
SPICE & WOLF
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Spring Log II
ISUNA HASEKURA

Spice & Wolf

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SPRING LOG II

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A Petal's Fragrance and Wolf
"That's right, I remember now."
"You obtained this vial on our journey so long ago, yes? Did Myuri not find it here and press questions upon us with her usual curiosity?"
Holo placed her hand on the cork of the vial as she spoke.
And then she removed the lid on Lawrence's memories.
He had come across that vial during his second spring with Holo.
Mistress of the
Spice and Wolf bathhouse
Holo the Wisewolf



Grooming Sheep and Wolf

"Sometimes, we simply need to change our perspective."

Lawrence shrugged, and Holo laughed in a slightly self-deprecating way.

"Because for the longest time, I have been gazing at only one sheep. But no matter."

She clung to Lawrence.

"I've got it easy. I only ever need to look at just one wolf."

"I shall not forgive your looking at other wolves."

"Of course not."


Memories of Spice and Wolf
"What's the name of this house?"
"Hmm? Indeed, 'twould be the best."
Memories of her time with her companion. Memories she could never forget. She would fill it with as many of them as she could.
A tome overflowing with happiness, like the season of life and blossoms and the bubbling waters of their home—a Spring Log.
Master of the Spice and Wolf bathhouse
Lawrence

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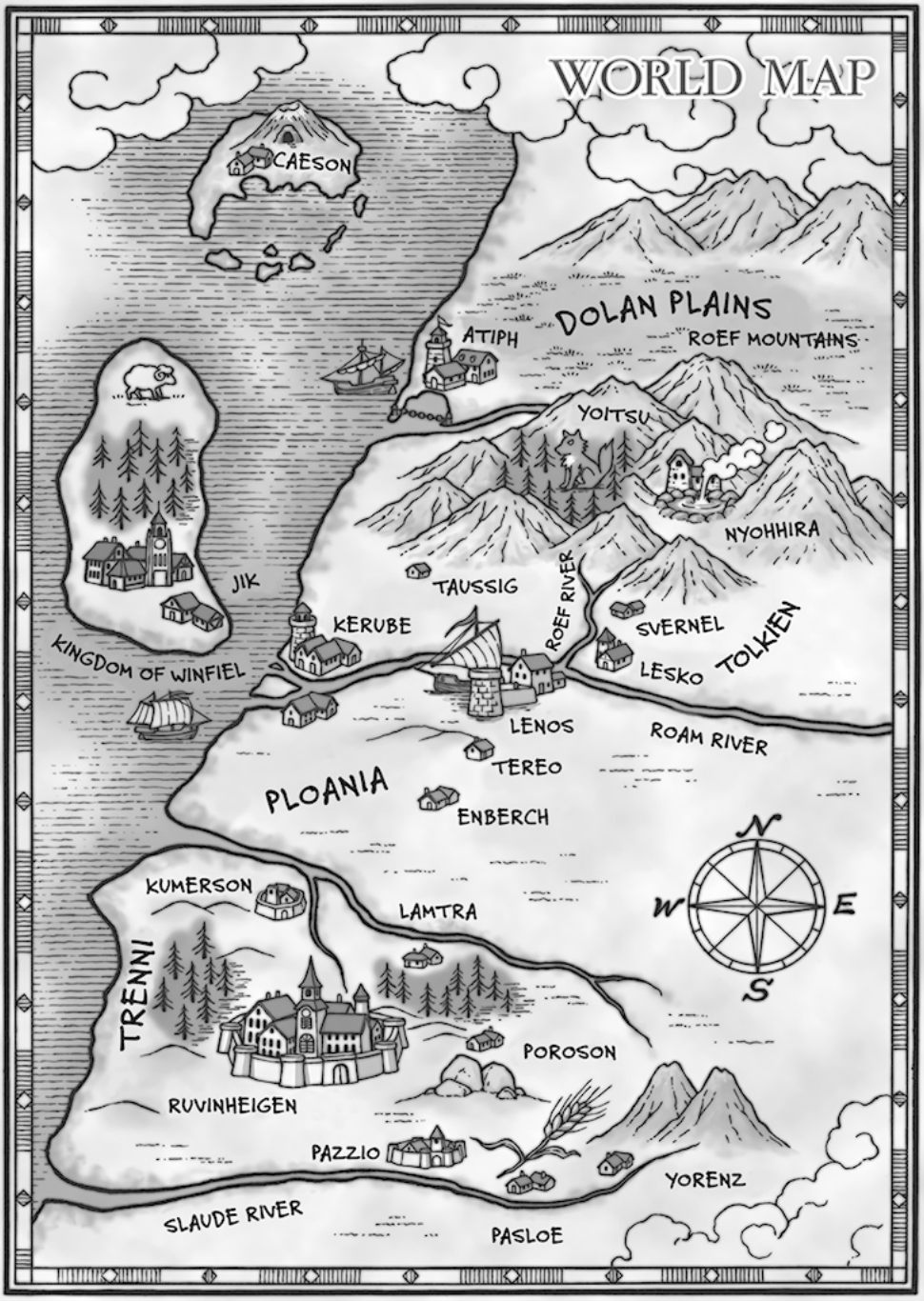




Volume XIX
Spring Log II

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YEN ON
New York



Map Illustration: Hidetada Idemitsu

A PETAL'S FRAGRANCE AND WOLF



A PETAL'S FRAGRANCE AND WOLF

No matter how much he cleaned, dust gathered in the corners of rooms, so of course the neglected shed grew messier throughout the years. He'd come searching for the hand mill he suddenly needed for a village event, but it was impossible to find.

"That's strange...I don't think I threw it away, and since Hanna doesn't use it, it should be here..."

Lawrence stood up, scratching his head, and exited the dusty shed for the moment.

"Can you not find it?"

Holo sat on a tree stump in front of the small structure, a knitted, woolen shawl draped over her shoulders. Had she sat quietly, she would have been the very image of a young, new bride, what with her loosely braided flaxen hair, the long skirt she wore, and that hint of childishness still in her face.

However, Holo was not as young as she appeared, and a wolf's tail, the same color as her hair, peeked out from under her clothes. It was not fur she carried to keep her warm but her actual tail, and its owner was the avatar of a wolf who had lived for several hundred years.

Over ten years earlier, she had met Lawrence, a traveling merchant at the time, and at the end of their journey, they had arrived at the northern hot springs of Nyohhira as husband and wife.

“I can’t ask you to sniff out the smell of stone, huh?”

As the incarnation of a wolf, Holo had big, triangular animal ears on her head, and her sense of smell rivaled that of any hound. She could even sniff out something lost in the mountains, but a small millstone would likely be quite a feat.

“Had you slept with it in your arms every night, I may have.”

“I’d probably suffer horribly if I cheated on you.”

He could easily imagine Holo glaring at his pained self over a drink.

“Fool. I would tear you to shreds for such adultery.”

She leaned forward and rested her chin on her palm, showing her fangs in a toothy grin.

Despite what she said, Lawrence thought that if anything like that did happen, she would be more sad than angry—and about how bringing tears to her eyes would be much more agonizing than being ripped apart.

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind.”

“As long as you make sure it stays in your puny mind.”

Holo stood and hopped to the entrance of the shed, peeking inside.

“’Tis full of things.”

“It’s been ten years since we started the bathhouse. It’s quite a collection now.”

“Mm. ’Tis true, seeing this and that brings back memories.”

The shed held things they typically used such as axes, saws, and hammers, as well as things that guests had forgotten or left in their care, all on top of spare parts for fixing broken chairs and the like. They all gave meaning to these past ten years.

“This netting as well…Had we not used this as a cradle for Myuri?”

Holo brushed a dust-covered netting that hung from the ceiling with her finger as she smiled with her eyes.

It had not exactly been intended as a replacement for a cradle but something they put their daughter in when it was impossible to divert any attention from their work, mostly because they never knew what sort of trouble the overly energetic Myuri would get into if they left her alone.

Their daughter had inherited Holo’s magnificent blood, sprouting her own wolf ears and tail. At the time, her fluffy tail had been as big as she was, so when they put her in the net, Myuri looked exactly like a trapped wolf pup.

The months and days since then had flown by in a flash.

“She fit so well in such a small thing.”

“Yeah, she’s grown up fast.” Lawrence sighed as he spoke, because once her height had doubled, her energy seemingly quadrupled. “Hmm, oh, right.”

“Mm?”

“Myuri used to mess around in here sometimes. She might’ve just taken it to use in one of her pranks.”

Holo looked at him in puzzlement at first, then chuckled.

“’Tis quite possible. I recall she was interested in making ointments at one time.”

Their daughter had delighted in collecting grasses and mushrooms for her pet project, grinding the ingredients with rocks and rolling the paste into balls. For some reason, all the village children had been obsessed.

“She may have considered it too much work to put it away and buried it someplace on the mountain.”

“...I’ll ask her.”

Lawrence’s sigh was clear this time as he placed a hand on the door.

“Hey, I’m closing up now.”

Holo had been staring curiously around the shed and turned toward him when he spoke.

Then, as she was about to exit as requested, her gaze suddenly fixed on a corner of the room.

“What’s wrong?”

“Mmm...I feel as though I may recall something...”

Holo reached toward an assortment of small objects sitting on a wooden shelf. Coated as the items were in grime and mold, it was hard to distinguish them by shape alone. She took one from the shelf, brushed off some dust, and rubbed it against the hem of her clothes, revealing a small glass vial.

“Ahh, aye.”

As she looked at the vial, the hint of a smile appeared on her

face.

“This…It may be next to impossible to find the mill.”

“Huh?”

Just as he was about to ask what she meant, Lawrence finally realized.

The corners of his mouth drew upward on their own. It was, of course, a wry smile.

“That’s right, I remember now.”

“You obtained this vial on our journey so long ago, yes? Did Myuri not find it here and press questions upon us with her usual curiosity?”

Holo placed her hand on the cork of the vial as she spoke.

And then she removed the lid on Lawrence’s memories.

He had come across that vial during his second spring with Holo.

Traveling merchants were much like migratory birds. From the snowy, northern countries to the warm climes and blue seas of the south, their year was spent traveling in all directions. Unlike town-based traders, they were not tied to land or people, so it was rather easy to move freely. The one difficulty was the inability to make close friends, the unchanging fact that no matter where they went, they would forever be an outsider. Even after death, they simply rotted away in the village they happened to be passing through or by the roadside, unbeknownst to anyone. Though

their destinations welcomed merchants, along with the cargo and business they brought, this did not mean friendship.

It was hard to tell comfort and loneliness apart.

That was why logic dictated he should find someone to sit beside him in the driver's perch to bury the nighttime loneliness. He would simply have to endure losing part of his comfort.

"Why do we head east?"

He heard a voice from behind. She had happily sat beside him in the driver's perch up until three days before, when her mood took a turn for the worse.

He knew the reason.

"Didn't I tell you?"

Lawrence spoke, still gripping the reins, not bothering to look back.

It was spring, and though the wind was still chilly, the sun grew stronger and stronger with each day. The two were passing through endless fields of tall grass. Lawrence sensed that Holo was sulking in the wagon. Her tail was likely puffed out wide in anger. He sighed, but not because he had grown irritated with her selfishness.

"I wish we could go west, too. We've been living on the road for three weeks now. I want to splurge on a room with a wool-stuffed bed and drink wine to my heart's content. I want to wake up late, eat lunch with the windows open, and lazily gaze out on lively town streets."

And yet, at the fork in the road, Lawrence had turned the cart to the east.

That was because Lawrence was a traveling merchant, and he had a client to meet.

“And you have tossed such important things aside all for a chance to make money!”

“That’s right. I love gold. Oh, beautiful *lumione* !”

Lawrence’s voice was loud and exaggerated, and he could hear Holo’s groan behind him.

Holo also understood that there was nothing to be done about the situation, but it had probably been unwise for her to assume they would stop for a break in a town.

“But the abbot at a monastery who I have known for many years through peddling has asked me a favor, so I have no choice but to go. And he’s asked me to check on an unlucky lamb who was suddenly called home to serve as a lord, even though it was his family who decided to place him in the monastery at a young age. Not only will we be able to get close to this new young lord, who’s probably facing great hardship from his ignorance about earthly matters and totally unable to tell his left from his right, but we might even have a chance to help him! Any merchant would go, and those who wouldn’t…are definitely not merchants.”

After a number of adventures, he had promised Holo he would no longer accept big jobs that would put them in danger, but not only did he believe this did not fall into that category, it was also novel work with promising profits.

The only thing they needed to offer in compensation was to slightly delay their rest, but in return, they would make the acquaintance of a feudal lord, and that was profit enough.

Holo was reluctant, and though she should have understood by now, still she argued.

“You…”

That deep voice was proof of her displeasure. If Lawrence continued in this manner and truly angered Holo, she would most certainly not allow him to have her warm tail under the blanket while he slept that night.

Though it was spring, it was still cold sleeping outside.

“I know, I know. Know that I’ll make it up to you.”

“…”

There was no response, so he sighed before continuing.

“Though the place where we’re heading is small, it’s still the house of a lord. Look forward to the hospitality…”

He spoke only up to that point before tapering off because he suddenly felt a lukewarm breath on the nape of his neck.

Holo could discern people’s lies with those wolf ears of hers.

It was child’s play for her to gauge the substance of his words.

Before she had a chance to nip the back of his neck, he gave up and turned around.

“I get it. I promise. If we get to the lord’s house and they give this traveling merchant the cold shoulder, then we’ll go to a nearby town. We’ll spend our money there.”

Even if it was not a wool and silk bed, they could no doubt secure a room with a roof and a bed stuffed with straw in any town around the area. Then dinner would likely consist of fresh pork or chicken or, at the very least, a hodgepodge of seasonal vegetables and mushrooms. They had almost come far enough south to

reach lands where grapes were harvested, so wine would also be available in great quantities.

“I wish to bid farewell to cold porridge and spoiled ale.”

Holo glared at him with accusatory eyes and kept her gaze trained on him for a while.

Then, she finally sighed deeply and audibly exhaled through her nose.

“And you absolutely must bathe.”

“Huh?”

Surprised, Lawrence unwittingly sniffed his own clothes. He thought for a moment that he was still perfectly fine, but he suddenly reached a conclusion. Perhaps the reason why Holo wished to stop and rest at a town was for this very reason.

“If you wish to use my tail for warmth in the cold evenings, then you must clean yourself a tad more. I shall not tolerate any mites or lice!”

Holo was devoted to caring for her tail. Much like how a mercenary reveled in maintaining a polished blade and steeled muscles, her tail was her pride.

So despite Holo doing all she could to put up with her traveling companion, who seemed as though bugs wafted from him even at that very moment, it was apparent that she was at her limit.

“...I don’t smell that bad...”

Lawrence tentatively fought back. He never minded when he was traveling by himself, but since he started traveling with Holo,

he had given some effort to keep clean.

Holo, however, would be the judge of that.

“ *I* always smell of sweet, fragrant flowers, but you simply never notice.”

Her retort was issued while holding her hand to her nose. She certainly did smell faintly sweet all the time, but even Lawrence knew that trick.

“That’s thanks to the oil you use on your tail. It was expensive, after all.”

Holo glared hard at him.

“You fool. I have always smelled this way!”

“…If you say so.”

There was no point in arguing, so he faced forward and gripped the reins again. Even if it was simply the oil she used, a soft, sweet scent borne by the breeze that tickled his nose, Lawrence did not mind so much.

Did her oil smell like this, though?

As he pondered, Holo sniffed a bit and looked around.

“Mm. Quite suddenly, I smell something sweet. Perhaps someone is baking?”

“No, this…”

He had started speaking when the road in the field took a sharp turn, and when he saw the land ahead, he understood.

“Aha.”

Holo sounded surprised as she spoke her next words, and her reaction was wholly appropriate.

“How marvelous!”

Suddenly, as though a line had been drawn in the ground, the greenery changed into a purple carpet spreading out endlessly before them.

“There is, however…too much of a good thing…”

Though it did not bother Lawrence much, Holo, with her keen sense of smell, found it necessary to hold her nose as they traveled along the road that ran through the field of flowers.

There were also quite a number of bees, which must have been drawn to the heady scent.

After cautiously exiting the field of flowers and continuing beyond a creek where a dingy and tattered water mill spun creakily, Lawrence could finally see his destination. According to the information he had received ahead of time, the village they would soon reach was called Hadish.

He could tell immediately it was a small hamlet by the size of the lines that connected house to house. He was unsure whether it was true or not, but Lawrence had once heard that the paths in a village were made just wide enough to carry a coffin after someone has died. In places where no one would stand along the roadside to send off the deceased, the paths were so small that a wagon bed would stick out on either side.

What most drew his attention was the distance between houses.

“Perhaps the villagers here do not get on?”

Before meeting Lawrence, Holo had spent decades—even centuries—hiding in the wheat fields of a town called Pasloe, so she had a rather keen sense for figuring out the state of things in human settlements.

The homes in Hadish were so far apart that it would be impossible to see the face of a person standing in the doorway at the nearest house.

“But the roads are very clean, considering that. The grass is cut, and the dirt is hardened. There are also lots of chickens.”

If the villagers did not get along, then there was no way chickens would be left to roam about as it would have led to quarrels regarding stealing or finding stolen livestock.

As he gazed at the village, a sweet scent riding on the breeze, the only word he could think of was *peaceful* .

“There must be a reason. It’s odd that there’s such a wide-open field, but they haven’t cultivated much of it.”

All cities surrounded with walls were overcrowded, and there were many who would carry a plow out to fertile land immediately if they had a chance.

“Perhaps the king here is wicked, and everyone has run off? Perhaps we should flee, too?”

Holo was still saying such things even after they had come this far.

“I don’t think that’s impossible, but according to the abbot, the person who took up the seat of the new lord is someone truly worthy of faith. I don’t think he’d do anything cruel.”

"...Hmph."

That being said, when Holo heard he was of good faith, she frowned.

"I see now. They are the sort to subsist every day of their lives on nothing but roasted beans and water, aye? Even at the table they act as though someone has died—so silent, so gloomy..."

A good monk was one who aimed to eat simple foods and adhered to the commandment of silence.

Of course, it was completely incompatible with Holo's morally lax lifestyle.

That was likely one reason she had been fussy for the past few days.

"If that is where we must go, then look, why not that house? There are onions and dried trout hanging from the eaves. There are chickens and pigs in the garden, and the soil in the vegetable plot is an earthy black."

Holo pointed to a building that gave the impression it would stay the same for a thousand years, topped by a short and stout straw-thatched roof that looked like a dog had rolled in it. Though they would likely receive scratchy straw beds to sleep on, it was certain that the food would be good. And since the locals could gather the ingredients straight from the fields, there was likely lots of drink as well.

"But not every monk who lives at an abbey is so straitlaced. Not to mention the kind of monastery that the houses of fine lords would visit, even the ones in poor, remote villages. I don't think they'd welcome nobles with roasted beans and onions."

And there was significance in staying at the house of a lord.

That was because once permission to stay had been given, those guests would be allowed to stay again. That was how trust was built.

Lawrence explained as much, though Holo made a face that looked like she had swallowed a bug.

“And we’re dealing with a young lord who has suddenly been cast out into the mortal world and is deeply troubled. If we manage this well, then I’m sure we’ll get some help when we open a store.”

He was aware that he sounded like he was merely considering loss and profits, but of course, he had no intention of letting this young lord deal with any losses.

If there were even one suspicious merchant hoping to take advantage of a new lord who was ignorant of market prices in the hope of making a quick coin, everyone would be sent away.

“You…! I have had enough!”

Holo finally became fed up and said one last thing before curling up in the wagon bed.

Though Lawrence thought her mood had cheered up considerably, she was still rather irritable from the fatigue of travel.

However, he felt like she had not been this way until they stopped over at the monastery. There was something odd about it —had she wanted to visit the towns in the west that badly?

As he wondered why, a large number of people appeared from the house Holo had pointed out.

At the front stood a short, bald old man, and there was a group of men who seemed to be the villagers. They all wore displeased

expressions and were huddled near one another, talking. Among them were those who looked up to the heavens in exaggeration or those who shook their heads strongly.

Then, they all looked inside the house.

“Holo.”

Quietly, Lawrence called her name over his shoulder. Though she was balled up in the back of the wagon, her ears would be able to hear what they were saying. Even Holo knew that if there were quarrels happening in the place they were headed, then it would be best to have a grasp of them.

“Hmph.”

However, the only response she gave was a huff from her nose. Surprised that Holo was in such a foul mood, Lawrence turned around, but at the same moment, the people waiting outside the house finally noticed they were there.

Feeling their eyes on him, he faced forward again, and they were indeed staring at him.

“Hello.”

Lawrence greeted them after stopping the wagon an appropriate distance away.

“I see everyone’s gathered together. Talks about the spring festival, perhaps?”

He spoke with a smile, as though signaling he was an idiot who had not grasped a single hint of the tension hanging in the air.

The villagers exchanged glances in hesitation, and the small

old man finally looked his way.

“A traveling merchant, I see. Our village’s festival is in the summer.”

He showed him a cheerful, insincere smile. It seemed this old man was the village head.

Lawrence stepped down from the driver’s perch, and several of the villagers looked hard at his horse, and he heard the murmurs of “Good horse.” As Holo was curled up in the bed of the wagon, no one noticed her.

“Yes, I typically make my rounds on merchant routes more north of here, but I’ve been asked a favor.”

“A favor?”

“I’ve heard the ruling lord here is new and has recently taken over. An old acquaintance has asked me to give respects in his stead.”

The moment he mentioned the lord, the people behind the village head exchanged meaningful glances.

It seemed that though they should be busy farming during this time of year, they were gathered during the day because of the lord.

“Oh ho. So you mean the abbey our lord is from?”

“Yes. By orders of the abbot there.”

He did not know for what reason the villagers were standing up against the landlord, but for now, he pretended that he did not notice. He supported his story that he had simply come to fulfill his favor with a clueless smile.

“And so, would you be able to tell me where the lord’s manor is?”

Unlike city nobles who lived within walls, it was difficult for outsiders to tell where country lords resided. Either way, after Lawrence asked with the intention of learning the way there, the village head glanced back over his shoulder at the people behind him.

“Well, you have perfect timing,” he said, and the villagers loitering outside the house quickly parted for the entrance. “The landlord just happens to be here in this house on business. I shall mention you.”

Passing between the villagers, the village head entered the house.

He returned before long with a person following behind him.

“This is the merchant.”

The village head motioned with his hand to the person standing behind him—a large man of towering height, wide shoulders, and deep chest. With power reminiscent of a wild ram, his puffed beard reached all the way down to his chest, and it almost looked as though his upper arms had legs growing out of them. Though his clothes were hemmed with fur as a display of authority, he looked like nothing so much as a bandit leader.

Of course, there were a number of sturdy monks, and there were many who had old-looking features.

However, no matter how Lawrence looked at it, the man before him seemed over fifty, and the thickness of his fingers and the shape of his fingernails clearly showed years of labor.

Was this the lost little lamb who was suddenly called home

from the monastery and placed in the seat of landlord that the abbot talked about?

The man's eyes moved with a vigor that almost seemed to make a sound, and he peered at Lawrence from above.

As Lawrence stood, shocked, at a loss for words, the man suddenly turned around and moved to the side.

"Huh?"

Then, appearing from behind him was a lady with a neat face, her red hair tied back in a low bun.

"Are you the messenger from Ivan Abbey?"

There was almost no embroidery on her long robe, and though it was simple, he could tell it was beautifully woven linen. The pendant hanging from her neck was a tear-shaped piece of amber.

More importantly, the large man beside her bowed to her stiffly.

And so, though the answer was obvious, it was all so sudden that the words inside Lawrence's head did not quite string together.

"Is something the matter?"

Her question snapped him back to reality. This person was the landlord.

Typically, it was the eldest son who inherited the family estate, but if there was no one else, then such situations were possible. And then Lawrence finally remembered—as it was a monastery he had been dealing with for a long time, it had completely

slipped his mind. As earthly persons could not enter the building proper, he and the abbot always held their conversations outside, so he never quite registered it in his mind, but the proper name for the place was:



The Saint Isiodorus Brotherhood Ivan *Girls* Abbey.

A family sending off their daughter to a monastery was a means of keeping their inheritance rights from leaving their control and a way for noble families who could not prepare dowries to rid themselves of a nuisance.

Since the lady had suddenly been brought home, it would be normal for the abbot to be worried sick that not only did she not know what was what, but also that she might be in some sort of deep trouble.

And then Lawrence finally understood why Holo had been in such a bad mood since leaving the monastery.

"Oh no, my apologies."

Lawrence stood up straight and retrieved the abbot's letter from his chest pocket.

"This is from the abbot."

The lady—perhaps it was even possible to call her a girl—moved to accept the paper. It was clear that she did not know how to act as a lady as she moved to take it directly from his hands.

Her slender fingers, which looked as though they would redden from simply peeling kidney beans from their pods, extended toward the letter, but thick hands that could probably break rocks obstructed her. The girl seemed surprised, but Lawrence was not. Those of high status did not take things directly from strangers of humble birth.

"Th-thank…you."

She took the letter from the big man, who would more appropriately be called an attendant than a manservant in all likelihood. Then she donned a vague expression of thanks that made it unclear whether she intended it for Lawrence or the towering figure.

However, since she had been in an abbey, there was no hesitation in her hands as she opened the letter, and she read quickly. The abbot must have written something nice as a smile slowly spread across her face with an innocence that gave him the impression of reading the scripture in a sunny garden.

The abbot was a man who had been so stingy with his prices that most town merchants had given up doing business with him. It got to the point where he had to trust the delivery of the abbey's goods to a traveling merchant who would work for the slightest of profits. But even so, he was still the kind to be worried and concerned.

Lawrence looked at the neat features and brown eyes of this young lady and quietly held his breath.

Holo had been angry about this the entire time.

Since it was a women's abbey, he should have noticed right away that it was a young girl who returned home. If anything, it would have been odd if she were not angry when she saw how motivated he was to come see her.

He had sat and trampled on her tail without even noticing.

He glanced back at Holo, who was pretending to be cargo on the wagon bed, and when he thought about what they were going to do afterward, his heart sank.

"Mr....Lawrence?"

The sound of his name suddenly returned him to reality.

“Yes.”

It seemed the young landlady had found his name in the letter.

“I am Kraft Lawrence. I am a traveling merchant. I have known the abbot for a long time.”

“Which means you are the one to thank for such delicious bread at the abbey.”

She spoke kindly and a soft smile appeared on her face. The large man beside her did not even blink, and Lawrence was painfully aware of how he stared, the sharp gaze overpowering him.

The girl, however, was an innocent youth who had come straight from an abbey.

“What makes bread delicious are the hands of a baker and the blessings of God.”

He responded modestly, and the young lady chuckled.

“That may be true, but the letter says that you have a traveling companion.”

He could see her young eyes looking nervously at the cart, and he almost wanted to laugh.

“Please forgive her rudeness, but she is lying down in the back of the wagon. It seems the long journey has taken its toll.”

“Oh, well then.”

Her eyes widened in surprise, and she began quickly folding the letter.

“Now, please come to the house.”

Her expression was so serious it almost made him regret telling that lie.

“But it seemed you were in the middle of something important, my lady.”

After Lawrence spoke, the redheaded girl hurriedly looked around her, but her expression suddenly changed to show a sad smile.

“No…We’re done for now.”

When she said that, out of the corner of his eye, he could see several villagers drop their shoulders in defeat. The young ruler handed the folded letter to the large man, excused herself, and stood before the village head, who was watching over the exchange.

“Let us continue discussing this at a later date.”

“As you wish.”

The village head respectfully bowed his head, but the gesture felt cold.

It was uncertain if the landlady had noticed, but she prompted Lawrence to follow her and walked off. It seemed she would be returning to the house on foot. Perhaps she had never learned how to ride horses. Lawrence jumped onto the driver’s perch, gripped the reins, and followed the large man, who walked perfectly behind her and slightly to the side. Lawrence turned around, and he saw that the villagers seemed thoroughly defeated as they reentered the village head’s house. The village head saw Lawrence and the others off for a while before finally going inside himself.

What could they have possibly been arguing about?

As he wondered what was going on, he faced forward again, only to see the girl had turned around to stare at him while she walked ahead.

“Do you want to know?” she asked with a troubled smile.

Lawrence hesitated for a moment but then decided to go with it.

“The abbot instructed me to help you, my lady.”

The same should have been written in the letter.

The girl he called “my lady” stopped walking, the troubled smile still on her face.

“Please don’t call me that.”

“Then what am I to call you?”

With a short cry of surprise, the girl placed her hand over her mouth.

“I’m sorry. I haven’t introduced myself yet.”

She cleared her throat, placed her hand on her chest, and spoke.

“I am Amalie Draustem-Hadish, the seventh lord of this land.” And in a quiet, embarrassed voice, she added, “I still can’t believe it, though.”

Since Amalie had been put into the abbey, which meant the previous lord had had a proper male heir to inherit, there must have been some sort of accident that had resulted in the simultaneous loss of both the previous lord and his son.

It was not because Amalie was a resilient girl that she seemed unfazed by their loss. It was likely the truth that she had been left in the abbey for as long as she could remember.

“Then, Lady Draustem?”

“They called me Amalie at the abbey.”

It seemed she was not fond of her grandiose family name.

But when he glanced at the large man, just to make sure if it was all right to call a landlady by her first name, the response was a look of resignation. It seemed there had already been an argument between this taciturn vassal and Amalie.

“Then, Lady Amalie.”

“Lady is too formal…”

“Lady Amalie.”

The large man spoke for the first time since Lawrence had arrived, drawing Amalie’s gaze toward him. Apparently this was the point of compromise between them. She nodded reluctantly.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“No, the pleasure is all mine.”

Lawrence dipped his head reverently.

“So the abbot has instructed me to be your pen in this world, Lady Amalie.”

Her sword was that large man.

Amalie began walking again and gave a clear sigh.

“Ha…Well, it’s quite the regrettable story.”

She broached the subject, and as they made their way to the house, she told Lawrence about the dispute, which was round-about, and though it had not quite yet reached a conclusion, it ended up being rather simple.

The Draustem family estate was less of a manor and more of a luxurious farmhouse.

Lord was not much more than a title for those who only governed poor villages, since they, too, had to work diligently in the fields for a living. The Draustem family had a stable and a sheep-fold, and they kept some fish in a small pond, while chickens and pigs nibbled at grass in the courtyard. The large man was likely the one taking care of all this.

As simple as it was, the estate was very well taken care of and it appeared a comfortable place to live.

Had this been a fort or small castle built on a hill, then the landlord, his family, and their servants would have been crammed together into very tight quarters. The number of people who could live comfortably as lords was overwhelmingly small.

When they arrived at the house, the large man named Yergin, who was Amalie’s vassal, prepared the guest room.

It also seemed that he and Amalie had not eaten anything for lunch yet, so while they were preparing that, they offered Lawrence and Holo a chance to take a rest.

They were led to a room common for the countryside, with a dirt floor and exposed roof beams, but it was clean, and the straw in the bed was fresh. For Lawrence’s body, which was used to the

hard wagon bed, it was enough to feel luxurious.

“Hmm. Now we can relax a bit.”

When they arrived at the house, Holo finally emerged from the wagon bed, and Amalie was happy to see her dressed as a nun but disappointed when she learned the outfit was only a means to an end for their journey.

It seemed this landlady was still thinking about the abbey.

On the other hand, due to the morals she had cultivated at the abbey, Amalie was a bit apprehensive about placing Lawrence and Holo in the same room. So he told her that once he was finished working as a traveling merchant, they were planning on opening a store and getting married.

It was not a lie, but it felt like one since it did not seem real for some reason, and perhaps he was expecting Holo’s mood to improve once he said this.

After they had been led into the room (but before Lawrence could set down any luggage), Holo collapsed onto the bed.

Then she finally talked to him.

“You fool.”

Lawrence packed their things into the long chest in the room and turned back to her.

“You will go anywhere to aid helpless females, will you not?”

The nuance in her words was less “softhearted” and more “cheater.”

“No, actually…”

Lawrence was about to make an excuse when Holo buried her face into the pillow and heaved a long sigh before glancing sideways at him.

“Silence.”

He had no choice but to do what he was told.

Lawrence obediently closed his mouth, and Holo took a deep breath and rustled her tail under her robe. Her expression was more exasperated than angry.

“ *Sigh* …I was displeased by what an inattentive idiot you are, but to think that you were actually a fool who did not notice the ruler of this land was female in the first place!”

It seemed she had completely noticed his surprise when he saw that the girl who appeared from the village head’s house was the landlord.

“You are an extraordinary idiot.”

“I assumed the landlord would be a man.”

Lawrence gave his response, and Holo turned the opposite way in a huff.

However, that was not rejection but something else entirely.

Unwilling to give up, he sighed, then sat down on a corner of the bed that Holo was lying on.

“I had no idea that was why you were in such a bad mood.”

“…”

Holo did not look at him, but the wolf ears on her exposed head were facing him. The triangular ears of the wisewolf could

hear the ring of any lie being told.

After moving her ears this way and that for a bit, she slowly turned to face him again.

“Hmph. Why would I be in a bad mood? You are not bold enough to cheat on me, not to mention, you are not handsome enough to attract other females.”

They were meant to be harsh words, but Lawrence desperately held back a laugh.

Holo had been jealous over Lawrence’s apparent eagerness to head toward Hadish in aid of an ignorant girl who had been suddenly called home from a girls’ abbey. Though there was likely nothing between them, he must have seemed oddly worried about this female ruler.

On the other hand, the very same Lawrence had not even considered the possibility that the landlord would be a lady.

Her verbal barb had been the result of experiencing such unnecessary anxiety.

Of course, it was cute.

Lawrence reached out to Holo’s head and ran his fingers through her soft, flaxen-colored hair.

“That may be true.”

The only one who would spend this much time with him was the bighearted wisewolf.

Even if he saw through her facade, no matter how much of an act she put on, that appearance was what counted.

“But you might like watching me gallantly saving troubled girls, huh?”

Her ears twitched as he stroked her head, and she smiled with her eyes closed.

“...Fool.”

Though she was not entirely happy with this detour, she did not stubbornly oppose it, likely for this reason.

Lawrence believed that he and Holo were very similar when it came to their good nature and that she would be proud of him if he helped somebody.

More confidently, he also thought that Holo would find him more attractive.

If he said that out loud, she would laugh at him and drag him through the dirt, but then in the end, she would look at him with eyes filled with expectation. And if he did well, she would praise him.

Her rustling tail had finally fallen silent.

It was quiet for a few moments.

Lawrence leaned over to kiss Holo on the cheek, but her hands suddenly flew up and landed on both sides of his face, holding him there.

“Bathe first.”

She then thrust him aside.

“...Is it really that bad?”

Lawrence sniffed his clothes, but he really could not tell.

But if the princess said so, then he had to obey.

“And you have work to do. It all seemed rather troublesome. Will you be all right? I shall not allow you to endanger yourself around me, aye?”

Despite sulking in the wagon bed, she had clearly heard everything.

But if he mentioned it, she would definitely get mad and refuse to let him hug her tail during the night.

“Your powers could solve this instantly.”

Holo snorted at his declaration, hugging the pillow.

“I am not a dog.”

Lawrence shrugged and stood up.

“Finding a hand mill itself isn’t hard.”

The argument with the villagers that Amalie had explained on the way was essentially about money, starting with the repairs of the water mill.

The structure had been neglected for a long time, and after they called on a repairman, it turned out the work would require quite a lot of money. Though it never really functioned well, it fell apart completely after being neglected in the confusion of the sudden succession. In reality, the mill belonged to the ones who owned the land, but the Draustem family did not have enough funds to repair it on their own. And since it was operated by the fees the villagers paid when they used it, Amalie took Yergin’s advice and came to a very logical solution: collect installation costs from the villagers.

Of course, many villagers objected. Not all of them relied on the water mill to the same extent. The ones who would gain from the installation of the water mill would be the families who owned extensive fields and those with lots of sheep.

Or perhaps, it would be easier for households without young workers to use the water mill by paying money. Even the Draustem family themselves needed the water mill, as they collected wheat as taxes and land usage fees.

On the other hand, what was left over from the fees to use the water mill would not be added to the Draustem family coffers, but instead go toward mending bridges and fixing roads. So until recently, it was a rule that the villagers used the water mill when grinding their wheat into flour.

However, from the perspective of the villagers, whose precious coin would be collected, they wanted to avoid using the mill if they could.

And so, since the time of the previous landlord, the villagers secretly produced hand mills so that they would not have to use the water mill.

Amalie went into direct negotiations to resolve the situation.

“If those hand mills or whatnot are the reason why they refrain from using the water mill, then ’tis logical to retrieve them, but…Hmm, how shall I say this?”

“Precisely. You’re earnest.”

“Unlike you.”

He looked at Holo, and he found a smile beaming on her tilted head.

“You are soft—’tis a compliment.”

Her teasing was proof that she was in a better mood, so he simply left it at that with a shrug.

“So do you plan to help this little girl?”

“I do. The reason why is Miss Amalie. But…”

“But?”

“You heard, too, didn’t you? The water mill catches fire almost every year.”

It was the biggest factor in why Amalie’s explanation was somewhat hard to understand and a key reason the villagers were so opposed to her plan.

“I cannot believe it so readily.”

The water mill was built on a river, and water flowed through the river. And as long as there were no candles around it at night, there was almost no danger of accidental fires.

But when Lawrence had spotted the building from far away, it certainly seemed a bit dark. That had not been mold but the traces of fire.

It seemed that was the reason why the village houses were built so far from one another as well.

“To think that flower field catches fire every summer and becomes a sea of flames…’Tis unthinkable in the land we lived in.”

It was something that happened occasionally to oily flowering plants, and it had the worrying characteristic of blooming in spring and bearing fruit in the summer, when the sunlight would

cause it to burst into flames, spreading its seeds to sprout again in the burned fields. Of course, other plants and flowers naturally burned to ash in the fire, so once those flowers began taking root in an area, they soon dominated as the only things left standing.

Misfortune befell the village when these flowers took root one day by chance and flourished.

According to Amalie, they were not around during her grandfather's time, and out of the entire region, it was only in the vicinity of Hadish where this plant grew.

"So the fire finally dies down around the river, but the nearby flames scorch the water mill, and it keeps falling apart. In the past, the houses would burn whenever there was a brush fire, and since they needed lots of lumber, all the surrounding forests became fields."

"'Tis quite wise they spaced their houses out to prevent them from all being killed at once."

The area had few inhabitants because they sacrificed the forests to harvest materials to build their homes, and half the space had been taken over by those purple flowers.

"To make sure the reconstructed water mill stays around a long time, they would need to cut down as many of those flowers as possible before summer comes, but it's the busy season and the villagers don't want to help."

"No water mill means they would not have to go through the trouble, perhaps."

But if they are unable to grind the wheat into flour, then they could not make bread, and it took too much time to grind by hand. It signaled that, in the bigger picture, the villagers' productivity would drop—and consequently their tax revenue—and the

village's economy would wither. With the water mill, they could save that time, giving them a chance to cultivate more fields. They could sell the surplus goods in towns and gain the ability to buy many things. From a top-down perspective, it was clearly for the villagers' sake.

It was apparently Yergin who explained this to Amalie, and Yergin himself learned that from the previous landlord, who seemed to have been a wise ruler.

That being said, others did not always accept sound arguments, which led to the current situation.

"Mr. Yergin said he could confiscate the hand mills by force, but they want to avoid that if possible. It would only cause problems later. So Miss Amalie went to them herself and was hoping the villagers would hand over the mills on their own."

"Hmm. But would it not be the same if you found and confiscated the mills in secret?"

Holo said this without particularly thinking.

Lawrence smiled ironically and answered.

"No. Mr. Yergin and Miss Amalie live here. But I'm a traveling merchant. It's the travelers who bring misfortune to villages. If we make it so that I was the one who put an idea into Miss Amalie's head, then I'll be the target of the villagers' resentment. And so when I leave, then the person who everyone hates simply disappears. I don't think Miss Amalie has thought of this, but it seems like Mr. Yergin is already well aware of how to best use me. That's probably why they've given us such a nice room."

Traveling merchants, who never settled in one place, derived their value from the very characteristic Lawrence had just described. They brought things the villages needed, then took away

what they did not need. Even Holo, who was once called a god who governed the harvests of wheat, had experienced this treatment.

A god could never be a member of a village, and though they were worshipped during farming seasons, they were blamed for bad harvests, and the fault of every other sort of misfortune the god had no control over was still laid at their feet. People could not vent their anger on their fellow villagers, but if they blamed outsiders, all was well that ends well. In the end, once they no longer needed their god, they stopped worshipping it completely.

And so Holo had snuck into Lawrence's wagon.

When he thought about it, he noticed that the way they met was much like how similar tools were stored away in the same place since there was no other place to put them.

But Lawrence did not consider his job an unhappy one.

Because it was thanks to his work that he had met Holo.

"Don't make that face."

Lawrence's smile was a bit forced. Seeing Holo's hurt expression, he moved to pinch her small nose.

"Now that I have someone to share my burden with me on the driver's perch, what else do I need?"

"...Fool."

She knocked his hand away and spoke grumpily. Only her tail was restless.

"Would you truly be able to find the mills, however? Should the time call for it, I may be able to find them by the scent of the

wheat.”

Holo spoke up, but this time, Lawrence showed her a boastful smile.

“If this is a contest of cunning, I won’t lose, you know!”

He puffed out his chest, and after Holo gave him a blank stare, she chuckled.

“Perhaps you have mistaken it for shallow wit.”

“You judge harshly.”

Lawrence shrugged, and Holo intertwined her index finger with his, which she had just been gripping. She was more of a lady than he thought.

So Lawrence, who acknowledged himself as a gentleman, laid out his words tentatively.

“Well, it probably won’t be very fun, so you don’t have to come collect the mills if you don’t want.”

Holo, still smiling, brought Lawrence’s hand up to her mouth and bared her fangs.

“I am quite fond of seeing your face blubbering with tears.”

“Oh, I see we’ll get along, then.”

Holo’s ears and tail twitched happily.

“Fool.”

Holo smiled, leaned her head against him, and kissed his hand.

Then she let go.

“Then I shall be watching how you work.”

Before long, there was a knock on the door and Yergin came to call on them.

The bread they were given was far from fresh, but it was good white bread made from wheat. Moreover, the soup was not simply seasoned with salt and vinegar but had been thickened with bread crumbs, and it contained large chunks of lamb.

But most surprising was the liquor bottle on the table.

“What a gorgeous bottle. It’s a lovely shade of green.”

Once Amalie finished the long, long prayer she had learned from the abbey, the meal finally began in earnest, and Lawrence broached the subject with his curious comment.

“It was my father’s hobby, it seems. There are many things fashioned from glass in the basement of the manor…There are truly so many I thought maybe I could keep some and sell the rest and use that to cover the costs of the water mill, but…”

Amalie spoke apprehensively, and Yergin, sitting uncomfortably at a corner of the table, glanced at Lawrence. His awkwardness stemmed from his large stature but was also likely due to an outlook of his that probably said master and servant did not sit at the same table.

Between the two of them, it seemed there was a great difference in their ways of thinking, and that apparently applied to the glass collection as well.

Amalie, with an impartial spirit, most certainly thought of selling the glass, but for Yergin, there was no doubt that even thinking of such a thing was outrageous. Heirlooms that belonged to the previous landlord were the same as family treasures.

"If you forbade the use of the hand mills, however, you might solve the water mill problem for the time being." Lawrence offered his suggestion as he broke off a piece of bread and dipped it into his soup. "I've seen a similar thing happen somewhere else in the past. I am sure I can help you."

Then, Yergin sat up straight again. It was as though he realized that Lawrence also understood.

"You can?"

"Yes. Even in wide-open farming villages, there really aren't that many places to hide things."

When she heard the word *hide* , her twinkling expression quickly deflated.

She was most certainly hoping that the villagers would help her of their own free will.

Lawrence took a sip of wine, then spoke like a cruel, money-mad man.

"There's no need to worry. It is even worse to avoid paying taxes."

He smiled as though that were simply the course of things.

Amalie grimaced, but she did not look to Yergin because she knew that he was not on her side.

"The installation of the water mill is for the sake of the village,

after all. Oh, and of course, I will not do anything that would trouble you, Lady Amalie. I can collect the hand mills."

"Oh, but you—"

"Of course, it would be difficult to carry the hand mills, so I wish to ask Mr. Yergin's assistance."

Amalie was a smart girl. She immediately realized that she needed to distance herself from the dirty work that would take place. But she also had a kind heart that felt confusion and guilt about doing such a thing.

And then there was Yergin, who responded in a hard tone of voice.

"Any time."

Amalie looked between Lawrence and Yergin with a dejected expression and stared toward her feet. The seat of authority was not as comfortable as some assumed, and it was not meant for everyone.

But Lawrence considered Amalie once more. For better or worse, people could grow used to power.

Some poets called this a worn-down heart, but for whatever reason, the world was not kind to people.

"And it is an unanticipated delight for a traveling merchant to help the lord of a land."

He said this hinting at his expectation of additional perks.

At that, the taciturn Yergin opened his mouth to speak.

"The Draustem family will reward you for your services."

He concluded that the wicked one was the merchant who came from the outside for money, and he was the obstinate vassal.

As she watched this exchange, Holo shot a bit of a sympathetic look toward Amalie, but of course, she did not interject. Holo knew better than anyone of the world's mercilessness.

"Well then, let us go quickly after our meal."

"Lady Amalie?"

Yergin checked with her, and Amalie raised her head and seemed as though she would say something, but she ended up staring downward again.

Her shoulders shook as she gripped the hemp cloth she had so daintily placed on her lap.

"...Yes, all right..."

Lawrence's expression suddenly relaxed and not because it had gone exactly as he imagined.

Amalie was softhearted, but she did have the courage to stand up to destiny.

And so all he had to do was cooperate the best he could.

They decided to use Lawrence's wagon to transport the hand mills. As he was unloading his cargo from the bed, Yergin suddenly spoke.

"Pardon."

Lawrence did not stop working, but since his eyes met Holo's, he smiled at him.

“We will be asking a fee for using the wagon.”

Of course, he knew that Yergin was not talking about the wagon.

“And the abbot from Ivan Abbey is relying on me. He’s stingy and thinks of nothing but his abbey and is the kind who has never appropriately rewarded me for my troubles, for carrying his goods. But he said that Lady Amalie is likely in trouble and I should help her.”

That was a merchant’s roundabout way of expressing she was a wonderful person to warrant such a response from the abbot.

Yergin, with the muscles on his shoulders like those of a raging bull, picked up some cargo and gently placed it on the ground.

Though he looked a bit like a bandit, it did not mean he was unrefined.

“I’m sure Lady Amalie will make a great landlord.”

With a smile, Lawrence removed the last of the cargo from the bed.

“It means it will be worth my while to help her.”

Then, once again, Lawrence made his way to the village head’s place. Holo wondered for a moment if she should stay behind with Amalie and comfort her, but Lawrence stopped her. They would soon be leaving the village. That was Yergin’s job. Besides, Yergin would pass away before Amalie would. It was never too early for her to learn while his wisdom was still available to her.

Lawrence headed to the village, pulling the rattling, empty wagon behind him. When he arrived, he found the village head and the others completely unguarded, as they were in the middle

of a humble feast.

The furniture had been put away and straw strewn over the hard dirt floor, where the villagers sat around in a circle. Right in the middle was a copper distilling pot. It was likely the village head's specially brewed ale.

"This—this is…"

Though the village head seemed to be the cleverest of all the villagers, he of course could not hide his confusion.

"Oh, I don't mind if you stay where you are. I have received the right to collect taxes in the landlady's stead, so I have come to give notice."

"The right to collect taxes…Wait, but that is—"

"During the reign of the previous lord, there was a declaration that forbade the use of hand mills, yes? And so by that declaration, I have come to confiscate them."

He could almost hear the villagers' hair stand on the back of their necks.

But the village head quickly signaled them with his eyes. It seemed like he gave them a faint nod, perhaps to calm them down.

"Is that so…? But as you can see, we are not sitting around a pile of hand mills. There are no places to hide them in a shack such as this."

That meant the others were already hidden.

Lawrence did not change the smile on his face and nodded.

“Indeed. Unlike town houses, the beams supporting the roofs are exposed, and so you cannot hide them in the ceiling. The floor is not made of boards but of packed earth. It would be obvious if you buried them in the ground, and of course, it would be difficult to dig them back up.”

The villagers were bewildered by his sudden statements.

“So what about the fields? It would be easy to search them. One simply needs to poke the ground with a stick. And all the crops have already been planted for this season. There should be no large holes.”

One or two villagers gulped. Yergin would pick out those who did.

“I’m sure there are plenty of spaces to hide them in the backyards of the houses and on the roads to the fields, but one would be able to tell from far away by how the weeds grew if they were dug up. I’m sure it’s possible to hide them in the field on the other side of the river, but I doubt anyone would be willing to carry a hand mill that far. Which means?”

Lawrence looked around and peered into the kitchen one room over, no door separating the continuous stretch of dirt floor.

“Inside the stove…which would mean the hand mills would be rather big. And the shaft would burn, too.”

Then where would they hide them? A good part about being a traveling merchant was that he had visited many lands and he had learned that no matter the place, everyone thought the same way.

“Something that would always be included when building a house and difficult to tell if it has been turned over and some-

where that no one thinks to bother with."

Lawrence turned on his heel and stood before Holo, who rested in the doorway, watching. She stared blankly up at him, and when he respectfully motioned for her to move, beneath her was a stone slab.

"People are constantly passing through here, so the earth quickly hollows out."

So it would be easy to dig a hole and then place the stone above it. And as the tax collector searched the house, the owner would typically stand around the doorway anxiously, so it was the biggest blind spot.

When Yergin took the metal stick to be used as a lever in his hands, the village head sadly gritted his teeth and looked down.

"Even if we use the water mill, it will only burn in the wildfire..."

They would need to either cut away the whole lot of those ridiculous purple flowers or at least prune the area around the mill. Such worthless plants, during such a busy season.

"I can assure you as a merchant...," Lawrence said, "that having a water mill would be for the benefit of all the village."

Yergin pried away the stone slab, and beneath it was a hand mill.

Though there were several houses they could not find hand mills in, those families likely did not have one. He did casually glance at Holo to make sure, but had the villagers been lying, she would have signaled to him.

In the end, they collected seventeen hand mills.

The cart horse snorted unhappily as it pulled the heavily laden wagon along.

“We managed it without force.”

Yergin suddenly spoke, unclear if he was talking to himself or saying it as thanks.

“Craftiness is a merchant’s strength.”

Lawrence made his remark as he gripped the reins.

“The problem is Lady Amalie, correct?”

He thought for a moment that Yergin would hit him, but he only groaned.

“She seems to be a bit too kind to be a landlord.”

“…It is unthinkable that the people would be happy to pay taxes. Even if it is for their benefit.”

“That hits a little close to home.”

Traveling merchants cheated on customs tariffs and plotted in order to avoid every sort of taxes towns imposed on their people. Even if they knew the tax would expand infrastructure in the town, making it safer, gathering people from all around, and expanding trade.

“Worse, she might run out of money to repair the water mill again. When that happens, she might have to resort to even harsher methods.”

There would not be any more hand mills to collect next time.

“Is there any other way?”

When Yergin asked this, Holo glanced at Lawrence. She was trying to discourage him from getting too deeply involved, so he patted her head to reassure her.

“I’ve done trade in many different towns, and I’ve seen taxes of every kind. I can think of quite a few.”

“…So that really is our only choice.”

“Well, there is the option of finding something that would make the villagers rich.”

Without a means to make or gain money, there was no way they could pay.

“…We are not merchants.”

“Of course.”

Lawrence answered simply, but he imagined that every time Amalie levied a new tax, the soft parts of her heart would chip away.

“With my knowledge of trade, I might be able…”

But before he could finish his thought…

“Lady Amalie?”

They could see Amalie jogging her way toward the manor, coming from a different direction. She held something heavy looking in her arms, and her steps were unsteady.

Then, she disappeared into the back garden.

It seemed that she had gone out somewhere while they were

collecting the hand mills.

“What is she doing?”

“Mm…”

It seemed Yergin did not know, either. Thinking Holo might know, Lawrence looked to her, and she seemed surprised at first but then smiled somewhat happily.

He learned why as they reached the manor.

“Y…young miss?”

They found Amalie sitting at the table where they had lunch, and Yergin, without thinking, called her that.

“I thought you promised me you would not call me that anymore.”

Amalie’s response was sharp.

She had her sleeves rolled up while she fiddled with what she had spread out on the table.

It was the purple flowers that had brought disaster to the village.

“These are the culprits, after all,” Amalie continued to explain. “If there was a use for these flowers, then the villagers would be happy to cut them down, and we would be able to protect the water mill.”

This was not the girl who had been thrown about by fate, too helpless to do anything but shed tears.

“And you are a traveling merchant, Mr. Lawrence. If a distant land has need for these flowers, then you will be able to go and

sell them for us."

Holo shot him a teasing glance, as though asking *You will?*

But he had no other choice but to give one answer.

"Of course. If there are profits to be had."

That was the one point he refused to negotiate on.

"For now, why don't we try using it in cooking? I learned how to use fragrant grasses at the abbey. This flower has a nice scent, you know."

This pioneer had already come up with some ideas.

Suggestions were easy to come up with, but it was more important to have the resolve to follow through.

"If we place it on a thick beef shoulder steak, it may impart a nice flavor."

"What else?"

"Maybe submerging it in low-quality wine?"

Amalie nodded, placed her hand on her chin, then made another suggestion.

"Perhaps we may be able to eat it as is?"

Yergin cleared his throat.

"That is the one thing I wish not to try again. Whether boiled or fried."

It seemed he had already thoroughly tried it, and his conclusion was that eating the flowers straight was not bearable.

“And it must be too fragrant, because none of the sheep, cows, or pigs will eat it.”

If it could serve as fodder for the livestock, then the villagers would be happy to turn their animals loose in the flower fields. It was clear to see why no one did.

“It wouldn’t be enough if we just sold them as decorations or fragrances for cooking.”

The flowers came from a practically endless field.

“Then why don’t we place the flower into a scented sachet? We did that often with the herbs we grew at the abbey.”

Young girls to old madams gathered at the all-women abbey, and it must have been an elegant, calming sight to watch them sew the sachets, needle in hand.

“Scented sachets are a thing, and this flower does have a strong, sweet scent. But it certainly isn’t something that sells a lot. I can’t foresee anything like that could sell so much that it would make a difference.”

The question was, would people be more likely to buy a nice-smelling petal or nice-smelling bread?

Not to mention that once someone bought a scented bag, they would not need to buy another one for a while.

“Even if we sell a little bit in one town, then why not sell in many towns?”

“It’s possible the goods might get caught in the rain on the way, and dried-out petals would be light but a burden. The wagon bed is not that big. Selling just one tankard full at one town does not quite make for a lucrative business, and I can’t imagine such a

small amount will reduce the field."

Amalie bit her nails in frustration, but it did not seem to mean she had given up.

"Then…all right. If they burn well, then why not use them as daily fuel?"

"There must be a reason why the villagers aren't already doing that."

Lawrence countered her suggestion, and Yergin continued for him.

"We would find ourselves in trouble if those flowers crossed the river and took root on this side as well. They are also a symbol of fire. To store those in our houses would prevent anyone from having a good night's sleep."

This was not a problem that could be solved in a hurry. Though they were villagers, these people were not foolish, and their previous landlord was a wise ruler.

But Amalie did not seem discouraged. Lawrence could tell that she was fully aware of her ignorance about the world. She had already prepared herself.

"I will think of something."

It was a confident declaration.

"If anything, I did a lot of thinking at the abbey."

"Young miss…"

The large Yergin murmured, his eyes bleary.

"I thought I told you to stop calling me that," Amalie quipped

again, smiling bitterly. “I am now the head of this family.”

Lawrence gave Holo a little poke on her back and took a flower in his hand.

“Then let us brainstorm.”

Though they spoke so enthusiastically, reality was not as sweet as the flower’s scent. They thought about this and that until the evening, and once they ran out of ideas, the candle finally burned out, signaling a stop for the night.

Another tallow candle was lit for them, and Yergin offered them some ale to help them sleep—it must have been his way of giving thanks. They happily accepted.

Once Lawrence returned to their room, he found Holo, who had returned a bit earlier than him, sitting by the open window grooming her tail by the light of the moon.

“This feels like a dream.”

Lawrence spoke as he closed the door, and Holo, as she bit the strands of hair on her tail that had gone crooked, did not seem particularly happy.

“No good thing ever happens when you compliment me.”

“You caught me.”

He poured the ale he had received from Yergin into a wooden mug and handed it to Holo.

She took the mug and quickly went to drink it, and her hands stopped.

“When they brew it, either the flowers are used as fuel or the scent simply hangs heavy in the village air.”

They noticed that aroma plenty in the dining room, and it smelled so much like flowers that it nearly drove them crazy. Holo was typically happy to try unconventional ale, but she was predictably fed up with it.

“Hmm…Well, the wheat is not bad.”

She gulped it down and finished with a cough.

“But how useless it is.”

“The purple flowers, you mean?”

Lawrence poured more ale into her mug, which had gone empty in an instant.

She looked at him uncertainly and deliberately puffed out her fluffy tail.

“What else could be so good for nothing?”

“Well…There’s the traveling merchant’s cunning.”

Lawrence smiled, and Holo chugged the ale again, then skillfully fell backward onto the bed.

“You’re going to spill that someday.”

“’Tis a dream of mine to fall asleep soaked in liquor.”

“That’s silly. Come on.”

He reached out for the mug of ale sitting on her stomach, and she obediently handed it to him.

It seemed the gears in her head were still churning behind her closed eyelids.

“To think that I, once called the Wisewolf of Yoitsu, would ever fret so much over what to do with a flower…”

“If you could concoct amazing ideas for trading goods one after the other, I would have become the president of a company a long time ago.”

“Fool. I would be saving the money, so ’twould all be mine.”

She rolled over onto her stomach, rested her chin on her arms, and wagged her tail back and forth.

Perhaps she was imagining a hoard of riches the height of mountains and a luxurious life filled with drink and meat.

“But flowers…”

Lawrence groaned, then Holo came to sit beside him. Her tail smacked him gently on the back.

“If only they were roses.”

“Oh?”

“Townspeople use roses a lot in festivals and such, so you can sell them in bunches. People cover the roads with them when royalty and nobility come visit as well. And even farther south, businesses use them in expensive food and candies; they’re really popular.”

“Ohhh?”

She drew closer to him, as if very interested in hearing more. Lawrence quickly gave a disclaimer, saying he only had some sec-

ondhand information before continuing.

“Apparently almond milk, rose water, and sugar are all necessities for noble banquets. And especially, when they mix them all together, it makes a thick and sweet soup that smells of flowers. Then you boil that with rice and drink it with raspberry cider after the meal. Or you can add ginger to make it refreshing and then boil with quail or duck. Those weakened by illness get better almost immediately after drinking this, I’ve heard.”

Holo had completely forgotten to blink, and she gulped.

Though they had already taken their meal while they were brainstorming in the dining room, it seemed she could still eat more. While he found himself exasperated, he also thought it was funny to see this silly side of Holo, strung along by her appetite, and he continued.

“What’s even more amazing is the candy from the countries with deep-blue seas, where more than half the year could be counted as summer.”

Holo grasped the clothes around his waist, her tail whipping back and forth.

“Even in hot countries, where they harvest dates, there are amazingly tall mountains that have ice hidden on their peaks all year round. In the boiling heat, the nobles send their servants up the mountainsides and have them cut out some ice. Then, they shave it with blades to make fluffy snow, mix it with sugar, then finally cover it in rose water, the skin of a tart fruit they call lemon boiled with honey, and honey itself.”

He piled snow into an imaginary bowl and pretended to pour honey over it, and Holo’s eyes followed his hands in fascination.

“Then, when it’s all cold, they eat it with a silver spoon. It

makes a crunch inside their mouths, and the cold, tart honey rolls down their throat…Ow, ouch…Holo!”

She was gripping his thigh, her nails digging into his flesh.

“…We must…go south after this…”

“No. We are not.”

He regretted getting so carried away.

“It’s more expensive than honeyed peaches anyway, so we can’t afford it in the first place.”

“Ohhh…”

Holo suddenly seemed like she would cry and then bit into his leg.

“Ouch, that hurts!”

As she dug her fangs into his legs, as though wanting him to suffer with her, Holo suddenly raised her head.

“Sheesh, my clothes might rip…”

“But wait.”

“What is it now?”

“There is ice in the north, as well as honey. Lemon, well…we must use another sort of fruit instead, and one may find sugar in port towns, aye?”

Holo had been learning unnecessary things on her merchant’s journey.

“If there were, then who would pay that much for it?”

Her tail smacked him on his back.

“And rose water? It exists, yes? Is it also expensive?”

“What?”

Lawrence questioned her while Holo mumbled something to herself with a distant look. She must have been using all the knowledge she had gained thus far and was thinking about how she might be able to make ice candy.

Then suddenly, when consciousness returned to her eyes, they wavered with angry flames and turned on Lawrence.

“Which do you think is more valuable: the price of that rose water or whatnot or the warmth from my tail on cold nights, hmm?”

Even the highest-quality wolf fur was inferior to deer fur, and deer fur was not as good as rabbit fur, and rabbit fur was no match for fox fur, but even fox fur was nothing compared to that of the ermine. Ermine fur could be traded as is for silver *trenni* coins, and if one wanted to buy rose water they would have to trade the same weight in gold. This fact would deeply hurt her pride as a wolf.

However, Lawrence was not worried she would rip him to shreds because she had made some sort of misunderstanding.

“All the wolf fur lined up in a market might not be able to buy a single drop of rose water.”

Holo’s eyes widened. She was speechless.

Before long her hands began to tremble, then her shoulders, then her ears, then her tail.

As she lifted her upper lip, showing the two sharp canines beneath, Lawrence spoke.

“But do you know what it is you put on your tail?”

“...Huh?”

The tail that she constantly combed and caressed day in and day out without rest was puffed out so large in just the slightest bit of anger, and the ends of the hairs glinted like thin bundles of glass.

What was it that gave it that sheen and a sweet scent that tickled his nose?

Holo gazed at her own tail, then turned toward Lawrence.

“The warmth of your tail is much more expensive than any rose water. So, so much more.”

Lawrence dropped his shoulders with a sigh.

“You can’t find the oil you use at an oil merchant’s. It was from an apothecary. And it would be absolutely absurd to use it in cooking. But since you picked it out only by scent and bought it without looking at the price, and well, that simply shows how good your nose is. You managed to pick out the most expensive thing from the apothecary without a second thought.”

Holo pestered him for expensive things whenever he made a foolish blunder of equal worth, so Lawrence could never protest with much strength. And so he would loosen the string around his coin purse as he was told, and Holo bought what she wanted without much hesitation. But this was typically something that the women of nobility used and not something a merchant would give as a present to his daughter.

Plenty of which had been rubbed into the tail of one blank-eyed Holo.

"That is collected from the clear top layer that appears when rose water is made, and then it's diluted in different oil. Of course, there are tales of a tyrant of a large empire from long ago who gave it as gift to a princess, but it didn't compare to undiluted, refined oil pressed from even a single rose petal. According to legend, after using as many flower petals that equaled the weight of ten fat horses, the tyrant finally managed to fill a small vial the size of the tip of his pinkie. But even the perfumed oil that you use would need a wagonful of…"

Lawrence got that far in his story when his words caught.

"Full of…"

"…Hello?"

Holo wore a nervous expression on her face and peered up at him from below.

Then Lawrence suddenly whipped around.

He looked not at Holo's worried face but to her fluffy, wagging tail.

"A wagonful?"

"Fwa?!"

Holo let out an odd cry and tried to stand up.

Lawrence did not even notice as he gripped her tail and stared hard at it.

"O-oh, my tail…You're so violent—"

Holo's face had gone red, and in an attempt to escape, she wriggled her tail like a fish. But Lawrence's grip was firm, and he would not let go. He was not even really examining her tail. He was too busy piecing together all the things he had seen in the village in intense concentration.

They had fuel. They had tools. They had materials. Everything needed was already on hand. Not only that, it was the sort of thing where the result was guaranteed before they even started. On top of all this, the product was not the bulky kind.

"This is it! This is the answer!"

Lawrence finally raised his head from his sea of ideas and showed Holo a smile.

Then, when he finally realized that her face was red and there were tears brimming at the edges of her eyes, it was much too late.

"You…fool!"

She puffed out her cheeks as far as she could.

But even if she fell from the bed at that very moment, Lawrence could not stop smiling.

"This could be something amazing!"

He leaped up hand in hand with Holo, who was still sadly checking to see if he had left an odd mark on her tail from gripping it so tightly.

She recoiled at his outburst, slightly frightened.

"And it'll be useful for the maintenance of your tail!"

Holo, whose tail had just been treated horribly, was about to say something, but Lawrence gave her hand a tug and she almost tumbled from the bed.

“W-wait, wait, you!”

“Come on—what are you doing? Let’s go!”

He grasped the tallow candle on the candlestand on the wall and opened the door.

“We can help these people and make a fortune, too!”

Holo sighed in irritation, but she did not shake off Lawrence’s hand.

Here we go again crossed her face for a moment, but a small smile of amusement appeared afterward.

The flowers, full of oil that could catch fire by just the light of the summer sun, as well as possessing an effusive aroma, bloomed endlessly before them.

In the very center of that flower field, they prepared a copper distilling pot with a narrowed opening in the shape of a flattened jar, clay, and the glass vials that Amalie’s father had so passionately collected.

Once the fuel was lit, they could gather as much as they needed from the field afterward.

With everything they had readied, they would be able to turn the purple flower field that only brought disaster into a product that could be traded for gold.

“Something like this?”

The landlady Amalie had her sleeves rolled up and was stuffing clay into the mouth of the distilling pot. It was filled to the brim with flower petals and water she had drawn from the river.

"And then, into this glass bottle…"

Skillfully combining it with the clay, Lawrence attached the thin mouth of the glass bottle diagonally. In reality, they would ask a specialist glassmaker to create a pipe or prepare a copper tube, but this was just a makeshift version.

They first had to be certain if it was possible.

"And now I will light it."

The one that spoke uneasily was the representative of the villagers, the village head. The villagers all looked very unsettled, wondering what on earth they would do with boiled flowers in a distilling pot, as they watched from a distance.

They should have all the tools and procedures they needed.

Lawrence watched as he lit the fire, the stems and leaves plucked from the flowers also catching, and the smoke rose into the air.

"And…so?"

Amalie, who stood beside him, asked as though giving a prayer.

When he told her his idea the night before, she had been just as excited—if not even more so—than he was and nearly went straight into the field with sickle in hand, but Yergin managed somehow to hold her back. It seemed, however, that she had not been able to get any sleep due to her excitement, and the circles under her eyes were as dark as ash.

Yergin lamented that she should have maintained her dignity as a landlord, but despite how tired she looked, she behaved quite lively.

Though she looked meek, perhaps that did not mean she preferred being absorbed in meditation.

“Once it starts boiling, the steam will seep into the glass bottle. Then, we chill it with water.”

The villagers, who were neglecting their farmwork to answer the call to gather here, were all holding wooden buckets and standing at attention, however reluctantly.

“It won’t be long now…Look.”

The inside of the bottle clouded. Lawrence signaled to the villagers, and they all shuffled their feet while retrieving water and began pouring it onto the bottle.

“This is how the steam will cool and become water.”

The sound of bubbling, boiling water came from inside the distilling pot, and steam silently steeped into the glass bottle. Though it was spring, the mountains upstream were still in a snowy season, so the waters from the river were cold. Whenever they poured water onto the glass, it cooled, and they could see the inside.

“There is more and more water…”

Amalie raised her voice in surprise.

“Is that…oil…on the water surface?”

“It looks like it’s a success.”

Gathering near the mouth of the leaning glass bottle was a film of oil.

It already smelled strongly of flowers around them, and under the hood that covered her eyes, Holo pressed her hand against her mouth.

After watching them repeat the same activity for a while, Lawrence reached out to remove the glass bottle.

But Yergin interrupted him.

“It will be my job to endlessly carry on this work now.”

Or perhaps it was his way of making sure a guest did not get burned.

Lawrence smiled and gave his spot to Yergin.

His thick palms gently grasped the glass bottle and released it from the clay, making sure the contents did not spill.

“Whoa.”

“What a smell!”

The scent that wafted from it was so tremendous that the surrounding villagers unwittingly cried out.

And when held up to the sun, there was a clear divide between water and oil in the bottle.

Yergin pointed the opening of the bottle toward his mistress, Amalie.

Then she dipped her finger into the oil slightly and wiped it onto the cloth she had prepared.

"...Incredible."

That was all she could manage, shocked as she was.

"It will take a lot of flowers to make perfumed oil, but that's not a problem here. And an apothecary will dilute such a strong perfume with oil before quickly selling it off. A traveling merchant like myself only needs a bit of the original oil in a small vial. It would be fine in the rain and wouldn't put too much pressure on my wagon."

He did not know how much they would be able to sell, but at least they would have a lot, and it smelled wonderful.

It seemed Lawrence could safely expect the villagers to cut more than enough flowers.

"The only problem is..."

When Lawrence spoke up again, Amalie, who had been engrossed in sniffing the oil she rubbed on the cloth, as well as Yergin, Holo, and the village head, looked at him.

"...once you finish working on this, whatever you eat that night will smell sweet."

Everyone laughed, and Yergin even clapped.

"This wise traveler has shared splendid wisdom with us. Now, we must overcome this challenge that God has given us and make this field of flowers our boon!"

There was a veritable mountain of flowers to be cut, and then the villagers had to pluck the stems before drying them, all so they would burn better.

Not only that, they had to carry on with their normal farm-

work, and once the season changed, the flowers would fall.

There was no time to stand around.

The place suddenly burst into a hive of activity, and Lawrence, in a very traveler-like manner, took one, then two quiet steps away.

Then a hand landed on his shoulder with a thud.

“Oh.”

He turned around, and it was Holo.

“How about it? Aren’t you impressed with my cunning?”

She would allow him to puff out his chest in pride a little.

When he spoke, and as soon as she showed him an exasperated smile under the hood she had pulled down to her nose, she twisted her body and drove her fist straight into his stomach.

“Guh?!”

“’Tis the grudge for my tail, you fool.”

“Augh…”

It did not hurt that much, but his body buckled in surprise.

Then Holo peered at Lawrence’s face when it grew closer, and there was quite a scary smile on her face that he could see even with the intervening cloth, and then she spoke.

“I shall never, ever forget that you mussed up my tail.”

“N-no, wait—”

“And so…”

Holo drew closer.

“…from now on, you must maintain my tail as finely as you possibly can. You have now earned the goodwill of this land’s ruler and stand to make quite the fortune, aye?”

“Wha—? No, we don’t even know if it’ll sell…”

“Oh, do you not wish to continue sleeping in warmth at night?”

Her reddish-amber eyes glinted like boiled fruit.

Though he had come here for the tantalizing promise of making a quick profit, it did not seem like his wallet would be getting any fatter in the end.

“…Okay.”

He replied obediently, and Holo grinned like an innocent girl.

Then, she spoke.

“I must clean out your wallet regularly, after all.”

“…”

He looked at her, and she happily clung to his arm.

The villagers were busily working while Yergin and Amalie were in the middle of a heated conversation.

They suddenly noticed the two of them and came over with attractive, beaming smiles.

“Mr. Lawrence, there is no doubt that you are a gift from

God!”

When she said that, Lawrence responded with a troubled smile, lightly raising his hand.

His other arm was in the grip of a greedy wolf, making sure he would not be taken away.

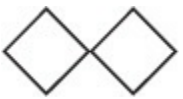
“I’m nothing of the sort. If anything, I’m more like a sacrifice for someone who was once called a god…,” he murmured quietly to himself.

“’Tis the pleasure of the merchant-sort to help others.”

Holo’s tail wagged underneath her robe as she made the remark.

Lawrence gazed up at the beautiful blue sky. Winter had ended, and it was nearly spring.

That was the story of a field of flowers that filled his entire body with sweetness whenever the wind blew.



Standing before the dusty shed, Lawrence finally awoke from the memories that wafted from the small vial.

It seemed that its potency had not faded over the years.

“Now I remember. Myuri wasn’t at all interested in this little vial.”

“While it may smell nice, and while it is sweet, it cannot be eaten, after all.”

Myuri was too much of a child to be content with simply enjoying the scent of flowers.

“That fool was much more interested in hiding the hand mill. ’Tis why it may be hiding in a place that does not occur to us.”

Their only daughter, Myuri, loved pranks more than anything and was obsessed with treasure hunting as well as adventure stories.

“That reminds me of a certain someone…”

“Yes, of you, how you are obsessed with treasure and how you try stuff as much as you can in that purse of yours.”

“No, I’m thinking of someone who will pick out the best piece of jerky from a bag of rations and hide it for later.”

“No, you fool.”

“Oh ho. It seems there are things even the wisewolf doesn’t know.”

“I surely know much more than you!”

The two continued this back-and-forth as they knocked shoulders, exiting the shed together and walking back to the main house. Though they bickered, their hands were clasped together tightly.

Wafting behind them as they walked was a sweet scent.

It was not that of a flower, however, but something entirely different.

Perhaps it was the fragrance of happiness.



SWEET FANGS AND WOLF



SWEET FANGS AND WOLF

The snow was melting, the festivals celebrating the coming spring had ended, and a season of fresh green had arrived.

There was still time before the guests seeking to escape the heat of summer showed themselves, while the noisiest and most frantic season of winter was still some ways away. The village had calmed some, as the buildings were being mended or rebuilt in preparation for the next season, and every bathhouse was quiet.

The bathhouse Col worked at, Spice and Wolf, was no exception. There were no guests; the master, Lawrence, had gone to a village assembly, and his wife, Holo, had curiously tagged along for once. The more likely story was that it was a meeting only in name and was actually a drinking party with lots of good seasonal food. The woman in charge of Spice and Wolf's kitchen, Hanna, had also gone out to gather mushrooms and mountain vegetables and such. And so, having worked throughout the morning, Col found himself bored before lunch.

It was times like these he should have cracked open his theology texts to study God's teachings, but there was time and, more importantly, lots of hot water. Before helping himself to the lunch that Hanna had left for him, he took a dip in the empty baths and sighed under the blue sky. It was such a comfortable and quiet time.

Beside him sat the sweet mead that had recently become a regular part of his diet. With a twinge of regret for his laziness, he took a sip and leaned his head back toward the heavens, spreading before him as one beautiful blue sky.

There was nothing else he could wish for, and he even felt like he was approaching the happiness God's teachings spoke about. Closer than he ever could from opening his theology texts…

"Ah…"

He wanted it to last forever.

He placed his work and his disciplined devotion to study on the side and indulged himself in a bout of laziness, when—

"Broootheeer!"

Col thought he could just make out a distant voice.

For a moment, he thought he had dozed off and imagined it in a dream, but then he heard it again, more clearly.

"Brotheeer!"

It seemed that Myuri, who had gone to play in the river, had returned. The only daughter of the master of Spice and Wolf, Lawrence, and his wife, Holo, Myuri often called him "brother" in admiration. She was about twelve or thirteen and was about the right age if she were to be married off early, and when he thought about that, he grew a bit sad.

That being said, lately, he was concerned in a completely *opposite* manner.

"I'm in the bath!"

He called to her, but before long, he could hear her feet slapping against the ground, finally followed by Myuri appearing in the baths.

"There you are! Brother!!"

When she looked at him, her face instantly lit up.

Though her facial features and eye color were the same as her mother's, the two smiled differently. Holo's smile had a softness to it, like slowly being boiled in honey, but Myuri's was exactly like the summer sun.

It shone brightly and sometimes burned others.

"Brother! Look, look! Look at this! Isn't it cool?!"

She shook the cage she held with both arms and jogged over to him. Her clothes were soaked because she had probably been so focused on playing in the river that she had fallen in several times.

She was covered with countless fresh cuts, her energy and innocence unchanged since childhood, and her smile was filled with a charm that could not help but elicit a similar response from those who saw it. She had a great power to make others feel her youth and naïveté.

But at a certain point, her smile became concerning.

"Myuri, if you run like that—"

— *You'll slip* was how he planned to complete his thought, but he never had a chance.

Myuri had been so fixated on running that when she tried to stop at the edge of the bath, her feet completely flew out from under her.

"Huh?"

Then, she, along with the cage she carried, plunged directly into the bath.

"…"

The spray covered Col's head, and beyond his dripping wet bangs, he could see bubbles gathering on the surface of the water. Girls of twelve or thirteen were encouraged to learn embroidery and cooking, instructed not to show their teeth when they smiled, and taught how to shyly tilt their heads. But all these things were so far removed from Myuri's daily life.

He would be sad if Myuri, who he had taken care of as his own sister, were to be married off, but recently, he was starting to worry whether anyone would take her as a bride. He sighed and went to pull Myuri up, as she had yet to come up on her own, but then he realized—

Something was moving in the water.

"Pwah!"

Myuri finally lifted her head above the water.

"Myuri, what on earth have you—?"

"Brother! Don't just stand there!"

She did not even look at him as she stared into the water and braced herself for something.

Then slowly, she submerged herself completely into the water, and this time, her face and arms immediately returned to the surface.

"Hey…Stay still!"

She shouted at a fat, round lamprey eel dancing in her grip.

"Ah, ah, it's gonna get away, it's gonna—Eek!"

The lamprey slipped out of her hands, and Myuri, chasing after it in a strange stance, dove into the water again.

It seemed that the wriggling in the water had been the prey Myuri caught in the river. A little farther away, a large trout energetically jumped in and out of the water.

Col stood before Myuri and the fish splashing about in the bathwater, took a deep breath, then exhaled.

"Myuri!"

His calm and peaceful moment had vanished in an instant.

When Col told this story, the person placing a skewered fish over the red-hot coals in the hearth chuckled. She had flaxen-colored hair and red eyes, and her face was the same as Myuri's. Their physiques were even similar; she did not look much older than fourteen, and if she stayed silent she was nothing but a pretty little girl. However, her smile inspired an odd feeling in all who saw it. That was likely due to the grimness of living such a terribly long time.

Myuri's mother, Holo, was not human. On the wall, illuminated by the light of the hearth, was a shadow of her large triangular ears and her tail. She was the avatar of a wolf, called Holo the Wisewolf, who was once worshipped as a god and lived in wheat and would live on for hundreds of years.

"It is not funny. We were lucky that there are no guests here during this season."

"What, with fish in the bath, it shall save us some time when we must collect snacks to go with our drink, will it not?"

Holo's response was one of amusement.

The fish they managed to rescue from those that Myuri had thrown into the baths were left to live in a barrel filled with water while the rest had been boiled. It seemed like a waste to throw them out, but it also did not seem appropriate to offer such things to the other villagers, so they smoked some of them while the rest were grilled and salted for their meal.

The reason they did not think to use the fish in a hot pot was because it seemed sad to boil the poor things even more.

"And so where has that fool gone?" Holo asked as she sprinkled more salt onto the fish before licking her fingers.

"Mr. Lawrence scolded her, so now she should be cutting firewood."

Then Holo looked up from the fish, which made a juicy sizzling sound as it cooked.

"Hmm?"

Then, the large, triangular ears on the top of her head twitched. Though she was hundreds of years older than him and the wife of the bathhouse master, Col thought her ears and fuzzy tail were, to speak frankly, very cute. When he was younger, she had allowed him to cling to that tail countless times.

"Is something the matter?"

"Mm. 'Tis much too quiet for woodcutting."

There were no guests at the bathhouse, and it was silent all around. It was almost quiet enough to hear a mouse yawn.

If Holo, whose vaunted ears were literally as sharp as a wolf's,

said so, then there was significance to this silence.

“Mr. Lawrence should be watching over her…”

“My dear husband had plenty of drink. He may very well be sleeping.”

Holo, too, had had plenty to drink.

“I’ll go check.”

Col stood, and Holo called after him.

“Mm. Ah, while you’re gone, please place the raisins in water.”

“Raisins?”

He turned around, and Holo’s eyes glittered as she wagged her tail.

“’Tis a gift from someone who had traveled south. They were given to us at the meeting. They are quite sweet eaten as they are, but I was told after steeping them overnight in water, using that water in bread dough will make for a very sweet and delicious bread.”

Holo was many times more childish than Myuri when it came to food.

But raisin bread did sound good.

“Little Col, you are fond of sweets, are you not? ’Tis well to sample some before putting them in the water. I grant you permission in my name.”

She called him the way she used to back when he first met Holo and Lawrence as a young boy, and he felt a little embarrassed.

But he still preferred sweet mead to bitter ale even though he had grown up, so he could not protest her treating him like a child.

“Thank you. I’ll try some.”

“Go ahead.”

Holo sent him off, her interest already returned to the frying fish. A small smile appeared on Col’s face, and then he headed toward the back of the building.

It was still quiet as he walked along the dark corridor, and he could not hear a single noise. If Myuri were really splitting logs, then he should have been able to hear chopping noises. The firewood shed was next to the kitchen, so first he peeked into the cooking area.

But he could not spot the raisins that Holo mentioned. Perhaps Lawrence used them as bait to lure Myuri into chopping wood. Thinking this, Col went outside and peered inside the firewood shed. Lit by the stars and the moon, leaning against a mountain of logs was the master, Lawrence, fast asleep.

“...Mr. Lawrence.”

Col murmured, irritated, and Lawrence’s breath paused for a moment with a “ *Ngh* ,” but his quiet snoozing started soon again. He still looked young, similar to how he was when they first met, but he always said self-deprecatingly that he could not hold his liquor as well as he used to now that he had grown older, and it seemed that was no exaggeration.

And of course, Myuri was nowhere to be seen. There was a blanket over Lawrence’s body, and Col could guess that was Myuri’s work. He wished to think that, of course, it was a daughter’s consideration for her father, but it was more likely a scheme

to make sure her father did not get too angry that she skipped out on chopping wood.

Perhaps it was his weakness as a father, but Lawrence had never lost his temper with Myuri even once.

“But where has she gone?”

Holo and Lawrence returned home before dinner, and once her father learned of what happened, he immediately ordered Myuri to cut wood. She was probably hungry. Not only had she inherited Holo’s face and red eyes but also her appetite. It was unthinkable for her to go to bed without eating.

As he considered this, he could hear the sounds of water splashing over Lawrence’s soft snoring.

“She’s in the baths?”

A little ways away from the firewood shed, Col emerged onto the stone path extending out from the bathhouse.

He followed it and arrived at the wide-open outdoor baths, but at the entrance, he already found traces of Myuri’s presence.

“…How many times do I have to tell her not to throw her clothes everywhere before she’ll stop…?”

He grumbled with a sigh and began collecting her scattered clothes. He folded each piece carefully, and as he at last bundled the pile with her waist wrap, he could hear her voice coming from the other side of the partition.

“Come on, you can do it!”

Whatever she was doing, it sounded like she having quite a time. It could be that children from other bathhouses had come

over to play. They were all infamously naughty children, but Myuri stood out even among them, and she was naturally their boss.

Wondering what they were doing at this hour, he rounded the partition, and his jaw dropped.

He let the nicely folded pile of Myuri's clothes fall to the floor at the absurd sight.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Mm?"

A stark-naked Myuri noticed Col.

The light of the stars and the moon was much brighter than any candle, clearly illuminating the scene. Myuri, her hair of ash with silver flecks inherited from her father, wagged her fluffy tail of the same color as she stood proudly on the rocks surrounding the edge of the bath without a single stitch on.

This time, Col set aside his disappointment in her lack of shame as a young maiden. He even forgave how the wolf ears and tail she inherited from Holo, which she usually kept hidden, were out in the open.

He could even ignore the hemp sack she gripped in her right hand, and the mountain of what seemed to be raisins, freshly hoisted from the bag, in her left hand.

No, the true problem lay where Myuri was looking.

On the small island in the middle of the bath, two bears stood face-to-face.

"Myuri…Wh-what are…?"

"Ah-ha-ha, Brother! Just in time!"

Myuri spun around, nimbly skipped over to him, and threw herself into his chest without any reserve or consideration.

Though she was thin and delicate and he stood one head above her, she was tomboyish and had the intensity of youth about her.

Col managed to catch her, but before he could launch into a scolding, she lifted her head.

“See, see, Brother? Look at that!”

Beaming and using the hand with which she gripped the sack, she pointed to the center island.

“Wh-what are you doing? And are those the raisins that were a gift for Miss Holo and Mr. Lawrence?”

When he pointed that out, Myuri looked at her own hands in surprise, but she immediately smiled.

“Eh-heh-heh. Do you want some?”

“Myuri!”

He promptly admonished her, and she tensed her shoulders, flattened her ears, and closed her eyes.

However, she did not let go of the raisins, and even when he reached out to take them back, she spun around to evade him.

“Come on, Brother, stop being so loud.”

He felt a headache coming on as she complained. He was starting to lose track of what he should be angry about, but for now, he was certain that his main concern was the bears, glaring at each other in the center island.

“No, tell me what that is.”

Nyohhira was a place nestled deep in the mountains, and one could come across wild animals even within the village. If anything, the bathhouses beyond the center of the village were intruding on the territory of those who dwelled in the surrounding forests. Of these, wolves and bears were the most feared. At a normal bathhouse, this would have caused a commotion that would draw the attention of the entire village.

"That? They said they wanted to have some raisins, so I said that whoever wins the fight can have some."

"...A fight?"

"Yeah. No biting or scratching. I don't want them getting hurt. The one that falls into the water first loses."

Myuri, an avatar of a wolf like her mother, seemed to be able to communicate with the forest animals. It was almost like a fairy tale. But if it was, then Myuri infused a limitless innocence into the story, almost to the point of cruelty.

"N-no, if you make those two bears fight..."

Lawrence had insisted they install a center island in the baths, and he worked incredibly hard to put the stones together so that the musicians would have a place to perform elegantly. It was a jewel of his sweat and toil, and of course, he only ever imagined that humans would be standing on it. As the bears stared intently at each other, circling while watching for any stray moves, the edges of the island were already falling apart. Once the fight began in earnest, Col could already imagine how the island would end up.

But even if he tried to stop the bears, he did not think that they would understand him.

Would it be a better idea to get Holo's help?

As he was considering this, the naked Myuri thrust the raisins up high.

“Hey, if you wish to have these, you shall show me your strength!”

She made her declaration, perhaps imitating how her mother spoke.

And the bears, with their appetites and pride on the line, menacingly bared their fangs at each other.

Please stop.

Before Col could say it, Myuri carried on.

“Ready…Fight!”

With an earth-rumbling growl, the bears began to fight. Their frightening strength raised waves in the bath, and the center island trembled, as though in fear.

Every time a stone fell into the water, there was a loud *plop, plop* .

As Col helplessly watched the bears, now standing on two legs while pushing and jostling each other, he noticed Myuri had come to stand next to him.

“Hey, Brother?”

At some point, he had begun to feel a bit of fear whenever he heard “Brother.”

Lit by the stars and moon, Myuri’s unclad body looked like it had been sculpted from silver and ice. She was looking up at him with an adorable smile.

“Brother, who do you think will win?”



Absolutely unfettered innocence.

Before long, a corner of the island collapsed, and both bears fell into the water.

In the morning, after removing all the water from the bath, the day was spent rebuilding the center island that the bear fight had destroyed. This involved carefully piling up rocks each roughly the size of a small dog. It was simple and backbreaking work. Col's spine ached and his arms were throbbing. But luckily, the center island was sturdier than he had assumed, and it was not completely broken. Now that he thought about it, Holo occasionally assumed her giant wolf form and slept there as well. And when they removed all the water, they found the remains of several fish that Myuri had dropped in the bath the day before, so it was a good opportunity to clean.

Even so, he still knit his eyebrows and let out a sigh.

"I'm sorry that it's always like this…Col."

As though sensing his displeasure, Lawrence, stacking stones with a pale face, spoke weakly.

Though he seemed hungover, the bathhouse master was someone with a strong sense of responsibility, so he would not leave the cleanup for his daughter's misconduct to another alone.

"I don't think Myuri means any harm, but…I don't think she knows when to stop…"

"N-no, it's not…"

Placing another stone on the pile, Col cut himself short and of-

fered a feeble laugh.

“Well…I suppose…just a little…”

His hand lifted another heavy rock into place with a *clack* , and he was suddenly reminded of his own anxiety.

“But, I swear, where on earth has she run off to on her own?”

Lawrence, who saw the terrible state of the baths in the morning, was merciless in admonishing her for once, but it must have fallen on deaf—or wolf—ears. The girl was nowhere to be found.

Even if she were around, her small arms would find it tough to lift many of those stones, so it would have only created unnecessary trouble. That being said, showing sincerity was important. If she simply sat at the side and reflected on her actions quietly, that would have been enough whether she helped or not.

“If she only behaved a little better, then there would be no cuter daughter…”

Lawrence sounded exactly like an overly fond parent, but it was true that if Myuri behaved, there was no one more adorable. She smiled a lot, was always cheerful, and was constantly full of energy, though she also had some thoughtful parts. She may have been a prankster, but she was not naturally malicious.

She did not have to be wise and crafty like her mother, Holo, but if only she could be slightly more obedient. As the pair ruminated over the thought while collecting the stones scattered about the bath floor, they could hear Holo’s distant voice.

“Dear.”

Though it was not loud by any means, her voice sounded like it had been carried in on the wind. There was a certain softness to

Holo's tone when she called Lawrence "dear," and that might have been why.

Col looked up, and Holo was standing on the path to the bathhouse. An apron she did not often wear was tied around her waist, and her arms up to her elbows were completely white. It seemed she was trying to make the raisin bread.

"Come take a look at the fire on the stove. I do not know how strong it must be."

"Ah…Miss Hanna isn't back yet?"

"'Tis a good season. Well, perhaps 'tis well she stretches her wings once in a while."

Hanna, like Holo, was not human and was the embodiment of a bird or something of the sort. She was a talented woman who worked harder than anyone else in the kitchen, but things like this did happen sometimes.

"But the fire, dear."

"Ah, um."

Lawrence glanced at Col.

"Please, go ahead."

He did not smile at them because they were his employers. It was simply that he was happy watching the village's most renowned couple of lovebirds.

"Sorry. I'll be right back."

"I have some prepared for you, too, little Col. Look forward to it for me."

Holo spoke and turned on her heel, and Lawrence followed.

Col saw them off as Holo slowly leaned her face in toward Lawrence, and he scratched the tip of her nose.

Holo's tail, which was exposed since there were no guests around, swished about happily.

His strain from stacking stones softened as he watched them go together.

He recentered himself and started piling stones one by one, when a chill suddenly shot down his spine.

Or perhaps, it was a premonition.

"Broootheeer!"

He heard Myuri's voice, who was liable to kick everything about with a smile, and he felt his gut tense up. Even Myuri was so busy in the summer, and especially in the winter, that she did not have any free time to be mischievous, but when there was a moment of respite, like during the current season, someone had to deal with all her energy.

Col placed another stone on the pile, sighed, and as he was about to turn around, a great shock hit his lower back.

"Guh?!"

"Brother!"

His chest thudded against the pile of rocks, but Myuri pulled his arm back with a cackle.

"Hey, hey, Brother! Listen, listen!"

"..."

Coughing, he turned toward her only to see mud plastered on her cheeks, spiderwebs in her hair, and she must have been attacked by swarms of horseflies as her bare arms were covered in bug bites.

There was no chance for him to ask where she had been and what she had done, since Myuri, like a little puppy chasing after a thrown ball, excitedly popped out her wolf ears and tail that she typically kept hidden as she continued to rattle on.

"So! I found something really cool in the forest! You'll be so surprised, Brother! So, like, let me take you into the forest, and we'll get your—"

She only got that far.

Col understood now that, like a bath, there was only so much he could hold in.

"Um…ah, Bro…ther?"

Even Myuri noticed his expression. Her ears lowered, and her tail drooped lifelessly. Lawrence could never bring himself to really get angry at her because she was his adorable daughter, but Col was different. Though they were not related by blood, he still thought of her as his cute little sister, so he had to be strict with her.

"Myuri."

When he said her name, she recoiled.

And yet, though there was a troubled expression on her face, she still hesitantly opened her mouth.

"S…so, yeah? I'll…take you to the forest, okay?"

He felt a sort of slight respect for how she was still trying to get him to play with her, but this time she had crossed the line.

He looked fixedly and quietly at her, then spoke.

“That’s enough.”

Myuri was not a little kid, and she was naturally a smart girl. She knew exactly what his curt words meant.

She froze, like she had been struck in the heart with a cursed arrow, and stared up at him in a daze.

“I have work to do.”

He was happy that she looked up to him like an older brother, but he could not always treat her like a small child.

He needed to admonish her as the closest thing she had to an actual older brother.

“I need to lift more stones, so please move.”

He spoke with even less emotion, crouched down, and raised another piece. It was a part of the island that broke because she convinced two bears to fight. Even if she could not lift a stone, he would still forgive her if she felt responsibility for what happened the night before and sat quietly to the side.

But after Lawrence scolded her, she had run off and been gone all day. It seemed she had decided to spend time in idle amusement in the forest after seeing and listening to him.

Her mother Holo occasionally spent a fair amount of time wandering outside, but she was old enough to know self-control. Someone had to teach this young, energetic silver wolf discretion.

"..."

"..."

She did not speak, and as she stared at his work, it did not seem she would move, either. She was used to being reprimanded or chided, and there were even some times when she was actually happy to be scolded. However, she was not used to someone pushing her away so coolly, and her mood would quickly sour if the only responses she received were inattentive grunts.

Of course, if she showed that she was willing to apologize and reflect on her actions, then everything would end quickly, and in reality, Col was not angry but rather a little sad. Myuri did not mind at all that someone else had to clean up after her, and she left the work behind while she went somewhere to play. He did not want Myuri to be a girl like that.

Whenever he placed another stone on the pile and the now-familiar *clack* resounded, Myuri shrunk even smaller. He did not even have to look at her to know that she was about to cry.

She gripped her hands in front of her and let go and repeated this for a while, simply standing there. When Lawrence scolded her, she would look upset, but that was all an act. But at the moment, there was no need for Myuri to pretend.

After placing an especially large stone on top with a *thud* , Col sighed.

"If you are not planning to help, then go back to your room."

He wanted her to reflect on her actions.

Myuri tensed her body so much that the tips of hair atop her flattened ears seemed to quiver, but she finally nodded. Or perhaps she just barely managed to hold back tears and had been

hunched over.

Either way, she hung her head, looking like the light inside her had been snuffed out as she took one, then two steps back.

She waited for a moment, probably expecting him to say something kind to her. But he only ignored her and continued stacking rocks, so she gave up, turned her back, and pattered off.

Col watched Myuri's back recede as she left the waterless bath and headed toward her room, and she looked like she was constantly wiping her face. Seeing that made his heart ache, but it was necessary for her to grow.

Then during lunch, if he asked if she thought about what she did, she would probably be her normal, bright self again.

He continued stacking stones as he mused about all this, and when the sun rose to the highest point in the sky, the main part of his work had mostly been completed. All that was left was to have someone from the village who was well-known for being an expert at arranging stonework to place wedged wood between the pieces to make sure everything stayed in place. It was not enough to simply pile stones one on top of the other—much like experience and human relationships.

Col stretched out his back, flexed his arms, and breathed a heavy sigh. He was thirsty and hungry.

Holo should have gotten around to baking the raisin bread by then, and he would love to have it with a bit of mead. If Holo, who loved to drink, saw him indulge in having sweets with sweets, she would probably be exasperated.

But he suddenly wondered if there was any more mead left in storage. The main ingredient for mead was honey, an incredible sweetener on its own as well as a preservative, so it was certainly

not cheap. Additionally, mead was too sweet for the regular drinkers in the village, so its production was often low priority.

As he walked, he thought of what to do in order to secure himself some honey, which was starting to appear in shops during this season when new greenery appeared. Just then, Holo appeared from the main building.

"Oh, your stomach is quite on time."

It seemed she had been about to call him in for lunch.

"I could tell from where the sun is in the sky."

Col pointed to the heavens, and after Holo stared up at the sky in a childlike manner, she faced him again and nodded.

"You have always been the logical sort, little Col."

"Please stop calling me 'little.'"

He protested with a wry smile, and Holo waved her tail, which was a size bigger than Myuri's.

"No matter how much time passes, you are all the same as children."

There was not much he could say about that to the wisewolf Holo, who would live on for hundreds of years.

"Why do you insist that you are not children, then quarrel so?"

Her riddle-like way of speaking was due to her typical playfulness, but the topic made Col pay closer attention.

"Quarrel?"

He asked for clarification, and she crossed her arms in disap-

pointment.

“My charming little daughter has been crying. If you were not as good as one of my own, little Col, then I would bite your head off.”

She was looking hard at him with the same eyes and face as Myuri, but the air about her was different.

Perhaps she had not come to call him in for lunch but instead to discuss this.

“Er, but, well…”

He wanted to say, *I would not make Myuri cry for no reason* , but Holo stopped him with an irritated smile and a mischievous poke to the chest.

“I know the situation. Bears that Myuri stirred up broke the island in the bath, and while you were fixing it, the girl left to run about in the mountains. Well, it is quite right that even my mild and fair dear would grow angry.”

If she knew that much, then why did she sound like she was on Myuri’s side?

Holo was the strictest with Myuri in the bathhouse, and she was not a soft touch. The only person that Myuri obeyed absolutely was her mother. The problem was that the most authoritative figure in the household almost never put in a word to her. Perhaps that was a wolf’s way of raising children, but it was sometimes irritating.

And so it was odd that Holo would be taking Myuri’s side, and Col could only stand there, confused.

“Hmm. Well, if you do not understand, then I must continue

calling you ‘little.’”

He was like a chick with a piece of eggshell still stuck to his bottom.

The wisewolf narrowed her eyes in affection.

“Myuri is most certainly a tomboy, but she is no fool.”

“That’s…right.”

“And she adores you.”

Holo chuckled in a teasing manner, but Col never once doubted that Myuri was attached to him.

“Of course, I feel the same about her as well. She is very important to me. Which is why I want her to know composure and discretion.”

“Hmph.”

Holo’s expression fell at that. She removed the finger from his chest only to poke him again with a bit more force.

“Both males in this family cloud their vision obsessing over things that do not matter.”

Before he could ask what that meant, Holo turned on her heel and began walking back toward the bathhouse.

“M-Miss Holo?”

“Myuri cried herself hoarse, and now she sleeps from exhaustion. I shall be holding on to your raisin bread until you two make up.”

Then she returned inside the bathhouse.

Col stood rooted to the spot, now alone.

Make up?

But there was nothing to reconcile. What happened between him and Myuri was not a quarrel. That was something he did because he wanted her to know what was right. There was no part that involved her.

He had been so confident, but he lost his footing listening to Holo and seeing how she acted.

Perhaps if all he wanted to do was teach her what was right, then he should have told her calmly in an easy-to-understand way. He had not needed to choose the method that would hurt her the most.

So then, why did he act like that?

He slowly dusted off his memory, and there he found a simple sentiment.

He only wanted her to apologize. It was not about what was right, nor did he want her to promise that she would never pull any more pranks—he only wanted her to say, "Sorry."

Then, even if she had gone to spend time in the forest, he would not have minded so much. Her small arms would not have been much help in stacking stones, and having her sit to the side with a blue expression would have accomplished nothing but troubling him.

And more than anything, it was because he wanted her to always be smiling.

"...Aghh, I get it..."

He recalled how he felt then and placed his hand on his forehead in exasperation.

That was because he had tried to hurt Myuri on purpose.

Myuri was precious to him, and he was always thinking about her. He was irritated with himself that he treated her so poorly despite that. This was not about what was right under the teachings of God or anything else.

When he realized this, it was most certainly a quarrel.

However, it was fact that Myuri had gone out to play without a single word of apology, and the whole beginning of this affair was surely her fault alone. He felt like the scales did not quite balance out. It was odd that Holo would take Myuri's side the way she did. That was to say nothing of how she told him that she was withholding his share of raisin bread, as though both parties were to blame. Wondering if maybe he should show how he could act like an adult, he considered that it was likely Holo was actually treating him, Myuri, and even Lawrence the same as children.

Standing in the middle of the path, he tilted his head in puzzlement.

Something was odd.

What was he missing…? As he contemplated this, he could hear footsteps echo from the front entrance to the bathhouse. It was not likely a guest during this time of year, so it was probably someone from the village.

But this visitor did not knock on the door, and he could tell by the sound that they changed direction. The footfalls approached Col, and slipping easily through the space between the trees planted for privacy was a familiar face.

“Wah!”

The intruder jumped and let out a cry. He had probably not expected anyone.

“Hello, Kalm.”

It was a boy from a nearby bathhouse who was the same age as Myuri and her playmate.

He must have come looking for her to join a game, but he was rather heavily armed. He carried a long stick and what seemed like a big folded linen sack was bound to his shoulder. Even stranger was the bundle of conifer branches, still with plenty of needles attached, that he held at his side.



It was impossible to even guess what sort of game they would be playing.

"Oh, it's Col. Hello. Where's Myuri? We've been waiting for her at home, but she hasn't showed up."

"Myuri? Umm…"

There was no way he could say that he had made her cry, which tired her out, and she was now sleeping. Naturally, he stumbled over his words.

Then, he picked up on the fact that Kalm mentioned they had waited for her at home.

"Do you have a playdate with Myuri?"

"Yes. We were going into the forest. Dadd…Father was going to come with us, so I finished helping him, got ready, and waited."

When he corrected himself to say "father," Col could tell that it was the display of a young man showing off, and he could not help but smile, but something was strange. They were planning on bringing Kalm's father into the forest, too?

That was a bit much for children's games. Then, he remembered what Myuri had said when she came into the bath.

"So! I found something really cool in the forest! You'll be so surprised, Brother!"

Something "really cool" that required an adult from the village to be around…That meant that it had to be something like actual hunting. But if so, Kalm's equipment did not seem to match up.

Then, he recalled the rest of what Myuri had said.

“So, like, let me take you into the forest, and we’ll get your—”

What exactly had she wanted to do?

“Well, since Myuri was the one who found it, could you tell her that she’ll get her share, even if she doesn’t come with us? Other people might take it if they find it before us, so we have to go quickly.”

The boy, Kalm, adjusted the sack on his shoulder as he spoke.

“I went out to look quite a bit, though I can’t match what the adults can do. But Myuri is fine going places adults are too scared to go, so she found something insane.”

Kalm spoke excitedly, and Col remembered what she had looked like when she came to him eagerly in a happy mood. In a word, *tattered* .

“Um, what was it that Myuri found in the mountains?”

What constricted his heart was a feeling awfully similar to regret.

He should have asked Myuri that question, not Kalm.

“Oh, she didn’t tell you?”

Kalm seemed surprised before he grinned.

“An insanely huge beehive. Then, she came to Father because she wanted him to make some mead.”

Kalm’s father, Cyrus, was a master brewer, one of the best in the village. More importantly, he mentioned mead.

Myuri was of that age where she was eager to grow up, so she was waiting for her chance to have her turn with alcohol. But this time, there was no mistaking her goal.

Myuri had reflected on what she did. She knew it was her fault, realized that she would be useless in stacking the stones back up, and understood perfectly that a simple apology would not be enough, so she thought of the best thing she could do and set out immediately.

Because she knew that he had taken a liking to mead recently.

Why had he not listened to her then? If only he had listened to what she had to say, there was no doubt he would have been overjoyed at her thoughtfulness.

Of course Holo became be angry.

If Col had just trusted Myuri a little more, then this misunderstanding would never have come about.

“Kalm.”

“Yes?”

Col spoke to the boy.

“Would it be all right if I went instead?”

Kalm stared at him wide-eyed for a second before shrugging his shoulders like an adult, then spoke.

“You’ll get stung a lot, though.”

It was exactly what he wanted.

Punishment must be accompanied by pain.

Whether his face or arms, Col wrapped as much of his body in cloth as he could, then chased the angry bees away with smoke from the burning young conifer branches and finally speared the hive with a stick before dropping it into the sack. Afterward, he closed the sack and ran for it.

It was easier said than done.

But he finally returned to the Spice and Wolf bathhouse as the sun began to set, and when Holo came out to greet him, she leaped back in surprise.

"...You are looking quite handsome."

With a wry smile, her eyes gave the impression that she was complimenting someone who had grown up.

"Where's Myuri?"

"In her room. That carefree girl is still moping about. It was surely quite a weight for her to bear, yes?"

She held back nothing, the blame clearly ringing in her words.

"It seems you have done your part, however."

Holo moved to the side and allowed him passage. He had a feeling that she and Lawrence had faced similar situations many times.

"Oh, Miss Holo, there's a favor I'd like to ask of you."

"Mm? What might that be?"

"I'd like you to taste this for me."

When the honest Holo heard the word *taste* , her ears stood straight up. She looked at the barrel he held in his arms and

grinned.

"'Twould be my pleasure."

They went into the kitchen and began preparing various things. Then Col headed toward Myuri's room.

He knocked, but there was no answer.

She might have been sleeping, but quickly growing anxious that she might still be crying, Col placed his ear to the door.

It was quiet.

He knocked again, then took a deep breath and opened the door.

"Myuri?"

After opening it slightly, he called her name. If a pillow or a carafe or even jeers flew his way, then he would give her some more time.

However, there seemed to be no particular rejection on her part so he opened the door completely. Myuri was curled up on the bed, spectacularly covered from head to toe in a blanket.

"…"

Her current state was an indication that she did not want anyone to see her face, and it almost seemed like a joke.

But if they took the first awkward step toward making up, then surely, as the elder of the two, it was Col's responsibility to make the first move.

“Myuri.”

He called her name again, and the bundle stirred.

“Come on, cheer up now.”

He spoke as if he was pleading with her, and a corner of the round balled-up blanket opened slightly.

“…You’re the one who’s mad.”

It sounded like she was sulking, but it was a weak voice, one that would shatter if he tapped it slightly.

“I’m not angry anymore.”

He pulled the chair from the desk, placed it beside the bed, and sat down.

“Will you show me your face?”

“…”

He could only see the hand that gripped the blanket.

It was a small, delicate hand.

“…Bro…ther?”

The familiar word echoed from the small gap in the blanket.

“What is it?”

“…I’m…sorry.”

Though he had heard that phrase before, it almost felt like it was his first time.

“B-but, you know, um, I, um—”

“Myuri.”

As he said her name, Myuri, who was about to try explaining herself with a shaky voice that made it sound like she would start crying again, shrunk farther into her blanket like a hermit crab.

Col sighed, as if to relax himself, then continued.

“Miss Holo told me about it earlier, but your voice really is terrible.”

“…”

Her voice was cracked and dry. There was a pain to it, as though it had been worn thin, and just listening to it made him want to cough. She had cried her eyes out, dehydrating herself, then likely kept crying despite that.

Col had done something terrible.

Myuri could fall from a cliff, end up covered in blood even as she smiled, but the heart inside her small body was still very delicate.

“I brought medicine. It will be good for your throat.”

“…”

Myuri rustled about, in order to find a place to poke her face out from the shell.

“Miss Holo helped me. She has given her guarantee for its flavor.”

He took the spoon sitting in the small wooden cup he held in his hands, mixed it once more, and scooped some up.

“Mm. Delicious.”

He gave it a taste, and it really was quite good.

As Myuri had not even eaten lunch, it immediately caught her interest.

“Do you want any?”

Though she had hesitated before, she peeked out from beneath the blankets.

“...Yes.”

She looked like she had just recovered from illness. Her hair was a tangled mess from being in bed, and her face was puffed up.

The area around her eyes, which looked listless, was especially bright red and swollen, giving her the appearance of a corpse.

When Col thought about how he was the reason why she ended up like this, his heart ached, but he knew how to fix things.

He presented the spoon to Myuri, and the worn-out girl did not even lift herself when she opened her mouth, readily accepting it.

It was right after that when her drooping wolf ears suddenly stood up straight.

“Th-this—”

Myuri was surprised, and then she finally noticed how Col looked.

“B-b-brother, your face...”

“I did not expect that taking down a beehive would be such a hassle.”

No matter how much armor he donned, the bees would slip in somewhere and sting him.

Every bit of him had swollen up, and it seemed like it would be hard to even wash his own face for a while.

“How is the medicine, by the way? This is squeezed juice of ginger added to honey, then mixed with a bit of wine. I’ve heard that royal songstresses have this when they catch colds.”

Myuri looked back and forth between his face and the cup in his hand before she finally smiled slightly.

“It’s good.”

“That’s good.”

“I want more.”

Col got the sense that she was returning to her regular self, but of course, he did not discourage her.

He scooped another spoonful and fed her. Myuri happily flopped her tail about.

“Oh, but if I have too much, you won’t…”

“It’s all right. A waterfall of honey came out of the beehive. And as there is both honey and wine in this, if we leave it too long, it will become alcohol. Eat it quickly.”

“…I wanna try the alcohol one.”

“You may not.”

Myuri puffed out her cheeks, and it seemed everything was back to normal.

But when she deliberately deflated her cheeks, Col was shocked when he got the feeling she would start crying again the moment she smiled.

As a matter of fact, she was already rubbing at her eyes as she smiled.

“Brother, you dummy.”

There was no need to inquire further as to what she meant.

“I’m sorry.”

Then, with a satisfied smile, Myuri opened her mouth in a request for more honey, but suddenly, she looked at him and her expression told him she had noticed something.

“What is it?”

As soon as he asked, she leaned forward without any notice and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

He heard the telltale *smooch* , then Myuri backed away slowly.

It was so sudden. She smiled at him with her head tilted to the side, but he could not move. She, of course, knew he lived strictly by the teachings of God and had taken vows of abstinence. She always teased and played with that understanding.

“Myuri, do I need to lecture you again?”

“It wasn’t a prank. I heard that the fastest way to heal beestings is to suck out the poison. It’s a cure!”

She always had a quip prepared.

And she loved pranks more than anything.

“I tried it with my arms and stuff, but…”

Myuri slowly placed her fingers on the collar of her clothes, then quickly turned the back of her neck to him.

“I was stung here, too.”

There was definitely a sting mark on her thin, white neck. She had also pulled her collar quite low, and baring her pale neck like that was dreadfully sensational, so it was less of a beesting and more a stab to Col’s eye. Her actions were too suggestive, likely due to the influence of the musicians and dancer girls who came to the bathhouse and thought it was funny to teach her these things.

But Myuri was Myuri. The alluring aura that was much too old for her vanished in an instant, and her tail began to thump on the bed. She was having too much fun with her prank. She leaned forward even more.

Realizing it was the regular Myuri he knew well, Col was able to react with a cool head. He retrieved cartilage from a shell at his chest, and rubbed it on her neck, as she cheerfully had her eyes closed, waiting for a kiss.

“This is medicine from Mr. Cyrus. He said it works very well.”

He deliberately smiled at her, and Myuri pursed her lips and furrowed her eyebrows, as if it was not a joke.

“Sheesh, Brother, you don’t understand anything!”

“I do, too. I see through all of your tricks.”

“Boo!”

She shouted, then opened her mouth wide.

“Honey!”

It was an unladylike sight, as she opened her mouth so wide that he could see the back of her throat, but it oddly suited her. And he felt like he had seen this somewhere before.

He scooped some honey and brought the spoon to her mouth, which closed around it with a sharp sound. Then, he remembered. That wide-open mouth foretold that one day Myuri would bite him on the head.

“Do you want more?”

And yet, he posed his question calmly, without getting flustered.

At the very least, as long as there was good food around, she would be in a good mood.

“Yeah!”

Her voice rang throughout the dusk in the season of new green.

GROOMING SHEEP AND WOLF



GROOMING SHEEP AND WOLF

If he counted, it wound up being a little more than ten years since he opened a bathhouse in a hot spring village deep in the mountains. Basically, he had been working as a bathhouse master longer than he had spent alone as a traveling merchant.

I see, I'm getting older…

Lawrence thought this to himself as he lay on his back in the bed of his wagon; he gazed up at the sky.

"Come now, you fool. Have you not woken yet?"

As that voice called to him, fur landed on his face. He looked up through the fur, which smelled like straw that had dried under plenty of sunlight paired with the scent of sweet boiled honey, and he could see a beautiful display of well-combed coat glinting in the sun.

"I don't mind if you drive the wagon. You've sat next to me and watched me hold the reins for years, haven't you?"

His reply came through the fur that swished mischievously across his face.

"I am Holo the Wisewolf of Yoitsu. Such a prideful wolf would not deign to grasp the reins of a horse."

The fur removed itself from his face, and a girl peered down at him with her arms crossed in dissatisfaction.

She had flaxen-colored hair and reddish-amber eyes. Then, there were large, triangular wolf ears the same color as her hair and a fluffy tail swaying back and forth beneath her coat. Though they met over ten years ago, her appearance had not changed at all.

Holo, who had called herself the Wisewolf of Yoitsu, was not human, as she was a kind of spirit that lived in wheat and was the embodiment of a wolf.

"...Then, hold on a little bit. My back hurts..."

"Hah..."

Holo sighed deliberately, and once she unfolded her arms, she began to rustle through the luggage.

"And this is the result of a male's hard work."

She glanced at him sideways with irritated eyes.

"Was the festival in that town not several days ago now? How pathetic it is that you sit all day in the driver's perch and then cannot move from back pain."

She pulled out a large piece of bread, butter, then cheese and honey from the bag.

"H-hey, you can't seriously plan on eating all that at...ow, ow..."

They were all gifts of thanks from the money changers' association at the town they had just been staying at, Svernel. Lawrence visited as a representative of Nyohhira, where his bathhouse was, and helped out with their big festival. It was called the Festival of the Dead, an exciting affair where they had to catch sheep and pigs running loose in the town square, and the captured animals

were butchered on the spot. Due to the lupine Holo's help, he had been able to secure a handy victory after catching an extraordinary amount, but he could not win against age.

His muscles and joints ached as the days went by. When he finally thought he could move properly, they had left the town, but now he had ended up like this.

"Stay where you are, fool. I shall enjoy this by myself."

She began putting butter directly onto the whole, big piece of round bread, not bothering to break it into pieces. She behaved a little better when their only daughter and guests were around in the bathhouse, but here, at the side of the road in the woods, there was no one around to see them.

Once she spread on plenty of butter, Holo opened her mouth wide and bit into the bread.

Not minding where or how the crust crumbled, her tail wagged happily, and she seemed quite satisfied.

"Honestly..."

Lawrence, who had a sense that nothing he said would matter, could only relax and gaze up at the sky.

As he did so, after every third bite she took from the bread, Holo broke off a piece and fed it to him. He told himself that the pieces were rather small not because she was being stingy with what she gave him but because she was making sure that they were easy to swallow.

Thanks to the generously salted butter, the sweetness of the wheat bread tasted even better.

He looked up at the sky as he chewed, then swallowed. The

weather was good, and there was no wind.

Lawrence did not mind spending time like this.

“This reminds me of the past.”

Several small birds emerged from the fields and flew into the forest. Perhaps prompted by the sound of their wings, Holo spoke absently, holding a skin filled with wine.

But there was no sign that she had become drunk from unreserved day drinking.

“Do you want to go traveling again?”

It had been during Lawrence’s time as a traveling merchant when he met Holo. Then, on an exciting journey to find her homeland, they got themselves into all sorts of commotion, time and time again.

It felt like nothing had changed since then, but when he watched the profile of Holo’s face, looking up at the sky, it did seem like it had changed a bit.

Holo looked down at him and smiled bitterly.

“You fool. Of course not.”

She stood, brushing off a mass of bread crumbs that had fallen on her skirt, then stretched.

She gazed at the scenery around her, and the edges of her mouth twisted into a satisfied grin.

“I am fond of where I soak in hot water every day. The place you created.”

She looked down at him, then smiled, baring her fangs.

Lawrence narrowed his eyes, though not because the light of the sun was too bright.

“Soaking in hot water might cure my back pain.”

“Of course. And the nights are still cold. I would enjoy not camping outside.”

Though it was warm while the sun was out, there was still plenty of snow in the dark corners of the woods. Once the sun set, it grew dreadfully cold, and he would not be able to sleep without Holo’s tail.

“It would be awful if I got sick, too. There’s so much to do to get ready for summer, and we have new help coming. We have to prepare her room and think about how we’re going to divide up the work. We have to get home and start…Hmm? What’s wrong?”

As he ran over the things they had to do, he suddenly realized that Holo was glaring at him.

She was not cross with him; it was more like she was glaring at a frostbitten toe that was itchy, but she could not scratch.

“’Tis nothing.”

Then she turned away in a huff.

Lawrence stared dumbly at her offended form for a while, and then he finally realized what it was. He smiled wryly.

“What, you’re still not satisfied?”

She did not even glance at him.

“Whatever could you be speaking of?”

To top it off, she was playing dumb.

“Seriously…”

This was not something he could just ignore with a sigh, because even if she was only half-joking, that meant that she was also half-serious. During the festival at Svernel they had just come from, the two of them had run into an unexpected party. There had been quite a lot of talk about them, as this group were prospective rivals in business for the hot spring village of Nyohhira, but their identity turned out to be a band of nonhumans. And of all things, they were not birds or rabbits or sheep—but wolves.

They had been working as mercenaries in the south when they happened across a chance to obtain a permit and had made their way to the northlands to found their own hot spring village, a place they could rest. But sure enough, trouble arose around the permit, and Lawrence reached out to help them solve their problem.

He thought that everything had come together nicely in the end. But he had forgotten about the sharp corner that had been left behind even after everything else had rounded out.

That was because one of the wolves absolutely had to live away from her companions.

But a master from a bathhouse just happened to be present then. The honest young man and the mischievous yet equally hardworking master’s only daughter had supported the bathhouse until recently, but as they had just left on a journey, the business was shorthanded and they in a bit of a bind. But if the master hired this wolf to work at the bathhouse, then it would kill two birds with one stone.

The problem was that she had the appearance of a young girl. And she was also the avatar of a wolf. Holo apparently had multi-

ple thoughts regarding these things.

That being said, it was not an option to chase away the girl they wound up hiring, named Selim. If that happened, then she would truly have nowhere to go, as it was necessary for her to live far away from her older brother and family, who had traveled with her from the south. It would be horrible for a nonhuman to live alone in an unfamiliar town, and Holo was much more sensitive to loneliness than the average person. She was not opposed to the hiring of Selim itself, but her wolflike sense of territory itched at the back of her mind.

"A young girl coming to us now doesn't mean anything."

No matter how many times he repeated this, Holo was not completely convinced.

"Fool. I am not worried about that."

Her reply brushed the matter aside, but Lawrence knew that it bothered her a little bit. He almost wanted to prattle on and on about how much she meant to him. Holo, who could detect a glove dropped two valleys away by smell alone, knew better than anyone that there was nothing he could hide from her while living under the same roof.

So her irritation was not logical but emotional.

He looked at her and privately thought she was adorable.

The wisewolf Holo only showed her sillier sides to Lawrence.

"...And what is it you are grinning about?"

She glared at him with a chilling gaze, and he looked away.

If he angered her during this time of year, she would definitely

make him sleep alone in the cold night.

"Anyway, when Miss Selim arrives, the busy season of summer will already be waiting. There's no time to think about anything else."

"..."

Holo, still offended, did not respond. Normally, he would embrace her to help her fix her mood, but he could not move as he pleased due to his back pain. While he was privately frustrated with himself, Holo moved her wolf ears and tail about listlessly, staring out into the distance.

"'Tis not what I worry about."

Then, as he pondered why she was mumbling to herself for once, Holo raised the hood over her head. He did not need to speculate on the reason because before long he could faintly hear the sound of a cranky infant's cries in the distance.

A baby? On this road?

Lawrence tilted his head in puzzlement, until he heard the distinctive sound of a bell.

Perhaps Holo was in a mood because she noticed their presence before he did.

She was a wolf and did not get along well with their kind.

Shepherds.

"Fool."

She muttered underneath her breath, her words hanging in the air, though it was uncertain who they were aimed at. Then she

pulled a blanket over her head and lay down.

With a slightly muffled *clang, clang* , the shepherd's bell swayed as the end of his staff struck the ground. It was a tool that confirmed their identities, and they used it to raise sheep outside of towns.

Lawrence had heard it was grueling work, moving about all day long without much sleep at night to ensure that the sheep did not run away, get attacked by wild dogs, or get stolen. On top of that, townspeople treated them as outsiders as they were scarcely around due to the nature of their work.

On the contrary, because people did not often get to see their labors, there was a multitude of misunderstandings about them. People held prejudices against shepherds, believing rumors that they understood the words of beasts or lay with them and that they indulged in hideous acts that defied the teachings of God. The shepherdess Lawrence and Holo met long ago had experienced much the same.

The only partner a shepherd could rely on was typically a lone sheepdog. These companions kept the flock together, fought off thieves alongside their master, and sometimes even faced wolves that targeted their charges. To Holo, the avatar of a wolf and someone who adored the taste of mutton, there was no being as incompatible with her as a shepherd.

Lawrence now understood that her sulking in the blanket was an indication that she wished for him to deal with the stranger. Enduring the pain in his back, he sat up and rubbed his eyes at the sight before him.

There was something odd.

“Thank God for his guidance! Hello there, traveler!”

The shepherd stood a little ways away and yelled in a loud voice. Then his sheepdog barked loudly and the flock of sheep stood still. There were quite a lot of them—not just a dozen or two. It was a huge mass. Beyond the sheer number, Lawrence also noticed that the sheep, thoroughly muddied on their lower halves, were all plump and seemed quite healthy. It was clear evidence of the shepherd’s skill.

The good-natured shepherd with a white-streaked goatee growing from his chin stood before the flock of sheep, which were *baa* ing as they pleased with great energy.

For some reason, the man carried his sheepdog on his shoulder.

“I am Horad the shepherd!”

His companion’s coat was the color of chestnuts, and as the sheepdog lay across Horad’s shoulders, it almost seemed like it was his hair.

The shepherd who identified himself as Horad was a man old enough to have deep wrinkles on his face, so the whole situation was unusual.

“I am a traveling mer— *Ahem*. I am Nyohhira bathhouse master Kraft Lawrence! What is it you need?!”

Lawrence raised his voice so the bleating sheep did not drown him out, and Horad bowed his head deeply, as though thanking him for simply responding.

“I sincerely believe that meeting you here, Master Lawrence, is due to God’s guidance! If you would have pity on me, then would you be so kind as to offer us a lift to Svernel?!”

Horad made his request, swaying a bit as he readjusted the sheepdog on his shoulder. His partner obediently stayed still, keeping watch over the sheep.

“We are actually just coming from Svernel and now returning north!”

There was a bit of distance between here and Svernel. They probably would not be able to make it before sundown. If they did not want to camp outside, then there was no choice but to continue north and reach a roadside inn.

“Oh…I see…”

He may have been expecting to hitch a ride if they were all going in the same direction.

Horad appeared discouraged, and the dog on his shoulders seemed like it might suddenly slip off.

“Is something the matter?!”

It was not unheard of for a shepherd to call out to a traveler. Many believed that there was something magical about shepherds, so there were times when people would ask for charms or some such to protect them on the road, and there were also shepherds who reached out to travelers on their own, offering those services in hopes of making a little extra money.

However, it did not seem that Horad was that sort of person, and it was the first time Lawrence had ever seen a shepherd carrying his sheepdog on his shoulders.

“Truth be told, my partner here stepped on a sharp rock and cannot walk!”

When he spoke, Lawrence finally noticed there was a bandage

wrapped around the sheepdog's front right foot.

"That's…"

Once upon a time, he, too, was a traveling merchant who lived on the road without a place in any town to call home. How would he have felt if his only conversation partner at the time, his wagon horse, got injured?

He held his breath and dropped his gaze into the wagon bed.

There, the avatar of a wolf had covered herself with a blanket and was sulking.

"Holo."

She should have heard the entire conversation, and Lawrence's tone of voice clearly indicated how he felt.

There was still snow on the ground, and the road was muddy from repeatedly freezing over, then thawing out. Then, by chance, this shepherd's only companion and hope had become injured, unable to walk.

He could not overlook this.

"We might have to camp outside…"

Hesitatingly, he placed his hand on top of the blanket. But a ferocious wolf with her fangs bared did not jump out at him. When he thought he saw the fuzzy tail that was filling the blanket move, a response came.

"If 'tis cold, you shall make it warm for me, aye?"

It was her way of asking if she could drink the finely distilled liquor they bought at Svernel.

“If you drink yourself to sleep, I’ll even take care of you afterward.”

“Hmph.”

Holo snorted, and their negotiations were settled.

“Mr. Horad!”

Lawrence called out his name, and Horad, who was studying his partner’s leg, looked up.

“We’ll help you!”

He immediately broke into a smile.

“Thank you!”

“Should I take you to town?!”

At Lawrence’s feet, Holo covered her ears in an exaggerated manner, but it probably had as much to do with how irritating the bleating sheep had become.

“Well, I was just thinking about that. Even if you spent the whole night and then some bringing me to town, I wouldn’t be able to repay you!”

Lawrence was about to say how that was unnecessary when Horad continued.

“Instead, do you think you could look after my sheep for a bit?!”

“Your sheep?”

Lawrence murmured unwittingly, practically speaking to himself.

Would Horad simply run to town with his partner over his shoulders in the meantime?

"I suddenly remembered I have a friend just over there!" Horad explained as he pointed behind Lawrence.

For a moment, a shiver shot down Lawrence's spine, as he imagined the possibility that bandits were approaching from behind them, falling into a trap where they would be attacked on both sides. But he quickly realized Holo would most certainly have noticed that. His powerful watch *wolf* was still under the blanket, plugging her ears and puffing her cheeks out, in a rather poor mood.

"I know a charcoal maker who should be in a charcoal-making hut during this season! I'll go leave my partner with him, so could I ask you to watch over my sheep until I come back?!"

Even the most skilled shepherds would not be able to bring such a large flock into the woods and expect good results. But doing it this way, Lawrence and Holo would probably still be able to make it to the next inn by sunset, so the least they could do was take care of the sheep.

"All right, then!"

Horad smiled in relief and started coming closer, parting the sheep around him.

The chestnut-colored sheepdog was anxiously trying to look back at the flock of sheep.

When the dog gave up and glanced at Lawrence, he saw eyes that were intelligent and a deep, burned brown.

"May God bless you, Master Lawrence."

“Oh, no worries. We were planning to stay parked here for a while anyway.”

“That’s…”

Horad had come over to stand by the side of the wagon bed, and when he finally noticed Holo, he nodded in understanding.

“From far away, I was sure you had a servant boy with you, but…How rude of me to interrupt…”

“Ah no, you misunderstand. We were just in Svernel participating in the Festival of the Dead, and we were resting here because I’ve injured my back.”

Horad stared at him blankly, unsure if he should laugh or not.

“By the way, Mr. Horad.”

Lawrence was curious.

“You don’t think I might run away with your sheep?”

The vague smile did not vanish from Horad’s face when he turned his bright blue eyes toward Lawrence.

He gave off the impression that no matter what hard days he had been through, he would still gaze into the sunset with this expression.

“It’s strange, but watching sheep every day has, for some reason, given me the ability to weigh people.”

Lawrence shrugged and nodded.

“Besides, the road is muddy and the forest still has snow everywhere. There is still a clean layer of it on the field over there. At least until spring comes, I’d be able to follow you anywhere,

Master Lawrence.”

He was absolutely right.

“Well then, I’ll keep a sharp eye on your sheep. Do you need water? We have wine, as well.”

“Thank you so much. I’ll just have some water.”

Lawrence retrieved the waterskin from his things, and after asking permission, Horad placed his partner onto the wagon bed, taking a breather to have a drink. Then, he cupped some water in his hand and offered it to his companion. The sheepdog wagged his tail as he drank from his master’s hand, but he kept glancing toward Holo under the blanket.

“Well, we’ll be off. It is not that far, so even if the sheep start disappearing, I’ll be right back.”

Horad once again pulled his trusty dog onto his shoulders.

“If the charcoal maker is not in or I can’t find him, then I will take that as a sign from God to take you up on the offer to go to Svernel.”

Horad beamed a bright expression at Lawrence and dipped his head.

Directly after, without hesitation, he started making his way into the woods.

“Well, then.”

Lawrence murmured and took the shepherd’s staff that had been left leaning against the wagon bed.

“It’s only for a short time, but how am I supposed to keep all

these sheep together…?”

The moment Horad and his partner disappeared, the bleating sheep immediately began to scatter, like a barrel that had its hoops come loose.

Lawrence tried to stand, but all the joints in his body groaned in pain.

“Ooof…Damn, I swear.”

But he believed moving around a bit would at least make it a little more bearable, so he placed his hand on the edge of the bed, but the staff was suddenly swiped from him. He looked, and Holo, still pouting, gripped the shaft.

“You are quite infuriating.”

“Huh?”

“I am not a fool who simply eats and sleeps. What am I to you?”

Holo had asked this same question during his traveling merchant days, and Lawrence remembered how he was flabbergasted at the time.

That was a time when he only ever looked at where his feet were as he walked, and whenever he found change on the floor, he truly considered it a blessing from God. He had been unable to bring himself to believe the enormous treasure that had been set before his eyes, making him scared to reach out back then.

But now, he could speak with confidence.

“My cute wife who I am very proud of.”

Holo widened her eyes, and her ears and tail moved so vigorously he could almost hear it.

“You are a fool.”

“I probably am.”

Holo lightly jumped from the wagon bed. She was so petite and thin that the shepherd’s staff looked large lined up next to her, but that gave the scene a sort of charm.

But as soon as he thought she would start rounding up the sheep right away, since she had jumped down with such authority, she suddenly turned around, placed her foot on a wheel, and leaped back on the wagon bed.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

Holo rustled about in the luggage and spoke with a serious expression.

“My tail will get muddied! There should be clothes for my tail somewhere!”

Holo had changed a bit throughout the years.

Lawrence privately thought to himself that it was probably his fault, since he spoiled her so.

Shepherds were occasionally mocked as children born between humans and animals. They spent much of their time in the fields and the mountains, and they held an eerie presence for humans who lived in towns.

But one only need to watch the shepherds’ skills once to understand that such a terrible prejudice also came from a certain

species of admiration.

Just by waving around one staff, they could control an entire flock of sheep at their will.

“Ho! Come now! There shall be no running!”

Clang, clang, clang. The bell hanging at the end of the staff rang violently. Holo was not so much holding the stick as she was partially clinging to it. When she glared at the sheep toward the left that had tried to sneak off when she was watching those on her right, the unattended wards seized the opportunity to start meandering off, and when she yelled at them, the sheep right in front of her tried to wander away as well.

Holo busily ran back and forth, mud covering her up to her knees.

“You…foolish…!”

She seized a nearby sheep by the scruff of its neck, displaying the depth of her indignation. The unlucky specimen, which Holo held tightly with her fangs bared, cried as though pleading for its life. But since the flock was so large, the sheep at the edges decided it was irrelevant and resolutely continued trying to move about as they pleased.

Lawrence thought that keeping a flock of sheep together would be a piece of cake for Holo, an embodiment of a wolf. She must have thought the same.

It had become clear that was a mistake.

“Hah…hah…”

She breathed, her shoulders heaving, and gave a dry cough. Under the muddied bottom of her coat, the covering that pro-

tected her tail was so full it seemed ready to burst. The sheep would listen if she glared directly at them, but the moment she looked away, they forgot everything.

Not only did she just have two eyes, she was also heavily outnumbered.

“Holo, are you okay?”

Unable to ignore her, Lawrence called out to her, and she turned to glare at him, too.

If he asked if he should help her, then he would have to pay the price for hurting her pride.

“ *Ooohhh* ...Why do they not listen!”

She slammed the staff into the ground, but the flock gave her no heed as they sauntered off in all directions.

The incessant *baa, baa* s must have been getting on her nerves, as he could clearly see the ears under her hood were stiff with rage.

She took such a deep breath that it almost looked like her body grew larger, and then she spoke like she was chanting a curse.

“Perhaps I should show you how frightening I can truly be?”

Lawrence was shocked—there was no way she would show her true form here, right?

At that moment, she looked like a frail girl just growing into her teenage years, but her true form was a gigantic wolf. If she transformed and bared her fangs to the sheep, they would not only tremble in fear but probably also drop dead on the spot.

For even one sheep to die during this season, when every town had many expenses to cover, would be a great loss. Like a prayer, Lawrence whispered, “Calm down,” from the back of the wagon to her back.

“……Ngh!”

He thought he saw her shoulders shake.

He thought that she might be sniffling, but something was odd.

Right when he was about to call out to Holo, she lifted the staff, as though she was going to make a heavy swing with it.

“Freeze!”

About three sheep, attempting to leave the flock in a group, suddenly stopped in place.

They really did listen to the wolf when she looked directly at them and spoke. Lawrence had been able to perform well because of this power of hers during the festival in Svernel, too. That was why Holo was exceptionally angry.

But her behavior really was strange.

This time she clearly sniffed her nose, and with an open hand, she wiped her face.

“Holo.”

Lawrence called her name, and her back shivered in surprise.

And Lawrence was just as surprised. She seemed just like a scolded child.

He was taken aback and felt hurt—did she think that he would

really get angry with her if it did not go well, despite how eagerly she took the staff? He was not such an intolerant man.

However, Holo's body was petrified, and she gripped the pole tightly with both hands.

Was it true? Had she really thought that?

Lawrence felt like he might cry, and an instant before he was going to call out to her—

"I—I…am not…a good-for-nothing."

She spoke with such a thin voice, Lawrence almost thought he had imagined it.

Holo was always dignified, calm, and composed. And yet now, she seemed hideously small from behind.

"I've never thought of you like that. So what's…?"

After getting that far, Lawrence finally realized it.

He remembered a conversation from Svernel.

It was when they were talking with Millike, the man who governed over Svernel, about whether or not they could hire the wolves who hailed from the south. Millike, who was also nonhuman, teased Holo, who was a bit less enthusiastic about hiring Selim and the others.

In front of her kin, she can't carelessly drink during the day or take naps.

Holo was vain and stubborn. Though she wore the face of an excellent mother and master of the household in front of her only daughter, Myuri, and Col, peeling back a layer revealed she was a

great deal more delicate than the tomboy Myuri, and there was a part of her that felt like a shy little girl.

Not only that, Holo was often prone to contemplating the darker sides of things. Perhaps it was because she had lived alone for so long in a state where her consciousness had practically faded away, but there were times when her preconceived notions were intense. Because of her harmful resolution to do many things on her own, she was incredibly reliable in the time of need, but on the other hand, she also stumbled over the strangest things.

The current situation was an example of the latter.

Pressing his hand against his pained back, Lawrence stood uneasily and gritted his teeth as he stepped down from the wagon bed. The sheep continued to *baa* and drift apart.

Forgetting about the flock for a moment, Lawrence embraced Holo from behind, who also seemed like she might drift apart piece by piece.

"No matter how hard Selim works, you can drink as much as you want right by the hearth."

Though they did have to make a good impression on their newcomer, Holo probably lost some confidence imagining herself working so hard again, as they had been pretty relaxed recently.

"The reason I don't scold you for sleeping in every day, going to the kitchen to eat four, five times a day, and grooming your tail whenever you have the chance is because I know you have your own proper work to do."

If one thought of the bathhouse in Nyohhira as a flock, then Holo would be the one standing above Lawrence. And even though she looked like she did not do much of anything, he knew

well that she was keeping a careful watch over her wards.

It was only Holo who could admonish the tomboyish and mischievous Myuri, and if she ordered the serious, hardworking Col to take a break, he would. He also understood that whenever she went to get a snack, Holo would call out for this and that in Hanna's stead, who managed the kitchen.

Then, when Lawrence was down or nervous about something concerning the operation of the bathhouse, she would keep him steady, like inserting wedges into the gaps of a stone wall on the verge of collapse.

That was how the Spice and Wolf bathhouse ran smoothly. Even when Selim the new recruit arrived, he would not make his wife cut wood or start the fires or sprinkle salt on cheese before kneading it. Those jobs would be left to those who were capable. Holo was the only one who could shepherd the flock. As long as she did that, there was nothing for him to say.

If there was any problem to speak of, it was only that Holo herself did not much enjoy standing at the top.

So because of that, things like this happened.

If she were the kind of person to enjoy that, she would not have become flustered after learning Selim would be coming, and she would not conjure up any strange thoughts, either. Had her personality really been like that, then if anything, she would be eager to have a chance to train the girl.

"I'm sorry, I hadn't noticed."

He placed his hand on the staff she still held, and surprisingly, she tightened her grip.

" *Sniff* ...I—I must watch over the sheep."

The fact that she could talk like that even now showed just how determined she was.

And it made Lawrence feel much better than her saying, “I’m okay.”

“That’s true, but…they’re all running away.”

The sheep were steadily heading off on their own.

Lawrence thought that even though she could not do it all on her own, something could probably be done if he helped her.

“Here, let me see the staff. You have your majesty as a wolf, so you don’t need this.”

But still she would not let go.

“…That dog can do this, so…why…?”

Her words came out as a mumble. It seemed she did not want to lose to a dog, of all things, and her pride as a wolf was on the line.

“Isn’t that simply the skill of a professional? Even if the sheepdog is a dog.”

The chestnut-colored dog had flawlessly carried out his work, even sitting atop Horad’s shoulders. Lawrence could only imagine there had to be some trick to it. And there were times where it seemed that Holo managed to somehow keep them more or less all together, so there was probably some sort of method that could be relied on.

“It really is strange. I thought it would be impossible to watch over it all from the wagon bed. But if that sheepdog had a good leg, then his line of sight would be lower than most of the sheep,

and yet he can still brilliantly keep the flock together."

Logically, if their eyes lay below the level of the sheep, it was impossible to look out across over the entire flock.

And yet the dog still managed to keep the herd together, guiding them in the desired direction. It was almost like magic, but that could not be the case.

What did that mean?

He racked his brains, and a light suddenly flicked on in his head. It was obvious for a flock.

"Hey, Holo."

He called out to her, and she turned. She looked like a little girl on the verge of tears, and in actuality, she really was ready to cry. As Lawrence wiped at the edges of her eyes with his thumb, he explained his thoughts to her. She seemed doubtful but must have decided it was worth trying.

Still holding the staff, she placed a foot onto a wheel and stood at the edge of the wagon bed.

Rising over the flock of unfettered sheep, she bent backward and took a deep breath.

Then she yelled a single word.

"Fools!"

She did not howl because if it reached Horad's ears, he would have returned in a mad rush.

It seemed all the sheep responded the same way. Hearing the roar of a wolf, they all lifted their heads, bustling about in a big

tumult. They all wanted to rush to a safe place, but the majority of sheep had no idea where to go, so they jostled one another and *baa* ed incessantly.

It was in one corner of the flock that all the sheep were looking toward.

They were all focusing on one sheep, trying to keep in pace with it.

“I found it! ’Tis you!”

Holo waved the staff and pointed it straight at that sheep. The animal was not particularly large or extraordinary-looking, but with the staff pointed at it, the creature *baa* ed pitifully, and the sheep in its vicinity immediately began to panic.

That sheep was the leader. Be it a flock of birds or sheep, there was a proper hierarchical order to the community, and having the leader under her thumb meant Holo could control them.

Holo drew the staff in an arc to the right, and the sheep under the intense stare of a wolf had no choice but to listen. The lead sheep plodded along, and the others followed. Interestingly enough, the sheep now moved as one.



“Heh.”

Completely the opposite from earlier, Holo stood on the wagon bed, smiling proudly. She must have been happy to live up to her reputation as a wolf. Once she understood the trick, it worked in an instant. She directed the sheep with only her chin and was making them endlessly circle the area.

It cheered her up considerably as she stepped down from the wagon to continue controlling the sheep while barely looking at them.

“Sometimes, we simply need to change our perspective.”

Lawrence shrugged, and Holo laughed in a slightly self-deprecating way.

“Because for the longest time, I have been gazing at only one sheep. But no matter.”

She clung to Lawrence.

“I’ve got it easy. I only ever need to look at just one wolf.”

“I shall not forgive your looking at other wolves.”

“Of course not.” He patted her head, and after a slow, relieved exhalation, he spoke. “You think you’ll be okay with bringing on Selim?”

Still clinging to Lawrence, Holo inhaled deeply, then stopped.

“I’m sure you’ll get along.”

“You fool.” Holo breathed and smiled. “I am not a child.”

Lawrence shrugged, agreeing with her, and Holo chuckled as

she rubbed her face up against him.

The sheep bleated in annoyance as they kept walking around in circles.

Horad, who had safely dropped off his partner at the charcoal hut, soon returned, allowing them to hand the flock back over to him. Lawrence's back still ached, but they needed to take their leave.

When they could no longer see Horad or his flock, Lawrence sat on the driver's perch and gripped the reins.

"Well then, let's go home."

"Mm."

Holo, sitting next to him, responded in her usual tone.

Not minding one bit that her feet were covered in mud, Holo rested her head on Lawrence's shoulder, happily swishing her tail about.

Winter was almost over.

It was a new season, one of new beginnings.

MEMORIES OF SPICE AND WOLF



MEMORIES OF SPICE AND WOLF

It was a nice day.

Unlike winter, when it grew colder while the sun was out, the temperature had been properly rising as of late and it was warm. Wearing thick clothes in the sunlight would bring out some sweat, so times like this were spent in the shade. The cold season still made itself known when the evenings grew dark, so it was comfortably chilly. As a fun bonus, there were still ice needles hidden on the ground that were enjoyable to step on.

In such weather, she sat on a straw mat by the bath inside the empty bathhouse while she worked.

Resting atop the straw mat was practically a mountain of wild vegetables that had just been gathered from the mountains, bits of frost still stuck here and there. The rounded buds were the only edible parts, so she tossed those into the basket. The rest would be dried in the sunlight and fed to the horses and sheep. The buds would be boiled with chicken bones and ginger to make a light broth. It was popular with those who could eat nothing but salted meat and fish during the winter and thus fell ill.

When she first tried it, she thought it must be a soup meant for rabbits, but after getting used to it, she quickly grew fond of the crunch from the vegetables and the grease from the chicken bones. It was also good for the cold nights after the sun set, since the ginger warmed her. And when she thought about how perfect it was with an accompaniment of hard liquor, she barely stopped herself from drooling.

As she thought about that, she took a plant from the right, broke off the tip, put it in the basket in front, then threw the rest to the left. This went on for quite some time. There was still a mess of other work waiting for her.

It would not be long before the monotonous work and warm sun brought on a drowsiness.

Several times she dozed off, and her head would suddenly droop. Each time she rubbed her eyes and yawned.

It was almost boring how peaceful the calm, early spring weather felt.

“Lady Holo.”

Someone suddenly called her name, and Holo’s eyes snapped open. She had apparently been dreaming about working. She looked over, and a girl stood beside her. The girl was thin, and her hair was whiter than it was silver, which gave her an evanescence that made it seem she would disappear in the sunlight.

This was the girl recently hired to work at the bathhouse Spice and Wolf, Selim.

They had originally planned to take her in during the summer, but she had arrived not too long ago instead, already beginning to live and work with them.

“Mm-hmm…I cannot believe you saw that.” Holo joked, and Selim blinked with surprise before showing a troubled smile.

“Sir Lawrence said you were surely sleeping and to wake you up…”

“What?”



That fool was what she wanted to say, but it disappeared behind a big yawn.

Her companion never noticed the important things, yet he was only ever sensible about the oddest things.

Holo stretched and sighed in exasperation, causing Selim to jump.

" *Hahh*... Ahh. Apologies...I shan't grow sleepy in this season."

She closed her eyes and shook her ears and tail as though throwing off a coating of water. She managed to suppress a bit of her sleepiness.

After Holo displayed the extent of her lethargy in an exaggerated manner, Selim wore an honest smile.

She was a rather formal girl, so it would be perfect if she relaxed just a little bit.

"And what is it you need?"

"Yes. It's nearly lunchtime, so I've come to get you."

"Mm. That time already. Tell them I shall be there soon."

"Very well."

She bowed her head gracefully, and Holo suddenly noticed how she was still staring at her.

"Lady Holo, has a leaf or the sort hurt you?"

"Hurt me?"

The wild vegetables were soft and not the kind to cause cuts,

nor was she using a knife.

“Ah well, I can smell blood…”

Selim spoke timidly as Holo checked herself and, when she lifted her arm, discovered—

—a round, plump leech dangling from her wrist.

“Oh, this.”

She had not noticed at all, thanks to her drowsiness and the chilly morning dew still clinging to the vegetables. It was a gluttonous fellow, and like how Myuri was once she found some delicious food, it would not let go. As she was about to pinch the tenacious leech and rip it off, Selim stopped her.

“Lady Holo, please don’t. Please wait a moment. I’ll bring some fire,” she said, dashing off into the main building. It could easily come off by roasting it with embers.

“…What a fool. The new girl need not go so far.”

She flicked the plump leech, and it dangled about wildly.

Selim was such a thin and polite girl, Holo worried for a moment that she was the type to faint when she saw the leech, but that did not seem to be the case. In the south, she and her friends had survived daily on an eat-or-be-eaten basis. Since she said they barely scraped by playing mercenary, it was probably safe to assume she was stronger than Holo first expected. And she had a good nose.

Like Holo, Selim was an embodiment of a wolf, and her human form was a temporary guise. As they recently hired her to work in the bathhouse, it was good for Holo to have someone who she did not need to hide her ears or tail from.

However, once they brought her in, Holo was very uneasy regarding hiring someone new. Shameful as it was, she had worried that her spot would be jeopardized.

Luckily, it turned out to be a groundless fear. Instead, Selim had the tendency to hold Holo in too high of a regard.

Before long, Selim returned with dead embers from the kitchen, then proceeded to sear the leech. She caught it the moment it let go, throwing the creature into the wilderness.

"You must eat a lot for lunch to make up for what was drained away."

Selim smiled and gathered up all the stems of the vegetables.

"Well then, I will go ahead and take these to dry."

"Thank you."

The new girl was a hard worker. Lawrence and Holo had been worried about what would happen since they lost two of their young helpers at once, but with Selim's help, there would be no trouble when the guests came.

As she thought about this, Holo stretched expansively one last time and cracked her back.

"Well, 'tis time for lunch."

Her tail puffed out in the early spring sun and swished about.

"How is Miss Selim?"

That night, as Holo's companion wrote some things down, he asked this without bothering to look over.

The question came while she was in the middle of grooming the fur on her tail, thinking about how it was the time of year she should soon be shedding her winter coat.

“She is quite different from what I imagined.”

“Hmm?”

He must have just finished a sentence, as he then turned toward her. They had met a little over ten years ago, and though they had changed much over the years, it almost felt like they had not changed at all.

No, he has gained a bit of weight , Holo thought as she looked at the base of her companion’s bent neck.

“Do you mean that in a good way? Or a bad way?”

“A good way, mostly.”

Smearing the expensive floral oil she had her companion buy for her onto her comb, she gracefully put on the fluffy finishing touches to her tail.

“And the rest, what I had imagined in a bad way was wrong in a good way.”

“Wrong in a good…what? What does that mean?”

Her companion made a puzzled face. While he understood a bathhouse that did not hire new people could not carry on with business, he was probably still worried about hiring Selim.

It was not in the way that a shopkeeper would hire a boy and worry about whether or not he would be doing the appropriate work for his level. Rather, it was the awkwardness of boarding a young female under his own roof. However, Selim behaved well

and was unobtrusive, and she also had a bit of an unfortunate air about her—the very sort of girl that her companion liked.

And he knew that Holo understood this well. He was also conscious of the fact that should anything happen, it would result in a troublesome uproar, and he had prepared for that.

That being said, Holo did trust her companion. Even if Selim was her companion's type, she was certain that he would not be unfaithful. In exchange, as he always overthought some things, if he worried too much about Selim, it would only trouble him.

And yet, he must have calmed a bit as he aged, since in the past if such a girl merely showed him the faintest of smiles, he would become infatuated with her. Now, he worked efficiently and professionally with her. At the same time, he was also taking good care of her, since she was far from her friends.

Of course, he would not neglect Holo over such a thing.

In summary, things were going so well now, it was almost a disappointment.

What made it complicated was that things had gone a little differently from how she wanted it to turn out.

"Really, I was expecting a bit more."

Her companion stared at her, trying to feel out what she really meant. He gulped, knowing that everything looked calm on the surface, but wondering if there was some sort of trouble he had not noticed underneath.

Holo almost wanted to smile watching him. *What a good male*
.

That was because it felt like she had been bound by how hard

he worked in every little thing.

“That means…”

She slipped off the bed and stood beside her companion. She shooed him with her hand, and hesitatingly, he scooted to the side, giving her space to sit.

There were many letters spread out over the desk, waiting for the ink to dry.

“You are managing this much better than I expected, and I cannot even foresee the *Q* in quarrel anywhere.”

Lawrence’s expression was slightly taken aback, and a hint of irritation appeared in relief’s stead.

“What…? That means there’s no problems now, right?”

“Hmm. I thought that I may be able to be unfriendly with you for the first time in a long time.”

She placed her face on his shoulder as her companion developed a clearly vexed, twitching smile.

“Wouldn’t you prefer we didn’t fight?”

“’Tis much more stimulating to add pepper to meat or drink, no? We lived quietly while Myuri was around, but now she is no longer here.”

She rubbed her face on his shoulder and wagged her tail.

“I swear…”

But her companion only sighed and faced the desk again, continuing to write his letters in a bit of a cramped manner.

She was disappointed—had she snuggled up to him like this in the past, that would have been enough to agitate him and it had been quite adorable. The way things were now made it seem like all she thought about was playing.

“Does it seem like we’ll be able to open the bathhouse?”

The very competent Col and their only daughter Myuri, who had followed after him, were gone, and they had supported the bathhouse until recently. Without their two young helpers, they simply did not have enough hands.

She was suspicious that her companion was possibly not writing letters to guests thanking them for their patronage, asking them to come in the next season, but rejections, requesting various parties to postpone their visit because they were short on help.

There was no doubt that their particular bathhouse could not easily hire people because she was not human. It would have been a different story if she could easily hide her ears and tail, but she could not, causing them difficulties.

It would be a lie to say she did not feel indebted.

“Miss Selim will do enough work. She can handle it. It’ll be much easier, since she’s not the mischievous Myuri, who creates double the work after finishing one job.”

“That foolish girl truly is nothing but pranks. I know not who she takes after.”

She sighed, and her companion stared at her with an indescribable expression.

She half glared back at him, and he immediately looked away, like a sheep.

“But for that, it seems the liveliness in this house will die down. Are you all right with that?”

Her companion’s back was to her, and he simply dropped his head lifelessly.

“I’m worried about that, too. We don’t have Col, either, who chatted with all the high-ranking clergymen…When I think about that, I can’t deny that what once attracted the guests to our bathhouse has disappeared.”

“’Tis because you can talk of nothing but trade.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you started singing and dancing, you know.”

Each bathhouse had its own specialty in soothing the tedium for long-stay guests. This bathhouse, Spice and Wolf, had truly been able to tout little Col, who could participate in complex discussions, and Myuri, who was as bright as any dancer.

However, when she imagined herself doing Myuri’s job, not to mention little Col’s, Holo felt exhausted.

“Well, it would just be trouble if you did that on top of your regular work. But I do want to see it.”

She could easily tell he was serious by how bashful his expression was, but this fool truly did not understand anything.

Her human form now was indeed young by human standards. When she thought about Myuri, who was truly young, however, she easily imagined how reckless it would be for herself to dance in her stead.

The image of the patrons looking up at her with confused smiles— *This isn’t bad, but something’s off* —easily came to mind.

Even though they appeared to be the same age, the aura around her was completely different compared to a girl who was truly young.

“I may as well stick with being particular about food.”

If they stayed on the topic much longer, she felt her dignity as a wisewolf would be on the line, so she immediately changed the subject.

“Food, huh? You do have some opinions about food.”

“Hanna may not be so happy to hear she would get more work.”

Hanna not only ran the kitchen but she was also not human either, her true identity being the avatar of a bird.

“We lost one person stealing snacks, so maybe you can make up for that.”

Talking about it now, Holo was beginning to lose track of whether Myuri, the bathhouse master’s only daughter, had helped with the work or merely played as she liked.

It was fine that she was as energetic as she was, but perhaps they had been a little too lax with her.

“But it really is quiet without Myuri around.”

Her companion paused his writing hand and looked up contemplatively, his gaze distant. Around this time of day, Myuri would be snoring on her bed in her usual room or playing around in Col’s room as he studied by candlelight, accompanied by his angry voice after she bothered him too much with her mischief.

Once it became clear that Myuri had left on the journey as

well, Holo's companion had raised such a fuss; she thought he had finally accepted it, but it seemed he was still a bit reluctant about it.

"I hope they haven't gotten in trouble where they are…"

"Had a letter not just recently come?"

"That's true, but…"

She sighed at her unsettled companion and embraced him.

"Have you forgotten who sits by your side?"

Her companion, now so far to the edge of the chair he was about to fall off, planted his foot on the other side and managed to stay up.

Then, he smiled flatly.

"Yeah. You're always by my side."

"Mm. 'Twould be best for your health to forget about your daughter after she has gone off to be wed."

"Sh-she's not getting married!"

The fool, who stubbornly told himself that Myuri and Col were nothing but very close siblings, retorted on reflex. Of course, she knew he did not truly oppose it. He was simply enjoying the role of the father of an only daughter to his heart's content.

And that meant she, too, had to enjoy her role.

"See here. I shan't be going anywhere. However, if you carelessly let go, I may be blown away by the wind."

She spoke while scratching her ears on his sharp shoulders.

The tallow candle had almost burned out, so it was good timing.

“Do you not think so?”

By the wavering candlelight, she narrowed her eyes and smiled in satisfaction.

Her companion would always seem frightened at times like these.

She vaguely remembered that he once said he felt like he was about to fall into the depths of oblivion.

Of course, she understood what he was trying to say.

That was because after they had fallen in love, they had arrived here.

“As you say, madam.”

Her companion embraced her in return and stood, picking her up, then carrying her to bed.

Before long, the candle blew out, and the room fell into darkness.

The bathhouse was silent without guests, and she could hear the *hoot, hoot* of an owl beyond the window.

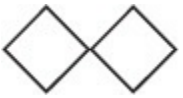
“Eh-heh.”

She twisted in her companion’s arms.

“Dear, be gentle with me—”

Just as she said that, there was a *thud* as he made a misstep. His posture collapsed, and they fell to the floor in the darkness.

Her foolish companion always did this at the most important moments.



Holo was greeted by a sudden shock, and as she was about to voice her complaints, something felt off.

"You…fool……hmm?"

She realized she was lying down on a straw mat.

Before her sat a mountain of wild vegetables, waiting to be taken care of, glistening in the spring sun. There was no one else in the baths, and she could only hear the bubbling sound of flowing water.

"…Hmm…?"

It seemed she had completely fallen asleep in the gentle spring sunlight. She was upset she had woken up during a good moment, but the warm sunlight was comfortable, like she had entered the bath while still wearing clothes, and she almost closed her eyes again.

But she could not allow Selim to see her in such a state.

She managed to pull herself up and yawned, reaching out to the pile of vegetables.

"But…'twas quite a vivid dream I had…"

A strange feeling overcame her as she plucked the buds.

"…No, 'twas not a dream. That happened yesterday for…

hmm?”

She murmured, suddenly doubting herself.

How many days had she been plucking the buds from vegetables? There were plenty to gather in the mountains, and bored women and children in the village plucked hundreds in order to earn some pocket change. They also were used as feed for the livestock, so while there were no guests around, every household dried and stored as much as they could, day after day. There was no difference between yesterday and today, and the next day she would be repeating the same all over again.

There was still frozen morning dew on the pile of wild vegetables, and they glistened in the sunlight. The temperature was just starting to rise, and the melted drops bubbled like nectar. Plucking the buds off wild vegetables let her know that spring had come to the village.

But how many times had spring come now? Ten? Twelve? Was it this year that Myuri and little Col had left the bathhouse? Or was that in the past?

In the wheat fields she had once slept in, she could roughly count the years as babies became children, children grew into adults, and adults aged into elders. In a year, she could only mark the dates by the changing seasons and the various festivals that came and went. The rest was simply a thread in the boundless tapestry that was the “every day.”

Her memories of regular days were much too vague as to what came before or after what. And that became truer the more distant the memory.

Had it really been the night before that her companion was writing many letters to guests, then carried her to the bed after the candle went out? Had she not been dreaming of a nostalgic

memory long past? It was like when she recalled her friends from her home village as she dozed off in the wheat fields.

Suddenly, an unsettling feeling rose in her chest, and she looked up toward the sky. There, the new spring sun silently shone with warmth. But it was too quiet. Was this a dream?

Anxiety bubbled up inside her, to the point she could clearly hear her heartbeat in her chest. If she was dreaming that the bathhouse was this quiet, then she could not imagine how quiet it was outside of her dream.

She was not like her companion and little Col and the rest of the villagers. Their entire lives would be over in the blink of an eye for her. It was not a dream or illusion that she would be the only one left of all her loved ones and that they would one day leave the bathhouse forever. That was a reality lying in wait for her.

"…"

Tears of anxiety and loneliness welled up in her eyes, and just as she was about to call out her companion's name, regardless of appearances. A flock of birds flew overhead from the direction of the woods, flitting about one another. The wind gusted, shaking the tree branches, and small waves rippled on the bath. There was still a hint of winter on the wind blowing across her cheek. It was all much too vivid to be a dream.

Before she began to cry like a small child, she looked at her left wrist. There, she could see the faint scar where the leech had bit her. When she scratched it, she could feel the pain.

It was not a dream, and she was certain that the night the leech had bitten her, she had nibbled at her companion's shoulders and neck and everywhere else. As she recalled all those small details, she finally returned to reality. Her nap had caused her

imagination to run wild in drowsiness.

"…What a fool…"

With relief came a feeling of embarrassment.

Deep in her heart was a well filled with dark things. The weight of her happiness, which was almost too warm for comfort, kept a tight lid on it. She almost always forgot about it, but when she let her guard down, it would come seeping out. The darkness inside had a name—loneliness.

Her happy, daily routine flowed from yesterday to today without any distinction between them. If she was too happy, time would pass by much too quickly.

That was why her words to her companion the night before had not been a lie. There were several things she was expecting from Selim, the new girl.

The first was to simply do her share of work as a helper, so that this bathhouse her companion had spent his blood, sweat, and tears on could mature. And the second was to be a spark that could incite a quarrel between herself and her companion.

Then, her memory of the fight and the consequent reconciliation would emerge as a clear pattern in the tapestry of her every day, become a concrete event in her memory, and keep the lid closed tight on her well of loneliness. The other hundreds and thousands of days without strife would become the same as her naps in the afternoon and would be pushed far away into the depths of her memory.

Time passed much too quickly. Her only choice was to make a mark on herself with her nails so that she would not forget. Like the scar the leech left on her wrist.

Human and animal activity, however, was nothing but the same actions repeated over and over again. So all she could do was simply soothe her anxiety a bit in a way that she would just forget the following day.

Embracing her companion from behind as he worked, drinking hard liquor until she became stupidly drunk, imparting all her knowledge to her only daughter as a bedtime story so she may capture the male she fancied…

That being said, it was like bottling the summer air to save it for winter.

The repetition of daily life wore many things down. So while the days went by smoothly and efficiently, not everything stayed in her memory.

It was not that she hated plucking buds off wild vegetables. It was honest work atop more honest work that kept the bathhouse running, and the better it ran, the happier her companion became. In the end, she considered herself living in luxury. She was like a dog peering into a stream with a piece of meat in its mouth only to greedily attempt to snatch the morsel in the water's reflection.

"What a fool I am."

She murmured to herself and returned to work plucking buds.

Though she was happy, she was sad she could not give names to each and every piece of her happiness.

Holo's work plucking buds was over before noon, thanks to her diligence.

She had Selim dry the parts that would become fodder while she took the edible buds to the kitchen, returning to the main house after. For now, she wanted to find where her companion was and stick close to him. It was like an insect sipping tree sap. He was a bit of a wooden blockhead, so it made sense.

“If you’re looking for the master, he’s out front.”

Hanna, who was parboiling the buds in the kitchen, informed her of his whereabouts. On her way out, Holo pilfered a few slices of jerky from a shelf, and Hanna scolded her.

“We’ll be eating lunch soon.”

If her companion was out front, that meant he must have been doing some sort of hard labor. Perhaps a traveling merchant delivering goods had come on the now-thawed mountain roads, or maybe it was a boat along the river that had brought cargo.

If he was in the middle of heavy lifting, then she would of course not interfere, but she would be able to accompany him to the baths after he was done.

She thought about this and that as she passed through the corridor and came out the front, where her companion was, with Selim.

“I am sorry…”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s my fault for not telling you.”

As they talked, they were untying the bundles of fodder stacked by the front entrance.

“What are you doing?”

Holo’s call prompted the two to look back at her.

“Oh, hey. Perfect timing. Can you help us?”

“Help?”

Beside him, Selim stopped what she was doing and looked up at her, a guilty expression written on her face. Her slender shoulders drooped so low it was like they nearly disappeared.

“I, um…used the wrong string to tie the fodder together…”

Responding quietly, she continued working. It seemed she was taking apart the bundles she had put together.

“Hmm. Should I undo everything?”

“No, just tie it with new string. And there’s some three-strand twine mixed in there, too, so take those off as well.”

“How bothersome.”

She had meant for it to be the lighthearted response she always gave him, but Selim recoiled and shrunk back.

“Oh, mm, ’twas not meant for you. I, too, make this mistake often,” she added hurriedly. The girl was nervous being in an unfamiliar pack. Even if she poked fun at her companion as she always did, it sounded harsh to the newcomer’s ears. She had to be careful.

She flashed an exceptional smile toward Selim and returned to work.

According to her companion, he had told Selim to use the old string to bundle the withered grasses together, but she had mistaken the new cord for the old. Both the old and new hemp string were in the same place in the shed, so it was undoubtedly complicated.

The task was completed rather quickly with all three of them working together. She told her former traveling-merchant companion that his fussy way of saving material by using the oldest things first made this his fault.

And it was good since Selim had made a modest mistake, as it gave Holo an excuse to ease up on her work. Had she done her work perfectly, it would have been suffocating.

But then again, the next day Selim made another little mistake.

In the spring, the villagers of Nyohhira hold a small, private festival. They worshipped Alzeuri, the patron saint of hot springs or some sort. Selim took the wrong votive candles to use in the festival.

She was supposed to hand over beeswax candles but apparently instead brought a boxful of tallow candles to the meeting hall.

“I’m sorry…”

Selim looked as though she might cry, perhaps in response to her continued mistakes. But it could be quickly resolved by simply switching the candles, and it did not seem like she was slacking in her duties. She worked without complaint and did everything she was told. And so of course, she prepared the correct candles without any scolding and simply carried them to the meeting hall.

By now, Holo had come to know Selim better. She was diligent and hardworking, but there were foolish parts to her. There were times she stumbled or dropped things. The person in question did seem aware of it, so it was admirable how she made sure to overcome her shortcomings. She was very much the kind of girl her companion fancied.

And so, Holo was not that surprised that the girl had mistaken beeswax candles for tallow ones. They were molded in a similar shape, and she may not have ever seen beeswax before in her life.

Because of that, her mistakes only came up once in a while when Holo and her companion talked before going to sleep at night. The problem was that Selim apparently did not see it that way.

Ever since the day she mistook the candles her mood had been awful. She was an honest girl, and she may have been needlessly pressuring herself.

The young wolf was a valuable worker, and it would cause problems for even Holo if she quit. Even without quitting, her mood would most certainly affect the atmosphere in the bathhouse. This was a place that brought people smiles and happiness, and so they could not tolerate anyone stifling that.

But what should they do? Selim did not seem the sort to cheer up with drink. And telling her not to mind appeared to only result in her becoming even more self-conscious.

Though Holo had lived for a long time, this was her first experience with this sort of situation.

Though she contemplated deeply about the best way to cheer someone up, she could not come up with anything, and because she was so busy with her own work, she missed her opportunity to call out to the young girl. But one day, her companion whispered to her.

“Do you think you could help me with Miss Selim?”

“Help?”

“Can you think of an excuse to take her into the mountains?”

Holo looked back at him, puzzled, wondering what he meant.

"Take her out saying you're going to find new springs or something, and could you bring her to the other side of the mountains while you're at it?"

She finally got the point.

"Have her visit her family, you mean?"

"Yeah."

Selim's older brother and other relatives were building lodgings some two or three mountains away. They were apparently planning to make a fortune by attracting pilgrims, touting their location as a sacred destination where the miracle of a holy woman had transpired. Had the good little boy Col known about this, he would definitely have made an unhappy face, but the one who thought of the scheme was her companion. That was the only plan that they could think of when they were at a loss in Svernel.

The problem was, the one who had played the part of the holy woman was Selim. She was supposed to be buried deep underground, so it would be odd if she were constantly seen around the inn. So accordingly, she was hired to work at the bathhouse Spice and Wolf, which was in need of helpers, but that meant she was forced to live far, far away from her family.

Of course, she could cross the distance in no time if she ran in her wolf form, so it was not an eternal parting.

Which was why Holo thought her companion's idea would be counterproductive.

"Is the girl not right in the middle of getting used to her new pack? Would having them meet after such a short time not only bring her and her friends' resolution into question?"

Selim and her older brother were especially serious folk. When Selim first came to the house, her expression was steely, as though in preparation for war. The kin of wolves would never stray from a path once they had decided upon it, no matter what.

And so she explained that to her companion.

“Logically, that makes sense.”

“Dear, I am serious—”

Holo stopped speaking because of the look in her companion’s eyes.

He never gave the impression of having confidence in himself and always seemed to have strange assumptions about things, but he occasionally held such unwavering beliefs that even a wisewolf could not sink her teeth in.

At times like those, though he should have exuded strength, his eyes always seemed somewhat sad.

She easily bent to his will whenever she saw those eyes of his.

Unwittingly, Holo’s ears and tail drooped.

“I was once a traveling merchant. I’ve carried people who lived far away from their family and friends many times. So many people did nothing but complain when they sat in the back of the wagon. ‘I don’t want to see them,’ ‘I can’t meet them now after all this time,’ ‘They’ll pummel me when they see me,’ and on and on.”

He flashed a tired smile and knelt down to her eye level.

It was almost as though he were reasoning with a child.

“But when they finally did meet, they were always happy. That’s not logical.”

Then, he reached out to touch her cheek.

She jumped and recoiled, because it almost felt as though he was going to directly touch the soft parts of her heart.

“You know this.”

He was right.

When she wanted to go home but had forgotten the way there and sat at a loss in a field of wheat, she forcefully snuck into her companion’s wagon. She did not care what came after. She missed her homeland that much.

And then, facing many dangers, her companion took her where she needed to go. At first, she only thought that he was just a hopelessly good-hearted person, but that was not so. He held true to his own beliefs born from his own experiences.

“And it might be a problem that Miss Selim’s brothers are so close.”

“…Hmm?”

“They’re probably thinking along the same lines as you. Once they decide on something, they’ll absolutely carry it out. And then, seeing how near they are, it will only make it harder for them. And because they’re so close, they probably imagine they shouldn’t just hop over to visit one another—that it would be weak and pathetic.”

“Mm-hmm…And so…you mean to say…’tis different?”

She looked back at him, and he smiled bitterly.

“I know Miss Selim is trying her best to be a member of this house. But any newcomer will always feel helpless. But on the other hand, do you remember Selim’s brother’s face when he saw her off? He was practically sick with worry. If you bring her to him, there’s no chance he would be cruel to her. He would encourage and comfort her. It would help her a hundred times more than us saying anything. She has someone like that not too far away, so why doesn’t she go see him?”

His train of thought was like grasping the ends of a tangled mess of thread, then pulling on them only to find that nothing had been tangled all along.

With both a will and a way, one should act.

She could even call this a very merchantlike way of thinking.

Of course, that included her companion’s personal outlook on life and his innate good-heartedness. There were a great many bathhouses that handled their help like tools, and if anything, such treatment was actually expected in the human world to the point where it was often considered that a master who did not punish their workers was already a good one.

But her companion was not that kind of person. Those who rode in the back of his wagon were his friends, and he tried his best to deal with them in a kind manner. It was perhaps similar to a merchant’s attachment to their cargo.

When she herself was a part of his cargo, she was distraught with worry about how he would treat other freight, but now she sat beside him on the driver’s perch.

And so, as his partner on his journey, she could depend on him for and was even proud of how he treated his cargo so well.

Her companion was so attractive in how he would not be tied

down by common sense when it came to his friends, and she almost hated him for it.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

Her companion finally noticed her state and was staring at her, puzzled.

Unable to hold back the warm feeling in her heart, she grinned proudly and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“You are such a fool, such a foolish man.”

“Huh?”

He sounded suspicious, but he understood that she was in a good mood by how her ears and tail twitched happily.

He returned the favor by embracing her back, and she managed to calm herself for the moment.

“Hmm…Regarding your idea, I do not mind, but there are still humans about in the mountains during this time of year. Would you mind if we left once night fell?”

“Oh, of course not. We have work during the day anyway.”

“You fool. ’Tis not the question.”

Her companion seemed puzzled. It seemed he did not understand what she had meant.

“I am asking if you do not feel lonely sleeping alone at night?”

Their daughter Myuri was not around, either.

Then, after a slight moment of surprise, he gave her a small smile.

“What? When you come home, you know how grateful I’ll be.”

Her companion knew how to treat her well, too.

“Heh-heh. Very well, then.”

In the end, unable to control herself, she clung to him again, and her tail swished about happily.

Though it was not a full moon that night, it was just bright enough.

They ate dinner, and around the time they would typically start going to bed, they instead gathered behind the bathhouse.

There was the wisewolf, who could easily swallow anything human-sized in one gulp, and a cute little wolf who one might typically see roaming around the forest. And the wisewolf’s shivering companion.

“I wish I had your fur.”

Once the sun set, a midwinter chill descended onto the mountains. A puff of white smoke rose from her companion’s mouth when he spoke.

“We shall return before dawn.”

“Make sure the charcoal makers and whatnot don’t get a good look at you.”

“Fool.”

She bumped him with her nose, and he scratched her around her chin. It was a natural exchange for them, but when she noticed that Selim was beside them watching, she suddenly grew

embarrassed.

“...Ahem. Well, shall we be off?”

“Yes.”

The young, slender wolf almost looked like she was glowing under the moonlight.

Holo was of course not envious, but she had a fleeting thought that if she could be that size, she and her companion could stay in the same room even in this form.

“Be safe.”

She did not know if her companion was aware of her thoughts, but he spoke all the same.

For all intents and purposes, they were supposedly searching for new springs, but it was really for Selim’s sake.

They turned away without a response and dashed off. Holo made rounds out in the mountains in this form to make sure that there would be no avalanches once the snow started to soften, but she had not done so lately. She loved the feeling of running in the mountains in this large form, and she could not help her gaining speed.

Once they reached the peak of the mountain behind the bath-house, she looked back, and Selim was already out of breath.

“Sorry. Am I going too fast?”

“N-no...ah, um, yes...”

She perhaps thought it would cause Holo even more trouble if she could not keep up.

“We shall go slowly. ’Tis the first chance in a long time I have had to run, so I could not help but frolic like a pup.”

The truth was, of course, she wished to run at top speed, and she wanted to howl at the moon as loud as she could. But if she did that, however, then it would echo through the entire village of Nyohhira, and there would be an uproar at the clear signal of a wolf. All the villagers would light fires and spend the entire night on watch.

Of course, her companion would know whose fault it was and stand under the torch with a cross expression.

“Well, should you get lost, you shall be able to return by scent, aye?”

Selim’s wolf mouth flawlessly curled into a smile at her banter.

Then they roamed about the mountains at the pace of a leisurely stroll. Though Holo had not particularly claimed that this was her territory, dutiful bears and deer looked up at her, wondering what was the matter.

Under the pretense of looking for springs, they inevitably arrived at locations that smelled as though they had potential for that purpose, but Holo had long since found all the noteworthy spots back when they were first opening the bathhouse. So in a casual manner, the two wolves simply went in circles, with Holo’s feet steadily aiming toward the other side of the mountains, where Selim’s older brother and relatives were constructing lodgings.

But Selim was not a naive or stupid girl. As they were about to cross the second ridge, she spoke, as though having made up her mind.

“Lady Holo.”

“Hmm?”

“Um…I’m…sorry…”

Of course, Holo played dumb.

“Why do you apologize? You have followed me this far, have you not?”

She spoke with a faint smile, so Selim did not say any more.

However, though she agreed with her companion’s logic, she was still apprehensive in a corner of her heart that they were being too meddlesome. There was no doubting that Selim had made up her mind when she came to the bathhouse. If they gave her special consideration simply because she was feeling down after a few mistakes, then it was entirely possible that treating her like a child would hurt her.

But when it came to thoughtfulness, matters only grew more complicated the more one second guessed them, eventually becoming like the snake that ate its own tail. So her companion’s idea that for the time being they should try the first thing that came to mind in hopes of showing their sincerity was refreshing and, most likely, correct.

When Holo herself had gotten stuck on certain points—like how she had once been called the wisewolf, or that she was eternally young, or how she was not human in the first place—it was her companion who had grasped her hand and pulled her along. It went without saying as to how that ended up.

Then, as fate would have it, Selim joined their pack. There would be nothing better than if she enjoyed her time with them.

Neither of them spoke after that, and as they occasionally peeked in hollow grounds and valleys that seemed like they might

produce water, they passed over the third ridge. The waxing moon had long since passed over their heads. It was the dead of the night, when even the grass and the trees slumbered.

As Holo wondered if her companion was freezing all alone, she saw a figure move at the edge of her vision, behind a cluster of trees.

"How admirable for you to come greet her."

She smiled and murmured, and though it was unlikely they heard, more shadows appeared behind the first. The wind blew down the mountain at this hour, so their scent must have reached them on the wind.

"Look."

Holo tried to encourage Selim, who stood stuck in place beside her, but she did not move. Perhaps it was from fear that her family would blame her for being weak.

But Holo had brought her all this way, and there was no turning back now, not to mention how dejected Selim was at the house.

At the head of the pack was a wolf who had been watching them silently, had the exact same coat color as Selim, and seemed so worried that it was possible he would start howling even now.

She recalled how it was the same expression little Col wore on his face as he loitered around the door whenever Myuri was late coming home from playing in the mountains.

Whether human or wolf, anxious males seemed to all be very similar.

"Do you wish for our kindness to be in vain?"

Holo bumped Selim's neck with her nose, and she finally took a few steps forward.

When Selim glanced back at her, she bared her fangs in a grin.

"I do not know how many times I clung to that companion of mine in tears at times like this."

Selim was clearly surprised, but at the same time, it seemed she understood Holo's feelings.

Her wide-open eyes seemed to grow softer, and she looked at Holo as they glistened.

"Thank you."

"'Tis what you must say to my foolish companion."

Without a word in response or a nod of the head, Selim dashed off, as though she had been set free.

Her older brother waited a moment, too, before dashing toward Selim. Though it was likely he would scold or become irritated with her, there was no way that he did not think dearly of his little sister, with whom he faced many hardships. Her companion's plan had been irritatingly on point.

Holo sighed in relief, but now she did not know what to do. If she hung around, Selim's friends would defer to her and that seemed like it would be annoying. If she stayed by Selim's side, she might hesitate and quickly decide it was time to return.

Getting in their way was inappropriate, so in the end, she decided to search for springs, as per their original goal. Besides, she had long wished for a place where she could relax by herself whenever she was so inclined.

She wandered as her nose led her, and on the way back to the second mountain, she found a place where water bubbled up naturally. It was in a secluded ravine, where even a hunter, relentlessly pursuing their prey, would not come.

"Hmm. 'Tis in a nice spot, but a bit small."

It was shallow, filled with rocks, surrounded by fallen trees and such and was only big enough for a bear to wet its bottom.

The stones cut off the water, struggling to rise. She could certainly fit into the spaces between the rocks if she returned to her human form, but if she were going that far, then the baths at the house were good enough.

"If there is a spring here, then there must be others."

She wandered across the face of the mountain, but the vein of water must have been very far underground as she could not find any more. As a test, she pulled the fallen trees away with her mouth and rolled the smaller stones away with her claws, and it seemed like more water came up. If she cleared all the stones and such, then it may have yet started to look like a proper bath.

"Lady Holo?"

She had stuck her nose in the water, trying to figure out where the water was coming from when someone called her name.

"What is it? Are you finished already?"

"Yes. And, um..."

Selim's ears and tail and head were all drooping, and behind her, her older brother and family were waiting.

Holo sighed in relief, and thinking it too much of a hassle to

stop now, she spoke as she returned to searching for the source of the water.

"And what do you need from me, standing there so quietly?"

"I am sorry my sister has caused you such trouble."

Selim's older brother, as the leader of the pack, took one step forward as he spoke. His manner and speech were stiff and formal.

These people were so clumsy that, though they had powers that surpassed any human, they struggled to earn enough to eat as mercenaries. And once, her older brother had said something toward Holo that was much too straightforward, courting her displeasure. Though she knew she was mostly the reason for this, it was hard for him to shake the bad first impression.

"She is not any trouble at all. Selim is a hard worker."

"But she is in your care now. For you to indulge her so—"

"Are you saying this is a point of honor for your bloodline?"

There were six in the pack including Selim, but they were all small. Even if they did surround Holo, a fight with them would be over in a flash.

But that is perhaps why they placed so much emphasis on honor.

"...With all due respect."

Selim's brother awkwardly hung his head.

Holo sighed— *what a job he has done* .

"On my companion's orders, I am simply here to search for

new springs. Since we have come so close to her home *, we merely took the opportunity to pay a visit along the way."*

"B-but—"

"So we may come to visit occasionally. There is no need for such drastic good-byes. I shan't mind if you take your time when we come."

Due to how honest he was, it seemed he could not argue when faced with such pretext.

He looked back and forth between the ground and his sister several times before he finally faced Holo in defeat.

"...As you wish."

"Good. Then shall we soon call it a day?"

After she finished speaking, Selim came to her side without hesitation. She could tell by the air around her that whatever had been causing her gloom was lifted.

Until recently, these siblings had never been separated, living and growing up as one. Her family may have not been as prepared to send Selim off to work alone at the bathhouse as they thought.

It was not exactly for that reason, but it was because she knew this that they would come again soon. As she and the young white wolf were about to head back to the bathhouse, Holo suddenly stopped.

"Ah, I forgot to mention."

A shock ran among Selim's friends.

“You shall not dig up this spring without my knowing. Let me do as I please.”

“…”

“Or is this water you found?”

“N-no.”

“Then I shall be using this for a while.”

This time they actually set off, traversing the dark woods at a brisk pace.

Selim followed silently. Holo still felt a bit of stiffness, or perhaps it was fighting spirit, around the younger wolf, but she was getting used to the bathhouse, and once her family’s lodgings were settled, she might relax more. Selim was well-behaved, but she had a strong heart that was evident in her profile even now.

And Holo was simply excited to make that spring hers. Once it was finished, she could jump in during the daytime in her wolf form without any hesitation even during the busiest seasons.

She would keep it a secret from her companion for a while.

When she imagined that, she was a bit thrilled for some reason.

“Lady Holo.”

Selim spoke again when they finally arrived at the bathhouse.

“Thank you.”

Selim gave her thanks quickly, after returning to her human form. Though she was slender, her body was different from that of Holo’s daughter, and she quickly covered it with clothes she

had prepared beforehand.

It did not seem like she considered Holo's meddling as a bother, so Holo only shrugged.

"I do not mind as I also have found something to look forward to. But you must sleep now or else work tomorrow will be a pain."

Selim nodded with a serious expression and then finally broke into a smile. They entered the bathhouse, and as they were parting in the hall, she bowed again dutifully. It was a different sort of seriousness than what she sensed from little Col, and to be frank, Holo was not used to it. If her companion were not around, then she probably would not be able to live in the same pack as her.

Though her companion was completely useless on his own, before she had a chance to notice, he had the power to bring all sorts of people together.

He was not the person who stood shining at the front of battle, but he had a good character for rallying the pack. Confident in her ability to judge others, she returned to the bedroom.

She did wonder at least once if he would be awake waiting for her, but there her companion was, sleeping soundly.

She crawled into the bed and just stuck her cold hands and feet on him.

He opened his eyes in surprise, and after he groaned for a moment, he greeted her.

"Urrghhh…Welcome back."

"I'm home."

Holo clung to him and closed her eyes, drifting off into sleep in

an instant.

Possibly due to the village of Nyohhira's typically festive atmosphere, the Festival of Saint Alzeuri was rather quiet and simple affair. They did not even construct a huge statue and march around with it in a pompous parade. They converted the communal shed into an impromptu church and the villagers gathered there to offer prayers, followed by a feast afterward. The most festival-like part of it all was how every single candle inside the shed was lit.

In the festivals of larger towns, associations competed to see who could donate the largest and greatest quantity of candles in order to display their wealth, but here, the number of candles they lit was a prayer for how hot the bathwaters would be. Of course, vain people could be found anywhere, but if the large candles prepared in service of their vanity were offered to warm the springs that bubbled up in the village, then people welcomed it. There were more than a few merchantlike characters who were fine with virtually anything, as long as others' money worked in their benefit.

Holo, who was once called a god and oversaw the harvest of wheat in a village, could only shrug her shoulders in response to that truth of the human world. It was Selim's first time seeing the festival, so she watched with great interest, but Holo paid the ceremony no mind and smacked her lips appreciatively over the food.

The Festival of Saint Alzeuri was a marker that signified the guests for the next season would start arriving. Though it was not nearly as busy as winter, there were still quite a number of summer patrons. A tense excitement ran through the air but also a feeling of tedium at the coming of another noisy, lively season.

“Hello! Is the master in?”

An energetic voice came from the entrance to the house. It had been three days since the start of the festival.

Though he did not quite seem to be a herald, it still likely signaled that someone of high rank was on their way. It was surely a servant sent to give a preliminary announcement.

“Abbot Harivel will be arriving tomorrow morning. Is everything in order?”

“We’ve been waiting for you. Everything is prepared.”

The servant was satisfied with Holo’s companion’s response, then happily took the rare opportunity to soak in the baths without any hesitation before his master came.

Holo was ready for the coming battle, but there was an odd expression on her companion’s face.

“What is it?”

This Harivel came every year. He always behaved well and paid generously during his stay. Myuri was excited every year to see how long that long, white beard of his had grown.

Even her companion was usually happy to see him. Their guest did not generally inspire such facial contortions.

“Hmm? Oh no, it just feels like he’s a bit early this year.”

“Early? Perhaps he simply could not wait.”

This was a hot spring village on the threshold between paradise and the mortal world. Those who came here to escape the fetters of worldly affairs always looked like they were going off to

hell when they left.

“That would be nice, but…”

He may have been nervous that it was now finally time to part with his lazy days.

Holo felt proud when she thought that, as she expected, he was no good without this wisewolf by his side.

After visiting her brother and the rest of her family, Selim had been overflowing with determination not to fall into despondency even if she made more mistakes. With their first guest soon to arrive, though, she had become incredibly tense, so Holo spoke a few words to her.

Unlike real war, no one would die if she made an error.

It was partially a joke, but Selim seemed quite relieved.

The following day, a familiar elderly priest arrived at the bathhouse.

“Oh, Sir Lawrence. Thank you for having me again this year.”

The old priest had a strong physique even in his old age, and though he was bald, a white beard overflowed from his chin, which made him look even bigger. He embraced her companion and, seeing Holo, embraced her, too, with the smile of a gentle old man.

Finding her face buried deep in that fuzzy beard, she gained a slightly better understanding of why her companion and little Col always wanted to do the same with her tail.

“Is your daughter out hunting now?”

“Well…”

As he heard the story of Myuri and little Col, Harivel’s face quickly flushed red.

“Oh, that’s exactly it! That’s what it is!”

Then, as though his own excited voice surprised himself, he placed his hand on his chest and whipped back and forth to look between his attendant and Holo’s companion.

“Erm…Father? Why not come inside for now? You must be tired after your journey.”

“Ah yes, you have my thanks. But oh, I had wondered if that was the case when I heard the rumors, but oh my…”

The large, bearded elderly priest walked energetically to the dining hall and sat in a chair, still buzzing with excitement.

Their guest was restless even in his seat, but when he saw Selim bring him a drink, he showed her a smile; he stood out even among their most amiable patrons.

“You’ve hired a new girl, I see. Thank you.”

He stated his gratitude, took several sips, then he sniffed and looked at Holo’s companion.

“The young priest I’ve heard so much about from the Kingdom of Winfiel who’s causing the commotion is Mr. Col, then.”

Though he had given the details of their activities in a letter, it was rather hard to know what little Col was up to when Spice and Wolf was nestled so deep in the mountains. And little Col always governed himself with humility and modesty.

She exchanged glances with her companion. It seemed the journey was not as insignificant as his letter had made it sound.

“He’s translated the scripture into the vernacular, forced an indulgent archbishop to repent, and even had the stubborn folk from the rural areas, who are sometimes under suspicion of heresy, awaken to a new, righteous faith. Oh, I’ll be, when I first met him, he was still only this big!”

His thick hands motioned to a height just above his own head.

Little Col grew up quickly, and when he surpassed Holo in height, she recalled how she was proud of him but also a bit sad.

“Is…Col causing problems for you?”

Her companion’s grave expression did not seem like an act.

Little Col was certainly angry with the Church organization, which had the world under their thumb, and how rotten they had become; he had ventured out from the mountains in order to fix that. And those who came to this bathhouse were high-ranking members of that very Church.

“Oh no, of course not. If there are those who feel like he’s causing problems, it means they must also be ashamed of themselves.”

The old priest spoke decisively. The serviceman who was Holo’s companion was clearly relieved, but there was something within the old priest’s beard that was not so easily satisfied.

“I must say, however.”

As he uneasily rubbed his thick beard, the old priest glanced at his attendant, and he retrieved something odd from his wicker chest. It was a huge bundle of rather dusty parchment.

“It is certain that many people heeded their conscience and followed the teachings of God. Even I, who is still unknown, think so, even though my discipline is not perfect. That being said, that does not mean there are no problems.”

“O-oh.”

There was such a large pile of parchment on the dining table that they could hardly see one another’s faces.

Holo did not know why the old priest had come to the bathhouse so early, but it seems the reason was within the parchment.

“This is Nyohhira, hot spring village. Everything you see and hear here disappears like the mist when you descend from the mountain. You think so, too, Sir Lawrence. And so, I pray a favor from you.”

His long preliminary statement was a request for him to keep a secret.

At any rate, Holo’s companion glanced at the pile of parchment out of the corner of his eye, and he was perplexed.

“…Are they…permits?”

“Indeed. This includes our monastery, our daughter monastery, grandchild monastery, and their daughter monastery.”

Holo once heard that the point of monasteries building other monasteries was similar to a master craftsman ordering all his apprentices to build additional workshops. Both took a percentage of those profits.

Piled on top of the table was a vast treasure firmly in the hands of the old priest.

“These permits are…well, they certainly seem like too much for us if you look closely. God commands us to share what we have. There are also Mr. Col’s activities, and I’ve heard there is now the tendency to re-recognize God’s true teachings, and…”

He faltered, his conscience, vanity, and pride all struggling with one another.

“In other words, you wish to lift a weight from your shoulders?”

“Yes! That’s right! To lift a weight! Why, thank you, Master Lawrence!”

The former merchant that he was changed his manner of speech from a moral matter of right or wrong to one that suggested he simply wished to rid himself of the burden weighing him down.

“However, these were permits supplied by our monastery and our dependent institutions, originally for the salvation of our souls. We cannot just simply give them up, either…But then, I remembered that you were once a famous merchant, Master Lawrence…”

Holo could see that her companion was translating the old priest’s words in his head.

“So you wish for me to give this to *someone who needs this the most* ?”

“Oh, God! Bless this wise bathhouse master!”

It was as though the Father wished to make the first move in selling his treasure before he was deemed greedy but nevertheless wanted the highest price possible for it. This annoyed Holo slightly, but her companion’s expression as he exchanged a firm

handshake with the old priest suggested it was not as bad as she thought, so there must have been a way for them to benefit from it somehow. In any case, if they profited from this and she could have more food at dinner, then she had no argument.

She extended her hand and plucked up a piece of parchment and saw grandiloquent designs and rows of picturesque letters.

"Is this similar to what you once had?"

She showed it to Selim, who stood next to her. Selim and her family, in a land far south, obtained a certain permit for a mountain and came all the way to the north.

"It's similar, but…ours was not as fancy as this."

The young wolf whispered softly to Holo. That meant there were likely unimaginable things written down on this one piece of paper, and there was a whole mountain of more just like it.

Holo did not know that much about the human world, but the majority of its inhabitants were poor people who lived day to day.

No matter what it was, keeping everything for oneself was not good.

Her thoughts got that far, but then she corrected herself in her heart.

She counted everything else separately from the love her companion gave her. Her daughter, Myuri, should be satisfied with what she could wring out from little Col.

"And of course, I will look into the contents of these permits and see if they may be of any use."

"Thank you so much."

The old priest spoke solemnly, as though praying to God, and then suddenly continued.

“So may I go ahead into the baths?”

This was a village in the space between nirvana and the mortal world.

A place to brush off the dust of earthly life.

She should have expected it, but her companion had become totally engrossed in the permits.

When he had time during the day, he would make short trips back to the bedroom and roll open some parchment, and after supper, he would quickly return to the bedroom and do the same. She noticed he had been waking up rather early, too, and of course, he was rolling open parchment.

It did seem like rather profitable work, so she did not have much right to be angry. Moreover, she had no time to sulk.

“Can you read?”

With a straight face, her companion shoved some parchment toward her. It seemed he was rather enjoying himself, so she could not refuse him and the bags under his eyes. More than anything, she wanted him to finish his work and come back under the covers; the night was still cold during this season.

And so she read the contents of the parchment, sorting each permit sheet by region and purpose. There were many placenames she was unfamiliar with, but she found them rather easily, searching for them on the map in the bathhouse. That map was something that Myuri, who yearned to go on a big adventure

around the world, had pestered every guest to draw out, wondering where they all had come from. It was something her rather easily bored daughter carried on for a long time, and disregarding its accuracy of the details, it had become a rather rich map once put together.

The permits were interesting in and of themselves.

Though she worked earnestly, there were of course difficulties.

"...Anyway, there are much too many."

As she recounted the work from the past few days, Holo placed her front paws together firmly on the ground, flattened her shoulders down, and assumed a posture where she bent her back forward. Then, she planted her back paws on the ground, lowered her behind, and stretched.

Finally, she shook out her body and felt like her blood finally started circulating again.

Sitting in a chair and doing nothing but reading brought about a different sort of weariness than working on mending.

After she had shifted into her wolf form outside the bathhouse, her mood greatly improved.

"That fool is having far too much fun."

She sighed, and her breath still puffed white in the cold.

"I am sorry for having you help us."

Selim, who was bending over, scratching her behind with her nose, immediately adjusted her posture and bowed her head deeply.

“Oh no…I am sorry I have not been much help…”

For once, her words were not a show of simple humility.

“I do not mind. You have enough work during the day. I only ask you help occasionally. Were you to be enthusiastic about this, I would earn more work as well.”

Selim smiled slightly and gazed up at the waning moon.

People did not walk about in the woods without a full moon, but in their wolf forms, Holo and Selim could rely on the scent of the trees and the earth to get far enough.

“But I’m learning a lot. I can truly feel how large the world is.”

“Hmm? I heard you all were once in a town so far south that my companion had never even heard of it.”

She should learn how big the world was with her own feet. When Holo spoke with that in mind, Selim smiled weakly.

“It was the sort of journey where we ate the grass on the side of the road, captured wild rabbits, and merely walked along while staring down at our feet. We couldn’t think of anything but putting our right foot out, then our left foot next. When we arrived at the northlands from the south, the only thing we noticed was that the color of the roads was slightly different.”

She may have been modest in some regards, but when Holo looked back on her own journey, there were similarities.

Though she had lived for so long, she felt as though she had been looking at the same things the entire time.

The growing wheat and the clouds floating across the sky.

That all suddenly changed only after she met her companion.

"I, too, spent all my years looking at a similar sight."

Selim smiled weakly.

Then together, they ran out into the mountains. They were going to meet Selim's family, but it was not for her sake. She had grown used to her work, and though she would still get discouraged when she made mistakes, Holo no longer needed to worry about her. And so when they occasionally left the bathhouse at night to go beyond the mountains, it was simply for work.

"The smell of sharpened metal unsettles me."

There was a cloth sack wrapped around Selim's neck, and she carried baggage on her back. Inside were iron tools that Selim's brother and others needed for the construction of their lodgings.

They either must have been laboring quite hard or did not understand how to use them, but they were having a hard time because the ones they had were growing dull quickly, so Holo and the others sharpened the tools for them. Of course, they were not sharpening them at the bathhouse but commissioning a craftsman in the village for the work; in exchange, Selim's family had been sharing a portion of the game they caught in the mountains.

Until recently, Myuri and little Col hunted for the bathhouse, and their yield comprised the majority of their meat supply. Once those two had gone, they either had to buy meat from a hunter in one of the nearby communities or from town at the bottom of the mountain, but Holo's stingy companion insisted that they be frugal when it came to meat. In the end, there was a reason why this wisewolf could not do the hunting.

The animals of the forest held Holo in veneration, perhaps because she could not completely hide her wisewolf majesty. They

occasionally depended on her to mediate territorial disputes and to care for animals that escaped, injured, from hunters.

It felt wrong to slaughter them. If she did go out to hunt, the deer would all line up, lie on their sides, and, with sad expressions, ask her to eat them.

On the other hand, Myuri and little Col faced the animals as humans with bows and traps. They both understood that it was a battle of wits and power between hunter and the hunted. Of course, when the animals of the forest came for a dip in the baths, they shared a tacit understanding with one another that it was a truce.

And so, their exchange with Selim's family was a lifesaver.

"Oh, 'tis bear today."

They always met with Selim's family by the spring Holo was in the middle of making on the second mountain.

Today, lying there was a magnificently large bear with pitch-black fur.

"We wished to exist peacefully together, but…"

Selim's brother and the rest of her family were waiting for them in their human forms, and he spoke with a pained expression.

They intruded on the mountain and were trying to attract humans to make money, so it was more or less inevitable that they would clash with the residents of the forest. It was no different for the animals that lived here. Even this large bear, before establishing his territory, most certainly took it by force from someone else.

But even though they were aware of all those details, it still pained them.

Though it annoyed Holo slightly, it also pleased her. That sort of sincerity would certainly serve them well in an inn for pilgrims.

“At the very least, please enjoy his meat and use everything, down to the bone. May we have the tools? We’ll handle the bear, as always.”

“Mm-hmm. Thank you.”

Holo glanced at Selim, and she had her family remove the baggage she carried on her back, then shook her head and body to fix the lie of her fur.

Watching from the corner of her eye as they each took up tools and set about flaying the bear, she put her feet into the ill-shaped spring, still in her wolf form.

The water vein really was quite far underground, because even after a bit of digging, there was still only a little water. Not only that, it was bubbling up onto plain, flat ground, so the piddling amount was spread out wastefully thin, its temperature much too cool.

There was a proper reason as to why Nyohhira thrived in the place that it did now.

It did seem like she would finally get everything out of the way, but in the end, it appeared unlikely the situation would take any favorable turns. With what she had, only the bottom of her stomach would get wet if she tried to lie down.

“It might spring up all at once if I dig somewhere.”

She walked along in the water, then suddenly mud swirled up

and became white and cloudy. She dug at it with her claws, searching for the water hole, but she could not find anything.

"Do even your claws come up empty-handed, Lady Holo?"

The one who spoke was Selim, washing her knife and her hands, which were red up to her elbows, in the spring. They could also wash up when they met here.

The bear had been skinned in an instant and was now being divided into parts with a large hatchet.

Regardless of her skinny arms, Selim was apparently quite adept at skinning, likely because of how skillful her hands were.

"If the flow of water has always been weak, then digging it up will create nothing but a lukewarm puddle."

Now, as Selim stood in the spring in her human form, the water only reached up to her ankles.

It might be faster to simply search for a different spring.

"Lady Holo, it's all finished."

She turned around at the voice, saw the bear pelt drying on a tree branch, and realized the meat was already wrapped in large, smooth leaves that grew in swamps. If they took the fur back to the bathhouse, then the townspeople would grow suspicious as to who went hunting and when, so that was the only thing they left Selim's family to take care of, and they would sell it in town when they went down the mountain. They were very close to what could be called Nyohhira's business competitors, so they could not maintain their relationship publicly.

"Then put it in the sack. Should I carry it back in my mouth, it may disappear before we arrive."

“Because it is quite greasy. Understood.”

As they smiled and began to pack it away, Holo spoke to them.

“Ah, be sure to take your own portion. Game is to be enjoyed by all.”

They were silent and ended up giving all the meat to Holo. It irritated her slightly, but their stiff formality was also rather adorable.

Selim had carried the baggage on the way here, and Holo carried it on the way home.

Holo lay on her stomach, and as Selim’s family adjusted the bag filled with meat on her back, she gazed at the pathetic puddle of water. She had looked forward to making a bath in secret, then telling her companion once she was finished, but it seemed she would have to start this project over from the beginning.

It was not that she was unsatisfied with the baths currently available at the house. Neither was she so desperate for one that she could visit freely in her wolf form.

Despite that, she realized how utterly disappointed she was as she stared at the puddle of water on the forest floor. She was also a bit surprised at how disheartened she felt.

“...Holo? Lady Holo?”

“Mm.”

She realized that Selim and the others were all looking at her. They must have called to her countless times.

“Apologies. I was thinking.”

“About the bath? If so, then we can search the mountains for you.”

What a fool I am , she thought to herself.

“There is no need. I simply wish to fool around with my claws and fangs once in a while. Digging holes and such.”

“Is that so?”

“Well then, we shall return home before it gets too late. You have work tomorrow as well, no?”

She stood, and the cloth bag was indeed tied firmly around her neck with rope. She could guess by the weight on her back that there was quite a large amount inside. Hanna would surely be glad, but when she considered how they would have to process the meat by drying and salting it, she thought it a bother.

“Oh, may I ask one thing?”

“What is it?”

“Do you have any requests for the next hunt? This time was unusual in that it was bear, but we were wondering if you tire of the usual deer.”

She was impressed—they were an attentive bunch.

“Let me see.”

What came to mind were smaller animals, like pheasant and squirrel. Smaller game did not have much meat on them, but they were deliciously loaded with flavor.

While she did not mind how hardworking the family was, they were not very adaptable. They did not seem to be adept at making

traps for smaller animals, so she refrained from mentioning it.

"No, I am fine with deer. My companion is also quite grateful he does not have to order any deliveries."

"Very well."

Selim's older brother and the rest of her family bowed their heads, like foot soldiers seeing off a king. With a wry smile, Holo looked toward Selim before they ran off.

Holo realized something as they briskly jogged through the nighttime woods, feeling the weight of the bear meat on her back. And that was what Selim's older brother had said to her.

"We were wondering if you tire of the usual deer."

It suddenly occurred to her that just maybe she was so disappointed over the worthless puddle of water because she was bored of life in the bathhouse.

As she thought *Impossible* to herself, her drifting off as she plucked buds from wild vegetables and imagining wild things in her drowsy state sprung fresh from her memory.

Life in the bathhouse was not dissimilar from life in the wheat fields in that she repeated the same things over and over again. What was it that she was hoping to see from Selim in the first place? She was honestly hoping the girl would stir up some trouble.

Anyone could get used to anything. She understood that. She knew that quite well, but that was different from being satisfied with it. Whether or not she could stand it was also another question.

As she told herself she was not *that* unsatisfied with her cur-

rent life, something about that was just her own insistence. There was no way today was much more exciting than the day before.

As these thoughts churned in her head, her legs moved forward and carried her all the way to the main house. It was the same as time passing as she idled away.

Selim returned to her human form, and as the young girl undid the bagful of meat hanging from her neck, Holo started to feel restless. If she spent all her days idly like this, she wondered if she would end up like that puddle. She wondered if, even though she would be warm, she would not be a lake and not a river but a place that others could only get their feet wet.

And then, in decades, when everyone was gone, her wet fur would chill her and she would sneeze alone.

She had spent over ten years living in the bathhouse, and she was confident her relationship with her companion had deepened so much that it irritated her. But at the same time, nothing was new anymore. Ever since Myuri was born, every day was like being swept up in a storm, but that only daughter of hers had left the bathhouse with little Col.

She could foresee that their lives from now on would be a repetition of the same things over and over.

Could she recall what she did yesterday, the day before, and the day before that? Would anything happen from here on out that would stay in her memory if she looked back in a hundred years? She grew anxious there was not enough happening if she hoped to bathe in plentiful warm memories.

As she thought about this and that, she tossed the meat hanging from her neck into an underground ice room on the bathhouse grounds. The mounds of snow in the winter could not keep in the summer, but she could enjoy the ice as much as she wanted

if they stuffed it in the ice room. It could be called the wisdom of an extraordinary person, but even the squirrels in the woods fervently buried their nuts in the fall.

And she should be doing the same, should she not?

With sleepy, bleary eyes, Selim returned to her room.

Holo saw her off, then returned to her own.

She placed a hand on the door, and faint candlelight was visible through the uneven gaps in the wood. Breathing through her nose, she could smell her companion, the unique scent of tallow burning, parchment, and the smell of ink that reminded her of little Col.

Behind the door, her companion was eagerly sending a pen flying across the page, a blanket draped over his hunched back.

“Oh, welcome back.”

He noticed her and turned around, and though he looked tired, he seemed to be rather enjoying himself.

But that familiar face, too, was a bit different from what it had been when she first met him. It was not just the light of the candle; she could most certainly make out the age on his face. Though life in the bathhouse was an endless repetition of the same things, the flow of time was not.

And baths that once had plenty of water, too, would one day dry out, become a puddle that could only wet one’s feet, and even that would eventually vanish.

Though she understood the end was coming, at the same time, it seemed like her guard had been down.

Had she truly been prepared for this, she should have been able to enjoy everything until the end without any doubts.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

She did not respond to his perplexed words, closed the distance between them with long strides, and embraced him from behind.

He did seem a bit surprised, but he must have thought it was one of her typical whims.

He did not say anything in particular as he reached back with both hands and stroked her head.

“You’re really cold. You going to take a dip in the baths before going to sleep?”

“...Mm. You smell quite sour.”

“Huh?”

Though he probably was not that lazy, her companion hurriedly sniffed his own sleeve. He smelled rather sour from the scent of the ink. Of course, she had purposefully said it in a way so he would misunderstand.

“So, the baths, yes?”

She let him go and took a step back.

Ever since coming to Nyohhira, where they could enter the baths at their leisure, he, too, began to keep himself tidy and clean. When he had lived in the wagon on the road, he had maintained nothing but a rough sense of cleanliness.

Though he was concerned about his body odor even now, he

took the time to lean back in his chair, grab the fur blanket on his shoulders, stand, and stretch.

"Ooohhh… *Nngh*. *Hahhh* …I used to be able to work all night long once."

He said it like a joke, but it was true.

And then one day, he would not open his eyes again.

What was she to do about that?

She felt herself freezing before nature's providence, but at the very least, he was here now before her eyes.

There was so much she could do.

First, she would not think too hard or too deeply about it and enjoy her time with him. She had forgotten this general rule when she first began her journey with him, and it had brought on quite a lot of trouble.

"We have received bear meat from Selim's friends. Why not use that for energy?"

"Oh, bear, huh? I don't know when it was, but I heard that the best part of a bear is its paw. I wonder if that's true."

"The paw? How does one eat that?"

As they chatted about such frivolous things, they made their way toward the baths.

But as they walked together, she had to be careful not to grip his hand too tightly.

Though she was supposed to be happy, she was bitter that this was not enough for her.

And again the next day, she was plucking buds from wild vegetables.

She would be doing this work until the snow disappeared from the mountains.

She always considered this work to be a chore, but now she also thought that she should not be using her time for this.

She needed to stock up on as many memories as she could, so that she would be ready for the cold, harsh days alone that waited for her.

In order to do that, she needed to make events, the ingredients of memory, bubble up like hot springs.

“Are you in a fight with the Sir?”

Hanna asked this casually, looking at the buds in the basket.

“F-for what reason do you ask?”

Holo was so shaken that her wisewolf name could have practically wept.

Hanna shrugged.

“Your plucking is a bit sloppy.”

“...We are not fighting.”

If she had a bigger body, she could easily hide the things in her heart, but so much ended up seeping out from this little frame.

And it was true that they were not fighting, so she found herself annoyed at Hanna’s exasperated expression.

“More importantly, there is a pile of bear meat in the middle of

the ice room. Please add plenty of meat to the pot today."

She mentioned the news as she was about to head off to her next work, then she stopped.

"Do not say anything odd to him. We are not fighting, after all."

Though that made it seem like they really were fighting, having her companion be attentive to her in that sort of way was a bit different from what she had hoped.

She was not unhappy with their current situation. She just wanted to spend time naturally, having fun.

"Okay, very well. Understood."

Sometimes, she wondered if it was Hanna that was the one who was twice her age.

No, she told herself that it was simply because her own human form looked like that of a child.

"Oh, would you prefer garlic or ginger in the pot today?"

Holo seriously pondered the question for a moment and answered, "Garlic."

Next, she made her way to the back of the house.

As she got closer, the peculiar smell of raw meat enveloped her. It was a mysterious thing that it smelled good enough to make her drool when it was being cooked but so horrendous when boiling in a pot.

Behind the building was Selim, stirring the pot, an expression on her face that suggested she had given up on everything.

“Come now, I have come to help. Go breathe some fresh air and take a rest.”

“Lady Hol… *Guh, cough, cough —*”

Selim spoke through her nose, and her eyes were even watering. She said a bit of thanks, handed the mixing stick to Holo, and unsteadily walked off. Her sense of smell was much better since she was young, so it must have been even more painful for her.

They were separating the plentiful fat from the bear meat with heat for the making of tallow candles.

After she mixed it well, there was still the job of picking out fragments of meat and bone that got into the mixture. If they were lazy about that, then that would cause extra smoke and foul odors once it was used as a candle. Her lungs would be thick with the smell of fat for a while.

It was typically little Col and his dull sense of smell or Myuri, as a punishment after she pulled a prank, who did this work, but now that they were shorthanded, there was no one left to do it except herself and Selim.

She added wood to the fire, mixed the pot, and scooped out some debris that caught her eye.

The first time she did this, she was so impressed to see this was how candles were made that she did not really mind the smell, but now it was just another part of her routine. It was nothing but a bother.

If they had to make candles, they should make the better smelling beeswax ones.

While she daydreamed about the nice scent of honey, she also had to struggle against the reality before her. This was not the

only work she had to do.

"Hmm…Once the candles are done, next is checking on the rest of the cheese."

Spring was also the season of cheese. In preparation for the next season, they had to place an order with a craftsman specifying what kind of cheese they wanted. There were many types: Some kept for a long time and others went bad quickly; there were ones that were easy to make and ones that were more complicated.

They also had to consider the fact that it was not something they would only place on their own dinner table but also serve to patrons.

As their first guest came much earlier than they expected, they had to place their order quickly, otherwise they would have to serve leftover cheese from the winter. The guests would immediately notice any inferior substitutes, and it would spawn rumors.

"And then…ah yes. Once we order the cheese, I must braid thread from the wool we received. Then I must mend all the frayed ones, like that and that and that…Ah! Foolish Myuri lost the weights for the threads, did she not?! Were there replacements in the shed…? Oh yes…I must clean the shed, otherwise bugs will start breeding by summer…'Tis only the bugs that do not listen to me…What should I do about that? Oohh…"

As she swirled the fat around in the pot, so many thoughts swirled around in her head.

She missed living on the road, relaxing and napping in the bed of the wagon.

No, she was only this busy because little Col and Myuri were gone.

On the other hand, she was now painfully aware of the sort of degenerate lifestyle she had been living.

This was what it meant to have no time to worry, but she shuddered when she thought about life continuing in the same manner forever.

She did not hate work itself.

She only wanted to avoid suddenly realizing that she had let all the good times pass.

“I must do something about this…”

That sad, trickling basin she had found in the mountains was stuck in the back of her mind.

She even started thinking about things she had no control over, like wishing they had instead opened a store in a town, where she could stand next to her companion all day as they tended the shop.

Working in a business like that would surely have its own difficult tasks every day. And living in a town meant being around the eyes of humans, so she would have to worry about how they would treat her since she could not hide her ears and tail and did not age.

“Mmm…”

She groaned, and much like how her dissatisfaction was coming to a boil, bubbles floated to the surface from beneath the churning fat.

That being said, she was looking forward to when Selim grew used to this work and eliminated some of the hustle and bustle. Or maybe when Selim’s family was finished building their lodg-

ings, they could hire another one of them once they had settled.

Indeed. She had to be patient for a while. And then she could start thinking about how she could make more memories with her companion.

She insisted this to herself.

“Well, soon we shall strain this and make the candles.”

She tapped the mixing stick on the edge of the pot, called Selim over, and began their work. All jobs would eventually end as long as they worked at it. Another guest arrived in the afternoon, and finally the sun set.

After finishing dinner, she returned to their room in relief, and there, her companion stood frozen before the desk.

“What is the matter?”

She wondered for a moment if Myuri had doodled on the parchment on the desk, but she then remembered that she was off traveling.

As she wondered what it might be, her companion turned around, and his expression was apologetic.

“Before you get mad, let me apologize.”

“...Hmm?”

He continued.

“The new guest also brought in parchment.”

Behind him, the bundles of parchment had doubled. If one person had an idea, then it seemed someone elsewhere had the same.

Though she was impressed that little Col and Myuri's journey was making such large waves throughout the world, her companion's face was dismal, so there had to be more to it.

"Is that all?"

When she asked, he released the breath he had been holding in—strangely, almost as if he had been saved—then slowly shook his head.

Perhaps it was difficult for him to broach the subject by himself.

"...Others staying elsewhere came over earlier, wanting to talk about the same thing."

"..."

Their relaxing, affectionate time together at night. Apparently, she would be unable to request it for a while.

But such a pile of work could also be called a notable incident. If she looked back after a while, it might very well become a memory she could recall clearly. And she was glad it was something she could do together with him. Sitting beside each other, she could keep the lid on that dark well tightly shut.

It was not so bad when she thought of it like that.

"Well, we have no choice. Aye?"

So she spoke brightly, and he seemed disappointed.

"What? Did you wish for me to get angry?"

He was always much too straightforward at times like this.

"There won't be any time for you to take a nap..."

“You fool.”

She smiled, closed the door, and quickly walked over to the desk.

The amount of parchment piled on the desk was intimidating.

“And we may make quite a lot of quick coin, no?”

“It should be enough for our troubles. Ask me for anything. We can probably get honeyed peaches.”

He spoke of a luxury item that was practically worth its weight in gold.

Her former merchant companion was handing her a blank contract, so this job must truly contain great prospects.

“Mm. I shall think about it.”

“But there aren’t infinite amounts of money.”

He did not forget to warn her.

She shrugged and stepped on his foot lightly.

“Well then, shall we get started?”

“Yeah. We can’t even waste time this late in the day. If we don’t manage this well, even more of the same work might come our way.”

“Shall we allot some to Selim?”

She wondered if they should add another duty on top of what the young wolf already had, but her companion looked a bit troubled.

“I’d want her to help, but…”

He spoke vaguely, and after glancing at the door, he drew close to her ear and whispered.

“She doesn’t really seem like she’s good at reading and writing.”

Unlike her usual jobs during the day, she did seem to be a bit clumsy when it came to this. She had made quite a few reading and spelling mistakes.

“She works hard during the day, so she’s probably tired at night.”

Little Col displayed his odd enthusiasm for studying by chasing away his nighttime sleepiness with sand in his mouth or munching on raw onions. It would be cruel to expect that much from Selim.

But something occurred to Holo.

“But when we go to trade on the other side of the mountain, she is never that sleepy.”

Selim did seem a little tired when they set out on the way home, but she did not appear to be falling asleep.

“It’s probably a matter of her strengths and weaknesses, right? She probably gets sleepy looking at writing. Myuri’s the same.”

When he spoke their daughter’s name, she understood.

“I am as good as anyone when it comes to this.”

“That’s not much to be proud of. Well, you can read, but when it comes to writing…Don’t you think the Wisewolf of Yoitsu

should be a bit better at writing?”

He hit her where it hurt, earning him a glare from her.

“I have improved quite a bit. This form of mine is temporary anyway. ’Tis not much I can do if my hands do not work well.”

“Even though you can grab meat so quickly from the pot?”

She bared her fangs, and he looked away, pretending not to notice.

“You fool. Learning letters does not fill the stomach!”

“…Myuri says the same thing, doesn’t she?”

“I beg your pardon?!”

She scolded her mumbling companion, and he shrugged cheekily.

“Look, come on, let’s get working.”

He was never constantly cornered the way he used to be.

And she did not hate this sort of bickering.

“Honestly, you fool.”

As she murmured that, she placed a chair next to his and stuck to his side. Of course, they shared the blanket as it draped over both of their backs. This was not bad at all.

She cemented in her memory that this moment had happened.

As she did so, she took the first piece of parchment into her hand.

There was the *thud* of wooden utensils being set down, and Holo opened her eyes.

It was after lunch, and the unoccupied Hanna had brought her something.

"Good work today."

"...Wine, how unusual."

Holo lifted her head from the table, and her nose twitched at the scent of the warmed wine, steam still rising from it.

Hanna was normally concerned with cost so it was curious for her to offer wine so freely.

Then, just as Holo was about to gratefully reach out to take the cup.

"Hmm, this is...?"

There was a wooden bowl, and it was filled with things she had never seen before.

"It's a gift from a guest. The Sir told me to serve some for you when he went out."

It was candied something or other. Sugar could be obtained by boarding a boat in town at the bottom of the mountain and heading downstream, then changing vessels after arriving at the open sea and traveling farther south, eventually reaching a port in a sunny country where the sea was a clear green and it was summer for more than half the year, all to trade with someone who had come by boat from an even more southern point.

If sugar was harvested from the earth like salt, then she would not mind living there and spending all her days licking the

ground.

It was that delicious of a sweetener, but she was caught by Hanna's words.

"...You hid this from me?"

Hanna only shrugged innocently.

"He said you might end up eating it all if I showed it to you once."

"That fool!"

I am not Myuri , she thought to herself as she grabbed a piece, finding the sweet in her hand quite strange.

Whatever the fruit was, it was cut into round slices and had been seasoned with sugar, but the shape was odd.

She had never seen such a fruit like this before, but when she put it in her mouth, she was shocked.

"'Tis ginger?!"

"It's still cold when the sun isn't out, so it will also warm you up."

"Mm-hmm...Mmm..."

The fur on her ears and tail stood on end at the crunchy texture of the sugar and its sweetness, then the indescribable ginger flavor that came after, the tingling spiciness heavy on her tongue. As her throat grew hot from the ginger, the warmed wine was a perfect accompaniment.

It was scandalous to hide such a wonderful thing from her.

She asked Hanna with her mouth full of the crunchy sugared ginger, “Is this all?”

“He said to make sure to give only a little bit at a time.”

It was exactly how he would have treated their daughter, Myuri. She almost wanted to demand Hanna give her more, immediately, lots more, but then that would only acknowledge his point that she would eat it all once she laid eyes on it. She had to avoid that as the wisewolf.

That being said, it was difficult to resist its charm.

She had been fighting with that parchment for a while, and her mind felt like it was melting.

To have this sweet and spicy food after all that was almost violent.

Even a wisewolf would roll over in surrender.

But before she did that, she spoke, managing to maintain a semblance of reason.

“C-come now, it may go bad if we do not eat it quickly, aye?”

“Sweets don’t spoil so quickly.”

“Then bugs and mice—”

“These will be fine buried in the ice room.”

There was no one in the bathhouse who could contest Hanna about food.

If she persisted, Holo felt like she would even be able to eat the bowl itself.

“Ooohhh…”

“Why not eat it slowly? You’ll be able to enjoy it longer that way.”

“You fool. I may also enjoy it all at once!”

Hanna sighed in exasperation.

But she was right, and the inside of her mouth was rather hot.

Heartbroken, she pushed the wooden bowl away toward Hanna, in a way that she did not have to look at it.

“Put it away…”

“My, how prudent of you. Very well then, I will go put this away before you change your mind.”

“Ah!”

Then, in a moment of weakness, Holo reached out and took one piece. Hanna smiled, slightly aggravated.

“Let me just say this now, but I am going to hide this in a place you can’t find, so don’t come looking for it.”

Hanna said the same thing Holo did when she scolded Myuri. She wondered if it was because they were two peas in a pod.

“You fool.”

“I am not a fool. I would not be happy to find my pantry in complete disarray because you went looking for it. I will put a tight lid on this, so even that great nose of yours will be no use.”

“Urgghhh…”

In a bathhouse, the greatest monetary costs were related to food, so her companion had given Hanna tremendous authority. It was almost as though it was difficult to tell who was master of the house when they were in the kitchen together.

Not only that, he also asked her to be strict with Holo and Myuri.

The kitchen was filled with things they could immediately gnaw on, but those were more akin to traps meant to distract them.



“I am working so hard, and yet such cruelty…”

Holo spoke reproachfully, but Hanna did not give the bowl back to her.

“Well, I don’t know about that, but I heard that it will be of great help once you finish all that work you are doing. Once that’s squared away, you can ask for sugar or anything else you’d like.”

“Of course I plan to. But I do not know when it will be over.”

It was not an act when she laid face-first on the table.

Guests were starting to arrive and musicians had returned to the bathhouse, so it was quite lively. As long as the guests had songs and dancing, they could spend the entire day in the baths, which meant she and her companion could leave them alone.

Once this was routine, there were some extremely hectic moments but also stretches of time with nothing to do at all.

But now, during her idle hours, she was pouring all her energy into those sheets of parchment. If she did not, then it would never end, and if they received more requests in the future, it was possible the work would not be finished at all until the fall.

Of course, they could refuse to do anything that was too much for them, but the guests were rushing to unburden themselves, all thanks to little Col and Myuri’s adventure, so they could not say they had no responsibility.

And her companion had said with a grave expression that if they accept the work now, it would lead to other things later.

If it was for his sake, then she had no choice but to stay committed.

“But what does that fool plan to do with all that money he will be making?”

Holo murmured to herself, her cheek still pressed to the table, as she watched Hanna put the candy away. Business at the bathhouse was going smoothly. Perhaps he was thinking about another matter. No, it could not be for buying honeyed peaches for her. That sort of foolish mistaken priorities had died down since they opened the bathhouse.

She did not know, but what she did know was that she had to focus on her own portion.

“Well, let us begin!”

She gulped down the rest of the wine Hanna had poured for her and headed toward the bedroom.

Her companion was absent because he had some work to do in the village, but she could tell by the lingering scent that he had been poring over the parchment until the very last moment.

She took the blanket draped over the back of the chair, hugged it, and sniffed it. It was filled with her companion’s scent.

“...Heh.”

In combination with the wine and effects of the ginger, her body was filled with warmth. She looked out beyond the open window, the faint melody of a musician’s instrument and singing drifting in.

It was a quiet, fair afternoon.

She lay down on the bed for a quick nap, and her consciousness drifted away instantly.

And so, about the permits.

There were permits for mining gold, silver, copper, iron, lead, mercury, sulfur, and a myriad of ores that included the above. There were also permits for trading them, as well as others for weighing them. There were permits for grading them. Permits for appointing someone to inspect them. Permits for exempting them from inspection.

Wheat, barley, rye, and oats were divided into different classifications depending on the town, with various taxes relating to each, and unlike other crops, straw that was used as fodder would also be treated separately. If it were to be used for ale, then it would not be recognized as food but as alcohol, and it fell under the classification for permits regarding wines, ciders, and distilled items. Related to that was yet another struggle as to what the definition of alcohol was. There were permits that allowed the holder the right to ignore the definition and privileges to appoint a specific examiner from a specific town in the event of a dispute over it.

There were similar collections of permits like this for meat, fish, furs, metal products, wood products…It was endless.

"…Is the human world just a bottomless swamp?"

Without even the energy to raise her voice to express how she resented this and was unwilling to do any more, Holo muttered to herself.

"You've gotten the hang of how the world works. Look, there's only a little left."

There was no need for her to think that her companion's face, lit by the candlelight, was looking any older. Instead, as their work continued, he grew livelier and livelier as he recalled the past.

“Look, it’s a permit for managing furs in Lenos,” and “Huh, I didn’t know there were rights for managing the dockworkers in Kerube,” and “There’s a permit for importing gold in Ruvinheigen. We wouldn’t have had to go through all that trouble back then if only we had this.” As he brought up this and that, his eyes shone.

Other permits indicated ties she had never noticed before between so many different towns, and her companion’s skin was much brighter than after drinking or eating any sort of food.

Even in his sleep, he mumbled about it. “Since this town and this town protect the privileges between them for that product… You could make a lot of money if you buy it in that town…Heh-heh…”

But as she stole glances at him as he did so, with parchment open before her, she was starting to enjoy it.

Whenever he found a place-name where they had once ventured together, far, far away from Nyohhira, he would light up. She did not mind, because she was the same.

Back then, it was not an endless repetition of the same routine. Every day had brought something new. Those dazzling, shining memories were impossibly stuffed into such a short amount of time.

It had all been so hectic that she was the first one to say no, she had had enough. It was her wish that put an end to her companion’s journey. Then, her companion granted her wish, and though he did seem a bit regretful at the time, now he did not seem to feel much anguish over his choice at all.

Essentially, her companion was simply enjoying the nostalgia with a distant gaze.

Even though she knew it was her own selfishness, it was not fun.

She wanted him to recall their old travels with a face that yearned terribly for it.

Then she would have an excuse to be angry at him. *Do you never learn your lesson?*

Then she could have said this to her companion.

"If you wish to go on a journey again, I—"

It was when she was writing down a place-name on a permit regarding salt tariffs as she listened to her companion grow excited about some complicated permit, which nullified the privilege to pass through the checkpoint on Roef River without paying taxes.

He fell silent, and Holo suddenly realized that her thoughts had escaped through her mouth.

"…"

She looked up, and he was staring at her with a strange expression on his face.

"…'Tis nothing."

She dropped her gaze back to the salt permit. He did not say anything right away, and after gazing again at the permit he had been so excitedly reading out loud, he spoke quietly.

"I'm not going on a journey."

She knew that.

That was why she could not let the next part of her sentence be

bitter words.

“Hey.”

He continued.

“You’ve been hiding something from me, haven’t you? Ever since Selim came.”

She was shocked. The fur on her ears and tail stood on end.

And yet, her only response was this.

“Whatever do you mean?”

He lightly scratched his nose, and—had he held back a smile?

“I know.”

His hand landed gently on her head.

“Because you’re my wife.”

She shivered uncomfortably, as though a soft woolen thread tickled the inside of her ear.

Her chest clenched painfully, and tears welled up in her eyes.

“...Fool.”

“But you really did seem to be in a good mood, so I honestly wasn’t sure what it could be. You were getting along well with Miss Selim. If I wasn’t careful and bothered you about it, you looked like you would get really angry at me, so I didn’t say anything.”

He was carefully studying her face. She could not look back at his.

“…”

“…”

They both kept quiet, and silence fell over them.

Her companion released the breath he had been holding, then leaned back in his chair.

It creaked as he did.

“It feels like things have gotten stale since Myuri and Col left.”

The bathhouse was silent.

“Are you bored of life here?”

There was a slight smile on his face.

“No, of—”

This is the bathhouse her companion worked so hard to bring together. It was their house and a place to call home. There was no chance he would wish to leave that all behind and go traveling again.

But she could not finish her sentence, and he even asked her if she wanted to go on a journey not too long ago.

She did not know herself very well.

“I do not know…”

She spoke honestly, and her companion seemed amused.

“I’ve come to notice lately how old I’ve gotten, but you’re still young.”

"...Huh?"

Her pitiful voice was starting to become a cry at the back of her throat.

She looked at him, and his smile was growing bigger and bigger. That meant her expression must have really been on the verge of tears.

"That's what I thought when I was watching Myuri—so that's what it means to be young. And that it wouldn't be surprising if a certain someone who is like a mature wolf got bored of life in the bathhouse, too."

"That's..."

She barely spoke, then shook her head. Hard.

"I have not grown bored. Not at all."

The inside of her heart, however, was not serene. There certainly was a tempest of irritation that every day was so similarly fulfilling.

No matter how she thought about that, it was indulgent and selfish and not something her companion could do anything about.

She could not stop or turn back time.

And so she was hesitant as to whether she should be honest. Her companion had a good heart, which made her worry that he might treat her strangely, or that it might make him sad.

As her words became stuck in her throat, he smiled a bit sadly.

"Did the wolves all show off together? What was it like with

Miss Selim?”

He was worried about her. He would listen to her. Not only that, he was always within her reach. And he would not be around forever.

If she had to say it someday, then she should say it sooner than later.

She swallowed something that was lodged in her throat, and slowly, she opened her mouth.

“I have not grown bored with life in the bathhouse.”

“Mm-hmm.”

He nodded, then reached out to the desk and cut the wick of the candle with scissors. The fire on the candle would be bigger and burn brighter.

“And?”

“I am used to repeating routine. I…I once watched the wheat grow for hundreds of years, after all.”

An endless cycle of seasons, time that would not come back.

“I am happy now. So happy.”

She gripped her companion’s hand on the desk, and he playfully wrapped his fingers around hers.

“However…Nothing changes from day to day. Tomorrow will be the same as today, and the day after that will be the same as tomorrow, and what happened last month is the same as what happened that month last year, and next month will be the same as that month next year, aye? ’Tis even more obvious now after

that fool Myuri and little Col are gone."

Her companion's fingers gripped her pointer finger a little too tightly.

His skin was much softer than it had been when he was a traveling merchant.

"If I were to let myself surrender to this happiness, all these precious days will melt away in my memory…Though the wise-wolf I may be, I cannot remember everything. I have grown terrified of that. Because…"

Then she suddenly looked at his face.

No matter how hard she studied it, that face was still something she would no longer be able to see one day.

"Because…"

"I can't stay by your side forever."

Her companion spoke and kissed her on the forehead.

They both knew that, so they had not dared say a word about it. They tacitly agreed to pretend they did not know. Back during the events in Svernel, thanks to Selim and her brother, they had faced it for the first time in a long time.

He ruffled her hair and continued.

"Even after we're gone, you should go live in the inn that Selim's family runs…It's insurance, at least. Cargo you lose won't always come back."

To Holo, her companion was like a young boy, just recently born, and he was smiling calmly.

“I know that. So I’ve thought about a lot of things on my own. I didn’t say anything because you’d get mad if I did, but I’m always thinking about all the things I can leave for you.”

She gulped and looked back at him.

Though she was so happy he worried about her, she was indescribably sad that he was concentrating on the end.

These two feelings clashed with each other in her throat, and it pained her so.

If he had said anything to her about it, she would not have been able to bear the agony and certainly would have grown angry.

Do not think of such things!

“But you’re a lonely person, the kind to fall asleep during the day clinging to a balled-up blanket. You definitely need something to keep yourself from shivering in the cold.”

“Hah?! I—I—I was not…”

Her ears stood straight up in rage, and her cheeks quickly turned red. Though this would never happen if she were in her wolf form, this body was much too small for such big emotions.

“And, well, I had an idea, and am working hard on it, but thanks to Col and Myuri, that plan looks like it’ll be accelerated.”

“…Hmm?”

His hand wrapped around to the back of her head, and he kissed away the tears welling in her eyes.

The feeling of his beard pressing roughly on her skin proved

that it was not a dream.

“I see…Then…then why did you decide to undertake this work? It has been bothering me. Do you simply wish to save money? What will you do with all that money?”

“I can’t bring gold into heaven, you know.”

“It can’t be…for me?”

She almost told him there was no need for that, but there was, for some reason, a look of relief on his face.

“Even if I left you money, wouldn’t you just turn every coin into booze as you cry all by your lonesome or show no interest in it at all and instead crawl into a field of wheat?”

“Wh—? You—”

“Well, I do want to leave some money for the earthier Myuri, though.”

He looked at her as she sat speechless, then smiled gently.

“That’s why I want to leave you something that you would never let go, even when you’re dozing in the sun or curled up around a blanket on a cold, quiet night. Well…”

For some reason, he stopped there, then scratched his head in embarrassment.

“I wanted to do that. It’s been busy, and I’m not really used to it…”

Not getting his point, she groaned in irritation, and he smiled and apologized repeatedly, then carried on.

“It was a book.”

"…A book?"

He shrugged.

"You said it a long time ago. Tell the beautiful tale of your journey with me."

She did feel like she had said that once before. That was how legends of times long past were passed down for future generations.

"But there's only so much word of mouth can do. Just look at this pile of permits. The world is full of things that can't fit inside one person's head."

Though they had visited many places on their journey together, there were so many invisible rules that they could never see. And that was just one small part of it all.

"Everyday life is the same. If you look closely, there are small differences among similar days, and sometimes, those little things can be really enjoyable. Like when that leech stuck to your wrist."

For some reason, when he pointed that out it embarrassed her, and she placed her hand over the mark to cover it.

"I thought it would be a good idea to write all those things down. Remember, you read a lot of things like that in Elsa's library, at the church in the village that worshipped the snake god?"

She finally recalled. She had done that. In order to find out where Yoitsu was, in order to find her old friends, she read countless old tales in that musty cellar. They were tales that someone wrote down to tell what had happened in the past.

“I wanted to write with as much detail as I could. Something others might not understand if they read it but that only you would enjoy. And then you can look back later and see that yesterday and today—last year and this year—really were different, right?”

“M-mm…’Tis…true…”

She nodded, and her companion reciprocated the gesture, satisfied.

But the expression that appeared on his face afterward was slightly embarrassed.

“But that said, I’ve been writing a bit when I have the time, but…ah… All I can write about is trade, and since Myuri was born, all I can write about are stories about her.”

And then, she realized.

“Ah, so that is what you have been writing from time to time?! ’Twas not complaints or grudges?!”

She questioned him in surprise, and he smiled wryly.

“It’s been a handful taking care of Myuri…But they weren’t complaints. Even our arguments make me laugh when I read back on them.”

When she finally understood what it was, she felt like she would collapse. Certainly, he occasionally wrote down what had happened that day as if transcribing the events. He had even recorded their quarrels, so she thought he was preparing something for when they fought later. What a milksop of a male she thought he was!

“But we’re not rich enough to prepare all that paper, and there

is literally no time to write anything down during the busy seasons."

It seemed their conversation had come full circle, back to the parchment on the desk.

"So you are saving for that?"

"Yes. It's usually nobility that hires monks to write down what happened in the past. Even then, only the biggest towns produce annual chronicles for their own prestige. But it was people from the monasteries who brought in this parchment work we're doing."

She watched her companion talk happily, and it reminded her of when they rode on the wagon together. That was when he had that stupid look on his face. *"Let me tell you how we can make money from this, and this time I'm sure we can earn plenty without getting wrapped up in trouble!"*

She was happy that nothing seemed to have changed between now and then, and at the same time, her chest tightened.

"And?"

"First, monasteries deal with the paper. If we gain their gratitude, then we can get it for cheap."

She nodded in a bit of exasperation at how obvious he was.

"Then, there is a special reason as to why we want to gain the gratitude of the people at the monastery. And that is…"

He turned his gaze to the desk and pulled out a certain piece of paper.

But that was not a permit but a memo Holo had written for

herself.

“This. For handwriting.”

“Handwriting…?”

“You still aren’t very good at writing, no matter how much time passes.”

“!”

She sat up straight, as though someone had stepped on her tail, and grabbed his beard.

“Ow, ow, don’t get—don’t get mad!”

“You fool! I may not be very good, but it is not illegible!”

Though her companion was the same, she truly did not understand the merits of the written human language. She was not good at writing and would not deny that. It was simply a fact that she could not write well.

She could only imagine that it was thanks to her human limbs, and it sincerely angered her when he pointed out her inability. There was nothing she could do about it.

“No, wait, wait. At first, I thought it was because you weren’t used to reading and writing. But you’re surprisingly dexterous with other things. So when I saw Miss Selim write, I had a thought.”

“Her?”

She was surprised to suddenly hear Selim’s name.

“Miss Selim’s handwriting is, well…bad.”

“She is also slow at reading, no?”

“Yeah. And then there’s all the mistakes she’s made.”

“…?”

Choosing the wrong twine, mixing up the candle boxes, tripping on herself, falling over, dropping things—how were these all related?

And how was all that related to gaining favor from the monastery?

Were they going to pray to God?

But what?

“You all don’t have very good eyesight.”

“Huh?”

She was caught by surprise.

There was no way that was possible.

“Th-that cannot be so. I see perfectly well. And I am perfectly free in a dark forest.”

“Then write this letter down. Just as you see it, okay?”

He pointed to a single letter. It was one she knew and could write easily. After a quick circle, there was a line that extended out to the right; then at the end of that there was a quick curve down and to the left.

She thought she did it quite well.

“Did you really write it how you see it?”

“Mm.”

His shoulders moved up and down as he breathed.

“The letter you copied was Miss Selim’s writing, and it’s a little bit off.”

“Wha—?”

“You’re not this bad at writing. That’s why I was unsure at first. But Miss Selim really is bad. I think that’s the reason why she trips all the time. She’s gotten better recently, but that’s probably because she remembers where everything is now. Or maybe from the scent.”

Now that he mentioned it, she recalled the dark forest. Of course. She was always relying on her nose and ears to run in her wolf form.

Then, after her surprise died down, a sudden bout of sadness settled over her. That was because it meant she had never truly been able to see her companion’s face all that well.

And on the other hand, there was also the fact that she had never felt like her vision was an inconvenience.

As a feeling of confusion akin to anger demanded to know what that meant, her logic found a path.

Since she had only ever known the world from behind these eyes, she had just assumed that this was normal.

But what was she to do about it?

“And then what? Should I pray to God, like little Col, so that my eyes may get better?”

“No. That’s why we’ll go to a monastery.”

He made a circle with his index finger and thumb, then placed it over his eyes.

“Glasses.”

“Glasses?”

“Didn’t I show you them once somewhere during our journey? If you let a droplet of water trickle onto a leaf, it swells into this indescribable shape, right? They process glass into that shape and polish it nicely. It can make letters bigger and clearer for you. Rich monasteries should have plenty of high-quality glasses.”

She could not picture it very well, but it did not seem like he was lying.

She nodded, relieved knowing something like that existed, and her companion placed the circle he made with his fingers onto her eyes.

“From what I’ve heard, you put it on your face like this. They say the price jumps up because they have to make the glass bigger, and it’s difficult to polish, but you can see all the little details in the world.”

Then, she could put everything she saw and everything she had been unable to see until now into writing.

Like storing snow in the ice room or a squirrel burying a nut.

On the other side of his finger circle, her companion smiled proudly.

For some reason, he seemed closer than usual.

“We probably can’t get it immediately because they go on your face, but we can likely find something that can make the words in your hand bigger. And then a lot of paper. Once we have that and you’ve practiced writing again, you can record anything you want to remember.”

It was not about waiting for a big incident she would never forget, but collecting the little things that happened every day. Of course, she just simply could not remember, and it was not because she hated daily life in the bathhouse. She loved everything that happened throughout the days.

The problem was, all those memories would spread out thin if she let them be, and it would only wet her stomach if she laid down in them, like that tepid puddle.

By putting them in writing, she could keep them warm.

“I’ll work as hard as I can to buy paper and ink, so you just need to write so much that you can’t read it all. You won’t get bored if you write so much that you forget the beginning by the time you reach the end, right?”

She did not know how much of that was a joke and how much was serious.

She did not know how effective it would really be, but it was something that he had thought so hard about for her, and it made her so happy she wanted to cry.

“But…If I spend all my time writing, would I not miss things I want to write down?”

“I’m honestly more worried whether you’ll actually do it every day or not, since you get bored so easily.”

She pouted with her lips and glared at him, but he took it with

a calm smile.

“But you’ll have ink and paper. You’ll have glasses. And once you can write, you should be fine, right? If you get anxious, make those tools your weapons. Scrub past the hazy darkness with your pen, and wipe it away with your paper.”

Had he known about the well of darkness inside of her all along?

“An ancient monk once said…”

Her companion had aged a bit since they first met, and he spoke with a more mature expression than it had once been.

“…give a man a fish, and he is fed for the day. But teach him to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.”

She showed her respect to the reckless man who spewed lectures to the wisewolf, and she grinned, baring her fangs.

“I do want fish. And honeyed peaches, as well.”

“I know. That’s why I’ll be busy every day.”

Then, at that moment, she could not hold herself back any longer as she leaped at him, and the upper right part of her forehead crashed into his cheekbone. There was quite a loud *thud* , and her companion groaned, but she did not mind.

That was because there was no doubt that it was her heart that was in the most pain.

“You fool.”

Those were the words that emerged from the bottom of her heart.

“You fool…”

She said it again, and her tail swished about.

Her heart was now bursting with happiness and love for her companion, and she almost said that she did not need glasses or anything of the sort, but she had learned. Much like the seasons, moods change. As long as she had the weapons he chose for her, she could beat back the blackness that seeped out once in a while.

“I do wish for glasses. But I do not need anything so big.”

“Mm…Huh? But you should have them anyway, right? And Miss Selim can use them, too.”

A long time ago, she would have bared her fangs and growled if he mentioned another female’s name in a situation like this, but not anymore. She was squarely in his arms, and he looked fixedly at her.

“She should use them. I do not need them.”

He looked a little disappointed, but it was certainly out of kindness. He was taking many things into consideration, like her being able to better see scenery.

But she had been like this for hundreds of years.

Her world was nothing if not the world she saw now.

“Shall I tell you why?”

She looked up, and his face was next to hers.

“For future reference please.”

She grinned.

“If I could see well, I may notice that I am not fond of your face. I would prefer not to be so disappointed after all this time.”

An unpleasant frown appeared on his face.

It was enough just knowing that.

“However, I found you in this world without relying on glasses in the first place.”

His eyes opened wide, and having been outdone, an irritated expression crossed his face.

“That’s true, I’m not sure if I’d like it if you became even more sharp-sighted.”

He was still a cute little boy if he could say things like that out of spite even now.

“Then I’ll get something for Miss Selim to read, and that might be expensive glasses, though, so don’t get mad, okay?”

“It depends.”

“You know…”

His annoyed face was so adorable, she could not help but grin.

“Honestly…It’s for work. If I gave Miss Selim glasses, she might get better at reading and writing, since she does seem eager to learn. She’s patient, so I could ask her to do all the things that Col did, like writing accounts for purchases and expenditures, letters to guests, and even write letters for business in town. That would make things a lot easier for me.”

“Will you not ask me?”

She could read and write all the same.

Well, she knew why he would of course ask Selim to do work and not herself.

But she asked purposefully anyway. She should be familiar with all the things on this desk. There were records of agreements they could not see. If she could see the threads that connected her and her companion when she found herself lost, then there was nothing to worry about.

He looked at her and sighed, tired.

He may have truly been exhausted.

Because—

“There’s no point in me being free if you’re busy.”

Because her companion loved her, and he was always working his hardest.

“Heh.”

She laughed at how spoiled she was, and she laughed at how strangely, terribly relieved she was.

“Heh-heh, ah-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha…! You fool, what a fool you are.”

“Of course I am.”

He laughed, too, and for a while they did nothing but laugh together before finally sighing in unison.

It was a strange interval of neither routine nor boredom.

“Well then, should we finish up the rest of this?”

He spoke purposefully as though he was smoothing things

over.

“Mm, let us square it all away.”

It felt like they had had the same conversation a thousand times in the past.

But now, she no longer feared being unable to tell them apart.

“Oh, right.”

“Hmm?”

As she grasped a pen, she spoke.

“Little Col mentioned it a lot. Books and such need titles. Shall we title this one after you?”

He looked at her for a little while before a slight smile appeared on his face.

“What’s the name of this house?”

“Hmm? Indeed, ’twould be the best.”

Memories of her time with her companion. Memories she could never forget. She would fill her book with as many of them as she could.

A tome overflowing with happiness, like the season of life and blossoms and the bubbling waters of their home—a Spring Log.

It would become something that anyone would look at with a dry smile and shrug their shoulders in exasperation.

AFTERWORD

Long time no see. Isuna Hasekura here. This is the newest *Spice & Wolf* novel in about eight months. Sorry to keep you waiting. Since this is a series I've already finished, I hope to put out more at around this pace. Please stick with me at this leisurely pace.

By the way, it might already be over by the time this afterword is printed in a book, but there was a *Spice & Wolf* collaboration café in juncture with Subculture Café & Bar Newtype Shinjuku. Collaboration cafés typically sell food and things based on the image of the characters in the work…but this time, they tried their best to replicate the food in the novel, and I really enjoyed it. I had rabbit meat, goat cheese, salted herring, and such for the first time. All the food that I wrote about completely with my imagination had been brought to life, and I was touched. There was also a footbath in the shop because of the bathhouse, and I thought it was just going to be a little tub with some hot water in it, but I was amazed to see a proper footbath, one you might actually see at a tourist spot, and the clerks were all dressed up as Holo and Myuri, and I think all my fortune as an author has run out. Thank you, thank you.

I am prospering even as I write this afterword, so I am as happy as can be as the original author.

Thank you very much to all who came.

What else…I have nothing to write about…My days are spent either changing oxygen into carbon dioxide or getting excited over *Friends* . But *Friends* is good. Now I only have a little bit left, and

I'm very sad that it will be over. Just recently, I cried over the story between Toki and the professor. It's amazing no matter how many times I watch it.

Now I remember. I've moved a bit away from the city, and now I commute by train. At first, I poked around on social games on my smartphone, but once I started reading, the number of books I had ballooned. I don't have the will or strength to read for two hours straight, so it was too bothersome for me to open a book, but if I just think about reading for ten or so minutes, I can get through a lot. The start is always hard to get through.

So I've been reading some popular stories I've been hearing about. They're all so good it pains me. It makes me want to work harder.

I imagined that once I read some new books, I would challenge myself with older novels that I'd never read but only heard of, but there are too many hot new books. I wonder when I'll get around to that.

And those are the sort of days I've been having.

My page is all filled now, so I'll end it here. I will see you in the next book.

Isuna Hasekura