支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

Merchant meets spicy wolf.

狼と香辛料

Side Colors VII

電撃文庫


SPICE & WOLF
VOL. 7
SIDE COLORS
BY ISUNA HASEKURA
ILLUSTRATED BY JYUU AYAKURA


Someone was standing there, backlit by the sun.
The boy thought it was the voice of God.
The Boy and the Girl and the White Flowers


LAWRENCE SHRUGGED HELPLESSLY AND LOOKED UP TO THE EXPANSE OF THE SKY ABOVE HIM, WHICH WAS A CLEAR, CLEAR BLUE.
THE RED OF THE APPLE, THE BLUE OF THE SKY



Wolf and Amber
Melancholy

Contents

The Boy and the Girl and the White Flowers —— 5
The Red of the Apple, the Blue of the Sky —— 125
Wolf and Amber Melancholy —— 157



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SIDE COLORS

ISUNA HASEKURA

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ISUNA HASEKURA

Translation: Paul Starr

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SPICE & WOLF



THE BOY AND THE GIRL AND THE WHITE FLOWERS

Klass sat upon a flat rock by the road, just past a little hill.

Without anything to obstruct the view, he could see quite a ways in every direction, despite the hill not being particularly large.

Things looked the same in every direction, and although he had heard that the road continued all the way to the sea, he couldn't see so much as a river.

Klass, just ten years and a bit more in the world, could not begin to conceive of what exactly the "sea" was.

But from what he had heard, it was not something that one could easily overlook while walking down the road, so it had to be a ways off still. He set the fat stick he was using as a walking staff down beside him and picked up a leather water skin. He wetted his lips with just a bit of the bitter, leather-flavored water. The breeze ruffled his brown hair, and he looked casually back over his shoulder.

The house that had kicked them out was long since out of sight. Klass felt more vindicated than lonely at the fact.

He didn't know exactly why he felt that way, but in any case, the goal had entered his field of vision.

He wondered if she'd stopped because of the white flowers that were in bloom there, and indeed it was so.

Winter was over; its dry, freezing winds were at an end, and in the spring sunshine the scent of soft grass filled the air. Squatting down, gazing tirelessly, almost hungrily, at the nameless flowers, she looked not unlike a sheep.

Her head was completely covered by a hood, and the hem of her white robe nearly touched the ground.

He was close enough to see the places where the robe was slightly dirty, but from a bit farther off, she would definitely resemble a sheep.

Her name was Aryes.

She said she didn't know how old she was, but to Klass's frustration, she was just a bit taller than him.

Thus he'd decided that she was two years older than he was.

"Aryes!" Klass called her name, and Aryes finally looked up. "You promised we'd make it over four hills by midday!"

Although he still didn't know what Aryes was thinking generally, Klass had grasped a few key truths.

One was that she would never do something just because he asked her to, but if he got her to make a promise, she would always keep it.

Klass wondered how many times he'd thought about leaving her behind after she'd stopped midwalk before he realized that fact.

Aryes sluggishly stood and dragged herself up the hill, looking back several times at the flowers as she went. Klass sighed at her and spoke.

"Are they that rare?"

He was still sitting on the flat rock and so looked up at her.

With her hood over her head, her face was not visible unless one was very close or looking up at her from below.

So it was that Klass had traveled with her for some time be-

fore realizing that while her expression changed little, the face beneath the hood was very lovely.

"Those are... flowers, right?" asked Aryes, as though trying to confirm something very important.

"Yup, they're flowers. You saw them yesterday and the day before, didn't you?"

Her cool blue eyes were cast down at the flowers that grew at the base of the hill.

Another breeze came up, causing a lock of blond hair that strayed out from under her hood to tremble.

"But... it's really odd," said Aryes.

"What is?"

Aryes looked at Klass for the first time, cocking her head questioningly. "There were no vases beneath those flowers. Why weren't they wilted?"

Without so much as a furrowed brow, Klass looked down from Aryes's face to the rest of her.

"We don't have much water, so don't get dirty—didn't I tell you?"

Aryes's hand was hidden by her sleeve. When Klass took it, he found that her fingers were dirtied with soil.

It had even gotten underneath her fingernails—her clean hands now gone to waste.

Klass was about to wipe them off with a cloth from his waist, but Aryes suddenly snatched her hand back and looked at him with suspicious eyes.

"I was told that filth comes only from the heart," she said. "It is not good to lie."

Klass tried to figure out something to say but finally gave up. "You're right. I'm sorry."

The corners of Aryes's eyes crinkled as she gave a small smile, and she nodded, satisfied.

* * *

In the end, her promise was broken—they did not make it over four hills.

However, once Aryes saw fit to preach on the subject of having broken the promise, they had lunch.

As Aryes had been strongly opposed to eating breakfast, Klass wouldn't have been able to stand not eating a big lunch.

That said, in the burlap bag over Klass's shoulder were seven slices of tough, tough bread made from horse oats, each slice big enough to hide his face behind, and some fried beans, a bit of salt, and one skin of water.

That was all they had been able to get from the house when they'd been chased out, and it was soon obvious that if they didn't eat the food carefully, it would be gone before they knew it.

He'd take a certain amount of bread and beans out, but otherwise the bag stayed tightly closed.

Fortunately Aryes ate surprisingly little. Today, too, she had but ten fried beans and one-eighth of a bread slice. Gradually, bite by tough little bite, she consumed the hard oat bread, offering prayers before and after she ate.

For Klass's part, he felt that since it was he who was giving her some of his precious food, thereby sparing her from traveling without any food at all, she should be thanking not God, but him. However, Aryes insisted that it was God who'd provided the food in the first place.

Klass felt this was somehow unfair, but he could think of no retort and was thus silent.

He had been subjected to a wide variety of unreasonable explanations of her strange behavior, but if someone had actually suggested that such explanations made her clever, Klass would've shaken his head.

Aryes's most outstanding feature was her unbelievable ignorance.

"Ah…," said Aryes, looking up. When Klass turned to see what she was looking at, he saw a brown bird flying across the sky.

As he mused that if he could catch it, pluck its feathers, and cook it, it would be tasty indeed, he remembered Aryes's words when she'd first seen a bird and for a moment forgot how distasteful the bread was. It had made enough of an impression on him that he felt he truly knew what the word *astounding* meant now.

Aryes's inquiring gaze brought him out of his reverie and back to reality.

"That's a bird, is it not?"

"Yeah, it's a bird. It's not a spider, and it's not a lizard."

"And it's… flying, is it not?"

"That's right."

He regarded Aryes's face as he picked fragments of oat out of his teeth with his finger. She looked impressed, as though she'd been told a great secret—strange but sweet.

When Aryes had first seen a bird, she said that it was a spider crawling across the ceiling.

For a moment Klass hadn't understood what she was saying. But as he listened to her, he realized that she thought the sky was merely another ceiling not far away and that the bird was a spider crawling across it.

Despite his surprise, Klass felt that to make sport of her confusion would reflect badly on him as a man, and so he explained to her that the sky was held up by a very tall tree, taller than she could even imagine, and that the bird was actually flying through the air, below the sky.

She'd been doubtful for a while, but as she watched birds

take off from the ground and fly up into the air, she finally accepted this.

Many things went this way.

Asking why the flowers in the field didn't wilt despite not being in vases was actually one of her less strange questions.

Aryes had apparently lived in a building surrounded by high stone walls next to the mansion where Klass has been forced to work as a servant.

She had never left the building that she could remember, and reading books was one of the few pleasures afforded her.

As time passed, Klass had come to know of the people who entered and exited the building.

From what he could tell from the rumors he collected, the master of the mansion had been tricked by people from a nation in the south into constructing the building, and those who came into and out of the building were also southerners.

Occasionally he would hear from over the walls strains of a song, but he could not understand the words and wondered if they were in the language of the south.

However, the master of the mansion seemed to have no love for his own land and spent the whole year traveling all over, and the head steward seemed not to know the particulars, or such was the collective opinion of the mansion staff.

So it went, and Klass learned that the song he occasionally heard was meant to praise God only when he heard the fact from Aryes herself.

He had heard the song about three times at close range.

"Well, shall we go?" asked Klass, popping the last bean into his mouth.

One day, suddenly, a large group of unfamiliar people came to the mansion. They brought a lot of supplies and livestock with them. When the mansion staff stopped their work to

gaze at the newcomers, the finest-dressed, largest-bellied man among them introduced himself as the younger brother of the mansion's master.

"From this moment forth, you are no longer residents of this mansion," he said. "Gather your things and leave immediately."

Evidently the former master of the mansion had died during his travels, and his younger brother had come to live in his place. Whatever it was he didn't like, he kicked everyone out, including the people in the stone building.

Some cried and wailed or were stunned into silence, some took it as a joke and tried to continue working, and some even clung to the younger brother (or whoever he was) himself. Of them all, only Aryes walked unsteadily away.

Shortly thereafter, Klass ran after her, once he gathered up some of the water and bread that the mansion's new master tossed out like so much chicken feed.

Off he ran to catch up with the girl who tottered down the road that led to the sea, as though she were being guided.

"Let's try to make it over six hills before sunset. At this rate there's no telling how long it'll take us to get to the sea."

"Is that a promise?"

"Sure, it's a promise."

Klass knew that Aryes would probably keep them from making it over six hills but that it would be his promise that was broken and the fault would lie with him.

But in order to get Aryes to move, he had no choice but to make the promise.

And if he was being honest, he didn't mind terribly looking at her exasperated face as she lectured him.

* * *

Compared to being yelled at and beaten while hauling water pails all over the mansion, Klass found traveling with Aryes to be relaxing and enjoyable.

But there was one part of it that he found deeply nerve-racking. And that was nighttime.

"The night is nothing to fear. Just as the day has the sun and the night the moon, God is always watching over us."

"... Y-yeah," he answered in a hoarse voice, though in some strange part of his head he felt that the only things watching over them were the moon and the many stars in the sky.

They lay atop the last hill they'd reached that day.

Although he knew there was nothing and no one around, he was still a bit bashful.

"This is what God said: A person alone fears loneliness and hunger and trembles in the cold. But with two, loneliness is healed and cold's edge softened."

"... Yeah."

"Are you still cold?"

Klass very nearly answered but only shook his head.

However, Aryes did not seem to believe him.

Her arms already encircled him, and she pulled him in with more strength, embracing him.

"It is good to endure hunger. But God never wishes for us to be cold."

Though he'd now heard these words four times, Klass's body still trembled with nervousness.

At first he'd been unable to sleep because of it, and it was all the worse now that he'd noticed just how lovely Aryes really was.

Removing her large outer robe and using it in place of a blanket, Aryes embraced Klass tightly.

Though it was spring, the nights were yet cold.



While the travel was no great burden for Klass, different only from his previous experience in that he was now sleeping outside most nights, Aryes seemed to consider the camping a trial sent by God and did what she could to lessen it—by using her body's warmth.

On the second night he slept soundly, thanks to his exhaustion from not sleeping the previous night. On the third night he somehow found his way past his nerves to sleep.

By the fourth night, although he'd begun to get used to the routine, he noticed how sweet Aryes's body smelled, and as he breathed it in his face reddened. It was sweet but not sweet like the smell of honey over fresh-baked bread.

The situation inspired feelings of guilt in Klass—there was something he wasn't telling Aryes.

"—nchoo!"

He heard her sneeze.

Here she was worrying only about other people, but Klass was sure she was cold herself, too.

She stirred slightly. "God may be angry at me for saying this," she started to say. Klass couldn't see her face, but he could nonetheless tell she was smiling. "But I don't think I could have done this alone. I'm so glad you're a girl, Klass."

Klass had never once in his life been mistaken for a girl, and if a hundred people were asked, surely all one hundred of them would laugh at the idea's impossibility.

But he was quite sure that Aryes sincerely believed he was a girl.

After all, the single time they'd passed a horse-drawn cart, Aryes had turned pale and said, "Is that the animal they call *man*?"

"I've gotten quite sleepy. Good night."

Aryes was quite deft at such things, and once she said she was sleepy she would soon be asleep.

Klass deliberately did not reply and stayed silent.

Once he heard the rabbitlike sound of her sleeping breaths, he very gently nestled his head into her bosom, praying nobody was looking at them.

When he said, "Good night," as though it was an excuse, it really was just an excuse.

That night, he suddenly awoke.

He glanced up at the sky and saw that the silver of a moon had almost crossed the entire sky.

It was the deepest part of the night.

The cold was considerable, and pushing away his shame, he put his arms back around Aryes's body.

He stirred for a moment but finally found a comfortable position and took another breath.

It was very still all around, and the only sound was that of Aryes's breathing.

Back when he'd slept in the mansion's barn, there was never a single moment of quiet.

Rats were constantly scurrying around in search of overlooked scraps of livestock feed, and they'd come crawling into his clothes whenever they liked. The eyes of the snakes and owls that fed on the rats gleamed in the darkness, and those were hardly the only night visitors. There were foxes after the chickens and wolves after the sheep.

When they sensed danger, the horses would stir and struggle, and the clucking and crowing of the chickens would reach a crescendo as they ran about.

The nights he spent with Aryes were so quiet his ears rang with the silence.

And when the sun rose and morning came, there was no one to work him like a dog and none of the endless chores. Falling asleep had never before been such a pleasure.

While he'd been surprised to be thrown out of the mansion, he didn't understand why the other servants had been so stricken by it that they'd wept. They didn't have to do chores anymore.

It was true that they didn't have much more food left, but he was sure they'd reach the sea before they ran out of food. The sea was apparently full of fish, so all they had to do was catch some and eat them. And if they could do that, why not just live there?

He wasn't sure if Aryes had ever seen a fish. Surely not. He'd have to explain to her, then—explain that they were animals that could swim underwater without drowning.

He let slip a soft laugh at the thought of it. It was very quiet.

Klass then tried to chase such things from his head and go back to sleep, whereupon he heard the faintest hint of a new sound.

Thup, thup, thup went the quiet sound.

It might have been Aryes's heartbeat.

Klass thought it mysterious that he could hear it so clearly, despite the swell of her chest—but then he realized something strange.

He could hear the sound from his other ear—his right ear, which was pressed to the ground.

Thup, thup, thup went the sound.

"What could it be?" he murmured to himself.

Immediately he reached back to grasp the stick he was using as a walking staff.

"Wo—"

Wolf, he was about to shout, but he swallowed the word, raising his head and looking around.

Ba-bump, ba-bump roared a pulse in his ears. It was the sound of his own heart.

The beating of his heart seemed to force breath audibly from his mouth.

He swallowed hard and looked to the right. Then to the left.

The moon was in the sky, and visibility was good.

But he could see no sign of a wolf.

"Aryes, Aryes."

His palms were sweaty, and his throat was dry.

He shook Aryes's shoulder and looked around but could see nothing.

But whatever it was out there seemed to have noticed the change in Klass. He felt the change in the mood.

Anyone that slept in a barn knew—whether they wanted to know or not—that wolves were special.

Those golden eyes shining in the dark of night.

Though Aryes had finally awoken, her focus had yet to fall on him, and she was so seemingly helpless it made him want to fool her.

Klass pulled his staff close and looked out again over the land.

Wolves rarely attacked humans, or so Klass believed. Three times before they'd jumped over his head with a chicken in their jaws, but he couldn't help wondering if that was because there'd been chickens to eat.

There it was again, the sound—*thup, thup, thup, thup*—seemingly louder than it was before.

He was sure of it—they were watching him, sharpening their fangs.

What should I do? he asked himself silently over and over

again. He wasn't considering taking Aryes and trying to run away, mostly because the moment he moved he was sure they would attack.

What should I do?

Aryes finally seemed to come completely awake and looked at Klass uncertainly.

It chilled him like cold water over his head, and he tried to put his finger to his lips.

"What's wrong?" asked Aryes, sitting up, just as they heard an indescribably beautiful howl.

"Wh-wha—?" Aryes looked frantically around, utterly bewildered.

In his gut, Klass felt like he wanted to cry, wanted to rage, but managed somehow to endure the stabbing feeling and jumped to his feet, looking ahead, and then he saw it.

He saw in a moment that the many shadows that fluttered atop the moonlit hills melted into the dark of night at the reverberation of the howl.

An instant later, his eyes met the golden irises of another's.

"Hurry—*hurry*, we have to go!" Trembling, his hand shook as he grabbed the burlap sack and took the hand of a bewildered Aryes.

And even then, he was frozen, unable to stand.

The wolves had stopped trying to hide their footfalls, which now sounded like a gust of wind blowing through the forest.

He was too scared to stop his teeth from chattering, but he mustered up enough courage to hold his staff at the ready.

He pushed Aryes behind him, terrified but brandishing his staff like a spear.

The wolves dove into a pool of darkness as they descended the hill, and then they charged back out of the depths.

Transfixed by their golden irises, he felt with strange clarity the sensation of his own mouth splitting in a wolflike smile.

Fear was forcing him to bare his teeth.

But the wolves, of course, were not flinching from their charge—

"—Huh?"

Suddenly, the lead wolf jumped sideways.

It was so jarring that for a moment, Klass wondered if someone had shot an arrow at it.

The wolves passed Klass and Aryes, hitting the ground and wheeling back around. They were so close that he could see every one of the hairs on their raised hackles.

But their gaze was not on Klass and Aryes, their intended prey—it was on something farther off, and they crouched low. Fangs bared, they growled, their forepaws poised to jump.

They could've pounced at any time, but they seemed less like they were hunting prey and more like they were turning to face an enemy.

Had they been shaken by Klass's courage?

Unrelated to such thoughts, the wolves were watching a single point, and then an instant later, they jumped and scattered.

It took a moment for Klass to realize that they had all run away.

They had fled farther and faster than they'd arrived.

The overwhelming sense of danger was entirely gone, without leaving so much as the feeling of having been saved.

Klass, stunned, watched the wolves retreat, and for a moment he didn't think about anything at all.

The only reason he looked back at Aryes was that she'd touched his back.

"Wh-what happened?" She was trembling slightly.

"There were wolves... That was a close one," he said, hands

still tight around his staff. He had no intention of teasing Aryes for her shaking but still hadn't realized that he was shaking himself.

Aryes cocked her head slightly. "Wo... wolves?"

She sneezed charmingly. Aryes didn't know what a wolf was. That meant her shivering had to be out of nothing more than the chill.

Klass looked at the staff he'd brandished as a spear, his lip curling. Disappointed, he dropped it.

"Wolves. They were about to attack us just now, weren't they? They attack people, and they attack livestock."

"Oh, my. Are they... men?"

Klass wondered if she was making fun of him.

But then he remembered the words of the mansion's stable master, who'd been old enough to be his father. "Yeah. Men *are* wolves."

At those words, finally Aryes's face evidenced some fear, and she drew a quick breath, looking around.

"It's all right. They've all gone off some—"

But he didn't finish his sentence.

Since in the space of a moment, his face had been pressed into Aryes's soft chest, and he couldn't so much as breathe.

"Ngh... guh..."

"Do not worry! I will... er, no, ah—God will protect us. There is nothing to fear!" she said, hugging him tightly. Klass was now more scared of her than the wolves.

What if right here, he was to tell her the truth, that he was a boy? What would she do?

Even Klass knew that it was wrong to lie and to deceive people.

But when he moved his head slightly and caught his breath, Aryes's scent filled his nostrils.

The scent was more than enough to erase the memory of terror about the attack, though their lives had only just been saved.

He decided to stay quiet on the matter for a bit longer.

"Still, I wonder what scared them off."

He had definitely gotten the sense that the wolves had been startled.

What could possibly scare off an entire pack of wolves?

He glanced in the direction they'd been looking, but all he could see was the grassy landscape and the pools of darkness, and he felt nothing particularly ominous or monstrous about it.

Still in Aryes's arms, he could not, of course, answer the question for certain, but his nervousness was long gone. Evidently with the skin warmth that followed a cold sweat, sleepiness came soon after. He yawned hugely.

Aryes loosened her embrace when Klass squirmed a bit, and though it pained him to do so, he finally forced the words out.

"I think we're safe now. Let's sleep. There are still hours before morning."

Aryes finally nodded at those words.

It was then that the uncertainty disappeared from her face.

The next day started with the early-rising Aryes waking him.

For a moment he flashed back to the previous night, but there were no wolves to be seen, with only their footprints left in the plains as proof that the night's events hadn't been a dream.

The morning played out much as it had before.

The only parts that were different was the worry that came with their dwindling food and water supplies—that and Aryes's complexion having improved a bit and that she said her feet hurt.

Aryes's problem could be solved by taking a short break, but the water issue troubled Klass greatly. He'd heard from travelers that passed through the lord's estate that one could go a week on an empty stomach but that three days without water would kill a man.

"You don't happen to know where a river is, do you?" he asked Aryes, just in case.

The plains seemed to continue on forever, the narrow road through them likewise. It was now the fifth day since they'd left the house, so they had to have traveled a considerable distance. He'd heard one could circumnavigate the world in two months.

While some part of him still couldn't help but make light of Aryes's naiveté since she'd apparently lived within walls her entire life, even Klass himself had never realized the world was so very large.

It made him unreasonably angry, and he walked faster.

Midday passed and evening came, and despite the breaks for Aryes's sake and the slowness of their pace, they'd climbed their twelfth hill of the day, the most so far.

And all that met his eye was grass, trees, and hill after hill after hill.

When he looked back, he saw Aryes behind him, whose interest in insects and flowers had been replaced by the exhaustion of the long trek. She had stopped a ways down the hill, and showed no sign of walking any farther.

For his part, Klass could easily keep walking, and the fact that they'd failed to reach another town yet because of their slow pace frustrated him.

Aryes could walk farther, he was quite sure. Just as he sighed and was about to call out to her, she squatted down right where she stood.

Just a bit of water. The unseen next town. The sea at the end

of the road, whether it was there or not. And the unimaginably wide world.

Such words floated up in his mind, stirring up his irritation. Up until the previous day the travel had been relaxed, but today all he could feel was that they were moving too slowly.

It made him want to click his tongue in frustration, and he didn't bother hiding it.

As usual, she didn't move.

"…Ugh."

He was so angry that he didn't want to bother raising his voice and for a moment even considered leaving here there.

It was just one road, so even she shouldn't get lost.

Just as he was thinking about how nice that would be, there was a strange sound.

"…?"

He looked at Aryes, who had one hand on the ground.

And then—

"A-Aryes!"

She moved, and just as Klass thought she might get up, she vomited onto the ground.

It was so unexpected that he couldn't move. Aryes didn't so much as look up before collapsing onto her side.

Klass tossed his bag aside and ran to her.

"Aryes! Aryes!"

He was more stunned than worried.

Rushing to her side and picking her up in his arms, he pulled her hood back and called her name.

Aryes slumped, unmoving, and past her open mouth, he saw her slack tongue and couldn't help but think of a dying sheep.

"Aryes!"

It wasn't concern that replaced his surprise—it was terror.

Aryes was going to die.

Wanting to cry, he shook her shoulders. He slapped her face. But there was no reaction.

A wave of fear rose up within him—now Klass was the one who felt nauseated.

Immediately thereafter, Aryes vomited again.

Thank goodness, Klass thought. *She's not dead.*

His relief lasted but a moment, though, as with nothing more to expel, she curled into a ball and moaned in pain.

Klass rubbed the tears from his eyes, took the handkerchief from his side, and wiped Aryes's mouth with it.

After that, he didn't know what else to do.

The words *healing herbs* occurred to him, but he seriously doubted the grass that surrounded them would have any effect at all.

Aryes's pained breathing was getting quieter and quieter. It made him imagine her life as a flickering flame, and the thought brought tears anew.

He wondered if she hadn't been tired but ill.

If he'd known, he would have taken more breaks from walking.

The excuses and regrets swirled around in his heart, but no words save Aryes's name came from his mouth.

And yet he did call her name, shaking her slack shoulders.

"Ugh... what... what should I do...?"

He could not bring himself to say what he was thinking: *Somebody help me.*

No one would help him in a place like this.

And if someone did come, it would probably be the useless God that Aryes was always praying to.

Yet in the bottom of his heart, he wished deeply for someone—even that bogus deity—to come and save them.

"Oh, God..."

And when he heard it, he thought it *was* the voice of God: "Whatever happened here?"

He looked up, totally shocked to hear another voice, but he couldn't make out its source through his teary eyes.

He rubbed them and looked again.

There was no one there.

"What...?"

Tears began to well up again.

"What happened here, boy?"

Behind him.

Klass looked back, and indeed, someone was standing there, backlit by the sun.

"Ill, is she?"

The clear voice didn't seem to match its tone. Since the figure was backlit and Klass was still sitting, he couldn't ascertain its height or face.

But pathetically, the simple fact that someone other than him was now present caused tears to overflow anew.

"I-I-I don't know...Sh-she just fell over, and..."

"Hmm," the shadowy figure murmured, lightly whirling around to regard Klass from in front of him.

It was a woman.

She peered at Aryes's profile. "Hmph, this looks like—"

Klass unconsciously straightened.

The woman continued.

"'Tis simple exhaustion," she proclaimed anticlimactically.

"...Huh?"

"Look at how hard her legs are," said the woman, reaching out to put her hand on the prone Aryes's calf.

"B-b-but—"

"She asked many times for a rest, did she not?" added the



woman flatly. "And worse, she hasn't been eating properly. 'Tis no surprise she fell."

Now that it had been said, it seemed like the most obvious thing in the world.

But as soon as he realized it, something strange occurred to him.

"How did you know that?"

"Curses. Slip of the tongue." She deliberately put her hand to her mouth and looked the other way.

There was no mistaking it: She must have been watching them from somewhere.

But Klass had gotten a good view of their surroundings every time they'd crested a hill.

There was nowhere for anyone to hide.

So where had she been watching from?

"In truth, I'd planned not to say anything to you. But this was simply too pathetic." The woman patted Aryes's side and shot Klass an accusing look.

A hot feeling stabbed through his chest. "N-no, I always tried to—"

"Tried to think about her? Hmph. You knew perfectly well that her body and yours are quite different."

He flinched at the words.

It wasn't just that he was at a loss for something to say—he was stunned.

"Heh. I've been watching you since last night. You know well and truly that she and you are not alike," she said, her expression shifting to a sticky smile.

Klass could feel his face becoming hotter and hotter.

He'd been watched.

"I suppose that's what they mean when they say, 'The luck to be born a man.' Still"—the woman stood with her hands on her

hips, lips curling into a fang-baring smile—"you had the pluck to stand your ground before the wolves. That much is praiseworthy."

"Wha…ah!"

"Hmph. Not a very discerning lad, are you?" sneered the woman past her fangs, looking down at the boy.

No, it wasn't just that.

He'd just that moment realized something.

It had been so strange that he simply hadn't seen it until that moment.

The woman that stood before him wore a cloak around her shoulders and a sash tied around her waist, with fine fur-lined trousers. Her hair was chestnut brown, but atop her head there was something strange.

"If you're just noticing these, you must not have noticed this!"

Her cloak swished dramatically.

"Ah…ah…!"

"'Tis fine fur, indeed, no?"

The puff of fur swished audibly.

The grandly furred wolf tail swayed, and the beast ears atop her head flicked.

In that moment, the memory of the wolves' actions the previous night flashed through his head.

"C-could it be—"

"Could it be?"

The woman's gaze pierced him, as though testing him.

"Last night, the one who saved us, that was…"

A breath of wind caused both the hem of the woman's cloak and the tip of her tail to flutter.

The light of the setting sun fell across her profile. "Indeed," she said as Klass was at a loss for words.

"It... it was you! You chased the wolves away!"

"I merely happened to be sleeping nearby. They realized I was there and turned tail of their own accord."

The woman sounded almost bored. Klass swallowed after closing his gaping mouth.

He'd heard many times of beings that looked human but were not who occasionally descended to grant good fortune or to play tricks on mortals.

Klass spoke in a tremulous whisper. "Could you be a... a spirit—?"

"Hardly!" said the woman with sudden irritation, tossing her head.

But the mysterious part-beast person before him soon made an awkward face.

"Hmph... well, 'tis true that some of your kind do call me such things. But I like it not."

Her expression of wry embarrassment at having shouted made her seem not so very much older than Klass.

And her face was unmistakably beautiful.

"H-how... shall I refer to you?" asked Klass, using the words he'd heard adults use in such situations, but the woman's brows only knitted in further irritation.

"I do not like *that*, either. And untangling your stumbling tongue is a nuisance."

Klass's face felt hot at the teasing being directed at him, but thinking the girl was some kind of spirit, he looked down.

Whereupon the sprit sighed and brought her face nearer to the ground.

"Come, look up. I only thought to aid you in your difficult travels. I did not reveal myself to you to endure your worship."

He was too scared to look up.

And yet, still timidly, he brought his gaze up to meet hers.

"Heh. You're still at the age where such an expression suits you."

The smile that greeted him when he looked up made him realize that there were many different kinds of smiles in the world. The instant he saw it, he looked down again, his face even redder than before but for a very different reason.

This time the spirit did not become angry.

"My name is Holo," said the spirit briefly as she squatted down.

It took Klass a few moments to realize that she'd introduced herself. "M-my name's Klass... ma'am."

"No need for 'ma'am' here."

"R-right."

The spirit named Holo smiled bitterly and stood. "And this one's name is Aryes?"

"Y-yes, that's right, but—"

"How do I know?"

Klass nodded.

"Did you not call her name out so charmingly and so many times? 'Aryes, Aryes!'?" said Holo, arms folded and clasping her own shoulders.

Klass had finally regained his composure but reddened again at this.

"I don't know that shaking a weakened comrade so is a kindness, though."

Startled, Klass looked at Aryes's face.

"Having lost consciousness, I'm sure she's calmed herself a bit. Just wipe her mouth clean and keep her warm now."

Nodding silently as though he had a piece of bread stuck in his throat, Klass moved Aryes from her unnatural-looking, collapsed position to a seemingly more comfortable state, then stood.

Though the bag he'd dropped was not so great a distance away, he was worried about leaving Aryes alone and thus hesitated to fetch it.

At which Holo said, "I'll watch her for you," then gestured to the bag with her chin.

Klass finally started running, but when he turned around to look over his shoulder, he saw Holo crouching down by Aryes, murmuring something to her.

He wondered if it was some sort of secret.

"Honestly, if this were wintertime, you'd be dead on the roadside somewhere," said Holo as she went through their things while Klass tended to Aryes. "You've no blankets! What were you intending to do in case of rain?"

"Huh? Er...," said Klass as he wiped Aryes's mouth clean with a moistened cloth.

Though he was trying to warm her up, he had no fuel for a fire, and as Holo pointed out, no blankets—so he was reduced to putting a simple jacket on her.

"Take shelter somewhere... I suppose..."

A sigh and a withering look were all that greeted him.

Klass looked down in spite of himself.

The fact was that there was no shelter to take as far as the eye could see.

"'Twas on a lark I decided to follow the strange pair wandering away across these plains without so much as a spring or a river, but to think you'd have been so unprepared!"

It angered Klass to hear her say this, but his fear kept him from saying anything.

"And while we're speaking of strange things, you're odd companions indeed. Why are two children traveling alone?"

Klass couldn't help but look up sharply at the word *children*.

While Holo seemed a few years older than him, she wasn't so mature he'd call her an adult.

"Foolish boy. I'm at least two centuries your elder."

"I-I'm sorry." It was strange—having had it pointed out to him, he could now see it.

After all, the girl was a spirit, so nothing about her would surprise him.

Having convinced himself of this, he found there was no reason to hide anything, so he answered her question.

Holo lay sideways, chewing noisily on a piece of oat bread she'd gotten out of Klass's things, and as Klass told his tale she acknowledged it with flicks of her tail.

"I daresay the mansion you were driven from was of a noble house called Antheo."

"Y-yes... you know them?"

"I heard a bit about them in a town I was in not long ago—that there was an eccentric nobleman out in the countryside. But I see—so he's dead, is he?"

Klass didn't know whether or not the lord of the mansion was an eccentric or not, but the word *countryside* bothered him.

The mansion was a magnificent place, and there were at least twenty servants and stone buildings like the one Aryes had occupied.

And nearby the estate there were grapevine trellises and villages, too.

As Klass thought about it, he became aware of Holo grinning at him.

"Indeed, you set out on a journey and were a helpless chick before long."

"..." He didn't know why he was being laughed at, but it was frustrating, and Klass looked away.

That seemed only to invite more laughter from Holo, who snickered covertly. "Be not angry, boy. Were you yourself not surprised at the size of the world?"

Stunned, he looked back at Holo.

"Nay, the reason I know that is because I felt the same way when I set out on my own travels."

Klass got the feeling that he was being manipulated this way and that, but she didn't seem to be lying.

"...Is that so?"

"Aye. The world is vast indeed. And—"

But her words cut off there. Klass followed her gaze and saw that at some point the sleeping Aryes's eyes had opened slightly.

"Aryes—" Klass called her name, forgetting all about Holo, and Aryes's eyes focused on him many times faster than her usual rate of awakening.

"Ah...wha—why—?"

She sat up, not seeming to understand the reason for her current position. Klass hurriedly tried to explain.

"You collapsed just a moment ago! Don't you remember?"

Having been reminded, she finally seemed to recall.

A bit of a flush began to creep into her much-improved complexion.

"As a servant of God, I am deeply ashamed. However, I am now well."

Despite the mere five days of their travel, Klass was beginning to understand her personality.

Though he might tell her to sleep, her tone revealed whether she was likely to do so or not.

He didn't try to stop her awakening, and thus she quite obviously noticed Holo.

"Oh, my...," she murmured and then paused.

The beast ears atop the head, the magnificent wolf tail—these were unmistakable signs of a spirit, and they were right before her eyes. Her surprise was understandable.

Aryes stared openly at Holo's inhuman attributes.

Klass was suddenly very worried that Holo would become angry at the rather rude staring. And just the previous night, Aryes had thought wolves to be men.

He would have to say something outrageous.

Just as he'd come to that conclusion and was about to try to whisper in her ear, the frozen Aryes seemed to come to a sudden understanding and nodded convincingly. "Oh... you're from far across the sea, aren't you?"

Klass was about to correct her mistaken notion—though the truth was just as strange—when Holo cut him off.

"Aye. I'm called Holo, and I've traveled here from far in the north."

Far from being angry, she smiled as though amused, and her tail wagged happily as though emphasizing the fact.

Aryes accepted the coat that Klass offered her, then bowed elegantly. "I am Aryes Belange," she said.

Klass had heard even kings bowed their heads before a spirit, and so while being in front of one was deeply intimidating, he found the idea of not knowing terrifying.

But since he'd heard that spirits came from a land where only they lived, perhaps what Aryes had said was not actually mistaken.

"So, how can we assist you?"

This may have been appropriate back at the mansion, but here Klass couldn't stop himself from speaking up. "N-no! Ho—Holo... she saved you, Aryes."

He stumbled over her name when he realized he didn't know how polite he needed to be when referring to her.

In that instant, he had avoided calling her "Lady Holo" after seeing the sharp glint in her amber eyes. For whatever reason, she seemed to hate such reverence.

Aryes looked surprised anew and hastily corrected her sitting posture.

Klass doubted that Aryes would be able to properly express her thanks, but that doubt lasted but a moment.

Aryes straightened and suddenly looked surprisingly adult.

"My sincere apologies—and again, my thanks," she said, putting her hands together and bowing in much the same way she did when praying before a meal.

Klass was stunned at Aryes's composure, but when he looked at Holo, he saw she was delighted. He felt relief at having managed to avoid rousing her anger.

Still, he was shocked that Aryes had revealed herself to be so levelheaded.

"And if that is true, then I would very much like to repay the kindness you showed in saving me."

"Kindness, eh?"

"Yes. Unfortunately we are but travelers and are limited in what we can offer."

This was like a different person from the Aryes who'd asked why the flowers in the field did not wither without vases.

He suddenly felt shame at having so condescendingly explained so many things to her.

"Hmph. I need no material goods. Instead, let me see..." Holo glanced at Klass.

At the same time, Aryes, too, looked over her shoulder at him, and for some reason he suddenly felt like a frog enduring the gaze of a serpent.

Though each of them was very different, somehow Klass got the feeling that he was the odd man out.

Amused, Holo continued. "Would you let me travel with you for a while?"

"Huh?!" Klass said without thinking and again felt himself under the gaze of the other two.

It did not seem that any objections would be allowed.

Then Aryes turned back to Holo, smiling, and spoke. "If it would please you to do so."

"I'm thankful."

The two nodded to each other like old friends, then just continued on with their conversation.

Klass was not amused.

And yet—he was not sure *why* he was unamused.

"Well, my things are over yonder. Would you help me gather them?"

"Ah, yes." Aryes stood, and Klass stopped her.

"Aryes, you rest."

"But—"

"Just rest," he repeated a bit more forcefully, and the surprised Aryes gave a hesitant nod.

Holo watched the exchange amusedly, then said, "Over this way," as she began to walk. "Heh. You needn't have been so demanding," she said, immediately taking the lead.

"Uh...well..."

"You could've merely said physical work is for men, nay?"

She looked over her shoulder at him, and Klass could feel his face becoming hot under her gaze.

Holo knew everything.

She giggled. "Ah, such troubles!"

Her tail swished happily beneath her cloak.

"Still, I expect eight or nine of ten males would act the same way. 'Tis nothing you need worry over," she said as though to encourage him, patting his back—none of this made Klass any happier.

After all, her face was still smiling as though she might burst out laughing at any moment.

"Oh, come now, I'm your ally."

You liar were the words that he felt in his heart.

Even Klass knew when he was being teased.

"Heh, 'tis true I'm making sport of you. However—" Holo took a quick step ahead of Klass, then turned and peered down at him from above.

Her eyes were the eyes of a wolf gazing at its prey.

Klass, entranced, could not bring himself to look away from those amber eyes.

"Shall the three of us sleep together tonight? With you in the middle, of course."

No sooner had Klass heard those words than he imagined the scene and immediately thereafter tripped over his own feet.

When Holo had asked to travel with Aryes and the two of them had looked at him, he'd felt like a frog under the eyes of a serpent for just this reason.

Holo crouched down beside where Klass had fallen and spoke. "What, can you not wait until evening?" She smiled maliciously.

But before Klass could feel anger at the jab, he realized he was comparing Holo's smile with Aryes's in his mind, and now at his wit's end, he stayed prostrate on the ground.

He could not help feeling as though he was a truly pathetic creature, indeed.

When he hit his own head a few times and looked up, Holo spoke, her expression now gentle.

"I'll make a proper male of you yet."

Klass collapsed again.

Thus the journey of the three fatigued travelers had begun.

* * *

Klass awoke sneezing, the first sneeze he'd had in some time.

I've been so warm these past few days and yet—he thought to himself, curled up in a blanket. But then he remembered that it was not so.

Yesterday, for the first time in a while, he'd slept alone atop a hill, the horizon yet uninterrupted.

Until then, he'd slept beside his traveling companion in order to conserve warmth—with a slightly odd girl named Aryes.

Just thinking about it was enough to take the edge off the cold, but there was a good reason why he hadn't been able to do it the previous night.

Klass and Aryes, having been driven out of the mansion in which they'd lived, were slowly traveling a road that led to the sea and had encountered a mysterious guest. Her name was Holo, and she claimed to be Klass and Aryes's senior by two centuries, despite looking merely Aryes's age, or perhaps a little older. But as she had a beast's ears atop her head, a wolf's tail at her waist, and sharp fangs in her mouth, Klass could not doubt her claims about her age.

And as for the reason Klass was enduring the cold and sleeping alone—that was Holo's doing.

"Let us all sleep together," Holo had said the previous day.

Klass had only been able to sleep with Aryes before that because of Aryes's extreme naiveté—she didn't realize Klass was a boy.

But Holo was different.

Holo had made the suggestion only to tease him.

No matter how majestic a spirit she might be, he could not take her up on it.

So in the end, Klass had borrowed the blanket and slept

alone. Aryes and Holo had slept together, using their robe and cloak in place of the blanket—and yet Klass pictured the two of them curled up together fast asleep and could not help but feel he'd wasted an opportunity.

Holo was surprisingly mean for a spirit, and Aryes was, well, *Aryes* and tended not to understand things very well, but there was no mistaking the fact that they were both beautiful.

Of course, he couldn't very well go and ask to be allowed between them now, but there would be no harm in just taking a look.

So Klass told himself as he poked his head out of the blanket—and right in front of his eyes, there was Holo.

"Shall I try to guess why you're making such a face?" Holo yawned and seemed to be grooming her tail.

Klass couldn't hide his face back under the blanket but feebly shook his head nonetheless.

"You're the last."

As Klass slowly emerged from the blanket, he saw that Aryes was indeed awake and a short distance away was saying her morning prayers.

He looked up at the sky, where God evidently was. It was cloudy again and a bit chilly.

And speaking of gods, the god right in front of him, Holo, tossed her tail aside after grooming it for a while, then produced a crust of bread from within her own possessions and broke off a generous piece for Klass.

Despite the fact that it was no harvest festival that day, it was wheat bread—wheat!

"'Twas a gift. No need for restraint."

Even if he'd been told to restrain himself, Klass's hand would've taken the bread of its own accord.

Still, he was worried about Aryes, who flatly refused to eat breakfast.

"Oh, that? I've already persuaded her. Look," said Holo.

She turned to Aryes, who was returning from her prayers, and tossed a piece of bread at her.

Aryes hastily extended both hands and caught the bread against her chest, as though she were saving an infant. Even Klass, who was far from well mannered himself, was surprised at Holo's impropriety. "Y-you're throwing food—!"

"It is the nature of the world that the wheat of the harvest will eventually return to the earth. Is there some reason I cannot throw bread, which is merely wheat ground into flour and baked?"

"Huh...?" Klass made an inadvertently foolish face while Aryes cocked her head as though someone were pinching her nose. Then, at length, she gave a vague nod.

Klass felt as though he was somehow being fooled, but he couldn't quite put his finger on how.

It was said that not even the wisest man could best a spirit.

"That's how it's done, lad," whispered Holo into Klass's ear, and he couldn't help being a bit impressed with her. "So, your destination was the sea, was it?"

Perhaps she was used to eating such bread; while Klass nibbled stingily at his portion, Holo downed hers with greedy gusto.

"M-more or less," said Klass.

"A meandering journey for two, eh?"

Klass shrunk back at the tease. "That's not really what it is, but..."

"If you're not truly wandering, then you've got to decide on a proper destination," said Holo definitively, popping the last bite into her mouth.

The word *wandering* echoed through Klass's mind for a moment.

He'd heard tales from such travelers, who migrated from nation to nation on horseback, faces gloomy and cloaks battered and worn.

But when he's spoken of such things, the other adults at the mansion all seemed to laugh in the same way, so he'd kept silent.

"Still, your eating is as slow as your waking is late."

"Huh?" At Holo's words, Klass looked down. He had not eat eaten even half of his bread.

He immediately thought that Holo's eating was merely too fast, but then he looked at Aryes.

"What is it that humans say? Eating like you need a knife and spoon, eh?"

Klass had often been told as much when his water-fetching and livestock chores were piling up.

For the nobility who used knives and spoons, the slower one ate, the better.

Naturally Klass had never used a spoon in his life.

He hastily crammed the remaining bread into his mouth.

Although the rich flavor of the bread now filled his mouth in a way it couldn't possibly have done so while he was nibbling on it, a few chews and a swallow later and that was it.

He was feeling as though it had been a bit of a waste, but it was gone now and what was done was done.

He'd been further pushed by the fact that even Aryes, who was normally a very slow eater, had finished.

"Right, then, let us gather our things and set off. The sea is yet far, but the next town is quite close."

At Holo's words, Klass immediately set about cleaning up.

He soon realized that he was the only one doing so, but he couldn't interrupt Aryes (who was now in the middle of her post-breakfast prayers) and ordering Holo to help him was out of the question.

Still, the one thing he couldn't abide was having to care for Holo's things in addition to his own.

In contrast to Klass and Aryes's meager belongings, Holo's bag contained everything a traveler needed. The heaviest part was a wineskin filled with wine.

"What do you mean, you can't carry it alone? How did you come this far, then?" Klass complained at the unreasonable request, which Holo flashed her fangs at and brought her face close to his, smiling mysteriously.

"You really want to know?"

There were several reasons for Klass's nervous gulp and nothing to make him nod in the affirmative.

Holo nodded, satisfied, and with a wave of her tail, she set off walking.

Klass had relinquished that pressure in exchange for this heavy burden; he sighed and walked after her. In any case, if this was the amount he was expected to carry, it was hardly impossible.

As he was considering the situation, he sensed a presence beside him. When he looked over, it was Aryes.

"Shall I help you?"

It was the first offer she'd made in six days of travel, but Klass knew she had collapsed of exhaustion just yesterday. He could hardly accept it and so demurred.

"But...," she began, looking more assaulted by personal guilt than concern, and so Klass gave her the food bag they'd originally been traveling with.

"Take this, then."

Aryes nodded and took the bag.

Klass didn't know why she was suddenly so eager to help but in any case was certainly happy she cared at all.

"Well, let's go."

Aryes slung the bag's drawstring over her shoulder and followed obediently behind and to one side of him.

This was a first for their travels together, but as Holo was already striding ahead, Klass had to hurry to keep up.

He was worried that Aryes would collapse again, but it seemed as though they were approaching level ground as the rolling hills grew lower, and by the time they stopped for their midday meal, they'd been able to climb three small hills.

Just before that break, Aryes—who'd been silent the entire time—spoke up.

"I forgot to give my thanks for protecting me from the wolves, so thank you very much!"

Klass was a bit taken aback at her strangely stiff affect and phrasing, which made it seem as though she'd been trying to find the right moment to say this.

She was likely very serious about such things.

"Um, y-you're welcome."

At this answer, Aryes sighed in obvious relief and smiled weakly.

It was so oddly charming that Klass was about to hastily add, "Please, don't worry about it," but he saw Holo sitting down ahead of them at a bit of a remove and said nothing.

Her gaze was fixed elsewhere, but her ears were pointed at them.

"A-anyway, let's stop and eat."

In that moment, he noticed Holo's profile looking suddenly irritated.

Klass realized that Holo had likely made him carry her luggage in order to elicit this thanks from Aryes.

He wished she would mind her own business.

Such things were not why he was traveling with Aryes.

And yet, being thanked so directly by her was a simple joy.

* * *

After their midday meal was over, Holo sprawled out on the ground.

She was no doubt sleepy from the large amount of wine she'd gulped down.

She'd sent Klass and Aryes on ahead, saying she'd catch up with them later. They left behind only the blanket.

Since the party's walking speed was limited to what Aryes could manage, Holo could let them go ahead and still easily catch up. What made Klass sigh was the way Holo had so quickly invited herself along to travel with them and then just as easily did as she liked even after joining them.

Of course, no matter what Holo's conduct, it was more than made up for by the debt they owed her for sharing her bread with them.

One could not argue with the person who fed them.

Thus it was that for the moment, Klass was again traveling alone with Aryes.

But it seemed that the reason she'd walked alongside Klass without straying all morning long was her searching for the opportunity to say the thanks she felt she'd missed. Now she would walk for a while, then stop, looking at him questioningly.

The constant stopping was honestly irritating, but the questioning looks were not at all unpleasant.

Naturally he couldn't help but tell her whatever she wanted to know.

After some time, she let slip a sound that might well have been a cry, which Klass turned at, surprised.

"Aryes?!"

In an instant, the events of the previous night flashed

through his mind, but he soon realized that if there were more wolves, Holo had said she would deal with them.

Aryes stood a short distance away; she looked at Klass, then pointed.

For a moment he thought it was terror that colored her features—but no, it was something else.

Not terror, but confusion.

"What's wrong?" The moment he heard her cry, Klass had nearly dropped the bags he was carrying to run to her side, but when he realized the lack of urgency in her voice, he reshouldered the burden and simply walked over to her.

Leave one's things unattended and they were liable to be snatched away by a hawk you'd never seen. Klass thought of the times he'd lost his meal to opportunistic livestock when tending them back at the estate.

"Wh-what's that...?"

As Klass approached Aryes, the nuances of her expression became visible.

Her face wasn't confused as much as sad and worried.

He looked to where she was pointing.

There, just far enough away that it must have felt confident in its ability to escape should these strangers approach, was a brown rabbit.

"A rabbit? What about it?"

Even if it was her first time seeing a rabbit, it had nothing of the presence of, say, a horse, and if anything was rather cute, Klass thought.

Just as he was wondering what she could possibly be so upset about, Aryes swallowed and answered his question.

"Its... Its ears..."

When Klass realized the reason for her sad, worried state, he couldn't help but laugh.

She thought its ears had gotten that way because someone had stretched them.

"All rabbits have ears like that. Those long ears are how they hear things far away."

Klass had heard the wolves' footfalls against the ground the night before, but when he'd slept in the estate's barn, he'd often heard the rabbits that lived in nearby dens thumping the ground with their feet.

When they hit the ground like that, their rabbit friends would hear the sound with their long ears and understand it as a warning of an approaching fox or wolf.

"Are you quite certain that... someone didn't do something terrible to it?"

"Yes," said Klass, which seemed to finally relieve Aryes. "Still, it sure looks tasty." The hare was chewing away as it watched the pair vigilantly. Its fur was fine and it was rather large. If it was roasted over a fire, Klass could easily imagine the thick, oily texture that would greet him if he bit into a roasted rabbit thigh almost hot enough to burn him as the juices trickled down his chin.

But once he'd said this, Aryes looked at him with utter disbelief.

"Huh? Uh, er, no, I-I meant the grass the rabbit is eating. It sure looks like it's tasty! That's all I meant!" Klass hastily amended his statement, and though Aryes was regarding him as though he was a scoundrel of the worst sort, she seemed finally to believe him, and her expression calmed.

"Ah, I see. I'm so sorry, I thought—"

"No, it's fine—I'm sorry I scared you."

In truth it was Klass who had been scared, but it seemed he'd managed to avoid Aryes's scorn.

Still, if that was so—had Aryes never eaten rabbit?

Klass pondered this, and after a time Aryes spoke up uncertainly.

"There undoubtedly is—"

"Hmm?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I mean, there undoubtedly is much I don't know about in the world," she said, her gaze distant.

Though her profile was calm, it seemed tinged with a quiet awe.

Aryes had said that she'd lived her entire life within the stone-walled confines of that small building.

Klass's mouth moved of its own accord. "Well, let's see more of it!"

"Oh?"

"We'll go far away. To the ocean, to all over."

Holo had said they needed to have a destination or a goal.

It seemed like a grand idea to Klass to have traveling the world and seeing its sights itself be the destination.

But Aryes did not react for a time. For a moment it was as though his words had been a spell that turned her to stone, but her expression finally softened.

Klass was a bit surprised at the very adult smile she wore.

"Yes, let's. Though I suppose I'll need to walk a bit faster," she said, her smile now the one Klass knew well.

Klass, nonplussed, nodded three times, and then instead of clearing his throat, he rebalanced the bags over her shoulder. "So long as you don't collapse," he said teasingly.

At this Aryes drew her chin in and hid her face beneath her hood.

It was such a childish gesture, and Klass was relieved. "Let's be off," he said.

He started walking as Aryes followed.

The sun was setting by the time Holo finally rejoined them.

* * *

"...Guh..." The voiceless sound came out of his throat unbidden. No matter how he tried to feign otherwise, there was nothing for it—he coughed hoarsely.

"Heh-heh. I suppose you're a bit young yet."

Holo took the wineskin from the coughing Klass and grinned unpleasantly.

According to her, it contained filtered grape wine.

Klass had always heard the word *grape wine* and imagined something sweet, but what he drank was more like spoiled grape juice that burned even though it was cold.

"Looks like this one's not just taller than you, she's more grown-up, too." Holo took another swig from the wineskin, then had a bite of jerky.

Height had nothing to do with it, Klass wanted to say, but couldn't come up with a good retort.

Aryes had been able to drink it with a straight face, and if she could do it, he thought he could, too—right up until the miserable accounting he'd just given of himself.

"Wine is the blood of God. If you can't drink this, it's proof that God's teachings aren't entering your body," Aryes had scolded him.

Since Klass had never heard any of these supposed teachings, that was probably true, but in any case it was humiliating that she could do something he couldn't.

"Wine is meant to be enjoyed. There are other liquors to drink to prove your pluck." Told thus by the spirit, he had no choice but to back down. "Though I do pity you being unable to enjoy this pleasure."

These last words, though, were directed not at Klass, but at Aryes.

Aryes seemed perplexed for a moment and looked at Klass.

Still frustrated at having been coddled, Klass looked away.

"Still, when one constantly calls upon God after having received His blessing, failures will also increase," said Aryes.

"It pains me to hear it," said Holo, twitching her wolf ears as though flicking an insect away.

Aryes smiled, then unfolded and refolded her arms on her lap awkwardly, as though embarrassed. "The most common failure is being unable to wait as the juice drips from the cloth one has bound the grapes in..."

"And so you wring it out by hand, yes? And then for some reason, it tastes awful."

Aryes closed her eyes and put her hand to her right cheek. "'If grape wine is the blood of God, and the blood of God is the blessing taken from his body, then you are fools who seek blessings though it injures God,' I was told."

Klass didn't really understand what Aryes was talking about, but Holo seemed deeply amused, as though she'd told a joke of the best sort.

The only thing he did understand was that whenever Aryes had heard those words, her right cheek had been struck. She rubbed her cheek as though remembering the pain.

"I felt deeply sorry. I knew I would never do such a thing again."

"And so you leashed your craving, eh?"

Aryes opened one eye and looked at Holo, whose head was slightly cocked; the two let slip a little ripple of laughter.

"I keep God's teachings and receive only those blessings I have earned."

"Catching one drop at a time, then licking it from your finger would surely be...," said Holo with exaggerated relish, and Aryes closed her eyes again and smiled.

But now her hand on her right cheek was not there to remember the pain, but rather to savor the memory of tasting something delicious.

Aryes's new expression and manner transfixed Klass; he felt it deep in his chest.

For a moment he was startled by it, but then realized there had been a tingle there ever since he'd downed the wine and felt somewhat relieved.

"Still, 'twould be a poor life not to know this particular pleasure," said Holo.

At those words the two of them looked at him, and Klass suddenly felt like a very young child, and like a young child he turned away angrily.

The sun had set during the exchange, and thanks to the cloudy weather they were truly surrounded by darkness.

As they had no fire, once night came there was nothing to do but sleep.

It was the same group—Holo, Klass, Aryes—as the previous night, but perhaps having gotten bored with teasing, Holo did not suggest they all sleep together.

Klass was simultaneously relieved and disappointed at this; it was a strangely lonely sensation, and he was frightened of thinking about it too much, so he wrapped himself in his blanket and closed his eyes.

The moderate throb of pain in his temples was surely due to the wine.

When he thought of Aryes, who tired after only a bit of walking, whose questioning eyes turned to him every time she saw something new, and who easily drank the wine, he sighed.

He was the one who had to hold her hand and pull her down the path she so unsteadily walked.

Such were the thoughts that occupied Klass as he drifted off to sleep.

It was only when he awoke, with a sensation like missing a stair-step, that he realized he'd fallen asleep.

"...Mph..."

He wiped a bit of drool from the corner of his mouth with the blanket.

"Maybe I shouldn't have," he murmured to himself, remembering that the blanket belonged to Holo. He finished wiping his mouth with his own sleeve, then still lying on his side, glanced up at the sky.

He felt like he'd been asleep for only a short time, but at some point the cloud cover had thinned, and a bit of moonlight was now escaping through. He shivered and drew the blanket tighter around himself but soon realized that the source of his shiver was not the cold.

If it had been pitch-dark, it would've been impossible to find his way back to the blanket after relieving himself, but fortunately his eyes could see in this light, so he sat up. If he tried to endure and went in his sleep, well—the thought was too awful to contemplate. There was the fact that he was right by Holo and Aryes, and above all the insects would be terrible.

He remembered a bed-wetting incident many years in the past and shivered again.

The reason he went a fair distance away from his blanket was both because he simply didn't like the idea of going near where he slept and because the idea of being seen by Aryes was flatly humiliating.

Once he got far enough away, he was finally able to relieve himself.

"Whew..." The moment of bliss over, Klass sighed, satisfied, and turned around.

But between the darkness and his sleepiness, he had difficulty retying his trousers' drawstring. He looked down at his fumbling hands as he walked lazily back.

As he was tottering back to where he'd slept, Klass murmured his thanks at having just finished his business.

"What, so you never noticed me?" There in the gloom that left only the barest outlines of the world visible, Holo's amusement-narrowed eyes were still strangely bright.

"Th-thought you were an owl spirit!"

"Hmph, and yet I am a wolf."

When he could not laugh, she stepped on his foot.

Klass hesitated to protest, whereupon Holo walked away, so he gave up entirely.

Once she was a short distance away, she looked over her shoulder at him and beckoned him near.

"Wh-what?"

Holo stopped and sat, motioning for Klass to sit beside her, which he did. Once they were sitting, they were roughly the same height, with Klass shorter than Holo only by the length of her ears.

"I've something I wish to ask you," she said.

"Something to ask me...?"

Klass wondered what it could possibly be that she would make a point of asking at this dark hour, when Holo slowly spoke.

"'Tis about Antheo, under whom you worked for a time."

"The lord?"

"Aye. Are you quite certain that he died?"

Klass remembered that when he was relating the events leading to his journey, Holo had seemed to take notice of the lord.

Perhaps they had been friends.

"'Quite certain,' you say... I just... I don't know."

The lord's younger brother had simply arrived with his retainers and declared it to be so, after all.

"Hmph... but from what I heard, he had a habit of going on long journeys."

"Ah, well, that is—after a while, he would come back with strange objects or people."

It was the collective opinion of the servants that his strangest habit of all was the stone building with Aryes in it.

"So what you're saying is that even at best you don't know where he traveled. Dim hope, indeed," said Holo with a sigh, lying down on the spot.

Not so much as a bug made a sound, and the only thing breaking the silence was the swishing of Holo's tail.

"Did you know him?" asked Klass.

"Me? No, nothing of the sort."

Holo lay sideways, propping her head up with an elbow on the ground.

From what he could tell of her form lit by the hazy moonlight, she was used to sleeping outside. Holo stayed like that for a while, looking at nothing in particular, and was silent, and Klass did not ask any further questions.

It was Holo who finally broke the silence.

"From what I heard, Antheo was seeking an immortality elixir."

"Im... mort...?"

"Immortality. It means living forever without getting old."

Klass could only mouth a befuddled, "Wha—?"—what would be the point of such a thing?

"Heh. You've only just been born, so of course you can't imagine it." Klass pulled his chin in, offended, and Holo regarded him. "Compared to many other creatures, humans live

quite a bit longer, but they still grow old and decrepit in a twinkling. Even I cannot claim not to understand why one would want to avoid such a fate."

While Klass still couldn't really wrap his head around this, something suddenly occurred to him. "Oh—but I'm sure you'll always stay young and pretty the way you are now, Miss Holo!" he said hastily.

Holo was briefly taken aback, then smiled, showing her fangs. "Something about being reassured by a child so young rubs me the wrong way. But of course, my beauty is eternal."

She sniffed and flicked her tail and seemed genuinely proud of this.

In any case, she wasn't angry, which was a relief.

"But your words are half right," said Holo.

"Huh?"

"'Twas not I that would use the immortality elixir," said Holo with a self-deprecating smile, sounding somehow embarrassed.

Klass barely managed to ask, "Then who?" when—

"One more thing," said Holo, glancing behind her. "So I hear Aryes lived in the same building since birth? Is that true?"

He hadn't told Holo anything about that, so she must have heard it from Aryes last night when they slept side by side, but Klass had no idea why Holo would look to him to confirm the story.

But setting inquiry aside, Klass told her what he knew.

"I-I think so. At least, the adult servants all said so."

"Hmmm." Though it was not clear whether she was actually interested or not, Holo nodded and gazed off into the distance.

"What's the matter?" Klass finally asked, unable to resist, which Holo shook her head at.

"Ah, 'tis well. But if Antheo is truly dead, that means I've no longer a destination. I meant it as a bit of a joke, but I may be traveling with you for quite some time."

"..."

Klass fortunately managed not to say anything, but his preference for traveling alone with Aryes must've shown on his face.

Holo raised an eyebrow bitterly. "I may well be a nuisance, but to have it show so plainly on your face hurts a bit."

"N-no, I didn't mean—"

"Ah, so I can stay with you forever?" asked Holo with a grin, which Klass could now hardly shake his head at.

And it was true that Aryes's charm was enough to balance out Holo's malicious smile.

So Klass nodded slowly, eliciting a chuckle from Holo. "At that rate, you'll have no cause to complain if your dear Aryes slaps you clean across your face."

Her brilliant smile turned into a mean-spirited grin.

Evidently spirits could read minds.

"Heh-heh. Ah, well, 'tis the right of all children to be honest. Should you be fool enough to bring her flowers, I'll be kind enough to let you."

Finding a retort was more trouble than it would be worth, so Klass simply cast his gaze up to the moon.

"Still, I envy you."

"...?"

Holo spoke as though muttering to herself, then sat up and crossed her legs.

He could see only a bit of her profile, so it was hard to be sure, but she seemed to be looking far off into the distance.

Holo was silent for a while, then looked back at Klass and spoke.

"What would you do if wolves were to appear right now and attack?"

It was an unexpected question and it took him off balance, but Holo the spirit was here, so surely there was nothing to fear.

"Er, I'd try not to get in your way…," Klass immediately answered, and Holo smiled a bit ruefully, then flopped down on her side.

Klass flinched away because not only did she lay on her side, she also rested her head right in his lap.

"'Tis a logical answer indeed, but there's nothing so hated as a selfish male."

"I-I see…"

"You do not see. You should've said something more like 'I would sacrifice myself to protect you.' Come now," she said, slapping his leg, which could only mean that she wanted him to actually say it.

Even if he was alone, saying something like that was embarrassing enough, but Holo was right there, her gaze upon him.

But he got the feeling that if he *didn't* say it, she'd be angry, and she wasn't going to release him until he did.

And yet he hesitated for a while, but at Holo's deliberate throat clearing, he composed himself. He took a deep breath as though he were about to jump into cold water, stuck his chin out, closed his eyes, and opened his mouth.

"I…I would sacrifice…"

"Hmph."

"…S-sacrifice…"

"Mm?"

"…Myself…"

Having gotten this far, his mind went blank.

When he stopped without continuing the sentence, Holo

rolled her eyes and muttered, sitting up, "Sacrifice myself to protect," she prompted.

"Oh, right, 'Sacrifice myself to protect you.'"

Having finished this, he realized that it was a short thing to say, but it had felt like reciting a lengthy poem.

Even after he finished repeating the line, he left his chin up, and his eyes remained closed.

He knew all too well that Holo was looking at him, as her gaze was so keen it felt as though something were poking his cheeks.

"Heh. Aye, I suppose that'll do," said Holo, finally turning her gaze away.

Klass let his chin drop and took a deep breath as though having just emerged from underwater.

"Still, if that's so difficult you'll have a hard time climbing that next step."

"Er, next step?"

"Aye." Holo's reply and her action were simultaneous.

Immediately thereafter, Klass was quite sure he had died.

Not only could he not move, but he couldn't even breathe or blink.

"Heh."

Klass could not tell whether Holo had actually let slip a chuckle or if the sensation of her finger softly tracing his ear had made him imagine one.

What he *could* tell was that Holo had wrapped her arms around his neck and rested her head on his shoulder.

The silence continued for a while.

His left ear began to tingle, which he realized later was because of the sensation of Holo's breath upon it.

He had no idea why she was doing this.

It was dreamlike and stifling all at once.

"Goodness, if I were to bite you like this, it's as though you would just die on the spot."

Holo's words were like a hand thrust into the mud of his mind.

Though she was obviously making a joke, nothing about this seemed funny to Klass, and he was finally able to turn his head.

What met his gaze when he did so was the moonlit glow of her beautiful amber eyes and her preternaturally white fangs.

That and her dizzyingly sweet scent.

Even in this state, with his field of vision tilting wildly, the one thing he could see strangely clearly were those white fangs, her lips curled up to reveal them.

At that moment, he truly believed she was about to devour him.

As Holo's mouth with its fangs approached him, some part of his numbed mind murmured that he wouldn't even mind it if she did.

A sensation akin to sleepiness made him close his eyes.

All that remained was her scent.

Yet—

"..."

Holo did not eat Klass.

"Ho, I can't very well devour you thus," she said lightly, suddenly releasing him from her embrace.

In that instant it felt to Klass like the dreamlike layers that had enfolded him all popped like so many bubbles.

No—they *had* popped.

He was stunned for a moment, then looked at Holo as though he'd dropped his favorite sweet on the ground.

What happened next made his heart break at her distant face.



Holo giggled. "When you look at me like that, it makes me want to continue, it does."

She tapped him on the nose with her index finger, and he knew she was joking.

Klass finally realized it.

He'd been toyed with.

"Don't be angry. It's not as though I'm offering not to do it only if you'll protect me from that."

"Huh?" Like a well-trained dog, Klass looked in the direction Holo nodded. "Oh—" His mouth froze in the shape of a cry. "A-Arye—!"

He couldn't finish the word.

There at the end of his gaze was Aryes, who was supposed to be sleeping a short distance away.

She was propped up slightly, her face somewhat hidden—*Purposefully?* Klass wondered—beneath the robe she was using as a blanket. Out from under that robe came her unreadable, colorless gaze, to which Klass had no reply.

Just after he realized his back had broken out in a cold sweat, Aryes averted her eyes, just like she had when they'd watched the rabbit in the field.

Klass felt like he'd been caught doing something very bad. No—this *was* very bad.

Although he didn't know exactly *what* was so bad, his brain ran in circles trying to come up with some kind of excuse.

Next to him, Holo chuckled in a lowered voice.

She still hadn't entirely released him from her arms, so he could feel her chortling; it was just like the sound of a rabbit thumping to warn of approaching danger.

"I have heard that love burns brighter when its road has many obstacles," Holo said.

"N-no, that's not—!"

"Well, then there's no need for concern, is there?" she shot back.

He glared resentfully at her, but she seemed to regard his harsh gaze as a gentle ray of spring sunlight. "This won't do. When I see such a lovely cub, I can't help but tease it," she said, lightly releasing him from her arms. She stretched with a groan, then waved her tail grandly.

He felt just like a dog that had been soundly beaten in a play fight, and the comparison was not just hypothetical.

Because, after all, he'd been toyed with again.

"You cannot simply gaze greedily at a thing forever," whispered Holo low enough that Aryes, who was undoubtedly listening in, would not be able to hear. Cocking her head, she continued. "But you've learned something now, yes?"

"Huh?" he replied, not understanding.

Holo's face looked irritated. "Ah, 'tis well," she said, shaking her head. "But know this: It's not only wolves that will bare their fangs at you and her. Far from it, as she is a young maiden."

"Wha—?"

"You've about as much charm as you have lesser traits. Now all you need is courage." These last words were delivered as Holo stood and ruffled Klass's hair.

He angrily pushed her hand away, but Holo only laughed and walked unconcernedly back to where she had slept.

Her movements were so light it was easy to think that the exchange that had just happened was nothing more than a brief dream during his night's sleep.

In any case, he watched Holo recede; she did not clarify her last words to him.

He slumped and let slip a sigh less from dejection than from relief at having been released by Holo the wolf.

Then he reached up to fix his mussed hair but suddenly stopped short.

It would be a shame to straighten it, he realized, since it acted as a landmark by which he could continue the dream.

As soon as Holo reached her destination, she seemed to have a hushed conversation there, immediately after which Aryes met Klass's eyes for a brief instant.

He suddenly felt like it would be a very bad idea to leave his hair mussed.

Klass fixed his hair and sighed again.

Holo and Aryes talked quietly for a while but eventually were silent.

Klass took the opportunity to return to where he'd been sleeping.

He was very tired, and suddenly felt he understood less than ever before.

"Still," he murmured into his blanket.

There was one thing he did understand.

While they both might smell nice, Holo and Aryes were nothing alike.

And if he had to choose which one he liked better...

Klass put the question to himself but smacked his own head before answering.

The night was wearing on.

He sighed so heavily it seemed like his blanket would be blown off.

A strange feeling of guilt made him unable to look at Aryes the next morning.

But Holo seemed to have patched things up nicely, since after Aryes finished her morning prayers, she greeted him as happily as she always did without hesitation or awkwardness.

He was honestly relieved at this, but a feeling of loneliness lingered in his chest.

Klass was surprised to realize that he'd been expecting Aryes to have misunderstood and therefore be in a foul temper.

As he hastily told himself that he most certainly did not want to attract Aryes's affection, he started to think of himself as more and more foolish.

And yet—, he thought.

He tried mentally switching Holo's and Aryes's positions and imagining the situation that followed.

In his mind, Holo was mysteriously charming.

"...Oh."

Feeling as though he'd become just a bit cleverer, he nodded to himself, but then his head was suddenly smacked, and he snapped out of his reverie.

He looked up to see Holo's displeased face.

"Hurry. Will you not eat? You're last to finish again."

Klass was startled by the sudden strike, but at the same time, he was suddenly worried that the contents of his imaginings had somehow been seen.

He jammed the wheat bread that Holo had again provided into his mouth, swallowing it along with his secret thoughts.

"Eating with haste is an art unto itself," muttered Holo, sounding so bored that the events of the previous night might never have happened.

Klass couldn't help but feel a bit disappointed, but evidently she wasn't reading his mind. He sighed in relief.

He once again wound up carrying everyone's luggage, and they set off walking.

Today Holo and Aryes walked side by side with the burdened Klass walking ahead.

He tilted his ear to try and hear their happy conversation; it

seemed they were still discussing liquor. While a moment ago grape wine had been the topic, they were now discussing some kind of brown wine made with bread.

In any case, having suffered defeat at the hands of the wine earlier, it was not a topic that deeply interested Klass.

Raspberry juice mixed with water and honey was a far tastier treat, in his opinion.

However, Klass did not have the gumption to turn around and tell that to the musical chirps of laughter behind him.

Doing so would only elicit sad smiles of pity from them, he was sure.

He kept the lead, sulking at having been left out of the conversation, when he realized that groves of bushes and stands of boulders were becoming more frequent.

The landscape was beginning to shift from plains to scrub, and from the hilltops, the dark forms of trees were visible.

The forest spread out ahead to their right, and far off in the distance, there was a small mountain visible.

In contrast, the view to the left was all tall grass and thickets, and if he looked closely, he could see pools of water dotting the area. It was becoming a marshland.

"'Tis a lovely view," said Holo, standing beside Klass, and beside her was Aryes, who put her hand to her mouth, surprised.

And now that she mentioned it, Klass realized that while they had climbed many hills, this was the first time they'd seen scenery like this.

"Pretty great scenery, eh?" said Klass proudly, looking at a surprised Aryes—but Holo was between them, and she elbowed Klass.

Ignoring Holo and Klass, Aryes looked off into the distance, taking in the view, then spoke in a hesitant voice.

"Er, is... is that the sea?" she asked, pointing in the direction of the marsh.

"No, that's a swamp," said Klass.

"Swamp?"

"It's sort of like a pond. But it's shallower and muddier."

Aryes nodded her understanding. A swamp meant there would be catfish, and Klass dearly wanted to catch one of the strange fish and show it to Aryes, just to see her reaction. Ignorant of this, Aryes continued. "So—" she asked, "is the sea anything like this?"

"The sea is much, much bigger!"

Klass had never actually seen the sea in person, but he'd heard about it. As he explained, he traced a great circle in the air with both arms, at which point Holo cut in.

"And just how big is it?"

"Wha—?" said Klass, at a loss for words. Aryes took her gaze from the swamp and looked at Klass questioningly.

After fumbling for a moment for a reply, Klass repeated what he'd been told about the sea. "It's so big that no matter which way you look—left, right, straight ahead—all you can see is the sea."

At this explanation, Aryes exhaled her wonderment, while Holo being Holo seemed to realize that Klass had never actually seen the sea. She grinned.

Fortunately, though, Klass was asked no further questions on the subject, and Aryes smiled and said, "I hope we can see it soon." Dazed by the sudden smile he was shown, Klass nodded vaguely only to be surprised by Holo maliciously stepping on his foot.

"So, we'll pass between the forest and the marsh. The town's not far beyond, but...," explained Holo, gnawing on some jerky as the trio then took their midday meal.

Her explanation seemed to imply something unpleasant, so Klass asked her about it. "Is the road rough?"

"No. When I came this way from the town, it was not so difficult. 'Tis much faster to cut through the forest—and more dangerous. What worries me is not the road, but what lies beyond it."

"Beyond it?"

"Aye. To be frank, I mean the state of your coin purse."

Hearing this, Klass untied his bindle and thrust his hand into it, still chewing on a piece of jerky he'd gotten from Holo.

In it was the money he'd received from travelers and other visitors to the mansion.

After rummaging around, he finally produced five coins. All of them were smaller than the end of his thumb, and three of them were mostly black with spots of green; the other two were rusty and gray.

They had been Klass's most treasured possessions for a long time.

"Oh ho, so this is your fortune, is it?" said Holo, mildly surprised. Klass nodded proudly.

Living for a half year on these might be hard, but he was sure they'd be able to get by for three months at least.

"Is this money?" asked Aryes, peering at the currency in Klass's palm.

"Sure is."

"I was taught that money is the root of all evil. But it's nothing like what I thought."

Klass amused himself by wondering what she *did* think it was like.

For a moment, he didn't comprehend the words he heard next.

"I'm not certain this will buy a piece of bread," she said.

There was a short pause; then Klass replied. "Huh?"

"I don't well understand the thing called money. I can quickly know the quality of a pelt, though, so 'tis hardly a burden, but..."

As she spoke, Holo went through her own things just as Klass had and produced a small pouch.

Untying the white and purple drawstring, she emptied the contents into her open palm.

The shock that hit Klass when he saw them was no different from being struck on the head.

"I think this bought a loaf of bread. With this silver one, you can buy a lot. What think you? I know not the details, but you can tell the difference between this and yours, can you not?"

Klass understood so well it hurt.

In the palm of Holo's hand were large, thick coins carved with surprising intricacy.

The ones that she said would buy a loaf of bread were a beautiful red-brown color while the ones that would buy many loaves were a bolder, dull white-silver color.

"Just being in a town costs money, to say nothing of the bread you'll need to buy to continue your travel. What do you imagine you'll do?" said Holo, putting her own coins back in her pouch.

The sound they made was not a light jingling, but rather a strong *clink*.

Just as when he'd come to understand the vast size of the world, Klass felt his chest fill with an angry sadness.

Holo was not in the wrong, and yet she seemed like a villain to him in that moment, and he tried to find words to hurl at her, but they would not come.

Just as it seemed like his only reply to her would be tears, someone else interrupted.

"Bread is the fruit of labor. If we work, we'll be fine," said Aryes, directing a smile at Klass.

She was trying to be considerate of him.

His face reddened, and he reconsidered their options, furiously rubbing the tears from his eyes. "Th-that's right. If we work, we'll be all right."

"Mm," said Holo, nodding but not smiling. Flashing her fangs and biting off another piece of jerky, she continued. "What if a hard day's work doesn't buy you a day's worth of food? What then?"

"W-we'll just work harder!" Klass was not totally confident, but he stole a glance at Aryes, who was nodding along with him. This gave him a bit of courage, and he looked back at Holo.

"You'll work harder, will you? Aye, and then the question becomes whether there's work for you at all."

This was more of Holo's banter. Klass guessed as much and opened his mouth to reply, but Holo cut him off.

"There are scores of adults unable to find work in the town—do you think two children like you will go and have an easy time of it?"

His mouth froze in the shape of a silent "Wha—?"

"You've neither strength nor skill, and you know no one in the town. I hear things are different in the human world if you can read and write, but..."

Klass, of course, could not read, but then he remembered that Aryes could.

"You can read, right, Aryes?" he asked her, at which she gave a thin smile.

Now there were no problems.

But as soon as he thought as much, Holo sighed again. "So what will Klass do as Aryes is toiling away?"

Klass felt as though a spear had pierced his chest.

"Oh, I wouldn't mind if Klass waited for me."

"Th-that's right. I'll wait."

Holo regarded Klass with a narrow-eyed gaze, and he bit his lower lip.

He'd never be able to do anything so pathetic.

"Still, I can't imagine there are so many jobs that involve reading and writing." Holo traced little circles in the air with her piece of jerky, then poked her cheek with the pointed, bitten-off end. Klass watched this, glaring at her quasi-mutinously and wondering why she was suddenly bringing this up.

It was as though she was trying to tell him to give up the journey.

"However, I've been thinking," said Holo.

Thinking what? Klass muttered inwardly.

Holo turned her gaze of beautiful amber eyes off into the distance. "What would you say to turning back here?" While Klass was stricken with surprise and unable to reply, she brought her gaze back from the distance. "From here we could fetch some water from the marsh, and if you took my food, you could make it back. There's no gain in forcing yourselves onward. And though you say you were driven from the mansion, you're yet children. If you appeal to their emotions, I'm sure all would be well."

Klass understood her proposal all too well, but something about it filled him with such anger that he was unable to nod.

Suddenly he realized what that was.

It was his promise with Aryes.

They were going to see the sea.

"I can tell what you're thinking, boy," said Holo with a tired laugh. "If you continue with any goal or plan or destination,

what will happen when your food runs out? When you have no money and no work? Will you beg? Will you sit on the roadside dressed in rags, covered in mud and filth?"

Somehow he understood what Holo was saying. He knew that she was right.

And yet he wanted desperately not to turn back.

"You're rather stubborn," said Holo.

Immediately thereafter, Aryes—who'd been quietly listening to Holo—spoke up. "I-I would also like to go and see the ocean. And see more of the world."

Klass looked to Aryes, feeling suddenly rescued.

Holo regarded her through half-lidded eyes. "And?" was her only reply.

"But I know little of the world. I cannot refute a single thing you've said, Miss Holo. And I've learned that the world is filled with all manner of suffering."

"Aye," said Holo, nodding, satisfied.

Klass could practically hear his own despondence.

To think that their promise to journey through the world had been so dear—!

But Aryes did not continue. She lowered her hood, fingering something around her neck.

"Aryes?"

Unmindful of Klass's inquiry, Aryes finally grabbed hold of some kind of chain and pulled it free.

From underneath her clothes emerged a stone as green as a quail's egg.

"Is—is that…," murmured Klass, gazing at the stone that dangled from the chain as it glittered, catching beams of sunlight now and again.

It looked exactly like something a noblewoman had worn upon being invited to the mansion by the lord.

Word of it had reached even Klass, thanks to the talk of the older servants—particularly the women.

It was a jewel—one so valuable it was said it could buy a whole village.

"I've been told this is a very precious thing, so perhaps it could buy us some bread."

As soon as Klass heard these words, he faced Holo defiantly.

His journey with Aryes was hardly impossible.

He pictured Holo's face at a loss for words at Klass's imagined retort—but the expression that met his gaze was not what he expected.

"Oh. So you *were* willing to part with that, then?"

"Huh—?" Klass's and Aryes's voices rose in unison.

"I took notice of it right away when we were sleeping... What, did you not realize it was there, boy?"

Rocked by Holo's question, Klass shook his head.

He hadn't noticed it at all.

"You must've been distracted by the softness, eh?"

"N-no, I wasn't!" Klass yelled angrily in reply to Holo's malicious question and smile.

"Well, in any case, if you're willing to part with that, you'll be secure for a while."

"So—" Aryes began, but Holo interrupted her.

"However, are you truly prepared to do that? Precious stones have special meaning, no matter the era or nation. If it's a memento from someone, you may wish to rethink your decision."

"No, I don't know who I received this from—only that the priest said that if someday I should find myself in trouble, it would help me. I think now that time has come."

Holo scratched the tip of her nose at Aryes's answer, then spoke slowly, as though she was thinking carefully. "You say

you don't know who you got it from? It had something written in the setting. What was it?"

"It's my name."

Holo's ears pricked up. "Just your name?"

"No, my name and a short message. It says…'I give this to Aryes, my daughter.'"

Holo's eyes widened, and she looked suddenly to Klass, her finger still touching her nose.

"What?" asked Klass with his eyes. If it said, "To my daughter," then that just meant it was a gift from a parent.

"Aye. That is a valuable gem, indeed. Not something that just anyone could give to a child. Surely you understand all too well what that means."

A short "Ah—" escaped Klass's lips.

The unimaginable thought stuck in the base of his throat.

Holo's gaze once again fell upon him, as though he was such a fool she didn't know how else to respond.

Aryes was the only one simply listening to Holo's words.

"So who do you think gave such a thing to you?" Holo asked.

"Huh? Er—" said Aryes. "God, I suppose."

Klass could clearly perceive Holo's chuckle.

"I'm sorry, I don't see—" began Aryes.

"Your god would hardly dirty his hands digging up gems. The one who gave that to you—"

"—Was the lord of the mansion!" Klass blurted out, unable to restrain himself.

Aryes's eyes unfocused.

"Aryes, you're the lord's—"

Daughter.

But it was such an absurd notion that despite the proof of it, he couldn't say the words.

In the resulting silence that suddenly fell, Aryes looked down at the green jewel and spoke, dazed. "Wha...? I... but...the lord of the mansion is...God?"

"No! Aryes, you're the lord's daughter, and the lord is a human!"

"But—"

Klass had no idea what to say to the troubled Aryes, but as his tone grew more strident, Holo spoke quietly.

"How does it go? 'We are all of us God's children' or some such."

Aryes nodded firmly.

"Aye."

Klass thought that was ridiculous.

He was just about to loudly say as much when someone grabbed him by the nape of the neck.

It was Holo—there was nobody else there.

"Even I understand human manners. That is not something you should say just now."

Chided by Holo's words, Klass cowered as though she'd scolded him.

Holo said nothing more and released Klass, sighing as though at a loss.

"As someone who's lived her share of years, I don't think that stone is something you should lose," she said quietly.

If Aryes was the lord's daughter and that stone had been given to her by him, then now it would be her only memento.

Even Klass didn't want to continue their journey if they had to sell it to do so. He wondered if they really did have to turn back here.

And if the revelation about Aryes's father was true, then even if they did return to the mansion, they might not be able to simply resume their previous life.

He now considered Holo's proposal more rationally than before, his gaze on the ground.

Their journey had been a short one, but he couldn't claim it hadn't been fun.

He felt a little bit better, thinking about it that way.

Klass looked slowly up at Holo. "Miss Holo, I really think we—"

Holo looked over her shoulder at him.

It was a swift movement utterly out of the ordinary.

Klass's words stuck in his throat at the suddenness of it, and he gazed back at her.

But Holo was not looking at Klass.

Her gaze was fixed far behind him, back in the direction from which they'd come.

"It never rains but pours, eh?" she murmured, standing.

"M-Miss Holo...?" Aryes remained wordless, and Klass finally managed to call her name.

Holo now looked back at Klass.

Her face had no trace of a smile on it, and her fangs only emphasized the keen concentration of her expression.

"Listen, you, did Antheo's younger brother, the one who drove you away, strike you as a kind man?"

Another sudden question.

But this one Klass could answer immediately.

"No."

"So what do you think a man who'd come to take his elder brother's place would do if he found out there was already a directly related successor?"

This question Klass could not answer right away.

No—he didn't *want* to answer it.

The heir was always obvious.

"You two have good fortune indeed to have escaped before

they realized," Holo murmured, smiling. "You've about as much charm as you have lesser points. What else does one need, I wonder?"

Klass remembered Holo's words from the previous night.

His stomach burned as though he'd swallowed a red-hot piece of charcoal.

"Aryes, stand up," said Klass, gathering their things and readying the stick he used in place of a proper staff.

"They're still some distance away, but—curses—they're not coming in peace. 'Tis bad enough we're being followed, but it'll be trouble indeed if we're flanked."

Klass spared a moment to glance at Aryes. He then clenched his fist and looked at Holo.

"So they're cutting through the forest, eh? Come, you—"

Klass nodded at the words. "Aryes—" he said.

Aryes, as usual, did not seem to understand the situation; she held on to her emerald gem tightly.

She was just one girl, one innocent, ignorant girl.

Klass couldn't drink wine, couldn't read or write, and wasn't even as tall as she was.

And yet—

"It'll be all right. I'm here," he said simply, holding out his hand to Aryes.

She looked at him, eyes widening a bit in surprise. He could tell Holo was watching them closely and felt suddenly self-conscious.

"...All right," she said with a little nod, hesitantly taking Klass's outstretched hand.

Her hand was soft and slender and her grip uncertain.

"Let's go."

I will protect this soft hand, Klass swore to himself, and Aryes nodded as though she could hear him.

Holo started running.

Holding on to Aryes's hand, Klass took off after her as they made for the forest.

They didn't so much run through the tall grass as swim through it.

Having passed the budding season, the forest fairly brimmed with life, and more than once it seemed to Klass that they were running through the belly of some great organism.

The forest canopy was so thick overhead that it choked out most of the sky.

Any exposed skin—cheeks, neck, hands—was immediately covered in scratches, and despite her hood, even Aryes found the corners of her eyes reddened with abrasions as though she'd cried her eyes out.

However, it was fortunate that the overgrown bushes and grass only served to hide their path, and there were still footpaths that had been cleared of rocks and roots. At the lead, Holo was picking the route as she ran so all Klass had to do was follow her, which was not too much of a hardship.

If Holo hadn't been there, Klass would've been stranded, unable to tell path from forest, occasionally tripping in the springs and rills that ran underfoot. Even the thought of it was enough to make him shiver. All it would take was one false step on a moss-covered root to turn him into an injured man, and that would be that.

To their right, the forest rose in elevation, and to the left, it descended into the swamp.

Water flowed from right to left, and whenever they encountered it, Holo would warn him, and they'd carefully cross and continue on.

As they did so, Klass held on tightly to Aryes's hand.

He felt that if he didn't, she'd be swallowed up into the forest.

For Aryes, who found the gently sloping roads of the plains taxing enough, traveling the paths that wound up, down, left, and right through the forest made her breath run ragged, and her weight on Klass's hand increased.

To Klass that felt like their pursuers actively pulling Aryes from him, so no matter how hard the running became, he kept holding her hand—and she gripped his in return, as though refusing to be left behind again.

Klass wondered how long they'd run like that.

The thick forest air stuck in his throat, and he was so tired that he didn't even mind the stickiness of it, when Aryes finally stumbled on something and fell to her knees.

"Aryes!" Klass stopped and called out over his shoulder frantically.

As soon as he stopped, sweat bloomed all over him. Though he wanted to believe he could still run, the fatigue made his body from the waist down feel as though it was stuck in mud.

Aryes was too tired to even blink properly; she clamped her lips tightly closed and nodded, as if to say, "I'm all right."

She looked very far from all right.

But the reality that they had to keep running compelled Klass's hand to move, and he pulled the exhausted Aryes to her feet.

He felt terribly about it. "Is your foot sprained?" he asked her to assuage his guilt.

Aryes had managed to stand, and she swayed giddily, unsteady for a moment, her eyes not meeting Klass's, but finally she moved her legs a bit and shook her head.

Klass relaxed his shoulders.

He still couldn't tell Aryes to press on.

"What is the matter?" Holo had evidently noticed that Klass

and Aryes were no longer following her, and she'd doubled back.

Seen from behind, Holo's walking had seemed like flying, but she too was out of breath, and her face scratched here and there. The tail she was so proud of had brambles and grass caught in its tufts, and it was fluffed out, making her seem almost angry.

"Aryes—she stumbled."

"Did she sprain anything?"

At the question, Aryes again shook her head.

"Then we must keep running, or we're in trouble. We've got a bit yet to cover."

Klass didn't want to know the exact distance.

If they were more than halfway there, he was sure Holo would say so in order to cheer them up, so they must not have made it that far yet.

While he didn't want to know how much distance lay ahead of them, he did want to know what separated them from their pursuers.

Klass looked hopefully up at Holo, who smiled and plucked free a leaf that had stuck to his forehead. "Why, if the worst should happen, you've got that staff in place of a spear, have you not?"

Her kind eyes were trying to soften the terrifying reality, Klass imagined. He simply nodded, gripped his staff so tightly it hurt.

"In any case, so long as we reach the town ahead of our pursuers, we'll be all right for a while. Come, let us go," said Holo and set off running again.

If they could just get to the town—

Klass held on to that one hope and started running with Aryes.

In the manor Klass had served in, there were people even below his station who slept in the corner of the barn among the pigs on lice-infested piles of straw. They were slaves whose language he barely understood, fallen into debt and sold or taken as prisoners of war. They were forced to do the hardest labor—repairing the grape trellises or clearing new farmland.

Even Klass hated the work he had to do, so much so that four days of the week he harbored fantasies of escape. The slaves frequently *did* escape, whereupon the bearded steward would ride out in lieu of his often-absent lord, donning armor and rounding up the fugitives.

They, too, had embraced that single hope and fled.

If they could make it within the walls of a town, there was evidently a rule that said their pursuers could not recapture them within that town.

The town air made people free.

Klass murmured the words uncertainly to himself, now feeling painful sympathy for those poor wretches.

When three escaped, it was common for two of them to be captured and beaten.

If they were captured, would they be whipped? Or—would they be hung?

The cries of the beaten slaves and the sound of the whip across their backs echoed in his mind. It was a sound like lightning falling upon them, skin and flesh and blood from their backs flying into the air, distinct in Klass's vision.

The more Klass thought about it, the tighter he unconsciously gripped Aryes's hand.

"God is always watching over us," said Aryes gently, smiling despite her fatigue-stiffened cheeks—it seemed his worries had been conveyed though his grip.

He had to persevere.

Gritting his teeth, Klass swallowed his dire imaginings.

"Let's go."

Aryes nodded at Klass's words and began running like a fledgling flapping its wings for the first time.

Once they passed through the forest and arrived at the town, Klass could not possibly imagine what would happen next.

Would Aryes sell the gem given to her by her father, or would Klass and Aryes together try to work and make a living?

Or would they again shoulder their bags full of food and water and press on to the sea?

Holo led the two of them through the deep of the forest's gloom.

Her form was slight but somehow sturdy and reliable; when she looked back over her shoulder and grinned, Klass wasn't afraid of whatever pack of wolves might come.

So long as they made it to the town, all would be well. They'd met Holo, and she'd taught them much—Klass knew she could teach them still more.

All he had to think about now was holding Aryes's hand and running.

As the weight of his pack bore down upon him, he thought of that and he ran.

The terrible cry that seemed to split the forest was utterly unexpected.

"—!"

Klass stopped short, and Ayres, propelled by her inertia, bumped into his shoulder and went a bit past him.

She didn't apologize—because her eyes were round as she stared into the forest.

The high-pitched cry sounded like a chicken being strangled.

Was it some sort of bird? Klass wondered.

As soon as the thought occurred to him, the cry sounded again, and there was the sound of flapping wings.

"...A bird?" he murmured, somehow overcoming the urge to collapse to the ground in exhaustion.

Aryes made a terrified face and covered her ears.

Klass again heard the sound of wings and was quite sure it was a bird.

"Aryes, are you all right? It's just a bird."

"A...a bird...?"

Her dubious gaze belied the fact that she had never imagined a bird making such a cry.

Klass had seen birds large enough to steal an infant before, so he was able to confidently reply, "That's right," and take Aryes's hand once again. "Never mind that. We have to catch up with Miss Holo!" he said, looking ahead and starting to take a step forward before stopping.

Ahead of them on the road that was beginning to veer to the right and uphill, Holo had stopped, her back to them.

It didn't seem as though she was waiting for Klass and Aryes to catch up to her.

Her head was downcast, and only her ears moved, flicking to and fro more keenly than a rabbit's.

"Miss Holo—"

Holo looked back so suddenly that Klass couldn't be sure whether it was because he'd called her name or not.

No sooner did the thought occur to him than he realized that Holo's gaze had shifted farther back behind them—down the path they had just run.

There was only one thing she could be looking at in that direction with such an uncalm gaze.

Klass swallowed and watched Holo, who came running

back down the hill toward him and Aryes. Her gaze steady in the direction they'd come from, she spoke.

"Seems our tail isn't coming."

"Wha—?" Klass looked up suddenly at Holo's face, but her concentration remained focused on the distance they had come.

"Is this some kind of scheme? Still..."

"M-maybe they're lost...?"

"Possibly. I'll go have a look," said Holo, finally looking at Klass with a smile. "You two should have a rest. 'Twould be dangerous for you to run longer. There's naught to fear; I'll be back presently," she said definitively, heading back down the path after giving Klass a light pat on the shoulder.

He, of course, could not stop her and simply watched her form disappear into the forest. He wondered if she would be all right on her own, and there was also the fear of being simply overlooked and abandoned by her.

Just grateful for the chance to rest, he looked back at Aryes, whereupon his eyes widened and he shouted.

"Wha—ah—Aryes!"

Aryes had fallen on her backside as though the straining strings that held her up had been cut—only by running to her side and holding her in his arms did he manage to stop her from falling over entirely. Her breathing came neither raggedly nor quietly, and her eyes closed in exhaustion.

He remembered a few days earlier, when despite her exhaustion he'd pushed her past her limit and she'd collapsed in the middle of the road. At the time he'd been terrified, and thinking on it now chilled him to his core.

As he held Aryes and peered at her face, he heard a still, small voice say, "Water."

"Water? W-wait just a moment—"

Supporting Aryes with one arm, he dropped the bags from his back and frantically swung the water skin around from his shoulder and opened it. Most of the water within it was already gone, but he didn't hesitate to bring the opening to Aryes's mouth.

Aryes did not open her eyes, but once she realized that the vessel's opening was near, she opened her mouth and Klass carefully helped her drink.

At first, perhaps because of how dry her mouth already was, she seemed to choke but soon drank the water easily.

Not knowing when the water would stop, Aryes closed her mouth, and water spilled out of the still-tilted skin. It wet her cheeks and clothes, but she was neither angry nor surprised and simply smiled.

"Do you feel bad?" asked Klass, which Aryes shook her head at.

Her color did not look too bad, so Klass felt like he could trust her.

Having drunk some water and calmed herself, Aryes's breathing grew slow and deep.

Just as Klass was worried she might fall asleep, she squirmed a bit, and her left hand grasped Klass's right.

Aryes's eyes remained closed.

Her hand was light and weak as though made of cork, and he returned her grip, which her eyes finally opened at slightly, and she smiled.

That smile—that phosphorescently, weakly shining smile bringing with it relief and peace of mind.

At the sight of it, Klass's heart sang so high it hurt.

The moment he tried to put the feeling that welled up in his chest into words, Aryes gave what seemed like a soft sigh.

When he realized it was actually a yawn, Klass returned to his senses, his face falling in discouragement.

"Oh, you're sleepy?"

He had to smile, which Aryes seemed to find mildly embarrassing.

His lip twisted just slightly.

"You should sleep a bit," he murmured, wiping away a trickle of water that clung to Aryes's chin.

Even a small amount of sleep could make a surprising difference in the amount of exhaustion someone felt.

Drowsiness would probably claim Aryes whether he told her it was all right or not, but after a short pause, Aryes nodded politely.

Then she found a comfortable position, and by the time she reclined against Klass, she was already asleep.

Aryes's soft body sank into his arms.

She was a bit taller than him, but that hadn't stopped her from collapsing, which allowed him to preserve some piece of his manly pride.

He would've liked to let her sleep soundly for a while, but that was going to be difficult. *If Holo would take a bit longer to return*, he could not help thinking.

At the same time, part of Klass wanted Holo to come back as quickly as she could.

The middle of the forest was dim and so quiet.

He was uncertain about what he would do if Holo didn't return at all. He was perfectly aware, though, that uncertainty wouldn't accomplish anything.

So fear was pointless.

He shook his head to banish such feelings and took a deep breath by way of encouragement.

But even if he was able to shake his unease, he could not escape the many unpleasant realities that were closing in.

Having used it to give water to Aryes, Klass found that the

water skin was now totally empty and even now lay discarded on the ground.

If he couldn't fill it with water somewhere, it was doubtful that they'd even be able to make camp and sleep, the thirst would be so bad.

The moment he began to think about water, the thirst became more difficult to bear.

He looked down at Aryes curled up in his arms like a rabbit and thought.

As they'd run through the forest, they'd crossed so much fresh water that he'd started to wonder whether the entire place was flooded. If he just looked around a bit, it seemed likely he'd be able to find some.

Once he started considering this, he couldn't stop himself.

It was hard to bring himself to let go of Aryes's hands, soft as rising dough, but he slowly released his fingers and carefully rearranged their bags to support her shoulders.

This was not without a certain feeling of guilt, but he could not win against the terrible thirst within him.

Once he confirmed that Aryes was still sleeping peacefully, Klass took the water skin and stood.

It felt as though his throat hurt more with every blink.

Over and over again, he tried to swallow nonexistent saliva, imagining it was cool water.

He cast his gaze about his surroundings, looking for plants that seemed likely to grow near water.

It would be dangerous to stray too far from Aryes's side, so turning in a circle, bearlike, he searched for a likely spot and soon found one.

A short remove away he noticed a huge tree covered in moss, and behind it he found a trickle of water.

However, the tiny amount could hardly be drunk, to say nothing of filling the water skin.

After a moment's hesitation, Klass started walking upstream of the trickle.

As he climbed, careful not to slip on the moss, he soon came to a small bluff.

He peered over the edge, and before he could even raise a cry of joy, he immediately started looking for a way down.

At the base of the drop, no higher than he was tall, was a large pool—perhaps where many of these trickles ran together and collected.

The water was very clear, and the base of the pool seemed to be sandy.

In any case, Klass forced himself to be patient as he pushed through the grass and circled the pool, taking care not to trip on the suddenly rocky terrain as he approached it—and then he noticed something.

The place from which he'd first spied the pool was directly above a cave, and the pool seemed to continue on into it.

The entrance was too cramped for Klass to fit through even crouched, so he didn't know how far back the cave went.

But what he wanted was the water, the sight of which was enough to snap him back to his senses.

He knelt down and took a drink.

There was no way for Klass to express the joy he felt in that moment.

The water was cool and wet, and he gulped it ecstatically.

After drinking he didn't know how much, breathing became difficult, and he finally brought his head up, belching loudly and sighing.

It was as cold as well water in the middle of winter.

Fish swam in the pool, taking no notice of Klass whatsoever.

They would trace serene paths through the exposed area, then swim back into the cave.

In the dazed, absentminded satiety that followed after Klass quenched his thirst, he watched the fish.

When he finally came to his senses with a start, he realized he'd been about to fall asleep, and he hastily wiped his mouth and slapped his own head.

If he slept here, Holo was sure to be furious at him when he returned.

Klass filled the water skin and fastened it to his waist.

Just as he lowered his mouth to the pool to take one last drink—

"...?"

Quite suddenly he felt that he was being watched.

Thinking that perhaps Holo had come looking for him after seeing that he'd left Aryes's side, he looked around, but Holo was nowhere to be seen.

Tall grass grew around the edge of the pool, but visibility was not particularly poor.

Despite there being nowhere good to hide, he could not find the gaze's owner.

"Must be my imagination...," he murmured, partially to convince himself. He checked behind him, then turned to face the pond again, lowering his mouth to its surface—and then he saw it.

To the left of the semicircle-shaped entrance to the cave was an animal standing very still.

It was a fawn, too young even to have lost the speckles from its coat, and it was watching him very carefully.

Its natural camouflage hid it against the bluff, and even as Klass realized that was why he hadn't noticed it, he concluded quite clearly that the fawn hadn't been there before.

He'd heard frightening stories about all sorts of strange things that could happen in the forest.

But the fawn was not some sort of animal spirit; it was simply looking at him. This may well have been the first time it had seen a human, he realized, so perhaps it was just curious.

Klass looked furtively back at the fawn, then stole a quick drink of water and stood.

The fawn did not so much as budge.

If anything it was rather cute, but somehow looking into its motionless black eyes made Klass feel a chill down his spine.

Of course it wasn't attacking or baring its teeth—it was just looking at him, so there was nothing to fear. Klass reminded himself as much, then turned on his heel and half ran away.

He looked back several times as he went. The notion that the fawn might follow him was utterly absurd, but his feet quickened their pace nonetheless.

The distance was not so great, but he was much relieved when he arrived back at Aryes's side.

Of course, the fact that Holo was also there was both fortunate and unfortunate.

"You look as though you're about to tell me you've seen a forest spirit."

"..."

Holo's jeering smile was a bit irritating, but looking at it did dispel his worries.

"I brought water."

"Mm, I see," murmured Holo, playing idly with the sleeping Aryes's bangs.

Klass wanted to tell her that if she kept doing that, she'd wake the girl, but watching Holo's beautiful fingers touch Aryes's soft hair aroused complicated emotions in him.

"...May I not have some?"

"Huh?" Klass snapped out of his trance at the sound of Holo's voice.

Holo narrowed her eyes slightly and repeated her question. "May I not have some water?"

"Oh, er, yes." Klass hadn't even sat down before he hastily handed the water skin to Holo.

Holo, of course, was not going to let him get away so easily.

"You want to give it a try too?"

Klass couldn't help swallowing at Holo's low-lidded eyes and wet-toothed smile.

With effort, he managed not to nod. "N-never mind about that. What about the people coming after us?" he asked forcefully, sitting down a short distance from Holo.

He was irritated at having to endure her teasing, and he was worried that if he didn't ask the question with some force, he'd be reduced to weak protestations.

Holo twitched her ears two or three times at Klass's words, then after peering into the water skin, muttered vague assent.

"They weren't there," she said.

"Wha—?"

"They weren't there."

After considering Holo's words for a moment, he realized the truth that they pointed to and let slip another exclamation of surprise. "But that means we're—"

"—Safe? Aye, it might be a bit early to say that. But at least it seems we won't be caught right away."

Klass exhaled, though even he wasn't sure whether it was a sigh of relief or not; his shoulders went slack.

He felt like a rigid pole in his back that had done its best to support him had finally snapped.

Holo watched this and chuckled soundlessly.

But as she did this, she stroked Aryes's cheek, and Holo's ex-

pression did not seem to be a teasing one—if anything, it was kind and her smile one of praise.

"Of course, there are probably also men walking outside the forest, so we're not completely safe yet. Our first job is to cross the forest and make it to the town."

He couldn't imagine Holo telling him that just to make him feel better.

Klass believed her words wholeheartedly. He nodded and stretched his cold-stiffened legs.

"Let us take a bit of a rest. We pushed ourselves rather hard to make it this far."

"Yes…I guess we did," he said, yawning midway through the sentence.

Holo smiled wryly at this, then rubbed her nose and smoothly stood before sitting down next to Klass. "You needn't be on your guard so."

Just because Holo said so, chuckling throatily as she did it, was no reason not to regard her with some suspicion.

Such suspicion bothered Holo not at all, of course, and by the time the word *"Come"* reached Klass's ears, his head was already upon her lap.

This had to be some sorcery, he was quite certain.

Because, although his face burned red with embarrassment, the courage to pull his body upright again had left him entirely.

"If you'll sleep a bit, your strength will return. We've some distance yet to cover. You'd best sleep."

He felt his head being stroked; it was such a pleasurable feeling that the back of his neck tingled.

That plus Holo's words were all the excuse he needed.

He started to nod, his head still in her lap. He didn't finish it, though, because Holo kept talking.

"Depending on what may come, you may have to carry Aryes over your shoulder if she becomes exhausted."

Aryes had earlier grasped Klass's right hand, turning her expression instantly from unease to relief, but now her hand was lightly closed, holding nothing.

Surely she was holding Klass's hand in her dreams.

When the thought occurred to him, he suddenly felt terrible for laying his head in Holo's lap.

He tried to sit up.

What stopped him was—of course—Holo's hand.

"Heh-heh-heh... you're such a faithful male, you are." Holo rested her elbow on his temple, holding her chin in her hand.

Half out of surprise, half out of anger, and with only a bit of regret, Klass tried to get out from under her elbow, but when she increased the pressure so that it actually hurt, he gave up.

"Seems I didn't actually have to do anything after all."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. 'Twas merely talking to myself. Anyway—" Holo removed her elbow from Klass's head as she spoke. Klass sighed and again tried to lift his head up when Holo interrupted him. "I simply hate losing, you see."

He felt, in the distance between his raised head and Holo's lap, a very soft thing indeed.

He didn't even have time to wonder what he'd done.

There was a delicate, almost ticklish sensation on his cheek and ear, along with Holo's sweet scent.

Beneath his head was her soft, silky tail.

Holo chuckled. "I wonder if you'll be able to raise your head now, eh?"

The sensation of the warm tail on his cheek made her point very hard to dispute, Klass thought.

Then she began to gently stroke his head.

There was no way he could sit up.

Klass relaxed his neck, and his head made a soft landing on her lap.

"I suspected as much," said Holo a bit haughtily, whereupon his gaze went to Aryes, still sleeping quietly. "Do not worry. I'll make sure to wake you before she rises."

Klass felt somehow tainted, which was sad enough, but still sadder was how relieved he was to hear Holo say this.

But even as he wanted to cry at how pathetic he was, Holo leaned down and whispered into his ear, her tone both teasing and honest, "'Tis nothing—a bit of indebtedness will only make you treat her more kindly."

"Wha…?" He thought about her words for a few moments.

Holo had called herself a wisewolf.

Klass believed that it was the truth.

He'd treat Aryes with kindness once she awoke.

Murmuring the excuse to himself, he felt like he would sleep very well upon Holo's tail.

Mere moments later, Klass was surrounded by darkness.

"Now then, next…," Holo muttered as though talking to herself.

But Klass couldn't tell whether he'd dreamed it or not.

He got the feeling that Holo and Aryes were talking about something.

Unable to clearly understand the words, he was at least certain that it was a dream.

After all, Holo had said she would wake him before Aryes awoke.

Which was why when he opened his eyes, his head still resting on Holo's warm tail, he turned bright red, and the first thing he thought was *Holo, you traitor!*

"Ah, it seems the sleepyhead has finally come awake."

"..."

Without being given so much as the opportunity to blame her, to say nothing of apologizing, Klass shouldered their bags and set off walking.

It seemed little time had passed; Klass felt he'd been asleep for no more time than it took for a thrown stone to fall to earth.

And yet his fatigue was significantly lessened, and the same seemed true for Aryes.

He ignored Aryes's puppylike reliance on him, the fact that he'd slept on Holo's lap still gnawing at him.

As he started to walk, he felt entirely gloomy and had a special hatred for Holo's tail, which up until a moment ago had seemed so invitingly comfortable.

He had no idea how he was supposed to talk to Aryes now. Why hadn't Holo woken him?

The dark feelings pressed down upon him so much that for a moment something escaped his notice.

When he did notice it a moment later, he couldn't help but make a sound of surprise.

Aryes was in fact doing nothing less than holding Klass's hand.

"Miss Holo said I mustn't let go," she said with a serious face.

Klass could not, of course, muster any anger at Aryes and felt an inward sigh of relief. He was so sure she'd be furious at him.

"It is a test from God, she said," said Aryes with an ambiguous expression. She then glanced at Holo.

Klass consider the meaning of those words, then glared at Holo's swaying tail.

She should mind her own business, he thought.

As he considered such things, thoughts of the exhaustion



that he'd felt back when he'd started walking were chased to a corner of his mind.

Klass wordlessly walked, and the forest, too, was quiet

A short walk through the woods near the mansion revealed all sorts of creatures, but here, the only animal he'd gotten a clear look at was the fawn; he saw nothing else.

Just as he was wondering if that was simply the kind of forest this was, he looked up.

He wondered if perhaps there were squirrels or the like scampering about above him in the trees.

He realized he'd misunderstood when he looked up and saw droplets of rain falling through the gaps in the forest canopy.

"Rain, eh? Well, so long as it's no worse than this, we'll get no wetter for our walking in the forest."

And it was just as Holo said—a small drop eventually fell on his nose, but little rain made it through the gaps in the thick foliage overhead.

And yet the rain made him begin to notice the strange quiet of the forest.

There was no sound—but it was not the silence that would've made a far-off pin drop audible and rather more like lead placed over his ears.

He could hear his own breath, but though Aryes was right next to him, he could hardly make out the rustling of their clothes.

Their surroundings were smothered in the peculiar silence of the rain.

Klass had heard that children born on rainy days never smiled.

The rumor around the mansion was that the silent, stoic beekeeper the lord retained had been born on a soggily rainy afternoon.

The forest overflowed with the green of the leaves, ferns, and moss, but it was starting to look hazy and misty.

The effect was somehow eerie, and Klass held Aryes's hand a bit more tightly.

Aryes seemed to likewise feel uncertain and returned his strengthened grip.

Soon thereafter, Klass happened to catch sight of something ahead.

The trees were thick. Past them, he thought he could make something out.

Standing on a small ridge, it looked down at them as though they were dolls made of straw.

It was a deer.

Holo seemed not to have noticed it, and when Klass looked again to make sure it wasn't his imagination, the deer was gone.

He felt an unpleasant chill and shivered.

He didn't want to say anything; he didn't even tell Aryes, who'd surely never seen a deer before.

Aryes and Holo continued walking silently.

As though rushed by the silence, Holo's footsteps grew steadily quicker.

She'd said that their pursuers weren't coming so there was no need to hurry, but the very idea of spending the night in the rainy forest made Klass's hair stand on end. It hardly mattered whether they were caught by the pursuers or by the dark of the forest.

Holo looked in his direction several times, irritated.

Noticing this, Klass wondered how many times he'd looked at Aryes similarly over the past few days.

So instead of trying to rush her, he spoke up. "Aryes, is there anything else you'd like to see besides the sea?" he asked. In truth, Klass himself had no idea what else the world contained.

If possible, he wanted to see the mountains that held up the sky, but that was probably impossible.

"What else...?" Tired as she was, her voice still had a bit of energy left in it.

More than anything else, her simply talking to him helped him find some relief in her meager expression.

"I've heard there are mountains that shoot fire and places where rivers run out of the sky."

Beneath her hood, Aryes cocked her head, puzzled.

It seemed she was having trouble imagining such things, but Klass couldn't blame her for that as he couldn't really imagine them himself.

He decided to stop posturing and talk about something he knew. "Hmm...have you ever seen any wheat fields?"

"Wheat fields?"

"Yeah. You know wheat, right?"

She nodded.

"They're where wheat comes from, whole fields like a golden carpet."

Aryes seemed to be able to imagine this.

Her eyes widened and she looked off into the distance dazedly—then tripped and nearly fell, vaguely murmuring, "Wheat fields...," to herself as though trying to confirm their existence.

"They look really fluffy when you see them from far away, like you just want to jump into them—but if you do, they're not fluffy at all. And if you knock over too much wheat, the adults will beat you with sticks," said Klass, which Aryes looked a bit surprised at and laughed.

Her face was elder sisterly. "Did you reflect on your misdeeds?"

"You bet I did," said Klass honestly.

"In that case, God will forgive you," said Aryes with a brilliant smile.

Klass found it somehow hard to look at and hastily averted his face, searching for another topic. "O-or a ship!"

"I know about ships."

"Oh, er, really?" Klass stopped himself from adding, *"Even though you didn't know about the sea?"*

"When the earth is covered in a great flood, that's a giant vehicle that will take all the righteous people to the kingdom in the sky."

Though fatigue was making her footing a bit uncertain, her face was entirely confident, and she spoke with even a touch of pride.

It was the same face she made when talking about God, and Klass was not overly fond of it.

But this time, something about her daft pride was endearing.

"The ships I know about don't fly in the sky, I don't think."

"...?" Aryes's look was so puzzled that Klass, who did not know about every ship the world over, was suddenly uncertain, but looking ahead at Holo, who was still just walking ahead, he answered.

"They float on rivers and lakes and things, on water, anyways. People ride on them, and they carry horses and such, too."

"On the... water?"

"That's right."

"And they don't sink?"

When Klass had first seen a ship, he'd also found its failure to sink rather mysterious, but since he had in fact seen such a ship, he stuck his chest out, quite able to answer. "They don't. Even if you put a bunch of people and a whole lot of heavy bags of wheat on them, they still don't sink."

Aryes regarded Klass's statement suspiciously, pursing her perfectly formed lips slightly. "It's a sin to lie, you know."

She seemed to think he was teasing her.

He was so tickled by her words that Klass couldn't help but laugh. "I'm not lying! I saw it with my own eyes."

"It could have been the work of a demon."

"So what would you do if you saw a ship floating on the water?"

Aryes was suddenly at a loss for words.

It seemed that within her there were parts that all too quickly believed what other people said while other parts stubbornly refused to listen.

Klass was getting the sense that this was one of her stubborn parts.

So whether or not it came from proposing a bet she could actually win, he found her stubbornness very charming.

"If it were floating on the water…?"

"Yes, floating on the water."

Klass smiled as he looked at her, and Aryes seemed to lose confidence by the second, averting her eyes and lowering her head.

But Aryes didn't take the coward's way out—that was one of her good points.

"I would apologize."

"It's a promise, then." Klass imagined himself generously accepting Aryes's apology and smiled broadly.

As he was doing so, basking in the afterglow of the conversation, Holo suddenly stopped, turned, and looked at him.

For just an instant, he prepared himself to be teased once again but soon realized that she had a different—and strangely serious—expression on her face.

"It pains me to ruin such a hard-earned mood," she said

shortly. "I kept mum about it because if I'd said anything, 'twould have made you nervous, and nerves invite injury. But it seems I must tell you."

Klass had a very bad feeling about this and wiped sweat from his forehead.

"Our pursuers are coming."

"Wha—?" he murmured in spite of himself, and Aryes also looked up. "B-but you said they weren't coming—"

"Aye," said Holo evenly, not seeming to take notice of Klass's accusatory tone. But as she continued, he soon realized that wasn't out of some generosity on her part, but rather because it was a trivial matter compared with their real problem. "Our human pursuers are not coming."

The wolf pack that attacked them a few days earlier appeared in his mind.

"I thought it strange. This is a grand, large forest. It should have a master. For such a master not to appear... Also, the group that was following us—I can't believe they'd suddenly turn tail. So—"

Holo turned and surveyed the surroundings, then sighed there in the green-choked forest.

She pursed her lips like a child. "So they've either been tricked by dwellers of the forest, or..."

Just then, Klass was sure he heard a howl, but then realized it was thunder from overhead. "Dwellers of the forest...?" he asked, unable to stay silent in the face of his uncertainty and fear, but Holo only shook her head, not giving him a straight answer.

When she spoke, it seemed to be mostly to herself. "I'm a wisewolf after all. Between my words and wisdom, I often get my own way, but that lot seems to have gotten rather crafty as well. I'd like to get out of this forest straightaway... and even I

can't do anything about the weather," Holo murmured, looking up.

Klass nodded and looked over at Aryes beside him. He squeezed her hand slightly. "Do you mean the...the deer?"

Holo's eyes widened slightly at the words, and she nodded. "You saw it, did you?"

"Yes. When I was fetching water and also just a moment ago. It was staring right at me, not moving at all."

Holo scratched her cheek and furrowed her brow.

Her tail flicked in displeasure.

"They're a cunning lot. I've no idea what they might do. There's not much use in telling you to be on your guard, but I suppose it's better than being suddenly ambushed in ignorance, eh?"

Aryes shrank back at the quiet words, looking at Klass.

If he also faltered at Holo's lack of confidence, then who would protect Aryes?

He braced himself on his heels and forced a smile. "It'll be all right. A wolf's stronger than a deer."

Klass wasn't sure whether his smile had been convincing enough, but Holo burst out laughing, so it must have gone over well.

She mussed his hair, which made him feel a bit awkward in front of Aryes but also pleased.

"Human cubs surely do grow quickly." Holo looked at Aryes as she spoke.

Klass wondered why Aryes, while Aryes herself neither nodded nor shook her head.

She only looked back at Holo with an expression of endurance.

"Ah, well, 'twill work out somehow. The rain's a calamity

for more than us." Holo responded to Aryes's look with a triumphant smile, gazing up overhead.

The umbrella of the forest canopy seemed to be nearly at its limit.

Drops of water fell down now like leaks in a leak-riddled hut.

"Well, shall we be off?" said Holo, and began walking.

Contrary to the tone of her voice, Klass saw uncertainty in her steps.

Huff, huff, huff.

After taking three breaths, he would swallow to hide his fatigue.

Then three more breaths, then swallow again—over and over.

The wine was an encumbrance and had been long since discarded. Half of the water he'd gone to such lengths to fetch was also left.

The rain had started to pour down on the forest in earnest, with Aryes removing her robe—it had been tangling up in her legs—and draping it over her head.

The lingering sense of fun in their last conversation was nowhere to be found now.

From her expression, Klass gathered that she'd be willing even to toss aside the robe if only to lighten her burden a bit.

The number of times she'd tripped and fallen to her knees was too many to count on both hands.

Aryes was working very hard.

But a certain clinging tendency had begun to tinge her efforts, and Klass was too close to his own limit to feel it as anything other than an extra burden.

"Keep at it," he said as she took his arm more than his hand, speaking not so much for encouragement as prayer.

He didn't think her tendency to trip was due only to exhaustion.

No doubt the blisters on her feet had long since burst.

The pouring rain was only intensifying, making it seem as though they were walking through a shallow river.

Small streams were everywhere, and every small hollow was rimmed with green and filled with brown water.

He desperately wanted to get to the town and sit in front of a warm hearth with a bowl of porridge.

With each step, thoughts of escaping their pursuers or protecting Aryes ran out of his ears.

The forest seemed to never end, and with the dense foliage and the cloud-choked sky overhead, it was a dim and gloomy place.

He couldn't imagine anything more terrifying than trying to traverse the forest at night in this rain. Holo had told him that come what may, she would be with them but had given him no hint of a clear resolution.

"Miss Holo!" he finally cried when they reached a small clearing.

"..." From her wordless over-the-shoulder glance and breathing, he could tell she was tired.

"I just..." *Can't walk anymore*, he thought—but he didn't have to finish the sentence. He looked at Holo and held up Aryes, who seemed to be on the verge of sitting herself.

Holo was a spirit who'd lived for centuries and had sounded full of confidence when she'd said that if worse came to worst, she'd be able to do something.

Hadn't that time now come?

He accused her with his eyes, and she looked evenly back at him, then pushing her rain-soaked bangs aside, turned her gaze upward.

"I am sorry."

"Huh?" For a moment, he thought she said, "I am stopping," but Holo said it again.

"I am sorry."

"Wh-what for?" asked Klass, standing there, barely managing to support Ayres.

"I may not be able to save you."

"Wha—?" he started to say, then was cut off.

It wasn't because Aryes was nearly collapsing; nor was it because of the way Holo bitterly chewed her lip.

It was because an intense chill had shot up his body, up from the ground through his feet, lancing through his spine.

Even over the sound of the pouring rain, he heard a strange noise.

It overflowed the torrential downpour—*glub*, it went, *shlukk*.

It might have been the sound of his own rising terror.

Noticing the sound in her exhaustion, Aryes twisted around to see, whereupon he could hear her breath catch.

Klass was too scared to turn and look.

He couldn't turn, but holding still while not looking was even more horrifying.

"..."

When he finally did, he saw what existed there.

It didn't simply stand.

It existed; it endured.

Like a great tree. Like a rocky crag. Like a mountain.

"...Ah..." His knees trembled, his breath stopped, and as Aryes clung to him, he clung to her.

The notion that this was pathetic or unmanly did not so much as occur to him.

There at the end of his gaze, so huge it could easily trample an ox, so tall he had to look up to see it, was a great stag.

"—."

He couldn't understand what it said.

Only that its voice was like thunder echoing through the mouth of a cave and more than enough to strip Klass of reason.

The animal was so rugged and cragged it was hard to think of it as a deer, and its eyes were two black moons.

The great horns that sprouted from its head seemed like they could rake the very sky.

Klass fell down on his backside but didn't immediately notice.

"—. —."

The deer had no fangs in its mouth, but great millstones of teeth, which ground together as it spoke with a sound like they could crush any boulder.

If Klass's head were caught between them, it would be smashed in an instant.

As he stared up, stunned, this was all he could think about.

"A good journey—"

Klass came to his senses with a start when a hand was laid on his shoulder.

"—is one in which you're blessed with a good companion."

He looked up to see Holo's fearless profile with her tail waving bravely.

The great stag's gaze fell on Holo, and it brought its face closer to her, threateningly.

"—!"

A great gust from its nostrils blew the raindrops away, and in an instant, the rain stopped.

Klass realized that they were surrounded by deer, all of whom watched.

He got the feeling that if he was to somehow give the wrong answer, he'd be trampled to death or chewed to pieces.

And yet Holo did not flinch; she grinned invincibly.

"—, —."

A grumbling murmured around them—whatever Holo had said seemed to have been taken as a provocation by the great stag.

"—…—." The stag ground its teeth noisily, and Klass scrambled back, still sitting on the ground.

Holo looked back at him and spoke quickly. "Seems this lot doesn't like me overmuch." She cocked her and grinned ruefully. "My coming along has complicated things."

"*Wroooooooooaaaa!*"

It happened the moment a great howl from the stag caused the earth to tremble; Klass could barely believe such a sound came from a living thing.

"They say parting always comes suddenly. 'Twas a lovely journey. The two of you should hurry off and run—"

Holo's apologetic smile seared itself into Klass's memory.

How much time would he need in order to understand what happened next?

Just as the stag closed what should've been yet a good distance, Holo's small body was flung into the air. She simply *flew*, and the great stag turned its vast body with unbelievable agility and followed her.

Her body mowed through the trees' branches, flying absurdly.

Ahead of her was a steep slope, which led down into perhaps a stream.

The great stag leaped into the air, the slope mattering to it not at all.

In no time at all it had jumped down to the bottom of the descent and out of sight; immediately thereafter, the ground literally shook. Just when Klass understood that the stag had

hit bottom, the terrible loud grinding sound of its millstone teeth echoed through the air.

Klass didn't know whether he was crying or not.

All he knew was that he was terrified and that he didn't want to think about what was happening.

The grinding sound continued, but eventually silence fell.

The deer surrounding Klass and Aryes did not move.

Then there was another terrible howl.

"Aaaaauuuah!" Klass cried out and started to dash away.

She'd claimed to be two centuries their elder, chased away a pack of wolves, teased Klass and outargued the stubborn Aryes, given them bread and taught them about money—and in an instant, Holo's small but trustworthy form had disappeared.

That was more than enough to make Klass forget everything and run—run down the path where water flowed like a river.

Or at least such thoughts filled his head, but when he actually rose and started to run, he pitched forward and tripped, clinging to his staff as he tried to get back up.

He didn't want to die. He didn't want to die crushed between those teeth.

His knees buckled and his courage failed, and he plunged face-first into the muddy water.

He didn't want to die.

Terror made him raise his head out of the water, and he looked back.

And the sight that greeted him—

Like a cursed steed out of his worst nightmare, the great stag rose slowly up the slope toward a small, curled-up ball of white.

Even smeared with mud, she looked like nothing less than a sheep—for it was Aryes.

"Ar…yes…" Klass tried to raise his hoarse voice but could not.

He prayed for her to run, to stand and run, but Aryes's feet did not suddenly sprout wings.

Had she lost consciousness? Or had she yet again failed to comprehend the situation and was simply staring in wonderment?

If it was wonderment, so be it—so long as she wasn't weeping in terror, so be it.

But somehow, a moment later, his face distorted pathetically.

Aryes had looked back, her face terrified.

"Wrrooooaaaa!"

The great stag bellowed a third time.

Its body was so big that it was only partially hidden past the slope.

Its roar seemed to be in anger.

Now—only now—they could still make it.

If she stood and ran, she could make it to Klass in ten strides.

Klass called out in his heart, but Aryes did not so much as stand; rage and urgency filled him.

But no, he realized.

That rage and urgency was directed at himself—at he who could not go and save her.

"—…! —…!"

The great stag seemed to be calling something out.

Klass covered his ears and gritted his teeth.

The deer that had surrounded Klass and Aryes all along began to close in.

As if to drive them out of the forest.

Or possibly to trap them within it forever.

"Aryes!" He finally found his voice and called out for what he was sure was the last time.

Atop the slope, the great stag reared up as though to trample the mountain flat.

Aryes realized this and looked back for a moment—back again at Klass.

She slowly reached out to him.

"Klass…"

He heard her call his name like a whisper, like a murmur, and then—

Despite the distance, which at a glance seemed much too great for it to do so, the great stag's forelegs raised, poised to fall where Aryes lay. The huge legs were tangled in grass and covered in mud that dripped with a horrible sound like the drool of some god of death.

Aryes looked at Klass.

"Aryes!"

He didn't think. He just ran.

He didn't know if he was running or flying; Aryes was the only thing he could see. He leaped toward her to embrace her, then—having no idea how he was doing it—picked her up and ran back, away from the stag.

The next moment, Klass dared not open his eyes at the tremendous shock that followed the fall of the great stag's hooves, which scattered everything.

"…"

The fact that Aryes was in his arms and not under those hooves Klass could only consider a miracle.

Holding her, he staggered and ran forward, and just when he'd bought them a bit of distance, he collapsed.

Klass hastily got up when Aryes, shivering and mouth clenched shut, clasped her hands and began to pray.

As she prayed, Klass realized her forehead was pressed against his chest.

He reflexively held her soft shoulders and felt himself filled with new strength.

He had to protect her.

Because she was so—

Her shoulders were so soft.

"It'll be all right," he said, and took a deep breath.

At this distance, Klass could get a clear view of the stag's bristly coat, each hair of which seemed thick enough to be made of rope. It was still a moderate distance away, and he could only look at the great stag as it directed its glare at him.

It ground its teeth and shook its head.

A true hero could cleave a boulder with a fist and with just a sword could fell a dragon, but all Klass had in hand was the stick he used as a staff, which he'd somehow managed to hold on to. And yet there had to be something he could do. If he was ready to let Aryes escape alone, there had to be *something*.

Courage was not something one simply had. Like oil from a rapeseed, it had to be forced out under pressure—Klass finally understood this.

"Aryes, can you stand?"

Trembling in his arms, Aryes looked up, and displaying her surprisingly stubborn side, she bit her lip and nodded.

"Right, then stay behind me."

She did not ask why, only looking deeply worried as she said nothing.

Getting up quietly so as not to provoke the stag, she moved behind Klass.

"When I stand up, run."

"Wha—? B-but—"

"It'll be all right. I know the story of the hero who defeated the giant."

It wasn't a lie.

There was a story of a hero who'd killed a giant whose head reached the sky, whose arms were as long as rivers, and whose feet were so gigantic they filled lakes.

Compared with that, this was just a big deer. Hardly anything at all really.

Hardly anything at all.

"I'll aim for the eyes. Those big eyes. If he can't see, he can't follow us. It'll be all right. That thing's eyes are so huge, I can't miss."

As he said it, Klass tried to move his cheeks and lips.

He wasn't sure if he'd managed to smile.

Nonetheless, Aryes seemed as though she were about to say something, then thought better of it, stopped, and slowly nodded—so he must've smiled, he decided.

"Right, here we go."

He thrust his staff into the ground and took a deep breath.

Aryes put her hands on his back, and it felt like she was filling him with strength.

Perhaps sensing his aim, the great stag shook its head and slowly lowered its body.

That terrible pressure.

The hero from the story wouldn't be afraid of this.

"Let's see the sea together," he said, then stood and ran.

The huge stag's eyes were so high he couldn't imagine his stick could reach them.

But there had to be some chance.

Just as Holo had done, there would be a moment when its head drew near.

The great stag raised its hoof, and it felt like the very air itself was drawn back.

Klass, undaunted, jumped aside.

The deer was, after all, just a deer.

Bringing its raised hoof down, it sent mud splattering next to Klass.

"Damn you—!" Klass swung his staff in a wide arc, and the deer pulled its leg back with surprising swiftness.

While he tottered and stumbled forward, Klass did not panic. He instead saw that the stag was afraid of him, and it filled his heart with cold steel.

This time it did not raise its hooves, but thrust them forward as though kicking away gravel.

But perhaps its vast body was a liability—Klass easily avoided this.

It was nothing to be afraid of. Nothing to be afraid of at all.

It was just a big deer.

Swinging his staff with all his might, he grazed its leg several times.

Unbelievably, he was holding his own against the huge stag.

From the great gap of its mouth, the stag exhaled clouds of white breath. Klass was bobbing and weaving to avoid it, so the stag might well have been getting tired. Perhaps its body was too large.

Klass was tired, too. He'd long since lost feeling in his hands from gripping the staff so tightly, and his arms' muscles were so tight that it was hard to tell where they ended and the staff began.

He faced the stag square on, close enough to reach it if he was to leap forward.

It was said that if one ground a stag's horns into powder, one could gain the wisdom of the forest. With its unfathomably black eyes, the stag regarded him.

It was considering something.

What was it thinking?

No sooner did Klass wonder this than the stag's eyes glared at something else—Aryes, her hands folded in prayer.

Klass felt on the verge of vomiting. Aryes had not run. Or perhaps she had simply lacked the strength to.

Aryes noticed the great stag's gaze on her.

The stag moved. Turning about to face her, it stamped the ground three times like a horse, lowering its head

"—!" Klass had no idea what he said.

He moved as though someone behind him had given him a shove.

His staff in one hand, he ran as fast as he could. There were countless tree roots, puddles, and divots left behind by the beast's footsteps, but Klass looked at none of them, his gaze fixed on the stag as he sprinted.

Then, facing the head of the stag, whose lunge was like the mountain itself deciding to move, he leaped at it with strength anew—brandishing his staff in his right hand like it was the hero's spear before it pierced the giant's eye.

"Aaaaaauuoh!"

There was a dull *krack*.

It came from around his right arm, so at first Klass thought he'd broken it.

He hadn't given the slightest thought to his landing, so he brushed by the stag's chin as he leaped straight into the underbrush.

He was on the verge of losing consciousness, but the sound of something huge falling behind him brought him back to full alertness.

Bellowing in what might have been pain, the stag howled a hair-raising howl as its hooves crashed into the ground.

When he finally raised his head, he saw—past the stag, slip-

ping as it struggled to stand—Aryes, whose gaze was fixed on the beast.

"Aryes!" Klass called her name and ran toward her. She looked at him, surprised, before her eyes returned to the stag. "Aryes, we've got to run!"

"B-but, his eye…"

Klass was past anger and had to smile at Aryes, who was worried about the great stag's eye when it had killed Holo and tried to kill her as well.

He couldn't be angry at her.

She *was* Aryes after all.

"We've got to hurry! If we're followed, there'll be nothing we can do!"

As soon as Klass finished saying this, the stag raised another bellow.

Klass flinched and turned to look. He saw that the stag had stumbled in a stream and fallen.

A sound like a landslide echoed across the forest; then there was a great noise that reverberated in his chest.

"Ha-ha-ha, we did it! Come, Aryes! Let's go!"

"Ah, er, b-but—"

Klass went to Aryes and took her hand, but she did not stand.

Her troubled face made Klass wonder if her feet were stuck in the mud.

"Can't you walk? Come—"

Klass wrapped the right arm he'd only just feared was broken around Aryes's back and slid his left under her legs.

This was how the hero always rescued the princess.

Despite her troubled expression, Aryes leaned into Klass's arms as though she'd practiced this many times.

"O-oof."

Compared with straw bales bound tight and hard as rocks, Aryes's body was like cotton.

That said, running like this was impossible, and Klass took careful steps, his trembling knees protesting.

He would carry her; he would escape the stag, get out of the forest, and reach the town.

Klass murmured this inwardly as Aryes's legs slipped free of his left arm, and he grit his teeth and summoned more strength.

It was a shame about Holo.

He'd hating her teasing, but in a very short time, she'd become like an elder sister to him.

He decided that once they'd reached the town and recovered, he'd come back in search of her body and give her a proper burial. And if he ran into the stag again, well—he'd take more than its eye.

Aryes's legs had escaped his arm again, and though they touched the ground, Klass had no strength in his left arm, and his legs felt so heavy they might as well have been tangled in roots—he could no longer move them at all.

And yet in Klass's mind, he could see a brilliant future, and he planned to face it, to head into it.

"P-please, just…," said Aryes about to cry, still somehow managing to cling to him. Klass smiled softly, finally stopped now.

"Sorry. You…go on ahead."

And as though saying it had taken the last of his strength, Klass collapsed on the spot.

He heard the *thud* of his fall as though at a great distance, and though his face was half submerged in muddy water, he could not move a muscle.

"—! —!"

Aryes was crying something out, but he could not hear.

The falling rain felt like a warm bath.

"Run," Klass murmured.

Run. We'll meet again at the town's inn.

That's what he'd meant to say somewhere in his distant consciousness.

Aryes—she, at least, needed to escape.

Aryes, at least.

Because—

Klass closed his eyes.

Because—he loved her so very much.

* * *

There was a sweet scent.

Was it food?

He tried to remember but could not.

He could tell it was the scent of something he liked very much, but for the life of him, he could not remember what it was.

And there was the question of where exactly this was.

It was dark, and he couldn't see anything.

His body did not move; it felt like he was submerged in very heavy water.

But that sweet, sweet scent enveloped his thoughts, and so such concerns seemed unimportant.

He wanted to stay inside this sweet scent forever.

This... sweet....

"Wha—?" Klass cried out as he jolted awake.

He swiveled his head this way and that, searching desperately with eyes that refused to focus.

When he saw her, she looked about to cry, surely because he'd suddenly sat up and opened his eyes.

"Ar-Aryes..."

"G-good morning," said Aryes, swallowing nervously, looking strangely on guard. She slowly reached her hand out. "How...how do you feel?"

Her hand touched his cheek, and he instantly groaned in pain.

Aryes snatched her hand away as though she'd burned it, tearfully apologizing.

Klass tried touching his own face.

It was swollen all over, and his hand was covered in cuts, too.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha, I'm a mess," he said with a laugh, then winced. Aryes's worried face changed to a smile, and she laughed, too, but then began crying. "Wha...? No, er, d-don't...don't cry!"

Klass hastily grabbed Aryes's shoulders, then stroked her head.

Surprised at himself for so casually doing such things, he was very happy to see that Aryes seemed not in the least upset by them.

"I'm all right—see?" he said, trying to reassure the sobbing Aryes, who nodded several times, then burst out crying again.

Not knowing what else to do, he decided to wait for her to cry herself out.

Klass finally looked at his surroundings and wondered.

Where exactly was this?

Light came in from behind him, and in front of him was something like a wall made of dark wood, on which grew a scattering of moss. He cast his gaze around his visible environs, and he seemed to be in some sort of dome, although the floor was covered in dry straw. He knew one thing for sure—this was not the town.

What was going on?

Just as he was trying to figure it out—

"Hmph," said a familiar voice.

"Wha—?" He tried to look back, but Aryes was still clinging to him, so he wound up losing his posture and toppling backward. "Oww…"

He tried to sit back up, but Aryes was still firmly attached, making movement impossible. And anyway, trying to move seemed like a waste. Aryes looked slender, but she was surprisingly solid, and Klass lay faceup beneath the weight of her body, gazing vaguely up at the ceiling. And then something popped into his field of vision—a face looking back at him, a face he couldn't believe was there.

"Heh. Seems you're in the middle of something, eh?"

"Ah—wha—?"

"What's that? Only one girl embracing you upon awakening isn't enough?"

Completely ignoring her usual teasing, Klass cried out the name that rose up in his chest. "Miss Holo!"

"You needn't shout so; I can hear you well enough."

Unconcerned with her scowl, Klass continued. "B-but, I—I thought you were—"

"Dead, you say?" Her smile was so fearless it seemed like even if killed, she wouldn't die.

And yet the fearsome sound of those great millstone teeth grinding still echoed through Klass's ears.

He was so sure she'd been chewed up, crushed.

"Heh-heh. You heard the lad," said Holo, looking over her shoulder, and suddenly a great shadow fell over the light.

Klass had no words to describe the shock he felt.

Behind Holo, at the entrance to the cave, appeared the face of the great stag he thought he'd killed.

The eye he was sure he'd stabbed glittered like polished

onyx, and when he met its gaze, it blinked once at him as though by way of greeting.

"A human child... with such courage. How many centuries... has it been... since I've... had... such fun...?" The words came with difficulty, and the great mouth twisted in an odd expression.

Klass realized it was a *smile*, and his chest burned. "It... it can't be..."

He pushed Aryes off him. Her eyes were moist with tears, and she looked deeply apologetic.

"You fool. Just who did you think you were attacking?" Holo smacked his head, and he faced her. The stag seemed to have retreated—in any case, it was gone. "I suppose the deer got a bit overenthused and played their part up rather more than I'd planned. Honestly, even I couldn't put them off it."

Holo grinned ruefully, and from somewhere far off, there was a short howl.

Had Holo planned everything?

Suddenly Klass could see it.

It had been so slow to bring its hooves down, but its movement when dodging his staff was swift indeed.

But did that mean that Aryes's look of terror when she'd been about to be trampled was a lie?

Klass looked at her, feeling suddenly betrayed, when Holo smacked his head again. "If you start doubting such things in matters like these, you truly *are* a fool."

She'd hit him with some force, and his scalp smarted.

When he thought about it like that, he realized that Aryes's face had been genuine.

Even if she'd known the stag was merely acting, she could easily have still been afraid.

Klass had to admit that even if he'd known it would be all

right, he might well have been nonetheless terrified before that presence.

And even now, she looked very apologetic.

As he looked at her, he wondered when Holo had found the time to explain the plan to her.

He'd been the only one fighting in earnest ignorance.

"Heh-heh. Still, you were quite gallant. Was he not?" Holo squatted down, propped her elbows on her knees, and thrust the staff, grinning.

Aryes wiped the corners of her eyes and nodded. "I'm sorry I didn't…say anything…but…" As she talked, she started to cry again.

Klass found not a trace of anger within himself, and he took Aryes's hand. "It's okay, really. I'm just glad we're safe…"

"…All right." As she nodded, a few tears dropped to the ground, and Klass realized something that had been bothering him.

"Oh—"

"Hmm?"

"What about our pursuers?" Klass asked, raising his head.

"Pursuers?" Holo returned the question, then made a pained face as she realized her mistake.

"W-wait, don't tell me that was a lie, too—"

"Heh-heh-heh," Holo chuckled and swished her tail.

When he looked at Aryes, he saw she was again wearing an apologetic look on her face.

He relaxed his neck and let his head fall back down to the floor, unconcerned with the *thunk* it made.

"Now then, we can't very well stay in this den forever—we must go out. There lies holy forest ground the likes of which few humans will ever see." Holo stood and cracked her neck.

"Holy…forest ground?"

"Aye. It's quite a sight, is it not?" These words were directed at Aryes, who nodded firmly.

It had to be something to see.

"The sun's been long up. Let us go and bask—your warrior tale will make a fine appetizer when considering what to do next. After all,"—Holo put her hand on her hip and flicked her tail—"the three of us have a journey ahead of us."

She grinned and walked off.

He could hardly be disappointed that she was safe.

And yet he couldn't help but wonder if she would play a trick like this on him again.

In any case, he wanted to see the holy forest ground.

What was so special about it, he wondered.

"So, this holy ground—was it really so great?" he asked Aryes as she helped him sit up, which she thought about for a moment, then nodded.

"I suppose…" She seemed to be seriously considering it, which lessened the joke. "Still…," she said, looking Klass straight in the eye.

His heart thumped painfully and not from any of his injuries.

And now he knew why.

"I'd rather visit the sea."

At this, Klass could no longer resist the smile that split his face.

Forgetting the pain it caused, he grinned and nodded.

Aryes then looked past Klass to something behind him. He got the feeling that whoever was there was looking at him and nodding, but he didn't care.

Someone rather clever and nosy had probably told Aryes to say it, but he was sure her words weren't a lie.

He'd found within himself the strength to believe that.

"Well, shall we go?" Klass took Aryes's hand and stood.

Just as he turned around, he saw Holo's tail flick and disappear into shadow.

That soft, silky, sweet-smelling tail. He thought about getting Holo to let him sleep upon it one more time by way of apology for overdoing her tricks.

It was so comforting, he felt it would be a fair trade.

He looked back over his shoulder as he thought about it.

"Hmm?" Aryes asked. He was surprised. Had he accidentally said it out loud? Not replying, he started walking.

Out of the den's opening, he went out into the light, holding Aryes's hand.

He thought about the saying "He who chases two rabbits catches neither."

But he had a wolf on one side and a sheep on the other, so...

"Shall I guess what you are thinking?" said a reproachful voice from behind him.

He was too scared to turn around.

There before him in a sunlit garden too beautiful for any painting, Holo basked in the rays of light, holding herself as she shook with mirth.

End.



THE RED OF THE APPLE, THE BLUE OF THE SKY

Realizing it had suddenly become quiet, Lawrence looked up.

But the street noise that entered along with sunlight through the open window hadn't changed.

So why had it suddenly turned so quiet? He put a bundle of sheepskins that his eyes lit upon in order, then cracked his neck.

A girl on the bed wiped her mouth. Perhaps that was the cause.

"So you were eating all along...? How many did you have?"

The girl, Holo, who had beautiful chestnut hair that would be the envy of any noblewoman, flicked her wolf ears, then counted on her fingers. "Ten and...seven. No, nine."

"And what's left?"

This time she flicked her tail, a tail that would've caused any furrier to drool with envy.

The gesture made her seem like a scolded puppy.

"...E-eight..."

"Eight?"

"Eighty...one."

Lawrence sighed, and Holo's expression shifted completely; she glared at him. "You're going to ask me if I'm going to eat them all."

"I haven't said anything yet."

"So what was to follow that sigh, eh?"

After a short pause, Lawrence answered. "*Can* you eat them all?"

Letting Holo's glare wash over him, Lawrence returned his attention to the bundle of sheepskins before him, trying to tie it up with some twine before remembering that he couldn't use his left hand.

This was because in some recent unpleasantness, he'd blundered into getting stabbed.

Nevertheless, the disturbance had had the effect of creating a new and priceless bond between him and Holo, whom he'd happened to meet earlier in his travels.

When he thought about it like that, it was cheap indeed, he reminded himself, standing up from a chair.

There was a pile of wooden crates filled with apples in the corner of the room. The bill was for 120 apples, but—including today's count—thirty-nine had been eaten.

Even if they were her favorite food, eating them all before they spoiled would be no mean feat.

"You don't have to be so stubborn," said Lawrence.

"I'm not being stubborn."

"Really?"

Holo turned away sullenly, every bit as childish as her appearance would lead one to expect, even though she'd lived scores of years longer than Lawrence and was a centuries-old wolf spirit who dwelled in wheat and could yield whatever harvest she saw fit.

But she remained that way for only a moment, finally laying

her wolf ears back in defeat. "...The truth is...I'm a bit full of them..."

Knowing he'd rouse her anger if he laughed at her, Lawrence merely agreed. "I'll bet. Even if they're your favorite food, that's a lot of apples."

"Still—"

"Hmm?"

"Still, I swear I'll eat them all."

Unlike when she'd given him that angry glare, she said this with what seemed like grim determination.

Lawrence was briefly surprised at this sudden change but soon realized Holo's position.

Holo had used Lawrence's name without his consent to order 120 apples, a fruit that was by no means inexpensive.

But she hadn't done it just for her own gluttonous purposes.

As strange as it sounded, Holo needed to waste a large amount of Lawrence's money in order for them to continue their travels.

Holo had originally been bound to a village that grew wheat, but had asked Lawrence to take her to her homeland in the north country—thus their journey had begun.

But it is the way of the world that plans made for simple reasons do not proceed simply.

Lawrence was not at all angry at Holo for buying the apples. Quite the contrary, and it wasn't just apples; she'd also bought some rather expensive clothes, but he had wished for her to do exactly that.

However, though they did understand each other on this count, Holo still seemed to feel some sense of responsibility for having gone and advanced a contract.

Lawrence was not some nobleman's prodigal son; he was a hardworking traveling merchant.

She was surely entirely aware of that.

Holo was a self-proclaimed wisewolf, after all.

She was also a wolf who cared so much about him he wanted to laugh.

"You needn't get so worked up about it," said Lawrence, picking up an apple. "Even if you tire of eating them raw, there are many ways to eat an apple."

He took a bite of the fruit, which was so ripe it seemed near bursting, but stopped at Holo's gaze.

Even before a mountain of apples she couldn't possibly finish, she evidently wouldn't allow anyone else to have one.

"If you bring yourself to ruin, apples will be the cause, I tell you." He grinned and tossed the apple to her, which she caught with a displeased face.

"So, tell me of these 'other ways' to eat them."

"Hmm, well, you could bake them."

Holo moved her face away from the apple he'd bitten into, and after scrutinizing it, she looked at Lawrence. "You'd best prepare for the consequences if you're making sport of me."

"Can't your ears always tell lies from truth?"

At these words her ears twitched as if flicked, and she grumbled, "Baking apples... I've never heard of the like."

"Ha-ha, I suppose not. It's not as though one roasts them on a spit over an open flame. It's more like bread baked in an oven."

"Hmph."

Evidently she had trouble understanding this, even once it was explained. She cocked her head as she chewed the apple.

"So you've never had apple pie, then?"

At this question, too, she shook her head.

"Hmm. I suppose it would be quickest to just show it to you.

When you bake apples, they turn soft—it's a bad example, but they're almost as soft baked as they are when rotten."

"Mmph."

"But just as something on the verge of spoiling can be tasty, baked apples are amazing. You know how a raw apple is good for a parched throat? Baked apples are so sweet you actually get thirsty."

"I…see," she said, feigning an even tone, but her tail was busily wagging to and fro.

While her clever mind and quick tongue were always making fun of Lawrence, when it came to food, Holo had a distinct weakness.

And no matter what her mouth said, her ears and tail always showed her true feelings.

"Anyway, they're good apples to begin with, so they'll be good no matter how you prepare them. Though you'll tire of sweetness, too, won't you?"

Holo's tail suddenly stopped.

"Salted meat or salted fish—which do you prefer?"

Her answer came instantly. "Meat!"

"So, for dinner—" Lawrence started but was cut off when his eyes met Holo's as she jumped off the bed and cheerfully threw on her robe. "What, you intend to go right now?"

"Aren't we?"

Giving up on trying to figure out where inside that small body of hers all those apples were fitting, he did recall that her true form was a wolf big enough to eat him in one bite.

He didn't want to think about it, but perhaps her stomach stayed as big as it was when she was a wolf.

"…So I'll ask you again, do you think you can eat all those apples?"

"After hearing you, I've made up my mind to do it. You

needn't worry." Quickly fixing her robe about her with a sash, she spun about and was ready in a flash.

Not much time had passed since midday, but Lawrence quietly gave up.

Persuading her otherwise would be impossible, he was quite sure.

"I suppose I have business, so why not? Let's go."

"Right!" Holo nodded, smiling, every bit as carefree as the young girl she looked like.

Lawrence had been a traveling merchant for seven years, since his eighteenth birthday, and still could not find any words to argue with her when she smiled at him like that.

Such thoughts occupied him he watched her impatiently flounce out the door, leaving behind the echo of her smile, sweeter than any apple.

Still, if she found that out, she'd only use it to tease him.

Lawrence cleared his throat and prepared himself to go out, but as he went to follow Holo, his feet suddenly stopped short.

Holo looked happily at him through the open door.

"You should smile like that more; 'tis nice."

They may well have been setting out to wash away the taste of apples, but she truly was malicious.

As he followed her out of the room, Lawrence spoke to the cheeky little wolf. "You're really rather unpalatable, you know."

Holo looked over one shoulder. "Am I to claim deliciousness, then?" she said, feigning irritation.

Lawrence's shoulders went slack, signaling his defeat, at which Holo snickered audibly.

Situated on the Slaude River, the port town of Pazzio was always crowded.

Even without any festival or battle preparations, the streets were busy and filled with people going here and there.

Farmers leading livestock, traveling merchants hauling their wares, tidily dressed servant children running errands, and confused-looking monks on their first visit in ages to a bustling town—all were in evidence.

It was said that wherever three roads converged, a city would grow—and there were many, many streets in the town, outnumbered only by the kinds of people that trod them.

But none among them imagined that one of the visitors to the town was not a person at all.

"Far from it," Lawrence said. "You look every bit the nun."

"Mm?" Holo looked back at Lawrence talking to himself, her mouth full. Despite having eaten so many apples, one look at the raisin stand was all it took for her to start begging like a pauper.

"I was saying I don't want to think about how much your food bill is running."

"Humph. Is there some inconvenience with my looking like a nun?" Holo couldn't hide her malicious pleasure at proving to Lawrence she'd heard exactly what he said.

"Far from it; it makes travel all the more convenient."

"Hmm. To be able to so easily change so much by simply choosing clothes—the human world surely is a strange one."

"I'm sure wolves would find something convenient in wearing sheepskins, if they could manage it."

Holo thought for a moment, then grinned. "Aye, and if I wore a rabbit skin, you'd happily walk right into any trap."

"So for you, I'll bait my trap with apples."

Lawrence had to laugh at the sight of Holo trying to sneer with her cheeks stuffed with raisins.

This was a pleasure no lone merchant could enjoy, whose conversation was either for business or to himself.

"Anyway, it's not without inconveniences, especially in your case."

Seeming to realize from his tone that he'd turned serious, Holo looked up again, this time without poking fun, as she walked beside him.

"There are all sorts of problems with a nun drinking wine in the middle of the day. Most taverns will overlook it, but you could stand to consider such things a bit more."

"Mm. 'Tis like drinking on a rickety bridge that could fall at any moment."

Lawrence found himself impressed that she'd come up with such an apt example so quickly.

"Also, different towns have different circumstances. Especially as we head north, there may be places where a nun would be a very bad disguise, indeed."

"What shall I do then?"

"It would be safest to have a change of clothes that would make you look like a town girl."

Holo nodded politely, then popped the rest of the raisins into her mouth. "In that case, can we not buy them before dinner? Anything that lessens our safety will make the food taste worse."

"I'm glad you understand. There's no time to waste convincing you."

"What, did you think I would insist on food and wine first? I'm not so blinded by gluttony as that."

Lawrence shrugged as if to say, "Aren't you?" Holo licked her fingers, unamused.

"Humph. You're trying to take care of me. I've got to take advantage of that, haven't I?" said Holo quietly, looking at the

street ahead instead of at Lawrence. She then smiled slightly and sighed. "That's quite a grand excuse to buy new clothes. Did you think I wouldn't notice?"

Lawrence put his hand to his mouth but not to stop an exclamation of surprise from slipping through—no, it was because he felt a bit embarrassed.

"Heh. Ah, well, if you're buying me some new things, I'm happy to impose on you. The cold winter awaits, after all."

"You could impose a *bit* less."

Holo smiled like a child telling a joke, entwining her fingers around Lawrence's right hand.

She was concerned about his coin purse in her own Holo-ish way. Though if it came down to this, having one's purse pitied was humiliating in its own way for a man.

The wisewolf seemed to have long since understood the conflict within him.

He didn't have near enough wisdom to outthink Holo.

"'Tis cold. My hand will freeze."

Lawrence did not, of course, believe a word of that.

"Yes, it certainly is cold."

"Aye."

They each knew the other was lying, which was somehow more fun than simply telling the truth.

Walking down the crowded street, they were the only two who understood the meaning hidden there.

That was enough to make him feel even better than he had when he'd finished his big trade and had a purse full of coins with laurel-topped queens' heads on them.

"Yeah."

But as he thought about it, Lawrence realized something that brought him out of his reverie and back to the crowded reality of the street.

"What is the matter?"

"I've... no money."

Holo looked blank for a moment, then gave him a look that went past irritation right on into pure disdain.

Whatever she might say, in this regard she was no different from a regular town girl.

If one didn't buy a town girl what one had promised her, her tenacity would be deeper than any merchant's.

That was one thing Lawrence had learned in his seven years of experience.

"However, for the sake of my honor, I must explain that when I say, 'I have no money,' I don't mean what you think I mean."

"Huh?"

"I mean I've got no small change." As he spoke, Lawrence felt for his coin purse but realized he couldn't use his left arm.

It was unfortunate, but he casually let go of Holo's hand. "Yup, none," he said upon examining the pouch's contents.

"They say too big is better than too small. 'Tis not as though you've no money at all."

"They also say not to kill a fly with a sledgehammer. Didn't you say the same thing to me when buying bread?"

"Mph. So we'll need change, then."

"We'll have to exchange it. If we gave gold coins to the tailor, there's no telling what kind of a terrible face he'd make."

"Mm... still—" said Holo as Lawrence closed his coin purse and replaced it at his waist. "Are gold coins really so very valuable?"

"Huh? They certainly are. The *lumione* coins in my purse now are trading for around thirty-five pieces of *trenni* silver. If you don't stay at an inn and don't drink any wine, you can live

for a week on a single *trenni*. So think about thirty-five times that."

"...That's quite something, indeed. So why would a tailor be bothered to get one in payment?" Holo said. Lawrence looked at her and could guess what she was going to ask next. "Unlike apples, a gold coin might buy only one or two pieces of clothing. I was told these clothes cost two gold pieces."

When noble houses were attacked by rioting commoners, Lawrence had heard that it was often a trivial statement that was the trigger. He grimaced, wondering if what Holo had just said was a good example of that kind of statement.

"If all clothing cost that much, the greater part of the townsfolk would be walking around totally naked."

Writing an IOU for a robe that cost two gold pieces, there was no doubt that the clothier would be wondering whether he was actually going to get paid or not—so much so that it was strange that a contract hadn't been signed in front of a public witness.

And it hadn't just been two pieces of clothing—there'd been a silk sash, too.

But the clothier hadn't thought it was some sort of childish prank, probably because Holo seemed like the private nun of some wealthy nobleman somewhere.

"Hmm...this was so costly, was it?" Holo looked down and fingered the robe she wore.

"That's right. So from now on, let's keep our purchases to the poorer stuff."

At this Holo looked up, her lip twisted, looking like her fun had been spoiled. "I'm Holo, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu. 'Twill wound my reputation to wear poor clothes."

Lawrence drew his chin in as his words stuck in his throat;

his mind spun as he searched for a good response but could find none.

Holo struck his right arm like a child having a temper tantrum.

"Still, money changing..." He put thoughts of Holo aside and considered the matter with a sigh.

There would be a fee involved in changing gold coins to silver, and something about him was never too pleased with letting go of gold.

He'd been laughed at for this, told that merchants saved money because they were in love with gold, but for Lawrence's part, he didn't think of it as a joke.

But right now he had a bigger problem to face.

When exchanging coins in a town, it was his routine to go to a cambist he knew, because seeing a money changer for the first time, they'd always swindle him and take him for a loss. What was worse, this was viewed as a sort of tax, so he couldn't even complain about it. "If you don't like it, you better get to know us better," was the standard line from cambists on the subject.

Of course, Lawrence had a preferred cambist and was not too worried about this.

He had a different problem.

Which was that his cambist was a notorious womanizer and had become instantly taken with Holo.

Worse, Holo seemed to enjoy this.

On top of that, she also seemed to enjoy how pathetic this made Lawrence feel.

If he could avoid it, he didn't want to bring Holo along to see the money changer.

"Money changing, eh? That means...oh ho." The clever Holo realized who they'd be seeing and grinned. "Well, then,

you'd better make the arrangements. I want to be drinking wine sooner rather than later."

Holo pulled on his hand, heading for the lively avenue.

Lawrence sighed the way he always did before any deal, cursing the mean-spiritedness of the owner of the soft hand that held his.

"For one *lumione*, today's rate is thirty-four *trenni*."

"And the fee?"

"Ten silver *lute* or thirty copper *trie*."

"I'll pay in *lute*."

"Very good, then. Right here, then...Oh, please do take care. Anything you drop on the street becomes the property of he who picks it up," said the money changer, politely placing the silver coins in Holo's hand, then covering them with his, as though he'd given them to a child.

Lawrence offered a single *lumione* coin, but the cambist did not let go of her hand.

In fact, he wasn't looking at Lawrence at all.

"Weiz."

At the sound of his name, the man finally looked over. "What?"

"*I'm* your customer."

Lawrence had been using Weiz as his cambist for a long time, owing to them both knowing his master. Weiz sighed dramatically and gestured to his table with his chin. "Just leave the gold there. I'm busy right now."

"And what is it you're busy with?"

"Can't you tell? I'm right in the middle of making sure this lovely maiden doesn't drop her silver." Weiz smiled at Holo, having still not let go of her hand.

Holo, for her part, acted more bashful than Lawrence had re-

alized she was capable of and now lowered her gaze, seemingly pleased.

Both Weiz and Holo were acting ridiculously, and as the only serious one, Lawrence was left entirely out of the play.

"But, sir—" said Holo finally, which Weiz's face tensed at, and he straightened his posture like a knight. "There seems to be too much silver for my hands to hold."

Weiz answered before Lawrence could get a word in. "My dear Miss Holo, that is why you have my hands as well."

Holo looked surprised, then spoke as though very sad. "I could not possibly impose such a weight upon you."

Weiz shook his head and continued. "If silver overflows from your hand, then I will gladly lend you mine. It would not trouble me in the slightest—because, my dear, I am sure that you, Miss Holo, will accept my feelings in turn, feelings so passionate I cannot hold them in both arms."

Holo averted her eyes like the blushing daughter of some nobleman while Weiz gazed steadily at her face.

The exchange was so teeth-grittingly saccharine it made Lawrence want to slap them both.

The whole thing was a cliché, of course, but it was also so perfectly done that it made Lawrence wonder if they'd somehow arranged it ahead of time.

He found the whole thing deeply unamusing.

It was time to throw cold water on it.

"Silver coins for the coin purse, gold for the box, and plain copper in hand—or have you forgotten that proverb, Weiz?" It was the most basic principle of handling money, the first thing that any cambist's apprentice learned from his master.

Weiz's fun was thoroughly spoiled.

As Lawrence expected, he finally removed both of his hands from Holo's and scratched his head noisily. "Bah.



Keeping a lovely girl like this all to yourself is an insult to God. Haven't you ever heard 'Share thine bread with others'?"

"You want me to share?" asked Lawrence, opening his leather purse and filling it with the silver coins in Holo's hand. She was smiling faintly but gave Lawrence an expressionless glance.

"There's no lending at the cambist's table. Only exchange or no exchange," said Lawrence with a smile to the serious-faced Weiz, placing the last silver coin in his pouch. "She comes with the debt she owes me. Do you mind?"

"Hmph," said Weiz, pulling his chin in.

He seemed a bit regretful now that talk of money had returned.

Still, Weiz was accustomed to that. He soon assumed a sad expression and looked at Holo. "I cannot possibly put a price upon you."

A laugh escaped Holo, but she still switched into her performance before replying, "I'm afraid the scales within my heart are still swinging. But I'm sure they will not simply tilt under the weight of gold..."

"Oh, but of course."

Weiz tried to take Holo's hands again, and she pulled them away. "To put your hands upon a swinging scale... sir, you truly are a scoundrel," Holo said to Weiz like a barmaid scolding a drunken customer, which flustered him so much Lawrence couldn't see him as the same man.

Swearing that he'd never let that happen to him, Lawrence sighed and lowered the curtain on this third-rate comedy.

"Come, let's be off."

"Oh, hey, Lawrence—"

"Hmm?"

"So if you came all the way out to change money, are you doing some kind of shopping?"

"Yes, we're heading north, so I'm getting clothes and such."

Weiz rolled his eyes up briefly. "S-so, you're going soon, then?"

"Yes, probably…," said Lawrence, looking at Holo, who smiled happily.

He didn't have to be as good at seeing through people as Holo was to know what Weiz was thinking.

"Prices rise with the sun after all. I'd like to buy what I need before the day's out."

"Ugh…" Weiz looked like he was ready to close his business and run after them, but he surely had deals he couldn't abandon.

Feeling like he'd gotten even for being made to feel like a third wheel, Lawrence said, "Well, then," and turned to leave.

But Holo blocked his path. "Can money be exchanged after the sun sets?"

Suddenly, Weiz seized the chance to jump in. "The market's decided that cambists who use scales after the sun sets are all swindlers. And, of course, I'm no swindler."

"You heard him," said Holo to Lawrence.

He realized he wasn't going to be able to nurse his petty grudge forever. And he'd planned on inviting Weiz anyway.

Traveling merchants didn't have many town friends close enough to drink with in the evenings.

"Once we've bought our clothes, we'll be heading to the tavern. When you're done with work, you should come by if you're free."

"Of course, brother! The usual tavern?"

"I'd be scared to get drunk in a place I didn't know."

"Right, got it. I'll be there—I'll surely be there!"

These last words were directed mostly at Holo. The other cambists in the area paid him little mind, only glancing at him briefly as if to say, "What, again?" Even as Lawrence and Holo moved away from his stall, Weiz continued waving.

Perhaps enjoying the display, Holo waved right back until they were out of sight.

When she finally faced forward again, it was because they'd finished crossing the bridge where all the money changers' and goldsmiths' stalls were lined up roof to roof.

"Heh. I knew that would be amusing," said Holo, as though having drunk a particularly tasty wine.

Lawrence could only sigh at this. "If you toy with people too much, you'll regret it later."

"Regret?"

There were many jokes about beautiful nuns who went on pilgrimage only to return with more people than they'd left with.

"You'll be followed around."

"I'm already being followed around by you." When Lawrence faltered in reply, Holo grinned wickedly, showing both fangs. "Unlike you, he knows I'm playing with him. 'Tis amusing enough toying with you, but sometimes one longs for a cleverer male to play with."

Lawrence had all sorts of things he wanted to say but couldn't force even one of them out of his mouth.

He felt a renewed sense of shame at being so utterly hopeless at everything besides business.

"We both know 'tis mere play; do not be so serious. You're making *me* bashful now."

Holo deliberately placed her hand on his cheek, which Lawrence could only look sour about.

"'Tis well, though. Weiz has a cleverer tongue than you, but

I've lived long enough to know that nothing is so untrustworthy as the words we say. Living in the world of trade as you do, surely you're not entirely unaware of that yourself."

A bit surprised at her sudden words, Lawrence saw that while Holo herself was smiling, her clear amber eyes were very serious indeed.

As the god of the wheat harvest, Holo had been kept in her village for a long time. Though the villagers sang her praises, they also hung an iron chain around her neck and did not let her leave. In the end, when they were done with her, their revenge would have been ruthless.

Considering that, Holo's words were heavy.

And yet the hand that so casually held his was warm.

"It's true. I'll tell any lie if it'll bring me a profit."

"They won't work on me, though."

Lawrence could tell her ears twitched proudly beneath her hood, and he couldn't help but smile. "So, shall we go buy some clothes?"

"Aye."

Lawrence wondered what sort of clothes would suit Holo and did his very best to make sure his musings weren't noticed.

Clothes of the sort Holo had bought previously—that cost a gold piece or two for a single item—were basically new goods.

However, few villagers actually wore new clothes.

Once a piece was finished, it was worn until holes began to wear through, and even then were sold again secondhand, repaired, and so on and so on. Merchants would buy used clothes originally made for wealthier merchants, and the used clothes of those middling merchants would then go to manservants. Servants would sell their clothes to apprentice craftsmen, or donate them to traveling ascetic monks.

This cycle made it clear at a glance where people fit in the social hierarchy.

To be able to spend two gold pieces on newly made clothes was very impressive. Even Lawrence had only one item of tailored clothing, which had been torn in the disturbance with Holo some days earlier.

Did she know that, or didn't she?

Before a shop selling used goods quite a ways down on the cycle of clothing, Holo's face evidenced clear displeasure.

"Huh..." She let a vague sigh escape as she held a brown piece that had probably been dyed by boiling it with tree bark.

Of course, there was no way to tell whether it had just been stained so much that it had turned the color of whatever stains had failed to wash out. That was how beat-up it was.

"That one's forty *lute*. It's quite sturdy for the price, I must say." The shopkeeper nodded vaguely, and Holo finally put it back on the display table, taking three steps back from the stall.

It was surely meant to declare her lack of interest in any of the clothes here, but it was so like a noble girl that Lawrence had to grin.

"Sir, as we are going north, could you possibly choose some warmer items for the two of us? And not too expensive, please."

"And your budget?"

"Two *trenni*."

"Very well, sir."

The type of clothing being sold around this time of year was not for everyday use, but meant for protecting against the cold and little different from bundles of straw. Color and shape were secondary—if the clothing held its shape, was as thick as possible, and wasn't full of bugs, it was great.

These heavy-duty items were sold off by travelers coming

down from the north and in turn bought by people who planned to go back up.

Who knew how many years the beat-up piece that Holo held had been carried back and forth for?

When it came to such items, one did not buy them by the piece, but by the pile.

"For tops and bottoms plus two blankets, how does this sound?"

"Yes... well, as you can see, I'm a traveling merchant, and I've come here on business with a trading company I know well—the Milone Company."

At the mention of one of the more prominent trading houses in the town, the shopkeeper's ears perked up.

"And it seems I'll be coming here several times a year."

This made it clear that the shopkeeper's customer was a traveling merchant with money to spare.

And it was all the better if he was planning on visiting often.

The clothier's business was not based on how much profit he could make from a single piece, but rather how many pieces he could sell, so Lawrence's words put a smile on his face.

"Very good, sir. I quite understand. Shall I add this cloak, then? It's been treated with smoke, of course. I guarantee it'll be vermin-free for two years."

The battered cloak was full of patches, and the blankets were made of terribly scratchy wool, but for those buying supplies for a journey to the north, they could still fetch a decent price.

Lawrence nodded, satisfied, and held out his right hand.

The deal was sealed with a handshake, and the shopkeeper started tying up the bundle of clothes with hemp twine.

Lawrence watched him do it but looked back when one of the pieces was suddenly snatched away.

As he expected, Holo wore a displeased expression.

"I thought we'd come to buy clothes for me," she said.

"That's right... and?" said Lawrence, as though wondering why Holo was asking him something so obvious. As he looked at her, the vigor seemed to drain from her face.

He realized that despite seeming to care only about her tail, Holo had actually been excited about these clothes.

But right after the wave of her disappointment receded, it came crashing back down as anger.

"Are you... saying I should wear this?"

"If you want to fight the cold with just that robe, I don't mind, but..."

Whether she snatched the clothes away because the shopkeeper hadn't asked her or whether it was out of sheer rage, Holo spoke in a low growl. "If you're angry about my using your money, just say as much. I'm Holo the Wisewolf. I've brains and beauty, but my nose is good, too. 'Twould wrinkle my nose to wear such a thing."

"Perhaps a bit of hardship will fix your wrinkled spirits."

Coughing at the sudden smack to the chest he received for this, Lawrence decided not to tease Holo any further.

"Don't be angry. I'll explain the secret here."

Holo was still baring her fangs and growling, but Lawrence took her hand, then spoke to the shopkeeper, who was still busy binding up the clothes.

"Sir, a word, please."

"Hnnnggh... There. Yes?"

"Have you no fine ladies' clothing?"

"Ladies' clothing, you say?"

"Something that could be worn in a northern town and is about her size," he said, referring, of course, to Holo.

The shopkeeper sized Holo up, then glanced back at Lawrence.

There was no doubt he was doing the cost-benefit calculations in his head.

This included not only the state of Lawrence's coin purse, but also Lawrence and Holo's relationship and how much he estimated Holo would be able to get Lawrence to spend.

If he was to bring out a treasured rare article, it could improve his relationship with Lawrence, which in turn could lead to untold profit in the future, which was exactly what he was surely trying to estimate. The more customers a used clothing store had, the more competitors it created. Gaining a traveling client who would visit often was a very big deal.

There was a reason he'd come to a bulk-sale stall like this to buy Holo's clothes.

Even a child could tell the robe Holo wore was of very fine quality. If he brought her, wearing a robe like that, to a cheap used clothier like this, that was like standing in front of rabbit while holding a meat cleaver.

The key to negotiation was to occupy a better position than your opponent.

"Very well. One moment, please."

Heaving the rudely bundled clothing—a horse's hay bale was more neatly tied—onto the display table, he turned and attended to the mountain of goods in the back of the stall.

For a stall like this, the challenge was moving goods from here to there, and thus the shopkeeper would not hesitate to buy from rather suspicious sources.

In other words, stolen goods were common, and among them were some choice items.

If bargain finds were the goal, there was no better place than a little stall like this.

"What about something like this? A certain merchant house sold it to me upon the change of the season," said the shop-

keeper, producing a collared shirt, which together with a long skirt, had been dyed blue.

Paired with a clean white apron and good posture, it would produce a perfectly suitable ensemble for a maid at a good inn somewhere. Its color was not faded nor its hems worn, so it was most likely stolen.

But whether the article was good or not, the question was would Holo like it?

Lawrence glanced at Holo, who seemed unimpressed.

"Perhaps the lady does not like it."

"I've no time for these silly colors."

If Holo truly had been born into a noble house, she would've inspired rumors that she preferred armor to dresses.

"I want something simpler. Something easy to put on."

Lawrence met the shopkeeper's eyes and smiled.

There was something charming about a girl who wanted to dress quickly.

"In that case..." The shopkeeper turned around and again went searching through his pile of clothes.

When it came to things that were easy to put on, something that went over the shoulders like a robe was a likely choice.

So what along those lines would turn up that would fit a town lass like Holo?

Lawrence wondered about it as he watched the shopkeeper's back, when his eyes lit upon something. "Excuse me, sir, but what is that?"

"Yes?" The shopkeeper looked over his shoulder, both hands holding a thin cloak, then followed Lawrence's pointing finger to its target.

And there it was.

A soft brown leather cape.

"Indeed. Now that my eye's upon it, you're quite right."

It had been mostly buried beneath the pile, but as the shopkeeper carefully extracted the cape, it was indeed just what Lawrence thought it might be.

"This was a very fine piece once worn by a certain nobleman."

Lawrence ignored the shopkeeper's immediate explanation—there was no telling whether it was truth or lies—and looked at Holo, who seemed not displeased.

"The leather's beautifully tanned, you see, here, and the edges are carefully sewn without a single rip. Notice also this walnut button. You fix it about your shoulders like this—like so—there. If she wears it along with one of the special kerchiefs the nobleman had made for his house staff, she'll be every bit the charming town lass."

Lawrence accepted the exaggerated description along with the cape and kerchief, and after a quick look, he handed them to Holo.

Holo sniffed briefly. "Rabbit, eh?" she murmured.

"Does it make you want to eat rabbit?" asked Lawrence, at which Holo smiled voicelessly and looked up.

"This will do."

"You heard the lady. How much, my good man?"

"Thank you for your business. For the two of them, hmm, perhaps ten *trenni*? No—make it nine."

It was a reasonably good price—surely an investment in having a good relationship with Lawrence.

But there was certainly room to haggle, Lawrence thought, and made a sour face, which made the shopkeeper continue.

"Understood. Then as an exception for this lovely young lady, eight pieces."

Having gotten it to that point, Lawrence couldn't help but

smile and was ready to buy—but just before he opened his mouth, Holo smoothly interrupted.

"In that case, out of consideration for my lovely self putting these on and modeling them, how about seven?"

The shopkeeper froze as though having forgotten to breathe, but at Holo's head-cocked smile, he returned to his senses and cleared his throat loudly.

It was not hard to imagine that he had a daughter that looked about Holo's age.

"Very well. I shall let them go for seven."

"Thank you!" said Holo, squeezing the cape and kerchief to her breast and smiling, which elicited another loud throat clearing from the shopkeeper.

Next to her, Lawrence could only smile ruefully at that negotiation ability, far better than what he'd been able to cultivate in his seven years of trade.

As it turned out, when Holo changed clothes, she became a town girl so fetching that ten out of ten people would turn and look at her as they walked past.

Adroitly putting the kerchief on over her head to hide her ears—right in front of the shopkeeper, to Lawrence's chagrin—Holo then unbuttoned the robe she wore and let it slide down, wearing it around her waist as a skirt. Then she put the cape over her shoulders and was done.

To Lawrence, who was fully aware of her nonhuman ears and tail, it seemed she changed clothes so easily it might as well have been magic.

The shopkeeper's reputation rose, and Holo was delighted.

A good while after they'd put the shop behind them, Holo finally spoke up.

"Were the clothes very expensive?"

"Not really. They're very good for seven silver pieces."

He spoke honesty, but walking to his left, Holo did not seem particularly proud.

Rebalancing the bundle of clothes that he carried over his right shoulder, Lawrence smiled and added, "Do you think you could've haggled him down further?"

But Holo did not smile, instead shaking her head slowly before answering in a low voice. "If it had been clothes for you to wear, you would've paid a tenth of that, would you not?"

"Yes," Lawrence agreed. "But I was sure it was going to be more than that, so don't trouble yourself over it."

Holo nodded slightly, but her expression did not clear.

"If you'll go easy on the wine at the tavern later, you can handily make up seven silver pieces' worth."

"I hardly drink that much." She finally smiled.

"Still, you drive a hard, hard bargain."

"Oh?"

"Not even the canniest merchant can compare, can they?"

"Hmph. Males are all of them idiots," said Holo with her usual wicked smile, continuing once Lawrence sighed heavily. "What will you do with your load there? Are you carrying it straight to the tavern?"

"This? No, I'm not."

At this, Holo made a perplexed face. "If you're returning to the inn, isn't it that way?"

"I'm not leaving it at the inn, either."

"Hrm?"

"I'm going to sell it to a different clothier. We'll be able to buy up cold-weather gear once we're a bit farther north."

It was a perfectly honest answer, but Holo stood stunned, as though he'd said something truly outrageous. "You're... selling them?"

"Yes. There's no point in carrying them around when we're not going to use them."

"Mm...I suppose that is true...but will you be able to sell them dear?"

"I wonder. I doubt it will be too bad, but we'll probably take a small loss."

There was something funny about Holo's increasingly confused face. "You're going to sell them...even...at a loss?"

"Don't get it, eh?"

"Wait. I'm thinking."

Lawrence smiled at the suddenly obstinate Holo and looked up at the autumn sky.

The sky was always the same pale blue, but at the moment it seemed somehow clearer and wider than usual.

"Mmm..."

"Shall I tell you the trick?" he said, returning his gaze from the familiar sky and seeing his new companion grumbling in frustration. "It's no great thing—and in the end, it's you who's the impressive one."

"Huh...?" said Holo, raising one eyebrow. Lawrence took that as capitulation and let her in on the trick.

"This bundle is two silver pieces' worth of clothing. So let's say I take it to a different clothier and sell it for half that. That's a loss of one silver piece."

"Aye."

"But let's turn our thinking to something else. Anyone can tell the robe you're wearing is a high-quality item. We can even say that someone wearing such a robe would never go to that kind of shop. So when they see you with me, they're going to want to establish a good relationship with me. So what does that shop do?"

Holo answered immediately. "Sell cheaply."

"Right. So what does that imply?"

Holo the self-proclaimed wisewolf's gaze unfocused for a moment.

Lawrence smiled and continued. "When I bought the bundle from that shop, he lowered the price a bit. When I bought the fine clothes for you, he lowered it *quite* a bit. By showing me generosity, he hopes I'll come shop there again later. After all, I bought up a bundle of rags for two silver pieces. But there's a big gap in price between the two items. So what does that lead to?"

If Holo was really so clever, she'd soon come to the correct answer.

A few moments later, Lawrence's prediction proved correct. "So," she said, "looking at the difference between the loss you take when you sell the bundle and the discount the shopkeeper gave you *because* you bought it, even if you take a loss on the bundle, you still come out ahead in total—is that it?"

He patted her on the head with his left hand as if to say, "Well done!"—at which she hit him hard, and he groaned in pain.

"Hmph. 'Tis a roundabout way of doing things, I'll say that."

"It's called business sense. But your techniques are far stronger, there's no doubt." Lawrence grinned self-deprecatingly, which Holo had to smile at.

"But of course. Your flimsy ideas are no match for my scheming."

"Gee, thanks."

"Oh ho. You think you can best me?" Holo narrowed her eyes, smiling seductively.

The smile suited her—women did not play fair.

Of course, the most unfair part of all was that Holo was perfectly aware of that.

"Well, if you've such confidence, why not try your luck in the tavern later?"

Holo waved her hand lightly, which made Lawrence's words stick in his throat.

He'd forgotten about it until just now—Weiz would also be at the tavern.

"Make sure you buy me for a high price, aye?" said Holo, which Lawrence could not remain silent about.

"Oh, I'll buy you, all right—but I'm paying in apples."

Taken by surprise, Holo's eyes widened a bit, and then with a frustrated smile, she drew nearer to Lawrence. "You're quite harsh yourself sometimes."

"Sweeter when cooked, though."

Holo laughed silently, then very gently took Lawrence's left hand, as though it were fragile. "Too sweet for me to eat."

"And what about you?" asked Lawrence, squeezing her hand as much as he could without aggravating his wound.

"Take a bite and see, if you dare."

Lawrence shrugged helplessly and looked up at the expanse of the sky above him, which was a clear, clear blue.

End.



WOLF AND AMBER MELANCHOLY

Strange, she thought—the alcohol certainly was working.

It was said the wisewolf could drink a lake dry, but to think she'd be like this after a single cup of this wheat-smelling liquid— And no sooner did the thought occur to her than she was halfway through her second, her face flushed.

And not only was the drink having a surprising effect on her, but also she didn't seem to be one bit pleased about it. Her nose twitched—was the drink not to her liking? She wasn't sure.

Her vision swayed, and she looked hazily over the many dishes on the table, eyelids heavy. Right before her there was an oil-drizzled pork shoulder coated in crushed rock salt, but somehow she had no appetite at all.

No, wait—how much had she already eaten? she wondered.

Having gotten to this point, she was starting to realize that she might actually be feeling quite poorly, which if true, meant that she couldn't very well keep this up.

Had this been just any meal, that would have been one thing—she could've claimed she felt bad, and her companion

would have nursed her back to health so thoroughly it would have been embarrassing.

But at the moment, she and her companion were not the only ones sitting at the small round table.

Her traveling companion's foolishness had gotten them into serious trouble, but having negotiated it safely, they were now having a bit of a celebration.

And she was certainly not going to be responsible for ruining such an opportunity. Celebrations, no matter how meager they might be, were very important.

However, this was not the only reason she couldn't afford to collapse here.

No, the biggest reason could surely be found before her very eyes, sitting right at the table.

The flaxen-haired, underfed shepherdess.

Right in front of *that*, she could hardly afford to look uncouth.

"Still, I never knew sheep could find rock salt," her companion said, sounding very interested as he continued a conversation about shepherds.

While the shepherdess was somewhere in her midteens, her companion was into his twenties. While a wisewolf might not know everything about the human world, she knew enough to tell that as they chatted intimately over the table, they could hardly fail to look like a mated pair.

"It's because they love the saltiness for some reason. If you rub salt onto a rock, they'll lick it for ages."

"Oh, so that's true? I once heard about a far-off town where they use sheep like that as a form of torture—very strange. I didn't believe it, honestly."

"They use... sheep?"

The shepherd girl—Norah or some such was her name—

had eyes filled with curiosity. The girl's eyes were so gentle and obedient that just looking at them made her want to eat her up.

The sheep-like shepherdess reached out toward a large chunk of beef sitting in the middle of the table. For a while now, all the dishes they'd ordered had been either beef, pork, or fish, with no mutton.

Perhaps this was out of consideration for the shepherdess who was dining with them, but in any case, nobody had asked *her*.

And of course, to selfishly insist that she'd wanted to have mutton would have been a mark upon her honor as a wisewolf.

Anyway, that didn't matter. It was trivial.

What mattered was that her companion hadn't noticed her poor state at all and was busy gallantly carving a thin slice of beef from the roast and carefully laying it on a plate for the shepherdess.

Irritated, her hand automatically brought her cup to her lips, though the drink had long since lost its flavor. It only served to heat her chest.

Inside her head, a proud wolf—her other self—rolled its eyes at her.

But there was nothing for it. As her mood and condition were both deteriorating, there was a loathed shepherd right in front of her, and to top it all off, she was exactly the kind of meek, pathetic little girl her companion seemed so fond of.

It was the height of male idiocy to prefer such weak girls, but she knew all too well that if she said so out loud, she would be making an utter fool of herself.

She was backed into a corner.

Fighting a battle one was unsuited to was exhausting.

"I've forgotten what the name of the town was, but what

they'd do was they'd have sheep lick your feet as a kind of torture."

"Wha—? Sheep would—"

Just when she thought the meek little shepherdess would probably politely sandwich the beef slice between some bread, the girl bit right into it.

But her mouth was small so it was a hesitant little bite, and she couldn't get all the way through it.

The girl should've opened her mouth wider and really ripped into the meat, she wanted to say, but then she saw her companion's face slacken pathetically.

She tucked that away in her memory, along with her anger—that was apparently the way to act when in human form.

"That's right. They have the sheep lick your feet, and apparently they put salt on them. Criminals laugh at first, which is bad enough. But eventually the licking starts to become agony…"

It might have been the liquor, but watching him exaggerate so was delicious.

Perhaps over the course of his journeys, he'd become used to telling stories like this.

But he'd never once told one to *her*.

The pain of an encroaching headache began to creep into her temples.

"I suppose I've had trouble with the sheep trying to lick my fingers after I've eaten jerky. They're well behaved, but they don't have any restraint, which is a bit scary."

"I imagine your faithful knight is more reasonable on that count."

Her wolf ears pricked up, but her companion surely didn't notice.

The shepherdess's "knight"—he meant her irritating sheepdog.

"You mean Enek? Well... Enek is Enek, and sometimes he tries a little too hard or is rather... unaccommodating...," said Norah when a bark of protest came up from her feet.

He'd been receiving crusts of bread and scraps of meat.

She was well aware that he was looking at her from under the table.

Despite being a mere dog, he'd gone into full alert in the face of a pure wolf.

"Which means that to keep both dog and sheep in line, you must be quite skilled indeed."

The shepherdess widened her eyes in surprise, then flushed red—undoubtedly not from the liquor.

Beneath her robe, the wisewolf's tail fluffed up.

Beneath the table, she could hear the dog's panting as though it were laughing at her.

Her vision swam, clearly out of anger.

"By the way, Miss Norah, will you be pursuing your dream now?"

Her dream.

She started at the word, and for the first time realized that she was becoming drowsy.

Perhaps this entire infuriating conversation had been a dream, she thought, but hurriedly dismissed the notion.

She now felt genuinely unwell.

There was nothing left to do except try and somehow get to the inn undetected.

This was enemy territory.

The methods she would otherwise use were likely to backfire here.

If she were to mar the hard-won celebration by saying she

felt sick, that would be more than enough to ruin the evening. And the only one to blame for that was her.

But she did have her own territory—their small room in the inn.

If she admitted she felt sick there, that would be tantamount to a successful hunt.

She thought of it like being hidden in a thicket while watching a rabbit come into view, totally unaware of her presence.

Which meant she couldn't afford to disgrace herself. With effort, she went to take a piece of meat from the table, but even lifting her arm was bothersome, and she was unable to reach the plate.

"What, drunk already?"

She didn't have to look at his face to know his rueful smile.

Her body might have been afflicted, but her lovely ears still worked perfectly.

She knew without using her eyes exactly how her traveling companion looked as he ate.

So as said companion reached out to take the slice of meat for her and looked at her as she failed to thank him, she knew everything about his expression and posture and hated him for it.

She knew so well that she could easily imagine how she looked to him and how he felt about her.

But she didn't care about any of that anymore.

Now she wanted only one thing.

"Hey, you don't look so well—"

She wanted to lie down.

"Holo!"

Her traveling companion's words were the last thing she heard before her memory cut off.

* * *

When next she came to, she was beneath a pile of blankets so heavy they were making it hard to breathe.

She had little memory of when or how she'd come to be here.

There was some vague sense of being carried on someone's back.

On one hand, this was humiliating, but she could not deny that there was some part of her that felt very tenderly about this.

But it had probably been a dream, so she swept it into a corner of her mind.

She'd had similar dreams before, after all.

If she *did* mistake dreams for reality and thank him for carrying her, there was no telling how happy that would make him.

This was the way of the wisewolf: Anger was for scolding and laughter for praise, but one showed weakness only to trick others into letting their guard down.

"…"

And yet, she thought, turning sideways and curling up beneath the too-heavy blankets.

She was a disgrace.

She'd interrupted dinner.

As someone who well understood the need for celebration, she was ashamed.

And having displayed such pathetic behavior in front of the shepherd girl, she was still more ashamed.

She could never regain her wisewolf's pride.

While she hated being worshipped, she didn't want to part with her dignity.

"…Mngh."

And yet, she thought.

Even having committed such disgrace, she thought about the other times she'd shamed herself in front of her foolish traveling companion—this felt like nothing compared to them.

Any of them were more than enough to shame the pride of the wisewolf.

She'd become angry out of displeasure, laughed when amused, and let her guard down long since.

Having only just met him, she felt like they'd been journeying for ages, and as she thought about each little piece, they added up to a huge failure, and her chest ached with it.

Long ago she'd made mistakes here or there, of course, but none of them had pained her so.

But this journey suddenly felt like that.

"...Why should that be, I wonder?" she murmured in spite of herself.

She wondered if it was because of the centuries she'd spent in the wheat fields. Day after day would pass with nothing happening, no difference between one day and the following, between tomorrow or the day after. The only things that reminded her of time's passage were the yearly festivals—the harvest festival, the sowing festival, the festivals of prayer for protection from frost and from wind.

When she really thought about it, there were perhaps only twenty days in the year that were any different from the others. Thus it had come to be that her sense of time was denominated not in days, but in months and seasons. Other days were all bundled together as "not festival days."

But now each day was so fresh, it was like being reborn daily.

Compared to her previous life, where if she wasn't careful a sapling would grow into a huge tree in the blink of an eye, the

time she'd spent with the young merchant seemed like many years' worth of experience.

Even within a single day, morning and evening were totally different. They might have a great row in the morning, make up by midday and tease each other for leaving the bread crumbs from lunch on their faces, have another fight over the struggle for dinner, then at bedtime talk quietly about the coming day.

She wondered if she'd ever experienced a time so dizzyingly full of change before.

I have, the answer came back to her.

She'd traveled and lived with people many times before. They were memories she would never lose.

But while she might have had time to dwell on such things back in the days when all she had to do in the wheat fields was groom her tail, she now had no such luxury.

She was too busy thinking about other things: What had her companion done yesterday? What about this morning? And what was he planning now right before her eyes?

Even when her companion had first met her, she'd only moments earlier been thinking of her homeland and weeping pathetically.

Since she'd gotten so used to days with so much free time she could count the hairs on her tail two or three times over, she couldn't very well start crying now that every day was filled with stimulation.

Were she to claim it wasn't fun, that would be a lie.

No—it was *too* fun, and that made her worry.

"…"

She rolled facedown from her side, then sighed at having finally found a comfortable position.

Having gone to the trouble of taking human form, she'd

tried to sleep human-style, but no matter what she did, this was the only position she could relax in.

Facedown—or better yet, curled up into a ball.

Her companion stretched out like some foolish cat, sleeping faceup with the most ridiculous expressions on his face, but lately she'd had to admit that it took such blithe insensitivity to survive in the human world.

She had no doubt that the humans were so short-lived—they were lucky to see seventy—because they were so busy every day.

Just look at the trees, she thought.

They lived so long because far from distinguishing today from tomorrow, they hardly knew the difference between next year and the year after.

And by the time the thought had occurred to her, she'd forgotten what it was she was thinking about in the first place.

"...Hmph. That shepherdess, eh..." Finally she came back around to the beginning of things.

In any case, she'd made a spectacle of herself back there.

But now they were in the inn, and no one would interrupt them.

So maybe it was time to hassle her insensitive companion—perhaps it was time for him to cater to a few of her whims.

After all, during last night's dinner, he'd paid all of his attention to the shepherdess and barely looked at her.

It was thanks to her wisewolf nature that she'd endured such a trial. That accursed shepherdess! That slender body! That blond damned hair!

As she thought about this and that, she felt her eyelids getting heavy again, which frustrated her anew.

Anyway, where was he?

Just as she was feeling an unreasonable anger boil over at thinking about that good-for-nothing male being absent when she needed him most—or perhaps she was being unreasonable—her ears picked up the sound of footsteps.

"…!"

She jolted herself up.

Then immediately sensing something doglike about her actions, she felt both shame and irritation and flopped back down on the bed.

Such shallow actions did not suit the dignity of a wisewolf.

And yet, humiliation was humiliation.

Not just because she was considering descending to such schemes with him, but worse—she'd already been unconsciously doing so.

There was a knock at the door.

She did not reply and faced away from it.

After a brief silence, the door was finally opened.

Since she always slept with her head beneath the blanket, if it was outside of the blanket, she was normally awake.

Her companion seemed to know this; he sighed, entered, and closed the door.

And yet he wasn't looking at her; his back remained turned.

If he was so fond of weak girls, then he could hardly fail to be charmed by her having fallen to the floor. She began to see a chance of victory.

Her companion stood next to the bed.

Now, to the hunt! she thought to herself, and full of anticipation, she rolled over to face him—very, very weakly.

To this she added a faintly happy "…Nn…"

Even she didn't know what she said—probably something she thought would help the pathetic performance.

But thinking about it later, he must have been surprised by this.

After all, as she looked back at him, her companion did not seem worried or concerned at all—his face was strained with anger.

"Why didn't you tell me you weren't feeling well?" was the first thing he said.

"..." She was so surprised she had no reply.

Never had she dreamed he would be angry with her, of all things.

"You're not a child. I assume you're not going to claim you didn't notice how bad you felt until you fell over, are you?"

This was the first time she'd seen this side of her companion: serious and angry.

Though he was a tiny fraction of her age, his wisdom and strength meager in comparison to hers as a wisewolf—his face was still frightening.

The words would not come.

Though her days had been as numerous as grains of sand on a beach, she could count the times someone had dared be angry with her on one hand.

"Don't tell me the meat and wine was just so damned important—"

"Wha—!"

She admitted that it was partially her pride that had kept her silent.

But that was only half true.

She would never conceal feeling poorly just to be treated to more food.

While she may have hated it, she had been called a god for ages. She knew well the importance of feasting. She would never try to change or destroy that.

That he'd accuse her of such thoughtless logic—

"...I'm sorry. That was wrong of me to say," her companion said, coming to his senses. He sighed deeply and turned away.

It was then that she noticed she'd been baring her fangs. "I would never—"

I would never have even thought to do that, she thought but did not say.

Her throat was dry, but more than that, her companion again turning to look at her was more than enough to make her close her mouth.

"I was very worried. What would you have done if we'd been traveling?"

It was here that she finally understood why he was so angry.

He was a traveling merchant.

If he fell ill on the road, he wouldn't necessarily have any comrades nearby to lend aid.

Quite the contrary—suffering alone in the wilderness was the likelier outcome.

She thought of the poor food she ate while on a journey, of the hardship that was making camp.

Collapsing in such circumstances was without exaggeration life threatening.

He was different than she was—she who complained about loneliness but had always lived with someone nearby.

"...I am sorry," she said in a low, desolate voice, and it was no act.

Her companion was so endlessly softhearted that he must have been truly worried about her.

That she'd ignored that and thought only of herself was deeply embarrassing.

She pulled her head in, unable to look at his face.

"No…it's all right, so long as you're well. You haven't… caught cold or gotten sick…have you?"

At these words she found herself both happy and sad.

His asking was slightly timid. The reason for that timidity was obvious.

He was a human, and she was a wisewolf.

She was beyond his understanding in some ways—like this one.

"I was just…a bit fatigued."

"I thought as much. I think I would've been able to tell if you'd been sick."

She knew it was a half-truth.

But there was no reason to point it out, and it would be even more pointless to get angry.

"I just wondered if maybe…"

"?" He hesitated to finish, and she looked at him questioningly.

He continued apologetically. "…If maybe you'd eaten an onion or some such."

Her eyes widened but not in anger.

It was actually rather amusing.

"I'm…not a dog, you know."

"I know. You're a wisewolf." Her companion finally smiled, and she realized she, too, was smiling for the first time in a while.

"I *do* feel 'twas a waste of wine and food, though."

At this her companion's expression suggested he agreed. "You need not worry about that—I'm a merchant after all. I had the leftover food packed up for us."

Again, her fangs were bared.

But this was because her lips curled into a smile.

"—Or at least, that's what I wish I could say." Her companion's smile disappeared, and he held out his hand.

It wasn't exactly tough, but neither did it speak of an easy life.

It was clearly different from her own hands, and if anything, the hand that enveloped hers was as rough as a wolf's paw.

His fingers carefully brushed her bangs aside and felt her forehead.

She became very restless at the sensation of his hand on her face.

For him to nuzzle her face with his nose would've been a bit too familiar.

She didn't let this feeling show on her face, though, and her companion certainly didn't notice it.

He just felt her forehead, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. "Ah, it's just as I thought. You've got a fever. You must've been truly exhausted."

"It's because you're such a fool, that...I had to work so hard," she said bitterly, His rough finger poked her nose at this.

"You've got to rein in that bravado." He wore a weary smirk, but his words were entirely serious, she could tell.

She was so embarrassed that she couldn't keep looking at him.

Turning her head aside as if to escape the nose poke, she looked out from under the blankets with only one eye.

"Honestly, it was quite an embarrassment to deal with in front of Norah."

That's because the feast got wasted, thought Holo to herself, curling up.

He had surely been distracted enough because of her.

Even if she hadn't already felt bad, hearing this kind of thing was enough to make her pretend.

She gave him a wounded glance, which was returned by an amazed look.

"Anyway, I'll get you some more suitable comfort food, so make sure to rest and gather your strength, all right? Then you can have as much food and wine as you like."

Her ears pricked up at the promise of "as much…as you like," but more than that, her chest ached at the notion of some comfort food.

Even before the hundreds of years she'd stayed in the village, she'd often heard that when people were sick, they were given the most luxurious food to make up for it.

When wolves became sick, they simply didn't eat, of course, but humans had the opposite idea.

She would simply have to pretend.

Because more than anything else, she could finally turn his gaze away from the shepherdess.

She wouldn't let him get away.

"When you're so kind, I fear what'll happen next." She chose the wryest, most bravado-laden words she could.

A wisewolf might collapse from exhaustion and be unable to move, but her mind still had to be sharp.

Her companion smiled. "That's my line," he said.

His finger touched her cheek, which she did indeed feel slightly feverish at, and she closed her eyes.

The next morning, she opened her eyes beneath the blankets and listened carefully.

She heard no foolish snoring. It seemed her companion was not in the room.

She consulted her body. It was now merely tired, and while raw mutton was still out of the question, something cooked and lightly salted would be fine.

Having been ordered to rest the previous night, she found the comfort food postponed.

Being able to eat delicious things just because she felt fine was not likely to happen.

While she had to sigh at herself for being so weak as to take a fever after less than a month of travel and this minor crisis, she also had to admit that this treatment was not bad at all.

It had, after all, been thanks to said weakness that she'd been able to be with her companion like this.

"You utter fool."

These words were clearly directed at herself, and she rustled about underneath the blankets before popping her head out.

Having grown accustomed to waking outdoors with the scenery spreading out all around, she found rising inside this small box was not particularly enjoyable.

Even the wagon bed, cramped and cold as it was, was preferable.

It was a far better thing to wake under the great sky, swallow great breaths of endless fresh air, and be all alone, just the two of them, there in the landscape. She could accept a roof, but only if it was within the hollow of some great tree.

She turned her head sideways as she thought of such things.

There was no sign of anybody in the next bed, and a sniff of her nose told her that her companion's scent was very thin.

Surely he hadn't gone to the church to pray for her return to health.

The notion was absurd, but it would have made a top-class joke.

She smiled to herself at the thought, but as no one else was there, it quickly faded.

Her breath came out white in the chilly air, and she hugged the wheat husk–stuffed pillow.

That softhearted dunce had no sense at all really.

"Such a fool...," she murmured, then tried to sit up but found the blankets surprisingly heavy.

How many years had it been since she'd last collapsed in human form?

She'd been sure it was impossible for her to become this weak over just one night but finally admitted it.

"Hmph."

She'd wanted to spend some time grooming her tail but gave up trying to sit.

Which meant—food. And she was thirsty. She'd eaten hardly anything the previous night.

Where had her companion gone, and what was he doing?

Back in Yoitsu, nursing someone to health meant staying close by them.

It was inexcusable that he wasn't beside her when she came awake, she angrily assured herself—but then she heard footsteps.

Instead of trying to sit, she pricked up her ears.

It was very frustrating, and she hugged the pillow again.

For just a moment, she was glad her companion was not there.

"Are you awake?" he asked after giving the door a hesitant knock and opening it.

If she'd been asleep, she wouldn't have been able to answer, and if she was awake, it was a meaningless question, she thought. "Can't you tell by looking?" she asked back.

"How do you feel?"

"I cannot sit up."

This was not a lie, but she still tried to say it as casually as possible.

To double bluff, one told the truth.

While his mouth said she was lying, his face betrayed worry.

She looked at the leather bag he was carrying, then back at him with the same pathetic face.

If he was going to be this charming, her position was not a good one.

"Indeed... your color's like a sheltered princess."

Evidently she looked poorly enough to joke about it, but since she hadn't eaten, that was to be expected.

"Still, I'm hungry."

"Ha-ha. That's a relief." Her companion smiled. "Well, then," he continued, "shall I have some porridge made?"

"I'm thirsty. Is that water there?" she asked, looking at the leather bag her companion carried. It was not overlarge and did not smell particularly of grapes.

"Ah, no—you had a fever yesterday, so I brought some apple wine."

She couldn't very well stay in bed at the mention of apples.

When she tried to sit up, though, she remembered the heaviness of the blankets.

"Ah, are you all right?"

"Mmph..." Once she'd been able to easily move a giant tree felled by lightning to free a comrade trapped beneath it, and now she'd been reduced to seeking rescue from underneath a blanket.

While worried, her companion happily lent her his hand.

"I am sorry," she said. With help she was finally able to pull free of the blankets and sit up.

He also helped her sit on a pillow so that her tail wouldn't be in the way.

The human form was so weak.

But that was precisely why it had worth.

"If you were only half this agreeable normally," said her companion wickedly. Beside the bed there was a shelf with a

candle stand. Instead of a candle, he placed a cup there and filled it with apple wine.

"Ah, but when I sleep agreeably in the wagon bed, you turn angry."

"Well, isn't it unfair that I should be the only one awake?" He handed her the small cup, which she accepted with both hands.

"Also, if I were too agreeable, you'd eat most of the food at mealtimes."

"Obviously—I'm bigger."

At these words, she grinned. "I'll just have to grow my demeanor to match."

Her companion's face strained in displeasure, but he seemed not to hit upon a good comeback. He scratched his head, irritated.

It was nothing so ceremonious as respect or admiration—all the more so because he was meeting her gaze at her eye level, with a face that said he was determined to win next time.

It was awfully comfortable.

Not just that—the fact that he was truly trying to best her made her unbearably happy.

Hurry and pin me! If she was to say this, she had no doubt that he'd turn bright red and get flustered.

She smiled to think of it, putting the cup to her lips to hide this from him.

However, it wasn't the hiding of it that erased her smile.

"Guh, huh?"

She removed the cup from her mouth and regarded its contents suspiciously.

Within it was a pale amber liquid.

"What's wrong?" her companion asked her.

"Ugh…the flavor, it's…," she said, rubbing her nose and wondering if it had stopped working.

She sniffed it again and detected very little apple scent and not much alcohol.

She was suddenly uncertain.

Her ears and nose were even more important to her than her eyes.

"Oh, I thinned it," said her companion quickly. While this came as a relief, in a twinkling that relief was replaced with a rising irritation.

"Aye, and too much. I thought my nose had gone stupid!"

"You had a fever, didn't you? Hence, thinned apple wine."

He said it as though it was the most obvious thing in the world, but she did not understand.

"Oh, right. Don't you know about that?"

"I'm a wisewolf—I know enough about the world to know there are things I don't know."

"There's a field called 'medicine' that's been built up from people-accumulated knowledge over the years. When you collapsed, I went to the trade house and thankfully was able to look through a translation of a book on the subject."

The word *medicine* was not familiar to her.

When the people in her old village were sick, they would boil grasses in water and drink it, and when injured, they would apply the grass to their wounds, but other than that, all they could do was pray to invented gods to aid them.

But she was interested in the unfamiliar.

She sniffed the cup again. "And what's this about?" she asked.

"Well, there are four humors in the body and four temperaments."

"Oh?"

"The four humors are blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm," he explained proudly, counting them off on his fingers, but she believed not a word of it.

Still, she kept quiet and listened.

"Sickness happens when these humors fall out of balance—when you're fatigued or breathe bad air or sometimes when the movements of the stars influence them."

"Hmm. Aye, I understand that." She smiled faintly. "When the full moon comes out and my body tingles and throbs, say." She drew her chin in and looked up at her companion, who she could easily tell was suddenly flustered.

Goodness, but he was so naive for a male.

"A-ah, yes, well, there is that, too. Just like the tides. So then, when the humors become unbalanced, you need to rebalance them by bleeding and the like."

"...Humans have the strangest notions."

"If you have a blister or boil, you lance it, do you not?"

"Wha—!" She looked up at her companion, shocked.

He grinned, at which she cursed her lapse.

"Humans do, which heals them. Sounds nice, eh?"

She turned away from him, ignoring his discussion of these savage methods.

"That's one way of restoring balance, but it must be performed by a doctor. But if they saw your ears and tail, who knows what mad disease they'd think you have, and what a fuss that would cause. So we can't see a doctor. We'll just have to cure you another way—by using the four temperaments."

She flicked her ears up and glanced at him with one eye. "And by that you mean delight, rage, sorrow, pleasure—all the emotions, right?"

"Close, but not quite. The human body has four temperaments: hot, cold, dry, and wet."

Taking a drink of the mostly flavorless apple wine, she examined the palm of her hand.

What he was saying was so obvious, she couldn't help but wonder if she was being made sport of.

"Also, you can affect those states with what you eat—because there are hot foods, cold foods, dry foods, and wet foods. Since you were hot, something cold—like an apple—is just right."

Or one could just say that humans were very good at ascribing meanings to things.

That was one thing she could assert to, having watched so many human lives over the ages.

If anything, she had to admit she was impressed at how they could imagine all sorts of interesting things, hopping from one to the next.

"Well, if that's the case, I would've preferred a simple raw apple."

"No, that's no good. Apples are cold, but medicinally speaking they're also dry. People who're feeling poorly are already overdry, so you have to reverse that. And for that, you need a drink."

So that was why she'd been served this unpleasant colored water.

Whether her companion had just learned this or had relied on it for a long time, he was explaining it so proudly that trying to tell him it was all meaningless would itself be meaningless. While humans were all of a species, different nations had entirely different ways of doing things—that much she knew.

So she had to admit it was not surprising that when it came to humans and wolves, the things they believed would be so different—and so she gave in.

"And so do you plan on making me eat anything else?"

"Yes, because you collapsed from exhaustion. Since you had a fever from the accumulated fatigue, first we had to cool you. Next, your body is too dry, so we need to replenish its moisture. When you run, you get thirsty, right? But moistening the body also cools it, and if you become too cool, you'll turn melancholy, so we must then warm you. Then..."

As he blithely continued, she sighed at having once shallowly looked forward to playing the patient.

But listening to her companion go on, she realized that sigh, too, might be hasty.

"So then, yes. We'll take some porridge made with grain and sheep's milk, add some sliced apples, and top it with cheese. Now with this, first the apples—"

"Aye, that will do. I'd like to eat that. Nay, I fear I'll faint again if I don't. Do you want to see? See how pale I look. Hurry, you—go and bring it!"

She could hardly stop her stomach from growling at the prospect of such delicious-sounding porridge.

Even now, a drop of drool threatened to spill from the corner of her mouth.

"... You're perfectly well again, aren't you?"

"Ooh, I'm so dizzy..."

Dizziness would never come at so convenient a time, but her companion was too softhearted not to reach out and steady her when she swayed and threatened to drop the cup.

She snuggled into his arm, then looked up coquettishly. "Hurry and fetch it, will you?"

Perhaps her face was a bit too close; her companion turned instantly red.

It was hard to tell who was truly the ill one.

However, she was starting to wonder if the queer human way of letting blood out of the body wasn't rather wise after all.

"Honestly... well, are you done with the apple wine?"

"Mm, yes, well, I think I've had enough," she said, taking the cup again and having a sip.

Her companion had gone to the trouble of preparing it for her, after all.

She would've felt bad if she'd refused the drink simply because it tasted bad.

"And make it a big serving of porridge, too," she said, to which her companion seemed to have nothing to say in reply.

She honestly didn't know how long she waited.

In any case, he didn't return immediately, and once she snuggled back under the blankets, she fell right asleep. She awoke only because her nose was tickled by a scent tempting enough to rouse her.

However, she did not feel well—not because of her physical condition, but rather because she'd had a bad dream.

It was of her homelands. And of the wheat fields.

The dream brought homesickness, yes, but also terrible disgust.

It was about a time when, as a being who stood above many others, she had to assume responsibility for them.

The world was the forest, and if the soil was not strong, trees would not grow. So the Wisewolf of Yoitsu had to be its foundation, strong and true. If she abandoned that duty, the forest would quickly wither.

It was not a favor asked of her; it was simply a responsibility that someone had to shoulder.

Then she realized that around her neck was a heavy, heavy shackle.

She wasn't sure since when it had been there—perhaps since her birth.



She was different from her surroundings.

Even if she assumed human form, they would always know she was different—grotesque.

She was relied on for her strength, feared for her size, prized for her usefulness.

She and her kind thought it natural to serve in this capacity, and so they did.

They were all of one mind that there was merit for them in doing so.

But the worshippers required majesty of their gods, in addition to favor. If the objects of their worship were meager, after all, how could they expect those gods to be able to bestow blessings?

Though she had never asked to be worshipped, she was unable to abandon these worshippers and was thus trapped.

Without anyone to worship, they would fade with the seasons, lost to fear, madness, and cruelty.

She knew it was foolish, but no matter how she suffered, she couldn't abandon them.

She'd never asked for this and never been asked, and yet—centuries passed.

Something smelled delicious; she was accustomed to smelling tasty foods.

But while her nose twitched at such things, she knew she would never be shown a welcoming smile.

Not even from someone cheeky who didn't know his place.

"Can you sit up?"

Her body had been gradually recovering, and now she had little difficulty in crawling out from under the blankets.

Nonetheless, she shook her head, her eyes still heavy with drowsiness.

The prison was long in the past.

She'd been able to make her long-held dream into reality.

To dance and play like a cub. To be selfish, to be powerless.

And to be protected by someone.

"Honestly—if I ever fall ill, I expect you to return the favor."

Having just woken and being still mostly exhausted, she must've looked like a cat dragged from its favorite sleeping spot.

It was embarrassing, but having done it once, she couldn't stop.

"Aye, so long as you don't mind treatment in the style of the wolves of Yoitsu." She grinned to hide her self-reproach.

In any case, her companion's face twitched, but she was quite sure that if he asked about that treatment, he would be very happy with the answer.

It involved a lot of licking and snuggling.

However, she was not so kind as to tell him without being asked.

"Ah, 'tis well. My nose is very keen—I'll know long before you turn this poorly and do something about it."

After saying this, she thought about adding something about not chatting happily away with some other female while not noticing him until he collapsed but decided against it.

Happily—yes, he had looked very happy, but her companion knew what his job was.

And in that moment, chatting nicely with the girl had been his job.

So he said, and she believed him.

"Still, I'm sorry I didn't notice. But I wish you'd have said something. In any case, yes—I'm rather thick," said her companion, shrugging.

"You surely are. I might have a much more serious sickness, and you'd doubtless still fail to notice."

"Huh?" He looked at her questioningly, but she would not explain.

He was too thick to make the connections.

She was lovesick.

But she knew it would be a long time before he noticed it.

"'Tis nothing. Never mind. Now food!" she said, which her companion childishly frowned at.

Humans judged things based on their appearances.

Being bested by someone who appeared to be a young human girl was frustrating.

It was a complicated emotion but not uncomfortable.

Even in the book of scriptures that circulated around the world, there was the satirical story of God dressing in rags and walking the roads, thereby losing all sense of formality and ceremony.

"You're quite the princess this morning," he grumbled, but nonetheless he removed the lid from the pot of porridge and picked up a dish.

No knight would ever speak so rudely to a princess.

She grinned. "Would you kindly spoon-feed me?" she asked by way of presuming on him.

Her companion froze, stricken—a face too pathetic by far to ever be suitable for a knight.

"'Twould have been better with more apples."

"Likely. Cold apples increase one's melancholy."

"Are you...mph...are you saying I'm too cheerful?" she said as he brought the last bite to her mouth.

She'd had two full bowls' worth.

The first few, probably thanks to his embarrassment, had

been a bit wobbly and sloppy, but either he turned serious or got used to it, and she'd been able to enjoy the last half of the meal very comfortably.

Being able to eat just by opening her mouth and waiting made her feel like a baby chick.

It would be nice to be able to have her grooming done this way, too, but her tail was too precious to entrust to anyone else.

She burped quietly, which her companion furrowed his brows at a bit.

"Also, recall how many apples I ate earlier in town."

"Ah, yes! You couldn't even finish them, so that's why you turned so melancholy."

"Mm."

It occurred to her that he was quite right, but not because of the apple's flavor or essence or any such nonsense, but simply because she'd bought too many.

"I don't want to eat any more apples for a while," said her companion.

She'd claimed she would be able to eat them all, but in the end he'd had to help.

However, she'd learned that eating with company was much more pleasant than eating alone—not that she would ever say so.

"Still, if you can eat this much, you're on the mend. Tomorrow or the next day you should be well again," said her companion as he gathered up the dish and pot. "Not that there's any need to rush. We'll be on the wagon again for quite some time once we leave. Might as well rest up."

He was too softhearted to recognize a lie as a lie.

No—it was more that he was so trusting that he would never suspect her of lying.

Feelings of guilt welled up in her chest, but when she looked up and met his eyes, her breath caught.

Those worried eyes of his.

This was not good at all.

"...I'm sorry to have...delayed our travel," she said when she realized this.

She couldn't let this opportunity escape.

"I gave up on hurrying when I picked you up. And they say hard times make for stronger foundations, don't they? I regained my good credit in this town, and it's probably better than it ever was. When I think about that profit, what's two or three more days?"

She would have to thank that god of fortune the humans were always worshipping, she thought to herself, that she had been picked up by such a softhearted fool.

Softhearted, softhearted— When she wasn't saying it with a scornful sneer, it turned into a different name entirely, which was terrifying.

She wanted him to stay with her.

Just watching him as he gathered the dishes and began to head for the door to return them to the inn, her tail swished restlessly.

"Still, you—"

"Hmm?" he said, with eyes so sincerely naive she could barely stand to look at them.

"The inn's just...too quiet, so..." Embarrassment kept her from finishing the sentence.

But her companion no doubt thought it was all an act.

And at the same time, he had surely guessed that though it was an act, it was also the truth.

"It's true, sleeping on the cart is much noisier. Anyway, I've nothing to do today. And I've got to consult on the evening menu for a certain big eater I know, so..."

So he'd stay with her.

She was being as selfish as a child.

Her companion smiled, and she made a deliberately pouting face, turning away.

It was an unobstructed, unclouded exchange.

If happiness had a form, this might well have been it.

"So, have you any rough preferences? I'll look up the details in the medicine book later, but once the market closes, I won't be able to buy ingredients."

"Mm. Hmm..."

"You seem well. You might not be completely better, though, so heavy things are right out."

"Meat, too?" She looked up pitifully.

This was an act.

"Certainly not. Porridge or soup made from boiled bread..."

"Hmph. Well, then, more of that—what was it, sheep's milk?" she said, indicating the dishes that her companion held. He nodded. "I liked its sweet scent and thick flavor. It will do."

"Sheep's milk, eh...?"

"Is there some problem?" she asked, and he shook his head.

"It spoils quickly, so good-quality milk can be hard to find in the afternoon. You'll want it fresh, yes?"

"Naturally." She grinned, baring her fangs, at which he slumped.

"Well, perhaps I'll have Norah get it for me again. Being a shepherd, she's got an eye for that kind of..."

He held back from finishing the sentence.

"Did you say Norah?" she shot back reflexively—so reflexively that she didn't know what sort of face she was making.

Her companion's expression made it clear he had realized he'd uttered a taboo word, so she must have made some kind of face.

The pleasant atmosphere was long gone.

At his mention of Norah's having an eye for sheep, she realized that while she slept, her companion had been walking around the town with that shepherdess.

That hated shepherdess.

Just the two of them.

While she slept!

"No, it…it was for you. I needed to get good milk, so I thought—"

"If you'd just spend the money, you don't need a damned eye for sheep," she growled, glaring resentfully at him.

Traitor, traitor, traitor! She cried the word out in her heart.

Though she knew he'd done nothing to earn her ire, he should've known better than to mention the shepherdess in such a moment, and so she could not help herself.

Shepherds and wolves were bitter enemies, after all.

"Su-surely there's no reason not to hire her as a guide. And anyway—" He clearly knew he'd stumbled upon a huge problem and was hastily trying to smooth things over. But in the throes of her irrational anger, such smoothing only served to heighten her suspicion. And to top it all off, he kept going. "And anyway, why do you hate Norah so much?"

Time froze.

In trying to appease her snarling anger, he'd said something so unexpected that she couldn't respond.

Her mouth dropped open. "Wh-what did you say?" she answered stupidly.

"W-well, I…I mean, I don't know what happened between you and shepherds in the past, but I understand that you're a wolf and you just don't like them. But that doesn't mean you have to hate her so much. I mean, Norah's a shepherdess, but well…" Still holding the bowl and dish in both hands, he care-

fully scratched his head. "...She's so sweet—surely there's an exception to every rule."

"Fool!" she very nearly shouted.

What stopped her was not her fatigue, nor was it the fact that it was unbecoming of a wisewolf.

It was, in fact, her companion's foolishness itself that drained the desire to shout from her.

It was true that after being lonely for so many centuries, having just escaped the wheat fields made her emotions unstable—she had to admit it. She'd so thoroughly forgotten how to talk to people that she now had to pay very careful attention to her conversations. She realized that she had forgotten how to read the subtle niceties of others.

And it would come as no surprise that her companion, having spent months and years alone on a wagon, had gotten rusty at these same skills.

Yet still—could he really be so thick? She sighed.

She couldn't understand how he could be so persistent even after having gotten himself into this situation; how despite being such a fool, he had the temerity to try to use reason on her; why for whatever reason despite seeming so considerate, even weak, he had the disposition to now—of all times!—have some pride; and why at this critical moment, he could be so impossibly dense. She couldn't understand it at all.

Could he really, truly not see? she wondered.

She was even beginning to think he was testing her.

His view of the situation was that the wisewolf of Yoitsu hated shepherds—was that what he thought?

Wolves hunted sheep, and shepherds protected those same pitiful, powerless sheep. So in this composition, who was the wolf and who was the shepherd and who was the sheep? If he

would only think about it, he'd immediately understand the reason for her displeasure.

She didn't hate shepherds. She was nervous that particular shepherd was near the sheep.

As though the sheep was not protected by the shepherd. As though the shepherd would blow her horn and steal the sheep away. As though he might wander away with the naive, kindly shepherdess because he was so helpless, so foolish, never thinking!

As such thoughts occupied her mind, she sighed one last time.

Her companion stood there, his face evidence that, as usual, he had not the faintest notion what she was thinking. He was every inch the blithe, silly sheep.

The sweet kindness he'd shown her in spooning up the porridge and feeding it to her felt the same as it had long ago.

Her dream had essentially become real.

She'd been released from her prison and was free to do as she liked without anyone looking askance at her, free to say what she liked without troubling anyone.

So by hook or by crook, she wanted to just once. What would it be like to frolic like a pup? How would it feel?

In the end, it didn't compare to being foolish by nature.

When drinking the night away, the sober one always had to take care of the drunken one.

"Listen, you—" she said tiredly, because she was indeed very tired.

It occurred to her to wonder that innocently frolicking like a pup was rather serious business.

It was finally impossible for a wolf to pretend to be a sheep.

Her companion might think she was wearing the skin of some ignorant sheep, but that was not her responsibility.

It was his fault for being so fixated on sheepish charms that she found herself wanting to become one but was unable to.

If they were both idiotic sheep, they'd just plunge over the cliff together.

One of them had to be the sober one and lead the other.

A loss.

A natural, inborn loss.

"I was in the wrong," she said with deliberate sulkiness. Her companion was clearly relieved. "But like and dislike are not things felt with reason. I feel I've said this before."

"Yes, well, that's true, of course. I don't think you have to decide everything with reason," he said to show he understood her feelings—but the truth was he didn't understand the real meaning of what she was saying.

She might well allow him to stroke her head, but she certainly couldn't let him groom her tail.

Would that day ever come?

She looked at him with tired eyes and wondered.

"And also, you—" she started, and her companion tensed, as though preparing for something new. He was like a dog lowering its head to be pet. "When you take that down, would you come right back up?" She said this with a meek smile.

He seemed taken aback at her sudden change, but soon caught up with her. Perhaps he was not so *very* foolish after all.

"... Yes, of course. The inn is rather too quiet and all."

The fool had a satisfied expression, as though he thought he'd been rather smooth.

The whole thing was too obvious to be called obvious, and yet here he was, such an unbelievable fool.

Unaware that he was being thought of thus, her companion's face cleared; he seemed to think the problem was solved.

"Well, then, I'll be right back. Would you like something to drink?"

Feeling like she was all out of sighs to sigh, she had to admit it was a kind thing of him to offer.

Thus she gave him his reward.

"The thinned apple wine you gave me before would be nice. I need to get well as soon as I can, do I not?"

He smiled very, very happily.

When he made that kind of face, she couldn't help but wonder how best to be cruel to him.

"So you just wait here, all right?" he said with some enthusiasm and left the room.

He really was an utter fool, but as she was rolling around right next to him, the same could be said of her.

It was a peaceful, tranquil time.

She knew well just how precious such a thing was.

So she would have to control it, cherish it, and enjoy it to the best of her abilities.

There was one thing that caused her concern.

She wriggled back underneath the blankets, burying her head in the pillow as she'd seen humans do.

Her poor companion had lived such a starved life that if she showed him just a bit of affection, he might become totally useless—and if she overdid it, he would become accustomed to it and it would lose its efficacy.

For both beast and human, enough repetition of something would always lead to boredom.

Which meant she would have to think of another way.

And as she did so, she immediately hit upon it.

If he got tired of sweetness, she need only add some salt.

If her smile failed to hook him, all she had to do was summon some tears.

It was so simple.

And it would certainly work on a simple sheep.

"...Hmm?"

Something nagged at her as she thought about this. For a moment she wondered what it could be, and she soon found the cause. It was the previous night's dinner when she collapsed.

They were talking about sheep—about how sheep would lick anything that tasted salty. She remembered that, and a strange thought occurred to her.

She imagined salty tears on her face, her companion persistently licking them up.

She would surely first giggle madly, though it would no doubt become tiresome very quickly. It was easy to imagine her companion not knowing when to stop—so easy to imagine, in fact, that it was depressing.

Yes, she would have to keep a tight hold on his reins to keep him doing what she wanted.

Thinking of how many things there were to worry about, she rolled over in bed.

Her head was still buried in the pillow, and she lay curled up on her side, chuckling.

It had been a very long time since she'd had such fun.

She wasn't sure exactly what was fun about the situation. There were so many amusements that it was impossible to choose just one.

But if pressed for an answer, it was that her foolish companion could not, for all his foolishness, be handled by ordinary means.

There was something of the delight of the hunt in this, somehow, that set her wolf heart aflame.

Having taken the dishes downstairs, her companion was true to his word, and she heard his footsteps approach.

Her heart thudded quietly.

Her tail twisted and her ears twitched.

Her nose itched, and she rubbed it into the pillow.

Ah, this ineffable delight of the hunt!

The footsteps stopped in front of the door.

She couldn't help but smile as she looked back toward it.

And then, as it opened, standing there was—

"Holo," her companion said, smiling.

The shepherdess beside him.

"Miss Norah's come to visit you."

No, indeed he could not be dealt with by normal means at all.

The shepherdess smiled a smile as fresh and clear as an early summer field, and it wasn't the wisewolf's centuries of experience that allowed her to smile back.

She smiled out of actual pleasure.

Holding the reins of her enormous fool of a companion was so difficult a task, she could only laugh at it.

"How are you feeling?" asked Norah the shepherdess.

"'Tis nothing, just a bit of fatigue."

If she hadn't answered the question this way, how else could she have possibly answered it?

Even with a wisewolf's clever mind, she had no idea.

Her companion watched the pleasant exchange with a proud, self-satisfied smile.

It wasn't that she *wasn't* exhausted exactly.

Far from it—she felt like her fever was about to rise back up.

"I've been a bit starved for company, though. You see, there was something I've been wanting to ask you," she said.

"Huh? Something to ask...me?" The shepherdess was a clever girl but was ever modest; she could see why her com-

panion would fall for that. "If it's something I can answer, then... please do."

She then smiled.

The shepherdess could not be underestimated. But as a hunter she would understand these words, and so the wisewolf wanted to ask them.

"What is the best way to lead sheep?"

The shepherdess's eyes widened in surprise at the unexpected question, but her usual smile soon returned.

Next to her, her cheeky sheepdog stood watchfully, his guard up as usual.

The pale, slender shepherdess spoke with a gentle smile. "You need a generous heart."

The moment after she heard the answer, she felt like the wind blew.

This girl was utterly genuine.

She was a real shepherdess.

To raise sheep, one needed a generous heart.

She glanced at her companion and thought to herself that the shepherdess was exactly right.

Norah saw the look and made a brief expression of realization.

A smart person needed only a moment to notice such things.

"'Tis because sheep always think themselves so clever."

Norah returned her gaze to her and smiled, a bit confused but pleased nonetheless.

She had the feeling she would get along with this girl just fine.

But as her companion watched, not knowing that they were talking about him, she wasn't confident about her ability to hold his reins.



Only God knew if she'd be able to.

She gave him a resentful look, which startled him.

You sheep, you sheep, you innocent little sheep, she thought to herself.

And yet, that silly way of his—yes.

"You're such a fool," she murmured.

She did so love her sheep.

End.

Hello again. This is Hasekura.

I thought it hadn't been too long since last time, but as I wrote this afterword and thought about it, it's been two months. It used to be that even a week seemed like an eternity, but time passes so fast now.

That's probably because I sleep about sixteen hours a day. Lately I have difficulty telling the difference between dreams and reality. Temporally speaking, I spend more time asleep. Thus two months feels to me like but one, I imagine.

Now then, this volume is a bit different than the previous long-form books.

It includes a novella and a short story that were featured on the Dengeki website, along with a new short story I wrote.

The novella is a tale from Holo's past, and the short stories are interludes from the main arc of the books.

In the novella we see Holo's big-sisterly side, and the shorter pieces feature her gluttony. Where did Lawrence go off to? One can't help but feel bad for him.

But what I'd most like to talk about here is the new piece.

It's the first one written from Holo's perspective.

At first I was really very worried about whether or not I would be able to write from her perspective at all, but when I gave it a try, it was actually a lot of fun—so much so that when I go back and reread it, I can tell that I was really enjoying writing it. So I truly hope you all enjoy it as much as I did.

Speaking of which—this is a total subject change—recently I took a ride in a certain author's 420-horsepower car.

420 horsepower. It's like, where in Japan are you going to go with that much power? It was more like a roller coaster than a car. When you accelerate, all your blood drains to your lower body, and when you slow down, you can feel it come rushing back.

It looked supercool, too, and since I don't know cars, it was a really memorable experience.

However, I'm sorry to say that while the car was amazing, the destination of the four shabby-from-all-nighters authors that piled into it was not a night view of some beautiful bayside road, but rather a hot springs where we could relax our cramped shoulders.

And although we're all getting up in age, we were really excited to put on our *yukata*, and once somebody said, "Hey, let's go sliding!" we were soon slip-sliding all over the wooden floors. This is all the more amazing since none of us were drunk. For the sake of my own pride, I should say that I did not participate in such unbecoming games. It's true, I swear.

Later, we all abused each others' terrible physical condition, then arm wrestled, had push-up contests, and then took *purikura* photos. It was like being back in junior high.

To get home, of course, we rode in the 420-horsepower supercar.

I do worry about my little scooter taking revenge on me, though.

And somehow after writing all that, I've filled up the page.

The next volume will return to the main story.

I'd like to think I can give Lawrence a chance to be a little cooler, but who knows.

Until we meet again.

Isuna Hasekura

Isuna Hasekura

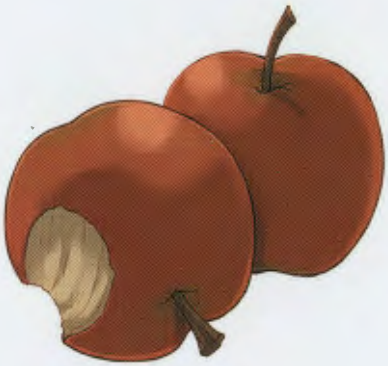
Born December 27, 1982, winner of the twelfth Dengeki Novel Prize Silver Medal. He spends his time musing that one can tell the difference between a science-minded person and a literary-minded person by whether or not they become excited by the prospect of benzene ring diagrams.

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