
NOVEL
7
Written by
Kennoji
Illustrated by
Matsuuni
DRUGSTORE
IN ANOTHER WORLD
~The Slow Life of a Cheat Pharmacist~

Table of Contents

- Color Gallery
- Table of Contents Page
- Title Page
- Copyrights and Credits
- Chapter 1: No More Slipping
- Chapter 2: I Just Want to Get Stronger
- Chapter 3: Market Research on Stiff Shoulders
- Chapter 4: The Electric Cleaner
- Chapter 5: The Irregular
- Chapter 6: The All-Purpose Condiment
- Chapter 7: Mina’s Daily Struggles
- Chapter 8: Touring the Capital
- Chapter 9: The Case of the Vanished Griffin
- Chapter 10: Beneath the Mask
- Chapter 11: Gifts and a Goodbye
- Chapter 12: Bodybuilding with the Red Cat Brigade
- Chapter 13: In Terms of Tanning
- Chapter 14: However You Look
- Afterword
- Newsletter



Stay up to date On Light Novels by Downloading our mobile App

Zerobooks Universal

Zerobooks USA ONLY

Zerobooks IOS

Download all your Favorite Light Novels

Jnovels.com

Join our Discord and meet Thousands of LN readers to chat with




CHARACTERS
MINA
NOELA
VIVI
REIJI
EJIL

CONTENTS



1 No More Slipping

2 I Just Want to Get Stronger

3 Market Research on Stiff Shoulders

4 The Electric Cleaner

5 The Irregular

6 The All-Purpose Condiment

7 Mina's Daily Struggles

8 Touring the Capital

9 The Case of the Vanished Griffin

10 Beneath the Mask

11 Gifts and a Goodbye

12 Bodybuilding with the Red Cat Brigade

13 In Terms of Tanning

14 However You Look

Afterword

Drugstore in Another World

~The Slow Life of a Cheat Pharmacist~

NOVEL 7

WRITTEN BY

Kennoji

ILLUSTRATED BY

Matsuuni

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

CHEAT KUSUSHI NO SLOW LIFE: ISEKAI NI TSUKURO DRUGSTORE VOL. 7

© HIFUMI SHOBO 2024
© Kennoji 2024
Originally published in Japan in 2021 by HIFUMISHOBO Co., LTD.
English translation rights arranged
through TOHAN CORPORATION, TOKYO
with © Edia Co., Ltd., TOKYO.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form without written permission from the copyright
holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and
incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are
used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or
persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information
or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to
those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views
of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to
Marketing Manager Lauren Hill at press@gomanga.com.
Information regarding the distribution and purchase of
digital editions is available from Digital Operations Manager
CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of
Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at
sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Elliot Ryouga
ADAPTATION: Kat Adler
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
COVER DESIGN: Mariel Dágá
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner
PROOFREADER: Catherine Langford
EDITOR: T. Burke, Kathleen Townsend
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Salvador Chan Jr., April Malig, Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
President: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-63858-818-4
Printed in Canada
First Printing: September 2025
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter 1:
No More Slipping

IT WAS BUSINESS as usual at the drugstore when a man resembling an adventurer dropped in.

"Greetings," he said. "Is this the shop that sells medicine made by an alchemist?"

"Er…"

The adventurer wasn't a familiar face; he was likely visiting Kirio Drugs based on word of mouth. I figured he was probably in his forties. I didn't know much about adventurers or their skills, but this one came off as a veteran. He had a well-used sword at his hip, and the rest of his equipment looked likewise worn. None was in poor shape, though; he must've maintained everything properly.

"I'm not actually an alchemist," I replied with a strained smile.

My voice woke Noela from her nap on the countertop. "Customer, Master?"

"I'm about to give him a consultation," I told her, stroking her head. She narrowed her eyes contentedly at that.

"A beastling," noted the adventurer.

"She's a *werewolf*, actually." I made sure to correct him. To Noela, there was a huge difference. In fact, she was rather snobbish on the subject. I frankly didn't see the two species as that distinct, but

she got up in arms if anyone said otherwise. “What do you need today?”

“Well, I’ve been using those potions of yours,” the adventurer replied. “They’re pretty damn incredible! They’ve saved my butt more than once.”

“Glad to hear that.”

“So, I’ve come with a request, Sir Alchemist…” He tried to cut to the chase.

“Um, just to be clear, I’m a *pharmacist*, not an alchemist.”

I again made a point of correcting him, since people confused those roles regularly. Then I motioned the old adventurer to take a seat. As he did so, Mina appeared with complimentary tea; she must’ve heard our conversation and realized a new customer had arrived.

“Thanks, Mina,” I said.

“You’re quite welcome. Enjoy!” She left the storefront with a smile.

“So, what’s this request you mentioned?” I asked.

“It’s about my sword.” The adventurer gently patted the sheath his blade was tucked into. “Recently, it hasn’t felt *right* in my hands. I hoped you could address that, Sir Alchemist.”

Is a drugstore really the best place for this errand? “You might prefer to visit an armorer or blacksmith, frankly.”

He shook his head with a gruff expression. “I can’t. They’re only interested in selling new weapons, and I want to keep using this

sword.”

Aha. He didn’t want to buy a replacement. Now this made sense. “Can I take a look?”

“Mm.” The adventurer placed the sheathed sword on the counter. The sheath itself was light, and even a total civilian like me could tell the sword inside was of good quality.

“May I draw it?”

“Of course.”

Holding the hilt, I slowly drew the blade from its sheath. It glistened in the light, which suggested it was well maintained. In fact, at first glance, it seemed totally functional. It’d clearly been wielded for many long years, but as far as I could tell, it wouldn’t slip in your hands so long as you held it properly. If the adventurer favored this sword, I saw no reason for him to replace it.

“It doesn’t feel ‘right’ in your hands, huh?” I again squeezed the hilt tightly but still couldn’t figure out what he meant.

“Exactly. That wasn’t always the case, though.”

“How’s the sword different now?”

“Well, this may seem minor, but I can’t put as much force behind it. For instance, I can’t split a tree in one swing anymore. I used to be able to.”

“Oh…” That claim impressed me immensely, despite my underwhelmed response. And nothing about the adventurer’s demeanor led me to think he’d probably gotten weaker. Even if it had, I couldn’t have implied that either.

"I switched hilts already, but…" He shook his head. Apparently, nothing had improved.

"Oh! Hold on." I had an idea. "Could you show me your hands for a second?"

"Hrm? Sure."

The old adventurer held out both hands. I prodded them for a moment. They were tough, calloused from years of swinging his sword.

"I knew it," I murmured. "Yeah… I think that might be your problem."

"What might?"

"Please wait here a sec."

Leaving the drugstore, I entered the lab. Following my medicine-making skill's instructions, I gathered the proper ingredients, then concocted a product I suspected would solve the adventurer's problem.

Nonslip Gel: Fast-drying nonstick friction gel.

All finished. I put some nonslip gel on my hands to test it; it dried immediately. Glancing around the room for a way to test the stuff, I spotted a mortar and pestle. I held the mortar tight in my hand and ground the pestle against it.

"Ah!"

It felt completely different from using my bare hands. My fingers didn't slip at all, and the pestle absorbed my grip's full strength. *Perfect.* With this product, I could solve the older adventurer's problem.

I carried the nonslip gel to the storefront. "I created something new. What do you think?"

"What is it?"

"It'll stop your grip on the sword hilt from sliding."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh. Your hands have gotten too dry, and that keeps you from feeling like you've got a sure grip on your weapon."

"Really?"

"Yup. The skin on your hands loses some of its natural moisture as you age."

A little moisture would normalize things, but dampening his hands in the middle of a journey would be a hassle for the adventurer. On top of that, it'd be a waste of time if his hands dried before he entered battle and drew his sword.

I lathered the man's hands with nonslip gel as if washing them. The gel dried quickly after that.

"That's it?"

"Should be."

He seemed doubtful but followed me outside, nonetheless. There, I told him to take a few swings with his sword.

"I can tell it's better even without swinging it, Sir Alchemist!" he exclaimed.

"Huh?"

"The sensation the moment I gripped the hilt—that's what's been missing lately!"

Things had seemingly worked out.

"Here I come!" the man said like a true swordsman. He took a deep breath, then yelled, "Hyah!!!"

Lunging forward, the adventurer swung his blade, producing a sound as if space itself had fractured. A literal blast of air shaped like a half circle flew away from his swing.

An actual projectile?! The blast mowed down a few meters of weeds and plants, then disappeared. *What the heck just happened?*

The aged adventurer gazed at his sword with a pleased yet nostalgic expression. "It's been years since I last pulled off a Wind Slash…"

A "W-Wind Slash"?! That was some formal technique?

"Hrmph!" He raised his sword quickly, and another blast of air cut through the plants nearby.

"A-awesome," I muttered.

"Thank you, Sir Alchemist. I owe you." The adventurer shook my hand, gripping it tightly. "It's thanks to you that I performed a move I thought I'd never use again!"

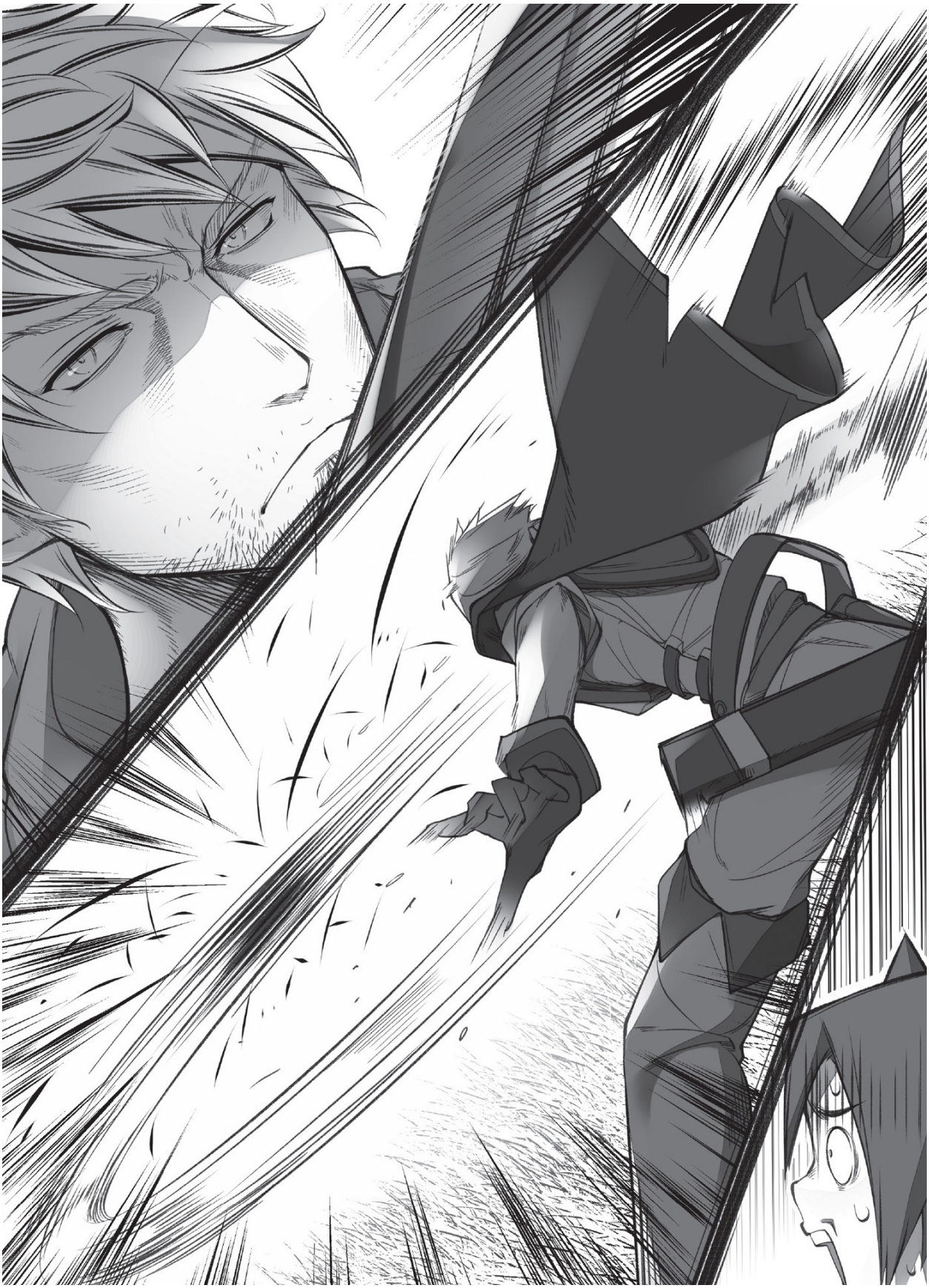
"So…what's a Wind Slash?" I asked hesitantly.

"A sword technique I developed. The concentrated pressure of a blade's swing produces a projectile."

"A *literal* slash of wind," I mused. It was incredibly cool. This dude was the real deal!

The adventurer presented me with a leather bag. "To express my gratitude, I'd like to offer you this."

"No, no. I can't possibly accept anything for a prototype." I was honestly just happy he showed me his awesome technique.



"This bag contains some rare materials I found while adventuring. They might prove useful in your medicine-making. You should have them, Sir Alchemist," the adventurer insisted. "Frankly, I have no use for them myself."

There was no rejecting them at this point. "I'll take you up on that, then."

I opened the bag. As the adventurer said, it was full of dried petals, herbs, tree roots, and other unusual materials.

"If you ever need anything else, feel free to drop by again," I told him.

"Mm-hmm. I intend to. Likewise, Sir Alchemist, should you ever need aid, I'll supply it—so long as doing so is within my power."

The older adventurer whistled between his fingers, and a horse —apparently his—galloped to him. The beautiful animal was muscular and jet-black, which wasn't at all a common sight.

"By the way, my name's Reiji," I told the adventurer. "Reiji the pharmacist."

"I'm Fiora Garon. At the port, I'm called Garon the Sword Saint. Take care." He rode off on horseback.

"The 'Sword Saint,' huh? Impressive…" He was clearly a legit big shot.

Noela must've seen Garon and I testing his sword. When I went back into the drugstore, I saw her swinging a stick and making fighting noises. I completely understood. Honestly? I wanted to become someone who could perform a Wind Slash too.

I quietly hoped that Garon would return someday.

Chapter 2:
I Just Want to Get Stronger

AS I TENDED the herbs in our borrowed meadow, I took a deep breath and glanced around for Noela, who'd come with me. She was nearby, playing with some pill bugs. I vaguely remembered doing the same as a kid. Noela supposedly couldn't stand insects, but pill bugs were apparently fine.

I heard voices in the meadow. "One, two! One, two!"

Looking toward the cries, I saw some Red Cat Brigade mercenaries jogging together. The brigade was in charge of the town's safety, so it made sense that they trained every day. Annabelle, the mercenaries' leader, was at the front of the pack. Behind her was a bunch of beefy—er, *tough*-looking—guys. At the very rear was a boy I'd never seen before.

"You're laggin' behind!" Annabelle yelled.

"Yesh, ma'am!" The boy responded in a strained voice. Although he was struggling, he was just managing to keep up.

"Peel joined mercs, Master," Noela told me.

"'Peel'?"

"Yeah. Peel. Shoemaker's son." No wonder I'd never seen the boy with the mercs before.

I watered and weeded the herbs, harvested a few we'd run out of, and began to leave the meadow. The mercs were still training. I

figured their routine must be tough, especially since it was technically part of their job.

"My life's pretty slow-paced next to theirs," I murmured.

Perhaps assuming I felt downcast, Noela rushed to praise me. "Master not slow! Master smart. Only Master make potions!"

"Thanks, buddy."

"Groo!"

The mercs greeted me as Noela and I passed. "Hey, Medicine God!"

"Guys, could you please stop calling me that? I'm no god."

Annabelle piped up herself. "Working in the meadow today?"

"Yeah. Mina's watching the drugstore for us right now." I then glanced at Peel, who was clearly exhausted.

"You ain't done yet, Peel!" A veteran mercenary needled the shoemaker's son to get back to his workout.

"That boy asked to join us a while back," Annabelle told me. "Who knows what he was thinkin'."

"I respect him," I replied. "He's working hard despite how tough this must be."

"I know he's goin' whole hog, but he ain't ready for the real job yet though," Annabelle said, scratching her head. "Ain't nothin' wrong with a shoemaker's son inheritin' the family business. No call for him to join us."

"Peel said no like making shoes," interjected Noela. She was apparently familiar with the boy's circumstances.

"Huh. Must be nice to have some choice," mused Annabelle. I guessed that many of her mercenaries had nowhere else to go.

"Reiji, bro!" Doz, Annabelle's second-in-command, waved. I returned the gesture. "Get ripped with us! C'mon!" His face wore the best grin.

I gave him a smile of my own. "No thanks." I knew for a fact that I'd end up like Peel. Speaking of which, the boy somehow completed his training and was now lying on the ground, arms and legs outstretched.

"Looks like we're all done here," Annabelle said. "We're gonna head back into town."

"All right."

The Red Cat Brigade went on its merry way. Peel, however, was still catching his breath on the ground. Noela trotted up and handed him a water bottle. "Here. Drink."

"Ah… You're the little wolf girl from the drugstore, right? Thanks." Peel took the water and chugged it down.

"Must be rough being a mercenary," I said.

"Oh, Mr. Pharmacist. Good day." Peel turned his head toward me. "They let me join just the other day, but I can't keep up." He laughed awkwardly.

As Annabelle had implied, Peel's frame was scrawny. It was hard to believe he'd be fit for combat. "Why'd you decide to join the Red

Cat Brigade?" I asked.

"Well…" He turned his melancholy gaze away from me. "I guess I want to be stronger."

Wh-what kind of reply is that? Oh, man, wait. Could he be…? "I…I see."

"If a monster attacks Kalta and the mercenaries can't handle it, I want to be equipped to protect this town myself," Peel continued.

Ah, yup. I figured him out. This was a path all boys eventually went down. Imagining a normal guy like themselves strutting his stuff during a crisis. Even I had dreamed about it. In fact, back in junior high, I thought about it *a lot*.

I stared blankly into space as Peel continued. "We train pretty much every day though, so I never have the chance to recover. My muscles hurt like crazy," he concluded, sighing.

Basically, his ideals differed from reality.

Out of nowhere, Noela jabbed Peel's shoulder. Even that caused sharp pain in his muscles. "Gah!" he yelped.

"Peel weakling. Noela strong."

I smacked her head. "You could be right, but don't taunt him."

"Mr. Pharmacist, I…" Peel bit his lip with a pained expression, then repeated, "I just want to get stronger."

"I think you're telling the wrong person."

Peel shook his head. "I'm not! Doesn't your drugstore have medicine that makes people stronger?!"

Oh. He means Strength Up. That treatment briefly raised your physical attack power, to use video game lingo. It was basically a form of doping. "That product only works temporarily. It's not like it keeps you strong forever. Besides, if you aren't tough to begin with, you won't get much stronger even if you *do* drink it."

"Wha…? How will I get strong effortlessly then?" Peel looked miffed.

He honestly planned to use Strength Up for that? I guess basic bodybuilding isn't his thing.

"No whine!" Noela brought her arms up into an X-shape at Peel, rebuking him. "No bother Master!"

"At this rate, I'll just be extra baggage forever," Peel lamented.

"Okay, okay," I replied reluctantly. "Fine."

"You'll devise a treatment to make me stronger?!" The shoemaker's son pushed his face close to mine.

I shoved him away. "Getting stronger will depend on you. But, well, I suppose I might be able to give you a hand."

"Thank you so much, Mr. Pharmacist!"

Now that I promised to create some kind of treatment, Peel gingerly staggered away. I understood that the brigade's training would help him get stronger, but it was obviously rough. "Shall we go home?" I asked Noela.

"Groo!"

Mina met us as we returned to the drugstore. "Welcome back!"

I quickly entered my lab. Most boys going through puberty dreamed of getting stronger—even I had—so I wanted to help Peel out, if just a little. That said, I couldn't simply create magic medicine to strengthen him immediately.

Well, actually, according to my medicine-making ability, I *could*. Now and then, my skill showed me how to make something that seemed unsettling in more ways than one. *If I were a bad guy, I could probably make bank, huh?*

I decided against making it, since it seemed kind of sketchy. My skill respected that, thankfully, and helpfully informed me of the materials and process for an alternative that even used some ingredients Garon had given me.

I mixed the ingredients into the drugstore's icy gel.

Muscle Chill Gel: Cools afflicted area, reducing muscle pain/exhaustion.

"Hopefully this helps," I muttered.

The new treatment didn't smell *terrible*, but it gave off a scent that was definitely…unique. I put some on my fingertip and then rubbed it on my arm. "Whoa! It's so cold!"

Is it just me, or is this gel more frigid than ice? The soothing sensation made it seem even chillier. *Wait—I'm familiar with this kind of gel. It's basically a chemical-based cold compress! No wonder it's got such a distinctive aroma!*

Peeking over at my work, Noela covered her nose. "Master. Smelly. No make."

"You only have to deal with it today, okay? I'll make a scentless version later."

She looked conflicted but hesitantly nodded. Having agreed to put up with the new product for now, she exited the lab.

"Time to get this to Peel and his aching muscles," I murmured.

Leaving Kirio Drugs again, I made my way to the Red Cat Brigade's barracks. The mercenaries weren't as far on the outskirts of town as the drugstore was, but they were relatively remote, nonetheless.

The brigade was now in the middle of combat training; they split into pairs and were throwing each other about.

Will Peel be okay? I looked around, concerned, only to see him sitting in a corner. He seriously looked like a nerdy schoolboy in gym class.

Annabelle was apparently in charge. She had a bamboo rod with her, and I'd seen her thump the ground with that rod on more than one occasion. "What brings you back, Pharmacist?"

"I've got something for Peel."

"Go ahead and pass it along. I can tell his spirit broke over the last few days."

Ah. Of course it had. Otherwise, he wouldn't be sitting there like he was. "You're really observant, Annabelle."

"Eh? Well, of course I noticed that," Annabelle retorted. "Peel's one of mine, whether he's a greenhorn or a veteran." I understood why her men respected her so much.

I headed toward Peel. "Sorry about the wait!" I called out. "It's ready."

"Ah, Mr. Pharmacist! Already?!"

"Yup." I handed him the new product. "This should make things a little easier on you."

He stared at the muscle chill gel in his hands. "This'll make me stronger me, huh?"

He certainly was obsessed with that idea. "Nah. Like I said, applying this won't enhance your muscles."

"Then what kind of treatment is it?"

"Well, your muscle pain right now is terrible, isn't it?"

"It is… Days and days of training left me a wreck." I figured as much. "I honestly can't even stand up," Peel added.

"Surely you're exaggerating." After all, he stood to walk here today. *When it comes to his issues, he sure can make a mountain out of a molehill*. I moved on and went back to describing the product. "Rubbing this on sore spots will chill them and relieve your exhaustion."

"Oh…? That's it?" Peel didn't hide his disappointment.

"If you aren't going to use it, fine. I'll just take it back." I snatched the bottle from his hands.

"D-don't be like that! I'll use it! Please, sir! Let me!"

"Good." Nodding, I handed him the bottle again, like some old martial arts master passing down a secret weapon to his pupil. "If you don't try to grow stronger, young man, this treatment will merely relieve your pain. Nothing more."

"Got it, Master!" Peel cried out.

"A single emotion can strengthen or weaken a man," I continued.

"Of course, Master!"

Once Peel and I had played "master and student" a bit, one of the mercenaries yelled to the shoemaker's son. "Hey, Peel, how about training with me? Or are you too tired of getting thrown around all the time?"

"I'll be there in just a second, all right?!" Peel rubbed the muscle chill gel all over. "O-oh my! My whole body's cold!"

"Freezing, right?"

"Yes! Could you handle my back, please?"

"Fine…" I reluctantly put some gel on my fingertips and spread it across Peel's back.

"I feel completely different!" Peel exclaimed. "It was so hard to move before, and my muscles ached so badly… But now they seem sharp and responsive! So maybe…" He opened and closed his hands like someone who'd just awoken a new skill.

"Careful. You *seriously* aren't any stronger than you were a few seconds ago," I reminded Peel. Evidently, I really needed to impress

that on him.

"I'll be back. Heh!"

The way he laughed and was trying to sound cool concerned me. *Is he going to be okay?*

Peel straightened up. "I'm ready!" he told a veteran mercenary, kicking off their sparring match. "This is what it means to become the wind itself!"

I couldn't watch. *Talk about second-hand embarrassment. Urgh.*

"Sir," Peel chattered to his opponent, "What you see is just my afterimage—"

Oh, jeez. He's acting like a delusional schoolboy! He was *definitely* under the completely mistaken impression that he'd gained some new skill.

Peel "made the most" of his opponent's so-called opening, trying to throw the mercenary. "Take *this*! Waaaaah!!!"

That was the kind of scream you only ever heard in thrilling mecha anime*. Yup… A single emotion can strengthen or weaken a man. Go, Peel!*

As I rooted for Peel internally, the two men began to grapple. *Fwump… Boom!* Peel's opponent threw him in seconds.

Peel landed on his back, groaning as he stared at the sky. "Urgh… Is this what losing feels like…?"

What the hell's he talking about? He's only ever *lost! How can he pull a face like that and act like this is the first time?*

"Hey, Peel," his opponent called out to him. "It can be real dangerous if you don't brace yourself when ya fall."

"Please…" Peel whispered to him. "Tell me your name… Tell me the name of the man who defeated me."

I *really* wished he'd stop acting like a super-tough character who lost to some protagonist. *Is he delusional? Or does he just want to impersonate a tough guy?*

"C'mon. Stop messin' around and stand up," his opponent continued. "The captain's watchin'."

"Urgh… Captain Annabelle!" Peel immediately stood straight. *Boing!*

Oh, so that was it. Peel wanted to show off to Annabelle, and since he'd been falling on his face this whole time, he probably didn't want her to see that anymore. In fact, that was likely why he'd been sitting around when I arrived. *How many times did I tell him that gel wouldn't strengthen him, though?*

"C'mon," the boy's opponent barked. "Let's go, Peel!"

"Y-yes, sir!" Peel got thrown yet again. "Grrbleh!"

He seemed close to tears, but the veteran was by no means bullying him. When it came to a life-threatening job like being a mercenary, this kind of training was linked to protecting yourself and your own survival.

"He looked broken not long ago, but he's got guts," Annabelle commented quietly as she watched them spar.

"You think so?"

"I mean, he's still weak, but…" Annabelle cackled. "Y'know, I'd say the townsfolk will feel safer if someone like him—someone from Kalta—belongs to the Red Cat Brigade. If it was more than just folks from who-knows-where, like me and the other men." I guessed that was part of why Annabelle had admitted Peel into the group.

"I don't think that's true," I replied. "Everyone in town knows what the brigade's done for them. Not a single person feels wary of you guys."

"I hope you're right," Annabelle said with a snarky smile.

"Hyah!" Peel was thrown yet again.

"Gah!"

The fact that Peel showed no sign of running off even though the mercenaries kept tossing him around, told me that maybe he *did* have guts, as Annabelle said. However weak he was, his somber face made me want to cheer him on.

I'd bring him more muscle chill gel tomorrow.

Chapter 3:
Market Research on Stiff Shoulders

"A LITTLE LOWER, Rei Rei."

"You've got way too many requests."

"Aw. There was nobody else I could ask! Pretty please? Aren't we besties?"

Since when? I heaved a sigh but kept massaging Paula's shoulders.

I must've hit a key spot. "Nnngh… So good," she groaned.

"Stop making weird noises." I turned around, feeling eyes on me. Mina and Noela were glaring daggers in my direction.

"Your hands aren't moving, Rei Rei," Paula complained.

"I know. Ugh…" I pushed hard into a pressure point.

"Mmmmm…!" Paula moaned loudly, clearly feeling great.

She's totally doing this on purpose.



Again, I sensed more staring and turned around again. Mina was putting a blindfold on Noela, glaring as if Paula and I were doing something salacious. “You mustn’t watch anymore, Noela!” she declared.

“Groo?”

“It may not be clear from there, but I’m just rubbing Paula’s shoulders,” I objected.

“Oh? I assumed you were touching all kinds of lascivious spots…!” Mina definitely jumped to a strange conclusion, but she giggled as if pretending she hadn’t.

“Don’t stop, Rei Rei!” Paula piped up. “Mmm…”

“Mina’s getting the wrong idea because you keep saying things like that.”

“Y-you mustn’t be so lewd, Mr. Reiji!” Mina cried, much to my embarrassment.

“I told you, I’m not!”

Removing the blindfold, Noela trotted to me. “Noela rub your shoulders too, Master.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yeah. Heal Master!”

I felt tears welling up. Noela had grown so much! I wasn’t exactly stiff, but I accepted her offer anyway, pointing her toward the general areas I wanted massaged. “Go right ahead.”

“Groo. Got it!”

Grind! Creak! Grind!

"Ow, ow! Too hard!!!" I cried.

"Werewolves strong. No forget, Master." I could only hear Noela's voice, but it was easy to picture her proud expression.

It didn't seem like she was going to let up on her own. I grabbed her hands myself. "Stop, Noela!"

"No feel good?"

Unlike Paula, Noela wasn't bothering me on purpose, which made this especially hard to address. "When you massage someone's shoulders, you really have to be careful how much strength you use," I explained.

"Arroo… Difficult." Noela's ears drooped. She was so cute that I couldn't help but give her a pat on the head.

"If you want to make him feel super good, Noela, you need to be gentle sometimes and rough other times," Paula advised, although I'd never seen Paula rub anyone's shoulders.

Mina came over, replacing the tool shop owner. "A-ahem! Might I request a shoulder rub as well, Mr. Reiji?"

Her shoulders are tight too? "Okay, sure."

"Then I'll massage yours, Rei Rei!"

"Noela rub Paula's shoulders!" Noela volunteered to try the new task again.

Paula immediately shook her head, smiling. "I'm good, Noela. No worries."

Noela tilted her head in confusion*. Is Paula immune to her werewolf cuteness?!*

I began rubbing Mina's shoulders. They were incredibly firm, as if a metal plate were bolted to her shoulder blades and the base of her neck. "Your shoulders are really tight, Mina."

"It's embarrassing to admit, but they are…"

Why is that embarrassing?

Mina helped at the drugstore and handled all the chores around our house. She might've been a ghost, but she spent tons of time in a corporeal form, and apparently even she had issues with tense muscles. I kept massaging the knots in her shoulders hard.

"Mmmm," Mina moaned.

"How do you feel, Mina?"

"Um…really good." Her face was bright red.

What's she so embarrassed about?

"Mina feel good?" Now Noela was checking for some reason.

"Yes…"

"Mina feel good, Master."

"I know. I just asked."

Meanwhile, Paula rubbed my shoulders. "You're totally loose, Rei Rei."

"My muscles don't usually get tense."

"What?! That's not fair." She gently smacked my back.

What was that for?

"Sometimes when my shoulders are really tense, I even get headaches, Rei Rei."

"Oh, me too," Mina agreed.

Really? Tight shoulders tended to cause headaches? That seemed extreme to me. "Out of curiosity, Noela, do your shoulders give you headaches?"

"No. Muscles never tight," she told me proudly.

I figured. I wondered how many people struggled with this kind of thing. I was sure it depended on someone's body type and so on, so it might've only been an issue for Paula and Mina. On the other hand, I remembered hearing that tense shoulders were an issue for women back on Earth too. I'd have to go ask people I knew.

Leaving the drugstore to Mina, I took Noela to town with me. We ran into Zeral and Feris right off the bat. They seemed to be on a date, but when I called out to them, they responded immediately.

"Have either of you ever had tight shoulders?" I asked.

"Nah, not me," Zeral said, passing the question to Feris.

"Every now and then," she said, "but not too bad."

Huh. Was I already off the mark, assuming tight shoulders bother women more often? Wait… Mina and Paula constantly did chores or worked, but Zeral was a lord, and Feris was a wealthy young woman. Neither had any reason to work, and they probably never did anything without moving for a long stretch of time.

"Thanks, guys." I decided to put the question to another acquaintance.

The next people we bumped into were Elaine, the daughter of the lord of this area, and her butler Rayne. Elaine seemed to be out shopping. She brushed her proud drill-like ringlets out of her face, greeting us as always. “Good day, Sir Reiji, Noela.” Rayne gently bowed his head as well.

Noela and I, used to Elaine’s greetings at this point, returned them.

“G’day, Drills!”

“Good day, Elaine,” I began. “Do you…” Elaine probably didn’t have stiff shoulders, I quickly realized. She was wealthier than Feris; she even had that hoity-toity hairstyle to boot.

“Yes?”

“Nah. Nothing.”

“You can’t just say that and expect me not to be curious! Please, what is it?”

“Fine, fine. Do you ever get stiff shoulders?”

“Never.”

“I figured. You were the wrong person to ask.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” Elaine stomped.

Off to the side, Rayne quietly raised his hand. “My shoulders sometimes do get a bit stiff, Sir Reiji.”

“Oh, really?” Yup, working hard on the job probably had something to do with it.

Saying farewell to Elaine and Rayne shortly after, we left.

Annabelle was the perfect example of a working woman, so we paid her a visit next. She said she got muscle aches more often than stiff shoulders, so I gave her some muscle chill gel. Next, I talked to Rena, the Rabbit Tavern's waitress. She was fifteen or sixteen at most, but she said her shoulders got tense too.

Eventually, I confirmed that folks who worked or did chores got stiff shoulders with overwhelming frequency. Annabelle was an exception, I decided, because she was a fighter who trained every day.

"All right, Noela, let's head home." Our investigation over, the two of us returned to the drugstore.

There, I slipped into my lab to develop a new treatment with Noela's help. Since I'd found a bunch of people with shoulder tension just by asking around, it'd be worth creating a product for them. I made icy gel to cool muscles, so I figured I could make something that did the opposite.

Warm 'n' Loose: Heats and relaxes muscles. Promotes blood flow.

"Awesome," I said to myself. "That should work on tight shoulders."

"What kind product?" Noela asked.

It'd be faster to test it than explain it, so I spread some Warm 'n' Loose on Noela's hand.

"Groo?" She seemed puzzled.

"You'll get it soon."

"Arroo!" Her eyes widened—a sign that the product was working. "Warm, Master!"

"Yup! That's what it does. Applying it to stiff, tight muscles warms and loosens them right up for you."

Noela blew on the Warm 'n' Loose on her hand. "Hot, Master."

"Yeah, that's deliberate."

"Start fire," she complained.

"Nope, that won't happen. No worries."

Curious, I touched the spot where I applied the Warm 'n' Loose. It really *was* scorching. It wouldn't be too weird to assume it could ignite. Then a wisp of smoke rose from Noela's hand, and for a moment I saw flames.

"Gah!!!"

"Groo?!?!?!"

Panicking, I immediately smacked Noela's hand to extinguish the flame and rinsed the Warm 'n' Loose off. "Th-that was crazy."

"Thought goner," agreed Noela. She really was scared.

I'd never expected Noela's hand to actually catch fire. Warm 'n' Loose was way too effective. *How strong* is *this stuff?* I might have applied too much, but I diluted the prototype some, just to be safe.

"Want to try the weaker formula, Noela?" She quickly shook her head. *I figured as much.* That first test was probably a little

traumatizing. *Sorry, Noela.*

Having heard our shrieks, Mina entered the lab. "Is everything all right, Mr. Reiji?"

"I developed a new treatment to relax people's shoulder muscles, but it was too effective," I replied. "I just diluted it now."

"Wait—it really treats stiff shoulders?!" Mina's eyes sparkled.

I hadn't realized she wanted something like that so badly. If her shoulders had been bothering her for a while, I wished she would've said something. "Want to try it?"

"Absolutely!" Mina pointed at the specific spot where her muscles were knotted. "Right here."

"Careful, Mina! Might cause fire," Noela warned. Mina tilted her head, bewildered.

I explained the disaster that had unfolded moments ago. It would've been wrong to keep quiet, and after the first test, I was understandably wary. "When I tested the undiluted prototype on Noela, it started to smoke, and…"

"Flames!" Noela exclaimed.

"Well, Noela's hand caught fire for a moment," I concluded.

Mina's expression was serious. "That means…it's *incredibly effective*!"

She wasn't the least bit scared—her desire to relax her stiff shoulders far outweighed any fear of fire. This issue must've been fairly major.

"Well, it's weaker now, since I watered it down," I reminded her.

"I'm fine with anything. Just spread it here, please." Mina said, patting her shoulders.

"All right, you got it. I'm impressed by your nerves of steel." I spread a little Warm 'n' Loose on her skin. "Well?"

"Nothing yet. Ah… Oh! It's getting nice and warm!"

"R-really?" The question I had though was at what temperature the gel would peak.

As we waited, Mina's face gradually relaxed. "How can I describe this…? It feels like my blood's flowing in all the right ways."

"No flames?" Noela asked worriedly.

"None at all! I'm quite warm, though—like I'm in the bath."

I touched the spot where I applied the Warm 'n' Loose. It was much cooler than Noela's hand had been minutes earlier—as Mina said, the temperature was almost bath-like. "How do your knotted muscles feel?"

"It's hard to tell right now, but I think they feel better. And although that's the only spot where you applied the new treatment, the rest of my body somehow feels warm too." Mina wore an expression of pure joy, as if bathing in a hot spring.

"Excellent. Then it's done," I said.

"Want warm too, Master!" Noela protested.

"Here you go." I handed her the bottle.

She put a bit of gel on her fingertip and spread it on the same spot Mina had. "Groo? Arroorrooooo? Warm, Master!"

"Glad to hear it."

"Sleepy." Noela's eyelids drooped, and she promptly lay down on her side.

"I'm getting a bit drowsy as well." Mina yawned and stretched out beside Noela.

"I'm pretty sure that isn't one of the effects…" I said.

The two fell fast asleep as I cocked my head in confusion. I would've felt bad about waking them, so I got blankets and spread them over the girls. If they were enjoying a nice nap, this new treatment was perfectly comfortable.

"Rei Rei? Mina?" Paula called out. "I'm heading home, okay?" The tool shop owner was alone in the drugstore since we had come into the lab.

"Oh, right." I should've had Paula try the prototype—she was the reason for all this. Carrying a bottle of Warm 'n' Loose, I headed back to the store.

"Oh, is that a new product?" she asked.

"Yup. It works great on tight shoulders. I asked around town, and a surprising number of folks had the same issue, so I figured I'd whip something up."

"You created this for me?" Paula seemed moved. "Rei Rei, you're the bestest." She gave me a thumbs-up and grinned.

"Just spread it on the tense area," I told her.

"Mm-hmm." She covered her fingertip with the Warm 'n' Loose and rubbed it on her shoulders. The formula seemed to dry fairly

quickly, which I imagined made it easier to use. "Oh… Oooh! It's so warm! Oh my gosh! What is this stuff?!"

Yup, it's working.

"It's soothing my muscles, like I'm in a hot spring or something! You *gotta* sell this stuff, Rei Rei. I'll buy some for sure." At this point, Paula was also on the verge of nodding off on the counter.

"Here. Take it home with you, okay? It's just a prototype, so you don't owe me anything."

"Wowzers! You're really the best, Rei Rei. This new product feels so *ridiculously* good!"

"Hey. Don't make it sound like I created something sketchy."

I glanced at Paula. Her eyes were now shut. *She… She's asleep too.* That sure didn't take long. She said her stiff shoulders gave her headaches though, so maybe she hadn't had a good night's sleep in a while.

"Jeez…"

I grabbed another blanket and spread it over Paula's back. I wasn't sure how things would turn out when Noela's hand suddenly burst into flames, but this outcome was fine, fortunately.

When the drugstore eventually started stocking Warm 'n' Loose, it sold well among local housewives thanks to Mina's word-of-mouth. Apparently, they all suffered from stiff shoulders too. Who knew?

Youngsters and people who exercised often didn't experience much shoulder tension. Old folks did, however, as did people who were sedentary or worked in the same position for hours. But if I told

Mina that those things caused stiff shoulders, who knew how she'd react? With that in mind, I simply told her that having tight shoulders came down to someone's body type.

Chapter 4:
The Electric Cleaner

THE DRUGSTORE was scheduled to be closed today, so we were cleaning all the nooks, crannies, and shelves we never got around to tidying. Mina had come up with the idea, but I wasn't opposed—the dust and stains were getting to me too.

Noela, Vivi, and Ejil all joined Mina and I. Noela tried to bow out at first, but when Mina got after her, she quickly fell in line.

"Would you please dust those shelves with a rag, Noela?" Mina requested.

"Groo!" Noela saluted and headed for the shelves per her commanding officer's orders.

"What should I do, Mina?" Vivi asked, having finished tidying one section. The lake spirit was a part-timer at the drugstore, and she commuted from a lake deep in the mountains whenever she had a shift.

Er, spirit? Fairy? Frankly, I didn't know the difference. According to Vivi, though, there *absolutely* was one—so I made sure to mix them up to mess with her.

"Um…please take a breather for now, Vivi," Mina replied. I figured it was tough directing everyone the way she was.

"Am I just in the way…?" Vivi could get morose quickly, and it was happening again. Her moods could be hard to deal with.

"Huh? No, that isn't it at all!" Mina reassured her.

"Mina just wants you to be ready for the next task," I added.

"O-oh. In that case, I'll wait, all right? I'll do my very best on the next job!" Vivi giggled and then left with a painfully pure, innocent smile.

"There's not much work left, is there?" I asked Mina. "The drugstore itself isn't that big."

"Tee hee! I can't argue with that, Mr. Reiji," Mina replied, smiling defeatedly.

Cool.

Having apparently finished tidying his area, Ejil raised his hand. "I'd like to clean the lab, Doctor!"

Ejil was supposedly a demon king and was in fact currently waging a war against humans. He became aware of Kirio Drugs thanks to my potions, and after meeting Noela, fell in love and became a part-timer as well. At work, he was clever and alert.

"The lab, huh? Now that you mention it, I've never deep cleaned it. Would you mind?"

"Absolutely not!"

Ejil was very useful, maybe because he was a demon king. He could be caustic with humans, but when it came to looking after the store, he was second only to Mina. Plus, whenever I needed product ingredients, he used teleportation magic to get them.

Noela wagged her tail, and Ejil's knee-jerk reaction was to watch her, cackling creepily. That must've set off the werewolf's instincts.

She turned and noticed Ejil's stare. "Hate. Pervert. Die."

"Heh heh heh! Noela, haven't you noticed? Your cruel words and cold glare are simply rewards to me…"

That really isn't the kind of thing he should say with a proud expression. In fact, that type of interaction was exactly why Noela hated Ejil. He was capable, but he couldn't hide his raw desire when it came to the werewolf girl. I shooed him off to the lab.

"He's so troublesome sometimes," Mina sighed.

Noela seemed fairly accustomed to Ejil at this point. Rather than dwelling on the exchange, she wiped shelves with renewed gusto. Meanwhile, I cleaned product bottles with a rag.

Whenever I created a new medicine or treatment, it initially sold like hotcakes. Then, sales eventually dropped off a bit and evened out. Some products wound up sitting on the shelves collecting dust for quite a while. It was clear at a glance that dust *never* collected on our potions; they always sold exceptionally well. But cleaning the other bottles one by one was a real pain, frankly.

"Oh, Mr. Reiji!" Mina called out from behind me.

"Gah!" She must've realized I wasn't taking the dusting seriously.

"Ahem! We're supposed to clean this place *thoroughly* today, remember?"

"Sorry, Sergeant!"

"I-I'm no sergeant!"

"Careful, Master. Sergeant scary when mad," Noela warned, clearly speaking from experience.

"Goodness! Stop calling me 'sergeant'!"

At any rate, it was definitely frustrating to clean this painstakingly. *If I had a product that got rid of dust better, it wouldn't be so annoying.* Also, it would make routine cleaning take way less time, and there'd be dramatically fewer occasions when we needed to clean this thoroughly.

"Actually…" *I might be able to make something that* does *clear dust better.* "Excuse me, Mina… Can I go create a product to make cleaning easier for all of us?"

Mina cocked her head at that. "Extra Strength Ultra Cleaning Gel, you mean?" That product left surfaces sparkling clean if you applied it, then wiped it off.

"We're already using that, right? I meant something different."

"I don't mind. Go ahead."

Having gotten the sergeant's permission, I headed to the lab. Ejil was still in there, cleaning up a storm. Despite being a demon king, he was always serious about work. "Ah, Doctor! Is something wrong?"

"I thought I'd whip up a product to make cleaning easier."

"May I watch?"

"Sure. It's nothing crazy."

"Thank you very much."

Come to think of it, is this the first time I'm showing Ejil how I create products? Learning the potion-making process had always been one of the demon king's goals. That was why he called me "Doctor" in the first place.

But man—it was hard doing *anything* with him staring at my hands. "Er, Ejil? Could you watch a bit less intently?"

"Why? I want to burn the process into my mind!" The young man was consumed with passion and drive.

"Fine…" If I made the product on my own, the demon king would just keep staring, so I decided to have him help me as Noela often did. "Ejil, could you grab some ingredients off that shelf?" I named the things I needed.

"Wh-wha—?! D-Doctor, this is…" Ejil pointed at an object I'd mentioned—the crystal I recently received from a wind spirit.

"Oh, right, that. I got it as a gift not long ago." After glancing at it with my identification skill, I learned it was a crystallized essence of the wind itself.

"That's insane, Doctor! It's incredibly rare! Like, one-per-century rare!"

"Seriously?" And here I was, just leaving it wherever. I would need to keep it somewhere safe so it didn't break. "So…what exactly is it? I figured it was rare, but…"

Ejil told me the same thing my identification skill had. "It's basically the wind itself ensconced in a crystal. I've seen small ones, but never one this large." The crystal was the size of my palm.

Suddenly, my medicine-making skill reacted. Apparently, I could use the crystal to create a product as hazardous as a weapon. *No thanks.* I didn't want to make that kind of thing.

Ejil stared cautiously at the crystal. "It's absurdly high-quality. It has basically no impurities."

"No wonder I could use it to make something dangerous," I whispered to myself, pondering the product my skill had revealed. That product—calling it a "treatment" was out of the question—was scary. Basically, it was a liquid that instantly caused a typhoon when you opened the bottle. It was terrifying that my abilities could create intentional natural disasters.

Anyone would see that kind of product as off-limits. Fortunately, the one I was attempting to make right now required only a small chunk of the wind crystal.

Once Ejil got my ingredients, I started working. Carving off a small piece off the crystal, I combined it with other materials. The demon king's eyes remained glued to the process, but I tried my best to ignore him.

Duster X: Apply to a duster. Produces weak static electricity, increasing dust absorption.

"Done."

"A new product made with a wind crystal piece! It must be amazing." Ejil stared at the bottled liquid gravely.

"It's not that crazy. It just makes dusting easier."

"H-how incredibly useful! You've turned the tides in our favor, Doctor!"

Duster X apparently blew Ejil's mind. I often forgot he was a neat freak—or at least methodical. Even outside the staff's current in-depth clean, his tidying during work hours was neat and precise.

Ejil knelt, presenting the duster at his hip to me. "Here, Doctor."

"Okay." Taking the duster as if it were some prized sword, I sprinkled it with Duster X. For a brief moment, blue lightning enveloped it. "I entrust this to you, Ejil. You can use it now."

"I'm honored." Ejil bowed his head and accepted the duster like a priceless blade. He went over to a yet untouched section of the room and swung at a few spots. Dust puffed into the air, and the duster absorbed it immediately. It wasn't quite as effective as a vacuum cleaner, but still, it sucked in dust like a magnet.

"Th-this is unprecedented, Doctor! A cleaning revolution's begun!" Ejil trembled with excitement.

He's really that *happy about this?*

"I can't tell you how often I've tried to dust, only to send it all flying into midair. Each time, I asked myself, am I cleaning? Or am I just making things worse?" That *would* stress out a neatnik like Ejil. "This new creation's magnificent, Doctor."

"Well, we have that wind crystal to thank." Without it, I would've had to come up with something else entirely. *Was it okay to make a cleaning product with such a rare item? If I hadn't, I probably still*

wouldn't have been able to make the most of the crystal, so… All in all, since we needed this new product, there was probably nothing wrong with using it like this.

I borrowed Ejil's duster and tried it. Immediately, I understood why he was so moved. Duster X sucked in dust, not just from the spot I brushed but from the surrounding space as well. "An area that used to take ten swipes will only take about five now," I mused.

"This product produces a wide-range electric charge, right, Doctor?!" Ejil asked excitedly.

"No, no. It's nothing that crazy." Man, Ejil's suggestion did sound cool. All Duster X did was suck in dust, though.

I left the overwhelmed Ejil behind in the lab and returned to the store carrying the duster myself.

"Did you make something, Mr. Reiji?" Mina asked curiously.

"Yeah, I created something useful."

I didn't have the duster with me earlier, so Mina quickly identified the new product. "Is that it?"

Even Noela focused on the duster. "Made something useful, Master?"

"Yup. I used a new product on this. Check out how powerful it is."

While they watched me, I swiped across a dusty bottle with the duster. It immediately sucked in the dust from the bottle and its surroundings. Airborne dust likewise flew into the duster as if being rewound. I then briefly explained Duster X to the girls.

"Amazing!"

"Groo! No more dust!"

Ejil's reaction hadn't been much stronger than theirs after all.

Noela's eyes glittered excitedly. "Want try too, Master!"

If Noela enjoyed cleaning with Duster X, that'd be the icing on the cake. I handed her the duster, and she trotted back to her spot to get started.

"Groo! Sucks up lots!"

Pleased as punch, Noela swept up nearby dust into the air, wagging her tail vigorously. The duster sucked up all the dust immediately.

I heard sniffling nearby. Turning, I saw Mina with teary eyes. "Why're you crying?!"

"You've made something incredible, Mr. Reiji," she replied. "I'm so happy. I can't tell you how often I've tried to dust, only to send it flying into the air instead. Each time, I asked myself, am I cleaning? Or am I just making things worse?"

That was exactly what Ejil had said. To a neat freak, a duster was apparently a double-edged sword. It made them feel like it was just getting dustier instead of cleaner.

After I watched Mina and Noela for a while, Ejil finally came back to the storefront. "I thought of a product name, Doctor! How does 'Area Lightning Duster' sound?"

His taste is no better than a junior high schooler's.

The little fluffball Noela, however, was into the dumb name. "Area Lightning Duster…"

Crap. "If we call it that, people won't understand how it works. Duster X is fine." I thought a simple name was better—we wouldn't waste as much time explaining the product to customers. Even if "Duster X" wasn't a particularly good name, "Area Lightning Duster" would *definitely* cause confusion.

"Really? I thought Area Lightning Duster was a perfectly good name," Ejil said, disappointed.

Noela resumed cleaning. "Area *Lightning*!!!" She shrieked it like an attack name or something, waving the duster.

"Noela seems to be a fan of the name, Ejil."

"Then that's a win, Doctor."

Don't look so proud. We weren't competing for her favor.

"Noela! Noela! *I* named it! We really do think alike, don't we?!" Ejil asked her, his enthusiasm clear.

Noela's duster smacked into him. *Zap!*

Ejil convulsed for a moment. "Gah!!!"

So, that's what happens if Duster X touches someone directly? I supposed that made sense, since the duster was enveloped in static electricity.

Noela, however, had no clue what'd just happened. "Groo?"

Either way, it wasn't good that Duster X could electrocute people like that. I'd have to tweak it.

***

And so I did. Once I confirmed that the product wouldn't shock anyone who touched it, the drugstore started stocking Duster X. Noela gave doubtful customers a full demonstration of how it worked, and it became a hit with housewives struggling to clear dust.

Noela was so fond of yelling "Area Lightning!" during demonstrations that customers mistakenly thought Duster X wouldn't work unless they did the same. If that made cleaning more fun for people though, who was I to complain?

I added a line to Duster X's instructions stating that you didn't *have* to shout anything for it to work. Nonetheless, the "Area Lightning!" cleaning cry spread as if customers were playing telephone.

At that point, I had no clue the phrase would reach a big-time adventurer's ears.

Chapter 5:
The Irregular

I WAS IN THE LAB, replenishing the drugstore's stock, when I heard a loud voice outside. "Sir Alchemist! Are you here?!"

Noela trotted in quickly, informing me of a visitor. "Sword Santa arrived, Master!"

"Uh… What?"

She grabbed my arm and yanked me into the drugstore, where Fiora Garon awaited.

"Oh," I said. "You meant the Sword *Saint."*

The adventurer nodded deeply. "Ah, Sir Alchemist! Good to see you."

"Welcome! What brings you here today?"

He nodded at my question. I assumed Garon probably wanted potions, energy potions, and maybe a few other products.

However, then he said, "A little bird told me you developed something that gives objects electric attributes."

"Pardon?" *What's he talking about?* I cocked my head in confusion, prompting Garon to continue.

"You know, that…" Seeming unsure of the product name, he awkwardly tried to describe it. "That…simple magisword potion."

"Magi…sorry, what?" *The heck does he mean?* I didn't recall developing a product that dealt direct damage to people.

"When you apply some to a sword, it shoots electricity," Garon continued. Speaking of which, Noela seemed to be ignoring my befuddlement and instead focused on the adventurer's blade. "It'll basically envelop my sword in lightning, right?"

Er, what? Wait… Does he mean Duster X? I grabbed a bottle off the shelf and brought it to Garon. "Um, I think you might be talking about this."

If Garon had heard that Duster X let swords shoot electricity, the rumors about the product were out of hand—likely due to Noela shouting "Area Lightning!" every time she swung a duster. Folks who heard her battle cry then described Duster X's effects to others, and their descriptions evolved from "collects dust using static electricity" to "envelops objects in lightning and shoots lightning bolts." I understood Garon's mistake now.

"Duster X?" Garon said.

"Yeah. In truth, it doesn't gives things electric attributes. It basically just collects dust using static electricity," I explained apologetically.

"Is that so?" His shoulders drooped slightly. "So, it doesn't let you shoot lightning?"

"No. Sorry." According to my medicine-making skill, I *could* create something like that if I wanted to, but Kirio Drugs didn't make or deal weapons. "It might be handy for sword maintenance though, since it absorbs dust so well." I didn't know where Garon had come from today but getting to the drugstore must've been quite a trip for him. I would've felt badly sending him home empty-handed.

"I'm fine on that end," Garon replied.

"Oh, all right."

"But could I look at that new product of yours?"

"Absolutely." I handed the Duster X to Garon. "When you apply some to a duster, it sucks up dust like crazy." I explained the product fully as the adventurer stared at the bottle's contents. For all I knew, he might be a neatnik like Ejil and Mina.

"May I try it?" Garon requested. "I'll pay later."

"Yes, of course." *Now, where did I put that duster?*

As I glanced around the store, Garon unsheathed his sword and spread Duster X over the blade. *Crackle. Crackle.* Electricity enveloped his blade.

Garon raised his voice. "Whoa! This is something else."

"That's just a little static," I insisted. "Duster X isn't meant for actual combat."

"Hrm…" Garon mulled that over. He then exited the drugstore with his sword in hand, clearly planning something. Noela and I followed.

"I have no magical talents, Sir Alchemist," Garon told me outside. "When it comes to combat, all I can do is swing this sword."

That's more than cool enough, as far as I'm concerned.

"Long ago, I always found myself wishing I could cast spells," Garon continued. "When I faced tough enemies, I imagined how different the encounters would be if I used magic. You can guess my reaction when I heard I could simply apply a product to my sword to

shoot lightning. And as I treated my blade with Duster X, all I could think was that it was indeed a type of magic!”

His interest in magic was deeper than I imagined, which only made me feel worse. “Er, it’s really just a product that sucks up dust.”

“Whether I can use Duster X’s weak static to create a magic sword depends entirely on my skills.” Garon widened his stance.

“Er, excuse me? Is that even possible?” If it was, it’d be incredible.

“I shall test whether I’ve trained enough.”

Is enhancing Duster X’s strength that dramatically really just a matter of training? I was doubtful as I watched him. I had even adjusted the product to ensure it wouldn’t harm customers, no matter how much they used.

“Groo?” Noela seemed not to follow the adventurer’s statements. She watched with a perplexed expression and tilted her head.

Garon took several deep breaths. “Now.”

He held his sword near his torso, widened his eyes, and prepared to slash downward. Before my eyes, the static that usually dissipated right away grew more powerful.

“N-no way,” I mumbled. *Is training really all it takes to turn static into a full-fledged lightning attack?!*

“Aaaaaaauuugh!!!”

Garon brought his sword down, producing an explosive rumble. A powerful beam of purple electricity shot instantly from his blade.

"What the hell?!" I yelped.

"Arroo?!"

As I gasped, Garon lowered his sword. "I shall take all the Duster X you have."

"Thank… Thank you for your patronage." *A-amazing.* "Could anyone else with sword training use Duster X that way?" I asked.

"I don't know. It'd depend on their training." So, training really *was* the reason he could use Duster X offensively. "However," Garon added, "I'm the Sword Saint, and that was the strongest attack I could perform. I sincerely doubt anyone could imitate it."

Did his sword enhance the attack? I wondered. Noela seemed to have the same thought; she poked gently at the blade, which didn't react.

"Thank you, Sir Alchemist," Garon said. "I plan to dedicate myself to training in order to determine whether I can use Duster X in combat."

He's a true seeker of new knowledge and skills… It was my first time seeing someone untrammeled by common sense and logic. I had a hunch that only Garon was capable of this achievement. I rounded up all the Duster X I'd made and sold it to the adventurer. I felt he was trustworthy, and I'd be lying if I said the electric blast he'd pulled off hadn't sealed the deal for me.

Like before, Garon snapped his fingers to summon his black horse. He stuffed the Duster X into his leather bag and mounted his steed. "Sir Alchemist."

"My name's Reiji." *Did I forget to introduce myself when he last dropped in?*

"Apologies. Sir Reiji, the next time you make something new, I shall visit."

"When you do, please browse the store. We also have potions and other high-quality products."

"I shall. Farewell." He spurred his horse and disappeared like the wind.

"He was amazing, Noela," I muttered.

"Groo. Noela has long way to go." The adventurer's presence prompted her to enter "stoic" mode.

After Garon's visit, Noela apparently didn't feel she could copy his swordplay. Instead, she went into the drugstore and practiced finger-whistling. I guess she figured that was one aspect of the adventurer's behavior she could potentially mimic. She kept blowing into her fingers ineffectually in hopes of being like Garon someday.

"Call Griffy like this," she muttered.

She wasn't wrong that it might be a cool way to summon Griffy.

And so Noela continued to futilely blow into her fingers in hopes of one day being like Garon.

Chapter 6:
The All-Purpose Condiment

AS I HARVESTED INGREDIENTS I needed from the herb meadow, an elderly farmer nearby called out to me.

"Hey, Mr. Pharmacist! We've got a bumper crop of these. Mind takin' some?" He handed me a basket full of tons of colorful vegetables.

"Oh, wow. You sure? Thanks a bunch!" I knew these would delight Mina.

"Of course! Your products have been real lifesavers for me and mine." With that, the old farmer departed.

That kind of thing was fairly common. Kalta wasn't gigantic, so Kirio Drugs was the only pharmacy. The same was true of other specialty stores and specialists. Thus, townsfolk thanked me constantly for the drugstore's product lineup. It honestly made the whole thing worth it to me.

When I finished harvesting the herbs I needed, I headed back to the store with the old farmer's basket. Elaine had apparently dropped by to hang out while I was gone. She was chatting with Noela, who stood by the counter, watching the store solo.

"Mina will get mad if you don't work hard, Noela," Elaine warned.

"Don't worry. Mina no watch. Master no here," Noela replied. I

swear, the little fluffball phoned it in whenever I took my eyes off her.

"I'll tell them," Elaine said.

"No betray."

"I'm back," I called, glancing at Noela. She stood up straight quickly.

"Welcome back, Sir Reiji!" exclaimed Elaine. "Noela said you went to the meadow. Oh, what're those?" she asked, noticing I had more than just herbs with me.

"A bunch of veggies. A farmer had a lot of extras, so he gave us these."

"Wow," Elaine said, as if she'd never heard of that sort of thing before. I figured it was far removed from her experiences as a wealthy young aristocrat. "You didn't need to pay?"

"Nope. Since they were more than they could use."

Likewise curious, Noela trotted over and peeked into the basket. "Vegetables…" Pulling an awkward face, she returned to her seat and shook her head, underwhelmed by the discovery. Her hatred of tomatoes was no secret, and although she'd gotten past that, it turned out that she found *all* vegetables unappetizing.

I usually shrugged that off, chalking it up to her species. According to Mina, however, Noela left her vegetables untouched at meals lately. It wasn't as if Mina wasn't good at preparing them; on the contrary, they were delicious. But an immature werewolf like Noela didn't understand their appeal.

"Elaine, do *you* eat vegetables?"

She quickly looked away. "O-of course…"

When it came to fibs, was anyone in the world as easy to read as Elaine? *That little princess.* She probably got away with just about anything, including refusing vegetables, if she whined enough about it. *This is why aristocrats are so hard to deal with.* "Hear that, Noela? Elaine eats vegetables."

Noela immediately pointed at the other girl. "Drills lying."

Elaine hunched her shoulders in surprise. "Eek!"

"Noela. Elaine. You've both got to eat your veggies," I said.

"I know, but they don't taste good!" As soon as she knew she was found out, Elaine became sincere.

Noela, on the other hand, declared, "Eat. No problem."

She thinks she can fool me*, of all people?* "Mina told me you won't eat them. She looked *so* sad too. Especially since she went out of her way to make them for you."

"Groo…" Noela's ears drooped, apparently feeling a little guilty. "Veggies bad for body, Master!"

"There's no way that's true."

"Wolf no eat veggies!"

She couldn't resist using that excuse anytime she had the chance. "You're a *were*wolf."

"Garoo…" Realizing she hadn't swayed me, Noela fell silent.

"Jeez," I muttered. Leaving the storefront, I headed out back and found Mina cleaning. I told her about the vegetables I received.

"Ooh, they look delicious!" Mina exclaimed. "Shall I cook them today?"

"That'd be great. Noela won't eat them, though, will she?"

"Good point. I've tried preparing veggies all kinds of ways, but she always comes up with a reason to push them to the side of her plate. Is my cooking that awful?"

This was bugging Mina more than I'd expected. "No way. Your meals are the best."

"Tee hee hee! Thanks so much, Mr. Reiji."

If Mina felt insecure and stopped cooking, it'd be a real issue. I had to do something about Noela's aversion to veggies—and Elaine's too, while I was at it.

Noela respected Garon deeply. Maybe he could tell her avoiding vegetables was lame or something? The problem was, the adventurer didn't live around here, and I had no idea when he'd actually be coming by.

It also wasn't impossible that Noela's aversion *did* have something to do with her species. As a werewolf, she was more sensitive to flavor than a human. Maybe she tasted the bitterness of, say, peppers way more strongly than I did.

"Hmm." As a kid, there were plenty of vegetables I couldn't stand—green pepper, eggplant, spinach. I started eating them all regularly as I grew up, but I had a hard time believing Noela would consume them even as she got older.

"There's got to be a way," I muttered. *Hey—couldn't she eat* that*? Back on Earth, I used tons of it on veggies. Plus, it pairs well with other foods. It's all-purpose!*

"Have you come up with an idea, Mr. Reiji?"

"Yup. And it might actually work."

I headed to the lab and buckled down on a new product that'd give Noela a shot at overcoming her hatred of veggies. It wasn't exactly a *treatment*, but the point was simply to get her to eat vegetables. Besides, this new product wouldn't just benefit her. I'd be delighted to have some on the dinner table in general, and it'd help Mina as well.

Time to hurry. I gathered the ingredients right away and followed my medicine-making skill's directions.

MayoMayo Max: Light-yellow condiment.

The new product I created was literally just mayonnaise.

"Wow. This is definitely mayo," I whispered to myself, staring at the bottle. "Shoot. It didn't occur to me that Noela might find mayo itself too sour…"

This was my only real shot. As someone from Earth, I had no compunctions about the flavor of mayonnaise, but would people here in Kalta accept it?

I spread some on my finger and sampled it. It had a slightly sour, pungent, eggy flavor. "Yup, this is definitely just high-quality

mayo," I muttered. "Hopefully Noela will eat vegetables dressed with this."

First, we had to see if she even liked the MayoMayo Max or not. I took the bottle back to the store and Noela quickly noticed it. Elaine also gazed at it curiously.

"This is a brand new, uh, treatment," I told them. As an Earthling familiar with mayonnaise, I knew it wasn't medicine, but… whatever. In a sense, it would serve a medicinal purpose by helping Noela ingest veggies successfully.

Noela drew close and sniffed the bottle. "Groo? Mysterious smell."

"Is it all right?" I asked.

She nodded. "Okay."

"What's it smell like?" Elaine, curious, also sniffed the bottle's contents. "I don't mind its aroma. What is it? Some sort of egg mixture?"

"Correct! You've got a good nose on you, Elaine."

"Gracious! Sir Reiji praised me!"

Elaine's clear joy contrasted with Noela's gravity as she informed me, "Noela recognized egg too, Master."

She seemed grumpy about my praise for Elaine, so I stroked her head gently. "You can use this to make all kinds of foods more tasty."

"*All* kinds?" Both Noela and Elaine piped up with that and seemed to imagine something.

I immediately figured out what Noela was thinking. “No, it won’t make potions tastier.”

“Groo?! How knew, Master?!” She was shocked that I guessed right, but she was easy to read.

“So…even meals I bungled would taste all right with this?” Elaine asked hesitantly.

“Hrm…” That depended how messed up the meal was. If a meal’s tastiness score was in the negatives, not even mayo could save it. “I’m not a hundred percent sure. But they’d definitely be more palatable with mayo. It doesn’t pair well with drinks or sweets though.”

“Amazing!” Elaine exclaimed. “Now I can finally fix it when I confuse salt and sugar!”

Just how many times has she made the same mistake?

Unfortunately for Elaine, her cooking definitely qualified as “disgusting.”

“Want to taste it?” I held the bottle out to the girls. They each put a little mayonnaise on their fingers and tried some.

“Groo… Salty.” Noela apparently hadn’t expected the flavor, but she didn’t seem to hate it.

“It… It has a hard-to-describe but rather smooth taste.” Elaine’s response was on the mark; her palate was, of course, much better-trained than Noela’s.

“Rather smooth taste, Master,” Noela echoed, copying Elaine’s reaction.

"You can put it on veggies before you eat them," I told the girls. "Even uncooked veggies taste good with mayo."

As I said that, however, the light and curiosity vanished from their eyes.

"No fall for trick, Master." Noela shook her head with a grave expression.

"Likewise, Sir Reiji. If *this* were enough to make vegetables appetizing, the chefs at home wouldn't struggle so much."

Please. You're the one making them struggle. "Veggies are seriously tasty, girls."

They shot me silent, doubtful gazes.

Fine. I told them to wait a moment and headed to the kitchen. I asked Mina to cut some of the vegetables into veggie sticks. I carried those back to the drugstore, only to find the girls licking at the bottle of MayoMayo Max. *All right, at least they like the flavor.*

"I got Mina to cut these veggies into easy-to-eat shapes," I announced, grabbing a cucumber spear and adding mayo to the tip. "Put some MayoMayo Max on them."

"Wait, wait!" Noela interjected, shaking her head. "MayoMayo Max good solo!"

"It's kind of a problem that you like it so much on its own…" I remarked.

"Why would you waste it on vegetables, Sir Reiji?" Elaine objected.

"I made it specifically to dress vegetables!" The two had taken one step forward and ten steps back.

I bit into the cucumber spear in front of them. *Crunch. Crunch.*

"Aah! Amazing!" *Man, there's nothing quite like this.*

Noela and Elaine, however, wore doubtful expressions and stared silently.

Just how much do they hate vegetables? I held a carrot stick dipped in MayoMayo Max out to Noela. "Come on. It's good."

"Groo…" She furrowed her brow, unsure of what to do. Curiosity won in the end though, and she took a bite.

Crunch. Crunch. She kept chewing.

"Groo…? No…hate?" A mysterious expression crossed Noela's face. Even she seemed unsure of what she was tasting.

"Noela's gone over to the other side?!" Elaine cried.

What does she mean, "the other side"? Jeez. I grabbed a second carrot stick and added mayo. "C'mon, you're next, Elaine. It's tasty, I promise."

"Y-you're going to feed it to me?! It's much too soon for us to engage in s-such activities, Sir Reiji!" Elaine fidgeted anxiously, blushing.

"Elaine no eat. Too bad!" Noela opened her mouth, ready to go instead.

Elaine pushed her away. "I never said I *wouldn't* eat it!"

"If that's too much for you, Elaine, want to hold the carrot stick yourself?"

"P-please, Sir Reiji, you hold it." Elaine shifted anxiously, both hands covering her face. Finally, she steeled herself and took a bite. She cupped her cheeks happily. "I can't believe it! Sir Reiji fed me!"

At this point, she seemingly couldn't have cared less how the carrot stick even *tasted.* "So, you girls can eat veggies as long as you've got MayoMayo Max, right?" I asked for the record, expecting an affirmative answer.

Noela, however, wagged her finger at me. "Master."

"Mm?"

"That different from *want* to eat."

Now she's gonna hit me with semantics? At any rate, Elaine and Noela now considered vegetables edible. All that was left was dealing with their bad habits. How could I get them to seek out veggies?

Two young women… Ah. "You know, mayo and veggies is quite a *grown-up* combination. Frankly, it's a mature flavor only us adults can enjoy." *Although most adults also eat veggies* without *mayo just fine.*

How would that claim affect the girls? I glanced at the pair, and they had already grabbed the rest of the veggie sticks, added MayoMayo Max, and were devouring them with smug expressions.

"Noela werewolf who understands *mature* flavor."

"I've been to numerous evening banquets. I'm certainly familiar with the mature palate."

I couldn’t help but grin inside. My statement had proven a great way to convince the girls to figuratively stand on tiptoe. From now on, they wouldn’t make excuses when it came to eating veggies.

“Lunch is ready, everyone!” Mina called. “Elaine, please join us.”

“No scared anymore,” Noela said with the face of a warrior.

“Me neither!” Elaine replied with an equally confident expression, brushing back her trademark drill curls.

The two had grown a lot in no time. I nodded proudly and followed after the pair, who just so happened to bring the MayoMayo Max with them. Mina cautiously set a bowl of salad on the table. Noela and Elaine dressed it with mayonnaise and ate it with no issues.

“Mature flavor. Very different,” said Noela.

“Indeed.”

The words “mature flavor” were a hit with the young ladies.

Mina seemed shocked. “Incredible… They hated vegetables so much, but now… We should sell this new treatment of yours, Mr. Reiji. I’m sure plenty of households struggle with the same problem!”

Mayo was a game changer. It wouldn’t have shocked me if the encyclopedia said as much.

With Mina’s full support, I turned MayoMayo Max into an official Kirio Drugs product. Noela wrote the product description. She included the phrase “mature flavor,” and the product attracted both kids and adults, making it one of the drugstore’s most popular “treatments.”

Chapter 7:
Mina's Daily Struggles

LATELY, MINA had skipped doing the dishes. When I peeked into the kitchen sink, it wasn't rare to see dirty tableware sitting there.

I didn't mind her skipping it. Mina handled most of our chores day to day—in fact, I felt bad leaving everything to her in the first place. I figured I'd use this as a jumping point to start washing dishes too. The detergent I developed scrubbed most of the nastiness off any dirty plate easily, and cleaning what was left took less than ten minutes.

"Thanks for doing those dishes, Mr. Reiji."

"Don't mention it. If anything, I should thank you."

I didn't mind Mina ignoring the dishes, but it was rare for her to bypass household chores without saying anything. After all, she wasn't Noela.

The queen of shirking caught me staring at her. "What, Master?"

"Nothing." I shook my head. *Now, why would Mina suddenly stop doing dishes?* There had to be a reason, but I couldn't come up with one. "Hey, Mina, is everything okay?"

"Huh? Well…" She thought for a moment, then replied, "Yes! Everything's fine. Every day is delightful." She nodded with a smile you could only describe as "saintly."

Then how come… "So, um… I noticed you stopped doing the dishes lately."

"Oh, yes. I'll be better soon. I promise. Sorry, Mr. Reiji." Mina bowed her head apologetically.

Wait… What does she mean that she'll "be better soon"? "It's totally fine. I'm not mad or anything. I'm just genuinely curious about what happened."

"Actually, this is the problem." She showed me her palms.

"Hm?" Looking carefully, I saw why she stopped. "Your hands are all chafed…"

"Mm-hmm."

Noela stared at Mina's hands, then her own. "Rough. Dry."

"Exactly. I thought maybe dishwashing had something to do with it, so I've been taking a break."

"Got it. That makes total sense."

My hands hadn't changed much since I took over for Mina, but she washed the dishes daily. It was possible the dish detergent itself affected her skin. My skin definitely felt tight after dishwashing, so I could see how repeating the task could lead to rough, dry hands.

"How are yours, Noela?"

"Groo?" She showed me her hands. Her skin was moist, super soft, and nice to touch. "Tickles, Master."

"Sorry."

Maybe it had to do with my own skin type, but I never had dry or rough hands. It seemed that wasn't the case for others. In hindsight, lots of folks had dry hands back on Earth too.

"I think plenty of women have this same problem, Mr. Reiji," Mina told me.

"Gotcha. I trust you completely on that." Mina was basically my representative homemaker at this point. "I'll try making something."

"Thanks so much!"

I left the dining room and entered my lab. Noela quickly followed me; with her help, I began developing a new product.

Noela responded to the aroma in the air right away. "Groo? Good smell."

"Women will use this, so I figured I'd give it a floral scent."

This product was strongly associated with women, but men used it as well. I would make a separate, unscented version later too, for folks who didn't like the flowery smell.

Hand Lotion: Moisturizing cream. Apply to skin to prevent roughness/dryness.

"Done. Let's have Mina try it."

"Groo!" Noela agreed, her tail wagging.

I left the lab and handed Mina the bottle. "We made a new treatment, Mina."

"Wow—it smells incredible! Like flowers, or maybe even fruit!"

Thank goodness she likes the aroma. Getting a scent right was trickier than you'd think. If I enjoyed it, that didn't mean others would. "This cream has a moisturizing effect. Applying it will keep your skin from drying out."

"Goodness gracious! *Really?"* Mina was acting like a flabbergasted guest on an infomercial.

"Give it a try."

"All right." Scooping out some lotion with her finger, she rubbed it across her palm before spreading it over both hands.

Noela sniffed the air. "Good smell!"

Mina brought her hands to her nose and likewise sniffed them. "Tee hee hee! I could do this forever."

"Noela try too!" Copying Mina, Noela spread the cream over her hands, then sniffed them like crazy.

"Besides the scent, how's it feel?" I asked. I knew I'd have to keep tabs on Mina today as the lotion's full results wouldn't show immediately.

"My skin's so firm!" Mina replied. "Is that how moisturized skin feels?"

Noela, meanwhile, scooped more lotion onto her hands, sniffing it all the while. Then she brought her hands to her mouth.

"Hold your horses," I told her.

"Groo?!"

"It only *smells* good, okay? It isn't yummy. It's not food!"

"Arroo. Too bad."

Is it officially Noela's opinion that anything that smells good should taste good?

Just then, I heard a voice from the drugstore. "Good day, Mr. Pharmacist!"

I checked the storefront and saw Rena from the Rabbit Tavern. "Welcome. What brings you here today?"

"Mayo, please! Dad's researching recipes using that stuff."

"Gotcha." I gathered up several bottles of MayoMayo Max for her. I totally understood why the Rabbit Tavern's proprietor would look into the product, since you could use mayonnaise in numerous dishes. *Oh…come to think of it, Rena washes tons of dishes too.* "Hey, Rena, do you ever have problems with dry hands?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, can you show me your hands real quick?"

She held out her palms. They weren't as bad as Mina's, but they were still dry, although it didn't really seem to bother the barmaid at all.

I decided to give her some of the prototype too. The more testers, the better, right? "Noela, get some more hand lotion."

"Groo! Gotcha!" Noela turned away, heading off to grab a bottle.

"Wow!" Rena exclaimed when Noela handed it to her. "It smells so good!"

“Flower and fruit extract,” the werewolf explained before I could.

I seized the opportunity to explain the lotion’s effects. “Putting some on your hands will moisturize them and keep them from getting rough and dry.”

“Wow! I didn’t know there was a treatment for that kind of thing!” Rena spread some lotion on her hands immediately. Just like Mina, she took the opportunity to smell it again from her fingers.

“Let me know how it works for you, okay?” I asked.

“Yes, of course!” She then paid and went home.

Soon after, two women who also seemed to be housewives dropped in asking where the hand lotion was. “We heard about it from Rena at the Rabbit Tavern,” one told me.

“You have more, right?” the other asked. “That skin moisturizer stuff?”

Their high-pressure demeanors were something else. “Um, it’s a prototype right now, not an official part of the Kirio Drugs lineup. Is that all right?” I didn’t mind asking friends to test trial products, but I typically gave normal customers a warning when it came to prototypes.

“That’s fine!” one woman assured me. “Let us try it, please!”

The other woman spotted Noela holding a bottle. “That’s it! The moisturizing cream that smells so good!”

They immediately put some lotion on their fingers and smoothed it over their hands.

"Amazing," they said in unison, rubbing their hands together. "It's so moist…!"

"We'll be back!"

"Yes! As soon as it's an official product, we'll buy some."

After giving their assurances, the two women departed. They were certainly in a rush, but at least I knew now that the product was viable.

"This cream really is wonderful, Mr. Reiji!" Mina informed me later. Her feedback spurred me to make the hand lotion an official Kirio Drugs product that very day.

As soon as it went on sale, the women from earlier came back and each bought a bottle. Noela couldn't deal with their assertive attitudes and hid behind me the whole time they were in the store.

"We'll be back!"

"Once we run out of hand lotion, that is!" Once again, the women departed.

It'd be nice if they came to buy other things too…

The brand-new hand lotion became popular—and not just with those two, but with women all over town.

Chapter 8:
Touring the Capital

PAULA OFTEN PESTERED Noela and I to come hang out, and we'd cave and head to her tool shop from time to time. This was one of those times. At least she always served refreshments when we visited.

"Rei Rei, you've been in Kalta, like, forever—right?" Paula asked, sipping a cup of black potion.

"Yeah, I suppose," I replied, likewise nursing my own black potion that she offered me. As usual, not much was happening here at the tool shop, and it was starting to concern me—was Paula making enough to live on?

"Have you ever been to the royal capital?" she asked.

"No. What's with the questions all of a sudden?"

The conversation seemed to bore Noela. She pulled out a sword that Paula would probably never sell, unsheathed it, stared at it, and sheathed it again. Once she finished, she repeated the process.

"I lived in the capital before I moved here," Paula replied.

"Whoa. That's news to me." *The capital, huh?* I was never particularly interested in the place. I had more than enough fun messing around here, raising herbs in the meadow and selling medicine and treatments. But, okay, maybe I *was* a little curious…

"Uh-huh. I studied item appraisal there for about four years."

Ah, that's right. She was hitting the books to renew her license not too long ago.

"I was just thinking back on how fun that was," Paula continued.

"Oh?"

"Come on." She burst out laughing. "You've gotta give me more than that!"

"Sorry. This is just how I am, you know?"

"Anyhow, I highly recommend visiting if you get a chance."

In the moment, I shrugged off Paula's suggestion. On the way home though, I posed the same question to Noela: "Have you been to the capital?"

She shook her head. "Boondocks werewolf. No go there."

"I see."

I wondered what the capital of this land was like. Heck, I hadn't even visited a proper city here yet, but that was partly because I didn't see it as urgent. I was having fun here without going on such a trek. If I had become an adventurer instead of a pharmacist, I might've seen the capital as a place I ought to go.

To my surprise, the chance Paula mentioned came without warning the next day.

A carriage stopped in front of the drugstore, and Elaine disembarked. "I've arrived!"

"We can tell." Thus far, she was our only friend who visited in a horse and carriage.

"I'm here, Noela!"

"Welcome, Drills."

Hearing voices, Mina poked her head out from the back. "Hello, Elaine. Let me get you some tea."

As always, I stopped her. "It's fine, Mina. Elaine's probably just here to play with Noela."

Elaine pouted. "Why must you always act so brusquely, Sir Reiji?"

"Because whenever you're here, Noela skips out on work."

Noela frowned angrily. "Never!"

"Lying won't get you anywhere, Noela."

Elaine wasn't guiltless either. She'd show up at the drugstore acting as if she were going shopping, but instead, she'd just chat with Noela and play with Griffy. She kept my werewolf from doing her duties.

Elaine cleared her throat as performatively as possible, puffing out her chest. "That may usually be the case, but today's different!"

"Oh? How come?"

"Well, actually, they're holding a banquet in the capital next week. Father wondered if you'd care to join us."

"Something like this happened before," I replied. I attended an aristocratic party on Lord Valgas's invitation once.

"*This* event will be in the capital city," Elaine said. "The Kalta region is basically in the middle of nowhere, so we rarely have

opportunities to visit the capital. And this is an *official* banquet."

"What's that mean?"

"His Highness will likely be there," she explained.

"Whoa. I don't want to be present for that."

"Why not?! That part would usually convince someone *to* go!"

"I want to avoid sticky situations."

"Well, Father said you needn't attend the banquet if you don't want to."

Elaine should've led with that! "He's just inviting me to the capital city then? How come?"

"As a breath of fresh air!" Elaine said.

Ah. He wanted to hang out. I wasn't anxious to take a break from the drugstore, but I was getting curious about what kind of place the capital was.

"If Master go, *both* go!" Noela apparently planned to tag along.

"How about you, Mina? If you'd like to join us, we can close the store for a bit."

"That's all right. A hiatus at Kirio Drugs would inconvenience a lot of people. I'll join you next time." That made sense. At any rate, Mina's primary concern seemed to be Noela, and she then turned to her. "Be sure to listen to Mr. Reiji, all right, Noela?"

"Groo! Got it."

"Okay, Elaine," I said. "Noela and I will visit the capital with you and Lord Valgas."

"Understood," Elaine said. "I shall inform Father."

Elaine's butler Rayne said that reaching the city by carriage took about four days. Riding Griffy would take only half a day, so Noela and I decided to travel that way. We would meet Elaine and her dad there. After we met back up, they'd show us around the capital. Having guides would keep us out of trouble.

The same day Elaine and Valgas left, a travel pass arrived at our house. That would allow Noela and I to enter the capital city's gates. Eventually, the date of our departure arrived, and Mina, Vivi, and Ejil saw us off.

"All right," I said. "We'll see you guys later."

Vivi hugged Noela. The lake spirit seemed miserable that the werewolf was departing for a while. "Reiji, you better come home, okay?" she pleaded. "If you don't keep me employed, I'll turn into one of those annoying customers who loiter at the drugstore all alone."

None of us would ever think Vivi was a customer. Besides, this trip wouldn't be dangerous…right?

"Entering humanity's stronghold, eh, Doctor?" Ejil muttered.

"Why do you have to frame it like that?" *I* was human too, even if Ejil had forgotten that.

"When you return, will you inform me of the capital's coordinates?" he asked.

"Not a chance."

Mina apparently had nothing left to say to us as she already warned us about tons of things.

I led Griffy out of its stable and helped Noela up on its back. "We're not staying there long," I reminded the rest of the staff. "We'll be back in a few days."

"Groo!"

We all waved to each other, and Griffy took off, heading toward the capital.

Riding atop the griffin, Noela and I passed over several mountains as I used the map I received to navigate to the city. We took a breather in a town we found along the way. By the time we saw a massive castle and walled city in the distance, it was already evening. Landing nearby would draw the guards' attention and stir up tons of fuss, so we set down in the shadows a little way away.

"What do with Griffy, Master?" Noela asked.

"Kyuu." Griffy stared at me, clearly wanting to come along.

I petted its head gently. "Promise not to make any sudden loud noises?"

"Kyuu!"

"And you won't start flapping?"

"Kyuu!" Griffy nodded.

"All right," I said. Reaching into my bag, I pulled out a certain product I created a while ago for the Red Cat Brigade. "If you can keep those promises, I'll give you some of this giant minimizer."

If Noela and I were heading home tomorrow, Griffy could've just killed time until then. We planned to stick around for a couple of days though, and to be honest, I would feel guilty sending Griffy home

after bringing us all the way here. I didn't want to run the griffin ragged.

"Kyuu?"

Griffy and Noela cocked their heads, confused. Come to think of it, it made sense that they weren't familiar with this product. The drugstore didn't stock it normally, and it was basically just for business use.

"Drinking this will shrink you for a while," I explained. When Doz used the giant minimizer, he became small enough to fit in the palm of my hand.

Noela and Griffy looked thrilled. "Come with Noela, Griffy!" the werewolf urged.

"Kyuu! Kyuu!" Griffy immediately opened its beak to allow me to pour giant minimizer down its throat.

"Say 'ah,'" I grinned.

As Griffy gulped loudly, it suddenly shrank. Noela lifted the tiny griffin in her fingers and placed it in her palm, gently stroking Griffy with a fingertip. "So small!"

At this size, Griffy was even cuter than usual. It chirped repeatedly, but it was tiny enough that you couldn't hear the chirping unless you really listened hard.

"In here, Griffy." Noela placed the creature in her bag's outer pocket.

"Kyuu."

I brought several bottles of giant minimizer, as well as some Super Invisiblize as a safety net, so we were fine for now. I'd have Griffy drink the latter product immediately if the minimizer suddenly wore off.

Once we were ready, we began trekking down the red road toward the capital city's gates. We showed our travel pass to a guard, and they let us right into the city.

Every way I looked, there was nothing but buildings everywhere. Innumerable shops selling all sorts of things lined the streets. But thanks to a simple city map Rayne drew for us, I basically knew where we were.

"So big! So much!"

I grabbed hold of Noela just before she ran off. "Hold on, puffball. I can't have you getting lost."

"No get lost."

"Where's all that confidence coming from?" I asked her.

"Know Master's smell."

Right. I underestimated the werewolf's senses. "But do you have any money?"

"Groo…" Noela was carrying a wallet Mina had made her. We checked it, and there was only about 300 rin inside. "Allowance, Master." Noela cupped her hands, and Griffy watched expectantly from her bag's front pocket.

"Just a little, okay?" I handed her a thousand-rin bill from my own wallet.

"Groo! Master real man!"

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks."

Once she had some spending money, Noela basically leaped toward the shops to look around. I'd have to collect her again eventually, since we were meeting Lord Valgas. To be safe, I made sure to keep her in eyeshot as I strolled around myself. Back on Earth, I lived in a big city, so I was used to crowded places like this. I thought someone like Mina might've had a hard time with all these people though.

The shopping district was pretty different from those in Japan, so looking around was a lot of fun in itself. The shops sold a plethora of goods and clothes from throughout the country, as well as strangely shaped weapons and armor. There was even a pharmacist offering some, let's just say, *questionable* medicines.

I kept an eye on Noela as I did so. She was now eating a meat kebab while trying to buy another one. "She's just ordering a second helping," I mumbled. It didn't look like she was interested in trying lots of different things.

Now carrying *two* meat kebabs, Noela bounced off yet again. Coincidentally, she was moving toward our meeting spot with Lord Valgas—a central plaza with a fountain. That worked for me, so I just followed her.

Noela stopped in front of a weapons store, darting from sword to sword and testing out different spears. Then, she tried on helmets at the neighboring armor shop. All sorts of species and people were

strolling around, and the old shop owner simply watched her entertain herself with a warm smile.



Eventually, Noela and I left the row of shops and reached the plaza. I spotted Lord Valgas and Elaine waiting there by a carriage beside the fountain. Noela was too distracted to notice them—in fact, she nearly headed someplace else before I grabbed her and approached Elaine and her father.

"I hope your long journey went well, Sir Reiji," Lord Valgas greeted me.

"It was no problem, Lord Valgas. Thanks so much for your kind invitation."

Noela was focused on eating her kebabs.

"What are those, Noela?" Elaine inquired.

"Meat. Tender! Very good."

"I'd like a bite."

"Bought with allowance. Drills buy own."

Wow, Noela's harsh. Elaine *was* nobility though, so she'd be able to afford it.

"Fair enough," said Elaine. "I shall have my butler purchase one." The butler, Rayne, stood behind Elaine and her father. At her words, he headed off to buy Elaine's kebab.

"You must be tired after your travels," Lord Valgas said. "Let us leave sightseeing until tomorrow so you may rest at the inn this evening." There were no inns on the street we just came down, so I opened my map to see where we could stay.

Valgas chuckled. "Heh heh heh! Don't fret. I've already booked your accommodations, Sir Reiji."

"Thank you. That's certainly a weight off my shoulders."

When Rayne returned, kebab in hand, he gave us directions to our inn.

Lord Valgas made sure Elaine and Noela were busy eating before quietly leaning toward me. "I could also arrange for you and I to visit a shop of…delights, shall we say."

Like a cabaret? I glanced at Rayne, who nodded.

"The entertainment of gentlemen," Valgas added.

"Mm… Noela's here, so I'll have to pass this time." I probably would've run out of cash, and frankly, I didn't handle that kind of place well.

Since Elaine and her father received formal invitations to the banquet, they were staying at the royal villa instead. I was curious about its interior—in fact, that interested me more than the "entertainment of gentlemen." I decided I'd ask about it tomorrow.

***

Following Rayne's directions, Noela and I reached our inn easily. The whole area was evidently full of accommodations, and most had a pub or restaurants on their first floors. Lord Valgas had booked us the best inn, at least as far as I could tell. The clerk seemed to be a gentleman rather than some old geezer.

Valgas had already informed the clerk of our situation, and the man checked us in quickly. He then led us to a room on the third floor. It was too big for the two of us, if anything. Everything was spotless, and we had two beds and a lovely view of the castle.

Noela looked out the window right away. “See castle!”

I sat on my bed, which was comfortably soft. *Oh, right.* Griffy needed more giant minimizer. I had to remember each dose so the griffin wouldn’t suddenly regain its usual size and cause a scene. “Griffy? Time for your medicine.”

The beast poked its head from Noela’s bag obediently. “Kyuu!” Mini-Griffy ran a few steps and then flew toward me.

Yeah, Griffy’s incredibly cute at this size. Gently petting the tiny griffin, I fed it more giant minimizer. That would keep it tiny for a while. Griffy was so small that it didn’t even need to consume the whole bottle. Meanwhile, Noela wagged her tail and gazed out the window. She was clearly taken by the vista.

“I wish Mina came with us,” I sighed.

“Groo.” Noela nodded, seeming to agree. “Store fine with Ejil.”

“Whoa, what’s this? You’re finally acknowledging Ejil’s abilities?”

“Arroo…” Noela’s expression was complex. I clearly hit a sore spot. “Besides Mina, Master trust Ejil most.”

She wasn’t wrong. Mina could handle anything in the drugstore on top of the household chores, but Ejil had unique strengths, despite being a demon king. He was incredibly on the ball when it came to the drugstore.

“Rely on werewolf more, Master,” Noela pleaded.

“I would if you took work more seriously.”

“Trying bestest!”

Really? Even though you constantly sleep on the job?

After we'd relaxed a bit, the sun began to set. As it grew dark outside, I heard a strange sound. It turned out to be Noela's stomach growling. I was used to that noise by this point. *She had kebabs not long ago and she's already hungry?* Noela never gained weight either. It must've had something to do with her species, as she said a while back.

"Food, Master."

"Uh-huh," I sighed. "This inn's restaurant is probably expensive. Let's check out some other spots."

"Groo."

I initially wasn't sure whether to bring Griffy, but I realized that in a worst-case scenario, the griffin could regain its normal size here in our room. I decided to bring it along to be safe, and we departed the inn.

Chapter 9:
The Case of the Vanished Griffin

AS NIGHT FELL, the streets grew even busier. Laughing voices and chatter filled the shops.

"What do you want to eat?" I asked Noela.

"Everything."

"My wallet can't handle that." We'd be staying for a few days, so I wanted to be frugal for this first evening.

"Anything fine."

Noela and I peeked into a tavern and decided to go inside. It was clearly a spot for common folk as it was full of travelers, adventurers, and older locals. A waiter led us to a table, and we ordered promptly. The food soon came. As we ate, I noticed a small, stage-like platform in the corner. It was only elevated a step from the ground.

"That's…"

"You a traveler, pal?" asked the old man in the next seat. It seemed like he was quite a few drinks in as his cheeks were bright red.

"Yeah. We just got in today."

"Well, you've got good luck! Today should be the day."

"'The day?" I tilted my head.

"Aye. Look." He pointed.

A girl in a flashy, revealing outfit appeared from one side and took the stage. She wore hair accessories and appropriately dramatic makeup. The slit in her skirt went all the way to her hip, revealing her pale leg, and her lower back and stomach were also visible. Very little cloth covered her body overall.

A man with a guitar-like instrument walked to her side and began to play. The woman started dancing to the music, and the tavern guests whistled and applauded. It was clearly some sort of show, so I followed everyone's lead and clapped too.

"Master leering." Next to me, Noela stabbed her fork into her meat and gnawed on it like a hamster.

"No, I'm not. Please." There wasn't anything quite like this in Kalta, so I couldn't help but watch.

As the woman left the stage, patrons invited her over to dance, giving the tavern quite a lively atmosphere. Each guest then tipped the dancer, usually by placing a bill between her breasts or at her hips. You didn't really see that kind of thing in Japan, but it was apparently common overseas.

I decided to tip the dancer too. As she drew close, I pulled a bill from my wallet and got ready. When I tried to hand it to her, though, she offered her chest and hips. Everyone else had tipped her the same way, but I felt flustered. *Is she telling me to put it in one of those spots?* My face apparently showed my thought process, and the dancer winked.

"Groo!" Grabbing the bill, Noela stuffed it down the dancer's top on my behalf. The woman looked surprised for a moment, but soon

regained her smile and headed to the next table.

Noela grimaced. “No good, Master. Tongue hanging out.”

“It was not.”

“Was. Far too.”

Is she serious…? I guess I was right to decline Valgas’s earlier invitation.

After a while, the show ended. When I made eye contact with the dancer, she winked again, and I was pretty sure Noela shot her a glare. *I wish she’d stop.*

“Let’s bring some food back for Griffy,” I suggested. We hadn’t let the tiny griffin eat on the table because everyone would’ve noticed if we had.

“Griffy?” Noela dug through her bag. “Groo?” She cocked her head, continuing to rummage. “Gone, Master.”

“Huh?” I looked inside her bag. Griffy was nowhere to be found. “Did it get lost?”

“Oh no! Was Griffy kidnapped?!” Noela was so panicked, she was speaking normally.

“No way.” I glanced beneath our table and scanned the floor, but I saw no mini-griffin anywhere. It was hard to believe Griffy would wander off on its own, being such a loyal beast. *Yeah, there’s no chance Griffy’s hiding or has run away.*

“*Was* Griffy kidnapped?!” I exclaimed.

“Noela said already, Master!” As she looked high and low, I considered asking the old man who sat next to us whether he’d seen

Griffy. Unfortunately, he was already gone. "Wh-while Master had tongue out, Griffy was—"

"Those two things aren't related! And my tongue *wasn't* hanging out!"

Noela and I were panicking. *Crap.* This was all because I told Griffy not to squawk or beat its wings. The griffin would've loudly resisted a kidnapping attempt, so we would've noticed someone stealing it. "Griffy, where could you be?" I muttered.

"Groo. Griffy…"

Eventually, the giant minimizer would wear off, and Griffy would regain its full size. Still, some ne'er-do-wells might hold a beast like that captive—and it'd sell for a high price too.

"Usually, *you'd* be in this situation," I told Noela, sighing.

That made her mad. "Noela no get kidnapped, Master!"

Fair enough. Still, she was usually the troublemaker of the group.

As I poked her puffed-up cheeks, a beautiful girl pulled out a chair next to us and sat down. She looked about my age, or maybe even younger. "Everything all right?" she asked.

"Er… We just lost something, is all," I replied. "It was in my friend's bag, but…"

"Gosh. I wonder whether it's that thing from before."

"What thing from before?" Had the girl seen something crucial? Anything would help—Noela and I had zero leads.

"Well, when I swung by your table earlier, an old man was sitting next to you. Right?"

"Earlier…?" Aha—I hadn't realized it, but she was the dancer. Her clothing and makeup were completely different now, so it was hard to tell.

"He stared your way through my entire performance. I thought it was odd that he wasn't watching me… Maybe he was looking at that bag of yours." She pointed at the exact spot where Noela's bag was earlier.

"Noela."

"Yup!" Noela checked the scent of the pocket Griffy had sat in, then sniffed the air.

I explained our strategy to the dancer. "If she can get the scent of Griffy, or that old guy, we'll be—"

"Groo… Aroorroooo! Got it!"

Jeez. That was fast.

"Man and Griffy probably together," Noela informed me.

"That old…" I grumbled, trailing off. *What the hell did he plan to do with our Griffy?*

As we rushed to pay our bill, the dancer waved goodbye. "I hope you'll find what you're seeking!"

"We owe you one! If we bump into each other again, please let me thank you properly."

"Sounds wonderful. I'll be waiting."

"Hurry, Master!" Noela yanked my arm, rushing me along. "No need thank!"

"That's not up to you, Noela! We need to be grateful if people help us out."

Noela kept frowning. *Is this little fluffball jealous? That's adorable!* I quickly stroked her head.

"First, find Griffy," Noela snapped back at me.

She was absolutely right, so I followed her past the street of inns. Noela was keenly focused on the scent as we headed down a path that branched off the shopping street. There were fewer and fewer people around.

"Scent strong, Master."

"We're close, then," I said.

"Groo!"

What if we're about to reach the site of some shady deal? I wondered. *What'll our move be?*

"Scent end here, Master."

That meant Griffy or the man had been nearby. Nobody was around now, however. Dim light came from the area's houses, but it was dark. The structures here were fairly run-down as well.

"Come on out, Griffy," I tried calling, but there was no response.

It was probably best to assume the old man had kidnapped Griffy. And if he took the creature to release it into the wild, he'd never bring it here.

"Master!" Noela tugged my shirt and narrowed her eyes, holding her hands up by her ears.

Does she hear something? I likewise focused on catching any sound I could and heard a low male voice coming from a building nearby. Noela and I quietly snuck over to one of its windows. Peeking in, we saw four men. One of them was carrying a leather bag with something inside that was thrashing about. *Bingo.* Griffy was probably inside of it, panicking.

"This'll earn us a nice chunk of change," one man said clearly.

"Did damn good, didn't I?" another asked. "How 'bout five million?"

"You out of yer damn mind? That's a rip-off!"

Crap. The old man really *was* trying to sell Griffy.

"Master!" Noela protested.

"Stay here," I told her. "If we jump in, we aren't certain to get Griffy back."

If only my abilities weren't limited to medicine making… There was no point dwelling on powers I didn't have now, though. I dug through my bag. Was there a drugstore product I could use in a situation like this?

I had a monster potion in case something happened to Griffy, but I didn't need that at the moment. I didn't need Super Invisiblize to hide the griffin or Translator DX to communicate with it either.

Mina had gotten me to bring water purifier as she said we might not like the capital's water. She also told us worriedly to bring stomach

medicine. I was carrying super high strength adhesive too. *Right. Mina put that in here in case we had to fix something ASAP. Man, we brought way too many products.* In fact, I packed additional supplies as well, but I left them at the inn. *Is there anything I can use here? Actually…*

"Hurry, Master! Men steal Griffy!"

"I've got a plan, Noela."

"Groo! Plan?! Beat bad guys?"

"Nope—but we'll rescue Griffy safely!" Lowering my voice, I explained the strategy to my partner in crime.

"Groo! Gotcha." Noela's body shone brightly as she fully transformed into her wolf form. Meanwhile, I drank two of my products, preparing to execute my plan.

"Grooooooowrr!!!" Noela howled up at the sky and then smashed through the building's window.

"Wh-what the hell?!"

"A dog?!"

A dog—a *wolf*, actually—had suddenly appeared in the room, causing panic.

"Awooooooo!!!" Noela howled. "Not dog! *Werewolf!* Grrrrr!!!"

Having drunk Translator DX a few moments earlier, I understood her in her animal form. She was mega upset. I scrutinized her. *Sure, you could describe her as a big dog,* I thought, but apparently being called that enraged her as much as "beastling."

"Gawooooo! Grrraaarr!!!" Noela bared her fangs at the men.

The whole room was in chaos. The men backed away, raising their hands to calm her down. Two pulled out knives, but I doubted the blades would hurt a wolf like Noela.

"L-Let's trounce this thing!"

"Gaaah!"

"I-It's gonna bite me!!!"

Eventually, one man opened the door, trying to send Noela outside. "Go away! Go out there!"

Great. Just as I planned. I entered calmly through the door. No one had a chance to even notice me, and since I gulped down some Super Invisiblize beforehand, they wouldn't detect me anytime soon as long as I was quiet.

I looked for the bag with Griffy and saw it on a shelf. The old man from the tavern had originally carried it on his person, but he set it down while shooing Noela away with a mop. I could tell Griffy was squirming frantically, but he was also still doing as I said—remaining as quiet as could be.

Nobody had noticed me yet. *Perfect.* I untied the bag. Checking inside, I found a tiny Griffy, just as I expected. "We're here to save you, Griffy!" I whispered.

The tiny, chick-like Griffy tilted its head. "Master's voice?"

"I'm invisible right now, so those guys can't see me. We're getting out of here. Stay quiet, okay?"

"Gotcha!"

Removing Griffy from the bag, I stealthily made my way to the exit. Noela, meanwhile, was still doing great—she bit the men's behinds, dragged them around, and caused a great amount of general chaos.

Hmm… I'd told her to keep the men busy until I rescued Griffy, but at this point, I was willing to bet she was just mad and had completely forgotten the plan.

"How dare you, you darn mutt!"

"Not mutt!" Deftly dodging the man's knife, Noela bit his arm.

"Gaaargh!!!"

"Arrooooo!!!"

Seriously—*did* she remember the plan at all? I was getting worried. For now, though, I focused on spreading tons of adhesive on the doorknob and doorframe in case one of the men touched either. The moment they did, their hand would temporarily stick to it.

"Flap your wings, Griffy!"

"Understood, Master!" Griffy began to flap its wings so Noela would notice the griffin's scent and realize what stage of the plan we were in…theoretically.

"No dog! *Werewolf!*"

Ugh. This is bad. I decided to call her name once. "Noela!"

"Arrooroorrrooo!!! Groo…?"

Aha! She picked up on that! I had Griffy flap its wings once more. Noela sniffed the air and caught its scent at last. Now that she

finally remembered the mission, she dashed out the door. We followed her.

"Where Master?" Noela demanded.

"Right here. Not that you can see me."

"Can smell." Noela peered upward, and we somehow managed eye contact.

"Griff's right here, Instructor!" Griffy let out a "kyuu" and hopped onto Noela's back.

Whoa. That's, like, the opposite of how things normally go.

"Griffy okay?" Noela asked. "Thank goodness!"

"Griff was worried too."

"Let's book it!" As I urged them along, I heard the men's voices inside the building.

"Where'd that mini-griffin go?!"

"Find it, now!"

"It must've run outside in the chaos!"

"Wait—the door's not opening! G-gah…! My hand's stuck!"

"What the hell are you doing, buffoon?!"

"I can't get my hand off!"

"Urgh…! The hell's going on?!"

Perfect. I stopped them in their tracks. They wouldn't leave that building for a while yet. Meanwhile, Noela and I had reclaimed Griffy and gotten away unscathed.

"Griff was so scared." Our little griffin cried softly.

Becoming visible again, I gently stroked Griffy's tiny head. "I'm really sorry, buddy. This was our fault for not paying attention."

Noela returned to her human form. "Focused on food," she confessed. "Completely forgot Griffy." She seemed to feel guilty about the way things went off the rails.

"You forgot Griff?" the tiny griffin echoed. "That hurts the *most*!"

Griffy let me check it over with a fine-toothed comb; luckily, it was completely uninjured. The men had been fairly gentle, since they planned to sell the mini-griffin. Still, I had Griffy drink a monster potion, just to be safe.

"The capital's dangerous, huh?" I mused.

"Groo," Noela agreed, her expression serious.

"Griff knew you'd come to my rescue."

The creature really trusted me a lot. "Noela worked hard to save you too, pal," I said.

"Yeah! Hate those men. Said awful things!"

She probably means the "dog" stuff… Noela seemed angrier about that than Griffy's kidnapping.

I would've loved to teach those jerks a lasting lesson, but I was only capable of so much. Maybe Noela messing them up was plenty. At any rate, that guy who touched the door would be stuck to it for a while.

Once we safely got back to the inn, we bought some meat at the first-floor tavern to feed Griffy in our room. The inn Lord Valgas has booked us was fancy, so Griffy's meal cost pretty much the same

as Noela's and mine combined. Griffy had been through a lot though, so I splurged.

"This is sure tasty!" Griffy pecked at the meat happily while Noela drooled nearby. She had quite a jealous look in her eyes.

Chapter 10:
Beneath the Mask

THE NEXT MORNING, Noela and I went to meet Lord Valgas and Elaine. Having gone through hell the night before with Griffy's kidnapping, Noela slept like a rock, as did I. I felt great this morning.

Griffy had drunk some giant minimizer and would hold down the fort in our room.

There was no guarantee more thugs wouldn't show up to nab Griffy, so we decided to have the griffin wait in our room.

I assured Griffy it was free to squawk, beat its wings, and flee if anything strange happened.

When Noela and I arrived at the meeting spot, Elaine and her father were there already. We greeted them and boarded their carriage.

"Did you sleep well last night, Sir Reiji?" Lord Valgas asked.

"Yes. The bed was quite comfortable. Thanks so much for booking our accommodations."

"Think of it as a token of my gratitude, please. I don't know where I'd be without your help!"

Elaine and Noela focused on the vista outside the window.

"That's a nice clothing boutique," Elaine told Noela.

"Groo."

"And if you go that way, you'll find the country's best shoe store."

"Groo."

Noela apparently had no interest in shoes or clothes, and this morning, she wagged her tail instead of chatting.

Lord Valgas cleared his throat. "Ahem! Tonight's the masked ball. Will you join us, Sir Reiji?"

"Hold on. Masked ball?" *In other words…a party you can enjoy without knowing who anyone is?*

"Indeed. Nobles who attended last night's banquet—and those they've invited personally—are welcome."

I'd do my best not to stir up trouble if I attended. If something *did* happen, nobody would know who I was. That would mean Lord Valgas wouldn't be in hot water. If that was the case, then why *not* go? After all, I felt guilty at constantly turning down the lord's invitations. Plus, getting a peek at the swanky atmosphere sounded interesting.

"Yeah, I guess I'd be happy to tag along," I replied.

"Excellent. I shall acquire several masks, and you may select the one you like best. Don't worry about a thing. I just want you to enjoy yourself!"

Suddenly, Noela's stomach growled. Lord Valgas had told us ahead of time to skip breakfast.

Elaine giggled. "There's a caffe we make sure to visit whenever we come to the capital. We'll soon arrive there for breakfast."

"Caffe"? Is that how people pronounce café in this world?

The carriage driver pulled on the reins, bringing us to a stop. Well-dressed diners were sipping tea in terrace seats beside us, and the caffe beyond them contained plenty more seating. All the guests seemed to be enjoying gourmet cuisine. This was definitely a café; it reminded me of a typical big-city coffee chain.

"We've arrived, Noela," Elaine informed the werewolf.

"First time caffe," Noela admitted.

"You can eat as much bread and drink as much juice as you wish," Elaine explained. "This caffe's 'all you can eat and drink,' so to speak." That was basically what people would've called it back on Earth too.

The werewolf looked shell-shocked. "All Noela can eat and drink…?"

We disembarked the carriage and entered the caffe. Soon, we heard the lovely sound of a string quartet. There was no stereo, however, so I figured the musicians had to be performing live somewhere. I looked around and spotted four people playing in the corner. This kind of upper-class joint felt a little pricey to a commoner like me.

"My dear alchemist, what has you so on edge?" Lord Valgas patted my back, chuckling.

"Uh…I'm a *pharmacist*, actually."

An employee approached to take our orders. "The usual," Lord Valgas told him. "For four."

The waiter seemingly understood. “Right away.” He headed into the back.

“All eat bread! All eat bread!” Noela chanted, wagging her tail behind her.

She didn’t tell the waiter how *much* she wanted, so in the end, he set some bread he brought on the table. The first courses after that were soup and salad, then ham and eggs.

So this caffe’s all-you-can-eat setup has them serving each table freshly made food?

“Groo!” Noela began devouring her breakfast with monstrous speed.

I could feel the stares from around us… Ones that just screamed “Look at those obnoxious country bumpkins!” Still, Lord Valgas didn’t stop Noela. He simply sat beside Elaine, watching the werewolf with a satisfied smile.

“If you eat that much, Noela, you won’t have room for sweets,” Elaine warned.

“No problem. Plenty room.” The gluttonous creature had no limits.

I was a proper adult, so I didn’t gorge on the bread, but it *was* hot from the oven and absolutely delicious. The fresh-squeezed juice was also delectable. As we dined, Lord Valgas told us about the caffe, capital, and surrounding region. After breakfast, we apparently were going to go see a statue of the hero who founded the nation. *What is this, a field trip?*

It wound up being an all-out tour—Rayne told us all kinds of historical facts as we looked at the statue. Noela was totally uninterested, though. Instead of listening, she stared at the candy shop.

Lord Valgas kept showing us around until nightfall. "See you later this evening, Sir Reiji."

"Of course."

I hadn't packed formal attire because, well, I didn't think I'd be attending any upper-crust parties. Fortunately, Valgas was taking care of that for me. I was tremendously grateful to him. *Talk about a warm welcome!* If Valgas and Elaine ever argued, I promised myself I'd take his side at least once, no questions asked.

"Where go tonight, Master?"

"I'm going to do a little adult socializing."

"Noela come too."

"You'd just be bored silly."

"Groo." She didn't look convinced.

Elaine wasn't attending either. She told me earlier that she'd drop by our inn though, so she and Noela would probably go out to play. In other words, Noela would have her own fun.

Once I rested a bit in our room, Rayne came to get me. Outside, I saw Lord Valgas sitting in his carriage, wearing a mask. He waved at me through the carriage window.

"Thanks for coming all this way to pick me up," I said.

"Think nothing of it! Come, Sir Reiji. Rayne acquired several masks and outfits—choose whichever pleases you."

Four separate ensembles were laid out on the carriage's seats. I picked a dark-gray suit and matching shirt and tie, plus a mask. It was nice and simple. I changed and donned the mask on the ride over.

"Hah! Wonderful! You look fantastic, Sir Reiji," Lord Valgas exclaimed.

I looked at myself in his mirror. *Not too shabby.* I wouldn't stand out in this.

According to Valgas, the ball would take place at a duke's villa. I had a feeling that the "villa" wasn't the kind of spot I was picturing though. Eventually, the carriage passed through the gates of an estate and traveled a long, long path across the grounds. I spotted a number of guests during our carriage ride over, in masks and formal attire. At last, I saw a massive mansion ahead.

Lord Valgas pointed at it. "That's the villa."

If this property were laid out like a traditional Japanese inn, that venue would've been the banquet hall. The building was way too huge for that, though. *Hell, that mansion is bigger than Valgas's entire estate, isn't it?*

When the carriage came to a stop, Rayne opened the door for us. "We have arrived. Enjoy yourselves, Sir Reiji, Lord Valgas."

"Thanks so much."

"We'll be on our way, then."

We disembarked. Lord Valgas walked proudly into the manor, and I followed cautiously. The interior was about the size of a gymnasium, and it could easily fit two or three hundred people. *So this is where the aristocrats are going to eat, drink, and be merry, huh?* To be fair, according to Lord Valgas, not *everyone* here was upper-class. The blue bloods had also invited some personal guests.

Waitstaff were serving small, stylish glasses of booze that guests could take at their leisure. I grabbed one and took a sip. If someone asked me whether it was a smooth drink or not… Well, it wasn't particularly. It didn't really suit the palate of a Japanese guy like me.

"Enjoy your evening," Lord Valgas told me. He then left to join a group of noblewomen chatting amongst themselves.

I wasn't nearly the social butterfly Valgas was, so I found an out-of-the-way corner and did some people watching. Guests ate and socialized at buffet tables along the walls. Once again, I was feeling like I had snuck into another world.

"Oh my. Are you alone?" a noblewoman asked me.

"Uh, yes. For now, anyway. This is my first ball, and I'm not really used to these things," I said, plastering a smile onto my face.

"Gosh, is that so? You come off as awfully cute and innocent! Could I have a song?" She offered a hand in a white glove.

She wants to dance, right? As I struggled to respond, the music began. The guests in the middle of the hall retreated to the sides, and couples began dancing in their stead.

"Come, come," the woman urged. Eventually, I took her hand and attempted to dance. She giggled. "For someone who looks so frank, you're quite the dancer."

"R-really?" I was just trying to copy the people around us, and apparently it was working. Honestly, I was happy that I wasn't being laughed at.

Lord Valgas was also dancing, by the way. Now I understood why he invited me—he wanted us guys to let loose a bit. If I joined him at the "cabaret" he mentioned yesterday, he could've kicked back there instead, but that wasn't a place you could bring Elaine or Lady Flam.

When the song ended, the noblewomen gracefully curtsied to the men. "Thank you. You're quite graceful."

"The pleasure was all mine." Finally, I had a moment to breathe.

As I took a glass of juice from a waiter to quench my thirst, a second woman approached. "Where might you have come from?"

"Um, a village called Kalta, quite a ways from h—"

Before I could finish, another noblewoman inserted herself into the conversation. "Hold on! Let us toast to new encounters!"

We all clinked glasses. Then, the ladies peppered me with questions—and as time passed, even more joined in. What was happening? Was it me, or were there *way* too many women surrounding me? Questions were coming from every direction, and I couldn't keep up anymore.

The musicians then began to play again, prompting the women to offer their hands.

"I'd like this dance."

"No, *I'm* first!"

"Care to enjoy a moment with me instead?"

They were all noblewomen through and through—not a single normal girl. Wherever I looked, I faced endless "drills," as if I were at a hardware store clearance sale.

I heard a voice call out from behind me. "This way!"

A mystery woman—presumably a noblewoman who hadn't been in that circle—gripped my arm and pulled me outside. The other women's voices came from behind me, complaining.

"Ah, no fair!" one called.

The woman who'd pulled me away paid them no heed. Outside, she turned once to glance at the villa. From where we were, we could just barely hear the music from inside it.

"You were backed into a corner, huh?" she asked.

"Definitely. You really saved me back there," I replied. "Why did so many women mob me?"

She giggled. "I'm sure it was because of your hair."

"What?" *Is there something strange about it?*

"Mm-hmm. Few gentlemen have such eye-catching black hair as yours."

"I had no idea…" The whole time I had been in this world, I really hadn't seen anyone else with black hair. No one ever pointed that out to me though, so I hadn't thought about it at all.

The noblewoman stared straight at me. "That's why I wondered whether you might be *him*."

"Wait… Who?" I cocked my head, not following what she was saying.

"I know this breaks the ball's rules, but…" She pulled her mask off.

"Ah!" I exclaimed. "From yesterday!"

My savior was the tavern dancer. Her makeup today gave her a completely different aura, both from her bewitching demeanor while performing, as well as her nondescript appearance when she sat next to Noela and me during dinner. At the moment, nobody would doubt she was a beautiful noblewoman.

"Wait," I said. "Why're you here?"

"Tee hee! Should I *not* be?"

"Aren't you a dancer? Are you also an aristocrat…?" I was totally lost.

"That could be, couldn't it? Weren't *you* also at a cheap tavern last night?"

"Heh. Touché," I replied. I wondered whether she was also invited by someone else, just like I was.

"My name's Stella Stateen. And you are?" She extended her gloved hand.

I took it. “I’m Reiji. I really didn’t see you rescuing me two days in a row.”

“Me neither!” Stella giggled, covering her mouth.

I told her that Noela and I resolved yesterday’s incident smoothly after we parted. “You have my sincerest thanks, Miss Stateen.”

“You’re quite welcome. I’m simply glad things ended well. And please, Reiji, you needn’t be so formal with me.”

Far be it from me not to oblige. “I was mulling over doing something to thank you, Stella. This ball’s a great opportunity.”

“Wow. You’re offering to do something for little old me? Oh my!” She looked me over, flashing a teasing glance.

“Well, yes. If you’re struggling with anything, I’d be happy to help, if I can.”

Like I did yesterday, I wondered how old Stella was. She looked about my age, or maybe a little younger. However, given her attitude and calmness, it was possible she was older…

“Well, I’d like to leave this ball,” Stella replied. “I’ve accomplished my goal in coming here, so I’m done.”

Her goal? Maybe meeting someone and talking to them…?

“My carriage won’t pick me up till it ends though,” she continued. “So…I hope you’ll take a stroll with me in the garden.”

“That’s all?”

“It’s more than adequate. Come,” she urged.

I was fine with leaving—I'd gotten enough of the ball's atmosphere. "Sure. I'll gladly accompany you."

"Let's be on our way, then." Stella said. She flashed an innocent smile beneath the pale moonlight.

Together, we walked into a labyrinthine garden. Stella knew the names of various flowers and taught me about each one as we passed them. My medicine-making skill actually identified them immediately, but I figured Stella must really love flowers to know them inside out.

"What do you do day-to-day, Reiji?" she asked.

"I make medicines and treatments. I run a pharmacy in a small town, and I just happen to be acquainted with the local lord there. He had to attend a banquet and invited me to come along to the capital, so here I am."

"Oh, this is your first time here?"

"Uh-huh."

"I bet you were surprised at how crowded it is." She smiled teasingly.



"Ah, you think I'm just some country guy, huh?" I asked. "Nope, totally wrong. I used to live in a big city." I meant Tokyo, which was several times more crowded than the capital. That said, the diversity of the people here certainly surprised me.

"Tee hee! Look at you, getting all serious."

"Only because you made me sound like a country bumpkin." Regardless, Stella seemed to have taken an interest in me.

The garden was hard to navigate. Whenever we thought we were making our way out, we wound up near a different part of the villa. Each time that happened, we whined.

"Why's this place so pointlessly huge?" Stella complained.

"They must have tons of gardeners on staff," I sighed.

For some reason, she laughed at my observation. "You're thinking about *that*?"

"Well, I mean…caring for this many flowers and other plants over this much space must be a real struggle, you know?" I could really empathize with that after all my time raising herbs in the meadow. "By the way, where'd you learn all those flower names, Stella?"

"Well, I used to like reading books on different subjects, not just flowers," she replied. "That way, I never ran out of topics for conversation."

"Aha. I see why you're so knowledgeable."

"Um, I'm really not used to such blunt praise," she said shyly.

Just taking this stroll didn't feel like a big enough thank-you to Stella. *If only I could make her something…*

Suddenly, I thought of a gift I could concoct from the foods, fruits, and drinks served at the party. I wasn't certain Stella would like it, but it was a must-have for women back on Earth, and it was better than giving her nothing.

"Hm, where's the kitchen?" I muttered, staring at the massive villa. Sure, I could've made the product from roots and petals here in the garden, but this green space was very well kept. Tampering with someone else's work would be rude. Still, I highly doubted I'd find the kitchen by chance, and wandering aimlessly—even as a guest—would raise eyebrows.

"Hmm?" said Stella. "You want to go to the kitchen?"

"Uh…yeah. Just for a sec."

"Looking for a snack?"

"Something like that," I said, lying, I wanted this to be a surprise.

"You've got quite a big appetite," she teased, then pointed. "The kitchen's that way."

"You sure know this building." Had she been here before?

"If you're hungry, you should have just said so."

"You're right. But I actually want to take care of something else too."

"Oh?" Stella tilted her head, but I didn't explain further.

Thinking that we were heading to the kitchen for a bite to eat, Stella began chatting about food. Her comments were nothing special, yet she was uniquely gifted in terms of carrying a conversation. Just listening to her felt good, and she also prompted me to speak at times. Her graceful chitchat reminded me of a talk show hostess or something.

Was she a dancer? Or actually a noblewoman? Elaine was a stereotypical blue blood, but Stella was completely different. Had some aristocrat taken a liking to her and invited her tonight? If so, how come she knew where the kitchen was?

Bewildered, I followed Stella to a classroom-sized kitchen. "It doesn't seem like anyone's here," she noted.

"I won't be long," I said.

"I hope not. How much do you plan to eat?"

Ignoring her sarcasm, I searched the shelves for the necessary ingredients. After about five minutes, I began preparing them with a mortar and pestle. I also juiced some fruit. I didn't have my normal tools and my process was different from usual, but I didn't struggle much. The massive kitchen had stand-ins for most of my equipment.

"Aren't you going to eat something?" Stella asked with uncertainty.

"Nope."

"Just what exactly are you up to…?" she mused.

I bottled the ingredients, mixed them, and shook the concoction once. The bottle then began to glow.

Shiny Nails: Brush onto nails. Produces beautiful fingertips. Fast drying.

"That was magic just now, wasn't it?"

"Uh, more like a skill," I replied. Next to a container of herbs, I found an empty bottle about the size of my index finger and poured the Shiny Nails inside. The concoction had a soft reddish-beige hue.

"It's beautiful," Stella told me.

"Please take it," I replied. "I want to thank you properly for everything."

"Wait. It's for me?"

"Yeah. Here." I handed her the bottle. "It's a present."

"Thank you!" Then, however, she cocked her head, unsure how to use the liquid.

If only I had a brush… Ah! There's some. Jeez, they really do *have everything here.* There were various brushes, from huge to tiny. I figured the kitchen staff used them to decorate bread and cakes.

I put some Shiny Nails on the smallest brush I could find. "Your fingertips, if you please," I said, extending my hand to Stella.

She placed hers atop it. "Uh, sure…"

"Here's how to use this stuff." I brushed the liquid gently over her nails. I had never given anyone a manicure, or gotten one myself for that matter, so I was worried I'd do it incorrectly. Fortunately, the Shiny Nails worked nicely. "Just like that."

"Amazing." Stella gazed down at both of her hands with her eyes sparkling. She then bent her fingers like cat claws and stared at them closely. "They're beautiful! You're sure you want to give me such a wonderful gift?"

"Absolutely. I made it for you, after all."

"Ah…" Stella blushed and grasped for the right words. "N-now I get it. You're trying to charm me, aren't you?"

"No, that's not my intention." I said with a hesitant smile. "I'm just expressing my gratitude."

Suddenly, I heard something clinking. It sounded like a tray of dishes or glassware shaking. A waiter was probably carrying dirty plates and glasses to the kitchen.

"Ugh. Crap." Who knew what the staff would say if they found Stella and I here?

"This way!" Grabbing my hand, Stella led me outside through an exit, just like how she pulled me out of the ball. Not only did she manage to leave the kitchen by a deserted route, but we circled back to the right entrance without getting lost, not even once.

"Do you live here…?" I asked.

"No. If I did, I wouldn't be a dancer, would I?"

"How come you're so familiar with this place then?"

Masked ladies and gentlemen were now filing out of the villa. It seemed like the ball had concluded.

"It's already over…" Stella said sadly. Suddenly, she wrapped her arms around me tight.

"Whoa!"

"Come on, you can handle that, right?" she laughed.

"It was so sudden! I was just surprised, that's all."

"Thanks for the gift. I'll save it for special occasions."

"No need. When you run out, just drop by my drugstore."

Stella looked up, surprised. "Really…?"

"Of course. You'll have to buy it next time though."

"Cheapskate." She frowned playfully.

I shrugged. "What can I say? It's my job."

"I have to go now." Standing on tiptoe, Stella gently kissed my cheek. "As a thank-you for the thank-you gift," she whispered in my ear. She then stepped back and started walking away, only turning around once to wave sadly. "I had fun! Thanks for the lovely night."

I waved back. "See you around, Stella!" I called, watching her fade into the crowd of masked guests and vanish.

Chapter 11:
Gifts and a Goodbye

AFTER THE EVENING'S BALL, Lord Valgas sent me back to the inn via carriage. When I got back to the inn, Noela told me to hurry up and take a bath. Her sensitive nose found unfamiliar female scents extremely unpleasant, and apparently I emanated all kinds of off-putting aromas.

"Master close to women?" Noela demanded.

"No," I lied.

That said, she asked the same question the next day too.

Anyway, all we had left was to do was buy souvenirs and head home. *We really are just here as tourists,* I reflected as Noela and I headed to the shopping district for presents. I held her hand, since there was a lot of foot traffic here today. "I wonder what Mina would like."

"Mina like anything."

"I hope so."

"She easy."

"Hey! You shouldn't say stuff like that."

We planned to buy souvenirs for Mina, Ejil, Vivi, Annabelle, and Paula—pretty much all the friends I remembered off the top of my head.

In a weapons store sat a scythe that the Grim Reaper himself might've carried. Noela pointed at it excitedly. "Want, Master!" Her eyes practically sparkled.

"We aren't shopping for you, Noela."

"Groo?" She didn't seem to grasp the concept of "souvenirs."

Among the shop's short blades was a pair of kitchen knives. "Whoa! Those could be good for Mina."

"You've got keen eyes to look at those, young man!" The old shopkeeper praised me.

The knives had apparently been forged from some specific type of steel during a particular historical period. I wasn't too interested in that, however, so the details went in one ear and out the other, including the names.

"Can I try them?" I asked.

"Aye."

I used one knife to slice some scrap paper the shopkeeper passed me. Its blade slipped in smoothly. I pulled it back, and it did a clean job. "Wow. Feels great. These are the real deal."

"Mm-hmm." The shopkeeper seemed as happy as if I complimented *him* instead of the merchandise. "I'm glad I had 'em in stock, lad. Praise from a sharp-eyed young man like yourself means the world to me."

"Don't mention it."

I tried cutting a few other things too, like meat and fruit. Slicing them with the blades felt amazing—way better than our current

kitchen knives.

"I think we'll get these for Mina," I told Noela—except she wasn't there. *Where'd that little fluffball get off to?*

Looking around, I spotted her trying on a small suit of armor at another nearby shop.

"What do you think, young lady?"

"Groo. No good. Squeezes tail." She shook her head vigorously.

"Well, of course. That there armor weren't made for beastlings."

Whoops. He stepped on a land mine.

"Not beastling! *Werewolf!*"

"Come on. Don't get so mad," the shopkeeper continued. "They're similar, ain't they?"

"Garrooooo!" Noela stomped angrily.

I stepped between her and the vendor. "Sorry about my little fluffball here."

"She with you, pal? I'm beggin' you, look after her. She drove me nuts demandin' to try on that armor."

"I'm really sorry." I bowed my head repeatedly. "Noela, take that off. I'm not buying you that. What were you thinking, trying it on?"

"Decided, Master. Buy," she insisted.

"Didn't you say it squeezed your tail?"

"Look strong with this! Awesome!" She was apparently choosing aesthetics over comfort.

"Doesn't matter. I'm still not buying it."

"Arrooooo! Master cheapskate!"

"We're buying everyone *else* souvenirs right now!" I said.

Noela was like this whenever she found something she admired at a shop. She even had to examine each new item Paula stocked at her tool shop. Frankly, I was sure there was nothing in the place she hadn't touched.

I grabbed Noela and helped the shopkeeper get the armor off her. At that point, it was covered in her fur, so I paid a small fee for cleaning and left politely.

Noela was still mad that the shopkeeper had called her a beastling and that he said werewolves weren't different from beastlings. She was also angry that I didn't buy the armor. "When get stronger?" she demanded.

"You don't *have* to get stronger." She was like a little boy focused on becoming the Red Ranger or something.

Since Noela was in a snippy mood, I wound up picking the souvenirs myself. I also bought two big bags, since mine was full already. At this point, our luggage was half presents, half herbs and rare materials. Finally, as an olive branch, I bought Noela two more of the kebabs she liked so much on the first day of the trip.

Her attitude changed in literally seconds. "Master know how buy souvenirs!"

We ran out of Super Invisiblize and giant minimizer last night, so Griffy had been waiting outside the city walls since then.

"The capital sure was a lot of fun," I said as we left.

"Groo." Noela nodded. She had sauce at the corners of her mouth.

All she really did the entire trip was eat, huh?

As we followed the path out of the city, we passed a hooded local girl carrying a basket in her hands. She had a hood over her head as well. "I promise I'll come see you," she said.

Hmm? I stopped and instinctively turned around. *Was she talking to herself?*

Cocking my head, I saw the girl shift her arm that was holding the basket. As she did so, her hand became visible, and I could tell that her nails were a beautiful reddish beige.

Aha! The Shiny Nails I made yesterday! The color hadn't faded at all.

The way I suddenly stopped confused Noela. "What, Master?"

"Nothing," I said, shaking my head and continuing to walk ahead.

***

Once we got home, I gave Mina her souvenirs immediately.

"Ooh! Kitchen knives! Thanks so much, Mr. Reiji!"

"Seeing how excited you are, it was worth getting them. I think they'll cut things more easily than the ones you have now."

"I'm so happy!" Mina hugged the knife boxes, jumping up and down with delight.

Ejil and Vivi both had shifts at the drugstore today too. They loitered awkwardly, stealing glances at me.

Ha! They're totally waiting for their souvenirs. They honestly reminded me of teenage boys on Valentine's Day—both hopeful that a present was coming and fearful that I hadn't gotten them anything.

"Ejil—"

"Yes! Yes, yes?!"

Quick reply. It was like he was waiting on pins and needles for me to say his name. "This is for you."

I handed him a small piece of art. At first glance, it seemed to depict the tail of some foxlike beast. Ejil's sharp senses immediately figured out what I'd passed him. "D-Doctor… I can't believe it!"

"Noela held on to it the whole trip back."

"I could live on this alone for three months!"

Ejil rubbed the painting against his cheek immediately, making disgusting sounds. He would sniff it occasionally, then heave a sigh into the air. He seemed healed and revitalized.

Vivi, meanwhile, was so concerned that she asked for her present outright. "Wh-what about me, Reiji? I'll be happy with anything, I swear. No one's ever bought a souvenir for me before…" She was like a schoolboy begging his closest female friend for any old candy, having given up all hope of getting Valentine's Day chocolate.

"Don't worry, I didn't forget you."

"You d-didn't?"

"Nope. I know this seems kind of tacky, but…" I handed her a wooden carving that read "Fairy Charm." "Man, that was heavy as heck," I informed her. "Carrying it was seriously a pain."

"Uh…yeah. Thanks." Vivi didn't seem remotely pleased, though. In fact, her eyes were dead.

"It's magical, Vivi," I chuckled.

"But wh-why does it say *fairy*? You should at least have gotten one that said *spirit*!"

"I forgot which you were."

"Aw, jeez! Knowing you don't do it on purpose hurts!" she whined, but she hugged the charm nonetheless. "I'll put it near the entrance to my house."

"I bet fairies will protect you."

"Should you really say that to a *spirit*?"

Vivi had looked miffed at first, but in the end, she was all smiles. I guessed she decided she was happier to have something than nothing at all.

I gave Paula and Annabelle their souvenirs when they dropped by the shop later.

I also thought back on meeting Stella—the dancer, young noblewoman, and city girl. She was charming, intelligent, and friendly, not to mention stunning. There was a character like that in an anime I used to watch.

I wanted to believe Stella was a good person, but who could really tell? She was probably a spy or something. After all, she knew

the mansion's layout, and she said she "accomplished her goal" when we slipped out of the ball.

Stella *did* say she'd visit the drugstore, so I figured I'd ask her then. I highly doubted she'd ever reveal the truth, but I couldn't help but look forward to her running out of Shiny Nails.

Chapter 12:
Bodybuilding with the Red Cat Brigade

DOZ, THE RED CAT BRIGADE'S vice-captain, lowered his voice as he put in his order. "Reiji, pal… I want *the goods*."

"Um… Doz, I've said over and over that you can ask for these out loud. They aren't black market items."

"But who knows what the rank-and-file guys would say if they found out I bought 'em?" Doz protested. *I guess he had his own troubles to deal with.*

Also, for the record, he was asking for power potions. Unlike standard potions, they contained tons of additives to promote muscle gain. They pretty much had the same effects as protein supplements. When I first developed power potions, they were so potent, they basically transformed Mina and Noela into female bodybuilders. The effects turned out to vary from person to person though. They wouldn't turn most customers into meatheads.

"Why would it be so bad for the others to see you?" I asked as I got Doz's order together. Nothing about buying power potions seemed odd to me.

"Bro…" Doz sighed. "Well, it's all my fault. I acted all high and mighty about my physique with some weaker mercs."

"Ah…" I said. Doz was a tough-looking dude. He was bulkier than ever now too since he was drinking power potions regularly ever since learning about them. "Did you really have to go and do that?"

"Nope, I didn't. You're right," Doz replied. "It's just… My muscles raised my confidence. I got a big head."

"I see…" *How does that connect to him buying these in secret though?*

"The guys couldn't stand me talkin' down to 'em anymore," Doz continued. "They started liftin' weights a lot."

Now I saw the big picture. "You're worried that they'll discover power potions and bulk up like you did. You'd lose the upper hand." Up till now, nobody else from the Red Cat Brigade—in fact, *no one* besides Doz—had purchased any power potions.

"Exactly," Doz said. "It'd be fine if just one or two of 'em did that, but most of 'em started trainin' hard thanks to my attitude."

In short, and to my surprise, bodybuilding beyond the usual training had now become a trend among the Red Cat Brigade. "But that can't be a bad thing, can it? After all, you guys guard the town."

"I can't afford them showin' me up!" Doz protested. "Think about my position!" Doz *was* Annabelle's second-in-command. I could see why he wouldn't want to look weaker than his underlings. "Please, bro! At this rate, I'm doomed!"

"I hear you, but…" I thought for a few moments and had an idea. "Uh, how about this?" I suggested, snatching a bottle of bigger-biggest liquid off the shelf.

"What's that?"

"The name says it all. It makes you bigger."

I never put the bigger-biggest prototype on sale after I made it since I didn't find a good use for it. The product's effects depended completely on how much you consumed. Once, Vivi became *massive* after drinking some.

"Mm… That ain't what I'm lookin' for."

"Yeah, I guess not." I figured as much, but I honestly hoped it'd work anyway. I finished readying Doz's order and handed him his usual number of power potions.

"I'll be back." Doz's giant body practically rocked the drugstore as he left.

Being second-in-command comes with its own problems, huh? I reflected.

Just after Doz left, Peel showed up. He looked…beefy. Peering at him, I rubbed my eyes a few times. *Wow, this weight-training wave even hit a weak little shoemaker's son like that.*

"Long time no see, Master," Peel said.

"You don't need to call me that anymore." *How long does he plan to draw out this master-and-student thing?* "Man, you've sure bulked up."

"Yup! It's all thanks to training hard."

"So, what's up? Felt like saying hello while passing by?"

"Nah. I'm here with a bit of a request, actually."

Oh boy…

"Could you create a treatment to help me build muscle?"

Gah! I knew it! This was my chance to sell some power potions, but Doz wanted to keep those secret from the rest of the brigade. And since he *just* confided that in me, it was hard to recommend power potions to Peel right now.

"You're a peerless alchemist, Master. I know you can make me something!"

I already did, to be honest. The power potions were literally sitting on a shelf beside me. "Well…"

I pretended to hesitate, trying to think of a way to work all this out. If Doz's underlings found out about the power potions, they'd bulk up even more and give him grief. Yet Peel, a Red Cat Brigade member, wanted to bulk up just like Doz had.

Hmm… Although Peel's muscles stood out, he was pretty fair-skinned compared to me. *Ah!* "Would you be okay with just *looking* strong?"

"Looking strong, huh?!" Peel reeled backward. "Wh-what do you have for me, Master?!"

"You won't actually *be* stronger than now, all right?"

"I don't mind, I don't mind!"

I've got him hook, line, and sinker. "Okay, then. Since you want to bulk up so badly, I'll create something."

"Thanks very much!"

"Wait a few minutes, okay?"

I called Noela in to watch the drugstore, then entered the lab and got to work. Doz's pride and position had complicated things a

little, but given Peel's request, the boy might still like this stuff.

Sun Friend: Blocks UV rays, safely producing a deeper suntan. Moisturizes skin.

A tan was a big part of looking macho. Bodybuilders were always tanned, right? When I pictured suntanned skin, it had a way "stronger" vibe than pasty skin did. And Sun Friend's ingredients included sunblock, so even people with sensitive skin could make use of it.

It was time to bring Peel the new product. I heard him talking to Noela in the store. "I'll get real tough thanks to Master's prescription, Li'l Wolf!"

"Groo? Tough?"

"Yeah! Master's making me something right now."

If he got Noela's hopes up, it'd be a hassle. I sped up to correct him immediately. "This product's just going to make you *look* strong, Peel."

"I don't care if it's for show!" Peel insisted.

Seriously?

"New product make look stronger?" asked Noela. Thanks to Peel's nonsense, Sun Friend intrigued her too.

"Um…beastlings can't use it."

"*Werewolf!* Can't mix up, Master!" Noela pouted.

"Sorry, sorry." I pushed her puffed cheeks back in. I couldn't help teasing her as her reactions were adorable.

"It's done?" Peel asked.

"Yeah. But remember, it just makes you *look* strong," I emphasized. "To use it, spread it over your body and hang out in the sun. That's all."

"Really?" Peel looked uncertain.

Noela did too, and she tilted her head. "Groo?"

"Let's try it, shall we?" I suggested.

I had Peel take off his shirt. Beneath it, his biceps, abs, chest, and shoulders were ripped. Doz was clearly correct that bodybuilding was popular with the mercs.

"Garoo! Macho!" Noela attempted to flex her muscles, which were barely visible.

"Heh heh! I worked hard for these."

"All right. Here you go." I began spreading Sun Friend over Peel's back.

"Much obliged." He squirmed a bit now and then.

Is this guy seriously ticklish?

"M-Master, I can't… The way you're touching me is so…"

"That's enough," I said. I had Peel apply Sun Friend to the front of his torso and told him to step outside. He'd get enough sunlight to be a tanned macho man in no time. "Well, Peel? Any changes?"

"No… But my body… It's hot!" Peel stared at his hands. "This is how it feels to grow stronger, isn't it?!"

The dummy thought he'd awakened some new power. "No! You're hot because of the sun, you dolt. You're just getting a tan!"

"Suntan make stronger?" Noela looked puzzled.

The little fluffball was likely to mislead Peel, so I again explained, "You're just getting a good tan. It won't make you stronger, but it *feels* tough, right?"

"Groo?" Noela still didn't seem to understand. To be fair, I didn't completely get it either. But there had to be a reason macho types tanned for competitions and all, right?

"I can't tan, Master!" Peel protested. "My skin stays all red for days!"

"No worries. Sun Friend's designed to prevent redness."

"R-really?"

Peel rolled over repeatedly, letting the sun toast his front and back much faster than normal. Every time I blinked, his tan had deepened even more. By the time he stood up, he was a completely different shade. *Those are Sun Friend's results, huh?*

"I can tell that I tanned, but I'm not burned. I don't feel overheated at all. How do I look, Master?" As Peel smiled, his white teeth stood out like crazy. It might've been hard to see him somewhere less brightly lit.

"You're nice and tan, I'd say."

"Tan look strong?" Noela still seemed confused. Peel flexed his muscles in response.

"Groo?! Look *strong*! Arroo!"

"Oh my God!" Even Peel was stunned.

"All that changed was your skin tone, but your muscles do stand out way more," I mused.

It was a simple before-and-after. He'd looked buff in the first place, certainly, but his fair skin had made his musculature hard to see. That wasn't the case anymore. Now, he seemed utterly jacked, although Sun Friend alone didn't build muscle.

"Thanks so much, Master! Now I can finally rise above Doz and the other veterans!" Nodding away, Peel excitedly carried the Sun Friend out of the drugstore.

Given how different Peel looked, Doz would be in for a shock. *Man… He's gonna realize I helped Peel.* To prepare for that, I made another bottle of Sun Friend just for Doz.

Chapter 13:
In Terms of Tanning

MINA APPARENTLY had some free time and poked her head into the store. "Another new product, Mr. Reiji?"

"Mina, Sun Friend make tan and look strong!" Noela explained proudly.

"It makes you tan and…strong?" Mina seemed to have trouble connecting the two.

"It basically helps you just tan instead of getting sunburned," I explained.

"Is it different from sunscreen?"

"Yup. That prevents tanning entirely, but this lets you tan."

Mina nodded slightly and seemed surprisingly interested. "I'd like to give it a try, Mr. Reiji!"

"Wha…?"

"Am I not allowed?"

"No, you're more than welcome!"

I thought Mina had a wonderful complexion to begin with, but maybe her fairness bothered her. When she was alive, she was a sickly girl, so maybe she equated ill health with her typical complexion.

"I've always wanted a tan, to be honest," Mina confided. "It makes it so clear that you've been enjoying yourself outdoors!"

My guess wasn't completely off the mark. "Give Sun Friend a shot, then." I handed Mina the extra bottle I'd made.

"Thanks very much!"

Mina promptly changed into her swimsuit.

"Noela, would you mind rubbing Sun Friend on my back?" Mina apparently already finished putting it on her front.

"Groo! On it." Noela quickly did as Mina asked.

"Oooh. Mm…" Mina couldn't keep herself from moaning loudly.

This is, uh, something else. I quickly averted my gaze, as it felt like I saw a side of Mina I wasn't supposed to.

Mina lay down and sunbathed for a while. Her face, arms, shoulders, stomach, and back all tanned quickly. She stood up at last. "I think I'm, like, all set, man!" she declared, then shook her head. Her beautiful blonde hair fluttered behind her.

Since when does Mina say stuff like that?

When Mina turned toward me, I could tell she'd tanned as deeply as Peel. She was the spitting image of a Japanese gyaru.

"Well, Mr. Reiji? Am I rocking the look?" she asked.

"Mina…?"

"I've, like, always wanted to try this. Y'know, I was totes a sick chick when I was alive!"

"Groo?! M-Mina off rocker?!" Even Noela was stunned. Her tail stood straight up in alarm.

"Huh? You're silly for real, Noelly! I'm just, like, tan. No big, yeah?" Mina clapped, laughing.

She's a total gyaru right out of Shibuya—hip and trendy with the attitude to boot.

"Anyway, I was, like, always *so* jelly of kids playing outside and stuff. I had to watch it all from bed, you know? Man, what a drag that was."

I completely understood. *But, uh, when will the normal Mina come back?*

"How're we gonna do dinner?" Mina inquired. "I'll whip it up if you want."

"Um…is that okay?"



"Totes fine! Oh, and like, Mr. Reiji? Why're you acting so polite with me? It's like, *so* hilarious."

It really wasn't.

"Evil Mina!" That was what Noela had apparently dubbed her. Unfortunately, a gyaru's appearance seemed to come with certain stereotypes. "Return Mina's body!"

"Noelly, you're *so* cute and funny! It's me, Mina." She furrowed her brow.

Noela hid behind me, frightened.

"Huh? Why're you, like, hiding?" Mina tried to peek at Noela, but the werewolf used me like a shield.

"I think she's scared. She's not used to you looking like this," I explained, although I felt pretty awkward at this point.

"*Scared?* Aren't I so *cute* though?" Mina's beauty standards were astonishingly flexible.

"Groo…" Noela eventually fled down the hall toward the living room.

"Whoa! Like, what a curveball," Mina mused.

"I think she'll get used to you eventually. Just hang on till then."

"You got it, dude."

Still not entirely pleased, Mina headed for the kitchen with a frown on her face. She was apparently planning to get dinner ready for everyone. Even though her appearance and way of talking changed, her cooking skills wouldn't have.

"At least, I hope not," I mumbled to myself.

Concerned, I peeked into the kitchen. It was foolish to have been concerned because Mina was skillfully preparing dinner. At the end of the day, Mina was Mina whether she was acting like a chic teenager or like normal.

Feeling someone tug my shirt, I turned to find Noela. "Make new treatment, Master."

"For what?"

"Mina possessed by demon," Noela replied, completely straight-faced. "No good. Exorcise."

I understood Noela's distaste for Mina's change, but Mina herself had always wanted to experience something like this, given how sickly she once was. I could create a product to revert her appearance, sure, but I'd feel bad doing so against her will. "There's no need for me to make anything. It'll wear off after some time."

"Arroo…" Noela's ears drooped. "Liked Mina better before."

For now, the werewolf just had to get used to the status quo. Mina's suntan wouldn't exactly fade overnight, and I honestly wanted to let her stay this way as long as she wanted.

***

Ririka visited the drugstore the next day, and Mina's new look shocked her. "What the heck's going on?"

I understood her surprise. The elf had arrived expecting the usual Mina, only to meet her new cool girl persona.

"What?" Mina asked. "Oh—my, like, new vibe? Mr. Reiji made this totally awesome new treatment, like, totes snappy!"

Totes snappy? I figured she meant how I offered her the Sun Friend quickly, since I'd already made some for Peel.

"Sick, right?" Mina played with her hair happily, striking poses for Ririka.

"I'm into it!" Ririka exclaimed.

"For real, yeah?" Mina giggled happily.

Ririka turned to me. "Reiji, could an elf transform like Mina did?"

I…didn't expect that kind of question from her. Man, what's so great about this look? Does it just happen to line up with elves' tastes? I couldn't imagine how Ririka's skin might react to Sun Friend. *Wouldn't it just make her a tan elf?* "I…don't know. Are you cool with tanning?"

"Of course! Does your new treatment just help people tan?"

"Yeah, more or less." *Wait. Will Ririka end up acting like Mina too?*

Although Sun Friend had done more than give Mina a tan, I had a hunch that her intense emotions about her appearance caused her transformation.

"Most elves are pale," Ririka told me. "We turn red and burn pretty fast in direct sunlight."

"Try this then." I tried to redirect her, grabbing a bottle of sunscreen off the shelf and passing it to her. My attempt failed.

"No, no. I don't want that. Staying pale after being in the sun's unnatural."

"So, you really do want to tan?"

"Mm-hmm. I hate being like everyone else!"

I was starting to understand why Ririka wanted to try Sun Friend. Disliking your natural appearance was kind of self-hatred, in a way; at least, it was for an elf. It was the kind of mindset you'd find among junior high and high school students who wanted to stick out. "Well, don't complain to me if other elves get mad at you."

"Come on, babe, try it! It'll be totes fun," Mina giggled.

Not only had Mina's pale complexion apparently really bothered her, but Ririka—also naturally pale—seemed to feel similarly. "Maybe a lot of pale people have this complex?" I mused aloud, cocking my head.

"I think so," Ririka replied.

"For sure," Mina chimed in.

Maybe there is some kind of demand for Sun Friend? Was it time to sell it as a drugstore product? "Mina, have you got any Sun Friend left over? Let Ririka use it."

"You got it! On it!" Mina said, skipping out of the drugstore.

Okay, that was kind of cute.

She returned carrying the bottle. "You're all set, Ririka!"

"Thanks!"

Like Mina, Ririka had someone else apply Sun Friend to her back—Mina, in this case.

"Eeek!" the elf cried. "Hey, that tickles. Jeez!"

"You're such a babe, Ririka!"

"What? Hey, no. I'm—"

"Mr. Reiji's staring!"

"St-stop!" Ririka glared at me, turning bright red.

I covered my face with both hands. Now, all I could hear was a giddy Mina and an elf being silly.

"Okey dokey!" Mina gave Ririka a thumbs-up. "All that's left is to get in that sun!"

And a personality change shouldn't be a side effect.

It didn't take Ririka long to tan. "Wow! That was, like, totes snappy! Reiji, you're divine!" she cried.

She changed too? A gyaru elf?!

Ririka looked at herself with great interest, checking out her tan. "Nobody's gonna mess with this babe. Tee hee hee!" she said confidently.

"You're, like, totes a hottie, Ririka!"

"A ten outta ten, right?!"

I was so, so lost—I was just an old dude who couldn't follow the girls' conversation as they cheered and high fived.

"Thanks a million, Reiji!" Ririka exclaimed.

"You're welcome. I just hope no one gets mad at you."

"No worries!" The elf waved happily and left.

Didn't she originally come here to buy something?

"Let's sell this stuff, Mr. Reiji," Mina urged. "I'll totes vouch for it!"

"It does seem like there's demand," I admitted. "Yeah, let's give it a try."

Just like that, Sun Friend became part of the drugstore's product line. I had only one misgiving, however: Would everyone who used it start acting like a confident, bubbly teenager?

My concerns turned out to be unfounded. Most customers who used Sun Friend just got a nice tan. You apparently had to be pretty insecure about your complexion to transform any further. *Thank goodness.* I was worried that parents would complain about a shift in their children.

Meanwhile, Mina's tan had faded, but her demeanor stayed the same. "Noelly?"

"Groo!" Whenever Mina called her, Noela ran off, still wary.

Mina, for her part, got used to that reaction. For a few days, she didn't say anything to Noela, but eventually she asked in a serious tone, "Mr. Reiji… Should I, like…go back to normal?"

"What do you think?"

"Well, I'm totes sad that Noelly keeps acting like this." Of course she was. The two of them were so close before this. "But, like, being so pale just looks mega sickly, you know?"

Sickly, huh? This was definitely a personal issue to Mina. Even if some others envied her fair complexion, it didn't improve her impression of herself. If I could somehow change her negative impression of her natural look, though, Mina wouldn't have to struggle with that anymore.

Chapter 14:
However You Look

"'SUP?"

"Ooh! Ririka!" Identifying the elf by voice alone, Mina dashed into the drugstore.

This was the first time Ririka had dropped by since she first used Sun Friend, and I wanted to ask how things were going. Poking my head into the store, I saw the two bubbly girls chatting happily.

"Like, oh my *gosh*, yeah?"

"I just could *not*, you know?"

Mina had always been cute, with strong features; Ririka, meanwhile, was famous for her good looks. Although the girls had turned into gyaru, neither had lost those qualities—rather, they were cute and beautiful as always. *I'm okay with both versions, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't prefer the original Mina…*

"Ah, Mr. Reiji!" Mina called. "'Sup?"

"'Sup?" I replied in kind, but I wasn't sure why.

"How're sales going?" she asked.

"Super well, actually!"

Ririka nodded, satisfied with how things were turning out. "I *totally* knew that tons of people wanted to tan!"

"Darn right, Ririka! Plus—"

Before Mina could finish, another customer arrived—a somewhat rotund forty-something housewife. “I’d like some of that new product,” she asked. “Do you have any?”

“Sun Friend, you mean?”

The woman nodded. “Exactly! Everyone around me’s gotten so nice and tan! I’m the only one who isn’t! And they all look much slimmer to boot!”

That was what Mina had been on the verge of saying too. Sun Friend was originally designed to make muscles look more defined, but these days, most folks were using it for the purposes the woman described. They felt it made them look slimmer. I’d heard as much from other customers, and looking at Mina, she *did* seem thinner. Sun Friend’s new application surprised me, but I was glad the product was selling, at any rate. There was no point restricting how people used the stuff.

Mina returned to chatting with Ririka. “Ririka, babe. What’s up anyway? Just chilling?”

“Nah, no way, girl,” Ririka teased back. “I’ve got a request for Reiji.”

“Wait. For me?” *What is it?*

“Well, I totally think I’m, like, just the *cutest* now.”

I went along with that. “And…?”

“You should make something that’ll make me even *cuter*! You know?”

“Ooh!” Mina exclaimed. “I want it too!”

Eyes sparkling, the two chic chicks waited for my response. I always had trouble dealing with girls like these two in high school. *Why am I remembering that* now*, of all times?* At the moment, I wasn't too freaked out—maybe it was because I was used to Mina and Ririka.

I tried to get the two off my case a little. "There's no way I can make something like that. It would totally depend on who you wanted to look cute *for.* Everyone has different tastes, you know."

I expected them to agree, but I was way off the mark. "Who we want to look cute *for*?" Ririka repeated. "Isn't that obvious? It's for *us*, man."

"Yup," Mina agreed. "We wanna get cuter for ourselves, Mr. Reiji—not for anyone else!"

For themselves, huh? High school girls always said they dressed cute for themselves, not because they wanted to show off for other people.

Both Mina and Ririka had found something they wanted to focus on when they first used Sun Friend. Mina always put everyone else first; she supported Noela, the part-time workers, and me as if it were no big deal. It was fine for her to be a little selfish for once, wasn't it?

I didn't quite understand Ririka's motivations, but maybe she simply enjoyed dolling herself up too.

Peel had actually told me something that seemed relevant: "Bodybuilding improves my confidence, and seeing my muscles grow

makes me want to work harder." Bodybuilding and primping yourself up were two sides of the same coin. I'd have to remember that.

Besides, I *could* concoct a perfect product for making the ladies cuter. In fact, I even made it once before.

"I'm not sure my definition of 'cute' matches yours, okay?" I warned them. "The product I make might not suit you two. Is that all right?"

"That's *totally* fine!" they chorused.

"Seriously," I added, trying to give myself as much leeway as possible. "I might end up creating something weird."

The girls exchanged looks.

"Mr. Reiji, you'd…"

"Never give us anything *legit* weird, you know?"

The faith they had in me was plenty of pressure. Still, there was no way to duck out of this after what I just said, so I headed into the lab.

Noela poked her head in. "Master make product?"

"Yup. One I've made before, actually."

"What?"

"You'll just have to see when it's done," I teased, but then I let Noela help out anyway.

"Want Mina back to normal," Noela confided in me.

"Look," I sighed. "I know you've nicknamed her 'Evil Mina,' but she hasn't messed with you in any way, has she? And she still makes

you delicious meals, right?"

"Groo…" Noela seemed to follow me. Still, she loved the old Mina so much that accepting this new persona was a tall order.

I wondered whether Noela would understand if I explained Mina's insecurities about her appearance. "Look. Mina died young because she was sickly," I explained. "She never got to play outside in the sun like she wanted to—and she was always pale. It's due to those sad memories that she doesn't like her complexion."

I tried to come up with a comparison with one of Noela's sore spots, but nothing came to mind.

Noela just kept working silently, and thanks to her help, I finished faster than I expected.

Shiny Nails: Brush onto nails. Produces beautiful fingertips. Fast drying.

It was the same stuff I created for Stella, but I made a bunch of colors this time—pink, white, light blue, yellow, orange. Hopefully the girls would like at least *one* shade.

Noela's reaction was positive. "Groo! Pretty colors." Her tail wagged slowly back and forth behind her.

"You paint your nails with these," I explained.

"Nails?"

"Uh-huh."

I already had Stella test the product, so there was no reason to limit myself to trialing it today. I handed Noela the bottles of Shiny Nails, explaining how to use it. "Could you deliver these to Mina and Ririka?"

Noela hesitated and thought about it for a second. She then slowly nodded. "Mm-hmm. Noela deliver."

I gave her a couple of tiny brushes, and she headed out. If Kirio Drugs was going to sell Shiny Nails regularly, I'd need to order tons of those brushes from the general store.

I discreetly peeked into the drugstore as Noela explained the product to Mina and Ririka.

"Noelly, sweetie, whatcha got?"

"Ohmigosh! These are like, so adorable!"

"Brush on nails," Noela replied stiffly. In her own way, she was trying to adjust to the new Mina. "Super shiny. Pretty."

"No way would I skip something Mr. Reiji made," exclaimed Mina.

"For real!"

The bubbly girls chose the shades of Shiny Nails they liked best. Mina picked light blue, while Ririka went for the white. Then they picked up the tiny brushes and started painting their nails.

Afterward, both young ladies gazed at their new manicures from all angles.

"Amazing! This is so gorgeous!" Mina stared at her light-blue fingertips, stunned.

Ririka's white nails moved her just as much. "Whoa! They're so sparkly, like gemstones!"

"Want me to paint your nails too, Noelly?" Mina offered.

"N-no thanks." Noela shook her head and headed back toward my hiding place.

Shoot! She'll notice that I'm peeking! Panicked, I rushed back to the lab to await Noela. She came in not long after. "Well? How'd they react?"

"Perfect." Noela looked tired, like she'd just finished a long, hard workday. "Master's treatment amazing."

I stroked her head to thank her for working so hard, smirking. "It's not really a treatment, to be honest."

"Groo?" Noela just looked confused at that.

Soon after, Mina and Ririka came in, grinning.

"Like, *wow*, Mr. Reiji! Thank you so much," Mina chirped. "Our nails are so darn cute!!!"

"I knew you could do it, Reiji!" agreed Ririka. "You're the bestest."

Frankly, their nails looked fantastic. "I'm just glad you like them."

Just as some men desired strength, perhaps some women sought beauty. And not just fashion-obsessed types either. *I wonder whether Noela's the same?* She refused to paint her nails previously, but…

When the two young ladies excitedly left again, I turned to

Noela. “You sure you don’t want to paint your nails?”

“Groo. Werewolf. Nails important.”

“You don’t want to mess around with them, huh?”

“Right.” Noela nodded, yet as far as I could tell, she was pretty intrigued. Mina had noticed that too, which was why she offered to paint Noela’s nails in the first place.

“I don’t know anything about being a werewolf,” I added, “but it isn’t like you’re always digging your nails into things.”

“Just in case,” Noela insisted, although I doubted she’d ever rely on her nails with our current lifestyle.

***

At Mina’s urging, I started selling the many hues of Shiny Nails. Each shade proved popular with women of all ages seeking a bit of beauty in their lives, and Shiny Nails eventually became a must-have. It was a bestseller with male customers too, since they saw it as an easy present to give a lady.

The new product *also* had additional effects. As everyone focused on beautifying their nails, they realized that a manicure could also enhance your face and body. Thus, the same customers who purchased Sun Friend started buying Shiny Nails as well.

On top of Shiny Nails, Peel still bought Sun Friend regularly. “I stand out in the brigade thanks to you, Master.”

“Just because you have a tan?”

“Mm-hmm.” It wasn’t the previously weak shoemaker’s son standing in front of me. Instead, it was a confident, tan macho man.

I handed Peel the Sun Friend Mina grabbed for me. “Thanks as always,” I said.

“No, thank you. This stuff is a huge help!” Peel nodded, paid, and went home.

Mina was still in gyaru mode, but she hadn’t reapplied Sun Friend since she first used it. Her tan was gradually starting to fade. After a month, however, she was still speaking like an excitable teenager. I wondered whether she got too used to the lingo to stop using it. That certainly seemed possible.

And for the record, people had grown fond of this new Mina too. Before all this happened, some customers found her unapproachable because she was so polite with everyone. But now, she addressed people warmly, and they found her impressively easy to talk to.

I also got used to new Mina, personally. As time went on, I found myself consciously missing the old one less and less. I think that was partly because her new personality really hadn’t harmed anything or anyone at all.

When Noela and I were alone in the drugstore, I asked, “Do you still prefer the old Mina?”

“Groo… Don’t know.”

I had a hunch that Noela felt the same as I did. Compared to when Mina first transformed, the awkwardness between her and Noela had largely faded.

Noela opened a bottle of Shiny Nails and sniffed it. She looked it over from all angles. The stuff definitely interested her. That particular

bottle was Mina's. Whenever Noela was working in the drugstore and had time to kill, Mina sat near the counter, painting and blowing on her nails.

"Want to try it, Noela?" I asked.

"Werewolf. Look after nails."

Would using Shiny Nails mean she wasn't looking after them? Maybe she was just reluctant to try the stuff because she already told me she wouldn't.

I left the store and hid. From my spot, I watched Noela glance around and move toward a shelf that was just out of eyeshot. She looked like she was trying to be sneaky. Curiously, Mina's bottle of Shiny Nails that had been on the counter was now gone. Noela obviously planned to do her own nails just out of sight.

"Arroo…roooo… Groo?"

I heard Noela's conflicted growls. She was probably having trouble using the product. While Noela was athletic—she could do pretty much anything in that regard—I didn't think of her as good with her hands.

"Groo! Rooroorrroooo! Yeah."

Sounds like she managed to pull it off on her own.

Noela contentedly returned to the counter after that. Like I suspected, her nails were painted now, but not especially well. There was Shiny Nails all over her fingertips.

Is she really happy with that *level of manicure?*

Noela cheerfully wagged her tail regardless. Well, if she was pleased, it wasn't my place to offer criticism.

As Noela gazed down at her nails though, she slowly tilted her head. "Nails…different?"

Ah. She finally realized she hadn't painted them as skillfully as Mina or Ririka.

"Groo! Try again!" Noela began to repaint her nails at the counter. It seemed relocating again was apparently too much hassle. "Arroo… Not quite." She was really struggling.

"'Sup, Mr. Reiji?"

"Oh, hey, Mina."

"Lunch is ready and all. Get Noelly for me?"

"Wait." I waved Mina over, preventing her from returning to the kitchen. "Got a sec?"

"Groo?!" Noela exclaimed from the store. "Wrong again!"

"So, uh, Noela's using your Shiny Nails," I explained to Mina. "She's trying her best, but it's not going great…"

I let Mina watch Noela struggle for a while. "But, like… Noelly totally said she didn't want me to paint her nails… Yeah?"

Mina took that personally, huh? "When I asked her if she wanted to try Shiny Nails, she didn't take me up on it either. She turned us down with that excuse she made up about werewolves 'taking care of their nails,' that's all. She's actually interested, though."

"Gotcha." Mina looked relieved.

"Would you paint her nails? If we leave it to her, she'll use up our entire stock."

"Well… Yeah, okay, I guess I *could*." Mina nodded. Face stiffening, she stepped into the drugstore.

Noela quietly tried to hide the Shiny Nails. She already told Mina that she wouldn't paint her nails, so she would probably be embarrassed to be caught paint-handed.

"Want me to do your nails for you, Noelly?"

"W-werewolf must take care nails…"

"Shiny Nails totally makes your nails tougher though, yeah?"

Wait, it does? I never actually used the stuff myself, so it was entirely possible that Mina was lying to give Noela a way out of her anti-Shiny Nails stance.

Buckling, Noela presented her hands to Mina. "Please paint…"

"'Kay!" Mina giggled, then peered at Noela's nails. "You used too much, Noelly."

"Hard."

I couldn't see from where I was, but Mina made it sound as though Noela's nails looked more like a painter's palette. After removing the lacquer from Noela's fingers, she carefully painted her favorite light blue hue on the werewolf's nails.

"Mina…"

"Yes, Noela?"

Hey… She's speaking normally again.

"Sorry. Other Mina…also Mina."

"Don't worry your cute little head," Mina said gently. "I didn't think you'd react the way you did, and, well, it made me quite sad."

"Groo." Noela looked down apologetically.

"It's fun being like that, you know," Mina continued. "But if things will be awkward between us, I'm happy to go back to normal."

"Don't have to! Don't worry. Noela adjust." The werewolf girl said while shaking her head. "Noela selfish. Mina fine!"

"It's fine, Noela. I've had my fun." Mina sounded even sweeter than usual.

"Groo."

"Finished! Your nails look wonderful, Noela."

"Groo! Pretty! Mina amazing!"

"Tee hee hee!" Mina giggled bashfully.

"Show Master now!" Noela hopped off her chair and dashed away to find me. When she opened the door and found me standing outside, she had a suspicious look for a moment, but she got over it quickly and showed me her hands. "Master! Look! Mina did!"

"Aw, those look wonderful. Good for you." I patted the happy Noela's head.

"Groo!"

Mina was still in the drugstore, and she watched with relief as Noela praised her manicure for a while. Thanks to their earlier heart-

to-heart, the awkwardness between the girls faded until they were interacting as usual.

At the same time, Mina's tan faded completely, and her usual personality returned.

"Which do you prefer, Mr. Reiji?" Mina asked when we finished breakfast. "My regular personality or the other version?"

"Do I have to choose one?"

Mina giggled, grinning. "I guess you took a shine to the bubbly me?"

"Yeah. I was wary at first, but then I got completely used to it."

"Is it all right if I do that occasionally, then? I had a lot of fun."

"I don't see anything wrong with that." Especially so if Noela had stopped avoiding her.

Suddenly, the door opened, and Noela popped in. "Hurry, Master! Few potions! Make more quick!" She hadn't gotten her morning potion yet, so she was in a rush.

"Busy as always, Mr. Reiji," Mina laughed.

"You know it." I smiled and got up, following Noela as she rushed to the lab.

Afterword

HOWDY, ALL. Kennoji here!

So, this is a personal note—but now, this series has hit Volume 7 and it's the longest of all my works. The only reason I've gotten this far is because of you, the readers. For that, you have all my gratitude.

At long last (?), this volume featured the Sword Saint's debut! This series actually hasn't had many archetypal "narou" characters, and that's why I wrote Fiora Garon into this tale. I'm honestly pretty fond of him.

Narou types are tricky to incorporate as drugstore customers, you know? After all, they've generally got battle-focused roles like summoner, sword saint, sage, adventurer, and so on. Most of their daily struggles would relate to combat, and since Reiji refuses to make hazardous products…how would you put those characters together?

That said, narou types—like Garon, who debuted in this volume—kind of bring a unique aura into a story with them.

On another note, the anime has finished airing now. Early on, you could *technically* catch new episodes on Wednesdays. They weren't broadcast where I am, though, so I watched via D-Anime. Noela, Mina, Annabelle, Paula, and Vivi looked adorable in motion. I'd say their charm multiplied dramatically as they moved and spoke. I could see their expressions change right before my very eyes.

Whenever an episode aired, I couldn't help but search on social media for people's opinions. The reactions were super positive, so I

got pretty addicted to checking them for a while! Now that the broadcast has wrapped up, though, my only Wednesday entertainment for the time being will be watching Downtown. One season went by so quickly!

The efforts of the anime's production team and cast created a bright, fun, and cute series. Thank you all so much! When I'm dying, I feel like I'll think back to watching the anime!

I'd also like to express my gratitude to everyone involved with publishing this book, such as my head editors, the publishers, Matsuuni who always handles the illustrations, and the workers at various bookstores that sell it. Thank you so much!

I say this every time, but don't worry—Reiji's slow-paced life will keep unfolding.

I imagine the next volume will be a lot like the previous ones. I'll be thrilled if you stick around for the ride!

—KENNOJI



Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

Sign up for our newsletter!

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter

Table of Contents

Color Gallery
Table of Contents Page
Title Page
Table of Contents
Copyrights and Credits
Jnovels
Chapter 1: No More Slipping
Chapter 2: I Just Want to Get Stronger
Chapter 3: Market Research on Stiff Shoulders
Chapter 4: The Electric Cleaner
Chapter 5: The Irregular
Chapter 6: The All-Purpose Condiment
Chapter 7: Mina's Daily Struggles
Chapter 8: Touring the Capital
Chapter 9: The Case of the Vanished Griffin
Chapter 10: Beneath the Mask
Chapter 11: Gifts and a Goodbye
Chapter 12: Bodybuilding with the Red Cat Brigade
Chapter 13: In Terms of Tanning
Chapter 14: However You Look
Afterword
Newsletter