



*Drunken Wolf  
Translations*

# *Volume 13*

狼 と 香 辛 料

*Spice and Wolf*

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Special Thanks to all contributors  
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Merchant  
meats spicy  
wolf.

支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

狼と香料

XIII Side Colors III

狼  
と  
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Side Colors III

支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

Illustration

文倉十

Jyuu Ayakura



# Wolf and Honey-Pickled Peaches




Holo's eye's were glued inside the shop before they'd even entered.



Holo's hand took his, as if she had been waiting for that.

After that, the only sounds that were heard on that quiet winter afternoon were the sounds of their rattling wagon.



She laughed so hard she began crying,  
eventually ending in one last tiny giggle.

*"It's my loss."*

**Wolf and the Twilight-Colored Gift**



She stands up and instinctively chases the decoration on her tail, round and round like a puppy.

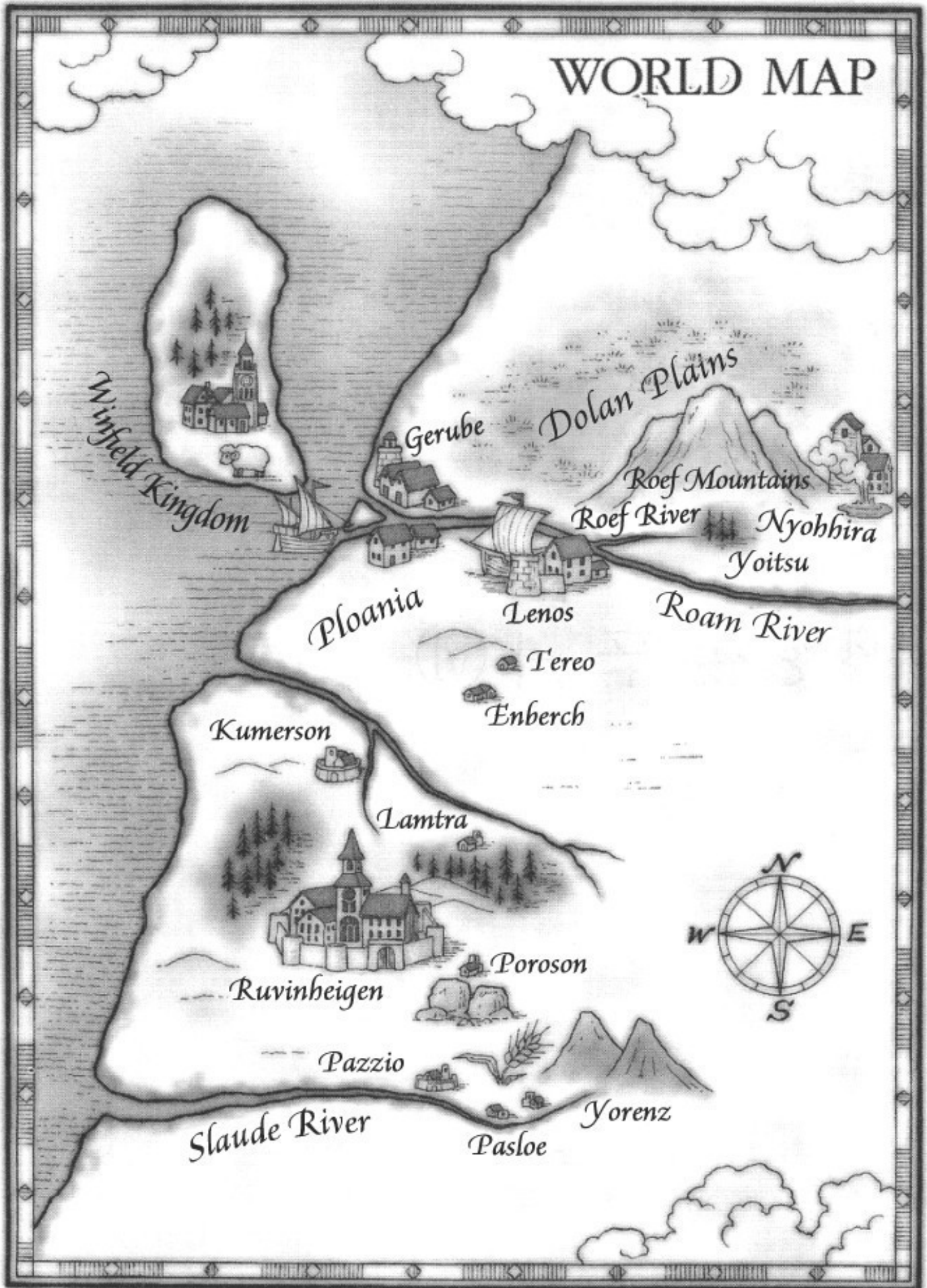
## **Wolf and the Silver Sigh**



My master hugs me tightly, burying her face  
in the furry scruff of my neck.

*"It'd be such a waste if I froze up now, wouldn't it?"*

**Shepherd and a Black Knight**



Map illustration by Idemitsu Hidemasa

狼と香辛料 ㊤

Side Colors III

# *Spice and Wolf*

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Volume 13 - SIDE COLORS III

*Translation & Editing by  
'Drunken Wolf Translations'*

# Contents

Wolf and Honey-Pickled Peaches	—	<b>4</b>
Wolf and the Twilight-Colored Gift	—	<b>39</b>
Wolf and the Silver Sigh	—————	<b>55</b>
Shepherd and a Black Knight	—————	<b>69</b>





## Wolf and Honey-Pickled Peaches

Even a smaller city like this could be attractive enough to become a trading hub. The setup was perfect; a lovely landscape, freely flowing waters, and rich soil.. all sorts of crops could thrive here. Those crops could be sold for a hardy profit because of how well they grew, and with that kind of income the quality of life here would be good enough to raise even more profitable crops with lesser yields.

In such an idyllic place, the flow of interesting products wouldn't cease in the winter. Merchants imported goods in bulk, and travelers were always resupplying, so craftsmen and other service-providers were everywhere. In the face of such crowds, the main market was always lively, to the point that even the surrounding residential areas were noisy with cobblers, tailors, and carpenters. Even moneychangers and smiths were busily engaged in business.

Everywhere you looked, you saw crowds of people. Now and then you'd smell freshly-baked bread and fish wafting in the breeze, tempting you to stop. It was no surprise for it to do the same to these two traveling companions, who had been on the cold road with little more than bread and wine. Especially Holo, who finally sat down and clutched Lawrence's sleeve after flitting to and from every stall along the way.

"Rabbit.. fish.. chestnuts.. sausages.."

She kept repeating the foods she'd spotted like some child trying to remember their names. If given the chance to sample everything she came across, she could easily spend a gold coin in a few days. Lawrence was focused on the complicated situation of the roads they were yet to travel, but her constant barrage of detailed reports was enough to clue him in on what was trading well in the city. Being landlocked explained the lack of variance in fruits, but also the wide variety of meats.

Lawrence felt his sleeve being tugged for attention. The stall they had just passed was roasting a pig whole. Skewering a pig and roasting it over a spit while drizzling it with oil took a lot of careful attention, but the results were delicious. A man who seemed to be the shopkeeper was toiling at this, bare-chested and sweating even in the dead of winter. Children were watching while smacking their lips and licking their fingers.. and so were travelers.

"..even if it is only once, I would like to try one of those.."

She mumbled at herself sadly as he turned to check up on her. He brushed it off by standing tall and coughing.

"Then you've already forgotten the piglet I bought you before?"

The image of an oil-drenched Holo surfaced in his mind; even her fingers, face, and hair were

soaked. But she'd shared none of it with him, so there was no way she'd have forgotten about it. She pushed up against him before replying.

"There was only enough there to satisfy me for so long.."

"..you're not saying you could finish that whole pig back there, are you?"

It was probably heavier than she was. He really didn't think she'd bother turning into a wolf to eat it whole, but he had no way to be sure. Just as he was about to sigh at her lofty tastes, he caught a glimpse of her looking up at him sadly.

"That is not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?"

She was being obtuse, as usual.

"You mean you do not know? But for a merchant to not know his customers' needs..!"

She put on an purposely shocked expression and sighed at him with eyes full of pity. As usual, rather than arguing, she'd chosen the most blatantly damaging point to attack: his self-esteem.

"Oh, very well.. let me see."

There was nothing else to do, so he pieced it together. Pigs. Pork. A piglet wasn't enough for her, but it wasn't the portion of pork.

"Right!"

"Hmm?"

As usual, she turned away and smiled as he uncovered the truth.

"It all comes down to the skin, doesn't it?"

"..Hmm?"

"Of course.. piglets wouldn't have that much, but if it's cooked just right.. ah, well, it's not for everyone. True, it's crispy, and if you bite into it along with the meat, the grease will ooze slowly and fill your mouth.. and it'll be even better with just a sprinkle of salt, but- hey!"

"Wah!"

She'd been so engrossed in his description that she had to wipe away her drool. It felt a bit sinful to indulge in such a conversation when he had to live a life of dry bread, tough meat,

onions and pickled vegetables, but in the end Holo coughed and rubbed her mouth, with a dissatisfied look on her face. His guess had been wrong.

“Oh? Was I wrong?”

“Completely wrong. But..”

She smacked her lips.

“That sounds delightful.”

“Well, if you want that, we’d have to order the whole roast pig. But if we can’t finish it, it’ll just go to waste. In fact I hear that nobles only order it to eat the skin, and the rest of the meat is just thrown away.”

“Oh?”

Her serious side always came out when they discussed food. It made him chuckle, but he continued.

“Then what is it? Something about a piglet not being enough, hmm..”

“Hmm?”

“If not the skin, then sausages? Maybe liver? I’m not too into that, but it’s popular..”

He was a bit concerned it would be something raw like that.. it wouldn’t surprise him, since she was a wolf, but if he went around asking for raw liver he’d earn stares from the devout.

“Stop it, fool!”

Her sudden shout threw his thoughts into disarray.

“Such a foolish mule.. I do not wish to earn the reputation of someone who cannot stop drooling when she hears about food.”

His thigh was pinched. Evidently he’d taken his teasing too far. But just as he wondered what to say to make up for it, she looked away and continued.

“Not even I could eat that much. A piglet is more than enough.”

He stopped himself from asking “then what is it?” He would have no one to blame but himself for her inevitable assault if he didn’t figure it out himself. But seeing her turned away in embarrassment made him laugh and surrender.

“Hey, let’s go eat something too big for one person to finish.”

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye, smiling. It was difficult to resist hugging her when she acting coy like that. After all, wolves feared being alone.

“So..?”

Should they splurge on a big meal? He saw a happy, fang-filled smile spread across her face, and didn’t want to ruin it. But merchants were a greedy lot, so while they loved to eat, they hated paying for it. Something like this would be fine once in a while, but if he let it get out of hand, it would be difficult to break that habit. Did that make him a bad companion? No, merchants had to be this way. He let the angel and demon on his shoulders fight for a while before he noticed that Holo had bent her waist, trying to keep from laughing.

“..”

Her tail was swishing around wildly. The moment he turned away, she erupted into peals of laughter. But it was alright, no one would care about a little girl’s merriment on a wagon in the middle of the city, so neither did he. “Truly, I don’t care” he told himself, knowing that he was the reason her mood had improved. After she’d had her fill, she spoke.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

There was no trace of guile in his voice.

~~~~

“What? All your rooms are full?”

They stood at the bar on the first floor, which did indeed seem quite crowded. The innkeeper held his ledger remorsefully as he apologized to Lawrence.

“There are just so many guests lately, sorry..”

“You mean all the inns are full?”

“I think so, ever since they imposed the new regulations..”

He probably meant regulations against having too many boarders. Inns had collapsed or given rise to disease thanks to overcrowding, and thieves and con artists thrived in such conditions as well. It was no surprise that strict regulations would be imposed, or that innkeepers would be powerless to resist them. This innkeeper closed his ledger and put on a thoughtful expression.

“..Though you’re free to have supper with us?”

“Thanks, perhaps next time.”

The man nodded as if used to hearing that response. Lawrence had no choice but to head back to the carriage and shake his head at Holo. She’d grown accustomed to this lifestyle, and nodded in understanding. But he didn’t miss how tense her expression was under her hood.

She knew this meant they might have to spend the night outside the city, if they couldn’t find a place to park their wagon and bunk in a manger, storeroom or church. Those were their only options now. If they had been in a larger city, this would have been more pleasant, but this was really just a middling town.

If they didn’t find a place before the market closed, they’d have to head to the outskirts for the night. This troubled Lawrence a bit. Others were already planning on spending the night on the outskirts, and would probably have already started drinking to pass the time.

Bringing a girl like Holo along to such a rowdy group could end badly. Besides, such drinking parties were only fun when you were properly rested. After such a long trip, all you’d want was a little wine to go with a nice warm meal, followed by sleep. And so, Lawrence kept trying.

The second and third inns were also full. Some sad-faced travelers left the fourth as he walked up to the door. He trudged back to Holo, who had probably gotten over it and be more interested in sleep by now. Since the same result likely awaited them at the fifth inn, he opted to just find a good place to park for the night. A roof would make all the difference.

He steered the wagon as he watched people jogging home from work, and felt jealousy creep over him.. they had homes to retire to. Holo sensed his irritation and sat next to him. The feeling of a soft body next to him was comforting, and she smiled when he put his hand on her hooded head. That’s when they overheard someone talking.

“We’ll have some of that next week.”

On such crowded streets it was no faster to walk than take a wagon, so overhearing others was bound to happen. Given the flour on their faces, they were bakers. They were talking about a shop they passed by on their side of the road.

“You mean the distinguished young manager of Ohm’s Company will actually do that? Putting those things on our goods would be a joke!”

“Now, now.. he pays us well, and he’s trying to come up with ways to make us money so we can sell white bread.. you’ve always wanted to bake with the finest wheat, haven’t you?”

“Well yeah, but..”

The man who was ill-at-ease had good reason; bakers took more pride in their work than most craftsmen. Being told to taint their products with cheap additives might even feel like a breach of ethics to someone like that. They worked long and hard to gain their independence after a grueling examination. Everything from mixing flour to rolling the dough needed to be mastered. There was good reason for their pride.

But what were they talking about? Even Holo was intent on listening in to find out. Lawrence stared out in front of the two men, at the buildings lined up on the street. They passed by interconnected shops for candles and lanterns, needles and thread, and buttons and fabric, but the closest thing to food in any of them was oil at the lamp shop - hardly something to be spread on one's bread. And then, just as the more baker-like of the men spoke, something interesting crossed Lawrence's line of vision.. a medicine shop.

"Our bread's good enough to be bare. You only put stuff like that on when it's going stale. And come on, it costs too much! I mean it's not like honey's cheap, it might as well be gold. It's bizarre."

"Oh? You saying you're happier to watch your bread go stale in the shop window?"

"No, no! But honeyed peaches? I'll pass!"

Lawrence's eyes shot back to Holo, just in time to see her ears perk up with such force that he wondered if she'd shot holes through her hood. She just sat there as though her brain had frozen, along with her tail, which was crookedly twisted under her robe like some dried-out bit of hay. Her face betrayed the intense struggle between logic and emotion that was being waged in her mind.

The bakers kept arguing with each other until they finally vanished around a corner. Once they were gone, Lawrence cautiously stole a glance at Holo, wondering if he ought to pretend he'd heard nothing. And yet, she just quietly sat there, rather than bringing it up. That silence was far more terrifying.. it left no room to bargain. If she spoke, he could decline or try change topics. But all he could do now was return her silence.

"I fear.. it'll be a cold one tonight."

He did his best to smooth things over, but given her continued silence it seemed that Holo was too far gone. They'd just discussed roasted pig skins, and now they were actually in town - who would want to spend their night eating bitter rye bread and cheap wine? He knew what that meant, but honeyed peaches were simply too pricey.

The going rate for a single such peach was ten Trenni silvers.. maybe even twenty. It was just too much, even if he had the cash on hand. He clutched his purse instinctively, picturing the smile that would have normally spread across Holo's face. But her silent act was just too

effective after their earlier disappointment. He knew he had to give in this time.

“..okay, let’s go to that medicine shop and get something to keep us warm.”

She remained frozen in place, save for her ears and tail flapping about like an excited puppy’s.

~~~

Medicine shops were supposed to sell medicine, but in fact they sold just about anything. Cobblers were to sell shoes, and tailors clothes.. the division of labor between companies was clear. Tailors couldn’t sell shoes, nor cobblers clothes. Candlemakers couldn’t sell seafood, and seafood shops couldn’t sell other kinds of food.

Of course, by this logic a medicine shop should only sell medicine. But having more products increased one’s customer base.. that was just common sense among merchants. And medicine sellers could come up with almost any excuse to extend their product base. The most common trick was selling spices; if they could claim a certain spice helped with fevers, it was medicinal. They just applied that kind of claim to other products, and honey was one of them.

Funny enough, candlemakers also had a similar excuse to sell honey along with their wax. So other merchants could hardly point fingers; this was really their battlefield, after all. Still, it was convenient that medicine shops stocked so many different kinds of honey-soaked foods. Peaches, pears, even carrots, pork, beef, mutton and fish.. take your pick.

Salt, vinegar, or honey were required to preserve food. In the dead of a winter that seemed to go on forever, the prices for these preservatives inevitably soared, and so did the preserved foods.. no matter how vague the labels on the final products were. The most popular of these preserves were presently in stock, in the furthest corner of the shop above the shopkeeper along with peppercorns and sugarcubes. It was a bottle containing a syrupy liquid.

“Welcome!”

At first the shopkeeper gleefully eyed Holo, seeing her expensive robes. His raised eyebrow, however, sank back down when he spotted the less-than-impressive outfit Lawrence was wearing. He realized that even if they wished to buy something, they couldn’t afford much. Having certainly drawn that conclusion, he quickly changed his tone.

“What do you want?”

“Something to warm us.. perhaps ginger-”

“Over there.”

Lawrence was cut off before he could complete his sentence, so he swallowed his words. The

shopkeeper clearly just wanted them to buy what they wanted and leave as soon as possible. He found the ginger products where the man had pointed, and settled on honey-soaked ginger. It was cheap, but effective to keep under the blankets on a long, cold night.



Holo's eyes followed him, as though preparing herself for disappointment. Of course he had no intention of doing so, and knew she was just playing her usual mind games because it cheered her up. But he also knew what she truly wanted, since it was something they'd discussed several times (despite letting it go each time).

The cost was less of a reason for their dropping the subject than the fact that they'd simply never come across any honey-pickled peaches. But now they had, and he knew Holo wouldn't be able to resist. And so, after asking the shopkeeper to bottle the ginger and preparing to pay the man, Lawrence wanted to try his hand at bargaining.

But luck wasn't on his side.

"Alright. Ten Lutes. Thanks."

After paying the man and gingerly accepting the honey-soaked ginger, all Lawrence could do was stare at the price on the bottle with the peach and feel the same level of disappointment Holo must have felt. One Lumione.. that was thirty-five Trenni silvers. Holo rubbed her eyes, but the price didn't change. That golden peach might as well have been real gold to them. The shopkeeper seemed to tire of watching them, and intentionally raised his voice.

"Oh-ho, you have good eyes. This year's peaches are so sweet and firm, not to mention Count Harold Lutlin's honey is the finest around. Even at a Lumione each, we're almost sold out. Those are the last three. Would you like one?"

*Good luck paying for it.* That was what he had written on his face. In a town like this, wedged between large commercial cities and wealthy nobles, he could charge whatever he wanted to, no matter how crazy. He could even afford to be haughty and arrogant to his customers without fear of reprisal.

But Lawrence was a merchant of experience, so being treated like some third-rate novice peddler was infuriating. He had half a mind to slam the Lumione down right then and there in front of the fool, but forced himself to stop. He really didn't want to, but if he splurged here the rest of his trip with Holo would suffer.

Lawrence knew his limit. Even the dullest merchant wouldn't carry all of his cash on his person, and neither did Lawrence. He didn't have much on-hand. He was mere inches from earning Holo's genuine smile, but reality wasn't going to let him. He forced himself to shake his head and decline.

"Hehe.. it's too much."

"Oh? Well, if you change your mind, you're welcome back."

Lawrence left, with Holo following him. She remained silent, even more horribly so than before.

It was like being stalked by a wolf. He remained silent, stewing in his defeat, but knew if he didn't apologize, the rest of their wagon ride would be marred. The wound might be smaller this way, he thought, as he turned to apologize.

And yet, he didn't know how to respond to the non-angry face he confronted.

"Mmm? What is it?"

There was no anger there, nor in fact any pressure whatsoever. If her face was pale, he would have suspected she'd fallen ill.

"N-nothing.."

"Alright, then let us hop to it! We will not move unless you drive, nay?"

"Huh.. yes, yes.."

He took his seat on the wagon and she followed. He wouldn't be surprised if her tail expanded angrily, then shrank back down in disappointment at being denied her much-desired treat. No one could blame her, after all the stale bread and cheap wine she'd endured. Even a hot bowl of soup would be worth more than riches to a starving king. Her disappointment had to be immense.

But all she did was stare ahead of them, unwilling to blame him. She'd seen the price as well. He turned to see her fidgeting in the back of the cart like she was utterly lost. She looked like she wouldn't notice it if he gave her a hug. And so, he inched their wagon forward. They were going to spend another night outdoors, except this time they didn't even have the prospect of a nice bed at the end of their journey to look forward to.

He rubbed his chin and shut his eyes, debating whether or not to just turn back and buy the damned peaches. But his hands wouldn't obey him, one Lumione was just out of reach. They couldn't survive on what was left if he bought one. Everything cost money, after all, so no matter how many beads of sweat lined up on his brow he had to endure her sadness. But could she endure another long, freezing night? Only the peaches could rejuvenate her. So buying them was the only option.

His mind made up, he pulled the reins.

"?"

She looked up at him in confusion. A Lumione was a lot, but nothing compared to her. And there were only three jars left.. they would sell out while he debated things, at this rate. The bakers would see to that, even if the wealthy clientele of this town didn't. And yet, the moment he began redirecting their carriage he realized something.

“Wait..”

That’s right.. with such a crowded market conducting such smooth business, this place had to be wealthy enough. An idea was emerging from the fog in his mind. It coalesced into a shape that made him once again pull the reins to turn them back on their original course. Someone walking by them roared at him, but he just flashed them his humblest smile in apology. And, because of those sudden actions that made Holo look at him quizzingly, he opened his mouth to speak.

“Let’s go to that company.”

“..Mmm.. What?”

She barely managed to turn her mumble into an actual question. But he didn’t reply. He just kept moving. Buying peaches took money, and if you didn’t have money, you needed to earn it. They were going to that company the two bakers were talking about.. Ohm’s Company.

Products couldn’t be sold without cash. So where they sold, cash must be flowing. It was a simple thought, but it made everything come into focus for Lawrence. There was no need for any grand schemes, this was the best way to make some money right now. It would make sense to Holo when they arrived.

~~~

It was evening, so most of the workers had already gone home.. and yet it was *still* crowded here. Bright-eyed people were wandering every-which-way, with managers shouting themselves hoarse to direct them. They weren’t trading wheat. Not meat or fish. Nor furs, gemstones or ironworks. They were selling parts for machinery, and the equipment to maintain those parts. These items were strewn about all over their loading zone.

“..what *are* these?”

Holo whispered to Lawrence in the din. Such energetic companies were common, yet this was the oddest company in town. While the rest were closing shop for the day, this place had just sprung to life.

“They sell parts for building.. something. Stages? No, that’s..”

He couldn’t quite figure it out just from seeing the raw parts, but he could understand why this place was special and why it ran so smoothly and energetically. Companies earned money from buying and selling products; the bigger the industry, the more profitable. They sent orders to local craftsmen, then brokered the sales to the highest bidder.

Lawrence could understand why the young bakers' manager wanted to try making a speciality dish out of bread and honeyed peaches; if he sold them at a place like this, it might as well be an endless stream of gold. Surprisingly, Holo was still awake and looking around in curiosity.. why was it that they were so crowded, and why were she and Lawrence here?

He walked into Ohm's Company, and was promptly overlooked by the busy workers. He needed to keep his cool, and greet the man that seemed to be in charge as politely as possible.

"Hello. I hear your company needs haulers, so I've come."

The man clearly hadn't slept for days, and only his eyes moved in response. He still held a pen in his hand, as though wanting to write in the ledger in front of him. His eyes were half-closed, so Lawrence smiled and patiently waited for time to un-freeze around the man. When he came to, he responded.

"Oh? Well, then we'll gladly take you. Head on down to the dock right away; which wagon's yours?"

It was difficult to make out the words from the man's hoarse voice, but Lawrence pointed at his wagon.

"What, that's it?"

The man seemed impatient, but Lawrence didn't feel nervous.

"Well, I don't have much in there right now, so.."

"But your horse seems pretty old.. who sent you to us? Well, anyway, just haul as much as you can. Get going."

It was alright; someone as busy as he was wouldn't realize how rude they were being.

There was a northern myth of a village where the man had eagle eyes and could shoot down birds in mid-flight like it was nothing, and the women could smile and thread needles while sleeping in the frigid air.

After a traveler earned his keep there, by teaching them to read and write, they thanked him; now they didn't have to worry about their history fading as their memories did. But after he had left, the men's vision became normal and the women found themselves tiring more easily.. only the children that couldn't read or write yet retained those qualities.

Lawrence recalled the myth now, as the young merchant struggled to stay awake and fought with his words.. it was like he was being chained to that desk, but not even the Devil would be so cruel.

“Excuse me..”

The man was here because he wanted to earn. As Lawrence continued speaking, he lumbered around like a bear. At times like these, no one would help you, assuming they even knew how. His keen awareness of that fact was why Lawrence continued pestering the man.

“I’ve never been here before, so how do I get paid, and where do I make my deliveries?”

The man seemed to swallow whatever words he wanted to say, despite wanting to brush him off. And yet, he knew he needed the help, so he did what came naturally. He pointed at another man who was furiously writing something down.

“Ask him.”

Lawrence scratched his head as he looked at the man he was pointing to.

“Thanks..”

It seemed that the tired man had already forgotten about him, so Lawrence made his way to the other man to be filled in on the details.

“..Hmm?”

“That guy over there says you’ll tell me what to deliver, and how I’ll get paid.”

He felt it was unnecessary to mention the rest. This man looked back at the other man, then back at Lawrence. Despite saying nothing, his pen was moving frantically. He was good.

“Well well well.”

As they spoke, the pile of pages he wrote kept growing. It appeared to be a catalog, but it was hard to believe it would need to be that large.

“They’re headed to Lowia village.. you know it? Well.. there’s signs on the way so you should be fine.. take those.. they’re all heading there.. deliver as many as you can..”

And yet, it seemed that Lawrence’s distraction was sending the man off to slumberland.

“..And my pay?”

Lawrence tapped the man’s shoulder, jolting him back to life.

“Pay..? Well.. it’s tagged on the goods.. so just bring the tags back.. each of ’em ought to pay out.. about a Trenni..”

Having murmured so, the man fell asleep. He'd probably get in trouble for it, but Lawrence didn't feel like rousing him. Still, he thought twice after only taking a few steps. He returned and shook the man's shoulders, remembering his other goal.

"Hey, wake up. You'll get your sleep later."

"O-okay.."

"I was called here suddenly, so I have no place to stay.. is there a free room in the company I might borrow?"

Such firms usually had a couple of spare rooms for workers to sleep in. The man, who wasn't quite awake, simply pointed off into the company.

"Talk to the maids.. in there.. if you're lucky they'll still have some food, too.."

"Thanks."

Lawrence smacked him on the back, but the man was soundly asleep. It was hopeless, so Lawrence returned to his wagon.

"I've found a place to stay."

Holo's eyes were full of surprised gratitude, but quickly narrowed as if to ask "what exactly are you planning?"

"I'm going to be working for them."

"Working? Just you?"

She frowned as soon as she heard his answer, but he was quite anxious to get started.. so he asked her to climb down from the wagon.

"It's going to be noisy like this the whole night; think you can tolerate it?"

He held the reins in his left hand as he walked them through the loading dock. It really was noisy, and far too busy for anyone to help them find their way. But once they made it inside, someone would probably figure it out. And sure enough, the moment his wagon was spotted some workers ran up to it and loaded it full. Holo's eyes went round, and her expression soured even further. She stared at him, motionlessly.

"This way I'll earn us some money, and a place to stay.."

He'd done this before. He knew they'd be sleeping outdoors if he didn't do this, and felt he had to give Holo a proper place to rest with a roof over her head.. at least for one night.

“Just look forward to tomorrow. We’ll- hey!”

She barged indoors before he could even finish talking, ever the more daring of the both of them. But she had a way with words, so she wouldn’t have any trouble convincing them to give her a room.

“Huh..”

Lawrence sighed, watching her peek at him as she spoke to a maid. She seemed to have things to say to him (probably all negative), but forced herself to remain silent. She was always so stubborn.. but then, her stubbornness generally proved quite useful.

He watched the maid lead her into the building, chuckling at her immense pride. But he knew he wasn’t any better, and that he wasn’t much less tired than she was. He was only doing this to buy her those honey-pickled peaches, even if he didn’t have to. She would forgive him, after all. But she wasn’t the only stubborn one.

This was all rather stupid, he thought. And as he led his wagon back to the road, he turned back and saw Holo looking down on him from a third floor window, obviously feeling the same way as she chewed on some honeyed-ginger. With the words “dumb male” practically written on her face, he felt no compunction to greet her.. so he just moved on.

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Lawrence soon understood why he was told he’d have no trouble finding Lowia village. There was even a wooden sign greeting him in front of the village, with lanterns at either side of the road to keep shipments coming in steadily. Half the reason for the sign seemed to be intimidating people into not stealing.

The red sky was gradually sinking into a dark blue, and the people passing Lawrence seemed more and more tired. Some of the horsemen even seemed to be asleep. Lawrence could see a line of people behind him all heading to the same place, some of them carrying goods on their backs, others on horses, and some on wagons like him. It was clear they were all called in just as suddenly as he was, given their disparate styles of clothing.

It turned out that Ohm’s company was mostly building the parts for a watermill. Which made sense, given how fertile the land in the area was they would need a mill to handle abundant harvests. Many people would want to settle here, and so a mill would be in demand. And that wasn’t even considering industries that could use a mill, like the dye industry.

Of course it would be costly to maintain a mill, and the nobility first had to agree on whose section of the river it would be built upon. Despite being a necessary service, it would be stressful for them to come to a consensus. And yet, the company was making it happen, so they had to

have finally made their choice.

It was good timing. If they'd waited for the spring thaw, it would be that much more difficult to build a mill. The necessary dams had to be planned and built while the water levels were low, and besides that the mill would be at peak efficiency when the rivers burgeoned during the thaw. So even if it was a gamble, everyone knew it had to be built quickly. And that was precisely why Lawrence had been so eagerly accepted.

This was his first time driving his cart alone for quite a while, and it felt great. He wouldn't have been so eager to experience this in the past, but nostalgia made everything look better. As he watched the sun set it struck him how carefree he'd become about such concerns as wolves. Regardless, he carefully made his way to his destination.

After a steep slope that led into the northern forest, he came to a stream. During sunset it would normally be too dark to see in the forest, so an elongated fire had been lit along the stream like some wayward dragon had breathed out next to it. People were napping everywhere, but the craftsmen who were still at it were working furiously.

It was a larger-than-life scene that painted the picture that they were likely building more than one water mill, to capitalize on their situation. After unloading the goods he'd hauled, Lawrence received the wooden tags he'd need for compensation, and climbed right back onto his wagon. His horse turned to him, as if pleading for him to halt, but Lawrence spurred it on.

This was the kind of business that didn't last; they could rest afterward. He was experiencing a rush right now, remembering past highs of fighting tooth and claw for every possible coin while he could. His horse might regret being asked to do such hard work again, but Lawrence just rubbed its back and smiled.

So then.. how many trips would he need to make to earn the honey-pickled peaches? As he considered this, he unconsciously sped up. The road to Lowia was a mess. Ohm's had called for so many workers that it was crowded. They weren't even all peddlers: farmers, shepherds, even monks and craftsmen were on the task. It was as if the entire city was doing it.

But with so many people unaccustomed to slinging goods over their shoulders, things became that much more dangerous. And that was just the start of the problems. Wolves and dogs were heard in the forests around them, likely salivating over the endless course of runners. And people everywhere were arguing over things, and fetching water from the nearby river.

Not all of the bundles being hauled made it intact, and since the women who were traveling with their husbands were dutifully keeping their men hydrated with water from the river, the road was fast becoming a swampy obstacle course. In fact, things were so tense that fully-equipped soldiers had been called out from the villages to patrol the road and keep the peace.

Earlier in the day, such things were less important to people than the wages they could be

earning. But as the day dragged on, more and more people were crouching at the side of the road in exhaustion. That caused shipping bottlenecks, and emboldened the wild dogs. After seven trips, Lawrence himself was quite taxed. It wasn't physical labor, but it was mentally exhausting to find a route through the crowds and avoid all the obstacles.

Seven trips meant seven Trenni silvers. It was a fair exchange. But still.. at this rate, he would need four or five days to earn the peaches. His growing anxiety made him want to redouble his efforts, but he knew his limits. With a heavy breath, he considered his options and chose to rest until the night deepened and there would be fewer people on the road. He left the loading bay, drove his wagon to a manger, then trudged back to Ohm's company.

He didn't know how she'd done it, but Holo hadn't simply been thrown out, or even forced to bunk with others. In fact, she was the only one in their room. She was perched on a chair next to the window, casually tending to her tail, so Lawrence casually tossed his dagger and wallet on the table as if they meant nothing to him. At first he wanted to vent his frustration at her indifference, but he thought better of it and sat down on the bed instead.

"There were two left."

He looked at her in annoyance, but she wasn't even looking his way.

"One is now gone. The other will be gone just as quickly."

It dawned on him that she was talking about the honey-pickled peaches. He'd already given up on the hope that she would encourage him, but it irked him that she would slap him in the face with it like that. But he did his best to contain his wrath and humor her.

"You went there just to confirm it?"

Sadly, his wrath was just too great, and he couldn't manage without slipping in the word "just." He stooped down to untie his shoelaces and conceal his temper.

"Is that a problem?"

His hands stopped in mid-air at her rebuttal, and it took some time for them to resume.

"Nope. They're one Lumione after all. I doubt there are that many buyers."

"Really? That puts me at ease."

Was that sarcasm? That was just what his frayed nerves needed right now. He resisted the urge to remind her just how much a Lumione was worth. Why was she going out of her way to irritate him? It was uncalled-for. Surely this was just some exhaustion-induced hallucination. He should just go to sleep.

Alas, he wasn't going to be able to do that with her staring at him.

"Surely you earned a lot?"

Was she being hostile for a reason?

"So will you be done tomorrow? Or are you back tonight because seven trips was enough?"

She had already skipped her usual ant-like tactics, and was already stinging like a wasp. It made him react instinctively.

"Of course not. I earned seven silvers.."

"Seven? After all that work? How long will it take for you to earn a Lumione.."

He recalled just how puffed-out her tail was in the sunlight and knew she had been hiding the true reason for her anger. He just didn't know why. Surely it wasn't because the honey-pickled peaches were selling out, or because she was tired of waiting? He stayed quiet, both in exhaustion and confusion.

Her eyes were as scarlet as a rabbit's being lit by the setting sun. At this level of anger, they might even scorch him away entirely. But as he brushed that aside in his mind, he realized how strange it was that she knew he had made seven trips. Not even the managers in the company kept track of that in a situation like this.

Had she been watching for him from the window? He shouted out in realization, and her ears perked up. Her tail also shifted in her lap. But her eyes were turned away and she sat there in silence, as if hoping the setting sun would just burn everything away.

"You were.."

He stopped himself when he saw the whites of her teeth.

"..Uh.. N-nevermind.."

She stared him over and closed her eyes. But when they reopened they were no longer directed at him, but at her hands. This wasn't just about her worrying over him, it was about her loneliness. She'd told him that loneliness was like an incurable illness, and she even put herself into mortal danger to prove that point. Of course he hadn't forgotten; why else would he be working so hard for her?

But apparently that wasn't what she wanted. When her eyes finally settled on him again, he realized that no matter how tedious the job was, or how exhausted she was, all she really wanted was for him to ask her to be with him. At least, he felt, it was certainly worth taking the chance that was what she wanted.

He cleared his throat in a bid to buy time for his heart to settle. He couldn't just invite her flat out. She was proud, and at this stage his own pride was already wounded. He needed to find a reason that would save face for both of them. And with his merchant's mind working harder at this problem than any mere merchantry, it didn't take long for him to find that reason. They were going to be on *that* road, after all.

"So, anyway, I don't like the thought of being on that road at night, not with those wild dogs. If possible--"

He briefly paused to steal a glance at her response, and saw that the eyes looking at her hands were already free of loneliness.

"I'd like you to please help me."

He did his best to make sure his "please" came across sincerely. Sure enough, her ears twitched. But also as expected, that was her only immediate reaction. Her pride wouldn't allow any more than that, even if he said exactly what she wanted to hear. She couldn't be bought that cheaply. Instead, she sighed and caressed her tail, turning her eyes up to look at him like a spoiled princess.

"No matter how?"

But she didn't care about his pride; she wanted him to beg. He had to earn her back, and she had to prove that he was the one at fault.

"Well, I did ask for your help, didn't I?"

He couldn't help but be a bit slighted by her act. Her ears twitched twice and she coughed to conceal her grin.

"Oh, my my.."

She sighed and looked back up at him. Independent workers like him were set in their ways, always doing things alone. He grinned back at her, hoping she'd let his boredom and embarrassment slide.

"I humbly thank you."

With that she finally laughed.



“Mhm.”

She curtseyed, obviously in a good mood. He’d paid his taxes and the collector was satisfied, so he heaved a great sigh and began removing his belt and coat. He didn’t even have the energy to properly lay out his coat.. he just wanted to sleep. Alas, even though he was already falling asleep, Holo wasn’t having any of it.

“Just what are you doing?”

He wondered whether his eyes had closed, or if all the light in the room had just been sucked away.

“Huh?”

“Hey, you have made your choice, and this is no time to rest.”

He rubbed his eyes and stared at her, proudly wearing her cloak and cap.

“Surely you jest?”

There was no anger in his voice, only meekness. He barely had the strength to look up at her cruel, devious smile and horribly happy tail. And having donned her outfit, she was now walking up to him with that same smile. It was just a bad joke.. it had to be. But no matter how hard he prayed, she just kept coming toward him.

“Hey, time to work.”

Her hand took his and tried to pull him up, but even he had his limits. He tried to gently pull his hand free while replying.

“Please, I am not a beast of burden..”

He knew saying that was iffy, so his eyes shot up to hers to see her reaction. And yet, he only saw her smile.

“Of course not.”

He strongly suspected that her anger still hadn’t burned itself out after all, but only until she happily sat down next to him.

“Hey, did you think I was angry with you?”

Clearly she wasn’t. Judging by her face she had only wanted to make *him* angry. Simply put, she’d pulled a fast one on him.

“You clearly are of the mind that taking a nap now will let you earn more efficiently at night, yes?”

She was looking outside, as if she’d seen right through him. He nodded, his eyes practically begging for her to just let him rest.

“Then you *are* that stupid.”

She clutched his beard and swayed his head back and forth, but in his state it felt a bit like being rocked gently in her arms.

“You sacrificed eating breakfast with me, worked the entire day away on that wagon, and only just returned. And yet, you only have seven silver to show for it, no?”

“..Indeed.”

“I have not forgotten that a Lumione is worth thirty-five silver.. and just how long would it take to earn the peaches at that rate?”

Even a child could work it out.

“Five days.”

“Well, that is simply too long. Not to mention..”

She didn’t even give him a instant to cry out.

“..That the road is so crowded that you planned to rest now until it became clearer at night. And yet, what is so special about you that makes you think you are the only one who thought of that?”

She flared her ears proudly. She’d clearly been listening in on the discussions in the loading bay from their room.

“You mean, everyone-”

“Indeed. It will be just as awful at night. And the workers who remain are no slouches. Where you could probably stand five days, they could probably stand eight.”

She was probably right on the money. He nodded, feeling utterly stupid. She poked his head, and he was too tired to even want to avoid it. His body tumbled back down into bed from the momentum, whereupon he did his best to keep his eyes open and talk with her.

“What’ll I do..?”

“You pray that the peaches will still be there..”

His eyes were definitely closed now.

“..Or?”

“Find another line of work.”

“..another..?”

Hauling goods was already so profitable that only a fool would look elsewhere. But before his mind could settle, she continued.

“I also heard about them, so I shall expel the wild dogs. And.. there is a faster way to earn.”

Which is..? Lawrence fell asleep wondering what it could be.

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Lawrence decided to rent a two-wheel wagon - they were smaller, but faster. He also bought ropes, blankets and baskets, and some coins. He drove up to a certain building with all of these, whereupon the shopkeeper ran out to greet him.

“Ah, I’ve been waiting. You’ve got it?”

“Mhm. You?”

“All set. Geez, I thought you were just a tourist when you knocking on my door this morning.”

His cheerful smile contrasted sharply with the oily grime and bits of dough stuck to his clothing.

“So I hear you hunted down the bakers last night, and woke up the craftsmen before a monk would rise? They must have been furious!”

The shopkeeper laughed and called for the people in question. Two strapping lads came out with a large cauldron.

“This’ll be enough for all fifty of ’em. They took one look at my shop and got worried that we couldn’t handle it.”

“Well, that’s no surprise given how rushed everyone is. Still, thanks for this.”

“No, no, we’re usually stuck only doing so much business, so I’m more than happy to make some more on a side job.”

The boys placed it up on the wagon deck and tied it down firmly so it wouldn't rattle and cool off as quickly. It was a mutton stew with onions, still bubbling. They then loaded the baskets with sliced bread, and added two tankards of wine. By the time the wagon was fully-loaded and Lawrence was asking the shopkeeper to make sure they were properly secured with ropes, his horse turned to Lawrence accusingly. If he could talk, Lawrence knew he'd get an earful.

"Looks like we're all making out well here.."

That's what the shopkeeper said as he handed everyone their wages; maybe it was just his custom to say that when they were able to make some profit on the side. The boys happily wandered back to their rooms with a few worn coins.

"But will you really be alright? You've gotta make it through the forest, after all.."

"You mean the wolves and wild dogs?"

"Yeah, that temporary road the Ohm Company made's infested with 'em and they've no fear of humans. You're not the first to have this idea, you know, but everyone else gave up."

Holo had overheard that sort of thing in their room; if there weren't any dogs to contend with, the town could sell food to Lowia village, which had an unstable water supply.

"Well, we ought to be fine."

Lawrence smiled in reply as he watched a thin girl cover the goods in their wagon with boards. There was something furry under her dress, like some sort of fancy belt or sash, and when she'd finished her task she sat on the same boards and nodded to Lawrence, then smiled at the shopkeeper.

"Boats have the protection of goddesses, and I have mine."

"Wow. You're trying to say *she's* gonna keep the dogs away?"

After Lawrence nodded in reply, the stunned shopkeeper said nothing. He must have seen people pray for many things, maybe even to keep snakes or frogs away. At any rate, he just received his pay from Lawrence, but ended the discussion.

"May you go with God."

With that, he stepped back.

"Thank you. Oh, right.."

"Hmm?"

Lawrence hopped onto the wagon before continuing. The sight of a two-wheel wagon wasn't anything special, but the sight of a happy girl on one made passersby stare at them, and kids wave their arms happily to Holo.

"We might have to come back to you tonight."

The man smiled in response.

"My place is already full of boarders, there's just too many workers and Ohm's Company had nothing against the locals taking them in for a while."

He laughed.

"Then, bye it is."

"Yeah. Have a good trip."

Their wagon crept slowly along. It wasn't a struggle keeping their regular wagon steady in towns this early in the morning, but a two-wheeler was a real pain. Holo kept scolding him as she did her best to not fall off. After what seemed like forever, the wagon finally left town and was back in its natural element.

"You sure you're ready for this?"

His question was answered by Holo leaning forward and wrapping her arms around him.

"This will be nothing; I am far faster than a horse."

"But normally you're the one in control."

She was holding him much the same way he held her in those times. It felt as strange as using someone else's money to trade. She rested her chin on his shoulder.

"Then I shall hold on tight, and try not to cry like a certain someone."

"I don't remember crying.."

"Oh ho ho."

Lawrence sighed.

"..But I won't stop even if you do."

"Then-"

Her voice was drowned out by the horse's neigh, as it took off as though it wanted to fly. They could just have a fun argument later if Holo somehow did end up crying. But now wasn't the time. Two-wheelers weren't as spacious and they shook like the dickens, but they were *fast*. Lawrence hadn't used one for a while, but they were definitely what one needed to deliver hot food. Holding the reins of one of these made Lawrence feel like he was in control of the view itself.

Holo actually clutched him fearfully at first, but soon grew familiar with the wagon. They flew through the forest with her hands on his shoulders, laughing happily. Everyone else was so nervous about the dogs that they probably felt embarrassed when they saw a girl laughing in such a carefree manner. The two of them received many waves, and Holo nearly fell off the wagon waving back to them. His heart would skip a beat each time, but he didn't want to drag her down by stopping her.

Any self-respecting wolf would of course be furious at intruders, so it wasn't surprising when they heard a sudden roar in the forest. Everyone stopped in their tracks, but Holo simply roared back at the voice. They all looked at her, shamed by her courage, and roared along with her.

They eventually made it after all that cheer. It went without saying that the villagers, used to seeing wagons full of building supplies, were shocked to see a wagon carrying tankards, a cauldron and a girl. Holo stepped down as Lawrence stopped the cart, and began preparing for their next task as went in search of whomever handled administrative fees in the village.

Given that the village didn't even have enough freshwater, they could easily sell meat and bread to all of those goods-haulers who hadn't brought any food out of fear of dogs; of course the villagers themselves were quite interested as well.

"Hey, you there! Queue up like the rest!"

Even just simply slicing the meat stewing in the cauldron and pinning it between bread was busy work for them. They barely had any time to sell their high-margin wine, since it required twice the work. They would later wonder how they managed to sell it as well. And on top of that, when they'd sold half of their food a carpenter suddenly approached them.

"We're all so famished, but we can't stop working.."

Holo's sympathy was always strongest when food was the topic. She looked over at Lawrence, who agreed to move their cart nearer to the workers. The cauldron was far from empty, after all, and with such steady business it didn't matter where they were, they would sell out of food anyway

Of course, Lawrence was a merchant: just selling out was good enough for him. He would normally feel no need to move around, but in this situation he realized that news of their business was spreading, and he had to capitalize on that fact by expanding their customer base

to include the carpenters.

His scheming didn't have long to simmer, though, before his foot was stomped.

"Why are you standing there thinking?"

"I'm a merchant! Oh, alright.."

Lawrence handed the last sandwich he was holding and put the lid on the cauldron.

"We've only got enough left for twenty guys, alright?"

Carpenters were like starving wolves, and the Ohm's company employed so many they couldn't feed them all or provide them shelter. They were only taken care of because the villagers pitched in. But since they were paid by the hour, they had no desire to desert their posts for a meal. They'd heard of Lawrence, but didn't want to even go that far. The people responsible for the water wheel didn't even want to leave their hut. Lawrence and Holo stared at each other, realizing that they would be the ones that walked around to feed the men.

"Huh? This isn't enough for me!"

That was the reply they always got, but they had no choice but to smile back at the men. The carpenters working outside had it the worst, but while no one was full, they had no reason to complain. It was better to feed more people. After all, one man couldn't build the entire mill. If people started collapsing it could only lead to ruin. Even Holo agreed, who had watched over farmers tending to their wheat fields.

Her smile wasn't a business smile - she was genuinely happy. They had paid for each drop of wine, but she always gave out more than she needed to. Lawrence knew it, but even he had no desire to stop her.

"Can we get two more pieces of bread back here?"

Someone called out from the site where the millstone was being laid. That area was covered in dust, but it wasn't flour. It was sawdust. Holo couldn't bear it, and had to wait outside. Her sense of smell was superior to humans, so it stood to reason that her nose would be more sensitive as well. And so, Lawrence walked down the steps and delivered the bread. Their customer wasn't being pleasant, but then they *were* fighting with the gearwork for the mill.

"I'm here!"

It was surprisingly loud inside, and the sounds of wood straining and splintering was heard everywhere. Two carpenters responded to Lawrence's shout, and so surprised him that he nearly fell over. Holo enjoyed that part, and laughed heartily as he sighed. She smiled as she

watched the wheel endlessly spin.

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“Well, I think we got everyone.”

“Yes, I do believe we did.”

Holo pretended to pull the wagon containing the empty cauldron and wine tankards, as the little wooden rabbit a carpenter gave her danced on her chest.

“I’m so excited I want to go a second time today.”

“But.. how much did we actually earn?”

“Uh, hang on a sec..”

It turned out to be less than they hoped.

“Four Trenni silver at most.”

“Four? But we sold so much!”

There was a lot of change in their purse, yes, but at the end of the day it was all just change.

“I’d push up the prices if we were selling to merchants, but I couldn’t do that to carpenters..”

Holo had no way to retort, since she was the one who made them move to the carpenters in the first place. And yet, they made more than just money. Such small gains in the face of such risk were still worth it, remembering the faces of the thankful villagers. Lawrence rubbed Holo’s head.

“Let’s bring twice as much food tomorrow. That’ll double our profits. And if we set it up in advance, we’ll also be able to sell at night. That’ll double them again. At that point, we’d already have enough for your honey-pickled peach.”

Holo nodded as her stomach grumbled. Her ears twitched, and Lawrence removed his hand from her head. He could only smile in response, as there was no way he wouldn’t have heard her stomach. She frowned, clearly wanting to hit back. But after all that work serving meat and bread, her hunger kept her at bay. She ended up smiling back at him, until Lawrence pointed at the wagon behind them.

“What?”

“You’ll see.”

He reached back and opened the cauldron, then pulled out a hunk of meat and a slightly stale piece of bread.

“I saved it for us for the way back.”

This was the first time he’d ever saved any food; normally, he would have sold every scrap and eaten whatever he could scrounge up later. Holo’s tail wagged as he cut the meat with a greasy knife.

“You..”

“What?”

“You always miss the crucial point.”

The cheap mutton was hardly tender, so it took him some time to carve it. That bought him some time to think, but in the end he still ended up looking up at her, confused.

“What crucial point?”

“Hmph. Of course you had to save some, but this is hardly good enough. It hardly looks tasty.”

He never expected that she would be fussy at a time like this, but clearly he’d erred. Holo was what she was, and all he could do was sigh.

“..my bad.”

He sliced their bread, wedged the meat between slices, then stared at the sandwiches for a while before handing Holo the larger one. Her tail drooped down like a sad puppy’s.

“I understand that we had to be frugal with the carpenters, but this is simply not enough.”

“Oh stop bickering. If it was just me riding here, I’d be foraging for berries and tender shoots.”

She happily devoured her meat first, before ravaging the bread. Lawrence had barely packed the knife, covered the cauldron, and handed her his own sandwich by the time she was done.

“..You sure know how to sound like an old man.”

She finally replied, making him want to ask her where he could have possibly picked up such a habit.

“But then, it is natural to want better food. Even trees grow taller and broader leaves for it.”

It was a pretty silly thing to claim, but if she said it, he had to let her get away with it. She'd already eaten half his meat in one bite, and was nibbling at the rest like a scolded child. Before long, she finally asked the question she was holding in.

“Are you upset?”



Of course she had to ask, since he wasn't talking. She had to be dubious about him giving away his own share of their food.

"God teaches us to share."

She eyed him carefully before resuming her larger bites. She made short work of the meat that remained.

"Sometimes you really do act like a proper male.."

The bread wasn't fresh enough for her tastes, so she practically swallowed it without chewing. Even just watching her made Lawrence feel full. He smiled to himself, remembering a certain line that her actions brought to mind.

"But will you truly be fine?"

She asked that, despite clutching the last of the bread tightly (clearly with no intent to share it). But since she wanted him to answer, and he wanted to answer her, he replied with that old line to bring things full circle with what she'd said a few days ago.

"Yeah, I'll be fine."

"Oh, then.."

"Cause I'm already full."

Her jaw dropped open and she stared at him.

"What?"

He couldn't help but ask as she squirmed in frustration before finally glaring at him.

"What do you mean, what? You have already eaten..? And I thought you had finally become a good male."

She began muttering to herself, so he cut in.

"Well, I can't have you hogging all the good lines."

"Huh? Me? Hogging lines?"

It was always him who was the prey in their little games, and now he finally understood what the appeal truly was. She shut her mouth and stared at the bread, then Lawrence, then back at the bread. Her forehead might as well have had a question mark written on it. He only wished he had some wine to go with this, but maybe not having any was for the best. He still had to

explain himself properly, after all.

“See, good food would cost twice as much, and properly satisfying food, double that. So how can I possibly be so pleasantly full right now?”

He’d recalled his upcoming line as they discussed the roasted pig the other day, and now he smiled, finally having the chance to use it.

“By watching you. I feel fully happy just knowing you’re fed.”

Her head dropped at his smile, possibly disappointed in herself. But of course that wasn’t his intent; he honestly did just want to make sure she was happily fed. But as his hand reached out to pat her on the head, it was brushed aside by her own hand heading for his mouth.

“How could I possibly finish all of it now?”

Half of the remaining bread was being offered back to him; much more than expected. Apparently it seemed smaller to her now that she heard his line. She was still just being true to herself, but he really didn’t mind if she finished the rest, so he opened his mouth to say so.. only to be interrupted by her making her own quip.

“Surely you are not saying I must settle for this less-filling stuff?”

His hand hovered over her head, ready to reassure her that he didn’t mind, but she’d beaten him to the punch.

“..Or were you planning to hog all that good stuff you were talking about?”

Ever the Wisewolf, she’d ensured that he had to accept her kindly offer, or be hoist by his own petard. He snatched the bread determinedly.

“Why thank you.”

“Mhm.”

Her head nodded proudly, but she ate her remaining bread with a look of embarrassment. He quickly downed his bread and wiped his hand free of the crumbs, only to realize that was what she had been waiting for. Her hand suddenly took his, but he knew better than to turn and look at her. He just smiled and gently gripped her hand.

After that, the only sounds that were heard on that quiet winter afternoon were the sounds of their rattling wagon.



## Wolf and the Twilight-Colored Gift

Towns, villages, and intermediate stables were crucial for keeping the supply chain going. Food and wood were obviously critical, but so were services; repairing wagons and mending clothing. Even simply providing road-side information and assistance. And the more people traveled together, the more they required. Preparations were of utmost importance. Especially when traveling with a dainty little princess. She frowned at his purchase of firewood.

“Well, it is your money. You make the choice.”

Of course that was hardly what she meant. With her beauty she might fool others, but this kind of hidden threat was completely at odds with that beauty. Yet he was hardly surprised. It was just like Holo to avoid saying what she really felt.

“You mean it won’t make you unhappy?”

“Not at all.”

She turned her face away indignantly. With that scarf on her head, shawl on her shoulders, jacket and deerskin purse, she looked every bit the fussy city girl. Her auburn hair even made her look like a noble; were she to let it down, nine of ten heads would turn her way.

Poets might say that “youthful maidens were the very definition of beauty,” but Lawrence knew the reality. Not only was she not a city girl, she wasn’t quite a maiden. In fact she wasn’t even human. If you plucked off her scarf, you’d be greeted by beastly ears. If you pulled up her skirt, you’d be greeted by a beastly tail.

She lived in fields of wheat, overseeing their harvest and being worshiped. A giant wolf that had lived for centuries.. that was the true identity of Holo, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu. When she stood tall and proud behind that name, he could only sigh. It was so emasculating to defer to her.

“Well, we’re not far from the next town, and it shouldn’t be that cold out. You’re ok with eating cold food for a couple more days, right?”

“I already said: you make the choice.”

“..”

They were standing there in that firewood shop like lost travelers. It wasn’t just travelers who bought firewood, of course, but they didn’t have to worry about spending their nights next to its odor: a smell that was no small trial for Holo’s keen nose. But it was on sale. And merchants would happily let their noses turn for something on sale. And if it wasn’t covered in peat, even Holo might have been able to bear it.

“Well, sir, what will you do? I’ll feel bad too if I let you leave empty-handed after all this contemplation.”

The shopkeeper was all smiles, possibly amused by Lawrence’s situation. But then he was probably also a bit jealous. Lawrence remembered what it was like to be on his end of such encounters, so it wasn’t right for him to get upset. Anyone would be jealous to see him with such a cute girl. But leaving empty-handed was a trial for him, too. Still, he decided to swallow his pride and just be happy there was a girl waiting for him. He cut his losses, and Holo turned around like some proud noblewoman.

“Sorry. Maybe next time.”

“Please come again.”

Just like Holo, the shopkeeper replied without matching his expression to his words. It went without saying that Holo’s mood improved drastically the moment they left the shop.

“Now we can buy food! Hurry up, you!”

She pulled him along as she ran. Anyone watching them would surely feel he was blessed to have a girl like her. But he was in for it now; convincing her about food would be even tougher.

“Hey, try to not make what you are thinking so obvious.”

She smiled, and her reddish-amber eyes looked up at him. He stopped, feeling exposed.

“The next town’s a big one, so we might be better off not wasting money here.”

“Ooh, so you mean we can waste it in the next town?”

Her happy smile rendered him speechless. He had to stand up to her, but he couldn’t do that when she held his hand so gently.

“I just mean we ought to save up a bit..”

“Ah.”

They ended up forgoing wheat bread for the cheaper rye. They also bought some carrots, fried beans and inexpensive wine. This way they saved a little without having to settle for the hardest oat bread and bitterest wine. He bought their provisions as Holo eyed some dried fruit and baked seeds. He knew he had to hurry up and pay before she made her mind up.

“Um, pardon me, but would you mind giving me change in those bronze coins?”

“Hmm? You mean the Schmi ones? You guys are heading through the northern forest?”

“Yeah, and there’s a village of woodcutters there, if I remember correctly.”

Towns often used different currencies, and so using an enemies’ coin in one - well, one could guess what might happen.

“It’s probably kind to even call it a village. They’re just a group of people who want to work as much as they can before the snowfall. Well, here’s your change.”

Merchants had no trouble remembering several types of currencies, even dozens of them. The shopkeeper’s exchange rate wasn’t very good, but Lawrence still hadn’t made an overall loss so he willingly accepted the bronze coins.

“Merchants sure are wily.”

Holo waited until they left the shop to speak her mind. He plopped his hand on her hood.

“They can’t compete with you. Anyway, all that’s left now is repairing the wagon and seeing if we can’t learn a bit about the road ahead.”

She looked up at him like a child as he counted off their tasks one by one on his fingers. If he didn’t humor her now, he’d hear no end of it, so he shrugged and continued.

“..maybe hit a pub..”

“Mm. After all, there are few places as good for gathering information.”

The Wisewolf always had a convenient excuse.

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As Lawrence wearily climbed the stairs to their room, the merchant passing them the other way tipped his hat and smiled in greeting. He knew the score when he saw Lawrence dragging the red-faced Holo upstairs before the sun had even set.

“How many times have I had to carry the gluttonous Wisewolf upstairs?”

“Ugh..”

“Lucky for you I’m not a loan shark, or you wouldn’t even have the clothes on your back.”

Dragging her back to their room was a challenge. He already had a routine of seating her in bed and plucking off her scarf and shawl. He always debated his inner loan shark on whether to peel off the rest of her clothes, but he always stopped there. Her happy face always wore the same

satisfied look.

“Hrm..”

He couldn't help but murmur and smile back, wanting nothing more than to caress her face.

“Well then..”

Since they started early, she was also out earlier than usual. Lawrence opened the shutters and got to work while the sun was still out and before he'd have to light any candles. He pulled out his knife, his wallet, and a map. He first confirmed that the knife was sharp and undamaged, since it was necessary for carving food, hunting, and self-defense while on the road. A good knife was far more practical than prayer.

The map.. well, it was enough that they had one, regardless of how accurate it might be. Even just knowing approximately how far they were from somewhere was better than nothing, when they had to pass through a thick forest. Holo actually wasn't much use in a forest, other than keeping other wolves away. But that was enough to be thankful for. After all, that giant wolf form of hers could easily swallow him whole, so what chance did a regular wolf have?

When he was on his own, all he could do to contend with wild beasts was pray. He tried other things, of course, even bringing pieces of lead with him in the hopes that it was true that wild animals didn't like the smell of metal. Or a bell, hoping that it was true wild beasts would be deterred by the sound. He even went as far as to donate to the Church for prayers of protection, or buying an amulet bearing the name of a saint who had fought with wolves.

None of it mattered, of course. Wolves would still attack him as they pleased. And yet in a strange way, it somehow felt wrong that he didn't have to worry about wolves anymore. Humans were odd creatures. He didn't want to run into wolves, but he didn't want to be so dependent on Holo for his protection. After all, she didn't like to take her inhuman form, so he was far too embarrassed to beg her to fight wolves off for him.

Which, also oddly, brought him to his wallet. Along with all those charms meant to keep wolves away, he now had the Schmi coins he exchanged today. They were small and thick, one of the most common of currencies. But unlike most coins, they weren't as detailed or strongly-pressed. The image on them was the reason. Lawrence was studying that beastly image right now.

“What? Are you collecting those now?”

He nearly dropped his wallet in shock. He hadn't even noticed her breathing or footsteps as she walked up behind him, reeking of alcohol.

“So you finally found something that reminds you of me.. interesting..”

“Yeah, yeah. Hey! Watch it..”

He caught her as she stumbled around, earning a smile. It was a little embarrassing seeing such a smile on a girl as drunk as she was.

“Want some water?”

“Mhm.. my throat is burning..”

Once again he tended to her, seating her on his chair before fetching her a cup of water. She drank it almost instantly. She’d told him that, being a wolf, she wasn’t used to having a chin, and that’s why she sometimes spilled water when drinking from a cup. But it didn’t look to him like she really cared.

“Ahhh..”

“Better?”

“Mhm.. that wine was so dry.. my throat is parched..”

He handed her another cup, and this time even more water spilled around her. He cleaned up after her like a loyal servant, understanding that she had a point - they added a lot of ginger to the wine here to cover its bitterness.

“But I’d hate to order their finest wine only to see you spill it like this.”

She stared at him silently.

“Anyway. If you’re feeling better now then give me back the chair. It’s about time I lit a candle.”

Holo eyed the things on the desk, then him, then stood up unpleasantly. She didn’t want to go to bed. Instead, she sat on the edge of the desk.

“Why is this so important? Can you not just talk to me?”

“Do you ever feel bad for using such childish tactics? I’d really like to know.”

“Hmph. Well, after all I am just wasting food.”

She drank straight out of their waterskin before poking it into his temple. He took it back from her and reminding himself that he really shouldn’t be serious with someone who was drunk. Especially since he never really knew how drunk this born-actor was, and might just be digging his own grave. Ultimately, he just turned back to his coins to avoid any of her traps.

“We’re passing through a village of woodcutters, and I have to sell something while we’re there.”

“..sell something?”

Her surprise was obvious. Coins were used to buy, not sell.

“That’s right.”

“But these are coins.”

“Nothing stopping me from selling them. In the old days.. well, maybe not by your reckoning, but back then, moneychangers and smiths sold decorative coins.”

Holo’s blinked her bleary eyes, grabbed a coin and held it up to her chest.

“That one’s too small; decorative ones are bigger. For you.. something like this would be better.”

He pulled out a coin that was neither large or small and held it up to her. It was just a worn coin, blackened with age. But remarkably, it seemed that the old wisdom about having to dress nicely didn’t apply to Holo - anything looked good when she wore it.

“Wow! Hey, poke a hole in it!”

He was momentarily swayed by her enthusiasm, but managed to pull the coin back.

“But then we couldn’t use it anymore.”

“Hmph!”

“Plus, it clashes too much with that pouch of wheat you wear so dear.”

She snatched the coin from his hand as he continued.

“That, and the Church frowns upon wearing them, saying it’s like planting coins in the ground.”

Her mind started turning at that, clearly thinking hard about what he meant. But she gave up sooner than usual, owing to the alcohol.

“..what does that mean?”

“Well, coins won’t grow into anything. In fact, they’ll just make the plants around them wilt. So they’re saying that wearing coins is sinful, because it defeats the very purpose of having coins in the first place.”

“Mmm.. mhmm..”

Her ears rolled around and she nodded.

“Indeed, if it will only cause wilting, it cannot be good.”

Seeing a girl like her wear a coin would also arouse people’s sympathy, but Lawrence didn’t want to point that out. He only had one life.

“But then, why do people sell *these*?”

She meant the Schmi coins in particular, the ones with the image of a wolf on them.

“Well..”

He paused in consideration before replying as a merchant would: because they had a wolf on them.

“Oh, is that all it takes? Then the guy making these is quite clever..”

She happily played with the coin as she spoke, and it wasn’t the wine talking; she was happy with it because there was a wolf engraved on it. Anyone would feel the same warmth if, say, they learned that a figure from their hometown was on a coin. But Lawrence didn’t know how to break the truth to her, so he kept himself silent.

“But, you.. why a wolf?”

He was too anxious to face her, let alone reply.

“Courage? ..Luck? No, wolves are not..”

She kept guessing, but he couldn’t just tell her that it was because people wore it as a charm to keep wolves away.

“Oh.. right.. you were planning to sell them to woodcutters.. ah.. so then..”

When she became serious, she seemed to ignore everything else. Lawrence peeked at her closed eyelids, then turned away again. She really was a Wisewolf, so of course she’d figure it out eventually. Her tail had stopped wagging, and she put the coin back on the table.

“..well, at any rate it is not important.”

She was letting him get away with it. Wolves and humans were supposed to be enemies, after all.

“Um, it’s actually to keep thieves away, so-”

“Hey.”

She smiled a lonely smile and sighed.

“If you care so much, I will only end up feeling more lonely.”

She hopped off the desk and climbed back into bed. It was too late to say anything once she vanished under the covers. Even her tail was gone. He’d been too careless. Now he had to live with the consequences. He sighed softly as he put the coins back into his wallet, then a thought crossed his mind.

“Hey.. you know what?”

He leaned back in the chair and twisted his body to look back at her in bed. She peered at him from under the covers.

“With you here, we could make a killing on these things.”

He paused as an evil smile crossed his face. It seemed to have the impact he wanted, judging from the look on her face as she looked at him.

“Oh?”

“I mean, would you be willing?”

She wore a childish expression that looked so pure and honest that he felt bad for asking, but he couldn’t pass up such a chance. After all, she was the perfect partner for such a scheme.

“Willing to..?”

He averted his eyes.

“Howl a bit and rile them up?”

“Howl? I hate doing that. But it would get their attention.”

It sure would.

“Then you would sell them as a holy talisman?”

“People think those only work if you donate to the Church every day. How about the smell of metal?”

“Metal..”

It seemed they’d finally found a worthwhile conversation. Holo sat up straight and shook her head to reply, then continued.

“What a strange notion.”

“I’ve heard that aprons of lead do the job.”

He’d actually seen something like that for sale before.

“Well..”

“I mean, there’s all sorts of myths of knights and mercenaries not being attacked because they wore metal armor all over their bodies.”

“That is really just because they have spears. I hate facing those. But swords.. sometimes I don’t even see those before I go after them.”

She was being surprisingly honest. Lawrence decided to be honest as well.

“But we could still use a scent that wolves wouldn’t like.”

“Mhm.. spices, for instance. I really hate those.”

He already had several spices in mind, some rather cheap. He hoped they could use one of them. Maybe they should go out and smell the spices in the shops before the sun set.

“Want to go walk off your alcohol?”

“What, right now?”

She smiled in surprise.

“That does sound nice.”

“Great.”

Lawrence put away his things and stood up. Holo had hopped out of bed, still smiling.

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“Hey, let us take our time, ok?”

Holo clutched Lawrence's hand as she asked. The western sky was still red, but the eastern sky was dark already. People had pulled up their collars and hunched their bodies to keep warm as they headed home.

As they passed the pub they were just in, the barmaid waved to them after lighting a lantern. Lawrence thought she wanted to talk about something, but Holo gripped his hand tighter to keep walking ahead. Perhaps the girl was just joking around. After all, she had no time to talk to them, and was already rushing back indoors to serve customers.

"I think they fell in love with you because you drink so much."

"Oh? Then should she not be waving a bottle at me?"

"..Are you saying I should wave my wallet at you?"

"Mhm!"

Such inane conversations were appropriate for a slow walk like this. Lawrence didn't like watching the sad summer sun set, but he loved winter sunsets. The air was cool and dry, and it marked the end of a long day on a dusty road and promised a warm meal at an inn. And really, he did wave his wallet around to keep her affection when they went to pubs, so there was a kernel of truth there.

They reached their first destination lost in thought. The sign hanging over its door made it clear that it was a medicine shop. Spices were often sold in medicine shops as well, together with all sorts of strange dried herbs. The shopkeeper seemed to be tidying up, and smiled when he saw them.

"We're closing soon.."

"Mind if we take a quick browse?"

"Well.. alright, just don't take too long."

He replied as he straightened up the bottles on the shelves.

"Thanks."

Lawrence smiled back at him until he went into the back for a moment, then he whispered to Holo.

"I wonder why he was staring at me like that.."

"He probably felt sorry for the stupid merchant buying things for the cute city girl."

Lawrence shrugged as Holo giggled.

“Well, coming here will probably make you hungry, so I guess that’ll come true.”

“More than likely.”

They sniffed every spice they could find. Black ones, blue ones, green ones, red ones, yellow ones.. even some dried herbs and fruit. Even Lawrence didn’t know what all of them were. But Holo kept saying things like “This one is used for beef. This one for cheap wine. This one for dark bread.” In other words, they were spices not added for extra flavor, but to cover up for poor quality.. she was being satirical.

But even the shopkeeper was impressed by her nose. She was right on the money each time. But then, anyone who knew spices wouldn’t find it that remarkable. And so the shopkeeper pulled out a little box for Holo to sample.

“Could you help me out..”

“Hmm?”

Holo first looked over to Lawrence, then the shopkeeper.

“These all look the same, but the market’s flooded with fakes. I’ve been in the business for thirty years, but sometimes there are ones that are so good they’ll fool me. I’ve heard some people train dogs for it, but well.. just this once, would you lend me your nose?”

Each merchant has his problems to deal with. Holo didn’t seem willing to help, but Lawrence interjected.

“She used to work for a noble family. The matron there loves spices, so her nose has grown accustomed to them. That’s why I keep her close.”

He was of course lying, but that was part of being a good merchant. The shopkeeper nodded and replied.

“Oh, of course I’ll be much obliged if you can help me out.”

He weighed out a bit of money on his scales for effect. They had a deal.

“Holo, would you please?”

“Hmm.. for some wheat bread.”

She’d become quite used to being his partner. He nodded in response. Spices were pretty expensive, so the merchant was offering quite a bit. Lawrence would still have a bit after buying

her bread, and since this was a one-time deal he didn't have to feel anxious about abusing his privileges.

"Oh, right.."

Lawrence uttered to himself as Holo looked up at him quizzingly.

"What?"

"Oh.. nothing. I just remembered I wanted to do something. I'll be right back."

Holo seemed concerned, but she could handle this on her own. He patted her on the back and sped off somewhere, the coins in his wallet jingling around.

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When Lawrence got back he saw Holo and the shopkeeper having a drink. He was expounding the virtues of being a medicinal merchant, so she'd probably long since completed her task.

"Ah, this young lady has an excellent nose. They were fake after all. Thank God! I was nearly swindled!"

"That's good to hear. Thank you for the wine."

"Oh, it's nothing.. especially compared to what I would have lost. Please accept it as a token of my gratitude."

He suddenly got up and disappeared into the dark back room of his shop. Holo was proudly drinking, and from her eyes it was clear that she was even more drunk than she had been before their walk.

"I think you've had too much."

"Hnn? 'Tis my reward for working, unlike you. And I am the one who is tired."

Clearly his absence had rubbed her the wrong way. She poked his chest seriously, but he didn't apologize. He just plucked a bit of spice off her face, which stank of wine.

"Now we won't be able to finish what we started."

She just sipped some more wine and retorted.

"You mean making a wolf smell things she hates? Why should I?"

She was clearly drunk, and was being confrontational. But Lawrence knew it was his fault for

leaving her on her own, so he sighed and just took her glass from her. She didn't expect that.

"My wine.."

She muttered to herself so cutely that Lawrence couldn't find the words to reply. So instead he just pulled out the reason why he'd left her alone. He'd left her so suddenly because he needed to make it to a shop before they closed, and knew they'd honor his simple request. He now handed Holo that Schmi coin, which hung from a string tied through the hole punched into it.

"But this is..?"

"I don't mind if it's just one. Besides, it suits you to a T."

She stared at the coin, then back up at him. Her eyes seemed moist, though that was probably the alcohol. But he would never forget the smile on her face.

"But.."

She sounded serious.

"Will wearing this not keep away my friends?"

It was a bauble meant to keep wolves away, after all. But Lawrence had an idea. He took the coin and moved to hang it around her neck.

"Then only wear it when we're in cities."

She let him put it on her without complaint, staring at his face as she swept aside her hair.



“What do you mean by that?”

There was another fragrance he caught as he completed his task, but it wasn't another of the spices. It was just Holo's vaguely pleasant scent, nothing new.

“To keep away the wolves in the cities.”

It was such a good line that he rewarded himself with a sip of her wine. She sat there in shock, all tensed up, her ears having nearly knocked the cap off her head as they pricked up. A few moments later she finally burst out laughing. The shopkeeper came back out in surprise, once again staring at Lawrence. Seeing that, she grabbed Lawrence's hand.

“Oh my, that was so wonderfully stupid!”

“Yeah, it was pretty good, huh?”

She just kept laughing as she tried to speak.

“This truly is.. the foulest thing.. I have smelled today!”

“Oh, so the other wolves will stay away?”

As the shopkeeper handed Lawrence his money, Lawrence left behind enough to compensate for the wine. The man wanted to hire Holo, but they refused. Lawrence just kept holding her hand as they walked out. She continued laughing, but also holding his hand tightly. Just then, he had one final thought.

“Hey that's right.. if it really smells *that* bad..”

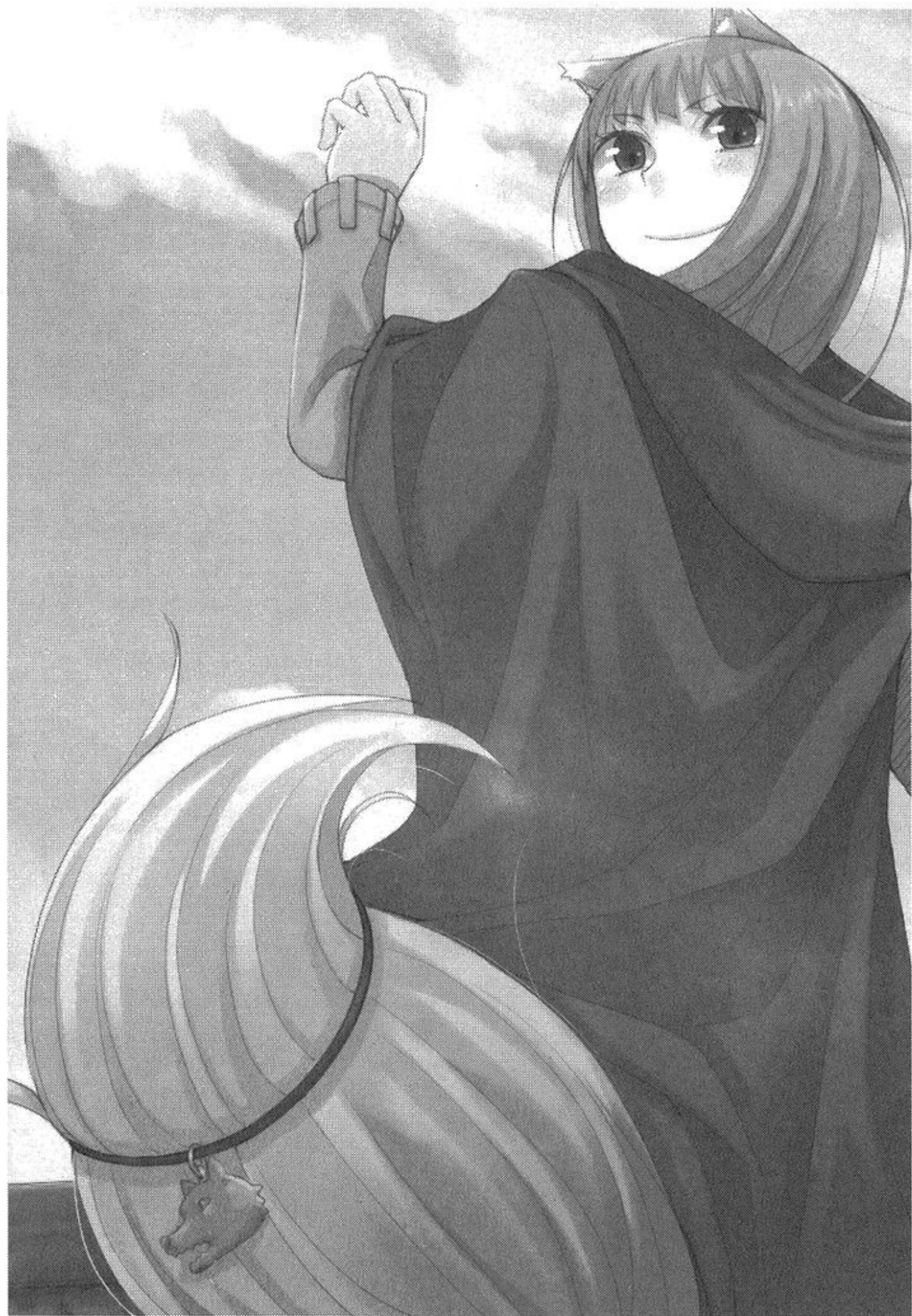
“Hmm?”

“..Then you won't be bothered by the smell of peat anymore, will you?”

She burst out laughing again, then sighed before taking a long breath.

“'Tis my loss.”

The Schmi coin kept swaying as they walked. Even the Wisewolf sighed happily that evening.



## Wolf and the Silver Sigh

I gazed behind me, and noted how far I had strayed from the wagon. It was too much fun playing with the rabbits, but in the end I was the one being played with. I fluttered my robe, signaling the end of our game and smiled at them. They seemed to look at each other in bewilderment, then fled.

“Alright..”

It was time for me to return home as well; that four-wheeled home pulled by a horse. The one made of iron-reinforced wood. It was rare for it to be this empty, and so comfortable. And yet, even if it was less comfortable when fully-loaded, such emptiness felt a bit cold.

I could nestle myself between canvas-covered crates, and they would block the wind for me. Large sacks of grain could serve as my pillows, and there were plenty of blankets to crawl underneath. I could relax away, inspecting the goods, or simply stare up in the sky without a care in the world.

The sun was out today, warming the soft blankets marvelously. I could not help imagining myself surrounded by those blankets, especially as I stretched after lunch. Having human jaws felt limiting enough, and stretching was not nearly as glorious in this form. And yet, despite being accustomed to my wolf form, I did not hate this one.

As a human, I was able to dress in fine clothes, which was less boring than always wearing the same fur. It was even more fun than trying to find ways to change the color of my fur, especially since this way I got to strong-arm my companion into buying clothes for me.

“I want that” was a phrase he had learned to dread, and he fought me tooth and claw for even the cheapest scarf. But I could hardly help the cost of clothes. A Wisewolf would never ask for handouts, but the simple fact was that he had to accommodate me in order for me to travel with him.

Still, he was a fool of a traveling merchant, who cared about money first and foremost. Even when he suggested eating outside due to the nice weather, he had ulterior motives. He could save on stable costs if we ate out on the road. He could also focus on what happened at the last city we had visited.

In fact he had spent the entire night muttering to himself and staring at the stars. Just as he was doing right now. He had not even noticed that I had eaten two of the milky sweets he guarded. He was too lost in his thoughts about coins and furs.

There were many kinds of coin and fur, and each had their own going rate with which he could profit. If he traded silver coins for black fur, he could trade those for brown fur. Then those for

bronze coins. Then those for black fur all over again. And somehow, along the way, he would profit. He had spent his entire night scheming on how to do just that sort of thing.

Of course, everything in the world of humans had a price. That was why he was traveling in the first place. Being angry at him for that was silly, especially when he worked so hard to earn every penny. I could not just sway him willy-nilly to purchase every trinket that struck my fancy.

But to see him *still* daydreaming, not even noticing that I had returned, put me in a foul mood.

“Hey, just how long do you plan on sitting there?”

I spread out the blankets as I spoke. Perhaps my icy tone finally did the trick, because he suddenly looked up at me. He had not eaten much, being utterly lost in his calculations and scratching on a waxy board with a stick.

“Oh.. wow, it’s getting pretty late, huh..”

No matter where humans traveled, they could tell what time it was just by glancing up at the sky. It was one of their bits of wisdom. The oaf nervously tidied up and shoved the rest of the bread in his mouth. He still had not even noticed that I had eaten those two candies.

“So you’ve had your fun, then?”

His sudden question caught me off-guard as I prepared to rest. I was certain that he had not even noticed I was away, but evidently he did care enough to keep an eye on me.

“Does it worry you when I stray away so slightly?”

He laughed, but it was clearly to cover up some mischievous intent. It was impossible to miss that stupid look on his face. He was like a cat that feared water, yet was obsessed with catching a fish. This is what he said.

“Not really, since no matter how far you wander, you’ll surely come back when your stomach begins growling.”

It was impossible to be angry at that stupid grin, like he had just told the world’s greatest joke. The way he always kept trying to one-up me, time after time, was endearing.

“Alright, well, I’ll get the horse.”

He then rose to his feet and walked up to said horse. I lifted myself up with two hands, peeking at him over the edge of the wagon. He was a kind man, but his confidence sometimes bordered on conceit. Money was second only to his life in importance, and sometimes that line blurred to the point where it frightened me.

But he was by no means a mean-spirited miser. In fact he sometimes amazed me with his generosity. I had even caught my tail wagging at him in appreciation, on occasion. He knew the pull food had on me, yet he still believed it could be just any food.

Did he really think a Wisewolf was that fickle? I would return when my stomach grumbled, indeed! The fool. In fact I returned because I could not stand eating alone. And here he proudly assumed that I would come back, tail wagging, so long as he had just any food.

“Idiot..”

His horse was making him grumpy, as it shook its head from side to side and fought back. Even the dourest wolf would have laughed at such a spectacle.

“He truly is but a sheep..”

I muttered to myself, the quietly warming sunlight somehow making his stupidity all the clearer. I smiled in satisfaction, amazed at his comeuppance.

“But perhaps it is I who is the fool..”

My muttering continued as my eyes fell to the ground beside the wagon. And there, they spotted something.

“What is that?”

I stared at the unfamiliar object for a moment before hopping out of the wagon and picking it up. It was metallic, bore the face of a beast, and had a leather strap through it.

“What’s wrong?”

I looked up in surprise, but his voice was not directed at me.

“Come on, let’s go!”

The horse was happy to be free, and kept grumbling about having to get back to work. His eyes were stark, but the fact was, he was often allowed to run free. There was no reason for him to bicker. In fact, he was probably just having a bit of fun with Lawrence.

“Hey, hey, don’t get angry.. just let me put this back on you.. oh-ho-ho, I know, I know.. don’t take it that way.”

Of course the horse was quite used to this. He soon accepted his fate, and let Lawrence put the bridle back on him. A perfect man playing the fool was nice, but seeing a fool suddenly act competently was equally heartwarming. At least, that was how I felt.. until the horse’s muzzle poked Lawrence in his back and made him stumble with a sigh.

“Well, alright, we’re good to go, Holo.. huh?”

I just wanted to wrap myself in the blanket, so I ignored him. In turn, he just scratched his head and sat back down in the driver’s seat, ignoring me and resuming his driving as I resumed my study of the object I had found.

I knew of many rocks and metals used by humans, and this reminded me of lead. It was the size of my thumb, and had something resembling a dog on it.. or perhaps it was a wolf’s face? It was quite worn down, so the finer details had long vanished. All that was left was the blackened base.

But I found such worn things more interesting than shiny, new things. It had a leather strap running through it, so I opted to try it on. I was looking forward to seeing *his* reaction. But it did not fit around my waist, and I already had my wheat pouch ’round my neck, so I struggled to think of a suitable place to wear it.

I then recalled that humans wore hair bands, so would it not be suitable for a wolf like myself to wear it on my tail? It required some slight adjustments, but since it was only the size of my thumb, it did not look half bad. Of course I would never wear something like this out in a forest or field, but I still wanted to stand up and wag my tail like a pup at *him*.

“Huh-huh-ho..”

As I giggled at the sight of something so unusual-

“Oh, yes, I’d like to ask you something-”

The oaf turned around, and saw me chasing my tail. I could not hide it from him, but fortunately I did not want to. He, however, was surprised.

“What are you doing?”

I wagged my tail in his face to show off.

“How is it? Pretty, is it not?”

I spun around like a dancer in a troupe as he stared at my tail, speechless.

“Um, well.. yeah, it’s nice? Uh..”

His “uh” made it clear just how flustered he was. How adorable! He quizzed me as I twirled around.

“Where did you find that?”

“Well, it was just lying on the ground.”

I took another look at the object, satisfied. Its dark grey matched my brown and white fur quite nicely. He had a perplexed look on his face as I wagged my tail at him.

“Really?”

It took him a while to even say that much before he turned back to face me. If I were to tilt my head like a proper maiden, he would surely lose it, would he not? Clearly my little tail-charm was having the effect I wanted, so I hopped into the seat next to him.

“Hey, would you like to tell me something?”

Having sat next to him, I now had to look up at him. When I took my wolf form I had to look down on others, so I loved being able to look up in this way. Especially when he was being elusive. This was a highly effective tactic.

I left my smirk behind, and put on the most pure maiden’s smile I could manage. When he caught a glimpse of that, he fought even harder to hold back his words. These were my favorite pastimes, right after eating and sleeping. I could watch him clear his throat and struggle to find his next words.

“Um, well, no, nothing..”

I caught him peeking at my tail, perhaps intentionally.

“..I just wanted to talk about those furs from yesterday..”

“Oh?”

He changed the topic to money again. Well, if he could earn more, I would be able to eat better. Nothing was a better motivator. And I meant that. After all, if we were to travel together, it would be best to smile rather than glare at each other. I cleared my throat as well.

“Very well, then.”

He began asking questions, about which fur is better and why. After all, humans only had their hands and eyes to rely on, unlike me and my nose. I answered each question, affirming which product was good and which was not, until his focus once again drifted away from me and onto the furs.

After his final question, he grew silent, making me wonder how he could be so impolite. But that serious expression was another of the many I could not get angry with. I could only sigh. Suddenly his hand shot out to the wagon-bed and pulled out the wax board he had written on.

He shouted loudly.

“Yes! That’s it!”

Humans had poor noses and ears, so they could be surprisingly loud. I was not the only one shocked - the horse neighed in protest as well. But Lawrence just ignored us and stopped the cart, tossing the board back into the wagon-bed.

“..What is it?”

I pawed at my sore ears like a cat, watching the happy fool.

“There *is* a way to make money off this!”

He turned to face me like an eager puppy. I had spent long enough with him to know about trade. Selling, buying, and ending up with the original product at a profit. He had surely figured something out.

“People hate buying expensive things with small change, and they hate buying cheap things with big denominations, so they exchange.. and it works the same in the fur market. Simply put-”

“You must avoid unreasonable exchanges at the end.”

“Exactly. I’ve checked and re-checked, and it’s watertight. I can make twenty or even thirty percent profit if we head back! Amazing!”

That was all well and good if true, but I was a bit upset at his excitement over that instead of my new decoration. But I could not ask for too much from someone too dim to focus on more than one thing at once.

It seemed that we would be going back to the city we left that morning. It would still be crowded; I wondered if that was part of his plan.

Still, most people either succeeded or failed in boring endeavors, while this man at least had a heart for adventure.. something that I had very nearly forgotten. It was endearing to watch him when he was this anxious about a trade. He looked like he was already planning on which stable to leave his horse in when we arrived.

“So.. would you mind waiting for me at that pub for a while?”

“Huh?”

I was stunned.. was he not planning on bringing me with him to evaluate the furs? This was a disappointing development.

“It’s just that I’ll have to dart around between all these shops.. and you hate those crowds, don’t you?”

How devious. He probably meant that I would just get in his way, yet he turned it around to sound like he was doing me a favor! And I could not argue. I often wondered if he was using this tactic on me.

“Alright.”

I smiled, feigning happiness, but he did not seem to buy it and rubbed the top of my head. I could tell he was worried about leaving me on my own again. Like a proper fool, he thought he understood me. But that look of confidence was yet another of the faces I liked to see on him, so who was the real fool here?

“Then here’s something to help pass the time.”

He took my hand and put something small and hard into it. I could tell he did not want to, but he had given me a silver coin.

“Don’t spend it all.”

Of course he would add that.

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It turned out that he really did not have the time to dally with me. In a high-walled city, the only way to know what time it was, was when the market bell tolled. The first time it did so, the market opened. The second time it did so, the workers left to take their rest.

They all seemed like puppets to me, and I was even more apt to look down on them after a glass of wine. Lawrence was the one with the most freedom here. He freely drove around in his wagon across the wide lands, traveling under the sun or stars. Being free meant having strength, so the fool really ought to be more powerful than he was. Especially if he trusted in himself so much.

But as I reflected back on our trip, I realized that I was simply miserable right now because I was alone. I was just looking to vent. But then, with only one silver coin to spend, the bars were my only option. And alas, the only people in a bar before sunset were lazy merchants and wealthy sons of noblemen.

It was quite empty where I sat now, but I still nursed my drink in the corner of the bar. There had been no time to change my clothes, so I was still in my nun’s robes. People often tossed a coin my way as I uttered the usual pleasantries.

“May God bless you.”

They bowed and took my hand, then returned to their seats. I hated Church believers, but they were sincere in their words, so it was impossible to get upset at them (a nun should be touched by their words, after all). And so, I simply ate my beans, wiped the corners of my eyes after stretching, and sipped my wine.

What would we do if that fool failed? Right now, all I had was this awfully bitter wine. What I needed was sleep. My mood kept worsening. Finally, as I wiped my mouth I noticed someone familiar out of the corner of my eye. It was him, and he bore many furs on his back as he poked his head inside the bar.

His eyes made it clear that things were proceeding smoothly. He had never realized this, but when things were going well he could not help but look happy. He thought he always wore a poker face, but that was only reserved for his times of failure. Men’s hearts were always stirring, and the only time they showed their true face was when they were fast asleep.

If I told him I knew he watched me as I slept, he would probably be too nervous to ever sleep again. Now *that* was an amusing thought. But my wine glass was now empty, and he had left, so without anyone to talk to I ordered another bottle.

After that I lost count of the number of times his foolish face poked inside. The next time he did, he finally walked into my quiet corner of the world. I felt too full of cheap wine, so I told him to fetch me some bread and milky sweets. Rather than grumbling, he smiled. He could hug me or poke me for all I cared.

“You’re still the master of your domain, I see? But I’m afraid I’m not done just yet.”

Sure enough, he pinched my cheeks in mirth. But he did not give me another penny.

*Merchants.*

“So you are still reaching for the stars?”

“Not just reaching, I have caught some already.”

His foolish confidence was infectious enough to make me smile. He truly had earned well, judging from the furs on his back; both their quantity and quality. But he had come across a fork in the proverbial road, and needed my help to ascertain which furs to purchase next before he headed off, to minimize his losses.

Perhaps he was being too careful, but that was just the way he was. He never stopped and yelled “I give up!” when things were not going his way. He simply formed a counter-plan and clawed his way back with devious cunning. But then again, he was sometimes utterly foolhardy.

He was full of contradictions.

My mind swam, having had far too much to drink. My bottle was empty so quickly that I suspected there might be a hole in the bottom. And just then, I saw him appear so suddenly that it shocked me. It seemed my senses were too dulled by the wine. I looked up and brushed my hair away from my eyes, and there was his happy face.

“I earned a lot!”

He sat down and showed off the contents of his wallet.

“But someone else caught wind of what I was doing and started doing it too, so I fell behind. Thankfully we came to an agreement before both of us lost out.”

He sat down and drank so much at once that it surprised me. He then sighed, the dusty smell of his sweat finally hitting my nose. He must have been running hard the whole time.

“I wish I could invite you to raise a glass in celebration, but it seems like you’re at your limit, huh?”

This time his smile *did* make me lose my temper. I lifted the empty bottle to my lips, but my hopes of drinking away my rage were dashed.

“Well, let’s just have a nice drink tomorrow. I’ll find us a nice place for the night.. after all, we’ve earned it.”

He gulped down the rest of his wine after his happy speech. He was so happy in fact, that he was almost ecstatic. But all I could do was return a smile.

“Alright, let’s go. Can you walk?”

It felt like it had been centuries since I had last held his hand. My fatigue suddenly hit me, and I leaned into him like an exhausted child. How embarrassing.

“Hang on, we’re almost there.”

His concern touched me, but there was no way I could reply right now. I could not even stand on my own power anymore. I just let him hold me and lead me through the crowds.

It was noisy. My eyes were closed, but I cared nothing of how the city looked. It was the sounds of people talking, animals bleating, and things crashing into each other that bothered me. Even amidst all that noise, I could hear the beating of his heart. Actually, it was my own, but that seemed like a trivial detail right now.

I was happy. I could only feel his hand, but I found myself wishing this moment could last

forever. It made me feel stupid to make such a wish, but I did not have to feel bad for long.

“What do you mean?! Why can’t you buy them?!”

That sudden roar snapped me back to reality.

“We just can’t. Apparently someone’s been going around making money off furs in some scheme, so we’re not allowed right now.”

“What the hell?!”

A bellow of that level would not catch many people’s attention in such a noisy place, but the two of us heard it clearly.

“Whew.. that was close.”

Lawrence smiled at me as he whispered that same line he always used when his horse strayed too close to a cliff. I smiled back in recognition of our common secret. But the shouting man wasn’t going to stop at that.

“Get whoever’s in charge!”

People were finally starting to pay attention. The man seemed furious about not being able to sell his furs, but I got the impression that he was just putting on a show. He probably wanted to cause a fuss so they would be forced to buy the furs to save face. I had seen a certain someone do that before. It was the kind of courage that merchants had, and I had to admit that it impressed me.

“Come on, let’s go.”

My hand was being pulled, and the face controlling that hand was grim. He might have earned a lot from the scheme, but he did not like seeing a fellow merchant lose. Such a foolish softie. We slowly made our way out of the crowd.

“See that?! It’s the stamp of Dio Olay’s company! How can you not buy these?!”

The man raised a scroll high above his head, and the merchant he was yelling at stepped back. Perhaps that scroll showed some form of legitimacy. I had learned on our travels that humans treasured promises, and so when they dealt with strangers they would use such tokens. It would enrage a merchant if he went through the trouble of getting such proof, only to be denied outright.

This seemed to be getting out of hand, and I wanted to stay and see how it developed. But something about the man’s furs caught my eye.. there was a familiar strap on them. And something metallic as well. I felt my hand being pulled harder as I looked over at my tail, then

back to the angry man's furs. They were the same. And the man's furs were low-quality fox furs.

Suddenly the hand tugging me felt sweaty, and everything came into focus. The owner of that hand had not been flustered at how good I looked with my new decoration, but because I had put a price tag on my own tail. Even the dullest wolf would be ashamed at that. And here I was, thinking the entire time that had he just been flustered.. how stupid of me!



But I felt no anger, nor did I want to. It was not his fault. He had tried so hard to cover it up for me, pulling me away right now, and even leaving me at a darkened bar while he worked all on his own. And now that the jig was up, he just stared at me silently.

His face said it all. He was not laughing at me. He felt bad for letting me do this. None of his usual confidence was there. But right now, I was even happier to have his side next to mine. At least this way I could bury my face in it.

“Um..”

He was doing his best to find something to say, so I pulled my hand back and placed my arm around his, like a girl walking with her man in the city. I rested my head against him, and continued leaning into him.

I could feel him tense up, like someone about to be attacked by a wild dog in the mountains. But I was no wild dog, I was Holo and Wisewolf. I just looked up into his eyes and smiled.

“Hey you, the merchant holding me.. am I a high-quality product?”

“What, you’re not a..”

“Say, you earned well, did you not? What kind of wine shall we have to celebrate? I have been waiting for you.”

Perhaps it was evilly unfair of me, but I could not bear to not change topics. He was obviously flustered, but had no way to refuse me right now so he nodded. I could not bear not to do this. After all, this was my chance to have this man, cleverer than the other merchants in town, dote on me. It was terribly silly of me, but I just could not bear not to.

I was unwilling to let go, and in fact I held onto him more tightly. Only I, the Wisewolf, knew his true worth. And I had no desire to share that secret with others. He was a fool, but he was the kind of fool that matched me, the kind of fool who would hang a price tag on her own tail.



# Shepherd and a Black Knight

## Prelude

As I crested the hill I was greeted by an unfamiliar view of unfamiliar fields. Birds flew overhead, and behind me were sheep and a lone shepherdess. I had no fondness for the place we had left behind, but nostalgia still nipped at my feet. The breeze ahead, however, made me want to smile.

I let out a sigh, which others would probably say sounded more like a short breath. Preparing to march forward always took time, gathering up our things and scouting ahead. The road went on and on, but I didn't care. I wasn't alone.

I looked at the one who called me her "dark-furred little knight" determinedly. I had to be brave and loyal to be referred to as a knight. I had to look at her as though I could chase away all of her worries. She smiled at me to signal her readiness, and this knight stood up as if to say "let's go."

The second step was always easier than the first. The third and fourth didn't even matter anymore. We just kept walking and watching the scenery unfold. We had found a new life in a new world.

## Chapter 1

Some people might think me stupid, but I say this world is driven by destiny. My very life is proof. From the moment I was born, I have lived. For how long, I can't say. But it's been a while. And though I've felt hopelessness grip me more than once, each time a miracle has saved me.

My first master was a quiet man. Steady-handed and aware of his privilege. He was my master almost from the moment I was born, and he taught me several skills I have used my entire life. My time with him was calm and pleasant; I truly miss those days. I was young enough to believe those days would last forever. And there is only one thing that I can think of that could make days like those vanish like soap bubbles in the breeze.. and that is destiny.

It isn't safe outdoors. Not only wolves and bears are out here, but also men with deadly iron. No matter how careful my master and I were, one day we still had to dash like fools to the nearest refuge when a storm suddenly caught us. Then, those men came out of nowhere and fought us. We fought with all our might, but we were outnumbered. They were reckless, so we felt some hope, but in the end we lost.

My master died, and I was devastated. I still remember the look on his face as he handed me

his staff, like it was his very life. A servant lives to protect his master, and so I had to protect his honor. I ran carrying that staff. I ran for dear life. The dark night after the storm was my savior. Under its cover I ran, and I ran. Until the feeling of the sun made me stop, and I finally realized how wounded I was. I felt so tired then, as I collapsed under a great rock.

The storm vanished without a trace, as though it had never even happened. The warm sunlight scalded me, burning the memories into my mind. I felt such a warmth wash over me that I knew I must be dying. I had failed. I couldn't protect my master's dignity. I was so sure of it that I decided I should just close my eyes, so when they next reopened I would once again be at his side. And so I closed them.

But my wish didn't come true. When my eyes reopened, I should have been in heaven. But I wasn't. Instead they saw a waifish girl with tattered clothes, who stood like a tree stump before me. She was shaking my body with her cool hands. At that moment I remembered my master sometimes comparing me to a knight, while telling me of their deeds. The tales of their spirit touched deeply enough that I never want to tarnish the title of "knight."

The girl who tended to me seemed ready to drop at any moment herself, yet she fought dearly to save my own life. She was almost in tears. If I didn't stand up right then and there, I was unworthy of calling myself a knight. And so I ignored my pain and my fatigue, and I rose to my feet. I felt pride wash over me, and saw the gentle girl return a smile.

She was cold and starving, yet she first cared for others. The smile on her face at that moment convinced me that I had to follow her. But in that moment, the two of us finally collapsed next to one another. It had to be destiny. When we finally woke up, it was because we were both famished. Destiny had to be what brought us together.

So now, I have a new master. She's a bit of a bumbler, but very warm and kind, so I don't mind. Her name is Norah, and I am Enek. Thankfully, my new master read my name at the end of my old master's staff, so I could keep that much. All of those small coincidences had lead to this larger one. Though we can't speak to each other, we can still feel each other's hearts.

As a dog, I can't help but think this is true, even if my new master would be angry if she ever heard me say it out loud. My old master would agree: she would be in trouble if I ever left her. Perhaps that sounds arrogant of me, but she can't even sleep when I am not at her side. And yet, she may be weak, but that just makes our bond all the stronger. We can even share the same blanket to avoid this cold, white winter. That is how strong our bond is.

I normally wake up early on winter days, but not because I feel the sun. It's simply because the air is coldest before dawn. Today is no exception; as usual, we woke together and stretched under the stars. Hearing my master's sneeze, I wrinkle my nose in contempt.

"I itch with excitement.."

She pauses as she stares at my eyes.

“..and yet..”

The same master that hugged me to keep warm under the blanket finally stands up and bravely walks into the cold air. She looks up at the stars and continues.

“..I miss hearing the sheep when we wake up.”

Indeed. I also miss them.

“A shepherd’s life is hard.. but now that it’s over, I feel so lonely.”

A shepherd leads their weak sheep to food and back. But such a simple-sounding task actually takes a lot of effort. Sheep are aimless and wander a lot. And no matter how much you try to teach them, they will never remember the way. They don’t know who their master is. They bleat. They can be so annoying.

That is how we made our living. But now our lives have changed, and we can leave that repetitive job. Now I no longer have to see that sad look on my master’s face when she wakes up in the morning and a sheep is missing. I’m also unused to their voices being gone, but it’s been two weeks, and we must move on. With that in mind, I slowly walk up to her and rub her face with my nose. I don’t want to see that unhappy look reappear on it.

“Oh, sorry. Thank you for worrying about me.”

Her arms wrap around my head. She wanted to quit, and that’s why she’s here. But when she really did quit and removed the bell from her staff, which had signified she was a shepherd.. well, I will never forget the look on her face. That’s why I shout out now. And, as my breath dissipates in the air, she finally smiles and acts tough.

“Oh, you’re hungry? Guess we got a bit spoiled lately, huh? We’ve got a little bit left..”

When she acts so shyly and pulls out a piece of bread, I can’t help but force myself to smile. We have some money, but we can’t afford to waste it. I stare at her, hoping she’ll understand that, and for a moment she seems to. But she laughs.

“Geez, don’t be so impatient, Enek.. it’s embarrassing.”

I’m surprised to hear her say that. My tail isn’t wagging because of the bread, but because I’m overjoyed that she’s happy. I’m not that pathetic.

“Hey, check it out.. the bread’s so white inside!”

As she breaks the loaf in half and displays it to me, the baked smell gets to me. I want to hold

back politely, but my instincts finally get the better of me.

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Dawn broke as we ate breakfast. The cold night vanished, taking the stars with it. My eyes can now see further off into the distance. But it's still cold; in fact the scenery is frosty.

"I guess I'm still too used to thinking about sheep first.. we really should find a roof to sleep under."

My master walks with a newfound determination that I never thought I'd see, supporting herself with her now bell-less staff.

"But it should only be a couple more days now."

She spreads out a map as she speaks, which is odd to me. Sheep were my master's charges. She cried when they were hurt, grew frightened when they were in danger, and was lonely when we finally parted ways. And now she's spreading a sheepskin map. I just can't understand how humans think.

"But Enek.. do you think we'll be okay in this new town?"

She is studying the map, as though worried. All I know is that I've decided to follow her, so I have no choice but to go there with her. It seems dangerous to me, but the only response I can give is to look away and ahead of us. We've already made our choice.. that is my answer.

"You're right.. they'll pay well in a dangerous place like that, so let's go on."

I bark in agreement. She was a famous shepherd, but gave that up for greener pastures. Luckily, she has some money, and so she can actually make it to those pastures. I hate it when she treats her dreams as things she'll never reach. So I wish I could smile at her and encourage her by saying "I will be with you when you fulfil your dream." After all, we have risked much to work toward her dream.

"A place where half the people have died from disease.."

I don't want to go there. It's just too dangerous. But my naive wishes won't help, because she has a reason to go there. From what we heard at the last town, many people have died where we're going and they need workers. Lots of workers, in fact, to keep their town running. Even people without any training, like my master, are being hired.

Of course there's a good reason they have a shortage: the disease isn't gone. Nobody wants to go there, so this is a huge opportunity. That's what the brave merchants told my master. They're the ones brave enough to go there and earn while everyone else avoids it. I hear

merchants will even go to hell if they can earn there. Now *that's* bravery!

Plus, they told her that this town, Gustav, has managed to control the disease so there's nothing to worry about. It's only a matter of time before the news spreads, so we have to get there as soon as we can. That's what my master heard, and immediately she decided to go there. This was on the same day that she had been rejected by the village where she wanted to become a seamstress, so it's hardly surprising she would decide to do this.

"If half the people there still died, they could sure use the prayers of the Church.."

She mumbles to herself like this as she looks at the map. The Church persecuted her when she was a shepherd. Maybe they're jealous of her. They say she's a witch. But she still happily sang while they persecuted her, never letting it worry her. As her servant, I have to say that I was impressed.

I still can't understand why she believes in the Church, though. I don't want to reply, so I just keep walking ahead. It seems like she realizes how I feel, and silently follows me. The sun keeps climbing up into the sky, warming the air. We are making excellent progress, even though she keeps checking the map to make sure we're going the right way.

As a dog, I can sleep outdoors, but my master is human. She can't always join me. I want to make sure that we get to this town before tomorrow night, even if the disease is still there. It will be much better for her than sleeping outside. She isn't a flower to be put in a greenhouse but, like a flower, she can't make it through cold nights indefinitely. She's too weak and thin, and humans don't have my thick fur coat. So I have to make sure she'll be alright.

"Enek!"

My hairs always stand on-end when she calls me like that. We know each other well enough that I know what each of her shouts mean. And this is the kind I know the best. I feel my blood boiling. Sure enough, she raises her staff and points in front of us.

"!"

I don't even think. I just bolt. I run to where she's pointing. There are several goats grazing there. My paws tear apart the ground as I run. I can hear the wind screaming past my ears.

The goats finally notice me, but they're too stupid to get away now. I run like I'm hoping to fly, leaving behind holes in my wake and roaring ahead at the goats. They're nervous, and keep turning themselves around. They're not going to be a challenge. And seeing that, I roar once again.

My master knows my strength. In fact, she's happily laughing as she runs to catch up to me. I can't contain myself, and keep barking to her. The goats eye us nervously, like they're waiting

for their doom. But they're lucky.. we aren't like those greedy wolves.

When my master waves her staff, I let them go and run back to her. She then proudly scratches my neck in reward.. and that's all I need.

"I'm sorry we frightened you."

She's talking to the goats, but they're wild anyway. They're already calm, and their leader bleats for them to leave. It's not strange to see them close to towns. I don't know how long they'll survive out here on their own, but we're in the same position.

My master is squinting as she watches them run off, but gets embarrassed when she sees that I'm watching her. She smiles, her face beet-red. I'll just pretend it's because she ran so hard to catch up to me.

"I feel sorry for doing that to them, but it just made me so happy."

It seems my master is starting to become a bad person.

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It is dark now, so we camp between two hills, still quite far from town. There haven't been any other people on the road there, probably because of news of the disease, so camping outdoors should be safe. But my master is nervous.

Earlier, my master fed a bird while we ate, and an eagle suddenly swooped down and caught the bird from under her nose. She was shocked. It wasn't the first time she'd seen it, but she can never quite accept it. She always recovers, then starts to blame me for doing nothing. But even a knight can do nothing about birds. I can only let my ears and tail hang low until she stops blaming me.

We should be sleeping after the sun sets. We have no choice but to huddle together, since we can't build a fire, We have no sheep anymore. But we're anxious. I'm on guard, even if I can't stand up from under the warm blanket. My master does poke her head out of the blanket, so I could move out like some spoiled house pet, but I stay with her.

That's just how I am. I should be a watchful knight, but I choose the warmth of my master. I still wonder which is the right thing to do, but tonight my thoughts are interrupted. It's not an illusion I'm sensing, and I'm looking up toward it, but my body's still under the blanket, nestled between her arm and body. It takes me a while to get out from under the blanket, but I manage to do it without waking her. I lie there listening to her talk to herself in her sleep, until her arms finally move.. and then I pop out quickly.

I know this sound! Someone is fighting!

“Unh.. Enek?”

Ever since my master quit her job, she has been able to sleep soundly. But it seems she’s noticed my absence, and her eyes immediately open.

“Is it wolves?”

Wolves always bothered us when we had sheep, so she’s not at all nervous.

“No, no.. not wolves..”

She lowers an ear to the ground. She’s rather good at judging how many people there are and where they’re going by doing this. Maybe as well as I can as a dog. She realizes it’s not wolves around us, and raises herself up for a look, just as I hear the fighting again. She must hear it too, because she’s staring in the same direction I am.

It’s the roar of battle; the clashing of weapons. It’s humans.

“Thieves?”

Humans fear wild animals, but not as much as their own kind. She’s whispering next to me, but since I’m not growling, she realizes that we’re not in any immediate danger. She quickly gathers our things, and slowly stands up. She quietly points her staff in front of us, and I quickly run toward the noises.

The moon is hiding behind the clouds tonight, but right now there are beams peeking through them, so I can see well. I am afraid my master won’t be able to find me if we get separated, so I keep turning around to make sure she’s close. In this way, we soon make to the top of a hill so we can see who it is.

When she gets to me, she gasps in surprise. A building is on fire. Her ears aren’t as good as mine, but she can still hear the panicked voices. An inn is being attacked by thieves.

“Wh-what’ll we do?”

It’s a normal reaction. She’s wondering if she should help them. But we don’t know how many people are there, or how strong and powerful their weapons are. She’s kind, but this isn’t a good time for kindness. Unfortunately, I’m not the one making the decisions. The house is still burning, too, and we watch as half of it collapses in on itself, in a shower of sparks.

“Oh!”

We see a man run out the main door, escaping the fire. It’s dark and a bit foggy, though, so I can’t see him well. I can only see his robes, and guess that he’s a traveling priest. He seems hurt

and frightened, and is moving clumsily. But he's running, and being chased by another person with a sword. There's no doubt about it, it's one of the attackers. They're not far behind him, and will catch him sooner or later. But just then, another man hops out and grabs the attacker from behind. I hear that man shout, probably more clearly than my master does.

"Run away quickly! Please!"

"Enek!"

My master commands me reflexively. And so I, her glorious knight servant, obey her and run. Soon the man is just in front of me, and the attacker's pushed the other man to the ground and run him through with his sword. But the attacker is too excited, and has trouble taking to his feet. He's no match for me anyway.

The soft grass would conceal my footfalls even if the burning building didn't, so the attacker has no way of noticing me. He just keeps moving toward the priest, who's now crawling on the ground and praying as though he's given up hope. But just as the attacker smiles and moves to lift his sword, he sees a black flash hurtling at him.

Before he knows it, I sink my teeth into his wrist and force him to drop his sword. My jaws can crush the thigh bones of a goat, and I only relent when I hear the man's bones break. He stares at me like I'm a beast from hell, and falls to the ground. And I'm no more merciful than a hell-beast: I sink my fangs into his right calf.

"Help me!!"

Damn, I didn't notice in time. There's another man coming out with a sword. And my master has almost caught up to us. I have to end this quickly.

"Hey! What happened?!"

Thankfully, the new man doesn't know what's going on. I release my current prey and bolt over to my new target. He drops his sack of prizes down in shock and lifts his sword. It's a dark night, so he seems to think I'm a wolf. I wasn't trying to pretend that, but it gives me the advantage. Since he doesn't know how to react, he steps back. And by the time I've reached him, he's already fainted.

The inn is a mess. Three people are on the ground, all wearing robes like the priest. I can sense another person on the stairs, and notice that they're clothed like the other attackers. But he flees back upstairs when he sees my fangs. Too bad for him, I have the advantage while his back is turned, so I give chase and sink my teeth into his calf. He flinches in surprise and crumples down, so I let him go.

Luckily, he rolls back down the stairs past me and stays down. His right leg and left hand are

bent in strange ways, but he isn't dead. I stare at him scornfully, and the inn is finally calm. Well, aside from the burning. I can tell from the smell that this place doesn't have long, and I'm worried that there might be other attackers upstairs, but I have to prioritize. I have to keep my master safe.

I run back down the stairs, but I am blocked at the entrance. The priest who escaped is coming back in. The bearded and robed man is bleeding, and looks like a mess, but it isn't just because of his injuries.

"Oh, ugh.. what happened.."

From their robes, the three others are friends of his. I pass him as he enters and spot my master outside, who immediately runs up to me and hugs me.

"Oh, thank goodness you're alright!"

Here I am, concerned first and foremost with her safety, but she's already more worried about the others. I look behind my master, and see that the man who was run through already has a white cloth draped over his face.

"Are the thieves dead?"

When she realizes that I'm unhurt, she finally releases me. I can only respond with a bark, but the man responds for me, no longer stumbling around like a ghost.

"There were three of them.."

"You mean there's still another one?"

He shakes his head and points to the third one at the bottom of the stairs. I hope my master knows it was bravery that solved this. I look up at her, but the man speaks.

"Oh.. thank God I'm still alive.."

I saved you, human! Bless my master! I'll bark at you if you don't, because she should be hugging my neck right now!

The bearded man calls himself Joseph Ozenstein. He is the bishop of a church that is three days away. I regret having saved someone of no use to the world, but my master doesn't feel the same way. Despite her issues with the Church, she kneels in front of the man. Oh, master, what am I to do with you?

"Please look up. Angels sent by the Lord need not prostrate themselves."

Had he dared to act high and mighty, a certain knight's fangs would have been in his calf as

well. But he didn't, so my lips never curled back. Instead, Joseph, a man several times older than my master, thanked her profusely.

"No, no.. Enek is the one to thank."

"Oh-hoh, so your name's Enek? You have my thanks."

His waist is wounded more severely than we thought. My master tries to stop his bleeding, but she isn't skilled enough to treat him. Joseph is in pain, so his thanks must be sincere. He even wears a comforting smile. A knight should accept such gratitude.

"But God's test really is.. too difficult this time.."

Only Joseph and the other young man have survived, though that young man is severely wounded and unconscious. My master has tried to treat him, but only God knows if he'll make it in the end.

"Did all the other people in the inn..?"

My master is tying the thieves up to the fence.

"Ah, no, this safe house was empty. We were only to spend the night here, but those thieves were lying in wait for travelers.. such horrible people, they're surely pagan."

"You mean because they have those strange gemstones shaped like arrowheads?"

"Oh, you saw them too? Yes. They're worn by the sorcerers who lived in the eastern mountains. They caught us as we slept.. and killed the mercenaries I hired. They were clever and brave men, but not as skilled as their attackers.."

I've noticed that too; two of the three people lying near the door are clothed like Joseph is, but have a smell more like mine. They're born fighters.

"But.. my trip can't end here.. I must.."

Joseph is struggling, and begins coughing. Not a good sign. I'm whimpering slightly in response, but my master doesn't hear it. She wears a pained expression, though, clearly wanting to help him.

"Where were you heading?"

Oh, master! We haven't the time to bother with other's business! We're supposed to be off to Gustav to make your dreams come true! These kinds of deadly mid-journey encounters are common, so don't give up your dream to help what can't be helped!

I'm just standing there, thinking thoughts like this, looking back and forth at the two of them.

"I'm.. so sorry.. I was going to.."

If he finishes that sentence, we're doomed. And I can do nothing to stop him. I can simply stand there anxiously as he slowly speaks.

"Gustav."

"Eh?"

My ears perk up, and when I turned to my master I can see she's also surprised.

"You've heard of it? There's a disease there.. and their prayers haven't been answered.. they're alone in such sad darkness.."

"Yes, we've heard. We're heading there too."

"What?"

He cries in surprise, then closes his eyes in prayer. My tail is already wagging in anticipation.

"Then this is the will of God.. that's a relief. Then might I, a servant of God, make a small request of you?"

My eyes turn from Joseph to my master. She's wearing such a serious look it's clear she's also anticipating a great order. Right now, even if I could say a word to stop her, it wouldn't matter.

"Please.."

He closes his eyes and remains silent for a time, before opening them and finishing his sentence.

"Will you take us to Gustav?"

My master firmly nods and holds his hand. Unable to do anything else, I simply watch the inn as it burns.

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"I see, you're heading to Gustav to become a tailor.."

"Yes, since I heard the news from traveling merchants."

"But it takes a lot of courage to go there now.. hey, what am I saying? You're certainly brave

enough.”

Joseph sits on his horse, with the other young man in the wagon behind him. We hardly have any choice, so we put the other bodies in the wagon as well.

“No, I’m actually quite terrified.. but I still want to try..”

My master speaks embarrassedly, but it seems she’s being honest.

“Then becoming a tailor is your dream, is it? It does take risks to achieve one’s dreams, so there’s no need to be embarrassed.”

He smiles gently, and my master looks up at him. My boredom is at its limits.

“We were heading there for similar reasons. When the disease started spreading, even the servants of God were caught in the disaster. Everyone began losing their faith. I’m hoping to shine some light on those people shivering in the darkness.”

“I see..”

“When I left the Church, I was ready to face the worst, but I never thought I would have to face it before I even made it to Gustav..”

He’s not sad, he’s still smiling. That smile leaves a good impression on me. I can still remember that he never begged or feared for his life, even when it was almost ended. He simply prayed. I’m not fond of the Church, but I do like people who try to be responsible and do the best at their jobs. Joseph might not be so bad.

“I may be a bishop, but I’ve got nothing special to give you in return. All I can really give you is my respect and admiration.”

“Th-there’s no need..”

My master nervously rejects his offer, but Joseph smiles for her to stop and continues in a strong tone.

“I was nearly killed by those pagans. You saved my life despite the danger, and now you’re heading to those who are despairing in the dark and need God’s light. You’re quite admirable. I’d at least like to repay your brave friend’s valor.”

“Enek?”

I’m surprised too. I look up, and he’s smiling at me. How strange.. I thought only my master smiled at animals.

“God created everything in the world to be equal, so I like to name plants, cherish animals, and glorify bravery wherever I see it.”

I look at my master, who likewise looks at me. We both turn to look at Joseph, and hear the injured bishop continue happily.

“When we get to Gustav, I’m going to confer upon Enek, this brave servant of the Lord, the title of Knight of the Church, using my name, Joseph Ozenstein, under the glory of God.”



I don't understand what he means, but if he wants to call me a knight then I don't mind. My master, however, is quite shocked.

"Of course, I'd still like to thank you, too, Norah."

With that, Joseph suddenly turns his face forward, and we all spot a town in the moonlight. It must be Gustav. It seems we're fortunate, and won't have to spend the night outdoors. Joseph didn't even have to spend the night in that safe house, given how close it was to our destination. Damn. What a sad coincidence. I'm not the only one thinking that either, Joseph and my master stare at each other silently, with forced smiles.

Gustav is a big place surrounded by stone walls. Not as big as Ruvinheigen, but big enough for people to get worried if the gates open at midnight. But that's the least of their problems right now. When the bishop reports his name, the guards react nervously. Things have been tough for them lately. We can hear a clamor behind the gates, like there's a riot on the other side that's even more raucous than a siege.

My master is easily intimidated, and she curls her body inwardly when she hears the sound. If the town longs for the guidance of the bishop, his savior will surely be more than welcome. But her worries are written plainly on her face. When the sound of the town's horn suddenly blasts through the air, she's finally overcome by fear. Joseph, too, is trying to act tough, and coughs while scratching his face. My master finally interjects.

"Uh, um.."

"Yes?"

"I have a request.."

Joseph's face now looks like the shepherd, and my master the lost sheep.

"What is it?"

People from the Church often hide their black hearts behind such a mask, but my master doesn't care.

"Will you tell them we're your followers?"

"Ah.."

Joseph blinks and nods. He's clever enough to know what she means. As the gates open, he bends down to softly talk into her ear.

"I'm glad you're following God's teachings so humbly. Modesty and courage rarely mix like this. Very well, I'll honor your request, but neither God nor I will forget who lead who."

As the gates open, we're blinded by the light of the torches. I wonder if Joseph will be able to handle the situation, but he nods at me even as my tail is wagging. I suppose everyone has their expectations.

"Well, let's go in."

He smiles and talks like a kid as the gates open. Inside, people are already waiting, obviously having rushed so quickly to the gates they didn't even put on decent clothes. Most of them still have messy hair and watch us nervously. A few of the girls are trying to tidy their hair.

Two guards with spears approach us. One of them is wearing nice clothes, but he's just a kid. His eyes are puffy, clearly having just woken up. Still, he's walking straight and properly, exuding authority like he's the leader here. Given his demeanor, I feel like he's worthy of respect. He doesn't want to make a bad impression. It's a heavy burden to be in his position, especially at his age. He's clearly unprepared for it, but disease always claims the old first so he's stuck with it.

"My name is Terry Ron Gustav Kerrick. I'm the head of the Council of Gustav. In the name of the Lord, we welcome you."

What a young voice. Even Joseph seems to be thinking what I am, and is even more polite in answering than he was with us.

"Please forgive me for not arriving sooner. I know your town has been craving the guidance of God's holy light, but remember that God has never abandoned you. I may be weak, but He is not, so do not despair. God's light is forever with your town."

He spoke in a bright voice, so everyone heard every word. All was silent as he finished. Then, like a wave washing over the crowd, their voices rang out in a roar. It was like they were celebrating the end of a war.

"Your trip must have been a hard one, bishop. Please rest well tonight."

As Kerrick, the one with the long title, approaches the bishop, he finally realizes that something's wrong.

"Bishop, you're.."

"Please tend to the one behind me first."

Kerrick finally notices the bodies in the wagon, and his girlish face contorts.

"Doctors! We need doctors!"

The celebration ends as he shouts. Everyone suddenly understands why he arrived so late at night. It's not like they don't know how common thieves attack people at night. Even I've been attacked while I tended flocks of sheep.

Nervous hands slowly lower the bishop from his horse as he calmly explains what happened. The people looking at the bodies in the carriage seem to be those who have fighting experience, and quickly instruct those around them on what to do.

Joseph honors my master's earlier request, and Kerrick thanks her shortly after that. I can't say that I'm happy, since I was the one who did all the work. But at least Joseph won't forget the truth. And my master knows better too, and touches my head in understanding before stepping ahead, as though to say "just let it go."

Seeing how bad things are, if my master tells them how we saved the bishop she'll pretty much become a tailor right away. It's a shame she's too modest to do that, though I have to admit her modesty is impressive. I look up at her impatiently, and she seems confused.

"What is it?"

I can't talk, so I can't do it for her. Besides, even if I'm her servant, I don't like the thought of having to do her job for her, so I look away. Joseph is being taken away. Suddenly I feel my master's hand on my head again.

"You're wondering when they'll start the feast to thank us?"

How rude! I bark in protest. My master can be so evil sometimes. Did I really look like that's what I wanted? I'm hurt, so she hugs me to apologize.

Joseph is long gone now, and we're the only ones left at the door. We've been forgotten. My frail master must just have been lonely. So I lick her face, and sure enough, she smiles.

"Don't worry, I'm also hoping for a feast!"

So my master was actually hoping for that? That's different. But then no one's perfect, so I lick her chin and bark quietly in forgiveness.

## Chapter 2

This white bread dipped in sauce is heavenly, it's like biting into a seasoned cloud. The sliced beef is really good too. We lead simple lives, but I have high standards for food. These guys can satisfy me. But I'm not happy about the portions. I've already wolfed down my food, but my master notices and shares some of hers with me.

"Not enough, huh?"

She knows. I'm thankful for that, and rub her leg with my snout in thanks.. after I've wolfed her offer down, of course.

"They're not going to charge us for room and board."

She doesn't lick the plate clean like I do, but she's far from worried about table manners: she soaks the rest of the sauce up with her bread while smiling at me.

"But, I hear the kitchen's planning to switch back to buckwheat bread."

Her voice is tinged with spite. I sigh and lay myself down on the floor.

"Well, it's not like this town can afford it right now. I wouldn't be surprised if this is the last of their good stuff."

I'm listening with one ear, not bothering to look up because I know her face won't have a smile on it. I lick her foot instead.

"Hey!"

She's poking me with her toes; my tongue's too itchy, apparently. When her foot gets scratched up outdoors, we don't always have clean water to wash it so I take it upon myself to lick her wounds. That only embarrasses her. But then, sometimes when she steps on a sharp stone, she'll kick my face as she flinches.. she's just that sensitive, I guess. And yet, she loves massaging my back with her feet. That's what she's doing right now, as she chews her last piece of bread.

"Okay."

She stands up, having finished her meal.

"Let's go to the church, then the company."

She puts on her coat, then puts away her cutlery. But she hesitates and leaves her staff behind. After all, it's fine when traveling but people in town will probably discriminate against her otherwise. Only fortune-tellers, witches, and shepherds use staves like that. I'm proud of my job, but after a while I understood why humans are so biased. My master's human, so she has even less trouble understanding it, even if she does feel sad to put the staff away.

"Well, it should be fine."

It takes a poke of her leg before she turns to me and says that with a heavy heart. She never talks about it, but one of her reasons for wanting to become a seamstress is to be her own master. I can't blame her; everyone wants that. She's never had anyone to talk to either, just

me and the sheep. That's why shepherds tend to smile at animals. So much so that they're sometimes accused of being half-blood animals themselves. But such rumors only make them feel more alone, and in the end they grow to loathe towns and people too. Perhaps my master is the same now? I often wonder about that.

"I said it'll be fine. Come here."

She rubs my face, but I can tell that she's forcing a smile. Only humans can smile like that. Well, to be honest, I can't even smile no matter how much I force it.

"Sorry.. I'm lying. I'm really nervous."

I understand. She's never liked to be singled out. Just being treated like a guest by this inn was bad enough. And now she has to leave her staff behind and hope that she'll be treated normally. Can she even behave like a "normal" human, though? That's why she's anxious.

"But.."

She puts on a tough expression.

"I have to move forward."

The strong have their moments of weakness, but can overcome them. So I bark, and as hoped she stands up.

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Walking these streets is like wandering through dark ruins. It's the same even after the sun rises. Even in the center of town, most of the window shutters are closed. Only a few people are out and about, trying to walk as quietly as possible.

I'm not sure if my master can smell it, but the stench of decay is on the wind. If you look closely, those are bones on the street corner. A fat dog sits in an alley, eying the street with hazy eyes. Fat rats are everywhere. I doubt anyone wants to think about why they're so fat.

Actually, I suspect my master has noticed too. She's walking even closer to me than she did when wolves were hunting us in the forests. The only people with any energy seem to be merchants who are passing through town. They're the kind who value money more than their own lives, so it's no surprise they can act that way in a place with such circumstances.

I hear something up ahead which snaps me out of it. There's a crowd there around the church, looking lost and hoping to calm themselves somehow. Many of them are pushing their way in, though, so it doesn't seem like calmness will come to them anytime soon.

"There are so many people.."

It seems my master is surprised. It will be difficult to meet with Joseph now.

“Well, it wouldn’t be a good idea to bother him now anyway.. let’s try again later.”

A good choice. My tail is wagging in agreement. It’ll be easy enough to get to our second destination. It’s a big town, but easy to walk around. We just ask a couple people for directions, and we’re there in no time. My master calls it a company, but it’s actually the Rowen guild.

It’s not just goats and sheep that form herds. Humans do, too. People gather in the same place to try to do some business, which is reasonable. They’ll usually open a branch of a company in a building in each city, and use those as their bases.

When my master gave up her job, it was this guild that helped her out. She has some ties to these people, and a letter of introduction. But it takes several long, nervous breaths before she actually goes in. In fact, she almost gave up like this when she went to quit her job, so I urge her until she walks in.

“Oh, welcome..”

It may be because she isn’t the kind of person they’re used to seeing here, but the person doesn’t finish their sentence. My master smiles, knowing how important first impressions are. It’s not the real smile she shows me. She’s putting on an act, but it’s good enough.

“How can I help you?”

The man replies softly and points at a chair.

“This black-furred fellow’s your friend, yes?”

He asks about me as I follow her in.

“Oh, yes. Um..”

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s fine. I remember you from last night. It’s dangerous to travel on your own, miss, but with a dog like that you’re better off than if you had a town guard with you.”

He smiles, and so does my master.

“I just had to ask because the dogs around here aren’t exactly in good standing.”

In times of a disease like this one, corpses are everywhere. When you hear chewing at night, if you open your window you’ll probably see a dog gnawing on those bodies. That’s hardly a pleasant thought for me, let alone humans. My master pats my head as she sits down, embarrassed.

“So, what brings a traveler like you here?”

Merchants talk straightforwardly, which helps in such a situation. I probably wasn't the only one thinking that. My master pulls out her letter of introduction and nervously hands it to the man. Such letters are powerful; my master didn't have to fear quitting her job or worry about her living expenses right now, all because of that piece of paper.

“Oh, I see.. from Ruvinheigen? That's quite a ways away.”

“Mr. Yikberg took good care of me.”

“Ah, yes.. then I can't have him upstaging me, can I?”

He laughs, but my master's frozen in the chair. He coughs intentionally and sits up straight.

“Anyhow, welcome to the Gustav branch of the Rowen guild. My name's Amon Granger-Tate. Let me offer my assistance so your memories of this trip are fond ones.”

Merchants are great actors. My master straightens up in her chair, too, then acknowledges him politely and introduces herself. After that, they shake hands.

“So, you wish to become a seamstress, Miss Norah?”

“Yes.. I've heard that this place needs workers.”

“Indeed. Gustav will survive this disease, and be reborn.”

Amon's determination makes my master smile back, but his face grows a bit concerned.

“But I'm afraid your timing is a bit off.”

“..what do you mean?”

“Well, it's great to see you here after all, and I'd like to thank you on behalf of all of us..”

He doesn't really want to say it, but he decides to anyway; he seems to feel obligated.

“But while the disease is finally receding, we're still in bad shape. The commercial industries here are all but destroyed, and need time to recover. We just don't need new workers yet, because so many people left that we just don't need that many people to serve who's left.. still, people will eventually start returning, and we'll definitely need workers then, so it's really just your timing.”

This is starkly different from what we heard. But that's just the luck of the draw for travelers.

My master nods while carefully listening.

“Still.. a seamstress, was it? I’ll write a letter to the master of the tailor’s guild. It’s the least I can do.”

He laughs again, but it’s clearly a front. He’s acting tough in the face of this disaster. My master repeatedly thanks him for the letter. She learns through observation, so she knows what has to be done.

As we leave, we reflect on how nicely Amon treated us in spite of the town’s situation. Soon enough, the route he’s recommended leads us to the guild. An image of needles and thread is carved onto the wall, so even a dog like me could understand.

My master is also acting brave as she knocks on the door, in spite of her bad timing. She’s rarely this brave, but unfortunately it seems there’s no one on the other side of the door.

“No one’s here?”

I can’t let her sad words get me too down, so I scratch my neck and yawn. She seems to take my meaning, and murmurs “alright” in disappointment. I bark, and she turns to leave, then suddenly gasps. What is it? My eyes follow hers, but I’m too late. I was careless. I’m under attack!

I land on my back with my legs dangling toward the sky, but not for long. I’m quickly back on my feet. Only a hawk could catch me off-guard like that.. or someone who fights like one. Someone must be throwing things at me, and sure enough there’s another cylindrical object flying at me right now.

“Enek!”

I hear my master shout. My muscles are already tensed up, but I don’t spring away because my master is halting me. I look up at her. Master! I’m under attack!

“Please, stop!”

But she isn’t talking to me.

“We’re travelers, this dog is my companion!”

She holds me to keep me from fighting back, but that can’t stop me from barking at the foolish young woman who attacked me. Her eyes make it clear that she’s beyond reason.

“..”

The thin woman’s dark eyes are like muddy puddles. She stares at me from between the locks

of messy red hair on her head. I just keep roaring at her, wondering what the hell her problem is. But my master holds me back and shows her the Amon's letter. Then the woman's eyes finally move.

"I'm looking for the master of this guild.."

I can't tell if the woman's paying any attention to her. She just blinks and leaves. My master's unsure too, and just hugs me tighter. The woman picks up the cylindrical object and passes by us without even looking at us. She only speaks once her hand is on the door.

"Are you the girl from last night?"

She isn't even trying to be polite. She's obviously eyeing my master to evaluate her.

"Well, coming in?"

Her eyes show an emotion that's difficult to describe. They look like muddy ink. It's the kind of expression you'd see on someone clinging onto the shins of another as they walk. Disease doesn't just claim lives, but also hope. The woman shakes her hair back and walks inside. As she disappears into the dark building, I hear her continue.

"I am the master here."

I'm not sure if my master heard that, but when I look up at her it seems she might have. This woman is the one we're looking for. More than half of the people in town are dead, it turns out, but my master still urges us to walk inside. It's dark here, and that horrible woman is here too. But it's actually quite tidy. The furniture is clean, and the shelves are sorted out. I finally get a good look at what hit me, and see that it's a bolt of cloth. The woman finally reappears.

"So. How can I help you?"

She doesn't even bother with introductions, so my master just hands her the letter. The woman scratches her head and walks away. Not rudely, mind you, but clearly trying to contain herself as she wobbles around. She opens the window to let in some light, but her every motion is stiff. This kind of anxiety is murder on a traveler. My master's even more sensitive to it than I am, and her legs are trembling. A wolf's fangs can slay a body, but human anxiety can slay their very spirit.

"Well, well.. a seamstress!"

"Can you help?"

The woman whispers as my master asks her question. I'm not human, but I can understand my master. She's afraid of being hated. Her fists are balled up tightly, trying to contain her fear. I've

heard humans call that behaviour “solemn” and “stirring.”

“..you can do whatever you want, basically.”

“Please.. I have a little experience evaluating wool.. huh?”

“I said you can do whatever you want.”

The woman acts like she’s bored, and tosses the letter on the table in front of her. My master is speechless, and looks like a bullied puppy.

“Well?”

The woman sits down like a fussy old lady, and stares at the table between us as the light from the window shines on it. I can’t see what she’s set on that table, except for the end of the bolt of cloth. I guess there must be tools for making clothes on it.

“Um, w-well..”

My master is staring at the ground. She’s murmuring nervously as the woman glares at her. It looks like my master is going to cry, so I glare back at the woman angrily.

“What, you want a test?”

She sneers, and I realize why my master is hesitating. She’s trembling. She’s not afraid of wild beasts (even wolves) but the sheer hostility of this woman is making her shiver.

“Go ahead. Cut the cloth. Spin the thread. Thread the needle. Process the fur. Dye it. There are many tests. So show me if you have the skill to become a member of our tailor’s guild led by me, Alice Winters!”

My master can’t defend herself against such an angry and talkative woman. She’s already stepping back in defeat.

“But then, we have no material to work with right now. Just broken buttons, threads and needles. They’re hardly good enough for testing you, so what should we do?”

Alice isn’t laughing because she’s happy. It’s just that if she doesn’t release her tension, her chest will probably burst. I’m old enough to understand why she’s acting this way, but my master isn’t. She’s been defeated by a powerful opponent, but she’s still being brave. She doesn’t understand what’s going on.

“I h-have some m-money-”

My brain already knows Alice will be angry, even before my eyes see her reaction.

“Money!?! Oh right, money can buy anything, can’t it? Listen you, if it’s beautiful buttons, cloth and needles you want, you don’t need money!”

Alice hits the table and starts to rapidly vent. My master can only curl up and remain silent. I’m sorry for her, but I can’t do anything. I know why Alice is angry, and why she’s still talking.

“Just forget the Bible and the Lord, and grab all you want from those bodies outside!”

What a rant. Humans like to bury their bodies, in nice clothes and with luxurious gifts. They say death is the start of some eternal journey, and that taking the jewelry off those bodies is robbery. It suddenly strikes me why the room seems so tidy; it’s because it’s barren. Alice finally exhausts herself and looks down for a moment, then smiles and looks up again.

“So you have money? Were you going to pay the guild fee first?”

It’s an icy smile, the kind that’s like arming yourself with a sword. A creature that can look like a child more gentle than any beast can also look this frightening. It’s abnormal, and I’m worried that my master might be in danger so I tug at her clothes. Someone who’s drowning will clutch at anything, and Alice looks like she’s drowning in a river hopelessly. I wouldn’t be surprised if she tried to drag my master down by her ankles. My master seems to snap out of it as I nip her clothes, and a drop of water falls on my face. It’s salty.

“Hey, you have money, don’t you?”

My master steps back and unconsciously touches my head. It’s the same thing she does when we run into wolves in the dark. Even if she can’t see, even if there’s danger all around us, she doesn’t have anything to fear once she knows I’m there. But it’s a hostile person more horrible than a fang-filled wolf who’s facing us now. Alice slowly stands up, and I can tell she’s about to explode. I crouch down in response, wondering what will spark this fire. And in response, someone knocks at the door.



“Alice! Alice Winters!”

It’s a young man. Even birds can’t take off when they’re cornered, and Alice looks away in resentment. She sits on her chair, speechless. The knocking at the door continues, and my polite master turns away. I look at her, only able to sigh.

“Alice, you have to be in there. Some of our purchasing funds just came in-“

The door suddenly opens, and the man’s roaring floods the room. My master, whose hand was just on the handle, pulls it back quickly in shock.

“Oh!”

The man has a young face. His eyes open wide when he sees my master, but when he spies me he gasps in surprise. I take the chance to leave. He’s a foot taller than my master, but young. I just scoot between his legs, and he staggers back as if a hellbeast has walked by him. Once outside, I turn around and bark and my master finally joins me.

It seems like the man wants to say something to me, but thinks twice when he sees my stare. He turns his gaze back indoors in fear. I’ve no idea who he is, but he smells of metal. I hate that smell. He holds the door and watches my master for a moment before disappearing behind the door as it closes.

Nothing is heard after that, and my master and I just stand there. She’s so tough and calm when she’s leading sheep with her staff, but that staff is in the inn right now. She’s no longer a fine shepherdess, she’s just a simple traveling girl. She wants to cry, and I can’t blame her. I rub my head against her foot.

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“..Hey, Enek..”

The sun’s setting as my master talks to me in the inn.

“I.. I’m awful.”

I’ve only ever seen my master sleep on a bed five times. One of those times, she was crying in her sleep. Her voice is just as hoarse now as it was then. She drinks some water as I notice this.

“Half of the people here died.”

Her water skin is black. It looks like it’s in bad shape, and in fact I’m surprised it doesn’t leak. I thought Alice was hostile, but apparently my master still saw her as a good person. Her kindness always surprises me. She’s silent for a while, but she isn’t lying down like I thought she would. She’s sitting on the bed and massaging my back with her feet.

“I’m just like a merchant.”

Merchants always lie, frame, trap, and betray others. They’re brave, but not the same kind of bravery that my master shows. My master can kill a sheep out of mercy, but that’s hardly the same as a merchant. She also doesn’t want to earn money from the misery of others. I sniff her feet, which are cleaner than usual, but she pulls them back.

“So many people died.. but I’m only thinking about myself.”

She plops herself down in bed. I can tell from the sound that she’s curling herself up into a ball. Damn, if she didn’t blame herself for everything, she’d have a much easier life. And yet-

“Hey.. Enek?”

And yet I have nothing against that side of her. At least she’s honest this way.

“It’s alright.. ah, enough already, you’re itchy, hey!”

We play like puppies for a bit, but after a few seconds she grabs me and buries her face in the fur on my neck.

“We can’t stay here, can we?”

I love how my master looks when she’s wandering the fields like she owns them. I bark, and she hugs me more tightly before letting me go.

“Let’s go see the bishop.”

Her eyes are swollen like she’s had a good cry, but her smile is genuine.

“I think.. I’ll feel better once I’ve talked to the bishop. I’d like a confessional.”

Master! Are you going to ignore how I curled my tail up, asking you if I’m not good enough?

Sadly, she just hops off the bed and starts getting ready.

“Quick now, don’t just stand there looking like you want me to let you out!”

I’ve never been more happy to be unable to talk. We head back outside, and look at the dark red sky. We’d normally be asleep right now. She even yawns, but that might just be from crying a moment ago. She catches me looking at her, and turns away to hide the fact that she’s yawning.

The streets are still empty. The setting sun makes it look even sadder here. My master dislikes

the dusk too, and as we walk along in the street she keeps touching my neck. I can't blame her, the dusk sucks. My shadow is never that long, and neither is hers even when we're on a hill. But during sunset, shadows get long enough to become frightful. Even sheep have horrible shadows now.

But right now, it's only our elongated shadows wandering the streets. It makes me feel rather alert. All I sense are things in alleys, usually dogs. When we get to the church and see the other townsfolk, my master finally relaxes. Makes sense.

"I hope the bishop is alright.."

I wouldn't know, of course, but judging from his condition last night it's up to his God. Humans have weak bodies. I know why my master is breathing deeply, she's tensing herself up because she doesn't want to back off from visiting Joseph even if he's in rough shape.

"Oh, you're.."

Someone talks to us as we go in. Some fat women are talking at the entrance. I can't tell who they are, but they have white cloth covering their arms and head. They're probably here to care for the ill. At least when you have strong people watching over you, you won't feel hopelessly alone.

"Um, I've been worried about the bishop.."

"Ah, I see. He's sleeping right now. He's severely wounded, so we were just praying for him."

Where there are three individuals, one becomes the leader. That's just the natural order of things. The strongest-looking woman is talking while the others nod.

"Really? That severely?"

"Yes. He's a bit better after having slept a while, but he *is* old.. well, still, he was saved by the Lord, so he should recover soon enough."

She flashes a beatific smile, the kind that even the dead would smile back at. Even my master, who isn't one to smile much, does so.

"And how about the other.. man?"

It's even less clear how well that man would be doing. He looked a lot worse off than Joseph.

"His head is fine, he just looked bad because of all the blood. He isn't awake now, but it looks like he'll be alright. He should be up anytime now."

My master nods at the encouraging remark.

“May I see them?”

“Hmm? Yes, sure. The bishop has been attending to holy duties, but he has asked about you and..”

The woman looks at me.

“The black knight.”

Is that why they weren’t shocked to see me? Ah, that makes sense. But my master is nervous when she hears me being called a knight. Why, master? You should be happy!

“Enek isn’t a knight..”

“Oh-ho, don’t be shy. The bishop says that he only made it because of this ardent knight. He is also quite thankful for the young angel who brought the knight with her.”

“Oh my gosh.. I, um..”

My master is so embarrassed she looks down at the ground. She’s been called a witch before, and suspected of witchcraft. But she’s not used to hearing kind words. Even I’m starting to feel embarrassed by her, so I bark and rub her foot with my nose.

“There, you see! Even the knight says you’re being too modest!”

My master stays silent, but I can tell from her face that she’s quite happy.

“Alright, well, come follow me and see them for yourself. Their sleeping faces should ease your mind.”

The woman sounds like she’s talking about her own children. But then, they did bring hope back to the town, so of course they should be proud of them. They’re even treating us well because of the part we played. It makes sense that we should be repaid, so we should stand tall and accept their praise. I do wonder, though, what they would think if they knew my master was a shepherd? I’m praying in my heart like a church-goer that they won’t ask her about that.

“Right this way.”

Perhaps God does answer prayers, since she just takes us into the church. Our previous employer was a church too, so we’re used to being in places like this. Rather sadly, this church isn’t in good shape. It’s the usual stone building, but it hasn’t been well-kept. That spider’s web around the candle is proof of how long it’s been unlit. And the dust on the walls makes it clear they haven’t been touched in years. Even the wood is starting to rot, so they have curtains instead of doors in places. So if they’re still in here, that must mean they’re loyal to God, right?

“In here.”

She’s suddenly very quiet. It’s quite a contrast. She pulls the curtain aside and urges my master to go in. I thought she would stop me, but she even lets me in. I think I like this woman.

“It’s only been a day.. but he’s..”

I guess she was going to say “so thin.” The woman sighs and nods. It’s not because he’s in the dark, but because humans tend to become frail when they’re injured. That, and Joseph is quite old to begin with. My master clasps her hands in prayer, making me remember just how badly the Church persecuted her in the past. I’m not comfortable here, but I still kneel. At the very least, Joseph isn’t one of the ones who persecuted her, and since he appreciates me, I would like him to get well.

“God bless you.”

After she finishes, my master puts her hand on Joseph’s blanket as he weakly breathes. She then looks at the woman, and seems to communicate with her in that eyes-only language that humans use in situations like these. The woman nods and places her hand on my master’s shoulder, leading her back out. I follow them, but have an urge to look back. I might have been imagining it, but I thought I felt Joseph looking at me. Yet there he is, still asleep.

I wake up under the stars each day, so I can sense the very land with my skin. I know how the stars and land move, so maybe it’s for the best that I can’t talk or make complicated expressions like humans can. Otherwise I might be tempted to fool my master. And yet, Joseph’s face is genuinely asleep. He’s calm, so there’s no need to be sad. I leave the room behind my master.

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When two birds meet they are noisy, so it isn’t surprising that talkative humans are even noisier when they band together. They won’t let someone off the hook so easily if they’ve met a bishop and his follower (who it turns out is named Luke Tellhoff).

“Hey, that Ruvineigen.. where is it, actually?”

“Oh, I’ve heard of it before. They say it shines at night because of the all the churches proclaiming the glory of God.”

“Yeah, that’s it. I even hear that they polish leather with gold.”

“Gold?! Wow.. I wonder if that’s true?”

They keep bugging my master or talking over her. I just lie next to her and yawn. They’re as

boring as sheep to me.

“The great Church city of Ruvineigen.. they’re even building a steeple to pierce the heavens.. that’s what Father Nick said.”

“Is that true?”

They finally wait for my master to answer. I peek at her, and notice her expression change. Her smile becomes forced.

“It.. might be.”

The church they’re building in Ruvineigen is tall, but if that’s the standard then even birds could be called angels. But disagreeing with a priest isn’t wise, unless you want to be called a liar. My master knows this from experience, and never speaks ill of the clergy.

“That’s why Father Nick says he wants to go back there again before he dies.”

“But then, Bishop Joseph goes there too. He passed through there this time. In fact, Miss Norah here led him from their church. I can only hope Father Nick gets his chance before the Lord calls for him.”

Everyone agrees, then insist on shaking hands with my master again. They thank her each time, making her even more nervous. I wonder if it’s because she’s not used to praise, or because she feels bad at being described as working for the Church. A shepherd is considered one of the lowest of occupations, right down with grinders, skimmers, butchers and tax collectors. But my master isn’t lying, she’s just not been asked.

These people believe that Joseph was sent by heaven to rekindle their hopes. They already feel warmth for us, since we helped save him. We should just accept their thanks, no matter how difficult it is for my master. She speaks with them, but feels embarrassed when they give her gifts like sausages. Humans like to give gifts and words in thanks.

“But then..”

After all of that, one woman speaks up.

“Why are you here? Did you come because you heard the rumors?”

We’re finally back on topic. But people living in towns think differently from people like my master, who have no hometown and care little about specific places, only people.

“Yes, I heard them.”

“So why did you come? Because of Joseph? Or did you feel called by God?”

The conversation's getting closer to what we dread. I notice that the woman's expression grows a bit suspicious, and my master nervously denies being called by God. But now she'll have to tell them the truth. She turns to me, and I remember Alice. We'll probably be laughed at when she mentioned she came looking for a job.

It's been a strange conversation, but at least it's been a happy one. My master doesn't want that to change, but no matter how natural that desire is I can't help her. I can only curl my tail under my legs and look down. But-

"Oh, I've found you.."

A man has suddenly appeared, and with him everything changes. The people around us become like sheep trembling at a wolf's advance. Surprised, my master looks over at what the other women are looking at and grows even more surprised. It's the man we saw at the Tailor's Guild. He waves at my master when he sees her.

"What are you doing here, you malicious spirit!"

My master is taken aback when she hears this. The women were so merry a moment ago, and now they've become entirely rude. My master shivers and I feel her hand on my neck.

"How dare you enter a church of God!"

"Now, now, stay calm. Am I not even allowed in a Church? I hear that God saves not just the kind, but also the wicked."

He smiles, but it's the smile of an attacker. I can't tell who he's attacking from where he's looking, though. It's a bit like me when I get excited. Another woman joins the first.

"Begone, you loan shark devil!"

She's downright hostile, but he simply shrugs it off. He's almost sneering as he raises his arms in surrender. A loan shark.. I see, that's what he is.

"Yes, yes. Worry not, I'm not after your empty purses today."

The women all put on a troubled expression.

"If that's the case.."

I understand humans well as a dog. I can tell what they're thinking.

"Y-you're looking for me?"

My master speaks up after a time. The women keep warning her not to talk to him, but my master's too kind, even if she hesitates. She still ends up talking to him. He smiles happily when she does.

“What do you mean? You were so brave earlier, so I told Alice she couldn't just brush you off like that.”

“..what, what do you mean?”

Curiosity finally gets the better of one of the women, like a cat being tempted by someone dangling a string. The man shrugs again and responds.

“All of you, listen up. This girl came here to find a job.”

“Oh!”

My master is now quite nervous at being the center of attention.

“Everyone's been leaving town, so Alice scolds anyone coming here looking for a job and drives them away.”

After he finishes, his words are replaced with silence. My master is probably having a hard time. I almost break the silence with a bark, but she's holding me so tightly and nervously that I can't bring myself to do so. Everyone's looking at her, but for once they do so matter-of-factly.

In our old occupation, everyone looked down on her with fear, hostility and contempt. A shepherd's staff was something to be driven from town. A witch. A pagan. A lowly shepherd. All three things were treated the same, and my master still remembers that treatment. She's clutching my neck so tight that I'm worried she might choke me.

“Welcome to Gustav.”

One of the women takes my master's hands. Her eyes are teary, and my master has no idea how to respond, so she just nods. She doesn't know where to look as all the women come and join with her in a hug. Now she knows what it's like to be nearly suffocated (though she's still not letting me go).

The man isn't smiling anymore. He knows how much they despise him, so he's surely jealous to see them welcoming my master so warmly.

“Alice is stubborn. She won't promise you anything now, but she'll change her mind later. So don't leave. Stay here. That's all I came to say.”

The woman have surrounded my master. After he finishes his sentence, he can't help but shoot one more in spite of himself.

“..And, please let me know when you’ve become a seamstress.”

The women hug my master more tightly.

“You shameless roach! Never ask for his help, Miss!”

“Right! Or you’ll end up with a life as hard as ours!”

All he can do is smile in response. He seems used to this treatment.

“My name’s Joam Ederssey. They call me a loan shark, but I’m really just a moneychanger.”

“You dare lie in a church-“

“I exchange today’s money for tomorrow’s money. I’m a moneychanger.”

He puts his strength on display, and the woman grow timid. He takes advantage of their momentary lack of courage to leave.

“That’s all I came for. Goodbye.”

He wears the trademark smile of a merchant, and leaves behind a room that looks like it’s weathered a storm. As his footsteps recede, the women finally begin talking again.

“Anyhow, people looking to work are welcome here. We want Gustav to become prosperous again.”

“Right, and it will be more fun to have new blood here.”

My master is puzzled at how different their reception is compared to Alice’s. When it sinks in that they aren’t lying, she finally smiles. It’s the same smile she wears when she returns to town after many days out in the field. I watch her as she smiles and nods.

Afterward, we head back to our inn where she massages my back again with her feet.

“What a busy day.”

That’s certainly an understatement. This new life is much more exciting than being a shepherd.

## Chapter 3

Our room is full of brave, young kids who survived the disease, and are now listening to my master. Yesterday, she proved to be good with children, so the innkeeper’s wife brought a lot of

them to us this morning. My master probably felt bad about staying here for free, so she's sharing her breakfast with them as she tells them religious stories. She doesn't seem to mind.

I'm impressed with her, so no matter how impolite the kids are I don't bark at them. I remain tolerant, and soon enough they're concentrating on the stories instead of me. The youngest lad had fallen asleep in my master's lap. The older ones are clutching at her sleeves as she talks (gently, as usual). She smiles when they cry, which kids always do at the drop of a hat. She has to work on her storytelling skills a bit, but she's getting pretty good.

Normally, she would be being chased out for carrying her shepherd's staff, so this situation has me feeling a bit conflicted. It's normal for a human like her to be surrounded by kids, and they can talk.

"And that's how the story goes!"

One of them sighs as she finishes her latest story. They're really into it. They're even more rude than I am, by human standards. They eat whatever they want, and keep demanding more and more stories. My master is far too gentle to be able to handle them. As her guard, I'm ready to help, but as I prepare to do so I hear a voice shout out. My master is shocked, and I step back and brace myself. It seems darker in the room, and sure enough a voice tears out like cloth being slashed.

"Wahhhh!"

It's so loud it stuns me. It's like an explosion to my ears. My master is nervous; she's like a kid herself. Unlike sheep, humans can't stand on their own when they're born. My master is doing her best to comfort the child, but he won't stop crying. What went wrong? Even I'm starting to get worried.

"Ah, big sis, let me help!"

The most wily of the kids speaks up and takes the crying kid. He's not that much bigger, but for whatever reason the crying kid stops soon after being hugged by his friends. These kids are good. My master isn't sure what to say. The crying kid has stopped, and starts to hug back. Soon the wily kid begins laughing like he's being tickled. And then, suddenly, he runs away and the others chase him. They're as fickle as birds, these children. But unlike birds, they at least remember to say goodbye before they vanish.

It's suddenly dead quiet in this once-noisy room, and the two of us are exhausted. My master just stares at the open door, then a while after that she puts her hand against her chest. If I was human, I would be laughing right now. Her emotions are all a jumble. She stares at the hand on her chest, then me, then puts on a wicked smile. She stands up and slowly walks over to me.

"You were laughing at me just now, weren't you?"

No! I turn away, but my master won't let me go. My stomach is facing her now, and she scratches it. Don't do this to a fine border collie like me, master! I can control sheep, but not my own instincts! And you know that!

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“But.. what should we do now?”

My master is talking to herself as she mends her clothes.

“Well, those ladies gave me a warm welcome.”

She breaks some thread with her teeth, then raises her clothes to find any holes or tearing. The mattress rocks with her as she moves, and it makes me flop over and stretch out. My master touches my neck and continues.

“But I can't just sit here and wait for a job to land in my lap..”

What about being a lookout? I wonder if she's thinking the same thing.

“It's not like taking care of kids will work out..”

She's not a wet nurse, so she's thinking at least. Oxen and sheep are valuable just for producing milk, but my master can't sell hers. She doesn't even have fur worth selling. They wouldn't even eat her. She's practically useless. If I wasn't here with her, she would be a big ball of worries.

“Ennnek?”

She smiles and pokes the air with her needle, threatening me. It makes me shiver, and my tail curls under me. She ends up poking me with just her finger.

“I was really hoping I could become a tailor right away..”

She lifts up her clothes, then lies down on the bed with them against her chest. I put my head on her belly, and she flinches in response before putting her hand on it. There were times when she would put my head on her belly when she was starving, hoping it would make her feel better. Humans can be so simple-minded. She even thinks the world would be a peaceful place if no one went hungry. She likes to say it whenever there's a problem she can't solve.

“Mmmhmmhmm..”

That odd sound is my master's humming. It's a song tailors hummed in Ruvineigen on a street with a lot of shops. The men sounded strange, but the girls had wonderful voices and sang as they worked. My master doesn't know the words to the song, so she can only hum along. I've

heard her sing it rather comically before, and have caught her daydreaming while doing so. She even sings herself to sleep with it or tears up as she sings it.

I'm just a dog, but I understand poems and songs. I look up at her, but she's not crying now. I know what she's daydreaming about, though. It's that happy street of tailors. Everyone knows each other, and even though their lives are tough they're honest, peaceful and caring people. My master is spellbound, like a child watching another with a toy.

I don't really like to see her get like this, but I'm just as anxious as she is lately so I can hardly blame her. I only hope she won't try to lift me up and pull my fur. She taps on my snout as she hums, like I'm some sort of musical instrument. Just then, I hear somebody outside and stand up, disrupting her performance. She stares at me, but when she hears a knock on the door she becomes nervous again. I want to sigh.

"Oh, I'm sorry, were you asleep?"

It's the innkeeper's wife, who brought us breakfast and all those children this morning.

"Um, no, uh.. thank you for the needle and thread."

My master nervously tidies up her hair and hands back the needle and thread. The woman laughs, but I don't think it's because of my master's unkempt hair. I think she was chuckling at how out of tune her humming was. But I'm a knight, I can't get worked up over something that silly.

"By the way, a man came by and told me the bishop is hoping to talk to you."

My master's hands freeze and she looks over at me.

"The bishop does?"

"Maybe he's finished his morning rituals? Do you have time to talk to him?"

My master nods and anxiously puts on her coat.

"Oh, and when you see the bishop, could you ask him to pray for me? There're too many guests lately, and I haven't a chance to ask him."

The innkeeper's wife is clearly asking for a favor, not being demanding. We go as soon as we're ready. Actually, it hasn't taken my master that long to get used to walking down these streets. She can walk them fearlessly now.

"I wonder what he'll say? Oh my, I should thank him for calling me an angel!"

My master touches her chin as she talks to herself. It's something that a lot of humans who live

by themselves do. But she also giggles like an idiot. She's that thrilled about being called an angel yesterday in the church. She's even gotten over her depression about the town. Even though they seem destitute compared to Ruvinheigen, the people here are more energetic than we thought they were at first.

There are menders everywhere. Cobblers and tool-makers, too, though nothing is being made or built right now. My master knows they're still recovering, and is happy to see the town looking so upbeat. She's trotting around happily, and more quickly than ever before. She holds her hands behind her back, looking to my eyes like she's trying to walk like a town girl in Ruvinheigen. I wish she'd stop trying to act like others and just be herself. I think that's the way to be happy, so I bark.

"Oh!"

My master can sense a wolf hiding behind a tree on a hill, so she's not reacting to me with her soft cry. She's spotted a young man talking to a woman next to a house.. it's Joam, the loan shark.

"Should we do something?"

She asks me, but-

"Hey!"

He greets her first. We have nothing against him, but I can understand why the town would hate his occupation. And that hatred is clear, given how the woman suspiciously eyes us when he greets my master. But he notices her staring as well, and softly says something to her. She reacts with surprise, and begins praying. Joam looks at my master proudly, like he's done something great. I look up at my master and see her wearing her forced smile.

"What a coincidence. Our meeting must be the will of God."

He walks up to us as he plays with the coins in his hands. He places them in his pocket, then takes off the Church seal he was wearing, kisses it, and puts it away. My master has no idea how to react, but she knows he's a sly one, and would sell the Church itself if he could.

"He-hello."

"Hello to you, and to Mr. Knight as well."

I glare at him angrily, and he shows fear, but still urges my master to "walk and talk." Though he walks beside her, not me.

"Miss Norah."

She flinches when he calls her name. She must be wondering where he learned her name (as am I). He just reaches his hand out and gently continues.

“Ah, sorry. You’re the talk of the town, after all. They even let you watch their children, and those children came back smiling.”

This is actually a fairly small town. I sniff at some torn clothing on the street and look up.

“Is this what you do in other towns, Miss Norah?”

He smiles kindly and politely as he asks. He’s probably the type who’s popular with girls. But those charms don’t work on my master. She can sense the unpleasantness in his words and reacts accordingly.

“I’m just joking, don’t be anxious. But this town is my home, so I want to make sure we know our visitors.”

He takes her hand up and bows toward it, then lets it go. I’m so hot with anger that I want to sink my fangs into his leg, but my master places her hand next to my head. That’s her secret gesture for me to wait.

“You are a shepherd, aren’t you?”

My master is clutching her dress. I swear I can hear her heart closing. I look up, but she’s like a statue overlooking a field. She stares at him with no expression - that a girl, that’s the one I serve and trust. But Joam has enough wit about him to realize the intent behind her stare. He puts on a cheap smile and turns away, then walks away with his hands behind his head.

“Or maybe not. I’m just not sure.”

My master stays silent, but he doesn’t care. He just keeps walking.

“After all, the only shepherds around here are farmers, so you’ll be fine if you don’t mention it.”

He relaxes his tone, but my master’s still on guard. We’re both surprised by what he says next, though.

“That eases my mind.”

“..huh?”

My master frowns, and he replies calmly.

“The bishop sent for you, didn’t he?”

“..yes.”

“Then you’ll understand soon enough. He didn’t send for me, so I just wanted to know who he *did* send for.”

It’s hard to understand what he means, even if he’s clearly not joking around. He eyes my master for a moment, then continues seriously.

“You’re capable enough, though, so that’s what eases my mind.”

He observes her reaction and smiles again.

“But you’re too damn small. You need to eat more.”

My master’s hand shoots to her chest, but she soon realizes that she’s just given her insecurity away. Her face gets beet-red, and Joam laughs. My master’s been holding me back, but I can’t take it anymore. He’s so annoying and and has been ignoring me, so I bare my fangs and bite into his calf.

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When we arrive at the church, the woman who greeted us yesterday seems awkward. She looks downward when she sees my master, and we can see the sweat on her forehead. But she stays silent; maybe we came more quickly than she expected?

I’m still remembering the scene where I bit that guy. He fell to the ground with a loud yell. I knew I shouldn’t actually hurt him, so I didn’t break the skin, but just roared at him and tore his clothes. He started yelling even louder, thinking he was severely wounded, but seemed puzzled when he realized he was okay.

That was a moment of sweet justice to me, and I’m feeling proud. But my master is not. She’s still thinking about her breast size as we wander deeper into the church, with the woman leading us. I’ve never seen the kind of sad look she’s wearing before. When we reach the sanctuary, though, that look vanishes.

They’re replaced more doors with curtains than I thought. She shifts the curtain aside to let us in, and we’re immediately greeted with the stares of everyone in the sanctuary. All of my hairs bristle instinctively.

“She’s here.”

The woman leaves it at that. Absolutely nothing looks similar about the people gathered here. A fat man, a young girl, a short and old man. The only thing they have in common is their sense of responsibility. Power works in strange ways in the human world.

Clearly we weren't asked here for a simple chat. My master's hand is trembling, as if she's wishing she had her staff with her. Her hand reaches out to me as if to save her from drowning, and her hand grazes me. I can tell she's being evaluated.

Yesterday, we came here to see Joseph as he lay in bed. The girl sitting next to him now is familiar to us. She's the one with the hazy eyes who hates the rest of the world. Her lips are dry as she looks at Joseph, her hand on the Bible in his hands. It's Alice. Her eyes are still like fish swimming in a pond as she turns to my master and slowly speaks.

"You're God's servant, Norah Arrent, yes?"

Why's she asking so suddenly? Before we even know that much, the next surprise is upon us.

"In the name of Joseph Ozenstein, we hereby nominate you the assistant priest of the church of Gustav."

Alice speaks despite how puzzled we are. This is obviously no joke. No one's laughing, even at how confused the two of us are. But when Alice continues, my master finally snaps out of it.

"This is no joke."

Alice's calm announcement of the truth makes my master tremble. What's happening? Why is everyone so serious? My master may be dim, but even she knows what's happening. Joseph seems so weak in the bed that I look up at my master, who is as concerned as I am. The fat man seems to read our minds, and finally speaks.

"The bishop is only asleep. But we don't know long he'll be out of commission.. so, Alice you'd better tell her."

With that, he motions to the others with his eyes and everyone else leaves except Alice and my master. Well, Joseph too, but his face is as pale as a new piece of paper. He seems to be in pain, and very frail. Apparently he was talking just now, but couldn't stay awake any longer and went back to sleep. My master wants to run to him, but Alice coughs for her to stop.

"I'll tell you what Bishop Joseph wanted to tell you."

She's making it clear that it's an order. We have no idea what she's going to say, but it's Joseph's will. Alice looks down at him with concern, then sighs.

"So please, sit down."

Alice points at a chair in the corner, and my master sits down like an obedient dog. I sit down beside her legs. The master of the tailor's guild then speaks seriously, still standing.

"Please understand, it's impossible for you to become a tailor here."

My master isn't even given enough time to react to the sudden proclamation before Alice continues.

"Well, you see.."

My master is confused, but Alice's expression hasn't changed. What does she have against my master, anyway? I don't have to think about it for long, thankfully. She's quite right in the end.

"First off, we have no supplies. And we have no customers, either. But soon, our town will become prosperous and everyone will return. And what will they think when their old jobs are taken by someone they don't know?"

She's being cold and direct because that's just the reality of the situation. No one wants to be in that position, and my master understands what she's saying. She's not angry or pouting, she's just disappointed.

"Hmm.."

My master looks up.

"I understand."

The smile on her face is so natural that Alice flinches in shame. She looks at the mirror in front of her as if she sees a witch look backing at her. She grits her teeth and stares at the ground. She's probably seen a lot of awful things recently, and now she's realizing that she was wrongfully taking it out on my master.

"..and one more thing."

"Huh?"

"The bishop's personal request."

This stubborn, serious tailor of few words is clearly taken seriously by the people here. She looks away, then peeks at my master before continuing.

"You will be the assistant priest here, as nominated by Bishop Joseph."

She repeats what she said earlier. My master seems to accept it this time, but I don't understand it. And neither does she, given how confused her no-longer-nervous eyes still are.

"Times are tough right now."

Alice talks while she looks around, then looks into the distance.

“Retzel town wants to swallow us up.”

“Swallow you up?”

“Yes. You must have seen a clue in my studio. We have no fine materials here. Anything of value is sold to the merchants, and we have no other customers to sell to. Wheat and meat are expensive now, and Retzel town is trying to leverage this chance.”

Even a bear will become food for other animals if it’s wounded too badly. They’ll put up quite a fight, but once they’re defeated they’re just food. It’s not just the animals of the forests who live by that rule.

“Our situation is pretty grim, even though we would be fine if we had the materials to work with. Even merchants would help us out in that case, but we’re in no position to get there yet. So Retzel offered us a loan.”

It was a typical financial trap, not genuine assistance. That much was clear just by considering how despised Joam was.

“But, why.. why would you nominate me?”

My master is speaking softly.

“Because we have no choice but to reject their offer. If we accept it, they’ll swallow us whole. We’ll have to repay the loan, and of course the interest rate will be terrible.”

Joam was the one we saw visiting Alice while we were there. Almost everyone will be in heavy debt right now, only someone like him can be as fat as the dogs right now. But that’s clearly not how my master would want things to end. Alice can see that too. She scratches her nose and takes in a deep breath before continuing.

“We want you to be there to bargain, with the identity we just gave you.”

She’s still being vague. Clearly she’s not skilled with words either. But then, there’s only so much my master can take in at once, so maybe Alice’s approach is for the best.

“To bargain?”

“Exactly. At first we were going to use a merchant, to keep arguments from happening when problems came up. After all, a war could happen if we aren’t careful. But if we can get the Church involved, and claim we only want to deal with true believers, then things will be even safer for us. I mean, who wants to pick a fight with the Church? We might even be able to just turn them away that easily.”

It makes sense now. I'm quite impressed, and look over at Joseph. It makes sense that he would nominate my master as assistant priest and have Alice talk to her.

"You've been nominated.. because the bishop is stuck here. We need someone in his place. Of course, we suggested someone in town, but the bishop knows these situations better than any of us do."

Alice sighs, and looks quite tired. And that's not just my impression of her, she's clearly exhausted. Looking back at the others who were in the room a few minutes ago, they were also important people in town. And just like Alice, they weren't chosen. They were too old or too young, and simply couldn't replace the bishop.

"Of course if we do this, Retzel might seek to bring the Church in on their side, too. That's why we can't pick someone from town. It would be too obvious a ploy. We wouldn't be able to trap them that way. Damn, they're so obnoxious. You've heard of Retzel, right? They're like barbarians, they even carve their gemstones like arrowheads. Such bad taste."

Just as Alice angrily says this, it's like my head's been knocked hard. Everything comes into focus. I remember the attackers, and our warm reception when we got to Gustav. They've been trying to refuse Retzel. And Joseph was almost killed after promising to help them. Even my dimwitted master should be able to understand what's going on.

Alice opens her eyes and opens her mouth as if to speak, but doesn't say anything. She just nervously looks over at Joseph. It seems he never told her who attacked him. Which was a wise choice. If he told her that it was Retzel, this town would flare up like cornered mice and go off to a war they couldn't win. So he kept his mouth shut.

"So you see, you're the one we need. A traveler, and one in excellent standing with the Church."

Alice looks up at my master.

"I.. I see.."

Ruinheigen is called the Church city, but it's an even darker place than here. We worked so hard to escape there, and now I'm being hit with the realization that every city is like that. My master seems to be quite disappointed too, and also looks up as though she's finally realized something. If I could cover my face with my paw right now, I would.

"Um.."

"Yes?"

"I get it.. so this is why you told me to give up on being a seamstress the first time we met?"

My master hasn't forgotten her own dreams, and she just has to ask this embarrassing question. Alice is probably wishing she could cover her face in embarrassment like I am. My master only said that to be kind.. she can't talk very well either, but she has kindness to make up for it.

"..it's because we need you to be the assistant priest in our bargaining, like I said."

"Alright."

"But even after that, if you want to become a seamstress.."

Alice stares at my master, as if hoping she understands. She doesn't get an immediate response, but it comes after some thought.

"Oh!"

My master finally cries out softly.

"You see? It's impossible!"

Alice sees it necessary to spell it out to her. My master risked coming here to become a seamstress, and Joseph knows that. He's clearly going to feel ashamed. But sometimes, protecting the flock means sacrificing one of the sheep. And he's the shepherd who had to make that decision. But he still made the master of the tailor's guild ask her. No one's to blame, and it has to be done.

"But still.."

Alice breaks the silence.

"Sorry for my attitude yesterday."

My master is surprised by that, and waves her hands for Alice to stop.

"No, I mean.. I should be the one apologizing. I was only thinking about myself.."

My master apologizes with her head bent in shame. Alice stares at her, obviously feeling terrible.

"I can't believe Joam's so angry at you.. I mean, I feel like such a jerk."

"Huh?"

"It's just.. I'm not a very good talker. You did your best to come here to become a seamstress."

You took that kind of risk, and I just shut you down. What’s wrong with me? I could only see the faces of the people who died..”

Her words are jumbled, but that just shows that she’s talking from the heart. She might act tough, but Alice really is a gentle person. She’s looking around like someone who’s too soft to look into the eyes of the person they’ve wronged.

“But I know we can’t go on like this anymore..”

Alice takes another deep breath, stands tall and looks up right at my master, with the same toughness and determination she usually had as the tailor’s guild master.

“So, I’ll ask again. Please help us. I know this will end your hope of working as a seamstress here, but we need your help. We won’t ask you to be an assistant priest forever, but just this once. Will you help save our town?”

Alice’s right hand clutches at her chest as she stands tall. My master lowers her eyes to the ground. Merchants in Ruvineigen stand like Alice when they want to prove they’re friends of the Church. But in spite of that, I feel respect for Alice right now. I just don’t know how my master feels. I look up in worry, but immediately regret doing so. I shouldn’t have doubted her. Even if her dream comes crashing down, she still sits tall and gently smiles.

“If this is the will of the Lord.”

“Th-then..”

“Yes, I’ll help.”

Nice people always lose first in this world. But I don’t want to serve a master that only thinks about themselves. Alice relaxes, perhaps touched, given that there are tears in her eyes. She reaches a hand out to my master, who takes it and keeps smiling. I’m still just a dog, but my master’s noble conduct is amazing to me. She hugs the sobbing Alice while smiling at me. It’s a forced smile, though. I can tell she’s thinking she just made a reckless promise. But my tail is wagging in appreciation.

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It’s easy to say you’ll do something, but actually doing it is difficult. Especially when it’s becoming an assistant priest. That’s what seems to be occupying my master’s mind tonight in the inn. Under the candlelight, she looks like a dried-out fish.

“..oh, so tired..”

She just crumples down in bed without even bothering to avoid me. I leap out before she lands

on me, wondering if exhaustion turns her evil. Soon I settle on “inconsiderate like a child” rather than “evil.” She grabs me with her hands regardless.

“Enek, I’m so tired.”

She holds me so tightly, and rubs my head so fiercely that she clearly doesn’t care what I feel. I’m worried she’s going to rub off my skin. Now both of us are uncomfortable. I can smell ink on her face when she buries it in my neck fur. She told the people here that she worked for a church in Ruvinheigen, but all she knows is the same prayers they always say. When they heard the truth from her, Alice and the other women taking care of Joseph nodded. I don’t really know what happened next.

Craftsmen and companies have their own patron saints, and company owners often lead their entire workforce in prayer like a priest. While Joseph recovers, these women have to teach my master how to hold a mass. At least she’s literate. Well, she can read. But she’s not very good at writing. I know it’s silly for me to say that, when I don’t know anything about words. But even I can tell her handwritten words are clumsy. And Amon and the others are utterly dumbfounded.

My master actually used the tip of her staff to practice writing, when we were shepherding. But it wasn’t enough. She can draw a sheep or a dog pretty well that way, but words? Not a chance. That’s why the people in the church are teaching her how to write properly in addition to the various prayers and things she needs to know to be an assistant priest.

That’s also why I can’t be next to her much right now. No matter how much she begs me with her eyes. But that just breaks her concentration, so I’m usually shooed away. The last thing I see is the hopeless and defeated look on her face. It makes me feel bad, but I have to leave her alone for now. So I was ruthless, and let the others lead me back to our inn.

And now, finally, my master has turned her face away from me and is staring at the ceiling. She stretches, and I hear the crumbling of the hay in the mattress under her. I sniff her hand, and detect a weak scent - probably the wax from the desk she was working at.

“I hope I’ll be as relaxed as you are someday, Enek.”

She suddenly begins fretting as I lick her hand. When she’s this tired, she’ll endlessly complain.

“Tomorrow I have to learn how to bargain, and what to say when I’m questioned about being from the Church. Jeez, can I really do this? I don’t think I can even remember what I learned today..”

I lower my ears in response to her grumbling. I know I can’t ignore her worries. I am a knight, after all. I have to help my master out, no matter how dangerous the situation.

“Well well.. heh. Alright. I’ll stop now.”

She smells of ink and candles, but I still rest my nose in her hair and sniff her head. I do so intentionally, so the noise makes her giggle. She plays with me even with her eyes closed, like a newborn pup. After a while, as usual, she stops with a determined look on her face. It seems she's thrown her useless worries out the window again.

"My dream is farther away again, but I'll work hard for these people's dreams for now."

She then looks at me. My master's eyes are gentle but firm, the eyes of a shepherd.

"They've already apologized and thanked me so much that I really don't have the will to be depressed about it anymore."

She smiles and takes my front paw in her hands. She just rubs it, and nothing more.

"Mr. Amon said that I can work for his company, too. They're known in a lot of cities, and he wants to help me, and he says he'll do what he can for me."

Her eyes then close, like she's letting every word she just said sink in. The look on her face is the same as the one when she's intentionally standing in the rain in midsummer. She has a problem: she's too kind to turn down a request for help. In my eyes, she's not even able to help anyone. She has no money, she's weak, she's not even well-educated. She's just a normal girl. She's a good shepherd, but that hardly changes anything.

This is just like it was with that traveling peddler and that wolf. She knew it was a dangerous deal, but she couldn't turn down the peddler's request for help. She's only inactive when it comes to her own interests. So when that peddler tempted her with a large cash prize, and I saw her actually being swayed by it, I wasn't angry. It actually comforted me.

"They asked me if I could keep on being an assistant priest until everything is normal here in town again."

This doesn't comfort me. I look up at her in response.

"I don't think I can.. there should be someone else who was here before me.. but.."

She smiles at me again. I know she doesn't want to obey the Church. Her face betrays how amused she is by all of this. She pulls my paw to her mouth and continues.

"I still want to become a seamstress if I can.. is that asking too much?"

I shift my body. My paw pushes against her lips and distorts them. She shows a bit of anger, but also an impatient smile. Her eyes close, and she makes sport of me by opening her mouth and pretending to bite my paw. I instantly recoil, but she won't let go of my paw. She sits up as though she's going to punish me.

Luckily, someone knocks on our door. My master replies, and raps my head gently. She was joking, right? She hops down from the bed and opens the door to reveal Alice.

“Sorry to disturb you this late..”

“It’s alright.”

My master observes Alice as she replies. Alice’s facial expression is a bit strange, maybe from coming so late.

“I know you’re tired, so I hope you’ll forgive me. Can I come in?”

My master nods and lets her in. Alice then brings in object after object until my master finally closes the door and stares at her. I jump off the bed and look at Alice. What in the world is she up to? A thick shadow covers her face in the candlelight, but she looks less dangerous than energetic. It’s quite surprising to me.

“I just stopped over at Mr. Kerrick’s place and got this.”

“Got this what?”

“This.”

Alices spread the white linen cloth. It’s quite nice.

“This is a piece of the high-quality linen they use for priest’s robes. It was the guildmaster’s originally, but hey! That’s me! Anyway, looks like it’ll be good.”

Alice squints as she eyes the cloth. I rarely see cloth that looks this pretty, and I can only wonder how good it’d look spread out properly. I’m actually impressed.

“You realize, I hope, that’s it’s just a tablecloth.”

My master is stunned, and even I’m surprised to realize that’s why I was smelling fish and mustard.

“We don’t have much time, so let’s take your measurements tonight.”

She folds the cloth skillfully, then takes out a small rope with markings on it. She then takes as many measurements of my master as it seems she possibly could.

“If we actually had time, I’d love to do a proper job. But we don’t, so this is the best we’ll be able to manage. Of course, once you’re properly ordained, it won’t just be a tablecloth. You’ll get a proper frock made from new cloth.”

She keeps talking as she directs my master on how to stand while she measures her height and the length of her limbs. My master laughs, but not just from how itchy the fabric is. A few days ago, she would never have fathomed someone using an noble's table cover to make her a costume. It's just too funny to her. Her life has just changed in a weird way.

After a while, Alice suddenly asks her a question.

“Say, why do you want to become a seamstress?”

She's direct as usual, and my master replies just as directly.

“If I'm not going to be able to wear pretty clothes, I'd like to be able to at least make them.”

Alice spins my master around to take some more measurements, and as she hears the answer she spins her around again to mess with my master and look her in the eyes.

“Making beautiful isn't easy, you know. You'd even start off making those uniforms worn by sweaty old men.”

My master is obviously surprised.

“And that's not all! New apprentices aren't even allowed to touch needles or thread. By the rules, it takes six years of training. Year one, you clean. Year two, you buy supplies. Year three, you can finally touch the tools, but not the cloth. You can only practice on old clothes. Year four you finally start making proper clothes, and by year five you finally make your first set. You're only done after six years. But even when you've passed the exam, you're still far away from that. The master - I mean former master - only made bridal gowns in his twelfth year.”

Alice finally measures my master's chest. Her most sensitive part. She mutters the wrong number intentionally, but she can't fool me. But I'm not sure why she lied. Was she thinking she was growing that quickly, or did she just not want to hurt my master's feelings?

“Twelve years..”

My master is counting on her fingers as she repeats. That's far longer than she's been together with me. In twelve years I'll be dead.

“Yeah, but lucky me, I can make a priest's get-up before I'm in my twelfth year!”

My master didn't seem to think she'd be that lucky. In fact it looks like she's already giving up on becoming a seamstress. After Alice jots down all the numbers on some paper, she smiles in apology.

“This is only temporary, but you have to be a priest, right? I think God's blessing is with you.”

Only someone who's been through the training could comfort my master right now, and sure enough, my master nods and smiles with an "mhm!"

"And if you have the time, you're welcome to swing by my studio. I'll teach you what I can."

"Oh?"

"It'll be rough, but if you're going to wear it, you should help make it, no?"

Alice points at my master's normal outfit. It's obviously been mended numerous times. She reacts by stupidly trying to hide her clothes in embarrassment, looking at the ground. She was so confident she could be a seamstress, but the reality isn't that optimistic.

"I can teach you the basics, even if I've still got a lot to learn from the old master."

Alice, the girl taking her measurements, is a great seamstress. She's thin, probably because she doesn't eat enough. But the way she handles clothes and takes measurements makes it obvious that she's talented and determined. She's a young, professional seamstress.

"..I-I'll be counting on you, then.."

My master is still so embarrassed that it seems to rub off on Alice as she replies.

"Oh, I can teach you *that* too.."

"That?"

"Mmmhmm."

Alice is packing her things, since it's late. In fact, I'm so sleepy that I'm yawning. That's why it feels like what she says flies right into my open mouth.

"The innkeeper's wife tells me that you're humming the tailor's song completely out of tune."

Guh.. a strange noise comes out of my throat. If I was human, I would be rolling on the floor and laughing while holding my belly. Alice is laughing too, though my master's standing pencil-straight. Her face is so red it's obvious even in the orange candlelight.

"Um, uh.."

"Hehe.. well, it's too late tonight. I'll teach you when we get the chance. I didn't want to sing it in my first year, but I had to learn it. I have to sing it in the middle of the town square!"

Alice is holding the linen and other things in her arms as she remembers this. My master is

almost in tears from her embarrassment. But I can see happiness in those eyes as well.

“On one condition, though.”

Alice walks up to me as I wag my tail, and rubs my stomach with her foot.

“You’ll have to teach me the song of the shepherds.”

I get back up and stare at my master. Her face is frozen solid. She spins around and looks at her staff, a sure sign of her old trade. It’s completely unnecessary for a traveler, but she’s too sentimental to leave it behind. She spins back around to Alice, her lips quivering as though unable to find the words to say. But Alice speaks first anyway.

“I heard it from Joam already. He’s in the loan business because of his family. It causes no shortage of worries for me. Oh, hey, don’t be so nervous about him.”

Alice walks up to her and talks to her softly.

“It’s just that my husband wanted to be the one to negotiate.”

“..”

My master has rich facial expressions. I am impressed. Alice squints. She’s also interested in the facial expressions of my master, I guess. Then she says “bye” and walks to the door.

“And you, little dog, I’m sorry for yesterday.”

I have a name, you know. It’s Enek. I bark to make it clear that I’m upset and eye her as she leaves. After that, the only sound that remains is the burning candles. I look back at my master, who is still standing there. Her hands are covering her complicated facial expression. She still needs to practice if she wants to be able to handle the different situations a priest has to work in. She’s still covering her face as I rub her feet, but she finally talks to me.

“Did I hear her wrong, or did she say ‘my husband?’”

So my master is interested in things like that? Well, I guess it can’t be helped. She’s a normal girl after all. She probably should be interested in such things.

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The innkeeper’s wife brings my master a Bible from the church along with our breakfast. Joseph has apparently been awake for most of the night writing things for my master. She’s so tired she wanted to sleep in until noon, so she tears his letter so that all that’s left is the parts she has to remember.

If the nice meal we had last time was thanking us for helping Joseph, then today's breakfast is for helping the entire town. My master shares her food with me, but she can't help but toy with me as she does so. I'm not very powerful, but I'm happy to be toyed with her. A knight's duties include always cheering up his master.

"..sit tall before the Lord.."

She removes her sandals and massages my back with her feet as usual. She even tugs my fur between her toes before moving to another part of my back. Eventually she sighs and massages my belly. Lakes look clear because they're deep enough for the silt to settle at the bottom. I'm willing to accept the silt for her, but I honestly would like to be rewarded sometimes. I'm being tolerant because I know she needs to study, but is her massaging supposed to be my reward? I don't want her toes poking in my ears! I look up and scratch her foot back with my icy nose.

"The light in the sky will spread.. because, because.. ugh..!"

She can't remember the words, so she yells out softly in frustration like a bleating sheep. But she then jumps up suddenly.

"Because it obeys the will of God!"

It's almost like she's debating with herself. It seems she's managed to recite that part completely, though her feet are rubbing me harshly in the process. I know she can do it, so I'm not worried. I can't talk, but I remember how quickly she became an excellent shepherd, so remembering words shouldn't pose much of a challenge to her.

"Whew.. I was worried I wouldn't be able to remember all of that.. I didn't think it would go that easily.. hey, Enek, were you listening?"

She looks down at me, and I can finally crawl up and lie down beside her. Her face has a rare look of pride as she caresses my head.

"Can you remember a couple of sentences too, Enek? I'm sure you can!"

Knights don't have to talk, so I turn away. She's like a kid who's showing off. She hums through her nose and rubs my head crazily. I'm not sure if I can take much more of this. But it's been a really long time since I saw this kind of look on her face, so I decide to kindly let her continue and pretend I'm happy.

"Oh, jeez, what time is it now?"

The window's open, and if we were in a sheepfold she'd have no trouble telling. But in an unfamiliar room, not even I can tell what time it is just by how the sunlight changes. My master stands up and stares out the window, which is a new thing to me. Usually she just lies on her

back in the grass and stares up at the sky like that, next to whatever mice, chickens, or ducks are in the area.

She's trying to tell the time from the sky, but she looks pretty depressed and hopeless. It saddens me to think that we're more fortunate than we were before when she's struggling like this. But then it seems like someone we knew just passed by the window, because she waves her hand.

"Enek! We have to go right now!"

I bark and walk up to the door. My master nervously prepares herself, then reflexively looks back toward the bell-less staff leaning against a wall. She hesitates, and the loneliness, sadness, and shame in her heart is written clearly on her face. That staff brought her such suffering, but she won't let it go. It's what brought her here and now.

I'm worried enough to sit down by the door, but she finally turns to me and smiles. We can only go forward. I have to let go of the past too. That's my duty. Not being sad or ashamed. I have to appreciate the present. My master rubs my head and I bark again, ready to step outside into the wide unknown as she opens the door to the inn.



