleep, after running about like that,” I pitched in.

“*Exactly*, Takumi!” Tilura beamed at me.

“Oh, honestly...” There was a kind look in Claire’s eyes, however.

They seemed to be quite far apart in age, but that probably only motivated Claire to find the capwort even more. She seemed the type who’d enjoy spoiling a younger sibling.

*Man, I wish I had a little brother or sister...*

“Ruff,” Leo barked, her eyes fixed squarely on Tilura. Tilura turned around and as soon as she laid eyes on Leo, her face lit up like the sun.

“Sister, who’s that doggy?!”

“She’s not a doggie, Tilura. She’s a silver fenrir. You remember seeing them in your books, don’t you?”

*She is a doggy, though. Technically speaking...*

“But they don’t *like* being people’s pets, right? Why’s she here?”

“Her name is Miss Leo and she’s here with Takumi.”

“Really?! You’re super amazing, Takumi!”

She looked up at me like I was a celebrity.

“Ruff, ruff, ruff?”

“*Hm?* Leo says it’s fine, Claire. You can let Tilura go see her.”

“Really? All right, then.”

“Yay!”

Claire finally pulled herself from Tilura’s arms and pushed her forward to beside where I sat. I couldn’t tell if she was excited or suffering last-minute jitters from seeing just how big Leo really was.

“Ruff. Woo-woo-woo.” Leo gave her a sloppy lick across her face, as if to reassure her.

“Hahaha!”

“Guess what, Tilura? Leo loves playing with kids. She’d love it if you played with her— Oh, but try not to break anything.”

“Can I, Sister?”

“If Takumi says you can, then go ahead. And look, isn’t Miss Leo cute?”

“Yeah, she is! Um...Miss Leo?”

“Ruff! Woo-woo!” Leo leaned in closer to Tilura and rubbed her furry silver cheek against her.

“Ahaha! Miss Leo!”





She threw herself at Leo with a giggle, surrendering herself to the fluff.

“Thank you for this, Takumi.”

“Oh, no. Leo really does love kids. I hope they don’t run around in here, of course, but I’m glad I was able to make Tilura smile somehow.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much. They seem plenty happy... I ought to thank Miss Leo properly later.”

Claire smiled at the two of them as they snuggled, and after a moment, I realized that even Sebastian and the maids were looking on with warm smiles.

*Tilura really is loved, huh?*

“Do you think Leo could play out in the backyard tomorrow, Claire?”

“Of course, though I imagine Tilura would love to join you.”

“I bet.”

Claire and I smiled at each other before looking back at Tilura and Leo. After a few minutes, however, Tilura seemed to run out of energy and moments later, she fell asleep in Leo’s silver fluff.

“It’s getting rather late, Takumi. Perhaps we should call it a night.”

“Yes, you’re right. I’m exhausted after everything that’s happened today.”

“Your room has already been prepared,” Laila said with a curtsy. “Please, follow me.”

“Great! Thank you very much.”

“Take good care of him, Laila.”

“As you ask, milady.”

“Well then, Takumi, good night.”

“Good night, Claire. And you too, Sebastian.”

“Pleasant dreams, sir.”

After saying goodnight to both Claire and Sebastian and making sure a sleeping Tilura was gently scooped up off her fluff pillow, Leo and I followed

Laila to our room. It was more spacious than I'd thought; it was easily big enough to fit my little studio apartment three times over.

*This mansion is huge...*

I looked around the room a little, then noticed that a basin of hot water and a towel had been left beside the bed. I quickly washed myself with it before laying down. It felt so nice to be free of all the dirt and sweat I'd accumulated in the forest. By that time, Leo had already curled up on the floor. Despite being plenty wide for me, it was still a size or two too small for her to sleep on.

Between my fatigue and full stomach, I could already feel myself slipping off into slumberland.

*I guess I never did wake up from my "dream," though... This really is a whole new world.*



**"RUFF, ruff!"**

*Is that Leo...? Don't tell me it's morning already.*

"Wooooo! Ruff, ruff!"

"C'mon, lemme sleep a little longer..."

"I didn't think you were the type to sleep in, Takumi." A feminine giggle came right from my bedside.

"Wha—?!"

Suddenly wide awake, I sat up and rubbed my eyes as I scanned the room.

"Hrruuuuuff..."

Leo huffed from right beside my bed. Tilura was deeply embedded in her fluff. Beside the pair was Claire, who met my gaze with a warm smile.

"C-Claire?!"

"Good morning, Takumi. Did you sleep well?"

"...Good morning. Yes, I slept well. Thanks for asking."

It was honestly the comfiest bed I'd ever been in. It felt as though I was

always wrapped up in a big, warm hug, and I'd slept better than I had in years as a result.

After waking up some more, I took in Claire's beauty again. She seemed to practically shine in the soft morning light. I'd never met someone who had looked so divine before. Her soft, golden hair was especially striking in this light.

*But next time, Leo, wake me up if someone's in my room. This is pretty awkward. No, wait...that's what you were trying to do, wasn't it? I'll just call it the bed's fault for being so comfy and leave it at that.*

"Breakfast is ready," Claire said with a smile. "You can come down to the parlor whenever you wish."

"Sounds wonderful. I'll be right there."

"There's no need to rush, of course. I imagine you'll need to freshen up a bit first. Come on, Tilura, let's give him some space."

"But Sister, I want to stay with Miss Leo!"

"You mustn't. Miss Leo needs some time to herself, too."

"Ruff!"

I chuckled. "You really like Leo, don't you?"

"Of course! Miss Leo is so big and friendly!"

*This kid's a good judge of character. I'm impressed she could get over how scary Leo looks so quickly.*

"And Takumi?" Tilura continued. "You don't hafta be so polite to me."

"Really? You sure?"

"Of course! You're older than me *and* you're best friends with Miss Leo. That makes you almost as amazing as her!"

"I'm really not *that* amazing, but...sure, I'll try."

"Please do!"

*It's been so long since I've been around kids...*

I needed to get up and wash my face and such, but Tilura still seemed



determined to stay with Leo. I couldn't exactly let her watch me get ready, though. It'd feel just a little too awkward.

*Besides, nobody would want to watch a guy like me get out of bed...*

"Tilura? Leo and I will be down for breakfast in a bit. If you keep grabbing onto her like that, though, neither of you can eat. Do you want that?"

"Um...no. I'm hungry."

"I bet Leo's hungry, too. Why don't you eat first, then? Claire told Leo and I that we can play in the garden after breakfast. Wanna join us?"

"Can I, Sister?!"

"Of course...after you finish your breakfast, that is."

"Okay! I'll go eat right now!" With that, Tilura ran out of the room.

"Oh, honestly..." Claire sighed. "I didn't expect that she'd get quite so attached to Miss Leo. I'm so sorry for the trouble she's causing you both."

"No, it's no trouble at all. I'm just glad that she's feeling better. You must be proud to have such a cute little sister."

"Ruff, ruff!" Leo nodded, as if in agreement.

*It's like she's really nodding... Is that just a silver fenrir thing? I guess it's a lot less surprising than breathing fire, huh?*

"Well then, Takumi, I'll see you in the parlor soon," Claire said with a short curtsy.

"Yes, see you then. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Roووو."

After watching her leave, I hopped out of bed and started getting ready. Since I had no other clothes than the ones I came in, I basically had nothing new to wear. I gave Leo a head scratch as I mulled it over.

"I don't *smell* or anything... Right?" I sniffed at my shirt.

"*Snuffle?*" Leo snuck her nose into my shirt and inhaled deeply. "*Sniff, Sniff.*"

*Looks like I'm fine, then...assuming I don't only smell good by dog standards.*

Even if I was fine now, I still had to think about tomorrow. I couldn't wear the same shirt and pants forever.

*I'll have to ask Sebastian about it later.*

"I hope I can get some new clothes soon."

"R00-roo."

Sebastian was about my build and height, so he might be willing to lend me something.

*No, wait...what if he only has butler suits?*

I wouldn't have objected to wearing a suit like his, but I honestly couldn't imagine how I would look in one.

*Well, first things first. Time to wash my face.*

It looked as though someone had filled the basin with fresh hot water and replaced the towel. After giving my face a good wash, I decided to wipe my body down one more time, just in case.

"You think Laila changed the water? Or maybe Claire did it while she was here."

"Ruff."

I wanted to shave as well, but couldn't find any trace of a razor.

*I'll ask Sebastian about that, too.*

Since this world's technology seemed to be at a medieval European level, I couldn't exactly expect an electric razor or even a T-shaped one. Still, there had to be *some* way.

"Well, I'll figure it out...or maybe I should try growing my beard out a bit. Think I'd pull off the rugged look?"

"Ruff...ruu-ruu."

*No way, those barks seemed to say.*

*I bet I'd come off as quite the gentleman if I had a bit of a beard, though. My coworkers all said I was baby-faced, but I still have a chance, right? Right?*

“...Whoops, we’d better get to the parlor.”

“Wooo.”

I did what I could for my appearance then headed for the parlor with Leo. I found Laila and Gelda waiting as soon as I left the room, and after they greeted me politely, they led the way downstairs.

*Jeez, I almost didn’t notice them... That startled me. They really don’t need to wait for me like that.*

Since I didn’t remember the route to the parlor perfectly, however, it was nice to have their guidance. The sheer size of the mansion alone made it feel almost like a labyrinth. I remembered the way to the bathroom, though, and I took the liberty of stopping there.

Before long, we arrived at the parlor. Claire and Tilura were already seated at the table and Sebastian was standing obediently behind them.

“Sorry for making you all wait.”

“Oh, Takumi. Good morning again.”

“Good morning, Takumi! Good morning to you too, Miss Leo!”

“Good morning, Tilura. Oh, and good morning to you, too, Sebastian.”

“Ruff, ruff!”

“Good morning, Mr. Hirooka. I trust you slept well?”

“Oh, yes. Thank you again for preparing such a wonderful room for me. The bed was great.”

I could tell that Tilura was itching to start eating and I felt a slight pang of guilt at making her wait so long. I sat down at the table, and Laila and Gelda took up their places behind me. Leo sat herself down right beside the table.

Breakfast had already been laid out, and it consisted of bread, salad, and a soup filled with sausage and other meats. Leo’s dish was loaded with a mountain of sausage.

*This is quite the spread.*

Back in Japan, my breakfasts often consisted of just a bun or cereal and a bit

of milk. Sometimes I didn't even have time for that and I'd run out the door with an energy bar or a lukewarm vitamin drink in hand. But those days were behind me now.

"All right, it seems as though we're all here. Let's eat."

"Thanks!"

"Ruff!"

"Thank you for the food," I said, clasping my hands together in a prayer-like gesture.

*Er...I guess they don't do that here...*

It was a very Japanese thing, after all, and the only other Japanese person at the table was Leo, who didn't even have hands.

Regardless, we all began eating. Leo stuck her head into her bowl and began wolfing down mouthfuls of sausage at an incredible rate. I picked up a fork and reached for the salad.

*Gotta get my greens.*

"Wow... This salad is quite good."

Claire smiled. "I'm glad you're enjoying it."

"Try the soup next, Takumi!" Tilura beamed at me. "It's super tasty!"

"Ruff, ruff! *scarf scarf scarf*"

The salad consisted mainly of leafy vegetables. It had a light dressing that felt quite easy on the stomach and tasted even better when eaten together with the bread. The soup was also surprisingly light, considering how much meat was in it.

*I don't remember the last time breakfast tasted this good.*

"Hey, slow down there, Leo! Nobody's gonna steal it from you, so try to actually chew!"

"Miss Leo is quite the voracious eater, isn't she?"

"Wow! I've never seen anyone eat so fast!"

*"Scarf scarf ...Rooo?"*

Leo finally noticed she was being watched, and raised her head in surprise.

*She really is a cute little...er, big dog. I guess if Claire doesn't mind, Leo can go ahead and eat however she wants.*

I wanted to talk with Sebastian, but I figured that it might be rude to call him over in the middle of breakfast. As soon as we'd all finished eating, however, I made eye contact with him and discreetly waved him closer.

"Sebastian? Can I have a moment?"

"But of course. What may I help you with?"

"It's about my clothes," I whispered. "You don't have any I can borrow, do you? I didn't have a chance to bring any with me."

"Ah, my sincerest apologies. The matter had slipped my mind completely. If you don't mind terribly, I can give you a change of my clothes for the time being."

"That'd be perfect." I lowered my voice a tad further. "Also, about my beard..."

"I can ready a razor for you as well. I shall have everything taken to your room posthaste."

"That'd be great. Thank you so much."

For some reason, just the thought of Claire or one of the other women hearing about my shaving made me feel embarrassed.

After that, however, Sebastian strode over to Laila and whispered something in her ear.

*Crap. I guess it got out anyway.*

"Takumi?" Claire asked. "What were you talking to Sebastian about just now?"

"Nothing much. Just...hygiene stuff."

"Oh, I see. Well, rest assured that Sebastian and Laila are both highly dependable. Feel free to rely on them if you require anything."

“I will... Wait, what about Gelda?”

She giggled. “She’s still new, so you’ll have to wait a while before relying on her too much.”

Gelda tensed up. “I-I’ll try my absolute best, though! Even if it costs me my life!”

*Gelda’s enthusiastic, I’ll give her that. But seeing her so tense only makes me more afraid that she’s going to mess up. Oh, well. I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.*

“Sister, I’m all done eating! May I please go play with Miss Leo now?”

“Why don’t you stop to take a breath first?” Claire admonished her.

“...Sorry.”

I chuckled. “Sorry, Tilura, Leo’s still not done yet. Can you wait a little longer?”

“Okay! I can wait!”

She fixed her gaze on Leo and grinned with anticipation.

“Do you have any siblings, Takumi?” Claire asked me.

“No. But I wish I did.”

“Is that so? You’re surprisingly good with children.”

I laughed. “That’s thanks to Leo.”

“Miss Leo?”

“Yeah. Whenever I wasn’t busy with work, I would take her out on walks and the neighborhood kids would all want to come pet her.”

“Oh, I see. That makes sense.”

“I got quite used to dealing with them before long, you see...not to mention that Leo *loves* kids.”

It took me a while to get used to just how much energy kids have. Some would focus on Leo and Leo alone, others would try to sweep me up in their games, and some would leave me constantly guessing. It was more like learning how to weather a storm than anything else.

*Come to think of it, there was that one girl who really took a liking to Leo... I hope she's not too lonely with us gone.*

She was about Tilura's age, if I remembered right, and she was just as eager to play.

*"Slurp, slurp, slurp ...Ruff!"*

The mountain of sausages that'd filled Leo's plate minutes earlier were now totally gone. Without skipping a beat, she took a long drink of milk and let out a content sigh.

"Oh, you're done already?"

*Don't you think you're acting a little crude for a lady, though? I guess dog manners must be different from human manners.*

Tilura sprang to her feet. "Can I play with Miss Leo now?!"

"Claire? Do you mind?"

"Of course not," Claire said with a nod. "But only out in the garden, of course."

"Okay!"

"Oh, and Claire? Would you mind looking after Leo for a while? I need to head back to my room for a bit. Sebastian should have everything ready there soon."

"I see." She turned to face Leo. "Miss Leo, would you mind if Takumi took a bit of time in his chambers?"

"Ruff?" Leo looked surprised for a moment, then went back to lounging. "Awooo."

"In that case, Takumi, I'll see you later."

"All right. I'll meet you in the garden as soon as I'm done."

"C'mon, Miss Leo, let's go!"

"Ruff, ruff!"

With that, Claire and Leo left the room, with Tilura clinging onto Leo's back and giggling. Sebastian brought up the rear and Gelda moved as if to follow

them.

“Gelda? Can I have a moment?”

“Wh-What is it?”

“Sorry, but I need some help getting back to my room. Do you mind?”

“Oh, n-no, not at all!”

It was honestly a pretty embarrassing thing to ask, but actually getting lost would have hurt my pride far more. Gelda had no difficulties in guiding me back to my room. Inside, I found Laila with a bundle of neatly folded clothes in her arms.

“Please feel free to make use of these clothes, Mr. Hirooka.”

“Thank you.”

It wasn't a suit like Sebastian's, but even if it was, I would've been just as glad. There was a shirt and waistcoat as well as a pair of pants.

“I took the liberty of preparing longer pants for you, as you are not wearing boots.”

“Oh, thank you.”

If I remembered right, they wore only half-length pants in many places in Europe during the Middle Ages, since even men's boots came up to the knees. Given my regular shoes, though, I was grateful for the normal-length pants.

I put my hands onto my belt to start changing, then realized Laila was still in the room with me.

“Um... Laila?”

“Yes? What may I help you with?”

“Are you sure you want to watch me get dressed?”

“Oh! My sincerest apologies. I shall wait for you outside.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

*I guess even Laila has her clumsy side, huh?*

She hurriedly turned to leave but paused at the door and turned back to face



me.

“One last thing, Mr. Hirooka ...”

“Yes?”

She pulled a small knife out of her apron pocket and handed it to me.

“Please use this to attend to your facial hair.”

I had hoped for a razor like a barber might use, but it was more similar in shape and heft to a paring knife. With that, Laila curtsied and left the room.

“So, um...” I said more to myself, “how do I shave with this?”

It seemed to be fairly common in this world, and there was that whole saying about doing as the Romans did, but I was genuinely worried about cutting myself.

I decided instead to start by getting dressed. The clothes were clearly of high quality, since they felt every bit as comfortable as what I’d been wearing.

*And here I was prepared to be itching up a storm... Nobles really are something else, huh?*

With that, all that was left was my beard. I hadn’t shaved for a couple days, not since the morning of the day before I came here. It was long enough now that I could pinch a few hairs at a time between my fingers if I tried.

The thought that Claire and the others had seen me like that made me feel awkward. *What was I thinking? No way I could ever be macho with a face like this. Yep, the beard goes.*

I swallowed hard, then brought the knife to my cheek. After ten careful minutes of scraping, I was finally free of my beard. There were a few spots that were bleeding slightly, but I probably just didn’t have enough practice yet.

I also noticed that the basin of hot water had been refilled and a fresh towel placed beside it. I gave my face a quick wash, then rinsed the knife clean and put it on my bedside table. Then, I took another look at my reflection in the mirror.

*I was pretty nervous for a while there, but I look okay.*

The few cuts here and there had already stopped bleeding and my face was stubble-free.

“All right, that’s that.”

After that, I decided to head to the garden as I’d promised. I opened the door to find Laila waiting right on the other side of it. I stifled my surprise as best I could before asking her to take me to Claire and the others.

*Please, no more jump scares.*



“**AHAHA!** Miss Leo, over here!”

“Ruff, ruff!”

I could hear Leo and Tilura even before I stepped outside. It looked like they were playing tag. Tilura was running around laughing, while Leo was very carefully chasing after her.

“Oh my, Takumi!” Claire must’ve heard the door open, since she walked up to me moments after I arrived. Sebastian followed closely at her heels. “I hardly recognized you.”

“Hello, Claire, Sebastian. I just freshened up a little.”

“Well, you look quite handsome. Those clothes fit you well.”

“Really? I’m...glad you think so.”

“I offer you my apologies, Mr. Hirooka, for providing you with such simple attire. I’m afraid that was the best I could acquire at such short notice.”

“Oh, no, these clothes are great. Thank you so much, Sebastian.”

“No need to thank me. I take great pleasure in such tasks. Please do not hesitate to ask if you require anything else.” He bowed politely, maintaining his place behind Claire.

“So...you asked Sebastian for a change of clothes, did you? A means of shaving as well, I see.”

“Yes, I did. I didn’t think it was proper to talk about in front of a lady, that’s all... especially when it came to shaving.”

“I suppose so. I thought that beard suited you, though.”

“I don’t think so. Nobody would want to see a scraggly thing like that.”

*Don’t encourage me like that, Claire. This world isn’t ready for Takumi the Rugged.*

“That aside,” I said, looking out at the garden, “I’m glad Tilura seems to be feeling better.”

“Oh, yes. And I have you to thank for finding that capwort.”

“Haha. It’s nothing, really! Besides, you’re the one who headed into an orc-filled forest alone in the first place.”

Sebastian solemnly cleared his throat. “Milady, though I risk repeating myself, I was nearly scared senseless by your actions. I implore you, please have an escort accompany you when you next leave the mansion.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Sebastian. Did I upset you?”

Claire smiled playfully at him. But I had to agree with Sebastian. She was lucky Leo and I had showed up when we did. Not only that, but with looks like hers, even visiting a town alone would be dangerous. There was no telling the kind of attention she might attract from the local riffraff, and if anything happened to her, everyone in the mansion would be devastated.

*Although I guess they might not have crass men like that here...*

“I might listen to him if I were you, Claire. If something bad happened to you, how do you think Tilura and your servants would feel?”

“Now *you’re* upset, Takumi?” She pursed her lips in thought a moment. “I suppose you’re right. *Someone* needs to look after Tilura.”

“And what about Sebastian?”

“Oh, I imagine he’ll be fine. Sebastian is technically my father’s butler, after all. He’s only here to keep an eye on me.”

“Please, milady. His Grace and I are only concerned—”

“Yes, yes, I’m aware... I suppose I *should* be a little more careful, though. I wouldn’t want you or Father to worry too much.”

“Uh... ‘Too much?’”

“Oh, Takumi, no need to sweat the details.”

“Haha...if you say so.”

*She’s more strong-willed than I gave her credit for... I guess she’s the type to act on her own initiative.*

I’d thought she was nice when we’d first met, for certain, but it felt as though we were closer now than before.

*Stuffy noble ladies have their appeal and all, but I’m glad she’s not like that. It’s so much easier to talk to someone more open.*

“Come now, sir. Do not overindulge milady.”

“Haha... I don’t see any harm in it. I think she’s pretty charming, actually. Besides, Leo can keep an eye on her if she needs to.”

“...I suppose that if Miss Leo will be attending to her, then I might allow it.”

“Right?”

Sebastian and I chuckled, but I noticed after a moment that Claire had gone quiet. I looked at her and noticed that her cheeks were red, her eyes averted.

“I’m...charming...?” she mumbled.

*Huh? Is it because I called her charming? I only said what I thought, though...*

“However,” Sebastian said as he cleared his throat, “you should practice restraint, with Miss Leo or without. Am I clear, milady?”

She suddenly raised her head. “Y-Yes. Crystal.” The blush had already faded from her cheeks and her smile was as composed as always.

*Maybe I was only imagining things...*

“Ruff? Roo-roo-rooooo!”

“Miss Leo, wait for me!”

Leo, having finally noticed I’d arrived, bolted toward me, tail wagging up a storm. Tilura was running after her, frantically trying to keep up. They’d reversed roles almost perfectly.

“What’s up, girl? Don’t you wanna play with Tilura anymore?”

“Ruff, ruff. Grufff!”

She lightly clamped her mouth around my clothes and tried to drag me out into the garden.

“Hold on, Leo! I get that you wanna play with me, but...”

“Come on, Takumi! Play with us!” Tilura was grinning.

“Ruff, ruff!” Leo looked up at me, her grip as tight as ever.

*Oh, fine. I guess I can play with them.*

I didn’t think I was too old to play with them or anything. I just knew that I’d wind up with all sorts of cramps and aches in the morning if I did.

Claire giggled at me. “Would you mind joining them for a spell, Takumi?”

“You too, Claire...? All right, then. I’ll be back.”

“Have fun, now.”

“C’mon, Takumi, hurry up!”

Sebastian chuckled. “Please do not worry about us, Mr. Hirooka. I wish you the best of luck.”

“Ruff, ruff!”

I was half-dragged to where they’d been playing several minutes before. Claire and Sebastian simply watched with warm smiles on their faces.

*Man, I’m going to feel this in the morning...but if Tilura’s happy, I guess that makes it worth it.*

“So what do you wanna play, Takumi?”

“Woo?”

“Let’s see... How about I throw a stick as far as I can and Leo has to grab it before it hits the ground?”

“Ruff!”

“What should I do?” she asked, her eyes shining.

“You can ride on Leo’s back. I bet that’d be a lot of fun.”

She grinned at me. “Yeah, loads of fun!”

“Ruff!”

Leo seemed to understand my suggestion perfectly as she lowered herself so Tilura could climb aboard more easily. *She’s crouched even lower than when she offered Claire and I a ride yesterday...*

*She’s such a good, considerate girl,* I found myself thinking as I gathered up sticks that seemed big enough for our game. It struck me as a bit odd that there were so many lying around, but it was a back garden, after all. They probably had more important things to do than tidy it.

“Ruff!”

“We’re ready, Takumi!”

“All right, then. Ready, set,” Leo hunched down, ready to spring into action, “fetch!”

I wound up, then threw the branch as far as I could in the opposite direction from the mansion. It didn’t go as far as I’d expected, though, and it began to fall about twenty yards out.

*Man... I really am outta shape.*

“C’mon, Miss Leo! We can get it!”

“Aroooo!”

Leo sprang into action, running faster than the wind. But she stayed close to the ground, taking care so that Tilura wouldn’t be jostled around too much.

*Come to think of it, didn’t I read somewhere that some dogs—like the greyhound—are faster than certain horses over short distances? Like horses are better at high speeds over long distances, but dogs are better sprinters...or something like that.*

Of course, at Leo’s current size, she was likely faster than any horse now.

“Ruuuuuff!”

“Haha! You’re so cool, Miss Leo!”

Tilura was clearly enjoying herself. She giggled as Leo snatched the branch right out of the air, then turned and ran back to me.

I smiled at them. "Wow, Leo! That was great!"

"GRRUUFFF!"

"Miss Leo is super-duper great!"

Leo lowered her head so I could take the branch from her, and I took the opportunity to affectionately scratch her on the head. Tilura also inched up Leo's back so she could pat her head.

*Wow...she snapped the branch clean in half. I guess I should've expected as much.*

I picked up the next stick. *But, given my weak arm, I'm not able to give her a good workout...*

*In that case...*

"All right, Leo, I'm gonna throw a bunch at once this time! You ready?"

"You can do it, Miss Leo!"

"Aroooo!" *Just you watch!*

Leo dropped low to the ground and wagged her big, fluffy tail. I gathered up four of the five branches I'd found and threw them all at once the same way as before. She shot off like a rocket after them, leaping to snatch one clean out of the air before landing and setting her sights on the next one. After watching her a moment, I took my last branch, turned to my immediate right, and threw it as hard as I could.

*Maybe that was a little mean...*

As I watched, though, Leo snatched up the fourth stick and whipped around to lock eyes on the fifth as it hurtled through the air. Then, at a speed so fast I could barely follow her, she zoomed over to it and caught it right before it hit the ground.

*One, two, three... Wow, all five sticks! Didn't see that coming.*

It looked as though Tilura was starting to slip off Leo's back, however, so I

decided to stop there.

“Bow-wow... Ruff!” Leo sounded very proud as she offered me her five sticks.

“Wow, Miss Leo! I never knew you were that fast!” Tilura was still bubbling with excitement.

“I’ve gotta admit, Leo, I didn’t think you could grab them all.”

“Ruff.”

I gave her a congratulatory pat on the head as she puffed out her chest with pride.

“Did you have fun, Tilura?”

“Yeah, tons! I don’t think I’ve *ever* had so much fun before in my life!”

“Great! I’m glad.”

With that, we all kept playing together in the back garden.



**“TAKUMI?** It’s nearly time for lunch.”

“Please come right in, everyone. Lunch is presently being served in the parlor.”

Leo, Tilura, and I had completely lost track of time as we played, but when Claire and Sebastian called us, we realized just how hungry we’d become. Tilura also seemed to be getting tired. She did only just recently recover from a fever.

*Maybe we should call it a day. There’s no need to play until we drop.*

I was also starting to grow a little weary. The only one of us who still seemed full of energy was Leo. There was a visible spring in her step as she wagged her way indoors.

Lunch proved every bit as extravagant as breakfast. As we ate, however, I noticed that Tilura was starting to rub her eyes sleepily.

*Looks like naptime comes after lunch. Like they say, a sleeping kid is a growing kid.*

Claire was watching Tilura doze with a soft smile. But, after a minute or two,



she turned to me as if suddenly remembering something.

“By the way, Takumi, I suppose you’ll be needing some more toiletries and the like, won’t you?”

*Oh, yeah... I have hardly anything right now.*

All I had were the clothes I was wearing and my handkerchief. My cellphone, wallet, and everything else I owned were still back in Japan.

“Yes, but...I don’t have any money right now.”

“Please, allow me to pay for what you need. It’s the least I could do for you, after all you’ve done for us.”

*But she’s already given me three meals a day and a place to stay. I’d hate to take anything more from her.*

That being said, I didn’t have a yen to my name in this world. I wanted to work to cover Leo’s and my expenses at the very least. But I’d no idea where to start.

*I guess I’ll have to rely on her a while longer... She might be offended if I turned her down, after all.*

It made the most sense to just borrow the money from her now and then talk to Sebastian about paying the estate back when I had the means to. If I tried to repay Claire directly, I had a strong feeling she’d refuse.

*That’s right...this is just a loan. I don’t need to feel guilty.*

“...In that case, I’ll gladly accept your offer. I’m very sorry for being so broke.”

“No need to be sorry, now. Why don’t we head into town after lunch and you can purchase whatever strikes your fancy?”

“So soon?”

“You’ll need them sooner rather than later, after all. The nearest town is a short ways away by horse, so we’ll be back by nightfall.”

“Oh, okay. Thank you. I’ll look forward to it.”

“You’re most welcome.”

*A town, huh... We didn't see any buildings on the way here, so it must be pretty far away, especially considering we'll have to ride there.*

It was likely several miles out, but not so far that it would take us more than an hour or two. My biggest worry, however, lay elsewhere.

"You said we'll be going there by horse, right? I've never ridden a horse before."

"No need to worry. We can use the carriage."

"And I shall drive said carriage," Sebastian added.

"Wooooooooo! Ruff, ruff, ruff!"

*What's gotten into you, Leo?*

She'd been engrossed in her sausages but now suddenly interrupted our conversation.

"Wait... Do you want me to ride you into town, maybe?"

She nodded. "Awooo-wooo."

"Miss Leo?" asked Claire, a note of hesitation in her voice. "If you don't mind terribly, could you please wait here for us?"

"Hruff?"

"Why do you want Leo to stay behind?"

"I'm afraid that she might be a little too much for the townsfolk to handle. We wouldn't want to startle them too badly."

"Yeah... I guess you're right."

Given not only her infamy as silver fenrir, but also her size and terrifying appearance, the townsfolk would probably be scared stiff of her.

*I don't know how much the average person knows about a silver fenrir, but she's a giant wolf. That's scary enough on its own.*

"...Aroooo?" Her ears drooped sadly and she looked at me with big, soulful eyes.

"C'mon, don't give me that look..."

*There's gotta be a line somewhere, right? We barely know a thing about this world. We shouldn't go causing a panic...right?*

"...Claire?"

"Oh, fine." She rolled her eyes with a smile. "You're quite the persuasive one, aren't you, Miss Leo? You must be *awfully* fond of Takumi."

"Wooo! Ruff, ruff!" Leo gave my face a big, wet lick.

It looked like Claire couldn't help pampering Leo either.

*It might be for the best if Leo comes with us, though. What with my going to school, then work, she spent an awful lot of time at home alone. She must've been quite lonely...and judging from her reaction just now, I bet she never really got used to it. She's a social little...er, big dog, so I'd better stick with her. Who knows what chaos would ensue if she tried to come after me once we left?*

"Isn't that great, Leo? Now what do you say to Claire?"

Leo drew her gigantic head closer to Claire. "Ruff! Ruff!"

"Hehe. Just remember, Miss Leo, there are quite a few people living in that town. Please be on your best behavior."

"Ruuuuffff!" Leo nodded.

Claire gave her a warm smile. But, at that moment, Tilura finished eating and she rubbed her eyes.

"Sister! If Miss Leo's going into town, then I'm going, too!"

"Tilura?"

*I'm not surprised, given how much she likes Leo.*

"You mustn't, Tilura! You're still recovering, remember? Besides, you look exhausted after all that playing. You can stay here."

Tilura pouted. "Aww... Buuuut I really wanna go..."

It was hard to imagine that she was back to normal after being so sick. She clearly needed rest, not more excitement.

"Lady Tilura," Sebastian interceded. "I can imagine that, after being bedridden

for so long, you wish to stay awake for as long as possible. I know you had trouble sleeping and that's why you woke up rather early this morning. If, however, you took this opportunity to nap, you would be fully refreshed in time for Miss Leo's return."

"Okay..."

Tilura nodded slowly, a pout still on her lips.

*Maybe I should buy her something while we're in town? No, wait, I'm broke...*

"You were up before even Sebastian was," Claire added. "I can't imagine you're not tired yet."

"That happened while I was still asleep?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," Claire replied. "She seemed fine last night, but I was worried that her fever might have returned overnight. When I arrived in the room she and Sebastian share early this morning, however, there was no trace of her. Sebastian and I were worried sick."

Sebastian nodded. "Milady and I roused the rest of the staff and we searched high and low for Lady Tilura. When we consulted the guards, however, we learned that not a soul had entered or left the building once the entire night. As such, we focused our search inside the mansion."

*Makes sense. Anyone would be worried if a sick kid suddenly vanished.*

"Then," Claire continued, "I checked every room in the mansion. That's when it occurred to me to check your room, Takumi."

"Wait... Don't tell me...?"

Claire nodded. "Tilura was slumbering quite peacefully in Miss Leo's fur."

Tilura huffed. "I just wanted to see Miss Leo. She's so super comfy..."

*Wow... I never would've guessed that happened while I was sleeping...*

Leo must've also taken quite a shine to Tilura, despite their having met just last night. Otherwise, she would've woken me up before Claire arrived.

*Leo is super comfy, though. I wish I had a giant pillow full of her fur.*

"So *that's* why you woke me up this morning, Claire."

“I’m sorry. You were sleeping so peacefully, but I didn’t think that I could separate Tilura from Miss Leo without waking you... Not to mention that breakfast was nearly finished, and that you would have to wake up soon either way.”

“Oh, I’m not blaming you. In fact, that bed was so comfortable that if you hadn’t come in, I probably would’ve slept straight through until lunch.”

*Seriously, why didn’t I wake up when Tilura first came in?*

Even when I was exhausted the morning after a hard day’s work, I’d still snap awake whenever I got a work call—not to mention that I was up at the crack of dawn anyways. Between caring for Leo and heading to work early, I needed all the time in the mornings that I could get.

*It’s all your fault, bed! Why are you so comfy?*

“Tilura?” Claire said. “Just to be clear, you’re free to visit Miss Leo whenever you please. But you’re never allowed to enter Takumi’s or anyone else’s room while they’re sleeping. Am I clear?”

Tilura nodded. “Yes... Sorry, Sister.”

After that, we each cleared our plates and I returned to my room to prepare for the trip into town.



**TILURA** still seemed determined to come with us, but when she started nodding off again, Laila carried her back to her room. Sebastian set about preparing the carriage, and Claire headed back to her room to get ready. I also returned to my room—by myself, since I was finally starting to remember the path to and from the parlor—but given my lack of belongings, there wasn’t much to prepare. I decided to use the washroom, since I didn’t know what the facilities were like in town, and then I waited for the others.

Roughly an hour later, Leo and I met Sebastian and Claire in the front entrance hall. About a dozen maids and butlers were there to see us off. Then a pair of guards wearing full armor came in from outside. I thought I recognized them from the group at the gate.

“The carriage is all ready for you, Sebastian,” said the first.

“Thank you very much. Takumi, these two will be accompanying us to town,” Sebastian explained.

“My name is Takumi. It’s a pleasure to meet you both.”

“I’m Phillip, and I oversee security at this mansion as captain of the guard. I’ll be accompanying you and milady to make sure there’s no trouble.”

He had silken brown hair that reached just past his shoulders and his eyes were filled with warmth. But even through his armor, I could tell he was quite muscular. If we were to get into a fight, he could knock me flat even without using the sword at his waist... Not that I *wanted* to fight him, of course.

“I am Johanna,” the second guard said with a polite nod. “I was also appointed to guard this mansion and its inhabitants, and today, that means the two of you.”

Her light green hair was tied back into a neat ponytail. She had slanted eyes and possessed a degree of sternness that Phillip lacked. To put it in my old world’s terms, she was the serious type of lady knight.

They bowed to me in unison and I hurriedly returned the gesture.

*Come to think of it, they don’t have their spears anymore. Maybe because we’re indoors now?*

I decided to ask Sebastian about it.

“Being indoors is certainly part of it,” he replied. “But more than that, any potential combat will be in the middle of town. Swords are far more reliable weapons in such circumstances.”

“Oh, okay. Makes sense...”

With so many people and buildings around, a big weapon like a spear would be harder to use. It made sense to use something smaller instead.

“Well then, Takumi. Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

With that, we headed for the door.

All the assembled servants called out in one voice and bowed or curtsied in unison. “Milady, Mr. Hirooka, safe travels! We pray you will return shortly!”

*Jeez, that scared me... I’ve never seen so many people so perfectly in sync before. Claire’s family must be crazy rich if even her servants are so amazing...*

On the road just outside the mansion, we saw a carriage waiting for us. It had four horses trussed up in front, organized into two pairs.

“Wow... A real carriage...”

I’d envisioned a covered wagon like in old Western movies, but this was far smaller. The carriage itself seemed only big enough for one or two people, and there was a seat for the driver in the front. Beneath the main seating area was a drawer-like compartment that seemed to be for luggage. All in all, it looked surprisingly similar to the rickshaws you could still see in some of the more touristy parts of Japan.

“Please take a seat, Mr. Hirooka,” Sebastian said with a bow.

“Oh, right. Of course.”

I climbed aboard and sat down. Claire followed, sitting down right beside me. We were so close that my heart skipped a beat, but she didn’t hear it...*probably*. I looked away to try to calm my pulse a little and I saw Phillip and Johanna mounting their horses.

*Oh, I see. So they’ll ride beside us for protection.*

Sebastian climbed into the driver’s seat and grabbed hold of the reins. “Well then, let us depart. Giddyap!”

With that, the horses began to trot toward the town.

*My first town in this world... I wonder what it’ll be like? Are they gonna have stone houses and cobblestone streets and everything?*

The mansion was made out of stone, but quite a bit of it looked like marble, so it didn’t feel significantly different from just any old fancy building in my world. The one thing I was sure of was that a town would be totally different.

Heart dancing with excitement, the carriage carried us down the country road and into town.



**THE** road wasn't nearly as bumpy as I'd feared. I didn't know whether I had the carriage or the road to thank. As far as I could tell, it was a fairly standard gravel road, nothing like the asphalt roads I was used to in Japan.

*I bet it's the carriage, then.*

Leo was running beside the carriage alongside the horses. Surprisingly enough, the horses didn't seem to have a problem with her. I'd heard that horses startled easily and had a tendency to run from anything that spooked them, but these particular ones must've been specially trained.

*But wait, didn't Claire's horse bolt as soon as it saw the orc back in that forest?*

*Leo must've said something to the horses to calm them. She did lick their faces and nuzzle them before we left, after all...*

But more than the horses or the journey at hand, there was one thing that bugged me.

"By the way, Claire, about my Gift..."

"Yes? What about it?"

"You said that we could determine if I had one or not in town, didn't you? Do you think we can do that today?"

"Well, let's see... What do you think, Sebastian?"

"I should imagine we can. After purchasing the necessary goods, we can visit the establishment I have in mind. In fact, I have already informed them that we will be paying a visit."

"Does that answer your question, Takumi?"

"Yes. Thank you."

*A Gift. A blessing from the gods. They sound a lot like the so-called "cheat skills" that're so common in anime and manga, so the other Gift-holders in this world might've also come from Japan. Not that I can prove that, of course...*

"Takumi? You seem rather lost in thought," Claire noted. "Is something the



matter?”

“No, not really. I was just trying to figure out what Gifts really are.”

“What they *are*...?”

“While it has been said that Gifts convey all manner of blessings upon their holders, said holders are in fact quite rare,” Sebastian explained. “They are revered in whatever country or town they may appear in and shown the utmost respect. As such, no one has been so brazen as to investigate where, precisely, the phenomenon originates.”

“Wait... So, no one has ever tried to understand Gifts before?”

“Oh, I imagine several have tried, yes. However, the literature is quite clear in that the conditions for receiving a Gift, as well as the requisite traits of a would-be Gift-holder, are unknown.”

“Maybe they couldn’t find anything out, then...”

“I would imagine so. Gift-holders come in all forms, after all. Some are born with their powers. Others live normally for years or even decades before suddenly manifesting their Gift. Without a more substantial sample size, the precise conditions are nigh-impossible to determine.”

“I see... And there aren’t that many Gift-holders to begin with.”

“Correct. Some say the number is roughly one in a million.”

*Wait, so maybe there are more Gift-holders out there than everyone thinks. That’s what, a thousand for every billion people? No, wait, I don’t even know this world’s population... That might still be pretty rare.*

“Maybe it’s impossible to really know what a Gift is,” I sighed.

“You might be right,” Claire nodded. “Besides, I believe that what truly matters isn’t the abilities you’re born with, but how you use them.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. An amazing power means nothing if you can’t use it well. Even a weak or useless talent could be extremely useful if you use it right.”

“Exactly.”

*It's all how you use it, huh...? No matter what my Gift is, I'll focus on putting it to the best use I possibly can. Then again, it might really be useless. Or I could not even have a Gift at all.*

"Milady, Mr. Hirooka. We shall arrive in town shortly."

Only an hour had passed since we'd left the mansion and I'd spent nearly the whole time mulling over Gifts.

"I shall find a place to park the carriage once we arrive. Please wait where I drop you off until I come to collect you."

"Okay, we will."

"We can watch over Miss Leo in the meantime."

"Yeah, that's a good idea."

I didn't doubt for an instant that Leo would stick by me, of course. I was honestly more worried at how the townsfolk might react.

*I'm sure Leo will behave, though. I hope.*

Several minutes later, we arrived at an imposingly tall stone wall. The guards at the gate talked to Sebastian for only a moment before letting us through. As we passed through, their jaws dropped at the sight of Leo. I wasn't surprised. If anything, their reactions were almost funny.

About a minute after entering, we stopped at a small cobblestone square.

"Well then, milady, Mr. Hirooka. I shall return for you presently."

"Okay. We'll wait here."

"Thank you, Sebastian."

With that, Claire and I exited the carriage and Sebastian headed off to find the stable. Phillip walked his and Johanna's horses behind him while Johanna herself waited with us. Leo sat beside me placidly.

After watching Phillip and Sebastian leave, I examined my surroundings. There were many people waiting to be either picked up or dropped off, like us. I also spotted multiple covered wagons and two-wheeled carts laden with crates, as well as more stereotypical horse-drawn wagons. All of it was so novel to my

eyes, I couldn't help but stare.

As I watched a few people disembark their wagon with interest, Claire got my attention.

"So, Takumi? What do you think of Ractos?"

"Ractos...? You mean this town? Well...it seems to have a lot of traffic."

"Yes, it does. I wouldn't call it particularly large, but it serves as a gateway between this region and the rest of the kingdom, including the capital. It's quite lively."

"A gateway? Like...everyone comes through here?"

*That'd explain the sheer volume of people.*

"This town is rather close to the capital, you see," Claire explained. "But more than that, there aren't many ways through the surrounding forest and mountains."

"Forest? Like the one we met in?"

"Exactly. It blankets the town's south and west sides, you see. Because of that, there are a fair number of monsters in the vicinity. The northern mountains are nearly as perilous as the forest. This town was built along the only safe passage through."

"That makes sense. Why risk your life when you can go through a nice, safe town, after all?"

I couldn't imagine that many people would risk danger like that, not to imagine that it sounded significantly slower.

"And those buildings across the square...they're made of wood, right?"

"Yes. Nearly everything in this town is made of wood from the neighboring forest. The lumber industry in Ractos is booming, despite the monsters."

*So, no stone buildings, then... I guess wood would be easier and cheaper to build with, especially if it's so common.*

After chatting with Claire a while longer, Sebastian and Phillip came back to us from the far side of the square.

“My sincerest apologies for the wait, milady. Now, let us set about purchasing Mr. Hirooka’s things.”

“Yes, let’s!”

“By all means.”

Sebastian led us down one of the side streets with Johanna and Phillip in the rear. Moments later, we arrived on a bustling avenue, filled with all sorts of travelers. Merchants lined both sides of the street, calling out their wares to passersby. It was even busier than the square we’d just left.

“This is the largest market in town,” Sebastian announced. “Most vendors deal in some form of foodstuff.”

“Oh, I see.”

Claire smiled. “This is where the ingredients we use at the mansion come from.”

*So all that delicious food came from here?*

I looked around to find stalls selling a variety of meats and vegetables around us. Leo was trying to inch toward the nearest meat vendor as indiscreetly as possible. I grabbed hold of her fur.

*Hold on, Leo! I know they’re selling sausages over there, but no leaving the group, okay? Besides, you’ve already had sausages twice today. You can wait a bit longer.*

“...Wooo.”

Her tail drooped. I couldn’t tell if she was genuinely sorry or just sad that I’d found her out. But she seemed to give up on the stall either way.

Claire giggled. “Miss Leo *is* rather fond of sausages, isn’t she?”

“Too fond, actually. I’ve seen her go crazy for them before, so keep an eye on her.”

“Ruff!”

Claire was taking this far too lightly. If Leo decided she really wanted sausages, nobody could stop her, especially at her size. I resolved to keep an eye on her.

*Is it just me, though, or is Claire extra nice to Leo?*

“Takumi? Is there anything here you’re particularly interested in?”

“Hmm... Nothing’s really jumping out at me. I’ll keep an eye out, though.”

“Please do. If there’s anything that you’d like to buy, please don’t hesitate to let me know. That’s the entire reason we’re here, after all.”

“Right... Maybe I’ll look at the market here next time, though.”

All the foodstuffs I could see were no different from what I’d had in Japan. There weren’t any fish, but the vegetables all looked familiar. As we walked, we passed one stall that was selling cabbage and the one to its right sold pumpkins. Even the meat seemed very familiar to me.

*I guess that means they have pigs and cows here? No, that orc looked and tasted just like pork, so maybe it’s monster meat.*

“Mr. Hirooka, there is a tailor not far ahead that makes rather fine clothes. Perhaps we should head there first so you may acquire some new clothes?”

With that, Sebastian led the way down a side street and after a minute’s walk, we entered one of the neat wooden stores there. Leo, of course, waited for us outside.

“Welcome!” called the middle-aged man at the counter as we walked in. “Why, if it isn’t Lady Claire! It’s truly an honor to see you!”

“Hello, Harton. I would like you to tailor some clothes for Takumi here. Takumi, this is Harton the tailor.”

I gave him a short, polite bow. “My name is Takumi. It’s a pleasure.”

“I’m Harton. It’s a pleasure to meet you too, sir! I’ll get my things ready and then I’ll take your measurements right away.”

*Does he mean he’ll make them from scratch? But I’m fine with anything, so long as it fits.*

Harton began to root through the storage area at the back of the room and I could see him fiddling with something that looked vaguely like a tape measure.

“Wait, Claire? Do I really need something tailor-made? Can’t I just buy

something premade?”

“Oh, come now, Takumi. There’s no such thing as *premade* clothes.”

*There isn’t? So they don’t just make similar-looking clothes in bulk here?*

“Milady,” Sebastian cut in, smiling. “Most people simply purchase clothes that fit their size, instead of having new ones made.”

“Really? Why, I’ve never heard of such a thing!”

*Wow... She actually means that...*

If she spent her entire life in a fancy mansion like that, though, it’d make sense that she was out of touch with the common folk. But more than anything, I was just glad I could buy something off the rack.

“Um... Harton?” I asked. “Could I see what premade clothes you have?”

Harton turned around. “Premade? Ah, yes. They’re right here.” He gestured to a display along the wall.

“Or we could have something tailored as planned...” Claire mumbled behind me.

Tailored clothes had to be expensive, though. As long as Claire was paying, I wanted to keep the price as low as reasonably possible.

Harton explained his selection to me in detail and in the end, I chose several full changes of clothes. I also bought an undershirt that seemed like it’d be plenty sweat absorbing, as well as several sets of underwear. Of course, Sebastian was the one who actually paid for everything, and Claire was no doubt the source of his money in turn.

*I swear I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.*

I moved to leave the store when Claire suddenly cut me off.

“Takumi! Why don’t we have some clothes tailored for you after all? Just one outfit?”

“Um... I’m really fine with just regular clothes, though.”

“No, I insist! You’ll need proper clothes, I swear!”

“Uh...”

*She's scary when she's this persistent.*

In the end, I gave in, and Claire asked Harton to tailor something for me. While he took my measurements, he asked about the kind of clothes I'd like. Since I didn't even know what the options were, I simply asked him to make something in the same style as the clothes I borrowed from Sebastian.

While my measurements were being taken, I noticed that a few sets of shoes were put out as well. They had two different varieties, some made of leather and others wood. Since the wood ones looked super uncomfortable, I decided to buy a pair of the leather ones instead. *They seem pretty similar to the dress shoes I'd worn for work, actually...*

Speaking of shoes, I was wearing my business loafers at that moment. Even though I was transported to this world wearing exactly what I had on when I fell asleep, I was wearing my shoes when I woke up. I had no clue as to why, but no amount of thinking would give me the answer. I decided to just be grateful that I wasn't barefoot.

“Very well, sir,” Harton said with a bow. “I'll have your clothes ready in about a week's time. Please come back then to pick up your order.”

Claire nodded. “All right. Thank you, Harton.”

“Thank you,” I echoed.

“Rest easy, sir!” An enthusiastic grin spread across his face. “I always put my best work into Lady Claire's orders, so you can expect a masterpiece!”

With that, we left the tailor's.

“I do believe your personal belongings come next,” Sebastian said. “I imagine a general store should suffice. Right this way, Mr. Hirooka.”

“All right.”

We returned to the market street, then headed down a different side street.

After walking for several minutes, however, a group of six men cut us off.

“Damn, you're dressed mighty fancy for a shoppin' trip!”

“We’re a little tight on cash, y’see?”

“How’s about you lend us some?”

“Wait up, boys, that lady’s lookin’ fine!”

“I bet she’s got a bundle hidden under that fancy dress, huh?”

“Why don’tcha share the wealth, sweetie?”

*Did we just walk into a cliché?*

All their lines were so cheesy, it felt as though I’d stepped into an old gangster movie. When I realized one of them was shooting Claire a dirty look, though, my disbelief quickly turned to anger.

Sebastian stepped in front of Claire and me. “Please stand back, milady.”

Phillip and Johanna followed him a moment later, hands on their swords and ready to draw. Small wonder, given that the men were all armed with knives. A few of their knives were extra long... I guessed they might be short swords.

“What, you wanna fight?”

“Hah! Ya think your dinky little swords can stop all of us, huh?”

“We got six people and you got two! This’ll be easy! Hahahahah!”

The other three men started guffawing.

*Who “guffaws” these days, anyways? And really, ragged clothes with spiked shoulder pads? Are they trying to look as stereotypically thuggish as possible? Who knew thugs looked the same in every world, huh?*

As I was getting lost in my thoughts, however, Leo sauntered toward the men.

“Th-The hell’s that?”

“Damn, that’s a big hound.”

“Ahh, so *what* if ya got a familiar?!”

“S-Screw your stupid mutt!” One of the men, knees knocking in terror, stabbed at Leo with his short sword.

“Leo!”



“Miss Leo!”

“Grrruuff.” Leo casually grabbed the blade in her teeth and, with a loud snap, crunched it clean in half.

All six thugs stared at her in disbelief, jaws scraping the dusty ground of the alley. The owner of the broken short sword looked blankly down at his weapon, up at Leo, then down at the shattered blade on the ground.

I was just as taken aback as them. “Uh...m-make sure you don’t swallow any metal, Leo.”

“Wuff...peh-peh.” She spat a few shards at the men’s feet. None of them moved a muscle.

“So...Claire? What should we do now?” I asked.

Claire mulled it over for a moment. “Let’s see... Could you fetch the town guard for us, Phillip?”

“Yes, ma’am!” With that, he ran back the way we’d came.

“Sebastian? Johanna?”

“At once, milady.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

At Claire’s command, they retrieved a length of rope from Johanna’s pack and began restraining the men. A few of them balked and took a few hesitant steps backward. But Leo let out a low growl and they froze in their tracks.

Claire sighed. “Honestly... What with all the travelers here, I’d hoped the guards would be more attentive.”

“Does that mean there are a lot of guys like this?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t say a lot, but there certainly are a few. They mainly target travelers, particularly merchants.”

*Anyone traveling through here has to have a fair bit of money, or at least enough to make the trip safely. It makes sense they’d set up here, then.*

Sebastian returned to us and bowed. “All the men are successfully bound, milady.”

“Thank you, Sebastian.”

“Hrruff.” As soon as the last man was secured, Leo snorted and turned around. Instantly, the ruffians began to struggle.

“Lemme go, dammit!”

“Hey! Untie me!”

“We’ll get you for this!”

Leo turned back to face them and bared her fangs, and all but one of them went silent again.

“Crap, I think I *like* this...” One of the men Johanna had hogtied seemed to be...enjoying himself. I looked away and pretended I didn’t hear anything.

Before long, Phillip came back with four armored guards in tow.

“Thank you for waiting, milady,” he said to Claire with a curt bow.

“*These* are the highwaymen?” One of the guards sized up the bound ruffians, then turned to Claire and bowed deeply. “My apologies for the trouble they caused you, Lady Claire. I’ll have them jailed posthaste.”

“Thank you,” she replied.

“Only doing my job,” he said with another bow.

*Does everyone in town know who Claire is? He seemed to recognize her at a glance.*

It wasn’t too surprising, considering the size of her mansion outside town, but the way he talked to her seemed a little too formal. I resolved to ask Sebastian for details later. I didn’t even know why she was living there in the first place. She mentioned that it was a villa, which implied that there had to be a main estate somewhere as well as a reason why she wasn’t living there.

As I mulled over her many secrets, the guards began escorting the ruffians away.

“Go on, scum. Move,” said a guard.

“Hey, you! No trying to sneak away!”

“You idiots really picked the wrong mark this time.”

“Pay more attention to who you rob.”

Claire and I watched as they walked off.

“I’m awfully sorry, Takumi,” she said. “I didn’t mean to use Leo like that.”

“Please don’t worry about it,” I replied. “Besides, Leo did that all on her own.”

“Roo... Ruff, ruff.” *They were a bunch of chumps*, she seemed to add.

The orcs in the forest had honestly felt more threatening. Anyone would be scared if a two-legged monster pig suddenly burst out of the woods and attacked them... even though Leo had dealt with it handily. It seemed like even Phillip and Johanna could’ve taken those street clowns.

“Um... Excuse me?” A voice came from behind us. I turned to see a young woman attempting to get our attention. She couldn’t have been past her teens. “That wolf wouldn’t happen to be your familiar, would it, sir? And you, miss... are you really Lady Claire, as those guardsmen said?”

I hesitated a moment. “Uh... This is Leo, and she’s not my familiar. She’s my partner.”

“And yes, I’m Claire. Is something amiss?”

With that, the woman dropped to one knee, bowing low as a knight might. I vaguely recalled learning in history class that some people bowed like that to nobles or other people of high rank... Or maybe it was how commoners bowed to a noble, I couldn’t remember which.

“My apologies, Lady Claire! Your visit would normally be the most auspicious of occasions! Yet, we failed to even notice!”

“Oh, no,” Claire cut her off. “I’m in town on a private matter. There’s no need for you or the other townsfolk to cause such a commotion.”

“You are too kind,” the woman said, dipping her head even lower for a moment before standing up.

*Wait...what was that about other townsfolk?*

I took a quick look around, only just realizing that several dozen people had

gathered all around us.

“Lady Claire... If you don’t mind my curiosity, could that wolf possibly be...?”

Claire and Sebastian exchanged glances.

“It might be best to come clean or else they might start spreading rumors,” Claire whispered.

“I concur, milady,” he whispered back.

Claire then turned to face me. “Takumi? Might I ask a favor of you?”

“What is it?”

Sebastian replied in her stead, loudly enough for the whole crowd to hear. “Judging from Leo’s size and the ease with which she broke that sword, these kind folk may be curious as to what, precisely, she is. Might I ask you to explain to them?”

*In other words, tell them she’s a silver fenrir.*

“Sure, why not?” I replied. “I don’t have anything to hide from them.”

“I see,” he nodded. “Thank you for your understanding.”

The woman gave us an uneasy look. “Um... Pardon me?”

“Oh, right,” I replied. “What was your name?”

“M-My name is Emeralda! It’s a pleasure.”

“Okay, Emeralda. Can you tell me exactly what you think Leo is?”

“Yes...w-well, that wolf of yours has rather striking silver fur and she’s accompanying Lady Claire. Not only that, but judging from her size and the strength of her fangs, I thought that she might just be a silver fenrir. Normal wolves don’t bite swords, after all.”

“You’re exactly right,” Claire nodded. “This is Miss Leo. She’s Takumi’s familiar. Don’t worry, she won’t harm a soul.”

“A-Are you sure...?”

Emeralda cautiously sized Leo up. She looked at Leo a lot like Gelda had during our first encounter.

*But wait, why would being with Claire indicate she's a fenrir? I guess I'll have to ask about that later. I bet Sebastian would love to explain it all to me.*

Now, though, I had to show these people—not just Emeralda but the whole crowd—just how harmless Leo was. A few of them looked like they were saying their prayers and waiting for death.

“Emeralda?”

“Y-Yes?”

“Leo’s really nice, I promise. You don’t need to be so afraid.”

“But they say silver fenrir are the strongest creatures alive... How could one *possibly* be nice?”

“I’ll show you. Leo, lay down.”

“Ruff!” Leo laid down.

“See? She’s obedient, too.” I gave Leo a pat on the head.

“What...?”

The entire crowd gasped in shock.

“Leo doesn’t attack people,” I explained. “And if you’ll notice, she’s been perfectly calm the whole time we’ve been here, and none of the guards have tried to get rid of her. Isn’t that proof enough?”

“Well... I suppose you have a point. The guards did seem okay with her...”

“I naturally had a word with them beforehand. They believe Miss Leo is one of milady’s bodyguards.” Sebastian suddenly leaned in close from behind me to whisper, causing me to jolt a little.

I didn’t remember seeing him saying anything to any guards except at the gate, so he must have told them then, or while he and Phillip had been stabling the horses.

“Why don’t you come closer, Emeralda?” I asked her.

“B-But...”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. Come here.”

“O-Okay.”

After a little more urging, she raised a trembling hand and placed it on Leo’s head. Leo didn’t seem to mind. If anything, she seemed to be enjoying the attention.

“Ruff, ruff.”

“You’re right... She is rather gentle.”

“Isn’t she?”

“Yes. And her fur...it’s so *soft*. I wish I could keep petting her forever. I never knew silver fenrir felt like this.”

“Yeah, I know. She’s the softest pup I know.”

*It’s as though her fluff can just suck away all the bad things in life.*

Emeralda’s expression rapidly began to soften, changing from nervous to euphoric in moments.

*...Okay, yeah, maybe she’s enjoying it a little too much. She does know everyone’s watching her, right?*

Claire’s brow furrowed in concern. “Um... Emeralda?”

“O-Oh, of course!” Emeralda finally snapped out of her ecstasy with a shake of her head. She quickly pulled her hand away and turned to face Claire.

Claire turned to address the crowd. “I’ll also have you know that Miss Leo is staying at my family villa. Please, take that as a sign of her harmlessness as well.”

Emeralda nodded. “Y-Yes, of course. I’m not worried anymore, Lady Claire. I know now she only *looks* scary. My sincerest apologies for jumping to the wrong conclusion.”

“Oh, no, don’t apologize. You’re right, she does look rather frightening.”

“Ruuuff?!” Leo seemed to take offense.

*Sorry, Leo. But you know I don’t think you’re scary. I think you’re really cool... unless you’d rather be thought of as something different?*

Leo seemed to pick up on my thoughts from the look on my face.

“Rooo.”

*Oh. So...you like being cool. That's cool!*

After that, Emeralda helped allay the townsfolk's fears. Fortunately, it seemed as though most of them were convinced and some even offered to spread Leo's praises in town. Having Claire with us probably helped a lot, though.

*Isn't that great, Leo? Now nobody will be afraid of you.*

We still had a general store to get to. But, as we were about to leave, the gathered townsfolk all wanted to pet Leo. Since I didn't want Leo to feel too overwhelmed, I had her sit, and the townsfolk were allowed to line up and touch Leo's forelegs one at a time. As they came and went, some people even bowed before her and started praying, while others burst into tears.

*Why do I feel we're gonna be here a while?*



**IT** took nearly two hours for the crowd around Leo to disperse. After that, we bid farewell to Emeralda and finally made it to the general store.

Sebastian cleared his throat with great pomp as we arrived. “Though it took far more time than I had intended... Mr. Hirooka, I present to you the finest general store in Ractos.”

“Wow...”

Though it couldn't quite compare to Claire's villa, it was easily the biggest building I'd seen yet. It was three-stories tall and made of quality lumber, and an impressive gate stood just outside the entrance. It still wasn't big enough to fit Leo, though.

“Sorry, girl. Wait outside with Phillip, okay?”

She watched us go in without her, a sorrowful look in her eyes. I could feel her tugging at my heartstrings.

As soon as we stepped inside, a slightly plump man in neatly tailored clothes and an upward-pointing moustache approached us. “What a pleasure it is to

receive you at my humble establishment, Lady Claire.”

*Ooh, isn't that a Kaiser moustache? I always wanted one when I was a kid... not that I think it'd look good on me now...*

Claire smiled and nodded. “The pleasure’s all mine, Hein.”

“But of course. And this gentleman is...?”

“M-My name’s Takumi Hirooka,” I stammered, feeling more than a little intimidated.

“Mr. Hirooka, is it? Please, call me Hein. I am the owner of this humble little general store.”

Hein then took over as our guide, taking us from one tidy display to the next. It appeared they dealt in nearly everything, including food. When we arrived on the second floor, I was shocked to find all manner of weapons and armor on display.

According to Hein, his selection wasn’t as good as an armorer’s but was more than sufficient for display or simple self-defense. His prices were low, and people seemed to buy equipment from him quite often. Part of me had always wanted to be a swordsman, but I decided not to buy anything there. It wasn’t my money, after all.

*I might return after finding a proper job, though.*

Hein continued leading us through the endless maze of racks and shelves. It was almost more like a modern shopping mall than a general store. I even spotted a few independent kiosks here and there. I noticed that a few items had small tags attached, and strangely enough, I could read them if I concentrated a little—and this was a whole new world, even! Not just another country. Instead of derailing the tour there to investigate, though, I decided to put that problem aside and focus on the wares themselves.

Of everything that Hein had showed us, the clocks were the most interesting. There were several there, including a few pocket watches. It took me a moment to figure out exactly what was so different about them: they didn’t have a minute or second hand. According to Claire, there simply wasn’t any need to measure time that precisely on a regular basis. She was flat-out puzzled when I



told her that an hour had sixty minutes and a minute consisted of sixty seconds.

Not only that, but the clocks here all went up to fourteen, not twelve—in other words, they had twenty-eight hours a day in this world. I couldn't tell if this planet revolved slower than Earth or if they simply thought of time differently. Until then, I thought the main distinguishing feature from my original world was the whole monsters-and-magic thing.

*But maybe the differences are a lot deeper. Maybe Claire and I have fundamentally different concepts of time.*

Having finished his tour, Hein turned to face us. "All right, good sir. Did anything catch your interest?"

"Well... I think I want a clock."

"Ah, a wise choice," he nodded. "A rather useful piece for any room, I daresay. Time is money, after all."

"Yeah. Ideally, I would like a shelf clock and a pocket watch. But I think I only want one for my room today."

*I'm spending Claire's money, after all.*

"Why not both?" Claire asked. "We'll take both, please, Hein."

"Really? Thank you."

I felt a little guilty, but Hein was eager in handing over our purchases.

"Thank you, sir and madam. You have quite the discerning eyes. Is there anything else I might interest you in?"

"Well..."

I wanted to buy only the essentials for the time being. Hein took me on another quick tour through the store, this time collecting all the necessities. The biggest find was probably a wide-bladed shaving knife, a lot more similar to a typical razor. It still wasn't T-shaped, of course, but it was far easier to use than the little knife Sebastian had lent me. With that, my morning shaving needs were all tended to...hopefully.

*Here's hoping I get used to it soon.*

After mulling over the selection for a while, I bought two large and two small leather bags at Sebastian's recommendation. The larger ones were about large enough to fit a watermelon and the smaller ones were roughly fist sized. Apparently, they used bags for wallets here, since all their money was in coins instead of bills. I also bought a fifth bag, one with a drawstring, for carrying things on the go. It wasn't exactly a backpack, but it seemed sturdy enough and, apparently, it was quite common to carry one over the shoulder.

After that, I stepped away from Claire for a bit to look at some other goods.

"Is something amiss?" Sebastian asked, coming closer. "I had thought you found all that you needed."

"No, it's not that... I just noticed this jewelry and I started thinking."

"Ah. I had not taken you to be the type for accessorizing."

"It's not for me. You see, I thought Claire and Tilura might like them."

"Oh, I see. You wish to surprise them."

"Yeah, that's it. It wouldn't feel right buying them presents with Claire's money, though, so I guess I'll have to give up on them for now."

"Hmm... I daresay that they would rather enjoy such gifts. All right, then, allow me to purchase these items in your stead. It will, of course, still be your present to milady. You may consider it a reward, if you will, for saving their lives."

"But... Are you sure?"

He chuckled. "Naturally. I had intended on gifting you such a sum from the start. As such, do not worry yourself with returning any of the fees incurred on this shopping expedition."

"Really? I didn't do much of anything, though. Leo was the one who saved them. I couldn't possibly accept."

"You are a rather considerate young man, Mr. Hirooka, but I insist. I bid you, accept this as a personal gift."

"...Okay, I guess I will, then."

I picked out the two accessories I'd been eyeing—a pretty little flower-shaped hairpin and a pendant with a silver wolf motif—and handed them both to Sebastian.

*I'm still paying you back later, though.*



**AFTER** that, I bought a few other knick-knacks and checked out...or rather, Sebastian did for me.

*Sorry and thank you.*

“Thank you very much for your most generous patronage,” Hein said with a smile. “Please come again.”

“Yes, we will,” replied Claire.

“Thank you, Hein,” I said with a bow.

When we left the store, Leo greeted us with an enthusiastic tail wag. After stopping to scratch her chin, we started walking back to the carriage, carrying all the things I'd bought—though I was carrying most of it, of course. They were *my* things, after all. As such, I couldn't let Sebastian or the guards carry them in good conscience, much less Claire. The clothes were particularly bulky, but not too heavy for me to handle.

By the time we were halfway back to the carriage, the sun had already begun to set. *It'll probably start getting dark by the time we leave.*

“We ended up taking a while,” I said to Claire. “Especially after that run-in with the highwaymen and all.”

“Yes... I imagine it'll be totally dark by the time we return.”

“Do you think Tilura will be asleep by then?”

“I wonder... She seemed rather tired when we left, but I think that she's probably awake by now and eagerly awaiting Miss Leo's return.”

“I feel kind of bad for making her wait so long.”

“Oh, don't be. Waiting with grace is all part of being a lady.”

“Waiting, huh? Come to think of it, weren't you out in that forest looking for

herbs because you weren't able to wait?"

"Oh, don't be like that!" She turned away from me haughtily. But I could tell her cheeks were red with embarrassment.

Sebastian watched us from behind with a warm smile. To be honest, I'd really enjoyed the little trip, and walking through town like this felt like the perfect way to end it. I'd never taken a stroll like this alone, let alone with anyone. I was swamped with school and part-time work when I began living alone, and after I'd graduated, I'd gone straight into the workforce. Leo took up all my free time then, which was fun, but it wasn't the same. Now, though, I could finally stop to smell the roses.

I suddenly stopped. "Wait a second. I think we forgot something."

"What could you mean, Takumi?"

"Weren't we going to find out if I have a Gift or not?"

"Oh! You're right, it entirely slipped my mind."

Sebastian nodded sagely. "'Tis indeed late, but not too late for one last stop. In fact, the establishment I have in mind is not far from where the horses are stabled."

"Sounds like a plan."

I'd no idea how long it would take, but at least it wasn't too far out of our way. With that, we decided to quicken our pace a little and head to this place.

Before long, we arrived at a small, grey building at the end of a narrow alleyway. Instead of a name, there was just a six-pointed star on its black wooden door. It was exactly the kind of place I would've avoided like the plague if I'd been alone, but I trusted Sebastian enough to not be too afraid. Leo, of course, stayed outside again, this time with Johanna.

Sebastian led the way, calling out as he set foot inside. "Hello? Are you back there?"

A moment later, an old woman with stark white hair and a slight hunch emerged from the back of the store.

"Took you long enough. I thought you weren't coming after all."

“My apologies, Isabel. We ran slightly behind schedule.”

“Well, that’s *your* problem... Oh! If it isn’t Lady Claire! Your Ladyship.” She bowed jerkily.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Isabel?”

“I should say so. Well, Sebastian? Where’s the fellow who wants his mana examined? Is that him?” She jabbed a finger at me.

“Indeed, it is,” he replied with a nod.

“Let’s take a look-see, then.”

*A mana examination? I thought she was going to be investigating my Gift?*

*Come to think of it, though, Claire mentioned something about how detecting my mana levels could determine if I had a Gift or not.* Now that the time had finally come, I started to feel a little nervous.

“The name’s Isabel,” the old woman said with a slight bow. “I’m the old crone who runs this magic shop.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Takumi.”

“Takumi, eh? Well, how’s about ya put your hand on this here crystal?”

“Okay, I can do that.”

She gestured toward a bowling-ball-sized sphere on the counter. It was almost completely transparent, except for a speck of something red in the center. It didn’t seem to be an impurity or anything, though, and it flickered on and off with a steady rhythm.

*Wow, she looks just like a fortuneteller, and she’s got a crystal ball...but I bet this is actually magical.*

As soon as I rested my hand on it, the spot strobed for a moment, then turned into a green light bright enough to fill the entire room.

“I see, I see...” Isabel muttered.

“What, if I may ask, is the verdict?” Sebastian asked.

“Hold your horses! Can’t you let an old woman focus?! ...Ah, so *that’s* it...”

As she studied it, the crystal began flashing from green to red then back again. It wasn't too bright, but I wanted to avoid being too close to it in the dark.

"There," Isabel said after a moment. "I know everything now, Takumi."

"So? How is it?"

She furrowed her brow slightly before continuing. "Well, you have a fair bit of mana, that's for certain. I'd imagine you could become quite the magic user, if you put your mind to it."

"Really?"

That meant that I could use magic, too. Maybe now, I could be a wizard, just like I'd dreamed as a kid. Not that I'd go looking for a fight with my magic, though.

"But there's something else here..." Isabel trailed off.

"What is it?"

"Can you tell what it is, Isabel?" Claire asked.

"...You have a Gift, don't you, boy?"

"I *knew* it!" Claire beamed.

"You did?" Isabel's eyes opened wide. "How?"

"Well, I didn't know for certain. But there were a few things that we couldn't explain otherwise."

"Ah, yes, I'd reckon so," Isabel nodded.

An eager look crossed Sebastian's face. "Well? What is it?"

*He looks more excited than I am... Not that I don't want to know myself, of course.*

"It's called Herb Cultivation, looks like. He can, well, cultivate herbs with it."

"Herb— What?"

*Oof, that sounds nice and useless. What a letdown.*

"So...what precisely can it do?" Claire asked.

“Well, for one thing, he can grow herbs, weeds—anything that’s not a crop, really—wherever he likes.”

“Does that include medicinal plants?”

“How should I know all the ins and outs? Basically, if it’s a plant that grows wherever it feels like, without anyone needing to care for it, then he can grow it and do whatever else he wants with it.”

“I see...” Claire muttered. “I knew he must’ve made that capwort grow somehow.”

“Does some part of that sound familiar to you, milady?” Sebastian asked.

“Well, when Takumi and I were in the forest looking for capwort, we didn’t have any luck at all for the longest time. Then, as soon as he sat down, there some was, like magic. I knew something about it was strange.”

“In other words, you believe that you found the capwort by virtue of Mr. Hirooka’s Gift. Is that correct?”

“Yes, I think so. What do you think, Takumi?”

“You might be right... Come to think of it, it sprang right up while I was thinking of it with my hand on the ground.”

“Really?” Claire asked in surprise. “Then I really *couldn’t* have found the capwort without you.”

“So it would seem,” Sebastian mused.

Isabel nodded. “See? Just like I told you! Growing anything you want, anywhere you want it. That’s a mighty fine Gift.”

“But didn’t you dry the capwort as well?” Claire asked. “Do you think your Herb Cultivation did that as well?”

“That’s right... I caught the capwort and then it was dried right out. It was all ready for medicinal use.”

“Yep, Herb Cultivation,” Isabel chimed. “Guess that means you can also change herbs however you please.”

“Come to think of it, I was thinking of drying capwort at the time...”

Claire nodded. "That about settles it, then."

*Honestly, I don't know if this is amazing or just kinda lame. Might be a useful skill for a pharmacist or something, though.*

I bowed to Isabel. "Thank you so much. Without you, I'm not sure I would have ever figured this out."

"Nah, I just read it straight off the crystal. But listen here, Takumi. This's important."

"What is it?"

"A Gift's a powerful thing, and how you use it is on you. Heck, you can ignore it for all I care. Just think good and hard before you go using it, a'right?"

"Okay. I will."

*Maybe there is a way for me to use it after all... It sounds like that'll be the hard part.*

Sebastian nodded. "Well, then. Now that the matter of Mr. Hirooka's Gift has been resolved, I propose we head back to the villa."

"What, leaving already?" Isabel seemed almost disappointed.

"The sun shall be setting soon, after all—not to mention that Lady Tilura is anticipating our return."

"That so? A'right, but next time, you visit me first. You hear?"

"And so we shall."

"Thank you, Isabel," Claire said with a curtsy.

"Thank you very much for everything," I bowed.

With that, we left the store.

*Maybe she's lonely, managing that little store all alone... I'll have to at least take a nice, long look at her magic items next time.*

After reuniting with Johanna and Leo outside, we hurried back to the carriage to head home.

*Come to think of it, Phillip came in with us, but he didn't say a word the whole*



*time... All he did was look shocked at my having a Gift. Being a guard must be rough...*



**BY** the time we arrived back at the villa, night had fallen. According to my new pocket watch, it was ten o'clock, or about eight by my original world's time.

"It's pretty late, isn't it?" I remarked.

"It is," Claire replied. "I hope Tilura hasn't been waiting too long."

When we opened the front door, we found about a dozen servants waiting for us.

"Welcome home milady, Mr. Hirooka," they called out in unison.

"We've returned," Claire said casually.

"Um... Th-Thank you for meeting us."

I still felt so self-conscious, having so many people welcome me home at once. It was a far cry from having only Leo waiting for me.

"Dinner is ready for you, milady," one of the servants said with a bow.

"All right. Why don't you drop off your things before we head to the dining hall, Takumi?"

"Okay. But, uh...where's that?"

I'd only eaten in the parlor so far, and I hadn't had a chance to explore much of the enormous house yet.

"Allow me to escort you, Mr. Hirooka," Laila said as she broke rank with the other maids to come forward. "But first, your things."

She reached out to take my luggage, but servant or not, I didn't want to make a woman carry anything for me. We reached a swift compromise, though, and I handed her half of my bounty.

"Take good care of him, Laila," Claire said.

"As you wish."

She curtsied to Claire, then led the way to my room, with Leo plodding along

behind us. As soon as I arrived, I let out a sigh and Leo yawned. Just going into town had taken a lot out of me. It was a whole new world, after all—but it still wasn't as bad as working overtime at my job. We dropped off my things, then made for the dining hall. Just before we went in, however, I stopped.

*I'd better give Leo a little reward for today.*

"C'mere, Leo."

"Woo?"

"You were such a good girl today! You let all those weird people pet you, and now they don't think you're scary anymore!"

"Ruff, ruff!"

I gave her a very thorough head-scratching.

"Oh, and thank you for saving us from those bad men."

"Ruuuff!" *Nah, that was a walk in the park*, she seemed to be saying.

Granted, it did look pretty easy for her—to the point where I almost felt sorry for them. If she'd wanted to, I bet she could've torn them all to shreds in an instant. Of course, I didn't want her fighting monsters if she didn't need to, let alone humans.

"Ruff, ruff."

"Haha, thanks." I brought my face close to hers. "Just having you makes this whole crazy experience way more fun."

"Ruff!"

The real Gift was having Leo with me. I didn't need magic or anything else as long as she was with me. I couldn't thank her enough.

"Mr. Hirooka?" Laila called out to us. "I believe milady is waiting for you."

"Oh, right. I'm sorry." Honestly, I nearly forgot she was there. I could feel my cheeks flush. Embarrassed, I followed her to the dining room, petting Leo as she followed along beside me.

*She wasn't watching that whole time, was she?*

“Please don’t worry about it.”

Her fingers twitched slightly as she watched me stroke Leo, as if she were envisioning doing the same herself. Come to think of it, she called Leo cute back when Gelda was still scared out of her wits. I made a mental note to let her pet Leo later. Leo probably wouldn’t mind. She seemed pretty attached to the servants already—after all, they were the ones who fed her.

When I stepped into the dining room, the first thing I noticed was the massive table. It was the absurdly long kind, and it looked big enough to seat some twenty people with ease. At far end of the table, way across the room from me, sat Claire. Tilura was seated right beside her, and Sebastian was standing behind her as always.

*I wonder when he eats?*

“Takumi?” Claire called out.

“Sorry for making you all wait.”

“Welcome home, Takumi! And you, too, Miss Leo!” Tilura’s smile was bright enough to outshine the sun.

“Ruff!”

She looked about ready to bolt across the room to bury herself in Leo’s fur, but Claire caught the hem of her clothes at the last moment and shot her a stern look.

“Um... Where should I sit?” I asked.

I didn’t know a thing about proper manners, and while I didn’t want to come off as uncivilized, it was better than embarrassing myself. *Better to ask and look stupid a moment than not ask and feel stupid for a lifetime.*

Laila gestured at the seat immediately across the table from Tilura, the seat one from the far end on the table’s right side. “Please, be seated.”

“Thank you.”

“Ruff.”

As I sat down, I noticed that there was no chair to my immediate right, the

seat directly across from Claire. It looked like the table was set so that Leo could eat there. I resolved to properly thank the servants later.

“I’d like us to be equals here, so I decided on this rather unorthodox arrangement,” Claire smiled. “It’s easier to talk like this, isn’t it?”

I smiled. “Yeah, it is. I’m really glad to hear that, since I don’t know a lot about the local table manners. I hope you can teach me some later, though.”

“I can teach you!” Tilura shouted, bounding out of her seat again.

Claire shot her another look. “You need to *know* proper manners before you can teach them.”

Tilura deflated back into her seat. “Fine...”

“Woo-wooo!”

“Why don’t we learn proper manners together, Tilura? Leo just said that she’d like to learn, too.”

“Really?! Okay!”

“Ruff!”

As we chatted, the double-doors opened and a small cart laden with food was wheeled in. Dinner was a meat sauté in a savory sauce, a salad with thick, colorful dressing, and a creamy white stew. *A potage, maybe?* Leo had fewer sausages this time, but there was a neat salad in a bowl beside them. A servant also placed a large basin of milk on the ground beside the table.

*They did say that last night was a welcoming feast for Leo and I, which’d explain why there was so much food... This is probably what their normal meals are like.*

As soon as all the food was laid out in front of us, a young woman in a chef’s hat came out to greet us.

“Milady, Lady Tilura, Mr. Hirooka, Miss Leo, please enjoy your meals.”

I decided to start with the salad. Unlike this morning’s offering, the dressing was quite rich.

*Yep, nothing wrong with a good salad. Gotta get those greens, after all!*

Next, I tried the meat. It tasted and felt a lot like beef and it went amazingly with the sauce. After a while, I decided to try a bit of the potage. It was nice and tasty and served as an excellent palate cleanser. Better yet, it really enhanced the meat's flavors when eaten together.

*Man, the food in this world is amazing!*

They didn't seem to have any rice or miso soup, but it was a relief to know that was one less thing I needed to worry about.

"This is really good. Thank you very much," I commented.

"Ruff!" Leo nodded.

"My pleasure," the cook said, bowing low.

Claire smiled as she sipped her soup. "You seem rather fond of it, Takumi."

"I am. Everything I've had since coming here has been amazing."

She chuckled. "It sounds like you have a new fan, Helena."

"So it seems, milady," the chef replied with a nod. "There's no greater pleasure than serving good food."

Claire turned back to me. "Oh, I forgot to introduce you. This is the villa's head chef, Helena."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I said. "Thank you for all the wonderful food."

"Please, no need to thank me. Knowing that you enjoy my humble offerings is plenty."

A slightly awkward silence followed since, after thanking each other, neither of us knew what to say. There wasn't anything to add, though, so long as I enjoyed the food and she enjoyed making it.

What surprised me, though, was how young Helena looked. She had to have been in her twenties and yet, she was head cook—and as a woman, no less. I had the impression that all the best restaurants in Japan were led by men in their forties or fifties or something like that. I didn't know how true it was, but I wasn't any less impressed either way. At any rate, her skills were the real deal.

"Today's food is extra yummy, Helena!" Tilura beamed.

“Why, thank you, Lady Tilura.”

I could practically feel Tilura’s energy radiating from across the table. She seemed even more energetic than she had this morning.

*I get the feeling Leo will be awake for quite some time...*



**LAILA** served us tea after dinner and I was reminded of just how good her tea was. Leo was curled up on the floor beside the table, blissed out on sausages, and Tilura had slipped into the middle of all her silver fur for cuddles. I was afraid that she was ready to play up a storm, but she was being surprisingly docile.

*I guess Leo’s just that comfy...*

Sebastian, Laila, and Gelda were all hovering a short distance away from Claire and I, ready to refill our cups if they ever came close to empty. Helena had already headed back into the kitchen with the dishes, evidently quite pleased that we’d enjoyed everything.

*This is probably the best shot I’ll get at asking Claire about herself.*

“Claire?”

“What is it, Takumi?”

“Well... I told you some stuff about myself yesterday. So I was wondering if you might tell me a bit about yourself?”

“About *me*? Oh, my...” Her face flushed bright red and her voice was barely louder than a whisper. Her gaze dropped to the table. “I-I’m not sure how to answer that...”

“Um... I know we only met yesterday, but I really want to know why you’re living in this ‘villa,’ and why even the townsfolk seem to respect you so much. Would you mind telling me?”

“O-Oh! Th-that’s what you meant. All right. I suppose it’s only fair to tell you, after all you told me about yourself.” She let out a sigh and continued so quietly I could barely hear her. “Honestly, you almost gave me the wrong idea...”

“Claire?”

“...No, it’s nothing! Let’s see, your first question was about the villa, was it?”

“Yeah.”

“To make a long story short, Tilura and I are here to be away from our father.”

*Oof, that sounds rough.*

“You mean you had to run away from your own dad?”

“In a way, yes. He’s always doted on us, but he just wouldn’t stop going on about potential suitors.”

“Suitors?”

“He would constantly ask his friends and acquaintances if they had any unmarried sons! He had a new bachelor lined up for us nearly every day. I remember once, I had to turn down five men in one afternoon! Gods, that was stressful...”

“He sounds, uh...like a lot...”

I didn’t have any kids—I wasn’t even married—but I often used to hear about overprotective fathers trying to prevent their daughters from even dating. Granted, there had to be some exceptions to the rule, and I heard that parents could get really overbearing if their daughters married too late...but Claire was still so young. Between that and how nice she was, I bet she’d find someone to marry sooner or later.

*Claire...getting married...*

The thought caused my chest to tighten a little for some reason.

More importantly, though, I was glad to hear that she wasn’t on awful terms with her dad or anything. It could’ve been far worse, even if she thought him a pain.

Claire shook her head. “The worst of it is, he would even try to marry off Tilura—and she’s barely ten!”

“That’s crazy.”

I looked at Tilura nestled in Leo’s fur. She was looking at us curiously, likely

having heard her name but not knowing what for.

“We were both rather fed up with his plans, honestly. And so, we decided to leave the main mansion and live here instead.”

“That makes sense. I can only imagine how annoying he must be.”

“Oh, he *is*! You wouldn’t believe some of the things he’s tried!”

Claire spent nearly the next half hour complaining to me about her father.

*Wow... Girls really get worked up about this kind of thing, don’t they?*

She clearly had a lot of long-buried resentments to unleash, especially since she clearly wasn’t the type to complain to her servants. I could see Sebastian and the maids giving me pitying glances throughout Claire’s rant.

“I’m sorry for making you listen to that,” she said after she was finally done.

“Oh, no. I’m just glad you were able to get that out of your system. It’s not healthy to keep those feelings bottled up inside too long.”

Back when I’d first started working, there were a few times where I almost got overwhelmed with stress. I didn’t have anyone to talk to, though, so I ended up venting to Leo. Not that she’d understood, of course. She’d always just stare back at me blankly.

“Let’s see, what was your next question?” Claire asked. “Oh, yes, about the townsfolk.”

“Yeah. They all called you ‘Lady’ Claire and the guards all seemed to know exactly who you were.”

“I suppose I’ll need to bring up my father again.”

For a moment I thought she was going to start complaining again, but she seemed far more composed than before.

“You see, the Libert family is a line of dukes and duchesses, of which my father is the present head. This villa and all the lands that surround it, including Ractos, are all part of his domain.”

“Wait...duke, as in nobility?”

“Yes. We follow a rather strict noble hierarchy in this kingdom. From the



bottom, they consist of baron, viscount, count, margrave, marquis, duchess, duke and finally, the royal family. In other words, our family is second in power to only the King.”

*I knew she was nobility! By medieval European standards, she must be a goddess. I guess by Japanese standards, then, she'd be like a vice-shogun... maybe? Um, maybe not...history never was my strong suit...*

I suddenly felt very self-conscious. “U-Um... I’m so sorry for all the rude things I’ve said and done in your presence. Could you possibly find it in your heart to forgive me?”

“What are you saying, Takumi? You haven’t been rude once since I’ve known you. If anything, I ought to thank you more properly for all the help you’ve been to me. Please keep treating me the same as you always have. But...”

“But?”

“I did notice that you seem preoccupied with being polite around me. You aren’t used to speaking like that, are you?”

“Y-You think so?”

“In fact, you seem far more natural when you talk with Tilura. I’d love it if you’d talk to me the same way.”

“...Are you sure?”

I looked at Claire, then Sebastian and the maids.

Sebastian gave me a reluctant nod. “If milady insists, then, I encourage you to do so. We must also take into consideration that you are a Gift-holder, and that you’ve a silver fenrir at your beck and call. By rights, you would outrank her.”

“Wait... *Me*, outrank a duke’s daughter?”

*That can’t be right. Wouldn’t that put me on par with the royal family?*

Claire nodded. “You’ve noticed that we all refer to her as ‘Miss’ Leo, don’t you?”

“Yeah...even people who are afraid of her call her that.”

“Doesn’t it strike you as strange that a duke’s daughter would refer to a

monster—pardon my language—so formally?”

“Come to think of it, you’re right.”

“And when we first met, I mentioned that this kingdom’s royal crest features a silver fenrir, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, you did.”

“The Libert family’s own crest also has a silver fenrir, except ours has fangs and claws.” She pulled out a palm-sized emblem and showed it to me. “See?”

The crest had a wolf that looked just like Leo on it. Its teeth were bared and its right foreleg was raised to show off its claws. The whole thing was made from glistening silver.

“Wow, you’re right...”

“The royal family uses the silver fenrir to symbolize supremacy, a state that will never crumble or falter. The Libert family, however, takes it to symbolize that it has never been defeated in battle. Not only that, but according to legend, the Libert family’s founder was said to be on good terms with a silver fenrir.”

“But didn’t you say that silver fenrir don’t serve anyone?”

“Yes. It’s said that they weren’t master and servant, but rather, that they were equals. Nobody knows the details, but it’s said that the silver fenrir was always there in times of need and together, they were unstoppable on the battlefield. It was in recognition of the founder’s war victories, in fact, that the Libert family was made nobility.”

“War?”

“Yes. In those days, the kingdom fought many wars with its neighbors. It’s said that whenever the founder stepped onto the battlefield, the silver fenrir would ride the wind to their aid.”

*She told me how silver fenrir are supposed to be the strongest monsters in the world, but I didn’t think they change the course of a whole war...!*

“After the Libert family led the kingdom to victory, they were given this crest. Since then, my family has had a tradition of honoring silver fenrir in recognition

of their aid.”

It was hard to imagine that Leo was any kind of mighty warrior, though, especially considering how she was currently curled up and sleeping off a bucketful of sausages.

Leo noticed I was looking at her and raised her head. “Woo?”

I tried to give her a reassuring look, but I didn’t know if it came across.

Claire continued. “That’s also why the people in these lands all know about silver fenrir.”

“Because of your family’s legend?”

“Exactly. That’s also why Emeralda and the other villagers thought it so natural that I’d have one with me.”

*Come to think of it, Emeralda had said something like that. Seeing Leo’s fangs and claws must’ve made it especially easy to recognize her from the legend.*

“That’s one of the reasons why you and Leo will always be welcome here...not to mention that you saved my life, of course.” Her smile was almost dazzlingly bright.

I laughed awkwardly and looked away. “I-I didn’t do anything. Leo was the one who saved you.”

Looking around at Sebastian, the maids and even Tilura, I realized that we really *were* welcome there. That much should’ve been obvious after all they’d done for Leo and I. But now, I could feel their warmth all over again.

I couldn’t just keep leeching off Claire’s wealth, though. I had to make my own way in the world, and I had a feeling the key lay in my Herb Cultivation skills.

Sebastian seemed to recall something at that moment, and he came around the table to whisper in my ear. “Mr. Hirooka? A moment?”

“Wh-What is it?”

*Wow... I knew that Sebastian was handsome and all, but seeing him up close like this is a whole different experience...*

“When do you intend to give milady and Lady Tilura your presents? I imagine

they would both be rather pleased.”

“Presents...? Oh, right!” My voice was a little louder than I’d intended, and both Claire and the maids gave me questioning looks.

*I’d almost forgotten about the gifts.*

“Do you think now would be a good time?” I whispered back.

“I believe that having heard milady’s tale, now would in fact be the optimal time for such a gift.”

“Okay.”

I’d left most of my things back in my room, but still had the presents in my waistcoat pocket. I rested them both on the table in front of me.

“Claire? Tilura?”

“What is it, Takumi?”

*“Ooh, what’s that?”*

“Well... I wanted to thank you both for all you’ve done for me so far, and I thought they suited you...b-but Sebastian was the one who paid for it, and I’ll be paying him back later...a-and...”

“Breathe, Mr. Hirooka!” Sebastian urged me.

I hadn’t even considered *how* to give them their presents, though. Laila and Gelda seemed to know what I was trying to do, however, and they were both giving me encouraging nods. Sebastian must’ve told them at some point. Only Claire and Tilura themselves seemed totally clueless.

*Wow, I suck at this. I guess anything I say at this point would be an improvement...*

“These are, *um...* tokens of my gratitude. Here.”

*No, wait, that might’ve been worse.*

With that, I awkwardly handed the silver wolf necklace over to Tilura.

“Wow! It looks just like Miss Leo! Thank you so much, Takumi!” She seemed to be almost bursting with joy.

*Whew...what a relief.*

I turned to face Claire. "So, um, Claire. About what you said earlier...w-well, I'll try to speak to you more casually, but I'm already pretty used to talking to you like this, so...h-here."

I reached out to hand Claire the white flower hairpin, hoping my hand wasn't shaking too badly. Strangely enough, it was far more nerve-wracking to give her something than Tilura.

As Claire accepted the hairpin from me, her eyes lit up in a smile. "Why, Takumi...this is rather pretty. Thank you very much! And don't worry, I'm sure you'll have plenty of time to practice talking to me casually in the future."

"Good... I'm glad you like it."

Tilura's smile was plenty cute, but somehow Claire's smile outshone it with ease.

*I wonder why she's blushing, though? Ah, well. She has the pin, and that's enough for me.*

Laila stepped forward to put the pin in Claire's hair and Claire shot me an expectant look. "Well? How is it?"

"I think it suits you quite well. You look even more beautiful now."

"I-I look what?!" She turned beet red and looked down at the table in front of her.

*Wait, what did I just say?! Dang it, brain, how could you do such a thing?!*

I could feel my own face start to burn up. I bet I was every bit as red as she was now.

Tilura looked up at us with a curious expression. "Sister? Takumi? What're you doing?"

"N-Nothing, Tilura!" Claire said hurriedly.

"Y-Yeah! Nothing at all," I echoed.

Fortunately, we were able to dodge her question...maybe. She still looked suspicious.

“Ah, youth,” Sebastian said with a wistful smile.

Laila nodded. “Indeed.”

“Hroo-hroo-hroo.”

Sebastian and the maids watched us with soft smiles. Even Leo seemed to be laughing at us. Neither Claire nor I could manage to overcome our shyness. Only Tilura remained baffled until the very end.



**AFTER** I gave Claire and Tilura their presents, Gelda led me down the hall to the bath. I was surprised to hear that they had a whole *room* for one, let alone an actual, full bathtub. As soon as Laila mentioned it on the way back to my room, I just couldn’t help myself. No Japanese person could resist a real bath, after all—especially considering that I’d taken nothing but showers *for* the past few years. Leo, of course, didn’t want anything to do with it.

“So...you really like covering yourself in all that water, Mr Takumi?” Gelda asked me.

“Well...yeah. Where I’m from, everyone takes baths.”

“Is that so? I’m not very good with them yet. I don’t hate them, of course, but something about them doesn’t quite sit right with me.”

*Huh. Maybe all shower people are like that?*

It could also be, of course, that baths were simply rare in this world, or that most people never took full-body baths. You didn’t need to totally cover yourself in water to wash up, after all.

After a short while, Gelda stopped outside a room. “Here we are.”

I opened the door to find a simple set of wooden shelves and several laundry baskets. Supposedly, I’d take off my clothes here, toss them in a basket, and then head into the bath. It looked a lot like the changing rooms I was used to back in Japan, not unlike a Japanese-style inn...well, aside from all the stonework. They were wooden back home.

“After you’re in the bath, I’ll put your towel in this basket here. Okay?”

“Oh, thank you.”

Gelda turned to leave and fetch a towel for me. It seemed like as good a time as any to get undressed and head into the bath. Just as I was getting ready, however, I heard something from the doorway.

“Eek!”

“Gelda?!”

I turned to find that she’d slipped on a puddle on the floor. I moved to help her up, but when I realized the state she was in, I had to avert my eyes. She’d landed face-first on the ground and was now almost perfectly upside down.

“U-Um... Gelda? Are you alright?”

“Oww...”

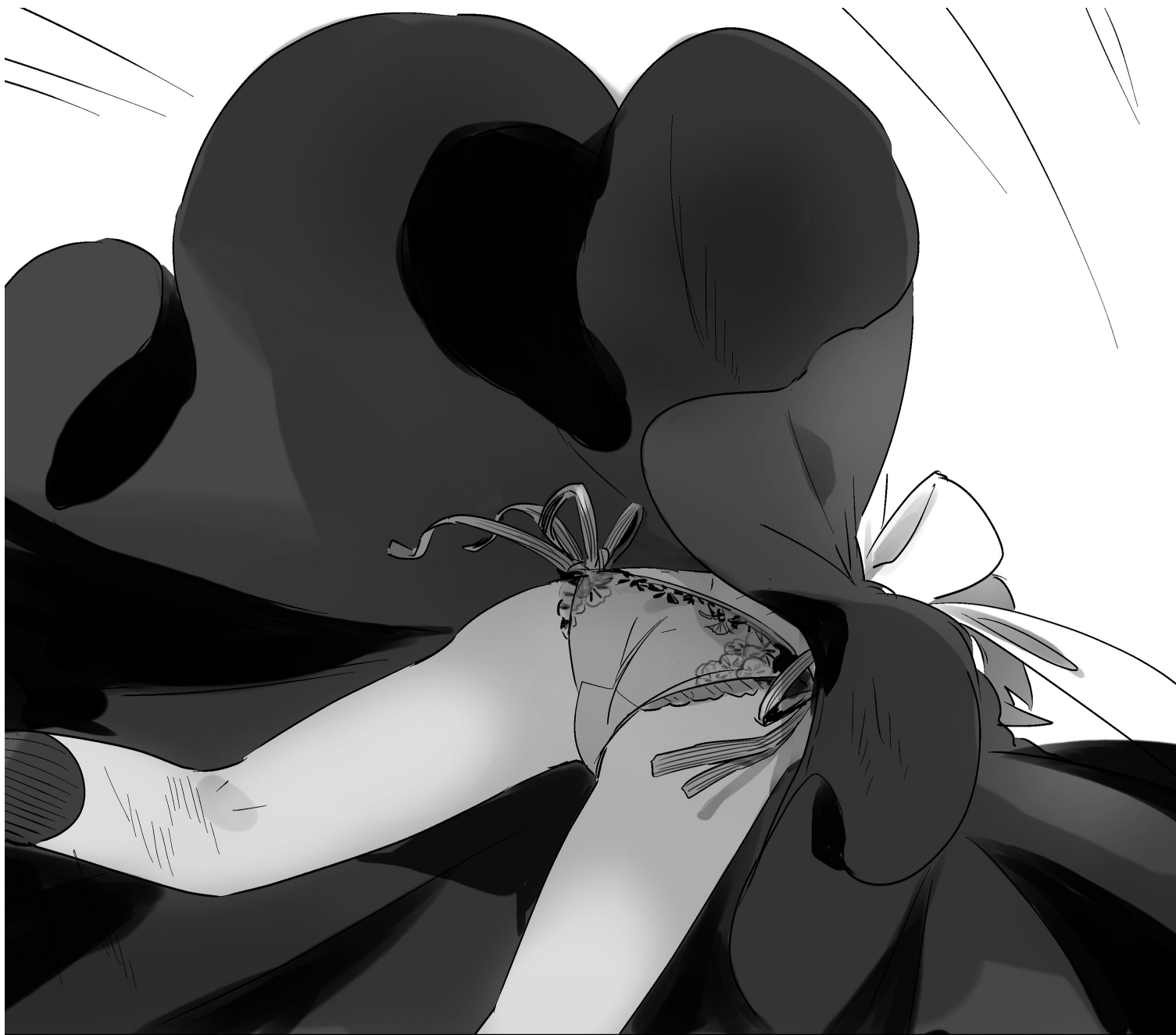
“Oof... Did you hit your nose there?”

“Yeb...”

She seemed so focused on her pain that she didn’t realize what she looked like at the moment. She hadn’t moved a muscle since falling and I was struggling to keep my eyes off her. I wanted to help her back up, but that’d involve looking at her, and I wanted to avoid that. After all, her skirt had flipped almost perfectly inside-out.







I'd caught only a glimpse, but it was enough to see her shapely bottom and elegant underwear. Honestly, I hadn't thought she was the type to wear anything so flashy down there. *Wait, maybe that's normal here?*

*No, stop thinking about that! Anything but that. For both our sakes, I'll just forget I saw anything.*

"Um... Gelda? I know it must hurt, but you *really* should stand up now..."

"Oww... Wait, what?!" She finally seemed to realize what was going on. She stood up with alarming speed and frantically flattened her skirt. "...You didn't see anything, did you?"

"No, of course not. I looked away as soon as I realized."

"So you saw?"

"Um...sorry."

"Oh, no... And here I was trying so hard not to mess up... In front of a guest, no less!" She shot me a reproachful look.

*I should've known she'd find out sooner or later. It's not like what I saw was burned into my retinas or anything, so I'll just forget this ever happened. A-And I don't regret her finding out or anything, nope.*

"Wait... So...you were worried about messing up, then?"

"C-Could you tell?"

"Pretty easily, yeah. You seem a lot more tense than Laila, for one thing."

"Oh, I was afraid of that... Laila really *is* amazing, isn't she? Maybe once I've been here as long as she has, I'll be more like her."

"You're new, then?"

"Yes, fairly. I'd better be even more careful from now on!"

*I knew it. I acted the same way when I started working, after all.*

I'd always been so tense and nervous back then, when really, what I'd needed most was to take a deep breath and relax. Gelda could probably benefit from that same advice...except, of course, that she seemed like the naturally clumsy

type. Clumsy people were scary in that no matter how nervous or relaxed they were, they'd always make the strangest mistakes. *Some people might call that cute, though...*

"You know," I said, "I was a lot like you when I first started working. Maybe you should try relaxing a little bit? Instead of sweating all the details, you should just take a deep breath and loosen up a little."

"Y-You were like me?" She paused for a moment. "All right, I'll try. Thank you very much for your advice."

"You're welcome. And remember, you've already messed up big-time, so you couldn't possibly do worse from here on out."

"Don't remind me." She shot me a reproachful look, but it softened slightly a moment later. "Thank you, though. I'll go get your towel." With that, she turned and left the room. A moment later, I could hear another short cry and someone falling over, but instead of risking her wrath again, I decided to ignore it and get undressed.

*She is a natural klutz, isn't she?*



IT felt so nice to be able to take a proper bath and I was glad this world had that same custom. The bathtub felt as large as the mansion itself, to the point where ten people could stretch out in it at once. I took the opportunity to wash every last nook and cranny.

After I finished, I headed back to my room, relishing that warm, steamy, after-bath feeling every step of the way.

"Ruff!"

"I'm back, Leo. Y'know, you should take a bath yourself soon."

"Hrnf..." She backed a few steps away from me.

*It's still so weird to me that she loves playing in rivers but hates baths.*

"C'mon, don't be like that. You wouldn't want your pretty silver fur to get all matted, would you?"

“Whine...”

“Don’t give me that. You’re taking a bath no matter how cute you are.”

“...Rrrr.” She poutily turned and curled up on the floor.

*I bet she’ll be back to normal by tomorrow. She’s not the type to hold a grudge so easily.*

I crawled into bed, other things filling my mind.

“Herb Cultivation...huh.”

To be honest, I never saw much difference between herbs and weeds, except that one tasted good and the other was a nuisance, and I bet most people would agree with me. Nobody paid plants like that much attention, and they couldn’t care less what their names or potential uses are. Not exactly the greatest image, I guess, which is why I didn’t hold out much hope for my Gift at first.

But after thinking about how that capwort had helped Tilura, it got me thinking about all the herbs and weeds with medicinal effects. That had to be worth something. There had to be some purpose to my power.

“How do I use it again?”

It didn’t activate at random; that much was clear. The only time it worked was with the capwort, when I was thinking about it with my hand to the ground. *In other words, I need to be thinking of an herb while touching the ground.*

“Right, and I dried it, too.”

Just like making it grow, I had to touch the herb and imagine it drying to work. In other words, I had to be directly touching the ground to make something grow or touching the herb to change its form.

“Plants from whatever I touch, huh?”

According to Isabel, though, it only worked on plants that could be grown without human aid. That meant no vegetables.

“If I could, I’d be one heck of a farmer.”

I’d never farmed anything before, but I wanted to try it out once. If I tried to

farm anything now, though, I might accidentally use my Gift in the fields. I bet my crops would get swarmed by weeds and that wouldn't do the soil any favors, either.

"Too bad. It would've been nice to find a job that easily."

There was no point dwelling on it now, though. What mattered was how I should use my Gift. Since I could grow capwort, I might be able to grow other medicinal herbs as well. But I'd need to know the exact extent of my power before I could go any further. I also needed to know what I could do aside from just growing and drying them.

*Sounds like I have my work cut out for me.*

"Let's take this step by step, though. Right, Leo?"

Leo didn't even turn to face me. *How sad.*

*My life back in Japan was jam-packed with work, but now that I've got a chance to start anew, I won't be making that same mistake. I have Leo to care for, after all.*

"There's a lot to think about. But there's no point in rushing."

With Claire's help, I'd at least have a place to stay for a while. I wouldn't be relying on her longer than I needed to, of course, and I needed to return the money she spent on my things in town earlier.

"Oh! And I need to repay Sebastian, too."

Herb Cultivation might hold the key to doing all that, but I had to take things one at a time. *There aren't any overbearing bosses here to yell at me when I take a break, or to heap overtime upon overtime, or get upset whenever I slow down... Nobody like that.*

"...Leo?"

I decided to stop thinking and go to sleep, but I was a little curious about Leo still. She hadn't answered me for a while. I sat up and looked around to find that she'd curled up beside my bed and was already fast asleep. No wonder she hadn't replied to me. As I watched, her jowls twitched, like she was dreaming about dinner.

“I wonder if dogs...no, if silver fenrir dream?”

I tugged my blanket back into place and closed my eyes.

“Maybe I’ll ask if I can test out my Gift in the garden tomorrow...”

Still setting out mental plans for the morning, I softly drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter 2: Testing Herb Cultivation and Reconsidering the Forest

A knock came at the door. I opened my eyes.

“Huh...? Morning already?”

A stream of brilliant morning light flowed into the room from the window. I blinked several times to adjust my eyes to the brightness as I got up. I'd barely left my bed before I heard a second knock.

*Guess I shouldn't leave them waiting.*

“Who is it?” I called out, my voice a little hoarse.

“It's me, Tilura! Can I come in?”

*I bet she's here for Leo.*

“Yawp...” Leo unballled herself from where she was sleeping on the floor, stretched her forelegs far out in front of her, and yawned.

“Sure, c'mon in,” I called back to her.

She threw open the door and bounded in. “Takumi, Miss Leo, good morning to you!”

“Morning. You're up pretty early.”

“Ruff!”

She at least said good morning like a proper lady, even if she was already glomping onto Leo seconds later. I was just glad that she remembered to knock first.

“Thank you very much for the necklace of Miss Leo you got me, Takumi!”

“You're welcome, but it's not *of* Leo specifically. It's just a wolf. Still, I'm glad you like it.”

Her hands went to the pendant at her neck. “I love it! I'll treat it very well!”

“Rooo?” Leo leaned in close for a better look.

“Look, Miss Leo! It’s you!”

Leo’s eyes widened and she shook her head from side to side. “Wroo... Ruff, Ruff!” *No, I’m way cooler than that!*

*Not sure I understand her obsession with being cool... Maybe it comes from going from small to BIG dog?*

*Come to think of it, though, I’ve been able to understand Leo ever since we arrived in this world. She always used to use more human-like gestures, which made her easier to understand than other dogs. But now, I can tell almost exactly what she’s saying...*

The smile on Tilura’s face died. “You don’t like it, Leo?”

“Roo? Ruff!” Leo gave her a reassuring nudge.

“Ehehe, that tickles!” She burst into giggles.

“Ruff!”

Just seeing them get along so well filled my heart with a warm, fuzzy feeling.

*Ah, friendship. What a beautiful thing.*

At that moment, though, my stomach let out a low growl.

“Takumi? Are you hungry?” Tilura asked.

“Ah... Ahaha, something like that. Sorry you had to hear that.”

“Ru-ruff!” Leo seemed to be laughing.

*Dang. I’ll have to be more careful in the future...*

“Are you hungry, too, Miss Leo?”

“Arooo!”

“All right, then! Let’s go to the dining hall!”

She grabbed my hand and tried to run out of the room, but I held her back.

“Hold on a minute, Tilura. I’d better get cleaned up before I go anywhere.”

“Oh...sorry.”

“No, don’t apologize. You wanted to hurry because I was hungry, right? That



was really kind of you.”

“Ehehe!”

“Ruff!”

I gave Tilura a pat on the head. Leo shoved her head under my other hand, so I decided to pat her head too.

“Okay then, Takumi. I’ll see you for breakfast!”

“All right, I’ll be there as soon as I can. You can go with Leo, if you’d like.”

Her face lit up. “Yes, please! C’mon, Miss Leo!”

“Ruff!”

With that, the two of them raced out of the room.

*Okay, time to try out that new razor.*

It wasn’t quite the same as the razors I was familiar with, but it seemed close enough. I fished it out of the pile of things I’d bought from Hein’s store and went to the mirror. I didn’t want to keep them waiting too long, so I set about shaving as quickly as I could without cutting myself. After that, I threw on a new change of clothes and hurried down to the dining hall. After being startled by Laila waiting just outside my door again, she led the way.

When I entered the dining hall, I found Claire and Tilura sitting in the same seats as yesterday.

“Good morning, Takumi,” Claire greeted me.

“Good morning, Claire. Oh, and good morning to you, too, Sebastian.”

“Good morning, Mr. Hirooka. Milady is in the *finest* of moods this morning.”

“Really?”

“Oh, stop it, Sebastian.” Claire shot him a look. “It’s nothing, Takumi. I’m the same as ever.”

Sebastian gave me a wink and a smile before taking his place behind Claire.

“Okay...”

She didn’t seem too different from before. Yet, she did seem to be in

somewhat higher spirits. It took me a moment to realize that she was wearing the hairpin I'd bought her.

*Maybe that's why? I'm glad they both like their gifts.*

"Well, then," Claire said, smiling. "Let's eat."

"Yeah."

"Ruff!"

Breakfast consisted of the same salad and potage as yesterday, plus two types of bread. On closer inspection, one was a simple sandwich of grilled bread, gooey cheese, and sliced ham. The second was a similar sandwich, but with a poached egg on top.

*Wait a second, I know these...this is a croque monsieur, and the one with an egg is a croque madame.*

If memory served, neither were ancient recipes or anything...but then again, this wasn't *my* world. Since they had monsters and magic, it made sense that they'd have other differences from my world's medieval Europe.

"This looks really good," I said.

"It does. It seems that Helena was rather flattered by your compliments last night. She got up rather early to cook for us."

"Really?"

Sebastian nodded. "It was apparently quite difficult to get the consistency of the cheese just right. I believe she called the dish a 'crock' or something like that."

As I looked across the table, I could see that Claire's sandwiches were different from mine. It looked like they each had a single slice of bread that was slightly thicker than mine, but the ingredients were added from a slit in the side so that the sandwich itself had less bulk. They were each nicely sized to fit our different appetites. Turning to Leo's plate, I could see a giant croque that was jam-packed with sausage. Honestly, I was impressed that she went so far.

*Thank you for all your hard work, Helena.*

“Ruff!” Leo dug into her sandwich, unable to hold back even a second longer.

I followed suit, grabbing the croque monsieur first and taking a big bite out of it. It was crisp and crunchy. The cheese spilled out to fill my mouth. The thick sauce mixed with it perfectly, creating pure happiness on my tongue.

*Man, nothing beats good food!*

“Isn’t this tasty, Miss Leo?!” Tilura called from across the table, beaming.

“Ruff!” Leo started vigorously wagging her tail.

Even Claire had a smile on her face as she ate her croque.

In the end, everyone finished their sandwiches, soups, and salads. Laila poured us all tea while we sat and let our meals digest. Tilura “rested” with Leo in the space beside my seat.

“Ruff, Ruff.”

“Haha, that tickles, Miss Leo!”

*Don’t go licking her face, okay, Leo? You just drank a whole bucket of milk.*

Claire chuckled. “It’s hard to believe Tilura was afraid of Miss Leo at first.”

“Yeah, it is. Leo *loves* kids, so I bet that helped quite a bit.”

We exchanged smiles.

*Wait, I almost forgot... I need to talk to her about my plans for today.*

“Claire? Would you mind if I used the garden after this?”

“The garden?” She gave me a puzzled look. “Planning on playing with Leo again, are you?”

“Not quite. I want to try out my Gift there...if you don’t mind.”

Her eyes brimmed with curiosity, but she was making a visible effort to conceal it. “Do you mind if I ask what you’re going to do, exactly?”

“Not at all. I wanted to figure out what kind of plants I could create with my Herb Cultivation. I was thinking I might be able to make something useful grow.”

“Oh, I see. You’re free to use the space however you see fit. We’ve not used it

hardly at all as of late.”

“Thank you very much.” I turned to Sebastian. “Can I ask a favor, Sebastian?”

“Of course. What may I help you with?”

“I was wondering if you had any books on medicinal herbs, or preferably just the plants themselves.”

“Herbs, you say? Let me think... I am afraid we do not have any such plants on the premises, but there *are* several textbooks. As we’ve no resident apothecary at the moment, we keep such books on hand for personal reference.”

Claire nodded. “That’s how I learned about capwort in the first place.”

“Is that so?” I answered. “Do you mind if I borrow those books, then? I’d like to reference them as I try out my Gift.”

“Of course,” Sebastian nodded. “If they are of any use to you whatsoever, then I will consider their presence here worthwhile.” He waved Gelda over and sent her to fetch them. Then he stopped to digest my words. “Reference material for Herb Cultivation, you say...?”

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Quite the opposite. I would welcome a means of procuring medicine so readily.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. You see, we have no stock of medicinal herbs of any description at present. Capwort, for instance, is a common reagent; yet, we lacked even that. If you would cultivate a few common natural remedies for us, I would greatly appreciate it.”

*That makes sense... Then they won't have to worry if someone gets sick again.*

Back in Japan, I always kept cold medicine on hand, even if I mainly used it to avoid taking sick days. My managers hated it when people stayed home for anything, especially the flu.

“I don’t know what my power can and can’t do yet, so I can’t make any promises,” I said. “But I’ll do what I can.”

“Please do. I shall ensure you are properly compensated for your trouble.”

I laughed. “Yeah, that *would* be nice.”

Claire leaned forward in her chair. “Do you mind if I watch you practice?”

“Not at all. I won’t be doing anything dangerous, so it should be just fine.”

*It... won’t be dangerous, right? How harmful could growing weeds be?*

“Excellent! Don’t start without me!” She was positively brimming with anticipation.

*Great, now I’m getting nervous. I don’t even know if my Gift works like I think it does, so I’m not sure what to expect. Granted, growing the capwort went fine, but still...*

After that, we sat and watched Leo and Tilura play for a while, sipping our tea and enjoying the morning air.



“**H-HERE** are the books on plants that you asked for”

Gelda brought me the textbooks a short while later, and with that, Claire, Sebastian, Leo, and I went out into the garden. I was puzzled for a moment to see that Tilura was gone, but I found her a moment later on Leo’s back.

*She must’ve really liked that game yesterday.*

I watched her and Leo a little bit longer before taking the books into an open space away from the others and leafing through the encyclopedia on top.

“Wow...there sure are a lot of plants in here.”

I could feel them all watching me as I read. Claire and Sebastian seemed especially excited, as if they thought I’d turn into a plant myself.

*They’re not making this any easier.*

“All right, I’ll start with this one.”

I decided to go for a relatively simple-looking herb: aloe plant. Its leaves were characteristically thick, tough, and spiked along the edges. According to its description, the jelly-like fluid inside it could heal scrapes and sunburns. I was

still puzzled as to how I could read so easily when the book wasn't even *in* Japanese, but I could look into that later.

"This is aloe vera, isn't it?" I muttered.

I remembered the time I'd tripped and scraped my knee as a kid, and one of the old ladies who lived in my neighborhood had treated it with an aloe patch. Since I was already so familiar with it, aloe seemed like a good place to start.

I shut the book and, envisioning an aloe plant, I reached out and pressed my hand to the ground.

"Um... I'm going to try it now," I called out to the others.

"All right."

"As you please."

"Ruff."

"This is so exciting!"

*Oof, they're staring even harder now...!*

I tried to relax a little as I focused on the aloe alone.

*I should probably say something for dramatic effect.*

"Uh... Herb Cultivation!"

I quickly regretted it. It felt as though I'd die of embarrassment...not that they were judging me, of course.

After a few seconds, I could feel the ground beneath my hand bulge slightly.

*Did it work?*

I moved my hand to look and a little green plant popped up before my eyes.







Ooh's and ahh's (and one ruff) rose up from my spectators. As we watched, it sprouted little leaves, then spines. After a while, it stopped growing altogether. It looked *exactly* like an aloe vera plant. My experiment had succeeded.

"Is that...loe?" Claire asked in surprise.

"Why, I do believe it is." Sebastian nodded, equally shocked. "Astounding!"

"Yeah. I just imagined the plant as the book showed it and...it grew."

"That's so cool, Takumi!" Tilura shouted.

"Ruff, ruff!"

"You... You *really* grew loe," Claire repeated in disbelief.

"Loe, of all things..." Sebastian mused.

"Um, yeah... What's wrong?"

*Loe...no, aloe is pretty common in Japan. I didn't think they would be that surprised.*

"Did you grow that plant, knowing full well what it *is*?" Sebastian asked.

"Well, I read its entry. I thought I'd go with this one specifically because it's so common where I come from."

"I see," he nodded. "Milady? May I?"

"Yes...perhaps you *should* explain it to him, Sebastian."

"Very well."

He cleared his throat and I could see a lecture forming in his mind. I caught a glimpse of a smile on his lips.

"Let us start with the basics. Do you know what loe does, Mr. Hirooka?"

"It heals scrapes and sunburns...right?"

"Precisely. With but a touch, it can heal an injury. Even a small amount of the fluid in its leaves is enough to produce remarkable healing effects."

"Okay."

*Sounds just like aloe vera.*

It wasn't the most pleasant thing to touch, though. I remember hating how the slime felt against my skin. But I also remember that it'd helped the scrape heal faster... I think. *I don't know how much faster, exactly.*

"Let me repeat myself. It can heal an injury *with one touch.*"

"Wait... So, you don't need to put it under a bandage or anything?"

"On the contrary. The time needed to heal varies depending on the graveness of the injury sustained. But for most smaller abrasions and such, the wound heals instantaneously. It cannot heal mortal wounds, of course. But even bone-deep gashes can be healed without leaving so much as a scar."

"...Seriously?"

*That's... How?*

The aloe I knew needed time to work. And it *definitely* couldn't do anything the human body was incapable of on its own. Maybe they really *were* different plants altogether, even if they looked identical. My gaze dropped to the little plant at my feet.

*To think one little plant could have so much power... Maybe weeds are more useful in this world?*

"Naturally, its effects make it a much sought-after herb," Sebastian continued his lecture. "Yet, since its native regions are not widely known, very few plants abound. In other words, it is exceedingly rare. I would wager that it is one of the most expensive plants on the market."

"Rare...?"

It was almost too common in Japan. You could find it virtually anywhere sunny enough, and most kept it as a houseplant.

"Now, I was certainly hoping you would grow a number of herbs for us. Yet I never imagined we would be welcoming such a treasure into our halls..."

"So...how much is a loe plant like this worth?"

"Well, let me see... The plant you grew has more than ten leaves, it seems. Those ten leaves alone would likely be enough for a house. As in, to have one built for you, from scratch."

“A *house*?” My mind boggled. “Do you think I could just sell plants for a living, then?”

“Well, I should imagine you could grow nearly any plant you set your mind to with the same speed you just demonstrated. You could have a rather large inventory with no production fees attached.”

“So, are you going to open a gardening store?” Claire asked.

“No, I don’t think I’ve decided yet. All I know for certain is that I want to work enough to be independent.”

If I had to keep leeching off of Claire’s coffers forever, I’d go crazy with guilt. Working had been a key part of my life for so long that without it, I don’t know what I’d do.

*I guess that makes me kind of a workaholic.*

The last thing I wanted was a stressful life, though. If I could use my Herb Cultivation power to make that not happen...well, it was worth considering, at least.

“Should you simply mass produce loe, I would imagine the price would drop quite considerably,” Sebastian said with a nod. “Mind you, you might also send the entire market into freefall in the process.”

Claire nodded in agreement. “Yes, I should imagine so. Would you mind if we kept that loe here at the villa, then?”

“Please, be my guest. I was planning on giving it to you in the first place.”

I didn’t know the value of loe at the time, of course, but it would be nice to start giving back to them.

“Thank you very much. Oh, and should you change your mind about selling plants, please let me know. I believe I might be able to help you,” Claire offered.

“How? Do you have something in mind?”

I’d never worked much in customer service or marketing, even as a student. Having Claire’s assistance on that front would be a great help, especially considering how little I knew about this world.

“Well, Sebastian said that you could destroy the market with your power, but that’s assuming you simply mass-produce loe and sell it.”

Sebastian nodded. “Indeed.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Suddenly flooding the market with rare goods would be a pretty bad idea.”

Merchants dealing in rare plants would be the first to be affected, but there was no telling what other impacts it might have.

“In that case,” continued Claire, “why not have the Libert estate handle the marketing and distribution?”

“Wait... You mean the duke’s people would handle it?”

“Yes, exactly.”

Realization lit up Sebastian’s eyes. “Ah... How clever of you, milady.”

*What would that even mean, though? Besides, should the duke be doing business like that?*

“You see, Takumi, the Libert estate runs several different businesses, both inside its domain and out. The taxes we collect are only enough to cover the cost of infrastructure, the military, and other administrative fees. Our real wealth—what allows us to live as nobles, that is—lies in our business ventures.”

“Wow. Really?”

“Yes. Granted, some nobles simply raise taxes and pocket as much as they can. But, in the end, nobles are free to decide whatever source of income suits them best. The only caveat is that if they harm the populace too much, the royal family will step in.”

Sebastian nodded. “Though of course, some nobles have simply perfected the art of milking their people dry and hiding their crimes from the outside world.”

“Okay... I think I get it.”

*So, the local lords decide the tax rates and whether or not they want to run side businesses... It doesn’t surprise me that some nobles would prefer to simply line their pockets with their people’s money, though.*

“The Libert family keeps the local taxes as low as possible to stimulate the economy and improve people’s quality of life,” Claire continued. “Fortunately, my father—as well as his predecessors and his aides—have a good mind for business. It’s thanks to that we live such comfortable lives here.”

*They must be successful, if they can build a mansion like this... I can’t even imagine how expensive this must’ve been... Maybe he wanted to marry off Claire and Tilura to forge new business alliances?* Then again, I’d never met him, so it was nothing more than a guess.

“You see, nobility is one of the most potent brands there is.”

“Brand...?”

“When a noble does business, the people will buy their products and use their services simply because a noble provided them. It depends on how much the people trust a given noble, of course. But a popular ruler will have better business than even the shrewdest merchant.”

“The perceived quality of said goods is also a factor,” Sebastian added. “The people trust that a noble will not sell them an inferior product. Likewise, a noble will not sell poor products for fear of losing said trust.”

“So basically, you deal in trust as much as you do actual goods and services?”

“Precisely.”

*Like a luxury brand back on Earth, then? If the Libert estate is making that much money, then their people must trust them a lot.*

“Essentially,” Claire continued, “the Libert estate would sell the plants you produce. The townsfolk would never doubt the quality of any products we offer to them. In exchange, we would pay you handsomely for your work.”

“Okay, I think I get it.”

“Since we would need to move carefully to keep the market intact, though, the estate’s experts would likely tell you what plants they’d like you to grow, and how much.”

*In other words, they’d sell my plants for me. But, in exchange, they’d decide what I grow...*

“Of course, if you wanted to market your herbs to the people directly, I wouldn’t stop you. After all, you would have more direct control over your earnings if you had a hand in every step of the process.”

“Oh, I don’t care that much about the money. I don’t think I could be a successful entrepreneur on my own, after all.”

*All I’d have to do, then, is sell herbs to the Libert family wholesale. I should get enough money from that to build a life, and I won’t need to bother learning the specifics of doing business in this world.*

It would be nice to keep all the profits to myself. But I wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Besides, selling wholesale was much easier, especially considering how easy it was to use my power. As long as I wasn’t looking to maximize my profits, letting the Libert estate take control of the details was a pretty tempting offer. And I could always branch out on my own later if I wanted to.

“I think I’ll let you and your family run the business side of things for now, then. I don’t trust my business acumen enough to do it myself.”

“Great! But please keep in mind, this is only a proposal. My father’s still head of the family. So I’m afraid that, without his permission, I can’t formally hire you.”

“Your father? So it won’t be happening soon, then?”

“I’m afraid not. I don’t imagine he’ll turn us down, but...”

“But?”

“I just know that he’ll try to marry me off again as soon as we meet. I’m not looking forward to that.”

“Oh... Yeah, I can imagine.”

*She mentioned before that he brought it up daily, after all.* I started feeling bad for her again.

“Before I meet my father, however, I would very much like to hash out the details of your contract. I would also encourage you to carefully consider whether or not you would like to sign. Oh, and I’ll devise a few new ways to

turn down marriage proposals as well!”

“All right.”

*She seemed especially determined about that last one... Maybe I should avoid that topic in the future.*

After that, I tried to make several other plants from the encyclopedia grow. Most of them responded to my power, but a few of them wouldn't work no matter how hard I tried. One of them was a skalyon, which seemed a lot like the scallions we had in Japan. Apparently, tying one around your neck could cure colds, among other things.

*Wait, so weird folk cures actually work in this world?*

According to Sebastian, though, skalyons were also farmed for use in cooking, which must have disqualified it from Herb Cultivation's roster. I was curious as to where exactly the line was drawn, but I decided to leave that question for another day.

In the end, I spent nearly the entire morning testing out my Gift in silence. The backyard had become something of an herb garden by the time I was finished. The curious thing was, however, that one of the herbs I grew wasn't listed anywhere in the book, and I'd never seen it before in my life.

“So...I can't just make whatever herb I'm thinking of grow?”

*What was I thinking of back then?*

*It must've been when I was watching Leo and Tilura playing in the garden and wondering just how tiring it must be to play like that. After that, I started thinking about energy drinks and other ways of relieving fatigue as I touched the ground. Before I'd realized what was happening, a stubby little plant with barely any stem and only a single violet leaf had popped out of the ground.*

I picked the mystery plant, but I didn't like the idea of selling it without first identifying it. Not even Claire or Sebastian recognized it, though, so I just took it back to my room with me.

“I guess I'll leave it on my desk,” I said with a shrug as I headed for the dining hall. Fortunately, I could finally remember the route there and back, so I was

able to make the trip without Laila's help.

Lunch that day was pasta. It was similar to spaghetti but, instead of being slender, the noodles were thicker and flatter. I'd never seen anything like it, but since Helena had made it, I knew it had to be delicious. I picked up my fork.

"This looks amazing as usual," I commented. I could feel my appetite growing.

Claire nodded. "Yes, Helena truly pulled out all the stops, it seems."

"I'm super hungry, too!"

"Ruff!"

I noticed that Leo's plate was also filled with pasta. But the long, thin noodles were already formed into neat balls to make it easier for her to eat.

*Thank you for being so considerate, Helena.*

"Let's eat, then," Claire said with a nod.

"Thanks for the food."

"Yes, thank you!"

"Ruff ruff!"

The noodles were covered in a red tomato sauce that had mincemeat mixed in. If I remembered correctly, it was called a Bolognese, and it was every bit as delicious as it looked. My only concern was that I'd get sauce on my clothes. *That wouldn't be an easy stain to remove.*

Claire was nimbly wrapping the noodles around her fork as she ate, but Tilura didn't seem as experienced, and she already had a few red splotches on the front of her dress.

"Pardon me, milady," Laila said as she halted Tilura's progress for a moment to dab at the stains with a white towelette.

*Wait...if this sauce is that messy, I bet there's one other person who'd have trouble.*

I turned to Leo and let out a sigh.

"I knew it."



The fur around her mouth was stained bright red, as though with blood.

“First thing after lunch, you’re taking a bath.”

“Ruff?!” She whipped her head up from her plate. That was the first time in a while I’d seen her react at all while she was eating.

*I guess baths deserve extra caution, huh.*

“Don’t give me that, girl. Just look at your mouth. No way that’s coming off with a napkin.”

“Ruff! Ruff, ruff!”

I ignored her protests and turned back to my meal.

“Wait, Miss Leo’s taking a bath?!” Tilura perked up. “I want to go in with her!”

I nearly spat out my food. “N-No, uh... Maybe that’s not such a good idea.”

There was no way that I could take a bath with her, after all. The last thing I wanted was to start making problems.

“You can’t, Tilura,” Claire pitched in. “You can’t take a bath with a man.”

“What?! You’re so mean, Sister! Why can’t I?”

“You just can’t. For a lady to take a bath with a man means... I-It means...”

“Sister?”

“A-Anyway, you’re forbidden from doing so. Boys and girls need to take baths separately.”

“They do?” Tilura gave me a questioning look.

*Don’t look at me! Why don’t you ask Sebastian or Laila or something?!*

“Y-Yeah...” I stammered. “It’s just not okay. You can’t ever take a bath with me.”

“Oh... Okay.” She started sullenly poking the pasta around her plate with her fork.

*I’m glad she seems to understand.*

Claire let out a sigh of relief, then shot me a sidelong glance. For some reason,

her cheeks were a little red.

*I wonder what got into her?*

“Roooo,” Leo lamented as she slurped up the last of her meal and began to lick the plate clean.

*C’mon, Leo. At least try to show some manners.*



**AFTER** we all finished eating, we took a short break to relax before Leo and I headed for the bathroom. Fortunately, Laila and Gelda had already prepared towels for us.

*Man, am I glad the bathtub’s big enough to fit her. She wouldn’t be able to fit in the bathtub in our apartment in Japan... Heck, she couldn’t fit in the apartment.*

*“Whine...”*

“Don’t give me that. You’d better get used to baths, ’cause you’ll be taking them a lot more from now on.”

“Yowt...” She hung her head low, her tail drooping as we walked.

*I still don’t get what the difference between playing in the river and taking a bath is. Is it a temperature thing? Or the closed space?*

I stopped in the changing room to undress before we hopped into the bath together.

“All right, Leo, here comes the hot water. You ready?”

“...Roo.”

I scooped up a small tubful and poured it down her back. She clamped her eyes tightly shut, body trembling as she tried to endure it.

After many more tubfuls, she was finally all wet. I rubbed some soap into a towel until the bubbles were nice and frothy. Then I approached her back and started working the soap through her silvery fur. It wasn’t long before the bubbles started to turn black with grime.





“You’re pretty filthy, huh?”

“Wuff...”

I rinsed the black bubbles away then worked in some more soap. After a few more times, I was finally done with her back.

*Man, this is harder than I thought!*

I worked my way through every bit of her body before finally arriving at the hardest part—her face. She’d always hated this part the most, probably because she was afraid of the soap getting in her eyes and ears, and her nose could pick up too much of the soapy smell. I couldn’t leave those red stains around her lips, though.

“Just hold *still*, girl. I’ll be done as soon as I can.”

“Ruuuuuff?! Wuff...wuff.”

She let out a pathetic sigh, rolling over on her back like she had when I was washing her belly. Her eyes were clamped tightly shut in resignation. I got to work quickly, doing my best to avoid getting anything in her eyes or mouth.

“Just a little while longer. We’re almost there...”

I found myself amazed by just how dirty her snout was, though. She’d even managed to get sauce stains up by her eyes.

*I’ll have to pay extra attention to her the next time we eat something messy...*

“C’mon, Leo. If you aren’t more careful next time, everyone’ll be too busy laughing at your messy face to notice how cool you are.”

She tried to reply, but all that came out was a weird snort.

After a few more rounds, her face was finally clean, and her fur was back to that beautiful silver-white shade.

“All right, Leo, you’re all done. You can get up now.”

“Ruff!”

She snapped back up in one powerful motion, twisting in midair to land with all four paws firmly planted on the ground. She’d moved so quickly, in fact, that

her sopping fur had unleashed a small wave on me.

*At least the bathroom's big enough for her to move like that...*

"That was cool, Leo! But did you have to splash me like that?"

"Rooo? Ruff."

"Oh, fine. Just be more careful next time, okay?"

"Ruff!"

"All right, onto the next step."

"Hrruff?!" She gave me an appalled look.

"Oh, relax, it won't be so bad. Hold still."

"Ruff..."

I grabbed the brush that Laila had lent me. The soap had gotten rid of the stains, sure, but her fur was still full of tangles and bits of dirt that the water couldn't dislodge.

"Okay, Leo. Sit."

"Ruff!"

She obediently sat down. It didn't seem like she minded too much—if anything, she seemed to be looking forward to it.

*Was she always okay with being brushed?*

Come to think of it, she was so relaxed when I brushed her in the past that she'd even fall asleep on my lap from time to time. She'd even start wagging her tail as soon as she saw her little brush in my hands. As long as I had that brush, she'd even follow me into the bathroom willingly, even though her tail started drooping the second she realized it was bath time.

"How's this, Leo? You like this?"

"Woo-woo."

She let out a relaxed sigh as she reclined on the bathroom floor. I was just glad that I didn't have to fight her every step of the way. Brushing that much fur was hard enough on its own. After what felt like forever, I finally finished.

*There. All that dirt and filth should be loose now.*

“Okay, Leo, time for one last rinse.”

“Hruuuuuff?!”

She whipped her head around to face me in shock, but I didn’t give her any time to resist before dumping a tub of water on her back. After a few more rinses, I was finally done.

“All right, that’s that! All clean.”

“Ruff ruff!”

She gave her body an enthusiastic shake, sending water flying all across the room again.

“Aw, seriously, Leo? At least wait until I’m not right beside you next time!”

“W-Wooooo.” She gave me an apologetic look.

*Oh, well. All that means is that I need a bath, too.*

I let Leo out into the changing room and I asked Laila through the door to make sure Leo got properly dried off. Then I headed back into the bathroom for my own bath. I used some more soap to give my whole body a quick wash. Now more or less clean, I crawled into the massive bathtub and stretched all the way out.

I let out a long-held sigh. “Ahh...”

*Man, a bath’s the best reward for a job well done.*

I massaged my aching arms as I reclined, enjoying every last second of it. When I’d had my fill and felt nice and warm all over, I hopped out of the tub and got dressed. Laila was waiting just outside the room as always and she politely informed me that Claire and Tilura were in the parlor.

“Is Leo there, too?”

“Yes. I believe she’s keeping milady company.”

Since I’d made it back to my room alone the night before, I had a pretty good idea of where the bath was in the mansion at large. When I told Laila that I didn’t need her to show me back, though, her shoulders sagged a little.

“I suppose I’ll go make tea, then,” she sullenly said before turning and leaving for the kitchen.

*Huh... Maybe she wanted to guide me back? This mansion has its share of weird servants, that’s for sure.*

When I arrived back at the parlor, I found the door closed. I gave it a light knock.

“It’s me, Takumi. I’m done with my bath.”

The door opened, and I found Laila standing there. “Please, come right in.”

*Wait, wasn’t she going to the kitchen? I know I just watched her trudge off in that direction.*

I noticed that Gelda was standing right beside her. She was carrying a steaming teapot and several teacups on a tray.

*I must not be as used to the layout of this place as I thought... That’s it, I must’ve taken the long way around by accident. That’s the only explanation.*

At that moment, Claire noticed me standing in the doorway. “Oh, Takumi! You did a wonderful job of washing Miss Leo. I bet you must be exhausted.”

“She *is* pretty big, after all. She’s not a fan of baths, either, so that made it even more difficult.”

“I’d imagine so. Why don’t you leave it to the maids next time? It would be easier to clean her in a group.”

“Hmm... Maybe I should keep doing it for the time being. I don’t want to just *force* all the hard work onto them. Besides, it’d be best if I did it until she’s more used to baths, at least.”

“I can’t imagine the servants would mind the work, but I suppose you do have a point. We’ll discuss this again later.”

“We’d be honored to wash Miss Leo when the time comes!” Laila exclaimed, oddly worked up for some reason. “Please just say the word!”

*Huh... Does Laila really want to touch Leo’s fluff that badly? I guess it’s not surprising, considering how addicted Tilura is to Leo.*



“All right, then,” I conceded. “You can be in charge of it as soon as Leo’s more comfortable. I wouldn’t want her to get spooked and start resisting mid-bath, after all. At her size, that could be pretty bad.”

Gelda went white as a sheet. “Leo... Resisting...”

Leo could probably send Gelda—or any of the maids, for that matter—flying if she decided to struggle. I couldn’t imagine she’d actually do that, of course, but it didn’t hurt to be careful.

*It looks like Gelda’s still a little scared of Leo, though. I hope they can become good friends soon.*

“Takumi!” Tilura shouted, hopping to her feet. “Can I go in the bath with Miss Leo if the maids are there?!”

She seemed just as determined as ever to bathe with Leo. Even I was surprised at how close the two had become in so little time.

“Sure, that’s fine.” I looked up at Claire. “You’re all right with that, aren’t you?”

“Of course. When the time comes, you can feel free to, Tilura.”

“Yay!” She glomped onto Leo, giggling.

Leo, on the other hand, was still pouting. “Hruff.”

Tilura buried her face deep into Leo’s fur before coming up for air a moment later, a look of wonder on her face.

“Wow, Miss Leo feels super-duper-extra soft now!”

I chuckled. “Yeah, I didn’t even realize how dirty she was before. Thanks to all that brushing, she’s totally dirt-free. I bet she’s even fluffier now.”

“Really?” She petted Leo. “Wow... I didn’t know anything could *be* this fluffy! You’re amazing, Miss Leo!”

“Ruff!” Leo nuzzled Tilura with her snout as she played.

Even Claire seemed deeply impressed. “Her fur seems even brighter and shinier than when we first met. This must be what her fur is supposed to look like.”

“She really is pretty, isn’t she?” I nodded in agreement.

“Oh, yes.”

Her coat was pretty enough as a Maltese. But now, between her size and her shining silver pelt, she seemed almost divine. Her fur seemed thicker, too. I was so focused on her size, I hadn’t even noticed before.

“No wonder silver fenrir are said to serve no human,” Claire said, still entranced. “Just one look would give that impression.”

Sebastian nodded. “Indeed, milady. I had read a great deal about the silver fenrir’s supposed luster, but never did I dream it would be so breathtaking. I had simply assumed her fur to be pretty, nothing more.”

“Yes... The old legends sometimes exaggerate things, but I see now that they were only telling the truth here.”

“Verily so.”

After a moment, I could see realization dawn on her. “Sebastian? Do you suppose the legends of the forest are also true?”

“We mustn’t assume that from her fur alone. However, I dare say there’s a chance.”

I couldn’t follow their conversation. I didn’t know any old legends about this world, after all. Just as I was about to ask them directly, though, Claire turned to me.

“Do you remember that forest we first met in, Takumi?”

“Yeah, I remember. Where you went looking for the capwort, right? What about it?”

“There’s a legend about those woods and the encounter the first Libert family head had when passing through them.”

“Wait... You mean the person who was friends with a silver fenrir?”

“Exactly. Supposedly, they first met in that forest, and it was there that they became best friends.”

*Wait, it happened there? What even happened to make them so close,*

*though?*

From what I'd been told, most silver fenrir were far too proud to have anything to do with humans, and they were openly feared. Leo was different, of course, but she was a special case. Or that might've been the case for all the silver fenrir in this world—I had no way of knowing one way or the other.

"Do the legends say *how* they got to be so close?" I asked.

"Well...no. None of the old tales explain that part. Not even the old documents relaying the back half of the founder's life or the stories passed down through the Libert family hold any clues."

"Oh...okay."

"There is one account, however, that details how the founder was surrounded by a pack of fenrir in the woods and that the silver fenrir came to her rescue."

"Fenrir?"

"Yes. Regular fenrir, you see, are a lot smaller and slower in comparison. They're still terrifyingly fast by human standards, and their mastery of fire and ice magic make them incredibly dangerous. Their fangs and claws may not be as sharp as a silver fenrir's, but they can still rip a human to shreds easily."

The founder must've been scared senseless, running into a whole pack of them like that.

"At any rate, that was when the founder first met the silver fenrir. That's why even today, we call that place the Fenrir Forest."

"Fenrir Forest, huh?"

It made enough sense from the legend, but neither Claire nor I had met regular fenrir when we were there.

"Are there still fenrir in there?" I asked.

"I'm afraid nobody knows," she replied. "Since the founder passed, no one has laid eyes on a fenrir of any kind."

"Oh...okay."

*But still, that's where Leo and I woke up and probably where Leo transformed.*

*Not only that, but Claire is descended from the person to last see a silver fenrir there...*

It couldn't just be a coincidence. It had to be fate.

Claire's brow furrowed. "There's one thing that still bothers me, though."

"What's that?"

*Is there something still in that forest?*

"It's true that no fenrir have been seen in those woods in ages, but then again, that forest is the stuff of legends now. Few people have entered the forest since then out of both awe and fear, and no one has plumbed its depths in ages. Nobody can say for certain what's in there."

"Oh..."

"That means that there *might* be fenrir living in there still...or who knows, maybe even silver fenrir!"

"That's a good point. It could just be that nobody knows about them."

"Exactly!" Claire enthused.

*I didn't know she was the type to get worked up so easily.*

*Come to think of it, though, she did ride into the forest alone as soon as she heard she might be able to save her sister. She might be more of a tomboy than I gave her credit for.*

"Now, Takumi," she started hesitantly. "This might sound crazy, so feel free to refuse."

"What is it?"

It felt like she was about to tell me some great secret, something that could put my life in danger.

"Do you want to explore the forest's depths with me? With Miss Leo too, of course."

"What?"

Sebastian and the maids did a double-take. "M-Milady?!"

“Huh?” Tilura seemed confused. She probably hadn’t been listening.

“Ruff?”

No wonder they were surprised. Claire was lucky to escape that orc with her life last time, and if she actually *found* a herd of fenrir—or for that matter, another silver fenrir—she’d be in even more danger.

“Milady!” Sebastian shouted. “Even with Mr. Hirooka and Miss Leo, it’s too dangerous!”

“*Far* too dangerous!” Laila echoed. “If you do find fenrir in there, I can’t imagine you would return alive!”

Even Gelda seemed to be in a panic. “P-Please reconsider, milady!”

They all advanced on Claire and she took a step back, her eyes spinning. “W-Wait... H-Hold on, everyone!”

*I’m not surprised, honestly. She has a history of being reckless like that.*

“Please, milady! For your own good!”

“Yes, just think of all that could go wrong!”

“P-Please, don’t do it!”

“.....”

Claire didn’t reply, but I couldn’t tell if she’d given up yet or not.

I was starting to get curious about the Fenrir Forest myself, though. There was a chance that I might find the reason I was brought to this world there, though admittedly not a high one. I wouldn’t go back to Japan for anything, of course—I could take things at my own pace here and could spend all my time with Leo.

What mattered now, though, was Claire’s choice.

She took a deep breath and I could see her eyes harden. “Oh, be quiet, all of you! I wasn’t talking to any of you!”

“M-My apologies for the intrusion.”

“Please forgive us, milady.”

“I-I’m sorry...”

*Wow... I didn't think she ever yelled like that.*

Sebastian and the others seemed totally mollified. They stepped back, heads low.

She turned back to me. "So? Are you coming with me or not?"

"....."

*Uh, Claire? You've still got one hell of a scowl on your face.*

I wasn't sure I had the guts to refuse, and the last thing I wanted to do now was side against her. I was also curious myself, of course. That being said, it *was* dangerous, and I wasn't sure it was a risk worth taking.

My eyes swung around the room until I finally met Leo's gaze. I noticed that Tilura was hiding behind her and quivering.

"Sorry, uh... D-Do you mind if I talk it over with Leo first?"

"O-Oh. Yes, of course." She finally seemed to calm down a little and her expression softened. "I'm sorry. I need to calm down, so please, take as much time as you need."

"Okay...thanks."

She turned around and I could see her shoulders heaving as she took a few deep breaths.

*Note to self: Don't make Claire mad...*

I felt that I could more or less handle how scary Leo or any other monster could be. But *she* was something else altogether.

*I guess I'll talk to Leo, then.*

She could understand everything I said, after all, and I had a pretty good idea of what she wanted to say, too. I didn't know how much we could *really* communicate when it came to complex topics like this but, as her partner, it only made sense to talk things over with her first.

"Hey, Tilura? Mind if I borrow Leo?"

"Okay..."

“Ruff?”

Tilura obediently backed away and sat down at the edge of the parlor. She still seemed a little spooked by Claire’s outburst, and she seemed very mindful of the distance between them now.

Leo cocked her head to the side as she plodded over to me. We moved to the opposite end of the room to talk.

“So, Leo. Claire wants us to go with her into that forest. What do you think?”

She paused to think for a moment. “Roo? Ruff. Ruff, ruff.” *Nothing wrong with that*, she seemed to be saying.

“But listen, there might be packs of dangerous fenrir in there, or even other silver fenrir.”

“Woo, woo, woo.” *Fenrir? You’re worried about those weaklings?*

Compared to her, sure, but they weren’t so weak against humans.

“Yeah, but what about the silver fenrir?”

“Ruff, ruff. Ruff, ruff, wuff!” *They’re my friends. They wouldn’t attack us.*

“Wait, really?”

“Ruff. Grr, uff, ruff. Wuff, muff, fruff.” *No silver fenrir would ever attack their kin. They’d welcome us like old friends—and even if one of them was stupid enough to pick a fight, they wouldn’t stand a chance against me.*

...Or something like that.

“Like old friends, huh? But even if regular fenrir are weaker than you, what if there’s a whole pack? Besides, there could be other monsters in there.”

“Ruff, ruff, ruff! Wooooooooo! Bark, bark, bark!” *It doesn’t matter how many fenrir there are; I can take them no problem. Besides, they wouldn’t dare attack me. The second they see any silver fenrir, they should just roll over and obey me. And even if there are other monsters, they’ll be even easier to take out than a fenrir! Nothing to worry about!*

The more she talked, the clearer I could understand her. This went way beyond just guessing what she meant by her little human-like tics.

*My Gift doesn't have anything to do with it, right?*

"I've been wondering, Leo. How come I can understand you so easily?"

"...Roووو?" She cocked her head to the side in confusion.

*So...she doesn't know, either. Well, it was worth a shot.*

I decided that it had to be a size thing. If she was bigger, then it'd be easier to read her body language. There was no point dwelling on it now, at any rate. I wouldn't be getting my answer anytime soon.

"Woووو?" Her brow furrowed in confusion as I got lost in my thoughts.

"No, it's nothing. So...you don't mind heading back to the forest?"

She gestured with her forepaws as she replied. "Woووو! Ruff Ruff, roo, woo, ruff! Woوو, roوو!" *Yeah! It's been forever since I've been able to really run around! Our last home was too small for that!* Or something like that...

*Yeah, our apartment was way too tiny—and I didn't have the time to let her out as often as I wanted to.*

"Uh... Sorry, I guess. I wish I could've given you more exercise back then."

"Ruff? Ruff."

She sloppily licked me across the face.

*I'm glad she doesn't seem to mind too much... Thanks, girl.*

"It's been a wild ride, but...I'm glad to have you, partner."

"Ruff, ruff!" She nodded enthusiastically.

*It's all thanks to you. Without you, I'd have long given up in our old world, let alone here.*

Now wasn't the time for getting sentimental, though. I needed to get back to Claire.

"Claire? I'm with you."

"Really?!" She broke into a shining smile. There wasn't so much as a shred of anger left on her face.

*She's so much prettier when she smiles.*



I noticed that Sebastian, Laila, and Gelda were all glaring at me, though.

*I'll make sure to convince them that we'll be perfectly safe. I just hope they trust Leo's words.*

"So, uh...Sebastian? Laila? Gelda?"

"Yes?" they replied in unison.

"You're only opposed to Claire going because you don't think it's safe, right? You're worried about what might happen if we actually find what we're looking for."

"...'Tis as you say," Sebastian replied humbly.

"Sebastian..." Claire finally seemed to understand why they were so harsh to her before.

In the heat of the moment, she probably hadn't considered why they were ganging up on her. Instead, it must've just felt like they were knocking her down without even considering her feelings.

*Or at least, it was probably something like that...maybe.*

"Well, Sebastian, I talked with Leo, and we figured that it'd be totally safe as long as we were with her."

"Is that so?" He still seemed skeptical. "I would imagine that in great enough numbers, even regular fenrir could pose a significant threat. And under such circumstances, if a silver fenrir appeared as one did for the founder..."

"So basically, you're worried about Leo having to handle a silver fenrir and a fenrir pack at the same time?"

"Precisely," he nodded.

I didn't blame them for being worried. I'd had the same fears just minutes ago.

"Well, according to Leo—"

"One moment, please," Laila interrupted, stepping forward. "You mean to say that you can understand her?"

Claire shot Laila a cross look but, perhaps because she could tell Laila was only

worried, she didn't say anything.

"Well, I can't catch every word perfectly. But we've been together long enough that I have a pretty good idea of what she wants to say."

"Ruff!" Leo nodded.

Laila hesitated a moment before curtsying and stepping back. "My apologies. It seems as though you truly do understand each other."

Claire also seemed to be digesting my words.

"So, uh... Do you mind if I continue?"

"O-Oh, yes," she nodded. "By all means."

"Well, according to Leo, fenrir are nothing to her, same with any other monsters in those woods. Besides, silver fenrir are superior to regular fenrir, so they'd just do what she said, if anything."

Both maids gave me baffled looks.

"M-Mr. Hirooka, are you quite certain?" Sebastian seemed equally confused. "I'm sure that silver fenrir are indeed superior, but fenrir are well-known for their violent natures. I can scarcely imagine they would obey anyone."

"Hmm... But you're sure, right, Leo?"

"Ruuuuff. Arooooo! Woo! Woo! Rooooo!" *It's practically instinct. They couldn't say no to me even if they wanted to. Besides, even if they did attack, I could take down a pack or two in the blink of an eye.*

I wasn't sure exactly how accurate my interpretation was, but I could tell that she was completely confident.

I turned back to Sebastian. "Well, there you have it."

"Er... I'm afraid you'll have to translate for us."

"Oh."

"Ruff."

I could understand easily enough, so I guess I assumed they could get the gist, too...how embarrassing.

I awkwardly cleared my throat. “B-Basically, fenrir wouldn’t attack silver fenrir because of their natural instincts. Even if they did, though, they’re weak enough that she could defeat them all, no problem.”

“I see...” he mused, still dubious. “What would she do against a pack of silver fenrir, however?”

Given that Claire’s life could be on the line, though, it wasn’t surprising that he’d want to double-check every potential danger.

“Oh, that would be no problem at all,” I replied.

“How so?”

“Apparently, one silver fenrir would never attack another. If anything, they’d be glad to welcome us. It might be safer overall if we ran into them, actually.”

“If you’re quite sure...as Miss Leo would be, I imagine...”

“Convinced yet?” Claire asked.

“...Yes.”

“All right, it’s decided, then. Takumi, Leo, and I will be heading back into the Fenrir Forest.”

“As you wish, milady.” He no longer had any logical reason to refuse her, but he still seemed reluctant.

“Claire?” I asked.

“Yes?”

“If you don’t mind my asking, why do you want to know if there are silver fenrir in there still?”

She glanced at Tilura and I followed her gaze to see that her sister was starting to nod off. “I think that’s enough for today. We’ve been talking long enough as is. I’ll have time to answer your questions later.”

*Is it just me or does she not want to answer?*

She noticed that I was a little put out, though, so she brought her mouth close to my ear. “I’ll tell you and Miss Leo when we’ve left. I’d rather the others not know.”

"If you say so." I nodded and she smiled.

*What could she want to hide from them, though? Man, it's gonna be hard to wait.*

"Laila, could you see to Tilura?"

"Of course, milady."

With that, Laila scooped Tilura up in her arms and carried her out of the room.

*No wonder she got tired, listening to all that complicated talk on a full stomach. Sounds like the perfect time for a nice nap.*

"I'll discuss the details of our trip with Sebastian, then," Claire said.

"Sounds good."

With that, Claire and Sebastian left the room.

*I wonder if she's going to scold Sebastian for what he said earlier? Wait, no, he'll be the one scolding her, if anything.*

Gelda was the only one left in the parlor and she busied herself with refilling Leo's milk. I sipped at my tea as I relaxed. It had cooled down completely now, but it still tasted good enough to finish every last drop.

"Gelda? Can I have a refill, please?"



I ended up spending the afternoon relaxing in the parlor. After Tilura finished her nap and Claire had finished talking with Sebastian, we had dinner and decided to go to sleep early. I already had a bath, so I headed right back to my room.

"Huh... I didn't expect we'd ever head back to that forest."

"Woof?" Leo cocked her head to the side. *Something wrong?*

"No, it's just...we got really lost last time, and there were those orcs... I was sure we'd never go back."

"Ruff, ruff, ruff?" *So why are we going?*

“Claire wants to go no matter what. And besides, I want to know if there’s some clue there about why we ended up in this world.”

“Ruuuuff? Ruff, ruff.”

“What’s up?”

She suddenly turned to face the desk, a curious look in her eyes.

*Weird. There shouldn’t be anything there, except for that weird plant I accidentally grew earlier.*

“Ruff?”

“Oh, I made that with Herb Cultivation. I’ve got no idea what it does, so I decided to do some research later and see if... H-Hey, stop! Don’t eat that!”

“*Munch munch* Ruff!”

“C’mon, I said no! I hope it wasn’t poisonous... How’re you feeling?”

“Ruff? Roooooo, woo-woo-woo-woo!”

She started getting really excited, wagging her tail and prancing around.

“Wait, what?”

“Ruff! Bark, bark!” *I feel so pumped, I could run forever!*

*So what did it do? Does it make you feel more awake? Or wait, is it a stamina-building plant?*

“You knew what that was, Leo?”

She energetically nodded. “Ruff! Gruff, gruff!” *I’m not tired anymore and I feel great! I think I’m stronger now, too!*

“You feel *that* good now, huh?”

*What did it do, exactly? Did it make her stronger and faster? Or increase all her physical abilities? Not that they’re any different, I guess...*

There was a strong chance it was even more amazing than the loe I grew. I’d have to do some more experimenting in the garden tomorrow. I’d cultivated it from a concept, after all, instead of a name, which could change everything I thought I knew about my Gift.

I laid down in bed, still thinking about tomorrow. But there was one very big thing on my mind.

“Hey, Leo? I get that you’re full of energy, but could you try to be a little quieter?”

“Ruff! Ruff!”

“Oh, all right, we can play a little bit. But only a little, and then it’s time for bed. Got it?”

“Woof!”

In the end, though, we played late into the night. Leo was so content that she fell asleep half on my bed, with my pillow entirely buried under her head and forepaw. I decided to try using her as a pillow for the first time.

*Wow... She’s sooo comfy...*

I really wanted a proper pillow made from her fur, but hadn’t shed a single strand yet, so silver fenrir probably didn’t change coats with the seasons.

Regardless, I slept soundly with her as my pillow until morning.



**WHEN** I woke up, I found that Leo was still sleeping in the exact same position she was in last night.

“Is sleeping all scrunched up like that actually comfortable?”

“Wuff.”

She blearily yawned, dragged herself off the bed and stretched her forelegs way out in front of her.

I’d slept incredibly well. I didn’t remember the last time I felt so good. I sprung out of bed and popped my head out of the room to ask Laila for some more hot water. I gave my face a quick wash and gave myself a quick shave.

“Man, this still makes my skin feel all tingly... I’m sure I’ll get used to it, though.”

After I’d finished shaving and getting dressed, there came a knock on the door.

“Takumi? Miss Leo?” came Tilura’s high-pitched voice. “Are you awake yet?”

*She’s probably here to say good morning to Leo.*

“Yeah, we’re up. Come on in.”

“Okay! I’m coming in!”

The door flew open, and she bounced in.

“Morning, Tilura.”

“Ruff!”

“Good morning, Takumi and Miss Leo!” She bobbed her head in an elegant little curtsy. It was at times like this that I could really tell she was a duke’s daughter. Her curtsy wasn’t as elegant as Claire’s by any measure, but it had a refined quality to it.

“You’re fluffy as ever today!” she giggled as she glomped onto Leo.

“Ruff, ruff!” Leo replied, nuzzling Tilura in return.

“Let’s go get breakfast. It’s all ready!”

“Thanks for letting us know,” I smiled. “Let’s head down to the dining hall, then.”

“Ruff!”

“Okay!”

*Her main reason for coming was probably just to say hi to Leo, but I don’t mind. I can tell Leo’s happy to see her.*

With that, the three of us left the room and headed for the dining hall. Tilura and Leo fooled around the entire trip there, the former riding partway on the latter’s back. As soon as we entered the room, Claire and Sebastian greeted us.

“Good morning, Takumi and Miss Leo.”

“Good morning, Mr. Hirooka and Miss Leo.”

“Good morning to you, too, Claire and Sebastian.”

“Ruff, ruff, ruff!”

Leo and I took our seats in our usual spots, and Tilura dismounted Leo to take her seat beside Claire.

Breakfast was already laid out on the table. It seemed to be sausages wrapped in cream puff dough and baked in small gratin dishes.

*What was this called again...Toad-in-the-hole? Helena outdid herself again.*

"Well, then," Claire said, "let's eat."

"Thanks for the food."

"Yes, thanks!"

"Ruuuuff!"

We all started eating. After we'd all finished and I was readying myself for a nice cup of tea, a second course was brought out. It looked like a dessert of some kind.

"Oh, my!" Claire exclaimed. "This is really good."

"Yeah, it is. I didn't know you even had Yorkshire pudding in this world."

"It's sooo sweet~!"

"Ruff, wuff!"

Yorkshire pudding was a side dish made from the same basic pastry as toad-in-the-hole, but sweeter. It was very fluffy and light on the palate, and both Claire and Tilura seemed to be savoring every bite. Leo was eating at the same pace, urged on by her own sweet tooth.

*I guess all women like sweets...not that I hate them myself.*

Claire gave me a curious look. "So do you have this dessert where you're from?"

"Yes, but it's not very popular in my country."

"Is that so? I never imagined any dessert this tasty could exist before now."

"Apparently, though, it was originally served alongside meat."

"Really? Well, I'm certainly glad Helena put in the effort to convert it like this. I'll make sure to thank her myself later."



“Yeah, I’m really glad she’s such a good cook.”

“Ruff!”

“I’m super glad, too!”

Thanking her was the least we could do for all her hard work.

As soon as we’d finished dessert, Sebastian, Laila, and Gelda brought out our tea. According to Helena, though, the dessert’s proper name was York pudding. I made a mental note to call it that next time.

“Do you have any plans for today?” Claire asked me as we drank.

“There’s something new I’d like to try with Herb Cultivation. Do you mind if I borrow your back garden again?”

“Oh, of course not. Please feel free to use it whenever you’d like.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

“Do you mind if I ask what you’ll be doing, though? I thought you tried everything you needed to yesterday?”

“Well... I’m planning on trying something a little different and I don’t know how it’ll turn out. If you don’t mind, I’d like to wait to tell everyone until I know how it goes.”

“Oh... I understand.” She seemed a little put out by my reply.

To be honest, it wasn’t anything that I felt I needed to keep secret, but I didn’t know if I could properly explain it. It’d be easier to show them all an example, and I felt somehow that I’d succeed.

“Ruff!”

“Oh, so you want to come too, Leo?”

“Ruff, Ruff!”

“I’m going wherever Miss Leo’s going!” Tilura chimed in.

I didn’t mind if Leo came along and Tilura would probably be fine as long as she just played with her.

“You can’t,” Claire chided. “Don’t you remember that you’re supposed to be

studying until lunch? I let it slide yesterday because you were still recovering, but not today.”

“But Sister, I *hate* studying!”

“Hate it or not, it’s important. No buts.”

Tilura visibly drooped. “Fine...”

*Huh. Claire really can be strict with Tilura when she wants to be.*

Tilura then plodded out of the room, giving Leo a longing glance before closing the door behind her.

*I can’t say I blame her. When I was her age, I hated school, too. All I wanted was to goof off all day, every day... I miss those days.*

“Rooo?” Leo gave me a worried look.

“No, it’s nothing. I’m fine, girl.” I gave her an affectionate scratch behind the ear. At that moment, though, I suddenly remembered something.

“By the way, Claire, when are we going to the Fenrir Forest?”

“Oh, let’s see... Sebastian?”

He sighed. “And here I was hoping you’d quite forgotten the topic.” He cleared his throat once before continuing. “I imagine preparations should take the rest of the day and that we will be set to depart tomorrow.”

“I see,” Claire nodded. “Tomorrow it is, then. Does that sound acceptable, Takumi?”

“Yeah, that works just fine. I don’t have anything to do before then except try a few things with Herb Cultivation, after all.”

“Ruff!” Even Leo nodded in agreement.

*I guess it’s decided, then. Tomorrow’s the day.*

I’d only been in this world a few days, but my time in that forest already felt like forever ago. That was the place where Leo got bigger, where I saw my first monster, and where Claire and I met.

“That forest had so many firsts,” I muttered to myself. “No wonder I’m getting

emotional over it.”

Having decided when we’d be leaving, Claire and Sebastian left to get everything prepared. Leo and I headed to the back garden, accompanied by Laila and Gelda.

As soon as we arrived, Leo started running around. I couldn’t tell if she had that much extra energy or if she was just trying to get some exercise in—probably both. At any rate, this presented a perfect opportunity.

“Laila? Gelda? Do either of you want to try riding Leo?”

Laila made a visible effort to suppress her excitement. “Oh, may we?”

Gelda gave Leo a dubious look as she bolted around. “A-Are you sure it’s safe?”

“Yeah, of course. C’mere, Leo!”

“Ruff!”

Leo perked up her ears and came running back to me. As soon as I finished explaining to her, she turned to Laila and Gelda and started enthusiastically wagging her tail. I was sure Laila would be just fine, but I decided to keep an eye on Gelda just in case. She was already frozen stiff with terror.

“It’ll be okay, Gelda. Can you help her up, Laila?”

With some heavy persuasion from Laila, Gelda finally climbed onto Leo’s back and Laila followed suit. Leo trotted about more slowly than she had with Tilura, making sure to not jostle them too much. Laila seemed overjoyed, but Gelda was wide-eyed and trembling.

*This’ll be a good chance for her to get more used to Leo, though. At least it can’t hurt.*

I watched the three of them a little while before returning my attention to my Herb Cultivation experiments.

*I wasn’t even imagining what that plant looked like yesterday, though...*

I started brainstorming possible plant effects one by one, working bit by bit to figure out the limits of my power.



**BY** the time noon rolled around, I was still engrossed in my tests. Laila and Gelda had gotten off Leo's back after about an hour, and after that, they'd watched Leo and I from beside the mansion. When Sebastian came out to get us for lunch, I decided it was about time to take a break.

"Whew...that was pretty productive."

Apparently, Herb Cultivation had no problems whatsoever creating plants I'd never even dreamed of before. I still couldn't create any vegetables or anything, but it was more than enough already.

After we finished our lunch, I left Claire to her preparations and Tilura to her studies to go back out to the garden and do some more trial-and-error with Herb Cultivation. Leo followed me and spent the whole time running around the garden at breakneck speeds.

After a while, she came back to me to lie down and relax.

"You sure have a lot of energy, huh?"

I offered her the same mysterious plant she'd eaten last night and she readily scarfed it down and went back out for another run.

*I guess I'm the reason she has this much energy, though... At least it's better than her moping around all day.*

When the sun had just begun to set, Tilura ran out into the garden, having finally caught up on all her missed schoolwork. They played up a storm together, first frolicking around, then riding around, and finally just snuggling.

I took a short break to watch them. After Laila noticed I'd stopped for a while, she came up to me.

"Thank you very much for what you've done for Gelda."

"What did I do?"

I didn't remember doing much of anything, and definitely nothing to deserve being thanked.

"You let her ride Miss Leo for a spell, remember? I-I also appreciated the ride,

of course.”

“Oh, no, it was nothing. Leo loves it.”

“Even so, you gave Gelda an invaluable opportunity to overcome her fears, even if only a little. I’ve already seen her attitude improve since then.”

“I’m not sure I’d call it ‘invaluable’, though. I don’t blame Gelda for being nervous around Leo. But I guess I am glad Gelda’s starting to warm up to her.”

I wanted everyone to know that Leo really was harmless and that she was very sweet under that intimidating exterior. There was no point in anyone being afraid of her.

Laila nodded. “Yes, I’ve seen just how gentle Miss Leo can be. And please, allow me to apologize for Gelda’s nervous disposition. No guest should have to concern themselves with a lowly maid’s anxieties.”

“But Gelda’s still new, isn’t she? I don’t think there’s anything wrong with her learning on the job, then. Besides, you’ve liked Leo since you first met her, right?”

“Yes, I have—from the moment you first brought her into the mansion, in fact.”

“Experience might have something to do with it, too. Leo and I really don’t mind if she makes mistakes around us. We both know she’s still getting the hang of things.”

I couldn’t imagine Leo getting upset about most things, and in my case, I couldn’t even tell what counted as a “failure.” I’d never been waited on like this before and I certainly wasn’t going to start yelling at her over every little thing—I knew how awful that felt. I was probably the ideal person for Gelda to practice on.

“Thank you for your kind words,” Laila said with a short bow. “Under my guidance, I’m sure Gelda shall become a proper maid in no time.”

“Just remember to go easy on her. Everything in moderation.”

“Of course.”

We exchanged smiles then turned to look at Gelda some distance away. She

was peacefully watching Leo and Tilura play without a hint of fear on her face.



**AFTER** Laila left, I continued working on my Herb Cultivation tests. By the time Claire and Sebastian had finished preparing for the next day's trip and came out to see us, it was time for dinner.

"Won't you tell me what you've been trying yet?" Claire asked as we finished eating.

I'd been trying to avoid her questions, but she was relentless. I deflected her interest with an offhand remark and she seemed visibly miffed. One bite of her York pudding dessert was enough to fix her mood, however.

After that, we relaxed until Tilura's fatigue from all her running around before dinner caught up with her and then dispersed for the night. Claire, Leo, and I went back to our rooms, and after Leo was settled, I went to take my bath alone. I'd spent almost the entire day outside, so I had to wash off properly.

"Ah... Nothing beats a good bath..."

Leo had accumulated a bit of dirt herself, but since we'd be heading back into the forest tomorrow, it didn't make sense to scrub her down now. She'd probably need one as soon as we got back, anyways.

After I finished washing up and felt warmed to my core, I headed back to the room and fooled around with Leo a bit more before crawling into bed. I wasn't physically tired, but my mind felt foggy from all the thinking I'd done.

"So...tomorrow's the day..."

All the preparations were made, so all that was left was to get a good night's sleep. After saying good night to Leo as she curled up beside my bed, I too shut my eyes and got some rest.

## Chapter 3: Forest Exploration and a New Friend

**ON** the morning of the forest expedition, I got dressed, shaved, and left the room. Tilura didn't come to visit me, oddly enough, but when Leo and I arrived in the dining hall, I learned that she'd just overslept. She made it in time for breakfast, but only barely.

After we finished eating, Leo and I headed back to our room to grab my sack. I stopped to stuff a few changes of clothes, a spare set of shoes, and a few other essentials in before shouldering the bag.

*Sebastian was right. These things really are useful.*

"All right. Are you ready, girl?"

"Ruff!"

With that, we left the room.

As we headed to the entrance hall, however, I saw a familiar figure in a chef's hat.

"Mr. Hirooka?"

"Oh, Helena. Is everything alright?"

"Ruff?"

"I hate to stop you at a time like this, but there's something I simply have to ask you. Sebastian said you knew of that York pudding I made?"

"Oh, yeah. I had it once, back home."

"Is that so?" She seemed almost depressed. "And here I was sure I'd made something that nobody had ever seen before..."

"O-Oh."

She probably wanted to surprise us all. No wonder she was feeling so upset about it.

“You see, I’ve devoted my entire life to cooking. That means creating dishes that people enjoy, of course, as well as crafting entirely new cuisines.”

“So...you want to make brand-new dishes?”

“In a sense, yes. I want to become skilled enough one day to make anything taste delicious.”

At first, I thought she was exaggerating, but I could tell from the way she talked that she really cared about her craft. It was as though she was just one big ball of passion, always rolling toward better and better cooking.

*No wonder she’s the villa’s head chef at her age, then.*

You probably had to be extremely talented and devoted in order to work for a duke’s family.

*And she’s so pretty, too. It’s almost a shame she spends all her time cooped up in the kitchen...*

“I’m sorry,” I apologized. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings or anything with my unnecessary knowledge.”

“No, please, don’t worry about it. If I’m going to craft something new, I’ll need to know everything that’s currently out there first. All you did was affirm that I’ve still got a long way to go.”

“Uh... I’m not sure I’d go *that* far.”

My knowledge of my past world was basically cheating, after all. For all I knew, she might really *have* invented York pudding in this world. I could tell I’d lit a fire under her, though, so I didn’t say anything.

“I likely won’t be done by the time you return from the forest, but I swear... one day, I’ll make something the likes of which nobody has ever seen!”

“Um... I’m looking forward to it?” Her determination was a little overwhelming.

“And, of course, I’ll create a dish for Miss Leo so amazing that she’ll never again think of sausages!”

“Ruff?! Ruff, ruff!”



I could practically see the flames of passion burning around her. I certainly wasn't going to refuse good food, though, so I decided it'd be best to cheer her on. My only concern was that Leo had already begun whimpering with excitement, but she would probably stop soon enough...I hoped.

"If you don't mind, then," she continued, "I'd love to pick your brain from time to time."

"Why me?"

"If you knew about York pudding, then you must've been something of a gourmand in your world. If you have any ideas, then please, come to me with them post-haste."

"Oh, okay. Makes sense. If I were you, I'd try not to get my hopes up too high, but I'll see what I can do."

"Yes, please do!"

With that, we both went our separate ways.

*I don't think I'll end up helping much, though. I can't even cook and it was just dumb luck I knew anything about York pudding.*

If *she* was handling the cooking, though, I might be able to come up with an idea or two. That being said, it seemed like ages since I'd eaten anything not from a convenience store, so I still wasn't too confident.

*I really hope she doesn't get her hopes up...*

As we walked, though, I realized Leo's tail was still wagging like crazy.

*It's not ready yet, Leo. You'll probably have to wait a while for that new dish.*



**WHEN** we arrived at the entrance hall, I noticed that there were about twenty servants assembled to see us off. Even Helena was there, to my surprise. Claire, Sebastian, and Laila were all dressed in simpler traveling clothes, as well as something like leather armor. I also saw Phillip, Johanna, and two other guards in gleaming metal armor.

Wait, they're all coming with us?

I walked up to Sebastian. “I didn’t know you or Laila were coming...or any of the guards, actually.”

“But of course. I would never dream of sending milady into the wilderness underprepared, as reliable a companion as you may be. Laila and I will take care of her mundane needs and the guards shall ensure that she is protected at all times.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “He refused to listen no matter how many times I told him we’d be fine.”

I laughed politely. “I bet he’s just trying to do what’s best for you.”

I couldn’t imagine he liked the idea of her going off into a dangerous forest alone with some guy and his big dog for a few days.

Wait, where’s Tilura? I was so sure she’d want to see Leo off.

Just at that moment, though, she popped her head out from among the crowd of servants.

“Goodbye, Miss Leo, Sister, Takumi! Be careful and come back soon!”

“Make sure you study while we’re gone,” Claire told her.

“Don’t worry, Tilura,” I added. “We’ll be back as soon as we can.”

“Ruff, ruff, ruff.” Leo nuzzled Tilura’s face and gave her a big lick.

The smile on Tilura’s face brightened a little. “See you soon, Miss Leo!”

I could tell she wanted to come with us, but none of us wanted to expose her to danger if we could help it. Claire probably spent quite some time yesterday convincing her.

“Well then, Takumi, shall we be off?” Claire asked.

“Yeah, let’s.”

“Ruff.”

All the servants bowed or curtsied in unison. “Farewell, milady, Mr. Hirooka, Miss Leo. We wish you pleasant travels!”

“Bye-bye, Sister, Takumi, Miss Leo!” Tilura chimed in.

We left the mansion with my ears still ringing from how loud the servants' goodbye was. There was a carriage and four horses waiting outside the front door. Sebastian climbed into the driver's seat again, and Claire, Laila, and I piled inside it. I sat on the far right, followed by Laila in the middle, and Claire on the left side. Given the carriage's size, though, we were packed in pretty tightly.

"L-Laila? Can you try to give me a little more room?"

My voice was too small to be heard, though, as I pushed myself against the carriage wall. I could feel my face growing hot, so I turned toward the window. Leo met my gaze.

"Ruhuff," she said with a disbelieving shake of her head.

Don't give me that look. I've never been in a situation like this before, okay?

Claire was beautiful, of course, but Laila was also quite attractive. It was also worth mentioning that Laila had decidedly thicker—

Nope, that's enough of that! I wouldn't be able to hide my thoughts if I kept going down that rabbit hole and Laila deserves better.

"Well then," Sebastian called from his seat outside, "let us be off!"

"Wooooo!"

With a snap of the reins, the horses broke into a trot. Leo kept pace beside the carriage with ease. The guards took up their positions—one in each quadrant around the carriage. If there was any danger on the road, one of them would be sure to spot it.

"By the way, Sebastian, how long will it take to get there?" I asked.

"About three hours, I'd imagine."

"Any specific reason you're asking?" Claire questioned me.

"No, not really. I was just a little worried I might not make it there in one go, since I'm still not used to carriages."

The real reason was to do with how close I was crammed in with the ladies, but there was some truth in what I'd said. I saw a horse for the first time only a few days ago, after all.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you about that,” Claire continued. “You said that Miss Leo was tiny in your old world, didn’t you? How did you get around, then?”

“Oof, how do I explain this? Well...we technically do have carriages, but not many people ride them. Instead, we have these big, steel boxes that move on their own.”

How do I even describe a car? It’s not alive, but I can’t imagine they have any vehicles beyond carriages here.

“A metal box?!” Claire blinked with disbelief. “So...these boxes can move without any horses to draw them? I thought you said your world didn’t have magic.”

She seemed a lot more interested than I thought she’d be. Even Laila was leaning in curiously.

Um...that’s a little too close!

Even Sebastian was casting an occasional glance through the window behind him into the carriage.

Where do I even start, though?

“Well, instead of magic, we use a kind of...flammable liquid to power them.”

“You mean the firewood in your world is liquid?”

“Not quite. We still use firewood for when we want to stay warm. Liquid fuel burns a lot better, though, and we can turn that heat into energy.”

“Heat into energy? How does that move around the steel boxes, though? They sound incredibly heavy.”

“I don’t know how it works, exactly. All I know is that it does.”

“It sounds like your world can do some amazing things!”

“Well, without magic, our only real option is science and technology, right?”

I remember reading in a book once that sufficiently advanced science was indistinguishable from magic. To my untrained eyes, TVs and the Internet might as well have been crystal balls and telepathy.

I continued telling them about my world as we rode on toward the forest. I

even managed to forget how closely Laila's body was squished against mine. It required all my concentration to explain science I barely understood, after all.



**AFTER** some time, we pulled up beside a lone tree by the roadside.

"I believe this is an ideal place for a short rest," Sebastian called out as he dismounted.

I was glad for a slight change of pace. The ride was uncomfortable enough that we would likely have all been worn out before we arrived if we didn't take a proper break now and then. Leo, on the other hand, seemed perfectly fine, despite having run all the way there.

Sebastian watered the horses as Claire, Laila, and I left the carriage and we all took a moment to stretch our stiff limbs.

"It turned out to be a little too cramped in there, huh?" I asked Claire.

"I don't think I've ever felt so squished before." She stretched, but I could tell as she cast a sidelong glance at me that she was holding back out of shyness.

Laila, meanwhile, took a bottle of milk out of the back of the coach and poured some into a small tub for Leo. Leo wasted no time in gulping it down with gusto.

*Just don't overdo it, girl. You don't want to drink so much you can't run.*

"How much longer to the forest, Sebastian?" I asked.

"We're presently just off the town road closest to the forest. I should imagine we're a little past halfway there. The condition of the roads shan't be as nice from here on out, but we should arrive in no more than an hour."

"We're *that* close? Is it all right if I ride Leo the rest of the way, then?"

"Ride Miss Leo?"

"Yes. I, uh..." I stepped closer until I was right up to his ear.

"Is something the matter?" he whispered.

"The carriage is a little too cramped," I whispered back. "I can't ride without pressing right up against either Claire or Laila."

He chuckled. "Well, Mr. Hirooka, I believe that is what they call 'good fortune.'"

*Wait, what did he just say? Doesn't he realize how embarrassing it is to be in a situation like that?! Did he see how close I was to Laila?!*

That wasn't to say that I was unhappy with the arrangement, *per se*. If anything, I felt the opposite, but also felt I couldn't hide my embarrassment any longer than I already had.

"I'm riding Leo the rest of the way and that's final," I returned.

"If you insist. I would hate to bring your pleasure to such an early end, but I shan't defy you."

*He didn't get replaced by his evil twin or anything, right?*

After we finished talking, he went to have a word with Claire and Laila. We decided that the most likely excuse would be that Leo wanted to give me a ride.

"Sorry, Leo. I hate to push the blame on you like this."

"Wruff." She gave me a pitying shake of her head.

Once we started going again, however, she was so excited that she could barely run in a straight line, and I had to make her stop multiple times so that we didn't totally leave the carriage behind.

"Can you try to calm down a little, Leo?"

"Woaaa." She seemed sorry, but I could tell she still had energy to burn.

Since she wouldn't have enough space to run all-out inside the forest, I thought of a different way to give her some exercise.

"All right, Leo, I have an idea of how you can get all nice and tuckered out."

"Ruff?! Ruff-ruff!"

With that, I told her to start running circles around the carriage's guards. Since we were circling a moving object, it took a lot more energy than it might seem at first glance. The only catch was, I could see Laila shooting me jealous looks every time we got close enough to the carriage to peek in.

*I'll give you a turn later, I promise. Just stop looking at me like that!*

I gave her an apologetic nod but, just as I was about to pull away, I could see that Claire looked just as put out.

*Et tu, Claire?!*

I gave her an apologetic look as well but, just as I finished, I noticed even Sebastian was looking at me.

“What, you think I would want a ride as well?” He grinned jokingly. “I’m afraid I’m a bit too old for that! Hahaha!”

*And here I thought he was a serious, composed gentleman... First impressions sure can be deceiving.*

The hour seemed to pass in a flash, however, and we reached the edge of the Fenrir Forest. Sebastian stopped the carriage there and Claire and Laila got out. I climbed off Leo’s back.

“How’re you holding up, Leo?”

“Ruff? Ruff, ruff!” She raised her foreleg. I bet she’d have given me a thumbs up if she had thumbs.

*Is it just me or is she starting to act more and more human? And wait, how is she not tired after all that running?*

“Well,” said Sebastian as he tied the carriage to a nearby tree, “this marks the end of our ride.”

He then proceeded to tie up the horses, first the ones that’d pulled the carriage, then the guards’.

“What will happen to them while we’re in the forest?” I asked.

“They should be safe here,” Sebastian replied.

One of the guards gave me a crisp salute. “And I shall remain here to watch over them!”

*Considering Claire’s horse bolted when it saw an orc, it’s probably for the best.*

“Is it so the horses don’t get spooked by monsters?” I asked.

“That’s part of it, certainly,” the butler replied. “The larger reason, however, is that it can be rather difficult to navigate a forest on horseback.”

“Yeah, you have a point there. But wait, wasn’t Claire on horseback when she came here before?”

“I was,” Claire cut in as she helped Laila unload the carriage, “but I stayed by the river the entire time. I didn’t need to go further than the riverbank then.”

“Oh...makes sense.”

The area by the river had had far less vegetation and provided enough room for a horse to get by.

*Wait, I’d better help, too.*

“Would you mind helping the guards gather branches, Mr. Hirooka?” Laila asked.

“Branches?”

“Yes. Try to find thick, dry ones. We’ll need fuel for a fire.”

“’Tis nearly noon, after all,” Sebastian added. “It’s high time for lunch.”

I nodded. “Okay. I’ll see what I can find. C’mon, Leo!”

“Ruff!”

After about ten minutes, we had enough branches to start a fire.

“Allow me to light it,” Sebastian said with a bow.

Claire nodded. “Please do.”

Sebastian stretched his hand out to light it and I paid close attention to what I hoped would be another chance to see magic. At that moment, however, Leo plodded up beside him.

“Woo-woo-woo.”

“Hm? What’s up, Leo? Don’t get in Sebastian’s way, now.”

“Ruff! Woo-woo-woo-woooooo.” She gave me a pointed look then looked down at the pile of branches.

“Oh. Sorry, Sebastian, but do you mind if Leo starts the fire?”

“Why, of course not. I’ve never witnessed a silver fenrir’s magic before!” He stepped aside to make room for her. “I wouldn’t miss it for anything!”



Even Claire was peering over at us with great interest.

Leo pointed her snout right at the branches.

“Grr... Bark!”

Flames gushed out of Leo’s mouth, enveloping the pile of firewood.

*Come to think of it, she did the same thing back when we had to cook that orc. I almost forgot about that.*

“So *that* was a silver fenrir’s magic,” Sebastian said with a hint of awe in his voice. “I’d heard that they breathed fire, but I must admit that wasn’t what I had envisioned.”

“It seemed far more natural than holding out her paw or something,” Claire added, a surprised look on her face.

It looked less like she was breathing fire in the traditional sense and more like she formed flames in her mouth and spat them out. I could tell from the looks on their faces, though, that they were moved all the same. Most of the guards, however, were frozen with shock, especially the ones who hadn’t properly met Leo before.

*It’s not surprising, considering they’ve never actually seen a silver fenrir in the flesh.*

“Allow me to prepare lunch, then,” said Laila as she brought a pot and a sack of what were probably ingredients to the fireside. “Please step back, Miss Leo.”

Leo obediently came over to sit beside me. She was smirking with pride.

“Good job, girl!”

“Ruff, ruff!”

She readily lowered her head so I could scratch it. As I was complimenting her, though, a second pair of hands reached out toward her.

“She’s awfully fluffy, isn’t she?” Claire remarked.

“Claire...?”

“I-I only wanted to pet her.”

“Ruff!”

“Haha, she says ‘Go ahead!’”

“I will, then!”

I could tell from the way she was stroking Leo that she’d wanted to do it for a long time. She moved slowly and nervously at first, but gradually, her stroking became more natural. Leo nuzzled her head closer, encouraging her to keep going.

*It’s times like this I can really tell she’s Tilura’s sister.*

After a little while, a delicious smell began to rise from the pot.

“Lunch is served,” Laila announced. “Please, enjoy.”

Sebastian handed out wooden bowls from the luggage and we all began eating together.

“And these are for you, Miss Leo,” Laila said as she placed the sausages she’d been grilling beside the pot on a plate.

“Ruff, ruff!”

Laila giggled. “Please help yourself.”

With that, Leo started scarfing down her food.

*I’d better eat, too, before my stomach starts growling in front of everyone.*

“This is *really* good, Laila,” I said.

“Oh, no. I’m afraid it’s nowhere near as good as Helena’s cooking.”

“That’s because Helena’s a professional chef. Your food has a nice, homey feel to it, though. I really like it.”

She blushed slightly. “Well... Thank you for your kind words, Mr. Hirooka.”

*I should really be the one thanking her, though.*

As I started shyly scratching my cheek, Sebastian leaned forward to whisper in my ear. “I fancy Laila would make a fine wife for a strapping young lad such as yourself.”

No sooner had he spoken than he went to sit back down.

*It feels like everything I knew about Sebastian up until yesterday is shriveling up and dying. He's enjoying this, isn't he? You're a slippery one, Sebastian.*

"I guess he's more than just a grampsplainer," I muttered to myself.

After everyone finished their respective meals, we set about breaking camp. I assumed at first that we'd be dousing the fire, but since one of the guards was going to be staying behind, we left it going. I watched with amazement as Sebastian rinsed the bowls and pot with magic.

*I didn't know magic could do that.*

"Ruff?" Leo opened her mouth and a large sphere of water formed in front of her snout.

"You'd like to help, Miss Leo? Why, I'd be honored to have your assistance."

*I'm glad the water didn't come right out of her mouth...that would've been hard to stomach. Thanks for that, Leo.*

Claire shook her head in amazement. "I never thought I'd get to see a silver fenrir use magic twice in one day."

While Sebastian used the water Leo made to wash the dishes, I asked him a few more things about magic. Apparently, the water had come from the surrounding atmosphere. Because of that, however, magically-created water was often full of airborne dirt and dust, so it wasn't the best for drinking.

"Come to think of it, I didn't pack any drinking water or anything, did I?"

It was times like this that I was really glad for Sebastian and Laila. I was never the outdoorsy type, so I thought that just grabbing some clothes and the like would be enough.

Apparently, the river was totally safe to drink from, so the plan was to head straight into the forest and establish a base camp as soon as we hit the river. We did have a few canteens just in case, but we'd be able to take only the bare minimum with us on any given trip.

"I guess it makes sense to secure fresh water first, huh."

I wouldn't have thought to prioritize drinking water. There was almost nowhere you could go in Japan without easy access to water, after all. I made a

mental note of it just in case. I wasn't planning on taking any more wilderness trips soon, but it couldn't hurt to keep in mind.

After everything was washed, we double-checked our bags. I even checked the sack I was carrying, just in case. Then, after our loads were fairly divvied up among us, we were ready to go.

"Mr. Hirooka, Lady Claire." Sebastian called out to us. "You'd best take these with you."

He reached into a bag and pulled out two bladed weapons—longer than daggers but shorter than proper swords—and handed one to each of us. They looked like the short swords those thugs had had. It was light enough to swing one-handed. Not that I could imagine myself doing so—I'd never even held a wooden kendo sword before.

"These are to be your last resorts," he explained. "Should the worst happen, I bid you, do not hesitate to use them. They're also rather handy for cutting through shrubbery."

I nodded. "Makes sense. Thank you very much. I don't know how much use I'd be in a fight either way, but I'll make sure not to lose it."

"Thank you, Sebastian."

After fiddling with the scabbard a moment, I found a way to attach it to my belt.

"*Snuffle, snuffle?*" Leo gave my short sword a few inquisitive sniffs. Then, after a moment, she turned away.

*Was she just curious, or just trying to memorize its smell?*





Sebastian turned to address the group. “Well, then. Everyone is ready to depart, I trust?”

“Yeah,” I nodded.

“Ruff!”

“I’m ready,” Claire said.

“Please lead the way,” Laila chimed in.

“We shall ensure no harm befalls you!” three of the guards—Phillip, Johanna, and one other—called out in unison.

Claire should’ve technically led our expedition, but Sebastian took command with ease. It wasn’t surprising, though, considering that he was more experienced and seemed to know just about everything.

The last guard waved to us as we filed into the woods with Sebastian at our head. Right behind him came Phillip and Laila, then Claire and Johanna behind them. Leo and I came after that. Taking up the rear was the guard whose name I still didn’t know.

“We’ll head straight across the forest until we hit the river,” Sebastian called back.

“All right,” Claire said with a nod.

From there, we’d be able to cover as much of the deepest part of the forest as possible over several trips. Not only that, but it served as a handy landmark in case anyone got lost—not that we were counting on that happening, but it paid to be prepared. *Otherwise, things would start unfolding like a survival movie really fast.*

“Wooooo-woooo-woooo!” Leo was barking to herself almost rhythmically, as though she were humming.

“What’s up, Leo? Are you that happy to be back here?”

“Ruff, ruff! Rooooo!” *This place feels so nostalgic and comfy! It’s like hugging an old friend!*

“Huh... But you’d never *been* here before we woke up here, right? It’s only

been a few days.”

She continued nimbly prancing around trees as she walked. “Woo, roo, ruff, yawp!” *I don’t know why, but it feels kinda like home to me...* or something like that.

*It’s a lot harder to understand her when we’re walking.*

“Huh... Maybe that’s part of the reason why this place’s called the Fenrir Forest?”

“Ruff?” She gave me a curious look. She was so tall, though, that she needed to look down a bit in order to meet my eyes. It felt like we’d switched places compared to how things were in our old world.

“This is just a thought, but Claire’s ancestor met a silver fenrir here, right? Maybe *that’s* part of the reason you’re feeling like that?”

“Ruff, ruff, ruff.”

Leo didn’t seem to know why herself, but it was enough that she was feeling super happy. Her tail was swishing back and forth in a shallow wag, and she went back to “humming.”

*I just know there’s something about this place...*

Our walk was uneventful for the next hour, at which point the sound of water finally reached my ears.

“It seems we’re approaching the river!” Sebastian called back so we could all hear. “Not much longer now, milady. We’ll rest as soon as we’ve arrived.”

Claire’s chest heaved with every breath. “O-Okay...I-I understand... I can hold out...until then...”

“Are you alright, milady?” Johanna asked worriedly.

“I-I’ll be fine...”

*She’s probably not used to walking this much.*

Fortunately, Sebastian and Phillip were making short work of the tangled vines and twisting branches in the path with short swords that looked very similar to the one he gave me. The ground was still covered in gnarled roots and





“O-Orcs...?” Claire looked up at Leo in shock, hands still on her knees.

Sebastian’s expression turned grave. “Phillip!”

“Understood!” Phillip called back. “Johanna, Nicola! With me!”

“I won’t let them lay a finger on milady!” Johanna shouted back.

The last guard—Nicola—nodded gravely. “Yea.”

All at once, the three of them took their positions in front of us. Behind them, Sebastian and Laila flanked Claire, ready to shield her with their lives if need be.

Leo hadn’t stopped growling the entire time. A moment later, we saw why—the shrubbery in front of us rustled as several figures worked their way toward us.

“Ruff! Rrrr-hrrrr-mrrrrr... Bark! Bark! Bark!”

*That first Ruff meant “orc,” and three barks...*

“Leo says there are three of them! Be careful!”

“Understood!” called out Phillip and Johanna.

“Verily,” called out Nicola a half-beat behind.

*That third guard, Nicola... How come he’s the only one who sounds like he’s actually from a few hundred years ago?*

I had more important things to worry about than that, though. The guards had their swords drawn, and Leo had lowered her haunches, ready to pounce. Just in case, I drew my short sword.

*This thing is pretty heavy...*

I’d never held a real sword before. I could feel uncertainty welling up inside me.

At that moment, the orcs broke through the underbrush. A wave of tension rippled through the air. They were every bit as fat as the first orc I’d encountered, and their faces no less piglike. Their grunts and calls, however, were nothing like any pig I knew. There were three of them, just as Leo had said, and their footsteps were sluggish under their massive bulk. I shuddered to think what something so massive could do to a human.

Just as Phillip and the others were about to charge at them, however, Leo bolted around them and leapt at the monsters.

“Leo?!”

She was moving almost too fast for me to follow, and she had one of her forelegs held low and wide. As soon as she was in range, she swiped. The first orc was cut clean in half from hip to shoulder and it fell to the ground with a pair of heavy thuds. Leo wasted no time in unleashing her second swipe with her other forepaw, and the second orc fell the same as the first. The third orc’s eyes bulged wide with terror as it turned around to flee, but it was far too slow.

“Woooooooooooooooooooooooooh!”

Leo was atop it in an instant, sinking her fangs deep into its fat neck. It let out a squeal unlike anything I’d ever heard before.

With that, all three orcs had been defeated. The battle had lasted only an instant, and without most of us even moving a muscle.

*Wow, Leo’s strong! I could more or less follow what she was doing with my eyes, but there’s no way any human could move that fast.*

“Ruff, ruff!”

Leo returned to my side with a spring in her step. She didn’t seem the least bit fazed.

I sheathed my sword. I was glad I didn’t have to use it.

“Ruuuuuff?” She lowered her head so I could easily pet her.

“Yeah, you did good, girl.” I gave her a good scratch behind the ears.

“Woooooo!”

Phillip was still frozen with disbelief. “W-We didn’t have time to do a thing...”

“Why are we even here?” Johanna shook her head.

Nicola narrowed his eyes. “I hath much yet to learn.”

*Don’t worry, guys! I’m sure we might need you later!*

“What speed! What power!” Sebastian mused. “No wonder they’re hailed as

the strongest of monsters.”

“And Miss Leo is usually so cute...”

“She certainly doesn’t seem to have any issue with orcs,” Claire said. “It ended just as quickly the last time she saved my life.”

“Ruff? Woo-woo! Roo-roo!”

Leo’s eyes were fixed on her orcs as she licked her lips.

*I guess orcs are just food to her. That was probably just like going hunting.*

Claire turned back to look at me. “What did Miss Leo say?”

“She says that orcs are just like pork chops with legs.”

Leo nodded.

She looked up at Leo in shock. “B-But... I’ve heard that even the most seasoned warriors struggle with orcs...”

The guards were all utterly baffled.

“Why don’t we focus on getting to the river now? We can rest there.”

Leo looked down at the orcs, then us with a puzzled look. “Ruff?! Ruff, ruff?”  
*We ate the orcs last time, but we’re not eating them this time? Why?!*

“Sorry, Leo. I don’t think we can carry that much with us.” I turned to Sebastian. “Hey, Leo says she wants to eat them. What do you think?”

He stroked his chin in thought. “Do you suppose we could take them with us, Phillip?”

Phillip shrugged. “We could probably carry the ones she cut in half.”

“In that case, we’ll drag them along with us. I imagine it’ll be easier than carrying them, and we haven’t long before the river.”

“Got it. Johanna, Nicola, let’s go!”

“Understood.”

“This shalt be worthy training indeed.”

With that, the guards moved to secure the orc bodies.

“Ruff, Ruff?”

“You want to carry one, too, Leo?”

“Ruff!”

She trotted over to them, grabbing the one she’d bitten in her massive jaws. Despite how heavy it must’ve been, Leo didn’t seem to be having any trouble at all.

Sebastian chuckled. “You’d help us, Miss Leo? How very generous of you.”

“We’ll take the other two, then,” Phillip added.

Phillip grabbed the two top pieces by the arms, and Johanna and Nicola started dragging one piece each. Considering they each had metal armor and their bags to worry about as well, it looked like it’d be hard work.

*Oh, right! I almost forgot!*

“Just a moment, Phillip!”

“Is something wrong?” He stopped and turned back as I rummaged through my bag.

After a few seconds, I finally found it.

“Here, eat this plant. It won’t hurt you or anything, honest.” I handed each of the guards a leaf—the fruit of my Herb Cultivation experiments the other day.

“What is this?” Phillip asked.

“Just eat them. I think it’ll make carrying those orcs a whole lot easier.”

He gave me a dubious look. “Really?”

“Thank you,” Johanna said curtly.

Nicola looked over the leaf carefully. “’Tis quite a curious hue.”

The leaves were a vibrant purple. Even knowing it was medicinal, it’d take a lot of guts to eat it. All three of them seemed to trust me more than they doubted the plant, though, and ate it readily.

“Hey, this isn’t half bad.”

“It’s quite tasty.”

“Verily, a flavor unbecoming its queer visage.”

*Glad they like it.*

I’d tried it myself back when I’d first grown them. It tasted a lot like soda. I’d no idea how or why, though. There were some parts of Herb Cultivation that’d probably always be a mystery.

“What the heck?” Phillip muttered. “My body feels so light now!”

“But how?”

“I say, I can hoist this half an orc with such ease!”

The herb had started working already. Johanna and Nicola could now lift their orc-halves with ease, and while Phillip still couldn’t lift both of his, he seemed to have a lot less trouble dragging them.

*I’m glad it worked. It kind of feels like I’m experimenting on them. But at least I knew the leaves were safe enough beforehand. I tried one when I cultivated them, after all.*

Claire seemed baffled. “What exactly did you give them, Takumi?”

“Just something I made yesterday. That’s one of the things I was looking into during all those experiments.”

“You mean you wanted to test out that herb?”

“That and others, yeah. I made the first one totally by accident, so yesterday, I wanted to see if I could mass-produce them on purpose.”

“What other herbs did you try, then?”

“I’ll have plenty of time to show you later. For now, we should get to the river.”

“You have a point, but...” She hesitated. “Fine. We’ll make for the river first, but promise me you’ll tell me everything, won’t you?”

With that, Sebastian once again led us toward the river.

I didn’t have any problem telling Claire everything I learned. But, between the orcs and our being in the middle of a hike, it didn’t seem the right time. *We can chat plenty after we reach the river.*

After about ten minutes, we finally caught glimpses of water through the trees.

“Look, milady,” said Laila. “We’ve arrived.”

“Oh... Finally...” Claire panted, her expression brightening somewhat.

*Forest hiking sure is a workout...*

“Ruff!”

Leo sprung ahead of us, the orc still dangling from her mouth. As soon as she reached the riverbank, she spat the orc out and leaped into the water with a gigantic splash. She started splashing and swimming around, occasionally stopping for a quick drink.

*Leo reacted the exact same way the last time we were here... How come she loves the river so much but hates baths?*

*I guess even silver fenrir do the doggy paddle, huh?*

We reached the bank while she played. Claire sat down on a nearby boulder to take a short rest. Sebastian wasted no time in searching for a place for the tents and Laila had already started gathering branches for a fire.

*Man, they’re such hard workers.*

Phillip and the others dropped their orcs by Leo’s, then started draining the blood out of all three corpses.

*I’m not as tired as Claire, so I guess I should pitch in.*

I started picking up branches with Laila. I didn’t know what made a good campsite, after all, nor did I know how to drain something’s blood. It didn’t feel fair to start playing with Leo, either. After all, the sooner we got camp set up, the better.

“Is this enough, Laila?” I asked.

“I believe so.” She nodded. “Thank you so much for your help, Mr. Hirooka.”

“Oh, it’s nothing, really. I’ll be using the fire as much as anyone else, after all.”

“You could be resting with milady instead.”

“I’ve got energy to spare, though, so I may as well put it to good use.”

As Laila and I prepared the fire, Sebastian came back.

“I’ve found the ideal spot for our campsite,” he announced.

“So we’re going there now?” I asked.

He nodded. “By all means. Laila and I shall inform Phillip and the others.”

“Okay. I’ll let Claire know, then.”

“Please do.”

With that, I walked over to where Claire was resting.

“Sebastian found a good campsite. We’re heading there now.”

“All right... Let’s go.” She still looked a little pale.

“Are you feeling okay?”

“I’ve rested plenty, don’t worry. I can walk.”

She slowly stood up, giving me a weak smile.

*I knew it. She needs more rest, probably for the rest of the day.*

“Oh, look,” I noticed. “Everyone’s coming this way.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

Sebastian and Laila were now accompanied by the three guards. The only one missing now was Leo.

“Hey, Leo! We’re going, so come over here!”

“Ruff, ruff!”

As soon as she heard me, she made a flying leap out of the water and landed squarely on the dry bank. She shook herself dry with enough force to spray us from where we stood some distance away.

*That’s what she hit me with point-blank in the bath, huh...? No wonder I got soaked.*

After drying off a little, she came bounding up to me, easily outpacing Sebastian and the others.



“Ruff!”

“Good girl!”

I gave her a quick scratch while we waited for the others.

“Mr. Hirooka, milady,” Sebastian said as he reached us. “My apologies for making you wait. Let us make for the campsite.”

“Yes, let’s.”

“Lead the way.”

“Ruff.”

With that, Sebastian led us on. It was only about a ten minutes’ walk away, an area that had even fewer trees than the section of bank we’d been at and had more exposed ground than rock underfoot. Laila and I started carrying the branches we’d found there and, after the orcs were bled dry, Leo and the guards hauled them over. The bank was tree-free, so Claire had no problems making it there.

“We’ll make this our base camp,” Sebastian announced.

“Sounds good,” Claire nodded.

“We’ll get the tents ready, then,” Phillip said.

He and the other guards laid out the luggage they’d been carrying and prepared to pitch the tents. Laila and I piled up the branches for the fire while Claire and Leo looked on with rapt interest.

“Does this look okay?” I asked Laila.

“Almost. If you create a space like this, you see, the air flow will improve and the fire will burn better.”

“Thank you.”

*So...it’s more than just putting sticks in a pile... I’m glad Laila’s willing to teach me.*

“Ruff, ruff!” Leo sauntered up to the pile of firewood, a hopeful look in her eyes.

“What’s that, girl? You want to start the fire again?”

“Ruff!”

“Do you mind, Laila?”

“No, by all means. I was thinking of asking her to, in fact.”

“Well, you heard her, Leo. Go on.”

“Bark!”

She spewed a ball of fire at the pile of firewood. It was just the right amount at the right angle, igniting the branches in the middle before quickly spreading to the whole pile.

“That’s the campfire done, then.”

Laila smiled. “Thank you very much for your assistance, both of you.”

“Ruff. Ruff, ruff!”

Leo puffed herself up with pride, evidently expecting to be pet. Claire was quick to give her a scratch.

*Leo sure seems happy. I’m glad they get along so well.*

“I’ll begin preparing the orc, then,” Laila said. “We’ve plenty of daylight left, but the sooner I get it cleaned and readied, the better.”

“All right, sounds good. Can I help?” I asked.

“Well, there are three of them... Yes, I would be grateful for the assistance.”

“Just tell me what to do.”

“Ruff!” Leo readily lined up right beside me.

“You wanna help, too, Leo?” I glanced back at Claire and noticed that she seemed a little disappointed. “You can hang back with Claire, y’know.”

“Ruff!”

She raised her foreleg and flexed her mighty claws.

*Right... Leo butchered that first orc, too. I hate to leave Claire alone, but we won’t be going far.*

“Why don’t you rest by the fire a spell, milady?” Laila suggested. “It’s rather chilly by the river, and you don’t want to risk catching a cold. It should help relieve your fatigue somewhat as well.”

Claire looked a little disappointed. “I wanted to watch you work, but...all right. I suppose I can watch from here.”

With that, we left to where the orc bodies were. Just in case, we let Johanna know that Claire was on her own and, after she exchanged words with Phillip, she left to sit with Claire. The tents looked like they were almost ready, after all, so they’d probably be finished by the time we were done with the orcs.

“Have you ever butchered an orc before?” I asked.

“No,” she admitted, “but I’ve cleaned and skinned plenty of other animals.”

“Oh, okay.”

*That’s kind of worrying. I never thought this would be her first time, too...*

“Ruff, euff!”

Just as I was lost in thought, though, Leo flexed her claws again.

“Wait... *Can* you handle all three, though?”

“Ruff!”

I turned to Laila. “I guess we can just leave it to her, then.”

“I suppose that would be for the best. My apologies, Miss Leo, for leaving the work to you.”

“Oh, no, don’t worry about it. After all you’ve done for us, this is the least we can do. Besides, Leo’s volunteering.”

“Roooooo!”

*It’s best to leave stuff like this to the best person—er, dog—for the job.*

“All right, girl. Work your magic.”

“Thank you again for your most generous offer, Miss Leo.”

“Ruff, ruff!”

Leo gave us a curt nod, then strolled over to the orcs and got to work. There

weren't any spurts of blood or anything, but seeing Leo cutting through them with such accuracy and ease was honestly kind of chilling. After about a minute, she plodded back over to us, her work complete.

*Wow... that was too fast!*

"How does the meat look, Laila?"

Laila was too shocked to reply for a long moment. "I... Only a professional chef could cut meat with such precision and ease. You're *amazing*, Miss Leo!"

"Ruuuuff!"

It was the kind of cut you might find in a high-class butcher's shop. Since it was on the ground, we'd have to wash it before doing anything with it. But otherwise, it looked ready to cook.

"She even divided the meat into different cuts," Laila gaped.

"Yeah, looks like it. I don't think any human could've done it this well, this fast, actually."

Even the organs were organized.

*It's unbelievable how she did this with her claws... I mean, a professional butcher would have a way harder time and take way longer.*

"Silver fenrir sure are something else."

"Ruff, ruff!"

I decided to stop sweating the details and just give Leo the petting she was asking for.

After that, we divided the meat into what we'd be saving and what we'd be cooking right away. Then Laila brought the latter cuts back to the fire and started cooking it with a few vegetables she'd brought from the villa.

*She must be tired after all that walking, too... Thanks, Laila...*

I realized now how foolish it'd sounded for Claire and I to come here alone. We wouldn't have been able to set up camp properly, let alone cook anything. We'd probably have turned back well before now if we were alone.

Claire was affectionately patting Leo on the head. She'd probably been

watching the butchering from afar. Johanna was watching them contentedly, but I noticed that she occasionally reached out to stroke Leo before reconsidering and withdrawing her hand.

*You can pet her if you want, y'know,* I thought as I hauled a bucket of water from the river and placed it over the fire.

Just as the sun began to set, Sebastian, Phillip, and Nicola joined us by the fire.

“We’ve finished pitching the tents,” Sebastian said.

“Thank you,” I replied with a nod as I threw another branch into the crackling flames.

Phillip and Nicola let out exhausted grunts as they sat down. Between carrying the luggage, hauling the orc bodies, and pitching the tents, they had to be tired. Even Sebastian looked fatigued, but he retained his perfect composure.

*One of these days, I’ve gotta ask him how he’s so capable. Is he really just a butler?*

Laila peered down into the pot. “Dinner will be ready soon, so feel free to relax a while.”

When I’d made orc before, it was just grilled skewers. This looked like a proper meal, though, and I knew just how nice Laila’s homemade meals could be. She might not have been a professional chef, but I couldn’t stop salivating.

“In that case,” Sebastian said, “why don’t we decide the order of the watch tonight?”

“The watch? What watch?”

“This forest is rife with monsters, you see, not to mention wild animals. We will need someone awake to alert the group to possible dangers. We want to avoid being attacked in our sleep, after all.”

“That makes sense. Sorry, I’ve never had to do anything like that before.”

“Never?” Claire looked at me in surprise.

“Nope. We don’t have any monsters where I come from, and wild animals rarely attack people. Besides, people generally only camped in places they knew were totally safe.”

“Is that so?”

They all seemed to be interested in how safe camping was in my world, but that was in a place like Japan. It was nothing like this true wilderness camping we were doing now, with man-eating monsters on the prowl in the area around us.

*This world really is so different.*

“I would love to hear more about this ‘safe camping’ later, but first, we need to determine the watch,” Sebastian said.

“Yeah, I agree.”

“I propose we take turns. Having one person stay up all night would make them unable to walk in the morning, after all.”

“I can take the first shift,” Phillip volunteered.

“Phillip will be first, then. After that, how about we have Johanna and Laila?”

“Understood,” replied Johanna.

“Gladly,” Laila nodded.

“In that case, Nicola and I shall take the last shift.”

*Hold on a second. I can understand Claire not taking a shift because she’s so tired and the lady of the house, but what about me?*

“When do I go, Sebastian?”

“You, Mr. Hirooka? Did you not just say you were unused to keeping watch?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

I’d barely gone camping even back in Japan, let alone keep watch for anything. It didn’t feel right to stay tucked away in bed while everyone else was up working, though.

“Please, let me keep watch, too. I’m not used to it, sure, but I can’t let you do

*all the work."*

"I see." He stroked his chin in thought. "What to do, then..."

"Ruff, ruff!" Leo suddenly started getting excited.

"Hm? What's up, Leo? Do you want to keep watch, too?"

"Rooooooo!" She nodded.

*That's a relief. At least now I won't have to do it alone.*

"Very well," Sebastian said. "In that case, Mr. Hirooka and Miss Leo shall take the first watch. Is that all right with you, Phillip?"

"Fine by me."

"Thanks," I said.

"Now, as it will be your first time, don't hesitate to wake someone if you feel something is amiss. With Miss Leo at your side, however, I don't imagine you'll have much to worry about."

"You're okay with leaving it to just me and Leo?" I asked.

"You remember how she picked up on the orcs' presence before any of us did, yes? I imagine that should any monsters attempt to sneak up on us, she will detect their presence long before anyone else can."

Leo nodded enthusiastically. "Ruff!"

*Come to think of it, she does have a knack for that. Can she smell them or does she just sense that something's there somehow?*

I suddenly felt like I'd be next to useless, but it'd be a good learning experience at any rate.

"In that case," Sebastian said as he pulled out his pocket watch, "we'll proceed in the order of Mr. Hirooka and Miss Leo, Phillip, Johanna and Laila, and finally Nicola and myself. We'll begin at ten o'clock. Each shift will be three hours. Understood?"

"Yes!" everyone called out.

"Ruff!" barked Leo.

*That means I'll be going from ten o'clock to thirteen o'clock, I guess. This world's time is still so weird, but I guess that means from about eleven to two.*

"Hold on a moment," Claire said. She'd been deep in thought the entire time, only speaking up now. "I'd like to keep watch as well."

She probably felt just as uneasy about being left out as I did.

"You've already done plenty today, milady. Please leave such trivial manners to us and get some rest."

"But—"

"You realize that if you're still tired tomorrow morning, we'll have to return to the mansion."

Claire froze at his words.

I knew exactly how she felt, but anyone could tell how exhausted she was. She wanted to explore the forest more than anyone but, if she couldn't even walk in the morning, we wouldn't be able to keep exploring. Sebastian was probably just trying to do what was best for her.

"All right, fine." There was a hint of displeasure in her voice. "I'll make sure to be ready for tomorrow morning."

"Please do," Sebastian said with a curt bow.

*Maybe I should talk to Claire about this later? I'd hate for things to get awkward between them because of this.*

I could tell that Sebastian was only trying to act in her best interests. *But it must hurt to be refused so bluntly after coming so far...*

*What do I even say to her, though? Jeez, what a mess.*

"Dinner is ready," Laila said. "Please help yourselves."

It looked like pork pot-au-feu, but I knew it wasn't pork. It was incredibly tasty, though, and brought a warmth back to my core that was more than welcome in the chilly evening air. The dish had all the trappings of a home-cooked meal and that was more than enough for me.

"You're a *really* good cook, Laila," I said.



“Yes, indeed,” echoed Claire.

It seemed that everyone greatly enjoyed her cooking, and as they all gave her their respective compliments, she smiled just a little.



**SEVERAL** hours later, everyone started retreating into the tents—men into one, women into another.

“I could *never* sleep in the same tent as you, milady!” Laila insisted.

“Oh, enough of that,” Claire said with a roll of her eyes. “Come on in.”

Johanna nodded. “Yes. Besides I’ll be accompanying you both. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

Laila was hesitant at first, but considering how rare the opportunity was, Claire and Johanna dragged her inside regardless. From the look on Claire’s face, I assumed they’d get wrapped up in the slumber-party mood, but it was none of my business either way.

“It’s not like a guy could join in, anyways,” I muttered to myself as I watched Laila disappear into the tent.

With that, Leo and I were alone. Our watch had officially begun.

For a little while, I heard rustling and muted chatter from the tents. But in time, they were replaced by the crackling of the fire and the babbling of the river. In the distance, I could hear the chirping of insects. Leo and I were totally alone for what felt like the first time since the day we’d arrived.

“It sure has been a while, huh?”

I’d spent a lot of time trying out Herb Cultivation and when we were in our room, we’d either play a little or go right to sleep. We hadn’t had much time to kick back and relax.

*I may as well chat with Leo a bit.*

“Leo, I’ve been wondering. Are you *really* glad we came here? Sure, you were small in our old world, but it was a peaceful enough life.”

“Ruff?” She cocked her head to the side. “Woo-woo, ruff, rooo.” *We get to*

*spend more time together now, so I like this world better.*

*So that's what really matters to her, huh? I'm kinda glad to hear that.*

"What do you think about being big, then? Isn't it kind of a pain sometimes?"

*"Ruff, ruff. Wuff, fruff, mruff." It's much easier to run around like this! And now I can protect you more easily!*

If she was human, she'd probably have all sorts of growing pains, but she seemed perfectly fine. She hadn't grown by natural means, after all. I felt a little hurt that she felt she had to protect me. But I was also genuinely happy.

"You can cast magic now, too. Must be nice."

She nodded. "Ruff. Roooo?" *Wanna see?*

"No, that's okay. Save it for if more monsters come."

"Herf..." Her tail drooped.

*I bet she wanted to show off.*

I didn't want to risk waking up the others, though, and Sebastian had described mana as being like lifeblood. The last thing I wanted was for Leo to go wasting it. I didn't know how much mana she *had*, exactly, but now wasn't the time to find out.

*Sebastian never did finish teaching me about magic, did he? I'd love to cast some myself.*

"So...what other kinds of magic *can* you use?"

"Wooo... Roo, ruff, mroo?"

"I said not now. Just tell me what you can do."

She seemed determined to show me. I wasn't too surprised, come to think of it. I know I'd want to show off if I were in her shoes.

Her ears drooped. "Ruff... Mrrr... Woo-woo, uff, mruff, hrumm, ruff." *I'm really good at fire, but I can do water, air, and earth, too. And some other stuff.*

The more we talked, the easier it was to understand her. I had no idea why. But I wasn't complaining.

“What do you mean by ‘other stuff’? Can you be more specific?”

“Ruff, wuff, wuff.”

Apparently, she’d only a general idea of her power. The only way to really know was to try it out.

*Not that I’m surprised. We’ve only been here a few days, after all.*

Her expression rapidly turned from proud to sorry. I ruffled her fur affectionately.

“C’mon, no need to feel bad about what you don’t know. It’s not like I know everything about Herb Cultivation, either.”

“Ruff, ruff!”

She leaned in closer and I affectionately scratched her cheeks. Fortunately, that was enough to put her back in high spirits. She started wagging, her big, bushy tail sweeping back and forth through the air above the fire.

*I hope her fur doesn’t get too ashy... That’d be a real pain to clean.*

After we spent about two hours chatting and having some quality time, I heard a rustling sound from by the tents.

“Is that you, Phillip?”

*Isn’t it way too early for him to get up, though?*

As I turned to look, however, I realized that the sound was coming from the women’s tent. I watched as Claire emerged.

*Does she need to use the bathroom or something?*

“Thank you for taking first watch, Takumi.”

“No problem. So...what’s up? Couldn’t fall asleep?”

“Nothing like that. Do you mind if I sit with you?”

“Be my guest.”

She sat beside me, opposite of Leo.

*She really should go back to bed, though. If she can sleep, she should.*

“I had something to talk to you about,” she said.

“To me?”

“Yes. Um...” Her cheeks looked a little red, but it had to be the light from the campfire.

If she’d something to say, then I was determined to hear her out. Leo laid down beside me, careful not to bother us. Her attention was trained on Claire and me.

“Well... Takumi?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you for agreeing to take me out here.”

“Oh, uh, no problem. I wanted to go, anyways.”

There had to be something special about the forest, after all. Something that could explain our coming to this world and Leo’s transformation. Its name was as big a hint as any.

“Still, I owe you a proper thank-you,” she insisted. “I never would’ve been able to come here again without you by my side.”

“I guess so.”

“There’s one other thing, though. It’s, um...about when I invited you to come out here.”

“Oh...”

I still couldn’t forget the look of rage on her face back then. She was even more terrifying than my work manager at his worst.

“You see...Sebastian scolded me.”

“He did?”

I could easily envision him lecturing her, but he didn’t seem the scolding type.

“Well, being scolded itself wasn’t exactly anything new.”

“It wasn’t?”

*Come to think of it, he was pretty harsh on her when she’d first returned from*

*the Fenrir Forest with me. I wonder if it's his job as butler to keep her in line?*

Claire was more of a tomboy than I gave her credit for, after all. I could imagine her getting yelled at for that.

"The problem was, he scolded me saying that you wouldn't be able to refuse a request from me."

"Oh."

"You're a guest, after all, so it'd make sense that you'd want to return the favor somehow. Not only that, but even in the short time I've known you, you've never struck me as the type to refuse a request. I felt awful after hearing that."

*Yeah, she's got me there.*

I'd tried to fix my people-pleasing side so many times before, but I'd always ended up doing whatever others asked of me in the end. It was especially bad at work; I'd taken on so much work from my colleagues at times that I couldn't finish my assigned duties.

"I didn't even think about you. I'm so sorry, Takumi."

"No, it's no problem. I've been a people-pleaser all my life, after all—but more than that, I really was happy to go with you."

"Even so, I was more forceful than I should've been. I've let down my entire house."

"Wait, you have?"

*That sounds like an exaggeration to me.*

"You see, my family is one of the most powerful in the kingdom. Most people would be unable to refuse a request from me. I don't believe that using my authority is wrong in and of itself, but my family has sworn against using said authority to manipulate or control others. And yet, I forced you to go with me."

"I see..."

I still didn't mind, however. I didn't even consider her position when I made my decision. I wanted to wait for her to finish before I said anything, though.

“I’ve brought shame on my entire family. I’m an embarrassment of a noble. B- But more than that...”

“What?”

“I knew you were a soft touch and I used that against you. I manipulated you. I can never forgive myself for that.”

“I see.”

*I don’t feel manipulated at all, though. I couldn’t have asked for better timing.*

She hadn’t used me. In fact, she didn’t mention her power or her standing once. It didn’t feel like she was using her authority at all. But then again, I didn’t know how the class system worked in this world.

*She’s carrying around a lot of baggage. So let’s see if I can lighten her load, one thing at a time. First things first...*

“Leo?”

“Ruff?”

Leo cocked her head to the side curiously as I whispered my request into her ear. After a moment she nodded, stood up, and walked over to Claire. She then laid down, resting her giant head squarely on Claire’s lap.







“Miss Leo? Takumi? What are you doing?”

“Just give Leo a few pets and relax.”

“...All right.”

She started stroking Leo’s head. In moments, her expression became notably softer.

“So, Claire...”

“Yes?” She stiffened up again.

*I hope she doesn’t think I’m about to yell at her... I wish she’d just calm down a bit.*

“Well, uh... You mentioned having used your authority against us, but I didn’t feel that way at all. It didn’t feel like you were waving your power around.”

She didn’t reply.

*Good, good. Just keep petting Leo.*

Leo and I exchanged looks. *I hope she understood what I meant by that...*

“When you were yelling, you were pretty scary. I can’t deny that. You weren’t yelling at me, though, and you apologized and took time to calm down immediately afterward. That was enough.”

“Takumi...”

“Besides, I don’t feel as though you used me in the slightest. I really *did* want to come here. And besides, uh...”

“Yes?”

“I-I think any guy would be happy to listen to a woman as beautiful as you.”

“O-Oh! Takumi!” She flushed bright red.

*Oops. I hope I didn’t offend her...*

It was too late to take back my words now, though, but she finally seemed to relax. She was so much prettier when she wasn’t looking so pensive.

“But are you sure, Takumi? You’re not just saying that?”

The look on her face told me that she still hadn't forgiven herself.

"How about this, then? If you tell me *why* you wanted to come here so badly, then we'll call it even."

"All right. Though you realize that I was planning on telling you that either way, don't you?"

"Come to think of it, you're right."

"We were planning on going alone back then, so I had thought that we'd have any number of chances to talk, just the three of us."

"Yeah," I laughed. "It feels so different with everyone else."

"Sebastian just wouldn't listen, no matter how many times I told him that we'd be fine alone. Fortunately, we have a prime opportunity now."

"Luckily, yeah."

I'd been dying to know why she wanted to come back here.

*I was so worried, in fact, that I only got eight hours of sleep.*

I smirked at my own poor joke.

"You see," Claire started, "I'm not interested in these woods, but in the silver fenrir."

"Not including Leo, you mean?"

"Yes. To use your words, the silver fenrir native to this world."

"So...what's got you so interested in them?"

"Well... Meeting Miss Leo was a big part of it, but..."

She stopped to think a moment as she stroked Leo. She'd a soft smile on her face now, her worries gone.

*I never would've thought Leo's fur had such power. Is this what they mean when they say silver fenrir are the strongest?*

After a long moment, Claire finally opened her mouth. "When I was born, or at least, by the time I was old enough to care what others said about me, the servants were spreading some odd rumors about me."

“Rumors? What kind of rumors?”

“They all seemed to think I was the reincarnation of the Libert family’s founder”

“Why would they think a thing like that?”

“It started from an old painting, you see.”

“A painting?”

“We had several of the founder, in fact, capturing her appearance at a number of ages. One of them was of her shortly after she was born. I looked just like her.”

“You did? Wait...the founder was a woman?”

“Yes. They say she stood on the frontlines as any man would and fought with twice the bravery.”

*And here I got the impression the founder was a man, given the whole war thing and being a family head...*

“As I matured,” Claire continued, “I never failed to match the paintings. I was nearly identical to them.”

“Like she’d walked out of the paintings herself.”

“Exactly. The servants all had such high hopes for me. They believed that I’d bring about a new golden age for the family.”

“Wow... What about your father?”

“He never trusted the rumors. He told me to ignore them and to never try to follow the founder’s path...that I was his daughter, and all I needed to do was live my own life.”

“He sounds like a pretty nice dad.”

“He is. He’s always treated Tilura and I with the utmost kindness and respect. Except, of course, when it comes to our future husbands.”

I chuckled. “I bet he has his reasons, though.”

“He’s never given me a chance to learn why. I was practically buried alive in

suitors!”

To be honest, I couldn’t imagine why he wanted to marry off his daughters so badly, either. And I didn’t even *have* kids.

“Anyhow. Because of my father, I was raised without ever putting too much weight on the topic of reincarnation. One thing always bothered me, though...”

“What was that?”

“Whenever I heard about silver fenrir—in the founder’s legends or elsewhere—my pulse would start to race. It was though my heart was trying to burst out of my chest.”

*Your chest...*

My eyes threatened to drop about a foot but, by mustering every last bit of will I had, I stayed focused on her face.

*C’mon! This is a serious conversation, so act like it.*

“Even looking at Miss Leo sets my heart racing, though I’ve no idea why.”

“Hmm...”

“That’s why I felt I needed to come back here. The reason for this strange sensation might be in here somewhere.”

“But there’s no guarantee you’ll even *find* another silver fenrir, right? Besides, you’ve already met Leo.”

“If I don’t find one in these woods, then I’ll give up on trying to figure it out. As for Miss Leo, I simply don’t feel the same rush I do when I hear about other silver fenrir.”

“So that’s why you want to find another one.”

“Yes. All I know for certain now is that if I don’t find one on this expedition, I’ll be able to lay those worries to rest.”

“You will?”

“I’ve caused everyone so much trouble in coming here, after all—Sebastian, Laila, even you.”

I didn't know what to say to that.

"I don't know what the point would be in continuing to chase after them. This expedition will either give me the answer I've been looking for, or it'll give me the reason I need to give up."

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

"I... I *do* wish I could tell Sebastian and the others about this, though."

"Why can't you? I bet Sebastian would understand."

"If you'll remember, it was the servants who started those reincarnation rumors in the first place. I wouldn't want him to feel responsible for this."

"That...makes sense, actually."

The rumors might be the reason for her complicated feelings, after all. Given Sebastian's age and how close he was to Claire, there was a chance that he'd been the Libert family butler since before she was born. *He might've even helped spread the rumors...*

"I'm so sorry for all of this, Takumi. I'm sure it must seem awfully selfish of me, wrapping up so many people in my personal issues."

"No, I don't mind. Actually, I'm just glad I finally know what's been eating at you."

"You're far too kind. Oh!"

"What?"

"I forgot to mention but, please, don't breathe a word of this to Sebastian."

"Don't worry, I won't. I swear this'll be our secret—yours, mine, and Leo's. Isn't that right, girl?"

"Ruff!"

"Thank you so much, both of you."

We sat for some time in peaceful silence, all hints of tension totally gone. It felt great knowing what'd been bothering Claire. With time, I was sure we'd figure out the source of her worries and whether or not she really was the founder's reincarnation. For now, though, I'd seen enough of her bashfulness

and blushing to be sated.

“Mr. Hirooka, milady,” came a voice from the men’s tent. I turned to see Phillip there. “Thank you both for keeping watch. Enjoyed yourselves, did you?”

“Oh, Phillip.”

“You’ve done enough for tonight, Mr. Hirooka.” He had a slight smirk on his face as he came to sit by the fire. “I’ll handle the watch from here.”

“Thank you. I was just starting to get tired.”

“You should be getting some sleep, too, milady. If you don’t rest up while you can, Sebastian might chew you out again.”

“I know,” she replied.

With that, Claire and I stood up and, having lost her comfy lap, Leo followed suit.

“Oh, and milady?” Phillip continued, his smile growing. “I wouldn’t worry too much about the past if I were you. Sebastian and I are here for you. Not for the founder, but you.”

Claire shot him a hard look. “You were listening?”

He shrugged and looked away. He looked about ready to start whistling, like in those old cartoons. “Who can say?”

*He heard everything, didn’t he? I didn’t say anything weird, right?*

I figured that she felt more embarrassed about it than me. I couldn’t see her face clearly in the darkness, but I bet she was bright red.

“Well, um... Let’s get some sleep, Takumi.”

“Yeah. I’d love to know what Phillip’s grinning over, but I doubt he’s going to tell us anything.”

“Not likely. Have a good watch, Phillip.”

He nodded. “Leave it to me. Rest easy now.”

With that, Claire and I turned to go back to our respective tents.

“Oh, right! One last thing, Claire.”

She stopped with her hand on the tent flap. “Yes?”

I walked over to her and fished an herb out of the pouch at my belt. “You should eat this before you go to sleep.”

“What is it?”

It was dark enough there that I couldn’t make out any details, but I knew it was a dried black flower.

“It’s an herb that’ll help you sleep better,” I explained as I handed it to her. “If you eat that before bed, you’ll be fully refreshed in the morning.”

“Is it, now? Is this thanks to Herb Cultivation, too?”

“Yep. That was one of the things I made during my trials.”

“Trials? Promise me you’ll explain everything you’ve found out one of these days.”

“Don’t worry, I will. I don’t have any reason to hide it, after all. I’ll let you know everything as soon as we have the time.”

“All right. In that case, Takumi, good night.”

“Yep. Good night.”

I headed back to my own tent, but before I went in, I glanced back at the women’s tent. I watched her eat the flower I’d given her, then enter her tent.

*I hope it works.*

I’d based it off a supplement I’d take in my old world when I felt exhausted no matter how much I slept. I remember the slogan was *a bottle a day keeps the fatigue away!* I tried the herb myself the night before and I’d woken up in the morning feeling totally refreshed. I didn’t know how much the herb had actually helped, though, but it at least didn’t seem to be harmful.

I ate one of the black flowers myself, then gave Leo one last pet and crawled into the tent. Leo didn’t follow me inside, of course. She slept just outside on a blanket we’d laid out for her. *Given her fur, she shouldn’t get too cold.*

Once inside the tent, I crawled inside the hemp sleeping bag they’d laid out for me and closed my eyes.

“Thank you, Mr. Hirooka,” came Sebastian’s voice from beside me.

“I didn’t know you were still awake.”

“Of course.”

*Don’t tell me Sebastian heard everything, too?*

The tent was close enough to the fire that it seemed possible.

“How much did you hear?”

“Everything, I should imagine. I hadn’t realized those rumors had bothered her so.”

“But Sebastian, she doesn’t—”

“I know. She doesn’t wish for me to feel responsible for it. We’ll end the topic here. Besides, I ought to be thanking you for being such good counsel. I imagine you’ve lightened her burden a good deal.”

“I hope so.”

“Without further ado, then, I bid you good night. Sleep well.”

“Thank you. I hope you sleep well, too, until it’s time for your watch.”

“Yes, I’d best rest while I can. I’m not half as young as I used to be. I’ll be sore all over if I don’t get some sleep.”

I laughed. “You’ve got a few decades left in you, I think.”

He replied with a chuckle. “I certainly hope so!”

After laughing together for a moment, we both fell silent.

*He might look old, but he doesn’t act it at all. Even after doing more work than most of us, he seems so full of energy...*

With that, I drifted off to sleep.



**WHEN** I woke up in the morning, I felt totally energized. I’d slept perfectly soundly the whole night. *That herb was certainly more effective than that fishy supplement ever was...*



I think I'll call that little flower a sleeping violet.

I crawled out of the tent and, after washing my face and getting ready, I returned to the fire. Claire was already sitting there.

"Good morning, Takumi."

"Yeah, good morning, Claire."

Johanna was sitting with Claire, and Laila was already preparing breakfast. Leo was sitting right by Laila's side, watching the pot as she wagged away that big, floofy tail of hers. Phillip, Sebastian, and Nicola were discussing how we should go about the day's exploration.

Looks like I woke up last.

I exchanged good mornings with everyone.

"By the way, Takumi, thank you for that herb last night," Claire said. "I slept like a log and feel quite refreshed."

"That's good to hear. I only tried it out once before, so I'm glad it worked for you."

Johanna gave us a curious look. "What herb, exactly?"

"Takumi gave me an herb that takes away your fatigue."

"It basically just makes you sleep better," I added. "Take one before you fall asleep and you won't feel tired at all."

"Really?" Johanna's eyebrows shot up. "I didn't know such a thing existed."

Since everyone seemed to be interested, I gave them one each. I didn't have much more than that on me, though, so I told them to only use it when they felt really tired.

Just then, Laila finished cooking breakfast. I handed her an herb as she handed me a bowl. Breakfast was nice and hearty and made ample use of the leftover orc. The meat wouldn't last long without refrigeration, after all, and there was a lot to go through.

After we all finished, we finally started our exploration. It didn't make sense to have all of us trudging through the woods together, so we decided to split

up. Leo, Sebastian, Claire, and I would head upstream and into the forest's depths, since Leo would be more than enough to handle any monsters. Phillip and Nicola would explore the area directly around the camp, taking out any monsters they saw and looking for any traces of silver fenrir in the process. Laila would stay in camp to tend the fire and Johanna would guard the camp with her.

"Well then, milady, Mr. Hirooka, Miss Leo. Let us depart."

"All right."

"Yes, let's."

"Ruff!"

Sebastian led our group, followed by Leo and I, and finally Claire. That way, we'd be able to clear as much growth as possible so that Claire would have an easier time of it.

I'm really glad Leo is big now.

After leaving the river's bank, we walked a while in silence. After about an hour, we found that the trees around us were growing denser and the forest floor was darker than it had been.

I was the first to say something. "It's getting pretty hard to see, isn't it?"

"Indeed, it is," Sebastian nodded. "As is, we might not be able to notice potential threats unless we're upon them. Are you still holding up all right, milady?"

"Oh, I'm fine. I'm nowhere near as tired as yesterday."

She did seem to be having an easier time of it, between Leo ploughing vegetation out of the way and not having to carry any luggage.

Sebastian brought a hand to his chin. "At this rate, however, it may be especially easy to trip, and I doubt we would notice monster tracks should we come across them. I suppose this calls for a tad of magic, though I was hoping to conserve my mana."

"Magic?"

“Yes. I’ll be utilizing some simple light magic.”

With that, he brandished his short sword.

“Light Elemental Shine.”

The sword’s blade started glowing so brightly, it hurt to look at directly. The forest floor was now well-lit, and we could see around us enough to tell if there was a monster coming, at least.

“There. It should be quite easy to see now.”

“That’s one useful spell.”

“Oh, it’s quite easy to use, I assure you. With a little practice, you could likely use it yourself.”

“Really? Would you mind teaching me when we get back to the mansion?”

“Not at all.”

Claire shot me a pouty look. “I know magic, too. I could teach you just as well.”

Sebastian chuckled. “And who was it that taught you, milady? No, I believe that I am the most suitable mentor.”

“I’ve been studying since then, though. I’d be a great teacher!”

“If you insist, milady, I suppose I can leave it to you.” He shot me a sly smile before continuing in a low voice, “I’m sure you’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Uh, yeah.”

What’s gotten into him lately? Why is he trying so hard to play matchmaker? Besides, should he really be doing that without Claire’s consent? And there was that time with Laila, too...

I puzzled over Sebastian’s newfound hobby as we walked.



**BY** the end of the day, we hadn’t found anything worth mentioning. We kept an eye on the time and made sure to start heading back well before twilight. On the way back, we talked over how we might be more successful tomorrow. Leo,

of course, was happy just to go on such a long walk. It probably had something to do with how at home she felt in the woods.

Two days passed, but none of us found so much as a trace of a fenrir. Not even Leo had picked up on anything unusual. We'd encountered enough orcs to eat for a week, but we were running worryingly low on vegetables. Our expedition seemed to be nearing the end of its natural lifespan.

On the third day, we gathered around the campfire to discuss our plans after dinner.

"It seems we have yet to come across any results," Sebastian announced.

Phillip nodded. "There's nothing close to camp except a few orcs."

"....."

"Maybe there *aren't* any fenrir in these woods after all," Johanna said.

"Ruff?"

I bet everyone thought the same way Johanna did. Even Leo seemed skeptical. We'd even explored deeper and longer than usual yesterday with no results. We wouldn't be running out of food or water anytime soon, but I could tell we were all starting to get tired. Everyone had already eaten their sleeping violets, and spending night after night in a tent was starting to wear on us.

Eventually, Claire broke the silence, looking up from the embers. "Tomorrow will be our last day. If we don't find anything, we'll return to the mansion."

"Are you quite certain, milady?" Sebastian asked.

"Yes. At this rate, we might never find what we're looking for. Besides, the more tired we become, the greater likelihood someone will get hurt. We'd best leave before then."

Sebastian's face creased with worry. "You make a valid point, but please, won't you reconsider?"

Looking around, I could see that everyone was worried. Apparently, what she'd told me on watch several nights ago had spread throughout the whole camp. She couldn't know that for certain, but she probably suspected as much.

*I didn't breathe a word of it, though.*

Most likely, Phillip had told the other guards and Johanna had passed it on to Laila. Almost everyone had come to ask me either while on watch or in the tent if what they'd heard was true, and they all felt guilty in some way. In the end, Sebastian had decided making this expedition a success was the best way to make amends, and not a soul there wanted to disappoint her.

*They sure do love her, huh?*

Claire shook her head, though. "I don't want to bother you all with my childish fantasies any longer. If we don't find something tomorrow, we're returning home, and that's final."

Sebastian nodded hesitantly. "As you wish, milady."

*This just isn't fair...and after all she told me about her past, too. If only we could find some clue.*

I couldn't wish a fenrir into existence, though, no matter how much I wanted to. After hashing out the details, we decided to go to sleep.

As an aside, we'd been changing the order of the watch every night but kept the pairings the same. We'd only had any trouble one night, when an orc tried to sneak up on us during Johanna and Laila's watch. Fortunately, Leo snapped awake and killed it before it could do anything, and it'd become our breakfast the next morning.

After Leo and I finished our watch, I ate my last sleeping violet and crawled into my sleeping bag. It was the one I'd saved for myself when I was handing them out to everyone else.

*I'd better be ready for tomorrow, after all. We've got to find something, no matter what!*



**THE** next morning after breakfast, we left Laila and Johanna at camp and headed into the deepest part of the forest. Our plan was to return as late as possible to allow for more exploring. Laila even packed herb-roasted orc for us so we wouldn't have to cook on the go.

We decided to investigate the far side of the river today, even though we hadn't finished checking everywhere on our camp's side. Phillip thought that exploring somewhere totally new might give us better results, though, and even Leo was really interested in the far side.

According to her, she'd caught a whiff of something strange and felt a weird presence coming from there since early that morning. It was apparently so faint that she doubted herself. But, whatever it was, she knew it wasn't an orc. None of our noses were sensitive enough to pick up on it, of course, but it was worth a shot.

Claire and Sebastian rode across the river on Leo's back while everyone else swam and with that, our final day of exploration began.

Several hours later, we'd entered a denser part of the forest. We'd been relying on Sebastian's light magic for a while now.

"No sign of anything here," Sebastian said with a frown.

"Oh... I see," Claire said sadly.

He cast a glance at her. "Why don't we rest a bit? I'm sure this adventure has been rather fatiguing on all of us."

I didn't feel tired from the past few days thanks to the herb, but my legs *were* starting to ache a little. Fatigue was starting to slowly spread among us all.

*Seems like as good a time as any for lunch.*

Since there weren't any clearings nearby, we sat down where we were and pulled out our lunches.

"How're you holding up, Claire?" I asked.

"Fine, I think. I'm tired, but I'm far more used to walking now than I was a few days ago."

"Do you think you can keep going?"

"I'll be okay. I want to find some trace of evidence that there were fenrir here in the past, at least."

We hadn't found so much as a footprint yet and I could tell that we couldn't

hold out much longer as we were. Even Sebastian was massaging his feet as he ate.

*If he's actually getting tired now, I can only imagine how rough Claire must be having it.*

"What do you think, Leo?"

"Ruff?"

"At this rate, we'll be going home empty-handed. I don't want all the effort Claire and everyone else put into this to be a waste. We've gotta do something."

"Wooooo... Ruff-ruff?!" She suddenly stood up from her sausages and stared right at me.

"Huh? What's up, Leo? Do you smell a monster?"

Sebastian's eyes widened. "Monsters?"

Everyone was instantly on high alert. Leo shook her head, though, and first Sebastian, then Phillip and the others relaxed.

"What is it, then?"

"Ruff, ruff, ruff!"

She licked my hand, then stuck her nose pointedly into the ground.

*What's she trying to say?*

"Wooo! Ruff-ruff-ruff-ruff-rooooo."

*Herb Cultivation...? Oh!*

"I totally forgot!"

Herb Cultivation didn't run on mana. I didn't even feel tired after using it, so there was no point in conserving it.

*There's so much I can do with it, too!*

I noticed that the others were starting to look at me like I was crazy, but I didn't have time for that.

*How did I manage to forget that? I even gave them herbs I'd made!*

With so much open ground around, there was no better place to use my Gift.

“Sorry, Claire, everyone. I made a huge mistake.” I bowed deeply to them.

Claire gave me a worried look. “What happened?”

“Is everything quite all right?”

“I forgot something really important. I have Herb Cultivation!”

Claire gave me a confused look. “What about it?”

“With it, our whole expedition could’ve been so much easier.”

“How so?”

“We don’t have much time to waste, so I’ll cut to the chase. First, I need to make sure I can use it here.”

“All right.”

They all stopped to watch me.

“Thanks, Leo. I might not have remembered if not for you.” I gave her an affectionate pat.

“Ruuuuuff!” *You’re welcome.*

*Seriously, after all that time I spent working on my Herb Cultivation, how’d I forget about it?*

I’d probably just gotten careless, but I’d have plenty of time to mull it over later. I put my hand to the ground, hoping that my Gift would work. After a moment’s concentration, a little loe plant popped out of the soil.

“Great, it works!”

Phillip stared in shock. “So that’s what a Gift’s like? Crazy.”

Nicola gaped. “Ne’er did I imagine such a thing possible.”

*If they’re shocked now, then they’re in for a real surprise.*

Giddy with excitement at my first chance to put my Gift to real use, I focused on growing more herbs. I’d been thinking of what kind of herbs might be useful the entire time we’d been in the forest, intending to grow them as soon as we got back to the mansion. So I had a full list in mind.



*Why didn't I think to grow them right away? Man, I'm stupid. I wish I could go back in time and slap myself until I remembered.*

For now, though, all I could do was focus on growing the right herbs. I didn't want to grow anything weird while I was distracted. One by one, three little patches of herbs started popping out of the ground.

"There, done."

"That's an awful lot of herbs," Claire remarked.

Sebastian looked them over curiously. "What, exactly, are these?"

*First things first, though.* I had them help me harvest the plants. Then I prepared each one so that it'd have its maximum effect. I was glad I knew I could dry them so easily. *I wouldn't have thought to try if not for the capwort incident.*

"All right, I've everyone's shares. Make sure you eat them all."

Claire's brow furrowed as I handed her the first herb, a small pile of leaves. "You're certain these are edible?"

Looking around, I could tell that Sebastian and the guards were equally unsure.

*Yeah, I'm not surprised.*

The leaves all had squiggly purple marks on them. They looked highly poisonous.

"They're safe, I promise. Watch."

I gulped them down. They didn't taste very good, but Leo seemed eager for her share.

Seeing me eat them seemed to calm everyone's nerves, and one by one, they ate their leaves, and their expressions changed.

"This is amazing! It's as though all my fatigue faded away!"

"Truly a marvel... I never imagined your Gift would bear such fruit."

"Whoa... This is awesome."

“Verily, I feel ready for training!”

All four of them started hopping in place and stretching, looks of awe on their faces.

*It's good that you guys feel reenergized, but don't tire yourselves out again.*

“WOO-WOO-WOOOOOOO!”

Leo started running circuits around a pair of nearby trees at high speed.

*Uh... Maybe you've got a little too much energy there, girl. Were you even tired before?*

“Glad it's working for everyone. All right, onto the next ones.”

“There's more?” Claire said in surprise.

“Yep,” I nodded as I picked the next herbs. “This one's to help with our search. Oh, but before that... Sebastian, Phillip, could you turn off your light spells?”

“I can,” Sebastian replied. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, please do.”

They doused their lights and the forest around us turned pitch black.

*Good...looks like they trust these herbs work. This one's definitely not something to take under bright light.*

I handed everyone a pair of herbs. They both looked better than the last one, but they tasted far worse. All four of them ate them readily, but I could faintly tell that they were wincing.

*Wait, I'd better eat mine.*

“Takumi! How can I see so well now?!”

“Did the forest become brighter? No...it only seems brighter now, doesn't it?”

I nodded. “Technically, it just reduces the amount of light your eyes need to see.”

“Whoa...”

“Verily, most impressive.”

Phillip and Nicola were gaping at each other as if they couldn't believe their eyes.

*It's too early to be shocked, everyone. Don't forget, you just ate two different herbs.*

"This should make things significantly easier," Sebastian said.

Phillip nodded. "Yeah. Light magic can only show so much, after all."

"I daresay we shan't miss a single clue now."

The guys were all still looking around in amazement, but Claire had a confused expression on her face.

*I bet she noticed.*

"Takumi?" she asked. "I've either gone mad or I can suddenly hear all sorts of animals that I couldn't before. Why, I think I can even feel where they are."

"You're not crazy, Claire. That's the third herb kicking in."

Her eyes widened. "It is?"

The second of the herbs they'd eaten improved their eyesight. The third increased their hearing and sharpened their so-called "sixth senses" so that they could sense the presence of anything around them. *Between the two of them, it should be a lot easier to find the fenrir now.*

"Oh, and here's your share, Leo." I held out a pair of herbs for her as well.

"Ruff." She lapped them up, then her ears drooped. "Urf."

"They taste pretty bad, huh? Sorry."

She continued giving me a sad look as she finished chewing them, then swallowed.

*Good girl!*

As Leo finished her herbs, I looked back at the others. Sebastian was looking around in awe.

"We can see everyone in front of the trees with such ease, and now, even that which is far away can be felt... Astounding."

“Hey, Nicola?” Phillip poked Nicola. “Can you sense that over there? I think it’s an orc.”

“Verily, the ideal herb for such an expedition. Dare I believe we may succeed in our task?”

Even Claire was testing out the limits of her new senses, peering around excitedly as if expecting a fenrir to be waiting just around the corner.

“Ruff!”

I turned to see that Leo had finished her herbs.

I’d given Claire and the others herbs to help speed us up, but Leo had great senses to begin with. By enhancing them even further, our chances of finding something out there greatly increased.

“So? Can you pick up anything, girl?”

“Rooo... Ruff!”

She took a moment to glance around her, but she seemed to come up empty.

“Okay. Let me know as soon as you do, though.”

She nodded. “Ruff!”

*Here’s hoping things go a lot more smoothly now.*

“All right, everyone. It doesn’t seem like there’s anything around here. If you’re all done resting, then how about we get going?”

“Indeed,” Sebastian said. “I believe we’re all feeling quite rejuvenated. We’d best get underway.”

“Your Herb Cultivation truly is amazing, Takumi. I was surprised to see you grow loe, but I never imagined you’d outdo yourself so quickly.”

I laughed it off. “I wouldn’t have been able to do it without such a great place to study.”

“Well, I hope you find even more ways to use it in the future.”

“Yeah,” I nodded.

Back when I first heard about my Gift, I was so afraid that it’d be useless. But

it was already proving how invaluable it could be when used right. I resolved to experiment with it some more as soon as we got back to the mansion.

With that, we headed deeper into the forest. We encountered a few orcs along the way, but Phillip and Nicola had little trouble dispatching them. Apparently, their heightened senses made it easier for them to read the orcs' moves. It was almost too easy to beat them now. Leo wanted to hunt them too, of course, but I had her heeling by my side the entire time. The guards wanted a proper chance to test the extent of their new senses, after all.

Even with the aid of our heightened senses and refreshed bodies, however, we still couldn't seem to find anything noteworthy. The sun was beginning to set and soon, we'd have to turn back.

"Still nothing, huh?" I remarked.

Claire smiled sadly. "No...no, I suppose not."

Sebastian looked at his pocket watch. "I'm afraid it's getting late. We'd best turn—"

"Rrrrrrrrrrr-grrrrrrrr... Bark, bark!!"

Before Sebastian could finish that dreaded sentence, Leo suddenly whipped her head to the left and started barking her head off. It wasn't the kind of bark she used for orcs, either.

"What is it, girl? Is something there?!"

She turned back to me for just a moment. "Woooooh! Ruff! Bark!!"

"Sebastian? Leo says monsters are fighting over there."

"Monsters, you say? Are they orcs? No... I can't imagine they would target each other."

"Ruff, ruff! Bark!" *Definitely not orcs!*

*What other monsters are there, though? Is it that weird thing Leo picked up on this morning?*

"Woooooh! HRRRRRR! Bark, bark, bark!"

Leo raised her paw. Then, she shook her head once, and finally pointed at

Claire.

*Okay, so something to do with her, but she shook her head, so not that. Then she pointed at Claire, so...*

“Claire!”

She jumped. “Wh-What?”

“Leo says it’s a fenrir!”

“What...?!”

Sebastian’s eyes opened wide. “Is that true?!”

Phillip tensed up. “Are you sure?”

Claire looked up at Leo. “But I still don’t feel anything. How can Leo pick it up?”

“Her senses are really good to begin with,” I explained. “But that was before I gave her the same herb as the rest of you.”

“Which means...”

“Her senses got even better,” I explained. “That’s why she can pick up on things further away than any of us can.”

“I see,” Sebastian mused.

*So there really are fenrir here... And just when we’d almost given up, too.*

Claire and Sebastian seemed especially shocked.

“Is the fenrir hunting or something, Leo?” I asked.

*Fenrir are pack monsters, though. So, if they’re in the middle of a hunt, we might want to avoid getting too close.*

She shook her head no. “Ruff, ruff, fruff. Ruff, bark, bark!”

*Wait...it’s getting attacked by something? What kind of monster could pull that off?*

“Claire, Sebastian, it sounds like the fenrir’s getting attacked. What kind of monsters living in these woods would be strong enough to do that?”

Claire looked baffled. “Attacking a fenrir...?”

“There are a scant few,” Sebastian mused. “If there are several of them, and only a single fenrir, I imagine trollds might be so bold.”

“Trollds? What are those?”

“Horrific giant-like creatures that grow over ten feet tall. They have enough raw strength to uproot a tree single-handed. They’re generally considered weaker than fenrir, but in great enough numbers, I imagine they would stand a chance.”

“Okay, I think I see. So, Leo, can you tell what the attackers are like from here?”

“Ruff... Bark, bark, bark!”

“She says there’s five of them, and they’re big and walk on two legs...sounds like trollds.”

Sebastian nodded. “Ah, I see.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Claire shouted. “Let’s go help it!”

“Please wait, milady. We have no means of defeating five trollds! You must consider your own wellbeing!”

“But—!”

“Ruff.”

Leo raised a paw, cutting them both off.

“Miss Leo?”

“Is something amiss, Miss Leo?”

“Ruff, Ruff. Bark!” She brandished her scythe-like claws.

“Leo says she can take ’em,” I translated.

Sebastian didn’t seem convinced. “I doubt even *you* could handle so many of them, Miss Leo.”

*C’mon, Sebastian, stop doubting her. Is she the strongest or isn’t she?*

“Roo-roo-roooooo!”

“Leo says trollds are basically just big babies. She can take them down without breaking a sweat.”

Sebastian did a double take. “Even trollds, you say?”

“Can we ask for your aid, then, Miss Leo?”

Leo nodded firmly. “Ruff.”

“All right, then. Please show us the way.”

“Aroooooo!”

Leo nodded again then took Sebastian’s place at the head of the party as we headed toward the monsters. After a while, even we could sense the monsters some distance ahead.

“I guess that must be them.”

“So it seems,” Claire agreed with me.

“No, wait...it feels too one-sided to be a ‘fight.’”

One of the presences—probably the fenrir—was barely moving. The five bigger creatures were surrounding it, bobbing toward and away from it.

“It feels like the trollds have the fenrir surrounded and are just taking turns beating it up.”

“How awful!” Claire exclaimed.

“We’ve got to save it!” Phillip shouted.

Sebastian nodded. “We’d best make haste.”

Everyone seemed to feel for the fenrir, but I couldn’t tell for certain if it was because it was getting ganged up on or because they’d come to know Leo so well. Not that I’d complain either way, of course.

“Go on ahead, Leo! We’ll catch up!”

“Wooooooh!”

Leo bolted off into the woods ahead of us. She’d get there much faster without the five of us to slow her down. She quickly disappeared from sight, but I could still feel her presence as she ran like the wind toward the trollds. After



only a moment, she'd clearly arrived there, as I could feel the trolds' presences disappear one by one as she took them out.

"We'd best hurry too!" Claire called out to the rest of us.

"Yeah!"

With that, we all started running. We still had to swerve around trees and such, but it was still faster than walking. Not even Claire seemed to mind as we collided with branches and vines. I could practically feel her determination.

After a few minutes, we finally arrived at the scene of the fight. There was a small clearing there, and most of it was taken up by five giant corpses. Some were burned to almost unrecognizable crisps, a few were hacked apart, and one was frozen solid with one gigantic arm raised in the air. They were just as massive as Sebastian had described, and they had human-sized clubs. I could only imagine how devastating a strike from one of those would be, but Leo probably didn't give them a chance to try. Leo herself, of course, was sitting under a tree, waiting for us.

"Mruff." *You're all so slow.*

We took a moment to calm our breathing and make sure the trolds were dead before heading over to her. She stayed sitting the whole time, however, not moving a muscle.

*What's gotten into her? I thought she'd want a pet for a job well done.*

"You okay, Leo?"

Claire looked around for a moment. "Where's the fenrir, Miss Leo?"

"Ruuuuff..."

I was the only one who seemed to find Leo's behavior weird, though. The others seemed more worried about the fenrir.

Leo nudged a red patch of ground with her nose.

*Wait...there's something there.*

"Leo... Don't tell me that's the fenrir."

*"Whine."*

Claire's eyes opened wide. "That's it?"

"To think they still lived in these woods," Sebastian mused.

It looked wolflike, just like Leo, except that it was about the size of a Border Collie. Especially with Leo standing protectively over it, the fenrir seemed especially small.

*Come to think of it, fenrir are supposed to be smaller.*

Leo gave it another nudge with her nose.

"What's up, girl?"

"Ruff... Woooo." She sounded a lot quieter than usual.

Sebastian stepped forward as we squinted at the fenrir. "Allow me to take a look."

I stepped forward with him until we were both right beside Leo. Claire followed closely behind us.

"Oh, my," Sebastian gasped as he reached out to examine it. "What terrible wounds."

"And here I thought it was just the same color as the ground..."

"How terrible."

Leo pulled her head back, and for the first time, I could tell that the little creature's fur was stained crimson with blood and dirt. The grass was stained the same reddish hue, which I'd thought was the ground's natural color. I could faintly see patches of the fenrir's snow-white fur here and there.

Leo gave Sebastian a pleading look. "*Whine...*"





Sebastian's brow furrowed as he examined its wounds. "How terrible."

"How is it, Sebastian?" Claire asked pensively.

"It appears as though we arrived too late. The poor creature is breathing, but only barely. I'm afraid it won't last much longer."

"How horrible... And here we finally found one..."

I didn't know what to say. The trolks must've really done a number on it. Looking closely, I could tell that one of its hind legs was broken at an unnatural angle, no doubt the work of a massive club. It was probably unable to escape after that first devastating hit.

"Woo... Woo, woo, woo..." Leo gave me the same look she usually did when she was begging. I could tell she wanted to save the poor pup.

"Leo..."

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Claire asked.

Sebastian shook his head. "I have some medical knowledge, but this far surpasses my abilities. I doubt even the most skilled of doctors could do much for it, in this state."

I could make out the shaky rise and fall of its chest. It didn't even attempt to move nor make a sound.

*Sebastian might be right.*

Even though fenrir attacked humans just as any trolk or orc might, it looked too similar to Leo for me to just sit by and do nothing. But I wasn't a doctor either, much less a vet. I bit my lip in frustration.

*Isn't there anything I can do?*

Claire turned to me. "Takumi? Isn't there something you or Miss Leo can do?"

Sebastian shook his head, closing his eyes with a regretful expression. "I doubt it, milady. These wounds are most definitely fatal."

"Ruff? *Whine... Whimper.*"

Leo's eyes grew larger and more pleading. I bit my lip even harder.

Phillip shook his head. “There’s nothing we can do for it now.”

“’Tis the law of nature,” Nicola muttered sadly. “And yet, it eases not the heartache.”

Their heads all drooped sadly as they watched on in silence.

After a moment, though, I realized something. I relaxed my jaw. There was still the bitter taste of the herbs left in my mouth, since I hadn’t drunk anything since then. I had an idea.

“Sebastian?”

“What is it?”

“You said that loe could heal wounds in an instant, right?”

He nodded hesitantly. “Yes, but I’m afraid it has its limits. With such grave wounds, I’m afraid it wouldn’t help.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t be using loe.”

*I’ll make something new—something similar, but stronger! An herb that can bring the fenrir back from the brink of death!*

Loe could be used as easily as rubbing the gooey inside bits on a wound. There had to be some herb with even stronger healing that worked the same way.

“Takumi?”

“Mr. Hirooka?”

I could hear Claire and Sebastian’s voices, but I didn’t have any time to waste. I carefully crafted a mental image of the herb I wanted, then stuck my hand to the ground. I didn’t breathe a word as I focused single-mindedly on it. The others could probably tell I was trying to use Herb Cultivation, as they didn’t try to interrupt me.

After a few long seconds, there was a glow from beneath my hand that I’d never seen before. The second I pulled it away, a white-leaved loe sprung up from the earth. I tore off a few fat, juicy leaves. Sebastian wordlessly handed me his short sword, and I carefully peeled the plant’s hard exterior away. Then,

with the preparation all done, I edged forward.

“Takumi?” Claire asked.

“Ruff...”

“It’ll be okay, I swear!”

They all watched with bated breath as I laid the gooey, exposed parts of the leaves over the fenrir’s wounds. The second they touched, the leaves began to give off a brilliant glow, which rapidly covered the fenrir’s entire body. Then, as if time itself were rewinding, its wounds began to close up. By the time the light had dissipated, even its broken leg was back to normal.

Claire covered her mouth with her hands, her eyes growing moist. “Oh, Takumi!”

“Ruff! Ruff, ruff, ruff!”

Sebastian’s eyes were wide with disbelief. “An herb that can bring one back from the brink of death...?!”

I was honestly just as surprised as Sebastian was, though.

“You’re *amazing*, Takumi!”

“Ruff! Ruff!”

Claire and Leo were both giddy beyond words.

I laughed awkwardly. “It was just luck, honestly. I had no idea this was even possible.”

“Your Gift really *is* amazing, though!”

“Ruffarooo!”

Claire and Leo both looked at me as if I’d done the impossible.

*This is kind of embarrassing...*

“What was that? A miracle?” Phillip asked in disbelief.

“Verily,” said Nicola with a dazed nod. “’Tis not every day one sees a man flaunt death itself.”

Only Sebastian seemed to maintain his composure. He pulled a square of

cloth about the size of a lap blanket out of his bag and gently wrapped the fenrir in it.

“Though its wounds have healed, it appears the poor thing is still exhausted.”

*Whoops. First things first, we need to look after this little guy.*

“Good idea. We’ve got to make sure it doesn’t get too cold.”

“Sebastian?” Claire asked hesitantly. “You don’t suppose I could touch it, do you?”

“I would advise against it, milady. Though its wounds have closed, it was still nearly on the brink of death mere moments ago. It would be best to let it rest for a spell.”

The smile dropped from her face. “Oh... Of course. I understand.”

*Did she want to pet it that badly?*

Leo leaned forward toward Claire, as if offering to be pet. “Ruff.”

“Oh. Thank you, Miss Leo.” She giggled, seemingly content.

Sebastian studied the fenrir with a contemplative expression. “It would appear that this fenrir is but a pup.”

“It is?”

At its size, I’d assumed it was fully grown. I thought that Leo was simply way too big to be any decent reference, and it seemed big enough to my eyes.

“My guess,” Sebastian continued, “is that this poor fellow was separated from his pack, and then had the misfortune to encounter those trollds.”

“Makes sense,” I nodded.

Claire took a look around the clearing and stopped. “Speaking of the trollds, where did they go? There’s only one now.”

Phillip stepped forward. “Nicola and I took the liberty of disposing of them while you were focused on the fenrir, Milady.”

Nicola nodded. “We were unable to move the frozen titan, but those that lay in pieces have been buried yonder.”



*When did they have the time to do that?*

I was glad that I wouldn't have to see the bodies again. The frozen one was still rooted in place where Leo had killed it, though.

*I hope it doesn't thaw out anytime soon.*

"It's sleeping so peacefully," Claire muttered beside me.

I turned back to find her watching the fenrir pup with a soft smile. It was snoozing away with a serene look on its face. Leo leaned protectively over the little sleeper, her head hanging right over it.

"Yeah... I'm glad."

"It may take some time yet to recover from its fatigue," Sebastian said. "The pain appears to be gone, at least, so a good night's rest should restore its lost energy."

The mystery herb I'd used could probably only heal wounds, but that was enough.

With that, we got ready to turn back to camp. It was well past the time we should've turned back home.

"Woo? Woo, woo, woo..." Leo didn't seem eager to go, however.

"What's up?"

"Roo-roo. Ruff?"

She leaned down to the little fenrir, then gently grabbed it by the scruff of the neck and made a lifting motion.

"You mean you want to take the fenrir with us?"

She nodded. "Ruff, ruff, ruff!"

*I'm not sure that's a good idea...we don't know how it'll take to people yet.*

"Uh, Claire? Sebastian?"

"What is it?" Claire asked.

"Anything you need?"

They both stopped gathering their things to look at me.

“Leo says we should take the fenrir back with us.”

“She does?” Sebastian arched an eyebrow.

Claire thought for a moment. “I think we should, too.”

“Milady. You realize that fenrir, pup though it may be, is a dangerous wild animal? Who knows what havoc it could wreak when it wakes up?”

“But we can’t just leave it here alone to die. What if some other monster comes while it’s asleep?”

He hesitated. “Well...granted, but nonetheless.”

“Ruff, ruff. Fruff, roo-roo, woo-woo, ruff.”

I could tell from her gestures and the tone in her voice that she thought taking the fenrir was safe. She motioned to pick up the pup a few more times.

*There’s no way those are things a dog could mime... I mean, I guess she’s not quite a dog, but still...it’s kind of funny how she can move like that.*

“I think we should take the pup, too,” I added.

“Even you?” Sebastian asked in surprise.

“You remember what Leo said before we came here, right?”

“Yes...that no fenrir could pose a threat to her.”

“Exactly. Also, don’t forget that they obey silver fenrir on instinct. As long as Leo’s with us, it won’t hurt anyone, I promise.”

“Miss Leo said so, did she?” He stroked his chin.

I nodded.

Claire gave him a pleading look. “Please, Sebastian?”

“...I suppose we can take it back so that it may recover safely.”

“Oh, thank you, Sebastian!”

“But! Should it harm a soul in the mansion, I shall have it dispatched immediately. Not only that, but Miss Leo must watch over it at all times without fail. Do I make myself clear?”

“Clear enough,” I nodded.

Claire hesitated a moment before nodding. “I can agree to that.”

“Ruff!”

It made sense that he’d be nervous about it. All we had to go on was Leo’s word, and she didn’t have any experience raising a fenrir—not to mention they were known maneaters.

“All right, then. With that settled, I propose we move out.”

“Okay,” I nodded.

Claire smiled. “We did achieve our goal after all. I’d call this more than enough.”

Not only did we finish what we came there to do, but we’d decided to head home in the morning anyways. We’d only spent about a week there, but it felt so much longer and more tiring than that.

“In that case, I’ll carry the fenrir,” Claire said as she walked over to Leo. “Do you mind?”

“Ruff.” Leo obediently backed away.

She leaned down to lift up the fenrir, not batting an eye at the blood that got stuck to her clothes. “You’re lighter than you look, aren’t you?” she said softly.

“Are you sure you can take it back?” I asked her. “You’re not tired from all that running, are you?”

“Oh, no. I’ve gotten quite used to the forest now. Besides, between the herb you so kindly gave me and this little one, I’m quite all right.”

She didn’t seem that tired, either, but she could be putting on a brave front for all I knew.

“Ruff, ruff. Ruff!” Leo pointedly sat down with her back to Claire, as if offering her a ride if she felt tired later.

“Thank you for the offer, Miss Leo,” Claire smiled.

“Ruff!”

I wasn't expecting Leo to be so protective of the fenrir, though. She kept saying how they were weak and such before we came, so I thought she didn't care for them much.

*Maybe it reminds her of the day I found her? It was so rainy and cold that day, and she felt so weak in my arms, I'd ended up running all the way home.*

"All right, then," Sebastian announced. "Let us be off."

*Whoops, this is no time to be thinking about the past.*

I nodded in agreement, and we all headed back through the forest down the path we'd came.

It was a lot darker than before, but the herbs we'd eaten were still in full effect, so we'd no trouble seeing. If anything, we were able to move more quickly than we had earlier.

As we walked, Leo occasionally checked to see how Claire was holding up. Several times, I caught Claire peering into the blanket at the fenrir and smiling. She didn't seem to tire once. I kept an eye on both of them from behind. It was almost like Claire was carrying a baby, and Leo looked like a big sister worried about her newborn sibling. Silver fenrir were supposedly a different species from fenrir altogether, but Leo didn't seem to care—not that she was originally a silver fenrir herself.

By the time we eventually made it back to camp, night had long fallen. Despite the hour, Laila and Johanna were ready and waiting with a warm dinner...no, a midnight snack.

*Man, it's nice to come home to a warm meal...even if this isn't home.*

It was a long trip all in all, but with the young fenrir in tow, we were able to call it a job well done.

"First a silver fenrir, then Herb Cultivation, and now a fenrir pup...there's never a dull moment in this world, is there? I hope I can relax a while when we get back," I muttered to myself as I sat by the fire, watching as the smoke drifted up into the unfamiliar night sky.

## Epilogue

**“MILADY?** Is that bundle in your arms what I think it is?”

Laila was the first to notice the bundle in Claire’s arms when we returned to camp. The pup was still blissfully asleep, probably still exhausted from its ordeal.

“It’s a fenrir pup,” Claire replied with a smile. “Isn’t it adorable? Leo saved it from being beaten to death by a group of trollds.”

“Trollds?” Laila blinked in surprise. “Are you sure it was wise to bring it back with you?”

“I promised Sebastian it’d be all right. Leo said she’d look after it, so I imagine it’ll be just fine. Besides, for whatever reason, I can’t imagine this little one would ever harm a human.”

“But what about all the tales of them devouring people?”

“Oh, those are just folktales. I just know this one wouldn’t do that.”

I didn’t know where Claire’s confidence stemmed from but, looking at the comfy little bundle in her arms, I had to agree. It could’ve just been because it looked like such a cute pup, though.

Laila raised an eyebrow. “Sebastian agreed to this?”

“Of course he did.” Claire turned to face him. “Didn’t you, Sebastian?”

He nodded. “I provided several conditions, of course, but I allowed it.”

“In that case, I suppose it might be all right.” She nodded to herself, then turned back to the pot on the fire. “It *is* rather cute,” she mumbled as she started spooning out dinner.

I was hungry after all that had happened, and the others seemed just as eager to eat as they formed a line. Dinner was orc again, alongside a simple soup with a few scant veggies on the side. Despite having eaten orc time and time again

during our trip, it had a calming, homey flavor to it, so I ate with the same enthusiasm I had on the first day.

As we all ate, Phillip and Nicola reported the day's findings to Laila and Johanna. Phillip especially got really excited when it came time to talk about my Herb Cultivation, and I got the impression that he exaggerated more than a few details, but I didn't cut in. I didn't want to rain on his parade, after all. I just wished that Laila and Johanna wouldn't look at me as if I were some kind of superhuman as he talked. It was more than embarrassing.

"Are you sure you want to leave now, milady?" Johanna asked Claire after the report was over.

"Yes, I'm quite sure. We've already stayed longer than I told the other servants we would, and I can't imagine we would be any more successful than this. This little one is living proof there are fenrir left in these woods."

"You have a point," Johanna nodded. "I haven't heard of anyone entering the depths of this forest since the founder's time, but the fenrir are still there, it seems."

"Exactly. To tell you the truth, I was hoping to meet a silver fenrir like the founder had, but this is enough for today."

"If you insist, milady, I won't say anything more about it."

"That's that, then."

With that, we finished our dinner and relaxed, having finally accomplished everything we set out to do.



**AFTER** our midnight meal, we rested a while around the fire. Just when we were about to start watch, however, the bundle Claire was holding started to rustle, then it whined once.

"Well, look who just woke up," Claire smiled.

The little fenrir opened its big eyes. It looked up at Claire's face. Leo, realizing it was awake, stood up from where she'd been sleeping beside me to say hello.

The sight of both Claire and Leo at once, though, prompted it to retreat into

its blankets. *“Whimper...”*

*Considering Leo’s size, I’m not surprised.*

“It’s all right, sweetie,” Claire cooed as she patted it on the back. “Leo’s not going to hurt you. She’s not a mean silver fenrir.”

“Arf...?”

Leo gently leaned in and gave the fenrir an affectionate nudge.

“Arf? Arf, arf?”

“Ruff, ruff.”

They exchanged words. I couldn’t understand what the fenrir was trying to say, but Leo was saying that it was safe now. The pup broke eye contact with Leo to warily look around the camp, as if looking for something.

“Arf... Arf-arf, arf?”

“Woof? Woo-woo-woo.” There was a worried tone in Leo’s voice.

*I wonder if it’s looking for its parents?*

The pup sounded just like Leo had right after I took her in. She was too weak to hear clearly through the rain back then, but I could tell that she was looking for her family.

Leo left the pup and plodded over to Laila. “Ruff... Woo, wroo, wruff.”

“Is everything all right, Miss Leo?”

She peered into the pot. “Woof?”

“Leo’s wondering if there’s any food left,” I translated.

“I understood that one,” Laila reassured me. She then turned back to Leo. “I’m afraid that dinner is all gone, but if you’d be willing to wait a short while, I could prepare something.”

“Ruff!”

Laila pulled some of the remaining orc meat out of one sack, then a few scraps of vegetables out of another.

*We really were low on veggies, huh... Orc is tastier than any pork I’ve had, but*

*it's gotta have a side or something. There's nutrition to think about, too.*

As soon as Leo saw Laila begin cooking again, she walked back over to the fenrir and gave it a little nudge.

"Woo, woo. Ruff."

"Arf?" It started squirming happily. "Arf-arf, arf!"

"Is she alright, Miss Leo?"

"Ruff, woof-woof."

Leo's ears drooped for a moment, then she mimed chewing.

"She says the puppy's hungry."

"Ruff."

"Oh, I see. That explains things."

*Makes sense that Leo would go to Laila, then. She's been cooking for us this whole trip.*

That might mean, then, that the fenrir was looking for food instead of its parents. I felt more than a little silly for assuming it was like Leo and getting all emotional. I didn't actually say anything, so I didn't feel *too* embarrassed about it. That didn't necessarily mean I was wrong either, though.

I shook my head clear and decided to have a word with Laila.

"Do you think you can make it a little lighter on the stomach than usual, Laila?"

"Hm? Is there some reason I shouldn't prepare it as I always do?"

"The baby fenrir's the one that'll be eating it, after all. Also, it was pretty seriously injured when we found it, so it might not have a lot of stamina left. Better safe than sorry, right?"

"All right, then. I'll try to make it easy on the stomach."

"Thank you."

With that, I went back to where Claire and Leo were sitting. The fenrir appeared totally used to Leo now and they were snuggling and licking each



other. As I watched, Claire held a finger out in front of the pup's nose.

"Arf? *Sniff.*" It hesitated for a moment in confusion then started sucking on her finger.

"Hehe, that tickles!"

*Uh, Claire? You realize how easily that could've gotten very, very bad, right?*

Fortunately, it wasn't using its teeth, instead, sucking at her finger the way it might at a baby bottle. As Claire giggled, I could hear Sebastian and all the guards let out a collective sigh of relief.

Given its size, I'd assumed it was a few years old. But it might really be a puppy, especially if it still had the urge to suckle when it got hungry. Even if it wasn't supposed to get as big as Leo was, it'd probably be pretty big as an adult.

"Food is ready," Laila called out. "You can come get it anytime, Miss Leo."

Leo readily stood up, grabbed the now-clean wooden plate she'd used at dinner and carried it to Laila. Laila filled it with food. Leo tried to carry it back but realized after a moment that her jaws weren't quite nimble enough to. It'd tip if she tried. She was giving Laila a pitiful look when I came to help.

"Here, let me carry that."

"Oh, thank you," Laila said. "My apologies. I should've asked you from the beginning."

I smiled at her moment of airheadedness as I carried it back to the pup.

"Woof, woof." Leo bowed politely to Laila.

"It was the least I could do, Miss Leo," Laila replied politely.

*Good girl, Leo. I'm glad you remembered to say thank you.*

I brought the food closer to Claire, and the fenrir pup seemed to instantly pick up on the smell. It eagerly sprang out of Claire's arms.

"Oh." Claire sadly looked down at the empty blankets in her arms.

"Hold on, there!" I shouted to the pup. "You've gotta calm down a little! It's still too hot for you!"

“Arf-arf!”

Either it didn’t understand what I was saying, or it was too hungry to care. It started running circles around my legs.

“Here, why don’t you feed the pup, Claire?” I held the bowl out to her. “Make sure the food’s cool enough that it doesn’t get burned.”

She hesitated. “Are you sure?”

“I don’t know how much Leo helped calm it down, but it seemed more than happy to sit in your arms. In fact, I think it’s starting to get attached to you.”

“Y-You really think so?”

“Yeah, I do. I know you’ll do great. Here.” I handed her the bowl I couldn’t blame her for feeling hesitant. She’d probably never cared for an animal before. I encouraged her to blow on the food to cool it down. The whole time she was hesitating, the fenrir was running around us and yipping.

“Grauuuul!” *Calm down!* Leo said.

“Yipe?!” Its eyes flew open with fear, then it immediately sat down.

*Wow. Leo can be harsh when she needs to be.*

“Go ahead, Claire,” I encouraged her.

“O-Okay.”

She started blowing on the food and, as soon as it was cool enough, she put it down. The fenrir looked up at Leo nervously.

“A-Arf?”

Leo nodded. “Ruff.”

The fenrir’s red eyes gleamed with joy as it pounced on the food.

Claire watched it eat with wide eyes. “Do you think there’s enough?”

“I’m not sure. It definitely wouldn’t be enough for Leo, but at its size, maybe.”

I became less sure as I watched it scarf down the meat, though.

*There was still a bit of meat left, wasn’t there?*

“Laila? Can we ask for seconds on that grilled orc?”

“Of course,” she replied.

If the fenrir couldn't finish it all, then I was sure Leo could handle the leftovers. It looked like it could handle solid food just fine, too.

For a while, we all watched the fenrir eat in silence.

*Hey. I see you drooling there, Leo.*

“Are you hungry, too?”

She gave me a sorry look. “Wooooo...”

After all that had happened, the usual helping of sausages must not have been enough.

“Laila? If you don't mind, could you—”

“Not a problem. I'll begin grilling some for Miss Leo as well.”

“Ruff! Ruff!” Leo started wagging up a storm.

*Not so hard there, Leo. You're making it hard for the little pup to eat.*

After a while, both Leo and the fenrir were digging into the second course of meat. The sheer difference in their sizes made them look like parent and child, especially when they sat side by side so nicely.





I had a feeling the pup would want more meat.

It ate a lot for such a little guy. Given all that it had been through, though, I wasn't too surprised. It needed all the energy it could get.

Claire giggled. "They have quite the appetites."

"Yeah, they do."

They both finished eating before long, and Sebastian and I went to wash the plate afterward. By the time we returned, we found the fenrir sound asleep in Claire's arms once again.

"My word," Sebastian said. "Asleep already?"

Claire nodded. "Yes. I imagine having such a full belly must have tuckered it out, the cute little thing."

It was probably still recovering, after all. She smiled as she looked down at it, and I could tell she'd already gotten attached.

After that, Phillip and Nicola stayed on first watch while everyone else returned to the tents to sleep. The fenrir refused to leave Claire, however, so Leo ended up sleeping right beside the women's tent just in case.

I'd better get some sleep while I still can... I'm on watch next.

I crawled into the men's tent and, after saying goodnight to Sebastian, I wormed into my sleeping bag. Tomorrow would be another busy day as we headed back to the mansion. I'd best be ready for it.

# Afterword

**MY** name is Ryuuou. It's a pleasure to meet you and thank you very much for picking up my book. This is my first printed novel, thanks to my winning a prize in the 8th Web Novel Awards. This story is virtually the same as what you'll find on my novel previously published online, so I imagine some of you might be familiar with this story already.

The main draw of this story is Leo who, even after going from cute little Maltese to unstoppable silver Fenrir is still fawned on by the protagonist, Takumi. In my original drafts, though, Leo wasn't even present. The plan was to have a protagonist with fantastic abilities who just toured around different countries in a fantasy world. I needed some way for them to get around, though.

I thought about using a usual horse-drawn carriage since there weren't any cars in the world. But I didn't want him to spend *too* much time getting from place to place. Instead, I thought about having him ride a monster, like a fenrir, since I'd seen a few other novels that used a similar concept. It was only then that I thought to have his mount be his dog from back in Japan and make his cute little pup into the strongest thing alive.

So I made the Maltese a giant fenrir, then upgraded it to a silver one, just in case Takumi needed the extra help. I knew that Leo still needed to be cute, though, since it'd be more interesting if Claire and the mansion's other residents fawned over her. I hope you found Leo just as cute!

With that, I'd like to move into the thank-you section. First, I'd like to thank the talented Ririnra for their hard work in taking my vague descriptions and turning them into such amazing illustrations. I know you were very busy but thank you for putting so much effort into making all the characters look great.

Next, I'd like to thank my editor Kawaguchi and the rest of GC Novels' editing department. It's all thanks to your hard work that this book was even possible. Thank you so much for everything. I would also like to thank everyone who joined in GC Novels' Twitter competition and sent pictures of their own beloved

dogs. It was incredibly hard to choose just one pup out of all of them—they were so cute! Thank you again to the winners Rin and your human friend Akatsuki Nero, for your pictures.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who has supported me and this book, from my web readers to everyone who bought this book. Really, I can't thank you enough.

I hope to see you again in the second volume. Until then, take care.

November 2020









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