



*Drunken Wolf
Translations*

Volume 17

狼と香辛料

Spice and Wolf

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支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

Merchant
meats
spicy wolf.

狼と香辛料

XVII Epilogue



狼
と
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Epilogue

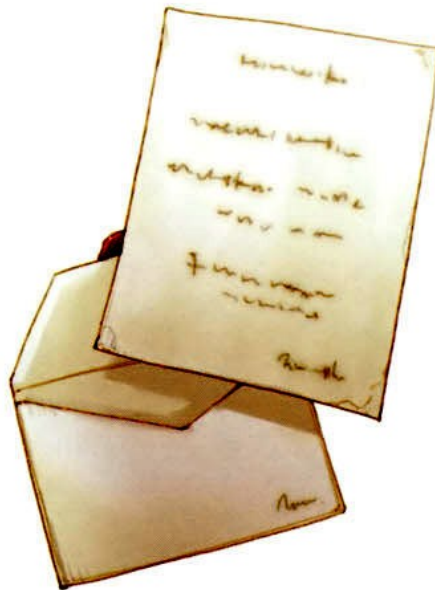
支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

Illustration

文倉十

Jyu Ayakura





Epilogue

“Your tastes really are extreme.”

“Were they not, I would not speak with such a foolish mule.”



"This."

Fred lifted up the helmet and touched the slightly-dented faceplate, squinting as though remembering something from his past. That helmet had probably saved his life.

"Could you evaluate it's value for me? I know it's heavy, but.."

Traveling Merchant and the Dark Grey Knight



They were having another argument.
This time it was because Miss Holo was given
less meat for dinner.

Wolf and a Grey Smile

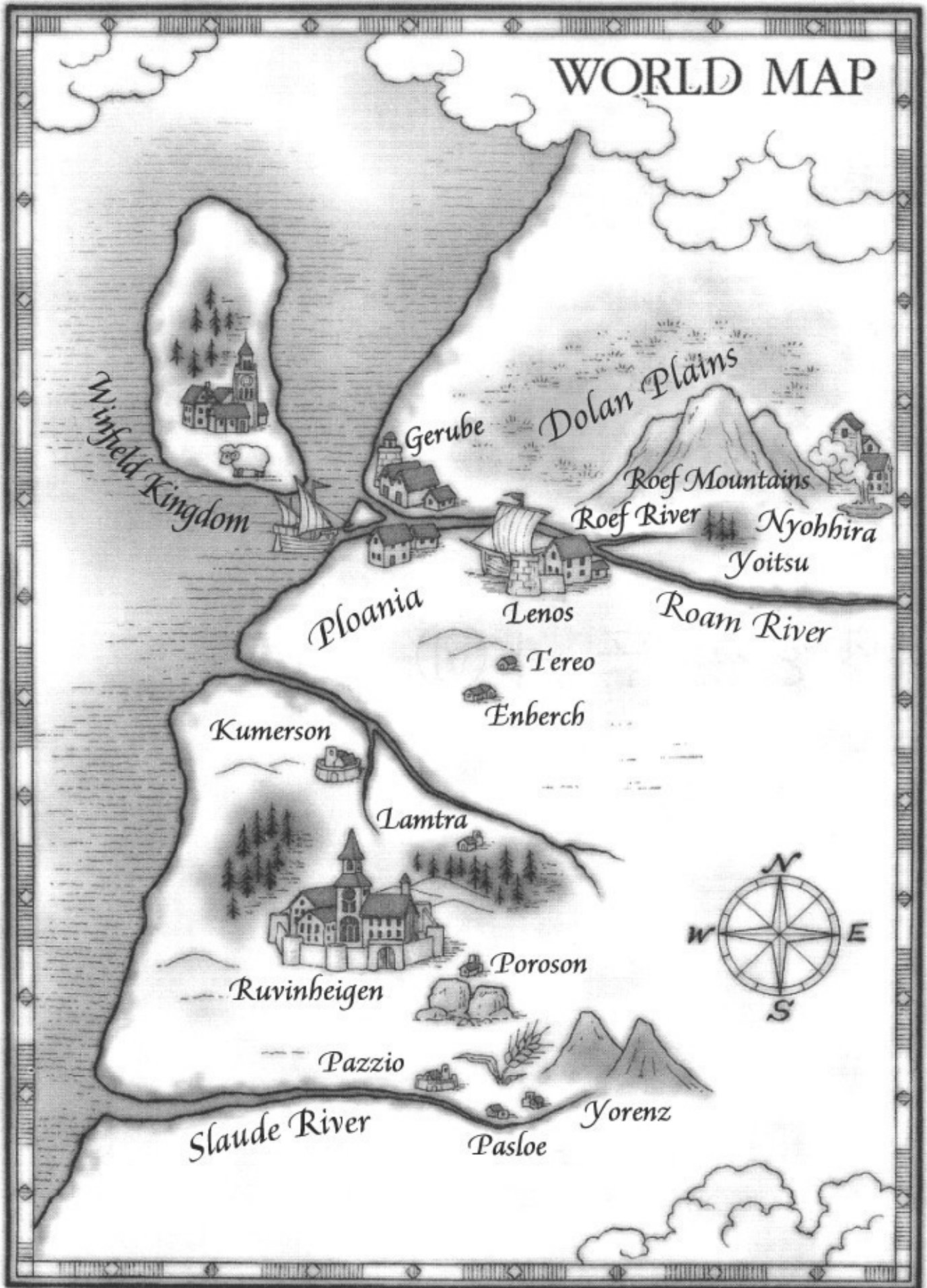


Wolf and the White Road

They still had a long way to go,
and no one can know whether a journey
will end in mirth or painful tears.

Anything is possible.

But if the road is wide enough to walk
beside one another, hand in hand,
then they can meet that end together.



Map illustration by Idemitsu Hidemasa

狼と香辛料 ⑩

Epilogue

Spice and Wolf

Volume 17

Epilogue

*Translation & Editing by
'Drunken Wolf Translations'*

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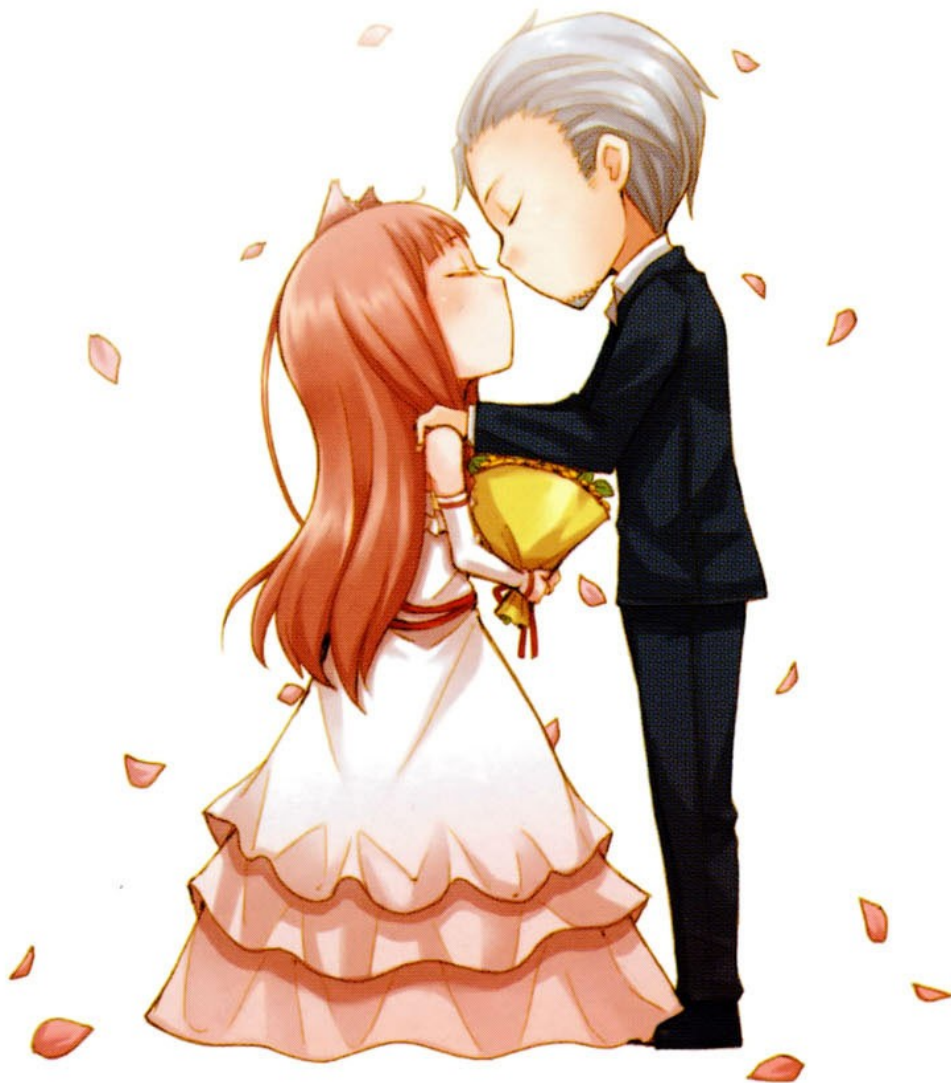
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Epilogue - Intermission

“Oh, how is our gentleman today?”

I hear the voice as I lie on the steps. My name is Enek, and yet it doesn't feel half bad being called a “gentleman.” I sigh and wag my tail, generously offering whatever help she requires.

“Is the Sister in?”

The woman has a cloth wrapped around her head, and with her sleeves rolled up like that she seems strong as a bear. If I remember correctly, she worked in a shop selling buckets and such. Presumably her work is done for the morning. That means she's probably stopping by for a prayer on her lunch break. The thought makes me yawn.

“I heard the children say they saw a carriage as they played on the hill.. I wonder if it's the one that Sister was talking about..”

“..”

It's so hard to keep my eyes open around this woman. Her presence just makes me want to fall asleep. There's little I can do about it, so I force myself to walk back to the Church to stay awake.

“But then, the children said it was black, like some carriage from the underworld.. I hope that's not a bad sign?”

Her questions continued; she was clearly trapped by her own curiosity. For such a bear of a woman, she sure acted more like a cat.

“Oh, you feel like joining me back inside, do you?”

Everyone in town casually talks to me, and I can't quite handle all the attention. That's why I just tune her voice out and walk down the middle of the hallway ignoring everyone. I only stop when I reach the door of the writing room. It's not just the place in a church for clergy to write, but also to read books.

It's been several days since the spring harvest festival. All of her time was devoted to countless prayers for saints, but things have settled down since then. Sadly, there aren't many people who can write, so she was probably still stuck doing that. At least, that's her normal routine, but..

“Sister, a carriage is..!”

With the door already half-open, the woman blusters her way in with barely a knock, only to stop short. It seems she does have some reflexes after all. The so-called “Sister,” my master, is asleep at the desk. Given how warm it has become these days, she has trouble waking up in the morning, let alone staying awake. She might be fully-grown now, with long locks of hair, but she still looks like a child when she sleeps. I cough out a bark.

“Ruff!”

“Uh.. Ah!”

My master nervously stands. She looks around. She then spies us beyond the papers, books, half-mended clothes and utensils scattered on the desk.

“Oh! Ms. Lithkin! I.. um.. hehe..”

She hastily tries sweeping the needles and other various things into the desk drawers like a child hoping they wouldn't be caught by their parent.

“Uh.. hmm..”

What a sorry sight for a nun. She really is still a little girl at heart.

“Oh, you don't have to fret so!”

The woman laughs, and my master smiles and leans back in her chair before shooting me a nasty glare. Why? What did I do? Don't blame me for this.

“Well, what can I do for you? If you're here about the celebration for the patron saint of the guild, I've put Mr. Ports in charge of that.”

“Oh no, no. I just came to say that there is a carriage on its way, and I believe it might be the one you mentioned.”

“..a carriage?”

“Indeed. Remember, you said that on the day one arrives, you will be taken someplace far away?”

“..”

My master stares at the woman, dumbfounded. Her jaw suddenly drops.

“That isn't next week!? Oh my gosh! Sorry, I have to get ready!!”

In a flash, her sleeves were rolled up and she was running around in a daze. The woman laughs

merrily at the sight of her. My master was a much better shepherdess. Norah the Nymph - that was her name back then, and she really was good at her work. Now she's a nun running this church and giving this town her guidance. It's hard to wrap my head around it.

And yet, perhaps owing to that determined look she always has on her face she's quite well-suited for these kinds of rituals. She's been doing quite well at her new job. She's long had to suffer the constant fear of wolves and starvation, so perhaps that's why she's so lethargic now that we're living in a town.

Dates. Numbers. Names. Prayers. Masses. She had been bombarded with new ideas, and it took her a long time to get used to them. If I wasn't there to help her, she might not have made it.

“Uh.. clothes and food.. oh, I should take a bible and prayer beads, too.. and.. I guess I should take spare shoes? Wow, I'm so used to having shoes now.. how did I live without them?”

She combs her long golden hair between tasks as she gets ready for her carriage. She even pulls out the clothes she wore before we came to town, but it's clear that they won't fit her anymore so I don't see why. It makes me sigh and lie down.

“Oh right, I'll need the invitation.. and this as well..”

Luggage was never a topic when we were herding sheep. The Church teaches people to give up their worldly possessions for those who have nothing, and now I see the wisdom behind that. The more things you have, the more trouble it is. It's the story of our lives. She hears me sigh a second time and I know she's looking at me. Before I can even think, “damn”, she's already walking up to me.

“It sure must be nice to have no worries, huh Enek?”

I've heard her say this for five years now, even since we came to town. It's obviously not true. Well, at least it wasn't, but I've since stopped caring as much about whether she needs support in her rituals, and started caring more about how much I'm fed for dinner. That means I have no choice but to ignore her right now, and leave her alone to run around the room. I emerged from the bundle of robes she had cast over me just in time to hear knocking on the door. It was not one of the knocks I had grown accustomed to; this was someone that wasn't from around here. Someone that might be better described as a “messenger from hell.”

~~~

A crowd has formed outside of the church. This town was once ravaged by a deadly illness, but thanks to the help of brave people like my master, it has since recovered. Foreigners aren't a rare sight here, actually. They even arrive in large companies with dozens of horses. Even so, the sight of such a prestigious-looking carriage has attracted this large crowd.

It is a black, fully-covered carriage with two sharp-looking horses pulling it. There's even a wagon behind it, presumably full of goods. There are even five or six stout men guarding it. It's enough to shock my master when she sees it. She's done her best to comb her hair straight, but it's so curly that it's a futile endeavor. Compared to the woman in the carriage, especially, who makes her preparations look sad by comparison.

Seeing a tall woman wasn't rare, but such a prestigious one? Definitely.

“I am Eve Boland.”

She speaks her name like she's delivering a report. Her height contrasts with how thin she appears, but then calling her "thin" isn't quite correct; it's more accurate to say that her body has no excess meat on it. Whatever perfume she's wearing, it vaguely reminds me of wild beasts.

“Um.. well..”

My master's quite nervous, but she's been a nun long enough to be able to regain her bearings and stand up tall, with a smile.

“Well, I am Norah Arendt.”

My master is fairly tall, but Eve is much taller still. But there is more than just a height difference between these two. My master's slowly been growing fatter over the years, all except for the one area where it counts the most. This lady with the wolf-like appearance has her beat in that department.

It's obvious when the two stand tall, because one of them is bending forward ever so slightly. That slant is not due to her outfit, which is ill-suited for the weather. Those furs are merely there for prominence, like a noble. Even her name, Eve, seems chosen for that purpose. She sighs as she looks my master over from head to toe.

“This is the one..?”

“Huh?”

My master's question-like sound is met only with the batting of eyelashes, which is itself enough of a reply, but is followed up with her voice.

“Ah, nothing. We'll take care of your food and clothes later. We still have time. But if you're easily bored I suggest you bring a bible. We've got others to pick up, like I mentioned in my letter, so we'll be leaving right away.”

With that, Eve returned to her carriage. My master stood there in shock, slowly turning her

head to look at me. I can't even bark anymore, so I just sigh again. If I remember correctly, Eve had been trading in the south. I know little about the scale of such things, but my experience tells me that her deals must have been huge.

~~~

The carriage's interior is just wide enough for three people, with two seats facing one another. There's cotton covering the back of those seats and their armrests, and the stitching is very fine throughout. My master may be a nun helping this town, but she adores clothing. Her eyes are glued to these things.

Even Eve's clothes are a rare sight for her; loose robe-like coverings on her torso with uncommon details. My master's stares seem to bother Eve, who breaks her silence to announce that her clothes are “from the desert nations.” It's been a very quiet trip thus far, with neither Eve nor my master striking up a conversation.

I am on the seat, having been permitted by Eve, and my master is staring out the window while rubbing my head. Her mind must be full of thoughts after five years of town life. Even back when we were herding sheep, we hardly got to travel much. It was always the same horribly tedious, virtually unchanging view.

Of course, I could survive alone in a forest, but not my human master. She cannot survive without others of her kind. Even my dog's eyes can see how difficult the life of a human is. They live days without hope, mechanically eating their meals until they perish.

Our sheepfold was full of mice and bugs, with my master often being awakened by them. A chance meeting had ended all of that, and permanently changed her life. Sometimes, even the fastest person only runs in place without even moving forward. They need someone to give them a push from behind. Luckily, my master received just such a push, and moved forward to this place.

“Does the outside world make you restless?”

Two days after we'd left town, Eve finally spoke while writing a letter.

“Hmm?”

“Well, nuns don't get many chances to travel.”

Having double-checked her letter, Eve pushes it out the window where someone has been waiting to receive it. He folds it shut and rides off in the opposite direction. Eve has been writing letters ever since we left.

“That, and you seem quite determined for someone heading somewhere in the middle of

nowhere like Nyohhira. Even I thought twice.”

She's sure one to talk, when she's been sitting there drinking and writing the day away, putting on airs. I don't like how she looks down on my master. Master isn't just some secluded nun with no knowledge of the real world. She might be dim sometimes, but she has experience and never gives up. I look up at master, hoping she'll stick up for herself.

“Oh ho.. yes, I do find it disconcerting.”

That's all, master? I bark softly, but she rubs me to console me.

“But I still wanted to go.”

“..”

Eve puts her elbow on the window ledge to hold her head up. She's been staring at master, who's in turn been talking while looking outside. She looks like one of the predators you would find in a forest.

“Is that town where you met them?”

By the time she asks her follow-up question, though, Eve's also looking outside.

“No. We met in Ruvineigen.”

“Ah, so you were already a nun, then.”

“No.”

Master looks over at me, embarrassed. She looks like she's peeking into some forbidden treasure vault.

“The Church was taking care of me, but I wasn't much more than a sheep.”

She's laughing at herself as she looks into my eyes, with the kind of smile only someone who's broken the chains of fate can wear.



“I was a shepherd, you see.”

Eve looks back at my master, obviously surprised.

“One day, I just met them. I'd like to say that they reached out to help me, but it's more honest to say they got me in more trouble. That's really what it comes down to.”

Master's come a long way to be able to talk so openly and honestly. It's quite true that while that wolf and sheep helped us, they ended up getting us into even more trouble in the end.

“Where did you meet them, Ms. Boland?”

A predator never answers, they only ask.. and even then, it's normally only to ask their prey which end they want to have eaten first. Eve's clearly quite displeased to be asked.

“Call me Eve.”

Master smiles, but settles on “Ms. Eve.”

“I met them in the north. We'll be passing by that place at some point.”

“I see.”

Master can patiently chat with church-goers for hours, so she gently nods with a smile as she replies. She doesn't push the topic. Perhaps that experienced response is what pushed Eve to finally respond carelessly.

“So you were a timid sheep?”

“Hmm?”

My master replies with the same sound, then smiles and nods in response.

“I was an injured wolf.”

Eve turns her head back toward the window, like she's hoping to relive some distant memory. It's the same kind of look that master often wore when we had just begun our lives in the town.

“That's why..”

“..”

Master says nothing. She just looks at Eve.

“I almost had an affair.”

Master's eyes were round as saucers when she heard that. Eve slowly turned back to look at her with a smile, but if my eyes didn't deceive me, it was more a smile of self-mockery. It seemed she had feelings for that man. Moreover, she seemed to guess that master also did, even if I believe that master doesn't really care about him at all.

After we had settled in town, many people attempted to court my master. They were all rejected. She always said she had already given herself to God, but that isn't quite true. She's just happy enough to have me. I sigh to let master rub my neck as she replies to Eve.

“Once sheep are focused on something, they forget about everything else.”

Eve smiles when she hears that.

“Damn. And yet he still called for us. What nerve.”

Eve's eyes are looking back outside, but now they're just looking at the scenery.

“I'm amazed that he has the gall to ask me to take everyone there. Can you believe it? We're picking up three more women on our way to Nyohhira.”

“Oh?”

“Hard to stomach, huh? I was beside myself in rage. That's why I brought the finest clothing and jewelry with me. Norah, was it? You just grab whichever you like, so we can show off that we don't need him.”

Eve smiles like a wolf, and master doesn't know how to respond. Makes sense. I'm the only male she's interested in anyway. Master does look at me after thinking it over, though.

“Yeah.. it's not a good idea to just let a sheep have his way.”

The wolf's smile on Eve's face widens as her eyes meet with master's. I lie on master's lap, lost in my thoughts about that incident with the stupid sheep they're talking about. We haven't been able to travel for a long time, so I've been getting a bit anxious, but this carriage is more luxurious than any church so I'm falling asleep. There's no chill wind blowing through the windows here.

~~~

Eve seems to have gained an appreciation for master's toughness. They haven't talked much, but it's hardly been an uncomfortable conversation. I'm getting quite tired of sleeping on master's lap, though. We're approaching the next town to pick up another traveler, but it seems like this time we're going to spend the night here in an inn. But before I can imagine what this next person will be like, I catch a strange scent ahead of us.

“..what is that smell?”

“Medicinal stones.”

“Medicinal.. stones?”

“This town has many alchemists, and I've been told that the person we're meeting is their chief.”

Millers, executioners, and shepherds were unpopular, but not even they were as infamous as witches and alchemists. Eve is using the same tone one would use to frighten a child, but master only plays along. In fact, she's quite disappointed.

“You'd better get used to it, because you'll be smelling the same thing in Nyohhira.”

“Oh, really?”

“Nyohhira's a famous hot spring town. There's a lot of springs there in the mountains, some as big as lakes.. and they all smell like this.”

I can't believe that for a second, but master seems to take it at face value. She closes her mouth and tries to picture what Eve has said. But come on; who would heat up an entire lake? Eve's clearly just being colorful.

Just then, the carriage stops after making a wide circle. The driver hops down from his seat, greets someone, and before anything interesting can happen we hear a knocking on the wooden door of the carriage.

“Ah.”

Eve barely has time to utter that much before the door opens and we're greeted by the spitting image of a witch from all those fairy tales.

“I am Dian Rubens. But please: call me Diana.”

The woman smiles, and her black hair audibly brushes up against her. It is immediately clear that she has a different disposition from either my master or Eve. After seating herself next to my master, she squints and looks outside, still smiling.

I'm still in master's lap (even though I don't want to be) and yet I can still sense what's happening above me. Eve is stealing glances at Diana. So is master. The reason is obvious. After all, how could someone like her be involved with that stupid sheep?

“Well then.”

It is Diana, who reminds me of a crow somehow, who finally breaks the silence.

“Are the two of you friends?”

Her calm smile makes her look rather gentle, but my nose is not that easy to fool - she is more like Eve than my master. Eve seems to instinctively recognize this too, given how impolitely she's sizing her up with her eyes.

“Do we seem to be?”

“Not at all.”

She says that, but her expression remains the same. Slowly, she turns that gentle smile toward master.

“But I doubted he had the courage to pursue several at once, so I wanted to check.”

My master nearly bursts out laughing, but manages to steady herself before smiling at Eve.

“He truly doesn't.”

“Not at all.”

Diana turns her head back to Eve, with her hair almost singing as it slides behind her. My hair is also black, but it can't compete with hers anymore.

“That said, you certainly seem to know him well.. as well as us.”

“Well.. you could say I was their counselor. In a sense.”

“..?”

Eve raises an eyebrow, but she's clearly used to concealing her real thoughts. Master's chin shifts subtly, like a strange wind is moving her.

“Are you married?”

Eve chuckles under her breath before raising her hands straight up, palms outward. If I'm not mistaken, that's a gesture of surrender.

“I'm far too busy counting money.”

“Oh ho..”

Diana doesn't seem the slightest bit surprised. She's still wearing the same smile, and when I look up at my master, that smile is on her face as well.

“And from what I was told, you must be.. ah..”

She has turned to face us, but is looking at me.

“You must be the one who protected them that time?”

With that, she has won my approval. I bark in response, and look up at master.

“Yes. He's been protecting me for a long time now.”

Master rubs my head, then covers my eyes with both hands.

“Haven't you, Enek?”

“Woof!”

I bark in the affirmative, but I know master has covered my eyes so I don't see the look on her face. She only gets more beautiful with time, but I do not. Being a sheepdog, my abilities have been dulling for the past five years. I am past my prime. In truth, I don't have that much time left.

“And yourself? Are you married?”

Diana looks at Eve as she interjects.

“I was once.”

She answers readily enough to make it clear that it's now a distant memory for her. Interestingly, that's the moment the beast-like Eve begins to treat her more politely. That said, Diana is even more interesting, holding her white hand over her breast and talking like a young girl sharing gossip with her friends.

“At any rate, I take it you were both very excited by their invitation, even though so much time has passed?”

She looks at master and then Eve, who then look at each other and smile.

“If anger counts as excitement.”

“If envy counts as excitement.”

Diana seems surprised by their answers, but a smile quickly reappears on her face. This time,

however, it feels like a genuine smile from her heart, and not one of simple politeness.

“As for me, I simply could not think of a way to decline an invitation after all this time, for such a distant trip.”

“Definitely anger.”

“Definitely envy.”

Both of them reply insistently before laughing in unison.

“He's the type who always looks so defenseless that you just can't resist reaching out.. even if you end up burned.”

“True, but then *she's* the one who was burned the most by that flame.”

Eve's smile betrayed just how much respect she had for that sheep. Everyone laughed; despite the differences in their ages, origins, and experiences, they all seemed to feel the same way about him. In fact, I basically agree as well. I just don't have anything I could add to the conversation when it came to that couple.

“Still, what surprises me the most is that they're really going to celebrate their wedding, as stated in their invitation.”

Diana pulls out her invitation, which my master looks at as though it's a secret message to be burned after reading.

“Ha ha.. yes, they always seemed so embarrassed that I never expected them to do this either.”

“With her attitude, why would she even think to invite us?”

“Why else?”

Master answers with a question, then looks over to Eve. Eve sighs happily before stating the obvious.

“So she can say ‘I win.’”

“Yes, that certainly would be just like her.”

Diana nods in agreement. My master hesitates a moment before asking her a question.

“So.. you say you were like a counselor to them? How so?”

I look up, surprised at master's change in tone. She seems positively shy, like the same girl who

couldn't contain her curiosity so long ago. But she's never been the type to gossip much with the other women in town.. has she finally reached that age?

“Are you sure you want to know?”

Diana can't help but flash a malicious smile at master.

“We have plenty of time.”

Eve cuts in, returning the same smile to Diana. She then huddles in toward Diana, and master follows suit.

“Their love story has become somewhat famous in this town..”

Diana begins with that line, and the atmosphere instantly changes to one that a knight like myself shouldn't really listen to. But they have plenty of time, and enough wine and food to help them pass it.

I catch flashes of smiles, surprise, anger and admiration - they're quite engrossed in this tale. The subject of their ages would be taboo around the likes of Eve and Diana, who seem like the types who would take such inquiries very personally.

And yet, the way they smile one could mistake them for young maidens. My master is rather quiet, but sips her wine as she determinedly listens. If I was to be asked which one of them is the most maiden-like, then my answer would hardly be a surprise.

It is the one I want to spend the rest of my days with. My master.

~~~

It's said that dogs can be kept occupied for 20 or 30 minutes by throwing them a bone. Well, these three have been occupied ever since we left that last town, so what does that say? They've finally stopped, but only because they're lethargic after lunch.

Even the beastly-looking Eve shrugs her shoulders and heads off to the wagon full of goods, presumably for a windless nap under the sun (or perhaps to improve her digestion after this story). She clearly still harbors feelings for that idiot. She looks like a dog taking her bone off to chew it in peace. Meanwhile, master is fanning herself with her hands, a bit drunk and overheated after Diana's story.

Apparently, everyone in town could tell those two were in love.. everyone except them. They didn't realize until after one of them was challenged to a duel over the other. Back when I met those two they seemed quite intimate, so I was quite shocked to learn just now that the wolf was being just as stupid as the sheep, and the sheep was just too naive to move in for the kill.

In fact, the sheep ran around town like a chicken with its head cut off, not realizing his worries were all unfounded. The situation only escalated until it came to a head, at which point the two finally saw eye to eye and began trusting each other long enough to cooperate, bringing the duel to a close. What can I even say to this story?

The one who made the initial challenge was unlucky, but deserved his fate. Thankfully it wasn't even a bad fate in the end, because he ended up catching the eye of someone with a big enough heart to accept an idiot like him. Apparently he was better off this way; or at least that's what Diana's tone seemed to imply.

These three women had just now enjoyed this story, the kind of tale that they wouldn't even be able to dream up when they were younger. I would have preferred a more bitter ending, but as long as master is happy then I can't say I really mind. I've since laid myself down on floor next to her as she partakes in the food and wine, breathing in the cool outside air.

The shutters of the carriage window are flung open again, and the wind is quite soothing. Even the sounds of the carriage's wheels is relaxing in this atmosphere.

“My my. Truly featherbrained.”

“Hmm?”

Master nervously unhands her collar when she hears that, worried Diana is talking about her unbecoming behavior.

“I mean those two.”

“Ah..”

Master sighs and joins Diana in a smile before replying.

“They truly are.”

A moment later, she continues.

“But I envy them.”

“Oh?”

I wonder if master's dropped her guard a bit too much from the drink, and sure enough Diana takes advantage of her lowered defenses.

“You ought to have had your share of chances.. don't tell me no one's introduced you to someone nice?”

“..well..”

Master smiles as she thinks it over.

“Were they just not good enough?”

Diana's just playing around with her question. She seems more interested in pouring herself some more wine and having fun. Master squints, leans back and thinks some more before answering.

“They weren't my type.”

Master seems to be cutting loose for a change. It's a bit surprising to hear her say such a thing, though.. I didn't realize she's ever taken the matter that seriously.

“Are you sure.. that it's alright to talk about this in front of him?”

Master looks at me and smiles.

“Not even Mr. Lawrence?”

Master leans back, like she's trying to cope with the alcohol. She has a good relationship with the people in town, even though she's a foreigner, but she's always secluded in a church. She never has a chance to relax with a drink, so she's nervously distanced herself from this kind of interaction. She only voices her complaints to me, and only shares her joy with me. That's why I'm always so confident around her.

“Ah, so the only one for you is the fellow already at your side.”

Diana gets the point, but master just stares at the ceiling like she hasn't heard anything. I know the truth, but if she doesn't confirm it now, I'll grow concerned. In fact I'm already getting worried now, seeing Diana's playful expression. Finally, I look up, wondering if master has fallen asleep.

“I've never wondered whether things would be better if Enek was human.”

I tense up a bit at her answer; I'm unsure how I should interpret it.

“I did tell you I was a shepherdess?”

“Yes, when you introduced yourself.”

“Ah. Well.. he has been with me this whole time, sharing my experiences, and yet I never think about these things.”

Shepherds were always shunned by townspeople, and viewed as the offspring of humans and wild animals. Is it wise for master to share such things in the open? I'm quite concerned, but master isn't backing down. She turns to Diana, very slowly.

“You're.. the same as Holo, aren't you Ms. Diana?”

What? I wonder how that could be.. and yet, Diana stays calm. She runs her finger around the rim of her glass and replies.

“I'm not a wolf.”

She sighs.

“But how did you know?”

Master is smiling proudly as Diana continues.

“Are you saying it's because you've been with your knight for so long?”

That seems a cleverly roundabout way to say such a thing, but then these two are playing mind games. Master is still smiling as she tilts her head back and slowly closes her eyes.

“I wanted to bring Enek with me because of this.”

“Because of this?”

Diana doesn't raise her voice to ask, but master still closes her eyes and smiles in embarrassment.

“Mhm. Because of this.”

“Oh? You wish to go to the Wisewolf and ask her what you should do?”

She's pretty daring to ask such a tough question so openly, but I'm the only one caught off guard. Master's even more calm now than when she's taking confessions. She replies, ever so slowly.

“What I should do?”

She reveals a sly smile and looks at Diana.

“No, she has it even worse.”

I wonder if master is talking about that gold smuggling thing we went through, or what followed.. all those things seemed quite childish to me.

“Then why are you going?”

Diana's question is met with an instant response.

“I just want to see them again.”

“Just to see them?”

Master's eyes slowly open, and she looks at me, calling for me. I stand up and set my front paw on her knee.

“Just to see them.”

She grabs my paw and playfully shakes it. Diana is staring at her, but master pretends not to notice. She rubs my face with her hands, turns my lips upward, gently whispers “roar!” at me, and smiles.

“God doesn't solve any of our problems.”

She's willing to say things I would never say, even with all these fangs to defend myself.

“And yet, everyone still goes to church.”

She releases me and smacks her palms on her knees, asking me to jump up. There's nothing I can do but obey. I'm quite confused, but I gracefully hop up on her lap and lick her face.

“I'm not sure if I'm making any sense.”

“No, I understand.”

Diana reaches out and rubs my neck.. but somehow it doesn't feel so bad to be touched by another.

“It has been decades since I went on a journey, you see, so I feel that alone is worth celebrating. I suspect that Miss Eve has similar reasons to mine: she can finally face the Wisewolf again, her only worthy opponent.”

Diana is quite a confident woman, if she dares to openly refer to Eve as “miss.”

“So we're all holding ourselves back, really just wanting to go see them in the end.”

Diana smiles, leaving her own mystery unanswered. What is she holding back? Does it have to do with those two, or master and I? Or her own past?

“Heh.. you are all living so happily.”

That's all she'll say. She lifts her glass to drink some more, but changes her mind and sets it down again. She stares out the window at the wide view of the fields outside. It's always so beautiful after a long winter, with green grass growing everywhere.. but that view goes on and on like it extends forever. Anyone leaving a walled town would feel that way.

At the end of this trip, however, we'll be greeted by that pair of idiots. That's why master's been willing to step back outside.

“One has to do their best to live on.”

Master clearly treasures me more than anyone.. but I'm just a dog, and she's human. Nothing can change that, no matter how hard we try to live on. No one can escape those bonds, only shake them to keep from suffocating.

That's why those two are such idiots, and look so childish. They're doing their best to ignore reality. Many people have tried this before because of so-called “human nature.” They're all proof of how naive such hopes are. When master hugs me and sighs, all I can do in response is lick her.

“This wedding of theirs..”

Diana takes a drink before continuing her complaint.

“..might very well make us all vomit.”

Master smiles in agreement, and I join in with a bark.

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We've made it to a small village, where we pick up two more people. One is a tough-looking clergywoman, though tough in a different way from Eve. The other is a silversmith. The carriage is quite warm now, with five people sitting inside of it. The two newcomers are also related to the pair in some way. It's like those two will always be the topic of conversation.

Once in awhile, I hop outside and walk beside the carriage or lie down in the wagon behind it. Being alone is nice sometimes. I can't really say I'm any better than that man, though, because I sleep in master's arms every night. His story is also something of a miracle, just like the one master and I share. If it wasn't, then there wouldn't be so much laughter and screaming coming from the carriage.

That pair is taking this event seriously, but as far as I'm concerned I'd respond to Diana's story this way: they're chasing a rainbow. In fact, they're already standing where it ought to touch

the ground. I may be just a dog, but I know that's a clever analogy. It's a shame that I can't share it with anyone.. or maybe that would defeat the point?

“Enek!”

I rest until master has the carriage stopped and calls for me. Having more possessions just means you have to carry more with you when you travel. Likewise, the more one talks the more chances there are for confusion to set in, so it's quite obvious why she's calling for me.



The sooner that pair comes to realize this reason, the better off they will be. I sigh, but then bark in response before dashing back to my master.



## Epilogue

Lawrence knew he was in for it now. In fact, he had a headache. Not the joking type, but the kind that really made his head throb. Its cause was quite simple: the letter that Holo had sent out without telling him in advance. It was sent to Norah, Eve, and the other girls they had met on their travels. It was an invitation for them to visit in the spring, for a feast on Saint Arozury's Day. He didn't quite know what was happening until Holo told him to "take care of the males" and handed him a copy of the letter.

Oh, Lawrence could catch up with the traveling merchant who was delivering the letter, but that would only incur Holo's wrath. He had been with her for long enough to know that he couldn't do that without a very good reason. She was just too smart for him to evade the rat's nest of rationalizations she surely had prepared. He wasn't going to win this one. Either he must have upset her some time ago and then made her angrier by failing to notice, or she was just incredibly bored.

Either way, all he could do was pray. At least his prayer might reach the ears of someone in this dark forest of trouble, perhaps even the wolf ears of a certain harvest deity. She had obviously been keeping this from him for some time and doing her best to make sure he couldn't stop her. She must have enlisted someone's help to write the letter, and so he could narrow down who it was that she would have trusted enough to write it, then seek them out.

He took the copy of the letter she handed to him and made his way down the snow-covered road to a certain solitary building. It should have been completed sometime in the previous autumn, but now it was probably being "decorated" by the winter climate. Originally, it was meant to house guests in the coming spring, but that plan had fallen through for various reasons. The war in the southern plains, for instance. Too many craftsmen had been sent to fight. There was also the heavy loss Lawrence had suffered when a merchant ship he had hired sank.

Yes, his plan was rent asunder, and there was no salvaging it with the heavy snow that had been hindering the shipping lanes this winter. He was keenly aware that even the most careful of business plans were prone to failure in this world, but at least they'd managed to erect the fine main building without incidents. "They" included him and Holo, but also some of the friends they had made during their travels.

He had been itching to open his hot spring inn come summer, so that's why he wished things had gone according to plan. He had been arranging a springtime celebration for that event, though he had planned that for after Saint Arozury's Day. He had met a lot of upper-class folks back then who he wanted present, but he didn't want to make them come while the mountains were still laden with snow; not during the season when Saint Arozury's Day occurred.

And yet, it was those who lived closest, and were closest to their hearts, who were used to the snow and could join them in celebration before the rest of the guests would arrive. That was a little too perfect; it had to be Holo's real aim. If it wasn't, then just the messenger's fees would be too dear to joke about. Especially the one to get a letter all the way to Eve. She had risked much to open a company in the southern empire. She was no longer the one being abused by a town council gone awry; she was now one of the elite.

There was also Norah, who had become a nun in a small town to the east of Ruvinheigen; sending a letter there wasn't cheap either. Diana and Elsa lived relatively nearby, but Elsa's town was considered fairly remote and letters may not even get to her. At least Fran may be there with her, since she had heard about Tereo's monastery. And yet, Lawrence's face grew grimmer as he considered all of the actors in this little play. He breathed the cold winter air into his lungs, and warmed his fingers with the warm air that came back out. With his hand over his mouth, he sighed.

"Just.. what is she gonna do?"

Even after six long years, he still hadn't fully grasped Holo's ways. He'd even gotten into a huge argument with her not that long ago. He didn't even remember what the cause of that argument was, only how suddenly she became irrational. Was it over food? It was the middle of winter, and it was just like Holo to be roundabout, so maybe that was it? At any rate, it took quite the idiot act to make her happy again. Not something he regretted, of course, but it did influence how much he was sighing lately. He brushed the snow off of his coat and walked into the main building.

"Oh, Mr. Lawrence?"

A boy looked up from his task of laying tiles. He was growing rapidly, and was now taller than Holo. He may well overtake Lawrence at this rate, even if he was quite thin. With his long hair tied back, he looked more like a tall girl than the wandering student he had been when they met. He brushed his hands of the dirt on them and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Is it afternoon already?"

"Nah, I just wanted to ask you something."

Cole's expression went blank as Lawrence revealed the letter. It was obvious that he'd written it, since he was the only one capable of such lovely writing.

"I was kind of forced-"

"Oh, I'm not blaming you.. I knew Holo would take advantage of you, given how much you enjoy writing."

His hard work this year had left the veins in his hands showing clearly through his skin. It was quite a contrast to his face. But the boy still kept studying the texts written by those monks and priests, even eating onions to keep himself awake late at night. His efforts were bearing fruit; he'd met with many knowledgeable people around the world. In fact, Lawrence really appreciated that, because it meant his own business had more visitors here in this sleepy, secret part of the mountains. They were so remote that not even wars could find them here in Nyohhira.

"I'm not here to scold you or anything, I just wanted to ask how she looked when she asked you to write this."

"Ms. Holo.."

"Hmm? Was she upset? Did she tell you anything?"

Lawrence felt rather dim, being thirty years old and having to ask this of the boy. But Cole was a lifesaver when it came to smoothing things over between him and Holo. Even she relied on Cole to deliver her messages to Lawrence when she didn't want to see him anymore. Indeed, the grim look on Cole's face implied that he knew something.

"..she was.."

".. she was..?"

"Smiling."

Cole spoke as if he'd seen a ghost.

"Smiling?"

"Yes. And those recipients.."

"Ah, yeah.. all the women we met on our travels. You know Elsa, of course, and I'm sure you remember Eve as well."

Cole laughed bitterly, obviously remembering the woman who looked more like a wolf than Holo did. It wasn't a tired or spiteful kind of bitterness, though, because Eve had been gentle to him.

"When she forced me to write it, saying she didn't want you to find out, I instantly figured you had made her angry again."

Cole was sure getting "smarter" over the years. Lawrence felt nothing but frustration at his inability to counter the boy's statement.

“Not surprising that you were put off by her smile, then, since she smiles when she's at her angriest.”

“Really? But it was quite a smile.. she seemed incredibly happy..”

“*Incredibly* happy..?”

Lawrence's eyes went round as saucers, and even Cole seemed to finally feel his terror as he nodded.

“Oh.. good lord.. then she's probably about ready to kill me!”

Lawrence's hand shot up to his forehead, but his mind had gone blank. What had he done? He just couldn't figure it out. He always kissed her before sleeping and after waking up. He always praised her tail when she combed it. He made sure to take time out of his schedule to eat breakfast and supper with her at home. He even took work home when he had to, in order to spend more time with her. If anything, she should probably feel a bit spoiled given his effort. Sure, they still argued from time to time, but never so terribly that she would call all of those girls here.

Lawrence suddenly looked up, searching his thoughts for what the reason might be. Many people came to Nyohhira during the long winters to soak in the hot springs. They were often quite wealthy, to the point where Lawrence went out of his way to find the most attractive and skilled servers to tend to them. Some of them even expressed interest in Lawrence, despite everyone here being way out of his league.

Of course, people in their middle age would even settle for someone like Lawrence, to the point where the men in town were reputedly ranked by the women. Many who settled to work here ended up with a good-looking woman of their own. Holo was there with him in the shop, and everyone knew that, but she never wanted to make it clear that they were a couple. At first he wondered if she was embarrassed, but perhaps the Wisewolf was simply too proud to admit that she wasn't sure if she wanted their relationship to progress. They were already well on the path for him to make good on the promise he had made in Sovereign.



His original promise to Holo was to take her back to her home, Yoitsu, but that never came to pass. Nyohhira was very close to Yoitsu, but in the end she chose to not return. Every time he mentioned it, she lost her temper, so perhaps it was her own way of staying interested in marriage. Of course, Lawrence could never really know the truth because of this, so he let the matter slide rather than forcing the issue.

They may not have taken any vows before God, but Lawrence was still able to stand tall and say they were closer than any other couple. He knew her every dimple, even the ones she was unaware of. He could never touch her tail directly, but at least he was now permitted to sometimes comb it. She was still stubbornly unreasonable, so perhaps that was why so many women had been drawn to him before they settled here. Those advances were mostly just jokes at his expense, of course, but not always.

In fact, he'd seen his share of serious offers. They were mostly indirect, but sometimes a bolder attack was made on Lawrence in the springtime, with a delicious meal here or a nicely woven vest there. He'd rejected every one of them, gently but firmly. It was always difficult when he actually did care for someone, because it felt just like walking past a diamond that was sitting in the middle of the road. It was enough to make him cry.

He knew Holo had seen every one of them, always with a look of pure rage. He never left any room for interpretation or joked at her expense, but she never once stepped in to clear the matter up herself. She just sat back and observed the situation like some wise sage. Finally, he woke up one day with his throat in Holo's mouth and couldn't take it anymore - if she needed him to say it, then he would say it. And say it he did, kneeling down before her and asking for her hand in marriage.

That seemed to do the trick; her tail swelled and her red eyes disappeared into his chest as she hugged him tightly. She sniffed at him for so long that he eventually suspected that when she stopped, she really would bite him to death. He steeled himself for that eventuality, but it never came. In fact, an entire week passed before she said anything to him at all. It went without saying that the first word that came out of her mouth was "fool."

Incidentally, the woman that bore witness to his declaration was quite influential in town. She always had good things to say about Lawrence's honesty and integrity. Her word was respected, and so Lawrence could finally relax. Holo would never think so strangely again. He could sigh in this cold, unfurnished room and daydream about that time five years ago in Sovereign, when her moonlit face had inspired him to make her his bride. This was a time for celebration, he thought, not more problems.

As he sighed, he realized that Cole had been standing there with a worried look on his face the entire time. Lawrence was aghast, and smiled nervously at the lad.

"By the way, it looks like this is almost done."

“Yes, I think one more day with the crew should do it. There's just some things that have to be prepared before then.”

“Thank you for everything. It's a shame that someone as capable as you is fated to become a church scholar.”

Cole smiled back. Many people came to Nyohhira in the spring, so he tried to visit in order to share discussions with everyone.. be they craftsmen or mercenaries. In an age where it wasn't rare for a priest to have formerly been a craftsman, all it took was the right attitude and the funds to learn about the church. Nobility was unnecessary.

“Well, Church Law is a little bit like architecture.. they both need a vision, the materials, and a theory on how to combine them.”

“They both need to be developed.”

Cole smiled.

“Yeah.”

Lawrence had bequeathed his business route to a trusted partner of his when he decided to open his own shop. It took two years to sort everything out, and then another to discover the right place to open said shop. Add to that the two years to build that shop, which wasn't even done yet. Still, wealthier lodgers would want a quiet room of their own, where they could talk at ease. That was the purpose of this building, where Cole was working now. The hot spring water was diverted under it for warmth, and so Cole's labor wasn't the only reason he was sweating.

“Hmm. You should probably head off a bit earlier, so you can take a bath before lunch.”

“Sure.”

Cole replied, then looked at the letter again.

“Um.. did I do a good job?”

It was clever and to the point, just the kind of writing that a hero or church leader would fall for. He had a gift, and if he got to choose what to write it would have been flawless.

“Yeah, there were just a couple of.. iffy phrases.”

“Ah.”

“We can change them later.”

“Thanks.”

Lawrence nodded and left. This was probably his last chance to teach Cole anything. Once Lawrence's shop made a splash, he was destined to become a stubborn old innkeeper, forever stuck in Nyohhira. It was just the way things were, as surely as the sun set in the west.

He knew he'd probably get a bit tired of it from time to time, and probably wish he could have a bit more capital to work with, but there was a good chance that Eve would welcome the chance to have him visit in the south. If he played along, they might even have another great adventure. In fact, Eve was wealthy enough to hire a biographer. She wouldn't want her name to only be recorded in tax ledgers.

Of course, Lawrence also had the option of working for Diva company. Hildir had managed to smooth things over for Mr. Diva and had returned to work there. They now ran the company like a king and his chancellor, and had earned a reputation as great as the Ruvik Alliance.

It wasn't long now before their sunny coins brightened up the north. Lawrence's excitement would peak that day, as he remembered his own contribution to the war over this currency. He wasn't against adventuring, he just had someone more important to consider. Any risks he took now had to be sensible.

With that thought, he slid the letter back into his coat and opened the door of the main building. He was greeted by the familiar smell of milk-based soup.

“Be patient, it will be ready soon.”

He walked into the living room and saw the chestnuts Holo had been shelling. Her face was still the same as always; she looked a bit taller (and maybe even fatter), but he swore that was just his imagination. In truth the only thing that had probably changed about her was the amount of space he occupied in her heart.

“You make it sound like you're cooking.”

Holo laughed at his joke, so she was probably in a good mood at least. The girl standing in the kitchen was the one who took care of their housework. She would be the cook for their inn, once it opened.

Her name was Hannah. She had been sent to them by Hildir, so Lawrence wasn't sure if she was even human, but he never bothered confirming it. A lady should be able to keep her secrets, and it was a faux pas to pry into people's backgrounds in a place of wandering travelers like Nyohhira.

Lawrence had settled on Nyohhira because it was near Yoitsu, and because it was convenient for his friends. For instance, Hugh the sheep would never age in the eyes of others, but if he left

town on a long “trading expedition” then he could one day return and pretend to be his own descendant.

Nyohhira was the perfect escape for that kind of purpose. Many colorful people came here for their own reasons, so Lawrence knew that when his time came then at least Holo wouldn't be as lonely.

Hannah was quite clever, too, and managed to easily find food in these snowy mountains. She was at least more keenly aware of human life compared to Holo. In fact she had even taught Holo how to weave. In a peculiar twist, Holo didn't find it tedious. Lawrence never happily received any clothes made by her, like they were a proper couple, but he hoped that one day he would be able to nervously accept her clothes with just the right fluster to make her happy.

“Why are you roasting so many chestnuts? They still have to last until spring, you know.”

“If I eat any more pickles I will throw up.”

“Odd, you haven't complained about them ever since we moved here.”

Lawrence ate a chestnut to quiet his starving belly.

“I prefer a more balanced diet.”

“Then why not ask Cole to go on a hunt? He's good with a bow, and Ross's boss caught a deer here not too long ago. I'm sure you'd enjoy sharing a nice bit of deer liver and a frosty ale with me.”

Holo frowned and looked down as she ate. He was upsetting her on purpose, of course, because he knew that she didn't like just sitting around at home eating all day.

“I have had no such desire lately.”

“But you felt like roasting chestnuts?”

“What I would like is a certain delicious-sounding honey and peach dish that some selfish fool has forgotten about.”

“I just can't afford them right now. You know I'll buy you whatever you like once we're out of the red.”

Holo harrumphed her displeasure so forcefully that the chestnut skins on the table flew off.

“However..”

She looked up at him, and Lawrence got to stare at the face he never tired of seeing. Her amber

eyes stared into his until he had to shut his eyes and look away.

“One who is ill gets their choice of meals.”

Another chestnut shell cracked open, its heart falling to the table below. Holo smiled as she unwrapped it from its thin skin.

“But that would be a choice from your rather limited menu for those who are ill.”

“Well, it's got to be limited to food that will help you get better, after all.”

“Yet there is only so much of that limited selection that I can stomach.. might that be the real reason for it?”

Holo refilled the basket of brown chestnuts, perhaps to underscore that her challenges would always be plentiful. He sighed in response and got back up. Just then, she continued.

“If the selection was a bit richer then I would never wish to be healthy again.”

She tilted her head as she looked up at him. She knew he would invest all of his energy into helping her if she became ill. And yet, he knew how sweetly she behaved during such times, so it seemed like a fair trade-off to him. She always pretended to fall ill when autumn rolled around, with him pretending to fall for it. She did make her acting clear with a “thank you” every time, at least.

“Then perhaps it's time for me to revise that menu.”

She said nothing to that reply; she merely chuckled and continued cracking chestnuts.

“Thank you.”

She finally replied as he walked away.

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Lawrence mulled things over for several days, but ended up not asking why Holo had written the letter. She just wanted to invite their friends to the celebration, so it would be odd for him to even bother asking. Plus, all she had to do was smile and say “What? I do have to invite them, do I not?” and Lawrence would be shut down.

At the moment he was at a meeting with the merchants of Nyohhira to discuss fuel prices. The letter was still on his mind, but he *was* technically a shopless rookie here, so he was obligated to follow along and he did his best to focus on the meeting. With the cancellation of the northern expedition, the price of wood had settled over the years. Regardless, this year's snow had fallen earlier than usual and thrown everything into disarray.

Nyohhira was actually a mish-mash of villages in a certain mountainous area that happened to coincide with important trade routes. The areas along the main routes had public baths shared by the lodges for travelers who weren't particularly wealthy. Those with more money stayed in the larger inns that had their own private hot springs. The truly rich, however, went to the most remote springs, so those who ran business there would usually be fashionably late to these meetings, using their distance as an excuse to show off. One of those men was staring at Lawrence now and raising his hand.

“If we're talking wood.. then you're part of the problem, Mr. Lawrence. You've been hoarding it since autumn.”

All eyes turned to Lawrence. Nyohhira had a rule wherein the person who discovered a hot spring had the right to develop it into a business. Many of those at the meeting were lucky adventurers, so it was stressful to meet their stares even if they weren't as terrible as the Myuri mercenaries, or as clever as Eve, or indeed as explosively wrathful as Holo. The man challenging him was probably just upset that Lawrence had found a spring where he felt there shouldn't be one. Lawrence was too used to these sorts of challenges by now, though, so he remained calm.

“Are you saying I should burn my treated lumber to keep warm, so you don't have to be the only one?”

A few laughs were finally heard around the table. The man, Morris, had suffered a fire at his inn in autumn, so Lawrence's comment was truly embarrassing for him. Despite Morris wanting to argue, the head of the meeting spoke up.

“There's no problem with Lawrence buying lumber. It's not firewood. Does anyone else take issue?”

Lawrence wasn't the only one who thought Morris was being ridiculous. Lots of people didn't want competition, and so they hadn't treated Lawrence particularly well, but Morris was going way too far. It was only winning support for Lawrence. Morris always showed off about his special guests, too, so he wasn't exactly doing himself any favors. Lawrence's humbler attitude contrasted in his favor. He just had to make sure they didn't walk all over him, and to do that in such a tight-knit community he had to be steady as a rock. At least that was how Holo put it.

“Then please raise your hand if you agree to the increased price for fuel.”

Winter was drawing to an end, so the business rush was also ending and the attendees would be able to just laze about drinking after the meeting. That's why nearly every hand shot up the moment the question was asked, and Morris grudgingly joined in.

“Then I call an end to this meeting.”

At that declaration, everyone left. Morris intentionally stared him down, but Lawrence ignored him.. or rather, he had better things to focus on anyway. His inn was quite remote even for one in Nyohhira, and so his hot springs were the kind that were favored by patrons. With Cole's help, there were quite a few clergymen and monks bound to visit, so business should be stable.

Lawrence was so convinced of this that he wondered if he ought to float a loan and buy Morris' struggling inn from him, but just as the thought crossed his mind he was pelted by a snowball. He figured it was one of the kids from Winfield Kingdom that were staying at Roger's inn, but it was none other than Holo.

“It seemed like you were thinking about traveling again.”

She smiled and leaned on the fence as she spoke, much to the delight of the other innkeepers. She didn't venture out often.

“We cannot afford that if we wish to open a shop, and you know it.”

Lawrence recalled Holo telling his horse, his trusty sidekicks for all these years, “do not let Lawrence go off on any more adventures.” She was clearly saying it so he would hear it, but at the same time she seemed to be seriously talking to the horse. They did have to ride that faithful steed to get around this wide open area, after all.

“You say that as though an adventure requires that I go on a journey.”

Holo was wearing the luxurious fur coat that Mr. Diva had given her as thanks, and the sight of it triggered something in Lawrence's mind. He realized that buying Morris' shop would only cause a mess similar to one that Diva company had caused.

“So what you're saying is 'If you want me to be happy, don't have any more fun?’”

Holo smiled beatifically as she puffed out a bit of hot air.

“It has been working so far, has it not?”

Lawrence shrugged with a sigh and took her hand in his. But she simply pulled her hand out of her glove, and quickly put her hand in his own glove. Two hands in one glove - what a ridiculous scene.

“Oh, they're all gonna laugh at us.”

“Only you. They admire me.”

Her curt statement was heightened by the sound of her foot stepping into the crunchy snow, and by her moving their hands into his pocket. She was really being flirty today.

“So what brings you here? I did say I was coming back early, didn't I?”

“Are you saying that I am unwelcome here?”

She sniffed as though on the verge of tears, but he knew she was really just smelling the hot springs. He'd heard that springs in different regions had their own distinct odors, but his nose couldn't tell them apart. Nor did he have the ability to gauge the temperature and amount of water underground just from smell alone.

But he had to find a new spring to start his inn, and many people had already been running around like children after the fountain of youth, so Holo took it upon herself to become a wolf. They spent two days searching for a spring, and in the end all it cost him was a generous selection of honey-pickled fruit and a banquet made of the deer and bears that lived around the new spring.

Holo's lupine ears could gauge the purity of silver coins, and her strength was such that she could move boulders; finding a spring was no challenge for her. Lawrence couldn't help but feel like a man that had caught a fairy in a bottle, only to have her grant him a wish for freedom. The only difference was that Holo was already free, and she wouldn't desert him.

The two of them now walked along the main road in Nyohhira, with him stealing glances at his patron deity of luck in an attempt to guess her mood.

“Hannah went off to find some herbs..”

Holo looked away at the various mercenaries, tourists and hunters enjoying themselves with a drink in the public baths. They wore their scars proudly under the steam. She stared at them until one of them saw her and shouted to her. She knew all of them well enough to turn away like an embarrassed maiden, earning a chorus of laughter.

“And?”

Lawrence urged her to continue with a smile. She looked away once more, waving her hands at the men.

“Well.. after you left, Cole did as well.”

“And you were lonely?”

Holo was always too stubborn to admit it, but he knew that she secretly liked it when he dared to call her out on it. In fact, she'd already forgotten the laughing men and was clinging tightly to his arm, her tail wagging.

“I could not drink *all* of the wine myself.”

Her line won another sigh. With all the sighing he was doing lately, he wondered if he was getting old before his time.

“So that's your game, is it?”

“Ho ho~”

As she laughed, he quickly looked around before giving her a hug as he raised her up. Her legs dangled in the air like they wanted to keep walking, but she was caught until he set her down in the sleigh that would take them the rest of the way home.

~~~

Lawrence returned to the kitchen, carrying the all-important wine back with him. When he saw the plate of sausages and jerky, he wondered why Hannah (who preferred more basic dishes) would cook them. It had to be at Holo's request.

“Well well..”

He popped a thick slice of sausage into his mouth, then picked the plate up and juggled it along with a bottle of red wine, honey wine, and two cups in his hands. All expensive wines were delicious to him, but recently his favorites were sweet ones like honey wine. They were for sipping, not getting drunk. On top of that, they didn't require eating much to get the most out of them. That was a plus, now that his life was easy. He wanted to blame Holo for his new belly, but then again he *was* starting to resemble a proper innkeeper now. If he wanted this life, then he might as well just greet it with a smile.

“Oh!”

As he left the building and walked to the hot spring, he spotted a large bear seated in the middle of the road. It was quite an expert at stealing honeycombs, and had a scar on its shoulder from a run-in with a hunter. For some reason it didn't hibernate in the winter, and always came around this area until spring. Given the steam rising from its wet fur, it looked like he'd just left the spring.

“Holo kicked you out, huh?”

Despite his casual question, the bear just stared and Lawrence made way for him to pass by. The first time Lawrence saw him, he was frightened. But after Holo mediated between the two of them, Lawrence came to think of him like some sort of silent mercenary. He gave the bear a couple pieces of sausage in thanks, then continued to the spring.

“Ahhhh~”

Holo was lying on the island in the middle of the huge bath, in her wolf form. There were times when she didn't wish to share this place with the other animals, but that was normally when Lawrence wasn't around. She did it to cheer herself up by claiming the whole place for herself. If Lawrence was around, however, her mood didn't matter. She would simply kneel in one corner as a human.

And so, Lawrence was confused. Was she feeling playful? As he walked up to the water, he noticed her tail wagging under the water. Her eyes were shut. His inn wasn't open for business yet, but he still had to maintain it. Of course that also meant he could enjoy it for the whole winter. Holo had been taking a soak every day, until she grew tired of it and only went with others. Cole loved it so dearly that he often stayed in so long he had trouble climbing back out.

After setting the wine and plate down in a good spot, Lawrence walked around the area to investigate. Even the more feral wildlife that hunters feared would often bathe in their spring, so Lawrence had to check if anything needed maintenance. Bears, deer, rabbits - they all shifted the stones around, creating extra work for Lawrence. He even suspected that Holo asked them to, like he was living in some sort of fairy tale. Today everything was in order, including the water ducts. Holo's nose was amazing; it was like she was born for this. It was high enough for water to flow down to the inn, and the warmth and amount of water were perfect.

“You're not too hot, are you?”

Holo ignored his shout, but given the way her tail was wagging she was probably fine. As such, Lawrence dipped his hands into the water and nearly gave it a taste; legend was that the more bitter the spring, the more illnesses it could heal, but his stomach had been acting up, so he listened to his skepticism. Lots of people drank the water, but that didn't mean he had to.

Instead, he inspected their filtration system, and it was just as clogged with sedimentation as he expected. Not even Cole had been able to find a way to avoid this problem. Other inns used pump systems, but he preferred a more natural approach. If he got a pump, it would be so people could more easily drink the water. At any rate, he would have to clean the sedimentation later, and that thought made him sigh.

“What's next..”

He stared up at the clouds, and noted that the winds were changing: they would likely get some more snow tonight. Some flurries were nice in the springtime, but it meant a cold walk back to their home. He was doing his best to put a positive spin on it, but he couldn't.

“What bad ideas are you concocting now?”

He looked back down at Holo and replied.

“Just trying to figure out how I'll afford those honey chestnuts you wanted.”

“I can easily find honey and chestnuts.”

“And yet you never do. You should take after Hannah a little, and learn to be frugal.”

Holo piped down at that, and just swished her tail with a smile.

“Some things just cannot be found, not even by me.”

She was stretching.

“For example?”

“For example..”

She hopped into the spring, sending water everywhere. Her massive furry body seemed like it would soak up the rest, but of course the springs couldn't really accommodate her. It was a human face that popped back up out of the water.

“Rainbows.”

She'd probably been listening to those poets again; they were everywhere in Nyohhira.

“Please stop jumping in.. you upset every stone.”

“That just means you have not set them firmly enough.”

On their summer journeys, she would hop into every pond she could find that would accommodate her wolf form. She swam well in that form, but not as a human. That was a secret of hers that Lawrence learned only after they came to Nyohhira. It seemed like she wanted to try swimming at first, but in the end she just walked along the edge of the springs.

“Come join me.”

She said that with a smile as she walked in deep enough to cover her lower half.

“Foolish mule.”

Lawrence had learned to mimic her tone, and it made her laugh. Then she sneezed.

“Serves you right for showing off your back.”

“Pass the red wine.”

“Very well.”

He began tipping the bottle of red wine, but Holo changed her mind.

“On second thought, I will have some of yours today.”

She really was in a fantastic mood now. He was about to pour a second cup, but she stopped him.. apparently she meant it when she said she would have some of *his*.

“It is quite sweet, but they could probably stand to make it even sweeter.”

She made her assessment after drinking the cup. Most wine-drinkers would have complained that it wasn't even proper wine, but this time he didn't even get to try some. He just sadly watched her drink it down as he unclothed, then refilled the cup and headed into the water himself.

“Your tastes really are extreme.”

“Were they not, I would not speak with such a foolish mule.”

She took the cup from him again, leaving him to stare up at the sky.



“You're such a.. well, anyway, I really ought to get better cups.”

“Oh?”

“Wooden ones are convenient, but-”

“Not good enough?”

“People consider them cheap. Silver ones are best.”

Morris, the man who antagonized Lawrence, always had powerful guests. To flaunt the luxury of his establishment, he only used silverware, but those turned black quite quickly in the spring. Silver cups had to be oiled and polished. That was all quite beyond Lawrence's patience. Iron, tin or bronze ones were too cheap. Brass was alright, but rare. That only left porcelain or wood.

“Well, it's not really something that'd interest you. You're only interested in what goes inside.”

He snatched the cup from Holo and took a sip.

“And that is precisely why you chose me.”

“..Ha.”

Holo laughed along as she ate a bit of sausage.

“It is hardly worth thinking about it, in the end.”

“Hmm?”

“Will the guests only care about the utensils?”

She glanced over at him with the eyes of a brash youth that was just heading off on their first adventure. Those eyes would never look to the past, only to the bright future that was surely ahead. If that was the case, they were looking at his future as well. In fact, they were coming closer to him right now.

“You're right.”

Lawrence laughed at how easily she had changed his mind.

“Food is the important thing. What was his name..”

“Morris?”

“Yes, him. The food he serves is unfit for even second-rate nobles.”

Sometimes, Holo knew things she couldn't possibly know.

“The scavenging crows and foxes said so. They tell me the best food is served by the inn with the oak tree on its sign.”

“Jack's shop? Yeah, he doesn't go out of his way to look nice, but he still does good business.”

“The key is food.”

Nyohhira merchants started off with nothing, so they became quite conservative. Lawrence was slowly getting used to it, but it helped that Holo was there with him. Especially since she was a being fit to be called a god.

“So..”

“Hmm?”

Holo's arms wrapped around his head as she smiled.

“You should prepare something tasty for our celebration.”

Perhaps the water was making things a little too hot, especially with the two of them stuck to one another in the nude. Lawrence felt he could certainly rise to the occasion. Holo's face was an obvious red compared to the rest of her pale skin.

“Uh.. hehe..”

Of course, Lawrence knew that she was beguiling him to get what she wanted.

“Oh? Do not tell me you refuse? The banquet *must* be excellent.. understood?!”

Her teeth were on his throat again. Her stare was so malicious that he felt his courage dwindling. He didn't think she would be nasty enough to invite five of their former female companions, let alone force this on him. Naturally, his eyes avoided hers, but she stood up, unwilling to let him so much as think before opening her mouth again.

“This sort of celebration is imperative the first time around. If you assert your dominance at that time, all will be well.”

It wasn't the first time Holo was being too proud for her maiden's body to contain it. She had done her part to help Lawrence earn his reputation, so he had no desire to decline her wishes, but he still didn't know why she had been so upset.. was this her way of forcing the issue?

“Uh, Holo..”

“What?”

He knew asking her now would probably mean opening the gates of hell, but he had no real choice. He needed to know what her motivations were, so in a way it would be more productive if she did lose her temper. He'd rather see the wolves in the forest than only hear their howls. He swallowed hard, and just as he was about to ask..

“What do you think you are doing!!”

Holo roared so loudly that all the wildlife around them fled. Lawrence turned toward the bird he heard taking off, and just barely caught sight of a fox rushing into the bushes. This appearance was really more refined and mature for Holo. She might never admit it, but she truly did feel as though she was the top dog in her world. It might be a byproduct of all those years she was called a god, but the end result was that Lawrence was completely under her control.

“Confound it all..”

Holo sighed, and her smile returned to one of being in an excellent mood.

“You must be serious with that audience, or they will walk all over you.”

Lawrence agreed; anyone who wandered into these mountains would naturally be at the mercy of the wildlife here. Without Holo, he would have spent a lot of money to have people guard him.

“Oh..”

“Hmm?”

“I am sorry, you were saying?”

She looked down on him and smiled, but what courage he had was long gone.

“Err.. um.. nothing..”

“Hmm? Well, just make sure the banquet is excellent. I am longing for that.”

She re-entered the spring and leaned against him. Longing for it? Her double-meanings were too much for him. He slouched down in the water so his nose was just barely over the surface, then closed his eyes.

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He would invite the men, she told him. And he had begun. He had sent letters to some of his male friends, inviting them to celebrate the opening of his shop. So far, it was just the few friends he had in Nyohhira.. and most of them were technically business associates.

But without hesitating, Holo had sent an invitation all the way out to Eve. If Eve was dragging everyone here, then Lawrence knew he had to make it worth their while. He'd also casually written a list of other names: Hildir from Diva company, Lou Loah the book dealer, Myuri of the Myuri mercenary band, Hugh the art dealer, Keeman of his former Rowen Guild, and the shepherd named Huskins. Furthest of all was Mark, whose shop was in the same town Diana lived in.

He had even unconsciously begun writing Amarti's name, but stopped dead in his tracks. Of the many men who showed interest in Holo over the years, Amarti was the only one bold enough to openly express his love. He wasn't a friend at all.. he was Lawrence's biggest enemy since he met Holo. Lawrence hoped God wouldn't think ill of him as he crossed Amarti's name off his list.

There were other remote people he had to invite anyhow: Jakob, who managed the Rowen guild branch in Ruvineigen, Weiz, the moneychanger in Pazzio, and Richten Marlheit, who had helped Lawrence free Holo so long ago. All of them warranted more formal invitations, and most of them would be at the formal celebration.

“Wow..”

Lawrence was sitting at his desk, staring at the parchment listing the names. He sighed, noting how many people he was able to list just off the top of his head. Many of these people had changed his life. If they hadn't, he wouldn't be here now, and when he thought about it he had also helped steer the course of their lives. Lawrence often felt proud that he had made it this far on his own with Holo, but it was plain as the nose on his face that he had been walking a tightrope. He thanked God for bringing them all together at the right time. His expression remained grim until he opened his eyes and saw all of those names again.

“Who else?”

Most of them wouldn't have trouble accepting, but they all had their own lives to lead and Nyohhira was practically at the northern edge of the world. Just the messenger's fees would be painful. There was always the chance of accidents occurring on the way to Nyohhira, too, and if he didn't carefully invite everyone, he would never live it down. He could hear it now: “you know that guy opened his own inn, and invited all his friends and family.. but he forgot all about me.” Just the thought made Lawrence cringe.

“I should ask her to make sure I don't miss anyone..”

Lawrence couldn't help but grumble.

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After two days of thinking, Lawrence decided to send invitations to three groups of people: those who could take a few months off of work if they willed it, those with moody temperaments, and those with important secrets like Huskins and Marlheit. Having sent the invitations, he finally found himself looking forward to holding this banquet. He wasn't expecting that Eve would really show up, but she was still invited. As Holo said, all he had to do was make sure the banquet was worth attending.

Thankfully, he had enough money saved up. Everyone's trip should be memorable, even if Lawrence was facing trouble when they all finally congregated. Even Delink's owner had requested that Lawrence call him over when he opened his shop, implying that he would support Lawrence financially if he needed help to hold the celebration. Not many people in Nyohhira had friends in such places. Mr. Diva joined Hildir in expressing their thanks and offering their help.

Lawrence politely declined everyone's help - he didn't want to be too dependent on them. Instead, he borrowed all his funding from Keeman and the Rowen guild.. only for that accident with the merchant trade fleet to happen. In the end Keeman himself had to bow to Diva and ask for their aid. Thankfully Keeman had managed to recover from that as things stabilized, and Lawrence had just enough savings to make it through that tough time.

His wallet was now fat, and he was happy even if it was all borrowed money. This way, he didn't have to worry about saving it, just making sure the feast was a success. Even the other guests in Nyohhira would turn their eyes on his place if he did so. After all, Holo was right: they would see how lavishly he treated his patrons. He had to make sure the food was top rate. Alas, he knew very little about cooking, so he didn't know what ingredients and prices would really be necessary, let alone what special dishes to serve.

“Just list whatever you feel is necessary.”

He turned to Holo to list the dishes she felt had to be included. Both she and Hannah were eating walnuts, though he had no idea where those nuts came from.

“..Anything?”

Holo wasn't playing around. It had been a while since he'd seen her react that seriously. He took a moment to mentally prepare himself before nodding.

“Truly?”

Her confirmation made Hannah look over at Lawrence, as if to say, “this is your last chance to escape, boss.” Hannah should know; she always pinched every penny she could to offset Holo's expensive taste in food. She had gained that taste on her trip with Lawrence, so he knew he

couldn't really blame anyone but himself.. but all he did was take a deeper breath and nod again.

“Yes, yes, whatever you desire.”

She knew that if she went too far and wrote “honey-pickled peaches” or something ridiculous, he'd just scratch it off. He'd made that obvious by handing her cheaper paper instead of parchment. She looked up with a smile.

“I am not as foolish as you seem to think.”

She continued after he handed her the paper and a pen.

“It would hardly be fun to kill all my prey at once.”

If she was willing to joke like that, then Lawrence was optimistic that she wouldn't go overboard. Hannah, however, sighed.

“I hope you'll still be able to pay me.”

Her serious tone was offset by her smile and the fact that she was watching Holo's wagging tail. She did it just so Lawrence would squirm, and made that obvious by smiling up at him.

“But if you're in the red, I'll pitch in by donating my time.”

“That's much appreciated.”

The very instant he finished thanking Hannah, Holo shouted “ink!” and Hannah stood on a chair to take it off the top shelf of the bookcase.

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Beer, cider, grape wine, honey wine, brandy, vodka, whiskey.. even kumis. Lawrence had no idea where Holo had even heard of kumis. Probably one of the many travelers from far in the east had tipped her off. Her list of meat was even more exotic. The expected mutton, veal, beef, pickled beef, rabbit, pork, chicken, geese, and pheasants were there, but also things like quail and peacocks.

“Just how am I supposed to get peacock?”

Peacocks were revered in many areas, so hunting them for meat was forbidden. Even a king would have trouble poaching them. Not many had ever tasted one. And yet, Holo at least put a note beside the word “peacock” - “if possible.” She even placed a similar one next to “quail” - “would be nice..” She seemed to know just how much she was asking for.

Her list of seafood was quite basic: pike, carp, and eel. Mostly freshwater things, probably because only pickled and smoked seafood from the ocean was readily available in the winter so she was probably tired of those. Lawrence had half a mind to make a show of crossing them all out and writing “pickled herring” instead.

She included “fish tails” as well, presumably the delicacy from Lenos. That should be doable, since people went to Lenos all the time. Next on her list came fruits and vegetables. “Please God, let it be reasonable” was the only thought running through his head. He looked at the list, and stopped breathing.

“Oranges? Lemons? Where have you had those?”

Lawrence had only heard of them by the rumor that a great merchant ship sold them at the southernmost port on the continent. They were foods from the desert, and he had no idea what they looked like. The other items - figs, strawberries, blueberries, gooseberries, peaches, apples, and pears - were ones he could at least find, even if they had to be dried or soaked in honey this time of year.

His eyes moved on to the nuts, grains, and other bits on her list. She was just listing everything she'd ever heard of.. wasn't she? Lawrence passed the list on to Hannah to see whether she could haggle with Holo. Hannah was the one that knew how to haggle Holo down on the meat, at least.

“You forgot meatballs.”

But she only added another item, one that Holo had asked Hannah to prepare on many occasions. Holo had even tried asking Lawrence, so this was certainly the best time to treat her to them. But.. making meatballs in Nyohhira? Lawrence sank into thought. They would be expensive, because only salted meat was available at the market here. He would just have to roll up his sleeves.

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Lawrence had decided to stop thinking about the expensive food and move on to the others items on their agenda. They needed a musician for a proper banquet, for starters.

“Oh, her?”

When Lawrence asked Cole to try to hire a certain musician, Cole was stunned.

“But it took so much effort to smooth things over with her..”

She was the woman who tried to win Lawrence's heart. It had been difficult, but she was the best musician they knew.

“Yes, please invite her on my behalf.”

“..”

Cole kept leafing through a book he had borrowed from someone visiting Nyohhira, making it painfully obvious that he didn't want to do it. Ultimately he agreed, but all the girls in troupes liked to chat with Cole; he'd decided to avoid them out of his desire to become a priest. Of course, his decision only made them pursue him even more forcefully, so a sly “God will forgive you” from Lawrence wasn't enough to convince him this time.

“Have you made arrangements with the workers?”

Craftsmen generally traveled south in the winter to continue working, and would only return after the thaw. Lawrence had somehow managed to convince them to remain this time so he could open his shop in the spring.

“Yeah, things should match up fine with the invitations we sent. They'll be here soon enough, too, so we've got to get cracking.”

“I see. Ah, that reminds me.. we need bedding for all the guests. Was Ms. Eve really coming? It wouldn't do to have her sleep on hay..”

Eve was an influential merchant now, so they felt compelled to have a full ensemble for her: a marble base for the bed, lavish pillows, and silk bed sheets. Norah would surely settle for a regular bed with regular bed sheets, but it wouldn't do to treat their guests discriminately. This was one of the reasons such celebrations were so painful to set up.

“Why don't we try borrowing some of Mr. Morris' beds?”

“Hmm..”

It was a great idea, since Morris had all sorts of furniture fit for wealthy patrons.

“Let me think it over..”

“We also have to consider their reception.. we don't know if their carriage can make it up the hill in this snow, and we don't even know exactly when they're arriving.”

“You're right!”

Lawrence hadn't thought about that. Their carriage might be able to make it, but if it was from the south then it might struggle to get through the snow. They really ought to prepare a sleigh, and see to it that their carriage was taken care of. It would be tricky without knowing when they were arriving.

“We'll need guards too, won't we? Would it be wise to ask Myuri? I'm guessing he's invited too?”

Lawrence raised his head as soon as Cole mentioned that.

“Yeah.. that's an option..”

“Then please make sure his invitation is customized. I expect it'll be enough to just send a letter to Lenos for Eve, since if she's really coming she'll definitely go that way. She knows her way around the north, after all.”

Cole really had a handle on these kinds of things. Lawrence would be lost without his help. He dearly wished Cole could work for him and help him manage the inn, but of course Cole wasn't his apprentice.

“Alright, I'll leave the rest to you.”

“Understood.”

Cole replied politely, despite bearing most of the responsibility for organizing the banquet. But Lawrence had to deal with the craftsmen working on the inn, so he prepared himself and headed down the snowy path to the main street in Nyohhira. When the workers were present it was always lively in the inn. Otherwise, it was just a large place that only had Lawrence, Holo, Cole and Hannah living in it. It felt a bit.. empty.

Holo was very territorial, but she didn't have a problem with patrons. In fact, she seemed to be looking forward to them opening their inn, and openly admitted that she liked livelier places. However, the winter had passed, and spring was underway, so Holo was getting sick of the noisy workers. In fact, she was always holed up in her room now, and wasn't eating much.

He was worried that she truly was ill this time. He thought that she perhaps eaten too much salty food in the winter. Catching a cold wasn't rare, but her mood was usually better after the season for fresh vegetables arrived. This year, more people had been absent from the town meetings, and everyone seemed quite thin and worn out after the winter. Despite that, the myth that the hot springs cured all illness curiously persisted.

Things had gotten to the point where Lawrence had begun rinsing the salt off their food, and asked Hannah to season as little as possible.. which Holo of course hated. Perhaps she just came to negatively associate it with the overly noisy atmosphere, but after so many meals consisting of porridge, she couldn't keep it down anymore. The best she could handle was bite-sized bits of bread soaked in goat's milk. Even wine was out of the question. She had to be in trouble.

His worries were looming over his head. Hannah was saying nothing, and acting as though Holo could stand to learn a little from actually falling ill. Despite that, Holo believed in Hannah, which only made Lawrence wish he could do more. He felt pretty useless. Time was flying by as he did his best to care for her, and he was juggling the organization of the workers with the preparations for the coming banquet.

Not long after that, after the solstice, they finally received a letter from Eve. She had made it all the way to Sovereign, and it seemed as though she had missed the letter Cole suggested they send to Lenos. But at least Eve had still sent them a message from Sovereign, so at things were proceeding smoothly with their guests.

If they were in Sovereign already, then they would arrive before Saint Arozury's Day, but Lawrence should still manage to have things prepared for them even if they arrived at that time. Nevertheless, his reply was: "even if you take in the sights and sounds, you'll still be just in time." Thinking that a bit too obvious, he also added that he was surprised they all decided to show up.

He figured they'd get a good chuckle out of that, since they were all invited. He wondered if he ought to casually ask them if Holo told them why they had been invited, but laughed that idea off. It was far too stupid to write, and Holo was eyeing him suspiciously.

"Well, our guests will be safely here soon enough."

Letters from Marlheit, Mark, and the others had already arrived a few days ago, with all of them safely in Lenos. They were probably on their way from Lenos the moment they sent that letter, so they could even meet Eve in Sovereign. Well, maybe that was a bit of a stretch. Holo looked up at him, leaning back in his chair with the letter on his knees, and gave him a meek nod.

"But I am still sick.."

She spoke softly.

"There's still time. You'll just have to focus on getting well before they arrive."

Her eyes slowly closed, but she gave him no sign of a response. She just raised her chin and looked at the fireplace. Even sick, Holo was Holo. She became a weak little princess when she felt like being pampered. Lawrence handed her the letter and gently rubbed her head.

She used to shy away from having her head rubbed, but lately she almost seemed to crave it. She finally began reading when he finished rubbing her. She wasn't good at writing, but reading was a different matter. He wondered if she still remembered how much trouble they went through when she lied about not being able to read, but she sniffed it first and softly laughed.

“She is quite angry.”

“Hmm?”

She smiled and returned the letter right away.

“You mean Eve?”

Holo stared at Lawrence for his question, then laughed. Her eyes slowly closed again, with a look that screamed “you still understand nothing, you fool.” Her good mood made him fearful, especially with her tail wagging like she had just had a good dream.

“How is the inn?”

She changed the topic. She had to be keeping a secret. She always made sure he was the one talking when she was unwell, at least ever since their travels ended. Back then, they always argued more when she was under the weather.

“It's coming along alright. The frame's all set, and we're about eighty percent of the way there. We'll be able to put on the finishing touches by the time it stops snowing.”

“What a pity that I cannot see all of that hard work.”

Watching the workers do their jobs was a wise decision, but it didn't help the workers do their jobs any better. After all, it just meant someone watching them and not doing any real work. They had their own ways of doing things, and they traveled far and wide to bring their varying skills everywhere. That kind of expertise made them stubborn, and hard to organize. It took a lot of money, and making sure everything was ready for them. If Cole wasn't around, Lawrence might have given up entirely. He deeply appreciated all of his help. And now.. it was almost over. Their first guests were on the way. Holo may feel bad about it, but Lawrence felt nothing but pride.

“Don't you worry about that; we've still got other buildings to raise.”

A profiting merchant would always expand their business, after all. Holo sighed and pinched his nose. She might be weak now, but her mind was still incredibly sharp.

“Wh- what was that for?”

Holo smiled at his protests.

“Just consider it a lesson. You still have much to learn.”

Her hand only released his nose after she had enough of tormenting him.

“We have only made it here step by step. You always see the forest, but never the trees, am I right?”

He expected that she would blame something on him, but her words seemed to seek common ground.

“Yes?”

He could only agree.

“Mhm.”

She gave him a satisfied nod before softly continuing.

“That carelessness may wind up giving you quite a shock.”

“Huh?”

She smiled at his response and waved her hands as if to say “nothing.”

“Incidentally.. how about *those* things?”

She opened her eyes and shot him a fierce look. He couldn't shrink back from that stare.

“Those things?”

“Those things. Will you have them ready?”

Her face was so grim that it was clear that she was worried, but as her eyes softened that look melted away to expose how she really felt. She now had the same gentle look she wore while laughing - one of her most charming expressions. There weren't many who could conceal their thoughts as well as she could, but there also weren't many who could express their thoughts so clearly with only their faces. Lawrence hadn't seen that face in a while, so he instinctively reached out to fondly caress it.

“There's no doubt in my mind that I'm able to keep up with the best of merchants in that regard.”

One of her eyes closed, like a dog having its head scratched. She probably felt it was beneath the Wisewolf to wag her tail just because her face was being caressed.

“That only puts us in graver peril!”

“It's no different from building a wall out of stones. Such is how a future is built.”

He easily responded to her challenge, and won a spiteful look from her in turn. She quickly sighed and stuck her tongue out at him.

“If only you could complete such a wall.”

“I could, if a certain someone could restrain herself at the hot springs.”

This time her nose was being pinched. He had once been terrified of her abandoning him for talking back, but now he didn't fear that at all (even after their most heated of arguments). Holo's amber eyes stared at him like they accused him of not truly caring about her, but he just stared right back with confidence. Her ears soon drooped and her tail shrank back. She pulled her knees to her chest and held them in her arms. Even a beast was admitting failure when they averted their eyes, but a beast wouldn't pout like she did.

“That is because it is too cold when I stand up to leave the spring.”

She was staring at him again.

“Then don't stand up, and you won't be cold.”

Holo didn't want to go home to Yoitsu, because she knew what it must look like now. According to the books in Tereo's church, the wolves who were her kin, having been attacked by the Moon-Hunting Bear, had fled to all corners of the world. Not one of them had come forth since then to seek her out, and their names had all been lost to time. The truth was harsh. Going to Yoitsu wasn't necessary for her anymore. Of course, it was still a question in the back of both of their minds. Holo could use excuses all she wanted, but she thought about Yoitsu from time to time. Her clan was no longer the one in power. They had been forced into exile.

It wasn't as though Lawrence would be there to see her final moments. He had no choice but to leave the world before she did. She was strong enough to not just know that, but also prepare for it, so all Lawrence could really do was make sure that the springs didn't dry up after he was gone. That was why he wanted to build a wall around them, one with music and food. A happy merchant was one whose products were in demand, and one who heard nothing but satisfaction from their customers.

“The spring has not been hot enough lately; even if it has not gone cold just yet.”

That was all she could muster. It made him want to spell out in full detail just what lengths he went to every day for her sake, but he knew he was her merchant to agitate.

“I'm quite sorry to hear that.”

He hugged her in lieu of using words. She slowly took a deep breath in his arms, even deeper than when she was smelling a tasty meal, making him wonder if she found him tastiest of all. He

knew it was dumb, but if she wanted him to salt and oil himself so she could eat him before he died, rather than being buried, he would do so. He only released her when she had fallen asleep.

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“About that..”

On cold mornings, Holo usually stopped Lawrence from getting out of bed when he wanted to. Today was no exception; in fact she was even groggier than usual.

“That? Oh.. hmm?”

“Want to give it a look? It might be nice to put it up before the feast.”

Lawrence was asking her about something made in Sovereign that was now on its way to Nyohhira. She lost herself in thought for a while, then gave a brief reply before resting her head on his chest and sighing.

“No need.”

Lawrence smiled at how lightly she brushed it off, but it seemed she was being honest. She yawned.

“Now that it is growing warmer I only wish to sleep.”

Even when she was groggy, she was still the Wisewolf.

“That's just like you.”

After his exclamation, she twisted her body around and reached out her hands.

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Pick me up.”

He wasn't embarrassed by such things. In fact his natural merchant's inclination had been to demand such things from her anyhow, so he picked her up. He suspected it would quite a while before he tired of it, but then a strange thought crossed his mind. She looked younger than he did, but up until now his thoughts were devoted to her well-being.. but what about his?

He'd only recently begun to appreciate what aging truly meant. Sure, he felt quite healthy now, and he knew he could travel and trade if he put his mind to it, but before he knew it he would be "old." It would look like he was holding his grandchild in his arms. Would she come to expect this treatment as a matter of course, then blame him when he could no longer lift her up? He

didn't like that thought; he fought to maintain his composure, but shot her an annoyed reply.

“Why does the Wisewolf cry to be picked up so much?”

Her arms were wrapped around his body, and her eyes were squinting happily.

“If I did not cry, would you still comfort me?”

Her ears and tail flicked around playfully as he held her. They could still afford these kinds of games, so he knew he should just enjoy it. Time wasn't going to slow down or come chasing after them. He opted to kiss the tips of her ears and gracefully lay her back into bed.

~~~

Things were very local in town; the roads were narrow, there were no inspectors, and everyone ran a similar business. They all knew he was planning a private function. Back when he was a traveling merchant he never dreamed he'd have such a vast social network, but now he understood what it was like. He didn't have to like it, but he was going to be the focus of everyone's attention. He had to bear his hosting duties with pride.

“What is the matter?”

Holo inquired as he scanned his eyes around the decorated hall. She had finally recovered, and probably because they found what foods she was able to keep down. In fact, she was hungrier than ever.

“I've finally made it this far!”

Holo laughed at his joke.

“Are you crying on the inside?”

“..”

He looked down at her and sighed.

“Let me put on a strong front, will you?”

“Oh~ho~”

She clasped her hands behind her back and leaned her face down against his arm.

“Yes, you have certainly had to try time and time again to open a shop.”

It had taken him several tries to get this far. He still remembered how angrily she scolded him,

even making him sell her in order to not give up his dream. All of that flighty behavior of hers had lead up to this point, with the two of them looking around the banquet hall. Fine tables and chairs, lovely drapes on the walls.. everything was immaculately set up to receive the most prestigious of guests.

All the utensils were silverware. All the jugs and vases were brass; sure they might be "fake gold," but brass yielded a cheerier atmosphere compared to the depressing gloom of gold. Lawrence had expected an uphill battle to find flowers during this season, but Hannah managed to find enough blossoming to decorate the hall with them.

It was silent now, but this hall would soon spring to life as one traveler after the other safely arrived. An independent merchant for 13 years, he was finally opening his own inn as tears fell from the eyes of his companion.

"You should have invited your mentor."

Holo seemed to grow emotional as she counted off the guests they had invited. Lawrence shrugged and smiled.

"That weirdo would only spend the whole time complaining."

"Would you like to go see him?"

Despite her question, he knew that the moment he showed signs of wanting to travel again, she wouldn't know whether to be angry or just cry. His faithful horse of many years had even been disobedient when he tried to help Cole move goods around town for the banquet. And so, in lieu of answering, he placed his hand on her head and pulled her to him.

"Is that a no?"

She looked him in the eyes for not even giving her a proper answer.

"I have a long way to go before I have a place big enough to satisfy my mentor."

".."

Holo's ears flicked to and fro, as if they were searching for his aim. Her eyes narrowed, as if trying to read his emotional state. He realized that the fact she was doing that was because he didn't sound confident in his reply.

"More importantly.."

He realized what he had to say when he considered how she felt about Yoitsu. He remembered traveling with his mentor, and taking a dangerous mountain path to make it to a large town. As the exhausted young Lawrence was falling asleep in the inn they reached, his mentor told him

he had to step out for a while.. and never returned. He took his goods, and Lawrence never saw him again.

Some said his mentor had heavy debts, others said he found himself a bride. Either way, Lawrence still worried that he had been nothing but a burden to him, until one day all of his mentor's deeds and most of his money found their way to Lawrence. It was strange; perhaps the man had become an ascetic monk, or opted to quietly retire somewhere. At least, Lawrence hoped that was the case.

“..I have a long way to go before I'm successful enough for you to stop laughing at me.”

“You know I will laugh at you no matter what happens.”

“Then I guess I'm in for a *really* long struggle.”

He scratched his cheek and turned away.

“But I guess that's what makes life interesting.”

The traveling merchant in him did feel that was true; he had to chase profits like they were the moon hanging in the sky. That way, once he caught them it would feel like he caught the moon itself.

“It is because you are blessed with my presence.”

There was no trace of embarrassment in her voice, so he picked up her hand and kissed it like she was a princess.

“Verily.”

“Just as I am blessed with this good life because of you.”

She laughed and put on an indomitable expression, earning a shrug from him.

“Verily.”

Her tail wagged as she chuckled, and just then Cole entered the hall. Given the prestige of this banquet, he had set aside his usual ratty clothes and put on a set of priestly robes Hannah had sewn for him. His hair, on the other hand, was simply tied back with a red band.. it was futile to try harder, because all of the dancers and musicians would be playing with his hair anyhow. He panted a moment before shouting out.

“They're all coming!”

It looked like he'd run all the way up the main street. Holo and Lawrence looked at each other

and nodded, then stepped outside. It had become sunny of late, so in such heavy clothing they would be sweaty in no time.

“After all of those cloudy days, it hurts to open my eyes in this light.”

“Are you alright?”

“That is why there are tears in my eyes, you see.”

“I hadn't noticed.”

“Fool.”

Cole closed the door, smiling the way he usually did when the two of them bantered like this.

“Oh right.. Mr. Lawrence!”

“Yes?”

Cole was under the eaves, surrounded by ladders and hammers that had been purposely left there.

“Mr. Myuri should be bringing *that* with him.. what should we do with it? Announce it when the banquet starts, or just hang it right away?”

They were standing at the main entrance of their inn, which for various reasons was still incomplete. Lawrence mulled over Cole's question for a while before finally responding.

“Let's hang it right away. This is where it belongs, after all.”

“Right.. it would make a more dramatic impact here.”

Cole was still easy to work with. He'd saved Lawrence a great deal of trouble by always preparing things in advance.

“You really are dependable.”

Holo smiled to show off her fangs, as if accusing Lawrence of being jealous.

“You seem happy to lose to a child.”

Seeing that wolf-like look on her face was increasingly rare, so rather than being unnerved by it, Lawrence felt it made her look even more beautiful.

“You seem happy to be fatter these days.”

His evil reply earned his foot a fierce stomping fit for him to yelp in pain.

“Fool!”

“Ah, Mr. Myuri! How good to see you! How was your trip?”

Cole was shocked at the events unfolding before his eyes, and ran off to welcome Myuri as Holo laughed and Lawrence remained silent.

“I wonder how we must look right now?”

Holo was happily musing as if nothing at all had happened; Lawrence was going to voice a protest, but decided to take the high ground.

“How else? Like a happy couple.”

“Mhm~”

She replied with a nod.

~~~

Lawrence had only given Hugh a rough outline of what he wanted, and Hugh then created a proper design.. an elegant one. Lawrence then sent it to Sovereign, where Milicky had it built. Lawrence had intended to ask someone else, but Holo firmly insisted on Milicky. Of course, that meant Milicky was able to request an invitation to their inn's unveiling.

Milicky was the child of a spirit and a human, and had outlived his own wife. He now watched over her final resting place, so he likely had some choice thoughts to share with Holo on such an event. The two of them saw eye to eye, and even sent each other gifts of wine from time to time.

Lawrence's project was well-suited for the furnace in Sovereign, where the first of Diva's gold coins had been minted. They had been there when the furnace was relit; it was the same time that he and Holo had sworn to continue walking side by side for good. The best silversmiths were in Sovereign, so it stood to reason that they were the best-suited place for this task.

After all, he and Holo wanted it to be perfect. They were quite anxiously waiting to see how it turned out, this signboard for their inn that would be hung up above the main entrance for the first time today.

“Mr. Lawrence, Ms. Holo!”

It was Moid, the tall and prominent staff sergeant of the Myuri Mercenaries, who spoke first,

but Myuri looked taller and stronger since they last saw him. There even seemed to be an aura glowing around him, owing to the sun being behind him. The illusion made Lawrence smile involuntarily.

“Long time no see.”

Myuri spoke calmly as he extended his right hand to Lawrence, then shook his hand forcefully. He would have knelt down in front of Holo, but she stopped him. He was from Yoitsu, and had succeeded her old friend's name, but Holo didn't want to see him give her respect that way even if she was the symbol on his band's flag. He settled for kissing her hand instead.

“You are becoming a fine male.”

“Thank you.”

She was grateful that his family had long kept a secret message for her, and was of course proud of the descendants of her old friend.

“It seems women only grow more beautiful with each passing..”

Holo cut him off.

“..?”

“Ho, ho, ho..”

She laughed and tilted her head before looking away at the carriage behind him.

“Is it there?”

“Ah.. yes. Hey, you!”

Myuri wasn't very experienced with such things, even if he was now old enough to no longer be called “the young master.”

“We were more careful with this than any of our previous jobs.”

The increased number of wounds on his face made his smile look rather frightening. He'd survived many dangerous situations, and at this rate he would be even more intimidating than Moid when he made it to that age.

“Shall we hang it now?”

“No, let us wait for the others.”

Holo directed her next words at Lawrence.

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance, after all.. just as we planned.”

“Understood. Then let's just have a sneak peek for now.”

It was a gigantic metallic oval of a sign. A grown man could barely lift it. Putting some sort of image on it would be overdoing it, so Lawrence specifically asked to just have their shop's name carved onto it.

“What do you guys think of it?”

Lawrence asked Myuri and Moid as they effortlessly held up the sign.

“It's.. almost too perfect. We were shocked.”

“Here's hoping you'll think the same of my inn.”

For the first time ever, Myuri and Moid openly laughed at one of his jokes.

“After all, I made sure it would be good enough to relax even the toughest of mercenaries.”

“Hey! Everyone's on their way!”

Despite his words, Lawrence instantly grew nervous when he heard Moid shout out. He saw people coming up the slope between the trees. Eve, Norah, and the other women were first. He couldn't believe all five of them actually came. He couldn't fathom why they would show up, but.. well as long as Holo was happy.

He still hadn't figured out what had made her so angry a while back, so he decided to just bury the issue. After all, he didn't want their banquet to be spoiled by something like that. Only mirth was welcome at a celebration like this.

“Oh, that is right..”

Holo suddenly started talking as they held hands, preparing to welcome their guests.

“Hmm?”

“I really should have asked you before..”

“What?”

What had he missed this time?

“Well, the name..”

“Huh?”

Lawrence didn't get it, so he continued.

“But we chose the name already, didn't we? I mean, I guess we can change it, but it looked like you really liked the name-”

Holo flashed him a glare and he stopped. It wasn't anger in her eyes. Nor sadness, nor surprise. In fact, the sweet smile that spread across her face only made him even more nervous, because he couldn't quite understand why she was so happy.

“I.. don't get it.”

He chose honesty.

“You really do not, do you?”

He look up at the sky, then back at her. She laughed, said “oh my,” and then sighed.

“When you failed to notice something so obvious, I thought you were acting the fool.”

His mind was in tatters. What was she talking about? Their guests were arriving, and he wasn't in any shape to think about such things right now. There was Weiz, and the dog that was always at his master's side, Enek. Everyone walking up the slope was precious to him, but he all he could do was stare past them, lost in amazement. Surely she didn't mean-

“Are you serious?!”

He was practically screaming at her, and everyone stopped talking when they heard him. What kind of welcome was this? Everyone glared at him darkly until Holo laughed. Still holding his one hand, she reached over and placed his other one on her belly.

“It seems you are no longer confused why I wanted everyone to come.”

Her answer was punctuated by her squinting as though she was fighting back tears of joy. Every muscle in her face was put into her smile.

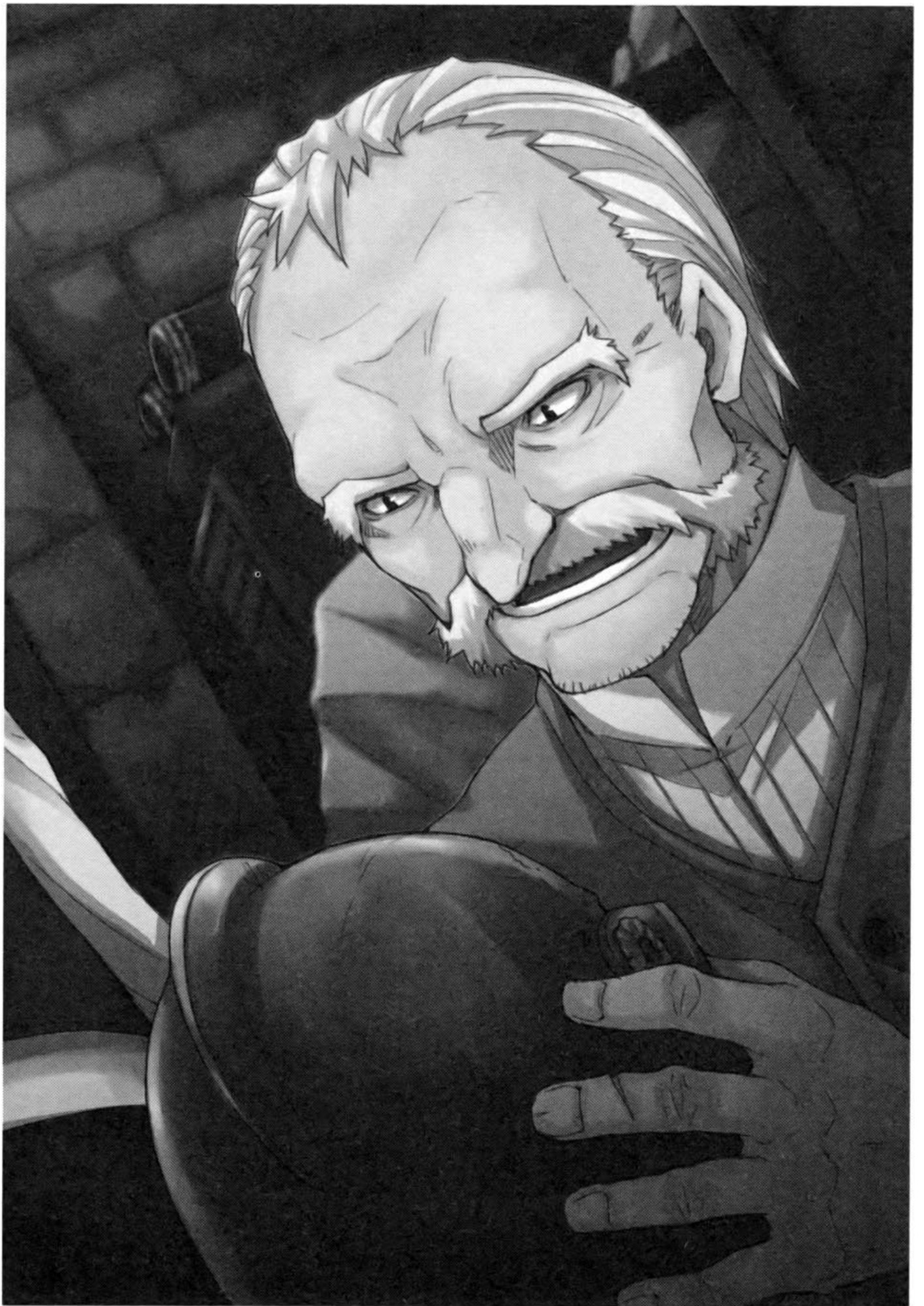
“We must show off!”

Dignity was the furthest thing from her mind as she rose up on her tiptoes and raised her chin. He never expected her to act this way in public, and was already hearing the inevitable screams of his future child ringing in his mind, but rather than sighing he grabbed Holo tightly in his arms, feeling like the luckiest man alive.

That was how the legendary hot springs resort “Spice and Wolf” was first unveiled to the public.







Traveling Merchant and the Dark Grey Knight

It was amazing how quickly an abandoned building would deteriorate. Windows broke, the floors warped, the roof collapsed. Even this formerly-impressive roof now offered less cover from the rain than it once had. At least the foundation of this building was solid, so the walls and floor were still intact. Lawrence had taken shelter from the rain here, forced to tie his horse to a nearby pillar so he could light a fire in what cover remained. He could see the thick, dark clouds looming down on him through the holes in the roof.

“How is it possible for the fire to not be lit yet?”

A thin girl walked over to him, splashing the water off of her robe. She too had taken shelter in the building, appearing every bit like a loyal nun living the life of a saint.. at least until she quickly began disrobing in front of him. Her long auburn hair made her seem almost like a noblewoman, save for the pair of canine ears on her head. Behind her waist was a matching tail, betraying that she was no ordinary maiden. Lawrence had been an independent merchant for seven years, but the girl with him now was centuries older: the self-titled Wisewolf.

“Sure must be nice to complain and wring out your robe while others are doing all the work.”

Starting a fire basically meant sparking some flint over dry grass, then spreading that flame to large bits of hay, and finally firewood. Having wrung her robe out, Holo put it back on just as Lawrence was lighting hay. She regarded him coolly.

“I guess the flames of your wrath aren't going to speed this up after all.”

Holo didn't respond to his teasing. She ignored him entirely and knelt down beside the fire, warming her hands as he carved off bits of wood with his dagger. It wasn't long before the fire was burning quite fiercely.

“That was a close one, wasn't it?”

Lawrence continued the conversation as he carved a few thin branches.

“Well, nobody asked a certain fool of a merchant to refrain from loading his wagon down with heavy goods. No small wonder we were slowed down to the point that I was almost forced to sleep in the rain.”

She spread a tanned animal hide blanket on the ground and laid down on it. She was talking about the salted herring that Lawrence's friend had strong-armed him into delivering on his behalf several days ago. Carting such goods around was slow-going and (as if to mock them)

they were finally caught in the rain. But what Holo truly despised was the pungent herring. She had to rest here, either sleeping or tending to her fur while her nose wrinkled at the smell.

“I guess we reap what we sow.”

Having sharpened the wooden sticks, Lawrence then pulled out a few fish from their cargo and skewered them for roasting. As part of their payment, they were allowed to eat up to ten of them. Lawrence considered putting more effort into cooking the rare treat. He wanted to wrap them in tree bark and cook them in a fire pit, with onions, garlic, and maybe some cream. But that would be too delicious. He knew that Holo would never be able to accept anything less than that, and it would be on her mind every time they ate. Prudence was the way to go.

“Mmm.. at least these fish smell good after being roasted.”

Her tail was wagging as she listened to the greasy fish crackling in the fire. Lawrence smiled as he dumped all the trimmings from his carving into the fire.

“At least we won't have to worry about the smell attracting too much wildlife. Except any mice that live here, I'll wager.”

As the fish roasted Holo kept reaching out to sample it. Each time she touched one, she then licked the salty oil off of her finger. She truly looked like a puppy as she did that, but of course Lawrence wouldn't dare to risk saying that out loud.

“Not likely. Only humans would live in a place like this.”

Having worked up her appetite, Holo was busily licking the salt off the herrings that weren't being cooked as she continued talking.

“I wonder why there is a fortress like this here to begin with..?”

She stared up at the hole-filled roof like a curious child. Her question wasn't asked to get an answer, but rather because it was strange to see an abandoned outpost like this. Anyone would marvel at the sight of it, especially if they were spending the night there.

“It makes me wonder how you knew it was here? The moment you realized it was going to rain, you immediately changed our course to come here, did you not?”

It seemed that licking the salt off the herring wasn't going to be enough for Holo. She took up one of the sharpened sticks and after a moment of nervous waiting, Lawrence watched her skewer the largest herring she could find as if to declare “this is mine.”

“I've been here before. Granted, I was lost on my first visit.”

Holo showed a face of understanding before looking around.

“Was it already in such disarray at that time?”

“No. It wasn't empty back then; it's really fallen apart since three years ago.”

Holo flipped over the fish as he spoke. It seemed like she couldn't wait much longer.

“Someone was living here?”

“Mhm. An odd man.”

Lawrence chuckled, but Holo didn't fail to notice the sigh he was concealing. She looked up at him inquisitively, and he looked up and shook his head.

“I mean, how could someone who isolated himself in the middle of nowhere *not* be odd?”

“Hmm.. I see..”

She looked at him, making it clear that what she really meant to say was “why were you sighing?” Lawrence could tell, but he kept his eyes glued on the fire.

“Was he that unpleasant?”

Her voice betrayed that she wasn't pleased, so Lawrence looked up. Her face didn't match the tone, however. She almost seemed sad.

“..Not really..”

Lawrence didn't want to tell this story to anyone, least of all Holo, but he knew that the harder he tried to hide it, the more she would want to find out. However, she seemed to sense his reluctance and opted to not press the issue. At least not directly; her ears still drooped down.

“You never wish to share your past with me.”

She snatched one of the fish, clearly being petulant on purpose. Lawrence didn't really have to tell her everything, after all. She just wanted to guilt him into sharing this one. To enhance the effect, she acted like she couldn't wait any longer and bit into the fish before it was ready. It was a big bite, too, so that oil was left oozing down her face. That meant he was going to have to wipe it off for her, and say something to keep her from teasing him about it.

“Wouldn't you rather hear about something less boring, to take your mind off this dismal trip?”

“If it is to take my mind off this dismal trip, then a boring and long story would be best.”

She had already eaten half the fish in a flash, and moved on to rudely gulping wine straight

from the bottle. She wasn't going to stop behaving like this until he told her the story; this was the closest to begging she was capable of. He put on his best expression of unwillingness, then sighed for good measure before holding his dagger over the fire.

“See this dagger?”

With that, his tale began.

“There are words etched onto it.”

It was a quality dagger. Any carpenter would be happy to have one like it. It had saved his life on several occasions, and proven its worth with many uses. That said, it really didn't suit a traveling peddler like Lawrence. Holo stuffed the rest of the fish in her mouth and scooted under his arm, studying the dagger like a nosy cat.

“Mmph mm mm may?”

She couldn't talk with the fish in her mouth, but she didn't need to for him to recognize that she wanted to know what the words were. He showed her the words as he read them out loud.

“God is merciful.”

Holo seemed surprised, probably because she expected something more grandiose was better-suited for a weapon. And she would be right; armor, hammers, broad swords and lances all had more interesting things to say. Only a dagger carried by knight would have something like this written on it. Even Lawrence had wondered about this practice, until he came to this outpost.

“The older a man gets, the more direct his words. They like to use the word ‘mercy’ on their daggers.”

Holo nodded, clearly interested. She turned the dagger under the firelight, then closed her eyes as though she had blinded herself.

“Hehe.. of course, I got this dagger from a pretty old guy.”

He received the dagger back from Holo and stared at it's aged hilt for a while. It had been three years. Back then, he never would have imagined he'd meet someone like Holo. He'd been lost that day, and was overjoyed when he stumbled across this place. Soon he came to realize it was the home of the Devil himself - and busy merchants like him didn't just throw titles like that around.

In fact, anyone who spotted an outpost like this on an empty plain would feel a sense of dread. Especially one on a lonely hill jutting up from the earth like a claw. It was like a little piece of hell on earth, like an executioner's domain. Even Lawrence thought he could see the Grim

Reaper floating around that place.

But Lawrence had pinched one too many pennies, and didn't buy enough food for his trip. He had eaten the last morsels on the previous night, and unlike a horse, he couldn't eat grass to survive. In fact he might have to kill his horse at this rate, and that just wasn't an option to him - traveling merchants viewed the loss of their horse as tantamount to declaring bankruptcy.

He was being punished by the Almighty for his success. At least that's what anyone in his circumstances would have felt, between their pangs of resentment and starvation. He was passing out at the time, so the welcome he received was a rude one indeed. It woke him up good and proper, like a huge bug had whizzed by his ears, and hit a tree behind him. But it was no bug. Lawrence instinctively jumped off his horse and hid under it: he was being shot at.

"I'm just a traveling merchant! I'm lost!"

His shout was answered by two more arrows, but the fact that they missed his horse showed the skill of his assailant. No further arrows flew after that, but that just meant he planned to shoot Lawrence when he got back out from under his horse. Lawrence couldn't budge an inch. Someone was approaching Lawrence, but not from the outpost - they had been hidden on the slope somewhere. Lawrence stole a cowardly glance from between his horse's legs and saw it was a man. The man then stopped.

"You say you're traveling merchant?"

The man's hoarse voice might have been an affect, but his old age was clearly no lie.

"Yes!"

The man knelt down when he heard that, and Lawrence finally saw that the man was shorter than his grizzled voice let on.

"Then thank God He averted that arrow.. it's lucky I didn't kill you!"

The man was smiling, but Lawrence wasn't sure what kind of smile it was. As the man rose to his feet again, he turned around. Lawrence was still wondering if he was safe when the man turned back around to face him again.

"Hey, what are you doing here anyway? You say you're lost?"

Lawrence slowly crept out from under his horse as the man pointed at the house on the hill.

"I don't mind letting you stay the night if you'll honor my request."

How could a lowly archer say that on behalf of the outpost? He spoke like he owned the place. And yet, as the man smiled to introduce himself, Lawrence noticed that he still didn't seem to

be missing any teeth - odd for his age.

“My name's Fred. I manage the Roam outpost on behalf of Count Richard Phil. I'm the one in charge here.”

He'd seen right through Lawrence. He looked up at the building and smiled, finally relaxing.

“That said, it's been a long time since I shot at a man.. good thing I missed.”

He laughed again before walking back up the slope. Lawrence watched his back for a while, both surprised and confused. He'd heard the name of Richard Phil, and knew he ruled the area. His name was famous because of his pride, but only innkeepers ever talked about him. Why would Fred be the lord here? Was he just a thief, like so many who squatted in abandoned buildings? But Fred didn't feel like a thief..

Someone who let his curiosity get the better of his profit-vs-loss calculations wasn't fit to be a merchant, and yet living too rigidly by such codes of conduct wasn't really a virtue either, so Lawrence eventually got up and pulled the arrows out of his wagon and drove behind Fred. The twisting path up to the outpost was certainly well-maintained, as were the sharpened poles poking out in places. They didn't seem like much more than a symbolic defence, but as soon as Lawrence walked through the gates he realized why.

There was nobody there.

“It's getting tough to climb up here at my age..”

As Lawrence stopped his wagon in the middle of the courtyard, he saw Fred place his bow on his back. Inside its walls, this place was nicely kept. There were storerooms, gardens, mangers, graves and a chapel - there were even fresh flowers on the altar of the chapel. The main building had two decks, and looked rather impressive.

Someone was obviously taking good care of this place. It looked like there should be people poking their heads out of every door and window right now, and yet Lawrence could feel no eyes on him as he tied his horse up. The only sounds were from pigs, hens, and a few sheep. It was eerily quiet here, like all the other soldiers had abandoned their posts.

“You know, I didn't believe you at first, but you really do look pretty haggard.”

Fred finally spoke up again as they walked around. There was no reason to lie now, so Lawrence replied honestly.

“Yeah, I haven't eaten anything substantial in two days.”

“Ah, I see.. but maybe that's for the best, since I get to show off this way. I've got some nice

cuts of fresh meat, and Paula even laid eggs this morning..”

Fred walked into the building muttering to himself. It was a common habit for older people, but Lawrence got the impression that he was exceptionally lonely. He followed Fred indoors, where he caught a glimpse of an immaculately tidy kitchen.

“This way please.”

Lawrence walked past the still-hot stove into a room far inside the building, where he was greeted by an old wooden table and chairs. As he sat down on one of those chairs, it creaked.. but despite his nervousness it was able to support him.

“Oh, it's strong enough for you? I guess I'm getting pretty good at this.”

Fred wasn't much like a lord, given how much he seemed to enjoy physical labor. Of course, that was a foregone conclusion the moment he attacked a visitor and then lead him home personally. It didn't suit this place to be called an “outpost.”

“Ah, relax. It's just you and me here.”

Lawrence had heard tales his whole life about beautiful women living on their own in forest dwellings. They were always a witch, spirit, or the Devil trying to trick travelers.. never kindly souls. But Lawrence had never heard about such stories with old men firing arrows. It didn't feel right to mix Fred up with those stories at all.

“You've been living here on your own?”

Fred smiled in a suspicious manner, but it came across more as one of self-mockery than anything else.

“Back when I was first stationed here, it was with five other brave souls. But one by one they left, until I was the only one here.”

“Was there a war?”

Fred's face grew grim, making Lawrence wonder if he's said something he shouldn't have, but just then Fred laughed.

“Hahaha! I wish! I've been here for decades, and the only battles I've seen are with hungry lost travelers like yourself!”

He laughed a little longer, then stared at Lawrence.

“So you'd best be careful! If you eat too much here, you'll never want to leave!”

With another laugh, he ran off to the kitchen. Lawrence knew this place wasn't hell, but he still had his doubts.

“What an odd place.”

~~~

It was a bit early for dinner, but Fred still prepared a platter of meat and eggs fried in oil along with large bits of vegetables. The wheat bread he set down was probably freshly-baked as well, given how soft it was. Even the beer must have been brewed in the outpost: Lawrence could tell from a few sips that the spices he'd seen in the garden were used to brew it. It was a sumptuous feast indeed, and Lawrence didn't even have to worry about poison: Fred was already way ahead of him, drinking happily and showing an appetite that didn't quite suit his age.

“How can I not be happy to eat with someone else for a change? Come on, someone as young as you should be digging in already! Especially with the beer!”

Lawrence couldn't help but be irritated. He ended up eating the food so quickly that even Fred was surprised.

“Ah, too much..”

Fred used the dagger he sliced the meat and bread with to carve himself a toothpick. Just like Lawrence thought, he evoked more of a tough, old farmer's aura than the lord of an outpost. In fact he didn't seem like a noble or knight at all. As they ate, he'd pestered Lawrence with questions: “Where'd you come from? What do you trade in? Where do you live? Are you married?” Lawrence had no choice but to humor him, what with the delightful dinner Fred had prepared, so he didn't get the chance to ask any questions of his own.. until now.

“Thanks for the meal.. I'd have to pay in gold to get something like this at an inn.”

It was a typical offer of thanks from a merchant.

“I see! Hahaha!”

Fred laughed and nodded.

“The wheat bread's good, but the pork's texture tops it. I wonder how you managed to grow wheat on this land, let alone having enough to feed all the pigs and sheep.. just how are you managing?”

Fred smiled and looked at the bread acting as his plate, which had become drenched in grease. From his smile it was clear that he was thinking of what to say in response. Old people had a

tendency to like talking about their pasts, but they didn't usually come right out with it.

“That, and I remember several years ago that the Count..”

“Hmm.”

That helped Fred quickly come to a decision. He nodded and tore the bread in front of him into four pieces, like he was breaking the last chains holding him back.

“The last time I got a letter was six years ago. It was sent by a knight who claimed to be the Count's nephew.. I suspect he died in that year's expedition. A shame, that..”

So far, this was within Lawrence's expectations.

“That letter stated that the Count had left, leaving this outpost to me and asking me to protect it in his stead. It also stipulated that the Duran Monastery would send me supplies. The Count, you see, was a good man, even the poets sing his praises. Of course there were also a lot of rumors about him, but he worked hard to build his base of power.”

Lawrence immediately suspected that the Count had made large donations to the monastery, back when he had the means. That would explain Fred's ability to remain independent here.

“I came from an entirely lifeless village. Twenty years ago, the world was swallowed up in war. I was a timid mercenary, until I met the Count. His charisma was such that everyone wanted to loyally serve him.”

“You're talking about.. those wars where everyone had to fight, from cobblers to shepherds?”

Lawrence gestured for Fred to join him in a drink, which surprised the old man and yielded a pleased nod from him.

“Yes. In that age, no matter how poor the land, its baron would fight for it, and everyone would run to join them, weapons in hand.”

Fred spoke with a tone of longing and pride that befit a man of his age, but Lawrence knew that the “world” he was talking about wasn't more than the small area Fred knew about. Everyone living in a town thought that way. Of course, Lawrence wasn't going to rudely point that out, so he kept quiet. Seeing that, Fred took another sip of wine and happily looked at him.

“You're rather polite for someone your age. I expected to hear you mumble something like ‘what a stupid old man.’”

Lawrence was surprised enough to smile; evidently Fred *had* experienced life for himself.

“It's pretty common, after all. You hear of some far-off war that's coming to you, and because

you've been stuck in town your whole life, and travelers keep to themselves, it feels like the whole of the world is at war.”

It must have actually been a peaceful time. Lawrence had heard of his share of war rumors, but most of them boiled down to two armies meeting, exchanging declarations, and then talking through their differences. That was the punchline to many a joke.

“It was no different back then. Even Count Phil, described by everyone as driven by pride, stupidly believed the rumors floating around the pubs. When I heard him declare that he was building an outpost out here, I was terrified.”

Fred suddenly tossed some bread out the nearby window.

“Stewart!”

The sound of hooves rang out after that shout, but Lawrence realized it was no horse with such a fine name: it was a hog.

“Still, it meant I had work, and why argue with a generous Count? So the outpost was built.”

“But it had no enemies to defend against, huh?”

Fred nodded with an expression as though he didn't want to wake up from a dream.

“I'm not sure how long ago it was anymore, but around ten years ago we took in a lot of refugees, and once in awhile we got reports that brigands wanted to attack us, but we've never faced a single battle.”

That made sense, since it would be quite wasteful to attack such an out-of-the-way place on such a rocky plain. The place wasn't really worth defending, all things considered - it would be too difficult to supply during a siege. Really, there was no value in attacking *or* defending this place, which explained why there weren't any soldiers posted.

“Incidentally, we never heard any rumors of attack after the Count died. This place is just too poor for anyone to want it. It's like the Church says, am I right? Poverty is a blessing.”

There was a hint of anger behind Fred's smile now; maybe the beer was getting to him. He'd lived in this outpost for at least ten years now, and was clearly disappointed that he'd never been in a battle.

“That said, my duties for the Count will end next summer. I received a letter not too long ago.”

“Oh?”

Lawrence revealed his surprise as Fred stood up.

“That's why it's so lucky I didn't kill you.. you're a traveling merchant, aren't you?”

Fred flung another piece of bread out the window, and a chicken was heard clucking outside.. Paula, perhaps? The quiet outpost was actually lively for once.

“I have a request, you see.”

“Hmm.. alright, if it's within my abilities.”

Lawrence's already had his business route set, but that didn't mean he was averse to expanding it. Even if the outpost's Count had died, and it was soon to be abandoned, that didn't mean there was no opportunity to be found here. If Lawrence could profit, he would try to. As his mind came to terms with that, the old man across the table smiled at him.

“Please help me put a price on everything here.”

Lawrence looked up, completely taken in.. and in that moment, a merchant lost whatever advantage he may have had.

“I want to travel, but to do so I'll have to sell everything for cash.”

“I can help, but..”

“I've lived here for ten years, so I'm entitled to do so. After all, I'm this land's defender.”

He was obviously drunkenly joking with that last sentence.

“Well, you have a good night's sleep. It's been a while since I've had guests, but the mattresses here are filled wheat husks.. makes for a surprisingly comfy bed!”

Fred laughed as he revealed his background as a knight.

“Of all the buildings we humans build, outposts are only beaten by churches in terms of how basically functional they are.”

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The next morning they climbed a rope to get into the tower of the outpost, then headed downstairs. The outpost was built on a bit of a slope, but a wagon would have no trouble keeping parked. It was built on a specific slant on purpose, so enemies on horseback would have a tougher time attacking with right-handed weapons, while the knights here could more easily attack with theirs. The holes in the tower walls weren't built just to spot enemies, but also to find the sun. Even under siege, a tower like this could still tell the time and calendar date from that.

In addition, the stone construction meant that water wasn't a problem, as all the troughs sent rainwater to the garden where it could be collected in barrels. There was no waste in the construction's design, so to speak: every stone would lead water to a barrel somewhere, so they didn't have to worry as much about well water. In fact, the only design flaw was that floors weren't designed to trap and retain the heat from the fireplaces under them.

“Maintaining this place is a nightmare, especially when the stones crumble. I can't do much about that.”

He didn't have to say that. Lawrence could already tell it was nothing short of a miracle that he did this well on his own. Having eaten breakfast, Fred was taking Lawrence to the underground treasure vault of the outpost. Needless to say, it was never used.. it was in the same shape it had been since day one. There wasn't a whiff of noxious gas, nor even a single mushroom.

“Count Phil left these behind when he built this place, but I've no idea what they're worth. Maybe you, a merchant, can tell me if any of this is worth anything?”

There were tents and flags there in the candlelight, and some other basic necessities for outpost life. The tents and flags were likely made of the finest canvas, given that they were bereft of mold. They should be worth a fair price. The utensils weren't silver, though, just iron or tin.

The deeds and certificates might seem promising, but only until one considered that even thieves steered clear of this place. That meant they weren't worth even that much effort. At best, one could erase their contents to sell them as blank paper, but that was about the best they could offer. There were also books of heroic adventures, for what they were worth.

Lawrence opened his mental account book and gave Fred his estimate, then added whatever fees he guessed would be involved. Fred carved those figures onto a wooden tablet with his dagger.

“Hmm, I see..”

Fred was impressed by the final amount.

“The tents and books are worth quite a bit. Maybe you ought to donate them to a monastery somewhere?”

The implicit joke there was that Fred could retire to live with prayer-minded thinkers for the rest of his life. Hearing that made Fred burst into laughter.

“Hahahaha! I've been living as an ascetic long enough already! I'd never spend my money to get what I already have!”

He sighed soon after his brash, youthful statement.

“I left my village because I wanted a piece of land to guard with my own sword. A ceiling is the last thing I want to see when I'm dying. I'm Fred Redmay of the Knights of Count Phil!”

He was an aged veteran, but Fred still sounded like a warrior. Even Lawrence was touched by his words. Fred suddenly looked at him and continued.

“Speaking of knights, there's another thing.. our most important thing. I should have you estimate its value, too.”

“Your most important thing..?”

Fred didn't answer Lawrence's question, and instead set down the wood tablet and sheathed his dagger at his waist. He then walked to one corner of the vault and moved the crates of tents and flags to reveal another crate covered by a piece of dark red cloth. Lawrence wondered what was in that crate with a hill-like symbol emblazoned on its cover, then wondered even more about the size of the box.. it was large enough for a man to fit inside. His questions were soon answered as Fred opened the crate. Indeed, there was something like a person curled up in that crate: a set of armor.

“This.”

Fred lifted up the helmet and touched the slightly-dented faceplate, squinting as though remembering something from his past. That helmet had probably saved his life.

“Could you evaluate it's value for me? I know it's heavy, but..”

He tossed the helmet to Lawrence as he spoke. It still had a slight film of oil on it, so even if it didn't shine brightly there was no trace of rust. It was a simple polish away from being usable. But Lawrence knew the value of this heavy-duty combat uniform, and could only look at Fred with a smile of embarrassment.

“Well, how much is it worth, the costume that saved my life?”

Lawrence also knew that the key item a young knight dreamt of owning after leaving home - the sign of their success - was a full set of armor. It was the item that decided whether they were fated to become knights or mercenaries. They were beyond valuable; they were a status symbol. Was Fred really able to sell something like this? Lawrence was so taken aback he couldn't give Fred a definite reply.

“..I suspect it will be worth more than the rest combined..”

“Oh? Even more than all those tents and flags? I guess that just goes to show how great I, its

wearer, was.”

Of course it had more cash-value, but Fred was clearly thinking the same thing Lawrence was. Knights swore their allegiance before flags, but those flags were worthless compared to a set of armor. And yet, after all that time, only its cash value remained. It really hit Lawrence hard to realize how fragile things like fame and power were.

“Ahaha! I would never have imagined selling my armor before, and now there's a merchant before me who's been rendered speechless by it. How curious!”

Fred hit Lawrence's back, and Lawrence coughed. It was clearer up close, even in such weak light, that Fred was trying to contain his emotions.

“..you know, even if you keep your armor, you'll have more than enough cash for a heck of a journey. That, and anyone who can single-handedly maintain a place like this will have no problem getting a job as a gardener or mason.”

“It's alright. I was knighted by the Count to defend this place, so it wouldn't do for me to take it with me when I leave.”

The most difficult customers to deal with were stubborn old folks. They were tough and decisive. Lawrence couldn't help but disagree, but when he saw the sad look in Fred's eyes he decided to drop the subject. Fred didn't really want to part ways with the armor, but taking it with him would only be a heavy burden on his heart. Lawrence's sentimentality couldn't change that.

“Alright then, let's go have a drink. I'd like to share some of the wine before you leave.”

Fred was trying to put on a playful tone, doing his best to imply that his life had been so good that he could afford to drink before noon. They left the treasure vault after he had placed his helmet back in its crate.

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“I was actually in several large-scale wars. Some of them were set down in records and will be remembered for centuries to come. I lost my helmet when I was shot several times, and then fainted as I was struck by axes. The smith who looked after my armor told me that I had to be blessed for it to still be in such good shape.”

Fred took out some pale wine and poured a glass for Lawrence. The thin layer of sediment in the bottle made it clear that this wasn't some cheap wine with added ginger - it was the real deal. Lawrence had never been able to afford such high class wine, and it felt oddly out of place under the same roof as a hungry chicken and hog, but his hesitation only seemed to please Fred.

“God really must like me to send such a knowledgeable young visitor my way!”

He motioned for Lawrence to drink it down, then downed his own glass in a single gulp. Lawrence had to match him, but he was instinctively wondering if he could somehow secretly spit the wine back out and sell it later.

“I really wanted to have one last drink with Count Phil, but..”

His smile wasn't one that suited an old man, but rather a young boy with grand dreams of heroism. The moment Lawrence finished his glass, it was already full of the delightful stuff again. Out of fear of getting drunk, Lawrence kept the conversation going.

“Where are you going to go when you leave?”

Fred looked up after he'd happily refilled his own glass. It was the kind of wine only fit for nobles, but Fred didn't seem to care enough to keep some of it from splashing onto the ground. One of the sheep promptly licked it clean, however.

“I'm going to seek out my old friends. They've sent me letters from time to time, through that ever-so-helpful monastery.”

He was being too boorish for any wine, let alone this stuff. Half of his second glass was already gone by the time he bit into some sausage.

“They were excellent soldiers, but their time's coming just like mine is. This might be our last chance to chat about the past. It'd be nice to see how the towns I defended have changed, too, and pray in the churches that we lost to the enemy. I'd like to end up in heaven, you see.”

His smile was full of charm; he seemed every bit like a veteran soldier trained on battlefields. Lawrence felt a pang of shame that he couldn't be such a man when he grew old.

“In the end, I'd like to pass away on a nice warm hill somewhere. You travel a lot, right?”

He turned to face Lawrence.

“Of course..”

“Then you probably know what I mean, huh? You're so starving you think it's over, but at least you'll breathe your last in a nice sunny place. It's a peaceful feeling.”

He was looking at the ceiling as if he could see the sky right through it. Lawrence drank a bit more wine, comparing the man before him to the merchant who had only ever stared at the ground hoping to find dropped coins. When Lawrence was starving, he'd consider boiling leather to keep from thinking about eating his own horse. He couldn't just lie down and

peacefully wait for death; it was an utterly foreign concept. Yet he felt a tinge of sadness at that realization, making him look away.

“If possible, that's how I'd like to go. Although actually..”

Fred trailed off, and Lawrence couldn't hear the rest of his sentence. When asked for clarification, he only denied saying anything. His mouth did move, however, so he just wasn't able to say whatever it was out loud. He looked like he wanted to drown that thought with more wine.

“Just what would a knight want to hide from a merchant, having already shown him all his treasures?”

Hearing that said so bluntly made Fred slap his own forehead and laugh again. He tossed the bread that Stewart had been eying over to the hog, then spoke up.

“Too true! I guess I just suddenly realized how old I am, now that I'm saying such things.”

Stewart wasn't satisfied with that little bread, so he walked up to Fred for more. His snout was pushed away, though, and Fred moved his food well out of his reach.

“I was left lying on a hill looking up at the sky.. that was how my first battle ended.”

Lawrence had no idea how long ago that would be, but to Fred it seemed like it was only yesterday.

“I had this new heavy armor, and didn't know the horse I was on, so I was nervous as hell. My foe and I fought for a good two or three rounds before I thought I'd bested him. But before I knew it, I was flat on the ground. Armor's heavy, you see, so it doesn't matter how strong it is when you fall down. You won't be getting back up yourself. You're just a sitting duck.”

Lawrence couldn't help but laugh as he pictured Fred lying there like a turtle on its back.

“Of course, I was already mentally prepared for the worst. I couldn't hear anything because my ears were ringing, but right there in the middle of that battle I looked up at the sunny sky and thought I could see a little piece of heaven up there.”

His voice became quite soft again.

“Turns out that I fell off my horse when I got a little over-eager.”

Falling off a horse in a suit of armor could be fatal, but Fred only passed out and wasn't killed or robbed afterward. He truly was blessed. And yet, he obviously wasn't talking about the topic he had trailed off about earlier. In fact he seemed to realize that he wasn't fooling Lawrence, given how he was scratching his nose and drinking while watching Stewart and Paula squabble over a

bit of bread. He didn't talk again until he'd finished his third glass of wine.

“I have a favor to ask.”

“Alright.”

It had been quite a while since he last spoke, so Lawrence had time to guess what he was going to say. The key was how Fred had acted with regard to his armor. Lawrence couldn't help but crack a smile as Fred's face went red. Fred was staring at him as dispassionately as he could.

“Would you like to be my final adversary?”

Before Fred left this place, he wanted to relive his memories one last time. Lawrence knew it made him less of a merchant to have this much empathy for those he was dealing with, but there were some requests that he just couldn't decline.

“I'd love to.”

With that, Fred rose to his feet like he had been pushed into this, and stared out the window at the sun.

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The suit of armor was in good condition, save for the straps that had rotted away and needed replacement. Luckily, Fred's talents would put a craftsman to shame. In no time at all, he had cut tanned leather straps into the required length. In the meantime, Lawrence did his best to polish the rest of the armor, and noticed the many dents it had accumulated.

There was one mark on the breastplate that looked bad enough to be deadly, but Fred laughed it off. It wasn't as though he knew why he was spared, it had just turned out that way. It seemed he was that type who could only die from something harmless, like a child poking him with a stick.

“Hmm, not bad at all.”

It was early afternoon when Fred finally replaced the final strap. The sheep were grazing with Stewart, acting like the best of friends. Paula had vanished somewhere behind the tower, and they only heard what sounded like a bunch of hens gossiping together. Lawrence had seen enough of the armor to know how impressive it was, despite it's imperfections. He still couldn't fathom how Fred could possibly sell something this important.

“I'm not sure if I'll even be able to put it on.”

Fred eyed his armor as he voiced his concern. He obviously felt it would be too embarrassing for Lawrence to watch him put it on.

“Well, we'll need weapons, right? I saw some spears and swords in the treasure vault, so I'll go get those. Which would you like?”

Fred took some time to reply.

“Grab a spear and a sword.”

“One of each?”

“Yes. I'll use the sword. You can handle a spear, right?”

Lawrence had heard that even young knights struggled to use a sword on horseback while wearing armor. It was usually difficult enough to hold a spear forward and charge their horse. And yet Lawrence decided to do as he was asked. The swords and spears were in rougher shape than the armor.. the spearheads looked like they were practically falling off. How could they possible have a mock-battle without repairing them? And yet, his thoughts were thrown into disarray when he returned; not only was Fred wearing his armor, but he was riding on a ram.

“This is my finest steed, Edward the Second!”

Edward the Second bleated disinterestedly. It seemed Fred knew his physical limits well enough to refrain from getting on a horse. But.. this was far too amusing for Lawrence to refrain from laughing out loud. Fred joined him, then loudly barked at Lawrence.

“Hand me my sword!”

After receiving the sword, he continued.

“I am one of Count Phil's knights, and ride under the banner of his Crimson Eagle! I am Fred Redmay!”

He held aloft that sword with its hilt pressed against his chest, and the blade flat against his forehead. His motions were clean and fluid, the very image of a man who had never forgotten how to handle a sword in armor.

“Take up your spear, young man!”

At his shout, Lawrence immediately held up his crumbling spear, looking incredibly pathetic by comparison. Fred smacked Edward the Second's flank, and after bleating in complaint, the ram charged at Lawrence. It all happened more quickly than Lawrence expected, with Fred riding by him and striking his spear with the flat of his sword.

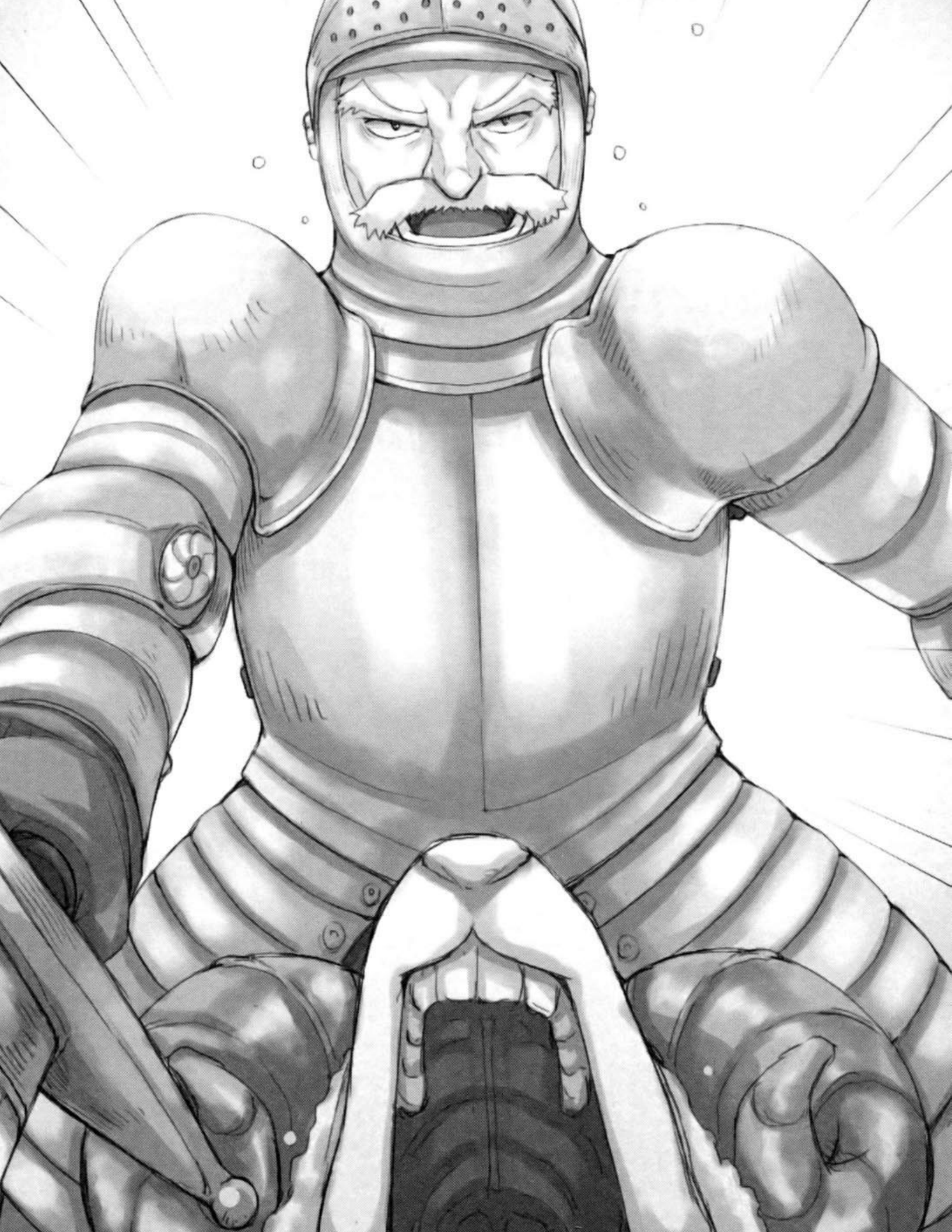
“What are you doing, young man? Are you afraid?!”

Fred grabbed Edward the Second by the messy scruff of his neck, and steered him back toward Lawrence. An aged knight in full armor was riding a disheveled ram. Fred wore everything with such dignity that the scene was utterly hilarious.

“Will the Goddess of Victory bless your spear or my sword? Time to find out!”

Edward the Second was doing his best to flee the battlefield, taking his rider with him. But he was just a ram, so he ultimately gave in and jogged back toward Lawrence. Fred was waving his sword in grand, intimidating gestures as he stared Lawrence down. There was no trace of excitement or emotion on his face - he was terribly calm.

Lawrence did his best to plant his feet and thrust the spear forward at the huge target riding his way, but Fred effortlessly parried the thrust with such grace that he didn't seem like an old man anymore. Edward the Second, on the other hand, had reached the limit of his patience and charged wildly ahead.



Fred was too weighed down with his armor to keep up with the wild ram, so he was leaning too far back and Lawrence was able to score a hit. Of course, the spearhead harmlessly fell off as he did, even if Fred did collapse onto the ground. Lawrence couldn't believe what had happened, and cast aside his broken spear to run to Fred.

“Mr. Fred!”

Lawrence saw Fred staring straight up at the sky, though he was impressed to find that the old man was still clutching his sword. Lawrence instinctively worried that Fred's back had given out, but soon remembered that he couldn't possibly get up with that set of armor on his body. Fred stared straight up and spoke in a booming voice.

“So God has finally given up on me.”

He slowly turned his head to stare at Lawrence.

“But will you show mercy?”

Fred struggled to search for his dagger with his left hand, and lifted it up to Lawrence.

“If so, then finish me off with one quick, clean stab.”

Lawrence was like any other traveler who used a dagger as a tool for everything from carving to eating, but the dagger being handed to him was a weapon of war. Fred was offering the hilt to Lawrence, holding the blade in his gauntlet. Lawrence felt like he was staring at a fellow merchant handing him a blank check.

Knights had a rigid code of honor, and their own ways of ending such battles. Such armor could only be defeated with a lucky decapitating blow from a broadsword or a powerful thrust from a strong spear, skewing their opponent's chest. Neither was a particularly pleasant way to die, so their killing blows were usually more merciful stabs between the helmet and breastplate.

Fred was staring at Lawrence, fully prepared to die. He was deadly serious, and it made Lawrence hesitate. The pressure of the situation ultimately won out, but Lawrence could only swallow as he realized how much longer this dagger was compared to the ones he was used to. Fred was being far too serious.. didn't he just want a symbolic death?

The Count was dead, and not even thieves honored him with their presence. Once his term of service was over, the monastery wouldn't support him. All too soon, this place would be forgotten, along with the treasure vault this old knight had shown him. Committing suicide was a grave sin, but being killed in battle was honorable. Lawrence stared back at Fred, gripping the dagger tightly to keep his hand from trembling. He took a deep breath, and finally realized there was writing etched onto the dagger.

“God is merciful.”

Lawrence was awestruck. Knights were supposed to stoically accept their defeat, but that didn't mean they wanted to die. They couldn't say that out loud, so they carved their sentiments onto their weapons instead. They really did have a culture as heroic as the legends stated. Fred relaxed his neck and looked back up at the sky.. but he felt more than relaxed, he felt like a free man.

“It seems I am being pitied.”

“Yes. And by a merchant, no less.”

Fred's mouth twisted up and he sighed.

“Then there's no way I can call myself a knight anymore. My long, exciting, happy struggle is over.”

Fred had just been set free, and could now leave the outpost.

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The rain had stopped as Lawrence told his story. Holo was lying in his arms, motionless. A light breeze tickled Lawrence's nose, with its chilly humidity mixing with Holo's hair. Just as he wondered if she had fallen asleep, she stirred as though sneezing. He took a look at the fire and saw it had died down considerably.

“..Hmph..”

At first he thought Holo was mumbling in her sleep, but when her body swelled up he realized that she was yawning. With her head bobbing up to face the sky like that, she might as well be the Queen of the forest. Even her arm trembled as she reached it out toward the fire.

He couldn't help but wonder if she was just pretending to yawn to cover her tears, but as he did he felt her tail smack him across the face. She too had been left behind to watch over a place, only to be forgotten in time.

“And this.. is all that is left now?”

“Seems like it. I'm sure Fred was disappointed that he couldn't find someone to care for this outpost after he left. After all that work, it was probably crushing to just abandon it.”

Counts fought over every plot of land because fertile soil was rare enough to be worth the struggle. Even seeing such meager land go to waste was a great disappointment. Holo tossed a piece of wood into the fire, as though hoping to burn her thoughts away. Sparks flew everywhere.

“Perhaps this is just the way of the world.”

She spoke lightly, then stood up and stared at the sky.

“Everything changes with time, so we can only treasure what we have now. That's probably the best we can hope for.”

He felt pretty foolish to say something like that despite only being in his mid-twenties, and indeed the centuries-old Wisewolf seemed a bit embarrassed to hear him say it as well. She looked back at him with a smile.

“I am hungry.”

He flashed back a tired smile before fetching some bread and sausages. Eating at midnight was considered even more fanciful than eating breakfast, but Lawrence didn't mind: he was hungry as well after sharing that story. He felt Holo's eyes on him as he carved the sausage up with his dagger, and by the time he looked up her smile had turned into a malicious-looking smirk.

“Just how much mercy will you show?”

His hand stopped carving as he considered her words, but only for a moment. She loved food with a passion, and he was a stingy merchant. She was trying to suggest that a thicker slice showed more mercy, begging in her usual lighthearted manner. He wanted to beg her in turn, by asking her how much mercy she was willing to show in her portion sizes, but decided on another angle of attack. He kept his eyes on his work as he answered.

“Are you saying you'd like me to quit being a merchant?”

He continued cutting thin slices, but as he reached the end of the sausage Holo continued.

“If you like, I will even finish you off with a quick, clean stab.”

He wondered why she knelt back down, but soon he felt her hand carefully moving his so the next slice would be twice as thick. Her amber eyes were right there, staring at him. Not even a knight like Fred would have the courage to stand up to them, so Lawrence just pushed down where she positioned the dagger.

“Oh, look! God *is* merciful!”

She beamed a smile at him. A building that wasn't being maintained would quickly fall apart, and people's smiles were no different. They would fall apart when food became poor, and the Wisewolf's smile was all the more demanding. Lawrence debated saying that out loud so she knew how much rationalizing it took him to accept her behavior, but in the end he just gave her an even thicker slice.

Fred's story wasn't really anything special. It was just an everyday story like any other in this world. Everything would end one day, and no one could stop that. At the very least, Lawrence wanted to do everything he could to keep her smiling until that day came. He hoped God would show mercy to this foolish merchant, who even the moon was too embarrassed to face on this night.





## Wolf and a Grey Smile

They were having another argument. This time it was because Miss Holo was given less meat for dinner. Mr. Lawrence had said, “it's because you ate some meat during the day, so you're getting less now,” she shot back with “you seem quite sure of that, but where is your evidence?”

But Miss Holo really did eat some meat earlier. I saw her chew on some of our dried meat provisions in the wagon as she combed her tail, back when Mr. Lawrence had left the wagon to go book us a room at the inn. Of course, he doesn't know when she did it, so now he's at a loss.

I could end this dispute right now by telling him the truth. But I won't, because I know Ms. Holo doesn't want me to.

“So where is your proof?”

She's backed him into a corner. He looks down as he replies.

“I have none.”

She stares at him for quite some time before making a loud “hmp” noise, then snatches some more meat with a look on her like it's her birthright. It's always like this with them. They're always arguing about something, be it a careless word or some basic misunderstanding. Miss Holo always starts it.

When I first joined them, their bickering terrified me. Now I'm used to it. It's like water off my back. It's the same result for them, too. I hear Mr. Lawrence sigh, then Holo turns away looking irate. She doesn't think what she's doing is bad at all. If they think so differently, they should really just talk it over.. I wonder why they never do?

Maybe after shrugging their shoulders they feel like their argument has brought them closer or something, even if they don't want to look at each other afterward. I never saw anything like this in my hometown.

Speaking of towns, they always have so many places to eat, like pubs and inns.. but Mr. Lawrence always wants to stay in and eat. He'd rather buy ingredients and cook them himself using the common stove wherever we stay. When I asked him why, he simply said it was cheaper. How did he put it?

“We won't overeat this way, since it's too much effort to cook more ourselves. Especially if we're already full enough. After all, we're with someone who will eat until she explodes.”

He said that with a sad smile. Miss Holo understands his reasons for not going out more often.

That's why she treasures every drop of wine. When we eat in, she'll never get any more wine than she's been given no matter how much she begs. Mr. Lawrence just gives her water.

When they *really* have an argument, they're not like normal villagers. They don't throw things at one another, they just stop talking entirely and each pretends the other doesn't exist. In my hometown, arguments were like storms, and people would nervously watch and make sure that everything valuable was safely out of reach.

Not so with these two. They don't blow up like that, they just smirk at each other after one of them lands the killing blow. Then when they wake up the next morning it's like it never really happened. Even if they completely ignored each other for the rest of the previous day.

Say for instance that Mr. Lawrence starts a fight and won't back down, putting Miss Holo in a bad mood. She'll just forget all about him while joking around with me with a big grin on her face. I can feel the wrath between them, but they're all smiles when they talk to me. It's chilling at first, until you realize just how childish they're really being.

Dinner's over, so I gather up the kitchenware and take it back downstairs. As I return, I see Mr. Lawrence heading outside to refill our water jug at the well. I finally have a chance, so I tell him that I know Miss Holo ate the dried meat earlier. As usual, he replies like they never fought at all.

“Ah, so she did, did she?”

“Yes.. I couldn't hide the truth from you..”

The Church teaches that God can see everything we do, so lying is useless. People don't have God's eyes, though. They can't see everything. Villagers believe that lightning strikes liars, that “the tiniest lie could end up worse than getting stuck in the snow and eaten by bears or wolves.” I've been cheated so much since I left my home, but still want to make good by my mistakes. That's why I tell him that I ate a piece of meat when Miss Holo gave it to me.

“Oh, I know.”

This time the smile on his face is a happy one.

“Huh? But you-”

“Yeah, I can't prove it. But there are still four pieces missing. I'm sure Holo gave you one and took the other three for herself, right?”

I felt ashamed to hear him say it so plainly. He might not be God, but he can see what's going on around him.

“.. I'm sorry..”

I cast my eyes downward, knowing that I would be stripped naked and whipped all the way home for this back in my hometown. Mr. Lawrence just smiles and rests the water jug on my head.

“She gave it to you on purpose, though.”

He's right about that, but it's the way he can see through me that worries me.

“Or am I wrong?”

I cast my eyes down again, shaking my head.

“I know I can trust you; you wouldn't have done it on purpose.”

He's still smiling when I look up.

“Holo isn't dumb, after all. She knows I keep track of how much food we have.”

“Oh?”

I can't help but respond as he lifts the water jug back up and starts walking away. He waits for me to catch up to him before answering.

“I'm not really bothered by what she did. We're hardly in the red right now.”

We walk outside, and are struck by the wind. The lanterns are probably going to be blown out tonight.

“But we can't let ourselves get too complacent.. otherwise we're just dooming ourselves to future problems. This way it'll just be that much harder for her to go without when we *are* in the red, won't it?”

I nod, and so does Mr. Lawrence. It's a very prudent way to look at things. But my reaction makes his expression sour a little.

“And yet she's too stubborn to accept that. She just goes straight to acting childish, and yet if I ever dare to point that out, she'll fly off the handle for sure.”

A Wisewolf really shouldn't be that childish, I agree. And yet, Lawrence is already shrugging.

“Listen, Cole..”

He draws his face near to mine.

“Suppose I had forced her to tell the truth. Then the next time I gave her a snack, she'd surely say ‘but this is bad behavior, is it not?’ or some-such. She'd probably even say ‘surely you jest?’ or turn to you and say ‘tis surely a trap,’ wouldn't she?”

When he talks like Miss Holo, it's usually with a tired look in his eyes. I can't say with certainty that he's wrong. In fact, he's probably right on the money. I'm always impressed by the strong appearance he puts on. He's obviously quite exhausted, but there's no trace of malice in his eyes.

“So I can't force the issue. It's not like it's worth reminding her that I count our supplies. She isn't dumb, she just needs me to gently point out her behavior, and she'll quit doing it for a while. I can't win by attacking her dead on, so why waste the effort? After all..”

He yanks the bucket up from the well and pours the water into our jug.

“If I blow things out of proportion, she won't want to ask me for more food or wine anymore, will she?”

I nod, impressed by his deduction. He truly understands how emotional she is.

“It's such a pain. Deep down, she knows how scary it is to be unprepared when the worst happens, and yet she always ignores it..”

He sighs as he holds up the almost-full jug.

“I sometimes wonder how she'd manage if I wasn't traveling with her.”

Just then, as if something wanted to stop him from saying anything further, Mr. Lawrence spots a familiar face down the hall and asks me to take the water jug back to our room for him. As usual, Miss Holo is taking swigs from her bottle of wine as she combs her tail.

“Oh, did you fetch water?”

“Would you like some?”

She nods, which implies that she doesn't want to get drunk tonight (despite being the one who always says “I do not care if it makes me more thirsty, I only want wine. Only fools drink water when there is wine.”) I search for a cup to pour her some water, but she takes the jug from my hands and drinks from it directly. She strikes the same pose she would to drain a bottle dry, but without spilling anything: she isn't drunk.. yet. Normally, Mr. Lawrence has to wipe her mouth for her after she drinks like this.

“Whew! Nothing beats chilled water!”

With a hiccup, she hands me the jug and laughs. I set it on the table, noting her good mood.

“Where is that foolish mule?”

“Mr. Lawrence? He's downstairs talking to someone.”

Normally I would add, “should I fetch him?” but I've learned a little bit about how Miss Holo operates.

“Ugh. Let us hope he does not get swept up into another business disaster..”

She looks at her tail, pulls out a curly hair, and blows it into the air. The way she yawns and stretches always looks so relaxing.

“Ahh.. so then, Cole my boy.. what did you two discuss about me?”

She cuts to the chase as usual, and my eyes lift up from the ground. I can't be like Mr. Lawrence around her. I'm already leaning back a bit in shock.

“Oh ho.. I am not angry.”

Her smiles are rarely genuine, and while I still struggle to tell her smiles apart, this time it seems sincere.

“Well? Out with it!”

She sets her cup (which had been behind her all along) on the floor, and then kicks it onto its side.. her usual ritual when she's about to go to sleep. However, this time she lifts her legs onto the bed and sits there, her face in her hands and her elbows on her knees, and shoots me a bored stare.

“Um..”

I haven't understood Mr. Lawrence's words, of course, but if I spill the beans now it will only lead to another argument between them. But I'm not a very good liar.. the best I can do is offer a half-truth.

“Mr. Lawrence said he has no proof, and is aware of that fact..”

I did my best, and meet her stare as she thinks about what I've said. She then turns away with a “hmp.”

“Really. The foolish mule.”

She sighs and goes on.

“He understands nothing of my intentions.”

“..Huh?”

“What? Are you saying you also thought I was merely hungry?”

Miss Holo's ears can hear anything, so she'll know if I pause too long to find an excuse. I have no choice but to nod back and swallow my fear.

“What..? You males..”

She falls forward with a frown, like she's suffering a headache. I panic that she might hurt herself, but of course it's for naught.. she lands on her hands, then picks up her cup and sits back down on the bed.

“Of course I know what he told you. I was being wasteful and my actions can only lead to trouble, yes?”

She says it like she's read it off my face, so I can only nod back like I'm being scolded.

“Obviously I realize such things, I simply feel he is being too stingy. We are suffering no shortage right now, and what I took was hardly substantial.”

She's right too. Mr. Lawrence only has good intentions, but if we do things his way we'll feel like we're suffocating. In my village, those who were considered the best hunters were the ones who could tense up at the drop of a hat, but also relax enough to sleep well at night. Even the Church warns to not be overly frugal.

“I only wish for him to relax a little. Back when we first met, he could not pass up the slightest object that someone had dropped on the road.. not even a nail. He cannot even enjoy food. He puts his all into his business, his entire life. If he carries on this way, he will exhaust himself and make a terrible mistake someday.”

She opts to take a long drink of wine, enough to have to take a deep breath afterward. It's her favorite drink, but you wouldn't know it from the look on her face right now.

“You humans do not live long. If you cannot enjoy life when you are able, you will die with a frown on your face.”

She clicks her tongue, then takes another swig. I stare at her, quite moved. I truly am.. she's lived for a long time, so she's probably seen many people leave the world the way she described. It's always the people who try too hard who die before their time.

In fact, if my own experiences have taught me anything, such people never get to enjoy the

fruits of their labor before they pass away. Every time Miss Holo drinks wine like water, or eats until she's bursting, Mr. Lawrence frowns.. but only for a moment before he joins her, like he's thinking "alright, I can't let you hog all the fun!"

It's not that Miss Holo is trampling Mr. Lawrence, it's that she wants to correct his all-too-strict perspective. I feel a bit bad for not realizing that until now.

"But there is no point in saying that to a male who fancies himself clever. Oh no, he will simply try to make me see things his way. I can only pretend to be a fool so he will give in and relax. He truly does not understand the pathetic things he is making the Wisewolf do.."

She complains as she takes another swig of wine. I wonder where I've heard that kind of sentiment before? It finally hits me after she finishes her thought with a hiccup.

"If he was not with me, God knows how he would end up."

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I wake up the next morning to find that Miss Holo has beaten me to it and opened a window. She's setting small morsels of bread down on the ledge to attract some birds. She's really a giant wolf that could swallow an ox, and even in her human form she's very intimidating when angered, but right now she's gentle as can be.

I know first-hand just how gentle she is. She helps me complete thoughts, sometimes even voicing things I can't quite bring myself to say. She tricks me, too, but even when she does she's always earnestly smiling.. in fact, she might not even think she's tricking me at all. I think she's the same way for Mr. Lawrence, and doesn't really mean to trick him at all.

Right now, Mr. Lawrence is still sleeping. If you want to know why his hair is still tidy, you will need to ask Miss Holo.

"Oh? Cole beat him to it?"

She still seems quite sleepy. As she speaks, the birds finally realize she's there and fly off, startled. She watches them, relaxed, then stands up with a weary look on her face.

"Very well.. let us rouse the foolish mule so we may eat."

She slowly rolls her head around and cracking is heard. She then sighs, expressionless but clearly happy.. probably because of how we're going to wake up Mr. Lawrence. I pretend not to notice her wagging tail as I pour water onto him from my water skin. Moments later, he jumps up, shocked, only to see Miss Holo laughing at him.

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“Who'd'ja see?”

Miss Holo finally asks Mr. Lawrence a question as he walks back to the room. The kitchen won't be ready for a while, so she's slurring her speech as she chews on another piece of dried meat. It hasn't been a day since he argued with her about that, but she still boldly goes ahead anyway.

Thankfully, Mr. Lawrence has a handle on her. He knows it's “her” piece of jerky. She even pulled it out of her mouth with a grin a moment ago to proclaim that. She was obviously hoping to chastise Mr. Lawrence if he brought it up again, but lucky for him he knows better than to fall for the same trap twice. Her tail sadly stops wagging.

“I met a merchant downstairs yesterday who asked for my help.”

“Go right ahead.”

Miss Holo's already moved on to combing her tail. She combs it several times daily, so it's really beautiful. It's amusing how much like a princess from those old stories she is, acting illogically and defiantly.

“You're not upset, are you?”

Her ears shoot up like a warning to not press the issue, so he just shrugs and continues.

“Um.. is there anything I can help with?”

I've got nothing to do, and I feel obligated to help those who've taken care of me. I don't mind doing the manual labor; in fact, I prefer something that's straightforward like that.

“Oh? Well, if you really meant it, then by all means.”

“Okay!”

It's rare for me to get a chance to help them, so I take to my feet with gusto. By the time he's finished waving at Miss Holo, I'm already in my coat and rushing to the door.

“What will I be in charge of?”

Mr. Lawrence answers right away.

“Nothing major, just counting coins. There's a lot of them, but you're good with numbers so you'll do just fine.”

He's trying to praise me, but that sort of thing embarrasses me. Before I met Mr. Lawrence, I was always just treated like an idiot or fooled like one - sometimes both at once.

“I'll do my best!”

“Hehe.. no need to be *that* serious. You'll see.”

He suddenly stops as we're leaving the room.

“What's this?”

He asks that casually, but he's wearing a grin on his face. I look back and see why: Miss Holo has stopped combing her tail and eating and is putting on her robe.

“I fear that you may die of loneliness if I do not join you.”

Mr. Lawrence and I exchange a glance and chuckle. There's no way she wouldn't hear it, and sure enough her first step out into the hallway is taken directly onto my foot. With that, the three of us are off to pay that merchant a visit. It's nice and warm outside, and the town is full of life. Everyone's in high spirits since it's close to lunchtime.

There are lots of stalls and shops, all of them catching Miss Holo's eye. Had Mr. Lawrence not been holding her hand tightly, she would surely have visited every one of them, but voicing that out loud would be stupid of me so I remain silent and Miss Holo's happy expression doesn't change.

“So, how will you be helping?”

“My friend wants me to help him count his earnings.”

His explanation is shorter and more abrupt with Miss Holo, but that's just how she likes it. She nods and scratches behind her ear.

“And why you?”

“Probably because he doesn't know any moneychangers around here. He's just started a business and already made a killing, but he's new to the currency being used here. He hopes I'll be able to help him make sense of his earnings. I hope some of his boldness rubs off on me.”

Miss Holo doesn't seem particularly interested in what he's saying. For my part, business isn't my strong suit, but I do know there's a lot of different coins being used around the world and exchanging between them is complicated.

Back when I was in Akent, the city of knowledge, someone taught me that you could learn a lot from biting a coin. He'd been cheated and given fake coins made of rusty iron, and told me I should learn the tastes of metals so I don't get cheated in the same way. When I tell that to Mr. Lawrence, he laughs.

“Lucky you! My master tried his best to cheat me that way.”

I'm shocked to hear that, but Mr. Lawrence seems quite happy. What a crazy occupation.. masters even cheat their apprentices! And yet, Miss Holo yawns tremendously before speaking up.

“So that is why you are such an awkward character.”

“I'd prefer it if you'd say I'm ‘cautious.’”

“Ha!”

She snorts the usual laugh she uses to scorn people. If I'm to be honest, I love it when she's like this; she wears an evil-looking smirk, but it's somehow very lovely. Mr. Lawrence tenses up, as usual, but he's long since learned to keep his mouth shut when she does this, and prevent digging himself any deeper. He just walks on ahead of us, in his usual manner to avoid an argument. I think he's quite manly to be that brazen, but Miss Holo always calls it cowardice instead.

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“Ah, my thanks to you! I'm so glad to see you come with your lovely apprentices!”

A strong older man greets us as we enter another inn. I've never seen the kind of hat he's wearing, but I don't ask because I'm sure it's from the far east. I've heard they have an extreme climate there, where it's always dry and either very cold or very hot. The man looks gentle now, but I get the feeling he's the type who gets scary when he's angered. The atmosphere around him reminds me of my hometown.

“These two are Holo and Cole. We're traveling together due to some.. strange coincidences.”

“I am Holo.”

“My name is Todd Cole.”

The man hums and nods at our introductions with a big smile. I wouldn't be surprised if he has grandchildren our age.

“I'm really sorry to ask you over like this.. it's just that this is my first time trading so far from home in twenty years. I can't keep up with all these currencies. Normally I wouldn't complain, but it's like every moneychanger here wants to steal half my earnings from me! Service fees? Bah! More like highway robbery!”

He's pretty angry, and I can sympathize. I've been cheated by moneychangers too. Just then I catch Miss Holo asking Mr. Lawrence something.

“Is *that* guy bad as well?”

Mr. Lawrence ponders about it for a bit and then answers.

“He is.”

I wonder if they're talking about a moneychanger they've met before. Mr. Lawrence seems to know everything that happens on and off the stage in this world, so I can't picture how bad someone has to be to be called “bad” by Mr. Lawrence. And yet, Miss Holo seems oddly happy. I'm mystified. Is she like a knight, growing happier when her enemies are stronger? There's way too much about life that I just don't know.

“Anyway, mind if we get to it right away? I actually have to go cash some checks from my buddies. Ah, it sucks getting old.. but these guys just won't stop overworking me! That's why I don't even like stepping outside!”

“Must be nice to always be in demand. Sure, we'll get right to it.”

“Then right this way, please.”

He takes us to his room in the inn.

“Whew!”

“Wow!”

“..”

We're all awestruck as we enter. It's about the same size as the one we're staying at, but it's cluttered up with so much stuff.. bundles of cloth, furs, and sacks full of something (I'm guessing beans, from the looks of them) and even a few crates. It's such a variety that I can't tell what kind of business this man does. But what really surprises us are the coins on his desk.

“Hahaha.. impressive, isn't it?”

He laughs so joyfully his shoulders shake. He seems almost boyish in how he likes to boast, but you can tell from his prideful expression that he's just that good of a merchant. Even Mr. Lawrence takes a deep breath, but as I look up to check his expression I realize he's already calmly trying to estimate how many coins there are. Sometimes his expressions remind me of the most thoughtful ones I saw while I was in Akent. Miss Holo likes to belittle him, but I can tell he's actually very good at what he does.

“There's so many kinds of coins.. some of them are really old, too.”

“That's why I'm in this bind! My partner's a young guy like you, always running between companies doing all sorts of business. He thinks he's hot stuff, but he's worthless when it comes to accounting. I tell you, it's enough to make me want to work alone again!”

He smiles broadly enough to reveal his uneven and yellow teeth. It reminds me of that old saying in my village that people turn into stone as they age, so we should take care to age gracefully so we don't end up in an embarrassing pose when we finally become rocks. But even if this guy turned to stone right now, he'd be the statue of exactly what people think of when they hear the word “merchant.”

“These goods.. did you score this stuff from a company that fell on hard times?”

“Huh?”

It seems I'm the only one surprised by that notion. They're all looking at me, and I just know that my face has gone red.

“Ohoho.. kind of. I don't play around, and now that the people I loaned to have hit it big, I'm calling in their debts.”

Mr. Lawrence shrugs. That's not the kind of thing people generally appreciate, but I can tell that Mr. Lawrence is impressed.. and the old man is quite proud of it. Once in a while I get the feeling that merchants are the kind of people who go straight from being a little kid to being an adult. I'm impressed by that, but I don't think Miss Holo would like that. Right now, she's poking the hilt of a sword, looking utterly bored.

“So anyway, we'll do what we can, but now that I see all these coins.. I think I'll need a reference. Hey Holo, sorry, but could you run back to the inn and get that sack of coins from my room?”

She looks up from the shield she's been studying, and shoots him a look, then looks at me. She clearly means that's the sort of physical work I should be doing. However..

“Oh, you mean that bag of various coins you are always using?”

Her modesty surprises me.

“Yeah, sorry.. would you please?”

“Very well.”

She nods, then scampers away. I'm not sure why, but for Mr. Lawrence to not trust me with that bag of coins.. makes me sad. But it can't be helped.

“And Cole..”

He shifts his attention to me.

“These, and these, and.. these. You can tell them apart, right? I need you to pile the ones that are the same. Stacks of 10 coins each.”

“Yes!”

I begin my task, and notice that the coins have already been half-sorted by the type of metal. We're going to start with the more expensive gold and silver ones, but even among those there are many types. Some have weaker images because they weren't struck as many times. Others have strange mixes of metals.

We could use scales to get a rough estimate, but it's more accurate to do it by eye. The old merchant realizes how much work it is, so he tells Mr. Lawrence he'll pay us for the help. That means being reduced to working under the man, but Mr. Lawrence still smiles with no trace of resentment or unwillingness.

I sort the silver coins as Mr. Lawrence's instructed, and stick to the ones that still have strong images on them. It's easy work, especially since Mr. Lawrence has managed to get the old merchant to join in helping us sort the gold coins. He's much older than Mr. Lawrence, and yet he's still politely requested help.. I don't think the old scholars in Akent could do that, even if they taught their students to do so. I didn't think merchants could, either, but I was wrong. Just like I was wrong about them only being able to lie.

“Well, that about does it for the gold coins!”

“Yep. The silver ones are the issue.”

With two skilled merchants working on them, the gold coins are already done. I'm intimidated to be sitting between two such men.

“Hey, you're pretty quick! No need to rush, it's more important to sort them correctly!”

“True, they're not going to run away or anything, but if you don't hurry up and put them to use they're only gonna depreciate.”

The old merchant laughs loudly at that, making it clear just how jolly he is. He'll live to be a hundred if he's that easygoing.

“Hmm.. from the image, this one's fake.. and this one was minted at a different place..”

“Oh? I guess this ruler still has trouble keeping things under control.”

“Guess so.”

The old merchant gives an exaggerated shrug and sighs. That does it for the gold coins, so we all focus on the silver ones. I'm suddenly reminded of Miss Holo. Why isn't she back yet? We're in town, but there are still thieves to worry about. She's too smart for me to think she's in trouble, but Mr. Lawrence doesn't seem to mind. It's a while before she shows up.

“Thanks!”

He gives her a verbal reward as he continues sorting. I see her nod, like a teacher watching over her student. She looks so gentle I can hardly believe it.

“Alright, you take care of these ones.”

“..”

She nods again and walks up to the desk, next to the pile of coins he pointed at. Normally she would giggle and knock over the coins with her tail, but that's not an option right now. She instead pulls out the bag Mr. Lawrence asked for from under her robe and sets it on the desk. I can swear there's something wrong with my eyes.. that's my ratty old bag, isn't it?

“Just don't get them mixed up with the others.”

Mr. Lawrence just says that and smiles. The old merchant looks at Miss Holo again like some beloved grandchild, then signals to Mr. Lawrence with his eyes like he's happy for him. Miss Holo ignores them and begins untying my pouch. I use a long string to tie it's opening, then tie the other end to the bottom of the bag, making a loop I can use to carry it over my shoulder. It looks like she's untying the bottom part, rather than the top, and I can't believe she'd make such a rudimentary mistake. I'm worried, so I decide to correct her, but just then Mr. Lawrence speaks to me.

“Hey, that's the wrong pile.”

“Huh? Oh!”

I was about to put a silver coin with the image of a lily onto a pile of coins with a lily and a moon. I instinctively check to make sure I haven't made the same mistake already.

“You'll only make mistakes if you get too distracted.”

After Mr. Lawrence's reminder I don't even dare to look at the old merchant, even though I can tell he's looking at me. I keep my eyes on the task at hand; I need to focus on that. If I screw up, I'll only make trouble for Mr. Lawrence, and it'll be centuries before I'm competent enough to worry about Miss Holo. Or so I think.

“H-hey! Holo!”

“Hmm?”

Mr. Lawrence nervously stands up and reaches his hand out toward Miss Holo just as she unties the bag. It's too late though, things have already been set in motion. The string slips through her hand and everything in the bag bursts out onto the table: and it's coins inside my pouch! She might as well have dropped a pouch of water on the table. It's all over in the blink of an eye. As my attention turns to Holo, I realize she's stupidly staring at the bag, and then the desk.

“Ah~ what are you doing? Have you lost your mind?!”

Mr. Lawrence is furious at her. Her face tenses up and I can see her getting ready to explode at him. In fact, I'm already stepping back reflexively, preparing for the inevitable “foolish mule!” And yet, this time it's Miss Holo who's cowering in front of Mr. Lawrence like a scolded child, nervously trying to pick up the coins that have spilled out.

But just like how bits of iron are mixed in with sand, our coins are all mixed in with the other ones. The more she tries to help, the worse she's making things, so he quickly pulls her back by the shoulders before even trying to scold her. The room is suddenly tense, and I'm so nervous I can't even breathe. I'm waiting for them to start yelling at each other when the old merchant coughs.

“Don't worry about it, I know how many coins were mine. I might not seem like it, but I know my left from my right.”

He's pointing at his head as he says that, but I can't tell how angry he really is on the inside. That said, I did notice him counting up the coins as we piled them. Mr. Lawrence seems ready to yell at Holo again, but manages to contain himself and looks at the man with a nod.

“I'm so sorry.. this is all my fault. I have no excuse, I'm the one to blame here.”

“Hehe.. well, me too since I was too busy counting.”

Back in our inn, Miss Holo had simply challenged Mr. Lawrence to prove that she had eaten the meat; but it wasn't always so clear how tricky someone was being.

“Thirty-two silvers from Bishop Ludwig's parish, fifty-five from Mitzfing Cathedral, forty-one of Duke Donlin's memorial coins, and eighty-five Trenni.”

The old merchant confidently asserts his claim, and looks at Lawrence with tired eyes.

“That sounds right to me.”

As Mr. Lawrence replies, the merchant looks up at Holo with a smile.

“Don't sweat it. Just help us gather up those totals. Even God looks upon those who correct their mistakes with forgiveness.”

After he quotes the Bible, Miss Holo nods and emerges from behind Mr. Lawrence to come to the desk. Mr. Lawrence keeps pointing out the coins we'll need for reference as the sound of silver coins clinking fills the room like a weeping child. The old merchant keeps watching them work with a pleasant look on his face, then suddenly looks over at me and smiles.

“Hey now, little one.. what did your master just tell you?”

With that I instantly resume working. There's still coins to sort out, as the ones that were knocked over were the ones we'd pretty much finished sorting.

“Ah.. now that's much better.”

The man proudly looks at his now-tidy piles of coins as he says that.

“May God's glory shine even more brightly!”

After that, Mr. Lawrence goes through them once more with the help of his reference coins. He finds a few that are especially hard to classify, and lets the old merchant know.

“I can only guess that I'm right on these ones. You'll have to get a moneychanger to double-check on them.”

The old man seems satisfied with that, shoots a smile and nods. As we get ready to leave, he hands a small pouch to Mr. Lawrence.

“Thanks again for your great help.”

With a kindly smile, he shakes Mr. Lawrence's hand as he passes the pouch to him.

“If you need my help again, please just ask.”

Mr. Lawrence smiles back, and we leave. I half-expected that we would invite him to join us for dinner, but we didn't. I don't know how merchant's relationships work, but I make a note of it. It seems they act a little differently from others. It gets me thinking about everything, and of course that brings me to the question of why Miss Holo brought my bag here.. let alone why she would commit an error that not even I would commit.

“Oh my!”

Mr. Lawrence suddenly speaks up, scattering my thoughts. I'm sure he's read my mind somehow, so I'm frozen in place. And yet, as he pulls out the pouch the old man gave him, I realize that I'm in the clear.

“He sure lives up to that mean old reputation of his! We work as skillfully and patiently as a real moneychanger, and he barely gives us a pittance!”

Three shabby silver coins plop out of the pouch into the sunlight. I expect teachers to abuse their student's hard work like this, but the old man sure has them beat.

“This won't even cover lunch.”

As I hear that, I realize that we haven't had lunch yet.

“Hungry? Then we should go celebrate our earnings.”

I figure Miss Holo is just telling some strange joke, but in the next instant she's chuckling to herself.

“Oh? Just how much did we earn?”

Mr. Lawrence doesn't seem to find anything suspicious about her remark, and she's laughing even more loudly. What's going on? I'm left to wonder as Miss Holo hands my ratty old bag, now full of coins, to Mr. Lawrence.

“I would not know. Do I look like a merchant to you? The price of silver coins eludes me.”

Hearing that makes me even more suspicious.. the old man knew how many coins there were supposed to be, but did Miss Holo take a few regardless? But isn't that stealing? I guess she's read my mind, though, because she turns to me. But she smiles, and even holds my hand.

“How many did you exchange?”

Mr. Lawrence is ignoring her smile, carefully peering into my bag. There must be a huge question mark over my head right now. Exchanging? What are they talking about?

“Ten with the longsword on them, but none with the lilies. I focused on my favorite instead, the Trenni ones, and I think I exchanged thirty or so.”

“Well then it depends on how old they are, but I think we did earn enough to celebrate.”

“Hoho.. that foolish old mule was counting so intently, blinded by the shine of his own coins. Will you be like that when you grow old?”

At her prompting, Mr. Lawrence's face turns sour. She laughs and turns back to me.

“Ah, yes, I did use your bag, but fear not: your things are back in our room at the inn.”

I nod, but I'm still mystified. We didn't steal, but we somehow still profited just by switching coins?

“That said, you really are a Wisewolf. Just when did you realize what the plan was?”

He re-ties my bag as he confronts Miss Holo.

“Hmm? When we entered the room, of course. You did make a show of leaving me behind without Cole, after all.”

I'm completely lost now. Even Mr. Lawrence has a doubtful look on his face.

“Oh, alright. I'll take your word for it.”

“Fool. That said, you sure put on quite the act. I was actually worried that Cole would say something.”

“Uh!”

She must be talking about Mr. Lawrence's stern reminder for me to keep working.

“I was blown away.. I was sure you'd find a safer way.”

“Was this not the best approach?”

“Certainly. If only you could act that meekly and modestly during every trade we'd be golden.”

She smiles and shows off her fangs, then immediately hides it again and tilts her head proudly. I guess I'm the only one out of the loop here. I feel like a dumb scarecrow left out in a field, but Mr. Lawrence seems to notice that and finally speaks up.

“Ah, sorry..”

He clears his throat.

“Holo's able to tell how much silver is in a coin by the sound it makes.”

“Huh?”

“You know, like how you can tell if there's copper or iron in something by its taste.. she can do that with her ears. Even if the coins have the same image, their purity varies based on when they were minted. When that old guy asked for help, it was obvious he wasn't going to pay us much, so we just switched out a few poorer coins for better ones to make up for that.”

Miss Holo must have somehow been able to tell from the sounds they made as she poured out

all those coins and mixed them up.

“This foolish mule never asks me to do something without a reason. As soon as I saw that pile of coins on the desk, all became clear.”

I didn't know the plan because they never discussed it beforehand. If they had, I would have heard them, and wouldn't have been able to stay calm. She has my right hand in her left, and Mr. Lawrence's left hand in her right. Mr. Lawrence is smiling, making it obvious just how well they understand one another.

“We can do more as a group than just fool around, can we not?”

She looks up as Mr. Lawrence looks down. He smiles like he's giving up and then tilts his head.

“Of course. Cole's a great help.”

The more I see how close they are, the more I feel like I'm an outsider. But Mr. Lawrence seems to want to reassure me.

“Well, that old mule was so confident that he became careless. It is easier to keep an eye on one then it is two. Cole was the key to success this time.”

“True, they say apprentices are a reflection of their master, and so once he saw Cole he never suspected I could be devious.”

Both of these people are so kind that they keep trying to comfort me. I can't help but feel proud, knowing that I'd be happy with less than half this reward. I finally smile to show how happy I am, as I do their smiles become even gentler. They're such good people. They can trust each other, and understand each other. They're even willing to comfort others like me.

If there were more people like them in the Church, I wouldn't have to worry so much about the people in and around my hometown. Once again, I'm reminded to be thankful that I've received the opportunity to travel with them, and speed up so I don't fall behind.

“Alright, time for lunch!”

“Sure, the room's waiting for us. Wasn't there a cheap bakery around here..?”

Mr. Lawrence is tugging her hand to steer her into the next alley, but she plants her feet and pulls back.

“Oh? This place looks nice.. let's eat here!”

“Here? But this is a restaurant.. I can already tell how expensive they'll be by the scents wafting out from there. Let's just have bread, shall we?”

He keeps trying to pull her, but she pulls back even harder.

“Fool. We have just profited, so what else is there to do but spend it?”

“Save it, of course. If we just spend all the profit we make, just when will I be able to relax?”

“Ha! You are always yawning like a lazy cat. This profit was earned because of me, so I get to choose how we spend it!”

“Without me we wouldn't even have found this job! That, and you didn't really help sort the coins, did you? Well, I guess I'll take the high road and give you half, even though it's still more than you mooch off me.”

“What? You dare drive such a hard bargain? Such a foolish mule..”

“Are you saying I should be the only one to reflect? Do you think of anything except food? You really ought to plan ahead more often..”

They're having a soft argument right here in the middle of the street. Thank goodness it's crowded and noisy. They're being drowned out by other merchants arguing over prices and workers having some sort of dispute. The few people that do look at us inquisitively lose interest right away. I've fallen behind again, only able to watch them with a sigh. Is this really what's called a “good” relationship? Once again, they're looking away from each other, unable to come to an agreement. And once again, Miss Holo is quickly walking up to me, pulling me away with her.

“Uh.. um.. what about Mr. Lawrence?”

Miss Holo's face is all swollen like a pouty little girl.

“Oh who cares about that foolish mule?”

I look back at Mr. Lawrence, who's eyeing us like he means to say the same thing about her. Still, they'll be fine by dinnertime. I guess I'm getting as good at judging their arguments by their voices as Miss Holo is at judging the quality of coins by their sounds. At least, I can't help but feel that way as we walk on in this noisy town.





Wolf and the White Road

He had left home when he was only about twelve years old to travel as his master's apprentice. He'd been a traveling merchant ever since. His master was the person he'd spent the most time traveling with in his life. Sure, they'd banded with others, but it was rarely for more than a day or two.

Not like with his master; they were rarely apart for more than a week. On some trips they'd even travel for a month or two at a time, then need some time to themselves before they wanted to kill each other. That was how it was traveling with others; it just wasn't the same as living with others in a town.

That's why those who lived in towns regarded travelers as strange. It made sense, especially in remote villages where everyone in town knew each other since birth. Those places held the most ire toward travelers; some of them would even run visitors out of town with weapons, like they were thieves.

Still, in the end most places were friendly enough to travelers, especially those who could excite the villager's curiosities. It was actually a bit of a problem being the focus of interested villagers. Experienced travelers will only share their stories with other, younger travelers for this very reason, and always in private at some inn. They don't want to be treated like some king.

“Oh, oh!”

Today, Lawrence had been passing by a village where he needed to refill his waterskins. When he asked someone tending their fields, that was the noise they had made. The moment he saw Lawrence, he looked like he'd spotted his son who had forgotten to write to him after leaving home.

The old man then took Lawrence's hands in his own muddy ones, and smiled at him like an old doll made of mud. His eyes shone like a little child's, so despite Lawrence enjoying a warm welcome he instinctively knew he really should get out of there.

“Um.. I was hoping to find some water..”

“Now, now, there's no rush!”

The man smiled and dodged the issue, trying to forcefully drag Lawrence into his house. Lawrence soon learned that the man was the village's elder, and unfortunately for him you can't just decline such a person's kind offer of wine. Of course they'll bend your ear about your entire trip as they keep your wine glass full, and wouldn't even let you nod off if you got tired.

Such a person would just stare at you as you related your tale, with a look in their eyes like

they felt they could sprout wings and soar off into the sky. Lawrence normally would have used his usual excuse of being hired by their baron and thus unable to waste too much time, but today he was trapped: the companion that should be waiting in his wagon was coming along as well.

“No!”

She lightly smacked the village elder's hand away, making Lawrence unsure if he'd done something to annoy her. But he couldn't say anything when he saw the uncharacteristically serious look on her face. She kept a tight hold on Lawrence's other hand, the one that hadn't just been in the elder's hand.

They looked every bit like a mother and grandmother fighting over a child, except of course one of them was an old man, the other was a young maiden, and the “child” was a grown man in mid-sigh. The elderly always warned Lawrence to avoid girls with hoods, because those hoods only contained secrets.

This girl's name was Holo, and under her hood was a mouth with fangs that were probably sharper than necessary. She was his companion out of circumstance, but her hood couldn't contain the true secret that she was a gigantic wolf capable of swallowing a man whole.

“He is mine.”

That was her follow-up. Her lovely aristocratic auburn hair was visible under that hood. The elder shot her a glare, but she glared right back with two eyes of amber that gleamed like precious gems. Two hands were fighting over Lawrence, and each other felt completely different.

“Would you please return him to me?”

She tilted her head and spoke with a sad tone that made the elder stop like he'd had a spell cast on him.

“Oh.. sorry.”

He let Lawrence go, but by then other villagers were running up to see what was going on. They would surely have just witnessed their happily pure elder being scolded by a nun for his wrongful behavior.

“Thank you.”

That said, Holo was still holding onto Lawrence's other hand, and that wasn't very nun-like at all. The man in Lawrence should be quite thrilled by it, but he knew she would only be holding his hand if she wanted something from him. Back when they'd only met, his heart would flutter

when she behaved so flirtatiously, but lately he was able to stay calm even if she did that while they were alone behind closed doors. This time, he was already sighing because he'd divined her true intent.

“But why were you dragging him away? He was only supposed to be asking for water.. was he being rude again?”

She intentionally stood up tall and gently knocked Lawrence on the head.

“No..”

“This man never listens to me.. and I have told him so many times to be polite to others..”

Lawrence had no clue where Holo had learned to act this way, but the clear tone she spoke with sounded entirely genuine. It was utterly convincing, to the point where Lawrence didn't even feel bad about being on the receiving end. Of course, he did resent the implication.

“No, no! He was! Really!”

The elder was nervous, finally realizing just which of two strangers in front of him was in charge. He wasn't even looking at Lawrence anymore.. in fact he practically bowing before Holo.

“We're just simple villagers in the middle of nowhere, so we were hoping to have a talk with you!”

“Talk with us?”

“Quite! I may not be very smart, but I'm still the village's elder. It's my responsibility to teach the others, so I jump at the chance for them to hear from travelers!”

Holo might be a good liar, but this elder was the type who would probably drag every person passing by their village into his home out of sheer curiosity. Lawrence had never seen such a brash, yet somehow humble elder before, but he could quite clearly see how he'd become so forceful. Only “rude” merchants like Lawrence would ever take a route like this.

“Well.. we *are* travelers, but our journey has been a tiring one. We have come from the south, and are on our way to the snowy north, though, so we have been caught in several storms that blew us off-course and given us an amazing show or two..”

She was exaggerating, even in her mannerisms. She'd probably seen one too many poets performing on the street to catch the attention of young children and idle adults. Her intelligence was surely matched by her bravado. She would do whatever struck her fancy, and that was the most terrifying thing about her.

“Oh! Oh! You don't say? Surely you don't mean you've run into some mythical spirits or heroic knights?”

“Hmm? I suppose we might have, but.. well, no one would ever believe it.”

“Ooh..”

Lawrence had lived his life trying to be a respectable merchant, even if he did have to prey on the innocence of others to survive. In villages like this, there was no way around that. But still.. this was downright embarrassing to watch. Even if she was lying through her teeth, and was putting on the world's funniest comedy, she could still put on a perfect performance.

“Hmm, am I talking too much? Did you get any water yet?”

Holo suddenly turned to Lawrence and gently spoke into his ear, like she was sharing a secret with him. Lawrence couldn't do much more than play along with her act, though, or risk earning the wrath of the villagers. He was sure he could keep up with her acting, but deep down he was too cowardly to make a scene. He took a breath to draw in some courage.

“Not yet. But we need to make it quick..”

He took his time to emphasize his point, and Holo stared at him unimpressed. He turned away nervously, grimacing and hoping God would be merciful.

“Forget water. It has been so long since I have had wine..”

He suddenly felt eyes burning into his back, so forcefully that he would have jumped awake had he been sleeping. The elder was staring at him like a hot-headed knight ready to rescue a captive princess.

“What? Why didn't you say so?”

Holo had a sensitive pair of wolf's ears under her hood, so when she heard the elder's booming voice she practically jumped into the air. The elder probably got that voice from instructing people in fields for a long time, but even Holo was startled by his keen sense of hearing. He could tell that she was struggling to maintain her composure, and it made him want to help her out. In fact, he was practically ready to march off to war. Where he ended up marching, though, was over to the elder.

“Do you mean it?”

The elder grinned from ear to ear.

“Please, come join me in my house! I'll break out my finest wine!”

Holo was having a tough time dealing with his powerful voice, and looked up at Lawrence with a wince.

“How very.. generous of you..”

She took a deep breath, doing everything she could to maintain her facade as she turned back to the elder. She really could use that drink now.

“Ah, our meeting must be the will of God!”

It was awkward to hear that, since Holo was something of a goddess herself. Even if she never paid attention to the God of the Church, and only caused problems for them, Lawrence secretly wanted to learn everything he could from her.. especially the way she drove past any obstacle to reach her goals.

For now at least it seemed like they would be fed, and have to discuss their travels. It seemed they wouldn't gain much from this meeting, sadly. Lawrence managed to chat with a mason to see if he knew about any nearby shortcuts, reasoning that he might since masons generally had to travel around to help repair bridges, roads, and roadside buildings.

Masons generally had news to share, at the very least, but despite this man's pleasant demeanor and eagerness-to-please the most he had to offer was news that a well recently had to be repaired at a nearby village where they had excellent wine. He went on to say that the local baron greedily refused to let them sell their wine.

At any rate, the man had been tasked by the baron to help repair that half-collapsed well. All he got in payment was wine, but it was such strong stuff that he'd never had anything like it and it left him feeling numb, like he was floating off to heaven. Nine out of ten of Holo's interests were food and wine, so at least her tail was wagging as he told his story.

It just reminded Lawrence that he'd been rather loose with his wallet lately. Every time they stayed in a town, he couldn't help but treat Holo to their finest food. Even a child would know not to feed a wild dog, no matter how much they beg or whine.. but Lawrence was like a stubborn child who just wouldn't learn.

All Holo had to do was look at him with hungry eyes and his wallet would already be open. She was just too good at bending him to her whims. Of course, once he'd eaten something delicious, he'd want more as well. He knew better, he really did, but his wallet just wouldn't stay closed. Holo practically had him eating out of her hand.

“And just then, I heard a wolf bravely howl somewhere off in the distance, like it was celebrating victory..”

It was Holo's turn now, and she ended her sentence like she really had been a spectator at such

an event. Everyone gasped; they were quite taken by her story. So much so that they weren't even drinking their wine.

“The wolves then rushed them back down toward the swamp, and the thieves were routed out of the valley empty-handed. And then, only the villagers remained.”

“But.. what became of the wolves?”

“Right.. the thieves might be gone, but-”

“Yeah, even if the thieves were gone, that's still not comforting..”

All the villagers listening to her story were thinking the same thing. Having been attacked by thieves, a certain defenseless village was bound to be destroyed.. until wolves arrived. It was laughably contrived, but everyone was enjoying it.

“So? What then..?”

Another villager joined in the questioning. Villagers were always said to know nothing and see even less, but the truth was that they knew a lot - it was just useless to people living in bigger towns. In fact, they probably knew more about living in the real world than people in towns did, especially about dangerous beasts. They knew, for instance, that wolves didn't really get along with people. Clearly they were expecting a more dramatic ending.

“Well, of course the villagers had the same fears you all share. Wolves might be even worse than thieves, because you cannot even talk to them.”

Holo was intentionally showing her cruelest smile to intimidate her audience. Villagers faced storms and hail the likes of which would make one think God was angry at them. Their lives were rather hard, and prayers meant nothing to such storms. And when it came to swarms of locusts, there wasn't even any solace in being around others.

A swarm of eyes and hungry mouths didn't distinguish between humans and other animals; they just saw “food.” They were driven purely by instinct, and anyone caught in their way would remember it for the rest of their lives. And wolves were feared even more than that. Everyone was listening intently while nervously looking at one another. Holo slowly took a sip of wine before she continued.

“In the end, one of the wolves came before the villagers. It was an old one, with grey hair.. and the village elder remembered it.”

“Was it the one he saved?!”

One of the villagers was so excited he shouted, and only won a smack upside the head from the

person next to him. It was such an obvious ending, but it was exactly what everyone wanted to hear. Wolves couldn't live with humans, and they rarely remembered when humans helped them, let alone repay them for their kindness by saving them. Such impossible-seeming things might actually happen in faraway lands, and the villagers weren't really after stories but hope.

“The villagers decided to give the wolves the salted meat they had stored up, and in the end neither they nor the wolves died of hunger, because the wolves couldn't eat their wheat. They all made it through the winter.”

“Wow..!”

Everyone was hanging on Holo's every word, especially the children. People quickly became wise to the cliches in stories like these, but villagers didn't get the chance to hear such fictions very often. Holo was on her seventh (or perhaps eighth?) story already, and she'd even snuck in some real ones she'd experienced with Lawrence among the ones he'd never heard of. They did indeed have fine wine here, and as expected when she said she was out of stories, they just refilled her cup. By now, she must be making them up.

“Is that it? You don't have any more like that?”

“Ah, let's try another kind of story! Maybe something heroic? How about a war story.. those happen all the time..”

“No, I wanna hear more about the Church! Those stories about going on pilgrimages! Does the Holy Mother really look like that statue in front of Brown Cathedral?”

Sure enough, they just kept on asking. The elder was no better, and wasn't really trying to keep them in line. He was too busy recording the stories onto tree bark with sharp stones.

“Um.. I really do not have any more stories to share..”

Holo smiled, completely bewildered, but they certainly weren't going to let her go.

“Hey! Come on, pour her some more wine!”

“Yeah! God gave us drinks for a reason! We can't just pass up a chance meeting with two guys like you.. please share all the stories you know!”

The wine was just too good. Holo would normally have been getting worried about the state of Lawrence's wallet, but here she could earn her wine just by talking so there was no need to feel uncomfortable. And indeed, her tongue was always wagging after she drank a little more.

But there was a limit to how much even she could drink, and how many stories even she knew. That, and she would suffer the next day if she overdid it. She knew that, but she didn't want to

disappoint the villagers regardless. Her face betrayed that she knew it was time to go, but she couldn't bring herself to do it.

Clearly Holo didn't have any more stories, and the wine probably didn't even have any taste by now. Lawrence had long since moved away from the crowd, lost in his own thoughts. At this point he would normally shout, “please let's all come back tomorrow,” but the two of them had to leave before tomorrow.

It was a bit cold and cruel to leave the villagers like that, but travelers had no choice but to move on. Lawrence wasn't sure whether Holo wanted to leave just yet. If he pulled her away, it would only come back to haunt him. She wasn't as weak as she might seem, and her stubbornness rivaled a spoiled princess.

However, when her eyes finally met his, he could tell that they were saying the closest thing to “please save me” they ever would. She'd realized that she needed his help to get away, and so he stood up with a heavy sigh.

“I truly am sorry..”

He made his way through the villagers who were practically flattening her like a cloth, all but destroying the atmosphere, but he had known all along that it was his destiny to play the villain this time. The villagers were still doing their best to urge her into sharing more stories until the village elder finally moved to stop them. He was an inquisitive and determined man, but it seemed like he knew what his role was in the end. The villagers grew sour, but shut their mouths as they watched Lawrence lift Holo up.

They were led away by a girl carrying a lantern, and taken to the storehouse next to the village elder's house that contained the village's supplies for the entire year. Having such a storehouse wasn't rare, nor was it rare for it to be among the most prestigious buildings in a village. It looked like the village was really doing their best to accommodate their guests on such short order.

The mattress was even a linen one filled with hay. Lawrence was torn on whether to ask the girl leading them why they'd only prepared a single bed, but in the end he just smiled and gave her a silver coin of middling worth before thanking her. The girl then left, politely closing the door behind her. He could picture her running home, overjoyed that she was given a whole silver piece for her task.

“You really don't know when to quit, do you?”

He gently set Holo down on the bed. His eyes couldn't help but trace the path of a moonbeam as it shone on her navel, since he couldn't see much otherwise. He could swear he felt a fire from where her face ought to be, which made him recoil slightly.

“Wh-what?”

Had he gone overboard? Was her throat too sore to even tease him back? Sure enough, she coughed and moaned.

“..Thirsty..”

That's all it was.

“..Hang on.”

This was new, she was tugging his pant leg. Usually when she drank this much she was soundly asleep by now, and wouldn't be up until noon the next day.

“I did overdo it.. my face is too hot.. there is a clear stream here, no?”

She was drunk, and had been pushed around by the villagers, so it stood to reason that she'd like to dunk her head in some cool water. He took her arm around his shoulder, and off they went.

“Whew..”

The moment they were outside, she sighed as though she could finally breathe again. It was just like her to keep quiet and only complain if someone asked for her opinion. She was all too happy to help, so even if she was too drunk for her own good she would still happily keep helping.

“Well, I have to admit that everyone was enjoying themselves.”

Holo couldn't walk in a straight line, but she wasn't so drunk that he had to carry her. In fact, he suspected that she was only acting like she was drunk. It would be too embarrassing to admit that she wanted to try so hard, so acting drunk would be the perfect scapegoat.

“..Hoo-ah!”

After walking down the quiet road, they found the stream and Holo washed her face with the clear, freezing water. As his princess did that, and drank some water for good measure, Lawrence held her steady and kept her hair out of the way. After filling her belly, she finally looked up like she'd had enough, so he helped her back to her feet.

He rubbed her face dry with the towel he'd faithfully brought along, then her hands. Holo remained silent, only taking his hand once she was tended-to. She might be looking at him like she'd been waiting forever for him to finish, but the simple act of holding his hand was enough for him.

“Hmm..”

“Hmm?”

That straight road from the stream back to the storehouse was just wide enough for them to walk side-by-side, and that's just what they did under the moonlight as Holo slowly revealed her thoughts.

“I never expected them to be so demanding.. thank goodness I did not share any secrets..”

She stopped to take a deep breath, then smiled embarrassedly as she continued.

“Halfway into that session I was getting quite scared.”

Lawrence was quite surprised to hear Holo admit that she felt any fear.

“You humans are terrible. Animals will stop when their bellies are full, but human minds will eat everything in sight, even lies.”

On her face was an expression of loathing, but Lawrence could tell there was some happiness mixed in. She was probably talking about herself as well.

“Well, so long as you remember that, I can rest easier.”

“Hmph.”

She wasn't really angry to hear to hear him say that, but she still gave his arm a headbutt.

“I wonder..”

“Hmm?”

“What did those people want from me, exactly?”

Lawrence snuck a peek at her face, wondering if she was seriously asking or not.

“Well, stories.. what else?”

“Of course I know that, but..!”

She was being snippy, just like she always was when she got drunk.

“That is not what I meant.. were my stories really interesting enough to warrant such attention? I mean, some of them were obviously made up..”

Lawrence couldn't help but smile to hear that he was right, and some of the stories were fakes. Still, he saw her point. The villagers had pretty much mobbed her, like they wouldn't stop until she died. Even individual stories didn't matter, they just wanted to hear more and more of them. It must have been driving Holo crazy.

But then, even if Holo was drunk and had no further stories to share, she still remained seated. Was it being too biased to pretend she was overwhelmed by all that craziness? One way or the other, Lawrence already had an answer for her, but wasn't sure how to say it without sounding too direct and making her even more snippy. In the end, he couldn't find the right words, so he just dove right in.

“Simply put-”

“It is because they are villagers.”

Like some manipulative sage, Holo completed his sentence and looked up at him, upset. He found her reaction charming, but also knew that there was only one bed. Unless he wanted to sleep on the cold floor, he had to recover quickly.

“Take this road.”

He pointed down at the road ahead of them. It evenly drew a line from the stream, passing by several houses including the elder's home and the storehouse.

“It's probably the nicest one in the village.”

Holo took a look behind them, then looked up at Lawrence, her eyes full of doubt.

“Were you looking for coins as we walked?”

She was even more upset now, judging by the frown on her face. Lawrence didn't expect her to really see his point right away, but now he had to get to the point and quickly.

“This road was made just wide enough for two people to walk beside one another holding hands.”

“..Hmm?”

“All the way from the stream to its other end.”

At this point, Holo looked more like a child clinging to him, so they weren't taking up the width of the road, but she seemed to understand.

“Of course, it's too narrow for two wagons, unless one felt like riding in the field.”

He said that because some remote villages had to build roads wide enough to accommodate a lot of traffic; wheat and other crops, or even herds of animals.

“But all villages have a road like this.. and there's a good reason.”

“..?”

Holo's anger had dissipated, but she didn't have to say anything to make it clear that he had better give her a satisfactory answer. However, Lawrence just smiled back.

“Just keep walking and you'll see. You'll have all the answers you want.”

“Hmm..”

Holo sighed, but at least now they were walking quietly and without any tension. During winter, there weren't even bugs or frogs to bother them, so it was dead quiet. All they felt was the warmth of each other's hand as they trudged on down the road. Lawrence had no idea whether this village had a name, and he doubted this road had one either, since they reached the end in no time flat. As they did, Holo's grip on his hand tightened.

“Well, there you are.”

He finally looked at her, and watched her stare at what lay ahead of them.

“The road starts at the stream here, but in some villages it would be a well instead. As long as there's water there. I'm sure you see why it has this odd width now, yes?”

The clouds have cleared up enough for the moon to shine down, revealing a place that people didn't want to visit at midnight: the village's graveyard, where the life of every villager ended.

“It is just wide enough to carry a coffin.. I see..”

“Exactly. When a villager is born, they are washed in the stream, and when they die, they end up at the other end of the road. You can see it more clearly in the daylight, just how much of their lives are decided for them. Even in death, they will still be right here at this end of the village. Few of them even get to see the outside world.”

It didn't matter whether the world was actually worth seeing or not, and Holo understood that. She gently put a hand on the wooden fence around the graveyard and took a deep breath.

“Does that clear things up?”

After nodding she smiled awkwardly.

“Had I known this at the time, I would have told them even more stories.”

She really was a gentle soul.

“But you know..”

Holo looked up after looking around, tilting her head.

“That is just the way it is for most people.”

“Of course. That's why traveling merchants like me have jobs in the first place.”

She smiled back at him.

“True. There is no end to the things we learn.. even I keep learning new things.”

Her tone was intentionally light, since she had just released his hand and spun around.

“Alright. With that, the riddle has been solved. Let us go back, I am sober now.”

“Sure, since we'd better leave early tomorrow.”

He paused for a moment to take her hand.

“We can't let our journey end here, after all.”

They still had a long way to go, and no one can know whether a journey will end in mirth or painful tears. Anything is possible. But if the road is wide enough to walk beside one another, hand in hand, then they can meet that end together.

Holo looked up at Lawrence, pouted, then smiled. Her chin then fell back down sharply in a nod, and she agreed.

“Mhm!”



1926



Here's a bonus for our readers from our editor, just in case you wanted a slightly spicier sfw ending! There's more news on the final page, too!

He made his way through the villagers who were practically flattening her like a cloth, all but destroying the atmosphere, but he had known all along that it was his destiny to play the villain this time. The villagers were still doing their best to urge her into sharing more stories until the village elder finally moved to stop them. He was an inquisitive and determined man, but it seemed like he knew what his role was in the end. The villagers grew sour, but shut their mouths as they watched Lawrence lift Holo up.

They were led away by a girl carrying a lantern, and taken to the storehouse next to the village elder's house that contained the village's supplies for the entire year. Having such a storehouse wasn't rare, nor was it rare for it to be among the most prestigious buildings in a village. It looked like the village was really doing their best to accommodate their guests on such short order.

The mattress was even a linen one filled with hay. Lawrence was torn on whether to ask the girl leading them why they'd only prepared a single bed, but in the end he just smiled and gave her a silver coin of middling worth before thanking her. The girl then left, politely closing the door behind her. He could picture her running home, overjoyed that she was given a whole silver piece for her task.

“You really don't know when to quit, do you?”

He gently set Holo down on the bed. His eyes couldn't help but trace the path of a moonbeam as it shone on her navel, since he couldn't see much otherwise. He could swear he felt a fire from where her face ought to be, which made him recoil slightly.

“Wh-what?”

Had he gone overboard? Was her throat too sore to even tease him back? Sure enough, she coughed and moaned.

“..Thirsty..”

That's all it was.

“..Hang on.”

He wanted to chastise Holo for being such a hopeless glutton. She knew better than to have so much wine, even if it was free and of a high grade. Was she a child? But by the time his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, his train of thought had moved on. He couldn't spy a water jug in their room. Apparently this place wasn't used as a guest room often enough for the villagers to think that far ahead.

“Looks like they forgot to leave us some water. I'll go get some-”

He stood up..

“Wait..”

..only to feel Holo tugging his pant leg. He was surprised that she was even awake at all. She was usually out like a light by now, and wouldn't wake up until noon the next day.

“That is not what I mean..”

Curious, Lawrence sat back down next to her. He could tell from the meekness of her voice that her face wasn't just covered by her hair; it was turned away. Now *this* was truly rare for Holo.. so rare in fact, that he couldn't help himself. Surely he could be forgiven for playing dumb?

“Hmm? Oh, of course! You want more wine!”

“..Fool.”

The way her hand was still clutching him made it all too obvious what she really wanted. Ever since their time in Sovereign, he'd slowly been learning what her body language meant. He even understood why she wasn't able to be honest now, given how she was always shutting him down. It would be too unfair of her.

“Then what is it?”

But he knew that didn't mean she could just spit it out. He slowly lay down beside her and rolled over on his side to watch her. Her face was turned away entirely so it was clear she was avoiding eye contact. She wasn't even leaving enough of an opening to get a peek at him. But he wasn't going to let her have all the fun.

“Hey.. you're not feeling ill, are you?”

As he loomed over her and reached around to tilt her chin, he felt her hands shoot up to her chest. He didn't know if this frail act was just something she enjoyed doing, or if the Wisewolf simply had her limits and needed him to make the move. Either way, he'd have some more fun first.

Her face was suddenly turned up to look at his, and his hand then brushed her hair aside. He still remembered what she'd told him so long ago, about how his hand made her feel uncomfortable. But now he knew why, and it only made him want to repeat that performance. Today he finally had the chance.

“Nnnh..”

She flinched as his hand intentionally rubbed her nose as he covered her brow. Her eyes were still avoiding his stare, the warmth on her brow made it perfectly clear that it was no illness that was causing her discomfort.

“Hmm.. no, you seem fine after all.. just what do you want?”

It wasn't entirely fair of him to make her say it, but a little give and take was natural. Especially between a headstrong Wisewolf and her self-styled “prey.”

“Nnnh!”

Repeating her earlier childish noise, she finally reached her hands up and looked straight at him. It seemed she wasn't able to hold back tonight, so he decided to drop the act as well. His head slowly descended to hers, and was soon locked in place by her outstretched arms.

He'd traveled so far with Holo during their time together, but these kinds of encounters were never any less embarrassing for her. He was always trying to get her in the mood, but all she ever did was reject him. It had to be her way, it seemed. And even then, he still had to do all of the work.

“Mmm..”

He lifted himself up as her arms finally relaxed. He knew the next word out of her mouth would be “hungry,” if he wasn't already ahead of her. He had to take his chances as they came. Holo would always be Holo, and Lawrence would always be Lawrence. He was no knight, but he still had his duties.

“My hero..”

Her words were oddly punctuated, and her breathing was irregular, but for once it wasn't just from drunkenness. Even if the only thing dry about her was her wit, she still needed to put on a sarcastic front. There was a reason she wasn't asking him why he'd shared no stories of his own, and it was because she already knew.

His eloquence was reserved for other venues, and his audience of one was always eager for more stories. Just like the villagers before her, she loudly demanded his attention, but she was secure in the knowledge that he would never run off, even after his stories put her to sleep.

And for his part, he'd gladly share more with her. All he needed was some more of his favorite wine to keep him going. Her happy sighs and wandering hands made it clear that she didn't wish to leave him, either. By the time their business was concluded, they were always happily drained, yet feeling closer than ever before.

“You will.. omit this part of our story.. when you write it.. will you not?”

He sighed. Was she really so embarrassed that she needed him to get flustered as well? He could only answer the same way she always did.

“Fool.”

He could hear her giggle, but he'd turned his face away. And yet, his hand still found hers and gripped it tightly.

“When we finally have a child, I'll have no need to brag about it in words.”

Her fingers locked even more tightly with his.

“Mm!”



Afterword:

I hope you guys have enjoyed the work we have put out over the past year and a half. It has been a fun, interesting and enlightening journey. It's sad to see it come to an end, however we have some exciting news to share with all of you. Here's a taste:

On a busy day in Kumerson, two figures relive the past while creating new memories. Will they find the peace they seek, and begin a new journey? Discover what awaits the chronicles of Lawrence and Holo when their tales are reopened and a new chapter begins!

If you'd like more Spice & Wolf, including this full-length after-story by our editor (among others), then please visit our forums. Link can be found on the cover page.

Enjoy!

-Pitythefool & the Drunken Wolf Translations Team