
SPICE & WOLF
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Spring Log
ISUNA HASEKURA

Spice & Wolf

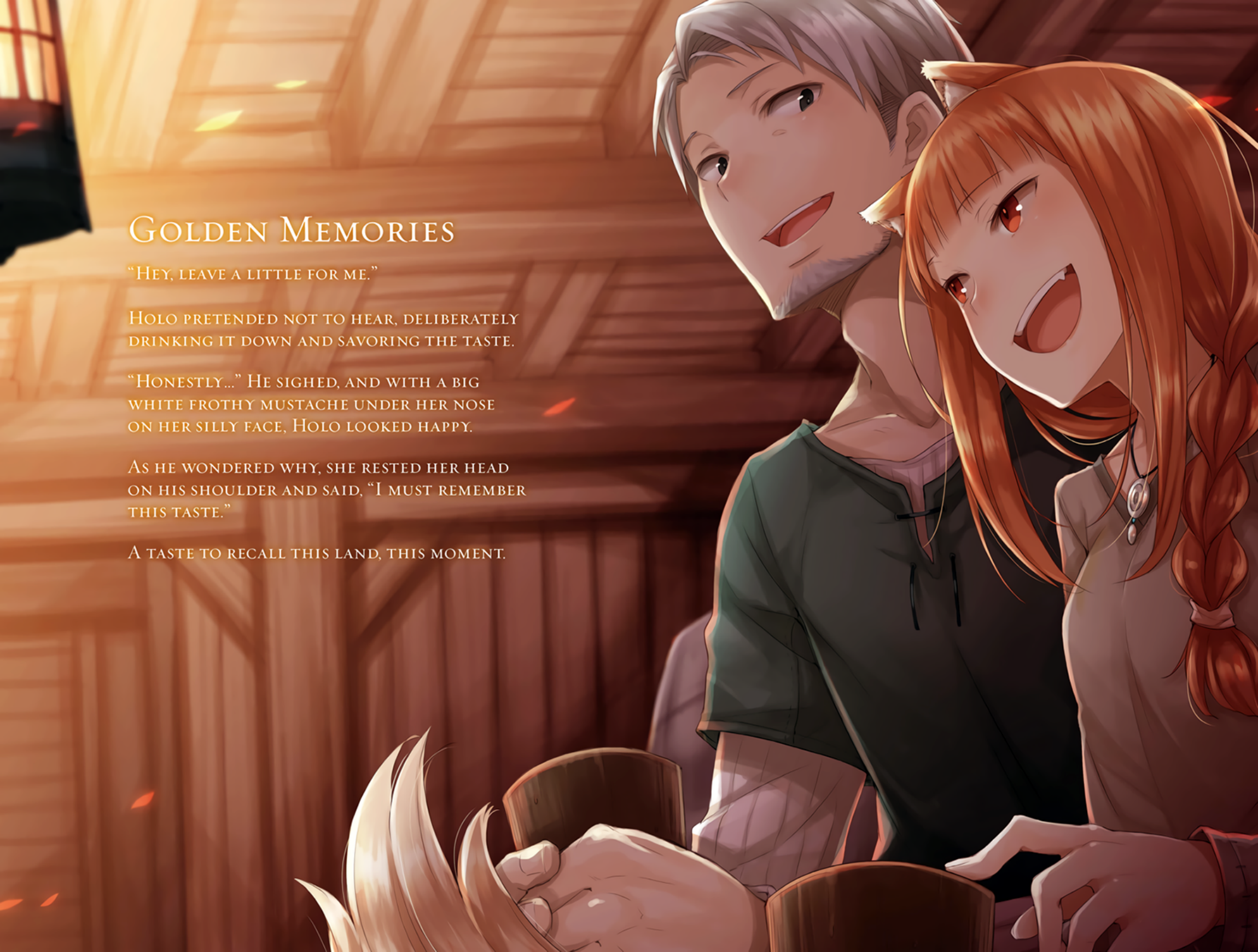
Vol. 18

SPRING LOG

By Isuna Hasekura
Illustrated by Jyuu Ayakura




THE MARGINS OF A JOURNEY
THE BATHHOUSE THAT BRINGS HAPPINESS AND SMILES—
THE SPICE AND WOLF BATHHOUSE
"OUR TRAVELS WILL CONTINUE, YES?"
"YES. JUST A LITTLE LONGER."
SPICE AND WOLF BATHHOUSE OWNER
LAWRENCE
SPICE AND WOLF BATHHOUSE MISTRESS
HOLO



Golden Memories

"Hey, leave a little for me."

Holo pretended not to hear, deliberately drinking it down and savoring the taste.

"Honestly..." He sighed, and with a big white frothy mustache under her nose on her silly face, Holo looked happy.

As he wondered why, she rested her head on his shoulder and said, "I must remember this taste."

A taste to recall this land, this moment.



Parchment and Graffiti

Myuri, the daughter of the wisewolf. She has quite a future ahead of her.

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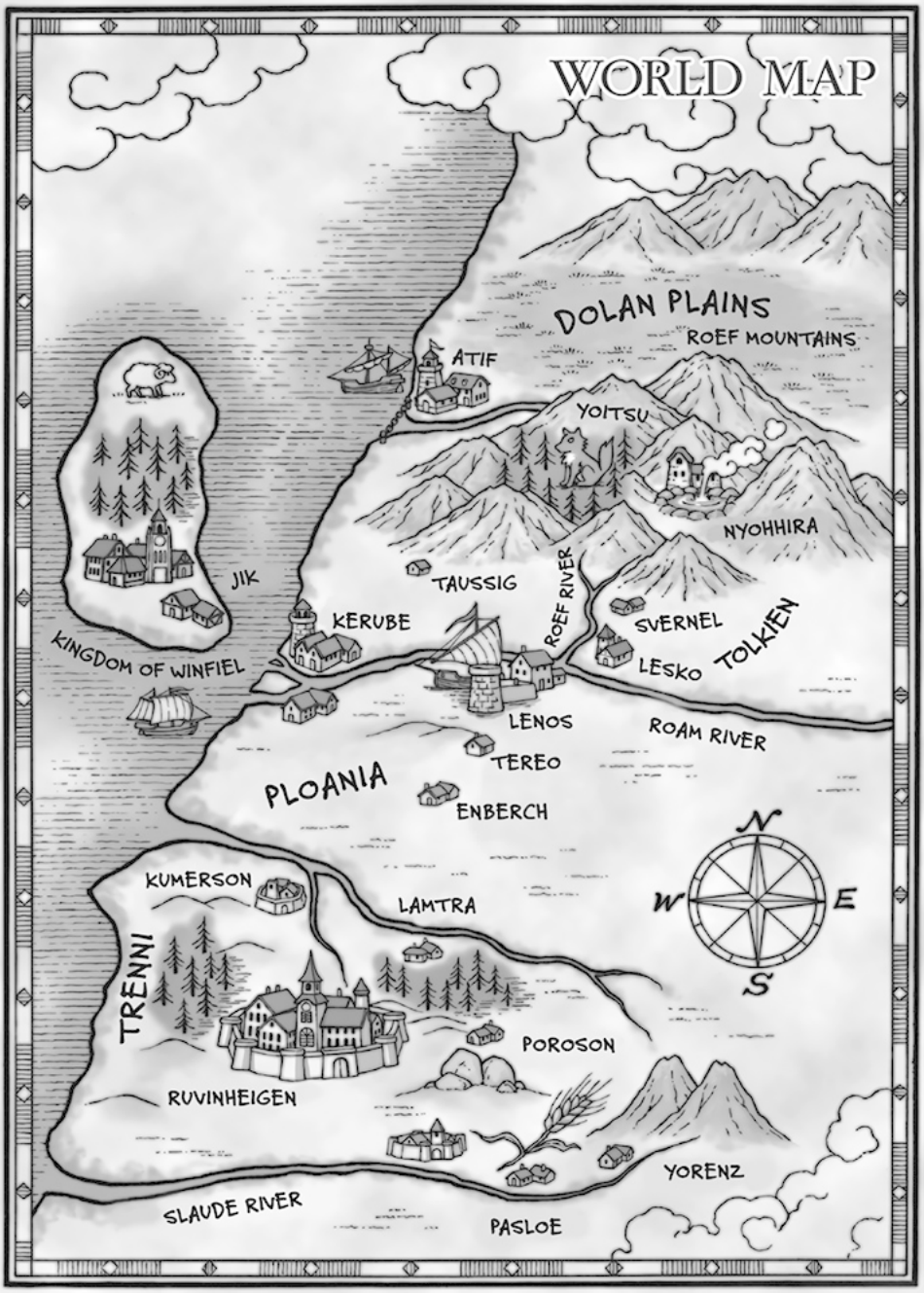




VOLUME XVIII
SPRING LOG

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YEN ON
NEW YORK



Map Illustration: Hidetada Idemitsu

The Margins of a Journey



THE MARGINS OF A JOURNEY

The snow-covered evergreens stood silently, like soldiers. It was quiet all around, and only a distant, crisp birdsong broke the silence.

Had there been at least one cloud in the sky the man's mind could have wandered, but today the sky was as deep a blue as the ocean floor. Unsure of what to do with himself, in the end he simply stared at his feet.

"Well then, let's get going."

The man heard the voice, and when he looked up, everything was ready.

With a somber look, the leading priest bowed once. Behind him, two men held staves roughly the height of a person and adorned with heavy-looking metal crests. On both sides behind them stood six more men, carrying a coffin on their shoulders.

"May God and the spirits grant us their protection."

The priest chanted solemnly as they slowly began to move. As they did, people hesitantly came out from beneath the evergreens that lined the street.

Some had dressed for the occasion, while others seemed to have come straight from work. They were uncertain, like deer that spotted a person in the woods. But encouraged by the priest, they approached the coffin and each whispered their parting words. Though their murmurs were brief, the man could tell they

had thought carefully about what to say and their words were full of feeling. As he listened, he began to feel as though these words were meant for him, and his head fell toward his chest a bit.

No, I shouldn't interpret it that way—he cleared his mind of those thoughts as they neared a corner and turned onto the next road.

There was a single building. Though one could catch glimpses of its vitality from when it was first built, as time had passed, the structure settled and now fit comfortably into its surroundings. Even with all the help there had been, in the end the ones that protected this place were none other than him and his companions. It should have been a source of pride.

As though the men carrying the crests in front of the procession shared a similar sentiment in their hearts, they held their staves up even higher. A sign glinted dully in the winter sun.

A lone wolf was engraved upon it.

"Under God's protection, we have safely reached his house. May the spirit of our friend find eternal peace here."

The priest made his announcement before a shed—a place deep in these mountains that had been hastily redecorated as a church—and the people bowed their heads reverently. The priest nodded, and the men carried the coffin into the shed. After waiting a moment, the man followed them into the shed and found it had already been placed at the altar. As though opening the way for him, the men split to either side and exited. They closed the door, likely out of consideration.

Slowly, he approached the coffin and sat down beside it.

He removed the veil from the face resting within the flowers, and it was almost as though he could hear silly-sounding snores

even now.

“I never thought I would be the one to lead your funeral.”



As Lawrence spoke, he stroked the lightly powdered face lying in the coffin.

"Holo."

From beyond the door, he could hear the deeply somber sound of a bell.

It had happened one sunny winter day...

◇◇

The smell of lunch still lingered in the dining hall, and a lute's gentle melody drifted from the baths.

He had been working nonstop since before sunrise, and by the time he could finally take a breather, it was already late in the afternoon.

"The Land of Hidden Water, Nyohhira. Still, the only ones who can relax are the customers, eh?"

Lawrence, owner of the Spice and Wolf bathhouse, stretched his head and cracked his neck. There was any number of reasons for his troubles.

For example, many of his customers were high-ranking clergy, and they usually made quite selfish requests. When they insisted on praying early in the morning, Lawrence had no choice but to comply. For that, he had various duties, such as readying their scriptures, cutting the candlesticks to a uniform length before lighting them, and laying out a fur rug for their comfort when they kneeled to pray.

While they prayed to God, oblivious to the pains he had to endure, Lawrence began cleaning the baths. Afterward, he put away

the utensils that the late-night customers left out from the previous evening, threw away garbage, scooped out fallen leaves from the springs, and splashed some hot water around to thaw the path that connected the main house to the baths. Sometimes, there were even critters hiding in the water that needed to be chased away.

As he did all this, smoke began to rise from the kitchen chimney, and a new fight began—preparing breakfast. The idea that a clergyman's breakfast should be simple and easy was almost nonexistent. Customers ate and drank until they slept, and they of course ordered plenty of breakfast.

Lawrence earnestly did the washing next to the cook, Hanna, who skillfully performed the work of three people on her own. It was not as though it was the owner's job to wash dishes normally. But after losing the two workers whose duties included these menial jobs, a few sacrifices were necessary.

Afterward, he had to care for the customers that trickled in for their morning meal, ready towels and coats for guests headed to the baths, and act as manager when the musicians and dancers arrived. The baths varied in size, and how much performers earned depended on the place—and it was up to Lawrence as owner to decide who performed where in a way that would not upset the musicians and dancers.

And to ensure their performances livened up the baths, he had to prepare props like branches or flowers with green leaves still attached or embroidered tents. If he was stingy with these things, then tips decreased, and fewer tips meant that the musicians would go to other bathhouses. No bathhouse was so sad as to have no music or dancing. Of course, he could not allow the dancers to dance on cold, wet stone, so he made sure to wrap with wool the stones he had dried on the fire the day before.

Then, as the last breakfast plate was being stored away, he had to line up lunch for the early comers.

Lawrence sometimes felt as though all this work was in vain, like trying to catch an entire downpour in a single pot. But so long as he worked his hardest, it would end someday.

And all this excitement was only supposed to be a brief test of patience.

“Good work today.”

Lawrence sat down in the now-quiet dining hall to take a breather by the corner, and in came Hanna, to whom it would be somewhat rude to call a young girl. Though she was not physically imposing by any means, Hanna had a commanding air about her and did not show a single trace of fatigue from the morning’s commotion. If someone had told him that she had raised ten children all on her own, he would have believed it.

On the tray she carried, there was a bowl brimming with baked beans, thick-cut smoked meat, and wine. Garlic and mustard garnished the meat, its fat still sizzling, and it smelled as good as sin. Lawrence remembered he had not eaten since morning and gulped.

“You too, Hanna.”

Though he was the owner, he did not forget to give thanks before wolfing down his food. Hanna may or may not have noticed his tactfulness as she laid out his utensils and poured wine into his cup. He scooped the beans into his mouth with a spoon, and his salt-deprived body was happy.

“I don’t mind so much that we lost our two helpers so quickly, but if you collapsed, sir, we’d lose everything.”

Shivering at the luxury of washing down salty food with wine, he cut himself another slice of the well-preserved meat and stuffed it into his mouth.

He was finally getting used to being called “sir.”

“Of course, I plan on hiring new workers, but I don’t think this excitement is going to last much longer. It’s almost time for spring to arrive at the bottom of the mountain.”

“Oh, it’s almost that time already? The winters are so long up here in the mountains, you forget about the rest of the seasons.”

“You’re not excited for spring, Hanna?”

The word *winter* carried the same meaning as the word *perseverance* for those who lived in the mountains, where the snow piled high. Everything—people and animals and trees—withdrew, dreaming of the release spring would bring.

“That’s not quite true, sir. But once winter’s over, everyone goes down the mountain, and the bathhouse is slow until summer. That makes me a little sad.”

She crossed her arms and touched her cheek, gazing off into the distance, and Lawrence forced a smile. He should have felt the same—his purpose in life was supposed to be working hard and staying busy—but Hanna was special. In terms of being a helper, no one could be more reassuring than she was. But Lawrence pined for spring’s arrival as much as anyone else. He for the chance to rest that season would provide, since his body could not handle strain like it used to. In light of all this, Hanna’s words stung a little.

On the other hand, as a former merchant who could not stand pointless waste, the period between winter and summer bothered him like a rock in his shoe. If he could get some customers to

come during that time, then he could rest and work and profit all at once, but plans for that were not progressing much.

"Anyway, is your wife still asleep?"

It was long past noon, but the bathhouse's mistress was nowhere to be seen.

Lawrence put more baked beans to his mouth and rewarded himself with some high-quality imported wine before biting into meat he covered in mustard. Then he spoke.

"She's the kind that can't wait for spring."

"My."

Hanna gave a small smile. "I'll go prepare for dinner." And she returned to the kitchen.

Lawrence took his time eating, and when he finished, he washed the dishes himself. Then he immediately poured wine into a small carafe and headed for their bedroom on the second floor of the bathhouse.

During the day, most customers were at the baths, so it was very quiet inside the building. When he opened the door and entered the bedroom, he could faintly hear the noise coming from the baths through an open window.

"Hey, how long are you planning on sleeping?" He called out to the lump on the bed, but not a single word came in response. The tightly curled bulge seemed to indicate closing the window would not be worth the effort.

Exasperated, Lawrence sighed and placed the wine on a desk where a quill and stacks of papers sat. There was still no answer, and he began to feel a bit worried.

“Holo?”

He called, but there was no movement. He approached the bed and gently pulled back the covers. Underneath was the sleeping face of a teenage girl. Usually, she arranged her hair and clothes to appear less girl-like, but looking at her now, he could see how young she appeared to be. She had long hair like nobility, and her spotless, pearl-like skin did not seem at all like it belonged to someone whose livelihood included hard labor. The way she quietly lay there—eyes closed, unmoving—was as though she had been freed from all sorts of pain and agony. Her peaceful face almost made him think, *If I was to die, I’d want to die like this*.

As Lawrence’s finger touched her cheek, the girl’s ears twitched. They topped her head, large and pointy. They were triangular and a shade darker than her flaxen hair. Simply put, they were animal ears, and they protruded outward. What’s more, a tail covered in a fine coat of fur grew from her lower back. Holo was not the young girl she seemed, and her true form was a wolf that could easily devour a person in one bite, a spirit that had slept hundreds of years in wheat.

Lawrence could not thank the gods enough for the luck that, in some twist of fate, led her to become his wife.

But daily life did not play out like a fairy tale.

Lawrence saw her rather fidgety ears, which were unlike her unchanging, sleeping expression, and sighed. “If you want to eat, get up and come down to the dining hall.”

With that, her sleeping face finally changed. She tightened her already-shut eyes, curled up even more into a taut ball, and the ears on her head wiggled. Under the blanket, her tail was most likely wagging in response to what she heard.

“Haaaahh…ahhh.”

At last Holo gave a silly-sounding yawn and opened her eyes just slightly.

“I do not wish to get up…” She spoke selfishly, sounding like a frail, spoiled princess. “Must you keep me up so late all the time…?”

She glanced at him with accusing eyes. But she was not wrong.

“Well, for that…I’m grateful,” Lawrence said and leaned closer to Holo’s face. “But the sleeping beauty should wake up with this, shouldn’t she?”

He kissed her cheek. Holo closed her eyes, and her ears twitched as though she was embarrassed.

He thought that he would grow bored after living under the same roof for ten years, but he did not feel that in the slightest.

What happiness. He smiled to himself, and Holo smiled, too.

“Really, you fool.”

“I know you’re exhausted from working every night, but you really need to get up. The mending is piling up.”

Holo seemed to surrender when Lawrence brought up reality. She gave one last big yawn and crawled out from underneath the blanket. Asking her to do other kinds of work would cause her to complain endlessly, but surprisingly, needlework seemed to suit her very well, and her work was careful and neat.

“Ooh, how cold!”

“Here, wear this.”

Lawrence gave his trembling wife a woolen robe to wear and

handed her a cup with some wine.

“Not enough.” She complained like a child.

“If you’re going to drink, do it after you eat. It looks bad if the lady of the house is drunk midday.”

“So strict, as always.”

Holo grumbled and sipped the wine.

“And? How was last night?” Lawrence asked Holo as they left the room, respectfully putting his arm around her, as though guiding a princess.

“You always fall asleep right away now.”

Holo lightly hit his shoulder in complaint.

He partially dodged the blow and cleared his throat. “Isn’t that you?” And then he added, “That’s, well…That’s something I want to work on…”

“Heh-heh. For it is a busy season, yes?”

Though he felt a touch scared at the implications that he might be promising her something, he held her tenderly.

“And about the mountain last night, ’tis well. I rid the dangerous areas of snow.”

“I see. Thanks for that.”

Recently, it had been snowing nonstop, and the sun had been stronger with the approaching spring, so there was a risk of avalanches.

Lately, people were carrying more and more goods down the

mountain paths. So, the past few days, Holo would return to her wolf form at night and check the worrisome areas.

There was nothing Lawrence could do about it, and it pained him to leave it to Holo. What little comfort he did have was that Holo being Holo, she seemed to have a good time running around the mountains as a wolf. And she seemed to enjoy returning home in the early hours of the morning and throwing her chilled body into the baths while no one was around.

"It's going to be pretty busy tonight until the customers go home, so I appreciate it."

"I do not mind. Smiles when they come and smiles when they go is our bathhouse's selling point."

Running a bathhouse was different from doing everything alone as a merchant. There were times when it was troublesome, but having someone working with him by his side took that trouble and made it his happiness. Lawrence replied to his wife with a pleased expression and a nod, and Holo beamed back a smile like a young girl.

As they went down to the first floor, Holo restlessly pulled the thin robe over her head. Sometimes she felt it was fine to leave it down since their customers were drunk all the time, but she could not let anyone get a good look at her ears. The only ones who knew about her identity in Nyohhira were the ones who worked at this bathhouse.

Entering the dining hall, Hanna brought Holo food, as though she had been listening for their footsteps. There was not too much, but the beans-to-meat ratio leaned much more in favor of meat this time, compared to Lawrence's meal. He smiled wryly. While aware that she was still young, seeing Holo eat this much meat right after waking had him worrying.

He understood and was prepared for the huge difference in life spans between himself and Holo, the avatar of the wolf-who-lived-in-wheat. But slowly, he experienced more and more moments that underscored the reality.

Understanding it with his head was different from seeing it happen in daily life.

Every time he realized it again, he thought about how he wanted to appreciate each and every day.

"Oh."

"Hmm?"

Lawrence gazed at the tomboyish Holo, who was deliciously gulping down meat before speaking slowly.

"'Tis you that must deal with all the trouble. You've been without rest since you lost the other helpers."

"Yeah, well, that's all right. It should be busy for only a bit more, and really I've been too easy on Col. He said he wanted to travel, but I couldn't really stop him."

Over ten years ago, when he met Holo and traveled here and there, getting into all sorts of adventures, they met a boy—Col. At the time, he was a wandering student trying to learn theology and was even younger than how young Holo had already looked.

And now he was a young man the same age as Lawrence was then, and the thought made the older man dread the passage of time.

At the same time, despite all the ups and downs, he felt guilty having Col work in the bathhouse forever when it had always been his dream to become a clergyman.

So Col, after hearing a story from a guest one day, could no longer stand it and finally decided to ask permission to leave on a journey; Lawrence had no choice but to support him.

"But I also think that maybe I should have had him wait until spring, honestly."

"Hmm. *Om, om…gulp*. Well, that Col is oddly diligent. If he let that chance get away from him, he would likely still be dragging his feet for who knows how long. I feel 'twas not wrong of you to send him off like that."

"That makes me feel better. I don't want to get in the way of a kid with his whole future ahead of him."

Lawrence poured some wine for himself into a tin cup, and Holo gave a small laugh at his particularly old-man-sounding speech.

"Indeed, but I never thought it would be an excuse to *elope*."

Clang! The tin cup fell, the cask tipped over, and the spilled wine spread slowly across the long table.

Lawrence desperately tried to cover his agitation, which had rushed out just like the wine, by reaching out to the cup and the cask, but it was not much use. Hanna heard the noise and came over with a cloth, while Holo just laughed and laughed.

"Heh-heh. You really are a fool! Why not just accept it?"

"Wh-what are you talking about?"

Lawrence spoke in a stiff wooden tone while lending Hanna a hand. Hanna's glance contained a bit of a smile. After they wiped up the wine, Lawrence sat in his chair and Holo waved a knife tip in his direction.

“Col’s a good male, no? You don’t think ’twould be good for him to take over after you?”

“Ghrh…”

Holo’s logic was dead-on, and that was definitely how he felt. But understanding it in his mind and actually confronting it head-on were two different things. Lawrence was acutely aware of this every day.

And if this conversation pivoted toward the topic of their daughter, he likely would not be able to keep it together.

Indeed, the reason managing the bathhouse had become so dizzyingly involved lately was not just because they were lucky their customers valued them greatly. It was also because Lawrence was filling in for the two young helpers after they left. One of those helpers was the aforementioned Col. And the other who made a completely unexpected departure was Lawrence and Holo’s only daughter, Myuri.

Just as Col was leaving on his journey, of all things their daughter also took off from the bathhouse and followed right after.

Of course, there were several answers to the question *Why?*, but it was clear that one particular matter sat prominently in the middle of all this. This village was small, and the bathhouse even smaller. Who liked whom was quite obvious.

“It’s too early for her to get married.”

Though he thought he had tried to make a reasonable objection, both Holo and Hanna began to laugh. It was the laughter shared between two women who were confirming with each other that men, no matter how old, were always foolish.

“Then when is it not too early?”

“Um…mmnm…”

“Sir, don’t stress yourself out.”

Agonizing over Holo’s remark and then Hanna’s words, which could be taken as either comforting or teasing, Lawrence finally plugged his ears. Reason was not going to help him much. He knew. He knew! Since the very day his daughter was born, he was prepared for this moment.

“Heh-heh. Then what a relief she chose to elope with Col.”

“It is not an elopement!”

But it seemed that no matter what, Lawrence would object. Holo and Hanna cackled in delight together. He wished he could drink with other bathhouse owners.

“Besides, I do not see what you could gain from not sharing what you want to say with your beloved. Rather, for someone who is my daughter, she is a taking her time a stretch too long.”

It seemed as though Holo was jealous in her own way.

All things considered, Lawrence thought that Holo had no right to speak about people holding back their feelings, recalling memories of their journey from over ten years ago. Of course, if he actually said such a thing, he knew what would happen, so he stayed his tongue.

“Do you think it’s due to the influence from the many churchmen?”

“The Church?”

Lawrence didn't seem to follow, and Holo twirled the tip of her knife as though hauling in a string from her head.

"Aye. They have the odd habit in never saying what matters until they die."

"Oh, you mean their final confessions."

"Aye, that."

Praying for reconciliation with God at death's door, people confessed various things to a priest, mostly sins or final requests. Some of these people were stubborn old men who would finally share their hidden thoughts with their family or divulge immoral love—anything imaginable could come out in these moments, so Holo was not exactly mistaken.

"How pointless it is to not say important things when you should."

Lawrence agreed, especially now that he had reached a certain age, and trembled at how fast time flew. Younglings should live fast and wild.

However, just as Lawrence was thinking about how it was much too early for Myuri to fall in love and marry, Holo suddenly spoke.

"Besides, I want to hurry and see the faces of my grandchildren."

"What! Wha…!"

Lawrence was left speechless, unable to breath in or out. True, they would definitely be cute, but Myuri was still a child. She may have been at the age where it was socially acceptable for her to wed, but she was much too young. There was no mistaking that.

There was acceptable by society's standards, and then there was acceptable by the family's standards.

As Lawrence tried to push away the fast-approaching reality, Holo leisurely drank her wine. Her composure came from either the difference between his and her age or the difference between a mother and a father.

It was the same when Col said he was going to leave and began his preparations before finally leaving. It was then they found out their daughter, who had always said she wanted to see the wide world outside the mountain village, had somehow snuck into Col's luggage.

Traveling came with danger, and thinking on his only daughter's safety, Lawrence was too impatient to write a letter, but Holo had admonished him when he tried to go after her on a sled.

"It will be fine," she had laughed.

There was a saying that went, "If you love your children, send them out into the world." Though he agreed in principle when watching how Holo acted, he could not accept it all.

Holo ignored Lawrence, who was groaning beside her, and she spoke thoughtfully with eyes closed, as though soaking in the baths.

"'Tis good enough, at any rate, if she is enjoying her first journey."

Though she seemed irresponsible, it was not as though she had no worries. Lawrence glared at Holo, who he felt tended to keep all the best parts of parenthood to herself.

Holo drew him close to her, smiling dryly.

“Everything fades with time. But I shall be by your side forever.”

Holo, shorter than Lawrence, gazed up at him with her beautifully shaped eyes.

“Is there anything wrong with that?”

When she said that, there was no way he could respond. To Holo, who would live for hundreds of years, everything happening before her now was just one scene of a brief journey. It was too much for her, and once she had tried to end things with Lawrence—thinking if she must see him off, it may as well be when goodbyes would not cut so deep. But she had chosen the fleeting happiness over the pain of parting.

Lawrence relaxed his shoulders, giving in to her.

“Don’t be silly.”

“Heh-heh.”

She gave a small laugh and rested her head on his shoulder. He lay his hand atop Holo the Wisewolf, her head round and small enough that his fingers fit snugly around it.

Surely this was the greatest extent of happiness that he could hold onto with his own hands.

And that was more than enough.

“Would you like some more wine?” Lawrence asked, and Holo answered, “Only if you have some, too.”

Lawrence could only laugh. “I can’t win against you.”

Lightly, he kissed the top of her head and handed the empty

cask to an astonished Hanna.

That night happened to be the date of the monthly town meeting. In the wavering moonlight, Lawrence carried food and drink along the road, shivering. When he first came to this village, he could not shake the eerie feeling nighttime gave him on this remote mountain, but now he was completely used to it.

And during this season when there were many visitors, inviting fires burned late into the night throughout the entire village, while the sounds of laughter and music drifted all over. The scene had an ethereal, fantastical air about it, and sometimes he would occasionally come out with Holo to gaze upon it.

Along the way, he passed popular musicians as they went from bathhouse to bathhouse and casually exchanged greetings with them. It had been more than ten years since he and Holo settled here, and it felt as though they were finally fitting in.

But this was both a good thing and a bad thing.

“Ooh! Our Sir Lawrence has finally come!”

As he entered the torch-lit community center, cheers bubbled up all at once.

Lawrence was bewildered, but other bathhouse owners came up to him, already red in the face, and patted him on the shoulders.

“Well, well, Lawrence! Let us drink till dawn!”

“Huh? Ah, right.”

Although it had been some ten odd years since they came to

this village, most of the bathhouses were as old as Lawrence if they had not been in business for even longer. He had to behave in front of his seniors, but at the same time they were competitors in business, and so they did not act too familiar with their fellows. If anything, these people occasionally stole materials or supplies from one another, and more often than not they were cold and unfriendly toward their peers.

This is sudden, he thought, and one man holding his drink spoke.

"Lawrence, I know it's tough, but it's not all hardships!"

"Ah…Um, I'm sorry?"

"It's fine, it's fine! We know well how difficult it is to let your daughter go!"

"Huh? Oh yes…"

Lawrence finally realized the identities of the people that kept offering him alcohol.

Most of them were parents with daughters.

"Um, well, it's not that they would end up together…"

"Oh no, we know you don't want to accept it, we know!"

Another person aggressively tried to reassure Lawrence, and he offered a vague smile in return. But in his heart, he kept repeating to himself, *They're not eloping, they're not eloping!*

"All right, gentlemen! Sorry to interrupt your merriment, but please leave it for after the meeting."

There was a clapping of hands, and like awakening from a

spell, everyone returned to their seats.

But there were some who, after returning to their seats, still recalled when they married their daughters off and were sobbing. Lawrence saw them and was filled with warmth rather than surprise. Though they were competitors, constantly fighting without mercy over sales and business, they were still members of the same community.

“Well then, today will probably be the last wintertime meeting. In other words, next month the snows should melt, and our customers will depart. And then we’ll have troublesome days ahead of us what with repairing all the buildings as well as preparations for the summer season, and again, allotting our imports.”

Seated at a long table, the bathhouse owners smiled tersely. The roads leading to Nyohhira were small, and they depended on a single town, Svernel, for the delivery of their resources and supplies. It always ended in a scramble for goods.

“Oh, about that, I’ve heard something that worries me.” One man raised his hand and spoke up. “I’ve heard that there’s going to be another hot spring village on the other side of the western mountains.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve heard that, too.”

“Is that true?”

“If it’s on the other mountain side, how will it affect the flow of patrons…?”

“Silence!”

The chairman cut off the growing murmurs, and quiet fell again. Lawrence had heard the same thing from a musician who said that people might not come to Nyohhira next year.

“I was told that, too, and it’s apparently true,” relayed the owner of Spice and Wolf.

Then anxiety crept into their feet. No one wanted more competition, but what everyone cared about the most was the question of where this new town would get its resources.

“And they might have Svernel supply their materials, too.”

“Oh, God!” someone yelled. Much like how much water a river could hold, the amount one was able to carry deep into the mountains was more or less set in stone.

And should these new competitors get their materials from Svernel, then that meant the new location would have a road straight from the town that guests would take.

This meant two villages would fight over patrons.

“If this were back in my time, we’d be going there now armed with clubs, but that won’t do.”

After the chairman spoke, the crowd’s anxiety became ripples of laughter.

“We are the proud people from the hot spring village, the historically renowned Nyohhira. Every quarrel that soaks in our waters soon softens and mellows. We have no choice but to draw people in with the allure of this land.”

“That’s right!” came voices of agreement.

“But what should we do?”

One person asked the obvious question, and everyone clammed up.

The chairman gave a small smile, cleared his throat, and looked suddenly toward Lawrence.

"This is when I propose we seriously consider what Sir Lawrence suggested previously."

Lawrence felt nervous as everyone turned their eyes on him, but he immediately understood.

"Ah, is this about the new village event?"

"Why, yes."

Lawrence suggested several years ago to hold something during the off-peak seasons of spring and fall. Spring and fall were crammed full of festivals and markets and religious celebrations all over, so normally no one would go out of their way to visit a far and inconvenient-to-reach spa.

Thus, business slowed to a crawl and it was too expensive to feed and board the helpers that had been hired in the winter, but if they were let go, there was no way to know if they would be able to work again in the summer—such extreme changes in customer turnout throughout the seasons brought about too much waste.

The plan was that if there were some fun event here in the spring and fall, then they could expect new customers.

"But then why did we drop it last time?" one participant wondered aloud.

"I think it was because it seemed like too much work. I want a break in the spring and fall at least." At the time, Lawrence thought that these owners had lapsed into complacency, but lately he had begun to understand how they felt. Working as a merchant, where potentially lost profits urged him to continually move forward, was different from owning a bathhouse—living in

the same place and doing the same work for years.

"While we sit around like that, we might have our legs cut out from underneath us. Like the Church," the chairman announced gravely, and the bathhouse owners all crossed their arms, grunting.

Lawrence did not know the details, but apparently at the foot of the mountains, the Church had reached a major turning point. They had officially ended their war with the pagans, who, ten years ago, were already a mere shadow of what they used to be. But right when they thought peace had finally arrived, another enemy appeared from within their own ranks. Col had heard about this from a guest and could not stand idly by. "*I have to face this critical moment in history, or I'll regret it for the rest of my life*," he had said.

"As you know, the fights with the pagans have ended for now, and so Nyohhira is losing its reputation as a dangerous but nevertheless irresistible uncharted destination within hostile lands. We must act quickly."

The chairman was a descendant of this village, but when he was young, he was an apprentice in a large commercial firm in the south, so his thinking reflected southern perceptions of the region as well.

Since what he said was correct, there were no particular objections and the attendees approved it with applause.

But it was also clear why the praise was a bit hesitant.

"So, what are we going to do?"

The chairman reached out and grabbed the wine cask that sat on the long table.

“We will think together.”

A sense of panic hung in the air, but there was no plan. If everyone was to think of something together, the practical troubles would seem endless and they would never reach a conclusion, but if one person came up with an idea, that individual would have to fill in as the coordinator.

And so, they could not be blamed for how the meeting suddenly became a drinking party as they chided one another to think of ideas. This seasonal meeting was also meant as a breather to help everyone keep it together and blow off steam during the busiest time of the year.

Lawrence was also in the presence of fathers with daughters who had all heard about Myuri and Col’s “escape,” so at the end of the day, nothing got done.

But what Holo had said earlier that day stuck in the corner of Lawrence’s mind.

“Everything fades with time.”

Do what you need to do when you need to do it—or you’ll regret it.

Thinking of it that way, maybe that was why Myuri tried as hard as she did.

As Lawrence thought this, he made sure to wash away the sentiment with wine.

Venting his stress with late-night drinking at the meeting and the subsequent hangover, Lawrence somehow overcame the daily work that threatened to overwhelm him at any moment and car-

ried on.

But as the guests left, he suddenly found the bathhouse mostly empty.

Thanks to Holo, there were no accidents due to the snow, and it seemed that Nyohhira would safely make it to spring.

“Mmm…Soaking in the sunrise is the best.”

That day, when the last reluctant guests were finally pulled away by their minders who had come to retrieve them, Holo jumped into the bath as though she had been long awaiting it. The musicians and dancers also descended the mountain seeking more profit at the spring festivals, so for the moment, it was fine to rest without minding the stares of others.

“Why don’t you join me? Wash away all the exhaustion of winter.”

“Hmm? Mm…”

Lawrence gave a vague answer and placed the liquor that had been chilled just for her alongside a serving of pork chops and her recent favorite, which she learned from a traveler—cheese drizzled in honey—at the side of the bath.

He was not looking at her beautiful naked body, but instead focused on something completely different.

“Fool!”

“Huh?!”

She suddenly splashed Lawrence with hot spring water, and he jumped back. As he made sure the letter he held was okay, Holo, who had at some point gotten out of the water, snatched it from

his grasp.

“How long will you gaze at this? They are fine, and you know they’ll be fine despite what happens to them!”

“Uh, ah, mm…”

Lawrence made a face like a sheepdog that had its snacks taken away and followed the letter in her hands with his eyes. It was from Col and Myuri. Col had written the top half and Myuri, the bottom; the second page was one they had done together.

The top half was about how the world was changing even more than the traveling pair had expected after they descended from the mountain, and there was a lot to learn. The bottom half was about how there were so many people and how lively it was in the south, and there was lots of food and other interesting things—all filled with spelling mistakes.

When Lawrence read the part that Myuri had written, he grinned over and over, but when he came to the second page, his face stiffened.

There was a full account of the troubles they had gotten into. When Col would attempt to write calmly, Myuri would butt in and try to write odd things. There were many points where it seemed Col tried to express events gently with Lawrence in mind, but Myuri rewrote them with intentionally exaggerated embellishments.

To sum it up, they had found themselves in quite the pickle, but it somehow worked out in the end. Col had been sick to his stomach with anxiety while Myuri seemed to have really enjoyed it. While Lawrence sympathized with the serious-mannered Col, he was glad that Myuri had fun and could not help but grin. Had the unlikely not happened, he would have been even more anxious.

It was like the life-risking adventure that he and Holo had experienced, but he was distressed for another reason as well.

“Still, they get on quite well, don’t you agree?” Holo was glancing over the letter and chuckled. The letter clearly showed how close the two were.

In the same inn, drawing close to one another in the candlelight, shoulders together, holding hands…

“Col is, um, yes, a good brother.” Lawrence cleared his throat and spoke, saying the words he had recently discovered that comforted him. “They always have been close like brother and sister, even more than real siblings, eh?”

“…”

Lawrence insisted, and Holo gave him an astonished look in reply.

“Well, if that is what you wish to believe.”

This male has been foolish for all time, she seemed to say, right before she sneezed.

Shivering, she handed the letter back to Lawrence and picked out a piece of cured meat, then jumped back into the bath. Smoothing out the crease that Holo’s finger left on the paper, he smiled at Myuri’s broken handwriting, but the details had him grimacing as though he was enduring a headache.

But this letter was the first thing his daughter had ever given him, and so he carefully folded it when he heard Holo’s voice.

“Oh, and did you think of anything exciting to do for spring?”

“Mm.”

“We were supposed to plan something interesting so the newcomers on the other side of the mountain leave our guests alone, were we not?”

It was what they had talked about at the meeting, but Lawrence’s face still looked troubled.

“Well…we couldn’t really think of anything.”

“There are saint festivals and such every year.”



Every town, village, and occupation had a patron saint, and throughout the year there were festivals for the saints held in one way or another. In Nyohhira, they happened in spring, and it was a private affair about rewarding the winter's toils.

"They aren't very unusual or novel, though."

"In that case, how about celebrations offering a large wolf some delicious food? I wouldn't mind."

Holo made her suggestion as she rested her face and elbows on the edge of the bath, kicking and splashing the water with her feet. With her wet hair thrown up in a very unladylike fashion, she looked just like Myuri.

"If we offer you more than this, you won't be able to eat it all."

Expensive delicacies like honeyed cheese were enough. Lawrence picked out a piece, and Holo bared her fangs, seemingly on purpose as a show.

"Hmph. Fine, you traveled here and there as a merchant, yes? There had to be one or two interesting things on the way. Why not borrow from one of those?"

"Hmm…Like the bull-chasing festival, I really liked that."

"Oh?"

"They close off all the side streets in the town and chase a bull. It goes mad, running down the streets, but they say good luck comes to whoever can touch its tail—it's exciting. In the end, they roast it and everyone eats it…"

"Why not that?"

“Every year, someone gets hurt, and there is huge damage to the buildings when the bull smashes into them.”

As a traveler, it was exciting going to such a chaotic place, being so close to danger. However, Holo knew the troubles in preparing buildings for a festival like that and the work that went into keeping everything intact. She made a frown, as though imagining the mess a ramming bull would make.

“’Tis…no good.”

“Right?”

“Anything else?”

“There’s…that. There’s a festival where each diocese in the town makes their own team and parades around the town kicking a leather ball.”

“That sounds interesting.”

“But everyone immediately loses their cool when they take the ball from one another. Even that problem alone would be all right, but there aren’t a lot of young people in this town. Everyone will give up right after it starts.”

Holo’s ears pointed down in disgust, seemingly understanding after imagining the other owners with their bellies sticking out.

“You, too, have been sagging lately.”

“Oh…ahem! Then it’ll probably end up something like putting on some costumes and celebrating that way. There are events like that here and there.”

“’Tis difficult.”

Holo kicked the water again and left the edge, meandering with something that looked like a doggy paddle. She seemed more carefree than she actually was with her hair and the fur on her tail spreading out in the water. Had she really not cared, she simply would not discuss it.

Holo worried about the bathhouse and the village in her own way. If not, she probably would not bother going out every night in the deep mountain snow or silently doing all the mending.

“Hmm.”

As Lawrence mulled over the ideas in his head, Holo pulled herself up onto the center rock and wrung out her hair, tail wagging.

“Come in!”

She called out to him, showing a smile that was more innocent than Myuri’s.

Lawrence still had work to do and waved his hand, but when Holo shot him a disappointed look, he gave in and stripped off his clothes.

“Once you know how enjoyable it is to just laze about, even if someone asked you to come up with some new fun in the spring, of course you wouldn’t have any motivation for it.”

Lawrence murmured to himself, holding cold liquor and looking up at the clear blue sky. He had called for Hanna to bring food and drink and ended up lounging around. Thinking about the other bathhouses and how they were likely in a similar state made him feel even lazier.

“I quite enjoyed lying in the grass when we were traveling merchants as well.”

“Of course. The one snoring loudly in the back of the cart after lounging around and the one sitting in front holding the reins had it differently.”

“I do not snore!”

Holo curled up, not denying that she would lie about in the back of the cart.

“Hmm…But this water is so good and peaceful. If this isn’t paradise on earth, then what is? Everyone should come straight here.”

“Well, ’twas busy for a few years, yes?”

Hundreds of years before Lawrence was even born, Holo had apparently soaked in these waters.

“Right…There actually may be a way to have the Church promote us as an earthly paradise.”

“Hmm?”

Holo looked puzzled, as though this fool was saying crazy things again, but Lawrence thought it could actually work.

“Look, you know about pilgrimages to holy sites, right? If there’s a location where a famous saint is enshrined—for example, a saint that can make the blind see again—those destinations that promise special effects are particularly sought after.”

Next to Lawrence, who rambled his thoughts out loud, Holo continued to sit, seemingly uninterested as she poured herself more alcohol. It was likely because of her experience from ten

years ago, when Lawrence would often start talking thoughtlessly about clever ways to make money, and the two of them would wind up getting involved in one uproar or another.

But now that he had thought of something, he could not stay silent.

"Everyone knows that the baths are good for your health, so we could possibly secure the help of the clergymen who frequent this place and have it designated as a holy site. Yes, that's right. It's even in their teachings. The opposite of earth is hell, and in between there's a midway point called purgatory, and if you can atone for your sins there, then those who were destined for hell can go to heaven instead. Like that, in the space between heaven and earth, there's a paradise that's neither heaven nor earth, and that is what Nyohhira can—"

Holo stuffed a piece of dried meat into Lawrence's mouth.

"Guh?"

"So, confess your sins in this purgatory to go to heaven? And what? If you drink and frolic in paradise or whatever, then you go to hell?"

Taking in Holo's face, flushed from the hot water and the alcohol, along with her reddish-amber eyes, Lawrence thought she looked like a demon.

"Mm..."

"We already get complaints that there are too many people here, do we not? Should the number of guests increase even more, 'tis unimaginable those churchmen would feel obligated to go out of their way and help us."

"...Mm."

That was definitely true.

"And it sounds like you forgot, you fool, but you want more guests to come during the season when you have nothing better to do, aye?"

"Yes…you're right. Yeah."

Drinking and soaking in the baths was making him drunk faster. Lawrence reached out of the water and grabbed a fistful of snow, putting a bit on his forehead.

"Hmm…I thought that the place between earth and heaven was a good idea…"

"Because there are angels like me here?"

Holo drew close, her laugh sounding like a purr. Her pearl-like skin and supple body certainly gave the impression of an angel.

But as she consumed more jerky, he could see her fangs showing, and anyone could tell she was not someone to become entangled with carelessly. *As the one that reached out to her myself, there is no doubt about that*, Lawrence thought in self-derision.

"Between heaven and earth…a festival…hmm…"

Next to the grumbling Lawrence, Holo bit into the snow on Lawrence's forehead, as though she, too, was beginning to boil. But suddenly, when he raised his head, she hurriedly got out of the bath.

"What's wrong?"

Holo hastened to pull her robe over her head and motioned to the main house with her chin in response.

“Sir, a visitor.”

Hanna had come to call on him with someone in tow. Of course, the villagers could not know that Holo was half-wolf, so she was quite careful.

“Ahh, all right.”

Lawrence rose from the bath and was surprised when he saw who stood at the head of the path leading to the main building.

He could not offer mulled wine, so he had Hanna boil goat milk and drizzle honey in it. But the visitor sat in the chair with a brooding look and stared at his hands, unmoving.

Holo, shuffling her fireplace-dried tail under her robe, came over and poked Lawrence in the back. *What is this about?* her face asked, but Lawrence did not know, either. At the moment, there were no guests in the quiet dining hall, and the only sound was Hanna preparing dinner. Holo stared with great interest at their guest and sat slightly farther away to work on mending.

Nothing would come of staying like this, so Lawrence opened his mouth first.

“What has your father asked you to do here today?”

The visitor looked like a child, but he was already a hardworking participant in the workforce around these parts, so Lawrence spoke with the respectful tone he deserved. But the boy slowly dropped his shoulders and solemnly shook his head. The sudden visitor was the second son of a nearby bathhouse owner and was around Myuri’s age.

They knew this boy very well, since there were few people the

same age Myuri, and he often played together with her. His name was Kalm. Lawrence could not count the number of times he had yelled at him when he and Myuri misbehaved.

As they grew of age, though they had to help with things around the house and could not play together much anymore, they would still throw snowballs or frogs at each other if they crossed paths in town.

“Have some before it gets cold.”

Again, he offered the drink to Kalm, and the boy took it in his hands.

Then, as though the cup was his cue, he suddenly raised his head.

“M-Mr. Lawrence, I’ve come to ask you something!”

Lawrence was more surprised at how serious he seemed, rather than the sound of his voice.

When he and Myuri had done something bad together and Lawrence scolded them, he was the kind to turn away in a huff and pout. But now, the face of a fine young man was meeting his gaze without hesitation.

“If it’s something I can answer myself, then gladly.”

Lawrence also straightened his back in response, not looking down on the child.

“That’s! Well…”

It was as if Kalm’s energy brought him that far and then petered out. When he opened his mouth, no words came out. His face was bright red, and he seemed as though he had suddenly

lost all his breath.

Kalm closed his eyes and gritted his teeth in pain, and Lawrence unconsciously began reaching out to put his hand on the boy's shoulder. But at that moment, Kalm suddenly blurted out, "P-please let me marry Myuri!"

The words, seeming to come straight from his body and soul, became a fierce wind that gusted through the dining hall.

Lawrence, dumbfounded, did not comprehend immediately.

Myuri? Marry?

"Erm, well, even if you say that, uhh…"

Lawrence could not form a thought in his head and was thrown into confusion.

As he did so, Kalm stared straight at Lawrence.

It was a look that said he was absolutely serious.

"…So you're asking for Myuri's hand in marriage."

Lawrence finally met the boy's determination head-on.

"Y-yes."

Kalm did not appear to be joking, and immediately Lawrence changed gears and stepped into the role of bathhouse owner in his head.

"Have you consulted your father about this?"

Lawrence raised his question and Kalm made a troubled face before he shook his head.

It was important in this small village to know which houses were related to whom. For example, if a popular bathhouse became connected to another by blood ties, then it would create a powerful clique. Though there was no rule forbidding marrying within the village, it was preferred by most to marry out, particularly choosing someone around Svernel.

Also, simply put, it was to avoid inbreeding in a place with so few households.

“Hmm.”

For some reason, Lawrence sighed, and Kalm abruptly leaned forward.

“U-um, I—I have one question.”

“Hmm?”

“D-did Myuri, I—I mean has your daughter, really…um, eloped…?”

“Yes.”

Lawrence muttered with a sigh, and he could feel Holo grinning at the edge of his vision.

Then, he finally understood why Kalm suddenly came over so determined, without talking to even his parents.

“Even I don’t know, either…if she eloped…No, probably, a part of me felt that this would…”

Lawrence found himself suddenly muddling his words and could not apply his logic.

“But it hasn’t been completely decided.”

The reason Lawrence could say this so confidently was not just because of hopeful observation. It was partly born from his respect for Kalm, who had gathered all his courage to come here.

"You know, Myuri is the kind to do absolutely reckless things without a second thought. And she gets bored very easily."

Kalm, her childhood friend, seemed to be familiar with this and nodded vigorously.

"So that means there's a chance she'll come back if they have a big fight or something like that."

On top of that, Col was working toward becoming a clergyman and had taken vows of abstinence. When the beautiful dancers came to the village, no matter who tried to entice Col, he had not been swayed.

"If that happens, then you should come talk to her yourself. I have no intention of barring your way."

Kalm's face brightened, as though he had seen a ray of light beyond the dark clouds, but his expression soon lost energy again.

"But…she's with…Col, isn't she?"

Everyone knew one another in this small village.

Lawrence nodded, and dejection crept into the once-mischievous child's expression. If Col had been Lawrence's own rival in love when he was Kalm's age, he would have simply given up hope. Col had always been a good boy, but when he grew up, he became an even more wonderful man.

"Sigh…"

Though Kalm had come in high spirits, it seemed he had lost heart when confronted with the situation he faced. Lawrence remembered he had a similar experience when he was an apprentice merchant and could not help but smile a little.

And though the person sitting before him was an awful boy who was after his beloved daughter, he was still a brave man who had marched in here all by himself.

“But why this, all of a sudden?”

“Huh?”

Kalm responded with confusion, and Lawrence drew near his face, consciously paying attention to Holo.

“Aren’t you the kind to prefer the dancing girls?”

He lowered his voice, as though it was a private conversation between men, and Kalm’s cheeks turned red. Song and dance were essential to a place of healing like Nyohhira, and there were plenty of beautiful women. On top of that, these girls, who had the privilege to indulge in the arts, could get away with anything. Like the first dazzling shoots of summer greenery, they held a beauty that everyone adored.

“That’s…well…” Kalm hesitated, but did not stay silent. “But I realized they’re…different…from Myuri.”

Lawrence recalled his daughter. Myuri looked just like Holo, but she was completely different on the inside. She was filled with endless energy, as though all the calm and cunning parts of Holo had been cut out, and all her pessimistic bits were replaced with radiant sunlight.

Once, when his daughter was little, she had blindly chased after a rabbit, trying to catch it, and fell backward in the mud,

bleeding from her head. The very next day, she was playing in the woods, chasing deer.

From her very core, she was different from the confident and calmly smiling dancers, with their plaited hair and incensed clothes and carefully maintained waistlines. They were more like Holo, if anything.

"Well…They're as different as a cat in a noble's manor…and a wolf in the mountains…"

Though he thought his own daughter was the world's cutest, there were some things he could not ignore.

Lawrence spoke shamefully, but Kalm gave him a small smile and hurriedly shook his head.

"Well, um, that's not it…"

"Hmm?"

Kalm's gaze dropped to his fingers.

"I did like the dancers once, but…when they went down the mountain, I thought, *Oh, I'll see them again*."

"I see."

"But when I heard Myuri left, I…I!"

It was then his expression became filled with pain, and it seemed as though he would cry again.

"You just couldn't bear waiting, huh?"

"…"

Unable to speak, Kalm nodded, lips trembling.

He was the same age as Myuri, and they were always playing together. They were like family. It seemed that Myuri was too close to Kalm to notice. But Lawrence knew quite well. From his experience traveling as a merchant, when he never stayed in one place for more than a month, the emotions of townspeople and villagers always stood out starkly in his eyes.

It was not often that big changes occurred in these towns and villages. The things that would come tomorrow had already happened today, and no matter how boring or pedestrian, they would repeat year after year, and the year after that. That was why inseparable old childhood friends stopped calling out to each other as they grew up, though they may have been interested in each other. If that went over poorly and he lost his chance, then he would continue to regret it until he became an old man, and then it would follow him to his grave.

And that was why the boy deserved respect for his courageous effort, coming here on his own. Plus, it was likely that his rival in love would be Col.

Lawrence looked at Kalm as a man.

"And I should have known that..." Kalm's fists tightened on his knees, and tears fell from his eyes. "I should have known, when my brother got sick and died..."

Lawrence knew immediately it was about Kalm's older brother, who had passed on all too soon due to an infectious disease. He hesitated for a moment before slowly putting his hand on the youth's shoulder.

"I knew...I have to say...*sniff*...what I want to say, because otherwise...there might not be a next time..."

Lawrence patted Kalm's shoulder, then his back, and pulled him into a hug. Then, he noticed how unlike Myuri the boyish

hardness of his bones were, and the faint smell of sweat, and Lawrence felt deeply moved by the thought that if he had a son, it would be like this.

He took the handkerchief that Holo so thoughtfully brought over and, again, patted the boy's back.

"But Myuri is still here."

"...Sniff..."

"If it were up to me, I'd punch every single guy that came after my daughter into next week."

He spoke purposefully, but Kalm looked up at Lawrence and flinched a bit. No matter how cute Holo thought this boy to be, Lawrence was still the upstanding owner of this bathhouse.

"But it would be irresponsible of me to tell you to go after her right now, even if you wanted to."

Kalm tried to stand up suddenly, but Lawrence kept him seated and handed him the handkerchief.

"She can be pretty indecisive about things like that, so I think there's a good chance she suddenly comes back like nothing happened after traveling around a bit with Col."

Knowing that Holo was in all likelihood listening very closely, he smiled dryly after picturing her reaction, but Lawrence really did think that this scenario was more than likely. He could not imagine Col putting his hands on Myuri without saying anything to her father first.

"When that happens, I want you to show me what a fine young man you are. And once more...once more..."

You can come get her, were the words he just could not spit out. But Kalm spoke up, gripping the handkerchief.

“I’ll come get her!”

Lawrence saw a determination that would not waver from just one or two hits. Then he relaxed his shoulders and smiled, nodding.

“I’m waiting. And until then, I’ll be sure to practice some punches.”

He grinned, and Kalm just stared back, his face twitching.

“Well then, wipe your tears, and drink this.”

“O-okay!”

Kalm did as he was told while Lawrence gazed at him, casually resting his chin in his hand.

He would not mind a good kid like this for a son.

“If you want to wash your face, you can use the baths. Your little brother’s got sharp eyes, right?!”

“Ahh…Y-yes please.”

If the ever-boisterous, proud older brother went home crying, it would be like a pack of wolves attacking a weak deer. Kalm stood, bowed, and headed to the baths with shaky steps.

Lawrence sent him off with a smile, and Holo came in his place, sitting on Lawrence’s lap without saying a word.

“Wh-what is it?”

“Mm? Heh-heh.”

Holo laughed merrily, puffing up her tail in the robe that could not quite cover it completely.

“Is this foolish boy acting like a big man?” She made the first blow and grasped his hand. “You are quite stern sometimes, and that’s why I cannot belittle you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment for now.”

“Fool.”

Her response was short and fawning, almost like she was rubbing her ears against him through the robe. That exchange seemed to have really pulled on her heartstrings.

Lawrence pulled her into a tight hug and spoke absently.

“There might not be a next time, huh?”

How suddenly Kalm’s older brother had died was fresh in his mind. On top of that, those words really resonated with Lawrence, who had led a life filled with fleeting meetings as a traveling merchant.

“If he understands that at his age, he will make a good male.”

“I thought it was clear I knew that, too.”

He was always reaching out to Holo, knowing that if they parted, there would not be a second meeting.

But Holo leaned back from him a bit, staring at Lawrence. He looked embarrassed under her accusing gaze.

“What, aren’t I right?”

“What makes you a fool is how you rewrite things that happened in the past when it suits you.”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“Though you say you are so in love with me, do you know how long it took you? Hmm?”

“…”

Holo’s play biting always hurt a bit. If he gave in to the pain and tried to say, *I might be wrong but what about you*, she would no doubt leave teeth marks in his hide. But her eyes had been on him the entire time, and her tail rustled like a dog that could not wait to play.

He had no choice but to accept that she desperately wanted him to say those embarrassing three words to her face, even now.

Being so loved is also pain, Lawrence, the poet, recited to himself, and just as he was going to say the words that Holo wanted to hear—

“Can’t you say what you want to say?”

He murmured to himself absently.

“Um, what? Wh-what is it?” Holo’s face looked as though she was expecting to be fed honey-dipped, sweet, dried grapes, but instead had pepper sprinkled in her mouth.

Lawrence was oblivious to this, though, as he desperately pulled on something to try to connect everything inside his head. He had a conversation similar to this recently.

A situation where he could not say what he wanted to say but would say it eventually.

Confessions at death’s door!

That was the great release, divulging everything on the brink of dying, since there would be no more chances. But like with Holo in front of him, the things he wanted to say but could not bring himself to were not all bad.

So?

"So..."

"Hello? Heeeelloooooo?"

Holo was tapping Lawrence's cheek, but he grabbed her hand and stood up, carrying her bridal-style. Everything came together. An event that would bring more people in spring bloomed in his head.

"Yes! We should make a landing on the way to heaven!"

Lawrence yelled loudly, and in his arms, Holo stared at him blankly.

◇◇

A funeral was a ceremony of parting.

Once the lid was closed, prayers were given, and the coffin buried in the ground, the living and the dead would never meet again.

When the coffin was being carried from his house, all who came out to greet Lawrence spoke their parting words. There was nothing to fake, nothing to hide, nothing to be embarrassed about anymore.

In parting, there was a certain strength that pushed out the things he could not easily express.

“Holo.”

Lawrence called her name, but he could not help the wry smile that tugged on his lips.

He had prepared as much as he could, and though everyone had been courteous enough to leave the shed, it was still difficult.

“Ooh…the angels would become impatient right about now, too.”

He could hear the groans of the dead coming from within the coffin.

Lawrence cleared his throat and peeked into the coffin at Holo, who was smiling uncomfortably. He began to speak.

“I was happy since the day I met you.”

“…Was?”

She cracked one eye open and asked her question accusingly.

“This is a funeral, you know.”

“Hmph.”

“And in this funeral, the dead returns to life by the water of miracles.”

He dipped his finger into a silver cup that had been prepared for them, wetting it with the hot spring water, and spread the liquid across Holo’s forehead.

“How does it feel to rejoin the living?”

Holo opened both eyes, looking up at Lawrence, and broke out into a smile.

“How happy I am to still have time to spend with you.”

“Ah…”

Lawrence was not expecting that answer and was at a loss for words. Holo showed her fangs in victory. He could never win against her and thought it was just like her.

“I am honored,” Lawrence said and helped her sit up.

“So, what do you think of this as a festival?”

“Mm?”

“You won’t know if someone said something good about you, nor can you speak any more after you die. So this is a ritual to get just one step closer to heaven, where you may as well spell out everything while you’re still alive, just under the pretense that you’re dead.”

“Hmm, mm…Well, you know what?” Holo looked at Lawrence and spoke with an honest expression. “’Tis not bad.”

“Ha-ha, I see. Well, it doesn’t need too many preparations, and it doesn’t get too out of hand, so I think it’s worth trying out.”

When Lawrence had told the other bathhouse owners what he thought up, they were startled at first. But when he told them the point of it, they immediately became excited. Everyone had one or two things that they wanted to say belatedly to someone important to them, and it would be better to do so quickly—the appeal was easy to understand. All that was needed was an excuse to say those words.

And all the stubborn men of the world were likely thinking the same thing.

That was why, in this secluded area, in the place closest to heaven on this earth, they would hold funerals for the living as their excuse. This was what Lawrence thought.

"Candles can get pretty expensive, so we have to be careful about that…And it really comes together when we all wear the same clothes, so that's also another expense…But yeah, this could work."

As he thought of all sorts of things, he suddenly realized that Holo was staring at him.

Oh no, I started thinking business and forgot about her. He tensed, but Holo showed him a small smile and, as though she had just woken up, softly gripped his sleeve.

"I am so…"

"Huh?"

"So happy I am still alive."

She kept smiling and tears rolled from the corners of her eyes.

Lawrence hurriedly wiped them away.

"Our travels will continue, yes?"

"Everything fades with time." From Holo's perspective, Lawrence, too, was nothing more than a leaf that would be blown away with passing years. One day, their parting would come, and this moment would forever remain in the past.

But that moment was still in the future.

Lawrence wrapped his arm around Holo's back and hugged her. They had to protect their "now" from the flow of time, as

much as they could.

“Yes,” he finally responded. “We will. Just a little longer.”

Holo lifted her head and smiled. Then, they had a bit of a back-and-forth. While neither of them made an effort to resolve it, they ended up naturally settling back down. It was similar to the time they decided to start a business together.

They shared a kiss in front of the altar, where God watched over them.

Their eyes met, and even after all their time together, they still found themselves blushing.

There were still many things left for them to do in this world.

Spring was near, the season when the snow would finally melt.

Golden Memories



GOLDEN MEMORIES

Surrounded on all sides by mountains in the center of the world.

The long winter was finally coming to an end in the hot spring village of Nyohhira.

Curious gazes gathered on Lawrence.

“Oh my, my. Isn’t that the owner of Spice and Wolf?”

Even though the sky was bright, it took a while for the sun to show itself in this land cradled by mountains. The village was still covered in a faint darkness, and it was difficult to see a distant person’s face. Currently, the various bathhouses’ maids gathered and quietly gossiped in a corner of the village and suddenly began to create a clamor, like pigeons that began to cry when they saw nearing crows.

Lawrence stepped into the snow and stood there, with a smile as vague as his white, wavering breath visible in the cold. He let down the firewood he was carrying.

There were several places that the maids and village women gathered in this predawn hour. There was the water mill and the well and so on, but the place that Lawrence had come to today was the communal bread oven.

“What’s happened to Hanna? Is she ill?”

“I wonder if his daughter is sleeping in.”

“Have you forgotten? His daughter has bravely gone off on an adventure. I wanted to do that a long time ago, too.”

“Oh, is that so? This was the only place I knew outside of the town I was born in.”

“But it’s a surprise to see the master himself come here. Do you think Ms. Holo is ill, too?”

“Oh, that’s terrible. We must go pay her a visit.”

Once or twice a week, these women came here to bake all the bread that each household and bathhouse required. Life here was dull, so the only thing they could do for fun was gossip about the village.

Originally, this was work for the maids or, if they could not do it, the young wives or helper girls. So if a man came, that was enough to spark chatter. Even Lawrence thought he looked silly carrying firewood on his back and the kneaded dough, wrapped in a cloth, underneath his arm.

At this rate, it’ll look as if my wife ran away from home, no?

But Lawrence’s smile did not waver before this inconsiderate pigeon flock.

Their rumors spread rapidly throughout the village. Though he had spent over ten years running a bathhouse here, he was still treated like a newcomer, and he could not let his guard down.

Instead, he cursed how he had been forced into this job, as he imagined his wife Holo, who was likely still idling away at the bathhouse.

“No, we’ve received a sudden guest. The other two have other important business to attend to, so I came today.”

When he spoke, the women's idle chatter suddenly stopped.

"Oh…Don't tell me that person is staying as a guest at Spice and Wolf?"

"How troublesome that must be."

She did not seem to be simply picking at crumbs of the conversation, and in fact her expression seemed sincere.

"Do you think they first stayed at Yoseph's?"

"Oh yes. It's the oldest bathhouse in the village, you know."

"Then Abel's?"

"And then Ramaninov's after that."

They listed off the names of bathhouse masters one after the other. They were the children and grandchildren of various people who came to this village from all over to start bathhouses, so they all sounded unique.

"Do you think this means he'll be staying at different places until spring?"

"He's always making such an unhappy face, like something isn't right."

"Oh, I know. He has so many demands, like having his lunch made so early in the morning. It was such a fuss! But he paid so well…"

"Hey, don't be distracted by tips. My husband thinks he's most likely investigating the village."

"My! Do you think our guest is from that other hot spring village they might build on the far side of the mountain?"

“But he really doesn’t use the baths very much for that.”

“True. If he were planning on building a new bathhouse, you think he’d be looking all over the village.”

Their conversation flowed as though their lines had been written beforehand, and their speaking habits were so similar it was difficult to tell who was who in the faint darkness. As they came together every week to bake their bread, their ways of thinking also began to resemble one another.

As Lawrence watched them, he finally understood why Holo had made it seem like it was so childishly difficult for her to get out of bed.

They treated her differently, especially since she was a newlywed, but more importantly, she was the young mistress of a bathhouse where none of them worked. They kept to themselves for the most part. Though this was their own way of being considerate and knowing their place as hired helpers, this treatment was the most difficult for Holo to bear.

“Well, if he’s at your place, Lawrence, then that means his tour will finally end.”

He heard his name being spoken and snapped back to the present. At the same time, even before he caught up with the conversation’s context, he automatically smiled. He had learned through experience that if he maintained a pleasant expression, any situation would turn out better.

“I’m sure he has been frowning since his arrival, but it’s best to pay it no mind. He’s been like that at every house. It hasn’t been long since you’ve started your business, so I can imagine he’s been nothing but trouble…”

“There were people like that long ago, too. Such unreasonable

customers!”

“That was back when you were still young…Over twenty years ago, I think?”

“Excuse you! I’m still young!”

It made Lawrence smile to watch the two bicker like close sisters, their true thoughts and emotions plain in everything they said. His bathhouse had been around for a little over ten years so it “wasn’t that old yet.”

The first place this guest stayed at was Yoseph’s bathhouse, the oldest in the village. It then naturally followed that he chose to stay at Spice and Wolf right before leaving the village because it was the newest.

It seemed it would take even more time to fit into the village.

“Well, anyway, I think it’s about time that everyone’s gathered.”

While they chatted like lively children, one spoke up, bringing them back to reality. Since the communal oven was not in the center of town, where the church bell could be relied on, time was nothing but an estimate. And since how much bread each person needed depended on the household, there was never a reason for every villager to gather and bake bread at the same time.

“All right, then, let’s draw straws.”

One woman took a bundle of twigs that lay next to the oven and wrapped it in some cloth hanging from her waist.

But the ends of all the twigs were the same length and poked out a bit from the impromptu bundle.

“Are these new? No cheating!”

“I’m getting old, so even if I did cheat, I wouldn’t be able to see which is the short stick in this darkness!”

They all laughed together, and one by one drew a limb from the bundle. Each twig was of a different length, and the longer the twig, the happier the person. Lawrence was the last to draw, and as if planned, his was short.

“O-oh, my…”

“Hey, are you sure none of you cheated?!”

There was an awkward atmosphere among the women. This draw was to decide who used the oven first.

No one wanted to be first when using the public oven. Though each person had to prepare their own fuel and materials to use the oven, it took quite a while for it to heat up. The first person to use it had to prepare extra fuel to get the oven going since it would have gone cold overnight.

“Oh no, actually, this helps.” Flustered, Lawrence cut in. “I don’t know what complaints we would get if we made that crabby guest wait. If I were last, I would probably ask to be first.”

The women were surprised, knowing that should their process’s fairness be doubted, they would lose face, so they all smiled at once, relieved.

“Well, if you say so…”

“It’s a good thing, definitely, if you think about time. Here we have some people who use too much firewood and bake their bread into ash!”

“Hey! That’s because I was so busy talking! And that was a long time ago!”

Their brightness had returned.

Lawrence smiled, relieved. He opened the oven lid, lining the insides with his firewood and lighting it.

It seemed there was still some time before they could see the sun over the mountains.

Though the freshly baked bread was wrapped in cloth, it still gave off warm steam. On the way, he stuffed his mouth with a piece of the soft bread, and by the time he reached home, the sun had risen high in the sky.

It was quite the challenge, baking bread with women whose hands and mouths worked equally hard, but between the clear sky and the smell of freshly baked bread, it also accorded him a wisp of energy.

Thanks to that, when he returned to his bathhouse on the outskirts of the village and saw that guest, standing silently outside, he was able muster the hospitality to combat the unpleasantness.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“Hmph.”

The small old man grunted discontentedly. He held the lunch that Hanna had made for him, and he stood under the eaves as though waiting for the bread. In addition to the guests who stayed for the baths, there were also those who stayed for the mountains, such as hunters and woodcutters, so it was not unusual to see patrons go out in the morning.

However, the way this old man was dressed, it did not look like he was prepared for any trade Lawrence knew.

He wore a fur-covered conical hat that was shaped like a bowl on his head, bear fur on his feet, fox fur on his shoulders, deer leather gloves on his hand, and a rather rough-looking hatchet slung behind his back. His rucksack seemed to be filled with all sorts of things, but Lawrence could not tell what was inside. The guest's purpose was a mystery, and he almost never used the baths.

The old man tried to grab the entire package of bread as Lawrence approached him.

He seemed confused—it was far too much bread for lunch, and as though the old man realized something, he conceded and withdrew his hand. Lawrence watched and felt a strange feeling pass through him, so he took three pieces of the fresh wheat bread and wrapped them in a separate cloth. As though carefully appraising him, Lawrence passed the bread to the old man. The elderly guest remained silent, but he nodded his head slightly and walked off without a word.

He was gruff, but it was not as though he had no manners.

Lawrence watched him leave and tilted his head. He was most likely not a bad person, but there was a brooding manner about him. The old man went off down the hill in front of the bathhouse. When Lawrence could no longer see his receding figure beyond the trees, he went inside and could smell something good coming from the dining hall.

On the long table was his breakfast, which seemed to have been served quite a while ago. Baked beans, thick-cut bacon, slices of cheese, and the last of the cured herring they had ordered last fall. It seemed to be the same as what Hanna had given

that odd guest for his takeaway lunch. There was no mistaking that she had saved herself some trouble and decided to make Lawrence's portion, as well.

And there at the table, always present wherever it smelled good, sat Holo.

"You're late. Your poor breakfast has gone cold."

She glared at her husband, who had just come back from baking bread in the cold outside.

"I told you, they pull straws to see who bakes when. This is what it's like when I'm first."

On top of that, this was a job that Holo was supposed to do as the innkeeper's wife. As he argued against her unreasonable complaints, he gave the rest of the fresh bread to Hannah, who had just emerged from the kitchen. She took out three pieces from the cloth for Lawrence.

Not two, not four, *but three*? Lawrence looked at her quizzically, and she just smiled mischievously. Confused, he took the bread and sat down, and then he finally understood.

They ate breakfast not facing each other across the table, but side by side. In the middle of the two chairs sat a ceramic jug, filled with wine.

Before he could argue that it was too much for the morning, his eyes stopped at Holo's empty cup. Finally, he realized what Hanna was planning and noticed Holo.

"If you're going to blame me for doing poorly on a job you don't want to do…" He pulled out a chair and sat next to her. "… Then you should have done it yourself, no?"

He set two pieces of bread down on his plate and one on Holo's.

"They might compliment you out of jealousy since you always look so young."

Holo had the appearance of a teenage girl, and she stared at her husband, having taken offense. But Holo was not a girl, nor was she human. Since no one else was in the bathhouse, she was not hiding the ears on her head or the tail on her behind. They were a reminder that her true form was a giant wolf that could easily swallow a person whole, a spirit who resided in wheat.

"And treat you with their well-intentioned distant formality for newcomers."

After Lawrence spoke, Holo reached out for the ceramic jug. Her small hands gripped the handle of the jug, which was much too big for her, and sloppily poured wine into Lawrence's cup. She always only poured for herself, so Lawrence could not help but laugh at her obvious behavior.

"If you'd gone, you definitely would have been hurt."

Holo once lived in an area called Yoitsu, but on a whim, she traveled south and stayed at a village there for hundreds of years, watching over the growing wheat. Why she did so in the first place had been lost in the flow of time, and she had even forgotten the road home. In her solitude, she had become like a stone.

That was when Lawrence met her, and this was where they ended up.

She called herself the wisewolf, cunning and sage, but she was also vain and easily became lonely.

Had she been the one at the bread oven, while she would have

managed to smile at the maids' insensitivities, he could easily imagine her becoming quickly exhausted.

"Well, I used to be a merchant. I chatted a lot with them and gave a good account of myself."

Lawrence spoke pointedly, but Holo said nothing. She split the bacon and placed a piece in front of him.

When she usually split it, no matter how he looked at it, her own portions were always bigger. But this time, the sizes were the same.

"So I'm not mad. It's simply how we divide the labor."

He took the second piece of bread on his plate and split it in two, placing the larger piece on Holo's plate.

"And so you've watched our odd guest for me while I was out, haven't you?"

Holo finally looked up at Lawrence, her lips scrunching up in a sour expression, as though she were gnashing her teeth.

Lawrence softly kissed her cheek and turned to face his food.

"But for now, breakfast."

Holo carefully watched Lawrence for a while but finally began to eat.

Her big pointed ears and tail were flicking happily.

"I do not believe he is wicked. I can sense something like his core."

This was new for Holo, who usually had a rough time evaluating normal people.

The guest in question had arrived suddenly a little after noon the day before. *"Do you have a room?"* he had asked quietly, in a way that was difficult to hear. Lawrence had heard that there were those who would spend an entire winter moving from bathhouse to bathhouse.

But when Lawrence, overpowered by his presence, nodded, the guest had silently placed a gold *lumione* coin on the register book. This was enough for a family of four to live modestly for a month. It was far more than enough to stay for the two weeks he had requested.

However, to make a two week's stay worth a gold *lumione* required effort. Lawrence offered musicians and dancers, but the old guest shook his head and refused it all. He only asked for one thing—a packed lunch, early.

He was definitely odd, but he was too unhurried for someone who might be on the run after committing a crime in another town, and it did not feel as though he was sensitive enough to be discontent with every bathhouse he had stayed in so far. Really, he did not seem to have any interest in the baths or rooms at all.

The place this peculiar guest had stayed at before coming here was the most reliable bathhouse in the village.

There lived a boy who was the same age as his daughter, Myuri, and they had often played together as children. His name was Kalm, and just the other day he had come to Lawrence asking permission to marry Myuri. He was a good young man, and Lawrence did not mind having him as a son. His father, Cyrus, seemed grumpy, but he was not so bad once one got to know him. After that odd lodger showed up, Cyrus stopped by Lawrence's

bathhouse and told him everything he knew about the man.

Whenever that old man changed houses, the previous host would relay information to the next, and this meant that all the accumulated intelligence had safely reached Lawrence in the end. Of course, he told Holo the Wisewolf this information.

“I suspect he may be a medicine man.”

“Medicine man?” Lawrence repeated, and Holo nodded. Her gaze was trained on the fresh wheat bread.

Today, their bread was a pure-white wheat bread, as it was the least they could provide to a guest that had paid them a whole gold *lumione*. The loaves were sweet and soft, and it was easy to eat plenty of them.

But Holo had put a gash in the bread and filled it with beans and bacon. It reminded him of a boneheaded cat when his greedy wife suggested putting one delicious thing with another would just make the result even tastier. With a big smile, she bit into the fluffy bread.

“Hmm, *nom…gulp*. Aye. Because—”

Lawrence cleaned off the skin of a bean that had gotten stuck to her cheek and urged her to continue.

“There is the smell of herbs about him, as well as a metallic scent coming from the items he carries on his person. There must be a sickle or the likes.”

“If he’s a traveler, then he would definitely have herbs and a short sword on him. Maybe that’s not it?”

“’Tis easy to tell for those who are used to smelling herbs. No, since I know the smell, I have smelled it somewhere before…”

She closed her eyes, searching for something in her memory, and greedily bit into the bread with her tiny mouth. Some might consider the way she gobbled it down bad manners, but there was an innocence about it that Lawrence loved.

"And hmm. For whatever reason, he has wheat on him."

Holo was a spirit who lived in wheat. Long ago, when she had snuck into Lawrence's wagon, she was only able to do so by using wheat.

"It's probably rations. Something you would want to have when you travel to a cold place. Even if you had a snow shed, you probably wouldn't put food in there. It can keep for years if it's not ground into powder."

"Hmm? Well, you are more knowledgeable of the human world than I am. Also, the way he's dressed. You can tell what a man's trade is by the way he dresses in the human world, aye?"

An innkeeper was an innkeeper, a money changer was a money changer, a merchant was a merchant. A smith would proudly wear an apron of thick, burn-resistant hide; a baker would wear a special hat.

Like Holo said, regular people would wear special outfits that showed their profession rather than stating it outright.

"I've never seen such a big hat before."

It seemed as deep as a pot, and when the old man wore it, it almost covered his entire face. It was so unique that if he knew what job required such a thing, then he would be satisfied.

"There is metal inside that fur. If he wears that by design to roam out in the mountains, then it must be because he's always next to the mountain slopes so he needs to protect his head from

falling rocks."

"...Metal? Now that I think of it, another owner told me that he might be a speculator looking for a mine."

However, mining would wreck the environment, and if the old man wanted to work here then he would need a special permit. Many of Nyohhira's guests had power and money, and the inhabitants had many connections they could call on to protect the land. If it was not something that would bring at least as much gold as the waters here did, then there was no way anyone would be able to get a permit. A speculator of that age would certainly know this.

"The word from those in the mountains is that somebody has been venturing into their territory but they don't know what to do. If he were a hunter, then they'd fight him fair and square, but he doesn't have anything resembling a weapon, and he does not chase any prey, so they, too, are confused."

Since Holo's true form was a wolf, it seemed as though she could communicate with normal animals.

This bathhouse was in a village in the mountains, and even further in than the others since the Spice and Wolf establishment was situated on the outskirts of the village. Regular bathhouses would normally be attacked all the time by mountain creatures, making it nearly impossible to conduct business, but Holo had given them strict orders, and they had been able to avoid any incidents.

In exchange, sometimes a bear would come to the baths, barely escaping with its life from a hunter. It was a peaceable coexistence.

"If you say that, then I can't imagine he's doing anything else but searching for something in the mountains."

“Hmm.”

Holo finished her bread and licked her slim and delicate fingers. Ever since their daughter’s birth, she had not acted like this, so for Lawrence to see it for the first time in a while made him feel as though time had turned backward.

Moreover, Myuri acted the same way.

“But we do not know if searching is all he’s doing.”

“What do you mean?”

Lawrence didn’t understand and Holo gave him an irritated look.

She sighed a bit, reached out for the jug, then poured wine only for herself.

“He moves from inn to inn, aye? And he seems to hold no interest in the baths, the rooms, singing, or dancing. So…?”

“…Oh, that’s right!”

The maids at the communal oven even spoke about how he was staying at the houses in order of oldest to newest. If he was searching for something in the village bathhouses, then that made sense.

“I feel like I’ve heard a story like that before…a rich merchant falls ill in a town during his travels. Then he secretly writes about where his hidden fortune is cloistered somewhere in the house.”

Lawrence told it like a funny story, but his expression suddenly became serious.

“What if…that was real?”

“Huh?”

“It’s how much he’s paying—all that money. I haven’t seen a gold *lumione* in a long time. If he were searching for something, you could understand how that would be payment for searching. Lots of our customers here have status, fame, or money, anyway.”

“Hmm. Were that true, then you think he goes from house to house, searching for the hidden message, and then takes his lunch out to look for the fortune buried in the mountain?”

“It’s possible it could be a light treasure, like a will or a charter.”

Lawrence began to think seriously, but Holo suddenly sighed and snatched his piece of bacon.

“H-hey, that’s mine!”

“’Tis too much for a fool in the morning,” Holo said and inhaled the morsel.

She licked the grease off her fingers and then looked at Lawrence, irritated.

“Have you forgotten that he has no interest in the water or the rooms?”

“…Oh.”

“Were there a clue in the walls or the ceiling, he’d be searching until his eyes ran with blood. And there could be something hidden under the rocks in the bath. If he was doing something like that, we’d know right away. He’s been moving around the village all winter, aye?”

“That’s right…Hmm…But searching for something as he goes

around to each inn really makes sense."

"He may be searching for something we can't see."

"Huh?" Lawrence asked and, at the same time, was shocked.

Holo was looking at him, a sad and lonely smile on her face.

"Like memories."

"..."

Holo was embarrassed and suddenly stood from her chair.

Then, she wrapped her arm around an unmoving Lawrence's neck in an embrace. The reason she let go so quickly was likely just a show.

"Well then, I shall go tidy the mending," Holo said in a deliberately bright manner and hurried up the stairs. Lawrence followed her with his gaze, watching until he could no longer see the fur on her tail.

Bound by her memories, Holo had stayed in the same wheat field in the same village for hundreds of years. As she did so, she had forgotten the road home and many things disappeared in the flow of time. Even after she left the village, the places she visited on her journey were so different from how she remembered that there were times she shed tears. In the end, she was able to realize she had visited this or that place before by the smell of their traditional food.

The old guest, who wore the strange fur hat on his head, seemed much older than Lawrence. It was possible that in search of memories from days long past and long forgotten, money was no object for this man.

If he visited the bathhouse where he had stayed on a previous visit to Nyohhira so long ago that he had forgotten the establishment's name, maybe he could recall what it was that he had left behind in these mountains.

Perhaps that is why he seemed to be thinking so hard.

Lawrence brought more beans, which had already gone cold, to his mouth and chewed. Though they were cool, the flavors had blended together and it was delicious. One or two stories would embed themselves like this into a bathhouse after a long time.

Lawrence quickly finished his meal and rose from his chair.

It was not uncommon for travelers to perish during their journeys while staying at roadside inns. Though there existed hospitals on pilgrimage roads, with monasteries as the parent building, the operating costs for these facilities mainly came from the wills of those that died there. It was often said that one could profit handsomely from a well-placed hospital on a famous route.

Though there were occasionally guests that passed away while staying in Nyohhira, they often wrote their wills before coming, and there were no rumors of anyone inheriting large sums. Since many of their guests were of old age, and Nyohhira itself was located quite far to the north, customers came prepared.

Besides, it would be distasteful to leave one's fortune at a relaxing place such as a hot spring village.

But customer death itself was not unheard of, so everyone had to be ready for that possibility.

"By the time he moved to Ramaninov's place, most of the other owners should have questioned it already."

Cyrus, the owner of the bathhouse that the mysterious guest stayed in before moving on to Lawrence's, spoke with a grim look.

It was not that he disliked Lawrence, nor was he looking down on Lawrence's shallow thinking. Cyrus was a hard man to read, with his beard covering more than half of his square face, and his eyebrows were as thick as two fingers. Moreover, he was not very expressive, and when combined with a mild demeanor, Cyrus was often misunderstood.

Lawrence quickly found out that he was a good person, though, once he talked to him.

"But, Mr. Lawrence, the competition between bathhouses here is fierce. What do you do with the room once a guest has gone home?"

"Of course, clean every nook and cranny. They leave piles of trash, you know."

"That's right. Even under the roof and in the basement. Skimp on the cleaning, and suddenly there are mice and owl nests everywhere. If someone squirreled away their will somewhere, we'd have found it by now."

"We wouldn't know right away—it could have been left as a symbol," Lawrence retorted, and Cyrus suddenly coughed, pouring alcohol into the cup that sat on a record book. It was bittersweet liquor made from the lingonberries gathered in the summer.

Upon closer inspection, Lawrence could see that the face across from him was smiling.

"I don't hate notions like this. I'd enjoy some occasional drama and adventure around these parts, too."

Lawrence was not sure if it was a compliment, but he accepted the liquor. The alcohol Cyrus kept at his place was always good. The bathhouse masters often combined their hobbies with practicality and brewed their own, but Cyrus was particularly absorbed in it. The man simply treasured truly delicious drink, and he was thankful that he could blame it on the alcohol anytime he uttered something foolish.

"But…I don't think that guy's looking around the insides of the houses. I think every owner would say the same, since they know at all times where even all the mice families roam."

If that was true, then it was not as though the elderly guest would secretly be searching inside the ceiling in the middle of the night.

"Do you know where he goes during the day?" Lawrence asked, and Cyrus, unyielding, shrugged his rugged shoulders.

"It's only recently that most guests have left and gone home for any bathhouse. No one has time to keep track of his activities during the busy daytime hours."

Cyrus lapped his liquor and tilted his head as he closed his eyes.

"It's a bit too sweet," he murmured, much more aware of these things than Lawrence was.

"According to hunters and loggers, it seems he's taking the trails that branch from the village. Sometimes, he apparently goes off them. One of the hunters complained that the hunting grounds were unbearably wrecked."

This matched the stories that Holo heard from the animals in the mountains.

“But why now?”

Cyrus posed his question suddenly.

“What do you mean?”

“Hmm…I don’t want you to think bad of me, but he’s staying at your place, Lawrence; that means he’s probably going home soon.”

Lawrence immediately understood what Cyrus was getting at.

“Right. I also thought that nothing would really come of looking into it now.”

The more senior bathhouse owners had all racked their brains over this mystery already, so it seemed incredibly pointless for Lawrence to do anything. If he was still going to try, he would need a special reason to do so.

“It’s mostly pure curiosity. I used to be a merchant, you know.”

“Curiosity…?”

To those who spent all their time in an unchanging village where the same things happened over and over, it must have sounded foreign. The bear-like Cyrus repeated Lawrence’s words, quite interested.

“And the rest?”

“Pride, actually.”

Whatever he said was the alcohol’s fault. Lawrence took another drink, as if trying to convince himself.

“This is Nyohhira. Any and all troubles melt away in our spring water, and everyone can spend their days happily. Don’t

you want them to go home happy?"

He recalled the old man's gloomy face.

"I think it's perfect for a newcomer like me to simply maintain that practice."

He added that the customer in question was an excellent patron who paid in gold coins.

Cyrus's eyes twinkled, and he scratched his head.

"That's true, though only a newcomer could say a naive line like that."

"Everyone else already smells like sulfur, anyway."

Cyrus agreed, shaking his shoulders in laughter, and stretched out his back. He faced the entrance of the house, almost as though he expected to see that old man walking in right at that moment.

"I didn't think he was a bad guest." Cyrus spoke again, quietly. "He paid well, and he didn't complain much."

"What about the early-morning lunch boxes?"

"The kitchen maid complained to me, of course."

Lawrence laughed, but Cyrus continued.

"And another thing. What I liked was that he was quite the drinker. He drank carefully, like he savored and tasted it. That's unusual for guests here."

"Everyone else drinks like a fish."

Cyrus narrowed his eyes, still gazing at the entrance, and emit-

ted a small sigh.

"He moved on with a glum face, but I was the one left smiling. I think the steam from the baths clouded my eyes and soul as a bathhouse master."

He dropped his eyes to his hands and took a drink of his specialty liquor.

"It's the same with the strange festival you came up with before, Mr. Lawrence. We're worn down in our everyday lives, little by little. A stone in the river becomes nice and smooth, but the current can carry it away. It can't stop or endure the pull anymore. But then we're used to it, and even if we look for excitement, we end up missing everything. I was ignoring the guests who seemed grouchy, who couldn't say what they needed to say to the ones closest to them, even though they were right here in Nyohhira."

Cyrus spoke at length, then suddenly closed his mouth. He hung his head, his expression a bit sad, then murmured as though speaking to his reflection in the liquor.

"This is unlike me. I talked too much."

It seemed as though he was blushing behind his beard.

Lawrence took a drink and then spoke.

"I actually like how sweet this is."

Cyrus lifted his head and laughed in relief.

"That's probably because your own bathhouse is so sweet."

"My own bathhouse?"

“It’s a thing among the guests. They say watching the couple that owns Spice and Wolf interact is much more interesting than the musicians and dancers there. It’s a reflection of the bathhouses in Nyohhira.”

“…”

Lawrence tried to show his personal opinion with a feigned expression, but it did not seem to fool the other man.

Cyrus seemed to be pleased from the bottom of his heart and took another sip.

“I can see how young Myuri was raised to be such an open, innocent girl.”

All the guests at Cyrus’s bathhouse had already gone home, and all was quiet.

His gentle speech softly echoed throughout the building.

Lawrence’s face was hot due to the alcohol and nothing else. As he told himself this, Cyrus laughed.

“I’ll do what I can to help you with that guest,” Cyrus said as they parted, and he waved his hand. Lawrence ended up staying quite a while at his place. Cyrus treated him to all sorts of fruit liquor that had matured during the winter, and Lawrence departed for home a bit drunk. He had also offered some lunch before he left, but Lawrence could not bring himself to accept that on top of everything else.

They had talked about the mystery guest, and once Lawrence thanked him for the alcohol, he left.

He started feeling it as he walked back, and mastering his shaky legs, he finally reached home. There, Holo and Hanna were doing the mending together in the dining hall. The second they looked at his face, they furrowed their brows.

“You seem in good spirits, aye?”

He could not argue, since he had left the needlework to the women as he came home drunk.

Meekly, he dropped his head partly out of regret, as though she would bite off his head, but that just made him feel dizzier.

“The liquor at Cyrus’s place…*hic*…is really…good…”

“Honestly, you fool.”

Holo placed the hemp sheet on the long table and stood, pressing close to Lawrence.

When he thought she would give him a good punch, she lent him her shoulder.

“I cannot stand the smell of alcohol in the bedroom. Hanna, fetch water and a blanket.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As though she already expected it, Hanna had also risen from her chair. As Lawrence watched her, Holo pulled him into the next room.

It was a carpeted room, where a hearth was carved into the floor. Hanging from the beams on the ceiling were meats and fish that they caught near the village, which were often smoked or roasted as a snack to accompany drinks for those who stayed awake at night. Occasionally, this was a place to rest for those

who got drunk too early in the day and could not navigate the stairs.

She left him to lie there, and he stared absently up at the sooty ceiling.

This ceiling, which had been around for a little over ten years, looked as though it had been used for a long time, but a closer examination showed that it was still quite new.

It was said that a bathhouse would be considered seasoned when soot made the joinery in the wood invisible.

Not fighting his heavy eyelids, he murmured to himself, “From now on, from now on…”

“You shan’t sleep yet.”

Just as his consciousness was about to blink out, he could feel someone tugging his head up and something shoved into his mouth.

“You must drink some water.”

Holo looked down at him, a serious expression on her face. *She’s worried about me*, he thought and smiled in happiness.

“Don’t laugh, you drunk. Drink!”

She scolded him, and he swallowed the cool water. It must have been snow melted in the hot baths. It was trouble to draw water from the river every day, so most bathhouses used snow this way.

When he first drank it, after tamping snow into a jug and boiling it into barely potable water, it tasted too much like sulfur, as though the steam had dissolved in it. But now, he thought of it as

the unique taste of Nyohhira's water.

"Honestly, 'tis much too early for you to smell like such delicious liquor…Lingonberries, currants…Mm, oh, is that blackberry?"

Holo sniffed him, as though discerning which smell was which, and complained bitterly.

"It was…good. He's particular about…the water, right?" Lawrence said, laughing, and Holo smacked him on the forehead. Then Hanna soon covered him in a blanket and took the time to place burning charcoal in the hearth and added a bit of wood.

"You fool. You owe me, aye?"

Holo admonished him and secured her own future right to get brazenly drunk during the daytime.

Lawrence smiled and closed his eyes and heard a sigh.

Suddenly, she picked up his head and something was placed between that and the floor.

"…?"

He opened one eye to find that a cloth had been placed on his face.

"Wha—? What is it?"

"Mm?"



Removing the cloth, he noticed Holo's face decorated with a bit of a mischievous smile.

It seemed she received the rest of the mending from Hanna.

"'Tis a bother that only I am working."

She laid her drunken husband's head in her lap.

This would be considered the act of a wonderful wife if that was all, but it was Holo's style to place the mending cloth atop her husband's face.

"If you find it unpleasant, I shan't mind if you move, you know."

If he did move, there was no doubt that she would not speak a word to him for at least three days.

Lawrence sighed, giving up, and closed his eyes.

Holo secretly smiled, but he could feel it through her legs.

She ran her fingers through his hair, and as she did that, he fell asleep.

When he suddenly came to, the view of a ceiling that was not his bedroom's greeted him. The guilt of taking such a long nap and irresistible comfort came together into a yawn. He must have felt incredibly tired because he had dreamed that Holo was throwing acorns at him. They hit his head with soft *thunks*.

When he thought that it was oddly warm in the blanket, he noticed Holo was with him. She breathed softly, going "fuu fuu" in her sleep, comfortably. Thinking she should at least take off her

head covering while she slept, he reached out to remove it but stopped.

He could hear the unmistakable sound of water dripping.

He thought for a moment there was a leak, but that was not it. The sound told him to remember something more serious, more important. Right. What Holo was throwing at him in his dream were not acorns…

That was it.

He shot up and looked toward the entrance to the bathhouse.

"…"

There stood the strange guest, completely drenched from the snow.

"I—I didn't realize!"

His dream about acorns hitting his head had actually been footsteps sounding against the floor.

He could not believe he had shown the man such a disgraceful sight, the master of the bathhouse himself leisurely taking a nap. He hastened to right himself, but then he remembered Holo, who clung to him. He tried to hide her, pulling the blanket over her, as though it would somehow trick the man at this point.

The old man stared at him.

Lawrence could do nothing but show him a strained smile.

"…Mm…Hey…," came a muffled voice from inside the blanket.

Lawrence ignored his wife, pulling her off before lifting her and wrapping the blanket around her. "Huh? What?!" Holo wrig-

gled inside, but he pretended not to hear.

"Please wait there a moment! I will bring you something to dry off with and prepare the fire shortly!" he said to the old man, who stood silently in the doorway, and rushed off, carrying Holo to the second floor. He was painfully aware of the old man's stare following them.

How embarrassing!

Though the old man likely had not seen Holo's ears and tail, it still cast a shadow on their service quality.

Dropping the Holo bundle onto the bed, Lawrence hurried back down to the first floor, ignoring his wife's censure.

Having fed both the hearth and the stove with plenty of wood, the guest's wet items were drying. There was no such thing as being too thorough with a single guest, and one that paid in gold at that.

However, no matter how many times Lawrence spoke to the old man—"Why don't you use the baths to warm up?" or "Would you like something to eat before dinner?" or "Where did you go today?"—he was met with silence. He sometimes shook his head or nodded, so it was not as though he was completely ignoring the questions, but the mysterious man was still difficult to deal with.

Lawrence felt indebted after showing his customer such a foolish scene and found himself on the defensive. But if the host paid the guest too much attention, it could backfire and make him even more uncomfortable. Lawrence told the old man to call him if he needed anything and let him be.

But after his heated discussion with Cyrus, there was a lot Lawrence wanted to ask the curious visitor. Of course, for the

man's own sake as well, Lawrence wanted to help him leave with a smile.

First, it was clear that since he had come back covered in snow, he had spent the entire time walking around the mountain. Lawrence could also tell that whatever the elder's intentions, it was likely not going so well if he was searching so hard.

What on earth is he looking for?

It seemed that the more Lawrence thought about it, the more questions he ended up with, and he complained as much to Hanna in the kitchen. Ever since he unceremoniously bundled Holo off and abandoned her on the bed upstairs, she had not deigned to leave the bedroom out of anger, and because the odd guest was warming up by the hearth, Hanna had nowhere else to be.

"But I agree with your wife. He is probably an herbalist."

Hanna spoke while she prepared dinner. She chopped and threw vegetables into the pot. She had been growing them throughout the winter, and they were an almost unnatural shade of dark green.

"Is there a reason?"

"I offered him some mulled wine earlier, but he was eating snow!"

"Snow? Did he want cold water?"

Lawrence might have been mistaken assuming their guest wanted something warm after being in the cold outside. He was probably thirsty after moving around a lot.

"That's not what it seemed like, I'm telling you."

She added jerky and pickled cabbage into the pot and then generously sprinkled salt onto it.

“He ate it slowly, as if he was checking it. It means that something is definitely wrong.”

Lawrence did not understand what Hanna was saying. He stared at her blankly, and she gave him a surprised look.

“Oh, did you not know, sir?”

“What?”

“In the south, where they grow olives, you can sell snow as medicine. People say it works well for headaches, stomachaches, fevers, and toothaches. Well, I think it’s only the nobles that buy it.”

Lawrence shook his head. He never traveled that far south, not even when he was a merchant.

“Even in the south, they gather snow from the tall mountains in the winter, you know. They pack trunks with it, and they cram those into the holds on their boats, like they’ve bundled up the mountain itself. Then, they bury the snow in deep holes, and once the weather becomes hot, they dig everything back up and sell it. Since it’s possible to get the goods without paying, people say you can earn quite the profit from it, but different places vary and all that, of course.”

“Uh-huh.” Lawrence sighed in admiration. It was definitely a trade where a large company used a widely cast distribution network to do business. With their skill and expertise, they could turn even things that fell from the sky into gold. “So you think… he’s a southerner?”

A southerner from so far south that he thought of snow as

medicine and the land itself had no connection to the cold. A place that even he had never been to, one that he had only heard of in stories…

Lawrence, coming to a conclusion, suddenly raised his voice.

Hanna, who was peering into the oven, turned to face him with a questioning look.

“Could it be…?”

Lawrence suddenly turned on his heel but ended up kicking a colander full of fava beans.

“Waah! Ahh!”

He stepped onto the bellows as he tried collecting the scattered beans. He could hear Hanna laughing behind him.

“You’re quite scatterbrained, sir.”

He could only show his embarrassment by gesturing with his shoulders as he gave a half smile.

“It’s all right. I’ll do the rest. I don’t know what you’ve thought up anyhow.”

What she must have wanted to say was that she could not have him making a mess in her territory anymore.

“Then, my apologies, I leave the rest to you…”

Hanna, still laughing, shrugged her shoulders.

Lawrence returned the colander to its place and left the kitchen. Then, he took out crude paper and a pot of ink from beneath the counter. He thought the contents might have frozen in the cold, but it seemed usable. He snatched a quill pen and

headed to the hearth room.

The odd guest sat staring at the fire and was, of course, eating snow. He ate slowly, chewing it well, as though letting it seep into his body. The old man, who had the countenance of a hermit, heard Lawrence's footsteps and looked up.

Lawrence entered with a simple "Excuse me" and sat at the other end of the hearth, pen in hand.

Then, he wrote "hello" in every language he knew and showed the paper to the old man, who opened his eyes in surprise and looked at Lawrence.

As Lawrence gestured to each greeting one at a time, the old man looked as though he had seen a dragon in broad daylight and pointed to one. What surprised Lawrence was that the writing the old man pointed to was a language used all throughout the world and probably even in heaven. It was liturgical script, the language of the Church—something that was unreadable without education.

"Who…are you?"

Lawrence asked, not thinking. The old man opened his mouth to respond but immediately closed it. Instead, he pointed to the pen and paper Lawrence held. He gave them to his guest, and the man nodded in thanks before beginning to write fluidly. He was not unfriendly, nor was he stubborn. He had simply been unable to speak.

In addition, having come from so far south, he likely had not thought that a bathhouse owner from such a remote town in what was considered, up until recently, pagan land could read and write in liturgical script.

However, anyone that stayed here a long time would know

that there were many high-ranking clergy among the clientele. He should have been able to communicate with the bathhouse masters through them if there were any inconveniences.

As Lawrence thought this odd, the old man showed him what he wrote.

"This is…?" he asked with his eyes, and the old man nodded.

The following was written there:

"I have come here on a mission by the orders of a certain exalted personage. For this, I require special, good water that should be here in this village. However, both snow and pure water here do not seem special. I ask if you are familiar with this."

His writing was elegant and fluid.

He remembered the term *medicine man*. Then he remembered what Hanna said—snow as medicine.

The old man did not let the details of his goal slip easily since the one that likely required the medicine was this certain exalted personage. If someone who held an important position showed weakness, they would become a target. It was likely that this person was hiding the sickness from their peers. There were many guests from the south that stayed in Nyohhira for extended periods of time. If he had asked another guest who could understand liturgical script to mediate an exchange, it could very well be that the other guest in question was connected to someone influential that opposed his own master. He must have been hesitant to speak openly about searching for medicine.

Coupled with the old man's gloomy expression, this made sense to Lawrence.

"I…"

He began to respond, but he remembered that the old man did not entirely understand the regional language.

He bowed lightly, taking back the pen and paper, and wrote:

"I don't know much about it, but I will ask someone who does."

After reading, the old man raised his head and again bowed deeply.

But Lawrence could not help but ask:

"Why did you decide to tell me of your objective?"

Lawrence thought that it was likely he had given up finding his objective on his own. The old man's expression was troubled, but he finally took the pen in hand. He wrote lightly:

"You seem to be someone I can place my trust in."

Lawrence racked his brain, attempting to recall what the guest might have seen to come to such a conclusion. He decided it was probably more that the old man thought Lawrence was easy to control, rather than trustworthy.

But of course, it was not a problem that this man had placed his confidence in Lawrence. Satisfied, he nodded, resisting the temptation to give the excuse that he was a slightly foolish bath-house owner.

When looking for something in the mountains, there were plenty of dependable people who could be called on.

If Lawrence asked the most reliable of them, then he could immediately find the good water his elderly visitor searched for. He

could learn everything immediately if it had to do with the mountains of Nyohhira.

The problem was, Lawrence rolled up that so-called godlike presence earlier and abandoned her on the bed.

If he went to her empty-handed, he would likely receive nothing but snide remarks. Putting on a fur coat, he first made his way to Cyrus's bathhouse. Tucked in his arm he carried salted lamb ribs, something even Holo adored. It was in thanks for earlier that day, as well as a way to secure liquor that could placate Holo. And since Cyrus's hobby was making alcohol, he might know the whereabouts of good water that could be used in medicine.

It was late in the afternoon, and once the sun dipped behind the mountains, darkness quickly fell over the village. This was when Nyohhira became like a flame that refused to go out when softly placed in water. Usually, the evening was the busiest time of day with preparations for dinner parties, but there were no guests during this season.

When Lawrence reached the bathhouse, Cyrus's sons sat opposite each other at the long table. They looked to be learning how to use an abacus made of wooden balls and sticks.

The moment Myuri's childhood friend, Kalm, noticed Lawrence's arrival, he instantly straightened his back and forced a tense smile. He probably had trouble deciding whether to smile amicably at the father of the girl he wanted to marry or to show a manly expression.

Lawrence smiled soothingly, and it seemed some of Kalm's tension dissipated.

"Is Cyrus around?"

"Y-yes, my father is in the back with the firewood."

“Thanks,” Lawrence said and added, “Study hard.”

“Yes!” Kalm responded in a strong voice and nudged his little brother, who just stared blankly at what was happening.

Like his son had said, Cyrus was in the back, taking a break with ax in hand. Exertion rose as steam from his shirtless body.

“Oh, how can I help you?”

“This is thanks for earlier.”

He handed over the wrapped package he held in his arm. Cyrus took it, and his eyes widened when he checked inside.

“This is…I’ve gotten pretty good at business, too. Just a bit of liquor’s brought some wonderful meat.”

“A token of my gratitude, and an advance for a question I have, as well as for a favor I need.”

Cyrus laughed, shaking his shoulders, at how nonchalant Lawrence sounded.

“Ask away. This is good meat; it’ll go well with plenty of drink.”

He rewrapped it before leaving to store the gift in the kitchen connected with the firewood yard, then returned and took hold of the ax.

“I hope you don’t mind if we do this while I split wood.”

“Of course.”

Cyrus nodded. He brought the ax up and, without straining, let it drop. With a satisfying noise, the wood cleaved in two.

“I managed to get that old man to tell me what he was looking for.”

Cyrus, placing the next piece of wood on the stump, directed only his eyes toward Lawrence.

“He’s come far from the south, and the reason he was always so quiet was only because he didn’t understand the language here.”

“So how did you talk to him?”

“Liturgical script. I had to use it every once in a while when I worked as a merchant.”

“…How much liquor would it take if I asked you to teach my sons?”

If he really wanted them to learn, he could ask any of their clientele. It was Cyrus’s way of joking.

“Ask me any time. And our guest said that he’s looking for good water.”

“Good water?”

“In the south, they apparently use snow as medicine. So I wonder if it’s for that.”

Cyrus gazed off into the distance, but his body continued to cut wood without faltering.

“I see. A spring of miracles that gives long life and cures sickness is a common myth.”

“Do you know anything about good water that could awaken even the dead?”

“Yes. You drank some today, Mr. Lawrence.”

“Do you use it for your liquor?”

“I do. Water from the river is enough for most customers, and the melted snow that tastes like sulfur is fine for the drunks. But for guests who have refined tastes, there’s a certain kind of water I use for their liquor. Or for the high-class guests that pay in gold.”

“Could you tell me?”

There was a reason Lawrence brought first-class lamb ribs. He thought that since making alcohol was Cyrus’s hobby, he might know where this water would be.

But if the secret to his signature liquor’s taste was in the water, it was likely he had no inclination to tell others.

“I know that’s what you’re thinking.”

Cyrus said the exact words that Lawrence was thinking and smiled.

“It’s not a secret. If you go north on a path the hunters call the Gray Wolf Road, you’ll run into a deep valley. If you go in until your body barely fits, you’ll find a spring that doesn’t freeze no matter how cold it is. The water there is exquisite.”

“Oh…Th-thank you.”

He had told him so easily that Lawrence suddenly felt deflated. When he thanked him, Cyrus shrugged his rough shoulders.

“Everyone in the village knows about it.”

For a moment, Lawrence felt as though a line had been drawn

between them.

But he trusted the man in front of him, and it could be interpreted as though Cyrus was telling him, *It's about time you knew, too, Lawrence.*

"I will pay you back for this."

"You already have."

Cyrus smiled and returned to his firewood. Lawrence wanted to thank him again, out of habit as a businessperson, but he resisted. If they were friends, then it would be rude instead.

"On your way out, tell Kalm which liquor you like and take it. You went home drunk, so I bet your cute wife was pretty mad at you."

"...That's rather accurate."

"Everyone's the same."

Cyrus smiled, and Lawrence sighed in defeat.

"See you later."

"Bye."

Cyrus did not watch him go. Lawrence turned on his heel, returned to the front, and collected the liquor.

He looked back when Cyrus's place had grown distant, and lingering there in the growing darkness was a beautiful bathhouse.

Lawrence gave Holo the liquor he received from Cyrus, and once she finally regained her good mood, he asked about the water

again. He also asked Hanna, who often ventured out on the mountain to gather vegetables, and she also indicated the place Cyrus mentioned was the best.

Holo nipped at him, hinting that there was no need to get liquor from Cyrus if that was the case. But if she was in a better mood, then that was good enough reason for Lawrence.

The old man, with whom Lawrence could finally communicate through liturgical script, introduced himself as Ceres. Though, it was likely not his real name, because he had been entrusted with a secret mission from his master, but it mattered not.

Since there were no other guests besides Ceres, and it was rather quiet in the bathhouse, Lawrence invited him to eat dinner with them, and he gladly accepted. His usually grumpy expression seemed to be his natural one. He complimented the food precisely and only slightly, and he seemed to narrow his eyes in enjoyment when he saw Lawrence cautioning Holo about showing her large appetite to a guest. It was embarrassing, being watched as though they were his bantering grandchildren, but if Ceres was having fun, then Lawrence should, as a bathhouse master, give over and let him smile.

The next day, Lawrence offered to help with collecting the water, but Ceres slowly shook his head. All he asked for was an earthen jug to draw the water with. He said it was his job. The pride he held in carrying out his work seemed to be like that of a knight.

Lawrence told him where the Gray Wolf Road and the marker for its entrance were and saw him off with Hanna before daybreak. Holo was fast asleep in bed, unwilling to go out in the cold.

As he departed, Ceres seemed glum as always; looking at him from behind, it seemed that his steps had a new lightness to

them, though.

Lawrence sighed in content, relieved that all was finally settled.

Then, after a quick nap and working hard on his daily duties, morning became afternoon.

Ceres returned, his expression dejected.

“You didn’t get the water?”

According to Cyrus, it would not freeze no matter how cold it became, but it was impossible to tell what would happen in the mountains. Thinking this, Lawrence had posed his question, but Ceres slowly shook his head. He was likely expressing his disappointment rather than a lack of understanding.

“Well, first, let’s dry out your wet clothes.”

As Lawrence fed firewood to the hearth and stove, Ceres stood nearby, staring into the ceramic jug he cradled. It was a brooding, sad look.

“Here.”

Lawrence gestured to the fire, and Ceres reluctantly complied. He respectfully received the jug and handed it to Holo, who was watching quietly. Then Lawrence helped with drying Ceres’s wet clothes.

When that was mostly finished, he handed Ceres some mulled wine. In the dining hall next door, he whispered to Holo.

“This isn’t it?”

Holo sniffed the inside of the jug and tilted her head in puzzle-

ment.

"'Tis it."

With a wolf's sense of smell, she could discern the smell of that superior water.

But if that were so, why did Ceres seem as crestfallen as he did? Lawrence thought about it, and it suddenly bothered him. Why was this water not what he wanted? Conversely, what qualities did the water need to satisfy his search?

"Hey, does a spring of miracles really exist?" Lawrence asked suddenly, and Holo looked at him blankly. "You know, like water of youth, or water of healing, something like that," he explained, and she finally nodded.

"I, too, know of such myths. You have eaten the bread of the wheat from Pasloe, where I slept, aye?"

That was where Holo, in a strong sense of obligation, watched over the growing wheat for hundreds of years. Years before, Lawrence passed by the village occasionally on his trade route.

He looked at her, puzzled, and she smiled mischievously.

"Then you have eaten bread blessed by my miracles, though your foolishness was not cured."

"..."

Lawrence sighed, and Holo cackled. But he understood easily.

"If so..."

What was Ceres really looking for in the water? Or did he really believe the myths and think he would know immediately if he

should drink it? Here he stood in front of what everyone in town lauded as the best water in Nyohhira, and he was perturbed.

Then, Ceres suddenly appeared, his mouth drawn taut.

“Oh, hello…This?”

It seemed he wanted the ceramic jug. Lawrence of course handed it over without a qualm.

Then Ceres put his lips to the container’s mouth and heavily gulped down some of the contents. He closed his eyes, swallowing it.

He opened them after a few moments, and his expression was still that of disappointment.

“Good…”

With strange pronunciation, he spoke.

“Good…”

He said it again and shook his head. Lawrence and Holo looked at each other, and then he looked at Ceres. He gave a big sigh and placed the jug on the long table.

“No.”

They were clear words of denial. Before Lawrence could say anything, Ceres turned on his heels. Lawrence thought if he could ask what was wrong with it, then they might find a way to a solution.

Or perhaps he had to tell Ceres that what he was looking for in the water was nothing but a myth.

As Lawrence was thinking this, Ceres reached out to the thing

that sat next to the hearth.

"...His hat?"

What Holo was talking about was his conical hat, covered in fur and lined with metal. But Ceres flipped it over and pulled on a string inside it, removing the wet fur on the outside.

"It's a pot," Lawrence suddenly realized.

With it, Ceres took out a few small packages from his rucksack. There came a grainy sound, and when Lawrence looked at Holo standing next to him, she shrugged.

"Alcohol."

Ceres spoke up, and Lawrence, suddenly snapping back to reality, hurriedly tried to make his way over to the kitchen. Ceres stopped him.

"No. Alcohol."

Ceres shook his head and repeated his words again. There were hemp bags in the pot he was holding.

Lawrence recalled what Holo had said yesterday. These were things he carried on his person.

What was inside the bags was wheat. If so, then the pot he brought...

"You're...a brewer."

Ceres, not understanding Lawrence's words, furrowed his brow and once more said, "Alcohol."

Two pieces of metal with the same shape, one lying inside the other, and they could be turned into two pots. In one pot, he

poured out the water he had drawn earlier and placed it over the hearth. In the other pot, he emptied ground wheat from a hemp bag.

"Oh, 'tis local wheat."

Holo identified it just by looking.

Ceres boiled the water in the first vessel, occasionally stirring it. Steam billowed, but just as it seemed to start bubbling, he removed that pot from the flame. Retrieving a wooden ladle from his rucksack, he mixed the water into the wheat. This continued until all of the water in the pot had been shifted over. In the end, he checked the temperature with his finger, adjusted the pot's position on the fire pit, and flipped over the now-empty water pot for use as a lid.

It seemed the first step was finished.

Ceres faced Lawrence and indicated he needed a pen and paper.

"I am a chef employed by a certain country's royal family."

Ceres first wrote this and paused. Lawrence was not surprised to read "royal family" since he had paid so well and how freely he used liturgical script, which indicated a well-to-do upbringing. A regular brewer would not be the same.

"However, I originally worked for the princess's family, and I was placed where I presently am as a part of her dowry."

He wrote and suddenly took the pot in hand and closed his eyes, as if checking for something.

Then, he stuck his fingers directly into the hearth's coals and adjusted the flame. He did not seem at all bothered by the heat,

and it appeared he was not burnt. The hands of a master craftsman are thick, or so the saying went. That seemed to be exactly the case here.

"When the princess learned she would marry, she indulged her selfishness only once. She said she wished to soak in the famous waters of Nyohhira. If she did, she said, she would be able to overcome anything."

Those events had happened during a time more unstable than now. Lawrence nodded, and Ceres slowly closed his eyes. When he did, it seemed as though he could still hear the turmoil.

"She hid her origins and put up at an inn, while I accompanied her as her servant. She had a wonderful time and spent her days in what might have been her last moments of freedom, as well as preparing herself for the future."

For those who held high social status, bloodlines were nothing but a tool. Lawrence translated every detail for Holo, who made a sympathetic, glum face.

"However, the princess happened upon a young man there. He, too, was of noble lineage and they recognized one another's identities immediately, so we could not outright ignore him. While I looked on in amazement, the two became close."

As Lawrence conveyed this to Holo, her face darkened even more. With a saddened expression, she drew close to him and clung to his arm. It seemed as though she was praying, *I hope this will have a happy ending*.

"The princess was a noblewoman that quite gracefully maintained court etiquette, but in Nyohhira, she was simply herself. She held her liquor well so she did nothing but drink and dance, so much that the young man finally admitted defeat."

Holo was happy, moved by a woman who loved to drink and dance.

"But the fun days soon passed, and the princess was not so weak as to make a mistake and give into a passing temptation. When the time came, she quietly gathered her things, and said good-bye to the man she had danced with, with a single hand-shake."

He straightened his back but did not smile, as though imagining a strong princess who put on a brave front. Still clinging to Lawrence's arm, Holo stared intensely at Ceres's writing, even though there was no way she could have understood it.

"On the way home, the princess spoke not even once. When she finally did, it was the day of the wedding, when her life in a strange land, in a strange castle, with strange people began. I had not known how anxious she was. She was strong. She did, however, say one thing to me, who had accompanied her from her homeland. 'Do you remember the taste of the liquor there?' she asked. I, of course, could not dishonor the princess. I told her, 'I am a chef that has mastered the food of the court, and on my pride, I do remember.'"

Ceres glanced fleetingly over at the pot again and then slowly continued to write.

"Then she said, 'It's all right, then. If I can drink that anytime, it'll be all right.'"

The old man's hand stopped, but he did not look up from the paper. The only sound in the room was the *crack, crack* of the burning coal in the sunken hearth.

The rustling sound of clothes was Holo, leaning forward.

"So…Was there a familiar face where she was sent to marry?

No?”

It was common for nobility to not know the face of the person they were promised to in political marriages. Since that was expected, it was easy to imagine stories. Though it was to be a calculated marriage, they both already knew and grew attracted to each other in a place where they did not know their identities. It was a popular fantasy among the village girls.

And of course, Ceres was already well aware. Though he did not entirely understand Holo’s words, he slowly shook his head.

Holo inhaled sharply. Lawrence wrapped his arm around Holo’s small back.

“The king was a wonderful man, twelve years her senior. He took good care of her. They were blessed with children, and I’d never seen such a happy court before.”

Ceres looked at Holo and gave her a little smile.

Holo, knowing she had been fooled, for some reason hit Lawrence’s arm. He could tell that she seemed genuinely relieved. Ceres was excellent at telling stories. He likely told this one to his own grandchildren as well.

But there, he stopped writing.

There was one difference between stories and reality—reality did not stop there.

“The princess did not ask for that liquor once. There was no need. However, the king has taken ill, becoming bedridden for a long while, and she suddenly called upon me. She told me to fetch that liquor.”

It was likely not for her own sake, but for the king that was

pained in sickness and did not have much time left.

The kings of old colored their lives with battle and politics. The luxury of leisurely soaking in a hot spring was for nothing higher than the caged daughters of nobility.

He recalled Ceres's gloomy expression.

A chef's trade had the sole purpose of making people happy. In Ceres's professional life, this was likely his last and most important job.

"But you can't re-create the taste?" Lawrence asked as he wrote the same. Ceres dropped his shoulders and nodded.

"I have tried several different methods of brewing with local wheat already. I remember the taste, the ingredients, everything. But I cannot re-create it. The ale I was treated to here was so pure. I can tell the result of the brew if I know the taste of the water. *Otherwise*, I thought, as I went from house to house."

"Otherwise?"



Lawrence's question appeared on his face, and Ceres looked back at him before looking at Holo, for some reason.

His eyes squinted slowly, as though he was calmly smiling.

"They say the air of the land seeps into the drink at the time of the brewing. A dreary air produces a dreary brew. A cheerful air produces a cheerful brew. That is why I thought this could be the place."

After writing the last letter, he gave a meaningful smile. Holo cocked her head in confusion, but Lawrence cleared his throat in embarrassment. Earlier, he had seen them napping together by the hearth, and even now, Holo stuck to his side like a little girl.

Lawrence, by any means, had no courage to say that his own bathhouse was the best in Nyohhira, but he could say that it was different. Cyrus, too, had said such a thing to him earlier that day.

Lawrence and Holo, as husband and wife, definitely got along best in the whole village.

Lawrence, too, had heard of such a brewer's superstition, but he did not believe it. Ceres was likely the same. He was just searching desperately for some sort of clue.

"The water here is good. That is true for every house here. Since it is the same water they use to brew, the drink is also good. But it is an average *good*. That special flavor I tasted thirty years ago has not shown itself."

When Ceres finished writing, he produced several small hemp pouches from his rucksack. Inside was every possible variety of herb that could be harvested from the area. Holo, who had a strong nose, gave a small sneeze at the sudden explosion of scent.

“Flavor…”

Or perhaps the air of that time itself had melted into the taste.

Ceres, glum face unchanging, glared at the metal pot.

It sat there silently.

Holo had a good nose and was thus picky with taste, but she could not produce it. Hanna did not know much about making alcohol, either, so in the end, Lawrence went to Cyrus.

“The taste of the ale from thirty years ago?”

When he told him the story, Cyrus became clearly flustered.

“That’s when I first came here…,” he said, then closed his mouth and directed his gaze to the spot beside Lawrence.

Standing there was a visitor that came before he did.

“I was about your age then, boy.”

The speaker was an elderly man who had a perfectly round head and a long, white beard that gave the impression of steam rising from the baths. He was not tall, but in old age, one could see the reminders that he had been quite stout in his younger days. His name was Jeck, and he was the now-retired, former master of the bathhouse that served the best food in all of Nyohhira.

“But ale, right? That’s difficult stuff. With local wheat, if the malt roast is about the same, you won’t get a difference. If he says he’s mastered the food of the court, I don’t think he’d get that wrong.”

Without mentioning his true intentions, Ceres shared his information with Cyrus and the others.

“Does it depend on the year of the wheat?”

Cyrus asked this, and Jeck shook his head. The pair, separated in age almost as much as a father and son, were brought together by their love for making alcohol and seemed to be rather close as master and pupil.

“I don’t know if the harvest is really bad, but if you add wheat grinding to the wort before it becomes alcohol, something will come of it. That’s for someone with much greater skill than us.”

Jeck was also mindful of Ceres; it seemed the old bathhouse owner’s pride had been a bit hurt when Ceres looked unhappy about his food and drink. But when Lawrence told him that Ceres was a court chef, Jeck was shocked for another reason. For anyone who stood in the world of cooking, this man was an existence normally far beyond reach.

“He said ‘special flavor.’”

“Hmm…It might be the taste of the time…”

“Isn’t that a brewer’s superstition?” Cyrus asked.

“Hmm? Ah, you mean how the taste changes depending on the air of the place. That is true, but—”

“Huh?!”

Lawrence and Cyrus both raised their voices at the same time, and Jeck snorted.

“But it’s not about the mood of the place, which you hear often. As the weather changes, the earth does, too, and the taste

of the drink can actually change, even when made from the same ingredients. I'm sure, even the spirits of drink in the heavens alter like we do when the earth changes. And that's why our guest here came back. You can get the ingredients as long as you have gold, and something will come of it. Isn't that right?"

His question was directed at Lawrence. As a former merchant, his face was known throughout this northern land in a way. Jeck smiled like a mischievous child, and Lawrence could only feel obligated.

"That's, well, yes…It will take some time, but I can get them."

"He has the skill, he has the ingredients, and he's come all the way here. If he doesn't get the flavor after brewing with all that, then what tints it is the air of time…In a word, his memories."

However, would a chef who decorated the plates of royalty forget such a taste, even if it was thirty years ago?

Neither Lawrence nor Cyrus said anything, but shared this question between them with a glance. Jeck gave an exaggerated sigh.

"You two are still kids."

He spoke frankly.

"The food you eat when you're having fun is good because of that. It's even better when you're with pleasant friends. But if you sit and eat with your wife when you're in the middle of a fight, it won't taste like anything! That's how it is."

"…"

The two looked down, as though apologizing for their inattentiveness, and Jeck nodded dramatically. Lawrence liked him—he

reminded him of Holo.

"However, letting our guest go home with a frown is not Nyohhira's style." Jeck grumbled, running his hand over his head.

"When Cyrus told me earlier about our guest, he told me what you said, Lawrence. I agree with you. I was angry—'what a stubborn customer! It's his fault!'...and such. I didn't realize steam was clouding my soul. How regrettable that is."

Jeck spoke as he took Lawrence's hand.

"You've reminded me what's important at this old age. Thank you, Lawrence."

Hearing those words was too much for Lawrence, and he was at a loss. But Jeck was not teasing him nor making a joke, it seemed. Lawrence looked back at the old man in awe, like a child.

He gripped Jeck's hand in return with natural strength.

"Heh-heh. When you first came and built your bathhouse here, I thought, look at this timid man with no spine."

Jeck smiled and spoke freely, and though Cyrus did not laugh outright in front of Lawrence, he played it off with a cough.

"Sometimes, a person never fits into the place they live. But you were meant to come here, Mr. Lawrence."

Jeck clasped his shoulder, and he felt as though something was peeling off from his stiffened face.

Lawrence's expression, now soft, showed a smile of pure happiness.

"But when I first drank the water here, I was sick all the time."

“Ha-ha-ha. That’s the sulfur in the water. I had my first bath in these waters, so it’s nothing to me, but Cyrus here kept his mouth closed at first, too.”

“Even the water I used for bread was from the river or pure mountain water.”

When he said that, Lawrence recalled the cool taste of the water that Holo gave him after he came home drunk. Water made from snow melted in the heat of the baths had that taste. That was the aroma of Nyohhira.

That is why Cyrus continued, not thinking about it.

“You can taste the hot springs in everything.”

What?

They all spoke at once. Even Cyrus was surprised at his own words. The bathhouse masters, from the oldest to the newest, all looked at one another. “Impossible,” was written on all of their faces.

Lawrence went back through his memories. He immediately recalled his conversations with Cyrus and Ceres.

Good liquor came from good water. But the best water that Ceres had collected from the mountain was, according to him, just good. Following that, if they only thought based on what Cyrus said, then the reason Ceres could never reach his answer was clear.

This was Nyohhira. The guests were treated with the utmost care. Grumpy but well-paying guests were given even more special attention. Lawrence offered to call in musicians and dancers just for Ceres, who paid in gold pieces. Even the bread they gave him in his lunch was of the best quality. They did all they could in

their bathhouse. That was why there was something he never tasted while he was here.

It was what Cyrus said—liquor made from the least troublesome way to obtain water, the one they gave to drunks who could not tell the difference in flavors.

A simple ale made from snow that melted in the heat of the baths.

"…They do say that it is darkest underneath the candle stand."

Jeck groaned. Though there was no solid conclusion that was the answer, they felt close to touching something.

"I'm sure we can maintain Nyohhira's reputation with this," Cyrus said.

Lawrence watched the two of them, and they suddenly looked back.

"Well, what are we waiting for?! We have an unhappy guest at Lawrence's place!"

As though he was being scolded by his trade master, Lawrence jumped and hurriedly turned on his heel, soon placing his hand on the doorway. But then he realized this was not just his own accomplishment. When he thought this, he turned around to find Jeck and Cyrus smiling quietly.

"We'll be holding a commiseration party for those who could not make a guest smile. Go."

Jeck waved him off with a big smile of his own.

"We'll hear about it later."

Cyrus echoed his senior, picking up the barrel that sat at his feet and placing it on the counter. They did not look at Lawrence anymore, but he interpreted it as a sign of closeness. They saw travelers off for a long time because once they were gone, they would not meet again, perhaps for a long, long time. So why would they do that for him?

Lawrence, his chest bursting with happiness, left Cyrus's bathhouse and quickly returned to his own. Holo and Hanna, who were watching the next part of the brewing process with great interest, saw him return with curious faces.

Lawrence explained the circumstances, and Hanna, half in disbelief, brought water from snow that had been melted in the heat of the baths.

Ceres took a sip and closed his eyes and gave a deep sigh.

And when he opened his eyes, he smiled, as though the sun had finally shown its face through the clouds.

They ended up using two kinds of water in the brewing process, but the rest of the ingredients were the same. Indeed, even the brewer was the same, so the difference in taste simply depended on the water.

After a few days, the difference in the results was clear.

"I didn't know it would be so different."

Lawrence contemplated the taste of the frothy ale. He would not know the difference if it was just given to him, but side by side, he could tell. Ceres knew the difference, as he was always comparing with his memory from thirty years ago, though that was to be expected.

“With this, my final mission is complete.”

After finishing the two brews, Ceres wrote this on a paper. He was getting quite old, and though they were orders from his master, this court chef was likely already no longer in charge of the kitchen if he was able to be away from the manor for so long.

“Truly, I thank you.”

Ceres, the weight lifted from his shoulders, was a kind and gentle old man. Since he had found what he was looking for, there was no point in staying longer. He began to collect his luggage. Lawrence tried to offer change for the gold piece that Ceres gave him with a silver piece, but he refused.

He said it was a sign of thanks, and his expression became stubborn again.

And with the same look on his face, he wrote:

“It is payment for when I come here again, when I am retired and bored.”

Ceres faced him with a smile, and there was nothing more he could say. Even if it was just his word, Lawrence wrote in large letters, “We will be waiting for you!”

Ceres nodded happily.

When they saw their guest off, carrying the liquor he made on his back, he walked with a more vigorous step than when he came, which had been only a few days prior. Like liquor, it seemed waiting a bit helped bring back the memory better.

“’Tis your age,” Holo said flatly, pouring the rest of the ale that Ceres made into a cup.

“Hey, leave a little for me.”

Holo pretended not to hear, deliberately drinking it down and savoring the taste.

“Honestly…” He sighed, and with a big white frothy mustache under her nose on her silly face, Holo looked happy.

As he wondered why, she rested her head on his shoulder and said, “I must remember this taste.”

A taste to recall this land, this moment.

“Only in moderation.”

There was a hint of bitterness in Lawrence’s words. He would not live the same length of time as Holo. After he died, he did not want her to suffer from it.

But that, too, was the same as ale. A drink’s quality did not come from its sweetness.

“You fool.”

Holo wore a troubled smile and took Lawrence’s hand. When he died, instead of olive oil, he would rather this ale be used to anoint him. As he thought this, he took a drink from the cup Holo shared with him.

It was a drink from the bathhouse that conjured smiles and happiness. Indeed, perhaps it was a bit too sweet.

Muddy Messenger

Wolf and Wolf



MUDDY MESSENGER WOLF AND WOLF

He could hear the distant sounds of woodcutting, mixed with clattering cart wheels, a mule's whinny, and voices busily calling out to one another. If he closed his eyes, it almost felt like he was in a town that was being built.

The hustle and bustle signaled that winter was finally ending.

The weather was good, and there was no wind in the calm sky. The people in this remote mountain village called Nyohhira were working hard to wash off the dirt of winter.

"Gold *lumione*? Twenty…nineteen, actually. Silver *debau*, seventy-three. One, two piles of bronze *dip*…roughly six hundred, is that correct? Have you weighed them?"

There was a continuous flow of people in and out of the town meeting hall, and the smell of rusted metal hung over the place. Everyone had a bag in hand and dropped them onto the long table in the room's center. After loosening the drawstrings and emptying the contents, out came a whole variety of different coins.

"All right then, Mr. Alaise, we'll take it from here."

"Thanks, Lawrence."

The bathhouse master, who had more hair in his beard than above his hairline, thanked Lawrence as he rubbed his head.

Sitting at the seat of honor, Lawrence nodded with a smile as

his hands blackened with work. Or more accurately, he was so busy that the smile was plastered to his face and he could not take it off. That was because one after the other, the masters from the different bathhouses arrived with the coins that guests had paid them over the winter.

He sorted the coins—typically there were five to seven kinds, and at most between ten to twenty or more—then had to count each, and then weigh them if the situation called for it. That was because a guest with too much time on his or her hands might have carefully whittled away at the coins to pilfer the silver and bronze shavings. The money changer would buy the same amount of coins for less if the weight did not add up properly. Lawrence had been at it since morning.

The hot spring village, Nyohhira, was located on the frontiers of frontiers in the middle of nowhere. The various currencies that passed between various peoples often ended their long journeys here. So twice a year, the inhabitants brought the coins they collected from guest payments to a bigger town that needed them. There they bought the materials they needed for the new season, hired craftsmen to repair the bathhouses, and left the rest of the money with the money changer. They would not gain anything from hoarding coins in boxes that had gone moldy from the steam, and they did not know what sort of thieves they would attract if news spread about treasure holed up in the mountains.

The bathhouse masters did this work every year in rotation, and this year it was the master of Spice and Wolf—Lawrence's turn. It had been ten-odd years since they opened in Nyohhira and he had spent many years on the other side of the table asking for assistance, but he never thought this job would be so hectic.

"Mr. Lawrence, the goods from Alvo are here!"

Though counting coins already took considerable concentra-

tion, that was not his only job.

“Tell Mr. Dabon, and put it in the shed!”

Nyohhira was a small village deep in the mountains, but there were people that lived even deeper in the wilderness, scattered about in even smaller communities. It was around this time of year that they came to call on Nyohhira, when they could finally take the thawed mountain paths. These people brought the hemp and twine they had made during the winter or carried a heap of furs on their backs and traded them with the things they could only get in a village, like alcohol, food, and metal goods. The people of Nyohhira took more than half of these products for themselves, and the rest they took down to the towns with the money to sell.

It was around this time that Nyohhira transformed from a village of healing waters to a remote marketplace.

“Mr. Lawrence! The owner of Adino said he wants to change his order.”

“Mr. Lawrence! Where should I store the hemp?”

“Mr. Lawrence!”

“Mr. Lawrence!”

When he finally came to a good stopping point, he was left without the energy to even stand. His ears rang, and he felt as though he could still hear his name being called. Once he had been a merchant, and he should have been used to such busy exchanges. He had done business in a market so clamorous there was barely any room to stand, where he could hardly hear his own yelling voice. All that now belonged to a distant past. He certainly felt a faint nostalgia for the tumult of those times. But now, he was much too happy simply working for the village he lived in.

This engagement would continue for several days. He had to work hard so that the other bathhouse owners would not laugh at him. So every day he went straight home and went to bed early.

When he stood up to do just that, he could hear masters loitering outside the meeting hall entrance and their chattering voices.

“Oh, this is new.”

“Mr. Lawrence? Yeah, he’s inside.”

“But really, you always look so young. I thought you were your daughter!”

He could hear the conversation from the partly open door, and before long, in came a familiar silhouette.

As he stood from his chair, he wore a small smile.

“Hello.”

He felt all his fatigue slip away when he heard that voice. The one that peeked in through the doorway was a small girl, wearing a heavy overcoat that reached down to her ankles and a hood over her head. She held a small wine cask to her chest, and if someone who was not familiar with her saw, they would think she was a maidservant. There still was a hint of youth in the face under the hood.

But once this young girl stood in front of Lawrence, she grinned audaciously.

“You look like a sheared sheep.”

Her usual barb pricked his ears. The girl standing before him was not what she appeared to be. Though she looked like a teenager on the outside, she was hiding animal ears underneath

her hood, and she even had a tail growing from her back. Her true form was a centuries-old giant wolf that could devour a person whole, who lived in wheat, and—

Lawrence's vaunted wife, Holo.

"You didn't have to come get me."

Typically, it was their daughter Myuri, who looked exactly like Holo, who came for him. But Myuri had left on a journey, and they wondered which parent she took after.

"I thought you might cry had I let you return home alone," she said and pushed the cask onto him. Lawrence removed the cork, and his stomach tightened at the smell of mead that wafted from it. That was when he recalled that he had nothing to eat since morning. He filled his mouth with drink, and the unbearable sweetness soothed his tired body. Holo often talked about this and that, but she always looked out for him.

And it was likely that the lonely one was Holo. Winter was over and the guests had gone home. Col, who had supported the bathhouse for a long time, was away traveling, and to top it off, their only daughter, Myuri, had followed him. They had one strange guest after all that, but he, too, left a short while ago. It was especially cute that Holo came to see him because she could not stand being left alone in the empty bathhouse. He tightly embraced her slender body, which seemed to draw closer to him than usual.

"But 'tis quite the amount of goods in the shed next door. The coins, too, seem like a mountain of treasure."

"Oh right, you've never seen it before, huh?"

Holo almost never left the bathhouse if she did not have anything particular to do outside. For one, she did not age with time

and was not human, so she tried not to be seen. There was also the simple fact that she just preferred staying at home.

“I think there’s more than usual this year…Every year, I watch how the others work, but I was surprised to find out how tough this is. I was so busy working all day today. Thinking about how this will continue for a few days is a bit scary.”

He gave a wry smile and had another drink, and Holo smiled again.

“What is it?”

“Heh-heh. I’m happy.”

“Why?”

Holo was wagging her tail under her overcoat. Lawrence thought she was tricking him somehow, and he unwittingly checked himself.

“You are slowly being accepted as a member of this village.”

Holo had lived for hundreds of years in a wheat field, watching over a town called Pasloe. She understood how much work it took for a new resident to finally fit in with the town.

Knowing that, she was happy.

“I’ve been working quite hard, too, you know.”

With a tired look, he put on a front, though seemingly on purpose. Holo giggled and held out her hand to help him up.

“Only since you have had my help.”

“I suppose so.”

He took her small hand and stood up.

Lawrence greeted the merchants gathered in the meeting hall, then exited the building. The sky was madder-lake red, but the snow on the ground was dyed indigo by nightfall. Tall mountains enveloped the village on all sides, so there was no true sunset in Nyohhira. It would dip straight from a bright sunny day into evening's dim murkiness.

"But…," Lawrence murmured. "Even with what you've already done, I feel like I need more."

"Hmm?"

A reason that work was so busy today was that there were few young folk to take over the chores.

Kalm, whose father Cyrus was also a bathhouse master and rather close with Lawrence, came over to help, but even then it was hectic.

As he counted and weighed the masses of coins, he could not count how many times he wished that Col was still around, since he had set out to travel a bit earlier. He also thought about how his daughter Myuri could have taken care of collecting and sorting goods from the surrounding communities.

But the two had left on a journey together. Originally, it was just supposed to be Col, but wild-hearted Myuri apparently secreted herself into his luggage. Holo would tease Lawrence for being overly protective, but he thought it was normal to worry. And what's more, though her partner was Col, she was still traveling alone with a boy!

"If only our two younglings were still around…"

There were many meanings in the words he uttered, but she

chose to interpret a good one.

“Well, you have been sagging lately. Perhaps some labor will do you good, as well.”

She said this while poking his side.

He thought that the dignified look of a fat chin and a big belly suited the master of a bathhouse, but Holo was not fond of that, so he always ate and drank in moderation. The most he did to cultivate his poise as a master was grow his beard out a bit.

“That’s true, but if they don’t come back for the time being, today I realized it really is a problem if we don’t hire more people. When the customers start coming again, there’s no way I’d be able to run the bathhouse by myself.” Lawrence also added, “That includes your mending and Hanna, our resident cook’s work.”

He had not forgotten that gratitude was the key to a happy marriage. Holo snorted, as though saying, *Very well*.

“Shall I suggest going down to town soon, then? You may hire anyone you need there, since ’tis full of people.”

“That’s true, but can I find someone that’s as excellent a worker as Col?”

He sighed, and Holo gave him an exasperated look.

“Wheat does not bear its fruits immediately.”

“Hmm?” He looked back at her and finally understood what she was trying to say. “Bring them up with your own hands, you mean.”

“Mm. You don’t know how hard I’ve worked.”

She looked at him intently, and all he could do was smile wryly. There were definitely many parts of him that were the result of Holo's help.

"Well, you too, have become a proper male."

She looked up at him and smiled proudly.

She could say anything to him with that smile.

"But we still have you, so I can't just hire anyone."

He could feel Holo's body shrink a bit when he sighed.

It was a bit rough for Holo to live in a human village, since she was not human and did not age.

Now, the woman named Hanna, who helped out at Lawrence's bathhouse, was unaware of the full details, but they had convinced her that Holo was the incarnation of a bird or something similar. Col was genuinely a normal human, but they had traveled together in the past and knew Holo's true form. As for their daughter Myuri, it went without saying.

They needed to hire someone that would not be shaken by this fact and willing to keep the secret, or maybe someone who was not human at all.

"I can ask Millike."

That was an influential name in Svernel and, at the same time, one of the few who knew Holo's identity.

He was also not human and was a reliable person they could consult with on these problems.

"If we can't find anyone even then…it might be good if we

stretch out a bit further."

"Stretch, you say?"

"Yeah. We've been holed up in the mountains for quite a while now. Even I'm surprised."

When they first started their bathhouse in Nyohhira, he could not really believe that they would never set out traveling again. He lived his life up until then on the road—from town to town, village to village. He knew people here and there, and he belonged to the loosely affiliated merchant association from his hometown. But never staying in one place for more than a month, he never made anything he could call a friendship. At worst, he feared there would be no grave for him to rest in when he died.

But at some point, the part of him that proudly said, *In return, I get to see most of the world*, disappeared, and he entirely isolated himself from the world beyond the mountain.

However, he never felt trapped. Rather, he was quite happy.

"I walked around so much that you would tease me and call me a dog. But now I stay put even more than the hemp cloth in the shed."

Lawrence turned back, a short while after they had left the meeting hall, and at the bottom of the gentle slope, he could see the large building and the shed that sat next to it.

"Can you believe this? I heard that in Svernel at the foot of the mountain, hemp cloths are flying off the shelves. But some of the cloth isn't used there and instead sold in another town. They say they travel like that, down the river, before finally reaching the ocean."

"The ocean?"

On their journey over ten years ago, he had sailed the ocean with Holo, and near their travels' end, they made a side trip to the beach in summertime. Holo, hearing about the ocean, of which she had little connection to, looked off distantly.

"The world is at peace, and trade is booming. People have started thinking lugging their goods across land isn't good enough anymore, so they are building an incredible number of boats now. And apparently some hemp from our village transforms into the sails on some of those boats. And then, filled with wind, they'll face the endless ocean that I've only ever heard about in stories."

Riding on the hopes of many people, that cloth would go through endless journeys. Instead of snow as far as the eye could see, maybe it would wind up in a country where scorching sand piled high like mountains. There, the ship's hold would fill up with fragrant spices, gold, and exotic fruits before heading home. It was a risky business that could mean great riches if the traders returned safely or losing everything if something went wrong on the way.

Beyond the sky Lawrence looked up at every morning as he cleaned the front of the bathhouse, wondering how the weather would be that day, lay such a world. And now, that world rocked as it faced a new era.

Long ago, he would not be able to sit still knowing that.

"It might be good to take a whiff of adventure every once in a while."

That way, Lawrence could restore his vigor and reapply himself to work hard at running the bathhouse. It would even be perfect if he could find outstanding staff to work at the house. Lawrence merely entertained the idea, but Holo took it in a dif-

ferent way.

He realized this after working for a few days, when he was about to travel to Svernel.

Under the blinding sunlight, he checked to make sure he had all the cargo he needed to go to town, and confirmed with the other masters the contents of their purchases. When all the little preparations were squared away, at last he hooked the horse to the wagon when someone pulled themselves up onto the driver's perch.

Though she was supposed to stay and look after the bathhouse, there was Holo, dressed for travel.

"...What's wrong?"

His voice faltered as he asked, only because Holo, who sat on the perch, wore a terrifying expression on her face.

"Nothing." Holo responded flatly, and she stared down at him. "'Twould be a pain should a fool like you lose your way."

"..."

Lawrence stared back at her blankly before he realized what was going on.

Long ago, Holo left her homeland of Yoitsu and could not go home for hundreds of years. During that time, her homeland had been swallowed up by the changing era, and the ones she once called companions had vanished. To Holo, who would live hundreds of years, she could not stand the possibility of someone going off somewhere and for that to be their eternal parting.

When Lawrence thought this, he regretted his carelessness from a few days ago, suggesting they stretch and travel a bit.

But as he checked the horse's yoke, he could not help but think. Holo had supported Col's decision—and particularly Myuri's choice—to leave the village more than Lawrence did. She was confident that her own daughter could safely overcome anything she might face. So she should not worry as much as she did if he was only heading to around Svernel, then back.

She simply might have wanted to come along since staying behind to watch the house was surprisingly lonely.

"I, too..."

Holo spoke suddenly, as Lawrence was gathering how she felt.

"...Fancy the delicious foods in town."

She spoke with a pout on her face, so he left it at that.

He greeted the other bathhouse masters, who stared in surprise at Holo sitting on the cart, then briskly finished his preparations and led the wagon outside. Though the sunshine was like that of a spring sun, snow still lay thick around the mountains surrounding Nyohhira.

"Keep it warm for me."

He turned to Holo as he spoke, and she faced the other way, huffing. That brought back memories of old times together. It was when the wagon bed had been filled with Holo's favorite apples, so many they could not finish them all.

Lawrence jumped onto the driver's box and, in high spirits, gripped the reins.

On the road to Svernel, they had to stop and stay one night each

at an inn, then a small settlement, making it roughly a three-day journey. Though it would be faster to take a boat on the river that flowed from the village outskirts, it was wise not to use it during this season. The melted snow raised the river's water level, and it was currently used to transport harvested lumber down from the mountains, so it would not be a cozy boat ride at all.

As they traveled the mountain paths, he could see the logs floating along whenever he caught a glimpse of the river beyond the trees. According to the woodcutters that came and used their baths, timber had been selling rapidly these past few years, and most, though not all, was used to make boats. And some of those boats would sail untold distances across the sea.

Lawrence was proud to think that long ago, he worked as a part of the trade network that blanketed the land. But now, he could not imagine going back to that world.

"What?"

Holo sat next to Lawrence, working hard at her mending, and noticing his gaze, she peered up.

"Oh, nothing. You look good is all."

Holo was not dressed as a traveling nun the way she had long ago. She wore a plain, wool-woven hood over her head, and from it hung her roughly braided hair. On her shoulders she wore a shawl that had the barest embroidery in the corner—she seemed proper and modest. Since she looked young, if she behaved herself, she seemed like an innocent, meek young bride.

She sat next to him, dressed like this, working on the mending, so there was no need to foul her mood.

And there was no more reason for him to go to the ends of the earth searching for treasure.

“You…hmm. ’Tis not bad.”

Lawrence had not held reins in quite a while, so Holo’s evaluation was quite forgiving, considering how awkwardly he managed the horse. The weather was pleasant, so she seemed to be in a good mood as well.

“And we shall see your capacity as a male once we’ve reached the town, aye?”

She narrowed her eyes, and her mouth twisted into a mischievous smile.

Even Lawrence knew she would say that. There was a reason they brought down the coins Nyohhira collected during the winter at this time of year.

That was because they held a big spring festival in town, so people gathered, trade bustled, and everyone soon ran out of coins. Without hard currency, they could not do business. Supplying the town at this time with coin relied on the basic concept of bringing goods to places that needed them and selling for a high price.

And at the same time, he need not ask what the wolf, the gourmet, would want in a town at the height of festivities.

“I don’t mind. You can ask for whatever food you like.”

“Oh?”

Lawrence spoke to Holo, who seemed surprised, not expecting him to be so generous.

“I know you’re really taking our finances into consideration.”

He gave her his merchant’s smile, and she pulled back, glaring

at him.

“You are quite sassy in old age.”

“It’s all thanks to the great wisewolf’s discipline.”

Holo puffed out her cheeks and stomped on Lawrence’s foot. He stomped back, and she head-butted his shoulder.

The horse pulling the wagon swished its tail, as though telling them to take it elsewhere.

“We still have a heap of things to deal with, though. Don’t be pouty if I can’t entertain you in town.”

“I am not unreasonable, like Myuri.”

Their daughter Myuri’s unreasonable nature suited her, but Lawrence believed that part of her personality came from Holo.

Lawrence looked at her with the same look as before, and she stomped on his foot again. This time, it was stronger.

“Hmph. ’Tis not even all that much. Sell the goods in the back, buy things for the village, and then look for workers.”

“Just looking for workers might take a while…And there’s still more.”

“Hmm?”

She gazed at him doubtfully in response. She was likely checking to see if his head was filled with schemes to turn a quick profit. On their journey over ten years ago, that was often the source of all their biggest, rowdiest adventures.

“The whole town is busy preparing for the festival. It’s a custom for Nyohhira to help with the preparations in exchange for

the town's money changer association buying all the village's goods at once. So I'll probably be busy with that during the festival."

"Hmm."

Nyohhira was wholly reliant on Svernel for the distribution of their goods, so it was a give-and-take relationship.

"So what will you help with during the festival?"

"I don't know all the details…but I'm sure there are several jobs. I've heard that it's been quite a lively festival these past few years."

"I know that. 'Tis why I wished to see it with you…"

Holo spoke dejectedly. She was craftily letting her adorably true feelings show.

"And this time, there's one more important job."

Holo, who had her lips pursed in boredom, looked up expectantly.

"I have to find out more about the people who might be building a new hot spring town on the other side of the mountain."

That was the most shocking information that spread this winter in Nyohhira.

He knew nothing about the details, but traveling merchants told the village about this rumor.

Though it would be on the other mountainside, most roads in this area led to Svernel, so they would end up fighting over customers. And of course, they would likely get their food, drink, and

other necessities from Svernel, so prices would rise accordingly.

He had to confirm whether the rumors were true or not.

“So I’m going to be very busy in town.”

As Lawrence declared his intentions, Holo hunched over, resting her chin in her hand and sighing.

“At the very least, don’t trip as you run around so much.”

“What, you’re not going to help? It might spell danger for our bathhouse and Nyohhira itself.”

The villagers saw Lawrence as one of their own, since they entrusted him with bringing the coins down to town during this season, and he was so overjoyed, he became overeager. He spoke pointedly, and Holo looked at him with uncertain eyes.

“Well then, shall I discover where they are digging holes for their baths, then cover them up, burying those people with it?”

When Holo spoke, Lawrence flinched. Sitting there was the wolf’s avatar, a being that held more power than humans knew.

Holo once again sighed at Lawrence’s response and reached out to pinch his beard.

“You, still, cannot, forget, playing, the, merchant, prince, still? Hmm?”

“Ow, stop, ouch, hey—”

She pulled his beard, moving his face side to side.

“Hmph. Whoever they may be, we shall always be ready, making our guests happy as we always do. Should that be enough, they will come. If not, then they will go there. Is that not correct?”

She let go of his beard, and Lawrence looked at her again, rubbing his chin.

The centuries-old wisewolf had appeared.

“Well, that’s true…”

“Very well, then.”

Her mood completely changed, and she drew close to Lawrence.

“Once the bathhouse empties out, won’t you spend more time with me? Our troublesome Myuri has left on her travels, you know.”

“…”

There was a sweet seduction that accompanied her decadent invitation.

Lawrence wavered dizzily for a moment, then shook his head and returned to his senses.

“It’s not just our problem. It’s the whole village’s problem.”

He spoke as though confirming it to himself, and Holo cackled, spotting his weak restraint.

“Well, we have no intentions to lay waste to our own territory. We shall find who it is that challenges us. That path will build competition between us.”

Holo was worth the help of a hundred people.

Lawrence gently adjusted the shawl on her shoulders and said, “I’m counting on you.”

In the three days it took to descend the mountain, the snow began to melt and it became much muddier. Because of that, there were many times when the wagon wheels got stuck and they were unable to move, but passing travelers helped them, and they finally made it to Svernel during an afternoon.

"Hmm…I've become a muddy rat."

Holo sat on the wagon and spoke disdainfully, examining her deerskin boots, thin wool trousers, and the woolen hem around her waist. As though she had anticipated it getting dirty, she stuffed the bushy tail growing from her behind into a special cloth bag like so many grapes.

But Lawrence, standing next to Holo—who much like a princess, tended to mind even the smallest hint of dirt on her clothes—was in a worse state. He had gotten out and pushed the wagon many times as it had floundered in the mud, so he was stained from head to toe, to the point where dried mud fell from his hair in flakes when he shook his head.

"I want to take a bath as soon as I can…"

"I, too, wish to care for my tail."

Lawrence asked himself whether he was doting on Holo a bit too much.

Then, after the soldiers guarding the city walls pitied the pair for their sorry state, they entered the town of Svernel.

There was still some snow here and there in town, and the streets were muddy. Of course, the wheels did not get stuck this time, but there were so many people and mud splashed everywhere, so everyone walking around had mud up to their knees. No one seemed to mind, since it was the time of year when there was no use worrying about it.

Holo watched all this, and her expression suggested she would not dare leave the driver's perch, as she cradled her pride, the beautiful tail stuffed in the bag.

"Okay...For now, we need to go to the money changers' association, but I hope we can get there all right."

It had been several years since he was last here, and the town had quickly developed and was rather different. Business was booming here, and Svernel grew. A new city wall encircled the old one that had protected the town when they first visited over ten years ago. And there were plans to build an even bigger wall. Gaudy mansions lined some paths, and street stalls stood packed together on the large avenues.

Lawrence had some trouble controlling the horse in the crowds, and when they finally reached the money changers' association with uneasy movements, he was covered in sweat. Holo, still on the perch, did not seem to understand why he was so sweaty as she handed him a handkerchief.

He wiped his face and did his best to at least clean off the mud from his clothes. Currency exchange was the center of the economy, and its practitioners held esteemed places in every town. The association building here, too, was an impressive five stories tall. Lawrence cleared his throat and worked up his courage, so as to not be overwhelmed by its presence, then called out through the door.

"Excuse me!"

But there was no answer, and no response even when he knocked on the door. With no other choice, he opened the door and peeked inside, when a humid heat wafted into his face. It was busier inside than the bustling streets outside, and the money changers, who all seemed to have gathered from throughout the

town, were clinging to desks stuffed into the hall. They all fixed their attention on the scales, as though taking part in some sort of ritual, and were writing things down. Lawrence recognized that the hard smell was one he had just experienced a scant few days ago—the smell of many coins.

"Excuse me!" he called out once more, and finally, an elderly money changer, sitting at a desk near him with dark circles under his eyes, yelled back at him.

"This isn't the inn! That's the next area over!"

The old man likely knew immediately that he was a traveler from outside the walls when he saw Lawrence's appearance.

"No, I've come from Nyohhira! I've brought goods!"

After Lawrence spoke, the atmosphere suddenly changed.

Everyone looked as though they had seen food for the first time in three days.

"Nyohhira?! He said Nyohhira!"

"The coins! Have you brought the coins?!"

"Where are they? Bring them in now! Do you have bronze *jinie* pieces? Give us everything you have!"

"Bring silver *debau* here! No, any silver piece will do! Our exchange might collapse at any moment!"

Just as he was almost swallowed up by the sea of pushy money changers, there came an iron pot's deafening clatter.

"Calm down! We will distribute coins as agreed!"

He heard the voice emanating from the farthest place inside

the first-floor hall, a step above everyone else. There was a rotund, elderly money changer, who had a magnificent white beard that reached his chest.

“First, show our guest some hospitality! Our association’s reputation depends on this!”

He was likely the president of their organization, and when he spoke, the ghastly money changers hesitantly returned to their places. Instead, a youth who appeared to be the chore boy approached him unsteadily. He was clearly sleep-deprived, and his fingers were coated black from handling too many coins.

He shook his head lightly, and it seemed as though numbers would fall out of his ears.

“C-come this way, please…”

He spoke uncomfortably, as though he had not spoken for a long time or he had talked too much and his voice had gone hoarse, and unsteadily led Lawrence outside. Had his breath not produced white clouds, it would have been easy to think he was dead.

The boy walked alongside the building for a bit, then used his entire weight to open a large, grated door. There, carved out from some building’s first floor, was a large passageway that led to a courtyard.

Prompted by his guide, Lawrence brought in his wagon and found himself relieved by the firm sensation the stones provided under his feet. The right-hand side of the passageway connected to the hall where he encountered the busy associates from earlier, and it was evidently built for unloading goods. Since this was a place with lots of snow, it was designed so that they could receive aristocrats or exchange goods without them getting dirty here.

Before long, the door connecting to the hall opened, and out came the elderly money changer who had yelled earlier, with an attendant in tow. The boy called him "president," so he was indeed the money changers' association leader.

"Well then, apologies for earlier. Everyone's been working all day and night, and some are going crazy."

"With the town this busy, that's something I can understand."

Above them, there was an elevated footbridge, and from the dim passage he could clearly see the endless flow of jam-packed people.

No matter how many coins he tossed to them, they would swallow them right up.

"I don't mind how the town grows every year, but we can only handle so much activity. But I'm really glad you came when you did. The coins are gone from the money changer's vault—it's like a bakery without bread."

Of course, I've come aiming exactly for this time, was something he should keep quiet about to maintain their amicable relationship.

"And as with every year, you wouldn't mind if we hold on to goods besides the coins, yes?"

"Yes, I know it's such a busy time for you, but…"

"Ha-ha-ha. In return, we'll have you working hard during the festival! And this year, they've sent quite a young fellow! How reassuring!"

The president patted Lawrence's shoulders as he spoke, his hands sturdy enough to bend a thin coin. On his fingertips lay a

money changer's years of experience dealing with various currencies.

"Well, we can talk about that once you wash off the dust…no, the mud, I believe, from your journey. Business can wait until after you've cleaned up. It is my honor to draw the waters for the bath of someone from Nyohhira, a village famous for their hot springs."

The president gave a loud laugh. Lawrence respectfully accepted the gracious offer.

"Tell the boy to picket the horse in the courtyard. We have a room ready for you, so feel free."

Everything had been taken care of. Though for a moment, Lawrence hesitated entering the association building with muddy shoes. Quietly peeking into the hallway, he could see a muddy dog and roaming chickens milling about, so he was relieved. Though the animals likely came in following the heat, they were also after the leftovers that the money changers left behind as they worked. When Holo passed them, the dog crouched in surprise and fluffed up his tail.

Lawrence and Holo were led to a beautiful room on the second floor. The furniture was exquisite, and the association's wealth was ostentatiously on display. Opening the wooden window and scanning the street below, he could see how tightly packed the crowds were and wondered how he managed to weave the wagon through the gaps.

It was busy, it was chaotic, and it was filled with life.

"This is going to be a fun stay," Lawrence murmured and breathed in the town air.

Lawrence received plenty of hot water for a bath, and after washing off the mud, he finally felt revived. His clothes were also muddy, but all he could do was wash his coat and dry it on the stove before he slept. For now, he brushed off what mud he could, and a nostalgic smile grew on his face.

"Is something funny?"

Holo, gazing out the window, had noticed and turned around to face him.

"Well, I remember when I was a fledgling merchant, I brushed off fleas or lice or something like this once."

Holo suddenly made a disgusted face and hid her bushy tail behind her.

"Refrain from coming near me."

"It was a long time ago."

He tried to reassure her, but Holo did not change her doubtful face and looked away in a huff.

Then, she leaned against the window frame and stared outside reproachfully.

As Lawrence thought about what an oddly bad mood she was in, she groaned.

That was when he finally realized…

"If you want to catch a rabbit, you have to stick your hand into the rabbit hole, even if it means crawling on the ground."

She wanted to go shopping among the crowded stalls, but she did not want to get muddy while doing it.

Every day, she combed out her beautiful tail, arranging how the hair lay, and oiled it to a glossy sheen.

She turned to Lawrence slowly, her reddish eyes watering, looking up toward him.

"...You want me to buy things for you? But I just cleaned myself..."

Holo's face suddenly brightened. Lawrence thought himself wretched for being so easily moved by her acting. He shook his head and steeled himself.

"You've been a bit too lazy ever since Myuri left."

The other bathhouse owners lamented that their cute wives transformed once they had children, but Holo did not change much. At best, one could say there were quite a few times where she maintained her dignity as a wolf around Myuri.

But now, even her mending was completely falling apart.

"Even though, when I first met you, you had a maiden's heart and wished to keep our relationship simple..."

His wife spoke, hugging her tail and hiding her mouth, with a sad expression on her face.

Lawrence put his hand to his forehead and covered his eyes, since her move was so effective.

It was long ago that he was afraid he would grow bored of his relationship with Holo as the months and years passed. As he got older, he felt as though he was growing more susceptible to Holo's wiles. Though his daughter Myuri was cuter, Holo was different and knew all the ways she could push him into submission.

He sighed and gazed out the window, standing next to her.

“So? Which stall do you want me to go to?”

Holo beamed and took Lawrence’s arm. She wagged her tail and leaned out the window.

“Mm, there is fried lamprey, and rabbit stew, and a pie shop that uses plenty of pig fat, then, over there—”

He gazed at her from the side as she talked happily and did not bother to listen.

When he was going to kiss her cheek, she suddenly slapped him.

“Are you listening?!”

“…”

Fair words fill not the belly.

Like a trained dog, he looked to the shops that Holo pointed out and noted her orders.

Though Lawrence had many things to do in Svernel, Holo sent him on her errands. He did think it was for the best if she stayed in a good mood.

He exited their room and went down the stairs, taking the chickens that would not give way and guiding them into the hallway’s corner. It was when he put his hand on the door of the passageway that led to the courtyard—

“Oh, are you going out?”

From the passage facing the workroom came the white-bearded president. He was wiping his hands with a handkerchief, so he must have been on break.

“Yes, we have not eaten yet, so I was planning on going out to buy something.”

It was the courtesy for a traveler to prepare their own food when borrowing a room.

“Oh! In that case, would you like to join me? Let’s send the boy to do the shopping.”

Accepting offers of hospitality was courtesy as well. It would be much too brazen to order the things that Holo wished for at this point, so he remained silent. The association president seemed rather old, so it would likely end up being food that differed from Holo’s preferences. He turned his thoughts to figuring out how he would convince Holo to bear with it, but his fears turned out to be groundless.

“Well then, don’t hesitate and help yourselves! I’m sorry it’s such a filthy place, though!”

The president led him and Holo into an inner room on the first floor, and it was likely a dining hall or meeting room for the association members most days. The room was filled with cargo, and the goods from Nyohhira were in there, too; this was just a portion of the goods that passed through the town in this season. Of course, the scale was incomparable to Nyohhira.

And atop the table was another mountain—a huge variety of oily foods.

“I’m sure you are tired from traveling during this time of year. And we want you to work hard preparing for the festival! Eat your fill as you please!”

The president's voice was rather loud. He may have been used to raising his voice in the workplace, but he was probably this energetic all the time. At any rate, there was a thick cut of smoked venison that had Holo's eyes sparkling, and she boldly stuck a knife into it and took a bite. Had Lawrence met her at an inn, he would have thought she was a bandit chief.

"Are you all right with ale to drink? We have wine, as well."

Since it was not possible to harvest grapes in cold areas, wine must have been an expensive import. Lawrence's former merchant nature kicked in and he tried to restrain Holo, but she luckily chose the cheaper ale. Of course, she was not being modest. She simply thought that ale was more suited to a table filled with greasy foods. Naturally, it did not seem as though she would restrain herself when it came to food.

"Ba-ha-ha-ha! That's a good way to eat!"

Holo garnished a boiled sausage, which was so stuffed with meat it seemed to be bursting, using plenty of mustard and bit into it. The only ones who would be complimented on their restraint would be the aristocratic ladies. Common folk had fewer standards of evaluation—eat well, drink well, and work well.

"But really, it is an honor as a money changer to sit and feast with you like this, Mr. Lawrence!"

"No, please."

Lawrence began to feel embarrassed, but something confused him.

He was going to finally introduce himself to the president, but instead Lawrence heard his name first.

"I'm sorry, have we met somewhere before?"

He would never forget so easily such a rotund, white-bearded money changer. Then, the association president bit into meat still on the bone and washed it down with ale before laughing.

"What are you talking about?! You are a hero to us money changers—nay, the patron saint of trade! And your wife has not changed a bit since then! I knew right away!"

Holo, who was spreading butter onto the fried lamprey, looked up as though she had been called.

"It was ten…fifteen years ago? I can still remember your wife yelling bravely out the inn window. We still talk about how she crushed those depraved merchants' schemes with such a beautiful speech! But there were some parts that stung us money changers."

Holo, not too interested, bit into the fried lamprey, then drank her ale to wash down the hot oil.

But Lawrence felt proud when he heard what the president said.

That was the last big adventure he and Holo undertook together.

"Anyhow, without your accomplishments, the Debau Company would have decayed and become a boring company right about now, and the silver *debau* that brightened the entire northern region may never have been born. And there is no way this town would have grown as big as it did."

At the time, Lawrence and his companions found themselves caught up in a giant plot. Since the convenience of transportation in this region was virtually nonexistent, centralized power had not been established, so there was a grandiose plan to unify the region by establishing a standardized currency. The ones who had

dreamed up such an outrageous thing were called the Debau Company.

But it was the way of the world in that wherever there was a plan, there would always be someone trying to foil it, and the Debau Company very nearly had to give up and start over. The one who saved them from that fate was Lawrence, and the one who supported him, Holo. That was why it was possible to claim that had they not been there, the silver *debau*—currently the most reliable silver piece in the region, a coin engraved with a design of the sun—would not exist.

But after starting their bathhouse in Nyohhira, the birth of their daughter Myuri, and the bustle of daily life, Lawrence had completely forgotten. A long time ago, he might have held his chest high in overflowing pride, but now he reacted with only a small smile and washed down the memory with some ale.

"That was all the will of God. And only possible due to the ties we had with many people."

They did nothing more than play a small part. At that time, they were, at any rate, just a lonely wolf that had been left behind by the passage of time who forgot her way home and a simple traveling merchant.

"And the silver *debau* is in circulation all thanks to the Debau Company's fiscal management."

"Heh-heh. Those who act modestly are the most frightening. Though the Debau Company is rather frightening, too. They're very strict in managing us."

There were endless kinds of currency in a merchant's purse. Like a power struggle between two countries, the strong determined what coins people used the most. At the worst, the Debau Company controlled business in the northern region by putting

the silver *debau* into circulation. In order to do that, they were thoroughly overseeing its circulation by maintaining its exchange rate and melting down other silver coins.

"The Debau Company now is less like a company and more like a nation of merchants, and the markets are their territory. Silver is stronger than the sword. They treat their vaults as if they were armories."

The world of money and power was one filled with plots.

Long ago, Lawrence thought he could disrupt such a world, but he looked back on his naiveté with a laugh.

"I'm still proud to think that I was involved with such a powerful company as Debau as a humble peddler, even if it was just a little bit."

"What! Being where you need to be when you need to be is a merchant's true skill. Ah no, you own a bathhouse now."

The president laughed and poured ale into Lawrence's mug.

"It seems where you needed to be was Nyohhira."

The president, who had a long relationship with the people of Nyohhira, knew what it meant for them to bring their coins and goods at this time of year.

He cracked the smile of a genial old man and nodded over and over.

"Though it's all and well to settle into the place you belong."

As Lawrence recalled the breadth of business negotiations, the president broached the critical topic.

“I’ve heard a rumor that there are several who wish to somehow jeopardize that place.”

He had a serious expression on his face, but then smiled slightly. There was a bright light in his eyes, as though boasting that he would not retire for another fifty years.

“We’ve also been talking about nothing but lately.”

The president leaned back in his chair and sighed as he stroked his beard. In that moment of silence, the only sound was the *crunch, crunch* of Holo tearing into lamb meat, still on the bone.

“Should we gain another hot spring village, at any rate, trade would grow exponentially, you know.”

Lawrence might have been imagining the unpleasant expression on the other man’s face.

It was the expression of a merchant who was honest in his profits and who single-mindedly moved forward.

Lawrence felt nostalgic, as though he had met an old friend for the first time in a long time.

“Wouldn’t that be like trying to thread two strings through the eye of one needle?”

The association looked busy with its current state of affairs. The president nodded in agreement as he skewered some fried garlic with a knife.

“Of course, I imagine this is not a pleasant situation for Nyohhira’s inhabitants.”

He pried out a clove of garlic and extended one on his knife in

offering, but Lawrence declined.

Instead, Holo took it and ate it with the venison. Lawrence was a bit exasperated, since whenever he ate garlic, she would become angry with him for the smell.

"Who are they? To dig the baths, you need a certain level of preparation. And beyond the mountains…I've heard it's on the other mountain face, to the west of Nyohhira, but I think that far out, there are no smaller communities or anything of the sort."

"Yes, however, there is an old road that travels from Svernel in that direction."

The president sprinkled some salt onto the garlic cloves and simply threw them into his mouth. Though they were in such an exquisite association building, it was refreshing for Lawrence to see him act unaffected.

"It's been several decades now…Back when the Church and its teachings had not taken root at all in this area. At the time zealous monks came, and their blood boiled because they were all but surrounded by enemies. With frightening enthusiasm, they carved open a road and built a stone monastery deep in the mountains. This was back when the northlands and the southern Church were truly at war. But no one bothered them, as though they sensed a sort of courage from them. I think many people in this town, including myself, converted to follow Church ways out of acknowledgment for their passion."

There certainly were things like that. That was true conviction.

"But before we knew it, the war, too, became a shell of what it used to be, and it became like an annual vacation, and the monks also grew old before going off somewhere. Well, this is a difficult land to live in without passion."

“So, the newcomers are at the ruins of the monastery?”

“It would seem so. The road hasn’t been used in a long while, so it needs to be cleared again, but I don’t know if that will be easier than building a new one. Also, there’s word that the building still stands. What’s more, they have a special permission for that whole area.”

Hearing those words, Lawrence gulped.

“Don’t tell me they’re planning to colonize?”

In order to prevent rising discontent of those unable to find work after a town or village grew too overpopulated, the nobility would occasionally migrate people to a distant territory. If these were colonists dispatched by noble decree, it would become quite troublesome.

“No…It shouldn’t be something on such a large scale. According to rumor, there aren’t even ten people.”

“Where are they from?”

“I’ve heard they used to be meager mercenaries in the south. As you know, it is quite a remote area, so they likely got their permission through some sort of connection. And see, since the war ended, mercenaries have also lost their jobs, and their lords might have thought this better than letting mercenaries roam around their land without jobs…That was likely part of the plan. A vagrant lifestyle probably did not suit those soldiers either, so they will likely wash their hands of the ruffian life here.”

“Which means…Supposing they cannot find any spring water, do they intend to live as pseudo hunters?”

If that was the case, then he would be thankful. It was extremely difficult to find new springs, even in Nyohhira. All of the

noteworthy places were used up, and it was thanks to Holo's wolf powers that he was able to open a bathhouse at all.

"We also thought so. But..."

The president put down his knife and gulped down his mug of ale.

"...They've got good heads on their shoulders."

Good heads.

And the president even looked a bit bitter.

"They're preparing ahead."

"Ahead?"

"Basically, they're assuming that they will strike water and have already come to buy the supplies needed for a hot spring village. So they've already made inroads with the lumber trade, the butcher's, the baker's association, the ale brewer's association, and the winery association."

Lawrence was at a loss for words, and the president's expression grew grimmer and grimmer.

"Every association will fight with us over seats in the city council. These newcomers seem to be aware, somehow, even of private affairs."

In exchange for handling materials, something was done under the table. Associations took bribes and bought places on the city council using that money. That was likely it.

Putting guesses aside, Lawrence did not think their conversation was truly reaching that point yet.

This meant that they were not up against southern ruffians who came simply because they had a rough idea. They would not come, risking everything on whether or not they would find spring water. They at least had enough sense to make sure they were properly laying down the necessary groundwork.

"They haven't come to us yet, so they probably don't need help with currency."

Rather, it was the money changers that relied on the coins that the hot spring towns saved up.

But as Lawrence groaned, the president slammed his thick arms, which could knock down a bull, onto the table and stood up.

"This means that our interests and your…no, Nyohhira's interests, are one and the same. If those with power in the council go against us, then we would lose face. At the same time, if we can stay above our competitors like we always have, we can continue to ensure the division of limited supplies will suit Nyohhira's circumstances. I believe we should cooperate."

It had been a while since he had talked about exposed interests that coincided.

Lawrence, aware of his own importance, slowly reached out to his ale and drank slowly. He kicked awake his sleeping mind and lit it ablaze, since the president should have been proposing that he wanted money in exchange for protecting their supplies.

"Of course, it is as you say."

But if that were the case, then it would be more effective to go directly to the lumber and meat associations in order to compete with the newcomers. Or it was possible that the president was using the fact newcomers had appeared as part of a show by the

president.

At any rate, it was something that involved quite a bit of money.

If Lawrence acted carelessly, it would affect his colleagues in Nyohhira for decades to come.

“But I must discuss this with the other villagers.”

“Hmm? I suppose you should, but Mr. Lawrence, I am asking you now.”

It was difficult to tell if his reddened cheeks were from excitement or the alcohol.

As Lawrence hesitated, the president suddenly looked as though he had realized something.

“Mr. Lawrence, don’t tell me you…?”

Lawrence panicked when he thought that perhaps the president had made a big misunderstanding. He likely thought that Nyohhira had already betrayed the money changers and run to the lumber and butcher associations.

“No, this is the first I’ve heard of this. That’s all I ask you to believe.”

“Oh, I see, well, I suppose so…I, too, would be flustered if I suddenly heard all of this at once, but we can’t lose to those guys.”

It was a fight for standing in a crowded town. Especially since business was booming now, seats in the council were like thrones. Even so, it would be unbearable to be treated as pawns in a political arena.

It was then Lawrence breathed deeply, bracing himself.

“Or could it be that? Mr. Lawrence, have you taken a special oath of nonviolence?”

The president had asked another question so suddenly, Lawrence felt if he took it too lightly, he would be instantly led around by the nose.

But it was too crazy.

“What? Non…violence?”

The other man might have been asking Lawrence to get rid of eyesores. It was not as though there were no such incidents in the world of trade—though he knew this, he felt his back grow sweaty.

Assassination.

Until just a few years ago, this place had been influenced by a war that spanned several decades. Kill or be killed might have been considered normal.

He gulped out of nervousness, and the president continued, staring at the table.

“Faith is precious. I cannot deny that. But as long as we choose to live, we cannot escape every single loss of life. May I ask you to avert your gaze, just this once?”

His gaze slowly made its way to Lawrence.

“You seem to take good care of yourself, and it doesn’t seem that your gut would get in the way.”

If a townsperson committed the deed, they would be exposed

easily. But if it was someone from the mountains, the president likely thought that they could simply disappear into the mountains. And digging a bath was similar to mining, and mining obviously came with accidents. Just as Holo said jokingly, they could go to the place where the newcomers were digging and bury them in dirt. And the bathhouse coordinator in Nyohhira said the same—if it were back in the old days, they would be ready to cross the mountain with clubs in hand…

Surrounded by the steam that smelled of sulfur, perhaps Lawrence could not clearly see outside the world.

Indeed—the world was a place this cruel and heartless.

He remembered that keeping a clean conscience was a tremendous luxury.

"But I—"

"I know, I know. It's a bit different than the help every year that my association and the village of Nyohhira have agreed on.

It is not just "a bit."

Lawrence wanted to yell that.

"Our money changer association is, as I'm sure you know, filled with those who sit to work. Besides the money changers, the other members of this association are all craftsmen who do metalwork, carve pillars and walls. And they're a bit too…old to run around chasing game."

Lawrence then recalled the president's exclamation from earlier about how happy he was the village had sent someone young this time—only now it had taken on a new, dark meaning. His choice of saying "game" was like a reminder that it happened regularly.

“But do not worry. We are used to these sorts of situations. Mr. Lawrence, I want you to catch our game and bring them back.”

Catch, kill, scatter, and bury. The flow of things was already determined.

The president gulped down his ale and spoke.

“I realize that your job is the most difficult. But…to beat them, this is our only choice. And I’ve heard that you used to live on the road as a merchant. I’m sure you’ve experienced this once or twice?”

He had certainly heard of those kinds of tradesmen. For example, the kind that stuck close to wars and conflicts. They went around pillaging towns with soldiers and dealt with those who attempted to protect their assets by swallowing gold and jewels.

He had seen and heard about them a few times when he was a traveling merchant. Stories about people who offered to travel together on dangerous roads when they were really the pawns of bandits.

But Lawrence thought himself different. Even if he could not say with pride before God that he was a perfectly honest merchant, he never crossed any moral boundaries the patron saint of trade would refuse to forgive. And it went without saying that he was a father now. There was no way he would be able to hug his beloved daughter when she came home if his hands were covered in blood. He could not. He would not.

Did the other bathhouse owners in Nyohhira know of this? Did they not know that the hands of the money changers, with whom they maintained such a long relationship, were covered in blood?

But when he realized the alternative, a chill ran up his spine.

Could this be why he was finally being regarded as a member of the village after ten-odd years? It was easy to keep dirty work a secret if they could not leave after being rooted there for such a long time.

If that were the case, then he could imagine what would happen if he refused.

Lawrence's eyes darkened.

Such things did happen.

"Mr. Lawrence?"

The association president called his name, and Lawrence snapped back to reality.

But nevertheless, he could not find his words.

Lawrence looked miserably at Holo, who sat beside him.

"Well."

As he gazed at her, she spoke pitilessly.

"Do you have a reason to reject?"

His vision wavered. But when he thought of the village—right. When he thought of living in the village, that was right. That was the place they called their home, something they would not find again. When he weighed that on the scales, it was almost like putting the devil on the other side.

"And I am with you."

When she smiled at him, he decided with his gut. He could go anywhere, as long as Holo was by his side.

He cleared his dry throat and placed his hand on the gates to hell.

As long as Holo was with him, he could get through it.

“You are breaking out in quite the sweat.”

“No, I’m all right.”

It was then he wiped the sweat from his brow.

“Once before when you took several head-butts in retaliation to the stomach, were you this scared? You took quite the magnificent tumble, though…,” Holo remarked.

“…Huh?”

Head-butts? Retaliation?

He then heard a snorting noise of air escaping. When he looked to see the source, the president burst into laughter across the table and hurriedly covered his laugh with his hand.

“Not to mention that should it be a bad hit, something may break.”

“Oh, God.”

The president murmured with a serious expression and stirred in his chair.

“But your game, too, will be disorganized, so I don’t think you need to worry about that.”

“Oh? I have heard they are quite the violent ones.”

“That is not something I can say as someone who has asked you to do this. But I can guarantee that it will be exciting. Well…I

believe you are prepared to take one or two hits…"

What are they talking about?

As Lawrence sat, baffled, Holo split a piece of bread in two and began to munch on it.

"And say the name. Or perhaps, he will hear the name and tremble with fear."

"Oh, I see!"

The president stroked his long, white beard and nodded as though he understood.

"Oh, Mr. Lawrence, I know the name is ominous and it seems fraught with danger, but I don't think it will be that bad."

He spoke cheerfully to Lawrence, who no longer had the strength to ask any more questions.

"It's called the Festival of the Dead, but it's not as gruesome as you imagine. I can't really explain the way and scope of the festival better than this. If you watch, I'm sure you'll understand."

"'Twill be the most exciting. I've heard they serve the meat of the butchered game, as well."

"Exactly. That's why we do it, actually. The point is to enjoy preparing for the Revitalization Festival of the Patron Saint, which happens after the Festival of the Dead. Too many people that gather in town around this time. The workers at the butchers can't meet the need for tallow, to make candles with, and the demand for meat we use in the ceremony all by themselves. We needed to do something to address these issues, and that's how it all started. And everything will get quite complicated after obtaining the political power to monopolize these important prepara-

tions."

"When I heard about it, I was most impressed with how well it was performed. And the rules of the festival are rather nice and clear-cut."

"Oh, you know? That's right. Long ago, this area was on the brink of starvation. The unwritten rules were typically something like how those at the top are simply those who had worked the hardest. In other towns with long histories, I'm sure the distinguished people lived in worlds filled with dirty schemes, but our town is different. We decide who sits in the city council by who gets the most game during the festival!"

He tightened his hand into a fist and seemed genuinely excited.

Lawrence did not know much about the festivals in this town. He had only heard that his work was to help out. He faintly recalled Holo asking him on the way here what sort of work he would be doing. She loved lively events and had undoubtedly asked one of their guests at the bathhouse about every little detail so she was probably well informed.

"Up until now, I, though unworthy, have held the stick, but I can't win against old age…Having said that, the only ones who can participate in the festival are the ones who have a connection to this land. All the notable young people have already been reserved. That is why at this rate, we'll lose to the other associations who've brought in mercenaries with permits, appearing suddenly like shooting stars. Please consider treating this year as an exception, and accept this job!"

Lawrence, his eyes drained of energy, asked in response:

"And what is it exactly?"

The president spoke.

"To capture sheep and pigs. We will handle the disposal. Yours is the most dangerous job, but please!"

He placed his hands on the table and bowed his head. The ones intruding in on the lumber and meat associations were mercenaries from the south. They were no doubt physically strong.

Lawrence gazed off, staring at the texture of the wooden ceiling, and nodded.

"I accept."

"Ohh! You have my thanks!"

The president looked up, then took Lawrence's hand and shook it vigorously. He would leave things as they were, but Lawrence had been thinking of something else entirely up until now.

He had to somehow hide the foolish misunderstanding.

But the sharp-sighted, mischievous Holo was not one to simply allow his odd behavior a pass. When they returned to the room after eating, she immediately bit into him. He did not try to resist. Like a pet pig that appeared timidly before his hatchet-wielding master, he confessed with blank eyes.

No poet alive could describe how much Holo had rolled about in laughter.

Starting the day after, Lawrence set out inside town with a wooden mallet in hand. It was not something meant for just a bit of timberwork. Including the handle, it was about the same size

as Holo. This was a tool meant for hammering in the railing that kept the round fence in the town square together for the Festival of the Dead.

It was simple but backbreaking work, so it was apparently divided between the town's craftsmen associations. So it was obvious with one look at the square which association was working properly. Among them, the money changers' association was not making much progress by any standard. They were quite busy and elderly men who sat down for work every day, so they all had bad backs. That was why every year, they relied on representatives from Nyohhira to do it for them.

Lawrence borrowed just one boy from the association and got to work. Propping up a stake the size of his thigh, there was no way he would be able to hammer it in alone. Though Holo would probably be able to hold it up, she refused. Likely because no matter how carefully she held the stake, she would end up covered in mud.

So in the end, as Lawrence spent the day hammering away, Holo stayed in their room at the association building, preening herself in luxury.

"...I really think I need to have a talk with you about what the word *cooperation* means."

"There is work that is suitable for a weakling like me."

Holo assured her husband as she elegantly blew on the white hairs at the tip of her tail.

Lawrence did not have the energy to get mad at her and washed himself in the bath the association had prepared for him.

Tired, he sat on the bed and began to dry his hair, but Holo took the handkerchief instead and dried it for him.

“Don’t think that this is me forgiving you,” Lawrence reminded her, and she spitefully rubbed his face, too.

“More importantly, have you spotted the fools who are trying to intrude on our territory?”

When she was mostly finished wiping his hair, she gave a little smack with the handkerchief on Lawrence’s head.

“No, I asked around, too, but apparently, they already finished with their work and are gone. For now they’ve left town, and they are probably digging holes for the baths.”

The members of other associations were surprised at how fast those newcomers worked. When Lawrence himself examined the stakes they had hammered, he shuddered. It was set in deep and perfectly straight and did not budge in the slightest. Would he be able to beat them at hunting pigs and sheep? He was beginning to have honest doubts.

“Well, ’twill turn out all right.”

When Lawrence told her his thoughts during the day, Holo would not seriously listen to him. She put her cheek to his back, wrapped her arms around his waist, and wagged her tail. She was likely so obviously wanting attention because her usual conversation partner Hanna was not here, and she had spent the entire day alone in the room.

Usually, he would be pleased, but now his mind was filled with other things.

“I can’t be as relaxed as you right now.”

If they did not do well, then the money changers’ association would lose seats in the city council, and they would lose their right to dictate the flow of goods in town. If they lost their stand-

ing, then they would no longer be able to give Nyohhira special treatment. Should that happen, Nyohhira's supply procurement would be suddenly hindered…Which might not happen, but it would not be a good thing for the village regardless.

If it came to that, he did not know how he would be able to face the rest of the villagers when they returned home.

"But worrying will not grow muscle in your arms. Still, I doubt you could refuse, then. Even if…'twere assassination?"

Holo said it herself and then laughed. She would be playing with that particular foolish misunderstanding for a while.

"That's…well, true…"

"Then, 'tis decided, aye?"

She released the arms around him and slipped in front of him.

"Food?"

"And drink."

They could not fight on empty stomachs.

Though he had just come back in, the stalls outside would close if they dallied. Mustering up the energy, Lawrence stood up, and Holo held her overcoat.

He was certain that Holo would make him go shopping on his own, but it seemed she was coming with him.

"…You always surprise me with how good you are at pushing and pulling."

On careful examination, he thought that was something normal, but Holo was amazing to think that, for some reason, he

meant it as a compliment.

Putting on a fox muffler, which she never wore because it was a bit much for the village, Holo smiled purposefully.

Then, like a cute young girl, she tilted her head as if she was clueless.

This sort of life continued for several days, and they watched the town prepare for the festival.

Two days after Lawrence first used the wooden mallet, he found himself plagued in his body and heart by terrible muscle pain, and he did his best to continue helping as much as he could. While, of course, there was the construction of the round fence for catching pigs and sheep in the Festival of the Dead, he was also running about to help make the giant straw statue for the Revitalization Festival of the Patron Saint, which came afterward. He quite literally dashed to the different districts of Svernel, collecting the straw as he pulled his cart along.

Every town had a similar kind of festival because there was all sorts of trash, such as damaged straw beddings or chair stuffing, after expending things over a long winter. And of course, he would assist pulling out this straw. In addition, he collected stockpiled fodder that had gone bad after rats took up residence inside it as well as packaging material that large companies had long kept.

After he gathered it all, he pushed through the crowd and headed to the square to tie it all together.

Helpers bound the straw together using hemp and leather string that had also outlived its usefulness—their final duty before they were to be discarded. Together with strangers from this

town, they combined the straw and held it up, tied the string around it, then passed it to the people who would place it onto the statue's wooden skeleton. One company had the sense to bring lunch for everyone in the square. Lawrence took his share with mud and straw still coating his hands, ate, and then washed everything down with alcohol to cheer himself up. The livelier ones sang.

He had done these sorts of things when he traveled as a merchant, so it was nostalgic for him as well as fun. When Lawrence returned to their room at the money changers' association building, his exhaustion was so acute that as he ate with Holo, he began falling asleep.

But it was a very good tired feeling, and Holo happily took care of him.

"Can't you be at least half this helpful on a normal basis?" he asked, but she made a rather foul expression.

"I am Holo the Wisewolf. I will move when the situation calls for it."

She seemed to imply that Lawrence should offer her tribute more frequently, though this particular outing had already cut quite deeply into their savings.

And he had another mountain that he really had to climb.

As the pain racking his body subsided, the incredibly tall statue of the patron saint in the town square was finished.

Svernel was an ironic town—just as the war to establish the Church's teachings in the heathen lands had ended, the southern religion suddenly spread and grew popular. Most people likely found the Church appealing on an emotional level since before. But because the war had still technically been undertaken, albeit

only as a shadow of the conflict it once was, people still minded how their neighbors would react if they converted to the enemy's religion at the time.

But listening to the stories of the townspeople he was working with, most of the people who converted to the teachings of the Church were not especially moved by them. They did so mostly because they had heard there were many festivals every year if they adhered to the Church's calendar. If they were to pray to a God that they were not entirely certain existed, then life was more enjoyable.

When he told Holo this, who long ago was offered supplication in return for a good wheat harvest in a village, she reacted with an indescribably bitter smile.

All that being said, the townspeople's passion for the festival was real. It was plain to see this peculiar enthusiasm at the spring festival, the first day of which coincided with the Festival of the Dead.

"Leave the disposal to us! If you like, we'll do it with the sharpened edges of bronze coins that have been shaven down too much!"

The president of the money changers' association howled, holding a large hatchet he had polished just for the occasion today.

The ones accompanying him were all money changers at least a decade or two older than Lawrence. All the younger money changers lay facedown on their desks, asleep after several consecutive days and nights of work. Most of the older money changers' excitement was likely due to sleep deprivation.

But Lawrence admired what looked like the sturdiness of elders that had seen war's hardships, and the president grinned.

“We don’t have many years left in us. We will work as hard as we can, knowing we won’t be able to come to the festival after a few more years.”

There was a saying—“live today as though tomorrow is your last.” He looked at them the way Holo peered into something flashing and radiant. He knew that due to Holo’s longevity, everything passed before her eyes in an instant. When they all left the association building like an old bandit gang, with the president in front and everyone with their own hatchet in hand, Lawrence spoke to Holo.

“I don’t have much longer to live from your perspective, do I?”

Holo opened her eyes, and her expression hardened.

“I’ll work as hard as physically possible. So try to smile as much as you can for me?”

Not for a routine where yesterday and today blended together, but for a special day that they could look back on and talk about fondly, where this happened and that happened.

Once he thought about it, Holo probably had her own reasons for suddenly leaving Nyohhira and accompanying him on this errand. Even in that ever-unchanging mountain village, Col left and Myuri followed after him. She might have sensed the approaching feeling of what would come next more strongly than Lawrence had.

So his honest, foolish misunderstanding that the money changers were asking him to assassinate someone would make a great souvenir for her.

And so would today’s festival.

“You fool.” Holo smiled as though she would cry and wrapped

her hands around her face. “You are my better half. You must shine the brightest at the festival.”

“Of course. The village is counting on me, too.”

The more game he caught at this festival, the higher the association would rise in status.

In the end, Lawrence had no chances to find out what warriors these former mercenaries were before the event.

It would be difficult to win, but he had to stand his ground.

“I am with you.”

“And I’m counting on you.”

Lawrence rubbed her head through the hood-like cloth covering her. Then, when he nodded as a signal to go, she seemed as though she would say something else, but chose not to.

More importantly, the town had never been as congested, so there was no time for idle chatter.

They moved forward, Lawrence practically holding Holo so that her small frame would not be shoved around by the crowd.

When they finally reached the square, he was out of breath and felt hot from being jostled around.

“Well then, let’s do it!”

The money changers, who had arrived just before them, were raising each other’s spirits by striking their hatchets against one another’s, in perhaps what was one of their rituals.

Around the outside of the fence, where he had worked so hard hammering in the posts, people were pushing to get closer. He

did not know if the barrier was meant to keep in the roaming livestock or if it was to protect them from the crowd.

Inside the round barricade, there were gatherings on a straw mat that had been placed at a set distance away from the edge. That was where the representatives for each association were stationed. Everyone seemed to have done their best to gather young competitors, and Lawrence could not tell at a glance which group contained the mercenaries.

“They determine the winners by the weight of the meat, so instead of aiming for one big one, you have a better chance with two that are easier to capture.”

The association president explained the rules to Lawrence as he handed him a club.

“You can also take your opponent’s game! If you hit it once, they’ll fall over, right? That’s when people who aren’t veterans wait for a response, and they waste time. Chase after the pigs and sheep with courage, and get them by jumping at them from behind!”

“Don’t tackle or hit anyone, though. It’ll be trouble later!”

“Let the game do everything for you. Sometimes, they will end up in the air, and it’s acceptable if they hit someone else.”

He meant that he should hit others with the game. Many town festivals were rough. Though they were getting on in years, the hot-blooded money changers seemed to be having a great old time. To protect himself, he carved their advice into his brain and took a deep breath.

The sky was clear, and he would surely be drenched in sweat if he moved around a lot. As he wondered how a bathhouse master like himself had ended up in a situation like this, a smile broke

out on his face due to nerves.

"Oh, Mr. Millike, head of the council."

As Lawrence was thinking to himself, a float arrived in the square, and standing atop it was a man whose scarlet ceremonial mantle—the symbol of a person in power—fluttered in the wind. It was Jean Millike, the town leader, with whom Lawrence was acquainted. Lawrence could not hear his speech over the crowd's noise, but even if he had been next to Millike, it was likely impossible to hear it anyway. That was how busy it was.

Before long, Lawrence was able to see wagons packed with animals that would be set loose as game, and a nauseating anxiousness slowly rose in his stomach. His nature did not contain a predisposition for violence.

Ignoring the money changers, who were currently the spitting image of bandits, holding their hatchets, Lawrence gazed back over the fence.

There was Holo, and she gave him a wry smile.

"Begin!" someone yelled.

At that moment, a large number of wagons poured into the square, and the pigs and the sheep were all sent running.

They were bewildered, having suddenly been freed in a wide-open space, but upon seeing the angry waves of people, they dashed off. A young man ran as hard as he could to chase a sheep that was running in circles with all its might, but a pig slammed straight into his side. The crowd watched this and raised a loud shout.

The number of sheep and pigs in the enclosure grew, and there were some that were so confused that they simply stood still.

Those poor, lost lambs were quickly taken and pulled away as soon as they froze.

Lawrence, too, jumped into the mayhem with determination.

Most of the sheep and pigs were, of course, mostly younger ones, not bigger, grown specimens. So even though there was no problem dragging their prey along or carrying them off, the animals were still energetic.

He first thought to knock them out with the club, but he understood immediately that there was no time for that.

So he threw himself at one that had stopped moving, grabbed it by the legs from behind, and held it up. “Baa! Baa! Oink! Oink!” came loud noises from all around him.

Lawrence carried the game back to their base, and the money changers took it from him.

He caught a second and then a third quite quickly, and as he caught his fourth, he took a nasty hit to the head and fell face-first into the mud. He felt a four-legged something walk over him and figured it must have been a pig.

Lawrence cleared his reeling head with a shake and jumped desperately toward a sheep that had fallen over like him and was wriggling on the ground. He pinned it like a beast that had forgotten how to speak, lifted it up with strength he was not even aware he had, and returned to their base as fast as he could. The old money changers, covered in blood from the butchering, yelled in exhilaration, and Lawrence threw the sheep to them before immediately turning on his heels.

Everyone running around the square was covered in mud, both people and animals. They were also all frantic.

Jump at anything with four legs, pin them, and carry it back. That was all he could think about in his strange euphoria, and his face smiled on its own. An energetic sheep shook off several men and broke away. The men, shaken off from its back and knocked away after attempts to stop it from the front, immediately rose from the mud and, becoming like mud dolls whose eyes only blazed white, howled in anger before chasing after their prey that got away.

Lawrence watched them and finally realized.

The Festival of the Dead.

That was exactly what it was.

"Number six!"

The old money changers cried in excitement. The meat was piled high on the mat, and the butcher boy who was weighing it had also become excited. It was probably more than some other mats.

"You just need to keep at it!" The association president himself yelled, also out of breath, and he was gripping the hatchet in his hand so hard that it was shaking.

Slaughtering animals was hard work.

"Leave it to me!"

Lawrence screamed in desperation and once again returned to the battlefield, but his body would not keep up. And it became increasingly clear that if this was a battle of endurance, then the four-legged ones were one step above the humans. He began to see that, covered in mud and full of fatigue, the ones who eventually began to totter like dead men staggered after the sheep and pigs, but could no longer keep up with them. There were also a

few sneaky ones, who stood in their place and jumped at game that passed by them.

Amid it all, Lawrence jumped at one that had luckily stopped in front of him, picked it up, and dispelling his fatigue with a courageous shout, carried it back to the base.

Number seven. Number eight.

"Amazing! We can do this! We can win!" The association president excitedly encouraged him, and Lawrence turned away, grabbing a pig that had suddenly stopped as though something had caught its attention and carrying it to the base.

"Number nine! It's a miracle!"

The president was not the only one shouting. The nearby audience was also delighted. Looking around, Lawrence confirmed there was no other place that had as much meat as this. He might be able to win against the associations that hired the mercenaries for this. And he was quite pleased with how well he had done.

There were great cheers from the other side of the fence, and he had felt as though he had become a hero on a battlefield. He boldly wiped his muddy face with his even muddier arm. Holo would definitely be happy to see him so valiant.

As he tried to search for Holo in the crowd, the sharp voice of the association president cut in.

"Mr. Lawrence, the game!"

A sheep had escaped near their base. The man that was chasing it fell dramatically from sheer fatigue. Lawrence, too, felt a similar exhaustion, but he stood up to catch the scampering sheep.

It immediately noticed him, and tilting its body, it changed directions. Though of course since it had run this far, he would catch it and win this fight.

Lawrence ran after the sheep with every last ounce of energy left in him and closed in on it. The ground felt unsteady. He was out of breath. The sheep's head hung low as it ran as fast as it could. He could see nothing but the sheep. Every single step he took felt like it lasted forever.

Only a bit more, but a bit more would not come. His prey was just far enough that it would get away if he jumped at it. But he could not get any closer. Then should he jump in a last act of desperation?

His lungs felt like they were burning, and his hands and feet did not feel like they were his own.

Everything depended on this!

It was the moment he deeply bent his knees.

The sheep suddenly stopped in shock and slipped onto its side.

Did it trip in the mud?! Whatever it was, now was his only chance!

Stirring his well-honed hunting skill to its limit, he leaped at the sheep. The later he made his next move, the harder it would be for him to stand. Urging his screaming limbs forward, he hoisted it up and walked off. Loud cheers came from the base. Though the money changers were also likely at their physical limit, they waved their hands in support. There were any number of things that were more difficult for merchants. Even that sentiment became his fuel, and he finally carried the sheep to the end.

Then, completely out of energy, Lawrence's knees gave in, and

he stared up at the sky as he gasped for air.

He could not take another step. But was it not wonderful?

Among the townspeople who waved and applauded him on the other side of the fence, he found Holo.

It was right after he realized his misunderstanding.

“Did I not say I would be by your side?”

Though it was so noisy he could barely hear his own ragged breathing, he felt as though he could hear Holo’s voice loud and clear. She smiled proudly at him because she was satisfied that she could work when the situation called for it.

Lawrence could only smile in defeat.

He was not particularly physically fit, nor was he particularly lucky. If he was having such an easy time, that meant there was something else at play. The silly sheep and pigs that had stopped right in front of him all did so because Holo had glared at them.



"*There is work that is suitable for a weakling like me*" was not a lie.

From meeting Holo up until now, Lawrence would never have gotten as far as he did by himself. There were times he held her small shoulders, and there were times he clung to the back of a literal huge wolf.

Lawrence spoke.

"It was worth all the tribute."

Holo smiled and moved her lips—"You fool."

The standoff with the butchers' association as well as the weighing of the meat began. The event officials presented each association's result as they finished measuring, and the crowd applauded and cheered. The mud- and blood-covered men of the blacksmiths' association placed their hands on their chests and bent their knees like nobility, earning the crowd's laughter.

When it was Lawrence and company's turn to weigh, he felt anxious before it went on the scale. But to begin with, the number of big wooden boxes used for weighing their catch was incomparable. The result was their team came out on top, no question, of all that had been weighed so far. The audience stamped their feet and clamored in excitement. As Lawrence and the old money changers agreed on beforehand, they stooped to their knees in a knightly manner and presented a bow.

"Wow, this has been much more than a normal year!"

The association president spoke, washing his face with hot water. A big company near the square opened up their loading

area as a place for the participants to wash up and take a break. He washed every place on him he could with the hot water and made a toast with cold ale.

He sat in a chair there and faced the square, where the commotion beyond the crowd suggested they were still weighing.

“I wonder how much our opponents have caught.”

“Yes, I wonder…We, too, were quite engrossed in our work.”

He looked at Holo, sitting next to him, and she shrugged her shoulders.

“There were definitely some courageous ones.”

“Well, since we did so much, even if we lost, I don’t think there would be much of a gap between us. I first thought we would be dead last! Oh, it’s all thanks to you, Mr. Lawrence. You’ve really helped us!”

He shook hands with everyone, including the president, for the hundredth time. He had not accomplished anything alone, but he was happy if he was of some help.

“Then what shall we do? After this, there will be more ceremonial things to do for the festival, and it won’t be for a while until the meat is served. Well, they’ll be serving this meat for some time starting today, so you may grow tired of it! Since that’s the gist of it, why don’t you go back to the building for a bit?”

Lawrence was not an association member. It would be out of place if he were present for the ceremonial proceedings.

He looked at Holo, wondering what she wanted to do, and she nodded.

“Then we will do just that.”

“Please help yourself to any of the food and drink in the building! But just don’t take too much money!”

Lawrence laughed in response to the unsubtle money changer–style joke, and he and Holo both stood up. As he did, his knees stiffened, and he wavered. Holo immediately supported her husband and directed a wry smile at him.

He felt as though he had aged fifty years in an instant.

“This is practice.” Lawrence whispered to her, and realizing what he meant, Holo’s face twitched as she tried to smile.

“But ’tis not for a while yet.”

She sounded like she was scolding him.

“That’s what I plan on.”

When he moved his overworked and stiff body bit by bit, a modicum of flexibility came back to him. They used the back entrance of the company, and it was easier to walk on the side streets since there were few people.

As they walked down the quiet street, the tumult that had pierced his ears, sprinting for the first time in many years—it all felt like a distant dream.

It might have been because he was tired. Since no one was around, with his muddy body leaning against Holo, who did not seem to mind, he gave her a fawning kiss on the cheek.

“…You once had strange ideas in these back roads before, as well.”

She was as harsh as always.

“I think it’s because it feels like we’re the only ones in the world.”

“You fool.”

She kicked him.

“And the work I did today. How was it? Did you see that I can do things when I need to? But when I thought that, I was really in the palm of your hand all along.”

“…”

Lawrence spoke, facing straight ahead, and he could feel Holo’s gaze on his cheek.

“When I first met you, I would have been frustrated…But today, I truly am happy. You’re always teasing me, but you know exactly when to help me out.”

He looked at her and smiled naturally.

She tightened her lips, then immediately looked away. She was unexpectedly shy.

“I thank you.” But instead of teasing her, Lawrence spoke. He did not need to say anything else.

The two walked slowly through the back roads.

It was then Holo stopped.

“I, too, rely on you.”

“It’s an honor.”

“And I believe that you rely on me, too.”

Was this her complicated way of expressing herself?

Lawrence thought that for a moment but realized that was wrong. Something was odd about her.

“Holo?”

He called her name, and the ears under her hood visibly twitched.

“Whatever trouble, we can solve it together.” She flashed a tired smile before raising her head. “If you have business with us, show yourselves.”

An ambush? In an old habit from his trading days, he reflexively reached behind him in search of his short sword. But he had left it in the association building. And he was not left wanting for protection because Holo was by his side.

Was it a giant legendary bear that carried mountain ridges on his back, who could pick up the moon in his outstretched paw, that dared face a giant wolf who could swallow a person whole? Or…

“We do not intend you any harm.”

The young man that appeared from around the corner of the alley spoke. Behind him, a meek-looking girl followed him.

The young man wore clothes that were covered in mud, and his short, golden hair was still wet as though he had just washed it. The girl’s plain travel kit was dyed with blood. He knew almost immediately what exactly they had just been doing.

But what caught Lawrence’s eye was the unique air about

them.



Both he and Holo had lived a while and had grown accustomed to this feeling with experience.

The pair that confronted them were, without a doubt, not human.

“My name is Aram. This is my sister, Selim.”

The boy called Aram inhaled deeply as though he was nervous. He held his breath and put his hand on the sword hilt hanging by his waist, which was the only thing not covered in mud.

“We were mercenaries in the south.”

The blade of the sword slipped out of the sheath, and it glinted dully in the shadow of the back road.

◇◇

One cannot even draw a longsword without practice. Lawrence could tell that Aram was not an ordinary swordsman by the way he unsheathed his weapon without hesitation and by his tempered body.

But he had been left speechless for a completely different reason.

It was why Lawrence ended up chasing after pigs and sheep in the mud. At the end of a road that led from Svernel, there would apparently be a new hot spring town. He heard that the hopeful newcomers were mercenaries from the south. In that case…

With the same elegance in which he unsheathed the sword, Aram removed the sheath from his waistband and crossed it with his sword at his feet. It was a sign of the utmost respect from mercenaries and knights. To his side, his sister, Selim, went to

her knees.

Lawrence knew immediately that they did not have any harmful intentions, nor were they simple thieves, but he did not know their purpose.

Then, Aram fixed his eyes not on Lawrence, but Holo.

“We have come to see the long-lived, proud lord of wolves.”

He spoke like a knight pledging his loyalty, but Holo was expressionless.

“I appreciate the flattery, but during the festival, you certainly held back when you noticed my presence. What is your purpose?”

He had wondered how the others were doing during the Festival of the Dead. When Lawrence asked her, she had not been clear when she said that there were some courageous ones. This is probably what she meant.

“…We had not realized that someone such as yourself was assisting the money changers’ association until the middle of the festival. We failed to notice right away since there is the strong smell of sulfur about you.”

Holo’s expression finally shifted a little. Then, she sniffed her own shoulders and Lawrence’s sleeves.

“You probably do not notice it yourself. That is how rooted you are to the land of Nyohhira.”

If he had asked any of the townspeople who the strangers helping the money changers were, he would have found out immediately. Any person working in trade in Svernel, from craftsmen to merchants, knew that bathhouse masters from Nyohhira came to help around this time every year.

But Aram was probably surprised. There was a nonhuman among the villagers of Nyohhira. And her companion was a human male.

“And?” Holo asked innocently.

Aram and Selim were clearly the ones trying to start a new hot spring village. And now they were on their knees before Holo, offering the greatest form of respect. It was impossible that this was just a courtesy call.

Aram spoke.

“This must be fate. We could not contain ourselves—we have come to ask for your assistance in creating our new home.”

Lawrence thought he saw Holo’s tail puff up under her overcoat.

“We wish to create a place that we can come home to with our companions for hundreds of years to come.”

The era of forests and spirits was gone, and nonhumans now felt small and inferior. On their journey some ten-odd years ago, to save their companions who were forced into nomadic wandering, they met a golden sheep that created a peaceful place for them to reside on the prairie. If they hid in the woods, there were roads. In the mountains, people built mines and cut them open to find coal. With no other choice, they may have decided to try to live in the human world, but a nonhuman would always be nonhuman.

So everyone had the thought of living in a remote place far removed from human civilization, doing modest work. For example, a merchant and the embodiment of a wolf running a bathhouse in Nyohhira.

"We've heard that the one next to you is the merchant that saved this town, who is now the master of the bathhouse Spice and Wolf. And it seems you have a deep relationship. If the God that humans worship does indeed exist, then this must be his will."

Lawrence listened to Aram speak and finally understood Holo's stiff expression.

He turned to him and spoke.

"To teach you how to manage your bathhouse?"

"Or..." Aram was not in the least bit daunted. "...To come live in our village."

He called it a *village*.

According to the money changers, there were no more than ten of them, and they wanted to construct a bathhouse out of the ruined monastery. Lawrence thought at first that they would live as hunters if they could not find any water, but they had meticulously laid the groundwork with the town's associations.

After doing all that and calling it a *village*, then that meant Aram's dream was much bigger than that.

"Your power and knowledge would be the strength of a hundred, no, a thousand people."

"We lived poorly as mercenaries in the southlands...To be more precise, we made our living by protecting small villages from outlaws who caused havoc during wartime."

Standing next to Aram, Selim spoke falteringly. She seemed more serious than Aram. Lawrence could sense her nunlike essence, the impression that she could work for two or three days

straight without sleeping or saying a word. She appeared to be a bit older than Holo, but from all the trials she must have gone through, her weary expression made her look even more like an adult. Moreover, he was taken aback by her hands. They were indescribably rough, and not just because she had performed the butchering at the Festival of the Dead.

They were completely different from Holo's hands.

"It was a life that we, as your kindred, must be ashamed of."

This meant that Aram and Selim's companions, too, were wolves.

Holo must have known this already. Her expression did not change as she continued to stare at them.

"We do not know much about the human world. We have only somehow helped the companies in this town for now. My brother and I are the only ones who can speak the language of this region."

"You may find this foolish or even laugh at us."

Aram dropped his eyes to the sword and sheath crossed on the ground, then courageously raised his head.

"The world continues to change, and even our small reason to live crumbled before us. In the end, we barely managed to subsist on the embers of war. Then we were blessed with the chance to receive a special permit for this land, so we decided we had no choice but to place our hopes here, and so we came."

And it also seemed that they could obtain water from the ground, and there was even a monastery still standing.

So that was it.

Everyone in this world had their own circumstances.

“Are you…?” There, Holo butted in. “…Asking us to throw away the village we have made our home in?”

“We would ask nothing more should you come to move with us. But of course, we would also appreciate it if you simply helped us—”

“Then, in any case, you ask us to betray our neighbors. You are our competitors.”

“Holo.”

The one who called her name was Lawrence.

Aram and Selim were certainly their competitors, but it was easy to see that they had their own circumstances. And like Holo, they were not human. More importantly—they were wolves. There was no mistaking that they were more similar to Holo than the people of Nyohhira.

Though at the same time, it was likely for that very reason she treated them so coldly.

If she sympathized with them just a little bit, if she opened her heart to them, then she would have no choice but to help them. And that would be treason against Nyohhira.

Holo was an alien existence, whose true identity had to be hidden from the villagers of Nyohhira. She was indebted to Lawrence more than he knew.

But Lawrence spoke to her.

“We can’t just decide on an answer to their proposal like that.”

He was talking about how this would affect her far into the future, something that coincided with their fundamental problem.

That reason was…

“Lady Holo.”

Aram, still on his knees, drew closer.

“Please, think about it. What you have now will not last forever.”

They were mercenaries who came from the south and had barely scraped by.

As it stood, Aram’s dauntless expression was much too direct.

In the world, there were things that, however right, should not be said.

Lawrence realized his mistake in not conveying those words.

“…So what if it’s true?” Holo’s voice was cold to its core. “What does that have to do with you?”

“Holo…”

“Answer me!”

A wise man once said that no happy story lasted forever. One day, Lawrence would die, and only Holo would live on. In response to that, Lawrence found the answer together with Holo. They both decided to put on a brave show, saying, *So what?*

Holo grasped Lawrence’s arms. She gripped so hard that it hurt.

“I was once called the wisewolf, but that is the past. I suggest

you try someone else.”

He could hear her heart slam shut.

Holo began to walk off, and she forcefully pulled on his arm. Her threatening attitude was almost as though she had kicked away the sword and sheath Aram had laid out in respect.

When they passed Aram, his expression was one of shock. He most likely had not thought Holo would grow angry at hearing his reasoning. Lawrence thought that he had such a straightforward nature that one did not often see in the human world.

But one could not live in this world with a purely straightforward manner. There were few, rare places that had straight roads —only found in towns protected by high walls.

“Holo.”

When they could not see Aram or Selim anymore, Lawrence called her name, but she did not stop walking.

“Holo— Hey, Holo!”

His back and legs still hurt, and he instead pulled on her arm. Her power was only that of a girl when she held this form.

And her slim body could not protect her soft heart.

Holo turned to face him, and she was crying. How she had so forcefully pulled him away was only a show.

“I—I…You…”

“I know. You don’t have to say any more.”

Lawrence hesitated for a moment, since his clothes were muddy, but he ended up pulling the sobbing Holo into his arms.

She clung to him, not caring that her face would be covered in mud. He rubbed her back—comforting her small, helpless form.

Embracing her as she cried, he rested his back against the wall and looked up.

Wedged among the tall buildings, the sky above him looked small and distant from the narrow path.

He knew that they were the foolish ones.

He suddenly noticed someone enter his field of vision and looked in that direction. There was Selim, so bewildered that she seemed to be suffering. She did not try to come too close and looked at Lawrence. He shook his head slightly.

She looked distressed but gave a small nod, then retreated with a deep bow. Since they did not seem to have any malice or ulterior motives, it was heartbreaking instead of threatening. If they had approached them maliciously, Lawrence and Holo would have doubtlessly protected their happy lives. But the thing they feared and would eventually have to confront had taken form and appeared before them.

Lawrence rubbed Holo's back once more before patting it lightly.

"Holo, nothing will get done like this."

His words were convincing, since he was once a merchant who could not make money if he was unable to walk forward.

"Let's go back to the room for now. Then…"

Then?

He was afraid to continue his sentence, but he could count on

Holo, and she was relying on him.

Unflinching, he spoke.

“Then, let’s think properly, without looking away.”

Holo did not say anything.

But when Lawrence slowly opened his arms, Holo backed away herself.

Unwittingly he smiled, as her face was completely covered in mud.

“If anyone saw you now, I don’t think they’d imagine you were once called the wisewolf.”

Holo hiccupped and furiously wiped her face on her sleeve, then balled her hand into a fist and punched him once in the stomach.

Then with the same hand, she grasped Lawrence’s. She was much more girl-like than the tomboyish Myuri.

“Cheer up. They said we could take any food or drink we wanted back at the association.”

Holo sniffled and head-butted his shoulder.

“Fool.”

She still sounded like she was crying, but she was all right for now if she was insulting him.

There was a strong bond between himself and Holo.

It would turn out all right, and they would see to it that it did.

When they entered the main street from the back road, like a suggestion of something, the warmth of the sun greeted them.

The money changers' association building was silent.

During the festivals, there were no large transactions between companies, but travelers and craftsmen who were taking off work came and went to and from town with change. The money changers, who were closing big deals and exchanges in the big hall all up until yesterday put their scales together and headed out into town.

And since the square was open after the Festival of the Dead and all the people suddenly gathered there, the district itself was quiet. It felt as though the sun had come out during the nighttime.

"Phew, I'm alive again. It really is a Festival of the Dead."

He was covered in mud from the top of his head to underneath his fingernails, and standing naked, he could see that there were big bruises all over his body.

He had the appearance of the dead during the festival, but there was no mistaking that the one who had come up with the name of the festival named it for this exact phrase Lawrence uttered after bathing.

"Have you calmed down, too?"

Holo's face was streaked with mud and tears. And since she had hugged him, her clothes had gotten dirty, too. She looked just like a girl who had fallen face-first into a muddy road and cried all the way home. The boys who stayed behind seemed more concerned for Holo than Lawrence, who had participated in the festi-

val.

"..."

With hot water, she washed her face, her hands, then changed her clothes, and sat silently in the corner of the bed.

She had not even touched the alcohol and the snacks that the boys prepared for them.

"Well...It was sudden. And he was as straightforward as a knight on horseback."

With such excellent swordsmanship, Aram had made a living guarding a village.

Surely, he would hesitate to use his power against others. Lawrence had a feeling that what he was protecting was also a poor village that no one would bother to help. If that was the case, then Lawrence also felt that the ones left behind working on the monastery ruins were much the same—honest folk who would have trouble living in today's world.

"Everyone knows what's right. Drink alcohol in moderation, use discretion when you talk, work hard, be gentle to the weak. And occasionally, pray to God."

As Lawrence talked, he walked over to the desk and picked up the leather mug. It was a proud, stiff leather that was to be expected from a town that flourished as a distribution channel of furs and amber for a long time, and it could even be used for weapons. There was wine inside. He poured some into an even smaller tin cup and held it out to Holo.

"By that logic, you know what you're supposed to do, right?"

Holo did not look at him, but she took the cup as though ac-

cepting his words.

“Aram and his companions will start business at their bathhouses with all who are not human. And their neighbors will grow, and before long, they will show off their village…Just thinking about it makes it sound like a fairy tale.”

Nyohhira, too, was often called uncharted territory, the boundary line between this world and heaven, but this was different. If a guest woke up in the middle of the night, they would surely find wolves and sheep, rabbits and foxes in the village square instead, drinking the night away.

There was likely a very good reason that those sorts of fairy tales still existed here and there today.

“Hey, Holo.”

He called out to her, and she looked up, startled. They were about to peel back the bandages that covered the wounds they pretended not to see. As she tried to stand up, forgetting she was holding her drink, Lawrence held her back with his hand.

“First, let’s say that helping Aram would mean betraying Nyohhira.”

Holo knew well that Lawrence was trying his hardest to fit in with the village. She also knew that it was incredibly difficult, since even though the people of Nyohhira had no malicious intent, they still always treated him like an outsider, like a newcomer. And she knew that even still, Lawrence purely and simply loved their home and offered his expertise at every opportunity so that the entire village would prosper.

And within it, only Holo would be giving up their knowledge to the enemies of Nyohhira.

All the while living comfortably in Nyohhira.

“I think that’s fine.”

“…But…”

“I’m a merchant.”

Lawrence smiled wryly, and it caught her off guard.

“I’m used to dealing with all kinds of people. Subtle communication is my specialty.”

If he could not do two completely different things at the same time, as if there were two of him, he could not be a businessperson.

Take for example, a transaction. While he must be cautious that the other would not outsmart him, or set him up in a trap, or commit fraud, he had to place his trust in the other party somehow and shake on it or the deal would not go through.

What’s more, while still doubting the other, he would even sometimes truly enjoy drinking with them after the deal was finished. And finally, the following day, he would continue doing business, still suspicious.

That was that. This was this.

“Even if you worked with Aram and the others, I would not interpret that as you trying to inflict losses on Nyohhira directly. That’s more than enough for an excuse. And I don’t think it’s bad if good competition shows up. Working at the bathhouse there I always think—it’s been too peaceful for hundreds of years. Our neighbors lack a sense of danger.”

Though he had suggested several things to bring customers in

the spring and fall when all the guests leave, his seniors had shown that they at least wanted to rest during that season.

As Lawrence spent most his time in the village, the laid-back atmosphere was beginning to infect him.

But if there was outside competition, they might wake from their slumber.

“Because of that, if you were to help Aram, then of course I would help you, but that would be unforgivable to the other bath-house owners…Well, at least a bit. I’ll just shrug my shoulders, since there’s nothing that can be done.”

He knew it was being unfaithful. But if they had bigger plans than this, then he was prepared to gracefully accept the sins as an apostate.

“And that’s not what you’re most worried about, is it?”

Holo pursed her lips, as though reopening an old wound.

“I should have said it before Aram did.”

What she had now would not last forever.

They both knew and decided to go through it as though they did not notice.

“You can’t stay in Nyohhira forever. You can only fool them for so long about why you don’t age. After everyone has died out, could you continue to live as a thankless guardian spirit like you once did in the wheat fields of Pasloe?”

Holo seemed to shiver slightly, and tears fell into the tin cup she gripped so forcefully. Lawrence could not look away from those tears.

“You are my most beloved. But…”

No matter what, he hesitated to say it. But keeping quiet here would indeed be a betrayal to his love.

“…You’re not human. With the long time you have left, you should live with Aram and the others.”

Holo looked up.

As she opened her lips, they trembled.

“But ’tis…’Tis as though I am preparing for your death…”

“That’s right. That’s what it is. I’ve already mostly practiced for your funeral. And now it’s your turn.”

Before the astonished Holo could say anything in response, Lawrence reached out and placed his hand on her cheek, wiping the tears away with his thumb.

“I know we promised that until the time comes, we would act like this relationship would last forever. But after we slept on the riverbank of time, a boat came. You wouldn’t lose anything if you caught hold for now to reach the other side in the far, far future.”

Lawrence smiled bitterly, because as he gazed at Holo, she seemed to look at him as though she were watching him die now.

He stooped before her, below her eye line.

“You’re the wife of a merchant and you should act like one.”

“…?”

“It’s insurance. Before you go on an adventure where you might lose everything, you prepare for when you’ve lost everything. But if you truly did not want to lose anything, then not ven-

turing out into danger would be the perfect insurance. Long ago, you wanted to choose the latter."

Saying goodbye before the parting became too painful.

"But that way, you would miss out on the profits you might gain. Okay, let's say you help Aram and the others, and their business is going well. Let's say you could live rather peacefully with others who have the same long life span as you. Think about it. Because you all know about each other, if you wanted to keep Spice and Wolf, then you can ask for their help and keep it after my death. If you come and go between Nyohhira and Aram's bathhouse every thirty years or so, then the people of Nyohhira would be none the wiser, and you could keep that up forever. Of course…as long as you aren't wasteful and let it go bankrupt, that is."

He smiled mischievously, and Holo, looking down at him, was caught in a fit of laughter.

"You fool…"

"I don't think it's a bad idea. There's no loss for anyone. Well, we do need to keep some secrets while we rival Aram's bathhouse and the people of Nyohhira are racking their brains."

Lawrence took Holo's hand and shook it a bit in encouragement.

"For you, I think it's okay to go against God's teachings, just a little bit."

Holo's smile looked pained because Lawrence was trying so hard to make a joke, so she forced herself to smile even more.

But that was enough. Even if it was forced at first, soon they would get used to it and then finally accept it.

If they decided to fight against the providence of the world, he had to give at least that much effort.

“Okay?”

Lawrence looked up at Holo, and she seemed like she would close her eyes, but she did not.

“We’ll help Aram and Selim. You should be friendlier toward them.”

And after this entire conversation, Holo finally made a displeased expression, and Lawrence could not help but laugh.

“You’re rather shy around strangers.”

“Wha—?” Holo gulped, and with a sudden fierce look in her eyes, she glared at Lawrence. “I am only prideful!”

She unfurled her fist and with a *smack*, she hit Lawrence’s cheek.

He reached out for her hand that had struck him.

Holo was indeed glaring down at him in anger, but her tail was making a slight thumping sound as it wagged.

“That’s true, too.”

He took the cup she was holding and set it at his feet.

He rose up to Holo’s eye level and wrapped his arms around her.

“Because you’re a princess.”

“…A *wisewolf*, you fool.”

Holo would always be Holo. When he let his guard down, she would knock him down instead. It was then that Lawrence realized he had forgotten to close the wooden window, but today was the festival. It was not too much of a problem.

He could see the clear sky through the open window.

The moon peeked on them many times, but luckily, the sun should have not seen them.

From an observer's point of view, the other party was aligned against the money changers' association and Nyohhira. If Lawrence and Holo went to see them in the open, it would get complicated if someone saw.

So, Lawrence used a convenient intermediary.

"When you two appear, I get nervous that some sort of commotion will happen again."

When they entered the waiting room meant for guests of nobility, the master of the town, Jean Millike, spoke with a grimace.

"Sorry for intruding at such a busy time."

"It truly is busy, but if the hidden leading figure of this town came with a wolf and told me to throw open the gates, I would have no choice."

Millike sat on a red-cushioned chair and gave a big sigh. He was not so much displeased as he was fatigued. In the commotion of the festival, it was so hectic as to be incredibly taxing, like trying to stir a giant pot of stew with many ingredients in it.

"But I did not expect to see you participate in the Festival of

the Dead. I had not realized."

The crowd was huge, and it seemed they had masked their wolf scent with sulfur.

"The money changers did get the most meat in the end."

They had lived up to the reputation. Lawrence, wanting to share his happiness with Holo, looked beside him, but she was indifferent. Since she had helped, that result was to be expected, seemed to be Holo's thoughts on the matter, and she merely munched on the sugared flowers that Millike offered them. She had just been crying, so her mouth likely felt salty.

"And your request—it was to summon the ones who have the special permit to settle the old monastery ruins, right?" Millike asked, and as Lawrence was about to nod, he leaned forward, as though trying to rein in his guest.

"Are you sure this won't cause trouble?"

Millike had been worried about this since they came.

Ten-some years ago, Lawrence and his companions were involved in a huge commotion and came to this town on a sliver of hope. There was no mistaking that to Millike, who was dragged into it, it felt like the whole disaster had been pushed onto him.

Though it had somehow turned out all right, the grudge he still held against them was eight-parts-out-of-ten justified.

"It's to make sure there won't be any trouble, actually."

"Hmm?"

Millike seemed doubtful, but Holo, happily eating a purple flower covered in sugar, butted in as she licked her fingers. "Why

did you hide them from us? Or why did you hide us from them? Such honest people must have come to greet you, the master of this town, first. You should have known."

They were not pressuring words, and Millike only slightly raised an eyebrow.

"Right. They were worried if their moldy permit was still valid. They came to confirm that as well."

"So you did not tell them, then, that there is a wolf in Nyohhira, though they say they wish to make bathhouses."

Millike stared at Holo, as though trying to feel out her true intentions. Holo, instead, did not seem to mind and happily returned enthusiastically to eating the fancy candied, sugar-coated flowers.

In the end, Millike sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"There are two reasons."

Then, he sat up and took a piece of candy from the ever-decreasing pile.

"First, my wish is to maintain the development of this town. If it works for the town, then it works for me."

The money changers' association president had explained that they would gain more profits if there were two hot spring villages.

"Second, they reminded me of you two from those ten-odd years ago."

"In that terrible a state?" Lawrence asked, and Millike shrugged his shoulders slightly.

“At first glance, they’re clinging to outrageous dreams, and they haven’t done enough prior preparations, if you know what I mean.”

Jean Millike had always been harsh.

“They came here, grasping at vague information and said they wanted to open a bathhouse as soon as they can get hot water from the mountain. They said that eventually they want to grow it into a village. What do you think would happen if I told them that there is a wolf in Nyohhira, and she’s already running a bathhouse? They would have gone straight to you. But if that happened, I don’t think they would have been a real nuisance to you.”

“We met them just now, and they were a real nuisance.”

As though satisfied with the sugared candy for now, Holo sipped the hot tea boiled from the flowers’ leaves. She had sworn at Lawrence once, asking him if there was any point to a drink such as tea if she could not get drunk from it, but she seemed to like its fragrance.

Svernel was much richer than he thought. All the things they had been given out of hospitality were imports from the south—things one would expect to see in the mansions of aristocrats.

“It was too much of a pain if it made you think I sent that nuisance in your direction. And I thought it would be wiser for you to eventually meet naturally at some point.”

There was a wariness in his eyes that suited him. Impressed, Lawrence nodded.

“But if you chanced upon each other, then that surely wasn’t it. Why must I call on them for you? Are you sure this won’t become a problem?”

Millike frowned and Lawrence looked at him, about to explain the situation. Though he remembered that Holo began to cry then and how little time had passed since they talked after returning to the room, he was troubled as to how to explain it well.

“Well, that’s, actually…”

When he stumbled over his words, Holo spoke.

“The moment we met them, all they did was ask for help. We could not answer at the time, so we returned to our inn and discussed it for a while. By then, the opportunity had passed.”

She was not lying, but it was incredibly far from the truth.

As Holo coolly sipped her tea, Lawrence remained impressed.

“And the result?”

Millike implied that he wanted to be informed ahead of time if they wanted to go through him. Lawrence signaled Holo with his eyes, and she snorted, uninterested.

“We shall help them. There are times I wish to spend some time away from this one.”

If Lawrence said, *That’s my line!* then she would likely not talk to him for three days and three nights.

“If that’s the case, then all right.”

Millike breathed a sigh of relief and directed his gaze toward the open wood window.

“I am of the same opinion.”

“Huh?”

Lawrence was surprised, and Millike narrowed his eyes as though he was looking at a dunce.

“I’ve been here for a long time. It’s about time I open this town again.”

Jean Millike was a name passed down to him by the previous leader of the town. He was also a lord that had another name of Havlish. What he might do was feign illness and withdraw to his territory, then publicly die from illness, then return as some relative who inherited all his domain and power. There were times among the noble class where they would place siblings and close relatives far away to protect their bloodline. Since it was quite a common practice, no one would question it.

And there was even a place nearby for him to hide, so it was no problem.

“’Tis fine since you have your beard. I could never hide my beautiful face. ’Tis actually quite troublesome.”

“…”

When helping with Aram’s bathhouse, someone who was not human would understand in an instant how it would be used. But it was unfortunate that Lawrence, a human, could not fit in that circle.

Even so, Lawrence thought, it seemed Holo and Millike got along surprisingly well. Even after he died, or even if Myuri decided to settle down somewhere on her journey, perhaps Holo would not have to end up tending to her tail all alone.

“Anyway, I’ll go ahead and call them in, all right?”

“Yes, please. If the townspeople found out we were communicating with them, it might cause some problems down the road.”

“How very merchant-like of you.”

Millike sighed and rang a small bell on the table. There immediately was a knock at the door, and in came a boy wearing well-starched clothes. Millike told him to fetch Aram, and the boy bowed respectfully before leaving the room.

“What’s wrong?” Millike asked him with a questioning glance, as Lawrence watched the scene carefully.

“Oh no…I was just thinking, what a good boy he is.”

“We have a severe lack of people now in town. All the boys that can work are being taken in by the companies.”

“Indeed.”

Lawrence spoke as though he was giving up, and Millike raised an eyebrow slightly.

“What, are you opening a branch for your bathhouse? You have that young one, Col, and your daughter, too.”

Millike had mentioned it, so Lawrence briefly described what happened with Col and Myuri.

“I see. You can’t fight blood.”

“Yes. So this time, we thought it might be good to hire someone new in town.”

“Hmm. Then you may as well hire some of these mercenaries, yeah?”

“I almost want to take that possibility into consideration.”

As Lawrence spoke, he looked at Holo beside him, and she made a frown.

“I’ve heard they’re kin of wolves. Isn’t that perfect?”

“That’s true. What’s the matter?”

Catching Lawrence and Millike’s attention, Holo made a face as though there were pebbles in the sugar. But she must have thought it would be silly to try to fool them, so she looked the other way and sighed before reluctantly speaking.

“I am Holo the Wisewolf. I have dignity that I must preserve.”

Dignity? Lawrence looked at Millike with that question in mind, and the head of Svernel shrugged his shoulders. He was rather strict with her.

“She means that in front of her kin, she can’t carelessly drink during the day or take naps.” He could almost hear Holo glaring at Millike, but of course, he was not fazed. “Is that wrong?”

Instead it was the final blow, and she groaned, frustrated.

“But I think she’s a hard worker. She always proves herself every day through the work I have for her. She’s more of a loyal hound than a wolf.”

“Definitely, she had a trustworthiness and energy that felt more like a hound.”

“But on the other hand, she’s shortsighted. She believes that the right thing will always and forever be the right thing. The reason they barely scraped by as mercenaries though they were not human wasn’t due to their lack of abilities, but a problem with their nature.”

Everyone in this world had their strengths and weaknesses.

And saying that it was right to do the right thing had made

Holo angry.

“A new hot spring village, hmm. It might be a good thing to get on board with them for now, but…”

“Is there a problem?”

Millike gave a tired sigh.

“It’s the permit they had. It’s probably the real thing, but I just can’t shake this bad feeling. Then you two came and told me to call them, so I looked up to the heavens.”

It seemed there was a basis for his doubts.

“That is, there must be something supporting it…For example, the shadow of someone with authority who is trying to fulfill his territorial ambitions or something.”

Millike was able to judge that the permit was real because those were things the people in power surrounding him manufactured, and he handled them on a regular basis.

But if that were the case, then there was something odd about it. Aram and the others were mercenaries from far south, and they did not just happen upon a moldy permit. It was not unusual that a permit could pass through various hands and end up far away, but typically when it traveled from lord to lord, the name on it would change.

As though Millike remembered something important, he pinched his brow.

“The one that printed that permit was the pope.”

“The pope? That’s a permit printed by the lead temple?”

If that was true, then it would not have been completely impossible for Aram and his companions, who worked in the south, to have gotten their hands on it, nor was it odd that Millike could determine its authenticity. The Church's network was scattered all over the world.

"But I've heard that there's an old monastery up in that area. So it must be the one that was printed for that."

"Normally, yes."

What else was there besides *normally*? That question must have made itself known on his face. Millike groaned for a bit and spoke, irritated.

"The permit guaranteed in the pope's name exclusive rights to whatever was dug up in that entire area."

"That…must be necessary to dig up water. But that's…"

Lawrence suddenly cut himself off.

They built the monastery there at a time when the war with the pagans was still raging. Zealous monks risked their lives to come here and with unbelievable passion cut open the forest and made a stone monastery deep in the mountains. Afterward, as the war became a shadow of itself, their passion must have waned as they eventually disappeared. That was the story they heard from the money changers. The region was a place much too difficult to live in, so they left.

But monks were a group of people who choose to live in adversity to cultivate their faith. Following that reasoning, there was something strange about this scenario.

Lawrence tilted his head in thought, and beside him, Holo burped.

“The monks I know do not dig holes.”

“Huh?”

He looked at Holo and their eyes met. Her reddish, amber eyes were staring straight at him.

“Right. Nyohhira was quite well known even then, so they might have tried to follow that example. But even that is strange.”

“Yes, I see. But even though they held out in a dangerous land for many years, *why did they withdraw from the region after it had finally become safe*?”

He murmured, and something clicked in his head.

“It was not their passion…that they ran out of.”

It was not.

They had been saying that Aram and the others got their hands on a moldy permit, but it was possible to interpret it another way.

It was a permit they had regretfully held on to until it grew moldy.

Perhaps they were hoping something was still there.

“Could it be…?”

As Lawrence murmured, there was a knock at the door. Everyone looked toward it, and peeking in was a different boy from the one Millike instructed earlier.

“What is it?”

The boy’s expression was rather confused in response to Mil-

like's question, and he turned back to the hall.

"There's a woman named Selim here who wishes to see you."

"What?"

She did not come because she was called. Millike turned back to them with that realization written on his face, but it did not make any sense to Lawrence and Holo, either.

"Let her in. Ah, and she said her name was Selim, right? So, is she alone?"

"Yes. One woman in traveler's clothes. And she was incredibly flustered…," the boy added, perplexed.

Millike ordered him to bring her in for now, and he turned on his heels and ran off.

It was not Aram, but Selim that came, alone and in a panic.

She could not have possibly brought some happy news.

No one spoke, and the only sound was that of Holo sipping her tea.

And when she placed the empty cup onto the table, Selim appeared.

Selim's face was pale.

She was about to say something to Millike, who came to greet her, but she finally realized that Lawrence and Holo were also in the room.

"Perfect timing. I had just wanted to call on Mr. Aram and

you. I wanted to apologize for the disrespect earlier."

Lawrence spoke with his best smile because Selim was clearly upset. He learned from his experience as a merchant that showing someone a pleasant expression would calm them down for at least a moment.

As intended, some of her tension peeled away when she saw Lawrence smile and, though she still seemed uncomfortable, she gave him a bow.

"Well, take a seat. And is it a situation where you need soldiers right away?"

Selim was beautiful, but the air about her was not that of a dignified wolf. It was more that of a shy sheep that ate grass in the corner of a field. If any stray dogs saw her, with their spirits high from the festival, they might make passes at her.

"N-no..."

Selim shook her head, and as though she had suddenly realized something, she shook her head again.

"No, but perhaps..."

"Perhaps?" he asked back, and Selim shook her head again as though fighting off the confusion.

"I don't know what happened...Suddenly, people from the association came to our room. They said, 'Where did you get that? Bad things will happen.'"

For a moment he thought they were talking about the permit, but that was odd. Aram and Selim had stepped foot into the associations for the exact reason that they had a permit and were going to open a bathhouse.

Selim closed her mouth, as though swallowing her nervousness, then spoke.

“We had some townspeople research the ore we found while digging for water.”

Ore.

Lawrence realized that the final missing cogwheel had fallen in place. This was what fit into the hole of the odd story surrounding the permit.

“And where’s your brother?” Millike asked calmly, though he also likely had already caught on.

“The people from the association…forced him to lead them to the monastery ruins…”

“What is the ore? It must be a bigger deal than I thought if association members left during the festival.”

“I—I don’t know, either. We asked townspeople to appraise it, since if we could sell it, then it could help us get on our feet. My brother thought it might be lead…”

“Lead?”

It was a metal that was everywhere, and it was not unusual. It was not something that association members, red in the face, would go after.

That is what Millike’s expression suggested.

But Lawrence thought differently.

He recalled his time as a merchant.

“Ores that contain lead are sometimes abundant in precious

metals," Lawrence said to Millike, who looked back at him. "Gold. Or silver."

Millike's eyes widened. If either one was discovered in the mountains, it would cause a huge uproar.

Silver would be especially troublesome. Like the association members that imposed on Aram had said, bad things would happen.

The severe mountain ranges hindered travel in this area, and the region could not be unified by the sword, but they were able to consolidate the economy through silver coin. It was easy to recall what the money changers' association president had said.

Under present circumstances, silver was a weapon that held power in this region.

If they found a spring that produced "weapons," what would those in power think?

"Then those monks from long ago really were mining for ore while they prayed to God…"

"That also explains why they were able to build a stone monastery deep in the mountains. With the excuse that they were digging for stones for building and not necessarily searching for ore, no one would notice if they carried it out if they changed the silver they dug up and refined it into ceremonial candle stands and crests."

"But silver? If that's so…"

Millike placed his hand on his forehead and staggered, but quickly stood up straight again.

"Why did you come here?" He suddenly changed the angle of

his questions. “And what are you going to do here?”

Selim seemed so bewildered that it felt like anyone watching her would become nervous, too, but there was a strength in her rough hands that suited her.

“I—I can tell, t-to a certain extent, what someone wants by their footsteps.”

That was due to the life she had lived until now. And since she was kin of wolves, she must have had good hearing like Holo.

“I immediately hid it in the straw of the bed. My brother took the opportunity to tell me to come to you. We have stepped on the tail of something that we should not have, and that you, Lord Millike, could help us…”

That was a hopeful observation, or even wishful thinking, but it could also be called reliance, and it was likely a good representation of Aram’s personality. Millike, who was not human, just like how they were not, would help them, and then naturally, they would help him if their roles were reversed.

But Millike’s expression did not waver.

“I want to ask you something. Did you really come here not knowing about that ore?”

Selim gulped as Millike’s sharp gaze bore deep into her.

Lawrence remembered trade negotiations from long ago. This was the atmosphere of that dried-up world, where no one could easily trust another, where they should not easily believe anyone.

What Millike was most afraid of was Selim pretending to be an innocent traveler while aiming to open a mine. He could not be sure that nonhumans did not work as agents for humans. If he

lent them a hand, simply because they were both like him, then it could lead to the town's destruction.

There came a third voice.

"Well, 'tis likely true."

It was Holo.

"Should she be lying, then I may as well sew my ears closed."

She removed her hood and showed her wolf ears, and they twitched. She was able to discern lies with her hearing.

"Should their goal be gold or silver or whatnot, would they ask the townspeople to identify what they unearthed if they did have these ulterior motives? 'Twould be announcing that they search for treasure."

It was unthinkable. With some tools and a bit of knowledge, they would be able to figure it out themselves. If their goal was ore, then they would have completed the preparations for it already.

"Well…I suppose your brother had no choice but to travel to the dig site with the townspeople. There is no depending on the ones who intruded and demanded he take them there."

Selim nodded uncomfortably at Holo's words.

"Then from what I've heard, there is no proper road to where the holes are. Then this might also mean he's buying time. Though the townspeople may be red in the face, they cannot move until they confirm how much treasure they may obtain from the mountain. Then again, the boy Aram has realized that he has stepped into something terrible, but has, on second thought, decided that it might become more complicated should

he act without understanding the situation. Buy time and rely on what he can. Well, 'tis good judgment."

"Save for the one who is going to solve this problem in the meantime."

Millike, who was being depended on to fulfill such a role, sighed, feeling annoyed.

"Considering the situation, they probably found silver in the mountains. And how are we supposed to explain this to someone who doesn't know how much trouble finding silver in this area means? What's more, the owner of that land isn't anyone around here—it's the pope!"

His long beard and hair seemed to quiver in anger.

Even now, Selim seemed as though she might cry out of guilt, so Lawrence piped in.

"Do you think the Debau Company would intervene and settle this nicely for us?"

It was troublesome that they found silver here because the Debau Company, who had unified this region into its current state, maintained its power through the circulation of silver coins.

If some stranger came and opened up a silver mine within their sphere of influence and then used that silver to mint coins, then it would be a clear violation of territorial sovereignty.

And since there were great concessions that came with the circulation of coin, Debau was incredibly sensitive about the treatment of silver, which was the foundation for their currency. The money changers' association president also complained about that.

But the same could be said about the opposite. If they were to sell land with silver in it to the Debau Company, then they probably would not be angry. Rather, they would gladly buy it.

They should think that why the association members were so angry and forced Aram to take them to the dig site was because the picture was clear.

But Millike gave a sigh that sounded like it came from the depths of hell.

"The pope printed that permit. Afterward, he might hear that a large amount of silver was discovered there. That's more than enough reason to spark a war."

What was written on the permit was not the written will of God.

How many large companies went bankrupt after they lent money to royalty and titled nobility, only to have them annul their debts?

"Then what shall we do?"

Millike groaned.

"In reality…the only thing that could happen is that the Debau Company would buy the silver they find there and put the bill into the pope's pocket. That's what they have in common."

Though the pope at the head temple of the Church had fallen from a position of ultimate power, he was still a prominent figure in this world. What's more, there were those in this land who despised the Debau Company. By the logic that the enemies of enemies were friends, then it was entirely possible there existed people who might purposefully instigate a confrontation between the pope and Debau.

And if it came to war, then there was no doubt that Svernel would become one of the main battlefields.

This was the worst possible outcome for Millike, who wanted to protect his town, and also for Lawrence, who was a person from the town of Nyohhira, which depended solely on Svernel for the distribution of their materials.

An oppressive air lay heavily over them all, and there came a small voice that sounded out of place.

“Um…”

It was Selim.

“Wh-what should…we…do…”

She and Aram came, burning with hope, from the south. They had no malicious intent, and they had no way of knowing that they would dig something up in the mountains. Rather, it was much more common for someone to mine, knowing there was silver, and instead run into trouble.

This was the meaning of too much luck becoming a curse.

“There’s nothing to be done. If we offered compensation to the pope, it wouldn’t be worth it if we don’t exploit the ore on a large scale. Secretly doing leisurely things such as running a bathhouse wouldn’t be possible.”

“N-no…”

Rather, it would not be unusual if they were held responsible for bringing a complicated problem to this land. Millike did not say that, though, as it was the least he could do to console her.

With her rough hands, Selim gripped her clothes.

“There at least would be jobs at the mine. All you can do is save your money and go to a new land.”

They coordinated with the associations in town, and all that was left was to wait for water to appear. They had only just barely touched their dream, and the disappointment was staggering. Selim reeled, and she sunk to the floor.

Millike did not say anything to her and only slightly narrowed his eyes.

“First, we need to contact the Debau Company. It would be best to have everyone from Debau here and ready when the ones who went to check on the mining come back. We can’t give those greedy folk time to do anything.”

As Millike spoke, he looked at everyone in the room in turn, as though confirming the order of things. Lawrence, Selim, and then finally, Holo.

“…You treat me like a post-horse.”

“How much do you think all the sugared candy you ate cost?”

The bowl, which was filled with candy, had at some point become empty.

“And you should be on good terms with the rabbit in Debau Company.”

The one who kept accounts there was not human, but the embodiment of a rabbit. With him, Lawrence and Holo had escaped to this city and had history of planning a comeback.

“Honestly…When we finally get out of the village, things go wrong.”

“W-wait.”

The one that interjected as Holo reluctantly agreed was Selim, who had been so dazed until then.

“P-please let me do it.”

Holo did not look at Selim, but at Millike, and tilted her head.

Millike was expressionless, either because it was his natural face or because he was a man with power that was used to passing cold judgment, and he looked down at Selim.

“If you are volunteering to work because you feel responsible, then no. You have no stock in the Debau Company and doing needless work now will just cause more problems.”

Thoughtless charity would not help anyone.

But this would have Selim completely left out. The situation would be taken care of in a way that was completely out of her hands. Lawrence, who was nothing but a simple salesman, knew well the feeling of being left behind by the system.

It was all because of bad luck and bad chances.

“And, Wisewolf Holo, I want you to go see Aram first. Delay their journey as much as you can. I’m sure wolves can communicate with each other without the townspeople realizing.”

“So rough for a wolf handler,” Holo said discontentedly as she stood from her chair.

“And? Troublesome ones like yourself enjoy writing all the time, aye? Should you have something I should bring, prepare it quickly. The sun will soon set.”

“I will do so shortly.”

Passing by Selim, who still sat on the floor, Millike left the room.

Millike was cold to everybody. The only thing he considered precious was this town.

“Can you stand?”

Lawrence, obliged, helped her up, and Selim finally snapped back to the present.

And when she did, the reality of the situation seemed to catch up to her at the same time. Tears pooled in her eyes.

It was difficult to hold back tears once they started. When she did, Lawrence first realized how young she truly was. Selim and Aram had an innocent dream that was fitting for their youth. If there was light at the end of the path, they believed in just that.

“Hey, young girls shouldn’t cry over things like that.”

Selim looked quite like his daughter Myuri, and as he held her up by the shoulders, Holo stared at them. Of course, on purpose.

“It’s not your fault, and they won’t take the permit for free.”

Like Millike had said, if they were to open a mine, there was an option for them to earn money there.

But at any rate, the wandering lifestyle still waited for them afterward.

“Or…”

Lawrence began to speak, but then hesitated. Even if he asked them to come work at his bathhouse, there was no way he could

take in all of them. In the end, it was a hopeless situation. If he had vast amounts of money, he would lend it to them so they would be able to build their own bathhouse deep in the mountains of Nyohhira.

But unfortunately, even if he knew all the ways of the world, there were still some things that could not be done.

That was why preachers always had to teach people about good lifestyles.

"We can also ask the people at the Debau Company if they have jobs, so we can keep you two as close together as possible."

Having watched Myuri, he knew that the tears of younglings fell like jewels.

Selim, too, tears still rolling down her cheek like small stones, looked at Lawrence.

He hoped the reason why she harbored no grudges was because of her personality. Hoped that it was not resignation simply because the hopes they held onto until now had been crushed in the end.

"Thank…you…so much…"

She thanked him with a hoarse voice and looked down.

Lawrence could only pat her thin shoulders.

Then he looked at Holo, suggesting that they leave her alone for now, and left the room.

"Hmm…"

The one that sighed when they exited to the hallway was not

Lawrence, but Holo.

“Is there nothing that can be done?”

She looked as though she was enduring the pain and looked beyond the closed door.

She had acted like it had nothing to do with her, but she was much more openhearted than Lawrence. She was the one that wanted to help the most in that room.

“Probably not. We can only hope for a miracle.”

The world was endless, and wherever one went, it already belonged to somebody.

“A miracle, hmm.”

Holo murmured and took a deep breath.

“Would you be angry with me if I became an enemy of humanity?”

If he gave an easy answer, Holo would scorn him. And if he trusted her, then the words came naturally.

“If you became my enemy or if you broke everything I kept dear. But I know you won’t. So I’ll listen. What’s your idea?”

“…I do not like it when you make my head hurt like that.”

He would take that as a compliment.

“I cannot create miracles, but I believe I can create the opposite of miracles.”

But Holo did have some crazy ideas.

“The opposite of miracles?”

“A curse.”

The sun was already starting to set, and it was dim inside the building.

It was the time when demons hid in the darkness everywhere —around the corners, beside the bookshelves.

“I recall a fairy tale. Men filled with greed are led by their guide to the place where treasure lies. They thought the guide an honest one, but the shadow he cast by the bonfire had fangs.”

It was certainly the type of story to scare children, but Lawrence unwittingly showed a twitching smile.

Usually, he would let it pass as a silly story, but he thought carefully about it.

The situation now was exactly the same as that fairy tale.

“Once they enter the mountains, it will not end safely. Demons of the mountains spread rumors of treasure. Those monks from long ago lost their fear of such a thing.”

Then, the people would not go near the mountain, and the stories of silver would grow vague.

Though there were reckless ones who thought, *Damn the stories*, and ventured up anyway, but they would be surrounded by wolves deep in the mountains.

And there, they would also find a giant wolf who could easily swallow a person whole.

“You can’t.”

That voice echoed coolly in the cold hallway.

"The people of today's world are not afraid of the dark forests."

It was Millike, holding a letter. It had not been rolled yet, and when he gave it a light shake, the sand to dry the ink scattered to the ground.

"They move about in confusion in the forest, and perhaps after being bitten a bit, they'll leave. But the next time they come, they will just bring heaps of boiling oil and torches. They'll set fire to the mountain and burn it all down, along with whatever nasty thing lives there."

That way they would expose the darkness of the forest, where the demons and spirits lived, to the light.

"Sometimes, people like Aram come to this town from the south. Without the blessing of wits to live in the human world, and yet those who no longer have a place to hide themselves. They reluctantly hope to survive in the north because they think there are still untouched lands."

Though there were some here and there, they were places that were incredibly difficult to live in. It was different from the south, where it was warm, where the tree limbs grew heavy with ripened fruit, where one could find wild honey to eat.

"That is why since they came pretending to be monks, they succeeded. If it were a sanctuary, people would still pay some respect."

They had many choices. There would be no way to know which one was the best choice.

And it was not easy to pretend to be a monk. Since Svernel was now a town that celebrated the Revitalization Festival of the Pa-

tron Saint on a grand scale, if new monks came to the ruins of the monastery, then there would be fervent believers that might go to pray. It was only a matter of time before someone found out.

“Well, it seems the ink’s dry. Take this to Hilde at Debau. It has the gist of the situation and the plan in it.”

He rolled it up and tied it with an odd string.

“You use such old things.”

Holo smiled dryly, and Lawrence finally realized the string was likely Millike’s hair.

“Sealing wax will break in the cold, and this is proof of my identity.”

“’Tis true.”

“I’ll have a carriage take you outside the wall.”

Things were moving along quickly. There was no time for sentimentality or to leave any aftertaste.

No one spoke of Selim, and when they exited the government building, they climbed onto the driver’s perch of the carriage Millike had prepared for them, and Lawrence gripped the reins.

Night had already fallen on the town, but the town was instead dyed a madder-lake red.

Lit all throughout town were not lamps, but fires to roast the meat.

“Looks delicious…”

Her words were carefree, but her heart was not in it.

She was likely still unwilling to move ahead in her mind as they left Selim and the others behind.

“You can eat as much as you like when we get back.”

Lawrence stuck to Holo’s topic.

The two things he learned as he grew older were that he had to understand the things he could and could not do in this world, as well as the boldness to pretend he had not realized certain things.

Conversation did not spark between them, and the carriage passed slowly through the town.

Then, they could see the square at the end of the road. The torches shone brightly, and they could see well the large statue of the saint.

“What would they gain from such a thing?”

“Who knows? It might be to protect them from illness or to keep away enemies from outside. At the end of the festival they light it on fire, and that is when the saint gives his body to God in our place. Then in thanks, they take the ashes and bury them at the base of the city walls. There are several saints with stories like that, and maybe it really happened in an old era.”

The townspeople explained this and that to him when they were making the statue, but it was nothing new.

“It must be quite troublesome to be a saint or whatnot. Even after you die and become ashes, you still must work for the town.”

“It’s better to be ashes, I think. There’s a famous church that houses the body of a saint that shriveled up a thousand years ago. Every single day pilgrims come to his side as he sleeps and offer prayers. It can’t be possible for him to sleep well like that.”

“I would not mind being worshipped about once a year…”

Holo spoke, and she looked straight at him.

“If you’re going to watch me for a thousand years, at least just eat me,” said Lawrence.

Holo bared her fangs and cackled.

“But pilgrimage sites make a lot of money. It’s fine if towns like these know they’re fake from the start, but there are many places that say they have the real remains of saints.”

“Hmm? How does one know if ’tis a fake? Should they be dead, would it not be difficult to tell?”

“It’s easy. Saint Alviross had five arms, and Saint Heres had two heads. The thing that makes me laugh the most is Martyr Rudeon’s bones. There are three bodies of his, and they’re all different sizes. They say they’re his bones from when he was very little, then bones from his childhood, then from when he was adolescent.”

“Hmm? Is there something odd about that?”

Her response was nonchalant. Rather, Lawrence even thought that she was teasing him.

“…He couldn’t have molted like a shrimp or crab. Why would one human leave multiple skeletons?”

“Oh.”

It seemed that she really did not notice. Holo hit Lawrence’s arm, even though she was the one that misunderstood and exposed her foolishness.

“Even though everyone knew at first that they weren’t real, as time passed everyone started to think of them that way. That’s why, as they bury the ashes of the burned statue under the walls, I’m sure at some point they might believe that the ashes of the saint are really buried there.”

“Humans are foolish.”

Holo was smiling softly, as though remembering a funny dream she had the previous night, either because she was exasperated or because she thought the foolishness of humans endearing.

“But if they are, why not take advantage of that?”

“Take advantage?”

“You should concoct something fake and make the monastery in the mountains its pilgrimage site and whatnot.”

He stared back at Holo not because he was surprised at such a reckless idea. He was surprised that she had not yet given up on Selim and the others.

Lawrence pulled on the reins, and the horses stopped. Holo did not ask why they did so.

“I will work my hardest, and when I open a new bathhouse, I also have the option of hiring them.”

“I have no doubts that if you save enough money for that, you will go through with it.”

Holo was not stupid. She of course knew how much time and money it would cost to open a new business.

“Holo…”

“Apologies. ’Twas nonsense. I wanted an excuse.”

She tried her best, but it was no use.

When Lawrence did not respond, Holo gave a strong smile.

“Let me off. I know what we must do.”

So that this would not end up in trouble with the pope, they would have the Debau Company settle it for them. Aram and Selim would have to give up. Lawrence and Holo themselves would watch the festival, then return to Nyohhira. Everything would pass without incident.

But Millike had said that Aram and the others were much like themselves from ten years ago.

Then, they had drawn in their own luck. At the very end, they did.

He could only think that their luck was good. He had used all the knowledge he knew, and if he had not depended on Holo in the end, it would not have come to fruition, even if he did know how to do it.

That was luck.

Aram and the others did not have that.

“I think it would be great, really, if we could use your pilgrimage site idea.”

Lawrence held the reins again and smacked the rump of the horse.

“…”

Holo did not look at him and nodded meekly.

“Even if the roads are bad—no, because the roads are bad, people will come and give lots of tithes. If you annexed an inn there, you would already have many guests. It’s much easier than running a bathhouse. You just need to be careful that someone won’t steal the holy artifacts on display.”

The carriage headed toward the city wall, and there were fewer and fewer people.

“It’s not a bathhouse, so it wouldn’t conflict with Nyohhira. Rather, pilgrims on their way home might even stop by at Nyohhira. And everyone would be happy.”

He added that they might come to quarrel over the distribution of food and drink, though.

“But even if we made up some artifacts, it would be difficult to have them recognized as the real thing. We don’t have that problem in the bathhouses. As long as we have spring water, no one will doubt us.”

Declining towns always thought at least once to change their town into a pilgrimage site as a way to revive themselves.

“Typically, you need to get approval from the center of the Church, or at least the archbishop. For that, you need proof that it’s a real miracle, or if not, a mountain of gold nuggets that could be considered nothing but a miracle.”

Because the designation was a method to get rich, it required the appropriate amount of payment. Since this was all the Church was ever doing, they had likely lost some of their authority.

“Well, the most I am able to do is mostly child’s play.”

Holo was the embodiment of a wolf who lived in wheat and had watched over the growing golden fields. Once, she had shown

him a seed immediately turning into a stalk of wheat.

“That might come in handy, depending on the situation.”

The place in question was too cold to grow wheat, so it would be too unnatural.

“And there’s also your miraculous appetite.”

“Fool.”

Holo stomped on Lawrence’s foot.

Then, her foot resting on his in place of holding hands, she spoke.

“Do you think we can do it if I show my true form?”

“Everyone will be surprised, but that’s different than a miracle.”

Holo had showed all the cards in her hand, but none of them would help. The carriage reached the city gates at the wall.

They had to give in to the reality that confronted them.

“For now, let’s leave the town and go where there’s no one else. I have to wrap your clothes around your neck.”

“There were no walls where the Debau Company was. I hope they do not mind my intruding as a wolf.”

“Mr. Hilde is the embodiment of a rabbit. I don’t think he’d want a wolf standing by his pillow at night.”

“Heh-heh. Of course.”

“Well, it’s a lot of work, but thank you. Nyohhira’s survival de-

pends on this, too."

"Leave it to me."

Using the pass they received from Millike, they exited the walls, and it suddenly felt colder. Inside and outside the walls were two different worlds.

"But if you run fast, you can get to the Debau Company in Lesko in one night. It takes three days hurrying with human legs. That in itself is a miracle."

"Hmm. They, too, should just become merchants. They could deliver faster than anyone, running around with goods on their back."

He thought it was possible at first, but he calmly thought about it and shook his head.

"People would wonder how they carried it. They might think magic or something nefarious was at play. They might think that someone is there that shouldn't be."

"The human world is quite troublesome."

As Holo spoke, she began to remove her clothes, as though determining that no one was around.

For the moment, he averted his gaze out of respect, but his eyes suddenly went to the walls.

There were small nails evenly spaced along the wall. They looked like small mounds, and it was probably where they buried the ashes of the saint's statue.

Luckily, since they were not the real ashes, there was no tired expression of the saint, sitting on the mounds being made to pro-

tect the town, nor did the saint have to endure a coughing fit every year after they dug the holes and added new ashes.

“Ha-ha.”

It was when he imagined that and laughed.

He thought he saw Selim sitting on a mound, looking at him.

“What is it?”

Holo, removing her last piece of clothing, noticed Lawrence.

Lawrence tried his hardest to think of the meaning of what he had just seen.

Sitting on the mound, *the saint*, *who should not be there*.

This, too, was a common type of narrative in the Church.

The most conspicuous example was *grave robbing*.

“...Hey.”

Not looking away from the mounds, he swallowed, and then spoke.

“I want to ask something.”

“What is it?”

He jumped a little because her voice was rather close.

He turned around, and Holo was practically whispering in his ear.

“’Tis been a long time since I’ve seen that expression.”

Holo narrowed her eyes, grinning. Her tail wagged happily.

"...I might not be able to live up to your expectations...There is a chance you might become angry."

"Hmm?" Holo said, and her animal ears twitched, as if saying, *Say what you want to say*.

Lawrence once again put together the plan in his head and thought it over.

It could work, but there were parts of it that might offend Holo.

Lawrence spoke slowly of the ridiculous plan that had popped into his head, and approaching the delicate parts, he said:

"Would you get angry if I sat atop another woman?"

Holo's smile clearly changed to a forced one.

Then, she spoke.

"I trust you. I shall not grow angry over every single thing. And I have sharp eyes and ears."

And of course, sharp fangs.

But the way she spoke was her mark of approval.

"Of course, 'tis the only choice with your plan."

"You go ahead and follow Mr. Millike's plan, because I don't know if this will work out well."

"Hmm. I, too, wish to run freely by myself sometimes."

She removed her last piece of clothing, intentionally threw it at

Lawrence, and jumped from the carriage, now naked.

"Are you forgetting your praise?" She was not the least bit embarrassed.

Instead, she seemed cold.

"This reminds me of old times," Lawence said, and Holo widened her eyes in surprise, then immediately laughed.

"Fool."

In that moment, she returned to a giant wolf.

"My clothes," she said to him, and Lawrence hurriedly folded the clothes she had scattered everywhere and gathered them with a string. Like a big dog, she was bumping his head with her nose the entire time.

"I'm counting on you."

The wolf's sharp, magnificent eyes stared at Lawrence.

"You as well."

Holo swiftly stood and gazed out at the horizon.

"Should those fools make a small village of wolves, then we know what the name of their patron saint shall be."

He could tell she was smiling with that fanged mouth.

And before Lawrence could say anything, Holo dashed off like the wind.

He wiped off the mud she had splattered on him as she ran off, likely on purpose, until he could no longer see her.

“Honestly…”

He swore, but his face smiled.

He made Holo expect quite a bit from this. If this ended in a fruitless delight, then he did not know what she would do to him.

“Well then, let’s go make miracles!”

With newfound energy, he jumped onto the driver’s perch of the wagon.

When Lawrence returned to the city government building, he summoned Millike.

He told him about his plan and saw how it made the other man wear a clear frown.

Though he had that expression, Millike did not say no.

“This way, the Debau Company will calm down, the Church will save face, and Aram and the others can live there.”

There was just one way everything could be settled peacefully.

“…No harm in trying…hmm.”

“At the worst, the Archbishop might think he was tricked by a fox.”

“Mm…”

Millike thought silently for a brief moment, and his beard quivered under his breath.

“You’ve really thought about this. Is this how trade goes be-

tween merchants?"

"I am not a merchant." Lawrence shrugged and smiled. "I am the master of a bathhouse in Nyohhira, which sits between this world and the next."

Millike, astonished, waved his hand and returned to business.

Lawrence, with his own feet, headed toward the room that was set aside for Selim. When he opened the door, there was Selim sitting on the bed, the candles in the room unlit. Perhaps she had heard Lawrence's big footsteps and resigned herself to any kind of treatment.

"We have a plan. Everything might end well for all of us."

Since he had said such a thing so suddenly, she did not seem surprised, but rather looked at Lawrence dubiously.

"But it might end up a bit differently than how you dreamed," he said as a disclaimer and then explained it to her.

Selim was perplexed at first, but as she came to see the outcome, the color of her eyes suddenly changed.

And Lawrence added one last thing.

"I need your assistance."

She stood up, emboldened.

"I will help."

Standing there was not a sorry sheep munching on grass. Supposing she were one, she was more like the brave sheep that was the last standing in that muddy square.

Selim was a wolf. Once she decided on her prey, her expres-

sion mirrored that of Holo's.

"But I must confirm one thing with you."

"What is it?"

Lawrence cleared his throat.

"Well…Would there be any problem if I rode on your back?"

He thought it polite to at least ask. She was of age, after all.

"…As long as Lady Holo does not grow angry, then it is fine with me."

"She probably won't."

"Heh-heh. Then all right. Mr. Lawrence, I will be sure to take you to Lenos."

"I'm only with you until the reception. Everything after that depends on your wits."

In the joy of being given a big responsibility, Selim beamed a smile that suited a girl her age and spoke.

"I am confident I can portray a dreary nun very well."

She was actually a girl who could smile and joke like this.

Lawrence nodded.

"Let's see if I agree with you."

Selim smiled uncomfortably, took a deep breath, and then exhaled slowly. There appeared the face of a nun who had never smiled before in her life.

“Long ago in the mountains, there was a monastery. In those ruins, there is a grave, and there are those who are unearthing it. I am Selim. I am the nun whose grave is being robbed.”

It was perfect.

Together with Selim, Lawrence headed out past the walls, and this time with complete respect, he turned away as she changed.

When prompted, he turned back, and there was a young-looking female wolf with beautiful silver fur that was two sizes smaller than Holo, but still much larger than a person.

“...It is odd that you do not fear me.”

“Mine is much scarier.”

The feel about her was much different than Holo, but he was oddly touched when he realized that the way wolves smiled was the same.

With the letter he had Millike prepare for him, the nun clothes, and Selim’s clothes on his back, he climbed up onto the silver wolf.

“Then we shall go.”

They immediately became the wind.

It would take more than two full days on the legs of a wolf to reach Lenos, the town of fur and lumber. On human legs, one would have to prepare for a journey of ten days. Then, there was the archiepiscopate, which was the Church’s authority that spread throughout that region, and the archbishop, who could say the head of a herring was sacred and it would be so.

According to Lawrence’s plan, Selim would sneak into the

archbishop's house and speak to him by his pillow.

I am Sister Selim. Far to the north, I have slumbered under the blessings of God…

It was all and well that she matured her faith deep in the mountains and was then called to God's side, but the body she left behind, by a heavenly miracle, unseen, turned into silver. She was able to rest soundly because the creatures of the forest had no interest, but greedy humans were different. She was troubled for they were planning to dig up her grave, and she wanted the archbishop to help her in the name of God.

It would be easy for wolf Selim to climb over the walls and sneak in.

Two days later, bracing against the cold wind, they finally reached Lenos—a place he had not been to for a long time. Briefly savoring the nostalgia, they headed to their destination.

The archbishop was asleep in his manor, which was like a noble's mansion, built on the side of the giant cathedral.

As the moon, as slim as a wolf claw, rose in the sky, Lawrence watched Selim disappear into the manor's garden.

The following day, Lawrence made himself seem timid and knocked on the gates of the great cathedral. *"I am a humble peddler, but last night I had a dream that commanded me to guide the archbishop to Svernel…"*

The archbishop, who was visited last night in something that could have either been a dream or reality, seemed like he would not have doubted even the wildest of stories. He received Lawrence warmly, thinking he was truly a servant of God, and forgetting all his business, he immediately began to prepare for the journey.

Then the archbishop headed straight for Svernel, and there was the Debau Company, who controlled the silver mining in the north, and the ones who had found silver while digging with the pope's permit in hand, all sitting together silently, waiting. Moreover—they were in the middle of an ugly fight over the silver.

The archbishop's face went pale, since he seemed to think that only he knew what the silver was made of, and he intervened.

Please wait, do not touch that silver! That is a holy woman who has been blessed by God!

Those words also marked the birth of a pilgrimage tourist attraction.

If the miracle of the holy woman really did happen, then the archbishop would not have handled the earth so carelessly after she stood by his side at night. Then the townspeople, no matter how greedy, would be unable to mine for silver. If they could not mine for silver, then the Debau Company had no need to bare its fangs.

Then, if people came and offered money, they would be able to open a little inn there.

"There were many rough edges, but it all rounded out quite nicely."

Holo was unusually impressed.

"That's only because you fought for it until the very end."

That was not modesty. The time when they would have been breathlessly convinced that something good was waiting for them at the end of the road had already passed. As it brought about peace, it also created a feeling similar to resignation that things

that were meant to be would be.

On their journey some ten-odd years ago, the one that would have cared the most about Aram and the others would definitely have been himself. He could imagine it—there was no mistaking that he would have raised a stink when he got a whiff of the profit he could make off a conflict of interest surrounding unexploited silver. In the process, he would have reached out a hand to Selim, unable to leave her out of the excitement; then Holo would grow jealous and there would have been a fight and a big commotion…

But about that last part, it was not as though Lady Holo the Wisewolf had already forgiven him.

"So, did you enjoy riding on that girl?" his wife inquired with a smile.

And Lawrence lay in bed, and Holo sat in a chair beside it. She held a bowl full of porridge in one hand and scooped some with a spoon and was feeding him.

Though it was fine clinging to Selim's back, heading to Lenos as a part of the plan, he could not win against his age. He had gotten all muddy and used up all his strength in the festival event, then traveled to Lenos for two whole days in the cold wind, and then turned right around and journeyed almost a week with the archbishop—there was no way he could have endured such an exhausting journey hale and hearty.

That night after seeing through Svernel's situation, he was seized by a high fever and collapsed.

He had nightmares for three days and three nights, and his fever was only now subsiding.

"She had silver fur."

“Hmm.”

Holo blew on the porridge in the spoon to cool it down and fed it to him properly.

“She was about two sizes smaller than you. A bit bigger than a big cow.”

“Mm.”

“I don’t really know how fast she was going.”

She scooped up more from the bowl and blew on it.

“And?”

When she asked him that, he realized.

She *wanted to be mad*.

“Yeah…It might have been because she was young, but her fur was really soft— Mgh!”

She shoved the spoon into his mouth as he spoke.

Holo, smiling, rattled the spoon around in his mouth.

Lawrence somehow bit into it and held fast until she let go.

He had a feeling he knew why she wanted to be angry.

“I couldn’t have predicted how it would end from the start. I was doing my best when I thought of how to round out those rough edges.”

And he had not thought of what to do *after* he had grabbed a hold of those edges.

Holo stared at Lawrence and slowly wagged her tail back and forth. She looked like a wolf who was ready to move immediately whether her prey ran left or right.

He did not know how long the silence lasted, and when Holo slowly took the spoon from Lawrence's hand, she scooped some more porridge and blew on it.

Then, she ate it herself.

"You fool."

Though since after eating some herself for a bit, she started to slowly feed Lawrence again, she was probably not truly angry at him. She might have gotten angry if he had lumped them together, like a dog asserting its territory.

"Since we set that girl up as the holy woman, she can't just hang around the inn at her own pilgrimage site."

So in terms of where she should go, there was a bathhouse right nearby that needed some help. Furthermore, that bathhouse was looking for people who would work hard and not be surprised even if they knew the secret that the mistress of the house had the ears and tails of an animal.

Even Holo knew the answer of what she should do.

But much like Lawrence knew all about Holo, Holo knew all about Lawrence.

"You fancy the ill-fated, weak girls, aye? Mm?"

She did not cool the porridge she scooped and, still hot, brought it close to his face.

It is often said that one should not interfere with lover's quar-

rels, but this porridge would soon interfere with his mouth.



“But you, too…Hot! H— Ho!”

In a fluster, he reached for the ale that sat by his bed.

Holo paid no mind to him and simply ate the porridge in the spoon herself.

“’Tis how I am adorably envious.”

“…That was too much.”

He did not have any burns, but his mouth stung.

Lawrence spoke to Holo as she ate the porridge.

“Thank you for looking after me.”

Holo’s ears stood straight up.

“I do not mind. I am the very model of a loving wife.”

“Sure.”

She was probably truly worried about him. When he finally woke up, the first thing he had said was that he was hungry, and she was so relieved that she was somehow irritated.

Though she was called the wisewolf and had many things at her disposal, she could not completely control her own emotions sometimes.

But he did not mind being played with because of that.

“I want to go back to the bathhouse soon.”

Holo, who ended up eating half of the porridge, gave a satisfied sigh and spoke.

“Well, we have no work for a while. You must rest properly for now.”

Prompted by her, he lay down in the bed, and she pulled the covers up over his shoulders.

“See, good children must close their eyes now.”

How old do you think I am? he thought, but he did not mind being treated like a child.

As she gently kissed his forehead and cheeks, he drifted off into sleep.

He felt as though he was with Holo all throughout his dreams.

Parchment and Graffiti



PARCHMENT AND GRAFFITI

The mountains were dyed the color of fire in this busy season of preparing for winter.

The hot spring village Nyohhira, deep in the northern mountains, saw the end of the short summer and was now just waiting for winter to come.

The wind grew colder every day, and the sound of falling leaves occasionally brought about something that felt like sadness. There are those that called it depression, but it felt more like sleepiness. It was a drowsy time before the coming of a quiet winter.

He did not hate it.

“Mr. Lawrence, should I put the cheeses from Alvo in the cellar?”

“Yeah, thanks, Col. Just put them anywhere…Whoa, they’re big.”

That day, when it truly became fall, everyone was working hard in their preparations to fill the bellies of the guests who would come to this bathhouse in Nyohhira, Spice and Wolf. The two men were sorting out the goods they received from the neighboring village. The cheeses they stacked were each so large that a full grown adult could barely carry one.

“The bigger they are, the more edible parts there are…Right?”

“Because the hard, outer skin tastes terrible and is practically inedible, right? There’s less wasted in bigger cheese, but…This is *huge*. I think the mayor of Alvo would make more money if he quit and opened a cheese shop.”

The inside of the gleaming, amber-colored cheese also felt quite substantial.

“I’ve heard it’s hard to make them bigger. If you don’t strain the water well enough, apparently, it will get moldy inside.”

“Then…let’s pray that we don’t cut it open to find it full of mold.”

“Ha-ha. Their mayor has the heart of a craftsman, so I don’t think that’ll happen.” Lawrence, the master of Spice and Wolf, laughed. It has been ten-some years since he came to this land and started a bathhouse, and though he still could not get away from the other villagers’ newcomer treatment, he was already quite used to life here.

And after traveling through many countries, pursuing theology and finally settling here for ten-some years, Col was keenly aware of how dreadful the flow of time was.

“Then, I’ll go put these away…I’m a bit worried that the shelves might break since they’re so big, though.”

It seemed too much to bring it up onto his shoulders, so though awkward, he held onto it with both hands like a baby lamb.

As he tottered around to the back of the main building, he could hear the lively voices coming from the baths beyond the partition.

Summer and winter were Nyohhira’s peak seasons, and it was

now around the time when guests for the winter were starting to arrive.

Most of the patrons were nobility or the directors of huge commercial firms or high-ranking clergy, so once they were finished managing the many festivals and events in the spring and fall, they would come to unwind.

There were already several guests at Spice and Wolf, and they were lazily spending their day in the outdoor bath.

As of yet, the number of guests were few, so the dancers and musicians who made their earnings in Nyohhira during the winter were nowhere to be seen, and it was quiet throughout town.

What he could hear beyond the partition was a rather heated commotion.

“Wa-ha-ha-ha! You can do it!”

“Here, drink, drink! Put your heart into it!”

They were rather lively for how high the sun was in the sky.

And for some reason, he could hear the *clop, clop* of a horse’s hooves on stone.

What on earth was going on in there?

Customers in the baths typically lost track of time once they became drunk. But that was usually when there were more people, more alcohol, and after they grew bored of staying in for a long while.

But this made him a bit uneasy, and still holding the cheese, he waddled to the partition and peeked through the crack.

“Make sure the rope doesn’t break! Did you tie it right?!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Shield! The shield! The shield is…Ba-ha-ha-ha!”

“Go, goddess of ours!”

“Yes! May God watch over you!”

It was an unusual amount of excitement. It seemed that guests from other bathhouses had come, too.

The naked men were all generally holding a mug of drink in one hand, waving it around, and cheering.

He could not see well through the steam of the baths, but he knew immediately what the clopping sound was coming from.

It was a mule. A pack mule was stomping around by the side of the bath. There was a boy, a nervous expression on his face, trying to keep it calm. It was the boy who brought the goods from Alvo on his pack mule.

But why was it in the bath?

A clue to his question was the thick rope that extended from its yoke.

The people were looking at the end of the taut rope, which went to the top of the bath.

“…Wh-wha…”

He was at a loss for words. There stood a girl, raising her hands to the cheers and smiling at everybody.

She did not seem to mind that the men were naked and only wore thin linen wrapped around her chest and hips. Though since

the baths were not separated by gender that in itself was not unusual, but she, for some reason, was wearing rough-looking gloves.

"…Wh-what?"

He had a fiercely unpleasant feeling.

There in the middle of the cheers was the bathhouse owner's—Lawrence's—only daughter, Myuri.

She would be twelve or thirteen this year, an age where it would not be unusual to be wed off early. Typically, this was around the time when she would be practicing needlework or cooking every day, preparing to support her husband as a good wife or saddling the household's prosperity as a mother.

But for some reason, here she was half-naked, wearing roughly hewn gloves, holding the rope of a mule that had been brought into the baths. And even still, Myuri was standing atop something odd.

He remembered what the guests were saying: "Shield, shield."

Since people of high standing mostly frequented here, they were accompanied by those who were heavily armed. Upon closer examination, there were several sturdy-looking men who watched the goings-on with obvious worry. Myuri was likely standing on one of their shields. He saw the broad shields, large enough to completely cover a tall adult, and finally understood what Myuri wanted to do.

That was when she yelled, standing atop the shields.



“Ready!”

She raised one hand, raising a cry like a knight in the battlefield, and he could almost hear her lift the corner of her mouth and clench her teeth.

She was looking at the mule. Next to the mule was the boy, who looked like he was about to cry. At the prompting of the cheers, he closed his eyes as though he had no choice and hit its rump with his stick.

“Charge!”

Though he was not sure if that is exactly what she said.

Everything happened in an instant, and while the entire world was paused, only Myuri, atop the shield, slid to the side.

Pulled by the rope, both Myuri and the shield slid across the water. It slid so fast and so cleanly on the water that it was almost funny. The audience gave a loud cheer and tossed their mugs. There was a loud *clunk* as the shield hit the edge of the bath.

“Ohhh!”

Myuri’s slender body flew into the air with the shield, but she did not fall. It hit the ground with a sound that pierced the air, and the mule pulled them along the wet stone. It was so skillfully done, Col could not speak.

He snapped out of it when he saw the excited guests all begin to run around, and the blood drained from his face.

He abandoned the cheese and ran after Myuri with the guests. Beyond the trail on the rocks left by the shield was the forest, covered in fallen leaves. Then there was a downward slope, and the

mule likely ran as fast as it could. A single dark path of earth was carved into the carpet of leaves, and it gradually turned right.

Then, the path suddenly stopped.

These men, who once they returned home all had positions of power and fame and fortune, were making a big ruckus naked in the forest. Standing in the middle of it all, big grin on her face, was a girl who looked like she had been raised from the dead, covered in leaves and mud.

The men lifted Myuri up and carried her back up the hill.

When the cackling girl realized who was waiting for her, her face stiffened for a moment.

But when he glared at her, being carried by the men, she immediately pretended not to notice.

He was not filled with anger, but exasperation.

He followed after Myuri, whom the men were cheering on, and he heard the sound of her being thrown into the bath. When she poked her head out of the water, she had a refreshed look on her face. Her beautiful forehead, now clear of mud and leaves, was covered in scratch-like cuts. Cuts on her maiden face!

But Myuri did not mind and waved to the guests cheering around her, then swam to the edge. He bent his knees and held his hand out to her, and she took it calmly.

“Eh-heh-heh, did you see that? Wasn’t it awesome?”

Myuri’s innocent smile has never changed.

He sighed and pulled her slim body up.

“Are you hurt?”

“Nope, not at all,” she said, but there were skid marks all over her forehead and cheeks, and her long legs were the same as well.

However, for Myuri, these did not fall under the category of “injury.”

Under her hair, which was the strange color of silver specks in ash, one could find many scars from her childhood. He did not know how many times he had fainted at the sight of a blood-smeared Myuri.

“Get changed and come to the fire.”

“Oh, are you gonna braid my hair?!”

“It’s a scolding!” he yelled at her and she drew up her shoulders, but her expression was that of annoyance. “Your answer?”

“...Fine.”

Guests that stayed for a while found these sorts of usual occurrences amusing, but it was not funny to those who had to clean up after Myuri. First, going into the bath covered in mud and dead leaves was inexcusable, and they had to fix the stone arrangements that the shield had broken. Then, they had to find that unlucky boy from the neighboring village and apologize to him.

Like bringing home a little cat that did something wrong, he brought Myuri back to the main house by the nape of her neck. Her wet feet slapped against the ground, and she sneezed on the way. She was wet and half-naked during a time where it would not be unusual if it began to snow.

“Put on some warm clothes.”

“Okay.”

He sent her off into the main building and sighed, then went to retrieve the cheese he had left behind. There, he heard Myuri, calling back to him.

“Hey, brother!”

“…What is it?”

Myuri, still dripping wet, stood in the doorway, a bit of a praiseworthy air around her. When she was behaving, she seemed like a little girl who got caught in the rain.

“…Wasn’t it amazing?”

Look, look, brother, I caught a really big fish!

She has not changed since her innocent childhood.

Through his shock, his face smiled on its own.

“That’s…Yes, it was amazing…I could hardly believe my eyes.”

“Ha-ha-ha, yay!”

She bounced in place and then entered the main house.

She did not seem to regret her actions one bit.

But it was true that it was “*amazing*.” He would never have dared to do such a thing or even think of it.

When he thought this, he shook his head. It was his job as her pseudo older brother to reprimand her for her tomboyishness. She was supposed to be ladylike and become a proper wife.

“All right.”

For the time being, he did his best to carry the cheese. And once that was over, he took his place in front of the stove, scripture in one hand. Although he waited and waited, Myuri did not come.

He went to check on her in her room, and he found her napping happily.

"Heh-heh-heh."

When Col told the story during their meal, a girl with the same face as Myuri laughed.

But there was a strange bit of intensity to this laugh, and the color of her hair was different. At a glance, she looked like a teenage girl, just like Myuri, but she was actually several hundred years old and the avatar of the wolf-that-lived-in-wheat—Holo the Wisewolf.

Holo, with big triangular ears on her head and tail wagging from her behind, was Myuri's mother and the good wife of Lawrence, the master of the Spice and Wolf bathhouse.

"It is not something to laugh about…"

"'Tis fine. She is unhurt in the end, is she not?"

"Is it all right to call this *unhurt*?"

Myuri, devouring her food, was covered in bandages from her face to her arms. Underneath the bandages, Lawrence had lathered on a special ointment that contained a bit of herb, pig fat, and sulfur. He had been astonished when he saw all her cuts and forced the bandages onto her, so that her injuries would not leave any scars.

“Father and brother are making too big a deal of it.”

“It’s fine that it ended all right, but if it didn’t, you would be seriously hurt.”

Col complained, but she just shrugged her slim shoulders.

He sighed anxiously, and Holo cackled.

“But where did the master of the house run off to?”

“Mr. Lawrence? He had Myuri help him find the Alvo boy’s mule, and he went straight to the village to apologize. He said it will affect their delivery of goods later.”

Since Nyohhira was deep in the mountains, there was a limit on how much material could be brought in. Should their relationship with the surrounding areas grow worse, then it was possible they could fold due to just that.

“It’s fine,” said Myuri, the one whose fault this all was.

“What made you say that?” he asked, and Myuri wiggled the same ears and tail as her mother. She took the lingonberry-honey jam, the fruit they had collected off a mountain in the forest over the summer, and spread it on the tough rye bread. For the moment, she put aside the question and bit into the loaf, overflowing with honey. The hair on her ears and tail bristled at the sourness.

Usually, unlike her mother Holo, she had her ears and tail put away, but they would occasionally show themselves when her emotions peaked, such as in astonishment or anger. It seemed that typically, it was more natural for them to be out.

“Wha d’yu mean…*om nom*. Besides, that kid likes me.”

“…”

Holo burst out laughing at his shock.

“Males are fools.”

“Yep, yep.”

He had nothing more to say to Myuri, as she added salt to her mushroom soup and slurped it down.

She was the kind of daughter who was turning out to make even Holo, who ruled over this house, seem small.

“Honestly…”

As Myuri began to look more and more like Holo, her father Lawrence would often find himself beaten in an argument instead. Holo had a broad-minded personality, and she did not mind the small things. So Col was the one who had to keep it together.

However, the struggle to make Myuri into a wonderful and ladylike daughter always felt in vain.

“Anyway, once you’ve finished eating, you’re going to practice reading and writing.”

“Nooo…”

“Don’t give me that.”

“Well, he’s right; ’tis a good thing to be able to read and write.”

Holo spoke, sprinkling a good helping of rock salt onto her cured pork and stuffing it into her mouth.

At her words, Myuri shrugged and looked at Holo, and her ears and tail drooped in obedience.

"...Okay."

The hierarchy of their group was clear.

Holo, Lawrence, himself, then Myuri.

Recently, Myuri was rising rapidly up this hierarchy, and when she seemed about to treat him cruelly, Holo would take the opportunity to intervene. Myuri would only ever listen to what Holo had to say. Perhaps the rules of the forest were entrenched in their blood. Before the wisewolf herself, a young pup behaved like a little dog.

"Then get ready and come to the room."

"Okay."

Myuri voiced her response in a bored tone, and in retaliation, reached for a new piece of bread.

As Col read the scriptures aloud in the candlelight, there came a knock on the door.

But the sound was rather near the floor.

Dubious, he opened the door, and there was Myuri, still covered in bandages, carrying a large blanket.

"Myuri, how many times have I told you not to kick the door?"

She gave no response and quickly entered the room, dumping the blanket onto the bed. He knew it was cold this time of year, and she did not have the luxury of a stove and the sort in her own room, but she also had a sheep's wool pillow, for some reason.

"Mother went to get father. Mother said she'll shear all the

hair off on my tail if I touch the stove, so let me sleep here tonight."

Holo was typically lenient with her, but of course, she was strict when it came to dealing with fire.

"I haven't slept here in forever! Ah-ha, the straw is so hard! Do you change it at all?"

Col's bed was made from the wild wheat that they used to feed the livestock—it was gathered into a bundle with a hemp sheet pulled over it. The stiffness Myuri felt beneath her was since she was light; there was no need to tie the bundle of straw tightly.

Col and Myuri often slept in the same bed when they were little, but after they grew up, they started to sleep separately. It was especially cold here, so wearing clothes to bed in the middle of winter would instead make one sick. It was normal to warm oneself through body heat.

Though that was typical, as a servant of God and as a good older brother, he wanted Myuri to have a maiden's sense of shyness. And there were the times he would be startled at how similar she looked to Holo in the darkness.

"If you do that, you really will fall asleep."

Myuri's specialty was the ability to fall asleep as soon as she lay down. Even now she had already gone quiet, and Col immediately pulled her up by the arm.

"Uuuu..."

"Come on, get up now!"

Even if he gripped her thin shoulders, her neck would lean at an angle.

But if she was truly sleepy, her tail would have been curled up, so she was merely acting.

“If you pretend any more, I’ll have you sleep on the floor.”

“…”

She cracked one eye open and giggled.

“You’re always so angry, brother. It’s in the scripture, right? ‘Thou shalt not give in to anger!’”

“That’s all you remember…?”

He sighed, and Myuri nimbly got out of the bed. She took the blanket and wrapped it around her, then sat in the chair.

Before her, he opened a collection of teachings that travelers used as solace during their journey and prepared a wooden board and pointed stick. A layer of wax lay on the board, and one wrote by scratching it. When it was full of writing, one would melt the wax with the heat of a candle and then could write on it many times.

“But I really am sleepy, so let’s hurry up and finish this so I can sleep.”

“I agree. If Mr. Lawrence does not come back tonight, then I must get up early to do the work tomorrow.”

“You sound like I don’t do any help at all.”

“Then will you get up before dawn and break the ice in the well for me?”

Myuri’s ears immediately flattened, and she began to scratch out the letters.

It was not that she was the lazy type and actually, she was a rather hard worker. The problem lay in the fact that Myuri was not a morning person, and it took her a while to get started on her work. And she would immediately get caught up in some foolishness if a guest egged her on.

Col watched the girl from behind, relieved, and once she had written about three lines, her tail began to fidget nervously.

“Aww, we’ve got another busy winter coming up, huh?”

Though Nyohhira had its fair share of visitors in the summer, the real deal was when the snow piled high in the winter, starting right around this time.

“You played a lot this spring, summer, and fall.”

Since Nyohhira was in the north, the transition from spring to fall passed quickly, but there were still many fun things to do. In the spring they collected wild plants, in the summer they collected tree seeds and caught fish, and in the fall they harvested mushrooms and fruit. Hunting was also occasionally included.

“That’s why I want to sleep during the winter.”

“…I don’t think wolves hibernate.”

“Wolves don’t study.”

She always had a retort ready.

“Then you must be a child, since you hate studying and cause mischief all the time.”

Lately, treating Myuri like a child would cause her to become angry.

“This is wrong.”

He reached over her and pointed to a letter, and she scratched it away with her fingernail.

“I haven’t done anything too bad,” she muttered as she wrote.

He was exasperated at what she was trying to say, considering she used a shield as a sled and skidded across the baths.

“Then what would be something that is *too* bad?”

Scratching the letters onto the board, she shrugged her slender shoulders.

“Brother, what’s this?”

“Like this.”

It was when he drew his face in by her side and tried to take the branch to write an example for her.

Myuri suddenly reached out and clamped both of her hands onto his cheeks.

Before he realized it, her long eyelashes were directly in front of his eyes, and the tips of their noses were touching. And then their lips.

It seemed that one’s body really could freeze. He could not move at all due to the suddenness of it all.

He could not breathe, and Myuri peeked one eye open, hesitating a bit before looking at him.

Her eyes were swimming feverishly, as though she would cry, and as though she was happy.

She leaned back and pursed her lips.

“Don’t tell father, okay?” Myuri whispered, smiling, even though it still seemed as though she would cry.

It was too quiet—a deep silence that almost moved him.

He knew Myuri was quite attached to him, but this was impossible.

The moment he thought about it, something burned deep in his heart. Even though their lips were parted, he still could not breathe. His heart was beating loudly, and his chest hurt as though the blood had nowhere to go.

And then there was Myuri, looking down, embarrassed.

The unexpectedly rough feeling of her lips still remained, as well as the strong smell of sulfur, likely since she was in the water…Rough?

Myuri’s lips remained a smooth cherry pink, even in winter.

As he thought something was amiss, Myuri let go of his face.

The bandages were pulled across her hands, creating a bridge. They were exactly the right width to fit perfectly over his mouth.

She looked up, her mouth forming a small pout, bearing a smile.

“This is father’s special ointment, so I think it’ll fix your dry lips, brother,” she said, the smile of a demon on her face, and wagged her tail.

Col finally understood what she did to him and off came the lid on his thoughts.

All the blood in his chest rushed to his head at once.

"M-M-Myuri!"

He yelled her name, and she shrugged and closed her eyes, but she still smiled.

"Gosh, don't get so mad at me."

"Y-y-you…"

"Don't worry, brother, your purity is safe," she said and pressed a slender finger against his lips. Obedience, purity, and asceticism were the three virtues that those who decided to serve God vowed to adhere to. Of course, it was not as though Myuri was thinking in a way that followed the teachings of a kind God.

However, Col did not know what to say to this sinful, frightening girl. And what's more, he did not know how to deal with the feelings that had welled up when their eyes met.

"…That's enough for today."

"What? Really?" Myuri exclaimed happily and jumped up from her chair. She unwrapped the blanket from around herself and neatly laid it on the bed.

When he pinched the flame on the candle, like killing a bug, the room fell into darkness. He slowly approached Myuri, who had not touched her blanket yet, from behind.

As though she had sensed him, she quickly whipped around.

"B-brother?"

Col did not reply and just reached out—

And took in his hand his own blanket.

“I will sleep on the floor.”

“Huh?”

“I will sleep on the floor.”

His reply was curt as he wrapped himself in the blanket and lay down on the floor.

“Huh, brother? Hey, wait, what, why?”

She truly sounded upset by this, but he would not have any of it.

“I came because it’s too cold to sleep by myself…”

He reclined on the cold, hard floor and faced away from her.

He wrapped the blanket tightly around himself and single-mindedly recited the scripture.

May God protect me. May God forgive me for my sins…

“Hey, brother!”

He did not budge. Should he move, there were many things that could get messy.

After that, Myuri slept on her own and gave several fake-sounding sneezes, but in the end she slept soundly.

For several days afterward, she was just a bit more obedient.

She probably thought that Col was mad at her, but he was not.

It was for the foolish reason that he could not seriously look at her without becoming embarrassed.

The daughter of the wisewolf, Myuri.

She had quite the future ahead of her.

AFTERWORD

Wh-what…? You should have made up your mind that day, five years ago…!

Mwa-ha-ha-ha! Did I not say I was immortal?! I will come back to life over and over. Yes, over and over!

While that is not true, it is my first new book in five years. Isuna Hasekura here.

This book is comprised of three short stories that were printed in *Dengeki Bunko Magazine*'s special home page (discussed later) and one new short novella. Chronologically, this takes place ten-some years after book 17.

The reason why I decided to publish this new novel was because I did not have any money…No, it was because when I was looking over material for a different series, *May Your Soul Rest in Magdala*, there were many things that had me thinking, *This would fit* Spice and Wolf *much better than* Magdala, and the manga version, drawn by Keito Koume-sensei, was plunging into the climax, so my supervisor's suggestion of publishing a short story collection in combination with promoting the manga version served as its inception. And then there was also the fact that it was the tenth anniversary of my first book, so my supervisor said we should do many things for that, and so we did.

But when I set out to write it, Holo and Lawrence's antics were not much of a problem, but the two children turned out to be much more of a handful than I thought, so I was in trouble. And

then I remembered the old saying: “Let the troubled child go.”

So without delay, I have written about Holo and Lawrence’s daily lives after book 17, but since the children also went on a journey…I also wrote about their story. Please check out *Wolf and Parchment*, also on sale this month! As the subtitle says, “The New Spice and Wolf,” they are connected, but it is all right if you only read that one. It is a story about Col, who is the main character, and how he gets tossed around by Holo and Lawrence’s daughter. She also tosses around her ears and tail! The last story in this book is about these two new main characters.

Furthermore, there will be at least one more short collection for *Spice and Wolf*, so look forward to it and please take a look at Koume-sensei’s exciting comic version of *Spice and Wolf*!

Also, the short stories we plan to publish in this new book are posted every month at *Spice and Wolf & Isuna Hasekura 10th Anniversary Official Site* (I get embarrassed writing that out myself). You can read them for free, so if there are those that cannot wait for the book, please take a visit. There are announcements for other tenth anniversary event things besides *S&W*, so please keep an eye out.

The URL is http://hasekuraisuna.jp.

Well then, I will keep working hard for the decade to come.

—Isuna Hasekura


Congratulations to Hasekura-sensei and to *Spice and Wolf* for ten years of work! I am very happy to have been able to draw Holo and Lawrence like this again. As a reader myself, I look forward to stories about their happy ending, in a place where they can live peacefully after their long travels!
Jyuu Ayakura
狼十.

Congratulations to Isuna Hasekura-sensei for the tenth anniversary of his debut and for the reboot of *Spice and Wolf*! It makes me happy to see Holo-san and Lawrence always get along so well in the bathhouse, and their beloved daughter Myuri is so unbearably cute.

As a fan, I will happily read it eagerly!

