

The cover art features two characters against a twilight sky. On the left, a young woman with long, flowing orange hair and fox-like ears is depicted. She has a gentle smile and is wearing a light blue dress with a dark brown belt and a patterned shoulder piece. On the right, a man with short, light grey hair and a small goatee is shown. He is wearing a dark blue and black outfit with a white collar. The background is a soft, hazy sky with pink and blue tones and some clouds.

ISUNA HASEKURA

SPICE
&
WOLF

VOL. 20

Spring Log III

SPIGE & WOLF

Vol. 20

SPRING LOG III

BY ISUNA HASEKURA
ILLUSTRATED BY JYUU AYAKURA



WHAT FALLS IN SPRING AND WOLF

“BY THE WAY, DEAR.”

HOLO SAT BACK DOWN IN THE CHAIR
AND SPOKE SOLEMNLY, EVEN CLEARING
HER THROAT.

THOUGH THIS HAPPENED EVERY YEAR,
SHE WOULD NEVER ASK FOR IT HERSELF.

“YES, YES, I UNDERSTAND, MILADY.”

LAWRENCE WORE A TIRED SMILE AND
TOOK IN HIS HAND A BRUSH THAT STILL
SMELLED OF THE FOREST.

SPICE AND WOLF
BATHHOUSE MISTRESS
HOLO THE WISEWOLF



CARAMEL DAYS AND WOLF

"HEY, I NEED TO TALK TO YOU."

HOLO FINALLY LOOKED UP WHEN SHE HEARD LAWRENCE'S EXASPERATED TONE.

SHE HAD BEEN GLUED TO THE DESK IN THEIR ROOM EVER SINCE THEY HAD FINISHED EATING.

SPICE AND WOLF
BATHHOUSE MASTER
LAWRENCE

"WHAT IS IT?"

"YOU HAVE INK ON YOU."

"MMPH."

AS LAWRENCE WIPED IT AWAY WITH HIS FINGER, HOLO CLOSED HER EYES, AND HER WOLF EARS FLUTTERED.





HARVEST AUTUMN AND WOLF

"HERE, 'TIS WATER."

AS HE SAT ON A FELLED
TREE PREPARING FOR
LUNCH, HOLO APPEARED,
HOLDING A WATERSKIN.

SHE MUST HAVE
RETRIEVED FRESH
WATER FROM A
STREAM SOMEWHERE.

"OH, THANKS. I'M GETTING
FOOD READY, SO JUST HOLD
ON A SEC."

"MM. WITH PLENTY OF
MEAT, OF COURSE."

HER VOICE CONTAINED
NOT EVEN A HINT OF
MISCHIEF. SHE SPOKE AS
SHE STOOD BY LAWRENCE,
HER NARROWED EYES
BLISSFULLY GAZING AT
THE TREES SWAYING IN
THE BREEZE.

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SPICE & WOLF

VOLUME XX
SPRING LOG III

ISUNA HASEKURA
JYUU AYAKURA


NEW YORK

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SPICE AND WOLF, Volume 20

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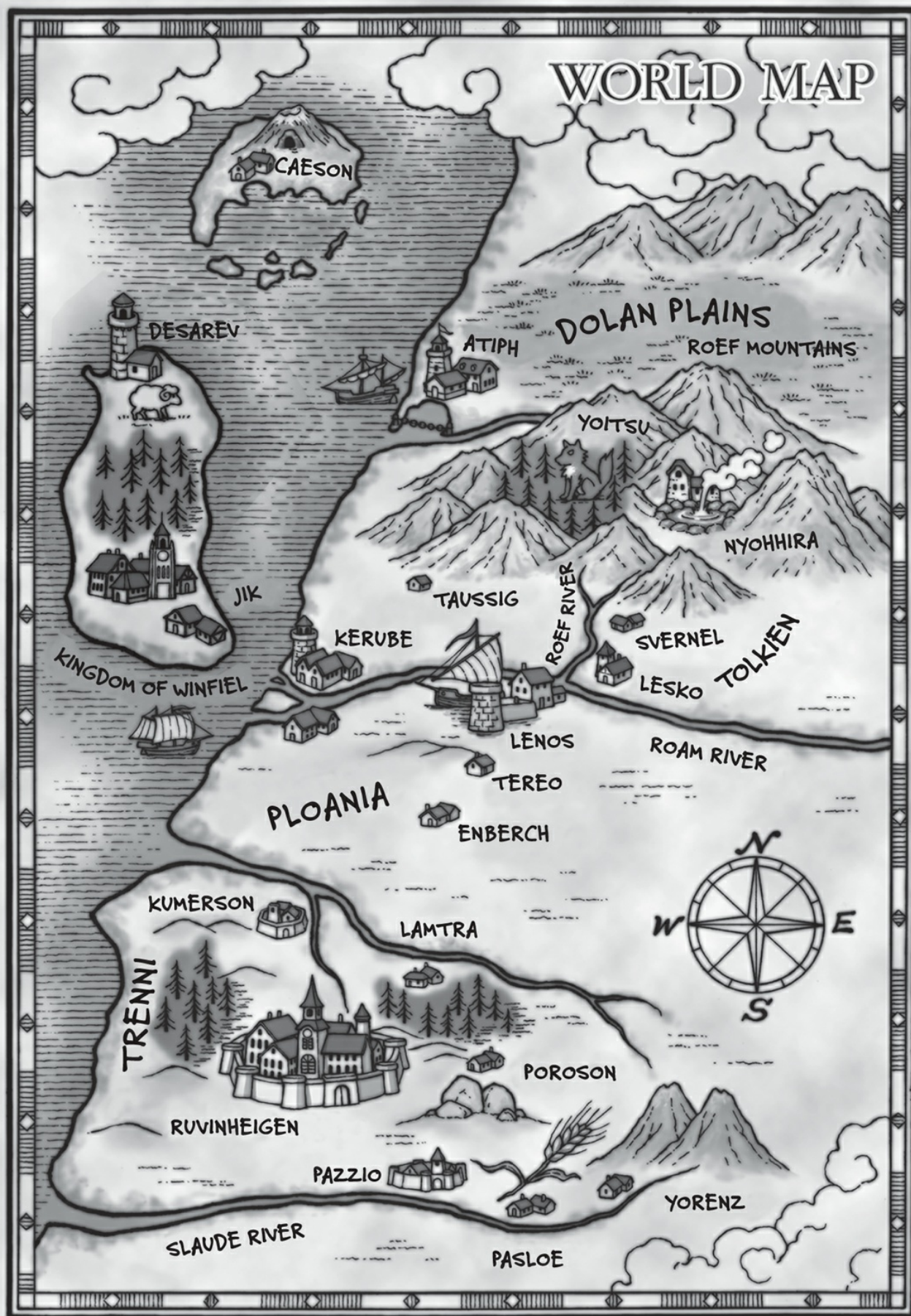
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Map Illustration: Hidetada Idemitsu

WHAT FALLS
IN SPRING
AND WOLF



WHAT FALLS IN SPRING AND WOLF

The snow disappeared from the mountains, the trees budded, and the world bloomed with color.

The stone-cold winter wind gained the scent of soft earth.

The change from winter to spring to early summer happened every year, but the happiness it brought was always fresh.

Nonetheless, plenty of work awaited as the world grew more active, some of it enjoyable and some not.

The most dreadful of them all found its way to Lawrence this year.

“Ngh...mm...Achoo!”

Something had gotten into the master of Spice and Wolf’s nose, and he awoke with a sneeze. He thought for a moment that a spider had spun a web on his face as he slept, but it seemed he was wrong.

Wondering what it might be, he rubbed his face and soon realized. He pulled back the blanket over him, and there was a terrible sight.

“Hey, get up.”

Under that same blanket was a girl who could easily be mistaken for a child, fast asleep. She had beautiful flaxen hair and, at first glance, looked like nobility, but her thin frame made her appear more like a nun.

Of course, Lawrence had not smuggled someone in behind God’s back—it was his wife, Holo.

In short, while not anything particularly shameful, there was something Holo did not wish for others to know. It was not how carefree she was, curled up sleeping without the blanket.

It was how she had pointed animal ears on her head and a large tail growing

from her behind. She was the avatar of a wolf, who once called herself a god and had been worshipped as one.

“So it’s this time of year again...”

As he looked down at Holo, a half smile from some sort of dream on her silly sleeping face, the self-proclaimed wisewolf’s large tail moved slowly. Lawrence immediately sneezed again.

The blanket was covered in brown hairs underneath, and of course, the color was the same as the sleeping Holo’s tail.

The shedding season had come again this year.

Nyohhira, famous as a hot spring village, was not only popular in winter but also during summer. Again today, there was plenty of luggage stacked at the port built on the river that cut through the village.

In the tavern beside the port, Lawrence pulled out some silver coins from his wallet and lined them up neatly.

“Here it is.”

“Hmm. Silver *debau*...and seven of them. Good weight, too. Been a while since I’ve seen a neat coin without the edges scraped away.”

The one counting Lawrence’s row of coins was a man with a rather large nose. Perhaps it looked so big because of how red it was from the alcohol.

The man dressed like a woodcutter pretending to be a merchant—which matched his occupation exactly. He was a traveling craftsman.

“I appreciate your patronage every year. But it seems your wife’s got rather long hair.”

On the table with ale and pork sausages were almost thirty brushes, their bristles all in neat rows. This craftsman made brushes and hair accessories for the dancing girls who came to the village, but Lawrence was very aware that he ordered the most brushes by far.

“She brushes her hair when she finds a free moment. It’s terribly expensive.”

The *debau* silver, a sun engraved on the face, was a splendid coin, considered

best among its peers.

Lawrence had handed over seven.

A skilled craftsman supporting a family as an honest citizen could earn a silver and a half to two silver at most in a day's work, so he knew how wasteful it was.

"I appreciate the business, but why not go for a metal one? A good gilded one will never rust and is gentle on the hair. One of those would last a long time."

The craftsman spoke words that would lessen his own keep. He was probably tired of making tens upon tens of brushes. He wandered, unaffiliated with any town association despite his talent, likely because he was the type to dislike repetitive work.

"She's insisted that she doesn't want to use a metal one."

"Ha-ha. There are plenty of girls like that, saying it'll damage their hair. Well, better than them wanting only metal brushes." The craftsman laughed, gulping down his ale, and finally heaved a loud sigh. "I can take your orders for a few more years, but what'll you do after that?" he said, gazing at the front and back of his new silver coins before putting them into his wallet. "My eyes've started going bad. Quite the hassle lining up all the bristles."

"Is that so...? I was hoping to always have you make them for us."

"Why, then I'll find a fellow craftsman for you. A workshop in town could easily get all the brushes you need done."

But that would cost them the craftsmen association's commission rate and shipping fees, plus the quality would be worse even if they paid the same price.

As Lawrence thought about how he needed to convince Holo somehow, the craftsman emptied his ale, stuffed the rest of the sausage into his mouth, and stood.

"Well, I've got work at the next bathhouse."

"Oh, my apologies. Thank you so much."

Like the impatient craftsman he was, the man was already walking off and responded to Lawrence with a wave of his hand.

Lawrence gave a tired sigh, downed his own ale, grabbed his bagful of brushes, and returned to the bathhouse.

There were already guests at the bathhouse, so Holo usually stayed in the bedroom during shedding season. That was because her fur stuck everywhere, which made it a chore to clean. Moreover, if the guests caught a glimpse of the characteristic wolf hairs, they would naturally grow nervous at the thought that a wolf emerged from the forest during the night and had been wandering around.

“Here, new brushes.”

He spread them out on the writing desk, then took one and tossed it to Holo. While she typically sat on the bed to groom herself, she was currently on a chair she had placed beside the window.

She looked rather elegant, with a cup of wine or something of the sort sitting on the windowsill.

“Hmm. As always, these brushes smell of fine wood.”

She leaned down to the new brush and sniffed it.

Lawrence in turn took a whiff, and there was the scent of freshly cut lumber.

“As expected, the scent of the forest suits my tail best.”

Holo spoke with great delight, but she was probably being self-conscious. She must have felt sorry for how expensive it was, yet found it difficult to switch to a metal brush.

“I don’t mind but don’t scatter the hair too much.”

“You fool,” she said, although it was true that there would be no end to cleaning the room at this time of year. Almost reflexively, Lawrence took the broom leaning on the wall and began sweeping the floor.

Holo, sitting in her chair, took offense.

“You grow more unpleasant every year.”

“Hmm? Sure, I suppose I’ve gotten more refined over the years.” Lawrence stretched his back, stroking his beard as he spoke. “Well, I’m much happier

since we have one fewer tails this year.”

There was another in the bathhouse who had a wolf’s ears and tail. Those belonged to their only daughter, Myuri, but she had stuck with Col, a young man who had been working at the bathhouse before leaving to travel, so she was no longer home. That still pained Lawrence even now, but it was not all bad. Especially since, unlike Holo, Myuri did not seem very interested in maintaining her tail, and because she left it to shed on its own, it was more of a handful than it needed to be.

However, as Lawrence placed the broom back on the wall, it dawned upon him.

“Actually, we haven’t lost a tail.”

“Hmm?”

“I forgot about Miss Selim.”

Selim was the new girl who had come to work at the bathhouse not too long ago. Odd circumstances had brought her to take on the job, and like Holo, Selim was also the embodiment of a wolf.

“Well, we have the brushes we ordered for Myuri, so I suppose I could give those to her.”

It was the master’s job to mind his employees so that their work could be easier.

Lawrence thought about that as he picked out several brushes from the desk when Holo reached out from beside him and snatched them all up.

“These are mine.”

Lawrence was dumbstruck but quickly recovered.

“What are you talking about? Miss Selim must be having a hard time just like you are.”

“She can hide her ears and tail, so there is no need.”

Holo’s reply was curt.

For a moment, Lawrence thought she was serious, but he quickly came to his

senses.

“Myuri could hide her ears and tail, but she was like you at this time of year.”

Unlike Holo, their only daughter Myuri could freely show and hide her ears and tail. Yet, they did not simply disappear once she hid them and still required maintenance.

“Why are you telling such obvious lies?”

When Lawrence asked his question, he was more exasperated than admonishing. Without even a hint of uncertainty, Holo looked away in a huff and spoke.

“‘Twould be better to just give her the coin. The artisan with the big nose is still in the village, yes?”

That was true, but Holo certainly had no need for that many brushes, despite how many she went through.

That was Lawrence’s line of thought, but he had learned from experience that responding logically to Holo’s whims would only make things more complicated. Brushes were not perishable, either, so giving Selim money and ordering brushes separately would produce the same result.

In the end, he chose to obey Holo.

“Very well, then.”

He responded, and Holo still looked at him like she wanted to say something but first returned the brushes and the bag she held back onto the desk.

“By the way, dear...”

Holo sat back down in the chair and spoke solemnly, even clearing her throat.

Though this happened every year, she would never ask for it herself.

“Yes, yes, I understand, milady.”

Lawrence wore a tired smile and took in his hand a brush that still smelled of the forest.

It was like peeling an onion, where it seemed as if one layer of skin suddenly turned into two; an optical illusion.

That was what maintaining Holo's tail felt like every year.

Once they ordered the new brushes, Lawrence was always the one to do the first brushing, and after that, he would only do so when Holo asked.

And this year, she had been asking much more than usual from the very start. Once a bit of his work was done and after he had finished lunch, Lawrence was in the room with Holo, who lay over his lap facedown.

Her freshly brushed tail waved about as she dozed lazily.

The great wisewolf was rather particular about caring for her tail, and under no circumstances had she allowed Lawrence to touch it for quite some time back when they first started traveling together. When that thought crossed his mind, he got a real sense for how much she trusted him, and a smile spread across his face. It was also an expression of resignation at how idle she looked, since the motherly poise she had so refined had been completely discarded ever since Myuri left.

Lawrence pulled out the hairs tangled in the brush and added them to the mountain of fur that had been stuffed in a bag.

He always thought about making a cushion out of it, but Holo consistently refused: "I am the one who sits atop you, not the other way around."

Regardless of who sat on top of whom, his merchant's instincts felt it somewhat of a waste. Had Holo been a sheep, it would have been unthinkable to throw away her sheared wool.

"...Bwaaa—"

As he was thinking, Holo made a strange sound and her body twitched.

He thought she resembled a dog dozing outside on a warm day, but he knew well what would happen if he mentioned that out loud.

"Hey, you'll get sick if you don't sleep with the covers on."

He said it out of consideration, but Holo began waving her tail at his face, as though telling him to be quiet.

"Come on, sto...stop!"

As he fought against her tail, Holo reached out to him when she had the opportunity and grabbed the nape of his neck. *Oh no*, he thought as he fell over, becoming the wolf's prey.

"...I have to go back to work soon," he said, but Holo clung to him, her tail wagging back and forth. "I swear...You've been so undisciplined ever since Myuri left."

She had not even one word to raise a word in argument.

Incidentally, the bit of wine Lawrence had for lunch was stronger than he had thought. He soon found himself struck with the irresistible temptation for a nap.

He had a great deal of work he needed to do, yet he could hear the devil whispering to him that it would be all right to relax for just one day.

As Holo's tail moved slower and slower, Lawrence's eyelids grew heavier and heavier.

Just as his consciousness was about to fade, he somehow managed to shake away the drowsiness and got up.

"No, I can't. Miss Hanna and Miss Selim are working right now."

Holo, still lying on the bed, shot Lawrence a spiteful look.

"I know having to stay in the room is depressing, but there's an exciting summer waiting for you once you get over this."

Anyone who ventured into the mountains could gather heaps of mushrooms and nuts, and the bees building hives in the region meant there was enough honey to fill an entire river. Fish from the rivers were more delicious in summer than they were in winter, and once the road conditions improved and grew lively with travel, herds of livestock would come—and with them, fresh uncured meat.

That was why he had to work hard and prepare.

"If you're that bored, then why don't you think of some use for this?"

Lawrence spoke as he pointed to the bag stuffed with Holo's hairs, and she narrowed her eyes.

“We gather so much every year, and it takes so much time, too. It’s a waste to do nothing with it. Hey, when that noble girl came a while ago, she had a doll made from her pet dog’s fur, no?”

It was extremely well-made, and the dancers had been quite interested in it. It had crossed his mind how rich he could be conducting trade with items such as that, but he did give up when he heard how much trouble it was to make one of those dolls.

“Your tail hairs must be plenty blessed to keep the bears away.”

He did not mention anything about the wolves, but the rulers of the forest would certainly keep clear if they caught Holo’s scent.

“Fool.” Holo spoke curtly, however, and rolled over. “I am Holo the Wisewolf. To use parts of my body so easily means disaster shall befall you.”

“That’s overdoing it.” He laughed, and Holo glared at him.

If he were to tease her any more, she would truly get angry at him.

“Just stay put for now.”

With that, Holo gave a deep sigh. Her ears and tail drooped weakly, dejected.

“I do not mind staying in the room...But how I wish to soak in the baths...”

“Don’t do that.”

Since they lived in the mountains, the residents were very sensitive to rumors about wandering wolves. If wolf hairs were found floating in the baths, the commotion would not end with just Holo and Lawrence’s inn. The entire village was liable to erupt into a frenzy.

“I’ll stock up on something good for you.”

In the end, with no choice but to placate her with food, Holo’s ears twitched.

“Hmm...Then I prefer roast pig.”

“Hey, don’t be so unreasonable. You know there’s no way I can stock up on roast pigs.”

He had explained to Holo many times how difficult it was to obtain live pig in the mountains.

First, they would have to order with a merchant traveling through Nyohhira, who would have to relay that to a butcher in the town downstream from the village. Once the butcher received the message, they would go to the market, tell the butcher's association farmhouse transaction receptionist what size and type of pig they wanted, then wait for the farm to bring one in. If they were lucky and the farm did have one, and there were no similar orders from other butchers, only then could they obtain it. For it to finally arrive in Nyohhira, the process went in reverse, and if the pig was still alive, then it would cry, poop, and try its best to run away, which would require special couriers to manage. Additionally, since everything was to be included under one price for the whole pig, contracts would have to be drawn up between the transporting and purchasing merchants. It was quite possible a notary could also be dragged into it.

In any case, it was an enormous hassle, and the costs were astronomical.

No matter how many times he explained that it was not a matter of simply being stingy or spiteful, Holo always remained skeptical.

When he thought he might have to repeat it all over again, Holo's ears twitched, and she spoke.

"'Tis not unreasonable."

"Come on."

As he began to explain with a sigh, Holo got up and peeked out the window.

"Look, dear, 'tis the pig merchant."

"Huh? No way something that convenient—"

He started to speak as he looked out the window, and there it was—a pig on a line being pulled along. Holo's ears must have caught the pig's squealing.

"Let us roast that for tonight. How about it, dear?"

Holo's expression transformed from listless to cheerful, and she grasped his clothes like a child, pestering him.

Lawrence, however, was not in shock because of the pig.



He recognized the person leading the animal along.

“Mr. Luward?!”

It was a stalwart, veteran mercenary, who did not quite fit the image of someone that would take a pig for a walk.

He hurriedly rushed out to the front of the bathhouse to greet him, and Luward, unburdened with only several subordinates in tow, stood there, relaxed.

“Hey, Mr. Lawrence.”

“...”

He thought he might have been mistaken, but it was, in fact, Luward.

He appeared to be in good health, and his smile grew increasingly dazzling every time they met, leaving Lawrence feeling a bit like he was daydreaming.

“Um...Well, if you’re here for a chat, then come in. Holo will be glad, too.”

Luward nodded, turned back to his subordinates, and ordered them inside.

And at the end of the lead he gripped in his hand was a fat, round pig.

“I would have sent you a letter, but we’re in a rush,” Luward said once he entered the bathhouse.

While Luward’s mercenary company was not that big, it was a band of soldiers who were no stranger to valor here in the northlands. Due to their strength and fame, they were in such a position that any and every lord would empty their wallets to call them to their territory.

And this mercenary captain had just entered his house in a rush with a pig in tow.

Things were not quite adding up.

“You must be busy during this season...” Lawrence murmured offhandedly something he did not quite understand himself.

“Well, sure, we’ve secured good income this year, but we took on some peculiar work. Anyways, let’s have a chat. That’s also why we came today,”

Luward said.

Certainly, he had brought only five subordinates with him, and his right-hand strategist was not present.

“And of course, I didn’t forget the souvenir.”

Apparently the pig he had brought with him was a gift. Lawrence smiled wearily at Luward’s usual lively demeanor.

“I’m sure Lady Holo and our mercenary troupe’s princess would be thrilled, right?” Luward continued.

The name of Luward’s band was the Myuri Mercenary Company. It had been created by the humans who were entrusted with a message given to them by Myuri, one of Holo’s old companions, after the two had last seen each other.

It was also their daughter’s namesake.

“Is our princess any bigger? And perhaps her attitude has improved as well?”

Luward spoke delightfully. The tomboyish Myuri loved Luward, a man who lived out real adventure stories and served as her strongest playmate since he never flinched, no matter what sort of unheard-of pranks she pulled on him.

Luward adored Myuri, too, but there was something that pained Lawrence.

“Well...”

He told Luward that their daughter Myuri had left on a journey with the young man who had worked in the bathhouse, Col.

Upon hearing this, Luward did not even notice that the lead had slipped from his hand.

“Oh my...Those two are...”

“Y-your head, sir!”

Two subordinates propped Luward up as he reeled.

Luward ordered his subordinates back, and with his hand on his forehead, he gazed skyward and closed his eyes.

When he finally looked at Lawrence, his face wore an expression that not

even his troops had seen when they had been nearly wiped out.

“I can’t believe I said that without any consideration to you, Mr. Lawrence.”

He pressed his hand to his chest as though he had been shot with an arrow.

“I feel like I’ve just sent my daughter off to be married...”

“They didn’t elope.”

Luward deflated at Lawrence’s quick response.

“Are you sure?”

“You have my guarantee.”

Luward seemed to finally understand when Lawrence spoke so insistently.

He smiled with a furrowed brow, lightly patted the stubborn bathhouse master on the shoulder, and even embraced him.

“Well then, I guess it’s time for a drink.”

Lawrence finally felt as if he had met someone he could empathize with about his daughter.

Plentiful, fatty meat clung to the ends of the bones Holo feasted on. Paying no mind to the grease dripping down her chin, she bit and tore into meat so tender it came straight off the bone. The pork melted in her mouth, becoming more and more flavorful as she chewed.

In the end, she licked off the yellow fat still stuck to the bone before finally draining the ale that had been cooling in the ice room.

“*Hmah*...So good...!”

Holo, the hairs on her tail bristling, was overcome with emotion as she spoke.

“I’m very glad you like it.”

Since other guests in the bathhouse dining hall would stare, they used the hearth in the bedroom for a bout of drinking.

Lawrence was slightly concerned since the smell of pork fat would not disappear for a few days, which meant Holo would be hungrier than usual for as long as that lasted.

“I really wish your daughter could have eaten it as well,” Luward said as he stuck the diced pork loin onto the metal skewer he had brought with him.

That cut of meat is said to be most delicious when cooked all the way through.

“What a pity it would be to waste such good meat on that fool. It’s enough to write to her and say ’twas good.”

Holo and her daughter, Myuri, competed quite seriously when it came to food.

However, Lawrence suddenly realized something.

“I see. A letter, hmm...If we tell her we have good meat, I wonder if she’ll come back home.”

Luward smiled wryly when he heard Lawrence muttering to himself.

“As someone who shares the Myuri name, I don’t think Col would be so bad.”

“Say it again for this stubborn fool,” Holo said, gnawing on the crunchy fried pig’s ear.

“But, Lady Holo, us men could never be so wise.”

Holo sighed, exasperated, and reached out to the pork intestine stew.

“By the by, why have you come? Even I feel indebted receiving a whole pig as a gift.”

She said this, but she had enough energy to put the food away almost entirely by herself. They were right to set aside portions for Selim and Hanna when slaughtering the pig.

As Lawrence considered this, the typically daring Luward hesitated rather conspicuously before opening his mouth.

“Er, about that...”

He withdrew a small pouch from his hip, where he kept his sword.

“This is a charm that I received from your daughter.”

The sewing on it was rough, and it could not be called nice-looking even out

of flattery.

Holo put down her ale and her nose twitched, her eyebrows quickly knitting together.

“Why has that fool given you such a thing?”

From the way she said it, Lawrence understood that it was Myuri who made the pouch.

“Well, when we went hunting together in this village, we were talking about what would happen if we were attacked by wolves, and she told me to keep this.”

“...”

Holo looked irritated.

“What’s inside?” Lawrence asked, and Luward looked extremely guilty.

“The hairs from your daughter’s tail.”

“Her tail?”

“Yes...I refused her three times, but she hid several in my luggage. I couldn’t throw them away, so I ended up carrying one around with me...”

The emblem of the Myuri Mercenary Company was a wolf, and Holo’s old companion had a hand in its formation, but Luward and the others never depended on Holo’s extraordinary power. That was partly of pride and out of respect for Holo as well.

Thus, he must have felt deeply pained in borrowing Myuri’s power, although it was out of his control.

However, it was strange that they would bring a pig all the way to the bathhouse for that.

As various speculations ran through Lawrence’s head, Holo placed her mug firmly on the floor, as if signaling something.

“Well, I suppose you ran into trouble wearing that as wolf repellent, no?” Holo spoke as she reached out for the skewered meat as it scorched.

Trouble? As Lawrence turned his gaze toward Holo, Luward spoke.

“Yes...exactly. In the beginning, no matter what forest we passed through, we no longer had any problematic encounters with wolves, and it was a great relief.”

Luward took a carafe from one of his subordinates and poured more drink into Holo’s mug. They must have been something like his personal guard and probably subordinates he could trust. They had been completely unfazed when they saw Holo’s ears and tail.

“It’s led to an odd situation where we recently took some work.”

“Hmm.”

Holo’s tail rustled, as if to say, “Tell me.”

Hairs fluttered about as they were shed, but Luward of course did not even so much as narrow his eyes.

“Right now, we are working as guards for a certain noble, but we were asked to curb the wolves that roamed in his territory.”

“Curb.” Holo repeated the word, a mischievous smile on her face.

Lawrence, being concerned about Luward’s position, directed a cough toward her.

“’Tis a joke. It sounds like a rumor spread that wolves stay clear of you, and someone who heard of such employed you, then went off to hunt the wolves to exterminate them, yes?”

Luward wordlessly drooped his head, so that seemed to be spot on.

“That is exactly it...”

“And? So with our little fool’s hair, most wolves stay away, no? Or perhaps you encountered our kin?”

While there were not many beasts like Holo, who understood the human language and lived long lives, they did certainly exist.

Among them were wolves, and Selim was a good example. They were often powerful beings as well.

In that case, then they would have no choice but to carry Holo away with

them in order to relieve the current situation, so it made sense they brought a pig as tribute. The problem was how Holo would have to turn on the wolves she should be calling her companions.

A chord of anxiety ran through Lawrence, but Luward shook his head weakly.

“No...”

“Mm...Hmm?”

Holo, who had just spoke of the worst possibility, looked at Lawrence with a mixture of relief, confusion, and worry.

Lawrence, too, found it unexpected, as he had not imagined any other possibility.

“Mr. Luward, it seems like you have been caught up in some sort of trouble due to our daughter. So it is our job as her parents to take on this responsibility. Do you think you could tell us what it is?” Lawrence asked, and Luward looked at him like a sinner to a priest in a confessional.

“I feel greatly obliged for your consideration. Honestly...To be honest, we are entirely responsible for all this...But this is not something we can do anything about,” Luward said. He held a fist to his mouth as though ready to bite into it, then lifted his head resolutely and continued. “In fact, it’s the opposite.”

“...The opposite?”

Holo’s tail flopped from right to left.

“Yes. The lord who hired us requested we do something about a pack of ferocious wolves roaming about the forests. While we were originally hired for a territorial war, our contract had already been settled, and to show cowardice would cause problems for our banner. With no choice, we accepted and went into the forest to curb the wolves. And as always, with the help of your daughter’s pouch, we had an immediate effect. However, that was one month ago.” Luward sighed deeply. “It seems the leader of the pack has become infatuated with me.”

It was clear from his sullen expression how terribly idiotic he felt explaining this.

“I want to believe it was a misunderstanding, but that’s all I can think of. At first, I thought they saw us as a formidable foe, so they followed us at a great distance. But one day, placed in front of the inn where we were lodging, we found a deer.”

The mercenary captain wiped away the beads of sweat on his forehead.

“In conflicts between tribes from long ago, warriors would intimidate their enemies by placing the carcasses of animals before their rival’s houses or harassed them with magic, but...”

He then peeked up at Holo, who responded, “We do not do such things,” her expression oddly serious.

Lawrence noticed how the tip of her tail was quivering and realized that she was suppressing a laugh.

“Not only that, but after we found sheep outside countless times, we found fox and rabbit, badgers, large carp, and even lamprey...The guarantee it could not be out of malice was when we found a large beehive outside.”

Holo pretended to drink her ale, desperately trying to hide her mirth. Yet, her tail shivered, like a snake in its death throes.

“Then one day we decided to confront the wolf. And what a magnificent pack the male led...”

Luward pressed his hand to his forehead, as though enduring a headache. Lawrence decided not to ask what happened and what sort of situation it ended up being.

A large male wolf, infatuated by Myuri’s scent, had fervently offered tribute.

Luward did not seem to be injured, so although he was likely not attacked, he probably did not feel very alive from being fawned over, either.

“It would be a warrior’s disgrace to turn a blade against someone who harbors no ill intent. Yet, we were up against a wolf, the opposite of a human...er, I mean, Lady Holo and Mr. Lawrence are different, though!”

“Don’t worry about it. And then?”

Lawrence urged him on, and Luward inhaled deeply, then continued.

“Even if no one gets hurt, we would still be troubled if surrounded by a pack of wolves. Someone may think we are using some sort of strange magic, and while there are people who might think we are part of the same pack, others might not think the same way. And...,” Luward said, “if possible, we would hope that you, Lady Holo, could explain this misunderstanding to those wolves.”

Holo then burst out into a fit of laughter.

“Heh-heh-heh...I am sorry. What a predicament this must be for you... But...*Snort*. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Holo laughed out loud, which was unlike her, and almost doubled over.

Once her fit had ended, Holo drew closer to the drooping Luward and took Myuri’s pouch from his hand.

“I swear. Our little fool is still young.”

She brought her nose closer to it and sniffed it, then tossed the pouch onto Lawrence’s lap.

“But we certainly cannot overlook our daughter’s carelessness. The old Myuri who had given you his claw would surely misjudge me as I have given you so much trouble.”

Luward looked up at her as if he were a criminal whose death sentence had just been canceled.

“Then—”

“Yes. We have no choice but to explain the situation to those hapless wolves.”

“Thank you. My strategist, Moizi, is wearing one of the pouches on his person, and he should be doing his best to handle that wolf right now.”

Moizi was Luward’s pseudo father-turned-strategist, a man with a magnificent bearlike physique.

When Lawrence imagined Moizi flustered as a large wolf fawned over him, he felt bad, yet found it funny.

“But...” Holo then spoke. “I cannot go.”

“Holo!”

Lawrence interjected, but Holo glared at him with a strangely sharp gaze.

Overwhelmed, Lawrence fell silent, and she waved her tail, satisfied, before speaking.

“Instead, I shall send one of our young ones.”

“Young...ones?”

“Miss Selim?”

Holo’s lips drew together into a pout at Lawrence’s question.

Then she faced Luward—not Lawrence—and explained:

“’Twas just a little while ago we hired one of our kin. A rather promising young wolf named Selim. She should fit well enough for the job.”

“Thank you. But...”

Luward glanced briefly at Lawrence, then at Holo. He seemed to notice a sort of odd atmosphere arising between the two.

“I must stay in the bathhouse. Help is the work of a newcomer. Is that not right?”

Of course, Luward could not deny this.

“That is true, but...”

“Then ’tis settled.”

Holo spoke and reached out for more meat.

Just as she opened her mouth wide to take a bite, she stared at the two dumbfounded men.

“I am Holo the Wisewolf. Do you find something unsatisfactory with my judgment?”

Luward shook his head in denial, and while Lawrence still had some questions, he merely sighed.

Selim accepted the job without a hint of resistance, despite being given such an odd duty.

Her return would be delayed had she traveled with Luward, so they told her

the name of their destination as well as providing a map, allowing her to leave the evening of the same day Luward came to the bathhouse. It would take her two days to go there and back, so she would be gone for about four days total.

Luward and the others, who had taken five days just to travel to the bathhouse, were clearly envious of her good legs.

Luward and the others left the day after, and while it was not a very exciting reunion, Lawrence was glad to see them since one never knew where and when something might happen in the mercenary line of work.

On the other hand, he and Hanna were the only workers left in the bathhouse, so he had no choice but to explain the situation to the guests. Selim had to leave on short notice, and Holo was feeling under the weather so she was resting. He explained how regretful he was that there may be things they could not totally fulfill to the guests' satisfaction.

Luckily, most of their guests were regulars, and they insisted they would be fine alone with just some drink and food. It seemed things would somehow turn out okay.

Fatigued, Lawrence saw Luward off and returned to the room for a moment, and Holo, waving Luward off from the window, turned to Lawrence with an accusing look.

"Did I not tell you so?"

For a moment, he was not sure what she was talking about, but there on the desk, along with the bunch of brushes, was the charm that Myuri had made.

"Is this what you meant by disaster?"

The answer to his question of why they could not use the hairs from her tail every year as wolf or bear repellent had become quite apparent.

Holo rested her chin in her hand on the windowsill and looked up at him, annoyed.

"I am Holo the Wisewolf. There is nothing in this land that can compare to my wit and charm. Those who carry amulets stuffed with bits of my fur would leave this place and stupefy male wolves in every land."

Lawrence took it as an exaggeration at first, but that is exactly what happened with the charm that Myuri had made.

“The males with blood rushing to their head may perhaps follow the scent and end up at this bathhouse.”

Though stories of knights who surround a princess and all kneel before her were made up, this was not at all fiction.

“Then at the bathhouse, those good-for-nothings, like unsatisfied sheep, would push the weak wisewolf around. What do you think these males would do? In the laws of the forest, the strong are the just.”

He wanted to ask who exactly would be pushing around whom, but he could imagine the situation.

Regardless of the details, it would be fatal if there were wolves lurking around the bathhouse.

“That would be...a disaster.”

Lawrence spoke, and Holo sniffed in irritation.

“But...,” Lawrence said, continuing. “You should have gone, not Miss Selim.”

Myuri was the cause of their problems this time, and more importantly, Selim, who could hide her ears and tail, was working for the bathhouse, unlike Holo.

It was this moment that Holo looked sincerely dejected and heaved a great sigh.

“Fool.”

Then, just as she looked at the disappointed Lawrence, she stood up lazily and walked toward him.

Lawrence unconsciously tensed, but Holo embraced him, almost falling into him, and pushed him back onto the bed.

“H-hey!”

As Lawrence found himself flustered, thinking it odd she was so moody, Holo gripped him tighter with the arms she had wrapped around him and spoke.

“They are all so easily infatuated in this season. I cannot allow you to stay

under the same roof alone with that girl.”

“What?”

Just as he was about to tell her that such a thing would never happen, she dug her nails into his back.

“The fool who wanted to present her with brushes without a second thought has no right to speak.”

Lawrence finally realized why Holo had criticized him when he wanted to give Selim a brush. He wanted to say how he had no ulterior motives, nor would Selim have taken it the wrong way, but in the end, he decided not to. This was not about how he felt but how Holo felt.

There was unexpected strife in life at the bathhouse after Myuri left, which he thought would be completely uneventful.

Holo, too, must have been insecure...but she was not.

As she was, she no longer had a reason to brush up on her motherly poise, so she must have been wanting to make selfish demands, pout, and act on her whims.

Holo was originally much more princess-like than Myuri.

“Well, I’ll apologize about the brushes. I wasn’t being very considerate.”

“As always,” Holo said with a muffled voice, her face still pressed against Lawrence’s chest.

“But about making those charms, it isn’t that bad, is it?”

Holo’s ears perked up.

She raised her head and looked up at him, and he smiled back.

“Don’t you want to see how awesome I’d look as I fight back all the male wolves all lined up, drawn in by your scent?”

Holo’s eyes widened, bearing her fangs in a grin.

“You used to shiver at a single distant howl when we lived on the road.”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“Hmm?”

“I’d muster up all my strength against the scariest opponents if it were for you.”

Holo shut her eyes, as if a sudden gust of wind blasted over her face, and her ears twitched.

Then she glued her cheek directly onto Lawrence’s chest.

“’Tis only your words that are so talented.”

“Then can I show you that it’s not only my words?”

Holo’s ears perked, and she twisted her body about. Either she was lonely alone in the room, or perhaps everyone was exceptionally susceptible to infatuation this time of year, as she had mentioned earlier. She was doting on him more than usual.

But Holo, who never said anything foolish, looked up at him with expectant eyes.

When their gazes met, Lawrence smiled, and when he saw an opening, he quickly pushed her off him.

As Holo rolled to the side like a little child, Lawrence quickly stood up.

She stared blankly at him in surprise.

“The scariest for me is the bathhouse going in the red. I have to face it, okay?”

When Holo realized she had been tricked, she flushed unusually scarlet, grabbed a pillow stuffed with wheat husks, and threw it at him.

Lawrence caught it easily and placed it gently on the bed.

“Well, I’m back to work, but you stay put here.”

Holo was curled up on the bed, perhaps vexed, and her tail puffed up as she spoke.

“You fool!”

It was just another day at the bathhouse, one where nothing happened.

THE
WHITE HOUND
AND WOLF



THE WHITE HOUND AND WOLF

God's trial must have begun when my companions slipped on the mountain road. It luckily had not been a serious ordeal, but the constant rain then was causing landslides everywhere, and we were brought to a standstill deep in the mountains.

The horseman we had hired from a nearby village was energetic, for a while at first, but began acting strange upon hearing the cries of wolves at night. One day at lunch, he went out to gather mushrooms for his meal, and he never came back.

We had been abandoned deep in the mountains, among the frequent cries of the wolf.

Luckily, we had not strayed from the trail, so we would find ourselves somewhere if we kept going forward. We trusted in God's guidance as we chanted his name and continued forward in the mud.

But as our supplies began to wane, we could not see any light beyond the dense trees. The rain continued to fall, and many times we set up our tents beneath giant trees or at the foot of a cliff only to gaze sleeplessly at the water dripping onto the moss.

We thought we were finally reaching the end on the third straight day of rain.

Many of us were coughing, likely from what practically amounted to a mushroom nursery beneath our tents. Even the most well-oiled tanned leather coats grew soft from absorbing water and were covered in a grand display of mold. Like the coats, we thought we would be returning to dust in this forest.

Of course, since we worked under the name of God, we did not fear death. We were confident that we would complete the task given to us.

And it was not terrible that our final place of inspection was that famous hot spring village, Nyohhira.

It was a land that had not once seen the fires of war, even in the old age when the torrential winds of battle blew, and so lively that it lived up to its reputation for endless laughter and music. Add alcohol into the mix, and certainly—coupled with the steam of the baths—one may not recognize the enemy before them.

But because of that, it could be said it was the perfect place for the lawless to escape to.

In addition, high-ranking clergymen came every year from the south to the land of Nyohhira to heal. It was not impossible that a number of people with wicked plans targeted these great servants of God and were seeping heretical ideals into the water.

Under the orders of the papal office, we had come to Nyohhira for the first time in over ten years.

It was as bustling as always—a garden of debauchery and pleasure.

It was not unusual for prestigious archbishops to ogle the dancing girls and chase after them. There were those who drank in the morning, daytime, and evening and finally slept when dawn came the following morning. While we were displeased with their misconduct, our mission was to expose heresy, not observe corruption. Yes—we were the inquisition.

It was late autumn when we came to this land, and we stayed throughout the winter. My companions scattered throughout the baths in the village, and in those baths, in those dining halls, they would keep a watchful eye to see if there were any scheming blasphemers.

The bathhouse I had been assigned was one that had not existed when we came over ten years ago.

Places deep in the mountains and isolated villages hated change. Nyohhira was no exception. Officially, it is said that anyone who finds a spring may start a bathhouse, but all valuable locations had been dug up a long time ago. For all intents and purposes, that law was a barrier meant to protect their vested interests.

Since there should not have been any new bathhouses for quite a long time, I

was shocked to hear one had appeared in the village. And on top of that, it was apparently flourishing.

In our preliminary investigation, we identified rumors that they had dug up the spring using magic and were tricking their customers. While we should not earnestly believe the rumors that cling to successful newcomers, it was, after all, Nyohhira.

It was my unworthy self who had been chosen to stay in this bathhouse. I was eager to reveal the truth in God's name. However, what I saw and heard there tormented my heart greatly.

That was because while the aforementioned bathhouse seemed respectable at first, it was a mystery as to why it thrived as it did if it truly were respectable.

Additionally, it was very deep within the mountains, almost on the outskirts of the village. It was in a spot that better-paying customers preferred and, at the same time, in a rugged place where it would be difficult to dig for water.

Perhaps the rumor that they had used magic to dig was not entirely fabricated.

Moreover, their customers were odd.

When I asked in the baths where they had heard of this inn, they mentioned various names of authority and power. They said they were all acquaintances of the master of the bathhouse when he once worked as a traveling merchant.

As I continued my investigation, I found that this bathhouse had deep connections to the Debau Company, the corporation that came to control the entire northlands with rapid force.

Was that possible for just a mere merchant?

Was he not a wizard deceiving the public? If not, then perhaps a spy sent by a great power? Regardless, if he were one who spoke ill of God's house, then I would have to report to the papal office.

Keeping that in mind, I kept a close watch on the bathhouse, but I did not understand.

What was so special about this bathhouse that people gathered here?

Nonetheless, while it was easy to report it to the papal office as one that needed surveillance, we could not send honest lambs of God to burn at the stake. And so, on the long road back to the papal office, I could not decide in the end what to do.

I had plenty of time anyhow.

As I watched the rain gently and tirelessly dampening the moss, I decided to reflect back on the bathhouse.

They said its name was Spice and Wolf.

Whether by river or on the road, the first thing one notices is the smell.

The peculiar smell of sulfur was so rich it was almost visible.

Then, once we grew used to it, we could see the steam from the baths beyond the trees.

At this point, depending on the direction of the wind, we could faintly hear the lively melodies of the musicians' music.

The first thing we saw farther up the road was a stable for hire. Tied there were horses with thick legs and long fur, and they stared unintimidated at the passersby. There were also more familiar-looking horses there, perhaps brought in by the staying guests.

Beyond the stable were buildings that looked like workshops with rather large frontage, but they were entranceways to bathhouses. The entrances were so wide perhaps due to the necessity of bringing patrons who brought lots of luggage inside during the winter. It also seemed that some musicians and acrobats who had come to Nyohhira for work were here to give their services, and some tall women were gathered around, playing with their hair, and a nimble-looking man stood on his hands, feeding a little bear as it did tricks. May God watch over them.

Every inn cluster beyond that was similar, along with a scattering of shops selling traveling necessities, and we finally reached the town square. It was located by the port on the river that ran along the village and looked to be quite lively.

Those alighting at the port were, of course, not just guests. The more people who came to the baths, the more goods needed to care for such a number of people. It was as lively as the eve of a battle, and there was a mountain of cargo at the loading area.

Then beside it was a fire in a metal cage, with many metal poles stuck into it.

As I gazed, wondering what it was, those who looked like workers from the village retrieved the poles as they finished inspecting the cargo and pressed it onto the goods.

It seemed they were branding them to ensure they would not end up in the wrong place.

While it looked to be the servants from every bathhouse that came to retrieve the cargo, there were both adults and children, with various colors of hair and eyes, all with different facial features. It was work that had great disparity between busy and idle seasons, so many of them must have traveled here for that purpose.

There were likely many who would mistake the names of the bathhouses, and it was questionable if they spoke one another's languages at all.

I felt it was quite logical to brand them.

Yet, however, it seemed as though there was an argument, and there were people yelling loudly at one another.

They were not dressed in traveling clothes, so they must have been locals. They were tearing at their hair before the stacked crates.

While I could not hear what they were arguing about, it did not seem related to my work, so I paid little attention to it.

Though we left the square, the clamor, for the most part, did not die down.

There were dining halls and cheap lodgings here and there, and many people were drinking and eating while the sun was still high in the sky.

Had this been a walled town the atmosphere would easily grow wild, but it did not feel that way. Perhaps all the loud ones here were those who came along to their masters' bath treatment. Retainers such as them could not stay in

the bathhouses, so they bathed in the public baths that anyone could use and slept together in huddles in cheap lodgings.

And due to the number of people, the dining halls set up tables all over the street, and those who were bathing in waters without any walls or roofs were crossing the street naked to buy a drink.

Those standing frozen on the side of the road were likely new priests who had come to Nyohhira for the first time in service of their archbishops or abbots.

The styles of their robes were all different so perhaps they were not acquainted with one another, but perhaps they thought they had found someone who would understand them among all the confusion and froze. They were just like baby lambs.

Beautiful, half-naked dancers called out to them just as we passed, and their eyes widened in bewilderment. I prayed that they may win against temptation and continued forward.

The crowds thinned out farther into the village, and there were more and more large buildings. Places with large, crested flags fluttering by the entrance likely meant a nobleman had rented out the entire building for himself.

Even farther into the village, where I began to feel the slope of the mountain, bathhouses were shrouded from one another by the veil of the trees. The bustle of the port faded into an occasional birdsong.

It is said that the farther away one goes from the bustle, the more potent the water becomes and the higher the quality of bathhouse.

That was because digging for water was hard enough as it was, and erecting a building afterward was also quite the hassle, so without enough funds, one could not even manage opening a business.

Therefore, it was without a doubt that this place, which could only be reached by entering the woods and at the top of a steep hill, was being supported by quite a lot of money.

The building itself felt simple, but I could tell it was bustling on the inside.

Like a re-creation of the scene at the port, there was cargo piled here and

there.

I spotted the wheat, fish, and cured meat right away. Sausages stuffed to the point of bursting were literally overflowing from their crates. There was a row of earthenware jugs common in the south that must have contained olive oil. It had most likely been a special request by one of the terribly selfish southern priests or nobility, but when I thought about how much time and money it would take to bring it here, I could not help but shake my head. Though I could not see inside the other crates, their containers were well-made, so they were likely various high-quality, luxury goods.

And there was branding on this cargo as well.

The design was easily recognizable from a distance and even hung from the bathhouse eaves: the image of a howling wolf.

It was the sign for the bathhouse Spice and Wolf.

“Oh no! Why doesn’t it add up?!”

Suddenly, as I wondered if that was a loud voice I heard coming from behind the cargo, a small head popped up. There was a child with a strangely colored hair that resembled flecks of silver mixed in with ash.

“Hey, Brother! Something’s definitely wrong!”

Rather than a servant, this was the child of the bathhouse master. Her hair was rather long, indicating that she was his daughter. Waving about the slate she held in her hand, she turned to face the bathhouse entrance and hollered. Just as I furrowed my brow, thinking it unbecoming of a young lady to speak in such a loud voice, I saw her grab something from a cloth bag nearby and stuff it into her mouth. What a tomboy she seemed to be.

“I counted it over and over, but there’s not enough wheat! And I think there’s some rye mixed in here, too! I told you they can’t be trusted!”

Though she was still small, I was impressed by how good her judgment was.

Once ground up, it was hard to tell flours apart. Even more so once they had been mixed.

Even once kneaded with water, no one besides a baking artisan would notice

until it was too late.

As I considered this, there came another voice.

“What is this ruckus? How noisy you are.”

Appearing from inside was another girl, a perfect match for the first one.

A cloth was wrapped loosely around her head, flaxen-colored hair peeking out from under it, and she was slightly taller.

I wondered if she might be her twin sister, but this girl had a peculiar presence about her.

“This isn’t all the flour we need, and I think some of it’s mixed up. Also, where’s Brother?”

“Little Col was invited to the baths by those geezers. But mixed together, hmm?”

The silver-haired girl modestly stepped out of the way of the flaxen-haired girl, giving her space.

The latter brought her nose closer to the sack of flour.

“Hmm. Regardless, ’tis likely we do not have enough due to how chaotic the port is. Not much we can do in this season.”

“Should I go check?”

The silver-haired girl asked, but the other quickly smacked her on the head.

“Fool. Are you going to play?”

“N-no...”

“There are plenty of idlers in the house. Have someone bring this in and have them go check while they can.”

“Awww...Can I go with them?”

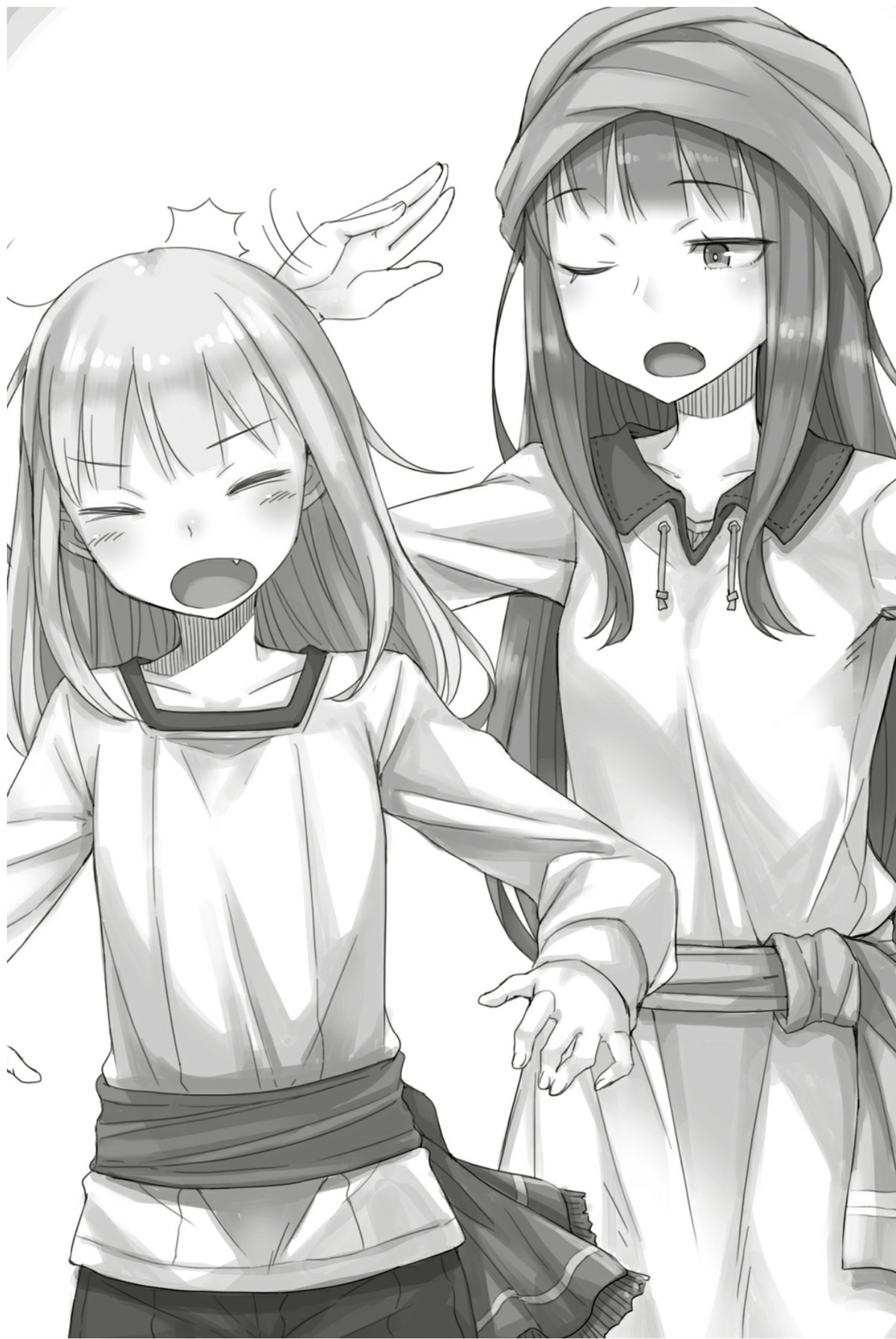
When the silver-haired girl spoke, the flaxen-haired one fixed upon her an icy gaze, and she recoiled, like an ermine discovered by a fox.

“And who is this?”

From beyond the large number of crates, the flaxen-haired girl motioned to

me.

It seems they had finally noticed me.



“Huh, I wonder. I dunno.”

“You little fool...”

The silver-haired girl seemed dissatisfied at the exasperated tone directed toward her, but she shrank back when glared at.

It was rather clear who was superior in this situation, so though they seemed quite alike, they were perhaps sisters separated in age. The one I presumed to be the older sister spoke in a rather old-fashioned manner, so perhaps she had been sent here from a faraway land to wed or had learned to speak from an older person.

That was what I imagined, but it was not consistent with my guess that she was the other girl's sister. It was unusual for a groom to bring both sisters into his home.

In terms of my work, things that did not logically add up strangely caught my attention.

As I thought about it, the older girl called over the cargo to me.

“And who are you? Perfect timing if you are here for mendicancy. There are plenty of that sort in the baths.”

The way she said “mendicancy” was muddled, and it was oddly endearing. What a strange girl she was.

For the moment, I straightened myself and began to speak.

“My name is Gran Salgado. I came here on the introduction of Abbot Bauha, who is staying here now. Perhaps you have heard already that I will be staying with you this winter?”

Despite my announcement, the girl's reaction was not very pleasant. She did not even bother to hide her suspicious gaze.

It was perhaps due to how I was dressed. I wore layers of long robes, the hems completely frayed away, and hanging around my neck was a string of bunched garlic for use as both preserved food and bug repellent for sleeping outdoors. My walking stick was about my height, one I found on the road, and it had been a great help keeping away stray dogs and measuring the depth of

mud and even drying my linens. My beard had not been shaved for a while in order to keep me warm.

Due to my state, I was painted black with dirt, from my fingernails to the crevices of my wrinkles.

Of course, I might be seen as a beggar.

She had mentioned mendicancy likely because it was impossible to live as a beggar deep in these cold mountains.

“Hmm...Well, I suppose there are many sorts of guests.”

“If you do not have a room, I do not mind sleeping in the shed.”

“No need. Perhaps I should say...I worry about something else.”

“Something else?” I asked in return, and it came to me. “Pardon me. If you are worried about fleas and lice, then I shall go cleanse myself in the river.”

This bathhouse was a gathering spot for those of a certain degree of wealth. It was not cheap roadside lodging.

“That as well, but actually...”

She sniffed lightly, then grinned.

“I am surprised to see you might be a genuine article. Despite your dress, you smell of nothing. Perhaps you are the type to prefer beans and water over meat and alcohol? This is not a hermitage in the wilderness.”

“Ah, I see.”

I gave a slight chuckle for the first time in months.

“Asceticism is meant for us to regulate ourselves, not an excuse to force beans and water on others. And God allows the occasional break.”

“I should hope so. Myuri.” The flaxen-haired girl spoke, and the girl with silver hair stood up straight. “Bring this man to the baths and prepare the grooming razor and soaps and such. I shall put the cargo away.”

“Aww, no fair! Mother, are you going to snack in secret from Father?”

The girl named Myuri called the other one Mother.

I had not even imagined it, but once she mentioned it, they no longer felt to me like sisters but mother and daughter.

What surprised me the most was how young the mother was.

“You fool. I shall be doing no such thing.”

“You definitely will! There’s a pot of sugar here! That’s not fair! I want a taste, too!”

As they interacted, they still did really seem like sisters.

At any rate, watching them brought a smile to my face.

Either would be spectacular if they served as the face for the bathhouse.

“Now then, what is it I should do?”

I posed the question with a bit of a strained smile, to which the mother smacked her daughter’s head, and the daughter glumly showed me inside.

The choir sang and the dancers swayed in time to the musicians’ performance. There were those entranced by their performance, those engrossed in conversation with wine in one hand, and—oh God, those concentrating on games of cards and dice.

Perhaps they had either come here after a long journey, or they were used to it back in their homelands from working in relief for the poor or taking in wandering monks. But not a single person paid me any mind when I entered the bath in my tattered state.

I shaved my beard, cut my hair, and washed my body with the items provided by the bathhouse. Abbot Bauha noticed me as I was doing so, and I quickly grew familiar with a few others by his introduction.

It seemed the abbot and the others would be staying here until sunset, but I had things I needed to take a look at. I left the spring, wore the clothes borrowed from the bathhouse, and returned to the main building. It was a comfortable outfit made of linen, accompanied by a coat stuffed with plenty of wool to keep me warm.

It was so warm it almost made me dizzy, so I wandered about searching for my own usual clothes, and there I spotted that girl with the flaxen hair...though

I was unsure if I should even call her a girl.

Beside her was an older man in his prime, and they sat rather intimately together.

I felt bad for interrupting such an affectionate atmosphere and hesitated if I should call out to them, but the girl soon noticed me.

“My, how handsome,” she said delightfully and cackled.

“Thanks to you, I feel refreshed.”

I gave my thanks, and after a brief smile, she winked at the man beside her.

“’Tis the guest who arrived earlier. How dirty he was, so I had him bathe first.”

She spoke without hesitation, yet it suited the air around her quite well.

But the man beside her smiled in embarrassment and admonished the girl.

“Pardon my wife. I’m the master, Kraft Lawrence.”

He gave his name, approached me, and offered his hands. Considering how he called her his wife, then that silver-haired girl must, in fact, be the flaxen-haired girl’s daughter.

There were perpetually young women among those who lived in the silence of contemplation and prayer, but this was unusual even among them.

I recalled the rumor of a business that thrived using magic.

The image of a witch who never aged crossed my mind.

“My name is Gran Salgado. I have come on the introduction of Abbot Bauha. I have heard that this land is the closest to the seat of God in all the world.”

“I pray every day that he is close, and not because he is here to scold us,” Lawrence, the master, said, smiling quietly.

As I was scrubbing the dirt from myself earlier, I listened in on the conversations of the bathing guests and managed to grasp that Lawrence was once a traveling merchant. I had the feeling that even if he had a tail, he would not be someone so easily caught.

“By the way, where might my luggage and clothes be? This set I have

borrowed is a bit too warm for me.”

“I have taken your luggage to your room. Your clothes are being washed. Had I left them in your room they would have become bugs’ nests.”

“Hey now, Holo.”

It sounded like the name of the wife was Holo. It was an unusual name, but I felt like I had heard it somewhere before.

As I pondered, wondering if it had anything to do with heretical festivals, I felt the master’s gaze on me and I returned to my senses.

“Please excuse her. She is just so foulmouthed.”

“Oh no, I apologize for arriving in such a state. Abbot Bauha scolds me for it occasionally. I am not a hermit, simply indolent, which embarrasses me greatly.”

There were times I had, in fact, been mistaken for a heretic while scouting for heresy.

The virtues expressed in the scripture were obedience, chastity, and asceticism—it did not say it was okay to be dirty.

“But I see...If you are washing my clothes, then...”

“Why don’t you rest a while in your room? You must be tired from your long journey.”

“I appreciate the consideration. But despite my age, I have been excited ever since arriving. As I’m wearing such warm clothes, I thought perhaps I should take a walk around the village. If possible, I will also make my way toward the port. I heard earlier that there was some sort of problem with the cargo.”

The master, Lawrence, looked slightly surprised and turned to Holo beside him.

“Myuri was making quite a fuss that not all crates were there, that there was not enough wheat.”

“Is that so? Hmm...that was the new miller who came to the village to sell...I guess because it was so cheap...Oh, but we couldn’t allow a guest to do such a

thing.”

“I am a naturally restless person, and I would enjoy wandering around a lively place rather than sit still before the fire.”

Lawrence looked at me apologetically, then smiled, as though changing his mind.

“Very well, then I would be truly grateful if you did. Actually, we had our hands full putting away the cargo that was delivered to us. Various foods would go bad if they got snowed on.”

“Leave it to me.”

The baths were full of guests, and a little ways down the hallway, I could hear pleasant chatter.

There must have been a fireplace there, with guests lazing around it. It cost quite a bit of money to stay in a bathhouse for a whole winter, which meant that there had to be plenty of guests who could pay that much.

I might learn the secret as to why this bathhouse flourished as it did as I asked around at the port for their cargo.

If they were using magic, then there might be rumors of them ordering suspicious goods.

And I also wondered about the youth of the bathhouse master’s wife, Holo.

“Well then, I will be off now,” I said in God’s name, beaming.

I understood how heading into the center of the village from a secluded bathhouse felt like ascending into the mortal world. The nobility paid large sums of money to stay in secluded locations for this feeling.

As I gazed at the hustle and bustle, keeping an eye out for any wanted enemies of God lurking about, I headed toward the port, and there was a commotion even greater than the one before.

“There isn’t enough!”

“This isn’t what we ordered!”

“What the hell is going on?!”

“Hey, someone send a boat and a messenger to Atiph!”

Several well-dressed men were making a ruckus.

All the cargo stacked there had been opened, their contents inspected.

From afar, it all looked to be flour.

“This is terrible! Or were they being clumsy when they stacked the crates?!”

One man turned his gaze to another dressed as a sailor. Many sailors were superstitious and gutsy, so of course this one could not sit still before such an enraged crowd.

“N-nonsense! You know how long I’ve been doing this work!”

“Urgh...Well, you’re right, you’re right...Sorry for doubting you.”

It seemed the men gathered here were all bathhouse masters.

I got an idea of what they were arguing about.

“Pardon me.”

I called out to them, and they all glared back.

“What? We’re busy now. Leave it for later.”

Perhaps due to the way I was dressed I looked like an outsider, a staying guest, so they swatted me away like a fly.

However, I had a good reason to be here.

“I was asked to run an errand by the master of bathhouse Spice and Wolf, Mr. Lawrence. They received less flour than they had ordered, so I thought I might see if some of it was left here by chance.”

When I announced this, the men all looked up at the sky in exasperation.

“Damn, that makes all of us!”

It seemed all the village’s bathhouses ordered the same thing and had been swindled by a rotten miller.

“Argh, nothing’s gonna get done at this rate! We’ll get some horses and go off to buy the flour ourselves, assembly regulations be damned!”

A plump middle-aged man took off his hat and scrunched it up as he shouted. The others reacted in shock.

“Come on, Mr. Morris, that’s no good. It’s a village rule.”

“That’s right! And my head hurts, too!”

Nyohhira was a village deep in the mountains, and the coming winter would bring deep snow. All their wheat must be imported. If they allowed one bathhouse to forestall the others, I easily imagined how quickly things would escalate into an all-out buying war. Especially since, if outside merchants caught a whiff of internal conflict, I could see them selling to the village at a high price.

It seemed Morris was already aware of this. He was especially well-dressed, so he must have had the funds of a higher-class bathhouse, even within Nyohhira.

As I pondered, Morris kept rattling on.

“I’m not upset because there’s just a little missing! After adding water and kneading it, I saw what I thought was wheat was actually all oats! I’d be ruined if I served that to my guests!”

Morris waved about the arm that was gripping the hat as he yelled.

There were several grades of bread: wheat, the highest; then wheat mixed with rye; followed by wheat mixed with chestnut or bean flour; then rye, bitter and dark; then rye mixed with chestnut or bean flour; and so on and so forth. Oat bread was the lowest of the low in this classification. Rather, since it did not rise very well, it was not something one could even call bread. It was typically eaten as a porridge, which was often distributed to the poor.

It was nothing more than horse feed in a flourishing land.

“But rules are rules...”

“No, if you’re going to send out a servant to buy some, Mr. Morris, then we will, too!”

“Hey!”

“The harvest this year is already over. The more time passes, the more

expensive the good flour is. It will certainly mean more losses for us if we don't rush to buy some quickly."

"But if we do this without an assembly, the other bathhouses..."

"Then we should hold an assembly. This is the village's problem!"

"But then again, it was us who were tricked by the sly words of that miller from Atiph...If we try to bend the village's rules, they'll say, *I told you so!*"

Though it was said this hot spring village was the closest to heaven, the ones who sponsored these waters were troubled over something rather grounded in reality.

While I thought it was quite comical, I also felt it was quite healthy.

As I was thinking, the hot-blooded man named Morris spoke.

"Then are you all planning to knead snow instead of wheat and put *that* in the oven?!"

It said in the scripture that man shall not live by bread alone.

Yet, guests used to wheat bread would never eat oat bread or porridge.

The bathhouse masters all exchanged glances, then sighed in defeat.

"Needs must when the devil drives...I suppose we should put up with this shame and call an emergency assembly."

Everyone nodded gloomily and left the port.

When I returned to the bathhouse and reported the situation, Lawrence, too, looked as if he had a headache.

I was not a member of the village, so I do not know in detail what happened with the miller afterward.

But I was precisely aware of where the constant stacks of delicious wheat bread on Spice and Wolf's tables were coming from.

According to the bathers, they all agreed that the bathhouse was using its connection to the Debau Company, the corporation controlling the entirety of the northlands. They all laughed, saying that no matter how bad the harvest was that year, it was just this bathhouse where they could eat soft, sweet

wheat bread.

I wondered if Lawrence was involved with the Debau Company, but it sounded like he had assisted them in a time of crisis back when he was a traveling merchant.

If that was so, then I found answers not just for the bread, but for my other questions. Essentially, if I considered he was borrowing help from the Debau Company, famous for their control over mines, they could indeed manage to find new springs in this land and fund the opening of their business.

However, there were still yet some oddities about this bathhouse. I came to realize this as I stayed and kept an eye on the entire village, but they were thriving so well that I would understand if the surrounding bathhouses were merely spreading malicious rumors.

Spice and Wolf was in a good location, the baths were spacious, and they were even equipped with a grotto bath that was the object of envy among nobles; otherwise, there was nothing particularly novel about it.

There were bathhouses that served more exquisite meals, and there were bathhouses that were particular about their alcohol. Their beds were made of bundles of straw—absolutely no match for the bathhouses with silk and wool beds.

The entertainment in the baths, too, was rather standard, and there were none who were making bears do tricks or breathing fire. Nor were they making the dancing girls do the unspeakable.

Upon asking the other guests what was so attractive about this, the only answer I received was *“Just a feeling.”*

The atmosphere in the house was certainly nice, but something did not quite add up. It made much more sense thinking they had applied some sort of magic. Dubious spells to pull in customers were not unusual.

I searched here and there around the grounds but found nothing in particular.

Meanwhile, many of the guests mentioned how charming the bathhouse master Lawrence’s wife Holo and her daughter, Myuri, were. They talked about the kind of appeal they had, one that even the traveling artists could never

hope to reach.

In fact, the silver-haired Myuri was energetic and endearing, and while her mother, Holo, seemed to be just as young as she was, she exuded a strange air of maturity and had a mysterious charm about her.

That being said, it was much too simple to believe that was the only reason the guests gathered here.

There had to be a reason for it, but time idly went by as I still could not find what that was.

It was two weeks into my stay at the bathhouse that there was a small change.

As I left the bustle of the baths behind and wandered about an empty road that continued through the heart of the village, I noticed someone walking, head down.

While I cannot speak for others, a person walking around alone, gloomily, in this village stood out terribly to me.

I looked closely, wondering if it was a suspicious character, and found it was the ordinary bathhouse master, Lawrence.

“Is something the matter?”

I asked the question from the position of a holy man. Of course, it was also my job to investigate heresy.

“Hmm? Oh no...That’s, um, that’s just my face.”

Lawrence looked up, and he had not noticed me on the road uphill from him. He rubbed his cheek, and his wry smile was rather strained.

“I hope you do not mind me asking. I assure you I am not trying to kill time.”

I spoke in a joking manner, and Lawrence laughed, then sighed.

“Are you headed to the village, Sir Salgado?”

“No, just out for a walk. I receive greater joy from jumping in the baths after I have cooled my body.”

“Just one of the many secrets to enjoying life. In that case, please listen to this

poor bathhouse master's trifle as we head back to the house."

According to the other guests, while he seemed unreliable at first, Lawrence had a rare talent for trade with ties to many of those with influence.

What was he troubled over?

I could understand if someone had come to arrange a marriage for his precious only daughter, Myuri.

"To tell the truth, that flour incident from the other day is still affecting us."

"The flour incident? Ah, you mean the faithless miller."

"We ended up buying cheap and wasting our money."

"But you always have a great supply of delicious wheat bread on the tables in the bathhouse. Is there yet another problem?"

Lawrence heaved another sigh and scratched his head.

"There were many people in the village who opposed ordering flour from that miller. Then, after many of the greedy bathhouse masters—myself included—spoke with one another, we ended up purchasing it."

Lawrence shrugged as he exhaled.

"Everyone started looking for someone to blame. Well, I suppose it is a rite of passage for a newcomer..."

"So they pushed the blame on to you?"

"There are some bathhouses that hate us. Although, I don't think I should be talking about this," he said with a wry smile. "At least, not when I have such a splitting headache."

"I do not know the details, but I often hear similar stories in my travels. Keep your head up. God will always side with the righteous."

"Thank you."

Lawrence seemed somewhat inspired, yet he still did not look entirely happy.

"If you have been given unreasonable demands, shall I mediate? I can do at least that much as a servant of God."

“Oh no, nothing like that. And, well, I guess you could say the resolution itself is possible.”

It was like he was saying a riddle. I studied Lawrence, and this young-looking bathhouse master smiled tiredly and continued.

“They forced on me all the oats that no one wanted to eat. I can’t bring myself to throw food away, and since there is so much of it, it cost quite a bit. I want to use it somehow, but...”

I could easily imagine what came next in his evasive phrase. The guests with their exquisite tastes would not even look at bread made from oat flour. That meant it would be Lawrence and the others in the bathhouse who would have to eat it, but since they had so much, it would take them a long time.

Since it was the snowy season in a cold region, they were lucky in that bugs would not soon appear, but no one would be happy eating oat bread every day.

“I will help as much as I can. I do not dislike unleavened bread.”

Lawrence was about to shake his head, but as though reconsidering it, he forced a grin.

“I want to say how I can’t make a guest do such a thing, but...I won’t ask you to, either. At worst, it might end up just being Col and I eating it all.”

Col was a young man who worked in the bathhouse. As someone aspiring to become a man of the cloth, his knowledge, faith, and character made for a wonderful human being.

And after two weeks in the bathhouse, I came to roughly understand their relationships.

Studying the relationships between the master Lawrence and his wife, Holo, as well as between their daughter, Myuri, and Col, I could see how the two men, in their kindness, would end up eating the oat bread in place of the girls.

Holo and Myuri, like mother like daughter, were extremely fond of fine cuisine.

It also sounded like both mother and daughter had been sticking their fingers into the sugar pot, which Myuri had been making a fuss about. Then, by the

time they realized it, the entire pot had been emptied, and that was when I saw the master, Lawrence, holding his head. It seemed as if the arrangement of Holo and Myuri pushing Lawrence and Col about was the main attraction of this bathhouse.

As I considered this, Lawrence suddenly appeared very merchantlike.

“May I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

Lawrence looked away and brought his hand to his mouth, perhaps in a show of contemplation.

“How much oat flour would God forgive if it were mixed in with wheat flour?”

As a cutthroat former merchant, he could have kept this quiet, but that just was not in his disposition. I could not help myself smiling before I answered.

“It is written in the scripture that the earth needs salt. It would be best for one’s health to occasionally eat a bit of hardened bread and not always sup on soft bread,” I replied, thinking he would not do anything too greedy.

“Well...I’m not entirely sure if I’ll do it.”

“Yes, of course. Only God and I may know of the sins you confessed.”

Lawrence smiled, relieved, and bowed his head.

After that, while I do not know how much oat flour was mixed into the bread served on the tables, it seemed I was not mistaken in my judgment of Lawrence as an honest man. Many times afterward, I caught glimpses of him with his head in his hands, standing before the bags stuffed with oats outside of the shed.

Oat bread was not something anyone could eat every day: Not only did it not rise when baked, it was also rock-hard yet still had the strange habit of sticking to one’s teeth. Furthermore, since it had been ground into flour, probably done by the miller to trick his customers, it could not be made into porridge.

It would not be a great expense if a little was mixed into the wheat flour.

As I saw him worry about what to do with the unnecessary items his village

seniors had pushed upon him, I thought that perhaps peeling back a layer showed how the bathhouse's liveliness was barely being kept together.

In the end, I could not even find anything glaringly suspicious through my investigation.

Even after holding a meeting with my companions who were infiltrating other bathhouses, it sounded like all the other places were the same. Apparently rumors about other bathhouses harboring heretics was mostly the usual bad-mouthing, stemming from tiffs that regularly occurred in such a small village.

We came to the conclusion that staying any longer would not bring any significant results after having stayed at the Spice and Wolf bathhouse for two months.

"Oh, you're leaving?"

Lawrence was surprised when I informed him. It was still the middle of winter, and the region was deep with snow. It must have been unusual for a guest to leave at this time. Of course, I had an excuse ready.

"Spring festivals in the south begin early. I must be returning soon."

Lawrence seemed disappointed for a moment, because he knew he could not force me to stay any longer, so he gripped my hand with both of his and said, "Please do come again."

I came to the Spice and Wolf bathhouse on the papal office's orders, but I wanted to come again on my own will, if possible.

Then, after a short bow, I raised a question.

"Do you think you could bake me some oat bread for my journey? It keeps very well due to how hard it is."

"I appreciate the consideration. I swear, our girls sneak tastes of the sweet, white sugar but won't even give oats the time of day."

If the business at the bathhouse folded, it would likely be because the whole framework had been melted down by their stomachs.

In the days following, they baked the hard oat bread for me. I was impressed to see Holo and Myuri unusually working the bread oven, perhaps in atonement

for their sin of emptying the sugar pot. Lawrence had given a defeated smile, saying that was what made them crafty.

I placed the bread they provided at the bottom of my sack. As long as it stayed dry, I could probably even eat it this time next year.

Once my preparations were done, I left the bathhouse.

Though I never learned the secret to their success, which had spawned the rumors that they were using magic, I did not find any clear evidence that they were involved with the unnatural.

Of course, I could easily report that it was suspicious, but on the other hand, such a report would only be followed up with a warning, then stowed away somewhere in the papal office library.

Though I personally know nothing of how pressing the campaign against heresy had once been, the way one should conduct themselves in the present society was, at the end of the day, dictated only by whether or not they were satisfied with their own work.

Additionally, I also felt it pitiful to question if the bathhouse was a result of magic. Though there were no particular points worthy of mention, it could perhaps simply be a case of a flourishing business.

I also felt that their honesty was apparent in the oat bread and how Holo and Myuri, the beautiful mother and daughter, were the very embodiment of innocence.

While it is hard to say they are entirely in the clear, there was nothing to be concerned about.

I decided that was what I would write in my report.

Then, over the small, sulking fire burning beneath the moldy tent, I held up the oat bread Lawrence had given me.

My companions, whose food had gone bad long ago, seemed to gain a bit of life back for the first time in a long time the moment they saw it.

Wheat bread would not keep like this.

As the oat bread roasted, a somewhat pleasant aroma wafted about that

would appeal even to those who insisted it tasted bad. Even my companions, who sung praises of asceticism and were not troubled at all by a life of subsisting on beans and water, had growling stomachs.

“They often say an empty stomach is the greatest spice,” someone said.

There was a small ripple of laughter, but his smile soon tensed in an odd expression.

“But it smells too good.”

Though he seemed happy, he sounded unsure.

“Hmm. Was oat bread truly this good-looking...?”

Filling the tent was a delightful scent that made my head spin.

“Perhaps it’s because that beautiful mother and daughter repented as they ground the flour and baked the bread?”

I said it as a joke, but once I finished speaking, the bread smelled so good that it was the only possibility I could think of.

“Impossible, a miracle from God?”

“Sacramental bread, you mean?”

Excitement suddenly stirred beneath the tent.

As I thought, *No, impossible, it can’t be*, my hand holding the bread began to shake at the delicious aroma. What fortune it would be to encounter a miracle from God in such a place!

“We must report this to the cardinal and investigate once again. Sir Salgado, what was the name of the inn you stayed at?”

I noticed something was appearing on the other side of the oat bread I was roasting before the excited bunch.

“B-be quiet. There appears to be a stigmata on this sacramental bread!”

There was a clamor, and those who gripped the crest of the Church, those who retrieved their scriptures from their bags, and those who folded their hands in prayer all gazed at the loaf.

While it felt as though it would fall from my hands in nervousness, I slowly turned the bread over.

It was unleavened bread, the kind that was flat and would not rise.

Then, the moment the other side of the bread became visible, everyone held their breath.

“...Th-this is...”

It appeared on one side of the plate-sized bread.

There was no doubting what we saw.

There was the figure of a howling wolf and a short sentence.

“...Please...come again to...Spice and Wolf?”

“Oh! I remember this smell!”

One cried out, grabbed the oat bread from me, pinched off a piece of the image that appeared from the roast, and tasted it.

“It’s sweet! Yes, this is the smell of burned sugar!”

Everyone stared at the one who yelled, then they all vied for a piece.

I took a bite, too, and it was certainly sweet. Since I had not been eating properly, the spot beneath my temples clenched in aching comfort.

“Honestly, scaring us like that! Perhaps there is melted sugar on top.”

Someone spoke, and everyone laughed.

“Is the same trick on the other pieces of bread?”

When I heard that, I immediately tried roasting other pieces of bread. As we suspected, there were various things written on it, such as “The Best Bathhouse in Nyohhira” and even “Grouchy Brother” underneath a caricature of that young one, Col. I knew right away that Myuri had made that one.

“It does not seem that there is sugar ground into it, but eating it with such a delicious scent in the air makes it taste better.”

“Reaching for the oat bread in one’s bag does mean that things have come to the worst.”

“What a wonderful thing this is, as a message from the bathhouse.”

As we talked about it, those who had been lying down in illness until then were munching on the oat bread.

With a piece of bread in my hands, I finally understood what it was.

There on my bread was a doodle of two men and three women. Beneath it were the words “Bathhouse Spice and Wolf.” There was Lawrence and Col, Holo and Myuri, and one more woman who must have been the one who managed the kitchen.

Of course the bathhouse thrived as it did.

Anyone who reached out to eat this bread on the way home from Nyohhira, for whatever reason, would think the same.

“I hope to investigate Spice and Wolf next time we have the chance to visit.”

“I hope to do so, too.”

“And I as well!”

We began arguing under the canopy.

No longer did anyone notice the tiresome rain that continued to fall outside.

Among the clamor in the tent, I gently placed one piece of bread back into the bag, then spoke.

“Don’t you think I would be most suited for another inspection, since I have already performed it once?”

The matter became more complicated, as the arguments followed one after the other.

As we bickered, the rain finally abated, and the sun peeked through.

Our spat went on even as we folded the tent and gathered our belongings.

Everyone had regained their energy, and our stomachs were full.

“Perhaps this is a miracle,” someone said.

Spice and Wolf.

I decided I would write about it in my report in a way that would not stand

out.

Because if the crowds rushed there, there would no longer be any place for me.

CARAMEL DAYS
AND WOLF



CARAMEL DAYS AND WOLF

In small villages, the residents knew everything about one another. From what other houses ate for dinner the night before to how the dog that slept in front of the fire was doing—everything was leaked. That was not different for the hot spring village of Nyohhira.

But what was most easily overlooked was how people did not often hear rumors about themselves.

“Holo.”

After dinner, Lawrence, the master of the bathhouse Spice and Wolf, called his wife’s name as he trimmed the wick of the candle in the bedroom.

Her long, flaxen hair, slender shoulders, and beautiful, flawless fingers often reminded him of those of a noble girl. In addition to how she looked to be fourteen or fifteen, many who came to the house for the first time would mistake her for a new bride and offer their congratulations.

However, her graceful appearance was only temporary. Holo was actually the avatar of a giant, centuries-old wolf.

And so when Lawrence called out to her, she did not obediently turn around to look at him, nor did she smile back coyly. Her ears responded apathetically with a quick twitch.

They were pointed, triangular wolf ears, the same color as her hair.

“Hey, I need to talk to you.”

Holo finally looked up when she heard Lawrence’s exasperated tone.

She had been glued to the desk in their room ever since they had finished eating.

“What is it?”

She furrowed her brows and glared as she spoke and seemed quite irritated. But Lawrence sighed once and reached out to her cheek.

“You have ink on you.”

“Mmph.”

As Lawrence wiped it away with his finger, Holo closed her eyes, and her wolf ears fluttered.

Her fluffy tail swished back and forth, so it was apparent that she was not in a bad mood.

She had looked at him that way because she was tired.

“I swear...”

Lawrence rubbed the edges of her eyes with both of his thumbs. Then he gently placed the pad of his thumb onto her closed eyelid, and she rolled her eye about playfully.

“Should I go soak a cloth in the water?”

Many of the people in the inn, such as high-ranking clergy, were involved with writing work.

He had inquired about their methods for treating eye strain, which was to place a warm, damp cloth over the eyes.

“Mmm...”

Holo, however, did not give much of a response, and after grabbing Lawrence’s hands, she placed them on her neck. She was asking him for a massage. Having no choice, Lawrence began to move his hands, and Holo lazily put her weight into him, her tail wagging in great satisfaction. Despite how obviously selfish she was acting, Lawrence found himself delighted to see how sincere her happiness was and doted on her.



Reality suddenly dawned on him, and he reminded himself that he would have to scold her today.

It was about her writing activities that she had become engrossed in not too long ago, cramming the pages spread out over the desk full with words.

“I heard a rumor when I went to the village assembly today.”

“Hmm?”

Holo took Lawrence’s hands, which had been massaging the back of her neck, and plopped them onto her shoulders.

She was telling him to massage her there, then talk afterward.

She was treating him like a servant, but her ears and tail wiggled about in pleasure, so Lawrence himself did not entirely hate it. In that respect, it was not all bad how she had suddenly become engrossed in writing.

The quill pens and ink, paper for memos, parchment for clean copies, a looking glass to enlarge the letters, and the candles for staying up late had all cost quite a bit of money, but Lawrence felt it was all worthwhile. Because most importantly, what Holo was writing about was very meaningful.

Holo was the avatar of a wolf, and she would live for hundreds of years. On the other hand, Lawrence was just human, and it would not be long before his life was over and he would leave Holo behind. She was writing about the things that happened during the day so that when the inevitable moment came that she found herself alone, she could relive their happy times now over and over.

That was all fine and well. It was Lawrence who had given her that idea.

However, Holo always took things too far.

“People are talking because you keep wandering around the house with pen and paper in hand.”

“Hmm.”

Holo leaned her head to the left, as though telling him to press harder on her right side.

Lawrence gripped his fingers harder, and she growled deep in her throat, less

like a wolf and more like a cat.

“They’re saying the mistress of Spice and Wolf must have either awakened to poetry, or is writing down her conversations with God.”

“Hmm...mm, hmm...Oohhh, there, right there.”

When Lawrence moved his fingers with a touch of anger, as Holo would not honestly listen to him, she just puffed up her tail and concentrated on the feeling.

After Lawrence had massaged her shoulders in silence for a little while, Holo spoke leisurely.

“And? What problem does that cause?”

Wondering if she was finally ready to listen, Lawrence tried to pull his hands away from her shoulders, but Holo resisted.

He gave up and answered as he continued the massage.

“Everyone around us is making weird speculations.”

Holo did not make even a peep, but her ears were facing him, so she must have been willing to listen.

“To put it briefly, people are gossiping, wondering if you’re going to leave the house and join some nunnery somewhere.”

At that moment, Holo’s ears stood up straight.

Then slowly, she turned to look back at Lawrence.

“What?”

She seemed dubious, as though she truly did not understand.

Lawrence hesitated to explain it, but nothing would come of deceiving her.

“You look young, remember? It means they’re wondering if you’re not satisfied with me; it’s a crude rumor.”

Holo still looked puzzled.

“For young wives married off to older men to decide one day to join a nunnery usually means she’s cheating as a result of being unable to control her

body or otherwise getting a divorce.”

The light disappeared from Holo’s eyes as she looked at him. Her lips began to move, but they froze in place.

Had an outsider seen Lawrence staring at Holo as she was, they might have thought that the wife was deeply hurt by her husband doubting her fidelity.

However, the first one to let out a breath was Lawrence, and he inhaled deeply once more after leaning forward and burying his nose in Holo’s hair.

“I know I’m not *that* old yet...”

The hands around Holo’s shoulders embraced her whole body.

She shook as though she were coughing, perhaps because she was laughing.

“Heh. Even a half-wit like you occasionally speaks like a boy.”

Holo patted his wrists, then pinched him.

“But it perhaps ’twould be best for me to ask. You seem rather upset about this, no?”

Holo’s tone of voice was unusually sympathetic.

After a moment of silence, Lawrence spoke.

“We’re in the service industry. Who would want to stay at the inn of a man whose young wife left him? Those types of rumors are more than enough to leave a bad impression on customers.”

Holo stared wide-eyed at him, then gave a tired smile.

“’Tis certainly true.”

“And you can’t be so careless anymore.”

“Oh?”

“A good inn is worthy property. There are guys who are after that inheritance, and there are many out there who are willing to start interfering when it comes to that. Before you even theoretically leave, we might be visited by good-natured fallen nobility who live modestly in poor territories, coming to sell their youngest daughters.”

His explanation caused Holo to prick up her ears so keenly that she would have been able to hear a mouse sneeze on the opposite side of a mountain, and even noble daughters paled in comparison to her sheer envy.

Lawrence withered under the danger he felt from merely imagining the cute, young girls waltzing gracefully in, aiming for the seat of the bathhouse wife, and how much trouble it would be to appease Holo.

As such, the rumors floating around the village were a great nuisance.

“Hmm...”

Those who try to steal her prey from her must be eliminated.

That was written all over Holo’s face as she pondered for a few moments before eyeing Lawrence reluctantly.

“And what is it I must do? Shall I cling to you before others?”

She spoke while gently stroking Lawrence’s hand, her gaze flirtatious.

For someone who referred to herself as the wisewolf, she loved putting on these kinds of affectations. Since she would grow even more pleased if Lawrence resisted, he responded calmly.

“Act normal.”

“Hmph! You bore me.”

Holo groaned, puffing out her cheeks, and Lawrence sighed impatiently.

“And don’t wander around too much with a paper and pen. You’ll stand out.”

“Mmmph...”

Her second groan was slightly different than the first.

“If you’re just writing down what happened that day, then you can do a little before you go to bed at night, right?”

Holo, however, never let go of her pen or paper from the moment she woke up to the moment she went to sleep.

“You fool. I may miss something important if I do.”

“There’s not even all that much that happens every day...Actually, hang on,

can I see what you've written today so far?"

"Ngh—th-this—no, this—fool!"

Like a child, Holo tried to hide her writing, so Lawrence held her back this time and snatched the paper from the desk.

Holo still tried to take it back, but Lawrence receded from the chair and she did not follow.

"Did you write anything down that would make me upset if I saw it?"

"Of course not!"

"So it's fine, then...But you've really crammed it in here...Are you still planning on copying this to the parchment?"

Holo kept cheap paper made from rags with her as she wandered about day by day. There she would write down memos and drafts; later she would copy the contents to proper parchment. Sheepskin parchment was incredibly durable and could even survive being caught in a fire, so it was perfect for Holo, who would pore over it for hundreds of years.

"Let's see...Your handwriting is as bad as always..."

"Silence!"

She took a pinch of sand meant for drying the ink and tossed it at him.

Despite being quite dexterous, Holo had rather poor handwriting. Her eyesight was not very good, so it was hard for her to differentiate between shapes.

"Now, then. 'Morning, woke up. Ate two boiled eggs and soft wheat bread with cheese on top, roasted on the fire. For garnish, two pieces of sausage from last night's dinner and chicken breast. A cup of ale to wash it down.'"

It was a particularly luxurious breakfast, so maybe she had been happy and wrote about it. On second thought, did she really need to write about it with so much detail? He looked at Holo, and she turned away in a huff.

"After breakfast, a guest romping in the bath asked me to give him some drink. He was drunk, so gave him wine that was almost expired mixed with

honey, and he was overjoyed to receive prime-class drink. He paid seven copper coins of a male's profile wearing a crown of thorns'...Wait, seven?!"

Lawrence looked at Holo in surprise, and she sniffed proudly.

"A crown of thorns...That's the *quisine* copper coin. Four would have been enough..."

"'Tis because I carried it to him myself. Tip was included. I did not exactly mention 'twas not expensive wine."

"..."

It was certainly the guest who had made the mistake, and merchants always thought hard on how to make wine taste better.

They either made it sweeter by using honey, faked the taste of spirits with the bitterness of ginger, or made it clear like premium alcohol with egg whites and lime.

Customers, too, were cautious, so if they were happy to pay, then they should be happy to receive as well.

While he considered that, it did not quite sit well with him.

"Dancers and musicians came before lunch. Cleaned the ash in the stove while the sun was up as I listened to the lively clamor."

"See how earnestly I am working?"

Holo grinned, her tail wagging as she spoke.

Though she always pushed cleaning the oven on someone else, saying the ash would get in her tail, Lawrence did think it unusual and read the next part.

"The onion I wrapped in clay in the ash had baked well. Cracked the clay, drizzled chopped green herbs and oil from the south on it, added some salt and ate it. Unfortunate that there was no ale..."

"Oh."

Holo looked guilty. She must have learned how to eat onion that way from a guest.

He had thought she was cleaning the oven for once, but she was just shrewdly

having a snack.

Perhaps no longer able to bear Lawrence's gaze, Holo got out of the chair.

"Do you not think that is enough now?"

"You're not doing other things like this, are you?"

Holo tried to take the paper back, but he was taller than her.

Lawrence held it high over his head and kept reading.

"'After lunch, cleaned the soot by the oven.' Wow, cleaning the soot, huh?"

No matter how well the oven was built, soot would cling to all the nooks and crannies if they tried to circulate the warm air that wafted from it throughout the building. Holo did not like this work, either, since it dirtied her face and hands.

"'Along the way, went to check on the bottle I left by the chimney'...Bottle?"

He gazed down at his chest at Holo as she grumpily stood on tiptoe, trying somehow to take the paper back.

"What bottle?"

"...I do not know."

She gave up, stepped back, folded her arms, and looked away.

Lawrence saw how her tail wavered in discontent, then continued reading.

"'That Cyrus had taught me something interesting. Next time, I must tell him where to find currants in the wood.'"

His attention caught on the name Cyrus.

That was the name of a bathhouse owner close to Lawrence and was well-known within Nyohhira as a master brewer.

A bottle placed beside the oven likely meant she was fermenting alcohol.

But he did not know what kind of alcohol it could be. Proper tools and fuel were required for making ale, and creating wine was not possible without grapes. He thought it might be a kind of cider, but real fruit around here could only be gathered in the early summertime, so it would have had to been kept

for several weeks. As for mead, they had left management of the honey to their kitchen worker, Hanna, so swiping some would not have been so easy a task.

Of course, he could not rebuke her for just simple penny scraping. If she were making alcohol on her own out of his sight, then there was no point in making her restrain her evening alcohol intake.

While Holo insisted she was all right, there was no way drinking too much was good for her.

“What kind of alcohol is it?”

Lawrence asked, and Holo pouted.

She looked exactly like their daughter, Myuri, who similarly pouted when Col scolded her after he discovered one of her tricks.

Now it was clear who exactly that tomboy took after.

“You don’t have to tell me, but when I talk about this with Miss Hanna, she’ll cut back your daily drinks.”

“Wha—!”

Holo looked murderously at Lawrence.

When he shook the paper, her head drooped, dejected.

“’Twas bread alcohol...”

“Bread? Oh, kvass, huh?”

Kvass was a light drink made by adding spirit and a bit of honey to dark rye bread soaking in water.

Its bitter and sour taste was unique, and one either hated it or loved it.

“You really thought about it...Miss Hanna isn’t so fussy about rye bread.”

Different types of grain produced completely different types of bread. The lowest among them was oats, which produced something that was not entirely bread, and at times even the horses ate them. The highest quality was of course wheat, which made soft and sweet bread.

In between those two was the black bread made from rye, but it was hard

and bitter and not very tasty, so it was often mixed in with wheat flour. The reason why a bathhouse that only housed the rich had such a dark bread was because the guests, who indulged in every luxury possible, occasionally observed moderation as a way to atone for their sins.

“I swear...Who would’ve thought that the wisewolf, of all people, was secretly brewing and drinking her own alcohol?”

Holo recoiled as though she had taken a hit but bounded back immediately.

“You fool! I have set my wits to work so that it does not harm your wallet!”

“Even though you were roasting and eating an onion, which we don’t look too closely after, on the stove on your own? And oil from the south sounds like olive oil. That stuff’s expensive, since it traveled such a long way.”

He found it maddening yet that she ate it with herbs. It most certainly sounded delicious.

In the end, instead of reflecting on the scolding, Holo pouted sullenly.

Perhaps it was because of how she was the avatar of a wolf who lived in wheat and governed over its harvest that she was so attached to food.

“*Sigh*...Ever since Myuri left, I thought we’d get a bit of peace back to the bathhouse...”

Their only daughter, Myuri, was like an impatient puppy, who put all her energy into pranks at every chance she could get.

Holo also had to preserve her dignity as a mother before her daughter, so she had shown composure that suited the wisewolf name.

But Myuri had chased after the young Col, who had been helping out at the bathhouse, and left on a journey.

Holo’s motherly guise was peeling away day by day, and the Holo who had traveled in the back of the cart had returned.

She pestered Lawrence for good food, diligently maintained her tail at every chance she had, and tried drinking as much alcohol as she could each night. She fussed about waking up in the morning, sleepily closed her eyes before the fireplace at dusk, and reached out for him to carry her back to their room.

He, of course, could not allow her to do all that. They simply lacked the manpower once Col and Myuri left, so Holo was doing her fair share of work.

Ordinary days continued as there were no significant arguments or disturbances.

Holo had said she was afraid of forgetting these ordinary days, despite how happy they were. But they had solved this problem by giving her a pen and ink and paper.

And so, it was all settled, everything was peaceful, the family was safe, the business flourishing...Or so he had thought, and now this.

Lawrence was more puzzled than he was annoyed. *Is there still something that's bothering her?*

No matter how forward she was with her demands, her utter charm made him feel as if he were the unreasonable one for not yielding to her every whim.

And yet, it was clear that she had written of other misdeeds as well. There was no doubt that a number of further offenses were recorded within these pages.

Why did she do it?

It was not like Holo to leave such foolish evidence in the first place.

Ever since she had started writing these documents, she seemed to not want anyone else to look, perhaps out of embarrassment, so he had respected her wishes and refrained. Perhaps she was relieved to have gotten away with it and proudly jotted it down like some kind of badge of honor.

Lawrence felt less anger than he did sadness. He had not thought Holo to be so mean-spirited.

He wanted to bake and eat the onion with her. Cracking open the clay and waiting with bated breath to see how it turned out sounded like so much fun. The kvass would have tasted much better had they and Selim and Hanna all drunk it together. He would have enjoyed brainstorming ways to brew it cheaply and deliciously.

He thought Holo knew that well.

But once his thoughts reached that far, it suddenly dawned on him that Holo might still have some troubles that he was not aware of.

He could not wholly say that she did not have the tendency to gleefully keep all the good food to herself, but it was a different story altogether if she were brewing and drinking alcohol in secret alone. What if it was a distraction from something she could not tell him? What if she detailed all these signs on paper, as her own style of code, to remind him of special feelings she could not tell him directly?

With those considerations in mind, Lawrence felt as though he understood Holo's actions. He should imagine how she would act if she were sipping on a bitter, sour drink like kvass all on her own. He could not imagine it was a very enjoyable drink. He should have noticed earlier.

Maybe what she needed now was not a scolding but a cuddle?

Even if she really had dug up a mud-covered onion from the oven, coated its soft, baked body in minced herbs and olive oil, and finally coated it all in a sprinkling of salt and ate it...Wait, *ate it*?

He changed his mind: *No, there was definitely something strange here.*

Lawrence sort of understood if she craved things in secret to distract herself from her troubles. Drinking in frustration was a prime example of that. But would she not be perfectly content to prepare herbs and olive oil and even a sprinkling of salt with such attention to detail? Holo would have been grinning no matter how he thought about it.

Lawrence looked straight at Holo. Nothing quite added up.

He squinted at her, and his mouth twisted in annoyance.

At last, he heaved a massive sigh.

"Hey, Holo."

She sulked, as though wishing he would leave her alone, and gave him a sidelong glance.

Lawrence scratched at his bangs.

"Everything you've written here is a lie, isn't it?"

Holo's wolf ears and tail, which had been drooped somewhat lazily, stood on end.

"I read this and get angry, tell you I'm going to confiscate the kvass, then start searching around the chimney. But I don't find anything. I ask you, *What is the meaning of this?* Then, like a drenched cat, you start shaking, insisting you don't know. Then I keep pressuring you for more answers. Then what happens?"

Holo, whose eyes were closed as she listened, took a deep breath as though to stretch, then exhaled.

Finally, she smirked.

"Then I would chuckle."

"..."

Lawrence stared at her grumpily, and Holo began laughing, her shoulders shaking as she playfully embraced him.

"Do not be so angry. I had no intentions of tricking you to tease you."

It was a humble smile, one that was searching for mediation, but Lawrence responded coolly.

"I'm not so sure about that."

"Wha—...You fool!"

Holo stomped on his toes.

But it seemed she was reasonable enough to reconsider that; since he doubted her words, she had done just enough wrong that he would doubt her herself. Reluctantly, she explained.

"Hmph. As I began to write down my daily activities, I found myself enjoying writing quite a bit. That being said, 'twas not enough to write about every day, so I began to write down what I would imagine would be fun."

Lawrence looked at the paper and wrinkled his nose.

"All this?"

"Well...about half."

Though she appeared calm and composed, her ears and tail clearly indicated that she was slightly embarrassed.

Becoming completely absorbed in writing fiction was nothing but a pastime for noble girls who had too much free time in their manors. Lawrence sort of understood how Holo felt, not wanting him to read what she wrote.

And yet, Lawrence himself had overlooked something.

“I guess I was supposed to realize you don’t have such luxurious breakfasts in the first place.”

“’Tis nothing but how pitiful I am, how starving I am, when I write about how much I wish to eat it...”

She even pretended to wipe away tears from the corners of her eyes as she said this, but the reason why she never ate the previous night’s leftovers for breakfast the following morning was because there were no leftovers—she always devoured everything on her dinner plate.

“And what about selling the vinegar wine for a high price?”

“’Tis real. Though it was a drunken guest who spilled it after barely a sip, however. My little trick, spoiled.”

Then he may have counted his copper wrong and given her too much.

“And the kvass? You didn’t actually make it?”

Lawrence probed for the truth, and Holo swiftly averted her gaze.

“Hey, come on...”

“I—I did not make it! I simply asked for directions how!”

As he studied her closely, she glared back at him.

Holo certainly had enough pride as a self-proclaimed wisewolf.

It did not seem like she was lying.

“...There are days we bake the black bread for the guests who fast on a whim, do we not? But they never finish it. I wish to tell them to imagine themselves in our shoes, having to feed on their leftovers!”

“Oh yeah, taking care of it would be easier that way...”

“Mm. And...I honestly did try it once, but I failed. Well, 'tis not a lie to say I did not actually make any.”

“...”

He looked at her, slightly vexed, and she tilted her head with a grin, like Myuri did when she was dodging a question.

“To eat such a delicious meal first thing in the morning, then to have a delightful snack whilst doing tiresome work, and to even have a drink—is that not the ideal day? I wish to spend days such as those. Isn't that so, dear?”

She squeezed him again and rubbed her face on his chest, fawning on him. Her tail wagged the way it did when she was in a good mood, so Lawrence's shoulders drooped.

“I'm the luckiest man alive to have married someone so humble and with such modest desires.”

“Eh-heh. Indeed, indeed.”

Lawrence wondered for a moment how much she understood his sarcasm, but this was Holo—of course she caught on.

He was not sure if he should be perturbed by her usual demeanor or just force out a smile.

He wrapped his arms around her one more time and spoke.

“So first, the onion.”

“Hmm?”

“You're keeping a log of the days you spend in this bathhouse to read a looong time from now, right?”

Holo opened her eyes wide, and the hair on her ears and tail puffed up.

“And won't eating onions make you really sick?”

When he asked her this with a mischievous smile on his face, Holo pouted and stomped on both of his feet.

“I am not a dog!”

Unbothered, Lawrence ignored her and shrugged.

“And the kvass will help make taking care of that bad dark bread a little easier, and I understand wanting a treat after taking care of the ash and cleaning the soot since it’s so much trouble.”

Holo still looked at him doubtfully after being teased so, but she finally smiled in agreement.

“There is no greater gain than turning the dreadful into the enjoyable. It must be the secret of having fun every day.”

“Mm.”

They smiled at each other as Holo’s tail flapped cheerfully, and Lawrence started again.

“Well, let’s leave the onions and the kvass for tomorrow and get to bed now.”

It was rather late. It had reached an hour where everyone was sleeping soundly, even in the late nights of Nyohhira.

With his hands wrapped around Holo, he lifted her slender frame and carried her to the bed.

His feet soon stopped because Holo planted herself in place.

“Holo?”

“Fool.”

She slipped from his grasp.

Then, ignoring Lawrence’s befuddlement, she gleefully put on the bandanna and sash she wore to conceal her ears and tail whenever she left the room.

“You are a merchant who would give his life for money, are you not?”

The moment the thought *I have a bad feeling about this...* crossed his mind, Holo readily tugged at his arms.

“Time is money. And there are so many things to do for my ideal day.”

She cradled Lawrence’s arm as she pulled him, motioning to the desk with her

chin.

There on the desk were the papers she had been glued to, writing both day and night.

Lawrence directed his gaze back to the girl beside him from the bundles of paper, and she gave a wide, deliberate grin.

“...We’re not going to actually make it all a reality, right?”

A tinge of mischief colored Holo’s expression as one of her wolf fangs peeked out from beneath her lips and a dangerous light glinted in her bright, reddish-amber eyes.

“I am Holo the Wisewolf, who lived in wheat, controlled its harvest, and was at one time worshipped as a god. Prophecies and the sort are highly valued in human society, no?”

If their daughter Myuri was the type of wolf to run straight at her prey at full speed, then Holo was the kind to attack from behind under the cover of night.

“Or is it that you are all right with me reading this alone to myself in the far future, wishing I had done such and such with my dear...as I weep?”

“Erk—”

There was Holo’s usual selfishness.

If he were to refuse outright, then she would trick him as she usually did into thinking he was the narrow-minded one.

Well? Her red eyes looked straight at him, brimming with confidence.

Lawrence resisted for a while, but her hand gripped him even tighter, and he gave in.

Because once he saw the joy on Holo’s face, that happiness would in the end become his own, too.

“However.”

Lawrence told himself that he was wiser now. “You have to help me as well, in order to clear up all the rumors in the village.”

Holo did not age and would always remain in the form of a young girl. Similar

rumors might spread in the future.

Lawrence was still much too young to say that it was all right if only they knew the truth.

And his self-respect as a man was also on the line.

“Eh-heh.”

Holo conceded like a collapsing heap of flour and chuckled.

“Very well. You are a boy, after all.”

She took his hand, sniffed his palm, and kissed the knuckle on his little finger.

“I shall act well enough to make it seem like I am in love with you,” Holo said. Lawrence pulled his arm in and her along with it.

“Not so that it *seems* but so that they *know*.”

Holo blinked at Lawrence’s dejected expression.

“No, *seems like I am in love with you* is the correct wording. For ’tis you that is in love with me.”

“Really? Who is it that gets grumpy the moment I become busy, pestering me to spend time with them?”

“Wha—?!”

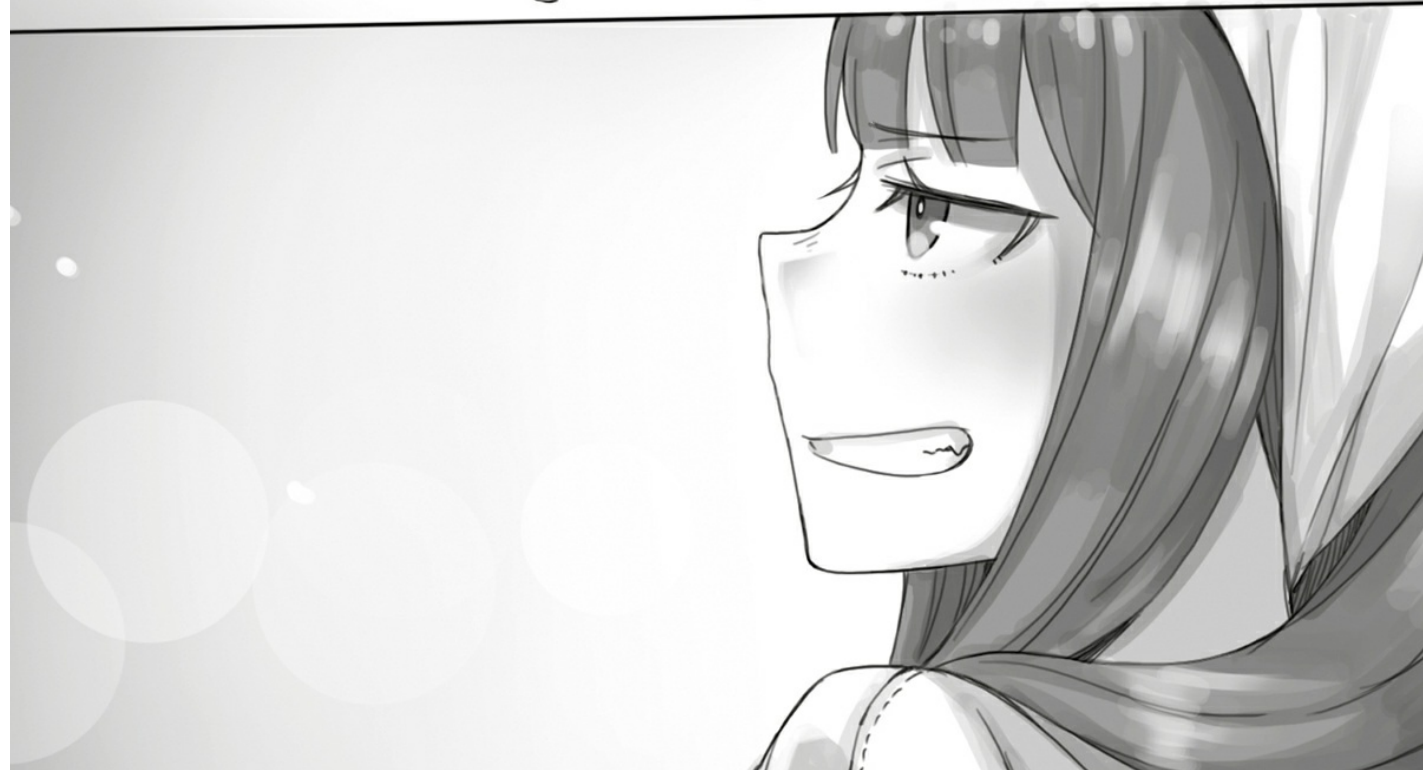
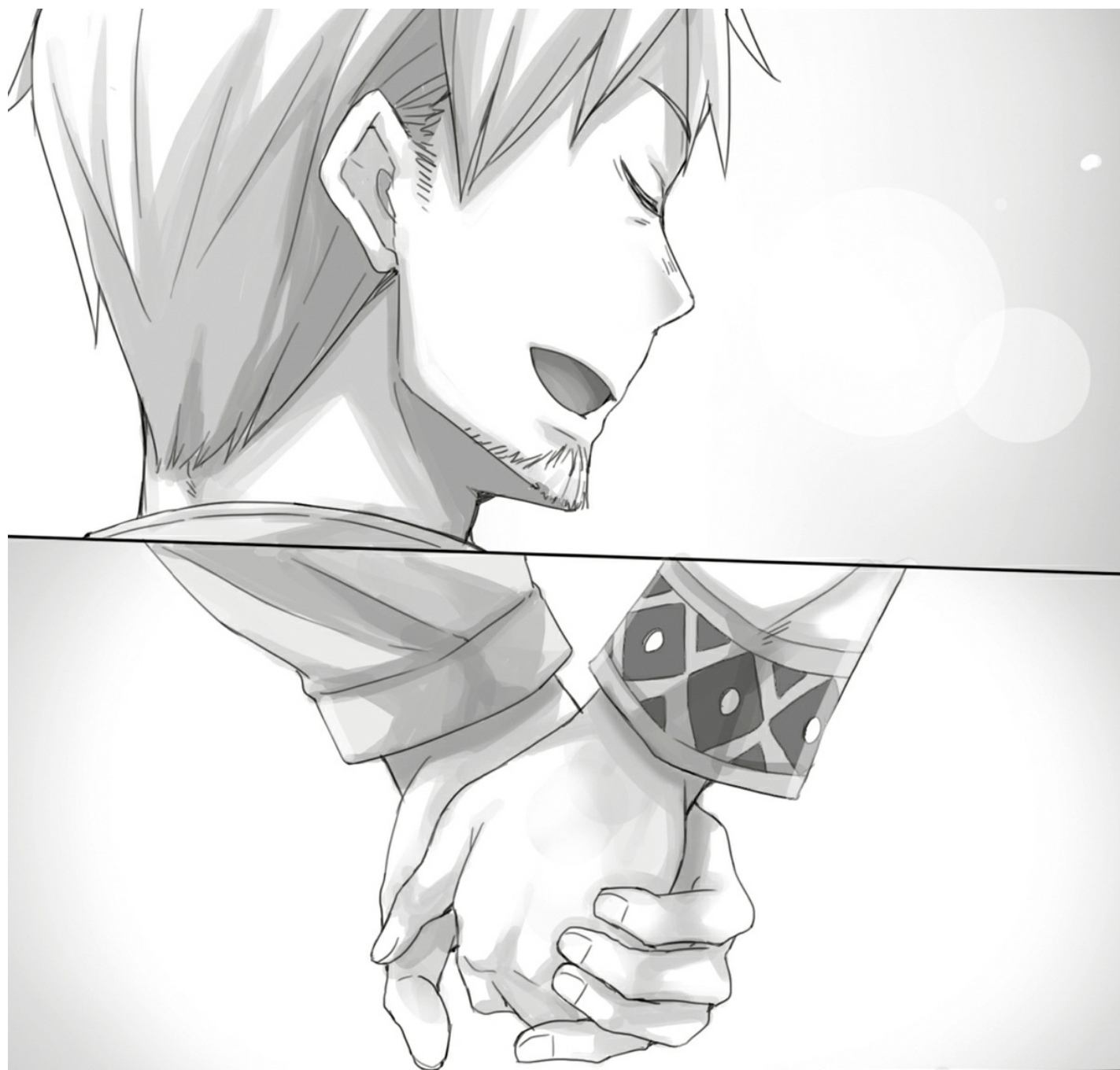
As they bickered back and forth, Holo and Lawrence left the bedroom together.

Their faces contorted sarcastically as they dugged at one another, pouring salt into each other’s wounds—but they quietly closed the door behind them and walked down the hallway hand in hand.

“’Tis why you are nothing but a fool, even after all this time!”

“The wisewolf herself is going to cry, considering she doesn’t seem to know me at all.”

As they walked through the dark house without so much as a candle, Lawrence recalled the time when he first met Holo.



They spent many nights together on that small cart. When they argued back then, they would truly grow angry with each other, their fights so intense that looking back on it now made him wonder why things got so heated.

For better or for worse, he could no longer fully recall how he felt back then.

The passing of the months and days was a mysterious thing, and all his past experiences enveloped him like the layers of blankets under which he slept. Underneath these layers, he could weather any cold, and no blade would be able to pierce deep enough to reach him. He was confident that nothing would ever come between him and Holo.

At the same time, in exchange, he felt a sense of loss. The feelings he so openly expressed back then now only existed in space somewhere in a faraway, distant world. He longed for them and felt sad that they were no longer with him.

But only a fool mourned the number of coins lost from one's wallet from shopping.

As long as the goods purchased were worthwhile, then the spent coins were nothing significant.

"One would be too few, yes? Here, hold it. I shall fetch the oil pot."

They crept into the food storehouse, and Lawrence laughed as he held the two or three onions that Holo handed him.

"This definitely isn't enough."

Any typical amount of preparedness would not be enough to enjoy all the time he received with Holo.

"Get the ale cask while you're at it."

Holo's eyes gleamed visibly through the darkness.

"'Tis your fault, after all. You shall be the one to explain to Hanna."

Lawrence was the master of the bathhouse, but the kitchen was Hanna's territory. Even Lawrence could not escape a scolding if he pilfered food from the kitchen.

“It’d be obvious whose fault it was if she saw you stumbling around with a hangover even if I did lie, wouldn’t it?”

Holo pouted angrily, but the air escaped her closed lips and she cackled.

“’Tis a challenge, then.”

“Alcohol isn’t something you drink during a challenge.”

“Oh? Are you running away?”

“A gentleman takes the blame for their partner.”

He and Holo, who bit her lip and grinned, prodded at each other.

Lawrence felt like he was ten, twenty years younger as they played around like children.

Like a bandit whispering to his partner, Lawrence said, “Hey, c’mon and get the goods ready. We don’t wanna be found.”

“You go and get the clay from the shed. I have heard ’tis sweeter the more clay there is. Bring plenty please.”

“Oh, that’s almost like—”

Lawrence said that much but cut himself off.

Holo looked up at him blankly, but she smiled and brushed it off.

“Got it. Then we’ll meet in front of the oven.”

“Mm.”

They exchanged light kisses, with Lawrence crouched forward and Holo standing on her toes, then went off to carry out their missions.

As Lawrence made his way to the shed out back, he thought about how the onions reminded him of themselves. The thicker their experiences were over the years, the sweeter the inside became. He did consider if it might be too sweet, but that was worth its own pleasure.

Lawrence prepared what he needed, then quickly returned to the fireplace in the guest hall. There were no guests up this late, and the red, ash-covered coals were crackling softly. Holo arrived just then as well, and they chuckled when

they looked at each other. No matter what they said, it would not be enough to express how they felt.

“Holo.”

“Hmm?”

Lawrence did not respond with words and merely smiled. Holo, too, understood what he meant, and like their tomboyish daughter, she bared her teeth in a grin.

Their days were not a repeat of one after another. There was no end to what they could enjoy.

This was but one scene in the quiet of night that convinced him of that.

BLUE DREAMS
AND WOLF



BLUE DREAMS AND WOLF

The sky turned a deeper blue and the smell of greenery wafted from the forest. In the mountains of the hot spring village Nyohhira, where half the year was spent covered in snow, summer had finally arrived.

Lawrence, the master of the bathhouse Spice and Wolf, inhaled a lungful of the summer air, but it was something else entirely that let him know of the season's arrival.

“...Honestly.”

It was when he took the ink from the record book back to the bedroom. Lawrence opened the door and sighed, exasperated.

He had wondered where his wife, Holo, might be since he had not seen her around the bathhouse, but there she was, sleeping soundly on the bed. On the desk by the bed was a cup of ale, still mostly full, so she had probably ended up nodding off after taking several sips from it as she gazed at the sky.

Leaving the window open in this season allowed the cool breeze to brush against his cheek while birdsongs tickled his ears. There was no greater luxury than spending the days lazily watching the clouds float by in the bright blue sky.

In the middle of it all was Holo, who resembled a silly-looking cat as she lay on her back with her mouth half open. Her right hand rested on her stomach and rose and fell with her soft snoring.

As he watched her, he saw her right hand occasionally scratch her stomach, and he smiled wryly.

The way she slept on the bed made her appear as if she were only a girl of just over ten years old, and it was tempting to say that it was very unbecoming of a girl her age, but alas—Holo was not the girl she seemed to be. Her true form was that of a giant wolf that lived in wheat and controlled its harvest.

And so on her head were wolf ears that were covered in the same flax-colored fur as her regular hair, and a fluffy tail grew from her backside. The hairs on her tail, which she could not go without maintaining, fluttered in the gentle breeze drifting in from the window.

Her wolflike features were not limited to her ears and tail but also in the way she slept.

In the winter, Holo curled up facedown like a wolf, but as it grew warmer she stretched her body farther and farther out. At this time of year, her arms and legs were splayed out in all directions and she lay on her back. There was nothing that frightened her in this world, simply enjoying it as it was.

How peaceful she seemed—foolish even.

Holo would without a doubt grow angry if she found out that Lawrence marked the passing of the seasons by how she slept.

And of course, he would no longer be able to look forward to it every year, so he took great care to hide it.

This year, too, after enjoying watching Holo for a moment, he dropped his gaze to the desk beside the bed. A quill and paper still sat out on it, and beside some writing was a rather crude drawing. It was of the currants they gathered yesterday, and there were a few berries sitting on the paper.

Currants were not inedible on their own, but they were sour enough to pucker one's face. Holo would occasionally eat the sour berries on their own on purpose to fluff up her tail much larger than usual.

The heaps of currants they gathered in this season were sometimes dipped in sugar, boiled in honey, or made into a form of alcohol.

Lawrence picked up one of the black berries and played with it in his hand. Then, after looking out the window and taking a deep breath, he sat at the edge of the bed Holo slept on.

After he gazed for a few moments at her sleeping face, relaxed with eyes still closed, he picked up the currant in his palm with two fingers and placed it gently on her lips.

Her wolf ears stood up straight and her eyelids briefly fluttered so he thought she might wake up, but she gave no indication of doing so. Rather, with her wolflike caution nowhere to be seen, her lips did not even tighten.

The gluttonous great wisewolf's lips began moving in a chewing motion the moment food touched her lips, even in her sleep, and the currant berry went down quickly— "*Nom...Mmm...*"

It was just after she bit into the berry.

"Mmmmmmmmm!"

It was so sour, Holo leaped up.

"Mn, ngh...*Guh*. Wh-what on—?!"

As though she had unconsciously swallowed it the moment she jumped awake, Holo patted her throat and her chest.

Lawrence, amused by her agitation, handed her the ale she had started drinking and forgotten about. Holo took advantage of the situation and clung to it, then it seemed she finally understood what was going on. It would not be difficult to put it together after seeing the currants on the desk and Lawrence, who sat at the edge of the bed, smiling.

The fire in her reddish-amber eyes glinted.

"...You...fool!"

A long time ago, Lawrence would have trembled in fear when seeing such a show of ferocity, but it had been over ten years since he and Holo married. He took the now-empty mug from Holo's hands as she threatened to bite him and wiped away the white froth around her mouth with his thumb.

"You up now?"

Holo glared at the smiling Lawrence, grasped his wrist with both hands, and forcefully wiped her mouth on him. At last, she bit the back of his hand and grumpily looked away in a huff.

"And what on earth is the meaning of this?!"

The vain Holo did not deal with surprise very well. While too much would

really push her into a bad mood, he probably would not be punished if he occasionally saw this side of her to soothe the blues of work.

Lawrence reached out to stroke her head, but she swatted his hand away.

He adored her so much when she pouted, but he had to speak before she truly got angry with him.

“I’ve got some work for you. It’s your turn now.”

“...”

She gave him a grumpy, sidelong glance before sighing and getting out of bed.

Lawrence spread a large, aged map on the table, and the puff of dust that came from it made Holo sneeze.

“*Sniff*...What is this?”

Holo asked with displeasure as she rubbed her nose, and when he heard her, Lawrence looked even more displeased.

“You don’t remember?”

“Hmm?”

Holo stared back at him blankly, but after looking between Lawrence’s face and the map, she mumbled in recognition.

“Ah...*Achoo! Sniff*...And why have you brought out such an old thing?”

It sounded like she finally remembered.

There were all sorts of notes written on the map spread before them, and there was a stain on one part from spilled alcohol.

It was the map Lawrence and Holo had made to pinpoint a good place to build a bathhouse when they started up their business here in Nyohhira. In other words, it was an old treasure map to let them find their home in the northlands.

“Once the treasure is found, a treasure map no longer has any use. I forgot about it entirely. That Myuri gazed at it once or twice at least, did she not?”

Lawrence reached out to wipe Holo’s nose with a handkerchief, and her tail flopped about as she spoke.

“And? What are you doing with this? I hope you do not plan to open another one?”

To build an annex to the bathhouse Spice and Wolf and expand their business...That was a dream he had long ago. Now, it was more important to keep their bathhouse modest yet unparalleled.

“No, what I want to ask you to do is from here to here.”

Lawrence slid his finger from the village of Nyohhira to the west.

It went deep into the woods, beyond a cluster of mountains, where even the smallest communities did not yet exist.

“I want you to find a road that connects these places.”

“A road?”

Holo repeated dubiously, and Lawrence responded.

“You’ve gone here many times in your wolf form, right?”

“True, but...No, ’tis the very reason why I know there is no road there.”

What Lawrence pointed to was a line that connected a certain land directly to the hot spring village of Nyohhira.

What lay there was a single building, which, at one time, was feared as a place that might have grown to become Nyohhira’s business rival.

“I know. We’re going to make one. But you know what places are easy to walk through and what places are difficult, right? And one more thing.”

Lawrence poked the tip of one of Holo’s wolf ears.

“There should be places that those in the forest definitely do not want people to enter.”

When he said that, Holo furrowed her brow and pursed her lips.

Her reddish eyes glared at him most likely because he had brought her such troublesome work.

“What troublesome work you have brought me.”

It was exactly what he thought she would say, and Lawrence gave her a tired

smile and shrugged.

“’Tis that, is it not? A road to the inn Selim and her kin made? Is that all right? Do you not consider them rivals in trade?”

Selim was a young girl who was working in the bathhouse, and she was not human, either. Like Holo, she was the embodiment of a wolf, and along with her brother and friends, who were also wolves, she had come from the south to the north, looking for a safe place to live. After many twists and turns, Selim came to work at Lawrence’s bathhouse, but her brother, Aram, and the others were different. On the other side of the mountains from Nyohhira, they ended up running a post town in the name of a miracle of a saint while pretending to be monks.

The memory of the bathhouse masters in Nyohhira growing agitated over a rival after hearing the rumors of Aram and the others setting up their residence there was still fresh in Lawrence’s mind.

But that had never been Selim or her brother’s intention, nor did they have the capacity or springs to compete with Nyohhira in the little village they created.

Additionally, what was more important to them was Selim, one of their own, working under Lawrence, and most importantly of all, how great of a deal Holo was to them.

Regardless, either was enough for Aram to suggest the following:

“Would it be possible for the bathhouses in Nyohhira to receive the pilgrims that come to our village?”

Lawrence accepted the favor and reported it to the assembly for bathhouse masters in Nyohhira.

Though they were conservative about everything, they were not blind to trade.

They understood that they would not be fighting over guests, and it was rather not a terrible idea if guests traveling on a pilgrimage also came to Nyohhira. Also, guests who came to Nyohhira would have something new to enjoy if they connected with Aram’s village. While the masters often boasted

about how they could soothe the boredom of their long-term guests, their ideas were not very diverse. And so, with a new pilgrimage site, the guests could go out on a leisurely trip for a few days, which would make the bathhouse masters' work easier.

The assembly unanimously agreed to it, but there was a problem.

"A road, then?"

"It'd be nice if there were animal trails, but I think we'd cause problems for the forest residents if we just started using them."

Holo, arms crossed, flitted her wolf ears every which way as a growl rumbled deep in her throat.

The forest had its own rules, so it would only bring trouble if they naively assumed things would end without incident.

That was even more so the case since it was not Holo's style to return to her giant wolf form and force them to listen to her.

"It's too far away for human legs to travel in a day, so we'll need a hut for resting. It wouldn't be good for either party if there was a bear cave or deer path nearby, right? I thought that you might know how to handle that stuff."

"Hnnng..."

Holo moaned, took a deep breath, then kicked her foot childishly.

"Why not have Selim do it? Those in the forest shall understand if she says she works in my name."

Selim was also the embodiment of a wolf, so it was not impossible for her to do this job.

But she was an absolutely crucial employee in the management of the bathhouse.

From dawn until dusk, she single-handedly took care of all the odd jobs around the house, and at night, she put on her pair of spectacles made from polished shards of glass and did their writing work by candlelight.

Were Lawrence to express his most honest feelings, he would say that Holo—

who in this comfortable season stayed the whole day napping in her bed, enticed by the cool breeze—was only half as useful as Selim.

Of course, he was aware that mentioning that would bring the whole household into danger, so he worked his wisdom as the ex-merchant he once was.

“There’s a reason why I can only ask you.”

“...Hmm?”

Holo gazed at him doubtfully, daring him to talk her into it.

Lawrence nearly whispered his response to Holo in an especially admirable fashion.

“Most of the guests who come to Nyohhira to bathe are elderly, right? So them going to Aram’s village means they’ll have to walk.”

“...Do you mean to imply that I, too, am elderly?”

Holo was hundreds of years old.

He caught a glimpse of a fang beneath her lips, but Lawrence, of course, stayed calm and continued.

“No. The reason I can’t let Miss Selim do it is because of that form of yours.”

“...Hmm?”

Lawrence placed his hand on Holo’s cheek, rubbed the corner of her eye with the pad of his thumb, then patted her on the head.

If she behaved, Holo’s childlike nature was almost palatable.

“Opening up a new road is tough work, and just deciding where it goes first is enough to start arguments. If we leave it to the slow-moving assembly, we’d never know when it might be finished. But if you could walk it in your body, then most of the guests that come to Nyohhira could. That’s why you can explain why we’d have to put the road where it is, right?”

Holo looked at the map and then back up at him with wide, pitiful eyes.

Lawrence wrung out all the power he could muster into his next sentence.

“You are much cuter than Miss Selim. You can convince the villagers way better.”

“...”

Holo’s eyes silently bored into Lawrence. They held not a single glimmer, but she suddenly shut them and turned away.

“Hmph.”

Holo huffed, her lips slightly pursed, her ears and tail flitting happily.

“The only thing you are a master of are your words. Then I shall succumb to your sweet talk.”

Lawrence bowed his head graciously to Holo, who put on a grumpy act.

“It’s a big help.”

Holo side-eyed Lawrence and sniffed once again, then closed her eyes, turned her shoulder to him, and bumped him with it.

Lawrence made a fatigued smile and embraced the needy wolf.

“So? Shall I just draw a line where I think might be a good road?”

“No, the village hunters, woodcutters, and Aram will be going with—join the survey with them.”

Holo, whose eyes were narrowed in the comfort of his arms, suddenly looked cross.

“What, there will be others? I do not wish to be seen by others. You feel the same, no?”

Holo was not human and did not age. She had tried to conceal herself as much as possible for the past ten-some years since coming to the village to hide that fact, but there was another reason.

Holo was rather shy.

“Please. They’ve finally acknowledged me as a member of the village. If you, my wife, can pull this off well, then we can finally be one of them.”

Holo, a wolf who lived in a pack, was even more sensitive to this kind of talk.

And since she had once experienced controlling a village's wheat harvest, alone and thankless, she knew well the pain of living with the feeling of being alienated.

Her expression was still honestly upset, but in the end, she sighed, drooping her shoulders.

"Hmph...What a troublesome household I have married into."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

Lawrence embraced Holo one more time, and her tail rustled back and forth.

"Well, I suppose 'twould not be terrible to go for a walk with you sometimes."

Lawrence felt guilty at how she smiled and said that to him.

She of course realized this and stared at him in surprise.

"H...mm?"

"Sorry...I have to stay in the bathhouse."

Holo's eyes widened slightly and her mouth closed shut. Her wolf ears trembled sadly and drooped.

He was not sure what to say to her, as she was so happy at the prospect of walking around the mountains together...But then again, he noticed how puffed up her tail was, and he sighed.

"Hey, can you cut the act, at least?"

The hint of sadness vanished from Holo's expression like a bubble suddenly bursting.

In its stead, her eyes gazed at him ever so coolly.

"Hmph. And what is it you will be up to whilst I am driven away into the mountains?"

"At the very least, it won't be napping on the bed as I take a sip of ale."

Holo knew very well that was a dig at her, and she glared up at him with all her might.

"Or do you want to do my work? It has to get done fairly quickly, so I wouldn't

mind if you did it well.”

“*Rgh...Y-your work?*”

Work in the bathhouse was divided between what needed to be done every day in order to maintain the house and seasonal work. The latter especially involved lots of troublesome chores, such as gathering and processing the harvest in order to preserve it. Holo looked as though she was trying to remember what sort of work it was, so Lawrence reminded her.

“Drying the sulfur powder in the sun for the guests’ gifts.”

“Oh.”

There was yellowish sulfur powder dissolved in the water that came up in the springs. It was apparently different from regular sulfur and was said to be effective against joint pain and swelling and cuts. Guests who believed the folklore liked to dissolve it in hot water and drink the concoction. Lawrence tried it once in the past and it purged his bowels so he could not outright recommend it, but it was a merchant’s duty to meet his customer’s demands.

However, the sulfur accumulated at the source of the spring had to be placed in an unglazed pot once to extract the water and then dried out in the sun. Most of the guests bought the stuff in bulk, so preparing for that was also quite a bother. Having said that, burning a big fire and drying the powder that way would be a loss of profits for them, so they did it all in the summer when the weather was mostly sunny. And preparations for that, too, were difficult to deal with.

The damp sulfur powder after being separated from the water was heavy, and it was arduous work scraping the hardened mass out of the pot. Once it was all on a scrap of linen, they had to use a stick to break it into pieces and spread it out, then when it was dry, they had to gather it all up and repeat the process over and over.

There was no doubt that Holo would whine after the third run-through.

Holo weighed her gains and losses in her mind’s eye as Lawrence stared at her, then suddenly broke into a smile and spoke.

“...Well, I suppose I am a member of the bathhouse. I must work hard to

become a friend of the village.”

It seemed that she had come to the conclusion that she would rather walk around the forest.

Lawrence glared coldly, and Holo glared right back, challenging him to respond.

He shrugged and sighed.

“I’ll tell Miss Hanna to prepare something good for you, so I’m counting on you.”

She then pinched the back of his hand.

“You fool. You believe I can always be won over with food?”

“So you don’t want any?”

“I said no such thing.”

Holo exhaled through her nose, and Lawrence could do nothing but smile bitterly.

There had been many times in the past that Lawrence strapped luggage to wolf-Holo’s back, but doing so to her human form was unusual. He placed a knapsack filled with writing utensils and lunch on her then tied the strings tightly so that it would not bother her on the mountain roads.

Then, since she would be going along with other villagers, they would have to hide her ears and tail. Her ears could be hidden by a hood, but her tail was the main issue.

As the saying goes, the best place to hide a tree was in the forest, so they chose to use a fluffy fur sash. Though it was summer, it was still rather chilly in the spots of the forest the sun did not reach, so it was perfect.

All that was left for him to do was trust in Holo’s actions and her eloquence if she aroused any suspicion.

“I’m counting on you.”

“Hmm.”

Holo, all covered in clothes for the outside, did not seem upset but actually

rather excited.

When she was going to leave, she stood on her toes and presented her face to him, so with a sigh, Lawrence gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Eh-heh. Be a good boy, now.”

Lawrence smirked—*Who was the lonely, clingy one?*—and Holo flashed her fangs gleefully as she headed off down the hill from the bathhouse. Before long, she met up with the village hunters, and Aram, dressed as a monk, bowed his head deeply and they were off. In the end, Holo gave him a big wave, and they vanished from view.

Unlike when they sent Myuri on her first errand, an absent, oddly sentimental smile appeared on Lawrence’s face.

“Excuse me, Sir Lawrence?”

There was a voice.

It was the girl who worked in the bathhouse, Selim, who had stood slightly behind him also to see Holo off.

“Perhaps I should have gone instead...”

Selim, whose shoulder-length hair was of a faded color and had a truly divine white coat when she returned to her wolf form, looked apologetic, but that meant she had grown used to her position.

Since Holo had often teased him for fancying the most pitiful types of girls, Lawrence had to be careful of how he treated Selim.

“No, she has done almost no work as of late. Without you, Miss Selim, the bathhouse would stop working. You’ve seen her napping before, haven’t you?”

Selim drew up her shoulders, as though shrinking, perhaps because she recalled the imagery.

She almost nodded honestly, but she quickly shook her head.

“N-no, I enjoy working, and Lady Holo will gladly lend me a hand when it counts.”

“That’s what I mean. She’s thinks it’s fine as long as the boat doesn’t sink. She

lacks the spirit to row faster.”

It was almost as though she was saying that Lawrence, who needed it, was the strange one.

Selim gave Lawrence a troubled smile as he groaned, then spoke slowly.

“Or maybe it is the secret to living a long life.”

Selim was a good person, as she smiled, trying to save both of their faces.

“That might be right. The scales will fall over if you put too much lead on one side.”

“Indeed.”

She beamed, and he smiled in return. Had Holo been there she would have glared, but Lawrence wished she would learn a little from the honest Selim, who never used her smile as a weapon.

“Oh, Sir Lawrence, I have a report to make.”

As they walked back to the bathhouse after watching Holo off, Selim spoke up.

“I was consolidating all our expenditure calculations last night.”

“Any discrepancies? No, don’t tell me, a deficit?”

After getting glasses, Selim’s skills in reading and writing improved greatly, and before they knew it, he could give her the same work that he would have trusted to Col.

Selim was perfectly suited for accounting work in particular, since she did not work frantically but carefully and steadily, one after another.

“No, it’s the coins.”

The moment she said that, Lawrence knew exactly what it was.



“Oh...the change...”

He spoke with a bit of a sigh, and Selim recoiled apologetically.

“I tried to make due with every kind of silver possible when it came to paying for our order, but we didn’t have enough change...”

“It’s not your fault, Miss Selim.”

Lawrence spoke to calm her down and scratched his head.

“That came up at the assembly, too. Trade is booming everywhere this year, and there’s a shortage of coin.”

“So...no allowance for a while, then?”

Selim shrugged and gazed up at him with rounded eyes, as though trying to make him worry about the coins for payment now.

“If we deal with larger purchases with money orders, then...What’s left are small expenses and change for the customers, right?”

The guests’ requests for change were especially important. One of their pleasures during their long stays were parties starring the dancing girls and musicians. The bored, lewd old men would stick thin copper coins onto the attractive dancers’ sweaty bodies as an offering and lived for the smile they would get in return.

There were also those in Nyohhira who walked around selling their homemade alcohol and sweets, so it was important to have small change on hand to pay for a snack, and those who brought attendants with them needed to provide some pocket money as well.

No small change meant a great inconvenience for many people.

“I will try and think of an idea, so if you could please manage something in the meanwhile.”

“Sure thing.”

Selim was a meek girl so she did not look at all upset with the situation, but she would have to bear the brunt of the guests’ criticism when it came to change. Lawrence felt a bit bad about it.

He watched her as she briefly bowed her head and returned to work, then he sighed.

“An idea...An idea, huh?”

Lawrence put his hands on his hips and looked to the sky.

His inn was deeper into the mountains from Nyohhira, which already stood quite far in. The closest proper town was several days' travel away, either by river or by road. This coin problem was giving the money changers in even the biggest cities trouble, so it was not something that a bathhouse master so far out in the wilderness could do anything about.

He could hear the melodies of an instrument and the guests' lively clamor from the bath on the other side of the building.

It was Lawrence the bathhouse master's job to keep this laughter and activity alive.

This was the home he and Holo had dreamed of, so giving up was not an option.

“But dreaming in this world is a pain on its own, isn't it?”

Lawrence smirked and grumbled to himself, then returned to work.

The village assembly met once a month during the busy seasons of summer and winter and twice during the down seasons. Additionally, they could also meet at their own discretion if a problem arose.

While these meetings often became drinking parties very quickly for the bathhouse masters, they had been talking rather seriously these past several times they gathered.

“Okay, well, about the road to Saint Selim's Village, things are going smoothly.”

Since his wife, Holo, was a part of it, Lawrence reported on the surveying of the road. None of the other masters expressed any particular objections to his idea of building a road where a girl like Holo could easily walk.

And in the end, it seemed they had settled on the name of Saint Selim's Village for Aram's post town. There was nothing they could do about it since,

when they acted out the miracle of a saint whose body became silver as she slept in the ground, Selim ended up using her own name before the archbishop.

But no one would think that she and the Selim who worked at Lawrence's bathhouse were one and the same.

"I hope you don't mind if we leave the allotment of expenses for building the road, the sale of cleared lumber, and construction costs of the huts for later."

"No objection," came the chorus from the other bathhouse masters. Though it was not as bad as winter, to talk about money during the summer when there were many people coming and going would only lead to confusion. During the busy season, none of the bathhouses were entirely certain how much money they were making.

"And now, next on the agenda..."

The chair hesitated.

"...the grave shortage of change that has befallen us."

"What did the money changers in Svernel say?"

Someone cried out in excitement.

Svernel was a town considered to be the key of trade in these northlands, one that Nyohhira relied on for the delivery of their goods. Whenever they had a surplus or deficit of coins, they would contact Svernel's money changers first.

"They might ask us to give them coins instead of giving any to us."

"Even though we gave them so much in the spring?"

Once the busy winter season was finished in the village of Nyohhira, it was customary for them to bring the large amounts of coin paid to the bathhouses to the money changers in Svernel. Since all the work left undone over the winter began at once in the spring, the value of coin went up, which gave them a nice profit from bringing the coins to town.

"What about the Debau Company?"

That question was directed to Lawrence. The Debau Company, which held great influence over the economy of the entire northlands and at the same time

minted the most reliable coin, was deeply connected to him since his days as a traveling merchant.

“I sent them a letter, but they said it would frankly be difficult to mint new coins since all the mines are plagued with snowmelt during the summer.”

Even with the tools to create money, they could not make any new coins without the source material.

Though the Debau Company had their own mines, it was likely their production was not enough.

“Well, I’m sure every place with the right tools is going frantic to secure their source metal. Hammering out new coin now would make them rich.”

“Oohh, I haven’t seen a shiny silver coin in a long time!”

“The merchants who come and go have all been issuing money orders lately and complaining that it doesn’t make them want to do any trade.”

Money orders were a kind of document with a price written on it. While on one hand, it was convenient that one did not have to carry every single heavy coin on oneself, it was still nothing more than a piece of paper, no matter how large the amount was. Lawrence understood how it felt as if there was no inherent value in it.

“If only we could give the dancing girls money orders for offerings!”

Everyone laughed at the joke.

“Even if we tell them that the piece of paper is a standin for coins, the girls probably won’t smile...”

No matter the condition the coins were in, everyone acknowledged their value because of how they were shaped.

“I guess then all we can do is somehow make the dancers, musicians, merchants, and peddlers spend the coin they’ve earned and collect it for ourselves.”

They were sharp as well, so they knew the most profitable places to take the money they gathered.

Unfortunately, Nyohhira was no such candidate, so their coins would only end up leaving the town.

“Or maybe we should sing and dance for them.”

That joke produced even more laughter.

But the way they laughed was almost out of desperation, showing how defeated they were in the face of a coin shortage.

“I guess we have no choice but to bear through this.”

The chair spoke tiredly, and all the bathhouse owners sighed.

It was when a heavy silence lay over them.

“While we might not be able to sing or dance...”

One master spoke. It was the one from the bathhouse that served the most delicious food in Nyohhira.

“We had the perfect event to scrape together some change, didn’t we? Isn’t that enough?”

Did we? came the murmured voices in the hall.

As Lawrence sat puzzled, that bathhouse master looked straight at him.

“It’s the one you spoke about before, Mr. Lawrence.”

“Huh?”

Everyone’s gazes suddenly gathered on him.

“That fake funeral of yours.”

The blood rushed to Lawrence’s head not because he was embarrassed.

It was because he was happy.

“Ah, putting the living in coffins...you mean?”

“Oh yeah, I remember that idea. That was an interesting one. What happened to it?”

People had trouble saying what was important to even their loved ones if they were not on their deathbed. So Lawrence had the idea of an event where

they held funerals for the living, in order to tell others the embarrassing things they would not typically say.

Since the guests gathered in Nyohhira during the summer and winter, Lawrence had the idea of calling in guests during their inactive seasons of spring and autumn.

They tried it once and it cost no money and was generally received well, but the problem was the conservative and slow-moving bathhouse masters. Preparations and that sort of thing were troublesome for them and none of them wanted to take responsibility, so it had been left at that.

Lawrence wondered for a while if he could take on all the responsibility himself, but he was the newest member of the village, so it was possible he would become a nuisance if he stood out too much.

And he had forgotten about it before he realized it, and he now felt oddly revived.

“We can sell candles as votives for funerals, and if we pass around an offering box, the dancers and musicians and traveling merchants will have to pay a bit of change. It’s crucial that we say just a little bit is fine since it’s for fun. Of course, it’s a great bonus if someone offers a silver coin.”

Everyone nodded in understanding.

Then the chair clapped.

“That certainly kills two birds with one stone. It is clear that if it is this bad during the summer, then the coin situation will grow worse during the winter. And so, while we cannot do it now, I don’t think it a bad idea to start discussing holding it in the autumn. How about that?”

Though the assembly typically could never reach an agreement on the smallest details, in a small town such as this, some matters were settled in an instant. “Agreed.” Voices accompanied raised hands, and Lawrence witnessed the moment his idea was accepted by the village.

“Well, we’ll leave it at that. But for now, there’s nothing for us to decide, so let’s concentrate on Saint Selim’s Village first.”

There was a mountain of things to do.

As the hall grew noisier, Lawrence directed his gaze toward the bathhouse owner who offered his idea.

The man noticed him immediately, and as though he understood why, he just shrugged.

He was a master who never failed to produce imaginative meals for his guests, so it seemed that he had just suggested it because it seemed useful, regardless of Lawrence.

But either way, Lawrence was pleased. This meant he had taken another step into the village circle.

“So let’s leave this for today and feast. I’m curious to see how the first brew of cider turned out this year.”

The other bathhouse owners applauded in agreement, and everyone quickly began preparations.

While it was not as busy as winter, many of the assembly members greatly looked forward to the opportunity to drink while the sun was still high in the sky during the frantic summer.

“We gathered a lot of mushrooms this summer. Hey, how’s the charcoal looking?!”

Everyone started bringing in food and casks of alcohol.

Lawrence was usually careful during the normal parties, but today it looked like he could enjoy the drink.

Holo might get angry if he came home red-faced, but he thought that maybe, just today, she would allow it.

While the coin problem hung over them like a dark cloud, the survey for the road leading to Aram’s village was going smoothly.

“And then, whenever I sat down, they cut fresh grass and lay it down for me, and whenever we crossed a slight ledge, the men carried me, and occasionally they created a simple palanquin of sticks and let me sit on it.”

Holo lay on her stomach, her tail waving about, and trilled as Lawrence massaged her feet.

“I truly felt like a princess. Perhaps such a thing once in a while would not be so bad.”

And who is it that's gallantly working hard right now to treat you like a princess? Lawrence was about to ask, but he kept it to himself. Since it seemed as though she got along with Aram and the hunters whom she had accompanied on the road survey, there was little reason to make her feel worse while she was enjoying herself.

“I thought that Aram boy was a rude child at first, too, but he is quite all right. His nose is rather sharp in the forest. The hunters are quite skilled for humans as well. They know well the rules of the forest. There would have been no problem without me.”

It was extremely unusual for Holo to compliment others. Or perhaps the reason for such an assessment was the three rabbits hanging from her waist and the several delicious-looking brown mushrooms as big as her face strapped to her back today when she came home from the survey.

“Then I guess we can build a road, huh?”

“Mm...Oohh, harder...”

Holo was without a doubt tired from all the walking, so when Lawrence pressed firmly on the back of her feet, the hairs on her tail stood on edge and she groaned.

“*Hooh*...And? How was it for you?”

Holo stayed in place as she spoke, lying on her stomach and hugging a pillow.

“How was what for me?”

“Was there not an assembly today?”

She typically never asked how the assembly went. Those were usually times when Lawrence had too much to drink. As he wondered if the smell really did linger that much, Holo's tail bent deftly and smacked his hand.

“You fool. I can tell when you are in high spirits.”

It was almost as though she was saying that she could see through it all, despite having her eyes closed.

But since she really did see through him, Lawrence began to gently massage her calves as though apologizing for underestimating her.

“Yeah, something great happened. You remember when we planned that fake funeral and tried it out, right? It might actually happen.”

“Oh ho.”

And it might solve their problem with the coins.

The others around him would acknowledge him if he managed to solve one of the village’s big problems.

“And because of your help, I might finally become a member of the village.”

“Mm. That’s...that’s...gre...at...”

As Lawrence happily poured his gratitude into Holo’s leg massage, her tail eventually flopped over to the right and was still.

He took a look and saw she was asleep, and quiet snores came from her half-opened mouth.

The night was still young, and it was typically around the time when she would be sipping on her ale, poking her nose into Lawrence’s business as he took care of documents. She had her fill of dinner today, but she had not drunk much. Perhaps walking around the mountain in her human form was much more relaxing than she thought it would be.

Lawrence gently stroked Holo’s head and pulled the covers up over her. He thought about doing some writing work afterward, but when he watched her as she breathed soundly and comfortably, he no longer felt like it.

He blew out the candle and quietly slipped under the covers so as not to wake Holo, but then he realized she was hogging the pillow.

Come on, Lawrence thought as he closed his eyes, and he, too, fell asleep in an instant.

While there were so many things going on, such as the shortage of coins and

the road survey, time passed as they just concentrated on the work before them. Holo leaving every morning with a rucksack became a familiar sight, and then at night they would tell each other what happened during the day as they fell asleep.

As for the funeral, they were in the middle of a busy season, so for the moment it was on hold until the beginning of autumn, but the coin problem grew worse day by day. Talk about calling in a stonemason to make stone coins and, since they may as well try, going down the mountain to gather change from various towns started to come up in regular conversation among the bathhouse owners.

While the former might not have been possible, the latter gave them a little hope.

While not as much as winter, this was still a busy season, so the problem was who from the village could go down and gather coins, but Lawrence had a slight hunch as to whom this sort of job might be given.

He anxiously thought about what he could do, since if the other villagers asked him to go, then he would have to close the bathhouse as he watched Holo off that morning as he always did.

She seemed to be rather enjoying walking around the mountain, since today she also brought with her a sack, possibly for gathering mushrooms or nuts or the sort. He imagined her greedily stuffing it full and coming home with shaky steps under the weight. As he wondered if he should prepare some good ale for her, he dried out the sulfur powder from the springs in an empty area before the bathhouse.

Then, as lunch time grew nearer, he looked up.

Holo had appeared from behind a tree, and for a few seconds, he doubted what he saw.

“...Huh? Wh-what’s wrong?”

It would have been cute if she came home during lunch to see him because she was lonely, but they had known each other for a long time. He noticed how glum she looked.

Holo wordlessly emerged from the forest, stood before Lawrence, and sighed.

“It has become complicated.”

Holo grumbled, and her gaze suddenly snapped to something behind him. Lawrence turned around, and there was Selim, carrying a basket to collect the drying sulfur powder.

“Aram and the others are still keeping watch in the mountain. Only I have returned to call on someone.”

Selim’s eyes widened when she heard her brother’s name.

Lawrence’s brow furrowed when he heard her say “keeping watch.”

“Is there something dangerous?”

The village of Nyohhira lay on the utmost frontier. And those who always needed to keep away from the eyes of humans ran and hid in places like this.

“’Tis not impossible, they said.”

“...Hmm?”

He was even more puzzled at Holo’s noncommittal response, and she let out a long, deep sigh.

“I wish little Col were here...”

The wrinkles between Lawrence’s brow deepened when he heard the unexpected name.

“Col?”

Col, who they had met over ten years ago when Lawrence was traveling together as a merchant with Holo, had supported the bathhouse business for a long time.

Lawrence could only think of one thing if they needed Col’s help. He lowered his voice and spoke.

“Don’t tell me...the remains of one of Myuri’s awful tricks?”

Their only daughter, Myuri, was an unapologetic tomboy and loved pranks. He could not count all the dangerous pranks she had pulled that would cause

the villagers to faint if they found out.

Myuri looked up to Col as an older brother and clung to him, so when she caused problems, Col was typically the one to resolve them. That was what Lawrence was reminded of, but when he saw Holo's wry smile, he realized that he was wrong.

"Because little Col and Myuri go so well together?"

Lawrence flinched at Holo's teasing, and it seemed that Holo finally overcame the nervousness stuck in her throat.

"'Tis not it. Little Col's, you know. That difficult knowledge of his."

"Col's...the Church?"

Holo had said it was complicated.

Lawrence placed both hands on his wife's small shoulders and asked her as the master of the bathhouse.

"What happened?"

What Holo mentioned was certainly complicated.

He was not physically strong, nor did he have the money to solve every problem.

What Lawrence did have was the knowledge he cultivated as a merchant and quite a few connections.

"I really apologize for how sudden this is."

"Oh no, I always appreciate what you do, Sir Lawrence."

Walking along the mountain road, his beard and hair still damp as they swayed in the wind, was an abbot of stocky build. Luckily, it was before he had anything to drink, so they told him what the situation was as he lounged in the baths and had him accompany them.

"And I hate to remind you again, but..."

Lawrence spoke as they walked the path, but the abbot raised his hand, as though telling him he did not need to finish.

“I am aware. This is Nyohhira, where God’s eyes cannot see beyond the steam of the baths. Rather, I am the one who must give you my continual thanks.”

Holo glowered at the two men for their blatant exchange.

This white-bearded abbot was the head of a large monastery called the Harivel Monastery and had come at the very end of spring to ask an odd favor from Lawrence.

To put it simply, the winds of the Church’s revolution blew throughout the towns, and the churches and monasteries that had amassed assets were being used as scapegoats. And so he had asked for Lawrence’s help to distribute the monastery’s assets to those who needed it the most.

Of course, “distribute to those who needed it the most” meant “find someone who will buy it for the highest price.”

With his knowledge as a former traveling merchant, the wide network he had cultivated, and his recollection of the rules of the different kinds of merchants, Lawrence decided to help out this man to the best of his ability.

And he had to ask for a favor in return.

It was the thing that Holo and the others found by chance as they went to survey the road.

They asked the abbot to inspect it.

“What you found in the mountains was a deceased traveler wearing a suspicious crest, was it?”

The abbot inquired as he walked at a brisk pace along the mountain path.

Lawrence responded.

“It looked like the body has been there a while. They perished in a very small cave.”

Though Lawrence did not give all the details, he appeared to get the gist of the situation.

“May God watch over them,” the abbot murmured. “In reality, there are many heretics who run to the northlands. Because inquisitors also sneak into

the north after them, they would be very guarded in public. Myself and my colleagues all believe that there would be no more reason to live if Nyohhira became mixed up in the inquisition and we no longer could bathe in these waters.”

“Thank you.”

Since it took several days to travel to the nearest town and the nearby communities would know right away if someone got lost, then there was absolutely no doubt that the person found in the cave had a reason for coming into the mountains.

Though it was immediately clear that it was not a regular traveler by the strange crest in his luggage, they did not know who he might be. Holo and the others could not reach a conclusion, nor could they dig a hole and bury him and pretend they had not seen him. After worrying about it, they apparently decided to let Holo go back to the village and find someone they could trust.

They took a quick break along the way, and after a bit more walking, Aram and a hunter shouldering a bow came to greet them. Once they arrived, another woodcutter had started a fire beside the thicket.

Lawrence was surprised to see how close it was to the village. The only way into the cave in question was through a crack in the fern-covered rock, and it was hard to spot even after someone pointed it out to him.

“Take care not to slip.”

Following the hunter’s guidance, Lawrence and the others slid through the crack and down into the cave.

“Mm-hmm...Ha-ha, it’s like a venture down into hell.”

The abbot looked unsteady with his large body, but he managed to get down safely.

It looked like a dark hole from the outside but was surprisingly bright with the light filtering in.

“It’s the perfect hiding spot.”

The inside of the cave was about as big as a shed, and the temperature was

cool even in this season. Once they caught a whiff of the particular smell of wet stone, they spotted a small stream of fresh water in the corner.

It was not very deep, and they saw the body in question immediately.

Like the holy man he was, the abbot gripped the crest of the Church that hung from his neck and offered a prayer.

“May God grant peace to this wandering soul.”

The body was not covered in bugs, and perhaps it had simply lost its water content. From the way it leaned up against the wall, legs splayed, Lawrence thought it practically looked like an old man from a charcoal-burning hut had a drink of ale and fell asleep on the spot.

It was not unusual to find corpses on the road back when Lawrence was traveling around, but he almost never saw one in such a pristine location. There was water, and fruits hung from the ceiling, so perhaps the life drained from this person slowly as he ate and drank and passed in his sleep.

Lawrence was not sure if he should take that as him prolonging his own pain, or if he should say that he was holding out hope until the bitter end.

It was just a feeling, but looking at the body, he thought it might be the latter.

“He looks as though he was just awake only moments ago.”

What the abbot said was not an exaggeration. The body had shown no indication of having been eaten by bugs or mice. His left arm hugged the bag that sat on his stomach, and his right hand held something that looked like a paper. From far away, he looked like an old man who fell asleep while reading it.

“It seems...he must have been caring for his tools or recalling his work.”

Lawrence realized it for the first time when the abbot mentioned it. Perhaps because of the long years and months they had been there and how they were covered not in rust but something of a black mosslike substance—it was hard to tell at first, but there was a line of tools by the body. They were all within reach from where the body sat, as if he was opening a store.

“A hammer, chisel, file...and this must be a saw. Is that a letter in his hand?

No...”

“It’s...”

What the abbot reached for was not flimsy paper but parchment, which could keep for a thousand years in the right conditions. Since it had not been wet, it was in perfect shape.

But the moment they saw what was on it, both Lawrence and the abbot were at a loss for words.

Holo gripped Lawrence’s arm so hard it hurt, and he glanced at her.

Her face was tense and slightly pale.

She had not been glum when she appeared at the bathhouse earlier. She was nervous.

There were countless pictures of wolves on the parchment that the body held. There were some that looked normal and some with two heads. Some were baring their fangs, others were holding things in their mouth—various kinds of wolves filled the page.

“A wolf faith?”

The pagans that the Church censured always brought to mind people who worshipped toads, but Lawrence knew there were many kinds of faith in the world. There were some who worshipped large rocks or giant trees and even springs of water, and there were those who revered eagles, bears, and even fish. Wolves were just as popular as eagles.

He knew the reason why Aram and Holo, who had found the body, pretended they had not noticed it.

And the reason why Holo the worrywart was afraid it might lead to bigger problems.

They could tell that it would lead to an uproar if they suspected a heretic who worshipped wolves had snuck their way into the mountain.

“But this is not enough for us to say anything. What’s inside this bag is...”

After a quick prayer, the abbot carefully reached out to the bag the body

held. He moved the arm away like a dried branch, and when he opened up the hemp rucksack, a large centipede slithered out from inside.

“Apologies. You were sleeping, weren’t you?”

The abbot did not seem at all bothered, and after watching the insect exit, he pulled out the bag’s contents. What came out was a heavy-looking metallic rod. It was not covered in any moss, nor had it lost its original shine. It appeared to be the right size to be a handle for a hand ax, and when the abbot held it aloft, the rod looked like the base for a fancy candlestick.

However, Lawrence recognized the object, and it wasn’t unknown to the abbot, either.

“Hmm.”

His sigh was more relieved than bewildered or puzzled.

“It does not seem this will become a heretical problem.”

The abbot then handed the item to Lawrence. It was heavy and cold.

Holo’s eyes widened as she stared hard at it.

It was the second time in his life he had held an object like this.

“Is this...a coin embosser?”

“The crest is of a wolf.”

The abbot reached out to the body and wiped the face of the pendant that hung from its neck.

Under the layers of dust appeared a wolf design.

“’Tis also all over his clothes.”

Holo murmured, and Lawrence finally noticed them as well.

What he thought were smudges all over the body’s clothes and even rucksack were images of wolves, faded over the years and months.

“There’s also...Ah, I knew it. It’s a seal.”

It was a metallic piece small enough to rest in his palm, and engraved on the finger rests were images of wolves.

“And this must be for branding cargo. A double-headed wolf is quite an extravagant design.”

Engraved on the square piece of metal, about as big as an adult’s hand, was a design of a single wolf with two heads. Holo shrunk away from the unfamiliar, eerie image.

But there was a precise reason for that reaction.

“A country destroyed in a war long ago...perhaps?”

“If not, then someone who tried to establish their house in a new land during the time when war ravaged the land and faded away in the midst of their dream. Seeing how he’s alone, he must have been a retainer who escaped the battles and headed north to fulfill his lord’s last wish...He must be from my grandfather’s time. A crest featuring a double-headed beast is too much for this day and age.”

Holo, full of doubt, turned to Lawrence, who spoke to her.

“This is a crest following the style of those originating from old empires.”

The abbot also found the copy of the scripture in the rucksack, and he prayed sincerely to the body’s faith.

“The wolf, especially, is evidence of power and a good harvest, so it is used often. I don’t quite recall when it was, but remember when I made a wolf coin into a necklace for you?”

Those kinds of coins also supposedly kept wolves away, so travelers liked them.

“Two heads facing left and right means its piercing gaze reaches all the way from east to west in its large territory. Nowadays, ever since territories started being divided into smaller pieces and the dream of a world to one’s own is no longer possible, it’s a design that only countries with a long history can use.”

Holo nodded meekly, but Lawrence noticed something else as he stared intently at the design.

Upon closer inspection, it was not symmetrical, and the depths of the faces carved on either side were different as well.

“This...The first design was squashed, and he carved a new one. Which means...”

The designs that filled the page of parchment were the remnants of this nameless artisan’s dreams, with no one to talk to in this cave.

When Lawrence told Holo this, she narrowed her eyes sadly and stared at the deceased artisan. Her hand gripped his arm even harder from the grief of losing someone with an affinity to wolves.

Meanwhile, the abbot finished his prayer and stood slowly.

“It must have been divine guidance that he perished here and we found him. Let us find out where this crest is from just to be sure, then give him a respectful burial.”

“Yes.”

This was the abbot who loved alcohol and meat and came to Lawrence with a favor to hastily avoid any criticism of amassing too much wealth in his monastery.

However, his next line appeared to be quite sincere.

“Be that as it may, it is cold here. Let us bury him in the Nyohhira cemetery and thaw his frozen soul.”

They crawled out of the cave, explained the gist of the situation to Aram and the others who had been anxiously waiting for a report, then called it a day.

In the end, through Abbot Harivel’s connections with guests in other bathhouses, they identified the dead man as someone from a small country that was destroyed a mere fifty years ago. An elderly landlord who had spent almost a month traveling far from the south knew the crest.

He looked terribly wistful and spoke of a time when war ravaged the world in a way that was impossible to imagine now.

Even after the fighting had died down, these sorts of war mementos were found in sheds and out in village fields all over the place. Among them were restored houses, whose faint rays of hope had come true, but many of their origins were simply lost in the flow of time.

After thoroughly washed and polished the branding iron they brought back from the cave, bringing it into the sunlight showed clearly that, just as Lawrence thought, the old design had not been entirely erased.

Many people long ago had grand dreams of ruling an entire empire.

Either way, since the traveler's origin turned out to not be a source of trouble, Lawrence relayed the situation to the other bathhouse owners and suggested they bury the body in the village's graveyard—but that was exactly what became a problem.

“What on earth are you talking about?! Our monastery is in the Schten region, from which the traveler fled, and boasts a history of two hundred and seventy years—”

“If we are talking about history, then our church is descendant of Saint Imodes and is actually six hundred and twenty—”

“Please hold on for a second. The scripture the traveler had was an edition with Professor Pearson's annotations, and it is clear he belonged to the Ridol school! So it would be most appropriate if we, the Millay Monastery, offer relief to the traveler's soul—” “What sophistry!” “How dare you!” “What did you say?!”

The storage room that they also used as a meeting place for assemblies fell into utter mayhem as they debated who would preside over the traveler's funeral. High-ranking clergymen from all over the world gathered in the village of Nyohhira, after all. A hundred ship captains would always end up arguing if there was only one boat. It was as though cows and goats and sheep had all been stuffed together in one room, with white beards and black beards, bald heads glinting from greasy sweat in anger, arms as skinny as dried twigs flailing about, and protruding stomachs knocking over tables.

Once the fighting bathhouse masters started grabbing the collars of one another's clothes, fully armored knights even wearing metal helms pulled them off each other, tired of it all.

The important guests, sitting on crimson-cushioned chairs, watching the whole thing unfold with sharp gazes, were the lords who supported the clergymen. Since they were, at the very least, donating to the churches and

monasteries in their own territory, they believed the authority of the clergymen they supported was a direct display of their own authority's greatness. Not only that, but the man who had perished in the cave had lived in a time of war, with faith and loyalty in his heart, and died acting out a dream—a war hero.

The question of who would offer solace to this man's soul was not one that could be compromised on in Nyohhira, where many of high status gathered.

In the corner of the meeting room, Lawrence gazed at the design and let slip a sigh.

He quickly closed his mouth so that he would not be reprimanded, but he heard a soft chuckle from beside him.

"It is truly foolish."

The one who said that was the old landlord who had told them who the traveler really was. Though he was not one of Lawrence's guests, he had rented out Spice and Wolf's famous grotto bath a number of times, so he knew his face.

"He lived in a time of war. I think we should just copy what they did back then."

"In a time of war?"

Lawrence had acquaintances who were mercenaries, but they preferred to avoid war since it got in the way of their trade. He did not know much about it.

"Yes. On the battlefield without any priests, you just bury the remains and sprinkle alcohol over them, or if they were a nondrinker, then bury them with their favorite food. Tedious prayer and who conducted the ceremony were of no importance."

It seemed easy enough for the rules of the battlefield, where practicality was key.

He was a bald, skinny, and aging lord, but Lawrence could easily imagine him sprinkling ale over a buried companion with sword in hand.

"But the war is over, and those who can control words act as they please. Perhaps it's proof of peace, but..."

The old lord sighed, too, then winked at his attendant who helped him to his feet.

“By the way, is that grotto bath of yours open?”

“Hmm? Oh yes, since everyone is taking part in this chaos.”

“Wonderful. I want to use it later.”

“Sure thing. I will see you soon.”

Lawrence dipped his head respectfully and watched the old lord walk off.

Then, knowing it would be a waste of time to stick around, he left.

Since not everyone could fit inside the meeting room, a dense crowd stood outside trying to peer through the open doors. Beyond them was a storyteller animatedly conveying what was going on inside to another crowd of guests enjoying the tale.

Lawrence sighed at the spectacle when someone tugged on his clothes, and he turned around.

There was Holo, a hood pulled low over her face, looking bored.

“Oh, perfect timing. I was just on my way back to the bathhouse.”

Holo nodded briefly and quickly began walking off. She was acting like a child dragged off to church in the middle of their playtime, but it was she who had wanted to see what was going on and followed him in the first place.

Though she typically walked beside him, at the moment she was a few steps ahead. Times like these usually meant she was grumpy, and if she was acting by the book, then it meant she was cranky from having been left alone.

However, she had also said she would wait outside, so the problem clearly lay elsewhere.

“Don’t worry about that.”

As they traveled up the sloping road, Lawrence spoke once the noise from the meeting room grew distant and they could hear the faint sounds of easy music coming from the bathhouses along the way.

“About what?”

Holo responded without turning back, and Lawrence smiled bitterly.

“That commotion isn’t your fault.”

Once he had asked the details of when they found the traveler’s body, apparently both Holo and Aram had used their wolf noses to sniff it out. They could have simply ignored the body, but they feared it might have been someone who had gotten lost so they went to check...And since it carried all sorts of wolf-related items, they were unable to just pretend they had not seen it.

And so, while it had not become a heretical problem, it did lead to a big scuffle among the guests.

The honest Aram was of course apologetic for causing trouble, and Holo, too, must have felt somewhat responsible since these past few days she seemed down and somewhat restless.

“I care not for the quarrels of those bearded ones.”

However, Holo spoke stubbornly. Lawrence wanted to ask her why she wanted to go watch them shouting at one another, but he had a feeling she would get angry with him if he did. Perhaps it was because of her pride as the self-styled wisewolf, ruler of the forests, but in any case, Holo was sensitive and prone to bouts of loneliness, so he could not let her alone.

While it could be said she was difficult, Lawrence thought about how she opened herself up to only him, and that truly made him happy.

Or perhaps it was his difficult merchant’s personality, which got him fired up at every troublesome customer’s order.

“But are *you* all right?”

Holo glanced back at him over her shoulder as she asked him.

“Me?”

Lawrence replied blankly, making Holo’s face twist into a scowl.

“That thing you had thought of—’twould not be possible at this rate, no?”

They were finally on the same page. Holo was talking about the fake funeral

that Lawrence had come up with.

“Probably not...If we decided to go through with the fake funeral as a town event, the guests would surely start fighting over who would get to preside over it. Watching all that makes me think, *Yeah, I don't think we can do it.*”

Since there were few visitors when they did a trial run, there had not been any problems. But once it became a village event, the priest who stood speaking before the coffin would become the very face of Nyohhira.

He could imagine the old men rushing forth, announcing their own qualifications.

But in that case, was this what Holo was the most worried about? Just as Lawrence had come up with the idea of an event, contributed to the village, and was excited about being recognized by his fellow villagers, though it was an accident, she had made it all for naught...

That did sound just like a mental trap she tended to fall into, but Lawrence did not think that was the case.

“But about that, this is good news, in a way.”

Holo gave him a frown, as though telling him to quit the flimsy consolations.

“It's true. Because I hadn't the foggiest idea that the clergy would be so vain and hardheaded. Imagine what would happen if we innocently announced our fake funeral without experiencing this. Even more people would be keeping their eyes on us.”

Holo stayed a few steps ahead of him as usual and responded, “And?”

“See, then we couldn't just simply cancel our plans. If all the guests got into a huge, uncontrollable fight because of my ideas, then who would be taking responsibility? I would. I wouldn't be a member of the village, then—I'd be on a bed of thorns. You saved me. Thank you.”

Lawrence beamed earnestly, and she slowed her pace, drawing closer to him.

“And the fake funeral was also meant for collecting coins, but now we know that was totally irrelevant.”

Lawrence spoke as if to himself. It was less of a consolation for Holo and more

of a complaint.

“Funerals come with donations and votives, so we thought we could gently coax coins out of the guests, but it’s usually the priest leading the ceremony who takes it all. If we don’t have someone from the village acting as priest, then the guest priest who leads it will collect the money. Of course, the other clergy won’t stay quiet. That is a big reason why they were arguing so much at the meeting, even if that isn’t the only reason.”

Lawrence’s sigh was genuine.

“Honestly, my get-rich senses have dulled since I’ve stopped peddling.”

Holo was still facing away from him, but he could tell from the air about her that she was listening.

Lawrence then spoke, not to soothe Holo, but to soothe himself.

“Once again, I came up with a way to get rich quick and almost fell into an unavoidable trap. I managed to avoid that only because I gave offerings of good meat and alcohol often.”

When he finished his sentence, Holo turned around and whapped him on the arm.

“Do not make such a fool of me. I have not provided you any wisdom.”

“But it’s your job as a goddess to bring me happiness, isn’t it?”

He took Holo’s hand and kissed the back of it.

But his smile slowly vanished because her expression remained sullen.

“...Hey. This commotion isn’t your fault, and no one has ever told me that I’ve brought unnecessary outside trouble into the village. And this time, we escaped without rustling too many feathers.”

When they were traveling when he was a merchant, they were constantly blamed for the bad things that happened to occur in the villages they visited. Holo was especially sensitive to that sort of atmosphere for her own safety.

And now, there was not a whiff of disquiet in the air, and since the guests were all taking part in the commotion, the masters were actually rather happy

for the empty bathhouses.

It was a short break in an otherwise busy season.

“I, too, know this.”

Lawrence wanted to ask her why she was so upset.

But he held his tongue when he saw her, still a few steps ahead, turn back to him, on the verge of tears.

“...Holo?”

Lawrence called her name, his apprehension piquing quicker than his surprise.

What was Holo worried about?

Was Holo disappointed that he did not know?

It was just after his heart began to beat faster in a panic in all his doubts.

She did not stop walking but instead turned on her heel like a rabbit and embraced Lawrence.

“Oof!”

He almost fell backward, but he managed to catch her in his arms.

Holo buried her face into Lawrence’s chest, and the arms wrapped around him held him firmly.

He was bewildered, not sure what it might be, and as he searched for something to say he could hear Holo’s muffled voice.

“You are here, right?”

“Huh?”

Holo held him even tighter and repeated herself.

“Is the one here the real you?”

“...”

Holo looked straight up at him, her expression seemed as if it would be swallowed up by a cloud of anxiety.

“You...”

Lawrence murmured, and after a brief expression of shock, Holo buried her face in his chest again.

At that moment, a familiar merchant who often came to the village passed by, clearly pretending not to look at them.

Though Lawrence predicted wild rumors would undoubtedly start flying around soon, what was important to him now was Holo.

“Hey, let’s go over there. People pass this way.”

There was still a bit of distance until the bathhouse, but there was a perfect stump in a thicket beside the road. He led Holo by the hand, and they both sat down on it. And as they gazed out onto the village, Lawrence recalled that they had done this when he was a traveling merchant.

The awkward make up after a fight, or when their travels were hindered for many days in the woods by the depressing, rainy days, or...

The arrogant princess clung to Lawrence from his side as she sniffled.

Lawrence wrapped his arm around his shoulders and thought.

“Is the one here the real you?” she had asked.

He lightly patted her on the back and sighed, tired.

The third reason Holo acted like this.

She had a bad dream.

“I get it now. You thought the corpse in that cave might be me, right?”

Holo’s body shivered. It seemed as though he was right.

Holo would live for centuries, and the years and decades could pass as she dozed. And so the span of a human life must be like a fleeting dream, and even Lawrence dwelled on this sometimes. He wondered if his blissful days were just a reverie and his real self was napping alone in the back of a wagon.

On top of that, the body they found in the cave was unmistakably that of a traveler. He gripped in his hands parchment filled with pictures of wolves.

It was entirely possible that Holo, who always overthought the strangest things, considered it some sort of sign.

If that were the case, then he could understand why she wore the expression she did when she came to call on him in the bathhouse.

“We never change.”

Lawrence spoke with a smile, and Holo looked up to glare at him with sharp eyes. Her cheeks were still damp with tears, and her lips twisted in an odd shape.

“The answer is simple. The biggest reason you got so scared is that embosser, isn’t it?”

Holo’s eyes widened, and Lawrence smiled wryly.

“Come on, trust me a little.”

Even if she called him a blockhead, being with Holo for so long let him generally understand her thoughts.

However, her expression suddenly turned sour and she whispered, “Fool.”

“It’s okay. We ran around the northlands while carrying an embosser with a sun on it, but it all turned out okay in the end. We definitely did not escape into a cave after a failure and end up dead in there.”

Tears welled up again in Holo’s eyes, and she looked down.

But the possibility had certainly been there. That was how dangerous that adventure had been.

It was entirely possible that had they failed in their quest of issuing the Debau Company silver, he would have ended up like that traveler.

Without any place to go, nowhere to get help, he would have lived in a cave with Holo and slowly passed away. Holo would surely have stayed by his dead body, long enough that she would forget why she was there. In the end, the boundary of the dreams she saw as she dozed would slowly disappear, and she would mistakenly believe the world of her dreams was reality.

It was all entirely possible.

“That never happened. We came out fine.”

It was thanks to luck and Holo.

He pressed his lips against her temple and inhaled her scent.

It was a nostalgic scent of dried wheat, undoubtedly her own.

“You went to go see the commotion at the meeting room to make sure the name of the dead traveler wasn’t Kraft Lawrence, didn’t you?”

Holo hesitated for a few moments, then with her head still down, she nodded.

“...”

That’s silly, Lawrence almost said, but his words faltered.

Holo was shivering slightly in his arms.

The time they would live was different, which meant the worlds they lived in differed more fundamentally than he could ever imagine.

Holo knew this and tried to pull back many times.

Since he was the one who held on to her hand and never let go, he had the responsibility to make her happy.

Lawrence reconsidered this and looked off into the distance. He wondered what he could do now. He could embrace her, kiss her, and drink warm mead before the fire with her at any time. He needed something that would convince himself that he could make Holo happy because it was him.

As he gazed out on the village from the thicket, he thought. If only he could enter her dreams and erase all her nightmares from corner to corner. Just as he thought about that, it dawned on him.

“Oh, I guess we could do that.”

Holo flinched in his arms.

Lawrence roughly mussed her hair.

“Hey, Holo?”

He spoke as though he was going to ask her on a stroll, so of course she looked up.

“I can’t guarantee this isn’t a dream, but...”

Holo’s brow drooped nervously when he said that, but he wrapped his arm

around her shoulder and swept one hand under her knees, sweeping her up like a new bride.

Holo's eyes were wide in surprise.

"If this is a dream, then let's make it a good one."

She either sniffed, or she held her breath. Holo moved her throat and spoke in a hoarse voice.

"What are you...?"

"It's simple."

He kissed the corner of her eye and spoke.

"Let's bury the bad stuff."



Though it was summer, the temperatures at night plummeted due to the moisture coming from the trees, and exhaling produced a white haze.

"You...truly are a fool..."

Holo was in her wolf form, looking unusually meek as she spoke.

Lawrence rustled the fur at the base of her neck and readjusted the spade on his shoulder.

"Recklessness like this isn't too bad once in a while, no?"

"..."

It seemed she could make an annoyed half smile even as a wolf.

"Hmph. You fool."

As she jabbed his head with her nose, Lawrence smiled when he saw how happily her tail was wagging.

"Well, take care of the house while we're gone."

Aram, who was currently staying in Lawrence's bathhouse due to the commotion in town, and his little sister, Selim, could not help but notice when Holo turned into her wolf form. As the two of them peeked out from the bathhouse to see what she and Lawrence were up to, he called out to them.

They both seemed to shrink back and nod in acknowledgment.

“Let’s go, then.”

“Mm.”

Holo and Lawrence were headed to the cave.

Holo was plagued by anxiety because that traveler, who gripped a piece of parchment filled with pictures of wolves and held an embosser engraved with a wolf, was in that cave.

So with their own hands, they would just fill the hole. Even if this was a dream, all they had to do was look away from whatever it was that was trying to wake her from something so pleasant.

The old Holo might have despised such a groundless argument. In searching for conviction, she might not have wanted to accept such simple methods. But the months and days had passed, and their relationship had changed.

Lawrence chased Holo’s tail like a child as she walked a step ahead of him and led the way. The woods at night never typically felt like the place for the living, but he was not frightened when he was with Holo.

He walked along in such high spirits that he was unable to stop himself when her tail grew closer, and his head became buried in fur.

“Bwuh, hey, Hol—”

His words, along with his head, were completely smothered by her tail.

“Someone is here.”

Holo’s whisper was like a growl in the back of her throat.

Lawrence kept silent, slipped out from the fur of her tail, and strained his eyes.

It was rather far away, but beyond the trees, he could see a small light.



"It seems...we were not the only foolish ones."

"What do you mean?"

Lawrence asked, and Holo sneered, revealing a fang.

"Perhaps a clash of those who have decided to use force when the dispute did not come to a settlement."

Lawrence had nothing else to say and only smiled, exasperated.

"What shall we do? Jump out and announce the arrival of an emissary of the forest?"

Holo lowered her head, rubbing the spot above her eyes against Lawrence's body, fawning on him.

She was telling him to be as foolish as he wished.

Lawrence stroked her fuzzy face as he groaned in thought.

"That would be funny, but...if we did that, it might become another miracle site."

"So no?"

"Those guys yelling over there would definitely say that since they saw the miracle with their own eyes, they deserve to manage it. Absolutely. There would be more problems."

"Mmh..."

Holo waved her tail discontentedly.

"But I never thought there would be so many people who wanted to carry the body away in the middle of the night...Sheesh, it'll take time before we can bury him."

Holo's large eyes blinked slowly, then narrowed.

"If he has a soul or whatnot, then why not ask it directly?"

"Sure, that would make things much faster," Lawrence agreed with a laugh but suddenly stopped. "Directly...to his soul?"

"...What, are you saying your ears are better than mine?"

Holo mischievously tilted her head to try and cover Lawrence with her large ears, which were big enough to shelter a child from the rain. He felt as if he had been turned into a mouse and dodged her prank, his thoughts turning over in his mind.

“No...Do we not totally understand the traveler’s wishes?”

“Hmm?”

“In that case...Umm...”

Perhaps it was his age, but his brain was not working as well as it should. It stopped just as everything was about to come together.

Holo watched him intently, then after glancing at the cave, she turned back to face him.

“What, will you hammer out coin or something of the sort?”

That was what the traveler dreamed of. Minting coin was a symbol of a territorial lord’s authority.

“Sure, but why do you think we worried so much over the coin problem?”

Holo pulled back slightly and narrowed her eyes like a wolf watching her prey.

“...I am Holo the Wisewolf. Do not hold me cheap. If we were simply to produce our own coin, things would grow complicated in a question of territory, would it not?”

“Exactly. Not only that, but we have no source material.”

“Then melt down other coin.”

“Huh. You sure know a lot.”

“...”

Holo jabbed him with her nose.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

Lawrence apologized, and Holo sniffed.

“What a fool. And there is yet another problem.”

“Hmm?”

“You were told this often, no?”

Lawrence looked up at Holo, looming over him. He spread his arms wide as if seeking an oracle and shrugged.

“No one may bring money into the next world. How would we tell that pitiful traveler that his dreams came true? Shall we copy the customs of the war, like that old bald one said? Shall we bury the coins—?”

It was at that moment when Lawrence clearly saw the light in the dark forest.

“That’s it!”

Then the second he found himself shouting, something giant pushed him down.

It was Holo’s palm, and Holo herself crouched down as she looked toward the light.

“You fool!”

“...Sorry...”

They remained stock-still for a few moments, but luckily, they did not seem to have been noticed.

“And? What is it you have thought of?”

Holo lay on her belly and looked at Lawrence with exasperated eyes.

Those were the eyes of a tired spouse who had dealt with her stupid partner the countless times they got into trouble whenever he thought of a way to make money.

And the half smile on her lips was excitement to see what sort of stupid idea he had in mind this time.

Lawrence told her his plan, and Holo wagged her tail happily.

What he came up with was, of course, bread drawn by himself, so he needed the appropriate skill to bring it to life. Lawrence finished laying the groundwork for this and that and wrapped up his preparations.

The next morning, he headed to the ever-chaotic meeting room.

“That is why, like I said before—”

“If you do not recognize this, then we—”

“If you keep waving those empty arguments around, your faith—”

As arguments flew about tirelessly, Lawrence and the others parted the crowd and continued farther into the room.

The spectators and the lords and their servants all looked at Lawrence and the others with odd gazes.

But no one tried to stop their march as the old lord stood at the front of their procession.

“What we really should be looking for now is salvation for the lamb’s soul—”

As a priest spoke, froth spewing from his mouth, the old lord raised his longsword up high, then slammed it down along with the sheath onto the long table. The red-faced men, like honking geese in a swamp, craned their necks and fell silent.

“Indeed, what we should be looking for is salvation for his soul.”

When the lord spoke, one priest, who looked as if he had swallowed a rock, boldly opened his mouth.

“...That is why that method...”

“That method?”

The priest who would call himself a servant from God clammed up when glared at by a veteran from an ancient battlefield.

The landlord was old enough that to him, even the white-bearded ones looked like his sons or grandsons.

“We know that.”

The elderly landlord announced, and silence fell over the crowded meeting room.

“That man lived in his dreams and died in them. Then what else is there besides the reality of his dreams?”

He then took out the coin embosser from his pocket.

“N-no, that’s bad!”

A middle-aged lord, sitting on a crimson-cushioned chair, cried in surprise.

“Hold your temper! That’s what would be bad!”

A different lord hurriedly stopped him. While they had not minded the clergy exchanging blows with one another, they went pale at the sight of the embosser.

Everyone understood that the problem grew even bigger once the old landlord had pulled out the embosser.

“Hmm? And what are you so afraid of? What do you think I would do with this?”

The battle-seasoned old lord smiled slyly like a fox. The flustered lords and priests seemed to then finally notice Lawrence and the others by his side.

“What, do you...? Wait, are those the bathhouse owners? Are you all trying to bring disaster to this village?”

“Nonsense.”

The one who answered was the assembly chair, who had agreed with Lawrence’s plan and lent a hand for the sake of the village’s peace. He owned and ran one of the older bathhouses.

“We wish nothing more from our esteemed guests than to enjoy their time in Nyohhira. For that, we wish to help the traveler in question.”

“And that is the problem. You want to make coins because of the recent coin situation, don’t you? It’s stupid to think you’re killing two birds with one stone. Don’t think you can so easily print money like the Debau Company.”

The answer was flustered, as though implying just thinking about it was a sin, but the old lord responded.

He waved the embosser about in his hand, as though swatting away a fly.

“Who said we would be making coins? We are earnest servants of God. And so by his teachings, we will be making true the dreams of the departed.”

“Wait, but...‘The dreams of the departed’? That’s...”

The old lord responded clearly to the faltering priest.

“Of course—using this embosser and branding iron, we will spread things engraved with his house’s seal. There is no doubt he would be happy if everyone used things made with these tools.”

The youngest generation of landlords were visibly angry when they heard the old lord’s response. They, too, had earned achievements as full-fledged lords, after all.

“And that is what we’re saying the problem is. What would you use a coin embosser for if not for coin? Are you planning to use it as a stick to knead bread?”

Several indignant voices rose up in agreement.

“Well, you’re not too far off.”

The erupting landlords’ spirits were dampened as the old lord grinned.

On the veteran’s signal, Lawrence and the others pulled back the coverings on the baskets they held.

“Wh-what’s—?”

The sweet smell of butter suddenly wafted through the meeting room.

“I do not know much about food, but according to Sir Lawrence here, who has traveled throughout the world, he said it is hard tack, a specialty of smaller villages. We created these with that in mind.”

Lawrence walked before the lords with basket in hand and passed out the contents one by one.

“This is...unleavened bread?”

“No, this is not just unleavened bread. Is it a cookie?”

“Hmm...It’s different from the cookies in the south...”

The rich lords of course were knowledgeable when it came to food. It was lightly baked bread dough made with plenty of eggs and butter.

And they realized immediately what the design on the bread meant.

“Oh! It’s a bread coin, made in the form of the embosser!

“No lord will complain about this, will they?”

“We do not have a bakers’ association in our village, after all.”

The chair added a few more words of his own.

“And this is also one of the few dreams of former merchant Sir Lawrence, and I’m sure everyone has thought of it once.”

After the mischievous addendum, Lawrence continued along the same line of thought.

“I always think about eating my fill of coins.”

Those who were here had distinguished and significant amounts of wealth. Dark, troubled grins slipped from their lips, though not from anger.

Then the old lord spoke.

“I once walked upon the stage of war, and once chased after those who lived in dreams. We lacked food and drink on the battlefield, and God’s protection was nowhere to be seen. Many years prior, the war priest lost the ability to walk in the mountains and never recovered. We never had the luxury of asking for the bodies of our friends to be buried with prayer. All we could do was dig a hole and bury him, sprinkle alcohol on him, or place a piece of jerky in the stead of a grave marker.”

When they heard his words, those who looked to be reputed for their battle stories listened with stern expressions, because this was none other than a battle story.

“As one who lived through that era, I believe that making the departed’s last wish come true would be an offering for his new journey.”

All the lords got down from their chairs and bowed on one knee to show their allegiance.

At this point, the priests could not stay obstinate, either. If they did not maintain good relationships with the lords, it would not turn out well for them

once they returned home.

There was a great moment of silence as the old lord waited for protests from the priests.

Then, once he saw that they all had lowered their eyes, he spoke.

“In the ways of the battlefield, I will bury this man like he was my friend. You, the holy men...”

The lambs of God raised their eyes.

“Pray for the bread coins buried in his grave, so that they may reach heaven.”

The priests all exchanged glances.

It was not about who was more important than whom.

Since no one knew whose prayer would send the bread coins to heaven, there would be no arguments over appearance and pride.

“Then...well...”

Listening to the mumbled voices of agreement, the old lord nodded.

“Then this conversation is over! Take action!”

When he slammed his hand on the table, everyone stood up straight.

With that, the sudden commotion in Nyohhira concluded.

The company carrying the coffin went in droves to the cave where the traveler slept. It looked as though a few of the bathhouse masters went along with them, but Lawrence, who had stayed up all night, only watched them off.

He had proposed his idea to the old lord yesterday, and after he received enthusiastic support, they went around to each bathhouse in the village with their story. That itself took quite a bit of time, but he also had to wake up the kitchen attendant, Hanna, after enlisting Aram and Selim to help knead the dough. They heated up the oven as well as the seal, branding iron, and the embosser, then finished making the lightly baked bread as dawn broke.

Exhaustion bore heavily on his shoulders and back, and the backs of his eyes stung.

Lawrence thought about how he could have conducted trade for three days straight without a wink of sleep when he was young and smiled wryly.

Once the majority of the people had headed out toward the mountain, he finally spoke.

“Do you want to go back to the bathhouse?”

Holo, who had come to watch what was going on at the meeting hall, nodded shortly. They clasped hands, and Holo began to scratch away at the dough that clung to his fingers no matter how many times he washed them.

“Hey, that hurts.”

Holo did not respond, concentrating as she scratched away at the dough stuck to his fingernails.

“...Do you want to go see the burial?”

She paused.

After a few paces, she started scratching at him again.

“No.”

She spoke like a sulking little girl.

“Right. The disturbance stays safely underground.”

Holo huffed as if she were telling him the only reason she stopped scraping at his fingers was because she was bored.

They walked silently through the village of Nyohhira, its typically lively streets now quiet and empty. It was almost as if all that merrymaking had just been a dream.

“Are you afraid to sleep?”

When he asked that, Holo’s body froze, and she stopped in her tracks.

There was no other reason for her to refrain from drinking and going to sleep after spending the whole night kneading dough.

If she fell asleep, she might wake up from this dream.

That terrified her, so she accompanied Lawrence.

There was a hint of a smile on his face as he watched her. He took a step out in front of her and felt around in his breast pocket.

He pulled out a thin piece of bread, the design of a wolf burned onto it.

“Here.”

Lawrence held it out to Holo’s mouth, but she turned away, grimacing.

He shrugged, broke it in half, and ate it himself.

“Take the rest.”

He placed a piece of the bread in the pouch stuffed with wheat that hung from Holo’s neck. She had given the old pouch of wheat to Myuri, so this was a new one.

Holo did not resist, but she glanced at him, wondering what he was up to.

“With this, if you wake up alone, in some wheat field far away—”

Holo’s eyes opened wide mid-sentence, astonished.

Exasperated, Lawrence smiled as he held both of her cheeks in his hands.

“If that happens, just follow the scent of this bread. That is where you’ll find me.”

Holo stared up at Lawrence, and when he smiled, tears poured from her eyes.

Then finally, she must have remembered how she called herself the wisewolf.

Holo, who had wolf ears and a tail the same color as her flaxen hair, took a deep breath, then forced herself to smile.

“Then make it so it is not bread but spice.”

“Because that makes food more delicious?”

Then, after a burst of laughter, Holo clung to Lawrence.

Lawrence embraced her slender frame and spoke.

“Let’s head back to the bathhouse now. The bathhouse you and I created.”

As her tail whipped back and forth, Holo nodded and gripped Lawrence’s hand. This time, she no longer held it as if she had something else to say.

The two walked together.

It was the short Nyohhira summer.

Above them hung a bright blue sky that seemed like it might swallow them whole.

HARVEST AUTUMN
AND WOLF



HARVEST AUTUMN AND WOLF

There was a quiet rustling sound, and Lawrence woke up.

For a moment, he reassured himself there was no way it could be snow. Though the summers passed by quickly in Nyohhira, it was still much too early.

As his vision cleared, he saw Holo brushing her tail.

“That sound...”

Once it started snowing, work in the bathhouse would suddenly grow busy. Lawrence breathed a sigh of relief and let his strained neck relax.

It was just after the beginning of autumn, and the summer guests had gone home. There was still some time to prepare for winter, a precious part of year when he was allowed to fall back asleep.

“Make sure you throw out the shed hairs...”

Lawrence said, and as he pulled the blanket up to his shoulders, he turned away from Holo.

It was a time when he would give in to his bubbling drowsiness so that it might soothe the year’s fatigue.

“Oh.”

A pile of fur was placed on his face. Of course, it was not rabbit fur meant for keeping him warm.

There was no doubting its beautiful lay, but there was a different character about it compared to that of deer or rabbits or other animals that nibbled on grass and nuts. Yet, it was not rough like that of a fox, nor stiff like that of a bear.

It was dignified and smooth, fur that could slip through the wilderness like wind—the pelt of a wolf.

Although he usually praised and admired it, now it was just getting in the way of his sleep.

“Urgh...What...?”

He swatted it away rather cruelly, and this time, Holo slapped him across the cheek.

“Did you not say we would go collect chestnuts today?”

“We can go at noon...”

It was ingrained in his body that if he swatted not just her tail but also her hand away, Holo would get angry.

Almost unconsciously Lawrence gripped the hand on his cheek, wrapped his fingers around it, and went in for the kiss...but just as he was pulling it toward him, he lost out to his sleepiness and began to snore.

Holo, now alone, sighed, her tail swishing back and forth.

“You fool.”

With a murmur, she too slipped under the covers and clung to Lawrence’s back.

It was the beginning of autumn.

The whole of Nyohhira was silent, a calm air drifting through the morning.

Lawrence left messages for Hanna, who ran the kitchen, and Selim, who, despite having only been at the bathhouse for less than a year, could be depended on for anything from household chores to bookkeeping. He finally left the bathhouse after having fallen back asleep countless times, and by now it was almost noon. To make things worse, the days were short in Nyohhira, so it could grow dark at any time.

Lawrence shouldered a sack stuffed with bread and roasted, cured meats for lunch, as well as a folding bag for the nuts and mushrooms he collected plus waterskins for the water and wine they would drink along the way.

He dressed like this when he was once a peddling merchant, but Holo was unburdened as she walked ahead along the road, taunting a dragonfly with a

stick she found.

“Don’t you think this is unfair?”

Lawrence spoke as he adjusted the luggage, while Holo blankly stared back.

“What is?”

She feigned such innocence that Lawrence sighed and responded, “Nothing.”

Holo walked through the forest so lightly that it almost seemed as though her slender frame had sprouted wings. Although she resembled a young girl around the age of ten, she was actually the avatar of a wolf that resided in wheat and would live for hundreds of years, so she was adept at trekking through the mountains.

Not only that, she had wolf ears and a tail, and her small body concealed the power of a giant wolf. She would occasionally stop and sniff and, without turning back toward Lawrence, poke at tree roots with her stick or use it to point at things.

Like the faithful manservant he was, Lawrence would take a look at where she pointed and typically find grand patches of mushrooms. Occasionally there would be a field mouse nest, its inhabitants peering up at them nervously from their hole. He apologized for Holo’s bad behavior and left them a piece of mushroom.

“You’re in a good mood today.”

Lawrence spoke cheerfully, opening up one of the bags he carried as he plucked a mushroom.

She must have felt more open since her wolf ears and tail were now exposed, which she usually kept cramped and hidden under a bandanna or sash as others were watching in the bathhouse. There were many guests during the summer and Holo had quite a bit of her own work. Then this year, in the middle of their work, they found the body of a traveler who had gotten lost in this land so long ago and perished, which had also caused a bit of an uproar. The whole commotion was now over, and she seemed to be enjoying the crisp, clear autumn weather from the bottom of her heart.

Lawrence, too, felt at ease.

In a typical year, their only daughter, Myuri, would have been with them. Myuri, as innocent as the sun itself, acted just like a wolf pup when she entered the forest. She never looked straight ahead as she rushed around, tumbling or running into things, and always laughed out loud. There were more than one or two times that she had put a poisonous mushroom in her mouth as a test of her own courage.

This year they were not being kept in suspense over Myuri's barbarous deeds, so they could even lazily gaze at the squirrels sitting atop a tree branch, nibbling on a nut, as they walked by.

But Lawrence loved the unbearable liveliness.

It had been over six months since his only daughter, Myuri, left on a journey with Col, whom she looked up to as an older brother. Lawrence wondered if he was concerned about the two not just because of simple parental affection but because he depended so deeply on the liveliness that was now gone.

And so there was a good reason Holo taunted Lawrence for being a fool when she saw him worrying over Myuri, reading and rereading the letters she sent him.

Because the reason Holo seemed so oddly bright as she ran ahead on the path was likely to bury these quiet, empty spaces.

"...No, am I overestimating her?"

On the road ahead of him, Holo was pretending to hunt snakes with a young fox that must have just gained its independence. There were fallen leaves stuck to her vaunted tail, and she was cackling delightfully.

"Oof."

He should have expected it, but with Holo's guidance, who knew the mountains around Nyohhira extremely well, down to the location of every mousehole, and even though she played as she walked, the bags he brought were soon stuffed full. He might find himself exhausted before they came to where the chestnut trees grew.

Lawrence called for an early break, and like a spirit of the forest, Holo pointed farther into the woods.

There was an old, fallen tree and a sunny clearing. When he sat down on the old tree, on which grew a single flower of a slim stem and light pink petals, and let down his bags, they already had enough mushrooms to sell.

“Here, ’tis water.”

As he sat on the felled tree preparing for lunch, Holo appeared, holding a waterskin.

She must have retrieved fresh water from a stream somewhere.

“Oh, thanks. I’m getting food ready, so just hold on a sec.”

“Mm. With plenty of meat, of course.”

Her voice contained not even a hint of mischief. She spoke as she stood by Lawrence, her narrowed eyes blissfully gazing at the trees swaying in the breeze.

Lawrence smiled slightly, and in jest, he stuffed the bread full of meat, then passed it to Holo.

After Holo’s eyes widened in surprise, she took it with a beaming smile.

The autumn forest was the best pantry, but the woods at this time of year were much more dangerous than the mounds of snow in the winter. That was because the things that humans thought were delicious to eat were also delicious for other animals.

Holo had gathered a heap of chestnuts in a childlike obsession but ultimately could not carry them all back and was then sitting in her spot, picking out the ones that had been eaten by bugs.

At that moment, Lawrence heard the snapping of a twig being stepped on and turned around to see a large bear towering over him. If he did not move carefully, a swing of one of those claws would kill him instantly. Lawrence froze and stared back into its black eyes when Holo returned, her tail wagging.

“What is it you need?”

Lawrence was human and did not understand the feelings of the beasts in the forest. However, as the avatar of a wolf, Holo did understand their feelings, and Lawrence in turn understood Holo's. So if he watched her expression, he could generally tell what the animal was thinking.

When he saw Holo's calm smile, he could somehow tell that the bear that had appeared before them was a polite one.

"You wish for chestnuts? I do not mind if you take these. They have bugs. Take as many as you wish."

The bear gave a brief sigh-like snort, stuffed its nose into the pile of bugged chestnuts that Holo and Lawrence had picked out, and began to devour them.

Holo watched it happily, and when the bear suddenly lifted its head as though thinking of something, she put the waterskin to its mouth and let it drink.

"How are the bees this year? Does it seem they will make it through the winter, I wonder?"

Holo, who loved sweets, was trying to ask the master of the forest about the bees' movements. The bear seemed to hesitate, perhaps because it did not want to tell her where its favorite honey might be, but its defeated expression suggested it had no choice but to answer when Holo asked, and it grunted softly.

"Hmm. So next spring at Swan's Peak sounds like the best time."

Holo's knowledge of the mountain far surpassed that of the nearby hunters and woodcutters. Lawrence did not mind fully using that knowledge to gather food, but he did not want to be left entirely to gather and catch and deal with all the disposal and processing afterward. He especially did not want to go collect any beehives.

Don't tell her too much about the beehives, Lawrence signaled to the bear.

As he continued thinking, the bear whispered to Holo, whose ears stood straight up.

"What? A whole patch of lingonberries?!"

It sounded as if she had heard some welcome news, but when Lawrence

looked up to the sky, it was already starting to change color.

“Did you hear that? Lingonberries!”

Holo tugged at Lawrence’s sleeve with an earnest expression, but Lawrence kept on sorting the chestnuts.

“The sun will be setting soon, and we have our chestnuts. We have mushrooms. Next time.”

“You fool! If we do not go quickly, they shall be eaten!”

Even with a massive bear waiting on her, Holo still acted like a child when it came to food.

“We wouldn’t be able to eat all that in a day. It’d be a different story if there were multiple gluttonous wolves, though.”

In a typical year, both his sleeves would be pulled on in this kind of situation: on his right sleeve, the Wisewolf Holo; on his left, his only daughter, Myuri.

“Tomorrow, then. We must!”

Lawrence heaved a sigh and agreed. However, it would be a mistake to tell her that if she really wanted to eat them that much, then she should just go on her own. Holo wanted to go together.

And he gave up, because it was his troublesome personality that made him happy whenever she made such selfish requests.

“But lingonberries, huh? Should we preserve some in sugar and send them to Myuri?” Lawrence murmured, and Holo’s ears twitched.

“She pesters little Col for delicious things anyhow. ’Twould be best not to spoil her.”

Though Holo looked like a rather proper mother in Myuri’s presence, they competed with each other like sisters when it came to fighting over food.

Apart from that, Lawrence regretted mentioning Myuri’s name.

Once he opened his mouth, the words he had bottled up in his heart spilled forth.

“We haven’t heard from her in a while...I hope she’s okay.”

“No news is good news, is it not?”

“Well, I guess so...”

It had sounded like Col, who had set off with high hopes, and Myuri, who followed closely after, clinging to him as an older brother, were causing quite the fuss in many places.

Though Lawrence thought it might turn out all right for them, he could not rid himself of his seeds of worry.

More importantly, his precious only daughter was traveling alone with a man of age, even though that man was the honest and straightforward Col. As Lawrence worried himself over all these unpleasant thoughts, he felt a whack.

There was Holo, annoyed.

“I swear, you never change.”

Though he knew Holo was right, he still could not shake his distress. Exasperated, she went to pet the bear’s neck.

“Males are fools.”

It seemed this was a female bear. Lawrence felt somewhat inferior since realizing the bathhouse, too, had become women’s territory. He tossed away the bug-eaten chestnuts, brushed off his hands, and stood up.

“Let’s start heading back.”

When Lawrence spoke, Holo gave the bear one last pat on the head and, unlike when they came, picked up and carried some of the luggage herself. It looked quite heavy on her slim physique, but she did not return to her wolf form.

As she staggered, she grasped Lawrence’s hand firmly.

“What do you think might be for dinner tonight?”

Lawrence gave a tired smile, and as he conversed with Holo about nothing but good food, they went along the forest road back home.

It was the best time of the day in the best season.

Lawrence enjoyed his trifling conversations with Holo as they walked, but he

suddenly noticed that Holo's expression had clouded over.

It was when they were almost back at the bathhouse.

"What's wrong?"

"Mm..."

Holo was staring farther down the path in the direction of the bathhouse.

She was sniffing incessantly, her ears and tail twitching nervously.

"Did something happen at the bathhouse?"

The worst case would be a fire, but she would have turned back into a wolf by now if it was. Lawrence could hardly imagine that a thief had snuck in and was causing trouble. Neither Hanna or Selim, both of whom had stayed behind, were human, so if thieves barged in, they should be able to fight back.

Then in that case...

"Could it be—Myuri's home?"

Lawrence grew restless as he spoke, and Holo finally gazed back at him and sneered.

"You fool. But not too far from the mark."

Lawrence cocked his head to one side, and Holo readjusted the bags on her shoulders, speaking in a somewhat disgruntled tone.

"I do not quite know what it might be, but it smells of many beasts."

Had a traveling animal tamer come to stay?

He wondered as they returned to the bathhouse where there was a group of about ten guests. It was rather unusual to have newcomers who not only had come out of season but did not send a message beforehand. Lawrence discovered Selim's flustered face among the group.

The reason being...

"Uh...Everyone?"

...every single one of these off-season guests was nonhuman.

Horses, sheep, goats, cows, rabbits, birds, deer. There were even two girls

who looked older than Holo and Selim, wearing the default nun outfit for traveling women.

After they all introduced themselves, they extended their greetings to Holo and Selim respectfully and even gave quite a long message to Lawrence.

But it was clear to see how genuinely pleased they seemed to be since they did not fear Holo or Selim, the wolves. The tall Deer who had been the last of the group to greet Lawrence grasped his shoulders with his large hands.

“I had been hoping to come to this bathhouse one day! A bathhouse made just for people like us!”

Lawrence’s vision was swimming. Holo looked on blankly, but the other guests were smiling and nodding in total agreement with the Deer.

“Heavens, my wishes have been fulfilled, and I am finally here. Everyone jumped at the offer to gather when I invited them. We faced much hardship on the road since we are not used to travel, but oh! How delighted we are to be here!”

The Deer embraced Lawrence heartily when he was finished.

Lawrence responded vaguely with *ahs* and *ohs* as he repeated the Deer’s words to himself.

A bathhouse made just for people like us?

“I am honored to receive such kind words, but...may I ask from whom you heard about us?”

There were some patrons who first visited on their own and invitations were not necessary to stay at the bathhouse, but most of their guests came at others’ recommendations.

Responding to Lawrence’s question was a short, rotund goat, who looked as if he ran his own liquor store.

“No one in particular, really, but it is quite well-known to us who live in the south. They say there is a hot spring land far to the north of this world, where we can escape from all conflict. That if we went, there would be a bathhouse that even we can relax in without minding the eyes of humans. And the name of

that bathhouse is...”

“Spice and Wolf!”

As though planned beforehand, the rest of them chanted in unison.

There was no doubt that on their long journey, they had gathered around a fire and talked about their destination.

He knew that painfully well, and it felt as though his heart would burst with happiness.

But that was the very reason why there was something he felt terrible about.

“I see...Well, I’m very happy to welcome you after such a long journey.”

As a former merchant and as the master of the bathhouse, Lawrence first swallowed all his queries and welcomed them with the widest grin he could muster. Mentioning to Selim how tired they must be after their journey, he had her take them to their rooms.

After he watched their sudden, strange guests disappear into the bathhouse, Lawrence scratched his head lightly.

Beside him, Holo shrugged in exasperation.

“Rumors travel faster than my legs.”

“And not very accurately, either.”

Lawrence mentioned what might have happened.

The acquaintances he had made on his journey with Holo must have told fellow avatars plenty about their bathhouse. Those who heard about it in turn told their acquaintances out of novelty. Nonhumans were sometimes mixed in among their guests’ attendants. They follow their masters innocently, and many of them were trying to make it in the world, using their talents as embodiments of beasts while they lived their lives as humans. It was apparently a difficult thing to blend in with the human world, and many of them saw Holo as the very proof of hope and fortune.

He could imagine how they had exaggerated about this bathhouse.

Yet, it was too much to say that this was a bathhouse where nonhumans

could relax freely.

“It’s fine since there’s no one else around this time of year...”

“‘Twould be quite the trouble if they came in winter.”

The feeling of being cramped from having to conceal herself from humans in such a small bathhouse was the source of part of Holo’s discontent.

“I have my apprehensions, but we’ll let them know about the bathhouse’s situation and make sure they enjoy their time here as much as possible.”

Lawrence thought about how pleased he was to see they had come with such high expectations, but Holo stood beside him, her expression still clouded.

“Shy as usual?”

Lawrence teased Holo, and her ears and tail bristled. “Fool,” she scoffed, stomping on his foot.

Then she shamelessly clung to him.

“...’Tis beneath my dignity.”

While he was surprised she embraced him so suddenly, he hugged her back and smirked.

Certainly, it would be entirely unacceptable for the ruler of the forest to fawn on a human like a puppy before the embodiments of herbivores.

He could laugh it off as a show of vanity, but there were many rules for an eternal maiden.

“Then do you want me to fawn over you? You can keep up your appearance that way.”

Holo’s ears stood on end.

The silly wisewolf almost fell into the trap of Lawrence’s words, but she managed to avoid it in the end.

“You fool. That sounds like I am the one who is always fawning on you.”

Telling her, “But isn’t that true?” would earn him a bite.

Lawrence slumped his shoulders, smiling, then took Holo’s hand and kissed it.

“I am indebted to you for always spending time with me.”

“Hmm.”

Holo was greatly pleased with her vassal’s show of gratitude, but they soon exchanged dry smiles and began their preparations to entertain their guests.

The name of the land of Nyohhira was almost legend in the south.

Most humans born in villages and towns never left their homes for their whole lives. Even the sailors who traveled all over the world only went from coast to coast and typically knew very little about the countries they visited.

And so, to travel for more than a month to a distant hot spring land deep in the mountains would not guarantee a safe return—it was a literal journey to the ends of the earth.

Perhaps for that very reason, once the stories reached the lands where these off-season guests lived, they were full of embellishments and exaggerations, some of which were clearly wrong.

“We sheep avatars are very proud of the stories of Ruvinheigen, the city of the Church—how Sir Lawrence and Lady Holo worked together alongside the legendary golden sheep to completely overturn the monopoly of trade that obstinate Church held over the gold.”

“I, too, have heard of your activities in the town of Lenos. I was so happy—how indignant you were over the state of the fur trade and how you invested so much money to secure the furs.”

The Deer replied to the Sheep. There was a deerskin that lay before the fire where they all sat in a circle, and Lawrence’s bottom squirmed slightly.

“My, well, it is the very original story that has moved us the most: the story of the village of Pasloe, which had forgotten their debt of gratitude and tried to attack Lady Holo, and of Sir Lawrence, who overcame the attack with true love! From what I hear, you hired mercenaries with several thousand silver, no?”

“That is incorrect. Sir Lawrence bought back the sheaf of wheat in which Lady Holo slept from an unscrupulous merchant with all his assets—”

“That’s strange, because from what I heard—”

Lawrence somehow managed to imagine which original events were causing the misunderstandings.

He simply sat there smiling wryly, but what truly worried him was Holo.

He stole a glance at her as she was just taking a sip of wine, and she looked at him as if to say, *I will not be mad over this.*

“Sir Lawrence, what is the truth?!”

The noisy guests, aided by alcohol and the invigoration of finishing a long journey, pushed closer to Lawrence, and he recoiled, while the two female guests sandwiched Holo beside him.

“Your story of romance with Master Lawrence has been famous for so long!”

“Is it true that the deciding factor was the luster of your tail?”

Questions that frightened him by just imagining how Holo would respond reached Lawrence’s ears.

When he turned his gaze toward her, all she did was briefly flashed a mischievous grin.

“Sir Lawrence, please stay with us until morning!”

The guests had raised their mugs in cheer many times as they sat around a pot of mushroom stew, no meat.

Lawrence talked about his journey with Holo in a way that would not crush their dreams. It was a story of a once-grand adventure, one he no longer looked back on often.

At the same time, he also enjoyed hearing the news they brought from the towns he once passed through.

What particularly surprised him when he asked who they heard these stories from was that they knew Elsa and had even made the trip to the small village where she lived with Evan, the miller. That was where the writings about the ancient era that Elsa’s father collected were located, so they must have had their own reasons to go there.

As Lawrence pondered this, someone quietly held out something before him.

It was a horse, who wore a dauntless expression among the others with kind features.

“This is for you, Sir Lawrence.”

He held a single envelope.

“What is this?”

“A letter from Lady Elsa.”

“From Elsa?”

“I had to give it to you before we drank too much.”

The Horse spoke with a hint of jest as he smiled, but there was already someone collapsed on the floor, snoring, and Selim was placing a blanket over him. Lawrence said his thanks and took the envelope.

Elsa was honest and had been working frantically for the church her father left behind. She was one they owed much to—when Lawrence could not make the last step in his relationship with Holo, she scolded them for not taking each other’s hands when they loved each other so. Though the unexpected visitors must have taken her by surprise, it was very much like her to faithfully send out a letter, and that made him happy.

“Thank you so much.”

“Oh no, this is my regular work. I cannot relax and drink while I am carrying a letter.”

The Horse grinned. He must use his quick legs as the embodiment of a horse as well. And since a courier’s work required more trust than that of a merchant, it surely seemed to match the stern-faced Horse in personality as well.

Lawrence stared at the envelope from Elsa, and a thought crossed his mind. He wondered if he could have them deliver a letter to Col and Myuri.

There had been few letters as of late, so he was not entirely sure where they were or what they were doing now. It seemed as if it would trouble many people in order to send one, so he hesitated. He thought for a moment that this Horse could quickly and reliably deliver a letter to them.

However, he did not know what Holo would say to him if he did.

Regardless, Holo must surely be in emotional turmoil during this banquet as they all spoke of the past. It was she who had wished Lawrence would quit his work as a traveling merchant and settle down in one place, yet still wondered if she was the one who crushed his dreams.

She had also been interrupted while she was relaxing, so he decided to hold back on agitating her any further.

Lawrence thought about all this and slipped Elsa's letter, along with his request to the Horse, into his breast pocket.

"Thank you for delivering Elsa's letter."

The Horse smiled when Lawrence spoke, everyone around them clapped, and they began to drink again.

The lively banquet continued late into the night.

"Urgh..."

Lawrence awoke to a hideously dry throat, and found himself somewhere that was not his bedroom. There was a single large log in the fireplace before him, a weak flame clinging to it. A blanket had been placed on him up to his shoulders, and when he pushed himself up, every single one of his joints ached.

"Oh, good morning."

Selim was just entering the hall; she carried her broom and was already back at work.

Feeling guilty, Lawrence scratched his head, and Selim beamed anxiously back at him.

"Everyone is in the baths."

"And Holo?"

Had she gone to bed alone, she would certainly be in a terrible mood this morning.

And since there were none of Holo's hairs on the blanket that had been placed on him, that meant she had not crawled in with him as she usually did.

At the same time, Lawrence noticed a piece of paper under the blanket. He picked it up and it read, “Seems to be quite an important letter, hmm?” in that familiar, messy handwriting. She must have meant to ask why he was sleeping with a letter from another woman in his pocket.

He thought it was a joke, since it was unlikely she would forget Elsa’s scent, but Lawrence glanced up at Selim timidly.

“Lady Holo is in the baths with them as well. Um...She took a lot of alcohol with her...”

Selim was also in charge of purchases.

From the way she spoke, it sounded as if they were drinking enough for her to cradle her head as she sat before the books.

“Oof...Okay. Thanks.”

“Certainly,” Selim replied, taking the blanket from Lawrence’s hands. “Would you like some water?”

Lawrence waved his hand in response to her question as she folded the blanket.

“I’m all right. I want to wash my face anyway.”

Selim was working in the stead of her foolish master, who had passed out after drinking. He could not bother her any more than this. Selim bowed her head respectfully and began cleaning the great hall.

Lawrence headed toward the kitchen as he tapped his head over his slight headache. Hanna was there, running about cooking as always. He passed through and exited to the garden where he washed his face in the well.

He could hear jubilant voices coming from the baths just a little ways away.

He wondered if he should show himself at the baths, but it would be bad if he appeared at the wrong time and they offered him a drink. And if Holo was upset, then things would not end well.

Lawrence wiped his face as he returned to the building to tidy up, but he ran into someone in the corridor. It was the Horse who had delivered the letter from Elsa.

Most men looked more dignified when lit by the firelight, and women, more charming. Though it was a common thing to be disappointed to see what these people looked like in the sunlight, the Horse seemed to be rather polished in his sternness.

Well, what made him think he looked polished was his cleanly shaven face and the well-creased clothes he wore.

“Good morning, Sir Lawrence.”

He looked more like a palace servant from a castle than someone here to bathe.

Lawrence greeted him in return, and wondering about the clothes he wore, he asked about them.

“Do you typically wear clothes like this?”

He probably did not wear these when relaxing in the baths.

“No, I am on my way to work.”

Lawrence was surprised, and the Horse looked somewhat apologetic.

“And there is something I wish to ask you, Sir Lawrence.”

“Me? What might it be?”

“Well. I was hoping you might tell me where this bathhouse is.”

The Horse pulled out an envelope from his pocket, a decorative piece of fabric held in place by a wax seal on top. Lawrence had heard that it was the culture of nobles when sending a letter to someone important, but it was his first time seeing it.

There was the name of a Nyohhira bathhouse on the decorative fabric.

“...I understand why you are dressed that way now, but what is the meaning of this?”

The question slipped from his mouth, but he realized that the Horse would not be serving as a courier if he was liable to leak the contents of a noble's letter to any outsider. Lawrence smiled apologetically, but the Horse grinned and shook his head.

“Don’t worry, it is nothing political. The noble who gave me the letter rather ordered me to spread word of this letter along the road.”

“Huh?”

Spread word of the letter?

Lawrence stared back at the Horse, not understanding at all, and the Horse calmly closed his eyes and spoke, as though a herald announcing a notice on the street given to him by his lord.

“Those that pass by, stop and listen. The Rosen Kingdom sends word in the name of the lord of the Subarb Territory. This is the tale of the hero who sailed on our ship.”

The Horse, who held the envelope gently with both hands and a solemn expression, stood even straighter than the crisp creases on his clothes.

“He voyaged on our boat, sent to us by God, and bravely sailed the seven seas. Through God’s command, he always kept bravery with him to protect those rowing out into the open ocean.”

When he got that far, Lawrence remembered which bathhouse it was meant to go to and understood what sort of letter it was.

That bathhouse had one of their sons leave on a journey after being asked to work for one of their guests, a territorial lord. This village was much too small for young people, and the world opened up the path to adventure and success.

But what came back was a letter, and the one who was delivering it was the very picture of a stern courier.

Had he accomplished and been successful in what he set out to do, he would have come back himself.

Lawrence looked at the Horse.

“He fought bravely and went to God’s side. In our name, we praise his glory.”

And in the same manner, he had repeated his story before the bathhouse in question.

It did seem to come out of nowhere, but they must have been somewhat

prepared for it when they saw their son off.

The bathhouse master had hung his head but quickly found composure and honored the esteemed messenger.

It sounded as though the youngster who left the village had entered the service of a coastal country and had become a sailor to learn the ways of seabound knights. Since lords would not typically send notice directly to a vassal's hometown if they were not of high standing, he must have distinguished himself appropriately in battle.

"Therefore, in accordance with the rules of the sailors, we are sending you this remuneration from the ship."

The Horse had retrieved a pouch stuffed full of silver coins from his pocket and handed it to the master. The master had thanked him again and welcomed the Horse inside the house. There was nothing left for Lawrence to do, standing there. He gave the Horse a silent bow, turned on his heels, and left.

Nyohhira was quiet again today, and the sky was clear.

He, too, had come across misfortune once in a while during his own travels. There were many times he had to look away from those begging for help. He thought he had perfected the skill of meeting the cold, stinging wind with a blank expression long ago.

But he shivered lightly in the autumn breeze.

He now had too many things he did not want to lose.

He understood this even more clearly when he looked at the Horse who had come to report the boy's death.

Lawrence quickly returned to his own bathhouse.

He could not be the master of a bathhouse of happiness and smiles with such a hard expression.

He smacked his cheeks and lifted his spirits before entering the bathhouse, and the sight before him caught him by surprise.

There was Holo, lying on the floor of the big hall, a wet cloth on her forehead, her face bright red.

“Sir Lawrence.”

The Rabbit addressed him. He looked to be the type who would juggle as he sold sweet pastries to children if Lawrence saw him in town, perhaps because of his jolly features.

The way he diligently fanned Holo with a blanket as she groaned seemed like a scene from a comedy routine.

“Wh-what is all this?”

“Oh dear, well, we were doing some drinking games with Lady Holo in the baths...”

She must have overheated after drinking too much.

It was great work for her to join guests as they partied, but it was all for nothing after drinking away her reason.

“Hey, Holo.”

Lawrence called her name, and it seemed as though she was conscious as she opened her eyes slightly. Holo was drunk, a sight he had seen many times on their journey and since they had opened the bathhouse.

“...Water.”

Her eyes wavered as she groaned quietly, and Lawrence sighed.

“I’ll take care of her,” he said to the Rabbit, who seemed somewhat apologetic, perhaps feeling responsible for making Holo drink, but he bowed his head and left the hall.

Lawrence sighed again, dropped to his knees beside Holo, and reached for the pitcher.

It was empty.

“How much did you drink?”

Holo tried to answer, but burped instead.

“Stay here. I’ll go draw some fresh water.”

Lawrence stood as he spoke, and Holo opened her mouth.

“...I...win...”

He was caught by surprise, but in the end, he smiled.

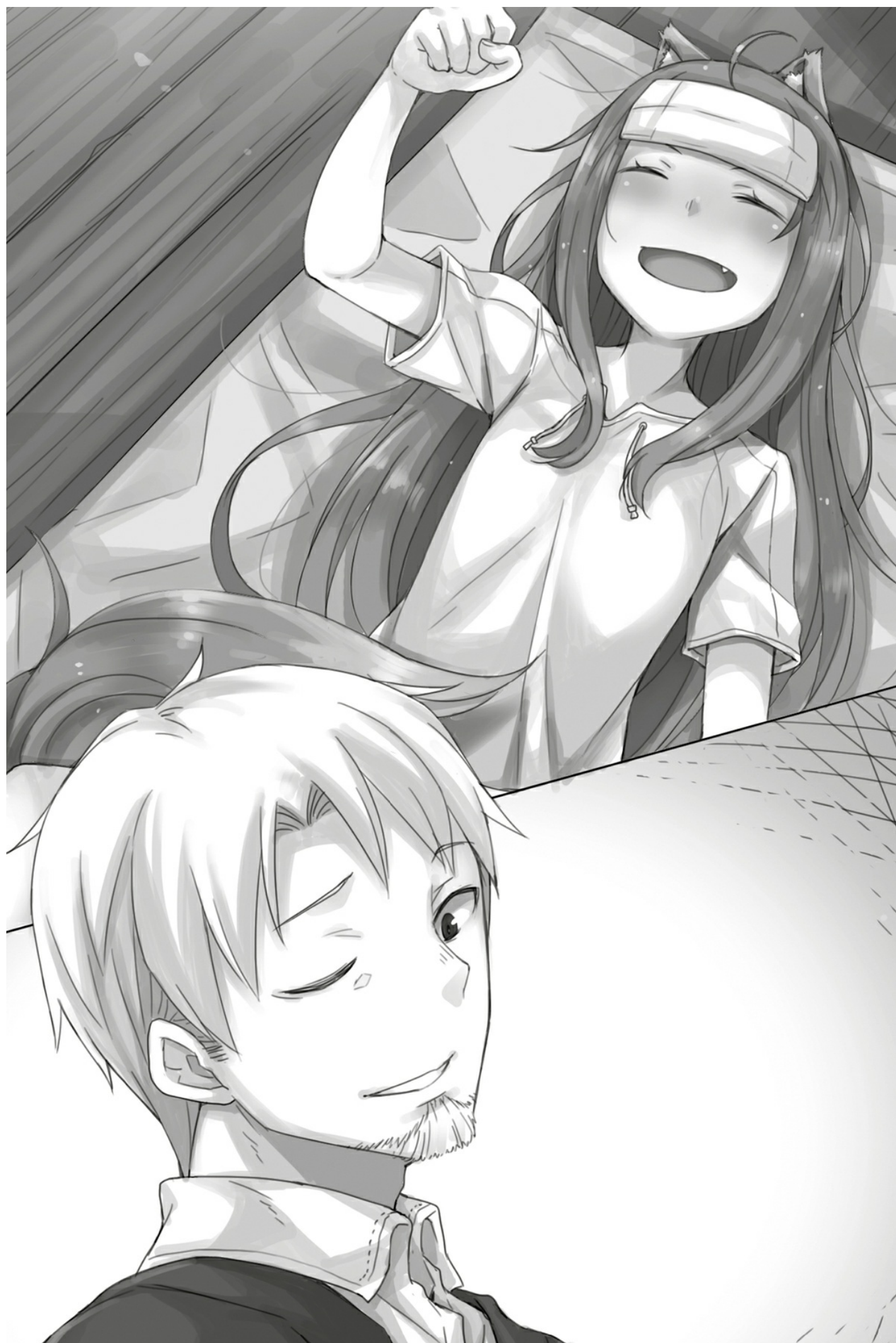
“You’re supposed to lose when you’re the host.”

“...Fool...”

She managed the single word before hiccuping loudly.

Lawrence heaved another sigh as he took the pitcher and headed toward the kitchen—with Holo acting this way, that meant all the work would end up on Miss Selim’s shoulders again.

They still had to pretreat, dry, and cure the mushrooms they gathered yesterday, and they still had to roast the chestnuts before bugs made their home in them, dip them in honey, or dry them and ground them into flour. As Lawrence thought about this and that, he found people busily running in and out of the kitchen, their sleeves rolled up.



“Oh, Sir Lawrence.”

“Erm...?”

“Oh, water, I see.”

Without any regard to his sheer bewilderment, the pitcher was plucked from his hand.

“My, Lady Holo sure can drink. Those among us we called bottomless pits swiftly lost. They must be passed out in their rooms about now.”

With a loud guffaw, the man jogged swiftly out to the well in the garden.

Lawrence, rooted to the spot, had no idea what to say to the people doing the chores in the kitchen and stood there blankly. One person washed mushrooms, one cracked the rock salt, one meticulously peeled the chestnuts, and another stirred the pot of honey as sweat dripped from his forehead.

Among them all was Hanna, giving out orders with great dignity.

“Miss Hanna, what is all this?”

Lawrence asked, and Hanna shrugged dramatically and approached him.

“Lady Holo asked them to work in her drunken stead.”

Lawrence’s mouth twisted bitterly, but the people working all looked up and grinned delightedly.

“Lady Holo was the winner, after all.”

“We promised.”

“And what a magnificent drinker she proved to be!”

Those compliments did not sound like lies, but it was now clear that Holo had participated in a drinking game to bet on the work she did not want to do. And since she could drink during the day, there was nothing better for her.

There was a hint of the self-proclaimed wisewolf’s cunning.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Sir Lawrence.”

Lawrence took the pitcher with a word of thanks, then said to the others, “No need to work too hard,” and left the kitchen.

The cold water chilled his hands through the metal as Lawrence walked down the corridors, contemplating. He wondered if his hunch was correct, so instead of returning to the great hall, he went up to the second floor, and there the two women were merrily sweeping and cleaning the floors.

“Ah, greetings, Master Lawrence!”

He had thought they were both dressed as nuns in order to travel, but perhaps they were always this elegant. They were older than Holo, but yet not as docile as Selim—the kind of girls who would be allowed to hold candles at a town festival and be very popular with the young men.

He thought he remembered them saying they were sisters at the banquet the day before.

“...You didn’t make a bet with Holo, did you?”

The two exchanged glances, then beamed.

“We are the type who get restless when we cannot do work, actually.”

Though they wore long robe-like dresses, their sleeves were rolled up, and their hems roughly tied up to their knees. Such a sloppy kind of look made them seem healthy, and at the same time, Lawrence found himself oddly flustered when he caught a glimpse of their long, bare legs, brimming with youthful, feminine vigor.

He thought quietly to himself how thankful he was that Holo was asleep downstairs.

As they worked, the two women finished collecting the dust, examined the hallway in satisfaction, and spoke.

“I also heard we still have to clean the soot in the chimney and sweep the ash by the stove.”

“Should we clean the silverware? I just adore it when things shine like that!”

“We’ve been itching to do so the whole way here. Oh, how we wish we could clean!”

They had a cheerfulness about them that was different from Myuri’s explosiveness and, of course, Holo’s. It seemed they genuinely enjoyed

cleaning.

Not only that but the hallway was spotless. Moreover, they had not neglected to open the windows and doors slightly to air it out. Their great skill suggested that they were used to working in large mansions. When they mentioned cleaning the silverware, he remembered that they were apparently embodiments of birds, and he somewhat understood. All the bird nests he saw in the forest were magnificent yet neat, and when jewelry went missing from town, the first places anyone searched were the nearby trees.

That being said, he still wondered if it was okay to let guests do the dirty work. These were all originally Holo's jobs, and he felt even more guilty when he thought about how she was currently sleeping on the floor, drunk.

On the other hand, if the women had free time and wanted to work, then maybe it was the right decision to let them do so. The peak season had passed anyhow, so there were no musicians or dancers or acrobats and no other way to spend the time.

Lawrence worried over it for a few moments, then raised the question.

"...Is this all really okay?"

The two women looked at each other and responded gleefully in unison, "Of course!"

Besides the two who were passed out in their rooms after losing to Holo in the drinking game, there were eight total people working, and the bathhouse suddenly turned into one massive cleanup job.

Most of the work Lawrence should have done had been taken from him, and he spotted Selim countless times, now with very little to do, wandering around aimlessly. In the end, she must have remembered that only she could do the bookkeeping, so she began her calculations for ordering and such at the counter.

Lawrence sat by Holo in the great hall as he watched everyone while tending to the fire. Holo must have sobered up as she looked less pained, and he could hear her soft, comfortable snores. It was not beneath her dignity to show herself like this.

He pulled the blanket back over her when it slipped off as she rolled over, and he brushed away the hair that stuck to her cheek. Her wolf ears twitched, slightly tickled, and her soft snores continued.

He had braced himself when a whole group of guests came as they relaxed, thinking about how busy they would be afterward to prepare for winter, so though it was just a little bit, he would thank Holo for her craftiness.

If their guests worked hard, then Lawrence and Holo would gain more time together.

Lawrence smiled at Holo's calm sleeping face, then turned his gaze to the fire in the stove. The big, fat log that was put in there this morning was burning as lazily as always. It looked as though it could burn forever.

This was Nyohhira, a special village protected by the steams of the baths and the melodies of musicians. It had not been touched by war for hundreds of years and has always offered hot water and smiles to people. There were many who called this place the land of dreams, and many others worked hard to make it that way.

But that did not mean they were free from reality.

Lawrence sighed. He thought he understood this, but it just reminded him how the steam from the baths clouded his vision. Bad news could come suddenly one day. A messenger with crisp clothing and a grave expression would open the envelope with bright white gloves and read the words aloud. Lawrence would be able to do nothing but listen. The most he could do was, at the very least, cover his ears. At the end of his train of thought, he looked at Holo.

That was the fate she was so afraid of.

The moment when a sudden gust of freezing wind came from beyond the steam, long after they grew used to not wearing coats.

Lawrence wordlessly looked at his hand, then suddenly remembered the letter, the one that Elsa sent them.

It was still in his pocket. He pulled it out and opened the seal.

On the page was a stiffly formal greeting, one that reminded him of Elsa's beautiful honey-colored eyes that contrasted with the constant cross expression on her face. She wrote blandly about the recent goings-on and how she just had her third child.

And then, *"Let us meet again."*

It was such a short sentence, but it bore most of the meaning of the letter.

Elsa was fluent when it came to lecturing but typically a poor talker.

Let us meet again.

Before the cold wind withers all the trees.

"Urgh..."

Holo groaned, and Lawrence snapped back to reality.

Her face collided with Lawrence's foot when she rolled over, and she woke up.

"Oh, 'tis you..."

"Did you think I was a hunk of meat?"

He stroked Holo's cheek with the back of his finger as he smirked, and her tail thumped happily under the blanket.

Holo lifted her head, and he thought she might rise, but she merely placed her face onto his foot and rustled around to get into a comfortable position. She had no intentions of getting up and working.

Work in the bathhouse was proceeding with much more vigor than anything Holo could manage when she exerted herself, but that was as a result of her cunning. It would not be very good if he indulged her as she dozed about.

Lawrence sighed, and it was just as he reached out to her back to get her up when she asked him a question.

"What was in the letter?"

Lawrence stopped because Holo's voice sounded more conscious than he thought it would be. It was the voice of Holo the Wisewolf, no hint of inebriation present.

But it did not sound as if she spoke that way because a letter had come from another woman. Holo knew very well how straitlaced Elsa was.

Lawrence relaxed the hand that was going to push her up and instead placed it on her shoulder.

“Greetings so stiff they would break if I smacked them.”

He took a breath.

“And she said, ‘Let us meet again.’”

He had lived a life as a traveling merchant, where those words were accompanied with a wave as he parted with others and never saw them again.

Perhaps that was why he felt so uneasy about Myuri.

“Will you go see her?”

Lawrence could not see Holo’s face as she lay on his foot.

But he had a hunch her eyes were open and staring at the floor.

He did not know what her motives were, but Lawrence knew what his answer was.

“Of course not.”

No matter how he felt, the reality was that he could not go.

Even with Selim in the bathhouse now, he did not know if she could manage it well when many guests came. Not only that, but more guests would come to Nyohhira in the near future from the pilgrimage village that her brothers were building. She had her hands full with chores. That was her life now.

Time would pass as they busied themselves, and it would be impossible for them to even imagine leaving this land. Then someone, perhaps even a guest, would one day knock on the bathhouse door and speak.

A letter for Sir Lawrence...

That was life in human society, and the world was much too wide, the roads far too narrow.

He could only take care of what lay within his reach, and even that could be

called a luxury.

Lawrence rubbed Holo's shoulders, and she inhaled deeply, then exhaled.

"You do nothing but worry about Myuri. Do you wish to see her as well?"

Lawrence stopped moving.

"I heard why that Horse came to this land. Can you imagine what sort of face you returned to the bathhouse with, you fretful fool?"

And which one of us tends to think about the future in such gloomy terms? he thought, but her ears twitched about as though she was suppressing a giggle, so she must have known when she spoke.

But that was why Lawrence did not smile.

Because he did not know why she mentioned that.

"...I know you have to squeeze out the pus in order for a wound to heal. Is that why you're hitting me where it hurts?"

"You fool," Holo replied and rolled over.

Her reddish-amber eyes were so kind he recoiled.

"You see..."

She started, then hesitated, her gaze shying away from Lawrence.

Holo then suddenly chuckled, sitting up with grandeur that made it seem as though her pain was finally gone, and snuggled against the flustered Lawrence.

"H-hey, you—"

Holo was not angry, crying, or even annoyed, so he did not know how to respond.

He leaned forward to hold her, and her scent, stronger than usual from sweating after drinking and bathing, tickled his nose.

Holo buried her face into his chest, and as though rubbing her scent onto him, she nuzzled her face back and forth.

"I have been quite spoiled ever since Myuri left."

"I, uh..."

While that was a truth he would not deny, if he spoke about it out loud, Holo might dig her claws into his back.

In his total discipline, Lawrence struggled to find a response, but Holo chuckled about that, too.

“Eh-heh. My eyes were sharp to have chosen you.”

“...Well, I’d say you did some good shopping, if I do say so myself.”

Holo flapped her ears and tail boisterously when he spoke.

After a bout of chuckling, however, the air surrounding Holo suddenly changed, and she let go of him.

She then spoke quietly.

“But the scales do not even out. I must repay you for everything you have done.”

Holo grinned when she saw how Lawrence could not shake his puzzlement.

He loved her smile, how her fangs stood out, how mischievous and spiteful she looked, yet how she was more caring and earnest than anyone else deep down.

“Let us go on a journey.”

Lawrence was astonished to hear what came from her mouth.

“...Huh? What on earth are...?”

“I say what I mean. We have spent ten years here. ’Tis quite long for the human world. ’Twould be best for us to venture out into the world occasionally. And it might perhaps be for the better in the future if we eased your foolish worries regarding Myuri, no?”

“Well...”

Lawrence faltered over thoughts that would not manifest into words, and Holo shrugged in a familiar way.

“Perhaps you wonder what will become of the bathhouse?”

Of course! Lawrence moved his lips to speak, but no words came out.

Holo should know how much effort was required to operate and maintain the bathhouse. She should have known even better than him how important it was.

There were older masters who closed up shop as they approached their later years and left on pilgrimages.

But it was still much too early for him.

Holo always spoke her mind when she came up with extreme ideas, but this time, it was too much. Lawrence finally furrowed his brow, wondering if this was a thoughtless, drunken remark, but Holo seemed to see right through him and gave him a sharp poke.

“As always, you are blind.”

“That’s not true. I’m just watching you speak and behave wildly, like you always have,” he replied, and Holo puffed up her chest in competition.

Lawrence took the opportunity to argue.

“What about the bathhouse? Do we close? I doubt it’ll operate without us. And if we close once, guests from far away won’t all come back at the same time. It’ll take a year, at least. How will we earn our keep until then? We’ll have to reestablish our suppliers. You really need to—”

“I believe you need to have a little more faith in all the things you have accomplished.”

The sheer depth of Holo’s smile alone caused Lawrence to fall silent.

“You have made this bathhouse into a wonderful thing. All of the guests are delighted to be here. Though little Col and Myuri are gone, the guests’ opinions have not changed. There is a proper flow here now.”

There was nothing Lawrence could say in response to her proud, beaming grin.

Holo almost never complimented people.

She was spiteful and disagreeable, which meant that was even more so for her companion, Lawrence.

“The guests would not be angry if we left for a year or two. Rather, they

would be happy to help us for when we return.”

Lawrence did not believe for a moment that it would be that convenient, but he mulled over the kinds of guests they received.

It was a merchant’s habit to be strictly prudent when regarding optimistic predictions.

But to doubt what Holo said meant doubting his confidence that their guests loved the bathhouse. And it should be the truth that the guests truly did love the place.

Though Lawrence understood this in theory, there was a realistic reason why he had a hard time going along with Holo’s sudden idea.

“B-but I mean...do we leave maintenance of the bathhouse to the drunken guests? Miss Selim will have her hands full doing accounting work without me, and Miss Hanna can’t leave the kitchen. No matter how you think about it, it won’t work out.”

In reality, the utopia of Nyohhira was established by plain old hard work. Lawrence looked at Holo questioningly, wondering if he had spoiled her so much she had forgotten that, but she merely glowered at him in return.

“You fool. ’Tis why I risked my life to see if ’twas possible.”

“Huh?”

She saw how dumbfounded he looked and offered her usual annoyed smile.

“After all, you think I used my wit to place a bet with them, do you not?”

Holo was talking about what happened earlier that day. She and the guests had a drinking contest, and since she won, they had to do all her work for her.

“Th-that’s not—”

What you did! But Lawrence, of course, could not finish his sentence. He realized what her intentions were, and his voice raised almost to a shout.

“No way!”

The wisewolf grinned.

“Though I lay here sleeping, and you gaze upon me lovingly as I do so with

such a foolish expression, the work in the bathhouse goes better than usual, does it not?"

Then it was the same as going out to travel together.

He had just seen them work.

Lawrence was at a loss for words, and Holo sighed in exasperation.

"I certainly have done my shopping well. Why do you not think long and hard about what you have gained?"

Holo snuggled him in a different way than before, like a snake entangling its prey.

There were plenty of times lately where Lawrence looked after her.

But Holo was, in the end, Holo.

"We certainly cannot stay away for too long, but they may take our place if we are only gone for half a year. Our reward is free time during the idle season."

Those guests had come here in defiance of a long journey for the ideal bathhouse.

How could they be so proud of the charm of their establishment if they chose not to believe in that passion?

"You..."

"Hmm?"

She wrapped her arms around Lawrence's waist, her tail waving back and forth mischievously as she fawned over him.

Lawrence gazed down at her and could do nothing but smile.

"Well, I was just thinking about how I shouldn't have thought any less of the avatar of the wolf who lives in wheat."

"Hmm."

Holo gazed back up at him as though urging him to elaborate.

"You've taken good care of me so far. You wouldn't be if good, healthy stocks

didn't grow, right?"

Holo widened her eyes, then smiled out of the corner of her mouth, baring her teeth.

"You fool."

He had heard her say those words so many times before.

And he agreed.

No matter how much time they spent together, he would never be able to fully understand how wonderful she was.

"So are you serious?"

Lawrence posed the question, and Holo response came right after.

"Yes. We may as well see our grandchildren's faces."

"Wha—!"

Holo grinned when she saw how speechless he was.

She is always like this... The more Lawrence grimaced as he thought, the happier Holo's tail wagged.

"I am Holo the Wisewolf. You are in the palm of my hand," she said, despite how she rubbed her face on Lawrence's chest.

No, that's exactly why she's wicked, Lawrence thought as he embraced her slender frame.

Once a wolf such as this stuck to him, he would never be able to let go.

"What a frightening thought."

Lawrence murmured in defeat and split the log in the fire.

It was autumn, the happiest time in the best season of the year.

AFTERWORD

Long time no see. This is Isuna Hasekura. *Spice & Wolf* has finally reached twenty volumes. Thank you. Now that I think back on it, around the time of Volume 3, I had already written all the stories I thought up and was worried about what might happen in the future. Though I had a stock of stories I wanted to tell just as I was starting up again with the short story collection, as of late, coming up with new ones started to feel like wringing out a dry cloth. It is quite strange when something drips out from it. Perhaps this cloth of mine is very good at pretending to be dry...? I would like to keep on writing so long as this cloth does not tear from the constant wringing, so I hope you will continue to bear with me.

Also, by the time you all are reading this, Keito Koume's last chapter of *Spice & Wolf* should be published already. He, too, has illustrated Holo and Lawrence's tale for over ten years and more than one hundred chapters. Manga versions of light novels are often swayed by circumstances such as anime adaptations, and it is a lot of trouble to keep going when the original series is so long. And yet Keito Koume has maintained such high quality and kept on illustrating to the very end. Thank you for all your hard work! Among the many different manga adaptations of light novels, I think I can be counted as one original author who is very pleased with the results. I also thank the editor Mr. O for introducing us!

I have ended on such an unusually moving note, but the rest of the page is blank...Also, *Spice & Wolf* and *Wolf & Parchment* will (should) still continue!

As for me, I've gained weight recently. This is the most I've weighed in my life, and my stomach feels crushed when I sit. Before the summertime, I had been jogging and watching what I ate, but I grew careless, and soon I was eating nothing but ramen, curry, curry, ramen, and it happened in an instant. I am now back to exercise and plain bread rolls. And just as I say that, I had a cake-like

pizza called Chicago pizza just the other day! It was so delicious! What I want to eat most now is anglerfish hot pot. One with plenty of monkfish liver. It should be healthy because it has lots of fish. I'm sure. I think.

On the other hand, I have not been traveling very much lately, so that is how I hope to spend 2018. I counted, and I have yet to visit even half of Japan's prefectures (not counting the ones I only passed through).

I do want to try the Shikoku pilgrimage, and there seem to be many things I haven't done yet.

And so, there should still be plenty more interesting stories slumbering in the world of *Spice & Wolf*!

That is how I would like to end this afterword.

Isuna Hasekura

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