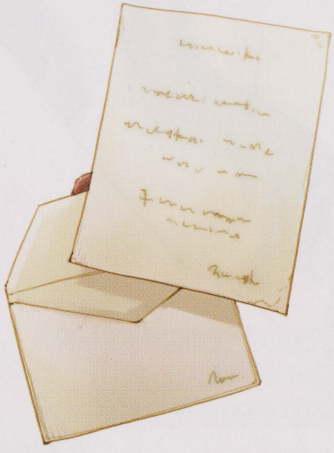

SPICE & WOLF
VOL. 17
Epilogue
ISUNA HASEKURA

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EPILOGUE

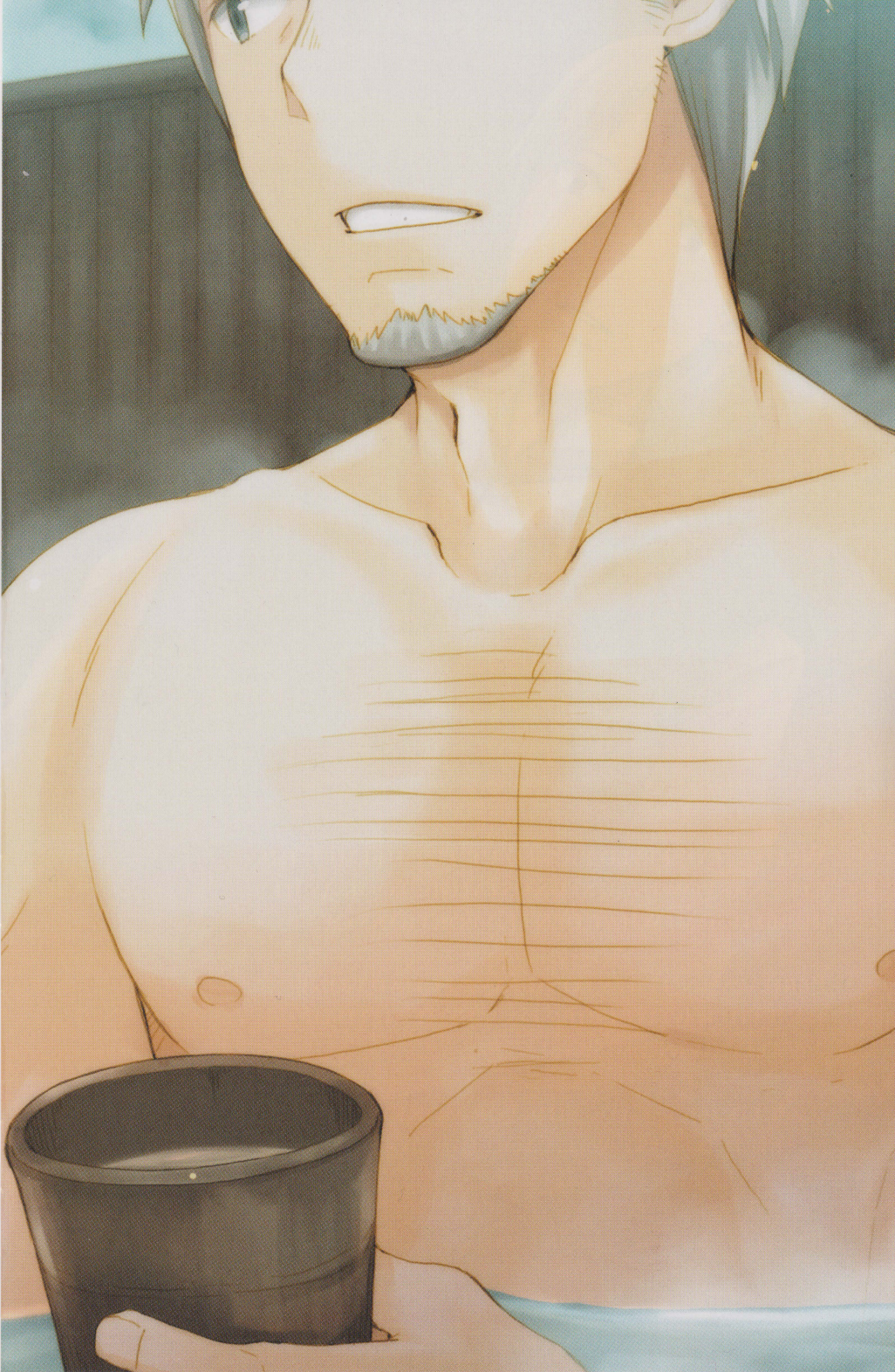
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Illustrated by Jyuu Ayakura

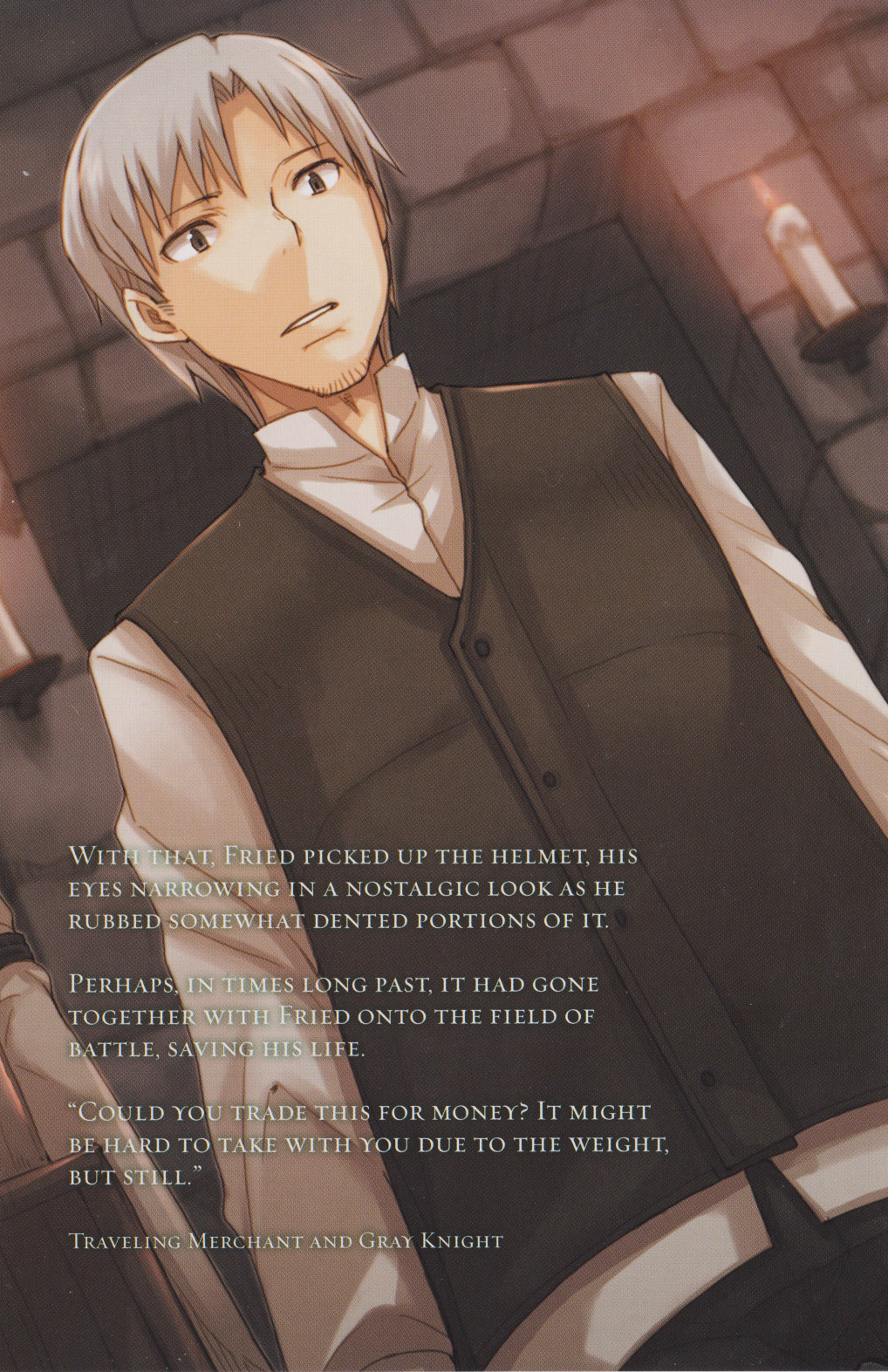




Epilogue

"You're too extreme in your tastes."
"Ohh? But if it wasn't for this, I could hardly spend time with a fool like you."





With that, Fried picked up the helmet, his eyes narrowing in a nostalgic look as he rubbed somewhat dented portions of it.

Perhaps, in times long past, it had gone together with Fried onto the field of battle, saving his life.

"Could you trade this for money? It might be hard to take with you due to the weight, but still."

Traveling Merchant and Gray Knight




The cause was not allotting Miss Holo enough meat in her stew for supper.
Gray Smiling Face and Wolf
Mr. Lawrence and Miss Holo were arguing again.



White Path and Wolf

So long as one journeyed, anything could happen.

Some things would be joyous, others would be sad, and still others, painful.

But, so long as their hands were joined and they had a road to follow, they could keep moving forward.

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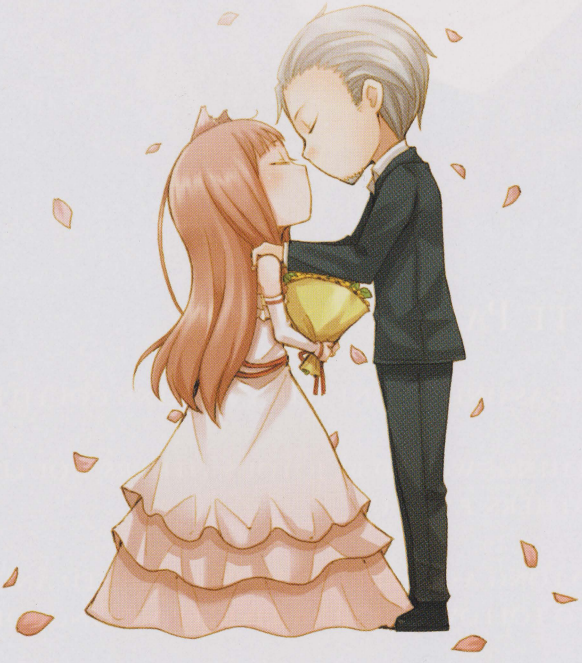
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VOLUME XVII
EPILOGUE

ISUNA HASEKURA
JYUU AYAKURA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

SPICE AND WOLF, Volume 17: Epilogue
ISUNA HASEKURA

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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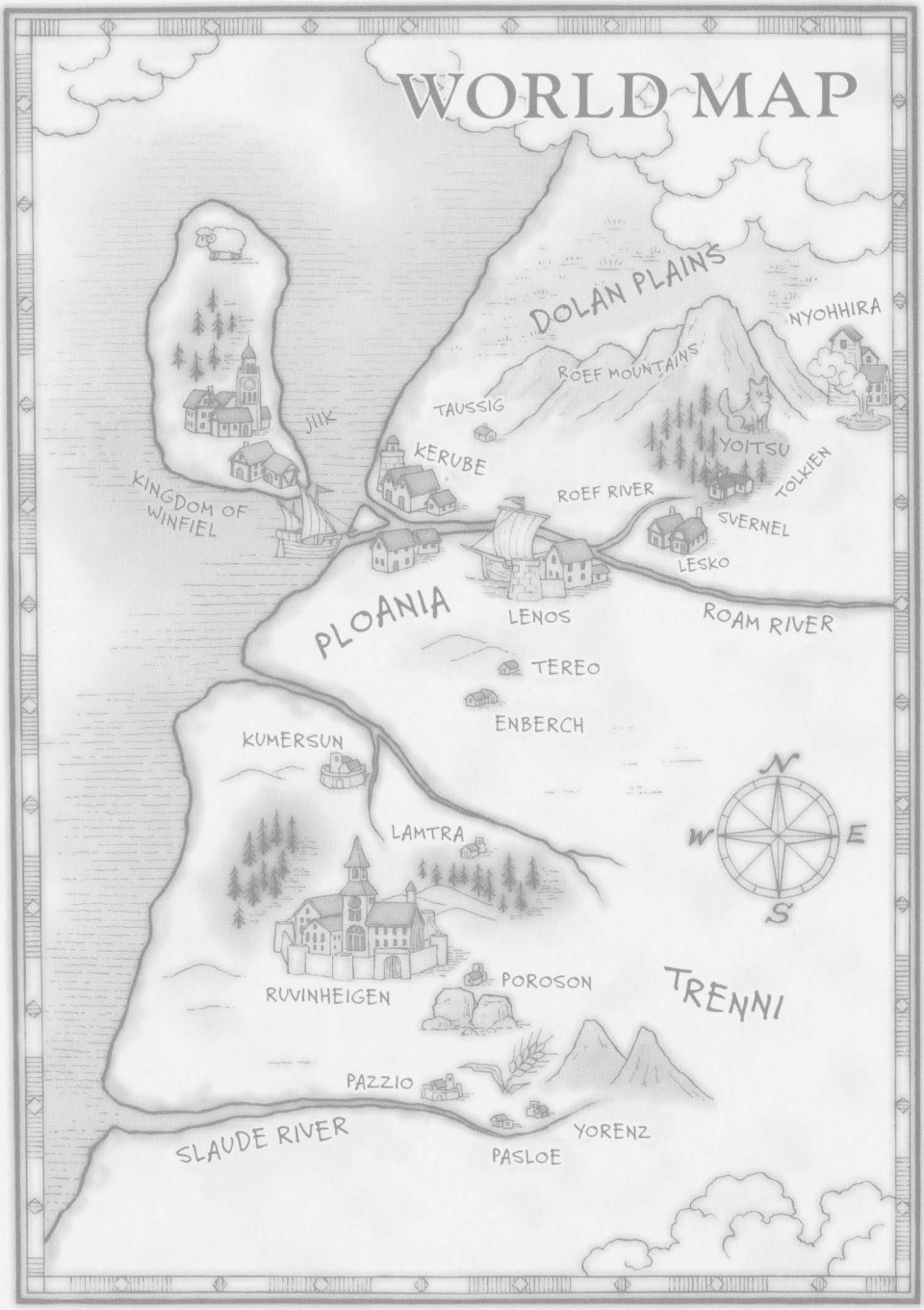
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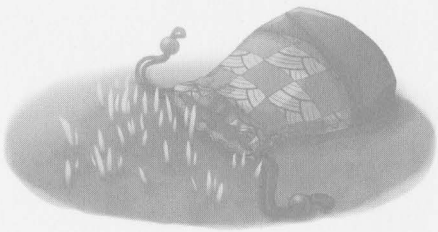
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SPICE & WOLF



Map Illustration: Hidetada Idemitsu

INTERMISSION



"Ah, Sir Knight. You seem to be in a fine mood."

I heard a voice calling out to me as I lay atop a sunlit stone step.

I have the fine name of Enek, mind you, but it was no bad thing to also be known as Knight. I made a generous sigh through my nostrils and gave a single wave of my tail.

"By the way, is the priest inside?"

Her head wrapped in a towel, both of her sleeves rolled up, the woman was built like a bear.

I seem to recall that she was a cooper—a maker of barrels. By this hour, things had probably calmed down at the morning markets and she was taking a small break until lunch. Perhaps she had even come to offer up a prayer or two.

Pondering such things, I yawned a great yawn.

"Someone said a horse-drawn carriage arrived where the children play on the hill, so I thought, maybe it's the one the priest mentioned."

"..."

Somehow, I kept my eyelids—heavy and ready to close even now—in check as I looked at the woman.

"Goodness," she said, rising and returning to the church. "But you know, the children said it was a pitch-black carriage...As if it was haunted. I wonder if it's all right..."

It was clear that the woman's doubt and curiosity were dueling within her as she followed the path, which I led her down.

She may have looked like a bear, but her personality was closer to that of a cat.

"What will you do, Sir Knight? Coming with me?" The humans of this town spoke readily to me, but I would never last if I answered them all.

Ignoring her, I walked to the middle of the corridor as far as the scribe room. It was the room where the priest of this church wrote important books and letters.

Though things had been busy but a short time ago with harvest festivals and saintly blessings, it was all peace and quiet now.

Having said that, there were not many people who wrote, and what few there were had a mountain of duties to fulfill. Today, too, he was surely writing up a storm in that scribe room.

If things were as expected, that is.

"Reverend, it seems that a horse-drawn carriage has—"

The woman made a light knock, half opening the door and speaking as she entered the room.

She seemed to swallow her words in a largely instinctive reaction. My master, loftily addressed as "Reverend," was bent over her desk, fast asleep. It had recently become rather warm. It was hard work to even get out of bed.

Even so, though her back and hair had grown somewhat, she still looked like a child as she slept.

I cleared my throat.

"Woof!"

"...Hunh!?"

As my master awoke, she sat up in a great hurry. Her eyes darted all around the area and noticed myself and the woman standing in the doorway. Though there was a mountain of papers and books atop her desk, along with clothing and the tools of a tailor placed atop it.

"Ah, Miss Rifkin...Ah, er...Ha-ha..." Like a child she tried to push the clothing and the tailoring tools into the middle of the desk as if she meant to hide them.

It was rather frivolous behavior for someone in the service of God. Despite the passage of some number of years, my master still had not quite been able to outgrow a certain childishness.

"Oh, I am not upset."

The woman made a teasing smile. My master's body seemed to shrink in embarrassment, but as she met my eyes, she made a somewhat resentful glare. It was highly illogical to act as if it were *my* fault.

"Ah, so, what is it? If it's preparations for the guild's Guardian Saint Festival, I'm hiring Mr. Botz to take care of it..."

"Oh, not that. There seems to be a horse-drawn carriage coming into town. I thought this might be the one you mentioned so I thought I'd let you know."

"...Carriage?"

"Yes. You mentioned it yourself. Something about having been called to somewhere a bit far off..."

"..." My master gazed at the woman in shock, and then, she suddenly opened her mouth wide, sucking in her breath. "I thought it'd be next w...Ah, er, sorry, if you'll excuse me!"

Pulling up the hem of her long outfit, she ran out of the room in decidedly unladylike fashion.

The woman laughed heartily, holding her belly as if keeping it from dropping.

I had the vague feeling that my master had been more reliable when she had been a shepherdess.

Norah the Fairy.

That had been my master's old name when she was a shepherdess for a time, highly skilled at leading sheep.

Now, though, she was the priest of a church in a small town leading a different kind of flock.

One never knew what might happen in this world.

Born the overly serious sort, she had cut her teeth in a place of solemn masses and festivals, making her a fairly sharp person.

However, in spite of having the ability and fortitude to endure hunger and cold while splendidly protecting a flock of sheep from wolves and foxes—or perhaps, *because* of it—I had learned, shortly after we began to live in town, that my master was surprisingly absentminded.

The date, math, people's names, prayer phrases, ceremonial protocol—in spite of having an eye-popping grasp of the broad outlines, she tended to lose track of the small details.

It was a pitiable thing that were I not by her side, no one would call her an adult.

"Errr...clothes, food, ah, I'd better have a book of scripture, too. Also a prayer book...ah? Maybe I should bring several pairs of boots? But I haven't worn boots since way back...I wonder why..."

As she used her hand to comb down her blond hair, which

ran down to the middle of her back, she feverishly prepared the luggage strewn about before her. My master pulled out the clothes she had worn when she came to this town, but I wondered what she intended to do with them, since it was clear it was not the right size.

I lied on my belly at the doorway as I sighed an exasperated sigh.

"Ahh, er, bring the letter, er, and then, and then..."

She had never been at a loss about what to bring when leading sheep out of the pastures.

Perhaps the Church was right to teach that one should discard one's belongings and pass them to those who lacked their own. It was an abundance of things, which made one hesitate in the face of a journey. That was all the truer for life itself.

I snorted another sigh, and my master noticed and looked at me.

By the time I thought, *Uh-oh*, a rolled-up apron was already sailing toward me.

"It must be nice to be so carefree, Enek!"

They were words I had heard from time to time during the five years since we had come to live in this town.

Of course, it was not so at all.

It was just that it mattered far more to me whether I was getting a cut of meat for supper that day than whether the day's mass had gone well or not.

As my master scurried about the room like a human storm, I crawled out from under the apron, sniffing for my master's scent, when my ears caught the sound of someone knocking at the entrance of the church.

I could tell most of the townspeople apart by their knocks.

I did not know this knock.

A guest had arrived from the outside.

It might have been just as well to call her an emissary from hell.

A throng of people had formed on the street in front of the church.

For a time, plague had reduced this town to a veritable town of the dead, but the brave few who remained, those who refused to give up, and the assistance of my master, had brought the town back to a fairly lively state.

It was not that someone coming from outside town was all that rare a sight. There were times when a caravan of merchants would pass through, with dozens of men mounted on horses. But what had caught the attention of the crowd was the majestic appearance of the entirely too-fine black horses and the pitch-black canopied carriage they were pulling. There was a separate wagon for carrying luggage, with six stout men escorting it all.

My master was seized by shock the moment she set foot out of the entrance of the church and saw the carriage.

Then, she desperately tried to comb her hair into place with her hand, but it was a complete waste of time, as it had always been fairly wavy to begin with. Besides, considering the person who came out of the carriage, one could only call my master's efforts to hand comb her own hair pathetic by comparison.

A tall woman was not such a rare sight.

Nonetheless, it was rare to see one possessed by such dignity.

"Eve Bolan."

The woman spoke her name. Her back was straight and tall;

her body was slender. But *thin* was not the most accurate word; rather, it was as if a sculptor had thoroughly scraped away everything unnecessary. The fragrance about her was decidedly feminine, but for the first time in quite a while, my nose caught the scent of a beast that roamed the plains.

"Ah…err…"

Though my master was still flustered, she was someone who had had a certain amount of success as a priest, and as such, apparently refocused her wits. Clearing her throat to set things straight, she stretched her back straight up and put a smile on her face. "Ahem. I am Norah Arendt."

Though my master had straightened her posture appreciably, this Eve was clearly an entire hand taller than her. Besides, she was overwhelmed for a number of reasons other than height. Though my master had put a fair bit of meat on her in the last five years, the woman before her came off like a wolf in her prime. Perhaps it was the combined effect of the swell of her bust and the curve of her back.

Eve, seeming like a noble who adorned herself with a fur coat regardless of the weather, looked over my master from head to toe and made a small sigh. "So she really…"

"Huh?"

As my master murmured back, Eve blinked her eyelashes, which were so long I expected to actually hear them. "Nothing. It seems best if I take care of all the necessities. If you get lonely at night, all you need bring is a book of scripture. There are other places we're stopping at, just like the letter said. We're leaving today."

Upon finishing her statement, the woman calling herself Eve returned to the carriage.

Left behind, my master stood still for a while, then looked at me. As it was too much trouble for me to bark, I snorted a sigh.

Apparently Eve did business in a country to the south.

Though I could only venture to guess as to the size of her business, my experience suggested it was considerable.

The horse-drawn carriage was wide enough to comfortably seat three adults, with two seats of that width facing each other. The seats and their backs had many lines on them and had been adorned with fabrics and delicate ornaments. In spite of my master's resolve to live for the sake of the townspeople, she had retained a lingering affection for sewing and so took great interest in those details.

For my part, I had rarely laid eyes upon clothing such as that in which Eve clothed herself. A very comfortable-seeming piece of clothing, it resembled a robe, but differed in many of the fine details. Perhaps responding to my master's furtive glances, the reticent Eve said only, "It's from a desert country."

From there, it was a peaceful trip.

Eve was a woman of few words by nature; my master was not the type to make proactive conversation, either. As my master had procured Eve's permission, I rose up onto the seat and gazed out the window, with her hand stroking my head the whole time.

When she had been a shepherd, even once we left the town gates, it was not a vast, borderless expanse that greeted us. Indeed, the land was more like a fearsome prison, for no matter where we went, nothing would change.

I would have been content living in the forest.

But my master, a human being, could only live among others

of her kind; as a dog, I was painfully aware of just how difficult it was to live in that world.

With no help from anyone, one's days were filled only with getting the food before one's eyes into one's own mouth, and there was scant likelihood of anything changing until one last drew breath.

When my master slept upon bales of straw at the sheep pen, gazing up at the moon as mice and insects scurried about her, she may not have voiced such thoughts, but she had no doubt had them.

And then a single chance meeting changed everything.

From that alone, my master's life was changed forever.

There are many who run with all their might. However, many see their legs fail them. And yet, if only there was someone to give them a little push from behind, that is all it would take for them to move forward, too.

And so my fortunate master was able to run until she arrived in a new land.

"Anxious to be heading out?"

It was the second day since we had left.

"Hm?"

"It's not often that a town priest leaves on a journey, after all."

Making a flourish with her pen at the end, she double-checked the text before extending the letter out of the open wooden shutter. As she did so, a human standing and waiting outside took it, folded it, sealed it, and began riding in a direction different from our own.

The woman returned to the same subject.

"Quite a decision for you to make. Nyohhira is at the far end of the world. Even I hesitated."

It was often said that even though one might be at the ends of the world or under the ground, if one could keep a calm face, had wine to drink, and could write letters, one was not doing so poorly.

But this Eve was underestimating my master. She was no small-town priest ignorant of the world. Though she undeniably had some fairly foolish aspects to her, she was a fine person who had never surrendered to hardship or deprivation.

I looked up at my master from her lap.

So say something, I thought at her.

My master laughed quietly. "Certainly, I was a little nervous about leaving town," my master finally said with a pleasant smile. When I made a small bark, my master stroked my head as if to soothe me. "Even though in the past, I wanted to go out, out, when I couldn't…"

"…"

As my master spoke while looking outside, Eve put her elbow on the windowsill, resting her chin on her hand in a very unladylike pose as she watched.

In the forest, this was behavior reserved for predators.

"Did you meet her in that town?"

There was something of a pause before Eve, now gazing out the window as well, asked as if she had no great interest in it.

"No, it was in Ruvinheigen."

"Oh? You're a former nun?"

"No…," my master replied bashfully as she lowered her gaze to me. She looked like someone who had peeked into a chest full of precious treasure. "The Church took care of me, but that is all. I was like a scared little lamb."

I laughed at my master's self-deprecation.



It was only because she had escaped that place that she could smile about it now.

"I was a shepherdess."

Eve raised her head up from her palms in surprise, looking over my master once more, this time with a long, hard look.

"That's how I met both of them…Or I should say, I was saved by them…or perhaps dragged by them into conflict?" She giggled. "The latter is likely more accurate."

Even my painfully overserious master had finally become able to speak in such a manner. Certainly, that wolf and that sheep had tried to aid us, but in the end had merely entangled us up in their chaos.

"Miss Bolan, where did you meet those two?"

A predator asks only one question. *Would you prefer to be eaten starting from the head or the tail?*

Perhaps that was why she frowned a fair amount at my master's question.

"Eve is fine."

My master grinned and nodded, correcting herself. "Miss Eve."

"It was farther north. They dropped in to visit along their way, as it turned out."

"Is that so?"

My master could persevere in conversation with congregants for *hours*.

She laughed softly; she nodded; sometimes she urged conversation forward, and others, she gently rebuked, as if with a soft pat from her palm.

That was why she did not say anything at that particular

time. But her collected experience of talking to people nonetheless loosened Eve's tongue.

"So you were a timid lamb."

"Hm?" My master echoed back before making an embarrassed-looking smile and a nod.

"I was a wounded wolf."

Eve gazed far into the distance, but surely it was an old memory she stared at.

When my master first became accustomed to this town and permitted herself the luxury of reminiscing, she often had such a look.

"That's why..."

"..."

Without prompting, my master gazed across at Eve. "...I make a poor cat burglar."

My master's eyes widened a little.

For her part, Eve slowly reeled in her gaze from the outside, glancing sidelong at my master.

There was a very faint smile on her lips, but it looked like she was laughing at herself.

It seemed that man was on her mind a fair bit.

Furthermore, though her gaze seemed to suggest my master as being of a piece with her, if my memory served correctly, my master thought nothing of men whatsoever. Even since she had settled down to live in this town, though no small number had approached my master, she had gently refused them all.

My master told them it was because she was in service to God, but that was not why.

So long as I was by her side, it was enough.

I whuffled a short sigh as my master, stroking me from head to neck, spoke to Eve. "You see, once a sheep's attention is taken by something, all else flies out of her head."

As my master spoke, Eve made what was clearly a strained smile.

"Hmph. Quite some nerve she has, calling us here like this."

Eve gazed outside once more, but this time she seemed to be actually looking outside.

"Using *me* as an errand girl for them takes no small amount of courage in itself. Can you believe it? There's going to be three more women riding that wagon to Nyohhira with us."

"Oh!"

"Shocking, isn't it? I'm quite wrathful over it. That horse-drawn wagon behind me is full of valuable clothing and jewels. You're Norah, right? You can borrow whatever you like and dress up however you please."

Eve made a sadistic smile that seemed to suit her very well as she spoke.

It was no surprise my master's smile seemed a little conflicted. After all, my master has no interest in any male besides myself.

However, after seeming to think about it a while, she stared at the tip of my nose before lifting up her gaze to speak. "Even sheep must not be pampered all the time, you see."

The wolflike woman gave my master a grin.

I was rather taken aback with shock, thinking back to that sheep while atop my master's lap, and made a guffaw with a sigh.

Though the old uncertainties of travel presented themselves, the carriage and clothing Eve had prepared were extravagant

indeed, napping in the carriage might have been more comfortable than that drafty old church.

My master is constitutionally hardier than she looks; Eve seemed to admire that as well.

Though there was no conversation to speak of, the atmosphere was not particularly ill, and I was able to nap on my master's lap quite a bit, too.

This was how it went until we arrived at another town. It seemed that here, another woman would be coming aboard.

However, first came a hot meal and a good night's sleep at the inn; later, we greeted the next day's morn.

In the middle of the morning, as I wondered what sort of person this new passenger would turn out to be, I caught a strange scent inside the moving coach.

"...I wonder what this scent is?"

"Medicine."

"Medicine...?"

"Numerous alchemists live in this town. Apparently the woman we're picking up collects them."

Miller, executioner, shepherd—she used all these words with the same tone she used for *witch* and *alchemist*.

Eve spoke in a jesting tone as if she was frightening a child, but when I saw my master make a sound of admiration through her nose, I was a bit disappointed.

"Rare or not, there'll be enough of those scents in Nyohhira to make you sick of them."

"Eh, is that so?"

"Nyohhira is a famous land of springs. In those mountains, there are baths everywhere the eye can see. Just picture a bathtub as large as a lake. The whole place smells much like this."

Of course, I found this a rather dubious claim, but my master seemed to take it in as the honest truth.

This time, just as Eve desired, I held my tongue and let my thoughts wander.

However, if there was a bathtub as large as a lake, who on earth would bathe in it...?

Naturally I thought it had to be an exaggeration.

And as the carriage came to a large turn in the road, it gently came to a stop.

The driver descended from his seat, checking someone's name outside. With things apparently cleared up without delay, there was a gentle knock on the wooden door of the carriage.

"Aye." Eve made a curt reply and respectfully opened the door.

There stood the woman who seemed to be a legendary witch.

"I am Dian Rubens. You may call me Diana." She smiled as her glossy black hair swayed slightly.

This woman had a different air about her than Eve or my master.

She sat on the same side as my master, keeping that faint smile on her face as she directed her radiant gaze out the window.

Reluctantly, I curled around my master's feet, but I continued to glance up at the woman intermittently, taking notice of matters overhead.

My master was sneaking sideways glances at Diana, as was Eve.

I could somehow understand why. It was an obvious question: What relationship did a woman who gave off an air like *this* have with that thickheaded sheep?

"Incidentally..." It was Diana, who seemed like a pitch-black raven, who lit the spark.

"Are the two of you friends, I wonder?"

At first glance, her calm, smiling face and demeanor displayed what looked like a gentle personality.

However, my nose told me that this bird was closer to Eve than my master.

Eve, making a bored face and giving Diana a characteristically ill-mannered look, rested her chin upon her hand as she spoke. "Does it look like that to you?"

"Not really." Diana's expression did not falter whatsoever as she turned her still-smiling face toward my master. "It's just, I could hardly believe that man capable enough to handle more than one more liaison, so you must be friends, I thought."

Those words made my master nearly smile. Somehow she suppressed it, but one threatened to break out at any moment as she turned toward Eve.

"I must agree on that point."

"But of course." As Diana tilted her head with a mirthful smile, her hair, so dark that it shimmered, made a sound as she brushed it. Both Eve's hair and my master's was splendid gold in color, but neither made the slightest move to copy her. Pitiably, though I have black hair myself, I have no skills to compare.

"I myself found it rather mysterious seeing you, I should say," said Eve.

Diana chuckled. "You could say that...I am their elder in terms of life experience, perhaps."

"...?"

Eve raised an eyebrow a little as she looked at Diana. One might say she was intensively scrutinizing the other party's words, but even while thinking of something, she did not show a single opening.

For her part, my master tucked her chin a bit, just like when sensing the wind coming from an odd direction across a meadow.

"Are either of you married?"

Eve made a small laugh at the question, sitting up and raising both hands up to shoulder level.

"I'm busy with financial matters."

"Heh." Diana expressed no surprise as she made a small laugh that seemed very typical of her, shifting her gaze to my master, who made a nervous smile.

"People in town have made advances, but..."

"Really?" As Diana spoke, she shifted her gaze onto me. "Not because *you* got in the way?"

Why—this woman! I made a short cry and met my master's eyes.

"Certainly he's always been protecting me." My master petted my head, then cradled it with both hands. "Right, Enek?"

"Woof." *Of course*, I answered, but my master made a somewhat lonely face.

Yes, of course I understood why.

My master was vibrant and full of life each and every day, but I was the opposite.

My prime as a sheepdog was probably five years ago now. I would have liked to say I had a mountain of time left, but indeed, it was all too brief.

"So, you do have a husband, then?"

Diana lifted her gaze from me in response to Eve's words. "I did once."

The curt reply, given without hesitation, seemed to be as far as she would look back and scratch at the old memory.

And yet, when Diana, who had a particularly dubious air all

about her, placed her snow-white hand on her chest, she made a face like a girl reminiscing about secrets from the night before as she spoke.

"So, when they came to my town, I had more excitement than I'd had in years. Was it like that for you?"

With that, her gaze moved to both Eve and my master. Both glanced at each other's face, making strained smiles together.

"Does annoyance count as part of excitement?" said Eve.

"If excitement includes envy enough to dazzle the eyes," said my master.

Diana's face showed a bit of surprise at both of their answers, finally breaking into a pleasant smile. This was not the resolute mask of before, but something more natural. "*Heh-heh.* So in the end, you got called over here, too. That's just, oh…"

"Annoying."

"I'm envious."

As both finished the sentence, like a ripple, all three of them smiled.

"But I think that innocent charm might put them in a tough spot."

"Only one of them will be in a tough spot, I assure you." Eve made a knowing smile as she spoke, and the two others indeed giggled and smiled.

Even though their ages, origins, and upbringings all differed, somehow they all shared the same estimation of that foolish sheep. As I largely agreed with them, I was certainly not going to jump to his defense.

"But that's why I find their having a proper ceremony to be rather unexpected." Diana pulled a sealed letter out of a purse.

It was just like the letter my master had received. When she

had opened her own copy of that letter, she had looked like nothing so much as a moth who had strayed too close to an open flame.

"Ha-ha. I thought the same thing! It seemed too embarrassing for them to actually do."

"Very much so. I'm all for being decisive, but to call us here, too…"

"And there's two more guests after this?"

As my master asked, Eve made a happy-sounding sigh. "Yes. He's a complete fool of a man."

"A fool of a man, yes, that expression fits perfectly."

As Diana nodded, my master's words turned timidly toward her. "Ah, incidentally, as their senior in life matters, what conversations have you had with them?"

I lifted my head without thinking, for I thought it a question very unlike my master to ask.

Even so, and in spite of my master's rather timid tone, her face betrayed great interest. In spite of her never setting one foot into the women's banter back in town, my master was indeed just at the right age for it.

"You want to hear?" A dubious smile came over Diana.

"We have plenty of time." As Eve replied with a leer, she and my master both leaned their light figures forward.

"This is a tale of love known to precious few in my town…"

As Diana began her tale with those words, as a knight, the atmosphere within the carriage suddenly became distinctly uncomfortable.

There was time. There was also wine. Oh, and plenty of snacks for those noisy girls, too.

They laughed, they were aghast, they sometimes smiled, sometimes grew angry, or perhaps simply interested, as they immersed themselves in the tale.

Though none of them were children, and Eve and Diana did not look like the sorts to engage in such frivolous conversation, they all behaved very much like adolescent maidens. My master positively never interrupted, taking sips of wine, which she had taken a fondness to of late, as she participated in the conversation to a rather shocking extent. Regretfully, I had no desire to venture my opinion of who was behaving most like a silly maiden here.

Like a dog who continued to gnaw on a bone he had been given for five or even ten days, they continued the conversation nonstop as they left the town, with things finally calming down when they stopped for a while to take breakfast.

Eve, whose throat rang out with such laughter that it made her shoulders quiver like that of a wild beast, said she had exhausted herself laughing and left the carriage, moving to the wagon with the luggage. Since the rays of the sun were warm and there was no wind at all, she probably just wanted a nap.

Or maybe she had pulled a stomach muscle from bragging so hard.

It was apparent she held more than a few feelings for that stupid man.

Perhaps she used the words *fool of a man* to reflect upon the matter—to chew over that particular bone in her own way.

For her part, my left-behind master was sitting on her seat, audibly fanning her own face. Perhaps one could get drunk on conversation as much as on wine. The story Diana told was of how, in spite of clearly looking like a couple to everyone else,

their lack of honesty with themselves about it resulted in a third party challenging him to what was essentially a duel.

When the pair had met us, we came under the impression they had been settled together for some time, but apparently that wolf had been much more of a fool than I had expected. Otherwise, would she have played the innocent sheep gripped by hesitation while mere wolves attacked?

At any rate, the man who had challenged him to a duel ran all about the town in his best efforts to win, with the resulting circus kicking up a completely unnecessary uproar.

In the end, they were able to trust each other to cooperate for victory in the duel or something like that. Though I felt sorry for the man who lost, I could only think of him that one reaps what one sows. Perhaps the saving grace was that there were still fools who could not let a damsel in distress go without rescue. He seemed to be living happily now that he had mended his broken heart.

In spite of their ages—and this went for the prior discussion too—the carriages's passengers displayed intense interest, or perhaps amusement, in the parts that seemed sweeter even than the dreams of maidens.

As I preferred savory things, just listening to these tales made my ears itch, but so long as my master was enjoying herself, I was content.

So musing, I let myself casually lay down on the floor.

My master, drunk on wine and conversation, had been audibly fanning over her breast for a while.

The wooden shutter of the carriage was open, letting a refreshing breeze in through it.

It was a quiet time, with the only sound being the rattling sound of the carriage wheels.

"Goodness, it's really quite something."

"Oh?" my master asked back, hastily pulling her hand away from her collar. She must have mistaken the words as criticism of indecent behavior.

"Those two, I mean."

"Ahh..." As Diana smiled, my master returned her expression in apparent relief, adding, "That's true."

"But I do find myself envious..."

"Oh, really?" The wine must have been hitting my master, for her lips had been loosened considerably.

Diana, viewing this as a good opportunity, continued speaking. "I'd think you'd be able to find plenty of good matches. I'm sure you have more than a few matchmakers trying to meddle?"

After pondering this for a bit, she made a strained smile.

"And yet—?" Diana was not asking in earnest. She posed the question while busily pouring wine into her own cup out of the casket Eve had left behind.

But perhaps that gave the question just the right seasoning.

My master leaned back into her seat, raising her chin and narrowing her eyes as if a little hot, and took her time thinking about it. "None of them seemed quite right."

Certainly, my master was currently like a loosened cord, but even so, that answer struck me as rather surprising. I had been sure she was going to brush off the whole subject.

"May I...speak to you about him, then?"

At that, my master drew her chin back a bit and lowered her gaze. My eyes met with hers as the corners of my master's lips made something like a faint smile. "It's not Mr. Lawrence, you know."

Then she leaned back in her seat once more. Even though she was on very good terms with the townspeople, my master was still someone from the outside. Moreover, she was always at the church—always a step removed from society. Drinking wine and letting her guard down simply did not happen. Usually she remained guarded, keeping her distance.

After all, I was the only one who voiced gentle complaints and told her when she was being silly; when happy, fun things happened to her, I was the first one she told.

Thus my confidence was not without basis.

"Then, it really is *him*?"

Diana struck right at the heart of the matter.

But my master gazed absentmindedly at the ceiling, as if not hearing her words whatsoever. It was not that I lacked confidence, but even so her lack of a reply was making me nervous.

It was right when I lifted up my head, wondering if my master might have fallen asleep.

"It's not that I wish Enek were human."

My body stiffened in shock.

I did not know how I should have taken those words.

"Did I mention that I was a shepherd?"

"I heard as much during our introductions."

"Ah, right...Er...So you see, Enek has been with me the whole time...And it's thanks to him that we were able to overcome so much...But still, I don't wish him to be a human."

A shepherd was said to be an alien entity to a townsperson,

the offspring of man and beast. Was it all right, then, to say something like this so lightly in front of someone she did not know well?

I was concerned for my master, but as she leaned back with her chin held high, she lazily changed the direction of her face.

"Miss Diana…You're the same as Miss Holo, aren't you?"

I was the one taken by surprise.

That's absurd, I thought, shocked, but the completely unruffled Diana merely stroked the edge of her wine-filled jar. "I am not a wolf, though." She continued with a sigh. "It seems I've let my secret out." My master smiled with a bit of pride as Diana added, "Or perhaps it's from your long association with the good knight there?"

It was a manner of speech rich with implication. They seemed to have both delivered verbal jabs to the other, but as my master laughed, she composed her face and gently closed her eyes.

"So you might have supposed that my thinking to bringing Enek with me was in *that* sense."

"In that sense." Diana spoke curtly without a single hint of question.

My master, her eyes still closed, made a somewhat embarrassed-looking smile.

"Yes, in *that* sense."

"And? Did you imagine that if you asked the great wisewolf, she just might give you the answer?"

I heard all too clearly something very difficult to listen to. Indeed, it was myself whose composure was disturbed, but my master, less perturbed than when listening to confessions by the townspeople, calmly replied, "I will do no such thing." Then, she made a somewhat malicious-looking smile, a true

rarity for her. "I think, if I did ask, it would put a genuinely conflicted look on her face."

I remembered back to just after the gold-smuggling uproar.

From my perspective, this seemed like childishness quite inappropriate for both their ages.

"Why, then?" Diana asked.

This time, my master replied with only the slightest hesitation. "I wanted to see them again."

"Just to see them?"

As Diana bounced the words back, my master slowly opened her eyelids, sitting up and looking me over.

I knew this as her cue for "come," so I got up and put my forepaws on top of her lap.

"Just to meet them." My master took my paws in her hands, teasingly moving them up and down.

Diana stared squarely at her, but my master did not return the gaze.

Grasping my head, my master pulled a lip aside with a finger and said "grrr" to me as she grinned.

"People don't come to church because they expect God to solve all their problems." With no apparent concern, she said something that I doubt would have come from even my fang-filled mouth. "But people come to church nonetheless."

My master removed her hand from my head and patted on her lap. When she said, "Come on up," I could not refuse.

Though I was somewhat reserved about it, I hopped up onto my master's lap and licked her face.

"I can't really put it in words, though."

"No, I understand very well." Diana reached out with her hand and stroked the back of my neck.

It was nice, I thought, to have a change of pace from my master's usual way of stroking.

"It's been several decades since I left the town I was in. But yes…I think of it like a pilgrimage. It's surely the same for Lady Eve, who's far more wolfish than even the wisewolf herself."

To call *that* a lady meant she must really have been quite something.

"To think, having to go together to a church like this." Diana laughed. I wondered who she was laughing at? The pair of fools we had been discussing? Or my master and I? Or perhaps, at her past self? "This really is quite fun."

Apparently, all of them.

Diana proposed drinking more wine, but my master objected as she looked out the window.

There was a grassland there that seemed infinite, continuing for God only knew how far.

The long winter was over. Grass was sprouting; trees were budding. It was a very fine season.

However, in the end, there were such scenes everywhere we went; they seemed to extend throughout the whole of the world. No doubt these were thoughts shared by many of those who left town walls behind on long journeys.

Even so, it made meeting a couple like that one possible someday.

With that, my master had been able to take the decisive first step.

Like a crab, she suddenly realized that it really was possible to move forward in the world.

My master probably treasured me more than anyone else in the world.

But I was a dog, and my master was a human. No matter how favorably the townspeople regarded my master, she was

a stranger, someone who had arrived from the outside. How we had lived ever since was all an extension of that distinction.

Even so, that stupid couple was an exception to all of it. They seemed so childish, and yet, like children, they paid no heed to the ways of the world.

What seemed to slowly tighten around my body was likely what they call *common sense*. But if push came to shove, those two did not mind breaking all the rules.

Their existence together was the very incarnation of that mad notion.

I drew in a deep breath as my master embraced me.

I could not embrace her body in return.

All I could do was lick her cheek.

"Those two, having a marriage ceremony...," Diana mumbled as she drank her wine. "It makes me want to laugh."

My master laughed again, too, and I barked for good measure.

It was several days later that we arrived at a small village and the other two women joined us in the carriage.

One was a strict-looking woman priest whose personality ran in yet another direction from Eve's; the other was a traveling silversmith.

The temperature in the carriage had already been plenty.

Now that there were five of them, each with their own relationship to that couple, it seemed like the talk was never going to end.

In the midst of it, I would sometimes get down from the carriage and walk, riding on the luggage wagon's roof at other times.

It was good to be alone once in a while.

But since I went back to sleep in my master's arms every night, perhaps I was in no position to laugh at that man.

But just as meeting me and my master was miraculous, there

was no mistake that their journey had brought various miracles to others just like us. Had that not been the case, I would not have been in that carriage, listening to the high-pitched exclamations and laughter within it.

It seemed of great import to the people concerned, but given Diana's story, I could explain it thus.

They were searching for a rainbow.

But it was this place, right where they stood, that was the end of the rainbow.

As a dog, I believed this to be a rather profound notion.

I had some regret that I was unable to share the thought, but perhaps such a thing was simply unnecessary.

"Enek!" As the carriage stopped for a break, my master stepped down and called my name.

Perhaps, just as belongings made one hesitate in the face of a journey, the capacity to speak made one hesitate in the face of conversation.

Yet in spite of that, the things one *needed* to do were very few.

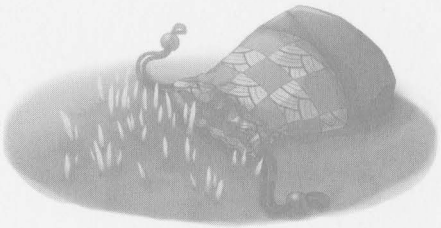
It was good for that stupid couple to realize that truth.

I sighed, paused, and barked a sharp *woof.*

Then, I ran to my beloved master's side as fast as my legs could take me.



CONCLUSION



CONCLUSION

Lawrence's head hurt.

Though at first he had said it as a mere what-if, he felt like he really *did* have a headache.

The cause was crystal clear.

It was the letters Holo had sent out.

They were addressed to Norah and Eve and others they had met on their journeys—all women.

The contents: *We're having a banquet, so come during the St. Alzeuri spring festival.*

Furthermore, he had first learned of the letters when Holo handed them over, already written, saying, "I shall leave the males to you."

At the time, he might still have been able to catch up to the traveling merchant she had handed the letters to.

But had he done that, he would have had to face Holo's imperious wrath.

From all his experiences with Holo until now, she always had a reason when she did something like this.

Furthermore, given her cleverness, it was highly likely she had armed herself with sound, logical arguments with which to display the righteousness of her cause. The point was, at times like these, she was often already beyond the point where she could still be swayed.

All Lawrence could do was to try and figure out if he had stepped on Holo's tail at some point, had invited Holo's displeasure without realizing it, or she simply had a bee in her bonnet.

Regardless of the outcome of such thoughts, all he could do was pray for the grace of God.

When one considered that if there were gods here in the mountains that would hear his prayer, there were only those with dignified, large, triangular wolf ears and splendidly furred tails—like Holo.

But when Wisewolf Holo herself had a bone to pick, she was implacable.

In the end, what Lawrence could do was very limited. The letter had to have been ghostwritten by a human, and since there were not many people in the area Holo trusted to write a letter for her, all he could do was speak with the one who had.

Retracing Holo's steps from when he had received the letter from her, Lawrence walked along the snow-covered path, heading away from the building under construction.

He had planned to complete all of the roof construction by autumn of that year, thinking he would set up enough interior decoration to make heads spin during winter and begin receiving guests once the snows melted in spring, but everything had fallen behind schedule. There apparently had been a war in the plains to the south, causing many enthusiastic

traveling craftsmen to head off for the front. Also, a large trading ship belonging to his lender for the construction funds had run aground, sustaining heavy damage, and heavy snow came earlier than most years, hindering his procurement of supplies.

The last three years had taught him that he could not expect everything to go smoothly, even here at the far edges of the world of trade.

Even so, keeping the main building construction on schedule was sometimes thanks to Holo's power and, beyond that, to the combined aid of everyone whose trust they had gained over the course of their long journey.

As a rival business was due to open in the summer, he wanted to be first if at all possible.

That was why he intended to hold a grand opening for his much-yearned-for establishment in the spring.

The plan had been to hold it a little after the festival of St. Alzeuri.

Among the acquaintances Lawrence had gained on his journey with Holo were people of status on a completely different scale than his own. Of course, he wanted to invite them all to his grand opening, but he could not very well force them to traverse snow-covered roads, for there would still be snow in the mountains during the festival of St. Alzeuri.

However, it was precisely the right time to invite those accustomed to snowy roads for a preopening celebration and those he was close to who did not dwell too great a distance away. It was in that sense, too, that Holo was well aware of the situation.

She was up to something.

Even if it was a simple prank or joke, the fees for even mere letters were hardly trivial.

The fee for Eve's letter was no doubt the highest. She was doing business in the great empire of the south; whatever dangerous bridges had to be crossed to get there, the town councils took care of all the preliminary duties, so the location of even a merchant in elite circles could be ascertained with certainty. Norah seemed to have headed east from Ruvinheigen to work in some town as a pastor; even getting a letter there required a nontrivial amount of money. Even though Diana and Elsa did not live quite that far away, Elsa lived in a small village, so Lawrence had his suspicions a letter would safely arrive there to begin with. In Fran's last correspondence with Lawrence, Elsa was showing her some things at her monastery, so she might still be in Elsa's village as well.

As he thought back, they were all very interesting people, but when he pictured Holo's letters bringing all of those women to meet in the same church at his very doorstep, Lawrence could not stop his face from going rigid.

Though his breaths brought in air cold enough that he could feel it in his lungs, the sigh he breathed out between the fingers covering his lips was a hot one.

"Gracious...What on earth is she thinking...?"

Even though he had been with her some six years, he still did not understand Holo.

They had had a big argument just earlier even.

He was not aware of there being a cause, per se, but he was well aware she was an unreasonable person.

He had the sense it was something about a tasteless meal.

He certainly understood that someone with Holo's personality

had to blow off a little steam from time to time while living in this land in the middle of winter.

And though he thought it was stupid of him, he did consider making up after arguments to be an important thing.

"Ah, Mr. Lawrence?"

When Lawrence sighed once more, brushing the snow off his head as he entered the under-construction addition, the young man laying down stone tiles lifted his head. His sudden growth spurt had made him taller than Holo; it felt like he would be taller than Lawrence, too, given another two or three years.

But as his features had been delicate since long ago, with the length of his hair tied in a tail even now, he looked every bit like a tall young woman. Col, who had been a wandering student when Lawrence had met him, waved Lawrence off with a hand, grabbing a towel and wiping the sweat off his brow.

"Is it lunchtime already?"

"No, I wanted to ask you about this."

When Lawrence hoisted the letter he had received from Holo as he spoke, Col's face looked like he had just swallowed a fly. It seemed she really had asked Col to write the letter. There might have been only one or two other people in the entire region who could write in multiple languages with such calligraphy.

"She pretty much twisted my arm into writing it..."

"Oh, I'm not criticizing you for that. I'm sure Holo asked you because she thought you'd never refuse."

Col's hands were mismatched with his face, weathered from doing manual labor in summer and winter alike.

But open at Col's feet laid manuscripts copied and borrowed from the theologians and high-ranking clergymen who visited

this land; Lawrence knew he recited and memorized them as he worked. Lawrence also knew that at night, he chewed on raw onions to fend off sleepiness as he studied.

After Col had parted ways with Lawrence and Holo, he had spent about two years traveling between churches and abbeys in every land before finally coming to work under Lawrence, but this absolutely did not mean he had given up on his dream from back then of walking the path of the clergyman. Once he learned Lawrence was setting up his own establishment here, he joined right in, saying it would kill two birds with one stone.

So far, Col's plans for discourse with intellectuals coming to this town from all over the world, difficult to meet anywhere else, had been a success. Lawrence understood from his own business dealings how Col benefited from forming connections with such esteemed company.

After all, no matter how busy such people were at home, when they came to this land, they had plenty of time to spare.

This was a secluded land deep in the mountains, well away from civilization.

It was said that this place, Nyohhira, was the only place war was unthinkable.

"More than that, I want to ask you about Holo's state when she made you write it."

"Miss Holo's...?"

"Yeah. Was she angry? Did she say anything?"

Though he was socially embarrassed to ask this of Col, a fine adult but maybe half his own age, this was far from the first time the boy had mediated in an argument between him and Holo.

Sometimes when Holo was being stubborn, she entrusted words to Col that she could not bring herself to say.

For that reason, Col should have known something, but this time he made a grave face.

"That's..."

"That's?"

"She was smiling."

Col said it like it was something he did not want to admit, like having seen a ghost in the mountains.

"Smiling?"

"Yes. Er, the addresses for these letters..."

"Yes. They're to the women Holo met on our journeys. Of course, you remember Elsa, but I'm sure you remember Eve, too, yes?"

Col made a rather pained smile as he recalled Eve, who seemed more of a wolf than Holo herself. But there was no ill will present, perhaps because she had treated Col very kindly, in her own way.

"For her to write those letters and send them against your wishes, I believe you must have done something to anger her, Mr. Lawrence, but..."

It was something Col had said often over the years.

Lawrence thought it exceedingly unfortunate that he had no proof to go with anything he might say in his own defense. "Er...but she's often smiling when she's really angry."

"Is that so? But I had the feeling she was genuinely smiling... I should say buoyant even..."

"Buoyant, you say?"

When Lawrence shot him a look of surprise, parroting back



the words, Col tucked his chin in like a little girl, making a timid shrug of his shoulders as he nodded.

"Ah...there's no mistaking it. She's angry." Lawrence put a hand to his forehead and hung his head then and there.

Where had he gone wrong?

He always kissed her cheek before rising in the morning and coming to bed at night; he never failed to compliment the fur of her tail when she was grooming. No matter how busy his other work was, he always prepared breakfast and supper at home. This left a mountain of craftsmen guarantees, thank-you letters for future cooperation, informational notes for suppliers and traders, and other secretarial work piling up on the table in his bedroom.

It should have been enough to make even Holo smile nervously and admit *perhaps I am pampered a trifle too much.*

But even so there was friction. There were arguments.

He could not think of any occasion whatsoever where he had courted such anger she would call over five acquaintances from long before—and all women at that.

Perhaps she was still angry about that, mused Lawrence as he lifted his head.

From the start of autumn onward, people came to Nyohhira from all over to spend the long winter partaking of its baths. Many of them were wealthy, giving rise to the necessity of arranging beautiful girls to greet them.

Several among those girls were known to give Lawrence amorous glances.

Here in this place away from civilization, customers who came to bathe were veritable fountains of gold for one's business, and

many flocked to the establishments with the prettiest girls. In a normal town, they would not pay the slightest heed to an ordinary merchant such as Lawrence.

That said, as the bathers were largely raisin-like old men or middle-aged scolds who loved to complain when boiled for too long, perhaps it was not so strange for a man such as Lawrence to enter their sights. They had been chatting, in short, about how many men there were in this place and how they ought to be ranked. Most people who worked here for five years or more had found a pretty girl to marry.

Certainly, the people who ran the bathhouses and stores all around Nyohhira were aware that Holo was with Lawrence while his establishment was under construction, but Holo had never publicly declared herself and Lawrence to be husband and wife.

At first she might have found it embarrassing, but this being Holo, a stubborn woman who rarely took back anything once she had said it, she displayed no sign of revisiting the idea even though they had lived here for three years.

There was no other way for him to interpret her highly literal interpretation of their agreement at Svolnel.

He had promised to bring Holo to Yoitsu to begin with. In point of fact, that promise remained unfulfilled.

From Nyohhira, Yoitsu was practically at the tip of her nose, and the distance was one Holo's paws could cover as if going out for a stroll. Even so, Holo had stubbornly refused to go, becoming angry in earnest whenever the subject was raised. Perhaps she had always meant to use their agreement at Svolnel to not commit to marriage before their previous commitment had been resolved as a shield to fend the subject off.

Lawrence himself, thinking that Holo had her own reasons, had asked about it, but had not forced the issue.

But even though they had not exchanged vows in a church, he could put his chest out and say that they were as close as almost any husband and wife in this world. He knew that there were several aspects of Holo that she herself had a poor grasp of. Besides, from time to time she had Lawrence groom her tail, something she would have absolutely never let him do in times past.

Given that, perhaps it was not entirely surprising that a few women—who had no doubt left plenty of men and their partners in tears long before he had arrived—had flirted with Lawrence half in jest.

But one can put their soul into anything, in any form. If one raises up the head of a herring in prayer, even in jest, soon enough they will be doing it for real.

In other words, at first he had simply been ambushed in womanly fashion while minding his own business relaxing at a public bath, but it escalated to home cooking before long, soon followed by the sewing of clothes for him.

His multiple refusals had not discouraged the women whatsoever, nor could he completely ignore them; furthermore, when Lawrence showed them even the slightest bit of admiration, they were so happy that they sparkled like jewels, making his heart hurt.

Holo angered easily, after all. And none had intervened in favor of the awkward newcomer no matter how much it put Lawrence in a bind.

On the road, everyone was a spectator.

In the end, it was the wordless tears welling in the back of Holo's throat at night that hardened his resolve to settle the matter.

After strenuously explaining to one after another that there would be no bride for him save Holo, he was finally able to get them to relent.

It was the same explanation he had given to everyone, but when he returned from convincing them, Holo, eyes red and tail bottlebrush puffed, grabbed Lawrence and sniffed the scents all over him.

From time to time, Holo stopped moving, and sensing why, Lawrence resigned himself to being snapped at, but in the end, Holo said nothing.

Instead, she did not speak to him for about an entire week.

After a week, when she finally did speak, the first thing out of her mouth was indeed, "Fool."

Incidentally, the women that had wooed Lawrence could still boast great popularity as musicians at baths all over Nyohhira. The one felicity was that word spread that Lawrence was a sincerely loyal man; thanks to that, the people of Nyohhira came to trust him a good deal more.

In the time since, it felt like Holo, too, had put her various feelings about the matter behind her.

Lawrence, still in the frigid living room of the addition under construction, hung his head deeply and sighed. As his feelings and Holo herself passed by one another, he thought back to that inn at Svolnel five years before.

Holo had been beautiful, the moonlight shining on her face like a white bridal veil.

He had thought everything after that would be *happily ever after*, but the extent of his worries had not changed. Indeed, it had only grown.

Lawrence sighed once more, suddenly realizing that Col was standing beside him, watching with a look of concern.

"This is coming along quite well, though."

"Ah yes. One more pass by the craftsmen, and it'll be perfect. There are a few things I hope to iron out before they come, though."

"That's a big help. You're very precise, too. Bit of a waste for the splitting image of a budding theologian."

As Lawrence spoke, Col laughed lightly. When Col had free time, he spoke to all sorts of people, learning about the local flavor and the various visitors who came to bathe. He did not mind if he was not speaking to theologians, but to craftsmen or mercenaries instead.

These days, it was no rare thing for a former craftsman to become a great scholar.

What mattered was if one had the will to learn and earned enough money to cover daily expenses. One did not have to be an aristocrat to study.

"I think architecture and theology are very similar. Each requires a blueprint, raw materials, and a logical way of putting it all together."

"And neither can be built in a day?"

"Quite so." Col made a wry smile.

In Lawrence's case, he had attained everything for setting up his establishment by spending two years negotiating with trusted comrades along his trading route and wrapping up various endeavors, spending another year traveling to many lands with Holo with an eye on where to set up shop, and another two years to construct it once he had decided this was where it would be.

And his work was far from done.

The addition had been expected to include individual rooms for the private use of affluent guests and a guest hall enabling them to have pleasant conversations without needing to worry about other boisterous guests. Here, where Col was working up a sweat laying down stone tiles, was the very place the guest hall would be.

Stone-laid aqueducts passed under the floor's surface, bringing the warmth of the hot spring water in.

Col was not sweating just because it was manual labor; the floor really was rather warm.

"Well, you can leave it like this for now and take a bath before dinner."

"Understood." As Col made his reply, his gaze shifted to the letter Lawrence was holding in his hand. "Er...Ought I not to have written that?"

He was very bright but also honest. Perhaps that was why even august, bearded bishops and scholars found themselves bound by Col's enthusiasm and zeal.

Natural talent had something to do with it, too, but even Col always faced temptation. Yet in the face of that, it was his own hard work that had brought him to this point, and he had never strayed from his path.

"It's quite all right. Though there were a few places where turns of phrases were used improperly."

"Er—"

"I'll correct them in a note later."

"Please!"

Lawrence nodded and put the addition behind him.

Lawrence was well aware that if he had anything to teach Col, he needed to do it while he still could.

Even if his business went well, he could foresee the day when he would become another old man in Nyohhira, ignorant of the wider world, being unable to imagine ever leaving his business behind. The course of human life was as natural and obvious as the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. There were many more odious and reckless jobs. Had things gone differently, he might have rowed his way into the ocean of large-scale trade.

He would no doubt have made the same choice one woman in the letter, Eve, had made to go south.

Going with Eve, profiting from one dangerous deal after another, would no doubt have been an adventure worthy of the heroes in the bards' tales.

In fact, Eve no doubt possessed enough financial power to employ a biographer to chronicle the latter half of her life, a life that in the years to come would surely leave behind a name as weighty as a thick tax ledger.

Failing that, he could also have chosen to accept the invitation to go to the Debau Company back at Svolnel, where he and Holo had first sworn to live their lives together. In the end, the exiled Hilde and his former employer Debau both returned to their seats of power; like a king and his chancellor, they were managing the company to that day.

Of late, though they were still not equal to the Ruvik Alliance, the greatest financial alliance in the whole of the world, their momentum was such that it seemed only a matter of time until the gold and silver coins bearing the mark of the sun truly did circulate throughout the entirety of the northlands.

Even now, when he thought about how he himself had fought to protect the symbol of that great currency, his excitement was such that his heart beat faster and sweat ran down to his heels.

It was not that he thought to avoid adventure. It was simply that what he carried in his arms was a weighty thing.

If one is going to go on an adventure, they need to lighten their load, and Lawrence had resolved not to cast anything aside.

As he thought about such things, Lawrence put the letter into his pocket and opened the door to the main building.

Upon doing so, the sweet fragrance of soup made with well-boiled milk wafted by.

"It will be a little longer, so wait just a moment, would you?"

When he went into the living room with the fireplace, Holo spoke while peeling the shells off roasted chestnuts.

She had not changed much since he had met her, but he felt like she had grown ever so slightly taller and seemed to be getting a bit rounder.

Or perhaps it was simply an optical illusion, with Holo growing larger only in his own heart.

"You say it as if you're the one cooking it," Lawrence said in exasperation, and Holo chuckled.

Her mood seemed good for the moment.

Standing in the kitchen was the woman who handled most of the housework and who was expected to work in the galley, too, once the place was up and running. Hilde had introduced her to them; her name was Hanna, but she probably was not human. Neither Holo nor the lady concerned had filled him in, but since it seemed that the two women got along better with a shared secret, he let the matter be.

Besides, a place with many travelers and vagabonds like Nyohhira was no place to pry too far into someone's past.

When considering numerous places for where to set up his establishment, he chose Nyohhira partly because it was close to Yoitsu, but he also took that local flavor into account. The sheep incarnate Jung, who had been dealing in paintings for a long time, was of course coming under suspicion by the townspeople because he did not age; by now he had probably gone "missing" while traveling to purchase paintings he had had his eye on. And once the ruckus died down some, he would return as someone with a "close resemblance."

Here, such methods were easy to pull off; and with similar beings close at hand, Holo would be less lonely for it, even if Lawrence should perish.

Besides, the woman Hilde had introduced as Hanna was a very skilled cook; she also had a keen eye, able to spot edible plants and herbs even on a snowy peak. She seemed more familiar with human society than Holo, so from time to time, she taught Holo sewing, embroidery, and so forth.

But for the time being at least, Holo did not tailor hats or gloves for him like loving wives did for their husbands all over the world. Holo probably enjoyed the sight of him wondering just what in the world she was working on.

"But what are you doing roasting chestnuts like this? Spring's a little ways off yet."

"I'm getting sick of salted meat and fish every day."

"The first year here, you kept saying how salty things were so tasty..."

Holo ate one of the chestnuts she had peeled as she gave him a dour glare. "Too much of a good thing."

"You should just ask Col to hunt something, then. Apparently he can use a bow now. Seems he took down a deer for Old Man Roz not long ago. If you boil the liver, I hear it's delicious with ale chilled in the snow."

As Lawrence spoke, Holo furrowed her brow and drew in her chin. She did not seem very fond of the idea.

It seemed that spending all day at home and eating salted meat and fish every day could put even Holo's body under the weather.

"I have not had any appetite for that of late."

"So roasted chestnuts?"

"They're good when dipped in currant honey, but *someone* does not seem to buy very much."

"I'm already under a mountain of debt. Once we're making money I'll buy as much as you like."

Holo seemed displeased as she sighed through her nose and made a soft chestnut shell dance on top of the table.

"But..."

As Lawrence spoke, Holo, deftly cutting into and peeling away a hard shell with a knife, raised her face, glancing at him.

He'd thought to himself many times, *I'll never get tired of looking at that face*, and it was truly so.

Looking back at Holo's red-tinged amber eyes, Lawrence closed his eyelids once, averting his eyes as he spoke. "...Since you're not feeling well, we need to think a little about what goes on the menu."

As the hard shell split with an audible snap and the contents fell onto the table, Holo made a bitter smile as she peeled the soft shell off.

"The food you make when I'm ill is only ever distasteful."

"But it works, doesn't it?"

"It makes a person think that eating it cannot be borne forever. In that sense, it works very well." She tossed yet another shelled chestnut into a basket.

As Holo always spoke in this fashion, Lawrence let it roll off and went toward the bedroom. It was not him, but Holo, who finished the thought.

"But if not for that, one would want to be a patient forever."

Her head was tilted slightly with upturned eyes. When Holo was in ill health, Lawrence would pour all his body and spirit into nursing her. Part of him wanted to nurse Holo because it was the only time she would meekly go along with being pampered.

During the lonely autumn season wedged between the twilight of summer and the start of winter, sometimes Holo clearly faked being ill.

At such times, he would pretend not to notice and nurse her anyway.

It was easy to tell when she was faking being ill, because she would invariably say "thank you" at the end.

"Shall I merely nurse you, then?"

When Lawrence asked, Holo chuckled without replying and returned to peeling chestnut shells. "Thank you," she finally said to Lawrence's back as he left the sitting room.

In the end, several days passed without him being able to ask and confirm the true purpose behind Holo's letter.

He had thought of holding a banquet for those they were close to in advance of the grand opening for some time, after all; questioning Holo for the need for one would have made strange conversation.

Besides, if he asked, she would turn to him with the same smiling face as always and say, "True purpose? It's to call friends of ours over, is it not?" Once she did, he would be unable to say anything back.

That day, the people who operated bathhouses and stores in the Nyohhira area were holding a council to set common prices for fuel, mainly kindling, yet Lawrence had not been able to pull his mind away from the matter.

But as a newcomer who had not even opened his establishment yet, it was a conversation he could not miss.

Thanks to the suspension of large expeditions here in the north in recent years, the price of fuel had fallen, but this winter's snows had come unexpectedly early, and heavily, too, which had led to a few quarrels.

The land known as Nyohhira constituted a central town through which passed a road many travelers made use of, along with tiny nearby hamlets in the surrounding mountains, which were linked by narrow roads.

The central town contained public paths used by travelers and the less affluent seasonal guests. All those with an abundance of time and money stayed at a specific inn, and each of those inns managed its own bath.

The richer the person, the farther from civilization he wanted to bathe. The owners of bathhouses frequented by archbishops and nobility always stressed that they were late for councils because their bathhouses were in such remote locations.

The owner of one such establishment glanced at Lawrence out of the blue and waved a hand.

"Concerning the rationing of kindling, Mr. Lawrence, don't you have too much as it is? You've been buying lumber from me since autumn rolled around."

The eyes of all those at the long table fell upon Lawrence.

In Nyohhira, anyone who discovered a hot spring essentially had the right to open a business there, so those who had done so were crafty and willing to accept risk.

The glares from a group of such men had quite a bit of force to them.

But none of them were as imposing as the least of the Myuri mercenaries, let alone Eve. They did not hold a candle to Holo on a rampage in wolf form. These business owners had a bone to pick with Lawrence because he, having already discovered a hot spring in a remote area where finding one was said to not be possible, made them nervous.

This had been a recurring scene since he had begun constructing his establishment, so Lawrence was quite calm as he replied, "Are you saying I should turn the lumber I bought for construction into kindling? If I was making as much as Master Morris, I might be able to do that, but..."

As Lawrence spoke, a number of people traded smiles and whispered among one another.

At the beginning of autumn, Morris's bathhouse had suffered a fire, the thing one had to avoid most here in the mountains.

Fortunately, at the time the fire was quickly extinguished, but Lawrence's words made the face of Morris, standing right before him, turn as bright as any flame. And just as he seemed about to say something, anything, so long as it was shouted, the chairman of the council interrupted.

"The amount of lumber Mr. Lawrence purchased was approved by this council. Following precedent, the rationing of kindling is an unrelated matter. Any questions?"

The chairman was not the only one fed up with Morris's stubbornness. There were a number of people cool to Lawrence because they preferred to have less competition, but Morris's unsightly ways had largely swung the group to Lawrence's favor.

This was also a result of Morris's attitude that only a man of high status could get customers.

That being the case, it was best to get under his skin just a little.

The secret to group relations was if one gave in at the start, they yielded for all time. A display of humility was more than enough for people to look down upon you. This was something Holo's acerbic tongue had taught him well.

"Then, I think we should agree to ration kindling in proportion to the rise of its purchasing cost."

At this time of year, with winter soon to end, with old guests about to leave and few new guests in the offing, it was just the right time for these people to drink some wine and have a relaxing nap as soon as the council concluded.

Nearly all the members raised their right hands in agreement with the chairman; even the ever-complaining Morris reluctantly raised his right hand in the end.

"Very well. The council is adjourned."

The chairman wrapped things up, and everyone rose from their seats and left the room.

Morris seemed to be aware of the glares in his direction, but Lawrence was entirely unconcerned.

Rather, he realized that he must pose a proportionally dire threat to the man's bottom line.

At that moment, Lawrence's establishment was in the running for the first- or second-most remote location in all Nyohhira. Furthermore, he had located a hot spring inside a cave, the sort popular with bathers above all others. Together with Col giving high-ranking clergymen and intellectuals such a warm welcome, the opening of his establishment was seen as a certain success. Lawrence himself thought as much.

If Morris's position had grown so weak, Lawrence wondered if he ought to borrow more money and buy the man's establishment outright.

As Lawrence entertained the thought while walking near the public square, he was suddenly struck by a snowball.

Standing in front of the Rogers Company building, founded by expatriates from the Kingdom of Winfiel across the far-off ocean, was not a child playing a prank, but Holo.

"You must be thinking something bad. I can tell from your face." She smirked at him as she sat on a wooden fence. The business owners just leaving the public assembly stared at Holo; it was rare for her to come down to town like this.

"You do understand that I'm not going to go out on a journey while I'm building something like that, don't you?"

There were times when Holo turned to the horse that Lawrence had traveled with during his days as a traveling merchant, strictly commanding that should Lawrence look about to set off on a journey, it must utterly refuse to cooperate.

Lawrence thought she probably allowed him to see her doing it on purpose, but he did not really think it was a joke. After all, ever since, he had been unable to mount it, even just to move it a short distance.

"Journeys are not the only adventures." As Holo spoke, she

swayed her body within the extravagant pelt coat, heavily decorated with fur at the edges; the Debau Company had sent it when they learned this was where he would set up his business.

Goodness, Lawrence thought to himself, but it was true that buying Morris out would create no small disturbance. "You're in no mood for an adventure?"

As Lawrence spoke, Holo casually let out a white breath, making a smile rich in meaning. "Let us just say my hands are full at the moment."

Lawrence sighed, shrugged his shoulders, and took Holo's hand.

He had had no idea what Holo had gone outside for without gloves on, but it seemed to be so that she could thrust her hand into Lawrence's glove.

It was, of course, rather odd for there to be two hands in one glove.

"People will laugh when they see."

"Let them laugh. It only means they are jealous."

Holo spoke casually as she marched over the snow. She thrust her remaining hand into her coat, looking like the perfect maiden.

"What did you come all the way down here for, though? I said I'd be back early today, didn't I?"

There were times when her nose twitching was an indicator she was about to start crying.

Today, though, she seemed to be just sniffing the springs out for the moment. Lawrence could not tell whatsoever, but apparently hot baths had subtle differences in smell depending on the place.

Since she could also tell the size and temperature of the spring, a severe problem for many—unearthing a new hot

spring in the area for setting up an establishment—was no more difficult for her than twisting a baby's arm.

Searching at night a bit in her wolf form, it had taken her but two days to find one.

Lawrence's only expenses were honey-preserved fruit and occasionally lending out the spring to the deer and bears whose territory encompassed this area.

It was not difficult work, for though the hot spring was in a cave, Holo's ears, able to discern even the purity of a silver coin, searched for sounds of water, and she was easily able to remove boulders that seemed unmovable by human means.

There were old stories that if one trapped a fairy in a bottle and fed it a sweet, it would lead a person all the way to a vein of gold. This was not far from that, though unlike the stories, if one opened the lid of this bottle, the fairy would not run off.

As the two walked through Nyohhira's central town without a word between them, Lawrence stole glances at the side of Holo's face, as if confirming his good fortune.

"Hanna went to pluck some herbs." Holo looked in another direction as she spoke.

Her gaze led to a public bath where mercenaries, travelers, and hunters from nearby, who had come in to sell the meat and pelts from the game they had felled, were drinking and relaxing together. There was also sunny music being played as an apparent competition unfolded, with men, still buck naked from their time in the bath, boasting to one another about their scars.

As Holo was staring at them with very little restraint, several men raised both hands and cried out something or other to her as they noticed.

Holo, quite fond of pranks, turned her face away like a bashful maiden, chuckling as she listened to the men's boisterous cheer.

"So?"

When Lawrence made an exasperated laugh and prompted her, Holo turned back to the men once more and made a small wave of her hand. "Aye. After you left, someone called for the lad and he went out, too."

"So you got lonely?"

Even though she was stubborn in odd places, she was oddly pleased as he posed his question.

As if no longer paying one shred of attention to the noisy men of the bathhouse, she clung to Lawrence's arm and swayed her tail about. "I procured wine as well."

The way she said it was rich with meaning, but as Lawrence looked down at Holo, he sighed again. Lately he felt like he was getting older; no doubt that was because the number of his sighs had increased.

"No doubt that's what you were really after."

"Heh-heh." Holo curled her lips as she smiled.

As Lawrence lightly looked around the area, he embraced Holo tightly, as if her feet were floating up to the heavens, and walked forward once more.

Afterward, he sent for a sleigh to take them out of town, and they returned home together.

It went without her saying—of *course* she had procured wine.

As Lawrence peeked into the kitchen, there was already a platter of pork sausages and cured meat.

As Hanna was a very frugal person who would have never

dreamt of such things, Holo had no doubt twisted her arm into making it.

"Honestly..." As he ate one slice of the thickly sliced pork sausage, Lawrence took a plate out of a nearby cabinet and put sweet, dried fruit on it, carrying it along with pitchers for both wine and mead.

Once it felt like he had enjoyed alcohol in proportion to its volume, but he had taken a liking to sweet things like mead of late. Sweet alcohol was not something a person gulped down in order to get drunk. He was glad it meant one needed fewer snacks.

But perhaps because he had let his guard down like that, his girth had grown larger of late, which Holo had pointed out to him. Though that put him one step closer to being a portly town shopkeeper, he had to smile wryly at how his journeys were finally over.

"Huh?" As Lawrence left the building and headed out down the road, there was a large brown bear sitting there. It had a scar on its right shoulder inflicted by a hunter; it seemed to specialize in finding bee hives. This year it had apparently failed to hibernate and appeared at the hot springs here and there. Its fur was all drenched, steam rising from it, as if it had emerged from a hot spring just a moment before.

"Did Holo chase you off?"

As Lawrence asked, it regarded him out of the corner of its eye, slumping down at a bend in the road.

Though he had at first been fearful, now that he knew he could speak to it through Holo, it differed little from a mercenary of few words.

Handing off two slices of sausage as he passed by, he arrived at the bath.

"Hmm..."

Holo, in her giant wolf form, was sprawled over the little island in the center of the large bath. Holo only allowed other beasts to share the same bath when she was in a foul mood—put another way, only when Lawrence was not there to join her.

When she evicted all interlopers and sprawled herself over the island like a king holding court, it was proof she was in a rather good mood indeed.

When she wanted to be alone or was sulking and so forth, she would go to a corner of the bath in human form, offering little clue as to where she was. The point being, she wanted more attention, she wanted the company—or the like. Even with Lawrence's arrival, Holo did not open her eyes; only her large, well-steamed tail moved, swaying around in the bath.

Even without guests, they had to ensure that the baths were not leaking or otherwise in poor shape, so they had been using the baths practically every day this winter. Holo was overjoyed to immerse herself day after day, but she had become quite sick of bathing by herself. Col might have entered alone more than she had; often whatever what was on one's mind came to a boil when in a bath.

Once Lawrence set the food and drink down in the usual spot, he took a good look around the bath.

Since a variety of beasts often bathed here—a sight that would shock or enliven the hearts of hunters if they could only see it—it was possible something might be damaged. As he had made a point of strictly telling Holo to fix anything that

might be broken, he had seen bears, deer, and rabbits fixing the stone arrangement more than once.

It was something right out of a fairy tale, he thought, drifting off as he recalled the scenes.

At any rate, there were no problems at the moment. The ducts that led to the bath were the same as always. Leave it to Holo to use her nose to find a bath by means literally beyond human facility. Though the elevation was higher than that of other bathhouses, the water volume and temperature were first-rate.

"It's not too hot?"

Even though Lawrence asked in a loud voice, Holo's tail merely continued to sway back and forth at the same speed. Meaning, it was fine.

From there, Lawrence inspected the ducts drawing in drinking water all around the area. It was believed that drinking hot spring water so rich in minerals that one could feel them on their teeth worked against all illnesses. Lawrence had found the claim highly dubious since being stricken by diarrhea the first day he had drank the water, but as the water tester he had to put up with it.

But today, too, the rough matting laid around to keep refuse from getting into the bath was in bad shape. The hot spring minerals stuck to it, plugging the gaps. Col had pondered the matter as well, but there was not any good solution to it. As other bathhouses used manpower to bring potable water in, he wanted to stand out somehow with a water fountain or something like that.

For the time being, I'll have to skip bathing and clean all this, he thought, making another sigh as he rose up. "I'll have to give it a sweep."

As he looked up at the sky, judging from the very hazy color, a change in wind direction would no doubt bring considerable snowfall. While falling snow getting into the bath was not a bad thing, being cold on the way back up to the main building was an inconvenience.

He racked his mind trying to think of a way to improve things, but no good plan came to mind.

As he did so, Holo, on the small island, raised her head and spoke. *"Your head fills itself with bad thoughts."*

"You want to eat honey-preserved currants, right? I need to make some money, then."

"I can get both honey and currants with my own paws."

"Not that you've ever done it. Why not learn from Miss Hanna?"

Instead of rebutting, Holo bared her fangs at him in a wordless laugh, making a large splash with her tail that made the bathwater churn.

"There are things one cannot grasp no matter how hard one tries."

Then she rose up, making a growl as she stretched her back.

"For example?"

"For example?" Holo parroted back before making a great sway of her head to the side, plunging into the bath.

She immersed herself without restraint, her entire body diving into the hot water.

As the depth was, of course, not very great, the face that popped out was that of a person.

"For example, a rainbow." She'd probably heard the words from some poet. There were many of such people in Nyohhira.

"Would you stop diving in like that? You'll mess up the stone arrangement."

"If they come apart that easily, arrange them more solidly next time."

On their journeys, whenever they found a spring during the summertime, Holo would adopt wolf form and plunge in. It was only since coming to Nyohhira that he learned Holo had done her share of swimming before, but not in human form.

Just then, too, Holo swam earnestly for a while, eventually giving that up and walking as far as the edge.

"Like certain friends of ours." Immersed in hot water up to her hips, Holo raised her drenched hair up, speaking as she gave him a defiant smile.

"Fool." As Lawrence mimicked Holo's manner of speech, Holo made a small chuckle as she smiled, then made a small sneeze. "Soak yourself to the shoulders already. Wine for you?"

"Aye."

Hearing her reply, he took hold of the cord around the neck of the pitcher when she said, "On second thought, I shall have mead, the same as you."

She really did seem to be in a good mood.

As Lawrence moved to pour the drink into a pair of wooden cups, Holo checked him with a hand. One cup was fine, in other words.

"After all, that drink could be even sweeter."

So Holo spoke while having a sip. That mead was sweet enough that serious connoisseurs would even say it did not count as proper alcohol. Amazed, Lawrence stripped off his clothes and immersed himself in the hot water, accepting the cup from her.

"You're too extreme in your tastes."

"Ohh? But if it wasn't for this, I could hardly spend time with a fool like you."

As he heard the words, he raised his face to the sky as he handed the cup back. "Goodness...but, I have to do something about these cups..."

"Mm?"

"The cups. Wooden cups are convenient, but..."

"They're not good enough?"

"They're cheap, no two ways about it. Silver cups are the top class, but..."

At the Morris bathhouse, which received numerous top-class guests, the owner made a great show of using actual silver utensils. If Lawrence tried to use silver utensils in a place like this, they would turn black in an instant. He would need to soak them in oil when not in use and kill himself polishing them before and after each use.

Though steel, tin, and bronze did not require so much labor, they all came off as cheap. Brass was an option, but it was difficult to obtain.

That left rustic earthenware and uncracked, cheap wooden utensils as the only candidates.

"I would think it of little import to one who cares only about what's inside, like you do."

As Holo took the cup back once more, she drank as she spun Lawrence's words into yarn.

"Well, that's why you picked me, isn't it?"

"...Ha!"

Holo snorted a blunt laugh as she brought a slice of pork sausage to her lips.

"Well, 'tis pointless just thinking about it, I think."

"Ah?"

"Are the guests you invite here really so meager as to pay attention only to material things?"

A smile that somehow smelled of victory came over Holo as she gazed squarely at Lawrence.

Those were the eyes of a young man about to set off on an adventure. Such eyes did not doubt their own judgment whatsoever, full of faith that the future waiting for them held only radiance.

Holo came to Lawrence's side.

If that was so, those eyes were looking at the future Lawrence should be seeing.

"I suppose not," Lawrence said with a plain, self-derisive smile.

"Besides, I think 'tis meals that are more important. That fellow who you get along with poorly, what's his name..."

"Morris?"

"Aye. That's the one. The meals you get there are, ah, second-rate."

Sometimes Holo knew things that really made him wonder *how* she knew them.

Had someone invited her there and shared a meal with her...?

"I know because I heard from the birds and foxes that fish through their trash. Right now, the best is the one under the sign with the two oaks."

"Jeck's place, eh...? That place is certainly thriving, though its facilities are fairly poor..."

"I think the meals are the secret."

Since they were all places where everyone stripped bare,



bathhouses were more secretive than other establishments in town. While Lawrence's thoughts crept along in his own fashion, Holo's presence was strongly felt as his right-hand man, so to speak. One might think this was to be expected of one who was sometimes—though largely against her wishes—called a god.

"So then, you."

"Yeah?"

"Could you not arrange a great and fine banquet for the saint's festival?"

Holo wrapped both arms around Lawrence's neck and grinned as she spoke. Perhaps it was the minerals of the hot spring at work, but the sensation he felt when they touched each other, naked like this, never failed to startle him.

The hot spring flush on Holo's cheeks was all the more conspicuous against her white skin.

"A-aye ..."

But at this stage, it was not Holo's provocative behavior that made Lawrence stammer.

"Why so hesitant? Anyway, you had better prepare things properly. It has to be magnificent. You understand, do you not?"

Without taking much effort to stretch her neck, Holo was right at the range where her fangs could reach Lawrence's throat at any moment. As Holo started at him, making a *hmm* sound all the while, Lawrence came to feel rather nervous.

He had never imagined Holo would be the one to bring up *that* subject—calling over five old female acquaintances and arbitrarily deciding they would hold a banquet.

As Lawrence's vision swam, with a splash, Holo snuggled all against Lawrence's body.

Lawrence did not even have time to think, *Oh no,* when Holo spoke.

"In these matters, first impressions are very important. If you surprise them at the start, the fish tales later will be even bigger. I've used this technique for a very long time. Once you overwhelm your opponent, they'll rarely defy you even if you let up later, you see."

Even though she had the body of a maiden, this was hardly the first time she spoke with overinflated pride.

Besides, at the very least, it was fair to say that Lawrence occupying the position in Nyohhira that he now did was largely due to Holo's suggestions. Given that, he should have just quietly enjoyed himself, but the issue kept tugging at Lawrence's mind regardless.

Namely, what was Holo really after with this banquet?

"Now hold on, Holo."

"Mm?"

Even as he thought asking might be lifting the lid of a cauldron full of hellish things, he *had* to ask. There was no way she had a normal, lucid reason behind this.

If she was angry, she should have just said so. Being surrounded by wolves on the open plain was far preferable to hearing rustle after rustle from the shadows of trees in a dark forest.

Lawrence swallowed down.

And the very moment he said, "Now, Holo...," to ascertain her true intentions...

"What do you suppose you're doing!?" As Holo suddenly made an angry shout, he heard cries of birds and sounds of beasts running away the next moment.

When Lawrence looked, he saw a bird taking flight and the

tail of a fox vanishing in a grove of trees, both having tried to take a bite of their snacks.

She was magnificently adult when she was chasing off beasts. No matter how much she might deny it, she behaved very much like one accustomed to standing above commoners.

Actually, Lawrence, too, found himself under her rump, her tail spread all over him.

"Goodness..." As Holo sighed, her face went back to her usual good mood in no time at all. "I must be strict in telling my guests not to misbehave. The damage would not be trivial, would it?"

It was just as she said. As it was humans that had forced their way into the mountains to live there, they of course came under attack by those who had dwelled in the forests and mountains for far longer. Were it not for Holo, he would have to hire people at considerable expense just to drive away beasts.

"Indeed. Ah, now then, you..."

"Hm?"

"What was it? Weren't you going to ask me something?"

Holo looked down at Lawrence with a smiling face as she asked.

But at this stage, Lawrence had no courage left in him to wave about.

"No, it's nothing..."

"Mm? Well, that's how it is. 'Twill be fun, will it not?" Immersing herself up to the shoulders, Holo snuggled against him as she spoke.

Those words—"*'Twill be fun...?*"—seemed entirely too meaningful. Lawrence soaked himself to his lips, making bubbling sounds as he closed his eyes.

* * *

Having been told to take care of the men, he had written letters of invitation to those who had attended the opening of his business and, separately, those he was friends with. Having said that, he had no acquaintances from long before anywhere in Nyohhira; there were not many people who he socialized with outside of business.

Holo had sent a letter to Eve without a shred of restraint, but if all those women did come, he had to gather a certain number of men to keep up appearances.

At any rate, Lawrence wrote to all the people he could think of.

Hilde of the Debau Company, Le Roi the book merchant, the Myuri Mercenary Company led by Luward, Hugues the art dealer, Kieman of the Rowan Trade Guild, Huskins the shepherd, and—though it was a reach—he thought of Mark, who had opened a shop in the same town Diana lived in. While writing to Amati, Lawrence could not help his hand stopping. Among all those who had been taken in by Holo's beauty and charm, no others had the stature to plainly convey those feelings to Holo. By that measure, he had been Lawrence's greatest rival during their journey.

Lawrence made a prayer to God and struck the name from his list.

Stretching his mind to the limits, there was Jakob, the guild hall master of Ruvinheigen; and the money changer Weiz near the village he had first met Holo; and Marlheit, who had taken care of him during the time he seized back Holo following her abduction.

But none of them struck him as people he could call for

whatever this event was, and more of them were of the sort he would be inclined to invite to a proper shop-opening banquet.

"Still..."

With that, Lawrence, in front of his bedroom desk, made a light sigh as he looked over the tablet he had written the names on.

Merely remembering their names showed just how many people he had become involved with.

Furthermore, at each and every one of their towns that he had visited were incidents that became crucial turning points for the course of his life. If a single one of them had been absent from those places, events would surely not have unfolded as they had. Each had played a decisive, irreplaceable role in Lawrence and Holo having slipped out of those predicaments.

From time to time, he had labored under the illusion that he traveled under his own power, or his and that of Holo. However, looking at what he had written, he viscerally realized he had traversed a frighteningly narrow tightrope on the way to becoming the man he now was.

Lawrence prayed once more before the stone tablet, willing his thanks to God that he had met all of them.

And bit by bit, Lawrence's face changed into something pained.

When he opened his eyes, there before him were the names of the people important to him.

"Now, who to invite, huh...?"

There were many who would no doubt gladly respond to an invitation, but they had everyday lives of their own. Furthermore, Nyohhira was practically at the edge of the known world.

Even the fees for the letters alone were practical concerns that could not be scoffed at. There was nothing guaranteeing people happily setting off on a journey in response would not become wrapped up in some accident or incident along the way.

That said, there might well be people he was on good terms with who would hold a grudge later if he did not invite them.

In this world, only rumors traveled thousands of miles. When people opened up an establishment, they seemed to invite only their inner circle of friends to the opening banquets. People would ask, "Weren't you invited?" And so forth.

It was a depressing thought.

"If only Holo just went and picked them all up..."

Lawrence muttered to himself as he anguished in front of the tablet.

In the end, after agonizing for two nights straight, he sent a bundle of letters to those who could take three months from their work without particular harm; those who would be enraged at not being invited even should they befall disaster en route; and those, like Huskins and Marlheit, who would surely reply that they would come no matter what.

From there, Lawrence switched from matters of the head to those of the stomach. He did not think Eve would really come, but since Lawrence had invited people, too, he had to put on a banquet to make their head spin, just as Holo had urged.

Fortunately, he had funds he could call on.

His journey with Holo had truly had many ups and downs. It was oddly linked to people that lived in this world that Lawrence would prefer never having to meet again for the rest of his life. A major slave trader had, like a Grim Reaper, told Lawrence

to invite him to celebrate the opening of his new establishment. Furthermore, he had said he would be happy to lend Lawrence money anytime he might be in distress. Even in Nyohhira, a place of many people with checkered pasts, there surely were not many people who would accept a letter from that source.

At the Debau Company, not only Hilde, but also Debau himself had met him a number of times to thank him.

They had told him that they would take care of him anytime he wanted to open an establishment, lending as much as he might need. He was truly grateful, but he simply could not leave everything to the Debau Company; he politely declined and borrowed funds from the Rowen Trade Guild via Huskins the great ram. Though Kieman's personal company trading ship had been shipwrecked, making Lawrence think he might bow his head before even the Debau Company to hide his embarrassment, he somehow came through. He apparently viewed owing a favor to the irresistible force that was the Debau Company as a last resort.

Besides, Lawrence himself had assets accumulated in the course of his travels and business dealings.

He was mindful that his coin purse was not as full as it might have been in the past.

As most of it was borrowed money, it did not even seem real.

Under such circumstances, even if the money weighed upon him a bit, he did not really need to be stingy; in particular, since people naturally flocked to the baths for long periods in anticipation of the festival.

Just as Holo had said, if he drew people to the merits of his establishment here, some among the bathers would surely consider his bathhouse the next time they visited.

That was why he had ordered first-rate food and drink, but unfortunately Lawrence possessed little passion for dining himself. No matter how well-informed he was about the price of food, he was ill versed in whether a dish was good or not.

"That being the case, if there's something you want to eat, please say it."

So Lawrence went to Holo to inquire after jotting down basic banquet dishes.

Today, too, she and Hanna were cracking and eating walnuts they had gotten from God only knew where.

"Anything is fine."

She had a serious look in her eyes he had not seen in several days.

In response to Holo's words, Lawrence hardened his resolve and nodded.

"Truly?"

Hanna shifted her gaze to him as he prompted for confirmation. She always said, "It's better to be very certain before you leap."

Usually she was standing in the kitchen; sometimes she ate with Holo, sometimes she was absent, always striving to be frugal—that was Hanna for you. No matter what kind of remote place she was in, Holo always seemed to know how to get good food to eat.

Furthermore, Holo's knowledge of food had prospered ridiculously well while traveling with Lawrence.

It was his own fault Holo was able to cajole him into loosening his purse strings, but Lawrence made a single deep breath, nodding.

"Right. Could you write what you want on this?"

And Lawrence brought forth not a tablet, but paper.

If she was to write down the likes of honey-pickled peaches on this, she would have to take back the earlier words she had so carelessly tossed out.

Showing that she would do nothing so underhanded would be, for her, a profound display of resolve.

As if noticing that very thing, Holo looked at the paper and pen Lawrence offered her. She looked up at Lawrence himself with what felt like a bit of a strained smile.

"I am not so much of a fool as that."

Holo spoke as she took the pen and paper from Lawrence's hand.

"After all, if you bite down on your prey till it perishes, you cannot play with it later."

Though that made her a cat toying with a mouse, speaking the joke surely meant she would grant him mercy.

Lawrence was optimistic, but Hanna made a sigh as she spoke.

"Will you still be able to pay my salary, I wonder?"

Her line came as Holo held the paper before her, her tail merrily swishing around.

Though Lawrence thought inside his head that he would regret this, he shook the notion off with a shake of his head.

Hanna looked at Lawrence and made an exasperated-looking smile.

"If things turn desperate, I shall claim my salary in food."

"Sounds like a fine plan."

As Lawrence spoke, Holo shouted, "Ink!" and Hanna rose from her chair to go and get some.

The list contained wine, beer, apple wine, mead, the drink called Kvass made from boiling rye, wine distilled into "fire

water," distilled wheat-based liquor called "the water of life," and besides that, even kumis made with fermented mare's milk; God only knew where she had learned of it. There were people and goods that came in from a far eastern nation of steppes and grasslands to Nyohhira via the northlands; she had probably heard of it that way.

The meat was even more incredible. Mutton, lamb, beef, bullock, hare, pork, chicken, domesticated goose, wild goose, and after those entries, she had listed the most expensive of all meats, namely quail, peacock, and so forth.

"Where am I going to buy *peacock*...?"

A great theologian had supposedly proven that peacock meat did not rot. Even kings sitting on their thrones did not partake of it often; many commoners probably had no idea it even existed.

But beside the entry for peacock was written "if possible," so she probably meant it as a joke.

She had surely been tempted to write that beside the entry for quail as well; that was probably what she was really after.

The fish were comparatively tame: pike, carp, eel, and so forth, all centered on river fish.

Small doubt she wanted these because everything from the sea had to be smoked or salted, and she was entirely sick of eating smoked and salted things during the winter months. *Maybe I should mix some herring in and play dumb,* he thought mischievously.

And finally, the last was "fish tail." No doubt this was the rodent prepared on the riverbank she had eaten in Lenos. He could order that relatively cheaply.

The next part of the list contained fruit.

"Thanks to the season, this one's relatively easy to do, but..."

Lawrence made a sigh as he looked the list over.

"Where did she learn about oranges and lemons?"

He had heard only rumors that ports to the south traded in them when giant trading ships unloaded their cargo. Apparently they were shipped from somewhere close to the desert, but Lawrence had never seen it firsthand.

Figs, raspberries, huckleberries, currants, peaches, apples, pears—these he could get if they were dried and pickled. The rest of the list was filled by a bunch of shellfish, chestnuts, and miscellaneous types of beans.

At that point, she was probably writing down anything else that came to mind.

He showed Hanna the list and struck off the things even Hanna could not prepare.

She said, "You can do basically anything if you're cooking meat.

"For example, roast pig."

He added that to the list.

He had seen Holo beg to be able to eat roast pig more than once. Usually she directed her begging for food toward Hanna, but she had begged Lawrence for roast pig, too.

Furthermore, when she went, *"You have not forgotten the taste of the roast pig you and I ate back then,"* he had no real leg to stand on.

He was not going to deny Holo now.

Roast pig here in Nyohhira? Lawrence thought, hanging his head. With salt-pickled meat the foundation of the market, he wondered just how much it would cost.

But having resolved to do it, he would carry it through.

Besides that, if he was going to spend this much on food, he of course needed music.

"Eh? Miss Annie?" When Lawrence called Col over to discuss it with him, Col of course parroted his words back in surprise.

"I mean, it's been so long and it neatly solves that problem..."

She was the musician who had tried to woo Lawrence. However, her skill really was first-rate, and moreover, he was afraid of what would happen if he invited any other.

"So could I have you ask her for me?"

"..."

Col, who still had a book open that he had borrowed from someone who had come to the baths, made a disagreeable face, but he yielded in the end. The women musicians were always calling out to Col, too.

He had never once wavered in the slightest from his resolve to become a man of the cloth, but this aloofness sent the girls' hearts aflutter all the more. Lawrence said to him that God might overlook a minor indiscretion or two, but Col being Col, his stubbornness turned what other men would consider good fortune into what seemed to be an improbable source of concern.

"Also, what's happening with the craftsmen arrangements?"

During winter, craftsmen looked for work where there was no snow, and when a certain amount of snow did fall, they came north. He wanted to open his establishment in spring so badly because of all the people gathered around.

"Based on the letter I received yesterday, there's nothing else left to do. They'll arrive in a few days' time, so I think we should get ready for them."

"Understood. Besides that, ah yes, we'll need bedding and

so on for the guests...Is Eve really going to come? If she really does, we can't be having her sleep on a bed of straw, can we...?"

At home, a merchant of Eve's caliber no doubt slept atop silks filled with cotton on a wood-frame bed sitting atop a stone foundation. Norah could probably handle sleeping on the floor if only she had a blanket, but it was not something he would actually care to propose to her. It was not the way to treat guests invited to a banquet to say the least.

"How about going to Mr. Morris and borrowing some things?"

"Ugh."

Certainly, he was short on guests and so had bedding to spare. That plan was especially attractive.

"I'll think about it..."

"Besides that, how will you pick them up? If it's by carriage, we should make arrangements as early as possible, but we don't really know when they will arrive..."

"Ah! That's right!"

He had forgotten about that. One could use a carriage on the road that continued to Nyohhira, but coming with assumptions from the south would not work very well. For that reason it was better for them to go to a comparatively large town like Svolnel and prepare specifically for the mountains in winter.

If a carriage was not arranged, they would have to hire someone to ship the goods...and walk.

One way or another, he needed to get in touch with them somewhere.

"If we're considering escorts, too, how about we ask Mr. Luward and his men? You're probably inviting them anyway?"

Lawrence was cradling his head when he suddenly lifted his face up.

"We can do that."

"I'll add an attachment to your invitation letter, then. Perhaps we can manage to send a letter to Lenos to Miss Eve and the others? Miss Eve is surely accustomed to traveling, so she'll probably gather information and make preparations there."

That was Col for you, both intelligent and well accustomed to travel.

He had already become completely dependent on Col; the boy was less of an apprentice than someone he could not help but think about convincing to stay on in order to keep the business running.

"I'll entrust all those things to you."

"Understood." Col respectfully bowed his head as he spoke.

He would leave the spring banquet in Col's hands; he had to deal with the more immediate issue of the craftsmen.

Having righted his thoughts, Lawrence went down to the central town amid lightly falling snow to make various preparations.

Things instantly got much livelier with the arrival of the craftsmen.

Usually, it was just Lawrence, Holo, Col, and Hanna—four people in a building designed for the lodging of numerous people, making it feel rather empty.

Besides, even though Holo was highly territorial, she was unexpectedly accommodating of guests. When they had settled on going ahead with a bathhouse, she had said with interest, *"I do not mind it being lively."*

But with winter having crested, with spring seemingly just on the other side of the hills, Holo withdrew from the ruckus they were raising every night.

Out of not feeling well, she spent many daylight hours shut in her own room; she did not seem to have any appetite, either.

She claimed it was from living this deep in the mountains during such a season and being forced to eat mostly dried meat and fish every day. When people spoke of spring sickness, they usually meant colds going around; people recovered right around when vivacious, fresh plants sprung up. Even the council had numerous absences; some people lost a fair bit of weight from loss of appetite. Seeing these things, Lawrence thought it mysterious that no one questioned the effectiveness of the baths, which were said to cure everything. Perhaps spring sickness was in the same category as lovesickness.

For his part, Lawrence had told Hanna to wash as much of the salt off as she could when preparing meals, even at the cost of less taste, but Holo seemed unable to endure that.

She had probably eaten too much along with the lively craftsmen at times, too.

For a while, even when Lawrence brought her gruel, all she seemed to do was take the scent in. In the end, though wheat gruel was no good, rye bread boiled in goat's milk went down fine, so she was currently eating small amounts of that. She was holding up pretty well given that she could not even drink wine.

Even though this was spring sickness, Lawrence was fairly worried at times, but Hanna told him there was no reason for special concern. As she seemed to be well versed in illnesses, Holo evidently trusted Hanna quite extensively; even if she could pull the wool over Lawrence's eyes, she got nowhere with Hanna.

As he nursed Holo and gave instructions to the craftsmen,

more and more days passed as he prepared for the spring banquet.

When a little more time passed, around when sunny days began to outnumber days when snow fell, a letter reached Lawrence. It had come to Svolnel, written by Eve's hand. As Col had suggested, he had written a letter and sent it to Lenos, but that seemed to have been in error.

Even so, just as he had surmised, for her to have properly sent a letter ahead of her from Svolnel, she had not lost her knack for travel.

If she came from Svolnel, she would arrive before the festival of St. Alzeuri, but preparations for food and other things would still be steadily under way. That was why Lawrence replied that she would make it just in time if she took it easy on the way up. He also wrote that he was surprised she would really come.

She would probably make a strained smile and say, *"I was invited, so why are you so surprised?"* but she would no doubt laugh herself silly if he told her the circumstances under which that letter had been sent. Lawrence chuckled to himself as he pictured the scene.

Because she was in a foul mood, Holo, sideways on her seat in front of the fireplace, made a questioning sound and shot him a suspicious look.

"It would seem our guests are on their way, safe and sound."

Several days prior, he had received letters indicating Weiz and Mark and those with them had safely reached Lenos. They seemed to have sent their letter on the way out, so they had probably reached Svolnel around the same time as Eve.

He felt somewhat odd as he thought about that.

Holo made a halfhearted nod as she sat in her chair, pulling a blanket over her lap. "You supposed poorly," she said curtly.

"And yet, there is still time, is there not? You should focus on recuperating till then."

As Holo spoke, she slowly closed her eyes, moving her chin so vaguely it barely felt like a nod, and turned toward the fireplace.

Even in poor condition, Holo was Holo.

When he was being soft, she always behaved frankly, but gracefully.

After taking the opportunity to show Holo the letter, he gently stroked her head. In the old days, she liked it when he messed with her hair, tousling it, but nowadays she seemed to prefer long, gentle strokes.

As her hair was being leisurely stroked, Holo browsed the contents of the letter. Though she had difficulty with writing even now, reading was no problem at all. There had been times when Lawrence's concern over Holo's lies that she could not read a single word had backfired. Perhaps Holo was remembering back to that time when, as she finished reading Eve's letter, she sniffed the letter's scent and made a small giggle.

"She is fairly angry about something, it would seem."

"Oh, aye?" Holo made a typical small smile as she returned the letter to Lawrence. "Eve's angry, is she?"

As Lawrence asked her back, Holo shifted her gaze to the side and closed her eyes.

It was as if she was saying, "The fool still understands nothing." She chuckled.

But Holo's good mood frightened Lawrence in a different sense.

Holo sank back into the chair, eyes closed. In that pose, with the tip of her tail gently swaying, it was as if she was having a pleasant dream.

"More importantly, how are things going with the business?"

For Holo to switch to that topic herself meant she wanted to dance around the other.

She was *definitely* hiding something, but with her worn down like this, he prudently followed her lead. On their journey, too, arguments broke out most easily when she was feeling off stride.

"It's getting there. I'd say the skeleton's all finished and eight-tenths of the meat is on, too. We should be getting the fine decorations and fixtures bit by bit as the snow clears."

"Indeed. A pity I cannot watch the work in progress."

Certainly there was pleasure in watching wood and stone put together as a building was being built. But only the passive observer had it easy; owners had no small amount of things to worry over.

"Go one step at a time. Sometimes your eyes see what is far off with surprising accuracy, but you also miss things right under your nose. 'Tis not so?"

"..."

He thought it was like she was lecturing a child, but when she asked again, "'Tis not so?" he answered, "That's right."

"Aye."

Holo made a satisfied nod and then added, "But."

"And yet your penchant for overlooking what is at your feet has led to your picking up some unexpectedly joyful things, yes?"

"Huh?"

At Lawrence's reply, Holo made a light smile and waved dismissively with her hand. "It's nothing," she seemed to say. "More importantly, you, what's happening with *that*?"

As Holo spoke, she opened her eyes, strength having returned to them at some point.

With the look she gave him, even Lawrence could not mistake what she meant by *that*.

"That, is it?"

"Aye. Will it be in time?"

The serious face Holo was making greatly resembled a look of concern, no doubt because her eyes were wide and her face was displaying a fair bit of emotion. Incidentally, it was her mouth that stood out when she smiled. It was truly lovely how she opened her mouth ridiculously wide to guffaw when she seemed to be really having fun.

As a matter of fact, while it was rare enough for Holo to be hiding something deep down, it was equally rare for her face to display this much emotion.

Without thinking, Lawrence embraced Holo's cheeks with his palms, stroking her, forgetting that Holo had "trained" him to do so only a short time before.

"I'm confident the appraisal and supply of the goods will be worthy of a top-rank merchant."

Holo closed one eye with a slightly dejected look while he stroked her neck like he would a puppy's.

Perhaps she thought her wisewolf wisdom might be affected depending on how much her cheeks were stroked and her tail swished.

"But those appraisals have gotten us into trouble more than once."

"It's like a stone wall. We wouldn't be here if it was any other way," Lawrence casually replied to Holo's abusive manner of speaking.

Holo made an exceedingly distasteful face as she stuck her tongue out, making a sigh.

"Are you not the type to keep breaking stone walls?"

"If you didn't like it, you should've gotten out of the bath." He spoke while pinching her cheeks.

They were words he would have been far too scared to speak in the middle of his journey with Holo. Nowadays, he did not worry at all that if they had a big argument on one day, Holo might be gone the next.

Holo trained her red-amber eyes on Lawrence, staring.

Many times over, water had been spilled and flames fanned from such a point onward.

Even so, ever since he had met Holo in that far-off village, Lawrence was proud that what Holo stared at the most was him.

As he confidently looked back at Holo, her ears finally wilted, her tail seeming to curl as she wrapped it around her own feet.

Among beasts, the first to look away lost.

Holo pouted her lips as she spoke.

"Once soaked, I cannot get out of the bath without getting cold." With that, she looked at Lawrence once more. "Thus, I should just soak in the water, at least till spring comes and it becomes warm outside."

Holo had been obstinate about not going to Yoitsu because she could guess well enough what had become of it.

According to a book she had seen in the church Elsa administered, Yoitsu's wolves had been attacked and scattered to the

winds by the Moon-Hunting Bear. Furthermore, in spite of having traveled around so much, they had never met anyone purporting to be one of Holo's comrades, nor had they even heard of one doing so.

If they went and saw, it would become the truth.

But if they did not go and see, they still would not be sure.

This age was not the age of the people of mountains and forests that Holo and her comrades knew.

In this age, which to them was a long, bitter winter, they were compelled to live quietly and in secret.

Lawrence could not remain married to Holo for centuries. He would almost certainly die before she did.

Holo was well aware of that. It was as if she was deciding what she should do afterward.

That being the case, Lawrence could not call staying soaking in the bath until the water ran out the right thing to do.

He should build stone walls to protect the bath and arrange good food, good wine, and the playing of musical instruments.

A merchant found joy in bringing joy to others through their wares. They risked everything for the sake of hearing at the end, *"Ahh, that was delightful."*

Then Holo spoke. "But I feel as if I have been soaking just a trifle too much of late."

Lawrence wanted to explain in detail just how much he did every single day for her sake.

But it was a princess like this that could bring cheer to a merchant with a single word.

"My apologies."

As Lawrence spoke, he embraced Holo from the side as she sat in her chair.

Inside Lawrence's arms, Holo took a very deep breath.

Perhaps she thought of Lawrence as the finest of food, but if so, he did not mind. On this occasion, if it was a choice between a sacrament granted by a priest he barely knew or having Holo season him with the finest oils mixed with the finest salts, he would rather Holo do it from head to toe.

As he thought of such things, Holo's tail, which had seemed asleep until now, slowly moved, making a swishing sound. As Lawrence loosened his arms slightly, she pouted a little like a sulking baby, but rationing in small amounts was a basic part of business.

"So, about *that*..."

On a cold morning like this, Holo would seriously obstruct Lawrence if he was trying to get her out of bed, but here, she listened as Lawrence spoke those words, a somewhat absent-minded look still on her face.

"Aye...?"

"Want a preview? I was thinking that the banquet wouldn't be a bad place for its debut."

The item in question had been made in Svolnel and was on its way to Nyohhira at that very moment.

For a while, Holo drifted off, thinking about it, she seemed to use Lawrence's chest to wipe her face once, exhaling before speaking curtly. "Indeed. I mind not."

Lawrence drew his chin in a bit, as this was a terribly blunt way to say it. Between the two of them, was *that* really such a light thing? And such.

But taking no heed, Holo closed her eyes and yawned.

"Now that I'm warm, I've become sleepy."

This was Wisewolf Holo, quirks and all.

Beside himself, Lawrence thought, *It certainly figures*, as Holo made a slight twist of her body and thrust her arms out.

"Mm? What is it?"

"Pick me up."

She said it without the slightest shred of embarrassment.

As it was the nature of a merchant to respond to requests, even this one, he could not help himself.

Lawrence cradled Holo and picked her up. He thought, with a somewhat strange feeling, the day would come when he would no longer be able to carry her like this.

Holo would remain young as he became old.

Until now, Lawrence had thought only of Holo, who would be the one left behind alone, but he had spared little thought for himself.

At the moment, he still had little grasp of the meaning of getting old. His body was in good health; if he hardened his body a bit, he thought he would be able to become a traveling merchant again. But at some point his body would decline, becoming decrepit with age, and Holo would start looking like his own granddaughter.

Perhaps when that time came, he would curse his own helplessness, or perhaps lament how pathetic he had become, for in the past he had been able to cradle and lift up Holo.

From that perspective, these daily trivialities, that would repeat themselves for who knew how long, constituted precious moments he ought to value far more than gold.

It was as if her abusive language was a distraction to keep that fact from weighing upon Lawrence's heart.

"Aren't you bringing your wolfishness to tears?"

Holo turned her body around in Lawrence's arms, her eyes narrowed, apparently in good spirits as she replied, "If I cry, will you console me?"

Within his arms, Holo's big ears twitched, her tail swaying happily.

This was happiness...almost too much happiness to bear.

Therefore, all they could do was enjoy it—for they could neither stop the flow of time, nor reverse it.

Lawrence kissed the base of Holo's closer ear, carefully putting her to bed.

Being a narrow town, streets were few.

Even without inspectors to ask what your cargo was and where it was going, those things were quite clear to all. As a result, rumors that Lawrence was holding a banquet for close acquaintances to celebrate the opening of his business had long circulated around town.

It had even been made known that he had what were clearly odd connections for a mere traveling merchant. This being the case, he would have all eyes on him whether he wanted it or not, but Lawrence did not grow timid whatsoever.

For the banquet he was preparing would be very fine indeed.

"What are you doing?" Holo called out to Lawrence while he looked over the hall of the main building that he had decorated.

These last several days her condition had improved as she had eaten more, perhaps because she had made clearer what she wished to eat and what she did not.

"I was just thinking, look at how far I've come."

He said it as a light joke, but Holo made a rude laugh beside him.

"Is that a voice of mourning I hear?"

"..."

He looked down beside him at Holo and sighed.

"Only because you made me show off."

"Heh-heh." Holo folded her arms behind her, nuzzling against Lawrence's arm with her face alone.

"Your own business, something you've gained and lost before."

Not only once, but also twice.

There was a time when Holo had shouted at him, *"Are you giving up on your dream?"* That was when Holo herself had become the merchandise, about to be sold off.

For a while, Holo kept Lawrence company like that, gazing at the hall with him.

There was white fabric all over the reception table, the chairs, and the walls, making them ready to greet human beings of even the highest rank. Even if the utensils and trays were not silver, he had been able to put together a full set of brass. Swindlers deceived people into thinking fool's gold was the real thing, but the dull, golden twinkle of brass held the indecency of gold in check, giving off what Lawrence thought to be a rather pleasant glint.

Even though he had thought it would be difficult preparing flowers in the present season, Hanna had somehow gotten her hands on plenty of early blooming ones that he had used to decorate.

Even if the hall was deserted now, it would no doubt be full of people and laughter soon enough.

It seemed that, in the end, everyone they had invited had come and would arrive without incident.

With his fingers, he counted thirteen years since he had set out on his own as a merchant. Finally, he had an establishment to call his own.

"It would have been nice if your master could have seen this, too," Holo chimed in, apparently noticing him counting with his fingers.

Lawrence made a pained smile and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, he was an eccentric man. He'd probably complain about all sorts of things."

"Do you want to go find him?"

It was Holo who spoke such words—Holo, who would have either yelled in anger or cried if he had shown the slightest sign of wanting to travel.

The horse that had seen Lawrence through so many trials had become an obstinate horse that only carried Col's things because Holo had strictly commanded it to do so.

Even so, Lawrence put his hand on Holo's head, drawing near, and said, "Why would I?"

Holo turned her head, looking up at him.

He had not spoken much of his master, even to Holo.

"All I have to do is have a business so big he'll have to take notice, after all."

"..."

Holo's large ears twitched as she discerned the meaning of his words, reading Lawrence's sentiment with her large eyes.

But, Lawrence thought to himself, he was confident she would not find what she sought within his heart, for he did not understand it himself.

No, he thought. It was probably the same way she thought about Yoitsu.

Lawrence and his master passed through a treacherous mountain trail, reaching a town inn at the ends of their endurance. Just before Lawrence fell asleep, his master told him, "*I'm heading out for a bit,*" and left without any proper luggage.

No one had seen him since.

Lawrence had heard he had debts and a woman he loved. He probably thought Lawrence would just slow him down.

But his master had left him all of his charters and most of his cash on hand.

He was a man of many mysteries, so he probably ended up as a monk or recluse or something.

At the very least, that is what Lawrence thought, for it dispensed with all concerns.

"Before that, I need an establishment no one's going to laugh at."

"They shall not laugh." Holo seemed peeved as she spoke, unclasping her hands from behind her back and folding her arms in front of her chest. "They absolutely shall not laugh."

"That might be a problem in itself."

As Lawrence pinched her cheek, she seemed annoyed as she turned her face aside.

"But even these things can happen if you live long enough." His murmur was deep in emotion.

A mere traveling merchant.

A traveling merchant who thought great profits were as distant as the moon floating in the sky.

His being in that place and time seemed very much like a reflection of that moon floating on the water.

"'Tis all thanks to me."

Holo said it without an ounce of shame.

With Holo like that, Lawrence took her hand, speaking to her as if she was a princess.

"I do not deny it."

"But 'tis thanks to you that I am so happy now, too."

Holo said that with even less shame.

She said it with a determined look, a chuckle, and a smile.

As Lawrence shrugged his shoulders and replied, "I won't deny that either, you know," Holo's tail swished around as she cackled.

Just as she was doing that, Col opened the door and entered.

Because 'twas the occasion of a banquet, he wore not his usual worn-out clothing, but a seminary student robe Hanna had tailored for him. His hair being fastened and held up by a red ribbon was no doubt the result of teasing by the musicians and dancing girls.

"Everyone is here!"

He was out of breath, possibly from running all the way over from the center of town.

Lawrence and Holo's faces met, and both nodding at the same time, they walked forward.

As they went outside, it was surprisingly fine weather, even by the standards of the last few days, enough to make someone wearing thick clothing sweat.

"Because the sky has been nothing but clouds, 'tis making my eyes blink."

"Are you all right?"

"I just wanted you to know if there are tears in my eyes 'tis not my doing."

As Holo spoke those words, she stomped on Lawrence's foot.

"I hadn't noticed."

"Fool."

As Col opened the door, he looked to and fro in front of the establishment and finally made a pained smile.

Col called out to him just so. "Ah, right. Mr. Lawrence..."

"Mm?"

"Mr. Luward and the others should be bringing *it* up right about now, but where shall you present it? At the start of the banquet? Or here, perhaps?" Col spoke as he made ready a stepladder and mallet below the building's eaves.

The front of the bathhouse served as a fine front entrance, but it was still incomplete, and there was a reason for that.

Lawrence thought a bit before replying.

"Here's good. That's what it's for to begin with."

"I suppose so. Best to use it as a nice opening ceremony, then."

Col moved with a bounce in his step. To be frank, Lawrence had not paid much heed to the tiny details because Col had taken care of them all beforehand.

"You've come to rely on him quite a lot."

"Jealous?"

As he asked, Holo leered, showing her fangs. "As if I could lose to a little brat like that."

It was a wolfish face she did not show very often, one not so much frightening as bewitching.

"Well, you have become a fair bit more plump of late."

As Lawrence spoke in jest, Holo stomped his foot with all her might.

He suffered in silent agony as Holo coldly declared, "Fool."

"Ah, Mr. Luward and the others are coming! Er, did something happen?"

As Col glanced between them, Holo made a grinning smile as Lawrence suffered without a word, something that happened rather often. Col made an exasperated smile and went to welcome Luward and the others.

"But I wonder how it'll feel in the end?"

She spoke in such a sunny voice that it was as if what had just occurred had never existed.

Though it would do Lawrence no good to speak of the fact, he was in awe at the speed of the change.

"It'll feel simple. Simple is best, after all."

She replied, "Indeed," and nodded.

Lawrence had conveyed his broad desires to Hugues the art merchant, and from the drawings Hugues had come up with, he had selected the simplest of them.

From there, the drawing had been shipped to Svolnel, entrusted to the hands of Jean Millike, the man who ran it. Lawrence had wanted to entrust someone else, but Holo had stubbornly insisted.

In the end, Millike did accept; he also sent an exceptionally curt letter that simply said: "Invite me when you hold the celebration."

No doubt Millike, child of man and spirit, who even now held sway over that town to protect the burial site of his beloved wife, who had departed long before him, had a thought or two in regards to Holo.

Nonetheless, the two did apparently have a few things in common. From time to time, Holo would send off some alcohol to him and he would send some to her, back and forth.

And so, what Lawrence had requested was cast in the furnace that had been lit once more in Svolnel.

It was the same furnace where the first gold coins bearing the Debau Company's symbol of the sun were minted, and the day that furnace was lit was the day Lawrence and Holo had sworn to go as far as they might together.

No doubt a first-rate craftsman had been hired to do the work.

As neither Lawrence nor Holo had wanted to look at it before it was complete, they had no idea what the final product looked like at all.

So the sign that would hang over the bathhouse's front entrance would truly be revealed for the first time this day.

"Mr. Lawrence! Miss Holo!"

Moizi raised his voice first, his great frame and vigor undiminished by the years.

Luward Myuri was a tad taller and his physique quite a bit sterner after six years, perhaps looking so radiant because of the backdrop, but to Lawrence's eyes, he looked like he was at pains to drag a smile onto his face.

"It's been a while."

Luward spoke calmly and put out his hand.

Lawrence gripped his hand, shaking it vigorously.

And then, Luward knelt before Holo on one knee, suddenly coming to a halt.

This was no doubt his display of the highest respect to Holo, comrade of Myuri, the symbol of their banner and the wolf of Yoitsu from whom he had inherited his name as captain of a mercenary company of people of Yoitsu.

But Holo did not like this kind of thing.

Luward, still halted on one knee, respectfully took Holo's hand and put his lips to the back of it.

"A fine male you have become."

"Thank you very much."

The Myuri family line had passed a message down for Holo's sake.

No doubt Holo was grateful beyond words; no doubt Luward, current head of the house, could not be more proud.

"But you have become even more beautiful. Truly, among women, you are—"

Right around there, Holo put her index finger to Luward's lips.

"...?"

"Kufu."

Holo smiled and tilted her head slightly, her gaze shifting from Luward's questioning look to the horse-drawn wagon behind him.

"The luggage is over there?"

"Ah yes. Hey!"

With that, Luward completely regained his captain's demeanor. No doubt the men who had followed Luward in his father's stead no longer called him "Young One."

"I was more worried about this than any other cargo escort job we've ever had."

The scars on his face had increased, making his smile feel more striking.

No doubt he would slip past death many times more as the years would pass, growing into a mercenary sharper and more forceful than even Moizi.

"Should we put it up right now?"

"No, we'll do it once people come, right?"

Holo's words were directed toward Lawrence.

"I think that's best. They've come all this way."

"Understood. Moizi and I have it here, so go ahead and unveil it."

It was a large, round metallic sign that a single adult could just barely get his arms around.

Some people simply had the name of their establishment for the design on their signs; others used symbols that carried some kind of drama or that simply stood out.

Lawrence had put the name of his establishment on the sign.

"It came out nicely?"

As Lawrence asked, Luward carried it over together with Moizi with ease, making a leer as he spoke.

"It made me tremble."

"Can we use that line as a testimonial?"

Luward first made an easygoing laugh at Lawrence's words. "How about 'Tis the finest bathhouse of the age, where even the hardy Myuri Mercenary Company feels at home'?"

"Oh, everyone has arrived!"

Lawrence suddenly grew tense at Moizi's words.

He could see a group coming from a grove of trees toward the top of the hill.

Eve was first, followed by Norah and Elsa and more. There seemed to indeed be five people.

In the end, he would still never understand Holo's true intent.

But beside him, Holo was in an exuberant mood; it seemed that Holo really had not brought this about because he had made her angry.

If that was so, what in the world was this?

No, best not to question, Lawrence decided.

Either way, there was no more felicitous day than this.

To Lawrence, there was only a single thing that he could think of that would be more so.

"Ah, that's right." It was while she held Lawrence's hand, in the middle of heading to the entrance to the grounds to meet their guests.

"Mm?"

"There is something I forgot to ask."

"What?"

Was there something she had forgotten to have prepared for the day's feast?

He thought it must be something like that.

"Aye. The name."

"Hm?" Lawrence replied, then continued. "We decided on a name, didn't we? Er, well, certainly if you want to change it, it can still be changed...But didn't you like it? Spice and..."

He would have continued, but Holo's gaze alone brought Lawrence's lips to a halt.

It was not because she was angry. She was not sad, either. Nor was she beside herself. It was that even though her smiling face was so soft, it bore a look of seemingly unfathomable happiness, as if merely looking at him was enough to stir her heart very deeply.

And so she spoke. "'Tis not that."

"That?"

Lawrence spontaneously raised his head, looking all around the area.

Holo giggled and smiled. "Honestly," she said with a sigh. "So you really had not noticed? I was beginning to think you simply pretended not to..."

Lawrence was utterly confused.

What was Holo talking about?

While this was going on, the party of guests reached the top of the hill.

Unexpectedly, the first one up the hill was Weiz the money changer, but apparently Enek the dog had been chasing him; he had probably made a pass at Norah or something.

But the sight of them did not really enter Lawrence's head.

Inside his head, he felt like something incredible was about to be born.

Yes.

So strongly, like something, something completely new, was about to be born, here and now!

"It can't be—" As Lawrence raised his voice in a near shout, he became too overwhelmed to say any more.

He was in no condition to greet their guests; everyone around them paid attention to Lawrence's odd state.

Holo grinned. "To the very end, you never actually asked *why* I invited them to a banquet," she said. She narrowed her eyes—because of the dazzling brightness, or perhaps to hold back tears. "Obviously I wish to brag!"

And then, she lifted her chin and stood up on her toes, heedless of her surroundings.

There was no way he could decide something like that with all these people watching…!

He did not know if what reached his ears after were cries of acclaim or exasperated sighs.

But as Lawrence embraced Holo, he could say with certainty that he was the happiest man in the world.



Such was the memorable opening of a legendary bathhouse said to be a place of many smiles and much happiness...

...Spice and Wolf.

THE END





TRAVELING MERCHANT AND GRAY KNIGHT

It was a strange thing, but without any particular reason for it, a house unlived in seemed to become decrepit with incredible force.

The doors cracked, the floorboards swelled, the roof fell to pieces.

Though the roof that had protected pitiable travelers from the rain had been robust while people lived here, it was now unreliable even before a light drizzle.

Perhaps because the building had been built on a firm foundation of stone, the weight-bearing pillars at the building's four corners still bore the vestiges of belonging to a house. Right now he seemed as if he pressed his body against them as he sheltered himself from the rain.

As that was the state of affairs, he placed the cargo-laden horse-drawn wagon, and the horse pulling it, beside the supporting pillar on the other side, and the supporting pillar for the ridge beside it, respectively.

As Lawrence sat with his back against the wall and lit a fire,

he took a good look through the dilapidated roof at the heavy clouds on the other side.

"What, the fire is not ready yet?"

So spoke a small girl as she came over along the wall, splashing water off her robe all the while.

Under the dirty stone building, she looked like a devout nun on a pilgrimage to see the remains of an ancient saint.

However, as she went to Lawrence's side, stripping off her robe and shaking about, he beheld something very odd. Namely, though her long chestnut hair had a noblesse-like beauty to it, enshrined upon her head were the ears of a beast, and below her slender hips, which seemed a trifle too thin for a teenage girl, hung a beast's tail.

Lawrence, who had traveled alone as a merchant for some seven years, now traveled with Holo, a centuries-old incarnation of a giant wolf sometimes known as a wisewolf.

"Is that what you should say while you're wringing water out of a robe right beside someone starting a fire?"

The first step was to take grass stalks that had been pulverized and cleaned with water, then dried to make them come apart, and light them with sparks from repeatedly striking flints together. Next came using that to ignite straw, using that to make wood burn.

The somewhat ominous look Holo made when she put her wrung-out robe back on was just as Lawrence finally got the fire transferred to the bundle of straw in his hand.

"I believe 'tis easier to light that fire with the heat of your anger."

Sarcasm aside, it did not seem she was interested in a real argument with Lawrence.

As her words fell on deaf ears, Holo put her hand over her head beside the fire.

Lawrence began burning wood chips he had shaved with a dagger, feeding kindling into the fire bit by bit, resulting in a fine campfire shortly thereafter.

"It really was just in the nick of time, though."

Lawrence picked out a branch from among his kindling, speaking as he pruned it with his dagger.

"Aye, thanks to a foolish merchant being unable to say no, we piled up too much heavy freight and ran late. We almost ended up having to sleep under the rain."

Holo spoke while spreading out some oiled leather and sprawling herself over it.

At the town they had visited several days earlier, he had been unable to say no when a traveling merchant he knew asked him to carry salt-pickled herring on his wagon. Thanks to the weight, the wagon had only been able to make gradual progress on the road, and rain began to fall midway.

But there was no mistake that far more than that, she simply found the strong smell of pickled herring on the roof rack hard to stomach. Perhaps it was due to all the lazy napping, but Holo's overly sensitive nose was not accustomed to any scent on the roof rack besides that of the hair of her own tail.

"We are profiting from it, though, after a fashion."

With the sharp, shaved branches, he skewered from mouth to tail a number of pickled herring from the cargo, standing them around the fire.

The contract with the shipper permitted them to eat up to ten fish.

It had been a while since they had had fish, so if he had wanted to go all out, he could put onions, garlic, and butter with them; surround them with tree bark; bury them in soil; and build a fire on top. After a while, he could put the fire out and dig the food up, having nicely cooked a covered "pot" of sweet and salty fish.

The reason he had not done so this night was that he could foresee that once Holo had tasted such cooking, she would never again be satisfied with fish that had been merely baked.

Tasty things were poison for the eyes and poison for the tongue. But one could not crave something they knew nothing about.

"Indeed. Aye, baked. 'Tis a rather tasty-seeming scent."

Holo smacked her lips as her tail wagged rapidly.

As Lawrence made an amazed-looking smile, he tossed wood shavings right into the fire.

"Since we're not in the woods, I'm not worried about attracting anything and everything, but I am concerned about mice."

Even though he had only just begun cooking, Holo poked a fish with a finger and licked the salt off.

If he said something like, "I thought it was dogs that liked the taste of salt," no doubt every hair on her tail would stand up with her flying into a rage.

"Well, I do not think that will be a problem. Not many people dwell in a place like this. For that matter..."

With that, Holo merrily licked salt directly off a fish that had not yet been skewered before continuing her words.

"...What is a building doing here, anyway?"

Holo looked up at the crumbling ceiling as she spoke, like a child looking at something odd.

It was not a particularly strange thought, nor could he call it ignorance of the ways of the world. The building suddenly jutted out of the earth amid an empty plain stretching as far as the eye could see. She must have thought it similar to a pimple suddenly popping up from silky, beautiful skin.

Looking at the building, surely it did not take someone who had spent centuries in a village's wheat field like Holo to think the same thing.

Namely, that the building sheltering Lawrence and Holo from the rain had been built atop something that itself stood out.

"To begin with, how did you know about this place? When you realized rain might fall, you came straight here, did you not?"

Perhaps having licked enough salt to satisfy her for the time being, Holo took the piece of wood that Lawrence had been whittling right out of his hands as she spoke.

Just as he wondered what in the world she was doing, she picked out the largest fish left among those that had not yet been impaled on sticks, squeezing its mouth shut.

She was probably saying, "This one is mine."

"That's because I've been here before. At the time I was lost and just stumbled upon it."

Holo murmured as she took that in, looking around the area.

"I wonder, was it already this worn out back then?"

"No. Buildings pile up damage when people don't live in them. It's right about three years since I came here."

As the conversation continued, Holo turned to the fish baking from the fire.

She really could not calm down with food right in front of her.

"Meaning, there was someone living here at the time?"

"Yes. A rather eccentric man, too." As Lawrence spoke, he chuckled as he remembered. But it was not simply a laugh, for a considerable sigh was mixed in as well.

No doubt the dubious-looking face Holo made toward him was due to her noticing that sigh.

Lawrence raised his face up and shook his head a little.

"He built a stone fort in a place like this and lived in it, so of course he was eccentric."

"Indeed...Well, that might be the case, but..."

...What was the cause of that sigh?

As Holo spoke the unexpected words, she stared straight toward him.

Lawrence did not notice where she was looking, for he was looking not at her, but squarely at the flames of the campfire.

"It sounds like quite a story."

The voice Holo suddenly turned toward him seemed displeased on the surface, but there was a small air of sadness lurking behind her tone.

"Not really, but..."

It was not really something Lawrence wanted to talk to other people about.

That seemed particularly so in Holo's case.

Even though it felt like Holo lived to expose that which was hidden, she seemed to read the atmosphere at that point.

It looked like she might just quietly back off, but her ears drooped as she gave off a desolate look.

And then she spoke while reaching out for a fish. "You really do not speak much about your past."

Surely it was not so much insisting on hearing the story than lodging a small complaint.

Even so, Lawrence got weak in the knees when he saw Holo in that state.

As Holo, perhaps unable to resist, bit into the fish, as if purposefully taking off the salt she had gotten on her cheek in the process, Lawrence tentatively prefaced his comments.

"When tired on a journey, aren't funny stories better?"

"Salt never tastes better than when you are tired."

In no time at all, she had finished eating half the length of the fish and drank wine from a small keg with a sour look.

Her behavior, like that of a spoiled little lady, was largely an act, but Lawrence knew she wanted to be indulged with a story.

No choice, then, he thought with a sigh; he brought the dagger he was using to scrape branches over the fire.

"This dagger's taken good care of me here and there."

With that, he began.

"You see the words engraved here?"

It was a well-made dagger that he would not be ashamed to show any smith in any town whatsoever.

It had protected Lawrence on numerous occasions and had served as a convenient tool on his various journeys.

But it really felt like too martial a dagger for a traveling merchant to carry around with him.

As Holo savored the taste of the fish in her mouth, she snuggled against Lawrence's body under his arm, squarely peeking out at it like a cat.

"Ahh, where weally is somewhing?"

Holo spoke lazily with fish still in her mouth.

She was probably asking, *"So what is written on it?"*

As Holo sat beside him, Lawrence handed her the dagger.

"God grant me mercy."

Holo's look of surprise might have been because she expected something more magnificent to be engraved on a weapon like this. In fact, chariots, rams, and the great swords and lances knights used on horseback all had phrases etched upon them. Yet among them, only a knight's dagger had something as seemingly banal as "God grant me mercy" engraved upon it.

In the past, Lawrence, too, had found it curious but thought it simply a matter of custom. He had only learned of its significance when he came to this very stone fort.

"Among the elderly, there are those who call these daggers 'misericordes,' meaning acts of mercy in an older tongue."

Holo nodded with deep interest; the moment she raised the dagger over the fire, the finely polished blade reflected the fire's light so brightly that she closed her eyes.

"Ha-ha. So you see, this dagger was handed down to me by just one such old man."

As he retrieved the dagger from Holo, his gaze fell to the well-used hilt.

The story was from three years prior.

It was a time when something like Lawrence meeting Holo was as yet unthinkable.

Though by good fortune he had reached it while having lost his way, truly this was the house of the devil.

The story of a merchant who wasted his profits on a daily basis was not an amusing one.

Furthermore, having set eyes upon *it* amid a plain that continued seemingly for all eternity, even though he thought it an ill omen, it simply could not have been helped.

The bare hill appearing smack in the middle of the plain had posts sticking out of it like the spines of a sea urchin. The grand, dignified stone fort at the summit of the hill gave off an atmosphere like an execution ground straight out of hell where the sins of man would be judged.

The feeling that a demon or Grim Reaper might show up at any moment was not based upon that atmosphere alone.

Having cut food down to the minimum to reduce traveling expenses, his last provisions had run out the night before. Horses could live off eating the poor, wild grasses while on the road, but men could not. Though he could choose to sacrifice his horse as a last resort, it would bring about bankruptcy, which meant much the same as death to a merchant.

Finally, he had received divine punishment for being too obsessed with turning a profit.

The circumstances were more than sufficient to make a man think that way.

Aided by his empty stomach, Lawrence was on the verge of losing his spirit and giving up.

However, it was an all too realistic welcoming ceremony that suddenly brought Lawrence back to his senses.

He heard a high-pitched sound, making him think that a large insect had buzzed past his ear. After, a sound like the shaking of wood instantly alerted him to just what had flown at him.

Lawrence instantly leaped down from the driver's seat and hid under his horse.

Someone had shot an arrow at him.

"I'm a traveling merchant who got lost! Just a traveling merchant!"

And even after yelling with all his strength, two more arrows

thrust into the earth. They neatly avoided the horse, one falling to the left, one to the right; the shooter must have been rather skilled.

Whether as a result of Lawrence's shouts or not, no other arrows came flying, or perhaps the shooter was simply waiting for him to stick his head up before shooting again. Thinking of that, Lawrence stayed put for a while; finally, he heard the sound of footsteps. It seemed he had not been shot at from the fort; the shooter was apparently hidden on some slope somewhere.

When Lawrence, pathetically between the legs of his horse, looked in the direction of the sound, he saw the silhouette of a man.

The man stood still and spoke.

"A traveling merchant, you say?"

The voice was rather coarse; even if it was for show, Lawrence thought the man had to have been fairly old.

As Lawrence answered yes, the man swiftly crouched down.

The man, as small and aged as his voice had made him seem, had a very frank look about him.

"By the grace of God. Good thing I didn't shoot you to death."

The leering grin on his face made it hard to dismiss as a joke.

But the man stood up and made an about-face on his heel.

Is he letting me live? wondered Lawrence, staying put under his horse, when the old man suddenly looked back.

"Well, what are you doing? You got lost, didn't you?"

When Lawrence slowly poked his head out, the old man was pointing to the fort atop the hill as he spoke.

"At least let me treat you to a meal for your journey ahead, young man. Also, I have a favor to ask you."

It was quite a line, coming from someone defending his fortress by bowshot.

He behaved as though he was the master of this fort, but the old man, showing a perfect set of teeth in spite of his age as he smiled, introduced himself in this manner:

"I am called Fried, entrusted with Rumut Fort by the command of Count Zenfel, honored lord of this castle."

Spoken like a king, or someone who thought he was one in his own mind, but as Fried finished speaking, he looked up at the fort, his face suddenly breaking into an embarrassed-looking smile.

"Having said so, it's been quite a while since I shot an arrow at someone. I'm thankful I didn't hit you."

And as he made a chuckle, he walked up the hill.

For a while, Lawrence stayed where he was, watching Fried's backside from under his horse, his face a mix of a bit of surprise and bewilderment. He had heard of a Count Zenfel. He was famous in this region for his trivial pursuits, though one would no doubt only hear such talk about the ruler from travelers on the side of the road.

After all, it had been over a decade since that ruler had governed these lands.

What was Fried doing in a fort that no longer had a lord?

Bandits were fond of setting up shop in forts abandoned by soldiers, but was it really that?

Furthermore, he had no sense the man was going to plunder his cargo.

Courting unprofitable danger would make him a poor merchant, but lack of curiosity would make him an even poorer one.

After thinking it over for a while, Lawrence finally crawled

out from under his horse, picked up the arrows Fried had left on the ground, and tossed them on top of the roof rack, and gripping the reins, he followed after Fried.

The road winding its way to the fort was in good repair, with tapered stakes all over the place embedded into the slope at an angle. They looked like defenses one would put up against an army about to invade at any moment, yet it all seemed to be lacking somehow.

It was only when they entered through the open stone gateway that he realized that somehow it was far too quiet.

"...Goodness, it's hard getting up the hill at my age."

As the wagon entered the courtyard, Fried spoke while slapping his hip with his bow.

Inside the finely set stone walls, life on the inside of the fort was just as finely maintained.

There was a cattle pen, a vegetable garden, and a stable, plus a graveyard and a small chapel, with flowers blooming all around.

It was immediately clear that the second floor of the building was kept in impressive repair as well; it seemed like someone's face might suddenly poke out from the shadows made by the open windows and doors.

But as Lawrence tethered his horse as Fried told him to, no faces poked out, nor was there even the slightest sign that they might.

He heard pigs, chickens, and even the faint *baa* of a sheep.

To be blunt, it was as quiet as if all the soldiers had turned tail and run.

"Hmm. I thought it might be my imagination, but you really don't look so good."

Fried suddenly spoke like that as he took note of Lawrence's state while walking with him and leading him inside.

There was no point hiding it, so Lawrence made an honest reply.

"Actually, my last proper meal was two nights ago."

"Hmph. That would do it. I must treat you to a feast, then. I have freshly ground pork and…Oh, come to think of it, Paule laid an egg by the ditch just this morning," Fried murmured to himself as he went into the building.

Many people spoke to themselves as the years advanced, but if Lawrence's assessment was correct, Fried was likely doing it out of having lived on his own for too long.

Thinking such thoughts, Lawrence followed along, entering a neat and tidy galley.

"Over here."

They passed by a cooking stove that still had red embers in it, arriving at the middle of the room.

There stood a well-used table and chair.

As Lawrence sat, the chair made an uneasy creak, but there was not a speck of dust on it.

"Yes, yes. Still fine for you to sit in, is it? It seems my skills haven't dulled yet."

Though he spoke like a noble, he apparently did not shy away from manual labor.

In the first place, if he was the lord of the castle, he would not go out of his way to personally take up arms against guests. Moreover, leaving one's fort meant it had no value as a fortress.

"Well, you can rest easy. You and I are the only ones in this fort, after all."

There were tales of women living in small cottages in the middle of the forest.

Whether the woman be witch, devil, or spirit, the possibility she brought good fortune was overwhelmingly low.

But did that go for an old man who greeted visitors with shots from his bow?

Whatever the case, Lawrence certainly could not think of him as some sort of monster.

"Have you always been here by yourself?"

Fried smiled at Lawrence's question.

It seemed the chagrined smile on his face was not just Lawrence's imagination.

"When this place was entrusted to me, I had five bold men under me. I was down one, then another, and finally, only I remained."

"Was that from battle?"

As Lawrence questioned further, Fried turned toward him with a very forthright look.

Right around the moment Lawrence wondered if it was a bad question, Fried raised his face toward the ceiling and let out a hearty laugh.

"Ha-ha-ha! If only! It's been ten years since this was entrusted to me. The only visitors are the ones who get lost!"

Speaking as he laughed loudly, he stopped on a dime and closed his mouth, glaring at Lawrence.

"Do be careful about supper. If you eat too much, you won't be able to leave."

And smiling once more, he immediately walked toward the kitchen.

I'm sure this is not some demon-built gateway to hell, at least, but I have entered a very odd place indeed, murmured Lawrence within his own thoughts.

* * *

It did not take much time before pork added to runny eggs and rough-cut vegetables stir-fried in tallow were all done; the outside was still dyed dark red.

Bread seemed to have been recently baked inside the fort, for the wheat bread he was served was still soft, coming with ale that itself had been brewed in the fort. His mouth was full of herbs he had seen in the vegetable garden outside. In most respects it was a feast indeed.

Furthermore, before Lawrence could worry about it being poisoned, Fried himself toasted him in good cheer, displaying a healthy appetite one would not expect from someone his age.

"Aye. It's indeed tastier than when you're by yourself. Oh, don't hold back. You're young! Eat up! You've barely touched your ale."

He was hungry, of course.

Once he first stretched out his hand, he wolfed down everything in no time, to the point Fried's eyes went wide.

"My, my, you certainly ate that," Fried remarked while putting toothpicks whittled from a branch with a small knife through scraps of meat and bread. Indeed, though he spoke as if he was a nobleman, he looked like an old man in a village happily heading out to his fields and certainly nothing like a noble or knight at all.

In the middle of their meal, Fried asked Lawrence some very probing questions, such as "Where did you come from?" "What are you trading?" "Where were you born?" and "Do you have a wife?" As Lawrence had to answer such questions or do without such a delicious meal, he had no time to ask questions of his own at all.

"That was truly a splendid feast. No doubt I'd have needed a gold coin to eat like that at a traveler's inn."

He spoke very merchant-like words of thanks.

"I see, I see. Ha-ha-ha."

Fried, his face red from drinking ale, made an amiable laugh and nodded along.

"The wheat bread was splendid. The pork was of exceptional quality. But there's no land here to grow wheat, and you can't have enough feed for pigs and sheep on your own. What do you do about it all?"

Fried kept the smile on his face as he looked over some bread that had absorbed a lot of grease while being used in lieu of a plate.

There was a smile on his face, but Lawrence knew well the look of someone in thought.

In general, he found that if one was in a normal conversation with an elderly person, even if they were reluctant, they would speak even of troubles and conflicts of the past if a person insisted on asking.

"And...it has been several years since Count Zenfel..."

"Aye."

Fried promptly made his decision.

As he nodded, he took hold of the bread acting as a plate, and as if ripping the caution in his heart, he tore it into four large, roughly similar pieces.

"It's been...six years, perhaps, since the last letter came? It came from a knight calling himself the count's nephew. Apparently the count was campaigning in distant lands, fell ill, and passed away. What a shame to lose him."

So it was largely as Lawrence had remembered.

"The letter contained a will by the count, stating that he was entrusting this fort to me, to defend well this dominion. It also said the Duller Monastery would no doubt send whatever supplies I might lack. There are many who claim that the count was as upbeat as a poet singing a song, but he was very reliable in such matters."

He had probably made donations there when it was harvest time in the territory.

So this was the reason Fried was living alone in a fort on a hill in the middle of a barren prairie.

"I left a village withering away to begin with. Over twenty years ago, I was a would-be mercenary while the fever of a great war laid waste to the world. I gained a fief from the count during that time. He truly was a fine man to serve."

"They say...it is only in a time of war that one can dream of going from a shoemaker to a shepherd, yes?"

As Lawrence spoke while getting further along with his ale, Fried made an "Ohh" with a suitable expression, nodding in satisfaction.

"Yes. It was an age when princes strove to gain lands by force of arms, however barren they might be."

Like an elder, Fried spoke of the past with nostalgia and some measure of pride.

But Lawrence knew. In truth, war took place in but limited regions, though based on the all-too-heroic tales that were topics of conversations in this town and that, one would think the entire world had been plunged in mayhem.

Of course, Lawrence kept his peace, not wanting to pour cold water upon the matter, but Fried gazed at him with amusement as Lawrence casually brought more ale to his lips.

"Ha-ha. You are quite reserved for one so young, not telling me I'm an ignorant old man."

Surprised at those words, Lawrence made a pained smile.

Even in a place like this, Fried was well aware of the goings-on in the world.

"It's fairly often that far-off disputes are taken for stories of conflicts in nearby lands by mistake at some point. The sparks of war and chaos fly out of the mouths of men. Neither those who live in towns nor those who till the soil in villages travel outside them very often. Furthermore, travelers like you don't pour cold water on the tales of villagers, either. Before long, people get the notion that war is a whirlwind spanning the entire world."

Lawrence wondered if it was a magnanimous era.

Many real conflicts erupted over mere rumor; in many cases, both armies stuck their noses into something in the name of justice, with different ideas about how that was to be defined.

The stories left behind seemed like bad jokes.

"Because things are like that, I was as surprised as a hen when I heard the tale at a tavern...that Count Zenfel, known not only in his own lands but outside them, had declared he was building a fort here."

As Fried spoke, he tossed broken pieces of bread out through the window.

"Stöckengurt!"

And as shouted outside the window like so, Lawrence heard a sound like hooves; the whine that followed established that it was that which bore the exaggerated name of Stöckengurt.

Apparently it was a pig.

"But building this fort did give plenty of people work to do.

Count Zenfel was a very generous man. Thus, the fort was completed, but..."

"So no enemies came, then?"

As if Lawrence's words had awoken Fried from a dream he had not wanted to wake from, he slowly nodded.

"I have no recollection of any in the last ten-odd years. I've aided many lost souls, and once some bandits came down from the mountains looking for this place, or at least I heard rumors to that effect. In the end, there has not been a single battle."

It was pointless to invade a barren land with nothing but dry, open prairie, after all. There was no value in defending such land. The fort could not support itself if besieged and would be forced to surrender in a very short time.

A worthless place to attack and completely unsuited to defense.

So that was why an abandoned fort like this had not fallen even once in spite of the passage of over a decade.

"In the first place, I never heard one word about anyone invading this region after the count passed away. I suppose other groups didn't want the place because it's too barren. It's like a teaching of the Church, is it not? Blessed are the meek."

Aided by his ale, Fried's laugh was tinged with a smidgen of anger.

He had lived in this fort for ten and more years.

Perhaps he regretted that he had not had a single battle in that time.

"But it looks like the privileges granted to the count will run out next summer. A letter to that effect practically just arrived."

"Oh?"

Fried stood up at the same time as Lawrence's surprised reaction.

"Because of that, I am, as I said, quite glad I did not hit you with my arrow. You're a traveling merchant, yes?"

When Fried tossed yet another piece of bread out the window, it was a chicken that cried out this time. Perhaps this was the Paule that had just laid an egg at the channel.

For a quiet fort, it had certainly become rather noisy.

"There is something I wish to ask of you."

"That's…Yes, of course, if it's within my power."

Even though he had only recently begun traveling on a proper trade route, he was still very hungry for new business opportunities. Even a fort with its lord having long passed away, with his privileges soon due to expire, it had to have stores of some kind. He would be very grateful if he could make a good profit from it.

As Lawrence balanced his debt to the man who had aided him and his own greed on the scales in his mind, the elderly man employed in defense of the fort had a smile on his face, looking somehow relieved as he spoke.

"I'd like you to help me liquidate this fort."

Lawrence raised his face, realizing then that he had an unguarded look that was entirely pathetic for a merchant.

"I want to go on a journey. So, I want to convert everything here into money."

"I don't…mind, but…"

"I have served here for ten-odd years. I deserve that much of a fitting farewell. I have faithfully defended this land, after all."

Only the last line sounded like the joke of a man who was drunk.

"Well, go ahead and enjoy a good night's sleep. It's been so long since I had a guest. You'll be amazed at how well you sleep on a straw bed that isn't squished down!"

Fried spoke in the exaggerated manner of a knight on the field of battle, following up with a great, hearty laugh.

Among human-built structures, forts were said to be places of simplicity and elegance second only to churches. Fried walked down a set of stone stairs within the fort, talking along the way.

Building a fort on top of a hill required a hill road, and these invariably spiraled clockwise around the hill going up. Such planning allowed for the transit of cargo up even steep hills, and should enemies ride up on horseback, it forced them to continually expose their right flanks to the fort. Since ordinarily, knights carried weapons in their right hand and shields in their left, this made them easier to attack from the fort.

Besides allowing one to see the condition of the enemy, the holes in the stone wall protecting the fort were harmonized with a solar calendar so that people under siege could determine the time of year.

It was set so that one could tell what month it was by the height of the hole the sun came through at noon.

Also, channels had been dug in various places around the fort to gather rainwater that splashed off the stone walls, making it run close to the vegetable garden. Jugs were placed thereafter so that the water did not go to waste; even the excess was blocked by stone slabs embedded in the ground, allowing the water to be pumped out later like from a well. What made the fort even finer was that when smoke was permitted to leave

the kitchen, it was piped out to distribute warmth throughout the fort.

"It's quite a job for one man to maintain all this; in particular, dealing well with broken stones."

That was how Fried put it, but Lawrence felt that if he had been here by himself, maintaining a stone fort like this over the course of several years would be little short of a miracle.

The treasure room he was guided to after breakfast was, of course, not despoiled by enemy actions, but rather had been maintained in a tidy state, prevailing against the forces of humidity and mold.

"Well, more than anything of monetary value, this was placed here for when Count Zenfel might visit. To me, it's a treasure I can't put a value on, but what about you? Surely there is something here you can convert into money?"

Illuminated by the light of a candle were pavilion tents for use by persons of high status when traveling, banners, and a number of antique utensils. Certainly, the tents and banners seemed to have been used as bedding, but since there was no mold growing on them, they surely would have a fair amount of value. The utensils were not actual, magnificent silver, but rather all tin and steel. Of course, they were worth at least as much as the value of the melted-down metal. There was also a parchment upon which was written the rights to the fort and an exception from taxation, but this was a fort ignored by bandits for over a decade. Anyone would understand that the privileges on such a certificate were worthless, but if the words were erased, it could be sold off as a blank parchment. He could probably dig out something on the level of a book of tales of chivalry.

As Lawrence took note of everything in his head, he took his own wages into consideration as he reported to Fried about one item after another.

Fried marked a wax-varnished wooden table with a dagger to keep count.

"Mmm. For things to turn out like this..."

As he recorded the final numbers, Fried seemed a bit relieved as he spoke.

"The tents and books will go for quite a bit. It might make enough of a dowry that you could get into a monastery."

Afterward, he could live out his days peacefully in prayer and contemplation.

Fried roared with laughter at Lawrence's words.

"Ha-ha-ha. I've spent quite long enough living in a place like this, staring at nothing but the sky and flat plains.

"I've no intention of spending my money like that."

Speaking like a young man, Fried took in a deep breath and made a sigh.

"I left my village to win land of my own by the sword. I don't think I could die under a roof now. I am Fried Rittenmayer, part of a knightly order under Count Zenfel."

Even an old soldier had force behind his voice befitting an old soldier.

As Fried's own words seemed to deeply resonate within him, he suddenly looked in Lawrence's direction.

"I now remember that I am a knight. I forgot to take into account the most important thing."

"The most important thing?"

As Lawrence bounced the question back, Fried made no response; rather, he placed the dagger he had left on the table

back on his hip and walked to one corner of the not particularly large treasure room.

And withdrawing a box from the tents and banners the count had granted him, he peeled off the crimson fabric beneath it all at once. Lawrence had assumed it was a protrusion from when the underground chamber had been constructed, but beneath that fabric appeared a large wooden crate large enough to fit an adult person inside.

As Lawrence wondered, *I wonder what could be inside*, his question was immediately answered.

When Fried opened the crate's lid, the candlelight illuminated what looked like the silhouette of a man on his knees. It was a suit of armor from a bygone era, complete with helmet and greaves.

"This."

With that, Fried picked up the helmet, his eyes narrowing in a nostalgic look as he rubbed somewhat dented portions of it.

Perhaps, in times long past, it had gone together with Fried onto the field of battle, saving his life.

"Could you trade this for money? It might be hard to take with you due to the weight, but still."

As Fried spoke those words, he tossed the helmet in Lawrence's direction.

Having been well oiled, it had dulled somewhat, but was not rusted whatsoever. A little polish and it would once more be ready to take onto the battlefield at any moment.

But when Lawrence looked at Fried after a price came to mind in his head, Fried made an embarrassed-looking smile.

"The armor that saved my life in my younger days has to be worth something."

Lawrence had heard that when a young man leaves his home with dreams of glory, whether he wears a suit of armor or not determines if he is knight or bandit.

Like a king's cloak, simply wearing something of such high value established someone's status.

However, was it really all right to sell something like this?

With such thoughts in mind, Lawrence could not find proper words with which to reply.

"...I think it's...probably worth as much as everything else here put together...but..."

"Mm. I see, I see. If it's worth more than banners and tents for looking heroic on the field of battle, I suppose I'd look like quite a person wearing a suit like this, then."

Certainly that might be so if considering only the monetary value, but his tone made it clear he did not truly think that way. Compared to everyone risking their lives under the magnificent, embroidered crimson banner they had sworn fealty to, it was true that this dulled suit of armor bore only a tiny fraction of its former value.

It bore only the value of what was left behind with the passage of time.

He was well aware of the awful truth that things like prestige and might were fleeting things indeed.

"Fwa-ha-ha. In the old days I'd never have thought of selling my suit of armor. Yet now it is not I choking on his words in the face of it, but a traveling merchant. How amusing!"

Lawrence, his back slapped by Fried, was a tad flustered.

Perhaps it was a trick of the candlelight, but it looked to him like Fried was putting out an excessive amount of bravado.

"...To be honest, I think you have enough for traveling expenses

even without selling it. Besides, all you'd need to maintain this fort is enough to pay for a mason and a gardener."

"No, it's quite fine. The count granted me knighthood for the purpose of defending this fort. If I am to leave, I shall require the armor no more."

In business, whether in towns or villages, the most difficult people to deal with were stubborn old men. Even if they looked soft, they never deviated from their pet theories. Lawrence was sensing that impression from Fried, but what made him give up on convincing him otherwise was seeing the lonely look on Fried's face from the side.

He really did not want to sell it.

However, enveloped by the accumulated memories of an old man, the suit of armor was too great a burden to bear.

How he felt was plain to see.

"Well, let's go up and have a bit of a drink. If I'm going to leave, there's some wine I want to open up first."

Lawrence told Fried in a teasing tone that his having a drink before it was even noon showed he was still as spry as he was in his younger days.

Putting the helmet back and closing the wooden box, Lawrence and Fried left the treasure room and went back up the stairs.

"I joined in a number of large battles, too. It was a war that will be remembered for a thousand years in the annals of scribes. I lost count of how many times arrows struck my helmet. When an enemy's ax bounced off my armor, the sparks thrown up made my eyes dizzy. When I was waiting to have my armor fixed one time, the blacksmith told me it was only by the grace of God that it hadn't been ripped apart."

The white wine Fried brought out of the cellar was slightly hazy from sediment as he poured it into glasses. Completely unlike low-quality wine that had ginger added to it to cover up the taste of strained grape lees, being able to see the lees in the glass after one was finished was a mark of high-quality wine Lawrence had heard of, but never before seen.

This was absolutely not something one drank while sitting on the porch, teasing the pig while your shoes turned fluffy from the chicken pecking at them.

Fried's face broke into a smile at Lawrence's hesitation to drink.

"Truly, it was the Lord who guided this young man to me who knows the value of things!"

Speaking such words, he made a grandiose toast and emptied his glass in one gulp.

Lawrence had no choice but to drink, then.

It was so good, he wished he could spit it out into a barrel later, package it, and sell it in town.

"I truly wanted to drink this with the count once more, but it cannot be helped."

As he spoke, his laugh and his smiling face struck Lawrence not as that of an old man having lived several times longer than he, but the smiling face of a man the same age—no, younger than he, a teenager still embracing tales of heroism inside him.

Lawrence, his eyes nearly spinning from pouring more of the fine wine into his glass, feared he was drunk as he opened his mouth.

"Where do you intend to go after you leave here?"

Fried looked at Lawrence with upturned eyes at his question,

looking amused as he poured wine into his own cup. Though it was wine of the sort one would drink at dinner among nobles, he greedily poured too much into the glass, leaving it to a sheep passing by to lick up what had been spilled.

"I thought I'd go visit an old friend of mine. I get letters from him from time to time. It'll take me past the monastery that's sent me necessities so nicely."

Most would drink even low-quality beer with more care.

Fried drank down half his glass and bit into a sausage.

"He was a stout man, but my friend's finally at a precarious age. It's probably my last chance to talk about old times. Also, I want to see how a town I once defended is doing now; maybe go to the church in a town I sacked long ago and atone for my sins. Even I want to go to heaven, you see."

Making a leer, it was quite charming how he made one think he was truly accustomed to the field of battle in old times. Lawrence somehow regretted that it was doubtful he would be anything like Fried when he advanced in years.

"And I thought it'd be good to live on the road like you traveling merchants, finally collapsing on some warm patch of grass somewhere for my final breaths."

Fried steered the conversation over.

"Ah, is that so..."

"You've probably had the experience. Your belly empty, lying flat on a patch of grass on a clear day thinking you might die, staring up at the sky...How strangely refreshing it is."

Fried looked up at the sky as he spoke such words.

Hearing them, Lawrence put some wine in his mouth, as if sulking a little.

For ever since setting off on his own as a merchant, he had had his eyes glued to the ground, searching for any money that might have fallen. When hungry, he had imagined boiling leather to eat or had even looked intently upon the muscular rump of his horse.

He had not been born with the manliness to stare up at the sky, arms wide, resigned to death. He could not even imagine it.

Regretting that fact, Lawrence faced forward.

"I think, I'd like to die like that if I could. But really..."

After, Lawrence felt like Fried muttered something, but he could not catch what it was.

When he prompted back, Fried had not seemed to have said anything to begin with, for he had interrupted his mumbled words by swallowing down more wine.

"What does a knight who's shown a merchant his treasure room have left to hide?"

That line seemed especially effective when used on an especially chivalrous knight.

Fried slapped his own forehead and made a hearty laugh; still sharp, he tossed a sandwich over to Stöckengurt as the pig searched for any openings.

"Ah, 'tis exactly as you say. Why, as I said all that, I surprised myself that I'm finally at the age to think that way."

As Stöckengurt drew near, wondering what else there might be, Fried fended off its snout and pushed it toward a plate left on the porch as he spoke.

"In the first place, lying with my back against the grass staring up at the sky was an experience from my first sortie."

Lawrence could not even imagine how long ago that had been, but Fried spoke like it was yesterday.

"I was wearing a heavy suit of armor, on an unfamiliar horse, all full of myself. It was right after I encountered the enemy and traded two or three blows of the lance. I thought I'd taken down my foe, but when I came to, I was spread out on the ground, staring at the sky. The suit was extremely heavy; tough as it was, once you fell, you couldn't get back up on your own. All I could do was wait for my comrades to rescue me or be skewered."

Lawrence was in danger of laughing as he imagined a knight like a turtle on its back.

"Of course, I was prepared to die. I hadn't even heard the sound of the impact from the fall; the only thing before my eyes was the broad, clear sky of early spring. Even though 'twas the middle of a battle, I wondered if that was heaven."

And lastly, Fried related in a low voice, "When I thought I'd felled my foe, I got so excited I fell off my horse."

Even without wearing a heavy suit of armor, it was not difficult to get killed falling from the back of a tall horse.

That he escaped with only a concussion, and had not been impaled like a fish by someone's lance, surely meant that God's grace had been with him.

However, the only words Fried did not continue were those he had begun with, "But really..."

As if realizing he was trying to pull the wool over his own eyes as well, Fried stubbornly scratched his nose and drank his wine as he watched Stöckengurt and Paule scramble for a piece of bread.

By the time he finally opened his mouth, he was on his third glass of wine.

"I have a favor to ask."

Having spent this much time with him, Lawrence could

form a good idea of what he might want, as this was Fried, who had made such a lonely face in front of the armor back in the treasure room.

"Yes." Lawrence could not hide the smile on his face as he replied.

Fried's cheeks may have been red as he looked at Lawrence, but his eyes were resolute.

"Would you face me in my final battle?"

He wanted to remember old times once more before departing on his journey.

To Lawrence, entirely aware that he had a long way to go before becoming a merchant who could turn anything and everything into money without a smidgen of compassion, it was a heartwarming request.

"I am at your service."

Fried stood straight up, looking at the radiant sun.

In spite of the armor being in fair condition as a whole, it was unsurprising that the straps and leather portions had rotted with mold growing on them and had to be replaced.

Happily, Fried had fingers as skilled as any craftsman; he made straps out of leather in no time at all, and repairs proceeded apace.

During that time, Lawrence drenched linen in oil and used it to polish the helmet, armor, and gauntlets.

There were blade marks and dents all over the place. In particular, the helmet bore dents that one would think must have been instantly lethal, helmet or no.

Fried himself said with a hearty laugh, "It's strange, why didn't I die from all that?"

That often seemed to be the case for those who survived in this world.

When one died, it might be from a sharpened stick thrust into them by a child in some village.

"Let's see, how about this?"

It was well past noon when the binding of the last leather straps was complete.

As the sheep and Stöckengurt ate grass side by side in the barn in neighborly fashion, he could hear Paule making vivid calls from the back side of the fort from time to time.

The suit of armor, marks from battles past engraved in it while simultaneously polished to a sparkle, looked fine enough that even Lawrence, who walked the path of a merchant, got a little worked up inside.

How could you sell something like this?

It was enough to make him think even that.

"I'm not sure I can wear it, but..."

That was what Fried said as he and Lawrence gazed upon the suit together, but it was very obvious his voice rang false.

He wanted to wear it, so there was no avoiding it, but he was no doubt a little embarrassed at doing it in front of Lawrence.

"Let's see, now comes the weapons. There were swords and lances in the treasure room so I'll get some. What would be best?"

As Lawrence asked, Fried thought it over a bit before replying.

"Bring one sword and one lance, then."

"One of each?"

"Aye. I'll take the sword. Would you take up the lance?"

He had only heard of young knights with robust physiques

swinging swords on horseback while wearing heavy suits of armor, for it was far more sensible to use the lance on horseback in most cases, charging while bracing it.

But Lawrence went to the treasure room and carried back a sword and lance just as he was told.

As he entered the courtyard, wondering if these were fit even for mock combat without being touched up, there was a single knight of small stature before him.

What sent Lawrence into shock was not so much that Fried had put on the heavy suit of armor by himself—shocking as that was—but rather what he looked like.

The small-built Fried's upper body looked very fine with the suit of armor over it, but what he straddled was not a tall horse, but rather a sheep, calmly eating grass all the while.

"Behold my beloved ram, Edward the Second!"

Edward the Second made a "baa" with an annoyed look.

Likely, Fried himself grasped that his body was at an age where it could support neither the endurance nor the skill for riding on horseback.

But riding a sheep, let alone in that outfit, was all too comical.

As Lawrence laughed, unable to help himself, Fried let out a hearty laugh as well, saying in a loud voice, "Give me my sword!"

"I am Fried Rittenmayer under the Scarlet Eagle of Count Zenfel!"

Gripping the sword in his right hand, Fried touched the hilt against himself around his chest, holding the sword's blade up as if about to touch it to his forehead as he made a mighty shout that filled the fort.

As he made circular motions with his sword without a hint of hesitation, even as he was clad in a heavy suit of armor, it

seemed his body had not forgotten how to handle a heavy sword even now.

"Raise your lance, young man!"

And then, Fried shouted.

In a hurry, Lawrence awkwardly raised the head of the unwieldy lance.

The next moment, Fried seemed to smack Edward's rump with his left hand.

As Edward raised a cry that Lawrence thought was more like a shriek, he ran forward like a surging wave.

Lawrence stood still in surprise; as Fried passed by his flank, he deftly struck the shaft of the lance with his sword.

"What's wrong, young man? Losing your nerve?"

Fried grabbed the base of the confused Edward's neck, overbearingly steering him in Lawrence's direction.

A gentlemanly old knight straddling a fluffy ram; yet he looked good enough to make one laugh.

"My sword versus your lance. Let us make clear here and now who the goddess of victory favors this day!"

Edward ran as if trying to escape the baggage on his back.

But he was just a sheep.

His hooves suddenly slowed to run rather ponderously in Lawrence's direction.

Fried raised his sword high overhead, staring straight at Lawrence's eyes all the while.

Even worked up like this, he was not brought to tears from nostalgia; he had a gentle look on his face.

Lawrence thrust the lance toward his wide-open torso. Fried swept it away, disposing of it and transferring to an offensive stance with the grace of a far younger man. Suddenly,



Edward's patience seemed to snap; he lowered his head and charged with all his might.

Fried, his balance thrown off from the sudden acceleration, lurched backward due to the weight of his armor and sword. The tip of Lawrence's thrusted lance struck his head; with light resistance, it broke from the base on up.

Fried collapsed straight behind, both arms wide as he fell from Edward's back.

It was all over in an instant.

The great crashing sound woke Lawrence from his reverie; he hastily cast aside the lance's shaft and rushed to Fried's side.

"Mr. Fried!"

As Lawrence ran over, Fried was staring straight at the sky.

What surprised him was that Fried was still gripping his sword.

That he was not getting up was likely due partly to the impact he had taken to his back, but just like in the story, he probably could not get up on his own power.

As Fried looked at the sky, he spoke in a dramatic voice.

"H-has heaven finally forsaken me…?"

Fried's gaze slowly shifted to look at him.

"But if there is compassion in you…"

And with his left hand, Fried drew from his hip the dagger he had used previously.

"…would you deliver the final blow?"

This dagger was a little different than the ones traveling merchants like Lawrence employed for their daily meals, being more martial.

The dagger was sharpened along some parts; turning the crest on the hilt to him was likely an action similar to how

merchants exchanged daggers when making formal written contracts.

As a noble knight, he was obligated to be noble even in defeat.

With his entire body covered in armor, slicing his neck off with a sword or impaling his chest with a lance were not realistic outcomes. Using a dagger to thrust through the gap between helmet and armor was the most logical option.

From the gravity in Fried's eyes, it did not look like he was joking.

Bewildered, Lawrence yielded to superior force of will and accepted the dagger.

And when he beheld the blade, longer and thicker than that of an everyday tool, he swallowed.

Was this really what Fried wanted? Could it be he really intended for Lawrence's hand to send him on an eternal journey?

His liege was no more; even bandits ignored him; when the privileges ran out, the people of the monastery would no longer bring necessities in. This was already a fort forgotten by all of the people of the world, home to an aging knight who had exposed his treasure room to a traveling merchant and who had a ram for a steed.

Suicide was considered indecent.

Then why not do it by another's hand?

Lawrence looked down at Fried.

A moment after he gripped the dagger hard to cover up the shaking of his hand...

...he noticed the words etched into the blade.

"God grant me mercy."

His gaze was stolen by those words carved into the blade as if they were pulling him in.

Even if a knight's pride would not tolerate defeat, it did not mean he wished for death. If he could not beg for his life with his tongue, he need only write words to that effect on the dagger meant to finish him.

Perhaps this was a culture born from the gap between honor and one's true feelings.

Exhaling, Lawrence's expression slackened as he slipped the dagger under his belt.

Upon seeing this, the strength in Fried's neck suddenly failed him; with a clang, he looked up at the sky.

His expression was not that of peace of mind, but relief.

"So I have been granted mercy, have I?"

"Yes. By a merchant."

Fried's lips twisted and he made a sigh.

"Then I should call myself a knight no longer. 'Twas a good, stirring fight."

And so, the old soldier Fried finished his preparations to leave the fort.

The rain had already stopped at some point as he finished the story.

Holo was in Lawrence's arms, resting against him and not moving in the slightest as he embraced her from behind. The sweet scent of Holo's chestnut hair rode the wind along with the wetness of the just-lifted rain, tickling Lawrence's nose.

Maybe she fell asleep?

Just as he thought it, Holo's body made a small burst of motion inside his arms.

She seemed like she was going to sneeze as he noticed the bonfire had grown much smaller.

"...Nn!"

He thought Holo was murmuring something, but she was simply making a large yawn.

Within his arms, Holo stirred and spread herself larger as the wisewolf opened her mouth toward the sky.

After making a yawn worthy of a king of the forest, she lazily half closed her eyes as she crawled to the pile of kindling and reached out with her hand. On cue, the tail that had been between Holo and Lawrence that whole time struck Lawrence's face as if on purpose.

He wondered if her yawn had been a way to cover up tears.

Holo herself had been asked to stay in a field of wheat, and so she had for several centuries, long after the person asking it had passed away and the locals had forgotten.

"So...this place has been deserted ever since?"

Midway, Holo cleared her throat as she spoke, as if she had not raised her voice in quite a while.

"I believe so. On one hand, Mr. Fried did say he had some regrets so would try to find someone he could push the deed and rights to the fort onto, but it doesn't look like that worked out very well."

After all, the two things that kept territorial disputes going were that barren land remained barren forever and fertile land was limited.

Even though this was an iron law of the world, seeing it firsthand did make one feel a bit desolate.

Without any warning, Holo tossed kindling into the bonfire, sending sparks dancing far and wide.

"Perhaps 'tis the way the world flows, so to speak."

Holo spoke in an oddly candid tone as she rose to her feet and looked at the sky.

"There is nothing that does not change. All we can do is appreciate that which is right before our eyes. Something like that?"

If that is what Holo, who had lived for centuries, said, Lawrence, having lived a couple of decades and change, could say no differently.

But Wisewolf Holo of Yoitsu seemed slightly embarrassed to have only come up with that line after several centuries of life.

She turned toward him, made an awkward smile, and said... "I'm hungry."

Lawrence made an exasperated smile as he brought out bread and sausage. Eating at night like this was more of a luxury than breakfast, but being tired from speaking so much, Lawrence was hungry, too.

As he drew his dagger and brought it to the sausage, Lawrence suddenly felt her gaze upon him and brought his face up.

As Holo looked down at him with a malicious smile, she said this:

"And how much mercy shall you grant, I wonder?"

For a moment, he did not catch her meaning, but when his gaze fell to his hands, he immediately understood.

It was Holo the glutton versus Lawrence the diligent, stingy merchant. The thickness of the cut of the sausage was a compromise between their mutual interests.

Holo was demanding mercy in the form of thick sausage; Lawrence was asking for her to be merciful in not eating any more of it.

With the blade still resting on the sausage, Lawrence did not look toward Holo as he opened his mouth.

"Are you telling me to stop being a merchant?"

He positioned the blade for a shallow cut of sausage.

Just as it seemed a little more pressure would tear the thin skin, Holo spoke to him with amusement.

"When that happens, I shall finish you off myself."

Then, as Holo squatted in front of Lawrence, she gently took hold of the blade and moved it into position to make a cut of sausage twice as thick.

Right before his eyes, her large amber eyes bore a mischievous look.

Surely even Fried the knight would have surrendered.

Lawrence put his strength into the hand that held the dagger.

"Ohh, God grant me mercy."

Holo smiled in satisfaction.

A building quickly fell into ruin without human hands to maintain it. Surely a person's smile would soon falter if there was no good food to maintain it. That was especially true for this wisewolf.

Amazed at the excuses he made to himself, Lawrence sliced a thick cut of sausage and offered it to Holo.

Whatever happened, someday the end would come, and they would part.

If that could not be avoided, he at least wanted to keep a smile on her face until that moment came.

"O Lord, grant thy mercy to this foolish traveling merchant."

As Lawrence muttered, the reflection of the moonlight gave the dagger a dull glint.

End



GRAY SMILING FACE AND WOLF

Mr. Lawrence and Miss Holo were arguing again.

The cause was not allotting Miss Holo enough meat in her stew for supper.

For his part, Mr. Lawrence said he was subtracting equal to the dried meat she had snatched and eaten. For her part, Miss Holo said, "You have some nerve, do you have any proof," and so forth.

In fact, Miss Holo really had snatched and eaten the dried meat. During the time Mr. Lawrence had gone into town, checking the state of the place and speaking to people at the inns, I had witnessed with my very own eyes her sitting on the bed, casually eating the dried meat while grooming her tail.

Even so, Mr. Lawrence had no way of knowing that; so when pressed for evidence, he was at a loss for words. I thought if I said I saw the whole thing, the circumstances would have been turned on their head.

I did no such thing, because I thought it might have been some kind of scheme of Miss Holo's.

After all, she was a wolf god known as the wisewolf who had lived centuries.

Miss Holo pressed even harder. "Any proof?"

With an unpleasant look, Mr. Lawrence drew in his chin and said, "None." After glaring at Mr. Lawrence for a while, Miss Holo snorted a "hmph" and turned aside. Afterward, she declared it her natural right and pulled a handful of dried meat out of the pouch.

I had witnessed this kind of back-and-forth many times ever since they allowed me to travel with them.

Though arguments could begin based on a few words and on the slightest of misunderstandings, there were also many cases like this where Miss Holo was clearly at fault. At first, it made me very nervous, but lately I had become quite accustomed to it, so I just turn away from them ever so slightly and think little of it.

This time, too, Mr. Lawrence made a sigh and Miss Holo turned away in annoyance. Perhaps Miss Holo did not recognize what she was doing as bad behavior. Even though I think that if thoughts between you differ, you should just talk things over properly, for some reason, neither of them did.

But even though their gazes were averted so as to not look at the other, I felt like they were closer to each other than before the argument, maybe because they were both leaning forward a bit.

It was a sight I did not see much of in my village.

When in town, there were multiple options for supper, like a tavern or the dining hall of an inn, but Mr. Lawrence wanted to eat in his room at the inn as much as possible.

When eating in the room of an inn, it was usually cooking using ingredients he had procured for low prices that he brought to the dining hall to be cooked. If you asked him, he would say it was cheaper that way. He would also say, even if there was not enough and he asked for extras, he could still keep expenses down that way.

He would add with a strained smile that this was particularly important since he had someone with him who ate and drank her fill.

As if Miss Holo knew why Mr. Lawrence did not go to the dining halls or taverns to eat, she drank her wine as if it was precious. When eating in a room and finished drinking her allotted wine, she never got any more, no matter how much she sulked like a spoiled child. All Mr. Lawrence did was open his waterskin and present it to her without any expression.

When Mr. Lawrence and Miss Holo argued, they did not shout and throw things at each other like I often saw back at the village; they just suddenly stopped talking. They did not meet each other's eyes, behaving like there was no one else there. Back in my village, when people had an argument, it was like both people concerned had started a fire, and as a rule, the neighbors did not approach until it had burned itself out, since valuable things always seemed to get broken.

Instead of doing things like that, even as Mr. Lawrence and Miss Holo gave each other the cold shoulder, they were able to talk to others with smiling faces right away. Judging from their faces, you would think there had been nothing but fun times since getting up that morning.

After that, as if each's existence had been exiled from the other's head, they were able to completely ignore the other

as if it was truly second nature. Even if Mr. Lawrence broke down first during the ignore-the-other contest that followed, calling out to Miss Holo over and over, it was all for nothing if her mood had not improved. Her tone, posture, and eye movements were completely natural as she joked with me and ignored Mr. Lawrence.

At first, how they were both exceptionally adept at making composed smiles even while angry looked a little creepy to me.

Even so, when looking at the big picture, it all looked so childish that I did not really understand either of them.

After we ate, by the time I put into order the utensils we had borrowed from the inn, went to return them to the kitchen, and came back, Mr. Lawrence was coming out to refill a pitcher of water.

I simply could not hold it in anymore and told him about Miss Holo.

Once I did so, Mr. Lawrence made a surprised expression, indeed acting as if there had been no argument whatsoever.

"Mm? Holo did?"

"Yes...Er, I felt that it really wasn't good for me to keep quiet about it..."

The Church teaches us that God sees all our actions, so it is futile to try and hide what we do. However, as we do not possess eyes like those of God, the truth remains hidden from a great many people.

In my village, lies were punished by having one's rump smacked with a supple bow.

It was literally beaten into you that when holed up by snow in the middle of winter, when bears and wolves roamed the

mountains, even the smallest lie or concealed thing could bring about nigh-unimaginable disaster.

I have encountered many lies and concealed things since descending from the mountains, but I still believe such things must be rectified.

All the more so because I had eaten the slice of dried meat that Miss Holo pushed onto me.

"Yeah, I know."

But with a smile, that was what Mr. Lawrence said to me.

"Ah? But Mr. Lawrence, you..."

"Certainly if you insist on my providing proof, I have none, but we're down four pieces of dried meat. Perhaps Holo ate three and you ate the other one?"

As he beat me to it, I brought my fingertip up to my forehead.

Mr. Lawrence, who was well versed in dense passages from scripture, seemed able to recall exactly what he had of everything.

"...I'm sorry."

After speaking, I hung my head.

In my village, if you stole food, they even made you stand naked outside of the house.

But Mr. Lawrence made a wry smile and placed the pitcher in his hand on top of my head.

"Holo made you eat it, didn't she?"

That was exactly what happened, but the fact this was what Mr. Lawrence believed actually made me a little concerned.

"Am I wrong?"

Quickly lowering my upturned eyes, I made a small shake of my head.

"I trust you, and that's why I don't doubt what you said."

When I lifted my head, Mr. Lawrence had a smiling face very typical of him.

"Besides, even Holo must vaguely realize that I count the slices of dry meat."

"Ah?"

Mr. Lawrence removed the pitcher from my head and spoke as he walked.

As I spoke back in surprise, I followed right behind Mr. Lawrence, awaiting his reply.

"It's not as if I thought I was putting her on trial and determining her guilt or innocence. I'm not that hard up for money."

Mr. Lawrence opened the door that led to the courtyard and went outside.

It was a moonlit night, seemingly blotting out the oil lantern in his hand with ease.

"But on a journey, if you let your guard down over and over, that can lead to disaster someday. For example, in a critical situation, you might have to give up on something because you're just a little short on money or something similar.

"You understand, don't you?"

As I nodded, Mr. Lawrence nodded back.

I thought that these were very important words.

But after Mr. Lawrence made a satisfied face at my reaction, he turned gloomy.

"But she's extremely narrow-minded about some things, you see. I have no objection to simple childishness, but she'll probably get hardheaded if I prove impropriety to her face."

I wondered if that was really true for Miss Holo, a wolf so sublime as to be called wisewolf.

Though that was what I thought, Mr. Lawrence sighed and slumped his shoulders and, drawing close to my face, said this:

"If I back her into a corner and say, 'You swiped the food, didn't you?' she'd acknowledge it, yes. And after, when taking the slightest break and offered food, there's no doubt in my mind she'd say, 'Is this not swiping food?' Moreover, she'd go, 'Is it all right to eat this?' or something, and even 'This, my boy, this is a trap,' wouldn't she?"

Mr. Lawrence looked like he dreaded it from the bottom of his heart as he mimicked Miss Holo's manner of speech.

I could not say with confidence, *"No, she would never do that"*; they certainly did seem like things Miss Holo might say.

Overwhelmed by Mr. Lawrence that I was, I found it mysterious that, however great the dread on Mr. Lawrence's face, I did not see a single shred of dislike for Miss Holo upon it.

"That's why I don't need to back her that far into a corner and drive the fact I count all the food in like it's a nail. Holo's no idiot. If I gently point it out, even she'll stop swiping food after a while; a few cross words to me doesn't mean any genuine conflict. Besides..."

Lawrence drew the bucket out of the well and poured cold water into the pitcher.

"It makes it a little harder for her to beg for food and wine when the going gets a little rough, doesn't it?"

I nodded in admiration.

It was definitely so, I thought, for Miss Holo was indeed stubborn about certain things.

"Goodness. She should know exactly what happens when you're not prepared and trouble strikes...She really is quite troublesome."

Holding the pitcher, nearly full to the brim, Mr. Lawrence made a heavy sigh.

"Where would she be if I wasn't the one traveling with her?"

In the corridor, someone was passing through who was apparently a merchant who knew Mr. Lawrence, so I took the pitcher and returned to the room in his place.

When I arrived back, Miss Holo was glugging down her wine as if still holding a grudge as she sat on the bed, grooming her tail.

"Mm. Water?"

"Would you like some?"

As I inquired, Miss Holo nodded. Beginning to drink water apparently meant she was done drinking wine for that day.

Drinking wine alone made you thirsty, but treating it by drinking more wine would not put a stop to that. "Even fools treat thirst with water," she would always say.

Just as I was looking around the room for a small container to open, Miss Holo reached her hand out to me. Then, she took the pitcher, put it to her lips, and began to drink. Even though she drank the water as heartily as any wine, she did not spill even a single drop.

I thought to myself that she was not very drunk today, for I had often seen Mr. Lawrence hurrying to wipe water dripping from the corner of her mouth.

"Phew. 'Tis nothing quite like cold water."

Making a burp that greatly resembled a hiccup, she cackled as she tendered the pitcher.

I took it and put it on top of the table.

It seemed Miss Holo's mood was not terribly foul at present.

"So, what of that fool?"

"Mr. Lawrence, you mean? He seems to be speaking to a merchant he's acquaintances with downstairs..."

Do you want me to call him? I nearly asked, but I stopped myself.

I had learned a thing or two about how Miss Holo operated, too.

"Hmph. 'Tis good if he does not stick his neck into strange schemes again..."

Her eyes fell upon her fluffy tail; seeming to see some hair that was about to shed, she pulled it out with a light tug and blew it away with her breath. Then, she made a great yawn, raising her arms in a stretch that looked like it felt good from where I stood.

"...Ah. So, did you tell him about me, lad?"

As she examined the sandals sitting on a chair, Miss Holo launched one of her usual ambushes.

I could not feign innocence like Mr. Lawrence could.

Taken back by surprise, I looked toward Miss Holo.

"Heh-heh. I am not upset."

There were times you could do naught but trust the smile on Miss Holo's face.

Even now, there were times when I guessed wrong, but I thought today's was genuine.

"Did he say something, then?"

Miss Holo put the tankard with wine in it onto the floor and pushed it into the corner.

Usually, this was a signal she was going right to sleep.

But she crossed her legs and sat on top of the bed, putting her elbows on top of her knees and resting her chin upon her palms with a bored look.

"Er...ah, that's..."

Of course I remembered, since it was only moments before, but if I told her all of it there would probably be another argument.

Since I am quite poor at telling lies, I was as economical with the truth as I could be.

"Well, he said he can't provide any proof, but he does know you ate it..."

After gazing straight at me, scrutinizing every word, Miss Holo went "Hmph!" and turned aside.

"Goodness, he truly is a fool."

Then, she made a large sigh.

"He does not understand in the slightest why I swiped the food."

"...Ah?"

"Mm? Could it be that even you think all I was doing was having a snack?"

Miss Holo's ears were fearsome ears that could pick up *anything.*

I nodded, venturing no excuse, tilting my head a bit as I looked at Miss Holo.

"My word, these males are just..." Miss Holo rocked forward, grimacing as if enduring a headache.

She fell from the bed, but my worry was of course needless; she deftly put a hand to the floor, reached her other hand out to the wine, taking it in her hand as she rose up in one swoop.

"I am certainly aware of his side. 'Tis not good to swipe food and waste it, it might cost us when in a real pinch, and so forth?"

It being exactly as she said, I nodded as if wondering if she was angry with me.

"Of course I understand that. But I do not think 'tis necessary to be so narrow-minded about each and every little thing. I did not steal food that we have but a limited supply. A few slices of dried meat shall hardly be missed."

Miss Holo had a valid point as well, I thought.

Mr. Lawrence's preparedness was important, but to always be that way was stifling.

Even in my village, it was said good hunters must keep their guard up at all times, but when night falls, the good hunters are the hunters who sleep well.

Even the Church teaches that excessive austerity is no virtue.

"I think it a good thing if that fool lightens up a little. When I first met that fool, he was so greedy that he would not overlook even a nail fallen upon the road. He did not even eat properly, focusing everything on making money, neglecting even his own life. If you do such things long enough, your mind shall split and you shall make a terrible mistake."

As Miss Holo finished the last part, she guzzled down some wine.

Though she had a great love of wine, it did not look so tasty when she drank it alone.

"Human life is short. Those who do not enjoy themselves when it is time to do so die with scowls on their faces."

Then she muttered, "Goodness," as she drank the seemingly bitter wine.

I looked at Miss Holo as if I was admiring her.

No, I really was admiring her.

Miss Holo lived a very long time. She had no doubt watched the lives of many souls.

I thought she had likely seen some who prepared for any future

eventuality, yet had not lived long lives as a result. If that was so, they had likely never had the time to use any of what they had piled higher and higher, dying without ever enjoying themselves.

Certainly, Mr. Lawrence always made a pained face at Miss Holo's propensity to eat and drink her fill until she could no longer move. But in the end, he was greatly enjoying having Miss Holo with him. "It can't be helped," "Might as well enjoy it after having come this far," and so on.

Apparently Miss Holo was not behaving like this out of self-indulgence; she truly believed Mr. Lawrence's obstinate aspects ought to be mended.

I reflected upon the fact that I had not noticed this whatsoever.

"Well, if I said this to his face, he'd no doubt think he is the wise one. He'd likely say, no, you're the one who's mistaken. That is why I must very slightly play the fool, loosening him up whether he likes it or not. Yet even though this wisewolf is doing so much for him, truly that fool is..."

As I thought to myself, *I feel like I've heard something like this before*, Miss Holo made a large burp and said this:

"What would happen to that fool if I was not traveling with him?"

Miss Holo was already up when I awoke the next morning.

She had opened the inn's shutters and placed bread crumbs from last night on the windowsill that attracted small birds.

Even though her true form was a huge wolf that seemed like it could swallow a cow whole, and even in her current human form had incredible intensity when angry, she watched the little birds peck at the bread crumbs on the windowsill with her chin on her palms, looking very gentle.

Besides, I knew that Miss Holo truly was very kind. She was considerate to me about all kinds of things; sometimes she even told Mr. Lawrence things in my place that I found very difficult to say.

She was mean to me just as much, but since Miss Holo always seemed to be having fun from the bottom of her heart, she probably did not think it was mean. After all, she did not tease even Mr. Lawrence *all* the time.

As I got up out of bed, I saw that Mr. Lawrence was sound asleep in the adjacent bed. Even though Mr. Lawrence was in the middle of sleep, his forelocks were in perfect order. Miss Holo, with her chin on her palms at the window, most likely knew why they were like that.

"What, 'tis the lad who awoke first?"

As Miss Holo noticed me and said that, she seemed a little sleepy.

Those words seemed to make the little birds pecking at the bread crumbs realize that Miss Holo was right beside them. With shrill cries, they hopped up and flew off.

Miss Holo lazily watched the heartless little birds as they departed; it felt like she was saying "My, my" as she rose from her seat.

"Now then…slap the fool awake and get breakfast, perhaps?"

She cracked her wrists, finally making a sigh and a snort.

Though her face lacked expression, she seemed somehow amused; no doubt she enjoyed waking Mr. Lawrence up.

I pretended not to notice the eager sway of her tail as she drank cold water out of a pitcher.

In short order, Mr. Lawrence was waking up with a start while Miss Holo made a cackling laugh.

* * *

"—nsherned you shay?"

It was a little before noon when Mr. Lawrence entered the room and Miss Holo parroted the words back at him.

Her strange way of speaking was because she still had dried meat in her mouth.

In spite of that, his composure did not waver an inch.

However, perhaps I might say, that is Mr. Lawrence for you. After all, the dried meat Holo was gnawing on was broken out from Miss Holo's personal supply.

When I heard Miss Holo rummaging around and saw her taking out the dried meat and gnawing on it, I exclaimed, "Ah!" but Miss Holo made a conspiratorial laugh and explained it to me.

She seemed to have done it with the intent of Mr. Lawrence seeing that and admonishing her, with her answer to give her great bragging rights.

Miss Holo's tail wiggled all around when Mr. Lawrence failed to fall into her trap.

"Yesterday I ran into an old acquaintance of a merchant in the corridor, and he asked me to help with something."

"Then should you not do it?"

As Miss Holo spoke those words, she returned to her everyday tail grooming.

Since she combed it several times a day, it was a comely tail indeed.

However, Miss Holo was being uncooperative beyond reason, like a princess withdrawing from a conversation.

"You're free, aren't you?"

Immediately one of Miss Holo's sharp ears stood straight up.

It was as if to say, "Aye, try saying that again," but Mr. Lawrence simply slumped his shoulders.

"Um, can I do it?"

I was not doing anything in particular, and since they were both taking such good care of me, I wanted to help where I could.

I did not mind physical labor; it was the simple, boring chores that made you stronger.

"Mm? Ah yes, you'd be plenty of help, Col. Can I count on you?"

"Yes!"

Since I did not have many opportunities to be useful, I leaped up at this one.

As Mr. Lawrence beckoned with his hand, I tossed on my overcoat and hurried to the doorway.

"What will I be doing?"

As I asked, Mr. Lawrence spoke rather casually. "It's merely counting some gold coins. There's a fair amount, but you're strong in math so I'm not at all concerned."

I knew that this was high praise coming from Mr. Lawrence, but such considerate words were ticklish. Before meeting Mr. Lawrence and Miss Holo, I would have wondered if I was being mocked, deceived, or perhaps both.

"I'll do my best!"

"Ha-ha. You'll be fine even without the enthusiasm."

And as Mr. Lawrence was escorting me out of the room, his feet suddenly came to a halt.

"So?" Mr. Lawrence said curtly.

His face seemed somewhat amused.

When I turned around, it was just as Miss Holo, who but a moment before had been gnawing on dried meat, grooming her tail, was pulling her robe out of the luggage.

"I shall go, for you will be lonely without me."

I met Mr. Lawrence's face and made a small smile.

Of course, this was not overlooked by Miss Holo, for in the corridor she stomped on my foot.

In the end, the three of us left the inn, making our way to the inn the merchant concerned was staying at.

Outside, it was very bright and warm.

It was bustling from so many people being out; everyone was full of life in the morning.

Miss Holo was showing great interest in stalls she spotted through the spaces in the crowd; had Mr. Lawrence not been holding her hand, she would probably have gotten lost like a child. If I asked her what in the world she was doing, she would have probably been mean to me again so I held my tongue, but Miss Holo truly seemed to be having fun as usual.

"So what was all this?"

"A merchant I know asked for help tabulating his money."

It was a vaguer explanation than he had given me, but Miss Holo, as if she thought it was fine as it was, went "Hmph," nodded, and scratched the base of her ear through the hood of her robe.

"And why did he ask you to do such a thing?"

"Apparently he's not close to any of the money changers in this town. His deal ended well, but he's unfamiliar with the currencies here, he said. So he asked me to sort out the coins and show him in broad terms how to convert them efficiently; he can't learn without seeing it for himself."

Miss Holo listened to Lawrence's explanation, though it felt unclear whether she was really listening or not. I was not an expert on trade, but I did know it was very complicated to exchange a

mountain of differing varieties of coin. When I was studying in the scholarly city of Aquent, there were people who told silver coins apart by biting them. They told me they had been fooled by counterfeits made from rusting pieces of steel. They added, "You can tell steel by the taste, so you'd better learn it, too."

I told Mr. Lawrence the story, to which he made a great laugh.

"That brings me back. My teacher did that a lot to cheat me out of my allowance."

This shocked me quite a bit, but Mr. Lawrence looked like he had had a great deal of fun.

That master and pupil to deceive each other by such means made me admire what an amazing profession being a merchant was.

However, Miss Holo yawned as she listened to the story, saying this at the end:

"So that is how you became so gutless?"

"I'd rather you said 'watchful.' "

"Ha!"

Actually, I really liked the way Miss Holo laughed when she was mocking someone.

That was because she looked so malicious and yet so very pretty.

Even as Mr. Lawrence drew his head back a little, he surely understood that any rebuttal would dig a deeper hole.

He politely held back his words and walked forward.

He was devoting himself to silence to avoid an argument.

I thought Mr. Lawrence came off very well, too. Miss Holo harshly dubbed him a cowardly fool, though.

"Ahh, ahh, thank you for coming. And you brought such a charming apprentice, too."

It was indeed a portly, middle-aged merchant who greeted them at the inn.

I was unaccustomed to the hat he was wearing; when I asked about it, he indicated it was from a land far to the east. Apparently it was a harsh land that was dry year-round, a place of both extreme heat and extreme cold.

Certainly, the gentleman was very kind, but I felt he would be quite frightening if angered. It was an atmosphere I saw much of in my village.

"This is Holo, who I travel with for a few odd reasons, and Col."

"I am Holo."

"Tote Col."

When Miss Holo and I introduced ourselves, the gentleman went "Mm, mm," as his wrinkled face made a nod.

Perhaps he had grandchildren around our ages.

"Oh, I'm truly sorry for making you come out of your way like this. I've been trading in far-off lands for twenty years, you see. I can't make sense of this mountain of strange coins, and as a result, these money changers want to keep half my coins for commission. You can't slip anything past them."

He spoke resentfully, but I understood very well what he meant, having had my own terrible experiences at the hands of money changers. Only Miss Holo asked Mr. Lawrence, "Was that one at the town back then ill-natured, I wonder?"

Mr. Lawrence thought about it for a while and replied, "That money changer was a real villain."

Most likely, Mr. Lawrence and Miss Holo were speaking of a money changer at a town they had visited before on their journey. I could not even imagine what kind of money changer

it took for Mr. Lawrence, with such a breadth of knowledge about the world, both in front of and behind the curtain, to call him a villain.

But I wondered why Miss Holo looked somehow amused. Perhaps, like a knight, she was more worked up the mightier the foe.

There were many things I still did not understand.

"So, can I ask you to get this done as soon as possible? Actually, there's a money order from a comrade I need to settle by tomorrow. There's too many people who push this job and that onto their elders, I tell you. This is why I hate traveling."

"It just shows how much they trust you. Understood."

"Right this way, then..."

And so, the gentleman showed us to the inn room where he was staying.

"Mm."

"Ooh."

"..."

The moment we entered the room, the three of us were at a loss for words.

In spite of being about the same size as the room where we were staying, it was just overflowing with things: bundles of rolled-up fabric; bundles of furs fastened with ropes; and bulging flaxen sacks with their mouths closed strewn all over the floor, filled with different kinds of beans so far as I could tell. There were other things I did not understand at all, but I picked out a number of crates, making me wonder just what kind of business this man was into; I really could not tell.

But what struck us dumbfounded was most likely not that,

but rather the mass of coins, a mountain, piled atop a large table likely at its limits.

"*Bwa-ha-ha!* How about it. Surprised?"

The gentleman's shoulders shook as he made a droll laugh.

Though he seemed every bit a little boy playing a prank, the proud smile on his face was indeed that of a greedy and exceptionally skilled merchant.

Though Mr. Lawrence, too, had sucked in his breath, when I glanced up at the side of his face, he looked composed as he stared straight at the top of the table, seeming to calculate in his head. In Aquent, there were a great many people who devoted themselves to thinking, but I thought that sometimes, the side of Mr. Lawrence's face looked like those of exceptional people I had seen in that town.

It had been famously said the front of the face can lie, but the side cannot.

Miss Holo mocked and made fun of Mr. Lawrence quite often, but I thought Mr. Lawrence was an excellent merchant himself.

"There's quite a bit of coins all over the place here...and with old ones mixed in, too."

"Yes. That makes it difficult. My traveling companion is a merchant about the same level as I. I had a deal for the guild to send someone to do the accounting, but he was completely useless. I have to think it's our willingness to stick our own necks into danger that makes us into merchants."

When the gentleman smiled, his teeth poked out, with several off-color like a set of mismatched coins.

In the village, it was taught that men became like stone as they advanced in years. Therefore, it was taught, one should age

gracefully so that even if you truly became stone and you were on display forever, you would have nothing to be ashamed of.

Surely, even if this gentleman became stone then and there, he had the look of a merchant whom travelers could only admire.

"Also, this merchandise...You bought up a whole warehouse from some company hard on its luck?"

"Ah?"

I was the only one surprised. When the gazes of everyone else there assembled onto me, I realized that my face was red.

"Hah. Well, something like that. I haven't been in business long enough for this land to trade kings three times over for nothing. I was collecting on favors I'd made here and there and so forth."

I understood from Mr. Lawrence's slumping his shoulders that this was surely not worthy of overwhelming praise.

But the gentleman took it as admiration and looked very proud.

Looking at the two of them, I felt like I was watching two children who had enjoyed pranks who had grown into adults wholly unchanged.

I thought that was something to be quite envious of, but Miss Holo did not seem all that fond of it.

Even at a time like this, she had a bored look as she poked the hilt of a sword in its sheath with the tip of her finger.

"We'll be as much help as we possibly can. But with so much, I'm not quite as confident so...I need a visual reference. Holo, sorry but could you go get the pouch with coins in it from the inn?"

Miss Holo lifted her head from a shield adorned with pretty decorations, looking at Mr. Lawrence, then at me.

She must have thought, *Why not make the lad do something so tiresome like that?*

But.

"Mm. The one you always use to compare by eye?"

Miss Holo asked with a display of humility that astonished me. "That's the one. Sorry, but thanks."

"Mm."

Miss Holo nodded briskly, heading out of the room at a jog.

Though I did not understand whatsoever the circumstances swirling around, I wondered if perhaps the coins were too valuable to be entrusted to me.

That made me a little sad, but it stood to reason.

"Now then, Col."

That was when Mr. Lawrence's voice leaped out.

"This one, this one...and this one; shouldn't be any question for these. Take the same type as these and line them up in piles of ten."

"Right!"

I made my reply and got to work.

As the coins on the table had already been roughly divided into copper, silver, and gold coins, we strove to sort out the valuable gold and silver coins.

Since there were several silver and gold coins that closely resembled one another, plus subtle differences depending on the date of minting, it seemed quite a few coins were mixed up with others. Scales and measuring boxes full of water were methods for rigorous distinction, but it was best to sort by hand as much we could.

Seeming well aware of these circumstances, the gentleman

said, "A lot of money's riding on getting the fine details right." Though this meant Mr. Lawrence was doing so-called assistant's work, he made a pained smile that revealed no special dislike.

I did as Mr. Lawrence had told me, proceeding to divide silver coins alone. Furthermore, since these were different enough that there could be no mistake, my work proceeded fairly smoothly.

For sorting the gold coins, Mr. Lawrence gave instructions to the gentleman, with both doing it together.

When taught something you do not know, you should be cordial and pay proper respect, even to someone younger.

This is what the learned men of Aquent taught, but I thought it very unlikely that they could follow their own precept.

As a result, I had thought that it might not be possible, but in fact, it was possible.

Merchants might be liars, but they are forthright to about the same extent.

"Hmmm. The gold coins are fine like this."

"It seems so. The problem is the silver coins."

The pair of experienced merchants had apparently divided the gold coins up in what seemed no time at all.

As my eyes widened, both merchants came to my side, making small grunts as they sat.

"Ah, you're making good time here. There's no need to rush; accuracy is what's important for this."

"Right, right. Rushing won't make more of them. Though when you don't close your purse quickly, you find yourself a few short!"

With that, the gentleman made a loud laugh.

He seemed in spirits high enough to live another few centuries.

"Now then, you have to watch out for this one and that one. This is counterfeit; that one's from a rival religion."

"Hmph. Today's men in high places do things just like the old ones."

"Well, I suppose so."

The gentleman made an exaggerated slump of his shoulders and a large sigh.

After that, we began to divide silver coins together, but I suddenly realized about Miss Holo. I felt she was a little late coming back.

Even in the middle of a town, there would be cowardly thugs after your things if you let your guard down.

I did not think Miss Holo, of all people, would have her things taken by highwaymen, but nonetheless, I was getting worried.

But Mr. Lawrence did not seem to be paying that much concern. In the end, Miss Holo arrived back a short time later.

"Sorry about that."

As Mr. Lawrence, still sorting out silver coins, displayed his gratitude, Miss Holo curtly nodded.

Somehow, it felt like the back and forth between a master and a dutiful apprentice.

I watched Miss Holo, quiet with her hood pulled down, as if watching something somewhat mysterious.

"All right, line the contents up over there."

"..."

Miss Holo nodded briskly and stepped closer to the table. Mr. Lawrence had indicated where silver coins were in neat

rows in piles of ten. Normally, Miss Holo would probably make a great laugh and send the piles of silver coins crashing down with one swipe of her tail, but of course, she did not do so here.

Instead, she pulled something out of her robe and put it on the table as Mr. Lawrence had asked.

I instantly doubted my own eyes.

For Miss Holo had taken out a very familiar carrying bag—mine.

"Don't mix them up with the others."

Mr. Lawrence said it casually with a small smile. His eyes narrowed as he smiled, like an old man displaying his affection for a beloved granddaughter. Beside Mr. Lawrence and the rest of us, Miss Holo untied the cord of my carrying bag. In addition, my carrying bag, made for carrying over my shoulder, was tied with two cords: one around the mouth of the sack and another tied around the base of the bag forming a large ring.

What Miss Holo had untied just now was the cord of the bottom; she had laid the bag onto the table on its mouth.

Even as I thought there was no way Miss Holo would make a basic mistake like that, I was somewhat concerned and was about to raise my voice.

That was when Mr. Lawrence spoke to me.

"Ah, that silver coin is wrong."

"Ah? Oh."

I had put one with a lily drawn on it where the ones with lilies and moons drawn on them went.

As I hurried to fix that, I confirmed that I had not made any similar mistakes.

"You'll make mistakes if your eyes stray."

Lowering my eyes as the gentleman, sitting across me, admonished me with his gaze, I resumed my work.

I needed to worry about myself, not others. If I failed here, it would only cause trouble for Mr. Lawrence. Furthermore, I was a hundred years too young to be worrying about Miss Holo.

Right after I had that thought...

"Ah, hey, Holo!"

"Mm, uh?"

It was the instant Mr. Lawrence rose from his chair in haste and stretched his hand toward Miss Holo. The carrying bag Miss Holo had untied with her own hands began to move according to the laws of nature.

As Miss Holo slowly drew the cord out, the contents, lightly held up, now had nothing to support them and came crashing down onto the table. And just like when dropping a leather pouch full of water, the contents did not simply fall and crash, but sought an outlet to pour out of.

The carrying bag's mouth had only been lightly tied.

The heavy silver coins inside easily broke through the dam, flying out toward greener pastures.

It was all in the blink of an eye.

When I regained my senses, Miss Holo was absentmindedly holding the now-empty sack as she stood before the spilled contents of the bag.

"Ahh, what are you doing, you fool!" Mr. Lawrence disparaged Miss Holo.

Under the hood, Miss Holo's face drew back and exploded.

I reflexively cowered, but I did not hear Miss Holo yell, "Fool!" Instead, she looked at Mr. Lawrence like a frightened

child and began scooping up the spilled silver coins from the mountain of silver coins piled up on the table.

However, one could not separate iron powder from sand without special implements. The task before Miss Holo was all the harder because several of the coins were the same varieties as those that had been lined up on the table.

As a result, things ended up only becoming a bigger mess. Before she could be yelled at, Mr. Lawrence grabbed Miss Holo's shoulders and pulled her back.

An awkward silence fell over the room.

I forgot to breathe and waited for someone to speak.

The gentleman cleared his throat.

"I'm not upset. In exchange, is it all right if I decide how many silver coins there were? Looks aside, I'm still going strong up here."

The gentleman pointed to his own head as he spoke.

Though a merchant's words were never to be taken at face value, it was true that the gentleman did not appear upset. He had probably counted them while we were piling them up.

Mr. Lawrence, looking like he wanted to say something to Miss Holo, shut his mouth and nodded toward the gentleman.

"Sorry. I can't have you saying I inflated the numbers in the confusion."

"Ha-ha. I'd say the same thing even if there was a written count."

"Is there any proof I ate the dried meat?"

That is what Miss Holo had asked at the inn.

In this world, irrefutable proof rarely existed.

"That's thirty-two Ladeon Diocese silver pieces; fifty-five Mitzfing Cathedral silver pieces; forty-one Archduke Dandren

Enthronement silver pieces; and finally, eighty-five silver *trenni* pieces."

As the gentleman listed them off, he gave Mr. Lawrence a somewhat sleepy look when he reached the last part. "The same as I recall."

As Mr. Lawrence replied, the gentleman made a broad grin before shifting his gaze toward Miss Holo.

"That's how it is. Don't be concerned; just separate that many coins out. If you make a mistake, correct your mistake and you will be forgiven, for the Lord is generous."

The last part was a famous line from scripture.

As Miss Holo nodded, Mr. Lawrence emerged from behind, extending the hand nearest to the table.

Without a word, Mr. Lawrence pointed out the silver coins concerned and assisted with the work. *Clang, ching*—the sounds peculiar to silver coins reverberated, almost as if they were crying.

The gentleman seemed satisfied as he gazed at Miss Holo and Mr. Lawrence's work.

And when he suddenly looked in my direction, his smile grew even stronger as he said this:

"Lad. What did your master tell you earlier?"

I resumed my work in a hurry.

Miss Holo finished sorting out the silver coins that had been jumbled together around the same time I finished sorting out the gentleman's remaining silver coins.

"Good. Splendid."

Looking at the coins neatly piled on top of the table, the gentleman spoke with pride.

"Glory to God."

* * *

Afterward, Mr. Lawrence used reference samples to make a more detailed classification, focusing on those he considered especially troublesome. Mr. Lawrence said that this was all that could be instantly recognized on sight and to please consult a proper money changer with proper scales for an expert opinion on the others.

The gentleman seemed quite satisfied with just this, nodding with a smile on his face.

And as the three of us were preparing to depart from the inn, he handed Mr. Lawrence a small leather pouch.

"You've been a real help."

As Mr. Lawrence's hand accepted the pouch, the gentleman clasped both hands around his with a good-natured smile on his face. "Call if you need anything else," Mr. Lawrence said with a smile; then they parted.

I had been sure that we were going to have dinner together, but it did not feel like that at all. I could not really tell if they got along well or poorly. *Perhaps relationships between merchants just aren't like that*, I thought, committing it to memory.

Besides, there were other things pressing on my mind far more.

The first was: Why did Miss Holo put coins in my carrying bag and bring it over?

The second was: Why in the world did Miss Holo make a blunder even worse than mine?

"Goodness."

As I pondered these things, Mr. Lawrence finally opened his mouth.

For a moment, I was startled, wondering if he was referring

to the words inside my head, but Mr. Lawrence had spoken after opening the pouch from the gentleman and placing the contents atop his open palm.

"That's a well-known miser for you. Made us work like money changers and this is all he pays us."

Mr. Lawrence pinched three coarse silver coins together and held them up to the sun.

Even though he had told me the story of his master swindling his own student, I was shocked nonetheless.

"This won't even cover lunch."

As Mr. Lawrence spoke, I finally recalled that I hadn't *had* lunch.

"Hungry, aren't you? Let's go buy something with our profits."

I thought I had heard wrong, but the next moment, Miss Holo, who had remained silent up to this point, let out a chuckle.

"So, how much did we make?"

Mr. Lawrence did not find Miss Holo's behavior suspicious in the least.

Miss Holo seemed to be toning down her usual voice as she laughed.

What in the world is going on? I wondered, as Miss Holo pushed the carrying bag, packed with silver coins, onto Mr. Lawrence.

"Who knows? I am not a merchant. I do not know the prices of silver coins."

At those words, I thought, *Ah!*

At the time, the gentleman had counted from memory, but I wondered if a few extra had not fallen into the sack in the confusion.

Isn't that plain burglary? The moment after I had that

thought, Miss Holo spun toward me and took my hand, making a proud, grinning smile, with her fangs showing.

"How many coins were you able to swap?"

While Miss Holo stood beside me, grinning all the while, Mr. Lawrence carefully opened the mouth of the carrying sack wide and peered inside as he spoke.

My head was full of question marks. *Swap?*

"About ten of the silver coins with swords on them; I did not replace any with lilies. I replaced around thirty of your beloved silver *trennis*."

"Mm...if that's the case, well, considering the age difference, it comes out to a fair bit."

"Heh-heh. That fool was desperately counting them, was he not? It was as if he had grease in his eyes. I wonder, will you turn into that when you grow old?"

Mr. Lawrence made a disagreeable face at Miss Holo's final words.

Miss Holo made a small cackle before suddenly looking toward me.

"Ah, Col. I had to use your carrying bag. Do not be concerned, your belongings are all in order at the inn."

I nodded at that, but I still had not the faintest clue what was going on here.

They had not stolen silver coins, yet they profited from swapping them alone?

"Good of you, though. At what point did you notice?"

Mr. Lawrence closed the carrying bag and directed his words toward Miss Holo.

"Mmm? 'Tis obvious. 'Twas the moment you returned to the room and spoke to me rather than the lad."

I was completely lost.

Even Mr. Lawrence looked at Miss Holo with a suspicious look now.

"Well, I'll take your word for it."

"Fool. But I must say, you put on quite an act yourself. When Col made that dubious face at the carrying bag, I thought things might get a little rough."

"…!"

That was when Mr. Lawrence had warned me.

"I was surprised, too. I thought you'd pick a gentler method."

"But 'twas perfect, was it not?"

"Very much so. Well, it's a good thing I'm used to giving out that humble, submissive feeling, too."

Miss Holo maintained the smile on her face while baring her fangs, which was quite a dexterous feat.

However, she immediately withdrew her fangs, pulling her head back in apparent happiness.

I was the only one not in on it.

As I stood there like a scarecrow, Mr. Lawrence noticed me and said, "Ahh, sorry, sorry," and explained.

"Holo can tell whether silver is good or bad by sound."

"Huh?"

"She can tell by sound just like we can tell steel and copper by taste. Even if the symbol is the same, the silver purity rate varies heavily according to the year it was minted. It was clear from the start that stingy old man would get people to help him without any proper reward, you see. So, we swapped our bad coins for good coins and took our own reward."

The sound Miss Holo made when scattering the silver coins

about. And then, the sounds the coins made when she hastily sorted the silver coins out again.

"This fool wouldn't ask me to do something troublesome for no reason, you see. There was definitely something behind it. And then there was that mountain of coins. Of course, I understood right away what he had in mind."

At the very least, so far as I was aware, there was no evidence either of them had spoken a single word to plan out this conspiracy. After all, no doubt if they had, I would have heard them, and being a timid person, I could not have calmly gone along with it.

Miss Holo took my hand with her left; she took Mr. Lawrence's hand with her right.

Mr. Lawrence's face had a satisfied smile as well; they really were dancing to the same tune.

"Well, we're not traveling for nothing, are we?"

Miss Holo was looking up at Mr. Lawrence as she spoke. As she did so, Mr. Lawrence looked down at her, somewhat sarcastically curled up the corners of his lips, and inclined his head a little.

It was when I felt somewhat left out by the tight bonds that Mr. Lawrence and Miss Holo shared that Mr. Lawrence said that to me.

"Aye. 'Twas because the lad worked so diligently that the fool let his guard down, after all. Besides, paying attention to one rabbit is one thing; two rabbits is a different matter altogether. Col's hard work making him careless beforehand was what made it possible."

"That's because the apprentice is a reflection of the master. He seemed to think Col was my apprentice, so that must have made him more confident I had nothing up my sleeve."

As they were both very kind people, I thought this was probably more than half being considerate of me.

However, the other half, or even less than half, was praise, something I should gratefully accept.

That made me happy, and I smiled widely at it.

When Miss Holo and Mr. Lawrence saw me like that, the smiles they gave me were much gentler than before.

They were very good people. They were people I could trust, people I could open my heart to. Moreover, they were people considerate to someone like me. If the people in the Church were like this, people would be able to live in my village and the villages nearby with greater relief.

In spite of that thought, I needed to lament about that less and be happy I was able to travel with both of them. Setting my thoughts in order, I picked my pace back up and I, Miss Holo, and Mr. Lawrence walked side by side.

"Now then, time for lunch?"

"Yeah. Let's buy something appropriate around here. I know there's a cheap bakery right around…"

Mr. Lawrence tried pulling Miss Holo's hand down a street, but as if he had made a misstep, Miss Holo stopped walking, with her hand holding Mr. Lawrence back.

"Mmm? There's a restaurant with delicious-looking food over there. Is that not better?"

"That's the one with what, roasted chicken and duck? During the day it may smell delicious, but it's expensive. Bread's plenty."

As Mr. Lawrence tried to walk forward once more, Miss Holo fiercely yanked him back.

"Fool. You go earn money, but you have no intention of using it?"

"No intention whatsoever. If I use up everything I earn, when can I rest easy?"

"Hah! That's quite something from someone who's always sleeping like a foolish, lazy cat. What you earned back there was thanks to me, so use it as I tell you!"

"I'm the one who took the job. Besides, you don't even know how to arrange coins by type. Let's say you earned half. That half probably doesn't even cover all the food you've swiped."

"Y-you're dragging that out again…Really, this fool is just…"

"Don't you think about anything but eating? Think ahead a little more…"

In hushed voices, here in the middle of the street, the back-and-forth started again. Fortunately, the street was incredibly packed, making an even more incredible racket. There were craftsmen arguing with one another and merchants having price disputes all over the place. The people around them gave Mr. Lawrence and Miss Holo slightly odd looks, but immediately lost interest and hurried along their own way.

But as I watched the two of them like this, I slowly had a thought:

This is probably what getting along well *means.*

In the end, as if unable to come to terms, both suddenly looked away from each other; Miss Holo came toward me with incredible force.

Then, she grabbed my hand and walked off.

"Ah, er, and Mr. Lawrence?"

As I asked her, Miss Holo had a sulky look on her face like that of a little girl as she said this:

"That fool can jump off a bridge!"

In the midst of being pulled away by Miss Holo, I looked back at Mr. Lawrence.

Mr. Lawrence looked toward us and, moving his mouth, formed but did not say the words:

You, too!

Still, they looked like they would be making up before supper.

Like telling the quality of coins by their sound, I had a fair grasp of the tone of their words.

I quietly thought about that as we slipped into the bustle of the town.

End



WHITE PATH AND WOLF

He was not sure if he was twelve or thirteen when he apprenticed himself and left the cold village in which he had been born. He had lived as a merchant ever since.

He and his master had spent a long time together as just the two of them, but there were sometimes others who traveled with them.

There were people they would travel two or three days together with before immediately parting ways, only to unexpectedly rendezvous with them a week later; there were others they would travel with for a month or two, living on the road through thick and thin, and as soon as they had learned all there was to know about one another, they parted ways, just like that.

That was normal for those who lived on the road; of course, other rare things happened that one would likely never experience living in a town. A person could meet nobles of high on the road they would be bowing to in the middle of town and enjoy a warm meal together as equals.

For that reason, it was understandable why those who lived in a town all their lives looked at those who lived on the road as strangers. The stigma toward foreigners was especially strong among residents of remote villages who had known everyone around them since birth.

Some people would raise up scythes as tall as men as if driving away bandits. But they were outnumbered by those who welcomed one on friendly terms. In particular, those who occupied high places by villager standards were friendly out of burning curiosity—which was really quite a bother when one got ahold of you.

Sometimes people who had lived on the road for a long time offered those just starting out some amusing tales when staying at the same inn.

At times like these, the storyteller received a warm welcome fit for a king.

"Yes, yes, yes."

That was the reply he received when asking someone in a nearby field if he could have some water from the village while passing through.

The man looked at Lawrence in surprise as if he was a son returning after going off to war without a single word since; suddenly, a broad smile came over him, and his mud-caked hand grabbed hold of Lawrence's own.

The man was fairly advanced in years, but with his face bronzed by the sun, he was like a doll crafted out of mud when he smiled. Furthermore, his eyes had a glittering radiance in them like that of a child.

Though Lawrence was indeed pleased at the welcome, experience had taught him this might turn into trouble.

"Um, water...?"

But his words were lightly brushed off with a smiling face and a "Now, now now."

And with impressive strength, the man pulled Lawrence toward his house.

Later, Lawrence would learn that this was the village headman, but he would be done for once the wine came out.

The man would fiercely ask what drinks Lawrence would recommend and stories of Lawrence's journey; the conversation would no doubt continue until Lawrence's shoulders shook from complete exhaustion.

After hearing such stories, he would no doubt claim he wanted to go on a journey himself to get a feather under his cap.

In his usual travels, Lawrence would drop the name of the lord of the land and proclaim he was a merchant on official business and make his escape, but today he did not. Or perhaps it was better to say, he could not—for his traveling companion, who ought to have waited at the horse-drawn wagon, had at some point turned up at Lawrence's side.

"Here."

With that, his traveling companion gave the village headman's hand a light, chiding slap.

Lawrence was not certain if this was really a rebuke, for after slapping the headman's hand, she had an exceedingly serious look on her face that she usually never showed, grabbing Lawrence's hand on the arm opposite the one the headman was pulling.

It was like an actual mother and a mother-in-law bickering over a child, but on the one hand was a man from a village.

On the other was a girl who looked beautiful on the surface, but Lawrence could only sigh.

His elders had warned him, *"Beware of girls with hoods on their heads."* Indeed, there was a secret under this hood.

If she opened her mouth, pretty white fangs liable to rip one's throat out poked out; her name was Holo.

By happenstance, she had come to travel with Lawrence, but her true form was that of a giant wolf easily able to gobble a man whole.

Then, she said *this*: "This one is mine."

Under her hooded religious habit, he could see her pretty, noble, flaxen-furred tail.

The headman gave Holo's face a long look, but Holo's reddish eyes, like amber-colored jewels, returned a stout look to the headman.

The two hands pulling on Lawrence's arms, the headman's and Holo's, differed in size, smoothness, and every other way.

"Would you give him back?"

Holo tilted her head slightly, looking sad as she spoke.

With that, the headman regained his senses as if a spell on him had been broken.

"Ha! Er, well, pardon me."

He let go of Lawrence's hand in a hurry.

If villagers in the surrounding fields looked over to see what was going on, no doubt it would look like their cheerful, guileless headman had once again done something rude and was being scolded by a traveling nun.

"Thank you."

However, as Holo said those words, she grabbed Lawrence's now-free arm with a covetous look unbecoming of any nun.

Though no man could find this disagreeable, for Holo to do this within sight of others meant she was definitely up to something.

When they had first met, his being unable to tell when she was serious or not made him nervous, but lately it had not been so. He had become able to calmly discern when she was serious, even in the solitude of a room for two at the inn.

Lawrence sighed, as it was quite obvious what Holo had in mind.

"What did you want incidentally? We came thinking we might get some water, but...perhaps he made some mistake?"

It was unclear if she would leave it at that when she pushed up onto her toes and gave Lawrence's head a light slap with a "Here.

"This truly is a helpless soul. Even though I tell him over and over to approach all things with a sincere heart..."

He had no idea where she had picked this up, but somehow she plausibly strung similar words together, speaking them with a clear tone one would normally never hear them spoken with. Though it was no bad thing to be gently scolded with words at his age, Lawrence's spirit grew heavy.

"No, no, not at all. Not at all."

It was the village headman who interjected with great excitement, having finally grasped who was in charge between the two people before him.

With great energy, he humbled himself and explained not to Lawrence, but to Holo.

"Because I live in a village such as this, I was hoping very much I could speak with you."

"Mmm? Speak?"

"Yes, yes. If I may say so, I am the headman of this village, and I bear the duty of broadening the horizons of the people

who live here. Therefore, I was very much hoping to speak with travelers such as yourselves about your experiences in other lands..."

If Holo played her con to the hilt, she would have this village headman use his position and bring them into the house of one of his fellow villagers and satisfy her own curiosity.

Lawrence had never seen such a humble yet shameless headman.

It was plain as day who he normally spoke with. Almost beyond all doubt, they were merchants taking a shortcut, just like Lawrence.

It was easy to tell what sort of people had influenced his choice of words and manner of speech.

"Aye...certainly we are travelers. We have come from the south on our way to the north where all is cold. Of course, our lives are like candles flickering in the storm, and we have been saved not a few times by the grace of a great light."

She spoke like a true believer, throwing in an appropriate wave of her hand.

She was probably recycling stories told by bards to groups of children and bored adults in town. What made Holo frightening was that she was sharp enough to be worthy of her other name, Wisewolf, and furthermore, she feared nothing, which made her able to pull off stunts like this.

"Ohh, ohh, my goodness...In other words, you bear tales of fantastic creatures of legend, vagabonds, heroic knights, and the like?"

"Mmm? Aye, certainly I know several stories like that... Mmm...No, you probably would not believe them..."

"Ohhhhh...!"

Lawrence himself, in spite of striving to be a complete merchant in every way, was hardly unfamiliar with taking advantage of people's ignorance, particularly people living in backwaters like this with limited sources of information, but the sight before his eyes made even him blush.

"Oh, I forget myself. Were you not here to get water?"

As if going out of her way to keep it private, she whispered into Lawrence's ear.

Now that she had gone this far, he had no idea what kind of retribution she would indulge in if he did not play along. If it was business, he had plenty of confidence in his acting ability, but thinking of doing it in any other context gave him stage fright.

Quietly, Lawrence took in a large breath and girded himself.

"...We're still all right, but if I don't do something soon..."

Lawrence thought as hard as he could and forced the words out. As he did so, Holo gave him a sour glare.

Lord have mercy on our souls, Lawrence thought, turning his face away as he spoke.

"We're not running out of just water, but wine, as well..."

That moment, in the direction opposite to where Lawrence turned his face from, he felt a gaze shift to him so hot, he could feel it even in his sleep.

It was the village headman; he looked like a knight whose beloved princess had been taken captive.

"What! You should have said so sooner!"

His voice was so great that Holo's angular, dignified wolf ears, hidden under her hood, threatened to spring right up. It was no doubt a voice honed so that he could give precise instructions to villagers working in large fields. No doubt Holo, of excellent hearing, was surprised by it.

She looked like she was desperately trying to calm herself under her hood.

Seeing Holo like that, and having come this far, Lawrence assumed an expression of surrender. He bypassed Holo and spoke to the village headman.

"Meaning?"

The headman made a smile so great that it almost sent Lawrence flying.

"Come stay at my house! I'll prepare fine wine indeed!"

Holo, who was bad with loud noises, looked like she was desperately enduring the ringing in her ears. She still had a look of suffering on her as she glanced up at Lawrence.

"What a...generous offer..."

And after taking a short, deep breath, she turned back to the village headman, looking like she had been offered the chance of a lifetime.

And so, with her whole heart set on drinking his wine...

"No doubt the blessings of God shall be upon you."

Being something like a god herself, Holo cared little for the God that the Church spoke of.

Even while thinking she was quite a troublesome girl, he wondered if her manner of relentlessly pushing her way to her own objective might be something he should learn for himself.

At any rate, Lawrence and Holo had just traded stories of the road for a drinking party in the village.

In the first place, Lawrence should not have engaged in unnecessary conversation in the middle of the road.

Lawrence had asked a passing stonemason on a pilgrimage about the state of the village to cut down his own travel times.

Since he apparently repaired the stones that made up the

stone bridges of the area's villages, their millstones, and sometimes even went to town to cut cobblestones, Lawrence was able to ask him detailed questions about various things.

He was a good-natured craftsman, so Lawrence thought it was probably kindness at work.

He had been at special pains to sing the praises of one nearby village, which apparently had a beautiful spring, and the wine made there was exceedingly tasty.

But, the craftsman said, the wine made by the principality's commoners was so good the archduke himself could not neglect it, so the technique of producing the wine, and the wine itself, remained fairly well-kept secrets.

He said that once, he had even been called up by the archduke himself for a job, cutting pretty stones to repair a collapsed well, and this treasured wine had been his reward.

At the time, he was deeply moved by an aroma so extravagant, one would not think such a thing existed in this world; a taste so rich, it numbed a person's very temples; and so forth. Holo, to whom food and wine were nine-tenths of the pleasures of the world to be craved, listened to the story, her tail swaying under her robe the whole time.

Moreover, Lawrence's wallet had become lighter of late from allowing Holo to eat the food considered the most famous specialties at one town after another. Perhaps it was like he had been taught as a child: One keeps trouble from stray dogs at bay by never feeding one, no matter how hungry it looks.

But very much like a child who had never been taught, Lawrence had fed Holo delicious food over and over when she made that hungry-looking face. As a result, just like stray dogs emerging from the mountains and forests to cause

people trouble, Holo, with the knowledge of what delicious food tasted like, used various means to cause Lawrence grief.

This was despite his knowing where this led: Once she had tasted good food, she wanted more of the same; then she wanted even more delicious food and more of it.

For that reason, holding Holo in check was essentially impossible.

"Aye. And then, that very moment, he heard the distant howl of a valiant wolf. It was like a cry of victory..."

Trailing off as she spoke, Holo made a sigh full of admiration at the last part.

Everyone was listening so intently that they forgot to drink the wine in their hands.

"The wolf pack plunged down into the valley like an avalanche. In the end, the bandits that had invaded the valley could do nothing against them and fled, all in a jumble. The only ones left were the villagers who lived in the valley."

"A-a valley full of wolves?"

"Even if the bandits were driven off, that's...you know?"

"Y-yeah. Even if the bandits were gone I can't tell which's worse..."

Several villagers argued among one another.

A village in a valley isolated and helpless before a band of heinous bandits, saved by the arrival of a pack of wolves; it sounded too good to be true, yet Lawrence did not think a single person doubted it.

"S-so, what happened in the end...?" One of the flustered villagers asked.

Though men like these were often called villagers ignorant of the world, they simply knew a different set of things than

the humans who lived in towns. Indeed, it was they who were far better informed about the outside world.

They knew all too well that bears and wolves were animals that brought direct harm to men.

They knew that wolves had never been domesticated.

But that was precisely why they hung on every word.

"The villagers in the valley no doubt thought the same thing; one calamity followed by another. No, this could be worse than the bandits, for this was not a foe one could reason with."

Holo seemed quite satisfied when the callous smile that came over her as she spoke made all the villagers tremble.

No doubt these villagers had all endured numerous hardships, such as mercilessly blowing windstorms and hail one could only think of as the anger of God himself.

But just as windstorms and hail seemed to rebuff the prayers of men, those who had seen locusts gnaw on not only the ears of wheat, but also on homes and even men themselves knew in their hearts that it was meaningless to beg for aid beyond that of man, whatever their eyes or mouths might say.

Once one had seen the eerie sight of stricken men with empty eyes, obeying nothing but their own instinct to eat, it was a sight never forgotten.

Wolves existed at the summit of man's mountain of fears.

Everyone held their breath.

Holo slowly took a sip of her wine and spoke.

"But one wolf advanced in front of the line of villagers. It was an old wolf with gray hair mixed in. And the village headman had seen this wolf before."

"It was the wolf he'd helped?!" Someone shouted in his excitement, earning a smack to his head from someone else.

But it was clear this was where it was going and what everyone was waiting for.

A wolf, never to be domesticated by man, saved the village from danger, for he never forgot his debt from long ago.

It was not the moving tale that the villagers sought; it was the possibility itself that such a thing could happen in some far-off land.

"In the end, the villagers offered all the salt-pickled meat they had. But they did not eat the villagers even so. After all, wolves do not eat ears of wheat. And so, the village managed to get through the winter that year."

"Ohh..."

Men, women, and of course children were all lost in the tale.

Anyone who had listened to stories at an inn had a fairly good grasp of which stories were true and which were fabrications. Even so, few thought this story was false.

Holo told seven or eight stories more. Some were stories of things she and Lawrence had been dragged into; others Lawrence had never heard of before.

In villages like this, which seemed to transform every drop of the high-quality spring beside it into wine, Holo was wont to say, *"I have no more stories to tell,"* casually pouring more wine into her tankard all the while.

Therefore, a number of her stories might have been flat-out lies.

"And? Is there more? Other stories like that to tell?"

"No, how about tales of chivalry! There's lots of those all over the place, right?"

"I want to talk about the Church. There's things I want to ask people on a pilgrimage. Is it true that the Holy Mother is at the cathedral in the Belan Mountains?"

It continued like that, one after another.

The village headman, rather than admonishing the villagers as headman for their shamelessness, seemed to be busy lightly engraving the story Holo had told into a roll of tree bark with a finely pared stone.

"Hmmm. But really, I am all out..."

Holo spoke with a laugh as if in mild distress, but of course the villagers would not let her escape so easily.

"Hey, looks like you're running low on wine. Lemme pour some more!"

"Hey, hey, God forgives people for drinking all the time. We don't get these chances very often, so please, tell us more stories like that one!"

Perhaps not so with the food, but the wine was every bit as good as the mason had claimed.

Furthermore, Holo, who normally had at least some regard for Lawrence's wallet, was not bothered in the least by villagers taking her stories as having equal value to their wine; she glugged it down without restraint, becoming even more talkative about this and that.

But even Holo's strength against wine was not infinite; nor was the variety of stories she could tell as great as dandelions in spring were many.

Though Holo hardly needed to be told either of these things, for whatever reason, she did not stand up while inside the ring of villagers around her.

Even so, it felt like it was just about time to end this; also, that standing up might prove difficult.

There probably really was not any more for her to talk about; Lawrence had his doubts she could even taste the wine anymore.

Watching Holo like that as the furthest person in the ring of people, Lawrence was somewhat at a loss as to what to do. Normally, he ought to put an immediate stop to it, saying, *"We'll have a fun time again tomorrow,"* to take the steam out of them. Then, when "tomorrow" came, they just needed to set off before anyone was the wiser.

It might seem a cold and arbitrary way of doing things, but one could hardly be a traveler without doing at least that much.

The problem was if Holo had different ideas, pulling her out of the throng would only backfire. Holo was not the little girl she seemed to be; indeed, she was as pampered and stubborn as any princess.

As he thought about that, his eyes met Holo's as if on cue.

Even if her look didn't quite say, "I want some help here," it was close enough.

Apparently she realized she could not simply escape the ring of people on her own power.

Goodness, thought Lawrence with a sigh, rising up.

"I'm very sorry, but..."

The atmosphere soured the moment Lawrence pushed through the people clustered around Holo.

Of course, he could not help but think, *Damn you for making me play the villain.*

The villagers seemed to be arguing over Holo continuing her stories, but it was the village headman who calmed things down.

Notwithstanding how much he seemed to be a childlike mass of innocence and inquisitiveness, when it was time to do his duty, the headman carried it through.

The villagers seemed disappointed, but as Lawrence, keeping

his mouth shut, embraced Holo, their gazes were like those given after a feast.

One young lady took a tallow candle in hand and led the way for Lawrence and Holo. She guided them to a large barn beside the village headman's house that stored about a year's supply of food for the villagers.

The common barn had been built sturdier than the villagers' own houses, but the villagers thought this perfectly normal.

In the center of the barn, a single bed had been prepared, a bed made of bales of straw tied together with hemp rope, piled up in what seemed to have been a great hurry. Surely whether they thought this was tactful, or simply had nothing else to provide, was something better not asked.

Lawrence gave the girl a smile on his face and a silver piece of middling value as he uttered his thanks.

After accepting the silver coin, the girl reverently opened the door; after, Lawrence could see her jumping for joy as she returned to her cottage.

"So, why didn't you get up before it got to this point?"

As he laid Holo down upon the bed of straw, the moonlight shining through the skylight built for summer use shone right on top of Holo's belly. Thanks to that, he could not see her expression all that well, but he could tell it was an annoyed one.

"Goodness..."

As Lawrence spoke, Holo made a small groan in her throat, probably because it was so very dry from having spoken too much.

"...Water."

Then, what came out was but that single word.

"...Hold on."

Surely it would have been no great sin to say something sarcastic.

However much she might blame it on drinking wine, she had been a complete child to make it a huge ruckus like that.

Mixing in a sigh, Lawrence searched the room with his eyes, but there was no water pitcher to be found. Apparently, so few were the travelers who stayed overnight that the villagers had neglected that detail.

"There's no water pitcher. Hold on a bit, I'll go draw some water."

But just as Lawrence spoke, starting to move away from the bed...

"Me, too..."

With that, she grabbed hold of Lawrence's trousers.

Usually, when Holo was drunk and lay down once, she never rose again till noon the next day, so this was a rare sight.

"I spoke too much...My face is hot. There's a brook near here, yes?"

Certainly, after having been sandwiched by that large a crowd and drinking wine, it was good to at least wash one's face.

Lawrence lent Holo his shoulder as they left the barn.

"Whew..."

As they went outside, Holo sighed, as if finally being able to breathe again.

In the first place, Holo was the type of person who could merrily brush off a request, calling it *troublesome* or something like that.

Yes, she had been passed quite a bit of wine, but she had given the villagers a lavish performance.

"Well, looked like you had fun."

Though Holo sometimes seemed in danger of tripping, she did not seem to be quite that drunk and walked properly on her own two feet.

Or perhaps Holo could walk on her own two feet just fine, but she wanted to pretend she was drunk.

Holo always seemed embarrassed when she had done her best for something, so it was entirely possible she was trying to conceal a blush.

"...Pwah!"

The two went as far as the brook that crossed the quiet village's road; there, Holo washed her face in the cold springwater.

Until the princess finished washing her face and moistening her throat, her servant Lawrence put Holo's hair in order from behind with one hand, supporting Holo's body with the other.

After drinking a fair amount, Holo suddenly had had enough; she lifted her face and pulled her body back up.

Then, Holo used the hand towel she had hung from her waist to wipe off her face, nonchalantly wiping both hands off as well.

There were no words of thanks, but when Holo stood up, she grasped Lawrence's hand.

"Is this not enough?" she might have said, but he wondered if it really meant there was no complaint for her to make.

"What is with this, though?"

"Mm?"

The path extended in a perfectly straight line from the brook to the barn, precisely wide enough for two people walking side by side.

Holo spoke softly as the two of them walked together under the moonlight.

"I did not think they would be that insistent. I wanted to slip out somehow, but..."

Pausing to take a breath, she made an embarrassed-sounding laugh.

"I got scared midway."

Lawrence was a little surprised that Holo had had the same thought.

"People are more frightening. Once wolves and bears' bellies are full, there is nothing to fear from them. But people are not limited by such concerns; when abstract things are concerned, all the more so."

She spoke as if out of pique, but the side of her face looked mildly amused.

It was probably something she thought she, too, should reflect upon.

"It would be nice if you always remembered that..."

"Mmm."

Holo pouted, but she did not move away from Lawrence; to the contrary, she butted her head against his arm.

"But I must wonder."

"Mmm?"

"What did they expect from me?"

Judging from the side of her face, it was not a joke, so Lawrence thought for a while before parroting her words.

"What...you ask?"

"I know they wanted amusing tales. That is not what I mean."

Apparently annoyed, the tone of her voice became prickly.

It seemed the wine had made her a fair bit moodier.

"That is not what I mean...Surely my stories were not amusing enough to listen to them so seriously? Or were they so

fascinating? A number of them were lies, and obvious ones at that, yet even so?"

So she really did mix lies in, he thought with a somewhat strained smile, but he somehow understood what Holo was getting at.

After all, the villagers had truly been desperate.

It was as if they felt it was more important to hear as many stories as was possible than to enjoy them.

There was no mistaking that this had thrown Holo off her stride.

Perhaps the reason she had not gotten up when drunk from her wine and running out of stories to tell was because the desperation of the villagers was so incomprehensible, her legs just would not move.

But the answer Lawrence immediately prepared within himself was a very simple one.

Indeed, it was so simple an answer that Holo might be upset once he told her.

Hence, he thought he should dress it up somehow, but nothing came to mind.

Giving up, he spoke. "To put it bluntly...Because they're villagers."

It must have sounded like the sort of ill-tempered reply one would get from a hermit.

Holo made a pout as she looked up at Lawrence.

Really, he did not mind seeing Holo a little angry and a bit sullen like this.

But the straw bed the friendly villagers had prepared beckoned just beyond.

Since he did not want to sleep on the hard ground, Lawrence spoke.

"This path..."

And he pointed to the path they were currently walking upon.

It was a pretty path that stretched from the brook past several houses, right past the front of the village headman's house, and right in front of the barn.

"It's probably the prettiest path in the village."

Holo looked behind her, then ahead, then finally back at Lawrence.

"What of it?" her skeptical eyes seemed to say.

"Haven't you noticed something since we started walking?"

As Lawrence asked, Holo's face grew even more dubious. Her eyebrows were scowling so much that she really did look angry.

As Lawrence did not think Holo would arrive at the correct answer by herself, he laid it out before she became genuinely angry.

"This path is just wide enough for two adults to walk along it, holding hands."

"...Mm?"

"No doubt it's like this from the brook till it ends."

Since Holo was a little too small to be adult sized and was snuggled up to Lawrence like this, there was a bit of room to spare.

Even so, Holo displayed tentative agreement with Lawrence's words.

"But since it's too narrow for two horse-drawn wagons to pass by each other, the path through the field over there is probably wider."

It was precisely because this was a remote village that a wide

path was needed for transporting bundles of straw, produce, and livestock.

"And yet, this path, connecting most of the houses in the village, is only this wide. There's a reason for that."

"Aye...?"

Though her sourness had vanished, it felt like she might say at any moment, *If this answer is not interesting, you shall regret it.*

But paying little heed, Lawrence made a small smile as he spoke.

"If we walk to the end, you'll see. And, it'll serve as the answer to your own question, too."

"Aye..."

If you put it that way, let us walk.

Making a sigh that seemed to express that, Holo leisurely walked with Lawrence along the path.

As the season was winter, there were no frogs, nor the sounds of birds or insects.

Having been silent this far, one would think it would remain silent the rest of the way.

The only warmth rested between their palms as they walked straight down the simple path.

The village, which Lawrence did not even know the name of, did not reach very far.

They soon arrived at the end of the path.

And when they arrived at that place, Holo squeezed Lawrence's hand just a little harder.

"This is the answer."

As Lawrence spoke, he looked at Holo beside him.

Holo stood silently in place, staring squarely at where the path ended.

"This village begins at the brook, but for other villages it can be a well. Anyway, it begins where there is water, and here is where it ends. You understand why the path is so narrow now, don't you?"

Even though the moon was out, it was nowhere anyone wanted to go to in the middle of the night.

This was the village's graveyard, the final destination at the end of the villagers' lives.

"Wide enough to carry a casket?"

"Yes. The brook is used for baptism, and when you die, you reach the end of this path. If the sun was out, you could see this place straight from the brook. The villagers' lives have no twists or turns. There are no detours. Where they were born and where they shall die were determined long ago. That's why they want to know about the outside world."

The stories being interesting was of secondary importance.

Holo patted a stake of the fence surrounding the graveyard and let out a long, narrow, white breath.

"You see what I mean?"

Holo nodded.

And after she nodded, she made a vexed smile.

"It would have been nice to speak with them more."

It was kindness typical of her, he thought.

"But ah yes..."

Holo lifted her chin and looked over all of the graveyard, which was not all that large, and tilted her head ever so slightly.

"This is the natural order for many people, is it not?"

"I suppose so. If it wasn't, there wouldn't be any business for traveling merchants."

As Lawrence spoke, Holo said, "Quite true," and laughed.

"Well, the world is full of many things. Now I have become wiser about one more."

As Holo spoke with an intentionally comedic tone, she let go of Lawrence's hand and spun around on the spot.

"Now that the mystery is solved, shall we go back? My hotness from the wine seems to be cooling."

"I'm all for that. After all, tomorrow..."

Lawrence closed the gap between them, took firm hold of Holo's hand once more, and spoke.

"...we'll be back on the road again."

So long as one journeyed, anything could happen.

Some things would be joyous, others would be sad, and still others, painful.

But so long as their hands were joined and they had a road to follow, they could keep moving forward.

Holo glanced up at Lawrence, her refined lips tapered ever so slightly in a smile.

After that, she raised her chin, saying, "Aye," and made a satisfied-sounding laugh.

End



AFTERWORD

It's the last afterword, but actually, I didn't want to write it.

I truly have written all in the *Spice and Wolf* series that I wanted to.

This volume is centered on an episode taking place a while after the events in volume sixteen, but midway, it became harder to write than anything before it. I really didn't want to write it.

But rather mysteriously, this brought me no anguish. Indeed, it made me very happy.

Really, really—really, I've done this, I've done that, I've done it all, there's no more!

I was able to think such a thought for the first time in my life. My personality has tended to make me get tired of anything, discarding things midway as soon as I get used to them, over and over again.

Besides, in the beginning, not having anything left to write was my nightmare. Fearing this, I read a great many books. But it seems that the true meaning of not having anything left

to write laid elsewhere. *So there are things like this*, I thought in exasperation; I slumped and grinned a pained grin.

(Bit of a *Spice and Wolf* joke there.)

Even so, having written these characters for a whole five years, I was able to gather the vestiges of my memories and commit them to paper, but this is a method permitted only once, at the very, very end.

The "intermission" and "conclusion" comprise that one last time. When I reread the short stories I'd jotted down during the same time, made with the sense that I was finishing somewhere, I really surprised myself.

I'm happy that I was able to have fun with the series *Spice and Wolf* until the final seventeenth volume.

Now then, even though I just said I've written everything I wanted to, I have a bunch of other things I already want to do. Volume sixteenish in...you might blame me for writing "summerish" as too optimistic, but it'll be within the year! I'm sure of it!

After that, I'm picking at some private creative activities, so if you see me somewhere else, please take a look!

And so, the long journey of *Spice and Wolf* comes to an end.

To all who participated in this series, and to all the readers who read to the very end, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart as I lower the curtain.

Isuna Hasekura



Several years have passed since the incidents surrounding the Coin of the Sun. Having received a letter from Holo, Norah the former shepherdess and Eve the merchant woman travel north—and on the way, they end up in the same wagon as Diana the alchemist! Were Lawrence and Holo able to find happiness for themselves? In addition to covering the days immediately after the events of Volume 16, this epilogue to the *Spice and Wolf* series includes three new short stories!

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