



*Drunken Wolf  
Translations*

# Volume 7

狼と香辛料

*Spice and Wolf*

**Author:** Isuna Hasekura

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**Project Manager:** Pitythefool

**Translator:** Terrence

**Editor:** Bashzestampeedo

**Proofreaders:** MyInnerFred, Integirl

**Typesetters:** Elensar, Xilent

**Visit our forums:** <http://s3.excoboard.com/pitythefool>

**Questions?** [DrunkenWolfTranslations@gmail.com](mailto:DrunkenWolfTranslations@gmail.com)

Artwork by Ayakura Juu

Special Thanks to all contributors  
that made this project possible

# Contributors



Reybangs  
Graywind  
Roose44  
Mithphoenix

Battlezoid  
The\_Nice\_Guy  
ashp




Aftyn  
FullArmageddon  
Paradoxed  
Justie  
xsolider55  
King0011  
jfaerr  
herreshoff  
Katlan  
bonebone  
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rainfire  
kutta  
achitenshi87  
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Anath1234  
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An anime-style illustration of a young woman with long, flowing orange hair and small fox-like ears. She is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved top under a black vest and a black skirt with a pink and black patterned ruffle. She is holding several stalks of wheat in her hands. The background is a bright yellow with soft bokeh light effects.

支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

*Merchant meats  
spicy wolf*

狼と香料

Side Colors VII

# 狼と香辛料 ⑦

Side Colors

支倉凍砂  
Isuna Hasekura

Illustration

文倉十

Jyuu Ayakura



# A boy, a Girl and a White Flower



In the backlight, there was unmistakably, someone standing  
The young boy thought it was the voice of God

# Red Apple and Blue Sky

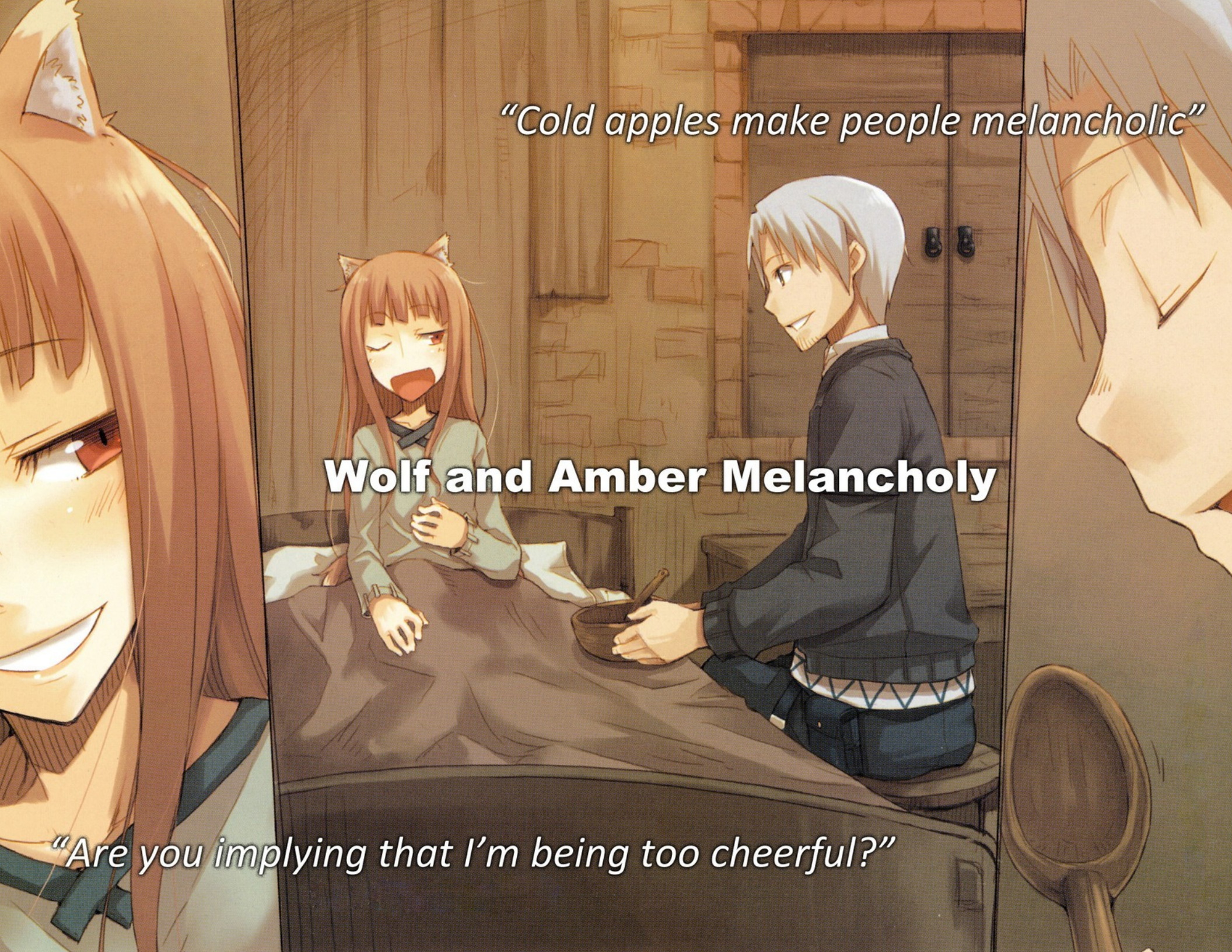


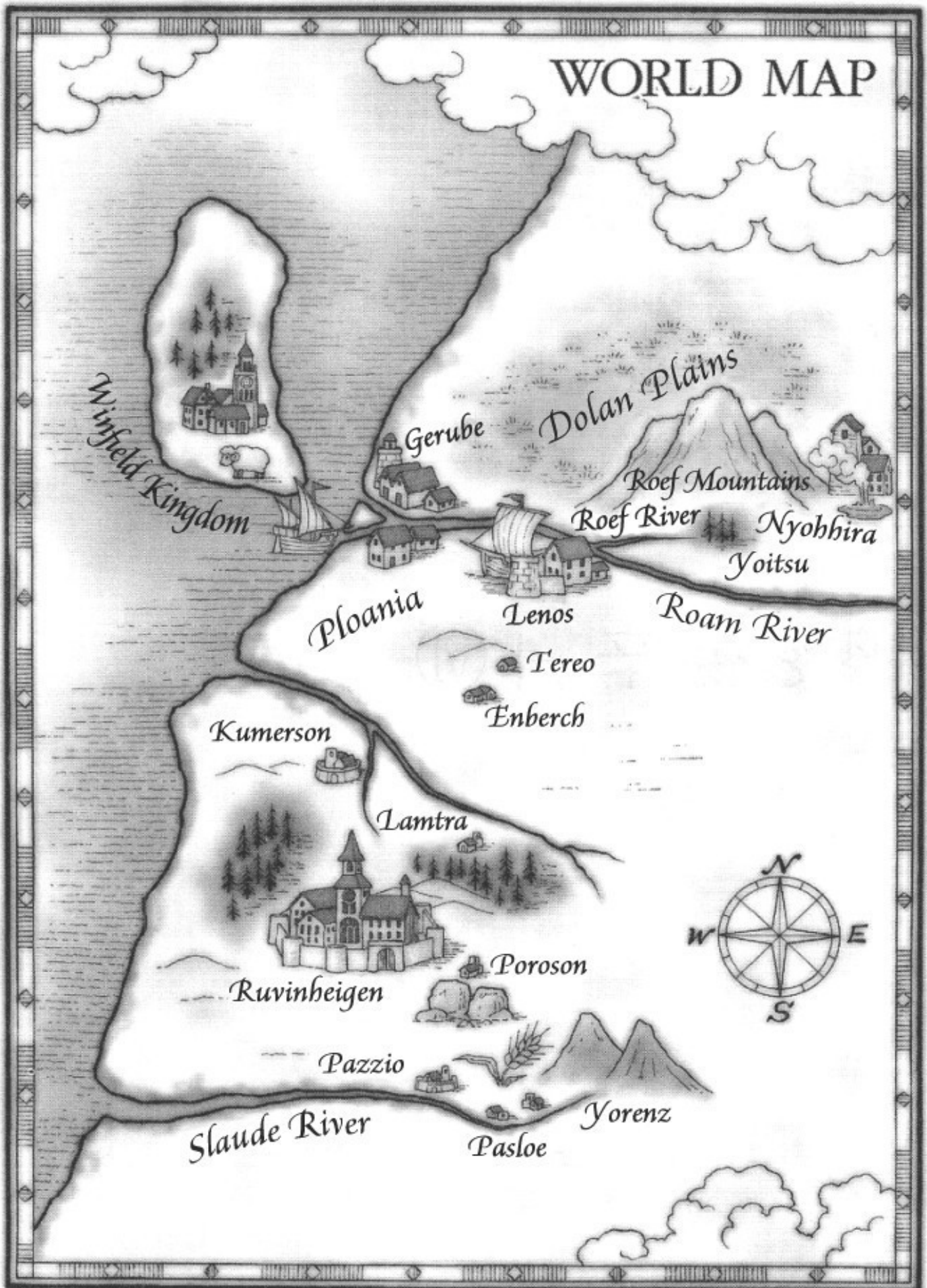
As he shrugged his shoulders, laughed and looked up,  
he saw the vast clear blue sky

*"Cold apples make people melancholic"*

**Wolf and Amber Melancholy**

*"Are you implying that I'm being too cheerful?"*





Map illustration by Idemitsu Hidemasa

狼と香辛料 ⑦

Side Colors

# *Spice and Wolf*

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Volume 7 – Side Colors I

*Translation & Editing by  
'Drunken Wolf Translations'*

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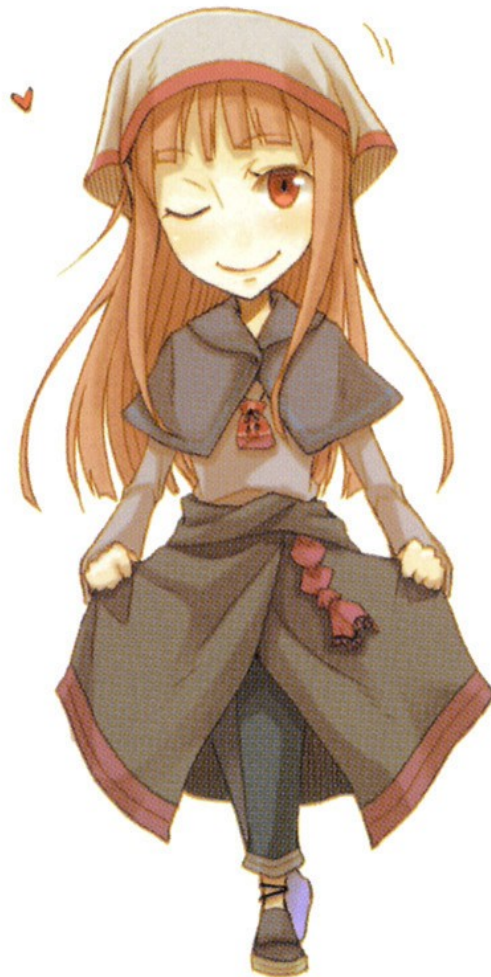
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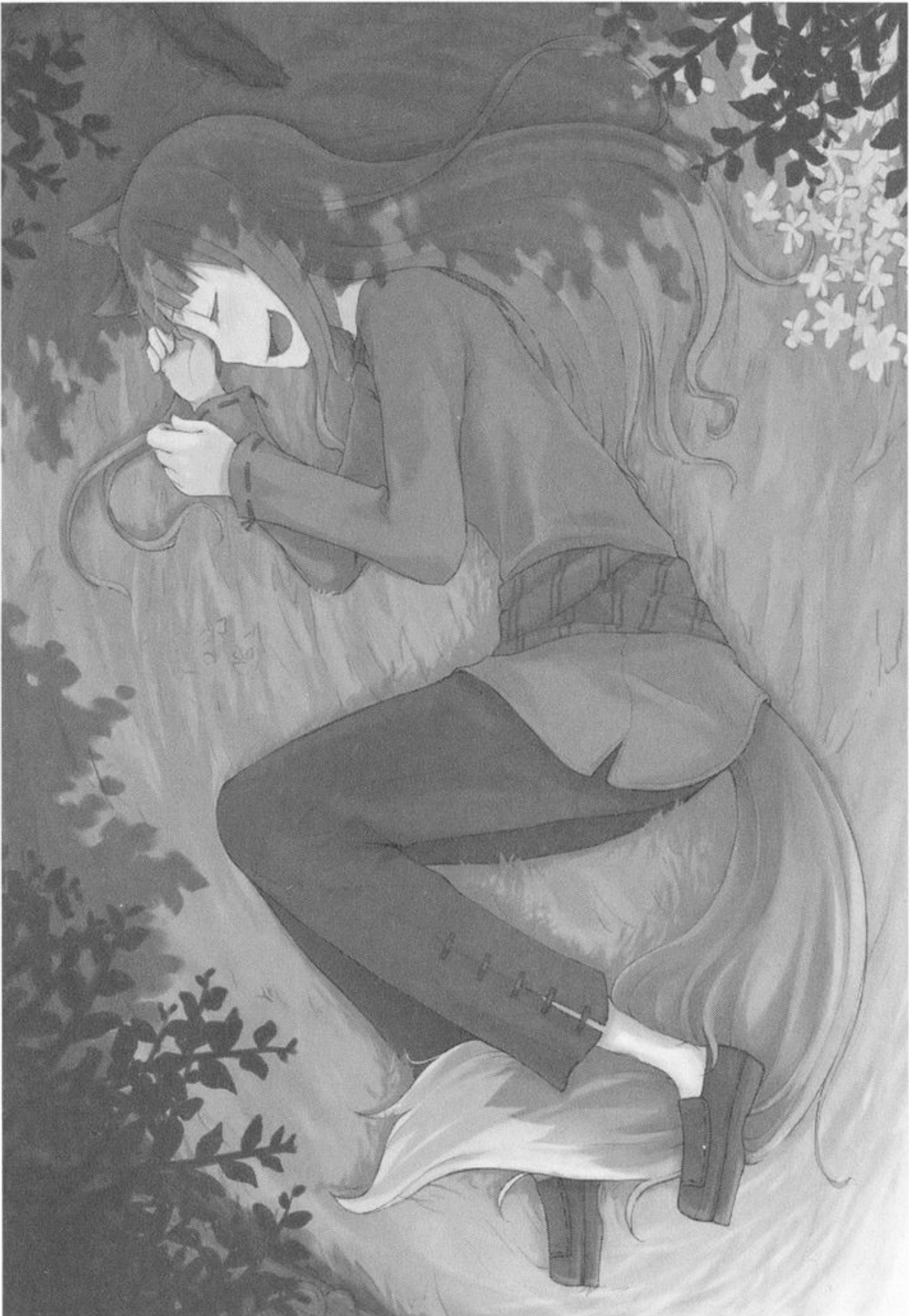
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A Boy, a Girl and a White Flower

## A Boy, a Girl and a White Flower

Klaus sat down on a flat stone atop the hill, next to the path. With nothing to block his view, he could see far off into the distance despite the hill being quite small. He walked and walked, but the view was always the same. People told him the path lead to the sea, but he had yet to see even a stream.

He was soon to be ten years old. How the sea looked was beyond his imagination, but he was sure he hadn't missed it on this path. He must still have a long way to go. Placing his wooden stick under his armpit, he took a drink out of his leather waterskin. It smelled of leather, but it was still wet on his lips.

A breeze blew through his tea-colored hair, making him look behind him. He'd just been thrown out of someone's mansion, but that had long since vanished from his sights. He wasn't feeling lonely, in fact he felt like shouting "serves them right!", though he had no idea why. Right now, they were focused on what was right in front of them.

White flowers were blossoming beside the path, and just as he assumed they would stop, they did. Winter had gone, taking the cold, dry wind with it. The spring sunshine now melted into the gentler air along with the smell of grass.

The way she knelt down in front of those common flowers and stared at them intently, wondering what their name was, made her resemble a grazing goat. Up close, one could see her robes were quite filthy, but from far off she might as well be a goat.

Her name was Ariette. She told him she didn't know her own age, but he was a bit upset that she was taller than he was, so he decided she must be two years older than he was.

"Ariette!"

After hearing his shout she finally raised her head.

"Didn't we promise to pass the next four hills before sunset?"

He didn't completely understand her thoughts, but he had learned a thing or two about her. One of them was that while she wouldn't do anything he asked, she would at least keep her promises. Before he figured that out, he'd thought several times to leave her behind whenever she dallied like this. She slowly rose to her feet, looking as if she missed the scenery they'd left behind. Seeing this, all he could do was sigh.

"Do you think they're rare?"

Since he was still seated on the rock, he raised his head to look up at her. Her hood was thick, making it hard to see her face unless he was close to her. Right from the start, he sensed that the face under the hood was pretty, even though he didn't see it often.

“They are ...flowers, right?”

She spoke as if confirming something of importance.

“Yes they are. We saw them yesterday, and the day before.”

Her clear blue eyes returned to the flowers as another breeze wafted by, waving the exposed bits of her golden hair.

“But.. it's odd..”

“What is?”

For the first time, she looked at him. Her head was tilted.

“How can they survive without any vases?”

Klaus didn't frown at that question, but he moved his gaze down from her face.

“Hey! Didn't I tell you not to get dirty? We've got no water!”

He pulled her hands out from under her sleeves, and saw the soil all over her hands.. even under her fingernails. Her small, lovely hands looked like they had been ruined. As Klaus tried to wipe them with the towel at his waist, she pulled them away and gave him a stern look.

“I've been told that uncleanliness only exists in our hearts. Don't lie.”

Klaus wanted to retort, but couldn't bring himself to do it.

“You're right. It's my fault.”

She smiled with her eyes and nodded, apparently satisfied.

~~~

In the end, they broke the promise and didn't end up passing four hills. But he somehow ended up eating his lunch while listening to Ariette scold *him* about not keeping promises, for whatever reason. They were quite hungry by lunchtime, since Ariette was strongly against eating breakfast.

Truth be told, the hemp sack Klaus was carrying on his back didn't contain much food. They had

seven pieces of hard flatbread bigger than their faces, made of the oats horses ate. Apart from those, they had some fried beans, salt, and a cup's worth of water in the waterskin.

They received these things from the mansion they had been thrown out of. He knew they'd be in trouble if they didn't plan well enough ahead. He only ate a certain amount for each meal, before closing the mouth of the sack tightly. Fortunately, Ariette didn't eat much. She had eaten maybe ten beans and an eighth of one piece of bread today.

She also prayed before and after meals, thanking God. Klaus was the one providing it for her, since she hadn't brought any with her when she left with him. He felt he should be thanked, not God, but Ariette simply replied: “they all came from God originally.”

It was a cunning thing to say to someone like him, who didn't know how to argue. All he could do was silently accept it. Though she unreasonably coaxed him into things, if you asked him whether she was clever he really had no idea. Above all else, unbelievably, she truly seemed to know next to nothing.

“Ah..”

She looked up into the sky as a brown bird flew overhead. Klaus caught himself wondering how delicious it would be if he caught it, plucked it and roasted it.. but then remembered what Ariette had said the first time she saw a bird. It was enough to make him forget how bitter the bread was. She had been surprised and shouted out loud – simply at seeing a flying bird. He couldn't believe it at first, but her questioning eyes came to bear on him.

“Is that a bird?”

“Yeah. It's not a spider or a lizard.”

“It's.. flying, right?”

“Right.”

Having chomped down a bit too hard on the bread, he was now picking the bread out from between his teeth. As he did, he thought about how Ariette praised and observed things like flying birds as though they were important secrets. She was strange, but also cute somehow.

The first time she had seen a bird, she'd uttered something strange like “a spider is climbing on the ceiling.” At first he had no idea what she was saying. But by listening to her then, he came to realize that to her the sky was like a ceiling, with a bird climbing on it like a spider.

He was stunned, but feeling it would be disgraceful of a man to treat her like a fool, he told her the sky was supported by unbelievably tall trees, and the birds flew under it. She was suspicious, but when she finally saw a bird take off from the ground she believed him. Every

question of hers went like this.

It did make sense for her to ask how a flower could survive outside of a vase. She had lived in a building with tall walls of stone, beside the mansion that Klaus had been working in as a servant. According to Ariette, she hadn't left that building for as long as she could remember. And reading was one of the few things she did.

Klaus had heard about those who entered and left that building. Rumor had it that the landlord had been swindled into building it by southerners, and that those who used it were all from the south. Once in a while, he heard unfamiliar songs coming from behind those stony walls, and Klaus would assume they were songs from the south.

But despite building such a place, the landlord didn't like staying in his own lands and spent the year roaming around. As such, everyone felt that even his personal butler wouldn't know the details. All Klaus knew was that those songs praised God, having just recently learned that from Ariette. He had heard one of those songs three times recently.

“Well, let's get going.”

He spoke as he ate his last bean.

One day, many newcomers barged into the mansion with many goods and animals. All the servants were surprised, and stopped to watch them. The fattest among them, the one with the finest clothes who had announced himself as the landlord's brother, then spoke loudly.

“You are no longer welcome in this mansion, so leave immediately”.

They were told that the landlord had died on his trip, and that his brother wanted to live there now. He wasn't satisfied somehow, and he wanted everyone inside, including those in that stony building, to leave.

Many burst into tears. Some had no idea what to do. Others thought it was a joke and kept working, while some grabbed the man's leg and didn't let go. Only Ariette left aimlessly. After a while, the men began distributing things like water, bread and chicken feed. Klaus received food for two people and ran off, wanting to catch up with that strange, wispy girl who was attracted by something on the path.

“Let's cross six hills before sunset. At this rate, I don't know when we'll reach the sea.”

“Is that a promise?”

“Yeah, a promise”

Klaus thought it would be impossible with Ariette, but in the end it was still a broken promise..

it would be his fault. But it was the only way to convince her to go with him. But even when he failed and she gave him a surprisingly angry lecture, he honestly didn't feel bad looking at her.

~~~

Their trip was much more relaxed and carefree than the days he spent in that mansion, where he was beaten and had to carry heavy buckets of water and wheat all day long. But he was still sometimes nervous, especially at night.

"The night isn't so terrible.. in the daytime we have the sun, and in the nighttime the moon. God is always watching over us."

"..Y-yes"

His raspy voice replied as the calm part of his mind contemplated things - it was just the moon and stars watching over them. They were lying down on the hill they had finally reached. There wasn't anything to be afraid of, he knew they were alone, but still, he was embarrassed.

"God told us that people shiver in the cold loneliness of being alone. But when there are two people, the loneliness will leave taking the cold with it."

"...yes"

"Are you still cold?"

He nearly responded with a "yes", but ultimately shook his head instead. And Ariette didn't believe him. The hands on his back contracted a little, holding him tightly.

"It's good to test our tolerance with hunger, but God wouldn't want you to suffer coldness at the same time."

That was the fourth time she'd said that. It didn't help him feel any less nervous, and his body curled. At first he had just been too nervous to sleep out of fear of the dark. But that nervousness became so much worse after he realized how pretty Ariette truly was.

She pulled her large robe over herself like a blanket, hugging Klaus tightly. Despite it being spring, the nights were still cold. But Klaus didn't resent the cold. Despite having always had a roof over his head, he had always felt like was sleeping outdoors.



Ariette, however, felt that the beasts of the night were more tests from God, and did her best to ease his mind.. by warming him with her body. On the second night, Klaus slept well simply because he hadn't slept well on the first. On the third, he was too nervous, but still managed to fall asleep.

He had finally grown used to things on the fourth night. But his face grew warmer each time he breathed in Ariette's sweet scent. It wasn't the same sweetness as honeyed bread.. if was far gentler. It maybe him feel pangs of guilt, because there was something he'd never told her.

“Ah-choo!”

She sneezed into his ears. Despite fretting over him, she herself was cold. Her body shifted slightly.

“Well.. I may be scolded by God for saying this..”

Klaus couldn't see her face, but he could tell she was smiling.

“But I wouldn't have been able to bear it on my own. I'm glad that you were a girl!”

No one had ever mistaken Klaus for a girl. If he asked a hundred people, they would all tell him he was a boy. But she probably really believed that Klaus was a girl, since the first time they passed by a horse she asked him, with curious look, “is that creature what we'd call a 'man'?”

“I'm so sleepy.. good night.”

What a remarkable girl. It really didn't take her long to fall asleep. Klaus didn't reply but kept quiet. When he finally heard her breathing like a rabbit, he gently pushed his head back up against her soft breasts, hoping that there was nobody looking.

“Good night.”

It felt like he was making excuses, but that act really did help him fall asleep.

~~~

In the middle of the night, he suddenly woke up and looked at the sky. The misshapen moon had since passed over their heads, so it was past midnight. It was so cold.. he nuzzled up to Ariette again, trying not to feel embarrassed. At first he felt terrible, but he soon found a comfortable position and breathed out his concerns. It was so quiet he could only hear her snoring.

He would never have enjoyed a night like this sleeping in the corner of the stables. Rats would nibble at the animal feed that fell on the ground, and naturally went into his clothes. He would spot eyes shining in the dark – the snakes and owls preying on the rats – and those weren't the

only night guests.. there were also foxes after their chickens, and wolves after their sheep. Whenever danger drew near, the horse became violent, the chickens shrieked, and the rats ran around even more frantically.

But his nights with Ariette were so quiet that he could have heard the beating of his own heart. And no one ordered him awake in the morning, dragging him to laborious tasks that seemed to take forever. He never found going to sleep as happy as he did now.

He was surprised to be kicked out the house, but he couldn't understand why the others were so fearful. Having no job was such happy freedom. True, they didn't have much food, but he believed they would reach the seashore before they ran out. And then there would be many fish for him to catch. If it were possible, he'd like to live beside the sea.

He started wondering if Ariette had ever seen a fish, but concluded that she hadn't. He would have to tell her, “fish don't drown in water.” The thought made him chuckle. What a quiet night it was.. he really should try to sleep at least a little longer. He pushed his jumbled thoughts out of his mind, before he heard quiet sounds in addition to Ariette's snoring.

*Thump, thump, thump.*

Perhaps it was Ariette's heart? Just as he was thinking it was strange that he could hear her heartbeat through the soft mounds on her chest, he noticed something even stranger: he wasn't hearing it from his free ear, but the one that was pressed to the ground.

*Thump, thump, thump.*

The sound kept coming.

“What is that?”

He murmured to himself before pushing gently away from Ariette and twisting his body up, clutching his wooden stick for support.

“Wol-”

He almost shouted “wolves!” but swallowed his words, and observed his surroundings.

*Thump, thump.*

Those solid sounds beat against his ear drums, but they were the beating of his own heart. He tried to calm himself but started panting. He swallowed hard and kept observing, his head spinning to and fro. The moon hung high in the sky, so he could see quite far, but he didn't see any wolves.

“Ariette.. Ariette!!”

His palms were sweaty, as though they had stolen the moisture from his parched throat. He kept looking around as he shook her shoulder. He still couldn't spot the wolves. But it seems they had spotted him, and the air became even more tense.

Living in the stables made him aware, whether he liked it or not, that wolves were special. Those golden eyes would be the only points of light in the dark. Their footsteps were heard but they weren't seen, until their prey was snatched without him hearing any footsteps at all.

Ariette was finally roused, but still seemed half-awake, looking so helpless that he wanted to tease her. Perhaps it would be best to let her sleep, and then maybe the wolves would overlook her. He pulled his stick in and crouched down to the ground to listen.

He hadn't believed that wolves attacked people often, but after seeing them pass by him on three occasions with chickens their mouths, he began to suspect he was only spared because of those chickens.

The thumping continued. Was it just in his head? It seemed to be getting louder. They must be sharpening their fangs as they surrounded them, he thought.

“What do we do?”

He was talking to himself, wondering if it was even possible for them to escape. If they moved, they would be attacked. What should they do? Ariette eyed him in surprise, now completely awake. At that moment, he froze as if a bucket of ice water was flung onto him.. he nearly put his finger to his lips.

“What happened?”

Ariette sat up as she spoke, and at that exact moment they heard a howl of indescribable beauty.

“Huh? Wha?”

She surveyed the area in puzzlement. Klaus held in his tears and the anger boiling in his stomach, took to his feet, and saw: on the moonlit hill were many wavering shadows melting into the darkness with the lingering sound of howls. For just a moment he felt as if his eyes had met with ones of gold.

“Hurry, hurry.. Get ready..”

His trembling hand picked up his hemp backpack, then put it on and grasped Ariette's hand. She was still looking around in puzzlement of the situation. He found it difficult to stand. The wolves' no-longer-hidden footsteps hit their ears like a rush of wind through a forest.

He was so scared he couldn't keep his teeth from chattering. But he still found the courage to raise his stick. He pushed Ariette behind him, and though he nearly fell to his knees in panic he still managed to plant his feet as though he was holding a lance.

The wolves dove into the lake of darkness between the hills, only to burst back out into the moonlight nearby. Their golden eyes pierced right through him, and Klaus found himself oddly smiling like the wolves - in his fear he had bared his teeth. But the wolves didn't even flinch as they sprang toward them and..

“Huh!?”

Suddenly the lead wolf leaped aside as it landed, so quickly Klaus thought it looked like it had been shot by a hunter. When the other wolves landed, they immediately looked back. They were so near him that he could see every hair on their bodies bristling. They were no longer eying their prey. They glared at something far away, lowering their bodies and showing their fangs, and softly howling with the forelegs flat on the ground.

They looked like they could pounce at any moment. But their posture seemed less like one for hunting prey and more to face down an enemy in front of them. Surely they weren't cowed by his courage? Regardless of his thoughts the wolves kept staring at something, and in the next instant they fled.

It took a while for him to realize that they were fleeing, even faster and more suddenly than they had arrived. The threat vanished so anticlimactically that it left Klaus wondering whether it had really happened. He vacantly watched as the wolves fled, unable to think about anything for a while. He finally turned to face Ariette, but only because she hit his back hard.

“W-w-what happened?”

She was trembling.

“W-wolves.. we're so lucky..”

He had no desire to laugh at her trembling, and he gripped the stick he was holding tightly so she wouldn't notice he was doing the same thing. Ariette tilted her head in confusion.

“W-wolves?”

It was followed by an adorably tiny sneeze. Apparently she didn't know about wolves. She was only trembling because it was cold. Klaus stared at his would-be lance and pouted. He let it fall to the ground in disappointment.

“Wolves. You saw them try to attack us, right? They're wild beasts with fangs. They attack humans and animals.”

“Hmm.. so those were.. men?”

He almost suspected that she was toying with him. Then he remembered the words of the stablemaster, who was old enough to be his father, and repeated them.

“Yes. Men are wolves.”

Only then did her face finally show terror. Her eyes opened wide as they darted around.

“It's alright, they aren't-”

But Klaus was cut off, unable to finish because his face was being crushed against those soft parts of hers. He could barely breathe.

“..Mmf..!”

“We're fine.. we're fine! God is always with us.. there's nothing to worry about..”

She held him even tighter as she trembled. Now she was the one who was scared. How would she react if he told her the truth about men? Even Klaus felt that lying was wrongful, but when he turned his face to breathe all he caught was her sweet scent. That was enough to melt away his fear. He could get away with this lie, surely.

“But what are they so scared of?”

Indeed, the wolves suddenly seemed surprised. Why was that? Klaus couldn't see much in the direction they were facing; just bits of a meadow and the lake of darkness that was there. He didn't sense the presence of demons as he had earlier.

Of course there weren't any answers in Ariette's arms, but they did melt his nervousness away. His earlier tension and her warmth seemed to have made him sleepy, and he yawned. Sensing this, Ariette loosened her arms a bit and he left her embrace, despite not really wanting to.

“I think it's alright now. Let's sleep. There's still some time before sunrise.”

She nodded, her face showing no signs of fear.

~~~~

As usual, his next morning began when he was roused by Ariette. He shivered at the thought of the danger of the last night, but the wolves were gone. The paw-prints in the meadow were proof that they were indeed there, however.

This day, and the next, should be no different from the others. What *was* different was that

they now had less food, were now in real danger of running out of water, and one other thing: Ariette's face was paler now, and she was complaining that her feet were sore.

She would probably be fine if they rested more often, but he'd heard a traveler who visited the mansion warn that people would die after three days without water, even if they could survive an entire week without food.

"I suspect you wouldn't know if there's a river around here, would you?"

As expected, Ariette didn't know. All they saw were fields that seemed to stretch out indefinitely, and the long and narrow path they were on. Each time they crested a higher hill, they would stare into the distance longing to see a city or the sea.

It was now their fifth day since they left the house; they surely came a long way by now. He'd heard that one walking would reach the ends of the earth after two months. Deep inside, he had branded Ariette a dullard for having lived cooped-up her entire life, but he'd had no idea the world was so large.

For some reason this made him angry, so he sped up. After lunch, well into the evening and after many rests and bouts of anger at her slow pace, they reached their twelfth hill - the most hills they had crossed in one day. And yet still they saw only meadows, forests, and hills.

He looked back at Ariette. She had lost her interest in plants and insects and had struggled to keep up with him. She stood still downhill, showing no motivation to continue.

Klaus still felt able to press on. The thought kept surfacing that they were still not at a city because they were walking too slowly. She should be able to continue after a rest, he told himself with a sigh. As he was about to call out to her, she knelt down where she was.

The water shortage, the unseen next city, the growing doubts about the sea being at the end of the path, and a world more vast than he had imagined. Each time these thoughts surfaced his frustration increased. He had been relaxed and happy until last night, but now he felt they taken things too easily..

He let his frustration show on his face, but Ariette still didn't stand.

"Damn.."

He was so frustrated that he couldn't be bothered to call out to her. For a second he even contemplated whether he should leave her behind. There was only one path so she couldn't get lost. As he considered this option, he heard a strange sound from behind.

"Hmm?"

He looked back at her. She had placed one hand on the ground, and..

“Ariette!!”

Her back arched and she vomited. As he stood, stunned, she fell on her side. He threw off his pack and ran to her.

“Ariette! Ariette!”

He was surprised, not worried. He ran over to her and picked her up, removing her hood and yelling her name. She was limp and wasn't moving. The tongue between her lips recalled to his mind the image of a dying goat.

“Ariette!!”

His shock had become fear, with worry being the furthest thing from his mind. She was going to die. He felt tears trying to escape his eyes. He shook her shoulders and slapped her right cheek, but she still wouldn't respond. His fear grew so much that he felt like vomiting. Then she retched. Thank heavens.. she wasn't dead.

As relief washed over him she curled up and groaned in pain, having nothing left to vomit. He wiped his eyes, and then remembered to wipe her mouth with his towel. But he had no idea what to do next. The words “medicinal herbs” sprang to mind, but they were only surrounded by grass, which didn't look like it would help.

Her breathing was getting weaker and weaker, as though the life in her was vanishing. More tears were welling up, and his fear was back. Was she ill, rather than tired? If he'd known, they would have taken it easier and rested more.

Whether it was an excuse or just regret, it was the thought that popped into his mind. He couldn't even form a sentence, only call her name. He kept calling that name over and over, shaking her shoulders but feeling no resistance as he sobbed.

“What.. what do I do..”

He couldn't yell out for help; there wouldn't be anyone there. If anyone was there, it was that suspicious god that Ariette was always praying to. But anyone would be fine.. even a false god.. so he prayed.

“Please.. God..”

He thought he heard a voice; it had to be God.

“What happened?”

In shock he looked up, but his eyes were blinded by tears. After wiping them off, he still saw no one there.

“Oh no..”

He felt the tears returning.

“Boy, what happened?”

Behind them.. he turned, and indeed someone was standing there with the sun behind them.

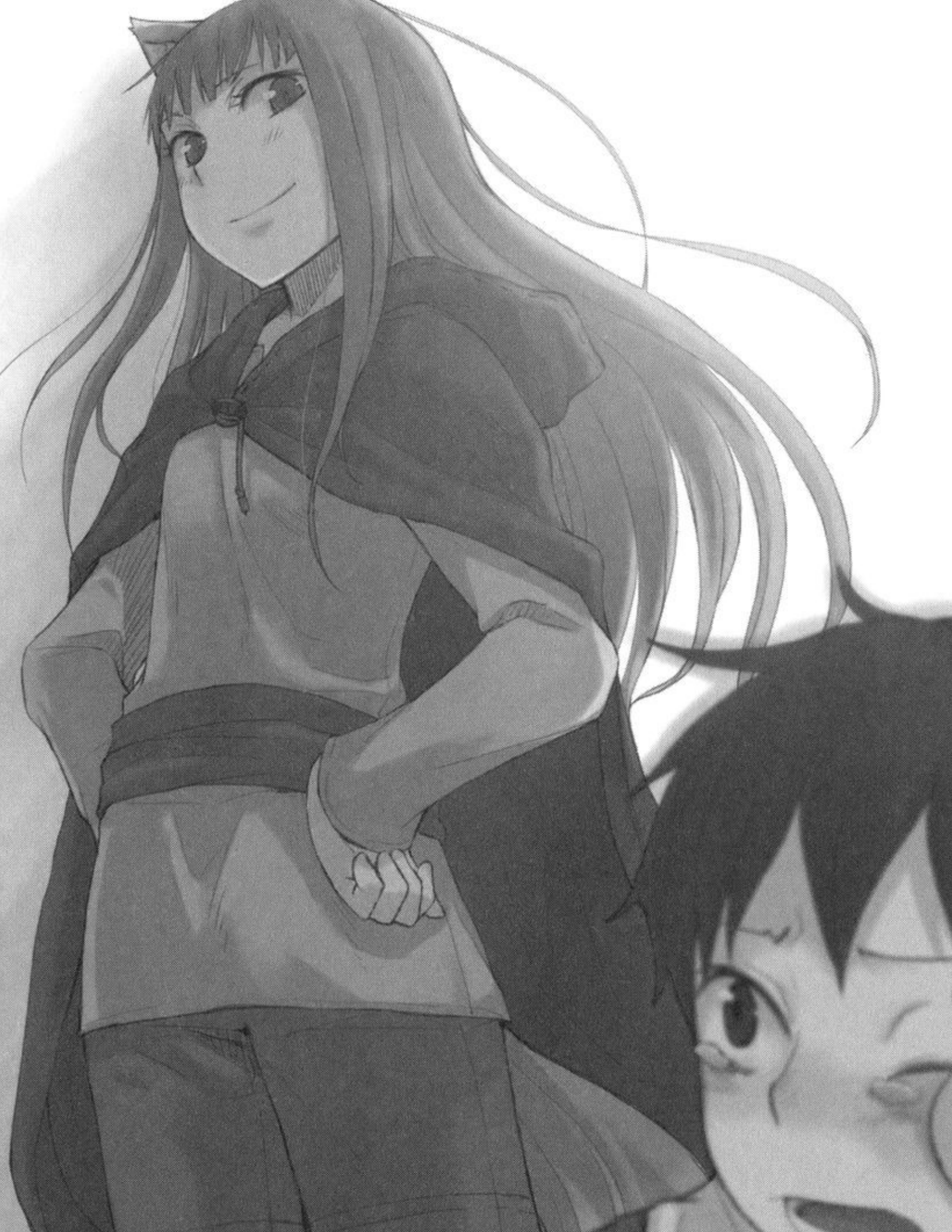
“Is she ill?”

The voice was clear, unlike its tone. With the sun blinding him, Klaus couldn't see the person's face or even judge their height as they approached. But realizing that someone was indeed really there made him cry, even if the tears embarrassed him.

“I.. I don't know.. she suddenly.. fell down..”

“Hmm..”

That person lightly walked over to him with and Klaus finally saw them clearly. It was a woman.



“Oh, I see.”

She looked at Ariette's face and spoke sternly. Klaus unconsciously sat up tall, and she continued.

“Simple exhaustion.”

It was a letdown.

“Huh..?”

“Look, her leg muscles are all in knots.”

She placed her hand on Ariette's calf.

“But..”

“After all, she *did* ask for rest several times.”

Klaus was speechless.

“And she has eaten little. She was bound to fall.”

Of course, that was only natural. But that wasn't what was strange.

“How would you know that?”

“Oh, I should not have said that.”

She intentionally covered her mouth and looked away. She must have been watching them. But he'd surveyed their surroundings every time they went up a hill. There wasn't a single place where anybody could have hid themselves. Where was she watching from?

“I had no plan on greeting you two. But it was too pitiful to watch.”

She smacked Ariette's waist before looking at him as though scolding him.

His heart felt like it was on fire.

“I did my best..”

“You took care of her? Hmph. You *do* know that her body is different from yours, do you not?”

Being told in this way was too much. He was speechless, but also embarrassed.

“I have been watching you two since last night. You know all too well just how different her body is.”

Her face twisted into a mischievous smile. Klaus felt himself blushing furiously. She saw him.

“I see.. so that is what it means for a male to ‘get lucky’. But-”

She stood up, placing her hand on her waist and smiling at him again.

“You are quite brave to stand up to the wolves. I admire your courage.”

“Eh.. uh, ah!!”

“Hmm. You are rather obtuse.”

As she stood up above him, he noticed the fangs in her evil-looking smile. And that wasn't it. It finally sank in that there was something even stranger about her. She wore a cloak with a feathered belt, and trousers made of fur, which only nobles wore. And on the hair under that cloak..

“Oh. you have just noticed this? Then I guess you haven't noticed *this*..”

She flung off her cloak.

“Ah..”

“Lovely fur, is it not?”

With that, the fur waved at him.. a flawless wolf's tail, and two beastly ears, greeting him and dragging those wolves back into his mind.

“Was.. that..”

“..Was that?”

Her gaze felt like it had cast a spell on him.

“Was that you who.. saved us.. last night?”

A breeze brushed by her cloak and her tail waved in the wind. Her face, as lit by the setting sun, silently said “my goodness.”

“You.. you did save us, didn't you?”

“I just happened to be sleeping there. They found me, and escaped on their own accord. That is

all.”

The matter seemed uninteresting to her. He was stunned. His jaw opened, then closed, then opened again. A few moments later, he was finally able to swallow and calm himself down. He had heard of many stories of human-like animal creatures, who sometimes spoke to and blessed people. But there were also some that played with people..

“Are you a spirit?”

“No!!”

Her anger was obvious. Klaus shied away, and she looked at him in embarrassment.

“Hmm. I have been called such by humans, but I do not like it.”

Her look of embarrassment at losing her temper made it seem she wasn't much older than him. But she was undoubtedly beautiful.

“H-how shall I.. refer to you?”

He was trying to sound like an adult. But she only raised an unhappy eyebrow.

“I do not like that. Anyway, if your tongue is tied, untangling it takes a lot of work.”

She was laughing at him like he was an idiot. He blushed again and lowered his face. She *was* a spirit, after all. Then, after a sigh, she moved her face closer to the ground.

“Raise your face. I just want to help you, because your journey worries me. I have no wish for praise.”

He was so scared that he couldn't raise his face, but he raised his eyes carefully.

“Yes, that look suits your age much better.”

He looked up at her smiling face and realized how many different types of smiles there were. Seeing the smile, his blush deepened and he looked at the ground, but not for the same reason. It seemed she wasn't angry, after all.

“My name is Holo.”

She crouched next to him as she spoke. It took some time before he realized she was introducing herself.

“M-my name's Klaus.. ma'am.”

“No need to be polite.”

“O-ok..”

This spirit calling herself Holo now stood up with a bitter smile.

“That girl's name is Ariette, is it not?”

“Yes, but-”

“How do I know?”

He nodded determinedly.

“Because you kept calling it out with that lovely voice: “Ariette.. Ariette..”

As she held his shoulder, the blush that had just left his face returned.

“But I do not think it is a good idea to shake someone who is frail.”

He was stunned, and looked at Ariette.

“She is unconscious, and you are calm now. Rinse out her mouth and keep her warm.”

He nodded as if there was a piece of bread stuck in his throat, and moved Ariette's limbs into a more comfortable position by twisting his own body. He then stood to fetch his backpack, but although it wasn't far he hesitated, worried about leaving Ariette alone.

Holo pointed her chin at his pack as if to say that she would watch Ariette, so he ran to fetch it. But he looked back over his shoulder and noticed Holo leaning over Ariette, as though whispering something secretly into her ear.

“This is intolerable. If it was winter, you two would be dead now.”

He was watching over Ariette as Holo studied his backpack.

“You do not even have a blanket. Whatever will you do when it rains?”

“Huh? Well..”

He wiped Ariette's face as he pondered. He wanted to keep her warm, but Holo was right – they had no blanket, nor any wood to make a fire. He could only really cover her with his coat.

“..Take shelter from it?”

Holo paused for a moment before sighing and eying him in surprise. His face dropped again in response. There wasn't even any shelter around them.

"I followed you out of sheer interest, you who traveled such a path so far from river or stream. But I had no expectation that you were this clueless."

He became angry at those words, but didn't say anything out of fear.

"But 'tis strange for you two to travel. Why are you out here? You are but children."

Klaus finally shot her a glare at hearing her call them "children." She seemed older than them, yet she hardly looked like an adult.

"Fool. I have over 200 years behind me."

"S-sorry.."

In a strange way she did look the part, now that she'd said that. After all, if she was a spirit then anything was possible. Having convinced himself, he answered Holo openly and honestly. She lay on the ground, gnawing a piece of bread she'd taken without asking, while waving her tail in lieu of actually chiming into the conversation. She finished eating as he finished telling their story. She then stood and began picking bread from of her teeth with her nails, humming and hawing.

"So that is the house owned by the one named Anseo, or some such?"

"Indeed. You know him?"

"I have heard tell of him in some cities I have been to: an eccentric noble living in the countryside. He is dead, then? I see.."

Klaus wasn't sure whether the lord was eccentric, but he certainly was unhappy to hear the manor he lived in referred to as "the countryside." The manor was luxurious, with over 20 servants. It even had that stony building where Ariette lived, as well as a vineyard and a surrounding village. Holo seemed to notice his feelings, and was smiling.

"What a greenhorn. You have clearly never traveled."

".."

He didn't even know why he was being laughed at. He spun away, unhappy. But her laughter was infectious, so after a while he couldn't help but laugh along.

"Oh, do not be so quick to anger. You have also felt surprised at how large this world is, have you not?"

He spun right back at looked at her in surprise.

“Well, that is normal. Even I experienced that when I began my own travels.”

His instincts were telling him that she was playing with him again, but she didn't look like she was lying.

“..yeah. It really is.”

“Mhm. It is indeed too large. In fact..”

When she paused, his eyes followed her line of sight to Ariette, who had opened her eyes.

“Ariette!”

For a moment Klaus completely forget about Holo, and shouted out when he saw Ariette's eyes. She was awake sooner than usual.

“I.. um.. what..?”

She didn't know what was going on, and was trying to sit up. He nervously stopped her and spoke.

“You just collapsed.. don't you remember?”

Having been told so, it seemed that she was slowly remembering. She looked better, though there was some redness on her face.

“How shameful of me, a servant of God.. but I feel alright now.”

It was only their fifth day together, but Klaus understood her. He could tell from her tone whether she'd go to sleep when he told her to. This time, he let her rise to her feet. Of course, she quickly noticed Holo.

“Ah!”

She was surprised into silence. The ears of a beast, a beautiful tail.. there could be no doubt, she was a spirit. Of course Ariette would be surprised. And yet, she kept impolitely staring at Holo's extra-human features.

Klaus worried that Holo would grow angry at such rudeness. He was also concerned how Ariette might react, having heard him say that all wolves were men the previous night. She might say something awful.

As he was about to whisper into her ear, Ariette, having stood still for a while, suddenly nodded as if she had understood something.

“You come from across the ocean, right?”

What nonsense was she saying? Klaus nervously wanted to correct her, but Holo interrupted.

“Yes, I come from the North. My name is Holo.”

She wasn't angry after all. In fact she was laughing happily, her tail wagging in delight. Ariette took off Klaus' coat and curtsied in front of Holo.

“My name is Ariette Belanger.”

Even a king would be polite to a spirit, yet Ariette was still treating her like an equal. Klaus fretted over her seemingly ignorant manner. But spirits were from their own plane, so Ariette could be right about that.

“Then what can we do for you?”

If this had been inside the mansion she would have looked good, but Klaus couldn't bear staying quiet any longer.

“You're wrong.. m-miss Holo helped you, Ariette.”

He stuttered at her name, undecided on whether to call her “mistress”. But the reason he instantly settled on “miss” was the deadly amber glare she shot him. She seemed to have a revulsion to being called “mistress” Ariette seemed surprised again, and stood up tall. She seemed surprisingly adult all of a sudden.

“Forgive my impoliteness.. and thank you.”

Ariette was always more serious when she prayed before and after meals. She brought her hands up to her chest and looked down. Her sudden courtesy was surprising to Klaus, but seemed to please Holo. In any case, Klaus was relieved that Holo wasn't angry. But still, he was surprised at her refined manner.

“How should I present my gratitude?”

“Gratitude?”

“Indeed. Unfortunately, I'm traveling, so I haven't much to offer you.”

This wasn't the same Ariette who would ask him things like how flowers could live without vases. It embarrassed him to think about how proud he felt to “teach” her.

“Hmph. I desire no tribute. However..”

She stole a glance at Klaus, and so did Ariette. For a moment he felt like he was frog with two snakes targeting him. Their bodies were different, but he felt like he had just been reduced in rank beneath them. Holo happily continued.

“I would like to travel with the two of you? Alright?”

“Huh!?”

Klaus couldn't help but voice his exasperation. The two girls glared at him again. Apparently, he wasn't permitted to have an opinion in this matter. Ariette turned to Holo and smiled.

“If you'd like.”

“My thanks.”

They were smiling at each other like old friends, and nodding. They had decided. Klaus had a sinking feeling, but he wasn't sure why.

“Well, my things are over there. Please give me a hand.”

“Ah, sure..”

Ariette was about to stand, but Klaus stopped her.

“You need to rest well.”

“But-”

“Rest.”

He emphasized by repeating himself. Ariette was taken aback, but she slowly nodded. Holo watched them happily before speaking.

“This way, please.”

She then walked, but stopped after a few steps.

Holo watched them happily before saying “this way” and walking.

“You did not need to be that one-sided, you know.”

She spoke as soon as they started to walk.

“Huh? No I didn't..”

“It is my duty as a man to do the physical labor'.. that would be better, no?”

She said so as she looked at him over her shoulder. As he stared into her amber eyes, he knew he was yet again blushing. Holo could see everything.

“Pfff... you are sure having a difficult time.”

Beneath her cloak, Holo's tail was wagging merrily.

“Nine out of ten men are the same, so do not worry.”

Even though she smacked his back as if in encouragement, it didn't make him feel better.. it felt too much like she was laughing at him behind her smile.

“What is it? We are friends now.”

*Liar*, thought Klaus quietly. Even he knew that she was teasing him.

“Hmm.. well I do play with you.. so..”

She stepped closer to him and stared him in the face, like a wolf observing its prey. Klaus felt attracted to that gaze, and was unable to divert his eyes from hers.

“Tonight, shall the three of us sleep together? Of course, you would be in the middle.”

He immediately thought about how stupid the look on his face must be. He then felt his legs stumble, and he fell. That's why he felt like a frog being watched by snakes when Holo asked Ariette whether she could join them. He'd fallen onto the grass, and Holo knelt down in front of him.

“Oh? Can you not wait until tonight?”

What an evil smile. But before he could get angry, he realized he was comparing her smile to Ariette's and fell flat on his face in shock at how hopelessly he was acting.

*Thump, thump*. His head was knocked, and he looked up at her gentle face.

“I shall make you into a proper adult male.”

And so he fell flat on his face again. An exhausting journey, with three travelers, had begun.

~~~

He hadn't woken up sneezing in a long time. Still under the blanket, he realized that the previous nights weren't warm as he'd remembered - he'd simply been keeping warm by sleeping together with his companion, that strange girl named Ariette. Even the cold morning air now was blown away just by thinking about that. But there was a reason he hadn't slept with her this time.

After they had been expelled from the manor he worked and lived in, he and Ariette had traveled to reach the sea. They then met a strange traveler named Holo. She said that she was two centuries older than them, yet she appeared as a girl only slightly older than Ariette.. save for her wolf's ears, tail and fangs. Those traits were enough to convince Klaus that she was what she claimed.

It was her fault that he had to tolerate the cold alone. She had teased him, saying "let's sleep together." But while Klaus could sleep with Ariette, a girl with little common sense who could pretend he wasn't a boy, Holo was different. She toyed with him. Even if she was a spirit, Klaus wasn't going to obey her.

And so, it had come to this. Klaus took a blanket from Holo and slept alone. She and Ariette covered themselves with the cloaks and coats and slept together. He sensed a missed opportunity as he pictured them all sleeping together.

Holo was a spirit, but that meant she was sometimes wicked. And he didn't completely understand Ariette's ways either. Undoubtedly, both were beautiful.. of course he couldn't bring himself to sleep with them now. But imagining it should be alright. With that thought, he poked his head out of the blanket, and saw Holo.

"Should I tell you why you're making that face?"

She sat there, tidying the fur on her tail. He was stuck now, unable to just crawl back under the blanket. He could only shake his head.

"You are the last to rise."

He slowly got up. Indeed, Ariette was awake and had removed herself some distance to pray. Klaus looked at the sky, where God supposedly lived. It was overcast, and a bit cold today. Speaking of deities, the goddess named Holo stopped playing with her tail and generously handed Klaus some of the bread from her own bag. It wasn't a celebration, and yet here she was handing him wheat-based bread.

"I received it from someone else. You need not restrain yourself."

Even if he were told to restrain himself, his hand would have taken the bread regardless. But he looked worryingly at Ariette, who refused to eat a morning meal.

“Worry not, I have convinced her. See?”

Holo tossed some bread to Ariette, who had finished her prayers and had returned. Ariette nervously reached her hands out and caught the bread like it was a baby as it struck her chest. Her lack of etiquette shocked him, even if he wasn't exactly cultured himself.

“Throwing food is wr-!”

“The seeds of wheat end up on the ground, that's how the world is. So why can I not throw bread, given that it is made of those same seeds ground into a powder?”

“Wha..?”

He felt stupid for making such a noise, but Ariette's face was also contorted as though her nose was being pinched. Her head tilted in thought for a while, then nodded blankly. Klaus suspected they were playing with him again, but could say nothing. After all, an ancient spirit was wiser than the wisest of humans.

“That is called logic.”

After whispering into his ear, she smiled proudly. Right now, she even looked quite impressive to him.

“So anyhow, you two were going to the sea?”

She took tremendous bites, while Klaus nibbled at it as if he wasn't used to eating such quality bread.

“F-for starters.”

“What an aimless journey.”

He ducked his head in embarrassment.

“Actually, it's not-”

“If it were not, you would have had a goal in advance.”

She concluded so, as she wolfed down the last of the bread. Klaus felt his heart skip when he heard the words “aimless journey.” He'd once heard of a weather-worn traveler in a threadbare cap and cloak who wandered the lands on his horse. But if he mentioned this out loud she would laugh at him like the people in the mansion did, so he chose to remain silent.

“Incidentally, you are not just slow to wake. You are slow to eat as well.”

“Huh?”

He looked down: a half-loaf of bread remained in his hands. He considered Holo to be the one who ate too quickly. But the look on Ariette’s face surprised him.

“She seems to want to ask you ‘would you like a knife and spoon?’, does she not?”

That was a sarcastic saying used by servants when there was too much work for dallying, since for nobles - who ate with knives and spoons - eating slowly was the proper etiquette. Of course, Klaus had never used a spoon.

He nervously stuffed the bread into his mouth. Its taste filled his mouth unlike when he nibbled at it, but it was gone after only a few chomps. It felt like a waste, but it was no use regretting it now. Besides, the typically slow-to-eat Ariette was already finished, which compelled him to hurry.

“Then let us pack up and go. The sea is still a while away, but the next city is not far.”

Hearing Holo's words inspired him to pack up quickly. It dawned on him that he was the only one doing the packing, but he couldn't disturb Ariette's prayers and he didn't feel right asking Holo to help. But he found it annoying that he was also expected to carry Holo's pack. Hers was different from their meager pack, full of all manners of apparent necessities for travel, and the heaviest was the leather sack filled with wine.

“You say you cannot carry it all? However did you make it this far?”

She walked up to him as he protested that she was being unreasonable, fangs showing and wearing a suspicious smile.

“Do you really want to know?”

He had many reasons to swallow hard, but none to nod his head. But she nodded and walked ahead while wagging her tail, apparently satisfied at his reaction. He sighed and started walking, having escaped from that stress but still fated to carry their heavy bags. At least it wouldn't be impossible for him to carry two more bags as he walked. As these thoughts swirled in his mind, he noticed someone and looked up. It was Ariette.

“Can I help?”

It was the first time she had asked him that in the six days they traveled together. But he refused her, as she'd collapsed in exhaustion the previous day.

“But..”

He could tell that her expression wasn't one of worry, but guilt. So he handed the bag of food he'd originally been carrying to her. It was quite light now, so she shouldn't be too burdened.

“Then help me with this.”

Ariette nodded at once, and received the bag. He didn't know what had gotten into her, but he was happy that she was being considerate.

“Well, let's go.”

Ariette slung the bag onto her shoulder and followed closely, and quietly, behind Klaus. That was new. But also new was the challenge he found in keeping up with Holo in front of them. He kept worrying that Ariette would stumble again, but it seemed as though the ground was getting flatter, and the hills less steep. When they stopped to rest at noon, they had crossed three hills. Just before stopping, Ariette, who had been silent the entire time, suddenly spoke.

“I still haven't properly thanked you yet for protecting me from the wolves. Thank you so much.”

Klaus was surprised by her sudden seriousness, but she seemed to have been waiting for the right time to thank him. She seemed to really take these things seriously.

“Hmm? Oh, you're welcome.”

She relaxed and breathed in deeply after he replied. Her smile betrayed her lack of confidence, but right now she looked so pretty that he wanted to say “no problem, my pleasure!” But because Holo had seated herself in front of them, he guarded his words. She wasn't facing them, but her ears were.

“In any case, we should eat.”

Just then, he noticed her expression change to a look of boredom. Possibly, she'd forced him to carry the packs so Ariette would think to thank him for his work. His heart was whispering “it's none of her business.” He wasn't traveling with Ariette because he wanted her thanks. But it sure did make him feel happy.

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Holo lay herself down after lunch. Having had so much wine seemed to make her sleepy. She told Klaus and Ariette she would catch up to them, then grabbed a blanket and shooed them onward. When they all walked together they had to match Ariette's pace, but Holo could quickly catch up to them even if they had a bit of a head start.

She had joined them so suddenly, and now wanted her independence. Klaus could only sigh.

But the fact was that she had given him wheat-bread, which was more than enough reason to let her do as she pleased. After all, one was indebted to another who gave them food.

So once again, he and Ariette walked on their own. However, while it seemed that Ariette had closely followed him before lunch - to find a chance to thank him - she now lagged behind as always, looking at him questioningly every time she stopped.

In all candor her frequent stops did annoy him, but he liked it when she looked at him with those eyes. He would wear an expression as if to say “alright then”, and tell her what she wanted to know. But on one such occasion, he heard her cry out in what could only be called a shriek. He turned around to her in surprise.

“Ariette?!”

For an instant the events of two nights ago filled his mind, but he soon calmed down. He knew that if wolves were after them again then Holo would be there to help. But Ariette, who was a bit far behind, was pointing at something while looking at him. At first he thought she looked horrified, but quickly changed his opinion - she was distressed.

“What is it?”

The moment he'd heard her shriek he nearly dropped the bags he was carrying to run to her.. but it didn't seem to be urgent after all. He pulled the bags back up onto his shoulders and then jogged up to her. Hawks would steal things from bags that were left unattended without so much as a shadow of a warning. He bitterly remembered having his lunch snatched from him when he worked as a shepherd for the manor.

“That.. that..”

As he neared her, he saw the expression on her shifting slightly. She wasn't distressed, she was sad and seemed worried. He saw what she was pointing at, a brown hare quite a distance away. It seemed confident it could escape if Klaus made a dash at it.

“It's only a hare.. what's the matter?”

Even if it was her first time seeing a hare, it wasn't something intimidating like a horse, so regardless of her surprised she should find it rather cute. As he considered why she was so agitated, she gulped.

“Its ears..”

He immediately understood what she was concerned about and couldn't hold back his laughter.. she must have thought someone had pulled its ears and stretched them out.

“Their ears are normally like that. They’re long so they can hear tiny noises from far away.”

On that fateful night, Klaus had heard the footfalls of wolves, but when he slept in the hut with the animals, he often heard the hares stomping their feet. They seemed to do that to signal their friends that wolves or foxes were on the prowl. And those ears were the reason they could make such a warning.

“So someone didn't pull them?”

“Of course not.”

Ariette exhaled as though greatly relieved.

“But it sure looks delicious, doesn’t it.”

The hare was busy eating grass, but it kept one wary eye out on them. It was plump and had a fine coat of fur. Klaus was thinking about how greasy his mouth would be if he roasted it and sank his teeth into one of its thighs, but Ariette seemed taken aback by his statement, as if she couldn't believe him.

“Oh.. uh.. that grass sure must be good for him to be enjoying it so much.. yeah, it must be really good..”

It was clearly a lie, but she still bought it. Her expression softened, and she was no longer looking at him like some kind of monster.

“Oh, I see.. sorry, I totally-”

“No, no.. I'm sorry if I scared you..”

Of course it was Klaus who was scared, but at least he'd managed to keep Ariette from hating him. She'd never eaten a hare before? As the thought crossed his mind, he heard her muttering.

“This world is..”

“Huh?”

“Oh, sorry. I meant to say, ‘This world is really filled with many things that I know nothing about, isn’t it’”

She looked as if she was staring off at something distant as she spoke. Her face seemed calm, but was filled with emotion. She had lived inside stony walls ever since the day she was born. With that in mind, he replied.

“Then let’s go and see it.”

“Huh?”

“Go to far-away places, go to the sea. See different things.”

Holo had implied that they ought to have a goal in mind. A journey of learning.. that sounded pretty good to him. But Ariette didn't respond. She just stood there like someone had placed a curse on her. Soon, however, her face relaxed. The smile on that face was so adult-like it shocked him.

“Right! Then we need to go faster!”

The smile melted into her normal one as she continued walking. He nodded firmly three times as if cornered by a fox, then adjusted the bags on his back to keep from clearing his throat.

“Just don't collapse again.”

She nodded at his joke, and sheepishly hid her face under her hood. He felt relieved by her childish behavior.

“Then let's go.”

As he started walking, she immediately followed. They ran into Holo just before sunset.

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“..Wh-”

That sound, which could barely be called a sound at all, spilled forth from Klaus' thoughts and out of his mouth. There was no way he could stifle his surprise and so he stood there, coughing.

“Oh, still too young?”

Holo smiled at him wickedly as she took her leather bag from him. There was wine inside. He'd always thought wine was something sweet, but it was nothing more than a cold, rotten drink that made him feel hot.

“T’would seem that I am the adult here, after all I am taller.”

She sipped the wine as she teased him. He thought that one's height and their ability to drink were unrelated, but had no words to refute her. Since Ariette had a bit and seemed fine, Klaus decided he could manage it as well.. which lead to this embarrassment.

“Wine is the blood of God. If you can't drink it, it's proof that you do not hold the teachings of

God within you.”

Ariette was angrily telling him off and indeed she could be correct, since he’d never heard the words of God. Nonetheless, he felt pathetic about being unable to do something she could do. It made him want to re-take the challenge, and so he reached out his hand.. but Holo smacked it away lightly.

“Wine is to be savored for its taste; there are other drinks for the proud and obstinate.”

He had no choice but to give in.

“What a pity to be unable to understand the joys of wine.”

But she didn't direct that last statement at him, but at Ariette. Ariette, in turn, was puzzled. She stole a glance at Klaus, who felt bad that she was worrying about him and turned away.

“Man has many failings, such as drunkenly invoking God's name for His blessings.”

“What an inelegant thing to say.”

Holo's ears flicked as if to shake off a bug. Ariette smiled, then crossed her hands on her knees as though embarrassed.

“Man’s worst failing is when they hang grapes in bags to make wine, they can’t wait for the wine to slow drip out..”

“..and so they end up squeezing the bag with their hands and ruin the whole thing, right? Indeed, it ends up tasting awful.”

Ariette's eyes closed as she placed her right cheek into her palm. She smiled happily.

“Someone once told me that since wine is the blood of God, and His blood was His blessing, we are such fools that we would even injure God to gain His blessing.”

Klaus hadn't the slightest idea what Ariette was talking about. But Holo seemed to have heard the funniest joke in the world. All Klaus knew was that Ariette must have been slapped on the cheek that time. Her hand rubbed her cheek as if remembering the pain.

“Upon reflection, I vowed never to do that again.”

“If only desires could be suppressed by vows.”

One of Ariette's eyes opened to study Holo, her head tilted as if pretending to be lost in thought. A moment later they both burst out laughing.

“From that point on, I’ve made sure to only take my fair share of God’s blessing.”

“Indeed, the taste of the drops you lick off your fingers is quite something..”

It seemed Holo found wine irresistible. Ariette closed her eyes and giggled. It seemed her hand wasn't on her cheek in remembrance of pain, but rather the taste of good food. Watching her now made Klaus feel a pain in his heart. At first that surprised him, but for some reason he felt relieved after he realized that he'd been depressed ever since drinking the wine.

“What a shame you are unable to experience this joy.”

The two of them looked at Klaus once more, making him feel like a little child. So, like a little child, he turned away.

They joked and talked until the sun went down. It was a cloudy night, so it felt like the darkness suddenly surrounded them. Without a fire, all they could do now was sleep. Of course their sleeping arrangements stayed the same. Mercifully, Holo seemed to have grown bored with teasing Klaus and didn't say any more lines like “shall we sleep together?”

He was both relieved and saddened by that. But he was fearful of what he might discover if he thought too much, so he instead closed his eyes and pulled the covers over himself. The sharp pain in his temples must be due to the wine.

But Ariette was fine with the drink, despite quickly tiring of walking and getting easily distracted with endless questions. Being the one stuck with a headache made him sigh. He was supposed to be guiding her, that unsteadily-walking girl, by the hand.

He was asleep as soon as the thought crossed his mind.. or so it seemed, since he suddenly snapped back to reality as if he had stumbled. He yawned and caught himself drooling on the blanket.. Holo's blanket.

“Damn!”

But it was just a little bit, so he wiped the rest on his sleeve looked up at the sky thinking it would be alright. He thought he had only fallen asleep for a short while, but the moonlight was now peering through the thinning clouds. He shivered, instinctively pulling the blanket back over himself, but then realized he wasn't shivering because of the cold.

If it had been pitch black he would have held it in, rather than risk being unable to find his way back after doing the deed. Luckily there was enough light so he rose, realizing the consequences of holding it in; it would be shameful to do that in front of Holo and Ariette, and bugs would swarm around him.

He shivered again, remembering an unfortunate incident he had suffered in the summer from

holding it in too long. He walked quite a distance, too embarrassed to risk Holo or Ariette seeing him.

“This should be far enough.”

He had made it in time, and sighed in relief before turning and walking back. But it was too dark and he was too groggy, and hadn't tied up his pants properly. He walked back lazily while holding them up with his hand thinking about how relieving the experience had felt.

“You did not realize I was here?”

Holo's eyes were strangely bright in the darkness, where the shape of objects was hazy, and she was squinting in annoyance.

“I-I thought you were an owl spirit or something..”

“Hmph. I am a wolf.”

He felt his foot get stomped. He wasn't sure how to apologize, but Holo walked away so he gave up. A few moments later she turned around and motioned to him to follow her. Shortly afterward she halted and sat. She pointed beside her, as if giving the command “sit.” He obeyed. They were nearly the same height, though her ears stuck up in the air above him.

“I have a question for you.”

“What's that?”

He wasn't sure why she felt obligated to ask him at midnight, but she continued.

“That nobleman, Anseo.. you worked for him?”

“The lord?”

“Yes, him. You are certain he has died?”

Klaus recalled that while he spoke with Holo about the reason they were traveling, she fidgeted when he spoke about Anseo.. perhaps they knew each other?

“Well I'm not sure.”

Klaus had only been told his alleged younger brother's retainer, after all.

“Hmm. Well, I heard that he had an interest in traveling.”

“Yes, he sometimes returned with strange people and things.”

The most strange one was the stony building that housed Ariette.. all the servants thought so.

“So he was lost while traveling? Then there is not much hope.”

She sighed, and lay herself down. It was dead silent around them; all Klaus could hear was the swishing of her tail.

“Was he a friend?”

“Of mine? No.”

Holo used her elbow to prop up her head. She looked so comfortable in the moonlight. This must be the kind of environment she was used to. She held that pose while staring off into the distance. Klaus didn't know what else to say. Holo eventually broke the ensuing silence.

“I have heard he is looking for medicine to halt one's aging.”

“To halt..?”

“Yes, halt. One would never age, and would remain youthful forever.”

Klaus gasped. Why would he want to do that?

“You are but a newborn, so it is quite difficult to understand, is it not?”

He shot her an angry glare, and she stared right back.

“Humans live a little longer than other animals, but it does not take long for them to grow old. I can understand their desire to live a longer life.”

Klaus couldn't imagine why. But he was curious about something.

“Then you're looking for the same thing, miss Holo?”

He immediately realized how clumsy it was to say that, and corrected himself.

“But.. uh.. you seem to always be young and beautiful, so..”

Holo seemed surprised as she smiled back and exposed her sharp fangs.

“Only an innocent child like you would worry about hurting my pride like that. Of course I am an eternal beauty.”

Her nose puffed proudly, and waved her tail as if to show off its majesty. He was just relieved that she wasn't angry, and calmed himself down.

“However, your question was not wrong.”

“Huh?”

“But the medicine would not be for me.”

She smiled sheepishly as if mocking herself. Klaus barely refrained from asking her who the medicine was for.

“Then, one more thing..”

Holo looked back at their campsite for a moment before continuing.

“Is it true that Ariette never left that building after she was born?”

Klaus had never told Holo about that. Had Ariette told her at night? In any case, Klaus really didn't have an answer. But it should be alright to just tell Holo what he thought.

“I think so. At least, that's what all the servants said.”

“Hmm..”

Holo nodded, but Klaus had no idea if she was actually interested. She just kept staring off into space and stopped moving.

“What's wrong?”

Holo shook her head dismissively.

“Alright then. If Anseo has really died then I no longer have a goal. No jokes. I shall have to travel with you two a bit longer.”

“..”

Klaus kept his composure, hoping to hide that he didn't want her to. But the thought that he'd rather be traveling alone with Ariette was plainly written on his face. Holo's eyebrows furrowed in irritation.

“Yes, I know I am a burden. But showing it so plainly on your face wounds me.”

“No.. that's not what I meant..”

“Then you do not mind me following you?”

She smiled, making it impossible for Klaus to even shake his head. It was a smile as beautiful as Ariette's, and he felt compelled to nod. She laughed.

“With that attitude, you would not shout at Ariette even if she punched you in the face.”

Her lovely smile twisted into a malicious one. This spirit could read minds.

“That is fine. Children are allowed to be innocent. Even if your thoughts turn to *this* or *that*, I, your big sister, will graciously forgive you.”

Klaus had no desire to even reply to her. He just stared at the moon.

“But I do envy you.”

Holo had whispered that last line to herself, before crossing her legs and straightening her back. Klaus could only see the slightest bit of her face. What she meant was unclear, as she stared off into space like that. But she soon broke her silence and turned to him again.

“For instance, what would you do if wolves attacked *me*?”

That was quite the calculated question. But if it was Holo he had nothing to fear.

“Well, I'd stay out of your way and try not to cause trouble.”

Hearing his reply made her smile in bemusement before lying down again. He jolted and sat up tall, but he couldn't help it: she had put her head on his lap.

“A reasonable answer. But males who hedge their bets like that will be despised.”

“Um, uh..”

“Why are you uming and uing? At least have the courage to say something like 'With my body, I shall protect you'. Say it!”

Again his foot was on the receiving end of a stomp. It seemed she really wanted to hear those words. It was embarrassing to say something like that, but she kept staring at him. She probably would get angry if he didn't say it, even if she wasn't going to forgive him if he did say it.

He wavered, but when Holo coughed intentionally he prepared himself. He breathed in as though he was about to jump into an icy river. He raised his head, closed his eyes and spoke.

“With.. with my body..”

“Hmm.”

“..with..”

“Mhm?”

“...w-w-with..”

Just saying those three words broke his mind. Realizing that, Holo straightened her back and murmured.

“I shall protect you.”

“I-I-I shall.. pro-protect you..”

For such a short sentence it felt like he was being asked to recite an epic poem. He still sat there all tensed-up as if it truly was a poem recital. His head was still raised, and his eyes still closed, but it felt like something was about to hit him.. he could tell she was staring at him.

“Hmm. Alright. Enough.”

She turned away, and he felt greatly relieved. He inhaled as though he had just surfaced for air from a deep dive underwater.

“But it will be difficult to move on to the next stage.”

“Wha? Next stage?”

“Mhm.”

Having replied, she moved toward him. He might still be alive, but his body felt dead. He couldn't move, and soon he couldn't even breathe. He heard a noise, but wasn't sure if she had chuckled or if the finger she had put into his ear made it sound that way.

All he knew was that she had her arm around him, and her head on his shoulder. Time froze, but before long he felt an itch on his left ear.. that was probably from her breathing on it. He didn't even have the energy to wonder why she was doing this. It was like a dream and nightmare at the same time.

“If I bite you, that will be the end of you, correct?”



Her words sank into his brain like a hand poking the soil. He knew she was joking, but it was impossible to take it as such. He was barely able to turn his neck. And there he saw her moon-like amber eyes and sharp fangs, and smelled a sweet scent that made him dizzy.

He could tell, in this strange atmosphere, as she opened her mouth to clearly display her teeth, that he would be eaten. All he could do was stare at her teeth as they approached him, his broken mind thinking “this isn't as bad as I pictured it would be.” He felt as if he was falling asleep, and closed his eyes. Only her sweet scent remained.

And then..

He was spared.

“This is too dangerous. I cannot simply eat you.”

Her face suddenly moved off of his shoulder as she unconsciously spoke. The dream-like haze that clouded his mind instantly dissipated. All that was left was an empty mind. He looked at her as though he had just dropped an expensive meal. He felt his heart beating as her face moved away.

“Oh ho.. from your face I take it that you wish to continue?”

Her evil smile returned and she poked his nose with her finger. Of course, he was still well aware that everything she was doing was a joke. He could tell. She was toying with him again.

“Do not feel upset. If you can protect me from that, it should be safe for us to continue.”

“Huh?”

Like a trained dog, he stared in the direction her chin was pointing.

“Ah..”

His mouth was frozen open as if he couldn't quite scream.

“Ariette!”

His mind went blank when he saw Ariette, who had been sleeping nearby, sitting up tall watching them. Half of her face was obscured by a scarf, as if hidden in shadow. As her emotionless eyes stared at him from under that scarf, he felt a cold sweat on his back.

They locked eyes for a moment before she lowered her face like a wounded hare. He got the sinking feeling that he had just let her see something bad. Something *really* bad. He wasn't sure what it was exactly, but he was desperately trying to think of an excuse.

Holo chuckled quietly to herself. He could feel each giggle through the arms she still had wrapped around his neck, as though they were like the warning stomps of a rabbit.

“I have heard that the flames of love burn more passionately when there are obstacles to overcome.”

“There aren't any obstacles here.”

“Then you have no reason to think of an excuse.”

Holo shot back effortlessly. Klaus glared at her. She just stared back with eyes like the soft sunshine of spring.

“I am terrible. But I so love to bully such cute kids.”

She moved her arms away as she spoke, then yawned and stretched, her tail wagging vigorously. He couldn't help but feel like an exhausted puppy; Holo was just having too much fun at his expense.

“Do not look so dissatisfied.”

Her ears were pricked up carefully, and she spoke in a soft voice that Ariette couldn't have heard. She then tilted her head and continued.

“You understand now, do you not?”

“Huh?”

Klaus fired back, obviously not understanding her. Holo seemed irritated, but shook her head as if accepting his reaction.

“You must be told in advance that it will not only be wolves who take aim at you. Ariette is a sweet young girl.”

“Wha?”

“She is cute. So cute that you will have to compete. But you should be alright if you remain brave.”

She stood as she spoke her final sentence, walking past him and patting his head. He smacked her hand away, but she laughed merrily and made her way back to bed. She seemed so relaxed that Klaus wondered if the entire conversation they just had was a dream.

He had no idea what she meant with that last sentence. He just stared at her as she walked away. He then lowered his head, finally free of that wolf, to tidy the hair she'd ruffled. But he

stopped halfway, wondering if he ought to. It seemed a pity, somehow, to tidy it up.

But he only hesitated briefly, realizing that it wasn't Ariette he was watching now, as the two of them shared secrets among themselves. It made him feel bad to leave his hair messy, so he straightened it and sighed.

He was unable to hear their quiet conversation, but when it was finally over he was finally able to go back. He was suddenly feeling oddly exhausted. He murmured to himself for a while under his blankets.

“Well I can be sure of one thing..”

“They both smell sweetly, but Holo and Ariette are different..”

“But which one do I like more?”

But before he could come up with an answer he knocked his own head. It was midnight now. He sighed deeply, as if trying to blow away the blanket.

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The next morning, Klaus felt so guilty that he couldn't bring himself to look at Ariette. But it seemed Holo had given her a good excuse. After her morning prayers, Ariette greeted him as usual. It eased his heart, but he still felt strangely lonely. For some reason, he had almost been hoping Ariette *would* misunderstand things. It shocked him to catch himself thinking that way.

“I'm not trying to test her.”

He found himself searching for another excuse, and it slowly ate away at him that he was acting like such a stupid boy. But it didn't change the fact that he was having these thoughts. In the next one, Holo and Ariette were changing clothes. Imagining the beautiful Holo doing that was tantalizing.

“..nice.”

He felt himself nodding at such a devious thought, but then felt his head being knocked back to reality. When he raised his eyes, he saw an unhappy-looking Holo.

“Eat quickly, or you will be the last one again.”

Being hit so suddenly did shock him, but his nervousness really stemmed from the fear that Holo was reading his mind. He stuffed his bread into his mouth and swallowed it as if swallowing his secrets.

“Eating breakfast is a skill.”

Holo seemed bored while she spoke, making it feel like everything the previous night had been a joke. It made him feel lonely, but also lucky that Holo didn't really see his thoughts.

Afterward, he was once again put in charge of their luggage as they set out once more. Today the girls walked together, with him at the lead. He tried to carefully listen in on their conversation, which had been about alcohol. It had shifted from grape wine to the amber drinks made of grains.

It was an uninteresting topic for him, having been bested by wine. He considered the juices made of boiled berries, honey and water to be far more delicious than any wine. But he wasn't feeling brave enough to turn around and say so.

Their laughter seemed both sympathetic and as if they were pitying him. He grew emotional as he realized how different he was from his friends. So he walked alone in the front as the path grew rockier and until he started seeing bushes ahead of them. They were coming upon hill-top forests. To their left was a meadow in which he carefully spied water. It was probably a marsh.

“A lovely view.”

Holo spoke as she had caught up with Klaus. Ariette, who was lagging behind, covered her mouth in awe. Indeed they had crossed many hills, and never seen such a view.

“Do you think so too?”

He had turned to ask Ariette as she stared, but Holo nudged his side. Ariette was ignoring them, taken in by the view. She finally pointed far into the distance.

“Is that.. the sea?”

She was pointing at the marsh. Klaus waited for Holo to reply, but she instead looked at him and smiled. And so, he replied.

“No. It's a marsh.”

“Marsh?”

“Kind of like a pond, but narrower and muddier.”

Her head nodded in understanding. Klaus was reminded of catfish when he saw the marsh, wondering how amazed Ariette would be to see such an amazing fish. But she didn't give him a chance to talk about it.

“Does the sea look like this?”

“The sea's *much* bigger than this.”

Klaus had never seen the sea. But he had heard of it. He was drawing a circle on the ground to try to explain it, when Holo interrupted.

“How big is it?”

“Wha?”

Klaus couldn't find an answer. Ariette turned her attention to him from the marsh, staring at him inquisitively.

Klaus couldn't find an answer. Ariette turned her attention to him from the swamp and stared inquisitively. He hesitated, then simply stated what he'd been told.

“No matter which way you look, all you can see is the sea.”

Ariette gasped in wonderment, but Holo smiled like she realized that Klaus had never really seen the sea. Thankfully they didn't question him any further. Ariette simply smiled.

“I want to see it as soon as possible.”

Seeing that smile shocked Klaus into nodding, at which point Holo stomped on his foot. After that, they decided to eat their lunch while at that spot. Holo spoke while eating some jerky.

“The next city will be near us as we pass the middle of the forest and swamp.”

Her indirectness inspired Klaus to question her.

“Is it a difficult path to walk?”

“No. It was difficult when I journeyed here from the city. If we pass through the forest directly it will be near us, but that path is dangerous. However, it is not as dangerous as your situation after that.”

“My situation?”

“Yes. To be precise, your financial situation.”

Klaus held the jerky Holo had given him between his teeth as he fumbled through his belongings. He had been given some money by the people in the house. It was five coins, all slightly fatter than his thumb. Three were originally black, but were now discolored green. Likewise, the others had been gray but were now tinted red with rust. All five were his treasures.

“Oh ho? Are those all yours?”

Holo seemed slightly surprised. Klaus proudly nodded. It would be tough to make it through half a year with them, but three months would be manageable.

“Is that money?”

Ariette observed the coins in his hand.

“Yes.”

“Money is the source of many a sin, and yet it's totally different from what I'd imagined.”

Klaus wondered just what she had imagined; it must have been pretty interesting. But he didn't know what to think of the words Holo uttered next.

“That one would be enough for a loaf of bread.”

After some time, Klaus finally spoke after a confused “Huh?”

“I don't know much about money. I can tell if furs are good, but money's complicated..”

Holo was rummaging through her pack as he spoke and soon produced a small pouch. She untied its white and purple strings and poured its contents onto her hand. What was there crushed his spirits like a blow to the head.

“This one can buy over a pound of bread. This white one can buy a great deal. I cannot tell you specifically why, but you should understand when you see it.”

Her words were clear they felt cruel to him. The coins in her hand was ornate. They were heavy. The one worth over a pound of bread was the color of black tea, and the one that could buy a great deal was a dull white. He looked at his own coins again and felt like crying at how pitiful they looked by comparison.

“Cities exist for a reason. You need money, because in order to continue traveling you need to buy bread. So what will you do?”

She dropped the coins back into the pouch as she spoke. Their sounds rang out brightly, unlike his own dull-sounding coins. Knowing how big the world was made him feel sad, but it came out as anger. It wasn't Holo's fault, though he felt she was a cruel person. He wanted to talk back, but ultimately he said nothing. Instead of words, tears welled up in his eyes until Ariette finally spoke.

“Bread is the fruit of labor, so just find work and everything will be solved.”

She smiled as she watched him; she was worrying about him. His face turned red, and he nervously and forcefully dried his eyes.

“Yes, right. Go find work.”

“Mhm.”

Holo nodded without a smile and bit the jerky in her mouth.

“But what if a day of work can only buy you food for the the day?”

“Then work more. More work should be able to earn more.”

He wasn't confident about his answer, but after stealing a glance at Ariette he saw her nodding and felt brave enough to look at Holo again.

“Work more? Well of course. But can you?”

Again she was toying with him. He wanted to protest, but Holo continued.

“Many adults in the city have no work. Do you think you can find a job? You are but a young pup.”

His mouth was frozen as if he wanted to say “Huh?” again.

“You have no power, nor any special skills. You do not know anyone. Of course, those who are literate are better off in the human world.”

Klaus knew he wasn't literate, but he remembered that Ariette was.

“Ariette, weren't you literate?”

She nodded with a smile. Well, then there was no problem.

“Then while Ariette works hard, what are you going to do?”

Those words felt like a spear hitting him in the chest.

“Well, I'll wait by her side.”

“Really.”

Holo squinted at him. He bit his lips. He couldn't take this.

“However, I do not think there are many jobs requiring literacy.”

She scratched her face with the end of her piece of jerky. Klaus glared at her angrily, as if to ask why she bothered bringing it up in the first place. It was like she was telling them to stop their trip.

“Well, there is one thing you can do.”

Klaus murmured “what?” in his heart.

Holo stared off into the distance with her lovely amber eyes.

“Go back.”

It was such a sudden suggestion that Klaus was left speechless.

“You should be able to make it if you collect water from the marsh and take my food. It will not do to continue forward. You two were expelled, but you are only children. If you plead you should be able to go back.”

It was a reasonable suggestion but it made him angry. He didn't nod. Soon he realized what he was angry about: they were supposed to go to the sea together.

“I know what you are thinking.”

Holo smiled.

“You have no guide, nor anyone to depend on. You can only press onward. After you have eaten all of the food, without money or a job what will you do? Beg? Sitting on the road in tattering and filthy clothes?”

He knew that. He knew Holo was right. But he didn't want to go back.

“Stubborn.”

“Um..”

Ariette, who had been listening quietly, suddenly spoke.

“I want to see the sea if I can, and see the world.”

Klaus looked at her as if she was saving him. Holo's eyes widened a little as she looked at Ariette questioningly.

“But I don't know much about the world. I can't deny what you say, miss Holo. I am just beginning to see how many painful things there are in the world.”

“Indeed.”

Holo nodded in satisfaction. Ariette's words depressed Klaus. Traveling the world; was their promise that unimportant? Ariette had stopped talking, and removed her scarf to touch her neck.

“Ariette?”

She didn't reply. She fiddled with something like a necklace, and took it off. She showed it to them. It had a green gem the size of a quail egg.

“Wow..”

That was all Klaus could manage as he watched the sunlight dancing on the gem. It was the same kind a noblewoman had once worn when the landlord invited her to his mansion. He'd heard the older women working for the landlord say it was worth more than an entire village.

“I've heard this is worth a lot. It should be able to buy us bread.”

Klaus heard that and looked at Holo.

“Then we shouldn't have any more problems.”

He was expecting Holo would be stunned, but the one who ended up stunned was him.

“Do you believe there will be no problems if you reveal this?”

“Huh?”

Both of the kids voiced their exasperation.

“I discovered that already while you were asleep. What? You did not?”

Klaus sheepishly nodded; he hadn't noticed it.

“You only noticed the soft bits?”

“No!! Absolutely not!”

He immediately roared at Holo for saying something so evil.

“Anyway, let us not talk about this for now. If you could sell this, you could indeed survive for a while.”

“Then-”

Holo interrupted Ariette.

“But *can* you really sell it? No matter the era, such stones have special meaning to people. If this is a gift from someone, you should think it over properly.”

“No. I haven't a clue who this is from. The priest told me it would be useful if I am in trouble. I think this is what he meant.”

Holo scratched her nose in thought before slowly replying.

“You do not even know who this is from? There is an inscription on the part where the stone connects to the necklace. What does it say?”

“It's my name.”

Holo's ears instantly flicked up.

“Is that all?”

“No, there is a bit more.. 'to my daughter Ariette.'”

Holo's eyes opened wide. She looked at Klaus with her finger on her chin. Klaus was staring at her in disbelief. It had to be something given to her by her parents.

“That's not just a gift, it's a treasure. It's obvious.”

After saying so, he swallowed hard – Ariette was staring at him like he was an idiot. He was quite shocked, but Ariette still stared at him.

“Who do you think this was from?”

“Huh? Well..”

“From God.”

Holo put on a twisted smile.

“Um..”

“The God you are thinking of would not dig up a stone and dirty his hands. So who does she mean?”

“God.. the Lord..”

Upon saying that he felt a strange sensation as Ariette's eyes focused on him.

“Ariette is the lord's..”

Daughter. The revelation took them all by surprise, though with only the necklace as evidence they couldn't confirm it. After a moment of silence, Ariette raised his eyes from the necklace in disbelief.

“Eh? Uh.. wha? The landlord is the Lord?”

“Of course not! You're the daughter of the landlord, a human.”

“Eh.. b-but-”

Klaus had no idea how to explain any of this to the dumbfounded Ariette, so he came across rather rudely. Holo finally spoke calmly.

“Indeed, we are all the children of God, correct?”

Ariette nodded, but Klaus thought “What? Of course not.” He was about to excitedly try to explain things to Ariette when he was grabbed by the collar. By Holo.

“I know you wish to explain it to her, but now is not the time.”

Since he hung his head down as if scolded, Holo released him without saying anything else. She sighed as if she were overwhelmed.

“As your elder, I do not believe you should sell this.”

Ariette was the landlord's daughter. If this was his dying gift to her, then it was his legacy. Even Klaus couldn't bring himself to sell it. They really *should* go back; if she *was* the landlord's daughter their lives would change when they returned.

Klaus calmed down as he reconsidered Holo's suggestion. He stared at the ground, thinking that it had only been a short trip. But he was happy; it would be better for him to think this way. He slowly raised his eyes.

“Miss Holo, we should-”

Holo suddenly turned to him. Her eyes were sharp. Something was amiss. It happened so suddenly Klaus couldn't finish his sentence. He just stared at her. But she wasn't looking at him. She was staring off into the distance, in the direction that Klaus and Ariette had come from.

“Misfortunes never come alone.”

She stood up.

“Miss.. miss Holo?”

Ariette was still silently sitting in puzzlement. But after Klaus called Holo's name again, she finally looked at him. This time she was baring her fangs as if deliberating something. It was like she wore a smile, but wasn't really smiling.

“You. Is the brother of Anseo a good man?”

It was a sudden question, but Klaus replied immediately.

“No.”

“If such a person wants to inherit his brother's legacy, what will he do when he learns his brother had children?”

Klaus couldn't bring himself to answer; the answer was too obvious.

“It seems you are fortunate to have left after all, before you were discovered.”

Holo's smile became genuine.

“Ariette is cute. As is your character, despite being incapable. So what is it you are lacking?”

Klaus remembered what Holo had told him the previous night. It was like a charcoal ember he had swallowed, still burning in his stomach.

“Stand up, Ariette.”

Klaus finished packing. He then gripped his wooden stick tightly, as he had when he faced down the wolves.

“They are still far away, but this is no time to take our time. It will be troublesome if they catch up and surround us.”

Klaus glanced at Ariette, then balled up his fist and looked back at Holo.

“You wish to go through the forest?”

Klaus nodded.

“Ariette.”

She didn't understand what was going on, and just held her necklace nervously like a simple and innocent girl. Klaus couldn't drink. He couldn't write. He wasn't even as tall as she was. But..

“It's alright, I'm with you.”

He reached his hand out to her after saying so. She stared at him in shock. He felt embarrassed to know that Holo was watching this, but he still held his hand out to her calmly.

“Mhm..”

She nodded took his hand in her own gentle, soft, and incapable hand.

“Then let's go.”

His only thought was “I must protect this hand.” Almost as if she heard him say that though out loud, she nodded. He held her hand tightly and ran into the forest after Holo.

It felt less like they were running, and more like they were swimming through the trees. The forest was lively in the springtime. Klaus got the impression that he was running inside a giant monster's belly. The sky was replaced with leaves. The air was fresh, yet somehow suffocating.

After a while his chin, hands, and neck were scratched up, since he didn't have a scarf. And yet, despite Ariette wearing her scarf over her entire head she had scratched around her eyes. Luckily the tree and grass obscured the path that they realized was there after noticing the rocks and tree roots.

Holo ran onward without hesitation, and the two children followed. It turned out to be easier for them than expected, but if Holo wasn't with them they would have had a difficult time finding the path. They might even slip and step in the puddles that were everywhere. Klaus shuddered at the thought of that, and the tripping on a slippery moss-covered root and being injured.

The forest floor sloped upwards from their left to their right. Holo let them know when a small stream or puddle was in front of them so they could carefully jump over it. Klaus held Ariette's hand the entire time. He got the impression that she would vanish into the forest if he didn't hold it tightly. She had a tough time on the hilly road, so this forest path was making her pant heavily. He tightened his grip.

Ariette was in danger of being caught by her pursuers. But no matter how hard this was, Klaus would never release her hand. She, too, didn't seem to want to be separated from him. But how far could they run in this situation? As the stress started to get to Klaus, Ariette suddenly fell as if she had tripped on something. She knelt down.

“Ariette!”

Klaus nervously stopped, turning around as she shouted. He finally noticed the sweat pouring off of him. He felt like he could still run, but the lower half of his body was gripped with fatigue. Ariette looked at him as if saying there wasn't a problem, but it didn't seem to be true. Unfortunately they had no choice but to keep running. Klaus automatically pulled the exhausted Ariette back up.

“You didn't twist your ankle, did you?”

She seemed dizzy with fatigue, her eyes unable to focus at first. She couldn't stand up tall, but she shook her head in reply. That eased his mind, but he still couldn't bring himself to start running again.

“What happened?”

Holo had come back, noticing that they hadn't been behind her. Even the swift-footed Holo was panting quickly with wounds on her face. The tail, which brought her so much pride, was such a mess from the wet grass that it looked angry.

“She fell.”

“She did not twist her ankle?”

Ariette shook her head again.

“If you cannot run we will be in trouble. We will be there in just a while.”

Klaus didn't bother asking her how far it really was. If they'd even made it halfway, Holo would have encouraged them by saying so. Obviously they weren't even close yet. Noticing the expression on his face, Holo smiled and picked the leaves off his brow.

“Oh ho.. whatever is the matter? You have a stick as mighty as any spear if anything should happen.”

Her gentle eyes helped him calm down a little. He grasped the stick tightly to defy the “anything” she might be talking about, and nodded.

“In any case we can relax if we make it to the city before they do.”

She then resumed running. *We will find a way once we arrive.* With that thought to support them, they sped off after her.

When he had been a servant in that mansion, Klaus slept in a grassy corner of the stables with hogs. But there were slaves who were worse off; some from wars, some from debt, and some who spoke foreign languages. They worked the hardest, doing the landscaping and tending to

the vineyards.

Klaus was so disgruntled by his daily labor that he thought of escaping four days a week. But the slaves who tried to escape were caught by the deacon who was the lord's housekeeper; he would run after them in his armor.

They tried to run because they had hope. Klaus had heard there was a law that a landlord couldn't catch them once they were in another cities' walls. They said "the air of a city can free a man," and Klaus now clearly understood their hopes.

But two of every three of them had been caught, and then whipped. Would Klaus be whipped? Or hanged? He remembered the thunderous sound of the whips, and the blood on the backs of the servants who were punished. It made him tighten his grip on Ariette's hand.

"God is always with us."

Ariette gently smiled as if he had conveyed his emotions through his hand, though her exhaustion was plain on her face. *I have to work harder.* With that thought he bit down hard, trying to bite off the worries swirling in his head.

"Let's go."

Ariette ran like a bird flying for the first time. Klaus had no idea what they should do once they made it to the city. Sell off the necklace Ariette's parents gave her? Get jobs? Or continue their travels after begging for a sack of water and food?

Holo lead them through the dark forest. She didn't look particularly encouraging from behind, but whenever she turned back and smiled it felt like they were being defended by a fierce pack of wolves.

She would teach them, Klaus thought. She had already taught them so many things since they'd met, so she would continue to do so. All Klaus had to do now was hold Ariette's hand and run. He ran with those thoughts distracting him from their pain of running with their luggage.

Suddenly a sound rang out so loudly it felt like it tore the forest apart. Klaus stopped. Ariette ran into his shoulder from behind and stumbled in front of him. She didn't apologize; she was too busy staring into the depths of the forest.

That sound was like a chicken being strangled. As Klaus wondered whether it was in fact a bird, the voice rang out again followed by the sound of beating wings.

"..just a bird?"

It wasn't easy to stay calm, but Klaus did as he murmured to himself. Ariette was terrified, it

was plainly written on her face as she covered her ears with her hands. After hearing the flapping of wings once more, Klaus decided it had to be a bird.

“It's alright Ariette, it's only a bird.”

“A bird?”

She was suspicious because Klaus couldn't tell her what kind of bird it was. He'd seen birds big enough to snatch a baby, so he confidently told her it was whatever kind those were. Ariette replied “right,” at which point he took her hand once more.

“Things will get bad if we don't catch up with miss Holo right away.”

Upon saying so he turned ahead and immediately froze. Up ahead on the curving slope was Holo, just standing there. She wasn't waiting for them. Her head seemed to be pointed down, and those ears of hers that were more sensitive than a rabbit's were listening around.

“Miss Holo..”

He didn't know if it was wise to keep talking. Holo suddenly turned to him, but she wasn't looking at him but at something far behind him in the opposite direction. There was only one thing she would be looking for with such worried eyes. He gulped as he watched her, but she eventually spoke while still staring off behind him.

“They are not able to catch up to us.”

“Are- are they lost?”

“Perhaps. I shall go and see. You two rest. No matter which way you go it would be a dangerous struggle. But never fear, I shall return soon.”

She didn't wait for a reply, and gently hit him on the shoulder before walking back along the path. Of course, Klaus had no way to stop her. He just watched her until she vanished. He had been wondering if it was alright to let her go alone, but Holo knew how scared he really was.

Still, it was a good chance for them to rest. With that thought he turned to Ariette, then immediately shouted wide wide eyes.

“Wha- ah!! Ariette!”

She fell like a puppet whose strings had suddenly been cut, and he grabbed her and fought to keep them balanced. She wasn't breathing strangely; she was simply exhausted. As she closed her eyes he remembered how exhausted she been a few days ago before her collapse. It was a horrible memory that brought a pain to his stomach. He gazed at her face and heard her whisper “water.”

“Water? Alright, just a second..”

He held her up with one arm, while letting their luggage fall haphazardly and uncorking their leather waterskin forcefully. There wasn't much water left, but he didn't care. He immediately brought it to her lips. Her eyes didn't open, but her mouth did when she sensed the bottle.

He carefully nursed her, worried if they had enough left. At first she coughed as if choking, but soon she let the water trickle down her throat. He didn't know when he should stop, so he waited for her to close her mouth before raising the skin. It was a waste of water, getting it all over her chin and cloak, but she wasn't angry or surprised. She simply smiled at him.

“Are you feeling worse?”

Ariette shook her head, and he believed her – she didn't look worse. Her breathing had calmed down, maybe because she'd had her fill of water. Klaus wanted her to just get some sleep, but she took his right hand with her left, her eyes still closed.

He held that light and frail hand until her eyes finally opened and she smiled calmly and brightly. Seeing that smile made his chest feel hot; painfully so. Just as his thoughts were about to spill out as words, she breathed out in an odd sigh. He soon realized she was actually yawning, and managed to relax.

“Want to sleep?”

He smiled as he asked, making her purse her lips in embarrassment.

“Might be a good idea.”

He whispered as he wiped her chin. She would recharge only if she slept, even for a second. He knew the devil of sleep wouldn't let her go, and sure enough she eventually nodded. Just as he moved into a more comfortable position, she fell asleep. Her soft body sank into his arms. She was a bit taller than he was, so he worked to avoid being pinned down by her.

Were it possible, he would have preferred to let her sleep. But it wasn't unless Holo took her time, and Klaus wanted Holo to come back as soon as possible. The forest was dark and quiet. What should he do if Holo didn't return? He thought about it, despite knowing it was useless for him to worry.

Fear wouldn't solve anything. He shook his head to discard those thoughts and breathed in deeply to encourage himself. But even if he stopped worrying, he couldn't solve their predicament. The leather waterskin lay on the ground, empty. The more he thought about it the more he realized he was thirsty.

He thought it over as he watched Ariette sleep like a little bunny. They had hopped over so many streams along their way; surely he could find one quickly. He stirred, and despite not wanting to let go of that hand - soft as a freshly-baked loaf of bread - he gently set it down. He carefully moved the luggage over to support her in his place.

He felt guilty about it, but his thirst won over that guilt. After confirming that she was still quietly sleeping, he took the waterskin and stood. His throat felt like it was on fire. He tried swallowing some non-existent saliva, and imagined how nice it would be to sip on some cool water.

He tried to find some water-loving plants, not wanted to stray too far from Ariette. As he walked in a circular region around her, he soon found a big tree not too far away. It was covered in moss, and just behind it there was a stream. But there wasn't enough water even to drink, let alone fill the skin.

After a moment's hesitation he followed the stream down the slope. It wasn't a tough path, though he carefully avoided slipping on the moss as he made his way. Soon he came to a cliff, and looked down with jubilation. His eyes darted around as he tried to find a way down as quickly as possible.

The “cliff” was actually no taller than he was, and there was a large pool beneath him. It was probably where many of the forest streams gathered. The water was so clear, and he could see sand under its surface.

He tried to stay calm as he nervously pushed the tall grass aside and found a way down the cliff. The way was suddenly rocky, and he became anxious about his footing as he carefully approached the pool. It was just under him now, in a spot with a cave.

There was water in the cave as well. Its entrance was tiny, and he couldn't have even entered it if he bent over. Nor did he have the slightest idea where it lead. All he actually cared about, of course, was the water. It was so clean.

He immediately knelt down and drank it, unable to describe his joy. So cool, so clean.. he happily drank it in excitement. He didn't raise his head until he needed air, at which point he took a long, deep breath. It was as cool as well-water in the winter.

There were fish swimming in the pond as though they hadn't even noticed him. They elegantly circled the pond and then entered the cave. Having quenched his thirst he stared at them.

He snapped back to reality, realizing he'd fallen asleep. He nervously wiped his mouth and bopped himself on the head. Holo would surely scold him if she found him sleeping there. He quickly filled the waterskin and hung it on his waist. Just as he bent down to take one final sip..

“?”

It felt like someone was watching him.

“Holo, is that you? Have you come to find me, since I'm not with Ariette?”

He looked around but saw no-one. The grass was tall, but his vision wasn't poor. There was nowhere to hide, but he saw nobody.

“Am I just being suspicious?”

He muttered to himself nervously, but turned back to the pool. As he did he noticed an animal quietly drinking as well. It stood beside the semi-circular pool near the cave.

“..”

It was glancing at him, a young deer that still had its spots. He muttered to himself, thinking that he hadn't noticed it because of those spots on its pelt. But he got the creepy feeling that there really wasn't a deer there in front of him.

Horrible things could easily happen in a forest. He was reminded of one particularly horrible incident, but a young deer like that wouldn't transform. It might just be watching him out of curiosity, perhaps having never seen a human before.

He kept an eye out on the deer as he drank the water. He then quickly stood up, but the deer didn't flee. No matter what he thought, it was just a lovely creature. But those unmoving black eyes made him fearful.

Of course it was just watching him. It didn't bare its teeth and attack. He didn't have to be afraid. He kept telling himself this, but still quickly clambered his way as if escaping. He kept looking back and wondering if it would chase him, his feet moving him faster and faster.

He wasn't far away, but he still relaxed when he saw Ariette. He had no idea if he was fortunate that Holo was there beside her as well.

“You look like you just saw a ghost in the forest.”

“..”

Holo's wicked smile always made him angry, but this time he was also relieved. He didn't have to worry anymore, having seen that smile.

“I found water.”

“Oh, really.”

She replied brusquely while she played with the hair on Ariette's brow. He wanted to warn her that it would rouse Ariette, but he also enjoyed watching her beautiful finger play with that beautiful hair. He stood there unsure what to do, tortured.

“You do not wish to give it to me?”

“Huh?”

He snapped back to reality. Holo squinted and repeated herself.

“You will not give me the water?”

“Oh, yes, right.”

He didn't sit down. He just stupidly stood there and handed her the waterskin. Of course Holo didn't miss that.

“Want some?”

Klaus gulped when he saw her toothy smile and squinted eyes. But as a man, he couldn't nod.

“Well.. what about our pursuers?”

He sat a bit further away from Holo and asked her as toughly as he could. He was upset to have her toying with him, but he also knew that if he didn't act tough his voice waver. Holo's ears flicked a few times before she looked at the waterskin. She finally smiled.

“Hmm. They are no more.”

“Eh?”

“No more.”

After thinking it over for a while he realized that she was putting it simply. But he still felt compelled to make sure.

“I mean, well, are we-”

“It is still too early to say that we are safe. But at least we shan't be caught right now.”

He exhaled, unsure whether it was a sigh or not. His shoulders finally relaxed, like he had lost the stick that supported them. Holo laughed silently, but judging by her face as she gently touched Ariette's face, she wasn't laughing at him. It felt more like gentle appreciation.

“Those guys left the forest, so we cannot relax yet. We have to make it to the city before they

do.”

She wasn't comforting him - he believed that from the bottom of his heart. He nodded and moved his cold and sore legs.

“Want to rest? You two ran so hard.”

“Uh.. yeah..”

He yawned as he replied. Holo chuckled in surprise. She touched Ariette's nose, then walked over to Klaus.

“You need not be so cautious.”

He looked at her face as she laughed deep inside her throat, which had forced a look of concern onto his face. Of course he wasn't afraid of her, but-

“Hey!”

He heard himself exclaiming this after noticing that his head was somehow in her lap. Had she used magic? She must have. If he had to give a reason why it ended up this way, it would be that he didn't have the courage to stop it from happening, even if his face was beet red.

“You need to recover, so sleep for a while. We are not that far, so it would be alright to take a nap.”

She gently touched his head, and he felt an tickling sensation on his neck. He was so comfortable, and she had given him a good excuse. He nodded his head on her knees, but stopped when she continued talking.

“It may yet come to the point where you must carry Ariette if she grows too exhausted.”

Hearing “Ariette” snapped him back to consciousness, and he looked over at her. Having held his hand, Ariette was smiling in her sleep instead of worrying. Her left hand still was still clenched tightly, but it held nothing. In her dream she must still be holding his hand tightly. He felt too guilty to sleep in Holo's lap while beside her, so he tried sitting up.. only to be stopped by Holo's hand.

“Such an honest male.”

Holo cupped his head in her arms, placing her palms on his chin. He tried to push away in anger and surprise, but she held him down tightly. All he could do was give up.

“Perhaps it will be not be necessary.”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself. However.”

She moved her arms away. Klaus wanted to sit up straight and give her an exasperated look, but she kept talking.

“You have not surrendered?”

He felt something between his head and her knees, but had no time to think about what she was doing. It felt comfortable against his ear and face, and smelled like her. It was her tail.

“Can you still sit up? It is difficult to resist its charms.”

She spoke simply, so he decided she must be talking about her tail. Her hand lightly caressed his head, making it difficult to resist. All power in his neck melted away, and his head fell back into her lap.

“That is what I meant.”

Klaus nervously eyed Ariette while hearing Holo's prideful words.

“Worry not. I shall wake you before she rouses.”

He suddenly felt sad, feeling quite dirty. But sadder still was how calm it made him to hear Holo say that. She lowered her face to his ear as he held in tears of guilt. She used a joking tone, but didn't seem to be joking around.

“You can only be gentle to others when you feel a bit guilty.”

“Wha..”

He reflected on her words. She called herself a Wisewolf, and perhaps she was.

“Treat her gently when you wake up.”

After trying to find an excuse to sleep on her tail, Klaus found it very peaceful. He soon fell asleep.

“Well then..”

He could swear he heard her whispering to herself, but wasn't sure if he was just dreaming.

~~~

Holo was talking with Ariette, but he couldn't hear them clearly. Because Holo promised to wake him up before Ariette, he wondered if he was still dreaming. When he finally opened his eyes on Holo's warm tail, he saw Ariette. The only part of her that was moving was her chin as she spoke with Holo. The only thought in Klaus' mind was “Holo betrayed me.”



“Alright, the snoring kid is up. We should go.”

“..”

He didn't think he could apologize to Ariette, as there wasn't a chance with Holo around. He got pulled the luggage onto his back and they resumed their trip for the day. Apparently they hadn't rested too long. Klaus felt like he had only taken a short nap, but since he felt a bit better Ariette probably did as well.

He felt awful for having slept on Holo's tail, having discarded Ariette like a small dog. His mood darkened and he started hating Holo's tail. He didn't know what expression to wear on his face. Why hadn't Holo roused him? He didn't notice it at first, being so intent on his depression, but when he did he exclaimed softly: Ariette had taken his hand.

“Miss Holo said we shouldn't stray too far from her,”

She spoke with sincerity. Of course he felt better knowing that Ariette wasn't angry. He had expected her to be.

“Because this is also a test from God.”

She was peering at Holo in a strange way as she spoke. Klaus watched Holo's tail wag as he pondered the meaning of Ariette's words. When he grew tired, he decided he was overthinking things, and banished those thoughts to the back of his mind.

After they fell silent the forest became quiet again. The forest near the landlord's mansion was full of animals, and Klaus had come across many of them on his short walks. But he had only seen that deer by the pool in this forest. That was it.

“Well, maybe that's just the way this forest is.”

As that thought crossed his mind, he looked up.

“Are there squirrels jumping up there or something?”

He quickly changed his mind when he saw the tree branches sway in the wind and caught the sight of rain drops falling between the leaves.

“Rain? Well, it should not be heavy enough to get us wet.”

As Holo said, the only rain they felt was an occasional drop falling on their noses. But Klaus felt the forest was strangely quiet in the rain, and it wasn't just because they weren't talking. It felt like he could hear a pin drop from far away. He could hear himself breathing, but not the rustling of Ariette's cloak.

There was just an odd kind of silence in the rain. It made the atmosphere felt too heavy. Klaus had heard once that children born on rainy days didn't smile; rumor even had it that the landlord's beekeeper wasn't talkative because he'd been born on a rainy day.

The forest was full of leaves, moss, and ferns. Greenery was everywhere. But it was somehow blurred, and Klaus felt danger around them. He tightened his hold on Ariette's hand. Was she feeling the same way? She was also gripping his hand more tightly.

Just then Klaus saw something in front of them, looking at them. It stood on a hill like a doll made of grass. It was a deer. Holo hadn't noticed it, so Klaus wondered if just in his head. He looked carefully but couldn't see it anymore. He shivered, feeling strangely cold.

He wanted to mention it, but Ariette had never seen a deer so he remained silent. Right now Holo and Ariette were quietly running. Holo kept accelerating as though the silence was commanding her to do so.

Given what Holo had said, their pursuers were far away. Klaus wondered why they were running. But it was scary to think about camping in the forest for the night; it somehow felt no better than being captured.

Klaus held Ariette's hand tightly, but wasn't sure why. He pulled her along, though she was growing more and more tired. Holo looked back on them unpleasantly several times, making Klaus wonder if she sometimes showed such faces to Ariette. He felt he should encourage her.

“What would you like to see other than the sea, Ariette?”

Despite asking, Klaus had no idea what else the world had to offer. If possible, he wanted to see the legendary tree that supported the sky some day, but knew that was impossible.

“Other than the sea?”

Ariette was very tired, but her voice revealed that she still had some energy in her. Anyone could tell from the expression on his face that he felt better knowing she could still reply.

“The mountains of fire. And the rivers falling from the sky.”

**Editor's note: volcanoes and waterfalls, of course.**

Ariette seemed lost in thought. She tilted her head, still covered by her scarf. She seemed to be struggling to imagine such things. Even Klaus couldn't imagine them, so he couldn't blame her. He decided to drop his pretense and just ask about things he knew.

“Hmm.. what about wheat fields?”

“Wheat fields?”

“Well, you know wheat?”

She nodded.

“What wheat ripens in a field, the whole field is like a golden carpet.”

She seemed to find it easier to imagine that. She was daydreaming, her eyes wide open and staring off into the distance. She tripped and nearly fell, then whispered to herself in confirmation.

“Wheat..”

“It looks so soft and gentle from far away that you want to jump in. But if you did, you'd find that it's not soft at all. You'd also be punished by the adults for crushing it.”

She smiled in surprise, like an older sister.

“Is that an action you've reflected on?”

“Deeply.”

He gave a straightforward answer, and Ariette continued.

“Then God will be forgiving.”

She smiled at him. For whatever reason, he wasn't brave enough to withstand that smile, so he nervously moved on the next topic.

“What about boats?”

“I know boats.”

Klaus kept himself from asking how she could know about them if she didn't even know about the sea, but let her continue.

“When the world floods, boats take the good people to heaven.”

She was so tired that her footing was confused, but she spoke with rare pride. Klaus felt a bit dumb for liking to see such a proud look on her face.

“The boats I know about can't fly.”

“Huh?”

She looked at him dumbly, but he didn't know much about boats either. It worried him, but after he glanced over at Holo's back he continued.

“They go on rivers or lakes, floating on water and carrying people and horses.”

“On the water?”

“Yes.”

“And they don't sink?”

When he'd seen his first boat, Klaus also thought it was crazy that they didn't sink. But there they were, floating away. He straightened his back before replying. It was strange that she believed boats could fly, yet be suspicious of them floating.

“They don't. Even if they're carrying sacks of wheat as heavy as several adults.”

She was still suspicious, and voiced her reservations unhappily.

“It's wrong to lie.”

She seemed to suspect he was playing around with her.

“I'm not. I saw them with my own eyes.”

“They were probably tricks of the Devil.”

“Then what will you do if you see floating boats some day?”

Ariette had no reply. Some things were easy for her to accept, but others were not. After a while Klaus had figured out this was just her stubborn streak. Being able to bet on something he was sure of made him feel good, and she sure was cute when she refused to believe such things.

“If they're floating..”

“If they're floating?”

He smiled at her, and her confidence seemed shaken. She looked and avoided his gaze. But she was too good to try to escape her problems.

“Then I'll apologize.”

“Alright then. Deal.”

He pictured the time when she would apologize and he'd graciously forgive her. It wasn't as if he was taking advantage of her, so he could look forward to that eventuality. But as he thought about it, their pleasant conversation came to an end.

Holo suddenly stopped and turned to them. Klaus instantly became defensive, wondering how she planned to toy with him this time. But she was wearing a serious expression he'd never seen.

"I feel awful for ruining this wonderful atmosphere."

She paused for a moment before continuing.

"Since you two will be unable to remain calm if I say this, and I suspect it will cause you hurt, I kept it to myself. But it seems I no longer have a choice."

Klaus felt a sense of dread as he wiped his brow.

"Our pursuers are almost upon us."

"What!?"

Klaus shouted, and Ariette looked up as well.

"B-but, didn't you say they wouldn't catch up anymore?"

"Mhm."

He felt he sounded too much like he was blaming Holo, but she didn't care. She just nodded as usual. But she wasn't being kind, she just no time to deal with details.

"They are not human."

Wolves! That's what sprang into Klaus' mind.

"I have also felt this is strange. Such a wide and beautiful forest must have a gorgeous master, but he isn't here.. I don't suspect our pursuers would be chasing us without reason. So.."

She looked around and exhaled loudly as if the atmosphere was suffocating her. She then pouted like a child.

"Are we being tricked by the forest-dwellers? Or.."

Who was she talking to? Klaus hear thunder overhead as he wondered.

"Forest-dwellers?"

He couldn't stay silent in the face of such anxiety. He asked, but Holo simply shook her head as if she was talking to herself.

“I am the Wisewolf. I know all the basic knowledge and languages, even ones you do not know. We should go quickly. I can nothing about this weather.”

She looked high above as she muttered. Before Klaus nodded he looked over at Ariette and tightened his grip on her hand.

“Is it deer?”

Holo's eyes opened wide at his question. She nodded.

“You saw them?”

“Yeah, when I got the water. There's also one on that hill over there, but it didn't move. Not even slightly.”

Holo shrugged and scratched her face. Her tail swished around, revealing her displeasure.

“They are insidious. I know not what they will do. It may be useless for me to ask you to be careful, but this is better than being unprepared for attack.”

Ariette's body shrank and she looked at Klaus. Holo didn't offer any encouragement. Klaus kept himself from panicking, knowing it would leave him unable to protect Ariette. He put all of his power into his legs and smiled.

“That's fine. Wolves are much stronger than deer.”

He didn't know if it was funny or just strange, but it made Holo laugh so it was effective. She rubbed his head, embarrassing him in front of Ariette. But he was happy.

“Humans grow so quickly.”

Holo looked at Ariette as she spoke. Klaus wondered why she said that to Ariette, but Ariette wasn't reacting. She looked at Holo as if she was tolerating something.

“What will happen? The rain isn't only our disaster.”

Holo flashed an unbeatable smile at Ariette and looked up. Their umbrella of leaves was reaching its limit, and now resembled a leaky roof. Raindrops were reaching them more frequently.

“Then let us go.”

Holo pressed onward, but her footsteps weren't as confident than her tone of voice; she seemed nervous.

Klaus was panting. He swallowing hard as if to keep himself from saying something, and just kept panting. His heaviest burden – their wine – had been left behind. As was half of the water he had gathered.

The rain finally became so thick that Ariette covered her face with the large coat she was using as a skirt. The happiness of their earlier conversation was eradicated. Her expression indicated that she'd rather discard her coat as well to unburden herself.

The number of times her knees grazed the ground as she stumbled was beyond count. She was doing her best. But her determination was wavering and she was relying more and more on Klaus. He was so tired that her dependence on him was now a burden, not a joy.

“Come on.”

He was no longer holding her hand, he was pulling her up by the wrist. But his words of encouragement might as well be prayers, as her legs were simply too tired to work properly. The blisters on her feet might had probably burst as well.

It was raining more and more intensely, giving Klaus the illusion that the path they walked on was a narrow river. Streams of water ran everywhere, and the pits in the ground now looked like muddy pools with green shores.

Klaus would give anything to be in the city eating a bowl of porridge beside a fire. With each step he took, a question was becoming harder to ignore: should he escape or protect Ariette? It had been so long and they were still in the forest. The clouds were thicker, and the trees looming taller. It was getting darker. There was nothing but fear in a forest at night.

And yet, Holo had not said anything like “I am still with you no matter what.” She didn't seem to have a solution, either.

“Miss Holo!”

Upon reaching a clearing in the forest, Klaus finally called out to her.

“..”

Holo was silently panting, clearly exhausted.

“We can't-”

Klaus couldn't finish saying “run anymore.” He supported Ariette so she wouldn't collapse as

she stared at Holo. Holo was a spirit, and had lived for centuries. She had been so confident; was this where she would say “I have a solution”? Klaus stared her in the eye, and she stared right back motionlessly. She then gathered up her wet hair and stared at the ground.

“Sorry.”

“Huh?”

Did she just say “hurry” or “sorry?” She repeated herself.

“Sorry.”

Klaus was dumbfounded. He held Ariette while he questioned Holo.

“What? What happened?”

“I may not be able to save the two of you.”

“Then-”

Klaus couldn't continue. Ariette collapsed. Holo only bit her lips sadly. Coldness seemed to seep into their legs from the ground and sent a shiver through their spines.

Klaus heard strange noises in the rain, like when water overflows a barrel on a rainy day. But he wasn't just hearing things out of fear, as Ariette sprang back to life when he heard it as well. He gulped in fear. He was so scared he couldn't move. He couldn't see anything, but that was just more terrifying.

“..”

He slowly turned around but there wasn't a creature there. Just the shadow of something, maybe a big tree, rock or hill.

“..ah..”

His knees were knocking and he stopped breathing. He wasn't leaning on Ariette, but she was leaning on him. He wasn't even able to worry about how embarrassingly he was acting. There was a huge deer in front of them. Terribly huge. He had to raise his head to see all of it.

It looked strong enough to effortlessly destroy an ox. It was talking, but Klaus had no idea what it was saying. Its thunderous voice alone was enough to scatter his thoughts. Its body wasn't smooth like a deer's. It had two black moons for eyes and two horns towering up to pierce the sky.

Klaus didn't even realize he had fallen to the ground in fear. Its teeth weren't sharp, but looked

more like a tidy row of millstones. When it spoke its voice made him shiver; every the rocks around him looked like they would break apart at its sound.

His only thought was how easily those teeth could grind his head into mush. He was stupefied, and just stared at the deer with that thought.

“A trip can be counted as good,”

He snapped back to reality as a hand was placed on his shoulder.

“When the company is good.”

Holo was looking up rather bravely, her tail swishing about as if to magnify that bravery. The deer then exhaled so powerfully that the rain in the forest seemed to be blown away. In fact, it stopped raining. Many deer were now glaring at them. It felt as if one wrong word would get them stomped into a jelly, or their heads crushed by those teeth. But Holo showed no fear. She simply smiled.

It became noisy as Holo challenged them in some strange language. They approached her while grinding their teeth. Klaus crawled back while still in a seated position, pulling Ariette with him. It wasn't out of a desire to protect her, but simply to be with her. Holo quickly faced them and spoke.

“It seems they really do not like me.”

She craned her neck and flicked her ears, wearing an awkward smile.

“It seems that I erred in bringing you here.”

The deer's voice suddenly lost its mysteriousness. It looked up and roared; that roar seemed to shake the land around it.

“Farewells are always sudden, but this should be a happy trip. Now go-”

Holo smiled at Klaus in apology. That image would remain with him forever.

They had to leave immediately. But Klaus needed time to do so. The giant deer was quite far from Holo, but it closed that distance in a split-second. Holo's thin body was struck by its nose, and sent hurtling into the air. The deer then caught up to her with quick and smooth movements unbecoming of its size.

Holo's body was struck like a tree being hit by an axe. It flew off past a pool and down a steep slope. The deer jumped down that slope after her. Soon its great body was no longer visible, although the ground still shook. Klaus knew it was over when he heard the noise of grinding teeth.

He didn't know whether he was crying, but he knew what had happened. It was something he didn't want to imagine. The sounds lasted for a while, but it soon grew quiet. The deer around Klaus remained still, but soon another roar split the air.

Klaus yelled, and ran almost like he was swimming along the forest floor. Holo had told him she was two centuries older than him. She had fought away the wolves. She had toyed with him and seen through Ariette's stubbornness. She had given them bread and taught them about money. She was thin, but capable. And now she was gone.

What he had just witnessed made him want to run for his life. He needed to run on the river-like path as quickly as he could. That was the only thought in his mind. But he fell as soon as he got up, and then struggled back up by propping himself up with his stick.

“I don't want to die.. I don't want to be crushed by those horrible teeth..”

He fell again into the mud and was unable to stand up, shaking in fear.

“No..”

In terror he looked up and slowly turned around. He watched as the deer climbed back up the slope like some demonic horse from his nightmares. It was heading towards a white body on the ground. Even covered with mud, that body looked like a sheep. Ariette.

“Ari.. ette..”

He was too tired to even say her name properly. But even if he prayed for her to stand up and run, wings wouldn't magically grow on her legs to help her. Her mind seemed to have gone blank; perhaps the situation was just beyond her comprehension as usual. Maybe she was daydreaming in shock.

Klaus' face twisted as he considered the situation. As Ariette turned to him he saw the fear in her eyes. The deer roared for a third time, its massive body tearing into the slope. That roar was filled with pure rage.

*Now's your chance.. stand up.. I'm only ten steps away..*

A voice in his head was shouting. He was nervous and angry that Ariette wasn't trying to stand. No, that wasn't it. He was nervous and angry at himself for not trying to save her. The giant deer kept roaring, making him cover his ears. He hated that as well. The other deer closed in on them, like they were about to expel him from the proceedings or trap him and Ariette forever.

“Ariette!!”

At the last moment he finally managed to shout out loud. The giant deer had raised its front

legs and body, as if preparing to destroy the entire hill. Ariette had reacted and turned back to Klaus. Their eyes met, and she slowly reached her hand out to him.

“Klaus..”

He heard her soft exclamation just as the deer's legs began to fall. He was far away, but Ariette was right under those legs. The muddy water on her body felt from her in drops like the saliva of some god of death. She was still staring at him.

“Ariette!!”

He hadn't told himself to run, and he wasn't even sure if he was running or simply flying through the air. All he could see was Ariette, as he ran up and grabbed her. He had no idea what was happening. He just pulled her out of harm's way just before the deer's hooves hit the ground. It was such a tremendous impact the wind made him close his eyes and sent anything loose around them flying.

“..”

That she was in his arms was a miracle. He ran with her, and fought to cover as much ground as possible to escape another onslaught. When he finally stopped, he saw her nervously shivering and praying in his arms. When she pressed her forehead against his chest he reflexively held her tighter.

He *had* to protect her, even now. He had to protect those soft shoulders. He breathed in deeply to reassure himself. The giant deer was right next to them. He could see the hairs of its coat, which looked more like ropes. But it was still far enough that he could look into its angry eyes.

His teeth were chattering, but he shook his head. Heroes could destroy a mouth full of teeth with a single punch. If they had a sword they could even slay a dragon. All Klaus had was a stick, and he didn't even know how he still had it. But he had to make it count. He couldn't leave Ariette behind.

When it finally sank in that he wasn't brave, it felt like all the courage had been forced out of his body.

“Ariette, can you stand?”

She looked up at him. A moment ago she was shivering in his arms, but now she nodded. It seemed she could use her stubbornness for obedience as well.

“Then stand behind me.”

She didn't even ask why. She just looked at him with a worried face he's never seen before,

then moved behind him slowly, so as to not provoke the deer.

“When I stand up, you run.”

“What? B-but..”

“It's alright. I've heard how the heroes beat the giants.”

He wasn't lying, he's heard the stories of heroes besting giants that had their heads in the clouds, arms as long as rivers, and feet the size of a lake. Compared to that this deer was nothing. Right.. it wasn't strong at all.

“I just have to take out its eyes. Those huge eyes. If it can't see, it can't chase us. No big deal, they're so huge I'll hit 'em for sure.”

He forced himself to speak while trying to smile. He didn't know if he managed to, and Ariette hesitated as if wondering how to respond. But she didn't say anything, she just slowly nodded. It seemed he had managed to smile after all.

“Let's do this.”

He stabbed his stick into the ground and took another deep breath. Ariette's hands were on his back, as if transferring her power to him. Did the deer sense his spirit? It shook its head and lowered its body. There was a moment of tense terror, but heroes weren't afraid of giants.

“Let's make it to the sea together.”

After he spoke, he stood up and ran at the deer. It was too tall, so he wouldn't normally reach its eyes. But he still had a chance, because when it fought Holo it had lowered its face. It moved its powerful legs, and Klaus sensed the air moving around them. That wouldn't sway him; he jumped out of the way. A deer was just a deer. Its legs crashed down, sending mud everywhere.

“Take this!”

He jabbed his forcefully at it, but the deer pulled its leg away quickly. So quickly, in fact, that he was taken by surprise and fell forward. But he wasn't nervous, because that action made him believe it was afraid of being hit.

It no longer moved its legs, it just kicked its hoof at him like it was kicking a stone. But maybe it was too big for its own good, because Klaus easily evaded that kick. It was simple, so simple.. it might be big, but it was still just a deer.

He'd managed to hit its leg several times with his stick. He couldn't believe it, but he was actually holding his own so far. White puffs of air were escaping from between its giant teeth. Perhaps it had grown tired of chasing after his nervous movements. It really was too big for its

own good.

But he also felt tired. His hands were numb, and his wrists were tense. He couldn't even feel where his hand ended and the stick began. He kept himself just out of its range, staring right back as it stared at him.

It was said that a deer's horns stored all of the knowledge of a forest, and that by crushing and consuming the powder of those horns one could gain all of that knowledge. It kept staring at him with its dark, piercing eyes. It seemed to be thinking about something, but what?

As Klaus wondered what it could be, the deer suddenly looked at something else. He caught Ariette's reflection in its eyes, as she stood there with her hands drawn to her chest in prayer. He felt the urge to vomit; she hadn't escaped. No, perhaps she didn't have the energy to run.

But she did notice its gaze. It shifted, its head pointed at Ariette. It then scraped a hoof along the ground, like a bull about to charge. As it lowered its head he heard it shout something, but had no idea what it was.

He felt compelled to move, so move he did. With his stick in hand, he lunged as quickly as he could toward the deer. There were so many roots, puddles and holes pounded into the ground by the deer's hooves, but he ignored them all and just ran straight for its eyes.

Then, just as he came face to face with that moving mountain of a beast, he slammed into it with all of his might. His stick plunged into its eyes like some hero wielding a spear. He heard a deafening roar, and what sounded like his arm snapping. He had no time to think about what came next; he simply ducked and flew right underneath the body of that beast and flew into the bushes behind it.

He nearly fainted, but hearing the sound of something pounding the ground kept him conscious. Had the pain been too great for the deer to withstand? It was roaring loud enough to make one's hair stand on-end, and stomping the ground.

Moments later he finally looked up and saw the deer in front of Ariette. It was trying to stand, but kept slipping down on its forelegs. Ariette was just staring at it.

“Ariette!!”

He shouted and ran toward her. She looked at him in shock, then back at the deer.

“Run, Ariette!”

“B-but, its eyes.. its eyes..”

She was worrying about the same deer that had killed Holo and had tried to kill him. He was so

overcome with rage he began laughing. He knew he couldn't blame her. That was just the way she was.

“Run! We'll be killed if the others catch up!”

The deer roared even more loudly in response. He turned to face it, and saw it stumble into a swampy pool of water. Its roar thundered like a falling mountain, bouncing around inside his heart.

“Ha ha! Success! Let's go Ariette!”

“Eh, ah.. but..”

He walked up to her and took her hand, but she didn't stand up. She sat there in the mud as if she couldn't stand.

“You can't walk?”

Using the arm he thought he broke, he pulled over to him. He then placed his other arm under her knees, and held her like a hero might hold a princess. She was puzzled at how smoothly he picked her up, like he'd practiced the gesture before.

“Nnng..”

Compared to bundles of grass, which were hard as stone, Ariette's body was soft as cotton. But he still couldn't run while holding her. It was everything he could do to will his wobbly legs to walk as he held her.

“We just have to get away from that beast.. just have to leave the forest and make it to the city..”

He muttered to himself as he tried to strengthen the muscles in his left arm and keep Ariette's legs from slipping out of his grasp.

He suddenly felt sorry for Holo. He hated how she messed around with him, but she'd been like the older sister he never had. Once they made it to the city, they could go back and find Holo's body. They could give her a proper burial, at least. If he ever met up with that deer again, he wouldn't settle for just blinding it.

But right now, Ariette's legs were on the ground again. His left arm was just too exhausted to hold her up. He couldn't even will the rest of his body to move. But he could still see that bright future in his mind, and could only think about moving toward it.

“That.. that's enough..”

Ariette was holding him tightly and speaking in a crying tone. He smiled, and finally gave up.

“Sorry.. you go on ahead of me..”

Forcing that sentence out took the last of his energy. He collapsed. He could swear he heard a strange noise from somewhere far away. But he couldn't move enough to even lift up the half of his face that was in the mud. Ariette seemed to be saying something, but he couldn't hear her. The drops of rain that fell on him felt hotter, almost like they were boiling.

“Go.. just go.. we'll meet at the inn in the city..”

His consciousness was fading, so he wasn't sure if his words were reaching her. But he at least wanted her to live on. *Because*. his eyes closed. *Because I love her so much*.

~~~

Klaus could smell something sweet. Was it food? He couldn't quite make out what it was. He knew it was a familiar scent.. something he really liked. But it wasn't coming to him. That's wasn't all that was on his mind, either. Where was he? It was too dark to see anything.

He couldn't move; it was like he was deep underwater. The sweet smell spread through his mind, and he thought he could probably be happy to just smell it forever. That smell..

“Huh!?”

He shouted as he jumped out of bed. He looked around, trying to find something for his eyes to focus on. When he finally spotted it, his eyes were teary from having suddenly been opened.

“Ariette..”

“G-good morning.”

She gulped. She sat in a strange pose, her hand reaching out to him.

“D-do you feel better?”

He winced in pain as her white hand touched his face. She recoiled like she'd touched an open flame, then apologized with tears in her eyes as well. Klaus touched his face with his own hand, and felt how swollen it was. He could see wounds all over his arms.

“Ha ha ha.. looks like I'm broken everywhere..”

He pulled his cheek and laughed while saying that, and saw a smile creep onto her face. But as soon as she chuckled, it turned into crying.

“H-hey.. don't cry.. please?”

He nervously hugged her and caressed her head. He was surprised that he did so without hesitation, but Ariette wasn't refusing him. It made him so happy.

“I'm alright, see?”

He tried to comfort her, but she was still crying as she nodded. He didn't know why, but he had no choice but to wait. He used that chance to look around. Where was he? There was a light coming from behind him, and some kind of dark, mossy wall all around him. He guessed it was a cave, and given the grass at his feet he could at least be sure he wasn't in a city. Just as he wondered what was going on-

“Hmm.”

He heard a familiar voice. He tried spinning around to face it, but with Ariette still in his arms he lost his balance and fell.

“OW!!”

He tried to sit up, but with Ariette lying on top of him he was stuck. And on second thought, it would be a shame for him to end this scene. Ariette was heavier than she looked. He lay on his back and just stared at the ceiling. Then, he saw something he couldn't believe. A face was looking down on him from above.

“Hmm.. your happiest moment?”

“Ah.. ah!”

“Oh? Only happy enough to hug one person, I see.”

He didn't care about Holo's joke. He simply shouted from the bottom of his heart.

“Miss Holo!!”

“..there is no need to be so loud.”

Holo shrugged, but Klaus was too distracted to notice.

“B-but why.. um.. aren't you..”

“Dead?”

Her smile looked invincible, but he could still remember the chewing noises he heard during the fight as his hairs stood on-end. Surely she was bitten to death by the deer.

“Ho ho. Well.”

Holo turned to him, and the light was suddenly blocked by something. He no longer knew what expression to wear on his face. There stood the giant deer that had tried to kill him, just behind Holo. Those eyes he had injured were reflecting the light like shining obsidian. Those huge eyes looked at him and blinked, as if greeting him.

“Brave.. human.. child. It has been.. centuries.. since I was this happy.”

After stammering out those words, its mouth moved around. Realizing it was trying to smile drove Klaus into a rage.

“Y-you didn't..?!”

He pushed Ariette away and saw her face, wet with tears. She was wearing a look of apology.

“Foolish boy. Surely you are not blaming her?”

Having his head knocked by Holo made him look up at her instead. The deer was looking away.

“This unexpected situation happened because the deer are so bored, yet have such a love for acting. I could not stop them.”

Holo seemed to be a bit peeved herself, though she quickly smiled. From far in the distance came the sound of roaring. Was this all planned by Holo? He couldn't help but be suspicious. The giant deer had been attacking so slowly, yet defended itself so quickly from his stick.

If that was the case, then Ariette's own look of horror as she was about to be trampled might also be faked. He looked at her, feeling betrayed. But it only won him another knock on the head.

“Even now, you *still* suspect her? You truly are dense.”

His head was hurting again, but at least he could be sure Ariette wasn't acting. Even if she realized the deer wasn't serious, she may have still been terrified at that moment. He would have felt overwhelmed as well, even if he knew. Besides, she was clearly expressing her guilt.

It was all slowly coming into focus now. If Holo was telling him the truth, then he was the only one who was fooled into working so hard.

“Ho ho.. you did a pretty good job.”

Holo placed her elbows on her knees and smiled.

“I'm so sorry I tricked you, but-”

Ariette blurted out her words, almost in tears again. He couldn't bring himself to feel angry at that, so he held her hand.

“It's alright. I'm just happy that you're safe.”

“Mhm..”

He broke out into laughter as he watched her tears fall each time she nodded.

“Oh..”

“Hmm?”

“What are the soldiers?”

“Soldiers?”

Klaus asked Holo, and she asked him right back. Her expression then snapped into one of surprise, almost like she really wanted to say “damn!”

“So even that was..”

“Oh ho ho ho..”

She laughed as her tail wagged happily. Klaus turned back to Ariette, who was once again wearing a look of apology. He lost all energy to his neck and fell back down with a thud. He didn't care anymore.

“You cannot just lie in here. Let us go. This is a holy place not meant for human eyes.”

“A holy place? In the forest?”

“Yes. Quite a suitable place to end the play, is it not?”

Holo was talking to Ariette, who quickly nodded in response. It really did sound suitable.

“The sun has risen, so let us bask in its light while we consider how to remember your heroic epic. Of course..”

Holo put her hand on her waist and swished her tail about.

“..it is the story of the three of us.”

She then laughed as she walked outside. Of course, Klaus was very happy to see she was alright. But he still hated her histrionics. He wanted to get a good look at this holy place, though.. What did it look like?

“Is this holy place really so great?”

He pulled Ariette up and asked her. After a moment's hesitation, she nodded.

“Mhm..”

He was getting anxious to see it for himself.

“But-”

Ariette finally looked him in the eye. He felt a pain in his chest, but it wasn't out of injury.. he just couldn't wait to hear her next words.

“I'm looking forward to the sea more.”

Hearing those words made him so happy he forgot his pain and smiled. He nodded, and noticed Ariette shyly peeking at something behind him. From that, he knew someone was watching them. But he didn't care. Maybe some clever person who always overdid things had told Ariette to act that way. But he knew Ariette never lied to him, or at least that he could believe in her.

“Then let's go.”

He took her hand and stood up. As he turned around, he caught a glimpse of a tail receding into the darkness ahead of them. A soft, dry tail with a sweet scent. If Holo ever offered an apology, he'd ask her to let him sleep on that tail again. It was just too tempting, he mused.

“Huh?”

Surprisingly, Ariette seemed to have read his thoughts. But he didn't reply, he just started walking. He held her hand tightly and left the cave. One who chased two rabbits would catch neither, but maybe that wouldn't apply for this sheep and that wolf.

“What are you thinking? Are you not heading for the sun?”

He heard a cold voice behind him, but was too scared to look back. Holo, who was in a garden that received no sunlight, laughed heartily with her hands on her belly.



Red Apple & Blue Sky

## Red Apple and Blue Sky

Lawrence looked up, having suddenly noticed how quiet the room had become. But the warm sunlight and lively sounds of the city were still creeping into the room through the open window, so he looked around for another reason. And there, upon the bed and picking her teeth, was his next suspect.

“Are you still at it? How many have you eaten?”

It was a girl with flaxen hair worthy of the envy of nobles. This girl, named Holo, adjusted her inhuman ears and counted on her fingers.

“Ten. No, wait, seven.. make that nine.”

“And how many are left?”

Her tail, worthy of the envy of merchants, was swishing about. But her face now looked like a dog being scolded by its master.

“Eight.. eight..”

“Eight?”

“Eighty.. one.”

Lawrence sighed. Her expression then soured and she glared at him.

“Are you suggesting that I cannot finish them?”

“I haven't even said anything.”

“And just what *were* you going to say after sighing so?”

After a pause, he replied.

“So you're at your limit, then?”

He avoided her stare as he spoke, and turned away to tie a string around a piece of parchment. Alas, that only served to remind him that his left hand was still incapacitated. He had been injured during an altercation several days ago, though it was due to his own misjudgment.

And yet, because of that altercation he and Holo were now tied together. One couldn't put a price on such bonds. In fact, as he rose to his feet Lawrence now found himself thinking that his

injury was a small price to pay.

In one corner of the room were four crates of apples. According to the bill that accompanied those crates, they contained a total of one hundred and twenty apples. To date, Holo had consumed thirty-nine of them. Despite her love for the things, at this rate they would spoil before she could finish them.

“You just seem awfully vexed.”

“I am not.”

“Is that so?”

That giant wolf in a girl's body, who had watched over fields of wheat for so many lifetimes, now turned away like a child at his persistent questioning. A moment later her ears also drooped down.

“It is so.. that I am getting sick of them.”

He knew better than to laugh and earn her wrath, so he simply agreed.

“Right, even if they're your favorite that's bound to happen.”

“Even so.”

“Hmm?”

“I *will* finish them all.”

She spoke with determination as she stared at him with eyes unusually bereft of anger. He was confused by her sudden mood shift, but only for a moment. True, she had purchased one hundred and twenty apples on his dime and without his permission. It wasn't a trivial amount, nor did they come cheaply, but she hadn't just ordered them on a whim.

It was a bit twisted, but she had to rely his money to achieve any kind of comfort on their trip. She had originally tired of her life as a harvest deity, and so she asked him to take her home. Their journey had started with that, but this world's stories needed more than an initial push to keep going.

So he wasn't angry about the apples. In fact she hadn't only ordered apples, but also some rather lavish clothing. And yet, even though Lawrence himself had wanted her to do so, he could also see it from her point of view. She felt guilty about failing to honor their contract.

Lawrence's wasn't a traveling noble, he was a merchant who worked hard every day to earn his keep. Holo surely understood that, given her self-proclaimed title of Wisewolf. But she was also

an amusing wolf.

“It's alright, you don't have to be so stubborn about it.”

He grabbed an apple and continued.

“Of course you'll get bored of eating them the same way, but there's a lot of ways to eat apples.”

He chuckled and tossed the apple at her. She immediately caught and bit into it.

“And what might those be?”

“Well, baking them, for starters.”

She pulled the apple away from her mouth and studied it intently. She then looked at him, unamused.

“You will need to prepare better jokes than that in the future.”

“Weren't those ears of yours great enough to spot a lie?”

She flicked those ears and assumed an unpleasant tone.

“I cannot imagine it. Baking apples?”

“Yeah, but you don't impale them on a stick and shove them into a fire, we put them in ovens like bread.”

“Huh.”

Maybe it was beyond his ability to explain it in words. Holo kept eating, but craned her neck as if thinking it over.

“So you've never had an apple pie?”

She shook her head.

“Well, words can't do it justice. When they're baked, apples get all soft. How should I put it? Like when an apple is rotting.”

“Hmm.”

“But baked ones are delicious, not like rotten ones. Raw apples are great when you're thirsty, but baked ones are so sweet they *make* you thirsty.”

“Hmm..”

Holo was doing her best to keep a straight face, but her wagging tail betrayed her. She was clever enough with words to make a fool out of Lawrence, but food was her weakness. She didn't have to say a single word for her ears and tail to reveal the truth.

“Hmm.. well, apples are great since you can prepare them any way you want without ruining them. But anyone would get sick of nothing but sweets, right?”

Holo's tail went still.

“So what would you prefer? Meat? Or salted fish?”

Her reply almost came before he finished speaking.

“Meat!!”

“Then for supper-”

He didn't manage to finish his sentence before Holo jumped off the bed and pulled on her cloak. She then looked him in the eye?

“Oh, you want to go now?”

“What do *you* think?”

He was stunned at where she could fit all those apples in her belly, but then her true form was a wolf large enough to swallow him whole. He couldn't picture how, but maybe her stomach stayed the same size when she transformed.

“But will you still be able to eat those apples afterward?”

“Never fear, your words have restored my confidence.”

Soon her belt was tied around her cloak, and she was ready to go. It was still a bit early for dinner, but Lawrence gave up on thoughts of resistance. Convincing her otherwise would prove difficult.

“Well, alright then. I still have business to deal with anyway, so let's go.”

“Mhm.”

Convincing her was hard enough when she wasn't wearing such a sunny smile. It certainly matched her youthful, girlish appearance. Lawrence had left home at the age of eighteen, and

that was seven years ago. Her smile tore right through his defenses.

She quickly turned and walked up to the door. To him, her smile even seemed to sweeten the room like the scent of apples. But if she ever learned that he'd be on the receiving end of a joke, so he coughed to cover his embarrassment and took to his feet. He had intended to chase after her, but was forced to stop when she suddenly opened the door and eyed him curiously.

“It is wise to keep my sweet smiles as a rare treat.”

Perhaps she was simply happy at the prospect of eating something else, but her joking attitude was back in full-force. As he followed her out of the room, he retorted.

“But your salty and oily ones are inedible.”

“Would you like to know if the rest of me is delicious?”

He could only shrug his shoulders in surrender, resulting in peals of her laughter.

~~~

Pazzio, being a small town along the midpoint of the Slaude river, was always crowded. It wasn't for celebrations or marches to war, but simply because there were so many people walking around: farmers, goods-hauling merchants, even boys ordered on errands from their masters.

Cenobites were about the only people you wouldn't see among the crowds, which was expected as there was a market in every part of the city. But there were roads everywhere, and people were walking right next to each other, so even in that hustle and bustle it was easy for everyone to miss such a rare sight.

“You're a nun from every angle.”

“Hmm?”

Holo had turned away and mumbled at him as her mouth continued chewing. Despite eating so many apples, the moment she spotted dried grapes being sold at a stall she cast a begging look in his direction.

“Well, except considering how much you eat.”

“Hmm. Is it not convenient for me to dress as a nun?”

He could only smile at how casually she ignored his verbal jab.

“Yeah, since we're traveling it's pretty convenient for us.”

“Mhm. 'Tis but a simple piece of cloth, but it makes such a difference. Humans are beyond strange.”

“Well, just imagine how much more freely a wolf could walk while wearing a sheep's skin.”

Holo mulled that over for a moment before smiling happily.

“Were I to wear the skin of a rabbit, you would surely fall into my trap.”

“I guess I'll have to carry some apples with me.”

Lawrence smiled as he watched her, her mouth purposely full of dried grapes. Whether speaking with her or just whispering to himself, he'd never experienced such fun. Especially when they kept the conversation moving along so amusingly.

“But still, there are inconveniences that come with that disguise. For you.”

“Hmm?”

His serious tone seemed to have tipped her off, and she looked up at him.

“Nuns cannot drink in front of others. Even if a shop doesn't refuse to serve you, they'll still be loathed to do so.”

“Ah. Like drinking on a crumbling bridge, is it?”

Lawrence thought that was a nice turn of phrase.

“Even more seriously, towns will react differently. In the North especially, it'll be problematic to be dressed like a nun.”

“Then what shall we do?”

“We should be fine once I've found you a town girl's clothes.”

Holo nodded sincerely, then popped the rest of her grapes into her mouth and ate them.

“Then let us purchase them before we eat. The prospect of working after dinner will ruin our appetites.”

“I'm glad you see it my way. I thought it would be harder to convince you.”

“Did you really expect me to demand food first? Do you feel I am *that* swayed by food?”

Lawrence simply shrugged with no further response. Holo licked her fingers as if bored.

“Well, since you care about me so much, I shan't resist.”

She didn't look at him as she softly spoke, quietly looked ahead of them. She then smiled and sighed.

“They are only clothes. Such convoluted reasons are unnecessary. Did you even notice how much you are fussing?”

Lawrence's hand shot up to cover his mouth. It wasn't out of surprise or because he was trying to stifle a sound, he was just embarrassed.

“Well, I shall accept your fussing. It will be a cold, cold winter after all.”

“I hope you can *appreciate* the fussing, too.”

Holo smiled at him jokingly, and took his right hand in hers. She fussed over him as well, but as a man it was embarrassing to always be on the receiving end. But the Wisewolf had noticed his slight resistance. He was just too young to stand up to her.

“Ugh.. such cold hands. They are freezing.”

Of course he didn't believe her for a second. But merchants knew how to lie to get the better part of a deal.

“Indeed they are.”

“Mhm.”

The two of them were lying, but only because it was too embarrassing to be honest. They could keep the truth a secret on this crowded street. It was as reassuring as remembering his first successful deal, or his first time carrying a coin with the profile of a queen wearing a crown of laurels.

“Um..”

He was snapped back to reality as soon as the word “coins” sprang to his mind.

“What is it?”

“I have no money..”

Holo's shock was obvious. Her eyes stared at him with surprise and disdain. She was like any other city girl in this one respect. If he couldn't afford what she wanted, she'd get more

stubborn than any merchant ever could. That was yet another memory from his seven year career.

“Well, that's not quite right. It's not like I'm broke.”

“Huh?”

“What I mean is that I don't have any small change.”

Reaching into his pocket reminded him yet again about his injured left hand.

“See? I'm all out.”

Lawrence revealed his wallet.

“The greater serves for the lesser, so you do have money.”

“But you don't skin a rabbit with a cleaver. Remember what I said when I gave you money for bread?”

“Mhm, about gold coins.”

“It'd be tough to use them. I can't image how upset a small shop's owner would be to be paid in gold coins.”

“Oh. But-”

Holo finished her question as he put away his wallet.

“Are gold coins really that valuable?”

“Hmm? Of course. For instance, the Lumione coin in my wallet is worth thirty-five Trenni silvers. Considering that one silver is enough for room and board for a week.. well, I'm sure you can figure it out from there.”

“Impressive.. but I still fail to see why it would make a fuss.”

Lawrence expected her to say something like this.

“Clothes are not the same as apples. They will cost one or two gold coins, right? The shop that sold me my nun's robe mentioned it was worth two gold coins.”

Lawrence had heard that nobles were attacked for speaking so carelessly. He smiled to show her he'd expected her response.

“But they're not common clothes. If all clothing was that pricey, everyone in town would have to go naked.”

After seeing her bill for her robes, Lawrence suspected that the shopkeeper who sold them to her doubted she could actually afford them. After all, there wasn't anyone there to prove she could. Yet she still bought two of them and a silk sash. He might have suspected she was using her good looks to trick him into thinking she was part of a convent run by the nobility.

“So these were actually expensive?”

She stared in disbelief at the robe draped around her. Lawrence was surprised she didn't know it already.

“Yeah, so we're gonna get you some normal ones.”

She looked up and smiled.

“I am the Wisewolf of Yoitsu. Wearing cheap clothes is beneath me.”

“So much for true beauty outshining its outward appearance.”

That got her tongue. She lightly slapped her right hand like a child scolding themselves.

“But that means exchanging..”

He purposely trailed off and considered his situation. It made him sigh. Exchanging gold and silver coins meant paying a service charge, and he didn't want to part with a gold coin to begin with. There was a joke about merchants working hard for money and loving gold coins, but Lawrence didn't know why it was even considered a joke.

The situation was a tricky one. They had to find a moneychanger they could trust. An unfamiliar face might cheat them, or might try to avoid paying taxes. Lawrence would have no way to prove his innocence in such a case, so he had to find someone he already knew and frequently relied on.

Of course, Lawrence had a friend who was a moneychanger, so that wasn't really the tricky part. The real trick was that his friend had fallen for Holo the moment their eyes met. And Holo, for her part, played up her role as the bashful maiden. Seeing the two of them flirt happily fanned the flames of jealousy with him.

“Oh, so the moneychanger then? Hehe.”

She was way ahead of him. Having seen his thoughts, she brought out her evil smile.

“Alright, then get a move on. I am getting thirsty.”

His hand was grabbed and he was dragged back out into the crowded street. He sighed again, more deeply than he might when facing a difficult negotiation. He cursed the malicious nature of that gentle hand's owner.

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“Today's rate is thirty-four Trenni per Lumione.”

“And the service charge?”

“One Lute silver, or 30 Trie copper.”

“Let's go with Lute then.”

“My thanks. Then, here you are.. oh, do be careful! Dropped coins become the property of whomever picks them up again.”

So said the moneychanger as he carefully collected silver coins and held them out, as if giving them to a spoiled child. Lawrence was holding up a Lumione gold coin, but those hands remained frozen in place. He didn't so much as bat an eyelash in Lawrence's direction.

“Weiz.”

Only after his name was called did he finally turn to face Lawrence.

“What is it?”

“I am your customer.”

Their mentors were friends, so Lawrence and Weiz the moneychanger had known each other for a long time. Weiz sighed deeply and pointing at his table with his chin.

“Just leave it there, I'm busy right now.”

“Too busy to serve your customer?”

“Of course, it is *far* more important that this young lady not drop her coins.”

The hand that Weiz had placed the coins into was of course Holo's. He once more turned to her and sighed. He was completely charmed by her, and basking in her smile. The only one who was taking things seriously, Lawrence, was being ignored.

“But, good sir..”

Hearing Holo speak brought a serious look to his face, like that of a knight errant.

“I fear there are too many coins for my little hand to hold.”

Lawrence didn't even have the time to scoffingly say 'of course there wouldn't be' before Weiz replied.

“Oh Miss Holo, that's why *my* hands are there.”

Holo seemed surprised, and replied with distress.

“But you must not, you need those precious hands for business.”

Weiz shook his head adamantly.

“To keep the coins from falling from your hands, I'll gladly let use my own. I have no cause for complaint, since there is a hole in my heart with your shape. God has given me these hands to fill that very hole.”



Holo turned away like a shy maiden from a noble family. Weiz stared at her with full sincerity. Such hammy dialogue was too much. If this was a play, Lawrence might be able to tolerate it, but watching it now was just irritating. He finally spoke some icy words to cool the two of them off.

“Silver coins go in pockets, and gold coins in chests. Only crude copper coins are held in hands. Surely you haven't forgotten that much, Weiz?”

That was the first thing Weiz would have learned as a moneychanger, since handling coins was such a fundamental principle of his business. This was the easiest way to snap him out of it. Sure enough, he finally let go of Holo's hand and scratched his head.

“Geez, you need to be more careful. Keeping such a fine girl to yourself is an affront to God. Surely *you* haven't forgotten to share your bread with others?”

“Oh, we're sharing now?”

Lawrence opened his wallet and had Holo drop the coins inside it. She had been smiling a moment ago, but was now watching him with a blank expression.

“Well I don't see your coin on my desk yet. So what does that mean?”

Weiz was now wearing a serious expression as the last coins fell into Lawrence's wallet.

“It means you'll have to share in her debts as well. How does that sound to you?”

“Ugh..”

Weiz moved back as he considered this new development. But he soon regretted his merchant's money-oriented manner asserting itself, and put on a sad face as he turned to Holo.

“I would never put a price on you.”

Holo seemed relaxed, but quickly resumed her act.

“The scales of my heart sway to and fro, but believe me when I say it is not from the weight of gold coins.”

“Oh, of course!”

Weiz once more reached out and took her hand.

“You cad.. touching a swaying scale with your hands..”

That was the same kind of scheme a bar waitress would use to confirm whether a patron was

drunk. Weiz had failed. Lawrence sighed, having had enough of this. He motioned to end this drama.

“Alright, let's go.”

“Ah, hey! Lawrence!”

“Hmm?”

“If you came to exchange coins, that means you're gonna buy something right?”

“Right. We're off to the north, so we're going to buy some clothes.”

Weiz's eyes still looked drunk.

“Right now?”

“Right now.”

Holo chuckled as she watched them. She was smart enough to understand the hidden meaning behind words, so she must have caught onto to Weiz's confusion.

“They're only going to get more expensive as the cold weather approaches, so the sooner the better.”

“Huh..”

From the look on his face, Weiz wanted to close up shop right then and there to tag along with them. But he clearly couldn't afford to do that just yet. And so, Lawrence could have a tiny bit of revenge. Having said farewell, he turned away – but Holo stopped him.

“Do moneychangers work after the sun sets?”

“Only a swindler uses scales in the dark. And I am no swindler.”

“So he says.”

With Holo egging him on, Lawrence had no choice but to give up on revenge. But he still needed to ask someone for directions to the north, and wandering merchants tended to ask such questions as they drank with friends after hours.

“We'll hit a bar after we're done shopping. You're free to join us.”

“Of course, bro, of course! The usual place?”

“It'd be too uncomfortable to get drunk somewhere unfamiliar.”

“Alright! I'll be there soon, real soon!”

Weiz cried out as he waved his arm at Holo. The other moneychangers seemed to be used to his hysterics. He still shouted and waved even though Lawrence and Holo were already quite far away. Was it really so entertaining? Holo kept looking back and waving until he was out of sight. She finally looked ahead when they stepped off the moneychanger's bridge and into the jeweler's district.

“Hehe. That lived up to my expectations.”

Lawrence breathed in like he was drink a long draught of ale.

“You'll have a problem if you let him get too serious.”

“A problem?”

“He'll tie himself to you.”

“I have already been tied to you, though.”

Holo smilingly revealed a fang as she peeked at him. He was left speechless, so she smiled.

“Unlike you, he knows this is but a game. Teasing you is a joy, but sometimes I wish to play with a clever male.”

Lawrence was forced to swallow the many words he wanted to say. It was embarrassing, but he really didn't know anything outside of business.

“Since we both know that it was not serious, can you not take it so seriously? You are making me feel bashful.”

Lawrence could only smile back as she cupped her face in feigned embarrassment.

“Still, Weiz bests you in eloquence. His tongue is as wily as mine, despite my long life. As one who lives in the world of trade, surely you agree?”

Hearing her say that came as a surprise. She was smiling, but he couldn't smile back when he looked into those amber eyes. She didn't volunteer to be tied down in Pasloe as a harvest deity. They praised her, but also chained her. She couldn't live openly; it was a cruel fate. Considering this was keeping him quiet, but it was also why he held her hand warmly.

“Well, I'll only lie for myself then.”

“Too bad it will be useless against me.”

He smiled as he saw her ears proudly shuffling under her hood.

“Alright then, let's go shopping.”

“Very well.”

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This was the first time Lawrence had to worry about what style of clothing would suit Holo.

Most town dwellers didn't buy new clothes. Clothes would eventually need mending, and then they would be sold as used. Once mended, they would be resold. Wealthy merchants would sell them to other merchants, who would give them to their families, their apprentices, or travelers. Clothing beyond repair would eventually end up sold as the raw materials used to make parchment.

So in a way, a person's status could be judged from how mended their clothes were. Clothes purchased with gold coins were rare. Lawrence had just one such shirt he'd specially ordered from a tailor, which had been ruined in their earlier altercation in the sewers. And now, standing in front of a used clothing stall – the very bottom of the status cycle – was an unsatisfied Holo.

“Hmm..”

She sighed as she held up a shirt dyed with boiled tree sap. It essentially looked like it was dirty, and such dye couldn't be washed off or bleached away.

“That one's forty Lutes. What do you think?”

Holo grumbled after hearing the shopkeeper say so. She put the shirt back on the counter and backed up a few meters from the stall. Nothing here would satisfy her. Her noble-like display made Lawrence smile.

“Sir, we're heading north. We'll both need some warm clothes.”

“Your budget is..?”

“Two Trenni.”

“Leave it to me.”

They weren't after the seasonal clothes, they needed clothes ready for the winter. Ones that were shaggy like grass, and the color and appearance didn't matter at all. They just had to be warm and thick, and they could only pray they were bug-free.

Such clothes were usually bought from northerners who visited to the south, and then re-sold to people heading to the north. The shirt Holo was eyeing earlier had probably traveled from the north to the south and back again several times. Just one such shirt wasn't enough, they would need a pile of them.

“Two tops and bottoms like this, and two blankets.. what say you?”

“Well, as you can see I'm a merchant myself. This time, while on my way north, I managed to establish a working relationship with a company here.. what was their name? Milone?”

They were one of the most famous companies in town, and the shopkeeper's expression shifted to reflect that.

“Of course that means I'll probably be coming back and forth now, several times a year.”

Successful traveling merchants were a used-clothing stall's best customers; all the better if they visited the town regularly. A stall like this didn't care about unit prices, but rather selling quantities. Hearing Lawrence's claim brought a happy smile to the shopkeeper's face.

“Oh, with Milone? Then let me add another blanket, and this coat. They've been smoked, so they should repel bugs for two full years.”

The coat was patched up everywhere, and the blankets looked like pressed and dried-up pies. They looked awful, but such things were necessities for traveling in the north so they had their virtues. Lawrence nodded in satisfaction and reached his right hand out to the shopkeeper.

After shaking his hand, the shopkeeper took out some rope to bundle up the clothes. While he did that, Lawrence turned to Holo. As expected, she was not impressed.

“Were you not buying clothes for me?”

“I am.”

Her face went blank at his immediate answer. She had no priorities higher than keeping her tail well-groomed, but she still expected to wear fine clothes. The disappointment on her face was gradually replaced with anger.

“You expect me to wear *that*?”

“Not if you think that cloak you're wearing will be good enough for the winter.”

She grabbed him and pulled him back. Perhaps she didn't want the shopkeeper to overhear them, or perhaps she was just angry enough to get physical. Either way she was struggling to keep her voice down.

“If you are angry about paying for me, just say so. I am the Wisewolf of Yoitsu. I have my wits, but also my nose. If I wear *those* my nose will twist itself inside-out!”

“Well, at least then it'll match your twisted personality.”

That earned him a punch to his chest. He coughed slightly, and finally stopped teasing her.

“Don't be like that, I'll let you in on the secret later.”

He stopped her as she approached him with her fangs bared, then called out to the shopkeeper.

“Sir, a moment please.”

“Yes? Is there something else?”

“Would you happen to have clothes fit for a lady?”

“A lady?”

“Something that won't stand out in the north. Something in about this size.”

Of course he was referring to Holo. The shopkeeper observed her for a moment before turning back to Lawrence. He seemed to be sizing up Lawrence's wallet, and trying to judge what relationship he had with Holo (which would of course correlate with how much he would spend on her).

He might even consider his future profits and try to sell Lawrence his best product at a discount, in order to earn his future business. Used clothes stalls had lots of customers, but also a lot of competition. Earning a loyal long-term customer was a godsend to them.

Lawrence had to have his reasons to bring Holo here. So if he was buying clothes for her, given how obviously luxurious her robes were, it was holding a cleaver up to a rabbit. Trading was all about keeping yourself in a better position compared to your opponent.

“Understood. One moment, please.”

He set down the bundle of winter clothes, which were roughly tied like a bale of hay, back on the counter. He then searched around in another pile of clothes in the back of the stall. Such shops would often have items that had to be sold as quickly as possible – stolen goods.

“How about this item? I bought it from another shop last season.”

He held up a shirt with a frilly collar and a blue dress. It came with an apron and seemed

suitable for a stay-at-home town girl. The colors were bright, and the sleeves were unmended. Just the kind of items that were probably stolen. They were nice, but probably not to Holo's eyes. With that thought in mind, Lawrence turned to see her upturned nose.

“No good?”

“I hate such extravagance.”

If Holo were a landowner's daughter, there would likely be rumors about how she preferred combat armor to girl's dresses.

“I want something simpler, easier to change into.”

Lawrence and the shopkeeper smiled at each other. Women who knew what they wanted had a certain charm.

“Very well..”

The shopkeeper dove back in and rummaged in his pile of clothes. Something like a cloak or coat would probably be easier to change into. What would make Holo look like a normal town girl? Lawrence pondered this as he watched the shopkeeper's back. He then spotted a shawl out of the corner of his eye.

“Excuse me, what about that?”

“Hmm?”

The shopkeeper held a jacket in his hand as he turned to where Lawrence was pointing. It was a tanned leather shawl.

“Ah, indeed! You have good eyes.”

It was half-buried in another pile of clothes. The shopkeeper carefully lifted it out.

“This was once worn by an aristocrat, it's quite a fine article.”

The shopkeeper made his pitch, and since Lawrence had no way of verifying it he instead watched for Holo's reaction. But she was keeping a straight face.

“The leather was carefully tanned, and see how fine the stitching is.. you can't even see the seams. Note also these lovely walnut buttons. If you sling this over your shoulder and wear this cap of a noble servant, you'll be the toast of town!”

After his exaggerated pitch, the shopkeeper handed Lawrence the shawl and cap. Lawrence briefly looked over them, then handed them to Holo. She took one sniff, then whispered.

“Rabbit?”

“Wanna give it a nibble?”

Holo finally smiled and looked up.

“This will do.”

“Sounds good. How much are they?”

“My thanks.. for these two, how about ten Trenni silver. No, make that nine. What do you think?”

That was quite cheap, an obvious concession to build a relationship with Lawrence. But he could still be bargained down. Lawrence contorted his face slightly as if thinking it over. The shopkeeper reacted instantly.

“In deference to this young lady's beauty, why not make it eight?”

Just as Lawrence smiled and began reaching out his hand to seal the deal, Holo opened her mouth.

“Were I to wear them now as an advertisement, would you make it seven?”

The shopkeeper was dumbfounded by her radiant expression. After a moment he came to and coughed loudly.

“Very well. Seven, though it be painful.”

“My thanks!”

He coughed once again as he watched her grab the items. Lawrence could only smile defeatedly, realizing that his seven years of bargaining experience were so easily bested by her. She was soon the spitting image of a town girl that would catch every eye that spotted her.

She carefully put the cap on under her hood, to keep her ears hidden. She then pulled her robe down and wore it like a skirt at her waist, finally putting the shawl on over her undershirt. Lawrence was the only one who knew about her inhuman ears and tail, so watching her change was like watching a magic act.

The shopkeeper's resulting gasp of appreciation seemed to make her happy. Once they had left and walked quite far away from his stall, Holo finally opened her mouth again.

“Were they expensive?”

“No. Seven silvers was a very good price for clothes of such quality.”

Lawrence was being honest, but Holo still seemed unsatisfied. He shifted the bundle of winter clothes he carrying into a more comfortable position over his shoulders and smiled over at her.

“You were that confident he would go even lower?”

Holo wasn't smiling, and she shook her head in the negative.

“I just assumed that those clothes you are now carrying are worth maybe a tenth of these.”

“Indeed.”

Lawrence nodded.

“Well don't worry, I actually expected I'd have to spend more.”

Holo nodded slightly, but still seemed dejected.

“If you hold back a little in your drinking, we'll make up for seven silvers in no time.”

“I do not drink that much.”

She finally smiled.

“You know, the way you haggled him was pretty dirty.”

“Hmm?”

“Not even the greatest merchant could stand up to that.”

“Of course, all men are twits.”

Her smile twisted into its usual malicious shape, and he smiled in response.

“So what will do with those clothes? Bring them to the tavern with us?”

“What, these? Nah.”

Holo was confused.

“But this is not the way back to our inn.”

“No, it's not. I'll just resell them as-is to another shop. We can still buy warmer clothes further up north.”

His honesty seemed to fry her mind.

“You will.. re-sell them?”

“Yeah, we won't be using them anyway, so there's no point in hauling them around.”

“Huh.. will you make a profit that way?”

“Probably not. Just breaking even might be tough, they're pretty ragged.”

She seemed completely bamboozled. She looked over at him questioningly, her head tilted in his direction.

“You will sell them even if you will not break even.. huh..”

“You don't see why?”

“Wait, let me think.”

He smiled as he watched her hold her chin and think. He looked up at the autumn sky as he waited. It was still the same pale blue stretching off into the distance as if it went on forever.

“Hmm..”

“Shall I reveal my trick?”

He looked back at her face, which seemed unwilling to ask him for the answer.

“Well, it's nothing special. It pales next to yours.”

“Huh.”

Holo shrugged her shoulders, so he gave her the honest truth.

“These winter clothes were two silvers, and I'll only get maybe half of that when I resell them.”

“Right.”

“But consider how well-to-do you look in your nun's robes. People wearing something like that would never visit a stall like that, so the merchant would want to get on our good side. What would you do in his place?”

Holo's response was immediate.

“Sell to you at a discount.”

“Correct. And what leads from that?”

The eyes of that self-styled Wisewolf seemed to clear instantly. Lawrence smiled and continued his explanation.

“He took a slight loss on these winter clothes, but quite a large one on those clothes for you. He wanted to earn my repeat business, to earn in the long-run. In fact, I bought these haggard clothes for two whole silver coins, but considering the difference in price, what can we conclude?”

Holo's mind was sharp indeed. She soon had the answer.

“So you willingly let him exploit you when you bought those, so you could save more overall for mine. Lose the battle but win the war, huh?”

Lawrence placed his left hand on her head to show her she got it, but it was immediately smacked away. He shouted out in pain.

“Do not touch me with your wicked hands.”

“Ow! That was my *injured* hand!”

“How sneaky! You deserve that for being so devious.”

“Business is business. But your deviousness beat mine in the end.”

Lawrence laughed at himself in mockery, and Holo smiled as if doing the same thing.

“Naturally. Your shallow smarts cannot beat my wise cunning.”

“You sure talk tough.”

“Oh ho.. do you think you can win?”

She squinted and smiled at him with a strangely beautiful expression. It completely matched her despicable personality. But what came next was even more despicable.

“Very well, then prove it to me later.”

Lawrence stood there speechless, rubbing his injured hand. He'd forgotten about their upcoming meeting with Weiz.

“Can you afford to buy me back?”

Seeing her smile made him even less willing to concede defeat, so he counterattacked.

“Of course. But only in apples.”

Holo's eyes opened wide as a look of regret swept across her face and she swept in close to him.

“Now who is being tough..”

“If you bake me, I might become sweeter.”

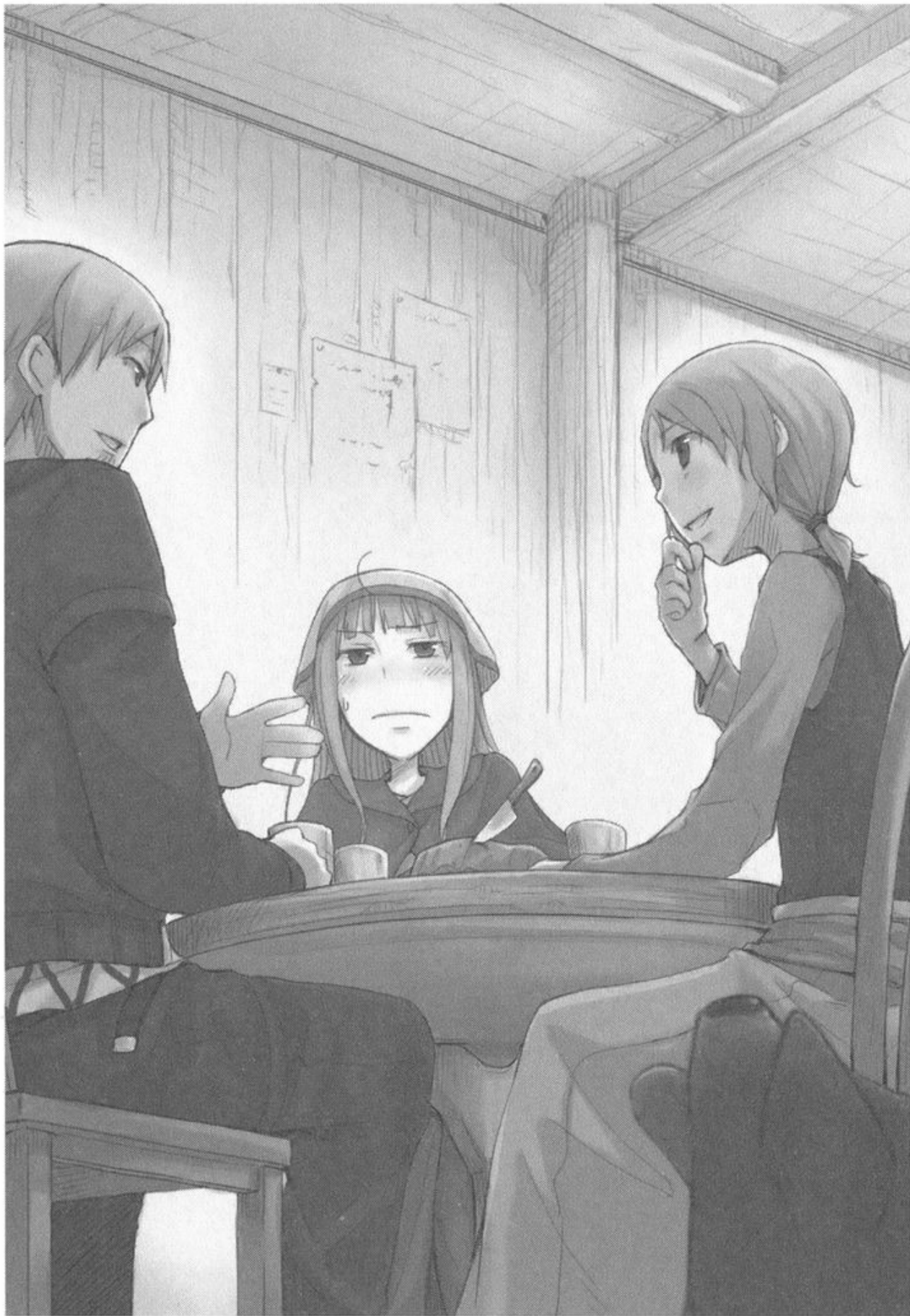
She laughed silently and held his left hand softly as though it was a fragile glass product.

“Males baked with jealousy are too sweet to eat.”

“And how about you?”

“Wanna give me a nibble?”

Lawrence shrugged and looked back up. That clear blue sky seemed as wide as the universe.



Wolf and Amber Melancholy

## Wolf and Amber Melancholy

It was odd that the wine was affecting me this quickly.

For a Wisewolf - who boasts of draining entire lakes dry - to be so affected by a lone cup of this wheat-tinged vintage was jarring; merely midway through my second cup and my face burned as if set ablaze.

Alas, despite the apparent quality of the drink, my mood had deteriorated. I sniffed my cup, assuming it to be the source of my woes, yet could detect nothing untoward within.

My vision had grown bleary, my eyelids heavier by the second. Even the dishes spread out in front of me were blurring together. Salted beef roast - fat enough to ooze oil - sat before me, yet no trace of my appetite remained.

No, wait.. how much had I eaten thus far? It was at this point that it dawned on me that I may well be ill, which was all the more reason to do something about the present situation.

Said problems would have been tractable had this been a typical meal.. merely suggesting to my companion that I felt unwell would win me an almost embarrassing amount of his fussing.

But in the current setting, my companion and I were not the only ones seated at this small, round table. After the drama my companion generated through his sheer stupidity, we came to decide that a celebratory meal was in order, to commemorate the happy conclusion of our tribulations.

I had no desire to pollute a hard-won atmosphere of triumph; not now, nor ever, no matter how joyous the reverie. But that was not the lone reason I now fought to remain conscious.

In fact, the greatest reason was the third party seated at our table in front of me: a blond shepherd girl with a meagre build. I could not afford to show any weakness before her.

"In any case, I had no clue that sheep seek out rock salt."

Sheep had been the topic for some time, and my companion seemed impressed.

In contrast to the shepherd girl, who was perhaps fifteen years of age, the young man she was conversing with was in his mid-twenties. Though a Wisewolf did not possess a complete understanding of human affairs, the manner in which they chatted across the table made it feel as though they were - dare I say it - a couple.

"Oh yes, they love the taste of salt.. for instance, if I were to sprinkle some on a rock they would

endlessly lick it."

"Is that so? I once heard a rumor that, in a far-off city, they somehow used sheep to question prisoners.. I wonder if this is how they pulled it off?"

"They used sheep?"

The shepherd girl, named Norah, had eyes filled with curiosity. Her countenance was that of an obedient sheep - the very kind you would want to swallow whole. As this sheepish shepherdess spoke, she reached out to the substantial pile of meat on the table.

There was beef, pork, fish.. various meats. But not a trace of mutton. The lack of mutton was probably out of consideration for the shepherd girl, but nobody had consulted me about this. Of course, it was unsightly for a Wisewolf to stubbornly insist on mutton.

Bah. These things were inconsequential, no more than minor grievances. Of more pressing concern was my companion's total lack of awareness of my plight. Instead, he was helping the shepherd girl by carefully carving the beef and serving it to her on slices of bread.

My hands continued to automatically deliver wine to my mouth, but it had long since lost all flavor. The gloom within me was only growing. And, in my mind, that proud wolf that represented my other self was laughing.

But there was no remedy for this situation. My body continued to ail, dragging my mood down with it, because I was sharing a table with a detestable shepherd. And, to make matters worse, she was the humble and amiable type my companion was weak to.

Falling for such a frail little lass.. men are all complete fools. I had no recourse to say this aloud, however, as I would appear just as foolish. In other words, this battle called for a defensive posture. Even a strategy that went against my character was viable.

"I don't recall the name of the place, but they carried out interrogations by having sheep lick the soles of their prisoner's feet."

"Ehhh.. really?"

I had assumed that this frail and gentle lass would carefully nibble on the meat between slices of bread. Rather unexpectedly, she deigned to take a larger bite. But her mouth was too small for her to chew such a large mouthful, and this led to obvious complications.

Simply grow a larger mouth or take smaller bites - problem solved. Yet I could not voice my complaint, as my companion's face appeared quite taken with this development. I stewed in my own anger, committing his transgression to memory; I was in my human form, so that was likely for the best.

“Yes, they make the sheep lick them. They even put salt on their feet first. The prisoner starts off tickled into laughter. But you see, the sheep would continue to lick and lick, and soon pleasure would turn into extreme pain, and then..”

He seemed to have been a little taken by the drink. He spoke in an exaggerated manner; a skill of his, presumably from relating these kinds of tales during his many journeys. But he never shared them with me. My headache was taking a turn for the worse, throbbing at my temples.

"That could be true. Whenever I eat dried meat, my flock surrounds me and they ceaselessly lick my fingers. It's quite inconvenient. They're good kids, but they have no concept of moderation.. it can get rather frightening."

"Ah, but I'm sure your trusty knight comes to your aid in those cases."

My ears twitched slightly.. something my companion assuredly failed to notice. The 'knight' he was referring to was her infuriating sheepdog.

"Do you mean Enek? Well.. he tries too hard at times, and has a stubborn streak."

In response, a yelp of protest was heard by her feet. The dog was dutifully lapping up the crumbs and scraps of meat that fell from the table, but I could still sense his occasional glances in my direction. How dare a mere dog be so wary of a pure and noble wolf!

“In that case, your skills as a shepherdess are even more praiseworthy.”

Her eyes widened in surprise, and her cheeks flushed a mild red - clearly not from the wine. I felt the tip of my tail stiffen under my robes. From under the table, I hear the dog laughing at me. My vision blurred even more from anger.

"By the way, Miss Norah, do you still intend to follow your dream?"

Dream. The word jarred me out of my stupor and brought me to my senses. Might this rage-inducing conversation be nothing more than a dream? I rejected the notion in a fit of panic. I was truly, truly unwell.

But I could not succumb now. I had to hold out out we returned to our room. I was, after all, in enemy territory. Showing a sign of weakness would only lead to adverse consequences. And declaring myself unwell would awkwardly end this well-earned celebration. And the blame would lie squarely with me.

But, I had my own territory: our small, cramped room in the inn. If I made it that far, the hunt could be considered a success. It would be akin to catching a rabbit that had not detected my presence in the brush. It was all the more reason to not reveal the poor state I was in.

I commanded my hand to fetch some of the beef on the table - but it responded clumsily. This was surely going to be my largest blunder to date..

"What, drunk already?"

I did not need to shoot him a glare to realize he wore a bitter smile. Despite my overall deterioration, the ears and tail that commanded my pride were still in good shape. I would not need to lift my face to know, almost tediously, what he was eating, his manner, or the expression he wore as he watched me.

Therefore his reaction, after he sliced beef and placed it in front of me, then realized I could not express any gratitude, was clear as crystal to me. The way I must look in his eyes.. the way those around us would respond.. these things were obvious.

But everything becomes irrelevant at a time like this.

There was but one thing on my mind..

"Hey, you look.."

I had to lie down.

"Holo!!"

My companion's exclamation was the last thing I heard before I passed out.

~~~

When I came to I was under several thick and suffocating blankets. My memory of how I made it to the room was virtually non-existent. In my foggy recollections I could only recall being carried back.

Despite my embarrassment, I could not help but feel a little touched. I instinctively asked myself if this was but a dream, but the notion was soundly rejected. For I had such dreams in the past, and if I were to confuse dreams and reality and thank my companion, I would never hear the end of it.

A Wisewolf only angers when she reprimands, only smiles when she praises, and only lowers her guard to make her opponent lower their own.

".."

At the moment I was cocooned in heavy blankets. How very shameful. The feast had probably come to an end right then and there. As one who knew the importance of a celebration, it was too pitiful to consider. How embarrassing for me to disgrace myself like this in front of that girl.

There was no way for me to retain my dignity as a Wisewolf. I had no love of being worshipped, but yielding my dignity was not my wish. Especially not in front of that soft-hearted merchant.

"Hmm.."

But on second thought, compared to the numerous embarrassing incidents I had suffered whilst traveling with that fool, this one was not particularly significant. In fact, any of those other incidents were worthy of tears for a Wisewolf's reputation.

I anger out of displeasure, laugh in bemusement, and end up unintentionally lowering my own guard. While we had only known each other a short time, it already felt as though we had been through a long journey together. As I recalled various past events, I felt the same pangs one would feel upon failure.

I had experienced a failure or two in the distant past, but looking back on those experiences did not spark any emotion within me. But on this journey, I have suddenly begun to feel this way.

"..why is that?"

I mumbled to myself, perhaps because until recently I had been on my own in fields of wheat, idling away the time with no distinction between "yesterday" and "today", nor "tomorrow" or "two days from now".

The only events to remind me that time was passing were annual harvest festivals, biannual seed-sowing festivals, ceremonies to pray for no frost, ones to pray for rain, ones to halt the wind.. upon calculation, there were no more than twenty days in a given year where I felt the passage of time.

Back then, time passed not in minutes or days, but in seasons and full moons. Otherwise I would only distinguish those days with festivals from those without. By comparison, each day of my present journey was unique and eventful. When compared with a life of watching saplings grow into towering trees, every day I spent with this young merchant was akin to several decades in the fields.

A typical day now passed with entirely different moods in the morning and evening. We would squabble in the morning, yet by lunch I could settle it by having him wipe the crumbs from my mouth. We would do battle over food during supper, yet be calm enough by nightfall to ruminate about the future.

Such days, filled with change and promises of the unknown, were ones I had experienced in the past.. I think. Long ago, I had journeyed with humans on several occasions. I had made some truly wonderful memories.

But now, I was no longer idling in fields of wheat and watching dull days as numerous as the hairs on my tail pass me by. I had no time now to dwell on such sentimental memories.

What had my companion done yesterday, what would he do today, what was he scheming right now.. I was too busy pondering over those questions. And I stopped reminiscing about my home shortly after meeting my companion.

But after having grown accustomed to a multitude of boring days where there was naught to do but count the hairs on my tail, I could not bring myself to taint such wonderful days with traces of melancholy.

To say I was unhappy would be a lie. In fact, I was too happy.. so happy that I was growing a bit troubled.

“..”

I curled up my body, finally finding a comfortable position, and sighed. I so rarely assumed my human form that my original intent had been to sleep as humans do.. but this was the only position in which I could sleep well.

Lying prone and curling up was best; my companion slept pencil-straight exposing his dumb face, like some stupid cat. However, I had lately come to realize that the only way to live in the human world might be with his defenseless and insensitive manner.

Perhaps the reason humans praised themselves for reaching 70, despite it being such a short life, was because every day they lived was so busy. I sometimes wished they would learn a thing or two from trees, for whom the difference between today or yesterday was the same as the difference between this year or the last.

As my mind wandered, I had forgotten what I was trying to think about.

"Ugh, the shepherd girl.."

I finally recalled the root of my woes. How embarrassing that had been. At least there was nobody around to bother me now. I would later have to pester that dullard more than usual..

It would serve him right for only engaging in conversation with that shepherd girl, with nary a glance in my direction. After having relied so on me, the Wisewolf, to overcome his crisis. What did he find so appealing about that shepherdess, that lanky.. was it because she was blond?

As I stewed over the matter I felt my eyelids grow heavy, which only increased my dissatisfaction. Anyway, where had the nitwit run off to? While fuming over his tactless inability to remain at my side at such a critical moment, my ears faintly detected his footsteps.

"!"

I instantly sat up. But it struck me that such a reaction was no better than a dog's, the shame of which forced me to lie back down again. Such pathetic actions were unfit for such a dignified wolf, so I was thankful to be in a human form better-suited for such things. Behaving that way to entrap my companion was still tolerable, but for such a reaction to be unconscious was naught but shameful.

Several knocks on the door resounded, each of which I ignored while turning my face away. After some silence the door slowly opened.

".."

I normally slept with my head under the covers; since that was presently untrue, it should be obvious that I was awake. My companion sighed, evidently having noticed, before latching the door shut.

Regardless, I kept my gaze averted. If he was so attracted to frail girls, my being bedridden should induce him to shower me with words of care.. it was a chance for victory!

He made his way to the bed, and the hunt began! Mindful of this, I turned confidently to face him, wearing a delicate appearance. Though it was not my intent to remain silent, I could not bring myself to speak.

I was not because of my thirst, however.. but the expression on my companion's face was enough to give me pause.

".."

I was mystified as to how I should respond. That was fine, as it added detail to my performance, but I had not conceived that I should plan for what I now faced. For having turned to face him, I saw not a careworn face, but a one sharp with anger.

"Why didn't you tell me you were feeling unwell?"

He was first to break the silence.

".."

I was simply too shocked to reply. The sincerity behind his rage made me again question whether I was still asleep..

"You're no child, surely you hadn't failed to realize anything the entire time before your collapse!"

That was the first time I had even seen him genuinely angry with me. Judged in terms of life experience, mental prowess, or physical ability, the man would be dwarfed by this Wisewolf. And yet, his was a truly terrifying visage.

I was frozen. The months and years I had lived were beyond my ability to count, but the number of incidents where people had truly lost their temper with me could be counted on one hand.

"Don't tell me you are so greedy you'd hide it just for more food and drink."

"What?!"

My companion's was angry for my own sake, but I could never tolerate being accused of something so petty. Despite not desiring it, I had long been worshipped as a god. I simply understood the importance of celebration.. it was not something one should interrupt, let alone

How could I possibly be that shallow..

"..sorry, that was uncalled for."

He finally backed off, letting out a heavy sigh and walking away from the bed. It was then that I realized I had unconsciously bared my fangs at him.

"I would never do such a thing.."

Unsurprisingly, a wolf was not the least bit suited for such a moment. For that reason, I found myself thankful that I had been in my human form, to minimize the impact of my reaction.

"Thank the heavens we were here when it happened.. what would we have done if we'd been traveling?"

It finally dawned on me why my companion had been so angry. He was a traveling merchant.. falling ill in the middle of a journey did not mean relying on a trusty companion, but rather suffering alone in the wilderness.

I recalled the tough food and uncomfortable camping arrangements we had shared during our travels.. it was no exaggeration that one being injured whilst outdoors would meet an unpleasant end.

We lived in different worlds; I constantly lamented my loneliness, but was in fact accustomed to the presence of others.

"..sorry.."

My voice was low and hoarse.. it was not an act. My companion was a soft-hearted man, and his concern for me was entirely genuine. Comparatively, I had only been thinking about myself; it made me feel very low. I lowered my face, unable to bear looking at his.

"Ah well, it's alright if you're feeling better. You haven't caught a cold or some other illness, have you?"

His words carried traces of both relief and grief, which made me even more timid. The reason was simple: I am a wolf, he was human. There was no way to bridge that divide.

"No.. it's nothing more than fatigue."

"I guessed as much. If you'd fallen ill, I should have enough wits about me to notice."

My words were only half-true, but he chose not to dwell on it or get angry.

"Thank goodness.."

"?"

I indicated to him with my eyes to continue, and he did so in a semi-apologetic tone.

"I was worried it was because I'd ordered onions.."

But his face was not full of anger, but amusement.

"I am not a dog."

"Uh huh, you're a Wisewolf."

Seeing him finally reveal a smile, I realized that I could not remember the last time I had smiled myself.

"Incidentally, you did not let the food and wine go to waste, surely?"

He put on an incredulous expression as if to say "Naturally".

"I am a merchant; I would never let food go to waste. In fact, I had them wrap up the leftovers."

My fangs were showing again, but this time it was because my lips had curled upwards.

"That said.."

His smile suddenly vanished, and his hand extended toward my face. It was neither rough nor smooth - quite different from my current human hands, and in fact more similar to my wolf

paws, covered in thick calluses.

His fingers gently brushed aside my hair and came to a rest upon my forehead. Being touched this way made my heart race.. it was a feeling not unlike that of a dancing wolf's nose. To be gently rubbed on the face by a wolf's nose was a little too intimate for me.

Of course I would not display such emotions on my face; my companion failed to perceive any shift in atmosphere. In what seemed like a perfectly natural gesture, his paw had rested itself on my forehead.

"I thought so.. you do have a fever, after all. You must have really been exhausted."

"And just who do is responsible for that.. forcing me to go out of my way to solve your problems."

Despite my attempt at forced bravado, he raised his other hand and gently pinched my nose.

"Come now, there's no need for that."

Although he wore a devilish smile, it was impossible to miss the sincerity of his statement. My shyness intensified.. I was unable to face him. I turned my face away to free myself from his hand, but under the shadow of the blanket I peered at him with one cautious eye.

"Alas, I fear we've both made fools of ourselves in front of Norah."

Being reminded of my disruption of a perfectly lovely feast make me shrink back a little more under the blanket. My foolishness was bad enough, but having someone else point it out so bluntly.. even if my body had partly recovered, it would surely take a turn for the worse now.

"So I'm afraid you'll have to hold off on the meat for a bit."

"Ugh.."

I stared up at him with pitiful and pleading eyes, drawing his unwilling sigh.

"But cheer up, I'll prepare you a meal fit for one who's ill. You have to properly recover for my sake. Once you do, you can have all the meat and wine you want."

The mention of "all the meat and wine I wanted" made my ears tremor slightly, but the "meal fit for one who's ill" truly touched me. It was not only a custom in the village I had protected for centuries; indeed, humans tended to prepare luxurious meals for those who were ill to help them recover.

A wolf would naturally reckon that illness meant going without meals altogether, but in the human world it was just the opposite. Clearly, I would not stubbornly stick to a wolf's instincts

and reject his kindness. His attention had drifted away from the shepherd girl and back to me - I would not let it drift away again.

"If you were to become a little gentler, you would be terrifying indeed."

That seemed to make him happy, even if I was maintaining my pretense of spiritedness. A Wisewolf could collapse from fatigue and become bedridden, but her mind would never lose its agility. My companion smiled and replied.

"That's my line."

I was indeed mildly feverish. As he gently stroked his fingers across my cheeks, I immediately fell asleep.

~~~

The very moment I awoke the next morning, I shifted my ears to listen before leaving the covers. The absence of continuous snoring meant he was no longer in the room.

I analyzed my condition; I was purely fatigued now. While my body might take issue with live sheep, the cooked and salted variety would not be a problem. But having slept through the night, I wound up missing my chance to eat a sick person's meal.. even when I was well, delicious meals were hard to come by.

My frail human form had collapsed due to a mere month of eventful travel, which made me want to sigh. But since I could still smile, things were not all bad. After all, such feebleness enhanced my ability to hold his attention.

"How stupid."

I sighed after all, pushing my head out from under the covers. Having grown accustomed to the refreshing experience of awakening in wide open landscapes, I could not bring myself to feel comfortable waking up in such a cramped place.

It was more comfortable being on the wagon, regardless of the close quarters and cold. Opening one's eyes to the sight of the broad sky, basking in the sensation of gulping down fresh air, and enjoying my company under the open sky was far superior to this. If one needed shelter from the rain (who, me?) they could simply hide under a large tree.

As my mind wandered, I glanced to the side. The bed beside mine was indeed empty. My nose twitched as I sniffed - my companion's scent was already very faint. Might he have gone to the church to pray for my recovery? How could that be.. that would truly be one of history's greatest episodes of black comedy.

The notion made me laugh, but without an audience my laughter felt empty. I exhaled white breath as usual, and hugged my pillow tightly.. it seemed to be filled with wheat husks. That good-hearted man was incredibly dim.

"So stupid.."

Enough muttering, I thought, and attempted to lift myself up, only to be shocked by how heavy I felt. I could not recall having fallen ill in my human form for hundreds of years. It finally sank in just how far I had fallen.

"Ugh.."

My original intent was to tend to the fur on my tail, but my condition forced me to abandon the notion. Where was the food? My throat was parched, and I had ultimately eaten nothing yesterday. Where was he, and why was he not here?

In Yoitsu, caring for one who was ill meant staying at their side. As I complained to myself - what kind of 'care' involves leaving your patient to wake up alone? - I once again heard familiar footsteps.

Despite being unable to lift my body, my ears were fine. I indignantly hugged my pillow tightly once more, and just for an instant a thought flashed through my mind.. perhaps things were better when he was not around.

"Are you awake?"

My companion knock on the door, then quietly pushed it open and entered the room. Were I asleep, how could I have answered? What a foolish question. Yet my reply differed from my thoughts.

"See for yourself."

"How are you feeling?"

"Unable to get up."

I did not lie, trying to reply as casually as possible. Lying about a lie equaled truth. Yet my companion eyed me with a face full of concern.

"Surely you're lying again."

My eyes accidentally caught sight of the wineskin in his hands, and were unable to stop watching it. Such a cute appearance made me feel ashamed of myself.

"Hmm.. you may be telling the truth, your complexion is like that of a princess living deep inside

a palace."

It seemed my complexion was bad enough to keep him from joking around, but it was only so because I had not eaten.

"I am hungry."

"Haha.. that won't be a problem."

He chuckled and continued.

"Shall I make you some porridge?"

"I am also thirsty.. is that water?"

I studied the wineskin in his hand. It was not especially large, but I could not detect the scent of grapes.

"Oh, no. Didn't you have a fever yesterday? So I brought you some hard cider."

Hearing "cider" made me instinctively try to rise. But the blanket were so very heavy..

"Hey.. are you sure you're okay?"

"Uh huh.."

I could easily free my companion if he were pinned under a tree struck down by lightning, yet here I was.. fallen to the point of needing his help to be free of a mere blanket. He seemed delighted by the chance, but still obviously concerned.

"Sorry."

With his help I finally escaped my blanket-prison. By curling my tail around my waist I was also able to remain seated upright. Human bodies were far too fragile.. but that was one of the reasons adopting such a form was so interesting.

"If only you were half as civil normally as you are right now.."

A cabinet, used to store candlesticks, sat beside the bed. My companion spoke as he poured cider into a wooden cup that originally held candles.

"You grow angry when I sleep peacefully in the wagon."

"Well it's hardly fair for me to be the only one awake, is it?"

He handed the cup to me; it was small, but I received it with both hands just to be on the safe side.

"If I was too civil you would take advantage and eat everything during meals."

"I'm a good deal larger than you, so that's natural."

He chuckled as he replied.

"And so I must compete with an attitude that is a good deal larger than yours."

He seemed discontent, probably unable to think of a rebuttal. He tossed his head unhappily, in a response neither impressed nor placated. As our eyes met, his face was declaring "I'll get you next time."

Now *that* was satisfying. His stubborn insistence to win one over me always made me happy. Were I to ask, "Have you no retort?", his face would surely grow red and flustered, would it not?

Even just imagining the scenario almost made me break out in peels of laughter; I covered it up by taking a mouthful of cider. But my smile vanished immediately. And so I had covered up yet another smile.

"Umm.. uh.."

I lowered the cup from my lips and studied its contents intently. Within it was a pale amber liquid.

"What's wrong?"

"Ugh, the taste.."

I rubbed my nose as I spoke, worried whether it had lost its effectiveness. I sniffed at the cup once more, but could detect neither apple nor alcohol. It was very unsettling. For me, my ears and nose were more important than my eyes.

"Oh, it's purposely mild."

I rubbed my chest in relief at his explanation, my dischord replaced with discontentedness.

"It is far *too* mild! I suspected my nose had stopped working.."

"You were having a fever, weren't you? That's why I diluted the cider for you."

He spoke matter-of-factly, as if what he said was logical. But try as I might, I could find no logic

behind his words, and so I frowned.

"Oh, that's right, you wouldn't know about modern medicine."

"I am the Wisewolf of Yoitsu, but that does not mean I am aware of every secret of this world."

"Over the years, we humans have built upon our foundation of experience to found the field of medicine. When you collapsed last night, I fled to the market to find the nearest apothecary and learn how to help you."

Medicine, apothecary.. I had no recollection of these terms. When villagers fell ill they would simply gather fragrant herbs and create a soup or salve, then pray to whatever imagined beings in the heavens they believed in. And in Yoitsu there was no treatment beyond licking and staying at one's side. My curiosity was piqued, so as I resumed sniffing at the cup, I spoke.

"And just what might this 'medicine' be?"

"Well, it's said that the human body has four humors, and four natures."

"Ah."

"The four humors flow through the body - blood, bile, black bile and phlegm."

As he listed each 'humor' he raised a digit in a self-satisfied manner, but my doubts were only increasing. Nevertheless, I patiently remained silent and waited for him to continue.

"So-called 'illnesses' are caused by imbalances in the four humors, for reasons such as fatigue, breathing unclean air, even the movements of stars."

"Ah, of course. That helps explain a lot.."

I smiled and continued, looking up at the ceiling.

"..you see, my body always tingles whenever the moon is full."

When I lowered my head and met his gaze, nervousness was written plain on his face. Oh bother, were all men this innocent?

"Hmm, well, such cases happen. When the humor of blood is imbalanced.. say one has too much of it.. the tides of the moon will pull on that blood. But that can still be balanced.."

"Surely what you humans have too much of is imagination."

"..through blood-letting."

"Eh!!"

I looked at his face in a fit of shock. But by the time I noticed the slight smirk spreading across that face, I knew I was too late.

"So be careful around us humans, because we might puncture you to help you heal.. doesn't sound like much fun, does it?"

I opted to ignore him and turn away.

"Although there might be an official treatment to help you recover faster, we can't very well take you to the apothecary.. not unless we want your ears and tail to cause a huge fuss. So since we can't do that, I learned how to treat your humors by using the four natures."

"I take it these so-called 'natures' are none other than laughter, anger, sorrow and happiness?"

"I'm afraid you're wrong, the human body actually possesses cold, warm, wet and dry natures."

I stared at my dry hands as I sipped the tasteless 'cider'. His matter-of-factness was starting to feel a little condescending.

"Those four natures can be balanced by eating foods that are themselves classified as cold, warm, dry or wet. So, for instance, for a 'hot' fever, we'd use 'cold' foods like apples."

Humans seemed to make a habit of assigning random truths to everything. At least *I* had ascertained that truth by having lived long enough to verify it.

"Then why am I not eating apples right now?"

"That wouldn't work. They're 'cold', but they're also 'dry'. But since you're ill, you're already 'dry', so you need a 'wet' food instead. In other words, a liquid. But hard cider's considered warm, so I had to dilute with water and cool it down for you."

So *that* was the reason I was forcing myself to drink what was essentially colored water? It was enough to make me sigh. I could not tell if he had learned all of this today, or acquired it over his life, but he certainly seemed proud to share it with me.

I could point out how meaningless his efforts were, given that even other humans had different beliefs about healing, but it was natural to feel that way.. even we wolves held our own such beliefs, so I decided to let the matter pass.

"Then just what am I permitted to eat with this?"

"Ah, well, when one collapses from fatigue, certain warm spices are needed to raise their temperature up. But since you are already feverish, the treatment needed to start with cooling.

Since that will also make you dry, we need to reverse that.. just like quenching your thirst after a spring, right? But excessive wetness causes cold, and excessive cold will cause melancholia, so we *must* keep you warm at all costs. And so.. given all of that.. let's see.."

I sighed helplessly as he droned on incessantly, feeling stupid for ever having entertained the notion of getting a delicious sick person's meal. But when his mouth next opened, I realized just how hungry I truly was.

"..based on all of that, the natural conclusion is this: cream-of-wheat porridge from sheep's milk, garnished with apple slices and cheese. That way the apples could be fresh and.."

"Oh! Perfect! I want that! You are right, I will surely collapse again without it, my complexion is already worsening, see? Please, do hurry!"

I spoke up in a vain effort to conceal my stomach's furious growls of protest at not having that wonderful-sounding porridge within grasp, and carefully sucked in the drool that was about to escape the corner of my mouth.

"Ssssayyy.. are you sure you're not completely recovered already?"

"Uhh.. I think I over-exerted-"

Of course such a dizzy spell was far too convenient to be legitimate, but he was a good-natured man and could not help but hold out his arms to catch me as I fell into them. As I nuzzled against his chest, I raised my eyes and looked up into his.

"Please.. hurry.."

Perhaps from seeing me act so helplessly, my companion's face went beet-red. Gah.. which one of us was the sick one? So the human cure for his facial affliction was a bit of blood-letting? I laughed in my mind as I tried applying his own 'logic' to the situation.



"Ahem.. anyhow, I take it you've had your fill of cider for now?"

"Mmhmm.. this will do."

I humored him by taking another sip.. he had, after all, prepared it especially for me. Throwing the cup at his face in disgust was hardly the respectful thing to do.

"Please make it a big bowl"

He opted to silently ignore my vocal request.

~~~

How long did he intend to make me wait? I had assumed he would return almost immediately, but when that proved wrong I buried my snout under the blanket for a little nap. When my eyes next opened, it was because my nose had caught a delicious fragrance wafting in the air.

But my mood was sour. My body was not the issue, it was the detestable nightmare I had suffered. A dream of home, and of fields of wheat. One of nostalgia and a horrible sense of loathing. Of a time when I stood at the top, bearing heavy responsibilities. For in a forest, good ground is everything - without it, trees cannot grow. If I relented in my duties, the forest would quickly wither away.

I had not asked for this, nor had I been asked to do this.. someone simply had to do it. Before I had realized it, I was imprisoned by the heavy shackles of responsibility. In fact I did not remember when it began. Perhaps I was born into this special existence, doomed to be different from my peers. Even in human form I was immediately singled out among thousands.

Saddling me with requests because of my strength.. worshiping me due to my massive size.. respecting me for my abilities.. humans felt such things so natural they came endlessly. They reckoned they could benefit themselves by doing so. But in their worship they also demanded dignity; divine favor had to come from something that looked dignified, after all.

I never desired their worship, not did I crave anything from them. But my insistence on not forsaking them had trapped me in yet another prison. Without an object of worship, humans grew timid and mad, scattered by the cruelty of the four seasons. I knew I was being stupid, but even if I suffered I could not bring myself to abandon them, neither seeking, nor having being sought.

And just like that, centuries came and passed. I grew accustomed to the smells of delicious feasts, but as I sniffed them I had never received any welcoming smiles. Not even ones tinged with impudent arrogance, like this fellow's, who did not know his proper place.

"Can you sit up?"

My body had indeed recovered to the point where I could now crawl up from under the blanket. But I still dimly opened my hazy eyes, shaking my head. My days of imprisonment were over. The dream I had longed for was now a reality. I could behave as a spoiled child. A selfish, if powerless one. And also, one under someone's protection.

"Hmph. I just hope you'll return the favor if I ever fall ill."

I was acting so weak as to be incapable of rising from bed; in his eyes this must have been like lifting a kitten from a blanket. It was somewhat embarrassing, but once I had experienced this feeling I could not pass it up again. Indeed, I did not want to.

"Only if you do not mind being treated in Yoitsu-fashion."

I giggled slightly to conceal my embarrassment. His face twitched slightly, but he would surely be thrilled to learn the truth.. would he prefer the licking, or having me by his side? Of course I would never take the initiative and reveal this unless he asked.

"Worry not.. my nose is sensitive enough to detect illness before it becomes serious."

I nearly continued, "unlike you, who were so taken with that girl that you failed to notice *my* condition," but I let the matter pass. He may have happily entertained the girl, but that was his job. The more I considered it, the more acceptable the matter seemed.

"Well, it's my fault I didn't notice. But I'd appreciate it if you told me about such things.. I mean, I guess I *am* a bit dim outside of business matters."

He shrugged in self-ridicule.

"Indeed. Even if I were stricken with a grave affliction you would fail to notice."

"Hmm?"

His eyes widened interestedly, but I had no intention of explaining. A grave affliction called 'love'. Consider this your punishment for being too dim to understand the most basic of things. The day it dawns on you, you will probably be on your death-bed.

"Nevermind. Where is my food?"

He revealed a childish frown upon being denied an explanation. Humans judged others by appearance, so losing to one who looked like a little girl always left him in tatters. It was a convoluted reason to feel happy, but I could not deny that was how it made me feel.

"Good lord, where did this spoiled princess come from.."

Would a common soldier dare talk back to a princess in such a manner? I smiled happily and continued my demands.

"Feed me with the spoon."

Hearing this made him flinch, and he put on an appearance as if he dearly wished he could desert his post.

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"It would have been even better with more apples."

"Perhaps.. more cold apples would have lead to melancholy."

"Are you.. ugh.. are you implying that I am too spirited?"

After delivering the final spoonful of my second bowl, he continued.

"In other words I hope you'll be more civil from now on."

The first few spoonfuls had been a bit tricky due to self-consciousness, but as his nervousness subsided he had been able to provide quite a delightful eating experience for me. Simply opening my mouth and having food delivered to it - I felt like a pup again. I even considered having him groom my fur, but I could not hand my tail to him. He frowned upon hearing me burp.

"But did I not consume many apples in the last city?"

"Indeed, and you became quite melancholic as a result."

"Hmm.."

It almost seemed reasonable to hear that, but really it had nothing to do with some special characteristic of apples. It was purely a case of not being able to finish them, then declaring that I did not wish to eat them for a while. I did declare that I would finish them on my own, but ultimately I had no choice but to request his help. In the process I learned that they tasted even more delicious when I ate them with another.. but of course I would *never* reveal that, not under penalty of death.

"Still, it's a relief to see you eating this much. You'll be up and about in a day or two."

He lifted himself up, along with the pot and bowl.

"But don't worry about that.. after leaving this place we'll be on the wagon for a while, so take your time to recover properly."

He was such a decent man that he played along with my act. Or rather, he was probably too decent to even suspect me of lying. It was enough to spark a wave of guilt in my conscience. When I raised my head, my eyes just happened to meet his; my breath caught when I noticed the concern written in them. Not good.

"..sorry for delaying the journey."

Before I even realized it, the words had slipped from my mouth. But then again, this was perfect.. I could not let such a chance escape me now.

"Since we met, I've given up on rushing things. Plus the ground will be firmer in a couple of days after that rain storm. And since my reputation's been salvaged, our stay here can be comfortable. So all things considered, a couple days of delay won't matter much."

The wheels in my mind were turning. Being able to travel with a decent fellow on a horse-drawn wagon was something I would thank the human gods for, if I were human. I had to insist on calling him a 'decent fellow' in fear of the day I would start calling him by a different name, but I truly wanted to remain by his side. Even as he collected the utensils and turned to leave, the mere sight of his back made my tail fidget.

"Please wait.."

"Hmm?"

He turned back, with eyes far too pure and innocent to meet.

"It is just.. the inn.. is far too quiet.."

I swallowed the rest of my sentence in shyness. He would probably mistake this for an act. But then again, he would also realize that even if it were an act, it was also the truth.

"You're right, a horse-wagon's far noisier, isn't it? Well, it's not like I had anything planned for today, and I do have to consult a certain glutton about the menu for tonight."

This way he would remain by my side, even if I was being almost infantile in my willfulness. He laughed nervously as I obstinately turned my face away. This was one of those private conversations no one would interrupt, and carried no trace of deceit. If one wanted to find a concrete meaning for 'happiness', they need look no further.

"So is there something specific you'd like? I'll be at the apothecary's later to follow up, and if the market's closed by the time you make your mind up it'll be too late."

"Umm.. hmm.."

"You certainly seem much better, but it wouldn't safe to assume you're well enough for heavier foods."

"How about meat?"

My eyes were positively glittering.. of course it was not an act.

"No, no.. just things like porridge, or soup with bread to soak in it."

"Ugh.. then just get more of what I just ate with the sheep's milk.."

I pointed at the utensils he was carrying and he nodded reservedly.

"It is fragrant, sweet, and rich-tasting.. that is what I want."

"But sheep's milk.. hmm.."

"Is that a problem?"

He nodded his head.

"It spoils quickly, so the good stuff is hard to find in the afternoon. I'm guessing you'll only settle for the best, right?"

"But of course."

As he studied my toothy smile, his shoulders slumped.

"Then I guess I'll have to hunt down Norah. As a shepherd, she's got an eye for sheep's milk-"

He suddenly cut himself off.. the silence was deafening.

"What about Norah?"

I retorted, completely unaware of my own facial expression. But given the I-just-said-something-catastrophic look on his face, it was easy enough to guess. Our serene mood had been completely swept away. Given what he just said about her "having an eye for sheep's milk," he had probably been gallivanting about with her while I was asleep. With that shepherdess. As a pair. While I was asleep!

"Don't misunderstand.. it's only to get you the finest sheep's milk.."

"If you study it with your wallet, you will not need a shepherd's eyes."

My outward voice was distorted with traces of hostility, and inwardly another voice was

screaming "TRAITOR! TRAITOR! TRAITOR!" He surely knew better, given my prior attitudes toward her. So why would he continue doing something so infuriating to me? Shepherds were essentially the sworn enemies of wolves!

"But s-since we're acquainted, I can hardly refuse her when offers to help me.. a-and.."

He looked as if he had walked into a trap. He was panicking, trying to find the words to smooth things over. But in my anger - which even I felt was excessive - anything he said would only be an excuse. After pausing for what seemed like an eternity, he finally completed his thought.

"..and I don't understand why you hate Norah so much?"

Time froze.

"Huh?"

This slip of his tongue was so unexpected that I was stupefied. My jaw dropped and I drew it back mechanically to try to recover.

"Wh-what did you just say?"

"Well, I don't know what's happened between you and shepherds, and I get it that you're a wolf and feel uncomfortable around her.. but there's no need to be so hostile, is there? She might be a shepherdess, but.. how can I put this.."

Both his hands were full with the pot, bowl and utensils.. but he still somehow managed to scratch his head.

"Being versatile is a virtue.. there are exceptions to every rule.. right?"

I wanted to loudly call him out on his stupidity. But I refrained, not due to my fatigue or to retain face as a Wisewolf, but rather because his hopeless idiocy had stolen away my breath. It seemed centuries of solitude in fields of wheat had left me out of sorts.. I had even forgotten the basics of interaction, to the extent that I had to pay careful attention even during mundane daily banter.

I could sense my ability to accurately perceiving the thoughts of others had been lost. But I could still understand that, being someone who spent long stretches of his life alone on a horse-cart, my companion's lack of alacrity in such matters could not be helped. I just had not expected him to be *this* slow.

Despite his dim-wittedness, he possessed an unyielding "never say die" attitude in the face of impending doom. Despite being stupid, his tenacious use of wisdom helped him get through adverse situations. Despite his naive soft-heartedness, he was strong enough to act forward

when the occasion called for that. And yet, he was naught but incompetent in such a crucial area. I was truly incapable of understanding why.

Was he really, *truly* unaware? I suspected he was even testing me. How could he truly fail to understand why the Wisewolf of Yoitsu would resent a shepherdess? Wolves hunted sheep, and shepherds protected those hopeless helpless animals. And yet who was now the wolf, the shepherd, and the sheep? Even thinking in such basic terms should be enough to understand my unhappiness.

It was not that I hated shepherds. I was merely unsettled by their presence as they lurked beside their flock. Worried about whether they would let a sheep stray away, or call it back with their horn. Worried about whether a dumb sheep would be lured away by their warm and simple smile, never to return. I sighed while thinking about this.

My companion still stood there rooted to the spot with a dim look on his face. He was the spitting image of a dumb sheep. That tender scene of being indulged and spoon-fed porridge already felt like a distant memory. My dream was so close to being a reality; I was free from my cage, and indulging in whatever I wanted rather than having demands heaped upon me.

I could be as willful as I wanted, and not offend anyone. That was why, whether with ploys or words, I wanted to try this. I wanted to know what it felt like to act like a spoiled child. But I had lost to my own stupidity. After all, after a long night of drinking, those who were still capable were of course responsible for those who had passed out.

"Hey, listen."

The weariness of my heart had seeped into my voice as well. I finally understand how difficult it actually was to be as willful as an innocent and carefree child. My companion may look upon me as some mysterious wolf wearing a sheep's skin, but that was through no fault of mine.

Even if I sometimes transformed into a sheep, I was not that way all the time. Truth be told, this was the fault of my overly sheep-like companion. But if we both turned into dumb sheep we would inevitably end up falling off a cliff, so there was a need for at least one of us to remain ourselves.

"I am the one at fault."

My statement, despite carrying traces of spite, was enough to surprise him.

"But liking or hating requires no reason; I said this before, did I not?"

No matter how much he acted as if he understood me, he was unlikely to have grasped the true meaning in my words. Alas.. I could let him rub my ears, but permitting him to groom my tail was out of the question. In fact I could not picture such a day arriving; as I considered that I

looked at him with tired eyes.

"But, you.."

He straightened his back attentively. My body shrank back, regardless of my original intent to let him rub my ears.

"Put those things away, and come back quickly."

I put on a wide grin. He seemed surprised by my speedy change, but immediately played along with me.. perhaps he was not quite so dim after all.

"Of course. After all, it's too quiet in here."

Merely stumbling onto the correct response had made him so happy that I changed my mind; a nitwit was still a nitwit. My act had been as clear as a winter's day.. but he seemed relaxed in the assumption that the matter had been settled.

"Then I'm off.. want anything to drink?"

I was too abject to sigh, but at least I could be thankful for his conscientiousness. I decided some praise was in order.

"That mild wine you made was not bad.. I suspect it might be helping me recover."

He wore his happiness on his face in a smile of genuine delight. That expression really made me want to bully him.

"Just wait here, then."

He happily replied and left the room. What a monumental fool. But then, was the Holo who frequently spurred him on any better? These were peaceful, almost tranquil times. I was fully aware that they were priceless, and why I had to cultivate them for all they were worth.

But there was still one cause for anxiety. As I slowly buried myself back under the blanket, I tried thinking like a human. Perhaps his monotonous prior lifestyle was the reason why my light praise and slightly-improved mood would delight him so.. but then I could not overdo it or they would yield diminishing returns. Most living things would grow bored and frustrated to experience the same thing over and over.. I would have to carefully find other means.

One idea came to me shortly after I began contemplating; if one gets sick of eating sweet foods, one should eat something salty. In other words, if smiles could not lure him, I should attack with tears. A simple strategy, but against a simple-minded sheep, it could be highly effective.

"Huh?"

As I pondered, I seemed to vaguely recall something. After racking my brain I finally remembered: it was that story my companion told during dinner just before I collapsed. Our conversation had been about sheep, and moved onto the topic of their habit to continuously lick anything salty.

This made me think twice. When I had revealed my salty tears to him this morning, he had licked my face continuously. At first I was ticklish and wanted to laugh, but the experience dragged itself out. He did not seem to know when to stop, so I shuddered as I recalled his tortured story of torture.

In the end it would be best to grasp his reigns tightly and make him believe he was wandering wherever he pleased. That would take more effort, but at least he was unlikely to try anything funny. I laughed to myself and curled my body around my pillow.

I had not experienced anything this interesting for a very long time. Just what made it "interesting" was beyond my grasp, however.. it was amusing for so many reasons that I could scarcely be expected to pinpoint the root cause.

But if I were to force myself to choose, it would have to be that despite having such a dim-witted sheep before my very eyes, I was unable to capture it through normal means; my wolveren heart had been sparked to life with the thrill of the hunt.

I suddenly heard his footsteps in my ears. As promised, he had returned quickly. My heart was racing, my tail twisted itself into a lump, and my ears tremored. Ahh.. I could hunt my entire life and still the thrill of the hunt could take my breath away. As his footsteps stopped outside the door, my anticipation was at its boiling point. The door then opened to reveal-

"Holo!"

My companion smiled as he announced himself.. and at his side there stood the shepherdess.

"Miss Norah's come to pay you a visit."

Yes indeed.. normal means were not going to work after all. Faced with the shepherdess' smile - which called to mind a grassy plain at the start of summer - I returned a smile befitting the Wisewolf of Yoitsu. What a miserable turn of events. My smile could not contain any actual happiness. Keeping a firm grasp on that fool's reigns would probably prove even more difficult.

"How are you feeling?"

The shepherdess asked her question.

"No longer ill, only tired."

What other reply could I have given? Even a self-proclaimed Wisewolf such as myself had no answer for this riddle. Observing this peaceful exchange, my companion revealed a relieved smile. This was truly wearying. In fact, the temperature in the room was rising.

"But forget that. I do wish to speak with someone, about something I have always wondered about."

"Hmm? Do you mean me?"

With such humility - offering no pretense of pride nor intellect - it was no small wonder that he would be attracted to her.

"If you feel I can offer you any answers, then by all means please ask."

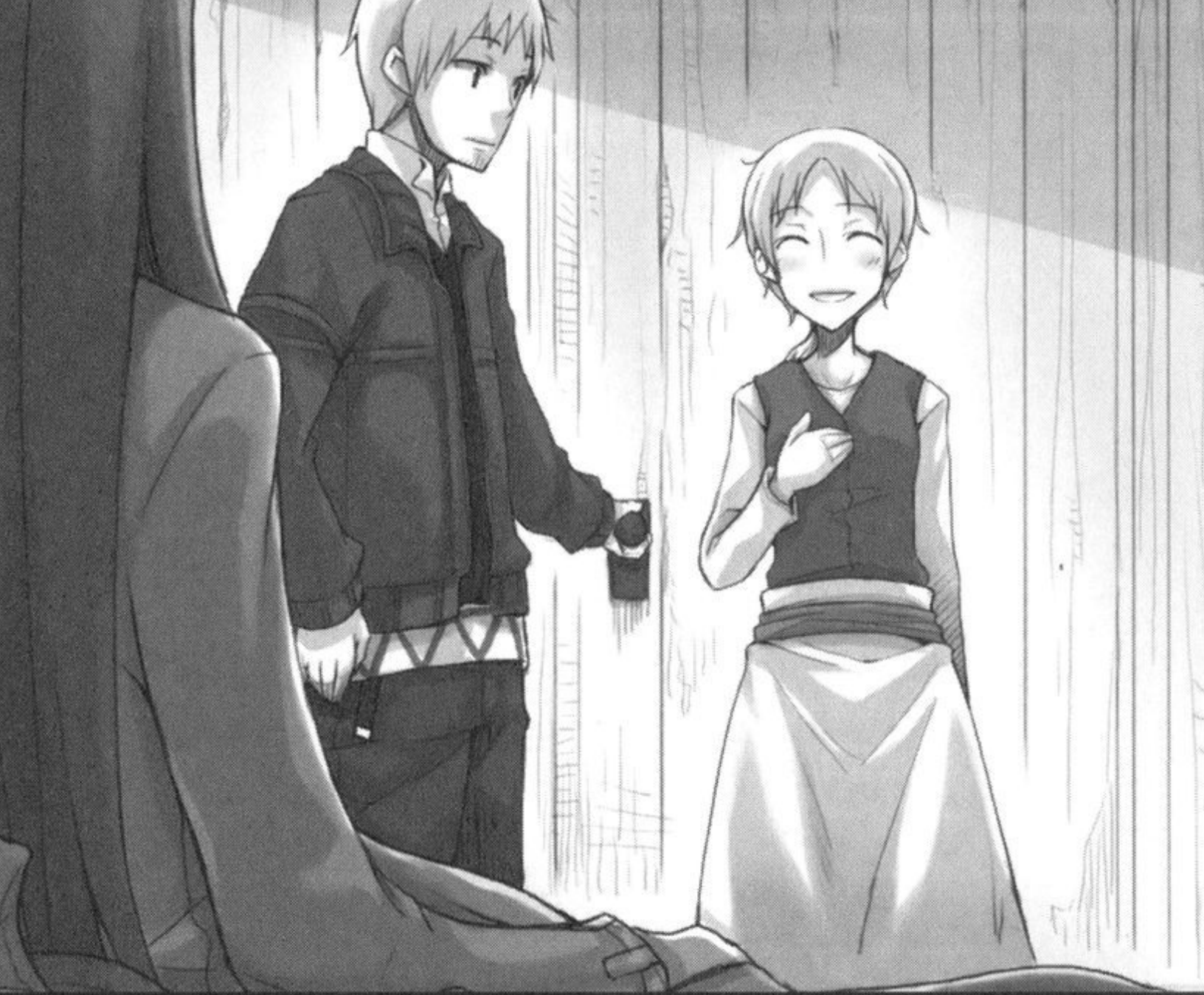
She made her offer with a smile. I could not get careless now. Or rather, I could not afford to be careless. As a hunter, I could hardly squander this hard-earned opportunity for dialog.

"What do you feel is the trick to leading sheep?"

Her eyes widened in surprise at my unanticipated riddle, but only for a moment. She quickly recovered her smile. All the while, her arrogant sheepdog glared at me vigilantly. Then that lass, with the simplicity of a clear sky, answered me with her warm smile.

"I would say it's having a big and open heart."

As she voiced her answer, an illusory wind seemed to blow by. This girl was a true.. a true shepherd. Herding sheep did require a big and open heart. I peeked at my companion, who seemed pensive. The girl followed my line of sight, then turned away and softly offered an "Oh!" Any reasonably intelligent person could deduce my meaning in but an instant.



"Indeed you are right, as sheep will always over-estimate their intelligence."

Norah, her attention turned back to me, smiled back in a sympathetic yet happy manner. It seemed I could probably befriend this gentle lass. But when I turned to my sheepishly-smiling companion - still completely unaware that he was the subject of the conversation - I began to doubt I had the ability to keep a hold on his reigns.

Truly, only the gods would know for certain. But.. gah, I too am called a god. I shot him an icy glare, which sent a shiver up his spine. A sheep, an innocent sheep, and yet such a stupid-

"Fool."

I mumbled that last word to myself. This fool, this sheep.. was the one I liked the most.

Figure 1

1.2.6.1931

